Young People's Experiences of Mental Health Stigma
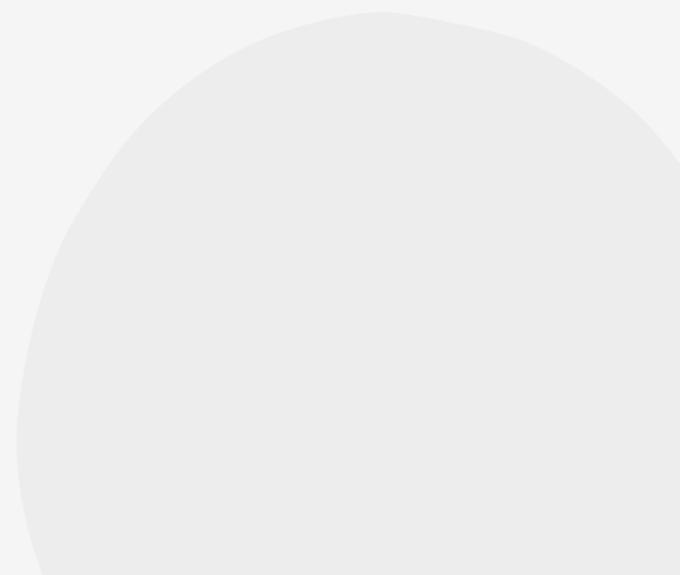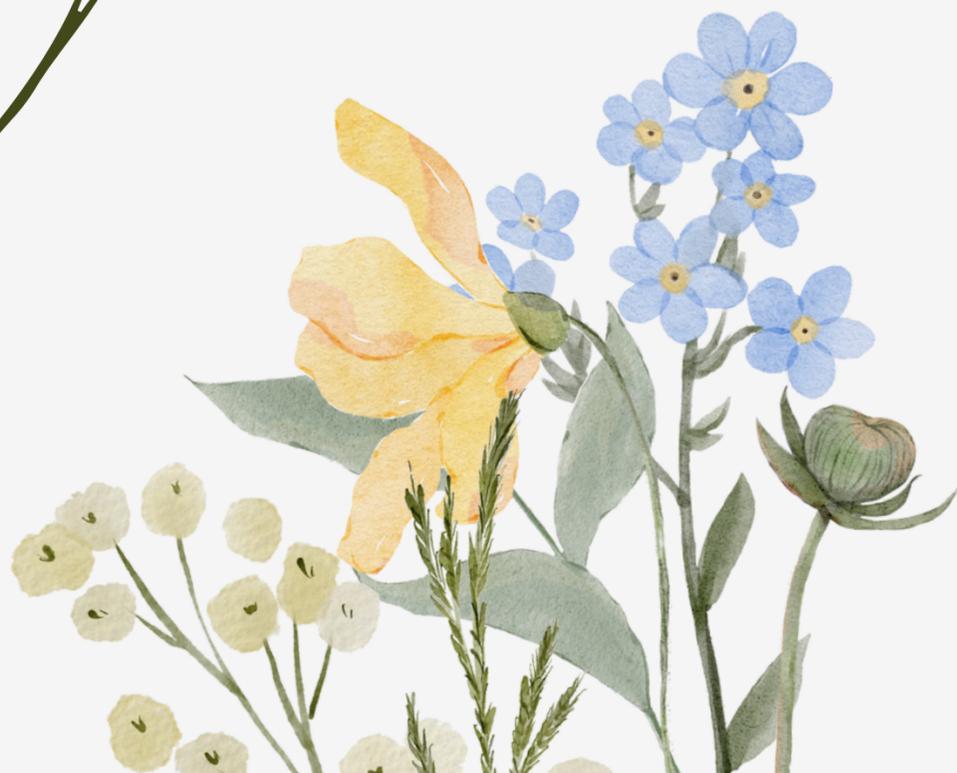
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HELLO!

Rebecca & Kirsty

The Issues

- *Stigma definitions, including measurement and interventions, are not often aligned with youth specific experiences.*

- *Young people are often not involved in decisions that will impact them, or in finding solutions to problems that they face.*

Our Study: What we did.

Rationale: Our understanding of mental health stigma is adult centric (Deluca, 2020; Kaushik et al., 2016) and there are no participatory studies in the area of youth mental health stigma (Swords et al., 2021).

Aim: Speak directly to young people and understand how they define and experience stigma. Design a measurement tool to capture this more clearly.

Methodology: Mixed methods (interviews, measurement design and pilot), participatory methods.

DISCLAIMER

Adult Power

Findings you can take with you

- POWER IMBALANCE

- STRUCTURAL CONTEXTS

- FEELINGS ABOUT STIGMATISATION

Power Imbalance

Adults play a unique role in youth stigmatisation

Power adults hold causes more harm

e.g., adults can gatekeep, make decisions about, and ultimately control more than peers (Austin et al., 2024)

Dismissed & Infaltalised

Youth reported that often their help-seeking was minimised in a way that demonstrated adults could decide what was and wasn't worthy (Johnson, 2025).

Should be Safe

Young people also reported feeling dismissed more often by adults than peers (Ansell et a., 2024) and by adults that should have been safe (e.g., teachers, parents).

Adultism & Power

- *Systems and structures that are designed to prioritise adults.*
- *Goes beyond the normal power imbalance between a client and a practitioner.*
- *Pervasive, unavoidable, in every facet of a young person's life, described as stigma then described as 'omnipresent' (Ansell et al., 2024).*
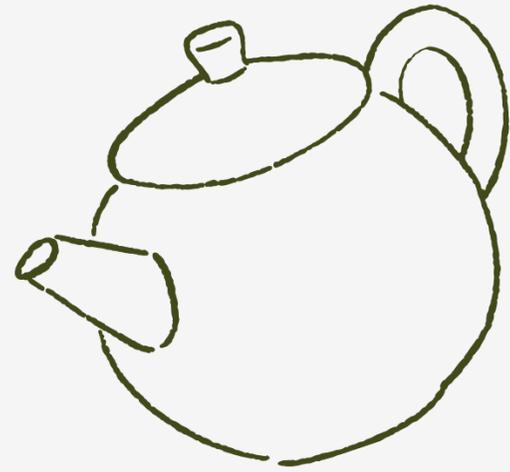
Structural Contexts

This power imbalance was most felt, and most detrimental, in structural contexts that placed young people at the bottom of a hierarchy (e.g., school, healthcare, home).
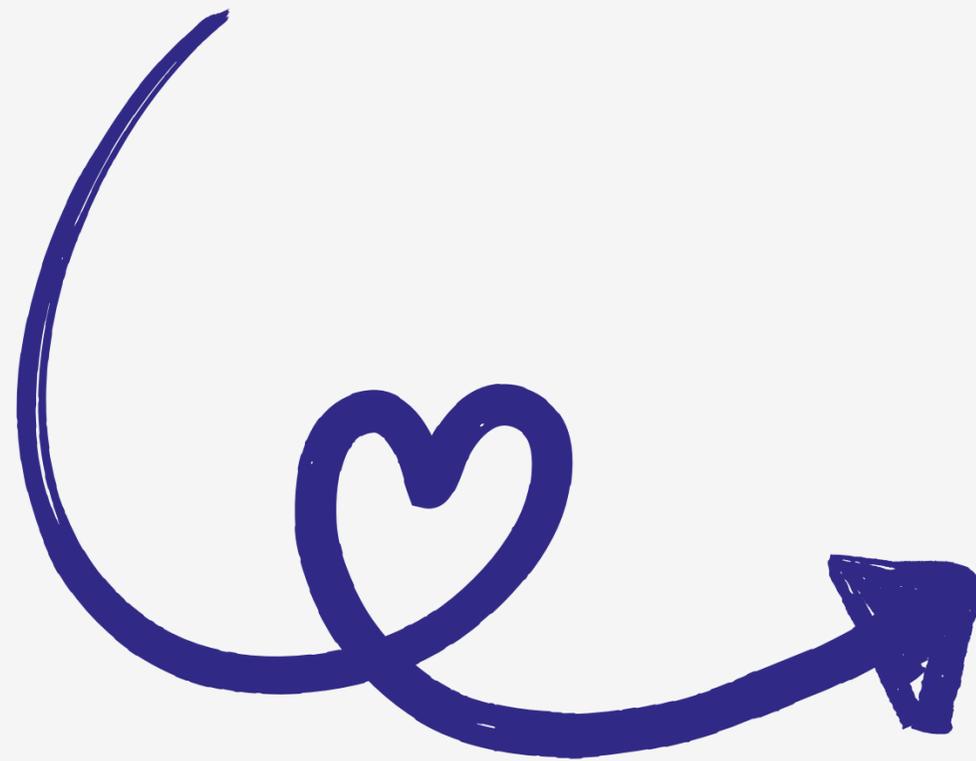
Lack of resource or prioritisation

Negative Culture around Youth MH

Tokenistic Action

Take A Break

Have you noticed certain 'go-to' responses you use when young people share something hard? Do you think they are always helpful?

Well Intentioned?
Still Harmful.

More often than not this stigmatising experience didn't come from overt negative comments. It came from everyday responses that signalled minimisation, lack of understanding and dismissal.

Response

Feels like?

Let's look at an example.

Response

A young person says:
"I've been feeling overwhelmed and I don't think I'm coping. I've tried a few things but it feels like it's getting worse"

Feels like?

"A lot of people your age feel like this, it's part of growing up. Let's keep an eye on it for now and see how things go, I'm sure it'll pass."

Feels like?

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"A lot of people your age feel like this, it's part of growing up. Let's keep an eye on it for now and see how things go, I'm sure it'll pass."

Feels like?

Feelings were **reframed** and **minimised.**
Threshold for support *gatekept and decided by adult.*
Decision made **without** them.

"Thank you for telling me — it sounds like things have been really heavy for you. Can we talk together about what support might help right now, and what you'd like the next step to be?"

A young person says:
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"Thank you for telling me — it sounds like things have been really heavy for you. Can we talk together about what support might help right now, and what you'd like the next step to be?"

A young person says:
"I've been feeling overwhelmed and I don't think I'm coping. I've tried a few things but it feels like it's getting worse"

Feels like?

Feelings were **validated.**
Collaborative next steps.
Power **shared** not removed.

What can you do?

Recognise your power

Young people believe you. Your power often positions you as an expert. Young people now expect negative responses.

Apply your learning

Take your learning from today and other CPD activities and actively apply it through reflective practise and supervision.

Nothing about us without us

A brilliant mantra, coined from disability research, which recognises that decisions about someone shouldn't be made without them.

Challenge it

You do not exist in a vacuum but you do contribute to a culture. Where possible, challenge negative culture and attitudes.

Help them see

The final unique finding from our research showed that understanding how stigmatisation felt really helped young people recognise how they should be treated. So support young people to recognise the difference between a stigmatising and a supportive response.
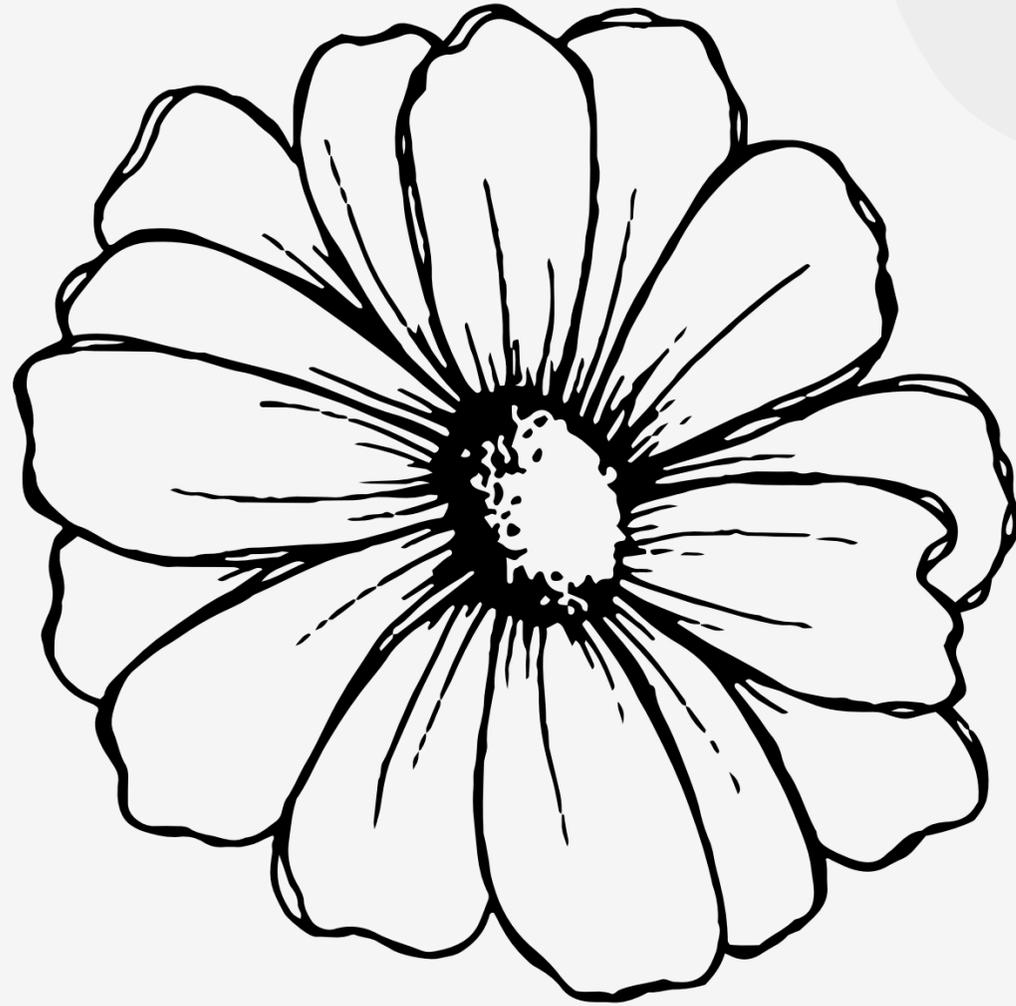
Conclusions

There's no right answer, right and wrong is the wrong metric

Interventions need to address adult stigma

We need to work on our internalised adultism

Are you ready to listen?

THANK YOU!

Any Questions or Reflections?

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