

New Technology, Familiar Barriers

What Young People Say About Using
Generative AI for Mental Health Support



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Executive Summary

The rapid rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping many aspects of young people’s everyday lives, including their mental health journey. As these technologies become more widely available, many are turning to GenAI to navigate, understand, and manage their mental health. While international research has increasingly documented this shift, little is known about how young people in Canada are using GenAI for mental health purposes, what needs it fulfills, and how it fits within their broader help-seeking pathways. Critically, few have asked what questions, concerns, and priorities young people themselves have about this topic, leaving these important questions unanswered.

In partnership with members of Jack.org’s Youth Voice Council Research & Evaluation Subcommittee, this report explores how and why young people in Canada use GenAI for mental health support. Findings are drawn from a national online survey of 395 young people, who were recruited through Jack.org’s network of youth.

Key Findings



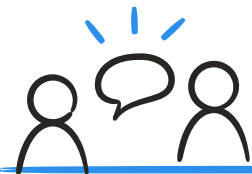
GenAI is already part of many young people’s mental health journeys

One in three young people surveyed reported using GenAI for mental health purposes **once per month or more**. GenAI was perceived as an accessible, immediate, and judgment-free space to process emotions, seek advice, and navigate everyday challenges, especially when human support was unavailable, difficult to access, or when a young person was not ready to speak with another individual.



Barriers to mental health support, rather than perceived effectiveness, often motivate GenAI use

Barriers to traditional mental health services (i.e., wait times, costs, stigma) appear to be driving young people in Canada to GenAI. While one in three young people reported using GenAI for mental health purposes because it felt less judgmental than talking to a human, **nearly half of respondents (43-50%) still viewed human relationships as the more effective source of mental health support**.



Low disclosure of GenAI use to adults highlights the central role of peers

Nearly half of young people reported not disclosing their use of GenAI for mental health purposes to anyone. While some preferred to keep their use private, qualitative findings suggested the possibility of an emerging or compounded stigma surrounding this form of help-seeking. Disclosure of GenAI use for mental health purposes was more likely to be made to a peer (37%) compared to caring adults (6-12%). These findings highlight the vital role of peer relationships in digital help-seeking pathways and the opportunity to foster open, non-judgmental conversations between young people and caring adults about their use of GenAI for mental health support.



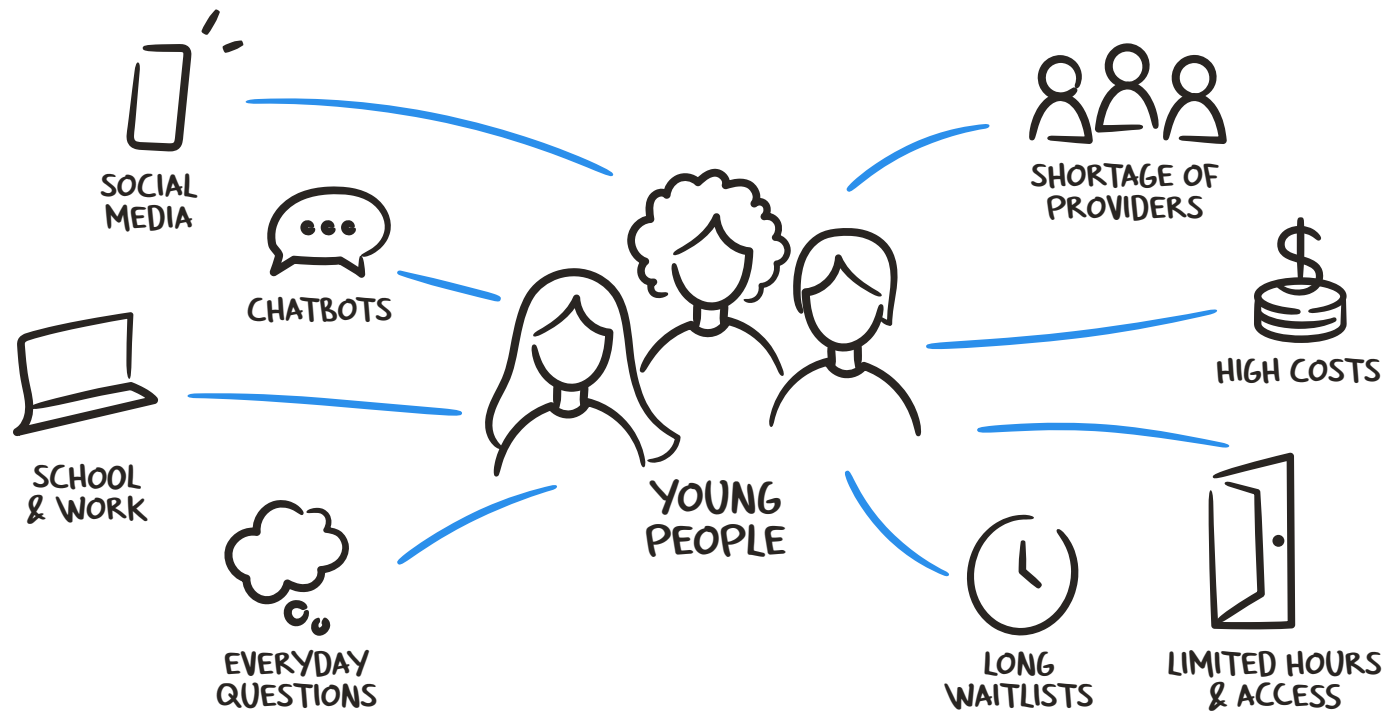
Young people want a role in shaping the future of GenAI and mental health

Young people expressed the desire to have an active role in shaping the future of GenAI and mental health. The highest ranked youth priority for government investment was **regulating GenAI** to protect young people’s data and privacy, as well as to support young people’s abilities to use these tools safely.

Background

The rapid growth of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), technologies that can generate new human-like content (text, images, audio, etc.) based on a user's prompt (Government of Canada, 2025) is changing how young people navigate their everyday lives. For many young people, exposure to GenAI begins passively through integrations embedded within social media platforms, such as Snapchat's MyAI or Meta AI. For others, engagement with GenAI tools is intentional, with young people actively seeking out popular GenAI chatbots, including ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot. Regardless of the entry point, GenAI has increasingly become embedded within young people's digital lives.

This emerging trend intersects with challenging realities of the Canadian youth mental health system. Approximately one in five Canadians are diagnosed with a mental illness by age 25, with nearly 70% experiencing their first symptoms before the age of 18.¹ Suicide has remained the second-leading cause of death among young people in Canada for the last two decades,² and 15–20% of Canadians aged 15–30 reported having suicidal thoughts.³ Despite these alarming realities, fewer than half of young Canadians living with mental illness receive adequate care.^{4,5} A shortage of mental health care providers, high costs, long waitlists, and limited hours of service, particularly in underserved communities, continue to prevent access to mental health care,⁶ representing a critical public health issue with profound impacts on young people in Canada.^{7,8}



A Changed Mental Health Ecosystem

As young people navigate these persistent gaps in the mental health system, some are turning to GenAI as a low-barrier avenue to understand and manage their mental health. Though Canadian-specific data remains limited, early national polling indicates that approximately 17% of young Canadians report having used GenAI tools for mental health purposes,⁹ with adoption rates nearly six times higher than older adults.¹⁰ These emerging findings mirror those reported in the United States, where nearly one in five adolescents and young adults report having used AI chatbots for mental health advice.¹¹

Global research indicates that young people have found a variety of mental health-related uses for GenAI. These include exploring one's emotions, learning about mental health, exploring coping strategies, accessing mental health information, seeking support during moments when human support may not be immediately available, and engaging in conversations that resemble supportive check-ins or reflection.^{11–15} In Canada, 69% of young people surveyed considered mental health-related content from GenAI tools as helpful.⁹

The value of GenAI appears to be shaped not only by the capabilities of the technology itself, but also by how it compares to existing sources of support. Youth have reported the availability, anonymity, non-judgmental tone, and immediate response from GenAI as possible reasons motivating their use of GenAI for this purpose.^{11,15–17} Reports from youth-serving organizations in Canada suggest that young people increasingly turn to GenAI when human support is unavailable, unaffordable, or perceived as stigmatizing.¹¹

As new opportunities for youth mental health and GenAI use emerge, so do new questions. What are the risks of using GenAI as a young person? Several concerns have been raised regarding GenAI's reliability, data privacy, accuracy, safety, crisis response capabilities, and the potential for overdependence for emotional regulation, particularly in situations where human support is imperative.^{16,18,19} A Canadian study highlighted concerns related to privacy, safety, and limitations in responding to complex mental health needs, reinforcing the importance of understanding how young people are using these tools and what guidance and support they need to use them safely.²⁰ GenAI was perceived to be unable to replace human connection, empathy, and professional judgment.²⁰ Several widely reported cases have also raised concerns about the potential risks of relying on GenAI for mental health support. These include legal cases and media reports alleging that chatbot interactions

may have contributed to harmful outcomes, including a lawsuit involving the suicide of a 14-year-old following interactions with a GenAI chatbot and reports of unsafe chatbot responses to young people experiencing suicidal thoughts.²¹ A comprehensive understanding of GenAI's role in youth mental health thus requires simultaneous attention to its potential benefits and risks, alongside the individual, relational, and systemic factors that influence young people's use of these technologies.

Unequal Experiences and Impacts

Early research suggests that youth experiences using GenAI for their mental health are not universal. Differences in how young people use, perceive, and benefit from these technologies have been observed across factors such as gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic location, race, income, and ethnicity.^{11,22–24} For example, research reported differences in frequency of use across demographic groups, with 18% of Black young people reporting using GenAI for mental health support compared with 6% of white young people. Similarly, higher use of GenAI for mental health purposes was reported among young adults identifying as male, Black, and those with higher socioeconomic status in the United States.²² A survey of LGBT+ people conducted by Hopelab found that young people identifying as transgender and non-binary were more likely to report engaging with GenAI for companionship compared to those identifying as cisgender.²⁵ These differences suggest that some communities may be turning to GenAI at higher rates, a finding that scholars hypothesize may reflect existing disparities in access to support, experiences of stigma, and/or unmet needs.¹¹

However, higher frequency of use may not necessarily translate into greater benefit. Some studies document GenAI's perceived usefulness and safety can also vary across communities, identities, and lived experiences. For example, one study found that Black young people were less likely than white non-Hispanic participants to find mental health advice generated by GenAI helpful.¹¹ The authors describe this as an indication of a potential competency gap in how GenAI responds to racialized youth.¹¹ Another study identified that some young people living with disabilities described GenAI as misrepresenting, distorting, or erasing important parts of who they are.²⁶ Exploring the perspectives of young people with diverse identities and lived experiences is therefore critical to understanding the factors that shape GenAI use for mental health, as well as the disparities in mental health access and support it may address or inadvertently widen.

Evidence Gaps

As GenAI has increasingly become part of young people’s mental health journeys, evidence has not kept pace with its rapid adoption, leaving critical gaps.

Canadian Context

While international research on this topic is growing, we know much less in the Canadian context about how and why young people are using GenAI technologies, their perceptions of safety and usefulness, and how they fit alongside other forms of mental health support, especially for young people belonging to diverse communities and identities.

Everyday GenAI Use

Much of the Canadian research to date about GenAI and mental health has centred on its role within formal systems of care. Less is known about how young people are using these tools on their own terms, outside clinical settings, as part of their everyday mental health journeys.

Youth Engaged

Young people themselves have rarely been engaged as partners in research on this topic, leaving questions about what matters most to them, and where current research, policy, and practice fall short in representing their experiences and perspectives.

Objectives

As part of Jack.org’s ongoing evaluation and quality improvement, we partnered with young people to understand how young people in Canada within Jack.org’s network are using GenAI as part of their mental health journeys. We explored four questions:

- **Use:**
How and why are young people in Canada using GenAI for mental health purposes?
- **Purpose:**
What mental health needs does GenAI meet for young people?
- **Perceptions:**
What are the perceived risks and benefits of using GenAI for mental health purposes, including across young people with diverse identities?
- **Priorities:**
What are young people’s priorities when it comes to the future of GenAI for mental health purposes?

Glossary

- Critical users:** Individuals who actively weigh the benefits of GenAI against the limitations and risks, question the reliability of its outputs to make informed decisions about how they use it.
- Digital literacy:** The ability to use digital technologies to understand, evaluate, and communicate information safely and appropriately while understanding the opportunities and risks associated with it.¹
- Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI):** A type of artificial intelligence that generates content such as text, images, code, and more based on user prompts.³
- Help-seeking:** The act or intention to seek support from a health-care professional when faced with a health problem that cannot be managed or solved independently.⁴
- Human connection:** The feeling of being seen, heard, understood, valued, and cared for through meaningful interpersonal relationships.⁵
- Lived experience:** Individuals who have personally experienced or are experiencing a mental health challenge.⁷
- Mental illness:** A medical condition that may disrupt one’s personal life by affecting their thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and relationships with others.⁹
- Perceived safety:** The extent to which young people feel protected from sociotechnical harms and supported in ways that are developmentally appropriate, socially aware, and grounded in both youth agency and stakeholder expertise.²⁷ For this report, Youth Voice Council members opted to focus on digital safety, physical safety, and emotional safety.
- Social relationships:** Interactions and/or connections between two or more individuals.¹⁰
- Stigma:** Negative attitudes, behaviours, or beliefs directed towards a group of individuals due to a particular reason.¹¹
- Traditional mental health Services:** Mental health services that are conventional, such as speaking to a mental health professional, primary care provider, and/or licensed counsellor in a clinical setting.¹³
- Youth-informed:** Working with youth and directly including their perspectives, opinions, and experiences to allow for programs and services to be better tailored and sensitized to their needs and lived experiences.¹⁴



Methods

Through collaboration with Jack.org's Youth Voice Council Research & Evaluation Subcommittee¹, young people co-led each stage of the Youth Voice Report, from determining the most critical questions to defining what would make this report meaningful for a variety of stakeholders.

The project involved six stages:

- 1 Environmental Scan and Data Extraction**
A systematic environmental scan of both peer-reviewed and grey literature was conducted to identify and synthesize existing evidence on GenAI and youth mental health. Research gaps and limitations to methodological approaches were documented using a data extraction form.
- 2 Guided Workbook**
Building on the environmental scan, Youth Voice Council members completed a structured workbook, developed to translate literature findings into project priorities. The workbook guided young people through three key tasks: (1) identifying emerging themes from scanned literature, (2) prioritizing which themes represented the most pressing and under-explored areas, and (3) translating identified priority themes into survey questions. This phase ensured that youth perspectives informed which findings from the literature warranted further exploration and shaped the direction of the project.
- 3 Refining the Focus**
Jack.org's staff worked with youth members to finalize the report's key questions, identify core areas of project focus, and prioritize areas based on the impact and feasibility within the scope of the Youth Voice Report.

- 4 Survey Design**
The survey employed a mixed-methods design, combining structured quantitative questions about the extent and pattern of GenAI use among people in Canada, with qualitative questions that capture the context, nuance, and lived experiences associated with their use. The survey, available in both English and French, first screened for eligibility. Eligible respondents were members of Jack.org's youth network who self-reported using GenAI for mental health purposes.

Before beginning the survey, respondents were presented with a consent process outlining the purpose of the project and questions asked from participants. Respondents were asked to indicate their preference regarding the use of their experiences and perspectives in this report and were given the following options: (1) consent for their feedback to be anonymously quoted, or (2) a preference for their feedback not to be quoted. This preference was recorded and respected throughout the analysis and reporting process, and no respondent feedback was quoted against their stated preference.

Survey questions were informed by three key inputs: environmental scan, structured data extraction, and completed workbooks by subcommittee members. Triangulating across these three sources allowed survey questions to be grounded in existing evidence and youth-identified priorities.

- 5 Data Collection**
A multi-phase survey dissemination strategy was used to reach as many young people as possible. This included distribution via email to Jack.org's network of youth mental health advocates across Canada.² All respondents who completed the survey received a \$10 gift card as an honorarium.

- 6 Data Analysis & Report Preparation**
While only Jack.org staff had access to the full dataset, young people were provided opportunities to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data collection after all identifiable information was removed.

¹ Jack.org's Youth Voice Council is made up of 20 young people aged 18–27 with diverse lived experiences who work with staff to shape Jack.org's work through co-creation and engagement across multiple areas of the organization. The Research & Evaluation Subcommittee consists of five members from the Youth Voice Council.

² This included young people who participated in Jack.org's Communities, Be There, Youth Voice Council, and Jack Talks Speaker programs.

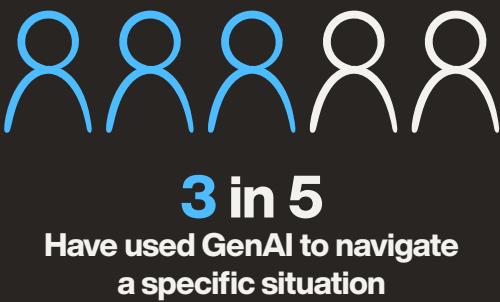
Results

A total of 471 young people responded to the online survey, of which 96% (n=452) reported using GenAI for any purpose, while 84% (n=395) reported using GenAI for mental health purposes. The following section reports results from tje 395 eligible respondents who completed the full survey.



Question 1:
How and why are young people using GenAI?z

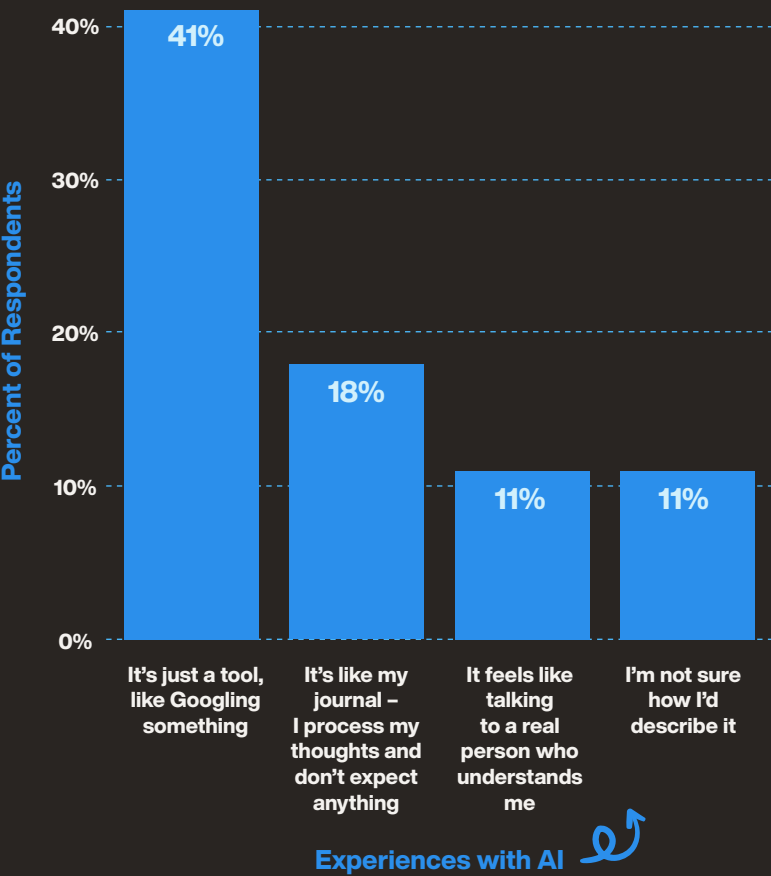
Young people are turning to GenAI as a situational support tool.



GenAI use among respondents was more commonly situational than routine. Roughly 1 in 3 of youth respondents reported using GenAI for mental health purposes once per month or more, while 3 in 5 used GenAI to seek advice about a specific situation. Most commonly, these situations were related to their social relationships, including friendships, romantic relationships, and family dynamics (46%), followed by academic challenges (23%) and self-care strategies (15%).

Despite these shared patterns, there is no *single* way young people reported engaging with GenAI. Nearly half of respondents viewed GenAI as a practical tool for finding information, similar to a search engine. Others used it as a private space to process their thoughts and emotions, while only a small proportion of young people described interacting with GenAI in a more relational or companion-like way.

“SOME GENAI BOTS ON WEBSITES SUCH AS CHARACTER.AI ARE MADE SO YOU CAN SPEAK TO A CHARACTER. I USED TO DO THIS OFTEN WHEN I NEEDED TO VENT FOR A NONJUDGMENTAL PERSON BEFORE FIGURING OUT THAT IT WAS [HARMFUL].”



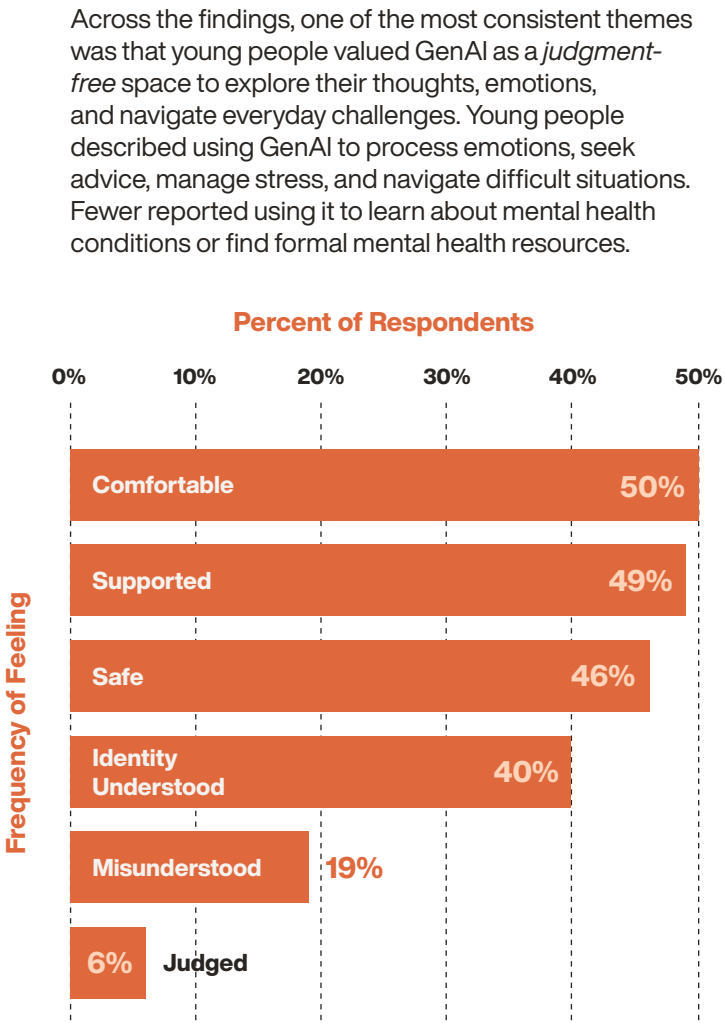
The figure above presents the percent of respondents who selected each response option.

Question 2

What needs do GenAI tools meet for young people?

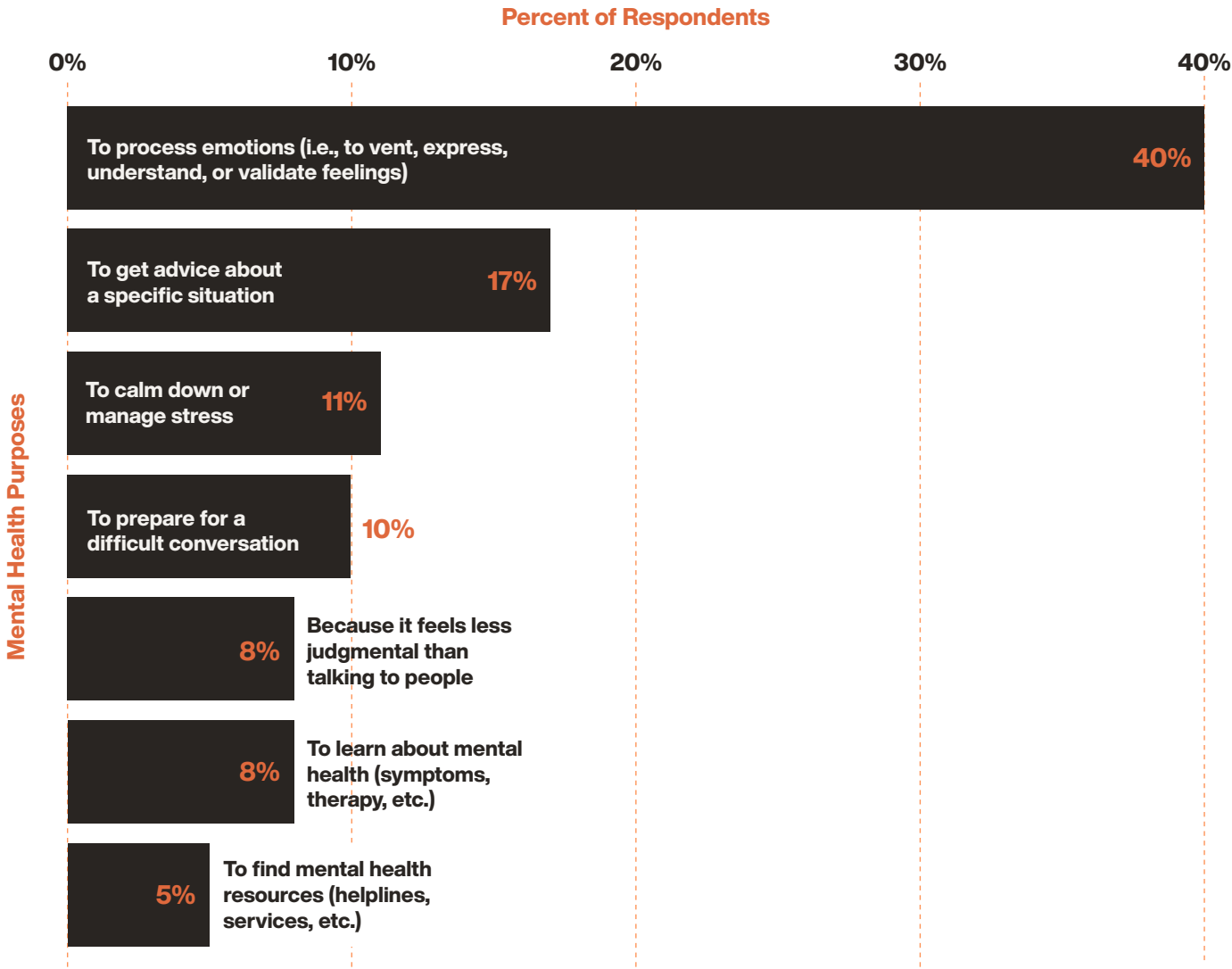
A judgment-free space was one of GenAI’s greatest perceived strengths.

- IF I AM STRESSED ABOUT A FINAL OR SOMETHING IT CAN HELP ME CALM DOWN [AND] PLAN.
- I FIND THAT TALKING TO GENAI CAN HELP MORE... NO JUDGMENT OR REAL-LIFE REACTIONS NO MATTER WHAT COMES TO MY MIND.
- I THINK IT'S A GOOD WAY TO SORT THROUGH MY THOUGHTS, FIND OUT EXACTLY WHAT I'M FEELING, FIGURE OUT WAYS TO COPE AND CALM DOWN WITHOUT SPIRALING.
- I GENERALLY USE IT FOR ADVICE OR TO UNPACK FEELINGS THAT I'M CONFUSED ABOUT.
- I FEEL COMFORTABLE BECAUSE OF ITS REASSURING VALUES.



The figure above presents the percent of respondents who reported that GenAI responses ‘Often’ or ‘Always’ made them feel each of the response options. Respondents were asked the following statement ‘When you used GenAI for mental health purposes, how often did the GenAI responses make you feel’.

Although the reasons for using GenAI varied, young people emphasized why they turned to GenAI: they valued having a private, accessible space where they could express themselves openly without the fear of judgment, criticism, or negative reactions. For many respondents, this made GenAI feel like an approachable first step to explore their thoughts, before taking further action.



The figure above presents the percent of respondents who selected each response option.

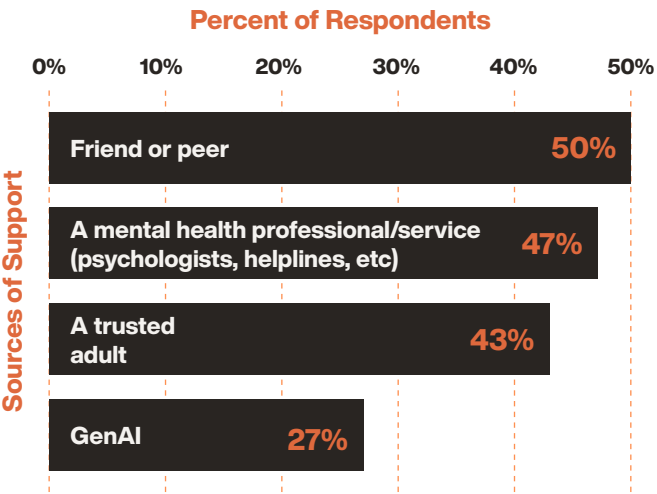
Key takeaway >>> These findings highlight GenAI’s potential role within a broader prevention and early intervention approach by offering young people an accessible space to reflect and seek support before challenges escalate.

Question 2

What needs do GenAI tools meet for young people?

Despite the perceived emotional value of GenAI, many youth rated human support as more effective than GenAI tools for mental health support.

Despite describing positive experiences with GenAI, respondents consistently viewed human relationships as the more effective source of mental health support. Peer support was rated more effective by half of the respondents (50%), followed by mental health professionals (47%) and support through trusted adults (43%). In comparison, only 27% viewed GenAI as an effective source of mental health support.



Despite describing positive experiences with GenAI, respondents consistently viewed human relationships as the most effective source of mental health support. Peer support was rated most effective by half of the respondents (50%), followed by mental health professionals (47%) and support through trusted adults (43%). In comparison, only 27% viewed GenAI as an effective source of mental health support. This raises an important question: If young people prefer human support, why are they turning to GenAI at all? The findings point to barriers that make accessing human support difficult, including wait times, cost, limited availability, and stigma around mental health. Indeed, 78% of young people reported experiencing at least one of these barriers. In addition, young people who perceived greater mental health stigma in their communities and those facing greater financial barriers were also more likely to report difficulty accessing support (correlation coefficients of $r = 0.23$ and $r = 0.26$, respectively, indicating positive relationships).

Together, these findings suggest that young people may be leveraging GenAI to fill gaps when traditional supports are unavailable or difficult to access, providing the immediate, affordable, and judgment-free assistance they are seeking.

"I CAN'T BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH GENAI, AND IT DOES NOT ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO CARE THAT I EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE OF GENAI USE. MY INSURANCE IS STILL TERRIBLE, I'M STILL EXPERIENCING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WELLNESS (E.G., RISING COSTS OF LIVING, NORMALISING OVERWORK, LINGERING STIGMA). I STILL DON'T HAVE A SUSTAINABLE WAY TO ACCESS PERSON-CENTRED, TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE."

"NOT EVERY YOUNG PERSON STRUGGLING HAS ACCESS TO "MORE BENEFICIAL/EFFECTIVE" FORMS OF SUPPORT...WHILE ADULTS MAY RECOMMEND COUNSELLING, MEDICATIONS, CRISIS LINES, ETC.; THESE RESOURCES ARE HARD TO ACCESS FOR MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY MEMBERS. STIGMA MAY MAKE YOUNG PEOPLE TURN TO GENAI BECAUSE IT FEELS SAFER FOR THEM IN THE MOMENT (MAYBE THEY WANT A TRUSTED REAL PERSON TO TALK TO BUT DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO ONE)."

"WE USE IT BECAUSE WE DON'T HAVE EASILY ACCESSIBLE RESOURCES. GENAI IS THE FREEST, MOST ACCESSIBLE AND LEASIEST] TO TALK TO (IN TERMS OF FAST ACCESS AND WE CAN DISCUSS WHAT WE FEEL ANYTIME!)."

Key takeaway >>>

GenAI does not eliminate the need for human support. Rather, it is helping fill unmet needs created by barriers such as cost, wait times, and stigma. Young people still prefer peers, trusted adults, and mental health professionals when those supports are accessible and non-judgmental.

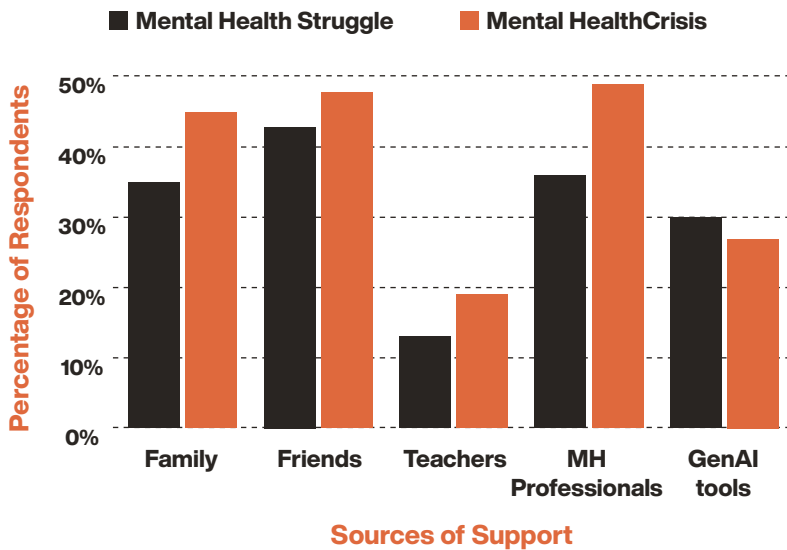


Question 2

What needs do GenAI tools meet for young people?

Young people view GenAI as a tool for everyday support.

Young people’s use of GenAI was reportedly intentional and context-dependent. Rather than solely relying on GenAI for all kinds of mental health needs, respondents described adapting their help-seeking pathway based on the severity of the situation. When presented with a mental health struggle compared with a crisis scenario, young people reported feeling less comfortable using GenAI for support during a crisis situation.



The figure above presents the percent of respondents who felt comfortable going to the listed support sources after being presented with a mental health struggle or crisis scenario.

This shift in preference suggests that *young people may recognize different roles for different sources of support* (i.e., GenAI may provide immediate guidance and a space for reflection, while human support remains essential when challenges become more serious or complex).

Spotlighting Lived Experiences

Overall, youth demonstrated a preference for turning to their peers for support when struggling with their mental health. However, some gender differences emerged.

Young men **rated GenAI as more effective** for supporting their mental health than women ($p < .05$). This may be due to young men being significantly less likely to feel comfortable going to a friend for support during a struggle than women ($p < .05$).

These findings may reflect broader gender differences in help-seeking behaviours, and highlight the potential role of GenAI as a more accessible, less socially vulnerable avenue for mental health support among young men.

“ACTUALLY HAVING PROPER ADVICE TO LISTEN TO IS A MENTAL HEALTH NEED THAT IS UNMET FOR ME... GENAI ALWAYS GIVES UNREALISTIC, CORNY ADVICE THAT WOULDN'T POSSIBLY WORK IN THE REAL WORLD.”

“IF I WAS IN [A] DEEP CRISIS WITH MENTAL HEALTH THEN I WOULD NOT USE AI, I WOULD GO TO A PROFESSIONAL.”

“I WOULDN'T USE GENAI IN CRISIS SITUATIONS, FOR DIAGNOSIS, OR FOR TREATMENT DECISIONS. I'D SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP INSTEAD.”

“IF I WAS IN A SERIOUS SITUATION WHERE I FEEL A REAL MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL IS NEEDED, OR REGARDING SENSITIVE TOPICS... I WOULD FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING [IT] WITH A REAL PERSON.”



Key takeaway >>> Young people appear to understand that different supports serve different roles: GenAI can provide immediate, low-barrier support for everyday challenges, while human relationships and professional care remain essential during crisis situations.

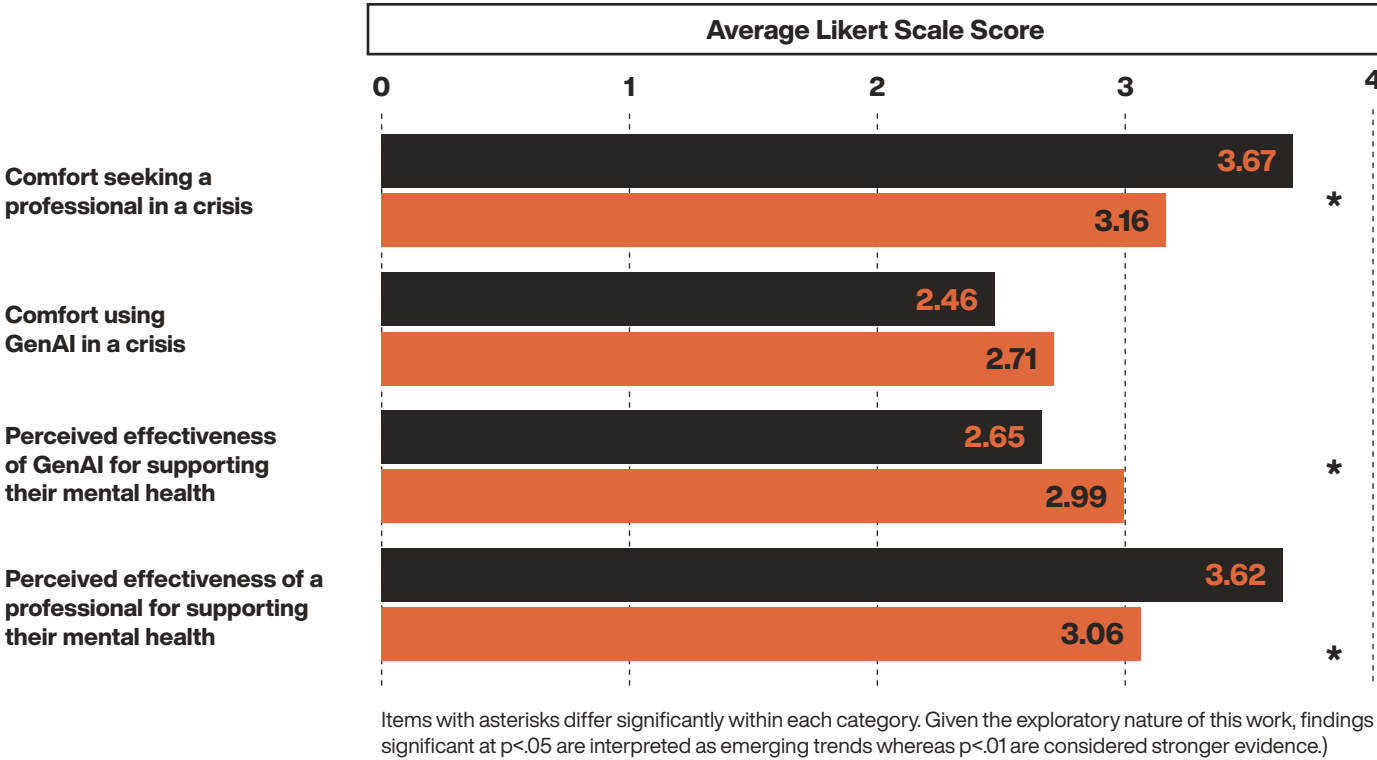
Question 2
What needs do GenAI tools meet for young people?

Perceived effectiveness of GenAI was significantly lower among those who accessed professional mental health services in the past.

Young people did not view GenAI as a replacement for professional mental health support. In fact, respondents who had accessed professional mental health support in the past, rated GenAI as *less effective* for supporting their mental health and reported lower comfort using GenAI in both mental health struggle and crisis situations ($p < .01$).

In contrast, these respondents reported significantly greater comfort seeking support from a mental health professional during a crisis situation ($p < .01$) and rated professional support as significantly more effective for supporting their mental health ($p < .01$) as compared to respondents who had never accessed mental health services. These findings suggest that lived experience with professional mental health services reinforced the value of human support while highlighting the limitations of GenAI for more complex mental health needs.

Experience Accessing MH Services	Comfort seeking a professional in a crisis	Comfort using GenAI in a crisis	Perceived effectiveness of GenAI for supporting their MH	Perceived effectiveness of a professional for supporting their MH
Yes	3.67	2.46	2.65	3.62
No	3.16	2.71	2.99	3.06
Difference (Yes - No)	0.51	-0.25	-0.34	0.56



Qualitative responses reinforced this finding. Young people emphasized that GenAI cannot replicate the trust, accountability, physical presence, and human connection they experience through relationships with peers, trusted adults, and mental health professionals. Respondents described GenAI as a complementary tool that can help them reflect, seek information, or navigate challenges when other sources of support are not immediately available.

Several respondents specifically highlighted that they would turn to human support during serious mental health situations:



Key takeaway >>> GenAI is becoming another layer within young people’s mental health journeys. Young people appear to use GenAI to navigate everyday challenges while continuing to recognize the importance of human connection, accountability, and professional support.

“I WOULD NOT USE [IT] IF I WERE STRUGGLING WITH MY MENTAL HEALTH. THIS IS DANGEROUS, AND THERE ARE DOCUMENTED INSTANCES OF GENAI ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO USE HARMFUL COPING STRATEGIES OR ENGAGE IN SELF-HARM... I AM VERY VERY VERY AGAINST USING IT AS A REPLACEMENT FOR A THERAPIST OR PERSON... IT IS DANGEROUS IF USED AS A REPLACEMENT FOR A SUPPORT PERSON.”

“I PROBABLY WOULDN'T USE IT OTHER THAN TO FIND OUT SYMPTOMS AND THEN DISCUSS IT WITH A PROFESSIONAL.”



Question 3:
What are the perceived risks and benefits of GenAI, including across young people with diverse identities?

Young people feel GenAI is emotionally safer but are concerned about the risks of digital use.

Young people demonstrated a nuanced understanding of GenAI's potential and limitations. While many recognized GenAI as immediate and accessible support, they also expressed concerns about its ability to respond appropriately and safely to complex mental health needs. These concerns included privacy risks, inaccurate information, over-validation of harmful thoughts or behaviors, and its inability to replicate genuine human connection.

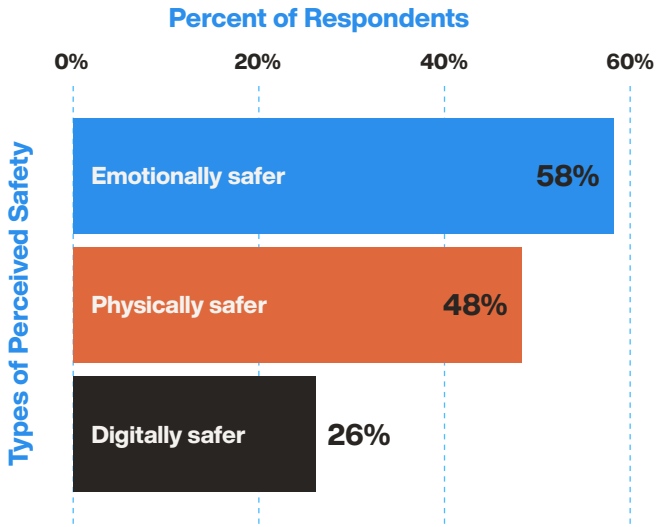
One recurring concern was the risk of GenAI reinforcing rather than challenging harmful thinking. As one young person explained: “GenAI hurt me...since it validated my behaviour, even when it was negative. Talking to a person...is infinitely better than a bot.”

Young people also expressed concerns about using GenAI for diagnosing or interpreting symptoms. Many respondents described it as a tool for recognizing symptoms, but preferred working through them with a trusted person or a mental health professional. This perspective was particularly evident among young people with lived experience of mental health struggle, who rated GenAI as less effective for supporting their mental health as compared to those without similar experiences.

At the same time, young people highlighted an important distinction between *emotional safety* and *digital safety*. Some described feeling more emotionally and physically safer using GenAI because it felt private, non-judgmental, and easier to approach than speaking with another person. One participant shared, “Talking to GenAI for my mental health feels safer than talking to people.”

However, youth respondents often expressed concerns about digital safety, including privacy, data use, and reliability of AI-generated responses. Rather than relying solely on GenAI, many young people described setting boundaries around their use, limiting what they shared, and advising peers to be careful when using these tools. One youth reflected, “I do not think it is the best option but it will be good if you are not in a deep crisis and are using it to vent purposes but I would be very cautious with privacy purposes. Overall, it is better if you talk about your feelings with peers, therapists, parents, trusted adult, etc.”

Together, these findings suggest that young people are not passive users of GenAI. They are actively weighing its accessibility and emotional comfort against concerns around privacy, safety, and overreliance.



Percent of respondents who agreed with the following statement “Talking to GenAI for my mental health feels safer than talking to people” with regards to three types of safety displayed above.



Spotlighting Lived Experiences

Perceptions of safety were not universal across respondents, suggesting that lived experiences may shape how youth engage with these tools.

- Among our sample, men were more likely than women to perceive talking to GenAI for their mental health as emotionally safer than talking to people ($p < .05$).
-
- Young people who identified as immigrants rated talking to GenAI for their mental health as emotionally safer than talking to people, when compared to non-immigrant youth ($p < .05$).

These findings suggest that the appeal of GenAI as a mental health support tool is uniquely shaped by young people's needs.



Key takeaway



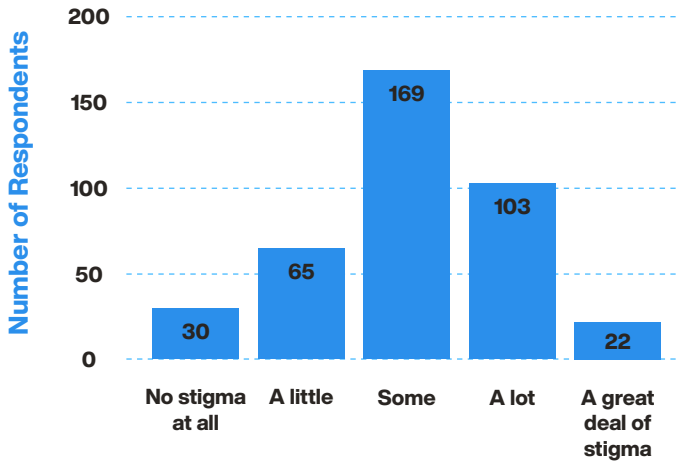
Young people are not passively relying on GenAI. Rather, they are actively weighing its benefits against potential harms. Their experiences demonstrate the importance of equipping young people with the knowledge and tools to make informed decisions about GenAI use.

Question 3:
What are the perceived risks and benefits of GenAI, including across young people with diverse identities?

GenAI may become a more frequent source of support when perceived stigma is higher.

Young people who used GenAI more frequently for mental health support also reported experiencing greater mental health stigma in their local communities as compared to those who used it less often ($p < .05$). This suggests that stigma may influence not only whether young people seek mental health support, but also *where* they choose to seek it.

Qualitative responses echoed this finding. Several respondents described GenAI as a pathway that felt easier to access when they feared judgment or misunderstanding. Others also raised concerns about facing additional stigma for using GenAI itself as a mental health support tool. As one young person shared:



Perceptions of Mental Health Stigma

The figure above presents the number of respondents who selected each response option, out of a total of 395 respondents.

“MANY YOUTH FEAR THAT ADULTS MAY STIGMATIZE OR JUDGE THEM FOR USING GENAI FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT, WHICH MAY PREVENT YOUTH FROM SEEKING HELP”. ANOTHER RESPONDENT EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF ACKNOWLEDGING GENAI AS PART OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S HELP-SEEKING PATHWAYS: “WE STILL NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT IT IS A HEALTH-SEEKING PATHWAY FOR YOUTH AND THAT WE DO NOT FURTHER STIGMATIZE, AS THAT CAN BE VERY DANGEROUS.”

Key takeaway



Young people’s experiences suggest that stigma remains a significant barrier to mental health support. As GenAI becomes part of how some young people seek help, conversations about stigma should also consider how emerging technologies fit within broader support pathways.

"I THINK THERE'S A LOT OF STIGMA AROUND THE USE OF AI AND A LOT OF STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH. THE TWO TOGETHER, I THINK, [ARE] LOOKED DOWN UPON."

"I THINK THE STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH MOSTLY COMES FROM ADULTS..."

"I THINK THAT FEELING COMFORTABLE TO GO TO A TRUSTED ADULT FOR HELP IS A HUGE ISSUE AMONG YOUTH. THERE'S STILL A LOT OF STIGMA SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH AND I ALSO THINK THAT THERE'S A STIGMA AGAINST PEOPLE WHO ARE IN THERAPY OR A REHABILITATION PROGRAM. I THINK THAT THERE SHOULD BE MORE MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY AND AWARENESS FOR YOUTH TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO TALK ABOUT THEIR STRUGGLES."



Question 3:

What are the perceived risks and benefits of GenAI, including across young people with diverse identities?

Nearly half of youth reported that they did not disclose their GenAI usage to anyone.

Though GenAI is increasingly becoming part of many young people's mental health journeys, 49.9% of respondents reported not disclosing their use to anyone. Among those who did disclose their use, friends and peers were the most common people they confided in (37.2%), followed by siblings (15.9%), parents (12.1%), mental health professionals (10.1%), and teachers (6.3%).

Young people gave a range of reasons for keeping their GenAI use private. While the most common reason was their preference to keep it private (25.1%), others described concerns about being judged (6.1%), feeling embarrassed (5.8%), feeling uncertain about how others would react (5.6%), and feeling unsure if adults would understand why they used GenAI (2.03%). These findings suggest that for many young people, using GenAI for mental health purposes remains a personal as well as a potentially stigmatized experience.

"I FEEL INCREDIBLY GUILTY AND DISAPPOINTED IN MYSELF FOR USING GENAI."

"ADULTS MAY NOT UNDERSTAND THE REASONING AS TO WHY CHILDREN/TEENS USE GENAI FOR VENTING/MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT, OFTENTIMES STATING "WHY DON'T YOU TALK TO ME INSTEAD?" AND ALTHOUGH THIS COULD BE AN ATTEMPT AT OFFERING GENUINE SUPPORT, I FIND THAT TALKING TO GENAI CAN HELP MORE AS THIS IS NO JUDGMENT OR REAL-LIFE REACTIONS, NO MATTER WHAT COMES TO MY MIND."

Key takeaway >>>

Almost half of young people reported keeping their GenAI use private, suggesting that using GenAI for mental health remains a personal and stigmatized form of help-seeking. Building greater understanding of why young people use GenAI may encourage more open and supportive conversations.

Question 3:
What are the perceived risks and benefits of GenAI, including across young people with diverse identities?

Young people hesitated to disclose their own GenAI use, but responded with empathy when their peers did.

Although many young people reported keeping their own GenAI use private, they overwhelmingly expressed empathy and support toward peers who used GenAI for mental health. When asked, “What would you say to a friend using GenAI for their mental health?” respondents frequently reassured their peers, normalized the experience by saying things such as “me too,” and emphasized that they would be there to listen. Many responses centered on human connection, with young people offering messages such as, “I’m here if you need to talk” and “You can always come to me.”

Many youth respondents acknowledged that these technologies can be helpful while encouraging their peers not to solely rely on them. Instead, they described GenAI as one part of a broader support system and encouraged peers to continue seeking support from trusted people and mental health professionals, when needed.

- “I WOULD LISTEN NON-JUDGMENTALLY, ASK IF IT IS EFFECTIVE, OFFER SOLUTIONS IF NEEDED/WARRANTED, EXTEND MY PERSONAL SUPPORT BY LETTING THEM KNOW I AM A SAFE SPACE FOR THEM.”
- “IF MY BEST FRIEND SAID SHE USED GENAI FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT, I WOULD SAY I COULD RELATE AND THEY COULD ALWAYS COME TO ME INSTEAD IF THEY ARE FEELING DOWN.”
- “I WOULDN’T JUDGE THEM OR PUT THEM OFF, I’D ASK WHAT THEY LOOKED UP AND THE RESPONSE AND RESEARCH PROPERLY TOGETHER OR GIVE ADVICE I’VE GOTTEN THAT I THINK COULD HELP THEM.”

- “I WOULD ADVISE AGAINST RELYING ON IT HEAVILY OR USING IT AS A THERAPIST BUT WOULD NOT BE JUDGMENTAL BECAUSE I UNDERSTAND THAT IT IS ACCESSIBLE AND LESS INTIMIDATING THAN USING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.”
- “I WOULD BE NONJUDGMENTAL AND ASK THEM MORE ABOUT THEIR GENAI USAGE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT ROLE IT SERVES IN THEIR LIFE. I WOULD GENTLY SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES LIKE PROFESSIONALS OR MH TEXT LINES, BUT ALSO JUST REMIND THEM THAT I’M HAPPY TO CHAT/LISTEN IF THEY’RE LOOKING FOR MORE SUPPORT AND CONNECTION.”

Question 3:
What are the perceived risks and benefits of GenAI, including across young people with diverse identities?

Perceived social acceptance shaped how comfortable young people feel discussing GenAI.

Young people’s expectations of others’ reactions to their GenAI use differed across relationships. Many anticipated that parents would respond with concern, disappointment, or frustration, particularly by questioning why they had turned to GenAI instead of seeking human support. In comparison, close friends were perceived as more likely to respond with understanding, validation, and acceptance. These findings suggest that young people’s willingness to disclose GenAI use may be shaped by whether they expect support or judgment from those around them, reinforcing the important role of peer relationships in emerging digital help-seeking pathways.



- “FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT USING GENAI FOR MENTAL HEALTH PURPOSES. I HAVEN’T HAD ANY BAD EXPERIENCES AND IT FEELS GOOD TO BE SEEN AND HEARD WHEN I OFTEN DON’T FEEL LIKE PEOPLE LISTEN.”
- “MY PARENTS WOULD JUDGE ME.”
- “I DON’T THINK IT’S IDEAL BUT SOMETIMES IT CAN HELP TO HAVE IT TO RANT TO WHEN NO ONE AROUND YOU FEELS LIKE A “SAFE PERSON” OR IF YOU FEAR BEING JUDGED/SHAMED BY FAMILY.”

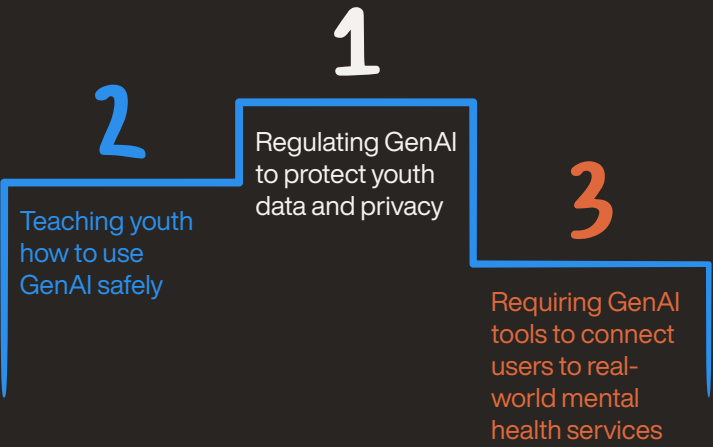
Question 4:
What are young people’s priorities when it comes to the future of GenAI for mental health purposes?

Young people prioritize safety, education, and accountability in shaping the future of GenAI.

Young people are insightful users of GenAI and want to have a voice in decision-making when it comes to policies around GenAI and mental health. Given emerging discussions about this topic, a smaller sample of respondents (n = 73) were asked about their priorities for how the Canadian government should invest in young people and GenAI for mental health. Respondents prioritized approaches focused on making GenAI safer and supporting young people’s ability to use these tools responsibly. These findings provide initial indications of potential priorities among young people, and should be further explored with a larger sample.

Youth Priorities for Government Investment:

The highest ranked priority was regulating GenAI to protect young people’s data and privacy, highlighting strong concerns around how their personal data is collected, stored, and used by these digital technologies. This was closely followed by teaching young people how to use GenAI safely, and requiring GenAI creators to ensure that GenAI tools connect users to real-world mental health services, when required. Priorities shared by young people:



Young people also emphasized the importance of having a voice in shaping the future of GenAI, ranking opportunities for young people to advocate for what they need from GenAI as their fourth priority. In comparison, banning GenAI use for young people under the age of 16 was ranked lowest amongst the provided options. Only 13 respondents selected banning of GenAI as their first priority.

Youth Priorities for Education on Using GenAI Safely:

Young people want to be able to use GenAI safely, and want transparency on GenAI use of their data. When asked to imagine education designed for young people on using GenAI safely for mental health purposes, youth indicated the following as most relevant for them:

- 1. Knowing their rights around data privacy and what happens with their conversations
- 2. Understanding the emotional risks of leaning too heavily on GenAI for mental health support
- 3. Recognizing signs if GenAI is not giving them helpful or accurate information

Key takeaway

>>> **Young people’s recommendations focused on privacy protections, safety education, and accountability from technology companies, suggesting a preference for empowering young people to navigate GenAI safely rather than limiting their access altogether.**

What are adults missing about this topic?

Young people want adults to understand why they are turning to GenAI

When asked, “What do adults/researchers misunderstand about young people using GenAI for mental health support?” young people consistently described a gap between how they experience GenAI and how they believe adults interpret its use. Many felt that adults focus primarily on the risks of GenAI or assume that young people prefer it over human support. However, they described a more complex reality—for many, GenAI is not necessarily their preferred source of support, but rather an immediate and accessible option available to them.

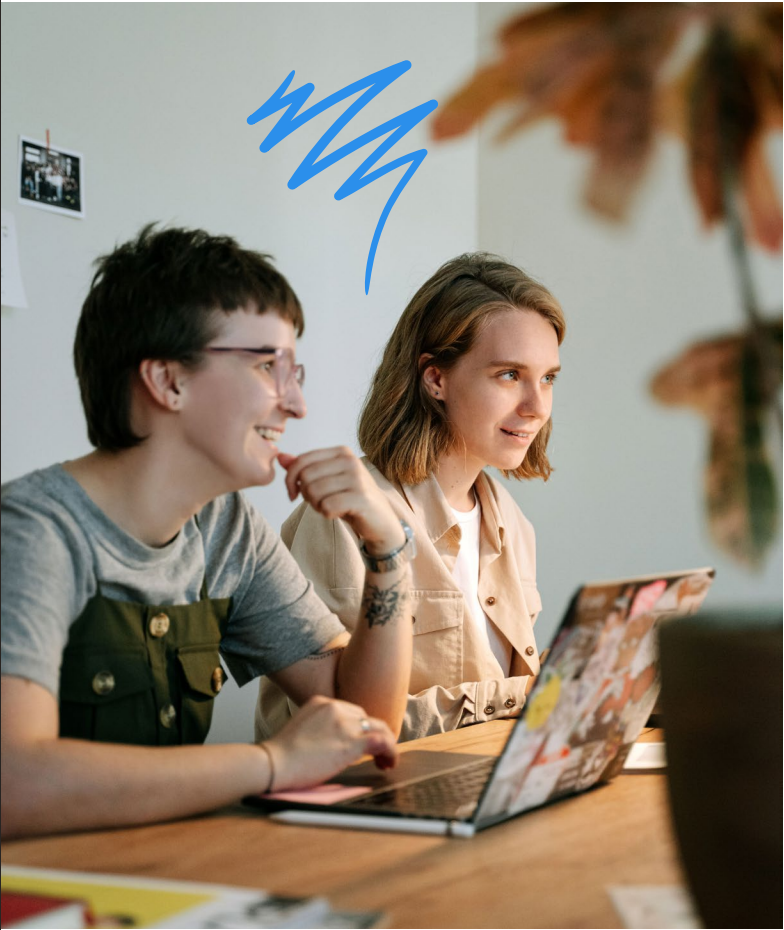
Young people also wanted adults to understand that they are aware of GenAI’s risks and limitations. Many raised concerns about privacy, inaccurate information, data security, harmful responses, and overreliance. Their responses suggest that conversations about using GenAI for mental health purposes should move beyond whether they should use these tools and instead focus on understanding why they are using them, what needs they are meeting, and what support young people need to use them more safely.

Four themes emerged from young people’s responses.

1. GenAI use is not a reflection of laziness or social failure.

Some young people felt that adults may interpret their GenAI use as a matter of convenience or preference for technology over human connection. However, many respondents described turning to GenAI when human or professional support was difficult to access when they needed it.

Young people described wanting support that GenAI cannot provide: empathy, shared experiences, physical presence, reassurance, and meaningful connections. Yet, barriers such as cost, limited availability, wait times, and fear of judgment can make these forms of support difficult to access. In this context, GenAI’s immediate availability makes it an appealing option.



“WITH HUMANS, WE CAN SHARE OUR OWN EXPERIENCES, CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER, LET OTHERS KNOW WHAT WORKED FOR US AND WHAT DIDN'T, OR SIMPLY BE THERE TO SIT WITH SOMEONE OR PROVIDE THEM COMFORT THROUGH A HUG. GENAI CAN PROVIDE INFORMATION AND THOUGHTS, BUT CANNOT PROVIDE THE PHYSICAL PRESENCE OF A HUMAN (WHICH MAY BE WHAT WE NEED SOMETIMES).”

“[ADULTS] ASSUME THAT I DON'T REACH OUT AND THAT I'M SHY. WHEN IN REALITY I CRY OUT FOR HELP, AND NO ONE ELSE CAN HELP. IT'S A BAND AID TO A BROKEN LIMB THAT CANNOT BE FIXED. MAY AS WELL JUST TAKE THE BAND AID.”

“THEY MIGHT THINK THAT WE USE IT FOR EASE OR BECAUSE OF LAZINESS BUT I KNOW THAT MANY PEOPLE, INCLUDING MYSELF, DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO THERAPY OR PROFESSIONALS TO TALK TO.”

These responses reinforce an important finding from this study: young people evaluate the value of GenAI, not only based on what the technology can provide but also based on what other forms of support are available to them when they need it.

2. GenAI is often a starting point, and can complement human support.

Young people also want adults to understand that using GenAI does not necessarily mean that they are not seeking human support or professional care. Many described GenAI as a starting point—a place to organize their thoughts, process their feelings, ask questions, or explore possible next steps before deciding how and whom to seek support from another person. For some, GenAI served as a comfortable first step to put their experiences into words before speaking with a friend, trusted adult, or professional.

“ADULTS SOMETIMES THINK YOUNG PEOPLE USE GENAI INSTEAD OF REAL HELP, BUT MANY OF US USE IT AS A FIRST STEP TO UNDERSTAND OUR FEELINGS OR GET ADVICE WHILE STILL KNOWING REAL PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT.”

“BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE, I THINK GENAI CAN BE A USEFUL STARTING POINT FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT. IT'S ACCESSIBLE, FAST, AND CAN MAKE IT EASIER TO OPEN UP OR LEARN ABOUT DIFFERENT COPING STRATEGIES WITHOUT FEELING JUDGED. IT CAN ALSO HELP ORGANIZE THOUGHTS OR GIVE YOU LANGUAGE TO EXPRESS HOW YOU'RE FEELING. HOWEVER, I DON'T THINK IT SHOULD BE RELIED ON TOO HEAVILY. IT WORKS BEST AS A SUPPORT TOOL RATHER THAN A REPLACEMENT FOR REAL CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND YOU AND CAN PROVIDE DEEPER, MORE MEANINGFUL SUPPORT.”

“I BELIEVE IT CAN BE USEFUL FOR SMALL SITUATIONS, BUT SHOULD NOT BE THE ONLY TOOL USED AND IS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR CRISES.”



Importantly, this finding aligns with the broader results of the report. Despite the growing use of GenAI, young people continued to put greater value on human relationships and professional mental health support. Many described GenAI as useful for reflection, emotional processing, or navigating everyday challenges, while recognizing that more serious mental health concerns require human and professional support.

These findings suggest that viewing GenAI as a replacement for human or professional support may overlook the nuanced role it can play in young people's help-seeking journeys. For many respondents, GenAI served as an accessible first step or complementary source of support rather than a substitute for human care.

3. Young people are thinking about GenAI's risks.

Young people also highlighted the assumption that they are unaware of potential harms associated with GenAI use. Across the study, respondents raised concerns around privacy, data security, inaccuracy, bias, and GenAI's potential to validate or reinforce harmful thoughts. Many also expressed concerns around overreliance on GenAI for emotional support. Some described actively setting boundaries around their own use, while others said they would encourage their peers to be cautious and seek human support when needed.

“I BELIEVE IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE AWARE OF THE RISKS OF GENAI—MISLEADING INFORMATION CAN VALIDATE HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS, CONTRIBUTE TO WORSENING MENTAL HEALTH OR EVEN CRISIS SITUATIONS. I USE IT AS A WAY TO REFLECT/PROCESS, BUT IF I'M SERIOUSLY STRUGGLING, I KNOW I NEED SUPPORT FROM THE REAL PEOPLE IN MY LIFE, MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS, ETC.”

“[ADULTS] THINK WE DON'T KNOW THE RISKS AND THAT WE DON'T WORRY ABOUT THEM. WE DO IT'S JUST THAT WE ARE MORE ISOLATED THAN EVER, AND PROFESSIONAL HELP IS NOWHERE NEAR AS IMMEDIATE OR ACCESSIBLE AS A COMMUNITY. SOMETIMES WE NEED SOMETHING TO SPRINGBOARD OUR THOUGHTS OFF OF, AND AI FILLS THAT VOID.”

These responses suggest that many young people are actively weighing GenAI's perceived benefits against its limitations. Rather than treating young people as passive users, adults may need to recognize the critical judgments many are already making about when and how GenAI is appropriate to use.

4. Concerns about being judged for GenAI use may add to existing stigma around seeking support.

Perhaps one of the most important messages from young people was that adults' assumptions about their GenAI use can itself become a barrier to help-seeking. Many young people already navigate concerns about being judged or stigmatized for their mental health struggles. However, open-ended responses revealed a new layer of stigma where young people described feeling judged for how they are seeking support. They expressed concerns that adults may dismiss, criticize, or shame them for seeking mental health support through GenAI. This creates the potential for a new or worsened stigma surrounding seeking mental health support. Young people may feel uncomfortable disclosing their mental health struggles while also feeling unable to openly discuss their use of GenAI as part of their efforts to cope, reflect, or seek guidance.

- “I THINK THERE’S A LOT OF STIGMA AROUND THE USE OF AI AND A LOT OF STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH. THE TWO TOGETHER, I THINK, [ARE] LOOKED DOWN UPON.”
- “I THINK ADULTS SEE GENAI AS EVIL SINCE IT’S NOT HUMAN. THEY DON’T SEE HOW DIFFICULT BEING VULNERABLE IS NOWADAYS WHEN EVERYTHING IS PERFORMANCE. I THINK GENAI CAN BE A GOOD TOOL SINCE IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE OBJECTIVE AND EASILY ACCESSIBLE.”

These findings do not suggest that adults should minimize the potential risks of GenAI or treat these digital tools as a replacement for human support. Rather, they highlight the importance of how adults respond when they learn that a young person is using GenAI for mental health purposes. An open and curious conversation can create an opportunity to understand what needs GenAI is meeting and whether additional support is needed.



Key takeaway

- Young people want adults to move beyond asking whether they should use GenAI and instead ask why they are turning to it. For many, GenAI is not a replacement for human support, but a response to gaps in access, availability, comfort, and connection. Approaching these conversations with curiosity rather than judgment can help adults better understand young people’s unmet needs while reducing the risk of creating another barrier to help-seeking.

Limitations

The results provide an initial understanding of how young people are engaging with GenAI for mental health purposes and should be interpreted in light of a few limitations. First, study participants were recruited through Jack.org’s youth mental health network, which may have resulted in a sample with greater awareness and engagement with mental health issues as compared to broader youth population. Second, the results provide initial indication of potential priorities and patterns among young people rather than population-level estimates. Further research with larger and more diverse samples are needed to determine whether these findings are consistent across different contexts and communities. Since GenAI technologies and young people’s experiences with them are evolving rapidly, these findings represent a snapshot of their perspectives at the time of data collection.

Discussion and Conclusion

This report builds on the growing body of evidence exploring GenAI and mental health by examining how these technologies are becoming part of young people’s mental health journeys and where they fit within formal and informal support systems.

Five key takeaways from the results:

- 1 GenAI is emerging as an entry point in young people’s help-seeking journeys. Our findings suggest that GenAI is becoming an increasingly common part of how young people navigate their mental health. Rather than replacing existing sources of support, many young people described using GenAI as an accessible first step to process their emotions, make sense of difficult situations, seek advice, and explore possible next steps. GenAI seems to appeal to young people less in terms of the information it provides, and more in the experience it offers—immediate access, privacy, availability, and a judgment-free space.

These findings also add important context to the growing body of national and international research documenting that young people are increasingly leaning towards GenAI for mental health purposes. While existing research has largely established that young people are using GenAI, this work helps explain why. The findings suggest that young people are not necessarily looking for professional support from GenAI. Instead, many of them are seeking an immediate outlet to articulate thoughts, navigate everyday challenges, and receive emotional support at times when human support may not be available or is difficult to access.

Another important aspect to note is that many respondents described GenAI as one of the resources within a broader network of support, rather than a sole source of support. This positions GenAI as an emerging help-seeking pathway that exists alongside peers, trusted adults, educators, and mental health professionals.



2 Young people continue to value human connections over GenAI.

The findings *do not* suggest that GenAI is replacing human connection among young people. Across both quantitative and qualitative findings, young people consistently rated peers, trusted adults, and mental health professionals as more effective than GenAI for supporting their mental wellbeing. They also highlighted a clear understanding that more serious mental health concerns, especially crisis situations, require human care. Comfort using GenAI decreased in mental health crisis situations, while willingness to seek professional support increased. Young people who had previously accessed mental health services placed even greater value on professional support and perceived GenAI as less effective than those without prior experience.

Notably, young people themselves reinforced these boundaries—they frequently cautioned peers about reliance on GenAI and emphasized that GenAI cannot replace empathy or genuine human connection. Overall, GenAI appears to be filling gaps created by barriers to help-seeking rather than replacing existing sources of support.

3 Barriers to support may be driving young people to GenAI.

Findings also reinforce that GenAI cannot be understood in isolation from the broader youth mental health space. Many respondents emphasized persistent barriers to accessing traditional mental health support, including wait times, costs, limited availability, and stigma associated with help-seeking. Young people who experienced greater mental health stigma were also more likely to report frequent GenAI use, suggesting that barriers influence not only whether young people seek support, but also where they choose to seek it.

The importance of social relationships was also highlighted by respondents. Many young people expected their peers to respond with empathy and understanding if they disclosed using GenAI for mental health purposes, while expecting parents to react with concern or disappointment. Nearly half of respondents reported not telling anyone they used GenAI for mental health support, yet many said they will respond empathetically if a friend disclosed use. This highlights that judgment remains an important concern, while peer relationships continue to play a central role in young people's mental wellbeing. It also points to unmet needs within existing systems of support.

4 Young people are critical users who want to shape the future of GenAI.

One of the striking findings is that young people are not passive consumers of GenAI. Respondents demonstrated a nuanced understanding of both the opportunities and limitations of GenAI tools. Many young people expressed concerns about privacy, misinformation, over-reliance, and the inability of GenAI to respond appropriately in crisis situations. At the same time, they recognize the value of GenAI to offer a non-judgmental space for reflection and accessing immediate support.

Their recommendations for government priorities reinforced this perspective. Rather than calling to ban GenAI, young people prioritized stronger privacy protections, better digital literacy education, greater accountability from technology companies, and clearer help-seeking pathways to connect them to professional mental health services. They also desired meaningful opportunities to help shape the policies and systems surrounding GenAI. These findings challenge the assumptions that young people use GenAI casually. Instead, they demonstrated a strong desire to engage with GenAI tools safely, responsibly, and in partnership with the adults and institutions responsible for regulating their use.

5 Using GenAI for mental health purposes may carry stigma.

Another important finding is that stigma extends beyond mental health itself to the ways young people choose to seek support. Nearly half of respondents reported not disclosing their use of GenAI for mental health purposes to anyone. While many simply preferred to keep their use private, others described concerns about being judged, feeling embarrassed, or believing that adults would *not* understand why they turn to GenAI. Respondents described concerns that, rather than viewing GenAI as a first step toward help-seeking, adults may dismiss their use as inappropriate, irresponsible, lazy, or evidence that they are avoiding “real” support. This points to the emergence of a second layer of stigma.

On the flip side, this anticipated judgment was not reflected in how young people viewed one another. Despite many choosing not to disclose their own GenAI use, young people described responding with empathy, reassurance, and curiosity if a friend disclosed using GenAI for mental health purposes. These findings suggest that conversations about reducing mental health stigma should also consider emerging forms of digital health seeking. If young people fear being judged for using GenAI, they may also become less willing to discuss *how* they are managing their mental health or seek guidance on using these tools safely. Approaching these conversations with curiosity rather than judgment may help reduce stigma, strengthen trust with adults, and create opportunities to guide young people towards safe, balanced, and informed use.

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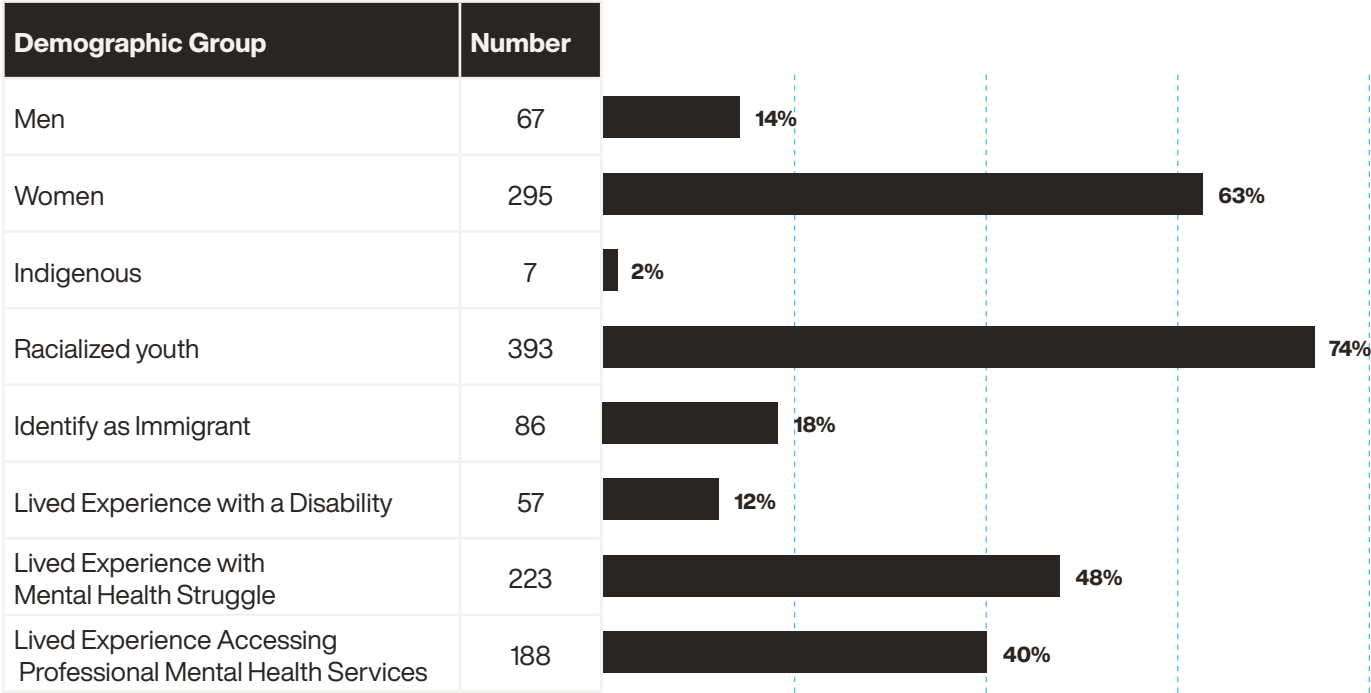
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Appendix

Demographics



Survey Design

Along with standard demographic questions, the survey consisted of 28 questions that sought to explore young people’s perspectives, experiences, and needs related to the use of GenAI for mental health purposes. Questions explored the following core areas:

Core Domains

Frequency and context of use

How often and in what situations respondents turned to GenAI for mental health purposes

Perceived benefits and limitations

How respondents evaluated GenAI in relation to other sources of mental health support

Systemic Barriers

Stigma, accessibility, and systemic barriers respondents associated with seeking human-delivered mental health support

Trust, privacy, and safety

Respondent attitudes toward data use, safety, and trust in GenAI tools within a mental health context

Diverse youth identities

Background information collected to build a holistic picture of who respondents are and to support disaggregated analysis

Data Analysis

Likert scales were used as survey measures throughout the survey, with youth rating their agreement on a five-point scale, unless otherwise specified. Agreement to statements is reported throughout the report as the proportion of those who rated a 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree) and disagreement as a 1 (strongly disagree) or 2 (disagree). Additionally, this report includes a number of responses to qualitative questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using R software. Qualitative responses were analyzed with support from the Research & Evaluation Subcommittee who used guiding questions to extract common themes, youth perspectives, gaps, narratives, and youth priorities emerging from the data. Overall, subcommittee members took an inductive thematic approach, identifying recurring themes through manual coding and mind mapping.

Where applicable, findings are disaggregated by identity and background, including gender, ethnic background, age, geographic location, and socioeconomic status, to clearly showcase the differences in diverse experiences of youth with GenAI for mental health support.

Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in outcome measures across groups. This test is appropriate for analyses with unequal group sizes or when data does not meet the assumptions required for parametric tests (e.g., normally distributed data). Because several demographic groups in our data varied in size, this test provided a more robust and reliable approach for comparing groups. When a significant Kruskal-Wallis result was identified, post-hoc Dunn tests were conducted to determine which specific groups differed from one another. Adjusted p-values using the Holm correction were applied to account for multiple comparisons and reduce the likelihood of false positive findings. Differences were tested for statistical significance at $p < .05$.

In some cases, Spearman’s correlations (reported as the ‘r’ coefficient) were conducted to further explore relationships between variables and provide additional context for findings. The coefficient, ranging from 0 to 1, identifies the strength and direction of associations between variables with values closer to 1 indicating a stronger relationship.

New Technology, Familiar Barriers

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