

Beyond Leave: The Importance of Mental Health in the Workplace for Gen Z

DMEC Annual Meeting

August 7, 2025



AUGUST 4-7 • WASHINGTON, DC

GEN Z: The Anxious Generation

Gen Z grew up in a digital-first world that shaped their approach to work, emphasizing flexibility and mental wellbeing.

- Grew up with mobile devices and high-speed internet
- Prefer instant messaging and collaborating asynchronously using digital tools
- Prefer quick, informal communication channels over following email strings or formally scheduled meetings
- Clash with older generations' preferences for more formal workplace communication

Gen X employees are most likely to identify as workhorses¹

- 62% of millennials and 57% of baby boomers view themselves as workhorses
- Gen Z employees are least likely to view themselves as workhorses

Gen Z employees value workplace flexibility and value time off programs.



¹2024 SideHustles Survey of 1,000 employees

Mental Health by Generation

Born 1997 - 2012

Gen Z

- **Prevalence:** 91%
- **Contribution factors:** social media, academic pressure, global issues like climate change
- **Preferred resources:** digital, including online therapy, mental health apps, social media platforms for support
- **Willingness to seek help:** high; they view it as a critical aspect of overall wellbeing

Born 1981 - 1996

Millennials

- **Prevalence:** 22%
- **Contributing factors:** economic challenges (student debt, job market instability), social isolation
- **Preferred resources:** utilize both traditional and online resources, telehealth, and mental health apps
- **Willingness to seek help:** some stigma to seeking help, barriers to cost and access to care

Born 1965 - 1980

Generation X

- **Prevalence:** 20%
- **Contributing factors:** balancing work and family, caring for aging parents, financial pressures
- **Preferred resources:** traditional therapy and counseling. May use online resources.
- **Willingness to seek help:** moderate stigma to seeking help

Born 1946 - 1964

Baby Boomers

- **Prevalence:** 15%
- **Contributing factors:** aging, health issues, loss of a loved one
- **Preferred resources:** traditional forms of therapy and support of family and friends
- **Willingness to seek help:** high stigma to seeking help

What Causes Generations to Differ

Childhood experiences

war, economic trends, politics, societal changes

Changes in technology

radio to television to cable, personal computers, internet to the iPhone

Early 2000s - 2006

The convergence of high-speed broadband in the 2000's

Facebook launches in 2004

Twitter launches in 2006

2007 - 2008

The iPhone arrives in 2007

Financial Crisis in 2008

2009 - 2010

The arrival of the "like" and "retweet" or "share" buttons in 2009

Posting images online of oneself with the front facing camera on the iPhone (selfie) in 2010

2020

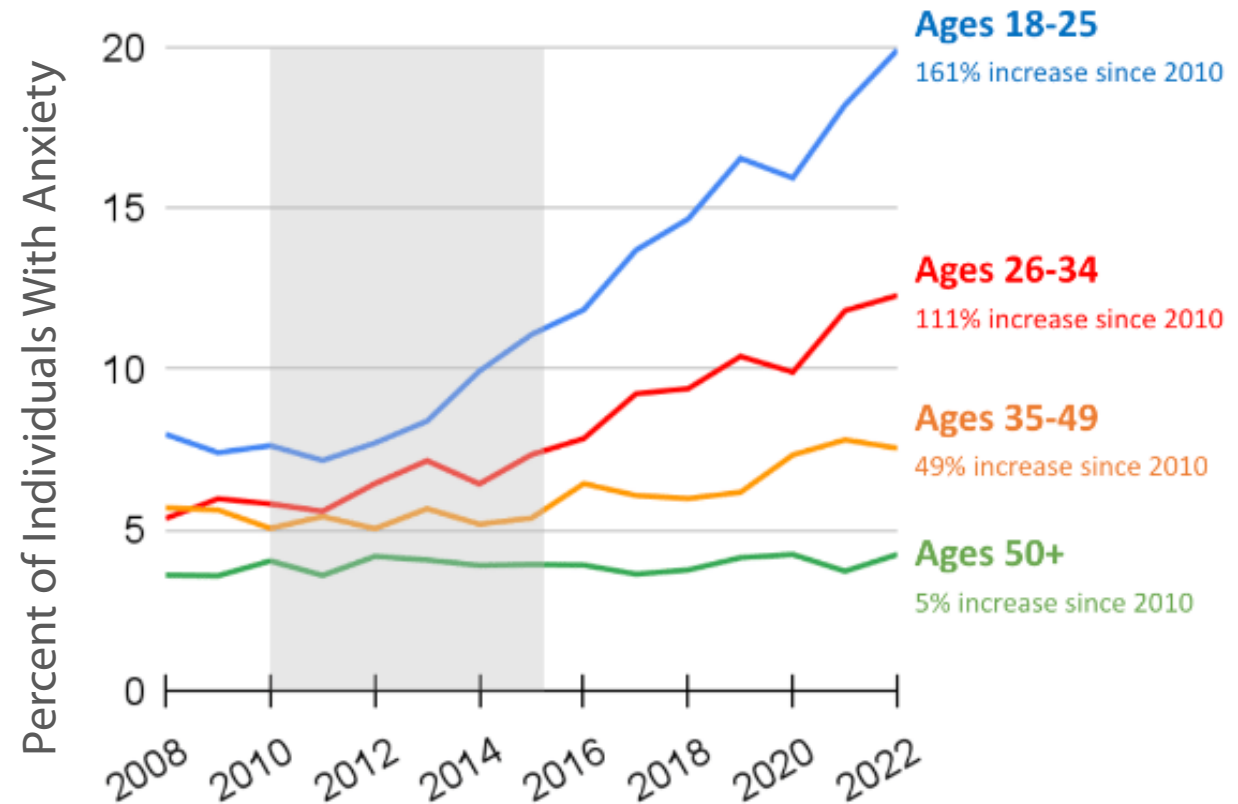
Global Pandemic (COVID) in 2020

The Transition from Play-based to Phone-based Childhood

- The late 1980s was the start of the transition from “play-based childhood” to “phone-based childhood.” This transition was not complete until the mid-2010s.
- Free play began to decline in the late 1980s and accelerated in the 90s.
- Restricted unsupervised outdoor play
- Free time began to shift as the personal computer became more common.
 - Most adolescents had their own smartphone. In this context, we are using “smartphone” to broadly include internet-connected devices such as tablets, laptop computers, video games, and smartphones with unlimited apps.
- Gen Z became the first generation to go through puberty with access to technology that pulled them away from growing through personal interaction into an alternative universe dominated by technology.
- Over protection in the real world and under protection in the virtual world collided to create what Jonathan Haidt, PhD, calls “*The Anxious Generation*.”

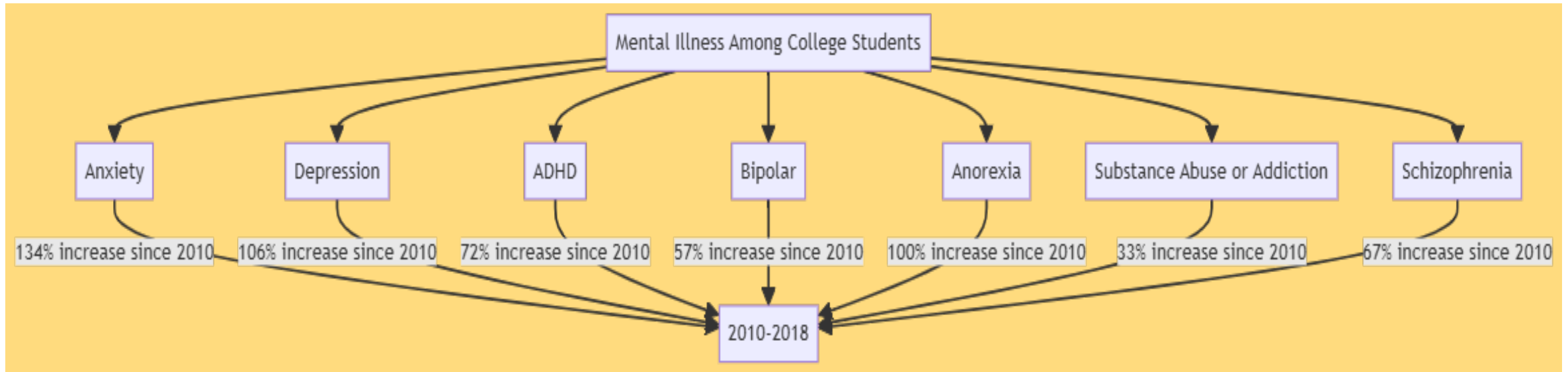
A Tsunami of Anxiety and Depression is Coming

The iPhone was released in April of 2007. Since 2010, the U.S. age 18 to 25 demographic has seen the largest increase in generalized anxiety disorder, significantly exceeding all other generations currently in the workforce.



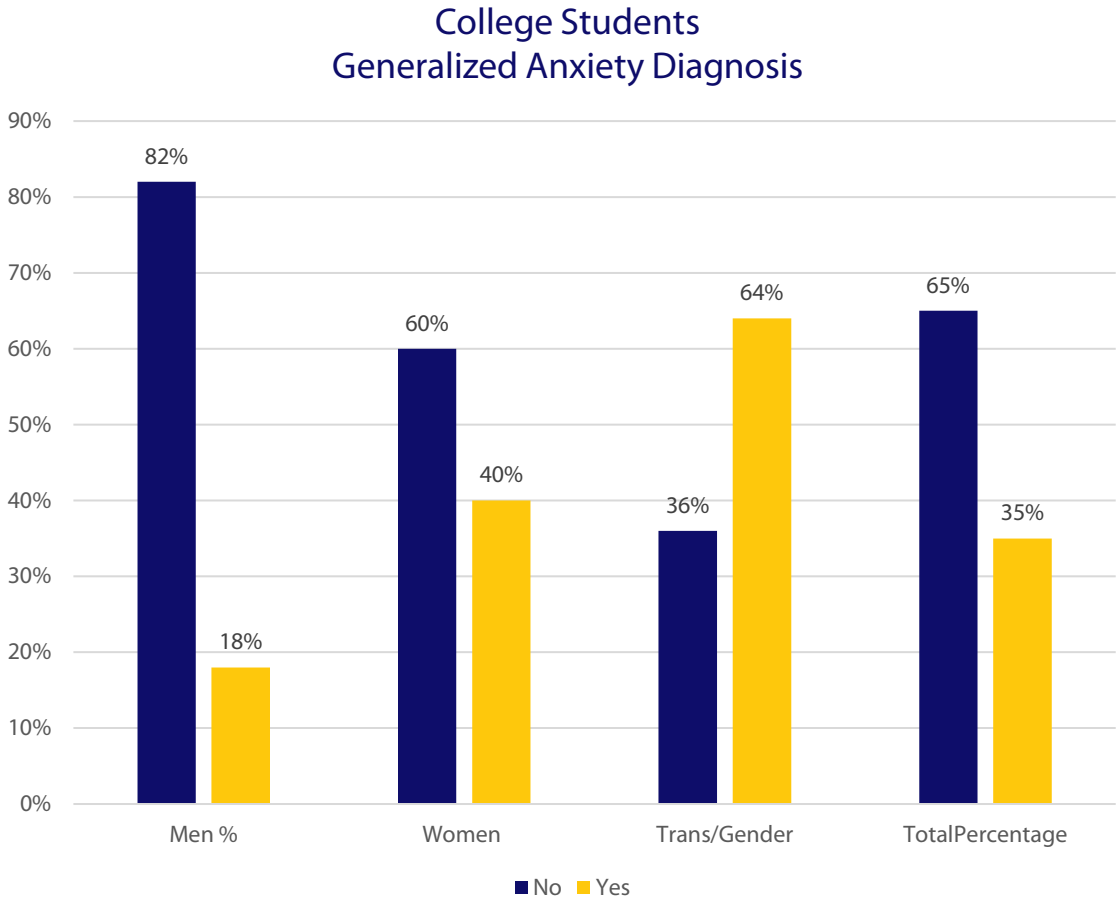
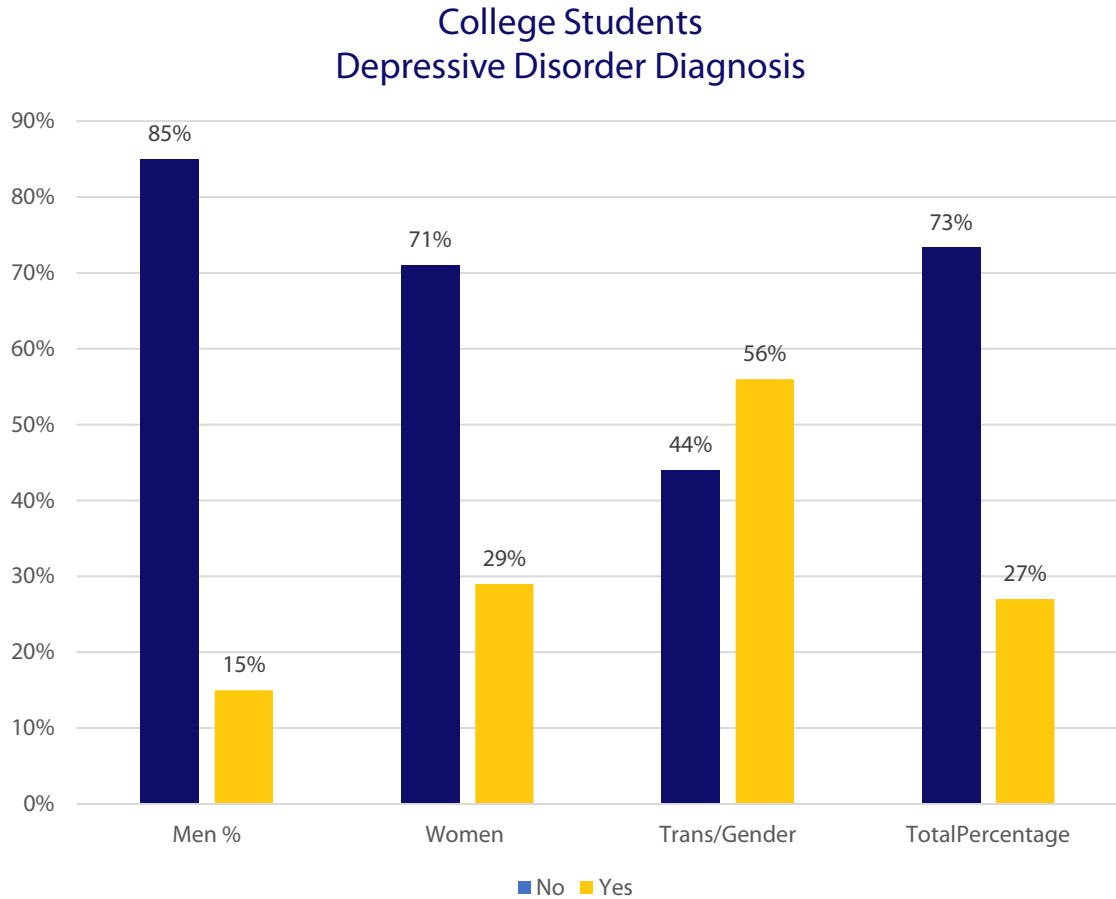
Mental Illness Among College Students

2010 to 2018



Generalized Anxiety and Major Depressive Disorder in College Students

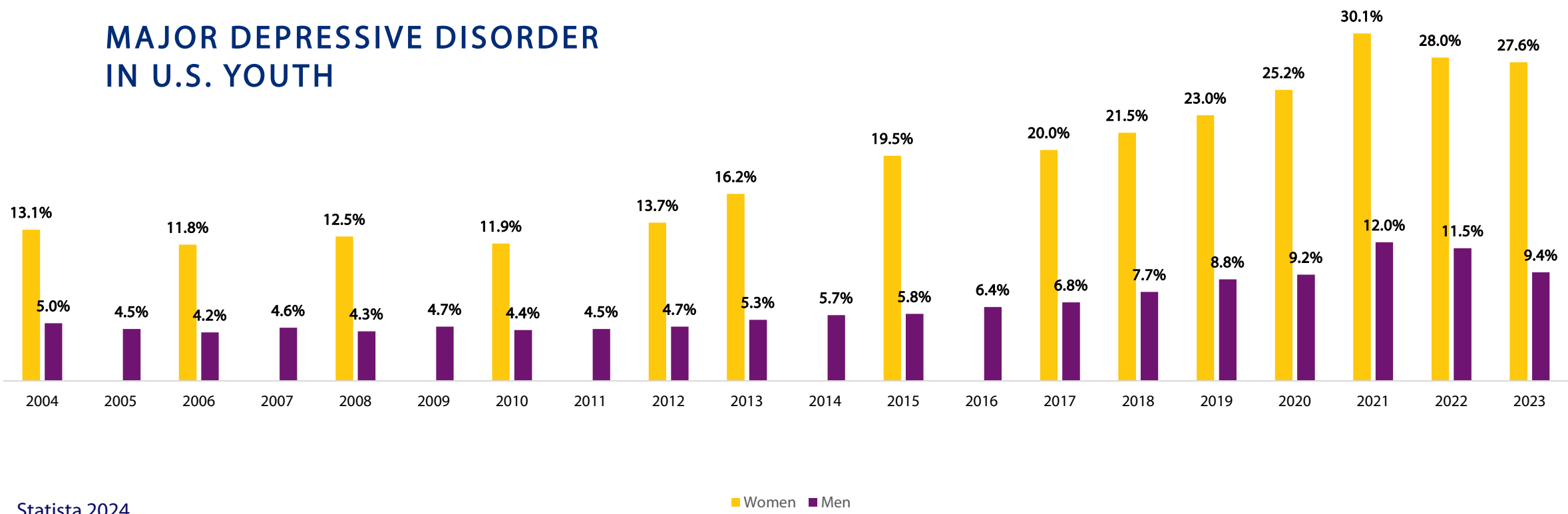
102,000 Respondents



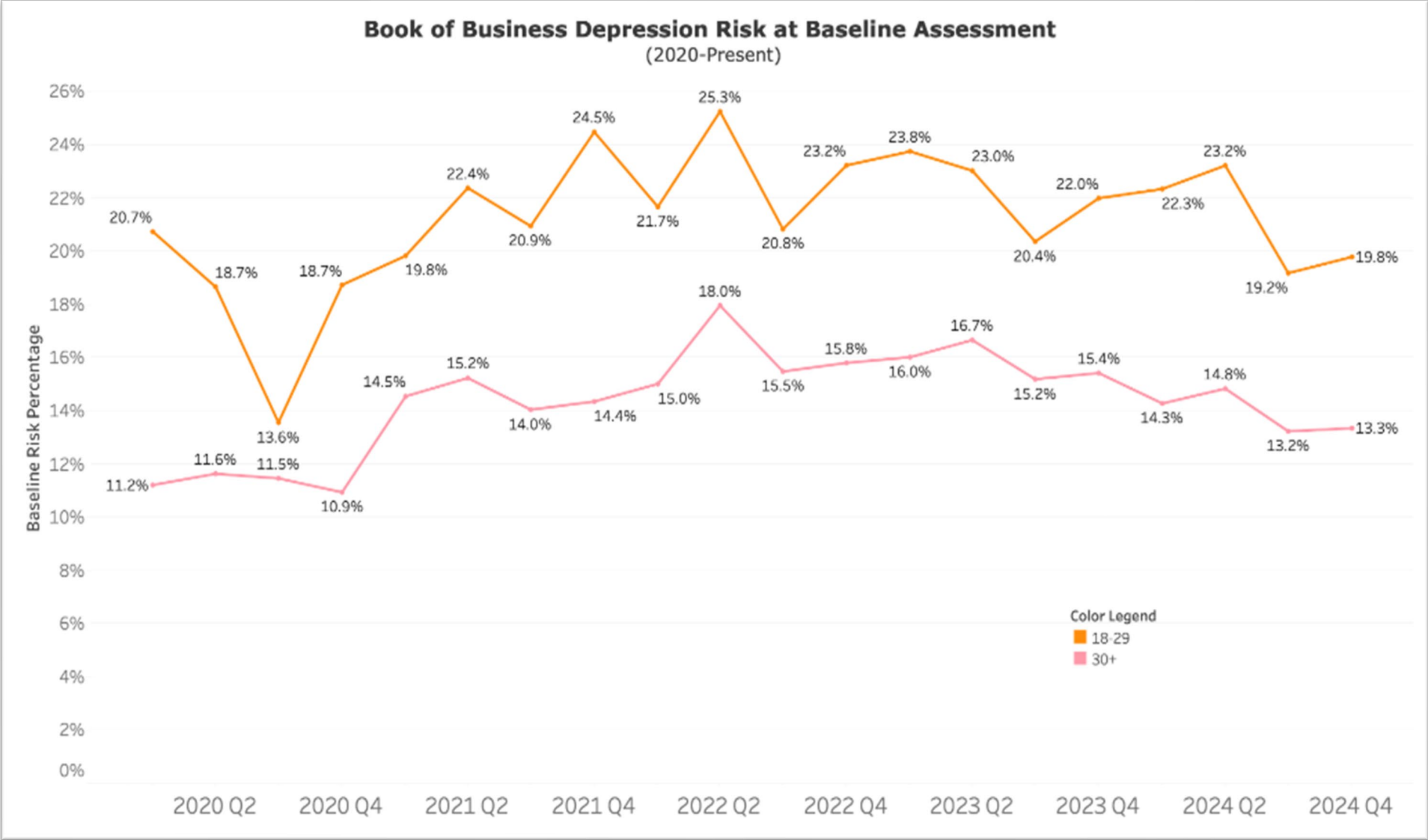
Major Depressive Disorder in Youth

Ages 12 to 17

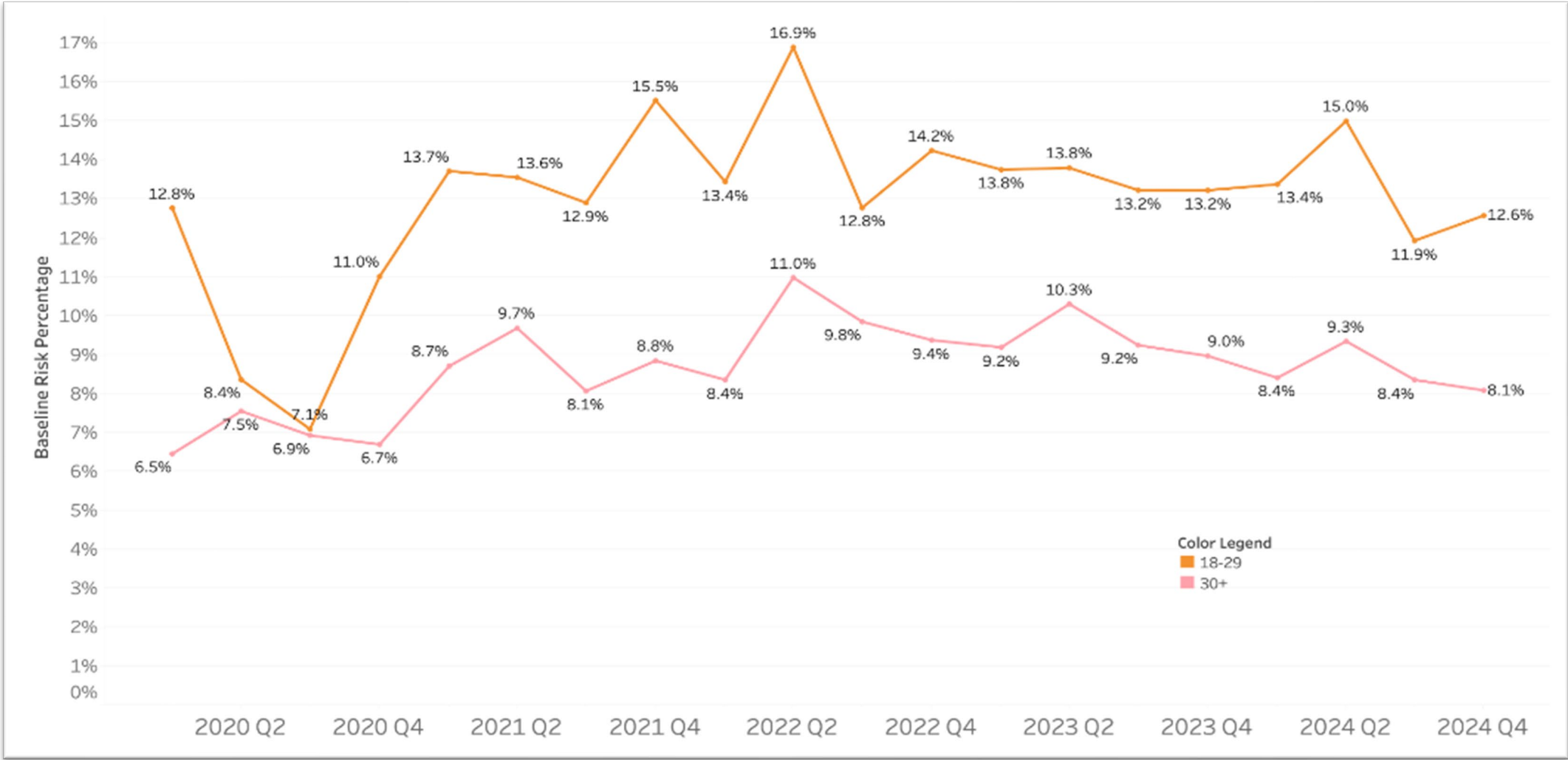
As the first of Gen Z population entered their teens, the rate of major depressive disorder began to rise by 2012



The Mental Health Generation Gap is Stark in Working-age Adults

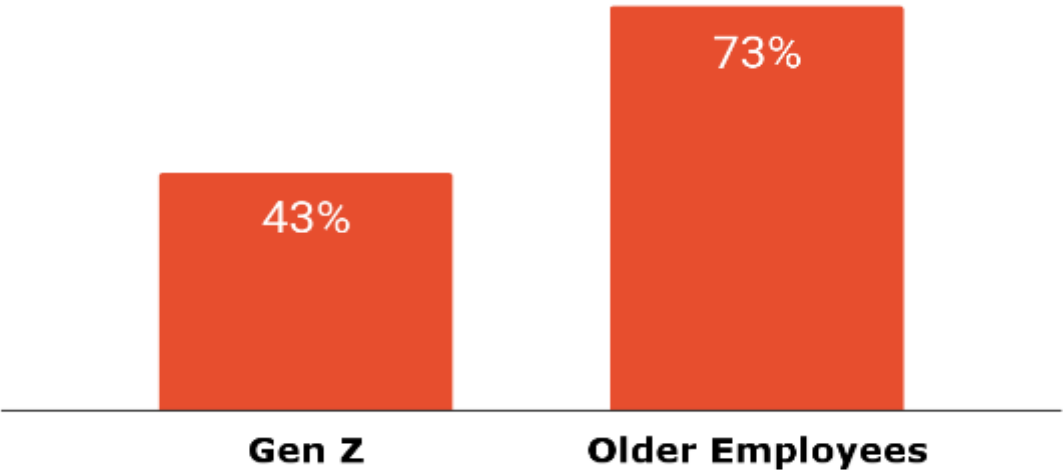


Accompanied by a Large Generation Gap for Burnout



Young employees have the greatest need for, but are least likely to be aware of, available mental well-being benefits

PERCENT OF EMPLOYEES REPORTING AWARENESS OF THEIR EMPLOYER'S MENTAL WELLBEING BENEFITS BY GENERATION



Awareness of support for mental well-being (EAP, coaching, apps) is lowest where the need is highest.

Mental Health Risk at KBR by Age Group

			Anxiety Risk	Burnout Risk	Depression Risk	Productivity Risk	Sleep Risk	Stress Risk
			Norm: 16%	Norm: 11%	Norm: 17%	Norm: 11%	Norm: 10%	Norm: 8%
Age Band	30-39	n = 590	22%	12%	23%	17%	10%	9%
	40-49	n = 719	19%	12%	20%	14%	11%	8%
	50-59	n = 636	16%	9%	18%	8%	11%	5%
	60+	n = 351	16%	9%	19%	11%	7%	5%
	Under 30	n = 314	28%	11%	26%	21%	12%	14%

Reaching Gen Z

FLEXIBILITY & CONTROL

- Gen Z demands flexibility
- Tailored communications and access
- On-the-Go Training

How KBR Supports

- Provide bite-size, accessible, portable options for mental resilience
- The pilot of meQ Microsoft Teams functionality has opened a new way of interacting with mental fitness in our company.

VALUES BASED APPROACH

- Gen Z seeks out companies who match their values.

How KBR Supports

- Designed landing pages for each Key to Mental Fitness with related content and learning.
- Management Training and resources to increase knowledge and embed our values from the top down.

COMMUNITY & INDIVIDUALITY

- Desire to feel supported and understood
- Wants more options to engage and give feedback.

How KBR Supports

- Leveraging enterprise-wide challenges to generate community engagement.
- Regionally tailored promotional material.

A Strategy for Everyone



- KBR is committed to creating a safe, healthy, and high-performance workplace, where the mental and physical health of employees are valued and prioritized.
- We celebrate that everyone is different – we each have our own experiences, personalities, motivations, and abilities and we should all get the opportunity to improve our mental fitness and performance.
- With this in mind, KBR offers a wide variety of options for Mental Health and Fitness support, training, and engagement.

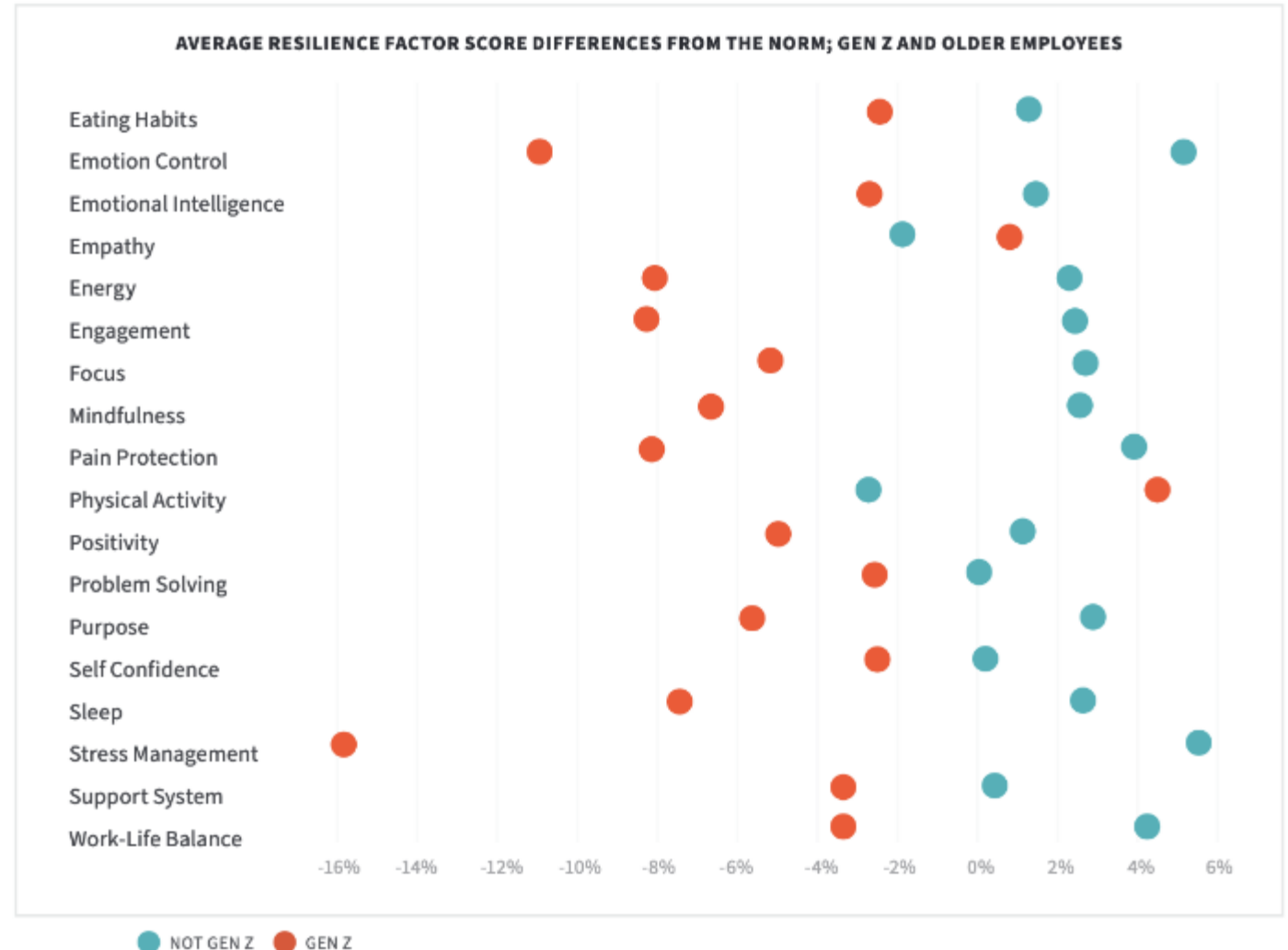
Gen Z Employees Think Differently

Data from the meQ warehouse evidence significant generational gaps across all 18 resilience factors tracked.

Gen Z employees score significantly lower on factors like:

- **Stress Management** (40.7% lower)
- **Emotion Control** (32.3% lower)
- **Work-Life Balance** (29.5% lower) compared to older employees.

The pattern is reversed for **Empathy** and **Physical Activity**.



What can be done to maximize the contributions of Gen Z team members?

Start with managers

Teach managers to:

- Actively support team mental wellbeing
- Model and mentor resilience
- Build connection through purpose
- Create and maintain psychologically safe environments



Actively Support Team Mental Wellbeing

Research consistently shows that the most powerful protective effect against negative mental health outcomes is an empathetic manager who actively supports team wellbeing.

Managers need not/should not serve as therapists but can play a positive, pivotal role with simple steps.



Try this: Hold regular 1:1s focused on wellbeing, not just performance, where they ask specific questions about workload, stress levels, and support needs.

Model & Mentor Resilience

Gen Z is under-resourced to manage stress at work.

Short of adding life experience, modeling and mentoring resilience through cognitive behavioral techniques provides powerful leverage to help team members identify and replace destructive thinking patterns.



Help team members avoid productivity-paralyzing “thinking traps” by:

- **Personalizing:** instinctively blaming yourself when things go wrong
- **Worst-Case Thinking:** taking a real problem and taking an unlikely path to the worst-case scenario
- **Mind Reading:** expecting others to know what you're thinking without having to tell them or assuming you know what others are thinking
- **Overgeneralizing:** taking one piece of information and making a general rule about the world

Build Connection through Purpose

Purpose is important to Gen Z. They want to see how their work contributes to their values & a larger societal good.

Research shows that feeling a sense of shared purpose with colleagues is also a powerful buffer against stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation.



Try this: Make the impact of your team's work visible through regular impact storytelling sessions.

Create and Maintain Psychologically Safe Environments

Growing up through periods of significant societal change and economic instability has made Gen Z value stability and a sense of belonging, which is fostered by psychological safety.

Psychological safety allows team members to take risks, express ideas, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences. **It's also proven to boost innovation and productivity.**

Leaders can build psychological safety: By prioritizing mental well-being, modeling trust, managing conflict respectfully, and enabling collaboration, leaders can create a culture where teams thrive.



Try this: Hold a team meeting and openly share a past mistake, ask for input on a current challenge, or encourage everyone to contribute to foster trust and collaboration.