



AIM Ideas Lab Youth Survey 2023

Monterey County

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Youth Report Created by AIM Ideas Lab Participants March 6-12, 2023

Introduction

AIM Youth Mental Health invited high school student volunteers in Monterey County to take part in AIM Ideas Lab: a virtual, Youth Participatory Action Research project focused on mental health advocacy. This program ran from January 16 - March 12, 2023.

Thirty-four AIM Ideas Lab youth researchers from throughout the county worked together to conduct youth mental health research and make recommendations to policy makers, researchers, and their community about how to address the youth mental health crisis that is growing in the wake of COVID. Over 400 hours of community service was invested by the youth participants in this program.

AIM Ideas Lab Program Objectives:

1. Discuss youth mental health, emerging issues, and brainstorm ways to address the crisis with teens from other high schools.
2. Learn about qualitative and quantitative scientific research
3. Conduct peer-to-peer research mentored by youth mental health researchers and professionals
4. Collect, compare, and analyze research with the findings of AIM Ideas Labs across multiple counties
5. Bring the youth voice to the table by presenting ideas, research, and recommendations via identified channels.
6. Drive the next phase of investments in youth mental health research by making recommendations to the AIM Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) for the most impactful youth mental health research for the future

Research Design: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach to research and social change that encourages young people to utilize their own perspectives and strengths to identify, study, and address issues that impact them.

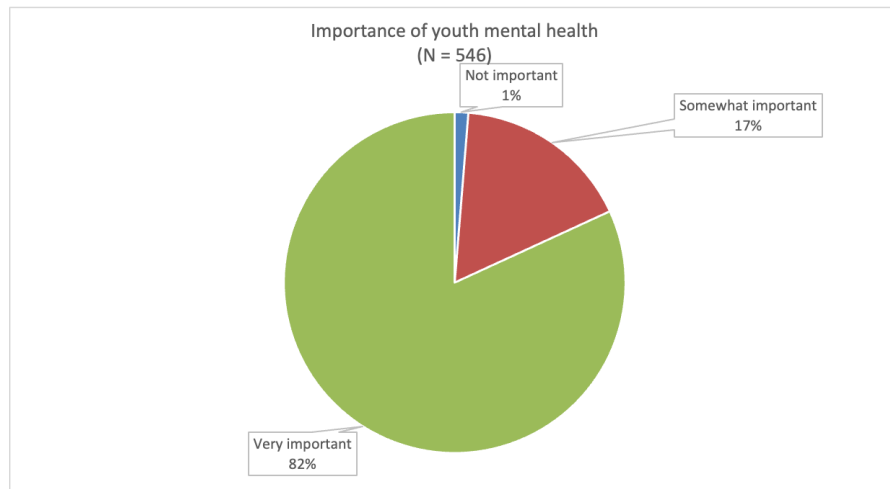
Research Objective: Survey a demographically representative sample of teens in Monterey County to discover the mental health challenges youth are facing and potential ways to address them.

Survey Distribution: The survey took about 10-15 minutes to complete. Questions included demographic information like gender identity, race, and age, as well as questions about youth mental health and support services. The survey was distributed February 15-March 9, 2023, via word-of-mouth, text message, social media, and in select schools. 567 youth in Monterey County completed the survey.

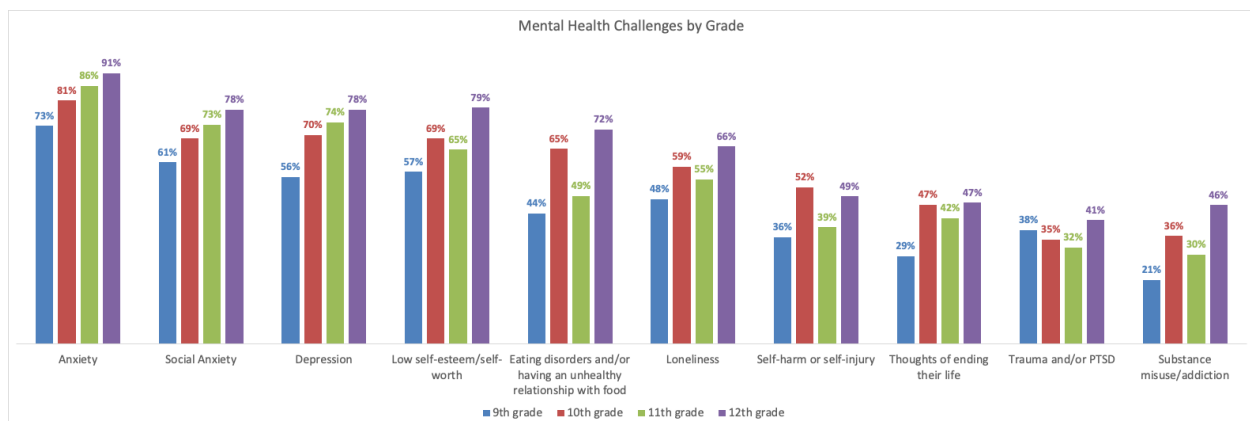
Mixed-Methods Approach: The survey consisted of 17 quantitative (frequencies, percentages) and 2 qualitative (open ended response) questions and were analyzed by the youth researchers to form conclusions and recommendations for next steps.

Executive Summary

1. Youth mental health is a very important issue for teens in Monterey County. The importance of youth mental health seems to have increased since last year's Ideas Lab survey, likely due to greater awareness of mental health challenges in school and amongst peers.

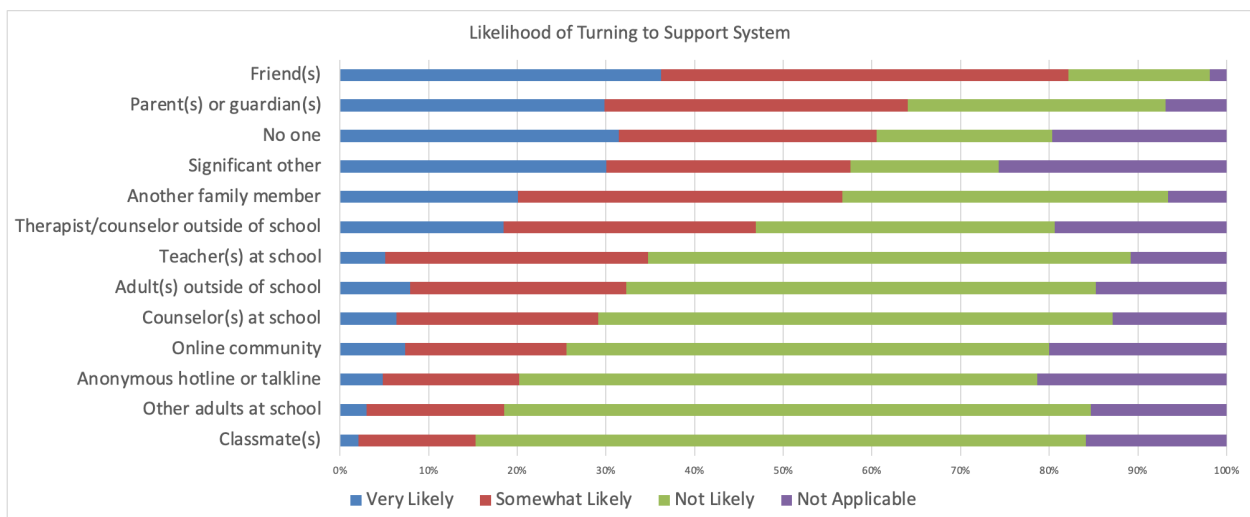


2. Teens in Monterey County are facing significant mental health challenges, particularly anxiety, social anxiety, depression, and feelings of low self-esteem/self-worth. Contrary to last year's Ideas Lab survey where Juniors seemed to be experiencing the greatest challenges, this year's data show Seniors being more impacted. This may be due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, where today's Seniors were severely impacted during their Freshman year, which may have created a sense of instability throughout high school.

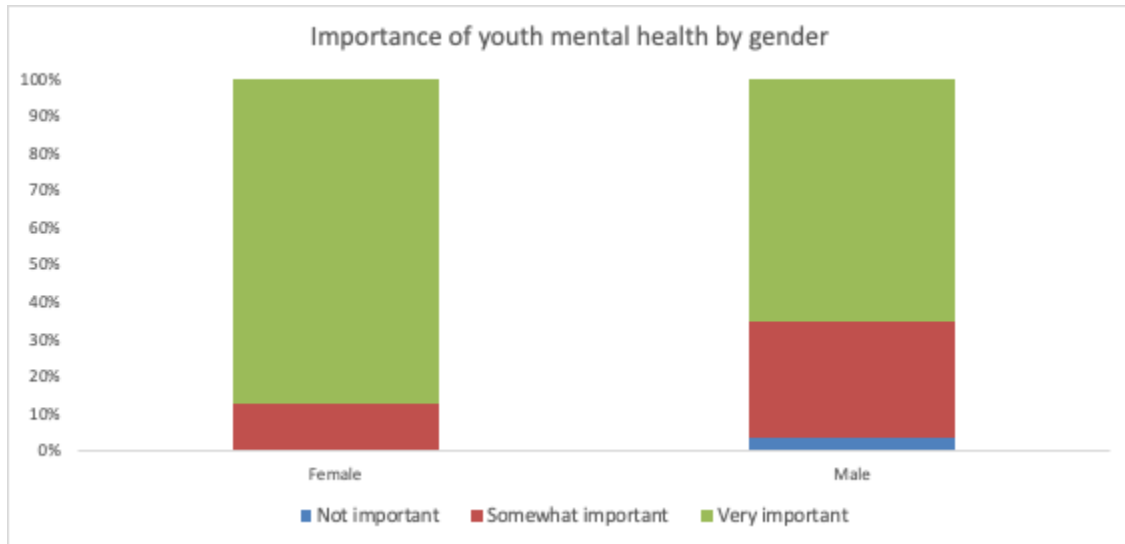


- a. **Recommendation:** It is critical for our community to come together and address youth mental health in Monterey County, particularly issues of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem/self-worth. The lingering effects of Covid-19 must be considered when addressing youth mental health.

3. There is an urgent need for 360° psychoeducation about youth mental health for parents/family, school teachers and staff, and youth themselves.
 - a. **Family:** Teens report that negative home environments, pressure from parent(s) or guardian(s), and family not acknowledging mental health issues are some of the top factors that worsen youth mental health.
 - i. **Recommendation:** Parents should participate in family education programs about youth mental health to help eliminate stigma at home.
 - ii. **Recommendation:** Parents should be patient with their teens and focus on listening when they open up since youth sometimes just want to be heard and are not always looking for solutions.
 - b. **School:** A majority of teens are unlikely to turn to teachers, counselors, or other adults at school when they need mental health support.
 - i. **Recommendation:** Schools should assign dedicated counselors to each grade who can proactively check on students as they progress through high school. It is much easier to open up to an adult when that consistent relationship has built and trust has been established.
 - ii. **Recommendation:** Every school should have adults who are properly trained and equipped to provide emotional support for students.
 - c. **Youth:** A majority of teens would rather not reach out to anyone for support, citing difficulty in trusting others and a desire to be self-reliant when it comes to their mental health.
 - i. **Recommendation:** Youth should know that when they are going through something, sharing with others will help and make them feel less alone. They should be more receptive to building relationships with others when they reach out.
 - ii. **Recommendation:** Youth should be more proactive about practicing self-care and finding healthy coping activities to protect their own mental health.



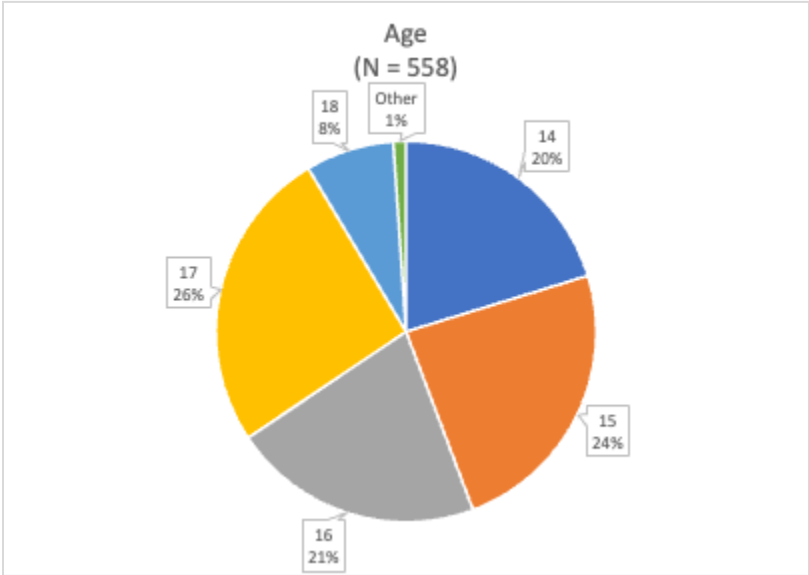
4. Male teens seem to have greater stigma about addressing their mental health than other teens. The survey sample had fewer male respondents and of those who participated, they are less likely to believe youth mental health is a very important issue. Male teens are also more likely to be concerned about being judged or bullied by others if they reach out for mental health support.



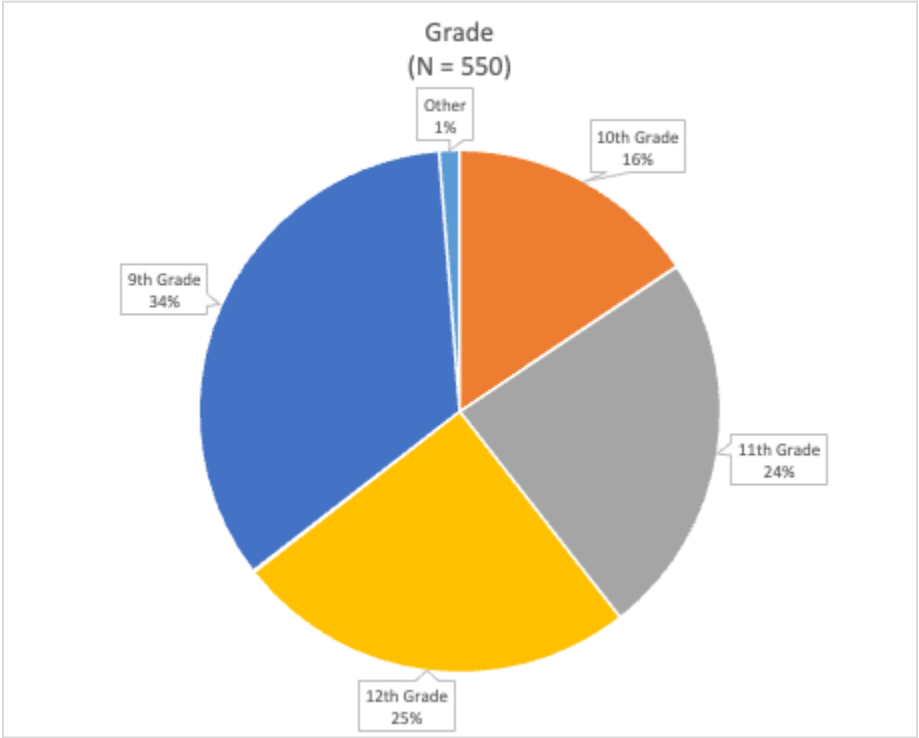
- a. Recommendation: There should be a culture change among male teens in our community. Males should encourage their friends to be more open about mental health and let each other know that it's completely normal and not "feminine." Male teens should be made more aware of the need for mental health support and resources.
5. Teens are experiencing immense pressure due to academics and feel like they don't have the time to address their mental health. Less than 25% of respondents are getting 8+ hours of sleep a day, pressure for academic success, lack of sleep and time for self-care are some of the top factors that worsen youth mental health, and teens have identified lack of time as the top reason for not socializing more with their peers and having a sense of community.
- a. Recommendation: Schools should reconsider how much homework they're giving and provide more time in class to complete work so students aren't staying up doing work when they could be sleeping.
- b. Recommendation: Schools should include student input when they make changes to the school schedule and workload since students are very impacted by it.
- c. Recommendation: Parents should reduce the amount of pressure they put on their children when it comes to academic success in an effort to support youth mental health.

Respondent Demographics

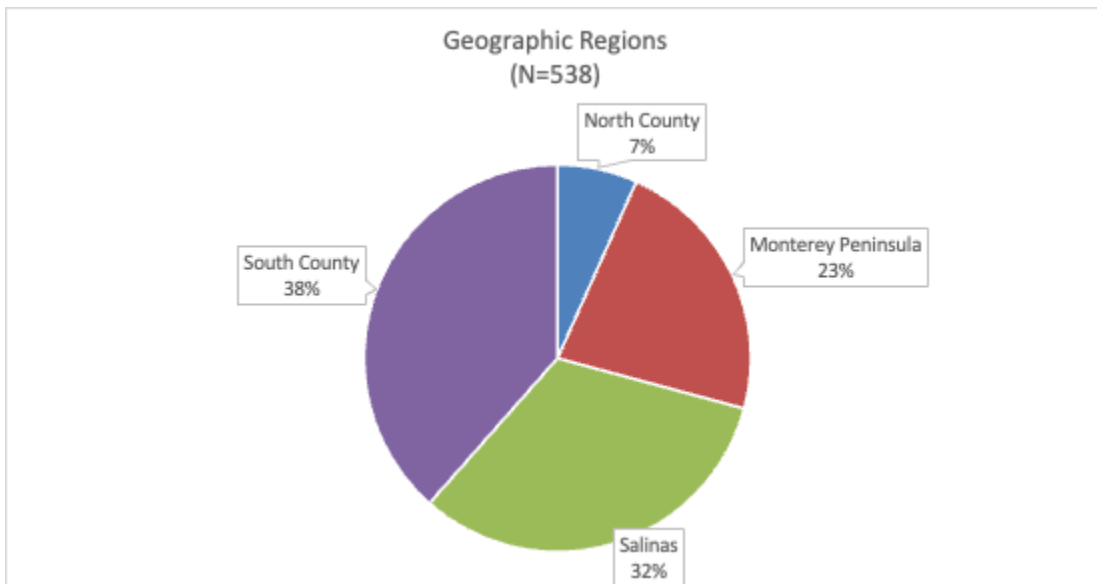
What is your age?



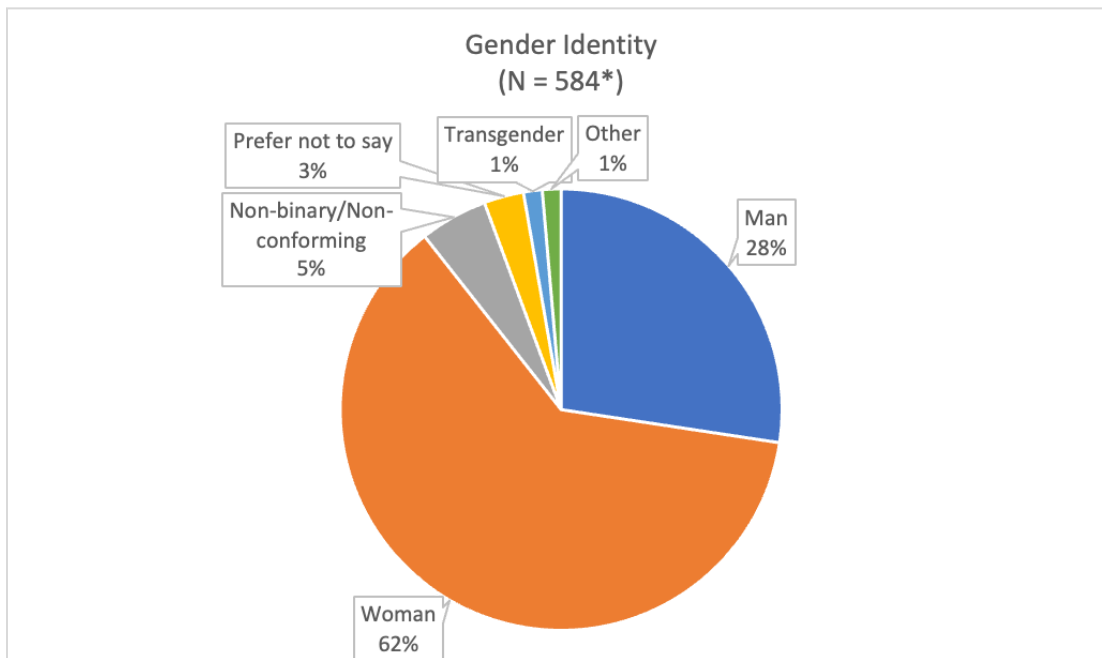
What grade are you in school?



What city do you live in?

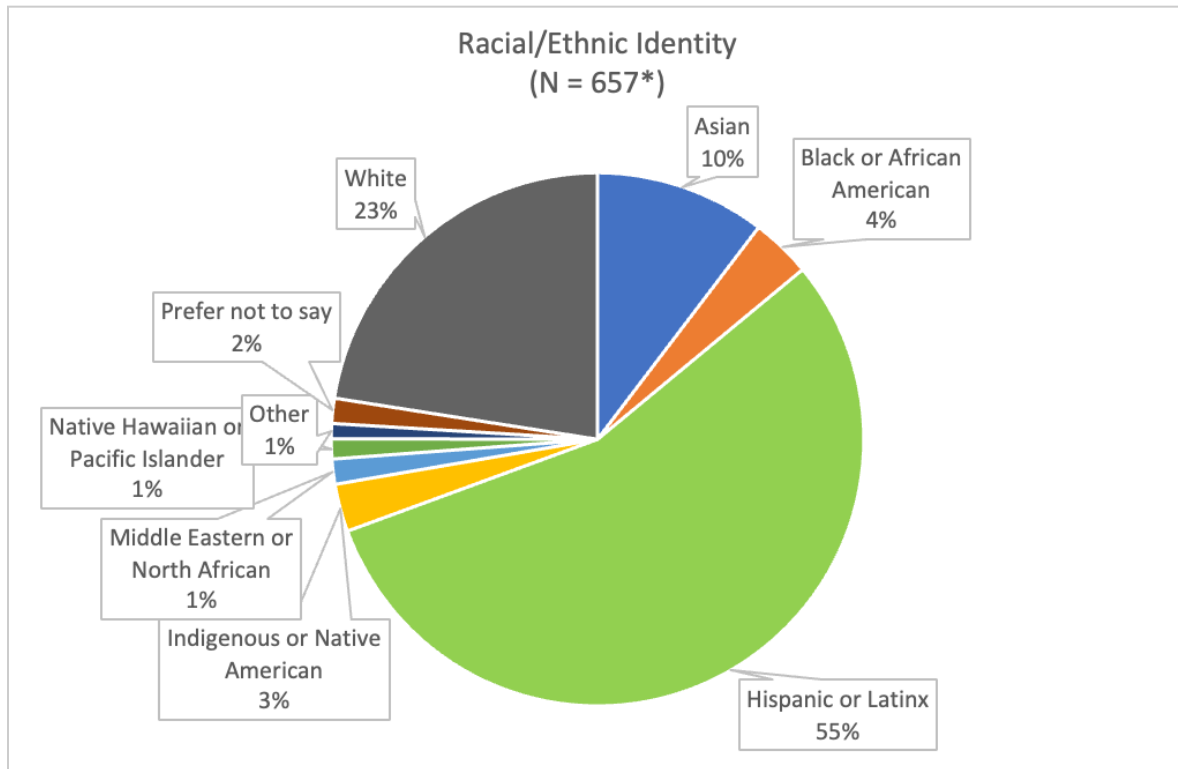


What is your gender identity?



*Includes 23 respondents who selected more than 1 gender identity

What racial/ethnic group do you belong to?



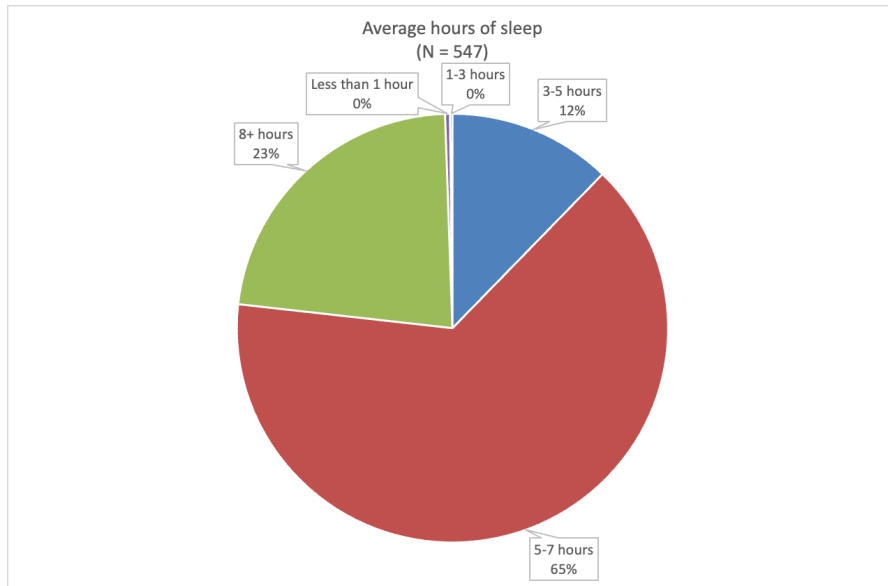
*Includes 89 respondents who selected more than 1 racial/ethnic identity

Demographic Insights

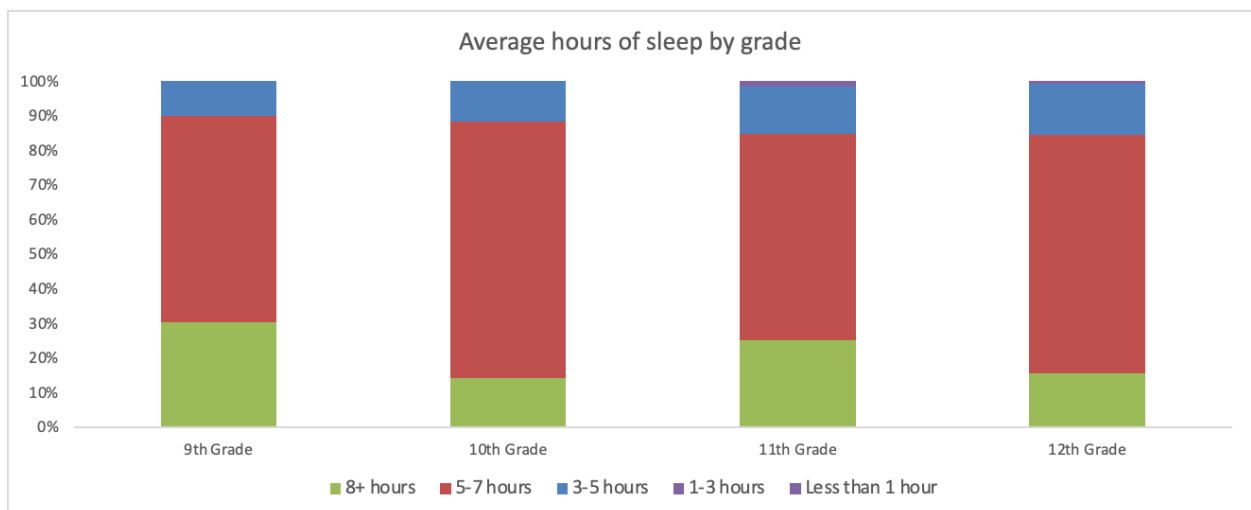
- Skews in the respondents' gender identity seems to reflect the demographics of the Ideas Lab participants. Having more diverse Ideas Lab participants across gender identity, grades, and schools will help generate a more representative sample.
- Having the ability to field the survey in school also helps create a more representative sample since it gives the Ideas Lab participants the opportunity to reach teens outside of their immediate friend groups.
- There is good representation of different gender identities including non-binary/non-conforming and transgender respondents.
- Having the option to select more than one gender identity and racial/ethnic identity is more inclusive and reflects the youth-led nature of the Ideas Lab survey.

Survey Results

Q1: On average, how many hours of sleep do you get on a typical weeknight?

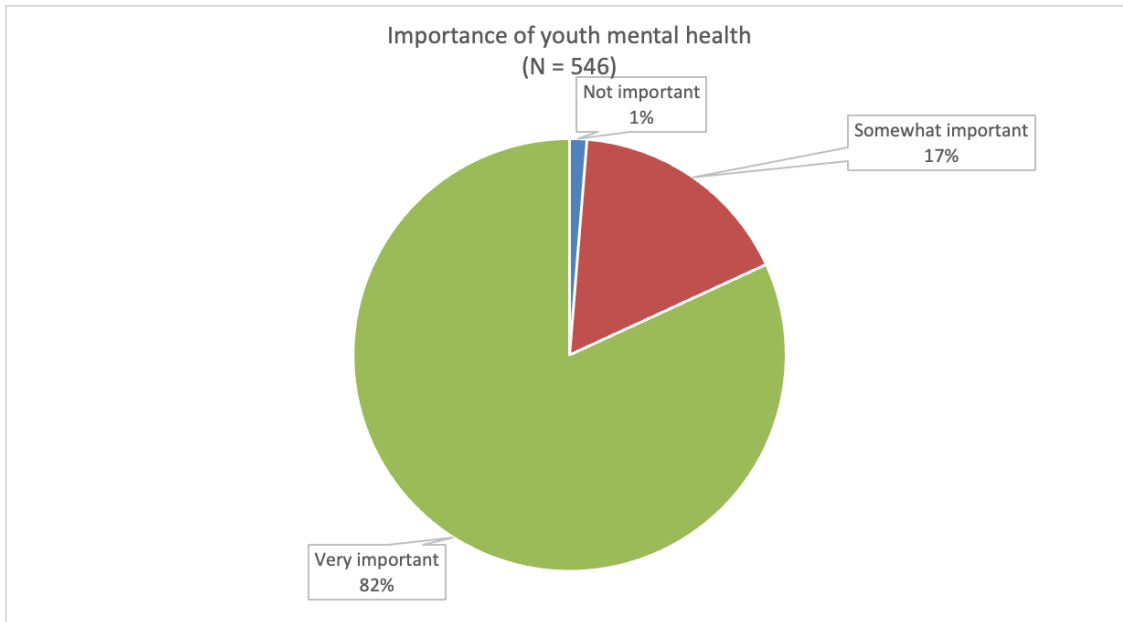


- The majority of survey respondents get 5-7 hours of sleep each weeknight, which is too little but likely a realistic reflection of students' schedules nowadays
 - Since 5-7 hours can include both healthy and unhealthy amounts of sleep, there is potential to revisit the categories of hours in future surveys e.g., 4-6, 7-8 hours
- Youth often underestimate the amount of sleep they need and the negative effects of sleep deprivation, including irritability, lack of focus, and difficulty in tackling their daily responsibilities

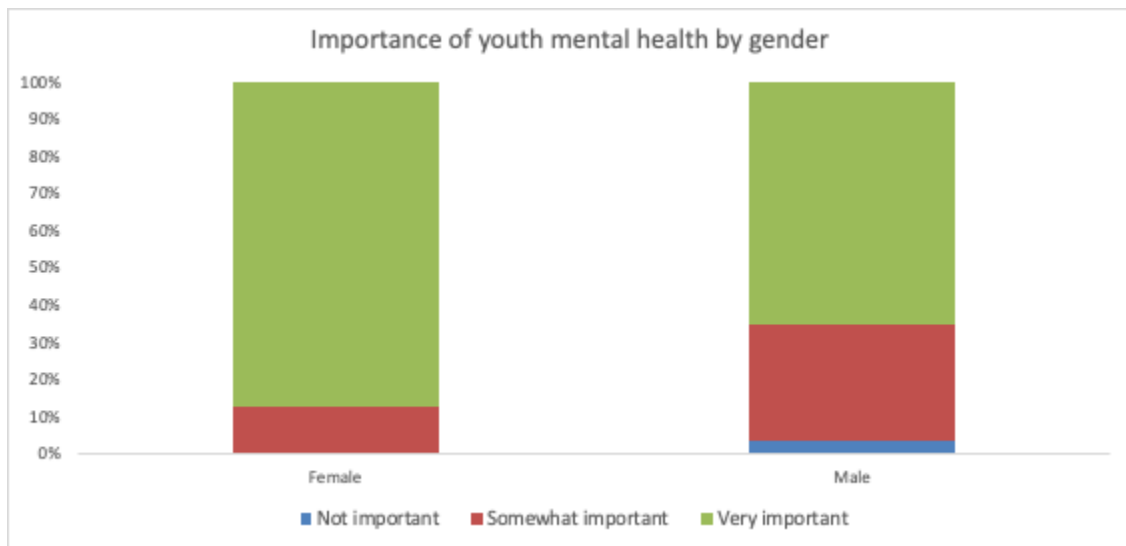


- Surprising that Juniors seem to get more sleep than Sophomores, maybe Sophomores are experiencing time management issues as their workload increases

Q2: How important do you think it is to address the mental health of teens in Monterey County?

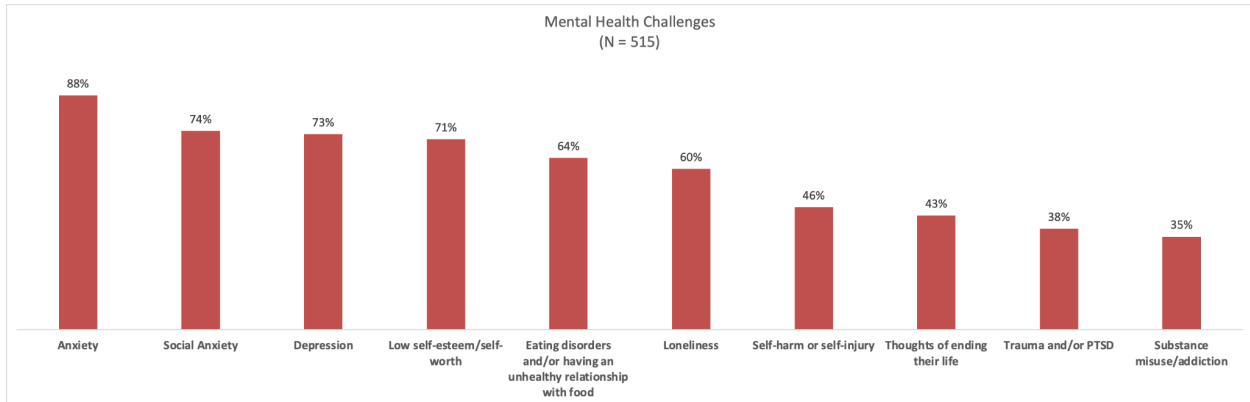


- The importance of youth mental health seems to have increased since last year’s Ideas Lab survey, likely due to greater awareness of mental health challenges in school and amongst peers.

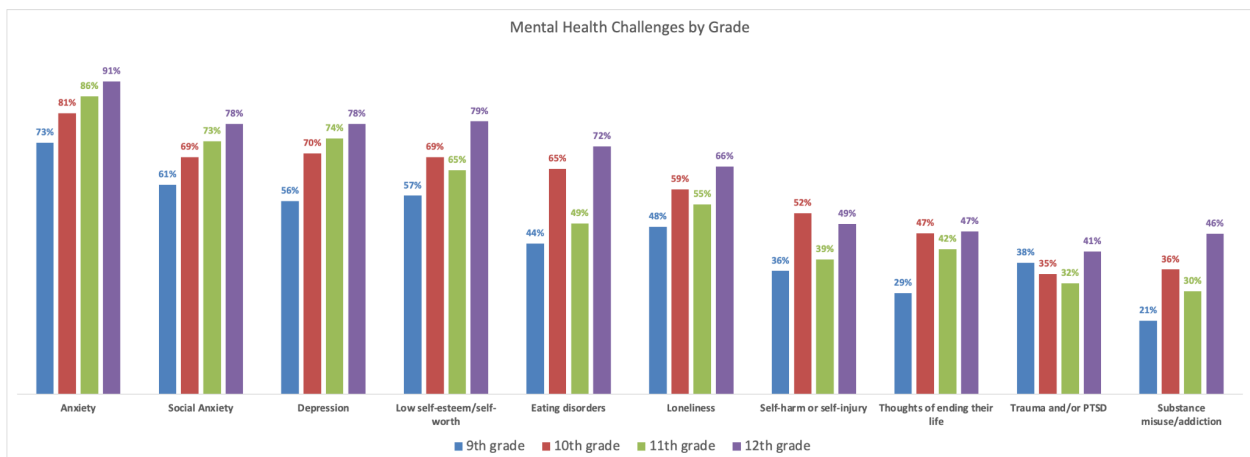


- The differences in how Male and Female respondents view the importance of youth mental health may be due to different societal expectations for Males. Our male Ideas Lab participants remarked that it is less acceptable for Males to experience mental health challenges and are expected to just “move on” and not encouraged to make time to address them.

Q3: Have any of your friends shared with you that they have experienced any of the following?



- Top youth mental health challenges are anxiety, social anxiety, depression, and feelings of low self-esteem/self-worth
- Surprising that substance misuse/addiction ranked the lowest but this may be because youth use substances as a coping mechanism to relax and have fun with friends so it's not seen as a negative challenge
- Also surprising that self-harm/self-injury ranked so high since it's typically thought of as a private act but good that it's being talked about amongst peers



- Surprising that last year's Ideas Lab data showed Juniors having the most challenges but this year, the data seem to show more challenges amongst Seniors and Sophomores. Maybe this is an effect from Covid-19 where today's Seniors were severely impacted during their Freshman year, which may have created a sense of instability throughout high school.
 - One Senior participant mentioned it was overwhelming to return to school as a Junior and deal with the pressures of that year after being virtual for 2 years
- Similarly for Sophomores, who were in middle school during the pandemic and weren't able to develop strong friendships during those crucial years
- Sophomores may also be adjusting to more challenging academic responsibilities and getting less sleep

Q4: Which of the following do you think worsens mental health for teenagers in Monterey County?

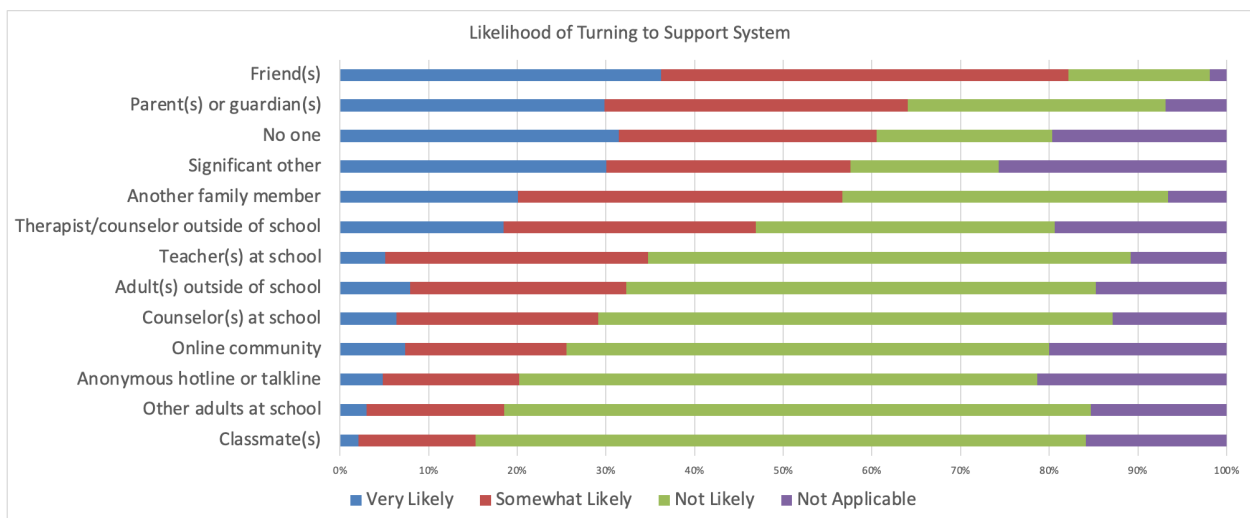
Top risk factors by grade (N = 544):

	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
1.	Lack of sleep	Lack of time for self-care	Pressure from parent(s) or guardian(s)	Pressure from parent(s) or guardian(s)
2.	Bullying/cyberbullying	Social media	Pressure to succeed academically	Negative home environments
3.	Easy access to drugs and alcohol	Lack of sleep	Lack of sleep	Lack of sleep
4.	Negative home environments	Negative home environments	Negative home environments	Family not acknowledging mental health issues
5.	Family not acknowledging mental health issues	Family not acknowledging mental health issues	Family not acknowledging mental health issues	Pressure to meet societal expectations
6.	Social media	Pressure from parent(s) or guardian(s)	Lack of time for self-care	Pressure to succeed academically
7.	Pressure from parent(s) or guardian(s)	Pressure to succeed academically	Feeling unprepared for the future	Comparisons to other people
8.	Lack of time for self-care	Comparisons to other people	Social media	Social media
9.	Comparisons to other people	Pressure to meet societal expectations	Pressure to meet societal expectations	Feeling unprepared for the future
10.	Pressure to succeed academically	Feeling unprepared for the future	Comparisons to other people	Lack of time for self-care

- Parents and home environments are top risk factors for respondents from all grades, which is not surprising but unfortunate since family is supposed to be a main source of support
- Respondents seem to be feeling a lot of pressure from all sides - parents, home, school, and self. There is an unspoken pressure to have your whole life path figured out to “keep up with the pack”, particularly for the upperclassmen.
 - Juniors and Seniors’ risk factors are likely due to them looking ahead to the future and feeling stressed and unprepared.
- Freshman and Sophomores’ risk factors seem to be a reflection of them transitioning to HS

- Surprising that social media was only top risk factor for sophomores but that may be because older grades have other priorities or are more comfortable with themselves and less focused on peer approval
 - **Recommendation:** Educate younger teens about social media hygiene to be less influenced by what they're seeing online and build self-esteem
- Bullying/cyberbullying appearing as a top risk factor for freshmen could be remnants from middle school where bullying is more common. Good to see that this becomes less of an issue as respondents mature.

Q5: If you were going through a challenging time, how likely are you to ask the following people for mental health support?



- Friends being the main source of support makes sense because youth are around their friends constantly and are able to communicate with them anytime
- Not turning to anyone as one of the top choices also makes sense because it is often difficult for youth to take the first step of reaching out. Youth are more likely to deal with their issues on their own and not be comfortable sharing with others, which requires vulnerability. They may also be concerned about being a burden to others, especially since it seems like most teens are dealing with their own challenges (Q3).
 - It is also possible that youth are dealing with more serious issues (e.g., suicidal thoughts), which makes them scared to reach out and/or think that others are not equipped to support
 - **Recommendation:** Make it more well-known that when teens are going through something, sharing with others will help and make them feel less alone.
- In general, reaching out to adults is difficult due to lack of relatability and shared experiences. Youth want to talk to someone who knows what their life is like right now.
 - **Recommendation:** Parents should be patient with their teens and focus on listening when they open up since youth sometimes just want to be heard and are not always looking for solutions.

- Not surprising that reaching out to teachers, counselors, and other adults at school ranked low due to students having a limited number of interactions and limited time to interact with them. Students don't feel like they know their teachers or counselors and as a result, don't want to turn to them for mental health support.
 - Specifically, the ratio of counselors to students may be an issue since counselors are overwhelmed and students may feel like they're wasting the counselor's time when they see them
 - Students may be concerned with teachers and counselors being mandated reporters, particularly if they open the conversation with that
 - ***Recommendation:*** Teachers and counselors should be more proactive in reaching out and building relationships with students. "Adults need to step it up more" but students also need to be receptive to building that relationship.
- The Ideas Lab participants were hoping the hotline/talkline option would rank higher with the new 988 number but they mentioned the number is not widely publicized or discussed on a regular basis. There may also be a level of stranger danger and mistrust when reaching out to an anonymous resource.
 - ***Recommendation:*** Spread more awareness of the 988 hotline and its purpose. Let teens know it is not only for serious issues such as suicide but also a safe resource when they need emotional support.

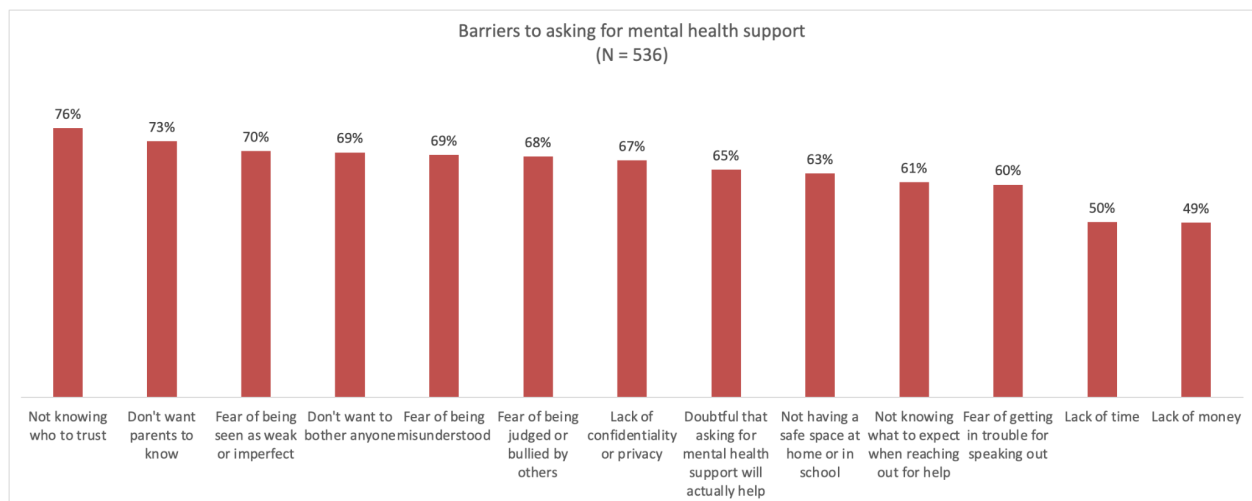
Q6: What type(s) of mental health support do you think would be most helpful at your school?

Most helpful mental health support at school (N = 538)	
64%	Ability for students to take mental health days
62%	Free mental health resources
60%	Support that doesn't require parent/guardian permission
56%	Educating parents/guardians about youth mental health
55%	Access to anonymous support
53%	Educating teachers and school staff about youth mental health
52%	Educating students on healthy coping skills and self-care activities

- Currently, most schools don't seem to offer the option for students to take mental health days. While not every student will take them (due to difficulty in making up classwork), the few students who might take mental health days could benefit meaningfully.
 - Having the option to take mental health days gives students a choice they can make and helps normalize needing mental health support at school

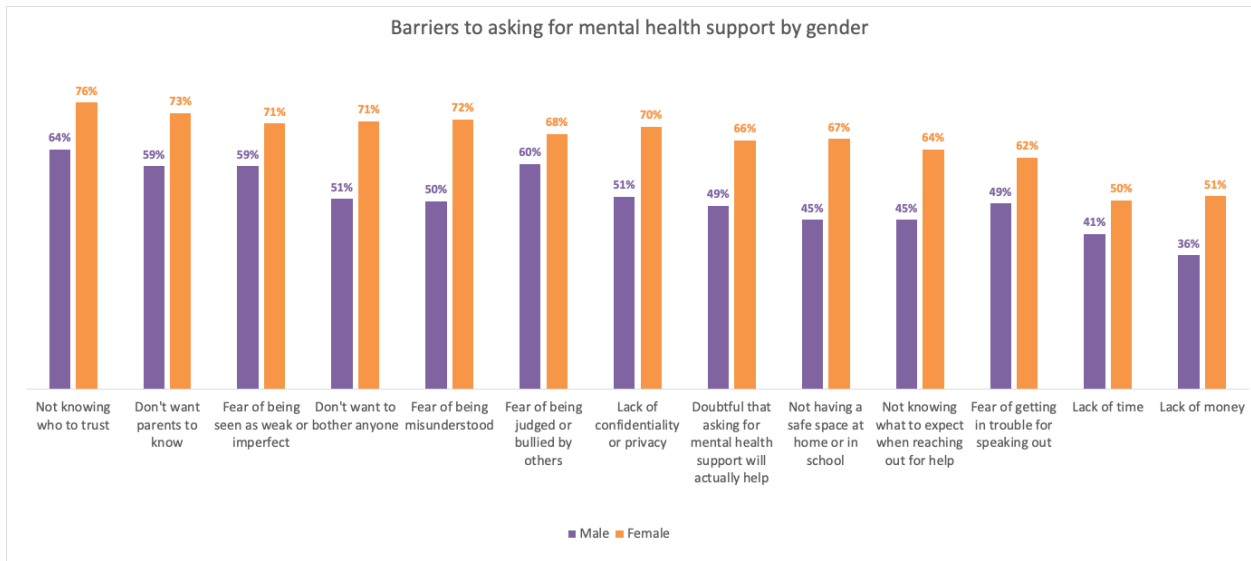
- The top mental health supports at school seem to speak to a desire for students to resolve their issues independently, rather than receiving direct support at school. This may be due to a perceived lack of understanding and safety from adults.
- While respondents have identified the need for student education of self-care and coping skills, Ideas Lab participants didn't think this should be presented in class lectures (e.g., health class). Our participants believe students should be given this information and be reminded that they have the option to use it when they need it, making it more relevant and meaningful.
- ***Recommendation:*** Youth have clearly identified the need for more psychoeducation about youth mental health for parents, teachers, and school staff
 - One participant mentioned instances of teachers being insensitive when giving students passes to see the counselor by announcing it to the entire class

Q7: Which of the following do you think prevents teens in Monterey County from asking for mental health support?



- Trust seems to be a common barrier in reaching out for support. Teens are very concerned of breaches in confidentiality and their private information being shared.
 - Digital communications can easily be copy/pasted or screenshotted, which increases the lack of trust and safety in opening up.
 - It may be difficult to build trust after the Covid-19 pandemic when everyone was forced to keep to themselves, 6 feet apart. The mindset was for students to “go to school, don't get sick, and then go home”, which may have created an attitude of self-sufficiency
- Youth have a tendency toward self-reliance and being hyper-independent, resulting in them not wanting to ask for help. Participants acknowledged that reaching out for help is not as easy as it seems since it requires vulnerability and it's difficult to know who to trust with that vulnerability.

- **Recommendation:** Because youth have a tendency to not want to bother others with their issues, schools should assign dedicated counselors to each grade who can proactively check on students. It is much easier to open up to an adult when that relationship has already been established beforehand.



- Males seem more concerned about being judged or bullied by others if they reach out for mental health support.
 - **Recommendation:** It is crucial to reduce the stigma of asking for mental health support amongst Males.

Q8: Which of the following do you think are important to encourage teens to use a youth wellness center?

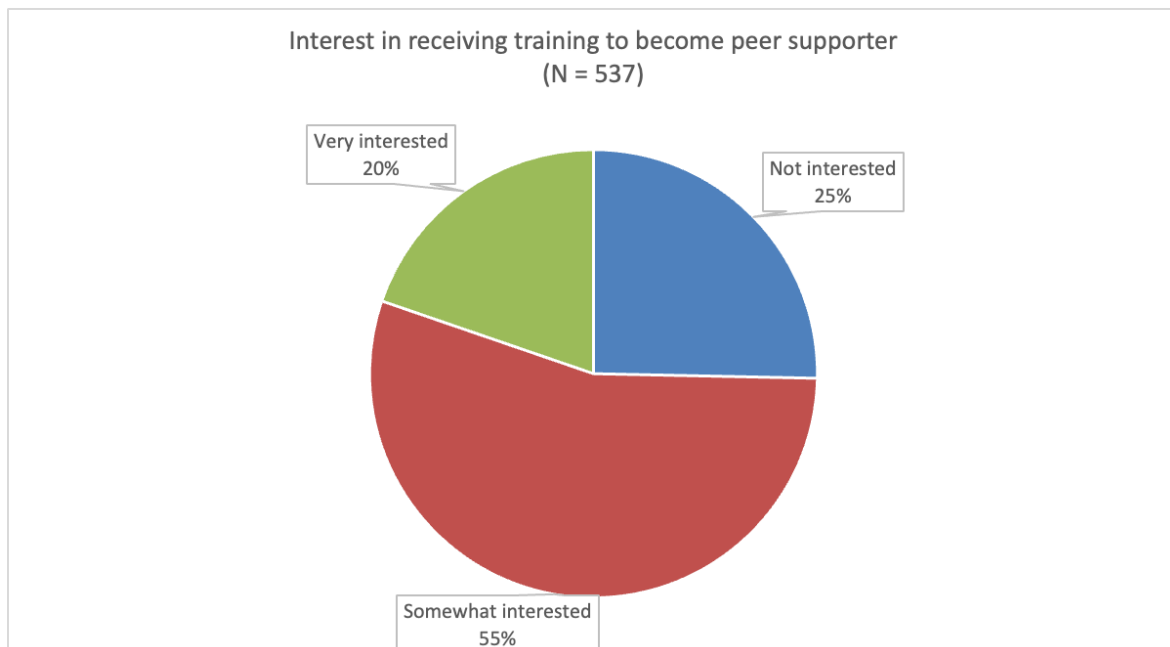
Most Important Features
69% Supportive, non-judgemental adults
68% Welcoming and relaxed space
65% Free or low-cost services
65% Private spaces for conversation or self-care
64% Not needing parent/guardian permission

Least Important Features
40% Diverse staff
40% Accessible by public transportation
42% Peer support with other teens
45% Workshops on self-care activities
47% More awareness of wellness centers and their services

- Supportive, non-judgmental adults are critical in a youth wellness center, particularly those who understand that youth may sometimes just want to share their issues (“word vomit”) and leave rather than having a real therapy session
 - **Recommendation:** Every school should have adults who are properly trained and equipped to provide emotional support for students. Academic counselors who are also expected to provide emotional support for students must be trained in youth mental health.
- Peer support as one of the least important features makes sense due to privacy and confidentiality issues: “It would be really awkward to be in a classroom with someone I just confided in.”

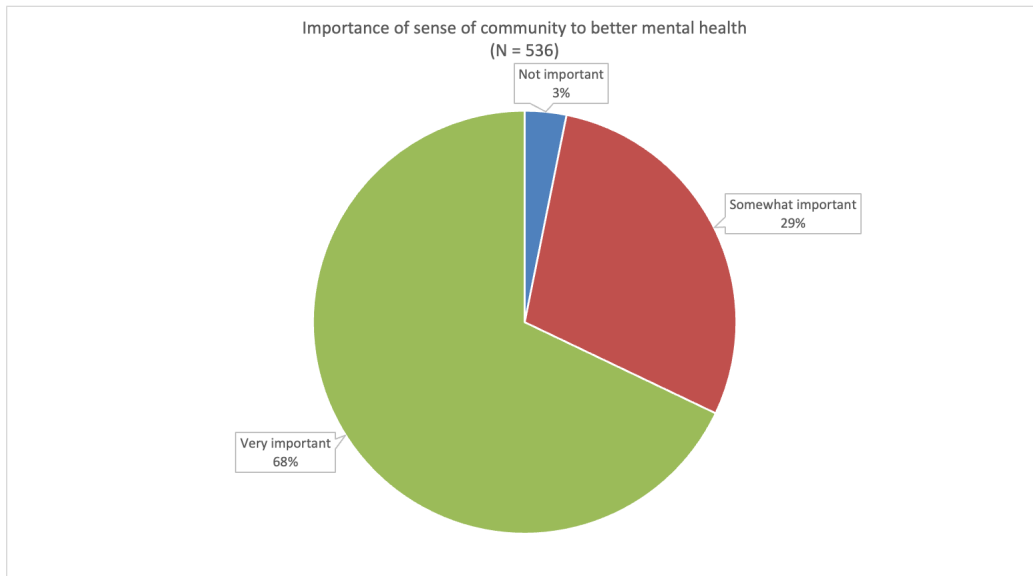
- **Recommendation:** If teens are trained as peer supporters, it is critical to build trust in peer supporters as a resource. This can be done by letting other teens know the level of training peer supporters receive and their duty to privacy and confidentiality.
- Participants mentioned that current wellness centers in their schools are not well-advertised, in awkward, hard-to-find locations, and sometimes look like office spaces or classrooms, which is not welcoming
 - **Recommendation:** Schools should ensure their wellness centers include the most important features that teens want.

Q9: Would you be interested in receiving 8-10 hours of training to learn how to support your peers and their mental health?



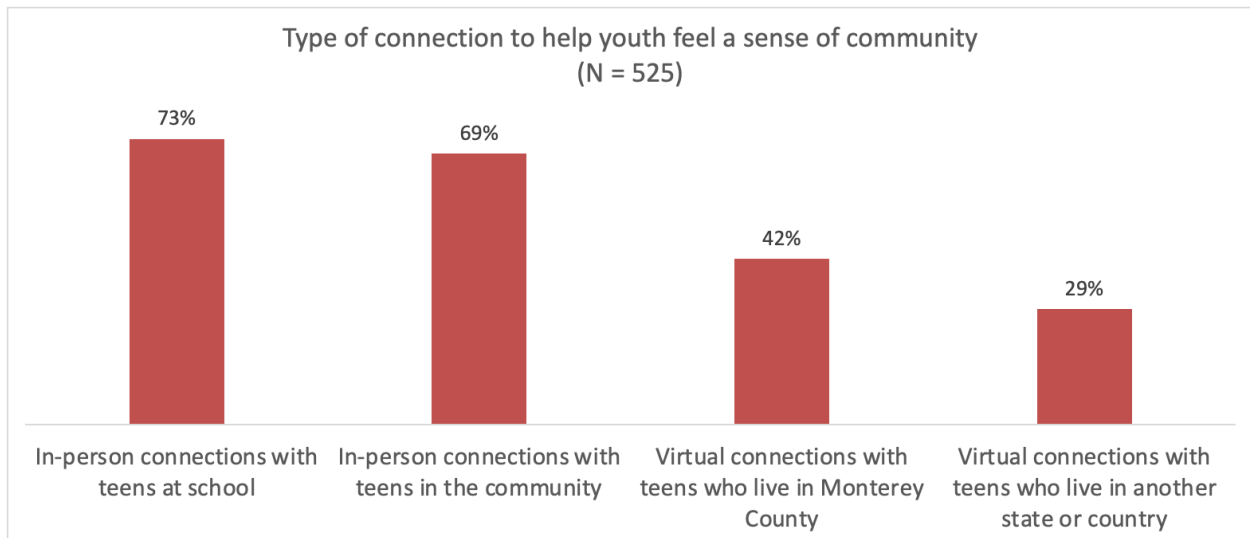
- The lukewarm response to receiving training makes sense since youth are already feeling time pressured and may not have the bandwidth to take on more responsibilities.
 - But even if the 20% who are very interested get trained, it still represents a good number of peer supporters available to students.
- **Recommendation:** If teens are trained as peer supporters, it is critical to build trust in peer supporters as a resource. This can be done by letting other teens know the level of training peer supporters receive and their duty to privacy and confidentiality.

Q10: In your opinion, how important is having a sense of community to improving youth mental health in Monterey County?



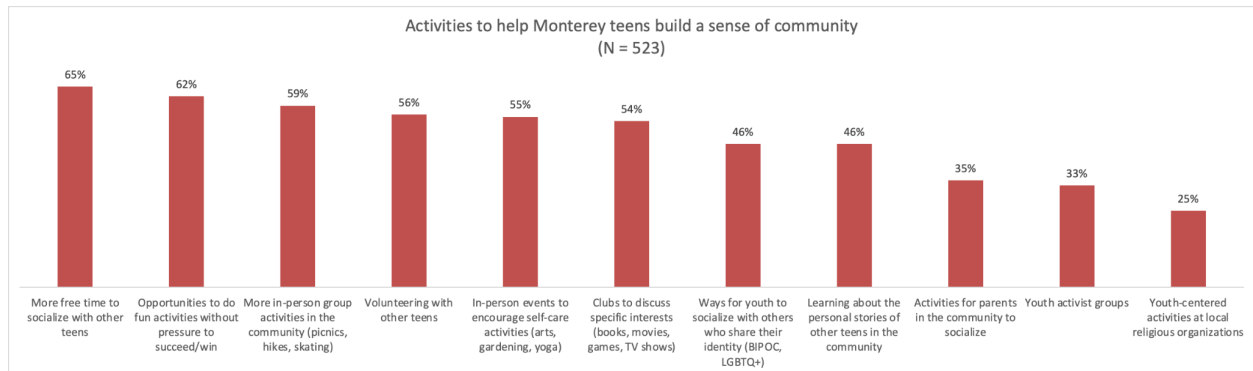
- Good that youth understand the connection between having a sense of community and mental health

Q11: What kind(s) of connections do you think would help teens in Monterey County feel a sense of community?



- Despite the accessibility of virtual connections, youth still recognize the importance of in-person relationships. This preference may be because of Covid-19 and youth realizing they cannot take relationships at school for granted
- The preference for in-person connections could be another reason for youth not wanting to use a hotline/talkline since it feels more impersonal

Q12: Which of the following do you think would help teens in Monterey County build a sense of community?



- Youth want more time to socialize with peers and their community. This time could be either structured (group projects and activities) or unstructured (recess, time for play).
 - This can also be a type of mental health day since it encourages students to build trust and community with one another.
- Youth want the opportunity to participate in low-stress activities but Ideas Lab participants weren't sure how youth can create more free time, given their current time constraints

Q13: What do you wish adults in Monterey County knew about youth mental health and how to support teens better? (Open-ended) (N = 341)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Acknowledge the reality of youth mental health today, don't compare it to adults' experiences as youth	<p>"I wish they knew how tough the young generations have it, rather than just thinking we are 'weak' or ignoring our problems."</p> <p>"I wish adults were more considerate of youth mental health, and would acknowledge it as a real thing."</p>
Understand how much pressure and stress school causes, don't add to it	<p>"Schools need to balance workload given to students"</p> <p>"I wish adults knew how much stress they put on us"</p> <p>"That going to school is like having a job"</p>
Adults need to be more understanding and less judgmental	<p>"I really wish adults knew that literally any teen, no matter how much they laugh, how good their grades are, or how 'put together' they seem, can be struggling. And to help these teens, what I find the most supportive is feeling like they are not judging me. Just being understanding, especially when they don't know the circumstances of something, can make the world of a difference in how a kid feels."</p> <p>"Listen to how they're feeling and not saying it's selfish to feel a certain way and instead support them and be understanding."</p>
Don't force youth to talk, give them time to open up	<p>"I think some adults should know that pushing someone to tell them things or excessively asking questions is NOT helpful."</p> <p>"That we're not faking it. When we say we're depressed we don't need judgment or rushing to conclusions. We just need time and support, but privacy as well. Sometimes we don't even know what we need or want, so patience is appreciated."</p>
Adults should help normalize mental health challenges and asking for support	<p>"I wish they knew how to better reinforce the idea that it is okay to talk about mental health."</p> <p>"I wish adults knew that mental health is a normal thing and struggling with life should be seen as acceptable! Adults should learn how to ask to help instead of thinking it's weird!"</p>
Understand youth have different coping strategies, which shouldn't always be seen as "bad"	<p>"I wish that they knew phones are not so harmful. Sometimes when I'm on my phone it's like a getaway from reality."</p> <p>"That our phones are a distraction from reality and so instead of taking our phones away they should focus on what the problems in our reality are instead of the phone."</p>

Q14: How do you think teens in Monterey County can address youth mental health?

(Open-ended) (N = 326)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Find a reliable, trusted source of support	<p>“Get a therapist, find a friend that you actually trust, I know for some of us that’s the hardest part. Finding somebody you trust”</p> <p>“Just to be able to find someone who is 100% reliable and being able to be completely honest with them.”</p>
Be a source of support for other youth	<p>“We also need to get out of our darn comfort zone to connect with others, for the better of everyone.”</p> <p>“I think teens can address mental health by being there for their friends. If every kid knew that one of their friends was really there for them and cared about them enough to listen, I know teens would feel much more supported. I think feeling heard is one of the most important things, especially by those you choose to be around.”</p>
Sharing personal experiences to spread awareness and reduce stigma	<p>“I think teens in Monterey County can address youth mental health by having gatherings and speeches for those brave enough to talk about their experiences.”</p> <p>“I think that teens in Monterey County can maybe share their stories more, or speak up about their experiences with their own mental health or experiences with therapy, wellness centers, family, friends, school staff, etc.”</p>
Understand addressing their mental health is a necessity	<p>“I think teens need to start looking at mental health as a necessity and not as something that’s unimportant. A lot of teens (at least that I know of) tend to not really care about their mental health because no one’s ever told them why it’s important and how to take care of their mental health.”</p> <p>“Understanding that every person has some work on their mental health. It should be a component of every persons day. This will increase awareness and treatment. The importance of taking care of one’s body. The damage of negative self-talk. The damage of gossip on one’s own mental health.”</p>
Increase awareness of mental health resources and support	<p>“I think teens can address youth mental health through social media platforms by reposting and sharing information about mental health and ways to cope/help.”</p> <p>“Teens in Monterey County can address youth mental health by creating posters to hang in the community and schools or organizing volunteer opportunities to unite the community.”</p>