

Sharp rise in mental health struggles among young women

March 23, 2023

NASHVILLE (BP)—Young people's mental health is in trouble, especially young women's.

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) shows 57 percent of young women said they felt "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" during 2021. That's up from 36 percent just 10 years ago.



The report notes 30 percent of women surveyed said they seriously considered attempting suicide in the last year, with 24 percent making a plan.

Social media is a key factor, according to Kathy Steele, a licensed professional counselor, former missionary and longtime counseling professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

"I have been watching the research on teenage mental health, especially women, for some time," Steele told Baptist Press. "I'm not surprised by this. ... There are a number of elements, but the primary one does seem to be social media.

"The data is just pretty clear that social media and the access to smartphones all the time is playing a part in this. It takes a toll on them. Teenage girls, their anxiety levels are much higher, their depression seems to be a lot greater, and the biggest explanation has to do with cell phones and social media.

“I’ve also found that the anxiety levels have been somewhat impacted by just the instability of our world right now—politically, in Europe and even here in the United States, everything that’s happened across the last few years. That tends to make parents more anxious, and that then in turn makes teenagers more anxious, because they pick up on all of that anxiety.”

Young women face identity crisis

Steele said beyond contributing factors to a decline in mental health, the true cause comes from a lack of biblical identity.

“I think our society as a whole, especially adolescent and young adults, are definitely in an identity crisis,” Steele said.

“Whether it has to do with sexual identity, or their identity as what is it that means I’m successful, or the way that they look at their identity in terms of their value or worth. We have all grown up in a set belief that I must perform. If I’m going to be acceptable, if I’m going to be loved, if I’m going to be of value I have to perform. And that raises anxiety.”



Katie McCoy, director of women’s ministry with Texas Baptists

Katie McCoy, director of women’s ministry for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, echoed Steele’s sentiment.

“Perhaps the most important topics in discipleship for young women are identity, purpose and worth,” McCoy said. “Nearly every issue plaguing adolescent and young adult girls can be traced back to those three issues.”

In addition to Christian counseling, the local church can play a crucial role in improving the holistic health of women, she said.

“God knows our struggles, our weaknesses and our natures,” McCoy said. “His redemption includes every aspect of our humanity. Through his Spirit, his word and his church, God has given us spiritual tools to overcome ways of thinking that habitually defeat us.

“The Body of Christ gives all the ‘ingredients’ to help a woman become spiritually, emotionally and mentally healthy. It provides a place to belong and to contribute, both significant needs in a culture marked by widespread loneliness. It provides a framework to value the whole person and recognize the complexity of internal and external factors in mental health.

“It provides perspective that corrects the pursuits and priorities of a social media obsessed world. And, it provides the opportunities for meaningful relationships that allow women to talk about mental health challenges before they become crises.”

Steele acknowledges this research can be deeply concerning for parents of young girls.

She said the most important things parents and family members can do are look for signs an adolescent may need professional help, but also listen intently to what they’re going through simply out of love.

“Pay attention to regular life patterns, and when you see drastic changes, that’s something always to check into and be concerned about,” Steele said.

“Parents can really talk with their kids about the impact, about what’s going on.”