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Gen Z young adults twice as anxious and depressed as teens

A new report from Harvard's Making Caring Common identifies several drivers of young adults' emotional challenges, including a lack of meaning and purpose

Cambridge, Massachusetts – Young adults in the U.S. report twice the rates of anxiety and depression as teens, according to a new report from [Making Caring Common](#), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The report identifies several drivers of young adults' emotional challenges, including a lack of meaning and purpose.

The report, [On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges](#), is based on a nationally representative survey of young adults (ages 18 – 25), teens, and parents conducted in December 2022. Thirty-six (36%) of young adults who responded to the survey reported anxiety compared to 18% of teens; 29% of young adults reported depression compared to 15% of teens.

“Young adulthood can be a time of great growth and possibility,” said [Richard Weissbourd](#), lead author of the report, faculty director of Making Caring Common, and Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “But far too many young adults told us that they feel on edge, lonely, directionless, and that they worry about financial security. Many are ‘achieving to achieve’ and find little meaning in either school or work.”

The report identifies a variety of stressors that may be driving young adults' high rates of anxiety and depression. The top drivers of young adults' mental health challenges include:

- **A lack of meaning, purpose, and direction:** Nearly 3 in 5 young adults (58%) reported that they lacked “meaning or purpose” in their lives in the previous month. Half of young adults reported that their mental health was negatively influenced by “not knowing what to do with my life.”

- **Financial worries and achievement pressure:** More than half of young adults reported that financial worries (56%) and achievement pressure (51%) were negatively impacting their mental health.
- **A perception that the world is unraveling:** Forty-five percent (45%) of young adults reported that a general "sense that things are falling apart" was impairing their mental health.
- **Relationship deficits:** Forty-four percent (44%) of young adults reported a sense of not mattering to others and 34% reported loneliness.
- **Social and political issues:** 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.

"Young adults' mental health hasn't been on our public radar in the way that teens' mental health has been since the pandemic," said Milena Batanova, MCC's Director of Research & Evaluation and a co-author of the report. "But really high percentages of young adult respondents to our survey said they felt anxious, depressed, or both.

At the same time, the report argues, young adults have many strengths that provide many reasons for hope. For example, the young adults of Generation Z may be more emotionally aware and open about mental health challenges than any generation in our history. They may finally break the stubborn, damaging stigma about mental health troubles in this country.

The report also suggests strategies for promoting young adults' mental health and mitigating their emotional challenges. These include:

- **Cultivating meaning and purpose** in young people, including by engaging them in caring for others and service;
- Supporting young people in developing **gratifying and durable relationships**; and
- Helping young people experience their **lives as more than the sum of their achievements**.

"We need to do much more to support young adults' mental health and devote more resources to prevention," said Kiran Bhai, MCC's Schools & Parenting Programs Director and a co-author of the report. "This includes reducing the stressors that young people are facing and helping them develop the skills they need to thrive."

The report is based on a mixed-methods study, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews, designed to help us better understand young people's perceptions and experiences surrounding their mental health. We used two well-known screening tools to assess anxiety and depression in the survey participants, the GAD-2 and PHQ-2 measures. NORC at the University of Chicago programmed and tested the surveys and used their AmeriSpeak® Panel to collect the data. Our surveys included 396 teens (14 - 17 years old), 709 young adults (18 - 25 years old), and 748 parents or caregivers living in the United States.

To read the full report and recommendations and learn more about Making Caring Common, visit www.makingcaringcommon.org.

About Making Caring Common: Making Caring Common (MCC), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), helps parents, educators, and communities raise children who are concerned about others and the common good, and who are committed to justice.