

# New research to improve treatment for adolescent mental health

- £35 million programme will build a better understanding of the adolescent mind to improve the standards of care available
- Mental health issues affect around one in eight children and young people

Vital improvements to treatments for mental health conditions amongst teenagers and young adults could be on the horizon thanks to new government-backed research.

In the UK, one in eight children or young people are affected by mental health problems. Approximately three-quarters of children or young people who experience mental health problems will do so before the age of 24.

A new £35 million government-backed research programme launched today (Monday 7 October) aims to give more support to teenagers battling with mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, self-harm and eating disorders. Academics will look at external tensions and genetics to ensure mental health problems are being treated as effectively as possible at this crucial age, while the brain is still developing.

Adolescence is often a poorly understood period in our lives, when the brain is particularly sensitive to external influences – while youngsters' social and cultural interactions are rapidly changing. Early intervention has a crucial role to play in ensuring young people have quicker, better access to support and treatments.

Business Secretary Andrea Leadsom said:

Our teenage years can be the most fantastic of our life. But there are those for whom the teenage years are the most difficult. We know that in the UK, three quarters of those that will experience mental health problems will do so before they turn 24.

The £35 million government-backed research programme we are announcing today will look to better understand why so many teenagers face mental health problems, and how we can better support, detect and treat them.

Promoting healthy behaviours, the new programme will benefit from £35 million over its five-year duration and will look at how youngsters interact with the world, their biological background, their social relationships and achievements at school. It is open to Higher Education Institutes, businesses and Public Sector Research Schemes for involvement – building a national capability across the UK.

The project could lead to early identification of vulnerable young people in schools and health services and better diagnosis, while exploring what makes some teenagers more susceptible to conditions than others. The findings from this research could potentially reduce instances of anti-social behaviour, substance abuse or low educational attainment.

Emma Thomas, Chief Executive of YoungMinds:

This investment in research is hugely welcome. We know from young people we work with that the factors that can lead to poor mental health are often complex, but that difficult experiences at a young age – like bereavement, bullying or abuse – can have a huge impact. It's really important that we have clear evidence about how the circumstances children grow up in affect their mental health, and about what forms of support make the most difference.

While we undoubtedly need investment in NHS mental health services, we would also hope that this research would lead to further action across government and across society to address the crisis and make early support a priority.

The investment is the latest move by the government to improve mental health support for youngsters – with the NHS Long Term Plan being backed by an extra £2.3 billion a year, so 345,000 more children and young people have better access to mental health support by 2023-24. It also builds on the government's new health education curriculum, which will become mandatory in all schools from September 2020.

The funding forms part of the government's Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF), led by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) – and comes after the government reaffirming its commitment to invest at least 2.4% of GDP in R&D by 2027.

UK Research and Innovation Executive Chair for the Medical Research Council, Professor Fiona Watt, said:

It's clear that events in our teenage years have a major impact on lifelong mental health and wellbeing. The current statistics are stark – 75 per cent of mental health problems emerge by the age of 24. Mental health problems are on the rise and suicide is a leading cause of death in young people.

UK Research and Innovation is one of the top three funders of mental health research in the UK, and our researchers are making huge strides towards improving our understanding of mental health. This significant new investment will play a key role in unlocking the mysteries that surround how and why we develop mental health problems.

1. About the Strategic Priorities Fund: The Strategic Priorities Fund supports high quality multidisciplinary research and development priorities. This is the second wave of funding. The SPF Wave 2 total programme funding allocation is £496.8m.
  
2. About the Project: Adolescence, Mental Health and the Developing Mind – MRC with AHRC and ESRC Funding requested: £35 million over 5 years  
Location(s): The intention is to build a national capability through calls which are open to HEIs, Institutes, PSREs and/or businesses across the UK, and therefore provide a variety of announcement opportunities in terms of place. This multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral programme aims to better understand the developing adolescent mind and the genetic, physiological, social and cultural factors that shape it, and how they interact to influence, both positively and negatively, lifelong mental health, educational attainment, identity, social relationships and behaviour. This integrated approach will: generate better interventions to promote good mental health; accelerate translation of research into policy and practice in education, healthcare and other public services; promote young people's life chances; and strengthen their involvement in research and innovation.
  
3. How else the government is supporting mental health for children and young people:
  - The new Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) are a new resource, funded and accountable through the NHS which will be established in 20% to 25% of the country by 2023 and will intervene in cases of mild to moderate mental health issues. These teams will employ new staff who are being recruited and trained specifically for the programme and will work with schools and colleges to improve join up between schools, colleges and mental health services/professionals and support them with mental health and wellbeing issues. The first 25 trailblazer sites, delivering 59 MHSTs will be up and running by the end of the year. A further 123 Mental Health Support Teams will be introduced in 57 sites around the country during 19-20, 48 of these sites are new, bringing the total number of sites to 73 to date.
  
  - The government is already on track to ensure 70,000 more children and young people get access to specialist mental health care by 2020/21 and are piloting a four-week waiting time in some areas so we can better understand how to reduce waiting times.
  
  - Through our new compulsory health education all children will be taught how to look after their mental wellbeing and recognise when classmates are struggling.

- We recognise that school-based counselling by well-qualified practitioners can play an important role in supporting pupils' mental health. To support schools to provide counselling, the government has provided advice to schools on how to deliver high quality [school-based counselling](#).