

young adult ministry Trend Report

TOPICAL NEWS, RELIABLE DATA &
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR MINISTRY TODAY



Young People & Wellness Culture

YAM Trend Report: August, 2023

Summary Findings

Young people (ages 13-39) want to **detoxify wellness culture** and shift it so that mental health, rather than beauty or physical perfection, is the central theme. Most young people can't relate to the aggressive fitness or diet regimes portrayed on social media, and they think these regimes are **harmful to mental health**. Emphasizing that what feels good *is* good, many young people are shifting the wellness discussion to include more room for occasional indulgence and the messiness of ordinary human life.



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**RESOURCES ON
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Subscribe

Sign up for a paid subscription and **get access to our monthly newsletter, along with our full archive!** Our June edition focused on recent reports around spirituality and religion among young people, and our May edition tracked **social media use among young people**. In April,

we discussed **dating and partnering norms**. Sign up today and get access to our newsletter archive along with all future editions! Each newsletter provides insight into ongoing trends among young people, connecting these trends to helpful resources and ministry ideas for leaders today.

WHO WE ARE

We are a team of seminary faculty and church practitioners seeking to support and encourage church leaders as they engage youth and young adults (13–39-year-olds) in their ministries. We hope to provide an accessible overview of current trends in North American society that can help to inform youth and young adult ministries across church traditions. We believe that a careful analysis and engagement with cultural and social trends is crucial to ministry with young people and we aim to support practitioners by making that analysis “short and sweet” for the busy pastor and church leader.



Team Member Highlight!



Kim Arakawa holds an MA in Organizational Leadership and is pursuing her Ph.D. in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University. She is the Project Manager for the *Mutual Ministry* and *Baptized for Life* initiatives and Coordinator for the Lifelong Initiatives

Team with the Department of Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary. Geographically located on the island of O’ahu, Kim is

active within the Diocese of Hawai’i as a diocesan council member, deputy to General Convention, facilitator, and task group volunteer. Before her work within the Church, Kim owned a boutique communications and development company focusing primarily on supporting non-profits, volunteered with the Rotary Club, and taught high school. When not voraciously reading and thinking about grace-based collaborative models of leadership and system theories, she enjoys quality time with her husband of almost 30 years, 17-year-old son, and joyful terrier.

Wellness Culture: Back to the Future?

From the heyday of diet culture (think: 1980's Slim-Fast commercials) to the early 2000's, wellness was defined by lean bodies and toned muscles. **The mental health effects of such an approach include rampant [body-image issues](#) and a high prevalence of eating disorders.** Millennials are now reacting against this form of wellness culture, a culture that was ubiquitous for many of them in adolescence and early adulthood. Their solutions largely focused on emphasizing both [fitness](#) and [body-inclusivity](#).

Physical exercise remains a priority for young people (Millennials and Gen Z), but trends over the past few years indicate that **the emphasis shifted from exercise for toned muscles to exercise for resilient mental health.** This points to a larger movement among young people to focus on mental health in all conversations about well-being.* This shift in how young people view exercise reflects broader changes in the wellness landscape, changes we'll explore more in the pages ahead.



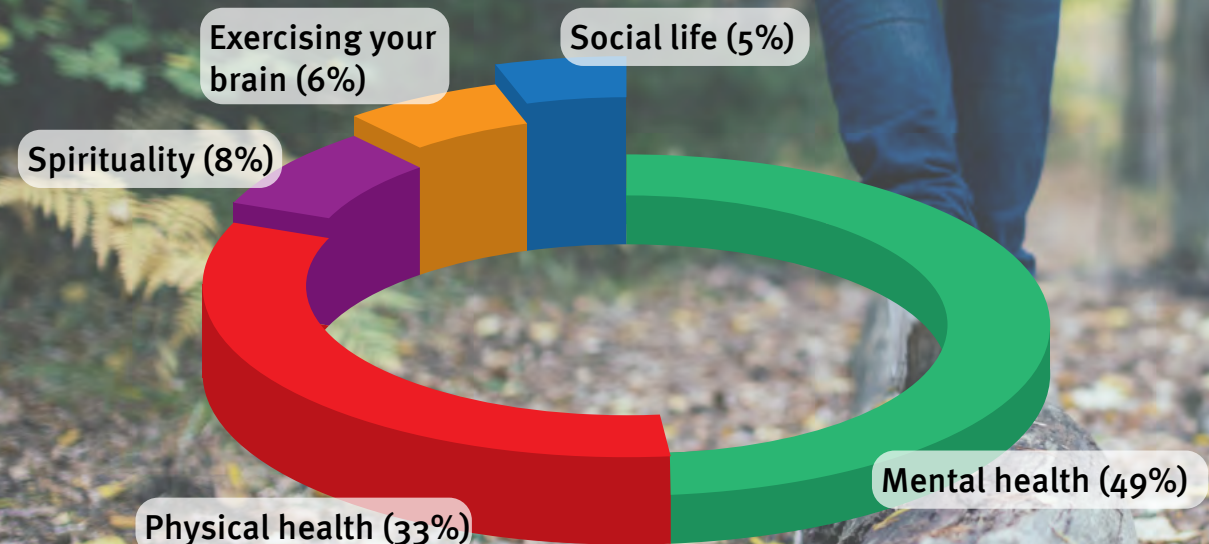
*For more on recent mental health trends among young people, check out our [March newsletter](#).

Wellness and Fitness

Fitness culture remains an important aspect of the broader wellness discussions for young people, with more than half of Gen Z and Millennials reporting that they exercise at least three times a week. In fact, 18% of young people report daily exercise activities. For many young people, these routines and activities have become **a healthy way of exerting control over what feels like a chaotic and unpredictable age**: 81% agree with the statement that, “Focusing on my health/wellness helps me feel in control of something tangible.”

For many young people, however, mental health is taking center stage. A large majority (85%) claim that **“working out is just as much for mental health as physical health.”** Furthermore, nearly half of young people rank mental health as the most important aspect of wellness with only a third claiming the same for physical health. For young people today, wellness is not simply a focus on fitness and diet as it was in past eras. **Rather, wellness is about mental health, good sleep, physical health (as opposed to mere fitness), friendship, intellectual challenge, and more.**

What is the **most important** part of wellness?



Wellness and Social Media



Despite these trends shifting away from an unhealthy wellness culture, young people today report that the aggressive pushing of certain diet and fitness trends on social media is having a negative impact overall. That is, many see it as **doubling down on the least healthy aspects of diet and fitness culture.**

This effect is especially notable among young women and girls. A recent YPulse survey found the following:



of young women and girls (ages 13-39) reported that social media made them feel bad about their appearance (compared to 44% for men and boys)



wished that they could look the same in real life as they appear using social media photo filters (compared to 48% for boys and men).

Connected to these pressures, and possibly even more alarming, **48% of females and 44% of males believe that “it’s important that I look perfect on social media.”** It’s no wonder, then, that they are concerned about trends like [#thatgirl](#) that popularize perfectionistic life routines centered around an intense wellness regimen.

Holistic Wellness


Thus, most young people want wellness culture to change. **They want it to be more relaxed (i.e., less focused on strict routine), more inclusive of different lifestyles, groups and appearances, and more holistic overall (i.e., less fitness and diet, more healthy relationships, spirituality, mental challenge).**

Young people want the emphasis to be less on losing weight and more on **feeling good and relieving stress**. In a recent poll asking why young people are focused on wellness, the following answers were given in order of popularity:

1. To feel good (73%)
2. To relieve stress (63%)
3. To get stronger (51%)
4. To have me-time (39%)
5. To lose weight (38%)

This more holistic approach is rooted in a broader definition of **what wellness is and how one may pursue it**. Though overwhelming majorities reported that physical and mental health was a part of how they define wholeness, almost half included **“exercising your brain.”** Social life and spirituality were also popular categories for young people defining wellness.

Beyond this shift towards a more holistic approach to wellness, young people increasingly see different aspects of self-care and indulgence as components of wellness culture.



76% OF YOUNG PEOPLE AGREE THAT “WELLNESS CAN BE ANYTHING THAT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD”

62% THINK THAT “IT’S OK TO DO SOMETHING UNHEALTHY IF IT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD.”

Subverting the Narrative with Counter-Trends



Trending themes on Instagram and TikTok personalities inundate the accounts of young people with bulging muscles, skinny waists, easy fixes and a perfect-body aesthetic. Though not the only source of social media related psychological harm, these trends are having a significant impact on self-image among young people today. **Some young people have begun to rebel—creating counter-trends that underline the toxicity of these social media spaces and promote positive approaches to wellness and holistic well-being.**

The church and other social organizations can combat these harmful messages. Where influencers use shame and the appearance of perfection to sell diet products or fitness advice, churches can support opposing trends that promote positive, healthier approaches to well-being. Furthermore, **church groups can provide space for frank discussion of advertising trends that manipulate our desire for the good life—trends telling us that we need to buy specific products or experience certain things to be safe, happy, and whole.**



Wellness and Advertising

Check it out:

The National Eating Disorders Association has a plethora of useful material related to media usage and both eating disorders and body-image concerns. Their blog on this matter is [here](#) and the main page is [here](#).



Because advertisements so often rely on images of the good life (happy, healthy people and families sponsored by Volkswagen, Tide, or Honey Nut Cheerios!), **the church has a natural entry point to engage critical media consumption.** Social media trends and commercial television tell us to buy this, eat that, and do these things with the promise that we will feel good about ourselves and be happy if we do so. In other words, **advertisements present us with an image of human flourishing in order to convince us to open our wallets and pay up** (or, with social media fitness trends: hit the gym and adopt such-and-such diet).

Knowing, however, that a perfect gym routine, new car, and stain-removing detergent cannot deliver meaning and fulfillment in life, **can the church be more active in countering these messages?** When it comes to social media fitfluencers and dietary trends, **is there more we can do to push back against psychologically harmful messaging?**

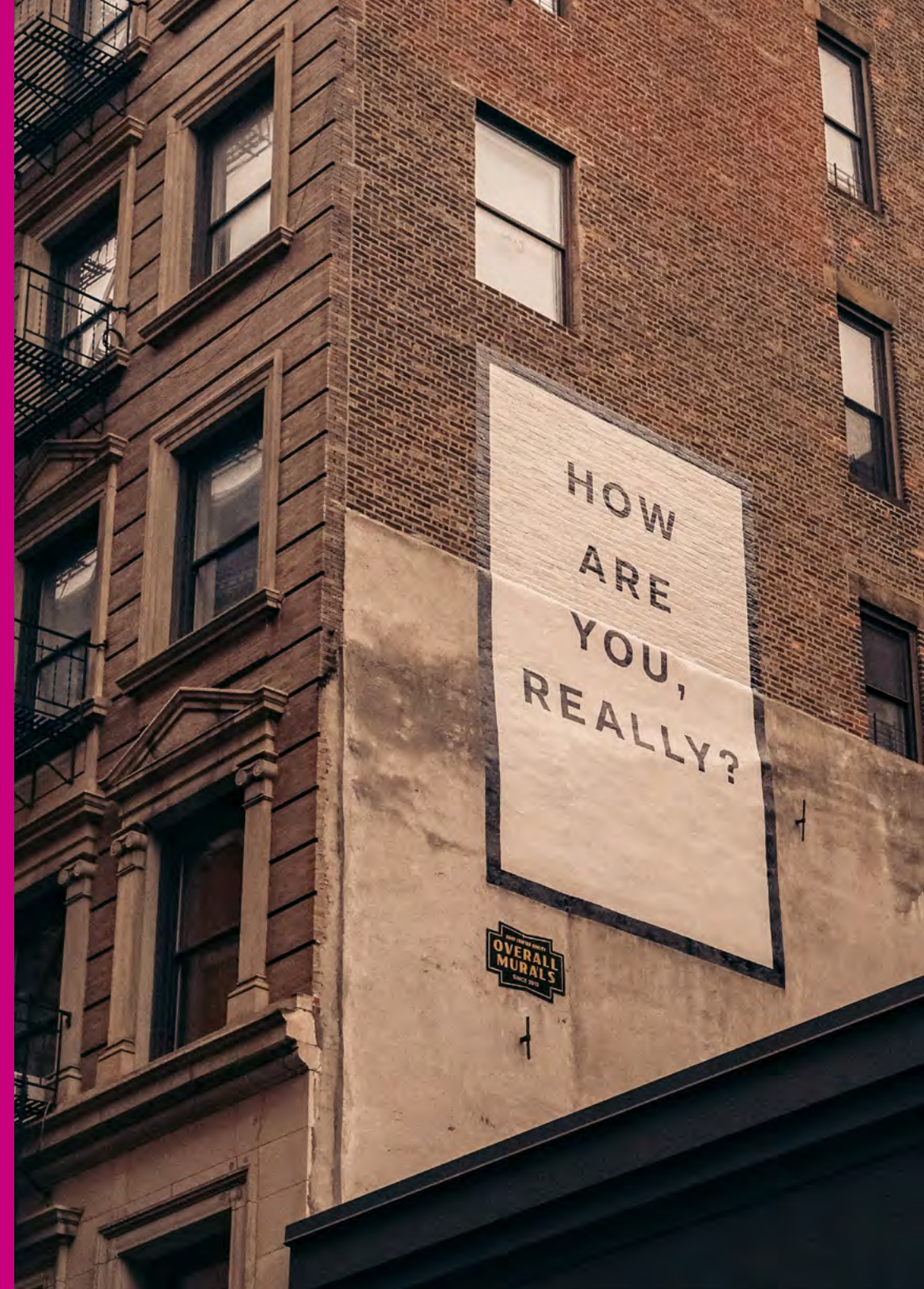


An Exercise for Youth/ Young Adult Ministers

For example, many fitness and dietary posts rely on the basic idea that you are not good enough (or acceptable, lovable, and attractive enough) unless you look/eat like this. Building off these insecurities, it is natural for young people to be more open to the sales pitch (who doesn't want to look great and be perfectly happy?). If we can see through the message, and help others to do the same, perhaps **we can push back at the root cause of so many of [the insecurities and anxieties besetting young people today](#).**

Try it:

A simple exercise for church leaders is **to discuss the subliminal messaging in influencer and/or social media trends with the local youth /young adult group**, helping them to read between the lines and be more critical about their media consumption.



Wellness Culture and Indulgence

Resistance to today's wellness regime often includes a **higher tolerance for certain kinds of indulgence—doing things we know are unhealthy but that we feel good about anyway**. While this approach can ease the stress and pressure of a high-control diet or fitness schedule, it can also combine with more harmful aspects of youth culture today.

Young peoples' attitudes about drugs and alcohol is one area where truly problematic and unhealthy behavior can combine with an indulgence-friendly approach. The next few slides will explore the drug and alcohol norms among young people.



Drug Use and Young People

Both Gen Z and Millennials reported increases in drug use from 2021-2022. This chart shows the trends, pointing to an almost universal rise in drug usage in recent years.

Drugs Young People Have Experimented With:

	GEN Z		Millennials	
	2021	2022	2021	2022
I have never experimented with any drugs for recreational use	72%	64%	35%	35%
Marijuana	18%	22%	40%	48%
E-Cigarettes / Vaping	15%	19%	26%	22%
Cigarettes	11%	11%	35%	35%
Mushrooms / Peyote	6%	5%	10%	13%
Prescription drugs prescribed to someone else, taken for recreation	5%	5%	11%	12%
Cocaine	3%	5%	15%	14%
Prescription drugs prescribed to you, but taken for recreation	5%	4%	13%	9%
Speed	2%	4%	10%	10%
Salvia	2%	4%	8%	6%
Methamphetamine / Crystal meth	2%	3%	12%	10%
LSD / Acid / DMT	7%	3%	9%	8%
Ecstasy / Molly	5%	3%	12%	13%
Steroids	3%	3%	4%	4%
Herion / Morphine	1%	2%	8%	7%

All data on this slide come from YPulse's July 2022 Health, Drugs and Risky Behavior Report



Drugs and Alcohol

Young people don't often view marijuana use as a gateway drug in the way that former President Ronald Reagan once described it. As the drug becomes more widely available in the U.S. and as more states legalize its usage (marijuana remains illegal at the federal level), researchers will be able to conduct more longitudinal studies on its health effects (the CDC has a website discussing some [known health effects](#)). For now, moderation is the name of the game.

Other forms of drug usage from the chart above will surely come as a shock. **The responses to YPulse's poll found between 10-20% of young people using prescription drugs, cocaine, methamphetamines and/or heroin.**

**“YOUNG PEOPLE
DON'T OFTEN VIEW
MARIJUANA USE
AS A GATEWAY
DRUG”**



Drugs and Alcohol Support and Resources

These figures are sources of deep concern to many faith leaders, though perhaps not shocking given the more than decade-long opioid crisis. With the increased prevalence of youth drug use and abuse, however, comes an abundance of resources to help families and communities respond to harmful, drug-related behavior. Here are just a couple:

- SAMHSA's page on [Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs](#) provides both an overview of these issues and helpful resources
- HHS has a [faith and community leader page](#) that provides information on interventions and work that community groups can do to ameliorate the opioid epidemic



Drugs, Alcohol, and 12-Step Groups

While Millennials drink less than previous generations overall, Gen Z is even less likely to imbibe. In fact, Gen Z young people were [20% less likely](#) to consume alcohol than Millennials were at the same age. This research connects to a recent [report](#) from the World Health Organization and [research](#) published by *Lancet* showing that **no amount of alcohol consumption is healthy for human beings**. Perhaps young people got the message, or perhaps they were too occupied with cannabis products to care. Both may be true, as [The Hill](#) recently noted.

Despite these promising trends, alcohol abuse remains a problem across the country, for young and old. Churches and faith institutions have long hosted recovery groups (especially [AA](#) and [Al-Anon](#)), an ongoing source of connection to the community in a mission-centered way. Other groups, like [NA](#) and [Nar-Anon](#) can also be hosted or sponsored by faith communities. As the opioid epidemic has hit young

people especially hard, such **sponsorship could be a key way for churches to connect with young people, regardless of whether or not those people join the church.**

Though there are many excellent rehab programs out there, **12-step programs remain both effective and free**. They are more accessible to most people struggling with addiction because of the low cost **and their rootedness in a local community** (where sponsors are nearby and meetings can be arranged more easily).

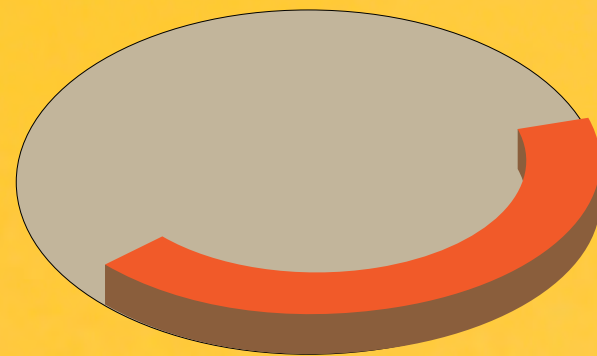
There is much the church can do in addiction/recovery work, much that the church is already doing. Beyond this, however, lie other areas of wellness culture that the church has engaged much less. Turning our attention there without diminishing the importance of recovery ministries could bring new fruit to the church's work with young people.



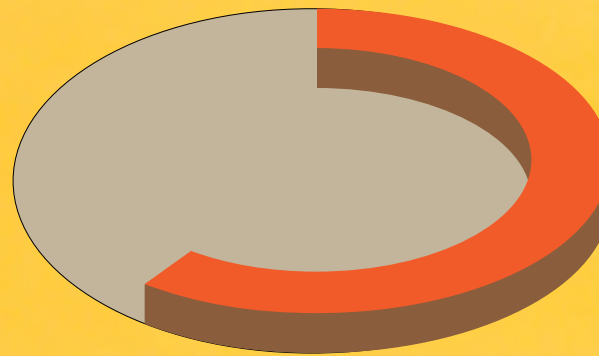
Diet and Food Culture

One such area is in the relationship young people have to food and diet culture. Many people immediately connect diet and food culture to any number of [fad-diet trends](#) that they've seen on advertisements or even participated in themselves. [Atkins](#), [Keto](#), and others hold forth the promise of weight loss and the amelioration of chronic health problems.

For most young people today, however, the main goal is simply to eat healthier and lose some weight. A recent YPulse report the following:



43% of Millennials report eating only organic or all-natural foods



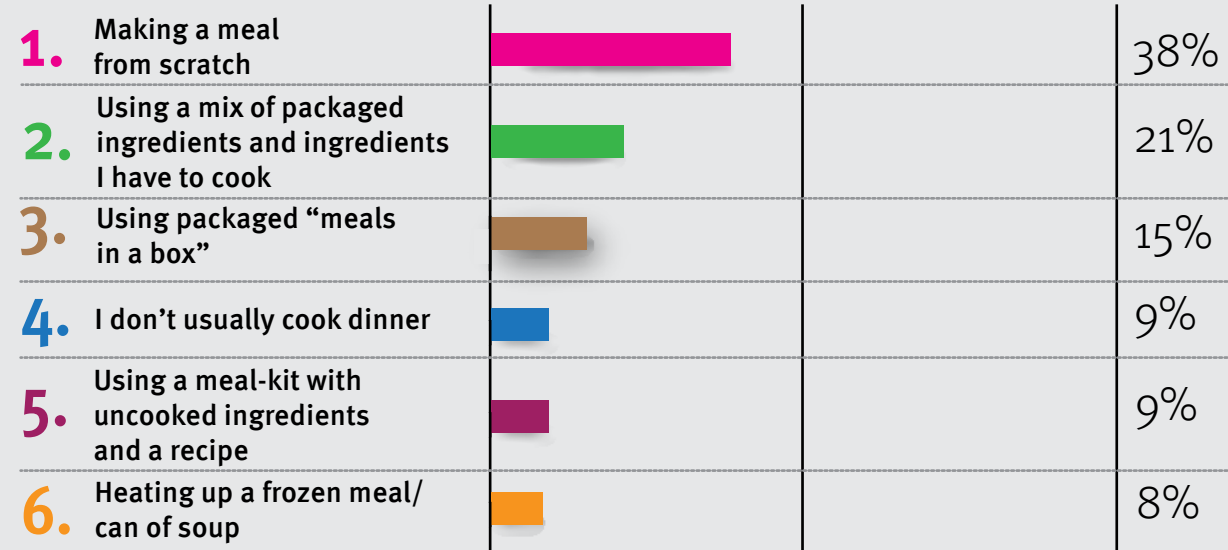
60% said that weight loss was an important factor when choosing their meals.

Despite this, young people overall reported that **their top two goals around food and diet were to eat healthier foods and get physically fit**. Losing weight, being happier, and saving money were important, too, but not as crucial as overall health and fitness.



More than three quarters of Millennials cook at home, and almost two-thirds of Gen Z does the same. Among those who prepare their own meals, nearly two-fifths cook from scratch. Those who cook at home and from scratch choose healthier foods to consume: they are “much more likely to be eating pork, plant-based meat, salad, and chicken, compared to those who aren’t cooking.”

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE USUALLY COOK DINNER:



Cooking, for these young people, is a source of joy: 82% of Millennials like to cook and even 71% of Gen Z said the same. **Most young people describe cooking as a creative outlet**, something that has **a positive impact on their mental health** and is a source of accomplishment.



Diet and Food Culture

Cooking is an art and a science that requires a significant amount of learning to do well. For many, this quasi-apprenticeship comes in their homes of origin under the tutelage of gifted parents who love to cook and do it well. But for those not blessed with parents who cook often and well, the learning curve can be daunting. Many turn to online forums and social media for help—there is a veritable cottage industry of cooking influencers and YouTubers. Others, it seems, simply don't learn a lot of the skills that cooking requires and resign themselves to years of mediocre meals and expensive restaurant bills.

But what if the church could offer an alternative? **What if the church**, perhaps working with local chef-whizzes and gifted parents, **sponsored hands-on cooking classes?** Such classes would: a) teach important life skills to young people, b) represent a form of charitable giving from the privileged few (gifted cooks) to the needy (in this case, needy for a specific skill set and not necessarily in an economic sense), c) promote more sustainable lifestyles as young people could save money by cooking at home, and d) provide a space for intergenerational mentorship and relationship-building.

If churches find that young people get most of their cooking advice online, perhaps **community elders would consider sharing their precious family recipes, a kind of passing-on of love and knowledge to the next generation?** This, too, could be done in an in-person setting, especially with the industrial kitchens that are so common in many churches.





MENTAL
HEALTH
MATTERS

- The [Edible Theology Project](#) fosters connection through stories about food shared around the table. This creates spaces where everyone can be known, valued, and loved—by God and each other.
- Professional baker and practical theologian Kendall Vanderslice has two excellent books about food, faith and community formation: [By Bread Alone: A Baker's Reflections on Hunger, Longing, and the Goodness of God](#) (2022) and [We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God](#) (2019).
- [Eating Together Faithfully](#) is a freely available curriculum created by Life Around the Table (an ecumenical ministry of the United Methodist Church). The curriculum “provides a much-needed resources for congregations interested in looking at how they eat together in their church, their homes, and their community as a reflection of their understandings of faith, creation, justice, and community.”
- [The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection](#) (2002) by Robert Farrar Capon discusses prayer, poetry, and old-fashioned home cooking.
- [Fat and Faithful: Learning to Love Our Bodies, Our Neighbors, and Ourselves](#) (2018) by J. Nicole Morgan explores the author's experience loving Jesus and experiencing body shame throughout her adolescence and early adulthood. The book provides helpful reflections on the messages our culture tells young people about their bodies and the way bodies are valued in modern society with important lessons for body positivity and a healthy self-image.
- [Soil and Sacrament: A Spiritual Memoir of Food and Faith](#) (2013) by Fred Bahnson describes the author's experience finding a deeper sense of faith in agrarian, communal living. This book tells that story and the story of many others in America who are returning to the land for food, faith, and love.
- Norman Wirzba's [Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating](#) theologically engages the meaning of eating, with an eye towards analyzing the current systems of food production and consumption in the contemporary U.S. The author describes the sacramental character of eating, the role of hospitality, and so much more. Wirzba's book has had a major influence on the theology of food and agrarianism more generally over the past decade.
- Duke University's [Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health](#) conducts research, and hosts workshops and retreats around issues of health, food, and spirituality.
- [Shameful Bodies: Religion and the Culture of Physical Improvement](#) by Michelle Mary Lelwica
- [Grace, Food, and Everything in Between](#) by Aubrey Goldbeck