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A Generation Under Pressure: Social Media, Stress, and the Mental Health of NYC Youth

A skateboarder performs a trick as people gather in Washington Square Park on a sunny afternoon in March 2025. Photo by Ian M. Torres

New York City is witnessing a significant rise in mental health challenges among its youth. According to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, nearly half (48%) of teens aged 13 to 17 report experiencing depressive symptoms, and 36% of high school students report persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness—both of which have shown substantial increases in recent years.

This trend is part of a broader national pattern. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has documented a sharp rise in mental health disorders among young people over the past decade. In New York City alone, adolescent anxiety-related hospital visits have surged by 35% since 2019.

Social media platforms, particularly among younger generations, are being increasingly linked to mental health issues. New York City's Health Commissioner, Dr. Ashwin Vasan, has

recommended delaying access to smartphones for children until at least age 14, citing concerns about the links between social media use and depression.

Paola Melendez, a school counselor at Tompkins Square Middle School, explains that social media is central to many peer-related issues. "Social media is the catalyst for 90% of peer-to-peer issues the staff at my school has to mediate," she says. Conflicts that once occurred in person now often spill over into online spaces. Students are sometimes subjected to threatening messages or images on platforms like Instagram, which can require the involvement of law enforcement.

Melendez also points out the impact of online influencers on students' self-esteem. "They only see a small part of that person's actual life," she notes, emphasizing how social media creates a distorted self-image, as many students fail to recognize the curated nature of influencers' content.

Teenagers have varying experiences with social media. Phillip, 15, acknowledges that social media "sometimes makes me a bit more stressed," especially when he feels left out of posts shared by friends. In contrast, Evan, a high school student, views social media as "a tool rather than a supplement for social interaction." He feels it has not negatively affected his well-being but recognizes its influence on his daily routines.

Experts warn that even passive consumption of curated content can have detrimental effects. While platforms like TikTok may help raise awareness of mental health issues, they can also encourage self-diagnosis without clinical guidance, which may reinforce harmful behaviors. According to a 2025 report from [Psychology Today](), the growing popularity of TikTok has led to a trend where young people rely on the platform for mental health advice. This phenomenon, referred to as "TikTok therapy," has reshaped how this generation perceives and manages mental health, with millions of views on videos offering tips for coping with emotional challenges and self-diagnosis.

In addition to the mental health impacts of social media, Gen Z faces mounting pressures related to academics and economic instability. The competitive nature of college admissions, coupled with the uncertainty of the modern job market, has created a climate of burnout. A 2024 [Forbes report]() emphasizes the need for businesses and schools to implement resilience-building programs, flexible learning environments, and accessible mental health support to alleviate these pressures.

The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to shape the mental health of many young people as well. The isolation, loss of loved ones, and disruptions to education have left lasting psychological scars. A 2023 report from the [NYC Health Department]() revealed that 42% of adolescents in need of behavioral health care in 2022 did not receive it, highlighting significant gaps in access to mental health services.

"We're seeing grief show up in surprising ways—in behavior, disengagement, and emotional volatility," said Melendez.

Local and state leaders are taking action to address the growing mental health crisis. Governor Kathy Hochul announced a $20 million expansion of school-based mental health clinics across New York to ensure that every school with a need for a clinic can have one. Additionally, she launched the [Youth Mental Health Advisory Board](#), which provides a platform for young people to influence state-level policy.

At the local level, the [New York City Council](#) is expanding peer-to-peer mental health programs in schools, equipping students with tools to support both, their own and their peers' mental well-being.

Despite these challenges, Gen Z is increasingly vocal about mental health. Many young people are reflecting on the emotional toll of growing up online and taking active steps to set digital boundaries and prioritize their well-being. As this generation continues to advocate for change their openness and activism offer hope for the future of mental health awareness and the generations that follow behind them.

While Gen Z faces an array of stressors, their willingness to engage in discussions about mental health and push for societal change offers a promising sign that the stigma surrounding mental health may finally be beginning to dissipate.