



# On Edge

## Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges

Richard Weissbourd, Milena Batanova, Joseph McIntyre, and Eric Torres with Shanae Irving, Sawsan Eskander, and Kiran Bhai



MAKING  
CARING  
COMMON  
PROJECT



# On Edge

## Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges

Richard Weissbourd, Milena Batanova, Joseph McIntyre, and Eric Torres with Shanae Irving, Sawsan Eskander, and Kiran Bhai

*We are grateful to the many friends and colleagues who have helped guide, advise, and support us in writing this report. This includes but is certainly not limited to: William Damon, Ruth Grant, all our friends at the Einhorn Collaborative, and, of course, the Making Caring Common team.*

Recommended reference:

Making Caring Common. (2023). *On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges*. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/on-edge>

October 2023

[www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org)

Copyright © 2023 The President and Fellows of Harvard College

## Executive Summary

Our recent data suggests that the young adults of Generation Z are experiencing emotional struggles at alarming rates. While the emotional struggles of teens have been in the national spotlight since the pandemic—and this attention has been vital—according to our nationally representative survey, young adults report roughly *twice* the rates of anxiety and depression as teens. Compared to 18% of teens, a whopping 36% of young adults in our survey reported anxiety; in contrast to 15% of teens, 29% of young adults reported depression. Far too many young adults report that they feel on edge, lonely, unmoored, directionless, and that they worry about financial security. Many are “achieving to achieve” and find little meaning in either school or work. Yet these struggles of young adults have been largely off the public radar.

---

**...according to our nationally representative survey,  
young adults report roughly *twice* the rates of anxiety  
and depression as teens.**

---

The emotional challenges of young adults have many sources that vary by culture, race, class, and many other factors. Yet at least a few factors appear to afflict huge numbers of young adults across a wide array of demographic groups. Legions of young adults report that financial worries (56%) and achievement pressure (51%) negatively influence their mental health, and alarming percentages report that they lack “meaning or purpose” in their lives (58%). Relationship deficits, too, appear to be epidemic among young adults, including loneliness (34%) and a sense of not mattering to others (44%). Young adults are also clearly not immune to the troubles of the larger world. Forty-five percent (45%) of young adults reported a general “sense that things are falling apart” was impairing their mental health. Forty-two percent (42%) reported the negative influence on their mental health of gun violence in schools, 34% cited climate change,

and 30% cited worries that our political leaders are incompetent or corrupt (see Figures 2 and 3).

To call attention to these emotional challenges is, emphatically, not to suggest that young adults these days are frail or doomed. This generation of young adults has great strengths and potential and provides many reasons for hope. Hardships in young adulthood can produce insights and coping strategies that are crucial at later life stages. Young adults today may also be more emotionally aware and articulate than any generation in American history. These capacities, if used effectively, may assist young people throughout their lives in developing meaningful relationships, contributing to their communities, and dealing more constructively than previous generations with emotional distress. Young adults are also less likely than their immediate predecessors to abuse illicit drugs and alcohol,<sup>1</sup> and are more open than previous generations about talking about their mental health troubles.<sup>2</sup> As pediatrician Ken Ginsburg observes, it is this generation that may, in fact, finally break the stigma around mental health, freeing millions of Americans who have suffered terribly and silently to seek help. Young people are also spearheading work on vital societal issues. Our data indicate that when it comes to meeting our pressing societal challenges, young people lack faith in older generations but have a good deal of faith in each other.

---

**...when it comes to meeting our pressing societal challenges, young people lack faith in older generations but have a good deal of faith in each other.**

---

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Panchal and colleagues at the Kaiser Family Foundation (2022), the use of alcohol and drugs among adolescents declined in the decade prior to the pandemic, but there are still high percentages of teens using substances.

<sup>2</sup> While it's been challenging to find precise statistics, the American Psychological Association (2018) found that about 40% of Gen Z has reported seeking help from a psychologist or other mental health professional, closely followed by 35% of Millennials, but far ahead of Gen Xers (26%), Boomers (22%), and older adults (15%).

How can we promote young adults' mental health and mitigate these emotional challenges? While young adults across the country—and especially in low-income communities—need more access to mental health providers, we shouldn't simply focus on treating suffering when we know strategies that can prevent it. Preventing many of the stressors young people identify, whether financial stress, gun violence, or climate change, go well beyond the scope of this report. Yet there is much that families, communities, colleges, and governments at every level can do to create systems, cultures, and experiences that reduce the toll these stresses take; that alleviate loneliness and other relationship deficits, creating more supportive, gratifying relationships for young people; and that help cultivate in them a greater sense of meaning and purpose. Engaging more young people in caring for others and in high quality service of various kinds can, for example, both alleviate loneliness and provide meaning and purpose. Younger adults also need older adults who share insights and wisdom, who are focused on asking questions and listening, seeking to understand the realities of young people's lives, and who support young people in developing, if not a single purpose, meaningful goals and direction. Further, while we are not arguing here for or against young people becoming more religious, there are important structures, traditions, and practices in many religious communities that create meaning and purpose, that enable young people to feel part of a larger human experience that transcends their achievements, and that mitigate loneliness. We need to more intentionally cultivate these practices in secular life.

## Introduction

*“I just wish I was able to calm down literally ever. I always feel on edge, everything scares me...If I could just find some way to calm down a little it would work miracles.”<sup>3</sup>*

Young adulthood can be a time of exploration, excitement, hope, and possibility. It can be a powerful time to try things, to learn, and to come to some reassuring understanding of who one wants to be in the adult world.

But our recent data suggests that the young adults of Generation Z are experiencing emotional struggles at alarming rates. While the emotional struggles of teens have been in the national spotlight since the pandemic—and this attention has been vital—young adults report roughly *twice* the rates of anxiety and depression as teens. Far too many young adults report that they feel on edge, lonely, unmoored, directionless, and that they worry about financial security. Many are “achieving to achieve” and find little meaning in either school or work. Yet these struggles of young adults have been largely off the public radar.<sup>4</sup>

**“I just wish I was able to calm down literally ever.  
I always feel on edge, everything scares me...  
If I could just find some way to calm down a little  
it would work miracles.”**

In the spring of 2022, we conducted focus groups and interviews with a diverse range of teens, young adults, and adults who work with and care for young people; consulted with

---

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from survey respondents.

<sup>4</sup> The hyperfocus on teens has obscured another American population that is suffering mental health challenges at rates as high as teens. As we covered in our last report, [\*Caring for the Caregivers: The Critical Link Between Parent and Teen Mental Health\*](#), parents of teens are suffering anxiety and depression at about the same rate as teens.

mental health researchers; and combed the research on youth mental health. Informed by our findings, in December 2022 we conducted a rigorous national survey of 396 teens (14-17 years old) and 709 young adults (18-25 years old), and a survey with 748 parents or caregivers living in the United States. To better understand our findings, over the last several months we again consulted with a wide range of researchers and youth practitioners, including counselors, afterschool providers, and teachers.

Based on well-established measures of anxiety and depression, a whopping 36% of young adults in our survey reported anxiety, compared to 18% of teens; 29% of young adults reported depression, compared to 15% of teens. Forty-two percent (42%) of young adults reported either depression or anxiety and 23% reported both.

There is no single cause of these mental health troubles—there are many interacting causes—and these causes often vary widely by culture, race, and economic class, and other factors. The drivers of young adults' depression or anxiety are both similar and vastly different, for example, in the tony suburbs of New York or Chicago, where the pressure to land lucrative, high-status jobs often ties young people in knots, than in many low-income rural communities in Mississippi or Maine where generation after generation of young adults have been cut off from opportunity and contend daily with the deprivations and degradations of poverty.

Yet at least a few factors appear to afflict huge numbers of young adults across a wide range of demographic groups. Given a list of myriad factors that might be negatively affecting their mental health, young adults in our survey were most likely to select financial worries (56%) and a high percentage reported achievement pressure (51%). Women were significantly more likely to report both financial and achievement pressure than men. While there were no significant differences across economic class and race in these rates, what people mean by achievement pressure and financial stress clearly differs within and across economic class, culture, and race. It is one thing, for example, to experience intense pressure to attend a selective college or obtain a prestigious



internship; it is quite another to experience high levels of stress about meeting basic needs.

Troubling numbers of young adults in our survey also appear to lack meaning, purpose, and a sense of direction. Meaning and purpose are deep sources of gratification, enable us to power through setbacks and obstacles, and safeguard us against many forms of adversity and anguish. Nietzsche claimed that those who have a “why” can endure almost any “how,” a notion echoed by psychiatrist Victor Frankl in “Man’s Search for Meaning,” his memoir on surviving a concentration camp. Yet for many reasons that also vary by race, culture, and class, half of young people in our survey reported that their mental health was negatively influenced by “not knowing what to do with my life” and more than half (58%) reported experiencing little or no “purpose or meaning” in life in the previous month. Lacking purpose and meaning is highly correlated in our data with both depression and anxiety. Our data also indicates that relationship deficits are epidemic among young adults, including loneliness and a sense of not mattering to others. These deficits, too, predict anxiety and depression.

---

**... half of young people in our survey reported that their mental health was negatively influenced by “not knowing what to do with my life” and more than half (58%) reported experiencing little or no “purpose or meaning” in life in the previous month.**

---

To be sure, these struggles are not new. For at least several decades, as a society we’ve done little to support emerging adults at precisely the time when they are dealing with the most defining, stressful decisions of their lives related to work, love, and identity. Who to love? What to be? There are fundamental problems with the ways we’ve structured the passage to adulthood in this country, including that young adults often



don't have easy access to supportive communities. But the mental health struggles of young adults appear to have risen over the last several decades.<sup>5</sup>

To underscore young adult's emotional struggles is, emphatically, not to suggest that this generation is either frail or doomed. There are good reasons for both alarm *and* hope. As a result of the pandemic, many young people appear to have developed or deepened important relationships. For example, 40% of respondents reported becoming closer to one of their parents during the pandemic and research indicates that this closeness can nurture and sustain young people as they transition into adulthood.<sup>6</sup> Hardship in young adulthood can also produce insights and coping strategies that are crucial at later life stages.

---

**While there are costs to being too absorbed in our inner lives that we discuss here, young adults these days may be more emotionally aware and articulate than any generation in American history.**

---

Further, teens and young adults today are products of a psychological age and are more immersed in psychological talk than perhaps any generation in history. While there are costs to being too absorbed in our inner lives that we discuss here, young adults these days may be more emotionally aware and articulate than any generation in American history. These capacities, if used effectively, may assist young adults throughout their lives in developing meaningful relationships, contributing in new ways to our communities and collective life, and dealing with emotional distress more constructively than previous generations. Young adults are also less likely than their immediate

---

<sup>5</sup> According to a study by Twenge and colleagues (2019), there was a 71% increase in young adults experiencing serious psychological distress in the previous 30 days from 2008 to 2017. Another study using data from over 300,000 college students found that over 60% of students met criteria for one or more mental health problems in 2020-2021, a nearly 50% increase from 2013 (Lipson et al., 2022).

<sup>6</sup> See Birditt & Fingerman, 2013; Huber, 2012; Stapley, 2021.

predecessors to abuse illicit drugs and alcohol<sup>7</sup> and are more open about their mental health concerns than previous generations.<sup>8</sup> It is this generation, as pediatrician Ken Ginsburg observes, that may, in fact, finally break the stigma around mental health, freeing millions of Americans who have suffered terribly and silently to seek help.<sup>9</sup>

The promise of this generation should not be underestimated in another respect: there are abundant signs that large numbers of young people are spearheading important work on urgent issues, including climate change, political polarization, and economic inequality.<sup>10</sup> The percentage of young people voting has increased over the last several years. And there are important signs of solidarity and hope among young people. As we discuss here, our data indicate that when it comes to meeting our pressing societal challenges, young people lack faith in older generations but have a good deal of faith in each other.

This report proceeds as follows. We first examine the many factors that appear to be driving high rates of mental health challenges among young adults and how they affect varying demographic groups. We then explore why so many young adults report experiencing little meaning and purpose and how low meaning and purpose might be interacting with other factors to contribute to depression and anxiety. Finally, we take up how we can prevent these mental health troubles. While young adults across the country—and especially in low-income communities—need more access to mental health providers, it makes no sense to simply focus on treating suffering when we know strategies that can prevent it. More specifically, there is much that families, communities, colleges, and governments at every level can do to create systems, cultures, and experiences that create more supportive, fulfilling relationships for young people, that enable young people to experience life as more than the sum of their

---

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 1 above.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 2 above.

<sup>9</sup> The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) conducted a survey in 2015 finding that college-aged adults (age 18–25) have more accepting views of mental health care than other adults. However, certain people and communities are also more susceptible to stigma and thus warrant tailored approaches to alleviating mental health challenges (Lockett, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> See Mineo, 2022; Volpe, 2022.

achievements, and that help cultivate in them greater meaning and purpose.

## **Young adults' mental health challenges**

According to our survey, while depression and anxiety beset young people widely across gender, race, culture, and class (see Figure 1), young women are more likely to endure anxiety (41%) and depression (35%) than men (31% anxiety, 24% depression),<sup>11</sup> and Asian young adults suffer lower rates of depression (21%) than white (28%), Hispanic (32%), and Black young adults (35%). A roughly similar racial pattern holds true for anxiety. Gay male (45%), bisexual (59%), and questioning (61%) young adults are far more likely than heterosexual (38%) young adults to report anxiety or depression. Lesbian respondents were the least likely among these groups to report anxiety or depression (28%). Low-income young adults were more likely to be anxious or depressed than higher-income young adults. While conservative teens were significantly less likely to report anxiety or depression than liberal teens, conservative and liberal young adults suffer anxiety or depression at roughly the same rates.

---

<sup>11</sup> We should note, however, that mental health challenges like anxiety or depression may be under-diagnosed and under-reported in men because they surface in different ways. The American Psychological Association's (see Pappas, 2019) first-ever guidelines for mental health practitioners working with boys and men indicate that when men do seek help, they might mask their internalizing problems with more externalizing ones.

## Young adults' anxiety and depression, overall and by key demographics

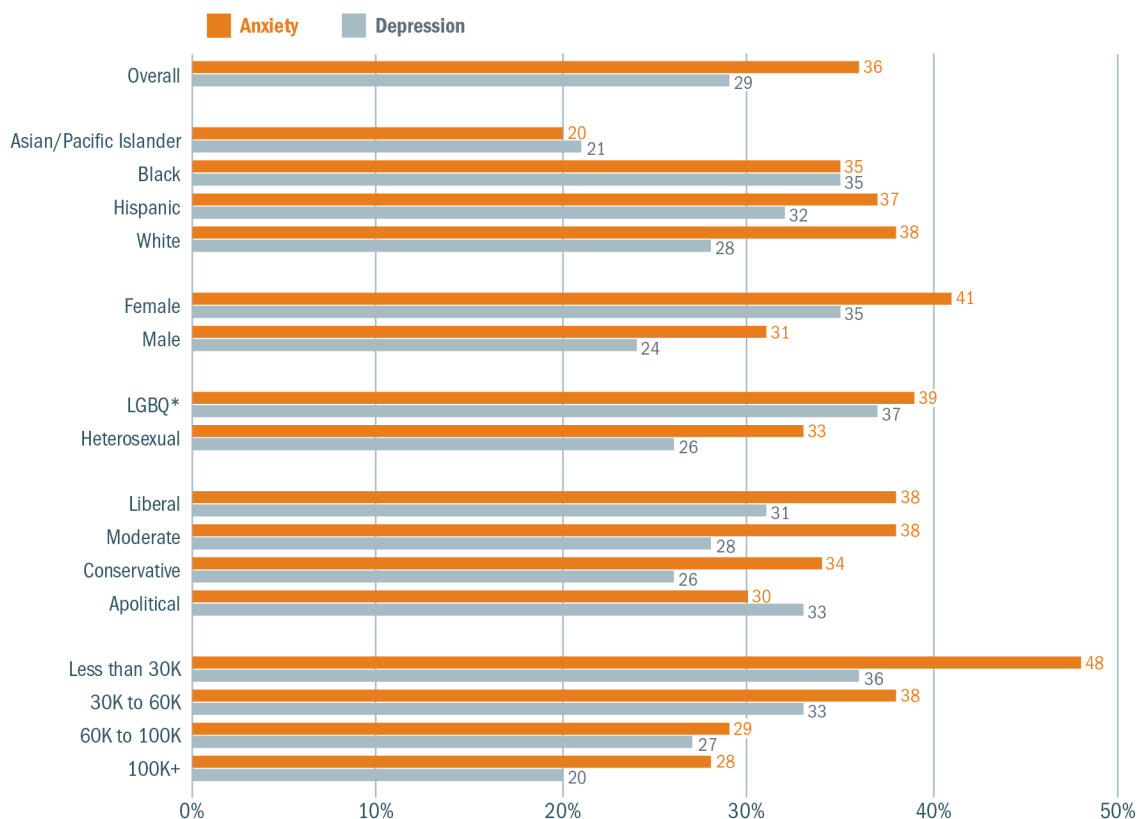


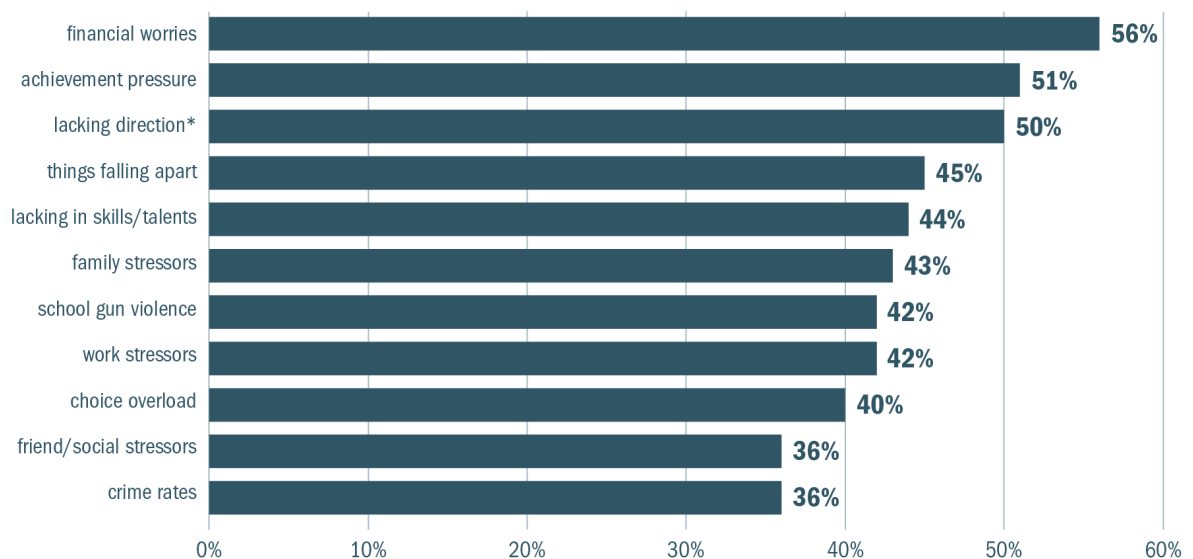
Figure 1. Prevalence rates of anxiety and depression among young adults, overall and by key demographic factors, including race, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and income. \*Note, LGBQ+ included the following response options in our survey: lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, I identify another way, and prefer not to say.

To better understand the sources of these troubles, we first asked young adults themselves to rate the negative impact on their mental health of 21 personal, social, and political factors (see Figures 2 and 3 below), including achievement pressure, stresses related to friendships or social life, family stresses or problems, lack of access to abortion services, not knowing what to do with their life, a general sense that “things are falling apart,” gun violence in schools, worries about their financial future, concerns about climate change, and concerns about “political beliefs being pushed in schools.”

We asked whether these factors negatively impacted respondents' mental health "at all," "a little," "quite a bit," or "a lot." We report here on young adults who identified a factor as negatively impacting them "quite a bit" or "a lot." We call these factors "drivers."

Young adults identified a wide array of drivers impairing their mental health. Stresses related to money, lacking direction or purpose, and achievement most commonly plagued them (see Figure 2). While "worrying about money or my financial future" (56%) was the most commonly identified driver, it was closely followed by "pressure to achieve or do well at school" (51%), and concerns about future goals or "not knowing what to do with my life" (50%). High percentages of young people also viewed themselves as lacking important skills and talents (44%), a worry that can balloon when it is inflated by fears of achievement or financial failure. Forty-three percent (43%) reported that "stresses or problems related to my family" harm their mental health, which may be partly explained by the fact that parents are also suffering anxiety and depression at high rates.<sup>12</sup>

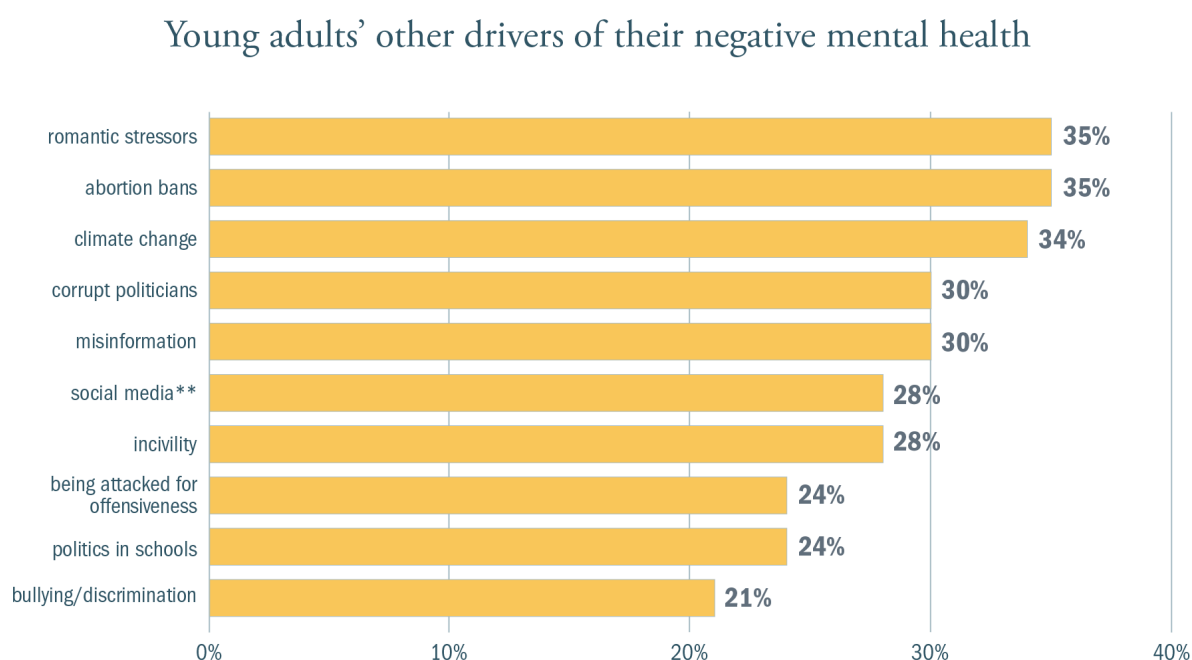
Young adults' top perceived drivers of their negative mental health



<sup>12</sup> See our latest 2023 report, [Caring for the Caregivers: The critical link between parent and teen mental health](#).

Figure 2. Young adults' top ratings of the factors that negatively influence their mental health (i.e., "drivers"). On a scale of 1-4, where 1=Doesn't affect me negatively at all, 2=Negatively affects me a little, 3=Negatively affects me quite a bit, and 4=Negatively affects me a lot, we asked, "To what extent does each of the following **negatively** affect your mental health?" The top drivers listed here represent young adults who answered "quite a bit" or "a lot" (out of 21 options provided). \*This factor, "lacking direction" in the survey, was originally "stresses related to not knowing what to do with my life."

Young adults are also clearly not immune to the troubles of the larger world.<sup>13</sup> Forty-five percent (45%) reported a general "sense that things are falling apart" and 42% reported that gun violence in schools was impairing their mental health. Thirty-four percent (34%) cited climate change and 30% reported worries "that our political leaders are incompetent or corrupt." (see Figures 2 and 3).



<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the APA (see Bethune, 2019) has cited many external stressors affecting young adults. According to a survey they conducted in 2018, for example, 75% of young adults (ages 15-21) cited mass shootings as their top stressor, followed by the rise in suicide rates (62%), climate change (58%), separation and deportation of immigrant/migrant families (57%), and widespread sexual harassment and assault reports (53%).

*Figure 3. Young adults' remaining ratings of the factors that negatively contribute to their negative mental health (i.e., "drivers"). \*\*This factor, social media, was given in a separate section of the survey but was asked about in the same way.*

The impact of these drivers appears to vary by many demographic factors. Women, for example, are substantially more likely to report achievement and financial pressure than men. Sixty-five percent (65%) of women reported the negative impact of financial pressure and 61% reported the negative impact of achievement pressure, compared to 47% and 50% of young men.

### **Lacking meaning and purpose**

*"I have no purpose or meaning in life. I just go to work, do my mundane job, go home, prepare for the next day, scroll on my phone, and repeat."*

In addition to financial and achievement-related stress, what was most concerning in our data was the percentage of young adults who reported lacking meaning and purpose. As we've noted, over half of young adults (51%) reported that they don't know what to do with their lives, and 58% indicated that it was either "not true" or only "a little true" that they felt a sense of "purpose or meaning in life" in the past 30 days. Many young people, to be sure, have lacked meaning, direction, and purpose in other eras.<sup>14</sup> Yet adults in any healthy society need to stop and take serious stock when so many people entering adulthood report lacking energizing goals, direction, and meaning or are altogether rudderless—feelings that are commonly linked to anxiety and depression. More than half (54%) of young adults with little or no purpose or meaning in our survey reported anxiety or depression, while only a quarter (25%) of young adults who experienced purpose and meaning reported these mental health challenges.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Damon, 2008; Kenniston, 1965.



---

**“I have no purpose or meaning in life. I just go to work, do my mundane job, go home, prepare for the next day, scroll on my phone, and repeat.”**

---

There were no significant differences across gender, race, or income in the percentage of young adults reporting little or no purpose or meaning. Those belonging to any religion were more likely to report meaning or purpose (47%) than Atheists (34%) and Agnostics (32%).<sup>15</sup> Those in four-year undergraduate colleges were no more likely to report meaning and purpose than those not in college, yet respondents with graduate school degrees were significantly more likely (81%) to report meaning and purpose than those who left school after obtaining a bachelor's degree (51%), a vocational degree (44%), or a high school degree (35%).

It is hard to know from our data exactly what's causing this lack of purpose and meaning or how, specifically, this absence is related to high rates of depression and anxiety. For example, lacking purpose and meaning can certainly cause depression and anxiety, but depression and anxiety can also undermine our capacity to experience purpose and meaning. Or lacking purpose and depression and anxiety may be symptoms of a third factor or factors, such as dissatisfaction in relationships. Perhaps most common and concerning, the lack of meaning/purpose and the experience of depression/anxiety compound each other. Those who feel little purpose and meaning in work or relationships, for example, may slide into depression or anxiety, which may cause them to pull back from activities and relationships that formerly provided purpose and meaning, which in turn deepens their anxiety and depression.

In our focus groups and in an open-ended question in our survey, when we asked young adults what gives them meaning and purpose, a large majority focused on relationships

---

<sup>15</sup> See Cox, 2022, for an interesting analysis of faith among Gen Z.

with family and friends. Other research similarly indicates the importance of these relationships.<sup>16</sup> Work and school were almost entirely absent as sources of purpose and meaning. Of about 200 respondents to this question, a handful reported directly finding meaning in school and only about a dozen described finding meaning in work.<sup>17</sup> As one 23-year-old told us, “No one I know throws their heart and soul into work anymore. Work is just a means to an end.” About thirteen percent (13%) reported finding meaning and purpose in serving or helping others and 7% in religion or faith.

**...when we asked young adults what gives them meaning and purpose, a large majority focused on relationships with family and friends.**

Large numbers of young adults are experiencing relationship deficits, including loneliness, that are not only troubling in themselves but that are correlated with lacking meaning and purpose. Thirty-four percent (34%) of survey respondents reported loneliness, almost 40% reported they had only 1-2 caring friends, and 12% said they had no caring friends; 60% of young people wanted friends to “reach out more to ask how you’re really doing and to really listen.” The importance that young adults place on relationships may explain why at least some relationship deficits are correlated not only with lacking meaning and purpose but with anxiety and depression. For example, among the 34% of young adults who reported loneliness, 54% said they lacked meaning and

---

<sup>16</sup> According to William Damon’s research on purpose (e.g., see Damon, 2008; 2014), the plurality of young people—somewhere between 35-40%—find purpose in family. Vocation or work tends to be the second highest source, followed by serving God or religion. Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2018) has found that Americans tend to report that family, being outdoors, and spending time with friends bring them a “great deal” of meaning, but when asked to rank their “MOST important source,” 40% say family, followed by 20% who cite religion. In a follow-up global study, Pew (2021) also found that young people ages 18-29 rank family and friends as their first and second sources of meaning, followed by occupation.

<sup>17</sup> We should note, however, that about 12% of respondents emphasized having goals, which may or may not be reflective of aspirations either at school or work. For example, one young person said, “My journey to success. And my aspirations for a better life.”

purpose, while only 25% of those who are not lonely reported lacking meaning and purpose. Forty-four percent (44%) of young adults reported feeling like they matter to people only “a little” or “not at all,” and not mattering was strongly correlated with lacking meaning and purpose. Eighty-six percent (86%) of young adults who feel they don't matter to others reported lacking meaning/purpose compared to 36% of those who felt like they do matter.<sup>18</sup>

**Forty-four percent (44%) of young adults reported feeling like they matter to people only “a little” or “not at all”**

Finally, hope about our own future and the future of those we care about often provides meaning and purpose and helps protect us from depression and anxiety. Those who were hopeful about the future were far more likely than those without hope to report experiencing meaning and purpose. Lacking hope about fulfillment in work and love in our data is also significantly correlated with lacking meaning and purpose and with anxiety and depression. Asked if they expect to be in a healthy, fulfilling romantic relationship as well as whether they expect to find work fulfilling, only about 40% of survey respondents reported “yes” to both questions (the remaining respondents reported “maybe” or “no”).

There are many other factors that may contribute to feelings of meaninglessness and purposelessness as well as to anxiety and depression, including the increasing focus on the self in our culture; difficulties making choices given new, rapidly changing, and sometimes undefined career paths; young adults marrying at older ages; declines in

---

<sup>18</sup> Seventy percent (70%) of young adults also reported lacking social trust—specifically, they answered “not at all true” or “a little true” to the statement, “In general, I think people can be trusted.” Given this very high percentage, it was unsurprising that we did *not* find social trust to be significantly correlated with a sense of meaning or purpose or fewer mental health challenges.

religious participation; high social media use and other forms of digital media use; and a media ecosystem that floods us with frightening messages. Many young people may also be more likely to report lacking meaning and purpose these days because they have higher expectations than their predecessors for finding meaning and purpose (see callout).

---

Many trends over the last few decades may be contributing to young people lacking meaning and direction and experiencing anxiety and depression. That Americans have been immersed in psychological talk and a self-help culture has had many benefits, but it has also caused many people to look inward to find meaning and vitality. Yet as psychologist Martin Seligman puts it, “the self is a very poor site to find meanings.” The wellness industries and the relentless quest for happiness over the last few decades may also have turned many Americans away from the kinds of self-sacrifice and service to others that often brought meaning and purpose to previous generations. Adults are also marrying and having children at older ages than previous generations, experiences that tend to anchor young people and to provide meaning and purpose. Declines in religious participation and observance as well as participation in many types of social clubs may have further dwindled young people’s feelings of connection, meaning, and purpose (Putnam, 2001). While the impact of digital and, in particular, social media is complex, social media, too, can corrode connection, meaning, and purpose, magnifying our longing for real understanding and connection and greatly deepening feelings of not being wanted—the addictive torture of insufficient “likes.” Experts also suggest that many young people today prioritize meaning and purpose in their lives, particularly when it comes to work and work/life balance (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, & Woodhead, 2021; Peterson, 2023; Sweeney, 2023). They may thus be more likely than previous generations to report lacking meaning and purpose because they have higher expectations for finding meaning and purpose.

---

## **Troubling patterns**

None of the perceived drivers or the other factors that we describe admit to easy solutions and, again, they interact in complex ways. But certain patterns are especially

troubling. Far too many young adults suffer financial stress—stress that is especially consequential and severe for young adults from low-income families, who are commonly dealing with many other stresses and often lack access to basic mental health care. Any conversation about preventing young people’s mental health struggles should start with these young adults.

Far too many young people also suffer achievement-related stress and experience little meaning, direction, or purpose. That’s not a recipe for a gratifying or moral life. Disconnected from meaning, achievement is a particularly frantic, hellish hamster wheel. We have spoken to therapists who underscore that much of the work of therapy with young people is getting them to stop “achieving to achieve” and to instead find some meaning and purpose for achieving. Achievement pressure may also be a prime reason why young people don’t feel like they matter, which in turn diminishes their sense of meaning and purpose. Jennifer Wallace, the author of a new book on achievement and mattering, “Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—And What We Can Do About It,” argues that so many young people don’t feel like they matter because “mattering to other people to them is so contingent on performance, and many young people don’t feel like they can ever perform well enough.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Preventing young adults’ mental health challenges**

Just as there is no single cause of young adults’ mental health challenges, there is no single solution, and some solutions, such as relieving young people’s financial stresses and addressing young people’s lack of hope about fulfilling love, go well beyond the scope of this report. But our data suggest that at the heart of prevention are three strategies (see Appendix for recommended resources related to these strategies):

- Cultivating meaning and purpose in young people, including by engaging them in caring for others and service;

---

<sup>19</sup> See Wallace, 2023.

- Supporting young people in developing gratifying and durable relationships; and
- Helping young people experience their lives as more than the sum of their achievements.

## Cultivating purpose and “possibilities”

Developing young people’s sense of meaning and purpose is no simple challenge. There are, of course, many types of meaning, which our great storytellers, poets, cultural observers, and philosophers have explored since ancient times. And even the term “purpose” itself can be misleading. There is much talk in our country about finding a purpose, “passion,” or “calling” in young adulthood that will power and organize one’s life. Yet many of us are not built to have a single, guiding purpose. Research directed by William Damon indicates that only about 1/5 of young people in our era experience a deep, guiding purpose; that young adults often do not land on a satisfying goal until well into their 20s and 30s and that many of us don’t have a single, guiding purpose at any point in our lives.<sup>20</sup> The expectation that we should have a single purpose can itself hound us with anxiety and self-doubt. Our experiences of purpose also may vacillate throughout adulthood, partly because purpose results from complex interactions between who we are—including our values, desires, identities, dispositions, life stage, strengths, and vulnerabilities—and the opportunities, demands, and constraints of the outside world.

Yet it’s important to at least give young people opportunities to develop a core sense of purpose, or what William Damon, Kendall Bronk, and Heather Malin define as a future-directed, personally meaningful goal aimed at “contributing to something larger than the self.”<sup>21</sup> This type of purpose is associated with numerous academic, physical, and mental health benefits,<sup>22</sup> is important to the well-being of any society, and can be found in many areas of one’s life, including work, religious participation, hobbies, or

---

<sup>20</sup> See Damon, 2008, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> See Bronk, 2011; Damon, 2008; Malin, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> See Malin, 2018. Also see Bronk et al., 2018; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2015; Suldo, Mariano, & Gilfix, 2021.

volunteering for a cause.<sup>23</sup> To engage the large number of young people who are not likely to experience a single purpose and to enable more young people to experience meaning, it's also vital to provide them with meaningful, energizing experiences that give them some direction and goals—a rich sense of what Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis call “possibilities”—including goals directed beyond the self.

### **Adult modeling, mentoring, and structured reflections**

Whether young adults find purpose or “possibilities” is not just determined by their immediate experience; it's profoundly influenced by their interactions beginning at birth. When a parent, for example, consistently responds to an infant's early attempts to explore with warm encouragement and careful attention to their safety, it can help infants develop the trust, hope, and confidence that are the building blocks of meaningful, energizing experiences and purpose, supporting the kind of in-depth exploration that often enables children to identify what they find meaningful. Further, parents and other adults can support children and teens in many aspects of identity development that shape whether and how young people experience purpose and possibilities—research suggests that identity development is a precursor to purpose.<sup>24</sup>

But how can older adults as well as peers support purpose and possibility development in young adults? It is, of course, a common trope across time, countries, and religions that the role of older adults is to pass on wisdom to younger adults about how to lead purposeful, meaningful lives. Yet young adults are not passive receptacles but active meaning-makers, who may have very different frames for understanding the world than older adults and, especially these days, may live in worlds that older adults hardly understand. Parents, educators, workplace supervisors, and many other adults certainly have wisdom to share, but they are likely to be most useful in cultivating in young people meaningful purpose and possibilities when they engage in the art and discipline of careful listening—our data suggest that large numbers of young adults want older adults

---

<sup>23</sup> See Suttie, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> See Bronk, 2011; 2013.



not to offer solutions or to try to fix problems, but to listen to them more and to connect their insights to young people’s specific beliefs, views, and realities. At times, older adults may also need to encourage young adults to get out of their heads and to try new things, paying close attention to what bores, irritates, excites, and energizes them.

---

**...our data suggest that large numbers of young adults want older adults not to offer solutions or to try to fix problems, but to listen to them more and to connect their insights to young people’s specific beliefs, views, and realities.**

---

Increasing numbers of work, school, therapeutic, and career counseling settings are also utilizing structured “purpose-fostering” interventions<sup>25</sup> that focus, for example, on reflection on what long-term aims matter most, developing a sense of agency, strengthening self-regulation, and/or gratitude exercises—research suggests that gratitude is often an important source of meaning and purpose.<sup>26</sup> Still other approaches center on the construction of a “narrative identity,” an “internalized and evolving life story” that integrates patterns from the past and the imagined future.<sup>27</sup> We’ve developed a framework that enables young people to consider how various deep internal stories about their lives—e.g., their aspirational or “ideal” story, their “ought” story, their “shame” story—shape how and when they experience meaning and purpose, and guides them in moving toward their ideal story (see callout).

---

<sup>25</sup> See Bronk, 2019; Immordino-Yang, working paper; Koshy & Mariano, 2011; Malin, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> See Bredouw, 2023.

---

We've developed a framework to support young people in finding purpose and energizing possibilities that asks them to consider:

- their “ideal story,” the story of the life they aspire to lead;
- their “ought story,” the story about the life their parents and/or community expects them to lead;
- their “almost story,” the story of roads not taken that still pull on their imagination;
- their “shame story,” the story of the life they fear they will lead;
- their “existential story,” the story they may have about the essential meaning of life;
- and their “pragmatic story,” the story of the constraints and realities they are facing, such as financial constraints or family obligations.

Young adults then explore how they might manage each of these stories in ways that enable them to move toward their ideal story. Parents and other older adults might also think about how they navigate their own stories and weave these ideas into conversations with young adults about their stories.

---

Parents and other older adults might also explore with young adults what might be blocking their capacity to find meaning and purpose, including worries that they lack skills—worries about skill deficits are significantly linked with lacking meaning and purpose in our data—and feelings of hopelessness and cynicism. These obstacles can dramatically vary across culture, race, and class. In isolated, under-resourced communities, for example, where high barriers to opportunity deplete hope and a sense of possibility, simple talk about hope and purpose is likely to only reinforce distrust and cynicism. The pathway to possibility often involves, among other things, guidance in examining and challenging systemic barriers and unjust systems.<sup>28</sup> As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it in “A Letter to My Son,” “I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life determined

---

<sup>28</sup> See Ward, 2018. As indicated at the beginning of this section, see our Appendix for resources, including Fresh Lifelines for Youth which works specifically to support and partner with youth to unlock their potential.

to struggle...I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.”<sup>29</sup>

Engaging in these conversations and structured interventions in colleges and workplaces won’t be easy. Many colleges do little to support high-quality advising, for example, and workplaces commonly devote little attention to career exploration and development. Further, while frameworks and tools for building purpose in young people are proliferating, evidence of their effectiveness is scarce.<sup>30</sup>

Yet given the number of young people who are suffering anxiety and depression and struggling to find purpose and meaning, it’s vital that colleges invest in advising, provide time for structured reflections, evaluate their efforts, and continuously improve. At least several colleges have undertaken this investment (see callout).

Many colleges have developed intentional programs and various practices and initiatives designed to cultivate purpose (Brzycki & Brzycki, 2019). For example, the University of Minnesota offers a course that focuses students on discovering purpose to take “charge of your health and well-being”; Harvard’s “Reflecting On Your Life” program engages undergraduates in considering a range of questions about what matters to them and how their sense of what matters shapes their understanding of their life goals; and Purposeful Work, a program at Bates College, guides students in connecting their purpose to the professions.

Just as important, parents, educators, and other adults need to model taking up goals that contribute beyond the self, including taking on pressing problems in their communities and country. Yet many older adults do not appear to be effective models in this respect, and far too often young adults appear to be alert to the gap between what older adults say and what they actually do when it comes to addressing social problems. In our survey, about half of the young adults reported that it is “pretty true” or “very

---

<sup>29</sup> See Coates, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> See Bronk et al., 2019.

true” that a “lot of the adults in my life talk about social problems but do little or nothing about them.” About 40% of young adults also indicated that they have little faith in older adults’ capacity to solve problems, compared to 20% who lacked this faith in their peers. At a time when our country is facing dire problems like climate change and when democracy itself seems on the rails, young adults need to see older adults with their hands on the wheel, facing these problems squarely.

---

**In our survey, about half of the young adults reported that it is “pretty true” or “very true” that a “lot of the adults in my life talk about social problems but do little or nothing about them.”**

---

#### Care for others and service

*“Doing literally anything helpful gives me a sense of purpose. I want to help and guide and support people, and change the world for the better. I’m not happy unless I feel like I’m bringing about genuine good change, whether that’s for individual people, a broader community, or the world at large.”*

*“My grandma always says that our generation is going to be the one to change things and make the world a great place and that inspires me.”*

While young people should have many types of opportunities to explore meaningful possibilities, whether via internships, classes, or participation in sports, any healthy and moral society ought to give young people opportunities to find meaningful goals and possibilities by engaging in service and other forms of care for others. For many of us, helping others not only provides meaning and purpose, it also provides relief from debilitating self-occupations. Thomas Insel, the former head of the National Institute of

Mental Health, says, “in many ways helping others is more therapeutic than getting help from others.”<sup>31</sup>

**“I would really like to have some sort of meaning from working towards a goal or cause that betters humanity as a whole. I see the world falling apart and no direction for humanity, and I’d like to do something about it.”**

Helping can take many forms. Many young people are already engaged in substantial forms of care—working to support their families, for example, or taking care of sick relatives or supervising younger siblings. The point is not to overload these young people. But other young people can clearly benefit, for example, from well-structured community service experiences that enable them to have impact, to reflect on what matters to them and how it connects to career paths or other activities, and that provide community and camaraderie, mitigating loneliness. Taking on the challenges now facing our country—whether climate change, gun violence, or political polarization—may be especially meaningful and can provide purpose, given the constant toll these challenges can take on our mental health and the helplessness that these problems can breed. As one survey respondent put it, “I would really like to have some sort of meaning from working towards a goal or cause that betters humanity as a whole. I see the world falling apart and no direction for humanity, and I’d like to do something about it.” Young adults and older adults can also work together to combat social problems, learning from each other’s perspectives. Cogenerate is an exciting new national program that brings young people and older adults together “to solve problems that neither generation can solve alone.” Many older adults will also need to get beyond stereotypes of young people as

---

<sup>31</sup> See [Reinventing Mental Healthcare online webinar](#) with Insel, Chaudhary, Patel, Larrauri, & Crawford, 2022.

entitled and fragile and provide support and encouragement to them in taking on community and societal challenges.

Many different institutions can create more opportunities for young people to engage in service. The federal government can expand national service programs<sup>32</sup> that bring young people together from various backgrounds to work on common causes, “doing with” rather than “doing for.” Local governments can similarly provide more high-quality service experiences. Colleges could encourage students to take a semester or year off campus engaging in credit-bearing service. Far more workplaces, too, can offer young people meaningful service opportunities.<sup>33</sup>

### **Understanding and experiencing life as more than the sum of one’s achievements**

Important as it is for young people to feel that their achievements are meaningful, it may be even more important for young people’s mental health—and particularly their ability to manage achievement-related stress—to feel that they are part of a larger human experience that transcends their achievements. Across countries and centuries, many young people have, of course, found this transcendence in religion. For those in religious communities, life is often experienced as inherently meaningful. Religious communities often inspire a sense of awe—“to encounter the sacred is to be alive at the deepest center of human existence,” writes the poet and novelist N. Scott Momaday—and religious participation often enables us to feel that we have a meaningful place in a larger humanity that spans generations and geographic boundaries. Religions also often provide communities grounded in compassion and love, and provide members with an ordained, meaningful role. In these respects, religious communities can provide an oasis from achievement stress, from the successes and failures of day-to-day life. Religious communities also often instill a sense of responsibility for one’s ancestors and descendants that can be a powerful source of meaning and purpose, they can provide

---

<sup>32</sup> See McChrystal, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> See Center for the future of work, 2022; Dunlop & Pankowski, 2023; Roddell, 2021.

young people with a calling or purpose rooted in religious values, and they often engage members in gratitude practices, such as blessings.

Yet religious affiliation and observance have both declined among young adults in the last several decades.<sup>34</sup> More than a 1 / 3 of Gen Z (which includes young adults) now identifies as religiously unaffiliated, followed by 29% of Millennials. Only about 15% of young adults, according to research reported by Damon in 2008, find purpose in religion.

We're not arguing here for or against greater participation in religion—religions throughout history have had all sorts of benefits and costs to individuals and societies. But there are practices, structures, and traditions in many religious communities that are important to develop in secular life. Far more college students, for example, might participate in coming-of-age rituals, such as capstone projects, that ask them to consider what constitutes a meaningful life, how that life is related to their achievements, and what they owe their communities, their ancestors, and their descendants. Far more colleges might take up rituals of gratitude and be far more intentional about inspiring awe and wonder in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, history, anthropology, and many other subjects. Older adults in general might encourage young adults to consider when they feel in the flow of a larger life stream, such as during their time in nature, and how those experiences might be pursued more intentionally and regularly in daily life.

## **Loneliness and connection**

Given that the great majority of young adults report finding meaning and purpose in their relationships, preventing and mitigating loneliness and supporting young people in developing gratifying relationships is both vital to their mental health and to their experiencing meaning and purpose. Rates of loneliness are higher among young people than among any other age cohort. There are many different strategies for reducing loneliness and developing fulfilling relationships among young people that we and others

---

<sup>34</sup> See Cox, 2022.



have described at some length.<sup>35</sup> Here we highlight a few strategies that we view as priorities:

1. **Rebuilding our social infrastructure.** We need to be more intentional about creating opportunities for young people to connect with each other. We can learn from countries like the United Kingdom and Japan, which have national strategies to combat loneliness. For example, primary care physicians could routinely ask about loneliness at annual physicals and connect patients to relevant social groups or nonprofits. Housing and urban planning departments could be charged with developing strategies for promoting connections and community for young adults. Governments could also support the growing trend to reimagine public libraries as vibrant, cross-generational community hubs.
2. **Educating young adults about loneliness.** We need public education efforts that guide young adults in identifying and managing the negative thoughts and behaviors that can contribute to loneliness. For example, lonely people are more likely to be critical of themselves and others, and to expect rejection.<sup>36</sup> Many lonely people also believe that they give more than they receive.<sup>37</sup> Awareness of these negative mindsets, and strategies for reframing negative thoughts, can help motivate lonely people to reach out to others.
3. **Promoting a sense of community and social responsibility.** Loneliness is a sign that Americans are too focused on self-concerns and self-advancement, and not enough on supporting each other and the common good. That we have lost a healthy balance between self-concerns and concerns for others has not only contributed to loneliness but to many other societal problems, including the lack of decency in public life, fierce polarization, and the rise of hate groups. We need to work in many domains of American life to strengthen the assumption that we

---

<sup>35</sup> See our 2021 report, [Loneliness in America: How the pandemic has deepened an epidemic of loneliness and what we can do about it](#). Also see the [U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

<sup>36</sup> See Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Watson & Nesdale, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> See Making Caring Common, 2021a.

all have commitments to each other, especially to those who are vulnerable (see callout).

---

For decades, cultural critics and researchers have decried Americans' imbalanced attention to the self as opposed to others and the common good (Making Caring Common, 2014, 2021b; Putnam & Garrett, 2020). In 1985, *Habits of the Heart*, an extensive study of values in American life, reported that Americans speak a "first language" of personal ambitions and only a "second language" of commitments to others and the collective (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Yet caring for others is a powerful source of connection, meaning, and purpose, and is essential to a moral and healthy society that protects those who are vulnerable.

In the long term, prioritizing caring in our culture requires making it a priority in our child-raising. At Making Caring Common, we have written at length about how the focus on happiness and achievements in homes and schools has squeezed out attention to children's care for others. In a survey we conducted in 2013, we asked youth to rank what was most important to them: achieving at a high level, happiness (feeling good most of the time), or caring for others. Almost 80% of youth selected a dimension of success—high achievement or happiness—as their top choice, while only roughly 20% picked caring for others (Making Caring Common, 2014). In a survey we conducted in 2021, we asked adult respondents of varying ages what was most important to their own parents in child-raising: achievement, happiness, or caring for others. Almost 90% of respondents reported that achievement or happiness was more important to their parents than whether they cared for others (Making Caring Common, 2021a).

There is much that families, schools, colleges, churches, and many other institutions can do to develop children's commitment to and capacity to care for others. And there is much that each of us can do to make caring—including caring for young people who are dealing with anxiety or depression—a common social norm. For example, we should ask ourselves if young people in our midst are struggling and, if we have the emotional bandwidth ourselves, commit to reaching out to a young person whom we're worried about.

---

## Conclusion

There is much else we can do to prevent young people's mental health challenges and to enable young people to feel greater significance and direction in their lives. Especially given how unaffordable college is for legions of young people, governments and businesses might support the growing proliferation of exciting alternative career paths that may both reduce financial stress and increase meaning and purpose. Colleges might do more to center meaning and purpose, including enabling students to more regularly explore the "why" in curriculum and engaging students in rigorous exercises that develop the muscles and reflexes needed to tie self-understanding to what they are learning about the world. Workplace productivity is also likely to increase if time is devoted to supporting young people in finding meaning in work and in developing meaningful career goals.

Whatever the merits of these specific recommendations, what does seem clear is that the emotional plight of so many young people demands far more concerted and serious attention from governments, colleges and universities, workplaces, and many other institutions. What also seems clear is that we need to give more than lip service to prevention, reimagining and working to reconfigure this phase of life.

## Methodology

[Note, we include here an abbreviated version of the methodology description in our previous report, [Caring for the Caregivers](#). For brevity, we do not provide the footnotes and their citations/references from that report.]

At the start of 2022, we combed the literature on the mental health of teens and young adults, including reviewing recent national reports, academic articles, and popular press materials. We simultaneously conducted informal interviews with practitioners and experts in the field, asking what they think are the main drivers of poor mental health among young people and what protective factors deserve attention. We then obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to conduct both quantitative (i.e., surveys) and qualitative (i.e., interviews and focus groups) research to better understand young people's perceptions and experiences surrounding their mental health.

In the spring of 2022, we conducted focus groups and interviews with a total of 35 participants in the U.S. (including interviews with young adults). In the summer of 2022, we started to develop our main survey intended for teens (ages 14-17) and young adults (ages 18-25); questions focused on their *perceived stressors, sense of self, hope, social media uses and perceptions, help-seeking, relationships and general sources of support, views of their parents and schools, and general attitudes, values, and behaviors*. We also created a brief survey for parents, much of which directly matched questions given to teens and young adults.

### A specific note about how we measured mental health

Two of our primary indicators of mental health were anxiety and depression, which we assessed using the [GAD-2](#) and [PHQ-2](#) measures, respectively. These are well known screening tools, asking “Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by

the following problems?” on a scale from 0 to 3: “not at all,” “several days,” “more than half the days,” and “nearly every day.” The two items assessing anxiety are “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge” and “not being able to stop or control worrying” and the two items assessing depression are “little interest or pleasure in doing things” and “feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.” A score of 3 or more—for example, saying “several days” to one item but “more than half the days” on the other—is considered the optimal cut point to screen for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) or major depressive disorder (MDD). Indeed, both measures have been found to have substantially high specificity and sensitivity for actual diagnosis. Both measures are validated and widely used by researchers as well as recommended to clinicians (e.g., primary care doctors, psychologists) for evaluating anxiety and depression symptoms. For the purposes of this report, we refer to young adults as having anxiety or depression if they met the 3+ cutoff for each, and when we make comparisons to non-anxious or non-depressed young adults (or those with little to no anxiety or depression) we mean those young adults had less frequent or no symptoms of anxiety or depression.

### **Sampling, data processing, and data weighting**

Once our surveys were finalized, we worked with NORC at the University of Chicago to program and test the surveys for dissemination. We worked with NORC because they have state-of-the-art sampling panels that ensure survey respondents can be used to represent the population of the U.S., when using appropriate weights. You can see our previous report, [\*“Do Americans really care for each other? What unites us—and what divides us”\*](#) for a detailed description of the adult AmeriSpeak® Panel (p.32).

To start dissemination, a sub-sample of AmeriSpeak web-mode young adult panelists ages 18-25 were invited to the youth survey on December 9, 2022 in a soft-launch. The initial data from the soft-launch was reviewed to confirm that there were no processing or programming errors. After thorough data cleaning (e.g., removing speeders and respondents with high refusal rates; redacting all personally identifying information from

open-ended data), NORC delivered data to us from 1,853 respondents through the probability AmeriSpeak panel, including a total of 396 teens, 709 young adults, and 748 parents.

Since the sampling frame for this study is the AmeriSpeak Panel, which itself is a sample, the starting point of the weighting process for the study was the AmeriSpeak panel weight (see the [previous report cited above](#) for more details, page 34). Then, the study specific base weights were developed to adjust for unequal selection probabilities from the AmeriSpeak panel, differential nonresponse across subpopulations, and frame coverage limitations. All these weighting adjustments were applied to the final panel weights, which were created by first adjusting the base weights for survey nonresponse through a weighting class method, where the weighting classes are defined by age, race/ethnicity, gender, and education. After that, a raking ratio adjustment was applied to the nonresponse adjusted base weights to align the sample with known population benchmarks made up of the following topline socio-demographic characteristics: age, gender, region, education, and race/ethnicity.

## **Appendix: Recommended Resources**

Below is a carefully curated selection of recommended resources—including programs and digital platforms—related to young adults’ mental health as well as fostering a sense of purpose. We plan to keep building out this list of resources on our [website](#), so please check back for these and additional resources.

### **[American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#)**

AACAP provides various resources for families, including information about topical issues affecting the mental health of children, teens, and parents, as well as helpful tools for people with depression in particular, such as CBT Diary and Mood Tools that can help users practice their cognitive-behavioral therapy skills.

### **[Anxiety & Depression Association of America \(ADAA\)](#)**

ADAA offers extensive information about anxiety and depression as well as other issues like PTSD and suicide. There are resources for finding a therapist and/or joining free peer-to-peer support communities.

### **[Big Brothers Big Sisters of America](#)**

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is a nationally recognized youth mentoring organization that connects adult volunteers ("Bigs") with young people ("Littles") facing adversity. Through one-to-one mentorship relationships, the program empowers youth to realize their potential, improve their social and emotional well-being, and achieve personal growth. Big Brothers Big Sisters is committed to providing young people with positive role models and mentors who help them navigate life's challenges and develop essential life skills, promoting positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees.



## **Brief Digital Interventions**

Harvard's Lab for Youth Mental Health lists a handful of brief interventions created for youth that can be used by all. While created for digital use, the PDF versions are also available and enable users to practice simple techniques, like turning unhelpful thoughts into helpful ones (e.g., Project THINK).

### **Blue Fever**

A mental health companion and well-being community for Gen Z/Alpha, BF provides a bridge between the mental health needs of young people and the resources that can best support them. They do this via their high trust, community diary where authentic self-expression unlocks peer support and personalized recommendations from an emotionally relevant AI. The platform provides personalized mental wellness assessments, interactive learning modules, mindfulness resources, peer support and so much more.

### **Cogenerate**

Cogenerate is an organization that fosters intergenerational collaboration by uniting young people and older adults through diverse programs, events, and media initiatives. Their mission is to empower these generations to work collectively, addressing challenges, bridging societal divides, and collaboratively shaping the future. Through various programs, events, and media “to solve problems, bridge divides and co-create the future.”

### **DoSomething**

DoSomething is one of the largest nonprofits exclusively engaging young people in social activism by providing opportunities to take action on various pressing social issues. With a user-friendly interface and a range of campaigns, DoSomething.org empowers youth to become leaders among their peers and in their communities. The platform inspires and

equips young individuals to address social challenges, fostering a sense of agency and social responsibility, and ultimately promoting positive change.

### [Fresh Lifelines for Youth](#)

FLY is an influential nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the lives of at-risk and justice-involved youth. FLY's innovative programs and initiatives play a pivotal role in diverting young people from a life of crime and incarceration, focusing on rehabilitation, personal growth, and future success.

### [Jed Foundation](#)

A nationally recognized nonprofit that works to prevent suicide and emotional struggles in young people, this foundation provides “comprehensive resources “to help you or someone you love plan for life after high school and manage big transitions including adjusting to college life, all while prioritizing mental health.”

### [Making Caring Common](#)

Making Caring Common’s growing library of mental health resources for [families](#) and for [educators](#) includes cognitive-behavioral strategies; stress management strategies; suggestions for activities that build resilience and coping skills; and resources for building and maintaining strong, caring relationships.

### [Mindfulness Resources & Programs](#)

Young adults can explore several evidence-based strategies for practicing mindfulness, or learning how to be aware and attentive, non-judgmentally, to one’s thoughts and feelings. Health-based journalist and documentary producer and star of Living Mindfully, Shannon Harvey, overviews the research, some of these resources, including the [Ten Percent](#) and [Unwinding Anxiety](#) apps, and specific programs such as MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), which could be particularly useful for treating depression ([see here](#)).

### **MindLyte App**

A user-friendly mental wellness application designed to promote mindfulness and emotional well-being in college students or young people. The app offers a range of guided meditations, stress-relief exercises, and personalized tools to support mental health. With a user-centric interface, MindLyte aims to enhance self-care practices and foster a positive mindset.

### **National Institute of Mental Health**

A U.S. government agency that studies mental health and provides information on an array of topics, including about mental health disorders, treatments, and therapies, and where to find clinical trials. You can call 1-866-615-6464 or live chat.

### **Sages and Seekers**

Designed to foster meaningful intergenerational connections between teenagers and young adults, this unique program can be easily applied to young adults across settings (e.g., student affairs or other personnel being matched with college students). It provides a safe and interactive space for the exchange of wisdom, life experiences, and personal stories between older individuals (Sages) and the younger generation (Seekers).

### **Wondermind**

Co-founded by Selena Gomez, this online resource provides expert advice, candid conversations, and exclusive, tailored content about mental fitness and mental health conditions. It also has a "filter by feels" feature, allowing you to find content specific to how you feel.

### **Youth Build**

YouthBuild is a transformative program dedicated to providing underserved young people with education, job skills, and leadership opportunities. By engaging in meaningful

community projects and receiving support to achieve academic and career goals, participants gain the tools needed to break the cycle of poverty. YouthBuild empowers youth to become leaders in their communities, contributing to positive change and personal growth.

## References

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America. (2022). College-aged adults face less mental health stigma.  
<https://adaa.org/college-aged-adults-face-less-mental-health-stigma>
- American Psychological Association (2018). *Stress in America: Generation Z*. Stress in America™ Survey.  
<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf>
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Bethune, S. (2019). Gen Z more likely to report mental health concerns. *Monitor on Psychology*, American Psychological Association.  
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/gen-z>
- Birditt, K. S., & Fingerman, K. L. (2013). Parent-child and intergenerational relationships in adulthood. In M. A. Fine & F. D. Fincham (Eds.), *Handbook of Family Theories: A Content-Based Approach* (pp. 71–86). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bredouw, M. (2023). How to help teens find purpose amid the mental health crisis. *Time*. <https://time.com/6255385/teens-mental-heath-how-to-help/>
- Bronk, K. C. (2011). Portraits of purpose: The role of purpose in identity formation. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 132, 31–44.
- Bronk, K. C. (2013). *Purpose in life: A critical component of optimal youth development*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Bronk, K. C., et al. (2019). Fostering Purpose Among Young Adults. *Journal of Character Education*, 15, 21-38.

- Brzycki, H. G. & Brzycki, E. J. (2019, February 18). Visionary universities teach life purpose: Does yours? *eCampus News*.  
<https://www.ecampusnews.com/campus-leadership/2019/02/18/visionary-universities-teach-life-purpose-does-yours/#:~:text=At%20Bates%20College%20in%20Maine.by%20discovering%20your%20life%20purpose>
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Hawkley, L. C. (2009). Perceived social isolation and cognition. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 13, 447–454.
- Center for the Future of Work. (2022). *The Purpose Gap*.  
[https://www.cognizant.com/en\\_us/insights/documents/the-purpose-gap-codex7086.pdf](https://www.cognizant.com/en_us/insights/documents/the-purpose-gap-codex7086.pdf)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report, 2011-2021*.  
[https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS\\_Data-Summary-Trends\\_Report2023\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf)
- Coates, T. (2015, July 4). A letter to my son. *The Atlantic*.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>
- Cox, D. (2022, March). Generation Z and the future of faith in America. *Survey Center on American Life*.  
<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>
- Damon, W. (2014). Motivating young people to be active citizens. *Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership Occasional Papers*: Vol. 1, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byupspapers/vol1/iss1/9>
- Damon, W. (2008). *The Path to Purpose: Helping our Children Find Their Calling in Life*. Simon and Schuster.

- Duffy, T., *et al.* (2019). Trends in Mood and Anxiety Symptoms and Suicide-Related Outcomes Among U.S. undergraduates, 2007–2018: Evidence from two national surveys. *Journal of Adolescent Health*.
- Dunlop, A. & Pankowski, M. (2023). Hey bosses: Here's what Gen Z actually wants at work. *Deloitte Digital*.  
<https://www.deloittedigital.com/us/en/blog-list/2023/gen-z-research-report.html>
- Froh, J. J., Bono, G., & Emmons, R. (2010). Being grateful is beyond good manners: Gratitude and motivation to contribute to society among early adolescents. *Motivation and Emotion*, 34, 144– 157.
- Huber, R. (2012, December 3). How to Parent Adult Children. *AARP*  
<https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-12-2012/how-to-parent-adult-children.html>
- Immordino-Yang, H. (working paper). Sages and Seekers: Values-based life goals in intergenerational conversations increase low-SES adolescents' life purpose and sense of community participation.
- Koshy, S. I., & Mariano, J. M. (2011). Promoting youth purpose: A review of the literature. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 132, 13–29.
- Lifeway research (n.d.). *American views on purpose in life*.  
<https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Americans-Sept-2020-Meaning-Purpose-Report.pdf>
- Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M., & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Trends in College Student Mental Health and Help-Seeking by Race/Ethnicity: Findings from the National Healthy Minds Study, 2013–2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138-147.
- Keniston, K. (1965). *The uncommitted: Alienated youth in American society*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Katz, R., Ogilvie, S., Shaw, J., & Woodhead, L. (2021). *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*. University of Chicago Press.

Lockett, E. (2022, October 26). How we can change the stigma around mental health.

*Healthline*.

<https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/mental-health-stigma-examples#statistics>

Making Caring Common. (2014). *The children we mean to raise*.

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise>

Making Caring Common. (2021a). *Loneliness in America: How the pandemic has deepened an epidemic of loneliness and what we can do about it*.

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america>

Making Caring Common. (2021b). *Do Americans really care for each other? What unites us and what divides us*.

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/caring-for-the-caregivers>

Making Caring Common. (2023). *Caring for the Caregivers: The Critical Link Between Parent and Teen Mental Health*.

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/caring-for-the-caregivers>.

Malin, H. (2018). *Teaching for purpose: Preparing students for lives of meaning*. Harvard Education Press.

McChrystal, S. (2017, June 20). Stanley McChrystal: Every American should serve for one year. *Time*.

<https://time.com/4824366/year-national-service-amicorps-peace-corps/>

Mineo, L. (2022, November 7). Mapping out a better society with focus on inclusion, environment. *The Harvard Gazette*.



<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/11/mapping-out-a-better-society-with-focus-on-inclusion-environment/>

Panchal, N., Rudowitz, R., & Cox, C. (2022). Recent trends in Mental Health and substance use concerns among adolescents. *Kaiser Family Foundation*.  
[https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/recent-trends-in-mental-health-and-substance-use-concerns-among-adolescents/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20nearly%20a%20third,adolescents%20\(Appendix%20Table%201\)](https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/recent-trends-in-mental-health-and-substance-use-concerns-among-adolescents/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20nearly%20a%20third,adolescents%20(Appendix%20Table%201))

Pappas, S. (2018). APA issues first-ever guidelines for practice with men and boys. *Monitor on Psychology*, 50, American Psychological Association.  
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/ce-corner#:~:text=First%2C%20clinicians%20must%20be%20aware,to%20age%20and%20ethnicity%20interact.>

Peterson, B. (2023, June 16). What Gen Z wants in the workplace. *Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/06/16/gen-z-employment/#>

Pew Research Center. (2018). Where Americans find meaning in life.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/>

Pew Research Center. (2019). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

Pew Research Center. (2021). What makes life meaningful? Globally, answers sometimes vary by age.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/23/what-makes-life-meaningful-globally-answers-sometimes-vary-by-age/#:~:text=In%20every%20public%20surveyed%2C%20adults,lives%20than%20their%20older%20counterparts.>

Putnam, R. D. (2001). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Putnam, R. D., & Garrett, S. R. (2020). *The upswing: How America came together a century ago and how we can do it again*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rodell, J. (2021). Volunteer programs that employees can get excited about. *Harvard Business Review*.  
<https://hbr.org/2021/01/volunteer-programs-that-employees-can-get-excited-about>

Stapley, E., Vainieri, I., Li, E., Merrick, H., Jeffery, M., Foreman, S., Casey, P., Ullman, R., & Cortina, M. (2021). A Scoping review of the factors that influence families' ability or capacity to provide young people with emotional support over the transition to adulthood. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.

Sumner, R., Burrow, A., & Hill, P. L. (2015). Identity and purpose as predictors of subjective well-being in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 3, 46–54.

Suldo, S. M., Mariano, J. M., & Gilfix, H. (2021). Promoting students' positive emotions, character, and purpose. In P. J. Lazarus, S. M. Suldo, & B. Doll (Eds.), *Fostering the emotional well-being of our youth: A school-based approach* (pp. 282–312). Oxford University Press.

Suttie, J. (2020, August 6). Seven ways to find your purpose in life. *The Greater Good Science Center*.  
[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/seven\\_ways\\_to\\_find\\_your\\_purpose\\_in\\_lif](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/seven_ways_to_find_your_purpose_in_lif)

Sweeney, E. (2023, August 31). Gen Z is over hustle culture and other generations agree. *Indeed*.  
<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/news/intergenerational-perspectives-quiet-quitting>

- Twenge, J. M., Cooper, A. B., Joiner, T. E., Duffy, M. E., & Binau, S. G. (2019). Age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorder indicators and suicide-related outcomes in a nationally representative dataset, 2005–2017. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*.  
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
- Volpe, J. D. (2022). *Fight: How Gen Z is channeling their fear and passion to save America*. St. Martin's Press.
- Wallace, J. B. (2023). *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It*. Portfolio/Penguin, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.
- Ward, J. (2018). Lessons in resistance and resilience. *Association of American Colleges and Universities*. <https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2018/winter/ward>
- Watson, J. & Nesdale, D. (2012). Rejection sensitivity, social withdrawal, and loneliness in young adults. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 8, 1984-2005.

