



SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH

EATING DISORDERS

ACROSS THE SOUTH & WEST

SWEDA Survey

Young people, mental health & support networks

By Nerissa Shaw, SWEDA Clinical Lead

Survey data collected: September - November 2025

Analysis written: February 2026

The theme of this year's Eating Disorder Awareness Week is 'Community'. SWEDA staff regularly visit FE colleges in and around Somerset and we wanted to ask students about their experiences of asking for and receiving help from others around them.

Having support around us is very important. We know that connections are not just a 'nice-to-have' for humans, they are essential for our wellbeing. Paul Gilbert, the founder of Compassion Focussed Therapy writes about this. He says: "Compassion evolved to help us survive – by caring for our young and protecting each other. In other words, we aren't designed to go it alone. We are designed to care."

We need a community and, when we are struggling, those around us can be a huge resource for us. What's also important to remember is that the systems we live in are not always compassionate themselves and this may mean we can find it hard to give and receive the support we need. We might find that when we reach out for help, we don't get what we need which can prevent us from doing so again and making us feel isolated.

At SWEDA, we know that recovery from an eating disorder is much easier when people have a support network to draw upon. This may include healthcare professionals such as doctors, psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors but, just as important, are friends, family, community members and supportive 'others'. The support 'network' is crucial.

It can be hard to ask for help – many of us might see this as a weakness or feel that we are undeserving of help. Our critical inner voice may give us messages that stop us from reaching out or we might fear judgement or that people won't understand our thoughts and feelings. We want to highlight that connections and community are important and talk about what people have said about the support networks they have. We think this will also help us all be better allies when our friends, family members, colleagues and neighbours do reach out for help.

THE COACH HOUSE • HARVEST COURT • SHEPTON MALLET BA4 5BS • 01749 343344 • WWW.SWEDAUK.ORG



SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH

EATING DISORDERS

ACROSS THE SOUTH & WEST

Our survey

In our survey, we decided to focus on mental health in general to get a bigger pool of responses and ask students some questions about community, support networks and mental health. We asked:

- What age are you?
- In terms of your gender, how do you identify?
- Do you, or have you ever, suffered from mental health difficulties? (This might be something you have seen a health professional about or times when you have not felt mentally "well")

For the next few questions, we provided a list of possible answers – participants could pick as many as they liked:

- Thinking about times when you have had difficulty with your mental health, who supported you? Please think about non-professionals only so NOT people like doctors, counsellors or mental health support workers. Pick as many as you like
- How do you like to be supported when you are struggling with your mental health (remember this is outside of any professional support you are getting such as therapy or medication)
- What gets in the way of you receiving this support from people?
- How much of an impact does this kind of help have on your mental health?

Our final question was a free text answer in case people wanted to share anything else they felt was relevant:

- Would you like to share anything else about your support networks?

131 people responded to our survey although not all of them gave all their information or answered all of the questions.

The report below shows what we found out.



SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH

EATING DISORDERS

ACROSS THE SOUTH & WEST

Key findings

62%

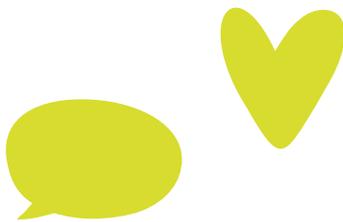
How many young people are experiencing mental health difficulties?

62% of our college age population said that they felt they experienced or had experienced mental health difficulties



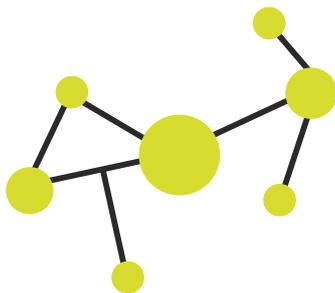
Who are young people turning to in difficult times?

In terms of support networks outside of professional services, most people (83%) named family (in particular, parents) as an important resource for help



What kind of support is helpful?

People expressed that the type of support they felt was best was based around feelings of being valued, of belonging and of having worth. They liked to be listened to, enjoy time with loved-ones and receive positive affirmations about themselves.



Is non-professional support enough?

For some people, having a non-professional support network is enough to get them out of a difficult time. But for many more (62%), a range of types of help including professional and non-professional support is desirable. However, most people (85%) said that the non-professional support network was important.



What barriers are they experiencing?

55.6% of people indicated that the felt support would not be forthcoming if they reached out for it and this stopped them from doing so.

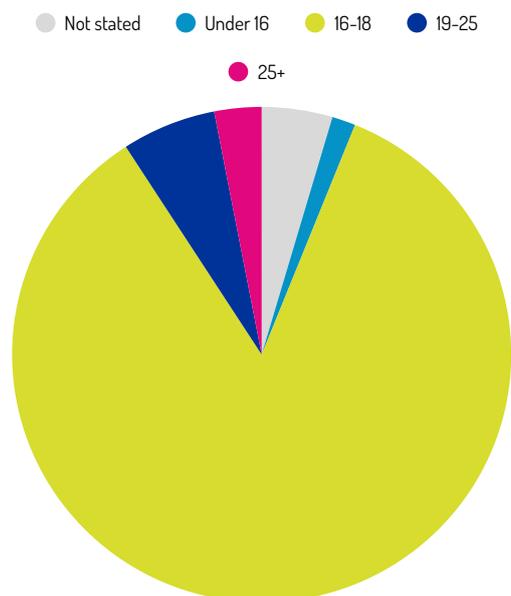


Demographics: Age

The vast majority of our participants were 16-18 which is as expected in an FE college.

Age	No of responses	Percentage
Not stated	6	4.6%
Under 16	2	1.6%
16-18	111	88.8%
19-25	8	6.4%
25+	4	3.2%

Age range of respondents



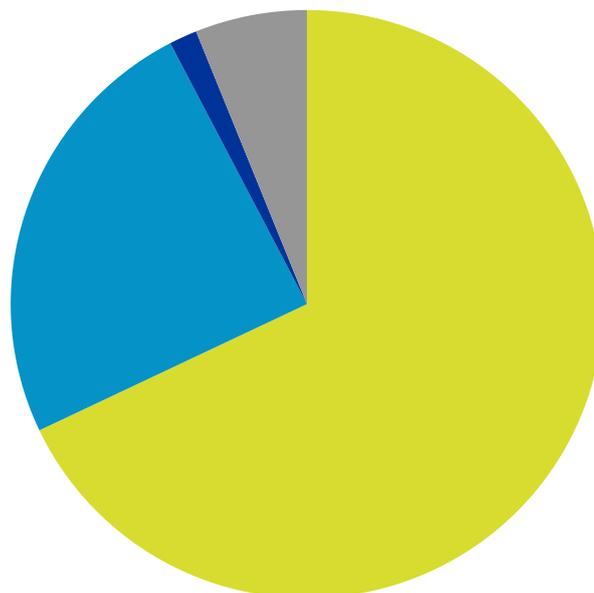


Demographics: Gender

Most of our participants were female but we did have some representation from participants identifying as male and just two identifying as another gender. The other genders represented were one Non-binary trans-masc. and one Non-binary.

Gender	No of responses	Percentage
Female	89	68%
Male	32	24.4%
Other Genders	2	1.5%
Not stated	8	6.1%

Participants by Gender





Who identifies as having or have had mental health difficulties?

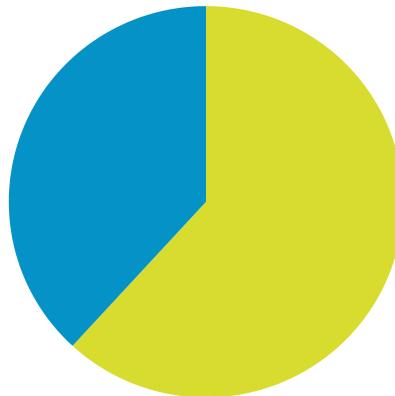
We asked our participants whether they felt they had had 'mental health difficulties'. We chose this phrase so as not to exclude people who might not have received any help for their difficulty, but who still felt they had struggled with their mental health. The question asked was:

Do you, or have you ever, suffered from mental health difficulties? (This might be something you have seen a health professional about or times when you have not felt mentally "well")

61.8% (81 people) answered 'Yes' to this question

Number of people identifying as having had MH difficulties

● Yes ● No



The UK's Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey from 2023-24 states that around 25% of adults were identified as having a 'common mental health condition' such as Anxiety, Depression, phobias or OCD. This statistic relates to those with a diagnosable condition. Our survey indicates that the number of people who struggle with their mental health is much higher than this!

Moving forward with the results of the survey, we have drawn the remaining answers from those who said they had experienced mental health difficulties – a total of 81 people. These 81 people came from all age and gender groups as described above.



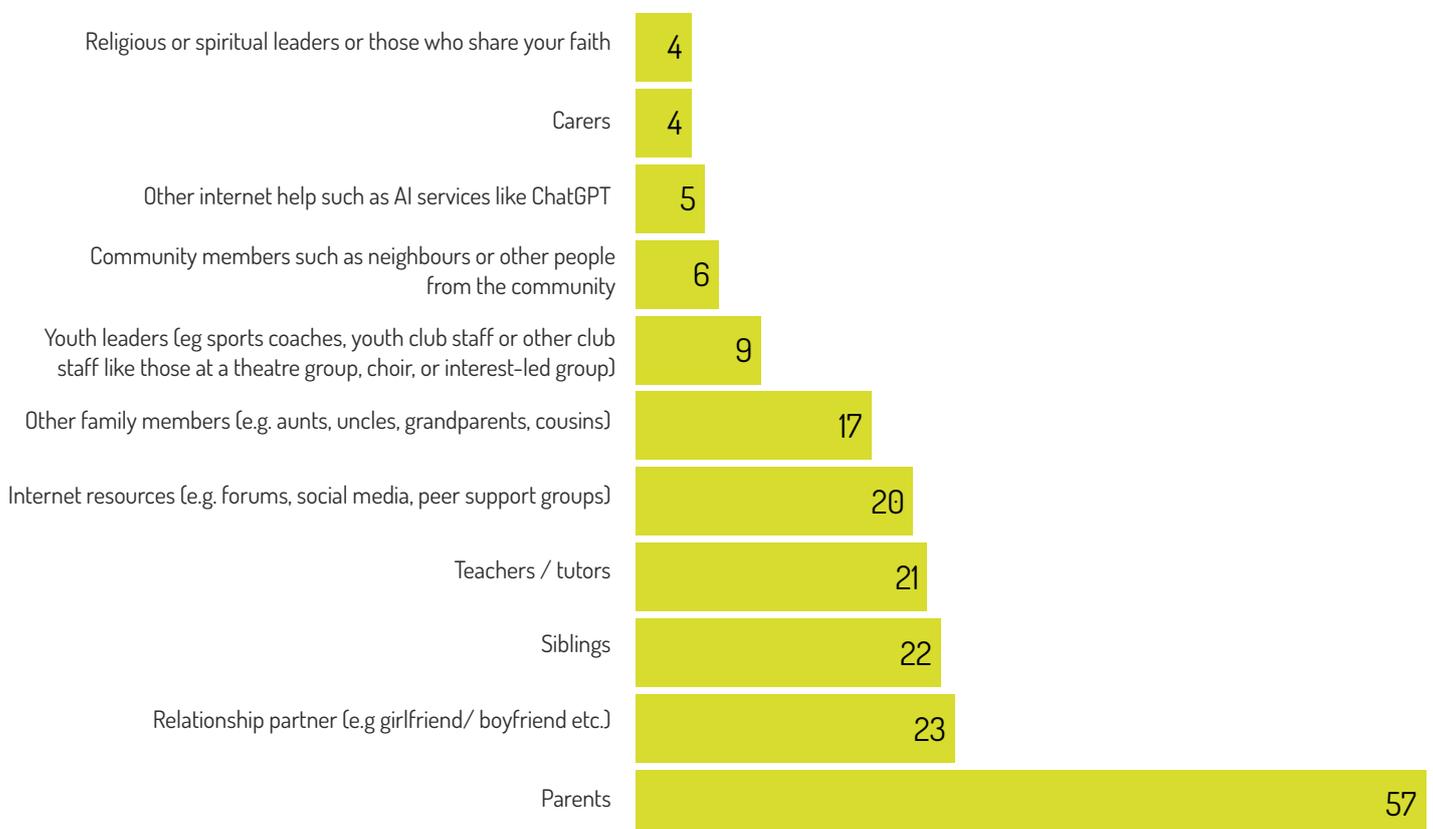
What is the community support that people draw on when they are struggling with their mental health?

We provided a list of possible sources of support and asked people to state who they felt had supported them at difficult times. We excluded any healthcare professionals from this list. People were able to pick as many options as they wished:

The question said: “Thinking about times when you have had difficulty with your mental health, who supported you? Please think about non-professionals only so NOT people like doctors, counsellors or mental health support workers. Pick as many as you like”

This chart shows the answers we received:

Who supported you with mental health difficulties in your community?





Perhaps unsurprisingly given the age demographic of our participants, the most popular answer was that people sought support from their parents. 57 (out of 81) people chose this option which is 70.4%. Other family members were also clearly providing much needed support with people identifying that siblings and wider family had supported them. Only 14 out of the 81 (17.3%) people did not draw on any family support.

Additionally, romantic partners are a source that many people draw on along with teachers and tutors.

The internet and online sources also rated quite highly. 23 people stated that they drew on support from one or both of the two online options listed which is 28.4%. There is an increasing number of people looking to AI sources for mental health support. This is controversial in a number of ways but, importantly, AI is not always a reliable source for information and advice, and it can be hard for people to make good judgements about this.

The numbers break down is shown below:

Source of support received	Number of people	Percentage
Parents	57	70.4%
Carers	4	4.9%
Siblings	22	27.2%
Other family members (e.g. aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)	17	21%
Relationship partner (e.g. girlfriend/ boyfriend etc.)	23	28.4%
Teachers/ Tutors	21	26%
Youth leaders (e.g. sports coaches, youth club staff or other club staff like those at a theatre group, choir, or interest-led group)	9	11.1%
Religious or spiritual leaders or those who share your faith	4	4.9%
Community members such as neighbours or other people from the community	6	7.4%
Internet resources (e.g. forums, social media, peer support groups)	20	25%
Other internet help such as AI services like ChatGPT	5	6.1%



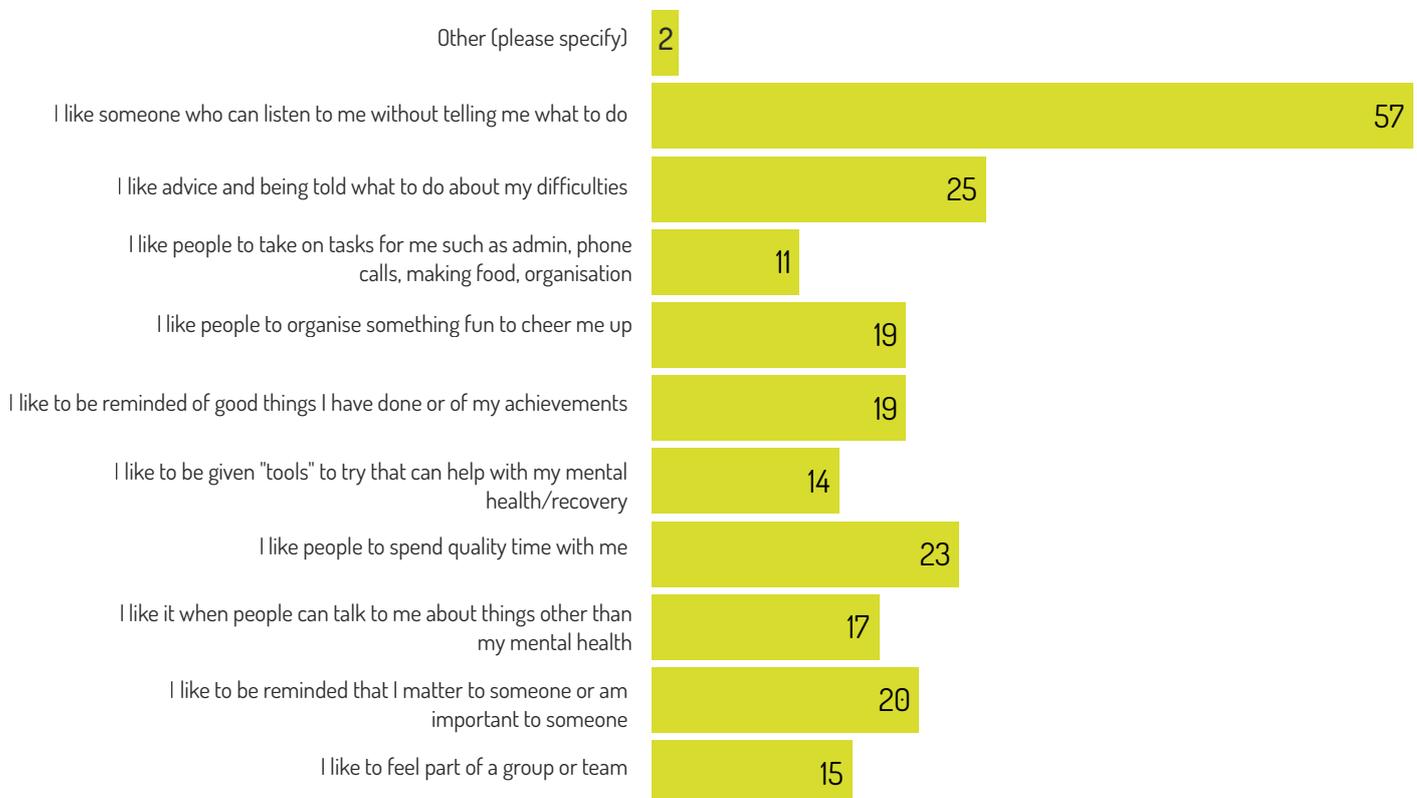
What sort of community support do people want when they are struggling with their mental health?

The next question we asked was about what sort of help people wanted from their communities when they were struggling. The question was:

“How do you like to be supported when you are struggling with your mental health (remember this is outside of any professional support you are getting such as therapy or medication)”

We again provided a list of possible responses from which people were able to pick as many options as they wished. The chart below shows the results.

What help do people want?





SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH

EATING DISORDERS

ACROSS THE SOUTH & WEST

The most popular response was that people wanted to be listened to without being told what to do. 57 out of 81 people, equating to 70.4% of people picked this option.

25 people (30.1%) picked what might look like the opposite response saying that they liked it when people gave advice and told them what to do. 10 people (12.3%) ticked both options which may point to us needing different things at different times.

Many of the popular options reflect the good things about connecting with others – things that we all need or want such as being reminded of our worth, feeling that we matter, or wanting to be part of a group as well as hoping for quality time with people we care about and that care about us.

Relatively few people went for options such as being offered ‘tools’ or practical help and advice compared to the options around connection and things that might support our self-worth and sense of belonging. The latter are often things that can’t be provided by therapy or the medical profession. We need a community and friends and family around us to get these things.

An Office for National Statistics [study on loneliness](#) (Health Survey for England, 2021) states that:

“Persistent and prolonged exposure to feeling lonely has been associated with an adverse impact on wellbeing and health. Research has shown loneliness increases the likelihood of [early mortality](#) and poor physical health; it has also been shown to put individuals at greater risk of poor mental health including [depression](#).

Mental wellbeing is a facet of mental health that includes experiences of positive emotions, a person’s perception of themselves and their lives, and overall life satisfaction. Lower mental wellbeing is associated with poor physical health, [higher morbidity](#), and lower life satisfaction.”

Although the study is not focussed on mental health support, it backs up the importance of meaningful connection to others as being hugely important to our mental wellbeing.



The table below shows a numbers breakdown of the answers to this question in our survey.

Type of support people find helpful	Number	Percentage
Other (please specify)	2	2.5%
I like someone who can listen to me without telling me what to do	57	70.4%
I like advice and being told what to do about my difficulties	25	30.9%
I like people to take on tasks for me such as admin, phone calls, making food, organisation	11	13.9%
I like people to organise something fun to cheer me up	19	23.5%
I like to be reminded of good things I have done or of my achievements	19	23.5%
I like to be given "tools" to try that can help with my mental health/recovery	14	17.3%
I like people to spend quality time with me	23	28.4%
I like it when people can talk to me about things other than my mental health	17	21%
I like to be reminded that I matter to someone or am important to someone	20	25%
I like to feel part of a group or team	15	18.5%

Two people wrote a response in the 'other' option box as to what they thought was helpful for them from others. They included 'music', 'being with my parents' and also 'I'm not sure'.



How effective is the community support that people draw on when they are struggling with their mental health?

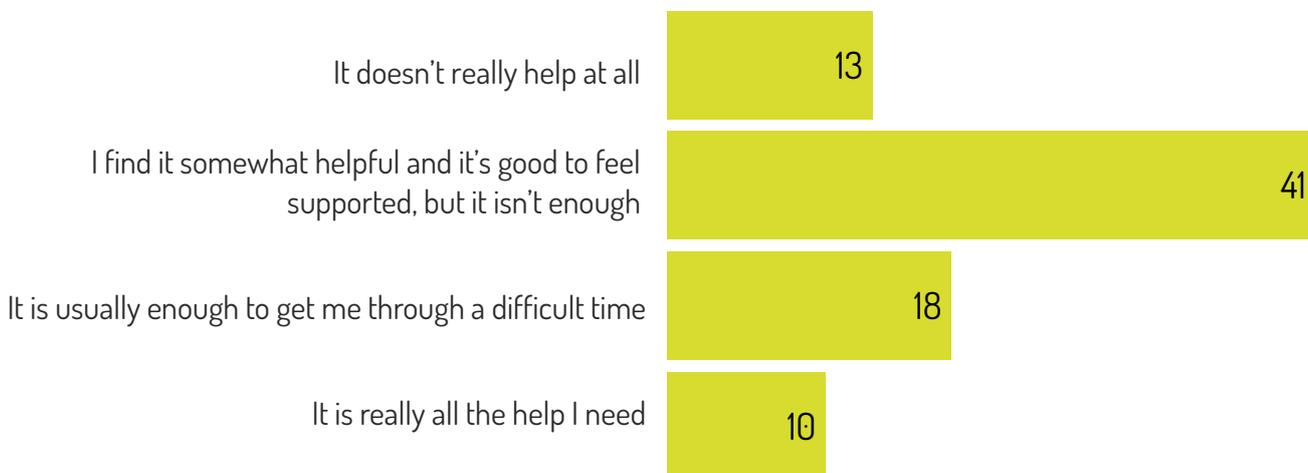
We next asked people how much of an impact they felt the community support they had received had had on their mental health difficulties. The question was:

“How much of an impact does this kind of help have on your mental health?”

We again provided a range of possible answers. This time, people were only able to choose one option. The table and bar chart show the breakdown of responses. Not everyone chose to answer this question.

How helpful is this type of support?	Number	Percentage
It doesn't really help at all	13	16.0%
I find it somewhat helpful and it's good to feel supported, but it isn't enough	41	50.6%
It is usually enough to get me through a difficult time	18	22.2%
It is really all the help I need	10	12.3%

How helpful is this type of support?





SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH

EATING DISORDERS

ACROSS THE SOUTH & WEST

Just over 50% of our respondents found the community support helpful but not enough, with a further 12.3% saying it didn't help them at all. Therefore, for over 62% of people in this survey experiencing mental health difficulties, this support is not enough.

For 34.5% of people, it was enough, which is significant; without these support networks, there would be a much higher demand on already stretched professional services.

This part of the survey may tell us that good support for mental health difficulties needs to be diverse and come from a range of places – professional help as well as community support. It points to the need for a 'Support Network' – a system of different kinds of support in society. It also highlights that people are complex and have layers of needs to recover and remain well. These cannot all be met by one thing or one person or one service. It can depend on the nature and severity of the difficulty; in some cases, one type of help might be enough but actually, having both professional support (which might include a talking therapy or medication for example) and more general support from the community – being a part of something, and having connections which help us regulate ourselves and remind us of our worth and value – provides better all round help.



What stops people from engaging with a support network?

Our final question was about what prevents people from accessing non-professional support for mental health difficulties. We provided a range of possible answers to choose from. People could pick more than one answer. The question was:

“What gets in the way of you receiving this support from people?”

The table shows the answers we received:

What gets in the way of you receiving this support from people?	Number	Percentage
I don't feel I have people around me who can, or will, support me	16	19.8%
I don't want to be a burden	42	51.9%
I feel people won't/ don't understand	31	38.3%
I'm embarrassed to talk about what is bothering me	30	37.0%
I think the people around me don't really understand mental health problems	13	16.0%
I've had bad experiences when reaching out for help which has made me reluctant to do it again	16	19.8%
I find it hard to find the words to express what's going on, so I don't bother	21	25.9%

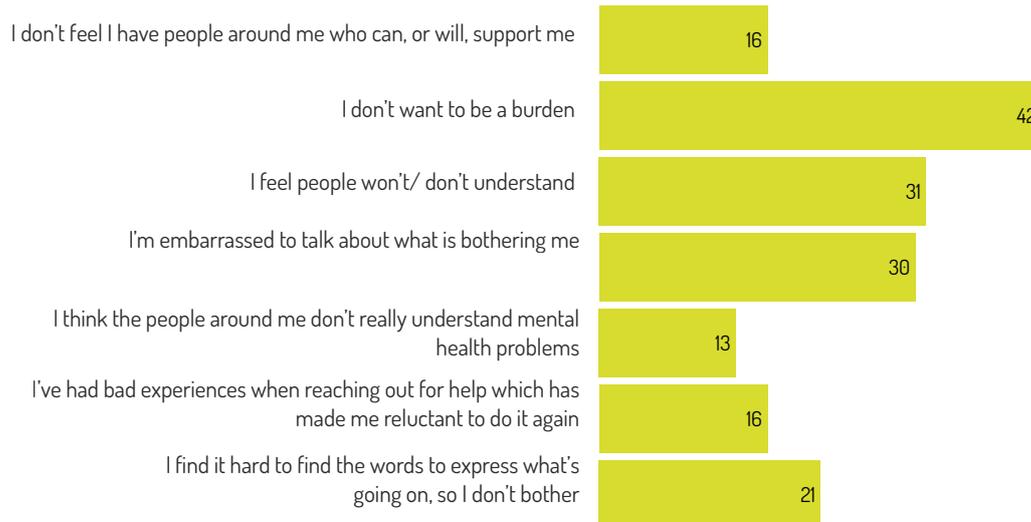
The highest scoring answer was that people felt they didn't want to be a burden with other answers such as 'I feel people won't understand' or 'I'm embarrassed' also being significant. This may point to internal feelings of worthlessness or self-criticism that can come alongside mental health difficulties which can cause a vicious circle leading to further isolation and worsening problems. When we are able to rely on our support networks and speak out without fearing judgement, we are much more likely to get the support we need.

Other answers themed around feeling that support would not be forthcoming if they reached out were also chosen. 45 people (55.6%) picked at least one of these types of responses. Having a bad experience when asking for support can put people off asking again. This could have huge implications for someone who needs help and reminds us that providing safe places for people to talk could make a huge difference for someone who feels they don't have supportive friends or family around them.



The chart below summarises the responses.

What stops people accessing community support?



Any other comments?

Finally we offered a space for people to share any further comments they wanted to asking:

“Would you like to share anything else about your support networks”

We received very few responses to this question. The one or two we did receive referenced receiving good support from particular people in that respondent's life and one comment was on how we, as a society, poorly value men's mental health.



SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH

EATING DISORDERS

ACROSS THE SOUTH & WEST

Conclusion

We believe our survey is a reminder of the importance of networks of support – how we all need different types of support at different times and that the support from our communities is a vital part of those networks. It also highlights that there should be professional help available to us as well when we need it.

Finally, it shows that it can be hard to reach out for help for many different reasons including that we might not feel worthy or that we worry no-one will be willing or able to help. It reminds us that all of us can be good supporters when we are well and being there for people when they need us encourages others to be there when they can be. This creates a system where we may all receive help when we are struggling.