

MRC/AHRC/ESRC ADOLESCENCE, MENTAL HEALTH AND THE DEVELOPING MIND: Research Programmes

Adolescent mental health and development in the digital world

Led by: Professor Chris Hollis and Professor Ellen Townsend at the University of Nottingham:

Project Funding: £3.9 million.

Project Summary: This project will see researchers work directly with young people and use digital technology to provide a safe and supportive online environment. This is to tackle an unmet need arising from mental health disorders in those aged between 10 and 24 years.

While social media can be a helpful place for accessing information, exchanging views and receiving support, it has also been linked with:

- depression
- suicide
- self-harm.

However, not all young people are at risk of mental health problems associated with social media. We don't yet understand why some young people are more vulnerable than others.

This project aims to understand the relationship between digital risk, resilience and adolescent mental health and in turn develop and evaluate preventative and personalised digital interventions.

Ultimately the project hopes to establish a new, ethical and responsible way of designing digital platforms and tools that supports young people's mental health.

Eating disorders: delineating illness and recovery trajectories to inform personalised prevention and early intervention in young people (EDIFY)

Led by: Professor Ulrike Schmidt at King's College London and Dr Helen Sharpe at the University of Edinburgh:

Project Funding: £3.8 million.

Project Summary: This project will see researchers work directly with young people with eating disorders to develop an interdisciplinary, evidence-based model of how these conditions develop and how young people recover.

Eating disorders are common and affect people of all genders, backgrounds and identities, with devastating impacts on young people's lives.

This new research will explore the diverse experiences of people with eating disorders, characterising the different pathways into these conditions, as well as distinct stages of illness:

- at-risk
- early stage
- late stage.

This is so that intervention can be personalised at each stage.

Lived experiences of young people with eating disorders will be at the heart of the project, with creative methods, such as theatre and comedy, being used to increase understanding amongst the public and professionals.

It is hoped this novel approach will transform the way eating disorders are understood and treated by challenging stereotypes and providing a 'map' for clinicians to tailor treatments to a young person's individual circumstances.

ATTUNE: understanding mechanisms and mental health impacts of adverse childhood experiences to co-design preventative arts and digital interventions

Led by: Professor Kamaldeep Bhui at the University of Oxford and Professor Minhua Ma at Falmouth University

Project Funding: £3.8 million.

Project Summary: This project will bring together diverse creative-arts, digital and health experts to investigate how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can affect adolescents' mental health with the aim of developing new approaches to prevention and care.

Children who suffer multiple ACEs are much more likely to develop multiple social and developmental problems, including mental health disorders as young adults. ACEs include:

- abuse

- neglect
- loss events
- poverty
- discrimination
- racism
- relational problems at home.

We do not fully understand what makes an adolescent vulnerable to, or protected from, mental health problems following ACEs. We also do not know how to best to protect and support affected young people, many of whom struggle to find and engage with care services.

This research aims to address these gaps in knowledge and support by placing a diverse range of young people's lived experience at the centre of learning, co-design and planning through:

- creative arts and writing
- performance
- film
- music and state-of-the-art games technology.

Developing and evaluating a stepped change whole-university approach for student wellbeing and mental health

Led by: Professor Edward Watkins at the University of Exeter

Project Funding: £3.7 million.

Project Summary: This project will focus on the wellbeing of students at university where the rate of mental health conditions is rising. University mental health services are reporting demand beyond their capacity.

Working in partnership with students and university leaders, the researchers aim to develop an evidence-based integrated whole university model of inclusive student wellbeing and mental health support. This will go onto inform policy recommendations.

The research will examine a stepped care approach for students with a focus on how needs may vary across the diverse student body. Wide-scale wellbeing promotion for all will include:

- initiatives to build compassionate campuses
- digital self-monitoring for students
- state-of-the-art mental health literacy courses.

Clinical trials will evaluate digital self-help interventions for students with mild-to-moderate symptoms and develop ways to personalise treatment. Digital tools will be used to enhance professional support from existing wellbeing services for students with more serious symptoms.

The team will also develop guidance, courses and tools to promote student wellbeing that can be easily be scaled across higher education.

RE-STAR: regulating emotions, strengthening adolescent resilience

Led by: Professor Edmund Sonuga-Barke at King's College London

Project Funding: £3.3 million.

This project aims to help young people with neuroatypicalities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) traits reduce their chance of developing depression.

Many young people with both a diagnosis or demonstrable traits of these conditions develop depression during adolescence, but we don't know:

- who is most at risk
- how to intervene to reduce that risk.

This project will address that gap by exploring the specific role of difficulty in regulating emotions. It will bring together a range of experts including:

- scientists
- artists
- teachers
- doctors.

They will work directly with the young people affected, whose views and day to day experiences will be at the heart of their work.

Together they will develop a new way of understanding and measuring emotional regulation difficulties. This will build a platform for effective intervention and provide those at risk of depression with the skills to reduce their chances of developing the condition.

Developing a school-based, transdiagnostic, preventative intervention for adolescent mental health

Led by: Professor Essi Viding and Professor Pasco Fearon at University College London

Project Funding: £2.8 million.

Project Summary: This project will investigate the close connections between the way that adolescents process emotions and their social relationships. A key part of the project is the development of a new preventative intervention that integrates established cognitive training and interpersonal therapy methods. This will address both emotional and social relationship mechanisms.

This research aims to improve mental health and wellbeing by helping adolescents understand how their emotions impact their social relationships and how their social relationships have an impact on their emotions.

To develop this new school-based intervention, the researchers will work in partnership with:

- young people
- educators
- parents
- clinicians.

They will also work with young people and artists to develop compelling short films, podcasts and infographics to give practical tips for understanding emotions and social relationships for young people, teachers and parents.

The shaping of mental health and the mechanisms leading to (un)successful transitions for care-experienced young people

Led by: Dr Lisa Holmes at the University of Oxford and Dr Rachel Hiller at the University of Bath

Project Funding: £2.2 million.

Project Summary: For young people who have been in care, this research programme will identify psychological, social, and service processes that are linked to an increased risk of, or are protective for, mental health and wellbeing.

Care-experienced young people have some of the poorest mental health outcomes of any youth and this can have major consequences for their wellbeing throughout their life. This includes the current overrepresentation in:

- school exclusions
- homelessness
- unemployment.

This programme will investigate factors linked to the mental health and wellbeing of care-experienced young people during two transition periods that can be particularly difficult:

- primary into early secondary education
- adolescence into early adulthood.

The research will utilise existing administrative data on 14,000 young people and also include longitudinal studies, involving:

- 600 young people
- their carer or adoptive parent(s)
- social worker.

In partnership with Coram Voice and Adoption UK, the programme also includes input throughout from three panels of care-experienced and adopted individuals.