

# Generation Z Mental Health Resource Guide

For educators, parents and counselors endeavoring to support emerging adults.

By Jodi Aman, DSW

## A Note From Dr. Jodi

*You've got this! Being a parent, caregiver, teacher, guardian, grandparent, or counselor of Gen Z is not for the faint of heart. It is difficult! In your role, you have a front-row seat to the mental health crisis plaguing this generation, so I don't have to tell you that it is a grave concern with dire consequences for our students, communities, and families. You may be feeling helpless, worried, and frankly, at times, desperate for understanding and something to help them. Before we go into what you can do, I want to first acknowledge what you are already doing. You are showing up in their corner, day after day. Your efforts are making a huge difference, even if they don't seem like they are. That's because changes kids make are subtle and take time.*

*Individuating (becoming a human adult) is a one-step-forward-three-steps-back kind of deal.*

*Also, I want to tell you that nothing is wrong with them. This is not a mental illness, weakness or pathology. The way they feel is a regular human response to our world. So, do we have to change the world? Or, help young people understand and manage it? Yes and yes. Unfortunately, only 41% of young people suffering receive professional help for their emotional turmoil; and on average, many wait 11 years before getting it. So it is parents, teachers, school counselors that are on the front lines, burning themselves out trying to help. You are not alone. Now you have me to explain the problem and share the solution as I have come to understand it in my 26 years of clinical experience and decades of academic research. In the following pages, you'll read about four things teenagers need to thrive emotionally in this modern world. This will both affirm what you already suspect, and point you to a more impactful response. I believe in you!*

*Warm regards,*

Jodi Aman, D.S.W.

Psychotherapist | Author | Speaker



# The Youth Mental Health Crisis: Growing Up in Today's Context

## The Problem

Adolescents have an increased risk of mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and depression than they did 20 years ago. In 2004, 9% of adolescents, ages 12-27, reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the previous year; in 2019, that rose to 15.7%; and in 2023, a staggering 42% (These statistics are from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Unfortunately, these symptoms escalate secondary consequences of self-harm, suicide, substance use, and violence, all which create a context for worsening symptoms.

Understanding common adolescent mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, as well as their prevalence and causes, is essential to countering this crisis. However, defining anxiety and depression is complicated due to the variety of ways professionals and sufferers perceive them. Rather than the medical model of mental problems, which assumes the illness is inside a person, it's more realistic to understand that anxiety and depression come out of the context of people's lives, such as difficult situations, loss, traumas, and societal pressures.

Therefore, in this resources guide, "anxiety" and "depression" are used as descriptors of an experience rather than labels or diagnoses.

1. **Anxiety** is an experience of the sympathetic nervous system response—the hormone adrenaline's effects on the body—when there is no physical danger present, for example, excessive worry, looming dread, cognitive and physical hyperarousal, and increased breathing and heart rate.
2. **Depression** describes feelings such as hopelessness low self-esteem; sadness; loss of interest and pleasure in activities; loss of appetite, motivation and energy; and difficulty or excessive sleeping.

Anxiety and depression are experienced in various ways and intensities depending on a person's history, their perception of the danger, and how they make meaning of their experience. Because they both can result from chaotic contexts, like insecurity, uncertainty, and instability, anxiety can be a result of a person experiencing depression, and depression can be a result of someone experiencing anxiety. Thus, **they occur in combination more often than either condition occurs alone** and have overlapping signs and symptoms that can increase suffering.

# **The growing problem is evident; the well-being of young people is compromised**

## **Why is this happening?**

Research has revealed correlations between increased emotional distress and the following four contextual factors:

1. Increased screen time
2. Isolation and loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic
3. Decreased necessity to engage in survival chores
4. Increased power inequity in communities


Each of these 4 areas is described in more detail in the following pages along with practical solutions you can use to address them.

## **Increased Screen Time**

Research confirms our suspicions that adolescents who spend more time on their phones also reported having more mental health issues (Twenge et al., 2018). The mechanisms of this are two-fold: The first is that with constant phone use, young people are missing the time to create, communicate authentically, and be bored. This interrupts the natural dopamine cycle, and among other things, lead to depression, isolation, and lack of motivation.

The other mechanism is three kinds of messages coming through constant access to social media that interrupt the conceptual understanding of cause and effect, making people feel worthless, powerless and out of control. These messages are (1) “Everyone is better than you,” (2) “You are probably in danger,” (3) “You deserve stuff just because.” [Watch my TEDxWilmington Talk to learn more about these.](#)

Increased phone use make young people (and people of all other ages) feel increasingly worthless, powerless, and out of control.

 “Everyone is better than you.”

Social media and the like encourage us to compare ourselves to the ideal pictures that we see. We don't see the messy parts of celebrities' or peers' lives, and this tricks us into thinking that they don't have any. (Meanwhile, you're up close and personal with your messy parts.) On social media, everyone seems happy, confident, loved, and successful. It appears that they are just born lucky rather than doing anything to get there. The more time teens spend on social media, the more depressed and anxious they report feeling. When they compare themselves to a thin slice at the end of someone's success story (the effect), they don't take into account the failure, hard work, and mistakes (the cause) that got them there. And, so, they repeatedly find themselves inadequate, worthless, powerless, and out of control.

😞 “you are probably in danger.”

The second is that traumatic events in social media feeds make life on earth appear more and more dangerous. Media outlets share the scary bits – making it seem random and out of control. The headlines are written to get clicks in order to find out if it’s okay or not. Young people watch traumatic scenes in the palm of their hand that are so awful that they either becoming desensitized or frozen in fear. Before the dawn of video, when a person experienced a threat, they were present and used up the effects of adrenaline responding to the situation. Now we witness violence very far away, and there’s nothing to do but helplessly replay it in our mind.

😏 “You deserve stuff just because.”

The last message is from marketing that touts, “You need this because it is cool, and you deserve it.” It manipulates people into dropping the ideals of work ethic, making them think they don’t have to put effort in, they simple deserve to receive their desires. Children under 18 see an average of 1.5 million of these entitled ads a year. Then, when their desire don’t materialize (i.e., they can’t buy the product) they feel disappointed and confused. Not having learned cause and effect, their heart doesn’t understand why they can’t have it. Since they were told they should get it because they deserve it, they falsely conclude, even though they don’t understand why, that they must not be deserving. Why they don’t understand why they are unworthy, they feel powerless to change it, so they look for the problem in themselves: “*I’ve made mistakes.*” “*I annoy people.*” “*I’m ugly.*”

## **Isolation and loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased anxiety and depression among teens due to several key factors. In combination, these factors created a perfect storm for mental health challenges, leading to a sharp rise in anxiety and depression among teens during and after the pandemic.

### **1. Social Isolation**

Teenagers thrive on social interactions with peers, which are crucial for emotional and social development. With schools closed and social distancing measures in place, teens were cut off from friends, extracurricular activities, and even casual interactions. This led to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which are closely linked to anxiety and depression.

### **2. Uncertainty and Fear**

The pandemic brought about a sense of uncertainty regarding the future—concerns about health, the well-being of loved ones, disruptions to education, and uncertainty about life plans. For many teens, this fear and uncertainty led to increased stress and anxiety as they grappled with situations beyond their control. Teens worried about their own health, the safety of their loved ones, and the long-term consequences of the virus. This heightened fear of illness contributed to their overall stress and mental health struggles.

### **3. Academic Disruptions**

School closures, the shift to remote learning, and a lack of routine caused significant disruptions in education. Many students struggled with the demands of online learning, technical difficulties, and the lack of in-person support. This disruption often led to academic stress, contributing to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and anxiety.

### **4. Increased Family Tensions**

The pandemic put a strain on family dynamics, with many families facing financial stress, health concerns, and the challenges of being confined together for extended periods. For some teens, these tensions at home led to increased anxiety, and in more severe cases, worsened mental health due to conflict or even abuse.

### **5. Loss of Milestones**

Teens missed out on significant life events and milestones, such as graduations, proms, sports competitions, and other rites of passage. These losses contributed to feelings of sadness, disappointment, and a sense of missing out, exacerbating depressive symptoms.

### **6. Lack of Access to Mental Health Resources**

Many teens lost access to in-person counseling, therapy, and school-based mental health services during the pandemic. The lack of these critical resources left some without the support they needed to manage their anxiety and depression.

## **Decreased necessity to engage in survival chores**

The decrease in "survival chores" or basic daily tasks necessary for survival—like cooking, cleaning, gathering food, and physical labor—may be contributing to poor mental health in several ways:

### **1. Lack of Purpose and Meaning**

Tasks like cooking or caring for the home made individuals feel a sense of purpose and belonging to the family or community. Caring and interacting with multiple generations in the same household correlates with improved mental health for children under 18.

### **2. Reduced Physical Activity**

Many survival chores were physically demanding, promoting regular movement and exercise, building confidence and reducing stress, anxiety and depression. Less physicality coupled with more sedentary lifestyles (due to technology and urbanization), can diminish mental well-being.

### **3. Increased Screen Time**

Without survival chores, teens can use free time for hobbies or productive activities, however it often leads to increased screen time and social media use, encouraging overthinking and negative self-comparisons.

#### **4. Erosion of Self-Sufficiency**

Completing chores instill a sense of competence and self-sufficiency. Teens who do chores develop problem-solving skills, resilience, and independence. More importantly, they see themselves as skilled and built self-trust, essential for countering anxiety.

#### **5. Disconnection from Nature**

Many traditional survival tasks involve direct interaction with nature and hands-on activities, like growing food, fixing things, or building. These activities often provide a sense of groundedness, mindfulness, and connection with the natural world, which are proven to boost mental health and reduce stress.

#### **6. Instant Gratification and Reduced Patience**

Survival chores often required delayed gratification—growing food, preparing meals, or maintaining a home took time and effort. They learn cause and effect. In contrast, modern conveniences, like fast food and automated devices, offer instant results. This shift toward immediate gratification may reduce resilience and patience in teens, and negatively impact their sense of worthiness.

#### **7. Lack of Routine and Structure**

Survival chores often create a sense of routine and structure in daily life. Without these, many teens may experience a lack of daily structure, which can lead to a sense of aimlessness and lack of focus. Routine provides stability and predictability, which are important for emotional regulation and mental health.

## **Increased power inequities in communities**

### **1. Increased Exposure to Violence and Trauma**

Communities with stark power inequities are often associated with higher levels of violence, poverty, and systemic discrimination. Teens in such environments are more likely to experience trauma, including exposure to crime, domestic violence, and substance abuse.

### **2. Social Exclusion and Stigmatization**

Power inequities also result in social exclusion, where certain groups may be stigmatized based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. For teens who experience discrimination or exclusion, the sense of not belonging or being treated unfairly can intensify feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression.

### **4. Limited Access to Resources**

Power inequities often manifest in unequal access to resources, such as quality education, healthcare, and mental health services. Teens in disadvantaged communities may struggle to access support for their mental health issues, either due to financial barriers or a lack of services in their area. This lack of access delays intervention and treatment, allowing mental health issues to worsen over time.

## 5. Chronic Stress and Uncertainty

Teens living in communities with power inequities often experience chronic stress due to economic instability, food insecurity, or inadequate housing. Constant stress and uncertainty about the future can overwhelm their ability to cope, leading to increased anxiety and depressive symptoms. The struggle to meet basic needs can overshadow personal development and mental health care, intensifying mental health challenges.

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Power inequities often result in marginalized groups feeling disempowered, which can contribute to feelings of helplessness and a lack of control over their lives. Teens in underprivileged communities may perceive that they have fewer opportunities and less influence on their environment, leading to anxiety, stress, and depression. When they observe societal structures that favor certain groups over others, they may internalize feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, negatively affecting their mental health.

Addressing these inequities requires systemic changes, such as improving access to mental health care, fostering inclusive communities, and creating opportunities for youth empowerment and engagement. In summary, young people are more isolated and inconvenienced than ever. Plus, they are bombarded with messages all day telling them that they are powerless, worthless, and out of control. This context disrupts the four life elements that help humans thrive: connectedness, mattering, agency, and authority.

# **The Solution**

## **Address mental health holistically and contextually, clearly explaining the problems and practical solutions.**

Your Goal: To help the young people in your life reclaim their sense of connectedness to others, their feeling of belonging in their communities, and their personal and collective agency and authority.

### **1. Connectedness**

Connectedness refers to the sense of belonging and feeling supported within a social network, whether that's with family, friends, school, or a community. It involves emotional bonds where individuals feel understood, valued, and cared for by others. This sense of connection is essential for both psychological well-being and social development.

#### **Why We Need Connectedness:**

- Connectedness is crucial for maintaining good mental health. It provides emotional support, reducing feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression.
- Having strong connections with others helps young people cope with stress and adversity. Supportive relationships offer resources and emotional comfort that promote resilience, security and self-esteem.
- Teens who feel connected to their parents and peers are less likely to engage in substance abuse, violence, or other high-risk behaviors. This is because connectedness fosters a sense of accountability and self-respect.
- School connectedness improves academic performance. A supportive school environment motivates students to engage, achieve, and persist in their education, as they feel more valued and included.
- Connectedness also has a positive impact on physical health. Strong social bonds are linked to lower rates of heart disease, healthier immune systems, and longer lifespans.

Connectedness plays a vital role in emotional health, resilience, academic success, and even physical well-being. Fostering these connections in various social contexts is key to improving both individual and community health.

# Ways to Increase Connectedness

HOME	SCHOOL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize a hike with one or more friends</li> <li>• Gather young people together for a game night</li> <li>• Encourage creativity in groups (start a business, make something, start a band)</li> <li>• Do a family building project</li> <li>• Volunteer as a family</li> <li>• Bring your teens to work with you or connect them with a mentor who works in an occupation where they are interested</li> <li>• Get them involved in group activities of their interest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have solid, communally negotiated classroom ground rules</li> <li>• Learn their names in the first couple of weeks of school</li> <li>• Play ice breaker games in the classroom</li> <li>• Gather a committee to plan or make something together</li> <li>• Use a call and response cheer whenever your group needs a pick me up</li> <li>• Start a club</li> <li>• Play skill-building games once in a while</li> <li>• Change seating weekly</li> <li>• Desks in groups</li> </ul>

## 2. Mattering

Sociologist Morris Rosenberg introduced the concept of mattering to the body of mental health literature in the 1970s. Mattering refers to feeling valued by, and adding value to, oneself and others. Adolescents want to feel like they matter to their parents, peers, romantic partners, teachers, and other adults in their lives. Humans are social beings, so feeling cared about is inextricably connected to well-being and behavior.

It reflects the sense that we are recognized, that our actions have an impact, and that we are cared about. Mattering is particularly crucial for developing self-worth, motivation, and emotional well-being.

### **Why We Need Mattering:**

- To foster self-esteem and confidence. When people feel like they matter to others, they feel more positive about themselves. For teens, navigating self-identity, the feeling of mattering can be especially protective against negative self-talk.
- To promote for positive behavior. Mattering contributes to a sense of purpose in life. When individuals believe that their actions make a difference, they are more likely to engage in meaningful activities, such as volunteering, leadership, or community service. For adolescents, it can drive academic and social engagement.

- To strengthen social connections, as people who feel valued are more likely to invest in relationships and communities. This creates a positive feedback loop—stronger bonds lead to more feelings of mattering, which in turn deepens relationships.

Mattering is a fundamental human need that supports mental health, fosters motivation, provides a sense of purpose, and enhances social bonds. Feeling valued by others is crucial for both personal development and community well-being.

## Ways to Foster Mattering

HOME	SCHOOL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Point out your children’s unique skills</li> <li>• Tell them you love them no matter what</li> <li>• Listen more than you talk</li> <li>• Do things they like to do</li> <li>• Spend one-on-one time with them</li> <li>• Say thank you</li> <li>• Remind them often what is special about them</li> <li>• Learn about topics where they have interest</li> <li>• Consult them on family decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give them a pre-class survey getting to know them and their interests, hopes, as well as worries.</li> <li>• Point out their uniqueness</li> <li>• Let them know that they can come to you in they need to talk or if something happened in class that made them uncomfortable</li> <li>• Consult them on classroom decisions</li> <li>• Assign collaborative creative projects</li> </ul>

### **3. Agency**

Agency refers to person's ability to respond to the world by making positive meaning of their experiences and choosing their actions. A person's response to the world makes a larger impact on how they feel, think, and relate, than anything that happens to them. Luckily, agency is 100% in one's control. Anxiety and depression tend to disconnect people with their sense of agency. When this happens, the world feels more and more out of control and so, people trust themselves less and less to be able to handle life.

**Why We Need to Remember our Agency** (We always have agency, we may not know it in the moment.)

- Connection to one's agency empowers young people to effect change and helps them feel in control of their lives. They experience their actions making a difference to their relationships, feelings, and opportunities, and anxiety can no longer convince them that they are powerless.
- Agency fosters a growth mindset, self-confidence, and resilience in the face of adversity. A growth mindset is the belief that a person's abilities can be developed and improved through effort, learning, and persistence. Challenges become opportunities to learn and grow.
- A growth mindset drives motivation. When individuals feel empowered, they are more likely to set goals and work toward achieving them.
- When individuals feel powerless to change their circumstances, they may become passive or withdraw from activities that could improve their situation.
- Young people with a strong sense of agency are more likely to participate in civic activities, volunteer, and advocate for causes they believe in, giving them a sense of purpose and belonging.

Agency enables people to take ownership of their lives and positively influence their surroundings.

## Ways to Connect to Agency

HOME	SCHOOL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get your kids used to doing chores from a young age.</li><li>• Have them involved in making dinner, laundry and cleaning.</li><li>• Point out their unique skills and abilities.</li><li>• Give them opportunity to learn</li><li>• Let them know you believe in them and why</li><li>• Remind them of their recent successes when they forget</li><li>• Teach them to interrupt negative self-talk and start a project before they are ready</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Skill-based learning activities</li><li>• Charades</li><li>• Flexible seating</li><li>• Use choice boards, giving students the choice between multiple activities or assignments.</li><li>• Think-pair-share</li><li>• Use student interest surveys</li><li>• Play improv activities</li><li>• Role-play common scenarios</li><li>• Interview personified “problems” to understand them better</li><li>• Daily self-assessments</li></ul>

## 4. Authority

Authority is a psychological term meaning someone’s ability to solve complex problems. Authority is often called “skills+,” because with a robust authority, people are able to go beyond what they have done in the past. It is not just a growth mindset; it is the resulting skills development that comes out of acting on a growth mindset.

### **Why We need a Robust Sense of our Authority:**

- Challenges are viewed as opportunities to learn and grow rather than as obstacles. This perspective helps young people persevere through difficulties and bounce back from failures.
- Creates beliefs in oneself; that abilities and intelligence develops over time. This encourages continuous learning and self-improvement, keeping people adaptable and curious throughout life.
- Fosters creativity and innovation, and persistence through trial and error.

- When you see effort as a path to mastery, you're more intrinsically motivated to act, leading to greater achievement and satisfaction.
- Helps you approach feedback constructively and see others' potential for growth, enhancing collaboration and communication.

Overall, a robust sense of authority helps you approach life with a sense of possibility and resilience, making it easier to navigate the ups and downs and achieve complex personal and professional goals.

## **Ways to Connect to Authority**

<b>HOME</b>	<b>SCHOOL</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solve problems together, like fixing something around the home, or helping someone</li> <li>• Brainstorm responses to complex situations, thinking how each might result</li> <li>• Brainstorm understandings of situations, so they learn the various choices we have when making meaning around an event</li> <li>• Watch movies together and analysis the plot, characters, and their relationships choices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give your students difficult and complex problems to solve</li> <li>• Use ice breaker games with complex problems</li> <li>• Have a weekly challenge game, competition or collaboration</li> <li>• Assign group complex creative projects</li> <li>• Have a scavenger hunt</li> <li>• Have students think of a local or school community problem and brainstorm solutions for it</li> <li>• Let students lead a project</li> </ul>

Access my books, tools, how to work me, and where to watch my show at [jodiaman.com/live](http://jodiaman.com/live).

### **Articles by Dr. Jodi You May Find Helpful (If this is printed, use the search feature on her website)**

[Teaching cause and effect – Dr. Jodi’s TEDx talk: How chores empower](#)

[For teachers: When students disclose mental health problems](#)

[Worrisome risks of social media on kids and teens](#)

[Knowing when it’s time to seek professional mental health care](#)

[Decision to medicate your children \(Or yourself\)](#)

[Let go of perfectionism and have the best school year yet!](#)

[How to be happy: 6 priorities for a robust mind, body, and soul](#)

[Three steps for dealing with life’s challenges](#)

[How I reduce anxiety and relax naturally](#)

[Seven ways to help someone stop thinking of suicide](#)

[How to listen: How to be a good parent, teacher, friend](#)

[How to prevent passing your baggage to your kids/students](#)

[What people with anxiety want you to know.](#)

[A robust teacher self-care plan](#)

### **Training You May Find Helpful**

Available at [jodiaman.com/shop](http://jodiaman.com/shop):

- Parenting 101: Raising Resilient & Happy Kids
- Parenting 102: Empowering Teens for Emotional Wellness
- Navigating Romantic Relationships *for Teens*
- Find your Diamond Confidence *for Teens*
- Anxiety Free Kids: Helping Kids Shrink their Anxiety
- Develop Your Intuition *For Teens*

## **More Resources**

### **[Common Worries about Teens and Technology](#)**

An article on Spark and Stitch Institute about common worries adults have and how to process them.

### **[Overcome Decision & Priority Paralysis](#)**

Analysis Paralysis is a problem facing today's youth, learn about it so you can understand better.

### **[Why Teens Have More Anxiety...and How to Help](#)**

An article by the Amen Clinic with their take on why teens have more anxiety today than they've had in the past.

### **[Neuroscience of How Gratitude Rewires Your Brain to be Happier](#)**

About a 2015 study that looked at the physical outcomes of practicing gratitude.

### **[10 Reasons Teens Have So Much Anxiety Today](#)**

Another take on the increase in teen anxiety from Psychology Today.

### **[Cortisol decrease following art creation](#)**

There are many ways to heal. Humans long to create and change the world around them. Our brains were designed to solve problems. Give them some.

### **[16 Ways Not to Respond to someone with Anxiety](#)**

You want to know what to say and also what not to say.

### **[Helping a friend with anxiety](#)**

Sweet article for young people about how to help their friends without taking more responsibility than they ought to.

### **[A List of Parenting Resources](#)**

Long list for you if you want something about a specific topic from the author of *Badass Parenting*, C. J. Scarlet.

### **[Influence of breath on the central nervous system](#)**

Sometimes it is helpful to know the why of what we are taught. Young people want to know this especially.