

Children and Young People's experiences of Mental Health & Anxiety during Covid-19

Introduction

Worcestershire County Council, Herefordshire Council and Worcestershire Health & Care NHS Trust were keen to find out about experiences of mental health and anxiety in children and young people during the Covid outbreak: aiming to gather information that helps to understand what worked well for children and young people and their families and to learn lessons and put measures in place to improve the mental health services for children and young adults in the future.

This questionnaire was aimed at children and young people but could also be filled in by parents and guardians on behalf of their child. The questionnaire was live from 18th May to 22nd June and overall 966 respondents completed the questionnaire.

Summary of findings

The small number of respondents who had been using mental health services prior to the Covid pandemic had mixed views on how helpful any continued support via telephone and video calls had been. 33% (17 people) found this not at all helpful; they had received no/next to no support or found talking on the telephone challenging.

59% of Worcestershire respondents and 48% of Herefordshire respondents say their mental health and wellbeing has got worse since the start of the coronavirus outbreak: the main reasons being:

- Missing family/friends; loneliness; isolation; lack of social interaction
- School work: working remotely; pace; volume; lack of support; missed exams; grades; deadlines; lack of mental stimulation; parent pressure on CYP to complete
- Anxious/stressed; anxiety attacks; needs more reassurance; worries; scared
- Disruption to routine; lack of structure; miss school; change

However, 15% of respondents say their mental health and wellbeing has improved as they prefer home schooling (due to working at own pace; no distractions; less pressure; less work; being away from teachers; improved behaviour); have reduced stress with fewer demands on time; have more time with family/at home and/or more time for hobbies and interests.

Around three quarters of all respondents were somewhat or very worried about friends or family catching the coronavirus, fewer worried about catching it themselves (46%).

In general, older teenagers were more likely than younger children to be worried about issues such as school work, a lack of freedom or loss of routine and not being able to talk face-to-face about problems.

When asked about activities to improve mental health and wellbeing, most respondents found direct time with parents and/or other household members somewhat or very helpful; particularly true for younger children. Face to face calls with family and friends were also viewed as helpful as were activities such as exercise, learning new skills and entertainment (TV/films, reading books, gaming; particularly for boys). The free text comments supported these findings, exercise being the most

common theme, followed by cooking and baking, and creative pursuits. General time outdoors was mentioned by a significant number of people and pets had been helpful for many.

Overall, 13% of respondents had felt the need to seek support or information on mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus outbreak, more girls than boys, and more older teenagers than young children.

59% of people who tried to get information on mental health and wellbeing felt they successfully got this; 53% of those who tried to get support on mental health and wellbeing were successful. The main reasons given for being unable to get information or support were concerns about the effectiveness and accessibility of telephone support and general reluctance to talk about mental health.

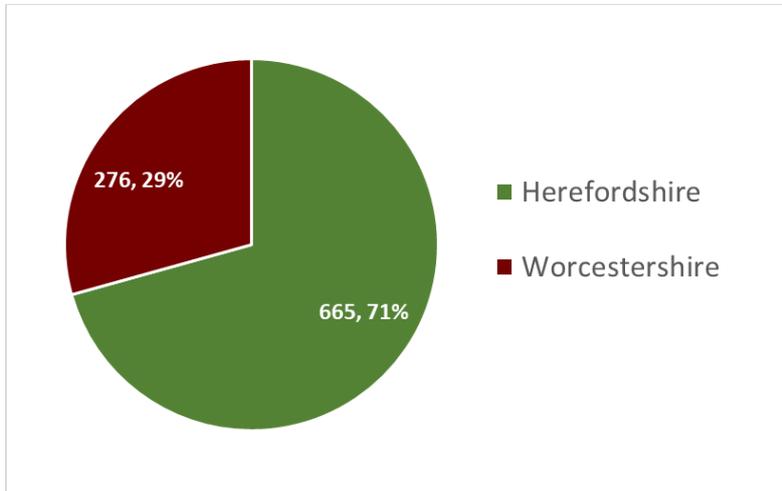
Of those who found information and/or support, nearly 60% found the information very or quite useful, and over 50% found very or quite useful support for their mental health and wellbeing. Free text comments generally indicated that information found was helpful and that it was reassuring to find others in their situation.

Overall the findings of the questionnaire highlight the importance of spending time with family and friends (physically or via video calls), exercise, fresh air and creative activities to improve mental health and wellbeing; these should continue to be promoted to children and young people.

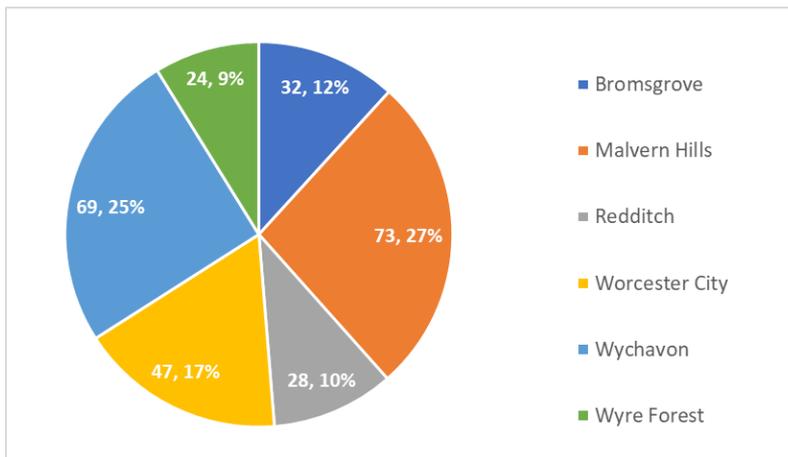
Where mental health support services are required, people recognise the constraints arising from the Covid pandemic, but many find these services difficult to use via telephone where non-verbal information is missing. Every effort should be made to offer in person support if at all possible, and where it is not an option people will need reassurance as to the benefits of the remotely delivered service.

The respondents

Herefordshire residents make up 71% of the responses, 29% from Worcestershire, and within Worcestershire the greatest number of responses were from Malvern Hills and Wychavon.



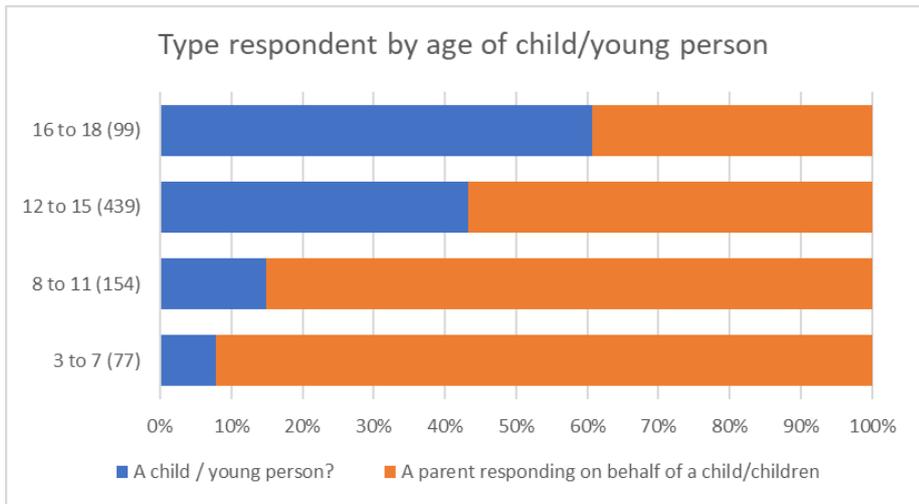
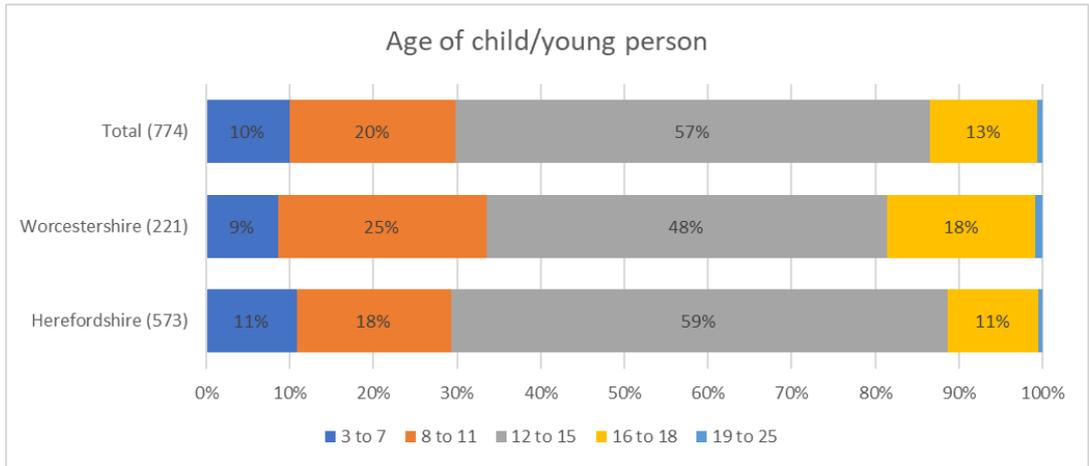
Base: 941 responses



Base: 273 responses

Parents responding on behalf of a child or young person were asked to give the age and gender of the child rather than themselves, however, in some cases the age given was clearly that of the parent and these demographics have been excluded below.

The age breakdown of the children and young people is shown in the chart below, a wide range of ages is covered in both counties. As you would expect, responses from younger children were more likely to be made by parents/guardians on their behalf.

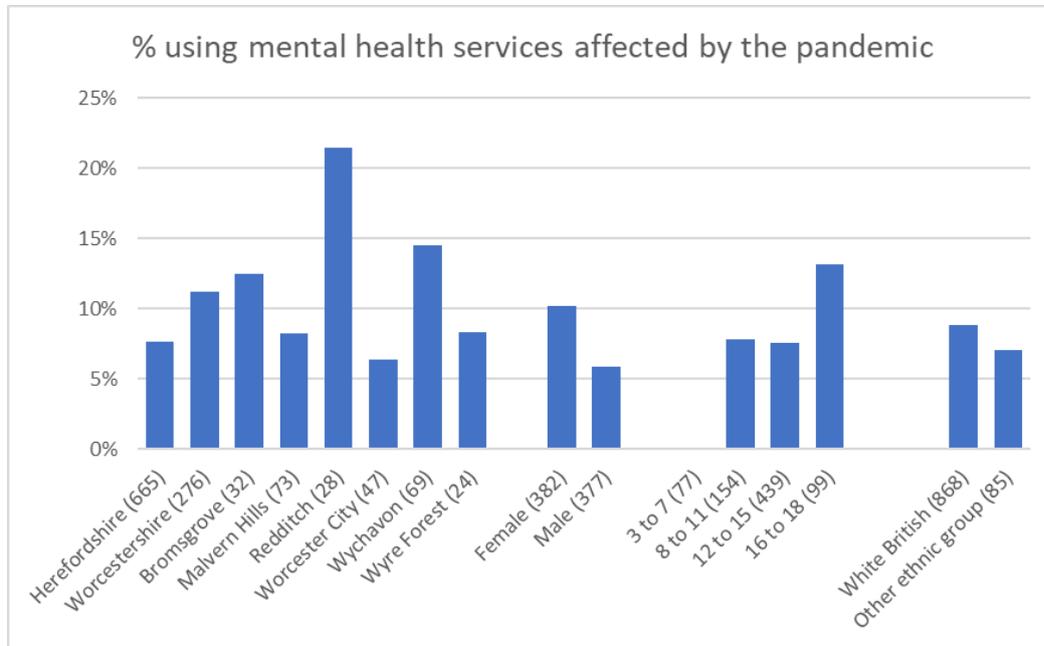


Considering the gender of children and young people (excluding parent respondents apparently giving their own age and gender), 49% were female, 49% male with a small number preferring not to say or self-describe.

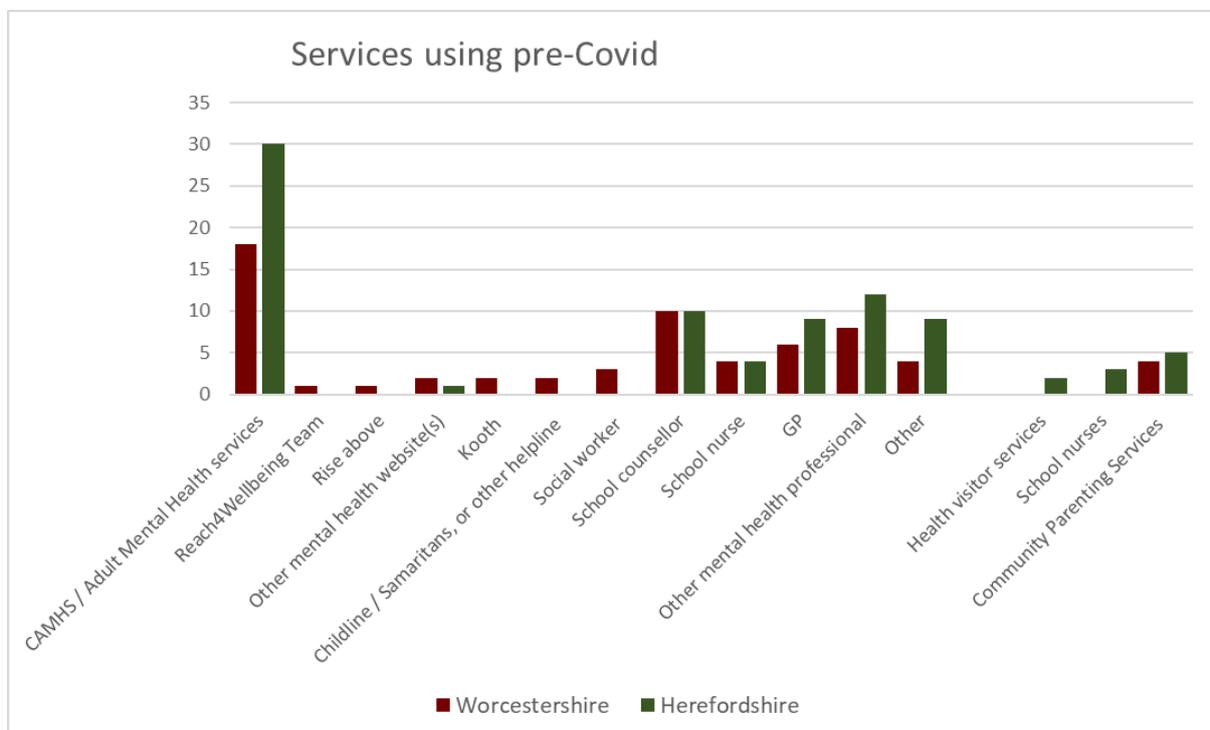
Overall 91% of the respondents were from a White British ethnic background, 3% another white background, 3% from mixed or multiple ethnic groups with very small numbers from Asian, Black, Arab or ethnic groups. Because of the small sample sizes any consideration of differences between ethnicities in the analysis that follows compares the White British respondents and all other groups.

Access to previously available Mental Health Services

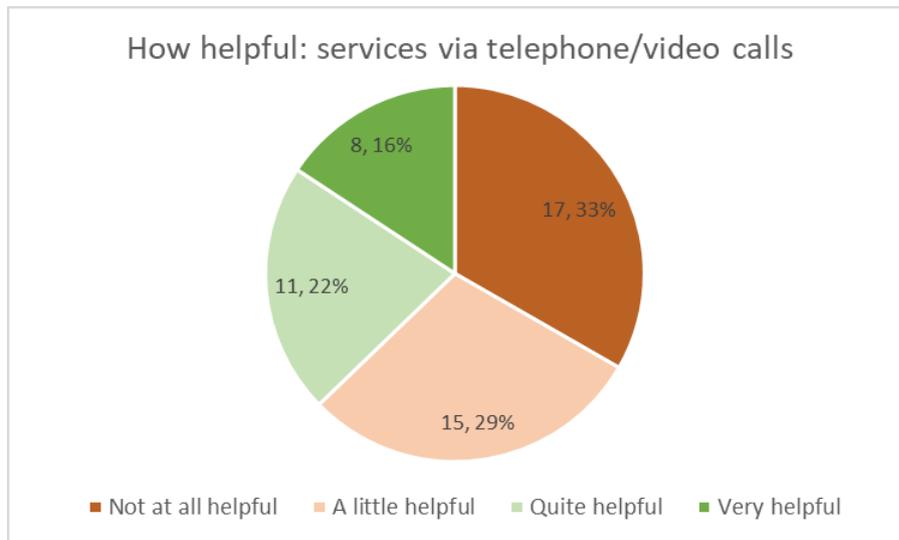
Overall 9% of respondents had previously been using mental health services either not being delivered or delivered differently during the coronavirus pandemic. A slightly higher proportion of Worcestershire residents had been using such services, and their use was more prevalent amongst older teenagers and female respondents.



The specific services used by children and by parents for respondents from the two counties are illustrated below.



Respondents who have been receiving support during the Covid outbreak via telephone and video calls were asked how helpful this has been. The number of responses is small, and response mixed with a third finding this not at all helpful, but almost 4 in 10 finding it quite or very helpful.



Base: 51 responses

46 respondents chose to comment further on why they had selected the response that they did. The table below shows a quantitative analysis of these comments, by grouping comments into categories.

(If you have been continuing to receive support during the Covid outbreak via telephone or video calls, how helpful has that been?) Please can you tell us why you gave this response	Count
Received no/next to no support; Support postponed	12
Challenging to talk/express feelings by telephone; Not the same as seeing someone	11
Contact was effective/reassuring	11
Unable to undertake physical checks/medication review by telephone	3
Different staff each call caused issues	2
Discharged if not use telephone appointment (threat/occurred)	2
Frequent/more frequent contact	2
Further support identified; Referral made	2
Infrequent/less frequent contact	2
Not as effective; better than nothing	2
Telephone support declined by young person/parent	2
Language barrier caused issues	1
Logistical issues - counsellors not having access to records, illness causing cancellations etc	1
Longer waiting times	1
Telephone support inappropriate - hearing issues	1

Those who found services via telephone/video calls not at all helpful were most likely to indicate that they received no/next to no support or that support was postponed (7) and that talking on the telephone was challenging or not the same as seeing someone (4). One parent of a child with ASD

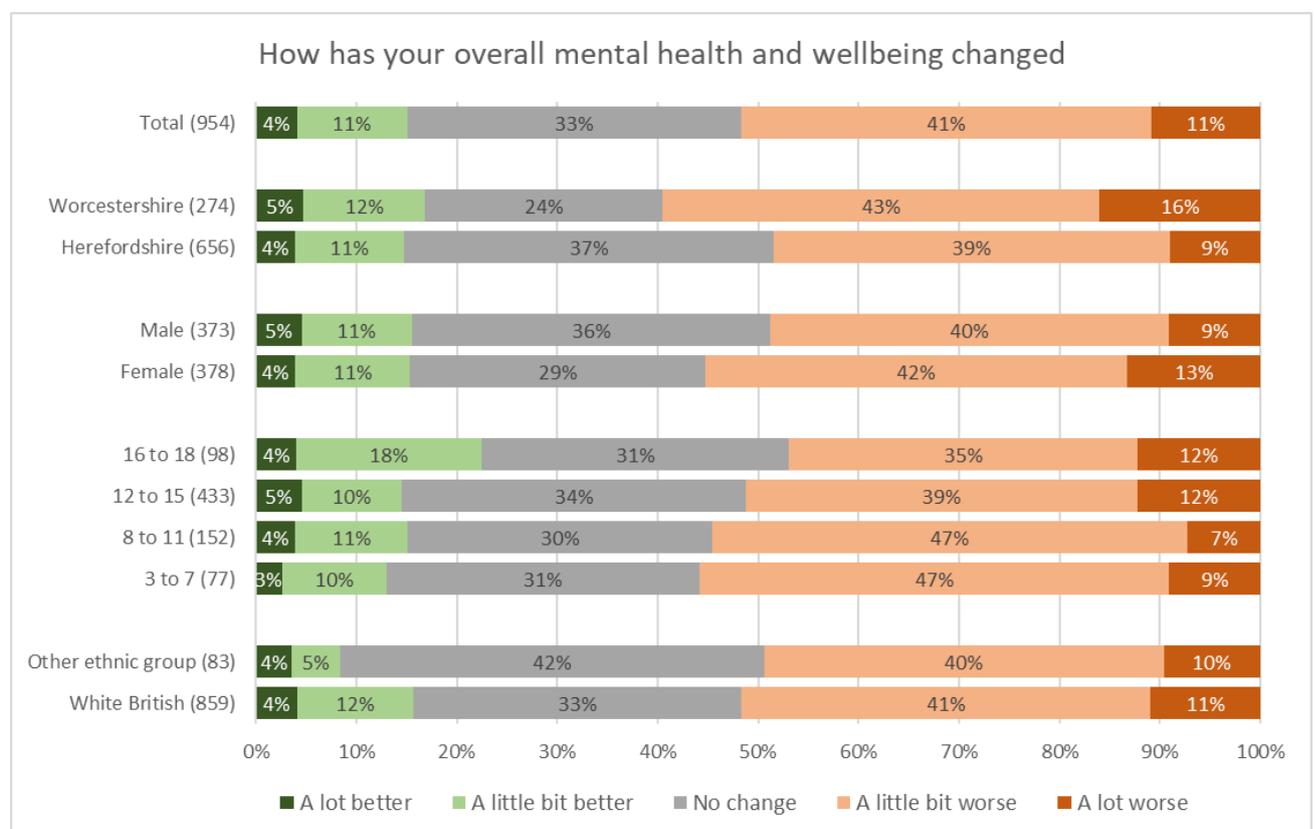
noted that the disorder meant their child found it difficult to communicate via telephone calls which had a negative effect on their mental health.

Some of the reasons respondents noted that telephone calls were challenging was because children found them awkward, they weren't able to let their facial expressions communicate their feelings, they lacked concentration, and struggled to engage due to ASD.

Covid-19 effect on mental health and wellbeing

When asked about their overall mental health and wellbeing, overall just 15% of respondents say this has got better since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, 52% say it has got worse.

Worcestershire respondents are more likely to say things have got worse, and more girls than boys have experienced a negative change. Older teenagers are the most likely to say that their mental health and wellbeing has got a little bit better.



Participants were invited to comment on why their mental health mental health and wellbeing had improved, worsened or remained consistent. The following three tables group these comments into categories.

The first table shows those comments where the respondent indicated the child or young person's mental health and wellbeing was a little or a lot better since the start of the outbreak. It is worth noting that both positive and negative comments were made from this group. Negative comments were generally balanced by positive comments. Negative comment categories are shown in red in the table below.

How has your overall mental health and wellbeing changed since the start of the coronavirus outbreak? Response: A little bit better / A lot better	Count
Please can you tell us why you gave this response	
Home-schooling preferable (due to working at own pace; no distractions; less pressure; less work; being away from teachers; improved behaviour); does not like school	58
No/less stress; less rushing; fewer demands on time; more relaxed	40
More time with family/at home	30
More time for: hobbies; interests; playing; exercise; improve oneself; reflection	20
Enjoy time on own; enjoy reduced social interactions	17
More time outdoors	13
Exams cancelled – relief; less pressure; no need to revise	9
Less tired; getting more sleep; getting better sleep; don't have to get up early	8
Break from normality; chance to look at things differently	2
Home-schooling worse (change in routine/work hard) (negative)	2
Less travel time; less time in the car	2
Miss friends, but still able to contact	2
Lockdown is now easing	1
Miss taking part in activities (negative)	1
Safe from the virus	1
Started medication	1
Unable to socialise (negative)	1

Those respondents that indicated the child or young person's mental health and wellbeing had not changed since the start of the outbreak gave both positive and negative comments. 24 of the 173 indicated that the reason for their response was because negative and positive impacts on their mental health and wellbeing were balanced, resulting in no overall change. Many respondents commented that they felt fine, and 'no change' was from a baseline of good mental health and wellbeing.

How has your overall mental health and wellbeing changed since the start of the coronavirus outbreak? Response: No Change	Count
Please can you tell us why you gave this response	
Fine; Seems fine; no change in mental health; Coronavirus not affected CYP much; Coping well	95
Enjoys more home/family/play/hobbies time; feels safe at home	25
Balanced negatives & positives; both ups & downs	21
Well supported by family	23
Happier without school; enjoying home-schooling; enjoying slower pace; not worried about exams; social anxiety improved	16
Keeping routine/busy; able to balance study, exercise and rest; coping with school work	16
Still able to contact friends/family remotely	16
Miss friends/teachers	11
Adapted; mitigated (e.g. with exercise/games etc)	9
Bored at times	6

Break from things don't enjoy; like a holiday	6
School work (i.e. home-schooling) currently causes stress	6
Limited understanding of situation (learning difficulties)	1
Miss taking part in activities	1
Relationships between other family members deteriorated	1
Sometimes feel sick	1

The most frequent comment (170) given by those whose mental health and wellbeing had worsened since the start of the outbreak was that this was due to social isolation. This was followed by concerns over school work and home-schooling. Comments were mixed; some gave the cause of the deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing and others described the feelings and behaviours in which this deterioration presented: anxiety; less regulated emotions; disrupted sleep; reduced motivation; frustration; depression; and boredom were the most frequent of these.

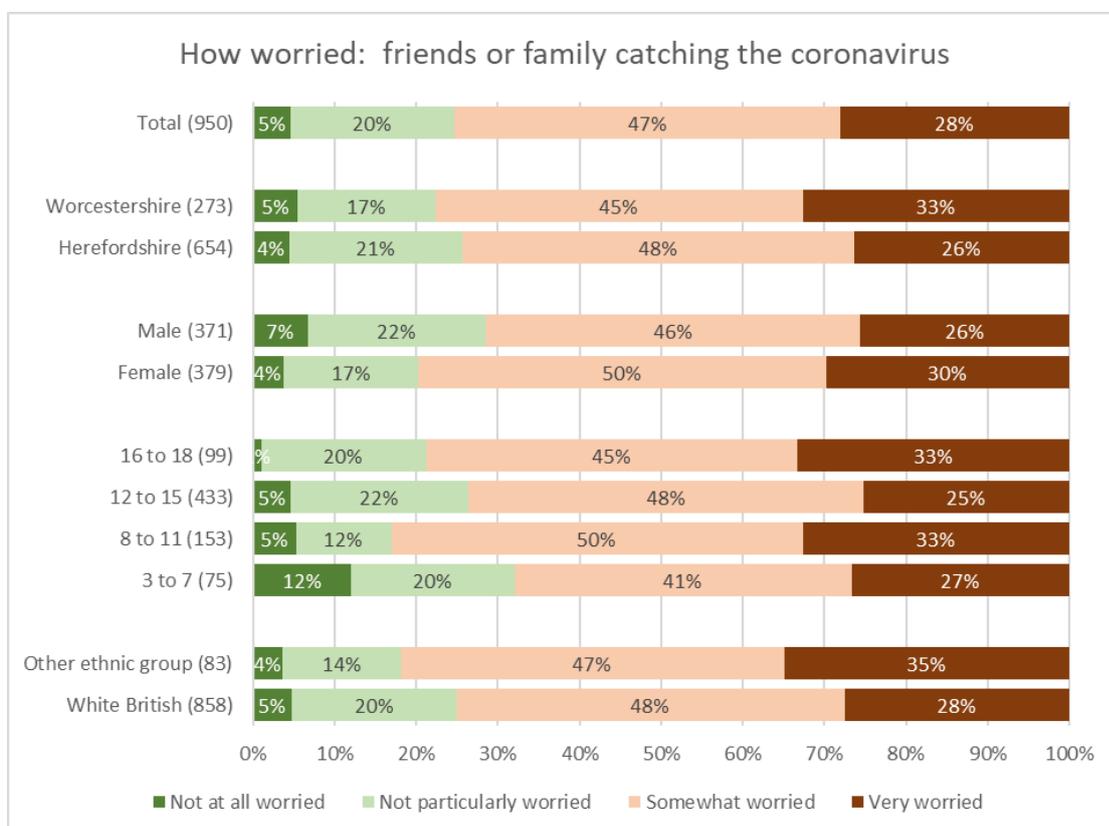
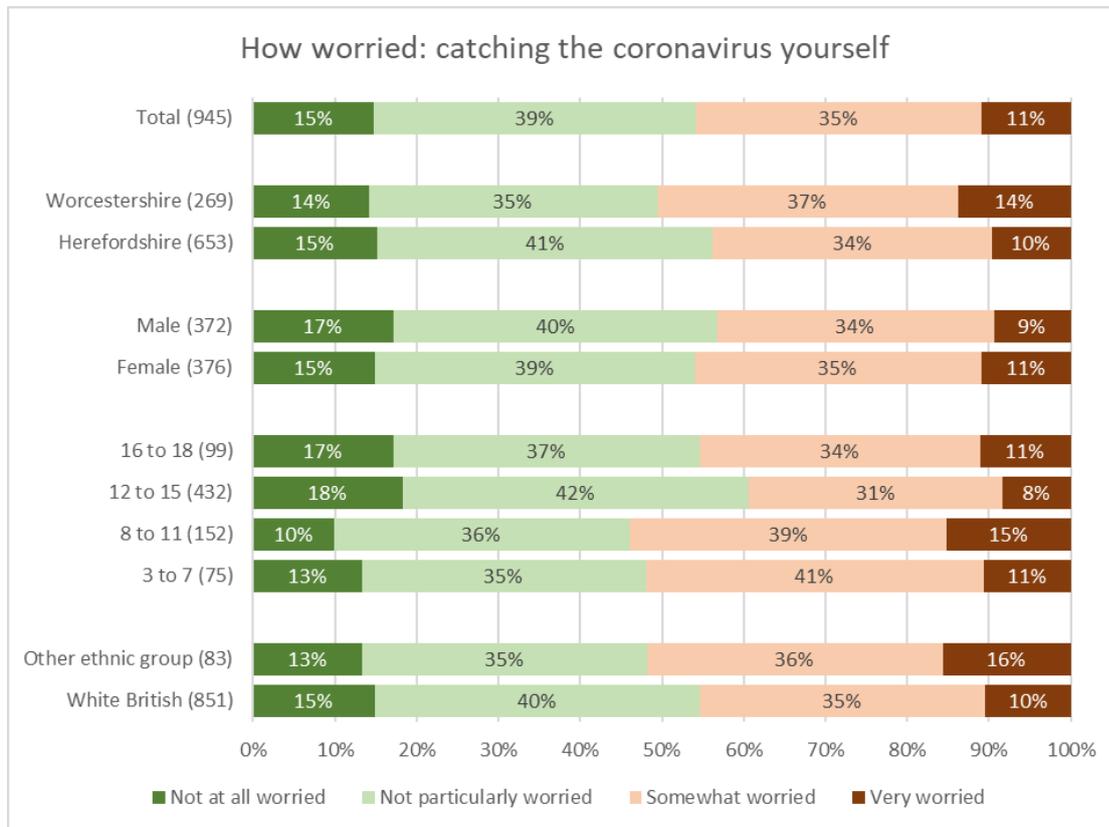
It is worth noting that both positive and negative comments were made from this group. Positive comments were generally balanced by negative comments. The two positive comment categories are shown in green in the table below.

How has your overall mental health and wellbeing changed since the start of the coronavirus outbreak? Response: A little bit worse / A lot worse	Count
Please can you tell us why you gave this response	
Missing family/friends; loneliness; isolation; lack of social interaction	170
School work: working remotely; pace; volume; lack of support; missed exams; grades; deadlines; lack of mental stimulation; parent pressure on CYP to complete	91
Anxious/stressed; anxiety attacks; needs more reassurance; worries; scared	72
Disruption to routine; lack of structure; miss school; change	68
Fear of contracting or spreading virus; worry about family/friends dying	39
Struggling with emotional self-regulation; mood swings; emotions higher; tearful; harder to cope; grumpy	39
Loss of freedom; Lack of variety in surroundings; feel trapped; unable to get away from family	37
Sleep difficult/disrupted; night terrors; more tired	34
Lack of motivation; lack of focus; lack of purpose; lethargic	33
Frustration; quick to anger; argumentative; tantrums	29
Missing out (e.g. holiday, activities); not enough exercise	26
Uncertainty in future; worried about future	21
Depressed; low mood; down	18
Fear of/unwilling to leave the house/socialise	18
Lack of support/care available (e.g. medication review, referral)	13
Less distractions; overthinking; more time with thoughts; questioning sexuality	11
Thought of returning to school; what school will be like	11
Bored; Fed up	10
Behavioural issues; disruptive; regressed	9
self-harming; diet restrictions; change in eating habits; developed tics	9
Retreated; become introverted; withdrawn; socially awkward	8

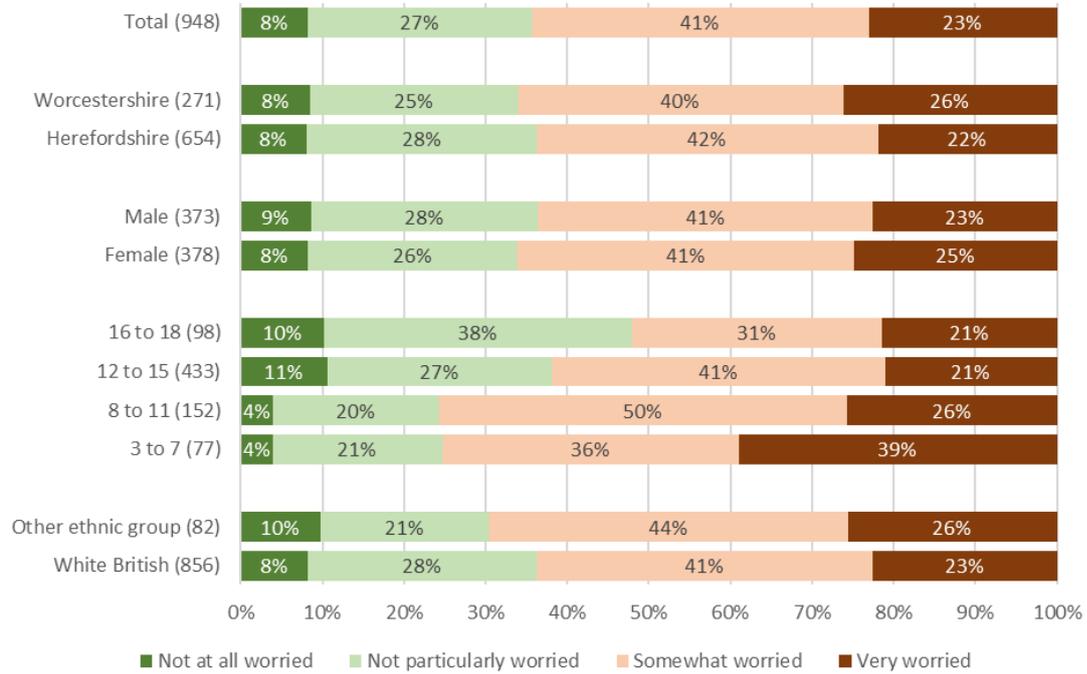
COVID rules/restrictions hard to understand	7
Family/friend/pet bereavement/extremely ill	5
Longevity of lockdown; monotony	5
Negativity; negative views	5
Eye issues from screen use; overuse of technology/screens	4
OCD intrusive thoughts; Suicidal thoughts	4
Helpful: being at home/remote schooling (pace, away from other children, time with family, feel safe)	3
Parents mental health suffering - affect child	3
Regular physical pain (e.g headaches, tummy aches)	3
Violent/Aggressive	3
Feel invisible/useless	1
Helpful: control over sleep routines	1
Struggling despite support	1

Parents of children diagnosed with conditions such as ASD, ADHD and Asperger Syndrome had differing experiences during lockdown, although more commonly the period had proved challenging for the child and family. One parent commented that their children with ADHD, autism/ASD, attachment disorder and sensory integration challenges have struggled to cope with the change in routine and their family have found this period challenging. However, another parent noted that their child with Severe Attachment Disorder, learning delay and mobility issues had found home-schooling preferable. Two parents of children with Autism said that their children either preferred being at home due to social anxiety at school, or was anxious at the thought of having to return to school. One parent of a child with Asperger Syndrome noted that their child's anxiety had reduced due to not having to go to school, whilst a teenager with Asperger Syndrome noted that the lack of routine had caused their mental health to deteriorate, including self-harming behaviour.

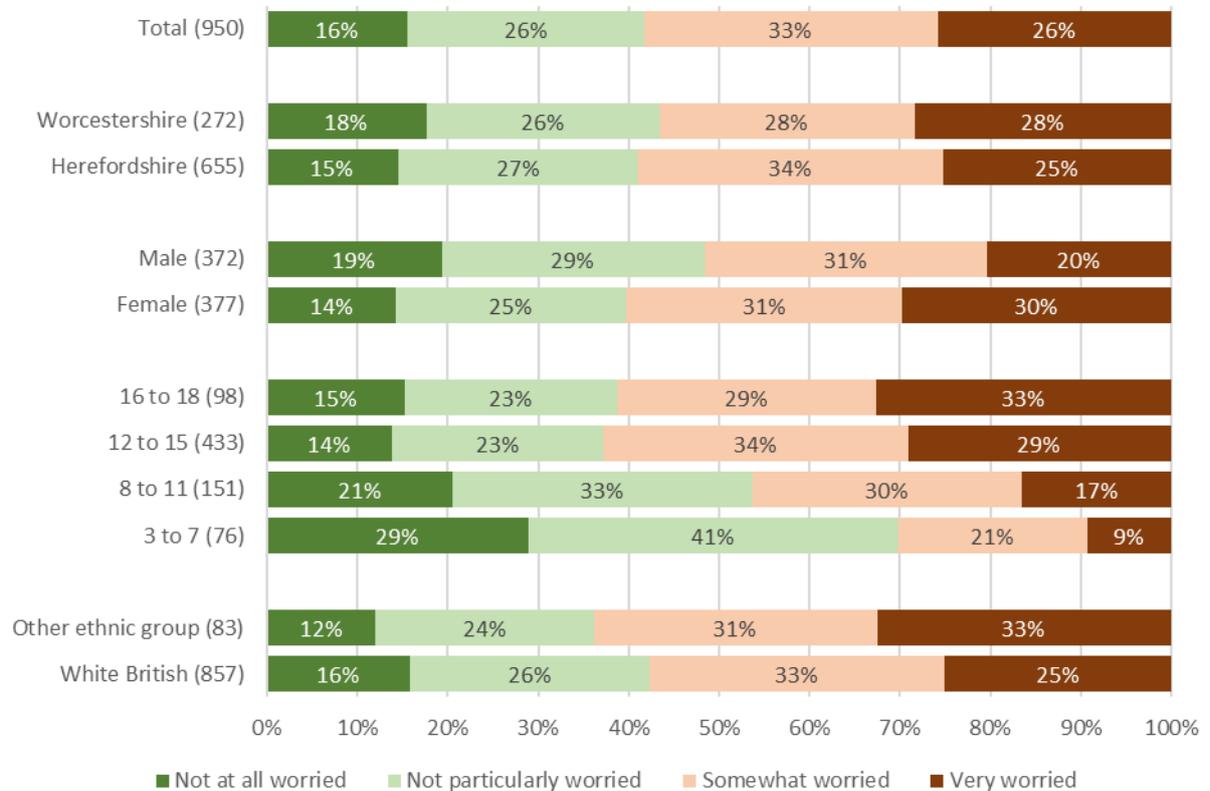
Respondents were asked a series of questions about how worried they were about certain aspects of their mental health and wellbeing, the charts below illustrate variation in responses across demographic and geographic groups.



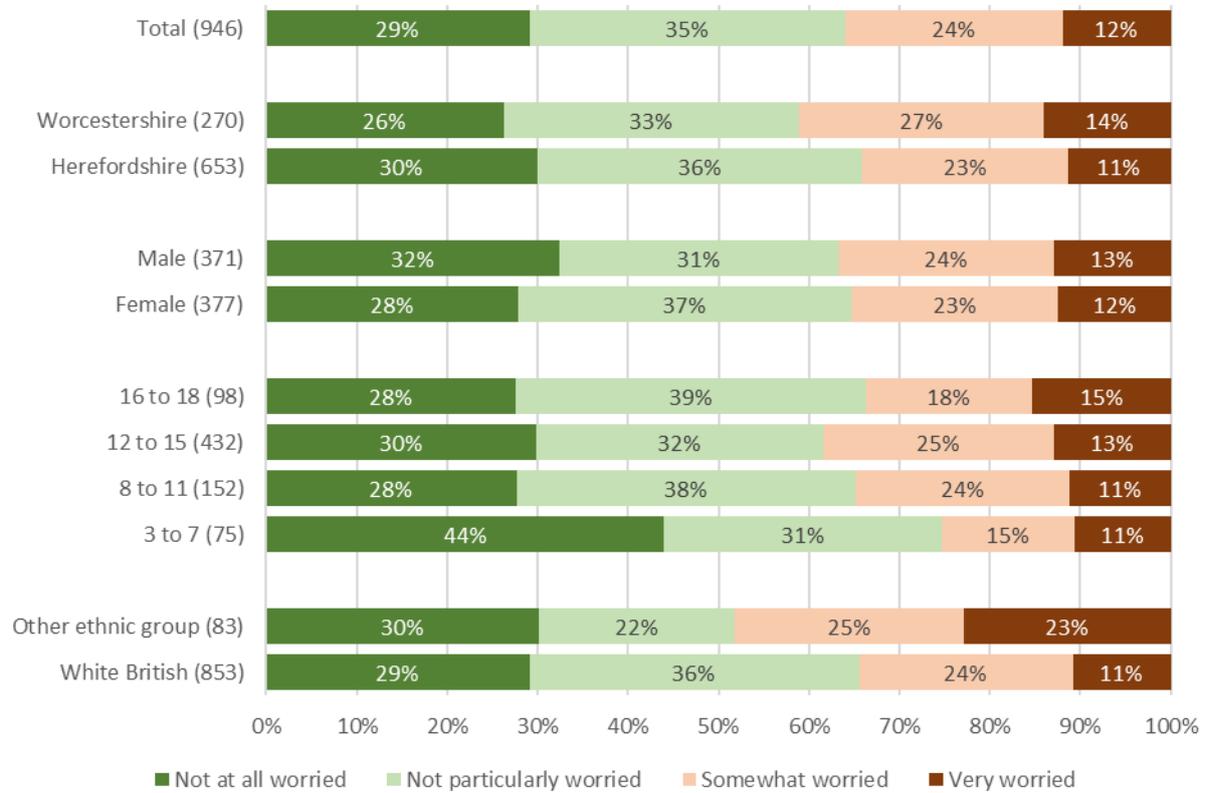
How worried: not meeting friends and family outside your household



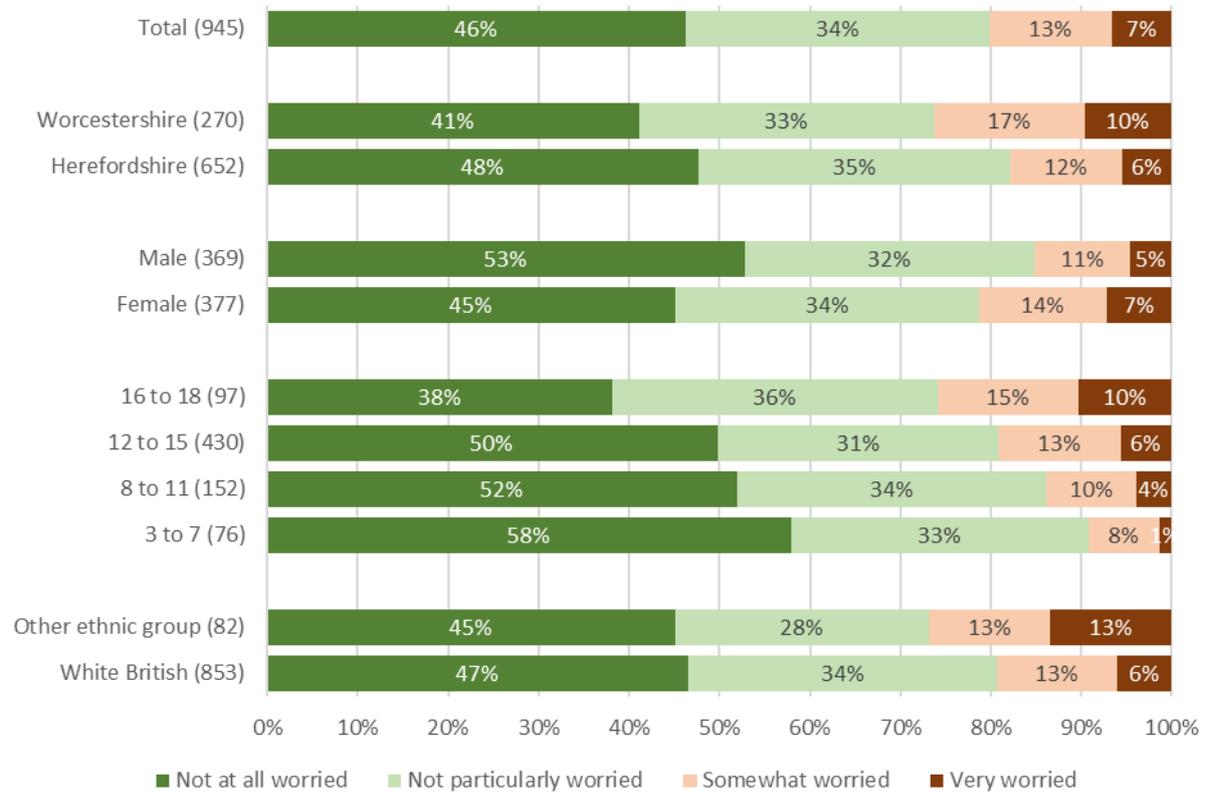
How worried: school work / grades suffering



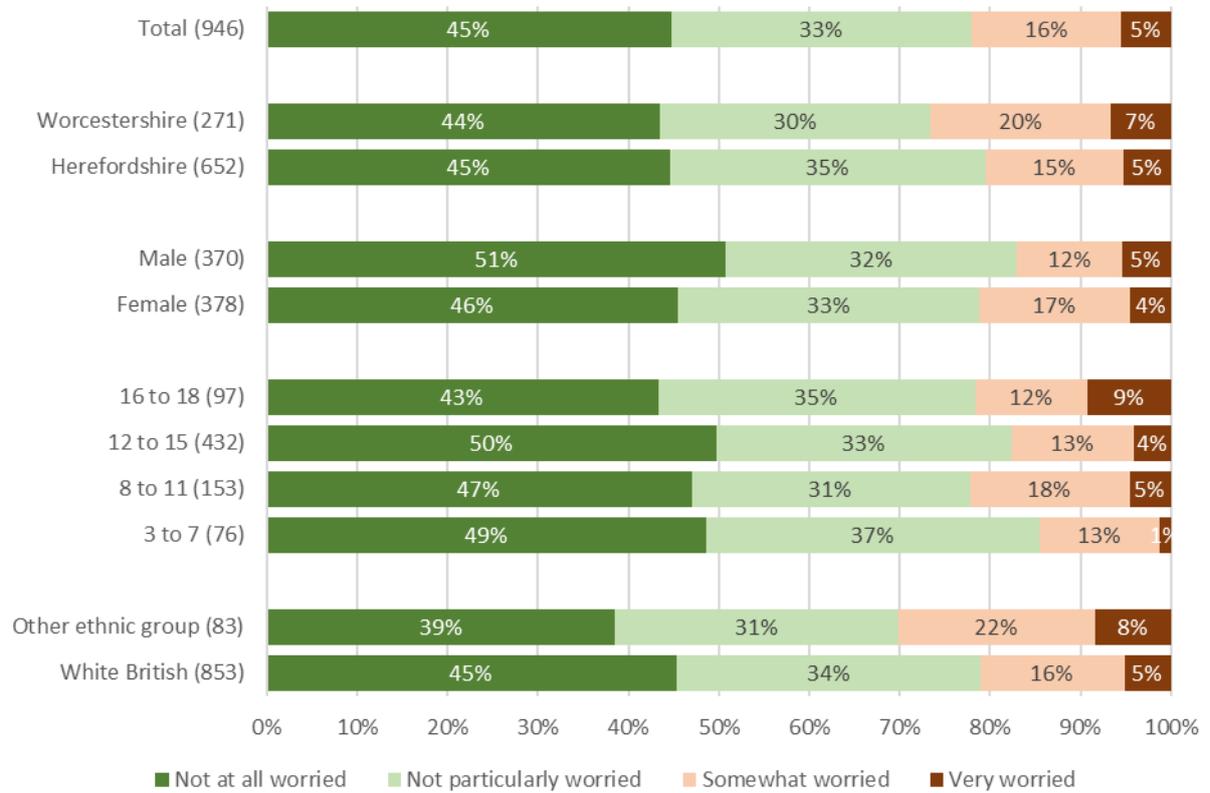
How worried: lack of exercise / outdoor activities



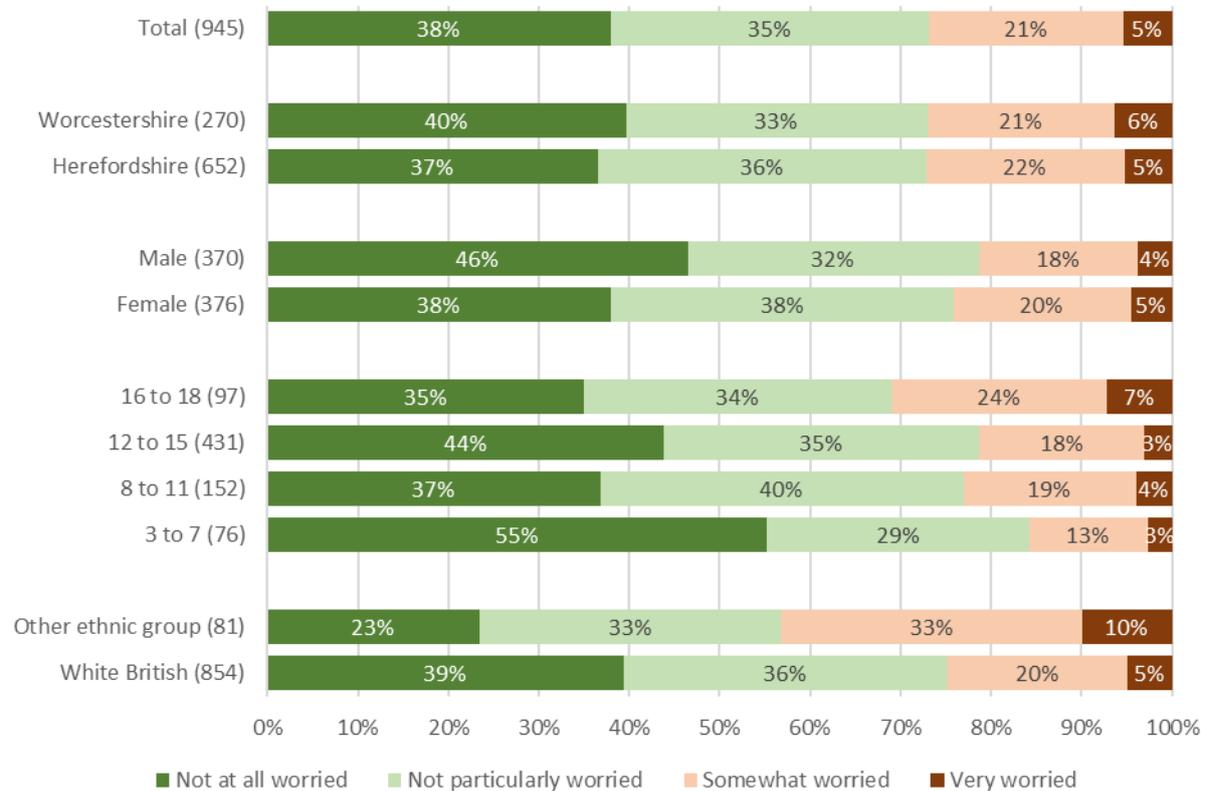
How worried: lack of access to mental health support



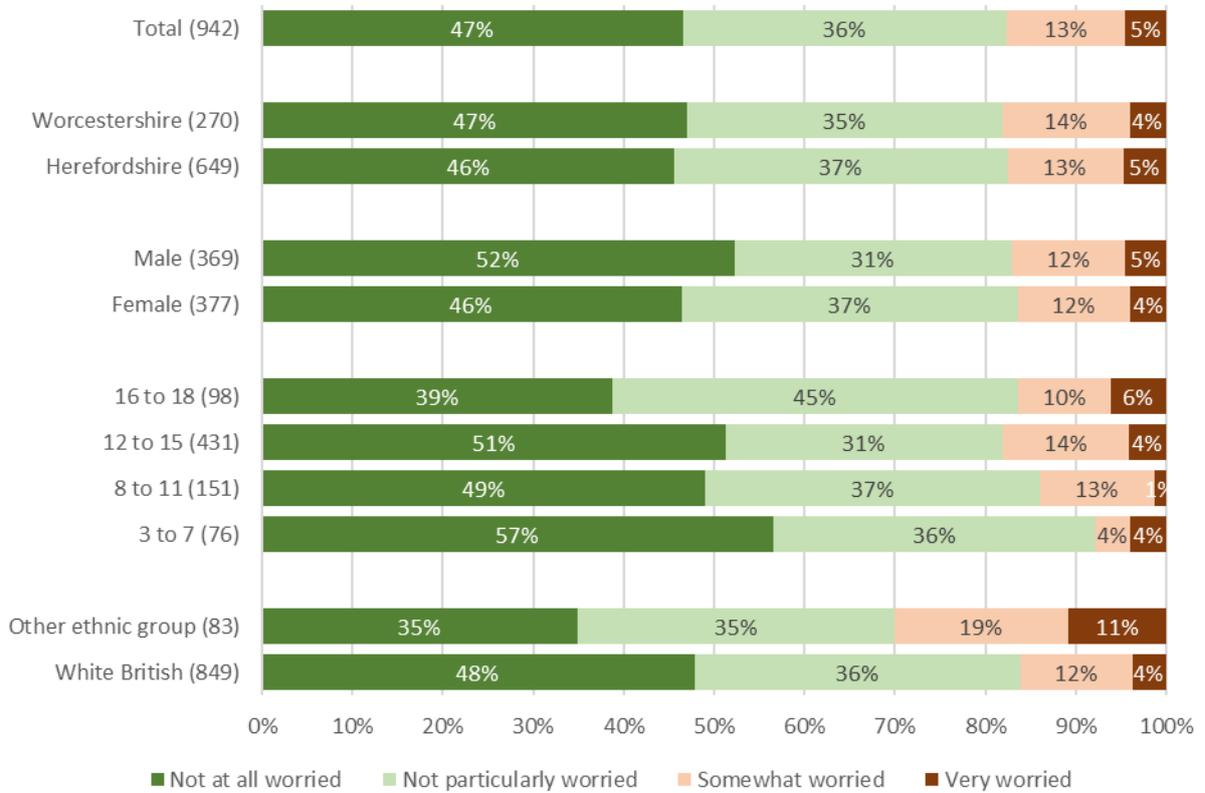
How worried: lack of access to school pastoral support



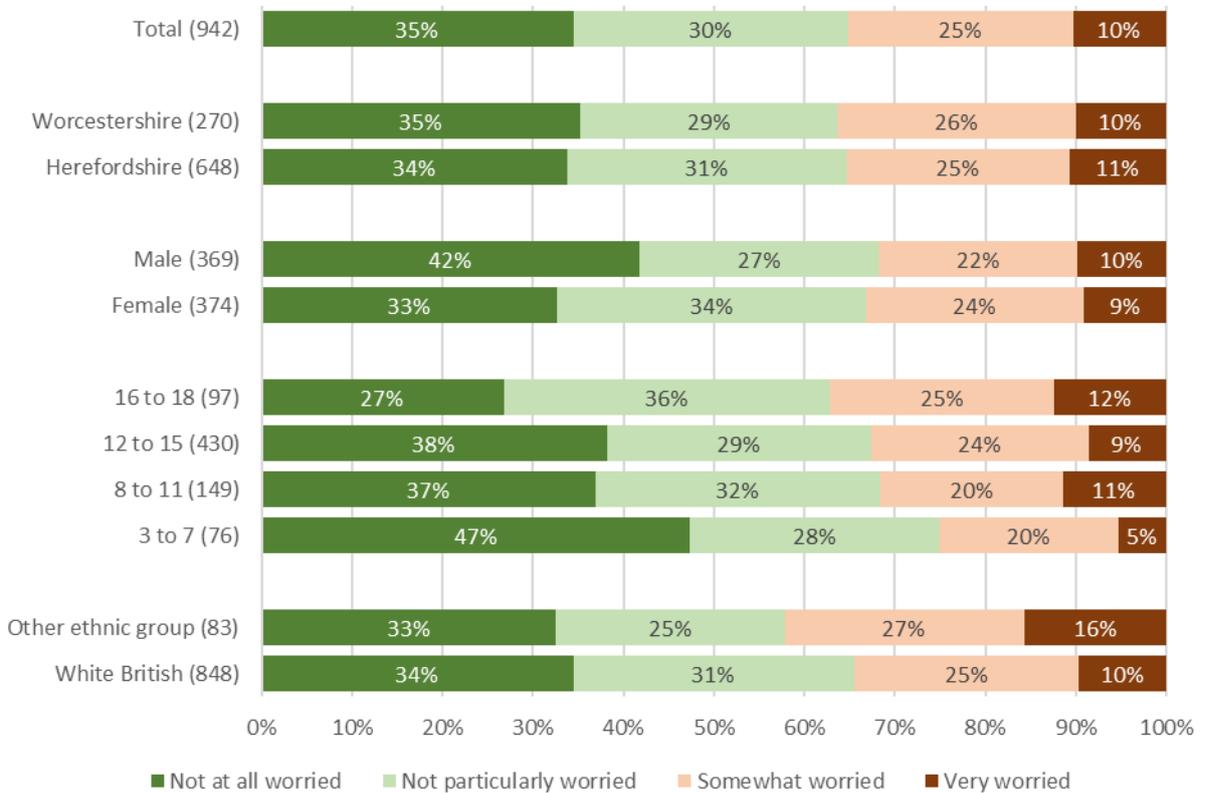
How worried: lack of access to GP support



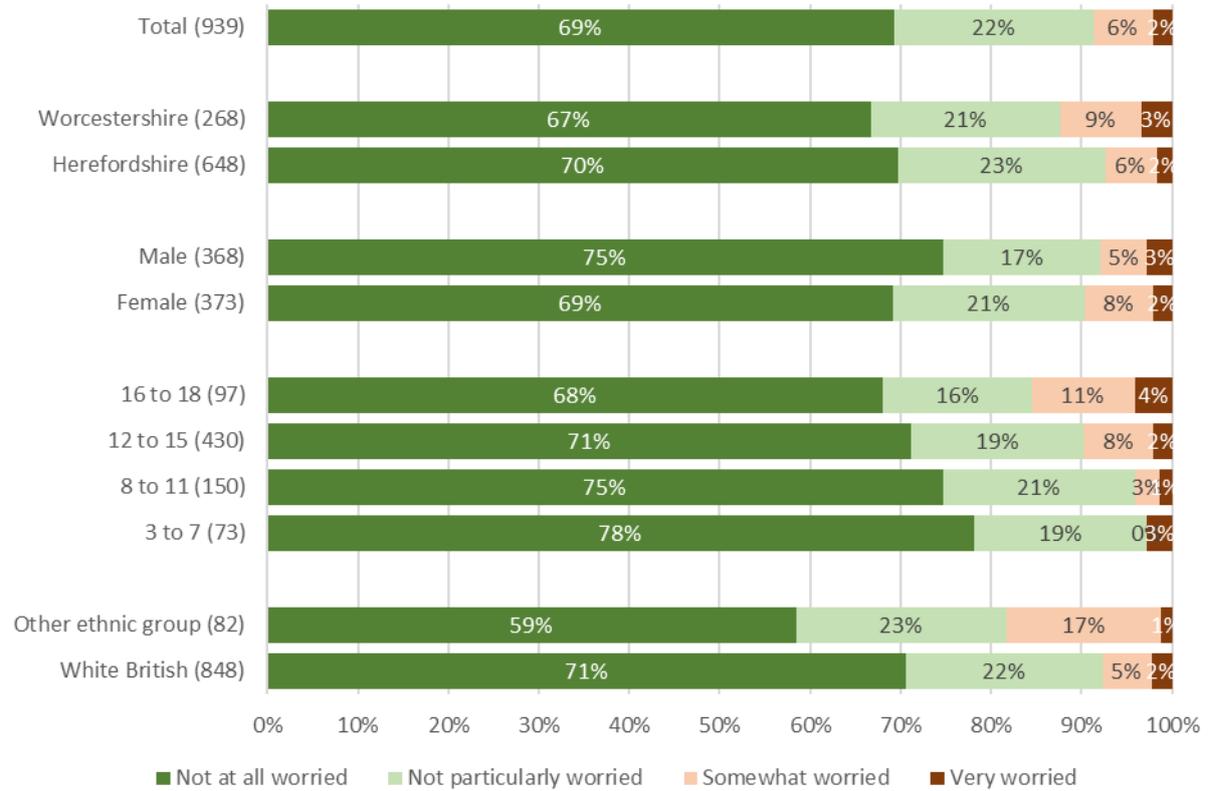
How worried: lack of access to physical health support



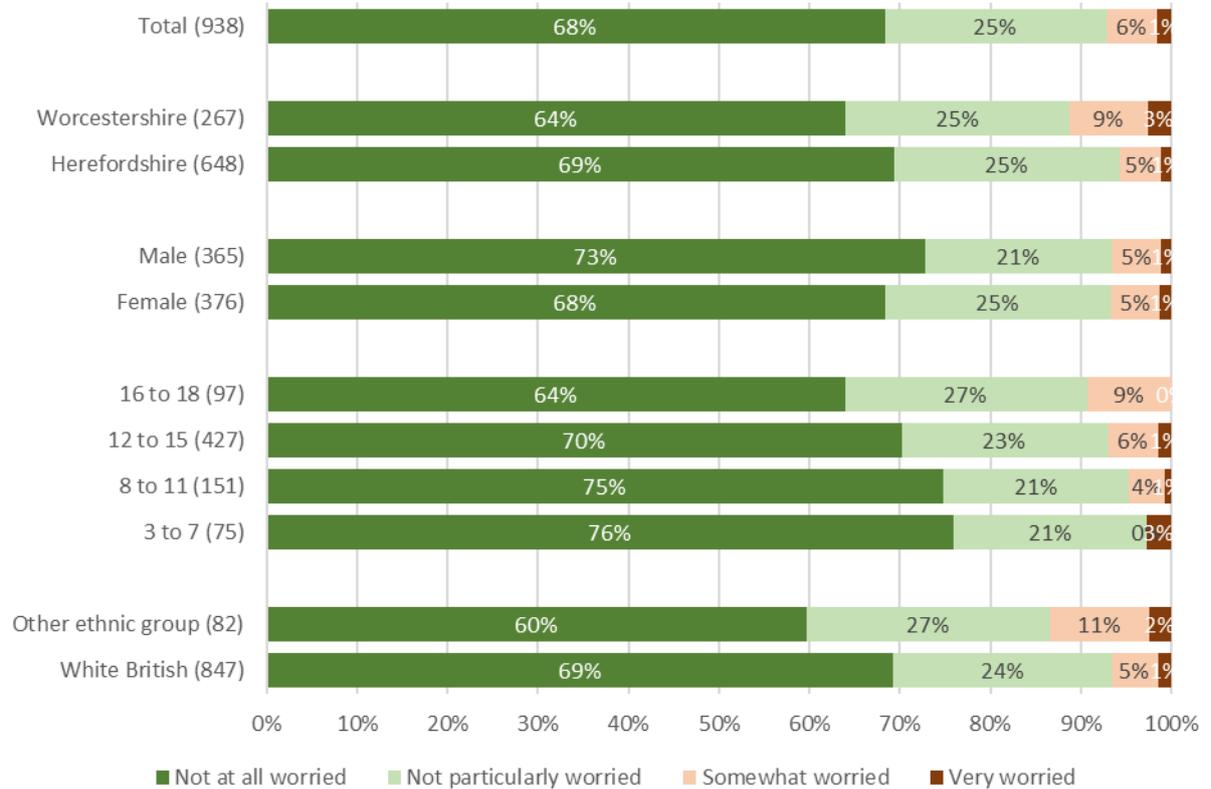
How worried: loss or reduction of income



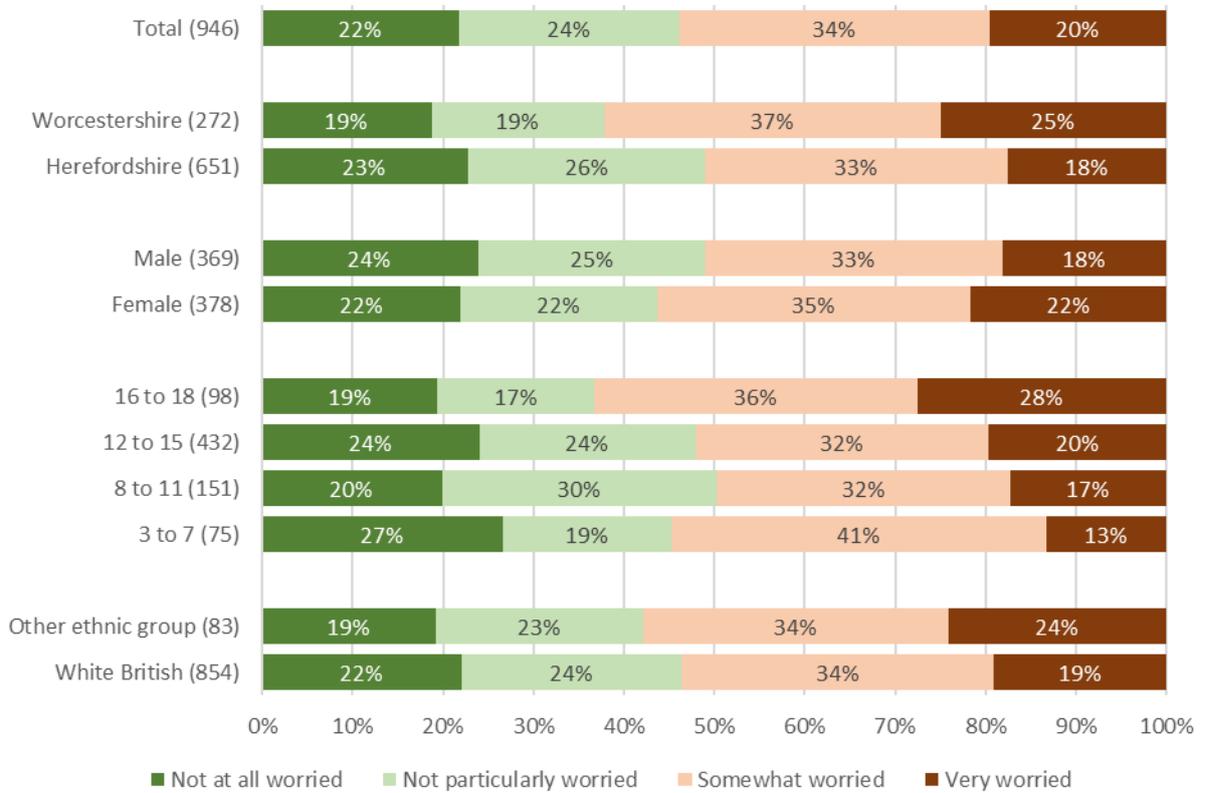
How worried: crowded or unsafe home life



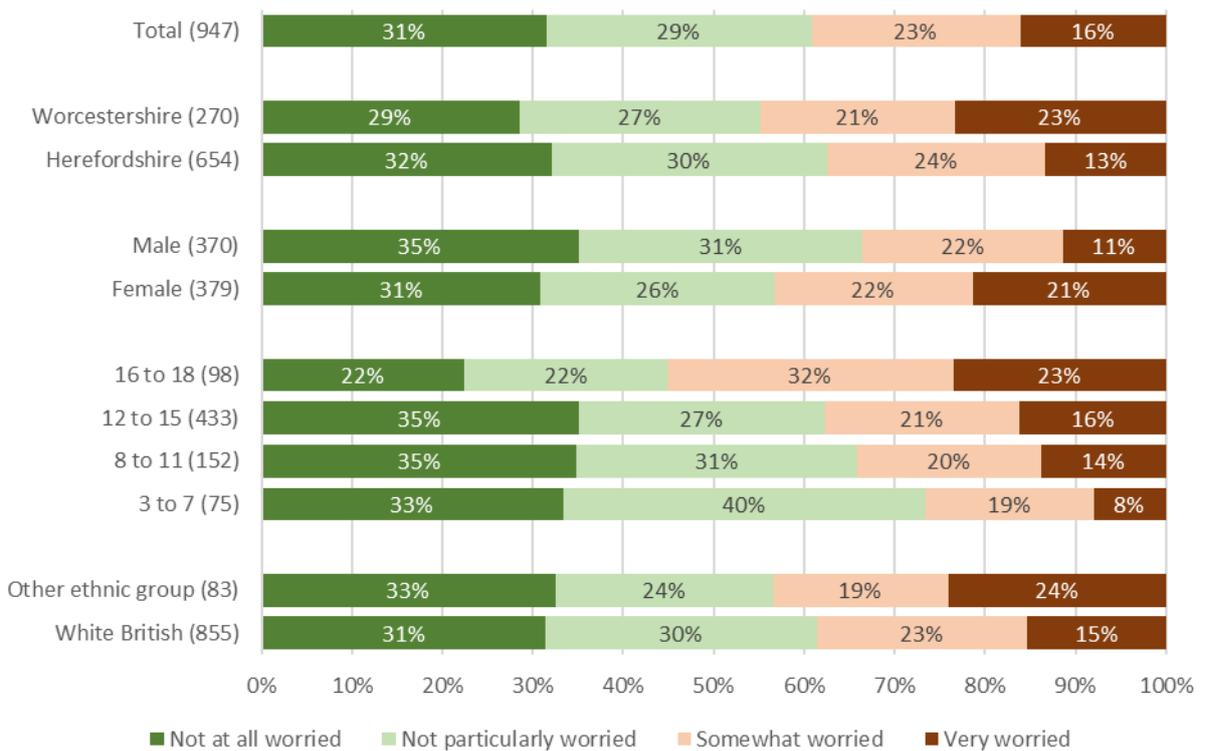
How worried: lack of good nutritious food



How worried: lack of freedom / loss of routine

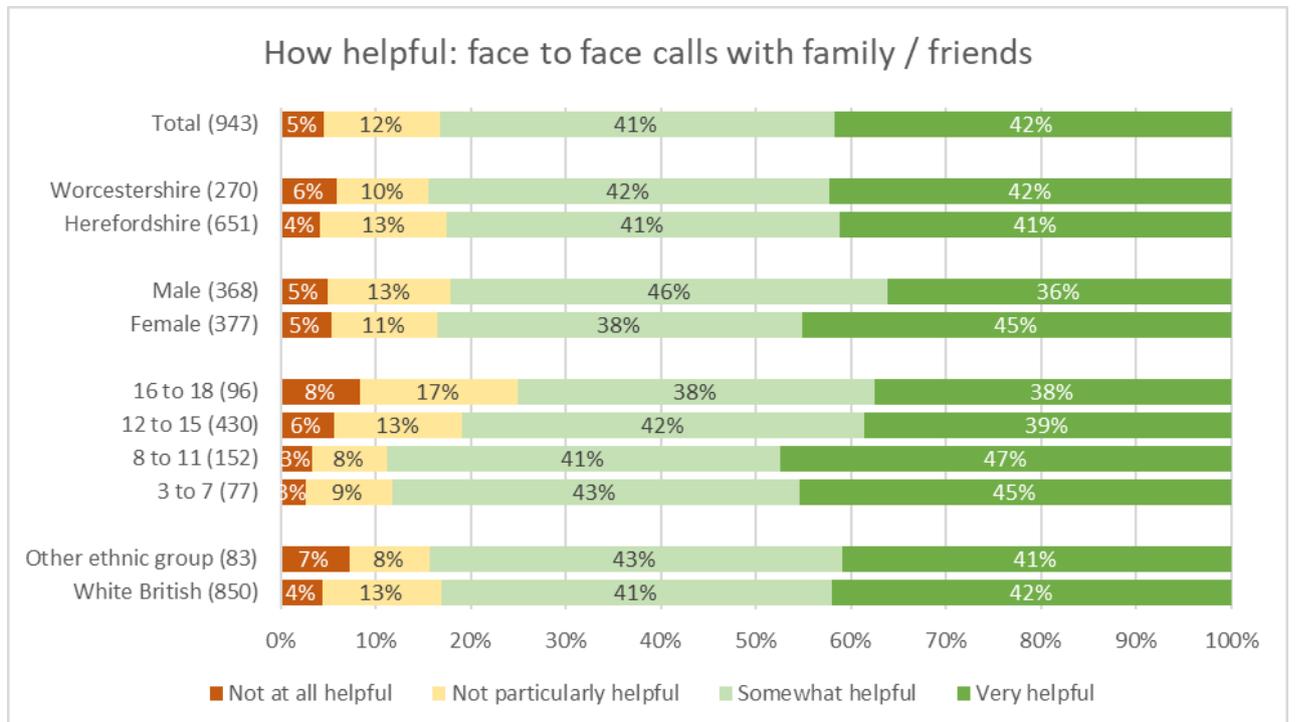
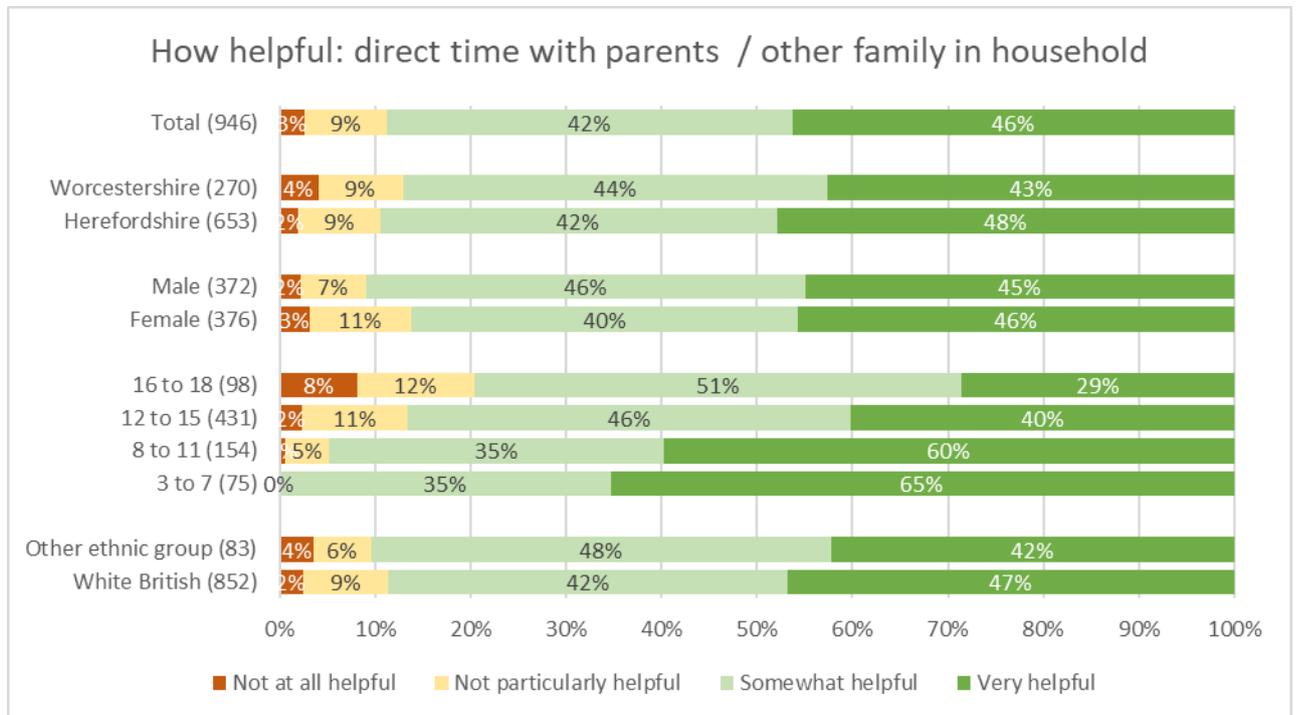


How worried: not being able to talk face-to-face about problems

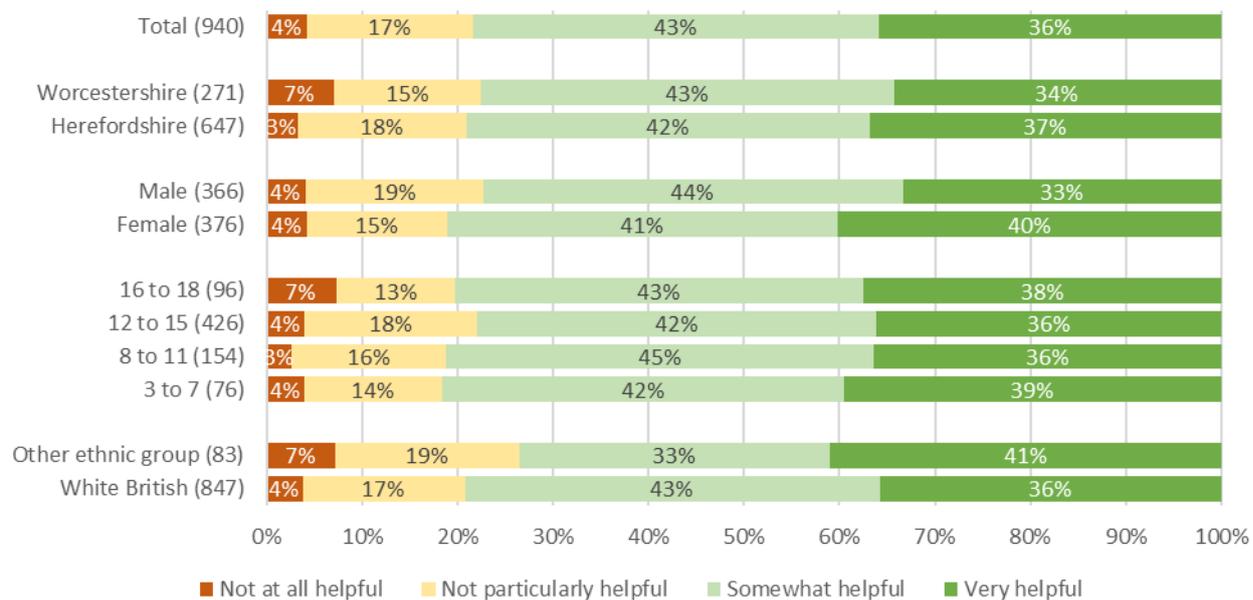


Activities to improve mental health and wellbeing

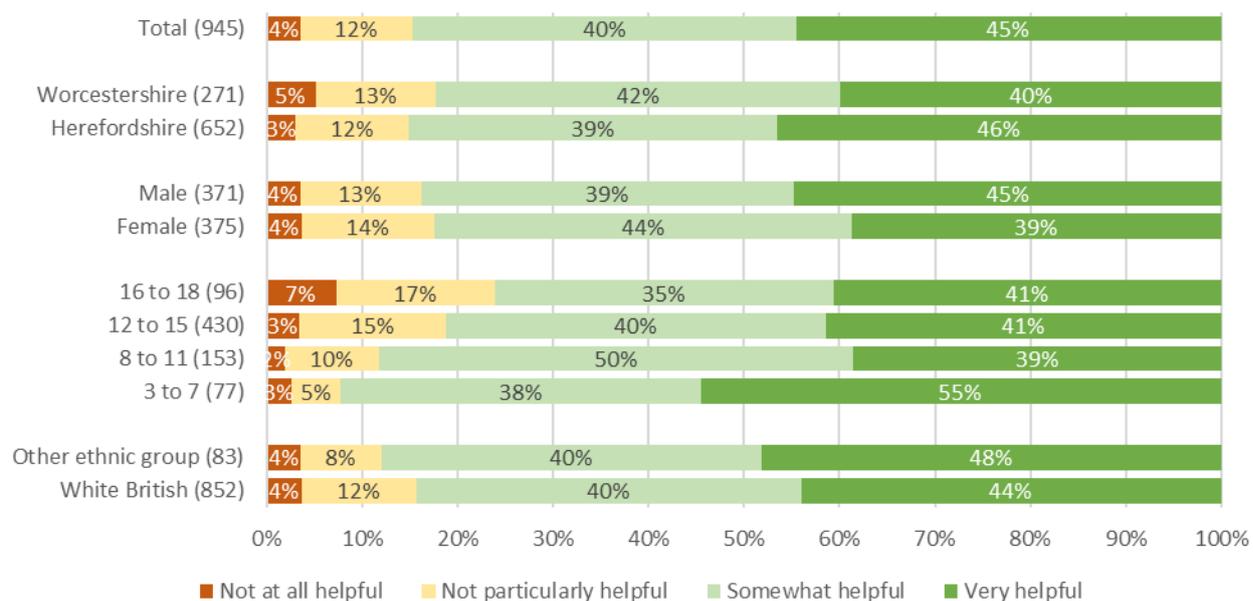
Respondents were then asked a series of questions about how helpful they had found various activities during the coronavirus pandemic, again the charts below illustrate variation in responses across demographic and geographic groups.



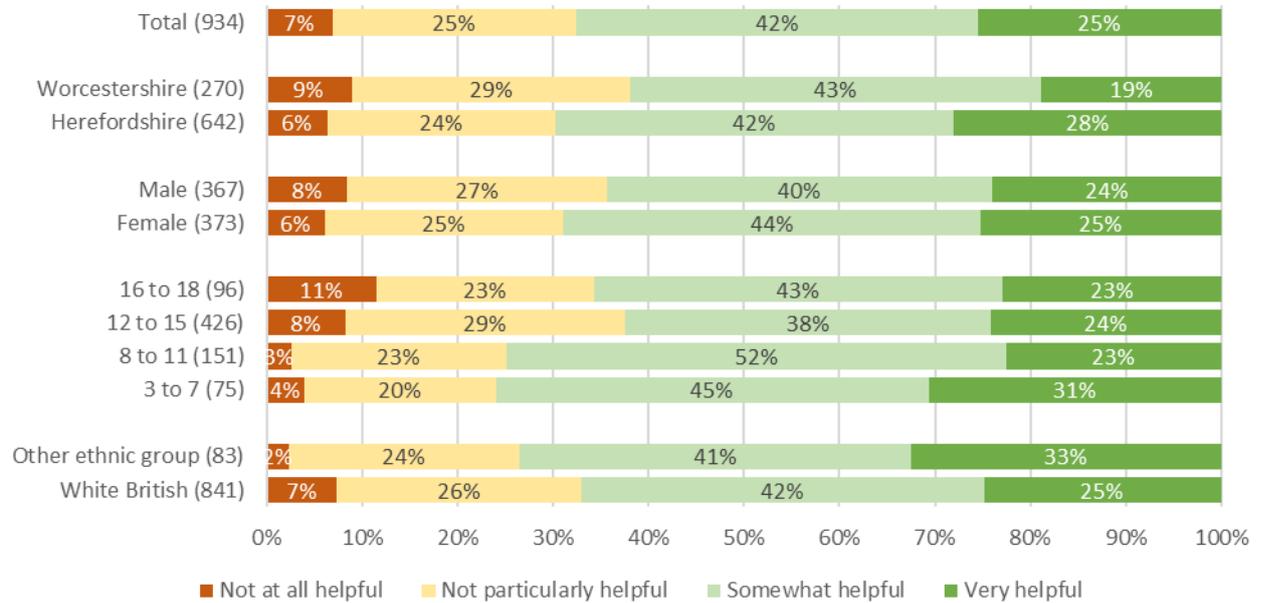
How helpful: watching TV/films



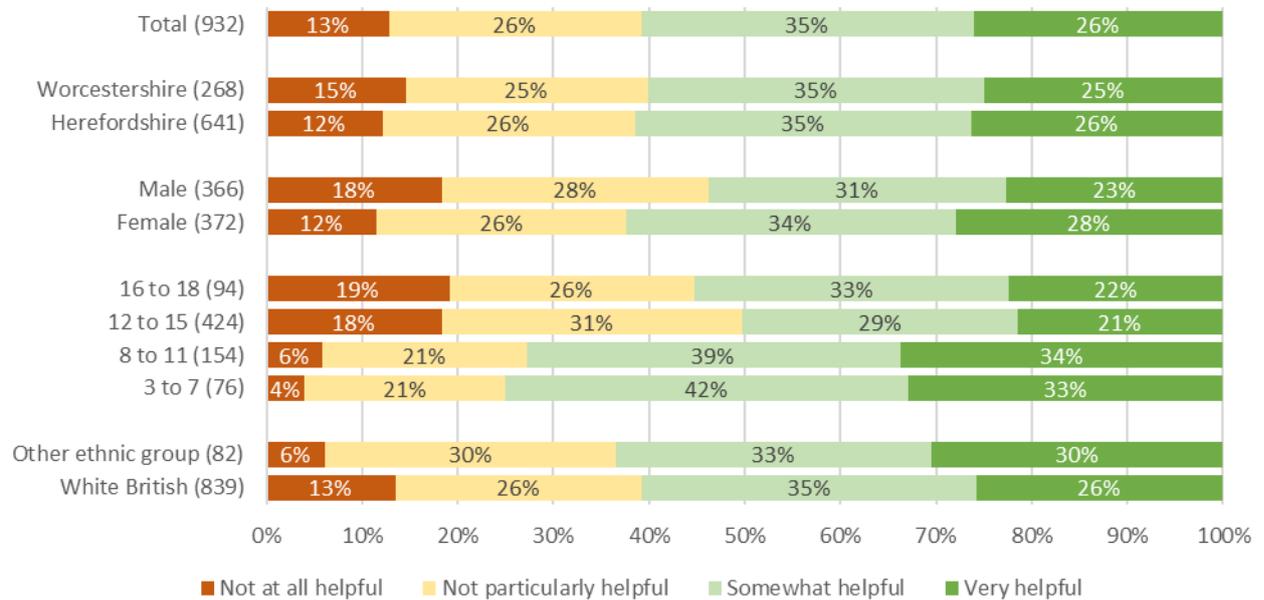
How helpful: exercise



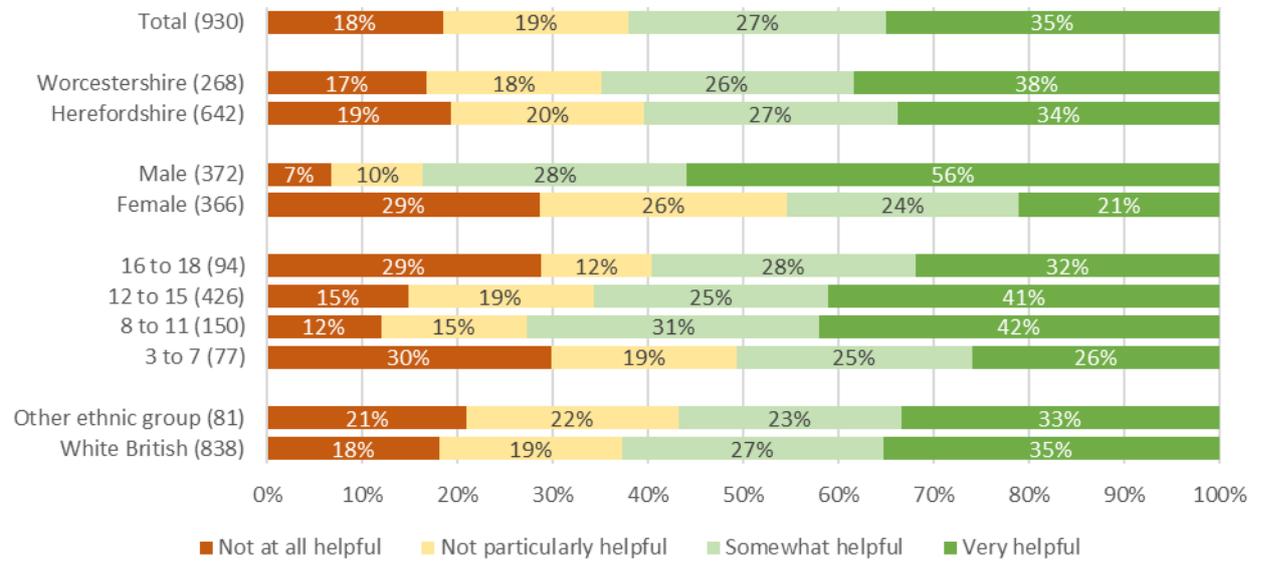
How helpful: learning new skills



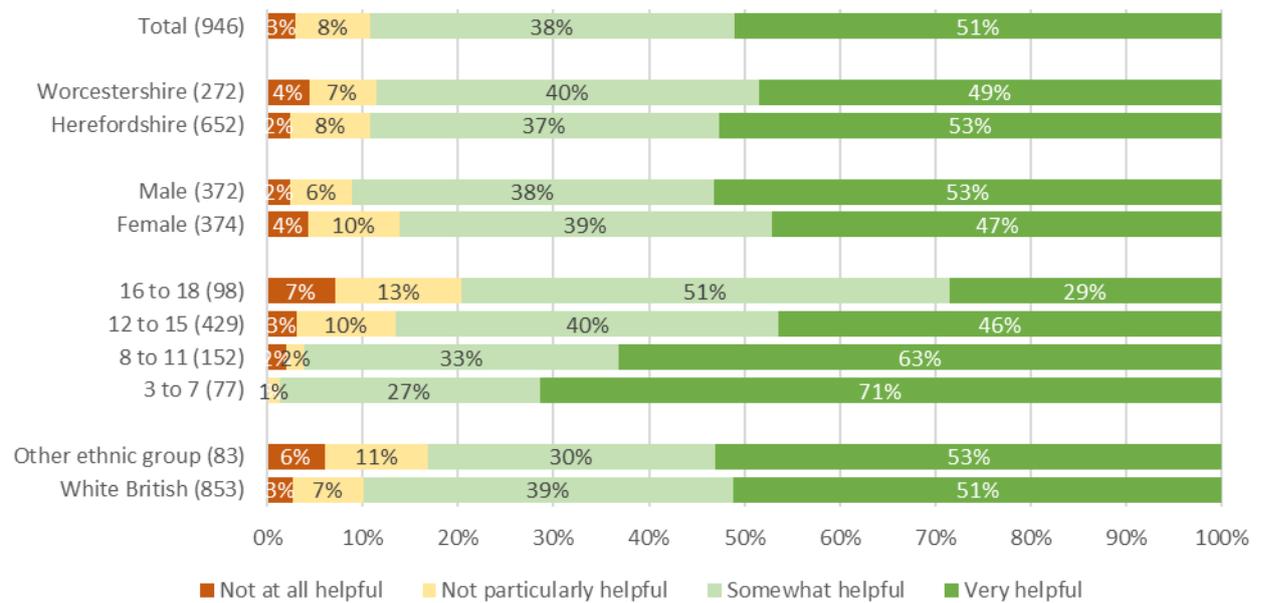
How helpful: reading books



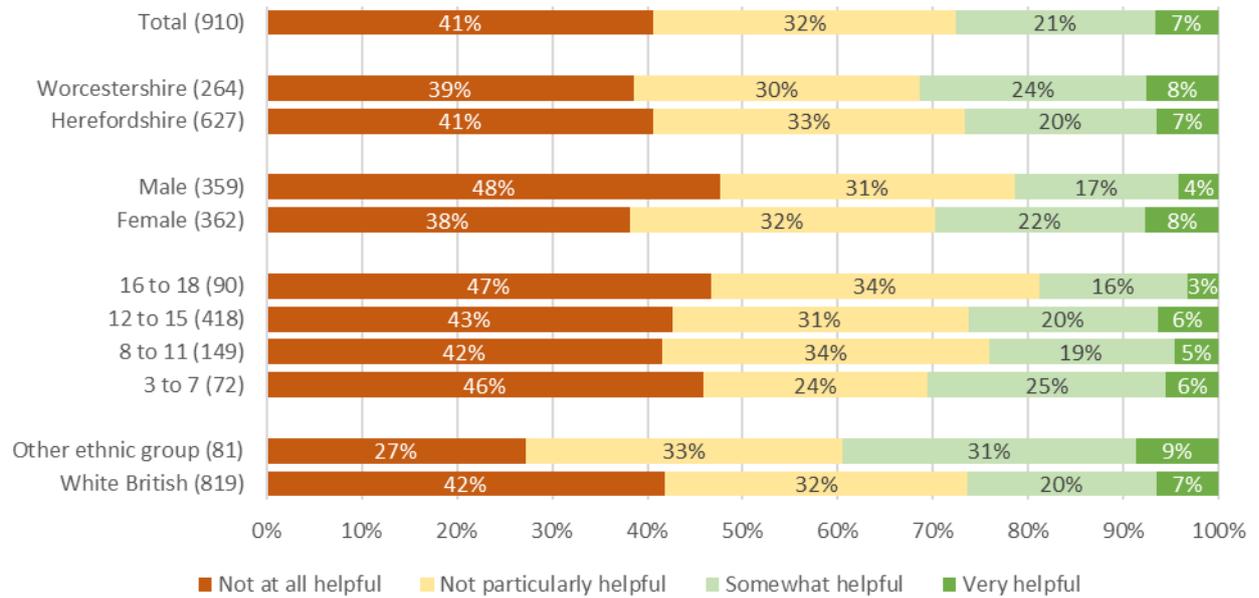
How helpful: gaming



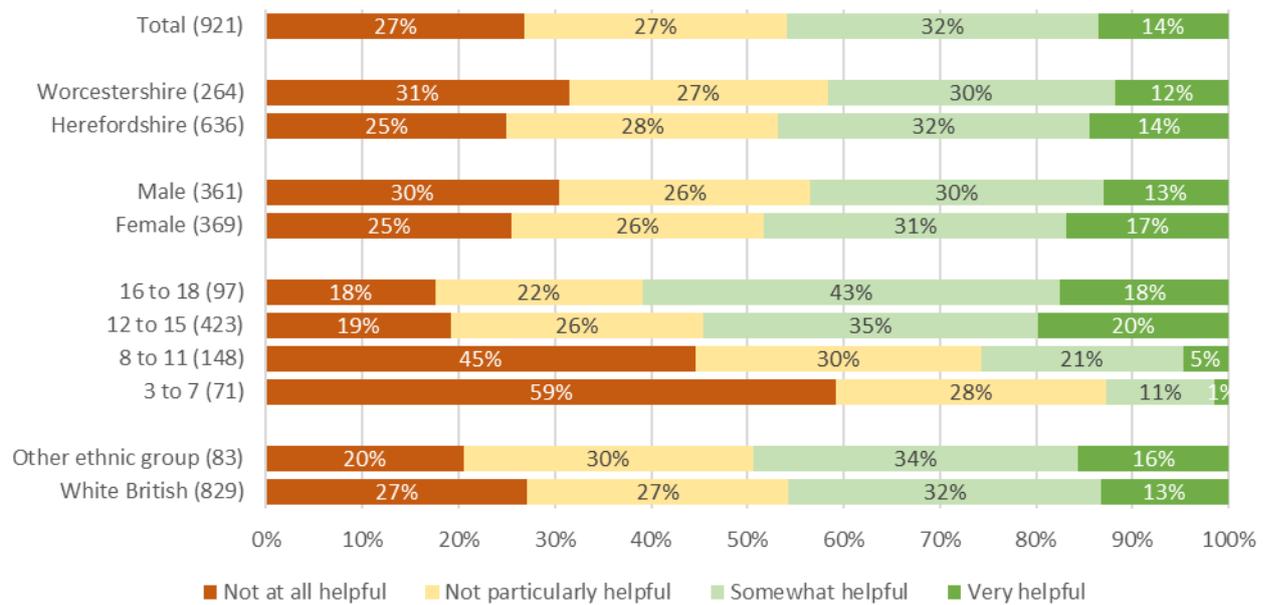
How helpful: spending time with family

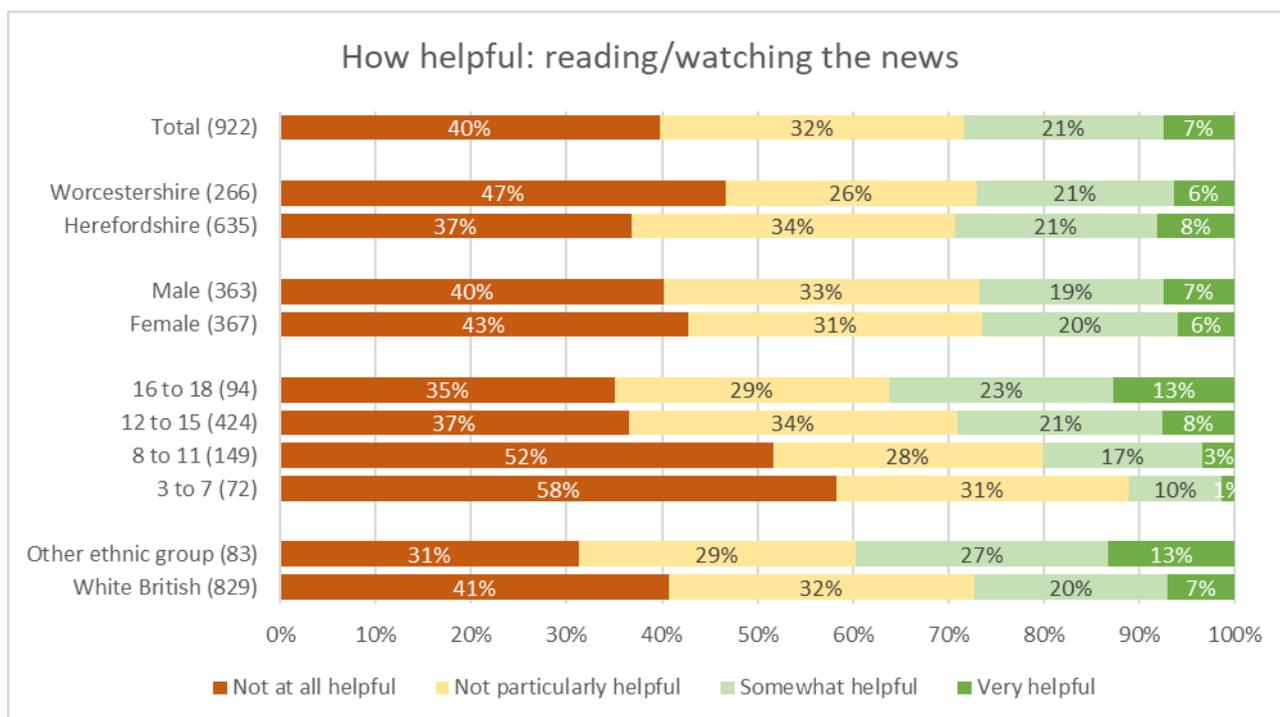


How helpful: breathing techniques



How helpful: spending time on social media





Respondents were invited to comment on other activities which they had found helpful or unhelpful during lockdown. These have been separated out below into two tables; helpful activities and unhelpful activities. Where participants mentioned turning off screens/news was helpful, this was combined into the category 'unhelpful activities: news/screen time etc' in the unhelpful activities table.

A lot of the activities which had been rated for helpfulness previously were revisited and repeated. Exercise was the most frequently mentioned helpful activity. Issues around completing schoolwork at home were the most frequently mentioned as unhelpful.

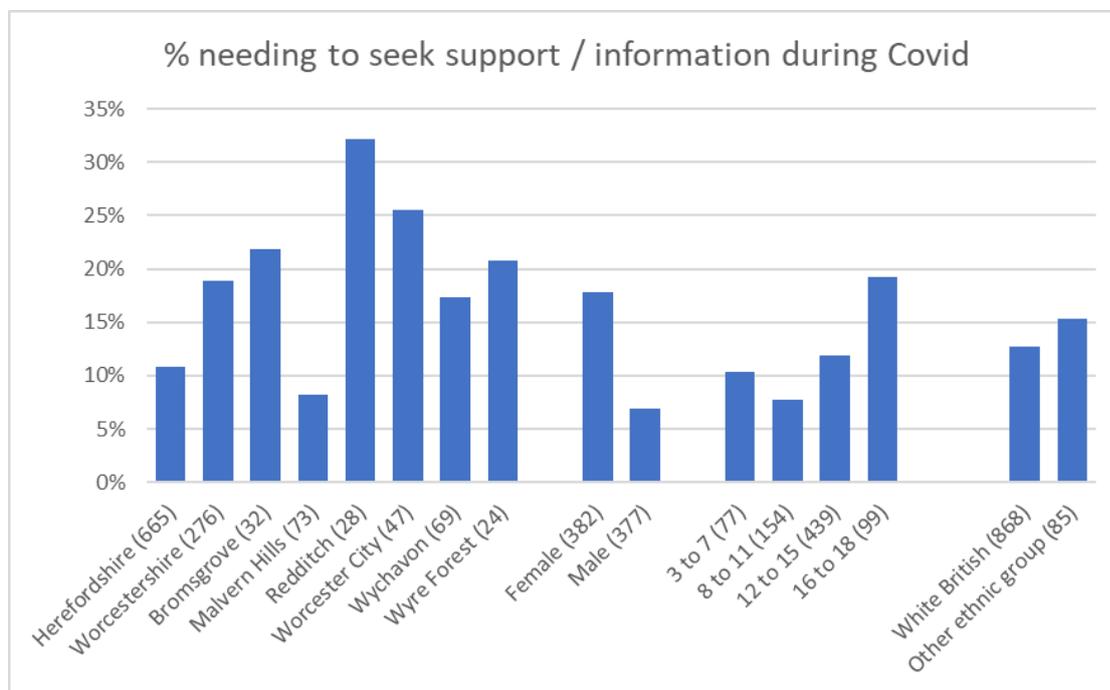
Can you think of any other activities you have done during lockdown that you have found particularly helpful or unhelpful? Please specify in the box below	Count
Helpful Activities	
Exercise (indoor/outdoor); sport; online exercise classes/games	162
Cooking and baking	89
Artwork; craft; photography; creative pursuits	72
Being outdoors/in the garden; fresh air; appreciating nature; exploring; camping	59
Pets/animals	57
Family time (actual/virtual)	56
Gardening; growing vegetables	44
Learning new skill; Researching; Online courses	44
Having a routine (including completing work/school work), Home-schooling rather than being at school (at own pace; less pressure)	32
Friends (video call/distanced; on Social Media)	31
Helping out around the house	17
Games; jigsaws; quizzes	15
Playing a musical instrument	15
Computer games; programming; making a movie	14

Listening to music	14
DIY; Sort/clear out; rearranging; decorating; carpentry	13
Mindfulness; meditation; relaxing (including bath/swing seat); taking breaks; thinking time	12
Reading; listening to audiobooks	12
Writing; writing a diary	9
Helping the community	8
Watching TV/YouTube	7
Sleeping; having a lie-in	6
Talking about worries	6
Contacting teachers about schoolwork	5
Online social clubs e.g. scouts	5
Social Media	5
Getting away from family members; being on own	4
Appreciate things; stay positive; make future plans	3
More time for hobbies	3
New toys; talking to toys	2
Alcohol	1
Parent furloughed to support child	1
Religious pursuits	1
Sensory play	1
Setting yourself challenges	1

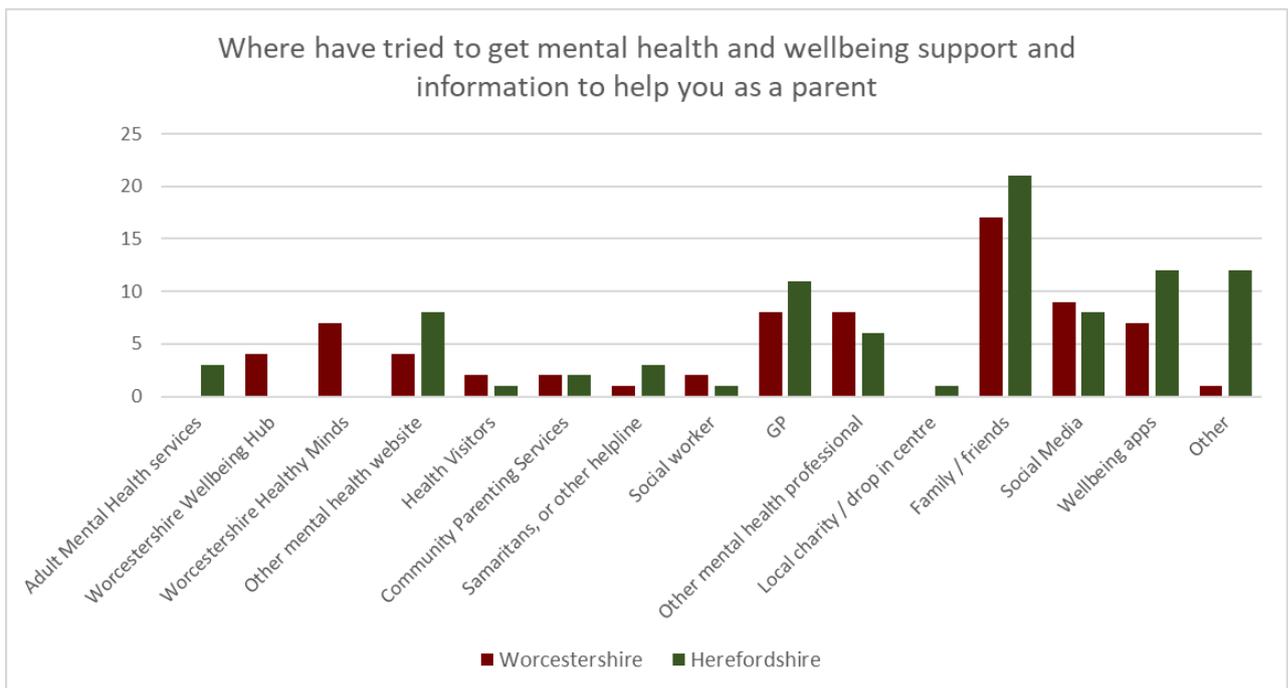
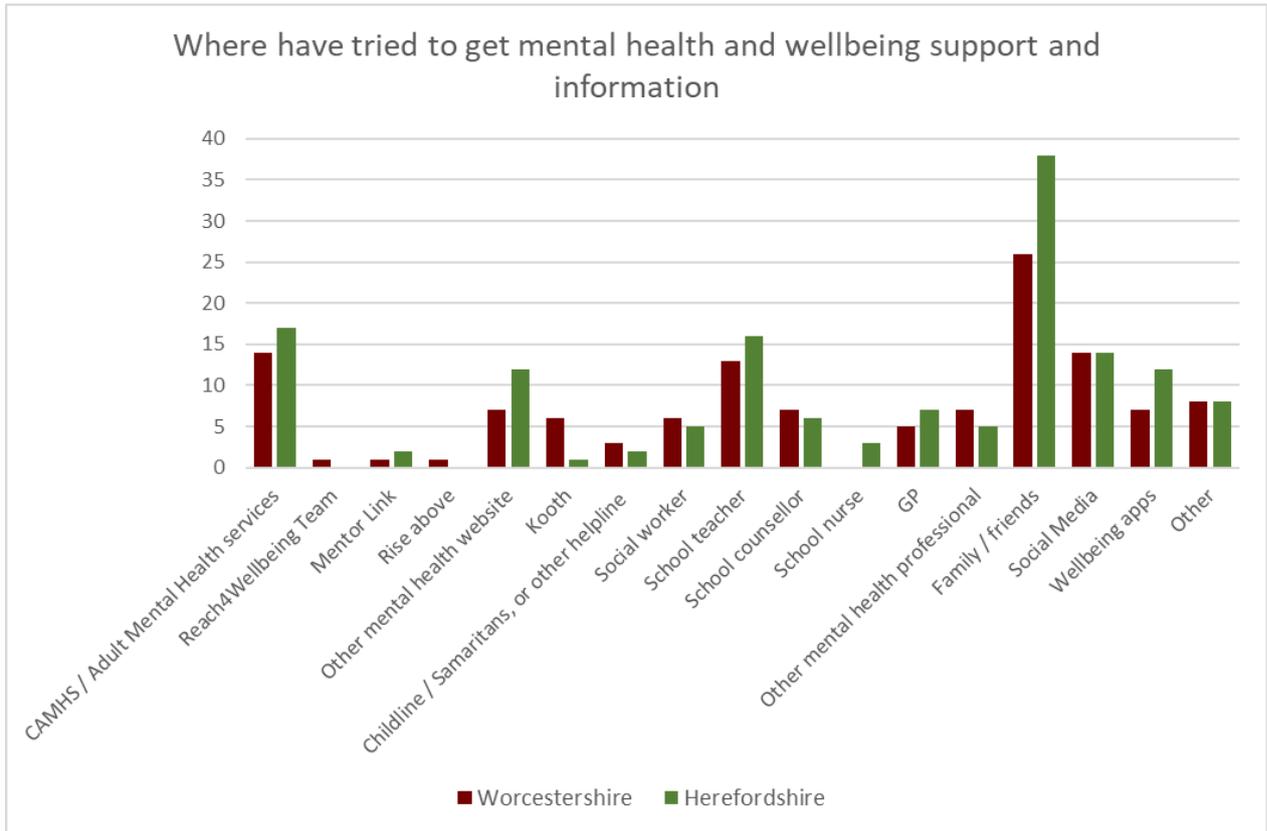
Can you think of any other activities you have done during lockdown that you have found particularly helpful or unhelpful? Please specify in the box below	Count
<u>Unhelpful Activities</u>	
Unhelpful: home schooling; unsupervised schooling; asking teacher Qs publicly; volume of work; logistics (no laptop); online completion	10
Unhelpful: news; social media; screen time; gaming (or stop these a while before bedtime)	9
Unhelpful: not being able to see family; friends; lack of adult focussed interaction	6
Unhelpful: family around all the time	2
Unhelpful: no access to swimming pool	2
Unhelpful: chores	1
Unhelpful: Electronic meet-ups	1
Unhelpful: exercise restrictions (at start of lockdown)	1
Unhelpful: leaving the house	1

Mental Health Information and Support

Overall, 13% of respondents have felt the need to seek support or information on mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus outbreak, with more girls than boys needing this, and more older teenagers than young children.



The most popular source of information and support across both counties to help young people and parents was family/friends; people also sought help from CAMHS services, schools, websites and social media.

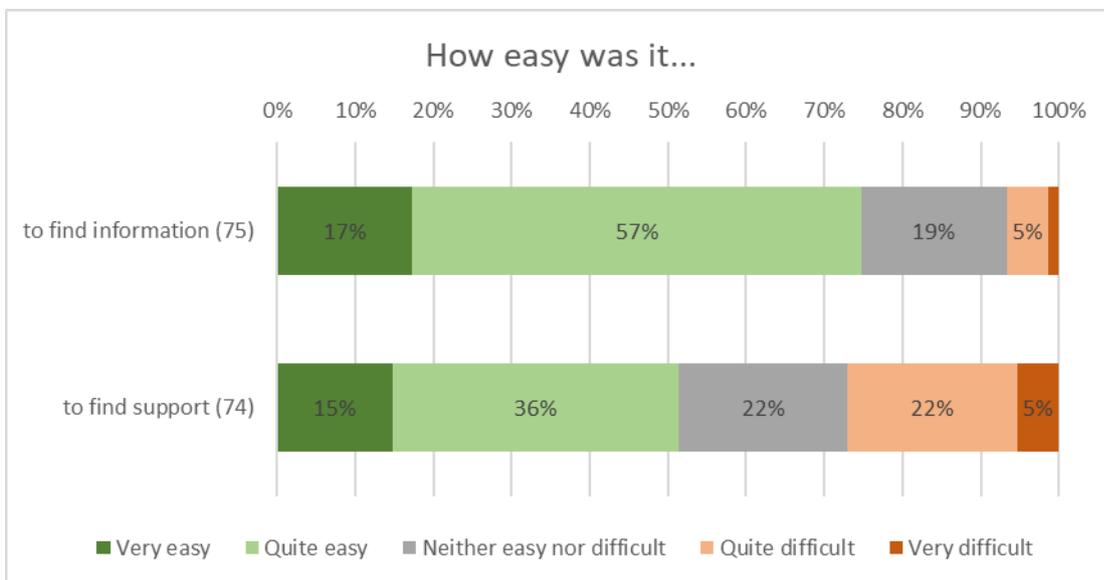


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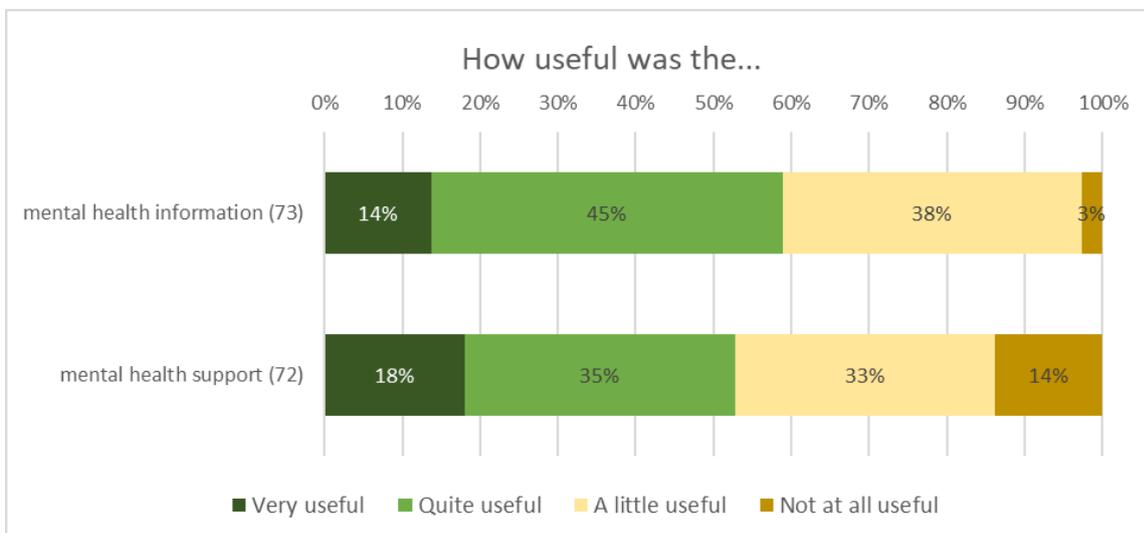
Respondents were asked to comment on what had stopped them from getting the information and / or support they felt they needed for their mental health. The comments are categorised in the table below.

What has stopped you from getting the information and / or support you felt you needed for your mental health?	Count
Unable/unwilling to access support via telephone; not as effective as in person	13
Can't face it; low motivation; find it difficult to talk about feelings; no one understands	8
Support not available	8
Unable to contact support; no response; slow response	7
Not able to access support	4
On waiting list; delayed referral; appointment cancelled	4
Other commitments; lack of resources	3
Difficult to process and practice online info	1

Most people found it quite easy to find information, but people had more difficulty finding support for mental health and wellbeing.



And for those who found information and/or support, nearly 60% found the information very or quite useful, and over 50% found very or quite useful support for their mental health and wellbeing.



Respondents had the opportunity to comment on what was useful or not useful about the mental health information and / or support they found. Generally, comments indicated that information found was helpful and that it was reassuring to find others in their situation.

Please let us know what was useful or not useful about the mental health information and /or support you found	Count
Some good/useful info/apps available	15
Information or support community gave reassurance/normalised problems	7
Support continued/was received	5
Need more support	4
No motivation to act upon new info; advice received won't help; don't think issues serious enough; no substitute for physical contact with loved ones	4
Online information confusing/conflicting; some symptoms not shown; support websites overcrowded	3
Already aware of all/most information available	2
Haven't made contact/used info yet OR only just started	2
Supported by friends	2
Assessment quick and guidance for support whilst on waiting list	1
No response from organisations contacted	1
Online solution solved problem	1
Past experience - know what need to cope	1

A further free text question asked about what participants thought of the mental health services they accessed, due to differing delivery during the outbreak. The table below categorises these comments.

Many mental health services are being delivered differently due to the effects of the coronavirus. What did you think of the mental health services that you accessed? Please give any thoughts you have below.	Count
Phone/video calls better than nothing; support fine considering current situation	6
Difficult to talk on phone/video call (may be overheard; can't read emotions; meaning on phone)	5
Service Limited/poor/ceased	4
Online info somewhat helpful	2
Apps: helpful	1
Check-in calls: helpful	1
Find phone calls easier than face to face	1
GP: helpful	1
Lots of information available for self-informing	1
Parent sought help through job	1
Staff changes/continuity caused issues	1
Support from friends with children with similar needs: helpful	1
Teacher: helpful	1
Waiting for services	1

Advice and Additional Comments

Comments were sought from participants about what advice they would give for young people who are feeling isolated, alone or struggling with other mental health issues. 472 respondents commented, and these are categorised in the table below. Talking was mentioned by the majority of those who commented. Interestingly, whilst 162 respondents commented in a previous question that exercise was helpful for their mental health and wellbeing, only 80 recommended it for others below.

Do you have any advice for young people who are feeling isolated, alone or struggling with other mental health issues?	Count
Talk to people; Talk about problems/worries with family/friends/teacher/teddy bear	293
Keep busy; occupy yourself with hobbies/new skills/gaming/reading/baking/gardening; do something you enjoy; have variety	97
Exercise	80
Get outside; fresh air; observe nature	56
Focus on achievements; keep motivated; try not to worry; Stay positive; take each day at a time; we are lucky; things could be worse; set a goal; plan for the future	45
Seek help; use mental health services/apps/Childline; ask for mental health help at school	42
Spend time with family/friends (including gaming/playing/quizzes)	35
This won't be forever; life will get better; focus on the future; these are weird times	30
You're not alone; others are going through this; it's Ok to not be OK; your feelings are normal	28
Take time to self for thinking/relaxing/to notice things you wouldn't usually; appreciate your surroundings; practice mindfulness/meditation/breathing techniques/yoga	24
Stay away from news/social media; choose reliable sources	22
Have a routine; maintain normality; get up, showered and dressed	20
Write down your thoughts for yourself/someone else to read	16
Eat healthy food; drink plenty water	13
Time with pets/animals	10
People care about you; people want to help; accept offered help	8
Listen to music	7
Do something kind for someone else; be nice to others	5
Don't compare yourself to others; be kind to yourself; you are enough	5
Keep up with schoolwork	5
Don't get overwhelmed by schoolwork	4
Sleep more; nap	4
There's nothing you can do about it	1
Use social platforms	1

The final question gave an opportunity for respondents to share anything else they wished to. The largest number of comments were further advice, reiterating comments made in the previous question. This was closely followed by a request for more support to be available.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us on this issue?	Count
Seek help; stay positive; stay safe; talk; exercise; take a break; pray; be kind to others	31
More resources/support needed; more face-to-face support; more free support; easier to access support; improvement needed in CAMHS; support for teachers; more consideration by decision makers; waiting for services	29
Concerns over returning to education (necessity of mental health support; virus spreading; children at different levels from lockdown learning; social anxiety; unpreparedness for starting university; wish to change school)	17
Concerns over missing out on schoolwork; home-learning material badly planned/poor quality; no virtual classes; too much work pressure; no teacher input once returned, just supervision	16
Keen to return to normality/school	16
Positives of Lockdown (more family time, less stress, love home-schooling); acknowledge/support these children on return to school	11
Survey not age-appropriate/caused upset; WCC cause of stress	4
Difficulties of parents working/busy: home-schooling; peer contact for young children; passing on stress to child	5
Feeling forgotten about by teachers/the system	4
Times are hard/unusual	4
Grateful for support received	3
Child experiencing feelings of worthlessness/debilitation	2
News is unhelpful and confusing/lies	2
Child in denial of mental health Issues	1
Good weather; very helpful	1
Lockdown is isolating for an only child	1
Self-discipline to complete school work is difficult	1
Summer holidays daunting (without school work)	1
Understand restrictions in services	1
Worried about weight gain	1