WHAT DO YOU NEED TO #MAKEiTGOOD?

Insight Topic 18:
STRESS + MENTAL WELLBEING

Report authors:
Dr Colin Morrison/Ross Robertson
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TASC

INTRODUCTION

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to **'About the Insight Gathering project'** also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org

1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

In this insight chapter the topic of *stress* is used as an overarching theme which also includes young people's perspectives on aspects of *mental well-being* and mental health problems. In the initial focus groups, the topic of **STRESS** was raised and discussed by 3 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **STRESS** online survey came from 37 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	7
Dundee	27
Perth and Kinross	3
Other area	-
Total by method	37

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	18	18	1

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	8	19	7	2	-	1	-

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the STRESS survey provided a response the request: *Tell us about your experience of stress when it comes to sex or relationships*. Insight from young people points to several themes.

Sources of stress

Young people identify a range of events or experiences that lead to them feeling stressed; these include exams, work demands, pressure from others, feeling jealous and being in a relationship in which they feel unhappy. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of stress when it comes to sex or relationships* young people responded as follows:

> Work overload, people stressing you out, feeling like your running out of time. (16/Dundee/Female)

> Rough patch, unhealthy relationship. (16/Dundee/Female)

Exams, Work, Porn, relationships. (16/P&K/Female)

When you and your partner may be going through a hard time. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Like when a friend goes out with your ex, especially a best friend. (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

Jealousy is a huge problem! Like if your ex gets all jealous and that then they will probably spread rumours and try and turn people against you. (Focus Group 4/P&K)

Impact on the individual
The insight from young people identifies that the impact of stress on the individual can be multi-faceted and significant and can include: feeling upset, feeling fearful, a loss of confidence or capacity to cope with immediate pressures, and confusion about what to do with any problems faced. Again, talking about experiences of stress:

Feeling unable to cope with the pressure of school/work/life. (16/Dundee/Female)

It makes you feel bad about yourself. (16/Dundee/Male)

Upsetting, horrible, hard. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Trapped, anxiety, fear. (16/Dundee/Female)

Really annoying and causes a high temper. (16/Dundee/Male)

Makes people think unclearly. (16/Angus/Female)

When stressed you will feel bad about yourself. (16/Dundee/Male)

Being under pressure and not being able to get anything done because you don't know where to start. (17/Dundee/Female)

Impact on relationships
Stress also impacts on relationships. Young people highlight negative consequences including a loss of control, arguments and a sense of not being able to identify and address a specific source of stress.

Stress and relationships is not a good mix. (16/Dundee/Male)

Stress makes relationships bad. (17/Angus/Male)

If you are stressed this can cause arguments and relationship problems as you take your problems home and out on people you don't mean to. (20/P&K/Male)

Getting worked up over things in your relationship. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Stress can destroy relationships as it can impact families. (18/P&K/Male)

Stress ends relationships, isolates the stressed person, it's a scary place. (17/Angus/Female)

Stress can really put a strain on relationships. If one person is feeling stressed then they could be short and snappy, or take their stress out on the other person, but stress is unavoidable. (16/Dundee/Female)

When you are stressed with school, work or family and that then you just pass it on to your relationship, like you can't disconnect between the relationship and what else is going on. (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

Managing stress
One online contributor identified some strategies to manage stress.

Stress effects everyone differently. However stress can be managed and controlled through mechanisms to either de-escalate stress or avoid it for example by running or a good dog walk at the beach. Stress can originate from many sources for example work/relationships etc. (17/Angus/Female)

2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the emphasis which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding *stress*.

Stress can be understood as **the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure, this pressure turns into stress when the individual feels unable to cope**. In their information for young people the Royal College of Psychiatrists[i] state the following:

"People feel stressed when they feel like the demands or pressures on them are more than what they can cope with. Everyone feels stressed at times. You may feel under pressure, worried, tense, upset, sad, and angry – or maybe a mixture of uncomfortable feelings. These feelings can be entirely normal, but sometimes stress can get too much and can even trigger a mental illness. Sometimes people try to 'block out' stress by using drugs or alcohol. This makes things worse in the long run".

NHS Health Scotland[ii] have published '**Children and Young People's Mental Health Indicators**'. The construct refers to both indicators of mental health problems and mental wellbeing. One of the indicators of individual well-being is *sexual health*. Two measures are used to ascertain the extent to which well-being is achieved: *pregnancies* (registered births and stillbirths combined with notifications of abortions in children and young people aged 15 years and under per 1,000 females aged 13 to 15 years old in the past year) and *the percentage of S4 pupils who reported having had sexual intercourse* (and who used a condom on the last occasion).

Using the Indicators ScotPHO (Public Health Information for Scotland) published the report 'Scotland's mental health: Children and Young People[iii]' Some key findings include the importance of gender, age and deprivation so that: boys are more likely to report happiness; girls score better when it comes to pro-social behaviour; overall boys are less likely to have common mental health problems or report sadness; mental health problems amongst young people increase with age; young people living in more deprived areas have poorer mental health outcomes.

In terms of **relationship stress** there is a great deal of discussion, advice and support online[iv]. An upcoming issue of 'Current Opinion in Psychology' focuses on the issue of stress and relationships. In their article Justin A. Lavner and Thomas N Bradbury[v] explore the theme of protecting relationships from stress. The authors recognise that:

> "Many people enter in relationships in the hope that they will find a 'shelter from the storm', a safe haven where they can connect, gain distance and perspective from outside stress, plan for the future, and ultimately experience some degree of equilibrium. Some couples achieve this but many couples do not, struggling either in short-term as they are buffeted by acute stressors or in the long term as they work to weather chronic demands, in either case hindering rather than facilitating the formation of warm and stable bonds within the family".

For Lavner and Bradbury partners in close relationships "often enable one another to manage stress" but also that "stress can also undermine the many benefits that these relationships provide". Seeking to understand how relationship stress might be addressed several points of interest to this insight gathering process stand out. Firstly, the authors suggest that work on stress can have a different focus – on the couple or the individual:

- **Work with couples** can help them manage stress when it occurs, this support would not necessarily reduce the occurrence of stress (because of money worries, work problems or feelings of insecurity or jealousy) rather build the relationship skills of the couple so that the effect of stress is not so harmful when they experience it.

- An alternative approach can be to **work with the individual**, so that one of the partners within a relationship might be able to be supported to focus on and eliminate a particular stressor, so "eliminating stress at its source" which "may hold unique advantages, in part because direct effort to intervene with

couples might heighten awareness of relationship weaknesses". As such, work with the individual happens more discreetly and while it is concerned with the relationship functioning of the individual it takes place "below the radar... outside of couple awareness".

In terms of relationship stress Lavner and Bradbury also highlight **health inequalities** (already raised in reporting of the work on Children and Young People's Mental Health Indicators). The authors consider the stress experienced by couples living with low income or in poverty who they identify are at "high levels of exposure to various forms of stress and elevated risk for unstable relationships" based on difficulties with finance and money management.

Emphasising the **importance of communication**, Sean Barnes[vi] and colleagues examine **the role of mindfulness in romantic relationships**. Mindfulness[vii] is a popular current practice supported by NHS and third sector agencies, defined as an open or a receptive attention to and awareness of what is taking place, both internally and externally, in the present. Considering relationship stress Barnes and colleagues report that studies find that mindfulness promotes "attunement, connection, and closeness in relationships" and "a greater ability or willingness to take interest in the partner's thoughts, emotions or welfare".

Finally, Allison K Farrell and Jeffry A Simpson[viii] highlight **the link between stress and physical wellbeing**, in that "Negative relationship perceptions and processes... tend to heighten stress responses and generate worse health over time, whereas positive relationship perceptions and processes, such as responsiveness, support, and intimacy, are generally associated with reduced or buffered stress responses and improved health".

In terms of **information and support**, Hands on Scotland[ix] provides resources that support practitioners focus on both *flourishing* (positive mental wellbeing) and how to address *troubling behaviours*. Young Minds[x] advocates and campaigns to improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. Across the UK they estimate that 850,000 children and young people experience a mental health disorder, arguing that "Investing in services and support for young people at an early stage not only reduces misery and loneliness, but saves millions in future costs to the NHS, education, criminal justice and social care costs". Young Scotland in Mind[xi] (although no longer funded the Forum maintains an online presence) acted as a Forum to bring voluntary sector agencies together who had an interest in mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. At NHS Choices[xii] information is provided which addresses how to manage stress and recognise personal triggers.

3. STRESS: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted. Again, some attention is given to the use of insight

from this project in terms of the use of social marketing to promote positive sexual health for young people.

Contextualising stress in relationships; the broader social setting
Insight from young people and from research highlights that relationships take place within a broader social context, and so relationships are impacted upon by stress that comes from external factors – work, exams, worries about money. Part of this contextualisation also means recognising that gender, age and deprivation play a part in determining health outcomes. Whether delivering services or communicating messages the social marketing benchmarks encourage the development of tailored interventions, *segmentation*, in order to meet needs.

The importance of mental wellbeing in the 'good relationship'
In other insight chapters at www.makeitgoodtayside.org.uk young people have talked about the importance of happiness, respect, trust, love and pleasure; these characterise the good relationship. By contrast, feeling unable to cope, arguing and feeling bad about yourself are negative experiences. When considering the use of social marketing this *insight* and the *customer orientation* it provides means that communication with young people (and service provision which targets them) could usefully be informed by the positive and aspirational aspects of young people's personal and sexual relationships, not just worries, anxieties or deficits that can easily frame a view of young people's sexual health outcomes.

Promoting the benefits of communication
The insight from young people, from research and other services identifies that relationship stress is complex. However, insight from young people also affirms that they understand that good communication in a relationship has benefits – you get to know each other better, understand what your partner likes and misunderstandings and arguments are avoided. However, we also know that in adolescence young people might not have the skills and confidence to talk with a partner. If young people feel that communication is difficult they need support to practice and perhaps change how they relate to a partner – in social marketing terms this points to the need to help more young people *exchange* current ways of behaving which are non-communicative and understand the benefits of behaving differently. The insight topic chapter COMMUNICATION is also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org.uk

REFERENCES

[i] Royal College of Psychiatrists http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyouthinfo/youngpeople/copingwithstress.aspx
[ii] NHS Health Scotland have published 'Children and Young People's Mental Health Indicators' http://www.healthscotland.com/scotlands-health/population/mental-health-indicators/children.aspx
[iii] Scotland's mental health: Children and Young People 2013

http://www.scotpho.org.uk/publications/reports-and-papers/1159-Scotlands-mental-health-children-and-young-people-2013

iv For example: Stress in Relationships Psychology Today https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/resolution-not-conflict/201305/stress-in-relationships-10-sources-and-their-antidotes; My Health London https://www.myhealth.london.nhs.uk/your-health/sexual-health/anxiety-and-depression-relationships; Very Well Stress Management https://www.verywell.com/stress-management-relationships-4013692;

v 'Protecting Relationships from Stress' Justin A Lavner and Thomas N Bradbury in Current Opinion in Psychology Volume 13 Relationships and Stress http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/2352250X/13/supp/C

vi 'The role of mindfulness in romantic relationship satisfaction and responses to relationship stress' Barnes et al (2007) Journal of Marital and Family Therapy Volume 33 issue 4 pp482-500

vii NHS Choices 'Mindfulness' http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx

viii Effects of Relationship Functioning on the Biological Experience of Stress and Physical Health' Allison K. Farrell and Jeffry A. Simpson in Current Opinion in Psychology Volume 13 Relationships and Stress http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/2352250X/13/supp/C

ix Hands on Scotland http://handsonscotland.co.uk/

x Young Minds http://www.youngminds.org.uk/

xi Young Scotland in Mind http://www.youngscotlandinmind.org.uk/

xii NHS Choices http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/understanding-stress.aspx