

Report

Can you hear me?

**Exploring young people's experiences of help seeking
on and offline**

Designed and written by Tender Education and Arts



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Abstract

Young women between the ages of 16-24 are the most likely group to experience relationship abuse, yet the least likely to seek help from support services. We know there are many services out there but the number of young people contacting them, in particular relationship abuse services, does not reflect the true number of those experiencing it.

This paper reviews the barriers to accessing these services and looks at how young people can be better supported. We look primarily at online support services, comparing them to telephone helplines and other sources of support. In order to get a deeper understanding of these issues we used various methods of primary and desk based research. We have consulted with over 100 young people through an online questionnaire which was put out online. We have held focus groups with 30+ young people in between the ages of 15-23, and we have interviewed two organisations both of which provide online support services.

We have come to the following conclusions; Online message counselling can be an effective means of support, especially when used alongside other services or as a stepping stone to access more support. However, online messaging services are not widely known about. This, alongside concerns of online safety, means that the idea of getting support online, surprisingly, does not always appeal to young people. However, it would benefit from wider promotion, or the possibility of being linked to a school or college setting where it could be promoted and run by someone known and trusted. It was commonly thought that a phonenumber support service is too intimidating for a first step, and ideally young people desired to talk to someone they know but shame, embarrassment and fear of repercussions are often barriers which prevent them from doing so. We also found that many young people find it difficult to articulate what is happening to them which impacts on their ability to effectively seek help through online resources. They also showed us how the internet can be a difficult place to seek support, due to the volume of information and questionable credibility of the sources presented. Our research demonstrates that young people do not know where to look for help online or what to trust. Online messaging services have shown to support particularly younger or isolated users, and those who are in crisis and looking for immediate help. The online messaging service is easy to use, convenient and the infrastructure is inexpensive. Taking all of this into account, we would recommend developing an online messaging service that is integrated into a school setting, ideally as part of a Whole School Approach, and accompanied by various workshops, projects and campaigns, e.g. on how to seek support online effectively and safely. The online messaging service would act as a stepping stone to help young people reach further support from the appropriate services, those that in the first instance can be found too intimidating to reach out to.

About the authors

This research project was developed and coordinated by young women. All four of us volunteered at Tender Education and Arts, committed to playing our part in ending violence against women and girls. Two of us went on to take up a paid position co-ordinating and managing the project with the aim of thoroughly exploring the support needs of young people. We all had a great impact on the report you are now reading. We time framed a work plan, did external desk-based research, developed an online survey, created a session plan and held focus groups with young people, consulted national organisations and developed links to valuable partners, transcribed and analysed all our data and by doing all of this shaped this report that includes recommendations on steps forward in the development of an appropriate support service for young people. We stress this here because we believe that it is important to note that this project was conducted by young people themselves, all aged between 19 and 27. We are convinced that in order to make a difference in any kind of issue the voices of people that are concerned by this issue have to be heard. Because we did exactly this we think that this report holds a special quality and authenticity. We are young women doing this for young women and we hope that our project will help to inform steps forward in giving young people the support and help they need and deserve.

1. Introduction

The following report illustrates a research project conducted by Tender Education and Arts that intends to understand the support needs of young people on and offline.

This report will be structured as followed:

- We will provide findings from our desk-based research to give a deeper understanding of existing support services impact.
- We will explain the methods we used to conduct our research, which will make clear how we formed our research questions to collect nuanced data.
- We then illustrate our results and findings, which will be discussed subsequently.
- We provide ideas on how the findings of our research can help in meeting the support needs of young people by exploring options for further actions.

The research conducted attempts to get a clearer and deeper understanding of support services in general, exploring what young people themselves know and think about support services and where they see advantages and disadvantages when using them. We want to understand their perspectives on subjects such as, which issues are prevalent among young people, what prevents young people from using support services and what they think can be done to combat existing barriers so that young people can get support and advice suitable for their needs.

Setting the scene

It is now widely researched that young women are the group most likely to experience violence and abuse in relationships. A study by Tender in 2011 of over 800 young people in London aged 13-15 found that 44% had experienced one or more forms of relationship abuse. Over three quarters of those who experienced abuse did not seek support from anyone. Where they had sought support, this was mostly from a friend or family member; less than 5% sought it from a professional, including Childline.

This shows us that young people are at a high risk of experiencing relationship abuse but are not likely to seek help and advice. We aim to explore what prevents young people from accessing support, and what can be done to ensure young people receive the support they need.

In 2015-2016 Rape Crisis Centres across England and Wales responded to 171,000 calls, an average of over 3,000 a week. Where age is known, 1,700 were aged 15 or under, and those aged under 25 represented 33% of service users. This does not reflect the fact that under 25's are the group most effected by abuse. In the past 5 years, the definition around domestic abuse has changed to include people under the age of 18 with the aim of encouraging young people to come forward if they are experiencing abuse. This followed British Crime Survey 2009/10 which found that 16-19-year-olds were the group most likely to suffer abuse from a partner'. To fully achieve an end to violence against women and girls we need to understand and challenge the barriers that prevent young people from seeking help.

In 2017 96% of young people owned a smartphone and 73% of 5-16s own their own computer/laptop/tablet¹. That is 8.6 million young people. In 2014 Ofcom's communication report evidenced that 14-15 year olds were the most digitally confident age group and 70% of 7-16

¹ Ofcom Communications Report 2015

year olds can access the internet in their own room². It also reported that over 16's are spending at least 20 hours a week online³.

In 2015/16 Childline report more than two thirds, 71%, counselling sessions took place online over 29% on the phone. This rose from 68% the previous year⁴. In 2015/2016 Rape Crisis described there being a 53% increase in service users accessing text and email support services on the previous year⁵. This shows there is some demand for online support services for young people. It could also contribute to the low number of callers to the National Domestic Violence Helpline from this age group.

These statistics led us to assume that an online support service could in fact be attractive to young people and could meet their support needs more effectively. For this reason while exploring the support needs of young people on and offline we want to take a detailed look at how online support services could function as an appropriate advice service for young people.

2. Current State of Research

As well as being led by primary research which will be illustrated later in this report, this study has been informed by extensive desk-based research. Through researching case studies about online support services we aim to get a deep understanding of online support services and their effectiveness. Therefore, below we represent the analysis of five related academic research studies from publications of different scientific journals, including the Journal of Medical Internet Research, Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling, and the Journal of Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking.

Report on Online Counselling

Online Counsellor Judie Brosnan carried out a study at Oxford Brookes University⁶, which

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ NSPCC Annual Review, Always There 2014-2015

⁵ Rape Crisis 2015-2016

⁶ Brosnan (2012-2013). "Report on Online Counselling", *Oxford Brookes University*.

investigates and evaluates the preferences of methods in counselling for students and assesses the effectiveness of each method. Students who signed up for counselling could choose between email counselling, internet relay chat (IRC) (also known as 'live chat'), face-to-face counselling or a mixture of them. The effectiveness of the services was then evaluated by assessing how much the students have improved, recovered or deteriorated from their original wellbeing. Findings showed that the majority of students favoured online counselling over face-to-face, based on registration, attendance and the outcome of recoveries and improvements⁷. In fact, the methods of email and IRC counselling were the most popular among the students, especially due to the lack of excessive closeness with the counsellor and the feeling of being in a safe environment. Email counselling was often described as positively intimate and personal, whereas the advantage of IRC was seen in its intensity which would lead to clarity and decisiveness, however it could also become too concrete and problem-focused. The study also found out, that 47% of online clients showed recovery, 38% showed reliable improvement and 15% showed no significant changes. Compared to that 41% of face-to-face clients showed recovery and 59% showed reliable improvement. Here one can see that the effect of online support is bigger on recovery, whereas face-to-face counselling showed a better improvement rate in general. Three students eventually moved from online counselling to face-to-face counselling because they felt something missing such as physical presence or the right frame of mind to write, however all three felt online counselling was helpful in approaching counselling in the first place. **In conclusion, this study shows that counselling through both email and IRC 'live chat' seemed the best approach to counselling (however this cannot apply to clients with suicidal ideation). Moreover, it emphasises that online counselling in general is not only perceived as positive but findings also show that it is in fact helpful to people who use it.**

Experiences of Counsellors Providing Online Chat Counselling to Young People

Another study we looked at examined the experiences of online counsellors providing mental health interventions to young people through an online chat service⁸. By doing that it analysed

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Dowling M. J., Rickwood D. J., (2014). "Experiences of Counsellors Providing Online Chat Counselling to Young People", *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol. 24(2), p. 183-196.

the effectiveness of online counselling through the lens of trained counsellors who have provided professional opinions. The study showed that the majority of young people who contacted the online service needed immediate support and would access the service once or twice. However, evidence suggests that long-term structured interventions can be effective through online chat as well⁹, although some clinicians viewed online chat as a stepping stone to face-to-face services. Furthermore, the most common problems presented by clients were relationship issues, sexual abuse, sexuality, trauma in early childhood and bullying. In general, clients who used the online services usually presented with complex psychological issues and social problems and because of the format of the online web chat (it's difficulty with gathering relevant background information, it's relatively slow speed and lack of non-verbal cues¹⁰) it was difficult for the counsellor to assess the client's complex situation. This shows that working online may expose clinicians to highly distressed clients who they do not have access or contact information for due to the high level of anonymity of an online web chat. However, the privacy and anonymity which presents as a risk to clinicians makes online counselling appeal more to clients e.g. because they can act in a less inhibited way compared to face-to-face counselling. What also differs to face-to-face is the communication style in online counselling as well as the time: The language has to be kept quite basic because it is difficult to judge a client's literacy level (acronyms and emoticons are useful) and online chat seemed slower than talking in person, face-to-face sessions could cover more content in the same amount of time. Findings also showed that non-directive techniques such as empathy and validation were considered the best ways to engage the client online and to develop a therapeutic relationship¹¹.

A unique finding in the study was that young clients will use online chat counselling adjunct to face-to-face, which could speed up improvement by using both online and face-to-face components¹². Again, like in the first case study these findings show that

⁹ Kessler D., Lewis G., Kaur S., Wiles N., King M., Weich S., Peters T., (2009). "Therapist-delivered Internet Psychotherapy for Depression in Primary Care: A Randomised Controlled Trial", *The Lancet*, Vol. 374(9690), p. 628-634.

¹⁰ Bambling M., King R., Reid W., Wegner K., (2008). "Online Counselling: The Experience of Counsellors providing Synchronous Single-Session Counselling to Young People.", *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 8(2), p. 110-116.

¹¹ Chardon L., Bagraith K.S., King R.J., (2011). "Counselling Activity in Single-Session Online Counselling with Adolescents: An Adherence Study", *Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 21(5), p. 583-592.

¹² Reese R.J., Toland M.D., Hopkins N.B., (2011). "Replicating and Extending the Good-enough Level

a combined method could potentially be beneficial.

The Effectiveness of a Web-Based Solution-Focused Brief Chat Treatment for Depressed Young Adults

The third case study we examined aimed to assess the effectiveness of an individual chat treatment¹³ based on Solution-Focus Brief Therapy (SFBT), an approach in counselling and psychotherapy which puts an emphasis on solution-building by exploring current resources and planning for the future instead of focusing on causes of problems in the present and past¹⁴. Reliable and clinically significant improvement of participants were assessed after 9 weeks, after 4.5 months and after 7.5 months and was compared to that of a waiting list control group who only received access to the chat treatment after 4.5 months. Results showed that both the chat group and the control group showed improvement in their depressive symptoms, but the improvement of web chat clients was higher (at 4.5 months, 28.2% of chat group participants and 13.6% of control group participants showed significant change). Therefore, one can conclude that the SFBT chat was effective. Despite this better effect of the web chat over control group, only a small proportion of both groups showed clinical improvement. This may imply that online counselling is not enough to alleviate depression, and clients may require other forms of counselling with more goal-based approaches. These results may again indicate, that a mixture of method could be most effective. However, this study focuses on clients with depressive symptoms whereas we at Tender are more focused on domestic violence and abuse and we cannot naturally assume that these two different issues require the same kind of support service. But other than that, this study further shows that online web chat could prove to be more effective than face-to-face for young people in terms of improvement and recovery, which reinforces that a web chat service would be beneficial.

Model of Change: Considering Session Frequency.”, *Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 21(5), p. 608-619.

¹³ The Effectiveness of a Web-based Solution-Focused Brief chat treatment for Depressed Young Adults (Trimbos Institute, Netherlands, 2014); Link to publication: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4062279/>

¹⁴ Iveson C., (2002). “Solution-Focused Brief Therapy”, *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, Vol. 8(2), p. 149-156.

The Effectiveness of Online Peer-to-Peer Support

We looked at two case studies that examined peer-to-peer support¹⁵¹⁶. One of them assessed the activity of users on an online counselling service called Kooth, which provides multiple channels of support for young people aged 11-25 including one-to-one web chat with a trained counsellor as well as an online forum where young people can converse with peers about their issues. The study focused on the latter and ultimately aimed to understand how young people use an online forum for emotional and mental health issues by specifically examining

- 1) what young people discuss
- 2) how young people seek support and
- 3) how users respond to posts to provide each other with peer-to-peer support

Results for question 1) showed that young people discussed a range of mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, panic attacks,...), physical health issues (e.g. pregnancy, cancer, periods,...) and issues related to interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendships, family issues, sexual relationships,...). In terms of seeking support young people mainly approach it in one of two ways: by direct request for advice with a themed heading or direct question within the post itself or by finding other young people on the forum who shared the same feelings or were in similar situations themselves. Peer-to-peer support could be found in different forms on the forum. For one, young people helped each other by providing emotional support. Non-directive emotional support e.g. including sharing their own experiences in a non-directive way to provide or offer sympathy and encouragement. Directive emotional support consisted of directive advice by suggesting they talk to someone about their issue and highlighting how this had helped them in the past (this type of emotional support was less common). Other than that young people provided each other with informational support. When giving non-directive informational support the responder would not directly suggest contacting support organisations or other help, but rather used personal experiences to tell the young person how useful they found the help. Compared to that directive informational support involved offering support in the form of directive information by straight forwardly suggesting they should seek the help of

¹⁵ Hanley T., Prescott J., Ujhelyi K., (2017). "Peer Communication in Online Mental Health Forums for Young People: Directional and Nondirectional Support", *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Vol. 4(3), e29.

¹⁶ Fukkink R., (2011). "Peer Counselling in an Online Chat Service: A Content Analysis of Social Support", *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking*, Vol. 14(4), p. 247-251.

e.g. a nurse, GP or friends. In conclusion, this study shows us that an online forum for the use of peer-to-peer counselling can be beneficial for young people experiencing issues, as it provides a sense of belonging, validation and empathy from others through different approaches (directive and non-directive), and can also prove to be constructive as some peers may have useful advice from past experiences. Interestingly, discussing non-clinical topics (such as music, films, pets) aided the young people in feeling better and created a sense of community. Similar to that the other case study about peer-to-peer support demonstrated that although peer helpers can give emotional support to help clients of similar age through online web chat, they may not be able to completely fulfil the role of a professional counsellor. However, peer helpers can still play a big role in offering support and validation as they would be of similar age and have similar prior experiences - for this reason their support can act more as a stepping stone rather than a long-term treatment plan.

All in all, the illustrated five case studies showed us several interesting findings about online support services. For one, we learned, that online support services - may it be an online web chat, an email support service or an online forum - can be beneficial for its users and can give them helpful advice for their situations. Also, what became very clear to us is the fact that online support services can act as a stepping stone and in this sense be useful in approaching further help, e.g. more serious treatment or counselling. This means that a mixture of support methods may be of great value for young people who experience domestic violence and abuse, for which we found plenty of evidence in our desk-based research. Moreover, the results of the case studies clarified that peer-to-peer counselling can be constructive and beneficial especially in terms of offering support and validation, but cannot replace advice and support from trained professionals/trained counsellors, especially when it comes to more serious issues.

What we did not learn from our desk-based research and therefore aim to address in our study is 1) which form of support service is (un)attractive to young people in general, 2) to what extent young people would use an online support service, 3) who young people would feel most comfortable talking to and 4) what prevents young people from accessing support services. As reflected in our research questions and the purpose of our study we aim to focus on the opinions of young people themselves. If we want to understand the support needs of young people their voices have to be heard.

3. Methods

When conducting our study, we drew upon various methods of primary research that we carried out with young people in schools, students and professionals from local services. We sent out a questionnaire to young people, held consultation focus groups and conducted one-to-one interviews with professionals from organisations that provide support services. Below we describe our research methods in detail.

We created the questionnaire, the session plan for the focus groups and the questions for the one-to-one interviews with professionals by drawing on various sources of information. For one, we used data from the Whole School Approach framework¹⁷ created by Tender, about young people's lives, feelings and needs to develop informed research approaches. Moreover, we did external online research on online forums like The Mix or The Student Room to explore which issues young people talk about online so we could include these themes in our research. Other than that, we included our previously described desk-based research and various reports about the experiences of young people to insure we created a survey of substantial value.

Questionnaires

The online questionnaire we created focused on the following topics:

- The experiences of young people using the internet for support
- The advantages and disadvantages of different forms of support services
- The potential barriers to seeking support

The questionnaire was promoted via social media channels, and organisations that work with young people. There were 160 responses from young people between the ages of 13-25.

Focus Groups

We developed a session plan to explore these issues further, drawing on our findings from the questionnaires.

We consulted seventeen students from Forest Hill Boys Secondary School, Lewisham, aged

¹⁷ Whole School Approach framework (2017), Tender

14-15, three Tender youth board members aged 15-23, and nineteen female students from City and Islington College aged 16-18.

Interviews

We interviewed professionals from two organisations which offer online counselling services for young people. These were Galop and Childline, both of which offered insight into;

- Logistics of online support services
- Their role in the help seeking process
- Service users
- Effects and critique of the service

Tender is a preventative organisation which works towards ending violence towards women and girls through the education of all young people, focusing on healthy and unhealthy relationships and behaviours. Domestic violence and abuse can occur in the lives of any young person and they may or may not understand themselves to be a victim of abuse, which is why we felt it was important to take into consideration the views of all, rather than focusing solely on those who named themselves as survivors of domestic violence and abuse. Given the prevalence of domestic violence among young people we are aware that there are survivors among our participants. The use of an online questionnaire meant we could reach people all over the country, whilst the focus groups allowed us to explore perspectives further because of the more intimate nature. The interviews with professionals working in the field then enriched our knowledgeably providing a professional perspective on the effectiveness of these services. Through the research process the data we obtained from each method helped to inform the development of the other methods of research. This means that while conducting our research we kept reflecting on our findings and assumptions in order to further develop our research and gather the best data possible.

4. Results

4.1. Questionnaire and Focus Groups

In the following we will present the key findings from the questionnaire and the focus group

discussions with young people. The questionnaire was sent out to various partners and posted it on different platforms. We got 160 respondents, not all of which but most completed in total. Our consultations took place at a secondary school, a college and with young people who are part of Tender's Youth Board. The answers have been grouped together to highlight key points.

4.1.1. Who completed the questionnaire and who took part in the consultation?

Questionnaire

68% of participants identify as female, 25% identify as male and 3% identify as non-binary, whereas 4% prefer not to say their gender.

The largest percentage of participants (36%) are between the ages 16-18, followed by the group of 13-15 year olds (33%) and 19-25 year olds (27%).

Most of our participants are school or college students (71%), a few are in full-time (13%) or part-time employment (12%). Some participants are volunteers (7%), some are university students (7%), some are unemployed (4%) and some are apprentices (2%). A few are in receipt of benefits for a disability (3%).

Most participants live in London (51%) or South-east England (22%). 6% live in North England, 4% live in the Midlands, 3% live in South-west England. We also have one participant living in Northern Ireland and one living in Paris.

The largest percentage of participants identify as White British (60%). 8% identify as White European, 4% identify as Mixed Ethnicity, 4% identify as Black African, 3% identify as Black British. 3% identify as Asian Bangladeshi and another 2% as Asian British. We also got people identifying as Black Caribbean (2%), Middle Eastern, Chinese, White Irish or White Other each with 1%.

Many participants answered that they identify as Atheist (26%) and 25% have no religion. Some identify as Christian (21%). Some also identify as Agnostic (9%). 3% identify as Muslim, and 2% as Jewish. Others identify as Buddhist (1%), Humanist (1%), or Sikh (1%).

Most of the people who answered the questionnaire identify as non-disabled (82%), some preferred not to say whether they are disabled or not (12%) and 6% identified as disabled. From the people identifying as disabled, two stated they have autism, one person said she/he has Dysthymia and social anxiety, two answered they have mental health problems, one person said she/he has Borderline Personality Disorder and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and one person identified as Dyslexic.

Focus Groups

We consulted with thirty-eight young people in total, all based in London. Twenty-one of those were female and seventeen male. They were all aged between 15 and 23.

4.1.2. What issues are prevalent amongst young people?

We asked participants what kind of issues they had previously sought advice on online and what topics they think are important for young people in general and should therefore be covered by support services.

Their answers show that a large proportion of young people have experienced difficulties with their mental health. The issue they have most sought advice on was stress with 58%. 53% have looked for advice on anxiety, and 47% on depression and 45% on mental health generally. 35% had sought advice on self-harm and another 32% on suicidal thoughts. These figures are alarmingly high, especially when taking into consideration that all participants are under 25, and 33% of those are between the ages of 13-15. It shows clearly that mental distress is a highly prevalent issue amongst young people. This is affirmed by data produced by other questions. When presented with different topics, mental health was chosen as the most essential topic (89%) for support services to have expertise in. These results are also reflected in one of our professional services case studies: Childline experiences mental health as the second most common reason for young people to contact them.

Friendships with 51% and relationships with 45% are also among the most common reasons these young people were seeking advice, which shows that those are important factors in their lives and potentially the cause or consequence of mental health concerns. In relation to this 14% have looked for advice on sex, 10% on consent and 14% on sexuality. Many participants (53%) also see relationships and friendships as an essential topic for support services. 34% see it as desirable, which again supports that it is an important topic to young people.

After mental health, the next topic chosen as most essential for support services to have expertise in was relationship abuse (71%). 18% of participants had looked for advice on emotional abuse online, 14% on sexual abuse/rape and 10% on physical abuse. This means that many young people have sought advice on some type of domestic abuse. When we take into consideration that many young people wouldn't label experiences as domestic abuse for a number of reasons including but not limited to: not associating incidents with the term domestic abuse, embarrassment/shame, thinking they might be overreacting, not wanting to believe the severity of their situation, etc., this could imply that the real number of young people seeking

advice on, and possibly experiencing domestic abuse could actually be even higher. The named reasons often function as barriers when young people try to seek help. These figures combined underline the importance and prevalence of relationship abuse to young people.

A very low percentage of participants had sought advice on so called Honour-based violence (1%), Forced Marriage (1%) and FGM (1%). In comparison to other topics, this issue is also seen as least important (17%) however, 56% still think it is essential. When looking at who completed the questionnaire we see that 68% of participants were white British or white European, which could be something to take into consideration.

What became clear in all our research – the questionnaire, the focus groups with young people and the case studies with professional services – is that most of the time if a young person is in a difficult situation it is not just one issue that is present but a combination of several issues that overlap.

4.1.3. What prevents young people from seeking help?

Shame and the fear of being judged

Our findings clearly show that one of the main reasons young people are not reaching out for support is because of embarrassment/shame (71%) and the fear of being judged negatively (71%). This affects almost three-quarters of all young people who took part in our survey. From this we can see that in order to enable young people to seek help we need to combat these feelings of embarrassment and shame.

54% of participants answered that they thought they could be overreacting, and 36% thought not being aware of what is happening to you is wrong could stop young people from seeking support. Another 46% name insecurity as a factor for not seeking help and 42% fear that they will not be believed. This shows huge amounts of uncertainty and insecurity and tells us that young people might fear that they will not be taken seriously if they access help.

‘Feel like I should be able to deal with things alone’

‘Not wanting to bother anyone else with your problems’

Fear of repercussions

39% of young people answered that the fear of repercussions/what could happen next is a barrier to seeking help. 16% of participants think that fear of the person abusing you and 9% think dependency on the person abusing you might prevent you from accessing support. So, this tells us that the relationship between a young person and their abuser is a considerable factor when it comes to seeking help. Here, complete hopelessness could also be a reason:

'Feeling that there is no point in seeking help, because you don't want to live anymore.'

Time may also prevent some from looking for help:

'Worrying that dealing with problems might simply take up too much time, causing you to fall behind with studies or work.'

This indicates a need for anonymity especially during the first steps of the help seeking process so young people can seek advice without the fear of the situation escalating beyond their control. From a professional perspective, this is seen as the main reason that prevents young people from seeking advice, which is why Childline assures young people that they are the ones who are in control of making decisions around their situation.

Not knowing where to look for help

Another 35% of young people feel that not knowing where to look for support is a big factor. Not only this figure but all the figures before clearly tell us that young people need education on how to seek help. It also needs to be ensured that young people are given the vocabulary and confidence to start conversations and seek help and advice if they need to:

'Not knowing how. Several times I want to start a conversation with someone about a problem but I don't even know how to describe what's going on.'

'So like domestic abuse for example or even emotional abuse in a relationship you might not even know that you're in one so I just would think you're always overthinking and you don't need to get help. Or maybe more extreme cases like rape like I think if I were in that situation I don't know, I wouldn't know who to tell or I wouldn't even want to go to find any help. So I wouldn't know where to start in terms of seeking help.'

'But apart from Childline I wouldn't really know any other places where you can get help.'

'But if everyone knew some place it would be a lot easier to help them.'

'But I think if I was going through something I wouldn't know where to go so I would probably go to maybe a friend and they know as much as you do.'

In our focus groups, young people named many reasons which may prevent someone from seeking help, including themes that came up in the questionnaire, e.g. fear of repercussions and/or of the person abusing you. They discussed 'reputation', not wanting to be judged or stigmatised by friends or someone you know and feeling embarrassed to disclose personal feelings.

We also asked participants what might prevent them from accessing help from specific services. Time was an issue for email support services and face-to-face counselling. This could be due to booking and attending appointments, and you might have to wait for long periods for a response. Also, especially for these two the uncertainty around cost could be unappealing. However, the main reason for young people not wanting to use a phone helpline, online message counselling, online forum, email support service and face-to-face counselling was the fear that the service might not be anonymous. This again stresses the importance of anonymity, which was also highly expressed by young people in our consultations.

Unexpected consequence of online safety education

Online safety was a recurring theme which came up frequently for the participants, especially those of school age or recent school leavers. There were initially many negative attitudes towards using the internet to seek help, the main reason being around the dangers of sharing personal information on the internet.

'There could be hackers, they can track you down where you are etc.'

'Well because like someone said you don't know who it is you're going to then it might be useful to, I know it's sounds stupid, but they could also be a person that is actually not trustworthy and they could try to manipulate you.'

It's clear that in recent years young people have been taught, to keep them safe, about the potential risks they face when using the internet. Whilst this is extremely important it may have also acted as a barrier to using the internet as a reliable source for information and support. This supports our finding that young people often struggle to use the internet to find help, despite being internet savvy in many ways.

4.1.4. Where and how do young people seek help?

We asked participants where they have looked for advice in the past and where they would seek help, if they were looking for help now.

Friends and Trusted Adults

Both questions showed that young people's number one choice for advice are friends. Around 70% of participants have gone to friends for help and would choose to go again. The main reason why they choose their friends when they need help is because of trust. They feel they can trust their friends and feel emotionally supported, understood and respected by them:

'Because many people treat my problems as if they're insignificant and it's easy to fix when it's not. I trust my friends more because they see how it's effecting me.'

Leading on from this our consultations explored the concerns young people may have when thinking about going to a friend for advice. They especially express the fear of their issues or problems being exposed by their friends. Here we ask how a 'friend' is defined. Others said they would only speak to a close friend, although for some this still was unappealing. This shows that young people are very worried about other people knowing about their problems and moreover it makes clear that there are in fact some barriers which could prevent young people from speaking to someone they know and trust.

Secondly, 58% of young people have chosen and 46% would choose again to go to a trusted adult like a parent or a teacher. Again, trust is a big factor. Young people think that trusted adults can give good, appropriate advice:

'I would tell a trusted adult about my problem because they will be able to help from life experiences'

These results tell us that young people desire direct contact with someone they know and who knows them. They feel that people that know them can give them better advice and help and they gain more from face-to-face contact:

'I know them and they know me. We are not strangers to each other which means the advice is probably going to be better.'

Furthermore, friends and trusted adults are seen as reliable, confidential and quick and easy to reach.

Face-to-face counsellor

35% of participants have sought advice from a face-to-face counsellor and 31% would seek advice from one in the future. Counsellors are trusted to provide effective support and advice due to their training. Another reason is that a counsellor offers a more personal experience than an online service including their ability to notice non-verbal cues:

'because face to face interactions leave a trace and you feel like they will understand you more if they see you'

'things I don't feel comfortable talking to my parents I can talk to my counsellor'

Some participants consider the negative aspects of face to face counselling. It is not always easy to access. It can be costly, and it may take time to arrange an appointment. This means that it is not beneficial as a first step, or for someone in crisis, as they cannot access it impulsively, it takes time and preparation. The thought of opening up to someone you don't know could be intimidating, and also may take time to feel comfortable with the counsellor which means it is likely that more than one session will be required.

Internet

When asked where they have sought advice in the past 65% answered they have looked for help using Google Search - this shows the internet, is a popular go to when seeking advice. However, as it became clear in our consultations as well as our case studies, in order for this to be effective young people would have to be able to explicitly name issues. In our consultation, we found that it was a lot easier for young people to find appropriate and reliable help and advice online when they were able to define the problem. When they could identify someone as having depression, they found useful support, whereas when they couldn't name the issue and used vague terms such as 'relationship problems', they found the internet confusing and unreliable.

50% of the participants have looked for advice on a website. This was because a website is easily accessible, and you can get instant advice and a wide range of information for no cost. Moreover, you can act anonymously and you don't have to interact with anyone in person so there is less fear of feeling judged. What did appeal was the ability to explore information and advice at your own pace without the time restrictions you may face when interacting with someone:

'I would seek advice online as it is easier and quicker and more confidential. Also, there

is less chance of judgement if you don't tell someone face to face'

Furthermore, you might find people who are going through a similar situation and just knowing this can validate your experience. Reading how they may have dealt with their situation could help you see options for yourself:

'it often helps me to find people in a similar situation which boosts my confidence, even if I don't speak to them'

This finding may indicate that young people are looking to their peers for advice. In correlation, 34% of participants have sought advice from an online forum, especially because the peer-to-peer support provided on online forums seems to be helpful for young people:

'online forum because peer to peer support is incredibly beneficial'

These findings tell us that a lot of young people are using the internet when they are seeking advice. Contradictory to this when asked directly in our consultations young people expressed many concerns about seeking advice online and had negative attitudes towards it.

Online message Counselling

Only 20% of participants have sought advice on an online message counselling service and only 23% would choose it for a source of advice in the future, even though we know that young people are increasingly using technology to communicate with each other. However, young people find many good reasons why an online message counselling could be beneficial. They think that it is easy and quick to access especially in comparison to face-to-face counselling. You can get *'immediate help'* and especially when you start to get support it is an *'easy first step'*. Also, the counsellors are trained and therefore can *'support you and give you ways to get out of the situation'*. Like with other forms of online services, it is anonymous, confidential and therefore there is less fear of feeling judged. Furthermore, because it is not a face-to-face situation you can think about what you want to respond and you don't see the initial reaction of the other person which could feel damaging if they don't respond appropriately:

'All online, feel safer typing my worries out as can't see the initial reaction of the other person'

Seeking help can be frightening however, online message counselling seems to hold less emotional barriers than other services:

'Online message counselling is good because you can decide whether or not to give your name and details. I wouldn't be comfortable talking to someone directly about

private things, so it's better over a computer screen.'

This reflects the views of young people in the focus groups. An online messaging service seems particularly appealing when you are in a vulnerable and isolated situation because it can give you confidential, appropriate advice and writing for some, is easier than talking. This was also expressed by Galop. The young people in the consultation also discussed online message counselling as not being well advertised which might be an explanation for why few young people use it.

'I actually don't know where you'd find somewhere that would do that (online messaging), and also maybe specifically searching to find it may not be the first thing you do, you'd just look up the problem you were having.'

A question we could ask is would online messaging services be more popular to these young people if they were as well-known as phonedlines, as they don't seem to hold the same barriers.

It was described as;

'More detached which makes it less painful talking'

'The ability to take a break and think about what you're saying which is harder to do in conversation'.

However, young people in the consultation did consider disadvantages of online services as well. As discussed previously many were concerned about safety and not knowing who the person on the other side of the screen was. It was also brought to attention that the problem-based focus felt *'clinical'* and an unnatural way to share your feelings. In response to this some felt that if they were to use a service they would like it to have a community feel, where you could build rapport with someone, which may sound a bit like a group forum or message board. An online message service could also be used alongside something like this. When speaking with Galop they confirmed that often their services are used alongside each other rather than in isolation which can lead to their online service acting as a stepping stone before they call or meet for further support. When asked directly if there was an option at their school to speak to a counsellor face to face or via message, a majority of the group said they would prefer to message. Despite some of the wary attitudes towards online services Childline has seen its use of online services grow each year since they started. The phonenumber is still very well used but online message counselling is now their most preferred method of contact.

Phoneline

The service that had the least use was the phone line. Only 12% have sought advice from a phone line in the past and only 11% would choose it as a source of advice in the future. This is even though phone lines are the most established help line service which underlines our theory that young people are not attracted to traditional forms of help seeking services and a service that meets their needs more appropriately needs to be established. When discussing phone helplines in our focus groups students believed they were the most well-known form of external support, however many felt it was a big step to pick up the phone and speak to someone, which might especially be difficult when you are in a vulnerable situation. This might be a reason why many young people don't feel comfortable using it which affirms Childline's experience of increased online messaging. Similar reasons of fear and embarrassment came up alongside feelings that they wouldn't be able to express in words what was wrong. It was described as an *'intimidating experience'* and many felt they wouldn't be ready for that level of support. Although the benefits you may get from speaking to someone in person may seem greater, assuming it was helpful, writing a message was thought to be easier. However, when young people are choosing to get help from a phone line then it is because they can get *'instant advice'* from a *'professional'* who is *'able to support'* them and give them options on how to handle a problematic situation. This could be why a phone line is seen as beneficial especially in an *'emergency'*.

In conclusion, we see that young people prefer to go to someone they know when they are seeking help. They trust friends and adults to give them the support and help that they need. This is important, however it is also clear that there are reasons which prevent them from doing so, and therefore they may still decide to turn to the internet for advice.

When consulting with a boy's school some students said they would rather not speak to their friends if something was bothering them.

'I wouldn't want to talk to my friends about things like that. I don't know, it's weird. Friends are for fun.'

We questioned whether this may differ when speaking with a female group but some had similar thoughts.

'You can't trust them, they might blackmail you'

In contrary to this some said they would speak to a friend, but only a close friend. Others described their first choice would be to speak with someone they knew and trusted. This was for reasons of trust, care and security, similar to our findings from the questionnaire.

'I also think that it's a lot easier for someone to go to someone they have already built a rapport with like a friend or a teacher, I would imagine that would probably be the first thing they would go to.'

This shows it is a complex and personal choice, and what works for one will not work for all however, we do notice some trends in the comments. When they were doing their case studies on how to seek advice, the difficulties they faced online may have caused some to say that they preferred the idea of speaking to someone over using the internet. This indicates that although the idea of speaking to someone you know and trust is the ideal situation, the reality is that there are many barriers which prevent young people from doing so. This is where support services can come in helpful.

4.1.5. What are young people's experiences of help seeking online and how effective is it?

We asked participants if advice they had found from online sources was helpful. 45% said yes, they found it helpful, and only 13% didn't find it helpful. 42% were not sure whether they found it helpful, which shows that online support and advice can be perceived as confusing. Similar to this, most young people we consulted with have at some point used the internet for advice and when pressed many said they found it helpful.

Young people who found online advice helpful justified their answer by naming positive outcomes from online support. In particular, they named the support they received online as a first step to accessing further face-to-face or specialised support.

'I found that online advice was really helpful because it was more anonymous and less intimidating. It was also a great stepping stone for me to accept and understand my current issue before maybe talking to someone off of the internet.'

Some young people discussed comfort and reassurance that they were not alone through finding support from peers which they could relate to. This suggests that for these user's online peer-to-peer support reduced feelings of isolation. So, we can see that despite some barriers, many young people see the internet as a great way to connect and relate to other people, which was also stressed by young people in our focus groups.

'You can search for other people or stories of people who've had the same experiences as you.'

'It makes you feel less alone as you realise other people feel the same way you do or

have had the same experiences'

Another reason some participants highlighted the internet was helpful is the wide range of information available, that it is easy to access and you can get help from various sources.

'easy to access and simply written so easy to understand'

'A range of ideas and advice is given. You can choose what best suits you'

Practicing online help seeking

We explored this in a practical session asking students to read a case study and search for advice online. Many expressed difficulties finding helpful advice, and had to visit multiple sites. They seem unenthusiastic and commented that they would rather speak to someone they trusted. When a group could name the problem, such as depression, they found it easier as they knew what to search for. More commonly students were not able to recognise or name the problem and vague questions or statements were typed in google, such as 'relationship problems'. When this happened they often found news articles. This was reflected in the questionnaire when participants expressed not having the vocabulary to describe a situation as preventing them help seeking. The wide range of sources and opinions can be beneficial but many participants also see this as a challenge, which is why students in our consultations were not particularly forthcoming or enthusiastic about seeking help from the internet. People found that with such a diverse set of websites and opinions it was hard to identify which were reliable sources and which were not, because the information is often contradictory or vague. Therefore, many people expressed confusion when using the internet for advice, which seemed to stem from receiving mixed messages and having to search thoroughly in order to find helpful information. Especially in the focus groups many young people expressed concerns regarding online safety and insecurities on how to differ between reliable and unreliable sources.

'Different websites say different stuff and it confused me'

'Some was very helpful but some advice I wasn't sure if I could trust (particularly Google searches etc)'

This highlights the benefit of young people learning how to access help or advice using the internet, as although they may use it daily, if they are not able to use it as an effective tool to find support this leaves them vulnerable when in times of need.

Both our results from the questionnaire and from the consultations we did with young people

tell us that young people are not sure how helpful online services are, and how safe it is to use them. However, when asked, most participants could name some benefits of seeking advice online. One key benefit that came up frequently was anonymity. Comments show that people feel comforted by the fact they can search for advice or find out information without having to disclose who they are. This is beneficial for people who want to seek out their options, whilst feeling in control over the decisions you make.

'Seeking online advice is anonymous and being able to do it by yourself allows you to ask questions and find out information that you may be worried about asking others'

'It's easier to take the first step and you maintain control. You also feel less obliged to follow the advice than if it was coming from a professional counsellor'

Similarly, people liked the fact that you can do it alone and don't have to face someone. In fact 88% of young people are searching the internet for advice alone. Many people expressed that they didn't like the idea of talking to someone face-to-face as it made them feel uncomfortable. These feelings show embarrassment and fear of being judged so for them as a first step the internet is a useful tool.

'It is more confidential and it helps you feel less ashamed, you don't have to see someone's reaction'

4.1.6. How do young people describe an ideal support service?

When seeking advice using an online service, 69% of participants would feel most comfortable talking to a professional trained in relevant issues, as well as 65% who would feel comfortable talking to a trained counsellor. Compared to that only 29% would feel comfortable talking to a trained peer. This tells us that when seeking advice from an online service many young people feel most comfortable in taking advice from a trained adult and would rather talk to them than to a trained peer.

This finding contradicts our assumption that young people might prefer peer-to-peer support when seeking advice and also that young people's number one choice for support are their friends. Drawn together this indicates that the majority of young people do rely on peer-to-peer support from their friends, not from any peer.

When asked how they would describe an ideal support service most participants interestingly described the person they would be conversing with. This tells us from young people's perspective that the behaviour and reactions of the person carrying out the service is fundamental

for a good support service.

The most frequently used word was ‘*supportive*’ and the rest of the comments followed suit, (e.g. *caring, non-judgmental, easy to talk to, knowledgeable, taken seriously* etc..) describing a service where they would feel listened to and respected. It was unclear what type of service they would like best, this could be down to personal preference, but what was clear was that the ideal service would provide emotional support, and a safe space to explore problems.

Many participants suggested features of the service. It was important for it to be easy to access, ideally open 24/7. It would benefit by being free at point of use, confidential, and with the ability to remain anonymous. It also seemed important that once you engaged with the service it responded quickly, which for the young person could confirm they are being listened to and taken seriously.

It was unanimously agreed that it was important for a level of anonymity especially in the first stages of help seeking. This is something they felt online messaging was especially able to provide. The idea of being behind a screen, gave a sense of safety and is believed to allow the benefit of time to compose what you want to say, and to respond. This can be done without feeling embarrassed and without any judgement from the listener. It also means the person disclosing feels in control of the decisions they make around the situation and once they no longer want to talk they can end a conversation simply without the fear of repercussions. This allows time and space to assess what type of support they might want, which is why many believed it could be a good stepping stone to access further help.

‘I think out of all of the methods of counselling personally I think talking on an online messaging service would be the least intimidating in terms of like sharing your feelings, as long as I know it’s a trained counsellor or someone who wouldn’t share my information. So, it can act as a stepping stone for more intimate channels or face to face calling. Because like calling for example is directly speaking to them and they can sort of, if you’re really upset they can hear your voice.’

Many young people presented the idea that often people are not aware what constitutes unhealthy or harmful behaviour in relationships. They could think they are overreacting or the behaviour may have been normalised. Validation from the online counsellor could give someone the confidence to seek further help.

- Those who participated in the focus groups indicated that if they knew about and trusted an online messaging service, the feeling of control over their situation would make it an attractive first step in help seeking.

- An issue with online services is difficulties with young people being able to articulate what is happening to them which negatively impacts on their ability to effectively seek help through online resources.
- The phonenumber is too intimidating for a first step for those consulted which is also reflected in the questionnaire data as the second least popular form of help seeking (12%).
- The online messaging service was seen as a valuable stepping stone rather than an end in itself.

4.2. Interviews with Professionals

We looked at a selection of organisations, all of which provide support services in various forms, including online counselling. This helped us to understand what is available for young people. To further inform this project we interviewed two of those organisations. We chose Childline, the UK's leading support service for children and young people, and Galop a longstanding LGBTQ+ charity. Childline has an extremely well-used service and they could offer some insight into how they operate as a big charity, whereas Galop's online services are a newer addition to their existing telephone helpline and therefore operate a smaller provision. Talking to these two organisations helped us gain a deeper understanding of online services from the professional perspective.

5. Conclusion

In the following we will present key findings from our research. We can state that all methods we used combined have provided valuable data which has challenged pre-existing assumptions about young people's use of internet based services. Moreover, our data illuminated clearly what prevents young people from help seeking and highlighted their preferences to seeking help. We go on to make recommendations which are grounded in the findings.

The greatest barriers to seeking help are embarrassment, shame and the fear of repercussions.

From our questionnaires, focus groups and interviews with professionals we drew the conclusion, that there are many factors that might prevent young people from accessing help. But

being embarrassed about one's situation, fear of being shamed or judged by others and feeling uncertain about what might happen when you seek help are the reasons that were most common. This showed us that young people are particularly worried of what others might think about them, about their 'reputation', and the fear that they might lose control over their situation if they talk to someone.

Recommendation:

To combat these barriers that prevent young people from accessing the help they need, we again would recommend educating young people about support services. From what we have learnt there are existent services, that see young people as experts of their lives and want them to be in control. They stress the importance of young people making their own decisions. If they were aware of this the fear of repercussions may be reduced. Furthermore, we would recommend public awareness campaigns that would help to lift stigma from prevalent issues, so that these can be talked about publicly. This would especially be beneficial if it was done as part of a Whole School Approach.

Young people most commonly seek advice from their friends or trusted adults but there are situations when they wouldn't.

We found that when young people are in a difficult situation seeking help from someone you know and trust is the ideal situation. However, in reality there are many barriers that prevent young people from doing so, for example being embarrassed or ashamed or not wanting the other person to worry.

Recommendation:

An effective online messaging service can be a space where young people don't feel ashamed and are not feeling judged for their situation. In order to realise this, young people have to be able to remain anonymous while accessing help. Taking into account that there clearly are situations in which young people don't want to talk to friends or trusted adults, we have to stress the importance of an alternative source of help for young people. Based on our research, we hope that we have informed the development of a service that meets the needs of young people in an effective way.

Young people don't know how and where to seek help online.

From the mapping undertaken as part of this project we have identified a range of online services for young people. However, it has become very apparent that young people are not aware how to reach appropriate online services. They struggle with articulating what is happening to them which hinders their ability to beneficially seek help online. Moreover, it is hard for them to distinguish between reliable sources and unreliable sources, partly because there is such a wide range of information on the internet.

Recommendation:

We find that telling young people that they can find useful advice and support online is not enough. As previously mentioned, young people need education on how and where to seek safe and reliable help online. They need to gain appropriate knowledge and vocabulary that enables them to name the things that they or their friends are experiencing. This could be incorporated into a workshop that is integrated in school lessons or projects and would especially be beneficial if it was part of a Whole School Approach. To show young people how exactly online messaging services work, an organisation that provides this kind of service (e.g. Childline) could be asked to talk to students about it.

Young people are not aware of online messaging services.

All our data tells that young people know little of online messaging services. They know about phone helplines, but as explained are hesitant to use them. In terms of online messaging services, they are hardly aware of their existence and don't know how they work.

Recommendation:

In order for an online messaging service to be helpful and beneficial for young people it has to be properly advertised and promoted. An effective advertisement structure has to be developed to make sure that the service reaches young people in need. Again, we think installing an online messaging service in a school or college setting would be productive. That way the service could greatly be promoted inside the school in various forms and young people would know of its existence. It still would have to be considered how to reach young people once they have left education.

Young people are particularly concerned about online safety.

When consulting with young people and reading their answers to our questionnaire it became clear to us that young people see the benefits of an online service, but are really worried about

their safety online. They fear that a service might not be anonymous and someone could find out their identity which could have various consequences on their lives.

Recommendation:

Young people need education about online services and about how to stay safe online. It has to be made clear which services are anonymous and confidential and safe for them to use, and also how to assess these risks themselves. Moreover, we think it would be beneficial to set up an online messaging service locally in a school context. This way young people would know who is on the other end of the line, which could offer security whilst remaining anonymous.

When it comes to using support services, young people feel more comfortable writing than talking.

Our research showed that young people see many advantages to online services. They feel online they can take their time to respond, they don't have to face someone which is especially beneficial when they're emotional and they can be anonymous. A phonenumber seems to be too intimidating for a first step when you are seeking help, which reflects our statistics that only a few young people would seek advice by calling a service. In these terms, an online messaging service has often been described as a stepping stone to the help seeking process, since it is easy to access and you don't actively have to speak to someone. Childline's increase in online chat contacts over the last couple of years supports these findings.

Recommendation:

We find that developing an online messaging service would be an effective means of support for young people. It could particularly be beneficial for younger and isolated users and those in crisis. However, several aspects have to be considered when it comes to online messaging services and they will be discussed in the following.

A combination of services has been proven to be effective.

Our data reflects that services are especially helpful to their users when they are not used as a stand-alone service. This particularly applies to online messaging services. Since all forms of services have different advantages and values to them, a combination of services can provide its user with richer and more effective support and advice.

Recommendation:

Based on our research we would not recommend developing a stand-alone service. Online messaging seems to work better when used alongside other services, or at least with the option of another service. It would be challenging to advertise it widely enough to reach young people in need without a large platform to promote from. Installing an online messaging service in a school setting, where there are other sources of support and advice available would be a lot more effective according to our findings. It could also be possible to look for a partner who offers a different type of service, like a phone line or face-to-face counselling, and link the online messaging service to them.

Young people are looking for a safe space.

Our research revealed that when young people look for help they are especially interested in finding a 'safe space', where they are emotionally supported. They want to talk to someone, who listens to them and helps to explore their options. It should be a space that is not judgmental and that takes them seriously. What was highly stressed was that young people should be able to remain anonymous because it gives them a feeling of safety, and therefore can hopefully encourage more young people to use support services when in need.

Recommendation:

If a service is developed we recommend it to be an anonymous and confidential listening service providing emotional and practical support for young people. It should be exactly what young people want and need: a safe space.

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