

**MENTAL
HEALTH
INNOVATIONS**

shout

85258

here for you 24/7



Supporting student mental health

Insight into students seeking support
September 2021

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Introduction

Shout 85258

Powered by charity Mental Health Innovations, **Shout 85258** is a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone in the UK who is struggling to cope. Anyone in higher education can text **'STUDENT'** to **85258** any time of the day or night to speak to a trained volunteer.

21% of texters who contact Shout are students. Since we launched, Shout has taken around 172,000 conversations with young people in higher education.

"Thank you for saving my life."

Student texter feedback

University is often hailed as 'one of the best times of your life'. But, for many young people, navigating so much change can be challenging. Moving away from home for the first time, coping with the pressures of studying and exams, managing personal finances and making new friends can all be difficult.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only added to the difficulties faced by students, with the last 18 months being among the most disruptive ever for young people in higher education. Recent reports have found that that 82% of students say that Covid-19 has negatively impacted their academic experience¹ and that 80% of students believe the pandemic has contributed to a decline in their mental wellbeing².

"The amount of pressure that these students are under is unbelievable."

Jess, Shout Volunteer

As a free, 24/7 digital service, Shout has been ideally placed to support large numbers of students at a time when they were unable to access face-to-face services and 88% of students say their conversation with Shout was helpful. Thanks to our partnership with Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity, we were able to significantly scale-up our offer to students by collaborating with key organisations to provide a range of holistic support to students in a moment of acute need.

Funding from the Office for Students (OfS) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) enabled the creation of the Student Space programme, run by Student Minds, that brought together Shout and a number of other organisations focused on supporting student's mental health. As part of the programme, Shout was white-labelled to directly target and appeal to those in higher education across England and Wales, by enabling students to text 'STUDENT' to 85258 for immediate support.

Thanks to the vast and unique dataset gathered from Shout's anonymised conversations, and our partnership with Imperial College London's Institute of Global Health Innovations, we are able to rapidly analyse the needs and experiences of students in mental distress across the UK, providing an invaluable evidence-base for service development to support mental health. In this report we shine a light on the

1 Student Minds (2021) University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic report
2 Accenture and Cibil (July 2021) University: The best time of our lives?

key mental health challenges students have faced in 2021³, how they are feeling about the new academic year⁴ and what support they feel they need. We have combined this data analysis with insight and expertise into the student experience from our team of clinicians, testimony from our Shout Volunteers, feedback from student texters and commentary from student mental health experts.

Through this report, we aim to help university leaders and policy makers understand students' mental health needs in real time, respond to these issues and target resources where they are needed most.

"Thank you for being a source of comfort and validation this evening at a time when I felt very overwhelmed emotionally."

Student texter feedback



Dr Radha Modgil, NHS GP, broadcaster and wellbeing campaigner

“Students have faced unprecedented challenges, rapid change and immense uncertainty in every area of their lives over the last 18 months. This has taken and will continue to take its toll on their mental and emotional wellbeing. It’s all our job to ensure adequate

support services are available to all students in the form that they find useful and accessible. Meaningful mental health support has for too long taken a back seat in the conversation about wellbeing and the pandemic has brought this need even more into focus. Mental health support in a tangible, holistic and meaningful format is key and action is what’s needed.

If you’re a student and you’re feeling overwhelmed or low, know that you are not alone and that you more than deserve support. It can be a scary thing to do, but the first step is telling someone how you feel. Try talking to a close friend, someone in your family, your GP or someone in confidence who is trained to help, like a Shout Volunteer. Taking this first step will enable you to start making sense of how you are feeling and help you to understand about the kind of support that can help. You’re all incredible, you’re all doing an amazing job and you’ve all come through so many challenges already. Keep supporting each other this year and remember that help, any time of the day or night, is only a text message away. ”

3 Based on data from 12,100 Shout conversations with 3,956 students aged 18+ between 1 January - 23 August 2021

4 Based on the responses of 627 student texters who completed a survey after their conversation with Shout between 28 June - 13 September 2021

Key findings

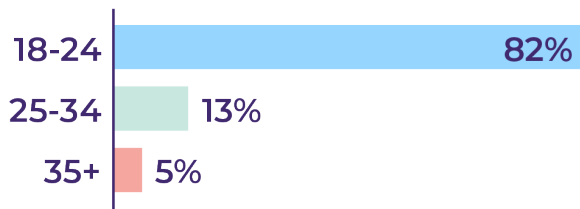
- **So far this year, 27,600 students have sought support for their mental health from Shout, with anxiety, depression and suicide the most commonly discussed issues**
 - For students who have texted Shout in 2021, anxiety (40%), depression (33%) and suicidal ideation (28%) were their main concerns
 - These issues were followed by relationships (25%), isolation and loneliness (17%), self-harm (12%) and Covid-19 (6%)
- **Students are more likely to seek support with anxiety than other texters who contacted Shout, but less likely to seek support to talk about suicide**
 - 40% of students sought support with anxiety vs 31% of other texters
 - 26% students sought support with suicidal ideation vs 35% of other texters
- **Students seek support round the clock, predominantly between 8pm-2am**
 - 75% of students contact Shout outside of the hours of 9am-5pm
 - Students are most likely to text Shout between 10pm-12am (20%), followed by 8pm-10pm (15%) and 12am-2am (13%)
- **Looking ahead to the new 2021/22 academic year, students told us their main concerns were loneliness, relationships and workload**
 - 61% of students are feeling anxious or worried about the upcoming year at university, with loneliness (74%), relationships (72%), workload (65%) and finances (52%) their main concerns
 - These students are also worried about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with anxieties around future restrictions (30%) and disruption to in-person teaching (27%) featuring prominently
- **The majority of students surveyed want their university to provide text message mental health support**
 - Three in four students would like their university to provide text message mental health support (75%), closely followed by face-to-face support (72%)
 - This outweighed the demand for webchat (47%) or phone (43%) support



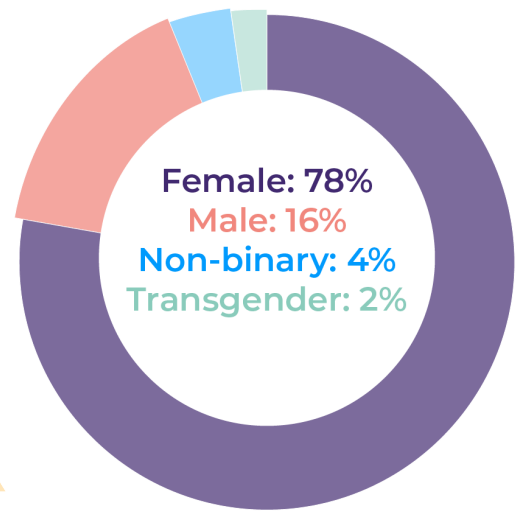
The demographics of students texting Shout for mental health support

Since January 2021, our trained volunteers and clinicians have taken around 78,000 conversations with 27,600 students⁵. The majority of students who texted Shout in this time were aged between 18-24, identified as female and were from a white ethnic background. We also took conversations with a significantly higher representation of students who identified as LGB+ than the broader UK population. Students from every nation and region in the UK contacted Shout at rates that suggest we representatively reach all parts of the UK⁶.

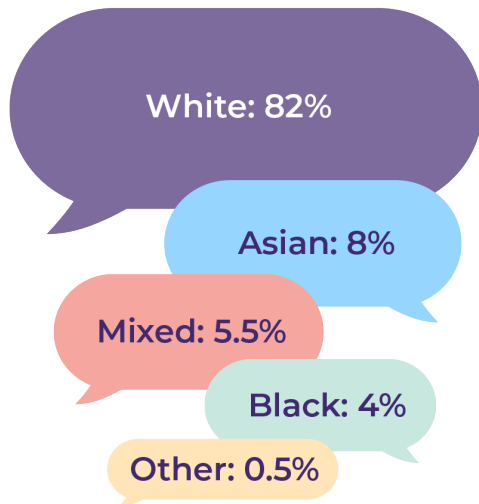
Age



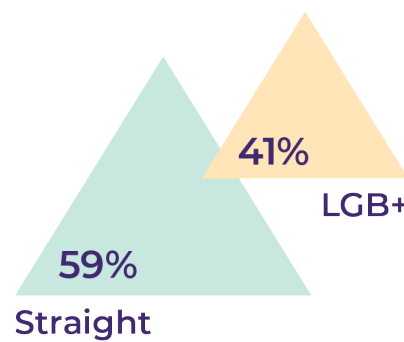
Gender identity



Ethnicity



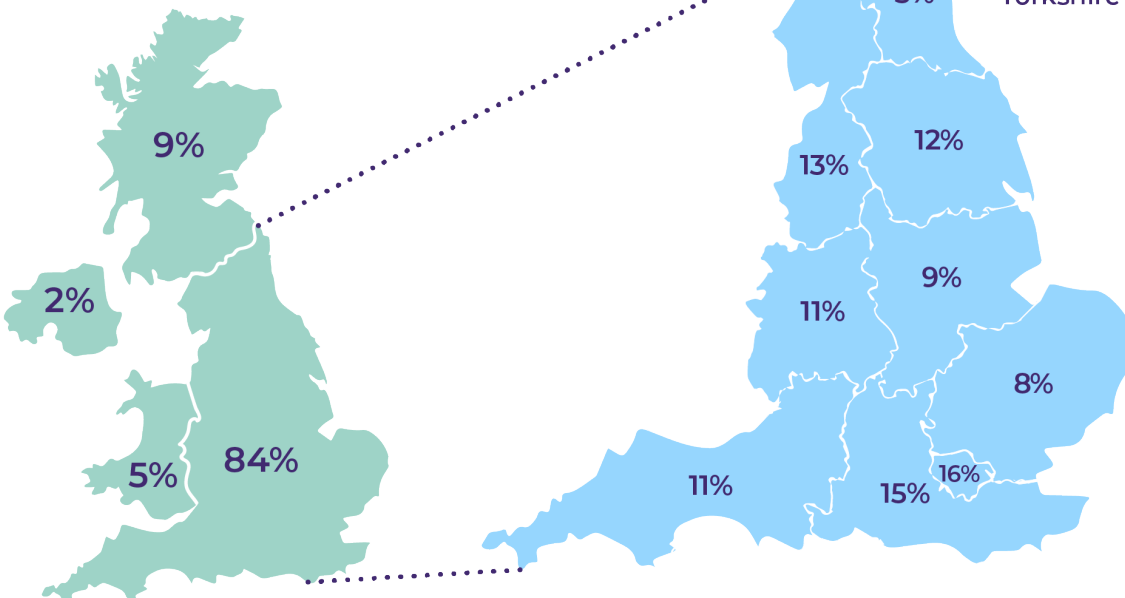
Sexual orientation



Regions in England

- Greater London: 16%
- South East: 15%
- North West: 13%
- Yorkshire and the Humber: 12%
- South West: 11%
- West Midlands: 11%
- East Midlands: 9%
- East of England: 8%
- North East: 5%

Nation

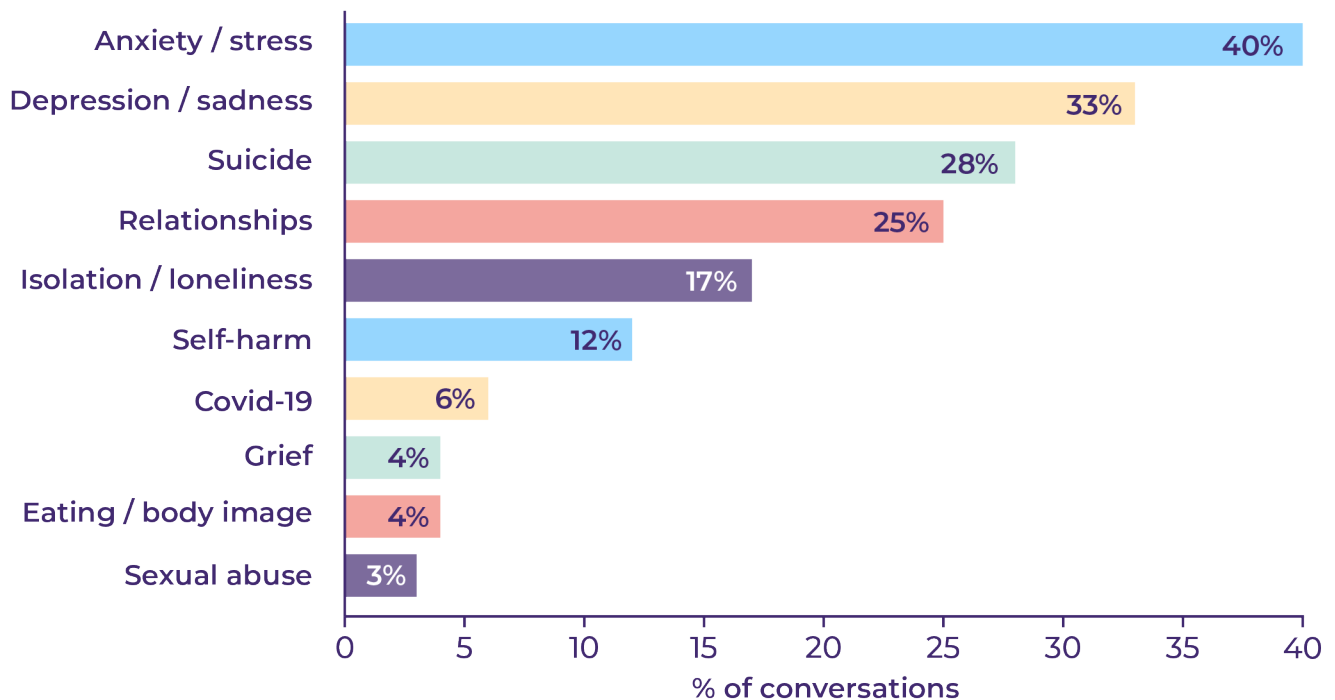


⁵ This estimate is based on the percentage of texters who identified as a student when completing a survey after their conversation with Shout
⁶ Demographics data is based on 12,100 Shout conversations with 3,956 students aged 18+ between 1 January - 23 August 2021

The mental health issues facing students in 2021

Our Shout 85258 dataset uniquely allows us to hear from students about their mental health in real time, in their own words and at scale across the UK. The most common issues students texted Shout for support with over the course of 2021 were anxiety or stress, depression or sadness and suicidal ideation, followed by relationships, and loneliness or isolation⁷.

Why students are texting Shout 85258⁸



Here we will explore these issues in more depth, identify the groups of students who have been affected the most by these specific issues and explore how the Covid-19 pandemic was interrelated.

Anxiety or stress

Anxiety and stress were the most common issues students texted Shout about in 2021, coming up in 40% of conversations. Students were more likely than other texters to mention anxiety (40% vs 31%).

Shout Volunteers and clinicians observed that the pressures of university life, ranging from studying and exams to making new friends and moving away from home, often exacerbated underlying mental health challenges and anxieties.

"Anxiety has often been about keeping up with the course and exam pressure."

Barbara, Shout Volunteer

⁷ Based on data from 12,100 Shout conversations with 3,956 students aged 18+ between 1 January - 23 August 2021

⁸ Note: conversations may cover more than one issue. This means that multiple issues may be tagged for each conversation. Therefore the sum of percentages for all issues will not equal 100%.

Another common theme was how the fear of underachieving academically and the pressure of living up to other people's expectations was contributing to students' increasing levels of anxiety.

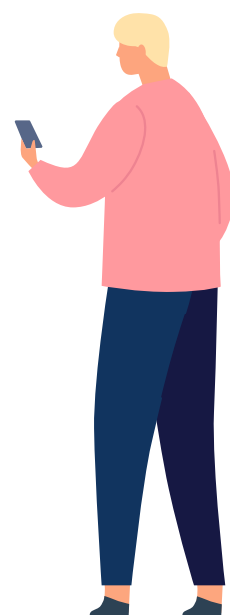
"Most of the pressure seems to arise out of expectation. The expectation of parents, teachers and such like, that the student needs to attain. The texter feels as though they are failing the people around them and themselves. They are "letting everybody down". This leads to additional feelings of low self-worth and compounds a general mood of inadequacy."

Elisa, Shout Volunteer

Covid-19 also intensified many students' feelings of anxiety, as students were forced to navigate unprecedented changes to university life and cope with fears about their own health and the health of their friends and loved ones.

"Many students discussed the extreme stress and anxiety caused by the guilt, responsibility and pressure of potentially bringing Covid-19 home from university campuses, exacerbating their worry and concern for parents' and grandparents' health. Many talked about not being able to go home despite wanting to, because of health fears for older relatives. They felt trapped at times and that this impacted their mental health."

Melissa, Shout Volunteer



Covid-19

In May 2021, the ONS Student Covid-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) revealed that the majority of students believe Covid-19 poses a major risk to their own (56%) mental and physical health, as well as that of their friends and family (74%), while half of students (50%) say their mental health and wellbeing has worsened since the start of the 2020/21 academic year⁹.

While Covid-19 has only been mentioned in 6% of students' conversations with Shout since January 2021, connected issues have impacted many students' mental health, including issues related to new restrictions, teaching modalities, exam methods, living situations and social limitations, as well as their overall experiences of university.

"The Covid situation heightened [pressures] in that students couldn't get together and support each other as much as they had before, and the support from teaching groups was online. The online delivery added to feelings of loneliness and isolation for those texters who already felt unsupported at home or in relationships."

Elisa, Shout Volunteer

At the peak of the pandemic, teaching moved online, students were unable to meet other students and social and recreational activities were limited or stopped altogether. Some students had to isolate with housemates they did not know well, some were unable to return to university after visiting family at home due to lockdown restrictions and some had to pay for accommodation they couldn't live in.

"Students have been forced to adapt to huge changes in the way they work, have been made to pay for accommodation they can't even use, had their exams cancelled after they've worked so hard on them and many have lost their jobs in industries such as hospitality and leisure."

Jess, Shout Volunteer



Ben West, student mental health campaigner

“ Arriving at university in a normal year is scary. For many people it will be the first time they've lived away from home, they're in a new city, they don't know anyone and the challenge of getting a degree looms over them.

Joining university during the Covid-19 pandemic and being forced to isolate in your room and attend online lectures, while necessary given the circumstances, was exceptionally challenging for many students. The isolation that online teaching and limited opportunities to socialise caused, undoubtedly had an effect on students' mental health.

We must make it a priority to learn from the pandemic and focus on creating innovative ways of providing students with both the support to allow them to thrive in their studies but also mechanisms to better identify, intervene and support those who are at risk of harm.

This report reveals some of the reasons that have driven students to get mental health support in the last year and shows us just how important Shout 85258 has been, especially for students experiencing anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and loneliness.

No doubt the year ahead will have its own challenges. We must make student mental health and prevention of student suicide a priority above all else and use research to fuel evidence-backed innovation that aids student mental health. ”

Depression and sadness

Depression and sadness were the second most common mental health issues students texted Shout about in 2021, mentioned in around 25,700 (33%) conversations.

Young people, especially women aged between 16 and 24, are known to be at particular risk of depression and its prevalence has increased steadily over the last 10 years. A recent study from University College London's Centre for Longitudinal Studies suggests that a third of young women aged 19 experienced depression during the Covid-19 lockdown and Shout's data mirrors this finding¹⁰.

What characterises the experience of depression? One student told us that it meant feeling pointless, numb, worthless, alone, empty and overflowing with emotions at the same time. This sense of there being an internal vacuum which is at war with a feeling of being overwhelmed with emotion is a common constellation in depression.

In 2021, at a time of huge change with Covid-19 overshadowing and compromising the anticipated experience of studenthood, students told us about additional challenges which amplified the sense that multiple things were wrong at the same time. For example, needing to self-isolate at university, having to adapt to a new environment and not being taught face-to-face, feeling they were missing out and that, as one student put it, their future had been "put on hold". This led to feeling hopeless and resulted in classic depressive symptoms of being unmotivated either to see friends or attend lectures and, subsequently, to feeling guilty about this behaviour.



"You got me through a difficult night. Thanks for your understanding and [the] opportunity to get this out of my head. Things make a bit more sense now."

Student texter feedback

Suicide

Suicidal ideation was the third most common mental health issue students texted Shout about in 2021, being mentioned in around 22,000 (28%) conversations. 81% of students who mentioned suicide found their conversation with Shout helpful and 72% felt calmer afterwards. Many students willing to work with the volunteer to come up with ways to keep safe, agreeing to reach out to support services to help deal with their thoughts, to open up to friends about their feelings or to look at resources shared with them.

"What you do is amazing and I cannot thank you enough for what you did today. You saved my life today."

Student texter feedback

A closer analysis of anonymised conversations with students relating to suicide revealed that both a sense of hopelessness and the absence of social connectedness intensified their feelings of distress¹¹. Both of these are recognised as critical factors in the potential development of suicidal ideation.

Hopelessness

In 46% of conversations relating to suicide, student texters described their situation as hopeless, something they are unable to change. Students expressed difficulty envisaging a future where they were not depressed or experiencing low moods and were resigned to the belief that nothing or nobody could help improve their feelings. As a result, some texters believed that ending their lives was the only option to get relief from their overwhelming distress.

"What I've noticed in conversations from student texters the most is that there's such a sense of hopelessness; a lack of belief that there are better times on the way."

Jess, Shout Volunteer

The absence of social connectedness

In around half (49%) of anonymised conversations relating to suicide, students mentioned an absence of social connectedness - the relationships we create with individuals in our environment and the support we receive in return.

Students mentioned being alone, feeling lonely and having no-one to open up to or confide in, which intensified their suicidal thoughts. In 30% of these conversations, students indicated that they lived alone and had no friends or family to reach out to, however, strikingly, in the majority of conversations (70%) students mentioned feeling lonely but not alone as they revealed having friends and family around them, but to whom they felt unable to confide in.

This was usually due to an unwillingness to cause worry and concern, but some students also mentioned feeling embarrassed to open up, that they didn't want to be a burden, that their feelings wouldn't be understood or that others couldn't do anything to help them. Other students said that their friends and family did not believe in mental illness and would be unsupportive.



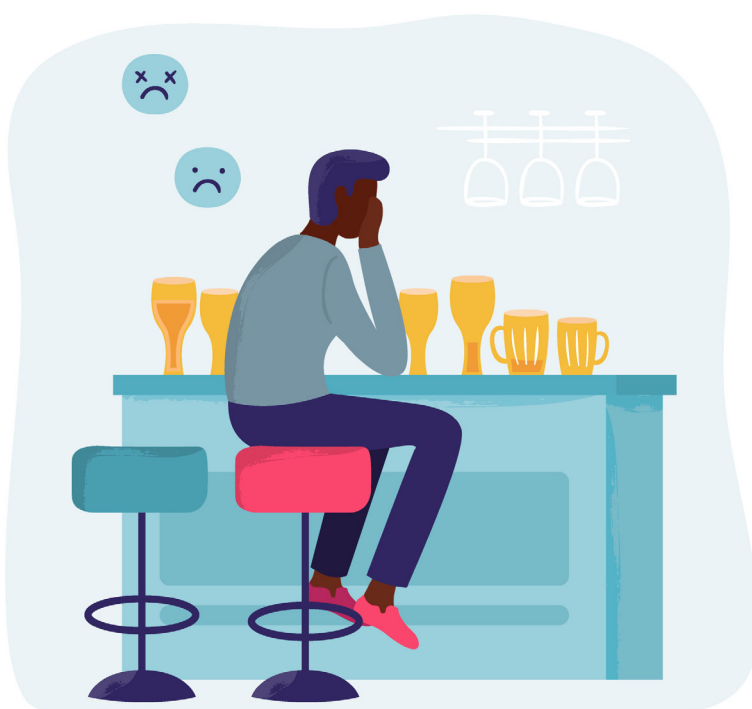
Seeking support with suicidal thoughts: what happens when a student contacts Shout

When a student reaches out by texting Shout, they have taken a positive step to connect with someone; they are seeking help even though they may be feeling highly distressed or having thoughts of suicide. When a student is having thoughts of suicide, the fact that they can reach out and connect with someone at any time of day or night is critical. The text conversation with one of Shout's trained volunteers provides them with an experience of connection with an empathic, compassionate, non-judgmental person, who wants to hear their story and supports them to regain a sense of calm and to feel less hopeless.

Shout Volunteers focus on rapport and trust building, listening with empathy and compassion to what the student is telling them, encouraging them to tell their story, acknowledging and validating their experiences. The focus is on helping all texters to finish the conversation feeling heard, supported and calmer. The aim is to help texters come up with a plan to keep themselves safe and of who they might reach out to, be that their University or College Student Support Centre, another specialised service where necessary, or family and friends.

If a student mentions suicide or uses language that indicates they may be at risk, Shout Volunteers are trained to undertake a risk assessment asking direct questions about thoughts, plans, means and a potential timeframe of suicide.

All conversations are overseen by Shout's expert Clinical Supervisors, who work hand in hand with volunteers as the conversation unfolds, supporting and advising them. If it is clear that a student needs support from the emergency services and is unable to call for help themselves, the clinical team will contact the emergency services to request an active rescue. It is testament to the skills of the Shout Volunteers and Clinical Supervisors in de-escalating high-risk situations that this step is undertaken very infrequently.



"Thank you so much, I contacted [Shout] because I was feeling suicidal and I feel a little less alone."

Student texter feedback

Relationships and loneliness

One quarter (25%) of conversations with students since January 2021 mentioned relationships and friendships, while one in six (17%) conversations related to loneliness and isolation.

"I'm really taken aback by the number of students who are lonely at university. The pandemic itself clearly impacted loneliness but the problem is not fundamentally one caused by the pandemic. Students are lonely and stressed with or without Covid-19."

Barbara, Shout Volunteer

For many students, moving away from the certainty and familiarity of their home, family, friends and school into new and sometimes uncertain living, social and academic situations can be unsettling and upsetting. These anxieties were often heightened by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which enforced social distancing measures and lockdown restrictions, often without a definitive timeframe.

"The majority of my conversations from students this year have shown those in education to be facing overwhelming amounts of uncertainty through a lack of information coming to them from our decision-makers."

Jess, Shout Volunteer

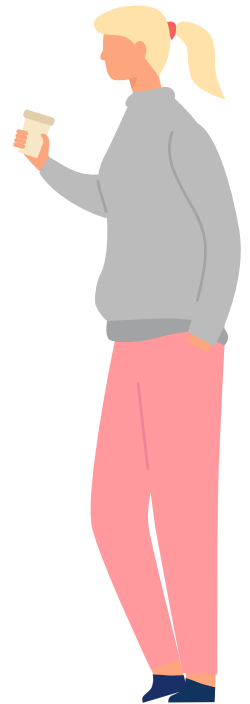
A recent report found that a quarter (24%) of students say they do not have any real friends at university, even into their second and third years, while more than half (55%) of students feel lonely daily or weekly¹². Indeed, more than half (55%) of students who contact Shout do so because they have no-one else to talk to¹³.

While loneliness and relationships have long been problematic for university students, the restrictions brought about by the pandemic, preventing students from physically being present in academic and social circumstances, have made these challenges more acute for many students.

Limited contact with university tutors and staff has also meant that emerging problems for students have not been identified as early as they might have been under normal circumstances.

"[Freshers] have spoken about the difficulties in making friends when everyone was in a heightened anxious state - finding it difficult to gauge personalities and determine what people were 'normally' like. This has left many of them with very small social contacts and friendships going forward."

Melissa, Shout Volunteer



From our conversations with students in 2021, feelings of loneliness and an absence of social connectedness often underpinned additional mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression and self-harm.

"Away from their loved ones and close friends, [students] felt that the lack of intimacy at university often triggered self-destructive spirals of drinking and self-harm. Moving away from relatives can be seen as the norm in society, yet there is something deeply inhumane about the process for many people."

Imogen, Shout Volunteer

One student texter's experience of isolation at university

" My most memorable conversation this year was with a young woman who was a first year student. She went home for a visit and became 'stuck' there as lockdown was re-imposed. When she returned to her room in halls, the other young women on her floor had bonded in her absence; she was isolated in her room and unsure how to find her way back into the social group. She was too anxious to go and join them.

She had a panic attack and showed signs of anxiety and depression. She didn't want to alarm her family by saying how badly she was feeling. Her work was suffering and looming coursework deadlines were adding to the pressure. Nobody from the university had been in touch with her and she was offered no support or pastoral care.

We did a grounding exercise together so that she could think more clearly. She engaged with it well and became calmer and more able to think through possible actions. By the end of our conversation, she said she felt more confident about leaving her room and going in to say hello to the other girls, now sensing she had little to lose by doing so. »

Barbara, Shout Volunteer

Spotlight on issues by gender identity

- Suicide was the most common issue in conversations with students who identified as non-binary (41%), compared to being the third most common issue in conversations with students who identified as female (30%) and and the fourth most common issue in conversations with students who identified as male (25%)
- Anxiety was the most common issue in conversations with male (40%) and female (39%) students, compared to being the second most common issue in conversations with non-binary (30%) students
- Male (36%) and female (35%) students were more likely to have conversations relating to depression than non-binary (29%) students
- Non-binary (20%) students were more than twice as likely to seek support with self-harm than male (9%) students and significantly more likely than female (13%) students

Spotlight on issues by sexual orientation

- Suicide was the most common issue in conversations with students who identified as LGB+ (35%), compared to being the fourth most common issue in conversations with students who identified as straight (26%)
- Anxiety was the most common issue in conversations with straight students (41%), compared to being the third most common issue in conversations with LGB+ (31%) students
- A third of conversations with straight (35%) and LGB+ (33%) students related to depression

“It is hard enough being a student, starting university and having to navigate a whole new world of unfamiliarity. If you add sexuality and relationships into the mix, and particularly any nervousness, confusion or uncertainty around this, it undoubtedly can lead to feelings of anxiety and loneliness and exacerbate any existing mental health issues.

Not feeling accepted or included in your community because of your sexuality can make students feel very alone and low, especially when combined with the myriad of challenges university life can bring. Unsurprisingly, this accumulation of pressures can lead to young adults feeling hopeless, unable to cope and, in some cases, having thoughts of suicide.

The fact that so many students from the LGBTQ+ community are reaching out to Shout for help is reassuring. Joining university groups and seeking face-to-face support can be intimidating for some young adults when it comes to discussing their sexuality. In contrast, Shout provides a silent, confidential, anonymous and free way to speak to someone who will listen, without judgement, any time of the day or night. We have a long way to go but it is vital that students know they are not alone and support is available whenever and wherever they need it. »

Michael Kitching, Shout Clinical Manager

Outlook for 2021/22 academic year

We asked university students for their thoughts on the upcoming 2021/22 academic year; specifically if they were worried about any particular issues and, if so, what the key factors driving their anxieties were¹⁴.

Six in 10 (61%) students we surveyed said they were anxious or worried about the upcoming year at university. The main concerns for these students were loneliness (74%) and relationships (72%).

Students also expressed concerns with their workload (65%) and finances (52%), while around three in 10 were worried about the potential future impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly restrictions that may be imposed (30%) and further disruption to in-person teaching (27%).

"I ended up getting very overwhelmed about going into lockdown again, feeling lonely, trapped and very stressed over getting university work done for my final year. I managed to get the support I needed [from Shout]. Thank you for your help."

Student texter feedback

Students also voiced concerns about how their time at university might negatively impact their mental health, how they will cope with moving out of home when already experiencing anxiety, their fear of failure or making mistakes, issues with drinking alcohol, and how they will cope with a physical or mental illness.

With record numbers of students accepted into university in 2021/22¹⁵ and with the number of applicants declaring a mental health condition increasing by 450% in the past decade¹⁶, it is fundamental that every student who needs mental health support will be able to access it.



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Based on the responses of 627 student texters who completed a survey after their conversation with Shout between 28 June 2021 - 13 September 2021
UCAS (August 2021) Record number of students accepted into their first choice of university
UCAS (June 2021) Starting the conversations: UCAS report on student mental health



Dr Dominique Thompson, award-winning GP, young people's mental health expert and author of *How to Grow a Grown Up* (Vermilion)

“ The biggest issues for students during the pandemic have been anxiety and loneliness as a result of uncertainty and lockdown isolation. The older generation may have borne the brunt of the physical impact of Covid-19, but the younger generation have sadly endured the worst of the mental health impacts. Shout's insightful and sensitive report illustrates this clearly, and also shows us what needs to be done to support students in the future.

Looking ahead, the main challenges for students seem to be focused on what they have missed in terms of academic work, the loss of social skills as a consequence of isolation, the absence of their usual teen life experiences and milestones around leaving school, and worries about what the future holds for them.

As a society, we now have an opportunity to proactively support this generation and close some of those academic and social skills gaps by listening to students, hearing their concerns, and working with them to create solutions that will overcome some of the setbacks and mental health difficulties of the last couple of years. They need us and we must not let our students down. ”

Providing appropriate mental health support for students

Overview

The pandemic is set to see demand for mental health services increase for all age groups, including students, with the Centre for Mental Health forecasting that 1.5 million children and young people and 8.5 million adults will need support for their mental health as a direct result of the pandemic over the next three to five years¹⁷.

Students need to be able to access a range of mental health and wellbeing support from universities, primary care settings, services for young people and services provided by the charity sector.

Last academic year, more than a quarter of students (29%) said they used mental health and wellbeing services, with 47% turning to a GP for support, 40% accessing online university services, and 35% using mental health services from student-specific and general mental health charities¹⁸.

Several surveys of students indicate that students feel that more and better mental health support could be provided by universities. A recent survey by the Office for Students revealed that three in five (58%) students did not agree that their university or college took sufficient steps to support their mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic¹⁹.

Mental health services must also cater for all students, including those who have already established good strategies to manage their mental health. As one Shout Volunteer summarises:

"Many conversations revealed that those struggling the most with wellbeing and mental health were the students that had previously worked out efficient, logical and effective strategies at school to cope with stress and demonstrate resilience, but these strategies all involved things that the pandemic stripped away, e.g. sport, social contact, performance arts, support groups. The more busy, active, creative, resourceful the student had been, the harder the negative impact of the pandemic seemed to be and yet they were 'untypical' students of concern and felt overlooked."

Melissa, Shout Volunteer

¹⁷ Centre for Mental Health (May 2021) Covid-19 and the nation's mental health: May 2021
¹⁸ ONS (June 2021) Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) 2020 to 2021
¹⁹ Office for Students (July 2021) Insight 10 - The National Student Survey: Student experience during the pandemic

Shout 85258

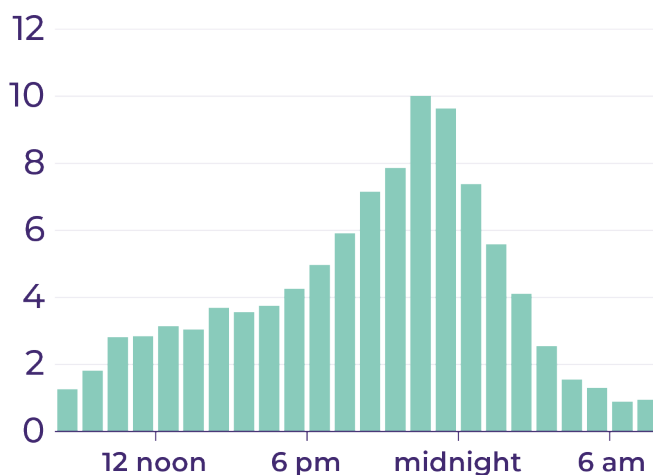
The nature of Shout 85258 as a text messaging service appeals particularly to the student population. Indeed, 75% of students we surveyed said they want their university to provide text message mental health support.

Not only is text a preferred means of communication for students, but the service is free, confidential and anonymous. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, suiting students' round-the-clock lifestyles. It is also a silent way to communicate, providing students who live in shared accommodation with privacy when seeking support:

- **Shout is available 24/7:** Half (48%) of students who contact Shout do so between 8pm-2am

Conversations peak after 10pm

% of conversations by hour of day



The service is powered by 2,800 volunteers in the UK and New Zealand, providing unbroken 24/7 support.

"Often, and at night in particular, [students] seem to have no-one to turn to."

Barbara, Shout Volunteer

- **Shout is confidential and anonymous:** Four in 10 (41%) students texted Shout because they wanted to talk to someone who doesn't know them.

"I sometimes feel I don't have anybody to talk to about my emotions because I don't want to worry friends and family... So to speak to somebody I don't know helps."

Student texter feedback

- **Shout is a digital service, which ensures privacy:** Half (52%) of students said they were more comfortable texting than talking about private things, while a third (33%) were too embarrassed to talk to someone in person or over the phone.
- **Shout helps texters reach a calm and safe place, with a plan of how to support themselves going forward and further resources or tools to help texters get ongoing support:**

"Thank you for your help, you have helped me feel more in control of my emotions at a time when I was really struggling. The resources you have given me will really help me."

Student texter feedback

“ Technology-led solutions such as Shout 85258 are underused by universities and offer scalable, accessible support that’s available anytime, anywhere. ”

**Accenture and Cibyl (2021)
University: The Best Time of
our Lives?**



Shout partnerships to support students

We currently work with a variety of organisations in innovative ways to reach and support as many students as possible.

Nationwide partnerships

In response to the significant challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic posed to university students' mental health and wellbeing, we joined a host of charity, education and public sector organisations - including Student Minds and The Mix - to provide students with round-the-clock advice, information and support through the launch of a new digital programme, Student Space. Over the last year, Student Space has established itself as a vital part of the infrastructure to support students nationwide.

Run by Student Minds and funded by the Office for Students and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Student Space brings together a number of complimentary services and projects to provide specific and targeted support to students at higher education establishments, including:

- Access to dedicated support services
- Information and advice from clinical experts and fellow students to help navigate the challenges of coronavirus
- Information about what support services are available to students from their specific place of study

Shout has been white-labelled for the platform, with students across England and Wales encouraged to text 'STUDENT' to 85258 for access to 24/7 'in the moment' support. Shout has also been able to compile a unique, anonymised, national dataset of conversations that has helped to inform the programme and the work of other key stakeholders.

"[My Shout Volunteer] was very supportive and understanding. They made me feel heard and reminded me that it was brave to speak out when experiencing a difficult time. They reminded me that I'm worthy and deserve better and it made me feel empowered and a lot calmer than before I messaged."

Texter using the 'STUDENT' keyword



Local partnerships

Since 2019, Shout has partnered with the University of the West of England (UWE) to provide bespoke support for their 32,000 students. Shout has been white-labelled for UWE, with students encouraged to text 'UWE' to 85258 for immediate mental health support.

Shout has provided UWE with a varied package of marketing assets to help promote the service and has also been able to build a unique, anonymised dataset of conversations with UWE students to help inform an understanding of mental health on campus.

UWE is also one of 32 universities committed to improving support for staff and student mental health through the University Mental Health Charter²⁰, which was launched in 2019 by Student Minds to make mental health a university-wide priority.

“ UWE was the first university to work with Shout. When we started talking with the team we saw the huge potential the service could offer students. We had been developing a landscape provision of mental health and wellbeing support for a while and a text based service provided us with an additional layer.

We know that one solution won't meet everyone's needs all of the time and our Mental Wealth Strategy saw us working with students to develop a range of support options that provide different support in different formats – this includes practical support with finance, accommodation or academic worries, wellbeing interventions that support students to get active, meet new people or develop new hobbies, and a range of counselling and crisis support delivered in person, online and, now with Shout, via text.

Students tell us they like this range of options and texting can make it a bit easier to reach out for help when they need it. The data and insight we receive from Shout helps us to ensure we are providing the right range of services and help us to understand the needs of different communities at university. ”

Suzanne Carrie, Deputy Director Library, Careers and Inclusivity: Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity at UWE

“Thank you so much for helping me take even a small step in this difficult time.”

Feedback from a Student texter using the 'UWE' keyword



Knowledge and expertise

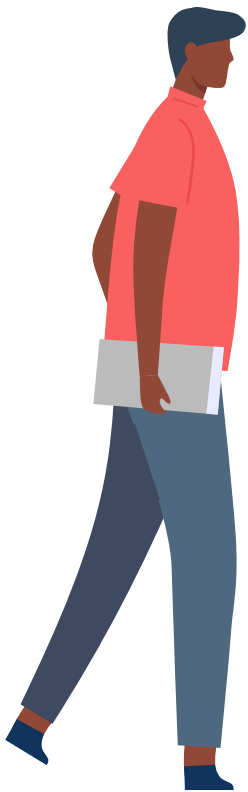
Shout has a team of over 40 clinical experts who support our volunteers in real time. They are highly qualified and are adept at creating tailored content to support different communities and audiences to maintain positive mental health.

Over the last 12 months, Shout has partnered with iQ Student Accommodation, one of the leading providers of student accommodation in the UK, to provide a varied series of regular content pieces to support their residents. Working in partnership with iQ, Shout has sought to be both responsive to the needs of students as well as proactive in identifying topics that may emerge based on our expertise and data insights.

Signposting

Shout works with a wide range of organisations to ensure we can signpost students who contact Shout to additional resources, advice and tools which can help them to cope with the specific challenges they are facing. Resources from organisations including Ditch the Label and University Mental Health Advisers Network are curated for students on the Shout website.

Joint research partnerships



With a unique and growing dataset, housed in a secure and accessible data environment, there are numerous opportunities to deliver cutting edge research projects such as those currently underway with Imperial College London using artificial intelligence to understand our conversations at scale.

Shout is uniquely positioned to analyse the mental health of students in the UK to both achieve a better understanding of the overall landscape and factors involved as well as the most significant opportunities to develop and deliver new scalable solutions to provide enhanced support.

We are interested in developing new types of partnerships with other organisations interested in better understanding and improving the mental health of students. If you work with young people and students and are interested in partnering with us, please contact commissionus@mhiuk.org.

Conclusion

While the Covid-19 pandemic has taken an unprecedented toll on all parts of society, its impacts have not been felt uniformly. Students in higher education have been acutely affected, with Covid-19 touching every aspect of their lives - from their health, education and finances through to their employment prospects, living situations and relationships with family and friends. While these challenges have existed for generations of university students, as evidenced in our report, the pandemic has made them even more difficult to navigate and handle.

Demand for mental health services to meet these complex and enduring needs is inevitably also growing. This places an even greater strain on an already overstretched system and catapults the importance of early intervention and digital services to the fore. Crucial to ensuring services are able to adapt to and meet the diverse needs of students, will be the provision of innovative and accessible support at scale, making digital mental health services, such as Shout 85258, indispensable.

Digital mental health services can also play a vital role in preventing crises. Three-quarters of students who contacted Shout in 2021 did so outside of the hours of 9am-5pm and a third had conversations relating to suicide. By their very nature, digital services can be more flexible in the hours they operate and the ways in which they are accessed than more traditional mental health services, meaning that students can potentially access lifesaving support in the very moment they need it.

Encouraging positive health seeking behaviours in students will also be increasingly important in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. By equipping students with meaningful, effective and personalised coping mechanisms, we can help them better manage their mental health and wellbeing so that they can flourish at university and beyond.

By developing an invaluable evidence-base to support the development of essential and innovative mental health services, alongside working in partnership to bring together existing support for students from across the sector, we can help to ensure that every university student who requires mental health support can access it at the very point they need it.





Special thanks

We would like to thank OfS, HEFCW and Student Minds, whose funding has enabled us to help thousands of students in need of urgent support with their mental health and who have made production of this report possible.

**STUDENT
SPACE** From **student
minds**

Thank you also to Dr Radha Modgil, Dr Dominique Thompson, Ben West, Student Minds and our Shout Volunteers and Clinicians for their contributions, insights and expertise on university students' mental health.

Methodology

Demographics

The findings in this report are based on data from 12,100 conversations with 3,956 texters aged 18+ who identified as students and texted Shout between 1 January 2021 and 23 August 2021. 3,121 texters identified as students in a post-conversation survey, while 1,063 texters used a keyword associated with a partnership organisation that supports a student population. Some students used a keyword and completed the post-conversation survey, therefore the total sample count is less than the sum of these two groups.

The same post-conversation survey also included questions relating to a texter's demographics, from which the data in this report is based.

We are unable to provide data for mental health issues according to students who identified as transgender, student ethnicity and student location (region and nation) due to small sample sizes.

Issues

Shout Volunteers use a tagging system to record the key issues that are discussed or apparent in each conversation, such as anxiety, depression and loneliness. The data on mental health issues in this report is based on the same sample of 12,100 conversations with 3,956 texters aged 18+ who identified as students and texted Shout between 1 January 2021 and 23 August 2021.

Outlook for 2021/22 academic year

627 students who texted Shout 85258 between 28 June 2021 and 13 September 2021 also took part in a post-conversation survey where they responded to questions asking for their opinions on the upcoming 2021/22 academic year.

Why students contact Shout 85258

92 students who texted Shout 85258 between 23 May 2018 and 17 November 2020 also responded to survey questions about why they contacted Shout and where else they have sought mental health support.

Student texter feedback

The quotations included in this report, and any reference to comments from students, are taken from direct feedback that students have provided upon the conclusion of their conversation with a Shout Volunteer. These quotations are not taken from anonymised conversations.



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