

**MENTAL  
HEALTH  
INNOVATIONS**

**shout**  
**85258**  
here for you 24/7

# Half a million conversations through a pandemic

**The power of text for providing 24/7  
digital mental health support**



# Foreword

The challenges and difficulties the coronavirus pandemic has brought to millions up and down the country cannot be overstated. Rates of anxiety, stress, and grief have skyrocketed. Long periods of lockdown have left so many desperately isolated, cut off from friends and family, and feeling as though they have nowhere to turn. During this unprecedented time, Shout 85258 has been a critical support service – a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people in the UK. The report that follows outlines the extraordinary, positive impact Shout has made in the face of this – acting as a warm, helping hand to those who are struggling, and a vital crutch for those in their darkest moments.

The Royal Foundation's journey with Shout began in 2017, born out of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry's mental health campaign Heads Together. The campaign drove forward decades of tireless work delivered by the sector to encourage more people to talk about mental health. Whilst working on the initiative, Their Royal Highnesses maintained an ambitious vision for its legacy. Having spent many years working to break down the stigma that surrounds mental health, they were dedicated to ensuring there existed the tools and support services necessary for people to talk – any time, and anywhere.

Mental Health Innovations was established in late 2017, supported by what was at the time, the largest grant in the Foundation's history. The launch of Shout that followed, and what this report shows it has since achieved, has more than realised that ambitious vision held by Their Royal Highnesses. We are all incredibly proud of the impact this service is having and inspired by the hard work, resilience and determination of the team.

Over 80 members of staff in the UK and New Zealand are supported by thousands of volunteers up and down the country to respond to people in need. The beauty of this service is in the humanity and empathy of this great army of volunteers. All that Shout has achieved is testament to their continuous selflessness and dedication.

We are incredibly proud of all that has been achieved by the team at Shout 85258 and are excited to continue to support what is undoubtedly a much needed service for so many in the UK.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "William Hague". The signature is fluid and cursive.

The Rt Hon Lord Hague of Richmond, William Hague  
Chairman of The Royal Foundation

# Introduction

When Mental Health Innovations publicly launched Shout 85258 in May 2019, we were a small team with a big idea: to bring free digital intervention in the form of text message support to anyone in the UK who is struggling to cope. Since then, we've swiftly grown to become an essential 24/7 mental health support service, with a community of more than 2,200 volunteers and more than 80 staff in the UK and New Zealand.

In November 2020, we reached our first 500,000 conversation milestone, having supported 213,262 texters across the UK. We offer a secure and free platform for confidential conversations about mental health, round the clock when other support is not available. Our conversations have provided positive early intervention for many, taking the pressure off other services and in some cases de-escalating suicide risk. A large percentage of these conversations have taken place in the time of Covid-19, and it is clear that the pandemic and its aftermath have had a huge impact on mental health that's likely to be enduring, particularly for the younger generation.

This report looks into what we've uncovered and learnt during our first half million conversations, with an additional focus on the impact of Covid-19 on mental health and the need for our service. We take into account data insights from analysis of our anonymised dataset, and the first-hand experiences of our Clinical Supervisors and our fantastic Shout Volunteers who are so generous with their time and support. We also include stories and feedback from our texters themselves, who have found the courage to take a positive step forward and contact us for support.

As we make progress towards one million conversations, we're looking to use our data-driven analysis and clinical expertise to keep improving the Shout offering and better serve our texters, whilst also reaching new audiences. This will be greatly helped by our research partnership with Imperial College London's Institute of Global Health Innovation, who are taking novel approaches to understanding our dataset, which offers a unique opportunity to understand mental health trends. In addition, we will seek to develop new, pioneering products and services that meet underserved needs and improve the mental health of the UK population, through the power of technology.



A stylized handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large 'V' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

**Victoria Hornby**

**CEO, Mental Health Innovations**

# Executive Summary

Shout 85258 is a free, confidential and anonymous mental health text support service for anyone in the UK who is struggling to cope. Shout launched publicly in May 2019 following a pilot period and is the first service from Mental Health Innovations, a digital mental health charity, which uses data-driven analysis, clinical expertise and technological innovation to develop and sustain pioneering digital products and services that meet underserved needs and that improve the mental health of the UK population. The service is built on the tried and tested technology of US charity Crisis Text Line.

Shout 85258 has been there to support texters through 500,000 conversations, and through the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our unique combination of data capabilities, clinical insight and technology have allowed us to look into these conversations and gain insight into the mental health issues facing our texters by different demographics. We have also examined specifically how Covid-19 has heightened the need for mental health support and shaped our conversations.

Our research encompasses data insights from the Shout platform, and the learnings of our team of Clinical Supervisors and Shout Volunteers from their interactions with 213,262 people.

This report covers an analysis of our first 500,000 conversations, which took place between 23rd May 2018 and 22nd November 2020, and also looks beyond to early January 2021, when the third Covid-19 UK lockdown drove unprecedented numbers of conversations with texters in need of support. Key findings explored in the report include:

- How text messaging has enabled a new and discreet way for those in need of mental health support to reach out for help. This early intervention is particularly important both around the clock, when other services and helplines are not available, and in times of lockdown, when face to face support cannot be accessed
- A large proportion of people who contacted Shout 85258 were reaching out for mental health support for the first time, with 38% having never spoken to anyone else, and 55% feeling they didn't have anyone else they could talk to
- The main reason people contacted Shout was for suicidal thoughts (34% of conversations)
- 65% of our texters aged under 25 and 7% aged 13 or under showing the importance of text support for a digitally native demographic
- 80% of Shout texters identified as female, in line with patterns in society reflecting both mental health need and a willingness to seek support among this gender
- Women were also twice as likely to mention eating disorders and body image than men and discussed self-harm in nearly 1 in 4 conversations
- We also see particular demographics, including autistic people (7% of our texters) and the LGBTQ+ community (35% of our texters) overrepresented in Shout usage
- Our busiest times on the platform have been in response to news events, in conjunction with social media signposts, highlighting an 'in the moment' demand for mental health support
- The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly taken a toll on mental health, prompting a huge increase in conversations along with an increased awareness of Shout
- Before the virus struck the UK in early 2020 we were seeing around 750 conversations a day. This rose to an average of 1,400 conversations per day in early 2021

# The power of text

Because Shout 85258 is a text service, the mental health support that we provide is uniquely discreet, accessible, confidential and anonymous. Our texters have contacted us from school, work, while travelling or at home, and each time have been able to have a private and silent conversation, without being overheard.

"Thank you for helping me. I've never done anything like this before and I hate talking on the phone so it's nice to have a text service. I was worried about doing this but I'm glad I did, you calmed me down and put my mind at ease."

Texter feedback

"Some texters say they are more comfortable texting rather than trying to express their feelings verbally. It enables them to be anonymous if the subject is too painful, embarrassing or life changing."

Sheenu, Shout Volunteer

Nearly half of the people who have texted us felt more comfortable texting than talking about private issues (48%). Text offers them an alternative way to open up and share the problems they haven't been able to speak out loud. It also gives people a valuable and lasting record of their action plan that they can return to whenever they need to, or use as a starting point for a conversation with a parent or GP.

"I could feel your kindness and compassion coming through the texts which is rare to find on phone services. I needed it after feeling extremely isolated and alone during this time."

Texter feedback





38% of people who contacted Shout have never asked for help anywhere else and 55% told us they didn't feel they had anyone else to talk to.

"Thank you for being so understanding and supportive of the way I was feeling at the time. I was feeling like I had nowhere to turn and you made me feel I wasn't alone."

Texter feedback

"Many love texting as they have never spoken to anyone, they feel they absolutely can't. They really open up on text and are so thankful that we have listened to them without judgement. It's humbling."

Lisa, Shout Volunteer



Digital is the default means of communication for children and young people and texting, rather than talking, is a natural way for them to reach out for help. Shout has also provided a valuable lifeline for many people in a year when face to face support has often not been possible. In response to the pandemic, as a digital organisation we were able to continue operating as we always do, with volunteers taking conversations from home.



"During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become increasingly obvious just how important digital services are. Text is a powerful medium, not only because people can seek help the moment they need it, but also because it is widely adopted by young people as a method of communicating they are adept at and comfortable with."

Dr Fiona Pienaar, Senior Clinical Advisor, Mental Health Innovations

For sections of society such as the Deaf community, text offers a form of communication that is fully accessible. In fact, we have both Deaf texters and volunteers on the platform.

*"SignHealth is very grateful for our partnership with Shout 85258. Their text message support service has supported more than 400 Deaf people to whom mainstream telephone support services are inaccessible. We would like to dedicate our thanks to Shout's amazing volunteers for working round the clock supporting Deaf people who need us the most."*

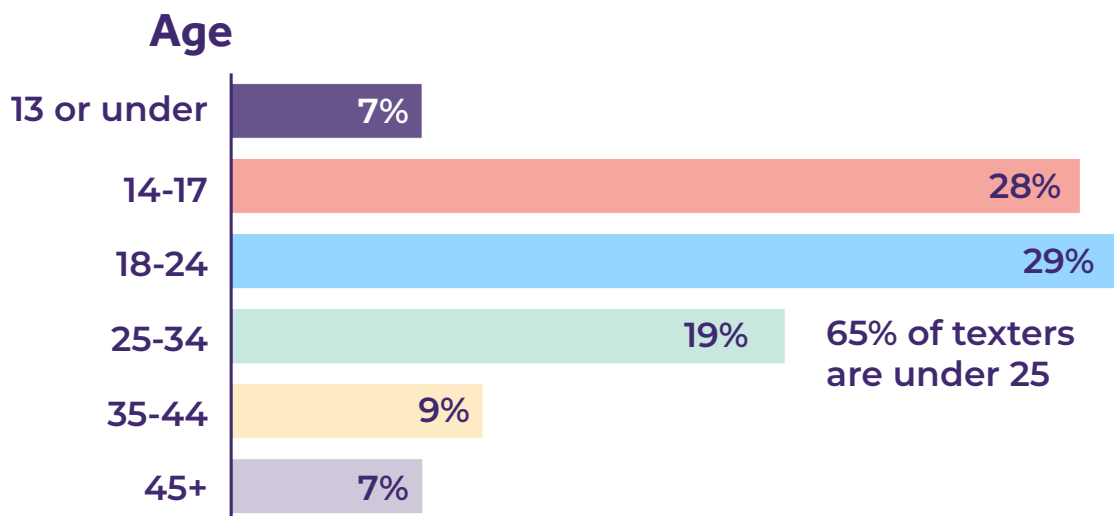
**Rebecca Mansell, Director of Communications & Fundraising at SignHealth**

For others, particularly key workers who have been working under the pressures of the pandemic, text offers a way to remain anonymous and speak to someone in a non-judgemental environment.

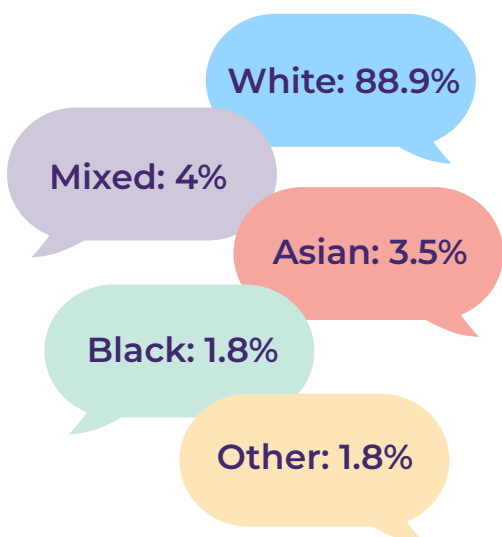


# Who is using Shout and why

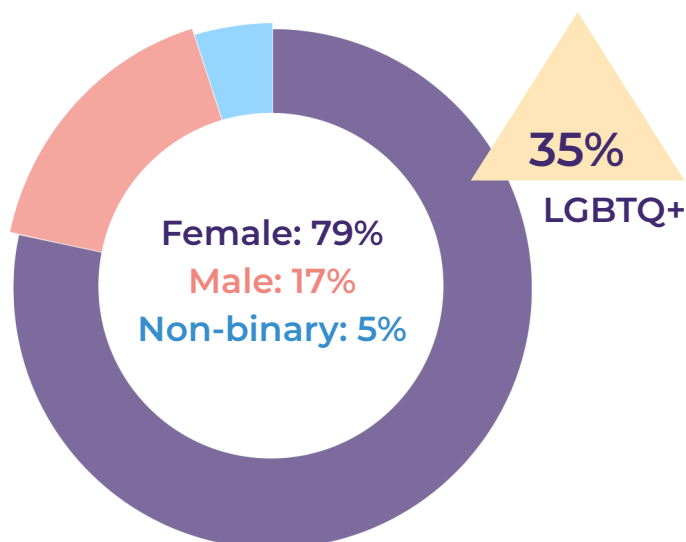
## Texter demographics overview



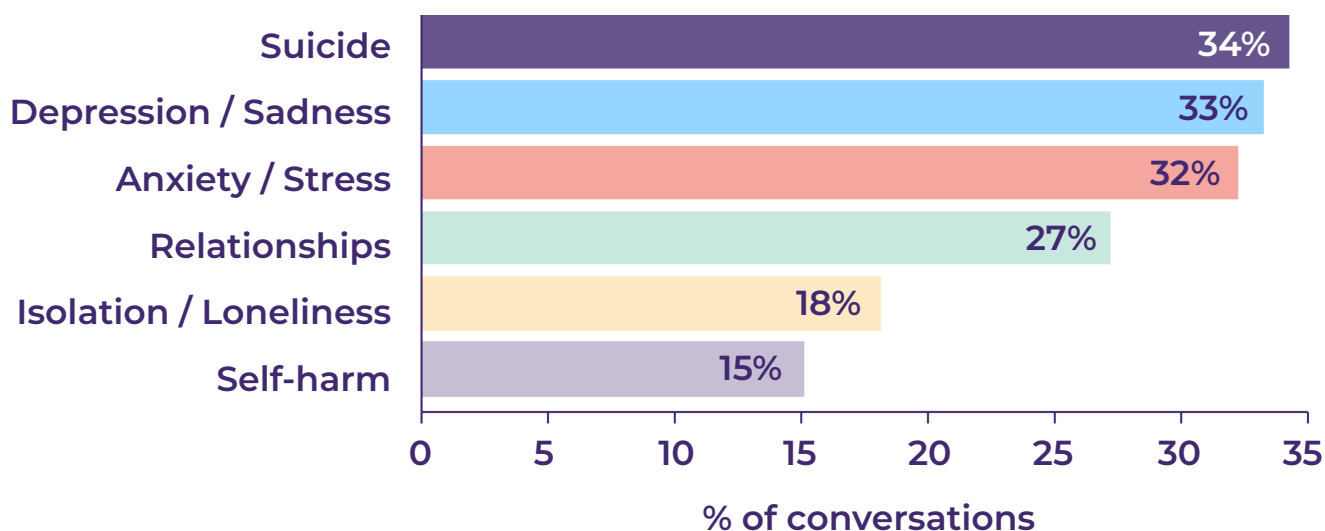
### Ethnicity



### Sexuality and gender



### Six most common issues





## Children and young people

Children and young people form the majority of Shout 85258's texters, with 65% aged 25 and under. Strikingly, although the rates of suicide in the UK increase with age, peaking between the ages of 45 to 49, we find suicide is one of the most common conversation issues tagged by our volunteers across all age groups; 18 to 24-year-olds texting Shout were the most likely to discuss suicide (39% of their conversations).\*

"I was speaking to a suicidal young adult. She was desperate and all I wanted to do was reach into my computer and somehow rescue her. We chatted further and she found the strength to call her mum and ask her to help keep her safe."

Jo, Shout Volunteer

Loneliness might usually be associated with older people, but it's also a problem for our younger texters. Against a backdrop of social media 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) and the Covid-19 pandemic, we have taken 68,000 conversations with texters who felt lonely or isolated. Nearly a third of these have been with people between the age of 18 and 24. With loneliness comes other issues: texters who contacted us about loneliness were more likely to discuss feelings of depression and sadness, or to talk to us about relationship problems.

Our data show that school is likely to have an impact on mentions of bullying in texters aged 17 and under. When schools closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic, we saw a 59% reduction in the mentions of bullying, compared to the 50 days preceding the closures.

## Partnerships to reach young people

In order to spread awareness of Shout 85258 to young people we have forged partnerships with charities and organisations including The Mix, YoungMinds, Winston's Wish, Diana Awards, Place2Be, Cameron Grant Memorial Trust, Student Minds and Hector's House.

"Shout 85258 is a vital service for young people struggling with their mental health and has provided much needed support during a very difficult time. It is an incredibly important partnership for YoungMinds, especially as we know that the pandemic is deepening the crisis in young people's mental health and that many are struggling to cope. We know that many young people find it easier to reach out for help via text and during the pandemic, with many of us at home, it has been even more important to provide an easy and accessible way to get support."

Emma Thomas, Chief Executive, YoungMinds

Based on recent survey data, 25% of our texter population told us they are at university or college, and we estimate that around 125,000 of these first 500,000 conversations were with students, a crucial audience for us to support.

## Commissioned partnerships



To start a conversation, text 'STUDENT' to 85258

Student Minds is an example of one of our commissioned partnerships, where we provide the partner with unique insights into their specific audience, in this case through a bespoke 'STUDENT' keyword. We launched this partnership on 3rd August 2020 to support students across England and Wales as part of Student Minds' designated Student Space.

Since launch, 51% of conversations using the 'STUDENT' keyword had anxiety or stress as an issue, compared to 33% across the whole service. 'STUDENT' keyword users were also more likely to talk about loneliness or isolation (28% versus 17%) and Covid-19 (19% versus 7%), consistent with widely reported concerns around the challenges that students have faced during the pandemic.

"At Student Minds we know that many difficulties for students have been exacerbated by the pandemic. We are pleased to have partnered with Shout to provide 24/7 text support for students. We know that not all students are able to or feel comfortable to have video calls or spoken conversations about their mental health and worries whilst being at home so this provides a helpful alternative way for students to access support, or acts as a helpful first step into different types of help. It is great to hear how helpful and beneficial texting has been, with students feeling listened to and heard thanks to the amazing volunteers at Shout."

Rosie Tressler, OBE, CEO of Student Minds

"Thank you so much for your support tonight. I couldn't sleep and had too many thoughts racing through my mind. I felt unable to talk to anyone else so thank you for being there. You helped me calm down so I can get some rest. I felt heard and respected."

Student texter feedback

"You listened, never judged and never rushed me. You helped me get through a difficult moment to a calmer, more hopeful one. I appreciate your support so much and can't put into words how much a simple conversation helped."

Student texter feedback

## Our youngest texters

7.3% of people who texted us were aged 13 and under, and we have taken 36,559 conversations with this age group\*. Texters aged 13 and under were the age group most likely to discuss self-harm (24%) and bullying (9%) with us.

*"Thank you for the space you created for me tonight. I really felt heard. It meant that I didn't take the idea of self-harming any further."*

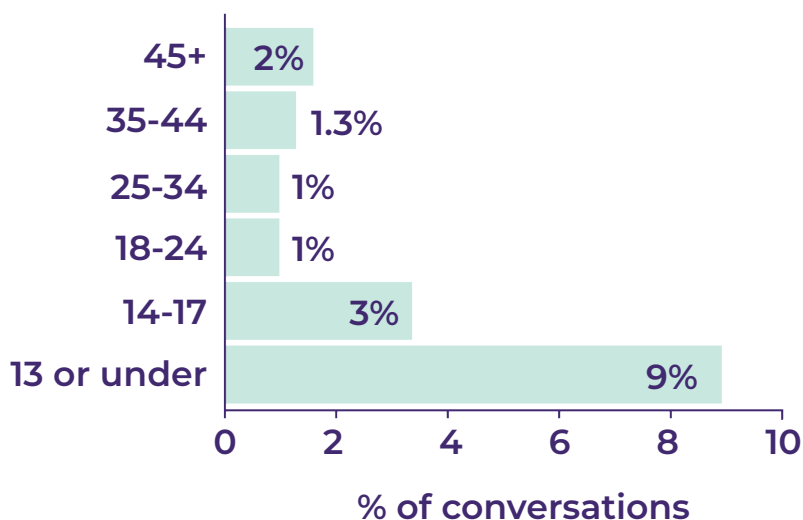
Texter feedback

*"So many texters are battling with resisting self-harm. Self-harm carries a stigma and it is easier for people to discuss it in an anonymous setting, as often the self-harm is kept secret from friends and family."*

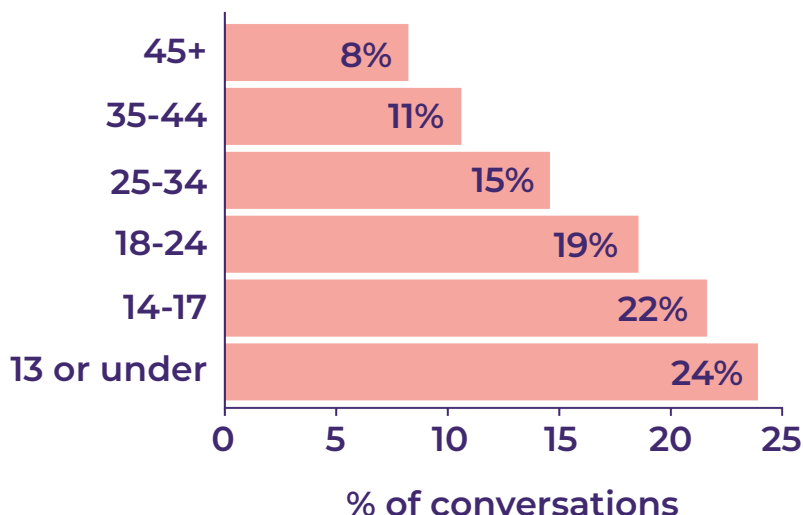
Evril, Shout Volunteer



### Bullying



### Self-harm

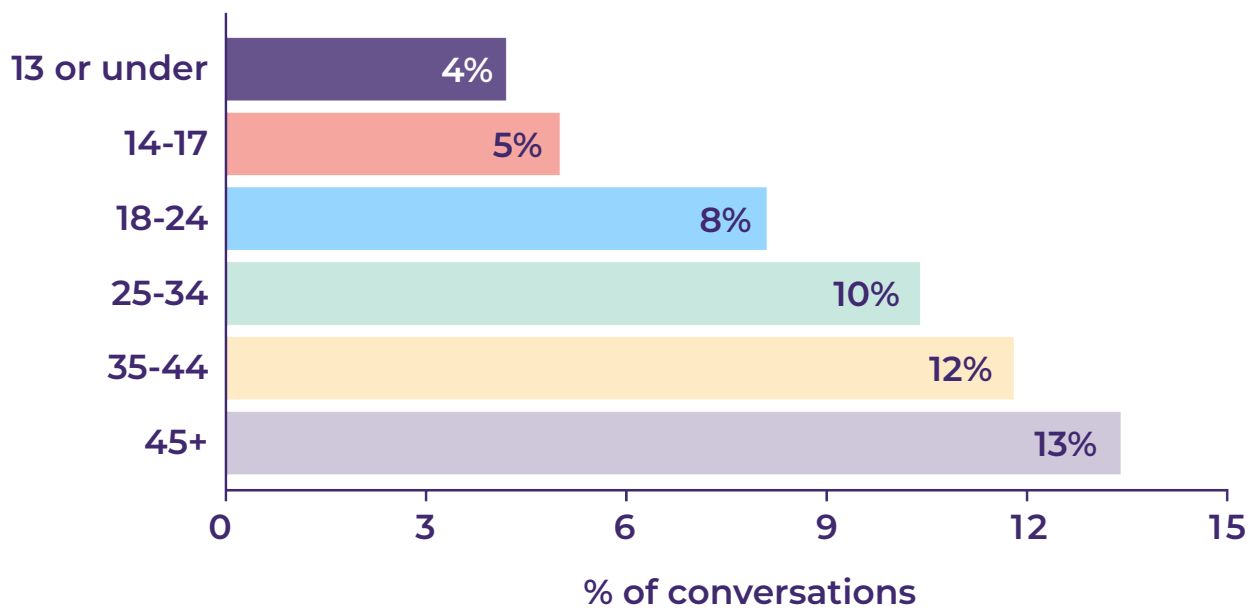


## Older texters

Nearly 17% of our texters were aged 35 and above: 35 - 44 (9%), 45 - 54 (5%), 55 - 64 (2%) and 65+ (1%). We estimate to have taken 82,634 conversations with people in these age groups\*.

The main issues this age group talked to our volunteers about overall were anxiety/stress (35%), depression/sadness (34%), suicide (32%), relationships (25%), isolation/loneliness (20%) and Covid-19 (13%). Of all ages, texters aged 35 and above were most likely to talk to us about Covid-19 during the pandemic.

## Older texters were more likely to contact us about Covid-19



A common theme in these conversations about Covid-19 was uncertainty, which peaked before lockdown was announced on March 23rd. Thereafter we saw larger numbers of people concerned about a lack of routine and mentioning feeling trapped.

From April 2020, there was an increase in the use of words such as 'exhaustion', 'tired' and 'fatigue'. Pre-lockdown, these appeared in around 15% of conversations, reducing slightly to 13% at the beginning of lockdown and then increasing gradually over the last few months to be included in around 20% of conversations each day. Mentions of the words 'strain' and 'drain' also gradually increased.

*"I have had conversations with people grieving for parents who have died in hospitals or homes for the aged and they were unable to visit because of the restrictions."*

Evril, Shout Volunteer

## Female texters

The majority of texters who used Shout 85258 identified as female, making up 80% of our first 500,000 conversations. This reflects patterns that we see in society, where the mental health of women and girls is deteriorating compared to that of men. For example, women are three times more likely than men to experience common mental health problems and rates of self-harm among young women have tripled since 1993.

"There is a specific group of individuals who we now know are at a much increased risk of mental disorders, particularly depression and anxiety and this group is young women aged between 16 and 24. For these individuals, mental disorder has increased in prevalence over the last 10 years, from around 10% to 25%. So 25% of young women have significant problems with anxiety and depression and a quarter of those self-harm. It's a serious problem."

**Professor Peter Fonagy OBE**

The main issues females texted Shout about were anxiety/stress (34%), suicide (36%), depression/sadness (33%), relationships (24%), self-harm (19%), and isolation/loneliness (18%).

While males mentioned self-harm in around 10% of conversations, females mentioned it in around 19%. They were also twice as likely to mention eating disorders and body image compared to males.

We have taken 57,246 conversations about self-harm, 84% of which were with females and 65% with young women aged 24 and under. In these conversations, 43% also mentioned suicide and just over 6% mentioned body image.

"Thank you, you took my mind off the feeling of wanting to self-harm and I now feel in a better situation to go to sleep."

**Texter feedback**



## Autistic texters

Our texter population is seven times more likely to report being autistic (7%) than the UK population (around 1%). One in 50 (2%) of our conversations mentioned autism or Asperger's.

90% of autistic adults are thought to have a co-occurring mental health disorder,<sup>1</sup> and autistic people are shown to struggle most with anxiety disorders. It is therefore not surprising that texters who are autistic mentioned anxiety or stress in 31% of conversations with us each day.

86% of autistic people who texted us found the service helpful and many mentioned that text is easier for them as a means of expressing how they feel.

"I am usually rubbish at reaching out to strangers as I am autistic and am scared of talking to people I don't know, but I needed somewhere to go tonight as I am feeling really isolated and alone. My Shout Volunteer was completely non-judgemental. She helped me to stay calm and kept me safe from taking the pain out on myself."

### Texter feedback

"Research suggests that around 80% of autistic adults struggle with their mental health issues during their lives. Yet thousands of autistic people miss out on crucial support every day, simply because there aren't enough services and mental health treatments aren't adapted for autism.

"Shout's 85258 is a great example of an organisation offering information, advice and support, especially as some autistic people find communicating on the phone or face-to-face difficult"

**Felicity Stephenson, Policy and Parliamentary Officer for Mental Health at the National Autistic Society**

<sup>1</sup> Camm-Crosbie et al., (2018) - 'People like me don't get support': Autistic adults' experiences of support and treatment for mental health difficulties, self-injury and suicidality



## The LGBTQ+ community

One in three texters who reached out to us for support identify as LGBTQ+. We estimate to have taken around 177,000 conversations with people who identify as LGBTQ+\*. During the first national lockdown in 2020, we took an additional 4,500 conversations with LGBTQ+ texters, many of whom felt 'trapped in the Covid closet' at home. This demographic were almost 40% more likely to mention self-harm than other texters (22% versus 16%).

Given the higher incidences of mental health problems and bullying or harassment experienced by people who identify as LGBTQ+, often from a young age, for these texters, having a safe space to be listened to without judgement was crucial and particularly resonated with their needs.

"I thought about coming out, and I'm going to build up the courage to tell my mum about how I'm struggling with my sexuality. It was a great relief to be able to talk this through with someone, thank you."

### Texter feedback

"With many LGBTQ+ youth feeling 'trapped in the closet' by lockdown or living in unsupportive home environments, the need to support the mental health of the LGBTQ+ community has been more important than ever. At a time when many people can't see friends and have their usual support networks, a text service has been vital for being able to talk to a non-judgemental volunteer in a confidential and anonymous setting, while getting the support they deserve."

Alexis Caught, Shout Volunteer, mental health advocate and co-host of queer podcast Qmmunity



## Suicidal texters

*"You've saved a life tonight and helped me find hope again."*

### Texter feedback

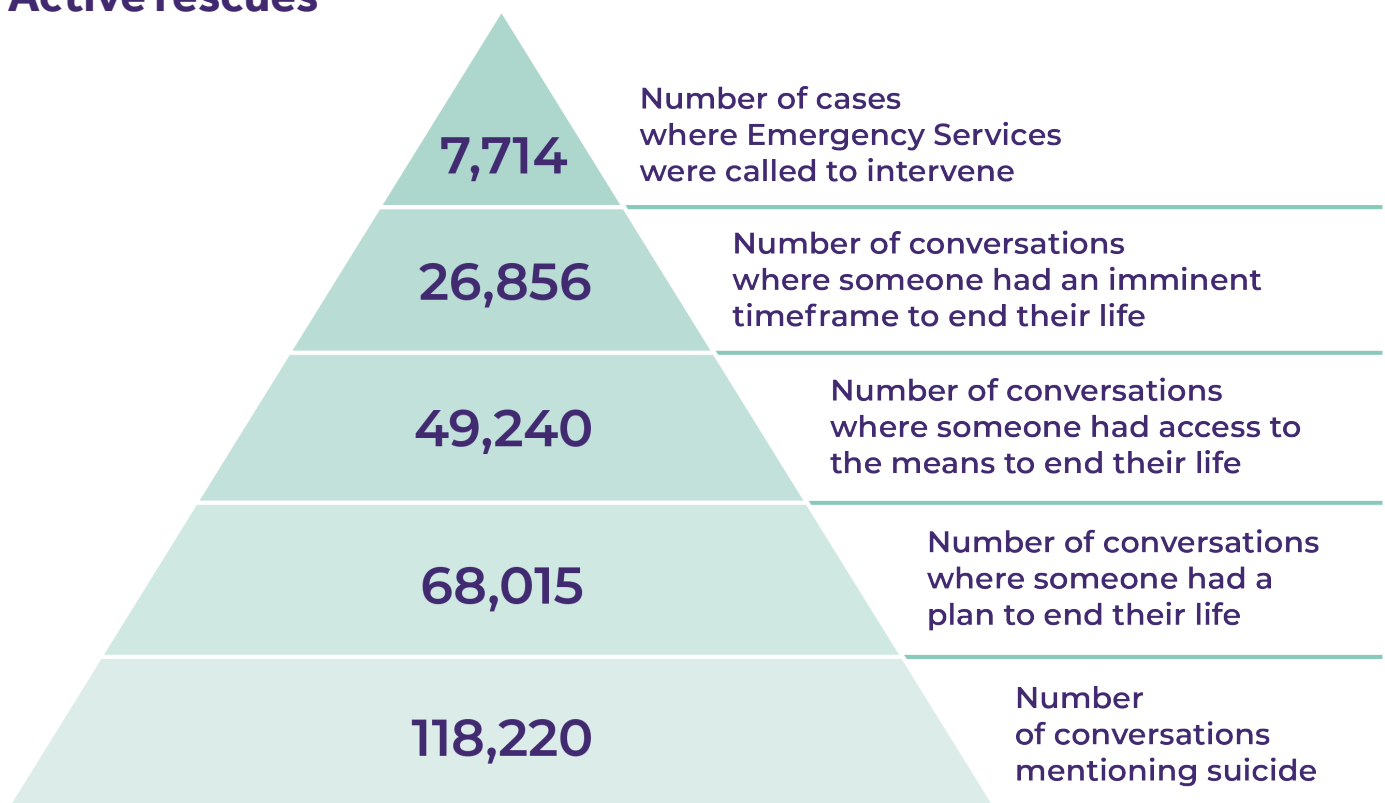
Suicidal thoughts were the most common reason people texted Shout, with an average day seeing around 34% of conversations about this issue. The Shout service provides active rescues - an intervention by the emergency services to dispatch a wellness check to individuals we believe to be at imminent risk of ending their life or in danger as a result of a safeguarding issue.

Our volunteers are trained to assess risk in every single conversation and create a safe space for the texter to talk about the pain they're experiencing. There are four steps associated with this process, known as a 'ladder-up risk assessment'. These steps aim to establish whether a texter's life is in immediate danger.

In around half of the daily conversations that mention suicide as an issue, the texter will have considered a plan and have the means to end their life. In around half of those cases they also had a timeframe in mind.

If a texter is considered to be at imminent risk, the volunteer will work with the texter to de-escalate the texter and guide them to a calmer frame of mind, working together to establish a plan to keep them safe. If a texter is unable to plan for their own safety, we will conduct an active rescue, a process that is always overseen by a Clinical Supervisor. Just 1-2% of our conversations every day result in an active rescue, highlighting the role of the skilled de-escalation process.

## Active rescues





The likelihood that a texter will discuss suicide increased during the day, peaking in the early hours of the morning. Conversations were around twice as likely to lead to an active rescue in the early hours of the morning compared to the daytime.

"I once had a suicidal texter, he was only 17 and was harming himself at the time we connected. He felt so alone and like no one would care if he took his own life. Just by listening to him and allowing him to express how he felt, to help him know that he wasn't alone was enough to help him to stop harming himself and seek help from his GP the following morning. By giving someone that safe space to open up and to feel like they have been listened to without any judgement can have such a big impact in saving someone's life."

Courtney, Shout Volunteer

## The power of a text message

We were recently contacted by the parent of a 12-year-old girl who had been struggling with anxiety over the lockdown and who had decided to go to a river to end her life. In her parent's words:

"Laura had been struggling with anxiety since the start of the lockdown. Without us knowing, things had gotten so bad that she had decided to go to a river near where we live and end her life. She went out on her scooter one evening as she so often does, and had planned to do this. The first we knew about it was when the police contacted us to explain what had happened and that Laura was with them and safe. Before the police arrived, Laura had contacted Shout and had a conversation with a volunteer. I've seen the text thread and have no doubt that the way the volunteer acted and the responses on the text caused Laura to stop and think, and then empowered her to phone 999 and ask the police to come and help her. I have no doubt at all that her life was saved."

NB, name and personal details have been amended to protect anonymity

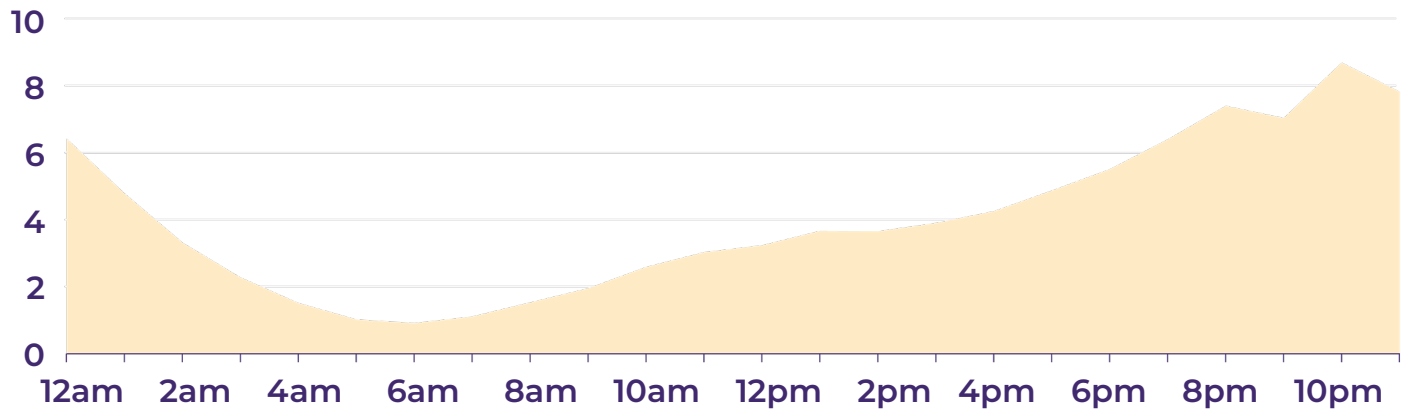
We have been fortunate enough to maintain contact with this incredible family, who have since informed us that Laura is safe and has been referred to CAMHS as a next step for the further support she deserves.

# When do people contact Shout?

## When they have no one else to talk to

Mental health issues do not discriminate by time of day or day of the week. Because we are a 24/7 service, Shout Volunteers take conversations around the clock, when most other helplines and services are closed.

## Percentage of conversations by hour of day

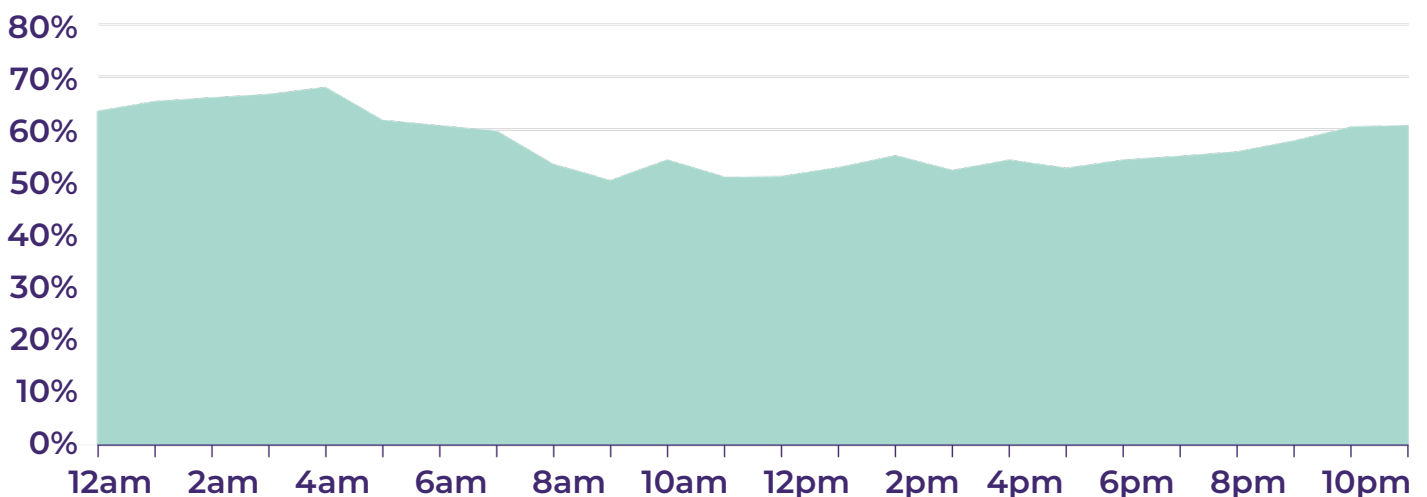


*"People text us when they feel lost and do not know where else to turn. They sometimes do not know what they need in that moment of crisis, they just know they need help, and that's where we come in."*

Charu, Shout Volunteer

Many people who texted Shout were reaching out for support for the first time (around 45% of our texters each day were new to the service) and 55% of texters didn't feel they had anyone else they could talk to. This rose to around two thirds of people at night, when other support services are unavailable and a person's social support networks such as friends or family members were likely to be asleep. Of those who texted us, 87% told us they found the service helpful and 74% said they felt more calm.

## The percentage of texters who tell us they didn't have anyone else to talk to (by hour of day)



"I've had a conversation with someone in their seventies who texted early in the morning before their partner woke up. More than anything, I get the sense it is a lonely time of day when their thoughts become overwhelming and they just want someone to listen and say it's OK."

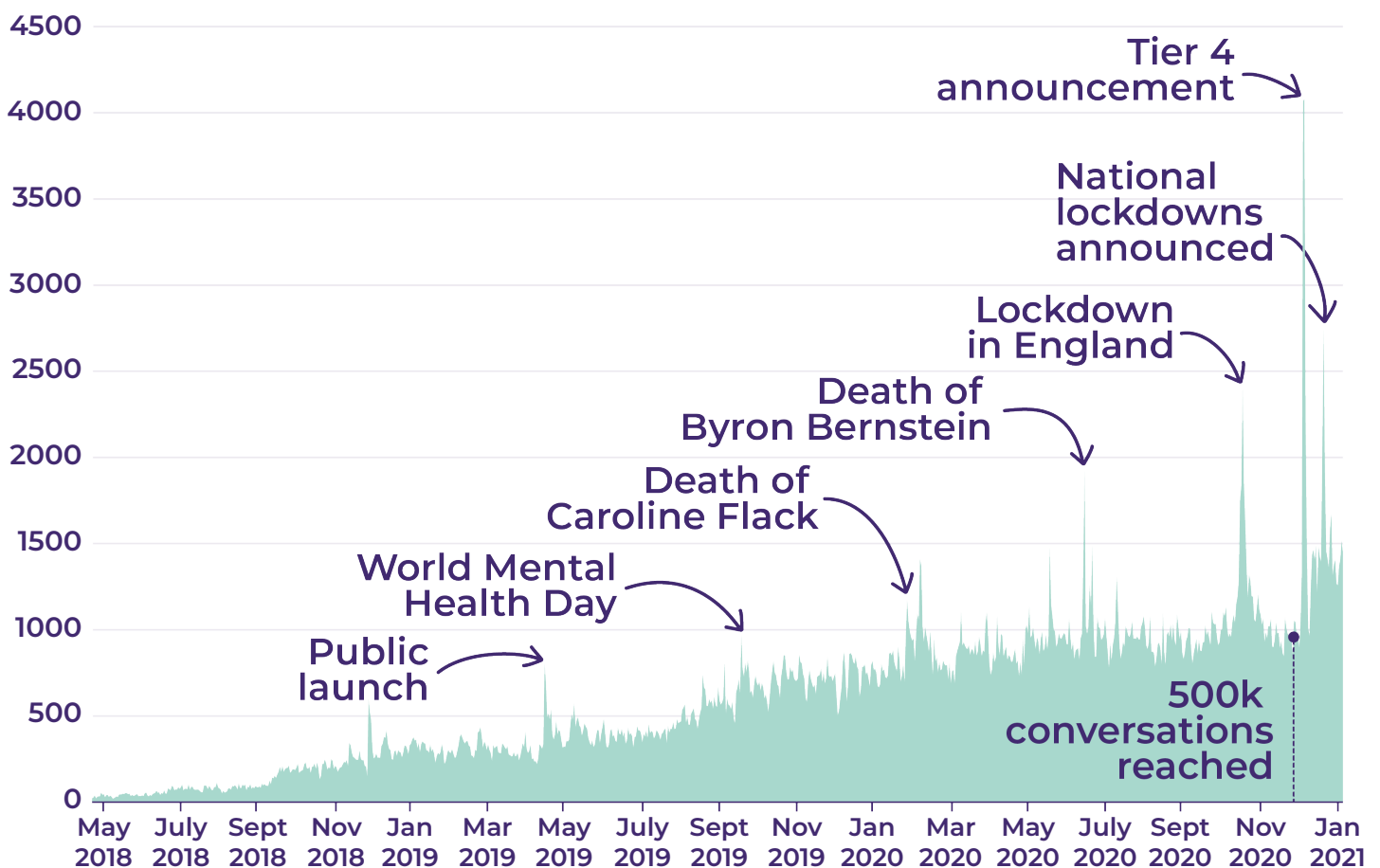
Liz, Shout Volunteer

To respond to 24/7 demand, we now have teams on both sides of the world. We have recruited a growing bank of Clinical Supervisors, practitioners and volunteers in New Zealand, who, being typically 13 hours ahead, are able to help us provide round the clock support, in what is the middle of the night for our UK volunteers.

## In response to news events and social media signposts

From tragic news events to announcements about the pandemic, our busiest periods have been when there's a major news story or announcement that affects large numbers of people in the UK.

### Daily conversations



Our busiest day on the platform during these 500,000 conversations was the 3rd November 2020, just after the second lockdown announcement. On that day we took 2,384 conversations, double the number that we see on an average day. Texters were twice as likely to talk to us about Covid-19, and 1 in 5 conversations mentioned lockdown.

The busiest two weeks preceding lockdown came after the suicide of the TV presenter Caroline Flack on 15th February 2020. The devastating event triggered 3,000 more conversations than during the preceding two weeks, a 30% increase.

*"I had my first shift a couple of days after the tragic death of Caroline Flack and the sheer volume of texters mentioning her by name was astonishing."*

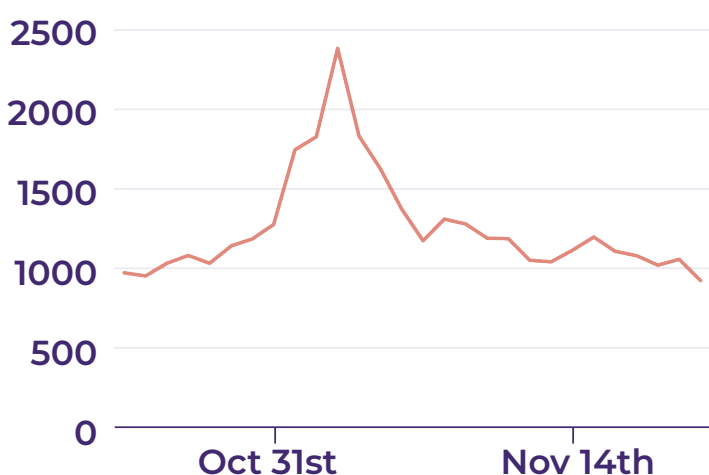
Liz, Shout Volunteer

The tragic suicide of gamer Byron Bernstein led to a similar need. When his girlfriend broke the news of his death on social media on 2nd July 2020, the text number was shared across TikTok, leading to a 43% rise in conversations for the ten days following, compared to the preceding period.

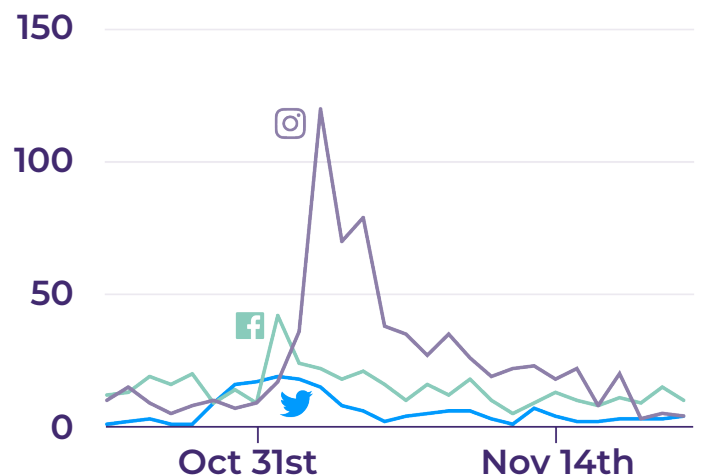
We have seen large spikes in conversations where our number has been shared across social media platforms, often to provide support in the moment following a tragic event. 34% of Shout texters heard about us from social media, with Facebook and Instagram being the biggest drivers of conversations. Newer social platforms are bringing younger demographics to Shout too, with 33% of first-time texters who heard about us via TikTok aged 13 or under.

## Following the lockdown announcement on October 31st, social media posts spread across Twitter, then Facebook and then Instagram leading to our busiest day on November 2nd

Conversations (daily total)



Texters who heard about us on: Twitter, Facebook and Instagram



## Our Frontline

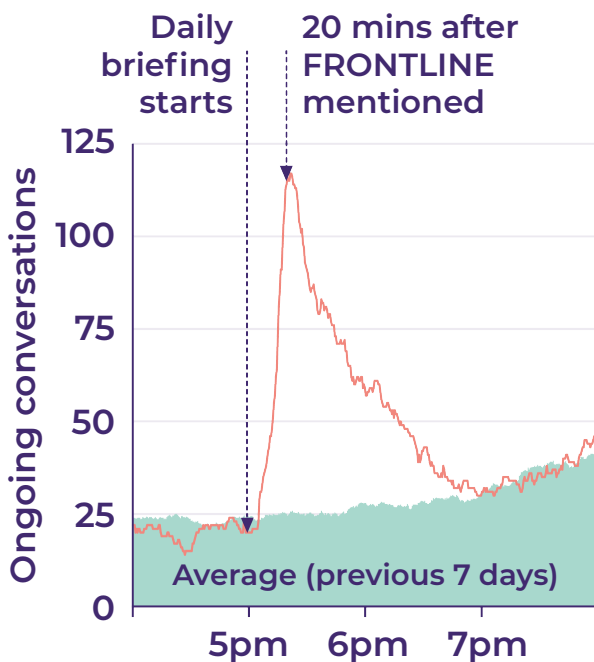
When the pandemic hit earlier this year, we knew the mental health impact this would have on the nation's key workers. In order to provide support to the very people whose lives are dedicated to supporting others, we founded Our Frontline, a partnership between Shout 85258, Samaritans, Hospice UK and Mind, supported by The Royal Foundation of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Our Frontline offers round-the-clock one-to-one support, by call or text, from trained volunteers, plus resources, tips and ideas to help key workers look after their mental health.

On 21st May 2020 the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock made a public service announcement in which he mentioned that the Shout service was available for frontline workers. Within minutes we saw almost 100 people contacting the service, compared to an average of around 25 conversations at that time of day, a demand that was quickly met by more than 150 volunteers logging on to take conversations. This pointed towards an unmet need for in the moment support among frontline workers during what has been an incredibly challenging year for those protecting the nation.

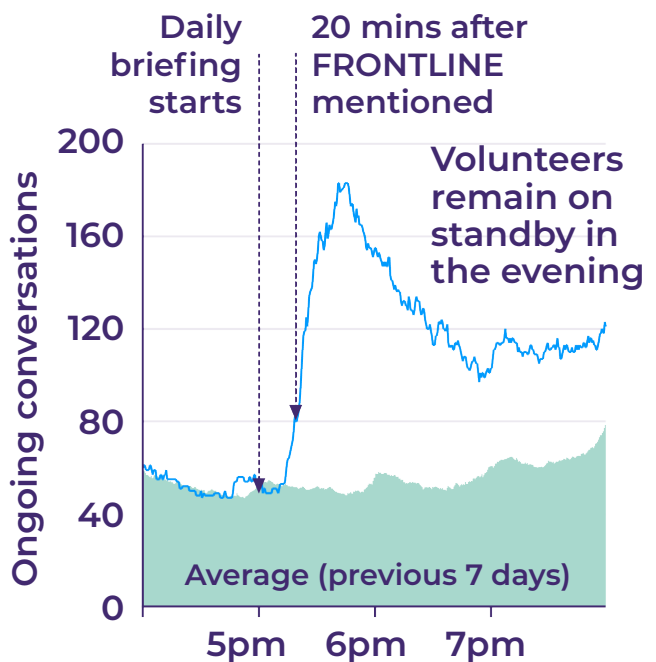
In our 2,800 conversations with frontline workers the most common issues mentioned were anxiety/stress (mentioned in 55% of conversations) and Covid-19 (50%). Other issues arising in conversations were depression/sadness (23%), isolation/loneliness (13%), relationships (13%) and suicide (11%).

## FRONTLINE text service announced in government briefing Spike in conversations handled by surge of volunteers on May 21st 2020

### Spike in conversations



### Surge in volunteers



From a texter feedback survey filled out by respondents, 91% of frontline texters said the service was helpful to them, and more than half (51%) told us they contacted Shout because they wanted to talk to someone who didn't know them; they like the anonymity it offered.

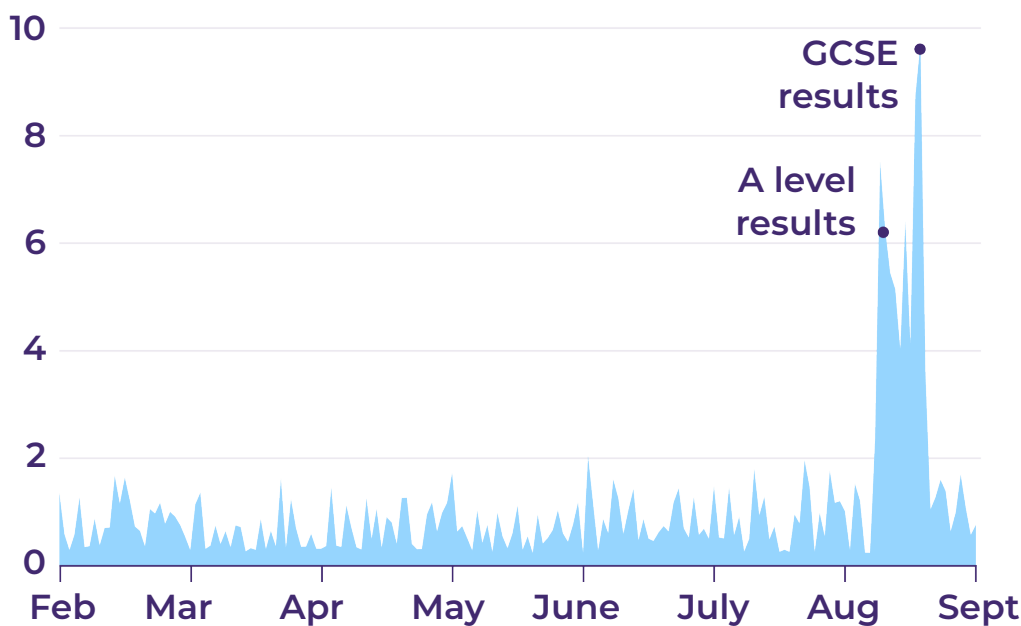
## In anticipation of events

We have regularly seen increased need for the service when people are worried about future events, an example being the release of A Level and GCSE exam results.

In 2019, we saw an almost tenfold increase in conversations that mentioned exam results, beginning on the day preceding both A Level and GCSE result publication. At this time, 1 in 5 conversations with texters aged 14-17 mentioned their results.

Those awaiting their A Level results were most likely to express concerns about uncertainty and a lack of control over their future, while GCSE students often told us they were worried about not doing well enough and disappointing themselves and others.

### % of conversations mentioning results



In 2020, while we didn't see a similar build up in anticipation of exams, students were texting us about anxiety in general. Indeed, from what our volunteers have told us about the types of conversations they took with students last year, many were feeling the heightened effects of the pandemic beyond the normal pressures of school.

"The conversations that have stuck with me the most are with texters from school and university who are fearful about exams. They aren't coping well with the pressure, expectations and the workload. Many think they are a failure, have low self-esteem and are of the mindset that their life will be over if they don't pass their exams. The pandemic has created huge challenges such as learning via online sessions, which has left many feeling extremely isolated and without support."

Phillippa, Shout Volunteer

# The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic has had a huge and enduring impact on the mental health of the UK population, and this has been reflected in our conversation numbers and subject matter.

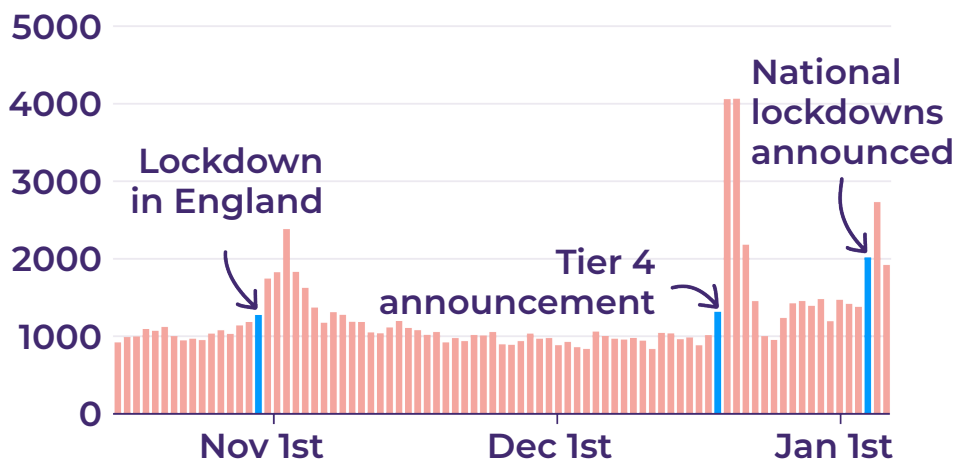
## Conversation volumes during lockdown

Conversations mentioning Covid-19 started increasing in early March and rose steadily during the pandemic. At this time we were taking around 750 conversations per day. Demand for our service started to build and by the summer, as the pandemic continued to dominate our lives, volumes had reached around 1,000 conversations per day.

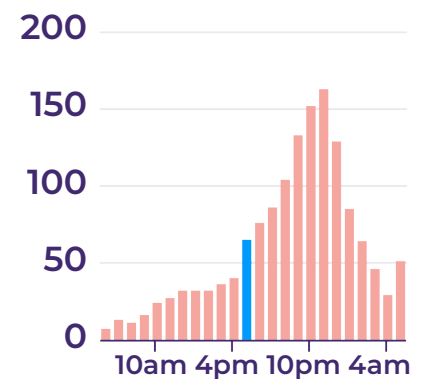
We experienced a dramatic increase in conversation numbers immediately following the second lockdown announcement for England on Saturday 31st October 2020, as people struggled to cope with the impending uncertainty. During the following four days we took roughly twice as many conversations as the same period a month earlier, peaking at 2,384 conversations on 3rd November.

## Conversation increases after announcements are rapid and sustained

### Daily totals



### Tier 4 Hourly totals



Demand for the Shout service continued to grow steadily as the pandemic continued. In November 2020 we were taking an average of 1,200 conversations per day.

## A 24-hour snapshot of our busiest day

At 4pm on 19th December 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made an announcement that those living in Tier 4 areas in England would not be able to mix households at Christmas. We saw an immediate increase in people contacting us for in-the-moment support, taking 4,046 conversations on the day following the announcement. What followed was our busiest ever 24-hour period, with volunteers and clinical supervisors taking a staggering 5,174 conversations between 20th - 21st December.

"Being told I deserved to be supported and feel safe was the most reassuring thing you could've said and although I was hesitant to get in contact, I didn't feel like a burden for the first time in a while and your support encouraged me to open up and speak to my parents tonight. The work you are doing is invaluable, especially in times like this."

#### Texter feedback

By the beginning of 2021, following the third UK lockdown, we were taking an average of 1,400 conversations per day. With average daily conversations levels now at an all-time high, over the course of Covid-19, Shout conversation volumes had increased by 85%.



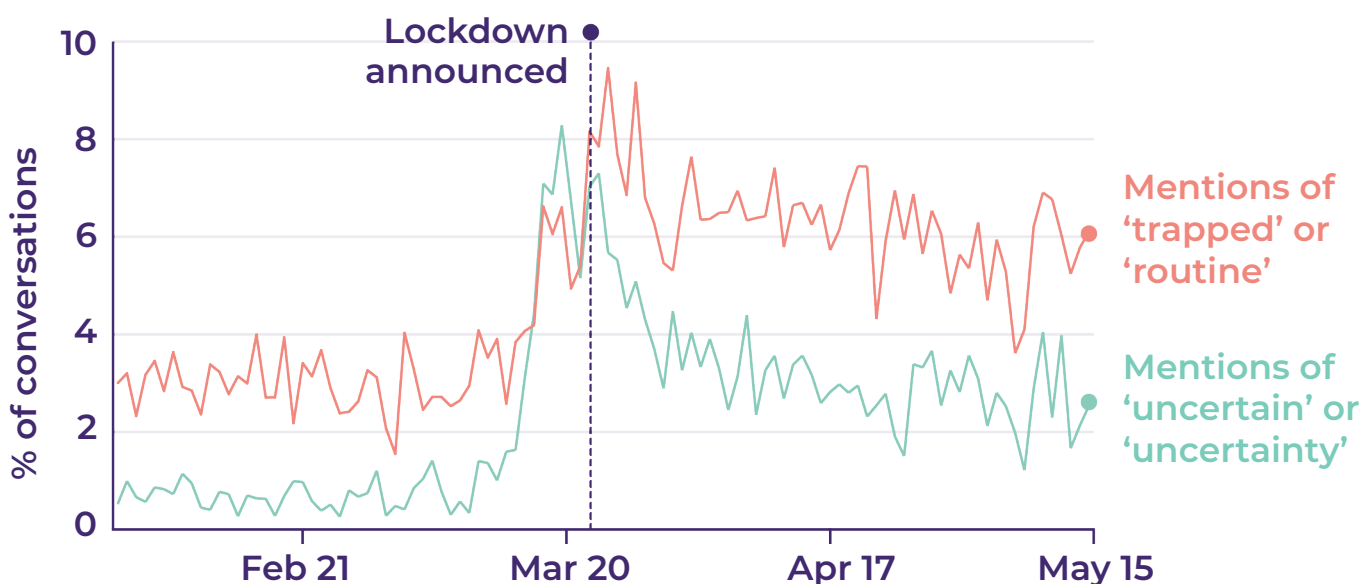


## Issues present in conversations during the pandemic

We noticed that people were starting to mention Covid-19 specifically in their conversations with us in early March 2020, as news about the virus came closer to the UK and in anticipation of lockdown. Our data showed mentions of Covid-19 accounted for 25% of total conversations on 18th March, the day school closures were announced, and further increased to 30% on 23rd March, the day the UK lockdown was announced. As the first lockdown continued, mentions of Covid-19 settled to around 10-15% of total conversations in May.

The pandemic has provoked much anxiety among texters. In more than half of the conversations where texters mentioned the virus, they also had anxiety as an issue; more than double the usual number. Analyses of conversations revealed that this anxiety pre-lockdown was often associated with uncertainty and what the impact of lockdown would be. Once lockdown was underway, people started to talk to us more about feeling trapped and having a lack of routine.

### Conversations during lockdown



### Issues varied with each lockdown

During the first UK lockdown in March 2020, a number of changes in how the service was being used became noticeable. A small number of texters use the service frequently. These frequent texters, who we believe to often be people in persistent distress, started messaging us even more regularly and we almost doubled the number of conversations we held with this demographic.

The number of texters that our volunteers signposted to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) also doubled.

We saw that people became likely to text us slightly later in the night, perhaps because of the lack of routine and subsequent difficulties in sleeping. The proportion of conversations that mentioned 'sleep' increased from around 20% of conversations before the lockdown to almost 25% of conversations in May. A closer qualitative examination of those conversations revealed that in many cases texters were having trouble sleeping because of their distress. Significantly, around 40% of conversations that mentioned sleep also mentioned suicide as an issue.

As the second lockdown was announced, this time, rather than seeing a large degree of uncertainty or mentions of the virus, many texters referred to lockdown as having intensified their distress, or 'making things worse'. Many texters also referred to concerns about the availability of essential support and the changes to their routines that lockdown brings, having experienced this during the first lockdown.

With the news that parts of the United Kingdom were going into Tier 4 and would not be able to meet multiple households at Christmas, the proportions of conversations about loneliness and relationships increased. 22% of conversations were about loneliness (up from 15%) and 30% about relationships (up from 24%).

Before Christmas 2020, nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of our conversations were about Covid-19, as increasing numbers of new texters reached out to us for help. 61% of texters who contacted us on the 20th December had never used the service before, compared with a previous average of 43%.

## The role of social media during the pandemic

Social media has played a key part in bringing people to the Shout service. Conversation volumes during the pandemic were largely driven by news announcements, followed by social media signposting to the Shout 85258 service for anyone who was struggling to cope with the news. In October and December 2020 and again in January 2021 following the third lockdown announcement, celebrities and social media influencers including Lewis Hamilton, Molly-Mae Hague, Gemma Collins, Sophie Hinchcliffe and Maya Jama, among many others, shared social media posts with Shout 85258 listed as a support service.

45% of texters who contacted us after the third lockdown announcement had never used the service before, and with many people hearing about us on social media, Instagram in particular, the importance of a readily accessible text service, for people in the exact moment of need, was highlighted. At a time when many were feeling isolated and alone, support was at their fingertips, for free.

## A digital response to demand

Shout 85258 has a dedicated volunteer community comprising more than 2,200 active volunteers. The community has now expanded to New Zealand in order to provide support for texters in the UK at night and during the early hours of the morning. Rigorously trained and overseen by clinical supervisors, Shout Volunteers have been providing round the clock support for people who are struggling to cope throughout the pandemic.

When the first lockdown came into effect, as a digital service, Shout 85258 was able to continue to operate as normal, responding to an increase in demand as volunteers logged on to the platform from their own homes. As we've continued to see unprecedented demand for support, our volunteers have risen to the challenge with empathy and understanding. At a time when many have felt unconnected and affected by loneliness and isolation, this digital community has not only been able to provide care and support to texters, but also to each other.

# Towards one million conversations

We are committed to refining and scaling our service in order to improve the mental health of the UK population. As we progress towards our first million conversations with people in distress, the insights that we gain put us in a unique position to act. In addition, we are using our learnings to determine what new products and services Mental Health Innovations will seek to develop, to further support the mental health of the UK population.

## Breaking down barriers to seeking mental health support

We know there is work to be done to reach more male texters through Shout. Men are three times more likely than women to die by suicide, yet only 36% of referrals to NHS talking therapies are for men<sup>2</sup> and only 17% of our texters identify as male. As a free, confidential service we would like to explore how we encourage more men to reach out earlier for support with their mental health.

Black people are also underrepresented in our texter base, with 2% of respondents identifying as Black, compared with 3% of the UK population. To begin to address this, we are embarking on a pilot project where we will work with local London community groups to understand the barriers young Black men have to using Shout, to inform the development of a behaviour change marketing campaign that we will then seek to roll out across other areas of the UK.

Through commissioned partnerships, we will also look to reach those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Target audiences include children in and on the edge of care and young parents.

## Continuing to develop support and resources for those in need

Striking in our analysis, is the unmet mental health need of those who have contacted us having never spoken to anyone else before, and the volume of young people who have reacted to seeing our number shared on social media and reached out for in-the-moment support. We will continue to provide round the clock support by expanding our operations in New Zealand and the UK, as well as provide resources on our platform and website, guided by our clinical and data insights, to support our texters and better meet their needs.

## Using data to support areas of need

Mental Health Innovations will look to develop new products and services based on the areas of need identified by our data analyses. We are currently considering developing support for particular groups of texters who appear to be in high need, or other groups that appear under-represented across the service for whom alternative services may be more helpful.

We will use our data insights to help design and shape those services using the latest data science techniques, artificial intelligence, and findings from our research partnerships, including with Imperial College London.

2 Source: Mental Health, men and mental health (<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/m/men-and-mental-health>)

\*Data date range: 2018-05-23 to 2020-11-22 inclusive, which includes 500,810 conversations with 213,268 texters. Demographic and outcomes data are from 55,900 post-conversation surveys. For the purposes of this report, estimates of the number of conversations held with some demographic groups were based on this incomplete survey data and therefore may be subject to survey completion bias. Conversation issue data are from volunteer post-conversation surveys (completed after every conversation; issues are only identified in cases where the texter engaged in conversation). In cases where volunteers have provided feedback on conversations, those conversations have been anonymised and identifying details changed.

# Our supporters

We are grateful to all of Mental Health Innovation's supporters for helping us help others when they are in need of immediate support.

## Funders



## Commissioned partners



## Supporters



We would also like to thank the following networks for providing the Shout 85258 text service free to the service user and 'off bill':

EE, O2, Three, Vodafone, BT Mobile, Tesco Mobile, Virgin Mobile, iD Mobile, Sky, Telecom Plus, Lebara and GiffGaff.





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