

Research Article

Mental Health and Counselling/ Psychotherapy: Public Perceptions and Attitudes

By Dr Ellen Kelly



Introduction

What are Irish adults saying about their own mental health in terms of experiencing stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness/ isolation? What are their attitudes towards mental health in general? What proportion of Irish adults have been affected by suicide – amongst relatives, friends/colleagues, neighbours or in the community? What do Irish adults think about counselling/psychotherapy? Would they seek counselling/ psychotherapeutic support themselves? What do they think about counselling/psychotherapeutic supports for children and young people?

These are some of the key areas

of focus in a general public survey carried out by Behaviour & Attitudes (B&A) in 2019 on behalf of the Irish Association for Counselling Psychotherapy. A discussion of the results and comparisons with previous general public surveys follows. Implications for counselling/ psychotherapy will also be drawn.

This research was carried out prior to the current Covid-19 pandemic. Given the likely impact of the current crisis on mental health, the IACP has commissioned an additional short public survey to assess levels of stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness/isolation amongst Irish adults during this time. A follow-up piece, including a comparative analysis between the two periods will

be submitted to an upcoming edition of this journal.

Research Design

A quantitative survey was designed by an IACP research team and fieldwork was carried out as part of B&A's Barometer (Omnibus) survey. Interviewing was undertaken face-to-face among a nationally representative sample of 1,008 adults aged 16 and over, at 63 randomly selected sampling locations nationwide. Quota controls were set in respect of gender, age, social class, region and area. This research conforms with the codes of conduct established by ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research).

Irish Adult Mental Health - Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Loneliness

This survey found that almost half of Irish adults say they feel stressed, more than a third feel anxious, and approximately a fifth feel depressed or lonely/isolated – either 'often' or 'sometimes'. Females, those aged 35-49, Dublin dwellers and those at family life-stages –with children – are the most likely to say they feel stressed. Those aged 65 and over, as well as parents whose children have left the family home – empty nesters – are the least likely to say they feel stressed. Overall, the proportion of adults who say they feel stressed 'often' has reduced from 1 in 5 in 2016 to just over 1 in 10 in 2019. In line with this, the proportion of those who say they 'never' feel stressed has risen from 23% in 2016 to 30% in 2019.

Irish adults in the family teen life-stage are more likely to say they feel anxious – with half of the respondents in this life-stage reporting feeling anxious compared with a third more generally. Men, farmers, those aged 65+ and empty nesters claim the most modest levels of anxiety.

Dublin and urban dwellers, those in

the family teen life-stage, those aged between 35-49 and those in lower income brackets are more likely to say they feel depressed. Those over 65, empty nesters, rural dwellers and farmers are the least likely to claim feeling depressed.

Single people and those at the family teen life-stage are the most likely to report feeling lonely/isolated.

Causes of Stress

Stress is a state of tension or strain resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances, and it occurs primarily when demands appear to exceed resources (Kelly, 2017, p. 214)

Work and money/debt are reported as the main causes of stress in Irish adult's lives. Almost 1 in 4 say that work is the main cause of stress, while money/debt is reported to be the main cause for almost 1 in 5. Where work is the main cause of stress, this is elevated for those in the pre-family life-stage (at 51%), for those living in Dublin (at 36%) and for those aged between 25-50 (at 34%). Where money/debt is the main cause of stress, this is elevated for those in the family teen life-stage (at 32%), for those aged between 25-34 (at 29%) and for those in the lower income brackets (24%). Children/family and health are reported to be the main causes of stress for more than 1 in 10.

Work has risen as a main cause of stress from 1 in 5 in 2015 to almost 1 in 4 in 2019, while the opposite is true for money/debt which has decreased from 1 in 4 in 2015 to 1 in 5 today. Money/debt had been the primary cause of stress in previous IACP / B&A general public surveys (2013, 2015, 2016). This is the first time that money/debt has come in below work as the primary stressor.

Helpful Strategies

The results of this survey indicate

Despite the broadly positive attitudes towards mental health found in this survey, 3 in 10 Irish adults believe that it is not as easy to talk about mental health issues as physical health issues today

that talking is the most common strategy employed by people to help them when experiencing a mental health difficulty. Almost half of the respondents say they talk to a friend or relative and almost a third say they talk to a spouse or partner. Talking to a General Practitioner is mentioned as helpful by 2 in 5 and talking to a counsellor/psychotherapist by more than 1 in 10. Exercise is the second most mentioned coping strategy - found to be helpful for more than 1 in 4 Irish adults, and this is elevated in the under 24 year age cohort to more than 1 in 3. Meditation/mindfulness, religion and medication are helpful for smaller percentages of the population. Encouragingly, those who more often experience mental health difficulties are more likely to engage in a variety of activities that they find helpful.

Attitudes Towards Mental Health

Positive attitudes towards mental health were broadly evident with 86% agreeing it's more acceptable to talk about mental health issues today than it was in the past. Just under half of Irish adults strongly agree with this, with the greatest certainty being amongst 35-49 year olds, those living outside Dublin, and those in the family pre-teen as well as the empty-nester life-stages. 9 in 10 agree that mental health issues are 'just as likely to affect my family as anyone else's'. Strong agreement with this was elevated amongst the 25-34 year olds as well as amongst those living outside Dublin.

Increased media focus on mental health is perceived to be the biggest contributory factor towards a greater acceptability today – thought to be the case by 7 in 10 respondents. This is further elevated for those living outside Dublin and rurally. Other highly rated contributory factors include specific events aimed at mental health awareness and celebrities opening up about their mental health issues.

Mental Health and Self-Disclosure

Stigma can lead to prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour on the part of others, a subsequent failure to seek medical or social assistance in times of crisis, and feelings of loneliness and isolation which many are reluctant to share (Kelly, 2017, p.361).

Despite the broadly positive attitudes towards mental health found in this survey, 3 in 10 Irish adults believe that it is not as easy to talk about mental health issues as physical health issues today. In line with this, self-disclosure when it comes to mental health issues is a perceived area of difficulty for many.

This research tells us that 3 in 5 Irish adults would find it difficult to speak to an employer about a personal mental health issue. Those living in Dublin are more likely to strongly agree with this. A greater reticence is also found amongst those aged 25-50. Furthermore, almost 3 in 5 say they would not want other people to know if they were experiencing a mental health difficulty. This is highest amongst Dublin dwellers and also higher amongst farmers.

Thus, while Irish adults say that they think it's more acceptable and easier to talk about mental health issues today, the reticence found in the area of self-disclosure is indicative of stigma continuing to play a role in the mental health landscape.

Suicide

Carrying out research in the area of suicide is challenging in many ways – particularly in terms of ethical considerations regarding vulnerable people. Research in this area tends to focus on causes of suicide and self-harm – or suicidality. Brendan O'Brien, in his article for this journal, draws on Hjelemeland and Knizek's three categories of research on suicidality – neurobiological research, epidemiological research and intervention studies including randomised controlled trials (2017, p. 35). The focus tends to be on explaining suicidality in terms of causes: "We need to move away from 'cause and effect' thinking and to focus on the individual experience of suicide within a given family and the cultural context in order to find meaningful insights" (O'Brien, 2017, p. 35). It is elsewhere recognised that more research is needed to develop effective preventative strategies: "Without more research, developing effective evidence-based policies or clinical practices to help suicidal populations will be much more difficult" (Siagle, Séguin & Racine, 2017, p.3).

The current research looks at the area of suicide from a different angle – focusing on those who have been affected by suicide in terms of knowing a person who has died this way. It also looks at what people should do if they think someone they know has suicidal ideation.

Those Affected by Suicide

The findings of this research indicate that 2 in 5 Irish adults have been affected by suicide in some way. Fourteen percent report they have been affected by suicide within the family (immediate/wider) and 31% report they have been affected by suicide amongst friends, colleagues or neighbours. There has been a 5% rise in the numbers reporting that they have been affected by suicide since the last survey IACP / B&A

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survey in 2016. This rise is most evident within a person's wider social circle rather than within the family. It is most likely to be due to a combination of greater awareness and acknowledgement of suicide, rather than a rise in actual suicide rates. Latest Central Statistics Office (CSO) figures tell us that suicide rates are now declining, and are reported to be at the lowest level so far this century (Holland, 2019; NOSP, 2018).

This research found that suicide within the community is reported more amongst farmers than other social groups – which hints towards greater prevalence in more isolated and rural communities as indicated by the latest CSO data.

Half of those who report feeling anxious or depressed, at least on occasion, say that they have been affected by suicide in some way. Irish adults who are in the family teen life-stage are more affected by suicide in the wider family and amongst friends/community than those in other life-stages.

Talking about Suicide

The vast majority of Irish adults agree that if they thought a friend or family member was at risk of suicide, they should suggest they see a health care professional (86%) or that they should speak to them about it themselves (83%).

However, almost 2 in 5 (38%) Irish adults say that they would be afraid

to start a conversation about suicide with someone who might be at risk. The survey found that younger adults, Dublin dwellers and those at the family pre-school life-stage are the most reluctant to initiate a conversation about suicide with someone who might be at risk.

Counselling and Psychotherapy

Attending Counselling/ Psychotherapy

One in 8 Irish adults say they have personally attended counselling/ psychotherapy – and this figure is consistent with the IACP / B&A general public surveys of 2015 and 2016. Three in 10 Irish adults say that they know someone who has attended counselling/ psychotherapy. Overall, 41% of Irish adults have either attended a counsellor/psychotherapist themselves or know someone who has. Those aged 35-49, in the family teen life-stage and those who have heard of the IACP are more likely to have personally attended a counsellor/psychotherapist. Women are more likely than men to have personally attended a counsellor/ psychotherapist – 1 in 7 women have attended compared with 1 in 9 men. Overall, those who more frequently experience difficult feelings are much more likely to have personally attended counselling/psychotherapy.

Likelihood of Attending Counselling/Psychotherapy

If struggling with mental health in some way two-thirds of Irish adults say they would be likely to see a counsellor/psychotherapist – with over a third saying they would be 'very likely' to. Women are more open than men to attending in the future – with 2 in 5 women saying they would be 'very likely' to attend if struggling in some way with their mental health, compared with 3 in 10 men. Those in the family pre-school life-stage, those living outside Dublin and farmers are

more likely to say they would attend.

Ninety two percent of Irish adults agree that it's a good idea to attend counselling/psychotherapy if struggling with mental health. This is further elevated for those in the family teen life-stage, as well as for those who say they struggle with their mental health in some way.

Perceived Barriers for Attending

While a majority of Irish adults (78%) think that counselling/psychotherapy is valued by people in general, this research also found that a similar majority (71%) think that the profession is not well understood by people in general. A lack of understanding of the profession could be considered as an invisible barrier for attending.

Almost half of Irish adults say that there would be no barrier for them attending counselling/psychotherapy. However, 1 in 4 Irish adults say that affordability is a potential barrier – and this is elevated for women, those aged 25-34, and those in lower income brackets. 1 in 7 say that embarrassment is a potential barrier – that they would be embarrassed if people knew they were seeing a counsellor/psychotherapist. Not knowing any counsellors/psychotherapists in the local area and not knowing how to go about making an appointment were also perceived as potential barriers.

Making an Appointment

Most Irish adults imagine that their GP is the logical way to go about making an appointment to see a counsellor/psychotherapist. Those over 65, living outside Dublin, rural dwellers and farmers are most likely to see their GP as the logical route. One in 5 would search online and almost 1 in 4 would ask friends/family how they would go about making an appointment – and this is elevated for those under 24 and those living in Dublin.

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Online Counselling/Psychotherapy

More than a third of Irish adults would be likely to opt for online counselling/psychotherapy (13% 'very likely' and 23% 'likely'). However, half of Irish adults would be unlikely to opt for this – with 37% saying they would be 'very unlikely' to. Dublin dwellers and younger people are more open to opting for online counselling/psychotherapy.

Counselling/Psychotherapy for Children

More than 9 in 10 Irish adults think that it's a good idea for children and adolescents to see a counsellor/psychotherapist if struggling with their mental health. Almost two-thirds are in strong agreement with this. Practically all (99%) in the family teen life-stage agree with this.

Further to this, almost 9 in 10 think that counselling/psychotherapy should be available in all schools in Ireland. Nearly all of those in the family teen and pre-teen life-stages think that this should be the case.

Funding for Counselling/Psychotherapy

There is very strong support amongst Irish adults for universal availability and funding of counselling/psychotherapy. Almost 9 in 10 people say it should be State funded for all people experiencing mental health difficulties, and that it should be included as a tax relief/benefit similar to other areas. More than 4 in 5 say that it should be available to all medical card holders and that it should be a benefit of private

health insurance. Those aged 25-34 are the most likely to support universal availability and funding of counselling/psychotherapy – and this is the age cohort that is also the most likely to say affordability is a potential barrier of access for them.

Implications for Counselling/Psychotherapy

As GPs are considered to be the most logical point of access for counselling/psychotherapy for 3 in 4 adults in Ireland, improving structural links between GPs and therapeutic practitioners is a key consideration for the future. Enhancing GP's understanding of the counselling/psychotherapy profession could form part of this strategy. In line with this, the perception that counselling/psychotherapy is not well understood by people in general points to the need for more public awareness and information raising strategies.

Face-to-face counselling is the preferred option for most Irish adults, with half saying they would be unlikely to choose online counselling/psychotherapy. However, more than a third would be likely to opt for online and it is Dublin dwellers and younger people who are particularly open to this. We know from the IACP members' survey in 2018 that 10% of the membership currently offers online counselling/psychotherapy and that out of those who do not offer it, 31% would like to be able to. Training in this area is the perceived barrier for more than half of these – either not having the right training or not thinking the right training is available. Almost a quarter say they do not feel confident relying on technology. There is a clear training gap in this area and if counsellors/psychotherapists are to be able to meet the needs of those who wish to avail of online counselling/psychotherapy this gap in training deserves further attention.

The very strong agreement found amongst Irish adults that children and

adolescents should see a counsellor/ psychotherapist if struggling with their mental health and that counselling/ psychotherapy should be available in all schools in Ireland should contribute to policy making in the area of youth mental health.

Conclusion

The results of the IACP / B&A 2019 general public survey indicate a notable decline in the proportion of Irish adults who report experiencing stress 'often' while those who report that they 'never' experience stress has increased since the last general public survey in 2016.

Experience of mental health difficulties are reported most acutely amongst those in the family teen life-stage, by Dublin and urban dwellers and by those aged 35-49. Those over 65 and empty nesters report experiencing the least mental health difficulties. Those in the family teen life-stage are the most likely to struggle with a range of difficult feelings.

When experiencing a mental health difficulty, Irish adults find that talking about it is the most helpful thing – especially to a person close to them, to a GP or to a counsellor/ psychotherapist. Taking physical exercise comes second to talking as a helpful strategy.

As we've seen, Irish adults have broadly positive attitudes to mental health. However, there is a fear or reticence when it comes to self-disclosure. Most would not want others to know if they were experiencing a mental health difficulty – and most would find it difficult to discuss this with an employer.

While suicide rates have declined in Ireland in recent years, this research points to an increase in those who say they've been affected by suicide – either in their family or amongst friends, neighbours or colleagues. This is likely to be indicative of greater awareness and acknowledgement of suicide in

society today. Most Irish adults think that they should talk to someone close who might have suicidal thoughts – or they should suggest seeking professional help. However, a significant proportion would be afraid to initiate a conversation.

The proportion of Irish adults who have attended counselling/ psychotherapy is consistent over the last number of years. Women are more likely than men to have personally attended and they are also more open to attending in the future. Most agree that it is a good idea to attend counselling/psychotherapy if struggling with mental health, and half would see no barriers to attending. However, up to a quarter would consider affordability a potential barrier – and this is further highlighted by the findings of this research which reveal strong support for access to state funded counselling/ psychotherapy for those who need it.

Preliminary results from the short IACP / B&A mental health survey put to the general public during the Covid-19 crisis indicate that levels of stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness/isolation amongst Irish

adults are all raised – with the most notable increases in the areas of anxiety and loneliness/isolation. A full comparative analysis is underway and will be reported on in a follow-up piece for this journal. ☺

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Ellen holds a PhD in Sociology. She worked for many years as a Researcher and Project Leader in the HSE Addiction Service. She is a Government of Ireland (Irish Research Council) Scholar, a Research Fellow of the former Institute for the Study of Social Change (now the Geary Institute) and a Royal Irish Academy Social Science Research Council award recipient. Her research interests lie in the area of mental health – particularly in relation to young people – and the counselling/psychotherapy profession. Ellen is a member of the Sociological Association of Ireland and the IACP Research Committee.

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