



WHITE PAPER

Supporting Gen Z: Understanding the unique stressors impacting the mental health of a generation

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Introduction

Recent articles in mainstream media outlets share to the rest of the world what many of us in higher education have known for several years now: today's Generation Z college and university students are significantly more distressed than prior generations of students.

Many of the articles imply Gen Z's increased distress is related primarily to the pandemic—how their learning experience has been impacted, the disruption in their social lives, and the economic and job uncertainty confronting them.

And while that's all true, it misses the real story behind Gen Z university students' distress.

We have to dig deeper than that—and farther back—for the answers.

Because for those of us in higher education, we know their increased distress started well before the pandemic even hit.

This paper will draw on research evidence, survey results, and the voices of current university students to identify and examine some of the unique stressors facing Generation Z even before the pandemic hit. We will also introduce a developmental model to provide a meaningful context for better understanding the impact of cumulative risks on resiliency capability.

In providing this heightened focus on the struggles many Gen Z students are grappling with, it is our intention to encourage readers to fundamentally re-frame their views regarding both today's college and university students as well as those members of Gen Z who will start college across the decade to come. In deepening their understanding of their students, colleges and universities can move to devise and revise policies and practices to more effectively respond to their students' mental health needs and promote their positive wellbeing.



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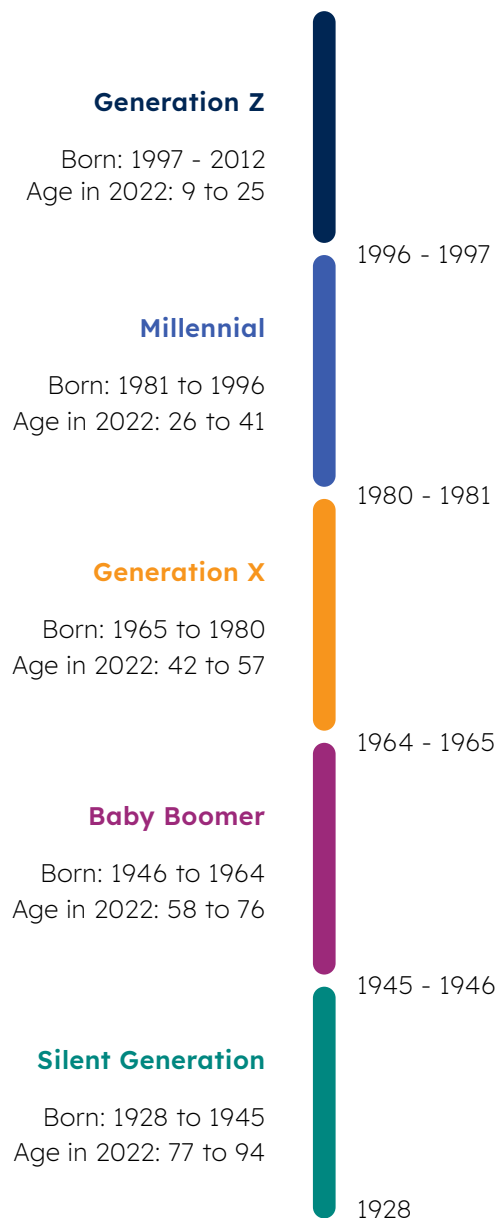
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Who is part of Gen Z?

First, let's define who is part of Generation Z. There is no single organization that sets each generation's birth range years, even the U.S. Census bureau doesn't, but the most commonly used dates cited by various research organizations identify Gen Z as those individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). So, members of Gen Z are currently between 9 years and 25 years of age. That means virtually all of today's college students are part of Gen Z.

The generations defined



Is Gen Z more distressed than previous generations?

If you talk to faculty and staff at your campus you might hear a lot of comments such as, “students just don’t seem as stoic or resilient as they used to” or “I can’t tell you how many times I have students crying during my office hours now. I would never have done that when I was a student” or “They are telling me things I don’t want to hear and don’t know what to do with when I do hear it. I’m not a therapist.”

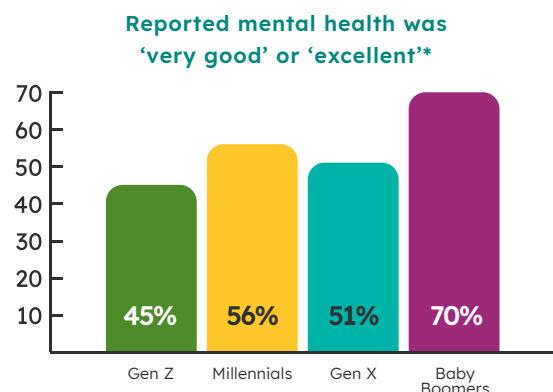
And if you talk to therapists at student counseling centers around the nation you are likely to hear comments like this, “we have waitlists for students to start therapy that are weeks-long now. That never used to happen” and “It’s like working at a crisis center now.”

The notion that student mental health and wellbeing has been getting significantly worse and that demand at college and university counseling centers is increasing has become a common refrain on campuses around the nation. It’s been written about in research journals, in books, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and in the popular media—starting well before the pandemic’s onset (see Xiao, et al., 2017 for a brief review).

And indeed there is a wealth of evidence to support that members of Gen Z are more distressed than earlier generations of students. The American Psychological Association (APA) produces an annual Stress in America report, and in 2018 it focused on Gen Z. That report showed that compared to older generations, Gen Z adults expressed the least positive assessment of their own mental health. Only 45% of Gen Z

members surveyed reported their mental health was “very good” or “excellent” compared to 56% of Millennials, 51% of Gen Xers, and 70% of baby boomers. And just two years later, the 2020 APA Stress in America report showed that Gen Z adults were the most stressed compared to all prior generations (averaging 6.1 out of 10) compared to Millennials (5.6), Gen Xers (5.2), Boomers (4.0), and older adults 75+ years (3.0).

Looking further, results from the annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health reveals that in 2007, 8.2% of 12-17 year olds self-reported experiencing a major depressive episode in the past year (SAMSHA, 2008), but by 2017 that figure had risen to 13.3%, representing 3.2 million teens (SAMSHA, 2018), many of whom are now in college. In addition, a Pew Research Center survey among 13-17 year olds in 2018 revealed that 7 out of 10 teens said anxiety and depression were “major problems” among teens in their communities. That same survey showed this result was true among households of varying incomes, from households making less than \$30,000/year to those making over \$75,000/year (Horowitz & Graf, 2019).

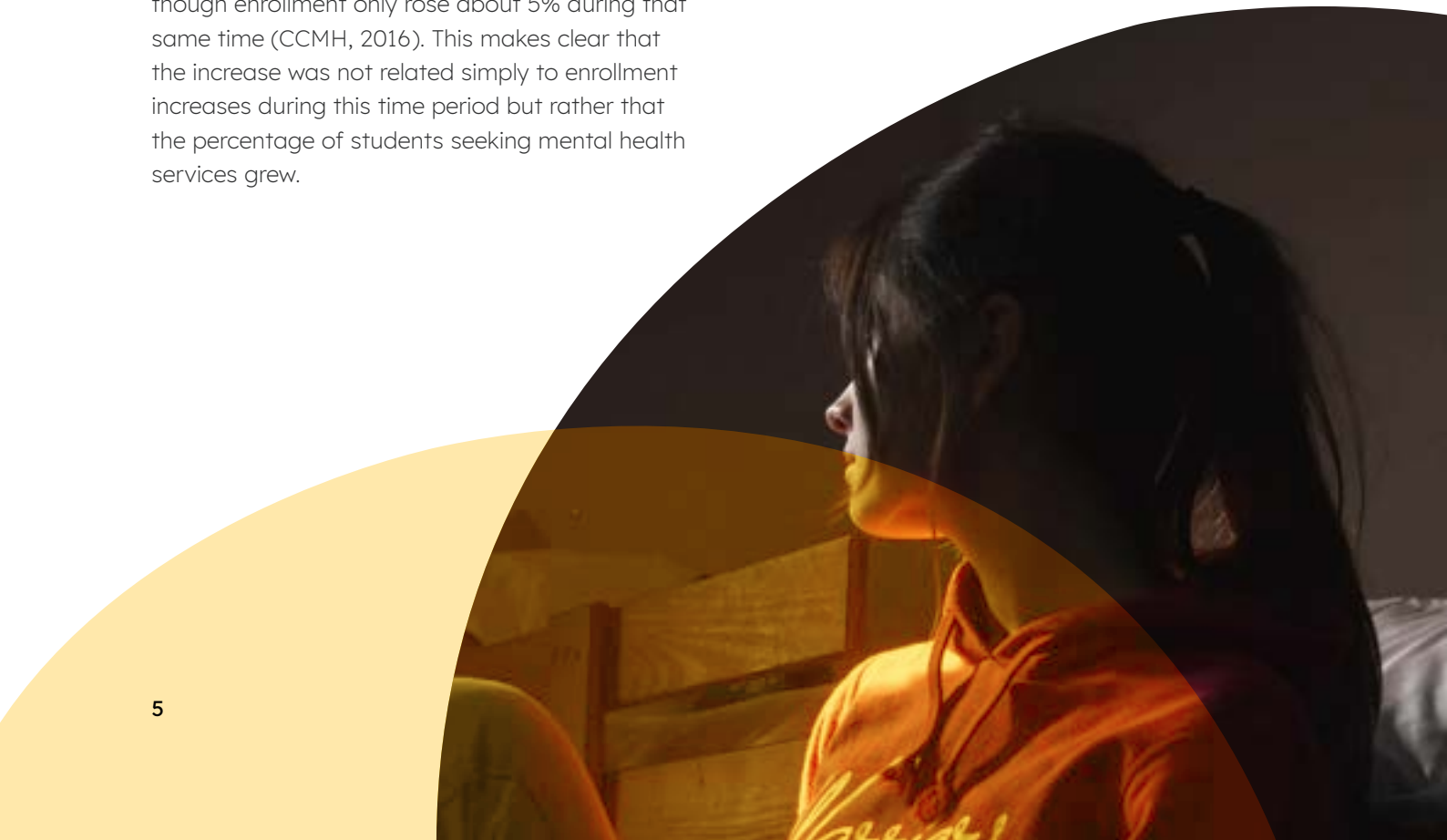


Looking more specifically at trends across time among college and university students seeking mental health care, the 2020 Center for Collegiate Mental Health annual report (CCMH, 2021) found increases in a number of very serious indicators of student distress. Data illustrates that among college students seeking counseling lifetime prevalence rates for engaging in “non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors” increased 6.1% from 2012 to 2020. Further, lifetime prevalence rates for those experiencing “serious suicidal ideation” increased 6.9% across the same 8 years. Lifetime prevalence rates of a variety of traumatic experiences also increased during that same period including experiences of “unwanted sexual contacts” (+6.8%), and “harassing, controlling or abusive behaviors” (+5.5%). The 2020 CCMH annual report also included a measure (CCAPS-34) of student self-reported distress that revealed a steady increase in generalized anxiety, social anxiety, depression, and overall distress from 2010 to 2020.

CCMH data also demonstrated that demand for services at campus counseling centers across the U.S. rose 30-40% between 2009 and 2015 even though enrollment only rose about 5% during that same time (CCMH, 2016). This makes clear that the increase was not related simply to enrollment increases during this time period but rather that the percentage of students seeking mental health services grew.

So evidence confirms what many of us in Higher Education have been observing and experiencing first-hand in the past several years:

1. Student distress has increased significantly in recent years, even prior to the pandemic’s onset
2. Distressed students are seeking support and help in greater numbers at university counseling centers
3. Students are presenting at University Counseling Centers with more serious levels and types of distress
4. Students are sharing their distress more openly (e.g., in their classes, at faculty/staff office hours, with residence hall advisors)



It's ok to not be ok...

Before we go any further, it's very important to understand that one of the reasons why more students are coming forward and letting us know they are distressed—via online forums, on campuses nationwide, and in so many other venues—is because we asked them to.

Sounds paradoxical—but it's true.

Think about it: for the past 15-20 years, the U.S. has run a host of local, state, and national public health campaigns on a range of mental health and wellness topics—all with the goal of encouraging early intervention for mental health issues, such as preventing suicides. Campaigns range from those that seek to increase help-seeking behaviors to raise awareness about mental health issues to others that aim to de-stigmatize mental health problems and help people better understand how to identify mental health issues and get help quickly (e.g., suicide prevention hotlines).

The truth is that these efforts have shown mixed success;

The more complex the behavior or attitude being targeted, the less effective most public health campaigns are (Rao, et al., 2019). For example, there is less demonstrated efficacy for stigma reduction campaigns (because stigma is a multi-layered, culturally-influenced phenomenon; Rao, et al., 2019) than for increasing awareness

of mental health issues and help-seeking, such as calling a hotline when distressed (Pirkis, et al, 2019). Further, many public health campaigns are simply not designed and rolled out with sufficient methodological rigor to even allow for an analysis of their effectiveness (Pirkis, et al., 2019).

So, while there is some evidence suggesting these campaigns can help explain the rise in awareness of distress and help-seeking behaviors that we see among Gen Z students, they do not explain the increases in the severity and type (anxiety, depression, suicidality, and other serious psychopathology) of their distress nor the significantly higher percentages of students that report feeling distressed. In other words, public health campaigns cannot explain why there are more members of Gen Z presenting with more severe mental health distress.

Think about it: for the past 15-20 years, the U.S. has run a host of local, state, and national public health campaigns on a range of mental health and wellness topics — all with the goal of encouraging early intervention for mental health issues, such as preventing suicides.



So why is Generation Z so distressed?

The big answer, as with many complex issues, is that there are a number of contributing factors but for our purposes, we will focus on the unique circumstances/stressors Generation Z is facing.

As we move through this discussion, we will also hear the voices of actual Gen Z students.

- Interviews with a number of university students were conducted across different regions of the U.S. asking a series of questions.
- We started with an open-ended question “what do you consider are or have been major stressors that have negatively impacted your mental health and wellbeing?”
- Following that, Gen Z students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (a tremendous amount) a number of possible stressors research indicated as impactful.

Their answers shed light on much of what we are discussing here.



Social media

Perhaps the most obvious factor to start with is that members of Gen Z are the first generation to grow up in a digital technology-focused world, and one with high social media saturation.

A 2018 Pew Research survey with 13-17 year olds (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) showed that 95% of all teens, regardless of household income, had access to a smartphone. In that same survey 45% of all teens reported being “almost constantly” online—up from 24% just a few years earlier in 2014-15. Another 44% of all teens reported being online “several times a day.” Given that Android phones only became popular in 2005 and iPhones

didn't hit the market until two years later, in 2007, when the oldest Gen Zers were just eight and six years old respectively, this is a remarkable finding.

As Jean Twenge, a researcher at San Diego State University studying generational characteristics wrote in a 2017 article, “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen [her early name for Gen Z] as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones... the twin rise of the smartphone and social media has caused an earthquake of a magnitude we’ve not seen in a very long time, if ever.

“

There is compelling evidence that the devices we’ve placed in young people’s hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy...

Jean Twenge (Para 9 & 10)

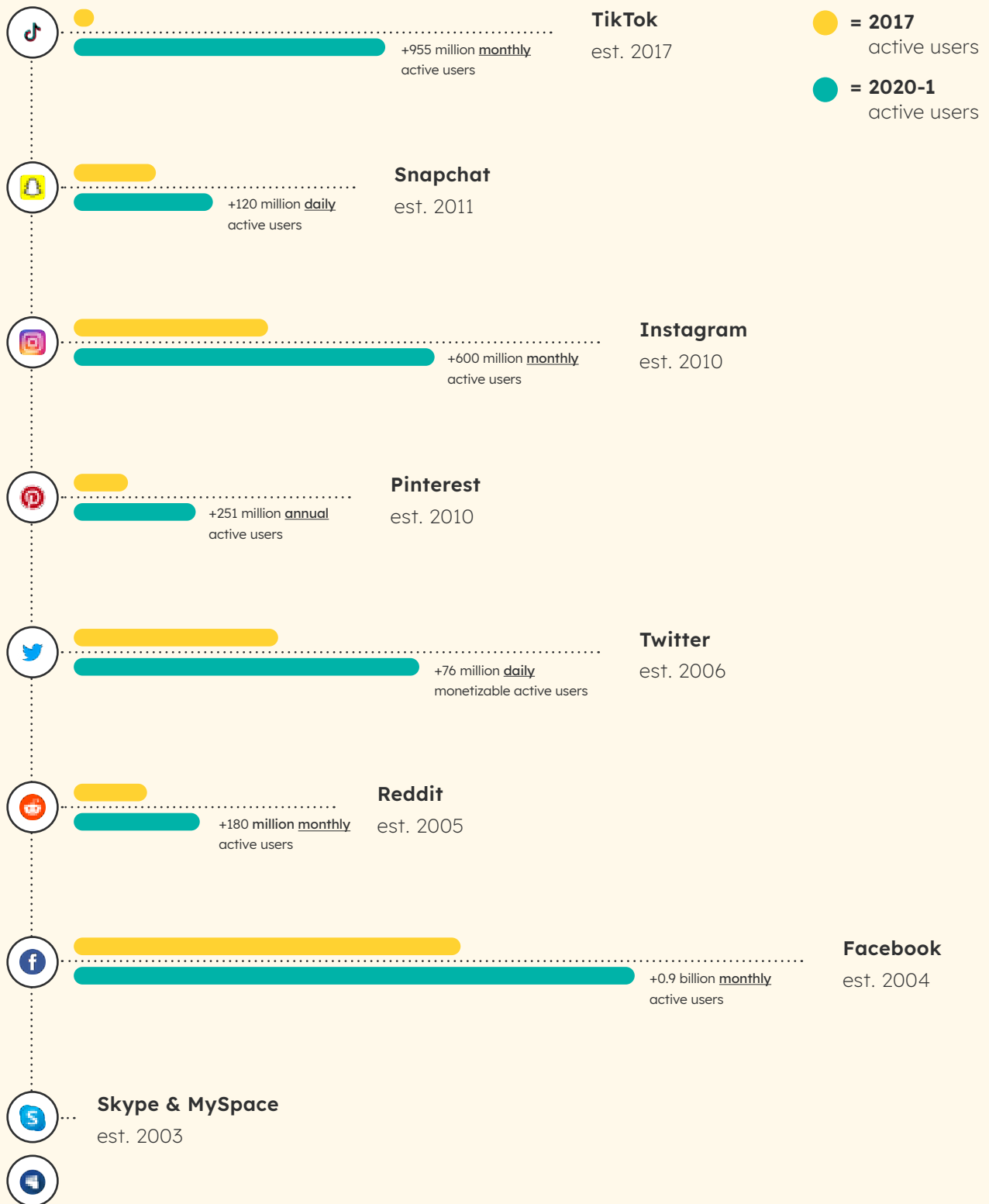
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When interviewed about social media’s impact, one female student said, **“My social media use was higher when I was younger. I spent a lot of time mindlessly scrolling—on FB, Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok—about 6-7 hours/day.... and over time I noticed this negative impact on my mental health.”**

A male student who identified social media as a major stressor for him said, **“it impacts me, my friends, my roommates. It has such a huge reach—definitely makes it so you feel you have to manicure yourself—give people what they want to see. It exacerbates social pressures to act in a certain way, to conform.”**



Date of creation and uptake of social media channels



Teens and young adults seek out social media for a variety of reasons, such as seeking a sense of community, reducing loneliness, and looking for resources and support, and there is evidence that these can be found. However, most social media sites are not intentionally built to provide a safe space for online users of a variety of ages and with different vulnerabilities. As a result, considerable evidence has emerged over the last several years about the adverse impacts of social media on teens and young adults.

First, significant evidence exists regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying on formal and school-based (e.g., classroom chat groups) social media among 10-19 year olds, with one large review study finding rates as high as 41% for perpetration of cyberbullying and 72% for victimization. Research shows that negative impacts of cyberbullying include difficulty sleeping, anxiety, depression, suicidality, and experiencing a variety of somatic-symptoms (Selkie, et al, 2016).

Cyberbullying while sharing many of the same characteristics of “traditional” bullying in terms of its impact on victims, is often considered more toxic because posts targeting someone can be viewed by a potentially limitless audience that a) likely includes many of the victim’s peers, b) can be anonymous, c) can be viewed repeatedly day or night, and d) are difficult for parents, teachers and others adults to effectively monitor (Mir, et al., 2022).

For those with mental health vulnerabilities, social media can be a landmine. Review papers, (Faelens, et al., 2021; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016) have shown a significant link between social media use and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among adolescents and young adults. Even social media’s attempts to offset damaging impacts by requiring self-disclaimers regarding idealized images have proven ineffective (Livingston, et al., 2020).

Another review paper examining social media sites for those engaging in deliberate self-harming behaviors (Dyson, et al., 2016) demonstrated adverse impacts, including increases in suicidal ideation, normalization of self-harming behaviors, and increased social isolation. Interestingly, despite guidelines about permissible content on social media, the review concluded that users routinely found ways around these restrictions, even as few social media platforms had mental health professionals monitoring postings that might have prevented such postings. As a result, the authors found that incidents of trolling (deliberately provocative posts), flaming (mocking or encouraging self-harming behaviors and thoughts), and posting of videos depicting self-harm were common.

In summary, without clinical monitoring, social media sites can be destructive, serving as fertile ground for the development or exacerbation of mental health issues among users, and negating the positive social connectedness and sense of community many are seeking.



Climate change

Let's now turn to another major stressor in the lives of Gen Zers, one they have grown up with and that only recently has begun to receive the attention it should: climate change. An APA 2018 report found that 58% of Gen Z adults reported they felt stressed about climate change and global warming. And a 2021 survey in California of 14-24 year olds found that 83% expressed "concern about the health of the planet" and 75% of respondents said that it had "at least some effect on their mental health" (Blue Shield of California). Further, a 2020 American Psychiatric Association survey revealed that 67% of U.S. adults were "somewhat or extremely anxious" about climate change. And regarding the impact of climate change on their own mental health, this concern rose among all surveyed adults from 47% in 2019 to 68% in 2020 with Gen Z adults (18-23 year olds) the most concerned of any generation (67%). These high levels of eco-anxiety were similar regardless of race/ethnicity or gender—making this a particularly robust finding.

Looking at teen members of Gen Z, a 2019 Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation survey of 13-17 year olds found that 57% were "afraid" of climate change and 43% endorsed feeling "helpless" about it. Last, it's important to note that these levels of eco-anxiety are not unique to U.S. members of Gen Z, but shared across the globe. A May 2021 study of 10,000 16 to 25 year olds across 10 countries and multiple continents found that almost 60% of respondents endorsed feeling "extremely worried" or "very worried" about

climate change, with 75% saying the "future was frightening" and 56% agreeing that "humanity was doomed" (Hickman, et al., 2021).

Hickman, et al., 2021

Survey of 10,000 16 – 25 year olds across 10 countries:

60%

'extremely worried' or 'very worried' about climate change

75%

said the 'future was frightening'

56%

agreed that 'humanity was doomed'



Of the students Togetherall interviewed, one young man when asked to rate climate change as a stressor said, **“That’s a 5 [out of 7] for me. It’s an existential fear that our lives are contributing to the demise of our planet—we have to drive cars, use computers, use water, and there is nothing we can do about that, no agency to do otherwise. It’s anxiety-producing. I think about it frequently.”**

Another female student echoed this. **“Climate change comes to mind immediately as a major stressor. Reading the news, things are not changing. This kind of large-scale issue feels out of reach. I don’t feel like I have a lot of agency.”**

Interestingly, both references to the notion of agency highlight an important consideration as we explore the reasons driving Gen Z distress. And that’s because it turns out that having a strong sense of agency is considered a key factor in positive well-being.

According to Martin Seligman (2020), the eminent researcher and leader in the field of positive psychology, agency is “one’s belief that he or she can change the world for the better.”. Having a subjective sense of agency is associated with feeling more in control and experiencing more positive well-being, whereas lacking a sense of

agency is associated with increased feelings of fear, anxiety, and loss of control (Christensen, et al., 2019; Haggard, 2017; Rao & Napper, 2019). Indeed, it could be said that the psychological “opposite” of a sense of agency is learned helplessness, which is the belief that one has no control over what happens to oneself and there is nothing one can do to change that. Importantly, research studies have shown that learned helplessness is associated with depressive symptoms, burnout, lack of motivation, anxiety, and higher stress (Ackerman, 2022). And knowing this, remember that the Washington-KFF survey cited earlier revealed 43% of teens felt helpless about climate change, which helps us understand their stress, anxiety, and depression about it.

Given all this, it seems reasonable to suggest that part of what drives Gen Z’s increasing mental health symptoms in recent years may be related to a decrease in their sense of agency in the face of stressors (climate change and the others identified here) that feel overwhelming and beyond their control to impact.



Mass shootings

Surveys show that Gen Z is growing up with a fear of mass shootings, a fear that cuts across race and ethnicity. A 2019 APA report showed 71% of all U.S. adults surveyed identified fear of mass shootings as a source of significant stress. This fear was highest among Hispanic adults (84%), followed closely by Black adults (79%), Asian adults (77%), Native American adults (71%), and then White adults (66%). But all groups were considerably higher in their reports of this as a stressor than in 2018 (APA, 2019). And a U.S. Gallup poll in 2019 also showed 48% of adults surveyed expressed being “very” or “somewhat worried” about being a victim (or having a family member be) of a mass shooting (Brenan, 2019).

Among Gen Z adults, APA’s 2018 report illustrated that 75% are more fearful than other generations about mass shootings compared to Millennials (69%), and Gen Xers and Baby Boomers (both at 58%). A 2019 Morning Consult poll in 2019 revealed that 65% of U.S. Gen Z members surveyed identified mass shootings such as the Sandy Hook massacre and Parkland high school as having a “major impact on their worldview,” the highest of any generation (Williams, 2019).

Among the students we interviewed, each endorsed fear of mass shootings as a 3 or 4 out of 7. All agreed that it had been more of a stressor when they were in high school. Several said they had done “active shooter” drills during high school in preparation for the possibility.

One student said, **“I worry about my boyfriend who wants to be a teacher.”**

It’s important to mention here that while Generation Z in the U.S. is the most stressed about mass shootings compared to all other generations, a majority of every living generation is significantly stressed about this phenomenon. There is converging agreement that mass shootings, while rare in the larger context of total U.S. deaths/injuries involving firearms, are more frequent than they used to be. A 2014 review analysis showed an increase in mass shootings starting in 2011 (Cohen, et al., 2014). The FBI’s 2013 assessment of “active shooter incidents” revealed an increase in their number starting in 2000 (Blair et al., 2014), and a 2018 study showed a) an increase in frequency of mass shootings across the prior 30 years, and b) a correlation between increasing online media attention and the decreasing time intervals between shootings (Lin, et al., 2018).

Taken together this data indicates that mass shootings are indeed more frequent. Added to this, the increased media attention to mass shootings may also help us better understand, at least in part, why Gen Z, whose members spend so much time online, are the most apprehensive about mass shootings compared to all other generations.



Sexual harassment & sexual assault

Turning to another major stressor for members of Gen Z, concerns about sexual harassment and sexual assault are widely held. In APA's 2018 report, Gen Z adults endorsed experiencing significant stress about "widespread sexual harassment and sexual assault reports" in considerably larger numbers (53%) than adults overall (39%). A 2017 Chronicle of Higher Education article detailed how extensive these sexual assault and harassment complaints are at colleges and universities across the United States, stating that the #MeToo movement has had a galvanizing effect on reporting of both domains of sexual misconduct (Gluckman, et al.).

Among the students interviewed, all the women identified this as a significant stressor—a 6 or 7 out of 7. All said they fear being the victim of a sexual assault and have concerns about how women are treated when they officially report. One student said, **"Being sexually assaulted is one of my biggest fears. I think about it every day—what I'm doing, being aware of my surroundings, how to prevent it."** Another said, **"As a female, it's horrible to think about. I know people it has happened to. It's always on my mind."** And another said, **"I am really concerned about how it's handled—a lot of people don't believe women [when they say it happened]."**

Concern about sexual assault and harassment is not a new stressor, but there are a number of reasons why members of Gen Z might be particularly concerned about it. First, there is evidence that this category of victimization has been increasing in recent years. Data from the 2018 National Crime Victim Survey (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019) showed that "the rate of rape or sexual-assault victimization increased from 1.6 to 2.7 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 or older from 2015 to 2018" (p. 3). This even as from 2017 to 2018, there was a statistically significant decline in the percentage (from 40% to 25%) of rapes and other sexual assaults that were reported to police. Data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) 2015 report, showed that 1 in 5 women experienced attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, with 83% of those reporting this experience occurring before age 25. And 37% of all women reported experiencing some type of unwanted sexual contact in their lifetime (Smith, et al., 2018)



What makes this stressor unique for Generation Z—and perhaps contributes to their perception of it as significantly stressful—seems likely to relate to a myriad of recent cultural changes. The #MeToo movement has galvanized women speaking out about their sexual victimization and served to put pressure on schools, employers, and other organizations regarding how sexual misconduct should be addressed. In addition, significantly greater focus has been given to sexual assault and harassment on college campuses across the nation in recent years due to changing Title IX guidelines regarding reporting, confidentiality, and accountability. This increased focus relates to the back and forth changes in the last 10-15 years in federal guidelines regarding how colleges and universities must respond to sexual misconduct claims.

“

Being sexually assaulted is one of my biggest fears. I think about it every day—what I’m doing, being aware of my surroundings, how to prevent it.

”

In sum, members of Generation Z are coming of age during a critical time period regarding what has become a national discourse on the topic of sexual assault and sexual harassment. It’s not surprising then that Gen Z’s stress levels about it exceeds those of earlier generations.



Polarization of societal opinions

We cannot end the discussion of why Gen Z is so distressed without diving into a central aspect of Gen Z identity and the particular impact the current polarized political and cultural climate in the U.S has on their psychological well-being.

First, it is important to know that Generation Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation ever in the United States. According to the 2018 Pew Research analysis of US Census data (Fry & Parker, 2018), only 52% of Gen Z respondents identified as non-Hispanic White, with 25% identifying as Hispanic, 14% as Black, and 6% as Asian. This is the smallest percentage of non-Hispanic Whites of any prior generation. Furthermore, Gen Z is on target to soon be the first generation in which non-Hispanic whites are in the minority, according to the Brookings Institution's analysis of the 2020 US Census (for individuals under age 18 years; Frey, 2020a).

To further understand the unique significance of this for Gen Z, consider the following about today's college and university students: a) 35% of all U.S. undergraduates as of 2015-16 (the most recent year available) are first generation students, meaning the first in their family to attend college; b) students from racial and ethnic minorities are significantly over-represented among first generation students; and c) first generation students come from households with lower median income than continuing education students. Indeed, over 20% of first gen students come from households making less than \$20,000 per year which is well below the federal poverty line (The Hunt Institute, 2021; PNPI, 2021; Stebleton, et al., 2014).

So we have several key intersecting issues, some related in part to Gen Z demographics and others related to wider issues that the United States as a whole is struggling with in very visible and resurgent ways—namely, racism, social injustice, and the widening political and cultural divide along class and race/ethnicity lines.

Here is what two of the students I spoke with said on these issues. When asked about what she considers stressors for her, one young woman said,

“

Racial injustice, my privilege. Knowing that as a white person I am accountable in perpetuating whiteness, and accountable to play a role in not perpetuating it.

”

And another young woman said, “[the Presidential election period] put fear in me. As a Hispanic woman who is also a member of the LGBTQ community, during the election my mom told me ‘don’t go outside, don’t talk about politics!’ There was a lot of hate and fear out there.”



In a nationally representative August 2020 interview-based survey of over 3100 eighteen to 36 year olds (i.e., Gen Z adults and younger Millennials), majorities, across all race and ethnic lines endorsed agreeing with the statement that “racism remains a major problem in this country” (76% African American, 66% Asian American, 68% Latinx, and 59% White; GenForward Survey, 2020). Further, this same survey showed strong agreement across race and ethnic groups that the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) protests in the summer of 2020 were somewhat or strongly justified (75% African American, 78% Asian American, 65% Latinx, and 68% White). And interestingly, strong agreement existed across race/ethnic groups that the movement ignited by the killing of George Floyd would have long-term impact on this country (African American (64%), Asian American (63%), Latinx (52%), and White (55%).

We can look at many examples of racism in the past 10-20 years in the U.S. However, given social media’s meteoric growth and 24/7 news coverage during that same period of time, it is important to note that many of these events have received a level of national coverage at an intensity and pitch well beyond what prior generations were exposed to during their respective youths. That said, it’s not news that racism has a long and traumatic history in this country. Despite this, according to Dr. Emma Adam, an adolescent researcher at Northwestern University, “Racial discrimination is a powerful stressor that is relatively understudied in the developmental literature on early adversity” (Adam, et al., 2020), thus less is known about its impacts on adolescents.

Recent research addressing this gap shows converging evidence regarding the adverse impact of racial discrimination (direct and vicarious, online and in person) on adolescent well-being (Adam, et al., 2020; Benner, et al., 2018; English, et al., 2020; Hughes, et al., 2016; Levy, et al., 2016). As the authors of one large meta-analytic study

concluded, “The findings reported in our meta-analysis clearly illustrate the pernicious effects of racial/ethnic discrimination across multiple domains of adolescents’ health and well-being, including their mental health, their engagement in risky health behaviors, and their educational success” (Benner, et al., 2018, p. 872).

It’s important to mention that while people of color are clearly the ones directly impacted by racism, they are not alone in feeling stressed about it. An online survey by Yubo, a social networking app, of a diverse group of more than 38,000 13-25 year olds conducted in June 2020, showed that 88% of participants believed that Black Americans were treated differently than others (Davis). In response to these injustices, Gen Z adults are taking action en masse. That same Yubo survey showed that 90% of the Gen Z respondents said they supported the Black Lives Matter movement, 77% said they had already been to a protest to support Black Americans’ equality, and 78% have used social media to express support for BLM issues. As William Frey of the Brookings Institution stated, “...the mass activism [regarding racial and ethnic discrimination] of millennials and Gen Z that we are seeing right now is so consequential. Unlike the protests and activism of the 1960s—... today’s movement is occurring in the midst of a fundamental demographic transformation. Diversity is not just their future—it is the nation’s future” (2020b).

In short, the racism, hate-rhetoric, and polarized cultural milieu seen in the U.S. in recent years has impacted Generation Z in a wholly unique way, galvanizing them to mass activism. However, the cost to Gen Z’s mental health is significant.



Cumulative risk model

To bring us full circle, while we have reviewed individual stressors, it is important to remember they don't exert their impact in isolation from each other. Indeed, members of Gen Z are grappling with all these stressors, though in different degrees, depending on each individual situation. For example, while climate change is a fact affecting the whole planet, it clearly has differential impacts depending on where one lives, one's socioeconomic status, and a host of other factors. In other words, the stressors discussed here do not exert equal impact on each member of Gen Z.

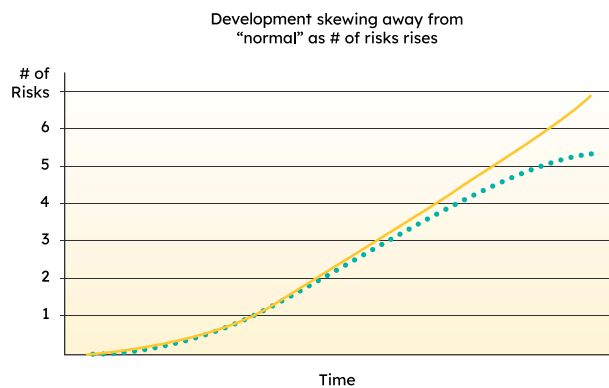
It's also critical to keep in mind that social media serves as a multiplier of each stressor's impact, though again to different degrees. In this sense, members of Gen Z, given their high levels of social media saturation, are growing up with an amplification of their exposure to each stressor. Indeed, Gen Z are getting information about stressful, polarizing, and/or traumatic events that individuals from prior generations might never have even heard about or been able to see, making it harder for them to self-regulate their exposure compared to prior generations.

Inevitably, for all of us, regardless of which generation we belong to, there is some personal mix of exposure to different stressful conditions and events that challenges our ability to cope with them and still thrive.

Drawing from developmental theory to help explain this varying impact, the cumulative risk model states that the individual's (and perhaps

the generation's) ability to adapt and "be resilient" is challenged by an increasing number of "risks" (i.e. adverse events or conditions; Evans, et al., 2013).

The cumulative risk model predicts that as adverse events/conditions increase in number, our ability to adapt is increasingly challenged.



The solid line = "normal" development
Dashed line = the impact of cumulative risks, skewing away from normal to "abnormal" development

What can help us cope better are protective factors that serve to buffer us from the exposure to or impact of stressors (e.g., a caring and responsive caregiver, a supportive, positive peer group, consistent and sufficient income to meet family needs, high quality safe schools, good physical health, and so on). Thus, protective factors can increase our ability to adapt and be resilient in the face of increasing risk exposure.

But only so far.



If the number of risks (or their severity) outweighs our ability to cope effectively, if it overwhelms the buffering effect of whatever protective factors exist then the model posits that normative stress reactions may develop into more serious mental health problems, compromising our sense of well-being and our ability to function well.

The power of the cumulative risk model is in providing a frame for understanding the interaction among stressors, shedding light on how even the “healthiest” most resilient individuals can be overwhelmed by the challenges they face, eroding their ability to cope effectively.

When we think about stress and resiliency in this way, we have greater compassion and understanding for Generation Z’s distress. For those of us in higher education, we can also more readily see why our students need more avenues for accessing support and help to manage their distress than prior generations of students did.

That said, this review of Gen Z stressors demonstrates that their adverse impact existed before the pandemic even started, so it’s even more critical to keep in mind that the pandemic in of itself has been an additional major stressor and one that has hit Gen Z particularly hard.

And as you might expect, evidence from the March 2021 report (i.e., conducted a year into the pandemic) from APA’s Stress in America series revealed that Gen Z members are more likely than any other generation to say their mental health worsened compared to before the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, in response to more students in greater distress, colleges and universities started increasing their counseling center budgets. In turn, many counseling centers hired more therapists, switched to clinical models that emphasized rapid access/brief treatment to address the problem of longer waitlists, and as budgets allowed, added other supportive services.

But now, with the pandemic added into the cumulative risk exposure for Gen Z students, many higher education institutions are looking for innovative, more scalable solutions to meaningfully address student distress.



So what does this mean for higher education?

1. First, these stressors are not going away. Some, such as climate change, are predicted to worsen in terms of the depth and breadth of their negative impact. Others such as racism, sexual assault/harassment, and mass shootings are hugely complex societal problems that, in the best of future visioning, will require time, compassionate and wise leadership, and widespread citizen engagement to meaningfully change for the better.
 - So, we need to accept that this is the new normal and find solutions now that can help our Gen Z students (and, soon enough, Gen Alpha students).
2. Second, while higher education institutions will likely continue to add staff to their mental health centers, continuing the multi-year trend in staff seen prior to the pandemic (AUCCCD, 2019), it's reasonable to predict that demand for mental health services will continue to exceed supply, even if only because of the data showing Gen Z mental health has worsened during the pandemic (CCMH, 2022; Jones, et al., 2022.)
 - Given this, schools will need to offer an array of options to meet the demand—in other words, the new normal requires new solutions.
3. Third, given the ongoing scope of the problem (i.e., demand for mental health services far exceeding supply), schools will need to identify new solutions that:
 - incorporate many of the benefits of direct clinical care
 - are easily scaled to the level of the need among each school's population, however large
 - are appealing to students and easily accessible
 - if possible, can help them whatever time of day or night they are distressed



Togetherall: A safe peer support community

And this is where Togetherall's online peer support platform can serve as a helpful and much needed response.

As we already know, Gen Z students are digitally savvy and spend a lot of time online; Togetherall meets them where they already are.

Togetherall provides 24/7 access, anonymity, and the opportunity for students to both receive as well as give support to their peers.

And unlike most other online forums— which as we have seen are prey to trolling, inappropriate content, and bullying—Togetherall offers discreet monitoring by licensed mental health professionals 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

These professionals intervene not only if a student presents in crisis, they also prevent negative escalations and postings.

In short, Togetherall is an innovative solution to the higher, unable-to-be-met demand for mental health services on college and university campuses across the United States.

It is clinically monitored, scalable to meet any student population need, supports a wide range of student wellness and mental health issues, is available day and night, and provides a safe, easily accessible and welcoming peer-oriented community where students can find acceptance, help, and a deep sense of connectedness.

Conclusion

It is our hope that you now have a better understanding of why Gen Z students on your campus are so distressed, and with that, you can now see the injustice in the many unkind and unhelpful adjectives and labels often used to describe Gen Z.

Generation Z students are not “weak” and they do not “lack stoicism” at all, rather, they demonstrate a staggering level of resiliency in the face of the significant stresses they have been confronting most of their lives. Indeed, these students bring both their vision for a better world and their many strengths to bear on the problems facing not just their generation but our entire society, and in some cases our planet.

In particular, Gen Z is widely known as one of the most activist of generations regarding social justice issues. Gen Z are leading the fight to raise awareness of and take action on climate change, such as Greta Thunberg’s School Strike for Climate. They are organizing large gun control rallies, including survivors of the Marjory Stoneman mass shooting who led the March for Our Lives protest which over 1.2 million attended. And they came out in large numbers for the first Women’s March in January 2017, supporting gender and racial equality, and producing the largest single-day protest in U.S. history.

As one of the interviewed students said when asked about the strengths of Generation Z: **“We have a different perspective than other generations. The way COVID has hit my generation—the way the world shut down. [There’s a] certain kind of resilience to Gen Z—we are more flexible, able to do things a different way.”**

And we will give the last word here to another member of Gen Z, words that eloquently speak to their generation’s resilience:

“

[Our main strength is] our ability to come together. We disagree about a lot of things, but when there are big things happening—bad things—our generation is good at working together and coming up with solutions. People using their voices and speaking up and making a change is kind of awesome.

”



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