

Research Report May 2024

# Unraveling the Stigma

Exploring Barriers to Mental Health Support Among U.S. Teens



The Jed Foundation

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## About The Jed Foundation (JED)

JED is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation’s teens and young adults. We’re partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We’re equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We’re encouraging community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health.

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## Suggested Citation

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# What's New From This Research

The stigma attached to mental health issues is widely viewed as a major barrier for those in need of help, but its relevance to teens and young adults has not been studied in depth. The Jed Foundation's research shows that stigma-related obstacles, like the shame caused by difficult emotions, are not the most important factors preventing teens from reaching out for mental health support. Their top concerns are that (1) others won't understand them, (2) talking about difficult feelings would make them uncomfortable, and (3) they don't want to be a burden to others. Teens primarily look for nonjudgmental support from parents, who are their top source of support. This report explores how parents, caregivers, and other adults can better enable teens to talk about their mental health.

## Background & Purpose

Teens and young adults are facing mental health challenges at a growing rate. In 2021, 42% of high school students surveyed said they experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year, compared to 28% in 2011<sup>1</sup>. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among young people ages 10-34<sup>2</sup>. The majority of people who die by suicide have not seen a mental health professional in the last year<sup>3</sup> and less than a third of adolescents 13-18 with suicidal thoughts see a mental health professional<sup>4</sup>. It's clear that ensuring access to mental health resources, providing support for mental health challenges, and ensuring youth and adolescents get help is essential in suicide prevention.

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1 [Youth Risk Behavior Survey, CDC, 2023](#)

2 [CDC, 2022](#)

3 [Stene-Larsen & Reneflot, 2019; Tang et al., 2021](#)

4 [Hom, Stanley, & Joiner, 2015](#)

While many barriers to mental health treatment exist, stigma traditionally has been high on the list. Mental health stigma generally encompasses negative and often unfair attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding people with a mental health condition. People who carry stigma-related attitudes and beliefs are less likely to access care and follow through with treatment for their mental health needs<sup>5</sup>.

However, stigma has been largely understudied among teen populations, and teens may not experience stigma the same way adults do. Perceptions of stigma as well as attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking behaviors may also vary by race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, each new generation forms its own perspectives on mental health care, which can create opportunities for more open discussion of mental health struggles<sup>7</sup>. The impact of COVID-19 likely increased mental health awareness after the loneliness, isolation, grief, and life disruptions experienced by many since 2020.



This research study examined teens (ages 13 to 17) and their help-seeking behaviors, attitudes, and barriers. We sought to understand the role stigma plays in discouraging help-seeking behaviors and to determine which groups are more likely to encounter different barriers to receiving help. Our work explored ways to better promote help-seeking behaviors and encourage more teens to seek support when they face emotional challenges. The study also aimed to ensure that the systems supporting students, such as schools and parents, receive the information and best practices they need to support students through difficult emotions.

This study led us to understand that there is a continuum of barriers preventing young people from seeking help (see [Figure 1 on page 4](#)). Using teen-centric language, we defined stigma as (1) feelings of shame, embarrassment, or guilt, (2) fear of being seen as “mentally ill”, and (3) fear of being seen as abnormal if they opened up about their mental health challenges. Stigma-related barriers include fear of (1) judgment from others, (2) disclosing information, and (3) damage to their reputation. These barriers could be related to stigma as well as other factors, such as protecting the image that teens want others to see, which is essential to this stage in life. Other barriers include social, structural, and situational barriers that stop teens from seeking help. These can include wanting to handle issues alone, not knowing where to get assistance, and lacking trust that the system will help them.

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5 [Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Livingston & Boyd, 2010; Caelear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014](#)

6 [Clement et al., 2015](#)

7 [American Psychological Association, 2019](#)



Figure 1:  
**Barriers to Teen Help-Seeking**





## Methodology

A mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used with diverse samples of teens ages 13 to 17 across the U.S. The qualitative phase consisted of in-depth interviews with 44 Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and non-Hispanic white teens. The quantitative phase followed, with a 25-minute questionnaire distributed to nearly 1,500 teens. This group was broadly representative of the U.S. teen population, including large samples of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, and LGBTQ+ teens to ensure that these groups with a history of help-seeking barriers were adequately represented in analyses. For more details on the methodology, please see the [Appendix](#).





# Key Findings

**1 Stigma is not a top barrier for teens reaching out about emotional concerns.** They hesitate to seek support because they feel they won't be understood, are very uncomfortable talking about difficult emotions, and/or do not want to be a burden to others. When it comes to confiding in adults, teens fear that adults won't be able to relate to their situation and will try to solve the teens' problems without really listening. As for confiding in peers, the reverse is true – teens fear friends would listen but not be able to help solve their problems.

Figure 2:

Top 5 Barriers With Adults	Top 5 Barriers With Friends
1 They might not understand me/ what I'm feeling	1 I would be very uncomfortable talking about it
2 I would be very uncomfortable talking about it	2 They might not understand me/ what I'm feeling
3 They would try to solve it rather than just listening to me	3 They would listen to me but not know how to help me solve my problems
4 I would rather avoid any discomfort when it comes to my emotions/feelings	4 I would rather avoid any discomfort when it comes to my emotions/feelings
5 They can't relate to my situation	5 I don't want to be a burden to them
5 I don't want to be a burden to them	



2

**Though not the greatest hurdles for teens, stigma-related barriers do exist.** The top stigma-related barriers are:

- ▶ not wanting anyone to know they are struggling (ranked 8th for barriers to reaching out to adults and 6th for reaching out to friends)
- ▶ not wanting to be seen as weak (ranked 12th for adults, 7th for friends)
- ▶ feeling shame, embarrassment, or guilt (ranked 13th for adults, 10th for friends)
- ▶ not being seen as normal anymore (ranked 30th for adults, 22nd for friends)
- ▶ feeling it would damage their reputation (ranked 36th for adults, 30th for friends)

**“Sometimes when things around me are bothering me, it can be difficult to express my feelings. You feel like you won’t be accepted, or you’ll be rejected really bad.”**

**– Alissa, 13**



Table 1: Barriers to Talking About Uncomfortable Emotions With Adults	General population
They might not understand me/what I'm feeling	51%
I would be very uncomfortable talking about it	51%
They would try to solve it rather than just listening to me	49%
I would rather avoid any discomfort when it comes to my emotions/feelings	48%
They can't relate to my situation	47%
I don't want to be a burden to them	47%
I should be able to handle my emotions and cope on my own	45%
I don't want anyone to find out that I'm struggling	43%
They would escalate the situation in ways I'm not comfortable with	42%
The thought of reaching out for help is too overwhelming	42%
I don't need to – I can handle things on my own	42%
I don't want to be seen as weak or not mentally strong	42%
I would feel shame, embarrassment, and/or guilt in talking about it	42%
I worry it will backfire and make the situation worse	42%
I don't know the words or language to use to express my feelings	42%
They would listen to me but not know how to help me solve my problems	41%
My problems are not serious enough to talk to others about them	40%
I would be seen as dramatic	39%
They would give generic/canned advice that isn't right for me personally	38%
They would bring it up in the future and I won't want to be reminded of it	38%

Colored bars correspond to 'stigma' and 'stigma-related' barriers on [page 4](#).

Table 2: Barriers to Talking About Uncomfortable Emotions With Friends	General population
I would be very uncomfortable talking about it	51%
They might not understand me/what I'm feeling	51%
They would listen to me but not know how to help me solve my problems	50%
I would rather avoid any discomfort when it comes to my emotions/feelings	49%
I don't want to be a burden to them	49%
I don't want anyone to find out that I'm struggling	48%
I don't want to be seen as weak or not mentally strong	47%
They would share what we discuss with others	47%
I should be able to handle my emotions and cope on my own	46%
I would feel shame, embarrassment, and/or guilt in talking about it	46%
I don't need to – I can handle things on my own	45%
They can't relate to my situation	44%
I worry it will backfire and make the situation worse	43%
The thought of reaching out for help is too overwhelming	42%
My problems are not serious enough to talk to others about them	42%
I would be seen as dramatic	42%
They would try to solve it rather than just listening to me	42%
They would bring it up in the future and I won't want to be reminded of it	41%
They would give generic/canned advice that isn't right for me personally	40%
They would escalate the situation in ways I'm not comfortable with	40%

Colored bars correspond to 'stigma' and 'stigma-related' barriers on [page 4](#).





3

**Certain barriers to help-seeking were reported to be higher when considering reaching out to friends versus adults.** The top barriers that were higher for friends included:

- ▶ fearing that they would tell others (47% for friends versus 37% for adults)
- ▶ not knowing how they would help (50% for friends versus 41% for adults)
- ▶ feeling that their friends would not want to hear about their struggles (34% versus 27%)
- ▶ feeling that it would damage their reputation (35% versus 28%)

These barriers suggest that teens may be more likely to experience stigma-related barriers when sharing information with friends than adults.

4

**Some stigma-related attitudes and beliefs were higher for Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, and/or LGBTQ+ teens.**

Asian teens reported that help-seeking and sharing emotions are not well accepted in their culture. Compared to the general teen population, they are less likely to reach out to sources of support such as mental health professionals, guidance counselors, teachers, family members, and online resources. Mental-health-related attitudes and perceptions show that they struggle to talk about emotions and ask for help. Asian teens are less likely than their peers to strongly agree that “it is important to me to actively take care of my mental health” (23% versus 30% for the general population), and they are more likely to report that “my problems are not serious enough to talk to others about them” (47% versus 42% for the general population).



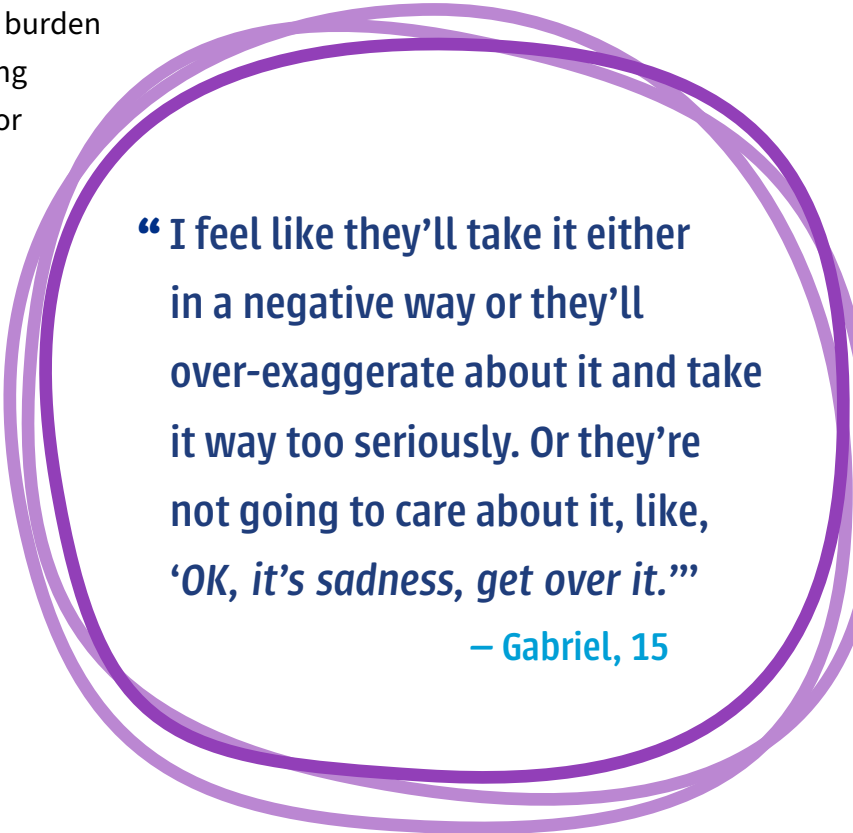
Hispanic/Latinx teens cite help-seeking barriers related to feeling unsafe or unsupported, fear of retaliation, and worries related to how they will be perceived by others. Hispanic/Latinx teens are also more likely to have experienced racial discrimination and inequality that has negatively impacted how they felt in the past month. Compared to the general teen population, they are more likely to report:

- ▶ the thought of reaching out for help is too overwhelming (49% versus 42% for the general population)
- ▶ it's hard to find moments when it's safe to reach out (39% versus 33%)
- ▶ people they confide in would bring it up in the future as ammunition in an argument (39% versus 32%)
- ▶ they wouldn't be seen as "normal" anymore (39% versus 32%)

Black/African American teens cite help-seeking barriers related to privacy, disclosure, and trust. They were more likely than the general population of teens to report that if they were to reach out for help, that person would escalate the situation in ways they are not comfortable with (50% versus 42% for the general population) and feared the person would share what was discussed with others (50% versus 37%). They also did not want to be seen as "weak" or "not mentally strong" (49% versus 42%). They are especially likely to have experienced racial discrimination and inequality that has negatively impacted how they have felt in the past month.

LGBTQ+ teens are more likely to fear being a burden to others, not being taken seriously, and being seen as lesser than others if they reach out for help. They were more likely to report that:

- ▶ they didn't want to be a burden (57% versus 47% for the general population)
- ▶ they should be able to handle their emotions and cope on their own (52% versus 45%)
- ▶ they would be seen as dramatic if they reached out for help (52% versus 39%)



**“I feel like they’ll take it either in a negative way or they’ll over-exaggerate about it and take it way too seriously. Or they’re not going to care about it, like, ‘OK, it’s sadness, get over it.’”**

– Gabriel, 15



LGBTQ+ teens are more likely to have experienced discrimination based on their physical appearance, sexuality, and gender that has negatively impacted how they felt in the past month. They are also more likely to report stress related to national and world issues.

**5** **Teens are aware of the importance of mental health and seeking support but have trouble taking action and reaching out for help.**

For example, 76% of teens believe it is important to actively care for their mental health and 74% of teens say it is a sign of strength to reach out for help with mental health. However, 48% say they would only seek out professional help as a last resort, 42% say they do not have the words to ask for help, 42% say it is too overwhelming to reach out for support, and 33% say it is hard to find safe moments to talk. Older teens and girls are more likely to agree that it is a sign of strength when someone reaches out, and to report that they feel comfortable talking with people close to them about their emotions.

**“Sometimes it’s not the right time. If my friends were going through something, it’d be hard to talk to them because they already have stuff that they’re going through.”**

**– Marshall, 15**

**6** **Teens would be most compelled to talk to someone for support if it would help them feel better in their day-to-day lives.** According to teens, the top five benefits of seeking help are the potential that the interaction will support them in the following ways:

- ▶ help them cope with pressure or stress better (38%)
- ▶ help them feel better about themselves (36%)
- ▶ help them improve their life for the better (32%)
- ▶ help them improve their mood each day (30%)
- ▶ help them be a better version of themselves (28%)

Older teens (17-year-olds) are more motivated than younger teens by messages about preparing for adulthood, including language that focuses on helping them prepare for life as an adult and helping them become successful.

**7** **Teens are most likely to seek out support from parents first, followed by friends and family members.** Older teens are more likely to reach out to their friends about challenges related to depression, family problems, and feeling overwhelmed at school. School personnel such as teachers and guidance counselors are next in line for school-related challenges, but overall are not seen as top supporters for teens' challenges.

Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American teens are more likely than their peers to:

- ▶ turn to siblings, cousins, other family members, community organizations, and their own religious group for support
- ▶ report seeking out support from online resources, including online friends and communities
- ▶ seek support from school personnel, such as guidance counselors and psychologists, regarding dating and family problems.






**“I don’t really know a lot of adults outside my family... so it’s like I can’t trust you if I don’t know you.”**

**– Jamar, 16**

In many cases, including problems with students at school, problems with depression, family problems, and school stress, Black/African American teens are more likely than their peers to seek out help from school support personnel and mental health professionals. LGBTQ+ teens are more likely than the general population to turn to mental health professionals and online friends and community for support. When dealing with depression, LGBTQ+ teens are more likely to seek help from friends and mental health professionals.

Table 3:

**People Teens Are Most Likely to Go to for Support in Various Situations  
(Among Teens Ages 13 to 17)**

	 Problems with students at school	 Dating problems	 Depression	 Family problems	 Overwhelmed at school
<b>1</b>	Parents 52%	In-real-life friends 40%	Parents 51%	Parents 45%	Parents 56%
<b>2</b>	In-real-life friends 42%	Parents 37%	In-real-life friends 37%	In-real-life friends 38%	In-real-life friends 39%
<b>3</b>	Siblings or cousins 32%	Siblings or cousins 27%	Siblings or cousins 31%	Siblings or cousins 30%	Siblings or cousins 30%
<b>4</b>	School guidance counselors 22%	Someone you are dating 19%	Other family members 20%	Other family members 20%	School guidance counselors 21%
<b>5</b>	Teachers 21%	Other family members 17%	Someone you are dating 20%	Someone you are dating 20%	Teachers 21%



**“ I like having the judgment-free zone. Sometimes you can’t get that with certain friends or certain family members, because they’re always going to be like, ‘What do you mean by that?’ And it’s just very nice having someone that I can go to without me being judged.”**

**– Tory, 15**






# 8

## Teens most prefer help-givers to listen without judgment and keep what they share confidential.

When prompted about various situations which they may need to seek out help, teens' top choice is someone who listens without judgment, followed by someone who keeps what they say confidential. Teens are particularly interested in talking with someone who listens without judgment about their problems with depression (54%), family problems (49%), dating problems (47%), problems with students at school (46%) and feeling overwhelmed at school (46%). Older teens (15 to 17 years old) are more likely than younger teens (13 to 14 years old) to prefer support from a person who listens without judgment.

Table 4:

**Top 4 Preferred Help Traits Across Situations (Among Teens Ages 13 to 17)**

	 Problems with students at school	 Dating problems	 Depression	 Family problems	 Overwhelmed at school
<b>1</b>	Can help me solve or fix the problem 47%	Listens without judgment 47%	Listens without judgment 54%	Listens without judgment 49%	Listens without judgment 46%
<b>2</b>	Listens without judgment 46%	Keeps what I say confidential 39%	Keeps what I say confidential 39%	Keeps what I say confidential 39%	Can help me solve or fix the problem 45%
<b>3</b>	Keeps what I say confidential 34%	Has been in a similar situation 31%	Can help me solve or fix the problem 32%	Can help me solve or fix the problem 37%	Has been in a similar situation 34%
<b>4</b>	Has been in a similar situation 32%	Can help me solve or fix the problem 30%	Has been in a similar situation 31%	Has been in a similar situation 34%	Keeps what I say confidential 31%

9

**Teens are most likely to reach out to an adult if they are worried about a friend being suicidal and less likely to reach out if they are feeling suicidal or are self-harming.** Over 90% of teens are *very or somewhat likely* to reach out to a supportive adult if they are worried a friend is suicidal and 88% would do so if they were worried about the mental health or well-being of a friend. 81% reported they were *very or somewhat likely* to reach out if they were feeling suicidal.

However, 59% of teens say they would be *very likely* to reach out to a supportive adult if they were worried a friend is suicidal, and only 43% would be *very likely* to reach out if they were feeling suicidal. The percentage of teens who say they would be *very likely* to reach out about their own suicidal thoughts is higher for Black/African American teens (52%) and lower for Asian teens (43%).

This gap between those who can confidently say they would reach out and those who would be somewhat likely to reach out indicates that teens may not understand what suicidal risk looks like and may not know who to go to and trust in these situations.

“ Maybe you don’t want your friends to be mad at you, but you know that it’s the best thing for them. I need to call her mom, because this is the best thing for her. Even on social media, suicide is a big thing nowadays. You don’t want to see your friend go through that. You don’t want to wish you had done something. ... I’d rather see her safe.”

– Ayanna, 15

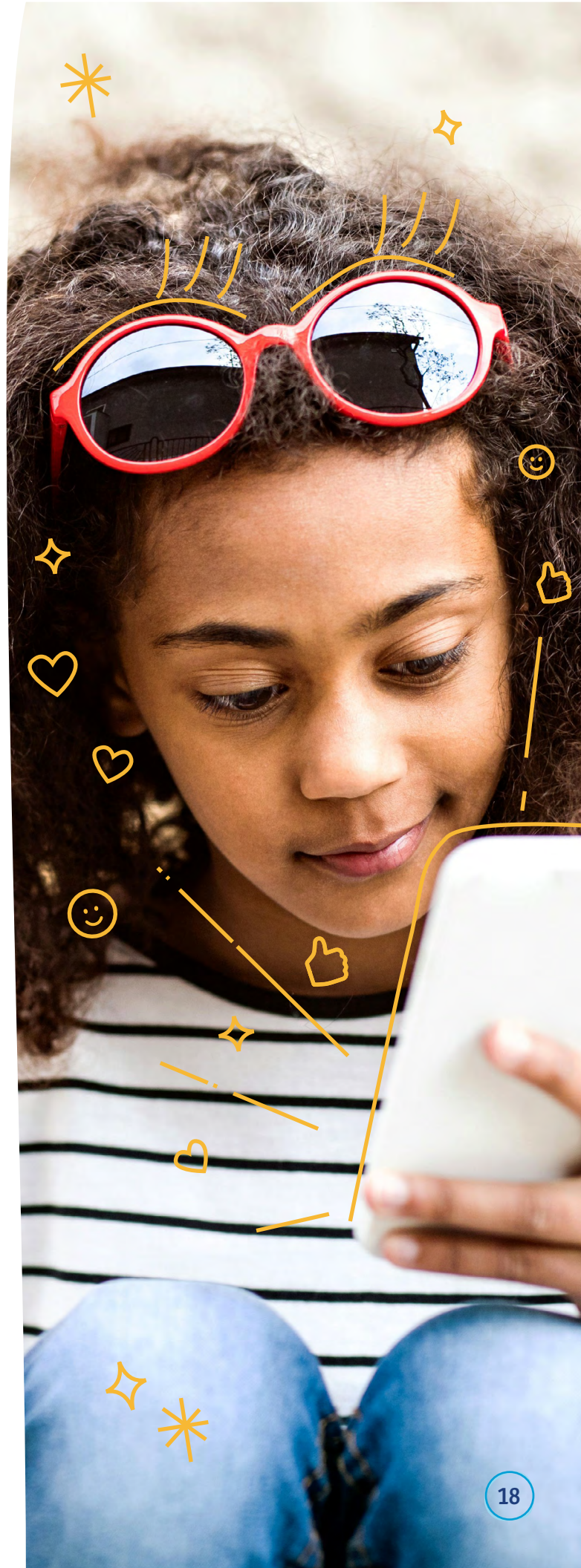
10

**When teens seek out support online, they are most likely to use TikTok (43%), YouTube (39%), and Instagram (38%).**

Hispanic and Black/African American teens are more likely to cite Instagram as a source of support than other platforms (46% for Hispanic teens and 51% for Black/African American teens). Compared to other teens, Asian and LGBTQ+ teens are more likely to use Discord (22% for Asian teens, and 26% for LGBTQ+ teens). Discord was not selected as a top source of support for other teens. 15% of teens do not use online sources of support.

“Sometimes I go on TikTok to see if there are tips on stress. It comes with the searches. If I’m searching ‘how to deal with stress’ videos, my page will come up with different ways. I just search it up.”

— Gabriel, 15







## Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has important implications for teen mental health. Teens encounter barriers to seeking out help, and stigma is part — but not all — of the equation. Teens need opportunities to practice expressing their feelings and seeking out help for emotional challenges. They would also benefit from more encouragement and modeling of how to identify sources of mental health support, as well as more information about what they should expect when they ask for help. Messages about help-seeking should address teens’ day-to-day lives and show how talking about their mental health may help them feel better and relieve stress.

Since parents are the top source of support for teen mental health, they have a great opportunity to make time and space for difficult conversations and help their teens manage challenges. Teens might benefit most from a supportive individual who can listen without judgment and refrain from immediately trying to solve their problems. Clear discussions of disclosure and confidentiality can help teens know what information remains protected and what needs to be shared with outside professionals.

Teens may not be equipped to provide comprehensive support to peers with mental health concerns, but they can still benefit from additional mental health education and resources to assist a friend in a time of need. Other supportive adults in teens’ lives, such as teachers, school mental health professionals, and other community members (e.g., coaches and religious leaders) should check in with teens regularly about their emotions and mental health concerns, rather than wait for teens to ask them for support. Adults can benefit from training in adolescent mental health support with the cultural, historical, and societal contexts that may make it more difficult for many teens to seek out help and trust the process.

Formal institutions, such as schools, and less formal online settings, such as social media platforms, need to take responsibility for teens' well-being by prioritizing messages about mental health. They can include positive messages about:

- self-care practices
- reaching out to a trusted supporter
- teaching and reinforcing healthy coping strategies
- looking out for teens when they are in distress

Teen mental health is not just the responsibility of friends and parents. From school counselors and coaches to neighbors and community leaders, everyone has a role to play in building positive, supportive environments that help teens prioritize their own mental health. When adults in the community come together, they can support young people's well-being and reassure them that they aren't alone and that safe and supportive resources are within reach.

Get additional support and resources about promoting teen help-seeking behaviors by visiting JED's ["I want to help my teen/young adult"](#) caregiver hub or ["I want to help my students"](#) educator hub.

If you're a teen looking for mental health support, visit the JED [Mental Health Resource Center](#) for information on common emotional health issues and tips on supporting your friends, overcoming challenges, and navigating the transition to adulthood.



# Appendix

## Methodology

Research was conducted over two phases. Qualitative research was conducted with a diverse sample of 44 teens ages 13 to 17 nationwide to understand common life stressors, support networks, definitions of trust, and barriers to help-seeking. This sample consisted of 17 girls and 27 boys across the following racial/ethnic backgrounds: Black/African American (n=17), Hispanic/Latinx (n=18), and Non-Hispanic White (n=9). This sample was specifically chosen in order to uncover stigma-related attitudes in groups of people who traditionally are less likely to reach out for help with mental health challenges. Participants took part in individualized in-depth webcam interviews with an adult research facilitator. Interviews were conducted between March 22 and April 14, 2023.

Quantitative research followed with 1,428 teens ages 13 to 17 nationwide to further understand the role of stigma-related barriers among the full set of help-seeking barriers. The research also aimed to explore the role of various supportive adults in teens' lives and the tendency for these adults to be sought out in times of challenge, and to uncover potential messages, platforms, and themes for which teens may be more likely to reach out for help. The sample was representative of the U.S. population of teens ages 13 to 17 with regard to race/ethnicity, income, and region. Large enough samples were obtained for particular groups (Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, Asian, and LGBTQ+ teens) known to be at risk for mental health challenges and/or that tend to reach out less for support for these challenges. 49% of the sample identified as girls, 49% identified as boys, and 2% identified as transgender or nonbinary. 14% of teens identified as LGBTQ+. Race/ethnicity was distributed as follows: 60% Non-Hispanic White, 21% Hispanic, 13% Black, 8% Asian, 4% Multiracial, 2% Native America/Alaskan Native, <1% Middle Eastern. The questionnaire was a 25-minute, self-administered online survey fielded from September 28 to October 31, 2023. In order to participate, parents/caregivers answered an initial set of demographic questions, and then turned it over to their teen to opt in and participate in the study.



The Jed Foundation