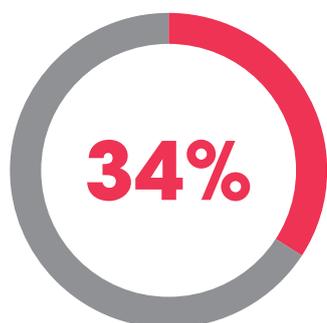




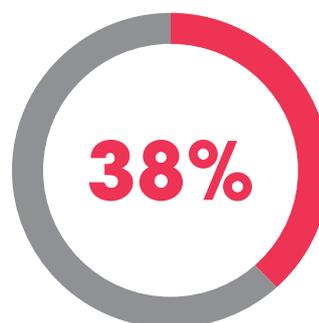
**Young people and  
self-harm**  
during the coronavirus pandemic

**THE MIX**

The Mix co-founded Self-Harm Awareness Day (SHAD, which takes place on 1st March), along with Young Minds, selfharmUK and NSPCC, because we have seen young people struggle with the issue and the stigma attached to it for many years. This struggle has only become more severe with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns limiting their access to social circles and mental health support. Research by The Mix (carried out February 2021) has found that:



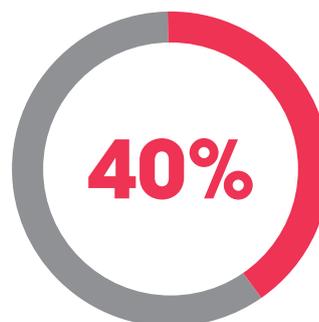
**34%** of young people (aged 16-25) who have self-harmed in the past 12 months said their tendency to self-harm has increased as a result of coronavirus lockdowns



Of those who self-harmed at some point in their life, **38%** self-harmed in the past 12 months, which is a 5% increase since March 2020



**30%** of under 25s say they have found it more difficult to get access to services



Among young people who have self-harmed in the past 12 months, **40%** have not accessed any support services during this time

It is clear that when it comes to self-harm support, our young people are being failed. While support is available, the coronavirus lockdowns have meant that they're less able to access professional support services, or even social support from their friends. As a result, more young people are self-harming than ever before.

We are releasing our research in order to raise awareness of this problem and to call for more support for self-harm in schools, universities and healthcare services. We also want to help point young people and those who care for them in the direction of existing services they can turn to for support, such as those we offer at the Mix.

We want young people to know that self-harm is not an issue that should induce shame and guilt, but one they should and can speak out about. We believe the media has a role in changing this and want more information about self-harm and self-harm support across the media landscape.

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm is an often discussed, but equally misunderstood, topic. In its simplest form - and for the purposes of this whitepaper - self-harm is the act of an individual intentionally damaging or injuring their own body<sup>1</sup>. There are a number of ways that people harm themselves, including but not limited to:



**Cutting or stabbing using sharp implements**



**Self-poisoning or intentional overdosing**



**Burning or scalding with hot objects e.g., stove or boiling water**



**Banging heads and other body parts against walls**



**Hair-pulling, usually in clumps**

<sup>1</sup> NHS, Why People Self-Harm, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/self-harm/getting-help/>

# Why do young people self-harm?

**The reasons behind why people self-harm are debated, but the general consensus is that most people who self-harm do so to develop a sense of control over their own lives, or as a distraction from intense thoughts and feelings. In self-harming, the individual seemingly gains a small amount of control back over their lives - even in a dangerous way.**

Another supposition is that individuals self-harm as a way of punishing themselves for what they deem wrongful behaviour<sup>2</sup>. It relieves tension for the individual, albeit in the short term. This can produce a pattern of behaviour, which can ultimately become addictive.

## Self-harm and suicide

While it is a misconception that self-harm indicates an intention to commit suicide, self-harm can become addictive and incredibly dangerous. Long term self-harm can lead to intense scarring, damage to the body or in severe cases, fatal accidents even when the individual had no intention to take their own life.

It's an issue that continues to blight young people, which has only been exacerbated by the UK lockdowns that occurred throughout 2020 and 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists, Self-Harm in Young People: For Parents and Carers, <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/information-for-parents-and-carers/self-harm-in-young-people-for-parents-and-carers>

# Gathering our data

**Where specified, data has been collated by YouGov on behalf of The Mix. The survey asked a total of 1,023 young people and was undertaken between 29th January - 3rd February 2021.**

This survey was carried out online; figures have been weighted, and are representative of all UK 16-25 year olds in the UK. To understand age groups most at risk of self-harm, the survey split respondents from ages 16-25 into two groups; ages 16 to 20 and ages 21 to 25.

We compared the results of this survey to a near identical one we ran 7th - 19th February 2020, before the coronavirus crisis. The main differences between these two surveys are the sample size and the age group split, with the 2020 version surveying 2,002 young people and breaking out respondents into 16-19 and 20-25.

Where we have quoted young people, the quotes are taken from the survey we carried out with YouGov and from our own self-harm survey on The Mix website in February 2021.

The Mix specialises in providing support for young people across the UK, on issues relating to mental health, as well as education, drugs, homelessness and money, to name a few. Our aim is to better the lives of our young people, to signpost them to key support including but not limited to self-harm.

We undertook this survey with the aim of gaining a better understanding of how the coronavirus epidemic and consequent lockdowns have impacted young people in relation to self-harm, and what can be done to better provide support for them.

# Self-harm and coronavirus lockdowns

**It's a truth well known that the coronavirus pandemic has been devastating for many reasons - with one of the hidden costs being the mental health of people of all age groups. In fact, the World Economic Forum reported that 1 in 3 adults had experienced anxiety or depression as a result, particularly highlighting that women and young people were the most at risk<sup>3</sup>.**

**11%** Our research furthers this statement, finding that on average 11% of all 16-25 year olds have self-harmed in the last 12 months.

**52%** Of the two age groups, those in the 16-20 category were more likely to self-harm than 21-25 year olds, with an astounding 52% self-harming in the last 12 months.

**38%** Crucially, of those who self-harmed at some point in their life, 38% self-harmed in the past 12 months with 5% choosing not to answer the question.

This represents an increase of 5% on last year, showing that the impact of COVID-19 is evidently having a detrimental impact on the mental health of young people.

When asked why their tendency to self-harm increased as a result of the coronavirus lockdowns, respondents suggested that the leading causes were:

**52%**

Anxiety about the future

**36%**

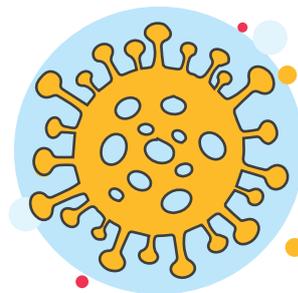
Worries about school or education

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/covid19-mental-health-depression-anxiety>

The survey also looked into whether young people were in work or full-time education, and whether this affected their likeliness to self-harm. It found that full-time students were far more likely to have self-harmed in the past 12 months than young people who work, at 46% and 33% respectively.

**The data above suggests that the pandemic has prevented them from having the future and education they were hoping for, which has increased their tendency towards self-harm.**

Students have been a forgotten group in the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, with widespread reports of students who are locked into unfair rental contracts for university dorms that they cannot use<sup>4</sup> and unable to access the level of services that they've paid for at university due to them being generally closed. In several statements, the Prime Minister has even attributed blame to students for the spread of the coronavirus. **With these considerations, it's clear to see why the UK's students are being failed when it comes to appropriate care for their mental wellbeing.**



It's not just students have been so clearly disadvantaged throughout the coronavirus crisis - school age children have been hugely affected too. With homeschooling becoming commonplace across the UK, and dramatic changes to grading that severely impacted many young people, it's clear to see why the wellbeing of young people is at stake.



In fact, a report by Ofsted has found that repeated isolation has had a detrimental effect on progression<sup>5</sup>, and that the efficiency of home learning is difficult to determine. The data gathered by The Mix survey supports this, and reflects the attitude that young people are uncertain about the future and worried about their education.

<sup>4</sup> BBC, Students Pledge Rent Strike Over Unused Uni Rooms, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55576471>

<sup>5</sup> Gov.uk OFSTED report into isolation and children's education: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/covid-19-isolation-having-detrimental-impact-on-childrens-education-and-welfare-particularly-the-most-vulnerable>

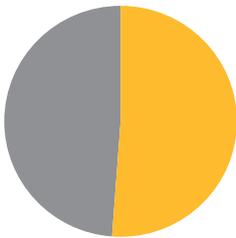
## Self-harm and loneliness

**“Often it (self-harm) is caused by feeling lonely, so the last thing that individual will be willing to do is reach out and seek help!”**

Isolation and a loss of social interaction has been a huge blow that young people have experienced in the past year, as they have been stuck at home, cut off from their friends and from the daily interaction they were used to at school, work, youth groups, college and university. Lots of young people have told us that missing out on landmarks they were expecting to enjoy, such as end of year celebrations at school, socialising as freshers and perhaps even taking time out to travel with friends, has given them a sense of loss and loneliness.

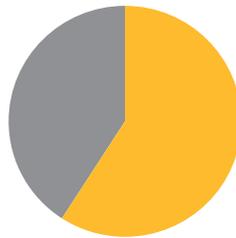
Our research has shown that in some cases, loneliness has strong links to self-harming behaviour:

**51%**



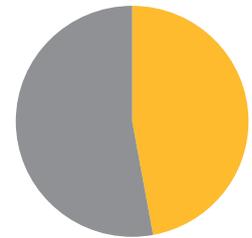
51% of those who self-harmed at some point during their lives felt an urge to self-harm in the past 12 months when feeling lonely

**59%**



59% of young people who self-harmed at some point in their lives have always or often felt lonely in the past 12 months, compared to only 31% among those who have not self-harmed

**47%**



YP who self-harmed in the past were far less likely to agree that they know how to cope with loneliness (47%) than YP who have not (61%)

## Self-harm, loneliness, drugs and alcohol

We have also found there to be a clear connection between self-harm and drugs and alcohol in those young people who said they have felt lonely in the past 12 months:



Young people who have self-harmed at some point in their lives were far more likely to have experienced an urge to drink alcohol (57%). This compares to 35% among those who have not self-harmed.



They were also more likely to have an urge to take drugs (30%). This compares to 10% among those who have not self-harmed.

## Self-harm, loneliness and suicidal thoughts



There is also a worrying link between loneliness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts, as our data shows that of those young people who have self-harmed at some point in their lives 48% have experienced suicidal thoughts when feeling lonely in the past 12 months (this compares to 14% among those who have not self-harmed).

# Who is self-harming?

Interestingly, while statistics suggest that roughly **11% of all 16-25 year olds have self-harmed in the past 12 months**, the number of young people under the age of 25 who have self-harmed has actually decreased year on year. The Mix's 2020 survey found that 34% had self-harmed at some point in their lives, whereas the 2021 survey reported that 29% had - marking a decrease of 5%.

However, the number of individuals who had continued to self-harm throughout 2021 was on the up.

As a summary, our research concluded that:

**Young people between the ages of 16-20 are more likely to self-harm than the 21-25 age group**

**Females are more likely to self-harm than their male counterparts**

**Self-harm among bisexuals is more prevalent than others under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, or heterosexuals (who were least likely to self-harm)**

It should also be noted that the number of young people who preferred not to answer whether they have ever self-harmed increased between the two surveys - 4% opted not to offer an answer in 2021, compared with 3% in 2020.

This suggests that attitudes towards self-harm may have shifted - it could be that young people have less access to information on the topic due to not being in school or around friends, or perhaps that there is an increased sense of shame around self-inflicted injury and therefore individuals are less likely to admit to self-harm or actively seek help for it.

## Areas most affected by self-harm

While self-harm isn't limited to any specific areas of the UK, there were some areas where it appears to be particularly prevalent. For example, in the South West (42%) and Northern Ireland (33%), young people were more likely to have self-harmed at some point in their lives, young people in the North West (19%) were the least likely to have ever inflicted any injury upon themselves.



In London and the East of England, almost half of young people (**49%**) who had self-harmed before did so again within the last 12 months. This was a tall margin against the next closest region of the South, with **43%** of young people who had self-harmed previously repeating this behaviour. This suggests that young people in these areas are the most at risk of repeated self-harm. The lowest numbers came from Wales with **22%**.



**49%**  
**East of England  
and London**

When asked about having ever self-harmed and repeating that behaviour within the last 12 months, it was the East of England and London that saw the highest numbers by a tall margin at 49%.

## Self-harm by gender

**Females are almost twice as likely than males to have ever self-harmed (38% vs 20%).**

**More males are self-harming when compared year on year**

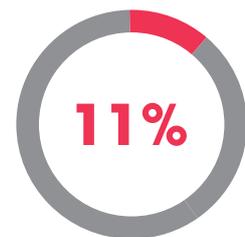
Year on year, the number of **males** who have self-harmed at any point in their lives decreased - from 25% in 2020 to 20% in 2021. However, there has been an increase in males who have self-harmed in the past 12 months.



While last year **29%** of males who self-harmed at some point in their life said they had also self-harmed in the past 12 months,



This year the proportion jumped to **39%**



An additional **11%** preferring not to answer the question.

Among females, the proportion of those who had previously self-harmed and then repeated the behaviour in 2021 remained fairly stable, at **36%** in 2020 and 37% in 2021.

This suggests that while females are more likely to self-harm than males, the number of those currently self-harming appears not to have fluctuated alongside the coronavirus pandemic.

Later in this report, we dig into which genders are more likely to seek support for self-harm, as well as the methods of support they proactively seek and find most useful.

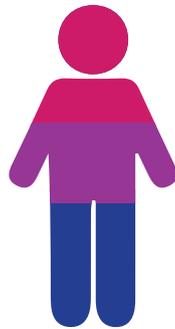
## Self-harm by sexual orientation

**Bisexuals are the most likely to have ever self-harmed, followed by young people who are gay and lesbian.**

**Of those who have ever self-harmed, bisexuals were again far more likely to say they have self-harmed in the past 12 months (45%) than heterosexuals (31%).**



As is often evidenced in research, people identifying as **LGBTQ+ are more likely to experience bouts of poor mental health**; and this was seen in The Mix's self-harm statistics too.



The survey found that of those who have ever self-harmed, **bisexuals were far more likely to have self-harmed** in the last 12 months, with an alarming **45%** of respondents answering that they had.



In comparison, **31% of heterosexual** young people selected this option in the survey.

Again, when asked whether they had ever self-harmed, it became clear that **bisexuals were more likely to have self-harmed than any other sexuality**, followed by those selecting 'other' and gay or lesbian. We can also see here that heterosexuals are the least likely to have ever self-harmed.

	Heterosexual	Gay or Lesbian	Bisexual	Other	Prefer not to say
<b>Unweighted base</b>	708	62	135	25	62
<b>Base: All UK 16-25 year olds</b>	708	62	135	25	62
<b>Yes, I have</b>	23%	41%	54%	44%	25%
<b>No, I haven't</b>	72%	54%	43%	52%	58%
<b>Prefer not to say</b>	3%	3%	2%	4%	16%
<b>Chose not to answer</b>	2%	2%	1%	-	-

From this, we can infer that mental health outcomes for young people identifying as bisexual are notably worse than they are for any other sexuality. Often overlooked and under-represented, a recent study conducted by University of Manchester found that bisexuals are up to six-times more likely to self-injure<sup>6</sup>, and suggests that biphobia may mean that existing services aimed at the LGBTQ+ services feel out of reach for bisexuals who are self-harming.

## Support for young people who self-harm

**“I think there needs to be more intervention support. There is lots of information available to read but more than this is needed. And I don't think people always know where to go for help, e.g., online websites where you can talk to counsellors etc.”**

<sup>6</sup> University of Manchester, Bisexual People Up To Six Times More Likely to Self-Injure, <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/bisexual-people-up-to-six-times-more-likely-to-self-injure/>

**“Because my friends haven't been able to get the support they needed, even after visiting a GP, they weren't validated and they were basically dismissed”**

**“There's a lack of understanding adults. Kids turn away because they think no one will get it. And they're right. They don't.”**

**There was a 12% decline in the number of young people who spoke to their friends about their self-harm. 32% disagreed that they would know where to turn to for support with self-harm if they needed it.**

One of the most worrying things about the UK lockdown is the lack of access to support services for mental health. With people across the country being unable to physically be in the presence of friends, family, colleagues or even professionals such as teachers or doctors, the assumption would be that people are not seeking help - and The Mix's survey goes to prove this point.

Worryingly, the number of people who didn't speak to anyone about their self-harm at all increased between 2020 and 2021, jumping from **21% to 24% respectively** - suggesting that they feel more cut off from any type of help than ever before. When reviewed by gender, it appears that females in particular were less likely to speak to anyone about self-harm than they were the year previous, with figures jumping from 21% to 25%.

Looking into the ways that people did seek support, the clear difference is the number of young people turning to friends.

**In 2020, 55% of respondents sought help from friends for self-harm – however potentially as a result of the pandemic, this number dropped to 43%.**

This suggests that as young people aren't freely able to hang out with their friends, they're choosing not to speak to anyone about self-harm at all. Other ways that young people did choose to reach out for support can be seen here:

<b>Which, if any, of the following people have you ever spoken to about your self-harm?</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>No-one</b>	21%	24%
<b>Friend</b>	55%	43%
<b>Teacher(s)</b>	10%	10%
<b>Parent(s) / Gaurdian(s)</b>	27%	24%
<b>Siblings</b>	10%	8%
<b>Family, excluding parents / siblings</b>	8%	5%
<b>A counsellor</b>	31%	27%
<b>A doctor / GP / healthcare professional</b>	34%	29%
<b>Someone at school / college who isn't a teacher</b>	14%	10%
<b>Youth worker(s)</b>	4%	5%
<b>Other</b>	7%	7%
<b>Don't know / can't recall</b>	1%	2%
<b>Prefer not to say</b>	1%	0%

The data also uncovered that young people in the 16-20 age group were less likely to seek help from a healthcare professional, with 28% doing so, compared to 31% in the older category. They were, however, more likely to seek support from someone at school or college who isn't a teacher, implying that they prefer to seek social peer support over professional forms of support.

## Family support for self-harm

**Given the lack of access to friendships, it could be expected that the number of people turning to family for support might increase to make up for this shortfall. However, of those who have not spoken about their self-harm to parents, the reasons for this varied:**



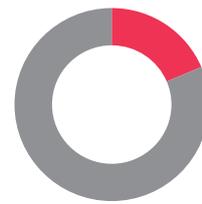
**Over half said (53%)** that had not done so as they did not want to make them worried



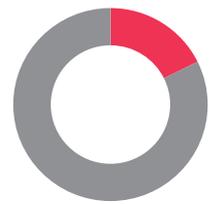
**41%** thought that it would not help



**37%** did not feel able to speak to their parents about it



**One in five (19%)** were worried that their parents would get angry



**18%** had not done so because they do not have a good relationship with their parents or guardians

Females were more likely than their male counterparts to state that they simply felt unable to speak to a parent or guardian about their self-harm (41% vs 30%), and generally agreed more that their parents would get angry, or that it simply wouldn't help.

Males however selected the option that they didn't want to worry their parents, at 51% vs 55% of females. They were also marginally more likely to state that they didn't have a good relationship with their parent or guardian.

Where respondents specified why they hadn't spoken to a parent or guardian about their self-harm, responses suggested that they didn't feel that the self-harm was significant enough to mention, or that they were concerned that the admission would be catastrophised:

**“I didn't think it was that important to do so”**

**“It's not that bad. I just bang my head and stuff”**

**“It wasn't for a long period, I felt if I told them I would be ridiculed”**

**“They will take it more seriously than I would hope”**

## What support are young people seeking for self-harm?

**40%**

Among those who self-harmed in the past 12 months, 40% have not accessed any support services in the past 12 months

**54%**

Over half (54%) of the older respondents (21 to 25) have not accessed any support, this compares to 30% among 16-20 year olds

**49%**

49% of female respondents have not accessed support in the last 12 months, compared to 28% of males.

When it comes to support that young people are utilising, online websites and counselling came out on top, at 17% and 14% respectively. This method of self-harm support may be popular among young people due to the anonymity aspect, whereby they can conceal their identity online and discuss self-harm freely, whereas professional services require identification which may be off-putting.

As a result of this, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) were only used by 6% of young people who have self-harmed in the past 12 months, despite these services remaining open (albeit with COVID-19 related limitations). 5% of people who have self-harmed in the past 12 months went to A&E for their injuries, and 4% to hospital (excluding A&E). However, young people are still utilising their GP for self-harm support, with 14% turning to this method of support.

**Worryingly, it appears that there is a belief that health professionals don't really understand self-harm, and therefore are not best placed to be able to help with self-harm related issues. When asked, 36% agreed with this statement, although this rose to 47% among young people who have self-harmed at some point in their life.**

As well as professional services, young people are selecting online alternatives, including visiting unmoderated online forums that proactively encourage self-harm through sharing photos or videos. In fact, nearly 1 in 5 young people who have inflicted injury on themselves in the past 12 months have visited such forums (17%), with 16-20 year olds more likely to have done so than their older counterparts in the 21-25 age group.

# Impact of self-harm stigma

**“It is such a stigmatised topic. Hospital staff mistreat you and are judgmental and cold. Media often portray it as a negative attention seeking behaviour”**

**“I think that more key figures in society such as footballers and big stars (who young people look up to) could be more open about self-harm. Some of them have opened up and it’s a big thing, but this would remove the stigma around self-harm and encourage others to be the same”**

**“It is quite stigmatised and associated with a lot of shame, people have to already be at a point where they really want help to find any because they would need to search it out”**

When it comes to stigma surrounding self-harm, there’s an abundance of it. From the misconception that anyone who self-harms must want to end their own life by suicide, to the idea that they are simply inflicting injury upon themselves for “attention” or “clout”.

Many people have an opinion about the topic, whether they've self-harmed before or not, which can lead to dangerous consequences in terms of the numbers of people who don't seek help for self-harm. In fact, some **42% of young people agreed that the stigma around self-harm would discourage them from accessing services if they needed them.**

Media representation also plays a big part in individual behaviours, and with self-harm there is no exception. Interestingly, **63% of young people think that self-harm is not spoken about enough in the media**, with those who self-harmed in the past even more likely to agree with this (67%). The Mix wants to change this by calling for representation of the issue across the media landscape, allowing young people and those who care for them to see that self-harm should be talked about openly and should not induce shame.

## How we can help young people with self-harm

**We asked young people what kind of support they'd like to see more of when it comes to getting help with self-harm. 56% of respondents to our survey stated that there is not enough support available, with a further 29% saying they didn't know. The Mix intends to improve this situation.**

Of the options available, young people suggested that they'd like more access to articles, online chat groups and forums - all of which The Mix currently provides.

It seems that to be able to effectively tackle the issues with self-harm that young people in the UK are facing, there needs to be better promotion of services within networks that individuals are turning to for support - whether that's within schools, GP services or counselling.

## Calling for a better future for young people who self-harm

To be able to appropriately care for young people's mental health, The Mix is calling for an urgent upscaling of existing services for self-harm and an increased awareness of the free and confidential services that are available to young people across the UK. To do this effectively, we must:

**Call on the UK Government to account for mental health considerations in policies surrounding schools, universities and healthcare services that may be accessed by young people.**

**Raise awareness of available services to parents, carers, healthcare professionals and others who may be confronted by a young person who self-harms, so they can effectively signpost for young people.**

**Break the self-harm stigma by talking about self-harm in the media, in workplaces, in education and at home.**

To prevent self-harm becoming even more widespread as a result of the pandemic, we must act now. As disruption to education and the rise of youth unemployment continues, the futures of young people seem more and more uncertain. As lockdown restrictions persist, we know the impact of these issues on self-harm could easily get worse. We need to reach as many young people in the UK as possible to show them that they're only one step away from the help they need.

**"Nearly everyone I know has self-harmed at some point, if there was more support, I doubt that would be the case"**

## Which services offer support for self-harm?

**You can speak to your GP if you're self-harming or you're worried that you might self-harm. You can also speak to them about any injuries you may have. Your GP can talk to you about what's going on and help you to treat any injuries.**

They may also refer you for an assessment with a local community mental health team, who can help you find more specialised support.

You can get in touch with these organisations for support, advice and information. They are there for anyone who self-harms or thinks about self-harm, or parents, carers or friends of those who self-harm:

### Mind

call **0300 123 3393** or text **86463**  
(9am to 6pm on weekdays)

### The Mix

call **0808 808 4994**  
(7 days a week from 3pm to 12am)

### Harmless

email  
[info@harmless.org.uk](mailto:info@harmless.org.uk)

### Self-injury Support

(for women and girls)

### CALM

for men

### YoungMinds Parents Helpline

call **0808 802 5544**  
(9.30am to 4pm on weekdays)

### National Self Harm Network forums

### Samaritans

Call **116 123** to talk to Samaritans, or email:  
[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) for a reply within 24 hours

### Shout Crisis Text Line

Text "**SHOUT**" to **85258** to contact the Shout Crisis Text Line, or text "YM" if you're under 19

### Childline

If you're under 19, you can also call **0800 1111** to talk to Childline (the number will not appear on your phone bill)



Editor's Notes:

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1023 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29th January - 3rd February 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK 16-25 year olds.