

UK MPs more likely to have mental health issues than general public, survey shows

July 1 2019

UK politicians (MPs) at Westminster are more likely to have mental health issues than either the general public or other people in comparable professions/managerial posts, suggest the responses to a survey of parliamentarians, published in the online journal *BMJ Open*.

What's more, awareness of confidential parliamentary support services or how to access them is low, as is a willingness to open up about their mental health to either appointed party officials (Whips) or fellow MPs, the responses indicate.

The [response](#) rate was relatively low. But that in itself might be quite revealing, and possibly indicative of the persisting stigma associated with [mental illness](#) and the nature of an MP's life lived in the public eye, the researchers suggest.

Very little research has been published on the mental health of UK parliamentarians and how this compares with that of the general public and employees in comparable professions/managerial roles.

In a bid to plug this knowledge gap, the researchers devised an anonymous online [survey](#) at the House of Commons in December 2016, which was sent to all 650 sitting MPs at Westminster.

The questions focused on a wide range of issues from the ability to concentrate, through stress levels and capacity to cope, to perceptions of unhappiness, depression, and self worth.

MPs were also asked if they knew about the mental health support services available to them, as well as their willingness to talk about their mental health with party Whips or other MPs.

Responses were compared with those for the nationally representative annual Health Survey for England (HSE) 2014, divided into four categories: total population; corporate managers; all managers; and those in high income groups.

And mental health for both sets of survey participants was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire, or GHQ-12 for short—a validated measure of mental health.

Around one in five MPs (146; 22.4%) returned completed questionnaires. Compared with the four categories of HSE respondents, MPs had poorer mental health and reported higher levels of worthlessness, unhappiness, and depression.

When the responses were combined, a higher proportion of MPs probably had mental ill health than any of the other groups, with women faring worse than their male colleagues.

Most MPs were unaware of the anonymous Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service, which was set up in 2013 for their workplace health needs.

More than three out of four respondents (77%) didn't know about this service, while over half (55%) didn't know how to access it. And around half said they were unwilling to open up about their mental health to party Whips (52%) or to other MPs (48%).

This is an observational study, which didn't set out to establish cause and the survey response rate was relatively low. What's more, those who

responded might have been more likely to do so because they had [mental health issues](#), the researchers point out.

"However, there is also a [potential risk](#) of under reporting from people who might be reluctant to take part in the study because they are affected by [mental health problems](#) or because of the stigma associated with the topic," they write.

"Prior experiences of, or fears of stalking and harassment, which might result from their disclosure, may decrease the willingness of MPs to participate in the survey," they add.

Better support, both to stave off mental ill [health](#) and deal with it promptly, is needed, they conclude. "Due to their working routine and hours, MPs spend a majority of their working time far from the support provided by NHS services in their own constituencies. In addition to their high-performance work life, this adds to the increased stress on MPs' [mental health](#)."

More information: Mental health of UK Members of Parliament in the House of Commons: a cross sectional survey, *BMJ Open* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-027892](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-027892)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: UK MPs more likely to have mental health issues than general public, survey shows (2019, July 1) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-uk-mps-mental-health-issues.html>

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