

How can Northern Ireland stem the rising tide of mental health needs in its young people?

Opening young minds

Northern Ireland has one of the youngest populations in the European Union, with approximately 657,000 individuals aged 25 and under.¹ The Health Promotion Agency in Northern Ireland estimates one in five adolescents will experience mental health problems, many of which will continue into adulthood.² The 16-25 year age range represents an important transitional period during which mental health conditions often first manifest. Exposure to a range of challenging and conflicting pressures – from friends, family, school and wider society – can cause a high degree of concern and anxiety. Surveys have revealed that the issues causing young people most stress include academic pressure, career choices, financial worries, concerns about the self and family problems.^{2,3} In the absence of appropriate support, issues such as these have the potential to be precipitators of more serious and enduring mental ill health, which can affect an individual's education and employment opportunities, integration into the community and overall quality of life.

In the majority of cases, mental ill health can be effectively treated or managed, providing problems are identified in their early stages and young people have access to appropriate treatment and support. A key aim of the government's Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan for 2003-2008 is to 'ensure that all those with a contribution to make are knowledgeable, skilled and aware of effective practice in mental and emotional health promotion'.⁴ Young people's key contacts need to know when and how to access information and support in order to enable early intervention and prevent the development of severe and enduring mental ill health.

A survey carried out by the Design for Living Partnership² has highlighted a perception among young people of the inaccessibility of health professionals, with

only seven per cent stating they would seek support from an adult in the community. These findings suggest that professionals and service providers need to understand the needs of young people better and be alert to signs of a mental health problem, as young people may not come forward of their own volition.

Evidence indicates that there are currently gaps in service provision for young people, particularly between the ages of 16-18, when they are in the transition phase between child and adolescent and adult mental health services. The need for access to age-appropriate services tailored to the complex needs of this age group have been highlighted.⁵

Researching local need

This article reports research carried out in Northern Ireland, in the Southern Health & Social Services Board and Southern Education & Library Board areas, by Action Mental Health's (AMH) MensSana project. Action Mental Health is a voluntary sector provider offering a wide range of community-based mental health and learning disability services in Northern Ireland. Its MensSana project is specifically aimed at raising awareness of mental health issues among children and young people (see next page). The aim of the research was to investigate the needs for information about mental health and mental health services among key adult contacts of young people in the 16-25 year age group, and the kinds of support they would welcome from professionals and services.

Two key contact groups were surveyed for their views: professionals with significant contact with young people in this age group, and parents/guardians. A questionnaire was devised seeking information on issues including respondents' understanding of the term 'mental ill health'; their awareness of availability locally of services for young people with mental health →

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AMH MensSana was launched by Action Mental Health in 2002 and has established itself as a valued, relevant and accessible service for young people and their key contacts within the community of the Southern Health and Social Services Board and Southern Education and Library Board areas of Northern Ireland.

AMH MensSana is already seeking to address many of the findings and recommendations identified in this research. For example, *Provoking Thought* is a workshop programme developed by AMH MensSana to promote awareness and understanding of mental health issues and challenge stigma and misconceptions among post-primary school children. The workshops combine an interactive presentation with personal disclosure from a mental health service user and a drama presentation. The programme is available to all post-primary schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area and to youth and community groups who work with young people between the ages of 14 and 25. Participants are also 'signposted' to relevant services where they can find help and support with mental health problems, and are provided with leaflets and contacts details.

AMH MensSana has also produced a DVD teaching resource for distribution to all post-primary schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area for use with key stage 3 pupils. Developed with a group of 12-14 year olds from four schools in the area, it explores issues such as bullying, exam stress and peer pressure through a series of short dramatisations depicting relevant real-life situations, which are intended to provide stimuli for discussion. These scenarios are interspersed with more factual reporting aimed at encouraging the young people to reflect on their own attitudes to the issue of mental health, to talk openly and seek support for any problems they may be experiencing and to take steps to look after their mental well-being on an on-going basis. The DVD is accompanied by a teaching manual with structured activities and lesson plans.

AMH MensSana is also involved in *Open Your Mind*, an annual public speaking competition for year 11 students across the Southern Education and Library Board region. The competition was developed in conjunction with Craigavon & Banbridge Community Health & Social Services Trust, the Southern Area health promotion department, the health promotion departments in Armagh & Dungannon and Newry & Mourne Health & Social Services Trusts and TASSK Healthy Living Centre. The students prepare and deliver presentations on a range of topics related to mental health, such as self-esteem, suicide and stigma. The aim is to enhance young people's understanding of issues that can impact on their mental health, and of coping strategies and sources of support, and to challenge negative attitudes and misconceptions through open discussion of the issues.

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- issues and how to access support; perceived gaps in service provision; key influences on the mental health of young people, and the kinds of information and support they would find helpful. The questionnaire for professionals also asked about specific education, training and support needs, and parents/guardians were asked about any previous experience of accessing services and support for young people.

A total of 54 professionals, including GPs, mental health professionals, teachers, youth workers, social workers, voluntary and community sector workers/agencies and family and occupational therapists, responded to the questionnaire (a 24% response rate). The highest number of questionnaires (20) was returned by teachers, followed by community (6) and youth workers (5), and mental health nurses (4). Of 227 questionnaires sent to a random selection of parents/guardians in the area with at least one child in the 16-25 age range, 54 were returned (24%). One third had personal experience of caring for a young person with mental health problems.

What we found

Awareness of preventive or early intervention services and services in the voluntary and community sectors was very poor both among the professionals and the parents/guardians. Professionals were able to identify a number of mental health services for this age group, mainly in the statutory sector and mainly at the secondary, specialist level. Almost three quarters of parents/guardians with no personal experience of caring for a young person with a mental health difficulty were unaware of any available support services. But 38% of professionals claimed they did not know how to access these services. General practitioners were identified by both groups as the primary gatekeeper.

Gaps in mental health service provision for young people were identified by 70% of the professionals: chiefly in youth/educational settings and in prevention and early intervention services. Many believed that a personal social and health education (PSHE) programme should be an integral component of the educational curriculum.

The need for a wider range of effective preventive and early intervention services was also highlighted by the professionals. Accessible and appropriate counselling services and drop-in centres operating self-referral procedures and available outside normal working hours were cited as particularly valuable:³

'In statutory services you have to be experiencing significant mental health concerns – gap in more low level services for young people with difficulties that are not yet falling under moderate to severe mental health difficulties.' (Psychologist)

Many of the professionals, particularly teachers, identified not just gaps in services but their own lack of awareness of what services actually exist as a major gap area:

'As a teacher I feel I don't have information on the services available, especially for the age group 11-16. I depend on personal knowledge gleaned from previous cases I have dealt with.' (Teacher)

The parents/guardians who had some experience of accessing young people's mental health services reported mixed experiences. GPs, the community mental health team and the child and family clinic were mentioned favourably by some, but others reported long waiting lists, lack of crisis care and family support, lack of services for children under the age of 14, and unsympathetic and unhelpful attitudes of staff, in particular GPs:

‘Contacted social services – very supportive and GP negative – GP told me she was a normal “stropky teenager” and to take her home, even though she was only 11. Unfortunately because of her age there weren’t any groups who could help her – there isn’t much help out there for under 14s.’ (Parent)

Asked about the main pressures affecting young people’s mental health, parents/guardians and professionals had similar views (see figures 1 and 2), although their responses to this question also showed some differences.

Asked about their information and support needs, professionals above all wanted practical information on how best to support young people and help them deal with mental health problems. They also wanted more information on available support and how to refer on young people if the problems were beyond their own knowledge and expertise.

A large number of professionals made comments that suggested they felt ‘out of touch’ with the lives and needs of young people. Many believed that professionals need to have a better understanding of youth culture in order to relate more effectively to young people and help them deal with issues affecting their mental health.

The majority of parents/guardians made no requests for further information on any issues. Those who did were mainly parents who had personal experience of caring for a young person with mental health problems, suggesting that mental health may not be seen as relevant to most parents until a problem occurs. They highlighted in particular the need to promote wider public awareness of mental health and challenge the associated stigma.

Almost two thirds of parents were unaware of any services offering them support to deal with young people’s mental health issues, and almost half indicated they would like more support, particularly around drugs and suicide. Some suggested drop-in centres, counselling, family support and parent helplines as useful sources.

Drawing conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate clearly the need for wide-scale, concerted efforts to promote awareness and understanding of mental health and raise its profile as an issue of relevance and importance to everyone. In particular, parents and professionals believed mental health promotion should begin at an early age and regarded schools, colleges and youth organisations as ideal arenas for promoting positive mental health and preventing the development of mental ill health. This suggests a need to offer a more balanced curriculum that adopts a holistic view of the young person in order to nurture their emotional, physical, social, spiritual and intellectual development. Life skills programmes that incorporate modules such as communication skills, assertiveness and confidence building and problem-solving could be usefully applied to help young people deal with mental health related issues such as bullying, substance misuse and relationship problems.

From the survey it seems clear that there is a need for information, training and support for parents/guardians and professionals – particularly for non-mental health specialists – who are key contacts in the early identification and appropriate referral of young people when problems arise.

Figure 1: Issues affecting young people’s mental health (professionals)

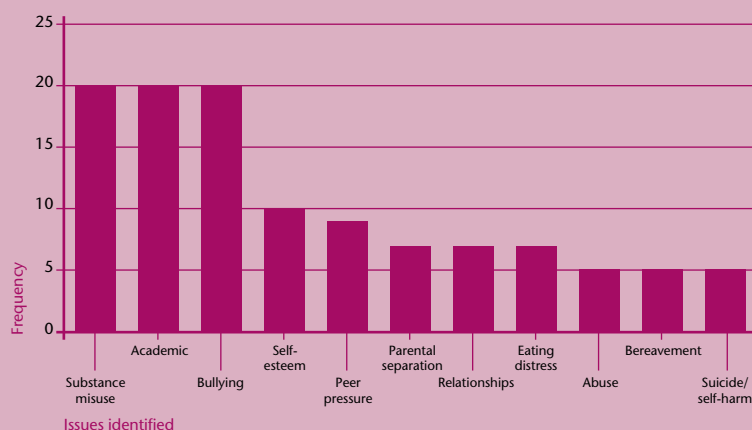
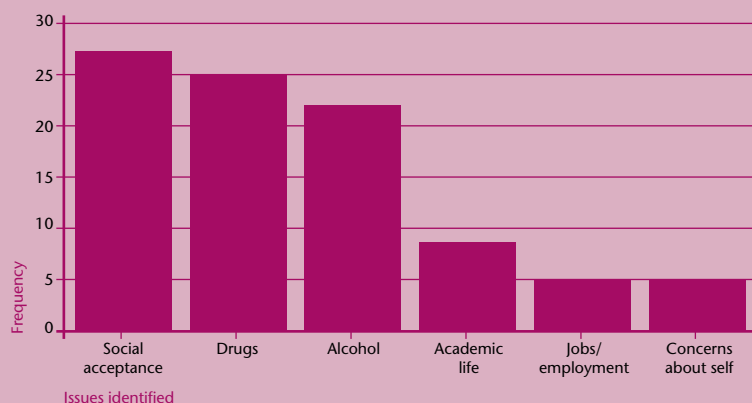


Figure 2: Issues affecting young people’s mental health (parents)



Last, services need to make themselves more accessible and acceptable to young people by offering informal, non-threatening environments and confidential and non-judgemental practice. Young people have identified these as key issues determining their uptake of services.³ Creating opportunities for professionals to meet and consult with young people on a more regular basis and events that bring young people and parents/guardians together would also be beneficial for enhancing communication and promoting mutual understanding. ■

- 1 Northern Ireland Statistic & Research Agency. 7th annual report of the registrar general (1998). Belfast: the Stationery Office, 1999.
- 2 Health Promotion Agency Northern Ireland. Design for living: research to support young people’s mental health and well-being. Belfast: HPANI, 2001.
- 3 Southern Area Health Promotion Consortium. The emotional and mental health needs of young people in the southern area. Armagh: Southern Area Health Promotion Department, 2002.
- 4 Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Promoting mental health: strategy and action plan 2003-2008. Belfast: DHSSPS, 2003.
- 5 Smith K, Leon L. Turned upside down: developing community-based crisis services for 16-25 year olds experiencing mental health problems. London: Mental Health Foundation, 2001.
- 6 Moore S, Rosenthal D. Sexuality in adolescence. London: Routledge, 1995.