AIM Ideas Lab Youth Survey 2024

San Diego County

Research Design Collaborators

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Introduction

AIM Youth Mental Health invited high school student volunteers in San Diego 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.

Fourteen AIM Ideas Lab youth researchers from San Diego 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 100 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 San Diego 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. 143 youth in San Diego 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. Inconsistencies exist between students' reported comfort levels in seeking support and their actual behavior, with 66.4% expressing comfort in seeking help but 66.9% indicating a high likelihood of not seeking assistance during difficult times.

2. The most common factors that would encourage teens from asking for help are:
   2.1. Feeling like their issues are valid enough to receive support: 78.4% of teens
   2.2. Knowing it's okay to reach out for help, no matter how big or small their issues are: 71.9% of teens
   2.3. Knowing their issues won't add to someone else's stress: 70.5% of teens

3. Teens are reluctant to seek support from school-based resources such as counselors, teachers, and adult figures, possibly indicating existing barriers within educational settings.
   3.1. This reluctance may stem from perceived barriers such as a lack of trust, relatability, or contextual understanding of students' experiences by school staff.

4. The top factors affecting the mental well-being of San Diego County teens are heightened academic stress, parental expectations, and self-imposed pressures, impacting teen's overall well-being.
   4.1. Academic pressure: 82.3% of teens
   4.2. Pressure from parents: 77.3% of teens
   4.3. Lack of sleep: 74.5% of teens
   4.4. Comparisons to other people: 74.5% of teens
   4.5. Lack of school/life balance: 73.0% of teens

5. A significant majority of teens, 77.5%, say that school interferes with their ability to take care of themselves, and 76.8% believe schools should do more to address student stress and mental health issues.

6. Schools can support student's mental health by reducing academic pressure and allowing more time for students to prioritize their well-being.
   6.1. Ability to take mental health days: 74.5%
   6.2. Less emphasis on grades: 70.1%
   6.3. Reducing amount of homework: 67.9%
   6.4. Adjusting the schedule so students can get more sleep: 62.8%
   6.5. More resources during stressful time (finals, college applications): 62.8%

7. Teens are advocating for mental health education to be a part of K-12 schools' core curriculum, with 70.1% of teens either strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with this statement, indicating a widespread recognition of the importance of mental health education in schools.

Demographics

Age

This survey gathered demographic information, with 143 respondents aged between 14 and 18. The distribution indicates 17-year-olds being the largest group (26.6%), followed by 25.9% each for ages 15 and 16. Fourteen-year olds comprise 13.3% of the total, while 18-year olds represent 7.0%. Additionally, 1.4% of respondents fell outside the specified range.
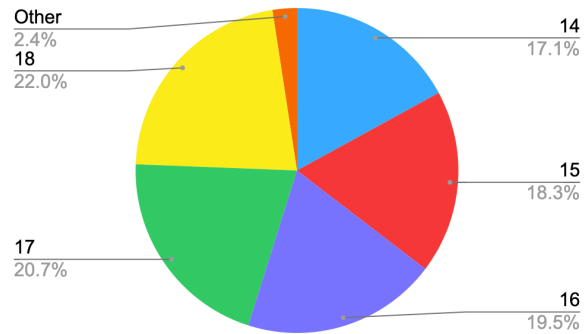

Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents.

Grade

The survey gathered demographic information from 140 participants regarding their grade level in school. Among the respondents, 28.6% were in 9th grade. Meanwhile, 10th graders comprised 18.60% of the sample, followed closely by 11th graders at 32.9%. A smaller proportion of participants, 18.60%, were in 12th grade.
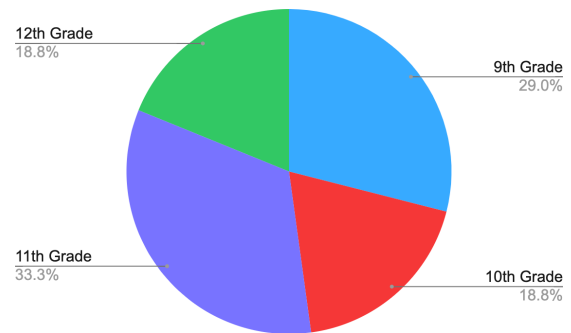

Figure 2. Grade distribution of respondents.

School

The school survey responses indicate that the majority of respondents attend Westview High School, which accounts for 31.9% of the total. Mar Vista High School and Helix Charter High School follow, with 18.1% and 17.4%, respectively. San Dieguito Academy represents 10.1% of the respondents. Rancho Bernardo High School has 8.0%, while the remaining schools each have less than 2% of the total responses, with 13 schools contributing just one respondent each. Overall, the survey collected responses from 138 students across a diverse range of high schools.

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 San Diego County.

Table 1. School distribution of respondents.

School	Count	%
Westview HS	44	31.9%
Mar Vista HS	25	18.1%
Helix Charter HS	24	17.4%
San Dieguito Academy	14	10.1%
Rancho Bernardo HS	11	8.0%
Mount Miguel HS	2	1.4%
Bernardo Heights HS	1	0.7%
Cathedral Catholic HS	1	0.7%
Classical Academy HS	1	0.7%
Coastal Academy HS	1	0.7%
Hilltop HS	1	0.7%
High Tech High Chula Vista	1	0.7%
La Jolla Country Day School	1	0.7%
Orange Glen HS	1	0.7%
Poway HS	1	0.7%
Poway to Palomar	1	0.7%
Rancho Buena Vista HS	1	0.7%
Santana HS	1	0.7%
Southwest HS	1	0.7%

City

The survey gathered demographic information from 138 participants regarding the city they reside in. The survey results show that a significant majority of respondents, 58.7% (81 students), reside in San Diego. Other notable cities include Imperial Beach, with 9.4% (13 students), and Encinitas, with 8.7% (12 students). La Mesa accounts for 6.5% (9 students) of the respondents. Smaller proportions come from various other locations, each contributing less than 3% to the total. This data highlights that the majority of the survey participants are concentrated in San Diego, with a broad distribution across several other cities. The full distribution of respondents can be found below in **Table 2.**

Recommendation: Survey distribution will extend throughout San Diego 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	%	City	Count	%
San Diego	81	58.7%	Oceanside	2	1.4%
Imperial Beach	13	9.4%	Spring Valley	2	1.4%
Encinitas	12	8.7%	Carlsbad	1	0.7%
La Mesa	9	6.5%	El Cajon	1	0.7%
Other	4	2.9%	National City	1	0.7%
Escondido	3	2.2%	Rancho Bernardo	1	0.7%
Lemon Grove	3	2.2%	Santee	1	0.7%
Poway	3	2.2%	Solana Beach	1	0.7%

Gender Identity

The survey collected data on gender identity from 140 participants. The school survey results reveal that the majority of respondents identify as women, comprising 55.4%. Men represent 23.6% . Both transgender and non-binary individuals each account for 7.7% . Additionally, 5.7% prefer not to disclose their gender. There is fair representation of different gender identities, however, the results skew to reflect the demographics of the Ideas Lab participants. 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.
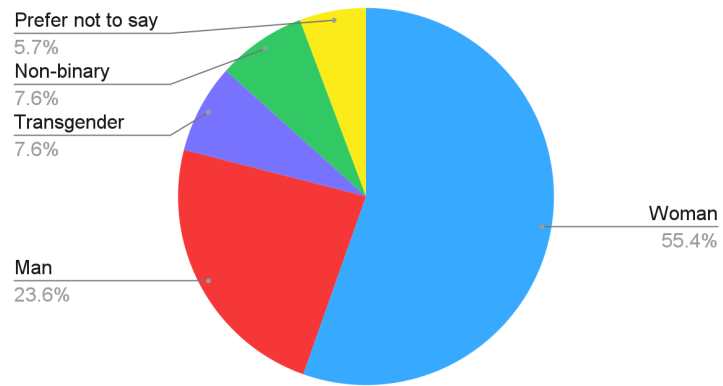
Figure 3. Distribution of respondents' gender identity.

Recommendation: Obtaining school approval for the survey could enable students to distribute it across their campus, reaching a broader and more representative sample beyond their immediate friend groups.

Racial/Ethnic Identity

In terms of racial and ethnic identity, the survey gathered responses from 140 participants. The racial and ethnic makeup of the survey respondents is representative of San Diego County, with the majority identifying as White (45.7%), Asian or Asian American (32.9%), or Latino/a or Hispanic (28.6%). Additionally, 8.6% identify as Black or African American, 5.0% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 3.6% as Middle Eastern or North African, and 1.4% each as Indigenous or Native American.

Table 3. Ethnic and racial distribution of survey respondents.

Race/Ethnicity	Percent	Count
White or Caucasian	45.7%	64
Asian or Asian American	32.9%	46
Latino/a or Hispanic	28.6%	40
Black or African American	8.6%	12
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	5.0%	7
Middle Eastern or North African	3.6%	5
Indigenous or Native American	1.4%	2
Prefer not to say	1.4%	2
Other - Write In	0.7%	1

Quantitative data

Q.1. How important do you think it is to address the mental health of teens in San Diego County?

The survey data indicates that the vast majority of respondents, 83.5%, consider addressing the mental health of teens in San Diego County as very important, with 15.8% viewing it as somewhat important, and only 0.7% deeming it not important. However, there appears to be a discrepancy between this acknowledgment and the seriousness with which mental health is discussed in person, possibly due to fear of judgment or stigma. Respondents suggest that increased dialogue about mental health could help destigmatize the issue and lead to greater awareness and support. This inconsistency suggests that while individuals recognize the importance of addressing teen mental health, societal attitudes and communication barriers may hinder meaningful discussions in person.
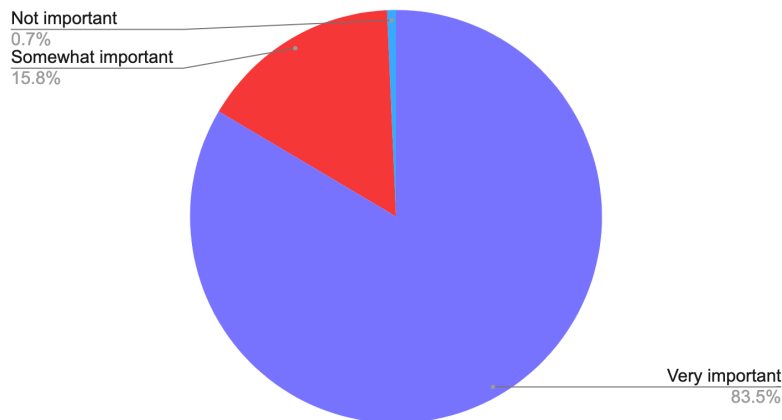

Not important
0.7%
Somewhat important
15.8%

Very important
83.5%

Figure 4. Importance of addressing teen mental health in San Diego County.

Recommendation: Schools should emphasize the importance of mental health and general well-being by introducing regular mental health surveys or check-ups to assess students' well-being and provide timely support when needed.

Recommendation: Peer support programs and online chat groups are examples of supportive and inclusive environments where teens can openly discuss mental health challenges helping normalize the conversation, and reducing the fear of judgment.

The data underscores a notable gender disparity in perceptions regarding the importance of addressing teen mental health in San Diego County, with women more inclined to consider it important compared to men. While a majority of teens acknowledge the significance of discussing mental health, they may not actively demonstrate this belief, possibly due to fear of judgment. Male respondents, in particular, were more inclined to perceive addressing mental health as somewhat important or not important, which could be attributed to societal stereotypes dictating that men should exhibit masculinity and express less emotion. This highlights the importance of addressing not only the topic
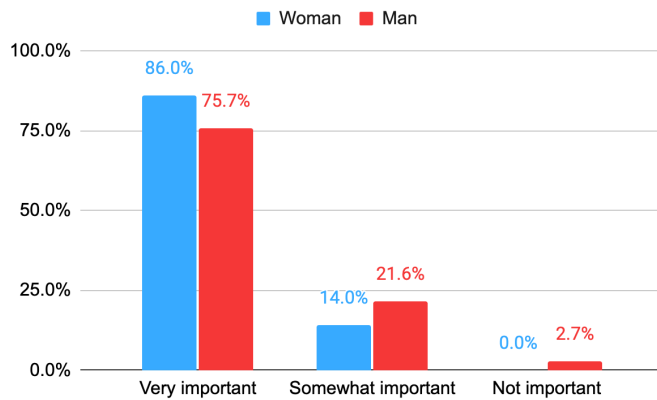
Figure 5. Disparities in the perceived importance of addressing teen mental health by gender.

itself but also the underlying social norms and perceptions surrounding mental health discussions.

Recommendation: Provide targeted education and awareness campaigns specifically tailored to address the unique mental health needs and concerns of male individuals.

Recommendation: Creating safe and inclusive spaces where men feel comfortable discussing their mental health without fear of judgment can significantly contribute to breaking down barriers and promoting acceptance.

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

The survey results highlight concerning levels of mental health challenges among teens, emphasizing the urgent need to address youth mental health. Stress and burnout are prevalent, affecting 90.5% of respondents' friends, followed closely by anxiety at 88.3%. These findings underscore the necessity for increased support and resources in schools, including initiatives to reduce academic stressors and prevent such high levels of stress among teens.

Particularly alarming are the rates of self-harm or self-injury (63.5%) and thoughts of ending one's life (59.9%), highlighting the urgency of normalizing mental health conversations as well as the importance of having mental health resources and support available to all teens. Additionally, high percentages of experiences include low self-esteem/self-worth (79.6%), depression (75.9%), and unhealthy relationships with food (64.2%).

Table 4. Mental health challenges respondents peers have experienced.

Mental Health Challenge	Peers' Mental Health Challenges (%)
High levels of stress and/or feeling burnt out	90.5%
Anxiety	88.3%
Low self-esteem/self-worth	79.6%
Depression	75.9%
Eating disorders/ unhealthy relationship with food	64.2%
Self-harm or self-injury	63.5%
Thoughts of ending their life	59.9%
Substance misuse/addiction	46.0%
Trauma and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	43.1%
Other - Write In	5.1%

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

The survey findings reveal several significant risk factors impacting teen mental health in San Diego. Academic pressure emerges as a predominant concern, affecting 82.3% of respondents, followed closely by pressure from parents at 77.3%. Lack of sleep is also prevalent, impacting 74.5% of respondents, potentially linked to teens prioritizing academics and extracurriculars over their well-being. 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**. There appears to be a potential correlation between academic pressure and parental expectations, highlighting the need to address both areas to support teen mental well-being. Surprisingly, only 31% of respondents identified the stigma of discussing mental health as a risk factor, while social media was expected to be more prevalent (57%). Efforts to improve school environments, promote work-life balance, and provide adequate support systems could help alleviate these stressors.

Recommendation: Implement policies that prioritize work-life balance and reduce academic stressors, such as homework load and exam pressure, to create a more supportive and conducive learning environment.

Recommendation: Introduce comprehensive mental health education programs to increase awareness and provide coping strategies for youth and teens facing academic pressure, parental expectations, and other stressors.

Recommendation: Offer accessible and confidential mental health support services within school settings to provide timely assistance to students in need.
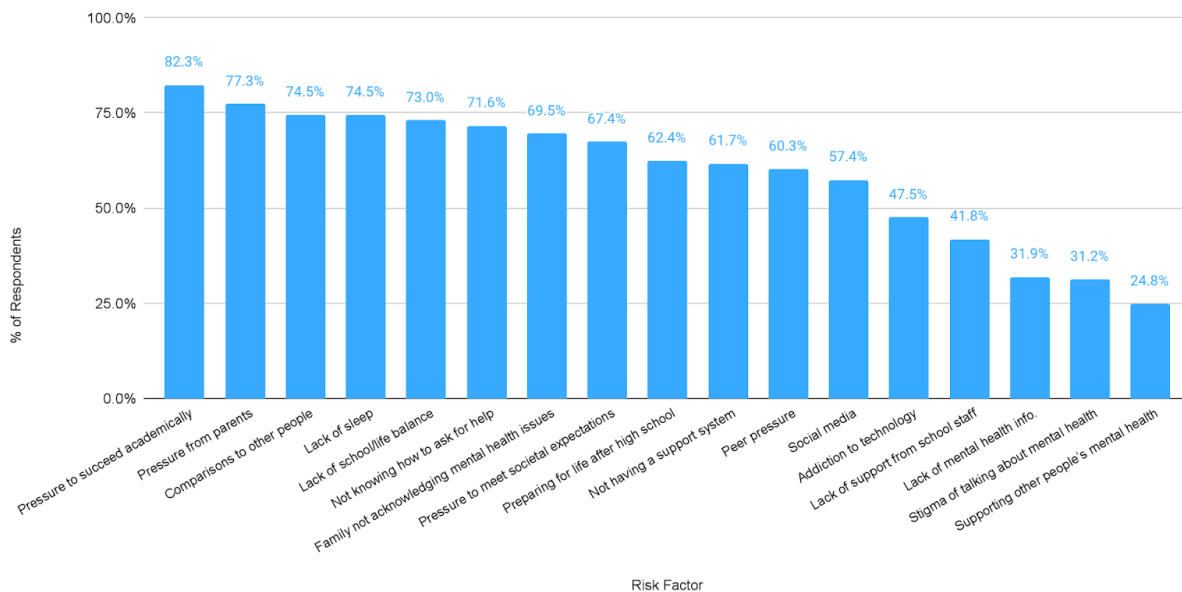

Figure 6. Factors impacting the mental health of teens in San Diego County.

Q.4 If you were going through a challenging time, how comfortable are you asking for support?

The survey assessed participants' comfort levels in asking for support if they were going through a challenging time, drawing responses from 140 participants. Based on the data, 66.4% of respondents are at least somewhat comfortable asking for help, suggesting a relatively positive trend in seeking support among teens. However, 33.6% express discomfort, possibly due to fear of judgment or lacking a supportive network.
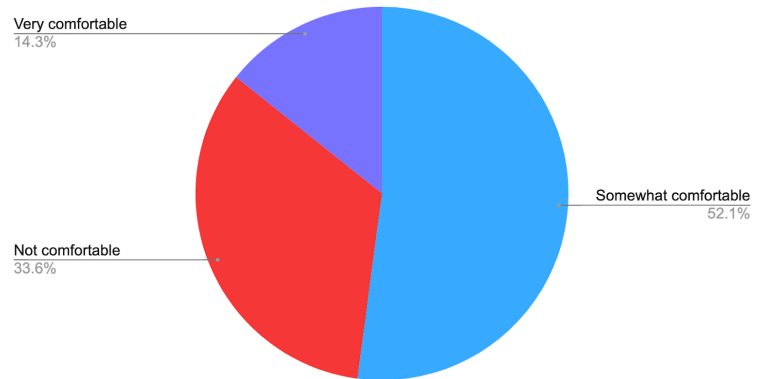

Figure 7. The comfort level of respondents in seeking support during challenging times.

Recommendation: Offer workshops for parents to educate them about teen mental health and equip them with strategies to support their children effectively.

Recommendation: Encourage regular mental health check-ins among friends and peers to promote mutual support and awareness of each other's well-being.

Recommendation: Foster open and non-judgmental dialogue with teens to create a safe space for discussing mental health challenges and seeking support.

Recommendation: Provide diverse resources and support systems to reassure teens that it's acceptable and encouraged to ask for help when needed.

Q.5. If you were going through a challenging time, how likely are you to ask the following people for mental health support?

The survey assessed 139 respondents' likelihood of seeking mental health support from various sources within their support system. The data reveals a concerning disparity between respondents' reported comfort levels in asking for help and their actual help-seeking behavior. While 66.4% of respondents expressed some level of comfort in seeking support, almost 70% indicated that they are unlikely to turn to anyone for mental health support when facing challenges. This suggests a nuanced relationship between comfort in seeking support and the likelihood of reaching out for assistance. Factors such as trust, relatability, and perceived effectiveness of support options likely influence individuals' help-seeking decisions. Moreover, the high percentage of respondents unlikely to turn to any source for support highlights a concerning gap in access to mental health resources.

Informal support networks such as friends (28.1%) and significant others (35.2%) emerged as preferred sources of support. This preference may reflect a greater level of trust and comfort within personal relationships compared to formal support structures. 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. This reluctance may stem from perceived barriers such as a lack of trust, relatability, or contextual understanding of students' experiences by school staff. These results demonstrate that there is a need for increased interaction with teachers, given their role as trusted adults in teens' lives. Overall, addressing these findings requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes both formal and informal support networks while actively working to remove barriers to seeking professional help.

Recommendation: Foster peer support networks by increasing social interaction among students in classrooms, promoting open dialogue about mental health challenges.

Recommendation: Develop awareness campaigns to educate students about available mental health resources, reducing barriers to accessing professional support through hotlines and support groups.

Recommendation: Encouraging open communication among peers is vital, with more opportunities for teens to talk and listen to each other.

Recommendation: Offer more peer-to-peer support focused groups or younger counselors since teens are more likely to reach out to people who they can relate to, will listen non-judgmentally, and are familiar with the context of what they're going through.
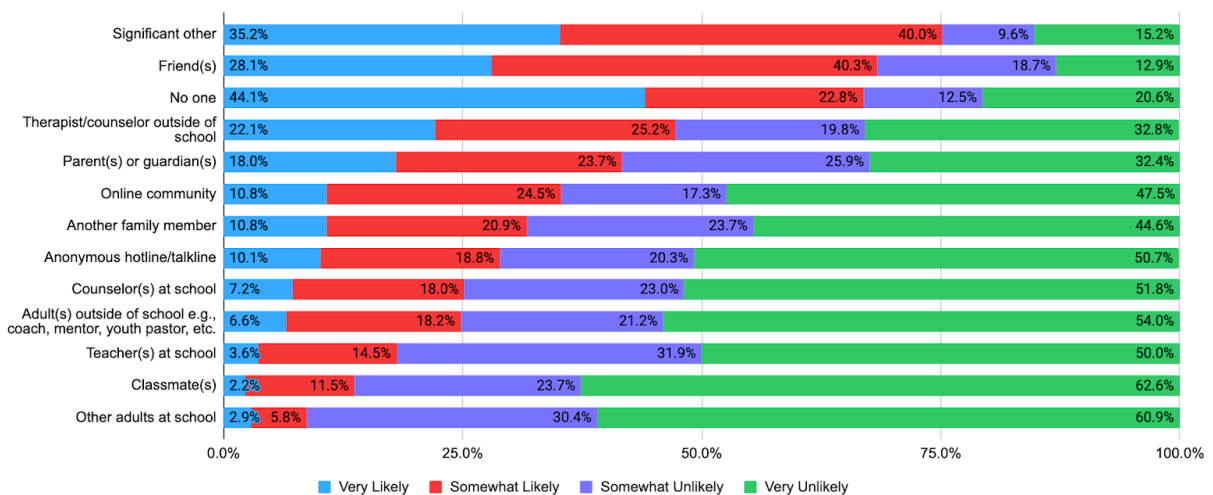

Figure 8. Respondents' likelihood of seeking mental health support from various sources within their support system.

Q.6. What do you think would encourage teens in San Diego County to reach out for mental health support?

The survey results shed light on factors that would encourage teens in San Diego County to seek mental health support based on 139 responses. Notably, respondents emphasized the importance of feeling validated in their issues, with 78.4% expressing the need for their concerns to be recognized as worthy of support to feel comfortable asking for help. Additionally, 71.9% emphasized the significance of normalizing help-seeking behavior, irrespective of the magnitude of their issues, highlighting the necessity of reducing stigma surrounding mental health discussions. Teens express concerns over burdening others by asking for support, with 70.5% indicating that ensuring that seeking support does not burden others would encourage them to seek help. These results underscore the need for continued efforts to destigmatize conversations around mental health. It is important for teens to know that there is no such thing as a problem that is "valid enough" - everyone is worthy of support.

Further analysis revealed other significant factors contributing to support-seeking inclinations, including the importance of practical knowledge on how to ask for help (59.7%) and understanding whom to turn to (59.0%). Teens expressed a desire for more transparency on what the process of asking for support looks like so that they can have a better understanding of what will happen when they ask for help (58.3%). These findings collectively underscore the importance of comprehensive mental health education and accessible support resources in empowering teens to address their mental well-being.

Prioritizing the validation of teens' concerns, normalizing help-seeking behaviors, and providing comprehensive education and accessible support resources are crucial steps in promoting mental health awareness and support-seeking behaviors among teens in San Diego County. By addressing these factors, stakeholders can create a supportive environment where teens feel empowered to prioritize their mental well-being and seek help when needed, ultimately fostering a healthier and more resilient community.

Recommendation: Implement comprehensive mental health education programs in schools to normalize help-seeking behaviors and provide practical guidance on seeking support.

Recommendation: Develop accessible and confidential avenues for mental health support tailored to teens' needs, ensuring that seeking help does not burden others.

Recommendation: Foster a supportive environment that validates teens' concerns and empowers them to prioritize their mental well-being through community-wide awareness campaigns and resource dissemination.

Recommendation: Create a supportive environment by validating teens' concerns and fostering open conversations about mental health without judgment or comparison, allowing them to express their needs freely and seek necessary support.
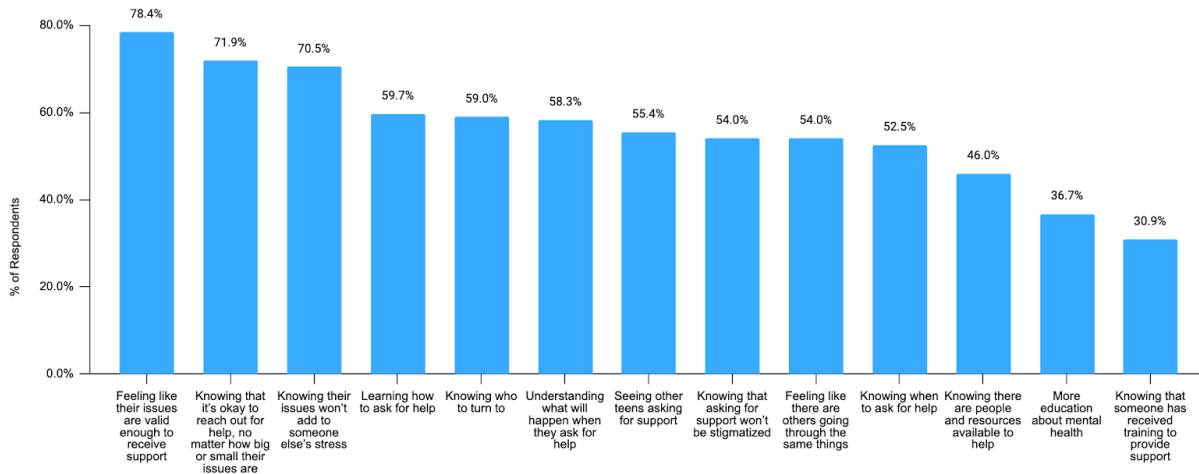
Figure 9. Factors encouraging teens in San Diego County to seek mental health support.

Q.7. Please select how much you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding various aspects of teen mental health?

A significant 77.5% of teens strongly or somewhat agree that school interferes with their self-care, highlighting a critical issue that schools must address to foster a healthier environment for students. This interference may stem from heavy academic workloads, extracurricular commitments, and the pressure to perform well, which collectively leave little time for students to engage in self-care practices essential for their mental well-being. Additionally, 76.8% of teens feel that their schools should do more to help manage student stress, indicating a strong demand for improved mental health support within educational institutions. This sentiment suggests that current resources and interventions may be insufficient or not adequately addressing the root causes of student stress.

In contrast, only 41.3% believe their schools are doing a good job addressing students' mental health, with a notable 33.3% disagreeing, underscoring a perceived deficiency in current efforts. This gap between the perceived need for support and the effectiveness of existing measures points to a significant opportunity for schools to enhance their mental health programs. Implementing comprehensive mental health education, increasing access to counseling services, and creating a supportive school culture that prioritizes mental health can help bridge this gap. Moreover, schools should consider integrating stress management techniques into the curriculum and providing training for teachers to recognize and address mental health issues among students. By taking these steps, schools can better support the mental health and overall well-being of their students, ensuring they have the tools and resources necessary to thrive both academically and personally.

Teens are advocating for mental health education to be a part of K-12 schools' core curriculum. A significant portion (70.1%) either strongly agree or somewhat agree with this statement, which would normalize and prioritize mental health awareness from an early age. Implementing mental health education can also decrease stigma around mental health, making it easier for students to seek help.
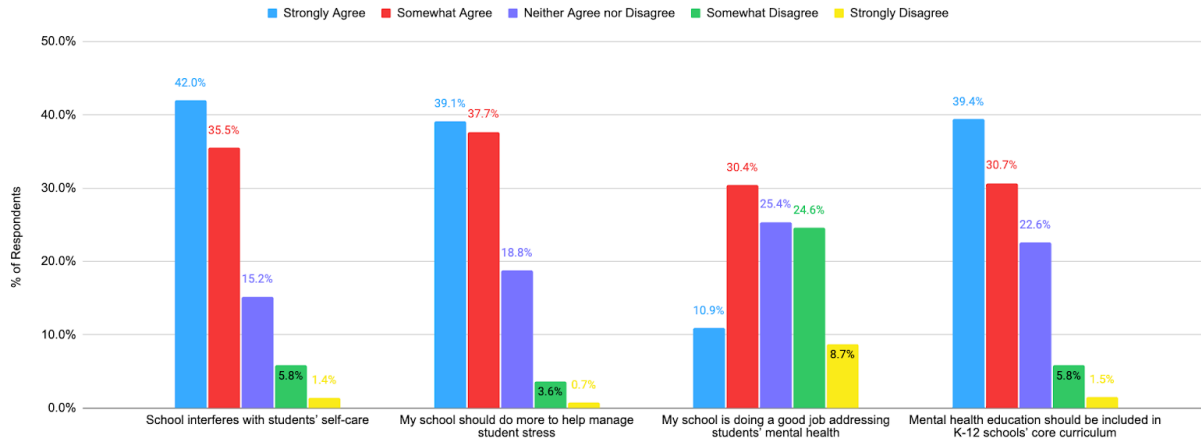
Figure 10. Insights into teens' perceptions of the relationship between mental health and schools.

A majority of teens (83.3%) acknowledge putting a lot of pressure on themselves, highlighting the pervasive issue of self-imposed stress among adolescents. This pressure is often influenced by external factors such as academic demands and parental expectations, which significantly contribute to the mental health challenges they face. Furthermore, only 25.3% of teens feel that adults around them understand what's going on in their lives, indicating a significant disconnect that could hinder effective support.

However, a reassuring 68.9% of teens feel they have people to turn to during challenging times, and an impressive 85.4% feel comfortable supporting others, suggesting strong peer support networks. There appears to be a disparity between respondents' reported support networks and comfort in asking for help and their actual help-seeking behavior. While 68.9% of respondents expressed that they have people they can turn to during a challenging time, almost 70% indicated that they are unlikely to turn to anyone for mental health support when facing challenges. This suggests a nuanced relationship between comfort and ability to seek support and the likelihood of teens actually reaching out for assistance. The survey revealed potential barriers to asking for help could be feeling like their issues are valid enough to ask for help and knowing that their issues won't add to someone else's stress. Teens are more comfortable supporting others than being supported themselves, highlighting the importance of fostering environments where mutual support is encouraged. While a majority of teens recognize the availability of support networks and feel comfortable supporting others, there remains a significant gap between this perceived support and actual help-seeking behavior. Addressing the underlying barriers to seeking help, such as concerns about the validity of their issues and the impact on others, is essential to fostering an environment where teens feel empowered to reach out for the support they need.

Lastly, social media's impact on mental health stigma is evident, with 58.4% of teens agreeing that it contributes to the stigma, reflecting the complex role of digital platforms in shaping perceptions of mental health. Overall, these insights highlight the urgent need for schools to enhance mental health support, the importance of adult understanding and involvement, and the critical role of peer support in fostering a supportive environment for teens.

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.

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.
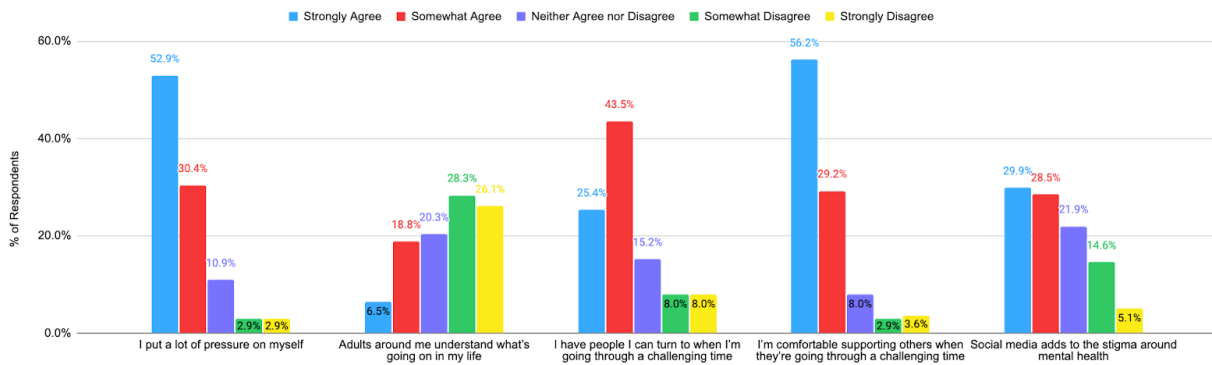

Figure 11. Insights into student perceptions on support networks, and mental health stigma.

Table 5. Teens assessment of various aspects of mental health.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
School interferes with students' self-care	42.0%	35.5%	15.2%	5.8%	1.4%
My school should do more to help manage student stress	39.1%	37.7%	18.8%	3.6%	0.7%
My school is doing a good job addressing students' mental health	10.9%	30.4%	25.4%	24.6%	8.7%
Mental health education should be included in K-12 schools' core curriculum	39.4%	30.7%	22.6%	5.8%	1.5%
I put a lot of pressure on myself	52.9%	30.4%	10.9%	2.9%	2.9%
Adults around me understand what's going on in my life	6.5%	18.8%	20.3%	28.3%	26.1%
I have people I can turn to when I'm going through a challenging time	25.4%	43.5%	15.2%	8.0%	8.0%
I'm comfortable supporting others when they're going through a challenging time	56.2%	29.2%	8.0%	2.9%	3.6%
Social media adds to the stigma around mental health	29.9%	28.5%	21.9%	14.6%	5.1%

Q.8. How can your school better support students' mental health?

The data in Table 6 below, outlines the preferences of 137 respondents for supporting mental health within schools. The top ways schools can support student mental health, according to selection rates, include allowing students to take mental health days (74.5%), placing less emphasis on grades (70.1%), and reducing the amount of homework (67.9%). 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 and success. 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 indicates a preference for other forms of support to alleviate academic stress.

The survey revealed that 62.0% of teens believe their schools could better support their mental health if teachers understood what they were going through. When students reach out to teachers, it is often because they trust them. However, when teachers dismiss their concerns, it can invalidate the students' feelings and make them feel worse. While teachers may not always feel equipped or have the capacity to provide mental health support, students primarily want a listening ear, and a sense of being seen - not necessarily professional mental health care. Teens feel if they reach out to their teachers about not being able to complete an assignment or need more time due to lack of time, overwhelm, or other circumstances, there will be repercussions. It is important that teachers emphasize student's well-being alongside their 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.

Recommendation: Schools should provide training for teachers to effectively listen and validate students' feelings without necessarily offering professional mental health care (Mental Health First Aid).

Table 6. Actions schools can take to better support student's mental health.

Action	Selection Rate
Ability to take mental health days	74.5%
Less emphasis on grades	70.1%
Reducing amount of homework	67.9%
Adjusting the schedule so students can get more sleep	62.8%
More resources during stressful times e.g., finals, college applications	62.8%
Teachers who understand what students are going through	62.0%
More academic support	56.9%
Reducing number of tests	52.6%
Tips to combat student stress	48.9%
More time to socialize with peers	48.2%
Educating parents/guardians about youth mental health	47.4%
Peer counseling for academic and non-academic support	38.0%
More counselors and staff educated about youth mental health	37.2%
Education on how students can support one another	36.5%
Provide opportunities for Juniors and Seniors to support younger students	33.6%
More education about mental health resources e.g., 988 crisis line	32.1%
Other - Write In	2.9%

Q.9. Where do you get education or information about mental health?

The survey results, based on 136 responses, reveal significant insights into where teens obtain information about mental health. Notably, a majority of teens rely on social media (61.8%) and friends (56.6%) as their primary sources. This highlights a crucial gap in the acquisition of mental health information, indicating a need for more reliable and structured educational resources. While these platforms can offer support and community, they often lack the reliability and accuracy necessary for sound mental health education. The fact that only 22.1% of teens rely on teachers and 29.4% on school counselors suggests that schools are not the primary sources of mental health information, despite being well-positioned to provide accurate and reputable education.

This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive mental health education within schools. By integrating mental health education into the curriculum and training teachers to address these topics effectively, schools can ensure that students receive trustworthy information. Furthermore, enhancing the role of school counselors and wellness centers can provide students with more accessible and reliable resources. Addressing mental health in a structured, educational environment not only equips teens with the knowledge they need but also normalizes discussions around mental health, reducing stigma and promoting overall well-being.

The data reveals that while digital resources like Google (45.6%), YouTube (39.7%), and online communities (35.3%) are significant sources of mental health information for teens, they lack real human interaction. In contrast, family members (34.6%), counselors (29.4%), and teachers (22.1%) are less commonly utilized but offer crucial face-to-face support. This highlights a disparity where teens are increasingly turning to digital platforms over real-life conversations. Encouragingly, therapists (26.5%)

and external adult support (19.1%) also provide avenues for personalized assistance, but their utilization remains less frequent. These statistics underscore the necessity of prioritizing in-person discussions about mental health within communities to ensure holistic support for teens. Such conversations not only provide personalized assistance but also build community support, destigmatize mental health issues, and reduce feelings of isolation among teens.

Recommendation: Schools should prioritize integrating comprehensive mental health education into their curriculum to provide students with accurate and reliable information.

Recommendation: Parents and caregivers should actively engage in open discussions about mental health with their teens to complement the information provided at school and foster a supportive environment.

Recommendation: Mental health professionals and educators should collaborate to develop resources and training programs for teachers and school counselors to effectively address mental health topics with students.
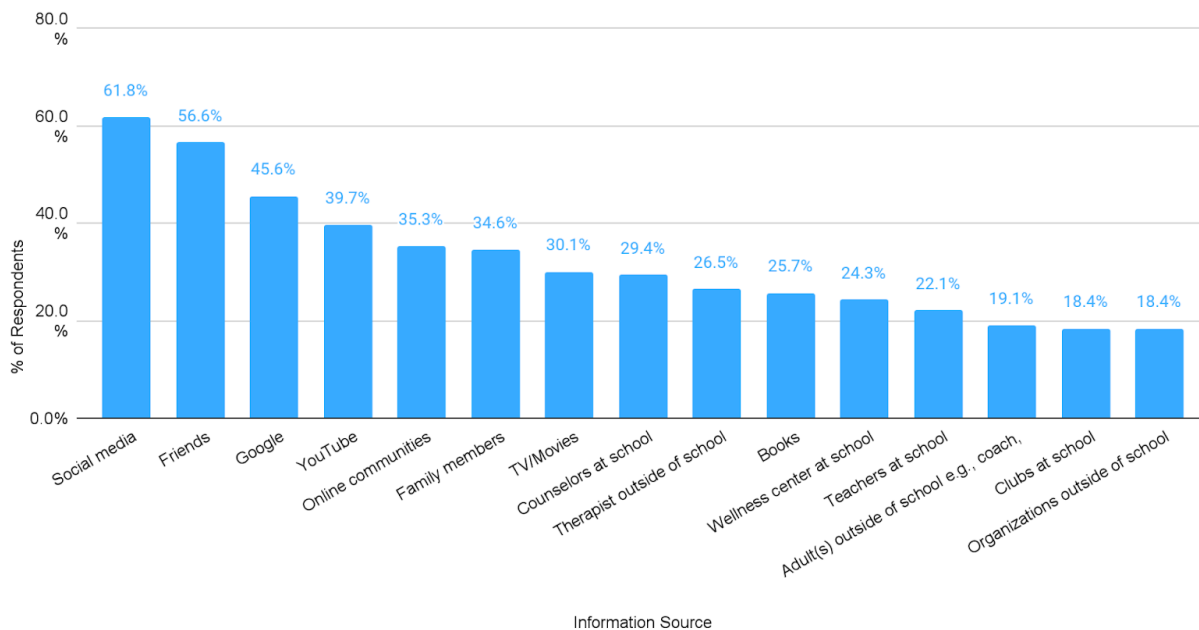

Figure 12. Sources of mental health information among teens in San Diego.

Q.10. Of the sources where you get information or education about mental health, how helpful are they in supporting your mental health?

The survey results provide valuable insights into how teens perceive the helpfulness of various sources of mental health information. Despite a majority of teens obtaining their information from social media (61.8%), only 15.6% find it very helpful, highlighting a significant gap between usage and perceived reliability. Similarly, while 45.6% of teens use Google, only 22% find it very helpful.

This data underscores the need for enhancing the accessibility and approachability of school-based mental health resources. For instance, while 35.1% of teens find school counselors very helpful, a considerable portion do not feel comfortable engaging with them, suggesting a barrier to effective utilization. Additionally, wellness centers were found to be either a very helpful or somewhat helpful resource by 64.5% of teens, yet a small percentage of students (24.3%) actually use this resource for mental health education. The findings emphasize the importance of fostering environments where teens feel comfortable seeking help from school resources.

Recommendation: Schools should increase the visibility and approachability of school wellness centers and counselors through regular mental health awareness campaigns and staff training programs.

Recommendation: Teens should encourage peers to utilize school-based mental health resources by sharing positive experiences and promoting open discussions about mental health.

Recommendation: Advocate for and support the integration of comprehensive mental health education in school curriculums to ensure teens receive reliable and accurate information.

Recommendation: Allocate funding and resources to improve mental health services in schools, making them more accessible and equipped to meet the needs of students.
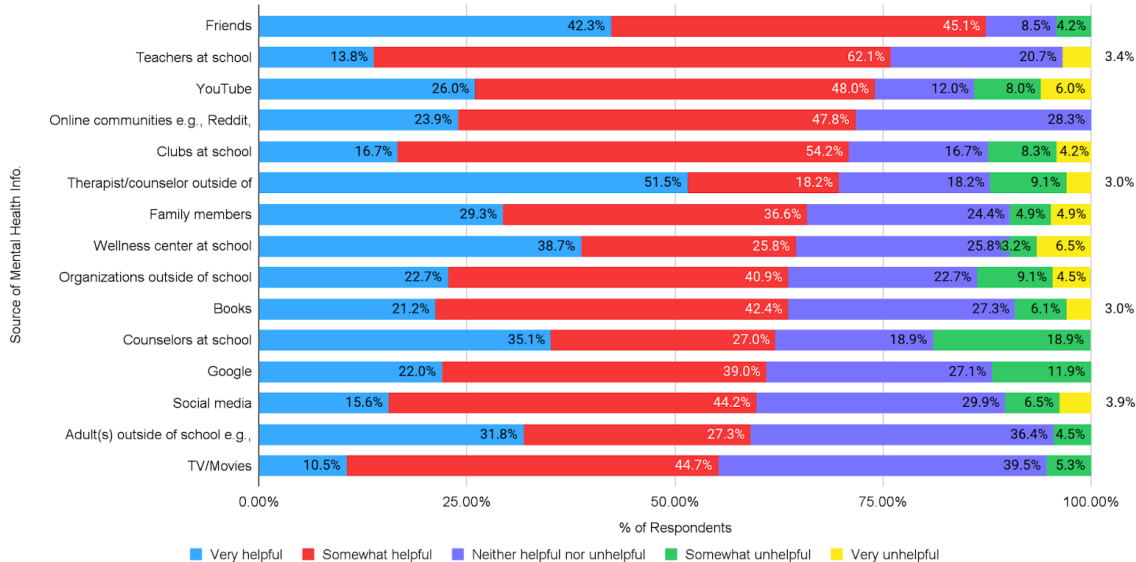

Figure 13. Helpfulness of various mental health information sources for teens.

Q.11. How much do you think self-esteem impacts youth mental health?

The data reveals a striking consensus among students regarding the impact of self-esteem on mental health. An overwhelming 83.7% of students perceive self-esteem as highly impactful on their mental health, while 14.7% consider it somewhat impactful. Only a mere 1.6% believe that self-esteem has no impact on their mental health. This overwhelming recognition of self-esteem's importance

underscores its fundamental role in adolescents' overall well-being. Given these insights, it becomes crucial for educational institutions, parents, and policymakers to prioritize initiatives that foster healthy self-esteem among teens. Encouraging supportive environments both at home and in school can significantly enhance teens' self-esteem and mental health, reducing the risk of anxiety, depression, and other related issues. The data clearly signals the need for a concerted effort to address self-esteem issues as a core component of mental health strategies for young people.
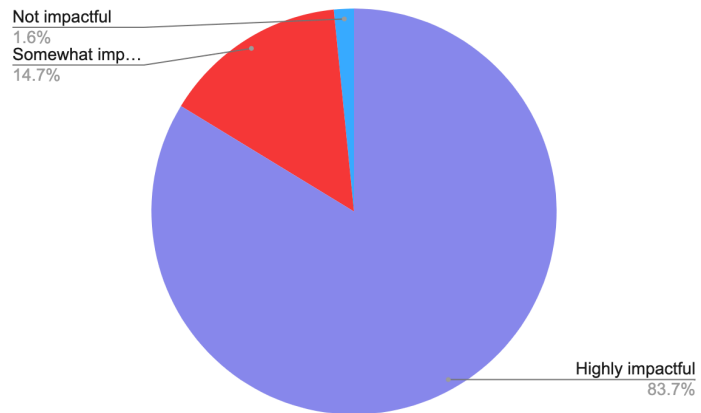

Not impactful
1.6%
Somewhat imp…
14.7%

Highly impactful
83.7%

Figure 14. Perceptions of the importance of self-esteem on the mental health of teens

Recommendation: Encourage teens to engage in hobbies and extracurricular activities that are empowering and enhance self-esteem.

Recommendation: We should all practice strategies to reduce comparison to others, particularly when it comes to social media.

Q.12. How do you think the following activities impact the self-esteem of teens in San Diego County?

The data provides insights into how various activities impact the self-esteem of teens in San Diego County. Socializing with classmates and participating in extracurriculars/sports are perceived as having predominantly positive impacts, with 82.5% and 79.4% of respondents respectively reporting either very positive or somewhat positive impacts.

Conversely, activities related to social media, such as posting and scrolling, as well as comparing oneself to others, are viewed more negatively, with the majority of respondents reporting somewhat negative or very negative impacts. Notably, talking about mental health and receiving constructive feedback from friends are seen as moderately positive, indicating the potential benefits of open communication and supportive relationships in bolstering self-esteem among teens.

However, grades appear to have a predominantly negative impact, with over 82.6% of respondents reporting either somewhat negative or very negative impacts. The most negatively impactful activities, according to the data, are comparing oneself to others (88.9% reporting somewhat negative or very negative impacts) and scrolling on social media (68.2% reporting somewhat negative or very negative impacts).
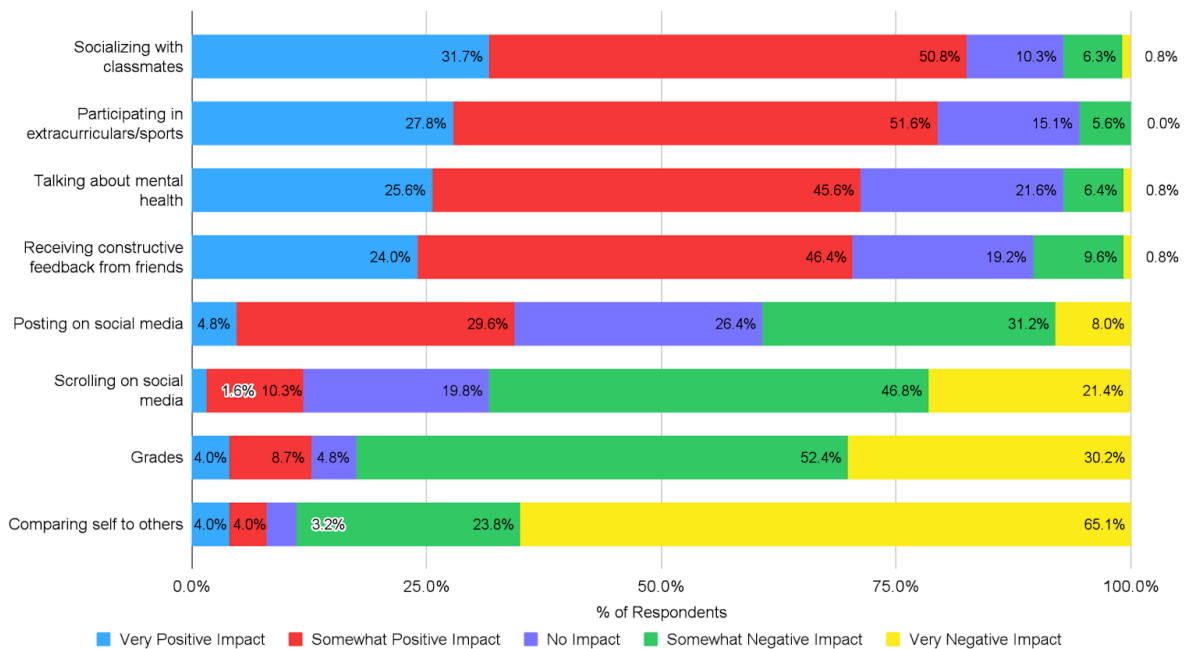
Figure 15. Perceived Impact of Activities on Teen Self-Esteem in San Diego County

These findings highlight the complex interplay between various activities and their influence on teen self-esteem, underscoring the importance of promoting healthy social interactions and supportive environments while mitigating potentially detrimental factors such as excessive social media use and comparison with peers.

Recommendation: Facilitate positive social interactions among teens, emphasizing participation in extracurriculars/sports and open discussions about mental health to bolster self-esteem.

Recommendation: Provide comprehensive education on social media literacy to empower teens to navigate online platforms responsibly, mitigating the negative impact of comparison and excessive scrolling on social media.

Recommendation: Cultivate a culture of constructive feedback among peers, promoting supportive relationships and respectful communication to enhance self-esteem and personal development.

Table 7. Perceived impact of various activities on the self esteem of teens.

	Very Positive Impact	Somewhat Positive Impact	No Impact	Somewhat Negative Impact	Very Negative Impact
Socializing with classmates	31.7%	50.8%	10.3%	6.3%	0.8%
Participating in extracurriculars/ sports	27.8%	51.6%	15.1%	5.6%	0.0%
Talking about mental health	25.6%	45.6%	21.6%	6.4%	0.8%
Receiving constructive feedback from friends	24.0%	46.4%	19.2%	9.6%	0.8%
Posting on social media	4.8%	29.6%	26.4%	31.2%	8.0%
Scrolling on social media	1.6%	10.3%	19.8%	46.8%	21.4%
Grades	4.0%	8.7%	4.8%	52.4%	30.2%
Comparing self to others	4.0%	4.0%	3.2%	23.8%	65.1%

Q.13. What types of accounts do you follow on social media?

The survey results reveal the social media consumption preferences for 127 respondents. Friends and family emerge as the most popular category, with a significant 75.6% of respondents indicating their engagement with content related to personal connections. Music follows closely behind at 72.4%, highlighting the widespread appeal of musical content across social media platforms.

Interestingly, while entertainment-focused content such as funny memes and celebrity updates maintain high engagement levels at 63.0% and 50.4% respectively, more niche interests like mental health and wellness (29.1%) and social activism (23.6%) also command notable attention. Moreover, the relatively lower engagement levels with news and political content (16.5%) compared to other categories underscore a potential gap in the dissemination of current affairs through social media platforms.

Despite the prevalence of these platforms as sources of information, there appears to be a preference for content that is more personally relevant or entertaining. Social media can serve as an outlet for teens, particularly funny and trending content, where they can let go of or distract from the stressors in their lives.

Although we are able to control who we follow, negative content is still easy to access particularly due to the algorithm pushing sensationalizing content. Social media content 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 setting boundaries with content that is not positively impacting their mental health 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.
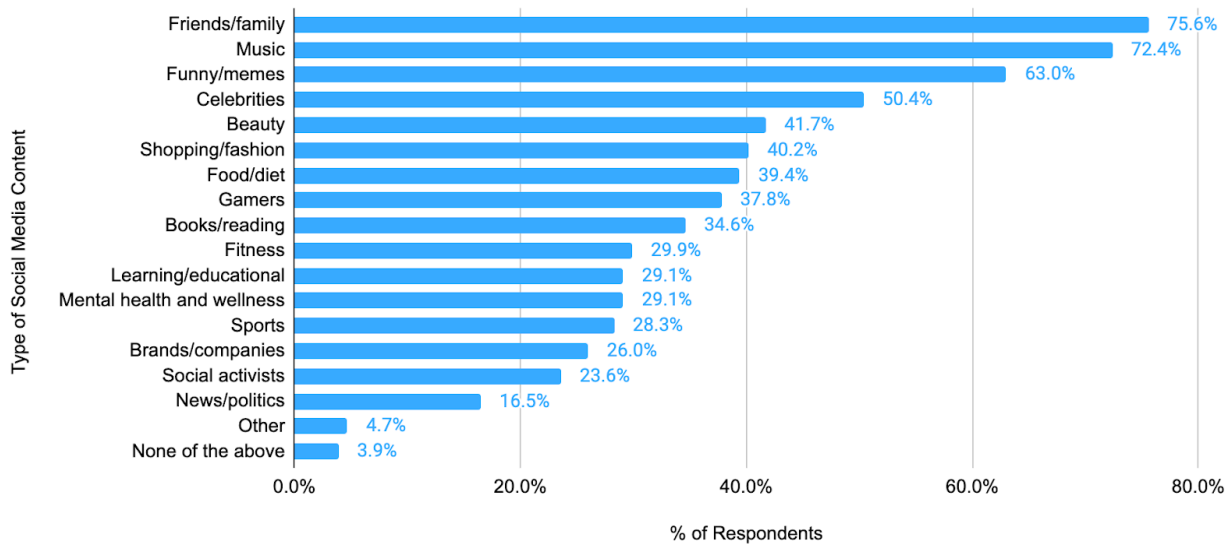

Figure 16. Social media content seen most frequently by teens in San Diego County.

Q. 14. 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, sleep, and schoolwork, where ratings skew towards the negative end of the spectrum. Conversely, aspects regarding socializing 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
Relationships with friends	7.2	Healthy habits	4.8
Relationships with classmates	6.1	Self-esteem	4.6
Romantic relationships	5.5	Peer pressure	4.5
Relationships with family	5.4	View of self	4.5
Mood	5.2	Body image	4
Free time	5.2	Sleep	3.7
Mental Health	4.8	Schoolwork	3.6

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 to real-life connections because interactions through screens are quite different from in person interactions, which could affect how we build relationships within our community.

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.14. How do you think people around teens can support them when they are stressed out? (N=101)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Offering non-judgmental support and being attentive listeners are essential ways to assist teens when they are stressed.	"I think teens can be supported if they're just given the knowledge that someone is there to listen to them without judgment or at least provide resources that can help them through tough times" "First ask if anything is going on, second always provide a listening ear" "Many people undermine what teens go through. Having an understanding support system without judgment is vital to teens' successful growth."
Interact with them in a positive or thoughtful way such as encouraging them or understanding their needs.	"They can motivate them and do what they can to relieve them of things that are in their control." "Listening and being there for them, knowing what makes them calm down and feel better" "Offer to listen or ask for THEIR needs, each person is different"
Reach out and offer support and resources	"Reaching out if they notice something is wrong, sometimes the hardest part is reaching out for help." "Validating feelings and providing resources for mental health support"
Give space and not be intrusive or make assumptions	"Hearing them out and not jumping into conclusions. Just hear them out and understand that times have changed and that they're living in different realities than you." "Give space, not everyone wants people asking them what's wrong 24/7. sometimes we just want quiet time to chill out and get our thoughts gathered"
Less pressure from adults	"Parents: not have such old-fashioned ideas about mental health and try to be more helpful Teachers/school staff: assign less homework, less tests, give more days off of school" "Expect less of them. Some people are going through a lot more than you realize and one little assignment being late isn't the end of the world."

Q.13. How can teens in San Diego County reduce or manage the stressors and pressures they face? (N=96)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Take time and pressure off of academics	"I am worth more than my grades" "Less homework, more time in understanding their inner self." "Less pressures from grades and social norms"
Take a break and spend more time on self care	"Putting in time to take care of themselves and decompress" "Take time off of school hang out with friends or just do things that help them relax" "By not worrying about grades and stop posting as much on social media and to give themselves time to be alone and do what they want"
Spend time with people who support you and do things you enjoy	"I also enjoy spending time with my friends, it's nice to have fun with people who make you happy." "Teens can join sports and focus their time into productive / enjoyable after school activities"
Be okay with asking for help	"Find a support system that is effective" "Turn to others for help or insight"
Spend less time on phone and social media	"Take lapses of time without social media. think to yourself without a phone. wrestle with your own problems mentally." "By taking breaks from things that bring down their self image like social media"
Better time management	"Procrastinate less, and be in full control of their time." "Limit time on social media and people that stress them out" "they can manage their time better"