

## Cultural Research Center

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# Emotional and Mental Health Issues Hinder Millennial Relationships

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Millennials are struggling to develop positive, lasting relationships—and these relational difficulties are likely tied to increasing levels of emotional and mental health issues young Americans report experiencing on a regular basis.

These deep struggles may be combining into a generational “perfect storm,” in which Millennials are bringing about a virtual revolution as they delay (and even reject) marriage and starting families of their own.

These are among the staggering conclusions from [\*Millennials in America: New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence\*](#), a report produced by George Barna and the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

This second in-depth report from *Millennials in America* looks at how the nation’s youngest generation of adults is struggling with relationships, as well as with skyrocketing rates of emotional and mental health issues.

According to the nationwide study of Millennials (adults ages 18 to 37), most in the generation say they are dissatisfied with their intimate and peer relationships. In fact, when it comes to relationships, they avoid conflict and have a hard time trusting others.

At the same time, a majority (54%) admits to frequently feeling anxiety, depression or fear. They are plagued with self-doubt and deeply desire to be part of a community that “knows, appreciates, and respects” them.

When it comes to how they view others, Millennials are less likely than other adults to believe they should respect other people or to see human life as valuable, according to the study.

## **Relational Dissatisfaction**

The report notes that today's young adults are more likely than their predecessors to struggle in their quest for lasting and meaningful relationships. Among the obstacles evident in that journey are their bouts of self-doubt, the influence of their dysfunctional family of origin, unrealistic relational standards, inadequate communication skills and efforts, and identity issues.

The research also pointed out that the loss of effective communication skills (partly attributable to their reliance on technology as an intermediary) and an array of financial challenges are also at play.

Combined, these transitions in thought and behavior have led to a virtual revolution in how young Americans view marriage and having a family of their own. The study found that Millennials are ambivalent when it comes to marriage. Fewer Millennials are getting married and those who do, increasingly insist on having a prenuptial agreement. More Millennials choose cohabitation over marriage.

And marriage, when it occurs, is happening later in life. There are fewer faith-based weddings, fewer young couples having children, and more women in the generation are having children outside of marriage.

The impact of such pressures on friendships has also been breathtaking. Young adults claim to experience fewer good friends and fewer long-term friendships. They have limited trust in their friends and lack people with whom they can freely share their most pressing concerns and most significant experiences. They also have a general dissatisfaction with the quality of their existing relationships, whether those are friendships or intimate relationships.

Looking at these findings, it is unsurprising that among the types of life changes most desired by Millennials are those associated with improving their relationships. Close to six out of 10 Millennials viewed significant changes in their relationships as being "extremely desirable"—and that does not include those who listed their personal relationship with God (mentioned by 14%). Only financial comfort exceeds the importance of better relationships among Millennials.

Why are Millennials having such difficulty with interpersonal connections? They say one factor is their experience with prejudice. One out of eight (13%) noted experiencing bias associated with their race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. The same number

(13%) are lacking a community that “knows, appreciates, and respects” them. One out of every five Millennials see having better relationships with family members as an extremely desirable change.

Yet another roadblock to meaningful relationships is the lack of trust that young adults have in other people. Trust is a vital element in any healthy relationship. However, the survey discovered that there is no group of influencers in their life who they trust to tell the truth or to do what is right either always or almost always.

Parents earned the highest level of trust, yet just 46% said they trusted their parents to that degree. Notably fewer—only one-third (36%)—trusted their friends to that extent. Lower on the trust scale for Millennials were college professors, Christian pastors, elected government officials, popular social media personalities and entertainment celebrities.

Millennials also struggle with relational conflict. Almost two-thirds (64%) admitted that within the past month they had “avoided interacting with someone because it was likely to produce conflict.” Their inability to comfortably converse with those who hold different opinions is a significant hindrance to building meaningful relationships.

Certainly, relational issues are common among every generation. However, this unique combination of troubles in their relationships may stem from their attitudes human life and how they view other people. For instance:

- The research indicates that young adults are less likely to believe they should respect other people.
- Half of all Millennials say they attach no absolute value to human life. In fact, they are almost twice as likely as other adults to dismiss the inherent value of human beings.
- Millennials are less than half as likely as other adults to say that human life is sacred. They are twice as likely to minimize the value and dignity of human life by describing human beings as either “material substance only” or to describe their very existence as “an illusion.”
- A minority of Millennials (48%) embraces the Golden Rule (i.e., treat others as you want them to treat you). In comparison, two-thirds of other adults (65%) say that guideline is how they try to live.
- Millennials have been described as a generation with a “victim mentality.” The survey showed that they are three times more likely than older adults to say they try to get even with those who wrong them.

- Their ability to create the level of trust required to build relationships is lacking. Millennials are less likely than any of the other adult generations to claim that they keep the promises they make or to repay a loan. They are also more likely than those from other generations to lie to protect their reputation or best interests.

<b>How Much Millennials Trust Influencers to Tell the Truth or Do What is Right</b>					
	<b>How often you trust them</b>				
	<b>Always or almost always</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Not too often</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
<b>Your parents</b>	46%	32%	12%	6%	4%
<b>Your friends</b>	36	40	16	4	4
<b>College professors</b>	27	39	18	6	10
<b>Pastors of Christian churches</b>	26	28	23	14	9
<b>Authors of non-fiction books</b>	18	39	22	8	12
<b>Journalists</b>	17	36	28	11	9
<b>Elected government officials</b>	15	28	32	17	8
<b>Popular social media personalities</b>	15	27	31	19	8
<b>Entertainment celebrities</b>	13	27	34	18	8

Source: ***Millennials in America: New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence***, by George Barna and the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; national sample of 600 adults, ages 18 to 37, conducted August 2021.

## **Emotional and Mental Health**

One of the most startling results from *Millennials in America* is the staggering need for better mental and emotional health among young adults.

A majority of young adults (54%) admitted to “often feeling anxious, depressed, or unsafe.” In fact, the need to address their mental and emotional health issues was among the highest rated desired changes identified by Millennials.

Along the same lines, the National Institute of Mental Health reports that 21% of U.S. adults have some form of mental illness. The condition is even more widespread among the younger half of the Millennial generation (i.e., ages 18 through 25). The NIMH found that 29% are counted as having some type of mental disorder, with nearly 9% having a severe mental illness. Perhaps even more startling is the diagnosis that 49% of American adolescents (ages 13-18) have one or more types of mental illness.<sup>i</sup>

This situation is a hidden but serious condition that is confronting and, ultimately, reshaping American society.

## **Worldview and Lifestyle**

According to George Barna, Director of Research at the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, the study’s findings about Millennials’ relational struggles are troubling and ultimately reflect the generation’s worldview.

“So much of a person’s life experience and fulfillment is wrapped up in our relationships. Millennials desperately want to be in community, but they are having a hard time developing those deeper, positive connections largely due to their ideas about life and humanity,” Barna explained.

“Millennials do not see people the way God does,” the veteran researcher and author continued. “Most of them do not consider human life to have intrinsic value. They feel no obligation to respect people because they do not even believe they were created by God, much less made in His likeness or for His purposes. They are less tolerant of beliefs and behaviors that differ from their own than are older adults.”

Barna noted, “They often seek relationships on their unyielding terms, but that strategy is untenable.”

Those same worldview issues have produced the mental and emotional challenges confronting young adults.

“Having dismissed the existence and authority of God it’s only natural that young adults are plagued by anxiety and fear,” Barna stated. “The result is they perceive the world to

be random, unpredictable and beyond their influence. They have is no realistic reason for hope.”

Barna continued, “In such a world they do not understand of how to address the future. When you remove the presence of an omnipotent but loving Creator, as well as His guidelines and standards designed to facilitate our ability to thrive, there are no anchors for truth, emotions, decision-making, relationships, or purpose and meaning. All that’s left is confusion, chaos, emptiness and aloneness.”

The most rational response, according to Barna, is to adopt a biblical worldview. “The alternative philosophies of life such as Marxism, Postmodernism, Secular Humanism, and Eastern Mysticism—are not just wrong, but dangerous. Why embrace any of those worldviews? They lead to despair and even to suicide,” he commented.

“The evidence of the existence of a living, powerful designer, creator and ruler of the universe is overwhelming. There is reason to maintain hope through the God of the Bible, not the popular but indefensible ideologies of humans.”

As Barna explained, “Based on more than 2,000 years of testimonies we know the adoption of the biblical worldview enables us to experience the power, authority and wisdom to live life to the fullest.”

### **About the Research**

This survey was developed and implemented in August 2021 by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University for Foundations of Freedom. The online survey was conducted among a national sample of 600 Millennials, defined as people born from 1984 through 2002 (ages 18 to 36 at the time of the survey). The survey questionnaire contained 71 questions, resulting in a median survey length of 17 minutes. Survey respondents were promised anonymity and confidentiality. Some of the questions and data appearing in this study originated in the *American Worldview Inventory*, an annual nationwide assessment of worldview conducted by the Cultural Research Center.

### **About the Cultural Research Center**

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. The institute annually conducts the *American Worldview Inventory*, a nationwide assessment of the worldview of American adults. CRC also developed the ACU Student Worldview Inventory, a survey administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, plus a final administration undertaken among students just prior to their graduation, tracking the worldview development of its student body. The Cultural

Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to facilitating the positive transformation of American culture with biblical truth.

The Cultural Research Center is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy F. Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. It works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Access to the results from past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is accessible at [www.culturalresearchcenter.com](http://www.culturalresearchcenter.com). Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at [www.arizonachristian.edu](http://www.arizonachristian.edu).

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<sup>i</sup> “Mental Illness,” National Institute of Mental Health; accessed September 1, 2021; [https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness?source=your\\_stories\\_page](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness?source=your_stories_page).