



SocialSpider

Centre for
Mental Health



Mark Brown and Geena Saini

A Day in the Life - Executive Summary

What happens when you ask people who live with mental health difficulties to write about their everyday life?

1. Introduction

A Day in the Life was a one-year crowdsourcing project conceived and carried out by Social Spider CIC that asked people living with mental health difficulties one very simple question: What was your day like? What made your mental health better and what made it worse?

On four calendar days between November 2014 and August 2015 via an open appeal, the project asked people who identified themselves as living with a mental health difficulty to write up to 700 words about what their day was like.

These accounts of ordinary days lived with mental health difficulties were then published on the internet, unedited for anyone to read. They represent the largest single collection of accounts of the everyday lives of people with mental health difficulties.

Over the year, 893 different days were written by participants, or nearly half a million words, giving a window into the everyday lives of people with mental health difficulties.

With funding from Public Health England, Centre for Mental Health and Social Spider CIC carried out a limited content analysis of 782 of the uploaded days seeing what, if anything, all of these days told us overall about what affects the day-to-day wellbeing of people living with mental health difficulties.

The full report of our analysis is available at www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/adayinthelifemh

The A Day in the Life blogs are available to read at www.dayinthelifemh.org.uk

2. What did people write about most?



Figure 1: Topics most mentioned which had a positive or negative effect on the wellbeing of the writer

The theme recognised in the greatest number of analysed days was experience of mental health services, whether this was positive or negative.

The second most frequently mentioned area was work contribution, covering the feeling that work had contributed either negatively or positively to the sense of wellbeing of the person living with mental health difficulty on the day in question.

The third most mentioned area was home life - stability, security, routine - the sense of home as a safe environment in which to live. The fourth was friend support, the ability and opportunity to talk to and gain support from friends. Fifth was sense of purpose in life or its absence.

The **three most commonly mentioned positive wellbeing indicators** are friend support, home life and sense of purpose (see figure 2). These are closely followed by positive experiences of mental health services, positive experiences at work, and hobbies.

The **three most common negative wellbeing indicators** were experiences of mental health services, poor or unsatisfying sleep and the physical health of the individual writing (see figure 3).

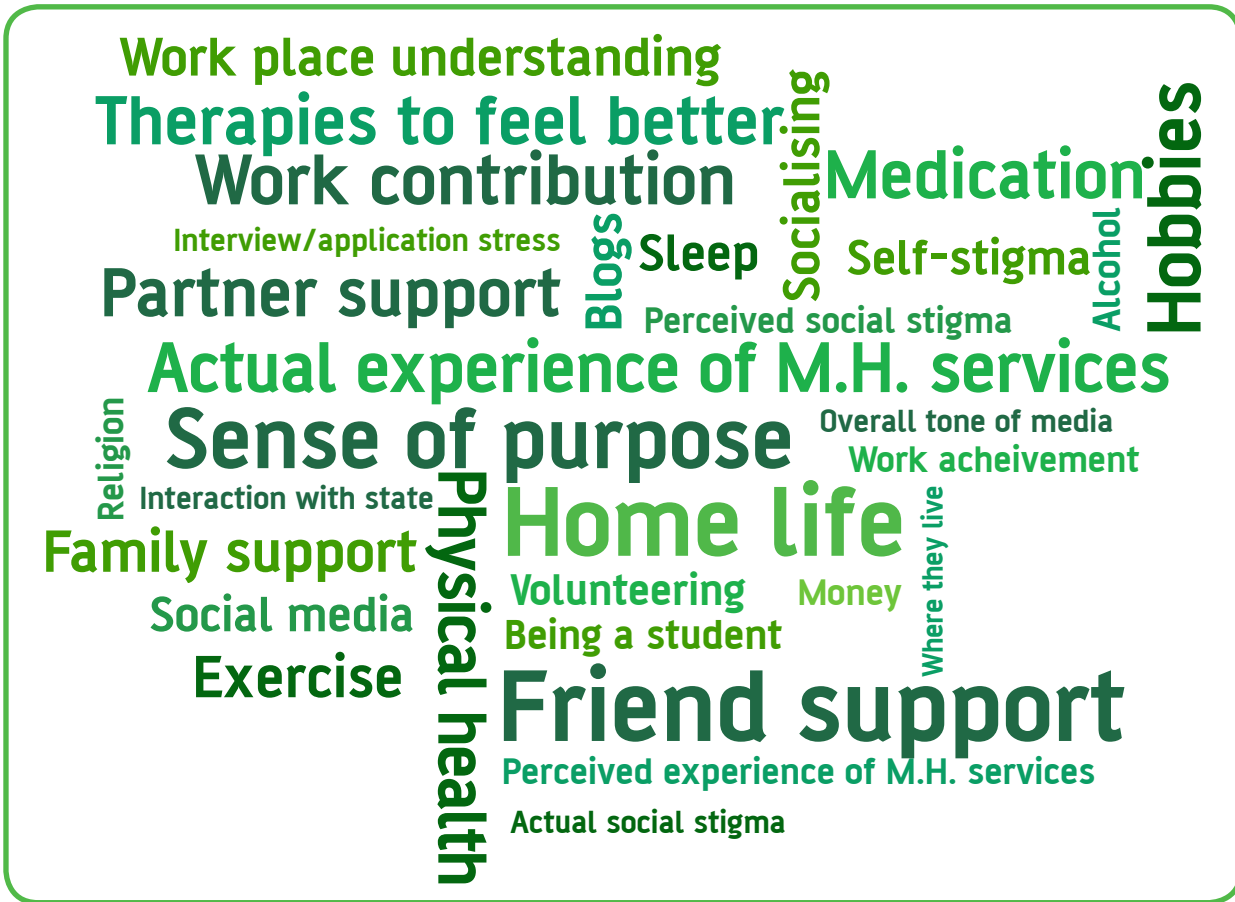


Figure 2: Topics recognised as having a positive effect on the wellbeing of the writer

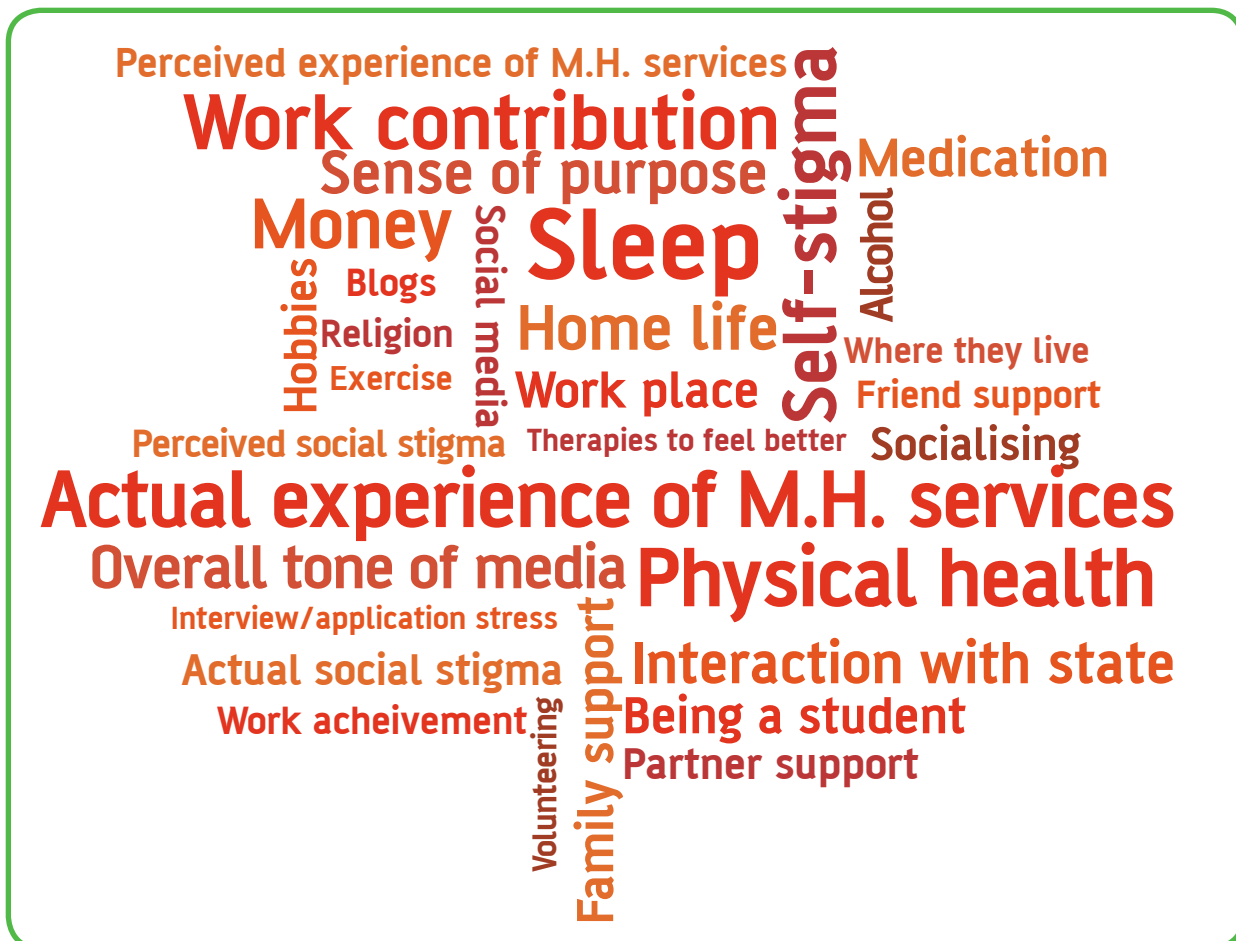


Figure 3: Topics recognised as having a negative effect on the wellbeing of the writer

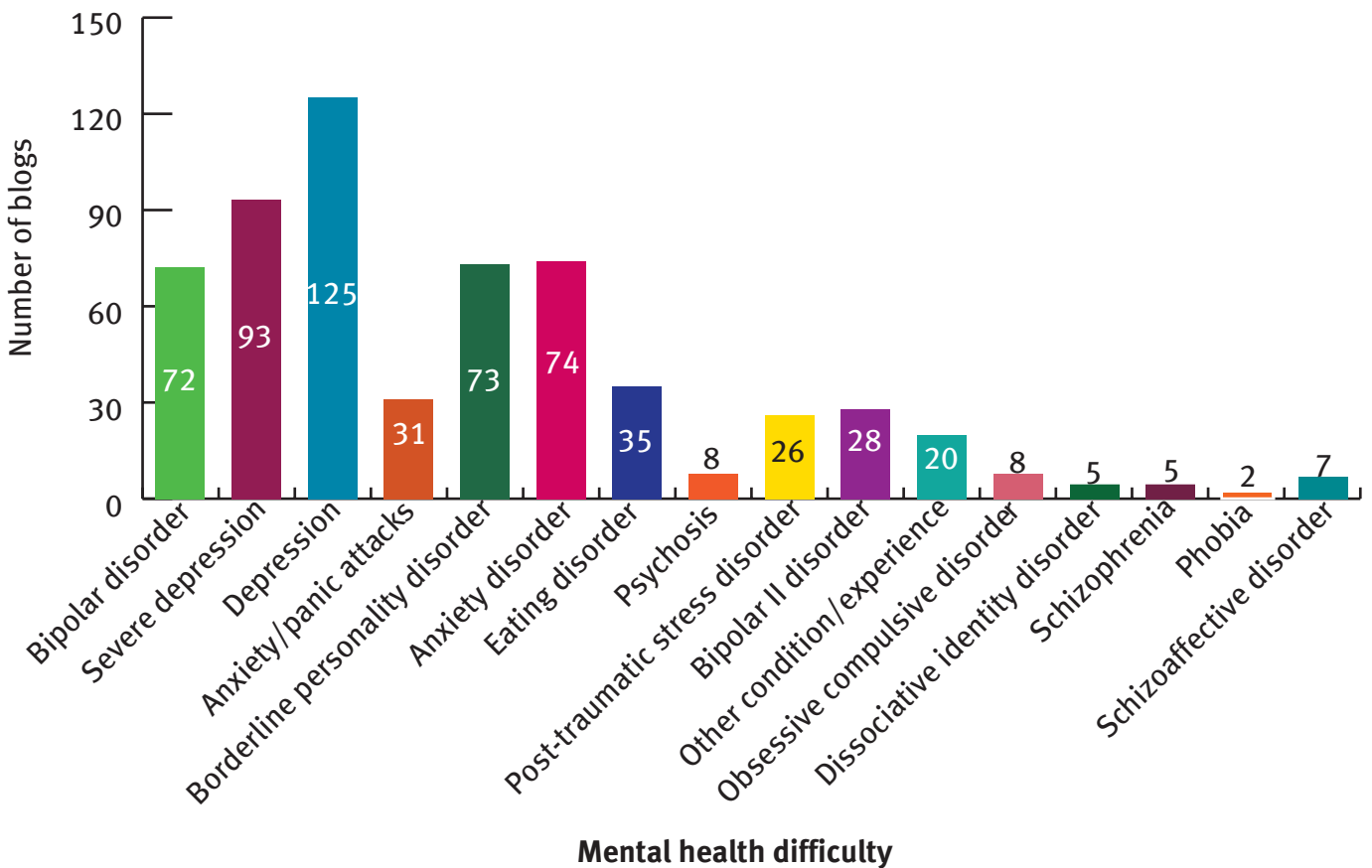
3. Who took part in A Day in the Life?

People taking part were asked to submit with each post some basic demographic data. While not all did, available data show that there are three times as many posts by women as by men; that there was a broad age range of participants, but at least half were in their twenties or thirties; and that about a third of participants had a long-term physical illness as well as a mental health difficulty.

People with a wide range of mental health conditions participated in A Day in the Life, the most common being depression (including

severe depression), anxiety, borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder. The vast majority were currently receiving treatment for their mental health condition.

In the full report, we analyse the different factors that affect the wellbeing of people from different demographic groups. Our analysis shows that it is not possible to make straightforward assumptions about the things that matter to people based on their demographic characteristics, such as age, gender or location.



4. The value of lived experience

A Day in the Life has demonstrated the value of using technology to crowdsource evidence to inform research, policy and practice in relation to mental health. As a ‘proof of concept’ it shows that by asking people to write about their days, without direction, researchers, policymakers and commissioners can begin to understand the everyday lives of the people about whom they are concerned.

Services intended to help and support people who experience mental health difficulties are predominantly commissioned at local area level by clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in conjunction with local authorities, with needs assessments and strategies set by health and wellbeing boards. While data may be available around prevalence, demographics or best practice, these are unlikely to form a picture ‘close enough to the ground’ to fully capture local variation, lived experience and preference. Available data might tell commissioners what has been happening, but it may not tell them why. Shifting to an intelligence-based commissioning model will require a deeper level of understanding. The A Day in the Life approach will be able to assist in framing problems, challenges and opportunities from the perspective of those in need rather than those in charge of creating and commissioning services and interventions.

This approach has potential to be used to ‘surface’ potential areas for further enquiry, highlighting what we may not have thought to examine, especially in areas where the existing evidence base is scarce or where the conditions of people’s lives have changed significantly in recent years.

It could also prove useful in developing new hypotheses or ‘hunches’, using similar non-directional calls to action, derived from the analysis of a number of people’s direct experience to be checked and tested with established methods.

Future uses of this approach could include:

- To explore specific issues nationally either relating to a particular group within the population or an issue facing large numbers of people where evidence is under-developed;
- To provide insight in a local area into the experiences of people with mental health problems, for example as part of a joint strategic needs assessment;
- To explore in greater depth people’s experiences of a particular situation;
- To offer a longer-term picture of people’s lives, going beyond a single year to enable patterns over time to be identified.

5. Conclusions

While mental health difficulties and the people who experience them have never had a higher profile in public discussion in the UK, it has not always been clear whether society's understanding of people with mental health difficulties as human beings with hopes, fears, desires and dreams has kept pace.

Refocusing upon the wellbeing of people who experience mental health difficulties may provide new insights into ways that we can make life better.

Against a background of challenging budget settlements, it has become clear that we must collectively find ways of helping people who experience mental health difficulties to have lives where it is possible to feel fulfilled, secure, supported and alive to new possibilities and able to resume old interests, relationships and activities that may have been interrupted by being unwell. Treatment is vital, and improvements in support and treatment are similarly of great importance, but that is not the total sum of life.

The growth in social media platforms and increasing internet usage has provided people

with mental health difficulties far greater opportunity to bring their experiences, ideas, discomforts and problems to a wider public. People who live with mental health difficulties are talking to each other far more widely than ever before. The approach tested by A Day in the Life shows that it is possible to harness these conversations and to build something from them that has both intrinsic value as a record of lives lived, and wider value for commissioners and policy makers.

A Day in the Life, containing raw, unfiltered first person experience contributes towards understanding what life with a mental health difficulty feels like and what makes it more or less liveable. A Day in the Life will, we hope, provide a greater breadth and depth of empathy for the everyday struggles, pleasures and reliefs of people experiencing mental health difficulties.

The archive of personal experiences submitted to the project will remain online indefinitely, providing a valuable resource for anyone wanting to broaden their understanding of what living with mental health difficulties is actually like and as a testimony to those who took part.

A Day in the Life

This is the executive summary from the report **A Day in the Life** by Mark Brown and Geena Saini. For the full report, please visit www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/adayinthelifemh

To find out more about Mark Brown or Social Spider CIC, email mark@socialspider.com or tweet [@markoneinfour](https://twitter.com/markoneinfour)

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