

EY Mental Health Science Education Research

Insights Report

June 2021





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“Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.¹

The World Health Organization's definition of mental health

Foreword for society

Building a better working world for future generations

The experience of the past year has demonstrated the importance of mental health more than at any other point in recent history. We therefore decided to commission this research in recognition of the importance of young people's mental health as we live our purpose of building a better working world.

We believe that young people and society benefit when young people are better informed about the science of mental health. We wanted to test whether including mental health science education in the national curriculum could have a positive impact for current and future generations.

To inform the debate, we tested the hypothesis (the "Hypothesis") shown in the text box below.

Our hypothesis is that teaching secondary school students about the science of mental health in the national science curriculum would improve how individuals:

- ▶ Realise their abilities
- ▶ Cope with the normal stresses of life
- ▶ Work productively
- ▶ And make contributions to their community

Our research was undertaken with 1,125 people across the UK, comprising 250 secondary school teachers and 875 nationally representative people. Of these, 126 were under 18 and 610 were parents.

We look forward to participating in the discussion regarding how to make the next generations' education even more beneficial for themselves and wider society.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to our research and inspired us, including young people, parents, mental healthcare practitioners and secondary school teachers. In particular, we are grateful to Aditya Sahu, a Sky Group senior leader and a passionate advocate of mental health empowerment and diversity and inclusion, who is working to advocate for the inclusion of mental health science education in the UK national curriculum.



Jo Aidroos
Associate Partner,
People Advisory Service
jo.aidroos@uk.ey.com



Bernie Segal
Partner,
EY Seren
bernie.segal@uk.ey.com



Shagun Seth
Practice Director,
Research & Insight
shagun.seth@ey-seren.com



Oliver Kastner
Senior Consultant
Research & Insight
oliver.kastner@ey-seren.com



Victoria O'Callaghan
Manager, Research & Insight
victoria.ocallaghan@
ey-seren.com



Giles Powdrill
Practice Director
Research & Insight
giles.powdrill@ey-seren.com

Executive summary



1

Understanding mental health has taken on a new urgency in the wake of COVID-19.

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for a better understanding and awareness of mental health in the UK, especially amongst the younger generation. More than two thirds of children and young people say that their mental health has become worse as a result of the pandemic (BBC Children in Need²).

2

Our research found strong support for the science of mental health to be taught in the national science curriculum in a positive way.

The WHO definition of mental health focuses on the benefits of wellbeing and its positive potential in enabling people to live better and more productive lives. Throughout our research, we found strong support for this more optimistic perspective and the opportunity to focus the mental health discussion around how best to enable positive outcomes.

3

Our research validated the Hypothesis that introducing mental health education in the national science curriculum would positively impact young people's lives and would benefit individuals and society.

It indicates that mental health science education would empower young people, on an individual basis, through the provision of knowledge, a common language and ways to safeguard their wellbeing. It also highlights the broader, positive, socio-cultural impacts that this individual empowerment could have on UK society.

We identified three key benefits for young people and society that could be realised by being better informed about the science of mental health.

For young people

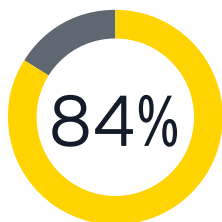
1. Mental health science education could equip and empower young people with important knowledge to live more fulfilling lives.
2. Mental health science education could lead to improved wellbeing and productivity for young people over the course of their lives.

For society

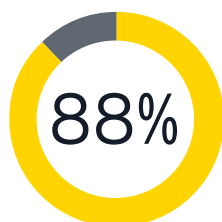
1. Mental health science education could lead to positive change in wider society.

Our research supports teaching mental health science education in a holistic way across five key areas:

1. **Biology:** The brain, neurotransmitters and hormones
2. **Psychology:** Experiences, behaviours and mental disorders
3. **Social:** Environment, social influence and determinants of mental health
4. **Mental health debates:** The different perspectives and their scientific basis
5. **Mental health in everyday life:** Healthy behaviours and their scientific basis



of our sample of 1,125 people across the UK, including 250 secondary school teachers, agreed with the Hypothesis: **'Teaching secondary school students about the science of mental health in the national science curriculum will improve how individuals realise their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make contributions to their community'**.



of secondary school teachers agreed that **teaching the science of mental health to secondary school students would improve students' wellbeing throughout their lives.**

“

What we should be teaching students should set them up to have successful, thriving adult lives.

Reuben Moore,
Head of Programmes,
Teach First





At-a-glance benefits

Our research showed strong support for the Hypothesis that introducing mental health science into the national curriculum would positively impact young people's lives. It illustrated that mental health science education could empower young people on an individual basis through the provision of knowledge to safeguard their wellbeing. Our research also highlighted the broader, positive, socio-cultural impact that this individual empowerment could have on the UK's society at large.

1 Mental health science education could equip and empower young people with important knowledge to live more fulfilling lives

- ▶ The knowledge and language to talk openly about mental health and seek help with their mental health.
- ▶ The knowledge and confidence to cope with the stress of normal life and develop resilience.

2 Mental health science education could lead to improved wellbeing and productivity for young people over the course of their lives

- ▶ Improved wellbeing throughout young people's lives.
- ▶ Improved productivity throughout young people's lives.

3 Mental health science education could lead to positive change in wider society

- ▶ Potential reduction in stigma around mental health and misconceptions about mental health.
- ▶ Supporting children to realise their full potential in society.

“

Science normalises things.

Mental Healthcare Practitioner

“

Mental health literacy is an important empowerment tool.

MHFA England

“

Absolutely no doubt that it would lead to ... better mental health overall throughout their life.

Teacher

“

If they understand ... the things that can improve mental health ... they can use it to help other people.

Mental Healthcare Practitioner

01

Mental health science education could equip and empower young people with important knowledge to live more fulfilling lives – giving them the knowledge and language to talk openly about mental health and seek help with their mental health.

79%

of respondents agree that if mental health was taught as part of the science curriculum in secondary school this would make it easier for people to seek help with their mental health.

The average time between displaying first symptoms of a mental disorder and getting help is currently 10 years for young people (Centre for Mental Health³). In this time, children's and adolescents' wellbeing could be severely affected and their development negatively impacted.

Our survey respondents perceived mental health science education as enabling young people to talk more openly about mental health and also, crucially, make it easier for them to seek help.

Knowledge of the scientific basis of mental health and illness could create awareness and normalise the topic and also provide young people with a common language to discuss it with peers and adults. This would put them in a position to speak more openly about their own mental health and address it with those around them.

“

Science normalises things. There is safety in science – if it can be explained with science, then maybe it can be fixed with science.

Mental Healthcare Practitioner

“

When they start to understand why these issues arise, they feel more comfortable talking about their own experiences. Now they've got a basis to understand why that behaviour is occurring.

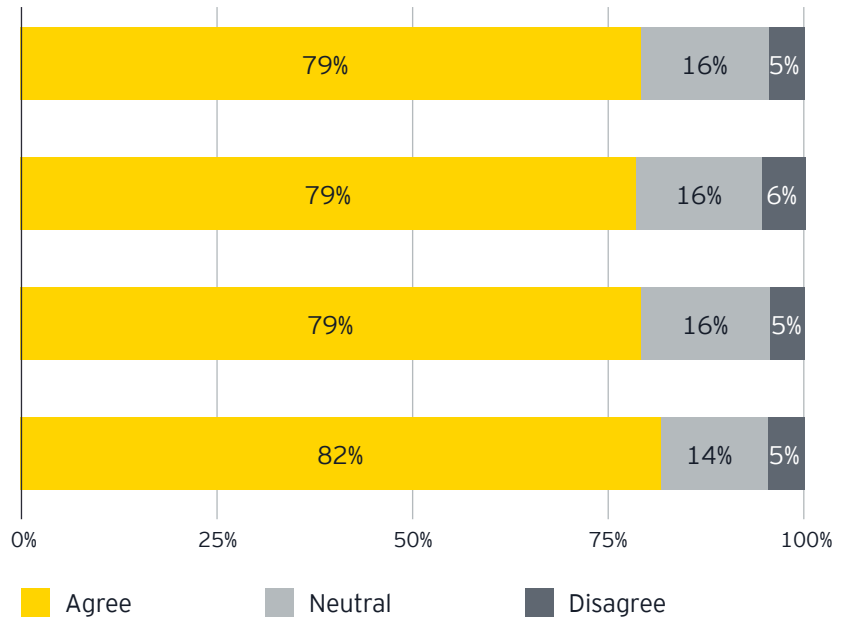
Teacher

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would make it easier for children to talk about mental health with friends and family

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would enable children to seek help for their mental health when appropriate

If mental health was taught as part of the science curriculum in secondary school this would make it easier for people to seek help with their mental health

If mental health was taught as part of the science curriculum in secondary school this would make people talk more openly about it



02

Mental health science education could equip young people with important knowledge to live more fulfilling lives – empowering them with the knowledge and confidence to cope with the stresses of normal life and develop resilience.

79%

of respondents agree that **science-based mental health education would help children to better cope with the stress of normal life.**

Being able to manage external pressures and developing emotional resilience are ways in which people can learn to manage stress better. Whilst being under pressure is a normal part of life, stress is closely linked to mental health and can cause mental health problems. In turn mental health problems can cause stress. (Mind⁵).

Providing young people with the tools to manage stress and adverse events in better ways could help set them up for better lives.

Our data shows that people perceive that understanding the different factors influencing our mental health would be beneficial, not only for identifying the normal stresses in life, but also for coping with them and other adverse events.

24% of women and **13%** of men in England are diagnosed with depression in their lifetime.⁴

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England

“

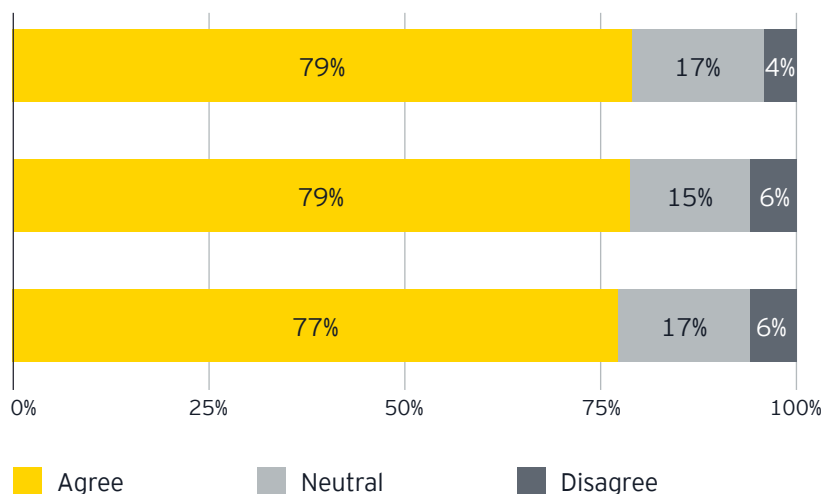
People aren't born to deal with the stress and emotions of our society. As a society, we are taught to suppress emotions. Education on how to deal with them is vital.

Mental Healthcare Practitioner

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would make it easier for children to identify the causes of stresses in normal life

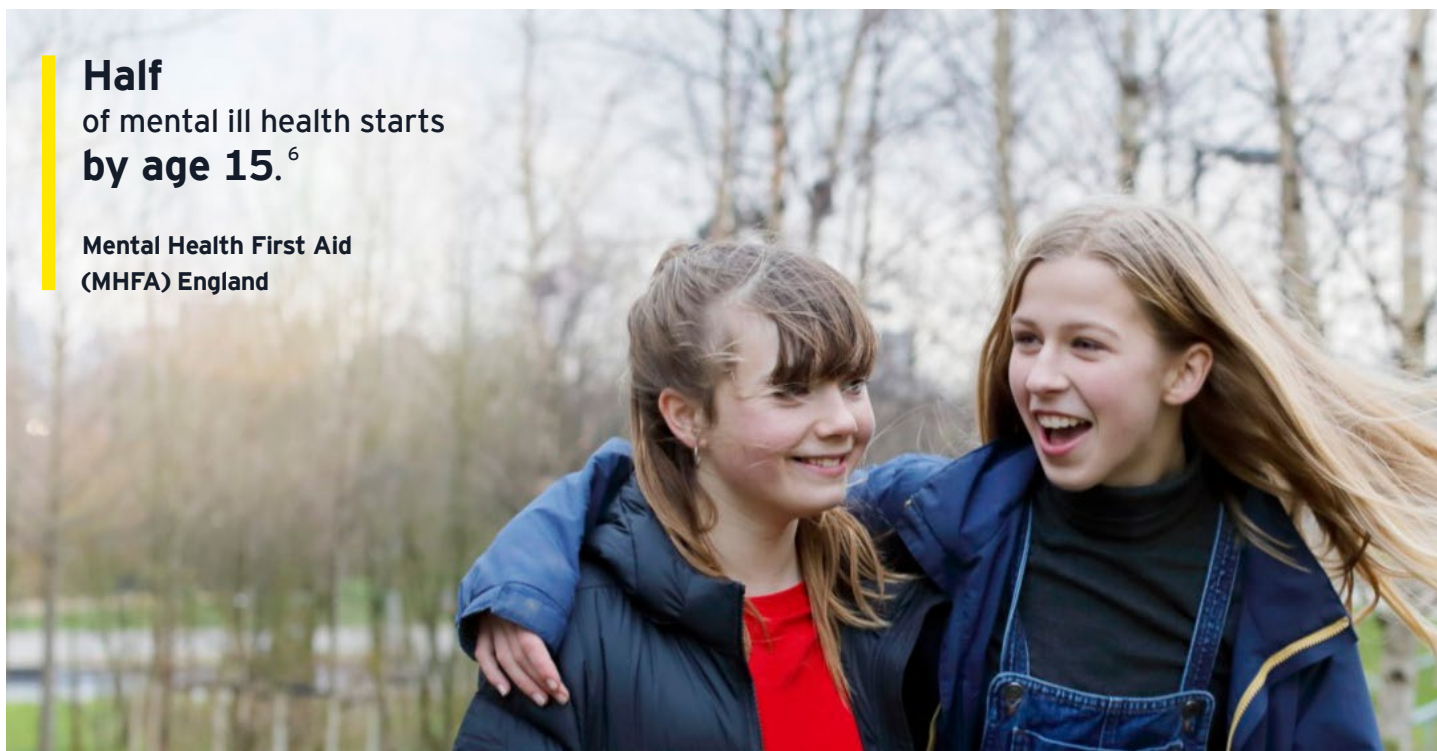
Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children to better cope with the stress of normal life

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children to better cope with adverse life events (e.g., the death of a loved one)



Half
of mental ill health starts
by age 15.⁶

Mental Health First Aid
(MHFA) England



03

Mental health science education could lead to better wellbeing and productivity – leading to improved wellbeing throughout young people’s lives.

84%

of respondents agree with the hypothesis.

88%

of secondary school teachers agree that teaching the science of mental health to all secondary school students would improve their wellbeing throughout their lives.

The vast majority of survey respondents (84%) agreed with our Hypothesis, with secondary school teachers in particular showing strong support for a science-based approach to teaching mental health (86% agreed).

Our research also highlighted very high levels of agreement (86%) from the 250 secondary school teachers surveyed that understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children to make better choices, that in turn, could lead to healthier lives.

Improving mental health literacy by teaching people about the biological, psychological and social factors that underpin it could improve people’s wellbeing, foster understanding and increase people’s resilience and self-efficacy.

“

Absolutely no doubt that it would lead to better understanding and better mental health overall throughout their life.

Teacher

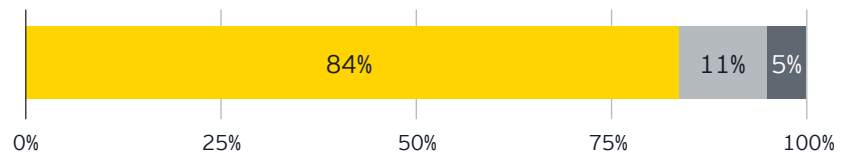
“

I like that this is really positive — that it’s about doing well and realising abilities.

Mental Healthcare Practitioner

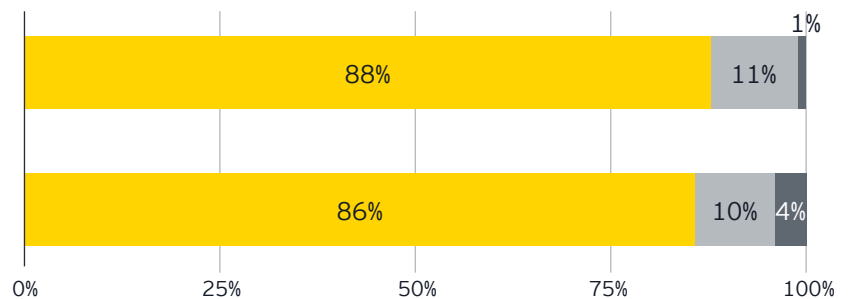
Hypothesis

Teaching secondary school students about the science of mental health in the National Science Curriculum will improve how individuals realise their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make contributions to their community.

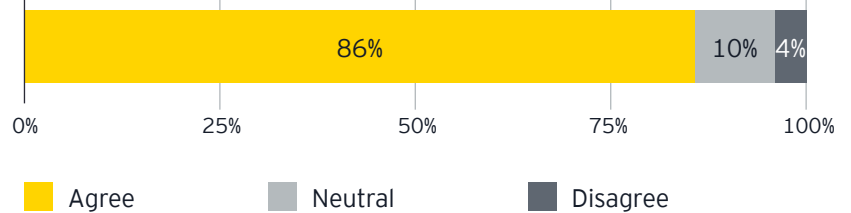


Secondary school teachers

Teaching the science of mental health to all secondary school students would improve their wellbeing throughout their lives



Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children make better choices that can lead to a healthier life



■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree



04

Mental health science education could lead to better wellbeing and productivity – leading to improved productivity throughout young people's lives.

67%

of survey respondents agreed that understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children be more productive throughout their lives.

48%

of survey respondents thought that mental health science education would improve young people's productivity to a large or very large extent.

Much of the economic cost of mental illness stems from reduced productivity while being at work as well as absence from work. People who report being in poor mental health have absence rates approximately 5% higher than their peers (Science Direct: Labour Economics, Vol 46).⁸

Over two thirds of our respondents believe that understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children be more productive throughout their lives (67%).

76% of the survey agreed that young people would be more able to maintain healthy work/life balances, deal with work-related stress later on and have better professional experiences.

In 2018

17.5 million working days were lost

to poor mental health.⁹

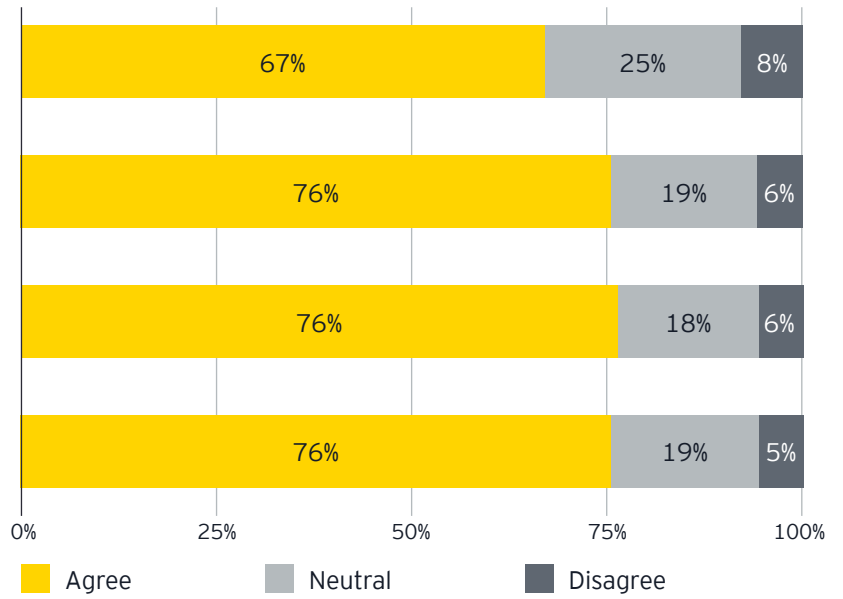
Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children be more productive throughout their lives

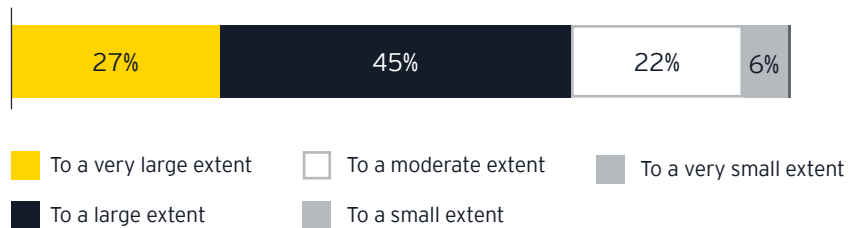
Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children maintain a healthy work/life balance throughout their lives

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help children deal with work-related stress later on

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would improve the professional experiences children will have later in life



To what extent do you think would children be more productive throughout their lives if they were taught the science of mental health at secondary school?



Benefits for society





01

Mental health science education could lead to positive change in wider society – potentially reducing the stigma and misconceptions around mental health.

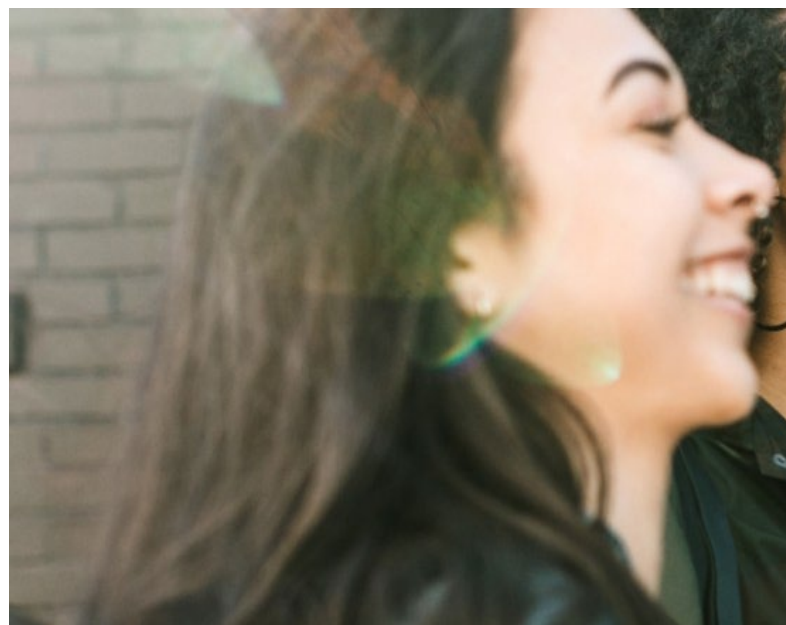
80%

of respondents agreed that if mental health was taught as part of the science curriculum in secondary school this would reduce the stigma around mental health in society.

Whilst in recent years we have started to speak more about our mental health, there can be a lack of understanding and misconception about it and the use of inappropriate language (Mind¹⁰). As a result there can still be a stigma attached to the topic which could makes people less willing to discuss it and less likely to seek help when they are not well.

80% of survey respondents agreed that a better understanding of the science of mental health would contribute to making a hidden mental illness more visible and socially acceptable and could reduce the stigma around mental health in the longer term.

The ability to communicate on the topic and a proactive, more open attitude could enable young people to address the topic more widely in society – contributing to their communities by addressing misconceptions about mental health with confidence and supporting those that are struggling. Over time, this carries the potential to reduce the stigma around mental health.



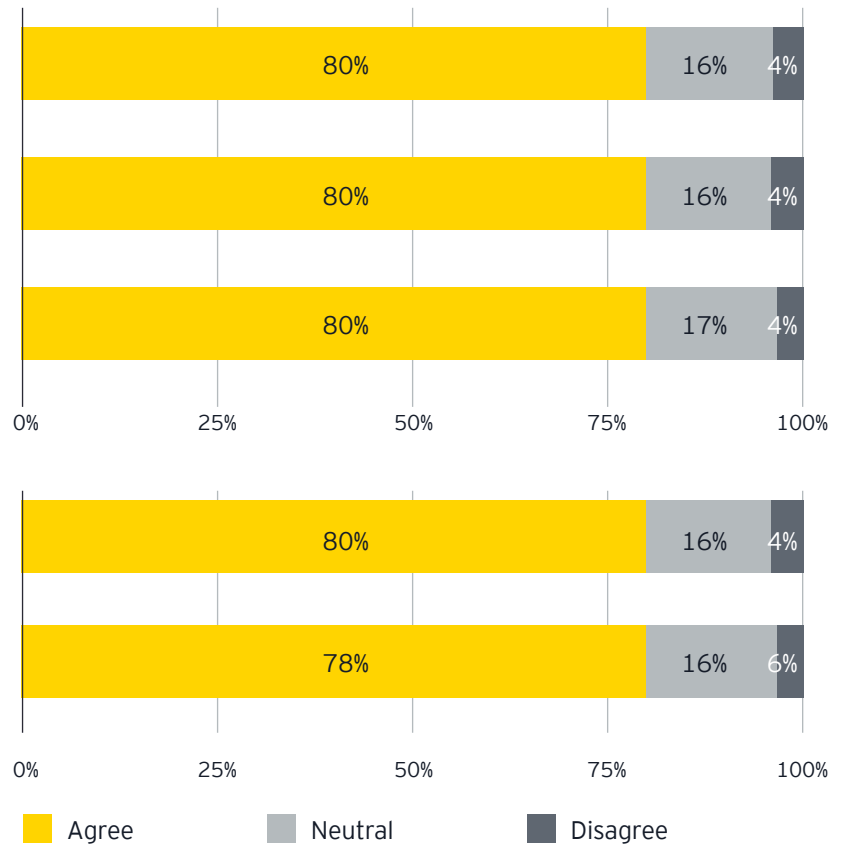
Understanding the scientific basis of mental health will give children the confidence to address misconceptions about mental health with others

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would enable people to support others with their mental health

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would help people interact with people with mental illness

If mental health was taught as part of the science curriculum in secondary school this would reduce the stigma around mental health in society

If mental health was taught as part of the science curriculum in secondary school this would make a hidden mental illness more visible and socially acceptable



“

If they understand some of the things that can improve mental health, then that means they can use it to help other people.

(Mental Healthcare Practitioner)

02

Mental health science education could lead to positive change in wider society – supporting children to realise their full potential.

83%

of secondary school teachers agree that understanding the scientific basis of mental health would support children in realising their academic potential.

Children who are dealing with mental health issues miss out on significant time at school, which could impact both their academic success and their prospects for professional development later on.

Self-knowledge and coping mechanisms could improve people's mental health in the long term and put them in a better position to spend their efforts on developing their abilities rather than dealing with poor mental health.

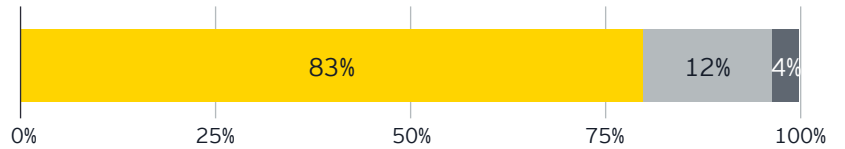
In 2020, 1 in 6 children aged 5 to 16 years were identified as having a probable mental health disorder (NHS¹¹).

Having the language to address mental health issues and a more open attitude could make children reach out sooner and address issues more proactively, putting them in a better position to realise their abilities.



Secondary school teachers

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would support children in realising their academic potential



All respondents

Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would improve the social experiences children will have later in life



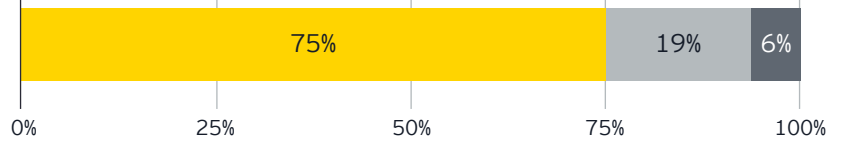
Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would support children in having healthy social relationships throughout their lives



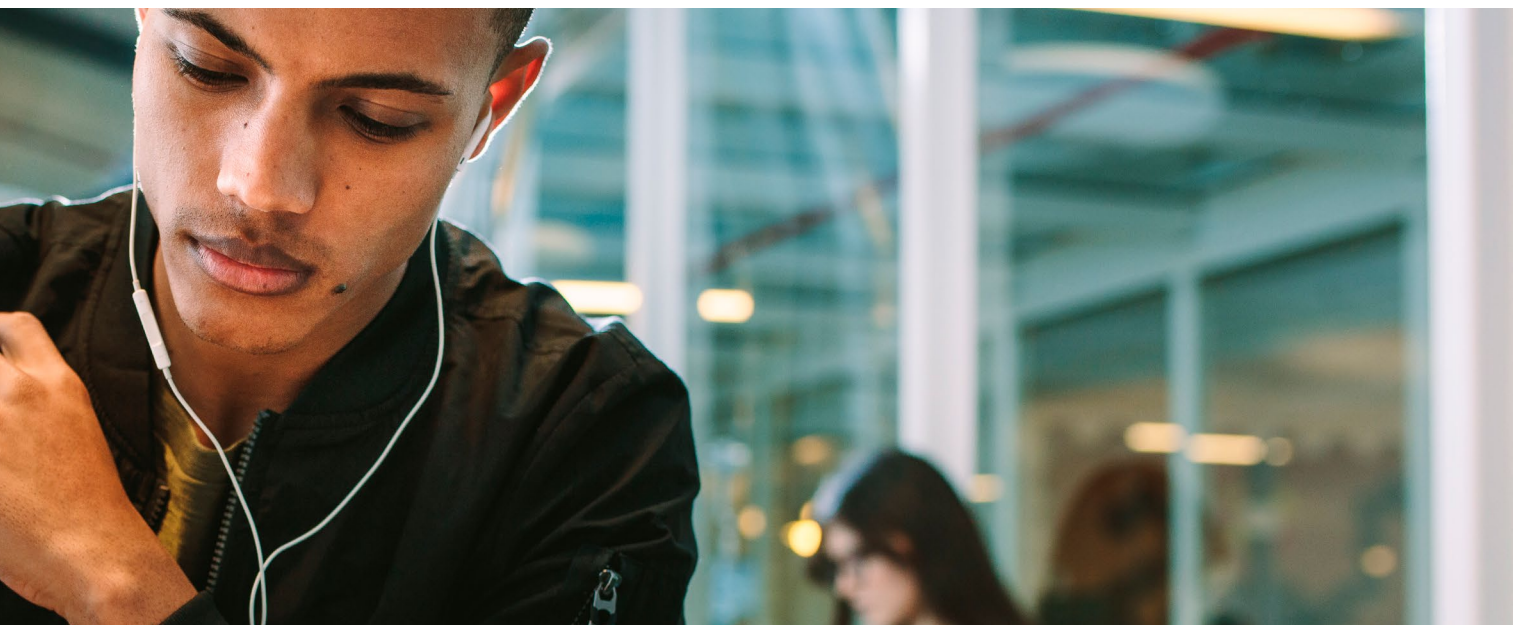
Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would support children in learning and developing professional skills later on



Understanding the scientific basis of mental health would support children in realising their academic potential



Agree Neutral Disagree



It is important for mental health education to be relatable, whilst grounded in scientific evidence

80%

of the respondents in our survey agreed that the science of mental health should be taught using content and examples children can relate to.

With rising numbers of mental illness over the past years, it is evident that young people are facing increasing challenges to their wellbeing as they develop into adults. Mental health is currently taught as part of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, but an opportunity exists to include mental health education in the science syllabus.

Our research shows that respondents believe that education which is both relatable and based in scientific evidence will significantly benefit young people.

It further indicated that the biological perspective and mental health in everyday life were the topics deemed to be worthy of the most significant focus, followed by the psychological and social perspectives, and then the mental health debate.

“

It's crucial to make it relatable — as in the mental health in everyday life. They understand topics better when it's relatable, so perhaps giving them some ready-made examples so they can understand mental health as a spectrum.

Teacher

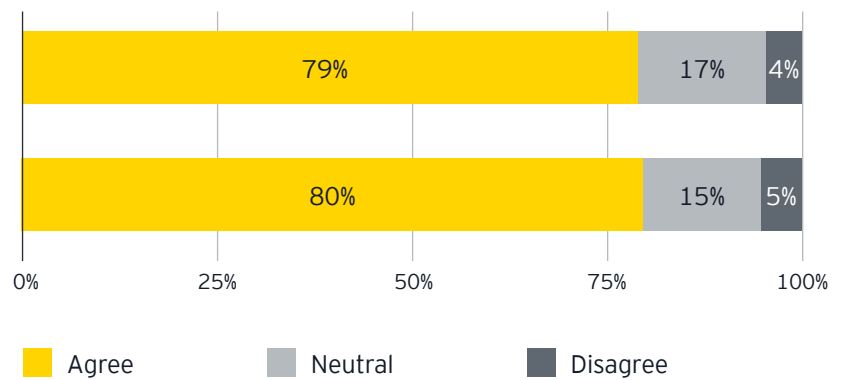
“

It's important that it's not just about the science but also how it relates to coping behaviours and self-care.

Mental Healthcare Practitioner

The science of mental health should be taught together with healthy behaviours (e.g., exercising and healthy diet)

The science of mental health should be taught using content and examples children can relate to



To what extent should the following topics be taught as part of mental health science education?

(% value between 1 and 100)

	Biological perspective: the brain, neurotransmitters and hormones	Psychological perspective: experiences, behaviours and mental disorders	Social perspective: environment, social influence and determinants of mental health	Mental health debates: the different perspectives and scientific arguments	Mental health in everyday life: healthy behaviours and their scientific basis
All respondents	22%	20%	19%	16%	22%
Secondary school teachers	23%	20%	20%	16%	21%





Our approach

We conducted Hypothesis-led research, engaging with young people, parents, mental healthcare practitioners and secondary school teachers.

Our hypothesis:

Teaching secondary school students about the science of mental health in the National Science Curriculum will improve how individuals realise their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make contributions to their community.

Hypothesis definition

We defined our Hypothesis in collaboration with mental healthcare and education specialists, arriving at a positive perspective of mental health and the WHO definition as a way to explore the topic of science-based mental health education in secondary schools.

One-to-one interviews

We discussed our Hypothesis in workshops and 1-1 interviews to refine statements for the potential impact of introducing the science of mental health and discussed how to best add it to the curriculum.

Definition

In our discussions and survey, we used the following working definition of the science of mental health:

The biological perspective:

The brain, neurotransmitters and hormones

The psychological perspective:

Experiences, behaviours and mental disorders

The social perspective:

Environment, social influence and determinants of mental health

Online survey

These conversations informed our opinion survey of 1,125 people across the UK. In this survey, we provided respondents with statements to test our Hypothesis.

Our online survey sample:

1,125 people across the UK

250
Secondary school teachers

875
UK national representative sample

126
people under 18 years

610
UK parents

References

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1. WHO | Mental Health

Page 2 (Exec summary)

2. <https://www.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/changing-lives/mental-health/state-of-the-nation-article/>

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3. <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/fact-sheet-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health>
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4. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-most-common-mental-health-problems>
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7. Mental health literacy| Page 9 | Mental Health Foundation

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8. Mental health and productivity at work: Does what you do matter? – ScienceDirect
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