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Family Matters

A REPORT ON THE STATE OF FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH IN THE U.S.





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OVERVIEW

Mental health conditions have experienced a distressing surge in prevalence over the past decade, notably exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has created a chorus of voices from all levels of academia, mental health advocacy groups, healthcare professionals, public health organizations, and government agencies to address the urgent need to foster broader understanding, education, and access to resources that can ultimately pave the way for effective behavioral health services for those at risk or living with acute or chronic mental health conditions.

The ubiquitous media coverage of mental health, punctuated by celebrity endorsements of mental health initiatives and public health campaigns, underscores the magnitude of the national conversation around mental health. Various organizations across the public, private, professional, and advocacy sectors continue to contribute to a growing pool of research to shed light on the challenges individuals face in understanding, addressing, and accessing support for their mental well-being.

However, there seems to be a significant gap in exploring family mental health as a collective unit.

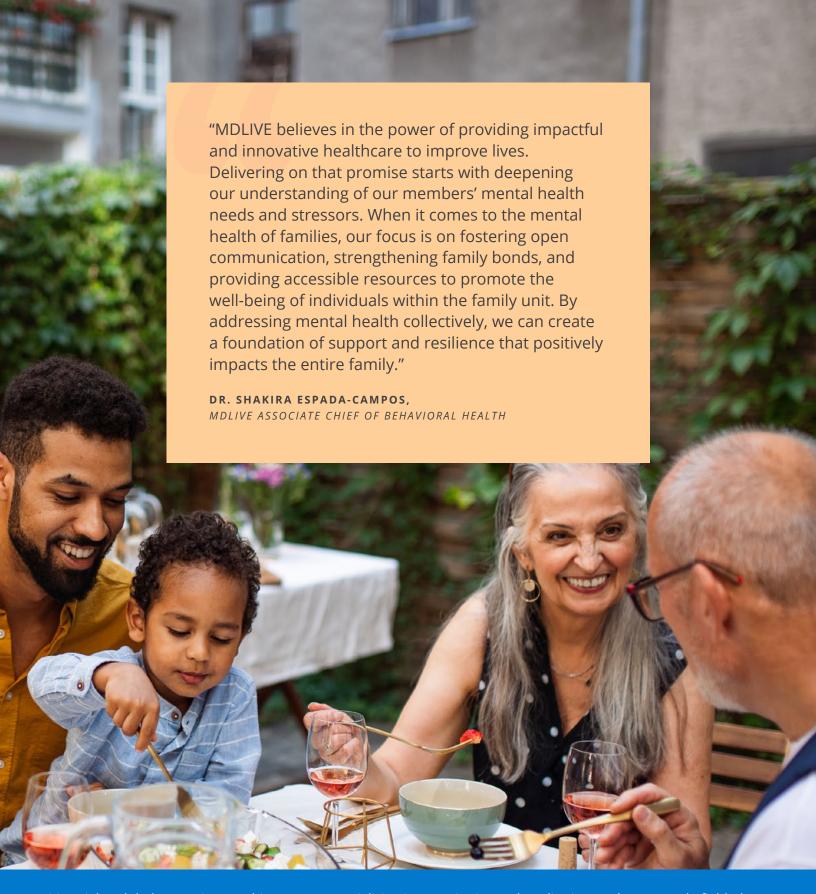
Critical to managing one's mental well-being is a robust support system comprised of people to confide in, lean on, and trust. These relationships provide the foundation for a safe and supportive environment that will have a lasting impact on one's mental health. For families, both chosen and biological, the emotional and physical well-being of the overall family is directly entwined with its members' individual mental health status and the relationship dynamics within the family unit.

This research explores how families manage different contemporary mental health stressors that may have a deleterious effect on family members and the family dynamic. It also looks at how different people within the family unit perceive the impact of these stressors on themselves and other family members and how individuals manage these stressors. Above all, this report highlights the importance of understanding family dynamics in the context of mental health to better provide behavioral health support for families.

To gain these insights, MDLIVE, a leading virtual medical and behavioral health service provider, conducted a research study to examine U.S. families' mental health and further understand the contemporary mainstream stressors, dynamics, needs, and barriers among different generations within the family unit.

The research suggests that U.S. families are struggling due to various societal and cultural triggers, with younger family members equally as impacted as parents and grandparents. While factors like family makeup, age, and gender all play a role in the degree to which the family unit and its members are affected, there are also important nuances between family members, family types, and family structures. The findings underscore the need for tangible services and solutions that help address behavioral health needs within the family unit.





Material, a global strategic consulting agency specializing in quantitative and qualitative market research, fielded the online survey consisting of a national sample of 1,505 Americans aged 13 and older, which took place between April 5 and April 12 in 2023.



Families falling short of achieving good mental health

Despite ongoing and increased attention on mental health and the increased recognition and acknowledgment of the triggers for poor mental health, U.S. families are struggling. For many, their collective mental health continues to decline. What was particularly striking was the breadth of mental health struggles, their pervasiveness across the family, and the differences between different family sizes and structures.



Families continue to fall short in achieving good mental health

Individual family members continue to struggle independently, and many acknowledge a significant impact from their spouse's or partner's mental health challenges, highlighting the intricate and reciprocal nature of mental health within family dynamics.

- According to the survey, only 1 in 3 respondents report that their family has achieved a very good level of mental health versus somewhat good or worse. Despite efforts to expand access to mental health resources and encourage families to care for their individual and collective mental health, two in five respondents said their family's mental health has worsened over the past few years.
- This decline reflects the broader perspective that 73% of all respondents agreed that the state of the world today makes it hard to maintain good mental health.
- While the survey reveals a recognition among respondents that mental health challenges impact multiple family members, respondents, regardless of age, were universally more likely to say they, themselves (34%), have struggled most with mental health over the past 12 months, compared to other family members, like their spouse (21%) or child (12%).
- More than half of respondents said their spouse's/partner's mental health challenges affect them more than any other family member's.



Only 1 in 3 people report that their family has achieved a very good level of mental health.



Lost in the shuffle: mental health struggles hit larger families

While being part of a larger family may suggest that one has access to more people to talk to and more support to tap into when experiencing mental health struggles, the survey data reveals a striking correlation between family size, family type, and mental health experiences, reflecting different dynamics in mental health acknowledgment and prioritization based on family configuration.

According to the survey, respondents in larger families (five or more members) were 25% less likely than those in smaller families (four or fewer members) to report that their family had achieved very good mental health.

Families reporting very good mental health

4 or fewer family members

40%

5 or more family members

29%

- Respondents in larger families were nearly 20% more likely than those in smaller families to report that their family's mental health has worsened over the past few years.
- Respondents from larger families were more likely to report experiencing negative emotions, such as stress and anxiety, over the past month than people from smaller families (82% vs. 68%).
- Respondents from single-parent families were more likely to talk openly with their family about mental health than those from two-parent families (79% vs. 67%). Respondents from single-parent families also reported they prioritize mental health now more than a few years ago (73% vs. 64%) versus those from two-parent families.

"Despite commendable efforts to expand resources and support, families continue to grapple with mental health concerns; for larger families, pursuing mental health may be an even more complex endeavor. Stakeholders must consider how to unpack and address the intricate interplay between individual and family when addressing mental health."



Family stressors hit close to home

Most survey respondents agree that the state of the world makes it hard to maintain good mental health. Negative headlines abound in news feeds, doom-scrolling has become persistently problematic for many people, and the pressures and stressors of daily living can add fuel to an emotionally fraught family dynamic. The research reveals that the most significant factors currently impacting the mental health of families are those that are closer to home: kitchen table issues around family finances and personal and public safety that have the potential to directly impact families on any given day.

The survey also revealed that many of these issues are not exclusively impacting parents or heads of household but are also being felt by teens and adolescents, who appear to be acutely aware of the stress and strain their families are feeling.



Piecing it together, paycheck to paycheck

Financial factors play a significant role in the mental health of families, underscoring the emotional toll of economic strain for everyone.

- Among all factors impacting the mental health of survey respondents and their families, the top three stressors are inflation (87%), food prices (86%), and gas prices (80%) suggesting, not surprisingly, the struggle to get by paycheck-to-paycheck carries a substantial emotional toll.
- Three out of four respondents reported that the overall financial stability of the family is a stressor, and 65% say housing costs and scarcity are a mental health burden to their family.
- Perhaps exacerbating the impact on families' mental health, many respondents feel that these issues are getting worse, not better. Despite national efforts to tamp down financial concerns and strengthen the economic environment, 82% feel food prices are getting worse, 78% think inflation is worsening, and 76% feel gas prices are worsening.
- According to the survey, teens (13-19-year-olds) were more likely than adults to be concerned about the job market (71% vs. 58%) and as likely to be worried about food prices (85% vs. 86%), inflation (84% vs. 88%), and the financial stability of the family unit (77% vs. 75%).



The top three stressors currently affecting **US families:**

Inflation

Food prices

86%

Gas prices

80%



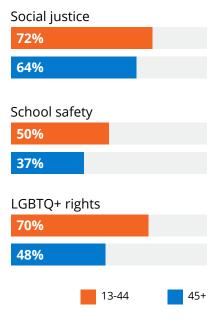
Stressing about social issues

The complex relationship between social issues and family mental health - from LGBTQ+ rights to public safety - are inducing stress among families, and how the effect varies across different generations, family sizes, and ethnicities. Further, it lays bare how various age groups and demographics perceive and are affected by these prevalent social concerns, highlighting a significant divide between younger and older respondents, larger and smaller families, and among different ethnic groups.

- Two-thirds of survey respondents (66%) cited social issues as causing significant stress for their families, with 44% saying the issue of LGBTQ+ rights in particular is driving negative mental health impact.
- The social issues contributing substantial impact on families' mental health include public safety/ crime (79%), social justice (68%), school safety (59%) and drug addiction and overdoses (57%).
- School safety was reportedly particularly stressful for Millennials more than Gen X (73% vs. 51%), possibly reflecting the age of children in the family.
- Moreover, respondents from larger families were more likely than those from smaller families to say their family mental health was impacted by school safety concerns (72% vs. 59%).

There are clear distinctions by age in the social issues impacting the mental health of respondents and their families.

Respondents aged 13-44 are substantially more likely than those aged 45 and older to say their family's mental health is impacted by social justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and school safety. Respondents 45 years old or older report that social issues have much less of an impact on family mental health, with economic concerns carrying a much more significant mental health burden.



Hispanic and Black respondents were more likely than white respondents to say their family's mental health is impacted by social justice (76% and 76% vs. 63%), drug addictions and overdoses (64% and 61% vs. 54%) and school safety concerns (69% and 68% vs. 54%).



Unhealthy headlines: the mental health burden of media

Americans continue to be immersed in a rapid and sometimes rabid media environment. The survey data underscores the substantial role of media in shaping family mental health, revealing a critical need to recognize and address issues of accuracy and bias in news reporting, the profound impact of social media on all family members, and the emerging perceptions of new media technologies.



More than two-thirds

67%

of survey respondents reported that the accuracy of news reporting negatively impacts their family's mental health, and 64% say bias in the media is particularly stressful for their family.



Social media continues to weigh heavily on the minds of U.S. families.

61%

of respondents say social media harms their family's mental health.

- For all the worry among parents about the effects of social media on their children, teens (13-19) in the survey perceive a more significant negative impact: they are more likely than adults (20+) to say social media impacts their family's mental health (72% vs. 59%).
- Teens are also more likely to say that media-related stressors impact their overall families' mental health than that of their own, including bias in the media (64% vs. 49%) and accuracy of news reporting (64% vs. 55%).

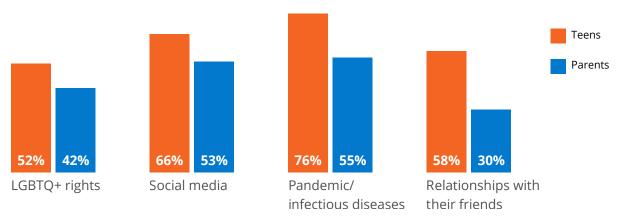


Some topics are still off the table

Open communication and the willingness to discuss problems and issues can positively impact family mental health. However, respondents noted a variety of topics that are less likely to be discussed, although those topics differ among younger and older respondents. While some topics are easier to broach, there is a growing desire among individuals to expand their comfort zone and become more at ease discussing certain sensitive matters.

- According to the survey, teens were about twice as likely as adults to say they wish core topics facing them today were talked about more openly within their families.
- While parents¹ in the survey were aware issues like bullying and school safety impact their children's mental health, there are additional issues teens in the survey noted were affecting their mental health and which parents aren't as aware or underestimate, including LGBTQ+ rights (52% teens report they are impacted vs. 42% parents say their children are impacted), social media (66% vs. 53%), pandemic/infectious diseases (76% vs. 55%) and the relationships with their friends (58% vs. 30%).

Teens report being impacted by certain issues more than parents perceive



Teen respondents, more so than parents, wish there were more open family discussions about the issues of school safety (29% vs. 20%), LGBTQ+ rights (36% vs. 24%), social justice in the U.S. (36% vs. 18%) and drug addiction/overdoses (34% vs. 21%). On the other hand, parents wish to be more open about topics like family financial stability (33%), academic pressures (25%), and climate change (22%).

"Starting conversations on sensitive topics within families creates an environment of acceptance where mental health issues can be openly discussed and addressed. Many families need help getting the conversation started on topics that may be uncomfortable, which is an area that licensed professionals can be particularly valuable."



^{1.} When comparing teens to parents in this section, parents are defined as adults aged 20+ that self-identified as parents within the survey.

The gender gap extends to family mental health

Gender disparities within families concerning health, particularly mental health, remain problematic. Traditional roles in the family, as well as gender-based societal perceptions and expectations around mental health, all contribute to perpetuating these disparities. Despite efforts to address gender disparities, the survey reveals that the distribution of the mental health burden within families disproportionately falls on women.2



There remains a pronounced gender disparity in mental health experiences within families, some of which reflect the influence of specific family responsibilities on their mental health.

- According to the survey findings, women were 24% more likely than men to report they struggle the most with mental health in their family (46% vs. 37%). Women were more likely than men to report experiencing negative emotions, including stress (48% vs. 35%), anxiety (42% vs. 30%), and feeling emotionally drained (38% vs. 24%).
- Among the top issues women reported causing them the most stress are housing costs and housing scarcity (87%), family financial stability (82%) and climate change (81%), while men reported more concern with inflation (86%), gas/auto prices (86%) and global political unrest (86%).
- The survey found women were far more impacted by school-related issues than men, including school safety (75% vs. 64%), bullying (67% vs. 58%) and quality of education (65% vs. 50%). Additionally, social media (81% vs. 72%) affected women's mental health more negatively than men.
- The persistent gender gap in family caregiving extends to mental health, as women respondents more than men reported that their mental health was affected by childcare duties (77% vs. 67%) and caregiving for elderly or sick relatives (69% vs. 58%).

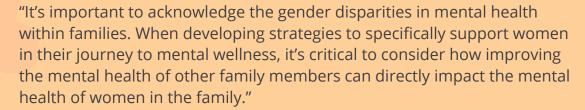
^{2.} Women are defined as women aged 18+ that self-identified as women within the survey. Men are defined as men aged 18+ that self-identified as men



Women are shouldering the mental health load of others

Women bear the brunt of familial mental health burdens, serving as the primary source of support and comfort during the mental health struggles of others. The role of women as mental health caregivers not only impacts their mental health but also subtly influences the mental health perception and struggles of other family members.

- Among teens in the survey, 46% said they turn to their mother to discuss issues impacting their mental health, while far fewer (31%) said they turn to their father. Nearly three in five teens (58%) said they could rely on their mothers or stepmothers for support when dealing with mental health struggles.
- Mothers in the family also serve as mental health caregivers for their adult children. Millennial respondents were twice as likely to say they turn to their mothers than their fathers (23% vs. 11%) when dealing with mental health struggles.
- Women are less likely than men to report they can rely on their spouse or partner for support with their own mental health struggles (35% vs. 45%).
- This added burden, and the visibility they have into other family members' mental health struggles, may explain why women respondents were far less likely than men to describe their family's mental health as "very good" (28% vs. 44%). They may be more aware of or directly exposed to the challenges others in the family face and may be spending more time and energy supporting the mental health of others in the family in addition to themselves.
- The survey findings also suggest that the mental health burden women in the family carry may contribute to the mental health struggles of other family members. Teen respondents were three times as likely to say their mother's mental health affects them most, significantly more than their father's (41% vs. 15%).





COVID-19 and kids: residual effects persist

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a substantial mental health impact on all age groups, altering nearly every facet of daily life. While much concern has been raised about the long-term effects on kids and their mental health, this research finds that, uniquely, the older cohort of Gen Z (18-24-year-olds) appear to be struggling more now with mental health than any other age group, including both younger members of Gen Z (13-17-year-olds) and Millennials.

Older members of Gen Z spent their late adolescence not only missing many important academic and social rites of passage but, perhaps more importantly, lacking exposure to experiences and situations that typically feed the evolution of important coping mechanisms and resiliency skills needed in young adulthood. Now in the initial stages of adulthood, the survey shows that these young adults are struggling and have not bounced back like younger adolescents or older young adults.



A bleak outlook for older Gen Z

A concerning reality has emerged in which the older Gen Z group (18–24-year-olds) is bearing a heavier mental health burden, revealing more profound challenges that may be unique to this age group's current circumstances, such as transition periods and societal pressures, as well as specific generational experiences such as the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey found that older members of Gen Z were far less likely (12%) to report they had achieved very good mental health than any other age group.

Fewer than half (47%) of 18–24-year-old respondents reported their mental health to be even somewhat good, far less than both their younger Gen Z adolescent counterparts (13-17) and Millennials (84% and 71%).



13-17-year-olds

84%

18-24-year-olds

47%

Millennials

71%



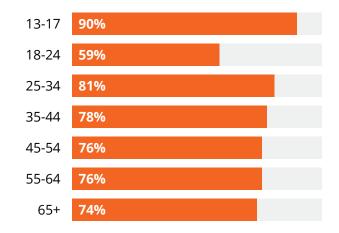
- Respondents aged 18-24 years old were more likely to report negative emotions over the past month (85%) than any other age group. They were also most likely to report negative emotions among their family (79%). This may suggest an increased sensitivity to negative feelings and emotions, a higher frequency of those feelings, or challenges with coping skills.
- Older Gen Z respondents were less likely to report they deal very well with mental health stressors compared to other age groups (43% vs. 52% overall Gen Z, 56% millennials, 53% Boomers), highlighting an opportunity for support services and resources for this age group.
- When asked who within their family has struggled the most in the past 12 months with mental health, nearly two-thirds (62%) of 18-24-year-olds say themselves, compared to only 31% of their younger Gen Z counterparts (13–17-year-olds). This finding supports the notion that they are sensitive to their own mental health challenges but reinforces the opportunity to provide assistance.

Affected and disconnected

There is a troubling disconnect within families, particularly regarding support for the mental health struggles of older Gen Z individuals (18-24 years old), signaling an urgent need for improved family communication, support structures, and resources for this age group.

One in three (34%) older Gen Z respondents (18–24-year-olds) reported they don't feel they can rely on their family for support when experiencing stress or mental health struggles, compared to only 14% of younger Gen Z (13-17-year-olds).

Older Gen Z respondents (18-24-year-olds) were far less likely than all other age groups to agree that people in their family are aware of the impact issues have on their mental health.



Older Gen Z respondents were less likely than younger Gen Z teens to agree that their family is equipped to help each other address issues affecting mental health (68% vs. 91%).



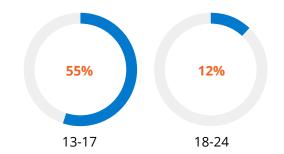
Teens today: still struggling themselves, feeling the family's challenges

Significant attention has been devoted to the ongoing mental health struggles that teens live with. The survey reveals that the issues impacting them go beyond traditional age-based issues to encompass larger challenges affecting the family overall. The good news is that teens are highly attuned to their mental health, that they acknowledge maintaining good mental health is an ongoing process, and they recognize the need for support.

- According to the survey, 71% of teens 13-19 years old agree that the state of the world today makes it hard to maintain good mental health. The issues impacting teens' mental health the most are the pandemic (76%), social media (66%) and climate change (63%).
- With that, 39% of teens said they don't have a lot of support from others in general when dealing with stress or mental health struggles.
- It's not just their own mental health, but their family's: 44% said their family's mental health has worsened over the past few years, and 71% said their family could do more to support each other's mental health.

Compared to their older **Gen Z counterparts**

Teens 13-17 years old were more than four times likely to report they had achieved very good mental health.



"It's promising to see teens' awareness of their mental health, but the high percentage of teens expressing a lack of support underscores the necessity for more accessible mental health resources that are uniquely designed and accessible for them."



Family members feel isolated, seek support to help them manage

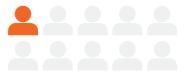
Turning to one's family and friends as a source of strength and support during times of stress is often considered the conventional path. However, while many people feel they have others they can turn to, far fewer follow through, choosing other coping methods or completely ignoring stress-inducing issues.

Few talk with family and friends, even fewer turn to mental health professionals

Families continue to lack essential mental health support systems, and family size may hint at potential issues of emotional distance or lack of adequate attention to one another's mental health needs. These data are reflective of the recent public health advisory issued by the <u>U.S. Surgeon General</u> on the epidemic of loneliness and may point to how mental health challenges and loneliness feed one another in a cycle of poor mental health.



1 in 4 respondents said they have no one in their family to turn to for support with their mental health.



1 in 10 feel they have no one to confide in within or outside the family about their mental health struggles.

- For those with someone to turn to for help with mental health struggles, 40% of respondents said they could turn to their spouse or partner, 31% said they could lean on a friend, and 21% could seek solace from their mother or stepmother. Only 9% said they could turn to a therapist, counselor, or mental health professional. Nearly one in four (22%) said they ignore the issue altogether.
- Perhaps ironically, respondents from families of five or more were more likely to say they lack family support than those from families of four or fewer people and were less likely to say they manage mental health issues by discussing them with family members (33% vs. 41%).



Teens see value in and seek support for themselves and their family members

Positive indicators have emerged highlighting the importance teens place on mental health and the beneficial role of open familial discussions about stressors in strengthening relationships.

- When teens were asked what solutions would help their family better manage their mental health, the top resources they cited were access to individual therapy for other members of the family (30%), virtual therapy options for themselves (28%), more cost-effective therapy (28%), and more mental health resources at school (27%).
- Teens in the survey confirmed that talking things out with the family is better. They were more likely than adults to say discussing stressors with their family improves their relationships with their family (73% teens 13-19 vs. 57% adults 20+).

Families feel more can be done to support one another's mental health

Despite a high level of confidence in their family's ability to manage mental health issues, many respondents see room for improvement, underscoring the urgent need for increased mental health resources and interventions.

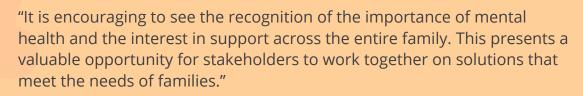
Approximately three-fourths of respondents (77%) agreed that their family knows how to help each other address issues that impact mental health, yet 69% said their family could do more to support each other's mental health.

When asked what solutions would help their family better manage mental health:

26% Said more cost-effective therapy.

Said access to individual therapy for other family members.

Said access to individual therapy for themselves.





Supporting family mental health: five key takeaways

- The collective mental health of families continues to decline despite the increased attention on mental health in the U.S., with the greatest stressors within the family unit being day-to-day social and economic issues that hit close to home - family finances, community safety, and education issues among others. These issues, which they perceive to be getting worse, not only affect the heads of household but are felt equally across all family members.
- The mental well-being of women, particularly mothers, is intricately linked to the overall mental health of their families. It's important not only to empower women to relieve the burden of the issues affecting their own mental health, but to also provide support and services to help others in the family manage their own mental health journey. Doing so will reduce the extra burden women in the family carry on behalf of others and help to alleviate the overall disparity in mental health carried by women.
- Older members of Gen Z (18-24-year-olds) who experienced late adolescence during the COVID-19 pandemic, face significant mental health challenges surpassing other age groups and report higher levels of mental health struggles within their families. Connecting with their families about mental health proves to be a challenge for them.
- Younger Gen Z members, or teens 13-17, face challenges that extend beyond typical adolescent issues and are influenced by broader family issues and the mental health of others in the family. However, they show awareness of the importance of mental health for themselves and their family, and seek tailored solutions to address their unique needs and those of their loved ones.
- Access to mental health support services and providers is crucial for supporting family mental health, but it must be coupled with teaching effective communication strategies among family members to address sensitive issues. Fostering open dialogue within the family to create an environment that welcomes and supports mental health discussions is equally important in promoting the well-being of the entire family.

Conclusion

This report provides a contemporary and compelling depiction of the multifaceted and complex nature of mental health within U.S. families, the array of factors that profoundly influence family mental health, and the extent to which families continue to grapple with mental health challenges across all members and age groups.

While the data identifies gaps in mental health support structures, it also highlights the promising role open communication and mutual support play in enhancing mental health within the family unit and the opportunities for stakeholders, including healthcare providers and payers, employers, advocacy organizations, and policymakers to develop strategies to meet the mental health needs of families. Moreover, it reminds us of the intricate, reciprocal nature of mental health within families and underscores the importance of a collective and multi-dimensional approach in addressing these prevailing challenges to foster a healthier and more resilient future for all.



METHODOLOGY

Sample

Online survey of 1,505 nationally representative Americans ages 13+, with a margin of error of +/- 3%

Methodology

The Generational Mental Health Survey was conducted between April 5 and April 12, 2023, among 1,505 nationally representative Americans ages 13+, using an e-mail invitation and an online survey.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results.

In this study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 3 percent from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all personas in the universe represented by the sample. The margin of error for any subgroups will be slightly higher.

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