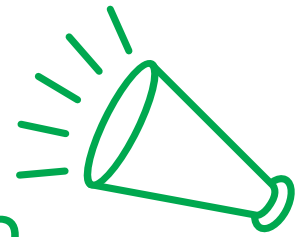


Girls Speak Out About Mental Health



Today's mental health statistics are sobering—in the United States, [major depression](#) among teen girls increased significantly from 2011 (12%) to 2017 (20%). And in 2015 alone, compared to 2010 [three times](#) as many 10- to 14-year-old girls were admitted to emergency rooms after deliberately harming themselves. [Suicide is the third-leading](#) cause of death in 15- to 19-year-olds, and about [70%](#) of U.S. teens suffer from loneliness. We also know that half of all mental health conditions start by age 14, but most go undetected and as a result are untreated.

Of course, these statistics were collected prior to the challenges of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which has spiked social and economic stressors, including social distancing, coping with illness or the fear of illness, attending remote school, and grappling with canceled major life events (e.g., proms and graduations).

Girl Scouts are deeply concerned about the stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that they and their peers are experiencing—and they're asking adults to take notice.



Our Team and Our Approach

Being [girl-led](#) is part of Girl Scouts' DNA—which is why in fall 2019 the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) took on the research behind *Girls Speak Out About Mental Health* with ten members of the G-Team, a group of high school Girl Scouts who serve as advisors to Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA). The G-Team is using this research to frame a [“Girls Speak Out” session](#) at the 55th triannual National Council Session—a chance for girls to make their voices heard across the Girl Scout Movement on a topic they care deeply about.

Our process was informed by participatory action research frameworks (e.g., [Fox, 2015](#); [Torres, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012](#)). Girl co-researchers were involved in all stages of research alongside the GSRI, from developing research questions to collecting data to analyzing the data.

Our multi-phase study combined qualitative and quantitative research methodologies that let us understand both the scale of these issues (e.g., the number of girls affected by mental health concerns) and how girls experience and understand mental health.

To get a better feel of what girls go through and how they'd like GSUSA to support them, we conducted a national survey completed by 334 Girl Scouts from 45 states across the country.¹ To delve further into the mental health issues girls care most about and to understand how they want GSUSA to address mental health, we held seven girl-led virtual focus groups with high school-age Girl Scouts.² The groups explored a wide range of relevant topics and how the pandemic relates to these areas.

Although the topic of mental health is incredibly broad in the forms it takes and how it affects different populations based on considerations such as race, class, gender, cultural norms, and so on, this report is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, the focus of the report is honed by our girl co-researchers to paint a picture of what they and their peers are currently most concerned about when it comes to mental health.

Our findings are structured around girls' overall experience with stress and anxiety, their complicated relationship with social media, the kinds of mental health support they experience, and the kinds of additional resources or support they need and would like to see from Girl Scouts. Throughout the report, to emphasize girls' voices, we've included quotes from our focus groups and surveys. All quotes are from Girl Scouts in high school.

1 The survey was sent in August 2020 to more than 400 girl delegates (Girl Scouts who are voting members and represent their local councils at the National Council Session) and a random sample of older Girl Scouts in high school. Of the 334 survey respondents, all were in high school (8% in 9th grade, 29% in 10th grade, 32% in 11th grade, and 32% in 12th grade) and 59% were girl delegates. Girls identified as 62% White, 13% Multiracial, 8% Black or African American, 7% Asian, 5% Latina, and less than 1% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 4% of girls preferred not to answer.

2 Focus group participants were all girl delegates.



Our Findings

1. Girls are currently coping with a lot of stress and uncertainty.

Our research found that school is a significant source of stress and this includes both the normative aspects of school and the exceptional circumstances youth find themselves in during the pandemic.

While more than 7 in 10 girls report feeling stressed about tests or homework, they also overwhelmingly express concern about living in an uncertain environment still dominated by the pandemic. At the time of our research, the topics most on girls' minds were what their schools' reopening plans would be, the pressure of choosing between remote and in-person school, and fears about safety and the academic quality of remote education. Of the girls surveyed:

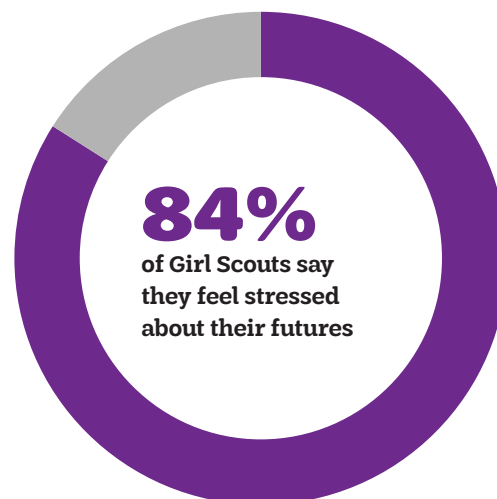
- **71%** felt nervous about the start of the school year
- **62%** worried their schools' reopening plans might not be safe
- **47%** felt nervous about remote school
- **45%** don't think they'll have enough social interaction with other students (indicating a common concern related to friendships and loneliness)
- **36%** don't think they'll receive a high-quality education because of the remote or hybrid formats

Additionally, girls are worried how the pandemic will affect them beyond the academic year:

- **84%** of girls are stressed about the future and how the pandemic will affect their prospects for attending college, finding internships, or landing a job
- **76%** say their extracurricular activities will be interrupted by the pandemic in fall 2020
- **66%** are nervous about the college application process changing because of the pandemic

“I get stressed about the SATs, college applications, my struggles with learning, having special needs, health issues, thinking about the future, and the expectations I have for myself—like what kind of woman am I supposed to be?”

“I feel a bit more stressed, because if this virus isn't over by the second semester, I may not be able to participate in clubs and extracurricular programs that could help me in the future.”





2. Girls have a complicated relationship with social media.

Nearly all girls (96%) who report having or using social media say that their screen time has increased during the pandemic. We asked them more about their relationship with social media and the pros and cons they associate with it.

Pros

Feeling Connected and Informed

“Social media gives us more access to learning about mental health, and now we are much better at recognizing and dealing with [it]. This generation also has more of a positive attitude towards therapy and coping methods.”

Girls identified several benefits of social media, such as:

- Staying connected with the world around them, including consuming news and learning about social issues
- Being entertained
- Keeping in touch with friends and family (especially while social distancing)
- Educating themselves about topics they’re interested in

Cons

Feeling Overconnected

“Watching news is stressful; the coverage is typically about bad things . . . we can feel powerless as younger people who don’t have a job and can’t contribute in the ways [we’d] like.”

Girls often find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive, especially during the pandemic. The constant influx of information and news surrounding the state of world can be damaging and taxing on their mental health. This is supported by a [recent poll](#) that found that more than one-third of Americans experience heightened stress or anxiety when watching COVID-related news or reading about [guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), suggesting that it’s important to take breaks from the media to protect one’s mental health.



Battling Negative Self-Image

“Social media forces you to compare yourself to people. It makes you feel like you’re missing out on something even though you may not be.”

- **61%** of respondents say they care about how they’re perceived on social media
- **47%** say social media has changed their body image standards
- Strikingly, **53%** say their self-image has worsened from using social media—girls express that they often find themselves comparing their bodies to others on social media

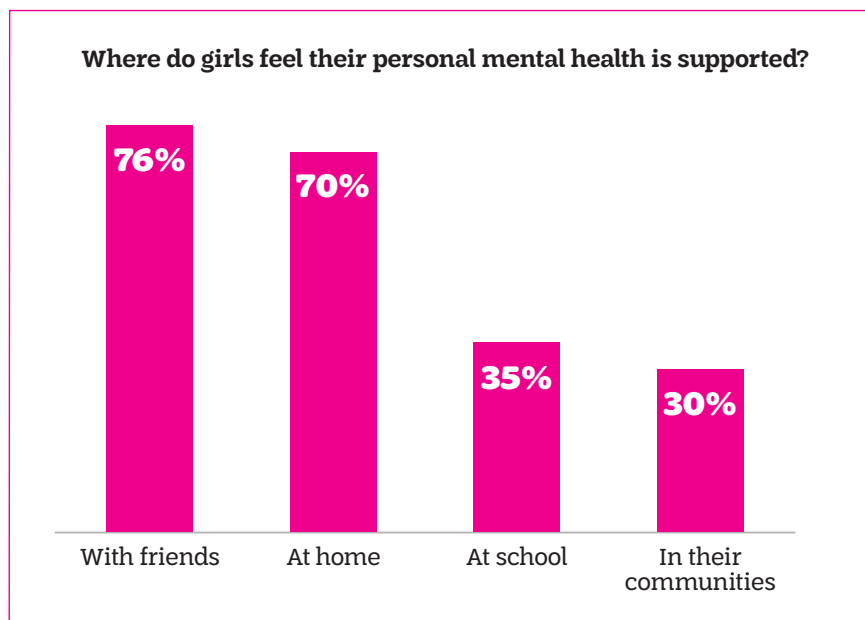
Recent research has found a link between frequently viewing pictures on social media and [decreased self-esteem](#) and [weight and body dissatisfaction](#). In our research, girls confirm that social media consumption can relate to a negative self-image.

3. Girls feel their mental health is somewhat supported but need more resources and want to address stigma.

Friend and Family Support

About 7 in 10 girls feel supported by their family members or friends when it comes to sustaining positive mental health, and about 6 in 10 say their family has a positive view toward mental health disorders, indicating an attitude that is inclusive and stigma-free.

“If we normalize talking about mental health, it can encourage girls to open up and find help. Help girls to realize that they are not alone.”





Even so, some girls express discomfort confiding in friends or family about their mental health because they don't know how to ask for help, feel the people in their life aren't educated on the subject, or are worried about their reactions. This is important given the [positive effects](#) associated with sharing mental health experiences, but according to the [National Alliance for Mental Illness](#), 1 in 5 teens are struggling in silence.

Community Support

Girls view their communities as the least supportive of their mental health. Although 65% of girls have access to resources in their communities that support mental health, less than a third (30%) feel personally supported by their communities when it comes to mental health. And only 45% of girls feel that their communities have an inclusive or stigma-free attitude toward mental health disorders.

School Support

“People don't want to go to counselors in school, because it's very stigmatized, and so you feel like you have no one to go to.”

While just over half (56%) of girls surveyed say their school takes an inclusive and stigma-free stance on mental health disorders, only 35% feel their personal mental health is supported in school.

- Only 58% of girls would go to an adult at school if they had a problem.
- Less than half of girls—44%—think their school provides adequate resources for students to support mental health.



Mental Health Stigma

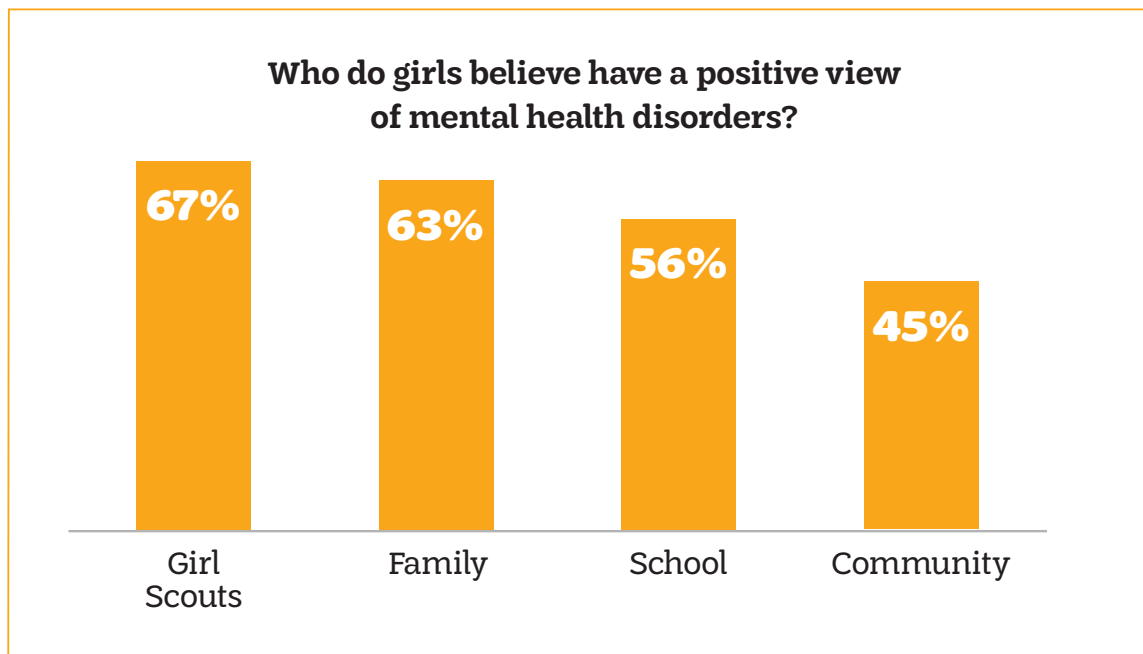
Unfortunately, stigma and mental health still often go hand in hand, making some girls feel like they can't talk about their concerns or experiences with friends and family. Recent [research](#) finds that almost 50% of Gen Z youth have worried about being judged negatively for receiving mental health treatment.

Most girls in our focus groups say they understand mental health disorders like depression and anxiety but that their peers and the adults in their lives aren't as aware of how these conditions present. Girls also note that they, their peers, and the adults in their lives need more resources to fully have the language and tools to discuss mental health conditions in an accepting and supportive way.

Unsurprisingly, given the concerns girls express, they sometimes don't share their personal struggles with others because they don't want to be seen as "weak." They agree that adolescents and young adults could benefit from more education about mental health and added that mental health isn't addressed enough in the media, which contributes to its overall stigma.

"There aren't enough resources, which means that people don't know the warning signs and people are suffering in silence because no one around them understands what's happening."

"People need to be better educated at school, at Girl Scouts, and at home—they need to understand that it is not a choice to have a mental illness or experience [problems with] mental health."



Girls read a description explaining that a "positive view" means treating those with mental health disorders fairly, equally, and with respect and that there isn't a stigma attached to experiencing mental health issues or seeking help or support.



How Girl Scouts Can Support Mental Health

Two-thirds of girls feel like being in Girl Scouts supports their mental health. Girls can explain how Girl Scouts currently supports their mental health; they also have clear ideas about additional ways the organization can step up.

Girls say that although there are a lot of resources available outside Girl Scouts, they “know and trust Girl Scouts” and if Girl Scouts were to offer resources or programming in support of mental health, “you know it’s [high-]quality, and you can trust it.”

Girls say Girl Scouts provides ...

- ✓ A safe space
- ✓ A program that teaches leadership, courage, confidence, and character
- ✓ Social support and friendships
- ✓ Supportive adult relationships
- ✓ Consistency and comfort in a time of change

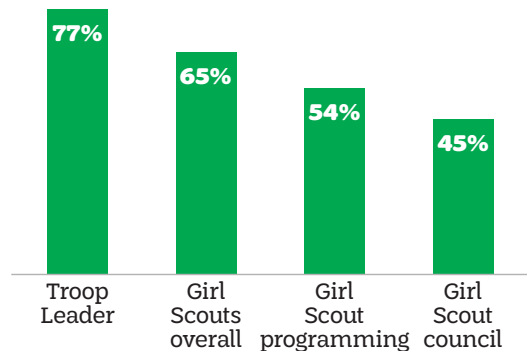
1. An Accepting, Safe Environment

“Because of Girl Scouts, I’ve had a community and a safe place to be myself.”

Girls’ safety, including their psychological safety, is Girl Scouts’ top priority. With the support of troop leaders and the comfort of being in a safe space, girls form a community that fosters positive mental health.

“Honestly, my troop leader saved my life and talked me out of suicide when I was in middle school. Girl Scouts gives me purpose right now, and that is incredibly invaluable to me.”

Aspects of Girl Scouting that are Most Supportive to Girls’ Mental Health



Girls say they feel free to be themselves at Girl Scouts, where they can discuss stressors with their peers and troop leaders—and that both girls and troop leaders can be an incredible source of support during difficult times. Friendships with other Girl Scouts contribute to girls’ positive mental health because having a community of likeminded girls allows them to feel comfortable and supported.

“Girl Scouts has been helpful to my mental health because of the meaningful connections and relationships I have been able to form, and continue to form, with my sister Girl Scouts.”

“There are many girls in my troop who have mental health issues, like ADD, anxiety, and depression. By being open about their issues, my troop has helped me recognize my own mental health issues. I see Girl Scouts as a safe space where I can be open about how I feel, something that can be hard for me.”



2. Engaging Programming

Participating in Girl Scout programming, including events, activities, and badge work, helps girls focus on tangible, interest-piquing tasks that can offer a break from the stressors of their lives. The virtual social interaction offered during the pandemic, particularly through online troop meetings and events and programs like those found on [Girl Scouts at Home](#), has relieved some of girls' COVID-related anxieties and helped Girl Scouts remain a constant during a time of change and uncertainty.

“Girl Scouts has been supportive of my mental health as it has consistently kept programs going. It did a good job at moving online and providing some normalcy in these difficult times.”

“[We can] distract ourselves from everything that is going on. Even virtual meetings help, since we get to see each other online and talk. It helps us to not feel so lonely.”

“It keeps me occupied and moving/looking forward. Sometimes my mental health makes me feel weighed down and unmotivated, but Girl Scouts helps combat that.”

Girls say that Girl Scout programs support resilience and positive mental health in many different ways—including building their confidence and equipping them with tools to help them cope with challenges and stressors.

“The Journeys my troop chooses are often focused on helping yourself and others, especially socially. Anxiety, depression, and bullying are three topics we have discussed . . . how to seek help for yourself, how to support others, etc.”

“Girl Scouts has taught me to be self-confident, which is very good for my mental health. I have learned to be brave when trying new things, which reduces anxiety I might have had when put in new or uncomfortable situations. I have learned to be adaptable. Girl Scouts' encouragement of always trying new things has led me to pursue activities that make me happy.”

Girl Scouts also offers activities that enhance wellness. For example, the outdoors has long been a pillar of the Girl Scout program, and there are dozens of available badges teaching outdoor skills and adventures. This is important to girls' well-being given research that shows that [spending time in nature](#) can improve mood and [curb negative thinking](#).



3. A Foundation for More Support

Girls are clear: we need to ensure they know what Girl Scouts offers can support their positive mental health. But even with the foundation of support that Girl Scouts provides girls would like additional backing, specifically:

- 1) Help breaking down mental health stigma
- 2) Encouragement of open conversations about mental health
- 3) New programming
- 4) Mental health education and training for girls and volunteers
- 5) Peer mentorship and social support (e.g., knowing how to support themselves and others)

For one, girls want more focus on self-care activities, like yoga and meditation, that can increase their resilience and positive mental health.

Girls also want Girl Scouts to delve into mental health issues like depression and anxiety and how they can help themselves or other girls. They overwhelmingly support Girl Scouts advocating explicitly for mental health, stressing that it's important to address and debunk associated stigmas early in girls' lives.

Girls are interested in new programs and badges that specifically address mental health support and help them understand mental health issues. They're excited about the possibility of educational opportunities, like webinars, courses, and online resources, that offer guidance on coping skills, destigmatizing mental health issues, and helping peers and loved ones with mental health issues.

“I would love to see more programming specifically about how to take care of your mental health, like workshops on how to practice mindfulness and manage stress, as well as seek help when needed.”

“Maybe a mental health first-aid [badge] as well as a normal first-aid [badge], or incorporation of that into a badge. I think it would also be helpful to know [how] to communicate when you are hurting; I often struggle with putting how I'm feeling into words I want to know how to ask the right questions to support those hurting as well.”

“I would like to see more programming, patches, and badges which outright talk about mental health issues. Programming that I have done talks about bullying and self-esteem, but . . . I think it would be beneficial to have more programming—particularly for older girls—which gives a name to the way girls may be feeling and lets them know that they are not alone.”



Our Final Thoughts

As a girl-led program, GSUSA keeps girls' needs top of mind. We thank all the participating Girl Scouts for their input on this critical topic. In closing, our girl co-researchers reiterate, in their own words, why a continued focus on mental health is so important and how, together, we can create a happier, healthier world for all girls.

1. **Mental health matters to us, and it affects us.** It's part of our everyday lives; our mental state influences our lives in every way. We have felt this firsthand, especially during the pandemic. And by listening to us, adults can understand what we need.
2. **Mental health struggles aren't limited to girls.** Research shows we're not alone, even if we've been hit especially hard. We see adults struggling with similar problems. Girls of our generation are looking to understand mental health; we're looking for guidance through our own struggles. And most importantly we're looking to make the world a better place by learning how to help others and break the stigma.
3. **Girl Scouts can make a huge difference.** Girl Scouts has the resources and power to help girls across the country—and to make a big difference. Girl Scouts helps girls be successful and reducing stigma and addressing mental health is part of that equation!

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The [Girl Scout Research Institute](https://www.girlscouts.org/research) conducts original research on girls' healthy development, well-being, and leadership. Learn more at www.girlscouts.org/research.

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