



**Youth Mental
Health Tracker**
SURGO HEALTH



The Jed Foundation



Youth Mental Health in the AI Era: How GenAI Enters Help-Seeking Pathways

About Surgo Health

Surgo Health is a Public Benefit Corporation pioneering data and analytics to transform how the healthcare system understands people. We uncover the unseen drivers of health—people's beliefs, barriers, and behaviors—and transform that intelligence into scalable products that enable organizations to drive impact, reduce costs, and advance equity. By revealing the human side of healthcare, we're making it more personal, precise, and effective—for everyone.

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Executive Summary

As generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, technologies that create content like texts, images, music, or videos in response to individual prompts, have become more accessible, youth are using them for a wide range of purposes, including identity exploration, AI companionship, school and career decisions, relationship questions, and emotional processing.

Drawing on nationally representative data from youth ages 13–24, Surgo Health finds that within this broader landscape, a distinct subset of youth report turning to these general-purpose technologies to discuss mental health concerns. GenAI can provide short-term emotional relief for some, but, particularly for youth facing the greatest barriers to professional care, this use risks becoming an unregulated substitute in the absence of clear guardrails, pathways to trusted adults or professional support, and oversight.

This report is the second in a two-part series examining youth engagement with GenAI. The first report introduced a segmentation framework that demonstrates how patterns of GenAI use vary by the underlying context, support, and stress in youths' lives, and therefore affect mental health unevenly.

Key Findings

1. A meaningful minority of youth use GenAI during times when they struggled with their mental health.

- Among youth experiencing mental health struggles, **12%** report using GenAI to discuss mental health concerns.
- Of this group, **69%** rely only on general-purpose tools not designed for mental health support and another **21%** utilize both general-purpose tools and mental health-specific tools. Among youth who experienced mental health struggles and used GenAI for mental health support, **59%** reported that GenAI encouraged them to seek professional help or crisis services, while **41%** did not report being encouraged.

Takeaway 1

This indicates that youth mental health disclosures are occurring primarily on systems that were not designed, governed, or safeguarded for youth mental health use.

2. Youth who use GenAI for mental health have greater barriers to professional care.

- Compared to other youth with mental health concerns, those who use GenAI for their mental health report barriers more frequently across nearly every measured barrier, including cost, insurance, transportation, parental support, and knowledge of how to access care. GenAI use appears to emerge in contexts where traditional care pathways may be inaccessible to youth.
- Youth with mental health struggles who used GenAI to address them were **2.8 times more likely** to report not knowing it was possible to get professional help than those who did not use GenAI for this reason

- Youth who reported mental health concerns and used GenAI were **2.3 times more likely** to cite a lack of support from parents/caregivers as a barrier to professional help than those who did not turn to GenAI for their mental health.

Takeaway 2

GenAI use is occurring in contexts where traditional care pathways feel inaccessible.

3. Perceived benefits of GenAI for mental health are mixed and not universal.

- Just over **two-thirds** of youth who reported having mental health concerns and used GenAI to address them described it as helpful.
- Approximately **1 in 4 youth** reported that they wished they had not shared their hard or personal experience with a GenAI tool. Their expressed regret highlights potential emotional, privacy, or relational costs that may emerge after GenAI use.

Takeaway 3

This suggests that GenAI's immediate emotional appeal often does not translate into experiences that youth feel positive about after the interaction.

4. For 1 in 3 youth, GenAI functions as an endpoint rather than a bridge to mental health care.

- **1 in 3 youth** who report mental health struggles are using GenAI as a substitute for professional care, while the remaining **2 in 3 youth** use it as a complement, such as before, after, or both before and after professional support.
- Although both youth who use GenAI as an endpoint and as a complement to professional care commonly describe short-term emotional relief, youth who use GenAI as a substitute were qualitatively more likely to report neutral or negative feelings about interactions than those who used it as a complement to care.

Takeaway 4

This distinction between GenAI as an endpoint versus a bridge is central to understanding both safety risk and design responsibility.

5. Uneven patterns of GenAI use by sociodemographic groups warrant attention to unique stressors and specific needs of diverse youth.

- Early signals indicate that younger youth, boys, Black and Hispanic youth, and youth experiencing financial hardship may be more likely to rely on GenAI as a substitute for professional care.
- While subgroup analyses are limited by small sample sizes, these patterns raise important concerns about whether youth who already face greater unmet support needs are turning to GenAI instead of being connected to existing care-seeking systems.

Takeaway 5

These patterns raise concern that GenAI may become the default point of support for youth with the fewest alternatives, reinforcing inequities in access to trusted adults and professional support.

Implications for GenAI System Design, Policy Approaches, and Public Health Initiatives

Youth turn to GenAI for mental health, often when care feels out of reach, with use ranging from a supportive complement to a risky substitute. Most youth in this study relied on general-purpose GenAI tools not designed for mental health use, creating additional safety concerns during periods of vulnerability. Evidence from outside this study has shown that some GenAI systems have generated actively harmful content,¹ including guidance related to self-harm or suicide, underscoring that GenAI is a system whose outputs can directly affect safety.

Whether GenAI supports or undermines youth well-being depends on how it is designed, governed, and integrated into broader mental health systems. GenAI should not replace connection or care; at most, it may serve a limited, short-term role that supports reflection while actively directing youth toward trusted people and professional help. That pathway includes professional mental health services, but also trusted adults and other meaningful sources of support.

To function safely, GenAI systems must include clear boundaries, age-appropriate safeguards, strong privacy protections, reliable risk interruption and referral, and design choices that prioritize safety over engagement or emotional dependence. Equally important are education and guidance for youth, caregivers, and educators on GenAI's limitations, appropriate use, and the continued importance of trusted support and evidence-based care.

Meeting these conditions depends on strengthening the design and regulation of GenAI systems and improving public policy and educational approaches.

Introduction

As generative AI (GenAI) becomes increasingly embedded in young people's daily lives, growing public attention has turned to how youth may be using these tools beyond productivity or creativity, including to seek help for personal and emotional concerns.

Across schools, policymakers, technology companies, and youth communities themselves, questions are emerging about what it means for young people to turn to GenAI tools to talk through stress, uncertainty, or mental health challenges.

Early evidence has found that 13.1% of youth use GenAI for mental health purposes,² and while this figure may represent a minority of youth, these estimates likely only scratch the surface of how GenAI tools appear in young people's mental and emotional lives.

Help-seeking often unfolds along a pathway that begins with discomfort or distress, followed by disclosure and, for some, engagement with formal systems of care. Where GenAI fits along this pathway, if at all, for whom, and why, remains under explored. **This research gap is particularly important because many widely-used GenAI tools and technologies were not designed to address youth mental needs or to function as substitutes for professional care.**

Further, little is known about what problems youth are bringing to these tools, how they are interacting with GenAI, or whether GenAI use coincides with connection to other forms of support, like professional care, or occurs in isolation from existing care systems. Finally, differences in equitable access to mental health care and technologies raise key questions

¹ Center for Countering Digital Hate. Fake Friend: How ChatGPT Betrays Vulnerable Teens by Encouraging Dangerous Behavior. Published August 2025.

² A 2025 nationally representative survey of youth ages 12–21 conducted by RAND and published in JAMA Network Open (McBain RK 2025) found 13.1% of youth respondents reported using GenAI for mental health advice.

about which groups of youth are more likely to turn to GenAI for support. GenAI may offer perceived accessibility or anonymity but may also exacerbate already existing inequities in health care access.

Identifying and understanding this specific group of youth, those who already recognize experiencing mental health struggles and are seeking support and who turn to GenAI during periods of struggles, offers a focused lens into gaps in access and support that shape help-seeking experiences for youth. Insights drawn from this group specifically can help understand the greater mental health and well-being landscape of youth and inform conversations about GenAI safety and equity in the mental health space.

● SECTION 1

Which Youth Turn to GenAI for Mental Health Support and Why

Youth Mental Health Challenges are Widespread and Unevenly Distributed

Mental health challenges are a significant and widespread issue for youth across the United States. Nearly half of youth (**44%**) report mental health struggles in the last two years, and an additional **11%** are unsure whether their experiences qualify as a mental health struggle.

This burden of reported mental health struggles varies by sociodemographic groups and is unevenly distributed: older youth (ages 18–24) report higher prevalence than younger adolescents (ages 13–17) (**49% vs 37%**), girls more than boys (**51% vs 36%**), LGBTQ youth more than non-LGBTQ youth (**69% vs 38%**) and youth experiencing financial hardship more than those who are not (**49% vs 37%**).

Clinical symptom burden is also substantial. Approximately **1 in 5** youth met the criteria for depression (**19%**), with higher prevalence among LGBTQ youth. Anxiety was even more prevalent, with nearly **1 in 4** youth (**24%**) meeting the criteria, and higher prevalence observed among girls, Black youth, LGBTQ youth, and youth experiencing financial hardship. **Despite the high and uneven burden, professional help-seeking is often delayed or avoided entirely.** Fewer than 1 in 5 youth receive immediate support (**20%**), while approximately one-third do not seek help at all.

To better understand what drives youth mental health challenges, qualitative responses point to recurring themes among youth. Youth report that their mental health was most impacted by:

- Academic or work stress
- Physical or mental health challenges
- Relationships and social dynamics
- Family responsibilities and stress
- Personal identity and self-development
- Life transitions and major changes
- Trauma, violence or abuse

Reading the Results Responsibly

This report examines the 12% of youth who reported experiencing mental health struggles and also reported using GenAI for mental health purposes, representing the experiences of 113 youth respondents. The analyses are purely descriptive and do not imply causation. Rather than testing causal effects, the goal is to identify meaningful patterns in how GenAI appears within youth mental health help-seeking pathways, including where it may function as a point of engagement, support, or substitution.

Some estimates are subject to greater uncertainty due to the limited sample sizes and should be interpreted as directional patterns rather than definitive population estimates.

A key contribution of this analysis is its mixed-methods approach, which combines quantitative survey findings with qualitative insights of youth narratives. Together, these results offer early insight into the conditions under which youth turn to GenAI for mental health support, and how GenAI intersects with existing systems of care. Future research with larger samples will be important for increasing precision.

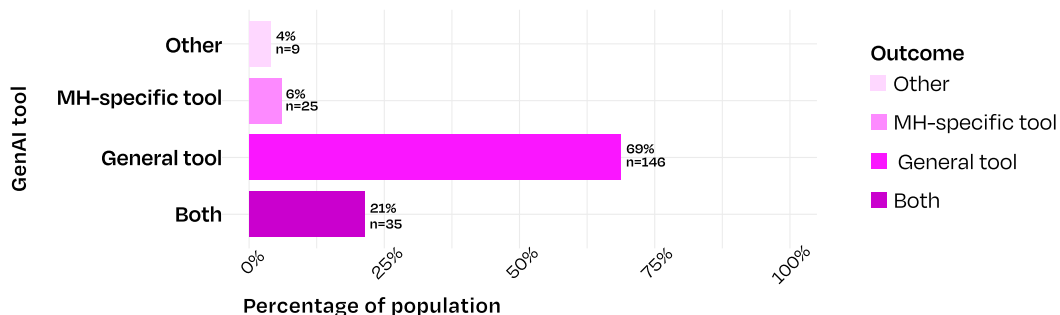
Youth Use of GenAI for Mental Health Signals Where Support Systems Fall Short

In the context of unmet need, some youth turn to sources of support outside of the traditional care systems. Among youth who reported mental health struggles, **12%** of youth reported using GenAI during the time they were struggling.³ There are at least two types of GenAI tools used in the mental health context. While general-purpose GenAI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude) are designed for wide use for a variety of topics, mental health-specific tools (e.g., Therabot) are designed to deliver mental health treatment and often trained on the field's best practices.⁴

Even with growing attention to mental health-specific GenAI tools, most youth in this sample relied on general-purpose tools like ChatGPT or Claude. Nearly two-thirds used only general-purpose tools either in isolation (**69%**) and another **21%** used both general-purpose and mental health-specific tools.

Figure 1.

Type of GenAI Tool Used for Mental Health Hardship Among Those Who Used GenAI



³ Use of GenAI to discuss mental health reflects respondents who explicitly self-identified using GenAI for mental health support. Youth who discussed personal hardships with GenAI but did not label that use as mental health-related are not included in this measure.

⁴ Michael V. Heinz et al., "Randomized Trial of a Generative AI Chatbot for Mental Health Treatment," *NEJM AI* 2, no. 4 (March 27, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1056/Aloa2400802>

In other words, youth mental health disclosures are often occurring on platforms not designed for mental health care, which raises questions about what these technologies are being asked to do, and the overall safeguards in place.

Among youth who experienced mental health struggles and used GenAI for mental health support, **59%** reported that GenAI encouraged them to seek professional help or crisis services, while **41%** did not report being encouraged. **These findings suggest that a substantial portion of youth who are struggling and turning to GenAI platforms for support are not receiving explicit guidance to connect with professional care.**

GenAI Use for Mental Health Varies Across Youth Subgroups

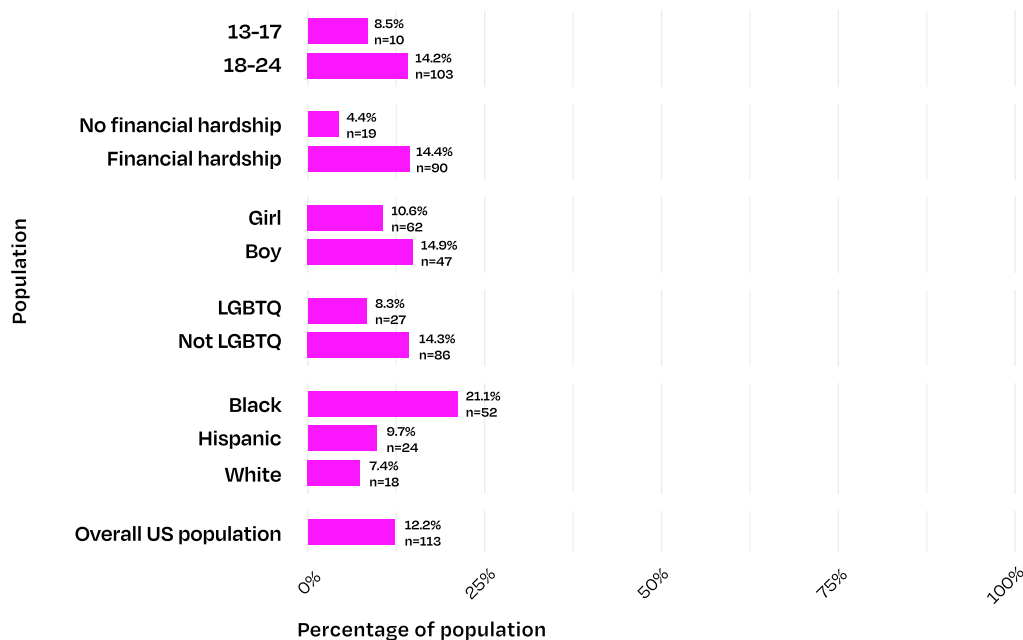
Among youth reporting mental health struggles, GenAI use for mental health struggles varies across subgroups, though most differences are best interpreted as directional.⁵ Boys reported higher GenAI use than girls (PR⁶=1.4 times more likely), older youth (18–24) higher than younger youth (13–17) (PR=1.7), and Black and Hispanic youth higher than White youth (P=2.9 and P=1.3, respectively). Reported use was lower among LGBTQ youth compared with non-LGBTQ youth (PR=0.6). Notably, those experiencing financial difficulties were **3.3 times more likely** to use GenAI for mental health issues compared to those who were not, suggesting a significant difference as 95% confidence intervals did not overlap.

These subgroup findings should be interpreted cautiously given sample size. Rather than indicating risk or need directly, these data highlight the heterogeneity in how GenAI appears in the youth mental health experience and underscore the importance of understanding which youth are turning to GenAI as a part of their mental health care-seeking experience.

Figure 2.

Prevalence of GenAI Use For Mental Health Struggles⁷

By youth subgroup



⁷ This figure represents weighted percentages with unweighted counts of youth who reported using GenAI for mental health struggles.

⁵ Most subgroup differences should be interpreted as directional given overlapping 95% confidence intervals. Directional means that the patterns are suggestive of differences between groups but the sample size is not sufficient to determine whether these differences reflect true variation or sampling variability.

⁶ PR: Prevalence Ratio

Barriers to Professional Care Shape Youth Use of GenAI for Mental Health Support

Youth who turned to GenAI for mental health support report higher levels of perceived barriers to accessing professional care than youth who did not. Across nearly every measured barrier, prevalence was directionally higher among GenAI users, suggesting that GenAI use often occurs in contexts where traditional care-seeking pathways may feel less accessible. Some barriers showed particularly pronounced differences:

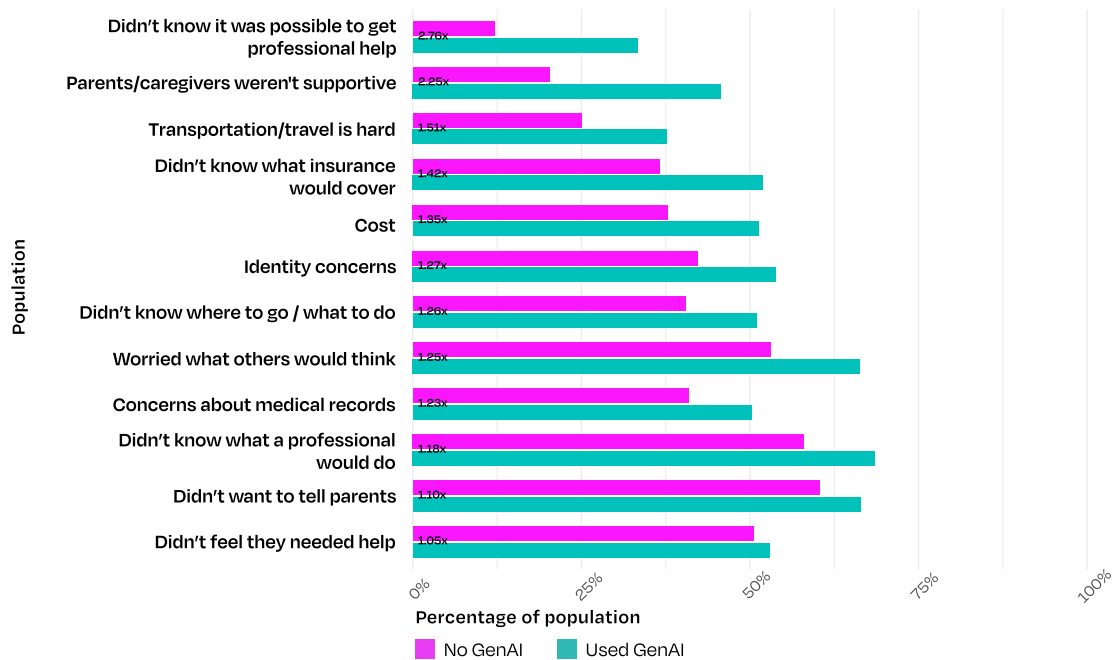
- Youth who did not know it was possible to get professional help were **2.8 times more likely** to have used GenAI for mental health support (**33% vs 12%**).⁸
- Youth whose parents/caregivers did not support them when youth shared they needed help were **2.3 times more likely** to have used GenAI for mental health support (**46% vs 20%**).⁹

Other barriers trended higher among GenAI users, though differences should be interpreted as directional (not significant):

- Youth who report transportation or travel barriers were **1.5 times more likely** to have used GenAI for mental health support (**38% vs 25%**).
- Youth who were unsure about insurance coverage were **1.4 times more likely** to use GenAI for mental health support (**52% vs. 37%**), as were those who cited cost as a barrier (**51% vs. 38%**).
- Youth who report identity-related concerns, didn't know where to go, worried what others would think, concerns about medical records, didn't know what a professional would do, or didn't want to tell parents were more likely to have used GenAI for mental health support (**1.1 times – 1.3 times**)

Figure 3.

Barriers To Professional Mental Health Care, By GenAI Use
Percent endorsing each barrier (95% CI)



⁸ Differences are statistically significant (95% confidence intervals do not overlap). All other comparisons indicate directional trends.

⁹ See Footnote 8

GenAI Use for Mental Health Struggles Is Concentrated Among Youth With Higher Symptom Burden

Youth who reported using GenAI to discuss mental health struggles tended to report higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms than youth with mental health struggles who did not use GenAI for this purpose. Overall, nearly two-thirds of youth with mental health struggles who used GenAI reported symptoms of depression or anxiety (**64%**) compared with under half of youth who did not use GenAI (**47%**).^{10,11} Based on survey data alone, it is difficult to know whether those with higher symptom burden are more likely to use GenAI to discuss mental health issues or whether those who use GenAI are more likely to report higher symptom burden. However, the concentration of GenAI use among youth experiencing higher levels of depression and anxiety provides important context for understanding why GenAI may emerge as a support tool, especially if and when traditional forms of support are not accessible.

Youth Experiences With GenAI for Mental Health Support: Immediate Appeal and Subsequent Limitations

Youth Describe GenAI as an Accessible, Low-Barrier Source of Immediate Emotional Support

Overall, youth describe their reasons for engaging with GenAI for mental health purposes as a source of instant, judgment-free support. For some, GenAI appears to function as a last resort: users turn to GenAI because they cannot afford professional help, or because they have no one else they trust or want to burden. For others, GenAI is described as a tool for emotional processing and support, where users turn to GenAI to put feelings into words, get validation, or process thoughts. Accessibility and convenience also emerge as important factors, with youth emphasizing the ease and speed of engaging with GenAI.

“ [GenAI is] free and easy to use; I don’t have to pay a penny for something to give me comforting words, even if they don’t really exist.”

Male, 19

These themes described above are reflected in the quantitative findings. Among youth experiencing mental health struggles who reported using GenAI for mental health support, use was driven by a multitude of factors. **The most frequently cited reasons included not wanting to be a burden to others (83%), and finding it easier to share with GenAI than with a trusted friend or family member (83%).**

“ [GenAI] was easy to access, [and] with the right prompts you can ask it to be logical and blunt.”

Male, 19

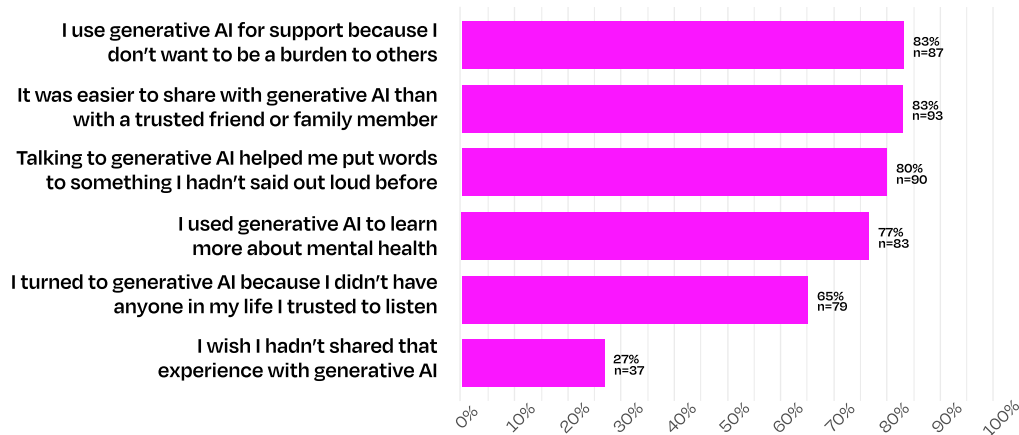
“ GenAI was readily available. I didn’t have to wait for an appointment and it’s free. Moreover, ChatGPT is surprisingly supportive. For needing immediate advice, it’s a great tool and it’s nice that it doesn’t feel emotions. Like, whatever I’m going through won’t impact ChatGPT, lightening the emotional burden on the people in my life who are helping me.”

Male, 22

¹⁰ Among youth who reported mental health struggles, 39.9% of those who used GenAI for mental health purposes met screening criteria for depression, compared with 29.6% of non-users. Anxiety symptoms were reported by 61.8% of GenAI users versus 38.0% of non-users. Estimates are weighted and based on screening measures (PHQ and GAD).

¹¹ Differences in depression and anxiety prevalence between GenAI users and non-users were not statistically significant because the 95% confidence intervals overlap.

Figure 4. When Youth Shared Something Hard Or Personal With Generative AI
Among youth with mental health struggles who used GenAI (95% CI)



Many youth described their reason for using GenAI for mental health purposes as driven by the need to put their emotions into words (**80%**) or to learn more about mental health (**77%**). **These reasons suggest that youth often engage with GenAI as a tool for emotional processing and self-understanding, rather than solely for immediate support.**

“ [GenAI] gave a lot of psychologically rooted theories and terms that I didn't know I was going through.”
Female, 24

“ [GenAI was] helpful; put my ramble of thoughts into a coherent sentence.”
Female, 22

“ Understanding, helped me open perspective, made me realize other people are going through stuff like I have, asked open-ended questions.”
Female, 23

Another commonly reported motivation highlights limited social support experienced by many youth who turn to GenAI for mental health support. **Among youth with mental health challenges who used GenAI, 65% reported that they had no one that they trusted to listen.**

“ I talked to [GenAI] because that was the only resource I had.”
Female, 19

“ Because I felt like I had no one else to talk to”
Male, 18

Positive experiences were most often attributed to validation and reassurance provided by the GenAI tool, helping organize thoughts and clarity, seeing another perspective, and short-term emotional relief.

“ [GenAI] was more of validating my feelings and [then] also giving a second opinion of what I could do to fix it.”

Female, 20

“ It [broke] down reasons why I was panicking about a situation so that I could go down the list and calm myself down.”

Female, 21

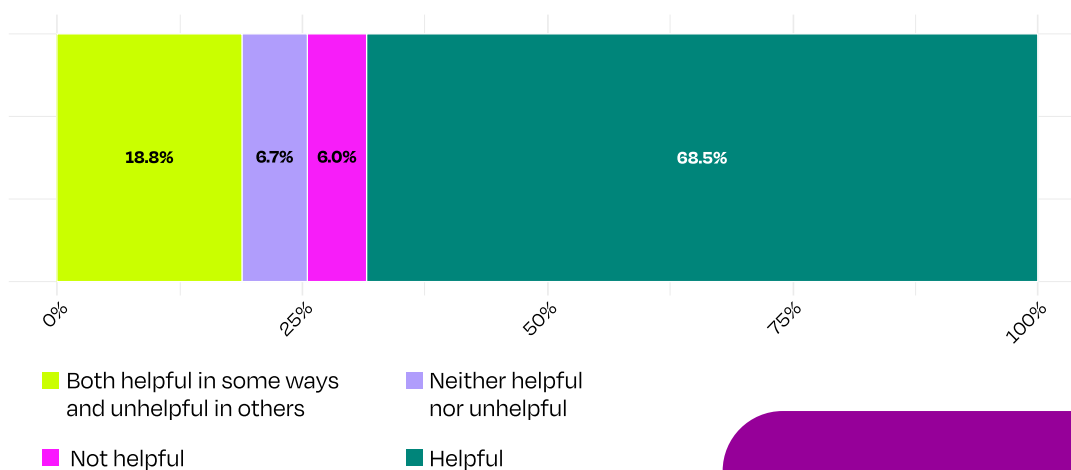
Perceived Benefits Are Mixed , Often Short-Lived and Sometimes Accompanied by Regret

Youth report that GenAI use does not uniformly translate into perceived benefit. Just over two-thirds of youth (**69%**) reported finding it helpful. The remaining **31%** expressed some degree of ambivalence or dissatisfaction, with 6% reporting it was not helpful, **7%** neither helpful nor unhelpful, and **19%** both helpful and unhelpful.

Figure 5.

How Helpful Was GenAI For Mental Health/Hardship

Among youth who used GenAI for Mental Health/Hardship (n=112)



“ [GenAI] felt **good** because it helped me figure out how I was feeling and the act of writing it as if I was talking to someone made it easier to be grounded. I used it as more of a short time thing because I didn't have anything else so it made me feel **better** but it didn't help fix anything. But it makes it easy to talk about anything because I don't have the lingering embarrassment that comes with talking to an actual person.

Female, 16

“ [GenAI] felt **somewhat better** or way better, **sometimes worse** depending on the situation.

Female, 19

“ [GenAI] made me feel **better** for awhile but then the **negative** feeling returned.

Female, 18

After youth shared something hard or personal with a GenAI tool, nearly **1 in 4 youth** reported that they wished they had not done so. **This expressed regret highlights that even when GenAI is accessible or seemingly supportive, the mental health impact is much more complicated as it may come at a cost to youth emotional well-being.**

GenAI Enters Youth Mental Health Care-Seeking Pathways at Multiple Points

The findings above describe which youth turn to GenAI for mental health support and the conditions under which they do so. The following section examines how GenAI fits into broader mental health help-seeking pathways.

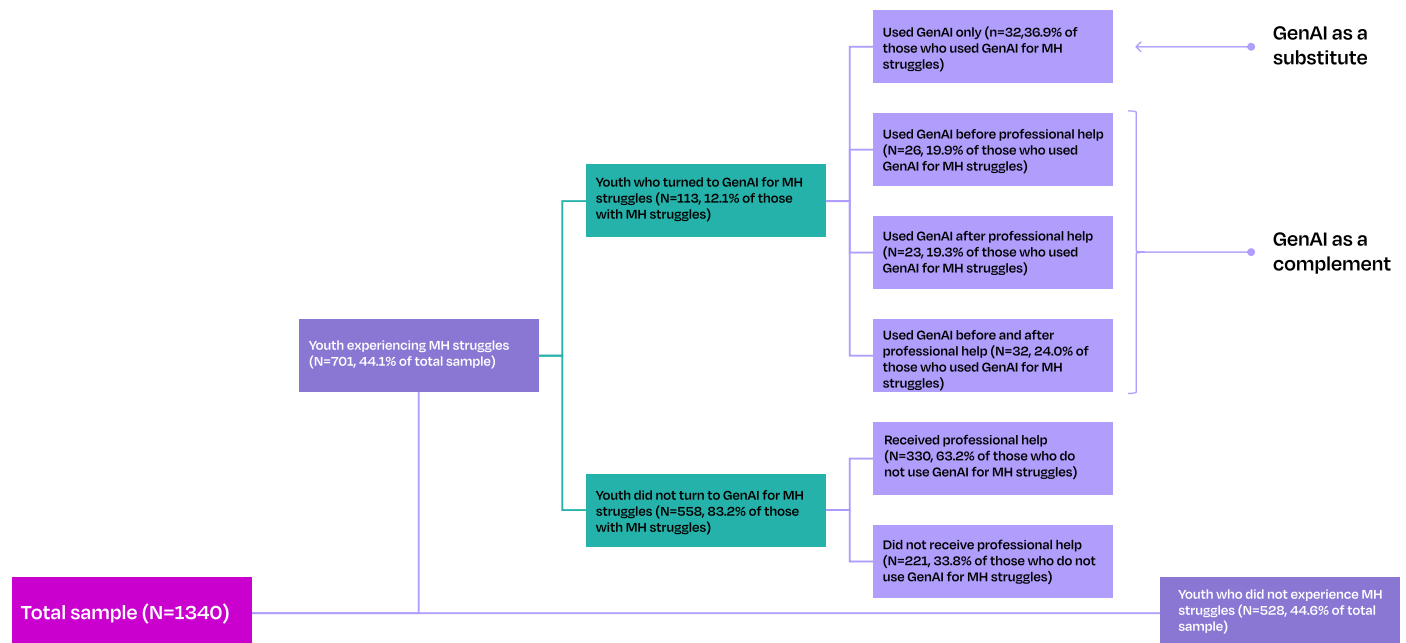
Youth Report GenAI Appearing as Both a Substitute and as a Complement to Professional Mental Health Care

Among youth experiencing mental health struggles, GenAI represents one of several possible pathways youth may take when navigating mental health struggles. **Among the 12% who use GenAI to discuss mental health issues (we'll refer to them as GenAI mental health users in this section), youth do not engage with these tools in uniform ways, particularly with respect to timing relative to professional care.**

Approximately **two-thirds** of GenAI mental health users reported engaging with professional help while another **one-third** do not (similar to rates for non-GenAI mental health users). Differences in timing of professional contact implies that GenAI may function differently within help-seeking pathways across youth. While some **(37%)** youth do not get professional help at all when using GenAI (substitution effect), others **(63%)** use GenAI before and/or after getting professional help, introducing GenAI as a complement in help-seeking pathways.

Figure 6.

How GenAI Augments And Sometimes Replaces Traditional Mental Health Support



Qualitative Differences in How Youth Use GenAI as a Substitute Versus a Complement to Care

Differences emerge in how youth describe their reasons for using GenAI as a substitute for professional care or as a complement to it. **Youth who use GenAI as a substitute more frequently cite the nonjudgmental or anonymous nature of the technology as central to their decision to use it, suggesting that emotional safety and privacy are particularly important when GenAI serves as emotional support.**

In contrast, complement users are more likely to describe using it for emotional processing, articulation, and working through problems. **Across both pathways, convenience and access-ibility are commonly cited, underscoring GenAI's role as a low-barrier point of engagement.**

“ They listen without the knowledge from anybody.”
Female, 22

“ Felt more disclosed and honestly better advice.”
Male, 23

“ To see list[ed] out in front of me of reasons why something could happen without my mind maybe passing over one.”
Female, 21

“ It was something to talk to that would help me work through problems in an unbiased way.”
Female, 21

“ I think AI seems to be really understanding and it validates your feelings. It also gives multiple options on next steps to grow from it.”
Female, 21

Across both pathways, youth reflections indicate that emotional relief and grounding is common as roughly **two-thirds** of youth in both the substitute and complement groups of GenAI mental health users described some degree of emotional relief or benefit after using GenAI, regardless of whether they ultimately engage with professional care. **Several youth reported that the emotional relief experienced was short-lived, emphasizing the dangers of relying on GenAI to responsibly address mental health concerns in place of trusted adults or professional care.** Also, negative or neutral experiences are more prevalent when GenAI serves as a substitute rather than as a complement.

This pattern supports our recommendation: GenAI use must be embedded within a broader care-seeking pathway.

“ A little better, but it felt like putting a band-aid on a giant gash.”
Male, 19

“ I felt the same. I felt like I already knew the right thing to think considering that an artificial intelligence is saying the same thing that's been repeated to me for years. I felt like I had to understand it, not just hear it.”
Male, 24

Who Uses GenAI as a Substitute Versus a Complement May Reflect Differences in Access, Support, and Clinical Context

Differences in Use of GenAI as a Substitute Versus Complement Across Youth Subgroups

In our study, we observe sociodemographic differences in patterns of GenAI use as an endpoint in care-seeking pathways. Those who use GenAI as a substitute are more likely to be:

- Boys than girls (**1.6 times**)
- Younger adolescents rather than older youth (**1.9 times**)
- Not LGBTQ youth rather than LGBTQ youth (**1.6 times**)
- Youth experiencing financial hardship (**1.4 times**)

Key Considerations for GenAI Design, Policy, and Youth Mental Health Systems

Our findings point to the need to broaden the questions we ask about GenAI use in youth mental health. Rather than stopping at the question *“Is GenAI good or bad for mental health?”* this study emphasizes the importance of also asking: *“Who is GenAI serving in times of mental health struggle, and for whom does GenAI function as a bridge to trusted adults and professional care versus an endpoint that leaves youth disconnected from the people and systems aimed to improve their mental health?”*

- **Youth turn to GenAI primarily because it lowers barriers to disclosure and support, filling gaps left by traditional mental health systems.** Qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that youth use GenAI because it is immediate, free, and emotionally low-risk. Many describe using GenAI to avoid burdening others, to access support when difficult, or because they lack trusted people to talk to. These patterns show that GenAI is being used as a low-barrier alternative when traditional supports feel unavailable or unsafe.
- **GenAI use does not appear uniformly supportive across contexts.** Patterns suggest that experiences differ depending on whether GenAI is used on its own or alongside other sources of professional help. Youth who use GenAI as an endpoint more often describe neutral or mixed experiences than youth who use GenAI to discuss mental health issues in addition to professional help. This distinction may imply that GenAI is being placed upstream of trusted adults, be it parents, caregivers, schools, or professional care systems, and may be the first touchpoint for youth seeking support and comfort in times of mental health struggles.
- **GenAI may be most relied upon by youth experiencing some of the greatest barriers to care.** Directional patterns suggest that GenAI may be more heavily relied upon by youth who face greater barriers to traditional care, including younger youth, boys, Black and Hispanic youth, and youth experiencing financial hardship. While these subgroup analyses are limited by small sample sizes, they raise important questions about whether GenAI is filling gaps in access to care or unintentionally reinforcing existing inequities.

For technology platforms, this means general-purpose systems are already functioning in mental health contexts for which they were not designed. For policymakers and public health leaders, it means GenAI is becoming part of youth mental health infrastructure without corresponding safeguards. For schools and youth-serving systems, it means young people may be disclosing distress to GenAI before reaching out to trusted adults. And for parents and caregivers, it means youth may be turning to GenAI in moments when family support feels out of reach.

GenAI is already part of youth mental health help-seeking and how it is designed and governed matters

Youth are bringing personal struggles and emotional disclosures to GenAI tools, and experiences differ meaningfully depending on whether it is used alongside other supports or as a substitute for them. This has implications for how GenAI systems should be designed, governed, and understood within youth mental health ecosystems.

Recommendation #1: Design GenAI to reduce isolation and strengthen connection to trusted adults and professional support

While GenAI may provide an outlet for some vulnerable youth, it can become a risk when it is the only outlet for help-seeking and when youth are using it in lieu of turning to trusted adults or professional mental health care. **The concern is not simply GenAI use itself, but use in isolation and when GenAI becomes the endpoint of help-seeking rather than one step within a broader continuum of care.**

GenAI systems should be designed to actively reinforce disclosure and connection to real people, including trusted adults, caregivers, educators, counselors, or crisis services. This includes interaction patterns that encourage off-platform support and reliable escalation when signs of distress appear, rather than allowing prolonged, emotionally reinforcing exchanges to function as a substitute for human connection. GenAI, for example, can help youth seek affordable care options or navigate health insurance systems, ultimately still encouraging youth towards connection to support systems and people.

Recommendation #2: Treat GenAI as part of the youth mental health ecosystem

Most youth in this study relied on general-purpose GenAI tools that were not designed for mental health use, yet were used during periods of mental health struggles. **Because GenAI is now showing up in these moments, it must be treated as part of the youth mental health ecosystem, whether intended or not.**

This means safety expectations cannot be limited to mental health-specific products. Whenever GenAI systems encounter youth, baseline protections should apply. This includes reliably detecting distress signals, preventing harmful or lethal guidance, interrupting unsafe interactions, reinforcing connection to real people, and including age-appropriate safeguards, meaningful parental or caregiver controls, and strong protections for the privacy of youth disclosures.

At the same time, the fact that youth are turning to GenAI during mental health struggles highlights real gaps in access to trusted adults and professional support. **Youth who used GenAI reported higher barriers to care, including not knowing help was available and lacking caregiver support.** Treating GenAI as part of the youth mental health ecosystem therefore also means addressing the conditions that lead youth to rely on it in the first place. This includes strengthening care navigation, improving youth and caregiver awareness of available support, reducing practical barriers to access, supporting digital literacy about the appropriate use and limitations of GenAI, and reinforcing the role of trusted adults so that GenAI does not become the place youth turn when other supports feel out of reach.

Recommendation #3: Ground conversations about GenAI in the realities of access to support

Youth who used GenAI during periods of mental health struggle reported substantially higher barriers to professional care, including not knowing it was possible to get help and lacking support from parents or caregivers. For some youth, GenAI was used as a substitute for other sources of support rather than alongside them.

This means reliance on GenAI, particularly when used without other supports, should be understood as a signal of unmet need rather than evidence that GenAI is adequately meeting youth mental health needs. Patterns of GenAI use can help identify where care navigation, and support and access to trusted adults are breaking down.

Public health systems, schools, clinicians, parents and caregivers, and youth-serving organizations should pay attention to where and for whom GenAI is functioning as a substitute, and respond by strengthening pathways to human support, improving awareness of available care, and reducing the barriers that lead youth to seek help from GenAI in the first place. GenAI is not waiting to be thoughtfully integrated into youth mental health systems. Youth are already bringing their struggles to these tools. **The question is no longer whether GenAI belongs in help-seeking pathways, but how its presence in these moments is addressed.** The findings in this report show that when GenAI becomes a substitute for human support, positive experiences with GenAI decrease and underlying gaps in access to care are revealed. Responding to this reality requires attention to how GenAI behaves during vulnerability and to the conditions that lead youth to rely on it in the first place.

Methodology

A nationally representative sample of 1340 individuals aged 13 to 24 in the United States were recruited to take the youth pulse survey. The cross-sectional survey ran from October 8–November 12, 2025. Using panelists from their probability panel AmeriSpeak and supplementary opt-in Prodege panel, youth aged 13–24 were recruited by NORC. Youth under 18 were recruited through their parents who are panelists (obtaining both parental consent and individual assent), and youth over 18 were recruited directly as panelists themselves (obtaining individual consent). Surveys were available in both English and Spanish, and through telephone and online mediums. This strategy was reviewed and approved by our Subject Matter Expert Advisory Board and our Youth Advisory Board. Ethics Approval was obtained from NORC IRB.

How We Centered Youth Voice

Surgo Health partnered with InTandem to form a Youth Advisory Board (YAB), bringing together a diverse group of 14 young people aged 15–18 to guide every stage of the YMHT project. The YAB played a central role in shaping the direction, design, and interpretation of our work.

This project began by asking the YAB what topics mattered most to them right now, with GenAI being one topic raised. Next, survey questions were workshopped directly with the YAB to ensure questions were being framed in a developmentally appropriate and accessible manner. The YAB reviewed the survey instrument for clarity, accessibility, and relevance to their lived experiences. Once the quantitative data was analyzed, YAB assisted by contextualizing key findings, sense-checking interpretations, and shaping the direction of recommendations.

By embedding youth voice throughout, from research design to data interpretation and solution-building, this report ensures that our findings and recommendations reflect not only data, but the lived experience of young people.



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