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Young people are supposed to be the happiest among us. Increasingly, they are not.

Today's epidemic of youth despair shows a departure from decades of previous research. Historically, youth and adolescents tended to score higher on markers of well-being. Middle-age people — who carry the stressors associated with being parents, having a mortgage and caring for aging parents — have always tended to report lower levels of flourishing. Senior adults completed the U-shaped well-being curve as they reported higher levels of flourishing. Now data confirms that the left (youthward) side of this U-shaped well-being curve has collapsed.

In his landmark book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt documents clearly that American youth chronically struggle with hopelessness and purposelessness, even as they spend countless hours scrolling through social media sites that exacerbate their struggles.

But the unhappiness problem is more serious than many realize: It has gone global. We now have many published studies showing that young people across the world are struggling in similar ways to American youth. In particular, findings from the [Global Flourishing Study \(GFS\)](#) confirm this harmful trend is affecting youth from impoverished as well as economically advanced countries.

The Global Flourishing Study is an unprecedented research initiative that collects data on over 200,000 people around the world in geographically and culturally different countries. We co-authored a book titled *The Death of Religion? Nones, Others, and the Flourishing of Faith* that analyzes this new data. [Johnson co-led the study, and Kidd is a member of the GFS research team.]

Nothing like this study has ever been attempted before, and its findings for world youth are grim. If youth continue to struggle, the implications will be devastating for the health and well-being of societies around the world.

What does the collapse of youth happiness have to do with religion? The Global Flourishing Study reveals that religion is one of the few variables that has an almost universally positive impact on well-being. Religious service attendance is consistently linked to a host of outcomes associated with flourishing.

Of course, it is easy to find tragic stories about abuse and "church hurt," in which congregational involvement led to wounded, disillusioned young people. But the broader data suggests that such stories are not the rule. Instead, religious practice is a massive contributor to flourishing, especially for young people.

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Young Americans (18 to 29 years old) who regularly attend religious services are significantly more likely to be flourishing than those who rarely attend or those who do not attend at all, the GFS data shows. This finding holds for each successive decadelong age category (30 to 39, etc.).

Why is religious service attendance so consequential? Among other things, communities of faith emphasize community relationships and social support — key drivers of human flourishing. Devout people also believe that they find reconciliation with God and hope for the afterlife within their tradition. This is arguably the most profound kind of "meaning and purpose."

Jon Clifton, CEO of Gallup, is one of our key partners in the GFS project. In his book *The Blind Spot*, Clifton also presents compelling evidence on the dramatic global rise of unhappiness in the last 15 years. He finds this steep ascent of despair results from a combination of stress, anxiety, loneliness, suffering and pain, both physical and mental. There are many factors that undergird this disheartening trend, such as fewer close relationships, increasing isolation, a decline in meaning and purpose and unhealthy dependence on social media.

Aside from "make more friends and get off TikTok," there may be few obvious solutions to the crisis of despair in world youth culture. But the GFS is also providing good news about factors that do enhance flourishing. Popular surveys, such as the

[World Happiness Report](#) and its "happiest countries" rankings, often focus exclusively on self-reported happiness to gauge how people are doing. The GFS takes a much broader and more complex view, considering many domains of flourishing, such as financial status, family stability, physical and mental health and religious practice.

Longitudinal data from GFS confirms there are consistent predictors of higher levels of character and virtue development, meaning, purpose and health — which are all linked to flourishing. Again, one of the most consistent factors (across the world's major faiths) is religious practice. Religious "belief" also has a modestly positive effect, but practice is much more significant. Practice most obviously includes attendance at worship services but often entails volunteering in religious charitable work.

Given the debilitating trends in unhappiness, especially among the young, we would give people a piece of solid, evidence-based advice: Go to religious services at least once a week. Of course, most believers would explain their devotion in terms other than gaining "flourishing" for themselves. As Jesus taught, it is more blessed to give than receive.

But that's the thing: When we give of ourselves to religious community, we receive blessings of flourishing. When we double down on isolation, doomscrolling and binge watching, we receive more despair.

Beyond GFS data, numerous rigorous studies show that regular religious attendance is associated with lower anxiety, stress and depression, along with better physical health, stronger mental well-being and improved longevity. Communities of faith are a proven protective factor and a surprising antidote to today's plague of unhappiness.