



# TEENAGERS' EXPERIENCES OF LIFE IN LOCKDOWN



THE TELL  
STUDY



MANCHESTER  
1824

The University of Manchester



# TEENAGERS' EXPERIENCES OF LIFE IN LOCKDOWN

**Briefing #2, August 2020**

Ola Demkowicz, Emma Ashworth, Alisha O'Neill, Terry Hanley, and Kirsty Pert

**Email:** [ola.demkowicz@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:ola.demkowicz@manchester.ac.uk)

## SUMMARY

This briefing presents the findings of a qualitative research project that explored subjective experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in the United Kingdom (UK) among 16-19 year-olds. In May 2020, 109 individuals shared their experiences with us using an online written account.

We found that:

- Many teenagers have experienced heightened emotionality
- This has been a time of change, loss, and uncertainty
- Teenagers have placed value on self-care in lockdown
- Many are trying to have a positive outlook and stay hopeful
- Lockdown is an opportunity for growth and development
- Having a sense of togetherness is important
- Teenagers may be frustrated with the government and media

Overall, findings show that:

- This has been a difficult year for teenagers, raising lots of difficult feelings and concerns
- Teenagers feel they have made important and responsible sacrifices this year, giving up normal teenage experiences
- Lockdown has also brought some positives for teenagers, including relief from the normal pressures of life
- Feeling connected to other people, including wider society, has been very important for teenagers

# INTRODUCTION

The TELL study is a rapid research project aiming to learn more about the perspectives and experiences of 16-to 19-year-olds in the COVID-19 UK lockdown. This age group have faced disruption during a key stage in the transition to adulthood, where they typically become more autonomous and begin planning for their future. We set out to better understand how individuals in this group have experienced lockdown, how they perceive its impact on their personal circumstances, and how they are experiencing and managing their wellbeing in lockdown.

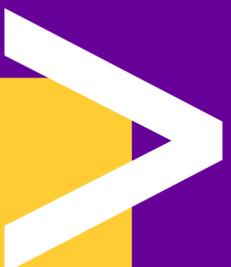
# METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

We invited UK-based 16-to 19-year-olds to provide anonymous written accounts of their lockdown experiences, via an online portal. We asked participants to tell us what lockdown looked like for them, what it felt like, and how they were managing it. We offered some open-ended prompts for guidance (see the appendix at the end of this briefing). Participants were recruited via adverts shared on social media and circulated among key networks and organisations (e.g., networks of further and higher education institutes, parent groups, young people's charities and initiatives).

In total, 109 individuals shared their lockdown experiences with us, between 12th May 2020 and 27th May 2020. Participants had a mean age of 17.6 (SD = 1.22). The majority identified themselves as girls and women ( $n = 87$ , 79.8%) with a smaller proportion identifying themselves as boys and men ( $n = 22$ , 20.2%), and readers should be aware that our sample should not be considered representative of all teenagers. All participants reported being in some form of education, with 11.9% ( $n = 13$ ) attending school, 47.7% ( $n = 52$ ) attending further education, 39.4% ( $n = 43$ ) attending higher education,

and 0.9% ( $n = 1$ ) attending another form of education. In terms of ethnicity, the sample is broadly similar to the national pattern recorded for state-funded secondary schools in 2019 [1]; the majority of participants were White ( $n = 69$ ; 63.3%), followed by Asian ( $n = 21$ , 19.3%), Black ( $n = 7$ , 6.4%), mixed ( $n = 4$ , 3.7%), Chinese ( $n = 3$ , 2.8%), and other ( $n = 4$ , 3.7%). The remaining 0.9% chose not to disclose ethnicity.

[1] Department for Education and Office for National Statistics (2019). Schools, pupils, and their characteristics: January 2019.



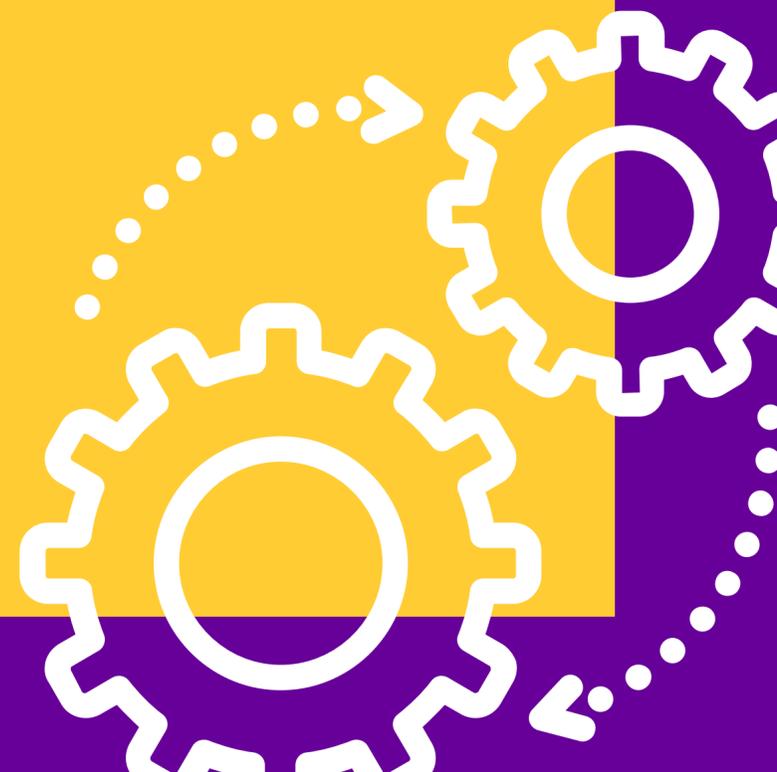
The length of the written accounts participants provided varied, ranging from 7 to 1,215 words (mean = 213 words). Four participants disclosed in their accounts that they left the UK at some point during the lockdown period to return to their home country. We chose to still include these participants' data because they described being in the UK for at least part of the lockdown period, and because these individuals had identified their experiences as relevant to us after reading our guidance.

We analysed participants' accounts of lockdown using thematic analysis [2] to identify common patterns in the data and explore experiential themes around how 16-to 19-year-olds:

- a) understand and make sense of their lockdown experiences;
- b) perceive the impact of lockdown on their circumstances; and
- c) experience and manage their wellbeing in the context of lockdown.



[2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.





**WHAT DID  
TEENAGERS  
TELL US?**



# FINDING 1: MANY TEENAGERS HAVE EXPERIENCED HEIGHTENED EMOTIONALITY

Participants varied in how they felt lockdown had impacted on their emotions. Many described how the lockdown had prompted a range of intense and difficult feelings, but some still felt that they had experienced mixed emotions overall. Some described feeling mostly okay or even positive during lockdown.

## Feeling lots of intense and difficult emotions

Many participants described feeling a range of intense, difficult feelings during lockdown, including sadness, worry and anxiety, and irritability. They put this down to various factors, including feeling overwhelmed, feeling trapped and claustrophobic, missing people outside their households, having more time to analyse thoughts and issues, having exams cancelled, and feeling uncertain about the future.



*"I have been feeling a wide range of emotions throughout the lockdown so far, my main emotion has been sadness."*

*"I have felt angry, sad, and had times of bad depression and anxiety throughout the lockdown as I can't see my friends, my family or my partner."*

*"I was terrified of anyone I knew getting it, especially my sister who suffers from asthma."*

Many also described experiencing feeling fear, anxiety, and distress about COVID-19. This included fear about contracting COVID-19, fear about family members (particularly vulnerable family members) contracting COVID-19, and fear that they would spread COVID-19 themselves. Several described how media coverage could make them feel more upset and worried.

*"Every time I went outside I'd get scared for my health and have trouble breathing."*

*"I have experienced great distress seeing the cases increasing everyday."*

**Others described challenges** in their lives that made lockdown particularly intense emotionally, including having existing mental health difficulties, being confined with family members with whom they have poor relationships, or returning to places they associated with trauma.

*"I've already got a history of mental health issues, being shoved into a house with none of my friends and any sense of normality shredded has certainly not helped."*

*"I remember at the start of lockdown feeling inexplicably angry. I am not usually an angry person so this confused me."*

**However, some described intense feelings that they could not attribute to anything** in particular, which they said they often found confusing and difficult to make sense of.

## Experiencing emotional shifts

**Participants often described their emotions changing during lockdown.** Some described experiencing sudden changes to mood, while others described shifts over time. Several described lockdown as an emotional "rollercoaster".

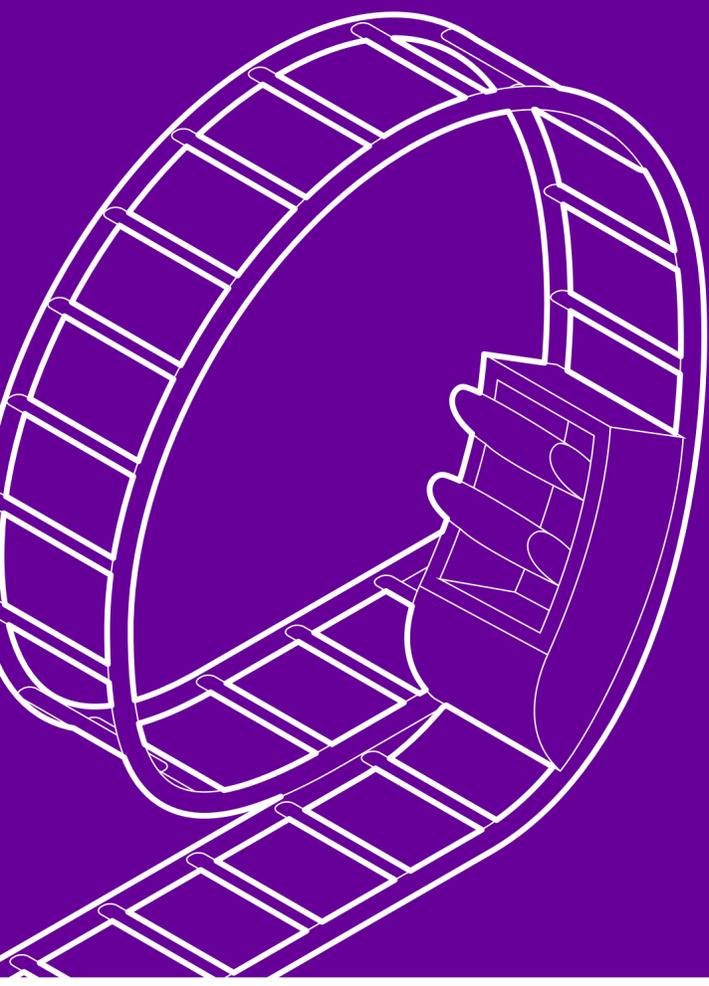
*"Lockdown will have me feeling extremely numb one minute and extremely tense the next."*

*"I began lockdown with a positive attitude understanding that it was something that could save many lives, however lockdown has begun to take its toll and I'm becoming agitated and upset at the smallest things."*

## Experiencing positive feelings

Though many described difficult feelings, participants also experienced positive feelings. Often these different types of feelings were not mutually exclusive, with many describing varied feelings throughout. Participants said lockdown had reduced the pressure of "normal" life, meaning that lockdown could be enjoyable and make them feel calm and happy at times.

*"I have felt a range of emotions since being in lockdown, from feeling trapped to stressed out to relief that I can take life at my own pace."*



## FINDING 2: THIS HAS BEEN A TIME OF CHANGE, LOSS, AND UNCERTAINTY

Loss, change, and uncertainty were incredibly common across participants' accounts of lockdown. Participants described feeling that their lives had changed because of the pandemic, sometimes dramatically so, and explained that they felt they were missing out on important experiences and facing uncertain futures.

### Life has changed a lot

**Participants often told us that their daily life had changed a lot.** Most often this included loss of normal routine, new educational challenges with the shift to online learning, lack of freedom and independence, loss of purpose and motivation, and being suddenly unable to spend time with friends. Older participants also often described moving back home to their family household.

*"Most things have changed, including my sleeping pattern, my study space, my surroundings, and even my diet."*

*"Moving back home was a big shock and takes getting used to. I think that's mainly because of the lack of independence and suddenly being on top of your family again."*

*"Everything is just stagnant. The days just sort of run onto each other and it feels like everything has paused, like I'm missing out on life."*

**Loss of routine and differences between days was often discussed.** Often participants commented that without the variability life usually brought, days felt boring and repetitive, like their life was on pause.

**Some participants focused on how changes in connecting to others were weakening their relationships.** Some also felt their social circle was becoming smaller, because they weren't experiencing the same network of people they would in daily life. Some were concerned that this might affect their social skills after lockdown.

*"I am not talking to my friends as much and feel like I'm getting slightly distant."*

*"I do have an inkling that I could be more awkward in forming relationships in the future."*



## Feelings of loss and uncertainty

Participants frequently described loss and uncertainty. They described missing out on "normal" teenage experiences, from day-to-day things like hanging out with friends to specific traditions like the last day of school, prom, and sitting exams. Participants often viewed these as necessary sacrifices, but still felt sad. It was notable that many described cancellation of exams as a substantial loss.

*"I missed out on a proper ending to school, my exams that I worked so hard for, all the traditions I had anticipated over the last five years just taken from me so quickly!"*

*"Knowing that university terms may begin online this year, I feel a sense of missing out (travelling with friends in the Summer, Freshers week, making friends, moving in), even though I know we are all in the same position."*

*"When it was announced that GCSEs were cancelled, I was distraught. I cried for two days straight and nearly ripped my hair out in anger and frustration at the whole situation. It felt like all my efforts had gone to waste."*

*"I have missed out on the opportunity to get a job, and do volunteering so I could add these to my personal statement for university."*

**Many felt that the pandemic meant their futures were now less certain.** Participants worried about getting lower grades, and described missing out on work experience and employment opportunities that would have been beneficial. Others were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the job market.

**A very small number of participants described having lost family members who had passed away due to COVID-19,** including parents and grandparents. These individuals described how difficult this loss was and described how bereavement restrictions added to the difficulty of this loss, such as being unable to attend funerals or socially distancing at funerals.

*"My father has been hospitalized and passed away due to coronavirus. I was not allowed to travel back home in order to attend the funeral."*

## FINDING 3: TEENAGERS HAVE PLACED VALUE ON SELF-CARE IN LOCKDOWN

There was a strong emphasis on self-care throughout participants' accounts. Participants described finding various self-care strategies that worked for them in lockdown (both existing and new approaches), and some felt they hadn't always prioritised self-care this much before. However some participants described difficulties in engaging in self-care.



### Self-care strategies used in lockdown

**Creating routine and goals:** *"One thing that is helping is having a routine in place, as it allows me to keep busy and stops me from getting anxious or worried."*

**Finding ways to distract and escape:**

*"I enjoy being out and keeping busy in order to avoid my thoughts."*

**Getting time outdoors:** *"Going on that one walk a day does really help, even if it's just half an hour walk, it really does relax you."*

**Taking care of physical health:** *"Exercise is really helping with my wellbeing, as it takes my mind off of lockdown and helps me exert my energy."*

**Finding ways to relax (e.g., hobbies):** *"Find something that helps you calm down/wind down after doing school work: a run, reading, knitting, whatever it is."*

**Spending time with pets:** *"We have cats and I'm really grateful for that, it's entertaining and always seems to relax me if I'm feeling anxious."*

**Being kind to yourself:** *"Lockdown has given me the ability to be kinder to myself and put myself first for once."*

**However, some participants described difficulty or conflict in maintaining self-care.** Some said they knew it was important but found it hard, while others described using coping strategies they thought were bad for them, like smoking and binge-eating.

*"Lockdown has caused me to start unhealthy habits such as not doing any exercise, oversleeping, and generally not looking after my own physical and mental health anymore."*

## FINDING 4: MANY ARE TRYING TO HAVE A POSITIVE OUTLOOK AND STAY HOPEFUL

Participants often described trying to adopt a positive mindset during lockdown, including using thinking strategies, identifying areas of their lives that they were thankful for, and trying to stay focused on the future.

### Thinking positively

Participants described various ways they were trying to adopt a positive mindset. This included taking time to reflect and think positively, trying to accept the situation rather than feel frustrated by it, and identifying positive opportunities in lockdown.

*"I have had phases where I have been down and upset and maybe even a little bit angry, but now after a long period I have accepted the fact that this is not a normal situation and there is nothing to do change it. All I can do is adapt."*

*"I feel lucky as no one in my family has been affected by COVID-19 so far and I have a supportive family with a big garden and lots of places we can go without the stress of social distancing."*

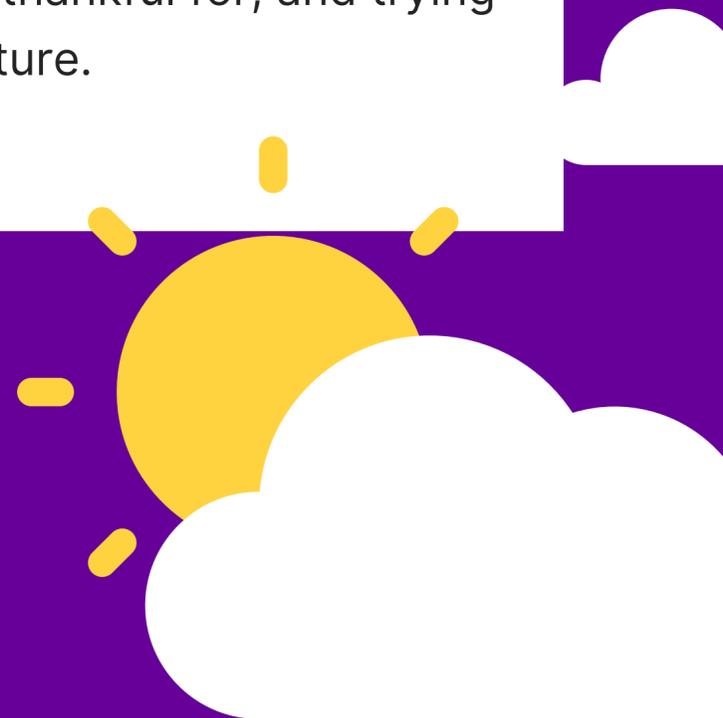
### Finding things to be grateful for

Many identified things they were grateful for in lockdown, such as access to local green spaces or positive relationships with family members, and often noted this was a privilege not everyone had. Some reflected on the challenges frontline workers were experiencing and the fact that many were dying or losing family members, which they felt gave them perspective.

### Staying hopeful about the future

Several participants reflected on how important it was to feel hopeful about the future. They focused on what life would be like after lockdown and planning the things they would do and places they would go.

*"It is not permanent, it won't last forever. We may have to put our lives on hold right now but it won't be forever, there is light at the end of the tunnel."*



## FINDING 5: LOCKDOWN IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Although participants felt that lockdown could be intense and challenging at times, many also said that they'd never had this much space and time for themselves. They felt a relief from daily life, which meant they could rest, develop themselves personally in ways of their own choosing, and focus on their relationships.

### Relief from normal pressures

Many participants felt that lockdown offered some relief, as daily pressures had been removed or eased, such as academic pressure, social pressure, and the fast pace of normal life, which gave them some rest and time to themselves.

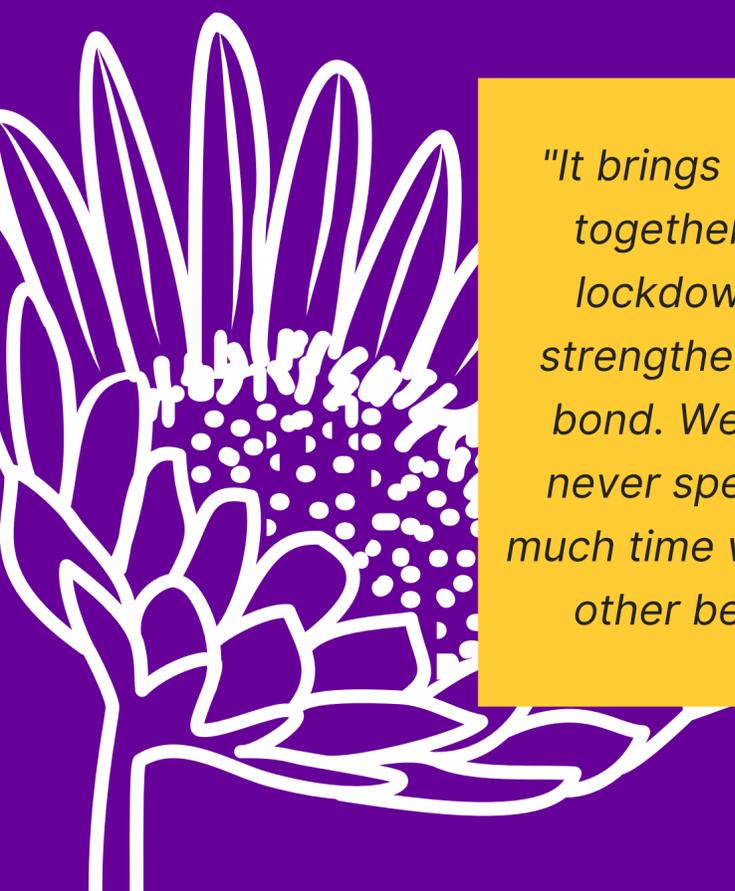
*"I have felt the most de-stressed ever. No pressure to complete schoolwork or wear the right thing or say the right thing."*

### Personal development

Many participants said that lockdown provided space and time to explore aspects of themselves, such as evaluating what they want in life and learning to enjoy their own company. Most described developing their skills, through trying new hobbies, taking online courses, and working on existing skills. However, several said this could be pressurising and sometimes people just needed rest.

*"I like being able to do things like courses and workouts I didn't previously feel I had time for."*

*"As much as we should try to develop into our better selves we also need to rest. Don't overwhelm or stress yourself."*



*"It brings families together. This lockdown has strengthened our bond. We would never spend this much time with each other before."*

### Strengthening relationships

Participants often felt lockdown allowed them to strengthen their relationships, often with those in their households but also beyond. They described being more focused on and appreciative of relationships, spending more quality time with people in their house, and developing mutually supportive relationships.

## FINDING 6: HAVING A SENSE OF TOGETHERNESS IS IMPORTANT

Participants frequently placed a strong emphasis on the importance of staying connected to other people. They emphasised how important personal relationships were, but many also said that they were feeling disconnected from others and finding this difficult. Participants also described a sense of large-scale togetherness, where we're all in this together.

### Positive and supportive interpersonal relationships are valuable

Participants placed a strong emphasis on positive relationships with family and friends in lockdown, which they said this made lockdown a more positive experience and/or helped them to cope. Many described making effort to reach out to others, highlighted the value of spending quality time with others, and emphasised the need to maintain strong relationships outside their household, where technology was seen as useful.



*"I'm lucky in the fact I can video chat with friends and family which keeps my mood up."*

*"My family being around me is really lovely, as they're supportive and loving."*

**Participants often said that relationships with people who were supportive and understanding** were important in lockdown, particularly when they were struggling.

*"If I feel lonely I know my best friend can help as we listen to each other and he makes me laugh."*

### Feeling disconnected

Although most participants recognised the importance of feeling connected to others, many experienced barriers that made them feel socially disconnected. The majority of participants described missing people outside of their home, missing physical contact, and feeling lonely and isolated.

*"Not being able to just go out and see my friends is hard."*

*"I have felt incredibly lonely despite having a great support system and being in the same household as one of my best friends, my sister."*

**Some participants described struggling to feel connected to those outside their household.** This included feeling unable to reach out, finding it hard to use virtual communication, or just slowly stopping talking to those outside their household.

*"Lockdown has made it harder to stay in contact with as many people and it makes me feel so heavy at times, I really miss people but I'm not close enough to just reach out."*

*"I feel lonely from my friends 'cause they like doing Zooms but I can't sit for that long and listen so I get frustrated and end the calls or don't go on, and feel left out."*

**Participants often explained that although using technology did allow virtual connections** outside their household, it didn't feel the same as face-to-face time.

*"There has been some stress placed on friendships where there is no face-to-face interactions."*

*"It's definitely hard not seeing people that you're used to seeing so often, and while I do phone and video call them, it just doesn't feel the same."*

*"I've been struggling with the fact that I cannot physically see my counsellor."*

*"I fight with my parents a lot more and it sometimes makes the whole day bad."*

**Several participants described instances of conflict with others,** especially in their household. This included minor arguments, general tension with everyone on edge, and at times very difficult relationships.

## **We're all in this together**

Many described a sense of community within their neighbourhood, country, and even planet, because of the pandemic. The idea that "we're all in this together" was often reassuring, and shared experiences like clapping for the National Health Service (NHS) added to this. This helped some in coping with restrictions, because they felt they were making sacrifices for a greater good.

*"I'm okay now because I understand that it is the most important thing right now to help save lives."*

*"It is reassuring to see others share their experiences which are similar to mine, as it makes me feel less alone. It brings a sense of togetherness amidst this madness."*



## FINDING 7: TEENAGERS MAY BE FRUSTRATED WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND MEDIA

Several participants described feeling frustrated with the UK government, whom they did not trust to make appropriate or transparent decisions for the public, and with the news media, who they felt were only offering negative coverage of the pandemic.

### Mistrust in the government

Several participants expressed concerns about how the UK government had managed the pandemic and lockdown. This included the easing of lockdown restrictions in May 2020 (at the time of data collection), which they felt the government was doing too quickly and without clear guidelines.

*"My only worries are how the government are dealing with it as they're being very vague which is evidently making the public anxious."*

*"I am unsure if I want to go back in September because I'm unsure that the government has the best supervisions."*

*"They even said that teachers might not be allowed PPE which is completely out of order and so unsafe."*

**Many were concerned about the safety of themselves and their teachers when they return to education.** Some felt that the government had not provided guidance specifically for their age group.

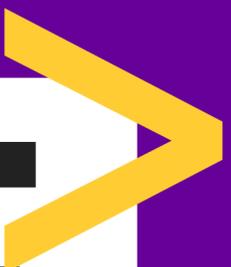
**However, a small number of participants did not agree** with the lockdown restrictions.

*"The way lockdown was imposed and handled has been a great violation of my right to freedom."*

### News media is mostly negative

Some felt that media coverage of the pandemic was too **negative**, and wanted more uplifting coverage. Several felt this was impacting them negatively and said they were limiting their news engagement.

*"Now I tend to only check the news once every two days so I don't get as worried."*



# WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS TELL US?

Findings show that this has been a difficult time for teenagers, raising lots of difficult feelings and concerns. Teenagers feel they have made important and responsible sacrifices, giving up normal teenage experiences. Lockdown has also brought some positives, including relief from the normal pressures of life. Feeling connected to other people, including wider society, has been very important for teenagers, though some are frustrated with the government's handling of the pandemic.

These findings show that there are a lot of different feelings and experiences happening. Teenagers have been experiencing both unease *and* growth, and those things have not been mutually exclusive, even though they might sound it. However, it's important to remember that no teenagers have experienced lockdown in exactly the same way, and this has been more challenging for some than for others. As noted in Finding 1, participants told us that contextual challenges could make lockdown much more emotionally difficult.

On the following pages, we offer some considerations for teenagers, parents/carers, education professionals and settings, and mental health and wellbeing practitioners. We do not offer these as "one size fits all" but instead as general guidance for people to tailor to their situation as needed.



# WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR TEENAGERS?



## **This has been a difficult time, and it is important to take care of yourself**

- It's normal to have been experiencing intense feelings this year, including sadness, worry, and frustration, and to have been feeling less in control. It's okay to feel emotional and to take some time for yourself.
- Have open conversations with people who care about you, including family and friends, and let them know how you feel about what's happening.
- Think about how you're taking care of yourself. Click [here](#) for teenagers' advice on self-care during the pandemic and [here](#) for self-care guidance.
- If you are concerned about next steps, like returning to education or finding a job, ask your parents and teachers for information and support.
- It can be helpful to take steps to organise your time, such as creating a timetable. Returning to a routine may be difficult, so go easy on yourself.

## **It can be helpful to think about making the experience more positive**

- Try to find positive ways of thinking about the situation, such as finding things you feel grateful for, or thinking about the future.
- Consider how you might have grown in lockdown, such as learning new skills and getting closer with family. There are still opportunities to do this, like trying a new hobby. Don't put pressure on yourself though! Sometimes it's important to relax and not worry too much about challenging yourself.
- This doesn't mean you shouldn't ever feel sad or worried. Those feelings are still normal and you don't need to try to be positive all the time. Remember that "thinking positively" can be hard for some, such as those with difficult circumstances and/or symptoms of mental health difficulties.

## **Staying connected to other people is important, but can feel difficult**

- Talk to others and keep connected, such as friends and family members.
- It can be helpful to arrange nice things to do with the people you live with, such as having movie nights or trying out a new hobby together.
- When it's not possible see people face-to-face, remember to keep reaching out and talking to them using technology, even when that feels hard to do.
- Remember we're all in this together! Teenagers said it was helpful to think about how the things they're giving up are sacrifices to help protect others.
- Get professional support if you feel you need it (e.g., [Childline](#), [The Mix](#), [Samaritans](#)).
- Some teenagers are feeling frustrated with the UK government. If you feel this way, speak up and get involved! Check out campaigns such as [#iwill](#).

# WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR PARENTS/CARERS?

## **This has been a difficult time for teenagers, with lots of feelings and concerns**

- Remember that this has been a strange time for teenagers. They are likely going to be experiencing a lot of difficult, intense feelings, and this may change over time. Be available for chats and check in regularly.
- Don't underestimate teenagers' resourcefulness to find ways to manage and cope in difficult times. To support them, have open conversations about how we might cope and look after ourselves, and discuss how they are doing this using their own strategies and what they are finding helpful.
- It can be helpful to talk together about positive things, such as finding things to be grateful for, feeling hopeful about the future, or identifying lockdown benefits and achievements. However, remember that we can't feel positive all the time and positivity can be especially tricky for some, such as those with mental health difficulties, so it is important to acknowledge difficult feelings.
- This has also been a difficult time for parents and carers. Remember to talk with and get support from others yourself.

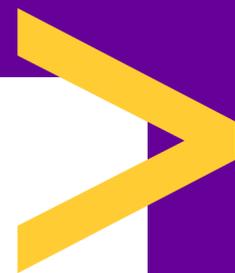
## **Helping teenagers feel connected**

- Accept that teenagers may need to connect with friends in different ways, and encourage them to stay connected with people outside the household.
- Remind teenagers that they are not alone, and others are also going through this. Though this doesn't diminish the difficulties they're facing, it may provide reassurance.
- Understand that teenagers may be angry and frustrated with the pandemic and how it is being handled. Where they need it, you can offer support and advocacy.

## **Teenagers may need further support in their next steps**

- Teenagers may find it hard to return to a set routine when they return to education/work. It may be useful to talk through plans and provide support where possible to help them establish or keep to a routine.
- Lots of teenagers told us they worried about returning to education, including fears about COVID-19 and worries that social dynamics with others might have changed. Take time to talk with your teenager about their concerns.
- Teenagers may feel they have lost some control over their future, with exams cancelled, opportunities lost, and education and job paths less clear. Check in about concerns around next steps, offering empathy, reassurance and, where you can, help them to find solutions.

# WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS AND SETTINGS?



## **Lockdown and school closures have been difficult for teenagers**

- It will be useful to remind students who they can talk to if they want to get support, and to check in with staff about accessing training and guidance in talking about difficult emotions and mental health and wellbeing issues.
- How teenagers are coping may change. Keep checking in and provide ongoing opportunities for support, even for those who seemed okay initially.
- Create time to talk about self-care and coping with difficult situations, encouraging teenagers to reflect on the steps they have taken. Resources like ["advice from teenagers"](#) on caring for wellbeing during the pandemic and [guidance on self-care](#) can help to promote self-care strategies.
- Supporting teenagers at this time is likely going to be challenging. Schools should provide additional support for staff (e.g., space for discussion or reflexive practice groups). Staff should be mindful of the personal impact work may be having, and engage in self-care and seek support when needed.

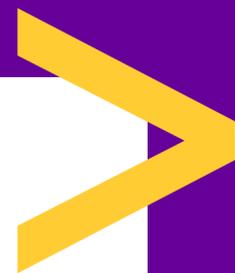
## **Teenagers may have mixed feelings about returning to education**

- Many teenagers are worried about COVID-19, including about returning to education settings. Schedule time to discuss the pandemic with students (e.g., in form groups) and clearly explain safety protocols.
- Create plenty of time for social engagement and opportunities to rebuild social skills and engage in team-building.
- In some instances, teenagers may be expected to engage remotely from home some of the time. A patient and flexible approach to expectations will be useful, as some will have challenges such as limited resources or space.
- Easing students back into a school routine may take time, especially for those who are not happy about returning to "normal" life.

## **Providing support for the future**

- Reassure students that staff will support them to move forward with plans. Consider extra career support, and create time to talk about future concerns.
- Set school-based plans and goals for the year, and ask students to think about how they can work towards these to encourage future thinking.
- Understand that students may be angry and frustrated with the handling of the pandemic. Use your professional voice to inform others about the difficulties teenagers face and advocate for them, including getting involved in campaigns for better policies for children and young people.

# WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING PROFESSIONALS?



## **This has been a difficult time for teenagers, with lots of feelings and concerns**

- It is likely that teenagers are feeling a lot of different things at the moment. This is normal and these feelings don't always need to be "managed". Simply trying to be empathetic and offering reassurance that this is normal may help.
- A flexible and accessible approach will be useful. For instance, meet with teenagers in environments that are familiar and comfortable, and consider online communication options where possible. Services in schools could have "drop-ins" where teenagers can informally discuss what's on their mind.
- The pandemic has created lots of change and loss of control. Check in and have conversations about this, offering sympathy and exploring what this means for the person. Strategies for creating a sense of control in other areas may help, such as planning for the future using realistic, time-limited goals.
- It may help to talk through teenagers' concerns about COVID-19, including for themselves and their family, and to offer reassurance where appropriate.
- Don't underestimate teenagers' resourcefulness to find ways to manage and cope in difficult times. Have conversations about how we can cope and look after ourselves, and discuss how the individual is doing this using their own strategies, working to jointly explore options if they are finding this difficult.

## **It can help to think about the positives**

- It may be useful to encourage positive thinking, such as supporting teenagers to be hopeful about the future or to identify things they are grateful for.
- Talk with teenagers about the positive elements they might have experienced in lockdown and consider what they might want to keep going forward, such as new self-care approaches, reduced pressures, or developing skills.
- Lockdown has brought some positives, including relief from the pressures of normal life. Provide space to talk about returning to "normal" life and acknowledge concerns that teenagers might have had about this.
- However, remember that some teenagers have had incredibly distressing experiences. Here, finding positives might not be possible and it is important not to minimise these experiences and to offer an empathetic response.

## **Speak up**

- Understand that students may be angry and frustrated with the handling of the pandemic. Use your professional voice to inform others about the difficulties teenagers face and advocate for them, including getting involved in campaigns for better policies for children and young people.



# APPENDIX: GUIDANCE SHOWN TO PARTICIPANTS WHEN WRITING ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES

**We want to know what lockdown looks like for you, what it feels like, and how you are managing it.**

You can tell us about this however you like, but we have put together some questions that might help you think about this. You don't have to answer these specific questions, but they are here in case you find them helpful:

1. What is your living situation in lockdown and who are you with? (Note: you do not need to provide your address.)
2. What has changed or stayed the same since lockdown began?
3. Is there anything that you like or dislike about being in lockdown?
4. Do you feel that lockdown might have any effect on your future plans, and if so how?
5. What kinds of feelings have you been experiencing since being in lockdown?
6. Is there anything that you think is helping with your wellbeing during the lockdown? Is there anything that doesn't help?
7. How has the lockdown affected your relationships with other people? Are your relationships affecting your experiences of lockdown?
8. What advice would you give to other young people about how best to manage lockdown?

# THE TELL STUDY

TELL (Teenagers' Experiences of Life in Lockdown) is a research project led by researchers at The University of Manchester and Liverpool John Moores University. TELL aims to understand 16- to 19-year-olds' experiences of the UK lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly their wellbeing. We asked teenagers aged 16-19 in the UK to provide a written account of their experiences of lockdown, telling us what lockdown looked like for them, what it felt like, and how they managed it. We also asked what advice they would give to others, and you can find their advice [here](#). More than 100 teenagers shared their experiences with us. This briefing presents experiential themes and common patterns in their account.

You can read more about The TELL Study [at our website](#) and stay up-to-date by following us on [Twitter](#).



@TheTELLStudy

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the teenagers who shared their experiences with us, and we thank them for taking the time to write about their lockdown with so much insight and honesty.

We also wish to thank several colleagues for their input at various stages of the TELL Study, in particular Cathy Creswell, Tee McCaldin, and Claire Briegel.