

2025

Pulling Back the Curtain on Youth Mental Health



alongside

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This report provides key findings from 250,000+ chats & activities teens engaged in during the 2024-25 school year.

“

Welcome to Alongside's second annual youth mental health report! Last year, in our inaugural report, we shed light on what we are learning from the youth who engage with us—both on and off our platform. This year, we build on that foundation, offering deeper insights and a more nuanced look into the needs of today's students.

The 2024–2025 school year marked a period of exciting growth for Alongside. We nearly tripled the number of students we serve, expanding across 19 states. As we grow, we continue to innovate, resulting in a 37% increase in the average hours of evidence-based support we provide per student. To provide more comprehensive service across MTSS tiers, we also introduced universal mental health screening. Finally, in response to requests from our school partners, we launched Alongside for Educators -- because supporting student well-being starts with supporting the adults who care for them.

In this report, we take a closer look at the challenges youth are navigating, the types of support they are naturally seeking out, and how this generation is defining mental health for themselves – in their own words.

By sharing this data, we aim to offer deeper insight into the issues teens are facing today. With greater understanding, we can work together to create solutions that align with the communication styles and preferences of today's youth, while also easing the burden on school-based mental health professionals.

Yours in health,

Dr. Elsa Friis, Ph.D.
Head of Product & Clinical
Alongside



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Alongside for
yourself!](#)

www.alongside.care

Alongside is committed to elevating teen voices and putting youth at the center of our mission to provide accessible preventative mental health support.

Founded in 2022, Alongside is a digital platform that delivers personalized mental health support for students in grades 4–12, focusing on everyday challenges.

Our team of doctoral-level mental health experts work with teens across the country, influencing everything from the features we develop to how we implement Alongside in schools.

Alongside uses an evidence-based chat framework to provide 5–10 minute coaching sessions designed to help youth build real-world skills and set actionable next steps.

While digital interventions do not replace the need for human support, they provide an essential on-ramp for many students, offering a “first line” of support for daily challenges, while screening for more severe issues that may otherwise go undetected.

How is this report unique?

In contrast to many surveys and studies about teen mental health, Alongside captures much more granular data about specific topics teens are seeking help on in their own words. Analysis of our aggregated and anonymized data provides deep insight into students’ everyday challenges.



Alongside Teen Advisors

“My school counselors were overworked with lines out the door

nobody should have to feel alone or confused

within minutes of having a conversation, I’m feeling a lot better

it feels great to confidentially work through the stress I face



[Meet our teen interns & advisors](#)

Alongside meets federal standards for evidence and impact with further research underway.

In 2024-25, Alongside worked with Instructure, a third-party educational research company, to review an independent study conducted by the [Northwestern University Lab for Scalable Mental Health](#).

The open pilot evaluation examined Alongside's impact on student distress, anxiety, and hopelessness over a 3 month period. The study was conducted across 5 different middle and high schools.



2.96

average hours of
support per month
(median = 3.78)

82%

of all youth in the
study utilized
Alongside

90%

of all youth rated
Alongside as
helpful

Alongside was shown to positively impact students at all levels of the MTSS framework.



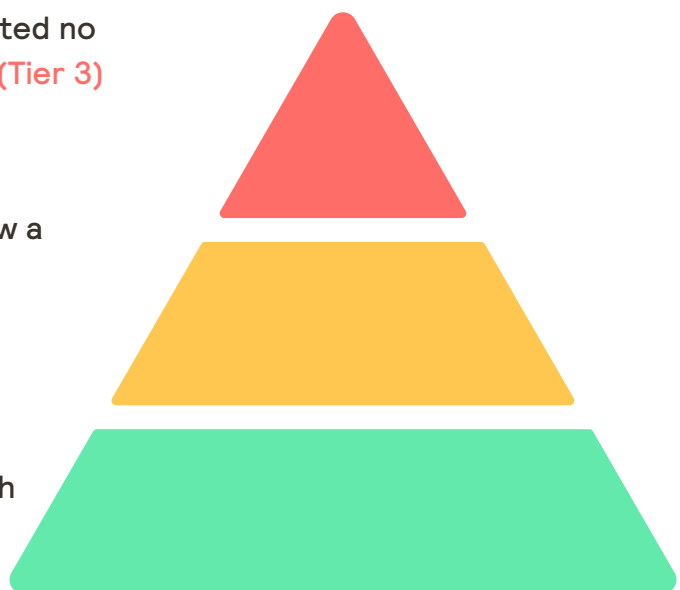
76% of high-risk students reported no suicidal ideation after 3 months (Tier 3)



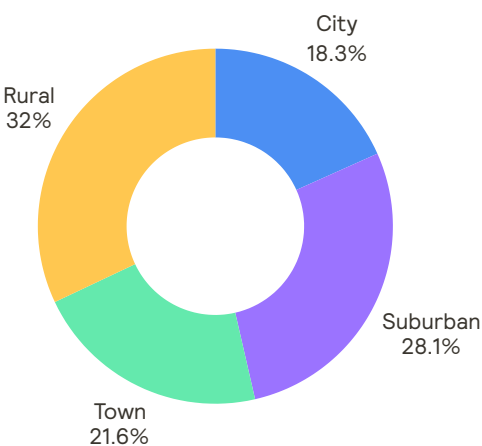
25% of students with anxiety saw a clinically significant reduction in symptoms (Tier 2)



Across all students, overall distress decreased after 1 month and hopelessness decreased after 3 months (Tier 1)



Alongside serves a diverse student population across 19 states, representing many cultures and communities.



Students live in all types of geographic settings

U.S. students chatted in 29 available languages



Ethnicity	Alongside Partner Schools (2024-25)	Public School Youth in US (NCES, 2021)
Asian	1.2%	5.4%
Black or African-American	21.7%	15%
Hispanic/Latin	45.2%	28%
Multiracial	3.5%	5%
Native American or American Indian	1.5%	0.9%
White/Caucasian	26.5%	45%

When engaging with Alongside's chat guide "Kiwi," students fell into one of six conversational personas.

The Digital Sounding Board

Treats Kiwi as a private, non-judgmental space to share things they might not share elsewhere.



Should I break up with him?
It's like... he just...

The Advice Seeker

Asks for direct advice on social situations, school problems, or personal dilemmas.



Help me figure out how to
not fail math

The Boundary Tester

Tests Kiwi's limits, which provides an opportunity for Kiwi to coach the student on how to communicate more appropriately.



I'm sorry I said that to you I
thought it would be funny

The Tentative Sharer

Starts vaguely ("idk," "nothing") or tests the waters with less sensitive topics before revealing deeper issues.



Are you going to share this
with anyone

The Support Seeker

Shares serious concerns about their safety or that of their friends. At times, directly requests additional support.



Can you tell the counselor I
am thinking of self-harming

The Role Player

Engages in imaginative scenarios related to their situation. Values creativity and willingness to play along (within limits).



Okay, you pretend to be...

Students' top chat topics focused on a mix of school and relational concerns.

What are students chatting about?

In comparison to our 2023-24 report, students have broadly similar concerns. The top 10 chat topics remained the same across all ages, grades, and school locations (urban vs. rural), with some slight variation in order.

1. Balancing activities and school



Balancing Act: Universal Challenge

Across all ages, genders, and locales, balancing school activities and schoolwork was the most common issue

2. Sleep struggles



Sleep Problems Start Young

Younger youth (13 and younger) were more likely to discuss sleep challenges

3. Finding a relationship



Speaking of Relationships...

- Relational concerns were highest in rural schools, while scholastic concerns were higher in suburban schools
- Pre & early teens (11-16 years) discussed finding a relationship more often than older teens

4. Interpersonal conflict



Fighting is Not a "Boy" Problem

Interpersonal conflict came up more frequently for female than male students

5. Lack of motivation



De-Motivation Increases with Age

Older (over 14) and male youth were more likely to discuss a lack of motivation

6. Test anxiety



7. Focus and procrastination



8. How to reach out for support



9. Having a bad day



10. Poor grades



Chat sessions serve as an on ramp to accessing in-person support for severe issues.

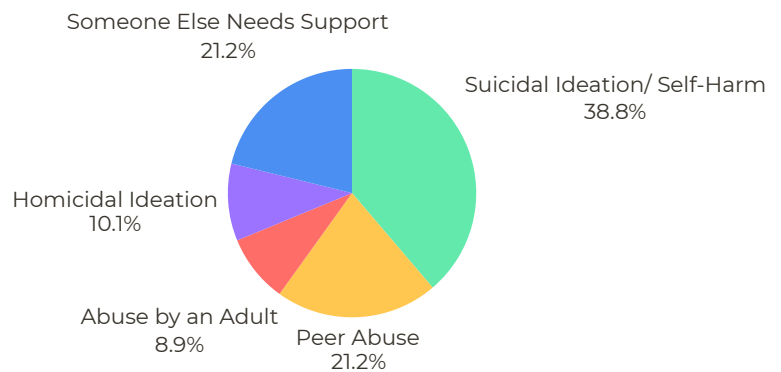
The vast majority of chats within Alongside did not discuss a severe issue. When they did, school teams were immediately alerted per a customized safety plan Alongside creates with each school.

Additionally, students were prompted to:

- Complete a brief risk assessment
- Call a 24/7 crisis support line
- Complete a self-guided safety plan

Severe Issues by Type of Concern

Suicidal Ideation was the most common severe issue, with peer abuse and someone else needing support the second most common.



Supporting their Peers

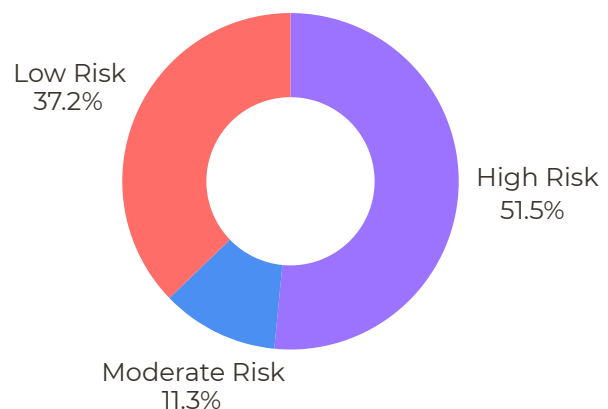
Approximately 15% of severe issues reported came from students reaching out about a friend or peer they were concerned about. Youth were split about wanting to share identifying details vs. just getting advice about what to do.



I want to help my friend I think he needs to talk to an adult ... hard part is I'm the only person he trusts ... he doesn't like his parents his teachers are rude to him I want to help but idk how....

Suicide Risk Severity as assessed by the CSSRS *

The small percentage of youth who disclosed thoughts of self-harm during a chat session tended to be high-risk according to the CSSRS and often were not previously identified by school staff as a student who was suffering.



*Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale

Students are carrying more than we see: juggling sleep, stress, disconnection, and self-doubt. We must meet them where they are and help them carry the load.

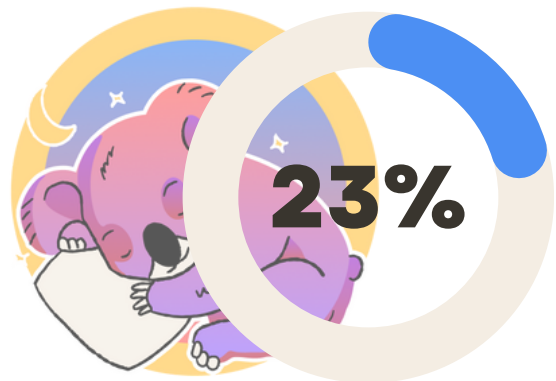
"I feel overwhelmed because of school and soccer and my parents are always fighting"

#1 The real stressor? Balancing everything all at once.

The challenge of balancing school, activities, and life emerged as one of the top 3 topics youth discussed across all grades, genders, and regions. What's more, many shared they feel misunderstood by adults when it comes to the amount of responsibility they carry outside of school.

#2: Teens are tired, and they want to do something about it.

Students consistently reported not getting enough sleep as a top life challenge. Over 23% of student chats sought advice on making plans to improve sleep, suggesting youth recognize they are struggling and are interested in improving their sleep.



#3 Loneliness doesn't always sound like "I'm lonely."

Only 6% of students mentioned loneliness outright—but beneath the surface, it showed up everywhere. In more than 50% of relationship-focused chats, teens described feeling left out, overlooked, or craving deeper connection. The takeaway? Disconnection is widespread, even when it goes unnamed.

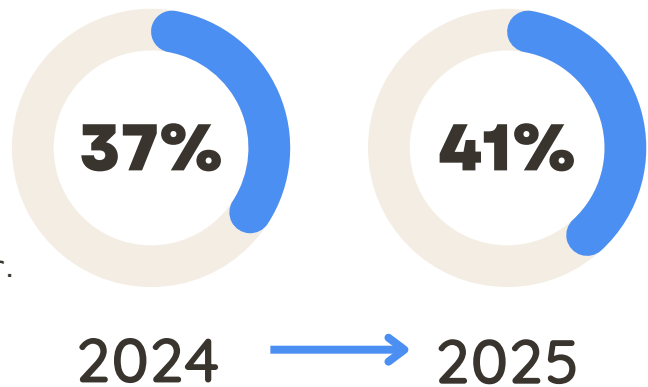
“Sometimes I don’t feel safe talking because I don’t know how they will respond”

#4 Private support creates a safe starting point.

Many teens are not ready to open up to an adult, but they still want help. Students consistently say that having a confidential, judgment-free space makes it easier to take that first step.

#5 Confidential doesn’t mean disconnected.

In the 2024–25 school year, 41% of students chose to share their chat summary and goals with a school counselor – a 4% increase from last year. Once students process what they are feeling, many choose to connect with a trusted adult for additional support.



“Mental health is much more than ‘mental illness’... It’s about embracing who you are, understanding what you feel, and learning about taking care of yourself.”

#6 Mental health = everyday challenges

Youth rarely talk about mental health disorders. Rather, they chat about daily challenges. In focus groups, youth explained they perceive mental health as a continuum and should recognize that it encompasses their emotions, their actions, and how they think about themselves.

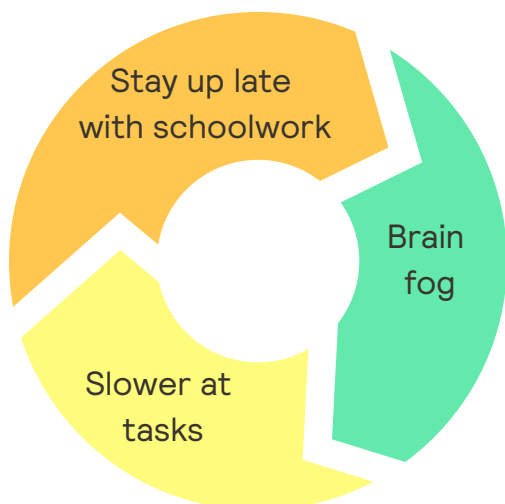
Kiven Nieves
Alongside Teen Advisor



Balancing everything is burning students out; this is often the leading cause of their stress and anxiety.

Students feel overwhelmed and under-prepared.

Balancing school with other commitments, including work, relationships, and activities, was the most common concern students chatted about. Many shared they don't feel fully equipped to manage the constant pressure, especially when expectations extend beyond academics. From jobs and caregiving to sports and social commitments, teens are carrying a lot.



Example of reinforcing cycle

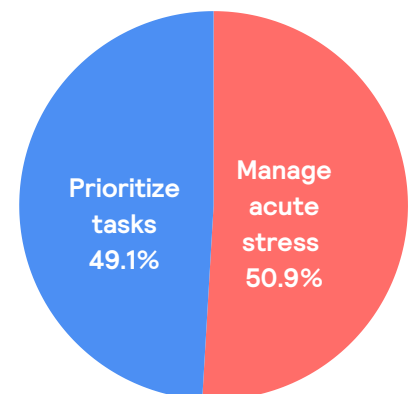
Stress doesn't come from one thing — it stacks.

When talking about managing school and activities, nearly all students mentioned experiencing extra stress from various sources such as friend or family conflicts, physical pain, teacher issues, lack of sleep, or pressure to succeed.

The most common issue was trouble focusing and feeling foggy. Some students also shared how being stuck in a cycle of “always behind” took a toll on their mental and physical health.

Students are split, but clear, on what they need.

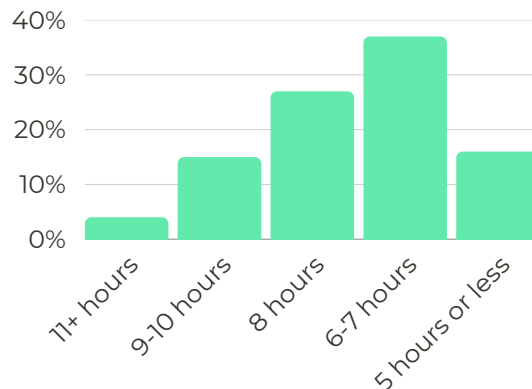
Students' coping strategies fell into two clear groups: managing stress in the moment and creating longer-term plans. From breathing exercises to time management techniques, teens across all grades and genders expressed a need for both emotional regulation and executive functioning support.



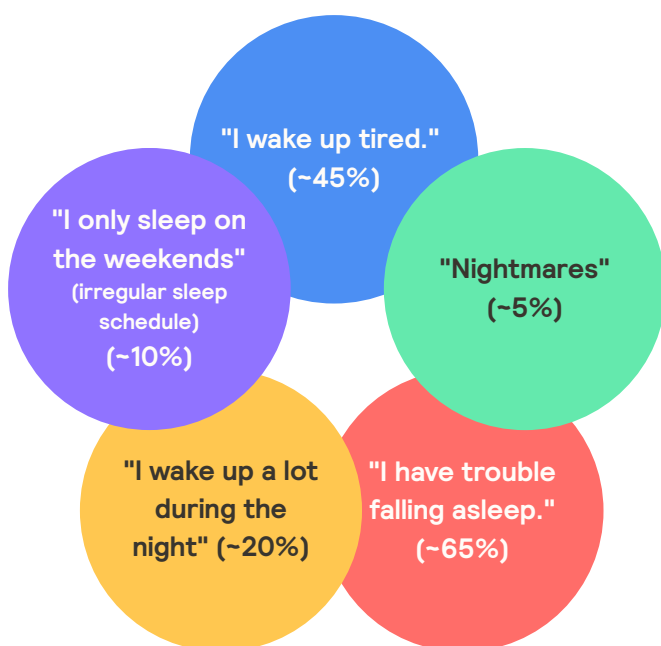
Preferred coping strategies

Students aren't just tired — they know it's a problem and want help fixing it.

- Youth report 53% of the time that they get less than 7 hours of sleep (the minimum the CDC recommends for teens).
- 23% of all chats completed in 2024-25 were related to improving sleep.



It's more than 1 thing... sleep problems tend to co-occur



Approximately 70% of the time, youth reported having more than one sleep-related challenge.

While the most infrequent, nightmares tended to be the most impactful type of sleep disruption.

A small portion of users did not mention any challenges but wanted to generally improve their sleep hygiene.

Youth easily identified barriers to getting effective sleep.

The most common barrier to sleep mentioned by youth was phone and electronic use (~60%). Additional challenges mentioned included stress (predominantly about school), not feeling tired, wanting to engage with friends, and environmental factors such as noise and temperature.

"Can't stop thinking,"

"Stress for final exam."

"Just not tired"

"Stay up late on my phone,

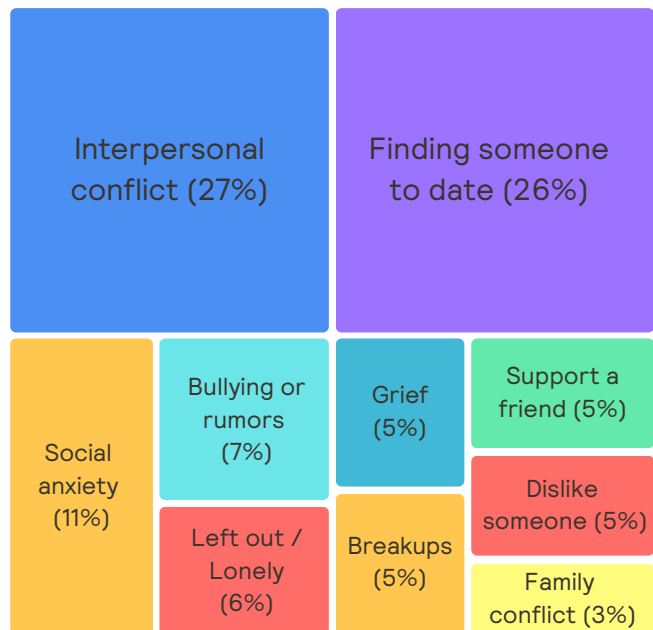
"I keep talking with my girlfriend"

"No quiet in my house"

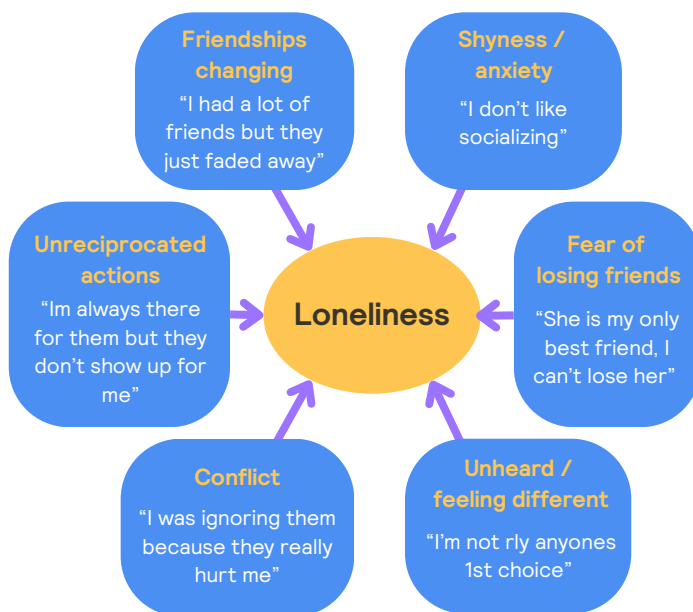
Interpersonal challenges beyond making friends likely contribute to students feeling lonely or disconnected.

A variety of interpersonal challenges are common.

The two most common relationship challenges were interpersonal conflict and finding someone to date. The high proportion of chats centered around “dating” reflects the fact that the platform is a confidential space for getting advice on topics you would not otherwise discuss openly. This topic was most common with 11–16 year-olds and was more frequently talked about by male youth.



Youth can feel lonely even when surrounded by friends.



Explicit conversations about being lonely or feeling left out accounted for only 6% of chats focusing on social dynamics or relationships. However, around 50% of relational-oriented chats contained implied feelings of loneliness or being left out.

This suggests that we look more broadly at the constructs underlying loneliness, beyond the absence of close relationships.



Less than 1% of chats mention social media

“Social media is a modern venue for typical social dynamics. It is a platform for connection, disappointment or bullying, not the root cause”

-- Dr. Elsa Friis, Ph.D.

As a starting point, completely anonymous support appeals to students for a variety of reasons.

The most common topics youth were afraid to talk to an adult about included:

- Personal issues (e.g., crushes)
- Sensitive health topics
- Negative academic outcomes

Shame is a common thread for sensitive topics

While there was a moderate level of variation among students in terms of what topics they did not want to share with an adult, the common thread was that the student felt shame or embarrassment.

"I would feel guilty that they have to take care of listen to me even though they could've been taking care of themselves."

"I don't want to bother anyone"

"I worry people won't care"

"But what if my friends or family were to criticize me even if I'm going through a lot?"

"I'm scared"

"It's hard to know what to say"

"I feel embarrassed"

"Worried about her reaction"

"Me preocupa que no me escuchen y que me dejen de hablar"

"I worry that they'll say ur to young to stress or feel hopeless and it's all just in ur head"

"Que piensen mal de mi sobre las decisions que tomo"

Mental health topics are better shared with specific adults.

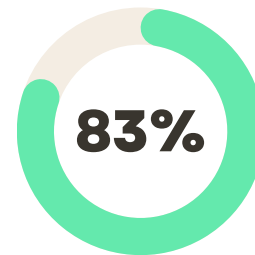
Very few students mentioned mental health concerns as a challenging topic of conversation. However, when discussed, youth tended to note they only talk to a specific parent or a non-parental adult (aunt, grandmother, therapist, counselor, etc) about mental health issues.

30%

About 30% of chats included a specific concern about seeking adult support.

While students like an anonymous “on-ramp,” nearly half will ultimately share with trusted adults.

Alongside uses motivational interviewing approaches to guide students and offers multiple pathways to connect with school staff or trusted adults in every chat. As a result, students who are at first hesitant to reach out change their mind about 83% of the time.



83% changed their minds about reaching out to an adult

Giving youth “the words” makes reaching out easier

Shira’s Chat Summary

Here is a summary of what Shira has learned and practiced:

- Learned how to prioritize tasks using an urgent/important/can wait system.
- Developed a strategy to balance math test preparation, work schedule, and personal time.
- Created a flexible plan to manage multiple responsibilities effectively.

When invited to share a chat summary with a counselor:

- <1% voluntarily reached out using their own words.

HOWEVER...

- 41% voluntarily shared an AI-generated summary with school staff

Opening up is hardest when you don’t know what to say. Alongside removes that barrier by offering a private space and pre-written summary so students don’t have to stress over finding the right words.

Helping youth gain emotional distance proved effective.

Chat modules guided students who were resistant to seek support from adults to choose from two styles of role playing:

- Pretending to be a friend going through the situation they are facing
- Working through a hypothetical situation similar to the one they face



Helping students gain emotional distance from a situation is an important step in motivating them to reach out for support.

Students rarely use clinical terms such as “anxiety” or “depression” to describe their challenges.

Youth describe mental health as a spectrum.

Alongside students and teen advisors defined mental health as more than mental illness, to include everything from daily stressors to serious concerns.

They noted varying comfort levels around the topic of “mental health” and wished adults felt less afraid to ask how they are doing emotionally.

"Mental health isn't just knowing about mental illnesses, it's knowing how to overcome everyday difficulties so you can take care of yourself on a regular basis"

Levi van Nieuwenhuize
Alongside Teen Advisor



"im so drained and empty"

"im super overwhelmed"

Fewer than 4% of students mentioned chronic anxiety, depression, or severe issues, but most highlighted ongoing stress and its impact on their life.

"Me rizzing the sigma beta alpha
skibidi slicers of all brainrot"

Slang was more common in boundary-testing situations, but less so in serious topics.

"i am just always sad y siento
que no le gusto a nadie"

Bilingual students often switched languages mid-chat.

Students are already trying to solve their own challenges.

Using a strengths-centered approach, Alongside chats frequently ask youth what coping mechanisms they have already used. Almost always, youth respond with at least one thing they have tried.

Common coping mechanisms:

- listening to music*
- drawing
- talking to friends
- journaling

**especially Billie Eilish!*

These recommendations reflect the increasing pressures youth face – and the kind of support that can make a real difference. By showing up with intention, listening closely, and leaning into difficult conversations, we can equip them to thrive in a complex and changing world.

1

As demands increase on youth, we must empower them with both coping AND executive functioning skills.

As the demands on youth continue to increase and evolve every year, it is important to ensure curricula include the necessary skills to navigate those ever-changing demands. While seemingly simple, skills such as prioritization, problem-solving, goal-setting, and self-monitoring are critical to help youth maintain a healthy level of stress as their responsibilities increase. We must not let up on emphasizing these skills.

2

Trust that students know what they need help with and start with “How can I support you in this goal?”

Youth on their own are seeking out support for many of the “hot topics” we see in the media and research, including poor sleep, loneliness or disconnection, and difficulties in limiting digital device use. Therefore, starting conversations with “how do you think your sleep has been?” rather than “you need to go to bed” is likely to open doors to aligning on goals, and provides an opportunity for adults to help youth reach their goals through accountability and troubleshooting.

3

Don’t avoid the hard conversations. It’s more important to ask questions than to have all the answers.

A key theme across all students was “adults are more scared of talking about mental health than we are.” When adults don’t ask about certain subjects or topics, it conveys to youth that these are topics that are scary and should be avoided. By approaching and asking about the tough topics, even if they are not receptive at first, it opens the door for future conversations.



What If Every Student Had a Safe Place to Talk Each Day?

- **Instant & Proactive Support:** Students log in with their school email and access confidential, personalized support anytime — no referral or appointment needed.
- **Real & Confidential Conversations:** Every chat connects students to personalized clinician-developed exercises tailored to what they're going through, whether it's stress, sleep, motivation, or relationships.
- **Skill-Building That Sticks:** Students set small, actionable goals that increase self-efficacy and hope, key drivers of long-term resilience.
- **Seamless School Integration:** Students can share summaries with counselors, access school and community resources, and stay on track with gentle follow-ups.



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