

 THE SPRINGTIDE SERIES
ON MENTAL HEALTH

THE NEW NORMAL

UPDATED & EXPANDED

10 Ways to Care for Gen Z
in a Post-Pandemic World

Springtide
RESEARCH INSTITUTE®




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INTRODUCTION

ENTERING YEAR THREE

In March 2020, the first month of lockdown related to the threat of COVID-19 in the United States, Springtide Research Institute® conducted a study of over 500 young people ages 18 to 25, asking about their experiences and expectations about what was to come. In February 2021, a year into living in lockdown, we checked in with young people again, broadening our reach to include ages 13 to 25. The data and insights that emerged from that study were published in our original edition of *The New Normal: 8 Ways to Care for Gen Z in a Post-Pandemic World*.

In that report, we asked young people about their experiences, how they processed losses and gains, and what they expected from life on the other side of the pandemic. But the other side didn't come. Even with vaccines becoming widely available in the United States, declines in transmission at the time of publication,

and well-known mitigation strategies in place, new variants of COVID-19 emerged; seasons of relative safety continued to fluctuate with seasons of increased risk through 2021 and into 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic will be the most formative and defining aspect of many young people's lives. While we wish we weren't writing a report on data entering its third year, we recognize how important it is to continue paying attention to the ways this pandemic is impacting this chapter of young people's lives—*especially when it comes to their mental health*.

We can imagine a post-pandemic world, and maybe in some places we are beginning to live differently than we've had to in the past two years. But it will take time, and different populations will emerge from or shed the practices (and fears and protocols) of pandemic living at different paces and in different ways.


NOT BACK TO NORMAL

For young people between the ages of 13 and 25, it's not uncommon for every year to be different from the one before; in this sense, there's really no "normal" to return to after the pandemic. Their world turned upside down just as they were starting to find their footing.

We can begin to imagine that for young people, these years of their lives are not opportunities and events delayed, like an adult returning to a well-known office at a steady job. In many instances, young people are missing entire developmental markers and moments, formative and singular events that in many cases cannot be easily made up for or replaced. And often, these losses are coupled and magnified by a loss of support systems, the kind that would normally help them move forward in times of uncertainty or growth. **In essence, the pandemic has not been a speed bump in their life. It has been a sudden and dramatic left turn.**

Caring for young people after these years of grief, trauma, upheaval, and uncertainty is a crucial and delicate calling. But as we enter year three of the pandemic, their mental health is at stake. Religious and faith leaders are part of the hope that's on the horizon as we begin to consider a post-pandemic world.

This updated and expanded guide is an invitation to rethink what can be shed, what can be kept, and how to begin exploring best practices for caring for young people—especially young people's mental health—after years of their adolescence and young adulthood have been compromised by the ongoing pandemic.







THE DATA: ***GEN Z'S MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC***



The Data

Gen Z's Mental & Spiritual Health during the Pandemic

Without qualification, mental health is the story to pay attention to in young people's lives two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. Staggering numbers tell us that young people are depressed, stressed, and lonely—though for those of faith, religion and spirituality provide healing and hope.

It is no secret now that young people maintain a tenuous relationship with American institutions. Despite the efforts of two presidential administrations, young people trusted the government very little to keep them safe during the pandemic, and far more young people now say they trust the government less than more. Faith communities, by comparison, are now more trustworthy than less so according to young people. And when it comes to young people's mental health, this trust is all-important.

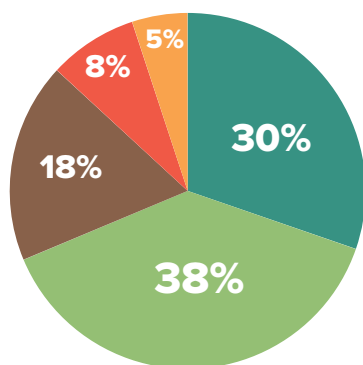
The first part of *The New Normal, Updated & Expanded* provides religious and faith leaders with a view into what young people are thinking and experiencing. The second part offers practical guidance on how to best care for young people as the pandemic enters a new stage and as the possibility of a post-pandemic world emerges. To start, we need to look at the big trends going on for young people—particularly in their mental health and spiritual lives—as they brace themselves for whatever year three of the pandemic might bring.



The pandemic has exacerbated an already critically important issue in the lives of young people today: their mental health. Many health organizations are calling the mental health crisis an epidemic. Springtide is dedicated to exploring proactive ways to meet the mental-health needs of young people before their concerns become crises. Learn more about *The Springtide Series on Mental Health*, including our forthcoming reports and guides on schools, religious settings, workplaces, and homes, as well as our podcast, blog posts, and other resources: springtideresearch.org/gen-z-mental-health

During the pandemic, more young people grew in their faith.

More young people told Springtide that their faith became stronger during the pandemic (30%) than weaker (18%) or lost completely (8%). This includes a growing number of young people who agree with the statement “I know a higher power exists, and I have no doubts about it” (22% in 2021 and 28% in 2022) and a higher percentage who say they feel “highly connected” to a higher power (13% in 2021 and 18% in 2022). Conversely, the proportion of those who say they “don’t feel connected at all” to a higher power dropped from 36% in 2021 to 27% in 2022.



Since the pandemic, has your faith . . . ?

- Become stronger
- Stayed the same
- Become weaker
- Lost my faith altogether
- Begun or converted to a new faith





THE ACTIONS: *CONTINUING CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN A PANDEMIC*

The Actions

Continuing Care for Young People in a Pandemic

In our conversations around mental health, we asked young people what they think of when they think of “home.” The most popular response was “a safe haven” (61%), a markedly higher percentage than those who say it’s “the place where I keep my belongings” (46%) or “the place where my loved ones are” (40%).

How can you be a safe haven for the young people in your life as they face an uncertain future and process a tumultuous few years?

Understand where they’re at.

Springtide’s data reveal where young people are at as they process and move through the difficulties and delights of these years in the pandemic. But our data is just a jumping-off point. Young people will be processing difficult things at different paces, which means you also need to tune into the young people in your life in intentional ways. Part of being tuned in is expressing care.



Nearly 8 in 10 young people agree with the statement ***“I am more likely to listen to adults in my life if I know they care about me.”***

Showing care can be as simple as listening, being a consistent presence, or sharing from your own experiences. The most important thing is to communicate care for young people as individuals, not assuming you know where they’re at without asking.

Exercise empathy.

Empathy is the ability to enter into the experience of another person and adopt a tender sensitivity to their world—feelings, ideas, and values—even if you don’t naturally experience those things in the same ways. Understanding where you’re at in the work of processing the upheaval of the pandemic is an important first step in responding with empathy to the experiences of others.

Young people will look to you as a model for how to feel safe, grieve, celebrate, resist comparison, and more. If you're struggling to do those things yourself, you'll struggle to extend those things to a young person navigating them for the first time.

Though the most prevalent feeling among young people in 2022 is hope (34%), numerous young people also say they're feeling uncertain (33%), isolated (21%), and trapped (21%). As religious and cultural leaders, you have an opportunity to rebuild trust and help stoke the small glimmer of hope young people admit having at this point. In each of the tips we offer in the following section of *The New Normal, Updated & Expanded*, we invite you to reflect on where you're at in practical ways. You can modify these same prompts to use with the young people in your life, practicing what you preach, and modeling what you offer. These exercises in empathy are key to making sure your care for young people in an ongoing pandemic is as effective and meaningful as possible.

1.

Create Safety to help young people regain their footing.

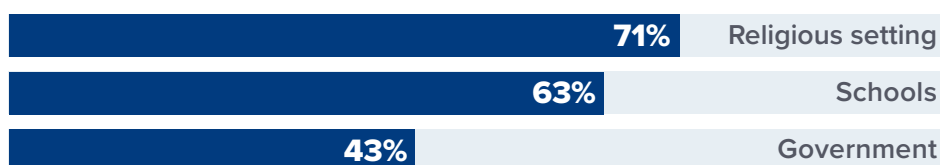
Uncertainty is about unsure footing. Safety is about making someone who stands on unstable ground feel confident taking a step, even when the next step might be equally as unsure as the first. We spoke with a practitioner trained in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) who works with at-risk teens and children in a ministry context, and we asked her about the importance of creating safety. “The brain in trauma,” she explained, “is in flight, fight, or freeze mode. Asking a young person who’s in a state of heightened uncertainty something as simple as ‘*how are you?*’ is practically unanswerable when the brain is in this mode. It’s like asking someone running a marathon to solve an algebra equation. The brain just can’t do both.”

Creating safety, then, is about helping a young person move from *fight, flight, or freeze* to (in Springtide’s language) breathe and be. Only from that space of breathing and being, finally calm and safe enough to take a break from “survival mode,” can they do the more internal work of unpacking, processing, and sharing about themselves.

While a sense of relative safety has increased in the past two years, many young people are hesitant to say the spaces they show up in on a regular basis are helping to keep them safe. Top among the spaces that young people *do* feel safe when they show up, however, are religious settings. Seven in ten young people (71%) agree that their place of worship did a good job keeping them safe from COVID-19, compared to 63% who agree that their school did, and 43% who agree that the government did.

This space did a good job keeping me safe from the coronavirus:

Young people who agree or strongly agree





With a special focus on mental health, *The New Normal, Updated & Expanded* can help you and the young people in your life process the events of the last two years and prepare for what's ahead. The bottom line? New approaches to your care, ministry, or advocacy with young people are needed for these ongoing events.

You simply cannot return to normal. 



The New Normal

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