

How is mental health changing in a digital world?

More than 420,000 young people in England are being treated for mental health problems every month, illustrating the stark reality of the unprecedented crisis professionals have been warning about.

Experts say the *“long tail of mental ill health”* coming out from the pandemic has seen a rise in conditions such as anxiety, depression and self harm. Statistics don't even tell the whole story: three quarters of people who experience mental health issues *do not access* or receive treatment.

The Internet is catalysing complex conversations about mental health where the opportunities and risks can be a double-edged sword. Exposure to online content can put undue pressure on young people, from self image to unrealistic aspirations for a perfect lifestyle, and we have seen some content become increasingly harmful.

We know most people facing risks online are those who rely most on online support. The Nominet Digital Youth Index shows young people who are LGBTQ+ or BAME are more likely to be exposed to negative content online, yet more likely to search the internet for support with mental health issues. Young people say despite being more connected, *nearly half* feel isolated and a third of 17-19 year olds say the internet has a negative impact on their mental health.

A positive take

On the flip side, online spaces can be important for young people to feel connected, communicate, access resources and seek help. Digital channels can present opportunities to reach people with digital services on their own terms and to reach those who would have otherwise never accessed support. The channels people use to seek support are migrating to digital and blurred on- and offline services.

Many mental health charities are reporting increased demand for multiple channels, in some instances where online or instant chat is beginning to overtake phone calls as the most popular main point of contact. In a context where communications habits have dramatically and irreversibly changed, the challenge to digitalise is particularly acute and ever-pressing for mental health organisations.

Both charities and private organisations are playing a crucial role in prevention and early-stage support. Pressures of long waiting lists for NHS child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), with some reporting waiting more than two months for an appointment, is making it incredibly difficult for young people to get the help they need via the customary channels. In addition, meeting eligibility criteria is another barrier to getting the right level of support. For these reasons, supporting alternative mental health charities and providers has a life changing and proximate impact on young people.

Resources in demand

There is a clear and obvious structural resource need in the sector for digital capacity, yet funding is typically difficult to come by as it is considered 'back office' and if money can be found it usually comes from charity core costs. It is increasingly apparent that this complex issue cannot be tackled in isolation as we move from improving and tackling challenges within individual organisations, to initiatives that benefit learning and collaboration. There is also a huge opportunity to bring in the expertise, resourcing and assets of the private sector.

We are starting to see the potential role to harness digital – for example to create pathways through support and the way young people navigate to relevant help. This in turn can evidence demand, support better planning and enable feedback on the effectiveness of support in meeting needs.

Nominet has worked with Samaritans, an organisation providing emotional support through listening to those struggling to cope, on a digital transformation partnership, which has included initiatives such as online chat,

a self-help tool and email support to diversify the channels for communication. The partnership has also catalysed new ways of doing things, introducing Samaritan's Intelligent Dashboard is beginning to realise how data can be used to better understand how support is accessed and better understand needs to improve future approaches.

Strained resources

It's more difficult to innovate with digital access in an under resourced charity, which underlines the importance of collaboration by sharing approaches and lessons learned, not least because the high importance of privacy and confidentiality leaves no margin for error. Appropriate signposting and diverse options to meet communications preferences can play an instrumental role in propensity and ability to access the right support at the right time.

Our #RESET mental health programme involving eight UK mental health charities has already had a major impact on organisations working on digital transformation in mental health services for young people. Collectively, these projects reached 878,514 young people in financial year 2020-21

An example project includes Hub of Hope, a signposting mental health service directory provided by the national charity, Chasing the Stigma. The free directory brings together local, national, peer, community, charity, private and NHS mental health support services across the UK. Users can filter results based on specific concerns they are facing such as anxiety, self-harm or bereavement and find BAME, LGBTQ+ and neurodiversity-specific support.

Since being listed on nhs.uk – made possible because of Nominet funding and support to technical infrastructure – and cited by Sajid Javid MP as the go-to pathway to find local mental health support in a letter to 3.6M vulnerable people across the UK (September 2021), the Hub of Hope has experienced unprecedented demand listing over 5,000 mental health providers and now signposting over 20,000 vulnerable individuals per month – a growth of 652% from October 2020 to October 2021.

Analysis of uptake has allowed Chasing the Stigma to begin evidencing a collective long-term trajectory of suicide reduction and identified clear gaps in the provision of single point of access (SPA) services for our population across the UK. This is an example of how digital is transforming the landscape not only as a new channel – but enabling understanding the issues and gaps with more clarity.

Our digital world is complicating young people's relationships with how they see themselves and how they communicate, with digital footprints that follow you and exposure to more content than ever before. For mental health support,

digital can also be a catalyst for transformation or doing things differently, whether that's offering different communications options to meet preferences or understanding the reality better to inform investments and decision making.

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