

Gen Z Feels Disconnected During Online Work, Worship, and School—But They’re Hopeful

Springtide™ Research Institute Data Reveal That Young People Feel Disconnected in Virtual Environments—But Are Willing to Invest in Building Meaningful Online Spaces

Gatherings that traditionally take place in person are, and have been, moving online. COVID-19 has accelerated this phenomenon and made the debate about how and whether to meet for school, work, or worship heated and difficult.

A new survey from Springtide asked young people ages 13 to 25 about their recent experiences in virtual environments and what they want out of future online gatherings.

Young People Are Gathering Online

As recently as June of this year,



21%
of young people have been in virtual
environments for religious gatherings.

32%
had gathered remotely with friends.

Others added that they had participated in workout classes, therapy sessions, doctor appointments, committee meetings, and even weddings online.

But They Aren't Feeling Connected

Despite the now-common experience of these activities happening virtually, Springtide data reveals that young people are experiencing a disconnect online.

61%

of young people said they felt disconnected from people in a virtual setting.

47%

of young people said that they didn't feel heard or listened to in a virtual environment.

57%

of young people said that they didn't feel like they could ask questions of authority figures in these spaces.

This sense of disconnection is more pronounced for 13-to-17-year-olds, with 65% saying they feel disconnected in virtual settings. Fifty-nine percent of 18-to-25-year-olds feel the same way. The sense of not feeling heard is less pronounced for 13-to-17-year-olds, with 41% saying they don't feel heard. Fifty percent of 18-to-25-year-olds tell us they don't feel heard.

In an interview with Springtide, Holly, age 20, spoke about difficulties of suddenly switching to virtual learning and working when coronavirus first required sheltering in place:

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Right now I'm interning with a public accounting firm. I would have spent the summer in the city, but they just moved it all remote. So I'm just doing it from my home. I would have been at an audit—I would have been interacting with clients, and there would have been social interactions. But just being in the basement of my house is like a full 180. Now you just talk to people over like Zoom or Teams. It's all like screen stuff. So that's been like a difficult adjustment. But I've been getting through the best I can.

Holly, 20

Religious Communities, Schools, and Workplaces Have Work to Do

In the shift to virtual environments, young people have felt a loss, especially with respect to religious community. They don't feel connected, listened to, or sure about how to recreate certain relational dynamics, like asking questions in virtual environments. This loss is felt keenly among those hoping to connect with their faith communities online. Leah, age 20, says:

“ I've been watching sermons online, which is good, but obviously not the same as if I was going to church.

Leah, 20

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67%

said they would learn to adjust to the virtual setting if they had to.

A horizontal bar chart with a light green bar extending to the left of a central box containing the number '47%'. A light grey bar extends to the right of the central box.

47%

said they would be fine if their school experience remained in a virtual environment.

It will be hard work to build connection and effective learning, especially in educational digital spaces. But the work won't be in vain: Young people are willing to invest in these spaces for the long term.

Not only are young people willing to invest in and commit to creating meaningful virtual environments, they also see opportunities among some of the losses. Brianna, age 23, told Springtide about her experience of connecting with her faith in an online setting:

“ I find meaning through my church community, and it’s definitely a different sense of community given the times we’re in and how we’re finding meaning. There’s something to be said about physically being with people, but COVID-19 has also opened up opportunities to connect with people virtually or on the phone that I haven’t connected with in a while. So, building and strengthening a community that exists, I see as an opportunity.

Brianna, 23

“The data are clear. Virtual environments can be meaningful spaces for young people, and it is increasingly important that they are. However, the data also show that online school, religious services, workplaces, etc. are currently falling short,” adds Dr. Josh Packard, Executive Director of Springtide. “We need more intentional connection and relationship building to make these virtual environments truly meaningful and productive in the lives of young people. This work is more crucial now than ever.”

This important study can be found on Springtide Research Institute’s website: www.springtidresearch.org.

Springtide Research Institute is a sociological research institute listening to the inner and outer lives of young people ages 13 to 25. Amplifying young people’s lived experiences through unbiased research and the generation of evidence-based actionable insights, we seek to help those who care about young people, care better.