



## How Social Media, Drugs, and the Changing Landscape of Sexuality Are Challenging Younger Generations' Mental Health

In an era of expanding sexual norms, legalization of marijuana, and lives lived online, today's teens and young adults are facing a new set of life questions and stressors compared to previous generations — all amidst a global pandemic. How are they dealing with it?

When Simone Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics gymnastics team finals in July, she catapulted a conversation into the mainstream that had been gaining steam like her run-ups to the vault: Even the most accomplished among us sometimes have to take a step back to take care of mental health. And for people in the 24-year-old gold medalist's age group who are living under pressures like no generation before, recognizing when you're not okay and in need of support and self-care is more important than ever.

“Today's adolescents and young adults are growing up in an age of anxiety,” says Patrice Harris, MD, a psychiatrist and Everyday Health's medical editor in chief at large. “They're living in an age of active shooter drills at school, bullying, ‘fear of missing out,’ and success measured by the number of likes — along with pressure, often from peers — that comes with social media use. And when your peers are not just your classmates, but millions of people, as with Olympians, there's even greater pressure.”

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— Patrice Harris, MD

While the pressures of being the gymnastics star are largely in a category of their own (Biles told Hota Kotb on Today that the sexual abuse she and hundreds of others suffered under former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar may have been a trigger during the Games), today's teens and young adults ages 16 to 26 don't have to be in the international spotlight to experience a new set of stressors beyond previous generations' traditional expectations to succeed in sports, academics, performing arts, and careers.

This group, ranging from the youngest millennials (starting at age 14) to Generation Z (up to age 24), is coming of age in an era of tumultuous sociopolitical issues — including constant pandemic uncertainty, gun violence, climate change, rapidly shifting social norms, and a reckoning with systemic racism and sexual assault — that are proven to take a toll on mental health, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) "Stress in America: Generation Z" report. As a result, symptoms of anxiety and depression in this generation are on the rise and have been reported by more than half of 18- to 29-year-olds, as reported in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report in April 2021.



Particularly with the surge of symptoms in this demographic, it's important that they get support as soon as they start to struggle. And with Biles and fellow superstar athletes like Carey Price and Michael Phelps sharing their stories on the world stage, understanding of the issues grows. "It is important that we raise the level of awareness around mental health and increase our advocacy for equitable, accessible, available treatment opportunities," Dr. Harris says. "I am hopeful that the awareness raised by them and others will encourage people to seek help when they need it."

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