



wysa

# No-one to turn to

*The teenage struggle to  
access mental health support*

Wysa UK youth mental health report 2023



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# Contents

Introduction	III
Methodology	IV
The breadth of mental health concerns teenagers face	VI
Numbers screening positive for depression or anxiety	VII
Getting support to those who need it	VIII
Satisfaction with support given	X
What are teenagers worrying about?	XI
Timing of stress peaks	XIII
Who teens are turning to for advice	XIV
The lived experience of Wysa	XV
Teenage appeal of digital therapeutics	XVI
Conclusion	XXI

# Introduction

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There's a youth mental health crisis. Words we hear a lot. NHS data suggests 1 in 6 have a mental health problem, and half of all mental health issues are established by adolescence. Yet Wysa's new research suggests that the scale could be larger than we think - and that the solutions we are offering aren't making a big enough difference.

In January we conducted an independent survey of 1406 13-17 year olds to find out more about their mental health. We asked them what is troubling them? Where do they get support? And is that support making a difference? Our survey also took respondents through two standard mental health assessment tools used by clinicians as an initial screening for depression and anxiety symptoms. We then asked those whose scores indicated significant levels of depression and anxiety whether or not they had sought professional support, and if not, why not? Are they comfortable talking to their teachers or parents? And what would they think about using an app?

The results reveal a worrying picture. Here are the top three findings:

1. The need for mental health support is bigger than is being reported - over four in five express worry and anxiety about an issue, and a third suffer symptoms at levels that require professional support and clinical investigation.
2. Services are proving to be inaccessible for over half of teenagers - they are not at the right time, steeped in stigma, or not the kind of support that people need.
3. Young people don't want to speak to teachers, or mental health teams at schools. They want their families - and they want always-on digital solutions.

We've spoken to a generation struggling with anxiety, stress and worry, who feel as though they have nowhere to go. The increased investment in mental health services through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services via schools, clinics and communities is welcomed, but it seems the impact isn't being felt by our young people. We need to meet young people where they are, in a way that is safe, clinically robust, and genuinely supportive.

This report shows what young people are experiencing right now, and how open they are to discussing it. It shows where they are seeking help, and what is stopping them. And it shows a mental health crisis of a bigger magnitude than we realised.

Read on to find out more.

## Methodology

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On behalf of Wysa, Obsurvant carried out a survey targeting 13-17 year olds in the UK. Respondents were asked about their mental health struggles and the support (or lack thereof) they have received in response. Respondents were incentivised and each provided opt-in consent in line with GDPR guidelines. Obsurvant is an accredited MRS company partner.

This survey was completed by 1,406 respondents on both mobile and desktop devices and all were based in the UK.

The research targeted 13-17 year olds either directly or through parents with opt in consent and a handover within the survey. Given the nature of the questions there was a summary and the option to end the survey at the beginning.

Different recruitment methods were used to remove any potential single source bias. Quality Control Measures included Geo IP tracking and digital fingerprint checks to ensure that there was no duplication or link manipulation.

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*The results from this research are troubling. Not only is the scale of mental health challenges potentially higher than we realised, but the avenues of support aren't reaching people in the way that they need them to.*

*Our young people are anxious, worried about the future, stressed about school work and exams, struggling with body image and relationships - all in the context of the tumult of the pandemic, war in Ukraine and cost of living crisis, which they are absorbing.*

*It shows that whilst work is being done to support our young people, the way it is delivered just doesn't quite work for their busy, digital lifestyles.*

*There needs to be new tools and resources. Round the clock opportunities to speak in a way that is free from embarrassment and without judgement. Support that meets our young people at the time of need, in a way that they want. Without providing them with the resources they need, we could have a generation growing up with crippling mental health problems.*

*Unless we act now.*



**Ross O'Brien**  
Managing Director  
Wysa UK Ltd

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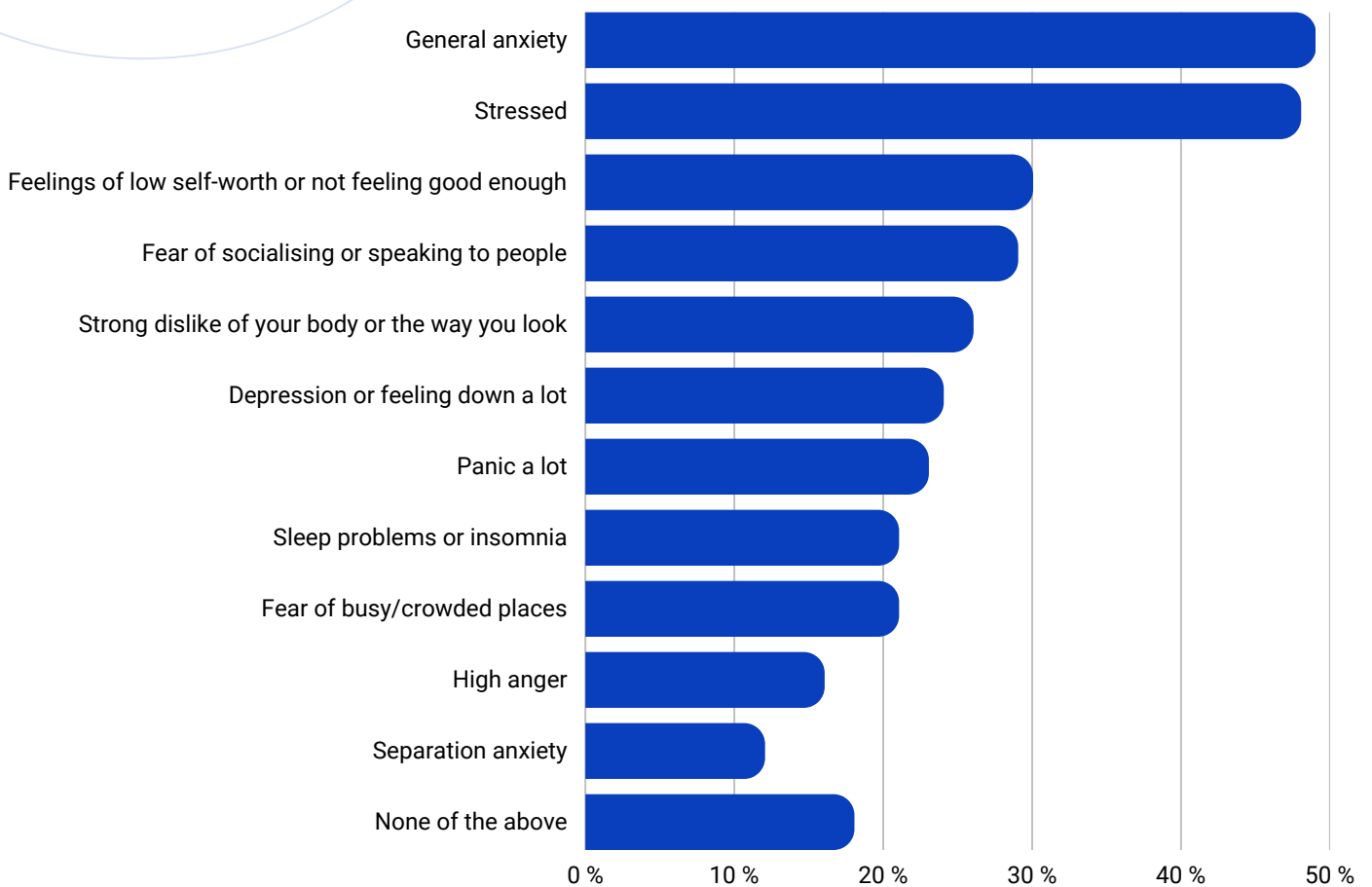
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# The breadth of mental health concerns teenagers face

What's clear is that young people are experiencing mental health worries. To a worrying extent. 82% said they feel they are experiencing one of the mental health worries we asked about.

When asked about their mental health, half feel that they are suffering from anxiety (49%) and stress (48%) and 1 in 3 self report feelings of low self worth (30%).

## Do you feel like you suffer from any of these mental health worries?



- Half (49%) of young people recognise their anxiety, rising to 63% of females
- 1 in 3 (29%) fear socialising and speaking to people
- Over a quarter (26%) have a strong disliking of their body or the way they look
- 24% are depressed or feel down a lot
- A fifth (21%) are struggling to get enough sleep

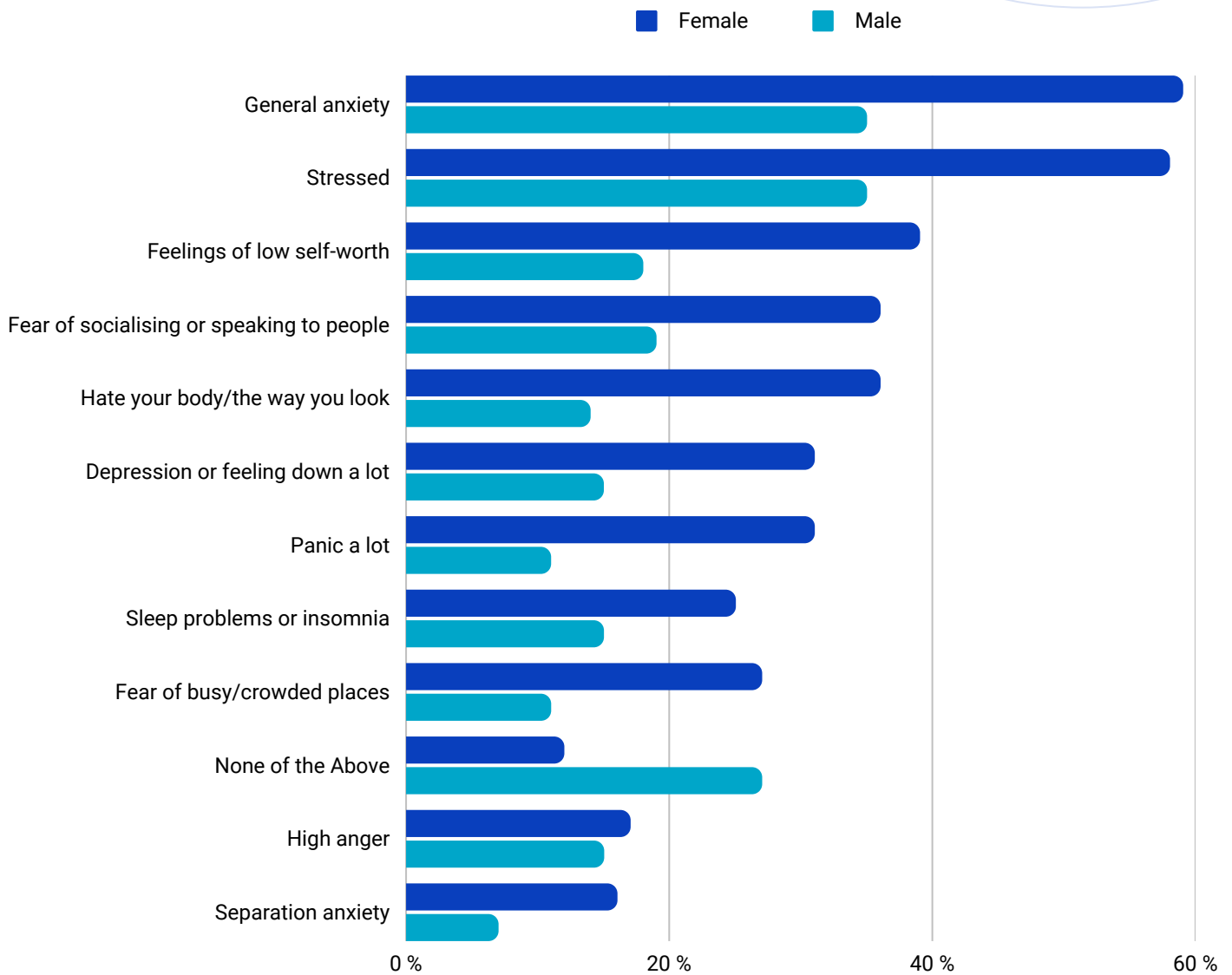
Females are much more likely to self report mental health worries. Over 2.5 times more girls have a strong dislike of body or appearances than boys (36% vs 14%), and are 1.7 times more likely to report anxiety or stress (59% compared to 35%). That doesn't mean boys don't suffer too. One third of young males are saying they are experiencing general anxiety (35%) - a worrying number.

A fifth (21%) are having sleep problems - which will have an impact on cognitive ability and thus educational performance. These concerns of young people go beyond emotional impact, and could have a very real effect on education and their future.

"We rarely see data that specifically refers to teenage males, so this research is welcome. We know that teenage boys are most likely to under report emotional challenges or mental health problems, so the fact that over a third say they are anxious is significant."

Emma Taylor, CAMHS Lead, Wysa

## Do you feel like you suffer from any of these mental health worries?



These self reported mental health concerns increase in prevalence amongst the older cohort. More than half (51%) of 16-17 year olds report general anxiety and stress (52%), and one quarter (27%) say they feel depressed or down frequently. A generation embarking on adulthood - and not feeling mentally equipped to do so.

Interestingly separation anxiety is higher among 16-17 year olds (14%) than 13-15 year olds (10%). Rather than fighting against parents and family, it seems there is a concern around separation.

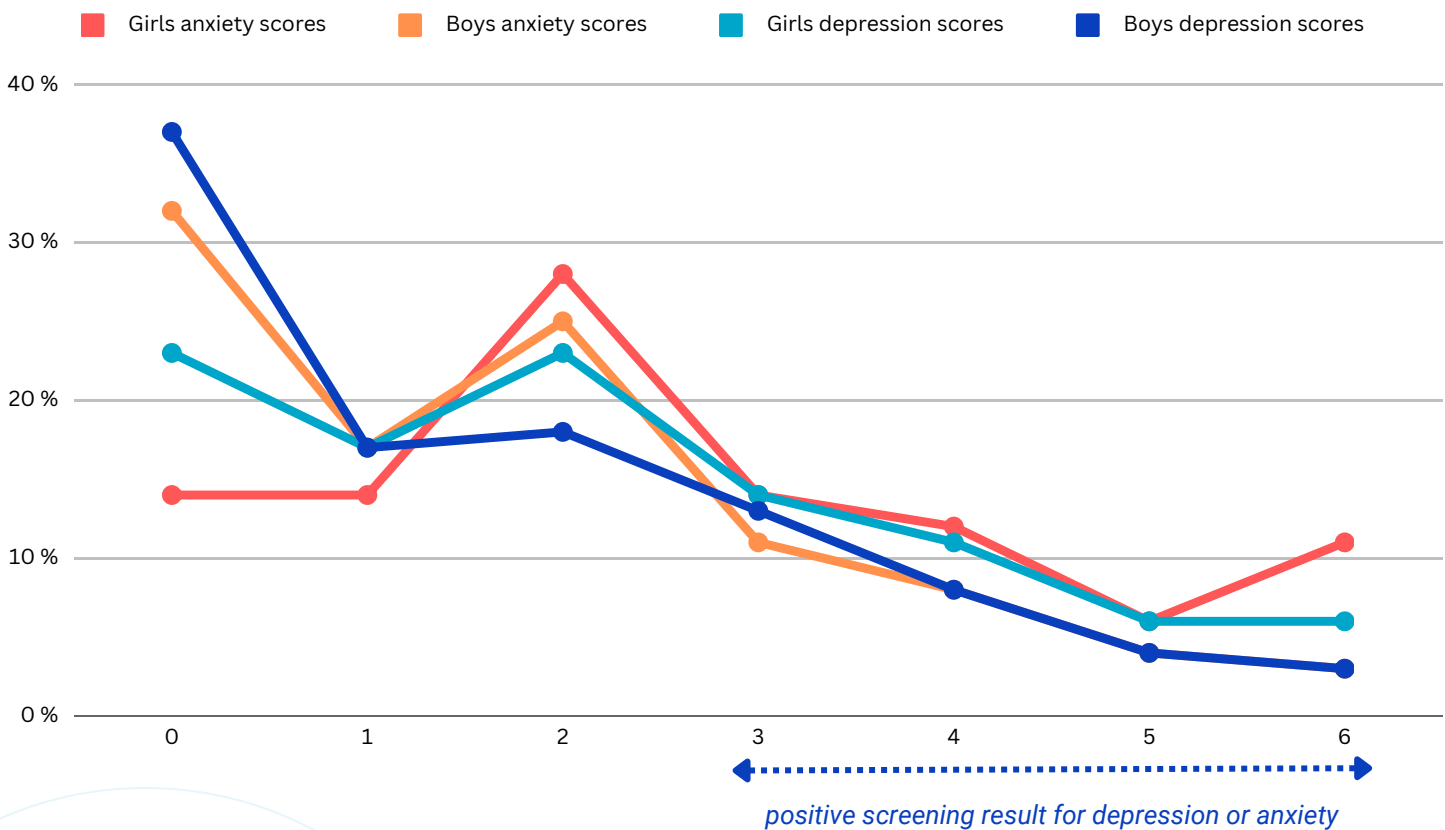
# 1 in 3 teenagers screened positive for symptoms of depression or anxiety

Teenagers are not just feeling they are experiencing these problems, as valid as that is. We took them through two clinical screening questionnaires for anxiety (GAD 2) and depression (PHQ 2), and the results indicate that the problems are far from imagined.

More than one in three (36%) young people scored 3 or more on the GAD 2 screening questionnaire, suggesting these teenagers are experiencing moderate to severe anxiety symptoms that require investigation and support. This rises to two in five (39%) 16-17 year olds, and is more likely to be seen in girls (44% of females scored 3+). A similar number is true for depression, with one third (33%) scoring 3 or more on the PHQ2 screening questionnaire, again suggesting moderate to severe symptom levels, rising to 34% of 16-17 year olds and 37% of females.

Official figures point to 1 in 6, but this new data suggests the issue is much more widespread. In fact, it suggests that 1.3 million 13-17 year olds have symptoms of anxiety and depression that warrant further investigation.

## Depression and anxiety screening scores in teenagers



**1 IN 4**

teen boys screened positive for depression

**44%**

teen girls with moderate to severe anxiety symptoms

**1 IN 3**

13-15 year olds screened positive for anxiety

**39%**

16-17 year olds with moderate to severe anxiety



## Getting support to those who need it

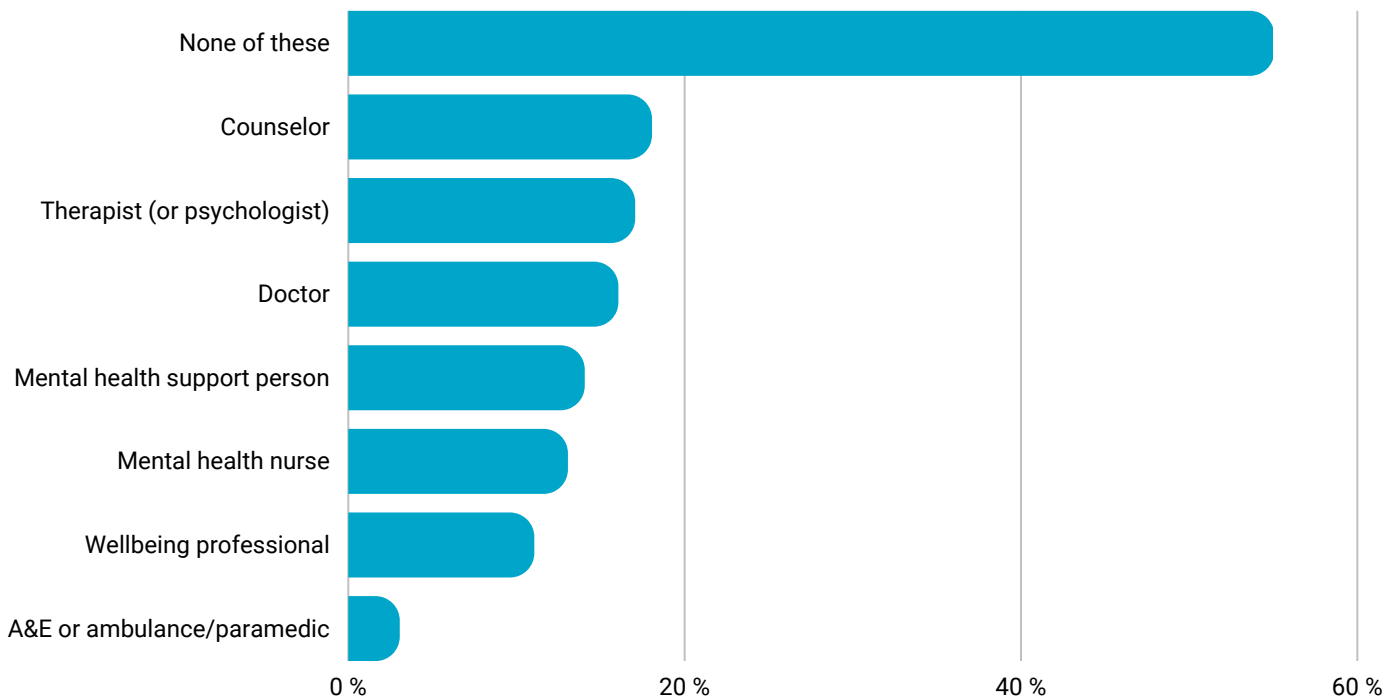
What support are these 1 in 3 with potentially significant mental health challenges getting? Are they accessing the support available to them? Do they even recognise that they are struggling, and could benefit from help? Or know that such help and resources even exist?

For most, the answer is no. More than half (55%) of teenagers who scored 3 or more on the GAD 2 and PHQ 2 haven't spoken to a relevant professional about their mental health.

Only 1 in 5 (18%) have spoken to a counsellor or therapist (17%). This points to a shocking trend where young people are struggling, even suffering, and not reaching out.

We asked those scoring 3+ on the GAD-2 or PHQ-2 screening questionnaires if they had accessed support.

### Have you spoken to a mental health professional about this?

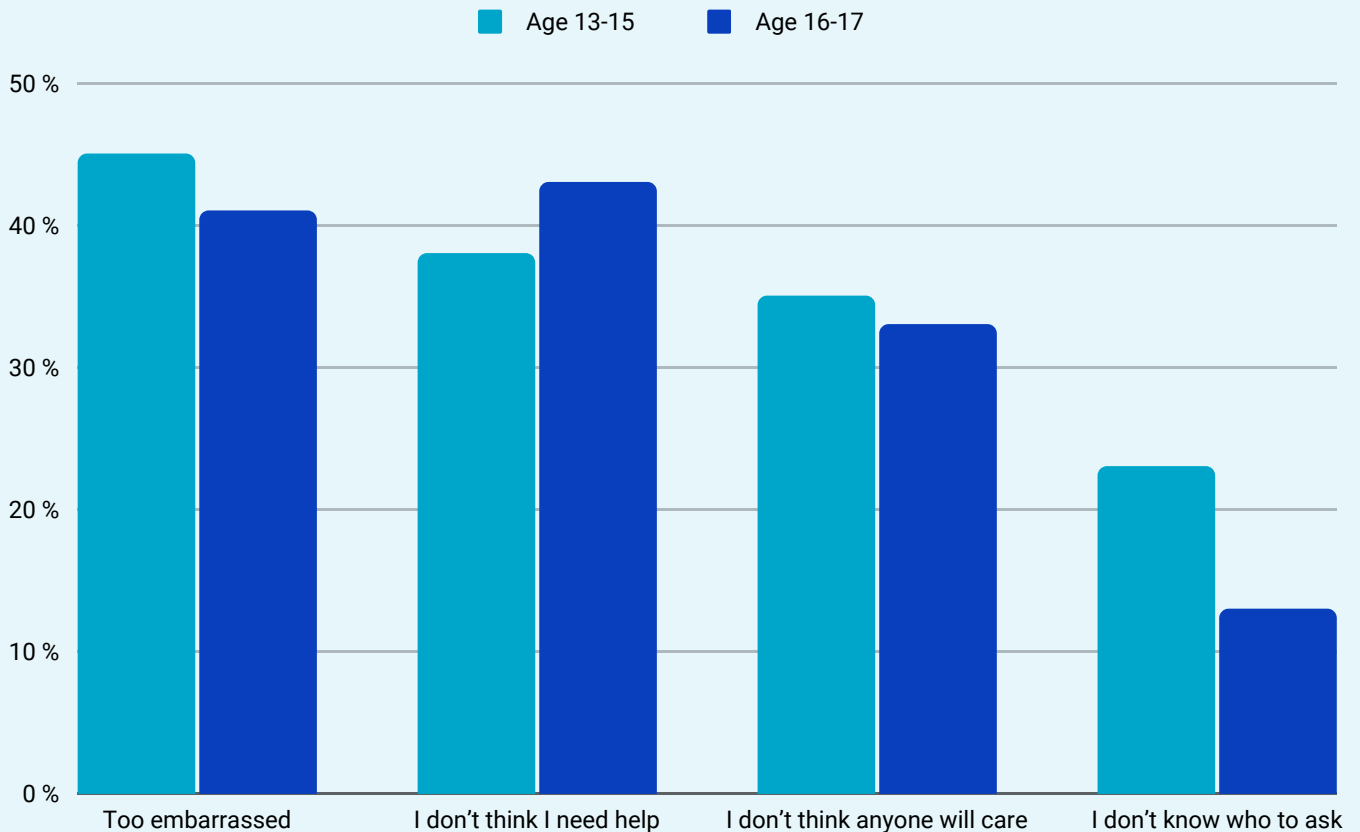


"We know that younger generations are facing huge challenges. A third of the young people surveyed are showing scores of 3 or more on the GAD-2 or PHQ-2. And more than half of them have not spoken to a professional. Despite this generation living in a society that is apparently more open with mental health challenges, a large number appear to be reluctant to reach out for help. If we don't want a population growing up with severe mental health issues, we need to find alternative ways for them to seek support."

**Nicky Main, UK and Europe clinical lead, Wysa**

We asked those who have not spoken to a relevant professional (who also screening positive for depression or anxiety)

## Why not?



The main reason for not seeking help is embarrassment (43%) or that, despite their symptoms, they don't think they need help (41%). Stigma still prevails, and education about what is normal needs to happen. We need to normalise talking about mental health, and provide the resources and education around what to do when struggling or faced with difficulties. Although there has been extra focus and investment into supporting people to understand and identify signs of mental ill health, it's just not landing with young people. Over one third of teens who need help think that no-one will care about their symptoms.

1 in 6 (17%) simply don't know who to ask for help, which rises to a quarter (23%) of the younger teens age bracket. Having a mental health nurse in school, or posters up about therapists only works if people are shown how to access them, and guided to getting support.

*"If i tell someone my problems they suddenly treat you different"*

*"I don't know how to bring it up and don't want to seem like I'm attention seeking"*

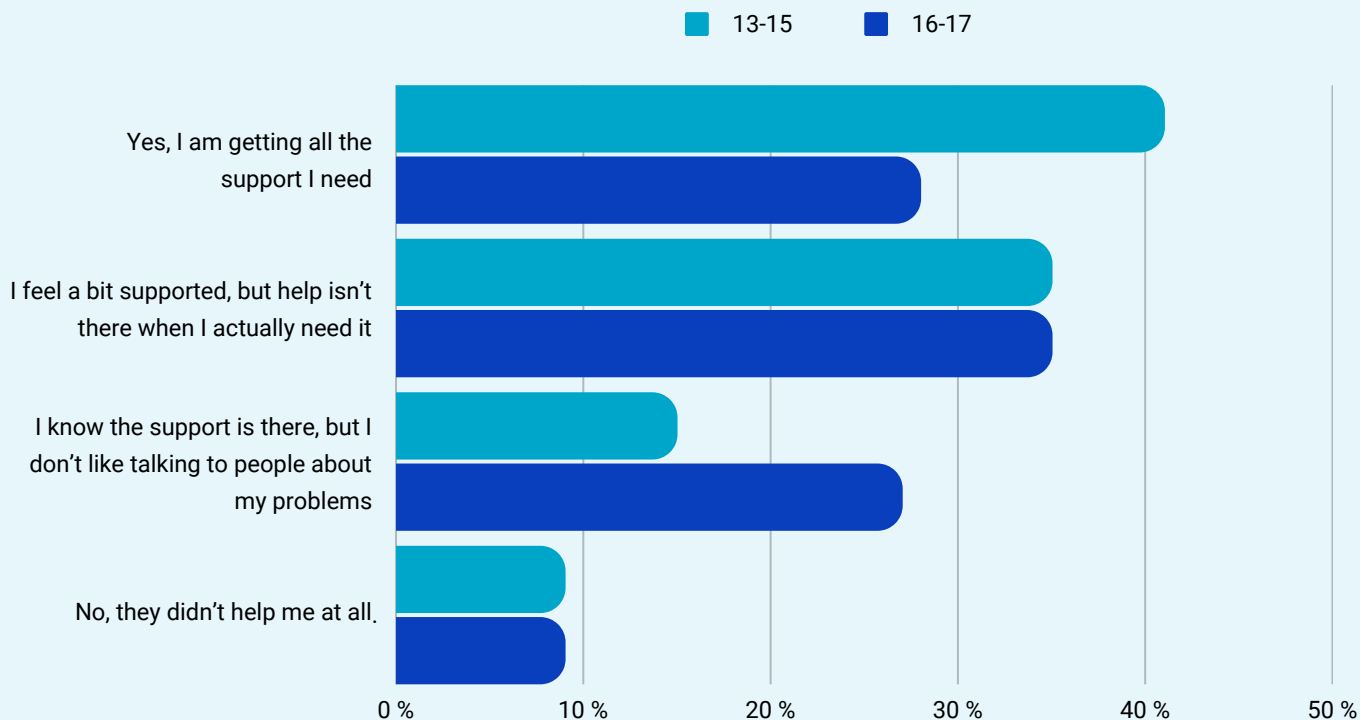
"We certainly talk about mental health as a society more than ever. But young people still fear speaking up, citing embarrassment and fear about starting a conversation. They don't want to speak to family, friends and teachers. What's needed is an anonymous and non judgemental outlet to share feelings, that will then guide them to the advice and help they need."

**Ross O'Brien, UK Managing Director at Wysa**

# Only 1 in 3 who have accessed support are getting the support they need

We asked those who have spoken to a relevant professional (who also screening positive for depression or anxiety)

## Do you feel you are getting the support you need?



Only a third of teenagers who have accessed support feel that they are now getting all the support they need.

Another third (35%) have accessed support but claim that the support isn't there at the times when they actually need it. As we've seen, worry and anxiety is most high before school, and also at bedtime - yet there is no mental health provision available when alone in the bedroom with just your thoughts and stresses.

Added to this is that many services are held during school or college hours, and so would involve being taken out of the classroom in front of peers - when we already know that embarrassment is a worry.

One in four 16-17 year olds say that even though they have accessed support, they don't like speaking about their problems. Stigma and fear is still paramount.

And almost 1 in 10 teens who have accessed support (9%) say that they weren't helped at all - rising to 11% for young females.

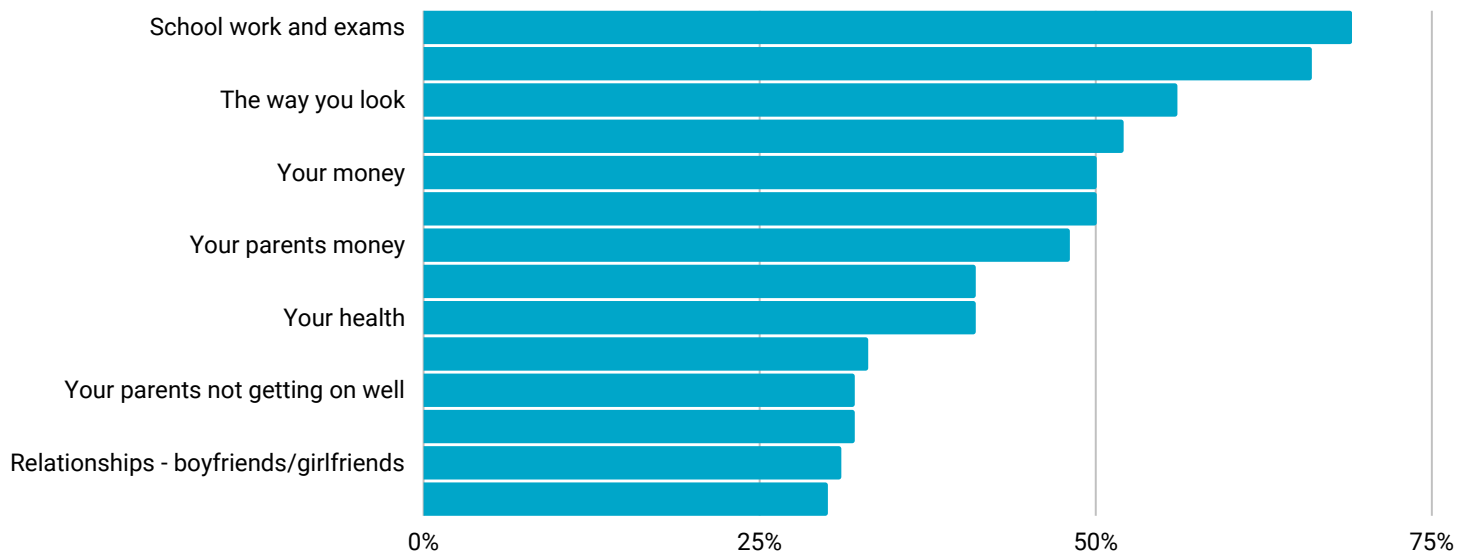
*"This research is clearly showing us that support isn't available right when our young people want it. Resources mean that young people who present for clinical support have limited and time bound treatment at specific times of the day - which may not be when they most need help. An always on, flexible solution, that helps them at the moment of need is necessary."*

**Emma Taylor, CAMHS Lead at Wysa**

What are teenagers  
worrying about?



## How worried are you about these things? (Worried or very worried)



7 in 10 (69%) are worried about school work and two thirds their future (66%).

More than half are concerned about the way they look (56%). The proportion of children and young people with possible eating problems increased from 2017 to 2021; from 6.7% to 13.0% in 11 to 16 year olds, and from 44.6% to 58.2% in 17 to 19 year olds. That's more than half with a possible eating issue.

Money is a concern for half (50%) rising to 57% of 16 and 17 year olds. And not just their money - half (50% of 16-17 year olds and 46% of 13-15 year olds) are worried about their parents' money.

Coupled with the fact that a third are worried about war (33%) and climate change (30%), even amongst the younger cohort, and it's clear that young people are absorbing the news and their surroundings. In a hyper connected always on world, our young people are faced with big issues and challenges that many adults find stressful and worrying - and are potentially without the tools and resources to know how to deal with this.

With so many nuances, it's important to have tailored support that addresses the personal need - but this can be hard in an overstretched school or service. We need to be always learning and gathering insight that can help support our young people, no matter what they face.

"Young people are faced with constant news updates through the media, and when the challenges of the last few years are added to the stresses of schoolwork, friendships and family life, can seem overwhelming. Clinical support needs to be contextualised in the here and now, and recognise that people are multi-faceted with many influences, and support them to respond in the most appropriate way."

**Emma Taylor, CAMHS Lead, Wysa**

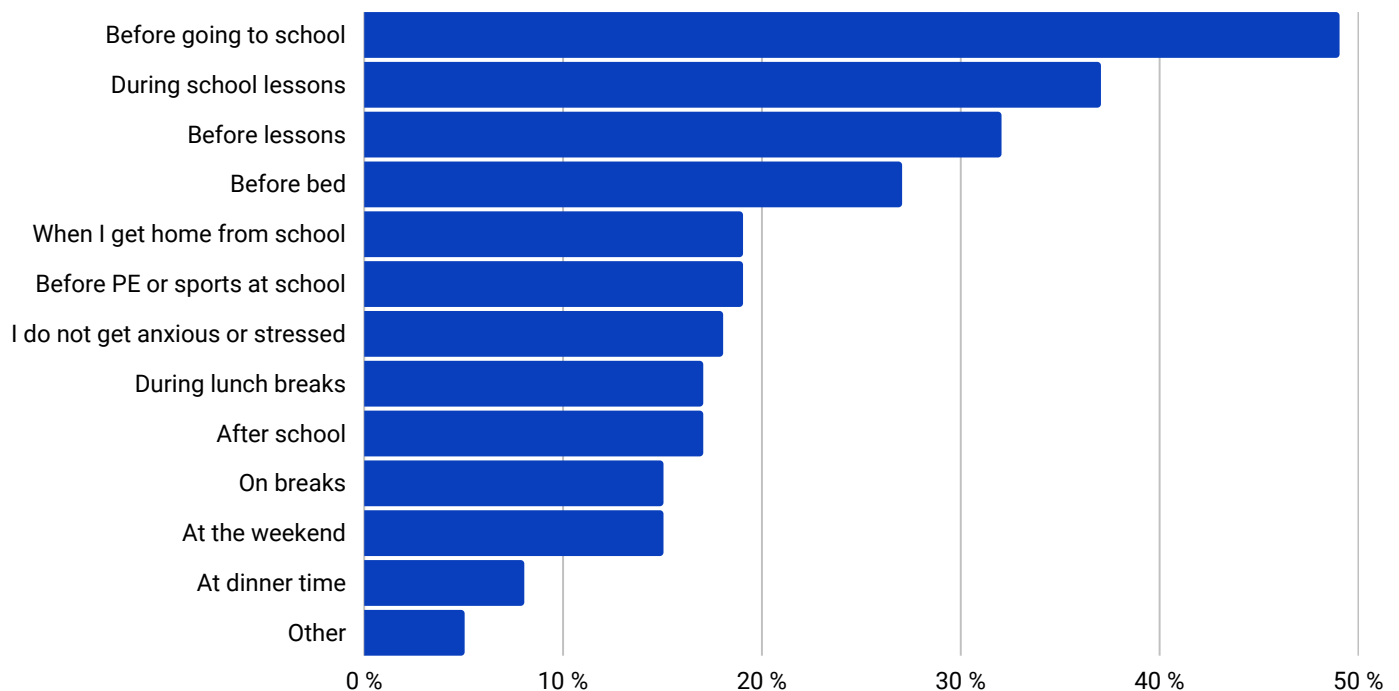
## Round the clock worry

It's no surprise to hear that support isn't available when teenagers need it. Teenagers told us that while they are worried, anxious and stressed throughout the day, there are key times when this peaks. The most difficult times of day for teenagers are before school, during lessons, and before bed - times when many of the support channels on offer are unavailable.

Half (49%) are most anxious, worried and stressed before school, and this continues throughout the school day. One in four (27%) are worried before bed - but late at night support tends not to be easy to access.

It's often when young people feel most alone that stress levels are higher - breaks (15%) and dinner time (8%) are the least stressful points of the day, possibly as they are with people and engaged in activities that act as a distraction.

### What time of day do you worry, feel anxious or stressed?



It is older teenagers, in further education, who are feeling most anxiety or worry during school lessons and after school. In fact the number reporting that when they get home from school they feel stress, worry and anxiety is almost twice as high amongst 16-17 year olds (23%) as it is among 13-15 year olds (13%). A similar pattern is seen at weekends; 18% of 16-17 year olds self report these feelings at the weekend, compared to 11% of the younger cohort.

# Turning to TikTok for mental health advice

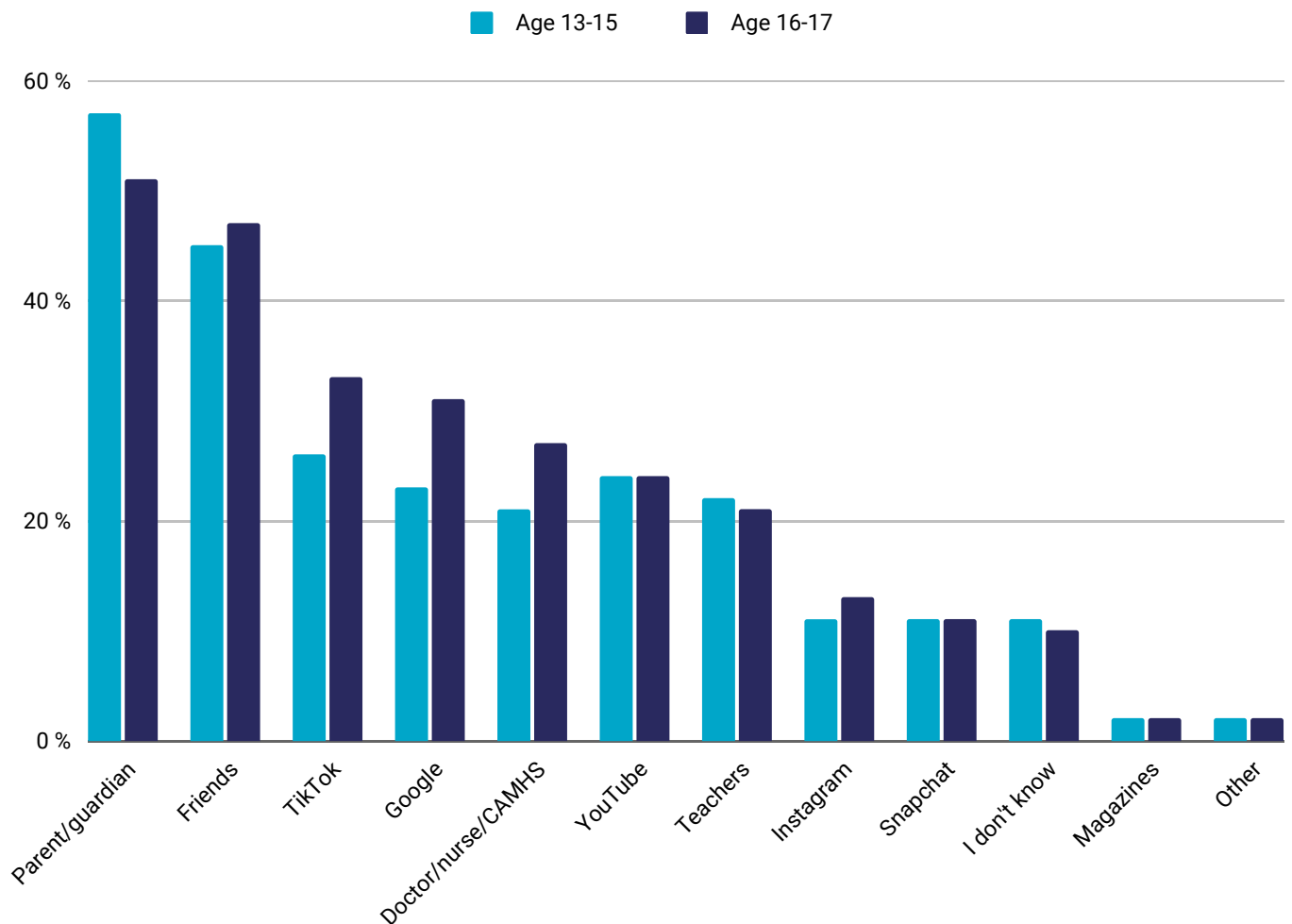
When faced with challenges half of young people would speak to parents (53%), and a similar number to friends (46%). But worryingly, TikTok is well ahead of relevant professionals such as CAMHS services (25%) and teachers (21%), with one in three teenagers turning to the social media platform looking for tips or advice on their mental health. Teenagers are using their phones and social media to access mental health support, which may not be accurate or regulated. This increases for older teenagers.

The habit is to reach for the phone (something that 91% say they have and can use in private) - yet the information available on the phone might not be the most helpful. At the same time, their parents and friends may not have the knowledge they need to support the person who most needs it.

It might be surprising that teachers are only a source of advice for a fifth, given that by far the biggest worry of young people is schoolwork. Teachers spend a lot of time with our young people, but are stretched and overworked themselves, so may not always appear available to provide support.

1 in 10 simply don't know where to go for advice. Despite all the narrative around the importance of mental health and providing support, nearly 400,000 young people wouldn't know where to start with mental health worries.

## If you had mental health worries where would you go to get tips or advice?



## The real world impact of Wysa

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**Koda is a 17 year old student and self-employed artist from the UK. Koda voluntarily contacted Wysa to share his story with us. Here is his story.**

*"I found out about Wysa through a friend when I was feeling very depressed and suicidal. I truly believed that there was no hope for me. I started to use the app and having the 24/7 support, no matter where I was or what time it is, has been the best thing. I can just pull out my phone and talk through any problems I might be having at the time, like a panic attack. Every time I finish a session with Wysa, I feel more relaxed and ready for the day.*

*"I like knowing that I'm not going to be judged or feel like a burden when talking to Wysa. It's a safe outlet for me when life is getting too tough to handle. There is always something available to help me and it has done a great job at getting me out of my depression. I've started to be more active and productive and my overall mood has been a lot better.*

*"I've had in person therapy a few times now and I think that the app does a wonderful job at simulating the experience of therapy with another person. It's really nice knowing that it's always available for me, rather than having to wait a week between therapy sessions. I've tried another app before that was recommended to me by Steps to Change, but I found it very confusing compared to Wysa. The experience on the Wysa app is nicer and I'd choose it over anything else. I use it about 4-5 times a day and have had it for around 6 months now.*

*"I notice that I'm having more good days than bad days and my anxiety has improved significantly. I've recommended Wysa to a few people I know and they say it's really helped them too, so, I'd recommend it to anyone who struggles with depression and anxiety."*



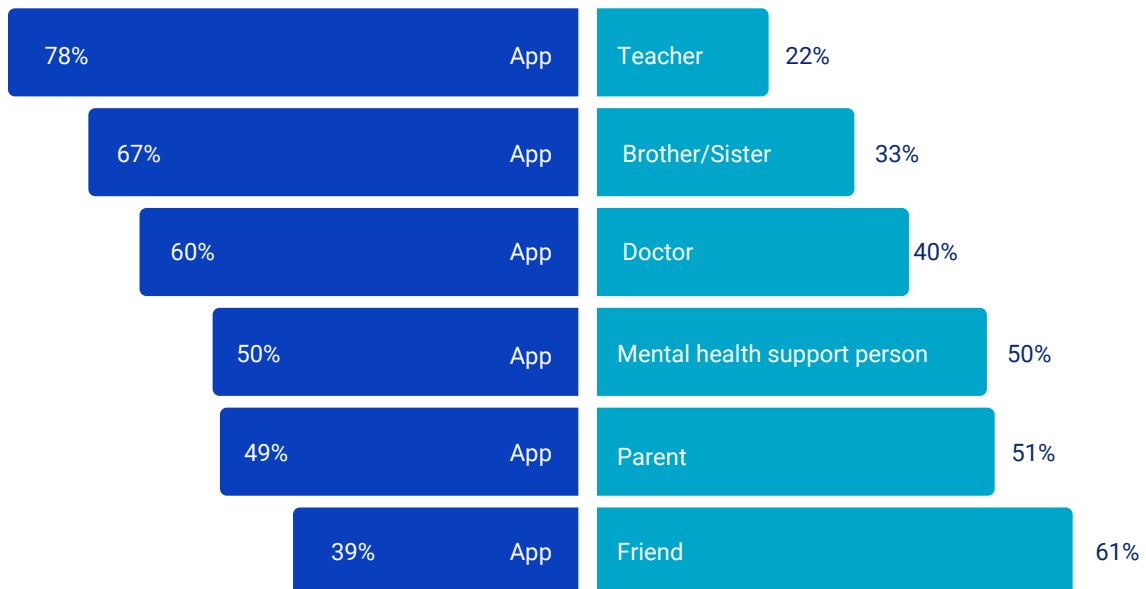


# Teenage appeal of digital therapeutics

**91% of teenagers have access to a smartphone they can use in private** (89% of 13-15 year olds and 92% of 16-17 year olds) and digital solutions appeal to these young people, as seen in the responses here.

When asked how they would feel about a confidential app with tailored support, and if that app would be a preference over other people, the app is the preference over teachers, doctors and siblings. An astonishing 8 in 10 (78%) would choose an app over their teachers, and three fifths (60%) would rather talk to an app than their doctor. Although friends and parents slightly outrank the app, there is clearly a huge appetite. Half (49%) would choose an app over speaking to their parents, and two fifths (39%) versus friends. Young people are fearing sharing their problems, and don't know where to turn.

## If you had a free mental health app that you could talk to about your worries in confidence, who would you rather talk to about your mental health?



“Teens are willing to embrace mobile apps and texting is part of everyday life, so we are meeting them on their level with this kind of interactive digital support. Self-help needs to be interactive, engaging and even enjoyable, to encourage teenagers to build their mental resilience and help prevent the onset or deterioration of any diagnosed mental illness.”

**Nana Owusu, Clinical Lead and Director of Children and Young Peoples Services, HFEH Mind**

## Conclusion

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What this study shows is that the scale of mental health problems amongst teenagers is worse than we thought. And the current mental health service provision isn't working for as many young people as it should. They're worried, anxious and stressed at times when support isn't available. They're fearful of reaching out due to stigma or embarrassment. When they do get help it doesn't always work for them. And they're seeking out advice and tips online - which isn't necessarily always safe. We need 24/7 clinically validated mobile support that meets young people where they are.

But they are digital natives, and live through their phones. Indeed, it is clear that many are already using their phones to access support outside of the professional care network.

We need always available support, in a form that young people want, personalised and tailored to their needs. No one person is the same, and they can't control when they feel anxious, worried or stressed. Having clinically validated resources available via a phone, and the ability to get guided and personalised support via a chatbot, is one such solution.

Digital mental health initiatives will not replace in-person mental health services, but provide access and guided support to people at a time and place when they really need it. It could offer hope at a time of despair, and advice when struggling. A digital solution is an entry point. An always on opportunity to speak. A part of the toolbox. And one we need to start using.

"We want to do our best for children and young people. We help support young people with their emotions, educate them about the importance of mental health, and make them feel engaged. But we need to make sure we do it in a way that feels accessible and engaging for them, meets them where they are, and is something they want to do. That's where great, clinically robust technology comes in."

- Emma Taylor, CAMHS Lead at Wysa

