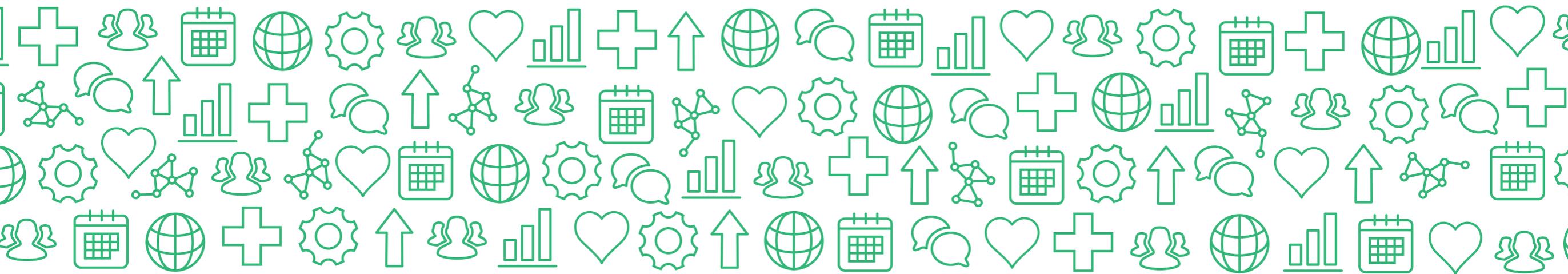


Mental Wellbeing and Online Peer to Peer Support

31 May 2017



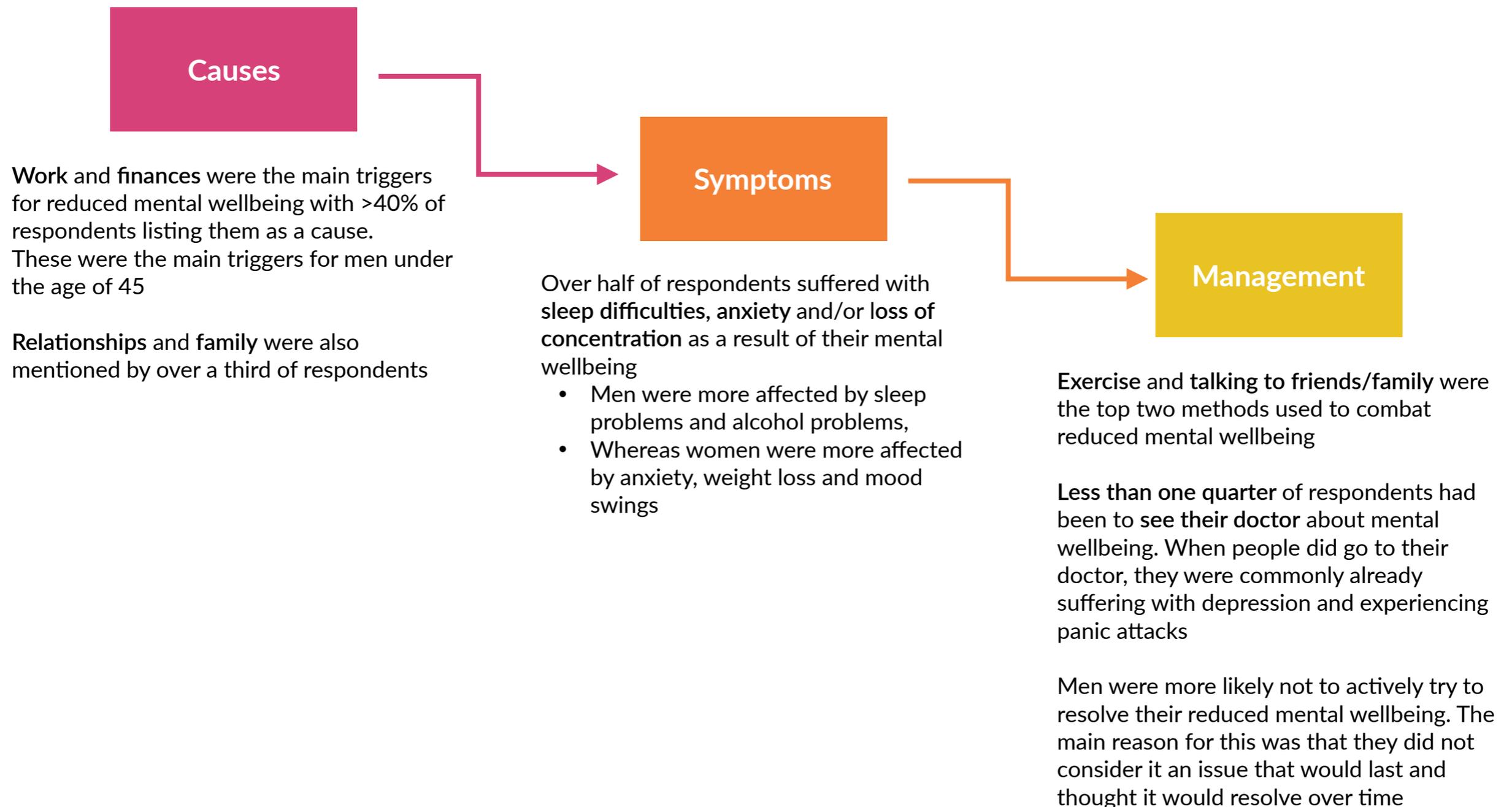
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Executive summary

Less than 25% of people visited their doctor about mental wellbeing, despite more than 50% experiencing sleep difficulties, anxiety and/or concentration loss



Large majority of people would find a dedicated online peer support community for mental wellbeing symptoms useful

Do people think a wellbeing community would be helpful?

Yes. 75% of people visiting wellness communities, would consider using an online community to discuss their mental wellbeing and would particularly like communities focussed on specific symptoms

What should the community look like?

Anonymity was the biggest factor that people needed in order to feel comfortable when using a mental wellbeing community.

Finding people in the same situation to talk to, medical expertise and moderated safe spaces were also key



Most important factors when considering using an online community to discuss mental wellbeing

What would people talk about?

People wanted to post about experiences, ask questions and be able to provide support to others

- **Symptoms:** Specific symptoms e.g. anxiety, sleep difficulties and physical symptoms
- **Triggers:** Work stress or relationship problems and ways to manage these were mentioned
- **Feelings:** Day to day moods and concerns

The effect on my work, and physical symptoms. Things that I found hard to manage by myself.
Female, 46-60 years

All symptoms but guarded to protect my identify.
Male, 31-45 years

Personal experiences and difficulties I have had and have at the moment as I know I can help others. [I would post about things] to relate to others about things they maybe struggling with.
Female, 18-30 years

Almost half of people were unlikely to change the way they used a mental wellbeing community compared to how they currently use a wellness community

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a large, paved public square. The ground is made of light-colored, rectangular paving stones. Numerous people of various ages and ethnicities are scattered across the square, walking in different directions. Some are in small groups, while others are alone. A few people are pushing strollers. The overall scene depicts a busy, open public space. The text "Methodology and Demographics" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Methodology and Demographics

Methodology

Background

Tower Hamlets CCG are leading the development of a London wide project aimed at identifying patients living with undiagnosed mental health related issues and referring them to relevant services including peer support, called the London Digital Mental Wellbeing (LDMW) service.

HealthUnlocked was able to provide insights to TH CCG by utilising the 200,000+ users from London to carry out research about mental wellbeing and online peer to peer support

Objectives

Understand the concerns people using the HealthUnlocked platform currently have regarding mental wellbeing and how it manifests itself

Understand how mental wellbeing affects two main types of people on HealthUnlocked:

- People considered as 'healthy' visiting HealthUnlocked for other wellbeing reasons
- People visiting HealthUnlocked to discuss mental health concerns

Establish the suitability of HealthUnlocked as a channel for providing peer support and to identify the existing communities, through which this peer support can be delivered, as well as to identify where additional communities should be built to address the key areas of undiagnosed mental health in London

Approach

Londoners living with stress or sleep problems were recruited from communities on the HealthUnlocked platform over a period of 4 weeks. They were then invited to take part in a survey about mental wellbeing.

Two separate surveys were fielded aimed at people visiting 2 types of communities on HealthUnlocked:

- Wellness communities (e.g. Lifestyle, Exercise, Eating communities)
- Anxiety and Depression

Data from the two surveys was analysed to understand common themes and differences between gender, age and the community being visited

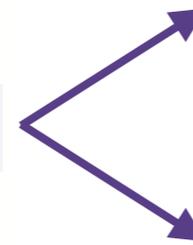
Demographics of respondents

Over the 4 weeks, over 300 respondents completed the 2 surveys:

- Wellness communities: 220 respondents
- Anxiety and depression communities: 103 respondents

The breakdown of gender and age can be seen below.

Total			
Age groups	Female	Male	Prefer not to say
18-30	62	39	4
31-45	83	49	1
46-60	42	18	0
61+	14	10	1



Anxiety			
Age groups	Female	Male	Prefer not to say
18-30	31	5	2
31-45	31	5	0
46-60	19	5	0
61+	5	0	0

Wellness			
Age groups	Female	Male	Prefer not to say
18-30	31	34	2
31-45	52	44	1
46-60	23	13	0
61+	9	10	1



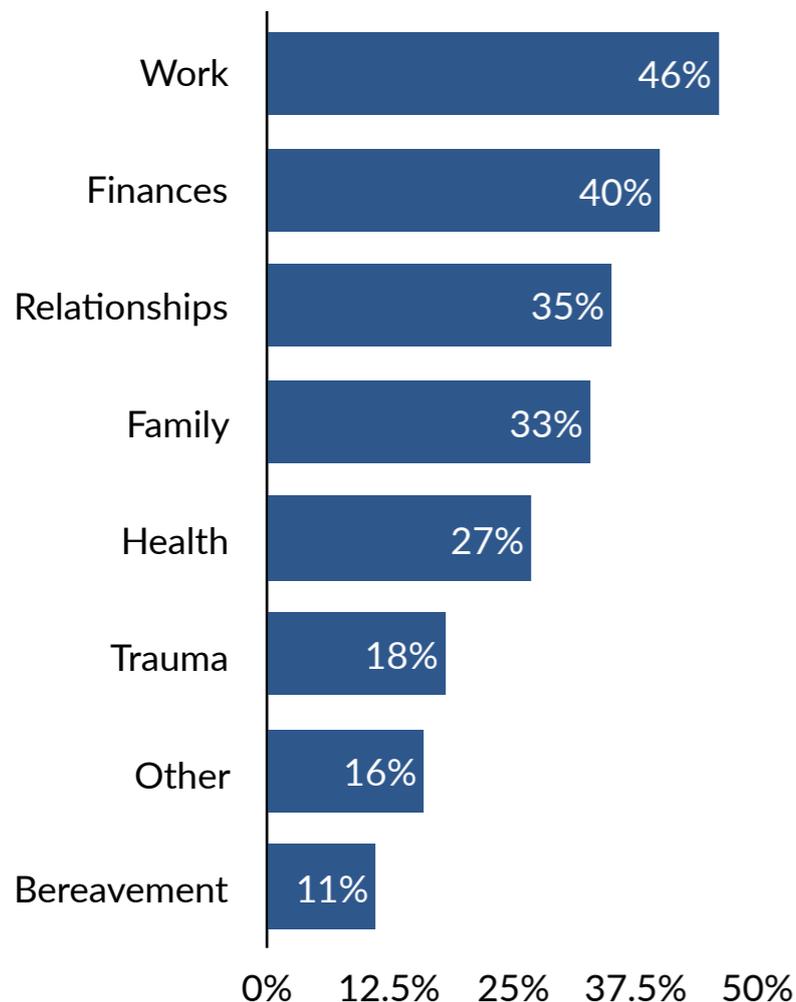
Current mental wellbeing status

Mental wellbeing concerns for men under age of 45 were predominantly triggered by work and finances, with relationships also a key concern for young women

Causes of mental wellbeing

For Londoners, work and finances were clear triggers for reduced mental wellbeing with >40% of respondents listing them as a cause.

Relationships and family were also mentioned by over a third of respondents

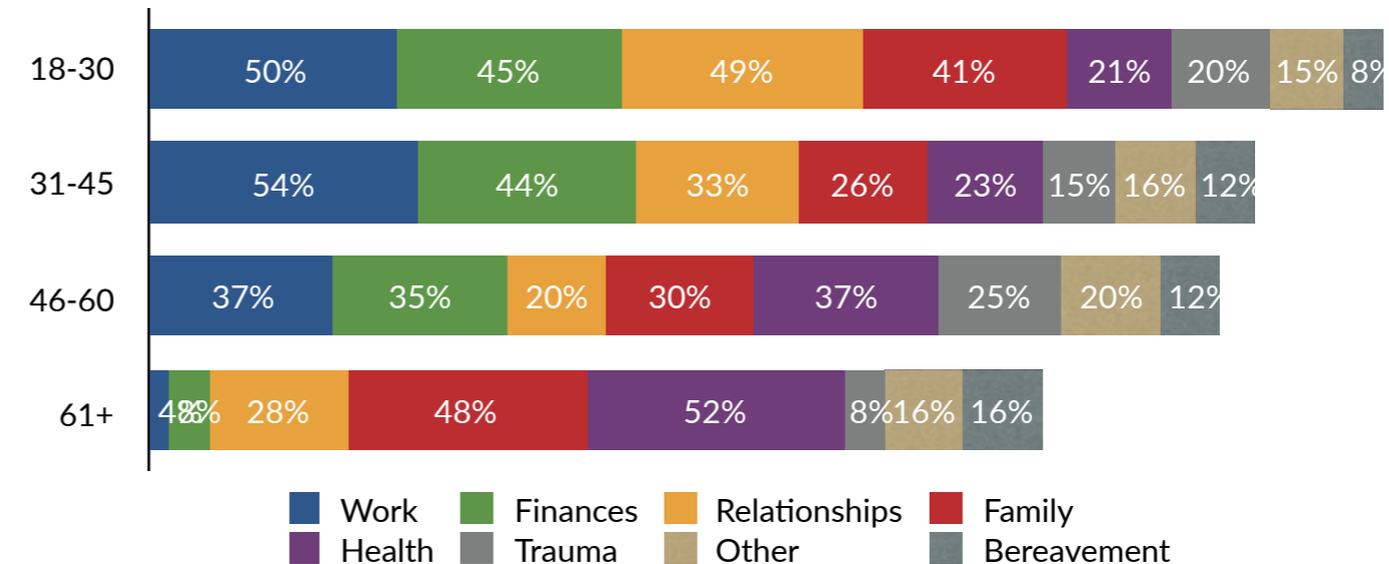


Causes of mental wellbeing by gender

Differences by gender showed that work and finances were the top 2 reasons for reduced mental wellbeing for men.

Work and finances were also the main causes of reduced mental wellbeing for women, but to a lesser extent than for men and with other reasons, such as family and relationships, impacting them to a similar level

Causes of mental wellbeing by age group



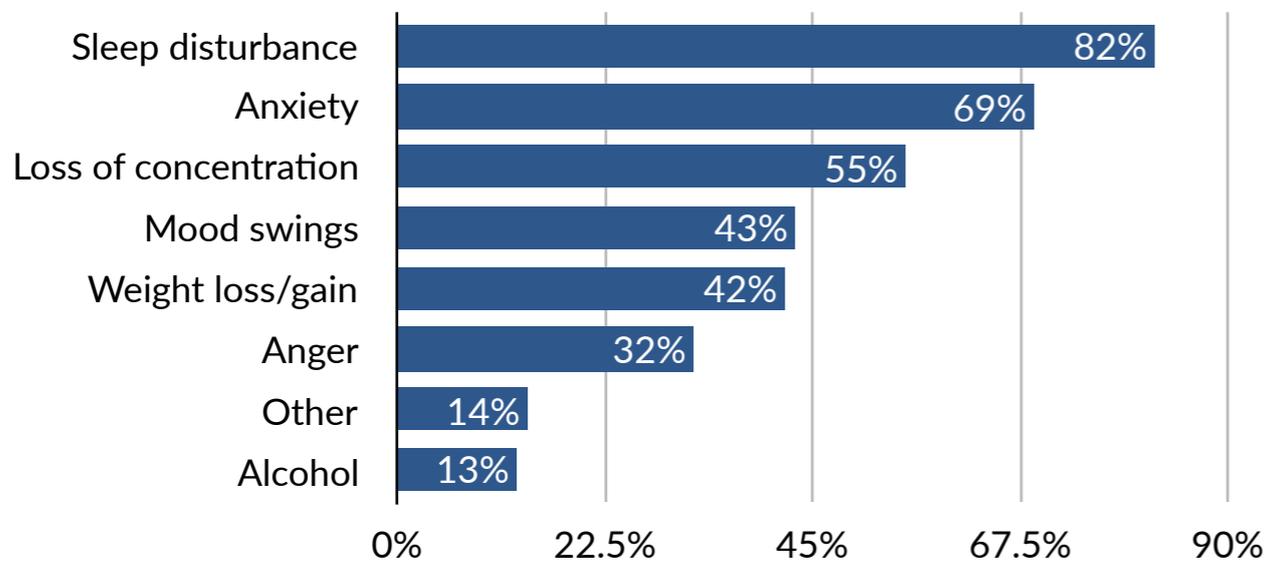
There was a clear gradient in changing causes by age. Younger people were more impacted by work, finances, and relationships.

This was particularly clear in men aged 18-45 years, where work and finances affected 58% and 52% of men, respectively, compared to 32% and 21% of men over the age of 45

Older respondents found family and health to be the key cause of reduced mental wellbeing

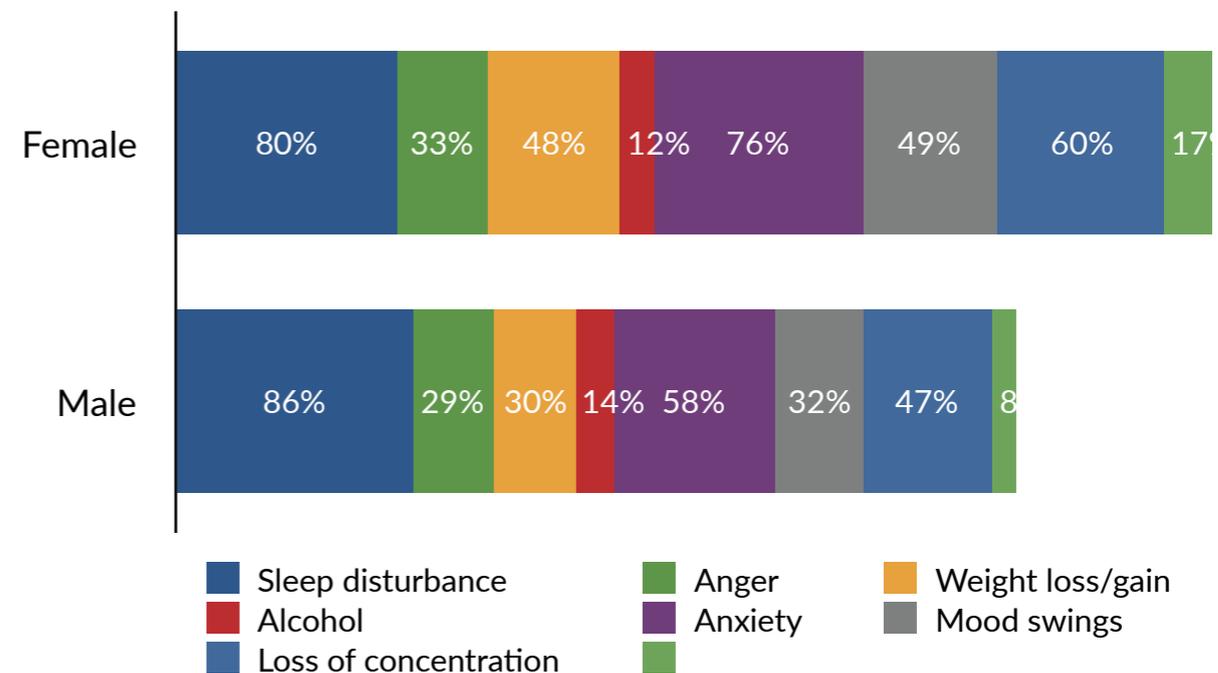
Mental wellbeing impacted the sleep of over 80% of respondents, along with on average 2 other symptoms

Number of symptoms of mental wellbeing



Symptoms associated with reduced mental wellbeing

Impact of gender on symptoms of mental wellbeing



Over half of respondents suffered with sleep difficulties, anxiety and/or loss of concentration as a result of their reduced mental wellbeing

On average people listed 3.5 symptoms associated with reduced mental wellbeing, with women listing more than men (3.7 vs 3.0), and younger men (18-45 years) identifying even fewer (2.9)

People visiting anxiety communities were also much more likely to have identified more symptoms (4.1)

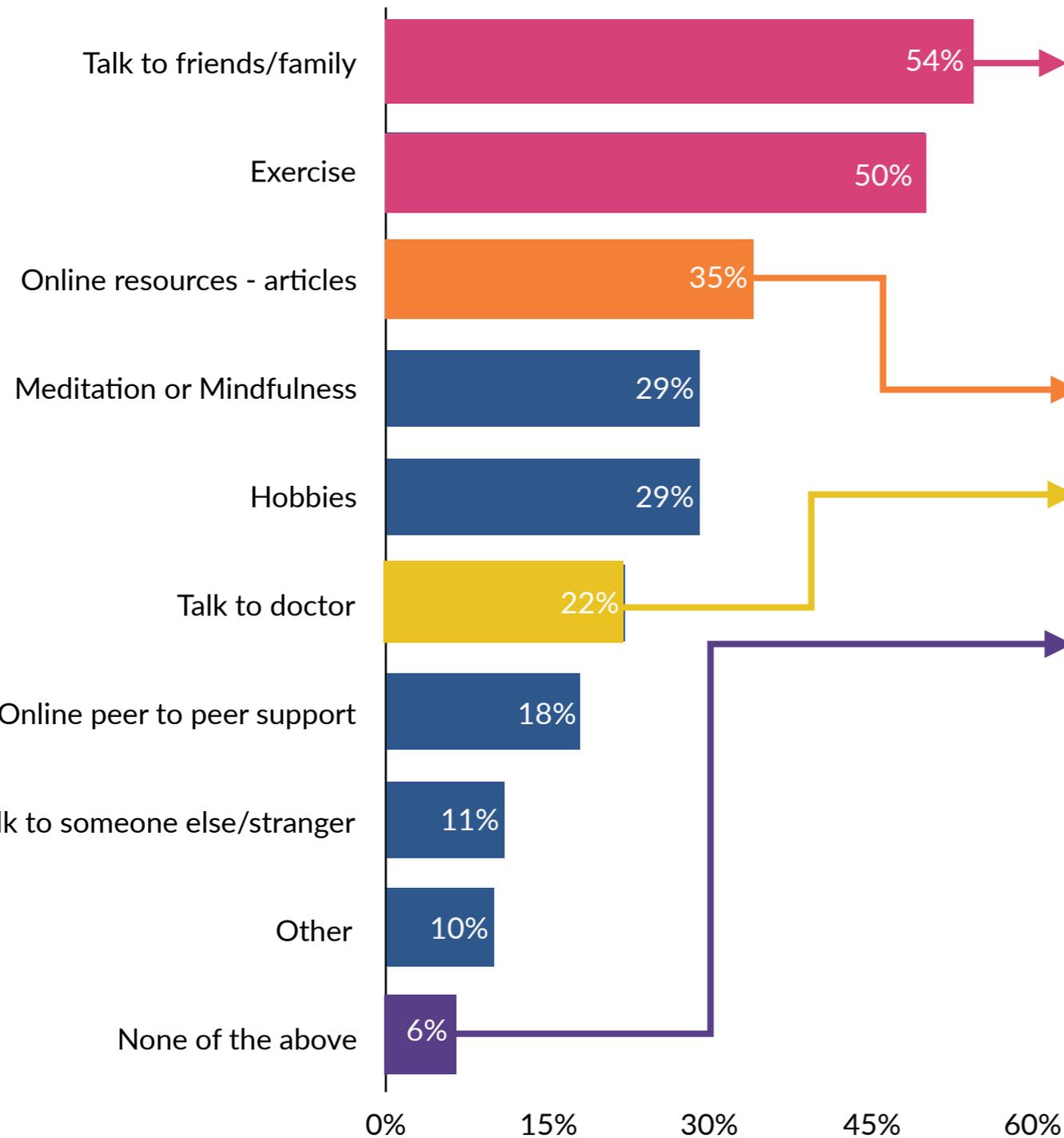
Gender impacted the type of symptoms being experienced:

Men were more affected by sleep difficulties and alcohol problems; alcohol particularly affected the 45-60 year age group

For all other symptoms, women were affected more greatly

- Anxiety was identified by >2/3 of women across all age groups (up to 82% in women aged 18-30 years)
- Weight loss was much more of a problem for older women (45+ years)
- Mood swings affected more younger women (18-45 years)

Talking to loved ones and exercise were top management methods across age and gender; males were less likely to actively try to improve mental wellbeing



Exercise and talking to friends/family were the top two methods used to combat reduced mental wellbeing

- Despite these being the top reasons for both genders, women were much more likely to talk to friends than men (62% vs 41%)
- Younger people were also more likely to talk to friends and family

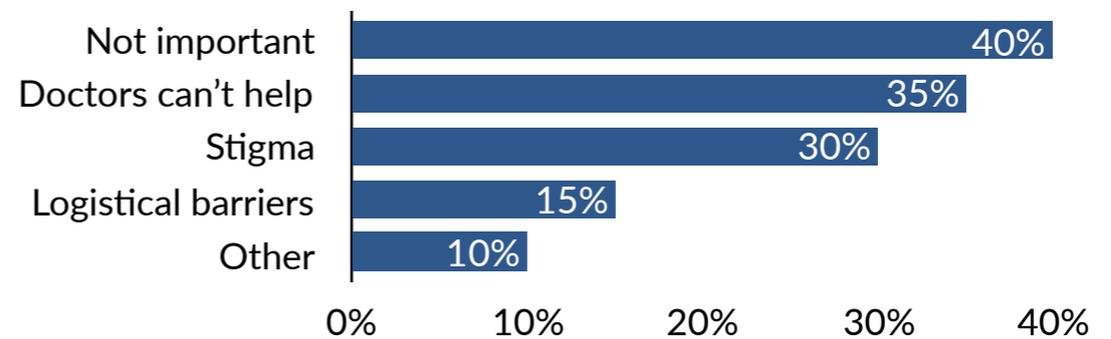
Men were more likely to use exercise and hobbies as methods of increasing mental wellbeing, compared to women

Young people were more likely to use online resources (35% of 18-45 years vs 28% 45 years+)

Less than one quarter of respondents had been to see their doctor about mental wellbeing (split equally between anxiety and wellness communities, gender and age)

Men were more likely not to actively try to resolve their reduced mental wellbeing (9% vs 4%)

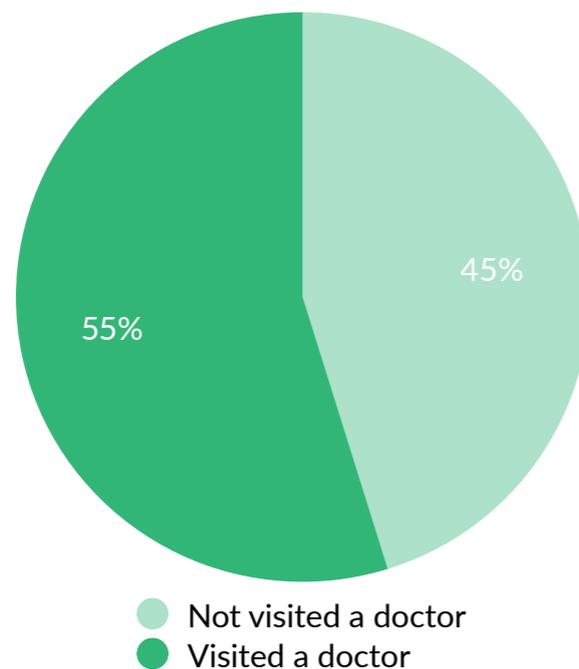
The main reason for not actively attempting to resolve mental wellbeing concerns was that people did not consider it an issue that would last and thought it would resolve over time



>50% of respondents had visited doctors about their mental wellbeing, however triggers for visit were late stage (e.g. depression and regular panic attacks)

Visiting doctors about mental wellbeing

Over half of respondents had been to see their doctor about their mental wellbeing concerns.



Gender: Women were much more likely to have seen their doctor (63% vs 42%).

Age: Older people appeared to be more likely to see their doctor, with 68% of 46-60 year olds going to their doctor

HU Communities: Unsurprisingly, people who were visiting anxiety communities were much more likely to have seen their doctor (77% vs 45%)

What triggered the visit to the doctor?

Visits to doctors were triggered by a range of situations and symptoms, with many people seeming to suffer from serious symptoms

Over a third of people were suffering from relatively serious mental health concerns before going to a doctor, including depression, suicidal thoughts or anxiety

My anxiety and depression were debilitating and affecting all areas of life; I was struggling to understand what were real concerns or what I was making up in my own head. Female, 31-45 years

Symptoms such as panic attacks, insomnia and other physical manifestations of reduced mental wellbeing were also a large cause for a visit to the doctor.

Many did not associate these symptoms with their mental wellbeing prior to their doctors visit

I knew I was going through a stressful time, but the physical feelings made me think something might be wrong with me. For example I would often feel out of breath, which to me mimicked heart attack symptoms or something more serious. Female, 18-30 years

Many people noted that it was on the suggestion of friends, family or work colleagues that they visited the doctor with their concerns

Lack of confidence in doctors' ability to treat mental wellbeing prevented people from visiting, as well as perceived low importance of symptoms

Doctors' ability to help

Reasons for not currently visiting a doctor

Over a third of people did not believe doctors could provide appropriate help. This ranged from assuming that doctors would only prescribe medications, which was not something people wanted, to believing that they would not be taken seriously

Some found that if they went to the doctor and admitted they had worries, this would make their mental wellbeing concerns more real and therefore serious



What would trigger a doctors visit?

People wanted reassurance that their doctors would take them seriously but not just prescribe medications if they went to them

If there were more services available, people would be more inclined to visit a doctor. This included more flexible hours, more informal settings and mental health specialists that they could trust

Symptoms

28% of respondents did not think their symptoms were important or serious enough, with many believing that they would pass with time



Large number of respondents (>40%) thought their symptoms would have to worsen significantly to warrant a visit to their doctors. Many mentioned anxiety or stress manifesting as physical symptoms or affecting relationships as a tipping point

Stigma

Embarrassment, the stigma surrounding mental health and possible consequences (e.g. to employment prospects and future health diagnoses) were reasons people did not visit a doctor



Education for GPs and members of the public to reduce the stigma was suggested as something that could encourage people to visit their doctors

I've never thought it serious enough to see a GP about and don't think they would be interested or take it seriously. I feel like it's my issue to deal with rather than a medical problem. Male, 46-60 years

If I knew that they specialised in dealing with mental health. Knowing that I wouldn't be judged, and not having to explain the reason to the receptionists. Female, 18-30 years

Current online peer to
peer support



People mainly joined anxiety communities to find people who understood, as well as advice and information

Reasons for joining a HealthUnlocked community

Peer support

Over a third of respondents joined an anxiety community on HealthUnlocked to find other people going through the same thing as them.

Seeing that people were going through similar situations and knowing that others understood made people more confident about dealing with their own situations

In addition to reading about other people's experiences, being able to discuss their own concerns openly and get reassurance from others was an additional level of support for the community users

Advice and information

The rest of respondents used the community to find out specific information or advice about their symptoms and conditions

Common information needed was about medication and tactics to improve anxiety

It helps me calm down from an anxiety attack when I read that other people experience similar/identical symptoms and/or thoughts with their anxiety. Although I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy, it is definitely consoling. Female, 18-30 years

[I joined to] be around and chat to people who understand. We are all individuals on the journey but it is nice to share with people who experience the same emotions. Female, 46-60 years

Knowledge is power and I felt it would be good to know why certain things are happening to me and affecting my health. Female, 46-60 years

Majority of users only read content, especially on anxiety communities where 2 in 3 hadn't posted

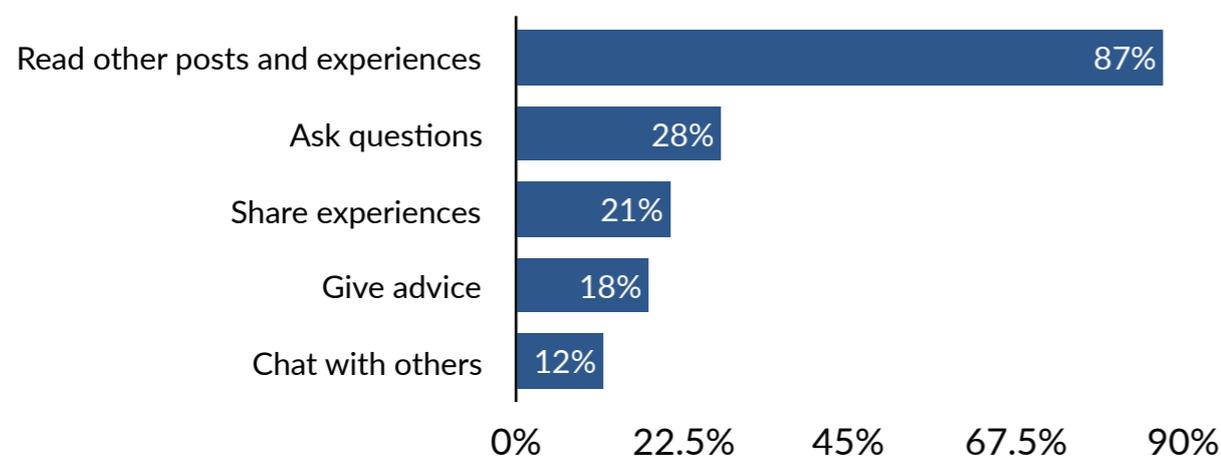
Activity on wellness communities

The most common activity for people on wellness communities was to read about other peoples experiences and their posts.

- This was clearly seen across all age groups
- Women appeared to prefer reading content and sharing they own experiences compared to men, whereas men were more likely to ask questions than women

Over half of users (57%) only read posts on the community, without taking any action to participate

~20% or people carried out 2 activities, most commonly reading posts and asking questions



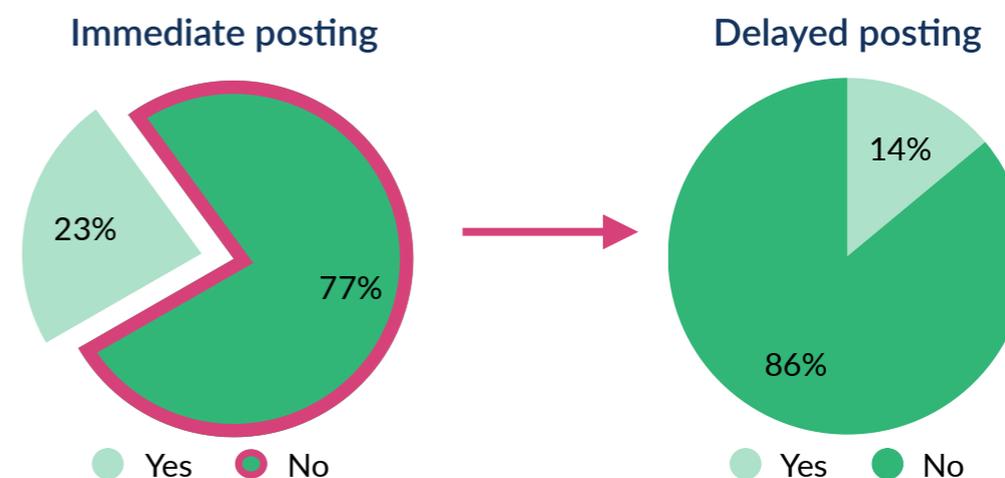
Posting on anxiety communities

Only a third of respondents posted or commented since joining a HealthUnlocked anxiety community

Two thirds of these posted straight away, while the others posted after being a member of the community for a while

Males and females posted in equal proportions when first joining (~25%), however women appeared more likely to post at a later date.*

Older age groups were more likely to posts with ~70% of over 46 year olds posting, compared to 20% of 18-45 year olds



Overall

The majority of users use communities as source of content to read, rather than a place to post or share their own experiences. The topic of conversation appears to impact the rate at which people post, with more people posting and connecting with other people on wellness communities compared to anxiety communities (57% vs 66%)

*Sample size of men is very small (n=15)

A wooden boardwalk with railings leads down a grassy dune towards a sandy beach and the ocean. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The text "Online peer to peer support for mental wellbeing" is overlaid in white in the upper center of the image.

Online peer to peer support for mental wellbeing

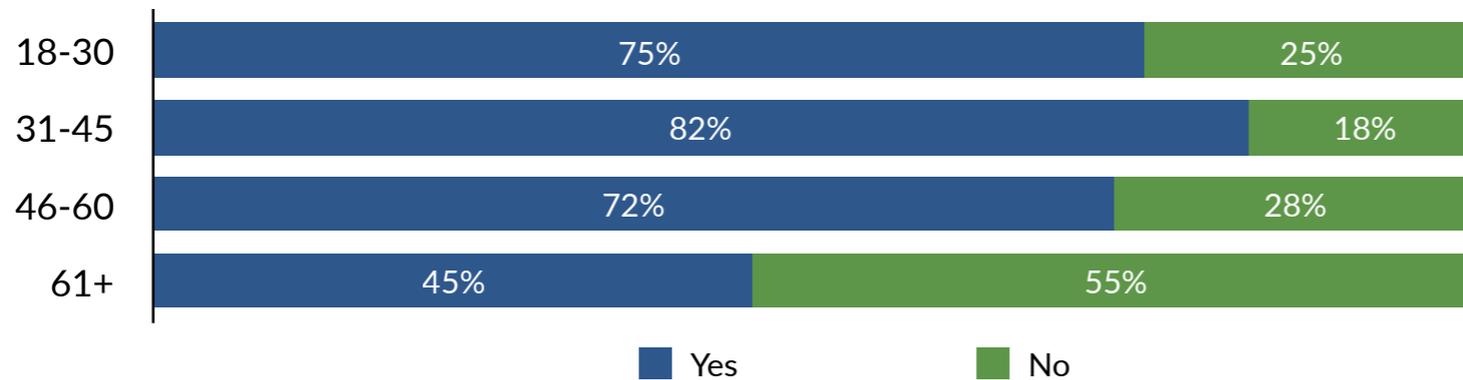
People overwhelmingly felt an online community for mental wellbeing and specific symptoms would be beneficial

Mental wellbeing community

75% of people visiting wellness communities, would consider using an online community to discuss their mental wellbeing. Men and women were equally interested in a mental wellbeing community.

However, age impacted the desire for an online mental wellbeing community with younger people much more interested

Would you consider using an online community for mental wellbeing?



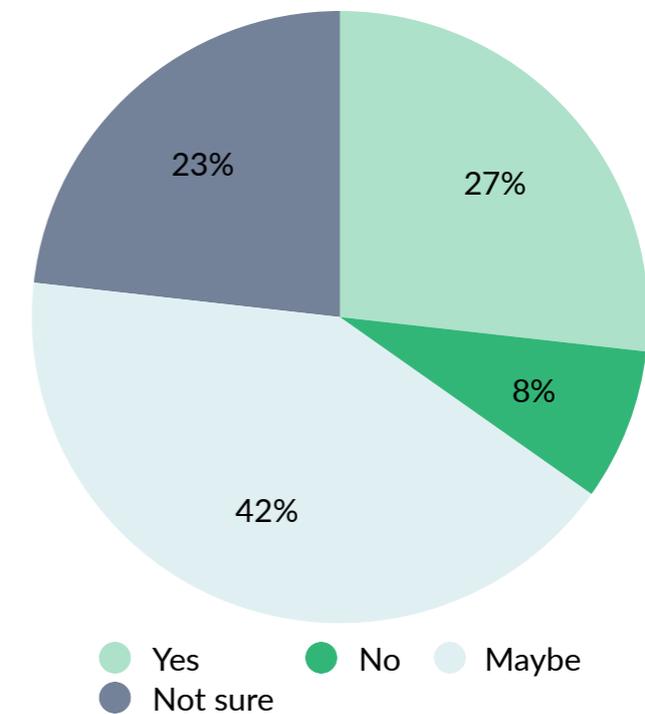
Community dedicated to mental wellbeing symptoms

People overwhelmingly believed that a community dedicated to specific mental wellbeing symptoms would be beneficial (87% of respondents). This was reflected similarly across age, gender and the community followed (anxiety vs wellness)

However, people were aware that this setting may not be suitable for all topics, with ~60% confirming that there would be some symptoms they wouldn't talk about

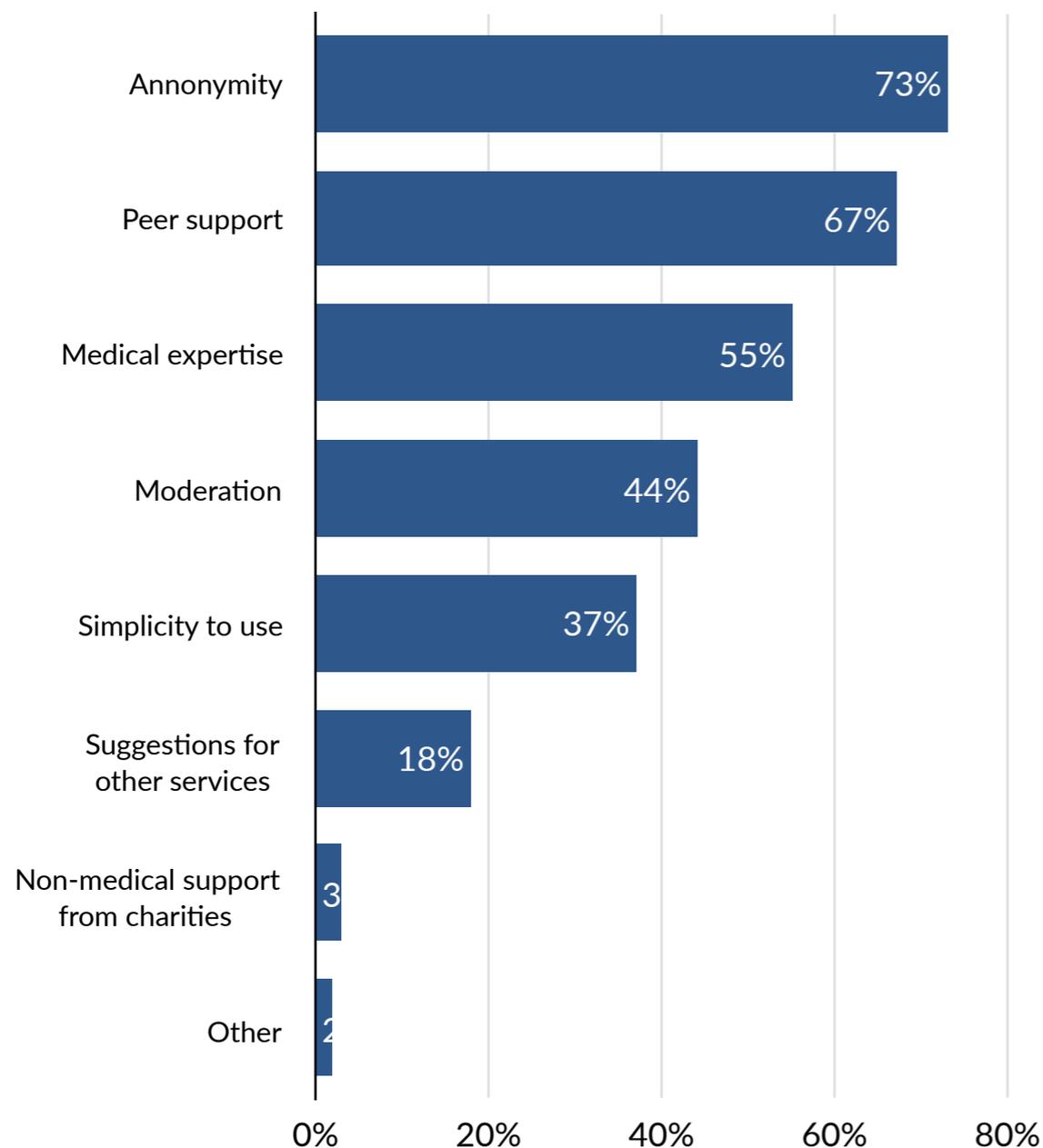
Long term impact of online communities on mental wellbeing

When people visiting anxiety communities, were asked if online peer to peer support may have helped them when they first started having concerns about their mental wellbeing, the response was largely positive, with <10% saying outright it would not have helped them



Anonymity and peer support were key factors needed for a mental wellbeing community; medical expertise was an important factor

Most important factors when considering using an online community to discuss mental wellbeing



For people visiting wellness communities, anonymity was the biggest factor that people needed in order to feel comfortable when using a mental wellbeing community.

This sentiment was echoed across numerous questions throughout the research

Opinions across genders and age were relatively similar, although men in particular rated the need for anonymity and peer support very highly (75% and 73% respectively)

Other suggestions to make the community more appealing, included:

- Being able to find local people to physically talk to
- Useful resources and information
- Presence of professionals or links to referral services

I would talk about all symptoms, if it's anonymous. Female, 18-30 years

HealthUnlocked experience

The importance of these factors were backed up by people currently visiting anxiety communities who thought the peer support and anonymity of the HealthUnlocked platform were the top benefits (79.6% and 48.5%, respectively)

Moderation and simplicity to use were also seen as benefits by over a quarter of respondents

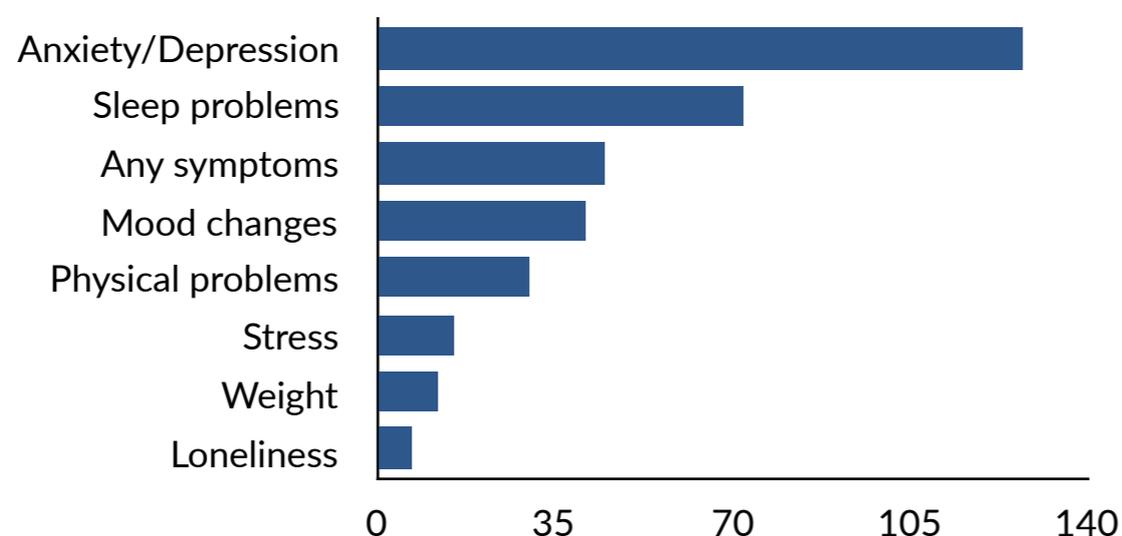
Symptoms, feelings and triggers would all be discussed on communities; some respondents would avoid discussing more 'private' symptoms

+ Topics that would be talked about on a mental wellbeing community

People wanted to post about experiences, ask questions and be able to provide support to others

- Symptoms: Specific symptoms e.g. anxiety, sleep difficulties and physical symptoms
- Triggers: Work stress or relationship problems and ways to manage these
- Feelings: Day to day moods and concerns

Symptoms people would talk about



— Topics that wouldn't be talked about on a mental wellbeing community

People weren't asked directly what symptoms they wouldn't discuss but overall, it was suggested that more personal feelings and aspects may be kept private

- A couple of people stated they wouldn't post about anything sexual or any forms of abuse
- If people didn't believe their symptoms were serious enough they may not post about them, especially if they saw others posting problems they considered worse

I would discuss...

Personal experiences and difficulties I have had and have at the moment as I know I can help others. [I would post about things] to relate to others about things they maybe struggling with. Female, 18-30 years

The effect on my work, and physical symptoms. Things that I found hard to manage by myself. Female, 46-60 years

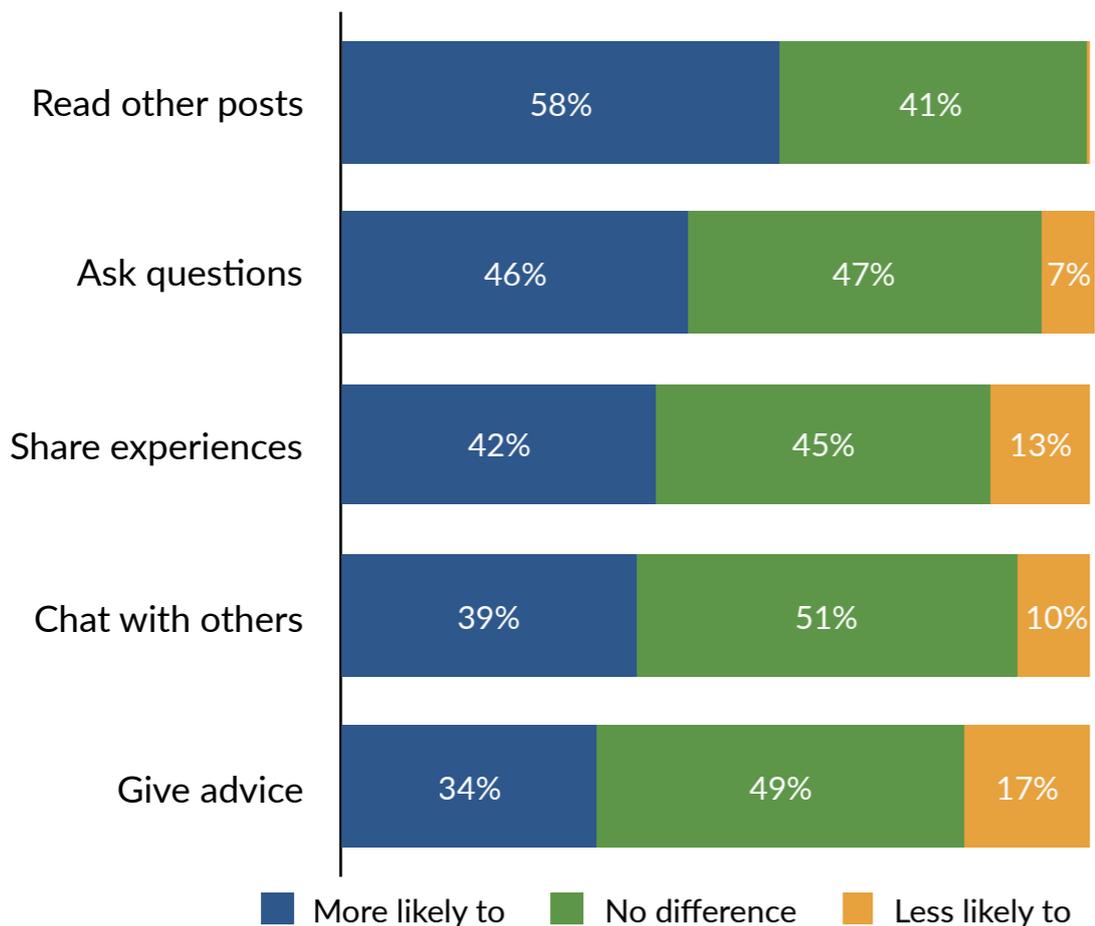
All symptoms but guarded to protect my identify . Male, 31-45 years

It would be easier to talk about general physical symptoms (e.g. shaking) and triggers. I would find it harder to discuss feelings and be more reluctant to give specific details of events. Female, 31-45 years

People would use a mental wellbeing community in a similar or more engaged way than current wellness communities

Almost half of people were unlikely to change the way they used a mental wellbeing community compared to how they use a wellness community

Generally, the rest of the respondents would take part in more activities, especially reading and asking questions. This reflects the lack of resources currently available and the desire for people to find reassurance in their peers



Reading posts was the main activity that people would be more likely to do, as people felt that seeing others going through the same thing would be enough to reassure them without needing to post themselves

I am more keen on reading about other people's experiences than sharing my own thoughts. Male, 18-30 years

Sharing experiences was something that some people were uncomfortable doing as they were concerned about being judged and were worried about complaining when there people seemed to be going through worse situations

I'm scared of being judged and not being able express my feelings. Female, 18-30 years

Many people voiced concerns about **giving advice** on mental health as they understood the serious nature of the condition and did not feel comfortable making recommendations

I don't feel qualified to advice anyone when I can't sort my self out. Female, 61+ years

Its not my place to advise on anyones conditions/emotional state. Female, 31-45 years