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## **Travel anxiety**

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## **Introduction**

In England, 26% of all adults report having been diagnosed with at least one mental illness, while a further 18% say that they have experienced a mental illness without being diagnosed (Bridges, 2014). Mental health conditions include: agoraphobia, anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and schizophrenia. See NHS Choices (2018) for more information about these conditions. More women than men report having been diagnosed with a mental illness and the prevalence is highest between the ages of 27 and 74, peaking in the 55-64 age group.

Travellers use a number of skills at different stages of the trip, such as concentration, interpretation of information, and the confidence to take decisions and interact with other people (Mackett, 2017). Mental health conditions can affect these abilities and so can affect the ability to travel. This presentation will discuss these issues by drawing on results from a survey carried out by the author, and then discuss the implications for transport policy and analysis.

## **The survey**

The survey was carried out on-line by distributing a link to a questionnaire that used Opinio software made available through UCL. The link was distributed by eighteen organizations and three individuals using social media (mainly Twitter), websites and newsletters. The organizations included ones dealing with mental health including SANE, Anxiety UK and the Mental Health Action Group, and transport organizations such as Transport for London and Transport Scotland. Responses were received between 15 May and 26 July 2018. The survey was given ethical approval by the UCL Research Ethics Committee.

There were 389 responses to the survey. Four were removed, two because they were blank and two because they were from people without a mental health condition, leaving 385 useable responses. Carers completed 22 of the responses on behalf of other people with a mental health condition. Of the respondents, 24% were male, 72% female, and 4%

preferred not to state their gender. There was a wide age range with 11 under the age of 18 and 2 over the age of 70. Over half of the respondents were in the range 18 to 40.

## Results

The mental health conditions of those in the survey are shown in Table 1. Anxieties, including social anxiety and panic attacks, were reported by 90% of the respondents and 68% reported having depression. Other conditions mentioned included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), agoraphobia, and bi-polar disorder.

**TABLE 1 The mental health conditions of those in the survey**

	<b>Number of respondents with the condition</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Anxiety (including social anxiety and panic attacks)	346	90
Depression	262	68
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	83	22
Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)	69	18
Agoraphobia	53	14
Bipolar disorder	30	8
Other conditions	85	22
Total	982	100

All 385 respondents answered this question, with many people giving more than one answer, reflecting the complex nature of their conditions.

Since 90% of the respondents have anxiety, the presentation will focus on its effect on travel. The respondents were given a list of possible causes of anxiety whilst travelling, based on evidence in the literature and were free to indicate as many as they wished (3). The causes of anxiety when going out that were reported in the survey by the respondents are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2 Causes of anxieties that the respondents have when they go out**

	Number of respondents reporting each cause of anxiety	% of respondents
What other people think about me	261	69%
Feeling out of control	257	67%
Having to mix with strangers	254	67%
Feeling claustrophobic and unable to escape	221	58%
How other people behave	197	52%
Feeling disorientated	181	48%
Failure of the bus, train or car	180	47%
Having to talk to staff such as bus drivers	175	46%
Finding suitable toilet facilities	154	40%
Getting lost	149	39%
Having to take decisions about where to go	141	37%
Not being able to obtain help	132	35%
Remembering where I am going to	76	20%
Using ticket machines	70	18%
Handling money	53	14%
Something else	55	14%
Total	2556	99%

Total number of responses: 381

The top reason given was 'What other people think about me', cited by 69% of the respondents, followed by 'Feeling out of control' and 'Having to mix with strangers', both mentioned by 67%. Other factors cited by more than half of the respondents were 'Feeling claustrophobic and unable to escape' and 'How other people behave'. It is clear from Table 2 that many factors cause anxiety while travelling.

The reasons cited can be grouped under themes, for example:

- Interacting with other people:
  - What other people think about me
  - Having to mix with strangers
  - How other people behave
  - Having to talk to staff such as bus drivers
- Factors associated with wayfinding:
  - Remembering where I am going to
  - Having to take decisions about where to go
  - Feeling disorientated
  - Getting lost
- Factors influenced by the actions of travel operators:
  - Failure of the bus, train or car
  - Finding suitable toilet facilities
  - Using ticket machines
  - Handling money

- Factors stemming from their mental health condition:
  - Feeling out of control
  - Feeling claustrophobic and unable to escape
  - Not being able to obtain help

It should be noted that some of these are combinations of factors: 'Feeling disoriented' and 'Not being able to find help' may be combinations of an effect of the person's mental health condition and of wayfinding; 'handling money' may be to do with interacting with other people or to do with the way the transport operator requires travellers to handle money.

As well as providing quantitative information such as that shown in the tables above, the respondents provided many descriptions of their travel experiences. For example, a man aged 41-50 said:

*'I was on a train, travelling to London .... I became so anxious that I just got off at the next stop and had no idea where I was at all. It took me over an hour to regain any sort of calm and control. I then had to get back on the train to be able to go home again. I have never been able to use public transport again since. That was 20+ years ago'.*

### **The implications for policy and analysis**

As example above shows, travel anxiety can have a decisive impact on travelling. The man quoted said that he has not been able to travel by public transport for over 20 years. It seems extremely likely that no action by policy makers or transport operators will encourage him to travel by public transport ever again. There were a number of people who said similar things about how a specific incident prevented them from using particular modes, particularly driving and the London Underground. Over one third of the respondents said that their mental health condition frequently prevented them from leaving home and making any journeys, and over half of them said that their health condition prevented them from buying rail tickets in advance, meaning that they had to pay the full fare rather than cheaper advance tickets for some journeys.

Given the high proportion of the population who have anxiety while travelling, transport policies and procedures need to take into account their concerns.

This phenomenon of people not using particular modes or having specific needs such as having to have a seat or being confident that they can access a toilet during their journey, may also distort travel analysis and forecasting since such factors are rarely, if ever taken into account.

The presentation will reflect on these issues and how they might be addressed.

### **Conclusions**

Many people in Britain have a mental health condition. In the presentation, the barriers to travel for people with mental health conditions, particularly those who suffer from anxiety when travelling, will be examined. A survey carried out by the author has revealed how complex some of the issues faced by such people when travelling. Two of the main areas where they have difficulty is interacting with other people, both staff and fellow travellers, and wayfinding. There are also some issues associated with travelling such as dealing with ticket machines and handling money. Other issues include finding toilet facilities and

failure of the train, bus or car. The implications of these findings for transport policies and procedures and for analysis and forecasting will be considered in the presentation.

### References

Bridges, S. (2014) **Mental health problems**, Chapter 2 in Volume 1 of the *Health Survey for England 2014*, Health, Social Care and Lifestyles, Health and Social Care Information Centre (2015). <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB19295/HSE2014-ch2-mh-prob.pdf>.

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NHS Choices (2018) **Health A-Z** <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/>.