

The Mental State of the World in 2022

Family Relationships and Mental Wellbeing

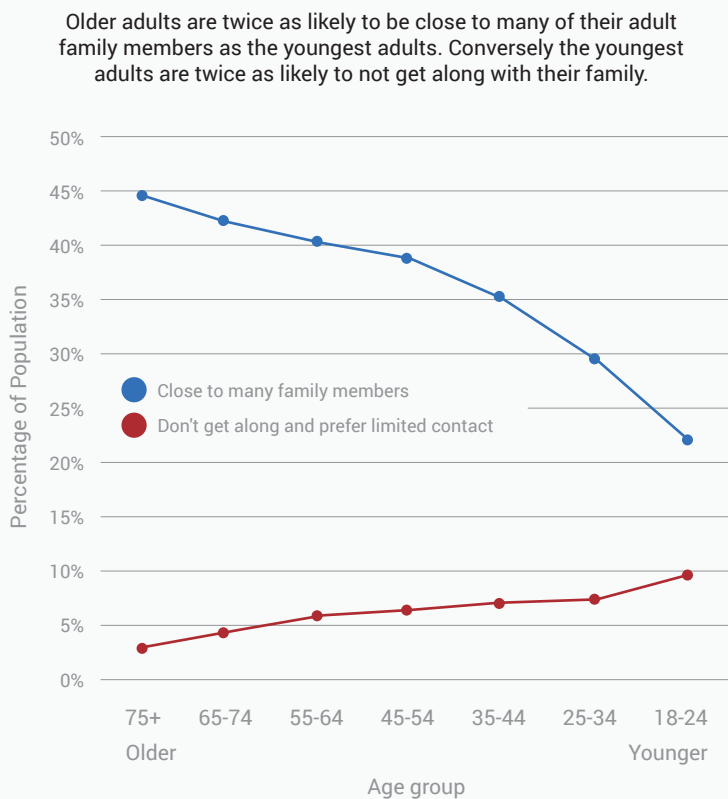
March 1, 2023

Family Relationships and Mental Wellbeing

The breakdown of the *Social Self* in younger generations reflects a breakdown of relationships, the sense of self and the sense of secure embeddedness within a social fabric. Our first relationships are with our family and many studies have shown a link between strong family relationships and happiness as well as other outcomes of life success (Martin-Joy et al., 2017; Ramos et al., 2022; Sroufe et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2017; Waldinger & Schulz, 2016). Here we explore the nature of family relationships across generations and geographies to reveal a progressive deterioration in younger generations across the global Internet-enabled world. We also show the profound relationship between family bonds and mental wellbeing that suggests the breakdown of family relationships as a substantial contributor to the progressive decline of mental wellbeing in younger generations.

Trends in family closeness

Figure 3.1: Relationship with adult family across age groups



We asked in the MHQ how close people were to their adult families. Were they close to many of their family members or just a few? Did they get along with their families but were not close, or did not get along at all, preferring not to see them. Perhaps not surprisingly, across the globe, the percentage who reported being close to many members of their family decreased with each younger generation. On average only 22% of young adults 18-24 were close to their families compared to 44% of the oldest generation aged 75+, a two-fold difference. Conversely, 10% in the 18-24 age group did not get along with any of their family and preferred not to see them compared to only 3% of the oldest generation.

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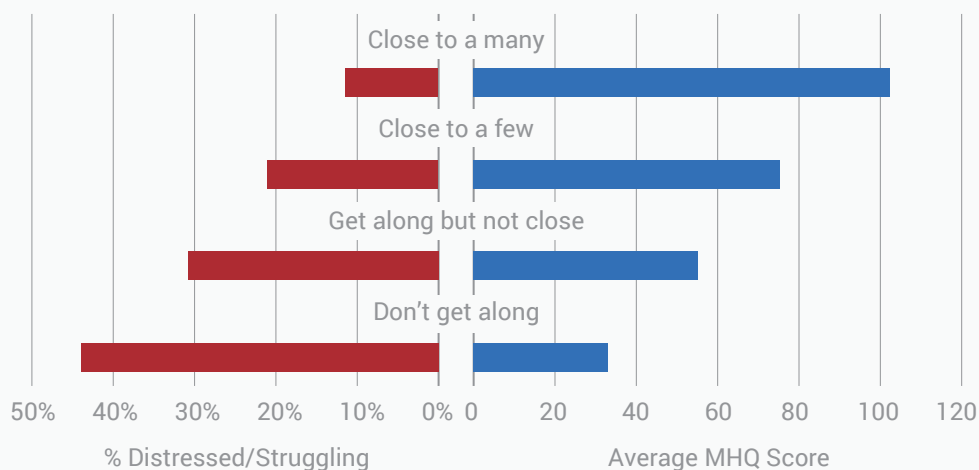
Family relationships and mental wellbeing

We looked at mental wellbeing across all adults for each answer group. MHQ scores were highest for those who were close to many of their family members with an average of 102, placed in the range we call 'Succeeding', and declining steadily to 33 for those who did not get along with any of their family, in the range we call "Enduring". Among those close to their families, 12% still struggled with their mental health. However, this was almost four times lower than the 44% of those who did not get along with their families. Thus, in the aggregate, the risk of mental health challenges are four times lower if you have close family relationships. This 70 MHQ point difference and four-fold differential in mental health struggles was consistent across all age groups. This is a profound difference in risk, twice that of the mental health risks associated with other factors such as lack of exercise, lack of education or unemployment.

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Figure 3.2: Relationship with adult family and mental wellbeing outcomes

Globally, those who have a close relationship with many of their adult family have an average MHQ score of 102 with only 12% struggling with their mental health. In contrast, those who do not get along with their family have an average MHQ score of 33 with 44% Distressed or Struggling.



Why is this so?

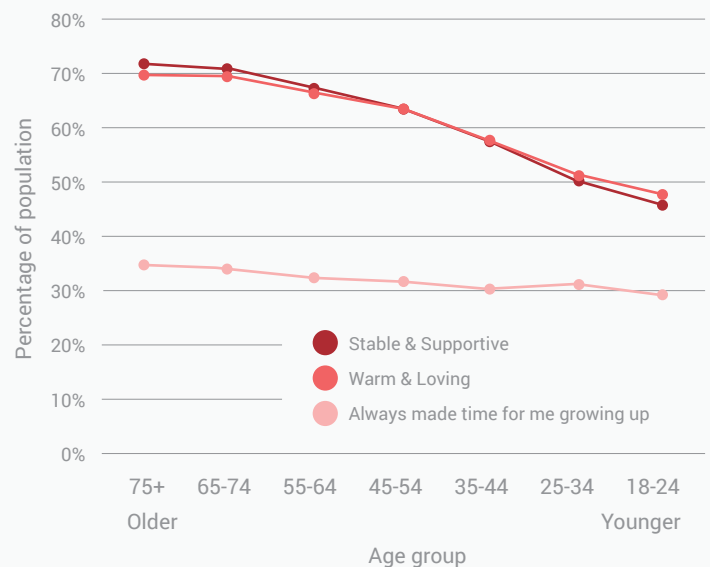
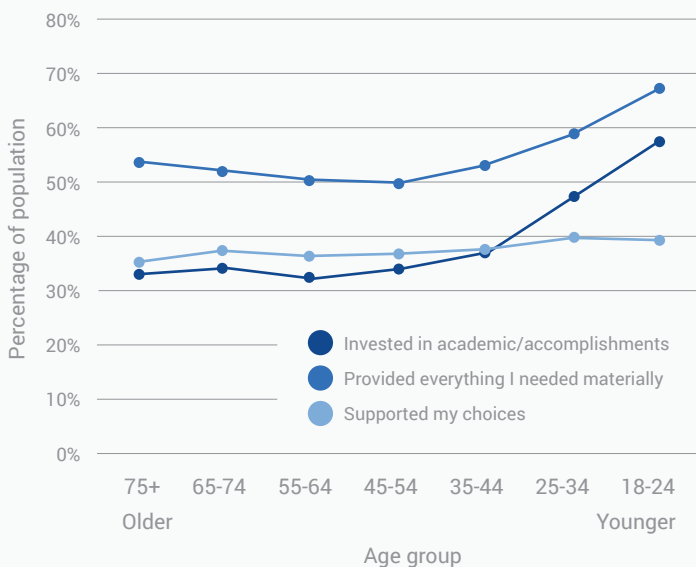
Is it that young people have increasingly abandoned the idea of family or have younger generations of parents precipitated a crisis of family? To gain insight into this we probed their childhood family experience. Did their parents provide for all their material needs? Were they invested in their academic and other accomplishments? How did they rate their childhood home from unstable with conflict to stable and supportive? From emotionally distant to warm and loving? And how did these factors influence how close they were to their families in adulthood and their adult mental wellbeing? We summarize the results in the next section.

The generational shift in childhood family experience

Starting with those who were born in the 1980s (age 45 and younger), there was a steady and substantial increase in the percentage who reported that their parents provided everything they needed materially, soaring to 68% of those 18-24 from only 50-54% in generations older than 45. Similarly, there was also a dramatic increase in the percentage who reported that their parents were invested in their academic and other accomplishments which grew from about 33-35% to 58%. There was also a small increase in the percentage of younger generations who reported that their parents always supported their choices from 36% for those over 65 to 39% of the 18-24 age group.

Figure 3.3: Nature of childhood home across generations

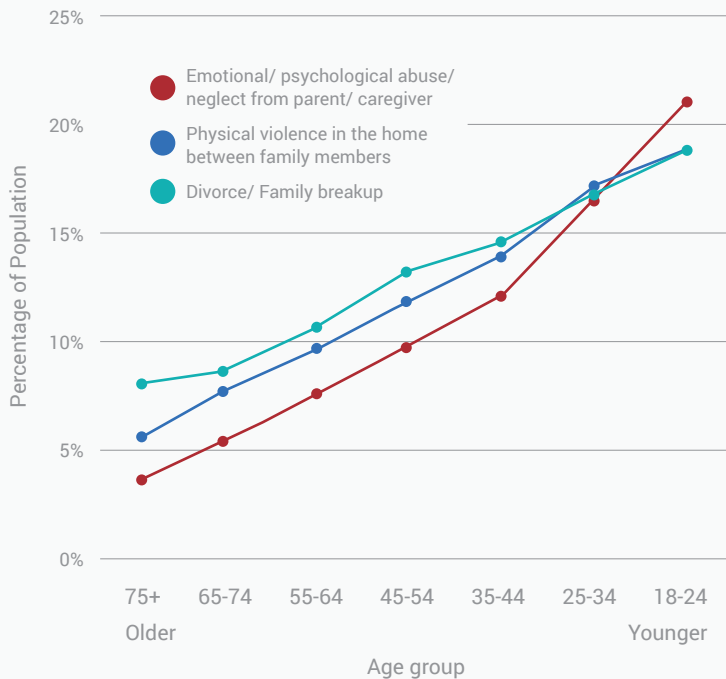
Adults younger than 35 increasingly report that their parents provided everything they needed materially and were very invested in their academic and other accomplishments. On the other hand the percentage reporting a stable and loving childhood home decreases dramatically with younger generations.



On the other hand, while 70-72% of those over 65 reported growing up in homes that were both stable and loving, only 46-48% of the 18-24 age group reported the same. So also the percentage reporting that their parents always made time for them declined but only slightly from about 35% for those 65+ to 29% for those 18-24.

Figure 3.4: Prevalence of parent driven traumas in childhood across age groups

The reported incidence of trauma in childhood increases with each younger generation of adults. This includes incidence of emotional abuse or neglect by a parent or caregiver to physical violence in the home and divorce or family breakup.



Further probing of the nature of instabilities, conflict and lack of emotional warmth showed a dramatic and steady increase with each younger generation in the percentage reporting parental divorce or family breakups, violence between family members and emotional abuse or neglect by their parents (Figure 3.4).

Among the age groups between 18 and 34, those who were provided everything they needed materially and whose parents were invested in their academics or accomplishments, only 48% reported a stable and loving home. This was in contrast to 70% for the age groups

between 45 and 64. And unsurprisingly, 49% of those from stable and loving homes reported being close to many family members in adulthood compared to only 14% of those who reported unstable and emotionally distant childhood homes. Altogether this paints a picture of changing parenting priorities from providing a stable and loving childhood home to a greater focus on material comfort and accomplishment. Alongside this shift is a home life with greater conflict and abuse.

This paints a picture of changing parenting priorities in younger generations from providing a stable and loving childhood home to one focused on material comfort and accomplishment, that fosters greater conflict and abuse.

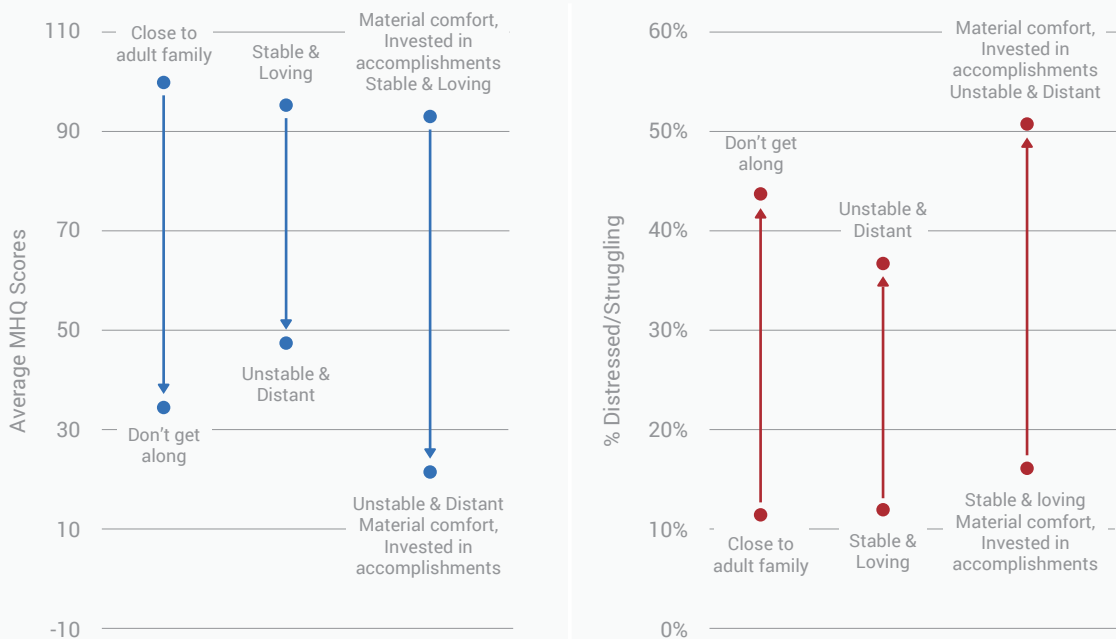
The childhood home and mental wellbeing in adulthood

Mental wellbeing increased with ratings of warmth and stability of the childhood home. Those who came from both stable and loving homes had MHQ scores that were 58 points higher on average than those who came from homes that were both unstable with conflict and emotionally distant. Correspondingly, 35-40% of those who reported either homes that were unstable with conflict or emotionally distant struggled with their mental health in adulthood while only 13-17% of those who reported homes that were stable or loving had mental health challenges. When combined, 41% of those who reported *both* instability and emotional distance had mental health challenges compared to just 13% of those from stable and loving homes.

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Figure 3.5: Difference in mental wellbeing based on childhood home and adult family relationships

Having a stable and loving childhood home means much higher MHQ scores on average in adulthood and far less likelihood of mental health struggles. For those with parents who provided all material comfort and were invested in their accomplishments MHQ scores were slightly lower and distress slightly higher.



Interestingly, those from stable and loving homes whose parents provided all material comfort and were invested in their accomplishments had MHQ scores that were not much different on average (Figure 3.5). On the other hand, those who came from unstable and emotionally distant homes where their parents provided everything they needed materially and invested in their accomplishments had worse mental wellbeing than those whose parents did not.

A geographic view of family trends

Where are family bonds the strongest? And in which regions of the world is this deterioration of family bonds most apparent?

First, in the aggregate, the Middle East & North Africa had the highest percentage of reported closeness to many adult family members (42%) as well as stable and loving childhood homes (60%). This was followed by English-speaking South Asia and South East Asia as well as Sub Saharan Africa, (in particular Swahili-speaking) that were all similar. At the bottom was Portuguese Latin America (Brazil) and the Core Anglosphere (North America and Oceania as well as UK and Ireland) where closeness to many adult family members ranged from 23 to 29% while growing up in a stable and loving home ranged from 39 to 41% (shown as dots on the left of each panel in Figure 3.6 and 3.7)

Figure 3.6: The demographics of close adult family relationships

English-speaking South and South East Asia, the Middle East & North Africa and Swahili-speaking Sub Saharan Africa have the closest families overall. However the decline in family closeness from older to younger generations is also steepest. Conversely, North America, Europe and Oceania as well as Portuguese Brazil are least likely to have close families.

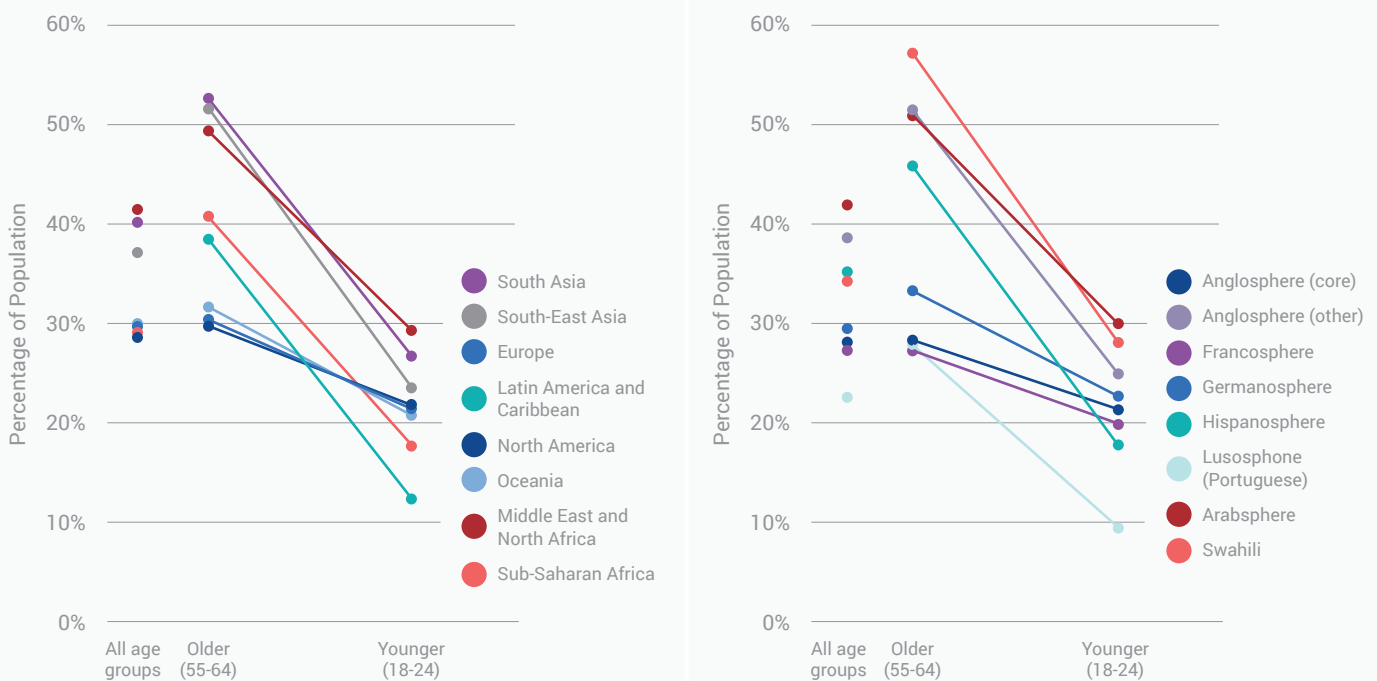
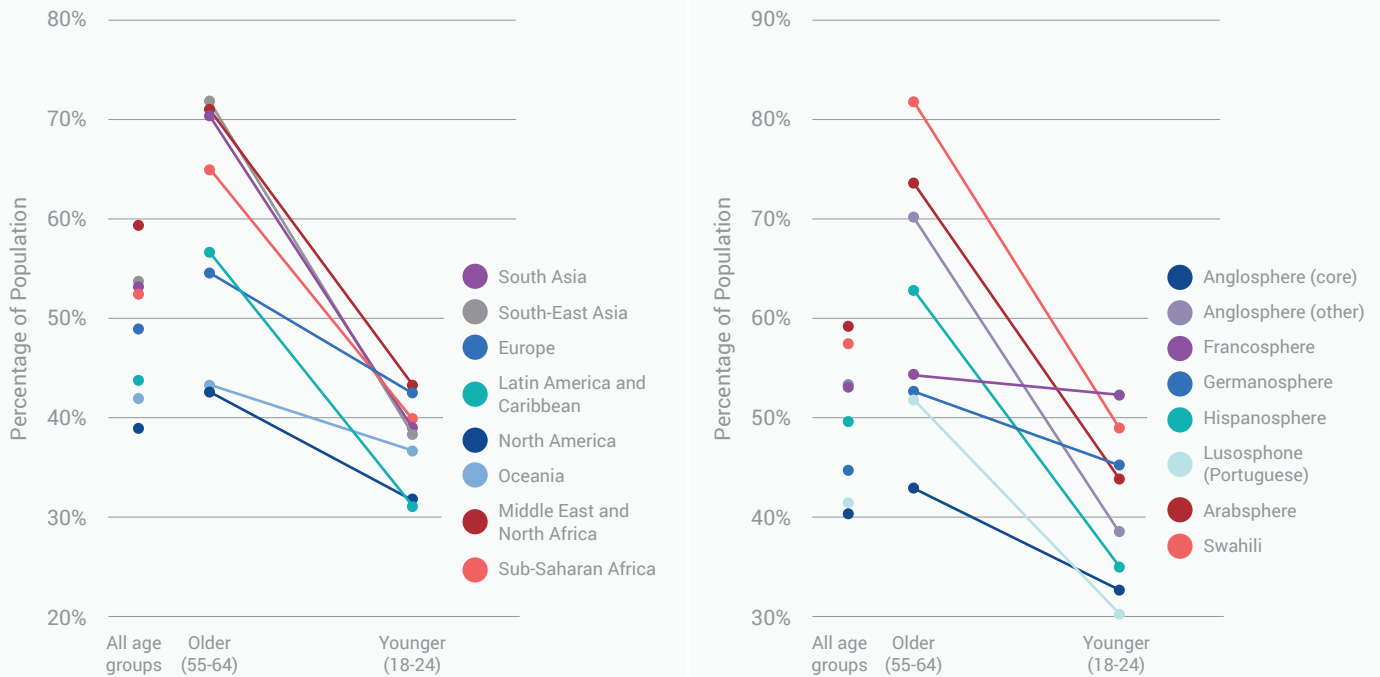


Figure 3.7: The demographics of adults from stable and loving childhood homes

Adults in the Middle East and North Africa, Swahili speaking Sub Saharan Africa and South and South East Asia grew up in the most stable and loving homes. However the decline in stable and loving childhood homes from older to younger generations is also steepest. Overall adults in North America and Portuguese Brazil had the least stable and loving childhood homes.



However, when comparing older and younger generations separately, a different picture emerges. While the deterioration encompasses the entire Internet-enabled world, the fall was steepest from older to younger generations among English-speaking South & South East Asia, followed by the Middle East & North Africa and Sub Saharan Africa where older generations had considerably higher family closeness and stable, loving childhood homes. In contrast, the fall was not as significant in Europe and the Core Anglosphere where closeness and stable, loving childhood homes are already lower among older generations. Thus, for the youngest generation of adults, the gap between regions was narrowed.

The Middle East & North Africa had the highest percentage of reported closeness to many adult family members (42%) as well as stable and loving childhood homes (60%) while Portuguese Latin America (Brazil) and the Core Anglosphere had the lowest closeness to many adult family members (23-29%) and stable and loving childhood home (39-41%).