



## **AIM Ideas Lab Youth Survey 2024**

Monterey County

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## Introduction

AIM Youth Mental Health invited high school student volunteers in Monterey County to take part in the AIM Ideas Lab: A Youth Participatory Action Research project focused on mental health advocacy. This program ran from January 21 - March 12, 2024.

Twenty-eight AIM Ideas Lab youth researchers from Monterey County worked together to conduct youth mental health research and make recommendations to policymakers, researchers, and their community about how to address the youth mental health crisis. 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 and emerging concerns, and collaborate to devise strategies to address these challenges with teens from various high schools
2. Learn about conducting and analyzing 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 findings with the outcomes of AIM Ideas Labs held across multiple counties
5. Advocate for the youth perspective by presenting ideas, research, and recommendations through identified communication channels.

### 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 use 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 identify the most pressing mental health challenges they are facing and to explore potential strategies for addressing them effectively.

**Survey Distribution:** The survey took about 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey was distributed February 18 - 29, 2024, via word-of-mouth, text message, social media, and in select schools. 472 youth in Monterey County completed the survey.

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

## Executive Summary

1. The factors that most negatively impact teens' mental health in Monterey County emerged as:
  - 1.1. Academic stress: 68.4% of teens
  - 1.2. Lack of sleep: 63.3% of teens
  - 1.3. Lack of motivation: 62.4% of teens
  - 1.4. Overwhelming schoolwork: 62.2% of teens
  - 1.5. Beauty Standards/Body Image: 62.0% of teens
2. 60.9% of teens report experiencing high levels of stress and burnout associated with academic stressors, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to alleviate academic pressure and promote overall well-being.
3. Teens are advocating for mental health education to be a part of K-12 schools' core curriculum, with 70% of teens either strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with this statement, indicating a widespread recognition of the importance of mental health education in schools.
4. Although 57.9% of teens say that they feel comfortable talking about mental health, 63.2% say they are likely to not seek support from anybody during a challenging time.
  - 4.1. Teens are most likely to reach out to people in their support system whom they have close relationships with and spend a majority of their time with, such as friends, parents/guardians, and significant others.
  - 4.2. Teens are reluctant to seek support from school-based resources such as counselors, teachers, and adult figures, indicating existing barriers within the educational setting.
5. Social Media
  - 5.1. Despite initial expectations for more dramatic effects, the overall rating hovers around 5, suggesting a fairly neutral impact.
  - 5.2. Scrolling on social media (51%) has a more negative impact on teens' mental health than posting on social media (30%).

## Demographics

### Age

This survey gathered demographic information, with 470 respondents aged between 14 and 18. The distribution indicates 15-year-olds being the largest group (34.0%), followed by 14-year-olds (19.0%) and 16-year-olds (23.0%). Notably, 17-year-olds accounted for 16.0% and 18-year-olds for 6.0%. Additionally, 2% of respondents fell outside the specified range.

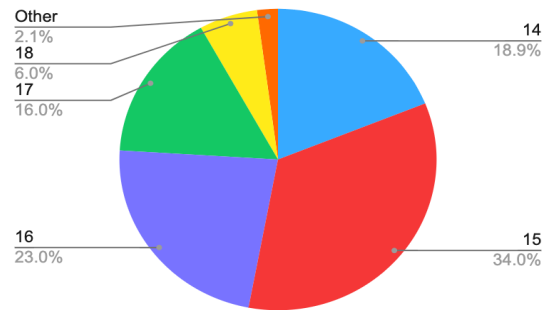


Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents.

### Grade

The survey gathered demographic information from 465 participants regarding their grade level in school. Among the respondents, 41.6% were in 9th grade. Meanwhile, 10th graders comprised 23.2% of the sample, followed closely by 11th graders at 21.9%. A smaller proportion of participants, 13.3%, were in 12th grade. The substantial representation of lower classmen is representative of the class standing of the Ideas Lab researchers that distributed the survey.

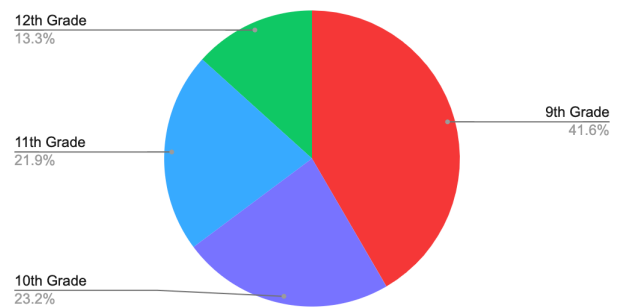


Figure 2. Grade distribution of respondents.

### School

The survey gathered demographic information from 465 participants regarding their school. The majority of respondents came from Everett Alvarez (34.0%) and North Monterey County High School (34.0%). The distribution of respondents can be seen below in **Table 1**. Although there is overwhelming representation of Everett Alvarez and North Monterey County High Schools, these results are representative of the Ideas Lab participants

**Recommendation:** Outreach for the Ideas Lab will be widespread across all high schools to achieve a wider distribution of the survey to obtain data that is representative of Monterey County.

**Table 1.** School distribution of respondents.

School	Count	%	School	Count	%
Everett Alvarez HS	158	34.0%	York School	20	4.3%
North Monterey County HS	158	34.0%	Rancho San Juan HS	8	1.7%
Salinas High School	29	6.2%	Marina HS	4	0.9%
Stevenson	27	5.8%	Alisal HS	3	0.6%
Carmel HS	26	5.6%	Ocean Grove Charter	1	0.2%
North Salinas HS	22	4.7%			

## City

The survey gathered demographic information from 464 participants regarding the city they reside in. The majority of respondents came from Salinas (54.5%), followed by Castroville (18.1%) and Prunedale (6.3%). The full distribution of respondents can be seen below in **Table 2**. Salinas is the most populated city in the county, therefore it was expected for a higher percentage of respondents to live there. However, there was expected to be a higher percentage of respondents from Watsonville (0.7%), Seaside (0.9%), and Monterey (2.8%), which are considered larger cities in Monterey County. Additionally, Aromas, Gonzales, and Royal Oaks, San Juan Bautista, Soledad, and Spreckles, collectively represented just over 1% of respondents.

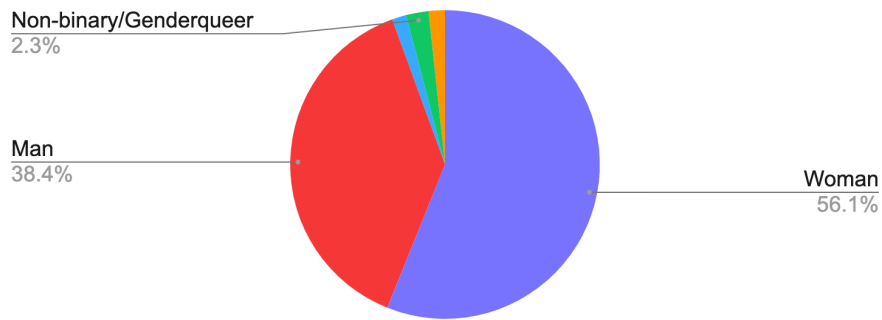
**Recommendation:** Survey distribution will extend throughout Monterey County to ensure broad coverage and obtain data that accurately represents the demographics and characteristics of the county.

**Table 2.** Distribution of respondents by city of residence.

City	Count	% of Respondents
Salinas	253	54.5%
Castroville	84	18.1%
Prunedale	29	6.3%
Carmel	24	5.2%
Marina	14	3.0%
Monterey	13	2.8%
Pacific Grove	9	1.9%
Other	8	1.7%
Pebble Beach	6	1.3%
Carmel Valley	5	1.1%
Seaside	4	0.9%
Moss Landing	3	0.7%
Watsonville	3	0.7%
Prefer not to say	3	0.7%
Aromas	1	0.2%
Gonzales	1	0.2%
Royal Oaks	1	0.2%
San Juan Bautista	1	0.2%
Soledad	1	0.2%
Spreckels	1	0.2%

## Gender Identity

The survey collected data on gender identity from 465 participants. The majority of respondents identified as women, comprising 56.9% of the sample, while 39.0% identified as men. A smaller percentage of respondents identified as transgender (1.50%), non-binary/genderqueer (2.40%), or preferred not to disclose their gender identity (1.70%). The higher proportion of female respondents compared to male respondents, reflects the gender identity of the AIM Ideas Lab participants. Lower male participation could be attributed to AIM Ideas Lab’s previous findings indicating that male identifying respondents are less comfortable discussing mental health. These findings provide valuable insights into the gender diversity within the surveyed population, highlighting the need for inclusive approaches in addressing mental health concerns among teens.



**Figure 3.** Distribution of respondents' gender identity.

## Racial/Ethnic Identity

In terms of racial and ethnic identity, the survey gathered responses from 465 participants. The largest racial/ethnic group represented in the sample was Latino/a/x or Hispanic, comprising 70.7% of respondents. Following this, the White or Caucasian group accounted for 21.5% of participants, while Asian or Asian American respondents made up 11.3% of the sample. These findings are representative of the racial and ethnic makeup of Monterey County and underscore the importance of considering diverse perspectives when addressing mental health issues among teens.

**Table 3.** Ethnic and racial distribution of survey respondents.

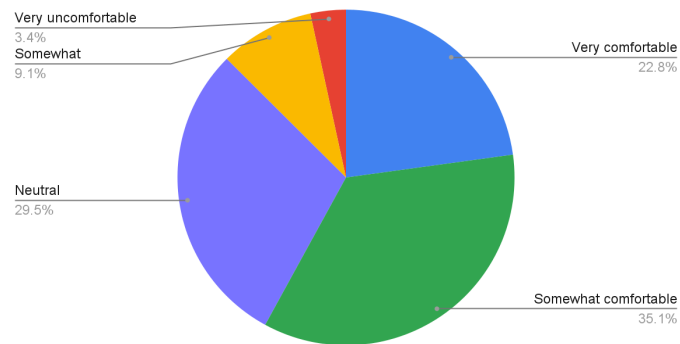
Race/Ethnicity	Percent	Count
Latino/a/x or Hispanic	70.97%	330
White or Caucasian	22.37%	104
Asian or Asian American	11.18%	52
Black or African American	2.15%	10
Indigenous or Native American	2.15%	10
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1.94%	9
Middle Eastern or North African	1.51%	7
Prefer not to say	2.37%	11
Other	0.65%	3

## Quantitative data

Q.1. How comfortable are you with having conversations about mental health with your friends?

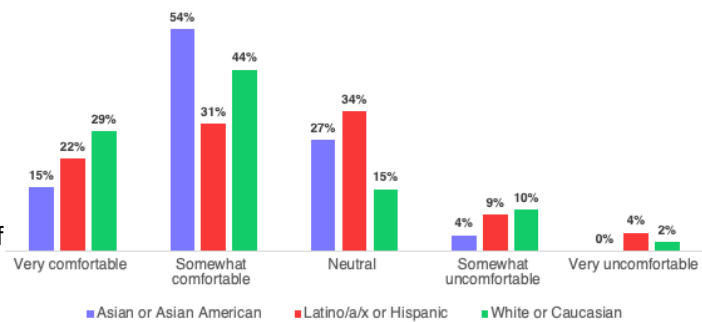
The survey assessed participants' comfort levels in discussing mental health with friends, drawing responses from 464 participants. Results indicate that a significant proportion of respondents felt at least somewhat comfortable having such conversations, with 22.8% indicating they were "very comfortable" and 35.1% reporting they were "somewhat comfortable." Moreover, nearly one-third of respondents (29.5%) expressed a neutral stance on the matter.

Conversely, smaller percentages of participants indicated feeling somewhat uncomfortable (9.1%) or very uncomfortable (3.4%) discussing mental health with friends.



**Figure 4.** Respondent's level of comfortability talking about mental health with friends.

When analyzing the results by race/ethnicity it was found that Asian American and White/Caucasian respondents are more comfortable talking about mental health than Latinx or Hispanic respondents. The spike in the percentage of Asian American respondents that feel somewhat comfortable discussing mental health (54%) could be attributed to the shared experiences that may come with a culture of high academic expectations. Friends and peers may be more open in sharing their mental health challenges with each other since they are going through similar situations. One teen added, "I am half Mexican, half Japanese, and looking at both my family sides there is definitely less talk surrounding mental health with the first generations" highlighting the varying levels of comfort among older generations, particularly first generation immigrants.



These findings provide insights into the comfort levels teens have in engaging in mental health conversations within their peer groups, highlighting an improved sense of comfort around the topic of mental health as well as continued potential for support and intervention.

**Figure 5.** Comfort talking about mental health by race/ethnicity.

**Recommendation:** In future surveys, directly ask about respondents' comfort levels in discussing mental health topics with family vs peers, with a follow-up question pertaining to whether or not racial/ethnic identity has an impact in that. We could analyze the results to find a potential correlation between race and comfort talking about mental health with family members.

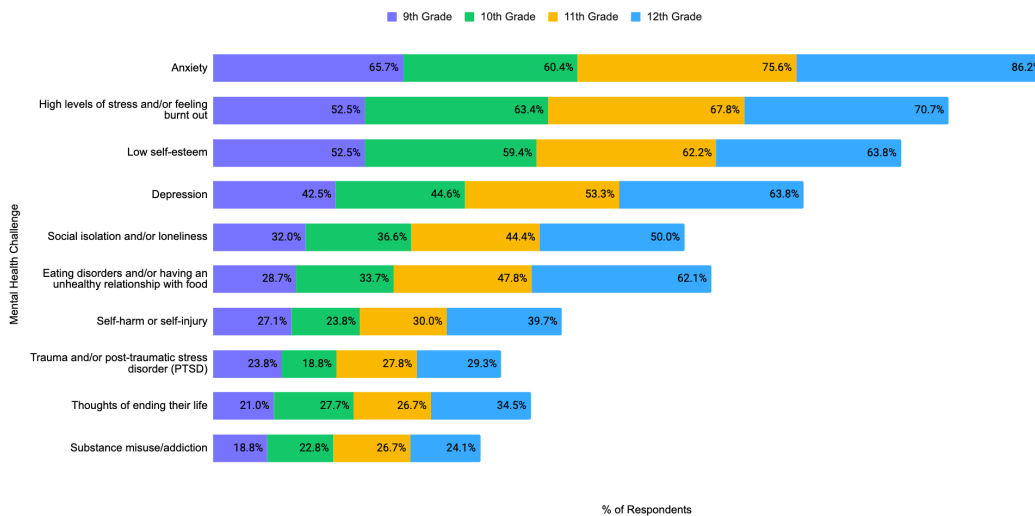
**Q.2. Have any of your friends shared with you that they have experienced any of the following mental health challenges?**

The survey results reveal a spectrum of mental health challenges shared by teenagers' peer groups, with anxiety emerging as the most commonly disclosed experience, reported by 69.3% of respondents. Following closely behind are high levels of stress and feeling burnt out, reported by 60.9% of respondents. These results demonstrate that the majority of teens in Monterey County are experiencing overwhelming levels of stress and anxiety, which could be attributed to a number of reasons such as academic stress and overthinking. Teens disclosed a sense of relatability and bonding with their peers over this shared anxiety, often turning to humor as a means for connection and coping.

**Recommendation:** School administrators should ensure the availability of mental health spaces on school grounds, preferably with a no-questions-asked policy, allowing students a designated place to retreat if they require a break.

The percentage of respondents reporting that their peers have experienced depression has decreased from 74% to 48.3% since last year (2023 AIM Ideas Lab Research Report). This decrease could be due to a greater availability of mental health resources and more discussions about mental health. Additionally, participants identified potential connections between the most common challenges, notably that loneliness/social isolation(38.0%) could increase feelings of low-self esteem (58.1%) which could increase the likelihood of experiencing feelings of depression.

When looking at the data for each grade in **Figure 6**, it was found that although freshmen had the highest percentage of respondents for the survey (41.6%), seniors showed the highest occurrences of mental health challenges across the board, regardless of only making up 13.3% of survey responses. It's likely that the number of underclassmen respondents skews the average, for example - 62% of seniors know someone who's experienced an eating disorder, but the average across all respondents is 38.7%. Additionally, 82% of seniors report experiencing anxiety but the average percentage is 69.3%.



**Figure 6.** Mental health challenges respondents peers have experienced, by grade.



These findings underscore the widespread prevalence of mental health challenges among teenagers' peer groups, highlighting the urgent need for supportive environments and open dialogues to address these issues effectively.

**Table 4.** Mental health challenges respondents peers have experienced.

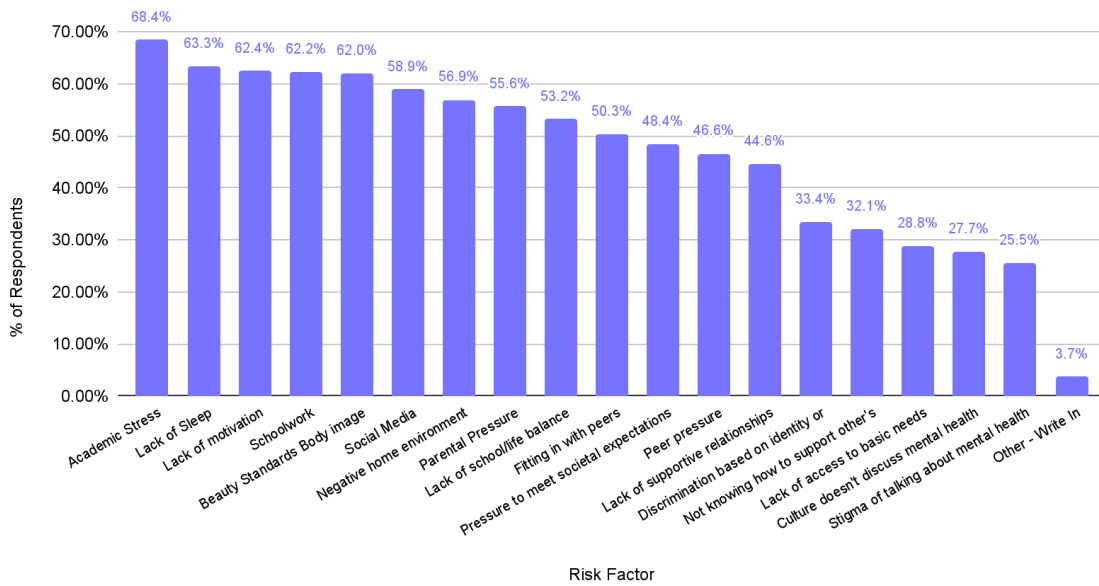
Mental Health Challenge	Peers' Mental Health Challenges (%)
Anxiety	69.3%
High levels of stress and/or feeling burnt out	60.9%
Low self-esteem	58.1%
Depression	48.3%
Eating disorders/unhealthy relationship with food	38.7%
Social isolation and/or loneliness	38.0%
Self-harm or self-injury	28.8%
Thoughts of ending their life	25.9%
Trauma and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	24.0%
Substance misuse/addiction	22.7%
Other - Write In	8.0%

**Q.3.** Which of the following do you think worsens mental health for teens in Monterey County?

The survey findings shed light on the various factors perceived to worsen mental health for teens in Monterey County. Topping the list is academic stress, identified by 68.4% of respondents as a significant contributor. This is closely followed by concerns related to lack of sleep (63.3%), lack of motivation (62.4%), and overwhelming schoolwork (62.2%), all of which highlight the heavy academic burden faced by teenagers. The highest risk factors are seemingly correlated, with overwhelming school work impacting levels of academic stress and contributing to a lack of sleep and poor school/life balance. Academic stress is something teens experience daily at school, and is a likely cause for the high levels of stress, anxiety, and burn out reported in **Table 4**. Family dynamics play a crucial role, with negative home environments (56.9%) and parental pressure (55.6%) emerging as notable factors negatively affecting teen mental health. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of factors impacting teen mental well-being in Monterey County and emphasize the need for comprehensive support systems to address these issues effectively.

**Recommendation:** Students: There should be open communication from students to teachers about factors (extracurriculars, schoolwork, personal experiences) that may affect their ability to complete assignments on time in order for teachers to provide leniency if necessary.

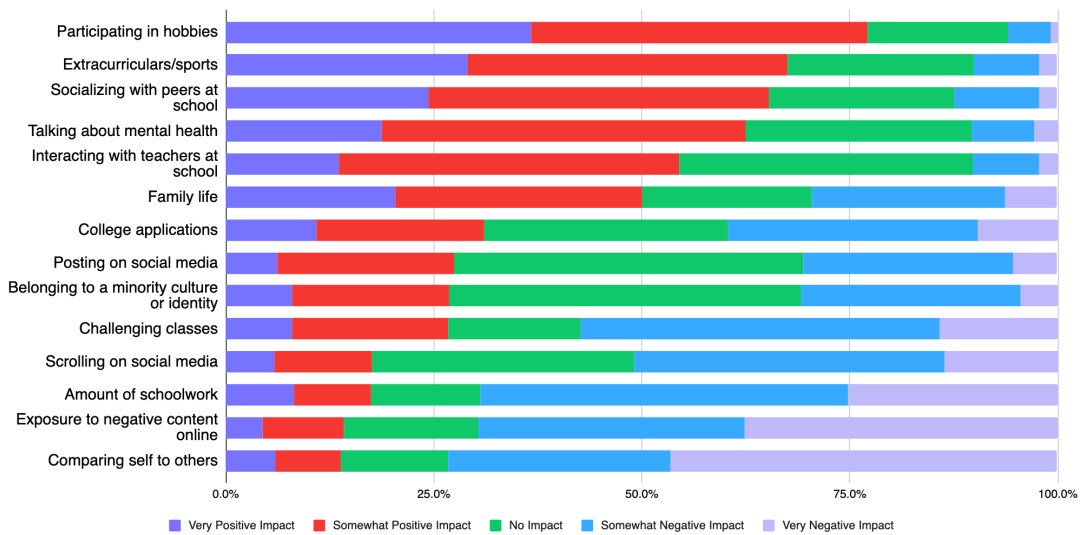
**Recommendation:** School professionals/teachers - Reducing school work or having flexibility with deadlines, would allow students to learn how to find equilibrium between their responsibilities and prioritizing their lives outside of academics.



**Figure 7.** Factors impacting the mental health of teens in Monterey County.

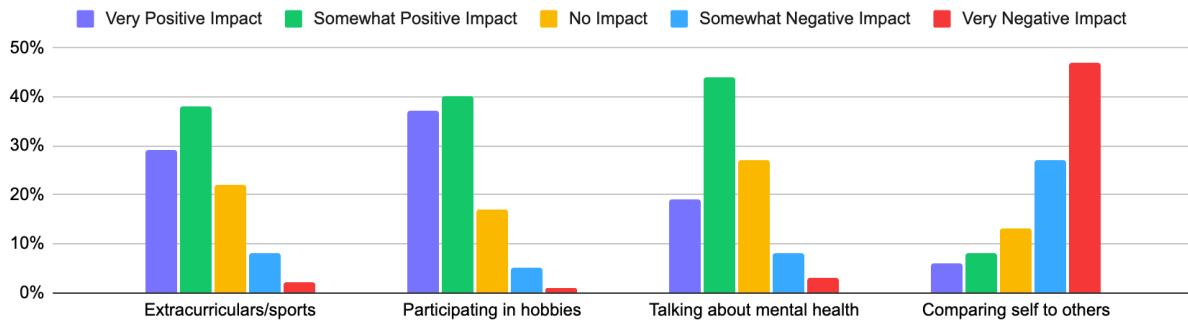
**Q.4 How do you think the following activities impact the mental health of youth in Monterey County?**

Extracurricular activities and hobbies were perceived as largely positive for mental health, with 29% and 37% of respondents reporting a very positive impact respectively. Teens feel a sense of belonging when they participate in activities with others who share their interests. Hobbies and extracurriculars offer teens a healthy way to relieve academic and personal stress. Participation in these activities, along with other social interactions are highly beneficial to teen’s mental health, and teens should participate in them for their overall wellbeing, not just for college applications.



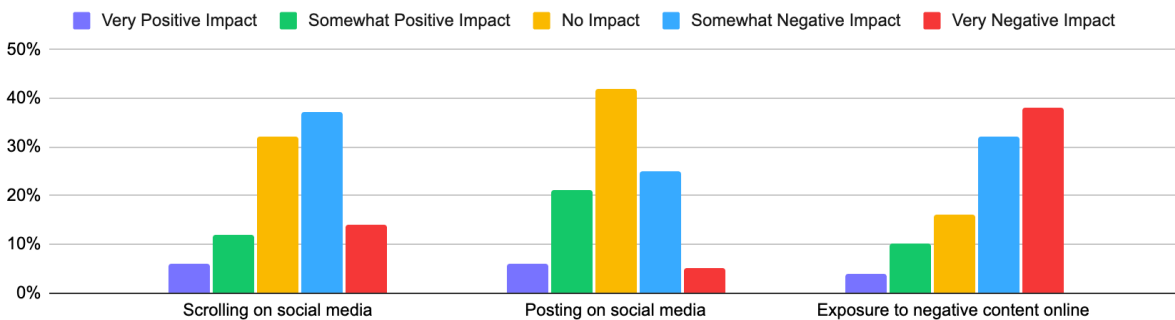
**Figure 8.** Activities impact on the mental health of teens in Monterey County.

Comparing self to others has a very negative impact on youth mental health, with 47% reported feeling very negatively impacted by it. Participants infer social media adds to this issue since much of what is on social media is a “highlight reel” and is not an accurate depiction of reality.



**Figure 9.** Activities teens in Monterey County participate in and their impact on teen mental health.

There was also found to be a more negative impact from scrolling on social media than posting on social media as seen in Table 4. The difference is possibly due to lack of control since an algorithm determines what pops up on social media feeds while scrolling, while teens are able to control who follows us and access what they post. Additionally, teens mainly post things that they feel confident about posting, which may explain why 42% of respondents report posting on social media has no impact on their mental health. Posting on social media is also a more engaged and conscious activity whereas scrolling on social media can be a time consuming activity for teens. Overall, social media was found to have a somewhat positive impact on teen mental health which was surprising, however social media may give youth a sense of community and connection with friends and provide a break from academic stressors.



**Figure 10.** The impact of social media on teen mental health.

**Table 5.** Student activities and their impact on teen mental health in Monterey County.

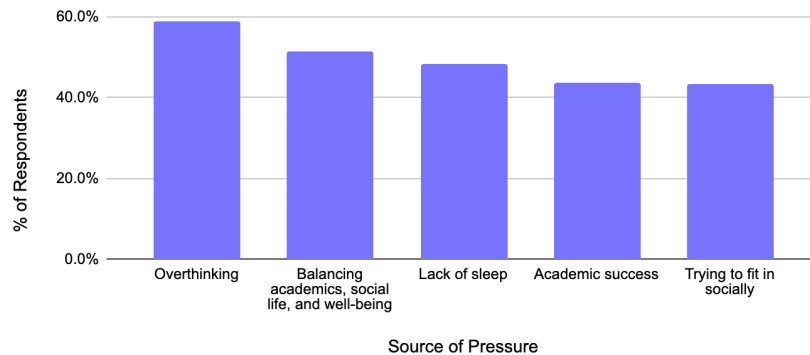
	Very Positive Impact	Somewhat Positive Impact	No Impact	Somewhat Negative Impact	Very Negative Impact
Participating in hobbies	37%	40%	17%	5%	2%
Extracurriculars /sports	29%	38%	22%	8%	1%
Socializing with peers at school	24%	41%	22%	10%	2%
Talking about mental health	19%	44%	27%	8%	3%
Comparing self to others	6%	8%	13%	27%	47%
Scrolling on social media	6%	12%	32%	37%	14%
Posting on social media	6%	21%	42%	25%	5%
Exposure to negative content online	4%	10%	16%	32%	38%
Amount of schoolwork	8%	9%	13%	44%	25%
Challenging classes	8%	19%	16%	43%	14%
College applications	11%	20%	29%	30%	10%
Interacting with teachers at school	14%	41%	35%	8%	2%
Family life	20%	30%	20%	23%	6%
Belonging to a minority culture or identity	8%	19%	42%	26%	5%

### Q.5. What are the top 5 sources of pressure for teens in Monterey County?

The survey results highlight what 454 respondents perceive as the top 5 sources of pressure for teens in Monterey County. Overthinking emerged as the most prevalent, selected by 58.8% of respondents. Recognizing that overthinking is an internal challenge, there's a clear need for mental health support that provides teens with tools to manage their individual well-being, alongside efforts to address systemic challenges within educational settings.

The data indicates that respondents identified balancing academics, social life, and well-being as the second-most significant source of pressure, with a selection rate of 51.5%. Additionally, lack of sleep and academic success were also highlighted, with selection rates of 48.2% and 43.2% respectively.

This pattern suggests that the pressure to balance various aspects of life, including academic responsibilities, social engagements, and personal well-being, may be influenced by the scarcity of time. When days are packed with numerous commitments, there's often insufficient time to fulfill all obligations without sacrificing sleep and neglecting other



**Figure 11.** Top 5 sources of pressure for teens in Monterey County

aspects of well-being. This underscores the interconnectedness of these pressures and emphasizes the need for strategies to effectively manage time and prioritize tasks to alleviate the burden on teens. Notably, extracurricular activities ranked lowest in pressure (11.9%), aligning with the understanding that they often serve as positive outlets for youth. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of teen stressors and emphasize the importance of addressing mental health within individuals.

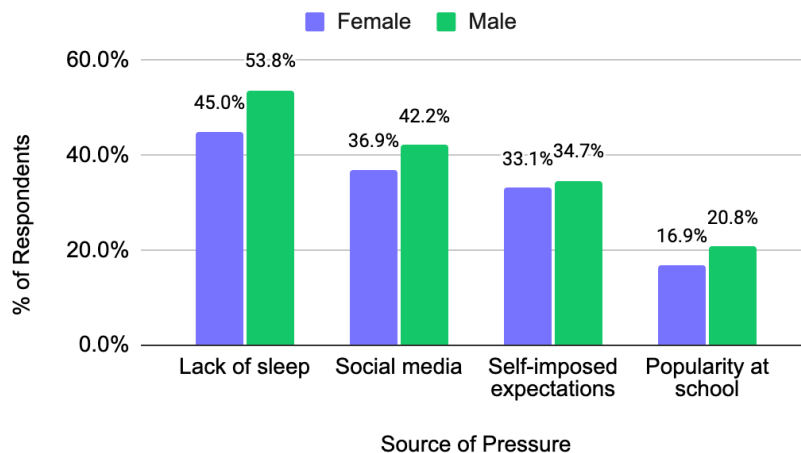
**Recommendation:** Teenagers could access workshops and educational materials aimed at showing students how to practice emotional well-being, stress management techniques and understanding the importance of prioritizing their well-being. These resources could be accessible through wellness centers, physical education classes, school clubs, and extracurricular activities.

**Recommendation:** Efforts should be collaborative among school professionals, parents, and students. Facilitating parent meetings and staff mental health training can help educate and support all stakeholders in promoting teen well-being and mental health.

**Table 5.** Common sources of pressure for teens and their effect on teen mental health.

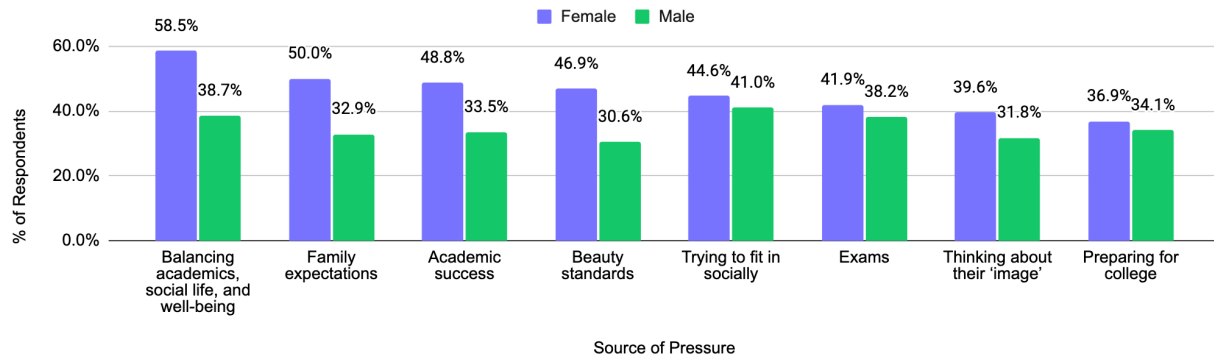
Source of Pressure	Selection Rate
Overthinking	58.8%
Balancing academics, social life, and well-being	51.5%
Lack of sleep	48.2%
Academic success	43.8%
Trying to fit in socially	43.4%
Family expectations	42.3%
Exams	40.3%
Beauty standards	39.4%
Social media	38.1%
Thinking about their 'image'	36.6%
Preparing for college	35.5%
Self-imposed expectations	33.9%
Popularity at school	17.8%
Expectations from their culture/identity	15.4%
Extracurricular activities	11.9%
Other - Write In	2.9%

Male respondents exhibited higher rankings than female respondents in the following areas: lack of sleep, pressure from social media, self-imposed expectations, and popularity at school. This trend could be attributed to heightened concerns about self-image and masculinity among males, a notion supported by previous data indicating a reluctance among males to openly discuss mental health. Additionally, this disparity in rankings may stem from a perceived lack of support networks among males, possibly amplifying the pressure and stress they experience in various aspects of their lives.



**Figure 12.** Gender Disparity in Pressure Factors: Impact on male respondents.

The data suggests a trend where women generally experience greater pressure across multiple fronts compared to men. This may be attributed to the existence of higher societal expectations placed on women. Notably, women appear to face increased pressure from familial obligations, such as managing household chores and caregiving responsibilities, which align with traditional gender roles perpetuated by societal norms.



**Figure 13.** Gender Disparity in Pressure Factors: Impact on female respondents.

**Recommendation** Mental health professionals should be aware of the difference in pressure to have more gender-specific mental health info/resources to help both men and women

**Recommendation:** Provide mental health education for younger age groups, before the differences and stereotypes between different genders become more apparent.

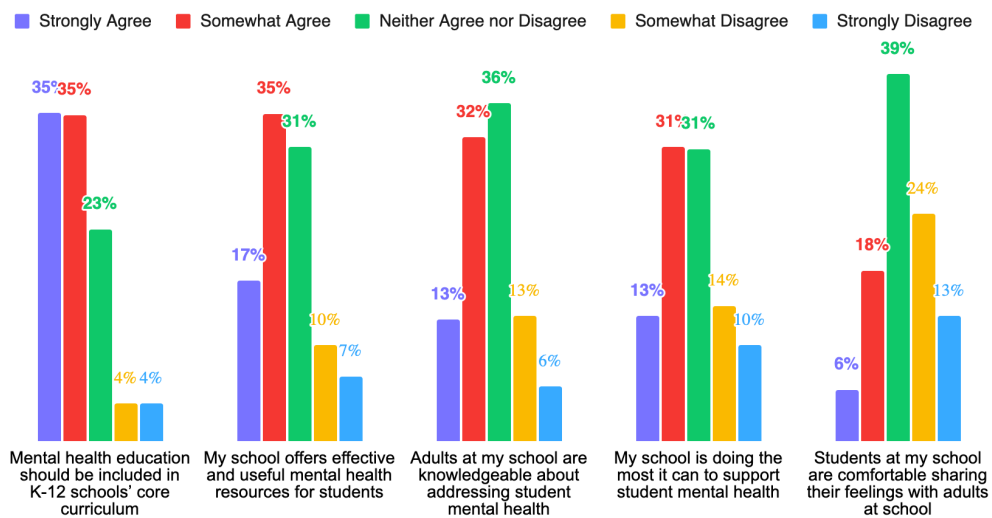
Q.6. Please select how much you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding various aspects of teen mental health?

While a considerable proportion (51.7%) either somewhat agree or strongly agree that their school offers effective and useful mental health resources, a notable portion (17.1%) strongly disagree, indicating a perceived deficiency in available mental health resources at school. Teens identified a need for improved mental health services as early as elementary school with one adding, “Some elementary schools have one counselor for 800+ students, leaving many students waitlisted.” They advocate for increased availability and specialization, suggesting a need for more tailored and comprehensive support from qualified professionals within school settings.

Teens are advocating for mental health education to be a part of K-12 schools’ core curriculum. A significant portion (69.4%) either strongly agree or somewhat agree with this statement, indicating a widespread recognition of the importance of mental health education in schools.

There are many responses stating “neither agree nor disagree” which may suggest that many students don’t know what resources are available at their school or if they can reach out to adults at school for mental health support.

The survey results indicate that teens do not feel comfortable sharing their feelings with adults at school. A substantial portion (37.4%) either somewhat disagree or strongly disagree, indicating discomfort or barriers to open communication with adults at school. This could be attributed to lack of trust in the adults at their schools either on a personal level or with their ability to provide effective support. Only a small minority (13.3%) strongly agree that adults at their school are knowledgeable about addressing student mental health, indicating potential gaps in adult awareness and preparedness to address student mental health issues.

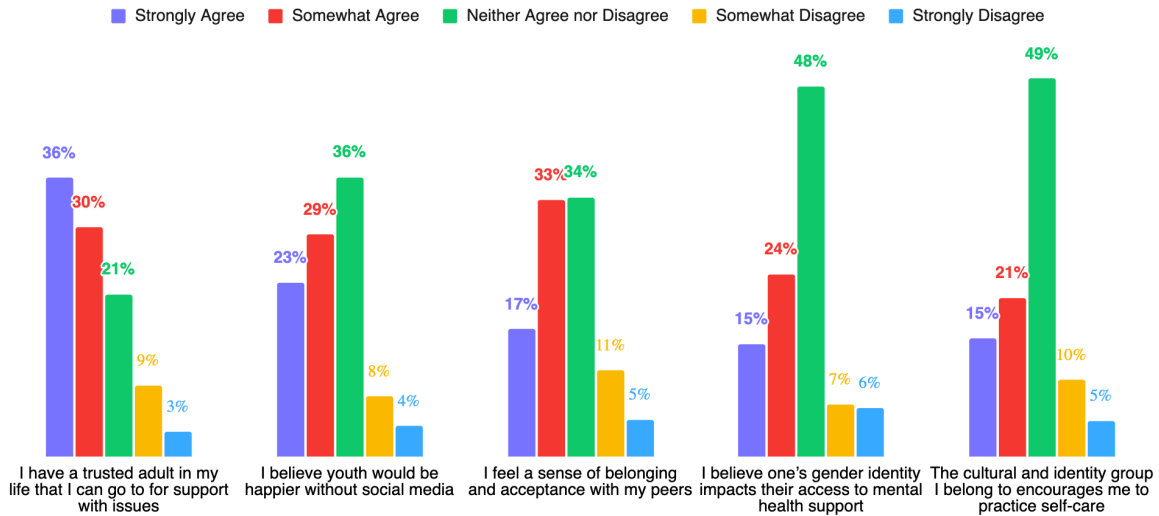


**Figure 14.** Insights into teens’ perceptions of mental health resources in schools.

**Recommendation:** Schools should ask students to assess the effectiveness of existing resources and ways to improve them to better suit their needs.

**Recommendation:** Schools ought to assess student awareness regarding existing mental health resources and take proactive measures to address any gaps. This could involve conducting assessments and disseminating information through presentations or assemblies, ensuring that all students are informed about the range of available resources and how to access them effectively.



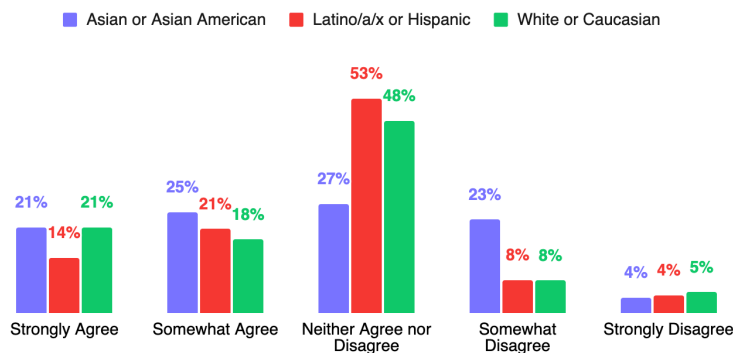


**Figure 15.** Insights into student perceptions on support networks, social media impact, peer acceptance, gender identity, and cultural influences on self-care practices

A majority (66.2%) of respondents affirm having a trusted adult for support, suggesting a substantial level of support networks among respondents. Surprisingly, many teens (48.2%) neither agree nor disagree on whether one's gender identity impacts their access to mental health support. The notable increase in "Neither Agree nor Disagree" responses, particularly in the latter two categories, may indicate a lack of awareness or discourse surrounding the topics of gender identity and cultural identity among participants. This suggests a potential need for increased education and discussion in these areas.

**Recommendation:** Parents and trusted adults should prioritize understanding and educating themselves (i.e. Mental Health First Aid) on how to provide unwavering support to children during both favorable and challenging times.

**Recommendation:** Integrating mental health segments into local Spanish news can help mitigate skepticism towards mental health among specific generations and facilitate discussions across diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly within Monterey's predominantly Latinx community.



**Figure 16.** Teens' assessment of cultural and identity group influence on self-care practices.

**Table 6.** Teens assessment of various aspects of mental health.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Mental health education should be included in K-12 schools' core curriculum	34.8%	34.6%	22.5%	4.0%	4.0%
My school offers effective and useful mental health resources for students	17.0%	34.7%	31.2%	10.2%	6.9%
Adults at my school are knowledgeable about addressing student mental health	12.9%	32.2%	35.8%	13.3%	5.8%
My school is doing the most it can to support student mental health	13.3%	31.2%	31.0%	14.4%	10.2%
Students at my school are comfortable sharing their feelings with adults at school	5.5%	18.1%	38.9%	24.1%	13.3%
I have a trusted adult in my life that I can go to for support with issues	36.3%	29.9%	21.2%	9.3%	3.3%
I believe youth would be happier without social media	22.7%	28.9%	36.4%	7.9%	4.0%
I feel a sense of belonging and acceptance with my peers	16.6%	33.4%	33.8%	11.3%	4.9%
I believe one's gender identity impacts their access to mental health support	14.7%	23.8%	48.2%	6.9%	6.4%
The cultural and identity group I belong to encourages me to practice self-care	15.4%	20.7%	49.2%	10.0%	4.7%

## Q.7. How can your school better support students' mental health?

The data in **Table 7** below, outlines the preferences of 449 respondents for supporting mental health within schools. The top ways schools can support student mental health, according to selection rates, include reducing the amount of schoolwork (61.0%), allowing students to take mental health days (55.0%), and placing less emphasis on grades (49.7%). Teens feel the burden of academic pressure and desire breaks to prioritize their well-being, which can ultimately reduce stress levels and enhance academic focus, performance, and self-esteem. Additionally, while it is recognized that schools are required to follow government mandates regarding attendance, there's a call for schools to formally acknowledge mental health days, allowing students to take time off without facing academic penalties. Policymakers are urged to prioritize student mental health by regulating and limiting academic workload outside of school hours. By heeding these recommendations and fostering a supportive environment, schools can play a pivotal role in promoting the mental well-being of their students. Interestingly, while respondents express a desire for mental health education within schools, the selection rate for education about mental health resources appears lower than expected (21.4%). This could indicate teens prefer other forms of support to alleviate academic stress. Overall, the data underscores the importance of proactive measures to support student mental health and the need for policies that prioritize well-being alongside academic achievement.

**Recommendation:** Schools should openly permit students to take mental health days, refraining from categorizing them solely as sick days. The language and constraints surrounding the act of prioritizing mental well-being has a significant impact on the stigma associated with mental health.

**Recommendation:** Policymakers are urged to prioritize student mental health by integrating mental health days into school schedules and attendance policies, as well as implementing regulations to control and minimize academic workload outside of school hours.

**Recommendation:** Shift focus from discussing mental health to implementing concrete measures in schools that allow students dedicated time to prioritize their well-being. This could include incorporating short periods during the school day for completing homework or simply decompressing.

**Table 7.** Actions schools in Monterey County can take to better support student’s mental health.

Action	Selection Rate
Reducing amount of schoolwork	61.0%
Ability to take mental health days	55.0%
Less emphasis on grades	49.7%
More time to practice well-being practices	47.0%
More resources during stressful times e.g., finals, college applications	45.0%
Adjusting the school schedule so students can get more sleep	44.5%
Learning about healthy coping skills	39.9%
More academic support	38.8%
Educating parents/guardians about youth mental health	37.9%
Tips to combat student stress	35.2%
Showing students the available resources and how to use them	33.4%
More counselors and staff educated about youth mental health	30.3%
Teachers and staff who communicate they’re available to provide support	28.7%
Access to wellness centers	27.8%
Peer counseling for academic and non-academic support	26.1%
More awareness and advertisements about mental health resources	25.8%
Education on how students can support one another	25.6%
Provide opportunities for Juniors and Seniors to support younger students	25.4%
More education about mental health resources e.g., 988 crisis line	21.4%
Other - Write In	3.1%

Q.8. If you were going through a challenging time, how likely are you to ask the following people for mental health support?

The survey assessed 442 respondents' likelihood of seeking mental health support from various sources within their support system. Notably, significant others, parents or guardians, and friends emerge as primary potential sources of support, with moderate to high likelihood ratings across different likelihood categories. It was surprising that respondents are most likely to turn to significant others for support, particularly since friends emerged as the primary source of support in previous findings. The absence of a "Not Applicable" option for significant others may have influenced the high selection rate for this option.

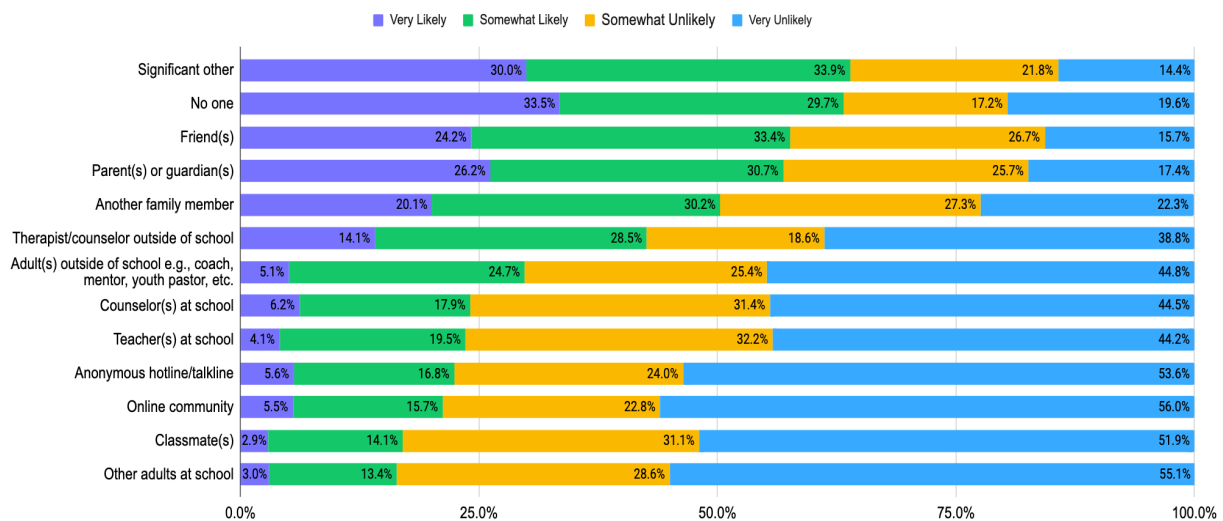
Surprisingly, a significant percentage of students expressed they were highly likely (33.5%) or somewhat likely (29.7%) to seek support from "No one," indicating a tendency towards self-reliance during challenging times. This prevalence of choosing "no one" contradicts the assumption that students would typically turn to parents, friends, or professionals for assistance. It also brings up potential distrust in support systems in place since a significant proportion of respondents reported feeling at least somewhat comfortable having conversations about mental health.

Moreover, the data reveals a reluctance among students to seek support from school-based resources such as counselors, teachers, and adult figures, possibly indicating existing barriers within educational settings. These results demonstrate that there is a need for increased interaction with teachers, given their role as trusted adults in teens' lives.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that teachers become more involved in fostering an environment where students feel comfortable communicating openly and asking for support.

**Recommendation:** Adults can support teens' mental health by focusing on building mutual trust and open communication within their relationships.

These findings underscore the importance of fostering supportive relationships with family and close peers, as well as addressing potential barriers to accessing mental health support within school environments.



**Figure 17.** Respondents' likelihood of seeking mental health support from various sources within their support system.

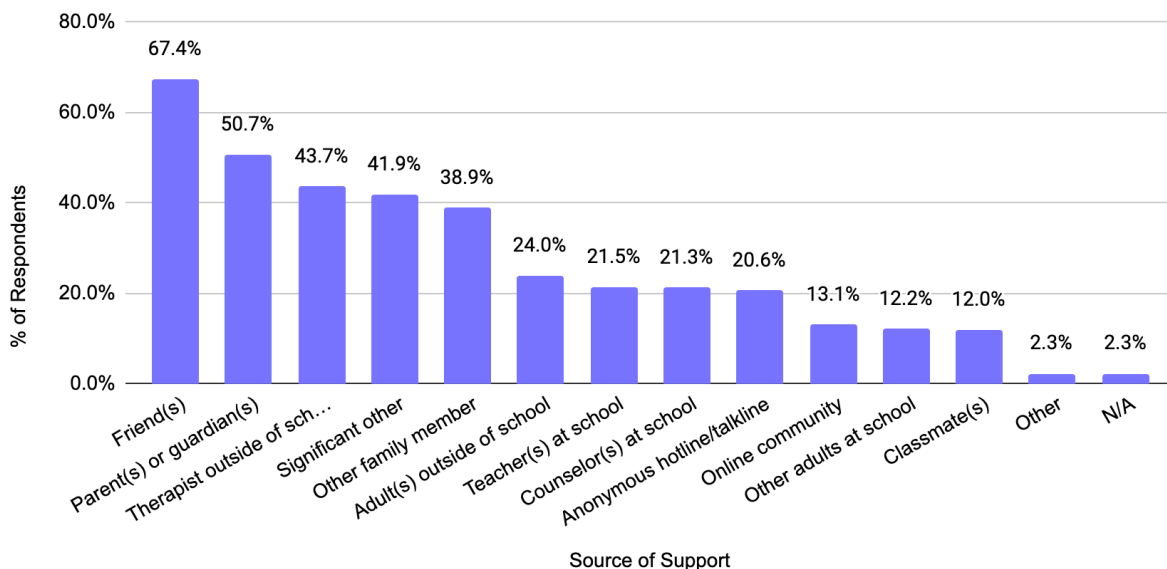
**Q.9. Who do you think could be the most successful at providing support during a challenging time?**

The survey assessed 442 respondents' support systems and the degree to which they feel they can provide support. The survey reveals that friends are perceived as the most effective source of support during challenging times, with a significant percentage of respondents (67.4%) selecting them. Parents or guardians also rank high, chosen by half of the respondents (50.7%). Additionally, significant others (41.9%) and other family members (38.9%) are recognized as potential sources of effective support. These results demonstrate teenagers' preference of turning to their close personal relationships for support, possibly due to feeling seen and understood by the people they spend the most time with. There is a sense of relatability and trust among teens and their peers which may explain why teens feel

that they are the most successful at providing support during a challenging time. Interestingly, while significant others were one of the sources of support teens were most likely to turn to for support, they were not perceived to be the most effective at providing support. Therapists or counselors outside of school were perceived as being one of the more helpful sources of support for teens (43.7%), however teens are still more likely to turn to their personal relationships for support.

Adults outside of school, teachers at school, and school counselors are selected by a relatively lower percentage of respondents (24.0%, 21.5%, and 21.3% respectively), indicating a lesser perceived effectiveness in providing support during challenging times. This is interesting particularly since teens perceive outside counselors as effective sources of support, while school counselors are not viewed as effective.

**Recommendation:** Counselors in schools should enhance their involvement in mental health support at schools, fostering a safe and inviting atmosphere for students. They should emphasize that, despite being affiliated with the school, they are available to address concerns beyond academics and assure students of the confidentiality of their discussions.



**Figure 18.** Perceived effectiveness of various mental health support systems.

**Q.10.** What type of content do you see the most on social media?

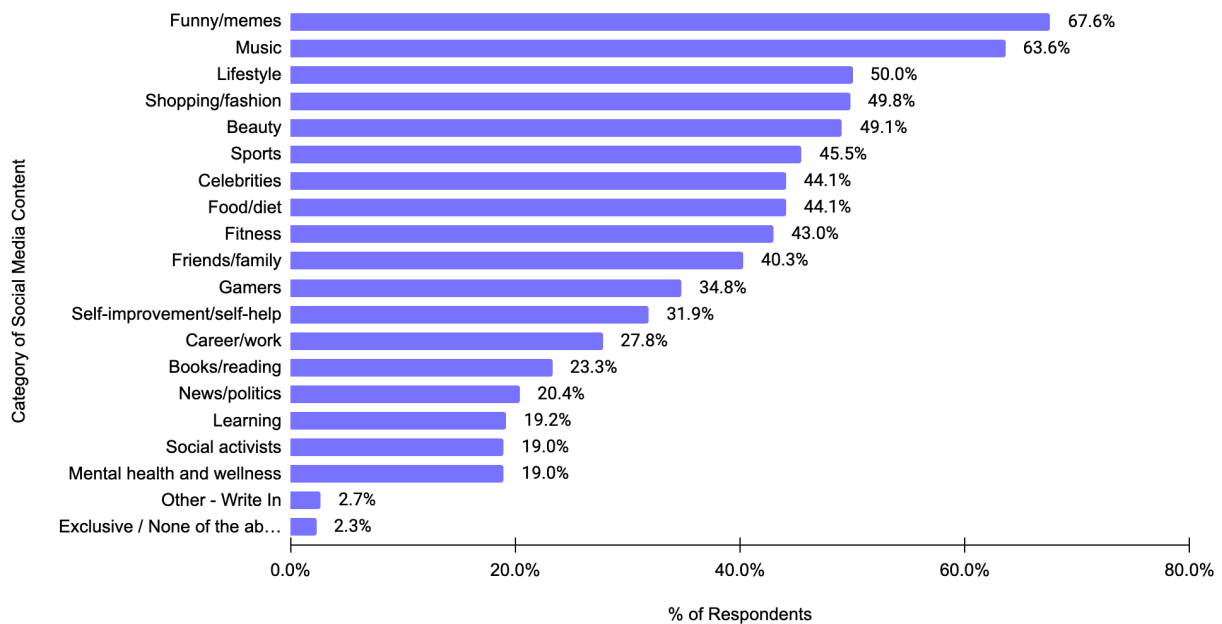
The survey results reveal the social media consumption preferences for 442 respondents. While the content that teens consume is highly personal and depends on their individual preferences, humor and memes were the predominant category of content, with a substantial 67.6% of respondents indicating a strong inclination towards this category. Following closely, music captures the attention of 63.6% of participants. Social media can serve as an outlet for teens, particularly funny and trending content, where they can let go of or ignore the stressors in their lives.

Conversely, subjects such as career/work, books/reading, news/politics, and learning exhibit comparatively lower engagement levels, ranging from 27.8% to 19.2%. Social activism, mental health, and wellness garner minimal interest among respondents, each scoring 19.0%.

Although we are able to control who we follow, negative content is still easy to access particularly due to the algorithm pushing sensationalizing content. Content about food, fitness, shopping, and lifestyle also has the potential to have a negative impact on teens as they can make comparisons between their lives and what is seen online.

**Recommendation:** Teens should practice safe internet behaviors/etiquette and be informed on how to be safe and healthy on the internet. e.g., limiting screen time, blocking negative accounts.

**Recommendation:** Parents and schools should take a more active role in providing guidance on social media usage in an enjoyable way and minimizing the negative impacts.



**Figure 19.** Social media content seen most frequently by teens in Monterey County.

Q.11. How would you rate the way social media impacts the following aspects of your life?

The average ratings provided by teens regarding the impact of social media on various aspects of their lives reveal a surprising trend. Despite initial expectations for more dramatic effects, the overall rating hovers around 5, suggesting a fairly neutral impact. Notably, social media's influence seems most pronounced in areas such as body image, productivity, and sleep, where ratings skew towards the

negative end of the spectrum. Conversely, aspects like creativity, access to information, and personal relationships receive higher ratings, indicating more positive impacts. It appears that active engagement with social media, rather than passive scrolling, contributes to these positive effects.

**Recommendation:** Teens must reflect on their own preferences and reactions to social media, as self-awareness can lead to a healthier and more fulfilling digital experience.

**Table 8.** Average rating of the impact social media has on various aspects of teens' lives.

Category	Average Rating	Category	Average Rating
Creativity	6.8	Free time	5.4
Relationships with peers	6	Mental health	5.2
Access to factual information	6	Self-esteem	5
Mood	5.7	Schoolwork/grades	4.9
Relationships with family	5.7	View of self	4.8
Relationship with food	5.7	Body image	4.6
Feelings of belonging	5.5	Productivity	4.6
Motivation	5.5	Sleep	4.5

The high rating for creativity aligns with the abundance of artistic content available on social media platforms, where users often find inspiration and tutorials for various creative endeavors, fostering a culture of innovation and self-expression. Social media serves as a platform for individuals to curate and showcase their unique identities and aesthetics. By discovering content that resonates with them, users can integrate these influences, contributing to the expression of individualism.

The high average impact rating for social media's connection to friends correlates with its role as the primary communication platform for sharing ideas and maintaining relationships. However, it also creates a barrier in real-life connections, as interactions mediated through screens differ significantly from face-to-face connections, potentially impacting the depth and authenticity of relationships.

The fluctuation of mood on social media platforms may be influenced by the algorithms dictating content exposure. Algorithms favoring uplifting content could positively impact mood, while those emphasizing negative content might have adverse effects. Additionally, the duration of time spent on social media may also play a role in mood regulation, with excessive usage potentially leading to mood disturbances.

Social media serves as a convenient pastime, but its immersive nature can detract from time spent elsewhere. The ease of getting absorbed in endless scrolling can lead to hours lost, potentially disrupting sleep patterns and forming unhealthy habits, particularly after a long day.



## Qualitative Data

Q.12. What do you think people in Monterey County could do to prioritize youth mental health? (N=363)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Provide a forum to discuss mental health openly, learn healthy ways to cope and resources for their mental health and general wellness.	<p>"I believe people could more openly talk about mental health with younger kids...I believe learning about it at a young age is really beneficial for later on."</p> <p>"Create a society where you can be more open about sharing struggles, taking it seriously, and educating people on how they should respond to someone or something damaging their mental health."</p>
Schools should understand that student life is hard and offer them breaks to get back on track such as mental health days and more accommodating workloads and schedules	<p>"Reduce the amount of school pressure, and fix the school schedule for students to get more sleep."</p> <p>"I think schools can normalize taking days off due to mental health, and not have absences...affect you in any way"</p> <p>"Offer breaks and normalize rest"</p> <p>"Have mental days where we do fun and not that much stressful work in all classes at least once a month."</p>
Let students know that they are not alone with their mental health problems.	<p>"Normalize that struggling with mental health is normal and okay, provide resources that people will actually use e.g. stress relief tips or what to do when someone has a panic attack or emotional burnout."</p> <p>"Activities to make u feel like you're not the only one going through this"</p>
Improve mental health services at school such as more professionals and wellness centers and making them known to students.	<p>"We should have more teachers and adults knowing how to help us, especially during tough times, because I don't even know the helpers at my school"</p> <p>"Have more wellness centers at school and more people to talk to and more programs"</p>
Training adults to be caring and more open-minded when addressing mental health, and knowing how to respond appropriately.	<p>"listen to what they have to say and take it seriously"</p> <p>"Be more understanding and practice putting themselves in our shoes"</p> <p>"Ask adults to check up on kids. May sound corny but sometimes a good "how are you" or an adult praising you can make you feel better"</p>
Encourage students to engage in activities outside the classroom	<p>"Take away emphasis from academics and encourage students to partake in hobbies, extracurriculars, and time with friends and family. In my experience, the biggest issue standing in the way of positive mental health is trying to balance perfect grades, extracurriculars, and social life. Grades shouldn't matter as much as they do; its far more important for students to have something fun they enjoy that they can do outside of school"</p>

Q.13. What types of activities or interests can contribute to a sense of connection amongst youth in Monterey County? (N=332)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Activities that bring out a sense of belonging and make students feel more connected.	<p>“I believe hosting fun group events could bring all of the youth together to connect and engage. It can introduce you to new people and personalities.”</p> <p>“Sports, community activities, cultural events, food events, peer support in skill, and the Breaking Down The Walls activity.”</p>
Ways for students to talk to each other more in school	<p>“meeting new people in your classes in group projects”</p> <p>“talking more to each other during class”</p>
Activities and events to meet new people who share the same interests	<p>“Sports, Clubs, Programs, or other extracurricular activities can contribute to a sense of connection since we find other people who like what we like to do.”</p> <p>“Programs catered towards specific interests”</p>
Activities to promote fun, creativity, and self-expression: Art, music, writing, food. Life can be overwhelming and taking some time to have fun can be beneficial.	<p>“More field trips and dances between different schools so kids can socialize and have fun”</p> <p>“Events to keep spirits up”</p> <p>“The ability to attend creative workshops, such as meditation, arts and crafts, etc, to get one's mind off of whatever is bothering them and focus on being in the moment.”</p>
Extracurriculars, sports, clubs, volunteering - activities that are free and not competitive	<p>“Clubs to get community service and help on self love, motivation, mental health”</p> <p>“School sports help students find a sense of belongingness and like they have a community.”</p> <p>“Theater is an activity that is super inclusive and feels very comfortable. Everyone supports each other and no one judges people for being who they are.”</p>
Creating groups of all kinds - for support, to study, engage in community service, ways to create a change in their community	<p>“Group therapy groups for different demographics of youth”</p> <p>“I also host study groups for people who might be more focused by engaging in a group mentality.”</p> <p>“Community service groups can make connections amongst youth in Monterey County.”</p>