

New findings released by Professor Siobhan O’Neill, Mental Health Champion, from the 2021 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, show that whilst there’s been a striking positive improvement in attitudes towards mental illness and suicide, almost half of those surveyed (44%) find it difficult to talk about their feelings and emotions, an increase from 2015 (38%).

Stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide are important public health issues because of the association with discrimination and help seeking; and how they impact on the response that people receive when they are in crisis.

Speaking about the findings of the survey, Professor O’Neill remarked:

“Unfortunately in 2015 48% believed that if a person wanted to end their life they will and there is nothing anybody can do about it. Thankfully this percentage has dropped to 14% in 2021, showing a greater awareness of steps that we can take to prevent suicide.

Some of our survey findings are positive. They show that the awareness and education programmes being run across Northern Ireland to improve attitudes are working, and this is likely to translate into people asking for support at an earlier stage. However this work must continue.

The fact that almost half of those surveyed had difficulty talking about feelings and emotions, and that the proportion increased from 2015, tells us that more needs to be done. Being able to identify and talk about our feelings is fundamental to managing our emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Action 2 of the ten-year Mental Health Strategy, is a plan to promote mental health through early intervention and prevention, and to reduce mental health stigma. It’s vital that the Strategy is implemented and funded in full, so that we can eradicate stigma and teach people the skills to understand, express and manage their emotions and feelings.”

The survey’s findings also included information about what sources of support people want, and their views on what the Government’s priorities for mental health should be.

Commenting on these findings Siobhan stated: “The study confirmed that prompt access to services is a priority for the population, and primary care has a key role to play. Again, the Strategy will address these issues through a range of actions; and deliver accessible local services. We now need to allocate the funding for year one and beyond so that work can commence urgently.”

Other key findings:

- 4 in 10 people in Northern Ireland want the government to prioritise accessible professional mental health services, and the General Practitioner remains an important source of help for mental health problems (nearly 50%).
- Stigma surrounding mental ill-health has decreased since 2015 and asking for help is now perceived to be more socially acceptable:

- 91% disagreed/strongly disagreed that asking someone else for help for a mental health problem is wrong.
- 78% agreed/strongly agreed that there is less of a stigma nowadays about asking for help for an emotional/mental health problem.
- There has been a dramatic reduction in the proportions of people holding negative and inaccurate beliefs about suicide:
 - 2% agreed/strongly agreed that if a person has made a previous suicide attempt then they would not do it for real; compared to the 2015 figure (16%).
- Many who may benefit from help have not accessed support:
 - One in three (34%) had not sought support from any source, if they had emotional or mental health problems in the past three years.
- Spouses/partners (45%), friends (46%) and family members (30%) were identified as key providers of mental health support.

Dr Paula Devine, Director of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey commented:

“The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is run by ARK, a joint initiative of Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University. It provides a vital role in recording public attitudes to key policy issues. Mental health is a particularly important, given the major local, national and global events that we have been living through, and continue to experience. Thus, the survey data is important for informing relevant mental health policy and programmes.”

Notes to editors:

1. The ARK NILT Survey has been running since 1998 and provides an important source of data on how our opinions have changed over the past 23 years.
2. The survey data has played an important role in shaping and evaluating key public policies, such as those relating to community relations and racial equality, and have consistently informed public and political debate, including in highly contested policy areas.
3. In 2021, a representative sample of 1397 people aged 18 years or over responded to questions on important issues, including relations between different communities living in Northern Ireland, Brexit, criminal justice system, COVID-19, mental health, poverty, income inequality and social security.
4. Full details, including tables of results, from the 2021 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey will be available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>
5. The questions on mental health policy priorities, and attitudes to mental health and suicide were funded by the Office of the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland.

6. You can access the full report, 'Attitudes to mental health and suicide in Northern Ireland' by Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Dr Margaret McLafferty and Dr Paula Devine here: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/publications/updates>
7. References to the 2015 survey are from:
SMR (2015) Evaluation of mental health public information campaign advertising 2014/15 [unpublished]
8. The ARK Seminar detailing the findings can be watched here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65WJ9biwW00>