

Common mental health issues affecting young people

This fact sheet is divided into two parts. Firstly, we outline some headline findings from Irish research on the mental health of young people. Secondly, we list and describe some of the mental health issues young people can experience.

Irish youth mental health research: selected findings

Headline findings from the RCSI Mental Health of Young People of Ireland Report (2013)

Research note: the findings in this report are based on in-depth clinical interviews from two separate studies, one with young people aged 11-13 and another with young people age 19-24. Strict criteria were used to determine how many young people met criteria for a broad range of diagnosable mental disorders based on what they reported during their interviews.



11-13 years

1 in 6

young people **aged 11-13 years** experiencing a **mental disorder** at any given time

1 in 3

young people **aged 11-13 years** who have met lifetime criteria for a **mental disorder**

1 in 8

young people who have met lifetime criteria for an **anxiety disorder** by the age of 13

1 in 7

young people who have met lifetime criteria for a **depressive disorder** by the age of 13

19-24 years

1 in 5

young people **aged 19-24 years** experiencing a **mental disorder** at any given time

1 in 2

young people who have met lifetime criteria for a **mental disorder** by the age of 24

1 in 4

young people who have met lifetime criteria for an **anxiety disorder** by the age of 24

1 in 4

young people who have met lifetime criteria for a **depressive disorder** by the age of 24

Headline findings from the UCD/Jigsaw My World Survey 2 report (2019)

Research note: the findings in this report are based on survey data from young people across Ireland. The survey used a number of validated self-report measures to gather information on both risk and protective factors in young people’s lives.



Adolescents

School & exams
top two **stressors** in adolescents' lives

40%
adolescents who reported **depression**

49%
adolescents who reported **anxiety**

Friends, music & sport/exercise
top 3 **coping strategies** for adolescents

Young adults

College & the future
top two **stressors** in young adults' lives

58%
young adults who reported **depression**

58%
young adults who reported **anxiety**

Friends, music & sleep
top 3 **coping strategies** for young adults

Mental health issues affecting young people

Here are some mental health issues affecting young people. They are listed in alphabetical order. The list is not exhaustive.

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) affects how focused and active people are. 'Attention deficit' means struggling to concentrate or focus on things. 'Hyperactive' is where people can't sit still for long. They fidget and move a lot and can be very chatty and accident prone. People with ADHD can often act without thinking. That means that they sometimes put themselves at risk because they haven't thought things through.

Most young people are diagnosed with ADHD after they've started school. Many young people with ADHD also have anxiety.

Anxiety

Anxiety is connected to the emotion of fear. It causes intense and upsetting thoughts, feelings and body sensations. When people are anxious, their heart might beat very fast or they might find it hard to breathe. People with anxiety can have a lot of negative thoughts (also known as cognitions) about things that might happen. These can stop them doing things or make them avoid certain situations. People with serious anxiety need support to help them manage their anxious thoughts, feelings and reactions.

Some common types of anxiety that young people have are:

- General anxiety – where they feel anxious most of the time
- Social anxiety – where they feel anxious around other people
- Panic attacks
- Phobias – where they have a really strong fear of something specific (like spiders or heights)
- School phobia – where they get so anxious about going to school that they find it really hard to go in or stop going altogether

People with anxiety can also experience compulsions (see below) and obsessions (see below).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a group of conditions that affect people's ability to:

- Communicate with others
- Form relationships
- Interpret social cues from others, like picking up that someone is upset
- Use or make sense of language or abstract ideas, like trying to express how they feel in words

Some people with ASD only have mild difficulties in one or more of these areas. Other people have serious difficulties in all of these areas.

People with ASD struggle with social connections with other people. They can find it hard to make eye contact. They can find it hard to interpret other people's emotions. Often, they like to spend time alone and can struggle to be in groups.

People with ASD generally like routines and don't manage change or unpredictable situations very well. They also often have sensory difficulties, like how they experience touch, smell and sound. That can mean that they don't like being touched by others or wearing tight clothes close to their skin.

Compulsions

A compulsion is a behaviour that they feel they have to do over and over again. Usually, compulsions are not enjoyable and make no sense. But the person who has them feels compelled to keep doing the same thing again and again. Some common compulsions are:

- Repeated hand washing
- Checking things over and over
- Turning light switches on and off for a certain number of times
- Tapping (tapping something over and over)

Compulsions are linked to anxiety (see above). Some people who have compulsions also experience obsessions (see below).

Depression

Depression is when someone experiences one or more of these feelings very strongly:

- Sadness
- Hopelessness
- Anger (often without the energy to express it)
- Irritability (getting irritated by other people very easily)
- Emotional numbness (not feeling anything at all)

Most people with depression feel low in mood most of the time. Some people with depression feel numb. It's like they don't have any feelings at all. When someone has depression, they're usually not able to experience things as pleasurable.

Depression isn't something that people can just 'get over'. But, it is something people can recover from. Most young people who have depression also struggle with anxiety (see above).

Drugs

Drugs come in lots of forms, both legal and illegal. There are a lot of illegal drugs, like cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine, for example. There are also drugs that are known as 'legal highs'. Even though they're not illegal, legal highs can be really dangerous. Other legal drugs are medications that you can buy over the counter. Many drugs (both 'legal' and illegal) have been found to increase the risk of:

- Anxiety (see above)
- Depression (see above)
- Impulsive or risk-taking behaviour and
- Psychosis (see below)

Many drugs are chemically and/or psychologically addictive. That means everyone who uses them regularly is at risk of becoming addicted to them.

Eating disorders

Eating disorders are complicated psychological issues. They affect a person's relationship with:

- Their body
- Food
- Eating
- The people around them and
- Other parts of their life (like school, hobbies, sport, socialising with friends).

There are lots of types of eating disorder. Some common ones are:

- Anorexia nervosa – where people restrict what they eat and do lots of exercise to try to lose weight and usually become dangerously underweight
- Bulimia nervosa – where people eat a lot and then try to get rid of what they've eaten (for example, by making themselves vomit)

People with an eating disorder have a distorted (not accurate) view of themselves and their bodies. They also do very unhelpful things to try to control what they eat and their body weight. For some people, their behaviour around food and eating can be life-threatening.

Hallucinations

Hallucinations are unusual experiences that involve

- Hearing
- Seeing
- Smelling or
- Feeling things that aren't there

People who have hallucinations can hear voices or sounds when no one is around. They can see things that aren't there. They can feel someone or something touch them when there's no one around. Or, they can smell things that aren't there. Sometimes hallucinations happen naturally and are not unusual. For example, people who are grieving often see or hear the person who has died and it's common to hear a voice just as you're falling asleep or waking up.

Many children and adolescents experience hallucinations. For a small number, they can also be a symptom of psychosis (see below).

Obsessions (Obsessional thoughts)

Obsessions are images or thoughts that keep coming into someone's head, no matter how hard they try to stop them. A lot of obsessions are very upsetting for people who have them and don't make any sense. For example,

- Thinking they've left their door unlocked even though they've checked it over and over again.
- Having upsetting images that come into their head (for example, imagining hurting someone even though they would never do anything to hurt someone else).

Obsessions happen when young people have anxiety (see above) or are stressed. Some people with obsessions also experience compulsions (see above).

Personality difficulties

Our personality is part of who we are. It is affected by how we were cared for when we were babies and children. It's also affected by how we feel our needs were met by the people around us when we were very young. People with personality difficulties have negative and critical thoughts about themselves and others. They often struggle to manage and regulate their emotions (emotion dysregulation). They usually find it hard to cope with the intense and uncomfortable emotions and can find it hard to trust others or to develop close relationships with people.

Psychosis

Psychosis is when people experience hallucinations (see above) and/or delusions (see above). Hallucinations are unusual experiences that involve:

- Hearing
- Seeing
- Smelling or
- Feeling things that aren't there.

Delusions are thoughts and beliefs that aren't true. People who have delusions can't be convinced that they aren't true.

Self-harm

Self-harm is when someone intentionally hurts or harms themselves.

Many people who self-harm do it privately as a way of:

- Expressing or coping with overwhelming feelings
- Trying to feel in control
- Punishing themselves or
- Communicating to other people that they're not OK

Most people who self-harm don't feel good about themselves. They can be very critical of themselves.

Suicidal thoughts

Suicidal thoughts are any thoughts about killing yourself. They include:

- Thoughts about wanting to kill yourself without any plan or intention to do so - known as suicidal ideation and
- Thoughts about killing yourself with an intention and a plan to do so – known as suicidal intent

Some people can also fantasise about being dead without any thoughts of wanting or planning to kill themselves. That's called having a passive death wish.