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Early intervention vital to address teen mental health crisis, conference hears

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Overdiagnosis is not the cause of rising mental illness in young people, a mental health conference heard this week.

Matthias Pierce, Senior Research Fellow in the Division of Psychology & Mental Health at the University of Manchester, told the BrainWaves Living Well conference that mental health has been worsening for years, accelerating from 2012 and post Covid, with rises in anxiety and self harm in particular and girls showing more distress than boys.

Some politicians and commentators blame overdiagnosis, but Pierce said that the overdiagnosis theory could be backed up if young people were presenting with milder symptoms. However, his research shows that is not the case.

He also looked at whether the environment young people are growing up in has affected their mental health, for instance, whether the increase could be explained by factors such as more academic pressure, more discrimination or greater awareness of mental illness. The research found evidence for four drivers of poor mental health in young people - poor sleep, employment worries after school, social media and a reduction in youth services.

The session on adolescent anxiety also heard from the BeeWell programme, co-created with young people, which surveyed the wellbeing of pupils in secondary schools across Greater Manchester. It found that factors such as increasing sleep quality, sport, creative activities and boosting a sense of belonging in schools results in better mental health, with school belonging being a standout factor.

Lesley French from the Anna Freud Centre spoke of the need for a strategic whole school approach, early intervention and good leadership that supports school staff to create a culture of safety and belonging, with a focus on good relationships, daily interactions, creative communication [for instance, through drawing and writing], guided self help and active listening.

Early intervention

The day began with a session on population mental health, with the audience informed that 80% of mental illness onset begins before 20 with potential lifelong consequences, from employment to early mortality. That makes it all the more important to address mental health issues as early as possible, with ethnicity, gender, economic group, sexuality and disability among the factors which make mental illness more likely.

Professor Praveetha Patalay from UCL presented research showing how reducing sexual harassment and violence, for instance, could have a significant impact on girls' mental wellbeing and increase gender equality. Her research showed a 16.8% decrease in self harm without sexual violence and an 18.7% reduction in suicide attempts.

She also spoke of how the gender gap narrows if students feel school is a safe space and teachers are fair, adding that there is growing interest in treating all school policies - from absence to school uniform - as mental health policies.

The next session was about the role of sport in mental wellbeing. Professor Camilla Knight from Greenhouse Sports spoke about what conditions enable sport to be more powerful when it comes to mental wellbeing. She said sport had lots of positive impacts, for instance, building team skills, connection and lessening anxiety, but it should be broadened beyond those who thrive on competition, for instance, by promoting young people for achievements such as improving their activity rate. She added that it should deliberately build life skills. Greenhouse Sports sends coaches into schools to promote sport and its benefits for everyone.

Another session focused on neurodiversity and loneliness amid statistics showing an overall reduction in the number of children in the UK and a steadily increasing rise in neurodiverse children, with government policy favouring 'mainstream first' and proposing an over 94% attendance target for all settings by 2028/29.

Research presented by Professor Sarah Bauermeister, Associate Professor of Cognitive Neuropsychology at the Department of Psychiatry University of Oxford, showed that addressing loneliness in neurodivergent young people could boost their mental health significantly.

Clinical psychologist Bettina Hohnen spoke of the need to redefine neurodiversity so that it is not seen as a negative or as something that is "a biological inevitability". She said executive function skills could be increased in neurodivergent young people through deliberate positive teaching tactics, getting young people to understand how particular problems with executive functions can get in their way and giving them the agency to come up with strategies to get around them. "We need to give kids the key to their own success. That's good for all of us and necessary for some," she said.

The Brainwaves conference also held sessions on self harm, belonging and ethnicity. Paediatrician Dr Sunil Bhopal spoke about research in Bradford which showed that context matters and that, in Bradford, young people from Pakistani backgrounds show significantly less mental distress and loneliness than their white peers. He suggested this might be due to them having a broader sense of belonging and access to supportive relationships through family, extended family, religious and neighbourhood communities.

Social media

Social media was a big feature of the conference as the Government prepares to introduce a social media ban for young people under the age of 16. The conference heard from researchers who highlighted the complexity of the relationship between mental health and social media. Dr James Lian from the University of Oxford spoke about research that divided social media behaviour into avoidant/escapist motivations, which has worse outcomes for mental health, and social/recreational motivations. He said the effects of social media depend on why teenagers are using it and not just on time spent on screens.

John Gallacher, Professor of Cognitive Health at Oxford University, said that TikTok affects more young people negatively and keeps them online for longer. Calling it the biggest predictor of poor teen mental health, he said that Snapchat, on the other hand, had a positive effect on mental health because of its focus on communication and connection. He said social media platforms should tackle this difference in terms of their design and content and called for incentives to be given to them to encourage emotional development. Others spoke of the link between time spent on social media and sleep deprivation, the importance of involving young people in research on this issue and placing a focus on positive mental health.

The event ended with an interview by the BBC's Sarah Montague and Professor Michael Thomas, the Chief Science Adviser in the Department for Education. He spoke about his interest in injecting evidence-based ideas into policy, but admitted that politicians have to take into account more than just the science when it comes to the social media ban. He felt there was an overfocus on social media in relation to mental health when there are many other factors and he called for more stringent data on the impact of a social media ban. Professor Thomas also signalled that 'the direction of travel' was towards earlier intervention in mental health.

Talk2Nish was proud to be a charity partner of the conference, which took place in London on Monday and was well attended, despite the heat. BrainWaves aims to bridge the gap between academic research and evidence and practice on mental health in schools. It has been working with schools for many years and has built the biggest national database of 16-19 year olds in the UK tracking mental health. This will extend to 11 year olds over the coming year. Several participants had used Brainwaves cohort for their research studies.

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talk2nishpm@gmail.com

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