

BACP Mindometer report 2021

**The expert view: Insights from
therapists into the 'five-year effect' of
lockdown and the future challenges to
the mental health of the UK's population**



Foreword



Hadyn Williams,
CEO of the British
Association for
Counselling and
Psychotherapy

Back in February, we carried out a survey with YouGov which found that three-quarters (75%) of the UK public say the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their mental health. They now need clear support and direction on steps to take to understand and to access professional mental health support for themselves, their friends and family.

As the UK's largest professional association of expert counselling professionals, BACP's 58,000 members are an invaluable resource for capturing a more in-depth look at the UK's mental health. Our Mindometer report is based on a survey of nearly 5,000 therapists. It serves to assess the immediate and future impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of therapy clients and BACP-registered therapists, based on professional first-hand experiences from the last year.

We've examined how our therapists have worked in the past 15 months and how this might shape the future of therapy. We have explored whether the issues clients are presenting within therapy sessions since the start of the pandemic have shifted, the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of therapists themselves and what the potential long-term impact of lockdown will be on the UK's mental health.

As part of this report, we've also been able to identify trends around which issues people are seeking support for from our therapists since the start of the pandemic. One in four therapists (26%) has seen an increase in clients presenting with eating disorders, and a fifth (20%) have seen an increase in addiction to substances or substance misuse. We know from the report that 80% of our therapists are operating at full capacity or beyond and respondents report an increase in young people

and men booking therapy sessions since the start of the pandemic. Anecdotal evidence suggests this has been due to reduced social circles and access to other activities that provide a mental health benefit, such as going to the gym. Our therapists also report in their open-ended responses an increase in cases of racial trauma in the last year in the context of COVID-19, the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement.

It's clear from our research that the impact of the last year will reverberate for some time to come, with more than a third (36%) of our therapists believing we'll continue to see the adverse mental health impact on the nation for at least the next five years. We also know that therapists themselves have felt the impact of the last year, with almost half (44%) feeling more stressed and overwhelmed since the beginning of the pandemic.

I have no doubt that the findings presented will highlight the importance of therapeutic support from highly trained and qualified therapists who've spent the last year getting to grips with the huge mental health challenges facing the general population. The skills, expertise and resilience of BACP therapists over the last year has undoubtedly changed lives.

For more information visit www.bacp.co.uk



Contents

1	The future of therapy	04
2	Changes in issues brought to therapy since the pandemic	06
3	The effects of lockdown	09
4	Impact on therapists themselves	12
5	Recommendations	14

1 The future of therapy

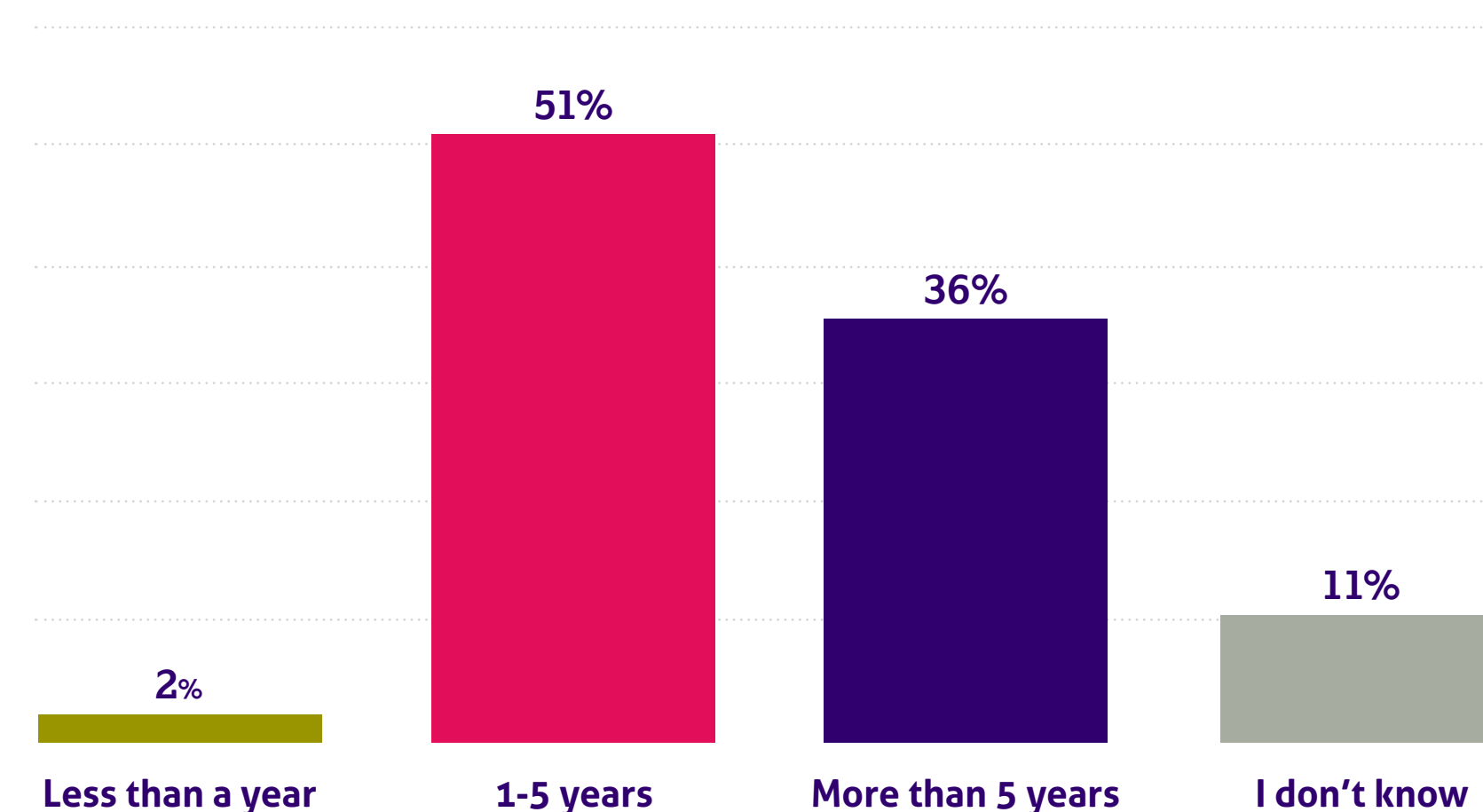
This section looks at the challenges and opportunities for therapy over the next five years – including the long-term negative consequences of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing.

Our Mindometer report reveals 72% of therapists believe that people are more open to having therapy.

93% of therapists say they have perceived an increased mental strain in the general population. This overwhelming statistic highlights how important the role of qualified therapists will be in addressing the problems people have faced and the role that therapy will continue to play in the coming years.

One of the most concerning points in this survey is that more than half (51%) of the therapists think we will continue to see the impact of COVID-19 on people's mental health for up to five years, while a further third (36%) thinks the impact could last for more than five years, which will prompt a significant mental health crisis. 79% of therapists agree that there is a bigger mental health problem in the UK today than there was five years ago.

From today, for how many years do you anticipate that we will continue seeing the impact of COVID-19 on people's mental health?





During the pandemic, demand for therapy increased considerably.

80% of the respondents report that demand for therapy is full or over capacity at the service where they work with more than half of these (56%) reporting that this has resulted in a waiting list and/or referral to other services. 77% of respondents say there will be increased demand for therapy post-COVID-19. This pinpoints the importance of further investment in providing therapy through a range of settings – such as the NHS, workplaces, schools, universities and third sector organisations. This would help increase the availability and accessibility of therapy.

Since the start of the pandemic, there's been a change in the way most therapists have worked - with video and telephone replacing face-to-face interactions for many. 82% of those questioned think online/remote working has meant therapy has been made more accessible

to clients and the general public. And it looks likely that this change is here to stay with 91% of therapists confirming that they will continue working with clients via video and audio post-pandemic. Our therapists believe this offers greater flexibility and choice to prospective clients, who can now pick from therapists from all over the country.

In addition, 44% believe there is less taboo around having therapy among the public. This is helpful from a wider wellbeing impact perspective as it can help take the strain off individuals, family and friends by giving those in need support from a qualified, professional, independent expert.

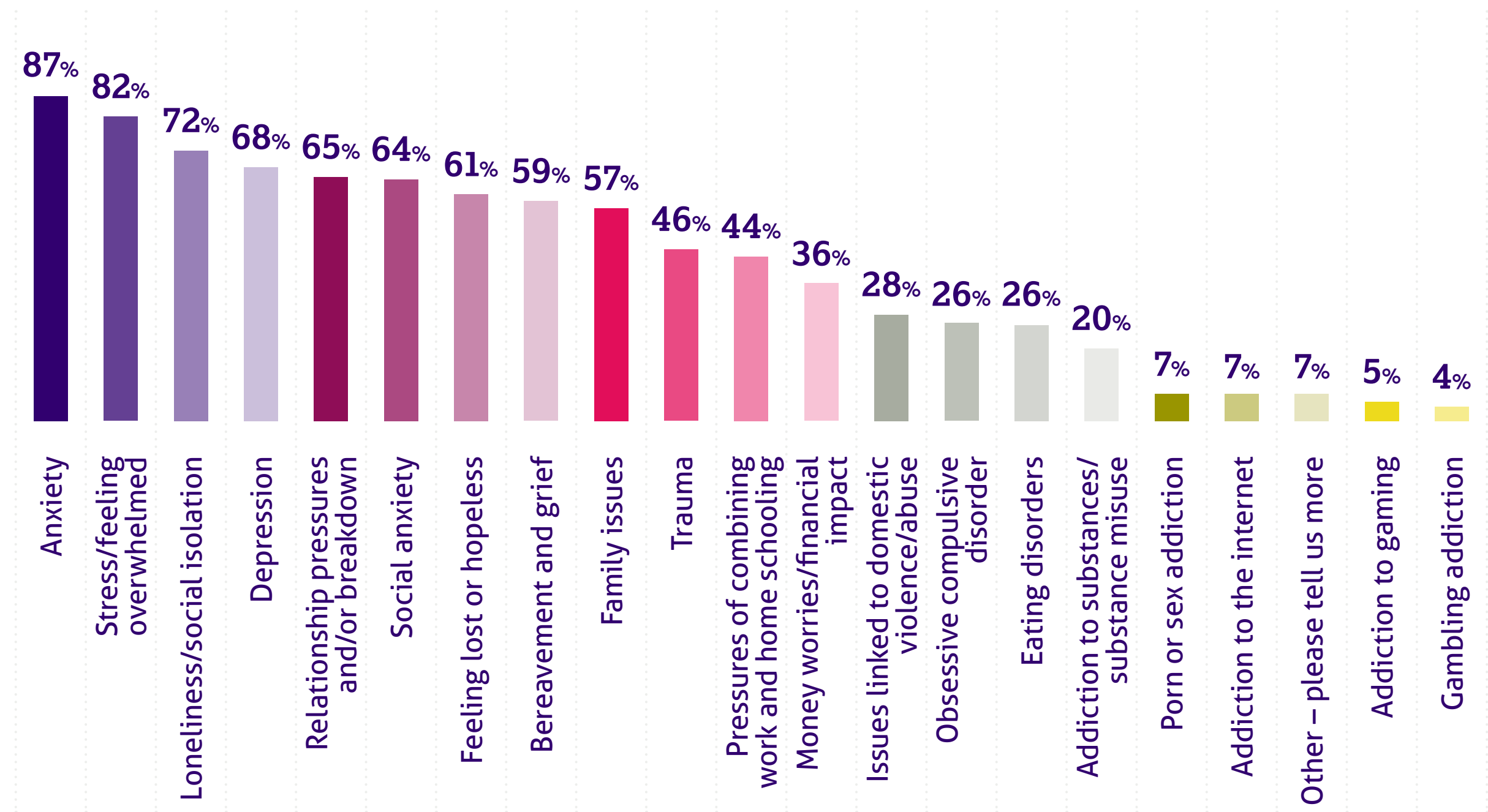
2 Changes in issues brought to therapy since the pandemic

This section highlights the mental health issues that have become more prevalent among the general population during the pandemic. Here, we will focus on the unexpected, moving beyond social isolation and anxiety, to introduce the full breadth of issues that therapy can support and indicating which issues have increased during the pandemic.

The top three issues in which therapists have indicated seeing an increase since the start of the pandemic are perhaps unsurprisingly: anxiety (87%), stress and/or feeling overwhelmed (82%) and loneliness or social isolation (72%). Individuals have been affected by a number of significant changes to everyday life, having been unable to go about their daily business. Events like going to the supermarket have become a source of social anxiety for many and for those who are totally alone, some feelings have deepened and worsened.



Since the start of the pandemic have you perceived an increase in people coming to you with any of these issues? Please select all that apply.



The pandemic has also caused many other mental health problems and people who may not have experienced problems in the past may have done so for the first time. Many living with existing issues have seen these worsen in recent months. Of therapists, who said they had noticed an increase in the number of sessions existing clients had with them, 86% said this was because of a need for greater support to the clients' decline in mental health.

Our findings show that:

- Almost half (46%) of therapists say incidences of trauma have increased.
- A quarter (26%) of therapists have seen an increase in eating disorders.
- Two-thirds (65%) of therapists have seen an increase in relationship pressures and breakdowns.
- A fifth (20%) of therapists reported seeing an increase in addiction, addictive behaviours to substances or substance misuse, with 7% seeing an increase in addiction to the internet. One in 20 therapists (5%) also reported seeing an increase in gaming addiction.
- A quarter (26%) of therapists have seen an increase in obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

- Therapists also highlighted increased numbers of people presenting with domestic violence, existential crisis and people with outside phobias.
- From our open-ended responses, therapists also reported increases in people from minority communities seeking support as well as an increase in those presenting with racial trauma in the context of COVID-19, the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. The open-ended responses, also included therapists highlighting mothers who have reported feeling overwhelmed due to the pressures and demands of being a parent, working, home-schooling and their usual support network not being as readily available.
- Respondents also reported an increase in young people and men booking therapy sessions since the start of the pandemic. Anecdotal evidence suggests this has been due to reduced social circles and access to other activities that provide a mental health benefit, such as going to the gym.



3 The effects of lockdown

This section looks at how lockdown has affected delivery and uptake of therapy, focusing on lockdown-related issues and the factors behind clients booking more sessions.



Anthony Davis

“This past year has been increasingly difficult for individuals to manage their anxiety and low mood.”

The UK-wide lockdown is, without doubt, one of the toughest mental health challenges we have faced in recent times. Our survey found that 71% of therapists have seen an increase in the number of enquiries or referrals for their services since the start of the pandemic, of which 47% have reported an increase in the number of sessions from existing clients and 65% an increase in clients presenting with complex needs.

There appears to be a re-entry anxiety among clients which has been observed more than Long-COVID-related mental health issues – at 87% and 45% respectively. However, 57% of therapists have seen a positive impact on mental health. One example from the survey was for those who previously experienced social anxiety. They had experienced a positive side to lockdown as they hadn't had to deal with people, or the outside world, in the way they were expected to previously.

BACP member Anthony Davis is a London-based therapist who specialises in counselling LGBT+ and male African/Caribbean clients. He said:

“This past year has been increasingly difficult for individuals to manage their anxiety and low mood. My clients have experienced anxiety related to job loss, redundancy and furlough and how to maintain financial stability for themselves and their families. There has also been health-related anxiety and the fear of contracting COVID-19.

“The relationships of my clients have further been impacted by the pandemic with more referrals from couples exhibiting difficulties relating to poor commutation, limited intimacy, and repressed anger from unresolved conflicts. With regards to my male clients, specifically African/Caribbean men, there has been an increase in referrals due to the resurgence of the BLM movement and triggered racialised trauma.

“The LGBT+ community has further experienced difficulties during the pandemic due to social media fatigue, having to move in with families or to hometowns that are not accepting of their sexuality and social isolation from limited interaction with others.”

Accredited BACP member Cate Campbell is a therapist specialising in relationship and psychosexual therapy and individual, couple and family counselling and coaching. She said:

“As we started to unlock, more couples with sex and relationship issues have come forward, including more cases of domestic abuse which was exacerbated by the lockdowns. There has inevitably been an upsurge in grief and distress caused by the loss of loved ones, as well as the distress of being unable to see family and friends and then the anxiety of re-entry. The context of threat created by the pandemic also appears to have triggered trauma memories, so there has been a large increase in numbers seeking treatment for PTSD.

“It has been great to see the improved awareness of mental health issues and willingness to seek help which has resulted from the pandemic, but the complexity of problems people have is a concern. The number of people presenting with eating disorders, dependency and addiction issues appears to have risen steeply in all age groups. Sexual addiction appears to be a particular problem that is no longer limited to internet pornography. Lack of outside contact during lockdowns may be behind the apparently increased compulsive interest in cybersex and the use of sex workers.

“It is possible that unwillingness to request help in the past has meant problems have built up, and available specialist help is consequently scarcer – further delaying treatment. This makes it likely that we will continue to see a growth in people seeking help during the next few years, potentially with many returning to therapy more than once if they have a positive initial experience.”





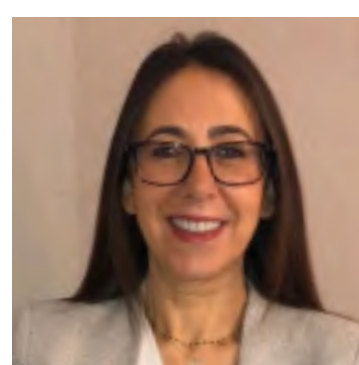
Therapists who said they'd noticed an increase in the number of sessions existing clients had with them gave the following reasons for increased demand in the last year:

- Need for more companionship due to increased social isolation (62%).
- Easier to access appointments (via online technology or remotely) (64%).
- The stigma around having therapy is reduced or removed due to increased public discourse (44%).

Speaking further on increased demand for therapy, accredited BACP member Louise Tyler, a Cheshire-based counsellor, said:

"Social groups and activities that people relied on for connection may still be dormant, exam results are still uncertain, event and travel plans are precarious. People are fearful about jobs and businesses.

"Loss and grief are still pervasive. We can't just bounce back magically. Even if socially, economically or health-wise we have been privileged enough to remain protected, we are not immune to others suffering. There's been and will continue to be a massive reset in how we live our lives. All these things mean that the demand for counselling is likely to remain high."



Louise Tyler

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4 Impact on therapists themselves

While therapists are there to help others, their job has become increasingly demanding. Here, we look at how the pandemic has changed the way therapists work and feel.

Our survey found that nearly half (44%) of therapists feel more stressed and overwhelmed since the beginning of the pandemic. What is concerning, is that almost one in five (18%) therapists feel more depressed or hopeless and 59% of therapists have found the impact of 'Zoom fatigue' challenging over time.

We've also seen changes in the ways therapists now practise and work, with 90% of therapists developing technical skills as a result of remote working. 82% of therapists have found therapy being more accessible as a positive or rewarding experience of working remotely. When asked about challenges of working online, open-ended responses showed therapists recognised difficulties for clients in finding private space in their homes and that it could be difficult to pick up non-verbal cues from clients.

"Moving to offer online counselling for me has been wholly positive. It has made it very accessible – I've had an almost zero rate of cancellations over the year.

Some people will need the in-room presence of a therapist for trauma work, or for neurodiverse clients. I think many counsellors will offer a hybrid model going forward with face to face for those who want it, and online for others. The issue of location has been removed, and clients can now look for a specialist counsellor anywhere in the country." – Accredited BACP member Louise Tyler

The majority of therapists (80%) say they have upskilled and developed additional skills. 17% of therapists said that they have needed to develop skills or competencies for working with grief and loss, and 47% said that they have developed skills for dealing with trauma online. More than one in 10 (13%) upskilled in working outdoors (e.g. outdoor therapy).

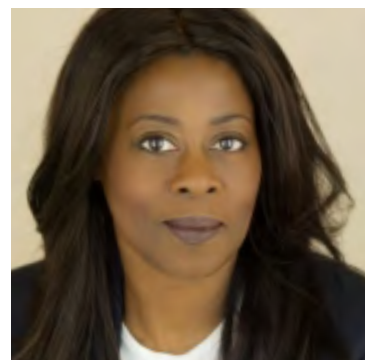
In terms of wider skills development, some therapists like Kemi Omijeh have called for increased training and understanding among counsellors on

racial trauma, amid the Black Lives Matter movement, and how to address this with individuals who are dealing with this strain on their mental health.



Kemi Omijeh

BACP member Kemi Omijeh, a child and adolescent therapist, said: “Therapists have a responsibility to seek training on racial trauma and the impact of racism on mental health. There is a distinct absence in a lot of therapeutic training and those that do cover it, tend to do so briefly or as a one-off module as opposed to embedding culturally competent practices.”



Denise Freeman

Looking ahead, BACP member Denise Freeman was keen to stress that anxiety doesn't end with vaccination, and she expects anxiety about returning to normal to be a short-term trend, with her focus returning to clients to address trauma. She said: “Anxiety is rooted in fear and uncertainty about the future. COVID-19 has dramatically amplified such feelings. In the short term, we are all worried about our health and that

of our loved ones, but it doesn't end with vaccination.

“COVID-19 has shown us just how fragile the life that we all take for granted can really be. At a subconscious level, we are all now alarmed about the future and this loss of security has led to an explosion in anxiety-related issues in my private practice. Presently I am seeing more and more clients presenting with social anxiety, related to going back to what was once routine like returning to the office or visiting a shopping mall. Going forward I would expect this to be the short-term trend and then with time we will begin to work with the trauma underpinning those anxieties.”

However, reflecting on the positives brought about for clients amid a seismic year of change, she ends on a positive note:

“I have seen many clients who have been forced to take stock of their lives during the lockdown and are now using therapy as a tool to ask the difficult question – ‘how do I want to live my life going forward’? I have had clients using the time to set up a new business, return to education, write a book, explore their sexuality. The theme has been endings, whether that be of a relationship with a partner, employers, or habit. Many of my clients have really taken the time to look at how they were living and question if that is in alignment with their own personal values and beliefs. As a result, there has been a lot of empowerments in the work I have been doing and It's been a privilege to watch and help people work their way through the transition. What has become clear to me is that post-pandemic the stigma around therapy may be shifting as we realise that therapy doesn't have to be about fixing what's broken, it can be about putting together a tool kit to build for a better future.”

5 Recommendations

This report highlights the profound impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the nation's mental health, according to our members, this will continue to be felt for several years to come.

To meet this demand and ensure that anyone struggling with their mental health and wellbeing can access a qualified therapist, who is registered with a body accredited by the Professional Standards Authority, when they need support, we've compiled a list of recommendations. Our priority is to widen access to therapy through a range of settings – such as schools and workplaces – across all four nations of the UK.

- **Counselling and psychotherapy need to be integral in the UK Governments' long-term mental health response to COVID-19:** The consequences for our nation's mental health will be far-reaching. This requires a robust response from the Government, to ensure increased demand is met with high-quality mental health support. We were pleased to see the Government's COVID-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Action Plan provided an important recognition of the key role that counselling and psychotherapy will need to play to support the nation's recovery from COVID-19. But more still needs to be done to ensure counsellors and psychotherapists are at the heart of the mental health response and investment.
- **Greater investment to increase access to therapy and access to a wider choice of therapies on the NHS and in community settings in all four nations of the UK:** We've campaigned with a range of partners across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to increase access to therapy. In Scotland and Wales, manifestos from several parties ahead of elections in May featured commitments to improve mental health support. We urge these parties to see these commitments through. In Northern Ireland, we've been engaging closely with the Department of Health on the new Ten-Year Mental Health Strategy. This reflects the need to enhance access to counselling services to ensure high-quality provision is in place across the nation. Governments across all four nations must ensure there is greater access to a wide range of therapies for people in need.



- **A counsellor for every secondary school, college and academy in England:** Speaking to a school counsellor can be a transformative experience for children and young people. It can help them cope with the difficult circumstances they face in their lives – and to go on and flourish in the future. But England is lagging in its provision of counselling in schools. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have government-funded school counselling services. England does not. As children face increased change and uncertainty in their lives because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's more important than ever before that they have access to this vital support.
- **Increasing access to counselling through workplaces:** As employees return to offices following more than a year of remote working, it's important that workplaces make adjustments to support colleagues through this

transition. We've worked successfully with employers on counselling programmes that provide beneficial and positive environments to prioritise the mental health of workforces across the UK. Employers must see their staff's mental health and wellbeing as a priority.

- **Increasing access to counselling for under-represented communities:** In relation to equality, diversity and inclusion, action is required to remove barriers to entry and progression within the counselling professions for people from minority communities. More must also be done to ensure equality of access to high quality mental health support, including counselling, for people from all communities and backgrounds. We're committed to the development and delivery of an equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, working with members and partners to affect real change in the profession and society at large.

About BACP

At BACP's heart is the message that counselling changes lives.

As the largest professional body for counsellors and psychotherapists, we champion the counselling professions and the expertise of our 58,000 members. We work to raise professional and ethical standards within the field and offer training, development and networking opportunities to our members.

Our register of members aims to protect the public and help them find therapists they can trust. We want clients, employers and the general public to know that a BACP registered practitioner adheres to high standards of proficiency, professionalism and good practice.

For more information visit [bacp.co.uk](https://www.bacp.co.uk)

About this report

Our Mindometer report is based on a survey of 4,923 of our members which was open from 30 April until 16 May 2021.

We use the word 'therapy' to cover talking therapies, such as counselling, psychotherapy and coaching.

Key links

What is counselling?

Types of therapy

How to find a qualified therapist

BACP directory