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# Samaritans: Young People, emotional health and the DEAL resource

Exam stress, bullying, pressure from peers and the media, and family arguments are just some of the stressors facing a young person today. Research by Samaritans and the Oxford Centre for Suicide Research, (2001), showed that 1 in 10 young people self harm, as a way of coping with the emotional pressure they are under. A conservative estimate on youth suicide suggested that 24,000 10-19 year olds attempt to take their own life each year - [www.samaritans.org.uk/know/information/information sheets/youngpeople/young\\_people\\_and\\_suicide\\_sheet.shtm](http://www.samaritans.org.uk/know/information/information sheets/youngpeople/young_people_and_suicide_sheet.shtm)

These figures raise the concern that young people are not sufficiently equipped to deal with the challenges they will face in life.

### Well-being

The need to tackle this problem and improve the well-being of young people has been widely recognised and formalised, for example through the Every Child Matters Framework and as part of the National Service Framework for Mental Health.

Whereas historically the emphasis might have been on health education, spreading information about illness and how to prevent it, it is now on health promotion, equipping people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to make healthy choices in their lives.

Samaritans, the emotional support charity, undertook research to investigate the perceptions of young people around the issue of emotional health, and to take a lead from them where their needs lay. Samaritans is known for its 50 years of experience providing emotional support via a helpline service, taking around 5 million contacts in 2006. Its emotional health

promotion strategy: 'Changing Our World', outlines the importance of supporting people in times of distress, but also of reaching them before the point of crisis.

### Web-based survey

A Web-based survey was carried out with 750 young people aged 14-16 from across the country. Additional qualitative work involved four paired depth interviews and two focus groups. These were carried out in rural and urban settings, in and outside of school. The sample of young people were going through everyday teenage issues, and none had recently experienced a serious emotional upheaval.

### Outcomes

The research focussed around three themes:

- Emotional health awareness and stigma
- Pressures and ways of coping with stressful situations
- Help-seeking behaviour and the tendency to ask for support when needed

### Stress

In face-to-face interviews, both boys and girls claimed that homework and increased school workloads are their biggest source of stress. They feel that there is a huge amount of pressure to do well, which combined with the level of coursework required, makes them more stressed than anything else. However, family is also a source of stress and teenagers reported frequent arguments with parents and siblings.

### Emotional health

Emotional health was not a commonly

used phrase, but relatively easy to work out and felt to be inclusive and accessible. Teenagers feel that mental health is about diseases that last a long time, that are not wide spread and that adults get.

### **Coping with emotions**

When it came to the skills for dealing with an emotionally challenging situation, a self-assured 80% of girls and 60% of boys are sure that they can decipher what someone else is feeling. However, over 60% of teenage boys and 40% of girls admit to having no idea what to do when someone becomes emotional and over half find it impossible to express their own feelings - sticking to the facts when they talk about their problems.

### **Coping with stress**

53% of all teenagers named The Queen as the public figure they think deals best with emotional situations. 42% also admitting that The Queen is the one they respect most above David Beckham, Tony Blair and Britney Spears. In complete contrast, only 4% of teenagers rate popular urban rapper Dizzee Rascal's ability to cope with the pressures of fame and only 6% give their mark of respect to the acclaimed Mercury and Mobo prize winner. It seems the British stiff upper lip, the appearance of coping rather than the public bearing of emotions and emotional problems, is still linked to confidence and respect.

### **Help seeking**

There were clear differences between boys and girls, with boys more likely to ignore stressors or deal with these alone. 13% of boys say they never talk to friends about their emotions and less than 40% say they discuss feelings with their family and friends more than once a week.

Girls tend to be better equipped to support one and other and seek out help. Of all teenage girls surveyed, 78% say that they

will talk to friends at least once a week and 50% claim to discuss emotions with their peers everyday. Only 5% say that they never talk to parents about their feelings and only 3% say they never discuss emotional issues with friends.

### **Seeking support in schools**

Seeking support in schools (outside of their friends) is a challenge for many, feeling they are a failure if they reach out to teachers and fear that they will be judged or teachers will pass on information without consent. Being offered advice and not having to seek it out is helpful. For example, where a visit to a Connexions advisor was compulsory for all students rather than individuals facing the stigma of visiting the advisor's office.

## **Conclusions**

All young people think that, if handled well, increased focus on emotional health would equip them to deal with the stress they face today and in the future. They are looking for interesting insights, presented in involving ways with content that offers them solutions to their problems or stress.

## **DEAL**

To turn the results of this research into action, Samaritans developed the Developing Emotional Awareness and Learning (DEAL) programme. This resource, aimed at the 14-16 age group, can be used as part of a whole school approach to emotional health. It contains cross curricular lessons and activities that promote skills including listening & communications, self awareness and empathy. DEAL explores difficult topics including homophobia, self-injury and depression through DVD case studies of young people talking about their experiences. It also contains teacher training activities and a documentary of the experiences of pilot schools in tackling the issue of emotional health with teenagers.