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Teen Mental Health Deep Dive: Initial Thoughts

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tl;dr

Caveat: these are initial high-level thoughts, as the project is still in process. Please do not share or cite.

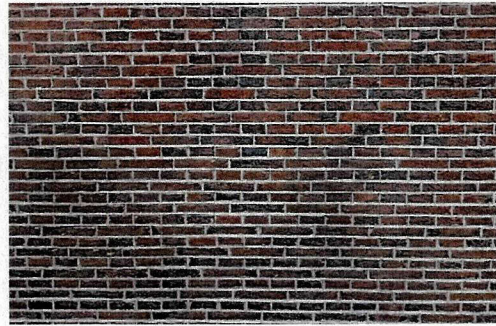
- 1. Teens use language of walls, doors, and wheels to describe mental unwellness.**
- 2. Teens quickly call out Instagram as being the most problematic social media platform for mental health.**
- 3. Resources to support teens are lacking, inadequate, or inaccessible.**
- 4. This isn't just everyday teenage life. Young people are having to deal with all the age old challenges of being a teenager in a supercharged environment.**
- 5. Young people on Instagram have clear and consistent ideas of what Instagram could do to help them.**



Language of unwellness

Walls, doors, shutting down

- As young people struggle with emotions that overwhelm them, they retreat into themselves to deal with things that upset them.
- Teens are afraid of being open with their emotions and want to process them before choosing who and when they can share.
- Instagram is not a safe, supportive space for emotionally raw content.



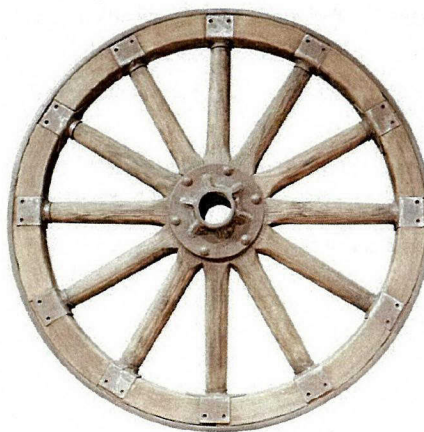
Loneliness and isolation

- Teens associated mental unwellness with a sense of dislocation from their social network
- They articulated a need or desire to be away from 'colorful people' because of the pressure that this puts on them to be happy
- Many teens, especially in the UK, viewed themselves as 'grey', 'boring', 'depressing'



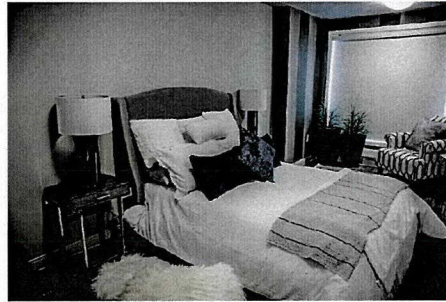
Running away, whirring thoughts

- Wheels to depict churning emotion and turbulence
- Heightened sense of over-thinking and worrying, leading to increases in stress and anxiety levels
- 'Keeping busy' or constantly moving is a coping strategy -- don't over-dwell on things and get on with it.



The bedroom is the safest place

- Beyond the stereotype of moping teens locking themselves in their bedrooms, teens articulated the need for their own time and space.
- Their bed is where they retreat and regroup when feeling bad.
- It's a place of privacy from the family and a place to self-soothe to help teens regain composure after an emotional knock back.





Impact of Instagram

Instagram is the most problematic for mental health

- Teens are acutely aware that Instagram can be bad for their mental health, but they feel compelled to spend time on the app so they don't miss out on cultural or social trends.
- Instagram is associated with:
 - pressure to conform to social stereotypes
 - pressure to match the money and body shapes of influencers
 - the need for validation -- views, likes, followers
 - friendship conflicts, bullying, and hate speech
 - over-sexualization of girls
 - inappropriate advertisements targeted to vulnerable groups

Impact of personal consumption



Credit: [@gemma.correll](#)

- Personal consumption patterns mean that teens are continually exposed to content that they find mentally harmful.
- This content hurts teens' self-esteem, because they compare themselves to others and find a deficit.
- Triggers are personal and individual, and therefore harder to track and monitor.
- In LA, specifically, we heard about the pressure and need to be happy.
 - All depictions of mental unwellness in LA juxtaposed a dark, colorless weight with a colorful happy state.
 - Mental unwellness was explicitly linked to social comparison and pressure.

Impact of others' behavior

- Other people's behavior can be very hurtful to young people, as it can affect relationships and social standing within a wider group of friends.
- Shifting allegiances and shaky trust can damage young people's self-esteem if they feel their social position is being continually challenged.
- In London, especially, we heard about "stupid people doing stupid things", especially more severe and more explicit examples of bullying.



Support and coping strategies

Teens have few coping strategies or sources of support

- Teachers are not the right conduit for support as it is in the school setting. Teachers are also perceived as being out of touch.
- Counsellors and therapists are for more “serious” problems.
 - As soon as teens go to a recognized professional, challenges transform from everyday issues to something more pathological.
 - In London, especially, teens echoed societal norms and stigmas around not being the type of person who needs help.
- Helplines are not seen as truly anonymous.
- Teens were hesitant to talk to friends or siblings.
 - Fear of standing out or being labeled as attention seeking
 - Fear that an IRL BFF is actually an online bully

Parents cannot understand the effect of social media

- Today's parents came of age in a time before smartphones and social media, but social media has fundamentally changed the landscape of adolescence.
- Social media amplifies and extends many of the age-old challenges of being a teenager.
- The always-on nature of social media means that teens' social lives have infiltrated into every part of life. In previous generations, teenagers had a break from the social world.
 - Teens have few ways to escape negative experiences when they occur.
 - Sharing more parts of life means more points of comparison.
- Even if parents could understand what it's like to be an adolescent these days, there are still some things teens can't talk their parents about.

Teens feel they have to cope alone

- Young people have a weak mental concept of what mental well-being is, so the struggle to understand how they can make themselves feel better.
- Teens have taken the lack of any meaningful support for them as a sign that they need to shoulder the responsibility themselves.
- Coping strategies tend to be incredibly self-directed, and teens articulate the need to do things alone:
 - Beautifying treatments such as baths or facemasks
 - Taking time by themselves, going for a walk, exercising
 - Going to their rooms and trying to talk themselves into taking things less seriously



Asks of Instagram

Clear, consistent ideas of what IG should do differently

- Feature-led changes to the platform that provide them with more control and personalization
- Voices like them who might be able to offer peer support or understanding
- More control over Explore, with the ability to choose and select different themes more attuned to their well-being
- The ability to filter Feed or Explore based on their mood, so they can protect themselves from content they find harmful when they're in a bad headspace.
- More editorial content over what they choose to display or not
- Choice to opt out of certain advertisements they find harmful, such as weight loss ads

