Partnership
for Young
London

Good
Thinking

Checking in: Voices of young people during lockdown

Contents:

Foreword

'Checking in' is a critical aspect of working with young people. Under normal circumstances, it happens all the time - in classrooms, colleges and youth centres; through counselling sessions, group work and directed activities; or, just as often, over a cup of tea or in the middle of a game of 5 a side. Checking in is also therapeutic, helping people reconnect with themselves ('How am I?') and then helping them work out what would help them ('What do I need?'). These conversations (with ourselves and each other) not only inform individual interventions but shape the wider delivery of services. The coronavirus pandemic has limited the opportunities to check in with young people at a time when they are needed more than ever to help us support them better.

We are, therefore, hugely grateful to our Digital Health Ambassadors for stepping in and giving us feedback on how they are. They have been generous in sharing their thoughts and worries about the coronavirus lockdown and in explaining what they are doing to support their mental wellbeing. We're struck by their eloquence, honesty and self-awareness.

As the pandemic evolves and, later, as the UK moves towards a relaxation of current restrictions, we will keep checking in with them, socially listening to their achievements and challenges, and we will share their insights. These insights will give all of those supporting young people a direction in these uncharted times.

This rapid assessment is intended to meet an immediate need – our need to know how young people are. We are conscious of its limitations; our small cohort cannot stand in for young people's collective experience. However, what may be lacking in terms of scale is countered by the richness of accounts of lived experience. We hope this report will go some way to inserting the voices of young people into the urgent conversations going on across the UK about how best to support their mental health and wellbeing. These are critical conversations and young people must be a part of them.

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Partnership for Young London
is a registered charity that works for a future where every young person's right to wellbeing is recognised and fulfilled. It provides a cross-sector platform, drawing together public and private organisations, as well as the voluntary sector, social enterprises, and local, regional and national government, as partners in the same vision.

https://www.good-thinking.uk/

Good Thinking & Healthy London Partnership
Good Thinking is London's digital mental well-being service, jointly developed by London's Directors of Public Health and the NHS and supported by the Greater London Authority and London Councils. Launched in November 2017, to date, it has been accessed by over 360,000 Londoners and had over half a million visits to the site. It provides a range of digital well-being support for the four common mental health conditions; anxiety, stress, low mood and poor sleep. These include self care apps, information sheets, self-assessment and signposting to services where required. Good Thinking has responded to COVID-19 by providing specific support, advice and personal stories for Londoners during the pandemic.

https://www.partnershipforyounglondon.org.uk/

Introduction

The Challenge

Young people may be less vulnerable to coronavirus infection, but they are not immune to the wider impacts of the pandemic such as isolation and lockdown. A survey carried out by University College London of over 75,000 respondents which focused on the psychological and social experiences of adults living in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic found that amongst younger people (aged between 18-29)[1]:

- Levels of depression and anxiety are higher than in any other age group
- Thoughts of death or self-harm are higher than in any other age group
- Levels of self-harm levels are higher than in any other age group
- Levels of abuse are higher than in any other age group
- Life satisfaction is lower than in any other age group
- Feelings of loneliness are higher than in any other age group

On 27 March 2020, one third of all young people surveyed by UCL reported having thoughts of death and on 18 April 2020, 15% said they had self-harmed.

The need to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people has rarely felt more urgent, yet a survey of UK Youth Movement members (a network of youth and community organisations that work with young people across the UK) found 88% are likely or very likely to reduce service provision to young people due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic[2].

Face with increasing need and decreasing resources, organisations that provide services to young people must develop new strategies to adapt to the unprecedented circumstances in which they are operating. However, rules on social distancing make it much harder to include young people in the process. If organisations can't speak to young people to find out how they're feeling, what's worrying them and what support they need, there is a risk that tools and support will be backward facing and only address adult-assumed challenges.

1   **Covid-19 Social Study Results Release 5**, Dr Daisy Fancourt, Dr Feifei Bu, Dr Hei Wan Mak, Prof Andrew Steptoe Department of Behavioural Science & Health, UCL, 22 April 2020

2   **The impact of COVID-19 on young people & the youth sector**, 8 April 2020

Partnership for Young London + **Good Thinking** + **TikTok**

The Project

TikTok has supported Partnership for Young London and Healthy London Partnership Good Thinking service to run a bi-weekly listening project with young people aged 14-24 in and around London to better understand their experience of Covid-19. The young people surveyed are part of the Digital Health Ambassador programme set up jointly by Healthy London Partnership and Partnership for Young London. Ambassadors are invited to answer a questionnaire developed by PYL and HLP, developed using the ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy) model to encourage mindful, guided self-reflection. The project team includes Dr Richard Graham, a consultant psychiatrist specialising in child development and digital wellbeing. Dr Graham helped design the initial questionnaire and subsequent iterations.
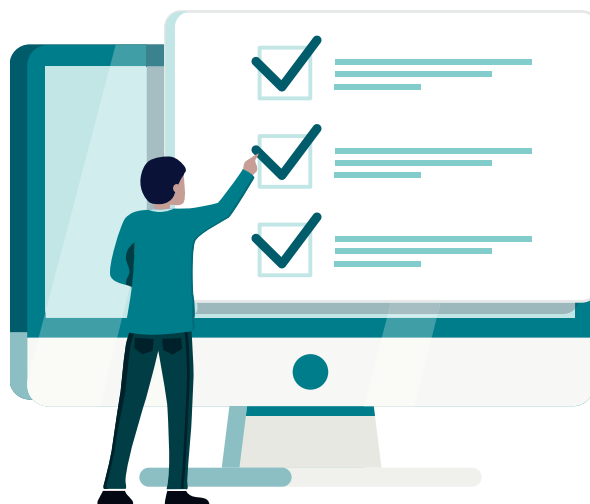
Digital Health Ambassadors

Partnership for Young London's Digital Health Ambassadors programme is funded by Healthy London Partnership. The project seeks to empower and support a core group of young Londoners to:

- Create opportunities for young people to shape digital products and initiatives
- Up-skill and support young people to design campaigns and content using the media that YP will take notice of
- Create a network of young Londoners that actively promote digital health and wellbeing initiatives amongst their peers
- Bring together partners
- Develop an evidence basis for future programmes and initiatives

There were no entry requirements for the programme other than age (14-24). Many of those who put themselves forward were involved in existing youth advocacy and outreach initiatives or were accessing services. The age range for the group is between 14-24, and the majority (approx. 95%) live in London. Of the 32 London boroughs, 24 are represented in the cohort. The group includes young people with disabilities, care leavers and young people from BAME.

The survey is sent out to the same group each time, but it is up to the young people whether they choose to respond so the number of responses and the demographic makeup of respondents varies from survey to survey. Digital Health Ambassadors are not paid to take part, but all those who respond are entered into a prize draw to win a £50 Amazon voucher. Once lockdown restrictions are eased, any Digital Health Ambassador who has completed two-thirds of the surveys will be invited to TikTok's London office to participate in a programme of events aimed at enhancing the young people's digital skills and offering career advice to those interested in working in tech. The Digital Health Ambassadors will also have an opportunity to share their thoughts with TikTok London's senior leadership team on what more the platform can do to support young people's mental wellbeing.

The surveys

This report is based on the first three surveys sent out to the Digital Health Ambassadors. Respondents could choose which questions they answered.

The first survey was sent out on 26 March. It was a rapid assessment containing just three questions:

- What are the most worrying issues for you today?
- What is most affecting your mental health today?
- What tip would you give to anyone to help their mental health during this coronavirus pandemic?

85 young people responded. Of those, 37 identified as male, 45 as female and 1 as non-binary.

The second survey was sent out on 9 April. It contained 18 substantive questions and Partnership for Young London received 33 responses. 28 respondents were aged 18-25 and 5 were 16-17. 21 identified as female, 8 as male, 2 as non-binary and 2 preferred not to say. 23 said they did not have a disability, 5 said they did and 5 preferred not to say.

The third survey was sent out on 23 April. It contained 16 substantive questions and Partnership for Young London received 48 responses. 39 respondents were aged 18-25, 6 were 16-17 and 3 were under 16. 19 identified as female, 28 as male and 1 as non-binary. 40 said they did not have a disability, 5 said they did and 3 preferred not to say.

The fourth survey was sent out on 11 May. It contained 16 substantive questions. At the time this report went to press, the survey was still live. Some preliminary responses on reasons for not going outside have been incorporated into this report but the full analysis will be reported at a later date.

Key Learning

The issues being raised by young people throughout this work are systemic; no one agency will be able to address the challenges being experienced by young people as we emerge slowly out of this crisis. Indeed, many large scale quantitative surveys are already in place. This project seeks to build on this critical work by drawing out some of the lived experiences of youngpeople - and giving a voice to some of those the data tells us are suffering most.

Some of the learning from this listening project, which will undoubtedly change and develop as lockdown is gradually lifted, includes the need:

- To create a space where the research on the impact of coronavirus on young people's mental health and wellbeing can be collated and used to influence future service design and delivery

- To develop a comprehensive and fully funded, cross-departmental strategy to support young people's mental health as lockdown eases. This strategy must address the full spectrum of mental health impacts – from the rise in acute disorders such as PTSD, suicide and self-harm to the challenge of adjusting to a new, less-certain future including the very practical challenge of going back outside

- To develop a cross-sector coalition to carry out a full audit of how the coronavirus pandemic has altered prospects for young people, including education, finances, career, physical health and mental health

- To develop work across all key partners to identify ways in which we need to adapt the delivery of mental health and wellbeing services, including greater use of digital to provide services immediately and at scale

Finally

Don't underestimate impact. Young people cannot return to normal, because their old world has gone. We need to look at changing our ways of working to meet the need, and young people must be co-creators of the solutions moving forward.

Insights

Below we set out the key themes that have emerged from the surveys.

Going outside

It is troubling that a third of respondents said they left the house once a week or less. This suggests that young people are going beyond government advice and imposing even greater restrictions. Such extreme confinement may negatively impact young people's mental health and quality of their sleep, especially if it also means they are not exercising or getting enough exposure to daylight, which could affect their Vitamin D levels and sleep. Longer-term, it may indicate respondents are anxious about the outside world and may struggle when the lockdown is eased and they are required to break their isolation.

"I feel like I'm less active than I was like walking around"

"I am finding the lack of motivation to get outside into the sun every day to get vital vitamin d"

"I just don't speak to people as much"

"Very isolated as I bounce off other people"

"it feels suffocating being inside the house and not seeing friends"

"I hate it here, would very much like to go outside"

"I'm most worried about having to come back out of isolation"

"Lack of physical contact. Being forced to stay at home. Other people not taking this seriously but also the people who go too far with panicking."

"I speak to people every day usually and now lockdown I speak to people less"

"Avoid human contact when possible"

"Anxiety due to all the unknown and risks of catching the virus"

"Loneliness, sadness, isolation, feeling afraid when I go out"

We explored this topic further in our fourth survey and whilst the survey was still live at the time of this report, the proportion of young people going out once a week or less remained the same. The weather was a significant factor when deciding to go outside or not. For most, good weather persuaded them out; for those who were uncomfortable going outside, it kept them indoors because they worried about the possibility of large crowds.

> "The fact that every time you go outside, you're at risk of contracting the virus and some people don't care about social distancing which is in place to protect them and others"

> "Weather and thought of how many people might be out because it's sunny, etc. Also the news."

> "The fact that people don't know how to social distance and the fact that the virus is still at large."

> "The virus."

> "Necessity of the task - has to be completely necessary "

> "My health and the risk of getting coronavirus."

> "Weather and the amount of people outside."

Mental Health

We found some indications that those with pre-existing mental health difficulties are struggling more. This supports quantitative studies that indicate this group is at higher risk of negative mental health impacts during lockdown. Respondents had good insight into the fact that lockdown had limited activities which would be protective or promote mental well-being (e.g. meet-ups, sports, walking). Some had found alternative solutions, others had not.

> "It's removed some of my usual coping mechanisms (e.g. socialising, spending time in nature) and therefore made my mental health a bit more wobbly. Nonetheless it's forced me to strengthen other coping mechanisms such as at-home exercises and meditation, and other self-care activities which before I'd focus on less."

> "I suffer from depression so not being able to go out more than once a day for a walk is affecting my ability to clear my head"

> "I've been feeling a lot more depressed. I'm deprived of my usual coping mechanisms (long walks in nature, travel, friends and socialising). I have no escape from my family environment which can be emotionally difficult at times. Nevertheless, I'm able to spend more time working on strategies such as mindfulness and meditation which are giving me newfound internal strength."

> "Being at home and with family comes with a lot of stresses and pressures. I am not used to living with them as much as I am a student and it has been difficult to come back. My brother has ADHD and my family aren't aware of mental health issues and argue a lot so I take on much more than I would usually."

"Mentally challenging"

"It's impacted my paranoia and fear over elements I can and cannot control. It has impacted my work, social and leisure time enormously so I am feeling more isolated and less productive"

"My anxiety has increased and I have adhd and odd so I find it really hard to stay in in the day time but I work every day in the evenings so that helps me feel better"

"My anxiety and depression has definitely got a lot worse in the past 2 weeks. It's causing me problems sleeping and some days I don't get out of bed because I'm feeling very low and no energy."

"Can't leave, feel isolated"

"I manage to concentrate more about myself which is helping my mental health in a positive way"

"My anxiety, depression and dissociation have heightened massively."

"I feel I have interacted less with the people I live at home, I sometimes feel separated from society."

"I think it has negatively impacted my mental health as it feels like you're stuck in the same routine, also not being free to go outside for things other than essential items is a bit suffocating"

"Working still, but not seeing boyfriend is becoming very difficult on my mental health"

"Has left me with more time to think about my mental health and time to mediate and not rush in the mornings"

"My boyfriend is a big part of my life and happiness and not seeing him or being able to have a cuddle really affects me"

"Overwhelmed with being in my final year at university and having to work from home, the children are always out playing which is nice but difficult to help concentration when studying."

"I also feel like everyday is becoming the same and some days are better than others when searching for motivation and hope"

Self-reflection/Monotony

Boredom/cabin fever is a key theme. As external activities/distractions are limited by isolation, there is a sense that what is challenging is the inevitable increase in self-reflection and responders being in closer contact with themselves. On the one hand, this is forcing an identity crisis - how they define themselves in the lockdown present, but it is also proving to be an opportunity to reconnect with their values – what is important. Some respondents find self-reflection easy, others less so. This suggests some young people would benefit from tools for guided self-reflection.

"Everyday is the same."

"Made me much more grateful for the things we are able to do on a day to day basis that we are unable to do currently in this pandemic"

"I've still had to actively create time to reflect."

"It's allowed me to focus on myself given the extra time I have, and I am using the negative situation to improve myself positively"

"Definitely, it has made me realise the things I love doing and what I want to do after the lockdown"

"It's just made things slower quiet"

"Has given me more time to think and slow down."

"Find it very easy and tempting to just do nothing...But there are also days when I sit down to reflect and write what I want to do/become etc."

"100%, can't run from my thoughts as easily & bingeing on anything will only make me sick so I have to confront myself"

"I feel like in isolation you know what to prioritise but don't know how to do it."

"Isolation has helped me evaluate and prioritise which relationships I should maintain."

"Just generally feel more tired and drained."

"Yes- a lot of the things we live for aren't actually necessary"

"Somewhat feeling less motivated to do simple tasks at home"

"Life is more boring."

"Less to do, boredom"

"It has made me realize how lucky I have it and how important my family are to me."

"Definitely! It's helped me realise what my basic necessities are, as well as which people and activities I am struggling to live without."

"Yes. There's nothing more important than your loved ones. A fast paced life can sometimes make you forget that"

"This time is encouraging self-reflection, which can be positive but also difficult at times."

"Not changing scenery, eating, working and relaxing in the same space can be a bit tedious and soul destroying"

Finance

Whilst the majority reported they could get helpful information regarding health, when it came to other areas of life such as finances, work or claiming benefits, far less knew how to find information. This suggests better information on money and employment could be very helpful.

"feeling more challenged with uni stresses and lack of money and income and trying to manage bills and debt is stressful whilst trying to also study within the final year of a BA honors in Politics"

"I was trying to get a part or full-time job; this has got much, much harder"

"I am worried about my income in the foreseeable future and that gives me a lot of anxiety"

"Financial issues are the MOST worrying as the family business has collapsed and my parents are having to work much much harder to secure our livelihoods."

"Money"

"I'm worried about the economy and how this is going to affect my generation... not to mention finding further employment after this and whether housing will be an issue as I won't be a student in September so will have to find another place to live and am worried about having the income saved to be able to move to a new place. The government have said they can only assist me with UC in May."

"It has been a real struggle to even find 3 meals in a day... let alone how the electric will be topped up. In terms of my current employment- it is a casual contract and therefore we do not have much coming in with this either. It's a real struggle however we stay grateful that we are not homeless and have each other"

"The economy"

"Because college is not happening I've gone back to my old job working everyday so getting dollar"

Closeness via technology

Half of the respondents seemed confident that technology helped them feel closer to friends and family, whilst about a third felt the technology did not help. However, our respondents reported mixed feelings; technology helped them feel closer, only to feel lonelier/apart when the call ended. One respondent wrote of how the absence was felt after the call. Video calls are hyper-real, amplifying certain aspects of communication (up close) and perhaps then creating a greater sense of distance as it ends.

"It's difficult to maintain friendships since you can't go out, but facetiming has helped a lot."

"I would say both [make you feel closer or miss them more], you maintain your friendships but at the end of the call you realise you miss them more"

"I miss them a bit more, but the absence isn't felt till after the call"

"Sometimes it makes me feel closer to them, and I am grateful that we are able to stay in touch. It also makes me feel better when lonely or down to be able to chat and video-call friends. Nevertheless, there is often a moment when communicating with them that I wish it wasn't through a screen, and I often miss physical contact and in-person interactions."

"Definitely closer. You've got to be flexible in these unique situations.

"Makes me closer we have deeper convos now"

"To a degree but it's not the same as being there in person so you end up missing them more"

"Don't like it. It's a demand on limited energy"

"Yes, I feel I am with my friends whilst at home!"

> "You've got to bite the bullet. Otherwise you'll be truly isolated."

> "definitely more zoom calls"

> "more phone calls and FaceTime"

> "It varies. Some days I'm quite social, others I'm not due to working from home. It can be quite difficult to switch off when your home is your workplace."

> "I have gone through my list of contacts reaching out to people who I haven't spoken to in a while"

Coping with uncertainty

The second and third surveys ended by asking the respondents if they had any questions. This question was designed to give respondents an opportunity to tell us what was on their mind but also to probe how they were coping with the inevitable uncertainty of a global pandemic, including the extent to which they were reconciled to the lack of answers. The majority didn't have any questions, suggesting they had a good understanding of the 'known unknowns'. Others acknowledged uncertainty was inevitable in a global pandemic:

> "None that can be answered yet"

> "Only things that answers don't yet exist to ;)"),

However, about one third are struggling with the uncertainty of the pandemic, which suggests there is a need for support to help young people acknowledge and bear the uncertainty. It is also important to provide answers where possible.

> "When is it going to be over?"

> "What are your predictions for when life will return to "normal"?"

> "when is it going to go away?"

"How long with these effects take a toll on the least advantage:("

"Is it possible to have a second wave and will it be worse than the first?"

"Will it end before summer"

"Is there a potential of a second wave?"

"when will lock down end???"

"When will it end"

"When will the restrictions become less stringent?"

"when is it going to end?!"

"When will lockdown end?"

"What is the real truth behind all of this?"

"How long is this actually gonna last?"

"How will the economy recover and how long until we can go back to where we were."

Some questions were quite precise, highlighting the need to provide answers to key questions as quickly as possible, particularly in relation to how the pandemic will impact studies:

"What's going to happen with exams next year? Will I have to repeat the year?"

"I understand the virus just the unknown stuff like school which would be nice to be clearer"

Tips from our Digital Health Ambassadors

Whilst this report is intended to highlight some of the challenges that young people are experiencing during the pandemic, the Digital Health Ambassadors also showed remarkable levels of resilience, acceptance and a deep commitment to supporting others – even when they were struggling themselves. It is, therefore, only fitting that we leave the last word to them. Below, we set out some of the tips the Digital Health Ambassadors offered to support mental wellbeing at this challenging time.

"Get active. Go outside if and when you can daily. Have a sleeping routine."

"Try to count your blessings and reach out to someone that offers you a safe space to talk when you need to."

"Try and do at least one thing every day. Always get out of bed and move around."

"Eat well. Exercise. Do things you enjoy. Learn."

"Step outside, open windows to get as much fresh air as you can"

"always think positively, this virus has given us more time to try something new, for example baking"

"Go for at least a half hour walk"

"Meditate! Practice yoga and at home exercises. Look at your window and find beauty. Go for walks if allowed. Stay in touch with loved ones virtually. Look after yourself and your body... Life hasn't stopped, it's just different and we need to adapt."

"Just to keep strong there will be an end but if we all come together and stay home it'll get better quicker"

"Keep calm, it won't stay around forever! There'll be a party one day soon!"

"Have a routine"

"Make sure you're exercising. Interact and call your friends and speak to people"

"Do what makes you happy, if you need to sleep or take a break do it"

"Avoid the news, find the positives, it's not BAU - don't feel lesser if you are having a hard time concentrating or being productive - find what works for you"

"Focus on what you can control and choose a proactively positive attitude towards this."

"Communicate with others, engage with the wider world, you are not going through this alone"

"Try think that it will be over and things will get better"

"Weather's been banging tbf and I've got to spend more time with my mum."

"Reach out to your friends"

About the Authors

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Links

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