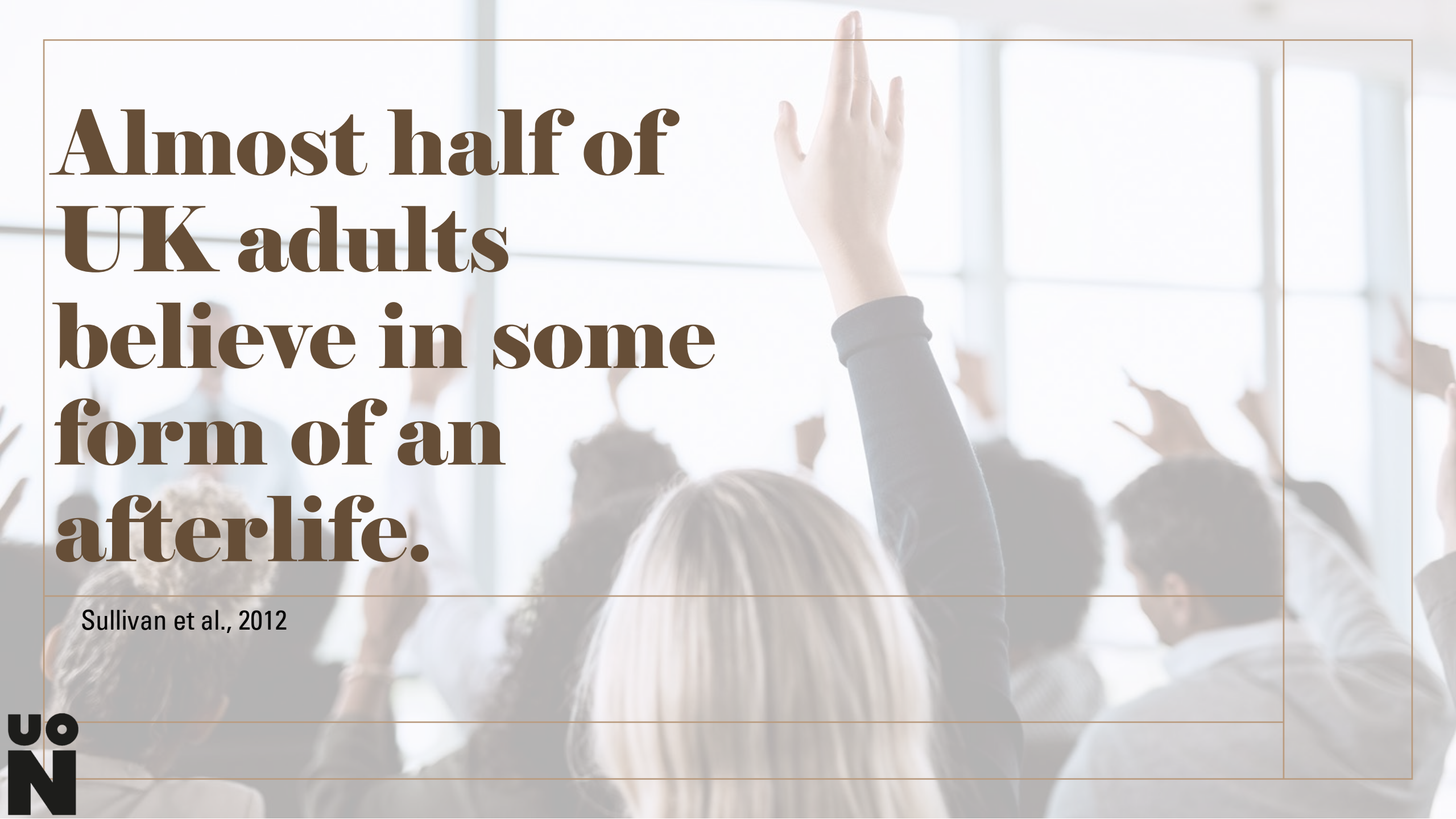


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SPR WORKSHOP  
From the Mouths of Babes:  
Children and Psychical Experiences  
27<sup>th</sup> April 2024

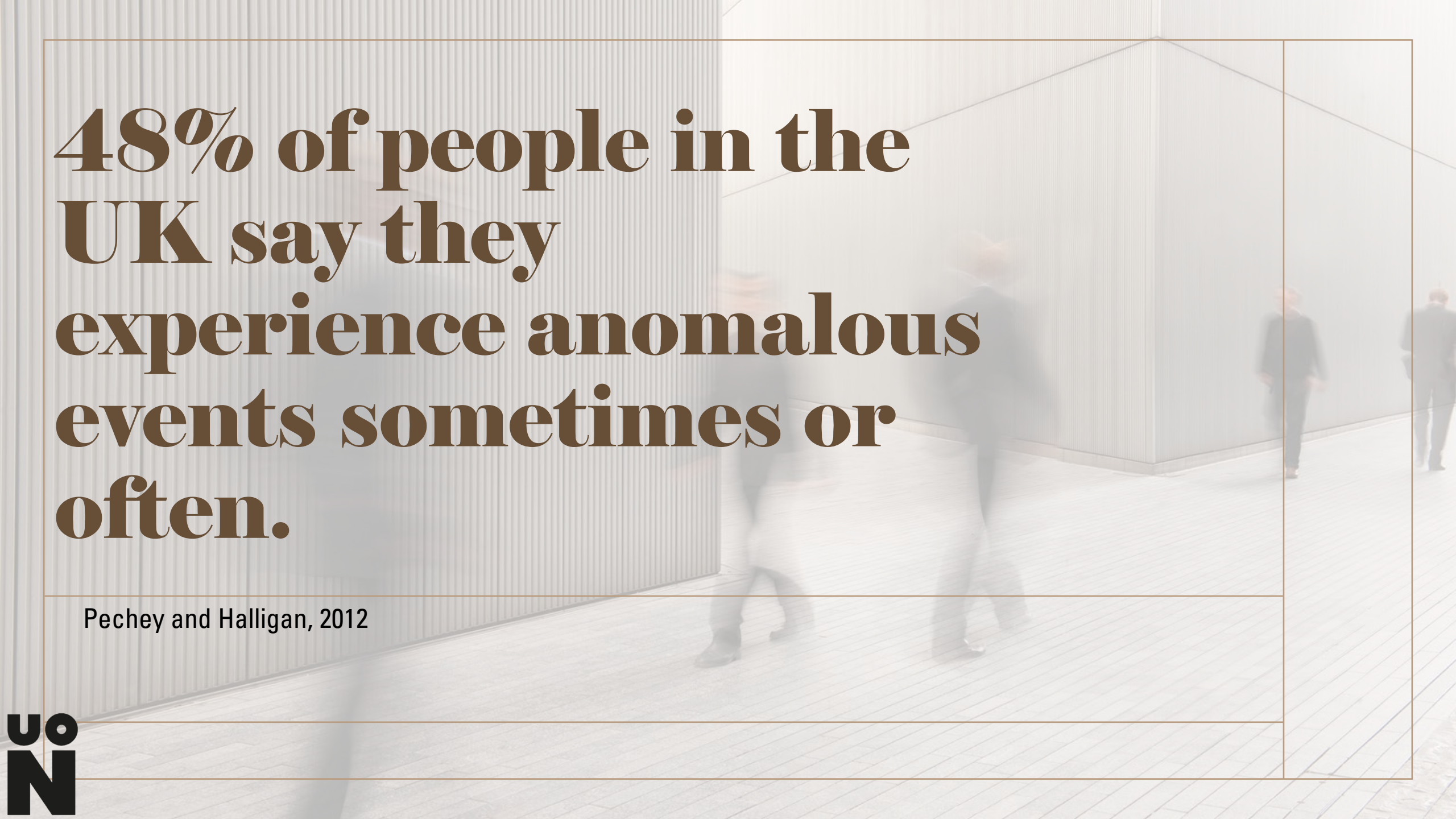
# **Anomalous Experiences in Childhood: The Implications for Therapists**





**Almost half of  
UK adults  
believe in some  
form of an  
afterlife.**

Sullivan et al., 2012



**48% of people in the  
UK say they  
experience anomalous  
events sometimes or  
often.**

Pechey and Halligan, 2012



If a huge number of people  
encounter anomalous  
experiences, why do they rarely  
share them?

Even to those they trust the most?

**Parents, friends, family, teachers,  
doctors, therapists...**



# STIGMA

Research continues to show that people experiencing AEs face stigma when they choose to share their personal experiences.

Keen et al. (2013), Mowen et al. (2022), Roxburgh and Evenden (2016)





# A common experience

Stigma is far from being uncommon and individuals experience stigma frequently and for a variety of reasons.

Research considering the stigmatisation of individuals with mental illness is a vast area and much work has been done in an attempt to reduce this stigma.

McCulloch and Scrivano (2023), Casados (2017)

# Counselling

Although individuals with mental illnesses find they face stigma from the general public, access to therapies and interventions are commonly available in most parts of the UK.

<https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/>

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists>

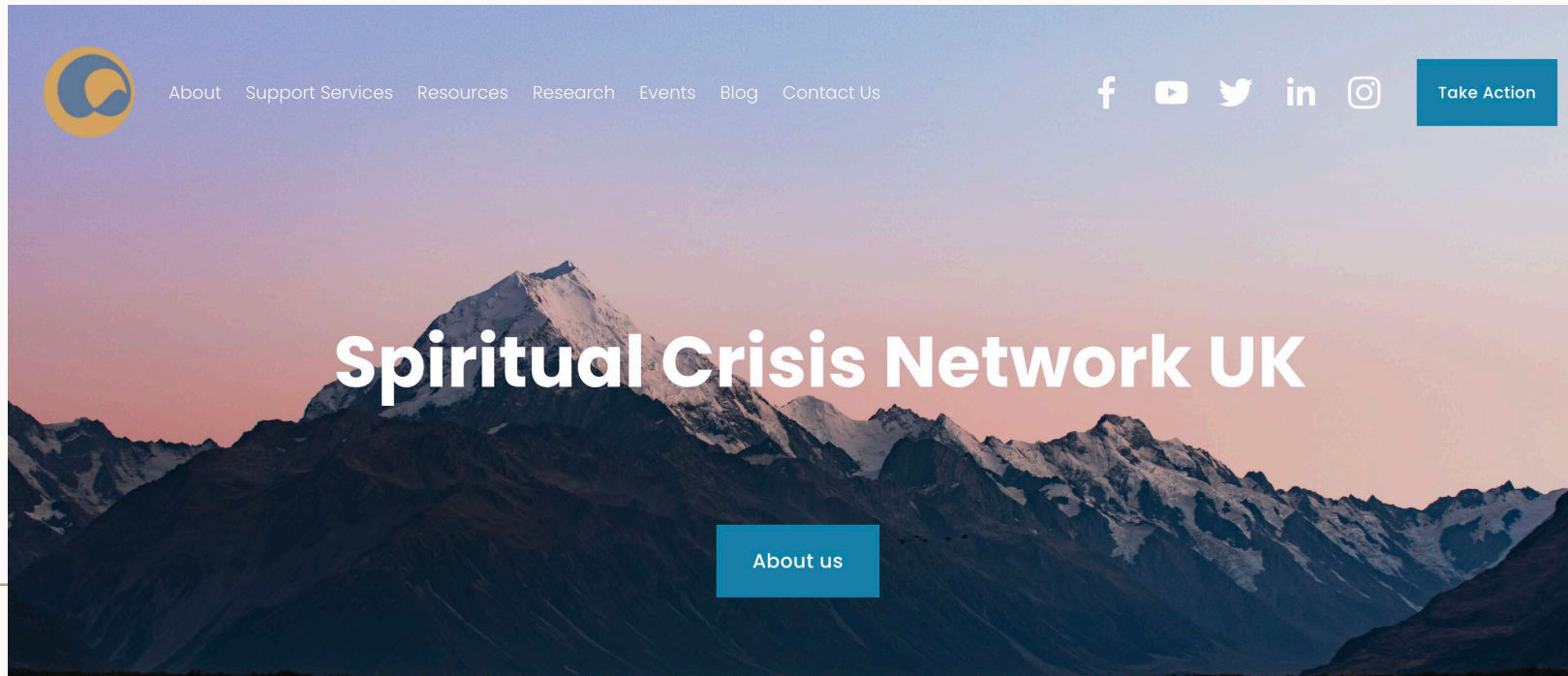
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/counselling>

<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service/>



# Anomalous experiences

Why is it so different for those who want to seek help for anomalous experiences?





**Spiritual crisis, often called spiritual emergency, awakening or psycho-spiritual crisis, is a turbulent period of psychological opening and transformation.**

# BUT...

*Adult relatives caring for children who are undergoing a spiritual crisis and seeking support for themselves are very welcome to join our 'Family and Carer' online support meetings. Due to Children's' Safeguarding legislation, however, we are unable to permit children or young people under the age of 18 to attend.*

*Contact us for information about caring for a minor experiencing a spiritual crisis.*





Evidence highlights that children and young people (CYP) also experience anomalous phenomena.

Bielski (2010), Houran (2004)

In research with CYP and AEs, the experiences of children are often measured against diagnostic criteria.

Wright et al. (2018)

# What about children?

# The child's view



## Why is it important to consider the child's perspective?

CYP are often overlooked in parapsychological/anomalistic research. If they are involved in this kind of research, they are seldom viewed as equals to their adult counterparts.

Children are also often medicalized in research referencing anomalous phenomena.

Thomas (2021), Thomas (2022)



# The process...



As a children's psychotherapist, I had experienced multiple clients presenting with anomalous experiences and sharing them in our sessions.

I recognised that my training did not address anything of this kind, and I was left feeling unequipped.

Lots of conversations were had with peers who felt the same, so I thought I should do something about it.



# Interviews

Organised interviews with adult participants to reflect on their childhood experiences.

Asked about their experiences of anomalous phenomena under the age of 16.

Discussed how they felt at the time and now, what it has meant for them and if they sought professional help.



# **1: Transformative features**

# Personal and spiritual identity

“Well, it’s your own identity essentially. It’s an identity that you’ve actually framed from those experiences.”

“I’ve grown up with it, so it’s all a case of this is who I am.”

“It’s changed how I see things.”

# Altering the professional and recreational trajectory

“You know, would I have gone down that route and been interested in that had these things not happened to me? Would I have even thought about it?”

“I am a working medium.”

“I actually retired when I could retire so that I could work more with spirit because I was starting to feel that pull.”

“I can sense things, but I can actually communicate with them as well now.”



## 2: Role of adults





# Discouragement from adults

“My dad just said no, you’ve had a dream, you’ve had a dream, and took me in his room with him.”

“If I had been, um, treated differently rather than just told to stop saying it... it was to protect me, I know they did it to protect me, but perhaps it wasn’t the best way.”



# Importance of familial understanding

"I know, like, being a child, it probably did affect me, but because I had such an understanding mum that knew about those sort of things, it never scared me."

"The help I did receive and the support I did receive, I got from my parents anyway, as I mentioned, you know, they came to my aid to comfort me and sit with me while I fell asleep."

"I think it was more the way my parents downplayed it, as if not to make a big deal out of it, made me feel like it wasn't a big deal."



# Needs of professionals

“If I’d have been able to say, oh, I don’t understand why mum and dad said this to me... I think there’s a need to have that, because my parents had said that.”

“Helping them come to terms with what they’re experiencing... Just that they’re not losing their marbles, so, they don’t feel like they’re different or they’re an outcast.”

“Help some people understand what’s happening, what’s going on, you know, not to be afraid.”

“It would be really nice to actually be able- for counsellors and mediums to work together in some way and to come up with some type of programme of understanding.”

# 3: Stigma

A blurred photograph of a crowd of people walking across a zebra crossing. The image is taken from a low angle, focusing on the lower legs and feet of the pedestrians. The zebra crossing stripes are prominent, running diagonally across the frame. The people are in motion, creating a sense of a busy, crowded environment. The overall tone is somewhat somber and anonymous.



# Contending with acceptance in wider society

"I've never actually spoken about it because people think you're mental."

"You better not say it 'cause, you know, an accountant, everything's gotta be black and white. They're not gonna want airy fairy stories."

"I didn't want people to look at me different and think, oh you're a weirdo, because that's what kids are like."

"I get the feeling that they may have laughed at this or told me not to be so silly."

"They don't wanna be shunned by their friends thinking they're an absolute loon because they've seen a ghost."



# What does this mean?

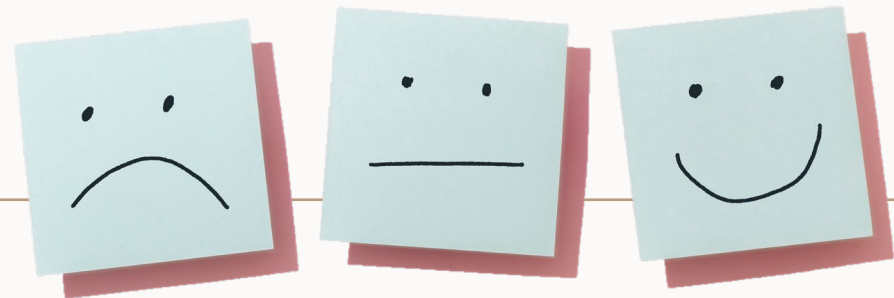
**There are hugely diverse outcomes of AEs for experients, often in conjunction with one-another.**

People feel scared to share their experiences for fear of ridicule, regardless of age.

Many children don't seek help for their AEs because of this fear.

Participants shared that they would be more likely to seek help if they knew that they would not be judged by the professional.

They feel as though both adults and children would not believe or attempt to understand them.



# But...

**There are positive elements**



Many people have found that their lives have changed as a result of their encounters, and this has meant that they pursue vocations or hobbies linked to after death communication.

Participants identified that their experiences made them who they are and, despite some negative impacts, say they would not change them.

Supportive adults play a hugely instrumental role in CYP AEs.

# Implications for practice



There is a need for all therapeutic professionals working with CYP to be aware of how they respond to children sharing their anomalous encounters.

This also extends to other professionals (teachers, nurses, GPs) as well as parents/carers and other family members.

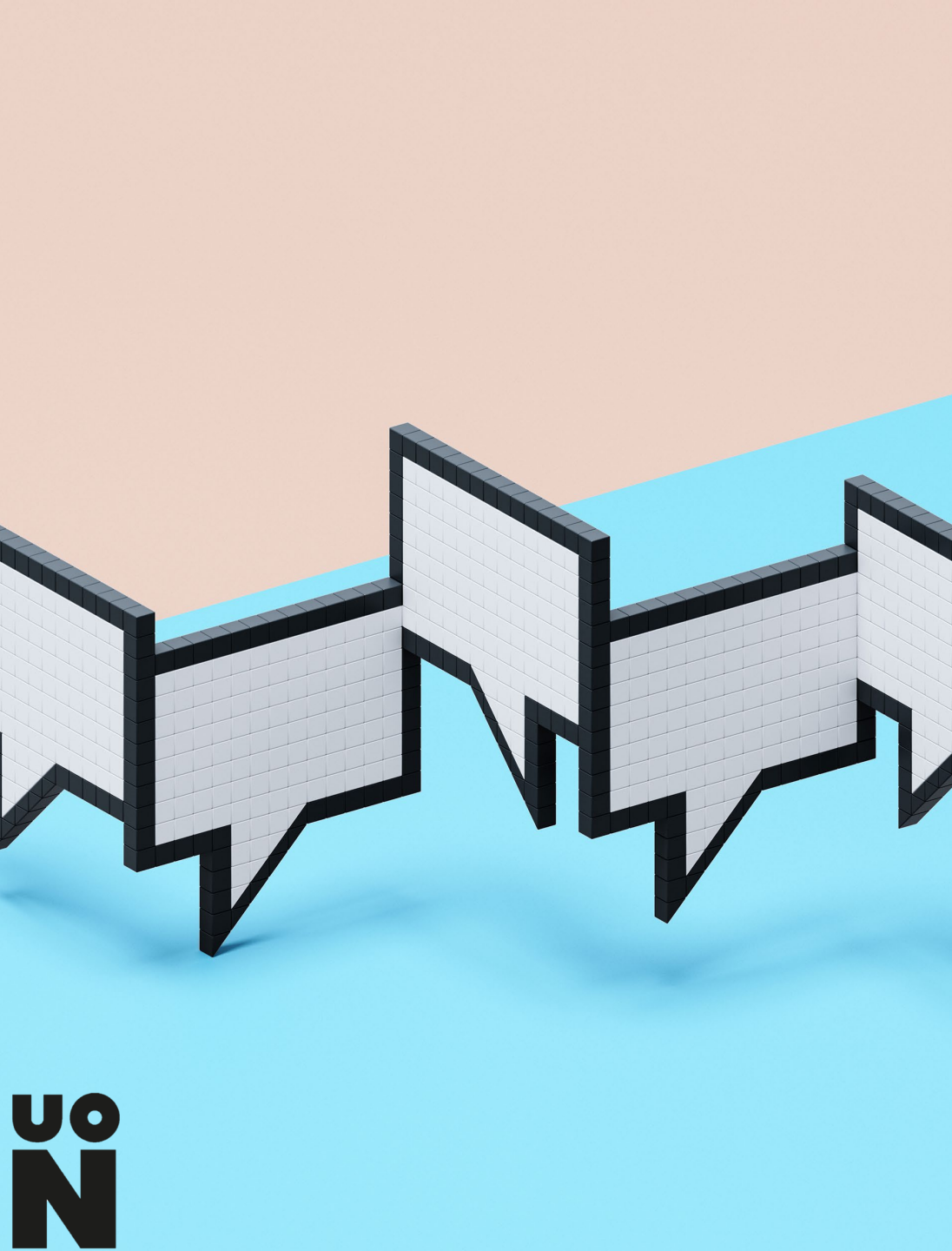
A need for responses to hold space for CYP rather than refuting or verifying their claims, despite what the professionals themselves may believe.



# Going forward

- Publish this research with Rachel Evenden (it's in the works!)
- Complete more research with other groups to gain a full picture
  - Therapist perspectives
  - Work with children directly
  - People who have sought professional help
- Eventually develop some training/CPD for professionals





# Thank you!

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Questions?