

## A Guide:

# How can we do better coverage of mental health?

**Tips for journalists and others who want to cover the mental health of young people.**

## Anxiety, stress and loneliness

We live in a time when our mental health has become one of the biggest challenges to public health. Danes have mental health problems and especially young people mistrive. So do numerous studies confirm. Several say that they feel lonely or have anxiety, and an increasing number of young people are being diagnosed with psychiatry.

### **What and how?**

But the question is, have young people become more fragile or has the world become a harder place to be? Regardless of the answers to those questions, lots of journalism is done telling and describing the problems. What about the solutions?

Can constructive journalism help change that? Can constructive journalism help to cover the topic in a more nuanced and solution-oriented way?

For the past year I have been trying to find an answer to that question. As a journalist, in recent years, I have dealt a lot with stories about young people's dissatisfaction, and made several stories describing the problems, but not the solutions. Over the course of this year, as a fellow at Constructive Institute, I have interviewed a large number of young people, politicians and experts who have all dealt with mental health either on a personal or professional level. In addition, I have followed two courses at Aarhus University, one at the Department of Public

## 2

Health<sup>1</sup> and one at the Department of Psychology, which has focused on anxiety among children and adolescents<sup>2</sup> and mindfulness.

### Some facts, figures and statistics

First, a few facts. One in four women aged 16-24 has a mental illness<sup>3</sup>, around 25% of the country's disease burden comes from psychiatric illness, and just over 580.000 people currently have a mental illness. Over the course of a lifetime, it is estimated that up to half of the population will be affected by a mental illness that negatively affects the quality of life.

The large human costs are followed by similar financial ones.

According to an OECD analysis from 2019, Denmark spends approximately 5,4 percent of its BNP on mental health problems in terms of treatment, lower attachment to the labor market and social benefits.

This corresponds to an annual expenditure of more than 100 billion Danish kroner<sup>4</sup>.

The problems in the mental field are now so extensive, that the politicians are also showing interest. This spring, the Danish Health Authority (Sundhedsstyrelsen) presented a proposal for a comprehensive plan. Over the next 10 years, 600 million Danish kroner every year has been set aside, to be used to provide better treatment and create coherence<sup>5</sup>.

### Does dissatisfaction increase?

Numerous studies have confirmed the same picture. Every time researchers have examined how young people are feeling, the answer has been that they are worse off than the last time they were asked. The dissatisfaction of young people has only increased and increased over time.

The young people experience stress, anxiety and loneliness and that is now the biggest obstacle for learning, if you ask the rector at Nyborg Gymnasium, Henrik Vestergaard Stokholm. He assesses that out of 1200 students, around 300 students mis thrive in one way or the other.

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<sup>1</sup> [Dansk Center for Mindfulness, Aarhus Universitet \(au.dk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Cool Kids \(au.dk\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Fagligt oplæg til en 10-årsplan: Bedre mental sundhed og en styrket indsats til mennesker med psykiske lidelser - Sundhedsstyrelsen](#)

<sup>4</sup> <https://psykiatrifonden.dk/viden/fakta-forskning/omkostninger>

<sup>5</sup> [10-års plan for psykiatrien I Sundhedsministeriet \(sum.dk\)](#)

It's also one of the conclusions of a new comprehensive survey of Danes' health, "Health Profile 2022"<sup>6</sup> (Danskernes Sundhed, Sundhedsprofilen 2022) from March this year. More than half of the young women between 16 and 24 years feel stressed. An important caveat is that the survey responses were collected in the spring of 2021, when corona restrictions shut the country down. But that cannot explain the whole development.

Since 2010, the population has been asked every four years how they are doing, including young people. In 2010, 30 percent of young women scored high, when asked about stress<sup>7</sup>.

In 2017, it had risen to 40 percent, and now more than half of all young women feel stressed. For 12 years, three Health Profiles have stated that it is going the wrong way. Every time they were asked, the answers got worse.

Part of the increase in numbers can be explained by more and better access to psychiatry<sup>8</sup>. But that explains far from everything. One fact is, that we do not know very much about how well-being among young people was in the past, because we did not pay attention to the problem and we did not ask them how they felt, in the same way we do today. Focus on the well-being of young people has accelerated today. We are concerned, and we measure it and the schools are obliged to make well-being measurements and prescribe psychological help<sup>9</sup>.

The great focus on mental health may give the impression that mental health problems today are a bigger problem than in the past. But does increased coverage and media coverage necessarily mean that the scope has grown? This is something leading experts can't actually give a clear answer to. For the question is, whether the young people have gotten worse, or whether it is in fact, that more people are talking openly about dissatisfaction and that mental health has become an issue that is high on both the public and political agenda.

According to an analysis from Vidensråd for Forebyggelse (2020)<sup>10</sup> it is not clear whether there has been a real increase in the incidence of mental health problems among children and young people over time, or whether we have simply become more aware of mental health problems<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> [Danskernes sundhed \(sst.dk\)](https://www.sst.dk)

<sup>7</sup> [Den Nationale Sundhedsprofil 2010 - Sundhedsstyrelsen](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Et stigende antal børn og unge har kontakt til psykiatrien - Sundhedsdatastyrelsen](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Genstart | De unge menneskers lidelser | DR LYD](#)

<sup>10</sup> [boern\\_unge\\_mentale\\_digi\\_01\\_0.pdf \(vidensraad.dk\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [boern\\_unge\\_mentale\\_digi\\_01\\_0.pdf \(vidensraad.dk\)](#), page 22

At the same time, the consumption of medicine among young people is an under-illuminated area.<sup>12</sup>

### **A simple generalization**

There are a lot of hypotheses why so many young people do not thrive.

Some experts point to performance pressure in school and the education system. Several researchers have also commented to the media on how PISA testing, high school and progress reform have increased the requirements. Others point to a societal development, where parents have less time for their children. There is also a focus on young people's lack of resilience and the ability to cope with demands and challenges.

Others point out that youth culture is characterized by high expectations for appearance and body, which are reinforced by social media's presentation of body ideals and demands for self-staging.

Professor and youth researcher at Aalborg University, Naomi Katznelson, points out that in the public debate we see organizations, politicians and professionals who are worried over the growing dissatisfaction and who require immediate intervention.

In other words, the debate is characterized by opposing explanatory frameworks, each of which draws on one-sided generalizations about young people and about the reasons for the increase in mental dissatisfaction.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore only, very few of these hypotheses about what drives development have been studied. Simply because it is not possible to measure scientifically. In other words, there is no simple explanation, why more young people today state that they are unhappy. There is not one cause, not one solution.

### **No national strategy**

In 2015, the UN sustainable development goals focused on strengthening mental health. But if you look at the prevention and treatment of mental health, you will find a number of contradictions.

Despite the increased focus on dissatisfaction and the National Board of Health's 10-year plan, there is no national strategy for children and young people's mental health in Denmark, unlike in

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<sup>12</sup> <https://sundhedskommunikation.com/2021/10/14/trivsel/>

<sup>13</sup> [Ny udsathed: nuancer i forståelser af psykisk mistrivsel | Nordic Journal for Youth Research \(idunn.no\)](#)

## 5

the UK, among other places, states Lone Overby Fjordback, who is an psychiatrist and expert in mindfulness, Aarhus University.

In the UK, school students are taught mental health according to the ".b program"<sup>14</sup>. The program which consists of 10 lessons is developed by three teachers who have experience in mindfulness<sup>15</sup>. Research shows that children and adolescents thrive better in classes where mindfulness is integrated, compared to classes without. Within a couple of years, a research trial will be completed in Denmark, where an attempt has been made to implement mindfulness in primary and lower secondary schools.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, a report from Vidensrådet for Forebyggelse (2020) indicates that there is a lack of common goals and strategy for both coherent prevention, knowledge sharing and management of mental health problems in Denmark.<sup>17</sup> The area is characterized by many different disciplines, silo thinking and very few common standards, guidelines and monitoring. The municipalities' efforts towards young people are very diverse, and there is no sharing of best practice<sup>18</sup>. Once the project money has run out, the project stops and it is not necessarily evaluated for the benefit of other municipalities.

For example, a survey from the research unit for child- and adolescent psychiatry in Region Nordjylland shows that half of the children who were diagnosed with autism and anxiety did not receive their first diagnosis until at least five years after the parents approached the school for help.<sup>19</sup> During that time, the child or young person was living with an untreated illness. Among other things, the waiting time for psychologists and psychiatrists has increased significantly.

Another example is a VIVE report (2021), where eight out of ten PPR managers answer, that the number of children and young people in dissatisfaction has increased in their municipality over the past five years<sup>20</sup>. In Aarhus municipality, they are in the process of mapping out what the increase is due to, says councilor for children and young people, Thomas Medom.

### Pitfalls in coverage

If you do cover the area, there are pitfalls you need to be aware of.

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<sup>14</sup> [.b-programmet \(au.dk\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [.b Curriculum \(ages 11 – 18\) - Mindfulness in Schools Project](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Stressfri \(au.dk\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Sådan øger vi børn og unges mentale trivsel. Ny episode af Sundhedsvisioner – Sundhedskommunikation](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Sådan øger vi børn og unges mentale trivsel. Ny episode af Sundhedsvisioner – Sundhedskommunikation](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Mange børn mistrives fem år, før psykiatrien finder ud af, at de har autisme og ADHD | Indland | DR](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Kortlægning af PPR-ledernes oplevelse af de kommunale indsatser - VIVE](#)

A large part of the surveys that are conducted are based on self-reporting. The respondent must assess questions of dissatisfaction based on subjective self-report questionnaires. Therefore, there is a certain risk of bias in the studies<sup>21</sup>.

### **A polarized public debate**

But how do we journalists cover the area? I have made a small sample in Infomedia in connection with the publication of the Health Profile 2022 (Sundhedsprofilen 2022), where one of the main conclusions was that more than half of the young women feel stressed. I have searched for the words "mental health", "health profile" and "youth and mental health" from the 8th. of March to the 15th. of March, 2022 in the nationwide and regional dailies.

Here are some of the headlines from the news articles that I found.

For example ..... "Young women have pain in the soul - and it gets worse all the time", Berlingske, (13.03.2022)

"Gigantic study of Danes' health: It can hardly be emphasized enough how serious this is", Politiken, (9.03.2022)

"The Danes' health and mental well-being are diving - again, again. What do we do about it ?", Jyllands Posten (9.03. 2022)

According to Professor of youth research Naomi Katznelson, the media tends to paint a far more alarmist and gloomy picture of youth life than it is in reality. She bases her assumption on an analysis among just over 2,000 young people that she has conducted. They have been asked about well-being, dissatisfaction and vulnerability, and it turns out that the picture is far more nuanced and less dramatic than the picture drawn in the public debate. The analysis shows important differences in what dissatisfaction covers<sup>22</sup>.

I have interviewed a group of students who all struggle with various mental challenges. And they do agree. Isabella Rasmussen, who is 18 years old, suffers from anxiety, depression and self-harm. She has been absent from school for several years.

She can recognize the feeling of wanting to be perfect in the eyes of others, but inside her world is chaotic.

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<sup>21</sup> [boern\\_unge\\_mentale\\_digi\\_01\\_0.pdf \(vidensraad.dk\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Ny udsathed: nuancer i forståelser af psykisk mistrivsel | Nordic Journal for Youth Research \(idunn.no\)](#)

She states it very clearly. Media only covers the problems about mental health. She has a great desire for the media to create a greater coherence, more personal and solution-oriented stories about young people that she can reflect on.

### **A constructive mindset**

The media today has a special responsibility. They can either help promote or prevent a change. So how can journalists make the coverage better, perhaps more constructive?

Here are three examples that can inspire from the constructive journalistic three pillars<sup>23</sup>. The ambition is to contribute to democracy through critical, constructive journalism.

#### **Pillar 1 - Focus on solutions**

Do not only describe the problem, but also explore possible solutions to push the story forward. Constructive stories can help point to solutions and provide more nuances in the debate.

Seek inspiration in other municipalities, organizations and countries. This is how they have solved the problem elsewhere, so this is how we can be inspired to change something.

In 2021, Opinion conducted a poll among Norwegian young people on which topics concern them most. Until then climate and environment were the most popular subjects, but now a new theme climbed the top, namely mental health.

NRK created the site "Lyspunkt" [NRK Lyspunkt - Mental helse - Special](#), which aims to inspire others.

There is the story of Jan, who has dedicated his life to helping others through grief.

[Jan bruker fjellturet som terapi etter å ha mistet fire av sine nærmeste – Møre og Romsdal \(nrk.no\)](#)

There is the story of Mathias, living with anxiety and giving others hope.

[Mathias lever med angst: – Jeg fikk god hjelp og vil vise for andre at det er håp – Nordland \(nrk.no\)](#)

And finally a short exercise video that can reduce stress or be used as inspiration.

[Denne enkle øvelsen kan brukes for å stresse ned – NRK](#)

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<sup>23</sup> [What is Constructive Journalism - Definition - Models - Meaning \(constructiveinstitute.org\)](#)

## **Pillar 2 - Nuances shades**

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of an issue, strive for the best achievable version of the truth and see the world with both eyes.

This article from Zetland, tries to come up with alternative suggestions on how to improve one's mental health by positive thinking. Thanks to a research group, there is now research that shows that self awareness can improve one's mental health. This article helps to provide knowledge and more nuances to the debate.

[Denne artikel kan måske forbedre dit mentale helbred. Hvis du altså tror på det, der står \(zetland.dk\)](https://zetland.dk)

## **Pillar 3 - Strengthen democratic dialogue**

Today, not all newsrooms can afford a dedicated staff for, for example, the health area. Therefore, it may be a good idea for one or more journalists to specialize themselves with a topic. In this way, you can ensure that there is an insightful colleague who can see through more complex issues.

This is exactly what the community editorial staff at Fyens Stiftstidende is doing right now.

After the summer holidays, the newspaper plans to launch a month-long "campaign" on young people's mental health. It will culminate in a big event at Nyborg Gymnasium.

The goal of the campaign is to stop myths and point to solutions.

Birgit Bakkær Sørensen, who is the editor and leader of the campaign, says that in the last three months, since the Health Profile 2022 (Sundhedsprofilen 2022) was published, she has experienced that the debate about young people's dissatisfaction, has been largely influenced by experts and that young people, parents and teachers have not been involved to the same extent.

As a regional media, it is therefore important for Fyens Stiftstidende to put faces on the debate.

Four large portraits are planned with young people and their parents. They need to create identification and nuance. At the same time, every article has a dogma. The articles must contain something that points forward or something that is constructive.



### **Facilitate the debate**

With such a complex topic as mental health, Fyens Stiftstidende tries to engage and facilitate the debate with an event at Nyborg Gymnasium.

The idea is to create a marketplace where young people and the newspaper's readers can meet the different cases from the articles. Professional organizations like "Ventilen" and "Headspace" will attend, and there will be talks and dilemma questions.

The newspaper will also involve the Danish teachers at the Funen high schools. The students are given the task of writing columns with their own personal experiences about mental health.

Other classes must produce video under the theme - "Me and my mobile"

And finally, the newspaper launches an award entitled "Fuck - du er sej", where brave young people are encouraged to share their thoughts with others.

### **A constructive mindset**

I would like to end by pointing out the importance of providing more nuances in the debate rather than just looking for conflict.

Seek inspiration in other municipalities, organizations and countries. This is how they have solved the problem elsewhere, so this is how we can be inspired to change something. At the same time, nuances can strengthen credibility and build trust. Mental health is a complex area, and the journalist must also convey this.

**Source list:**

Julie, 19 years, High School Student, 3.g. (anxiety and depression)

Silje, 18 years, High School Student, 2.g. (borderline)

Adam, 19 years, HHX Student, 2. år, (depression)

Isabella Rasmussen, 18 years, Student, (depression and anxiety)

Henrik Vestergaard Stokholm, Rector, Nyborg Gymnasium

Søren Østergaard, Youth Research, Center for Ungdomsforskning

Pia Jeppesen, Senior Research, Chief physician in child psychiatry, Leader of "Mind my Mind",  
Copenhagen University

Stine Liv Johansen, Chairman of the Media Council for Children and Young People and  
Associate Professor at the Center for Children's Literature and Media, Aarhus University

Noemi Katznelson, Professor, Center leader and research leader, Center for Youth Studies,  
Aalborg University

Dea Seidenfaden, Chairman, Danish Psychologists Association

Ida Jønsson, Pedagogical consultant, Børnetelefonen, Børns Vilkår

Sarah Cecilie Boss, Press manager, Psykiatrifonden

Line Holten Sichmann, Communications manager, Dansk Ungdommens Røde Kors

Birgit Bakkær Sørensen, Editor, Fyens Stiftstidende

Trine Torp, Member of the health committee, SF

Jane Heitmann, Chairman of the health committee, V

Camilla Fabricius, Member of the health committee, S

Thomas Medom, Children and youth counselor, Aarhus municipality, SF