

The State of Religion & Young People
Mental Health
What *Faith Leaders* Need to Know

RESOURCES

We'll highlight Springtide resources throughout this report, the kind that young people create and contribute to in our podcast episodes and blog posts, as well as conversations we're having with outside experts and more. All the resources referenced in numbered marginal notes throughout this report are compiled in a list at the end of this book and can also be found by scanning the QR code below.



Our Mission

Compelled by the urgent desire to listen and attend to the lives of young people (ages 13 to 25), Springtide Research Institute is committed to understanding the distinct ways new generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning.

We exist at the intersection of religious and human experience in the lives of young people. And we're here to listen.

We combine quantitative and qualitative research to reflect and amplify the lived realities of young people as they navigate shifting social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Delivering fresh data and actionable insights, we equip those who care about young people to care better.

Stay in Touch

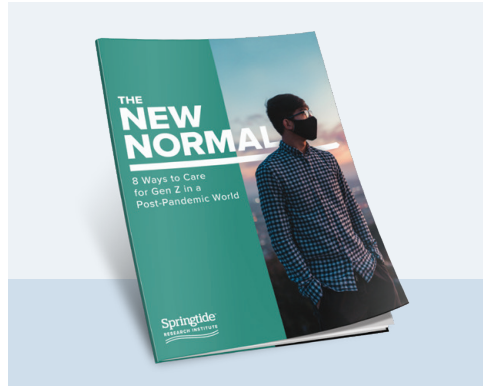
Visit the Springtide website for a variety of resources to help you support the young people in your life, including podcast episodes, blog posts, videos, and our other reports and books. Find these resources and sign up for our biweekly newsletter, *The Tide Report*, at springtideresearch.org.

Connect with us at [@WeAreSpringtide](#) on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, and use [#religionandyoungpeople2022](#) to join the conversation.

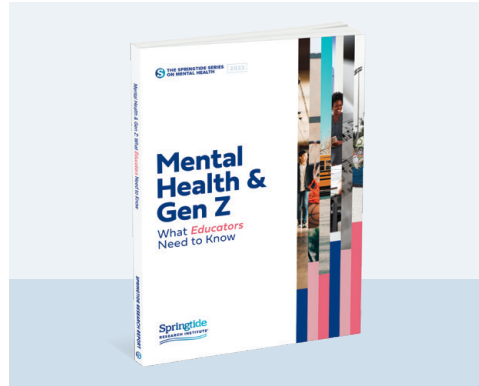


Share how you're creating spaces that are mental-health friendly, and send us a note at stories@springtideresearch.org.

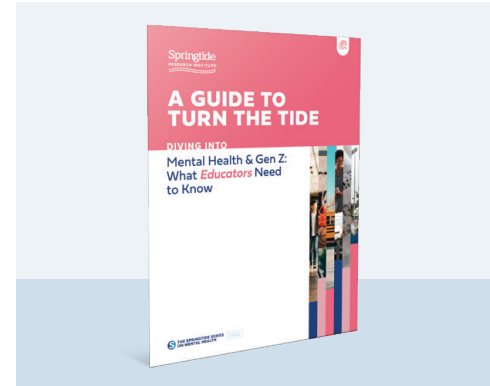
This report is part of *The Springtide Series on Mental Health*. In this series, we've already published:



The New Normal, Updated & Expanded: 10 Ways to Care for Gen Z in a Post-Pandemic World, to aid trusted adults in their care of young people during the pandemic with a special focus on their mental and spiritual health



Mental Health & Gen Z: What Educators Need to Know, a report dedicated to helping schools and educators find ways to make their organizations more mental-health friendly



A corresponding *Guide to Turn the Tide* to help readers reflect on and implement the data and insights that emerged in *Mental Health & Gen Z: What Educators Need to Know*

Future reports and resources in the series will focus on how families and workplaces can foster young people's mental and emotional well-being. In addition to written reports and guides, we have podcasts, videos, and more—all dedicated to these important conversations around mental health and Gen Z.

The Springtide Series on Mental Health emphasizes stories young people share in interviews alongside statistics from surveys. Our survey research enables us to reach a nationally representative group of young people and report on quantifiable trends. Our interviews enable us to discern nuances embedded in the details of young people's lives. Taken together, these two types of data illuminate the needs of young people and ways organizational leaders might be able to help.



Scan this QR code to find all our reports from *The Springtide Series on Mental Health*.



A Springtide Tribute.

A Promise. A Pledge.



TO YOU

... who are young, full of wonder and possibility. You who are navigating some of life's most important questions and most tumultuous waters. You who are sometimes flourishing and sometimes floundering and oftentimes both. You who are at once being and becoming.

We dedicate our work to your thriving.

We dedicate ourselves to understanding your inner and outer lives.



TO YOU

... who are fiercely devoted to young people. You who advocate for and walk alongside young people with steadiness. You who are unwavering amid the waves.

We offer our research as an aid to the role you already play.

We offer ourselves as allies in accompaniment.



AND TO

... the waves that crash, the currents that bend and beckon, the dark depths, and the effervescent crests. To this all-important period of life: worthy of considered listening and faithful retelling, worthy of companionship, worthy of care.

We situate our work at this intersection of human and religious experience in the lives of young people: a space of ebb and flow, of calm and chaos, of clear and murky moments.

A space we are dedicated to exploring and engaging



WITH YOU.

1

Watch members of our Springtide Ambassadors Program bring our tribute to life with their creative interpretation and filmmaking skills.



WATCH

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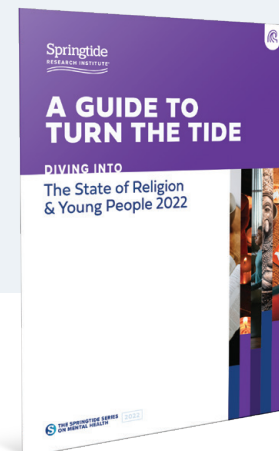
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Interested in reflecting on this report with more depth and guidance? *Diving into The State of Religion & Young People 2022: A Guide to Turn the Tide* presents a series of reflections and prompts designed to be used by individuals or small groups, 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.”

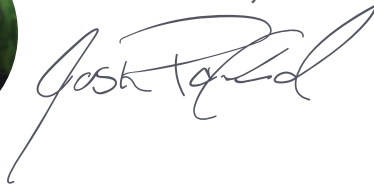
In this report, and in our ongoing *Springtide Series on Mental Health*, we offer a framework that enables trusted adults to both meet the immediate needs of young people and transform institutions to better serve them over the long run. I am really proud of this work. If we can create connections, align 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



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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.

3

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.

4



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.”





Mental Health & Religion

Sociologists have long demonstrated the relationship between religiosity and flourishing. Recent studies continue to confirm this basic fact. In February 2022, Gallup released its “Religion & Wellbeing in the U.S.: Update,” which reports data on life satisfaction among Americans:

92% of those who attend church services weekly are satisfied, compared with 82% of those who attend less than monthly. The difference is even more evident in terms of the percentage who report being very satisfied—67% of those who attend weekly are very satisfied with their personal life, compared with 48% among those who are infrequent attenders.

Citing a 2012 study, the Gallup article goes on: **“The very religious rate their lives more positively, are less likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression, and experience fewer daily negative emotions. . . .** The very religious also make much better health choices than do those who are not as or not at all religious.” *TIME Magazine* has also reported on the subject, saying: “Scientists have found, again and again, that those with a spiritual practice or who follow religious beliefs

For Springtide, the term *religious* is not a reference to a particular creed, code, or system, but rather a term that captures and categorizes a wide array of diverse impulses, questions, and connections.

DEFENITION

tend to be happier than those who don't. Study after study has found that religious people tend to be less depressed and less anxious than nonbelievers, better able to handle the vicissitudes of life than nonbelievers.”

Springtide research confirms and expands on this conversation with survey and interview data from young people ages 13 to 25. We first reported a correlation between flourishing *in all aspects of life* and being religious in *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty*. Our more recently gathered data tell the same story: Young people who are highly religious are more likely to say they are flourishing. Those who are not religious at all are more likely to say they are not flourishing. This is the case for every category of life we ask about, including mental well-being.

Those with poor mental health are less likely than those with good mental health to say they are flourishing spiritually. And young people without a connection to religion are less likely than those with a connection to report good mental health.

Our data show that mental well-being correlates with spirituality and religious engagement for many young people. Our data also show, however, that some young people experience religion as harmful to their mental health. Mark, a young man interviewed for this report, puts succinctly what we hear from many young people about the possibly helpful, possibly harmful, relationship between mental health and religion:

I think religion . . . is a place to find belonging. It's a place to connect with a higher purpose, which is a calling from God in my understanding. It's a place to connect to creativity, but **I think it's also, for many people, a restriction of freedom and sort of obligation,** which creates a lot of shame in people's lives.

—Mark, 22



While many faith leaders have a natural aptitude for deep conversations about inner realities, many don't have the credentials and skills of licensed mental-health professionals. But more than that, many religious leaders face a double challenge: to both actively support the mental health of those who participate in their religious communities *and* to ensure that their religious community does not, as Mark suggests, cause harm to their participants' mental health. Getting this dynamic right is critical, as more and more faith leaders find themselves on the front line when members of their communities face mental-health issues.

In a July 2021 article in *The Wall Street Journal*, journalist Clare Ansberry sheds light on this reality: “About one in four people with mental-health concerns turn to a clergy member before seeking help from clinical professionals, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, giving faith leaders a unique window on the mental health of many Americans. . . . Priests, pastors, rabbis, imams and deacons have witnessed waves of anxiety, depression, fear and grief.”

Because religion has the power to help so many young people thrive *or* to cause real damage by exacerbating mental-health challenges for young people (in ways that ultimately accelerate trends away from religion), it is critical that religious leaders engage in these discussions in the right way. Making conscientious efforts toward building connections that lead to belonging, aligning tools and expectations, and creating opportunities to discover purpose can help religious organizations meet these waves of mental-health concerns.

5

Watch Dr. Josh Packard explain why Springtide chose *mental health* rather than *mental illness* or *mental wellness* as its research focus.



WATCH

In the past two years, we've released *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority* and *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty*. Each of these reports offers data and frameworks designed to help trusted adults care better for the young people in their lives. Better care begins with better understandings of shifting cultural, religious, and social realities. And it all starts with better understandings of the experiences of young people themselves.

Our *State of Religion & Young People* reports combine data and insights to couple this increased understanding with tips for what to *do* to care for young people amid these shifting realities. This report is no different. In this first part of *The State of Religion & Young People 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know*, we've outlined the landscape of Gen Z's relationship to religion, especially in light of their mental health. Our key findings follow, offering a wide lens on the state of young people's religious identities, beliefs, practices, and relationships—all with reference to their mental health.



A CLOSER LOOK

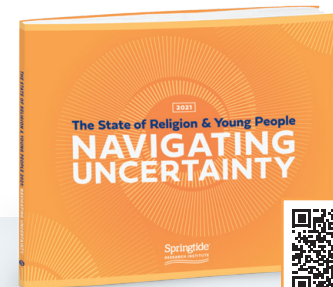
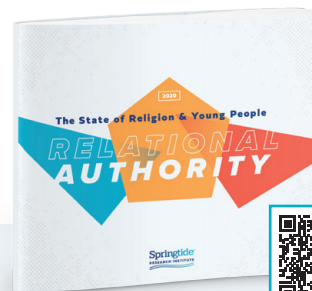
In this report, you'll find three special features, called "A Closer Look," that dive deeper into young people's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, connection and cultural diversity, and the concept of "unbundled" faith.

In the second part of this report, we offer insights and frameworks for what to *do* in the context of your ministry, outreach, or advocacy when it comes to the state of religion and young people. You'll hear from young people themselves, religious leaders caring for young people, and practitioners with expertise in connection, expectations, and purpose.

With insights on **connection**, Serena Bian is the coleader on the Loneliness & Connection project for the US Surgeon General within the federal government, helping to lead and shape the work of the Office of the Surgeon General in addressing loneliness, community, and connection, with a focus on cultural and systems change.

With insights on **expectations**, Matthew Grossman is the CEO of BBYO, the leading pluralistic, inclusive Jewish teen movement helping to involve more Jewish teens of all backgrounds and identities in more meaningful Jewish experiences.

With insights on **purpose**, Marcie Alvis-Walker is a writer and curator of popular social media platforms focused on the intersection of race, theology, and current events, with an eye toward American history, including *Black Coffee with White Friends*, "Mockingbird History Lessons," and *Black-Eyed Bible Studies*.



Learn more about our 2020 and 2021 reports and download a digital version for free.

LEARN MORE

A CLOSER LOOK

Mental Health & the Pandemic

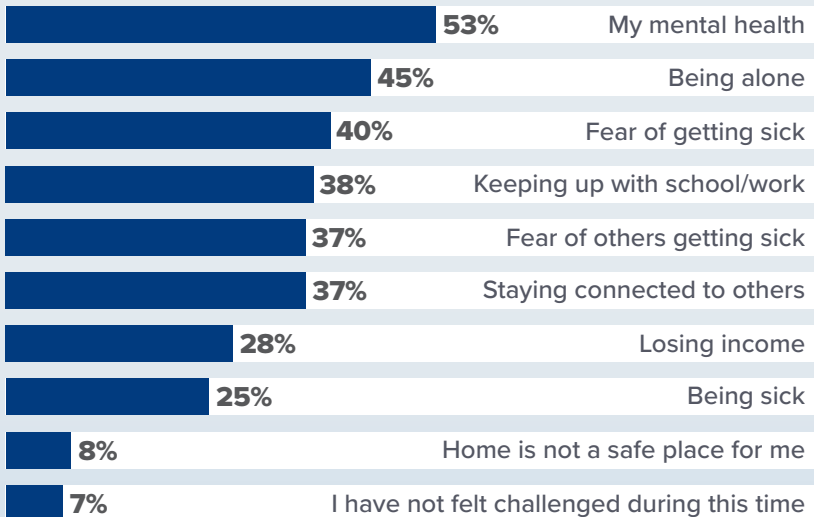
The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt become the most formative and defining aspect of many young people’s lives. At Springtide, we are continuing to pay attention to the ways this pandemic is impacting young people—especially their mental health.

Mental Health among Biggest Challenges for Majority of Young People

Our data show that mental health has been **the biggest** challenge for a majority (53%) of young people during the pandemic. Of the 10 challenges we asked about, “my mental health” was selected by the highest number of respondents.

During the pandemic, which of the following have been the biggest challenges for you?

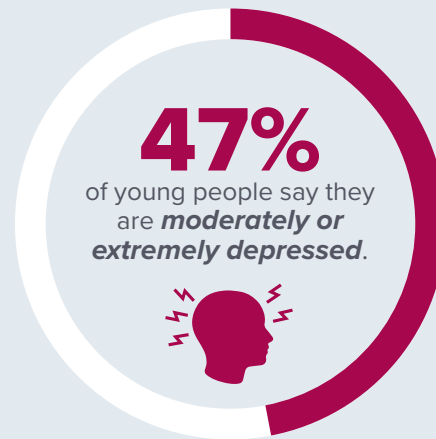
(Young people could select more than one answer.)



*I feel like **it’s definitely been harder.** Like, my mental health has changed maybe the worst—especially in the beginning, like, dealing with it—but I think that was everyone because we’ve never experienced this before.*

—Amy, 23

In an early 2022 survey, 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. Most 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.”



6

Read “3 Ways to Help Gen Z Flourish: Strategies for Faith Leaders in a Post-Pandemic World,” a free guide with data-driven insights about young people and how to best care for them.



READ

Silver Linings

For some young people, the pandemic offered a break from everyday life, which impacted their mental health *positively*. Logan, a young man we interviewed, articulated well what we heard from a number of young people. When we asked Logan how the pandemic impacted his mental health, he spoke about how time alone during the pandemic helped him:

I'm a lot more confident than I used to be. And I do owe it all to quarantine. I will say, self-isolation . . . back in freshman year, sophomore year, I just did what everyone else did around me 'cause I was too afraid to stand out and be myself. Then when quarantine happened, I was just alone all the time. **I realized that I'm stuck with myself for my whole life.** Like, I'm going to be the only one who ever lives with me always. So, you have to love yourself and you have to be confident, and **it just taught me more about myself [by] being away from those who judge** and all that.

—Logan, 18

Like Logan, other young people found silver linings—resources, relationships, or realizations—that they may not have otherwise turned to if not for the pandemic.

New Spiritual Practices

When asked in general about new practices they have started engaging in during the pandemic, young people ranked prayer at the top. More than half of all young people (51%) told us that prayer was a new activity they engaged in regularly, followed by meditation (45%), reading (42%), being in nature (32%), and yoga and the arts (both 31%). A majority of young people who say they are religious agree that their religious or spiritual life matters for their mental health (66%). Nearly three-quarters (73%) agree with the statement “My religious/spiritual practices positively impact my mental health.”

The call to care for young people affected by the pandemic is urgent. Our data show significant need: Alarming numbers of young people are depressed, anxious, stressed, and lonely. Our data also show that for many, attention to spirituality and the inner life can provide healing and hope. Because of this, religious and faith leaders are in a unique position to respond to the call in ways that matter for young people.

66%
of religious young people agree that their **religious or spiritual life matters for their mental health.**



73%
of religious young people agree that their **religious and spiritual practices positively impact their mental health.**



KEY FINDINGS

What Young People Are Telling Us

Springtide studies the intersection of young people's inner and outer lives. Mental health is at that crossroads. So is religion. For these reasons, this report offers a snapshot of not only young people's religious and spiritual lives but also their mental health, recognizing how the two are inextricably linked. In this year of gathering data, we asked young people about their mental health and their religious and spiritual lives, and how those two things might affect one another.



1 in 3 young people (33%) say they are *not* flourishing when it comes to their mental and emotional health.



Nearly 1 in 4 (24%) say they are *currently or have been* medicated or hospitalized for mental-health issues.



55%
of young people agree that their spirituality/religion matters for their mental health.

57%
of young people agree that their spiritual/religious practices positively impact their mental health.

Despite the significance of mental health in young people’s lives, only 34% of young people say they are comfortable talking to the adults in their lives about this topic.

Many young people naturally understand the ways religion and mental health often can and do overlap. Tiffany articulates the way her Jewish upbringing helped instill a sense of connection to something bigger than herself through service to others. But she contextualizes this personal reflection by pointing out that for others, religion can be a source of scruples or anxieties, *adding* to mental stress rather than providing relief or a way of coping with mental-health struggles:

// I was raised Jewish, but for us, it was less of a go-to-temple-all-the-time-and-pray [thing]. It was more like a way of life and not, like, you connect with your community, you build tradition, you have the kind of values that are expected of good Jews. [It was more about] you’re giving to charity, you’re doing volunteer work, you’re doing your part to make your community a better place. So, for me, I think that’s an important part of my mental health. I feel better when I’m doing things to help other people. That gives me something to think about. And then I’m not worried about myself and, like, what’s going on in my head. . . . Some people have religious compulsions or have religious anxieties as part of their mental illness. But I don’t. It’s more just like, that’s an outlet for me—doing good things for other people.

—Tiffany, 25

For Springtide, the term *religious* is not a reference to a particular creed, code, or system, but rather a term that captures and categorizes a wide array of diverse impulses, questions, and connections. These are the impulses that inspire young people to pursue community, identity, meaning, and various practices. We recognize that these impulses are increasingly finding expression in ways that may not seem overtly religious because they are not connected directly to a specific tradition or institution. From a sociological standpoint (as opposed to a theological one), we see the way religions, across creed and culture, can offer frames for living well, with careful consideration for congruence between the inner and outer life. We rely on four primary categories—identity, belief, practice, and community—to describe ways young people engage in religion or experience and express being religious. These four categories, along with mental health, are spotlighted throughout the “Key Findings” section as different avenues for examining the religious and spiritual landscape of young people today.



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

What is flourishing?

Sociologists use the term *flourishing* when surveying young people about their sense of well-being in many different areas: finances, relationships, mental and emotional health, school, work, and more. We help young people give accurate responses to our surveys by offering this preface to our question sets on flourishing: “For this question, *flourishing* means to grow well, to succeed and prosper. Other words associated with flourishing are *thrive* or *develop*.”

“Mental health that is good looks like calm, peacefulness, feeling like everything is working correctly and in place.”

—Grace, 9th grader



The opposite of *flourishing* is *floundering*—meaning to struggle, be confused, or feel stuck. In a 2021 article in *The New York Times*, Adam Grant offers another helpful antonym: *languishing*. “Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you’re muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021.” It may be the dominant emotion of 2021, of the pandemic, or of adolescence. So determining the areas in which young people feel they are languishing—or feel the *opposite*, that they are flourishing and are quite alive, energized, growing, and thriving—is essential to caring for them.

“I guess if someone tells you they’re struggling or if someone seems like they’re not able to just maintain basic functions of their life—like able to fulfill their work duties or just general self-care. Sometimes just the way someone talks to you, you can tell maybe they’re not doing super well.”

—Angie, 24

What is languishing?



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.



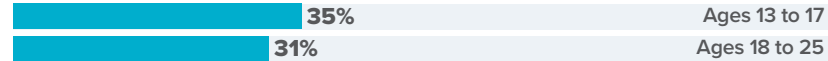
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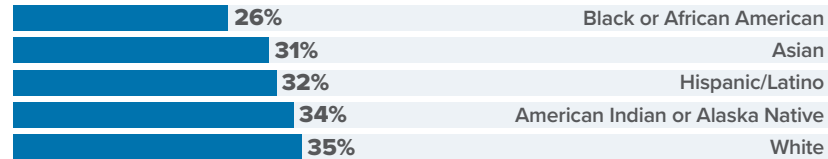
A third of young people say they are not flourishing in their mental and emotional health.

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.

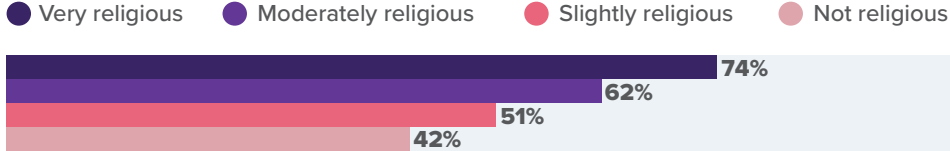
Being religious or spiritual helps mental health—even for those who are struggling the most.

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?

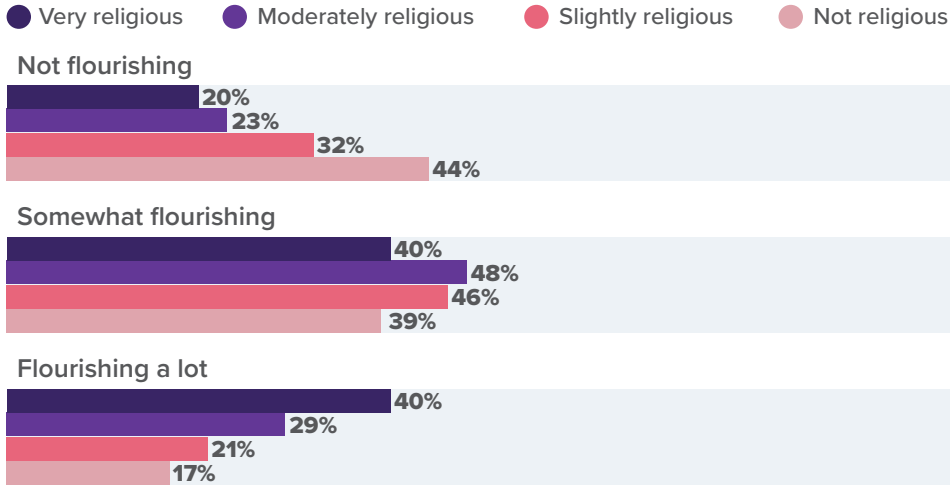
Young people who say they are religious are more likely to agree or strongly agree that they are in good physical and emotional condition.

“I am in good physical and emotional condition”



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

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

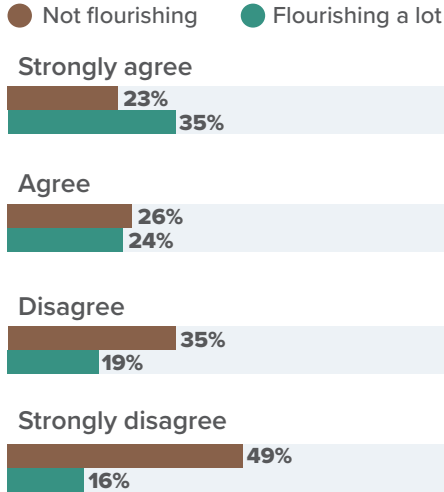


Percentages are approximate due to rounding.



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.”





KEY FINDINGS—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.

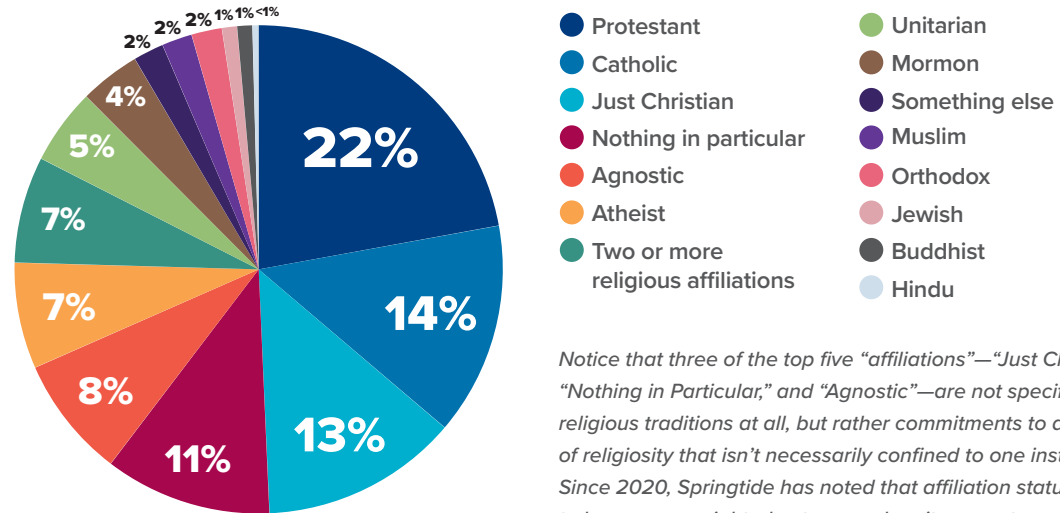


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Fewer young people identify with a particular religious system, though the majority of young people still tell us they are religious or spiritual.

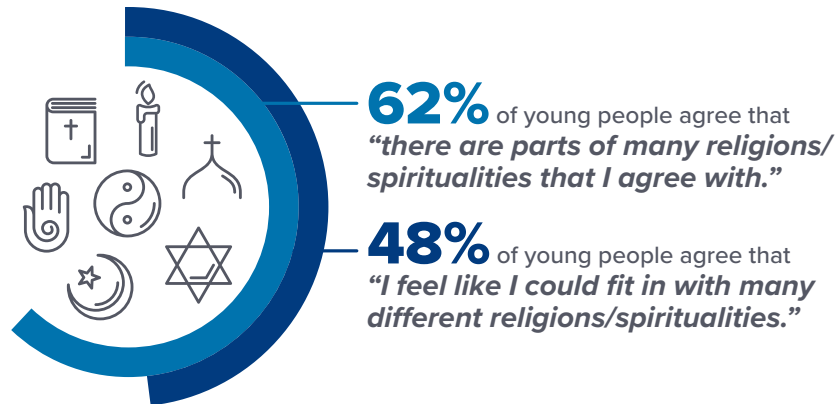
What is your present religion?



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

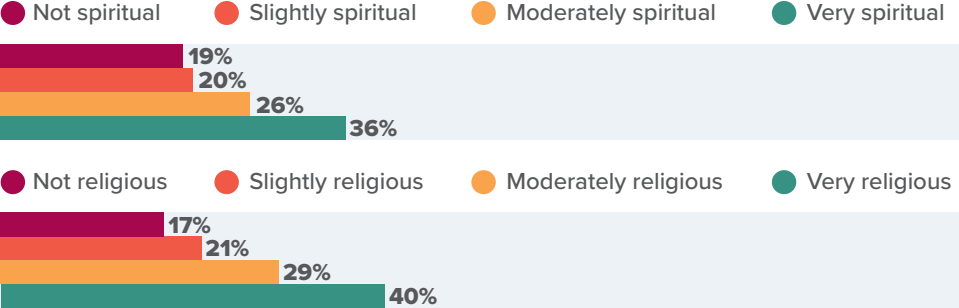
Notice that three of the top five “affiliations”—“Just Christian,” “Nothing in Particular,” and “Agnostic”—are not specific religious traditions at all, but rather commitments to a type of religiosity that isn’t necessarily confined to one institution. Since 2020, Springtide has noted that affiliation status tends to be an overweighted category when it comes to measuring young people’s religious and spiritual interests.

Instead of strict affiliation, young people see the value of many religious traditions.



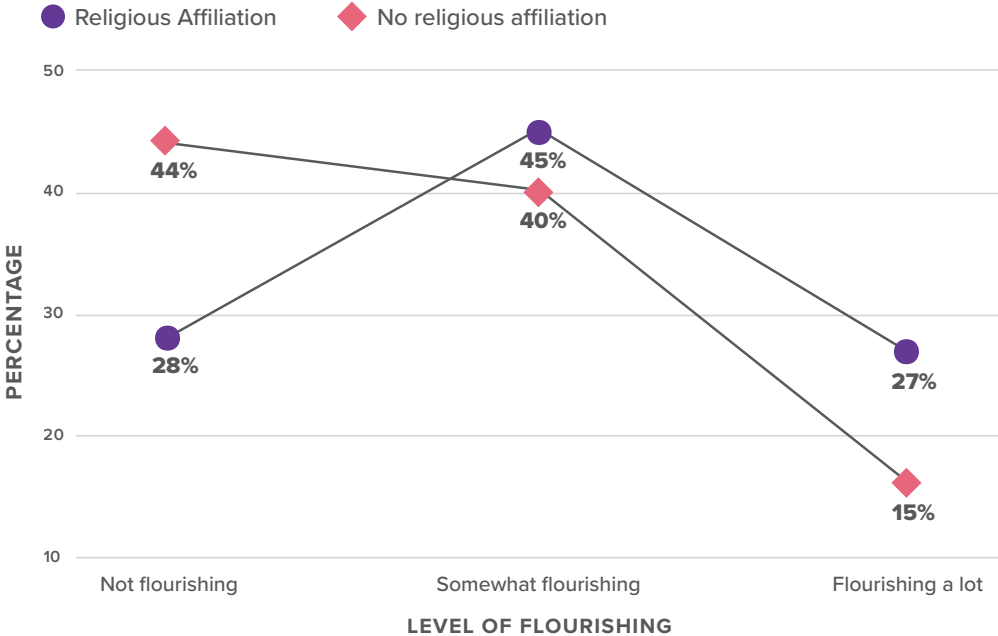
The more religious or spiritual a young person is, the more likely they are to say they are “flourishing a lot.”

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



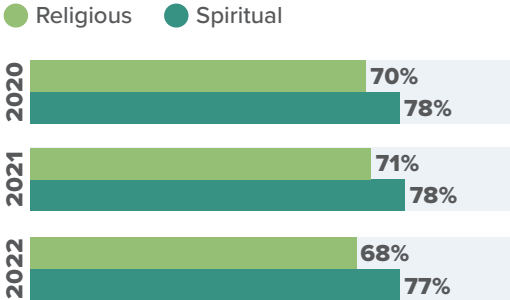
Those who identify with a religious affiliation report a different trend—flourishing a lot and not flourishing in almost equal amounts—meaning there may be additional factors that impact one’s ability to flourish.

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



Being religious or spiritual isn’t the same as being affiliated.

Although reports of religious affiliation may be declining, young people claim to be religious or spiritual at relatively stable rates. This chart shows percentages for the last three years, which demonstrate that while young people may be less inclined to claim a faith tradition, their choice to be religious or spiritual remains relatively unchanged.



The percent of young people that consider themselves at least slightly religious or spiritual.



KEY FINDINGS—THREE

Religious Beliefs & Mental Health

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

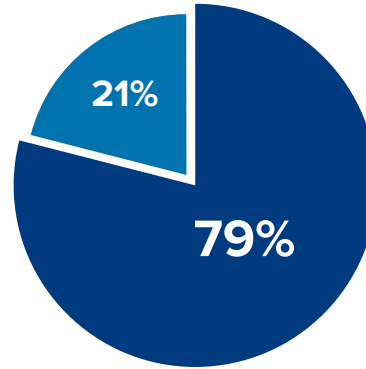


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Young people don't just entertain their beliefs, they live by them.

"I have a system of values and beliefs that guide my daily activities."



- Agree or strongly agree
- Disagree or strongly disagree

This kind of integrity positively impacts the mental health of young people. Of those who say they are flourishing a lot in their mental or emotional well-being, 84% say that they have a system of values and beliefs that guides their daily activities. Of those who say they are not flourishing, 55% say they have a system of values and beliefs that guides their daily activities.

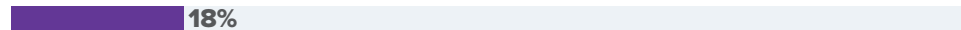
Belief in a higher power is distinct from feeling connected to the divine.

Which statement comes closest to what you believe about a higher power, whether it be God, gods, or some other divine source of universal energy?

I don't believe in a higher power.



I don't know whether there is a higher power, and I don't believe there is any way to find out.



I doubt a higher power's existence more than I believe.



I believe in a higher power's existence more than I doubt.



I know a higher power exists, and I have no doubts about it.

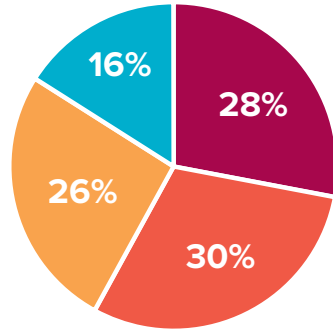


Young people feel connected to different elements of their world

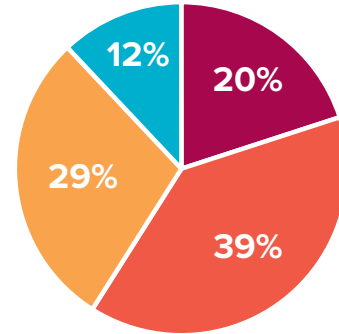
To what extent do you feel connected to the following?

● Not connected at all ● Slightly connected ● Moderately connected ● Highly connected

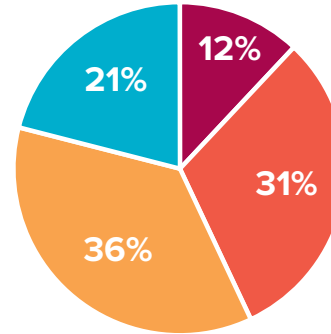
A HIGHER POWER



ALL OF HUMANITY



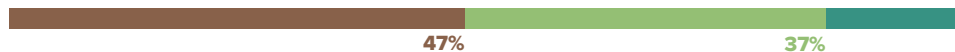
THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



Feeling connected to a higher power correlates with greater self-reported flourishing when it comes to mental and emotional health.

● Not flourishing ● Somewhat flourishing ● Flourishing a lot

Not at all connected



Slightly connected



Moderately connected



Highly connected



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

46%

of those who say *“I don’t believe in a higher power”* say they are in good physical and emotional condition.

44%

of those who say *“I don’t know whether there is a higher power, and I don’t believe there is a way to find out”* say they are in good physical and emotional condition.

56%

of those who say *“I doubt a higher power’s existence more than I believe”* say they are in good physical and emotional condition.

55%

of those who say *“I believe in a higher power’s existence more than I doubt”* say they are in good physical and emotional condition.

61%

of those who say *“I know a higher power exists, and I have no doubts about it”* say they are in good physical and emotional condition.



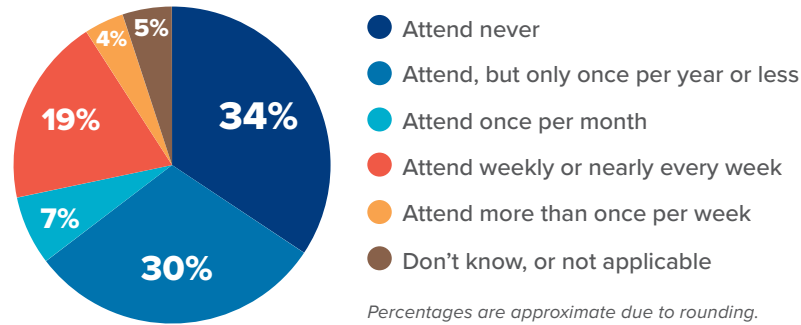
KEY FINDINGS—FOUR

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.

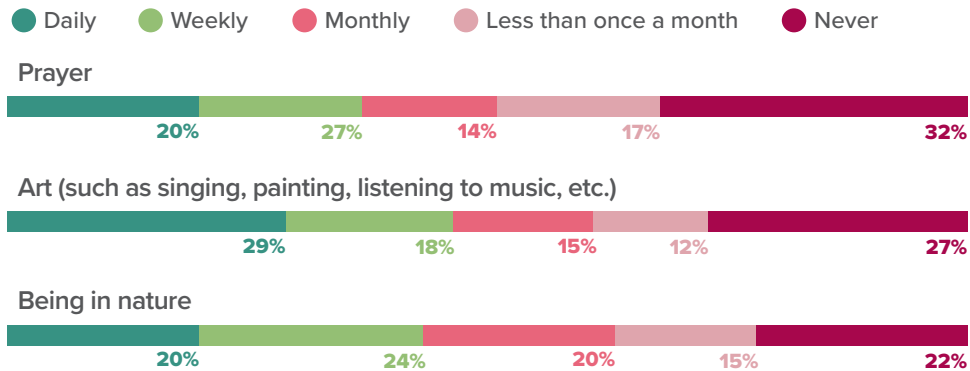
Though the majority of young people are spiritual or religious, they practice in diverse ways.

How often do you attend religious services, either in person or virtually?



Only about one-third of young people are present at religious services more than three times per year; in other words, nearly two-thirds are wholly or largely absent from religious services.

How often do you engage in the following as religious or spiritual practices?



We also asked young people about their practices around yoga, meditation, studying religious texts, reading tarot cards and fortune-telling, reading, fasting from food or technology, writing or journaling, connecting with ancestors, donating, protesting, volunteering, teaching, going to confession, having conversations, holding crystals, or participating in activism—all potentially undertaken as religious or spiritual practices. For additional breakdowns about their participation in some of these religious and spiritual activities, visit springtideresearch.org/the-state-2022-resources.

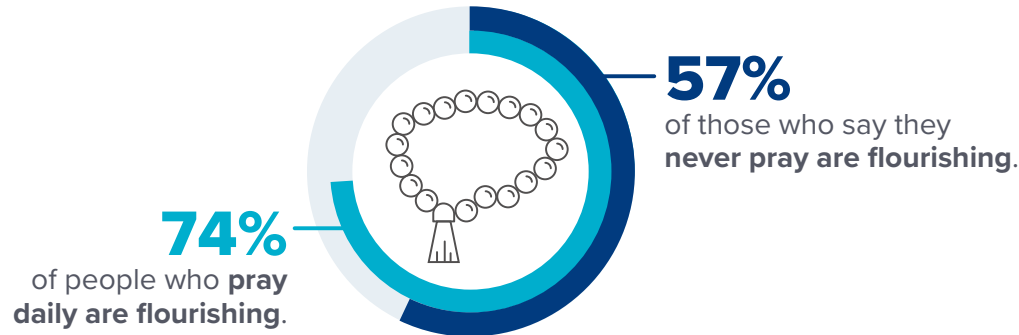


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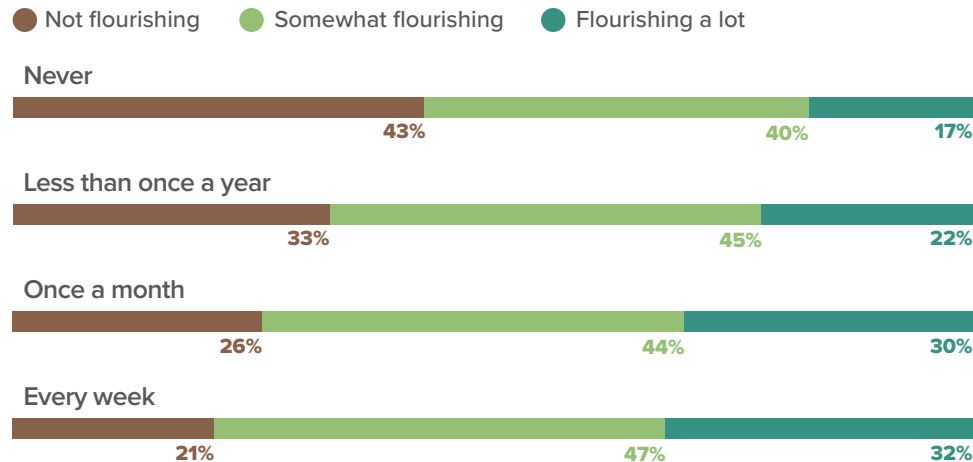
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Praying and attending religious services are correlated with mental and emotional flourishing.

PRAYER PRACTICES



RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE

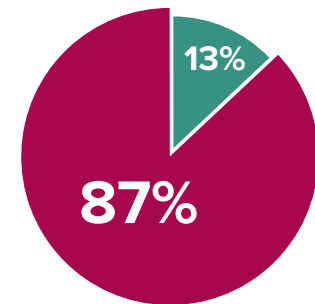


Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

Participating in religious or spiritual practices doesn't necessarily lead to a sense of purpose.

Has participating in religious or spiritual practices helped you discover your purpose?

● Yes ● No



Just being grounded in my faith and attending church services—just sitting there for an hour, not looking at my phone, just listening to nice things and being reminded that there's more to this than my immediate suffering—was very valuable to me. And I think that's kind of the reason I haven't left my church.

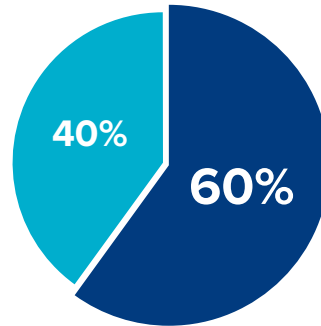
—Lana, 22



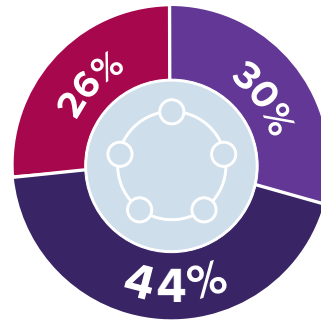
KEY FINDINGS—FIVE Relationships & Mental Health

By and large, young people are not participating consistently in religious or spiritual communities, whether online or in person, though some groups 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.

Young people aren't necessarily members of religious or spiritual communities.



- Say they are *not* a member of a spiritual or religious community that gathers online or in person.
- Say they are a member.



- I am currently connected to a spiritual or religious community.
- I used to be connected to a spiritual or religious community.
- I have never been connected to a spiritual or religious community.



A lot of people I've met have experienced religious trauma, so they don't do well with religion from past experiences with being pressured or forced into it.

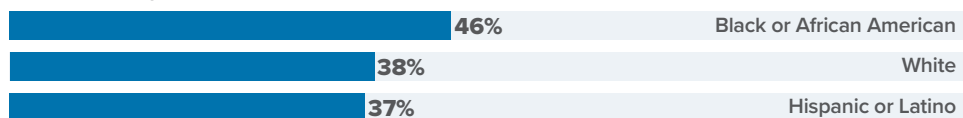
—Lisa, 16

I am currently a member of a religious or spiritual community.

Members by age



Members by race



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But participation in a religious or spiritual community correlates with greater flourishing.

FLOURISHING A LOT

29%

of those who say **they are a member** of a religious or spiritual community say they **are flourishing a lot** in their mental and emotional well-being.



20%

of those who say they are *not* a member of a religious or spiritual community say they **are flourishing a lot** in their mental and emotional well-being.

NOT FLOURISHING

26%

of those who say **they are a member** of a religious or spiritual community say they **are not flourishing** in their mental and emotional well-being.



37%

of those who say they are *not* a member of a religious or spiritual community say they **are not flourishing** in their mental and emotional well-being.

Young people who are connected to a religious or spiritual community fare better than those who have never been connected and also those who used to be connected.

● Not flourishing ● Somewhat flourishing ● Flourishing a lot

I am *currently* connected ...



I *used to be* connected ...



I have *never* been connected ...



“ Just being able to have somebody to talk to, whether it’s an actual person you could talk to or a religious figure, or just having some place you can turn to give you guidance. I think as long as you have a safe space or a safe person, everything is going to be all right for you.

—Julie, 17





KEY FINDINGS

Takeaways & Insights

1 Young People’s Mental Health Is at an All-Time Low

A third of young people report not flourishing in their mental and emotional health. Those ages 13 to 17, and those who identify as white or nonbinary, were more likely to report this. Yet, those who claim to be religious report flourishing in their mental health at higher rates.

2 But Religion and Spirituality Help

Young people who feel connected to a larger sense of purpose or meaning via their faith or belief in a higher power are more likely to say they are flourishing in their mental health.

3 Identifying as Religious or Spiritual Helps Mental Health

A significant number of young people identify as religious or spiritual. Yet, identification is different from affiliation. About one-third of young people claim to be “just Christian,” “nothing in particular,” or “agnostic,” and more than 60% of young people agree with elements of multiple religions. Regardless of affiliation, those who claim to be either religious or spiritual report higher levels of flourishing.

4 Maintaining Connection to a Higher Power Helps Mental Health

Young people say their beliefs are guideposts for daily life. Our data show that young people who say they believe in a higher power don't necessarily feel a connection to a higher power. Those who claim feeling connected at some level (somewhat, moderately, or a lot) report greater levels of flourishing.

5 Engaging in Religious or Spiritual Practices and Communities Helps Mental Health

Both religious and spiritual connection and practice impact flourishing. Those who report currently being connected to a religious or spiritual community claim greater mental and emotional health than those with only a prior connection and those who never had such a connection. Spiritual practice delivers similar results. Many young people are engaging in a number of practices they consider spiritual, including practicing art and being in nature. Those who pray or attend services regularly report flourishing at higher levels.

The Voices of Young People Podcast

Season 7: Mental Health & Gen Z features 16 young people in dialogue with Marte Aboagye, Springtide’s Head of Community Engagement, and with one another. The season consists of eight episodes released in summer 2022 as part of *The Springtide Series on Mental Health*.

Guests in this season range in age from 14 to 25. The youngest is a ninth grader, and the oldest are young professionals. The guests represent different regions, ethnicities, faith identities, and more. And they’re all spending time talking to Springtide—and to you—about Gen Z and mental health.

Tune in to hear their thoughts on prompts like . . .

- Where do you get your messages about mental health?
- If you were worried about your own or your friend’s mental health, who would you turn to? And what is it about that relationship that helps you know they’re trustworthy?
- In what ways do you feel connected to something bigger than yourself? Does this sense of purpose play a role in your mental health?

Find the latest episodes of this powerful season on our website by scanning the QR code below or find us on Google Podcasts, Anchor, Apple Podcasts, or Spotify.



Season 7: Mental Health & Gen Z

EPISODE 1



George, 23, FL

Joe, 21, CA

EPISODE 2



Grace, 16, MA

Mercer, 17, NC

EPISODE 3



Camden, 19, PA

Kaiya, 19, NY

EPISODE 4



Ivan, 21, NY

Sam, 19, OR

EPISODE 5



Camila, 18, LA

Ellington, 15, NY

EPISODE 6



Chris, 20, GA

Zineb, 24, OH

EPISODE 7



Julianna, 14, MN

Talia, 16, CA

EPISODE 8



Adiam, 25, DC

Daniel, 24, NV



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

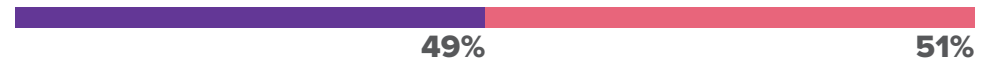
- > Young people naturally identify a variety of ways religion helps them feel connected, and how feeling connected—feeling *less alone*—is good for their mental health. Nik notes the feeling of having a “team” of like-minded people in his corner and how he feels less alone just knowing he has access 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.

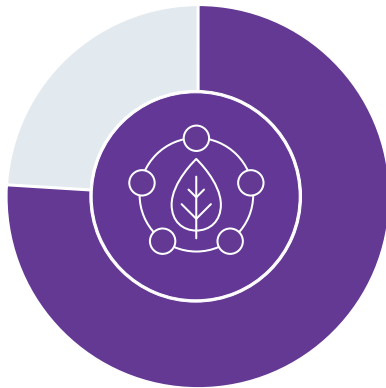
Connection describes the depth, number, and type of relationships a person has. Young people can be connected to one another, their families, friends, nonfamily adults, and even larger communities or groups. They find connection at school, home, or work—and it is helpful if they find it within religious 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.

7

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.



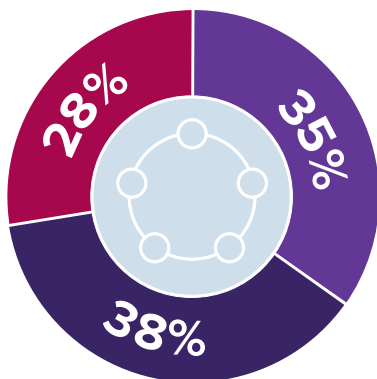
READ

How to Create Belonging

Trusted adults who are able to cultivate experiences of belonging for young people are in a strong position to foster mental healthiness. And belonging deepens through an identifiable process. Springtide’s *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation* (2020) first reported a pattern that we continue to see in the stories of young people. As a young person moves from initially joining an organization or group to experiencing real belonging within it, three distinct feelings surface: feeling noticed, feeling named, and feeling known. We refer to this pattern of moving from *noticed* to *named* to *known* as the Belongingness Process.

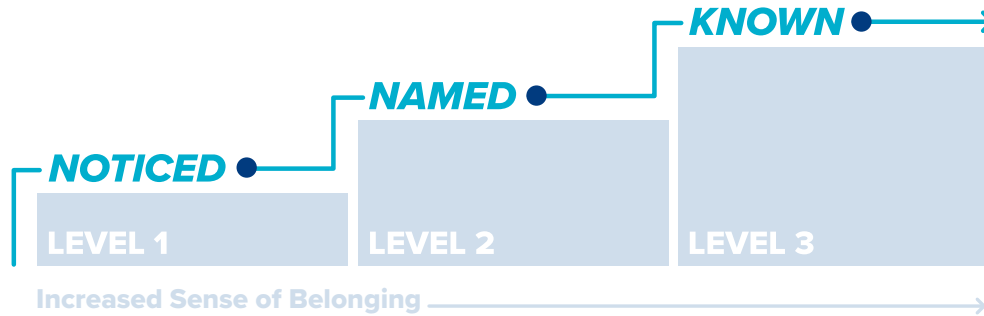
Young people initially enter relationships, groups, and organizations because of certain commonalities—shared interests, values, beliefs, practices, vocations, or professions. But they stay in those relationships when they feel like they belong. Religious spaces can offer deep relationships pertaining to matters of the soul and can facilitate acquaintance-style relationships. Both types are necessary and good when it comes to young people’s mental health. However, young people increasingly *aren’t* showing up to religious spaces—even if they once did.

The decades-long decline in affiliation and participation (a decline exacerbated, though not caused, by the pandemic) means religious leaders must be creative about facilitating connection in ways that don’t assume young people are walking through their doors on a regular basis. As we unfold the Belongingness Process and its impact on mental health throughout the next few pages, think creatively about how you might implement this framework in your community. Also consider how you might implement these insights with the growing number of young people who have never set foot in a religious space of any kind. They need you too.



- ***I am currently*** connected to a spiritual or religious community.
- ***I used to be*** connected to a spiritual or religious community.
- ***I have never been*** connected to a spiritual or religious community.

The Belongingness Process



Springtide’s Belongingness Process identifies three levels or building blocks for creating belonging for young people. And this experience of belonging—of deep and varied connections, especially within a religious community—is critical for their mental health. For each level, faith leaders and trusted adults can take actions to help young people feel noticed, named, and known.

● **LEVEL 1: (I AM) NOTICED**

The perception of being noticed by another—being seen or acknowledged, even in the most straightforward ways—is the initial step toward a sense of belonging. It is here that young people describe the power of being invited into a relationship and having others become interested in them. Consider this comment from a young person we interviewed when conducting our initial research for *Belonging*: “The dominant experience of young people when it comes to interacting with adults is of being dismissed. I just don’t expect them to pay attention to me.”

8

Read dozens of stories by young people ages 13 to 25 celebrating experiences of belonging and connection during the 2021–2022 school year, in *The Less Lonely #2022TimeCapsule*.



READ

The simple act of seeing generates an initial sense of belongingness for a young person, which creates a foundation for deeper relationships. We asked young people to tell us whether they experience being noticed within religious spaces.



Responses from young people who tell us they are *currently* connected to a religious community

● Agree ● Disagree

“I am acknowledged at my place of worship or spiritual community.”



“At least one person says hello to me when I am at my place of worship or spiritual community.”



“I do not feel anonymous or invisible at my place of worship or spiritual community.”



Looking at the graphic above, it’s clear that young people who are currently connected to a religious community are feeling noticed—they’re feeling acknowledged, greeted, and seen rather than invisible—within those spaces. This is especially important to note, as almost two-thirds (65%) aren’t connected to a religious or spiritual community. Religious leaders may do a great job noticing the young people in their spaces, but many young people who are seeking belonging aren’t showing up to religious communities to make that happen.

Lisa, the 16-year-old young woman quoted at the beginning of this chapter on connection, had been a new member of a religious community for about a month at the time Springtide interviewed her. She highlights how community itself is the primary way faith nurtures her mental health, and her story has all the elements of feeling noticed, named, and known that we know lead to belonging—a story we hear in interviews with many young people, albeit described in various ways. For this reason, Lisa’s story and voice appear throughout this section to emphasize the stages of feeling noticed, named, and known that she clearly experienced.

In fact, she highlights that one of the ways she felt she “fit in” right away was because the leaders noticed that she was new and explicitly asked her to join the ongoing activities:

“**My first day after the main service program in the afternoon, I went in there and I was chilling in a corner of the room.** I didn’t want to participate in the games, and they dragged me into it ‘against my will,’ [but] not in a negative way, but like, ‘Come on. It’ll be better with you!’

—Lisa, 16



Tide-Turning Tip from Our Springtide Ambassadors

Springtide ambassadors reflected on this report and offered tips based on their own experiences of connection in religious settings. Here, one member makes it clear what faith leaders can do: acknowledge their nonbinary identity. But this young person takes it further: What if their identity weren’t just acknowledged, but celebrated?

“I haven’t come fully out to my church in terms of my pronouns, but some do know. And they all know I changed my name. The pastor’s wife even gave me a pride sticker, which means so much. **My church supports LGBTQ+ people, but you have to join to know that’s their stance.** I wish there was a progress pride flag in the hallway. . . . Gosh, that would just mean so much to me.



To deepen belonging, find ways to move beyond noticing, acknowledging, and accepting toward celebrating the young people in your community.

● LEVEL 2: (I AM) NAMED

There are a number of ways to ensure someone feels named. The first and most obvious is simply to ensure that you *know* their name and that you are using it correctly, including with accurate pronunciation. If you don't know a person's name, pronouns, or pronunciation, take the time to ask. The use of a person's name triggers an immediate connection. It demonstrates a commitment to their participation in the community; it builds on noticing and makes a young person feel a deeper sense of being connected. Psychologists and linguists confirm that naming someone elevates them in importance and status. In many ways, our name forms and shapes our identity, and using someone's name confirms that you are in a relationship with them. We asked young people whether they experience being named in religious and spiritual settings.

The majority of young people who are connected to religious and spiritual communities say they feel "named" at those institutions.



Responses from young people who tell us they are *currently* connected to a religious community

● Agree ● Disagree

"People remember my name at my place of worship or spiritual community."



"I am greeted by name or in some other personal way at my place of worship or spiritual community (i.e., church, mosque, temple, synagogue, etc.)."



"People at my place of worship or spiritual community make a genuine effort to know who I am."



Continuing Lisa’s story of feeling a sense of belonging, after one month in her new religious setting, she tells us that she also experienced this sense of being named. She talks about a youth pastor who helped facilitate connections between young people by first getting to know them as individuals:



She just makes an all-around positive environment for anybody: longtime goers, new people, all of that. She helps kids get involved with other kids and meet new people. And that has been huge to me.

—Lisa, 16



Tide-Turning Tip from Our Springtide Ambassadors

Springtide ambassadors reflected on this report and offered tips based on their own experiences of connection in religious settings. Here, one member suggests that noticing amounts to more than noticing *presence*, but noticing *absence* too.



When adults notice that you aren’t—not just physically gone—but **if they notice that you aren’t being yourself, if you’re kind of withdrawn, it’s so significant to have them notice that too.**



Make a plan with your team of faith leaders and volunteers for how you might reach out to young people when they seem overwhelmed, withdrawn, or not quite themselves.

● **LEVEL 3: (I AM) KNOWN**

Belongingness reaches a new level when a person feels known. This depth of belongingness, this sense of feeling known, builds on being noticed and named but adds the all-important dimension of unreserved acceptance. Freed from the fear of rejection, young people feel safe having open, honest conversations. They are more likely to share hopes, anxieties, challenges, and joys alike. In essence, they experience trust within that relationship. This kind of acceptance has immeasurable significance as an antidote for loneliness, isolation, and stress. Accepting young people without judgment is an essential condition for deep belongingness.

We asked young people whether they experience being known in religious and spiritual contexts, recognizing that this step in the Belongingness Process is key to promoting positive mental health among young people.

Young people who are connected to a religious community feel they can be themselves, feel cared about, and feel safe with the people in those spaces. Experiences like these are incredibly important for ensuring young people ultimately feel known, which is the third and final step toward building belonging.



Responses from young people who tell us they are currently connected to a religious community

● Agree ● Disagree

“I don’t feel like I need to hide who I am at my place of worship or spiritual community.”



“I trust I am cared about at my place of worship or spiritual community.”



“I feel safe being my full self at my place of worship or spiritual community.”



Lisa described her sense of belonging at her new church in terms of the safety she felt there: “The instructors are always great. They know it’s their job to help kids feel safe, so they do a really good job at that. It’s really just the people, I think. We need a connection in something mutual.” Jade, a young woman who no longer identifies as religious, confirms Lisa’s sense that this feeling of being safe, supported, and accepted ultimately helped her mental health: “I grew up going to church, in the Christian Church, until the end of high school, but then in college I didn’t feel like that was super aligned with my belief system. But that community, when I was growing up, was a really good source of support for my mental health. I felt really supported and loved by that community, and felt like I could really open up to them.”

Throughout her story of belonging, Lisa emphasizes the people she encounters and the way they make her feel. She doesn’t emphasize her beliefs or even the experience of a shared religious sensibility or practice. Instead, her faith is expressed and experienced in these relationships of belonging. All the more reason these diverse elements of faith—identity, belief, practice, and community—are incredibly important aspects of a young person’s spirituality.



Tide-Turning Tip from Our Springtide Ambassadors

Springtide ambassadors reflected on this report and offered tips based on their own experiences of connection in religious settings. Here, one member suggests that being known resulted in increased self-knowledge, an experience that encouraged her to step more fully into a leadership role within her religious community.

In terms of feeling known, I think sometimes people don’t naturally know what they’re good at. And I had an experience of a leader in my religious group coming to me and recognizing some abilities I didn’t see in myself. **She not only noticed them but then asked me to use them on behalf of the community. So I felt seen by her, but I also felt like that experience of being seen and known led to me being a more integral part of my community.**



Find ways to activate young people by witnessing their natural skills and passions and making a point of connecting those skills and passions to real opportunities within your faith community.

Creating Resilient Structures for Connection

Insights from Serena Bian

Emerging from the pandemic, how can we make experiences of belonging for our young people the norm, rather than an exception? Faith leaders, given their key role as trusted confidantes to young people, play a key role in transforming religious organizations into holy sites for belonging.

From creating healing connection for college students, to supporting US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy on building a national strategy to combat loneliness, I have been immersed in the profound longing for community and connection across the country, particularly in our young people. And as a young person of faith myself, I've experienced the joys of feeling noticed, named, and known by my faith community.

When I first became a member of the Nuns & Nones Covenantal Community, I remember feeling daunted before an early community gathering. It was a feeling of intimidation that quickly vanished, as my experiences as a Chinese American, and as the daughter of immigrants, were named and celebrated in the company of this multifaith, multiclass, intergenerational group. The leadership council, wise in their understanding that “feeling known” takes time and trust, themed our first 18 months as a covenantal community around the Jewish calendar year, *Smita*—the sabbath year—to represent our approach to creating connection. We would move at the speed of rest and trust.

As adrienne maree brown reminds us with her fractal theory of social change, in order to create resilient structures that embody the change we seek, the values embodied in our larger structures must also be replicated in our smaller systems. To best support young people in creating connection, faith leaders must come from places of abundant connection themselves. Nurturing connection between staff and nurturing connection with oneself are just as important as fostering connection with young people.

Creating cultures of connection cannot be approached as a one-off activity, but rather must be ingrained into all efforts of a religious or spiritual community. In government, we call it an “in-all policies” approach, meaning an approach that requires federal, state, and local leaders to come together to center connection at the heart of all policies, programs, and campaign efforts.

Springtide advocates for the same among our nongovernmental structures: an “in-all” strategy for making spaces of connection able to prevent young people’s mental-health struggles, rather than just respond to them in times of crisis. I’m encouraged by the work of so many faith leaders, emerging from the pandemic, who are boldly creating strategies, structures, and programs to foster authentic, healing, relational infrastructure for our young seekers.



Serena Bian is the Project Coleader for Loneliness & Connection for the US Surgeon General within the federal government, working with Dr. Vivek Murthy. She helps lead and shape the Office of the Surgeon General’s work addressing loneliness, community, and connection, with a focus on cultural and systems change.

The data presented throughout this section make it clear that young people who are connected to religious and spiritual communities feel noticed, named, and known within those communities. This is wonderful news, and it should be cause for a pause to celebrate the strong, affirming experiences of connection that many young people are having within religious settings. But it’s imperative for religious leaders to recognize that the Belongingness Process works when young people feel noticed and named and known—in other words, that each of these steps builds on the one before. An experience of belonging is ultimately the result of a deepening of relationships over time, a deepening that mindfully includes helping young people feel noticed, named, and known in concrete ways but that is also bigger than any single act or gesture.

A CLOSER LOOK

Connection & Cultural Diversity

The Acceptance Gap

A 2022 special study of Latino young people, *The Cultural Bounds of Belonging*, spearheaded by Springtide BIPOC Fellow and Associate Researcher Nabil Tueme, looked closely at experiences of belonging and engagement with Latinos in educational settings. The data set draws on nearly 5,000 Latino young people ages 13 to 25. Among the central findings in this study was a dramatic disconnect for young Latinos when it comes to the Belongingness Process that occurs between levels two and three (*feeling named and feeling known*).

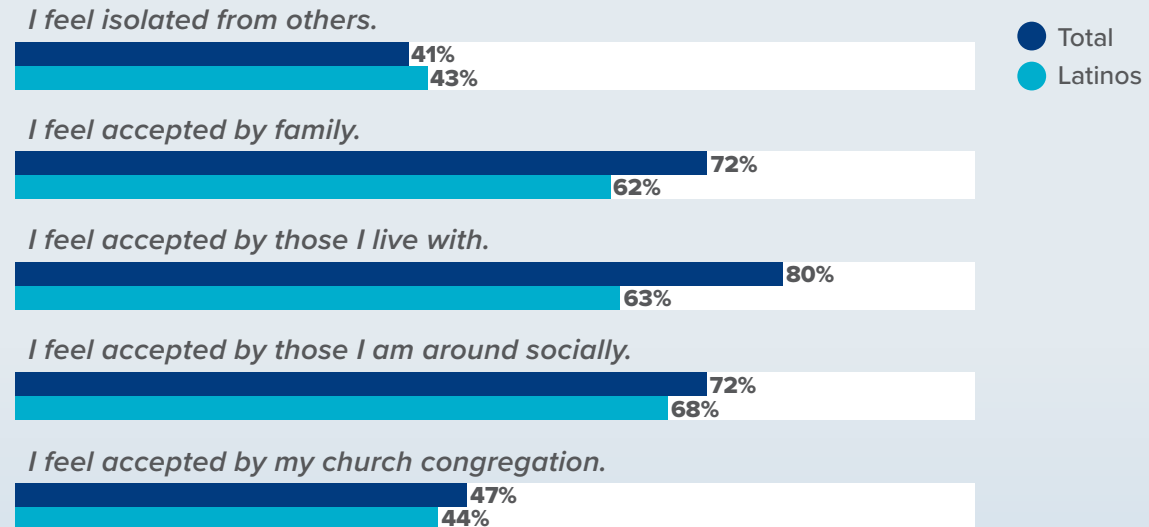
We call this disconnect **the acceptance gap**. Young Latinos are just as likely as young people in general to report feeling *noticed* (level 1) and *named* (level 2). But they are less likely to report feeling accepted—an all-important aspect of feeling *known* (level 3). This gap highlights that experiences of acceptance and belonging come more easily for young people in general than for young Latinos.

Young Latinos are as isolated as their peers and report lower rates of acceptance than other young people.

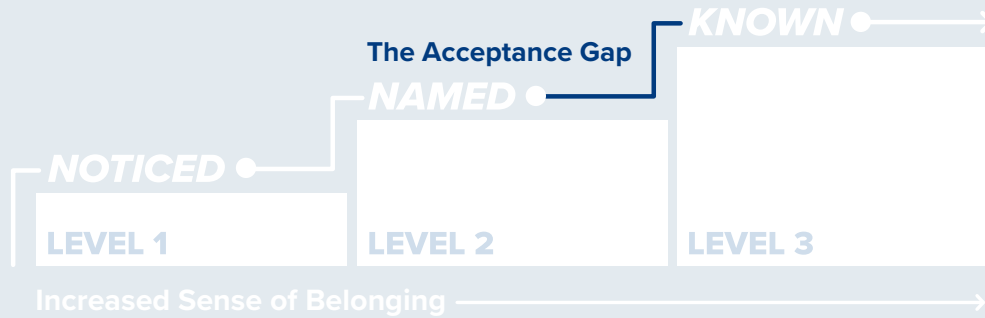


The Acceptance Gap among Young Latinos

Percentages of 13-to-25-year-olds who agree (“sometimes” or “always”) with each statement.



The acceptance gap highlights that young Latinos are as isolated as the general population, but they express considerably lower rates of acceptance—which is a key aspect of being *known*, the final step in the Belongingness Process.



> *Feeling accepted is a key aspect of moving from level 2 to level 3 in the Belongingness Process.*

Bridging the Acceptance Gap

Identifying *why* the acceptance gap exists is the first step in resolving it and in helping more Latino young people feel connected in ways that lead to a true sense of belonging. Springtide has uncovered two insights related to helping bridge this gap in acceptance among Latinos.

INSIGHT 1

For young Latinos, relating to others based on shared experiences and values fosters a greater sense of belonging than does shared race or ethnicity.

I shared an identity with only one professor I had my entire time at college. I was really excited to have her as my professor. She was Latinx. I'm Latinx. But I felt so disconnected from her. I think having a **shared identity can be important. But I also feel like shared ideology is first and ultimately the most important** overall. I think that's the most important thing for me over just sharing similar, cool, cultural backgrounds.

—River, 25

INSIGHT 2

Actions intentionally created to support Latino young people can feel like symbolic support rather than genuine support.



During college, for Lunar New Year or Cinco de Mayo, the dining halls would decorate and have special menus. **I see that as performative. Is there support before and after these performances for students?** What supports are there, and how accessible is it to get these things?

—Ana, 22

When we asked young Latinos what institutional actions make them feel genuinely supported, four characteristics emerged:

- 1 There is a demonstrated **need** for the action.
- 2 The action leads to **meaningful** change.
- 3 The action assumes **diverse** experiences.
- 4 The action is aligned with personal **values**.

These and other findings from *The Cultural Bounds of Belonging* indicate that while the core of our Belongingness Process framework remains intact and useful, there are some important considerations to keep in mind to create belonging for Latino young people. Institutions, and in particular religious organizations, can be mindful of building environments where young Latinos can share lived experiences, access vital resources, and feel unequivocally accepted on arrival as a way to foster connection and encourage mental health. But right now, with only 47% of young people in general and 44% of young Latinos telling us they feel accepted within their religious spaces, these organizations are among the lowest ranked for cultivating a sense of acceptance.

9

For more insights on how to support the flourishing of Latino young people, read *The Cultural Bounds of Belonging: A Closer Look at Latino Young People*.



READ

Springtide collects survey data along nationally representative demographic standards: we weight our data collection for age, race, region, and gender so that the population we report on is an accurate sample of the population at large. But reporting *trends* among young people ages 13 to 25 often means that the stories of majority populations are front and center.

To balance this natural limitation of collecting data along census lines, we intentionally spend time investigating the stories, voices, and trends at work in nonmajority populations as well. This work is taken up in formal and informal ways: through the research projects of our BIPOC Research Fellow, our investment in projects and studies that dive deeper into trends among diverse populations, and even in our relationships with board members, student ambassadors, and custom research partners.

**10**

Listen to associate researcher Nabil Tueme interview young Latinos in season 6 of *The Voices of Young People Podcast*.

**LISTEN**



EXPECTATIONS

How to Foster Healthy Narratives

// Oh my gosh. **Cut the expectations. Go all in on love.**
—Mark, 22

// If your parents are forcing you, or anyone is forcing you, to do a religion, **that can take a heavy toll on anyone's mental health.** On the flip side, if you are willing, then it can help.
—Jaques, 9th grader

// I had such a bad idea of heaven and hell, and when I made mistakes, I would be really hard on myself thinking like, 'Oh, God's mad at me,' but now I know **it's important to give yourself grace because you're allowed to make mistakes. You're allowed to have setbacks.** You're not going to be a perfect person.
—Etta, 18

// It kinda goes back to the whole 'just pray about it if you're going through a hard time.' Which, sometimes you need something that's . . . more tangible. I've struggled with this, especially growing up 'cause it kind of feels dismissive and everything. **I've actually never seen or been to a church that acknowledges mental health,** or anything really, within what they're preaching.
—Shonda, 24

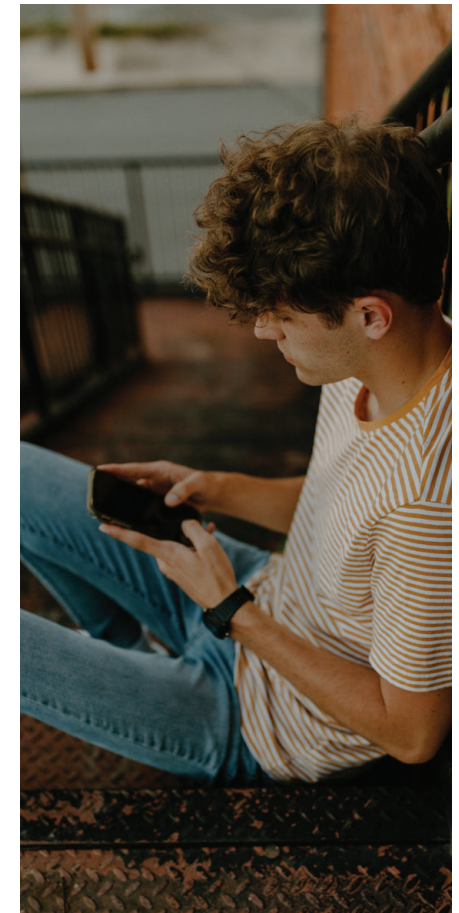
I don't want a Christian therapist. Just to think about that one Christian therapist who told me, 'God, doesn't give you more than you can handle. Or God is testing you.' I'm like, 'Oh, what's the rubric? What's the assignment?' You can't test someone without telling them what they're being tested on! You know, those are little **bumper sticker Christianity**, evangelical things that really, really first drew me away, and **it's only [been] recently that I'm like, 'Oh, not everyone is like that one therapist.'**

—Lana, 22

I feel like growing up in a Catholic family, I had a lot of these pressures laid on me, and I had a lot of these standards that I needed to live up to. **And that kind of, I don't know, negatively impacted my mental health.**

—Logan, 18

Mental health is so prominent in the lives of young people that it's often difficult for young people to trust people or organizations who fail to acknowledge mental health or treat it seriously. Repeatedly in interviews, young people make it clear that religion feels toxic when it is primarily presented as a *pressure* to live up to difficult expectations, rather than a vehicle for helping them navigate their current difficulties. Feeling forced to attend, believe, or participate is burdensome, as Jacques notes. Narratives about the afterlife, unhelpful aphorisms, and a feeling of pressure to conform to expectations that aren't clearly related to their own lived experience come up in the stories from Shonda, Lana, and Logan. To be clear, religious leaders can (and should!) have high expectations for the young people in their care. Part of their job is setting those expectations. But without giving young people the proper tools, those expectations lack stakes. For example, if expectations around mandatory attendance are loud and clear but little is offered during a service to address real issues in the young people's lives, young people will inevitably reject the expectation.





Young people aren't necessarily hostile toward religion. But they are skeptical of religious claims—narratives and expectations—that are promoted without any way to integrate them into real life. These kinds of lofty claims (things like “God is testing you,” as Lana says above) end up feeling dismissive of young people’s experiences, instead of deeply related to them.

What are expectations?

Expectations are standards for success and acceptance that organizations communicate. In religious contexts, there are prevailing narratives about who and how to be—and those expectations are often tied directly to morality, ethics, and the afterlife. Religious organizations communicate narratives about how and what and whether to identify, believe, practice, or participate. These can be implicit or explicit. They can carry clear insights and wisdom, or they can convey unintended messages. When religious expectations are unachievable, unclear, or unfair, some young people will judge themselves negatively, causing their mental health to suffer. Others will walk away from the religious organization that makes them or their peers feel inadequate.

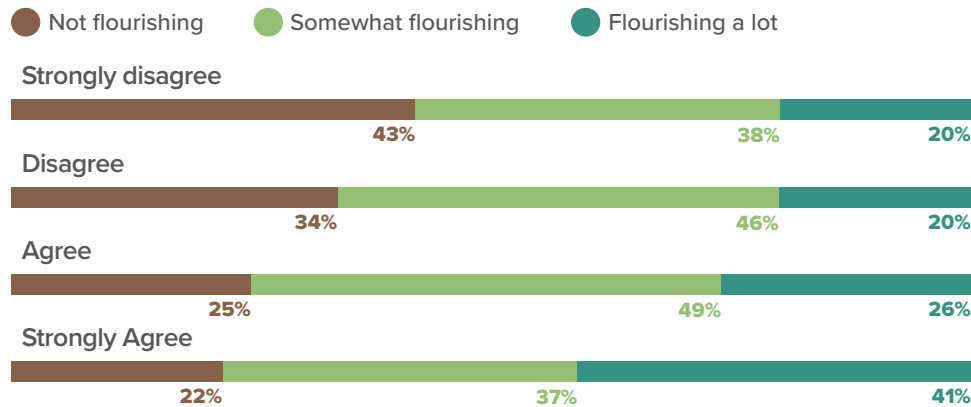
How do expectations impact mental health?

Clear and achievable expectations are imperative for any organization that wants to help promote mental health among young people. “Social groups that provide their members clear and attainable goals foster mental health. Those that create expectations that many people cannot fulfill are marked by widespread frustration and unhappiness,” sociologist Allan Horwitz writes. But in the context of religion or spirituality, there’s not necessarily one easy or obvious way to standardize conversations around expectations. In many cases, thousands of years of precedent exist for how to address certain topics. There are hierarchies, rituals, and authorities that don’t admit a lot of flexibility—and with good reason. These traditions, and the sense of a broad community of participants across time, are the very things that (when expressed and presented well) make religion such a powerful support for mental health.

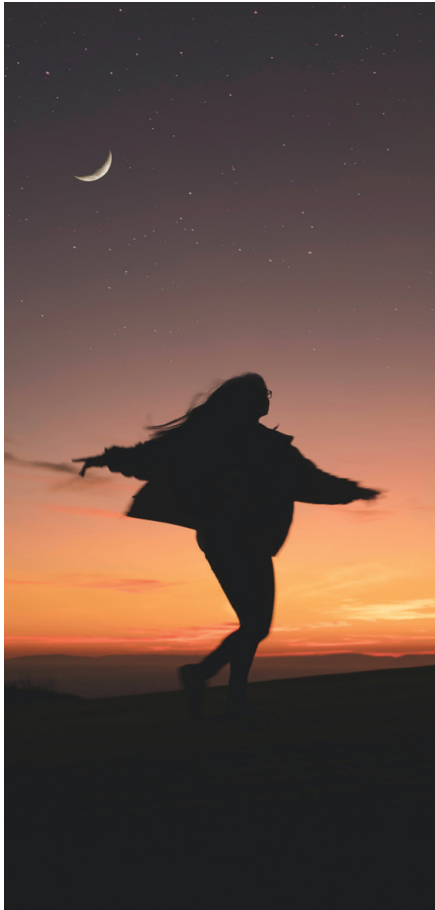
Young people who agree or strongly agree that “my place of worship or spiritual community expects things of me and other young people that, while challenging, are good for me and others” are more likely to report that they are flourishing in their mental and emotional health than those who disagree with the statement.

Conversely, young people who disagree or strongly disagree with that statement are more likely to report that they are *not* flourishing in their mental and emotional health. In other words, the nature of a community’s expectations for young people affects their mental health.

“My place of worship or spiritual community (i.e., church, mosque, temple, synagogue) expects things of me and other young people that, while challenging, are good for me and other young people.”



According to Horwitz, “Religion provides another example of the importance of cultural values.” He explains that social scientists have found that “in general, religious people report less distress, especially when they undergo highly stressful life experiences, than those who are not religious.” He notes that “overall, cultural values that provide group cohesion, meaning, and purpose to life are conducive to mental health.” So how can religious spaces and leaders help express expectations (i.e., cultural values for navigating this life and the next) in ways that make young people feel encouraged, rather than burdened?



Aligning Tools and Expectations

Many religious and spiritual leaders who turn to Springtide’s resources remark that they simply can’t *change* the expectations of their particular traditions. The options seem to be “watering down” the traditional faith (in other words, lowering expectations) or disappointing and ultimately discouraging young people’s participation by keeping strict expectations intact. We hear a tension expressed from many religious leaders who recognize that neither of these extremes seems to be in service to young people *or* their institutions.

The key to *encouraging* rather than *discouraging* young people is aligning expectations with tools for successfully accomplishing them. This alignment is a matter of both determining the right tools, offering them to the right user, and communicating clearly about both the tool and the expectation it’s related to. The tools needed for encouraging young people are more than likely available to religious leaders and to young people, even if they aren’t yet expressed or offered clearly enough: presence and participation.

The presence of young people, with all of their questions, needs to be welcome and expected in an organization that is mental-health friendly. Their participation shouldn’t be an afterthought. In order to foster self-efficacy, which is so crucial for mental health, we need to make their participation vital to faith development from the beginning.

When religious leaders communicate expectations without offering tools that utilize presence and participation, the result isn’t just a missed chance for success; it can sometimes mean damage is done. In an early internal conversation about Springtide’s series on mental health, we asked our ambassadors two simple questions: What spaces seem naturally *good* at encouraging your mental health? And which seem especially *poor* at helping your mental health? A member of the group spoke up with an insight that has continued to resonate throughout our survey and interview data. He told us:

“ The time I went to my youth leader with mental health concerns, I was told to pray about it. But that didn’t solve anything. I was told to turn to an interior conversation, but the problem was already an ongoing, spiraling interior conversation about my self-worth and life path. When that didn’t work, I thought, ‘Well, not only does my mental health suck, but my faith life sucks too.’

Presence and participation are two basic tools for making sure this scenario (encouraging prayer)—a scenario that may be offered sincerely and frequently in religious contexts—doesn’t have such a negative effect.

Presence

Presence is about relationships built on trust that make room for deep, mutual exchanges around things as important as prayer or mental health. This trust is built on listening, living with integrity, being transparent, caring, *and using* expertise—five core qualities we outline in a framework called Relational Authority. Trusted adults who give young people the gift of presence can become role models and conversation partners in the exploration of faith.

Young people need people to talk to. Young people need mentors who can accompany them in their religious and spiritual seeking. All five qualities that enable adults to build trust—listening, living with integrity, being transparent, caring, and using expertise—are essential. This is because they are based on various mutual exchanges. Being transparent means that young people get to see role models ask questions or encounter doubts. Listening and living with integrity help prevent the sense that religious claims are impersonally and rigidly applied. The combination of caring and using expertise means that a young person doesn’t feel they’re just a problem to be solved but a whole person to be in relationship with.

“ Well, not only does my
mental health suck, but
my faith life sucks too.”



When it comes to aligning tools and expectations in religious settings, trusting relationships make all the difference. In fact, relationships of trust are a tool in themselves for helping communicate expectations effectively, and they also make available other tools, including deep conversations between mentors and young people who are asking and answering life's big questions.

We wanted to know whether young people had adults in their spaces of worship whom they felt safe enough to seek out for spiritual matters. For those young people currently involved in a religious or spiritual community, 63% tell us, "I feel like I can have a conversation about some of the 'big questions' in life with people in my place of worship or spiritual community." Only 43% of those who *used to be* part of a religious community say the same. Similarly, when asked if they know who to turn to for spiritual guidance, more than two-thirds of young people (67%) who are currently connected to a religious community say they do know who they might turn to for this type of guidance and relationship. Less than half (43%) of those who are no longer connected to a religious group say the same. These findings give us a glimpse (though not a conclusive one) into what those religious and spiritual communities *might* have felt like to those young people before they stopped attending.

Responses from young people who tell us they are *currently* connected to a religious community

● Agree ● Disagree

"I feel like I can have conversations about some of the 'big questions' in life with people in my place of worship or spiritual community."



"I know who to turn to within my place of worship or spiritual community for spiritual guidance."



Conversations about big questions and knowing who to turn to for spiritual guidance matters for mental health—and not just because trusting relationships are the most effective communicators of religious and spiritual expectations. If a significant number of young people feel like they don't know how to bring up life's "big questions" or how to seek spiritual guidance at their place of worship, they're also unlikely to turn to these same relationships for the big questions (spiritual, emotional, and otherwise) that pertain to their mental health.

Alia, a 21-year-old woman raised Hindu and who now considers herself nonreligious, explains that she saw her tradition focus on spirituality and inner peace—which may very well be synonymous with mental wellness—but never refer, in clear terms, to mental health: "There's a lot of focus on spirituality and, like, inner peace and that sort of thing. But it's a little complicated. I don't think people really talk about it like that, even though I would see it like that." Lana, 22, agrees, saying that at the Catholic university she attends, the chaplains don't talk about mental health "because they talk about more like a spiritual health, spiritual wellness, that kind of stuff."

It's important to note that the importance of religious leaders' presence isn't limited to milestone events like a Confirmation class or a Bat Mitzvah. In other words, the time lines prescribed by institutional milestones within various traditions can't dictate the availability of trusting adults who practice presence. Instead, relying again on the trust that's built must extend deep into the lives of young people and be driven by their needs, not just by our institutionally driven milestones.

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Read Abby Jones's reflections on turning to friends, family, and God to navigate big questions in the blog post "Turning to Trusted Relationships" on our *Voices of Young People* blog.



READ

Young people need people to look up to. To build bonds of trust with young people, leaders and organizations must have integrity. When they don't, young people see them as hypocritical. In her interview with Springtide, Lucy describes a disconnect she perceives between the things she thought church members *should* care about (inclusivity for marginalized people, for example) versus what they *actually* care about (modest clothing and expensive religious art).



I didn't see the church putting its money where its mouth was, so to speak. So I saw members of the church judging people for coming into Mass in soccer shorts or, you know, silly things that shouldn't matter. It's just kind of that hypocrisy, I guess. My least favorite thing the church ever did was they bought a \$15,000 nativity set from, Jerusalem or something like that. [It was] this huge, hand-carved set, and I mean, it was gorgeous, but also that wasn't \$15,000 that was going to anything that would actually help people. **I think that those kinds of things caused me more distress and caused me to feel less like I belonged in that space.** And for people who are on the intersections of a lot of different identities, that can do a lot of harm.

—Lucy, 23

Over and over in interviews, young people tell us they have a hard time trusting religious organizations and people because the *positive* expectations promoted formally by the institution aren't lived out by its own members. This is why one aspect of aligning tools with expectations is to take stock of the expectations that are being communicated (implicitly or explicitly) and to then work to ensure that members—not *just* young people—have clarity about how that value finds expression.

12

Read Lily Scott's reflection on the lack of alignment many young people experience between their lives and religious organizations in the blog post "The 'Disconnect' —Then and Now."



READ

Participation

Participation means young people feel committed to their religious communities just as much as those communities are committed to them. Both of these tools make the difference when it comes to helping young people understand and feel aligned with the expectations of their traditions. To meet a community's expectations without compromising mental and emotional health, young people must feel free, not forced, to participate. What's more, young people need to feel challenged without feeling defeated by the community's expectations.

Young people need to feel guided, not forced. Among young people who are currently connected to religious communities, a majority (62%) agree with the statement “I became a member of my place of worship or spiritual community *because I personally chose to belong.*” Considerable light is shed on the importance of feeling free, not forced, to participate, when we look at how young people who are no longer connected to any religious community answer this same question. Only 35%—over *half* the percentage above—agree that they are members because they personally chose to belong. There is a clear correlation (though, once again, not necessarily causal or conclusive) between feeling *free* to participate and therefore continuing to participate. And Springtide data show that at least some of this sense of pressure to participate comes from parents and families.

Fifty-seven percent of young people who are currently members of a religious community indicate that they initially joined because “family members expected it.” This influence from parents is not a bad thing. It's good and natural for parents to pass their values, beliefs, practices, and more to their kids. But when young people feel a lack of agency or choice in how they come to embrace what's passed along, it has implications for what their level of commitment is and *should* have implications for how we treat them. Their participation might still have to be “activated” to get true commitment.



One way to gauge whether religious communities encourage participation without force is to look at the opportunities young people feel they have to serve and lead. Active participation is an indication that even if they didn't originally choose their particular faith tradition, they now claim it as their own.

By and large, young people feel the positive expectation of their full participation in their religious and spiritual communities. Nearly three out of four young people who are currently connected to a religious community agree that “I, and other young people, have opportunities to serve within my place of worship or spiritual community.” Sixty-nine percent of those currently involved in these communities say they have opportunities to lead.

Young people need to feel challenged, not defeated. Sometimes, even when a young person is actively participating in a religious or spiritual community, the expectations clearly expressed by that community are simply incongruent with that young person's values. This is especially true when it comes to social issues like racism, classism, environmental issues, and LGBTQ+ membership within various religious spaces.

Maggie, a 19-year-old woman who identifies herself as Cherokee and Mexican, has faced discrimination in her church and at her faith-based school, and she feels that some of it stems from the foundational teachings of her church surrounding race, class, and sexual orientation. Those teachings, and how people act on those teachings by shaming and insulting her, led Maggie to feel like an outsider. Maggie felt this community had certain expectations that she did not and could not meet. At a large gathering for her faith, for example, “one of the guys said that people who have abortions are bitter fruit and that single moms are a drain on the education system. So, my mom, a single mom, was a drain on the education system, yet she got me to your school?” Maggie said she currently doesn't have “a belief in the church at all anymore,” and she isn't sure where she stands when it comes to beliefs. Maybe she believes in Jesus, but not the church. She is still working through those religious questions.

13

Watch Dr. Josh Packard talk with Dr. Natalie Avalos, an ethnographer of religion and a professor of Native/Indigenous studies, about decolonial approaches to religion for young people.



WATCH

In fact, many young people are working through questions of religiosity, faith, and spirituality and how the answers to those questions intersect with the things they care about. For example, several interviewees mentioned the incongruence they feel between their own lived identities, or that of their peers, and the expectations of their religious communities. Paisley, an 18-year-old woman, noted a couple of friends who came out to their religious communities and then experienced what she terms “a sort of frostiness that can occasionally come.” Paisley said: “Christians, even the ones who seem to be more accepting of gay people, in my experience at least, tend to say, ‘Hate the sin not the sinner.’ But even that can feel very uncomfortable to a person who is gay. Like ‘We love you. We just hate gay people,’ . . . and it can just make a very stressful and uncomfortable situation.”

No matter the presence of role models and conversation partners in a young person’s life, no matter the young person’s sense of responsibility and ownership over the faith, instances can arise when young people feel that the expectation to abide by a doctrinal or social teaching is too much. If racism, homophobia, classism, or other kinds of prejudice are baked into the culture—and maybe also the doctrines—of a particular religious organization, few tools can help create alignment with those kinds of expectations for young people. To the extent that these expectations are rigid and their violations are sanctioned in clear and public ways—as, for Maggie, questioning these tenets would lead to expulsion from her religiously affiliated school—these prevailing narratives within a religious setting can be spiritually and emotionally difficult for young people who otherwise yearn for membership in these spaces.

This may seem a hopeless bind for religious leaders who want to offer their presence and encourage the participation of young people but who don’t feel they can (or want to) change aspects of their tradition’s teachings or positions. The good news is that young people don’t need to be committed, card-carrying members of a religious institution to benefit from its wisdom traditions. Religious leaders shouldn’t make membership or conformity to doctrinal criteria a precondition for offering a mentoring



presence to young people asking life’s big questions. While faith leaders may not be able to do anything to change an institutional rule that ultimately discourages young people, they do not—and *should* not—withhold their presence or limit their outreach to those who *do* conform or join in formal ways. In “A Closer Look: Faith Unbundled,” on page 80, we present an idea first outlined in *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* that makes this clear: This mode of presence and participation is *already in line* with young people’s natural way of asking and answering religious questions.



Tide-Turning Tip from Our Springtide Ambassadors

Springtide ambassadors reflected on this report and offered tips based on their own experiences of expectations in religious settings. Here, one member offers strong advice to lead with love. Her grandmother’s clear stance on LGBTQ+ issues overshadowed any sense that this member was loved or accepted by God, the church, or her grandmother.



Teach openly that **the love and support of a community and from God is not conditional.**

I grew up with my grandmother, who was not always the greatest example of Catholicism. I grew up with a lot of guilt, but especially guilt about being gay. I always felt I had a big secret, even when I was little, and I always felt that if anyone found out, I wouldn’t and couldn’t belong.



Many religious traditions have at least some imagery or language that connects God with the experience of love. Leading with that message of unconditional love doesn’t have to be a watering down of other parts of a tradition, but it prevents closing the door to young people who overwhelmingly wish to belong and be loved.

Defining clear and achievable expectations is a key step for any organization to support young people’s mental health. Yet, inflexible systems, structures, and traditions may make it difficult for leaders to consistently fill that need. To help navigate this dilemma, faith leaders can utilize presence and participation to position themselves as trusted partners while young people explore their beliefs. Young people need adults to talk to, and having someone they can talk with about matters big and small helps build trust. They also need to feel guided toward participation, not forced into it. Building relationships where young people feel heard, and creating spaces where they can participate in genuine and authentic ways, are key elements in helping young people feel challenged by expectations, not defeated by them.

Here, another member reflects on the appreciation she gained for her faith community’s reverence for “mystery” and question asking when she visited a faith community where the expectations were more reluctant about such things.

I once attended this youth group that was lots of fun, but there wasn’t a lot of room to question what the youth group leaders would say. **It bothered me not to be able to ask a lot of questions.** Something I grew to appreciate about my own church, where my mom was the leader, was something she often said when preaching: ‘Great is the mystery of faith.’ There was a sense that you get to lean into the mystery of God, which opened up the chance for young people to ask questions.



Expectations around the importance of certainty and doubt are pervasive in religious communities. But seeking answers *and* leaning into mystery can both be holy activities for young people as they navigate some of life’s biggest questions. One of the best things a role model in faith can do is to practice saying, “I’m not sure about the answer to that question—let’s find out together.”

Reflections on Expectations

Insights from Matthew Grossman

Best practices in adolescent development have long spoken to the importance of structure and routine in the life of a young person, from consistent daily schedules to regular interactions with influential figures in their lives. Of course, religion can be a source of structure in one's life, yet there is a balance between structure and expectations that faith-based organizations must strike when working with young people.

Leaders of BBYO, a pluralistic Jewish teen movement, recently spoke with teens about safety. We found that they overwhelmingly equate feelings of safety with environments in which they are accepted for who they are. This discovery leaves faith-based organizations with both a wonderful opportunity and an interesting conundrum. For Jewish communities, the opportunity is to reinforce with young people that they are accepted for who they are and can feel safe in our spaces because they were created in the image of G-d (the Jewish principle of *B'tselem Elohim*). However, this same G-d in whose image they were created, has laid out certain expectations, which they may or may not choose to incorporate into the way they live their lives. It begs the question; can religious leaders share expectations of faith without expecting or even desiring its practice?

For teens in BBYO, there is a difference in the expectations that come from religious leaders and the faith itself. In BBYO, the teen community is the faith leader—there is no central rabbi or spiritual leader. Adult figures are present as educators who represent a broad spectrum of ideas and practices. BBYO's expectation of teen participants is that they engage in learning and exploration so that the creativity and uniqueness that exists in each of them will piece together a road map that will work best in their own lives.



The connection between acceptance and safety is a critical learning and factors significantly into the expectations that faith-based groups set for their members. Safety has not always traditionally been associated with religious communities, and changes caused by the pandemic and the social unrest clearly rooted in hate have eroded the safety that many young people crave in their lives. Young people need to feel safe to open themselves up to communal participation as well as social, emotional, and spiritual growth. There is a compelling opportunity for faith-based organizations to restore a sense of safety for young people, but it starts with reexamining the expectations that are typically placed upon them in religious settings and/or faith communities.



Matthew Grossman *has served as the CEO of BBYO (formerly B'nai B'rith Youth Organization Inc.) since 2004 and is responsible for working with the organization's teen, professional, volunteer, and philanthropic leaders to set BBYO's vision and direction. Matt takes great pride in BBYO's ability to bring Jewish teens together so they can form powerful, authentic relationships with one another and with inspiring adult role models.*



PURPOSE

Connecting with Something Bigger

“ Everyone is trying to find their purpose right now. Everyone hasn’t even reached that, so they’re trying so many different outlets, but I would say within my grade, at least, **very few have found it through their faith** [—it’s usually parents or friends].

—Misty, 17

“ I think that having a **larger sense of purpose** allows [one] to feel more grounded instead of being, like, a lot of times when you’re in your teens, you’re just like, Where do I go? But it **gives them almost a guide path or something to work with.**

—Jade, 22

“ What’s left [after productivity]? I mean, the answer might partially be the spirituality piece, but it’s hard for that to really be what’s left when [**so many of**] **our existing religions don’t really support the whole freedom of human expression.**

—Lucy, 23

I do think that people can improve their mental health by going to church and that sort of thing 'cause it just provides a potential reason for why things are the way they are, because that's what religion is. The definition I learned for a religion, rather than a belief system, is the need to explain why and how we got here. And **some people often do have existential crises, and they don't have the answers to those questions, and religion can provide an answer to that and that helps.**

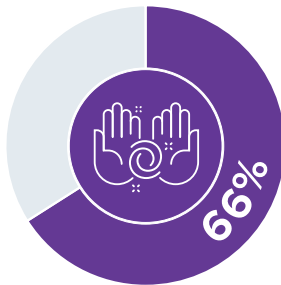
—Hayden, 15

If a friend comes to me and they need something, and **I'm able to help them or be there for them**, even if I don't have all the answers—just like, be a shoulder to cry on—**that's always made me feel, I guess, fulfilled or, like, there's a reason I'm here**, you know?

—Rose, 16

I understand why people would bring religion into purpose because they'd probably say, . . . 'Oh God gave me life because this is my purpose.' And try to create that connect[ion]. [That connection] for me is more of, like, **connecting to my highest self and connect[ing] to that purpose, you know, and just being able to heal, enjoy my time and my journey, and help others.**

—Eva, 23



Young people who agree or strongly agree:
“I live my life with a sense of purpose.”

Springtide data confirm that the majority of young people ages 13 to 25 are religious and spiritual, even while formal religious affiliation is on the decline. Many approach their faith in ways that combine different modes of identifying, practicing, believing, and participating in community that don't necessarily all come from one tradition or institution. What's more, Gen Z is sometimes called the "activist generation" for their collective concern for addressing the social issues of the day. These observations make it clear: purpose matters to young people. Two out of every three young people we surveyed tell us they live their life with a sense of purpose.

But how they seek and where they discover purpose is diverse. Misty, Lucy, and Eva, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, feel skeptical about the role and relevance of religion when it comes to young people's pursuit of purpose. Jade and Hayden, neither of whom identify with a particular religious tradition, both nonetheless affirm the way spirituality or organized religion can help young people as they seek a sense of purpose. Indeed, at a time in life when young people are really looking for clarity, Jade tells us that spirituality and purpose can alleviate a lot of the anxiety that comes with ambiguity and constant searching. Many of the young people we interviewed echoed Misty, Rose, and Eva's sense that being of service to others, meeting personal goals, and investing in family and friend relationships are the heart of their sense of purpose.

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Read the blog post "Young People Are Always Going to Be the Major Drivers of Change," and watch trusted adult Nima Dahir talk with her younger sister Fardowsa about values and meaning.



READ

What is purpose?

For this report and the others in our *Springtide Series on Mental Health*, we've used the term *purpose* to refer to a sense of connection with something or someone bigger than oneself, a mode of self-transcendence that can have several vehicles and several ends, depending on the tradition or the participant in it. For young people, this might be a hobby they're passionate about, a community they're involved with, a spiritual practice that grounds them, a belief in a divine source, or something else.

There are layers to this term though. And those layers show up in our data, as young people use the word *purpose* throughout their interviews in ways that sometimes indicate a broader definition than those we've used explicitly in our survey materials. Young people talk about purpose in terms of having a direction for their lives or their careers; they talk about purpose as a system for making sense of suffering or calling; they think of it as synonymous with happiness or satisfaction in life. In *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life*, William Damon writes: "Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self." We appreciate this two-pronged definition, which makes room for both the individual layer of purpose *and* the way purpose relates to the rest of the world.

Religious and spiritual communities are an ideal domain for conversations about what it means to align with something greater, and religious and spiritual leaders are an excellent fit to help young people navigate the path to purpose. Though few young people turn to traditional institutional religion as a one-stop shop for their purpose seeking, several note that their faith community played a pivotal role in that overall process. Forty-two percent of young people who say they are moderately or very religious say that their experiences within a religious or spiritual community helped them find purpose. Even Jade, who no longer participates in organized religion, notes this benefit when it comes to the resources that religion can offer young people.

“ I think if you're part of an organized religion, which is something that I do miss, [you have] leaders and guiders in your community who you feel like you can trust. You have a pastor or a youth group leader. These are people, adults in your community, who are not just your parents. And I think that's really powerful when you can have other adults in your life, besides your parents, that you can look to as a source of truth and a source of wisdom. And religion or a sense of being part of something like that, it's able to give people those adults in their life.

—Jade, 22



A CLOSER LOOK

Faith Unbundled

Springtide data show that young people increasingly construct their faith by combining elements such as beliefs, identity, community, and practices from a variety of sources, rather than receiving all these things from a single, intact system or tradition. We introduced the concept of Faith Unbundled to describe this in *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty*.

To understand unbundled faith, it is helpful to explore both the religious and nonreligious sources young people turn to when navigating the spheres of belief, identity, community, and practices. As sociologists, we set out to answer this question: What does Faith Unbundled *look like* in the lives of young people?



Belief unbundled from a single source or system looks like young people who turn to many or various sources when making meaning and discerning what to believe about right and wrong, purpose and calling, salvation and suffering, and more. It looks like **curiosity**.



Identity unbundled from a single source or system looks like young people who are unwilling to shed parts of themselves to fit into a prescribed narrative about who and how to be in the world. It looks like a commitment to **wholeness**.

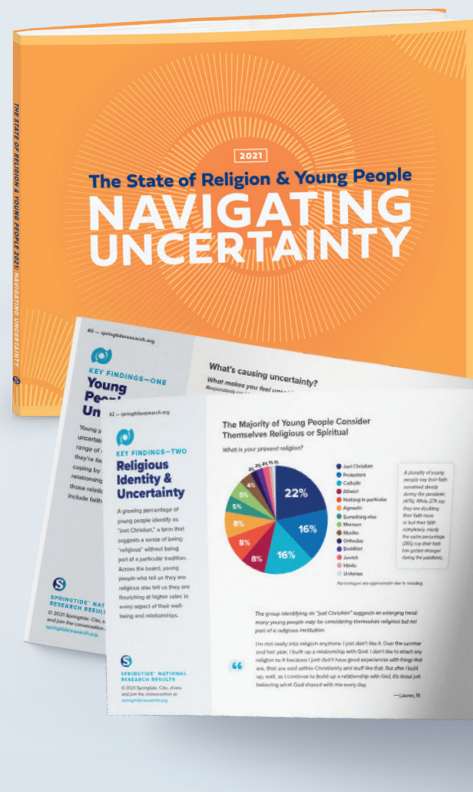


Community unbundled from a single source or system looks like young people who show up where trusted personal relationships exist or new ones seem possible, young people who are willing to forgo participation in communities lacking these qualities, even if they have had long-term associations with these communities. It looks like **connection**.



Practices unbundled from a single source or system looks like young people who blend and adapt various rituals and behaviors to suit and make sense of the current questions they're facing. It looks like **flexibility**.

What this means and *why this matters* for religious and spiritual leaders is simple: Young people are exploring religious questions differently from previous generations and, for that reason, differently than religious leaders might expect. Instead of expecting exclusive membership, faith leaders can meet young people where they are in their exploration. They can lead with questions rather than answers. They can go out from their houses of worship rather than expect young people to flock to them. They can focus on long-term accompaniment and trust building rather than affiliation “status” at any given point in time. Despite different ways of believing, identifying, participating, or practicing, young people still rely on spiritual and religious resources as they bundle together the elements of their faith. And for this reason, they still need the guidance of religious and spiritual leaders.



Although nearly 75% of young people are religious or spiritual, they don't turn to their faith communities to help them through stressful moments in life. This gap can be bridged. *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* has the data, insights, and frameworks to show you how.

Learn about Faith Unbundled, a framework to help leaders better understand the way young people are constructing their religious and spiritual lives by drawing on a variety of sources.

Faith Unbundled

describes the way young people increasingly construct their faith by combining elements such as beliefs, identity, practices, and community from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources rather than receiving all these things from a single, intact system or tradition.

DEFINITION

A CLOSER LOOK

Young people who report having found **significant meaning in their lives**



Young people who report having **discovered a satisfying life purpose**



- **I am currently** connected to a spiritual or religious community.
- **I used to be** connected to a spiritual or religious community.

Why does purpose matter for mental health?

There is a strong and significant correlation between mental wellness and purpose. Sociologists have shown that groups that prioritize the pursuit of meaning and purpose, both as a group and as individuals, have positive effects on the mental wellness of their members. Our data confirm this trend in clear ways:

Almost by definition, religious organizations have—or *should* have—the qualities social scientists point to (namely, *connection*, *expectations*, and *purpose*) when it comes to supporting mental health. But if those qualities are never accessed, they can't benefit the young people who need them most.

Discovering Purpose

Young people benefit by being connected to and involved with religion and spirituality. But access to these traditions may feel difficult or even impossible for young people who don't share the identities, beliefs, practices, or communities offered by a certain tradition. Springtide wasn't surprised to see—despite the data that correlate religiosity with positive mental health and a strong sense of purpose—that many young people nonetheless say they don't find religion, including religious practices, communities, or beliefs, to be especially helpful in discovering their own sense of purpose in the world. Indeed, young people ranked “nothing has helped” higher than “participating in religious or spiritual practices” when asked what kinds of experiences have encouraged them to discover a sense of purpose. Asking questions and seeking information is the most common way young people say they find a sense of purpose. Half (50%) of young people say this. The next most common ways are experiencing and emerging from a hardship (43%), and adhering to beliefs about how to treat others (35%).

What experiences have helped you discover your purpose?

Asking questions and seeking information about things that matter to me



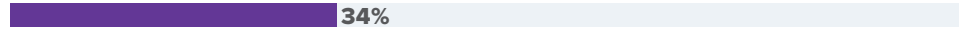
Experiencing trauma, hardship, or illness, either of my own or someone I care about



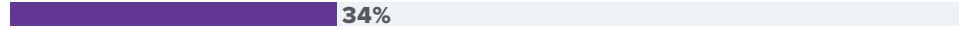
Following beliefs I was taught about how to treat others



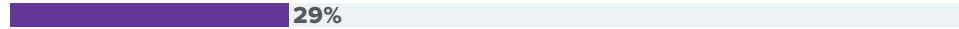
Caring for and supporting people in my life



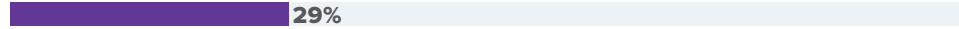
Making music or art



Being inspired by what someone I look up to is doing with their life



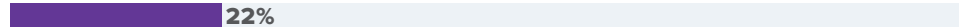
Using my knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute to society



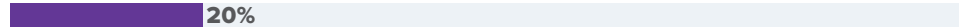
Developing expertise or skills



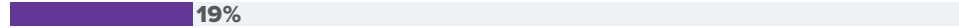
Traveling, camping, or hiking in nature or in places with different cultures than my own



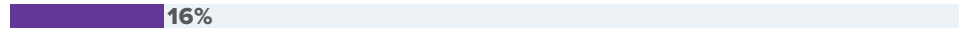
Developing my interests and talents by trying things and receiving encouragement from others



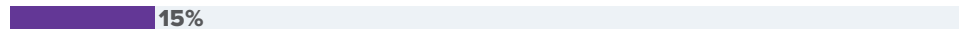
Being part of a community that values treating others with care and respect



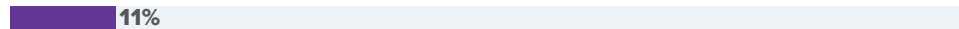
Knowledge I have about a religion's understanding of God (or a higher power)



Experiences of God's presence in my life



Belonging to a religious or spiritual community



Nothing has helped or is helping me discover my purpose



Participating in religious or spiritual practices



< *Young people could select more than one response.*

On the one hand, as sociologists, we know that participating in religious and spiritual practices *does* tend to help young people discover their purpose and encourage their mental wellness. On the other hand, young people don't seem to recognize the importance of these practices in their own lives unless they are already invested in using them. Of those who are or have been connected to religious communities, there is a sense of acknowledgment that those spaces have helped facilitate a purpose:

Of young people who are or have been involved in religious communities (i.e., church, mosque, temple, synagogue, etc.):



One of the ways to bridge this gap between the young people *accessing* religious and spiritual resources to help discover their purpose and *acknowledging* those avenues as modes for such a discovery is for religious and spiritual communities to focus on facilitating purpose.

In this section, we show specifically what some of those experiences are likely to entail—based on the things they already told us they are inclined to pursue for facilitating purpose. It is in these moments that young people begin to figure out who they are and how they fit into the world, and it's vital that a religious leader is there; otherwise, young people might not see their purpose as connected to the transcendent in any particular way.

Making Space for Trauma and Hardship

Forty-three percent of young people tell us that experiencing trauma, hardship, or illness, either of their own or of someone they care about, has helped them discover a sense of purpose.

Jeff Neel, the Executive Director of Northern Colorado Youth for Christ, who is quoted in the introduction to this book, recently transformed his entire ministry around helping kids heal from trauma by creating a program around Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) principles. Even before the pandemic, his group started to recognize this as a core need for the youth they served.

“It was really very simple,” Neel says. “We just realized that there was no way of talking to a kid about God while they were dealing with trauma that they couldn’t process or even understand. But we also realized that trauma ministry wasn’t just about getting an avenue to engage them; it was also the way we were able to demonstrate love and care and concern for them that, for us, comes directly from our faith. So the kids really get to feel cared for and experience God at the same time.”

Neel’s TBRI-informed ministry approach helps young people not only to heal from hardship but to understand their trauma, and the way they respond to it, in a different context where they have agency and control.

Neel’s success in this approach is not surprising. With 55% of young people telling us they have experienced trauma (whether through illness, hardship, or something else), the leaders who make space for young people to process this kind of hardship put themselves in a position to accompany young people as they find a sense of purpose. This isn’t because religious organizations *must* become first-response centers for mental health or must put aside religious concerns in favor of those explicitly about mental health or trauma. It’s because going through a difficult time is one of the primary ways young people tell us they are discovering a sense of purpose in life—and making spaces for addressing these concerns means meeting young people where they’re at in their own discovery of purpose in life.

15

Watch Marte Aboagye talk with Charlie Lucas about the free notOK App® that he and his sister created.



WATCH

Encouraging Integrity between Beliefs and Practices

Thirty-five percent of young people tell us that following the beliefs they were taught about how to treat others has helped them discover a sense of purpose.

Many religious traditions promote a version of the “golden rule”—the principle to treat others as one hopes to be treated. If a religious community holds this value, members need to express it through actions in the world too. In essence, it is a principle that insists on integrity between what is professed and what is acted upon. Misty, quoted earlier in this chapter, recognizes how religious beliefs are *most valuable* for her when she can put them into practice.



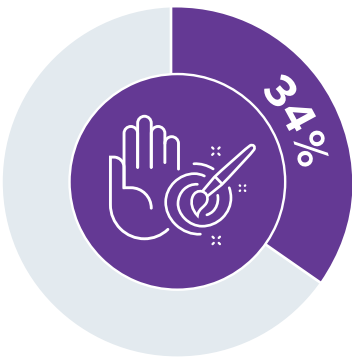
For me personally, just knowing my belief doesn't really impact my mental health, but if I act upon it, that gives me more clarity in my head. So, for me, just knowing that I'm Catholic and knowing that I trust God doesn't really fulfill me. I need to **do something** with that.

—Misty, 17

The ability to process abstract thought is still developing during adolescence, so it makes sense that young people benefit from putting ideas into action. Putting beliefs about how to treat others into action is the experience ranked next highest for young people trying to find purpose. More than one in three (34%) say that caring for and supporting people in their lives has helped them discover their purpose.

Turning to the Arts

Opportunities to discover purpose can come about when music or art prompts a new way to process or consider life. A good book whose protagonist is easy to relate to can trigger an “Aha!” that helps us see how to move through a circumstance. Things like art, music, or even nature, in general, are powerful vehicles for helping connect us with something outside ourselves. Making art or music can be even more powerful than simply enjoying them.



34% of young people say that ***making music or art has helped them discover a sense of purpose.***

In that sense, they are “religious” vehicles in themselves, fostering a sense of “something more” that can lead to conversations, questions, and curiosities at home within diverse religious traditions and rituals. Art and music connect us to something greater through wonder: curiosity about the world around us, including the experience of others. This can lead to self-understanding, as those insights also teach us a new vocabulary for our own self-expression. It’s not surprising then that more than one in three young people say that music and art are important ways they discover their sense of purpose in life.

When we unpack this statistic from the vantage point of those who are currently, used to be, or have never been involved in religious and spiritual communities, interesting data emerges.

“Making music or art has helped me discover a sense of purpose.”



Religious leaders need to think creatively about how to use the arts to engage the young people already within their religious organizations, those who have left, and those who have never stepped a foot inside. Clearly, those who are not currently connected to any religious communities (whether they ever have been) turn to music and art at higher rates than those currently connected. Finding opportunities for the arts to play a greater role in religious and spiritual spaces might help more young people see them as spaces that encourage purpose seeking.

16

Read about and view art by Acadia Neel in the blog post “A 16-Year-Old Uses Art to Reflect on Mental Health.”



READ

We know that young people actually find religious spaces encouraging when they're in them, despite the low rankings for knowing about God, experiencing God's presence, belonging to a religious community, and participating in religious practices (all at 16% or lower) for activities or experiences that help young people discover their purpose.

Why, if religion and spirituality are good for young people, don't young people *consistently* recognize their value?

A full answer to this question is beyond this report and the data we've collected for it. But what our data can show should nonetheless be encouraging to leaders: that



Tide-Turning Tip from Our Springtide Ambassadors

Springtide ambassadors reflected on this report and offered tips based on their own experiences of connection in religious settings. Here, one member feels encouraged to discover his own sense of purpose when the faith leaders in his life take seriously the big life questions he's discerning and provide opportunities to explore them, independently and together:



I think of the role of discernment, and having my faith leaders bring this up, as an invitation to deepen my own journey. Just having people refer to workshops and by initiating with expectations about the place of **heart-to-heart conversations and finding kindred spirits to walk together in this path** are such critical ways to help me find my purpose.



Springtide often remarks that young people are at the intersection of *being* and *becoming*. Find or create concrete opportunities for young people to discover their purpose—to help them *become*—like workshops, spiritual conversations, and intentional acts of accompaniment.

there is something inherently mental-health friendly about religion and spirituality for young people ages 13 to 25—whether they recognize it or not—and faith leaders can build on that.

In fact, we can say a bit more. There is agreement among religious leaders and young people themselves that purpose is important for life. As declining institutional engagement across all sectors has taken a toll on religious life, there is still a desire for experiences of things like beauty, awe, wonder, goodness, calling, and love—things that might very well be called or connected to the divine. The pathway to purpose for religious organizations runs through these elements, by connecting God or divine or spirituality to *experiences*.

Another member discusses how meaningful it is to experience an exchange of wisdom within his religious community. He loves to learn some of the ancient and traditional aspects of his faith but feels especially encouraged in his faith when he gets to introduce some of his personal practices to the group he's a part of.

Having spiritual mentors ask me what I need, what practices I turn to, and inviting me to contribute my own practices to our religious gatherings are all ways I feel supported in seeking my purpose. It's not that I don't want any pointers—I **actually really like being integrated into long-established traditions. But I also like feeling welcome to participate as myself**, to bring my own traditions to bear on our community in addition to learning from our long-held practices.



For young people, purpose has stakes in the personal. Encourage young people to bring their own perspective and practices to the table when and where there is flexibility for such things.

Purpose with Stakes in the Personal

Insights from Marcie Alvis-Walker

In 2005, the *New York Times* best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* by Rick Warren, received attention on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. This book bridged the gap between religion and self-help. Suddenly, churches received new visitors who were *seeking to find their purpose*. However, the first thing the book told people about their purpose was this: *It's not about you. It's about God.*

This was a familiar, even *comforting* message, especially for those who, like me, were raised in a Black Southern Baptist faith tradition steeped in evangelical culture. We were already familiar with this line of thinking. During my adolescent years, I don't recall a church sermon or Bible study that spoke about my purpose or mental health. Instead, the concern of most sermons and studies was my salvation (not purpose) and my spiritual (not mental) health. We went to church to worship God and learn about *God's* meaning and purpose—not our own. It was clear from the pastor's message that our purpose was simple: to worship. Talk of mental health fell into the category of self-help. And according to the faith of my youth, "the self" had little help to offer us; it might even get in the way of that ultimate purpose.

Though this message—that purpose is simply *all about God*—comforted us, it would be less comforting to our children.

Now 20 years after the publication of *The Purpose Driven Life*, Springtide is exploring how young people find purpose. They asked Gen Z this question: "What experiences have helped you discover your purpose?" (see p. 83). The answers given by young people complicate the idea of their purpose



solely being about God. Fifty percent say “asking questions and seeking information about things that matter to me” is important to finding their purpose. The key words here are “things that matter to *me*.” For young people, discovering a sense of purpose is absolutely *all* about them, their experiences, and the people they care about.

As a digital content creator, I’ve found that writing about a God whose purpose is bigger than any single, monolithic experience is essential for connecting with Gen Z. They have shared with me that a God who is more than a white tower in the sky, a God who is more than one gender or more than one cultural experience, is a God they already know and would like to hear more from. This is the reflection of God that they see in their friends and cultural icons who are varied in gender, race, faith, language, sexuality, and sexual preference. For them, a “purpose driven life” is not possible apart from their identities as individuals. Far from selfish, they acknowledge that they are integral to the equation of their own purpose, rather than an obstacle to it.



Marcie Alvis-Walker is a writer based in Chicago. She is the curator of the popular Instagram handle *@blackcoffeewithwhitefriends*, which focuses on race, theology, and current events, with a corresponding blog of the same name. She is also the writer and creator of *Black-Eyed Bible Stories*, a *Substack* newsletter and podcast focused on *Black Womanist* readings of the Bible.



Conclusion

Young people’s mental health is at an all-time low. While the pandemic didn’t cause this epidemic, it has exacerbated it. And faith leaders are on the front lines when it comes to responding. But what if there were ways to create spaces that are mental-health friendly, so that crisis response wasn’t the only way to address the current national emergency around young people’s mental health?

That question drove Springtide to investigate what qualities might naturally support mental health within organizations. We learned that religious and spiritual spaces are among the best suited to help support the mental health of young people.

In fact, *The State of Religion 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know* confirms decades of sociological research: **Religion and spirituality help mental health.** Our data confirm that identifying as religious or spiritual, maintaining beliefs that guide daily life, engaging in various religious and spiritual practices, and participating in religious communities are *all* correlated with higher reported mental wellness among young people.

But, of course, religion can harm mental health if not offered with care. Religious leaders must do their part to ensure that their spaces are mental-health friendly. Fostering connections for young people that lead to belonging, aligning tools and expectations, and encouraging young people to discover their purpose are three ways to make sure religious and spiritual spaces—and the faith leaders and trusted adults within those spaces—are proactively caring for young people’s mental health.

In each of these areas, there is work to do. Young people involved in religious communities feel noticed, named, and known, but this doesn’t necessarily lead to a sense of belonging. There are gaps in presence and participation that make it hard for young people to feel aligned with the expectations of their religious communities. And young people are seeking purpose in ways that may not always look like traditional religious activities—but in many cases, there’s no reason those activities can’t be pursued on religious or spiritual terms.

Equipped with renewed understanding, critical insights, and expert advice, we encourage faith leaders to think and act creatively to help support not only the mental health of the young people in their care but also the *spiritual* health of those in their care and those young people *outside* formal membership.

APPENDIX

Research Methodology & Promise

Quantitative Research

Springtide Research Institute collects quantitative data through surveys and qualitative data through interviews. The quantitative data tell us what is happening. The qualitative data tell us why and how it is happening.

For the quantitative data in this report, we conducted several studies about mental health in various settings beginning in the fall of 2021. We surveyed a nationally representative sample of young people ages 13 to 25 in the United States, totaling 9,837 participants. The sample was weighted for age, gender, race, and region to match the demographics of the country, and it produces a margin of error of +/- 3%. The age, gender, and racial demographics of this sample are indicated in the tables on the right.

For the quantitative data in *The Cultural Bounds of Belonging*, we conducted a dedicated study on belonging within Hispanic and Latino communities in 2021. We pooled data from the 2020 to 2022 waves of our nationally representative survey to create a subsample of Hispanic and Latino young people ages 13 to 25 in the United States, totaling 4,594 participants.

| Age | Valid Percent |
|--------------|---------------|
| 13 to 17 | 30% |
| 18 to 25 | 70% |
| Total | 100% |

| Gender | Valid Percent |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Girl/Woman or Transgender Girl/Woman | 55% |
| Boy/Man or Transgender Boy/Man | 40% |
| Nonbinary | 5% |
| Total | 100% |

| Race | Valid Percent |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| White | 53% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 22% |
| Black or African American | 17% |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 1% |
| Asian | 5% |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | <1% |
| Other | 2% |
| Total | 100% |

Tables may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

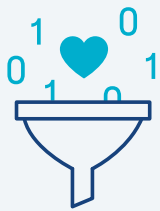
Qualitative Research

For the qualitative research in this report, we conducted 105 in-depth interviews, either in person, via telephone, or via video. Interviews focused on understanding how young people regard and experience mental health in their lives. For *The Cultural Bounds of Belonging* qualitative data, we conducted 15 in-depth

interviews, either in person, via telephone, or via video. Interviews focused on understanding where, why, and how Hispanic and Latino young people experience belonging. Conversations were guided but open-ended, allowing for as much direction as possible from the interviewee. Interviews were transcribed, lightly cleaned, and then analyzed thematically. The use of brackets in the qualitative quotes indicates that a word was replaced. All replacements come directly from the context of the quote to ensure accuracy. The use of bold in the qualitative quotes indicates emphasis added rather than emphasis in the original.

In addition to the interviews, we hosted a focus group in a ninth-grade religion classroom of 24 students. The conversation took place in December 2021 and lasted about 90 minutes. Our researchers asked students to take time to record their thoughts and to share aloud their responses to questions about mental health in their school environment.

Interviews and survey responses are confidential, and all names of research participants in this report are pseudonyms. For more information, please contact us at research@springtideresearch.org.



Our Research Promise

At Springtide Research Institute, we are committed to a Data with Heart™ approach. Our approach is rooted in deep systematic listening to young people and the things they care about. It is founded on values, commitments, and beliefs that ground why we do our research, in addition to employing a variety of rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods. Our philosophy and approach are dynamic— informed by varying ways of listening to young people through our Springtide Ambassadors Program (SAP), Writer in Residence, *The Voices of Young People Podcast*, interns, and BIPOC fellows.

This series of commitments is ever-evolving, just like the diversity and context of the young people that we are committed to. We commit to reassessing this philosophy in an ongoing capacity to reflect and embody our promise to be culturally informed and inclusive.

- 1 We are committed to listening to young people.
- 2 We believe that the voices of young people should shape what we study.
- 3 We bring our whole selves into our conversations with young people to build trust by owning our biases, being vulnerable about our own lives, and demonstrating that we are accountable for what we do and do not know.
- 4 We strive to deepen our understanding of young people, rather than impose our expectations on them.
- 5 We encourage young people to share their stories and creative expressions because we recognize that knowledge and truth are culturally bound and that young people actively shape our world.
- 6 We understand the value of numbers and that they are enriched by the words shared with us by young people.
- 7 We know that the questions are just as important as the answers and that our inquiry itself is a statement of our values.
- 8 We seek to break down the boxes that research often puts people into by exploring and understanding the highly variable lived experiences of young people.
- 9 We foster diverse ways of understanding the nuance and complexity of young people and social phenomena and are constantly expanding our methodologies to reflect what we have learned.
- 10 We resolve to produce knowledge that is actionable, useful, and valuable to the communities and organizations we serve.

Note: Numerals above are for reference only and not an indication of priority.

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Special thanks, as well, to the 2021 and 2022 cohorts of the Springtide Ambassadors Program. These young people, ages 13 to 25, have been regular conversation partners about mental health and Gen Z. They responded to surveys about possible focus areas and engaged in dialogue about questions and themes that arose in the course of our research and writing. Visit springtideresearch.org/springtide-ambassadors for more information about Springtide's ambassadors.

The influence of both groups in this report is diffuse and substantial. Their voices are clear in the contributions from Serena Bian and Marcie Alvis-Walker, in the Tide-Turning Tips, in our language, and in some of our insights and conclusions.

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Resources Listed throughout the Report

The resources referenced in numbered marginal notes in this report, which are listed here, are available at springtideresearch.org/the-state-2022-resources.

RESOURCE 1

Page 5—Watch members of our Springtide Ambassadors Program bring our tribute to life with their creative interpretation and filmmaking skills.

RESOURCE 2

Page 9—Watch Dr. Josh Packard introduce *The Springtide Series on Mental Health*.

RESOURCE 3

Page 12—Watch Marte Aboagye and Vanessa Trine, Internal Family Systems therapist and creator of *Support Deck*, discuss support strategies for use with young people.

RESOURCE 4

Page 13—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.

RESOURCE 5

Page 16—Watch Dr. Josh Packard explain why Springtide chose *mental health* rather than *mental illness* or *mental wellness* as its research focus.

RESOURCE 6

Page 20—Read “3 Ways to Help Gen Z Flourish: Strategies for Faith Leaders in a Post-Pandemic World,” a free guide with data-driven insights about young people and how to best care for them.

RESOURCE 7

Page 45—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.

RESOURCE 8

Page 47—Read dozens of stories by young people ages 13 to 25 celebrating experiences of belonging and connection during the 2021–2022 school year, in *The LessLonely #2022TimeCapsule*.

RESOURCE 9

Page 58—For more insights on how to support the flourishing of Latino young people, read *The Cultural Bounds of Belonging: A Closer Look at Latino Young People*.

RESOURCE 10

Page 59—Listen to associate researcher Nabil Tueme interview young Latinos in season 6 of *The Voices of Young People Podcast*.

RESOURCE 11

Page 67—Read Abby Jones’s reflections on turning to friends, family, and God to navigate big questions in the blog post “Turning to Trusted Relationships” on our *Voices of Young People* blog.

RESOURCE 12

Page 68—Read Lily Scott’s reflection on the lack of alignment many young people experience between their lives and religious organizations in the blog post “The ‘Disconnect’ —Then and Now.”

RESOURCE 13

Page 70—Watch Dr. Josh Packard talk with Dr. Natalie Avalos, an ethnographer of religion and a professor of Native/Indigenous studies, about decolonial approaches to religion for young people.

RESOURCE 14

Page 78—Read the blog post “Young People Are Always Going to Be the Major Drivers of Change,” and watch trusted adult Nima Dahir talk with her younger sister Fardowsa about values and meaning.

RESOURCE 15

Page 85—Watch Marte Aboagye talk with Charlie Lucas about the free notOK App® that he and his sister created.

RESOURCE 16

Page 87—Read about and view art by Acadia Neel in the blog post “A 16-Year-Old Uses Art to Reflect on Mental Health.”

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—Francine Constantini,
Director of Youth Ministry, Diocese of Cleveland



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