

**What people have told us about
their mental health and wellbeing**



April to October 2020

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Below is a summary of what people have told us about their mental health and wellbeing through the Weekly Check In's

Anxiety

Access to Health Services and Support

People discussed **anxiety** and **worry** about lack of access to treatment, GPs being unable to refer, and lack of specialist support leading to concerns over their health. This was a particularly common theme for people living with existing **long term** or **chronic conditions**.

- *"I have no idea when I can access further treatment for my disability"*
- *"It's so difficult even speaking to a doctor right now. I have fibromyalgia, hypermobility and chronic pain I feel total abandonment."*

Some people told us about how they were **struggling mentally** with the stresses of managing their physical conditions on their own or while waiting for appointments which had been **delayed**.

- *"My son is waiting for an operation and is very stressed verging on depression"*
- *"I'm worried that my cancer is NOT being monitored as they said it would be."*

Anxiety about being a **burden** on the NHS or **wasting time** if they attend A&E or a support service was mentioned by some people.

- *"Other people need help more than me"*

Concerns were expressed by a mental health charity about those **self-harming** who won't attend A&E for fear of coming into contact with coronavirus and worries about additional **stigma** in times when staff are overstretched.

The provision of **digital GP appointments** has, at times, been a good alternative for those with mental health problems.

- *"I hope they continue to offer this after the lockdown as it is hard for me to get out due to mental health problems."*

However others told us that the online GP appointments only offered medication for their mental health problems which was not always helpful.

- *"All [my GP] offered was sleeping pills and tranquilisers - which I didn't want"*

There were **challenges** for those not able to access services **online**.

- *"Before lockdown, I was having counselling and EMDR. Because I have a child in the house, I can't do it online."*

Some people talked about the challenges of building relationships with professionals and getting ongoing support for their mental health needs. Others told us about the negative impact of lockdown on their existing mental health issues.

- “I accessed a helpline suggested by my manager. This was a very helpful one-off conversation but left me feeling even more isolated as there is no ongoing regular support”
- “Anxiety has flared up, particularly in the first few weeks of lockdown. Isolation makes depression harder to manage. More difficult to be optimistic.”

Fear and Uncertainty

When health services began to reopen (from July onwards) people continued to tell us they had anxiety about being **exposed** to the virus in healthcare settings.

- *“I shan’t go to hospital but think I need urgent treatment unrelated to covid19”*
- *I would not feel comfortable accessing healthcare support right now.”*

People told us about anxiety related to **returning to normal life** and a **loss of confidence** in going outside. The uncertainty of the length of time the pandemic will go on for has also been difficult.

- *“Feelings of anxiety about going outside and being in public and overall about the future”*
- *“Bit worried about transition back to normal life as we have settled in to new normal.”*
- *“My daughter (11) was very emotional... She also became really frightened to leave the house & was very anxious that her key worker father would become ill.”*
- *“The uncertainty about how long lockdown will last, combined with being unable to take part in many enjoyable activities, make lockdown tough to deal with”*

As lockdown eased, for some people stresses and social anxiety **intensified**, especially in shielding groups which had been most isolated. The **behaviour of those around them** appears to be a key factor for people.

- *“I’ve been anxious, particularly about increasing numbers of cases at a time when it feels like the world is opening up.”*
- *“A well-organised setting which isn’t too crowded feels safe. There are settings where your safety depends entirely on the choices and actions of other people.”*

At the end of August, 85 of the 107 people who shared their experience with us (in the Summer Check In) said they felt unsafe in public at least some of the time.

At the beginning of October, some organisations and individuals told us that there is increasing **anxiety** about the winter months and the prospect of a **second wave** of the pandemic.

- *“Service users’ mental wellbeing has been knocked by the prospect of the pandemic entering a second wave, prolonging their isolation.”*
- *“There is a sense of dread with winter approaching and even less opportunity for social interaction.”*
- *“Members still feel anxious and low about what might be around the corner.”*
- *“I cannot face having to isolate again as Shielding caused me to suffer really badly with my mental health as I live alone.”*

Work and Financial Concerns

Anxiety and concerns about unemployment and **financial needs** such as feeding families and housing were common, including the loss of free school meals. This was increasingly reported by organisations that focus on those affected by **debt** and **vulnerable** families.

- *“I am paid monthly Universal Credit. I constantly run out of electric and food because most of my money goes out on paying bills. It is a nightmare so you have to constantly worry about things like that.”*
- *“I have a fairly consistently anxious feeling as I am self-employed and have lost all of my work. I feel very uncertain about the future”*
- *“Unemployed and fed up”*

Some people also talked about **work-related stresses** over lockdown leading to increased **anxiety** and feelings of **demotivation** and **lethargy**:

- *“I have lost confidence in my ability to make decisions. I have lost contact with people and feel more alone. My health has suffered as my posture at home was not as good and I have gained weight and prefer not to be seen in online meetings. My work has been more difficult and stressful and I fear redundancy.”*
- *“I get very down some days due to working from home and not seeing people”*

Others told us about the challenges of juggling **working** and **home schooling** and the stress that this has caused.

- *“Isolated from all support, lone parent juggling home schooling and work”*
- *“The struggle of home schooling and working feeling like I’m not achieving at either. Want to give kids more of my time.”*

Workforce Stress and Anxiety

Some organisations told us that staff were feeling **anxious** and **under pressure** especially when working in care settings and would benefit from additional support.

- *“Staff anxiety is very high and causing concerns in the organisation. More mental health support would help.”*

- *“There is some degree of increased anxiety amongst the staff team”.*

Some **care workers** told us that lockdown had had a negative effect on their wellbeing. They most commonly referred to **stress** and **anxiety**.

- *“Affected my mental health, anxiety has been exceptionally high and depression has crept in on days away from work due to not being able to see my family and loss of routine”*

Education and Young People

School closures and **exam cancellations** have had an effect on the mental health of young people. We found that young people **aged 16 to 18** are more likely than younger children to have seen their mental health and **well-being** negatively affected by lockdown.

- *“My mental health deteriorated... due to the cancellation of exams and not knowing where my place at university lies for September”*
- *“He had everything he was looking forward to pulled away from him, no last day at school, no goodbyes to friends, no prom, no Leeds fest, no athletics meetings he's told me he's felt suicidal. He feels he's wasted 11 years of education”*
- *“My daughter suffers with anxiety which has increased since lockdown with not having the distraction of school and the social interaction and routine. Her emotions and feelings became so overwhelming a couple of weeks ago that negative thoughts led her to taking an overdose and had to be admitted to A&E.”*

Some parents of children with **additional needs** reported school closures having a **positive impact** on their child.

- *“My son had severe dyslexia and despite being on SEN register is not supported in the school environment. He has flourished under home schooling and confidence has soared”*
- *“No stress/anxiety caused by school to child with ADHD, autism and other disabilities. Calmer and more focussed at home. Learning more.”*

However, this was not the case for everyone and some reported struggling without **school**, **routine** and **social interaction** with peers.

- *“My daughter suffers with anxiety which has increased since lockdown with not having the distraction of school and the social interaction and routine. Her emotions and feelings became so overwhelming a couple of weeks ago that negative thoughts led her to taking an overdose and had to be admitted to A&E.”*

A few young people told us about their experience of accessing online or phone **mental health support** during the pandemic. Experiences were **mostly positive**. One person mentioned issues around **long waiting lists**.

- *“It (The Market Place) was better than I thought it would be, pretty much the same just shorter”*

- *“Looked online for support - wait times for support are extensive due to demand.”*

Isolation

Loneliness and Social Isolation

An overwhelming amount of feedback has related to feelings of **loneliness** and **isolation**. This has affected all age groups and communities and spans from April through to October. Loneliness has increased people's levels of **anxiety** and has had an impact on people's mental health and wellbeing.

- *“Many members are finding the impact of Covid high, describing feelings of isolation, despair and depression”*
- *“Increased my anxiety and depression due to no contact from people”*
- *“Getting harder the longer it goes on, no longer feel part of society, seem bypassed by everything”*

People told us about feelings of being **isolated**, **lonely** or **“trapped”** by ongoing restrictions.

- *“feeling restricted on what I can do, loss of freedom and choice”*
- *“Shielding makes me feel like a prisoner”*

A common theme throughout the pandemic has been feelings of **‘demotivation’**.

- *“I can't concentrate as well as I used to, so have been flitting from one thing to another. Anything that takes real effort feels very arduous.”*
- *“Bored, depressed, can't be bothered to do even the smallest jobs”*

At the beginning of the pandemic, face to face support groups for a range of communities and conditions stopped. While the **transition** to online was smooth for some, it increased feelings of **loneliness** for others. Many group organisers told us that they were concerned about increasing levels of **social isolation** as attendance for online support groups was down and people missed out on the face to face interactions. Boredom and the mental impact of **loneliness** and being cut off from workers and peers was mentioned by those supporting people with **learning disabilities**.

- *“Group members are feeling isolated and missing the group as it's a lifeline”*
- *“Many members are finding the impact of Covid high, describing feelings of isolation, despair and depression. They miss the shared experience of the group.”*

Digital Exclusion

Those who struggle with technology or are **digitally excluded** can be more socially isolated. **Older** communities or people with **additional needs** are two of

the groups more likely to be affected by digital exclusion. This tends to impact on their ability to **access** and **understand** government guidance, leading to additional stress and anxiety. Communities with a **language barrier** and those supporting people with mental health issues and **learning disabilities** told us some of their members struggle with technology and online support.

- *“Trying to set up a Zoom meeting for those who have phones, but some are a bit ‘paranoid’ about technology and being spied on.”*
- *“They have simply been left behind by the digital revolution and trying to teach the necessary skills in this group is a real challenge.”*

In October we were told that **access to digital** services continued to be an issue.

- *“A large percentage of service users are struggling with the switch to digital - 80-90% don’t use online for anything and those that do have the capacity don’t have the technology.”*
- *“There has been some variance with regards to service users embracing the switch to digital, with the older group (80 and above) really struggling due to physical or sensory problems and finding it all very stressful”.*

Bereavement

People have reported **significant distress** and **anxiety** about loved ones dying alone or being unable to say goodbye due to isolation measures.

- *“Being unable to visit my father for two months has been very distressing. He is 97 and is dying slowly, a process that’s been exacerbated by lockdown. The care home does not provide the level of care we expect and without family visits dad has been left on his own without company, not helped to eat or drink. I finally saw him two days ago and it was like visiting a ghost, his body is there but my dad is gone, a result of isolation and neglect. I’m now feeling depressed and guilty that I’ve not been able to support him at the end of his life.”*

Isolation and regulations around **funerals** and social distancing have impacted the way people grieve and the use of coping strategies. People have been unable to **support** family and friends during their **grief** and have not been able to have (or attend) a proper funeral.

- *“Physical isolation from friends and family has also been difficult. While not having access to their usual distractions over lockdown has made some service users’ bereavement more painful, for others it has given them time to process their feelings.”*
- *“One of our friends lost his dad as lockdown started and we can’t support him and his family”*

Community Spirit and Self Care

Despite the negative effects of isolation and shielding, during the first lockdown people reported a feeling of **community spirit** and said the problem of elderly social isolation getting more **widespread attention** had helped them.

- *“Some people are getting more attention than they were before because of the pandemic.”*
- *“Being supported by neighbours, volunteers, the wider community and friends and family”*
- *“Some carers now receive more help from family, friends and neighbours. The stress of juggling work and other commitments outside the home has diminished.”*

Many of the positive experiences of lockdown which we heard about focussed on it being a **welcome break** from responsibilities, which has led people to feel **calmer**. This has also meant they have more time for **self-care** and new activities.

- *“It’s actually improved my anxiety not having to deal with people face to face and no commuting.”*
- *“It’s been great not to be dashing about all over the place. I feel much more relaxed.”*

Family, social and caring relationships

Carers

Many unpaid carers felt **trapped** during lockdown because of the unrelenting nature of their duties when day centres and other support was withdrawn, leading to extra stress and anxiety. Some talked about feeling **forgotten** and **abandoned**.

- *“Very hard no escape from caring, day centre closed, not wanting to wake up some mornings knowing what lies ahead again, life not worth living at the moment no respite no help.”*
- *“There’s no break from caring, which means my volunteer role at Citizens Advice has had to stop. This was the only time I came into contact with anyone else. My son can be quite demanding with his behaviour.”*

Others talked about the strain of having loved ones in **care homes**. They felt **anxious** and stressed about having **no contact** with them and worried about their mental health and wellbeing.

- *“Not being able to visit my mother in law who is in a care home and has dementia. She is really confused and doesn’t understand what is happening.”*
- *“No visits to mother in care home for last 8 weeks. Since testing positive for Covid-19 she has been further isolated to her small room, resulting in significant deterioration of her mental health. The fact that care home residents were so late to receive testing and are now having their already limited freedom denied is a huge injustice.”*
- *“I’ve a specific worry about my mum who is stuck in her care home without visits or outings.”*

There were specific concerns expressed around the mental health and wellbeing of those with **dementia** and the impact of the lockdown on them and their loved ones.

- *“My mum and dad both have dementia and live in their own homes. Both have deteriorated mentally and physically during lockdown and have missed my visits and care. In turn my own mental health has suffered and I have struggled coping with the fact that I am missing so much of the very precious time they have left as they are 88 and 92 respectively.”*
- *“Caring full time for a 97 year old mum who cannot understand what lockdown is and why she can’t go out. Her mental health is now so fragile she just wants to die”*

Family Relationships

The increased time spent in the house changed **family relationships** during the first lockdown. Some appreciated the extra time together, while others found it to be an **extra source of stress**.

- *“Quality family time and companionship. Emotional development through exposure to family feeling which may have been more hidden pre lockdown.”*
- *“Due to lockdown we seem to argue everyday about everything.”*
- *“The struggle of home schooling and working feeling like I’m not achieving at either. Want to give kids more of my time.”*

Some individuals have felt **trapped** in houses they feel **unsafe** in.

- *“It’s trapping me in a house where I lived with domestic abuse as a child, so it triggering memories and depression”*

As lockdown eased there were increased worries about **exposing vulnerable individuals** to the virus, leading to feelings of **guilt**.

- *“I’m really worried about bringing the virus home to my partner who is shielded. I go out very rarely but it is still a massive worry and I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing”*
- *“I still have some strong worries regarding the virus as my mum is in the high-risk group so you can say I’m quite scared about bringing the virus in i.e food deliveries. Lockdown is the safest way in terms of staying safer.”*