

IT WASN'T ALL BAD: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CMHT PATIENTS

Dr Khadeeja Ansar, Dr Lauren Unsworth and Dr Guy Brookes

North West Leeds Community Mental Health Team (NW CMHT), Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

BACKGROUND

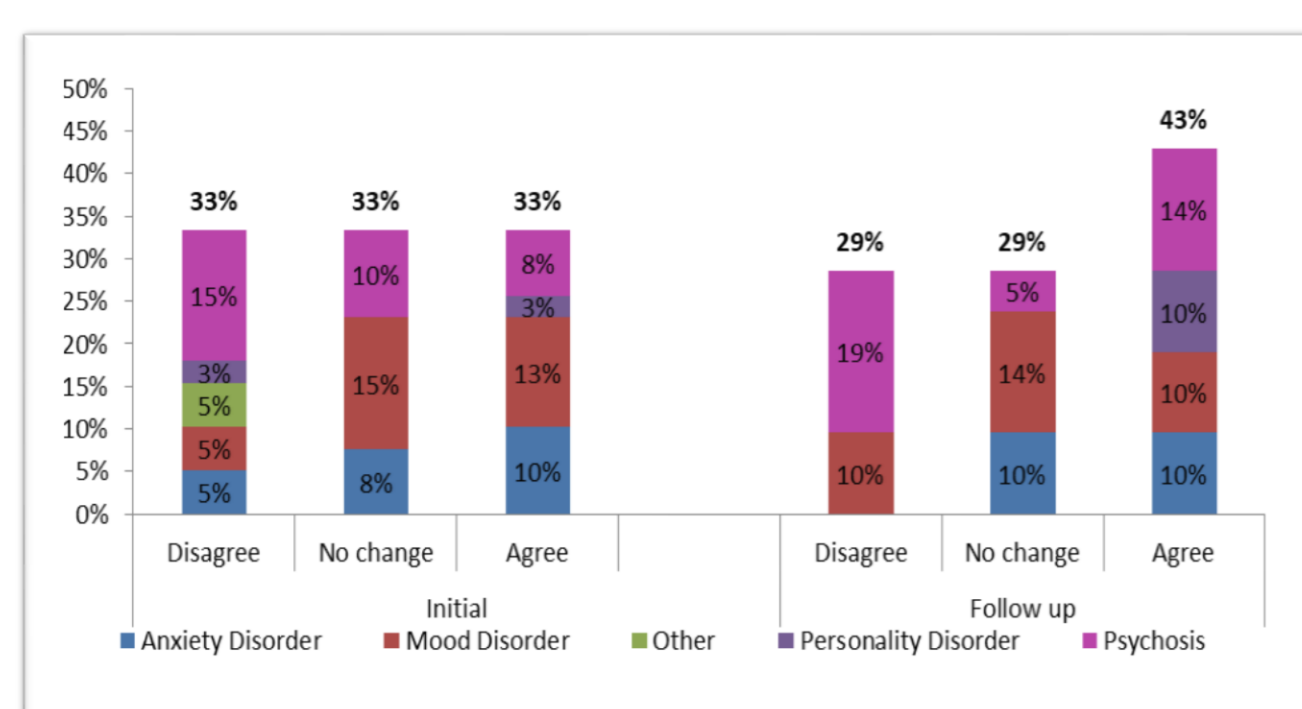
- Since March 2020, wide-ranging restrictions on social contact and freedom of movement have been enforced in the UK in order to reduce transmission of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).
- Alongside this, community mental health services had to work in different ways, with service bases closed, staff working from home and remote contact largely replacing face-to-face contact.
- There were significant concerns about how these unprecedented changes would affect people's mental health.
- The aims of this project were:
 - To evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of service users of the NW CMHT
 - To compare results obtained towards the start of the pandemic to those obtained after some easing of restrictions
 - To assess whether psychiatric diagnosis had an impact on the way in which service users were affected by COVID-19

METHOD

- A questionnaire was designed containing quantitative and qualitative questions to ask service users about their current emotional state, thought processes and coping strategies.
- Questionnaires were conducted via telephone interview by the authors.
- Participants were recruited from the NW CMHT caseload. Service users were included if they had been assessed by the CMHT before 01/02/2020, therefore excluding those who were very new to the service.
- Service users were excluded if they were inpatients in hospital or under the care of the Intensive Support Service, as it was considered that they would be too unwell to provide capacitous consent to take part.
- Initial telephone interviews were carried out during a 3-week period between 27th April and 21st May. Repeat questionnaires were then carried out with the same participants between 17th July and 18th August.

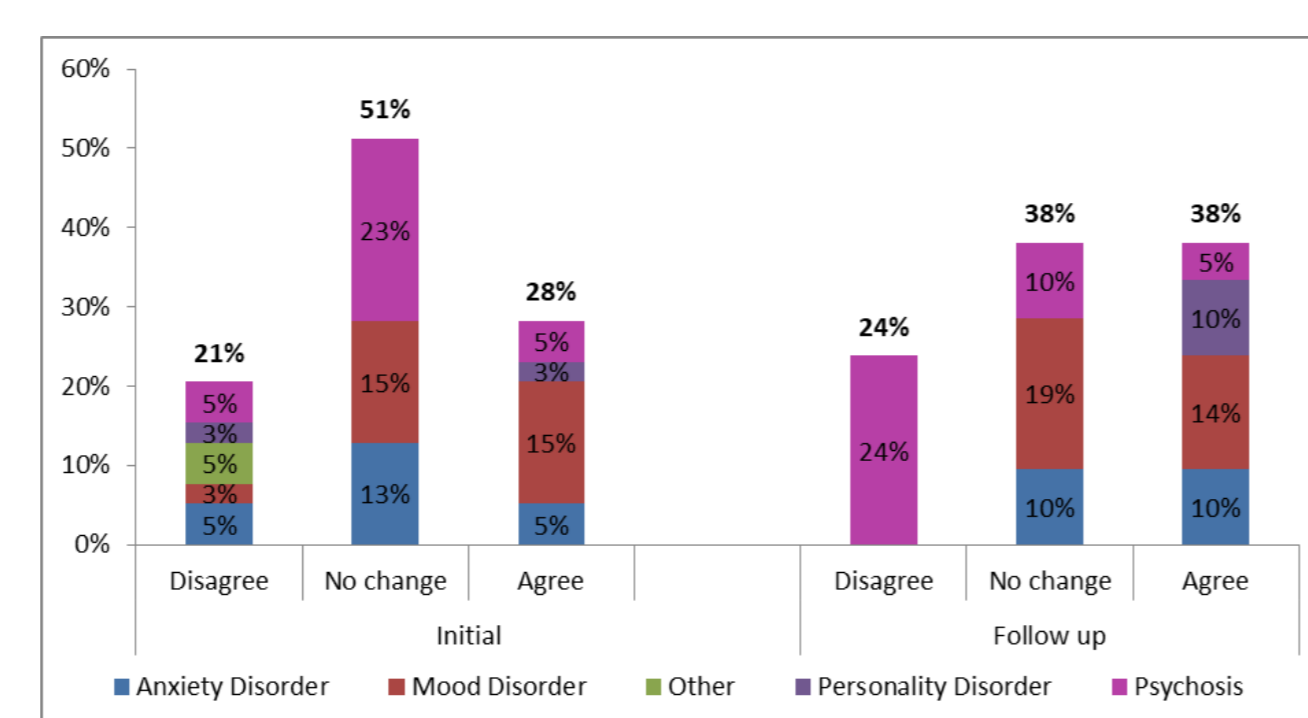
RESULTS

- 39 participants completed the questionnaire during the first round. 21 of these responded again in the second round.
- Results are shown in the charts for the initial time period (April / May) and follow up (July / August), broken down by the patients' diagnosis.



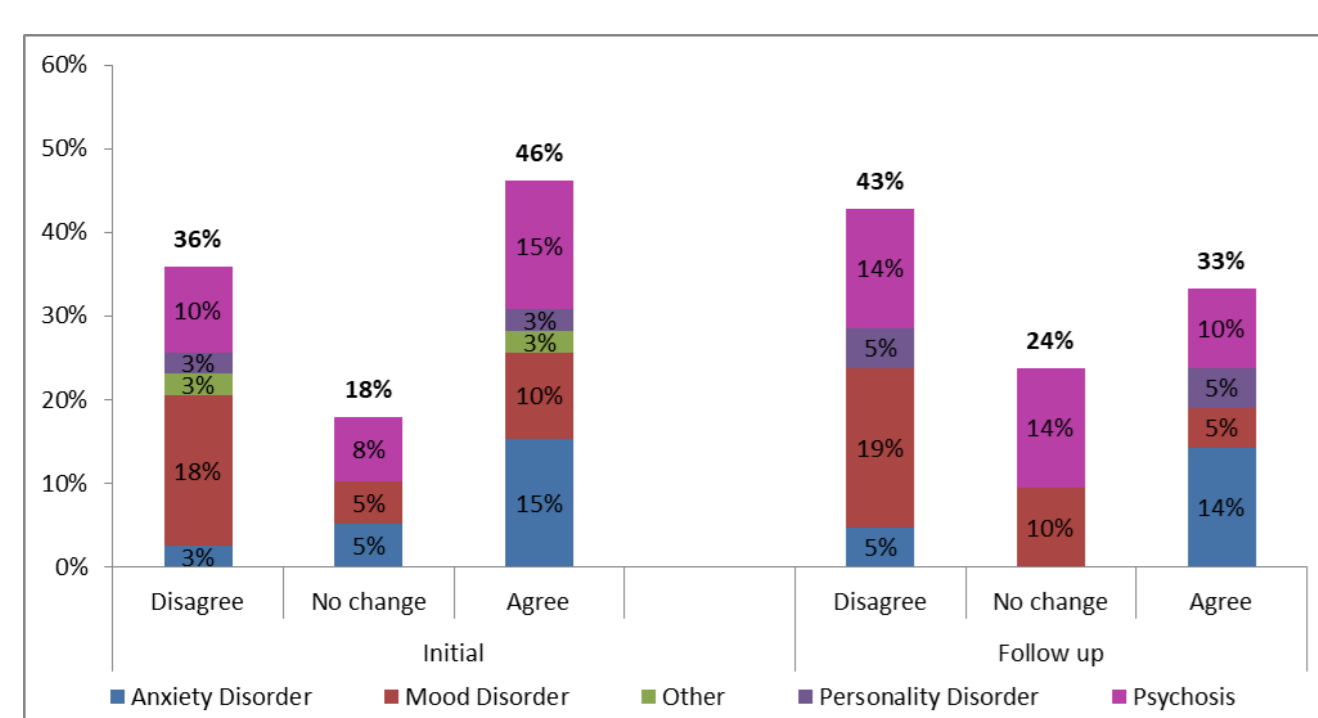
1. I feel down or sad more often

During the initial time period, one third of participants reported feeling more sad. By follow-up, this had increased to 43%. One third disagreed that they felt more sad, and this was maintained at follow-up.



2. I feel more anxious or worried

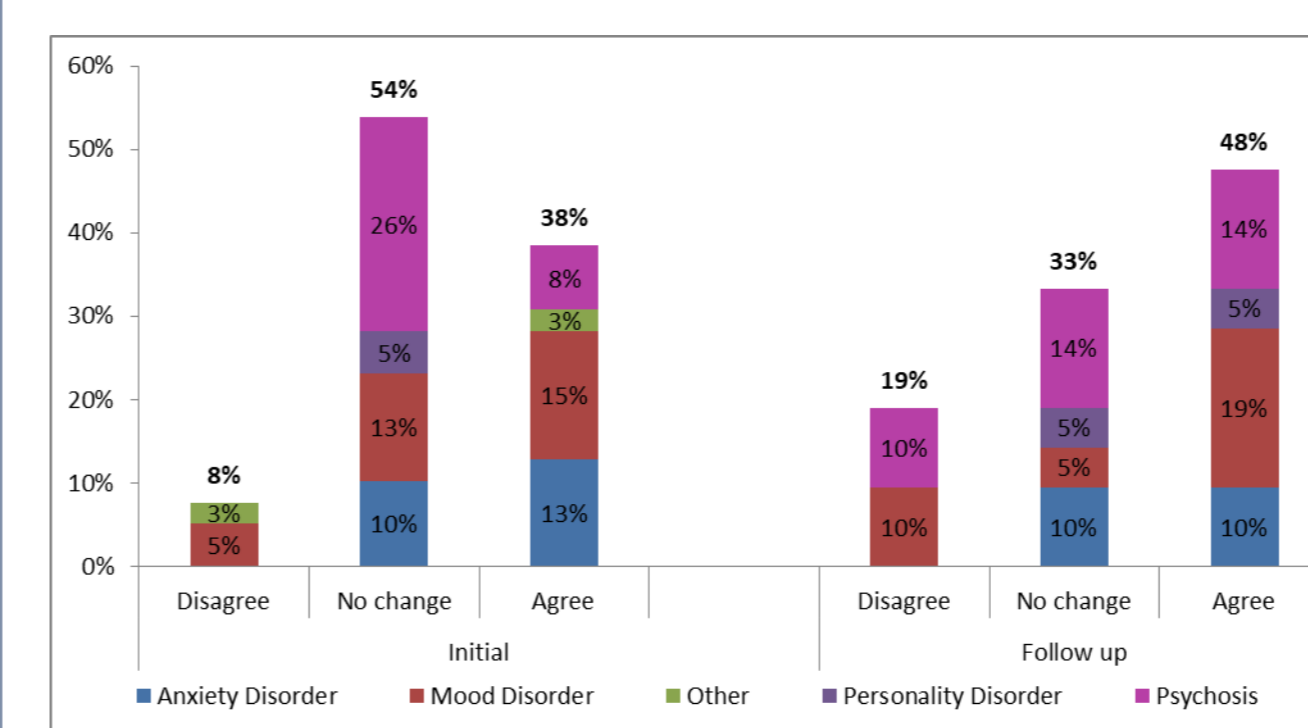
The majority of participants did not feel more anxious, both during the initial responses and at follow-up. Those with a diagnosis of a mood disorder reported more anxiety than people with other diagnoses.



3. I feel more connected to others

During the earlier stages of the pandemic, 46% reported feeling more connected to others. This had fallen to 33% at follow-up, with a greater proportion disagreeing that they felt more connected to others.

RESULTS



4. I have found different ways of coping with my mental health problems

A high proportion of participants reported that they had found different ways of coping with their mental health during the pandemic.

Some comments people made about different ways of coping:

"I am talking to family and being more open about how I am feeling"

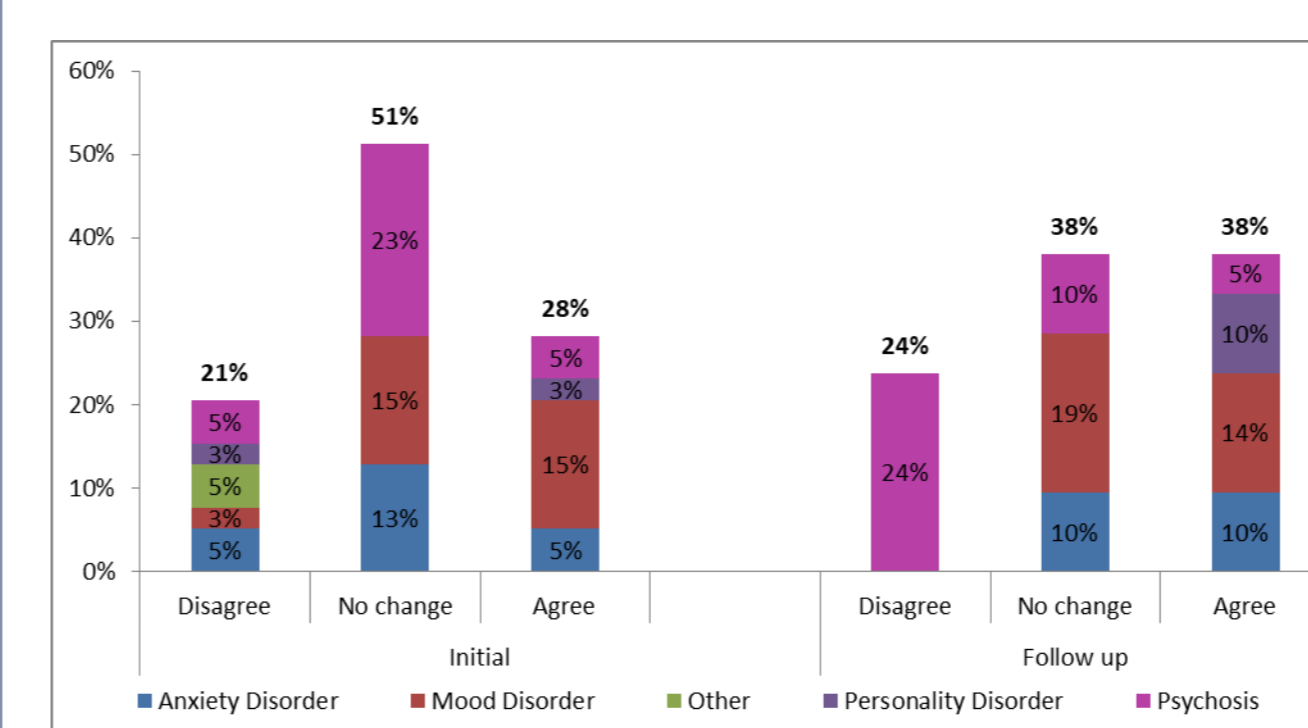
"I am doing more exercise now"

"I try to find something to do each day"

"Less rushing around, more quiet time"

"I get outdoors more"

"I have a healthier sleeping pattern"



5. Overall my mental health has worsened

Over time there had been a slight shift towards more people reporting a worsening of their mental health.

CONCLUSIONS

- Overall, it seemed that patients were more resilient than had been expected. The significant deterioration in mental health that was feared as a result of the pandemic did not seem to occur. Whilst there was a slight shift towards people reporting an overall worsening of their mental health over time, this was not as great as might have been expected given the huge changes in both way of life and provision of mental health services.
- In each of the questions asked, there was a lot of variation in the responses given. Whilst some people reported a very positive experience during lockdown, others felt it had a much more negative impact on them. It is important to remember that we should not consider all people with mental health problems as a homogenous group, but instead think about their individual experiences.
- With the changes in mental health services, people were able to find new ways of coping with their mental health difficulties. It was interesting that the comments people made about ways of coping mirrored the advice given by the government. For instance, government guidance advocated connecting with others, thinking about your daily routine, looking after your physical well-being and trying to get outside into nature – all things that patients reported they were doing. The impression from the study was that patients had identified these strategies for themselves, rather than simply following guidance.
- It is unclear whether these findings reflect the experiences of the population in general, and a larger scale study to include a sample more representative of the population would be interesting.