

Gen Z mental health: The impact of tech and social media

A new McKinsey Health Institute survey finds that Gen Z's social media engagement can feel negative but can also help with finding mental health support and connectivity.

by Erica Coe, Andrew Doy, Kana Enomoto, and Cheryl Healy



Much like many relationships a person might have between ages 18 and 24, the relationship a young person has with social media can be complicated. No matter where they live, respondents in a new global survey said social media usage can lead to a fear of missing out (FOMO) or poor body image, but it also can help with social connections and self-expression.

McKinsey Health Institute's (MHI's) 2022 Global Gen Z Survey asked more than 42,000 respondents in 26 countries across continents questions based on the four dimensions of health: mental, physical, social, and spiritual.¹ MHI then analyzed differences and similarities across generations and countries, with a hope of informing the broader dialogue around Gen Z mental health.

Gen Zers, on average, are more likely than other generations to cite negative feelings about social media.² They are also more likely to report having poor mental health. But correlation is not causation, and our data indicates that the relationship between social media use and mental health is complex. One surprise: Older generations' engagement with these platforms is on par with Gen Zers. For example, baby boomers in eight of the 26 countries surveyed report spending as much time on social media as Gen Zers, with millennials being the most likely to post. And while negative impacts of social media were reported across cohorts, positive effects were even more common—more than 50 percent of all groups cited self-expression and social connectivity as positives from social media.

More than 50 percent of all groups cited self-expression and social connectivity as positives from social media.

Methodology

To gain a better understanding of Gen Z in comparison with other generations, the McKinsey Health Institute conducted an internet-based survey in May 2022 in ten European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, and United Kingdom), with approximately 1,000 completes per country (including around 600 Gen Z). In August 2022, an additional 1,600 completes per country (including 600 Gen Z) were collected from 16 mostly non-European countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, United States, Vietnam). In total, the survey collected responses from 42,083 people, including 16,824 Gen Z individuals (mostly 18–24-year-olds and including a negligible minority of 13–17-year-old non-European respondents), 13,080 millennials (25–40 years old), 6,937 Gen Xers (41–56 years old), 5,119 baby boomers (57–75 years old), and 123 from the Silent Generation (76–93 years old).

Within each country, the survey applied weights to match the distribution of age cohorts, gender, and share of population with tertiary education in the sample to the country's national census. The sample was drawn from populations with access to the internet, which made the samples more representative of Gen Z respondents, in which nearly all individuals with access to the internet are active technology users; however, for other generations, this is less likely to be the case. This analysis reflects self-reported results in 2022.

Considerations for cross-generational surveys

The survey focused on how respondents—mainly Gen Z—were feeling at the time they were surveyed. Therefore, we cannot determine whether differences in answers between age cohorts are caused by an intrinsic change in attitudes and behaviors or are merely induced by age differences: it is possible that Gen Z will eventually think and behave like millennials, Gen X, or baby boomers, when they reach those ages.

¹ Participants were surveyed on the following nine key topics: overall health and well-being, mental health in the workplace, spiritual health and religion, social determinants of health, social media and digital health services, mental health service utilization, mental health among students, attitudes toward mental health, and global current events. As with all surveys, these data reflect a moment in time and MHI makes no long-term approximations about how these results will trend over time.

² Social media is defined here as apps to connect, potentially broadly, with other users. It does not include direct messaging apps.

There are also signs that technology provides access to supportive mental health resources for younger people. Gen Z respondents are more likely than other generations to use digital wellness apps and digital mental health programs.³ Additionally, respondents indicate that certain aspects of social media use can benefit their mental health, such as using social media for self-expression. Young refugees and asylum seekers are among those most likely to cite social media as a tool to stay connected and decrease loneliness.

In the six insights below, MHI delves deeper into the ways in which mental health, technology, and social media intersect for our respondents (see sidebar “Methodology” for further detail). This survey covered additional topics such as climate change and spiritual health (for selected insights, see sidebars “Climate change is a concern for many respondents” and “Gen Z and spiritual health: Insights”).

Methodology (continued)

Considerations for surveys conducted online

The survey was conducted online. Therefore, it may not accurately reflect the behaviors or attitudes of individuals who do not have reliable online access. This can be particularly significant in various aspects of life, given that the internet can have a profound impact on the information we access and how we process it.

Considerations for cross-country surveys

Cross-country, sociocultural differences can impact perceptions, scale usage, and affect other factors that may influence responses. However, we cannot automatically conclude that these differences are objective. For instance, the variations in answers on an agreement scale may be due to the respondent's inclination to agree or disagree and their propensity to choose extreme answers such as “strongly disagree” or “strongly agree.”

Although we relied on cultural experts and youth reviewers to ensure equivalence of meanings across languages during translations, some observed differences across countries may still be induced by the translations.

To measure country differences, we computed country averages and used them to calculate simple averages across countries. By doing so, we treated each country equally, regardless of its population size.

³ Digital wellness apps are defined as consumer-driven digital applications that aim to reduce stress, improve well-being and productivity, and address nonclinical conditions for consumers, focusing on topics such as meditation, sleep tracking, cognitive behavioral therapy, and fitness. Digital mental health programs are telehealth programs that offer remote appointments with a healthcare provider (for example, physician, therapist), either over video or phone.

Gen Z respondents report challenges with health across most dimensions

Although many individuals around the world are struggling with their health, there are meaningful differences within groups.

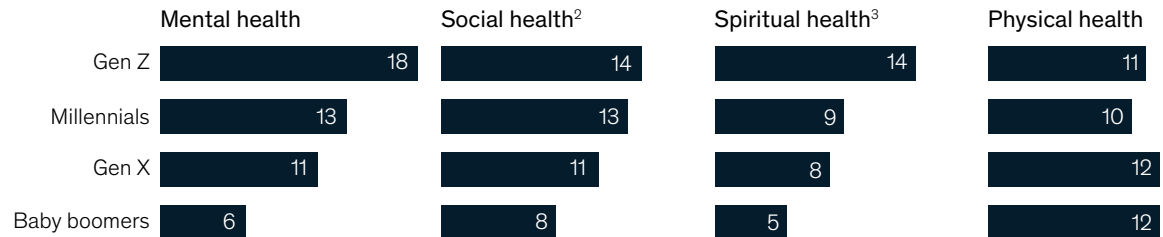
Globally, one in seven baby boomers say their mental health has declined over the past three years, compared with one in four Gen Z respondents. Female Gen Zers were almost twice as likely to report poor mental health when compared with their male counterparts (21 percent versus 13 percent, respectively).

In most surveyed countries, a higher proportion of Gen Z respondents said their mental health was poor or very poor when compared with other dimensions of health (16 percent in Gen Z and 7 percent for baby boomers). However, in China, Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam, Gen Z respondents reported that they struggled most with their social health. Overall, mental health experiences varied by region, with Gen Z participants in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Nigeria rating their mental health as “very good” with the highest frequencies.

While Gen Z tends to report worse mental health, the underlying cause is not clear. There are several age-specific factors that may impact Gen Z’s mental health independent of their generational cohort, including developmental stage, level of engagement with healthcare, and familial or societal attitudes.

A higher share of Gen Z survey respondents report poor mental, social, and spiritual health compared with other generations.

Share of respondents reporting their health as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ by dimension of health,¹ %



Note: Gen Z oversample; weighted by gender, age, and socioeconomic; dates fielded: May 5–June 27, 2022, for France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, and UK; and Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022, for other countries.

¹Question: Please rate your health across the following dimensions: social, mental, spiritual, physical. Respondents who answered “very good,” “good,” or “neutral” are not shown.

²Social health represents an individual’s ability to build healthy, nurturing, genuine, and supportive relationships. People in good social health have the capacity to form meaningful connections with others, to both receive and provide social support.

³Spiritual health enables people to integrate meaning in their lives. Spiritually healthy people have a strong sense of purpose. They feel a broad sense of connection to something larger than themselves, whether to a community, a calling, or to a form of divinity. We note that strong spiritual health does not necessarily imply the adoption of religious beliefs, in general, or any specific dogma.

Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Survey (2022) (n = 41,960)

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Almost everyone is using social media, but in different ways

More than 75 percent of respondents in all age groups said they use and check social media sites at least ten minutes a day.

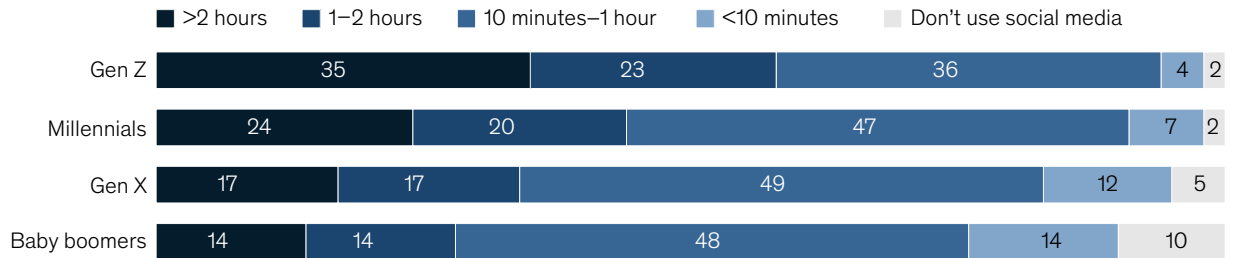
Younger generations tend to engage with social media regularly, in both active and passive ways. Almost half of both millennial and Gen Z respondents check social media multiple times a day. Over one-third of Gen Z respondents say they spend more than two hours each day on social media sites; however, millennials are the most active social media users, with 32 percent stating they post either daily or multiple times a day.

Whether less active social media use by Gen Z respondents could be related to greater caution and self-awareness among youth, reluctance to commit, or more comfort with passive social media use remains up for debate. Studies have shown that passive social media use (for example, scrolling) could be linked to declines in subjective well-being over time.⁴

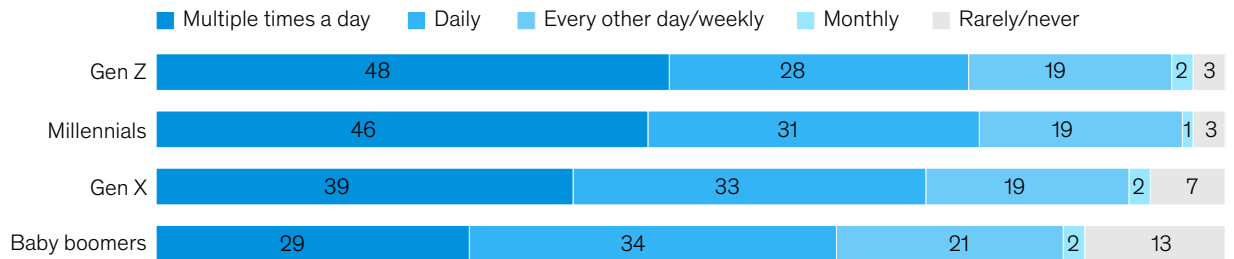
Everybody uses social media, but most Gen Z respondents spend at least one hour a day.

Social media habits by generation

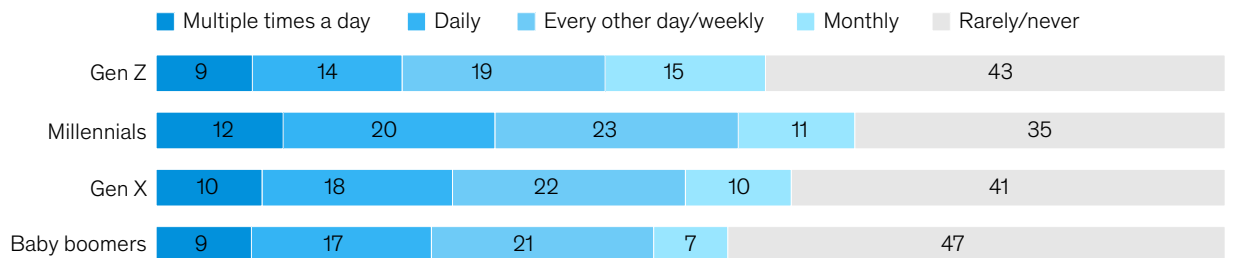
Time spent on social media daily,¹ % of respondents (n = 41,960)



Social media check-in frequency,² % of respondents who use social media (n = 40,684)



Social media posting frequency,³ % of respondents who use social media (n = 40,684)



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

¹Question: How much time, on average, do you spend on social media (not including messaging apps) each day?

²Question: How often do you check in on your social media accounts (not including messaging apps)?

³Question: How often do you post on your social media accounts (not including messaging apps)?

Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Survey (2022)

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⁴ Philippe Verduyn et al., "Passive Facebook usage undermines affective well-being: Experimental and longitudinal evidence," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 2015, Volume 144, Number 2.

Gen Zers and millennials are more likely than other generations to say social media affects their mental health

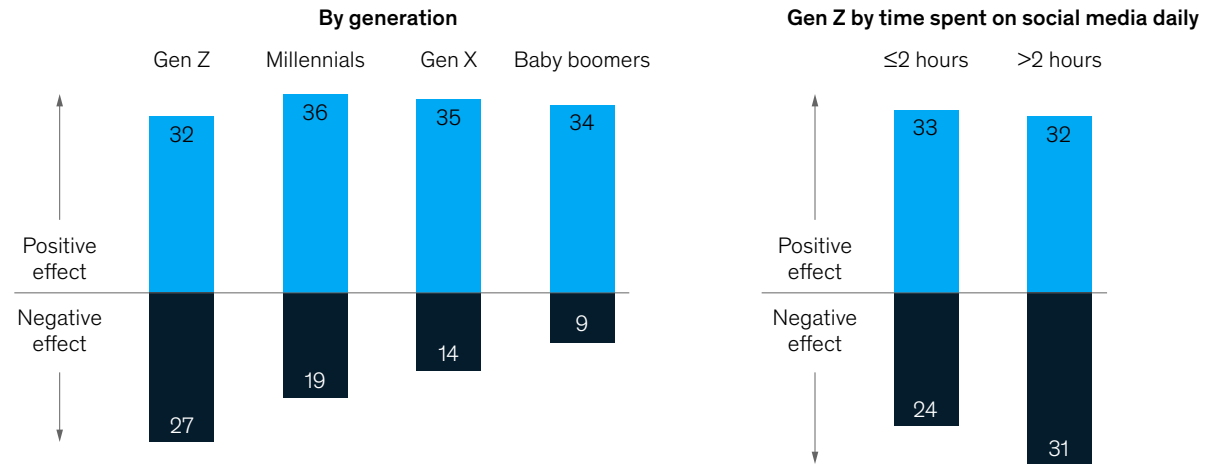
Studies of young adults and their social media use have shown an inverse relationship between screen time and psychological well-being,⁵ with higher utilization associated with poorer well-being. Other research indicates the nature of the relationship individuals have with social media can have a greater impact on their mental health than time spent.⁶

Our findings show a nuanced relationship between social media use and mental health. While around one-third of respondents across cohorts report positive impacts of social media on mental health, generations differ in reported negative impacts.

Negative effects seem to be greatest for younger generations, with particularly pronounced impacts for Gen Zers who spend more than two hours a day on social media and Gen Zers with poor mental health. Gen Z respondents from Europe and Oceania were most likely to report negative impacts from social media, and respondents from Asia were least likely (32 percent and 19 percent, respectively).⁷

While social media and tech have a consistent positive impact across all age cohorts, the negative impact increases substantially for younger ages.

Reported impact of technology and social media on mental health,¹ % of respondents



¹Question: How strongly do the following factors affect your mental health? Shown are the answers for "Technology and social media"; respondents who answered "does not affect my mental health" or "don't know/not applicable" are not shown.
Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Survey (2022) (n = 41,960)

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⁵ Jean Twenge et al., "Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study," *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 2018, Volume 12.

⁶ Mesfin A. Bekalu, Rachel F. McCloud, and K. Viswanath, "Association of social media use with social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health: Disentangling routine use from emotional connection to use," *Health Education & Behavior*, 2019, Volume 46, Number 2.

⁷ Participants were requested to rank 13 factors, including technology and social media, on how they perceive their impact on mental health. There is the possibility for varying interpretation of what classifies as negative or positive effects. Differences across generations and regions could be influenced in part by social media algorithms.

While the positive impact stays comparable, older generations report fewer negative effects

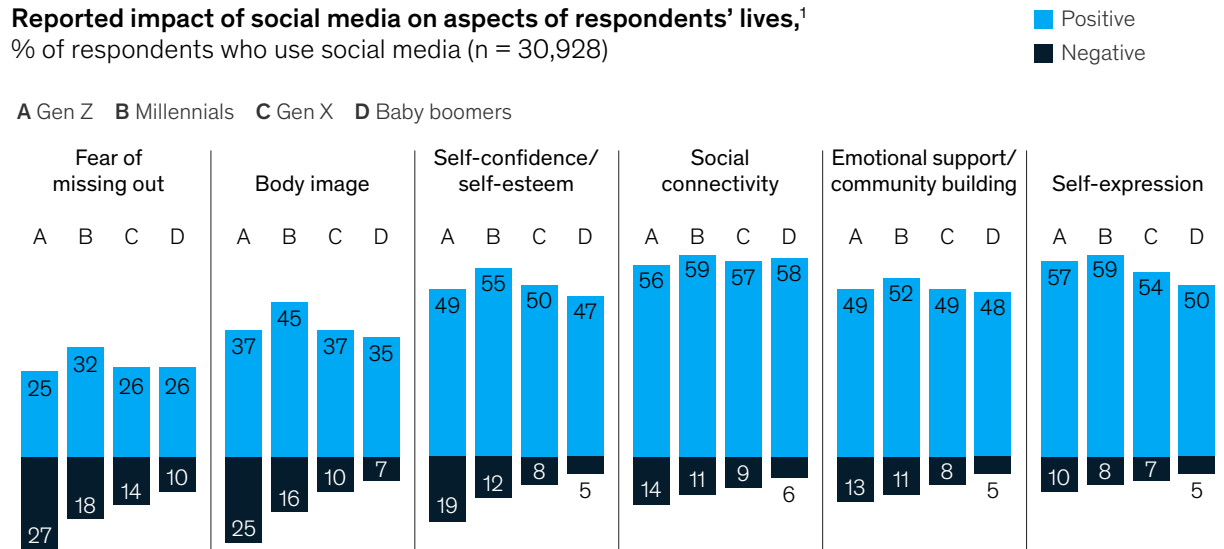
All generational cohorts in the survey said that social media use had the most positive impact on self-expression and social connectivity. Self-reported refugees and asylum seekers cite higher levels of positive impact than others across all aspects.

Across generations, there are more positive than negative impacts reported by respondents; however, the reported negative impact is higher for Gen Z. Respondents from high-income countries (as defined by World Bank) were twice as likely to report a negative impact of social media on their lives than respondents from lower-middle-income countries (13 percent compared with 7 percent).

When compared with their male counterparts, a higher proportion of female Gen Zers said social media had a negative impact on FOMO (32 percent versus 22 percent), body image (32 percent versus 16 percent), and self-confidence (24 percent versus 13 percent).

Respondents' assessment of the impact of social media ranges substantially depending on the dimension.

Reported impact of social media on aspects of respondents' lives,¹
% of respondents who use social media (n = 30,928)



Note: Gen Z oversample (covers ages 13–24); weighted by gender, age, and socioeconomic; dates fielded: Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022, for Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, UAE, US, and Vietnam.
¹ Respondents who answered “no effect” are not shown.
Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Survey (2022)

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Positive aspects of technology may include increased access to health resources

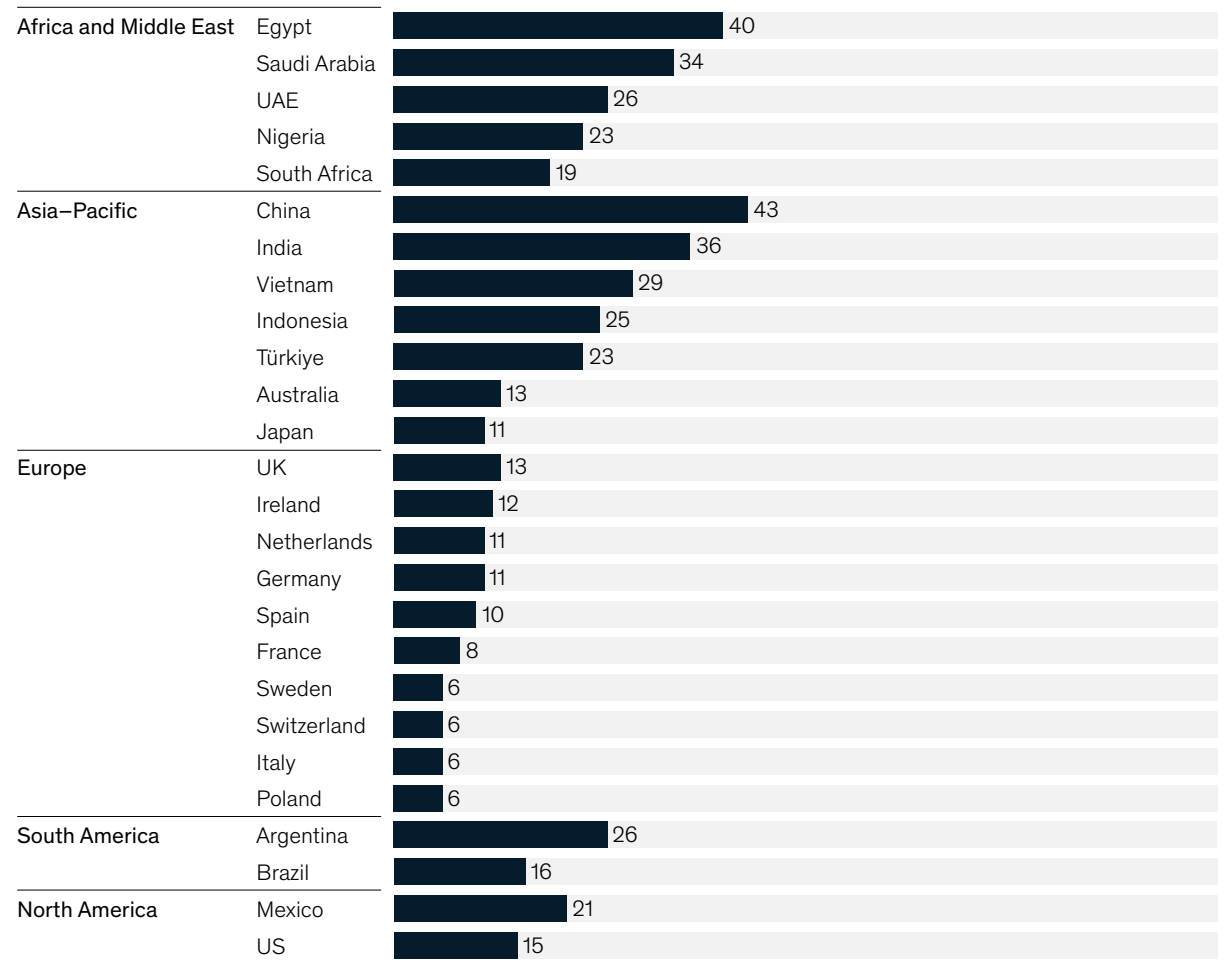
Across generations, more than one in four respondents report using digital wellness apps as compared with one out of five using digital mental health programs (28 percent compared with 19 percent, respectively). Fifty percent more Gen Z respondents reported using digital mental health programs than Gen X or baby boomers (22 percent for Gen Z versus 15 percent for Gen X and baby boomers).

Among those respondents who report using digital mental health programs, most Gen Zers say they would likely keep using them (65 percent); other generations are even more committed, with 74 percent reporting that they would likely continue to use the programs. Four out of five respondents across all generations report that these programs benefit their mental health.

While evaluation of outcomes and effectiveness requires continued study, digital health resources may play an important role in supporting mental health globally, especially when in-person resources are limited or geographically inaccessible. For certain populations, digital health resources could be the preferred method of obtaining support.

Respondents' use of digital mental-health programs varies widely.

Reported use of digital mental-health programs in the past 12 months, % of respondents (n = 41,960)



Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Survey (2022)

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Most find help on their own or by referral

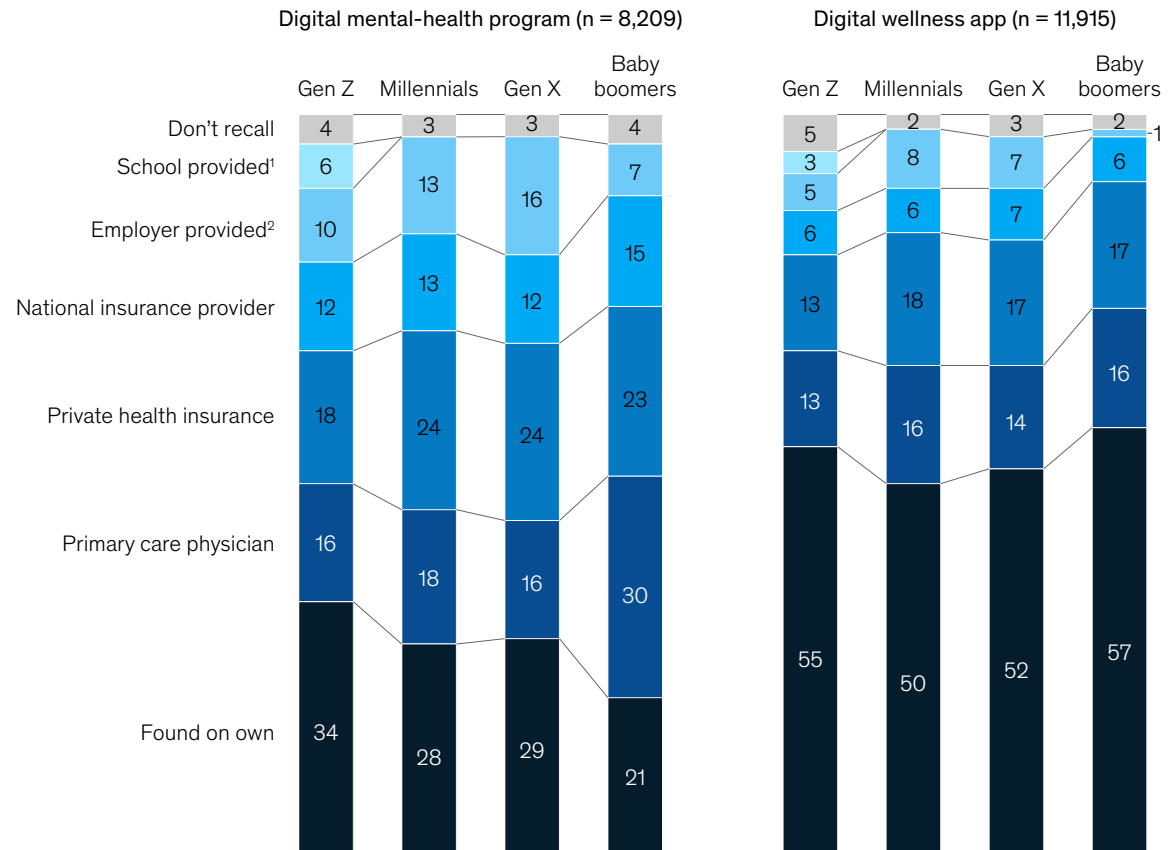
Thirty-four percent of Gen Z respondents who use digital mental health programs and apps say they found them on their own. This proportion increases to approximately 50 percent in Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa. In other countries, primary care physicians and healthcare payers (insurance plans) were listed as primary access points to digital mental health programs.

No matter the geography, employers have growing opportunities to promote workplace well-being and ensure employees have access to the evidence-based mental health resources they need.

At least a third of respondents in most countries and generational cohorts said physical, mental, social, and spiritual health resources were important or very important in choosing an employer, and Gen Z gave particular weight to mental health resources. Given that Gen Z is a growing percentage of the workforce, and that few Gen Z respondents cited employers as a primary access point for help, there may be room for employers to further engage around mental health in the future.

While respondents find digital wellness apps mostly on their own, referrals remain important for digital mental-health programs.

Source of access to digital mental-health programs and digital wellness apps,
% of respondents who accessed service in past 12 months



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

¹Option only suggested to respondents who answered that they were students to the question: "What is your current employment status?"

²Option only suggested to respondents who answered that they were working to the question: "What is your current employment status?"

Source: McKinsey Health Institute Gen Z Brain Health Survey, 2022

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Technology and social media can be a part of the solution

Social media and technology, while part of the broader dialogue around youth mental health, can be powerful tools in promoting well-being and offering scaled mental health support. For example, developers might consider embedding algorithms that make it easier for youth expressing psychological distress to find support groups, crisis hotlines, or emergency mental health services. Additionally, digital mental health companies could consider partnering with virtual and community-based providers to connect people with high-acuity needs to timely and culturally-appropriate crisis services.

Around the world, communities are struggling to provide young people with someone to call, someone to respond, or a safe place to get help during mental health, substance use, and/or suicidal crises. The availability of crisis supports globally is varied, with the majority of countries having no national suicide or mental health crisis line. In addition, communities in every geography lack adequate community mental health services infrastructure to respond to the volume of crises young people experience each year, instead relying on schools, emergency rooms, hospitals, law enforcement, or families to bridge a gap that could save lives and livelihoods. Dispatching specially trained mobile teams or providing a safe place to go in crisis is even more rare—a gap that technology could bridge.

Collaboration between technology companies, mental health professionals, educators, employers, policy makers, and the wider community is necessary. By prioritizing mental health and utilizing technology in a positive way, young people are more likely to achieve and sustain better health. Other strategies that could be considered include using social media to build supportive online communities for affinity groups and promoting youth leaders to create and disseminate content that promotes mental health.⁸ Researchers and companies can explore evidence-based strategies such as mental health promotion and

Climate change is a concern for many respondents

Climate change appears to be a major concern across generations: in the McKinsey Health Institute 2022 Global Gen Z Survey, more than half of respondents across all age groups reported feeling highly distressed when asked about climate change, with females reporting a higher percentage compared with males. Many Gen Z respondents reported experiencing stress, sadness, anger, and frustration due to climate change and its related disasters. More than 50 percent of total respondents expressed fear and anxiety about the future, with Gen Z demonstrating greater concern than other generations. More than 50 percent of all respondents agree or strongly agree that “government leaders and companies have failed to take care of the planet.”

This fear is not purely existential about the fate of the world or “eco-anxiety,” but instead is often rooted in specific environmental risks that may impact their direct day-to-day livelihoods. When asked about which statements related to climate change resonated with them, 33 percent agree or strongly agree that climate change poses a threat to their family’s physical or financial security. Individuals with self-reported poor mental health are more likely to feel affected by climate change, with 67 percent of Gen Z in this group stating that the future is “frightening” when looking at climate change, compared with 47 percent of Gen Z with neutral or good mental health.

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of mental health and climate change threats and related disruptions, there are no simple answers to the challenges they pose. There is an opportunity for further understanding of how experiences and attitudes around climate change may be influenced by political and ecological factors. However, in order to help young people navigate these issues, healthcare providers, educators, and parents can take a proactive approach by exploring these topics through targeted questioning and solution-oriented discussions. By encouraging young people to think critically about mental health and climate change, the focus can become empowerment and active role-playing to promote personal well-being, climate resilience, and the health of the planet.

⁸ Mizuko Ito, Candice Odgers, and Stephen Schueller, *Social media and youth wellbeing: What we know and where we could go*, Connected Learning Alliance, June 2020.

mindfulness programs to mitigate the negative effects of social media and to help young people use social media as a platform for authentic self-expression.⁹

A “precision prevention” approach to talking with young people about the role of technology in their lives may help create a more informed, supportive, and healthful environment. By providing parents, educators, and healthcare professionals with these tools, they can become actively engaged in promoting the health of Gen Z and beyond. While addressing these issues may seem overwhelming, it is essential that stakeholders work together to help improve the mental health of young people.

MHI is an enduring, non-profit-generating global entity within McKinsey. MHI strives to catalyze actions across continents, sectors, and communities to achieve material improvements in health, empowering people to lead their best possible lives. MHI sees supporting youth mental health as essential to adding years to life and life to years.

If you would like to learn more about the McKinsey Health Institute (MHI) 2022 Global Gen Z survey and the additional data and insights the McKinsey Health Institute has from the survey, please submit an inquiry via the MHI “contact us” form. The McKinsey Health Institute, as a non-profit-generating entity of McKinsey, is creating avenues for further research that can catalyze action.

Gen Z and spiritual health: Insights

According to the McKinsey Health Institute 2022 Global Gen Z survey, those between the ages of 18 and 24 report poorer spiritual health than older generations, with Gen Z respondents almost three times more likely than baby boomers to report poor or very poor spiritual health.

Spiritual health enables people to integrate meaning in their lives. Spiritually healthy people have a strong sense of purpose. While people who are experiencing poor mental health could have good spiritual health, or vice versa, Gen Z individuals who experienced poor mental health were five times more likely to report poor spiritual health than those with neutral or good mental health.

Responses varied widely by country, both in terms of overall ratings of spiritual health and in respondents' perceived importance of spiritual health. For example, there was a 48-point range across countries in respondents indicating that spiritual health was “extremely important” to them. While 8 percent of total respondents in the Netherlands said spiritual health was “extremely important” to them, 56 percent of total respondents in Brazil said the same. Respondents in higher-income countries were half as likely to indicate spiritual health is “extremely important” to them versus lower-middle-income countries (23 percent versus 43 percent).

Respondents in Africa and South America were most likely to report that spiritual health was extremely important to them (46 percent and 41 percent, respectively); respondents in Europe were least likely (18 percent).

Given these data, it's clear that spiritual health matters to young people around the world, and there may be important links to overall well-being. People seeking to support the mental health and psychological resilience of young people may want to inquire about how they are finding purpose in their homes, families, and at work.

⁹ Julia Brailovskaia and Jürgen Margraf, “Positive mental health and mindfulness as protective factors against addictive social media use during the COVID-19 outbreak,” *PLOS One*, 2022, Volume 17, Number 11.

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