

# How will a generation drowning in anxiety redefine wellness?

Forget what you think you know. Gen Z is reprogramming society's view of health for decades to come.

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# Executive summary

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Over the past decade, Gen Z has acted as a catalyst for the mental health movement sweeping the world and a focus of all generations. Like so many other societal shifts led by Gen Z, the movement they launched pre-COVID-19 has gained momentum over the past two years. While most expect the pandemic to eventually wane, awareness surrounding the mental health crisis is only gaining traction.

Anticipating where this will lead requires an understanding of the Gen Z evolution toward a mindset of complete wellness.

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In this report, we explore what Gen Z thinks about physical, mental and social health – and where they expect change. We also spotlight two heavy-hitting topics weighing on Gen Z's shoulders at the intersection of these elements: social media and substance addiction.



# Table of contents

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**What is wellness?** 06

---

**Physical health** 07

How does Gen Z define physical health, and how does that compare with what they see throughout society?

---

**Mental health** 17

What is Gen Z's view on the current state of mental health, and what do they think should be done about it?

---

**Social health** 27

Who does Gen Z trust, and how do they prefer to communicate?

---

**Spotlight on social media** 35

---

**Spotlight on substances and addiction** 40

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**Why does this matter?** 48

# We assembled a panel of highly vetted, leading-edge members of Gen Z to discuss the biggest issues of their generation.

Their insights provide the basis for understanding where Gen Z will go next and anticipate the implications for all generations.

## Research participants

Gender	13 men, 11 women and 1 non-binary
Race	7 White, 7 Hispanic or Latino, 6 Asian 3 Black or African American, and 2 Multiracial
LGBTQ+	14 straight, 7 bisexual, 4 genderqueer/gender-nonconforming 2 not listed, 1 gay or lesbian, 1 transgender and 1 prefer not to answer
Politics	1 very conservative, 5 conservative, 6 moderate, 8 liberal, 2 very liberal and 3 unsure

\*Participants were screened to align more closely with the demographics of the Gen Z generation versus society as a whole.

## Methodology

Ernst & Young LLP interviewed a sample of 25 members of Gen Z from across the United States. In-depth interviews were completed between September 29 and October 14, 2021.

To be considered a member of Gen Z, a person had to have been born between January 1, 1997, and December 31, 2007.

All quotes come from panel participants and have been edited for clarity and brevity.

The views of the third parties set out in this publication are not necessarily the views of the global EY organization or its member firms. Moreover, they should be seen in the context of the time they were made.

[Explore more details](#) about how Gen Z changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the EY Gen Z Segmentation Study, published in November 2021.

[Is Gen Z the spark we need to see the light?](#) →

[Explore more details](#) about each Gen Z segment in our pre-pandemic report published in April 2020.

[Gen Z – A generation of contradiction](#) →



# This is a moment of opportunity.

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Everything has changed globally, and now is the time to rethink health, wellness and what it means to be a healthy individual in a post-pandemic world. What catalysts and challenges will we face in getting there?

In our earlier studies, we learned that Gen Z is stressed, and mental health has been a rising concern for this overwhelmed generation throughout the last two years. In the fall of 2021, we uncovered our Gen Z panel's perspective on mental, physical and social wellness. With a generative approach, we learned how this panel defines things like mental and physical health, and what contributes to it.

67%

In 2021, 67% of Gen Z was moderately to extremely worried about their physical and mental health.

Source: [EY 2021 Gen Z Segmentation Study](#)

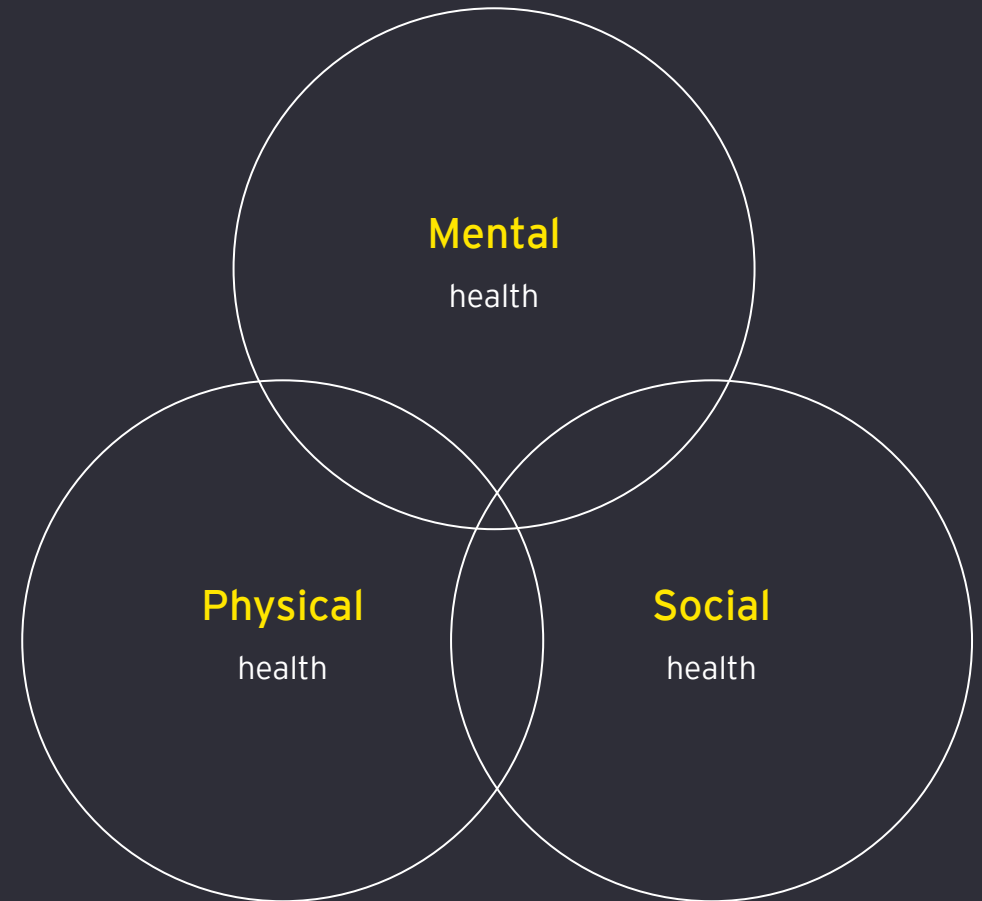
# What is wellness?

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## According to Gen Z:

Gen Z has never known a world where digital, physical and social channels didn't coexist seamlessly. Their view of wellness is similarly un-siloed, comprised of an interconnected web of physical health, mental health and social health. All three must work together. Neglect of one leads to neglect of the others.

Gen Z believes that mental health challenges will prevent you from taking care of your physical health and may drive you to withdraw further socially. They believe that physical exercise can help you think more clearly, feel accomplished and “fight your demons.” They feel socializing with friends and family can improve your mood. When battling top health issues – such as social media consumption, addiction, depression or eating disorders – these pillars of physical, mental and social health are all heavily intertwined.



# Wellness is physical.

How does Gen Z define physical health, and how does that compare with what they see throughout society?





## How does Gen Z define physical health?

They want to achieve equilibrium and balance. To Gen Z, physical health includes rest, whether that's slowing down to experience life fully or allowing your body the rest to balance out their physical activity.

They see physical health as more than just the standard definition of exercise and nutrition – it's the overall maintenance of your body and how strong or confident you feel.

“

It's a lot more than just exercise and being active. It's also the way that you treat your body — like the way you eat, the way you act, and just overall how your body is treated and what it goes through.

16-year-old male high school student from North Carolina

“

Physical health is really your body being able to handle everyday normal tasks and to do it without feeling tired at the end of the day.

17-year-old female TikTok microinfluencer from New Jersey





“

We really just prioritize being skinny as being good. And being fat is seen as ugly. And it goes further than that — being fat, you're seen as being stupid because you supposedly aren't eating right and you don't know how. When in reality there's so many different factors that can contribute to you being viewed as 'fat' in America.

19-year-old female amateur chef from Georgia

## How does Gen Z see physical health in society?

While Gen Z sees physical health as how you feel in your body, society and the internet still equate body size to health.

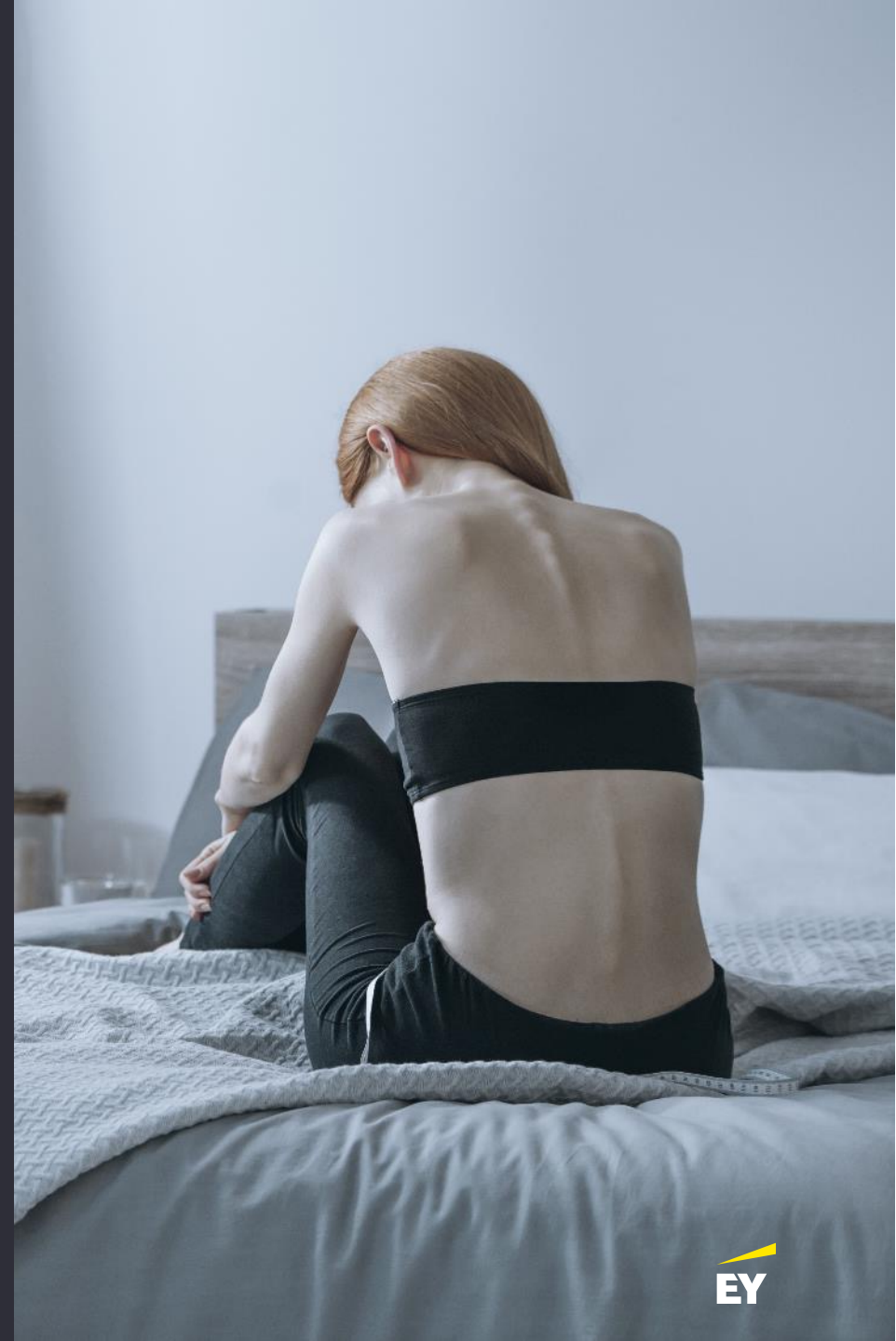
Gen Z understands that having an “ideal” body appearance does not mean someone is healthy. Gen Z acknowledges all bodies are different. All bodies put weight on differently, so health looks different for different people. You can be skinny and unhealthy, and vice versa.

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“

[It's superficial] because the way someone looks gives no indication of how healthy they actually are. Maybe they looked like that because they hadn't eaten in three days or they'd been at gym for like six hours that day.

24-year-old female nutritionist from New York



# What societal factors contribute to how Gen Z views physical health?

Here we explore Gen Z's views on body size inclusivity, what constitutes healthy eating and the taboo topic of sexual health.

## Physical health contributors

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1

Body expectations

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2

Nutrition decisions

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3

Sexual health taboo

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Physical health contributor

## Body positivity has made progress ...

While Gen Z is proud that body positivity has become more mainstream, they recognize there is more work to be done. Gender norms still play a large role in the way Gen Z views their bodies, even for those whose identity doesn't fall into the traditional gender binary.

There is still a dominant expectation from social media that bodies should be skinny. For Gen Z, equating thinness to healthy or pretty is reinforcing both outdated and unhealthy concepts. Body-related mental health issues, including eating disorders and body dysmorphia, are a serious, often life-death reality for this generation.



“

There is currently a lot of people saying, ‘every body is beautiful.’ ... But the overall media just continues to have a specific [body] image.

22-year-old female student teacher from New York





## ... but the movement has largely left out men.

From a consumer standpoint, there is not as much diversity in body sizes seen in male images. Even more, the belief that body image is a female issue prevents men from vocalizing or sharing their feelings about it.

“

The other day I was at [a discount retailer] and my mom was in the women’s section, and I saw a lot more heavier models and not just models that are sticks — like a normal body type. I feel like they could also display that more in the men’s section. Most clothing and apparel places just have fit, fair, skinny, tall guys.

15-year-old male gamer from Georgia

Physical health contributor

## Gen Z knows what healthy eating looks like.

Gen Z is well-educated on nutrition. They understand a need for balanced meals, and they give themselves grace when they make unhealthy decisions.

But their diet isn't always under their control.

Parents often decide the menu, school lunches leave something to be desired, or they face geographic or financial barriers to accessing healthy foods. Gen Z is concerned with the unfamiliar and unhealthy ingredients that are snuck into the processed foods they consume.

“

You have to make sure that you check ingredients of food to make sure you're consuming the right things and not putting chemicals in your body — even when it comes to meat.

22-year-old female realtor from California

“

My diet is not the best. Well, but that's partially by fault of my school. My school used to have a salad bar and that's what I would get every single day. But now my only option is the normal food that they serve.

17-year-old female TikTok microinfluencer from New Jersey

“

I'm pretty mindful about what I eat. I know that if I eat a whole bunch of junk or sugar, I know my limits of when I'm going to start feeling gross if I don't stop.

20-year-old female nursing student from Minnesota

Physical health contributor

## Gen Z wants better sex education ...

The taboo around sex is fading. Gen Z recognizes that sex is natural and that sexual health is important to talk about. However, a stigma still exists, especially with parents or when discussing sexually transmitted infections.

Gen Z wants school curriculum to include how to have healthy relationships, incorporate the importance of safe-sex practices and not shy away from direct language about uncomfortable topics.

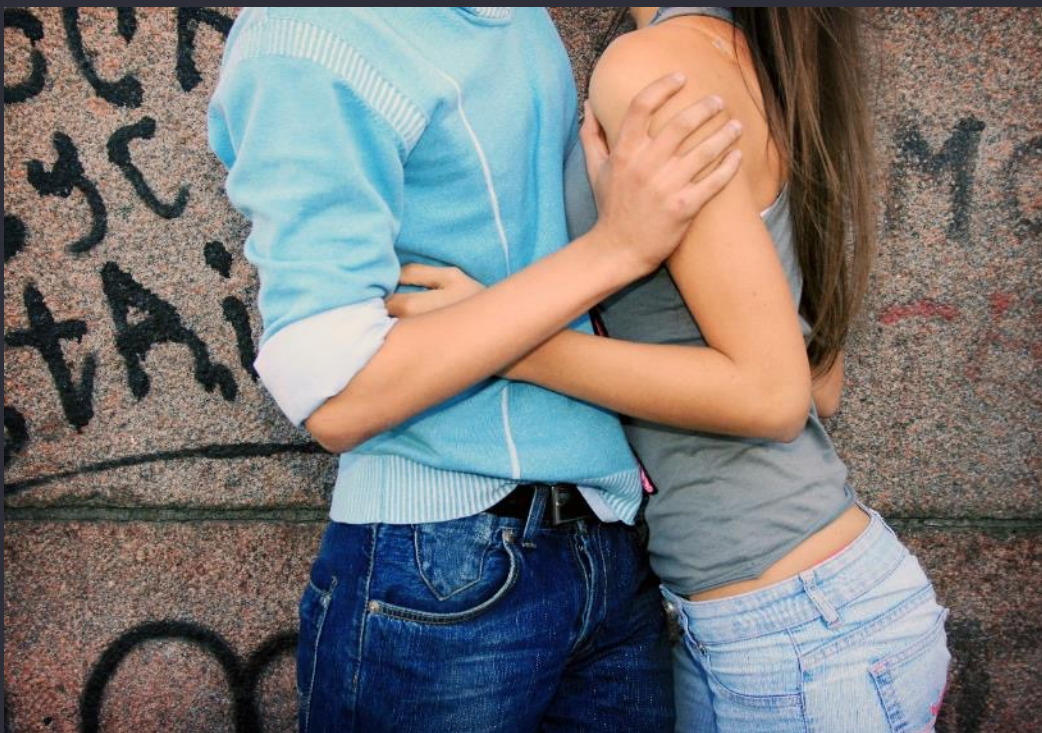


“

I felt like I learned more on the internet about sexual health than in school in health class. The education in school about sexual health needs to be way better.

17-year-old female TikTok microinfluencer from New Jersey





... especially as sex remains a responsibility placed on women.

Gen Z on our panel, regardless of gender, feel that women are more likely to be shamed for having sex, experience sexual abuse, be responsible for birth control and be seen as responsible for managing the consequences of unwanted pregnancies. Rather than accept this, Gen Z are fighting back.

Unlike past generations who largely hushed topics related to sex, feminine hygiene, reproduction or even sexual abuse, Gen Z is speaking out and calling attention to issues long glossed over or covered up altogether. They have started a movement that we can expect to grow across generations as other topics, like menopause, gain greater attention.

“

I get angry because it's so unfair for women to be that deciding role in birth control and everything. Especially with the things that are happening in Texas right now. You know, vasectomies are reversible and that would fix everything. But men are like, 'Oh, change the women. The women are the bearers of children. It's their problem.

16-year-old male band kid from North Carolina



# Wellness is mental.

What is Gen Z's view on the current state of mental health, and what do they think should be done about it?





## How does Gen Z define mental health?

It's an internal state that affects your external day to day.

Gen Z defines mental health as internal – how you feel, how you see the world and the stability of your emotions. Its manifestation is external – it affects your relationships and how well you handle the stressors life throws at you from day to day. A healthy mental state includes knowing how to cope and taking care of yourself – both big areas of focus for Gen Z.

“

Mental health is taking care of you and who you are and preserving that.

24-year-old female nursing student from Texas

“

It's being able to manage stress and anxiety. Finding the balance between good and bad in your everyday life.

17-year-old male track athlete from California



“

If we were to address [mental health] collectively as a country, we have to acknowledge that everyone's problems are different and that any sort of blanket, mushy answer is not going to work.

23-year-old male marketer from New York

## How does Gen Z see mental health in society?

America is talking about mental health, but it feels disingenuous to Gen Z.

Stigmas around mental health are still running rampant. While Gen Z generally agrees we are doing a better job in talking about mental health, the lack of accessible resources makes it look like all talk and no action.

**It's seen as something you shouldn't talk about.**  
Mental health brings up feelings of shame and guilt.

“

In society, it's more like mental health is something you should like hide.

14-year-old female aspiring filmmaker from Florida

**It changes the way people see you.**  
You're seen as weak or inferior.

“

You're thought of as weak or something if you're depressed. Nobody really understands, and they just make jokes about it.

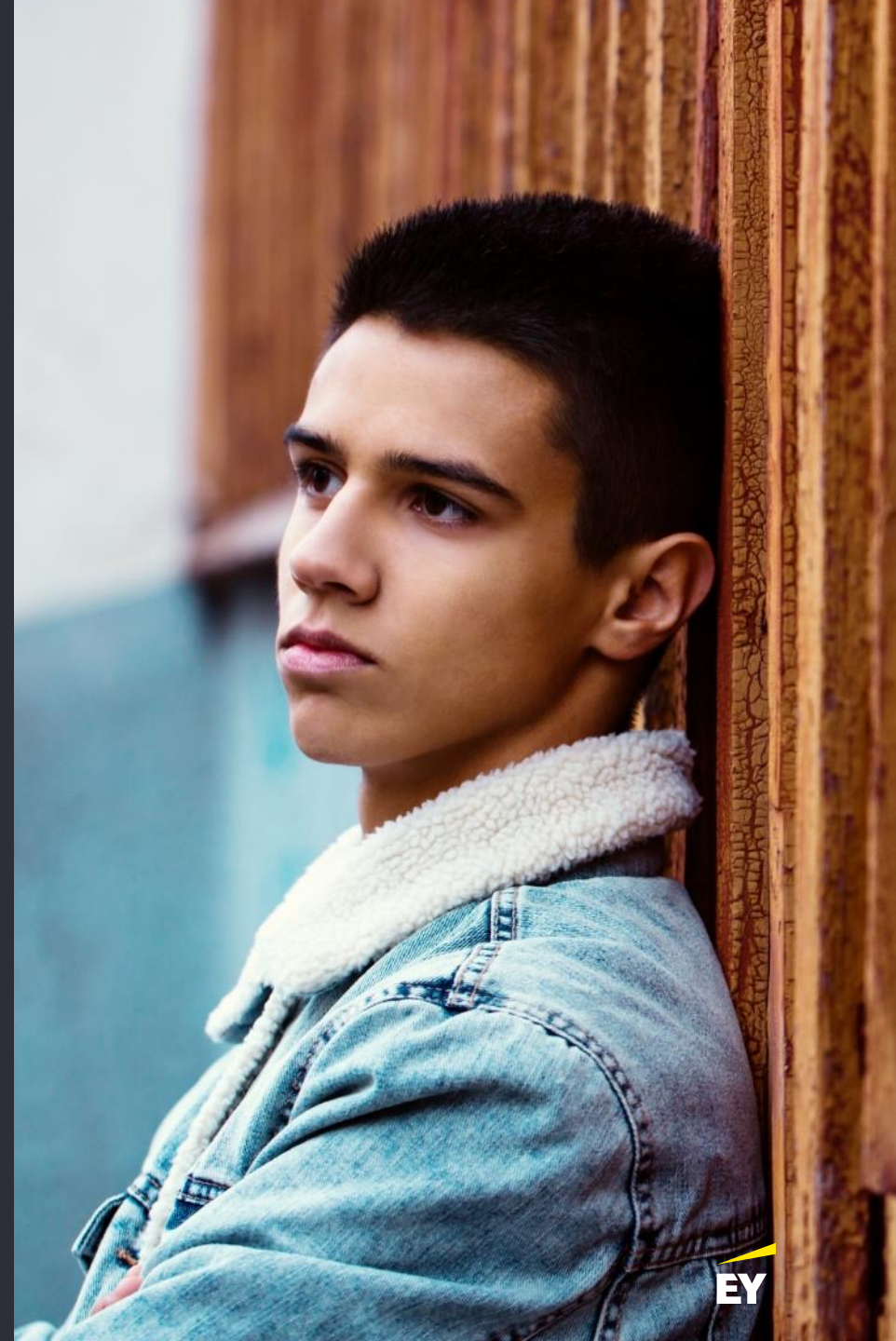
15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee

**Society has a dismissive attitude.**  
It's fake, it's "just hormones" or it's attention-seeking.

“

I think American society talks about it enough, but there are still people that are skeptical, that don't believe in it or don't want to acknowledge it.

17-year-old non-binary aspiring cyber security student from Virginia



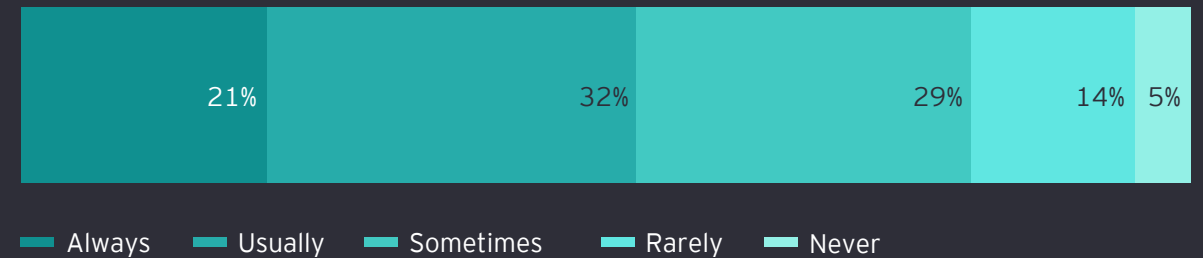


# 48% of Gen Z doesn't get the consistent support they need.

Those who do get support use several avenues to sustainable mental health. They spend mindful time by themselves to meditate or do something they enjoy. They talk to friends they trust about their challenges. Or they'll seek professional help.

## How often did you get the social and emotional support you need?

Q: Since March 2020, how often did you get the social and emotional support you need? n=1,509



Source: EY Gen Z Segmentation Study, 2021

“

I want to make sure that my friends are doing okay because some of them are kind of down that alley. So I'm really open about mental health, and I want to make sure everyone is heard and I want to make sure they feel important in this world.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee

# It's not always easy getting mental health support.

What barriers still exist to addressing mental health for Gen Z and society at large today?

## Mental health barriers

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**1** Parent's culture or generation

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**2** Traditional masculinity

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**3** Availability of professional services

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**4** Productivity vs. mental health

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Mental health barrier

# Parents can be a barrier to teens finding the help they need.

Participants agree that Gen Z understands the value of good mental health – but their parents are prone to the stigmas mentioned earlier. When parents are not on board, it can be difficult for teens to get the help they need and they must strongly advocate for themselves.

It's their generation.

“

I had been trying to seek help since I was 11 or 12. I'm currently 15. But mental health illness was such a stigma in my house. My dad was super, super traditional, so he's like, 'It's all in your head.'

15-year-old female skateboarder from Florida

It's their culture.

“

I know that foreign parents kind of downplay mental health a little bit because they don't really believe in it. They don't understand it. A couple of my friends have talked about it.

15-year-old male gamer from Georgia

It's their religion.

“

When I was in sixth grade, I had suicidal thoughts and my parents didn't understand why. They ruled it out as to like something spiritual...They rule it out to outside sources that will help them understand what's going on.

17-year-old non-binary aspiring cybersecurity student from Virginia



Mental health barrier

## Traditional masculinity is a barrier to males addressing mental health.

Males are told to be strong and to ‘suck it up’ when they’re growing up. Because of this, they feel like having mental health struggles are like showing weakness. This can cause males to internalize their feelings and not seek external support – even from friends.

“

Within the male community, I think there’s a lot of stigma that males aren’t supposed to be that vulnerable or weak.

21-year-old male law student from Ohio

“

A lot of men can’t share that they have problems with actual mental illnesses. A lot of the time they’re seen as lesser because American society emphasizes that men need to be productive — and this impedes on production.

15-year-old male musician from Georgia

“

I’ve been shown that I gotta be my own man, like, you know, fight for myself.

17-year-old male debate club member from New Jersey



Mental health barrier

## Getting professional help is easier said than done.

Their schools all have counselors, but they also said the school doesn't have enough resources, complained that it's not taken seriously or that it can be awkward to seek help at school.

Therapy can be unrealistic because of the cost, logistics or time involved. Online services and apps are making therapy more accessible – but the demand is so high that wait times are long, and finding someone you like is a process in and of itself.

“

So I went to a school counselor and told them, 'Hey, you know, I'm feeling sad.' And the counselor told me, 'Why do you feel sad? Yeah, you have a bad home, but you have a full ride.' So I'm like, okay, that's not what I want.

24-year-old female nursing student from Texas

“

A lot of people cannot even afford their own physical health, let alone their mental health. I have never seen a free therapist. I've never heard of a free psychiatrist. So how is anybody going to reach out to anybody?

21-year-old female rideshare driver from New York

“

Right now, a lot of people are realizing that they have mental health issues, but this is making the facilities very oversaturated. I had to wait two months to get my prescription refilled...the doctors straight up just don't have enough time for everyone.

17-year-old female TikTok microinfluencer from New Jersey





Mental health barrier

## Workplaces value productivity over mental health.

Critics have come up against “hustle culture,” and Gen Z is echoing the same sentiment. Productivity and focusing on achievement is often the source of poor mental health. Gen Z applauds celebrities and companies who prioritize mental health over deadlines or achievements.

“

When “Animal Crossing: New Horizons” came out, they ended up delaying the release date for the mental health of people making the game. I think that has to be a lot more important when it comes to businesses.

16-year-old male band kid from North Carolina

“

And then we come back to work because working and being productive is put over mental health. As long as you’re productive, society won’t say anything.

15-year-old female skateboarder from Florida

“

People are almost afraid of sleep because it looks weak. Especially in the city where a lot of people are in corporate, and during busy season, they didn’t sleep and weren’t eating.

24-year-old female nutritionist from New York

# Wellness is social.

Who does Gen Z trust, and how do they prefer to communicate?





## How does Gen Z define social health?

It's how you get along with and communicate with people.

Social health is a large component of Gen Z life. It's about how they interact with others in a genuine way, how they communicate and how they build trust in relationships.

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“

It's how you get along with people. Like your in-person relationships, family relationships, friendships, select love relationships and how you communicate with people.

15-year-old male gamer from Georgia



## They are natural advocates – they have the instinct to help even if they don't know how.

They are always striving to help, whether that means supporting a friend's mental health, helping their immigrant parents navigate the health care system or simply cooking meals for the family because they have the time and interest.

The EY [2021 Gen Z Segmentation Study](#) showed Gen Z's biggest worry was about others being treated badly because of their gender, race or sexual orientation – more than they worried about getting a good job or paying for college.

“

I feel like it should be really talked about. So I'm really open about mental health, and I want to make sure everyone is heard and I want to make sure they feel important in this world. So I'm pretty open about it.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee

“

I guess now I am the health care proxy. So I make the decisions. What health care plan, what doctor, what medications, who she had talked to when she got taken to the hospital.

24-year-old female nursing student from Texas

“

I watched my dad cook since I was young. And since I'm going to be home a little now because of COVID, I was like, 'I'll start practicing how to cook better now.' And then, I just like slowly took over the position to cook in the house.

17-year-old male debate club member from New Jersey



## They trust people who share similar worldviews and experiences.

A majority of Gen Z has someone in their life to provide the social and emotional support they need – and they value when their vulnerability is reciprocated. This support is most likely to come from their friends and siblings. (And their parents too, for some things.)

“

I think just like sharing your experiences or what you're going through can make you closer to those around you and more connected, and you can relate.

20-year-old nursing student from Minnesota

“

I think because we have very similar morals, very similar views on life, we approach things very similarly. So I think you want to get advice from people who are likeminded and who, you know, also have your best interests at heart.

24-year-old female nutritionist from New York

“

My intercultural friend group tends to be the friend group that I go to when I'm having a really hard time, because some of the experiences I have — they have so many cultural ties. The way they respond to situations, culture plays a huge role in it.

22-year-old female student teacher from New York

## They value honest communication – and technology enables them to do it better.

There's a belief that technology is taking over and Gen Z spends way too much time on their phones. For them, however, technology makes relationships stronger, because it allows them to communicate the way they want.

Gen Z wants to express themselves openly and honestly – and technology removes that awkward barrier and gives them time to think. They want to connect with people who share their unique interests – technology acts as their bridge.

“

I think technology helps my relationships. I'm in the population that's young enough to understand technology and to understand that it's not just like some evil entity.

19-year-old female amateur chef from Georgia

“

Tech is definitely a good thing. I know the older generation might disagree with how phones would impact our lives, but I can literally do everything. If I'm out at night stranded, I can call an Uber. Or if I need to work on my science project, I can Google anything possible.

16-year-old male varsity athlete from Maryland

“

We saw each other everyday at lunch, but we mostly texted. In person, we're completely different. They're shy in person and like super quiet, but on text they are so expressive. They felt a little more comfortable over text.

15-year-old female skateboarder from Florida

## Gen Z fully recognizes the negative impacts of social media ...

Panelists mentioned pressure to act a certain way, a negative effect on body image and how unrealistic photos can affect their views of their own life.

### Body comparisons

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“

[My younger sister will] make comments about her roommate's body and be like, 'Oh, this person has the perfect body.' I'm like, 'How do you know that? What does that even mean?' And I genuinely mean that. Cause I don't understand. And she's like, 'Well, everyone on TikTok has her body,' and I'm like, 'Oh, okay. So this comes from TikTok.'

24-year-old female second-grade teacher from Montana

### Posts are permanent

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“

We've gone so deep into that — everything we posted in there matters, and we can't mess up or anything or it's gonna be with us for the rest of our lives. You just have to really be cautious about what you're posting.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee

## ... but they can't get away from social media – it's where their friends are.

In EY's [2021 Gen Z Segmentation Study](#), 74% of Gen Z said they used social media to communicate more often with their friends than pre-pandemic. It's almost impossible for them not to be on a platform that their friends are on. When they're not on it, they feel like they're missing something – their social health is declining.

Social media is a great communication tool because it's quick – they don't need to have someone's phone number, and they can send things like memes and other content easily. Panelists also mentioned productive content and discussions or accessible expert content as a benefit of social media.

Q: Since March 2020, have you used social media to communicate with friends? n=1,463

“

I went through [a social media break]. I had my best friend calling me, and she was like, 'Why aren't you replying to messages on Instagram?! I've been messaging you. Are you mad at me? Are you ignoring me? Did I do something?'

24-year-old female nursing student from Texas

“

Fear of missing out. To be honest, I think that's the simplest answer there is. You just want to know what's going on.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee



Spotlight

# Social media and addiction are of great concern for Gen Z

Let's take a look at two prominent health issues, where all three pillars of wellness converge for Gen Z.



Social media

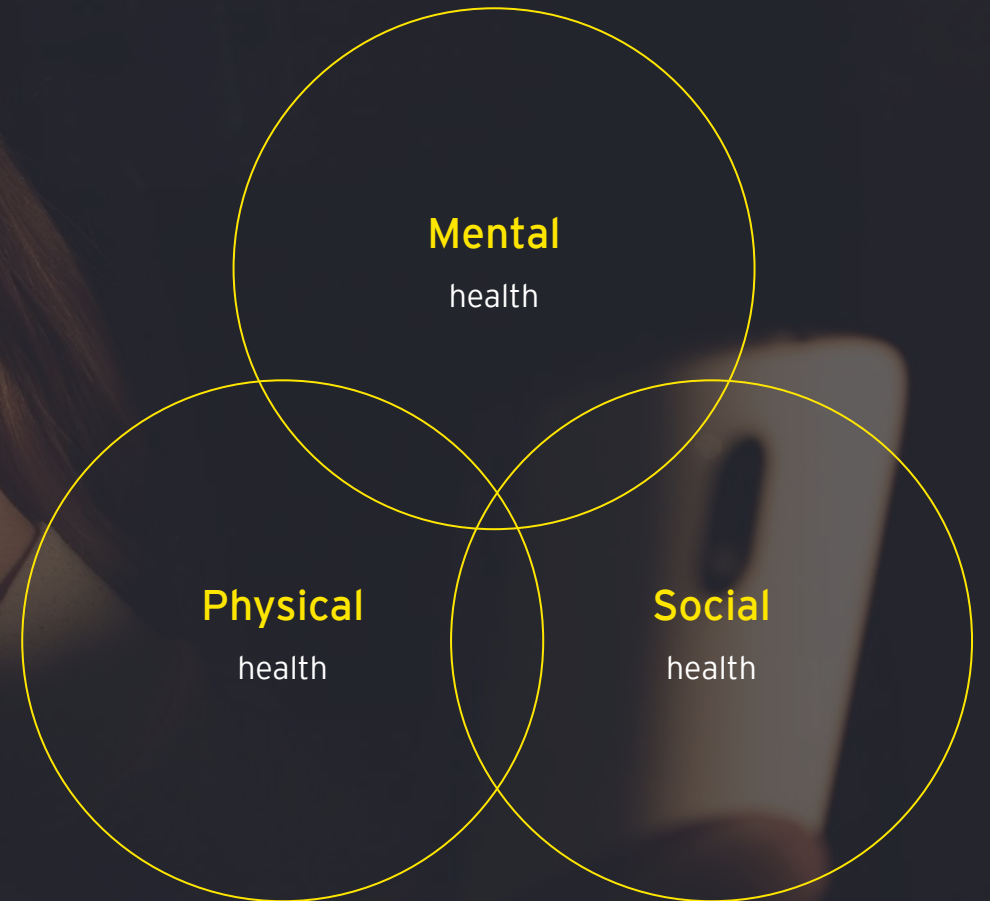


Addiction

Spotlight on social media

# Gen Z: Technology isn't the bad guy, social media is.

Social media is necessary to maintain Gen Z's social health. But it has well-documented negative effects on their mental health and how they view their physical health.



“

I feel like it would be good for me just to take a breather and step back because there's all these expectations on Instagram, to be perfect or to be skinny or to be funny or to be smart or creative.

24-year-old female nursing student from Texas



## In 2020, 1 in 3 members of Gen Z took a break from social media – but a majority didn't last long.

### Temporary breaks

78% of these breaks lasted less than a week because they were on vacation, felt their screen time was too high or felt like they weren't being productive. It's just too easy to get back on and resume normal activity – their lives are intertwined. This is one reason why some Gen Z don't take a break to begin with.

### Mental health breaks

22% of breaks were longer than a week. These panelists felt that they needed to take semi-permanent steps to battle the negative impact of social media, including deleting their accounts so they couldn't get back on.

Source: [EY 2021 Gen Z Segmentation Study](#)



“

If you can't handle that hate, then you shouldn't really be on social media until you finally learn how to love yourself.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee

## Temporary breaks

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“

I don't want to deal with Instagram just because I realized, wow, I spend a lot of time on that app just absorbing content.

23-year-old male marketer from New York

“

I asked my friend to change my password like he's done before. But after like, probably a good week, I asked for the password back because my friends were talking about something that was apparently big going on back in Atlanta.

16-year-old male high school student from Georgia

## Mental health breaks

---

“

I have to stop using Instagram because it's taking a toll on my self-esteem. I had to set it aside, because I would always start comparing myself to other women.

22-year-old female realtor from California

“

I knew that if I just deleted the app, I could always re-download it and just log back into my account. So I was like, no, we need to delete the account. And I told myself until I'm confident in myself that I'm not going to obsess over the numbers, then I'll re-create an account.

22-year-old female student teacher from New York

“

I don't really use much social media anymore. I used to try to like make posts like every month or whatever it was, but then I really realized that it's really controlling our lives.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee



Spotlight on substances and addiction

# Gen Z feels the impact of drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

What is Gen Z's take on substances ranging from cigarettes to cannabis? What do they think needs to be done about addiction?





“

Addiction is any unhealthy thing that isn't good for you and isn't bringing out positivity for you — whether it's mentally or physically. People can be addicted to anything.

24-year-old male sports podcaster from Georgia

## A tale as old as time, Gen Z is motivated by peer pressure and rebellion.

Gen Z understands the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol, but may use them anyway. Most believe it's a stage they are likely to grow out of, but some worry that they may form a serious addiction.

For most, the knowledge of the physical effects of smoking and drinking remains a deterrent. Others preach moderation.

“

With kids my age, [smoking] is good for your social health, because that's what kids are into these days — drugs and alcohol. So, you know, it's a good way to fit in with certain groups.

17-year-old male track athlete from California

“

I feel like it's more like an adrenaline rush. Like what if they're caught? Or, I dunno, maybe they like the flavor.

14-year-old female aspiring filmmaker from Florida



Cigarettes and vapes

## Are cigarettes making a Gen Z comeback?

Vaping was originally seen as a way for cigarette smokers to transition or end their nicotine addiction, but there is evidence that vaping is actually a gateway to cigarettes.

Many in Gen Z started vaping in middle school, and as one participant says, cigarettes are the “next drug in the line.” The very public, negative stigma around cigarettes may even be the reason why teens are intrigued – as a form of rebellion. While most say vaping is still more prevalent than cigarette smoking, it’s a trend we can’t ignore.

“

I think [vapes] have a purpose, which is to get people off of cigarettes, and that’s what they were originally used for. And there’s no secondhand smoke, which is good. But instead, they’re being abused by young kids.

16-year-old male high school student from North Carolina

“

A lot of people in my school are vaping or smoking weed, and they’re going to be into cigarettes. And it just is not worth it, but the addiction makes it really hard to stop.

15-year-old male short film director from Tennessee



Alcohol and cannabis

## Gen Z: Why is alcohol the legal one?

Gen Z seems to be wary of alcohol. They know the dangerous consequences of drinking, and some are questioning why it's so normalized within our society.

On the flip side, a significant portion of Gen Z is open to the legalization of cannabis – especially for medicinal use. Their opinions on legalization seem to be split, like the rest of the country is, but with a slight preference toward legalization.

“

I definitely think alcohol is probably one of the biggest contributors to bad health in our society today, because it's a silent killer. We've really normalized alcohol and drinking. It's legal, it's a social pastime, that kind of thing.

19-year-old female amateur chef from Georgia

“

I think alcohol is actually worse than cannabis. It blows my mind that alcohol is considered legal, but cannabis is illegal, because alcohol can kill you. Like, on its own without being mixed with anything. If you drink too much alcohol, you can die.

17-year-old female TikTok microinfluencer from New Jersey

“

It's divided. I think some people are more open to [the legalization of cannabis]. Like mainly the younger people.

16-year-old male band kid from North Carolina



“

I think with vapes or a cigarette or alcohol or cannabis, if you're doing it for a good purpose, go ahead. Don't be addicted to it and don't make it a reason to kill your organs — like you literally need them to stay alive.

21-year-old female rideshare driver from New York

## Gen Z avoids casting judgment if individuals are using substances responsibly.

Gen Z realizes all they can do is equip people with knowledge – but the decision is theirs to make, and they hope they make responsible decisions. They also recognize individual stories and scenarios are different from theirs; they show empathy toward individuals turning to substances as a coping mechanism for something they are going through.

“

As long as you don't get too carried away with it where it causes damage, then who am I to judge?

17-year-old non-binary aspiring cybersecurity student from Virginia

“

[My family has] a not-so-good relationship with [vaping]. Anything with nicotine is barred from my household, and everybody has something against it. My mother had a heart attack and an asthma attack, and she was a smoker since she was 16. And that is why she passed. Now, if any of my friends vape, I will look at them and I'll be like, 'Your lungs will collapse — but it's your body.' I don't have control over it.

15-year-old female skateboarder from Florida

# Gen Z feels you can't stop people from using substances, but you can help them do it responsibly.

Gen Z believes the government and society at large needs to accept that it's happening and prepare people with knowledge and strategies to be safer – especially around laced drugs, proper dosages, moderation and proactive support channels if things get out of control.

“

People need to be taught moderation. Usually it's just 'Drugs. Bad. Alcohol. Bad.' When in reality, marijuana can have some positive aspects when used in moderation. A night on the town with a few beers can be fun, as long as you're safe and careful, drinking in moderation.

17-year-old non-binary aspiring cybersecurity student from Virginia

“

I know in the UK at these rave festivals, the government knows that the kids are going to take drugs, so they don't push it. They're aware of it. They simply set up tents where people can come take their drugs there, and then they'll test them for you to see if they're laced or anything. And then they'll also recommend the dosage that you should take.

21-year-old male law student from Ohio

“

Letting the students know like, 'Okay, if you do want to smoke weed, just make sure that it's not laced with anything. If you are going to do it recreationally, this is the kind that you want to purchase. Don't just buy it from a sketchy person off the corner of the street. You want to go somewhere where you know it's safe.'

22-year-old female student teacher from New York

# Why does this matter?

The youth within our societies act as the “canary in the coal mine,” providing an early indicator of where society at large is heading. Given this, organizations can gain a strategic advantage by better understanding the nuances of Gen Z’s views on the world, including those related to health and wellness.

**Mental**  
health

**Physical**  
health

**Social**  
health



# Why does this matter?

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## Gen Z will push wellness in new directions.

Gen Z will be the driving force behind the continued conversation around physical, mental and social health, both from a consumer and employer standpoint.

The following pages explore seven crucial business implications surrounding Gen Z and health.



# Why does this matter?

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## Gen Z inclusion is critical to successful transformation.

If you want to know what a Gen Z is thinking, just ask them. They are vocal about progress, and they gravitate toward brands and companies that are open and transparent about change. Be vulnerable. Be honest. Own your mistakes. Continuously ask how you can improve – and then do it.

Gen Z wants health resources and want companies prioritizing employee health over deadlines, but most of all, they want to be part of the solution. Leaders that understand this will win with this authenticity-seeking cohort.



# Why does this matter?

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## Dated views on masculinity prohibit authenticity.

Gen Z demands authenticity. They expect brands to portray a more inclusive view of humanity, across all genders. Marketing and advertising have come a long way (but not nearly far enough) when it comes to women – depicting a broader range of sizes, shapes and skin tones. But men are still largely portrayed as strong, fit “guys-guys.”

Gen Z demands a more modern take on what it means to be a man, both physically and emotionally. Body positivity and inclusion, from a male perspective, needs to catch up to the progress that has been made on the female front, to help advance the cause further for all.





# Why does this matter?

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## Sexual health moves into the mainstream.

Just as brands are coming to grips with Gen Z's "live out loud" attitudes around mental health, pay and finances, race and gender harassment and inequities, Gen Z is taking society and businesses into the realm of sexual health.

The unresolved issues at the core of this movement, like lack of access to information on reproductive health and unavailability of free feminine hygiene, perpetuate inequalities that Gen Z is bringing to the forefront. They will demand the same level of transparency and open dialogue around sexual health as they have raised around other once-taboo topics.





# Why does this matter?

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## Healthy food should be medicine for all.

Gen Z understands the link between fueling their bodies with healthy food and overall wellness. They also recognize their nutrition is still largely out of their control (dictated by others or not within their budget).

They are inherently aware that healthy food should be available for all, not just those that can afford it. They will call out inequities and look for solutions. Organizations and people that perpetuate food inequities will be called out, while those that deliver solutions will be rewarded with greater trust and loyalty.





# Why does this matter?

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## Proactive transparency is a basic expectation.

Gen Z wants to empower the world to live out loud as their authentic, true self. Why wouldn't they expect the same from the brands they shop with and the employers they work for? They value meaningful engagement, sniff out inauthenticity with ease and are leery of "fake."

They are particularly averse to hidden ingredients in the foods that they eat, and they will be increasingly critical of companies that are not proactively open and honest about their sourcing, supply chain and manufacturing processes. Authenticity, transparency and accountability will need to be the theme statements for every company moving forward.



# Why does this matter?

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## Addiction is about more than just substances.

In Gen Z's view, anyone can be addicted to anything – video games, screen time, social media, exercise, achieving physical appearance or a host of other drugs and substances. Gen Z demands that society at large acknowledge that addiction is happening and educate people on how to moderate safely.

Companies will increasingly become part of the conversation around addiction, provide resources to help and educate, and avoid feeding into the problem.





# Why does this matter?

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## Activities that recharge must be encouraged.

Gen Z has been raised in an era where there is an open discussion about mental health. Employers will be called on to enable employees to care for and improve their mental well-being. Mental health courses and a positive culture are a great start, but far from enough. Employers must actively promote wellness in ways that are most meaningful to Gen Z.

Organizations can take this step forward by rewarding employees for community volunteering, giving back or taking mental health breaks. Gen Z knows that balance is important, but the majority have a hard time “turning off.” Guilt-free activities (i.e., educational retreats, volunteering) that enable decompression will resonate. Doing good for others is another form of self-care that often goes overlooked.





“

I think it's going to be important to involve people within Gen Z. I think it's important to bring in outsiders as well ... Make sure it's a diverse panel that's running [the company] and include the opinions of Gen Z.

17-year-old male track athlete from California

# Get in touch

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