

Anxiety in the UK

Exploring data from the Shout text support service to give insight into anxiety and effective coping skills to manage it

Dr Stella Rendall, Dr Fiona Pienaar, Dr Luzia Trobinger, Dr Ariele Noble, Dr Mark Ungless

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Introduction

For this report we analysed anonymised data associated with more than 300,000 conversations with Shout texters about anxiety. We used a combination of cutting-edge data science combined with qualitative psychological techniques. This approach has revealed insights into the underlying themes raised in conversations about anxiety and the most popular resources and coping skills texters use to help manage their anxiety.

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About Shout

Shout is the UK's only free, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Shout was publicly launched in May 2019 and has taken 1.9 million conversations with 650,000 people who are anxious, stressed, depressed, suicidal or overwhelmed and who need immediate support. The service provides round the clock support from trained volunteers, supervised and supported in real time by an expert Clinical team. We currently respond to 1,500-2,000 requests for support every day. Shout is the first service from charity Mental Health Innovations, whose mission is to use technology to give everyone in the UK access to the digital mental health services that they need.

Shout is a de-escalation service and we work with people in immediate distress to take them to a calmer moment. We empower them with support and techniques to take their next steps to feeling better and handle future issues. We may signpost texters to further support services or their GP so that they can get continuous and long-term support.

In around 2.5% of our conversations where de-escalation is not possible and the texter is deemed to be at imminent risk of suicide, Shout works with the emergency services to keep the texter safe. Shout listens without judgement to people who have nowhere else to turn and we give them the opportunity to feel heard.

Key findings

Over the past 5 years, anxiety has consistently been one of the most common issues that people contact Shout about, making up 30% of all conversations.

- Texters who contact Shout about anxiety are also often experiencing low mood, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts. Self-harm is also commonly seen, particularly amongst younger texters.
- Although people contact Shout about anxiety on all days of the week, Monday and Tuesday tend to show the highest demand, driven by concerns about the start of the school and work weeks.
- Because Shout is a 24/7 service, people contact us at all times. Demand from people contacting us about anxiety peaks between 6pm-10pm, when people are often alone with their thoughts and worried about the future.
- People from across the UK contact Shout about their anxiety.
- Over three quarters of people who contact Shout about anxiety are female. Texters are of all ages, from 13 or under to over 65 years old, although the majority (65%) are under 25 years old.
- Our analyses find that amongst adults, anxiety is often related to finances, relationships, ill-health, trauma and work stress. Amongst young texters, anxiety is often related to school-related pressure, bullying, family arguments and conflict, and traumatic experiences. Recent widespread concerns about global issues such as the COVID-19 lockdowns and the war in Ukraine caused feelings of uncertainty and heightened levels of anxiety in both adults and children.
- The most common coping skills that texters use to help with their anxiety include: sleep; talking to friends, family, and other trusted adults; listening to music; taking exercise, including walking and spending time with pets; and journaling, mindfulness activities, breathing exercises, and distraction techniques.
- Popular resources that texters use to help with their anxiety include guides on: anxiety; grounding techniques; breathing exercises; and mindfulness.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is described as a *'feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe'* (NHS [Overview of Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Oct 2022](#)). Anxiety is a perfectly normal response to common life experiences, for example, the feeling you might have while waiting for exam results or starting a new job, or watching a tense, closely-contested game of football.

The symptoms of anxiety will be different for everyone. Some mental symptoms of anxiety include not being able to control your thoughts; overthinking; difficulty concentrating; feeling irritable; disrupted sleep patterns; feelings of dread or panic. Physical symptoms of anxiety might include rapid heartbeat; tiredness or lack of energy; sweating; dizziness and fainting; headaches; loss of appetite.

We can usually manage that anxiety, whether that be through talking about it, recognising and adapting our thoughts, or distracting ourselves with an activity or interaction with others. For some, however, anxiety can feel overwhelming, making it difficult to engage in daily life.

When we look at more formal descriptions of anxiety we find that it is described as '*an emotion that is characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure*' ([APA Topic - Anxiety](#)), revealing that anxiety can affect our emotions, our thoughts, our body, and consequently, our behaviour. Someone who has received a formal diagnosis of, for example Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), experiences excessive anxiety and worry and significant distress which impacts on their ability to socialise, work and generally engage fully in their life. It's important to speak to a professional if you have concerns that the anxiety you're experiencing is more than the normal response to common life stressors, you're having difficulty managing it, and it's impacting on many aspects of your life. There is help available.

Why are reports of anxiety increasing in the UK?

In September 2022, the NHS Digital [Psychological Therapies: Annual Report on the use of IAPT services, England 2021-22](#) revealed that the number of referrals to talking therapies increased by 24.5% from 1.46 million to 1.81 million in 2022. A month later, the NHS Digital [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022](#) (aged 7-24) report revealed that the percentage of young people aged between 17 and 19, with a probable mental disorder increased from 17.4% in 2021 to 25.7% in 2022, while amongst 7-16 year olds the rate rose from 12.1% in 2017 to 18% in 2022.

There is no simple explanation for the reported increase in anxiety and other mental health disorders. It is multifactorial. While we may think that the increase has emerged purely due to the impact of the pandemic, in fact there has been a steady increase of persistent, chronic anxiety over the past two decades, particularly amongst young people (Duffy et al., 2019; Parodi et al., 2022, cited in Grant et al., 2023). For many people this was then exacerbated by the social distancing requirements during the height of COVID-19 meaning that people's lives were interrupted, socially and in relation to their work and studies, in an unprecedented way. Loneliness, isolation, interrupted sleep, worry about finances and many other challenges associated with the pandemic have certainly impacted on many people's lives and mental health. For example, a systematic review of studies (Kauhanen et al., 2022), across 22 countries comparing pre-pandemic and pandemic data, and focusing on the mental health of children and young people (aged 3-24) found that most studies reported a decline in mental health, with increased anxiety, depression, distress, and loneliness.

Given the scale of the topic and the myriad of reasons people may be anxious, we should also consider wider influences - societal, financial and ecological factors, (e.g., unemployment, poverty,

impoverished communities, discrimination), environmental attributes (e.g., housing, pollution, overcrowding), and crises (pandemic, conflict, political turmoil, climate) (Grant et al., 2023). Some of these factors affect people directly, others may be factors that lead to people worrying about how they will be impacted; uncertain what their future may look like.

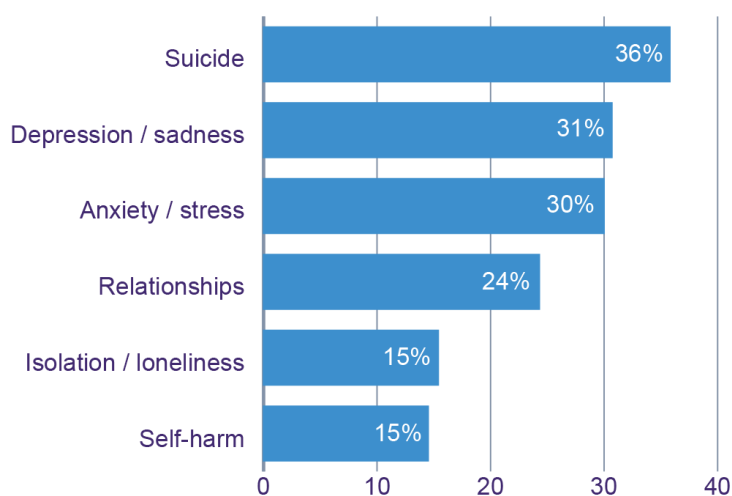
The impact of social media on people's mental health is a topic that is constantly explored and commented on, in the media, amongst professionals, in the academic literature, and amongst everyone who has an opinion on the subject. At Shout, we know that, amongst other routes, many people discover our service on social media and then reach out for support. They may be wanting to discuss the negative aspects of their social media use, e.g. self esteem, loneliness, cyberbullying, eating disorders, but, they have been able to identify an immediately available source of support when they need it most.

We know that talking to someone about what you are anxious about is helpful. Each person's story is unique and personal. Connecting and communicating takes the ruminating thoughts and the overwhelming emotions out of your head and into a conversation with a skilled person who will listen with compassion and support you to a calmer state, able to think more clearly about your next steps. This is what Shout offers.

Anxiety in Shout conversations

Anxiety is one of the most common reasons people contact Shout, making up 30% of all conversations. For the first time, we have analysed anonymised data associated with more than 300,000 conversations with Shout texters about anxiety. We used a combination of cutting-edge data science combined with qualitative psychological techniques. This approach has revealed insights into the underlying themes raised and the most popular resources and coping skills texters use to help manage their anxiety.

Most common issues (% of all conversations)

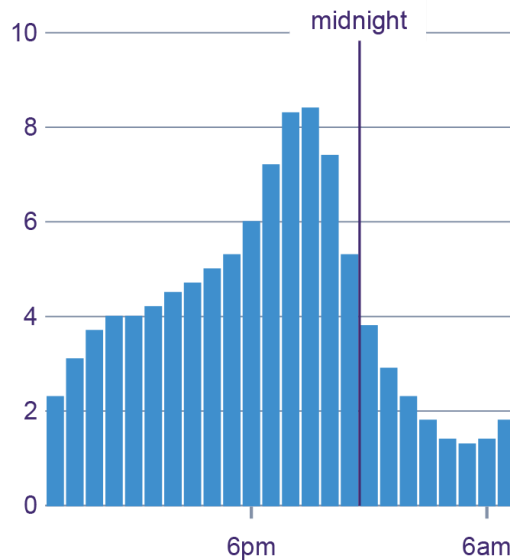


“Thanks for listening, I feel a little less anxious after our chat. Enough so that I can carry on with my day with not so much anxiety crippling me.”

- Shout texter feedback

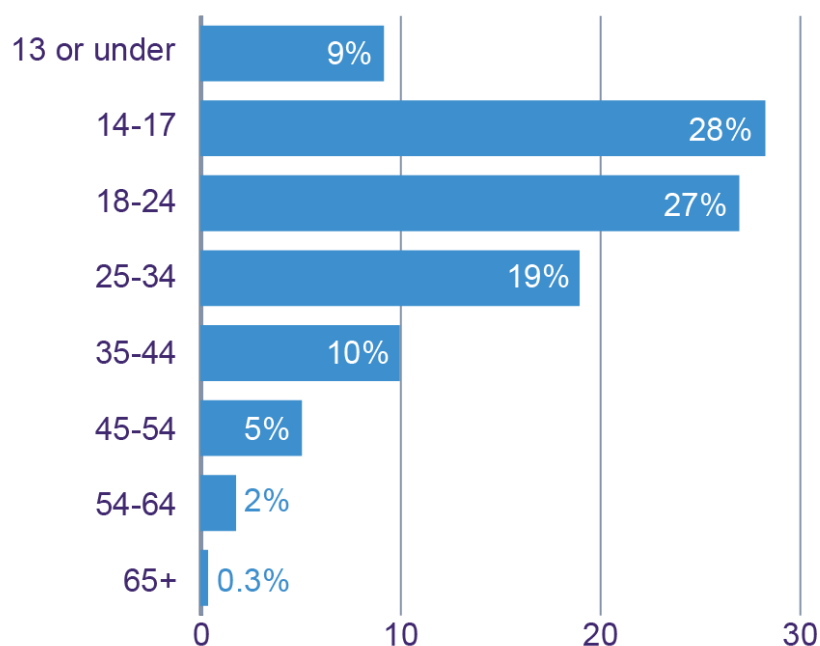
Because Shout is a 24/7 service, people contact us at all times. Demand from people contacting us about anxiety peaks between 6pm-10pm, when people are often alone with their thoughts and worried about the future. Although people contact Shout about anxiety on all days of the week, Monday and Tuesday tend to show the highest demand, driven by concerns about the start of the school and work weeks.

Conversations about anxiety (% hourly)



Those texting with issues of anxiety are of all ages, from 13 or under to over 65 years old, although the majority (65%) are under 25 years old.

Age (% of texters)



“I truly was at one of the most worrying points in my life, you helped me massively. Things seem clearer now and I have some form of plan. I wish I had spoken years ago.”

- Shout texter feedback

People who contact Shout about anxiety commonly describe being overwhelmed by worry and panic, often accompanied by a physical symptom such as insomnia, panic attacks, or an inability to focus. Our analyses find that amongst adult texters, anxiety is often related to finances, relationships, ill-health, trauma and work stress. Amongst young texters, anxiety is often related to academic pressure, bullying, family arguments and conflict, and traumatic experiences. Recent widespread concerns about global issues such as the COVID-19 lockdowns and the war in Ukraine caused feelings of uncertainty and heightened levels of anxiety in both adults and children. Below we discuss some of the main factors associated with this anxiety.

Finances

The soaring cost of food and energy is affecting people across the globe, pushing millions into poverty. The cost of living has been increasing across the UK since early 2021, with the annual inflation rate rising from 8.8% to 9.2% between January and February 2023 ([ONS, 2023](#)). The crisis is causing heightened anxiety and stress, with many, particularly those on low incomes, worried about the uncertainty of the future. A recent survey found that a quarter of young UK adults aged between 18 and 25 say that the cost of living crisis is the leading cause of anxiety in their life, forcing them to reduce pension contributions and even fear they may never start a family (Williams & Dienes, 2022). The cost of living crisis is having significant impacts on the mental health and emotional well-being of our texters. We find that adult texters worry about soaring food prices, mounting utility bills, rent and mortgage payments, huge debts, and the risk of homelessness. Younger texters worry about their parents' mental state, and not having enough money to live comfortably. Overall, texters are worried about how they are going to manage and the negative impact the cost of living crisis is having on their mental health. Texters reference feeling anxious, stressed, panicked, and having difficulty sleeping.

Relationships

Relationships are mentioned in a quarter of all Shout's conversations. In general, adult texters describe unhealthy relationships with partners that often end in breakups or separations, resulting in them feeling low and hopeless. Texters often find the stress of divorce or separation to be overwhelming due to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. Many texters worry about the potential psychological impact of a breakup or separation on themselves and/or their children, changes in their living arrangements, uncertainty around mutual friendships they have with their ex-partner, and the difficulty of starting over. For many young texters, ruptures with significant others, friends and family, and witnessing rows between parents causes feelings of anxiety and insecurity.

“Thank you so much for your help, I've suffered from anxiety since an abusive relationship and I've never been able to receive help. But you helped me more than you know, thank you.”

- Shout texter feedback

Academic pressure

Anxiety over schoolwork is a common issue mentioned by young texters, with many feeling anxious, stressed and overwhelmed with their course workload. In many cases, texters fall behind on their schoolwork due to the impact of life stressors such as relationship difficulties, ill-health and traumatic experiences. Overwhelmed by these experiences, texters struggle to remain focused on their schoolwork and often become anxious about upcoming exams and assignment deadlines.

In the UK, there are increasing concerns about the general amount of anxiety and stress that 15 to 18-year-old students are experiencing since the introduction of linear GCSE and A-level assessments in 2014. In a 2019 poll, 73% of teachers who responded considered that the new GCSE assessment format had led to a worsening in student mental health, with 55% reporting a decline in the mental health of A-level students (National Education Union, 2019). A wide review focusing on stress in secondary and tertiary education found that the impact of academic-related stress on students can result in both mental and physical health problems, in turn leading to a variety of academic challenges (Pascoe et al., 2020).

“Thank you for helping me tonight, I was really stressing about my exams and not being able to revise but you have helped me to calm down and focus on it more.”

- Shout texter feedback

Physical ill-health

Many texters often mention poor physical and mental ill-health as a source of anxiety and stress. Texters might be uncertain about the severity of a diagnosis and its prognosis, and the impact it could have on their lives, relationships and jobs. In most cases, texters discuss the negative impact that their physical or mental ill-health has on their sleep, falling asleep and/or staying asleep, which serves to exacerbate their feelings of anxiety.

“Just want to say thank you for being there when I was in such a dark place had no one to say am struggling to. I had no friends or anyone I could say that I am feeling unwell.”

- Shout texter feedback

Work stress

Many of our adult texters mention experiencing heightened anxiety as a result of work-related stress and experiences of a less than satisfactory work-life balance. A recent survey conducted with 3,400 people across 10 countries found that 60% of employees found their job to be the biggest factor influencing their mental health, highlighting the work environment, leadership and their managers as being critical in keeping a work-life balance (Workforce Institute, 2023). Texters similarly reference excessive workload, volatile work environments and unsupportive managers as pertinent work stressors. Texters also describe being overwhelmed with excessive workload as a result of taking on additional responsibilities or working very long hours.

“Thank you for being a source of comfort and accountability/validation/support this evening at a time when I felt very overwhelmed emotionally due to life and work stresses.”

- Shout texter feedback

Developed from the Shout Volunteer training, Mental Health Innovations delivers a [programme](#) for organisations, including the Football Association, to train its leaders and managers in the skills and confidence to have supportive conversations with those they lead. Organisations commission this training to gain insight into mental wellbeing, building resilience and developing a supportive and trusting work culture.

Global occurrences

In recent years, uncertainty surrounding global occurrences such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the war in Ukraine have caused feelings of anxiety in both adult and young texters. Many texters were unsure about how they would be impacted by the pandemic, and how long it would last, with widespread concern about disruptions to daily routines and the health and well-being of family and loved ones. Concerns that the war in Ukraine could escalate into a nuclear world war caused uncertainty about the future and fueled feelings of anxiety especially amongst younger texters.

The anxiety associated with climate change that people might experience, has been described as *eco-anxiety* - ‘*anxiety or worry about climate change and its effects*’ (also called *climate-anxiety*). Researchers have identified that uncertainty, unpredictability, and lack of control all contribute to people experiencing eco-anxiety. Depending on how people manage their consumption of news, this global issue can add to people’s sense of worry about their future and their overall anxiety.

“I just wanted to say thanks again. I assumed my troubles were small and invalid considering the grand scheme of what is going on in the world at the moment.”

- Shout texter feedback

Traumatic experiences

Traumatic experiences such as grief, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, verbal), and bullying are mentioned in 15% of all Shout conversations. Texters generally describe becoming anxious as a result of repeatedly reliving aspects of the trauma, and experience nightmares, vivid flashbacks and intrusive thoughts, which further negatively impacts their sleep. Research shows a strong correlation between trauma and sleep (Brown and Garcia, 2020), and sleep and anxiety (Staner, 2022). A lack of sleep can increase the severity of trauma and anxiety, and trauma and anxiety can worsen sleep quality. Texters often talk about their anxiety, as well as persistent low mood and self-harm urges, as a result of sleep deprivation.

“Thank you for talking to me, it definitely distracts your mind from intrusive thoughts and sometimes when you’re in that situation and it feels like there’s no way out of anxiety or panic, just talking to someone who does not judge helps.”

- Shout texter feedback

Coping skills for anxiety

We conducted a unique, large-scale analysis of almost 200,000 coping skills that our volunteers discussed with texters who had contacted Shout about anxiety. The most common coping skills that texters use to help with their anxiety include: sleep; talking to friends, family, and other trusted

adults; listening to music; taking exercise, including walking and spending time with pets; and journaling, mindfulness activities, breathing exercises, and distraction techniques.



Word cloud of terms seen in conversations with anxiety as an issue

We also analysed 150,000 resource recommendations made by our volunteers to texters to help them with their anxiety. We found that the most popular resources that texters use to help with their anxiety include guides on: anxiety; grounding techniques; breathing exercises; and mindfulness.

Sleep is mentioned as a coping skill in around a third of conversations. Many texters describe using sleep to cope with feelings of anxiety and stress, and refer to sleep as a means of escape; an interval of relief from overwhelming thoughts and feelings. The anxiety-relieving benefits of sleep have been observed in recent research, where deep sleep was found to be a natural remedy for anxiety, as it helps people better manage symptoms of anxiety (Ben Simon et al., 2020).

Music is mentioned as a coping skill in around a quarter of conversations. Texters describe listening to music and watching videos to feel calm, relaxed, and cope with anxiety brought on by significant stressors including relationship difficulties, physical ill-health, work and exam stress. Texters mention listening to their favourite music or watching an interesting video as sources of comfort that provide peace, which helps them to relax and de-stress. Some texters struggle with insomnia as a result of anxiety inducing events, and talk about the relaxing effects of listening to calm music at bedtime which helps to soothe them, induce sleep and improve sleep quality.

Other texters mention using exercise, particularly long walks, to cope with anxiety and stress, and find that it helps take their mind off their worries, and relieve symptoms of anxiety.

Texters find that connecting with friends, family and other trusted adults reduces the impact of stress and helps them cope better with anxiety. Research has found that feeling connected to others is a fundamental human need; one that confers important health benefits, including mitigating against the adverse effects of anxiety and stress (Umberson & Montez, 2010). We know that for someone to make sense of their thoughts and feelings, it can help to share and discuss them. It requires courage and vulnerability to talk about our feelings, which is difficult to do unless we know we will get the response that we need. However, when we lack the safety and trust around us to open up, we tend to bottle up our feelings. Unpleasant emotions can grow and if too many opportunities to talk about how we feel are missed, we can become overwhelmed and struggle to cope.

Conclusion

Shout has taken around 570,000 conversations with children, young people and adults with issues of anxiety, since launch in 2018. The issue affects nearly a third of our texters and affects all ages and demographics across the UK. The anonymised dataset from Shout puts us in the unique position of being able to hear from texters about their mental health, in real time, in their own words, at scale across the nation. We are therefore able to provide insight into mental health issues being faced by people today and provide valuable, in-depth information about issues such as anxiety.

Through the Shout service we are able to offer support to people overwhelmed by life, by listening and empowering them to hold on and move forward. We engage with compassion and kindness, validating our texters' thoughts and feelings so that they feel heard and supported to think about their next steps. We encourage texters who contact us about anxiety to use the coping strategies that have brought them some relief during previous experiences of distress, while exploring new alternatives that may be helpful. These may include turning to friends, family or professionals for support, or using additional resources to address their anxiety such as apps, online groups, and calming breathing exercises.

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About Mental Health Innovations and Shout

The charity [Mental Health Innovations](#) was set up with a grant from The Royal Foundation, following the Heads Together campaign. Our mission is to use technology to give everyone in the UK access to the digital mental health services that they need. Shout is our first product.

[Shout](#) is the UK's only 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Shout was publicly launched in May 2019, with support from The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Since then, Shout has taken 1.9 million conversations with 650,000 people who needed immediate support with issues such as anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. The service provides round the clock support from trained volunteers, supervised and supported in real time by expert clinicians. Shout currently responds to 1,500-2,000 requests for support every day.

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