

PULSE 3 REPORT

# Walton Family Foundation Voices of Gen Z Study

## Youth Happiness



# Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted Nov. 27-30, 2023, with a sample of 2,271 12- to 26-year-olds nationally. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random digit-dial phone interviews that cover landline and cellphones.

Overall, 1,078 12- to 18-year-old children nationally were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child 18 or younger living in their household; the additional 1,193 18- to 26-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the total sample of 2,271 Gen Z respondents nationally, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,078 12- to 18-year-old Gen Z youth recruited through a parent or guardian, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 4.0$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,193 18- to 26-year-old Gen Z youth nationally who are Gallup Panel members, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 4.7$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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# Introduction and Key Findings

## “Are you happy?”

Given the ubiquity of the question, the answer is more complicated than one might expect. Is happiness the presence of love and laughter in one’s life? The absence of negative emotions or sadness? Fulfillment and satisfaction, rather than effusive joy? Hopefulness for the future? Something else?

In its research on the subject, including the *World Happiness Report* and Global Flourishing Study, Gallup finds all of these, and more, are useful constructs for measuring happiness. In addition to varying conceptions and definitions across cultures, Gallup has found that happiness fluctuates with age, peaking among young adults and bottoming out in middle age. In partnership with the Walton Family Foundation and Dr. Arthur C. Brooks, Gallup has sought to expand its research of happiness within a new cohort of young adults: Generation Z.

To better understand not only how happy Gen Z are in their lives today, but what exactly defines and drives that sense of happiness, Gallup surveyed more than 2,000 12- to 26-year-olds about their experiences.

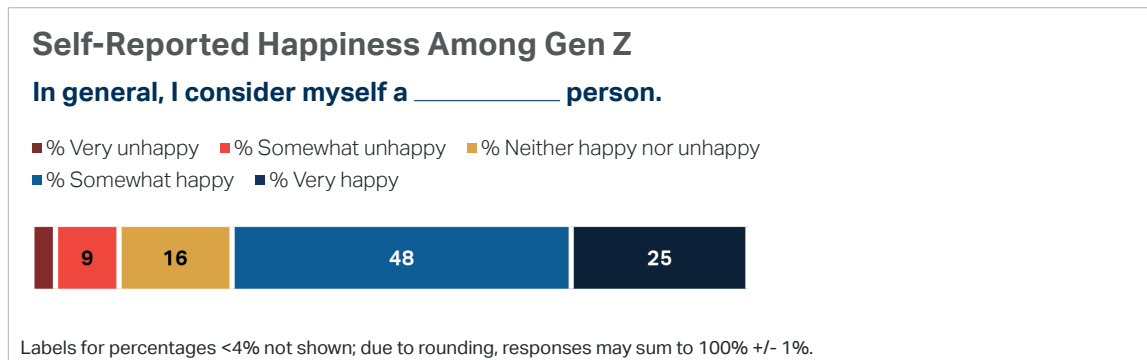
About three quarters (73%) of Gen Z describe themselves as very happy or somewhat happy. However, this percentage declines significantly as Gen Z reaches adulthood, alongside many of the factors that coincide with happiness. **Among the most important findings are:**

- 1 The most influential driver of Gen Z’s happiness is their sense of purpose at work and school. However, between 43% and 49% of Gen Zers do not feel what they do each day is interesting, important or motivating.
- 2 Sleep and relaxation are also highly influential in happiness: Gen Zers who usually have enough time during the week to sleep and relax are twice as likely as those who do not to say they are happy.
- 3 Gen Zers who spend a lot of time comparing themselves to others are notably less likely than their peers to say they are happy, and are about twice as likely to say they always or often feel anxious.
- 4 Happy members of Gen Z are at least twice as likely to say they often feel loved by, supported by and connected to those around them. However, about one in three members of Gen Z do not often feel loved and supported.

# How Happy Is Gen Z?

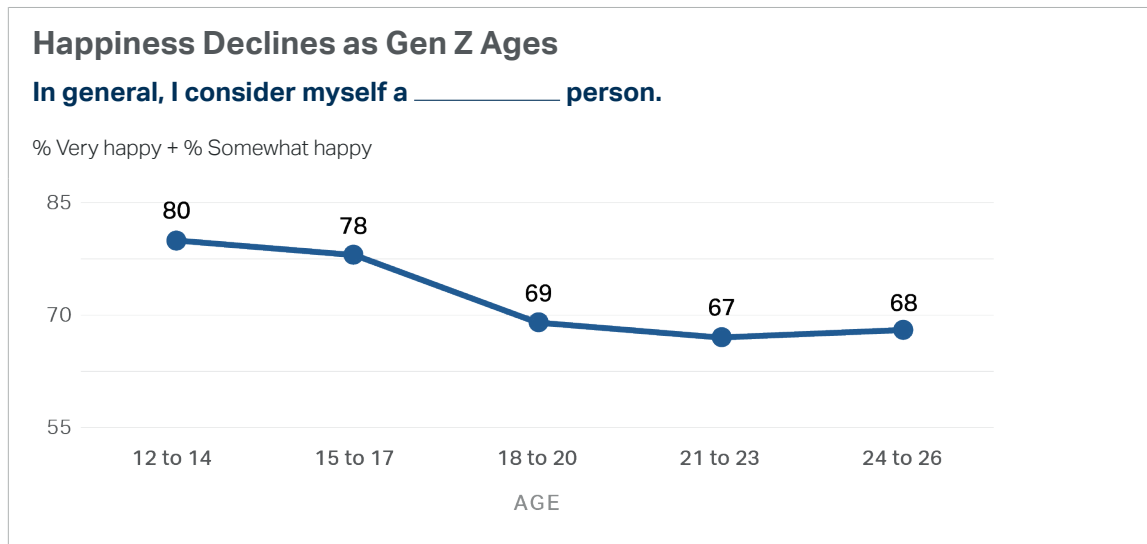
Despite the complexities of clinically or statistically defining happiness, there is value in the raw, instinctual response of a young person to the question, “Are you happy?” Within that framing, about three-quarters (73%) of Gen Zers agree they consider themselves at least somewhat happy.

FIGURE 1



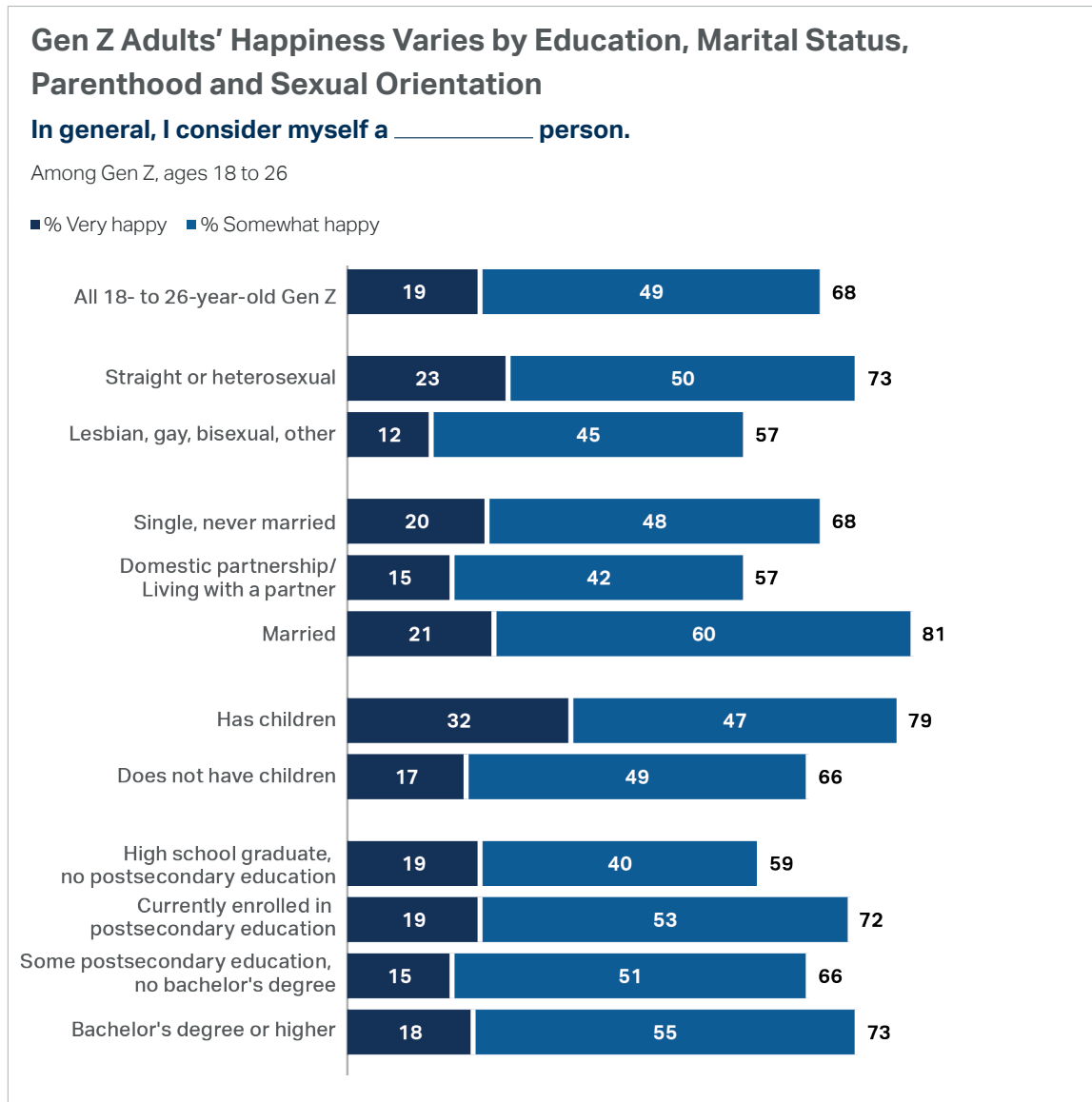
While happiness within Gen Z is generally consistent across gender, race and ethnicity, several demographic factors correlate with happiness. The most notable trend is associated with age: As Gen Z gets older — and particularly just as they enter adulthood — happiness declines noticeably.

FIGURE 2




Within the adult population of Gen Z, there are further happiness divides. Gen Z adults who have any level of postsecondary education, are married and have children are markedly happier than their peers. This finding is in line with [previous Gallup research](#) that suggests married adults — particularly those with children — are most likely to be thriving in their overall wellbeing. In addition, Gen Z adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another non-heterosexual orientation are 16 percentage points less likely to say they are happy than heterosexual Gen Z adults. This is particularly important because Gallup research suggests [one in five members of Gen Z identify as LGBT](#).


FIGURE 3




While convenient for summary purposes, the concept of “happiness” involves far more than just the question of whether an individual feels happy. Analysis of these survey data suggests there are a number of other factors that more holistically represent and drive overall happiness. While not an exhaustive list, four of the most broadly influential factors are:




**Purpose and  
Meaning**



**Basic Needs  
and Security**

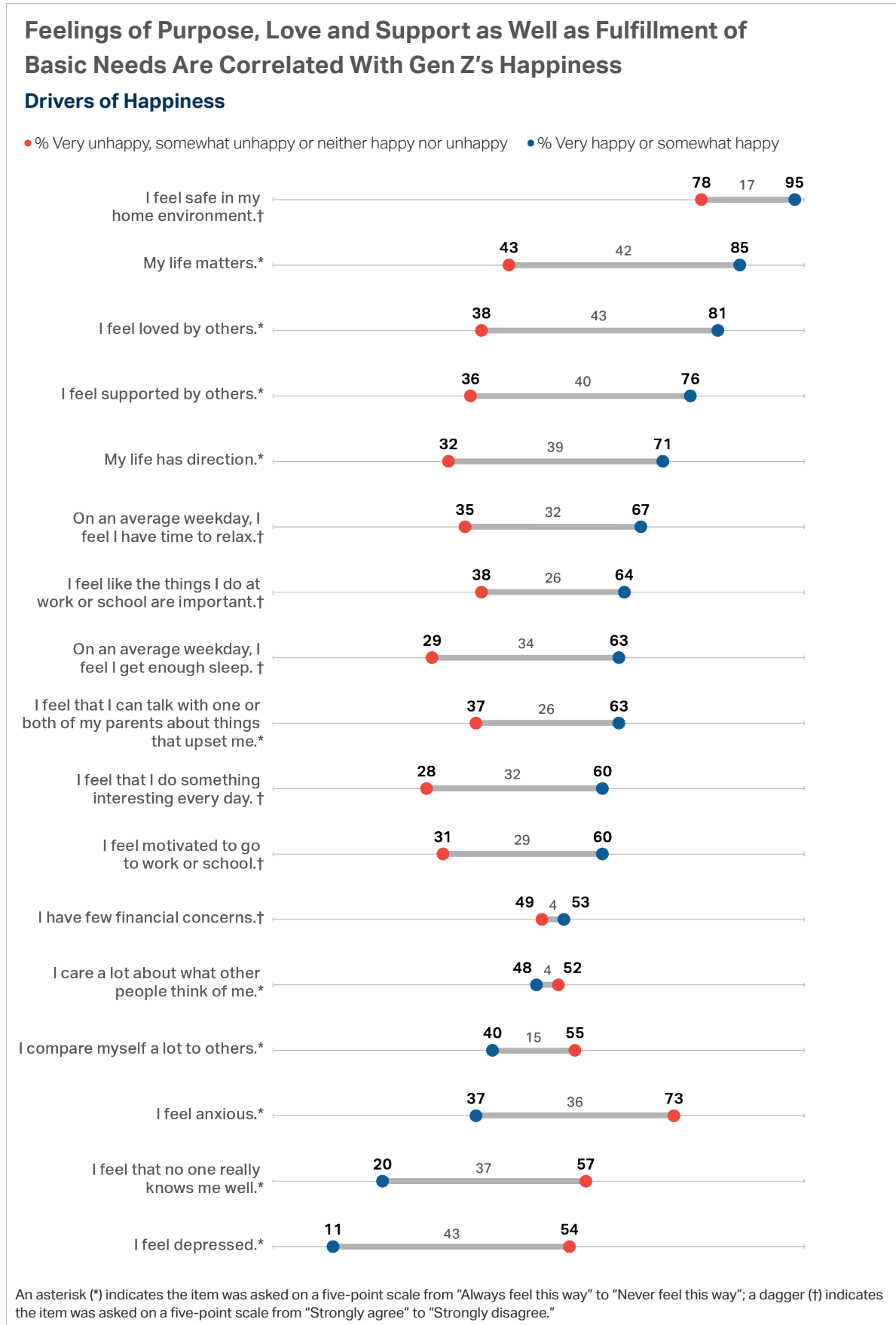


**Negative Emotions  
and Social Pressure**



**Positive Social  
Connections**

FIGURE 4

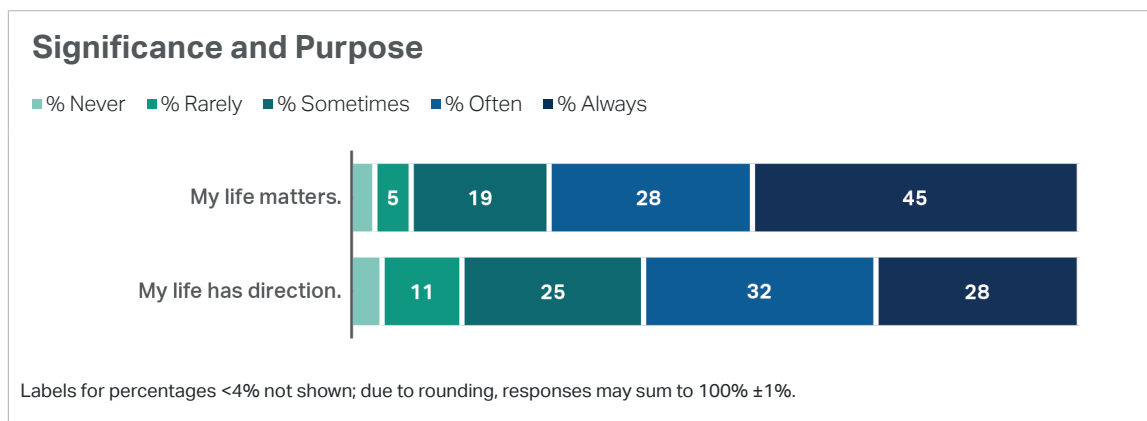


# Purpose in School and Work Is the Strongest Driver of Happiness

Whether Gen Zers consider themselves happy is closely tied to their belief that their life has significance and purpose. These facets are highly correlated with happiness on an individual basis: Among those who say they are somewhat happy people, 85% agree their life matters, and 71% feel their life has direction. Those who are not happy are about half as likely to say their life matters (43%) or has direction (32%).

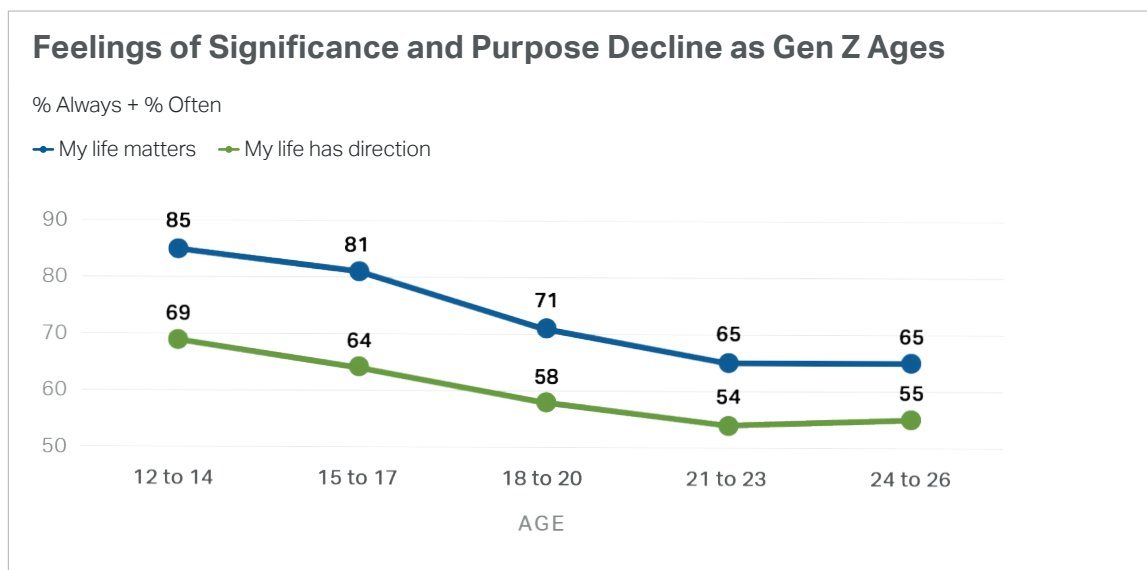
Overall, 73% of Gen Z say they often feel like their life matters — about the same percentage who say they are at least somewhat happy. However, fewer members of Gen Z (60%) say they always or often feel their life has direction.

FIGURE 5



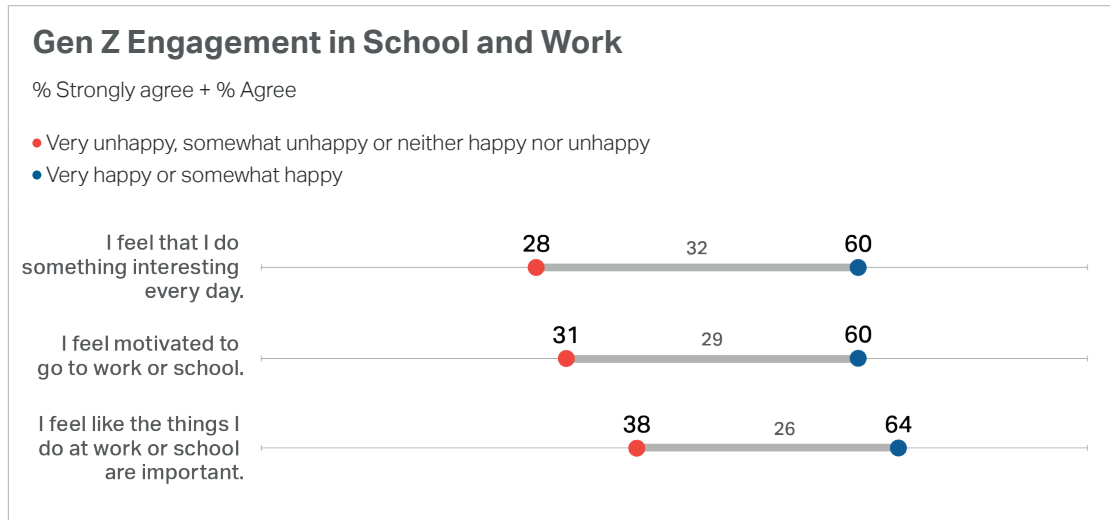
Despite the importance of purpose and significance, these critical sentiments decline notably over time, coinciding with the steep drop in happiness Gen Z reports upon reaching adulthood.

FIGURE 6



In terms of statistical impact, no factor is more influential in Gen Z's overall happiness than the extent to which their work or schoolwork feels purposeful. At least six in 10 Gen Zers who are happy also say they feel they do something interesting every day (60%), are motivated to go to work or school (60%) and that the things they do at work or school are important (64%). Meanwhile, Gen Zers who are not happy are about half as likely to say they agree with each of these statements. Yet, just over half of Gen Zers agree or strongly agree they are interested in and motivated to do those day-to-day activities.

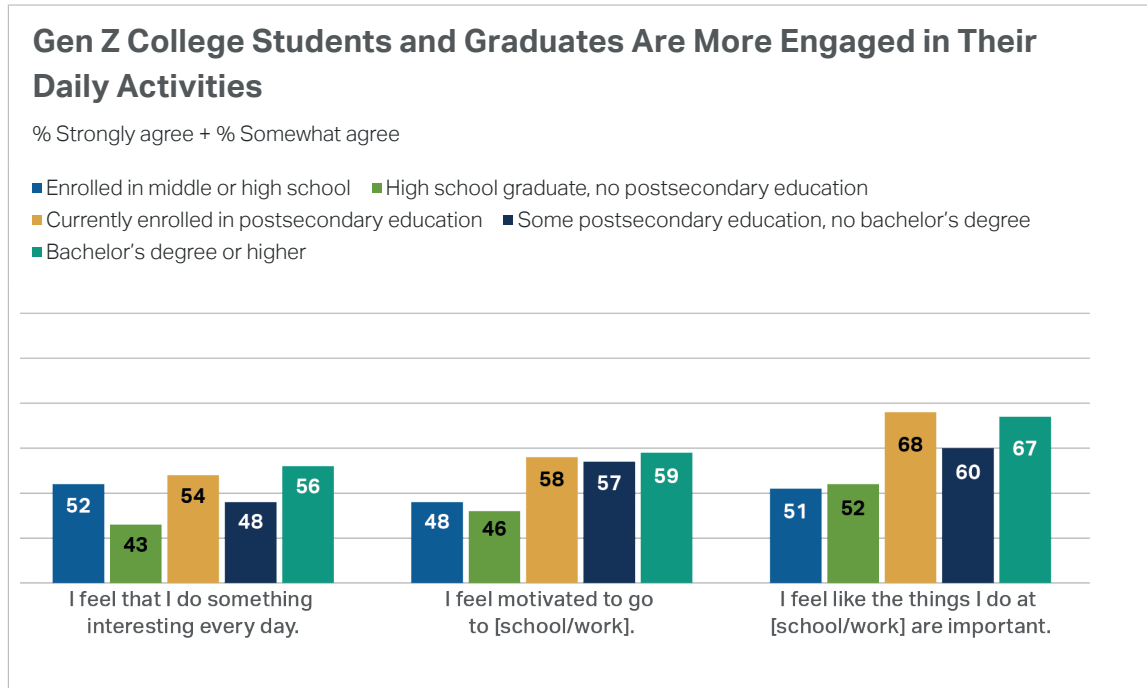
FIGURE 7





Breaking these results out by educational attainment suggests that not all work and academic experiences are created equal. Gen Zers with any level of postsecondary education are notably more likely than those with a high school diploma or less to agree what they do every day feels important, and to feel motivated to go to work or class. This mirrors the previously noted discrepancies in happiness between Gen Z adults with and without postsecondary education.

FIGURE 8



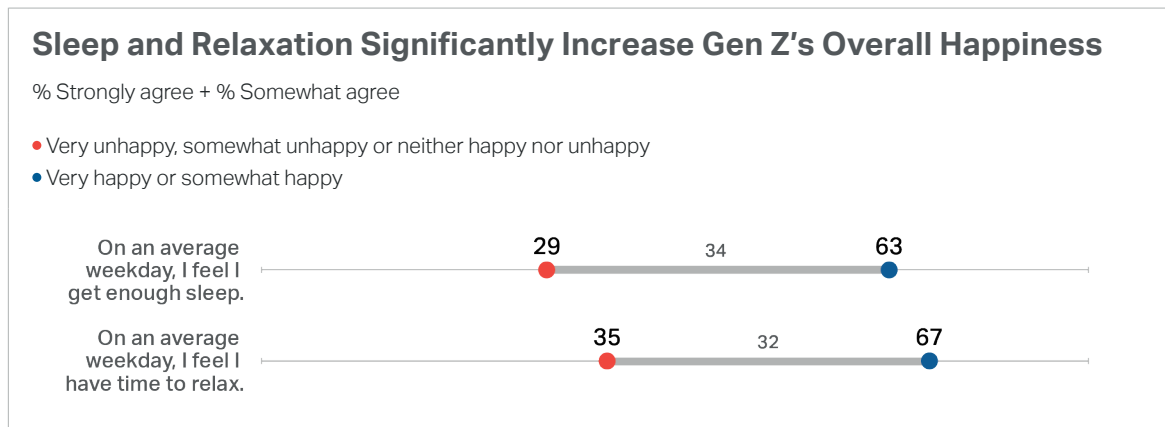
# Sleep and Relaxation Are Critical to Happiness but **Four in 10** Gen Zers Don't Get Enough



In addition to having meaningful experiences at school and in the workplace, Gen Z's happiness is heavily predicated by how secure and rested they are in their personal lives.

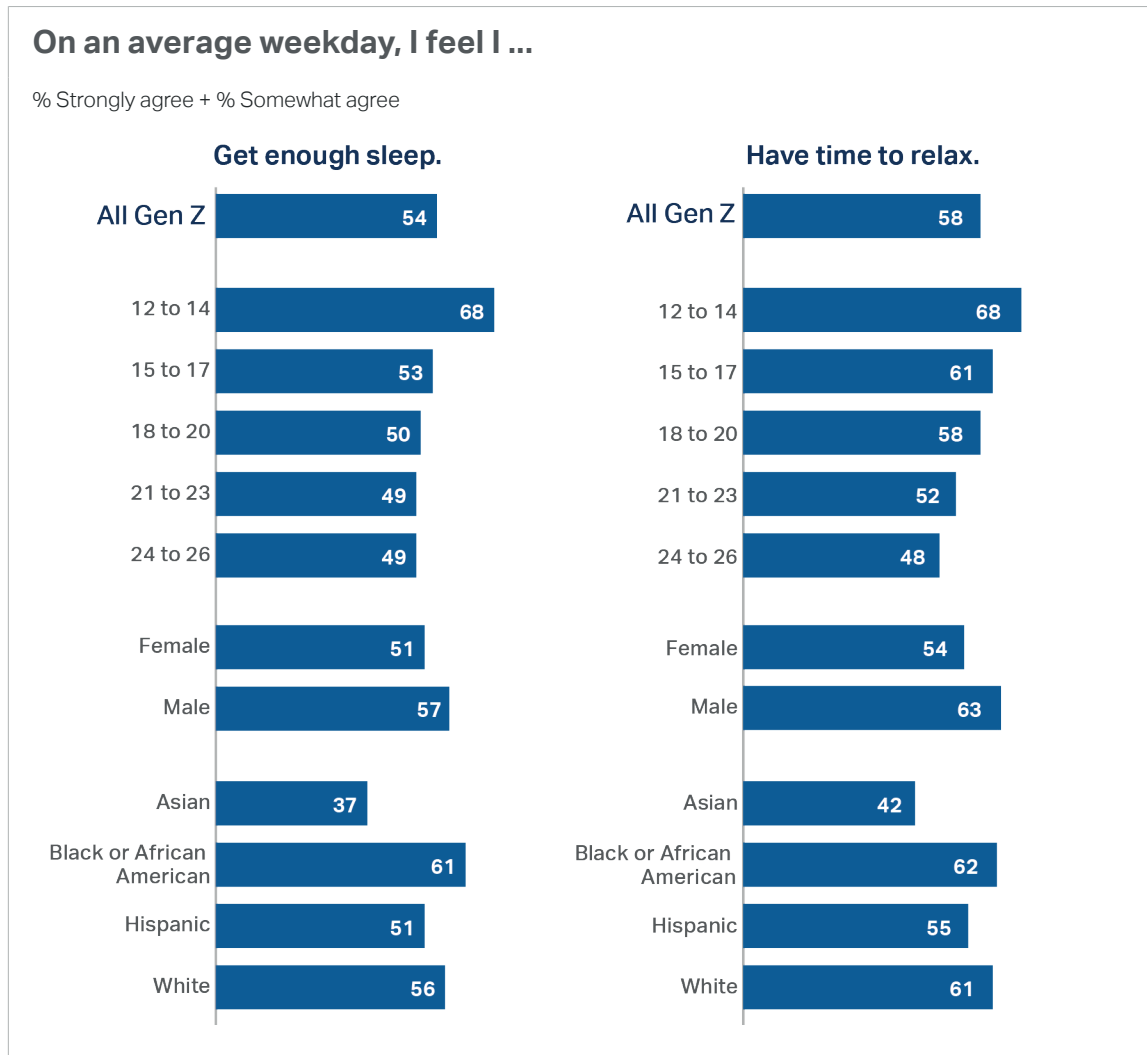
Among Gen Z's basic needs, the strongest predictor of happiness is whether an individual reports having enough time during the week to sleep and relax. These elements are even more influential in Gen Z's happiness than physical or financial security: Members of Gen Z who are happy are twice as likely as their less-than-happy peers to report getting enough sleep (63% vs. 29%), and nearly twice as likely to say they have time to relax (67% to 35%).

**FIGURE 9**




Despite the importance of sleep and relaxation, 46% of Gen Zers do not feel they get enough sleep, and 42% do not have time to relax during the week. This is especially true of older members of Gen Z, as well as those who are Asian or women.

FIGURE 10



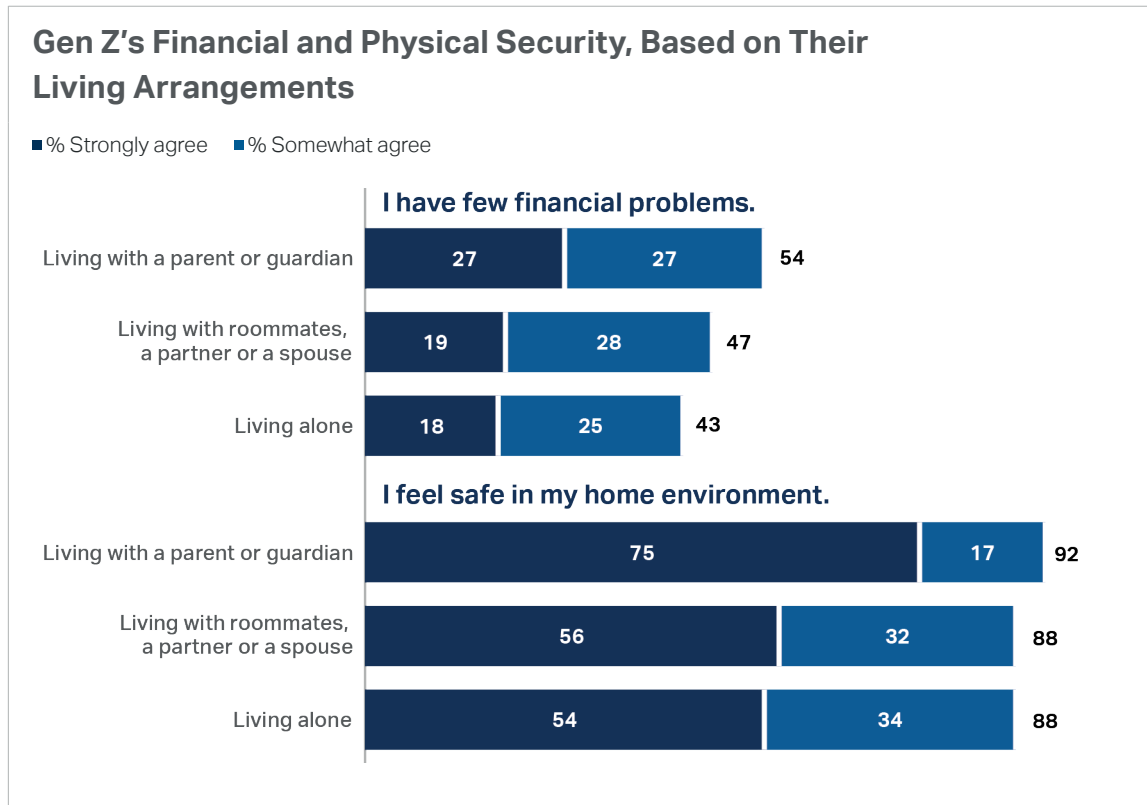
Though less impactful than Gen Z's sleep and relaxation habits, financial and physical security also have independent effects on happiness. Gen Zers are far more likely to report concerns about their financial security than their physical safety:



About half (51%) of Gen Z agree they have few financial concerns, implying the other half of Gen Z is at least somewhat worried about their financial situation.

While slightly less concerned than their independent peers, 30% of Gen Z who still live with parents or guardians — including 25% of 12- to 14-year-olds — say they worry about money, suggesting many of the youngest members of this generation are acutely aware of their family's finances as soon as middle school.

FIGURE 11



Concerns about physical safety are less pervasive for Gen Z than financial worries; however, many adult members of Gen Z have at least minor concerns about their physical safety. Just over half of Gen Z who live alone or with roommates, partners or spouses strongly agree they feel safe at home. This is about 20 points lower than Gen Zers who live with a parent or guardian.

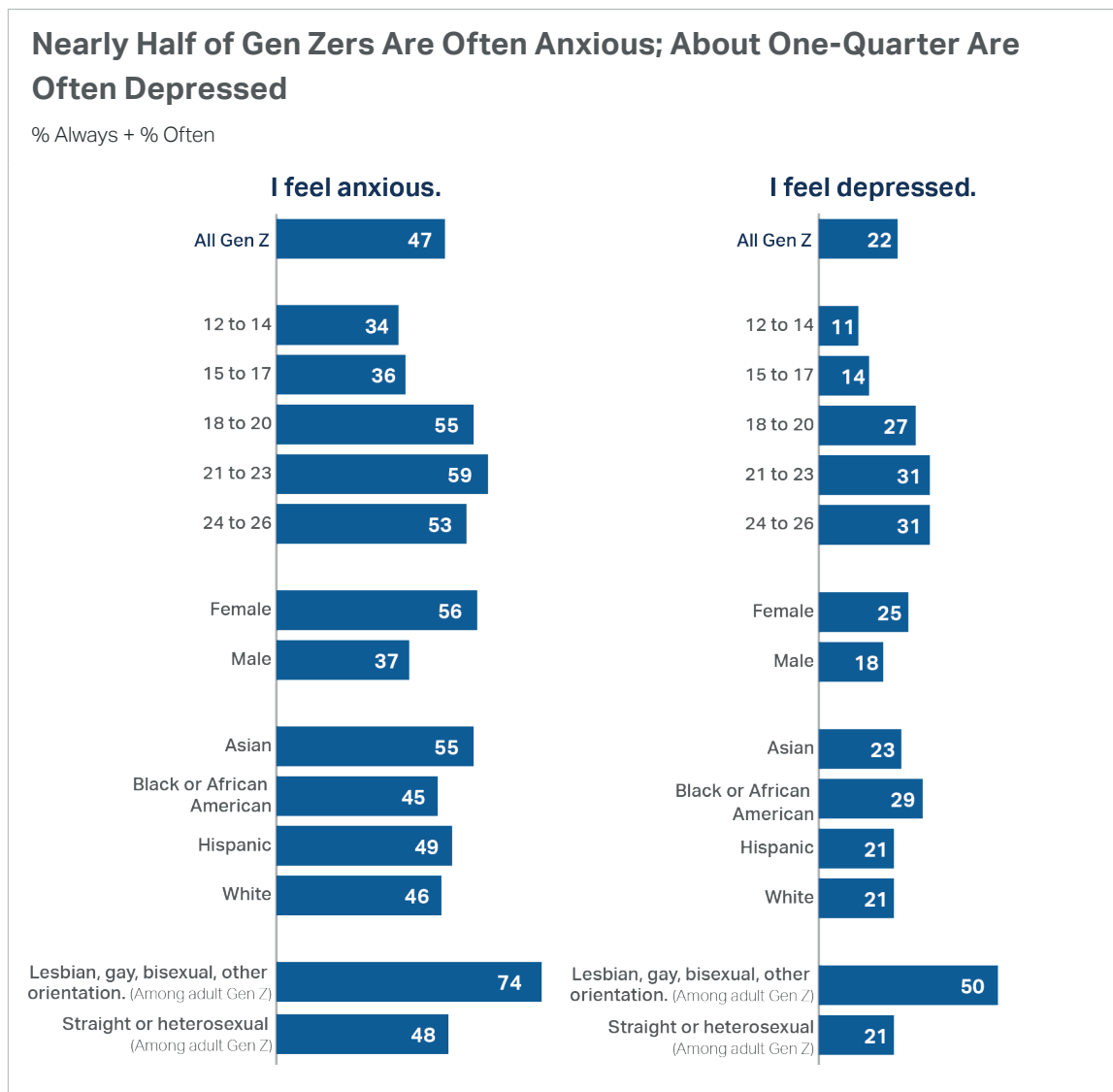


# Social Comparisons Drive Anxiety and Unhappiness

As one might expect, the presence of negative emotions — such as anxiety and depression — hinder the ability of Gen Z to achieve happiness in their lives. Just 11% of Gen Z who report they are generally happy people also report often feeling depressed, while more than half (54%) of Gen Z who are not happy often feel depressed. About one in three (37%) happy Gen Zers still report often feeling anxious, though this percentage is nearly twice as high (73%) among their less happy peers.

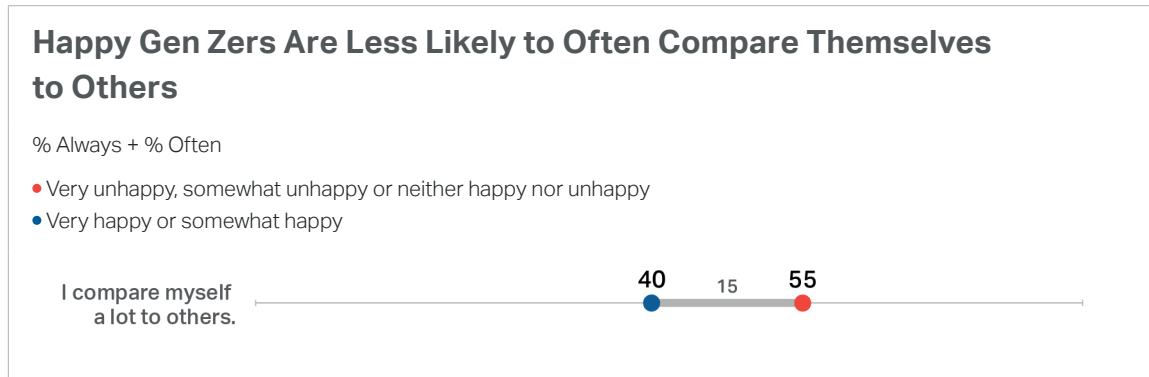
Overall, nearly half of Gen Z report often (30%) or always (17%) feeling anxious, and about one in four report they are often (15%) or always (7%) depressed. These mental health challenges are especially pronounced among Gen Z adults — particularly those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another non-heterosexual orientation.

FIGURE 12



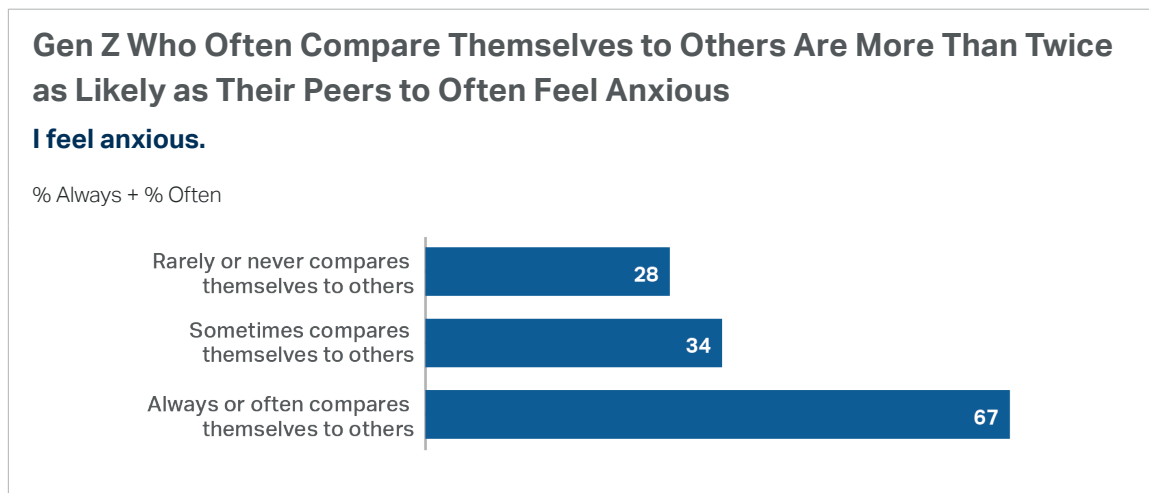
One of the primary drivers of Gen Z's anxiety is comparing themselves to others — 44% say they often compare themselves to others, and 49% often care what others think of them. These social comparisons have a clear, negative relationship with happiness: Four in 10 happy Gen Zers (40%) say they often or always compare themselves to others, versus 55% of those who are not happy.

FIGURE 13



Moreover, lower levels of happiness among those who often compare themselves to others is partly the result of a corresponding increase in anxiety associated with social comparisons. Gen Zers who always or often compare themselves to others are twice as likely to report often feeling anxious as those who rarely or never make such comparisons.

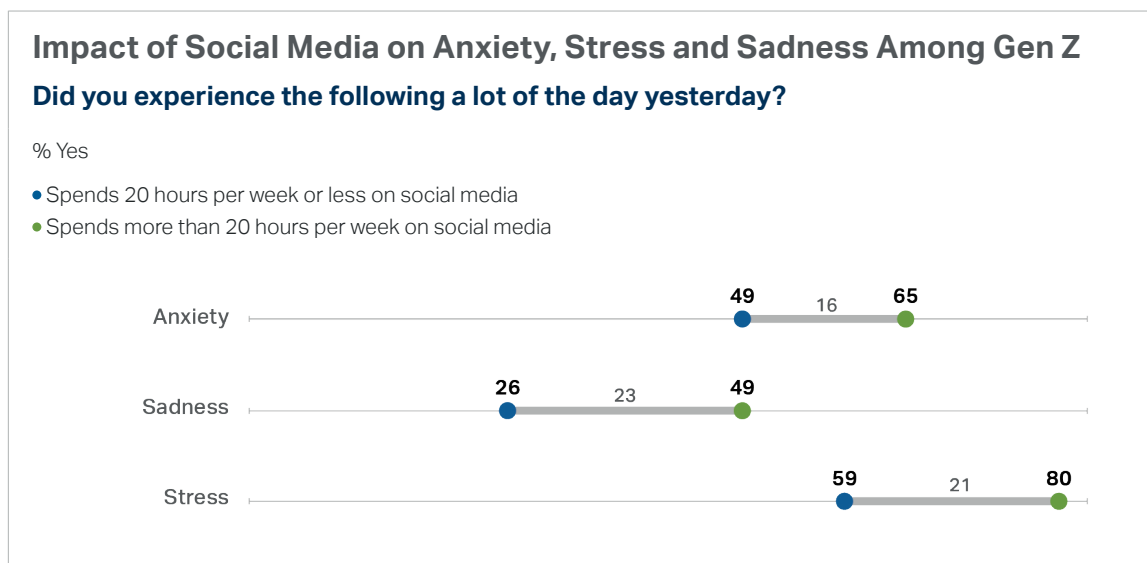
FIGURE 14



As these comparisons simultaneously increase anxiety and decrease happiness among Gen Z, social media may be enabling young people to compare themselves to others on a wider and more frequent scale than ever before, potentially exacerbating the mental health challenges Gen Z is facing. In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [advisory on the effects of social media on youth mental health](#), an action designed to raise awareness of “an urgent public health issue.” The report found, among other things, that 12- to 15-year-olds who spent more than three hours on social media were twice as likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

To further illustrate the relationship between social media, anxiety and happiness, data from a May 2023 iteration of the Gallup-Walton Family Foundation Voices of Gen Z study suggest 12- to 26-year-olds who spend more than 20 hours per week on social media are significantly more likely than their peers to report feeling anxious, stressed or sad a lot of the prior day.

FIGURE 15



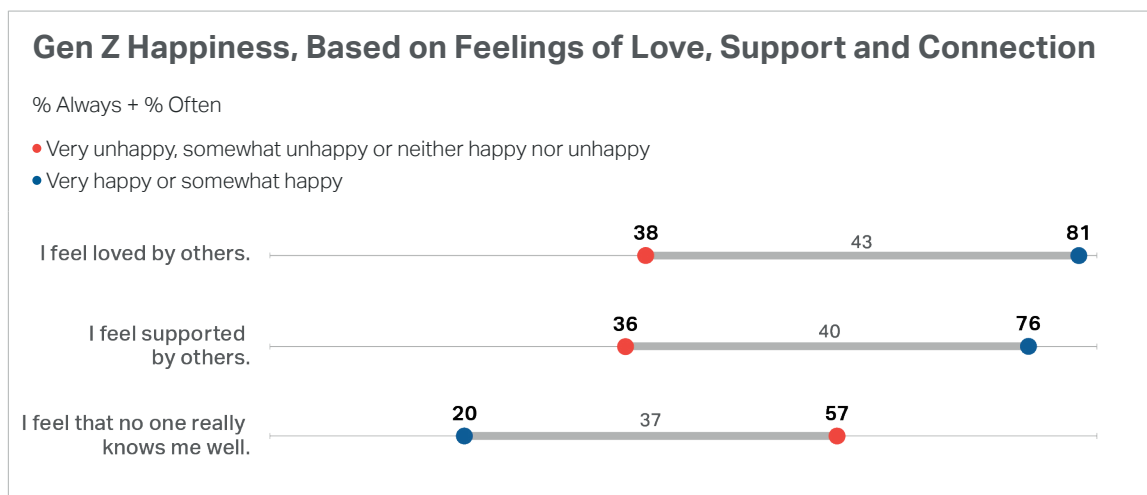
1 Office of the Surgeon General (May 2023). Social Media and Youth Mental Health. HHS.gov. Retrieved February 28, 2024, from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>

# One-Third of Gen Z Lacks Love, Support and Genuine Connection



If comparative connections to others generally impair Gen Z's ability to be happy, cultivating genuine, supportive relationships with friends and family enables it. Happy Gen Zers are about twice as likely as their less happy peers to say they often or always feel loved (81% vs. 38%) and supported by others (76% vs. 36%) and are nearly three times less likely to say they often or always feel like nobody knows them well (20% vs. 57%).

FIGURE 16

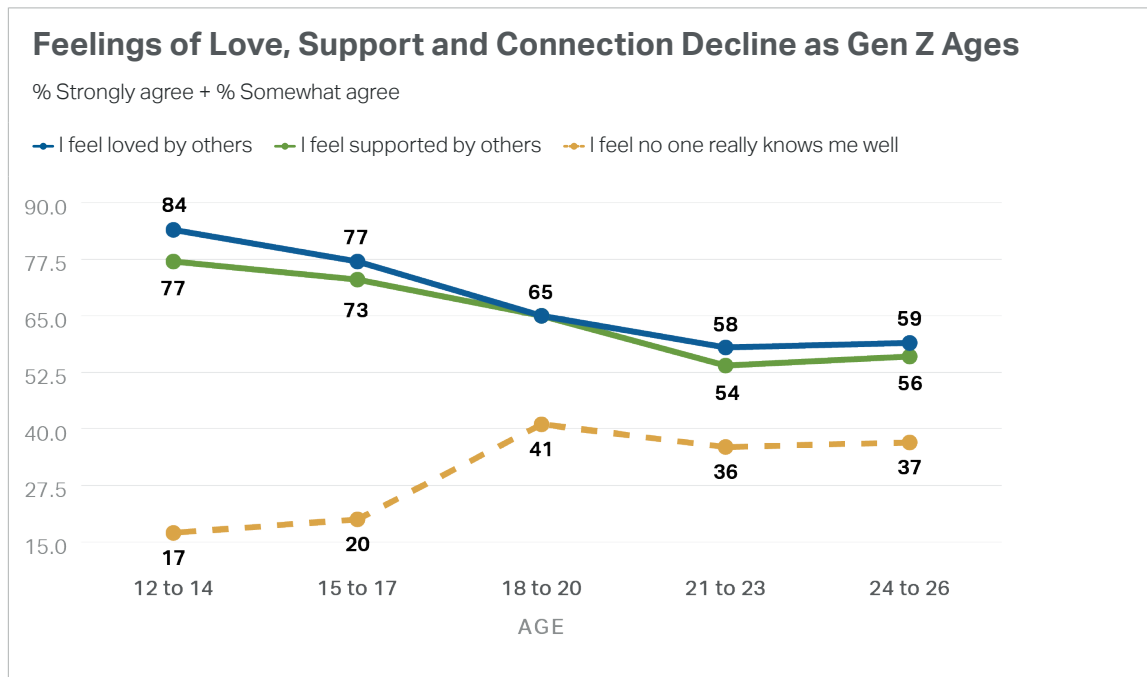


Still, about one in three members of Gen Z say they only sometimes, rarely or never feel loved and supported by others; similarly, 30% of Gen Zers say they always or often feel nobody really knows them well. As is the case with many elements and drivers of happiness, feelings of love and support are lower among older members of Gen Z.





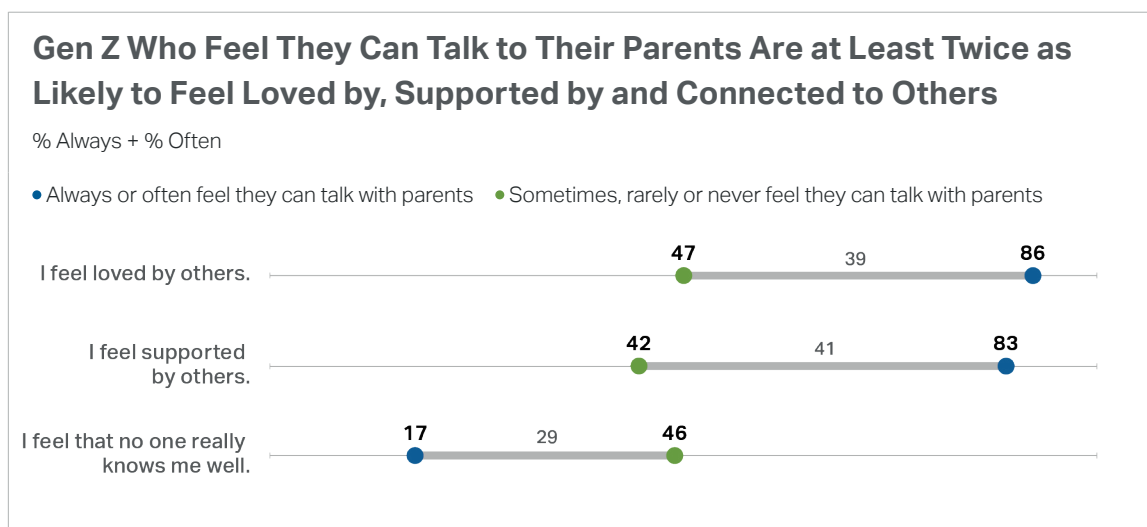
FIGURE 17



One important indicator of whether Gen Z feels loved and supported is whether they feel comfortable talking with their parents or guardians about things that bother them. About two-thirds (63%) of happy Gen Zers often or always feel they can talk with their parents or guardians, while about one in three (37%) of their less-happy peers say the same.

About half (56%) of Gen Z always or often feel comfortable talking with their parents — though this is 20 points higher among those under 18 (68%) than those 18 and older (48%). Among the 44% who feel they cannot talk with their parents, less than half usually feel loved and supported.

FIGURE 18



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