

The State of Religion & Young People **Mental Health**

What *Faith Leaders* Need to Know

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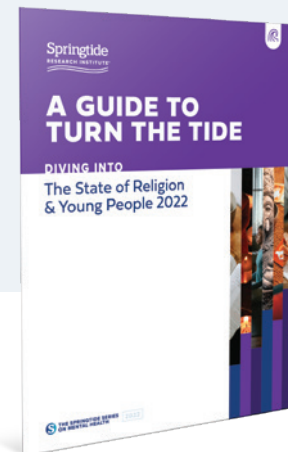
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Interested in reflecting on this report with more depth and guidance? *Diving into The State of Religion & Young People 2022: A Guide to Turn the Tide* presents a series of reflections and prompts designed to be used by individuals or small groups, or as the foundation for large-group workshops and conversations on the journey through *The State of Religion & Young People 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know*.



“And their concern is warranted. Mental health, it turns out, is the biggest issue to address in order to do ministry that matters for young people.”

—Josh Packard, PhD



From Springtide’s Executive Director

I have had the opportunity to give dozens of presentations about Springtide’s research over the last three years. When I field questions after these talks, whether in person or in virtual settings, the most common one I hear isn’t directly about young people’s faith lives. What people are most concerned about is young people’s mental health.

And their concern is warranted. Mental health, it turns out, is the biggest issue to address in order to do ministry that matters for young people.

Addressing mental-health issues in faith-based settings can be complex. Those who care about young people are compelled to care about their mental-health needs amid the ongoing national mental-health crisis. The good news is that decades of sociological research, confirmed by our own in this report, demonstrates that faith, religion, and spirituality can be strong antidotes to much of what contributes to mental-health struggles among young people. Our data clearly show that young people who are religious are better off mentally and emotionally.

At the same time, we also know that the solutions to mental-health struggles are more complicated than just “give young people more religion.” The reality is that without addressing mental-health issues, a young person who is mentally and emotionally unwell won’t be able to really engage with or understand the depth, beauty, power, awe, and love that can come with religion and spirituality. As Jeff Neel, the Executive Director of Northern Colorado Youth for Christ, puts it, “Young people have to heal and belong before they can hear and believe.”

In this report, and in our ongoing *Springtide Series on Mental Health*, we offer a framework that enables trusted adults to both meet the immediate needs of young people and transform institutions to better serve them over the long run. I am really proud of this work. If we can create connections, align tools with expectations, and help young people develop a sense of purpose—if we can create organizations that are mental-health friendly—then we can improve the mental health of young people and strengthen their faith lives, religious lives, and spiritual lives. If the data in this report show anything, it's that the pursuit of mental health is not separate from the development of a vibrant and flourishing faith and spiritual life.

As faith leaders, you must be equipped to address both.

With this report, you can be.



Josh Packard, PhD

A stylized, handwritten signature of Josh Packard in black ink.

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Watch Dr. Josh Packard introduce *The Springtide Series on Mental Health*.



WATCH



PART I MENTAL HEALTH & GEN Z

Welcome to *The State of Religion & Young People 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know*. This is Springtide's flagship annual report on the religious lives of young people ages 13 to 25. For this report, nearly 10,000 young people answered survey questions about their beliefs, practices, behaviors, relationships, and this year's focus: their mental health. In addition, over 100 young people participated in interviews about the same themes, providing the depth and nuance that emerges only through conversation.

Springtide's commitment to listening to young people extends beyond quantitative and qualitative research. Many more young people contribute in substantial ways, including through the Springtide Ambassadors Program, *The Voices of Young People Podcast*, internships, fellowships, and more. To learn more about Springtide's research methodology, including the Data with Heart™ approach to sociology, see pages 94–95 in this report.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children’s Hospital Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry have declared the mental-health crisis among young people in the United States a national emergency. Our data reflect this urgency.

In data collected at the two-year mark of the pandemic, nearly half of young people (47%) told Springtide that they are moderately or extremely depressed, while over half of young people say they are moderately or extremely anxious (55%) or moderately or extremely stressed (57%). Forty-five percent report being moderately or extremely lonely. Sadly, the majority of young people (61%) agree with the statement “The adults in my life don’t truly know how much I am struggling with my mental health.”

The current response to this mental-health crisis emphasizes the essential work of meeting immediate needs of young people. For long-term change, however, more is needed. Young people need environments that help them develop healthy minds and prevent crisis in the first place.

Mental-health initiatives today center largely on the individual and the psychological: What can *you* be doing differently to improve *your* mental health? This is both good and necessary to help curb the epidemic, but the structural factors that affect mental well-being also need attention: What can we do, as groups and organizations acting within systems and structures, to improve the mental health of all young people? *What qualities make youth-serving organizations mental-health friendly?* Springtide findings show that young people themselves see this need, as comments by Noah, 24, illustrate: “Don’t just tell people to make individual changes. . . . There need to be big structural changes.” Young people expect that the adults who care for them will demonstrate that care not just in interpersonal ways but also by attending to the structures that might help or harm their mental health.

47%

of young people say they are **moderately or extremely depressed.**

55%

of young people say they are **moderately or extremely anxious.**

57%

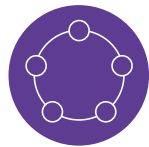
of young people say they are **moderately or extremely stressed.**

45%

of young people say they are **moderately or extremely lonely.**

This year Springtide has been working to identify the qualities of organizations that are mental-health friendly and to help leaders understand and develop these qualities where they are lacking. We turned to decades of sociological research and found three all-important qualities of organizations that are mental-health friendly: They enable **social connections**, they **align tools with expectations**, and they help young people develop **a sense of purpose**.

Religious organizations that create connection, encourage healthy approaches to expectations, and help young people discover a sense of purpose are highly likely to succeed at promoting the mental health and flourishing of young people.



CONNECTION is about relationships. Strong connections lead to a sense of belonging. Our data show that for young people, sensing that they are noticed, feeling that they are named, and being known correlate with having a sense of belonging. And belonging correlates with mental wellness. Helping young people make connections that lead to belonging within their spiritual and religious communities is a proactive way to mitigate mental illness. Our data here have uncovered some ways to accomplish this.

Young people who report they are currently connected to a religious community are more likely to tell us they are flourishing in their mental health than those who are not connected to a religious community.



EXPECTATIONS are the standards that young people feel pressure to meet or exceed in order to succeed and feel accepted. In religious contexts, there are often implicit and explicit narratives about who and how to be, and how to believe, practice, and participate--and those expectations are often tied to morality, ethics, and the afterlife. When religious expectations are unachievable, unclear, or unfair, some young people will judge themselves negatively, causing their mental health to suffer.

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Watch Marte Aboagye and Vanessa Trine, Internal Family Systems therapist and creator of *Support Deck*, discuss support strategies for use with young people.



WATCH

Some may walk away from the religious organization that makes them or their peers feel inadequate. Our data show that having the right tools—and employing them as religious leaders and offering them to young people—helps create relationships of trust and clear opportunities to participate in meaningful ways.

Young people who tell us their place of worship or spiritual community expects things of them that are both challenging and good are more likely to report they are flourishing in their mental health than those whose spiritual community does not set expectations.



PURPOSE is the domain of religion and spirituality. For this report, we use the term *purpose* to refer to a sense of connection with something or someone bigger than oneself. Purpose is a mode of self-transcendence that can have several vehicles and several ends, depending on the tradition or the participant. Though fewer young people turn to traditional institutional religion as a one-stop shop for their purpose seeking, they nonetheless need religious and spiritual leaders to guide and accompany them.

The mental-health crisis is related, at least in part, to a growing sense of isolation among Gen Z, a society-wide disconnect between expectations and tools for flourishing, and the rising need to support young people in their purpose seeking—both inside and outside the walls of institutional religion. Religious and spiritual leaders can help young people make connections that lead to belonging and help align expectations with tools, but they are *especially* well-positioned to guide young people in their pursuit of purpose. If religious leaders focus on incorporating the qualities around connection, expectations, and purpose into their religious organizations, they can help turn the tide on this mental-health epidemic.

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Watch Marte Aboagye talk with Eunice Nichols, Vice President of Innovation at Encore, about bringing older and younger generations together to solve society's greatest challenges.

WATCH

“Young people who tell us that their lives are connected to a larger sense of purpose through God, religion or spirituality, a higher power, or something outside themselves are more likely to tell us they are flourishing in their mental health than those whose lives are not connected to a larger sense of purpose.”





KEY FINDINGS

What You'll Find

The data presented in this section is intended to offer faith leaders a sense of the big picture—larger trends that shed light on the religious and spiritual lives of young people at a time when so many report struggling with their mental health.

||| One: Young People & Mental Health

The mental-health crisis has reached epidemic proportions. While a third of all young people tell us they are not flourishing when it comes to their mental and emotional well-being, more than half of nonbinary young people tell us that. But we know that religion and spirituality help—and they can help all young people.

||| Two: Religious Identity & Mental Health

Young people are exploring religion and spirituality differently than previous generations. Even those who are highly religious or spiritual don't necessarily identify with a particular tradition or institution. Increasingly, they feel they can fit in with, or appreciate, several. Whether a young person participates in a single religious tradition or draws from several, we know that those who identify as religious or spiritual—however expressed—are more likely to tell us they are flourishing in their mental health.



■ ■ ■ **Three: Religious Beliefs & Mental Health**

Religious beliefs and values sustain young people. But beliefs don't necessarily translate to a sense of purpose or calling, and belief in a higher power doesn't automatically mean feeling connected to that higher power. Still, feeling connected to the divine or letting core beliefs guide daily life correlates to greater flourishing when it comes to young people's mental health.

■ ■ ■ **Four: Religious Practices & Mental Health**

Young people are taking up spiritual and religious practices—though not always traditional practices. Despite a majority of young people telling us they are religious or spiritual, many don't pray or attend religious services regularly. Those who do, however, show greater signs of mental and emotional flourishing.

■ ■ ■ **Five: Relationships & Mental Health**

By and large, young people are not participating consistently in religious or spiritual communities, whether online or in person, though some categories of young people (based on age, race, etc.) are slightly more likely than others to be members. Consistent participation in religious or spiritual communities is related to greater mental flourishing.

For more breakdowns of data based on race, gender, present religion, and region, scan or click the QR code.



DATA



KEY FINDINGS—ONE Young People & Mental Health

The mental-health crisis has reached epidemic proportions. While a third of all young people tell us they are not flourishing when it comes to their mental and emotional well-being, nonbinary young people express the same at a rate of over 50%. But we know that religion and spirituality help—and they can help all young people.



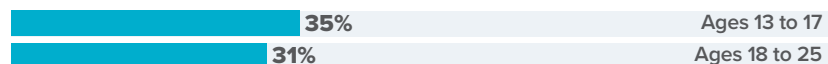
SPRINGTIDE NATIONAL RESEARCH RESULTS

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and join the conversation at
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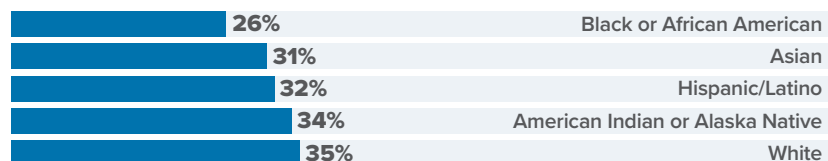
A third of young people say they are not flourishing in their mental and emotional health.

THIS INCLUDES . . .

Young people who told us they are “not flourishing,” by age:



Young people who told us they are “not flourishing,” by race:



Young people who told us they are “not flourishing,” by gender:



More than half of all nonbinary young people tell us they are not flourishing in their mental and emotional health, compared to about 1 in 4 male-identifying young people and 1 in 3 female-identifying young people.

Being religious or spiritual helps mental health—even for those who are struggling the most.

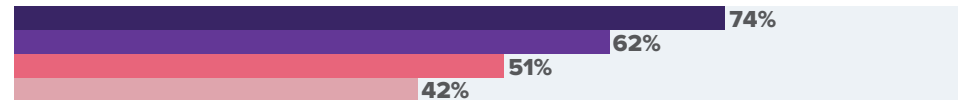
Among those nonbinary young people who say they are not spiritual, only 11% say they are “flourishing a lot” compared to 25% of nonbinary young people who are very spiritual. Only 10% of nonbinary young people who say they are not religious say they are “flourishing a lot,” compared to 42% of those who are very religious.

Our data show that nonbinary young people, a group that is by and large not faring well compared to their peers, are more likely to flourish when they are religious or spiritual. Yet, only 18% of nonbinary young people report being currently connected to a religious or spiritual community. So we wonder: How welcome are nonbinary young people within various religious and spiritual traditions? Do they always have access to the beliefs, practices, rituals, and communities that religion and spirituality can offer?

Young people who say they are religious are more likely to agree or strongly agree that they are in good physical and emotional condition.

“I am in good physical and emotional condition”

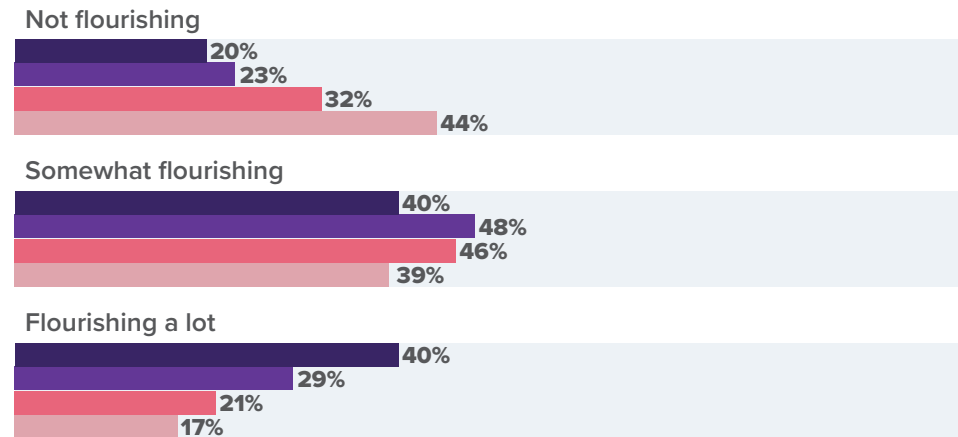
● Very religious ● Moderately religious ● Slightly religious ● Not religious



Religious young people say they are flourishing more than their non-religious counterparts.

“I am flourishing in my emotional or mental well-being”

● Very religious ● Moderately religious ● Slightly religious ● Not religious



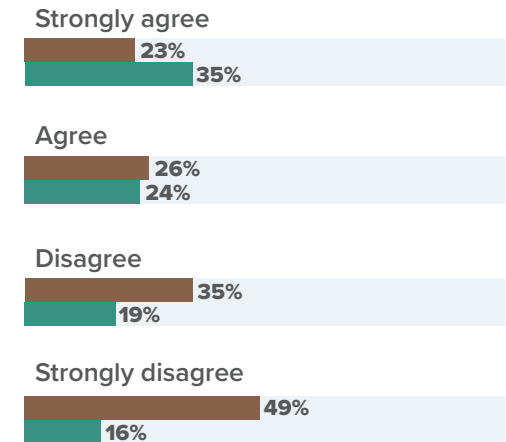
Percentages are approximate due to rounding.



Being religious is linked with flourishing in one's mental or emotional life.

“My life is connected to a larger sense of purpose through God, my religion/spirituality, a higher power, or something outside myself.”

● Not flourishing ● Flourishing a lot



PART II

WHAT FAITH LEADERS NEED TO KNOW



CONNECTION



EXPECTATIONS



PURPOSE



CONNECTION

How to Foster Belonging

If you believe in religion or a spiritual entity or something like that, I just feel like you feel less alone. **You feel like you have a team if you're with a religion** or something like that. And I think that helps because I think a big thing with mental illness or mental health is just people feeling alone.

—Nik, 21

Being Christian, going to church, I have a large church family, and I'm getting involved, and it's almost therapeutic to be able to go and have more connections there, more friends, and know more people.

—Lisa, 16

If I'm really sad, sometimes I'll just sit and pray, and then it almost makes me feel better **'cause I know if I'm not ready to talk to a person in real life about my problems, I can just explain them to God for me personally. And that's almost, like, a weight off my shoulders.**

—Misty, 17

I think [my faith] makes me feel less isolated and less alone. And I think that when I feel less alone, less isolated, I have better mental health.

—Jade, 22

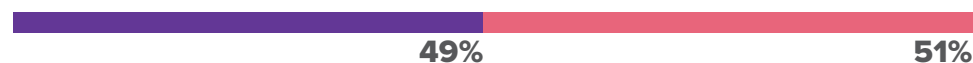
> Young people naturally identify a variety of ways religion helps them feel connected, and how feeling connected—feeling *less alone*—is good for their mental health. Nik notes the feeling of having a “team” of like-minded people in his corner and how he feels less alone just knowing he has access to them. Lisa calls her church her “family” and acknowledges how her circle of connections expands because of this community. Misty’s belief in God and her connection to a higher power help her process even if she’s “not ready to talk” to a real person in real life quite yet. And Jade notes how her faith as a whole is essential to feeling less alone.

What is connection?

“Community,” notes international religious leader Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is that place “where they know who you are and where they miss you when you are gone.” But over half of young people say they’re not missed when they’re gone.

When I have not been there for some reason, I am missed at my place of worship or spiritual community.

● Agree ● Disagree



Connection to others (whether those others are peers, mentors, or a higher power)—through shared identities, beliefs, practices, and various relationships—helps form the basis of community in religious organizations. And Springtide findings show that connections that lead to belonging are critical for proactively supporting young people’s mental health.

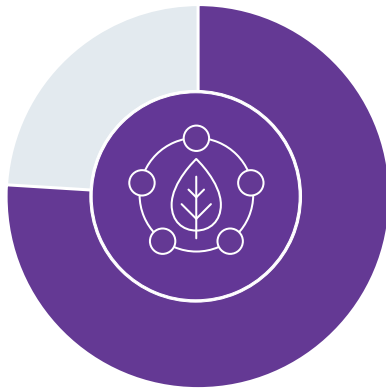
Connection describes the depth, number, and type of relationships a person has. Young people can be connected to one another, their families, friends, nonfamily adults, and even larger communities or groups. They find connection at school, home, or work—and it is helpful if they find it within religious spaces, as well. In fact, religious and spiritual spaces can offer what many other spaces cannot: connection and community where those gathered engage their sense of the divinity or the sacred together, elevating the social connections to something more than just a group of people with a common interest. Young people take advantage of the range of relationships available to them in religious settings: 51% of those who tell us they are currently connected to a religious community also tell us they have friends at their place of worship.

Why does connection matter for mental health?

Young people who have more, and more significant, connections are less likely to suffer from mental illness. To say it another way, young people are more likely to report mental wellness and flourishing if they have relationships with friends, family members, and others. Sociologists sometimes refer to this sense of connection as social integration. The social sciences have demonstrated, in the words of sociologist Allan V. Horwitz, that “people with more frequent contacts with family, friends, and neighbors and who are involved with voluntary organizations such as churches, civic organizations, and clubs report better mental health than those who are more isolated.”

Both quantity and quality of relationships matter when it comes to enhancing young people’s mental health. When young people’s involvement with a religious community or relationship with a religious leader makes them feel like they belong, they are more likely to report mental and emotional wellness.

Our data show that young people currently connected to a religious or spiritual community say they are “flourishing” at higher rates than those who used to be connected or never were connected to a community.



76% of young people who report being connected to a community say they are flourishing somewhat or a lot in their mental or emotional health.

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Read “How to Build Belonging: A Free Guide for Educators” to learn how educators can transform school culture and set up students for success by creating an environment that is mental-health friendly.



READ