2024

Getting Help Online:

How Young People Find, Evaluate, and Use Mental Health Apps, Online Therapy, and Behavioral Health Information

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How Young People Find, Evaluate, and Use Mental Health Apps, Online Therapy, and Behavioral Health Information

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Digital Health Practices, Social Media Use, and Mental Well-Being Among Teens and Young Adults in the U.S.
by Victoria Rideout and Susannah Fox (2018)

Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health
by Victoria Rideout, Susannah Fox, Alanna Peebles, and Michael Robb (2021)

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Introduction

Adolescents and young adults are facing elevated rates of mental health issues—and they're also struggling with access to the mental health care they urgently need. Many young people who struggle with their mental health are attending schools or living in communities where mental health professionals are limited, absent, or not accepting new patients.

And when young people express the need for professional help, they often encounter obstacles to seeing a therapist, such as prolonged wait times, limited local access to mental health providers, or financial barriers. Young people also face challenges finding therapists who are culturally responsive to their individual backgrounds. In light of these barriers, young people turn to social media and digital mental health apps to attempt to fulfill their needs.

Awareness of these systemic barriers is growing, prompting efforts to increase the accessibility of mental health support for young people. When in-person therapy sessions became impractical during the COVID-19 pandemic, policy changes and modifications to licensing regulations enabled telehealth services for patients to expand beyond traditional clinical settings. The policy shift broadened the therapy landscape, increasing online-based alternatives to traditional in-person therapy.[1]

The rise in options for online therapy shifted schools' approaches to addressing the growing number of young people in need of behavioral health services (i.e., services for mental health, substance use, and wellness). Educational institutions in the United States began exploring these alternatives to expand mental health services to K–12 and higher education students by connecting and sometimes contracting with direct-to-consumer private companies, nonprofit organizations, or state-run programs that offer online therapy.

Schools hoped that offering these services to students would help compensate for the shortage of social workers and school psychologists,[2] and enable more young people to access at least short-term mental health care.

However, while online therapy platforms can offer increased convenience, accessibility, and affordability when compared with traditional in-person treatment, important concerns remain related to patient data privacy, limited insurance coverage, and quality of care.[3]

At the same time, young people are proactively taking charge of their own mental health by seeking information online via social media and mental health apps. Youth often turn to video-based platforms like YouTube and TikTok, using them as search engines instead of Google.[4] These platforms can be accessed immediately, 24/7, and offer quick, sometimes entertaining, and easily digestible information in short video format. Social media platforms also offer access to communities and content creators who have similar, relatable mental health experiences and who can share their lived experiences and hard-won personal expertise.

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[1] Clark, K., Fazlullah, A., Garner, D., Golnabi, S., Hill, H., Kalmus, M., McQuiggan, M., & Salmirs, E. (2022). *Closing the digital divide benefits everyone, not just the disconnected: An analysis of how universal connectivity benefits education, health care, government services, and employment.* Common Sense. **https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/closing-the-digital-divide-benefits-everyone-not-just-the-unconnected**

[2] Sohn, E. (2024). There's a strong push for more school psychologists. *Monitor on Psychology, 55*(1), 72. **https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/01/trends-more-school-psychologists-needed**

[3] Garofalo, L. (2024). *"Doing the work": Therapeutic labor, teletherapy, and the platformization of mental health care.* Data & Society Research Institute. **http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4779005**

[4] Lim, M. S., Molenaar, A., Brennan, L., Reid, M., & McCaffrey, T. (2022). Young adults' use of different social media platforms for health information: Insights from web-based conversations. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 24*(1), Article e23656. **https://doi.org/10.2196/23656**

Youth also passively come across mental health information delivered by algorithms in their social media feed, regardless of whether they are looking for it, which can significantly impact their understanding of, decisions about, and behaviors around mental health.[5,6]

Although mental health information is easy to access on social media, it might not be beneficial or accurate, or could lead to harm.[7] Many researchers and mental health professionals question the reliability of online information, especially with the prevalence of health misinformation on social media during the pandemic.[8]

Young people are also embracing mental health apps as valued tools for managing their mental well-being. Mental health apps provide tools and activities aimed at tracking, managing, and improving mental health through such features as guided meditation, mood tracking, educational content, and community support. These apps are useful companions for managing mental well-being, but there is a lack of readily available information for young people about which apps are most helpful, evidence-based, inclusive, most applicable to their circumstances, and have adequate privacy protections (e.g., not sharing their health information with third parties).[9]

The current study focuses on some of the most important users of these platforms and programs: teens and young adults. Considering the present array of mental health resources available to young people and concerns about increasing mental distress in this group, it's crucial to examine the frequency with which they use digital technology for information and support. This usage can include how young people manage their mental health, how they understand their experiences with these resources, and how they judge the trustworthiness of mental health information.

Hopelab and Common Sense are determined to learn more. In a survey conducted in October and November of 2023, we asked young people about their use and the helpfulness of these platforms and programs. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of these mental health apps and services will be the first step in determining what is working and what needs to change to improve mental health care for all young people.

Summary of methodology

- This is a nationally representative survey of 1,274 teens and young adults age 14 to 22 in the United States.

- The survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, using their probability-based panel, as well as online opt-in panels to oversample for those who are LGBTQ+, Black, and Latino.

- Data was collected from October to November 2023.

- The survey was fielded online, in English or Spanish.

- The survey included several open-ended questions for respondents to share personal experiences.

- Data was analyzed by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity.

- A screener was included in the survey to identify levels of depressive symptoms (PHQ-8).

- Changes over time and differences between subgroups were tested for statistical significance at the level of $p < .05$.

- In this report, the term *teens* refers to people age 14 to 17, the term *young adults* refers to those age 18 to 22, and the terms *youth* and *young people* refer to our entire sample of 14- to 22-year-olds.

- The findings around app use and online information cover a range of behavioral health conditions including mental heath, substance use, and wellness. Across the report, we use the terms *mental health* and *behavioral health* interchangeably to refer to this data.

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[5] Hornik, R., Parvanta, S., Mello, S., Freres, D., Kelly, B., & Schwartz, J. S. (2013). Effects of scanning (routine health information exposure) on cancer screening and prevention behaviors in the general population. *Journal of Health Communication, 18*(12), 1422–1435. https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2013.798381

[6] Katella, K. (2024, January 8). *How social media affects your teen's mental health: A parent's guide.* Yale Medicine. https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/social-media-teen-mental-health-a-parents-guide

[7] Verma, G., Bhardwaj, A., Aledavood, T., De Choudhury, M., & Kumar, S. (2022). Examining the impact of sharing COVID-19 misinformation online on mental health. *Scientific Reports, 12,* Article 8045. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-11488-y

[8] Suarez-Lledo, V., & Alvarez-Galvez, J. (2021). Prevalence of health misinformation on social media: Systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 23*(1), Article e17187. https://doi.org/10.2196/17187

[9] Litke, S. G., Resnikoff, A., Anil, A., Montgomery, M., Matta, R., Huh-Yoo, J., & Daly, B. P. (2023). Mobile technologies for supporting mental health in youths: Scoping review of effectiveness, limitations, and inclusivity. *JMIR Mental Health, 10,* Article e46949. https://doi.org/10.2196/46949

Key Findings

1. While social media and the web are important sources of mental health information, most young people report that they take extra steps to verify what they find.

Almost two-thirds (65%) of young people age 14 to 22 have ever searched online for any behavioral health topics (i.e., mental health, substance use, and wellness). Among those young people who have ever searched online for information related to their mental health, the most common sources are websites focused on health or mental health (such as Healthline, WebMD, Psychology Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness), with 53% saying they have looked for behavioral health information from this type of source. However, social media sites are also an important source of information for many young people:

- 38% have searched YouTube for information related to behavioral health.

- 34% have searched TikTok.

- 23% have searched Instagram.

- 16% have searched Reddit.

- 8% have searched Twitter/X.

- 6% have searched for mental health information using ChatGPT or other generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

Most young people do not take the information they find at face value, and they engage in a variety of practices to check and verify information they see online. Among those who have ever searched online for behavioral health-related information:

- 89% *sometimes*, *often*, or *always*[10] consider the trustworthiness of the source.

- 88% *sometimes*, *often*, or *always* take information "with a grain of salt."

- 83% *sometimes*, *often*, or *always* compare information across multiple sources.

- 69% *sometimes*, *often*, or *always* run information by friends and family.

Both Black and Latino young people were more likely to say social media was somewhat or very important as a place to find information or resources about mental health or well-being than their White peers (64% and 59% vs. 44%). In our qualitative interviews and focus groups conducted for this study, both Black and Latino youth reflected on the value of being able to turn to social media for mental health support when they face stigma within their families or communities.

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[10] Response choices were *never*, *hardly ever*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *always*.

2. Online therapy has increased access to mental health support and is generally seen as helpful by those who seek it.

Just over one-quarter of 14- to 22-year-olds have ever attended online therapy to support their mental health and well-being, with 15% accessing it within the past year, and 12% before that. Contrary to patterns for in-person mental health care for young people, Latino young people were more likely to report accessing online therapy than their White and Black peers (34% vs. 23% and 27%). And online therapy has been more widely embraced by LGBTQ+ young people, who are about twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ+ peers to report ever having attended online therapy (44% vs. 23%).

Among those who have ever attended online therapy, about 6 in 10 found the experience very helpful (31%) or somewhat helpful (31%), while nearly one in three were helped only a little (27%) or not at all (5%). In addition, 6% could not remember how helpful their last online therapy experience was.

When asked why they had not tried online therapy, most pointed to a lack of need (52%) or desire (23%) for a therapist, or a preference for in-person therapy (20%). It is important to note that online therapy rates may also be impacted by factors not captured in the survey, such as access to technology and privacy or space for an appointment.

3. More than half of young people have used an app to support their mental health or well-being. For Latino and Black young people, limitations related to in-person therapy—such as accessibility, affordability, and cultural stigma—may contribute to higher rates of app usage.

A majority of young people (54%) say they have used a mental health or other type of app to help support their well-being. Having ever used an app to support mental health is more common for women and girls (62%) than for men and boys (44%), and usage is more common in young adults (60%) than teens (46%). In addition, app use varied by race and ethnicity; Latino young people (64%) were more likely to use behavioral health apps than Black young people (58%), and both Latino and Black young people were both more likely to use apps than White young people (47%). In our qualitative interviews and focus groups, Latino and Black youth attributed this higher use of behavioral health apps to their affordability and accessibility relative to therapy, and the difficulties of finding a therapist with a similar racial/ethnic identity, in addition to cultural stigma associated with seeking therapy.

Although apps are often touted as an alternative to in-person or virtual care provided by a therapist, questions remain about the helpfulness of different apps. Among respondents who have ever used an app for their mental health and well-being, 47% found the app to be very helpful or somewhat helpful, while 37% found the app a little helpful or not at all helpful. An additional 16% said they did not remember if the apps they used were helpful.

4. More than half of young people who have sought online therapy in the past year did so through a private practice or medical setting; 3 in 10 young people have used an online teletherapy platform through a telehealth company.

Among young people who have attended online therapy in the past year, they most often received this therapy through an individual private practice or medical setting (59%), while 31% of this group received online therapy through a telehealth company, such as BetterHelp, Talkspace, or Brightline. Another 14% of online therapy users from the last year used an online peer support service, where they can connect with other peers experiencing similar mental health issues for mental health support, and 7% said they used a chatbot, such as Woebot, for online therapy. In an open-ended question about sources of online therapy, users of teletherapy platforms cited direct-to-consumer platforms, university-focused providers, and smaller regional and local online mental health providers, as well as sites for intensive outpatient intervention and ADHD management.

5. LGBTQ+ youth and young people with depressive symptoms are more likely to have searched online for behavioral health information, to have used online therapy, and to have used apps to support their mental health or well-being.

LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to have ever sought information online about behavioral health-related topics than those who are not LGBTQ+ (91% vs. 61%).

About half of LGBTQ+ young people have ever searched online for information about eating disorders (52%), drug or alcohol abuse (51%), depression (49%), ADHD (49%), and anxiety (48%)—each of these rates are more than twice the percent of non-LGBTQ+ young people who have ever searched for information on these topics.

Those who are LGBTQ+ are also about twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ+ peers to report ever having attended online therapy (44% vs. 23%). And compared to non-LGBTQ+ young people, LGBTQ+ young people are also more likely to use all types of mobile behavioral health apps, with the exception of apps to support better sleep.

Additionally, depressive symptoms—and their degree—correlate with significant differences in certain activities like looking up behavioral health information, attending online therapy, and using apps related to mental health. As young people's reported severity of depressive symptoms increases, so does the likelihood that they will go online to look up health information on the majority of topics related to behavioral health.

Young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely than those with mild depressive symptoms and those with no symptoms to look up health information online on most mental and behavioral health topics, like depression, substance abuse, or eating disorders.
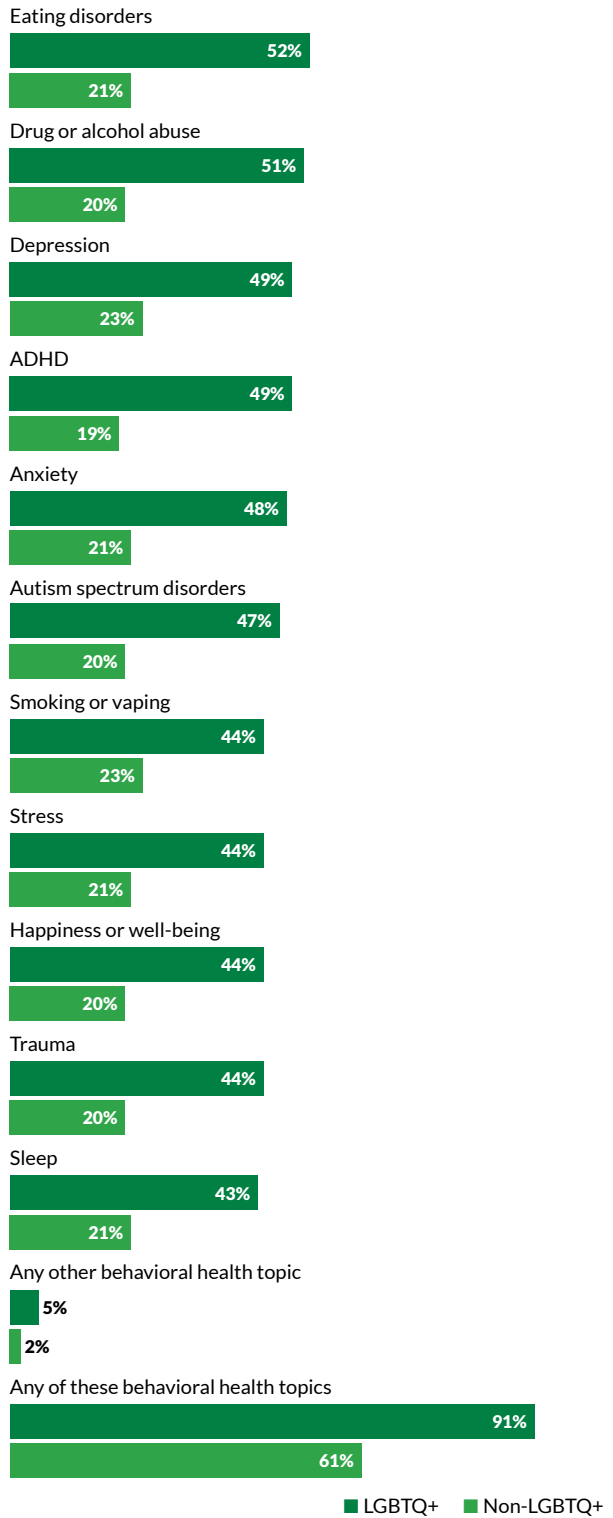
In a similar vein, the likelihood that a young person has attended online therapy tracks with the severity of a person's symptoms. Young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely than those without such symptoms to have used online therapy in the last year (25% vs. 8%) or before (22% vs. 5%).

In addition, the use of almost all types of mobile behavioral health apps tracks with the severity of an individual's depressive symptoms, as young people with more severe symptoms are more likely to report using all types of behavioral health apps. Similar shares of youth with moderate to severe, as well as mild, depressive symptoms have used apps related to depression and anxiety: about 4 in 10 with moderate to severe symptoms (38% for depression and 36% for anxiety); around 2 in 10 with mild symptoms (22% and 24%, respectively); and less than 1 in 10 with no symptoms (6% and 9%).

Besides apps related to depression and anxiety, young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely than those with mild symptoms and no symptoms to use a variety of apps related to other aspects of mental health and well-being.

LGBTQ+ youth are far more likely to search for a variety of behavioral health-related info online
% of young people age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who selected the following behavioral health topics

Eating disorders
- 52%
- 21%

Drug or alcohol abuse
- 51%
- 20%

Depression
- 49%
- 23%

ADHD
- 49%
- 19%

Anxiety
- 48%
- 21%

Autism spectrum disorders
- 47%
- 20%

Smoking or vaping
- 44%
- 23%

Stress
- 44%
- 21%

Happiness or well-being
- 44%
- 20%

Trauma
- 44%
- 20%

Sleep
- 43%
- 21%

Any other behavioral health topic
- 5%
- 2%

Any of these behavioral health topics
- 91%
- 61%

■ LGBTQ+   ■ Non-LGBTQ+

Note: Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant at the level of *p* < .05. Q: "Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics? *Select all that apply*." **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Young people with depressive symptoms are more likely to use all types of mobile behavioral health apps

% of young people age 14–22, by depressive symptoms who have ever used a mobile app related to the following
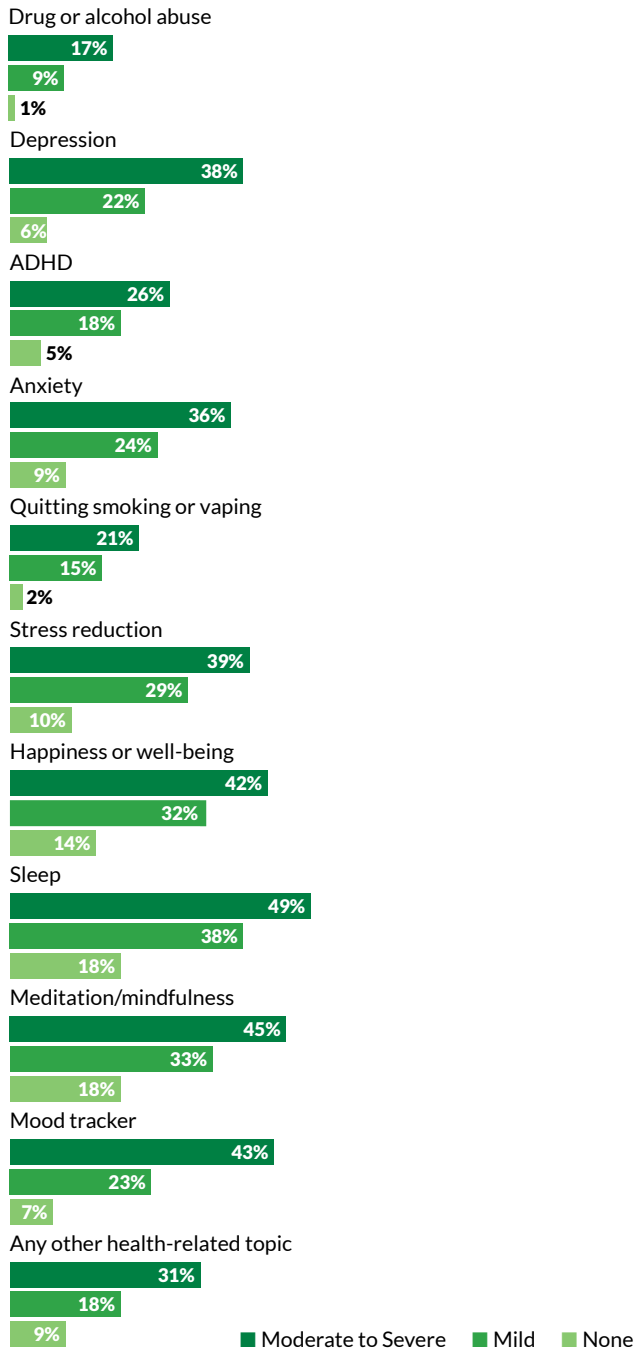
Drug or alcohol abuse
17%
9%
1%

Depression
38%
22%
6%

ADHD
26%
18%
5%

Anxiety
36%
24%
9%

Quitting smoking or vaping
21%
15%
2%

Stress reduction
39%
29%
10%

Happiness or well-being
42%
32%
14%

Sleep
49%
38%
18%

Meditation/mindfulness
45%
33%
18%

Mood tracker
43%
23%
7%

Any other health-related topic
31%
18%
9%

■ Moderate to Severe   ■ Mild   ■ None

Note: Differences among those with no, mild, and moderate to severe depressive symptoms are statistically significant for all items at the level of *p* < .05, with the exception of "quitting smoking or vaping" between those with mild and moderate to severe symptoms. Q: "Have you ever used a mobile app related to any of the following?" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Part 1: How Young People Find and Evaluate Behavioral Health Information Online

A little over two-thirds of young people have searched online for information about at least one topic related to behavioral health, whether through a website, search engine, app, or any other means.

Many young people search online to learn more about topics related to their mental health and well-being. The majority of teens and young adults have wide-ranging access to information on various health topics and conditions through websites, search engines, and apps. Young people are especially drawn to searching online and on social media to learn more about behavioral health (i.e., mental health, substance use, and wellness).[11]

Most young people have searched online for information about at least one of the behavioral health-related topics asked about in the survey, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means. Just under two-thirds (65%) report having ever looked for behavioral

Online behavioral health information searches, by year, and by age, gender, LGBTQ+, and race/ethnicity in 2023

Among ages 14 to 22, percent who have ever searched online about	Data Collection			Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
	2018	2020	2023	14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/boys	Women/girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Depression	39%ᵃ	38%ᵃ	27%ᵇ	20%ᵃ	31%ᵇ	23%ᵃ	30%ᵇ	27%	24%	26%	49%ᵃ	23%ᵇ
Drug or alcohol abuse	24%ᵃ	19%ᵇ	25%ᵃ	18%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	19%ᵃ	26%ᵇ	24%	26%	24%	51%ᵃ	20%ᵇ
Eating disorders	19%ᵃ	18%ᵃ	26%ᵇ	19%ᵃ	30%ᵇ	20%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	27%ᵃ	20%ᵇ	25%ᵃᵇ	52%ᵃ	21%ᵇ
Stress	44%ᵃ	39%ᵇ	24%ᶜ	18%ᵃ	28%ᵇ	19%ᵃ	26%ᵇ	24%	23%	26%	44%ᵃ	21%ᵇ
Anxiety	42%ᵃ	42%ᵃ	25%ᵇ	19%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	18%ᵃ	28%ᵇ	29%ᵃ	15%ᵇ	21%ᶜ	48%ᵃ	21%ᵇ
ADHD	NA	NA	24%	19%ᵃ	27%ᵇ	18%ᵃ	26%ᵇ	25%	23%	24%	49%ᵃ	19%ᵇ
Autism spectrum disorders	NA	NA	24%	16%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	18%ᵃ	27%ᵇ	21%ᵃ	19%ᵃ	28%ᵇ	47%ᵃ	20%ᵇ
Trauma	NA	NA	23%	18%ᵃ	26%ᵇ	16%ᵃ	27%ᵇ	25%	19%	23%	44%ᵃ	19%ᵇ
Sleep	NA	NA	24%	16%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	19%ᵃ	26%ᵇ	26%	19%	24%	43%ᵃ	21%ᵇ
Smoking or vaping*	NA	24%	25%	16%ᵃ	32%ᵇ	20%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	26%ᵃ	19%ᵇ	27%ᵃ	44%ᵃ	23%ᵇ
Happiness or well-being	NA	NA	24%	17%ᵃ	28%ᵇ	19%ᵃ	29%ᵇ	25%	22%	20%	44%ᵃ	20%ᵇ
Any other mental health issue	6%ᵃ	8%ᵃ	2%ᵇ	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%	2%	5%ᵃ	2%ᵇ
Any of these behavioral health topics	NA	NA	65%**	54%ᵃ	73%ᵇ	58%ᵃ	70%ᵇ	62%ᵃ	67%ᵃᵇ	69%ᵇ	91%ᵃ	61%ᵇ

Note: Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ($p < .05$). *In 2018, this item was worded as "smoking" and did not include "vaping." **The 2023 report included different health topics compared with the 2018 and 2020 reports. In 2018 and 2020, both behavioral and physical health searches were included. Therefore, the percentage for "Any of these behavioral health topics" in 2023 cannot be comparable to 2018 and 2020 data. Q: "Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics? *Select all that apply.*" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2018 ($n = 1,334$), 2020 ($n = 1,492$), and 2023 ($n = 1,274$) with young people age 14–22 nationwide.

[11] Skinner, H., Biscope, S., Poland, B., & Goldberg, E. (2003). How adolescents use technology for health information: Implications for health professionals from focus group studies. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 5*(4), e32. **https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.5.4.e32**

health-related information online, while 35% say they have never searched online for any of the behavioral health topics included in the survey. Depression was the behavioral health topic most commonly researched online (27% of 14- to 22-year-olds surveyed), followed by eating disorders (26%), smoking or vaping (25%), anxiety (25%), and drug or alcohol abuse (25%).

Young adults (age 18 to 22) are more likely than teens (age 14 to 17) to report ever looking up any of the topics related to their behavioral health online, either through a website, search engine, app, or any other means (73% vs. 54%, respectively). The largest difference across age groups is related to searching for information online about smoking or vaping. Young adults are nearly twice as likely as teens to say they have ever gotten information online about smoking or vaping (32% vs. 16%). Women and girls are more likely than men and boys to search for behavioral health-related information online.
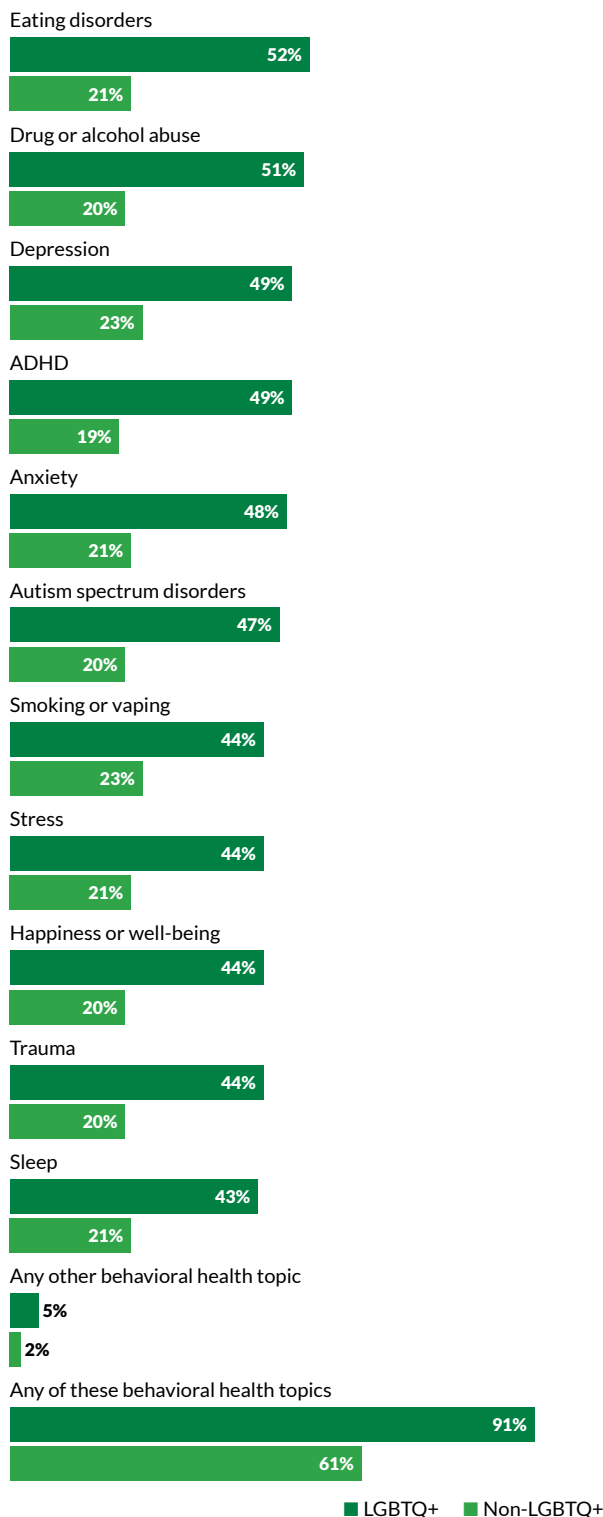
LGBTQ+ young people are twice as likely as non-LGBTQ+ young people to have ever looked up behavioral health information online.

LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to have ever sought information online about one or more of the behavioral health-related topics than those who are not LGBTQ+ (91% vs. 61%). About half of LGBTQ+ young people have ever searched online for information about eating disorders (52%), drug or alcohol abuse (51%), depression (49%), ADHD (49%), and anxiety (48%)—and each of these rates are more than twice the percentage of non-LGBTQ+ young people who have ever searched for information on these topics.

Black, White, and Latino young people look for behavioral health information online on each topic at similar rates, with a few exceptions. White young people are more likely than Black young people to look for information on eating disorders (27% vs. 20%). White young people are more likely to report they have ever searched online for information about anxiety (29%) when compared to both Latino (21%) and Black young people (15%), and Latino young people are significantly more likely than Black young people (21% vs. 15%) to search for anxiety. Black youth are less likely than White or Latino youth to search for health information on smoking or vaping (19% vs. 26% and 27%, respectively).

LGBTQ+ youth are far more likely to search for a variety of behavioral health-related info online
% of young people age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who selected the following behavioral health topics

Eating disorders
- 52%
- 21%

Drug or alcohol abuse
- 51%
- 20%

Depression
- 49%
- 23%

ADHD
- 49%
- 19%

Anxiety
- 48%
- 21%

Autism spectrum disorders
- 47%
- 20%

Smoking or vaping
- 44%
- 23%

Stress
- 44%
- 21%

Happiness or well-being
- 44%
- 20%

Trauma
- 44%
- 20%

Sleep
- 43%
- 21%

Any other behavioral health topic
- 5%
- 2%

Any of these behavioral health topics
- 91%
- 61%

■ LGBTQ+ ■ Non-LGBTQ+

Note: Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant at the level of *p* < .05. Q: "Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics? *Select all that apply*." **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

In 2023, young people were less likely to search for health information on depression, anxiety, and stress, compared with 2018 and 2020.

There is a notable decline in the percentage of young people who have ever looked online for information on depression (39% in 2018 and 38% in 2020 vs. 27% in 2023), anxiety (42% in both 2018 and 2020 vs. 25% in 2023), and stress (44% in 2018 and 39% in 2020 vs. 24% in 2023). This finding could be partially attributed to young people's exposure to online behavioral health information, particularly against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One study[12] that focused on how young adults (age 18 to 25) used digital tools to support their mental health during the pandemic lockdown found that "serendipitous finds" played an important role in determining which resources participants used. Exposure to behavioral health content is particularly relevant when considering how recommendation algorithms shape the information young people see online.[13] Adolescents search less often for mental health information, possibly because algorithms bring the information, to them, such as the ForYou page on TikTok.

Searches for health information on depression, anxiety, and stress have decreased significantly
% of young people age 14–22, by year of data collection who selected the following health topics

Depression
- 27%*
- 38%
- 39%

Anxiety
- 25%*
- 42%
- 42%

Stress
- 24%*
- 39%
- 44%

■ 2023　■ 2020　■ 2018
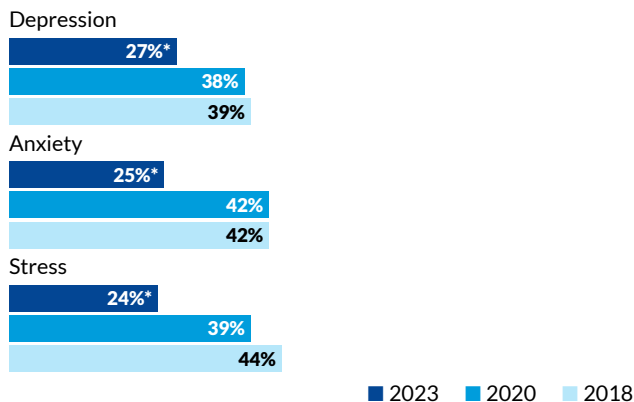
Note: *Differences between 2023, versus 2020 and 2018, are statistically significant at the level of $p < .05$. Q: "Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics? *Select all that apply.*" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2018 (n = 1,334), 2020 (n = 1,492), and 2023 (n = 1,274) with young people age 14–22 nationwide.

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[12] Pretorius, C., & Coyle, D. (2021). Young people's use of digital tools to support their mental health during COVID-19 restrictions. *Frontiers in Digital Health*, *3*, 763876. https://doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2021.763876

[13] Katella, K. (2024, January 8). *How social media affects your teen's mental health: A parent's guide.* Yale Medicine. https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/social-media-teen-mental-health-a-parents-guide

About 4 in 10 young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms report looking up behavioral health-related information online.

Among young people, as their reported severity of depressive symptoms increases, so does the likelihood of going online to look up behavioral health-related topics. Youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely than those with mild depressive symptoms and young people with no symptoms to look up health information online about depression (47% vs. 30% vs. 15%), anxiety (46% vs. 32% vs. 11%), sleep (41% vs. 34% vs. 11%), and happiness or well-being (41% vs. 31% vs. 12%). Compared with young people who have no depressive symptoms, those with moderate to severe symptoms are more than three times as likely to look up information online about stress (40% vs. 12%).

At least one in three young people report turning to YouTube and TikTok as a source for mental health information; 6% use ChatGPT or other generative AI tools for mental health information.

Among young people who have ever searched for information related to their mental health online, websites focused on health or mental health (such as Healthline, WebMD, Psychology Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness) are the most common sources, with 53% saying they have looked for mental health information from this type of source.

However, at least one in three have looked for mental health information on social media sites, such as YouTube (38%) and TikTok (34%). Smaller shares say they have searched for mental health information on social platforms, like Instagram (23%), Reddit (16%), or Twitter/X (8%). An additional 7% have looked for mental health information from another app or website, and 6% have searched using ChatGPT or other generative AI tools.

Some differences in source types also emerge across age groups among young people who have ever looked up health information online. Young adults are more likely than teens to look up mental health information from health-focused websites (58% vs. 45%) and from Reddit (20% vs. 9%).

Looking at differences between gender groups among young people who have ever searched for mental health-related information online, men and boys are more likely to report YouTube as a source when compared with women and girls (46% vs. 31%). By comparison, women and girls are more apt to search online for mental health information on TikTok (44% vs. 22%) and Instagram (27% vs. 16%) when compared with men and boys.

The likelihood that a young person has searched for certain behavioral health topics often tracks with the severity of their symptoms

% of young people age 14–22, by depression status who selected the following behavioral health topics

Depression
- Moderate to Severe: 47%
- Mild: 30%
- None: 15%

Anxiety
- Moderate to Severe: 46%
- Mild: 32%
- None: 11%

Drug or alcohol abuse
- Moderate to Severe: 44%
- Mild: 36%
- None: 10%

Eating disorders
- Moderate to Severe: 42%
- Mild: 34%
- None: 14%

ADHD
- Moderate to Severe: 42%
- Mild: 28%
- None: 11%

Autism spectrum disorders
- Moderate to Severe: 42%
- Mild: 31%
- None: 11%

Smoking or vaping
- Moderate to Severe: 42%
- Mild: 33%
- None: 14%

Sleep
- Moderate to Severe: 41%
- Mild: 34%
- None: 11%

Happiness or well-being
- Moderate to Severe: 41%
- Mild: 31%
- None: 12%

Stress
- Moderate to Severe: 40%
- Mild: 32%
- None: 12%

Trauma
- Moderate to Severe: 39%
- Mild: 28%
- None: 12%

Any other mental health issue
- Moderate to Severe: 4%
- Mild: 3%
- None: 1%

Any of these behavioral health topics
- Moderate to Severe: 88%
- Mild: 81%
- None: 47%

■ Moderate to Severe ■ Mild ■ None

Note: Differences among those with no, mild, and moderate to severe depressive symptoms are statistically significant for all items at the level of $p < .05$, with the exception of "drug or alcohol abuse," "stress," and "any other mental health issue" between those with mild and moderate to severe symptoms. Q: "Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics? *Select all that apply.*" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Young people say they check multiple sources and tend to trust mental health information when it comes from an expert or professional source.

Before asking closed-ended questions about specific ways that young people might vet online mental health information, we asked young people to describe how they decide to trust mental health information found online. This open-ended question about specific vetting techniques allowed young people to describe their experiences without being shaped by the response items in our survey.

Determining whether the information came from a mental health professional and checking multiple sources for supporting information were the most frequently mentioned ways of deciding whether to trust online behavioral health information.

Many young people expressed that they were more likely to trust the information if it was from an expert or professional. For example, one respondent said, "It was medication information resources sent by a psychiatrist. I trusted the professional." (White, young adult man)

In addition, some respondents mentioned that they follow trusted mental health professionals on social media: "I follow multiple psychologists and counselors on Instagram, as well as support groups for things like harm reduction and eating disorders, so I see their posts often." (White, young adult, no gender given)

Consulting multiple sources was another way young people decided whether to trust the information they found online. For instance, many young people said they come across information on social media by content creators and seek out more information through other sources: "I've seen a lot of stuff recently about people getting diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood. I've seen it from a lot of content creators who share tips and tricks on how to hack your ADHD to get things done. It definitely led me to doing more research online." (White, young adult woman)

Some used a combination of getting information from trusted professionals while also using search engines to check multiple sources: "I saw a TikTok about autism from a certified professional and looked into their advice on Google afterwards. I trusted them because of their qualifications." (White, nonbinary young adult)

Most young people vet the mental health information they find online. More than 8 in 10 young people evaluate the trustworthiness of a source.

In an age of proliferating misinformation and disinformation, being able to discern trustworthy information online is a challenge and an important skill. Young people engage in a variety of practices to check and verify information they see online. Among those who have ever searched for behavioral health-related information online, more than 8 in 10 young people sometimes or more often[14] consider the trustworthiness of the source (89%), compare information across multiple sources (83%), and take information "with a grain of salt" (88%). Running information by friends and family is less common, with 69% saying they sometimes or more often do this, and 31% saying they hardly ever or never do.

Among those who have ever searched for mental health information online, young adults are more likely than teens to say they sometimes or more often take mental health information with a grain of salt (89% vs. 85%) and compare information across multiple sources for consistency (88% vs. 73%). Young people of all ages are equally likely to report considering the trustworthiness of the source or asking friends and family about information.

One difference emerges on vetting information across racial and ethnic groups: Latino young people are more likely than White young people to say they sometimes or more often ask friends and family about the mental health information and advice they find online (75% vs. 66%).

Where young people search for mental health information or advice, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity

Among age 14–22, percent of those who have looked online for mental health information or advice on	Total	Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/ boys	Women/ girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Health websites	53%	45%[a]	58%[b]	48%[a]	58%[b]	59%[a]	41%[b]	41%[b]	67%[a]	50%[b]
Reddit	16%	9%[a]	20%[b]	16%	13%	18%[a]	8%[b]	13%[ab]	29%[a]	13%[b]
Twitter/X	8%	6%	9%	6%	8%	7%	9%	10%	14%[a]	7%[b]
YouTube	38%	44%[a]	35%[b]	46%[a]	31%[b]	32%[a]	56%[b]	40%[a]	44%	37%
Instagram	23%	20%	24%	16%[a]	27%[b]	22%	32%	23%	32%[a]	20%[b]
TikTok	34%	34%	34%	22%[a]	44%[b]	32%[a]	44%[b]	34%[ab]	40%[a]	32%[b]
ChatGPT	6%	5%	6%	7%	5%	4%[a]	10%[b]	3%[a]	4%	6%
Another app or website	7%	11%[a]	6%[b]	9%	7%	7%	10%	10%	8%	7%

Note: Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category (*p* < .05). Results among the race/ethnicity and LGBTQ+ data should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample sizes. Q: "Where have you looked online for mental health information or advice? *Select all that apply*." **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

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[14] Response choices were *never, hardly ever, sometimes, often,* and *always.*

Most young people sometimes or more often evaluate mental health information online

% of young people age 14–22 who have ever searched for mental health information online and selected the following statements

Take the information that you find with a grain of salt

88%	12%

Compare information across multiple sources

83%	17%

Consider the trustworthiness of the source

89%	11%

Ask friends and family about the information you find

69%	31%

■ Sometimes to Always   ■ Never to Hardly Ever

Q: "When looking for mental health information or advice online, how often do you…?" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Part 2: Online Therapy and Behavioral Health Apps

More than a quarter of young people have ever attended online therapy.

With the lack of adequate mental health services in the United States and a scarcity of available therapists who focus on adolescents, it can be challenging for teens and young adults to access mental health care. We also know that in general, Black and Latino youth are less likely to access traditional in-person mental health services than White youth; recent federal data indicates lower levels of treatment of major depressive episodes among Black (36%) and Latino (36%) young people when compared with their White peers (46%).[15] Cities, states, and school districts as well as families are beginning to turn to online therapy offerings to stand in and help close the gap in places where there is high demand and low availability of in-person sources.[16]

In November 2023, New York City rolled out a three-year, $26 million project[17] with a direct-to-consumer online therapy platform, offering 400,000 adolescents in New York City access to unlimited texting and a 30-minute virtual teletherapy session with a therapist once a month. In addition, a number of the country's largest school districts,[18] including those in Los Angeles, Miami, Las Vegas, and Washington, D.C., are offering online therapy sessions through schools.

But how many young people have actually taken advantage of online therapy? Do young people want to use it? What barriers do they face? And all things considered, do they find it effective for alleviating or managing their mental distress?

More than one-quarter (26%) of 14- to 22-year-old respondents to this survey reported having ever attended online therapy to support their mental health and well-being, with 15% attending within the past year and 12% attending before that.[19]

While there are no significant differences by age or gender in online therapy use, those who are LGBTQ+ are about twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ+ peers to report ever having attended online therapy (44% vs. 23%).

Latino young people were more likely to report ever accessing online therapy than their White and Black peers (34% vs. 23% and 27%). Similar rates of Latino (13%) and White young people (15%) say they have used online therapy in the past year. However, Latino young people are more likely to have seen a therapist online more than a year ago (21%) as compared to White youth (9%). When asked about this finding in interviews and focus groups, Latino young people noted that online therapy can be more affordable, more accessible, more discreet, and have better cultural representation than in-person therapy options.

Young people with mild to severe depressive symptoms are more likely than those without any symptoms to have used teletherapy in the last year or before.

[15] Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2021). *Racial/ethnic differences in mental health service use among adults and adolescents (2015–2019) (Publication No. PEP21-07-01-002)*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/racialethnic-differences-mental-health-service-use

[16] Clark, K., Fazlullah, A., Garner, D., Golnabi, S., Hill, H., Kalmus, M., McQuiggan, M., & Salmirs, E. (2022). *Closing the digital divide benefits everyone, not just the disconnected: An analysis of how universal connectivity benefits education, health care, government services, and employment*. Common Sense. https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/closing-the-digital-divide-benefits-everyone-not-just-the-unconnected

[17] Barry, E., & Caron, C. (2023, December 15). New York City is offering free online therapy to teens: Will it work? *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/health/free-therapy-teens-nyc.html
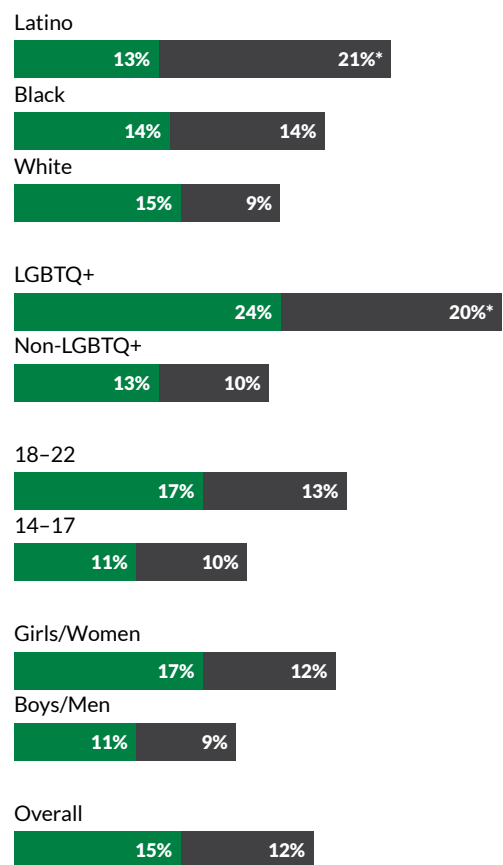
[18] Gecker, J. (2023, December 3). Lacking counselors, US schools turn to the booming business of online therapy. *Associated Press*. https://apnews.com/article/mental-health-counseling-school-hazel-bd7d650184decd94d4570e9841f1cedb

[19] Numbers may not sum exactly due to rounding.

The likelihood that a young person has attended online therapy in the 12 months prior to the survey tracks with the severity of a person's symptoms. Those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms (25%) are more likely than those with mild symptoms (18%) to have attended online therapy in the past 12 months. Furthermore, young people with mild symptoms are more likely than those with no symptoms (8%) to have attended online therapy in this time span. In addition, young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms (22%) and mild symptoms (14%) are more likely than those with no symptoms (5%) to have attended online therapy prior to this time period.

LGBTQ+ and Latino youth turn to online therapy in greater numbers

% of youth age 14–22, who have used online therapy

Latino
13% | 21%*

Black
14% | 14%

White
15% | 9%

LGBTQ+
24% | 20%*

Non-LGBTQ+
13% | 10%

18–22
17% | 13%

14–17
11% | 10%

Girls/Women
17% | 12%

Boys/Men
11% | 9%

Overall
15% | 12%

■ Yes, I have within the past 12 months
■ Yes, but not in the past 12 months

Note: *Differences between Latino youth, versus White and Black youth, as well as between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth, are statistically significant at the level of $p < .05$ for ever using online therapy. Q: "Have you ever attended online therapy—that is, connected with a therapist remotely by computer or phone—to support your mental health and well-being?" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Lack of need or desire for a therapist, and a preference for in-person therapy, are the top reasons why young people do not use online therapy services.

Among teens and young adults age 14 to 22 who reported never attending online therapy, when asked why they had not, about half (52%) of young people indicate that they do not need support with their mental health or well-being, 23% report that they do not want to speak to a therapist, and 20% say they would prefer to speak with a therapist in person rather than online. Other young people report cost and access as reasons why they don't use online therapy, saying that it is too expensive (8%), that they are uninsured or underinsured (5%), or that they don't know how to find an online therapy practice (6%).

Others report concerns that a therapist would not be able to help them (9%) or report previous bad experiences with therapy, whether online (1%) or in person (3%). And some young people report stigma around mental health as a barrier to use (6%) and difficulty asking or convincing parents to allow them to seek therapy (6%). In particular, in focus groups and interviews, LGBTQ+ young people expressed concerns around identity-related stigma, privacy, therapist expertise, and sensitivity when dealing with issues related to LGBTQ+ identity. It is important to note that online therapy uptake may also be shaped by factors not captured in the survey, such as access to technology and privacy or space for an appointment.

Barriers to teletherapy include preference for in-person therapy, access challenges, and stigma
% of young people age 14–22 who responded *yes* to the following statements

Don't need support

52%

Don't want to speak with a therapist

23%

Prefer in-person

20%

Don't believe therapist can help

9%

Too expensive

8%

Parents don't want me in therapy

6%

Don't know how to find online therapist

6%

Fear or stigma

6%

Uninsured / no coverage

5%

Other

3%

Previous negative experience (in person)

3%

Can't find therapist with similar identity and lived experience

2%

Previous negative experience (online)

1%

Waitlist too long

1%

Note: Q: "Why haven't you attended online therapy—that is, connected with a therapist remotely by computer or phone?" **Source**: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

More than half of those who seek online therapy do so through a private practice or medical setting, while about one-third rely on telehealth companies.

Among young people who have attended online therapy in the past year, they most often received this therapy through an individual private practice or medical setting (59%), while 31% of this group received online therapy through a telehealth company, such as BetterHelp, Talkspace, or Brightline. Another 14% of online therapy users used an online peer support service for mental health support in the last year, and 7% said they used a chatbot, such as Woebot, for online therapy. In an open-ended question, users of teletherapy platforms cited direct-to-consumer platforms, university-focused providers, smaller regional and local online mental health providers, as well as sites for intensive outpatient intervention and ADHD management, as sources of care. Among those who have been in online therapy, teens age 14 to 17 are more likely than young adults age 18 to 22 to have their online therapy conducted through an individual practice or medical setting (76% vs. 51%, respectively).

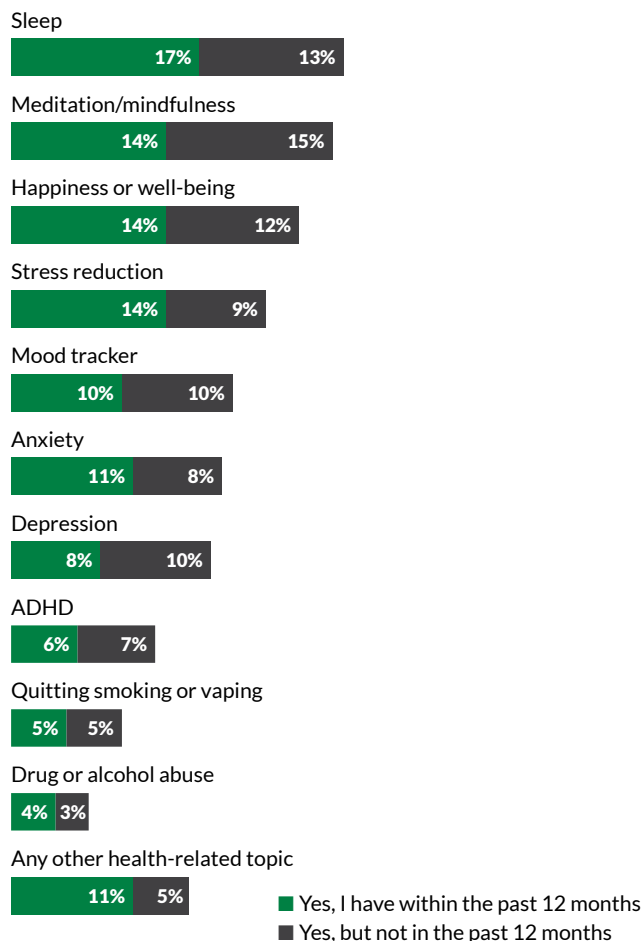## Online therapy is generally seen as helpful by those who seek it.

Among young people age 14 to 22 who have ever attended online therapy, about 6 in 10 found the experience very helpful (31%) or somewhat helpful (31%), while nearly one in three were helped only a little (27%) or not at all (5%). In addition, 6% could not remember how helpful their last online therapy experience was.

Three in ten have used a behavioral health app to support their well-being.

Some young people are turning to apps to support their well-being, with over half (54%) indicating they have ever used at least one app to help with their mental health or well-being. The most common kinds of apps downloaded include those for sleep (31%), meditation/mindfulness (29%), happiness (25%), stress reduction (22%), and mood tracking (20%). In open-ended questions, survey participants offered other examples of apps used to support their mental health, including meditation apps, major social media platforms, direct-to-consumer therapy platforms, habit trackers, and sobriety apps, as well as default general health apps that come pre-installed on a phone, calming games, affirmations, virtual plant and pet care apps, white noise apps to help with sleep, journaling or diary apps (including voice memos), and menstrual period trackers.

Youth use apps primarily to support sleep, stress reduction, and mindfulness
% of youth age 14–22, who have used mobile apps related to the following

Sleep

| 17% | 13% |

Meditation/mindfulness

| 14% | 15% |

Happiness or well-being

| 14% | 12% |

Stress reduction

| 14% | 9% |

Mood tracker

| 10% | 10% |

Anxiety

| 11% | 8% |

Depression

| 8% | 10% |

ADHD

| 6% | 7% |

Quitting smoking or vaping

| 5% | 5% |

Drug or alcohol abuse

| 4% | 3% |

Any other health-related topic

| 11% | 5% |

■ Yes, I have within the past 12 months
■ Yes, but not in the past 12 months

Source: "Q: Have you ever used a mobile app related to any of the following?" NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Latino young people, young adults, and women and girls are more likely to indicate they have ever used almost all apps surveyed related to mental health and well-being, compared to their peers.

App use varies by race and ethnicity, with Latino young people (64%) more likely to use behavioral health apps than Black young people (58%), who are both more likely to use such apps than White young people (47%). Latino young people are more likely to report ever using apps related to mood tracking (31%) than Black (22%) or White (14%) youth. Similarly, Latino young people are more likely than their Black or White peers to report using apps to help with sleep (38% vs. 32% and 27%.) Black and Latino young people are more likely than White youth to indicate ever using apps related to anxiety (28% and 26% vs. 15%), depression (27% and 25% vs. 13%), ADHD (17% and 20% vs. 10%), stress reduction (26% and 30% vs. 18%), quitting smoking or vaping (17% and 17% vs. 5%), and alcohol and drug abuse (12% and 10% vs. 4%).

In our qualitative interviews and focus groups, Latino and Black young people attributed this higher use of behavioral health apps to their affordability and accessibility relative to therapy, and the difficulties of finding a therapist with a similar racial/ethnic identity, in addition to cultural stigma associated with seeking therapy.

Young adults age 18 to 22 report ever using apps for depression, anxiety, ADHD, and happiness and well-being more often than 14- to 17-year-olds. In addition, compared to men and boys, women and girls are more likely to ever use apps related to anxiety (25% vs. 12%), mindfulness (35% vs. 22%), stress reduction (27% vs. 15%), mood tracking (24% vs. 13%), and happiness (30% vs. 17%).

Young people with depressive symptoms are more likely to use all types of apps for behavioral health.

Among young people with depressive symptoms, the use of all types of mobile behavioral health apps tracks with the severity of an individual's symptoms, as youth with more severe symptoms are more likely to report using all types of behavioral health apps. Similar shares of youth with moderate to severe, or mild, depressive symptoms have used apps related to depression and anxiety: about 4 in 10 of those with moderate to severe symptoms (38% for depression and 36% for anxiety); around 2 in 10 with mild symptoms (22% and 24%, respectively); and less than 1 in 10 with no symptoms (6% and 9%).

Besides apps related to anxiety and depression, young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely than young people with mild symptoms and no symptoms to use a host of apps related to other aspects of mental health and well-being. Those with mild symptoms are also more likely to use these apps than young people with no symptoms. App types encompass those related to meditation (45% for those with moderate to severe symptoms, 33% for those with mild symptoms, and 18% for those with no symptoms), sleep (49%, 38%, and 18%, respectively), stress reduction (39%, 29%, and 10%), happiness or well-being (42%, 32%, and 14%), and mood tracking (43%, 23%, and 7%).

Lack of need for an app and concerns that it would not help are the top reasons why young people do not use apps to support their mental health or well-being.

Among those who have never used an app to support their mental health or well-being, more than half (63%) say they do not need support with their mental health or well-being. Others do not believe that using an app would help (17%) or do not want to use an app to support their mental health or well-being (16%). Other young people reported knowledge barriers, that they didn't know these apps existed (10%), didn't

know how to find ones that would be helpful to them (5%), had a lack of trust in apps (9%), or were unable to find apps that were specific to their identity or lived experience (6%).

Concerns about the expense of apps and fear or stigma around using these apps were also cited by small numbers of young people who had not used behavioral health apps. Teens are more likely to cite lack of need for apps as a reason for non-use than young adults (70% vs. 57%), while young adults are more likely than teens to point to a lack of desire to use an app (20% vs. 11% of teens) and because they don't believe an app would help them (24% vs. 10% of teens).

Though many young people use behavioral health apps to manage mental health, they give mixed reviews on the helpfulness of these apps.

While apps are held up as an alternative to in-person or online care provided by a therapist, questions remain about the efficacy of different apps. Of the teens and young adults who have ever used an app for their mental health and well-being, 47% found the app to be very helpful (16%) or somewhat helpful (31%), while 37% found the app a little helpful (28%) or not at all helpful (9%). Sixteen percent were not able to remember accurately if the app was helpful.

Percent of young people who have used certain mobile apps related to mental health, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ in 2023

Among ages 14 to 22, percent of those who have ever used a mobile app related to any of the following	Total	Age		Gender		Race/ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/boys	Women/girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Sleep	31%	24%[a]	36%[b]	26%[a]	35%[b]	27%[a]	32%[a]	38%[b]	36%	30%
Meditation/mindfulness	29%	24%[a]	32%[b]	22%[a]	35%[b]	24%[a]	36%[b]	35%[b]	36%[a]	28%[b]
Happiness or well-being	25%	18%[a]	30%[b]	17%[a]	30%[b]	21%[a]	31%[b]	30%[b]	37%[a]	23%[b]
Stress reduction	22%	18%[a]	25%[b]	15%[a]	27%[b]	18%[a]	26%[b]	30%[b]	35%[a]	20%[b]
Anxiety	19%	15%[a]	23%[b]	12%[a]	25%[b]	15%[a]	28%[b]	26%[b]	31%[a]	18%[b]
Mood tracker	20%	15%[a]	24%[b]	13%[a]	24%[b]	14%[a]	22%[a]	31%[b]	34%[a]	18%[b]
Depression	18%	14%[a]	21%[b]	14%[a]	19%[b]	13%[a]	27%[b]	25%[b]	28%[a]	17%[b]
ADHD	13%	10%[a]	15%[b]	11%	14%	10%[a]	17%[ab]	20%[b]	19%[a]	12%[b]
Quitting smoking or vaping	10%	7%[a]	12%[b]	8%	10%	5%[a]	17%[b]	17%[b]	14%[a]	9%[b]
Drug or alcohol abuse	7%	4%[a]	9%[b]	6%	7%	4%[a]	12%[b]	10%[b]	10%[a]	6%[b]
Any other health-related topic	17%	11%[a]	20%[b]	10%[a]	22%[b]	15%[a]	24%[b]	18%[ab]	26%[a]	15%[b]

Note: Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category (*p* < .05). Q: "Have you ever used a mobile app related to any of the following?"
Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 young people age 14–22 nationwide.

Conclusion

With the increase in concern over youth mental health in the past decade, and in the absence of a parallel increase in care providers over the same time, many young people struggle to find in-person care, support, and actionable information for their behavioral health challenges. To address this gap, providers have developed new paths for care to expand capacity and begin to address the growing need for accessible support and information.

This report shares new data that puts into perspective how these newer options for care—including behavioral health apps, online therapy, and information on mental health shared through a variety of platforms—are being used and what users think about their effectiveness. One long-standing challenge of in-person youth mental health services has been that Black and Latino young people have lower rates of access and use of care when compared with White young people.[20] We see that users who are historically underserved by in-person care often take greater advantage of online offerings—potentially in part because such avenues can provide more tailored, affordable, culturally appropriate care, and also offer discreet access that works around community stigma about mental health.

The data also shows that young people who report symptoms of depression—including those who generally report substantially higher rates of these symptoms, like LGBTQ+ young people—are also taking greater advantage of these online opportunities for therapy, interventions, and information.

However, despite the sizable share of certain groups of young people who are turning to online therapy and behavioral health apps for support, the findings call attention to room for improvement in the accessibility and helpfulness of these digital platforms. While 31% of those who used an app to support their mental health said they were *somewhat helpful* in the current survey, just 16% of app users felt they were *very helpful*. The picture was more mixed to positive for online therapy, with 31% of those who attended saying it was *somewhat helpful*, and another 31% reporting that it was *very helpful*.

Latino young people are more likely to have attended online therapy and to seek therapy through a telehealth company than their White peers, and Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to use behavioral health apps. In focus groups, Black and Latino young people pointed to the potential of these technologies to help communities overcome barriers of cultural stigma, provide low-cost access, and facilitate connections with providers who share their ethnic and racial identities. Yet, in the survey, youth indicated mixed satisfaction with online therapy and apps.

Within qualitative interviews and focus groups, LGBTQ+ young people in particular expressed concerns around attending online therapy related to stigma, privacy, and therapist expertise and sensitivity around dealing with LGBTQ+ identity-related issues. Based on these patterns, telehealth and behavioral health apps need to do more to address LGBTQ+ young people's concerns related to privacy, stigma, and identity-related competencies. These findings also point to a broader need for targeted research into the qualities of online therapy and apps that make them more or less supportive, to facilitate the development of more effective online behavioral health services.

Overall, this study suggests that online therapy and behavioral health apps have begun to reduce barriers to access for Black and Latino young people, and fill some needs for LGBTQ+ youth, but work remains to fully realize their potential to be both culturally appropriate and youth-centered.

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[20] Lu, W., Todhunter-Reid, A., Mitsdarffer, M. L., Muñoz-Laboy, M., Yoon, A. S., & Xu, L. (2021). Barriers and facilitators for mental health service use among racial/ethnic minority adolescents: A systematic review of literature. *Frontiers in Public Health, 9.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.641605

Study Limitations

As with any study, various limitations should be kept in mind as stakeholders seek to translate the findings into recommendations. Crucially, this report does not seek to establish causality in its analysis and does not offer claims about the extent to which the use of behavioral health information, online therapy, and mental health apps drives positive or negative outcomes in youth mental health and well-being. Instead, this study contributes to a growing body of research illustrating the varied contexts in which young people make use of the digital tools at their disposal to find information and seek out professional and peer-based support across websites, social media platforms, and apps.

Additionally, while the study reports differences by demographic groups such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity, such findings should not be interpreted as applicable to all young people in such groups. Young people—and subgroups of them—are not a monolith. The impact that online behavioral health resources have on specific young people depends on their developmental level, individual dispositions, and contextual aspects (e.g., school, peer groups, family, socioeconomic status, etc.).[21,22]

Furthermore, while oversampling techniques allowed for deeper analysis of youth who are LGBTQ+, youth of color, and those who report depressive symptoms, certain smaller subgroups (such as nonbinary youth) were still too small to be meaningfully included in the analysis. It is essential to continue investment in studies such as these that present high-quality, nationally representative data paired with qualitative responses that reflect the lived experiences and views of teens and young adults as we seek to understand the complex interplay between young people's use of technology and their well-being.

[21] Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2013). The differential susceptibility to media effects model. *Journal of Communication, 63*(2), 221–243. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0122

[22] Beyens, I., Pouwels, J. L., van Driel, I. I., Keijsers, L., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. *Scientific Reports, 10*(1), Article 10763. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-67727-7

Methodology

For a detailed description of the Methodology for this report, please refer to the Methods section in our previous report based on this same data collection, *A Double-Edged Sword: How Diverse Communities of Young People Think About the Multifaceted Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health.* The report is available at: **www.commonsense.org/ youth-perspectives-social-media-mental-health**

Hopelab

Hopelab is a transformative social innovation lab and impact investor working to support the mental well-being of adolescents age 10 to 25, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ young people. Through philanthropic funding, collaborations, and intergenerational partnerships, Hopelab works at the intersection of tech and mental health alongside entrepreneurs, funders, researchers, and young change-makers to create systems of change and build a thriving future for underserved young people. For more information, visit **hopelab.org**.

Common Sense Media

Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century. Our independent research is designed to provide parents and caregivers, educators, health organizations, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. For more information, visit **commonsensemedia.org/research**.

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