

Our teens are not OK

Especially the girls, whose depression levels are at record highs. Can the church help?

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(Source image by Natalia Trubochnova / iStock / Getty)

A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report identifies a sharp increase in depression among teen girls. Boys are not doing well either, but girls are faring worse across nearly all measures. The reasons are unclear. While some have suggested that living through a global pandemic is to blame, in fact the trend begins back in 2012.

In his newsletter, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt points to the “rewiring of childhood” in the 2010s with the widespread use of mobile devices and social media. Girls report experiencing more online bullying and harassment than boys, and Haidt observes that even those who aren’t chronically online may suffer. When all your peers are posting, you can feel isolated, lonely, and depressed if you aren’t joining them.

Another study, in the journal *SSM-Mental Health*, suggests that increased exposure to politicized events, not social media use itself, is responsible for decreasing mental health. The study confirms that teen girls are the most depressed—and adds that teens who self-identify as liberal are even more depressed than their conservative peers.

Perhaps liberal teens have a greater awareness of systemic injustice, while conservatives are more likely to view inequality as a personal failure—and therefore to feel a greater sense of personal agency and hope. Maybe liberal teens feel anxious about breaking the strict and ever-shifting rules of progressive online discourse. Or maybe liberal girls feel increasingly alienated in a political climate in which they see their rights being stripped away and threatened.

Whatever the causes, the study indicates that the views through which teens process world events matter to their mental health, that teens are increasingly likely to root their personal identity in their political beliefs, and that conservative beliefs are more protective. That's a hard pill for progressive parents to swallow.

"Young people are experiencing a level of distress that calls on us to act with urgency and compassion," said the CDC's Kathleen Ethier in a press release. She has urged schools and health-care professionals to take evidence-based steps to improve teen mental health.

Churches can do this, too. Religious practice has proven to be neuroprotective for teens and adults, with higher levels of spirituality and religion associated with lower rates of depressive symptoms and suicidality. (The *SSM* study controlled for religiosity for this reason.) Psychologist Lisa Miller's research suggests that the teen years are marked by an increased capacity and desire for connection with others and with God. The development of healthy adolescent spirituality makes kids happier and can contribute to their lifelong mental health.

We don't know why girls are doing worse than boys (and it's possible that boys are underreporting their depressive symptoms). But progressive churches can make a difference in teens' lives by helping them cultivate healthy spiritual practices and a sense of belonging. The CDC says teens need a safe, trusted community that cares about them and their well-being—but the church can also be a place that cares about what they care about. Progressive churches can be places where they learn how to come together to work for justice, rather than scrolling through it alone.