



Episode 13 – School, COVID-19 and Adolescent Mental Health

Transcript

Adna [00:00:04] Welcome to our Sick Society, a podcast series where researchers from King's College London and people with lived experience explore together how social factors contribute to mental health problems

Karima [00:00:14] For this four-part series, we're doing things a little bit different. This is a REACH young person's take over. We'll be discussing all things related to mental health and young people. I'm Karima.

Adna [00:00:25] I'm Adna.

Thai-Sha [00:00:26] And I'm Thai-Sha. And we're all young person's community champions on the REACH team. Bringing you the four-part series.

Karima [00:00:33] REACH stands for Resilience, Ethnicity and Adolescent Mental Health, and we've worked with over 4000 young people to help us understand the best ways to promote good mental health amongst young people of all backgrounds.

Thai-Sha [00:00:45] REACH is also interested in exploring the potential impact of COVID 19 pandemic on young people. But most importantly, what things help young people maintain good mental health during this time, and the next steps to help young people thrive post-COVID.

Adna [00:01:00] We'll be joined by some very special guests during this series, discussing issues that are important and relevant to us.

Karima [00:01:06] This episode will focus on school and mental health. Statistics suggest that 50 percent of mental health conditions begin by the age of 15, and so adolescence is an important period of developing strategies and habits to maintain positive mental well-being.

Adna [00:01:21] As mentioned, the REACH study is interested in understanding the best ways to promote good mental health and well-being amongst young people.

Karima [00:01:30] From February 2016 to January 2018, four thousand three hundred and fifty-three (4353) secondary school pupils took part in an annual questionnaire, which asks them all about their experiences and mental health. Based on these questionnaires, we have found that one in five pupils were experiencing difficulties their mental health. That's approximately six in a class of 13.

Thai-Sha [00:01:52] There have been so many changes since then due to the COVID 19 pandemic, social distancing, remote learning, changes to exams, economic impacts, and the fear of the unknown, have all been challenging for us young people

Adna [00:02:05] To discuss this further. We're joined by Louise. One of the secondary school teachers at our local schools. Could you tell us a bit about yourself, Louise?

Louise [00:02:13] Hi, I'm so I've been a teacher at Langley Park School for Girls for over 10 years now. I've really enjoyed working at the school and continue to. I teach predominantly psychology, but I've taught a lot of other different subjects at the school as well. And over the last three years, I've gone part time at school to allow me to sort of pursue my own research interests as well. So, I've just finished up a research project looking at sensitivity and attention. And that's just drawing to a close at the moment.

Karima [00:02:50] Your research study sounds very interesting, I'd love to hear about it more. But my first question is, as young people we'll often feel that there's one size fits all approach when it comes to mental health support within school. From your perspective, as teachers, do you also feel this is the case?

Louise [00:03:08] Yeah, and now is your question regarding sort of the provision for students, or the provision for teachers, I imagine students or

Karima [00:03:16] Yeah for students.

Louise [00:03:17] Yeah, I feel like a lot of the time sort of, I guess, mental health in schools. It's a lot of the time trying to deal with very complex matters with quite limited resources, a lot of the time. And so while more and more teachers and other support staff in school are gaining expertise in lots of different areas of teenage mental health, a lot of the time the training that is provided perhaps doesn't really sort of unveil the complexity and the sort of more sort of nuanced approaches that might need to be taken for individual students. I don't know whether that fits with your experiences as students in school.

Karima [00:04:06] I feel like personally. With my school specifically, I feel like they've taken different approaches, depending on the student, and that the streams of the case, I know in my school have opted for like smaller like sessions. Where you just talk to... Where you talk to, I don't know what they call them, like a psychologist. And then they also have sessions where you can talk to a counsellor. So, I feel like maybe when I was younger, but as I've gotten older, they have more of a variety of approaches they take for different students.

Adna [00:04:39] So was this the same case for during COVID or before COVID, or post-COVID?

Karima [00:04:47] This is post COVID, so I think before COVID, there wasn't there wasn't that much of a variety for like approaches to mental health for students. But I feel like since COVID has been many studies and I that they understand a bit better that we was going through such different times. Things we've never, happened before, like a long-standing lockdown where they've they've, I don't know, tried to have a new approach to children's mental health in schools?

Adna [00:05:19] All right, because I when I was at school, I feel like there was a one size fits all approach to mental health. I felt like all of us fit into some neat box and that we were getting help as because because help was needed. But no one actually cared about individual cases. Everyone was just like, oh, everyone's going through COVID. Therefore, you're all having the same issue type thing. And I was like, It's not the same for all of us. All of us have different experiences.

Karima [00:05:45] Yes, I agree. I don't know if this is related, what do you guys feel like its schools responsibility to handle students mental health, or is it more of the parents or like, it's just the schools responsibility for like passing on information to parents.

Thai-Sha [00:06:04] I think it is the schools responsibility because for a certain amount of hours, you are at school like if you deep it, we're at school more time than you're at home, so you spend more time with your teachers than you do at your parents. So, they should be responsible to take care of mental health, which means that, why put all the pressure on teachers. But like we just said, like for example if something bad was happening at home, they wouldn't know about it. So why would you not want to know my mental health issues. Want to know if my, like yes, I'm not going to go into details, but in certain situations, you would want to know that, so, at school you should care about my mental health, to do something, it's their responsibility. But don't take it off the parents too, because they obviously should know a lot about their parents. But, with the first question I'm in the middle. I think it depends on the student, it depends on the school. If was a one sized thing, I feel like, like you said in my case, one of my friends, I know that they did something completely different. Like none of us have counselling for mental health issues, but she had some art therapy thing. And I feel like that's very different to like normally. But she did it, and one of her counsellors for the art therapy thing like, went, and that had a big impact on her, that's like a long story. I think it depends on the person, how they express the mental health issue. I feel like if you express the mental health issue really well, then the school will try to do something about it. But it's that very cliché about it. If you give the same answer as everyone else's, the school can't really help you as much as they maybe want to?

Karima [00:07:23] Yeah, I totally agree. I felt like I felt like school. I feel sorry. I feel like school and parents need to work together. I think there needs to be some middle ground because we spent a lot of time at home and it ... And we're at school for forty hours a week. And that is part of our lives too, there needs to be some, some type of bridge. So yes, I feel like schools should pass on certain information they've got to the parents and parents should do vice versa, just to make sure that the child is being protected in every way.

Thai-Sha [00:07:52] Yeah, I definitely agree. For myself, personally. My next question is, do you think COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown contributed to higher stress levels in young people?

Adna [00:08:04] Personally, I feel like I feel like I don't have the words before I had the first lockdown, the second lockdown. I think the first lockdown? Absolutely. So, I was just finishing school. I wasn't. I had...there was nothing for me to do. I was just, I was alive, in my house, like, I had no stress. I wasn't going to school, but I was literally just at home for about six months, just watching Netflix and that. However, the second lockdown, we, my year group had never done online learning. And I don't think there was much of a good transition between in school and online learning, so I was really stressed out, I felt like I couldn't keep up with schoolwork. There was handing out. I feel like when I was in the second lockdown, it wasn't really taking into account the fact that we are home and we're doing online learning, which she's never done before. And I was still have. I still had so many deadlines to meet up with and I was very stressed.

Thai-Sha [00:09:03] See, I'm going to say...Obviously. And obviously, I loved the first lockdown. I feel like there was no stress at all. I had no exams, like, it was a holiday technically, although like I couldn't physically go on holiday, it was a mini break if that makes sense. But I felt the second lockdown where ... we had we were still going to school and had a lockdown when we were actually not in school, we had online. And I really liked it, I feel like I liked it because I was at home, I was in my own comfort zone. I could legit log on to form in my bed. That sounds a bit weird, but I did sometimes like, but I like the comfort of my home a lot, and I really enjoyed it. Like going into my room, my desk, I do my work. I really enjoyed, I don't feel like I had a lot of stress. I think the stress happened, when I went straight back to school and that's when everything started happened, it didn't catch up to me until a very long time, but now I am feeling the consequences of my lessons. But I feel like, I didn't realise it, til a very long time. So, it's like what I first went back to school was okay, I was like, yeah, I loved it I want to go back to the lockdown, but and now it's catch up with me. So yeah, it took a long time to catch up with me.

Adna [00:10:10] Yeah, I'm gonna go ahead and disagree with both of you because I'm a year older than both of you and I went to the at the higher what's it called, I was in the year above you guys. Both lockdowns hit me quite hard. First one, obviously, I had a bit of let's sit back and relax. Little did I know that sitting back and relaxing at the end of Year 12, it's not where you should be doing. And then it caught up with me and then the beginning of 13, I had no idea what's happening. Half of my grades were D's and below, and I was very confused. I was like, what's happening? And then we had the second lockdown, which completely shattered me and had lots of like quite negative impacts on a lot of people. And I know that I know that the second lockdown hit quite a few people in my school really, really hard too and and I I don't want to make this sound really, really bad. But at the end of the second lockdown, I lost a friend of mine. And to say that lockdown and COVID has hit me and my friends really, really hard. Is an understatement. It was horrible, it is absolutely atrocious. And so, yes, I feel like stress levels were really, really high for people that were sitting their exams that year. And I think COVID wasn't the thing that we needed. But you know.

Louise [00:11:27] Well, the interesting thing, I think part of the agenda in schools now is saying, OK, post-COVID, there's an increase in in stress amongst teenagers and mental health problems. But I feel that one thing that's potentially been overlooked is how coming, so a lot of the focus was on how mental health decreased being out of school, whereas I don't think enough focus has been placed on mental health struggles with the reintegration to coming back to full time education and being in such a busy environment again for quite a lot of people. I feel like a lot of students have

had a lot of extra things that maybe they've had to do to catch up on schooling, and there's been a lot of pressure to kind of do more in school. But that readjustment back into this sort of busy overstimulating world perhaps is something that's been overlooked.

Karima [00:12:29] Exactly, I completely agree. I want to point out to students, some of us may have felt the impact of COVID 19 on our mental health, and I know that I have definitely felt the pressure when I came back to finish my A-levels. However, we appreciate teachers may have also found this to be a difficult time. How did you find this period?

Louise [00:12:47] Ah, that's a good question. Yeah. So basically, school is a very frantic, busy environment. And I guess I got quite used to teaching from home being in more control of my environment, the light, the temperature, the noise. And so, coming back into school did feel like quite draining. I know a lot of other teachers who said that by the end of the first couple of weeks back after long term sort of working from home, they felt way more tired than they had before. Because we got so used to sort of working through our own schedules, maybe having a little bit more sleep because of not commuting and things like that. I don't know whether it was possibly similar for some students as well. Perhaps.

Thai-Sha [00:13:38] Yeah, it shows how COVID had an impact on many people in different ways. It helped many people. And it didn't help many people. I feel like and we all can agree with some extent, but we can't agree the same time because everyone dealt with different, everyone had a different situation. Like I said, my impact of COVID came much later, the stress of Covid came much later, it didn't happen straight away. And for you, like you said it happened straight away like you felt impacts straight away, as soon as you was in COVID, it felt like a nightmare. But I don't think it was a fun situation for anyone. At moments of time, it was, but they ...causes. It's bad. All the time was bad. So yeah, I do understand it, and sorry for your loss Ads.

Adna [00:14:17] I totally agree. Thank you.

Karima [00:14:18] I honestly agree with the statement about how everyone experienced COVID so differently, like some people had, like family who was working in the front lines, people who wasn't in school, people who was like stressed about work. But we talk about coming back from lockdown. We talk a lot about how it affected students, but we never think about how it affected the teachers who were actually teaching it.

Louise [00:14:43] Yeah, I think one of the hardest things was the sort of trying to do the best for students as well, in quite tricky circumstances with the the access to technology that some students didn't have and trying to get that for them. But there were some positives in terms of sort of, if if you have a preference for sort of quieter working environments, perhaps.

Karima [00:15:11] Yes. My next question is from September 2020 to February 2021. 49 young people were involved in the REACH project and took part in interviews and diary entries about their experiences during lockdown. One of our young people from our diary study, they felt a lot of pressure from the uncertainty of exams, they also felt unmotivated and less able to keep up with teachers expectations. How do you think that this uncertainty and pressure affected young people and teachers?

Louise [00:15:40] That's a really good question. I think that the uncertainty around the assessment. I mean, it was, the pressure on teachers. I think it was quite hard in terms of teachers having to be there to reassure the students. Whilst we were getting information at a really late stage as well. So, it was like we were trying to provide this reassurance and this sort of consistency and keeping students sort of morale up. And yet we, things were chopping and changing for us sort of very quickly. And I think the students that I worked with in that time handled it, handled it super well. But I think for a lot of students, that sort of lack of certainty would lead to a decrease in motivation. But hopefully what a lot of teachers around the country might have done was to sort of try to sort of build up that internal motivation rather than just focusing on the external motivation of exams.

Adna [00:16:44] Did you feel any additional pressure or responsibility for students future due to like the weighing of predicted exams, how important they became now?

Louise [00:16:53] Oh, completely. So, the judgements around teacher assessed grades. I mean, we really upped the level of within department moderation because that sort of knowing that the threshold if a student was just one or two marks around a threshold for a particular grade and the effect that putting them below or above a particular threshold would have on their future. You these thoughts, you know, they don't leave you at the end of the day, when you sign off your computer, you're thinking about it a lot and thinking about the impact these decisions have sort of on the students moving forward. And it's a lot of pressure to kind of carry around with you, especially if you are a person who tends to overthink things and, you know, don't just make a decision, and leave it.

Thai-Sha [00:17:45] Yeah, I 100, 100 percent agree. I would add when that pressure on myself from being in year 11 at a time, you don't really think about the teachers side of it. You think about yourself and how it's going to affect you, you don't think about the pressure from the teachers. I feel like people forget that teachers are humans as well, and they just don't know anything as much as we knew they knew. I know my teachers well, anything they knew they would tell me, and I feel like, we thought they knew just much more. They had a lot of pressure put on exam results and predicted grades. Legit people's futures were in their hands like they had so much pressure on them, like, yeah, people just didn't understand it. And there's a lot of stress, even online lessons, they've never done online lessons before in their life. Having to change to this was a lot of pressure, and they had to do it. People just, I feel like it had a lot of pressure on teachers honestly.

Adna [00:18:34] Yeah, let's not entirely forget that teachers are human beings too. They have their own lives, have their own family, have their own friends. You know, they couldn't go out either. And suddenly they have these kids that depend on them for their futures, and everything has been flipped on its head. Just like just like we felt they felt it too. And they must have had family that was struggling with a lot of things and people they couldn't see and grandparents they couldn't visit. Life was tough for all of us at some point.

Thai-Sha [00:18:58] But my next question is, do you have any thoughts around support from the government for teachers during COVID-19 and post-COVID?

Louise [00:19:08] I guess, ooh I hope I don't get into trouble for saying this. I guess my thought is that that there's a lot of headline grabbing sort of like we're throwing money at this tutoring, but it seems that a lot of things have been done in a way that hasn't been strategically planned, and it hasn't been delivered in a way where schools have had what they need at a time when it's helpful to have it. So, you know, being able to plan how you're going to use a graduate tutor or some extra tutoring services that you could buy in advance of the start of school terms so you can get the best out of it rather than sort of trying to make decisions on the go while you've got all the other responsibilities in school happening still. And I do think, you know the exam boards in terms of the provision of the, the pre-release materials. That was something that, you know, it was just things that had already been published before, and so it led to feelings of, Oh, am I doing enough to sort of rigorously analyse the work if they've seen these questions before? And that put a lot of strain on people, I think.

Karima [00:20:28] Yeah, I hundred percent agree with that. I heard a lot about people who were in the year above me about all of the how it felt, especially with getting, like what they're going to do so late on. So, we have found that approximately five children in a classroom of 30 were likely to have mental health problems. How can we create a more supportive environment for teachers and students to seek mental health support?

Louise [00:20:56] That's a really good question. I guess the main thing is for ease of accessibility. I think part of the problem at the moment is that, you know, when it comes to students, there's a need there, but there maybe isn't always that easy access. So it might be that they have to make a disclosure about how they're feeling to somebody, and that takes a lot of courage. And then, you know, maybe that then get put on a wait list and then during that waitlist time, there's a lot of anxiety. And in terms of teachers, I guess, because they're working such long hours, opportunities to seek out help aren't often taken up because one of the things that they're most of, is time.

Karima [00:21:43] I don't really understand how to tackle teachers, maybe because they're older, different approach, like you wouldn't treat a four-year-old and a twenty-six-year-old mental health like in in the same way.

Adna [00:21:56] So, like for the students, I would like to see some teachers be real with students because I know that teachers have been going through a lot and we know that the teachers through a lot, but I don't think other students are aware. I think other students just think teachers live at school. And I feel like if teachers like went, you know, lockdown is really hard on me too. And we were struggling with this or like, I didn't like this part of this or like, I didn't like having to be in the same room all day for that many days and be real with the student and tell them that I feel like would genuinely give teachers more of a 3D shape, if you know what I mean. And that would be really really nice for me as a student, see, I would love to see that, but I feel like at the same time, teachers need to be talking to other teachers and making sure they can, that they are also okay to seek help.

Thai-Sha [00:22:44] Yeah, definitely. Well, your first point. I definitely agree. Feel like I love when everyone is open with each other, and definitely can see things, but then it goes through technical issues, you were too personal with your students, they get a bit too comfortable, etc. etc. But just

like, yeah just like being real, it's not easy. It's not easy and letting them know. But another thing, just listen, I feel like, everyone should just listen to each other and talk, that's something I feel will provide a much better environment, by listening and talking, especially this, sounds like cliché, everyone says it, but the government, I feel like they're so...say but I feel like, they're so far, like they're so far from everyone, it's like they're not real. Like, how can you not like... I can't explain it properly. But just listen to what people are trying to say and take it into consideration because we're humans and my life is, technically in your hands, like for example with giving grades and the teachers. Just like my life is in your hands. The way you deal with exams is in my hands, just listen and talk to each other, I feel like that, that would make a big difference and a better environment for everyone.

Adna [00:23:52] Yeah, I mean, there isn't a blanket solution to these things. We can always discuss what we think should happen or we should, what we think we should do. But there isn't really a clear answer. Having these discussions really helps.

Karima [00:24:04] Yeah.

[00:24:07] Okay that's all our questions we actually have today. Thank you for taking your time to talk with us, it's been very insightful.

Louise [00:24:14] Thank you very much.

Karima [00:24:15] Thank you very much. Thank you to all of our special guests who have participated in sharing their views during this four-part series.

Adna [00:24:26] Bye.

Thai-Sha [00:24:27] Bye.