

# By Youth, For Youth: Recommendations for the Youth Mental Health Crisis

From the



**NAMINEXTGEN**

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Community of Practice





**NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization. What started as a small group of families gathered around a kitchen table in 1979 has blossomed into the nation's leading voice on mental health. As an alliance of 50 State Organizations, more than 650 local Affiliates, over 300 NAMI On Campus clubs, and 40 NAMI Next Gen Advisors and alumni, we are dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.**

# NEXTGEN

In the face of a national youth mental health crisis, NAMI aims to meet young people where they are. NAMI Next Gen, a 10-member young adult advisory group, represents youth voices and young people across the country. This group helps inform NAMI's youth outreach, initiatives, and projects based on their own thoughts, opinions, and feedback – because NAMI believes in the idea that there should be “nothing about us without us.” By incorporating youth voices into our projects, NAMI better understands the mental health challenges faced by young people today.

The 2024 NAMI Next Gen cohort wanted to learn what youth want for mental health support from a collection of their peers. They created the NAMI Next Gen Community of Practice, uniting 50 youth and young adult mental health advocates from across the country. These young adults included college students, NAMI program participants, community leaders, and policy advocates. The NAMI Next Gen cohort and Community of Practice members developed the following recommendations for supporting youth and young adults in the future, based on their own lived experiences.





# BARRIERS TO CARE:

## CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In this section, we present four key challenges that youth and young adults experience in accessing mental health care. From the lack of culturally-sensitive providers to policy leaders and decision-makers not including youth voices in policy decisions, these barriers prevent young people from getting help early – and, in some cases, even limit their ability to prioritize caring for their own mental health.

### Equitable Mental Health Support

In the NAMI Next Gen Community of Practice, members discussed the challenges they face when seeking mental health services and supports. Notably, they experience difficulties related to equitable mental health care access. Kripa Kannan notes, “Barriers like the stigma of seeking help, lack of insurance coverage, and limited access to culturally competent care disproportionately affect marginalized youth, exacerbating disparities in mental health outcomes.”

Reflecting on their experiences, members discussed how mental health care is especially difficult to access for those who need it most. The barriers faced by Community of Practice members included discrimination based on identity factors combined with specific stressors youth face daily, such as intense academic pressure, social isolation, and financial instability. Addressing mental health inequities across the country is not just about fairness but about ensuring mental health interventions resonate across cultures and reduce barriers to access.

### Mental Health Stigma

Stigma surrounding mental health conditions can be difficult to navigate on anyone’s journey to accessing care. For youth who may need to advocate for their own care with their family or support network, mental health stigma demonstrates a significant barrier.

Without general knowledge or awareness of mental health conditions, many youth and young adults feel ashamed and unsupported when experiencing mental health concerns. Speaking to her lived experience, Mary Lawal explains, “Stigma creates a feeling of shame, which can lead to years of suffering in silence and fear of being judged or shunned. Stigma can often lead to a person carrying this shame and burden for many years.”

Family and cultural norms can sometimes discourage help-seeking, too. Jasmine Diaz states, “Stigma from one’s ethnic background can contribute to young adults not seeking mental health services. Within the Mexican community... experiencing a mental health crisis can be ‘fixed’ by either engaging in religious services or spending time with family.” In order to increase the number of young people who get help early, mental health stigma both culturally and at home needs to be addressed.

### Navigating Access to Care

Accessing all types of health care can be incredibly difficult. Getting access to mental health care presents additional challenges, in part due to the way physical health is separated from mental health.

Inadequate insurance coverage, high out-of-pocket costs, and provider shortages make the mental health system difficult to navigate, especially for youth. Even Community of Practice members who were able to access mental health care found that their friends struggled to find the same care.

In addition to struggling to find therapists with openings or culturally-sensitive practices, members report that peer support is an underutilized resource. “The term ‘peer support’ has gained traction in recent years,” says Gregory Carnesi, but increased mental health education and funding are needed to ensure youth and young adults can adequately support each other when they’re struggling.

### Youth Voices in Policy Conversations

Addressing systemic change and policy change is essential to fostering resilience and promoting the long-term well-being of vulnerable youth. Currently, the policies and systems around mental health care can sometimes leave youth and young adults feeling dismissed.

Community of Practice members noted that decision-making spaces related to mental health can be dominated by older generations, inadvertently marginalizing the lived experiences and unique needs of young people. Saanvi Arora explains, “For many young adults, these experiences discourage them from seeking help as they grow older, even as they enter different ecosystems and institutions that claim to support their well-being.”

The need for youth voices in policy conversations is a key finding for NAMI Next Gen and Community of Practice members. As long as policymakers continue to talk *about* youth – instead of talking *with* them – the lack of youth and young adult representation in policy and system change will likely lead to significant challenges. Engaging groups like NAMI Next Gen and the Community of Practice can lead to more inclusive and thoughtful systems change.

# BY US, FOR US:

## MENTAL HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Now that we see where the mental health landscape may leave youth and young adults out, consider what including young people could do. In this section, we present four high-level recommendations from the 2024 NAMI Next Gen Community of Practice, ranging from culturally responsive practices to increasing mental health education in schools. Getting help early and prioritizing mental health can guide young people into their futures with greater mental health awareness and more tools to address potential concerns.

### Develop Culturally Responsive Approaches

It is our hope and expectation that the current cultural shift in mental health awareness will continue to expand across diverse viewpoints. To that effect, fostering open dialogue and reducing stigma by tailoring communication to different cultural and ethnic groups can help mental health professionals and organizations approach youth mental health through a culturally responsive lens. Aleeza Virani notes, “To improve mental health equity, it is important for mental health professionals to remember that people are diverse in their needs, worldviews, cultures, and ultimately what effective care looks like for them.”

There are examples of successful initiatives that demonstrate these diverse approaches to mental health communication. For example, NAMI’s Sharing Hope Series are designed to facilitate conversations within the Black/African ancestry, Hispanic/Latin American, South Asian, and American Indian/Native American communities. These community conversations reduce stigma and encourage healing as people discuss mental health and wellbeing.

For other underserved areas, such as rural communities, expanding mental health care to include telehealth services can help. Kripa Kannan explains, “Telehealth services and digital platforms offering mental health tools and peer support networks can bridge gaps in care.”

By investing in culturally tailored resources and expanding how mental health services are provided, mental health care can be accessed by more young people, sooner.

### Invest in Youth Leadership and Peer Support

When organizations create platforms, like NAMI Next Gen and the Community of Practice, for youth leaders to connect, share ideas, and leverage lived experiences, our push for meaningful action grows, too. Involving young people in program design and advocacy efforts means lifting up the voices of youth, deepening impact.

The young people in NAMI Next Gen and the Community of Practice believe that prioritizing youth perspectives and involvement, funding and promoting peer-led initiatives

and support networks, and encouraging youth in decision-making roles is essential. As G. Matthews states, “Youth should be given meaningful opportunities to give feedback and to be part of the decision-making.”

Through NAMI Next Gen and the Community of Practice, and including two young people on our Board of Directors, NAMI is demonstrating the value of including young people in leadership and support positions. As NAMI Next Gen expands into state and local-level NAMI organizations, we will continue to see the positive impact of investment in youth leadership spreading across the country.

### Expand Access to Mental Health Education

Incorporating mental health literacy into school curricula is vital, even as early as elementary school. Schools are a good place to start understanding mental health because these are trusted spaces. Gregory Carnesi states, “I believe there is an opportunity for schools of different kinds to teach mental health literacy to youth.” Educators can collaborate with youth to integrate mental health education into school curricula, while extracurricular organizations provide opportunities for high school students to engage in mental health advocacy.

Mental health education programs that blend empirical data, storytelling, and skill-building can help create personal connections with mental health concepts. “Integrating more culturally competent programs and psychological support into schools and community sites that already exist and people trust,” as Clara Pritchett recommends, would mean all students gain knowledge about mental health conditions and taking care of their minds, as well as their bodies.

NAMI Next Gen and Community of Practice members also recommend incentivizing peer mentoring programs that provide relatable guidance and emotional support for youth. Mentors should be equipped with trauma-informed training to enhance their quality of care. Other programs like the evidence-based NAMI Ending the Silence and NAMI On Campus clubs provide powerful programs that communities can use as examples of high-quality youth involvement in mental health education.



## Continue to Advocate for Policy and System Changes

When organizations go to local, state, or federal policymakers to advocate for youth mental health services, it benefits everyone for young people to be included. Partnerships like this, between youth leaders and professional organizations, enhance credibility and provide more opportunities for youth voices to be heard.

To take youth involvement in advocacy among legislators a step further, Athila A. Khan suggests it's beneficial for young adults to "engage with policymakers at an early stage by forming youth advisory councils to provide input on local, state, or national mental health policies." NAMI National, as well as many NAMI State and Affiliate organizations, have created such groups, including NAMI Next Gen, to provide input and incorporate lived experience into advocacy efforts.

Additionally, organizations may choose to invest in public awareness campaigns that highlight community-based approaches to mental health in order to help shift perspectives. Cadon Sagendorf says, "Youth-driven advocacy campaigns that promote awareness of the benefits of community-based alternatives can help shift public opinion and influence policy changes."

Together, implementing these recommendations would integrate the perspectives of young people with lived experience into the policy-making process. With these recommendations, NAMI Next Gen and Community of Practice members encourage mental health and youth organizations to follow NAMI's lead and include young people in conversations about them, increasing impact and ensuring new policies address the nation's youth mental health crisis.

# TAKE THE NEXT STEP:

## INCLUDE YOUTH IN MENTAL HEALTH DECISIONS

The voices of youth and young adults are pivotal in shaping the future of mental health care. The 2024 NAMI Next Gen members and Community of Practice participants demonstrate this by amplifying youth perspectives, highlighting real-world examples, and providing actionable recommendations for improving youth mental health across the country.

NAMI imagines a future where every young person has access to the support they need, free from stigma and barriers to care. This report serves as a call to action for all stakeholders – advocates, policymakers, educators, mental health professionals, and community organizers – to recognize the invaluable contributions of youth, like NAMI has. We call on all members of our community to integrate their perspectives into decision-making processes about mental health treatment, research, and policy change.

Caring for our mental health starts at a young age. When we implement these recommendations to address the national youth mental health crisis, we will set up our young people for healthier, happier, and more satisfying futures.



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