

# Role of religion in youth and teen development



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The period between middle school and high school, ages eleven to eighteen, can be one of the most impactful and influential times in a youth's life. This is the time when youth are discovering who they are, developing their own opinions and beliefs, and making known to the world what they are there to do. These qualities develop and are influenced by parents or family, friends, school, extracurriculars, and religious activities. And despite the growing anti-Christian population, religion can play one of the most important roles in the development of youth and teens.

Religion has been recognized as positively associated with a child's well-being. With the increased number of psychological disorders that have arisen in the lives of youth, the need for this growing development and well-being is imperative. Growing evidence suggest that spirituality and spiritual development are important for the health and mental well-being of children and youth. These studies have shown that youth who participate in religious activities have a greater chance of reducing the probability of developing psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression. The question is then raised, " What is the relationship between youth religiosity/spirituality and reduced pediatric psychological disorders, such as anxiety or depression, and how can we use this relationship to help youth?"

It is common for youth to experience some mental discomfort as they grow and develop. This can be in the form of anxiety about starting middle school or high school or in the form of short spouts of depression that are impermanent in nature. However, when these symptoms and behaviors persist, it is reason to look into the well-being of the youth and, possibly, seek professional help. However, first, it is important to look for the signs.

The two most common types of mental disorders that youth experience are Anxiety and Depression. Anxiety, being the most pervasive disorder in the United States, is the feeling of constant nervousness, worry, or uneasiness, typically about an upcoming event or something with an uncertain outcome. The symptoms of anxiety can include feeling nervous, experiencing unfounded or unrealistic fears, sleep disturbance, obsessive thoughts or behaviors, loss of appetite, sweating, shortness of breath, stomach or headaches, etc. As of this year, nearly 40 million people in the United States (18%) suffer from an anxiety disorder and it has been found that approximately 8% of children in the US will experience some sort of anxiety disorder by the time they are 21. However, only about one third of these people will ever seek treatment as they get older, even though the disorders are highly treatable.

Depression is the second most common mental disorder among youth. Simply defined, depression is strong feelings of loss of hope and sadness. This can be a result of the loss of a loved one, occurrence of a traumatic event, being bullied, excessive amounts of stress, etc. In our world today, more than 268 million people live with depression. This number translates to around 6% of the world's population. Of these 268 million people, about 3.5% are youth. This means that over 10 million adolescents struggle with depression. The symptoms of depression are, often, more noticeable than those of anxiety. As the Anxiety and Depression Association of America state, " Depressed teenagers tend to be irritable, sulky, and get into trouble in school. They also frequently have co-morbid anxiety, eating disorders, or substance abuse." Despite depression's strong influence in the lives of

youth, the disorder is highly treatable with assistance from medication, psychotherapy, and, in some cases, electroconvulsive therapy.

While most youth are healthy, both physically and mentally, one in every four youth suffer from some sort of mental disorder. However, this number varies between gender differences. According to the Recovery Across Mental Health organization, females are more likely to be treated for mental illness than males, and anxiety is twice as likely to affect females than males. Of the number of people with phobias or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders, which are types of anxiety disorders, 60% are female. Women, also, are more likely to live with depression than men. 1 in 4 women will be treated for depression, compared to 1 in 10 men who are treated. The reasons for this statistic are unknown but have been theorized to be due to biological and social influences. Despite the tendency for mental illness to affect women more than males, men are more likely to develop an alcohol or drug problem as a result of mental illness.

When a youth is experiencing the effects of anxiety or depression, it feels like these symptoms are out of the student's control, which, then, adds even more concern. And despite the numbers given above, mental health in youth is, often, not permanent. However, with these years of a youth's life being essential to their development, it is important that they receive the attention and guidance from peers, professional supports and services, and family to help them navigate these transitional phases.

One of the greatest community and guidance areas for students to experience support during this transitional phase, is in a spiritual group

associated with a church. As mentioned before, religious activities are one of the most important influences for the health and mental well-being of children and youth. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, religion can serve as a source of coping during times of stress and illness.

According to the Gallop Poll Study "The Religious Cycle," about 63% of youth (ages 13-15) report that religion plays a "very important" role in their lives, with females being more likely than males to report such findings. Of youth, ages 16-17, only 52% report that church and their faith is "very important." This number tends to decrease as adolescents enter young adulthood, following a plateau phase, and then increasing back to "very important" as their age increases.

However, when split into male and female subgroups, the numbers and topic areas change. For example, more adolescent girls tend to report that spirituality is important to them than adolescent males. Adolescent girls, also, are assumed to have higher levels of belief and a more in depth, personal relationship with God. In comparison with the female view of a relational God, boys, overall, tend to view God as the Judge.[1] This comparison, perhaps, plays a role in how spirituality and religion affect mental illness based on gender.

Another way to look at how mental illness is affected by spirituality is by looking at resiliency factors. Studies have shown that students who participate in religious activities and maintain a spiritual life cultivate positive and protected lives. According to *Psychology in Schools*, it has been

suggested that spirituality can create resiliency in adolescents in four ways. These four ways include: 1) by helping students build relationships with each other and with mentors, 2) by unlocking sources for social support and encouragement, 3) by guiding moral values, and 4) by providing opportunities for adolescents to grow and development.[2]By creating a safe space for youth and adolescents to fully develop in these four ways and with the help of other students, mentors and youth pastors, youth and adolescents are able to face and fight for better mental health.

Because religion is such a big influencer in the lives of adolescents and adolescent well-being, youth pastors play a significant role in the mental health of these youth. Professional youth ministers teach students how to handle the pressures of a social life, how to connect and relate with other students, and how to apply religious findings (i. e. scripture and Bible stories) to their daily lives. So how can a youth pastor take the information discussed in this paper and find a way to make a difference in the lives of students who are battling a frightening mental illness?

Youth pastors actively work with the youth in their congregation and therefore, must be informed about the disorders and how to respond to and help the adolescents. Dr. Chris Amenson, suggests that the key to helping students with mental health illnesses is to become educated on the symptoms of the disease. In some countries even, such as Australia and Sweden, everyone who works with adolescents is required to be certified in recognizing the early signs of mental illness. As stated in earlier paragraphs, these can include nervousness, loss of appetite, irritableness, etc. Being able to recognize when a student is experiencing discomfort or producing

aberrant behavior could mean the difference between that student getting help now or waiting several years to get help, after the illness has progressed.

The next step after recognizing the symptoms, is addressing the guardians about what has been observed and offering to walk alongside them and their student in taking the next step. As a church worker, it is important to know the resources available and have a list of professionals in which to refer them. This, however, may be one of the hardest things that a youth pastor has to do. The act of talking to parents about something that could, potentially, be “ wrong” with their student, is something that must be tread lightly. With this in mind, what is the most effective way to approach the subject? First, parents do not like to be told what is “ wrong” with their child. Therefore, being blunt about observations, is, probably, not the best way to discuss the issue. To start, it is recommended that the conversation be done in the privacy of an office or home. Begin by acknowledging the great things about the adolescent and how enjoyable they are to have in the youth group. The next thing to do is discuss the changes that have been observed in the student’s behavior. Ask his or her parents if they have noticed the same or similar changes. If they have, gently bring up options that they can take and give them the names of resources (counselors, church staff, testing centers, etc.). Lastly, let them know that they are not alone and that the youth pastor or other church staff are willing to walk through this new journey with the family.

After recognizing the symptoms and discussing your observations with the parents, the next thing that can be done is the ministry of presence. By

<https://assignbuster.com/role-of-religion-in-youth-and-teen-development/>

connecting with the student and their family during this time, youth directors and church staff, in general, can continue to nurture them into relationship with God. This transitional phase in an adolescent's development and the coping that mental illness can sometimes require, is one of the hardest things that a family can go through. The ministry of presence can mean the difference between losing faith and growing closer to God in the face of adversity. For the student, this is, probably, more likely that with the parents. One way to encourage relationship growth between the student and God is through the form of a mentor: both an adolescent mentor and an adult mentor. During the uncertainty of this time, having someone to lean on and encourage them, can be so important to an adolescent. For the parents, the same thing is true. Encouraging them to, if they are not already a part of one, join a Sunday School or small group can help give the parents more support and hope.

Overall, the youth pastor can play a very important role in the well-being and lifting up of an adolescent that is suffering from a mental illness. They are a key to providing support by being able to recognize and respond to the symptoms, addressing the concern with the adolescent's parents or guardians, and encouraging the family through the ministry of presence.

The period between middle school and high school, ages eleven to eighteen, can be one of the most impactful and influential times in a youth's life. It is important, even when faced with adversity, mental illness, and situations that cause anxiety or depression, that students (youth and adolescents) know that there is something greater out there for them and with the help of



religious supporters and family, and with faith in God, all things can be overcome and fought. For if God is with us, what can stand against us?

### Bibliography

- Desrosiers, Alethea, and Lisa Miller. "Relational Spirituality and Depression in Adolescent Girls." *JCP* 63 (2007): 1021-1037. doi: 10.1002/jclp. 20409.
- Dew, Rachel et al. "Religion/ Spirituality and Adolescent Psychiatric Symptoms: A Review." *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* 39 (2008): 381-398. doi: 10.1007/s10578-007-0093-2
- Gallup Jr., George H. "The Religiosity Cycle." *Gallup* (2002).
- Goodwin, Steven. "Ministry to Youth with Mental Illness." *Youth Worker*.
- Hunter, William, and Matthew Stanford. "Adolescent Mental Health: The Role of Youth and College Pastors." *MHRC* 17 (2014): 957-966. doi: 10.1080/13674676.2014.966663.
- "Importance of Religion Among Youth." *Child Trends* (2018).
- "Religion, Spirituality and Your Mental Health Care." *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology* 107 (2018).
- Ritchie, Hannah, and Max Roser. "Mental Health." *Our World in Data* (2018).
- Sangwon, Kim and Giselle B. Esquivel. "Adolescent Spirituality and Resilience: Theory, Research, and Educational Practices." *Psychology in Schools* 48 (2011): 755-765. doi: 10.1002/pits. 20582.

- Westerlund, Katarina. " Spirituality and Mental Health Among Children and Youth - A Swedish Point of View." *IJCS* 21 (2016): 216-229. doi: 10.1080/1364436X.2016.1258392.
- Zohra, Nosheen Iffat, and Erum Irshad. " Religiosity and Anxiety Disorder in Peshawar." *JSS* 6 (2012): 57-64.

---

[1]Relational Spirituality (1023)

[2]Adolescent Spirituality and Resilience (756)