



The State of Youth Mental Health in California

2025 AIM Ideas Lab Report

OUR VISION

A world of mentally healthy youth.

OUR MISSION

AIM is bridging the gap between research and access to care for youth struggling with their mental health by finding, funding, and implementing promising youth mental health research and empowering youth to discover their own mental health solutions.



ABOUT THE AIM IDEAS LAB

Empowering Teens to Address the Youth Mental Health Crisis

The AIM Ideas Lab is an innovative youth participatory action research program, designed to give young people a direct voice in addressing the youth mental health crisis.

Over the course of 8 weeks, high school students conduct peer-to-peer mental health research, gathering insights from their fellow students. They analyze the data to develop actionable solutions and use their findings to better understand the state of youth mental health in their communities and advocate for stronger support systems.

The AIM Ideas Lab empowers teens to lead the conversation around mental health and drive positive change in their communities.

UNDERSTANDING TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a widespread and deeply felt concern among teens. Many carry heavy emotional burdens—often quietly and alone. There's an urgent need for youth-informed education, stronger school-based support, and open, judgment-free conversations across communities.

Teens are overwhelmed, anxious, and navigating family pressure, academic stress, and personal challenges. While common, these struggles show up differently and willingness to talk about them varies by gender and age. From anxiety and burnout to depression and unhealthy relationships, the challenges are wide-ranging, deeply personal, and often intensify over time.

Though many are quick to support a struggling friend, most hesitate to ask for help themselves—even when they want it. Stigma, fear of judgment, and concerns about confidentiality remain major barriers, especially when it comes to using school-based mental health resources.

Until support systems feel safe, relatable, and free from shame, they will go unused. This research calls for youth-informed solutions—at school, at home, and across communities—that meet teens where they are and remind them: you're not alone.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Normalize and Promote Mental Health Support: Schools should provide consistent, visible access to mental health resources and promote them regularly reducing stigma and encourage help-seeking.

Promote Youth-Led Mental Health Campaigns: Youth-led campaigns with peer stories reduce stigma, build empathy, and motivate students to care for themselves and others. Centering youth perspectives ensures mental health efforts are relevant, relatable, and resonate with those they aim to support.

Create Anonymous Support Pathways: Implementing anonymous, confidential ways for students to seek support can reduce stigma and help youth access existing school-based mental health resources.

Strengthen Peer Support Systems: Students often turn to peers first, and skill-building workshops to recognize signs of distress, support friends, and feel more confident reaching out for help themselves.

Tailor Interventions by Gender and Grade: Mental health concerns and barriers to support vary by gender and grade; strategies should be tailored to meet the unique needs of different student groups.

RESEARCH APPROACH

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

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Survey Development & Review: Youth researchers developed a survey to explore pressing mental health issues affecting teens in their community. It was reviewed by AIM's Scientific Advisory Board to ensure clarity, impact, and adherence to research ethics guidelines

Mixed-Methods Approach: The survey consisted of 28 quantitative (frequencies, percentages) and 1 qualitative (open-ended response) questions.

Survey Distribution: The survey took ~ 10 min to complete and was distributed Feb 17 - 28, 2025, via word-of-mouth, text message, social media, and in select schools.

1,623 youth in California completed the survey.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

DEMOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS

- The geographic and demographic distribution reflects the identities and communities of the youth researchers leading the project in regards to county, gender, race/ethnicity, age and grade.
- Participation tended to be higher in regions where direct outreach took place or where school communities were already engaged with the program—particularly in Monterey, Southern California, the Bay Area, and the Central Coast and Valley.
- The distribution of responses follows a long-tail pattern: a small group of schools contributed a large portion of responses, while the majority of schools had fewer participants.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS - SAMPLE SIZE

TOTAL RESPONDENTS

2025

1,623 RESPONDENTS

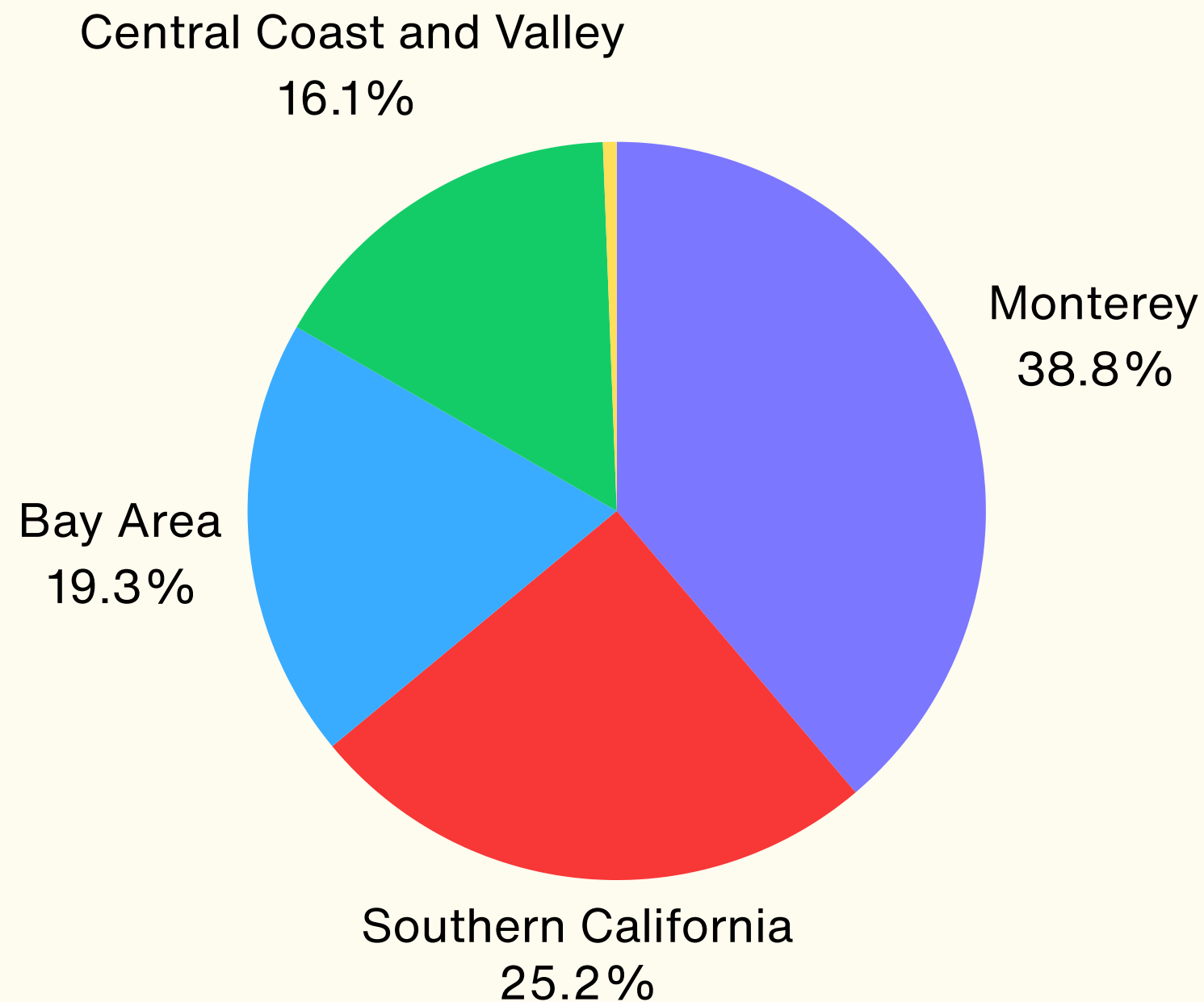
2024

1,156 RESPONDENTS

The youth researchers aimed for 384 respondents to ensure a statistically representative sample of teens in the California.



RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS - COUNTY REPRESENTATION



Monterey County - 38.8%

Southern California - 25.2%

- San Diego – 16.3%
- Los Angeles – 8.3%
- Orange – 0.6%

Bay Area - 19.3%

- Alameda – 6.0%
- Marin – 3.4%
- Solano – 3.4%
- Santa Clara – 3.0%
- Fremont – 2.1%
- San Mateo – 0.7%
- Contra Costa – 0.2%
- San Francisco – 0.2%
- Santa Cruz – 0.1%
- Napa – 0.1%
- Sonoma – 0.1%

Central Coast & Valley - 16.1%

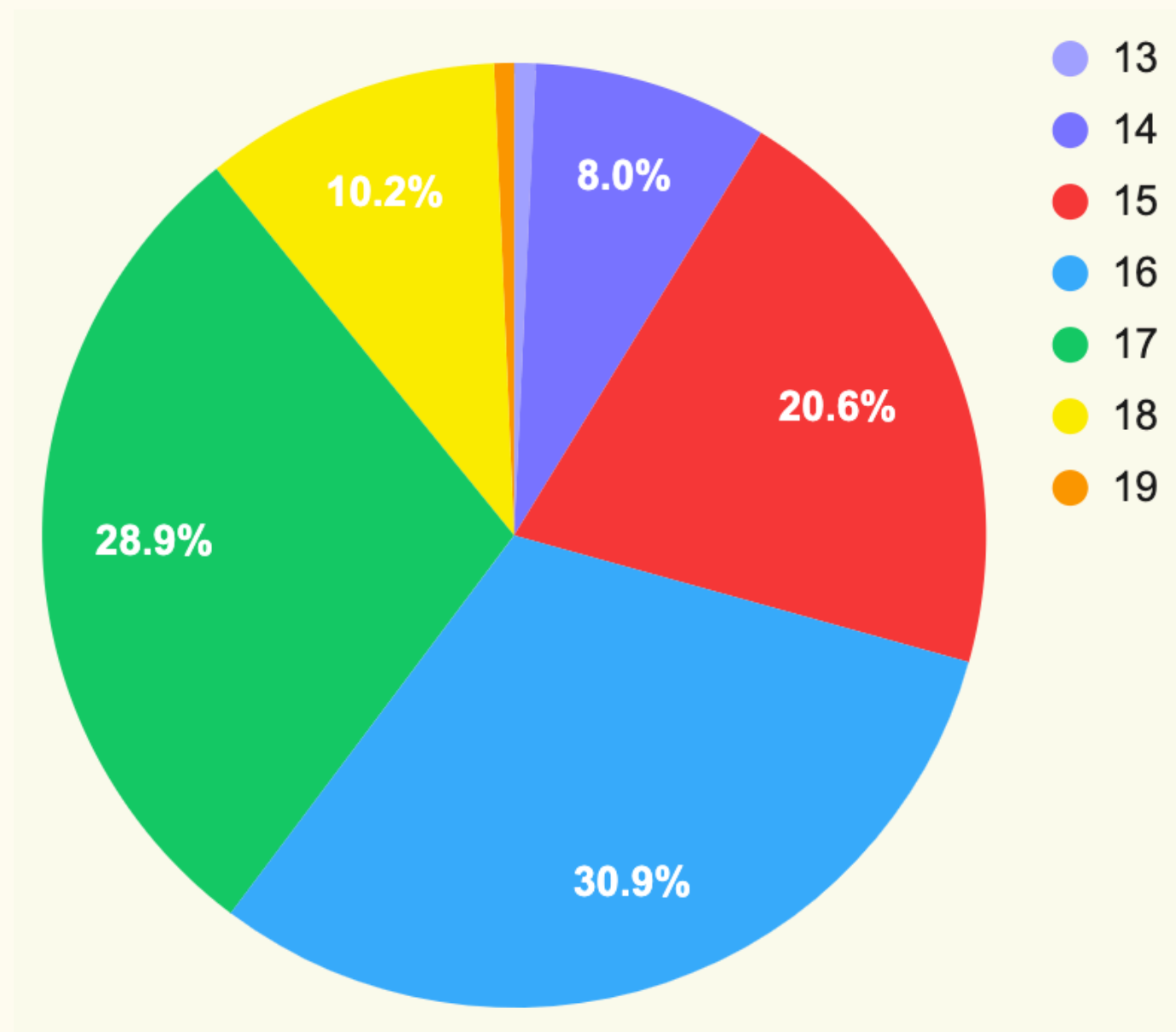
- San Luis Obispo – 14.4%
- Santa Barbara – 1.5%
- Fresno – 0.1%
- San Joaquin – 0.1%

Unspecified – 0.6%

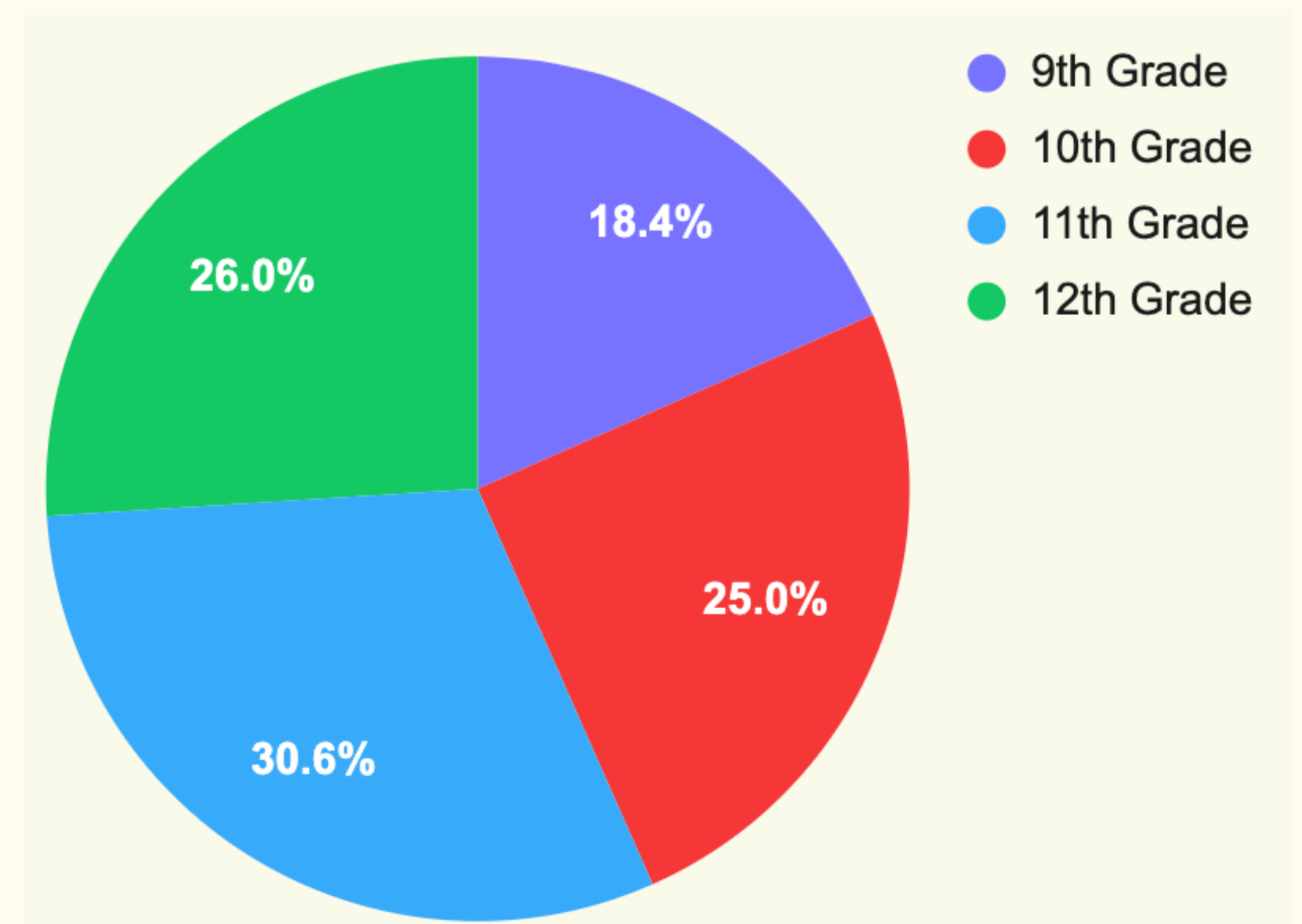
Responses were collected from youth in 18 counties statewide, with participation fielded across four distinct regions to ensure broad representation: Bay Area, Central Coast and Valley, Southern California, and Monterey.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS - AGE & GRADE LEVEL

AGE



GRADE



RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS - SCHOOL REPRESENTATION

Tier	# of Schools	Total Responses	% of Responses	Schools
High Representation (75+ responses)	6	666	41.70%	Soledad HS (178), Nipomo HS (179), Salinas HS (137), Westview HS (135), Everett Alvarez HS (93), Irvington HS (87)
Moderate Representation (10–75 responses)	16	509	31.80%	Coronado HS (74), Arroyo Grande HS (61), Monterey HS (60), Rancho San Juan HS (55), Brentwood School (54), Carmel HS (44), Stevenson School (42), Early College HS (31), Univ. Prep Academy (30), Bishop O'Dowd (24), Mar Vista HS (24), San Domenico (19), San Marin HS (16), Angelo Rodriguez HS (14), Lynbrook HS (12), Reseda Charter (11)
Broad Distribution. (<10 responses)	163	424	26.50%	<i>See Appendix A in the State of Youth Mental Health Report for full list of schools in this tier.</i>

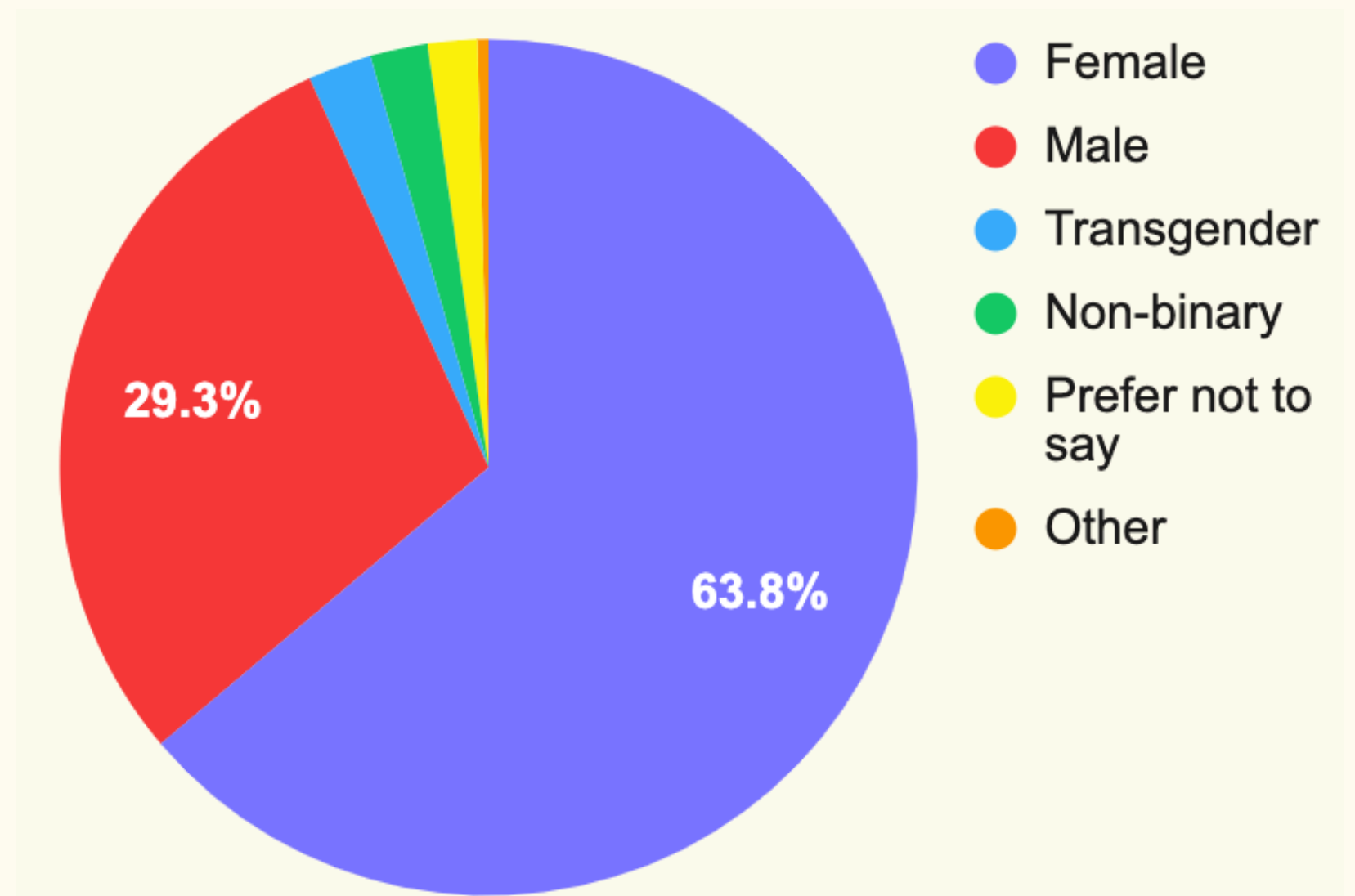
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS - RACE & GENDER IDENTITY

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Latino/a or Hispanic	37.0%
White or Caucasian	30.1%
Asian or Asian American	22.0%
Black or African American	3.4%
Indigenous or Native American	1.8%
Middle Eastern or North African	1.7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1.4%
Prefer not to say	1.6%
Other	0.9%

1,615 total respondents, includes 303 respondents who selected more than 1 racial/ethnic identity

GENDER IDENTITY



1,619 total respondents, includes 43 respondents who selected more than 1 gender identity

2025 AIM IDEAS LAB FINDINGS

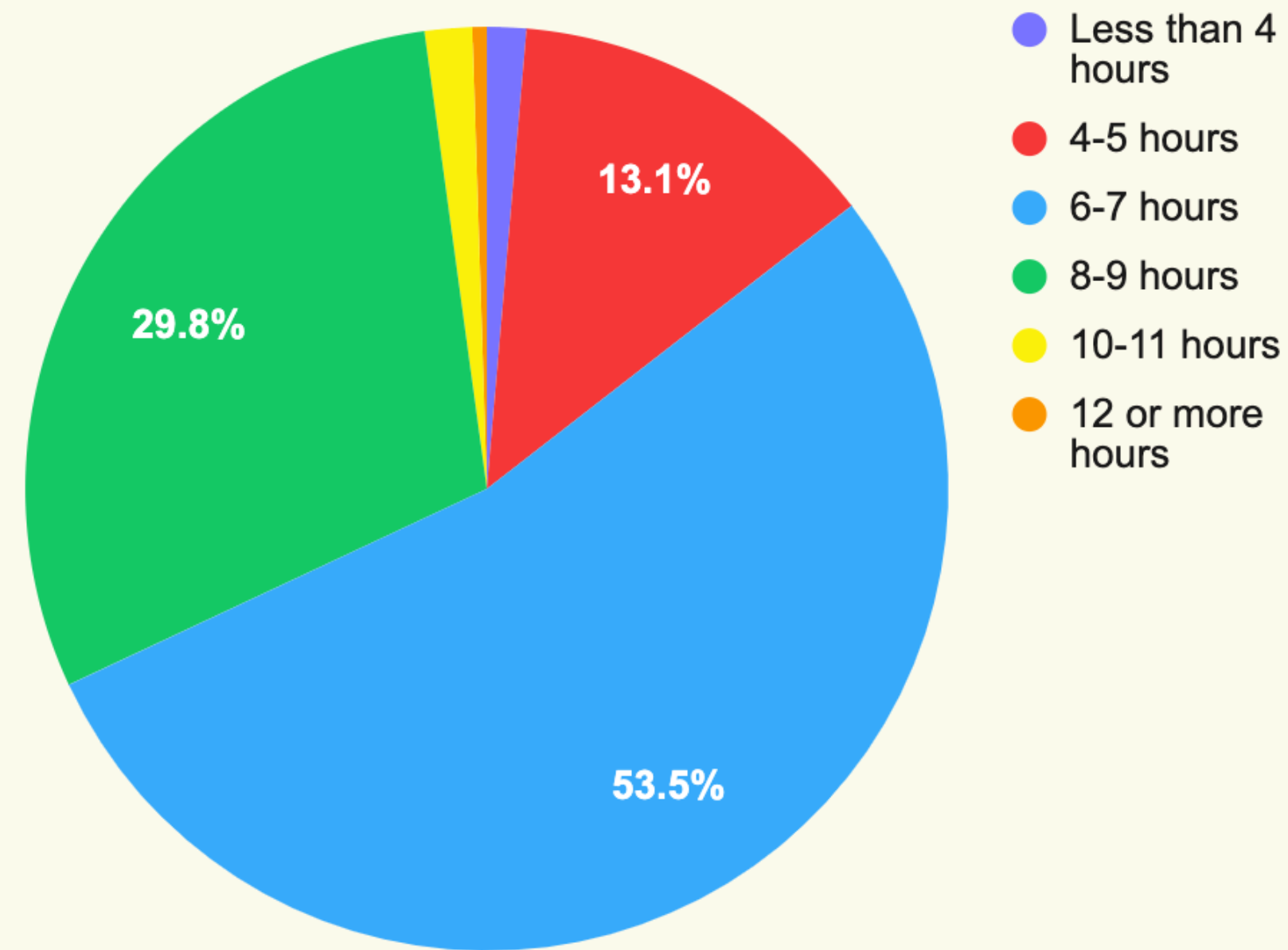
FACTORS AFFECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

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- Over two-thirds of teens aren't getting enough sleep—and sleep declines with age.
- 92.9% of California teens participate in extracurriculars, and over half (56.0%) spend four or more hours per week on them, on top of school and homework.
- Nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of students feel overwhelmed at least once a week, underscoring that stress is a regular part of life for many teens.
- Female students are more likely to feel overwhelmed frequently, while male students more often report only occasional or rare stress.
- Feelings of overwhelm increase through 11th grade, where they peak, before dipping slightly in 12th grade.
- Teens also report that the impact of self-image on their mental health fluctuates—it can go both ways and often shifts depending on the day, environment, or stressors.

SLEEP HABITS

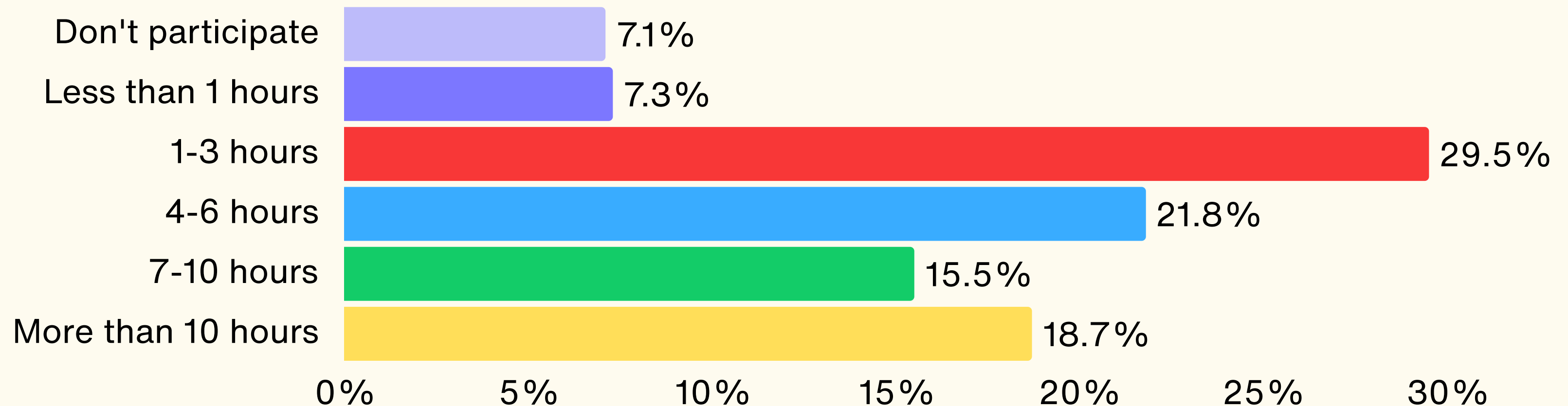
On average, how much sleep do you get per night?



- **Sleep Deficit:** 68.6% are not getting enough sleep
 - 13.1% get only 4–5 hours.
 - 53.5% get 6–7 hours.
 - 29.8% get 8–9 hours.
 - 1.7% get 10+ hours.
- **Sleep Declines by Grade:** 10th and 11th graders are most likely to get 4–5 hours and least likely to get the recommended 8–9 hours.

PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULARS

How much time do you spend on extracurricular activities each week?



92.9% of California teens take part in extracurriculars, with **56.0%** spending at least four hours per week on extracurriculars in addition to time spent in school and homework.

FEELINGS OF OVERWHELM

How often do you feel overwhelmed by balancing schoolwork, extracurriculars, family responsibilities, and/or a job?

Legend

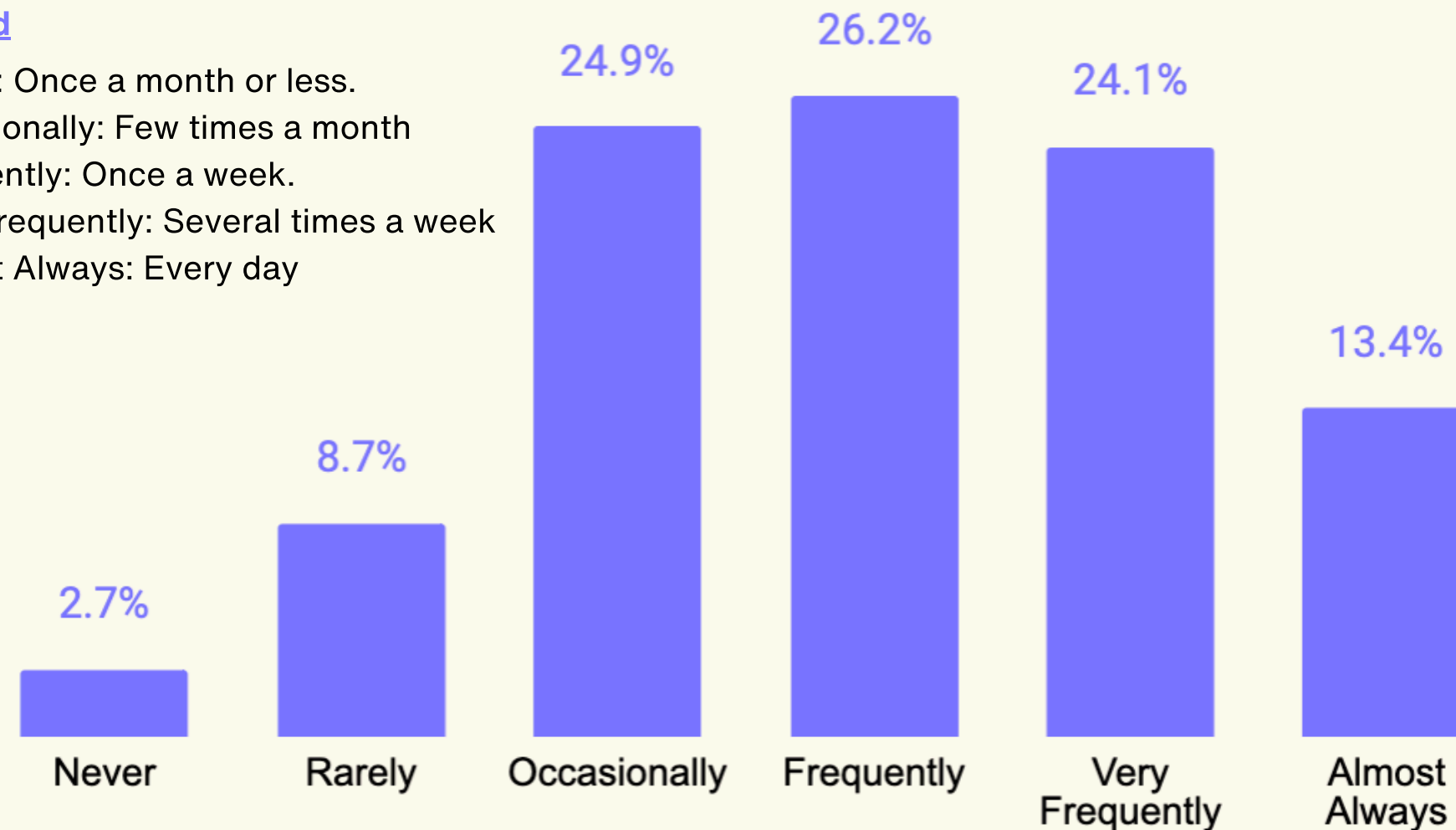
Rarely: Once a month or less.

Occasionally: Few times a month

Frequently: Once a week.

Very Frequently: Several times a week

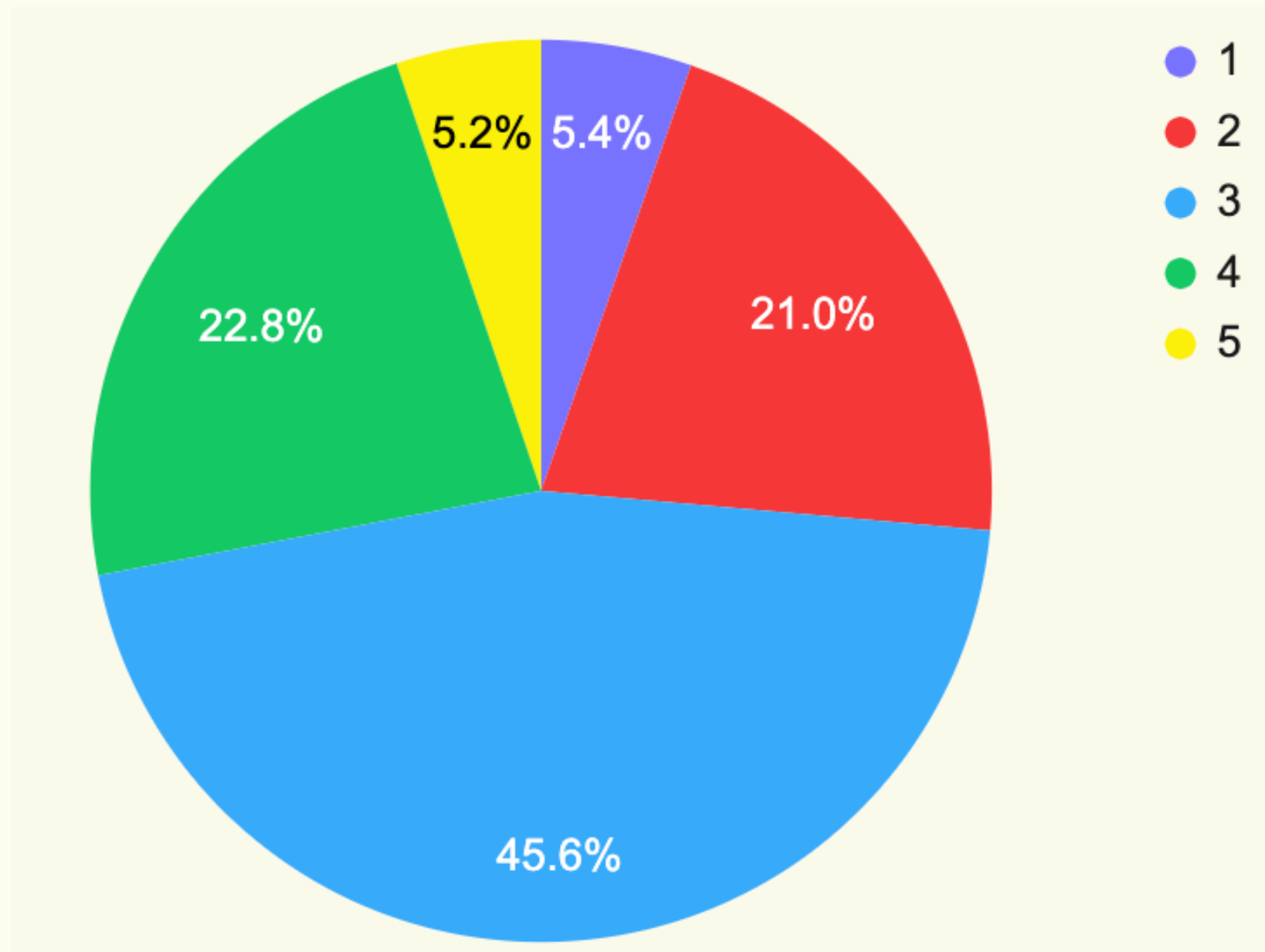
Almost Always: Every day



- Female students are more likely to feel overwhelmed frequently, while male students more often report occasional or rare stress.
- Feelings of overwhelm increase through 11th grade, where they peak, then drop slightly in 12th grade.

TIME MANAGEMENT

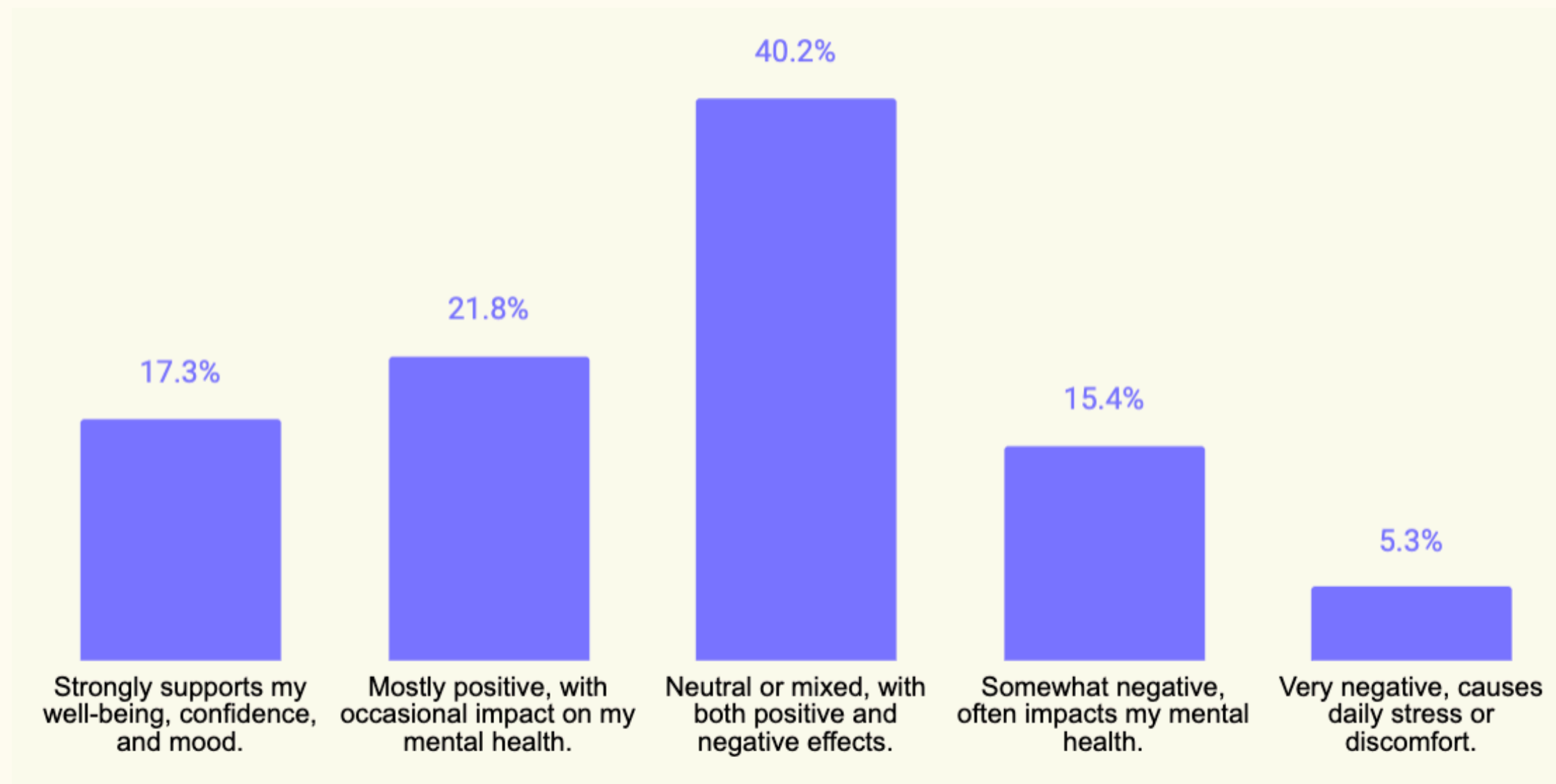
How well do you manage your time?



- **Most students feel somewhat capable** in managing their time
- 11th graders most likely to rate themselves a 1 and least likely to rate a 5—suggesting **time management becomes more difficult as academic and extracurricular demands increase**, particularly by junior year.

IMPACT OF SELF-ESTEEM

How much does your self-image impact your mood or mental health on a daily basis?



- Over 1 in 5 students said self-image negatively affects their mental health
- Negative self-image rises with age
- **Girls reported more negative impacts** from self-image than boys, who were more likely to describe theirs as positive.

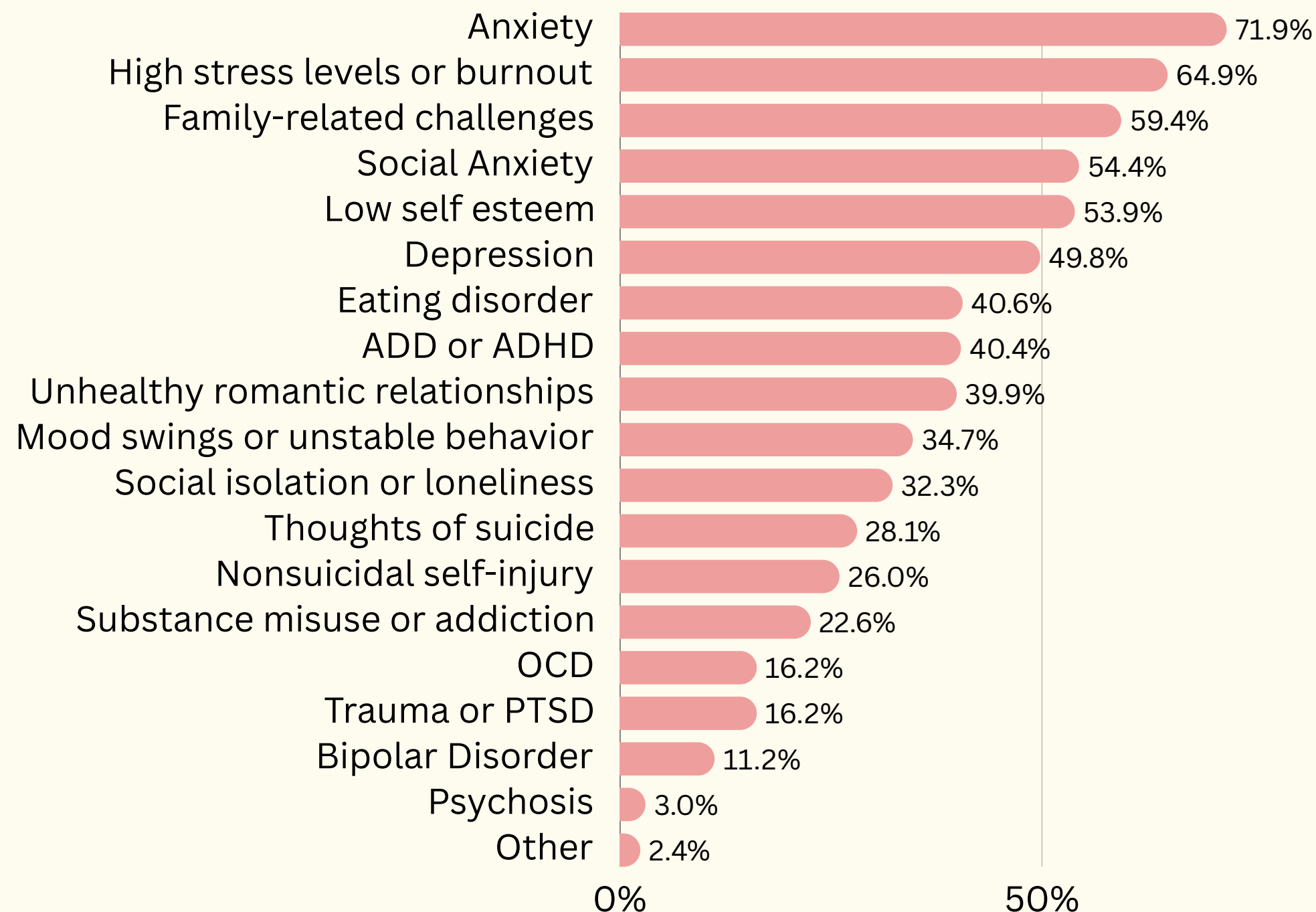
MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

- Anxiety, burnout, family conflict, social anxiety, and low self-esteem are the most common struggles teens report, reflecting complex pressures—from academics and social life to home and internal challenges.
- Female teens report higher rates of mental health issues than males, which may reflect greater emotional openness and different experiences; lower rates in boys could be due to stigma and underreporting.
- Mental health challenges increase steadily from 9th to 12th grade, driven by rising academic pressure, societal expectations, and future concerns.
- Mental health affects nearly every aspect of teens' lives—from emotions and self-esteem to academics, daily functioning, and safety—with few reporting minimal impact.
- Over half say mental health strongly affects their emotions and confidence, and nearly half report serious impacts on sleep, focus, and safety.

MOST COMMON MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

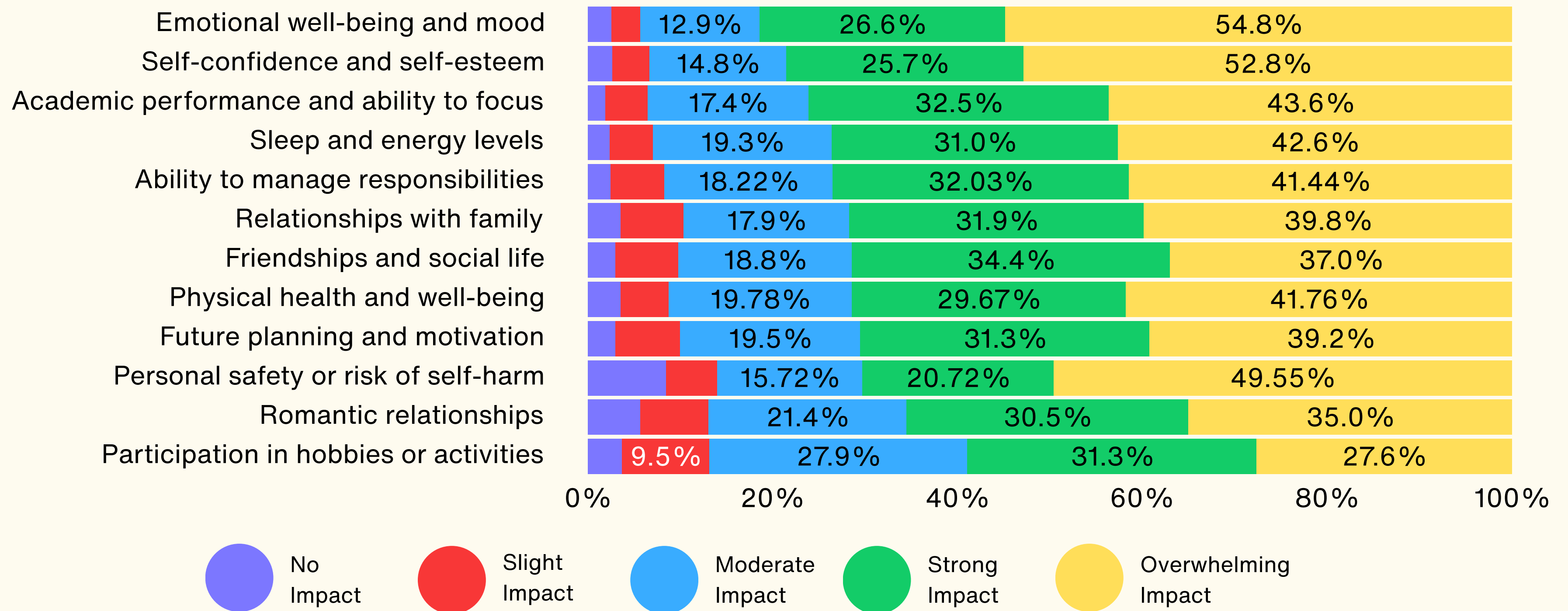
Have any of your peers shared with you that they have experienced any of the following mental health challenges?



- **Female teens report higher rates of mental health challenges** than males, which may reflect both greater emotional openness and differing experiences. Lower rates among boys could be due to underreporting linked to stigma.
- Mental health challenges **increase from 9th to 12th grade**, likely driven by rising academic pressure, societal expectations, and stress around future planning.

IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH ON THEIR LIVES

How do you think mental health can affect the following aspects of life?



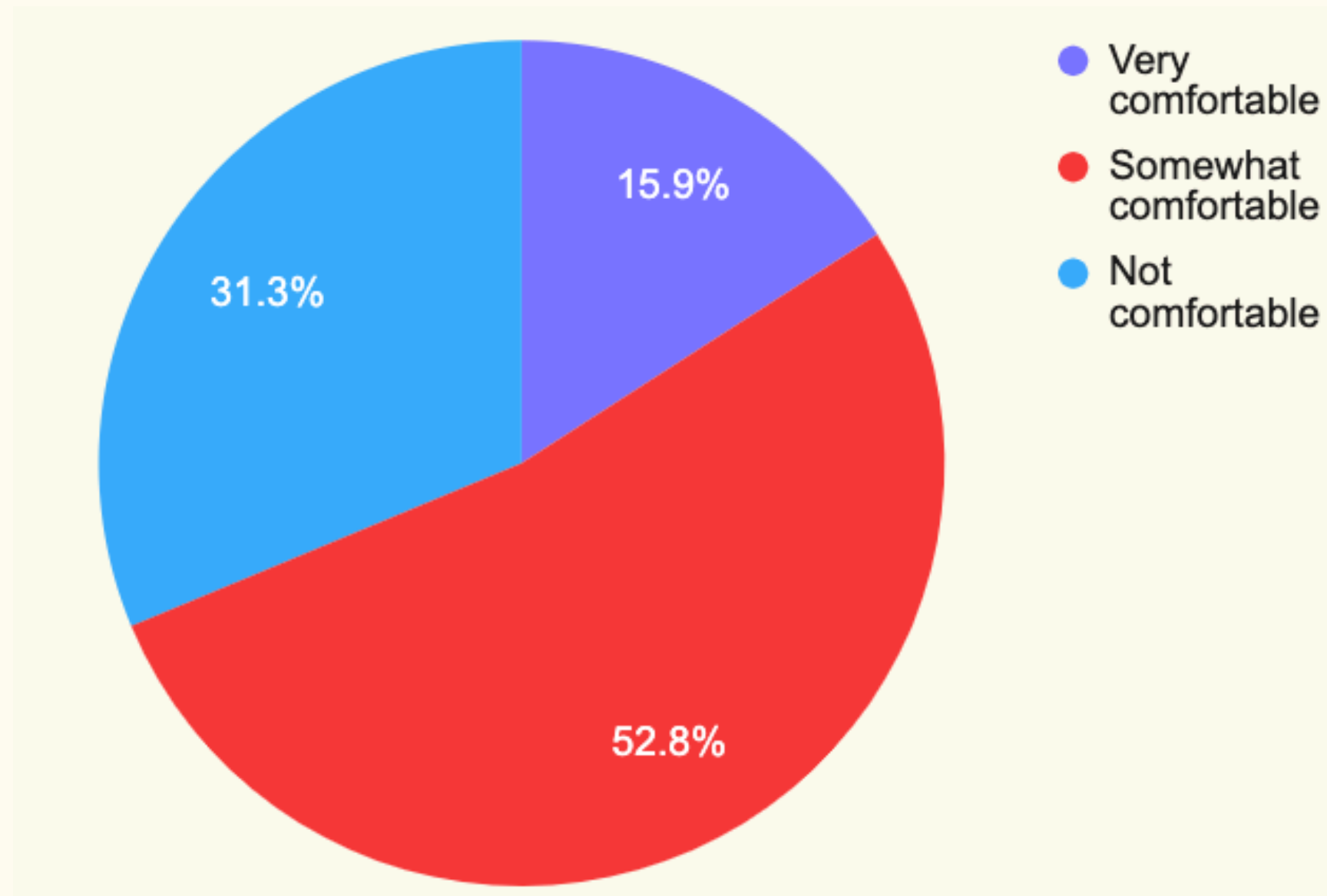
SEEKING SUPPORT + SELF-CARE

SEEKING SUPPORT AND SELF CARE

- Most students (68.7%) feel at least somewhat comfortable asking for support, but a significant 31.3% do not feel comfortable seeking help.
- Common coping strategies include solitude, music, watching shows, and heavy phone/social media use, often leading to isolation rather than professional help.
- Teens find it much easier to give support to others than to ask for help themselves.
- Teens primarily turn to trusted people—friends, significant others, and parents—but over half avoid school counselors, teachers, or other adults.
- Nearly half of teens say they would reach out to no one even when wanting help, reflecting barriers like stigma, confidentiality concerns, and uncertainty.
- Female students seek help more across all sources, while male students show greater reluctance and are more likely to avoid seeking help despite wanting it.
- Teens feel most comfortable discussing mental health in judgment-free, confidential, safe spaces with trusted, empathetic listeners—especially when conversations include shared experiences, vulnerability, and active support.

COMFORTABILITY SEEKING SUPPORT

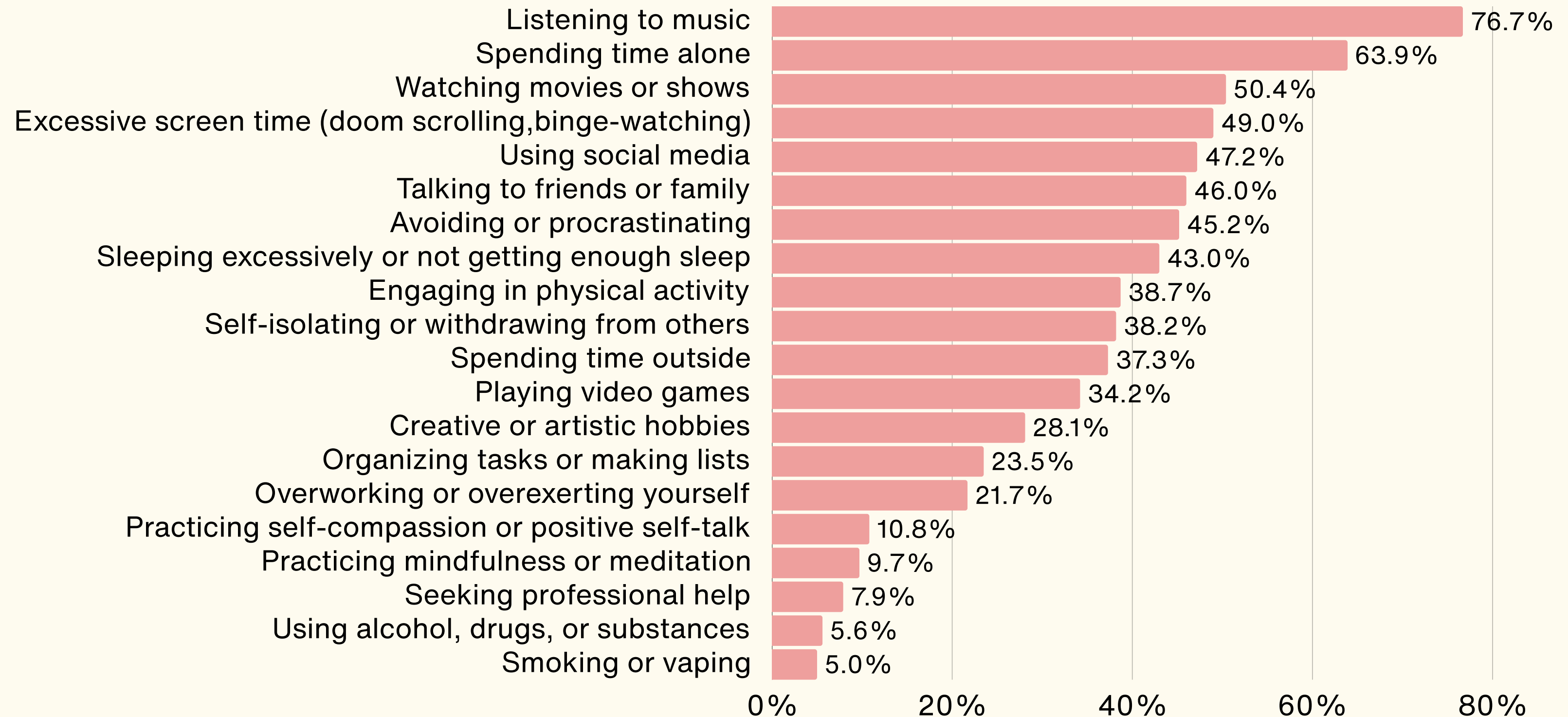
If you were going through a challenging time, how comfortable are you asking for support?



- Most students feel at least somewhat comfortable asking for support.
- Overall comfort in seeking support was similar across genders
- Males were more likely to feel very comfortable, while females were more likely to feel somewhat comfortable; discomfort rates were nearly identical.
- Older students are more confident in seeking support.

COPING MECHANISMS

How do you typically cope with stress and pressure?



COPING MECHANISMS - GENDER DIFFERENCES

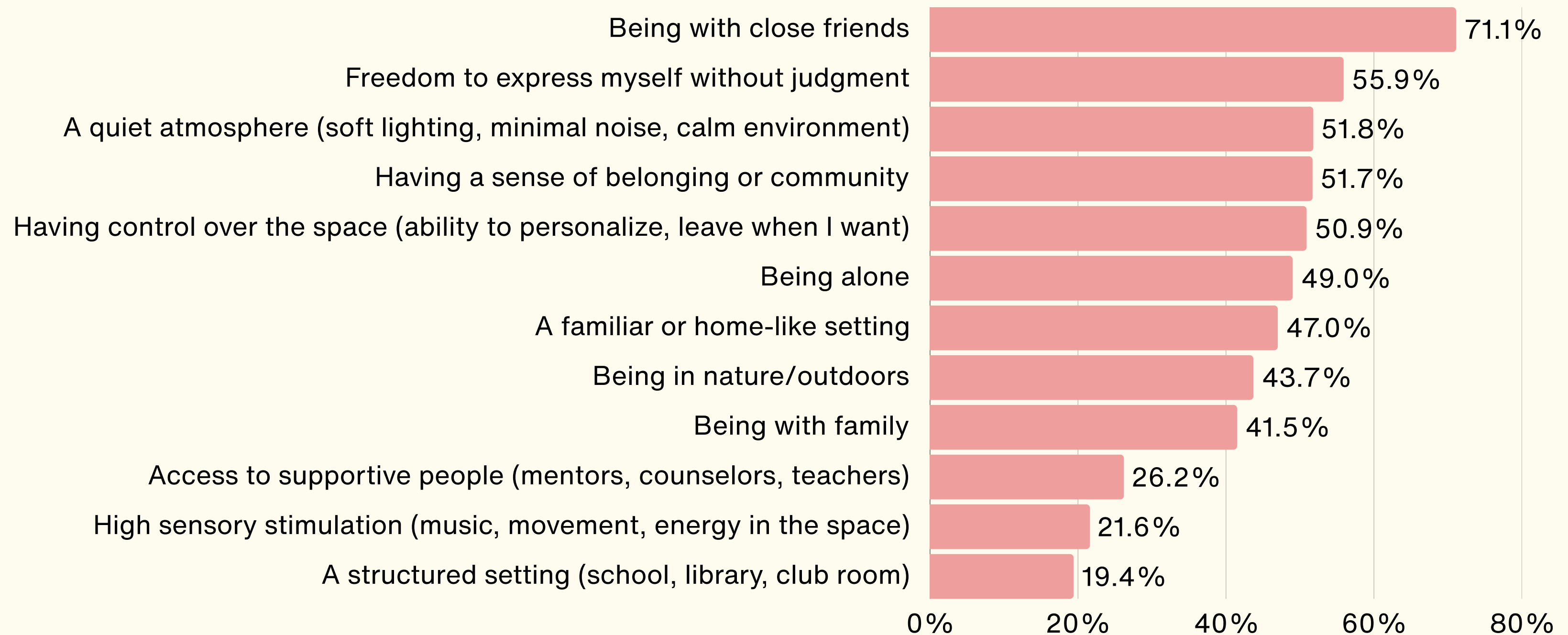
How do you typically cope with stress and pressure?



- Females are more likely to talk to friends or family and seek professional help, but also tended to procrastinate, change sleep habits, and self-isolate.
- Males favor physical activity and video games as coping strategies.

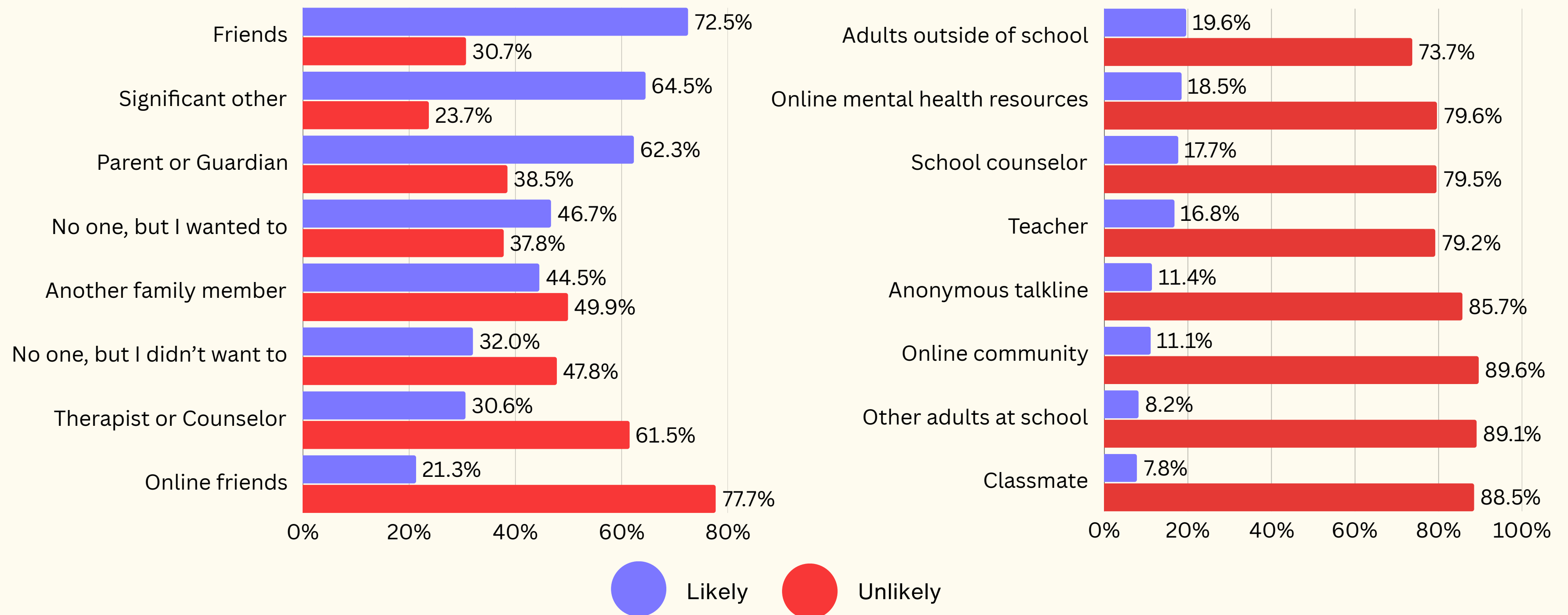
COMFORTABLE AND SUPPORTIVE SPACES

What factors make an environment feel comfortable and supportive?



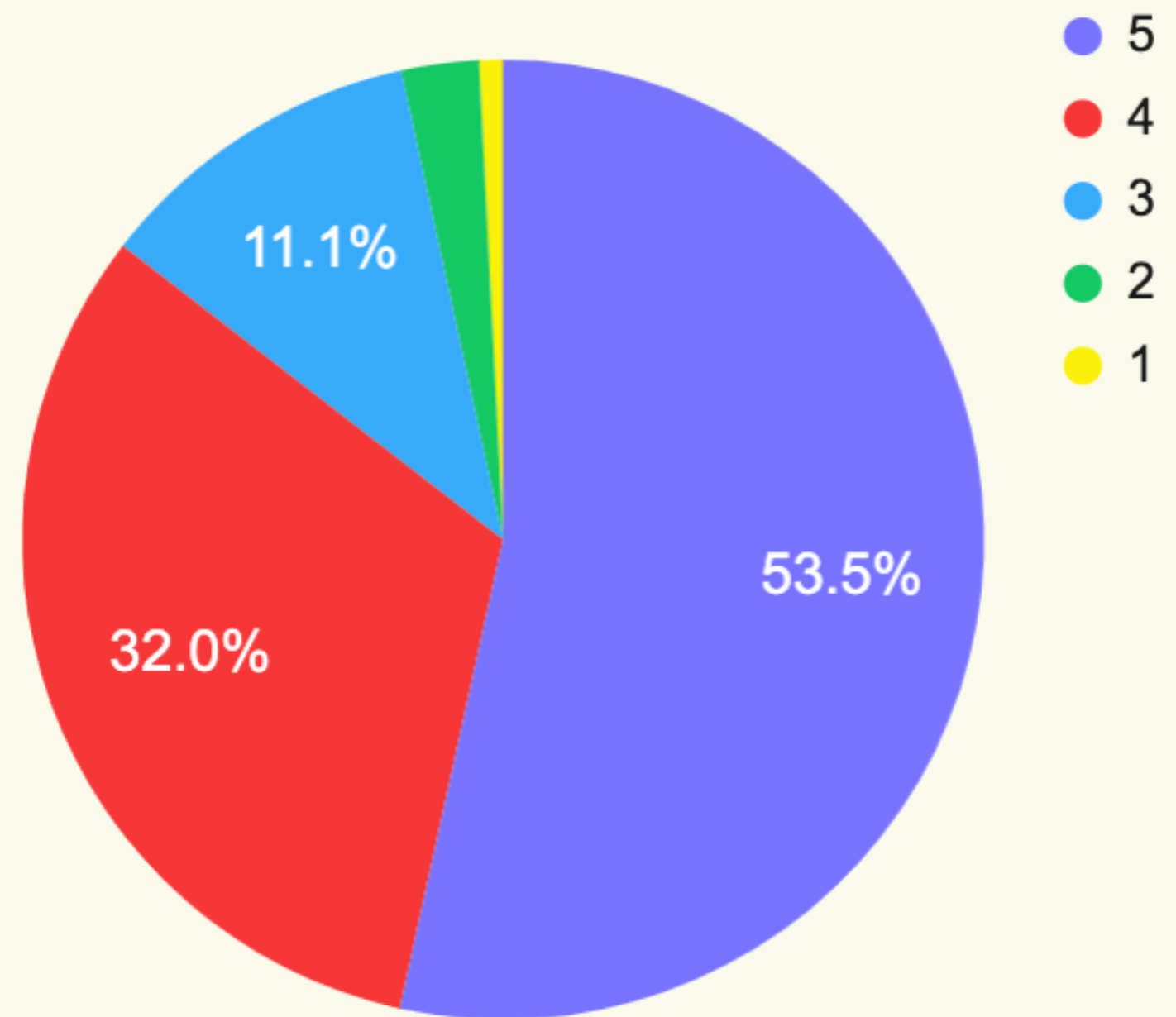
WHO YOUTH TURN TO FOR SUPPORT

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



COMFORTABILITY OFFERING SUPPORT TO A FRIEND

If a friend reached out to you for help with their mental health, how comfortable would you feel offering support?



- Most students are **very comfortable offering support**, with overall comfort levels nearly identical across genders.
- **Students are far more comfortable offering support (53.5%) than asking for it (15.9%),** revealing a key tension in how youth navigate mental health.
- Teens are often the first to support peers—giving them tools to help themselves and others can reduce stigma and improve access to care.

CHALLENGES IN PEER SUPPORT

If you felt less comfortable offering support, what do you think would make it difficult for you to help?

1. I'm unsure how to approach the conversation - **75.4%**
2. I'm worried I might say the wrong thing - **67.4%**
3. I don't feel confident in my ability to provide the right type of support - **53.7%**
4. I don't feel equipped to help with mental health issues - **51.4%**
5. I'm not sure how to support them without overstepping - **41.7%**
6. I'm worried it could make things worse - **38.3%**
7. I'm unsure if I should involve others in the situation (e.g., family, other friends) - **29.7%**
8. I've never dealt with something like this before - **29.7%**
9. I'm afraid they might not be open to receiving help - **23.4%**
10. I don't feel like I have enough time or energy to help - **22.9%**
11. I don't know where to direct them for professional help - **18.9%**
12. I'm afraid it might negatively affect our friendship - **16.0%**
13. I have my own mental health concerns that make it hard to help others - **14.3%**

WHAT MAKES TEENS COMFORTABLE OPENING UP

What would make you feel more comfortable opening up about and having conversations about mental health with people you trust?

No Judgment

“Knowing I can share without being judged.”

Feeling Heard

“They listen without jumping to conclusions.”

Shared Experience

“They’ve gone through it too.”

Close Relationship

“It’s easier if I know they care.”

Mutual Openness & Vulnerability

“I’ll share if they’re open too.”

Safe, Private Setting

“One-on-one in a calm space”

Confidentiality & Trust

“They’ll keep it between us”

Normalize the Conversation

“Talking about mental health shouldn’t be taboo.”

Addressing Stigma

“I don’t want to be seen as weak or broken”

Supportive Response

“I want them to take me seriously”

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AT SCHOOL

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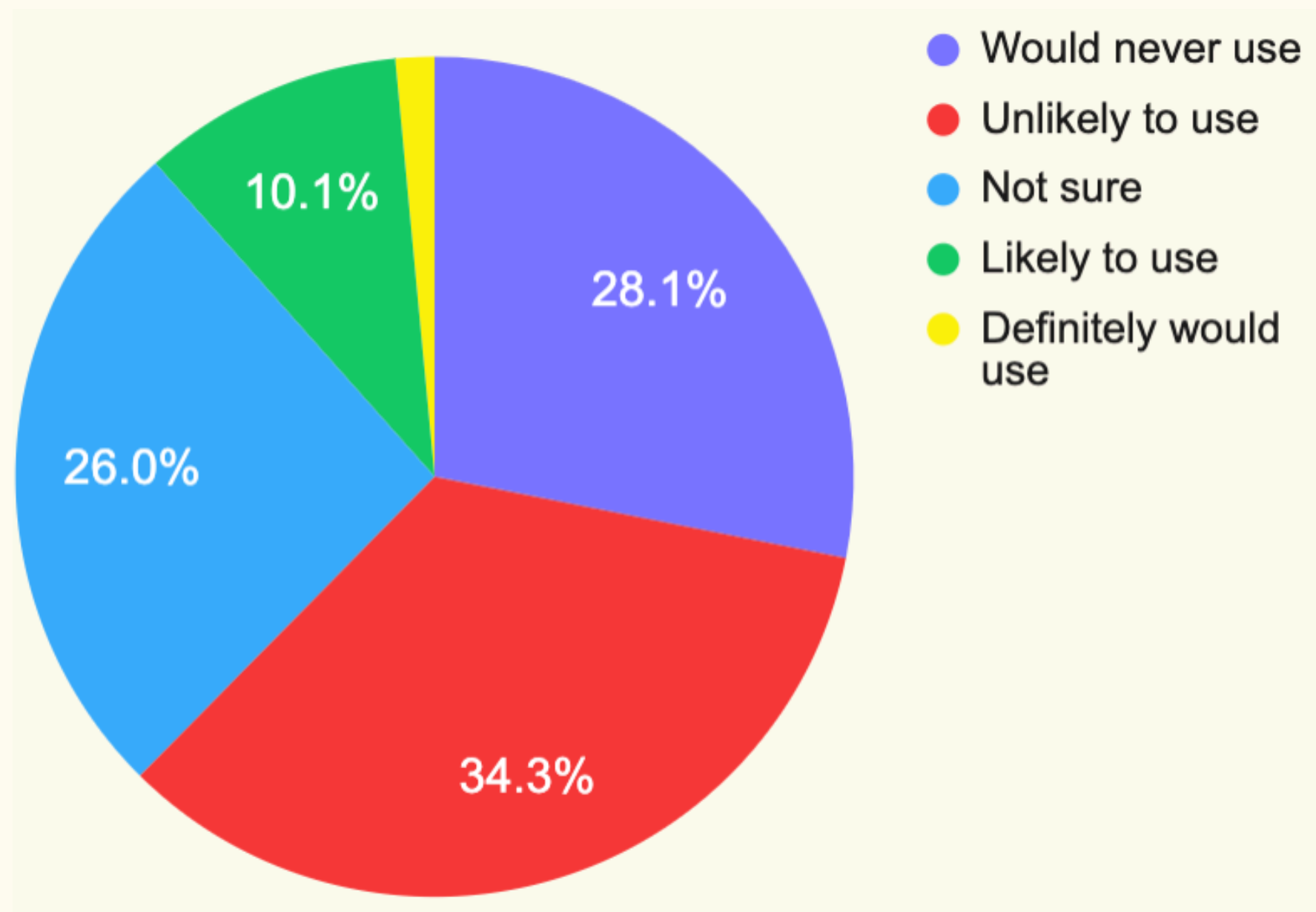
- **Time Spent in School:** Schools are a central part of students' lives, and as such, they serve as a critical environment for mental health support.
- **Established Systems:** Schools already have allocated teams and funding intended to provide mental health support, such as counselors, social workers, and wellness programs.
- **Intention vs. Implementation:** Despite the presence of these resources and efforts to create effective support systems, they are often falling short in meeting the real needs of students.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AT SCHOOL

- Over two-thirds of students hesitate to use school mental health resources; only about 1 in 10 would likely or definitely seek school-based support.
- Fewer than half know where to find help, citing stigma, embarrassment, and confidentiality concerns as major barriers.
- About one-third feel unsafe or uncomfortable discussing mental health, fearing judgment or stigma from peers and adults at school.
- Teens believe school mental health resources could be more approachable and accessible through greater teacher and staff support.
- Academic stress is significant, with over half endorsing reduced workload and flexible deadlines as key improvements.
- Nearly half support designated mental health days to help normalize and legitimize mental health care in schools.

UTILIZATION OF SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

How likely are you to use school-provided mental health resources if you were going through a challenging time?



- Nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of students expressed reluctance to use school mental health resources, with only 1 in 10 likely to turn to them
- Underclassmen (9th & 10th graders) showed the most hesitation.
- Boys showed more hesitation, while female students are more open to using them
- Most students don't feel ready or safe reaching out for support at school.

FAMILIARITY AND COMFORT WITH SCHOOL RESOURCES

Which of the following best represents your familiarity and comfort accessing mental health resources or accommodations at school?

44.3% know where to find resources, but feel hesitant to access them due to embarrassment, concerns about confidentiality, or fear of judgment.

27.1% are unsure whether their concerns are serious enough to justify seeking help or using available resources.

21.9% feel comfortable accessing resources when they need them

21.7% are aware of the available resources, but are unsure how to use them

17.3% are not sure what resources or accommodations are available

15.4% would feel more comfortable accessing resources if they were promoted in a more approachable way.

14.2% feel that teachers and staff could do more to make resources feel accessible and approachable

BARRIERS TO UTILIZING MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

If you haven't used the mental health resources available at school or outside of school, what are some reasons why?

47.5% prefer to handle their mental health on their own

33.8% don't feel comfortable or safe discussing their mental health with others

28.1% are afraid of being judged or stigmatized for seeking help

26.5% find it difficult to find someone they can relate to

25.4% don't believe their mental health problems are serious enough to warrant help

24.7% don't think the resources will be helpful or effective

21.4% feel embarrassed or ashamed about needing help

19.2% are concerned that their parent(s)/guardian(s) will find out

BARRIERS TO UTILIZING MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

If you haven't used the mental health resources available at school or outside of school, what are some reasons why?

18.4% are not sure if they trust the professionals or the services available

17.4% have not experienced any obstacles

15.6% are aware of the resources available

11.8% are concerned that seeking help will affect my grades or teacher's perception of me

10.0% are concerned that seeking help could affect future opportunities (college apps, recommendations)

9.9% are unsure how to access the resources or ask for help

9.2% cannot afford mental health care

8.2% are worried that my teachers or school staff will negatively judge me for seeking help

WHAT STUDENTS SAY WOULD ACTUALLY HELP

How can your school improve its mental health support system to make resources more accessible and comfortable for students?

- 55.4%** – Reduced or more manageable homework and assignment workload
- 53.5%** – More flexible deadlines or extended time for assignments
- 51.1%** – Less emphasis on grades
- 48.0%** – Private, quiet spaces for students to take breaks during the school day
- 43.7%** – Providing specified mental health days for students to utilize
- 41.0%** – More resources during stressful times (e.g., finals, college applications)
- 33.9%** – Training for teachers and staff to recognize and respond to mental health needs
- 31.5%** – Teachers openly acknowledging their availability to support student mental health
- 29.7%** – Educating parents/guardians about youth mental health
- 25.2%** – Tips to combat student stress
- 17.5%** – Increasing visibility of mental health resources through posters, announcements, and digital platforms
- 17.4%** – Offering regular mental health awareness programs or workshops
- 17.4%** – Education on how students can support one another and peer support groups
- 16.2%** – Integrating mental health discussions into classroom lessons and school activities

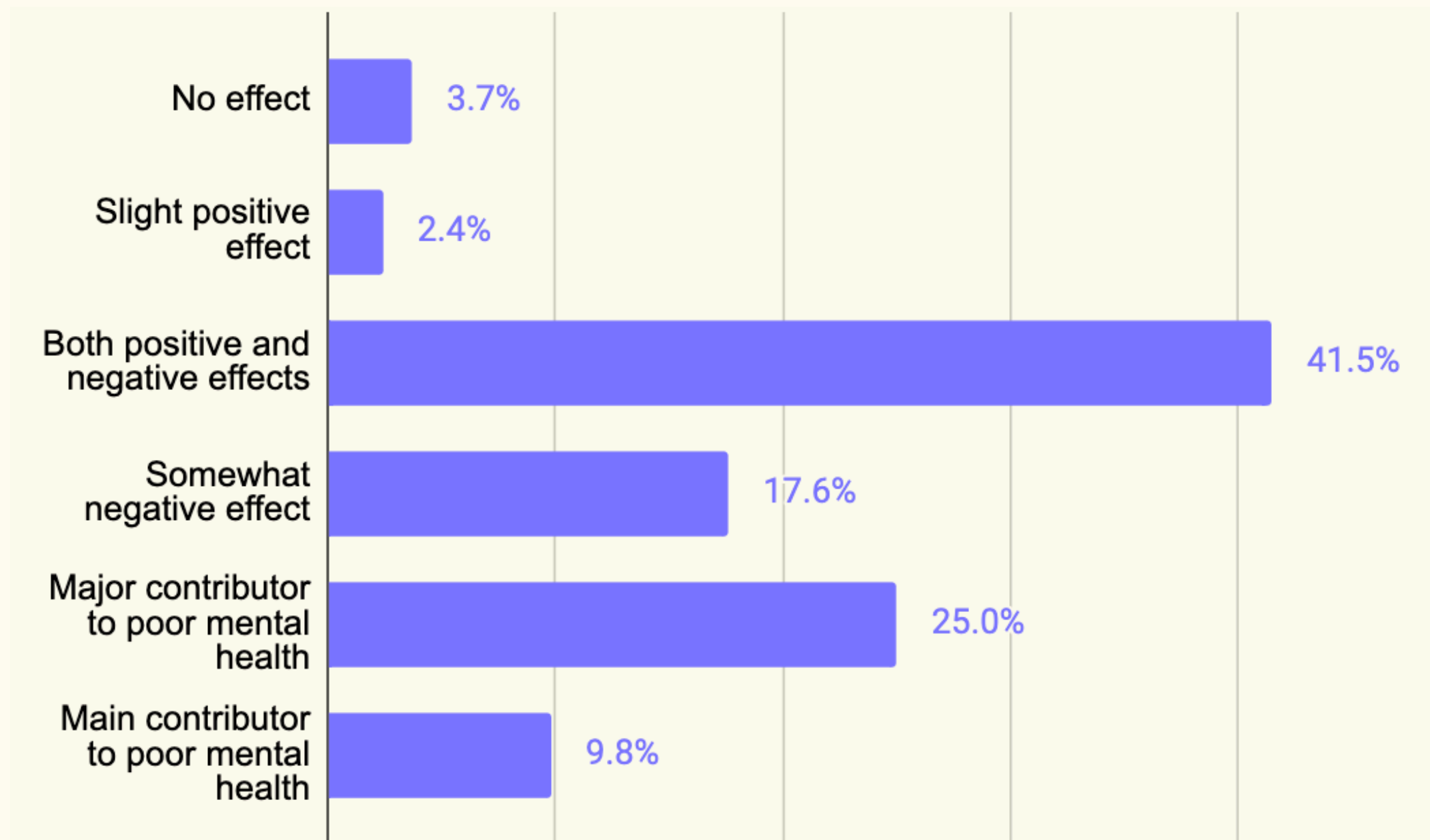
SOCIAL MEDIA

SOCIAL MEDIA

- Teens view social media as both a source of community and relaxation, but also as a factor that negatively affects sleep, self-esteem, and productivity.
- Half of students use social media excessively to cope with stress and pressure.
- Over half see social media as more harmful than helpful, with 25% citing it as a major contributor and 10% as the main contributor to poor mental health.
- As students get older, fewer report no effect from social media on their mental health, while more recognize it as a major contributor, indicating growing awareness over time.
- Negative effects are reported as having a stronger impact than positive ones, often shaping teens' self-image, habits, and mental health.
- Positive impacts include entertainment, inspiration, and a sense of community.
- Major negative effects include body image concerns, addiction, perfectionism, and seeking validation, impacting most teens.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

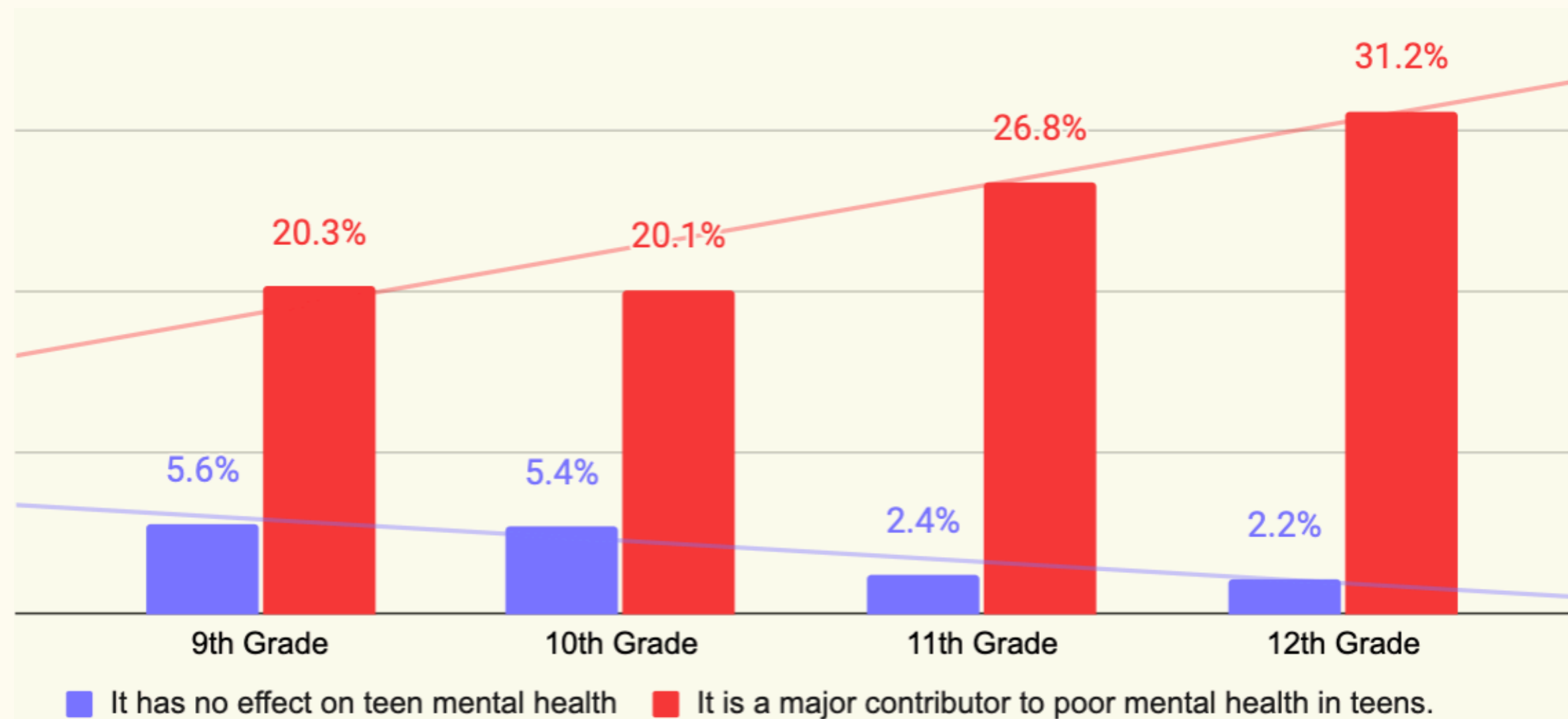
Which of the following statements reflects how you believe social media affects teen mental health overall?



- 52.4% recognize social media as having an overall negative effect on youth mental health.
- Findings reflect the dual nature of social media: while it can foster community and provide relaxation, it can also harm sleep, self-esteem, and productivity.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS TEEN MENTAL HEALTH BY GRADE

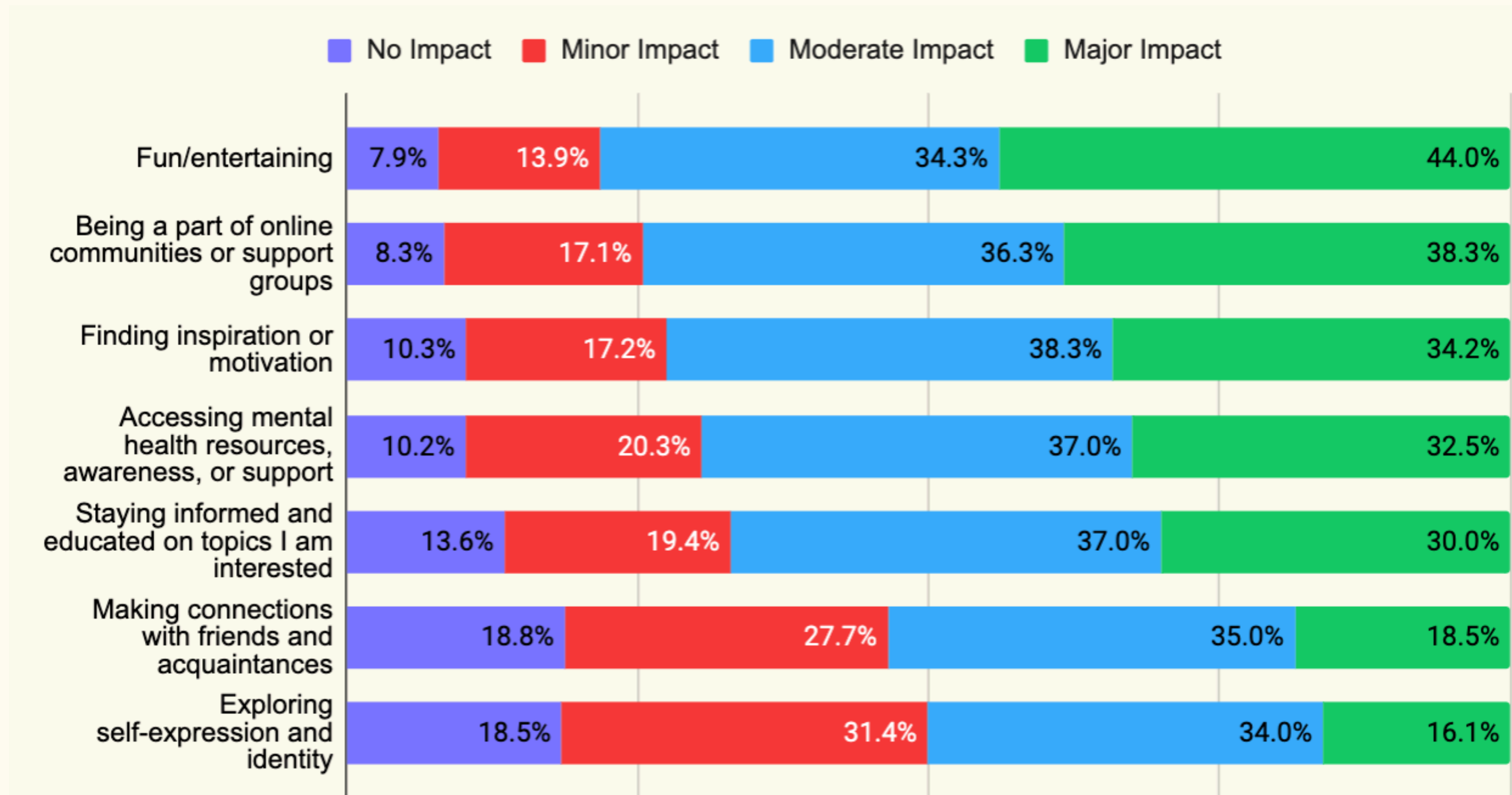
Which of the following statements reflects how you believe social media affects teen mental health overall?



As students get older, fewer say social media has no effect on their mental health, while more recognize it as a major contributor—suggesting increased awareness of its impact over time.

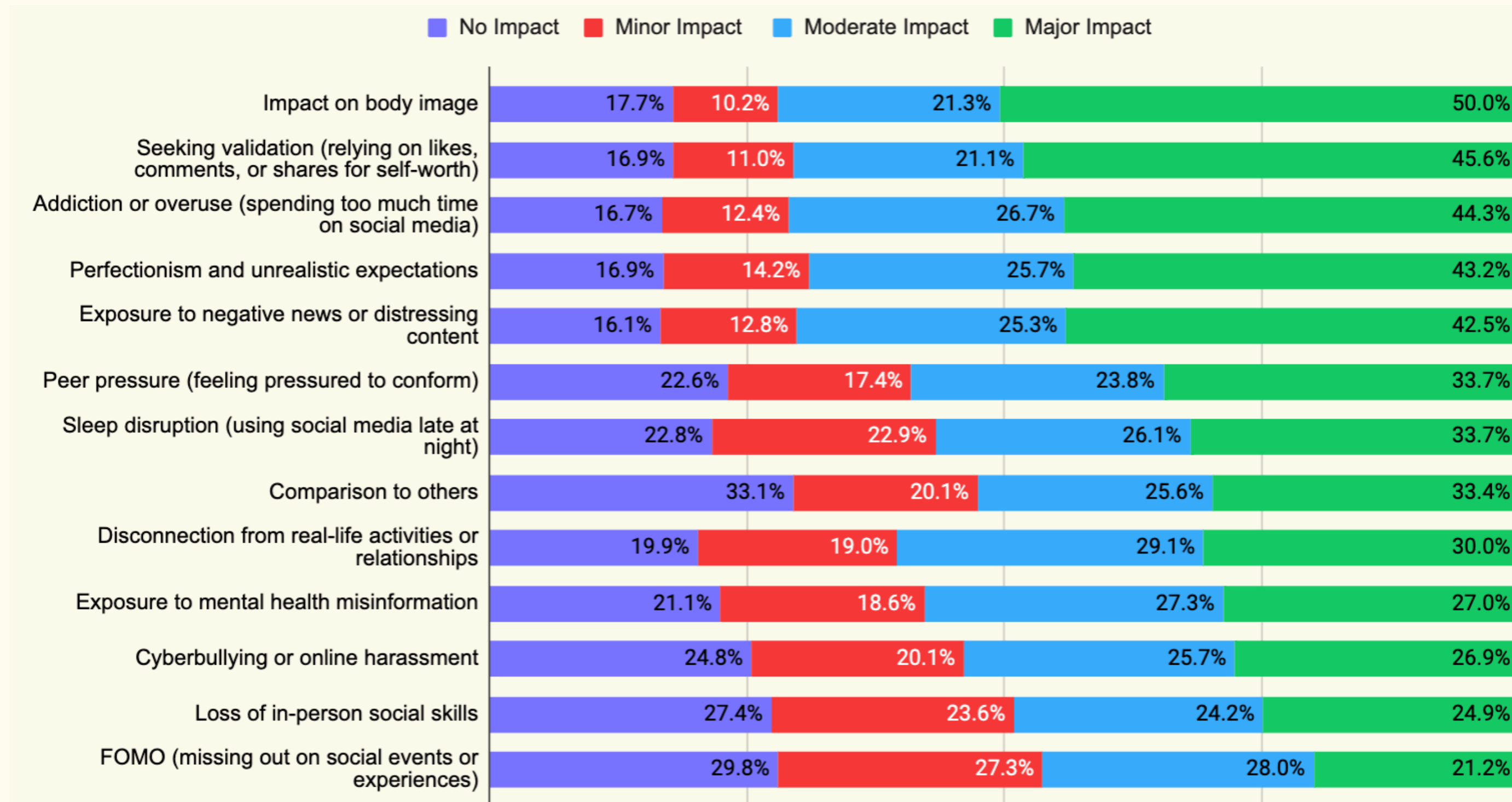
POSITIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

How much of a positive impact do the following aspects of social media have on mental health?



NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

How much of a negative impact do the following aspects of social media have on mental health?





THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE

If you have any questions, please contact Mariana@AIMymh.org