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Faith in Life



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Faith & Happiness: How Religious Belief Shapes Britain's Emotional Wellbeing

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Executive Summary

The pressure to better understand emotional health is intensifying with rising awareness of mental health and wellbeing struggles. Studies show that negative emotional states have been rapidly increasing across the globe in the last decade.¹ Research into wellbeing continues to focus on what's going wrong. But an equally important question is what are we doing well?² What are the character skills and strengths that help us to navigate life's difficulties and even grow through them? It is well-documented that religiosity and spirituality improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes.³ So what can we learn from people of faith about what works to improve emotional health? This study addresses this research gap.

Focusing on character strengths and skills, this study examines the differences in wellbeing and attitudes towards mental health between people of faith and no faith in the UK. Through a nationally representative survey and in-depth interviews, it explores the experiences of the UK's two largest religious groups (Christians and Muslims) and those without religious affiliation on a broad range of wellbeing measures, including life satisfaction, worry and anxiety, low mood and depression, loneliness, and attitudes to mental health.

The report finds that simply having a faith identity, a sense of believing and belonging, is more closely linked to wellbeing than regular participation in communal worship. This study suggests that being anchored in a broader spiritual narrative and identity offers more substantial emotional benefits than ritual practice alone. Crucially, the report goes beyond surface-level wellbeing scores to examine how faith shapes emotional skills such as resilience, acceptance, self-efficacy, and gratitude. These are not abstract traits; interviews show that believers actively use faith narratives to process difficulty and recover emotional balance. Rather than simply stating what people believe, the research explores how they use those beliefs, especially in moments of stress, to restore clarity, calm, and control.

Among all religious groups surveyed, Muslims consistently reported the highest levels of life satisfaction, optimism about the future, and confidence in handling life's challenges. They were also more likely than Christians to say they had someone, which could be God, that they could trust completely. The report links these findings to theological ideas within Islam around divine testing, growth through hardship, and the emotional regulation offered by prayer. For instance, Muslim participants described sadness as a kind of divine detox — a meaningful reframe that turns negative emotions into a spiritual process. These reframings were consistent across interviews: suffering as a test, emotions as necessary, and hardship as purposeful and temporary.

1 Gallup, "Faith and Wellness Study 2012-2022", <https://www.faithandmedia.com/research/gallup>

2 Until the rise of Positive Psychology in 1999, psychology was dominated by the disease model, which focused on the problems people faced, what was wrong with their lives, and how it contributed to their anxiety and lack of emotional wellbeing. See Seligman, M. "Flourish: A New understanding of happiness and wellbeing and how to achieve them" (New York: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011).

3 Gallup, "Faith and Wellness Study 2012-2022".

Key Findings

Faith boosts life-satisfaction

People of faith reported higher life satisfaction than those without. Faith identity (believing and belonging) correlates more strongly with wellbeing than regular participation in communal worship, which offers only marginal additional benefit.

Muslims emerged as the group most likely to feel a sense of harmony (77%) and acceptance (80%) in life. Both Muslims and Christians reported far fewer regrets (43% and 41%) than the non-religious (26%). They also placed more value on community: 77% of Muslims and 76% of Christians said talking to others is important, compared to just 68% of non-religious respondents.

Persons of faith reported less worry and more resilience

Muslims and Christians were markedly less anxious than non-religious respondents and more confident in managing life's challenges. 43% of Muslims and 49% of Christians versus 37% of those without faith were less likely to feel overwhelmed by time pressures, and showed less generalised anxiety. People of faith also felt more equipped to cope with life's difficulties: 66% of Muslims and 48% of Christians said they could handle whatever life brings, compared to just 36% of those with no faith. The difference between faith and non-faith groups in subjective measures of worry and anxiety was marginally more pronounced for Muslims and Christians participating in regular communal worship compared with those who attended collective worship less than once a month.

Faith guards against depression and pessimism

Muslims and Christians (both 78%) were more positive in their outlooks on life in difficult times compared to those without faith (69%), and more optimistic about the future (68% of Muslims and 58% of Christians compared to 47% of those without faith). 84% of Christians and 79% of Muslims also reported accepting that life's hardships will always pass compared to 77% of those without faith. In contrast, those without faith reported more sadness (38% compared to 34% of Muslims and 30% of Christians), low energy and motivation (64% compared to 58% of Christians and 55% of Muslims), and despair (34% compared to 32% of Muslims and 27% of Christians). This effect was less pronounced among Christians and Muslims who regularly took part in communal worship.

Faith communities buffer against loneliness

People of faith experienced more togetherness (38% of Muslims and 35% of Christians, compared to 23% of those without a faith) and meaningful contact with others (43% of Christians and 38% of Muslims compared to 31% of those without faith). While 45% of Christians and 43% of Muslims also reported frequent contact with people who care

about them compared to 38% of those without faith. Engagement in regular communal worship marginally enhanced this effect.

Faith creates a stronger sense of personal agency and control

81% of Muslims and 78% of Christians said they felt in control of their mental health, compared to 68% of non-believers. They were also more likely to advocate the need for greater resilience to handle hardship in life compared to those without faith (85% of Muslims and 82% of Christians compared to 70% of those without faith), and had greater confidence in themselves to meet demands in life (66% of Muslims and 48% of Christians compared to 36% of those without faith). This self-efficacy did not diminish reliance on social networks, but seemed to allow individuals to draw support from social relationships that empowered personal agency rather than increased passive dependency.

Women experience more worry and frequent low moods than men

Women were consistently more likely to report worry, sadness, and emotional fatigue. More than half of women (54%) said they often feel overwhelmed, compared to just 36% of men. They also reported higher levels of sadness (36% compared to 33% of men), low energy (65% versus 54%), and despair (33% versus 29%). Men, by contrast, were more confident in their ability to handle problems and were less prone to anxiety (37% of men agreed they do not tend to worry about things compared to 23% of women).

Anxiety and loneliness were highest in younger populations

Young people, especially those aged 18-24, showed the highest levels of anxiety and loneliness. 62% of 18-24s said they feel overwhelmed by worry (compared to just 22% of 65+), and had low confidence in their ability to solve their problems. Along with 25-34 year olds, 18-24s were also most likely to worry about future tasks (59% of 25-34s and 58% of 18-24s compared to 26% of 65+), and to worry when feeling under pressure (71% of 25-34s and 70% of 18-24s compared to 50% of 65+). Younger populations reported experiencing more loneliness. 17% of 18-24 year olds compared to 8% of respondents aged 65+ reported to frequently experience a lack of companionship. 18-24s were also more likely to experience a sense of loneliness (19% compared to 11% of respondents aged 65+), and feeling they have no one to turn to (13% compared to 5% of 65+). This paints a worrying picture of isolation and mental distress among Generation Z.

Wellbeing highest in Northern Ireland

Respondents from Northern Ireland reported the highest levels of harmony in life - 70% felt their life to be balanced compared to 61% of respondents from London. They also reported higher acceptance of life's conditions (75% compared to the lowest from the East Midlands and Yorkshire Humberside at 63%) and the fewest regrets (40% compared to the lowest from the East Midlands at 31%). Northern Ireland respondents showed the strongest preference for their physical environment - 90% compared to the lowest from London at 74%. They showed the highest positivity in life (83% compared to the lowest from Yorkshire/Humberside at 65%) and optimism (62% compared to the lowest from the East Midlands and the East at 48%). 86% of respondents from Northern Ireland accepted that difficult times will always pass compared to the lowest figures from the East at 75%. They were also the most likely to frequently experience a sense of togetherness with those around them (36%), have meaningful social interactions (52%), and contact with those who care about them (59%).

Introduction

The UK is experiencing a mental health crisis. The Big Mental Health Report 2024, commissioned by Mind, claims that “the scale and severity of mental health need is spiralling,” and that without urgent action, “things will get worse, [which] would be a catastrophe for people and their communities.”⁴ The report claims that 1 in 4 UK residents will experience mental health problems at some point each year, that loneliness is increasing among adults, and that adults and young people say their wellbeing is declining.⁵

Faith and spirituality often lead to better health and wellbeing outcomes. A growing body of academic research shows that religiosity is associated with higher levels of optimism, self-esteem, hope and coping with adversity, and lower levels of depression and anxiety.⁶ While religion has been accused of creating guilt, depressive thoughts, and encouraging visions that could lead to psychosis, these claims lack adequate evidence.⁷ Instead, greater religiosity (particularly when this includes regular worship attendance) is associated with better mental health and wellbeing, including reduced loneliness and increased meaningful social support.⁸ Faith can provide consolation, strength and perspective in life. It can touch and imbue the kaleidoscope of human experience with meaning and purpose. For some, faith can provide a sense of safety and wholeness.

Although the link between faith and wellbeing is clear, how emotional wellbeing experiences differ between faith and non-faith groups in the UK remains less understood. What exactly are faith groups doing that benefits them? One of the best ways to investigate this question is by examining how their processes differ from those employed by non-faith groups, and this report focuses precisely on that.

This study examines how religion influences experiences of wellbeing and attitudes towards mental health by comparing the UK's two largest religious groups, Christians and Muslims, to those without faith. The report is divided into five sections aligned with the survey themes. In each section, the data analysis is presented based on differences in faith, gender, and age. Qualitative data from interviews is embedded throughout each section to provide additional context for the findings.

4 Mind, “*The Big Mental Health Report 2024*,” <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/vbbdclpi/the-big-mental-health-report-2024-mind.pdf>, p.4.

5 Mind, “*The Big Mental Health Report 2024*”, p. 14.

6 Gallup, “*Faith and Wellness Study 2012-2022*”, <https://www.faithandmedia.com/research/gallup>

7 Loewenthal, K. M., “*Religion, Culture and Mental Health*” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

8 Ozan Aksoy, David Bann, Meg E Fluharty, and Alita Nandi., “*Religiosity and Mental Wellbeing Among Members of Majority and Minority Religions: Findings from Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study*” in *American Journal of Epidemiology*, (1) v.191 (2021), pp. 20-30, here p.20.

The project adopts a strength-based approach, exploring the skills and strengths that people of faith use to help them develop and maintain better wellbeing than those without faith. While wellbeing is influenced by various intersecting factors, such as the context in which it is experienced, regional and ethnic cultures, community structures, and public infrastructure, this research focuses on respondents' subjective assessments of their wellbeing to understand how faith-based attributes might contribute to improved emotional health. Through surveys and interviews, it aims to enhance our knowledge of why, how, and to what extent religion impacts wellbeing in the UK.

Methodology

The term “wellbeing” is interpreted broadly in this project to include a range of experiences related to emotional health. The study examined five key areas of wellbeing:

- **Satisfaction with life:** perceptions of harmony and contentment in life, and how this shapes and is shaped by social relationships.⁹
- **Worry and anxiety:** depth and frequency of worry and social support, and perceptions of personal capacity to manage life's difficulties.
- **Low mood and depression:** depth and frequency of negative thought processes about ourselves, and levels of optimism and positivity.
- **Loneliness:** depth and frequency of meaningful social interactions, and perceptions of their importance.
- **Attitudes to mental health:** how people make sense of the causes of mental health difficulties and their management.

Survey

A nationally representative sample of 2,068 UK adults were surveyed online by Whitestone Insight, a member of the British Polling Council, between the 2nd and 3rd of April 2025. The sample comprised Christians, Muslims, and those without faith. Christianity and Islam were chosen because they are the largest and second largest religions in the UK respectively and, due to the number of adherents, have greater ease accessing places of worship. This was vital to allow us to explore the potential effects of communal worship on wellbeing management. This was measured by asking participants whether they attended communal worship at least once a month.

⁹ This scale was modelled on the Satisfaction in Life Scale by Ed Diener, Robert A Emmons, Randy J. Larson and Sharon Griffin as noted in the 1985 article in the *Journal of Personality Assessment*.

The following survey questions were asked to participants. Responses to each statement were recorded using a five-point scale or respondents were given a binary choice.

1. Satisfaction with life

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Strongly agree to strongly disagree

- Most aspects of my life feel balanced.
- I am happy to accept my situation in life.
- I like my physical surroundings.
- If I could live life over again, I would change almost nothing.
- When I am worried or distressed, I generally prefer to be alone.
- Talking to others usually helps me find solutions to my problems.
- I usually seek others' help when I am upset.

2. Worry and anxiety

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not?

- If I don't have time to do everything, I don't usually worry.
- My worries often overwhelm me.
- I do not tend to worry about things.
- As soon as I finish one task, I start to worry about everything else I have to do.
- When I am under pressure, I tend to worry a lot.
- I am confident that no challenge in my life will be more than I can handle.
- I am usually the one who can sort out my problems.
- I have someone (including God or someone else) whom I trust to be there for me.

3. Low mood and depressive thoughts

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not?

- I experience feelings of sadness most days.
- I can find positives in my life even when it feels difficult.
- I feel optimistic about the future.
- I accept that life will sometimes be hard, but times of sadness always pass.
- I often experience bouts of low energy and motivation.
- I often feel despair about my life.
- I can feel grateful for aspects of my life, even when life feels hard.

4. Loneliness

How often do you feel...?

Most of the time to never

- Lacking in companionship.
- Alone.
- A sense of togetherness with people around you.
- There is no one to turn to.
- You have meaningful contact with others.
- You have contact with people who care for you and understand you.
- Prefer to work things out on your own.
- It's important for you to feel well-supported by those around you.

5. Attitudes to mental health

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Strongly agree to strongly disagree

- Everyone experiences mental health challenges at some point in their life.
- My mental health is largely within my control.
- When I've experienced mental health difficulties, it was because life was hard.
- People need to be more resilient in life because hard times are inevitable.
- The underlying causes of mental health problems are not always biological or social - they can be spiritual.

Interviews

10 respondents of faith were interviewed to add insights to the survey data. The semi-structured interview questions were divided into two sections. Part one explored how faith shapes responses to difficult times in life, cultivates strengths and virtues to support wellbeing, informs understanding of the relationship between self-care and care for others, and provides meaningful social networks. Part two asked for respondents' thoughts on key survey findings.¹⁰

Gender	Age	Religion
M	18-24	Eastern Orthodox Christian
F	45-54	Sunni Muslim
F	18-24	Anglican Christian
F	25-34	Sunni Muslim
F	25-34	Sunni Muslim
M	18-24	Pentecostal Christian
M	35-44	Sunni Muslim
F	35-44	Shia Muslim
F	45-54	Anglican Christian
Anonymous		

¹⁰ See Appendix for full interview questions

Satisfaction with life

Faith and non-faith groups

Christians and Muslims reported higher life satisfaction than those without faith across all measures, and this was slightly increased among those attending regular communal worship. Key factors potentially explaining this finding were people of faith's acceptance and reframing of life events as part of God's benevolent plan for their lives.

Muslims reported the highest sense of harmony (77%) and acceptance in life (80%), compared to persons of no faith (60% for both measures). People of faith reported the fewest regrets (43% of Muslims and 41% of Christians, compared to 26% of those without faith would change almost nothing if they could live life over again). 77% of Muslims and 76% of Christians saw value in talking to others compared to 68% of those without faith, and seeking others' help when distressed (57% of Muslims and 45% of Christians compared to 36% of those without faith).

Muslim and Christian responses diverged on a few indicators. The differences were greatest in preferences for seeking help from others (12% difference) and acceptance of life conditions (6% difference). Responses were most similar on the value of talking to others when distressed (1% difference), their sense of harmony in life (4% difference), and their degree of regret in life (2% difference).

Attending regular communal worship at least once a month increased life satisfaction, but only marginally. This difference was more pronounced between Christians engaged in regular communal worship than for Muslims. Regular worship increased a sense of balance in life (Christians by 5% and Muslims by 2%), acceptance in life (Christians by 6% and Muslims by 2%), and was associated with an increased absence of regret (Christians by 7% and Muslims 2%).

Faith was associated with a greater perception of balance in life, acceptance of life conditions, and fewer regrets. This suggests that religious affiliation can improve life satisfaction.

Our interview findings indicate that the ability to reframe life events in meaningful and purposeful ways is essential for greater life satisfaction. Accepting life's impermanence is a key part of this reframing. It allows us to see difficult times as temporary, passing events, which helps prevent feelings of hopelessness and despair. Recognising and harnessing narratives of the 'changing seasons' of life can promote a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, enabling us to find more harmony in life and endure hardships with calmness, as a Sunni Muslim explains:

"In the Quran as well is that through hardship comes ease . . . there is light at the end of the tunnel and there will be ease at the end of it. Nothing is permanent. The hardship that you suffer is not permanent just like the good times [which] are not going to last forever either."
(35-44, Male, Sunni Muslim)

Accepting life's impermanence is a powerful way to handle uncertainty and keep a sense of balance in life. Incorporating life events into the broader narrative of our lives reduces psychological resistance to life, allowing us to focus on the actual event rather than our dissatisfaction that it occurred. Acceptance, in its broadest sense, is an empowering practice utilised by people of faith. A Shia Muslim respondent explains the benefits of this practice:

"I think I respond to hard times with a sense of acceptance. So what that means is there doesn't tend to be kind of this resistance with it . . . there is a part of me that recognises that trying to meet hard times with a sense of resistance will increase the discomfort around it . . . it's about recognising that ebb and flow is a part of life. We're not meant to feel 100% all the time. And I think religion is inherently part of that acceptance because from a young age I think I've recognized that there's just this trust that things will be dynamic and fluid and changing but ultimately will find a balance again." (35-44, Female, Shia Muslim)

Faith enhances the effects of acceptance by providing the tools to reframe distressing situations as an integral part of God's plan for our lives. Believing that the impermanence of this world is connected to God's compassionate plan for us can serve as a significant source of strength and hope, as this Sunni Muslim respondent explains:

"It's all down to that core belief that whatever has happened, I'm being gifted with something far better . . . whatever I had, wasn't sufficient for the next phase of my life and the next part of my journey . . . And this makes me stronger." (45-54, Female, Sunni Muslim)

Putting the events of our lives in the context of God's love for us also means recognising that all emotions, even those we find hardest, serve a divine purpose. This higher purpose encourages us to view all life events as chances to deepen our faith and spirituality. Here, a Sunni Muslim respondent explains her approach to difficult emotions and the divine purpose she feels they serve:

"Sadness . . . shouldn't be viewed as a negative emotion. It's a way of . . . detoxifying your body . . . there were prophets who went through really hard times . . . You should be allowed to let out the pain . . . that emotion was put in you so you would be able to go through that process. The sadness shouldn't be seen negatively: it's a mental detox." (45-54, Female, Sunni Muslim)

For Muslim participants, beliefs in God's plan for our lives were also linked to the idea that suffering is a test and that God's intention is to bless individuals generously for their perseverance in faith. Here, a Sunni Muslim respondent explains how this idea strengthens her in difficult times:

"So I believe it's a test. If I can pass the test, I'll get something great later . . . [I try to be] patient and . . . trust in God's plan and [show] gratitude, even in hardship. I think this quality helps me to stay calm and focused, rather than overwhelmed. I believe that difficulties become opportunities to deepen my resilience . . . grow spiritually and develop inner strength." (25-34, Female, Sunni Muslim)

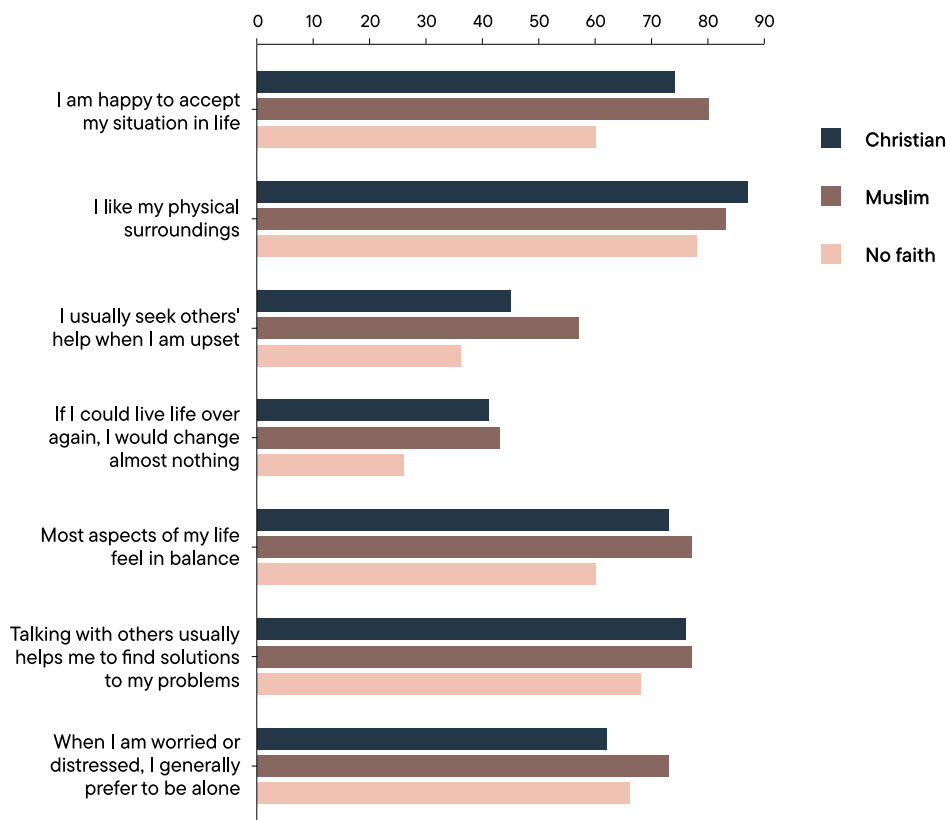
Harmony and balance in life were also achieved by drawing on narratives from the collective human history revealed in religious texts. Respondents explained that these accounts ‘normalised’ their experiences of hardship, which inspired and encouraged them to accept, work through, and grow in virtue through their difficulties, just as many religious figures before them did, as this respondent explains:

“... the holy prophet had to face a lot more hardships than I as an average person ... he had emotions too and he was steadfast with prayer with patience ... he felt all those emotions too, but he managed it by acknowledging what's happened, by praying to God, and by continuing the normal life ... then with prayer and strength, you too continue a normal life. It seems it's difficult, but then you notice that day by day things do get better, and then sometimes by God's grace things do get better.” (Anonymous)

Interview data suggests that greater life satisfaction among people of faith may be linked to reframing life's impermanence and unpredictability as part of God's benevolent plan. Religious frameworks provide ways to incorporate suffering into our understanding and experience of life. This enables suffering to be seen as an inherent aspect of the human condition rather than as an anomaly. Practically, this encourages a sense of acceptance, reducing distress by freeing mental resources to focus on the actual circumstances rather than on wishing they had never happened.

One of faith's key strengths is its ability to foster a sense of harmony in life, acceptance, and fewer regrets—all of which are interconnected qualities that can enhance life satisfaction.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with these statements? [% NET AGREE by FAITH]



Differences between men and women

Men and women exhibited few differences in life satisfaction. The most notable distinction was in their willingness to seek support from others during difficult times. 74% of women compared to 69% of men agreed that talking to others generally helps them find solutions to their problems. Women were also more likely to seek help from others when upset (47% of women compared to 36% of men).

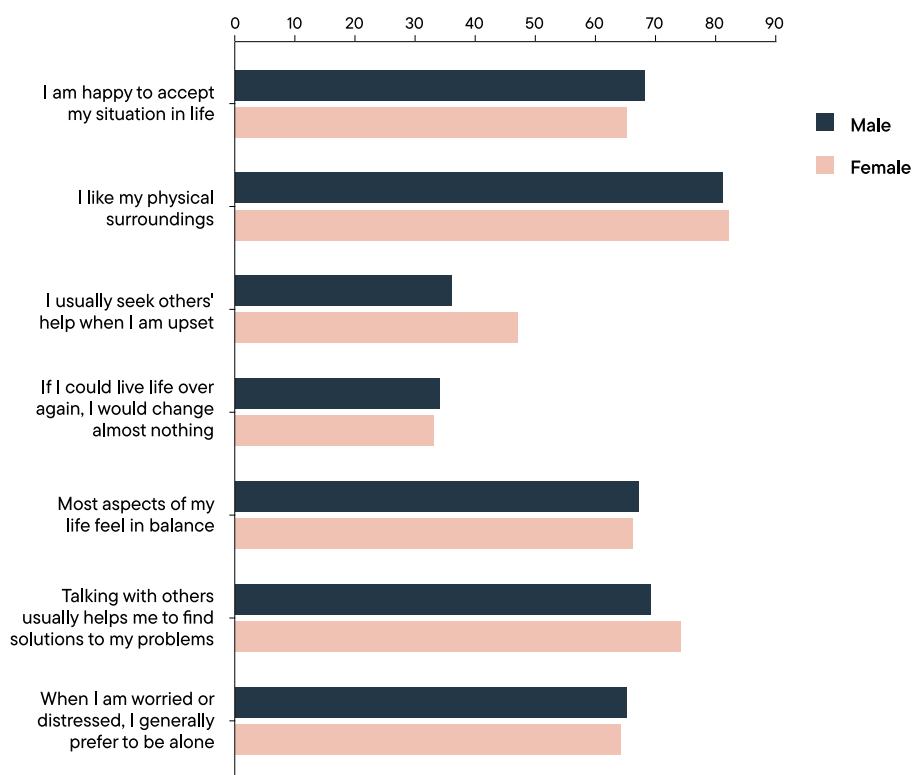
This suggests that women's sense of life satisfaction, whilst similar to men's, is derived in a somewhat different way through being embedded in mutually supportive social networks.

A Shia Muslim woman spoke to how she believes Islam meets the need for community for women through its often misunderstood practice of sex segregated spaces:

"I think what's so helpful within religion, which I think is so stigmatised within Islam, is this idea that there's a separation of spaces for men and women. But I found there's something so healthy and important and containing and safe about having those spaces. So just knowing that there is just that space to connect safely with other women who have kind of this containment to give and are willing to give. It has made such a difference in the trajectory of my life . . . whether that's through postpartum experiences, going through life transitions, or just having a space to talk about how we balance things like religion and career, and our working identities, and being mothers . . . There's something around connecting with each other and being vulnerable that allows us to be authentic." (35-44, Female, Shia Muslim)

Reciprocity is a crucial marker and strength of faith-based relationships. The relationships described here are not a means to an end but an opportunity for genuine vulnerability, involving mutual giving and receiving of support, positive regard, and encouragement. The shared connection through common values and beliefs seems to provide a solid, trusted, and intimate foundation for a relationship characterised by mutual dependency and support. Our data suggests this is more significant to women than men.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with these statements? [% NET AGREE by GENDER]



Age differences

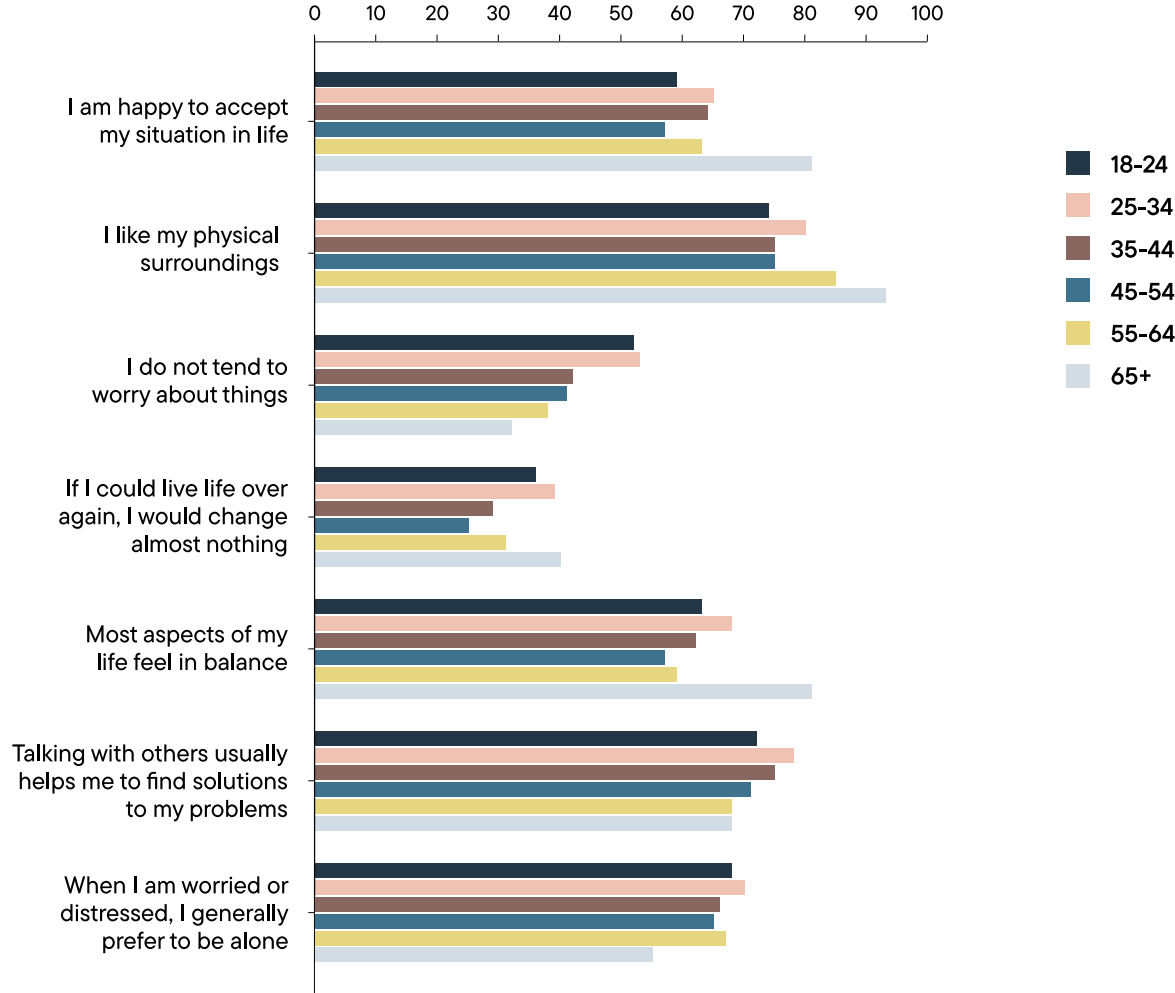
Life satisfaction increased with age, with people aged 65 and over reporting the highest levels of satisfaction across all measures. Although they were the least likely to value solitude in distress (55% compared to 70% of respondents aged 25-34), their desire for company in difficult times did not seem driven by a need for someone to solve their problems: only 68% of 65+ respondents compared to 78% of those aged 25-34 believed that talking to others would help them resolve their problems, and 32% of 65+ respondents compared to 52% of those aged 18-24 reported to seek others' help when distressed.

This highlights differences between age groups in their motivations for social interactions. Younger people are more likely to seek company when distressed to solve problems, while older populations tend to seek comfort.

Older populations might rely less on social interactions to resolve their distress because they tend to have greater confidence in their internal resources to cope with whatever life presents. This could, in turn, enable them to simply enjoy and savour interactions. Far from diminishing the value they find in relationships, this perspective may shift the focus of social exchanges towards enjoyment rather than necessity.

Our findings suggest that there's value in approaching relationships with detachment and independence. This method allows us to genuinely understand and respond to what others might need from us - to enjoy giving as much as receiving. Building relationships based on mutual trust and shared pleasure is a skill that greatly improves our emotional wellbeing.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with these statements? [% NET AGREE by AGE]



Worry and anxiety

Faith and non-faith groups

People of faith experienced less worry and anxiety than those without faith. Our findings suggest that this might be due to faith's ability to boost a sense of self-efficacy, order and stability in life through resources such as prayer, which are linked to higher life satisfaction.

49% of Christians and 43% of Muslims reported not worrying when they felt they had insufficient time to complete tasks, compared to 37% of those without faith. They also experienced less general anxiety (38% of Muslims and 33% of Christians compared to 26% of those without faith). 66% of Muslims and 48% of Christians had confidence in themselves to meet any demands in life compared to 36% of those without faith, and felt more assured they had a trusted figure in their life on whom they could always rely on (85% of Muslims and 76% of Christians compared to 54% of those without faith).

These effects were marginally higher among Muslims and Christians engaged in regular communal worship. Among Christians, worrying and becoming overwhelmed under pressure were reduced (by 4% and 5% respectively). Tendencies to worry less were increased by 8%, along with confidence that no challenge in life will be too great by 8%, confidence in their ability to manage life's problems by 6%, and their trust they have someone to rely on in life by 11%.

There were significant differences in responses between Christians and Muslims on some measures. They differed most in their confidence in handling any situation life brings (66% of Muslims compared to 48% of Christians) and having a trusted someone in life (85% of Muslims compared to 76% of Christians). On both questions, Muslims showed significantly higher confidence than Christians. Their responses were most similar in their confidence to sort out their problems (68% of Muslims compared to 66% of Christians) and their degree of worry when under pressure (61% of Christians compared to 57% of Muslims).

In contrast, those without faith reported higher levels of anxiety and worry. 49% of those without faith reported being frequently overwhelmed by worry compared to 47% of Muslims and 39% of Christians, and to worry about the next task as soon as one is complete (51% of respondents without faith compared to 48% of Muslims and 42% of Christians). People of no faith (69%) were more likely to worry more when under pressure than Christians (61%) and Muslims (57%).

Religiosity was linked to lower worry and anxiety. This may relate to a stronger sense of self-efficacy; confidence in one's ability to handle any situation. In faith, this feeling of control is reinforced by the belief that God governs when our personal resources fall short of life's demands. This restores a sense of order and predictability that is crucial for our wellbeing. During uncertain times, we tend to feel stronger, more capable, and resilient.

Our interview findings indicate that prayer serves as a resource to help reduce worry and anxiety. Prayer enabled respondents to see themselves and their difficulties with greater clarity, allowing them to respond rather than react to situations. The ability to respond to situations is key to effective decision-making and a sense of self-efficacy, as a Sunni Muslim respondent explains:

“The first thing I did was just turn towards my faith and kind of pray to God to seek guidance and protection . . . I think faith does kind of guide you . . . helps you to put things in perspective . . . to see things more clearly and be less reactive, and I remember within days of losing my job, the way I rationalised it was to say, actually, what’s the worst that could have happened?” (35-44, Male, Sunni Muslim)

An Anglican Christian respondent describes how prayer instills a sense of calm and trust that balance in life will be restored:

“So it’s just praying that that will come to pass for whatever He wants in my life and just kind of remembering if bad things do happen, that it will turn out okay . . . trusting God will provide and I don’t have to do everything myself . . . lots of things happened several months ago, and now I see how it’s all come out fine, and that God did have a plan and that His plan was better than maybe the one I thought He had for me.” (18-24, Female, Anglican Christian)

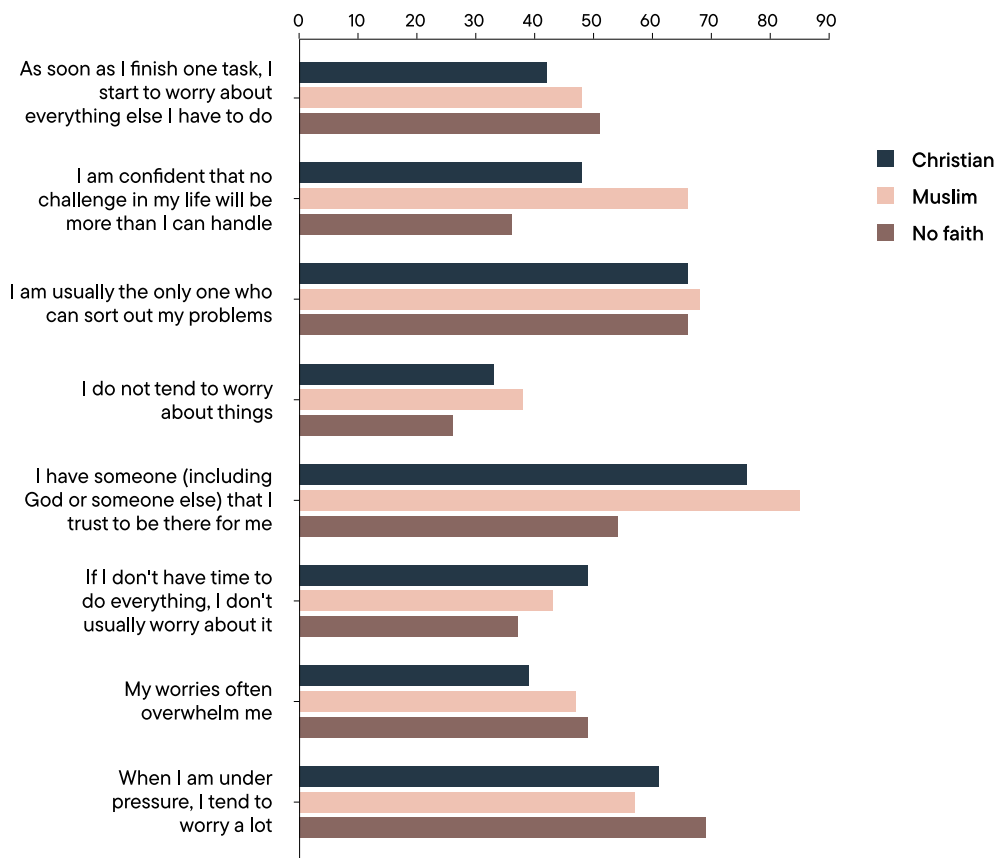
Respondents described different forms of prayer. The act of praying is not always a profound, transcendent experience – sometimes it can be very ordinary and unreflective. Another Anglican Christian respondent described prayer as her yoga: *“I go in and I just know when I come out that I feel better.” (45-54, Female, Anglican).*

Faith leaders can also propose innovative, holistic approaches to cope with anxiety outside traditional religious practices. When functioning optimally, faith considers the wellbeing of the whole person as a combination of body, mind, and spirit. An Eastern Orthodox Christian respondent explains his priest’s holistic approach to life’s difficulties:

“We have moments of rage or strong melancholy or anxiety and a lot of time my priest in particular he tells me, if you’re cloistered in your room all day reading the Bible, theology, or praying, he says it’s very ill-advised. He tells me to go outside and get sunlight and meet up with all of my friends . . . they do advise prayer, and they want you to pray over these things, but they also want you to socialise a lot, I’ve noticed.” (18-24, Male, Eastern Orthodox Christian)

Our results suggest that faith lessens anxiety by enhancing a sense of self-efficacy and perceptions of order and stability in life through resources such as prayer. This is connected to our finding that faith boosts life satisfaction. Worrying less and feeling more content with life support each other; the less I worry, the more at peace I feel with life, and vice versa. Both contribute to a greater sense of safety, security, and stability. The safer we feel, the more confidence we have in our own resources to handle life’s challenges and the less anxious we feel.

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not? [% DOES APPLY by FAITH]



Differences between men and women

Women worried more and experienced more anxiety than men. Men's agreement with statements was higher on all but one positive measure, while women's agreement was higher on negative measures.

Men reported to worry less if they don't have time to do everything (47% compared to 39% of women) and experienced less generalised anxiety (37% compared to 23% of women). 46% of men expressed confidence in their ability to manage life compared to 39% of women. Men also showed greater confidence in their ability to sort out their problems (66% compared to 64% of women).

In contrast, women reported to more frequently feel overwhelmed (54% compared to 36% of men) and to worry about the next task as soon as one is finished (54% compared to 38% of men). However, 71% of women compared to 61% of men felt they had someone on whom they could rely on.

Men and women differed most significantly in tendencies to worry under pressure (20% difference between women at 74% and men at 54%) and were most aligned in their confidence to sort out their problems (2% difference between men at 66% and women at 64%).

Women exhibited higher levels of worry and anxiety than men, along with less confidence in their personal resources to handle life's challenges. However, they were more likely than men to have trusted relationships to support them through life's difficulties. Our data suggests that this is more vital for women's wellbeing than for men's; women's sense of life satisfaction appears more strongly linked to supportive social relationships.¹¹

An Anglican Christian respondent describes the support she receives from faith relationships with women, and how this helps her through periods of anxiety:

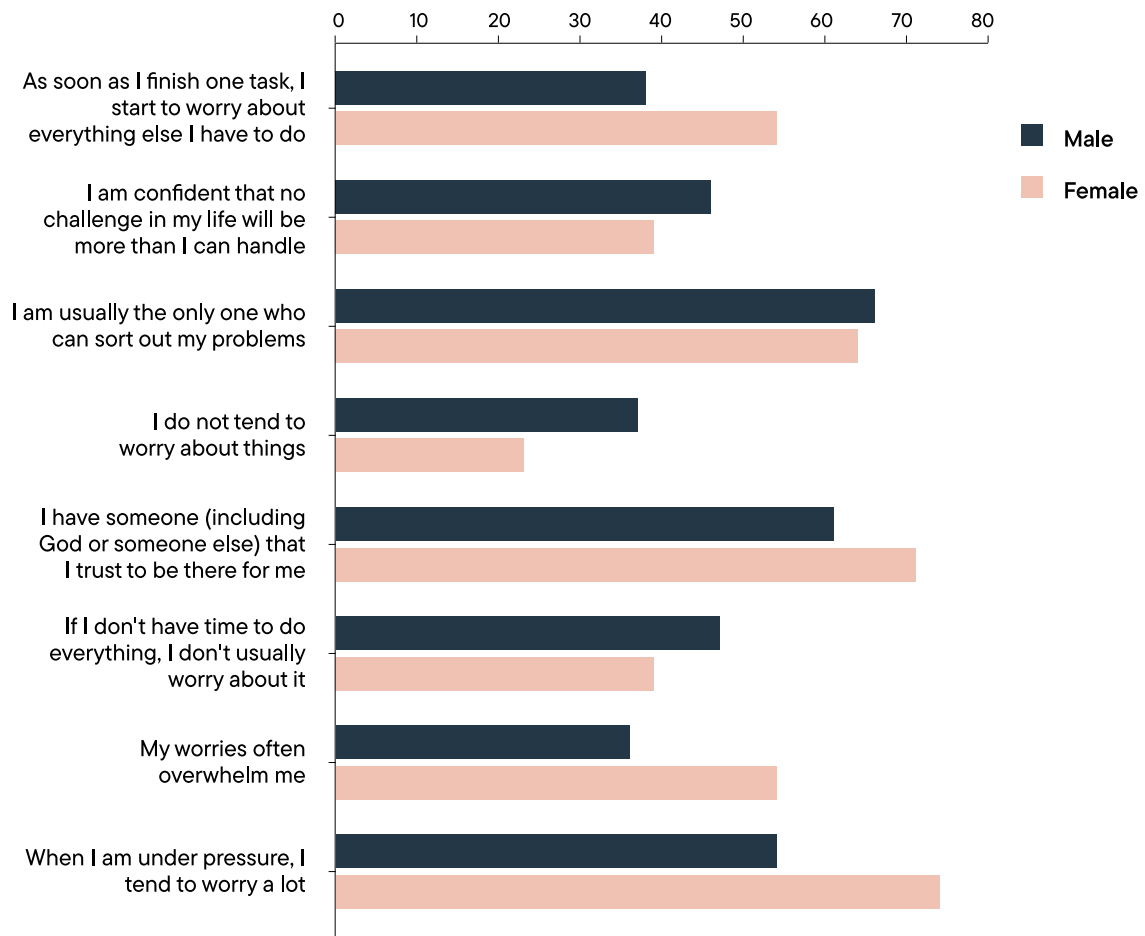
"I know a lot of my female Christian friends . . . we all go through phases just due to hormones and everything that involves just being a woman . . . We were at a church group yesterday that we go to every week. I'm on a women's only table. They have a men's table, and a mixed table, but we're all on the women's only table. So, it's kind of nice for us to be able to have that space to open up about the anxiety we're feeling. And then we all pray for each other throughout the week about it. And that just makes me feel a bit more at peace knowing that . . . there is power in prayer." (18-24, Female, Anglican Christian)

Faith can improve wellbeing by providing relationships with others in our faith group, but also, as this Sunni Muslim woman explains, by providing resources to help women understand and work through their fears in the knowledge they are seen and understood by God:

"I think women often carry many emotional and social responsibilities, which can lead to increased anxiety. I believe Islam acknowledges the emotional depth of women and offers us spiritual tools for support . . . Faith reminds me that I am of value and that my struggles are seen by God." (25-34, Female, Sunni Muslim)

¹¹ See section, "Satisfaction with Life", p.13

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not? [% DOES APPLY by GENDER]



Age differences

Worry and anxiety declined with age. People aged 65+ showed significantly lower tendencies to worry than those aged 18-24. 61% of respondents aged 65+ reported being unlikely to worry if they don't have enough time to do everything compared to 26% of 18-24s. They were also more likely than 18-24s to feel they do not generally worry about life (41% compared to 24%), and to have greater confidence in their resources to sort out their problems (68% compared to 58%). Conversely, 18-24s were most likely to feel overwhelmed by their worries (62% compared to 22% of 65+ respondents).

A young Pentecostal Christian describes some of the contemporary pressures upon young people, which he believes may explain these findings:

"I feel pressure from wanting to get your life better at an early age. These days, so many young adults just want to have it all at an early age . . . I want to be very rich, I want to have so many cars, and this brings about pressure and can cause some depression, worries and anxiety . . . expectations are high from society, from family, from friends, and from yourself as well . . . sometimes you might not know what to do, and you want to turn to God." (18-24, Male, Pentecostal Christian)

This Eastern Orthodox Christian respondent explains that higher mental health challenges among young people might be motivating the youth revival of faith in the UK:¹²

"I think all religions, including Christianity, appeal to very lost people . . . people out of their comfort zones, people who feel like they're on thin ice, who aren't comfortable in their own skin . . . I think a lot of those men - I don't mean to be disparaging - are lost and I would say sort of unstable. They're very disillusioned with . . . it could be their university, their education, their workplace, it could be their family or life . . . maybe they find the church enchanting and . . . maybe mystical and they see a sense of brotherhood or camaraderie." (18-24, Male, Eastern Orthodox Christian)

Worry and anxiety tend to decrease with age. This aligns with our finding that life satisfaction rises as people get older, with those aged 65+ reporting notably higher levels of life satisfaction than 18-24-year-olds. This may relate to a sense of letting go of concerns typically linked to earlier life stages, such as pursuing 'achievement' and conforming to others' expectations. Feeling more at ease with ourselves and our circumstances are strengths that foster greater positivity and optimism, which in turn help to shield against worry and anxiety.

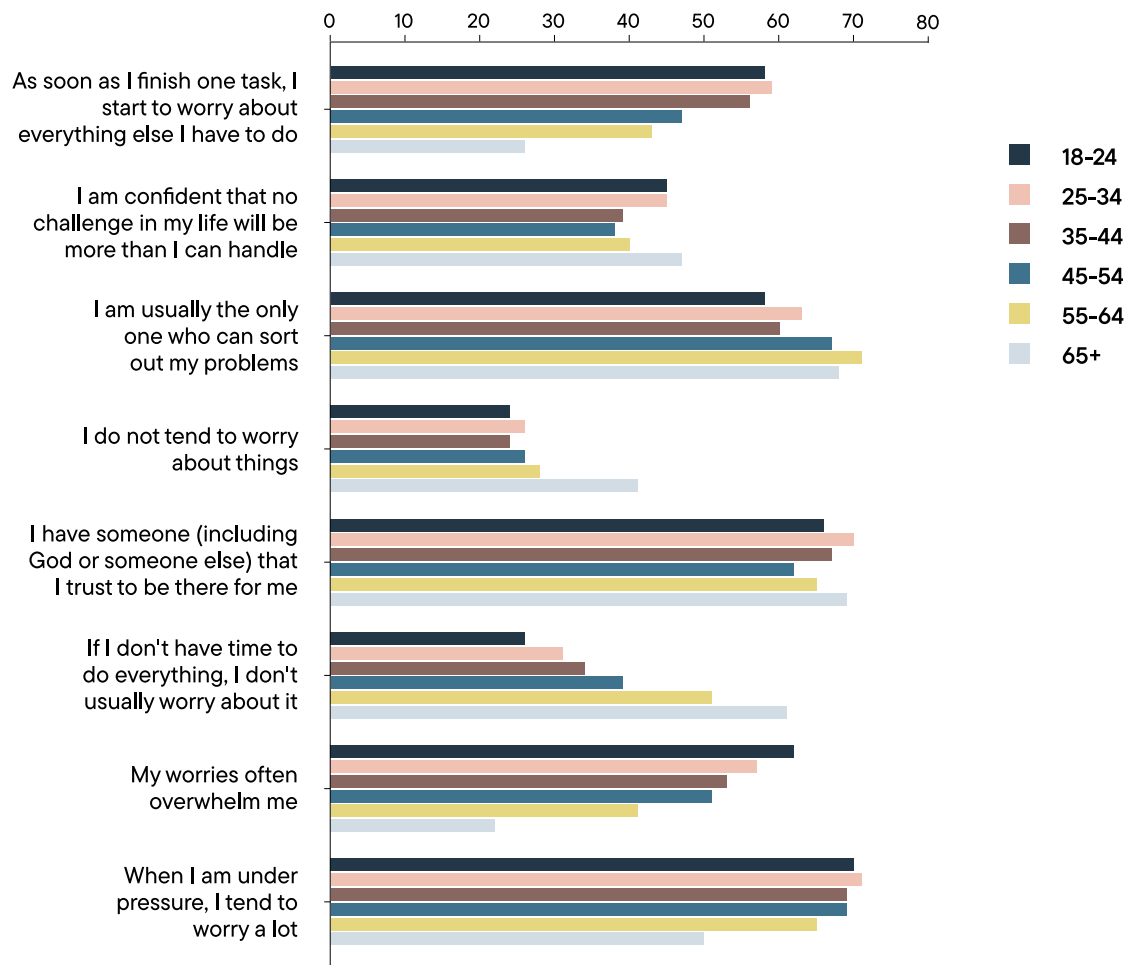
As these respondents explained, it might also indicate the maturing of faith into a deeper sense of spirituality that counters worry and enhances optimism and contentment:

¹² See our website for a blog by Dr Charlotte Littlewood on youth increases in religious affiliation, "Is there a revival of religion amongst the youth?" <https://iifl.org.uk/blogs/is-there-a-revival-of-religion-amongst-the-youth/>

“With age, faith moves away from something on paper and something that you have to do, to something that is all-encompassing and just carries you around.” (45-54, Female, Anglican Christian)

“As Muslims we believe that this life is temporary and death is inevitable . . . if they've got a strong faith . . . they must be thinking they're going to a better place . . . their detachment from the world must be stronger at that age . . . Maybe they've come closer to God and care less about this world and more about their spiritual connection and where they're heading . . . in Islam, death isn't a bad thing. It's not something to fear.” (45-54, Female, Sunni Muslim)

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not? [% DOES APPLY by AGE]



Low mood and depressive thoughts

Faith and non-faith groups

Faith was correlated with reduced experiences of low mood and depression, and higher positivity and optimism. Our findings suggest this may be connected to practices of self-compassion.

Muslims and Christians were consistently more likely to meet challenges with positivity than those without faith. Both faith groups (78% of Muslims and Christians) were more likely to find positives in life compared to those without faith (69%), and to feel optimistic about the future (68% of Muslims and 58% of Christians compared to 47% of those without faith). 84% of Christians and 79% of Muslims compared to 77% of those without faith reported to accept that difficult times in life will always pass.

Engagement in regular communal worship was associated with marginal increases in these figures across most measures, and was more pronounced for Christians than Muslims. Christians who attended church at least once a month showed a greater ability to find positives in life (4% increase), reported more optimism (10% increase), and experienced fewer bouts of low energy and motivation (5% decrease).

In contrast, those without faith (38%) reported being more likely to experience sadness most days compared to Muslims (34%) and Christians (30%), low energy and motivation (64% compared to 58% of Christians and 55% of Muslims), and despair (34% compared to 32% of Muslims and 27% of Christians).

The most notable difference between faith and non-faith responses was in optimism about the future. Muslims reported the highest level of optimism (68%), which was 21% higher than the non-faith group (47%). The greatest similarity in responses between faith and non-faith groups was in their sense of gratitude for life, with only a 6% difference between the non-faith group and the shared score of faith groups. Muslims and Christians were most aligned in their ability to find positives in life (78% for both) and differed most in their optimism about the future (Muslims at 68% and Christians at 58%).

Interview respondents indicated that faith can shield against low mood and depressive thoughts through self-compassion practices. A Sunni Muslim respondent explained that Islam emphasises the importance of self-care:

"I believe that Islam encourages balance and self-care as part of our worship, like taking care of my physical, emotional and spiritual needs allows me to be more present to others and supportive of others." (25-34, Female, Sunni Muslim)

Self-compassion guards against negative thoughts by helping a person face their most painful emotions with kindness and patience rather than judgment. This respondent emphasised that there are many ways to define self-care. For people of faith, this distinction is useful because it allows them to consider self-care in a manner more aligned with religious teachings on the importance of living a life of service, as this Shia Muslim respondent explains:

"I think the distinction here is something around what self-care means to me. So often I'll say to clients, you know, you can think of self-care as you think of the standard things, you know, going to the gym, pedicures, manicures, whatever you need. But that's a very stereotyped idea of self-care. You've got to find what works for you. What's your self-care? How do you feel self-connected?" (35-44, Female, Shia Muslim)

The idea of being 'self-connected' also provides ways to think about self-care that align more closely with religious narratives because it considers the self as a psycho-spiritual whole. From this viewpoint, self-care addresses our psychological and spiritual wellbeing. This shifts our understanding of self-care from merely meeting personal needs to recognising it as a vital part of the spiritual journey, where internal movements towards a deeper, more coherent sense of self in God correspond to an outward effort to benefit others and the wider world. Here, the same respondent expands on her understanding of self-care:

"I think there is something about recognising which practices within religion feel like self-care and maybe also which don't . . . there are the aspects of the community, doing things, activeness, being involved in things. But there's such a big part of religious practice which is about the internal process. So turning inwards, kind of connecting with something at a deeper level. When I think of self-care, for me, those practices serve as a self-care mechanism. They make me feel connected to my sense of self. I think sometimes we think of religious practices as an obligation. And in some ways, they are. I'm so mindful of the fact that I need to recognise for myself which parts of my religion feel like an obligation and which feel like I'm coming home." (35-44, Female, Shia Muslim)

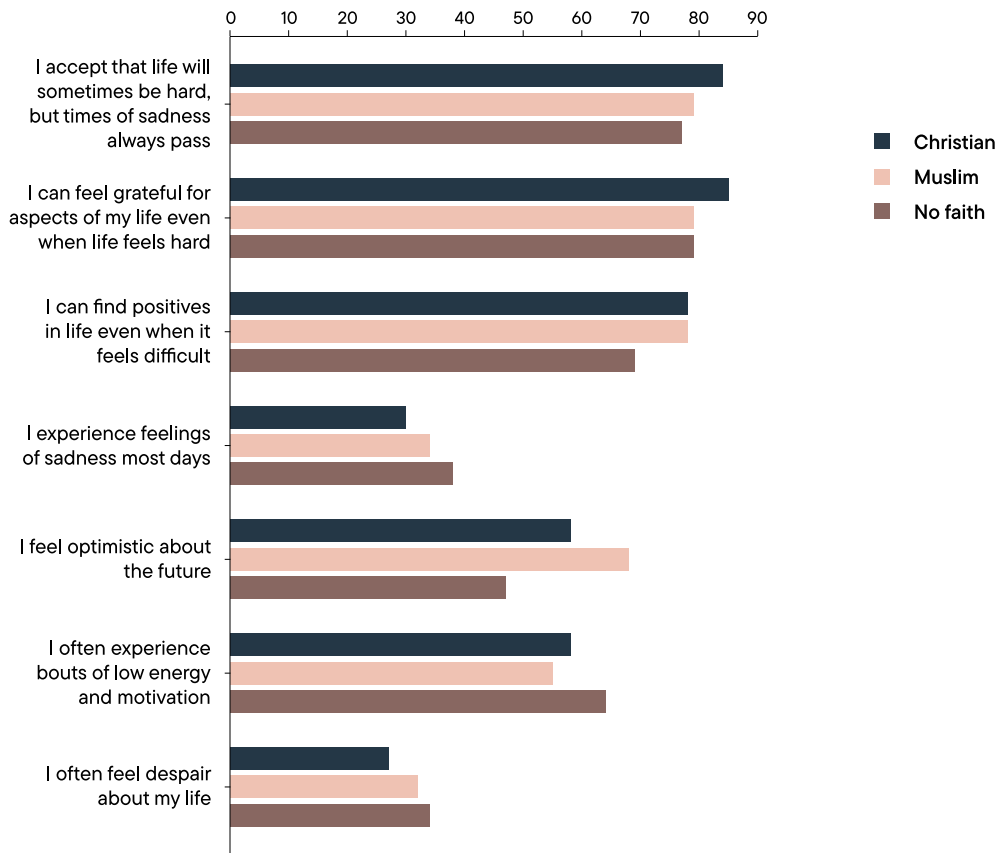
Religion can be a powerful source of consolation in hardship. A young Eastern Orthodox Christian respondent describes healing and supporting people through difficult times as one of its primary missions:

"The church wants to treat patients, so to speak. In Eastern Orthodoxy, there's very much a view that the church is a hospice, like a hospital and that there are sick beds, like where you could say pews or where you sit before confession and...the church very much wants you in her doors to give you medicine. And that medicine could be a confession with the priest. If you're going through hard times, the priest will happily for one hour just talk with you. It can be therapeutic . . . responding to hard times is very much something you shouldn't do in isolation." (18-24, Male, Eastern Orthodox Christian)

Religion may enhance wellbeing because it can both reduce low moods and increase optimism, which may be supported by practices of self-compassion. Cultivating positivity, optimism, and kindness towards oneself and others is an effective defence against negative thought patterns.

This also corresponds with findings of greater life satisfaction and lower anxiety levels among people of faith. Increased life satisfaction guards against anxiety and negative thinking, and the less we worry and the more positive we are, the more fulfillment we find in life.

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not? [% DOES APPLY by FAITH]



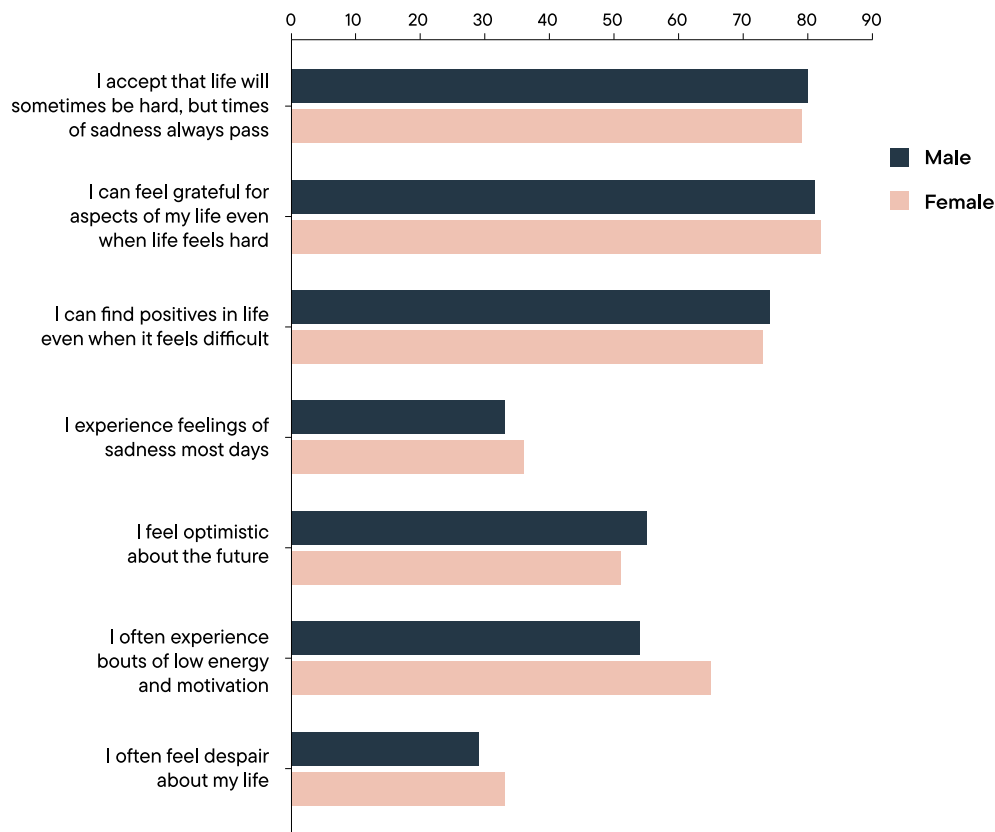
Differences between men and women

Men and women’s experiences of low mood and depression differed, though in most cases, this difference was marginal. Women were more likely to experience feelings of sadness most days (36% compared to 33% of men), experience bouts of low energy and motivation (65% compared to 54% of men) and despair (33% compared to 29% of men). In contrast, 55% of men compared to 51% of women felt optimistic about the future.

Our data suggests that women are more likely than men to worry, feel anxious, and to experience low moods and depression. Crucially, they report less confidence in their capacity to manage life’s difficulties. A Sunni Muslim woman reflects on these findings:

“[Women] worry because they’ve got pressures from society and that society looks down on women crying, for instance, but that’s a natural emotion that was put into us. It should be acceptable . . . When you draw on the stories of the prophets, one grieved for many years for his son who was taken away from him. The advice to pull himself together would be wrong. I’m just a mere mortal. Why can’t I grieve and cry and show my feelings?” (45–54, Female, Sunni Muslim)

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not? [% DOES APPLY by GENDER]



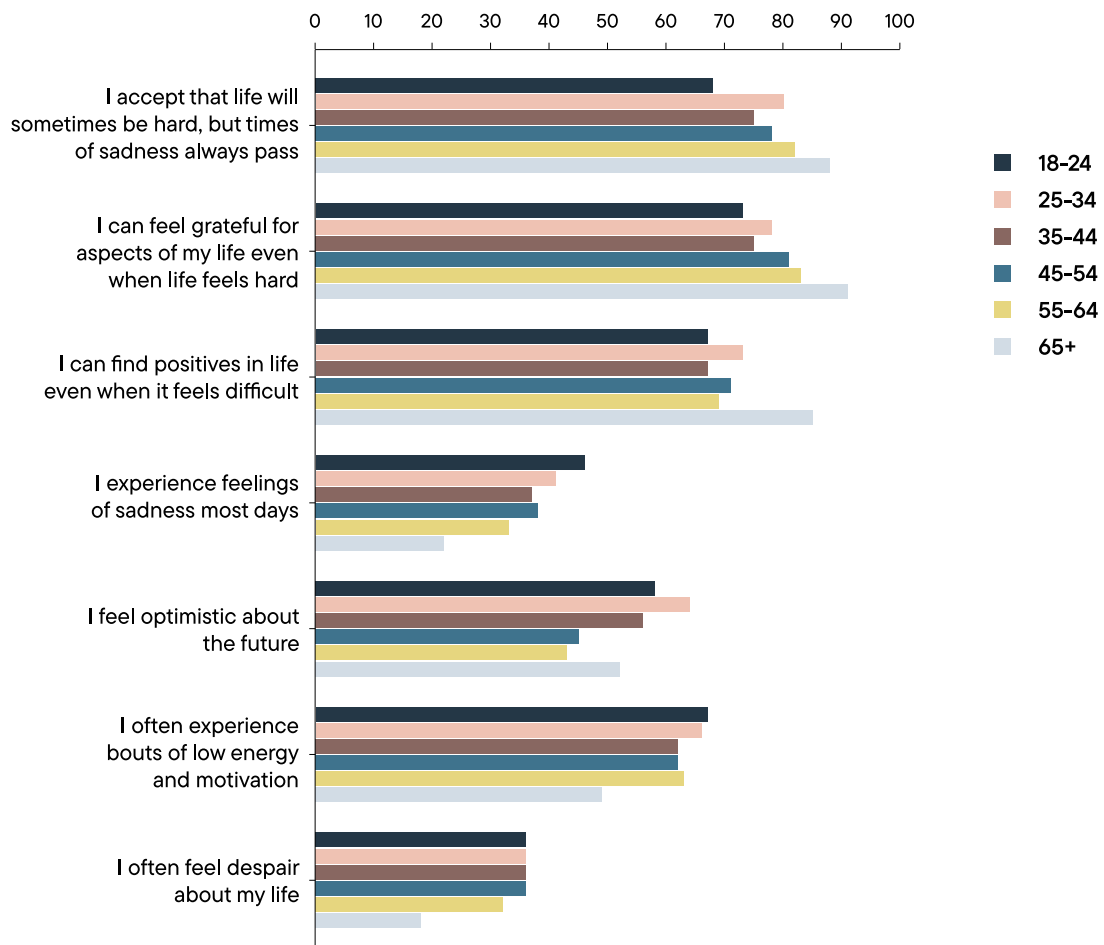
Age differences

Young people reported higher levels of low mood and depression than older respondents. Those aged 18-24 (46%) experienced more sadness than respondents aged 65+ (22%), frequent episodes of low energy and motivation (67% compared to 49% of 65+), and feelings of despair (36% compared to 18% of 65+).

In contrast, people aged 65+ reported a greater ability to find positives in life (85% compared to 67% of 18-24s), acceptance that difficult times always pass (88% compared to 68% of 18-24s), and experienced more gratitude (91% compared to 73% of 18-24s). This indicates that low mood and depression tend to decrease with age.

Higher frequencies of low mood and depression among young people are linked to our findings that 18-24s reported lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of worry and anxiety than older groups. The character strengths of positivity, gratitude, and acceptance, which were more prominent among the 65+ group, seem connected to lower levels of negative thinking. These skills help protect against worry and low mood and support us in cultivating fortitude, courage, and hope to navigate difficult periods in life.

Do each of these statements apply to your life, or not? [% DOES APPLY by AGE]



Loneliness

Faith and non-faith groups

Although differences between faith and non-faith groups were minor or insignificant regarding negative aspects of loneliness – such as feeling isolated, lacking companionship, or having no one to turn to – faith groups stood out in positive social indicators. This may be linked to a sense among people of faith that their faith enables them to forge deeper connections with others, where they feel free to be their true selves.

35% of Christians and 38% of Muslims reported frequent experiences of togetherness compared to 23% of those without faith, and more meaningful contact (43% of Christians and 38% of Muslims, compared to 31% of those without faith). People of faith (45% of Christians and 43% of Muslims) also had more contact with people who care about them compared to those without faith (38%).

While regular attendance at communal worship was not significantly linked to negative indicators, showing that it did not address loneliness as effectively as expected, it was slightly important for positive indicators among Christians and Muslims. Participation in regular worship increased the sense of togetherness by 4% for Christians and 2% for Muslims, meaningful contact by 5% for Christians and 1% for Muslims, and contact with people who care by 7% for Christians and 10% for Muslims.

People of faith, especially those who take part in regular communal worship, can experience deeper and more frequent meaningful connections, resulting in less loneliness compared to those who identify with a faith but do not often participate in communal worship. Faith-based relationships seem to be characterised by depth, openness, and genuine reciprocity, which respondents believed set them apart from their secular relationships. These qualities appear essential to the support and comfort they provide to people of faith.

Our interview data corroborated these findings. A key theme was the opportunity offered by religious communities to foster meaningful, trusted relationships. Respondents stated that faith communities provide benefits that are distinct from and greatly surpass what they receive in their secular relationships. Respondents felt they could be entirely themselves. An Anglican Christian explained that her church is special to her because it is a place “where people can absolutely be themselves” (45–54, Female, Anglican Christian).

This sense of authenticity contrasted with the pressure some felt from their secular peer groups to conform to what they perceived as secular expectations, as this Anglican Christian respondent explains:

"I feel like they understand what I'm going through, but it's not necessarily the same . . . I feel under pressure to act in a certain way or maybe fit in." (18-24, Female, Anglican Christian)

Respondents felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings within their faith relationships, trusting they would be understood. This openness was bolstered by the belief that the religious community offers a safe, non-judgmental environment. A Pentecostal Christian describes why he feels more comfortable sharing his struggles with his faith community than with his secular peer groups:

"Being part of a faith helps because you feel safer . . . rather than going out and sharing my struggles with others . . . I have doubt about how they'll take it, how they might even judge me. But in my church I believe no one is judging me. I'm just going to be accepted . . . It's a safe space to communicate my feelings, communicate my struggles." (18-24, Male, Pentecostal Christian)

Religious group interactions are often experienced as more profound and meaningful than secular ones because of the group's shared values and beliefs. Relationships operate at a deeper level that feels more comforting, healing, and centred on what feels 'real.' Here, a Sunni Muslim explains her deep connection with her faith community:

"[My] Muslim community offers spiritual support, a sense of belonging, because we share the same values. We uplift each other through reminders of faith, acts of kindness and collective worship, like praying together . . . We connect with depth and sincerity. While a secular relationship can be meaningful too, faith-based bonds often carry a stronger sense of emotional support." (25-34, Female, Sunni Muslim)

The sense of community built on shared beliefs and values creates a 'baseline' intimacy where members feel they are 'seen' and 'understood' in ways they might find difficult or impossible in their secular relationships. Members trust the group to listen, understand, and support them when needed.

This intimacy and authenticity found in religious relationships promote trust among members, allowing them to feel accepted without the need to create an ideal version of themselves. Respondents believed they would always be compassionately received and that group members have the personal resources to handle and respond to any form of disclosure without fear or discomfort, as this Anglican Christian respondent explains:

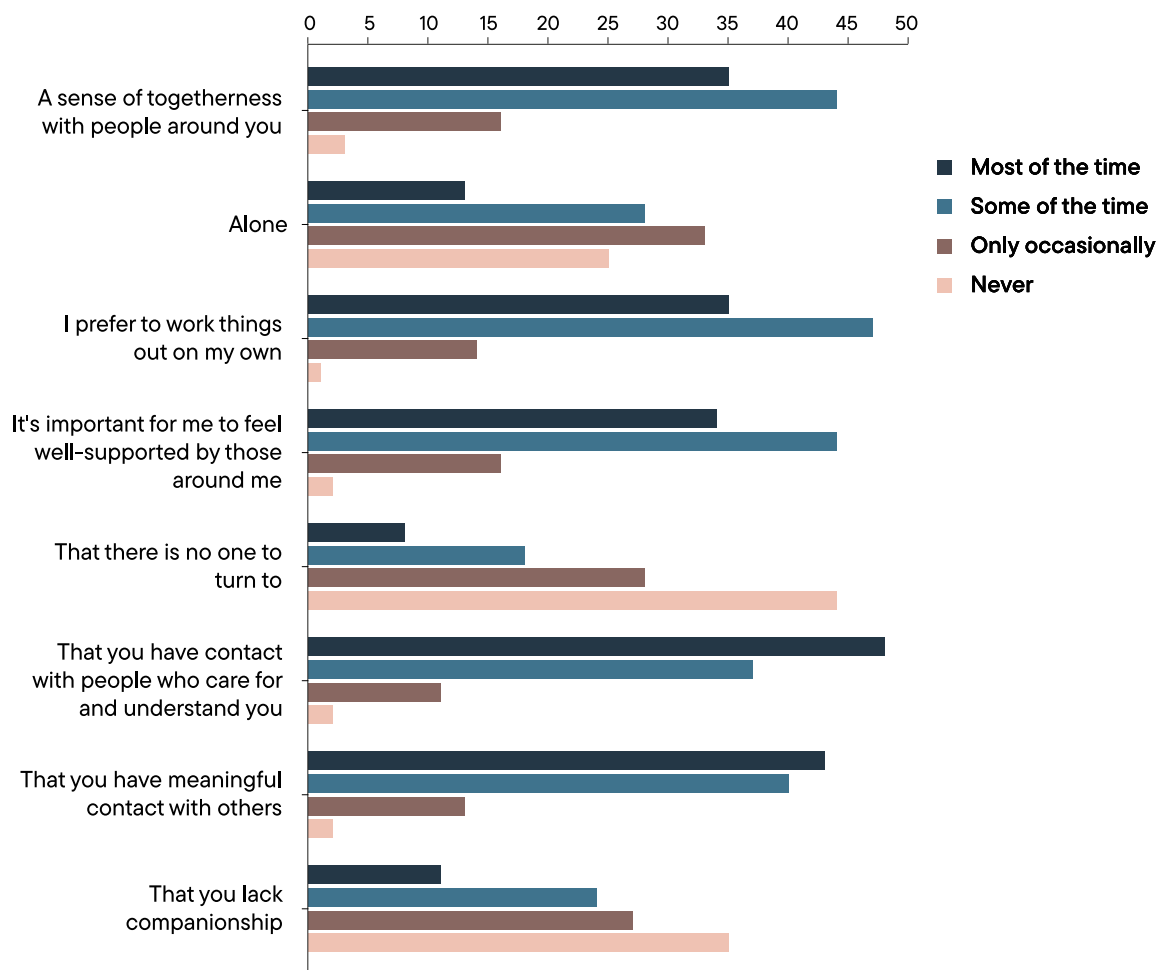
"I think it's not that people in the secular world aren't compassionate . . . I think sometimes they're scared. I can come to work and just say . . . I've just been upset at home or something's happened. It's obviously all over my face, but people don't mention it. But people in my church . . . do they notice things! They're like, 'You okay? You don't look okay. Come and talk about it, pray about it.' It's like they've got this radar . . . I think people are a lot more attentive. But then I think they're not scared to open Pandora's box, are they? They're not scared because they've got this faith." (45-54, Female, Anglican Christian)

This 'baseline' trust, rooted in bonds of shared values and beliefs, can be a rare and enduring thread through a life that is constantly in motion. Faith-based relationships can transcend many of the usual distinctions that define our group memberships, even across time and space, meaning 'home' can be felt even in the most unfamiliar places. Here, a respondent describes this profound connection in faith:

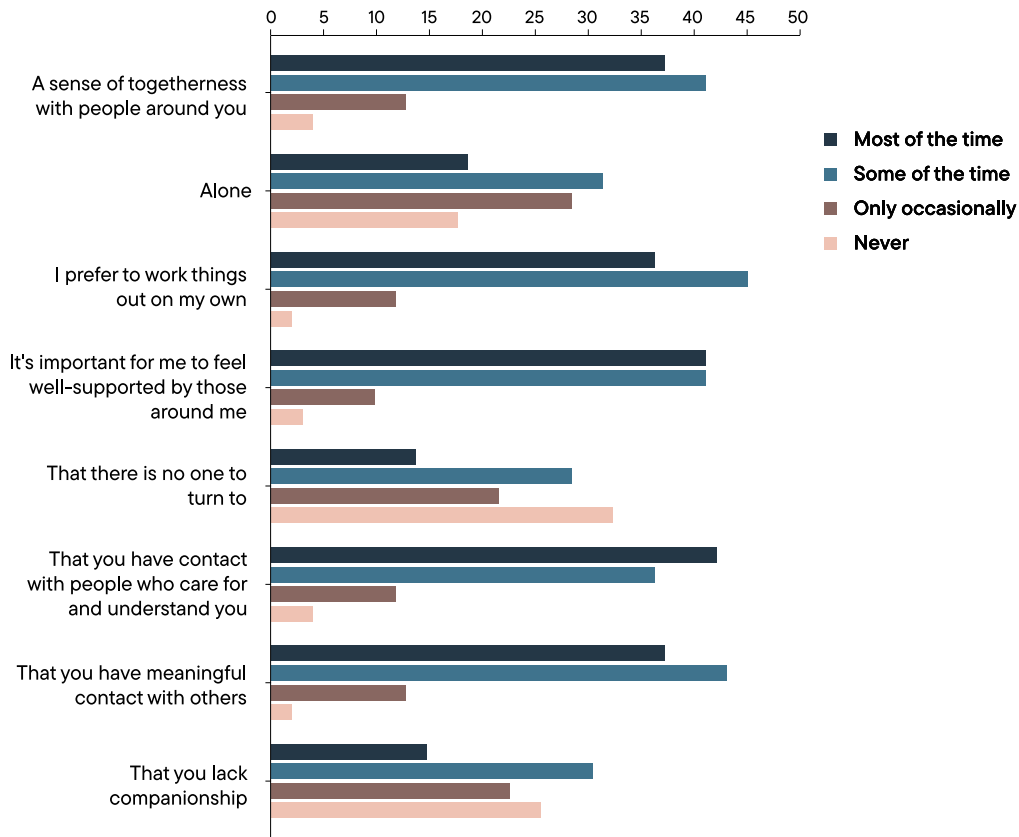
"I think the benefit of having this faith-based connection with people is that you could be far away, but in a spiritual and prayer sense, you have my support and my love, which is an empowering feeling at the end." (Anonymous)

The qualities linked to faith-based relationships make them a stable, trustworthy constant in life. People of faith may feel less lonely and form deeper connections with others, not only because of their relationship with an ever-present God, but also because of their membership in a religious community that feels firm, strong, and dependable, and where they feel free to be completely themselves.

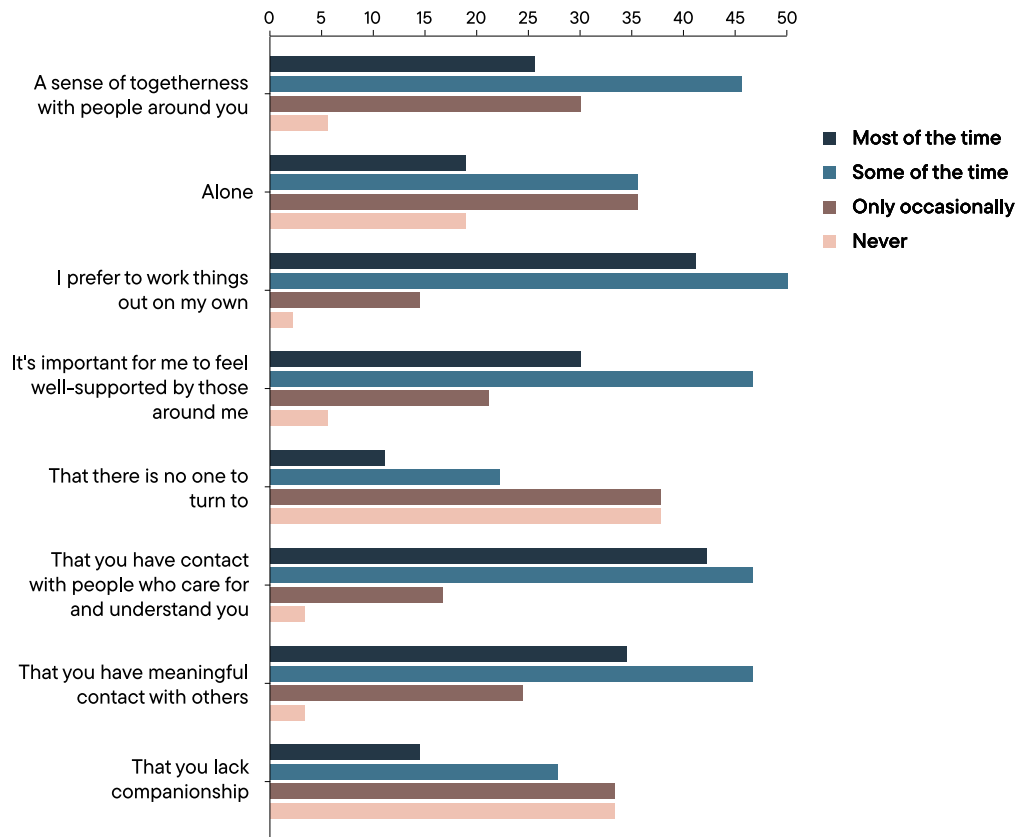
How often do you feel... [% HOW OFTEN - CHRISTIAN RESPONDENTS]



How often do you feel... [% HOW OFTEN - MUSLIM RESPONDENTS]



How often do you feel... [% HOW OFTEN - RESPONDENTS OF NO FAITH]



Differences between men and women

Although there were few notable differences between men and women on negative indicators of loneliness, such as feeling isolated or lacking companionship, there were significant differences in positive indicators.

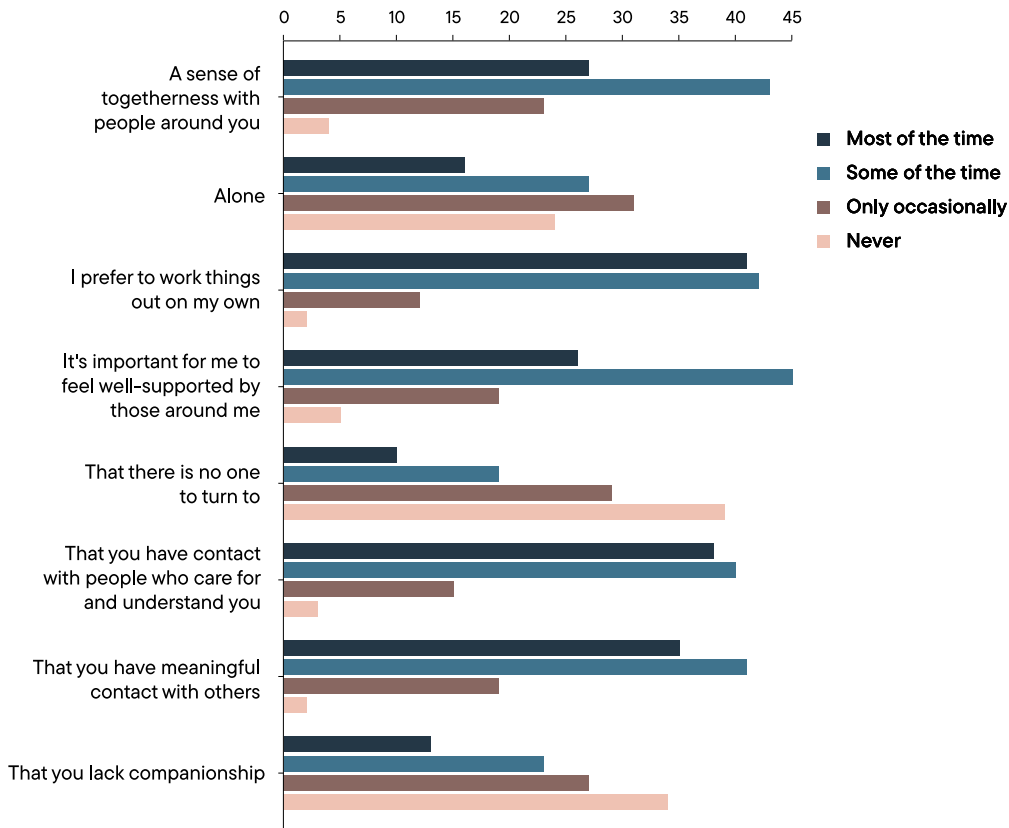
Women (31%) were more likely than men (27%) to frequently experience a sense of togetherness with people around them and to have meaningful contact with others (39% compared to 35% of men). They experienced more frequent meaningful contact with those who care for and understand them (39% of women compared to 35% of men) and attributed more importance to feeling well-supported by those around them (35% of women compared to 26% of men).

An Anglican Christian woman explains the benefits of her faith relationships:

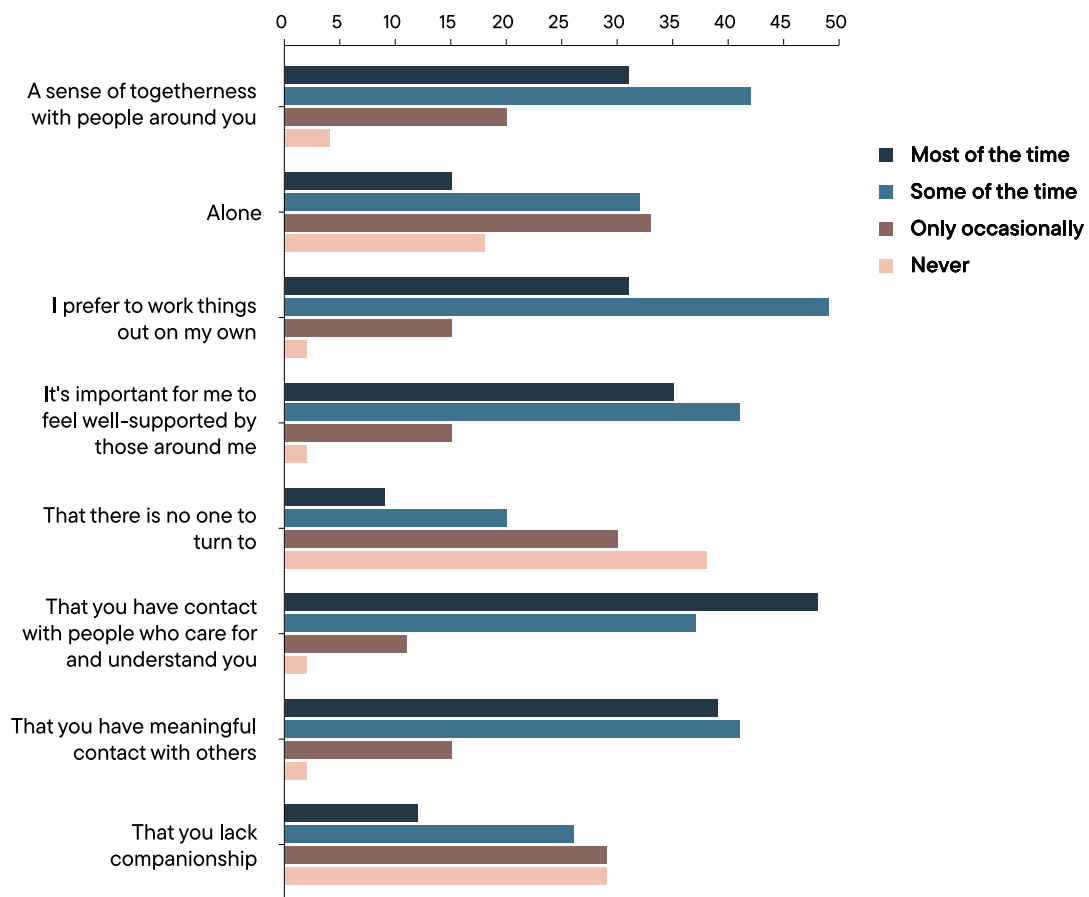
“I feel like they [secular friends] understand what I'm going through, but it's not necessarily the same . . . I feel under pressure to act in a certain way or maybe fit in. I think it's easier to just feel comfortable explaining what's going on to my Christian friends, and not expecting any judgment . . . I know they'll say let's pray together and that makes me feel a lot more at peace.”
(18-24, Female, Anglican Christian)

Women valued social networks more, and although the difference in frequency of social contact between men and women was marginal, women experienced and expected a deeper quality in these interactions. Communal worship might especially appeal to women because it satisfies a preference for social interaction and meaningful relationships, which our research indicates support emotional wellbeing. This relates to our finding that women's life satisfaction was more linked to being part of mutually supportive social networks than it was for men.

How often do you feel... [% HOW OFTEN - MALE RESPONDENTS]



How often do you feel... [% HOW OFTEN - FEMALE RESPONDENTS]



Age differences

Loneliness decreased with age, with young adults aged 18–24 reporting the highest levels of loneliness. 17% of 18–24 year olds reported frequently experiencing a lack of companionship compared to 8% of 65+. They were also more likely to experience a sense of being alone (19% compared to 11% of 65+) and feeling they have no one to turn to (13% compared to 5% of 65+).

In contrast, those aged 65+ consistently scored highest on positive measures of social connection. Respondents aged 65+ were the most likely to frequently experience a sense of togetherness with those around them (37%), meaningful contact (48%), and contact with those they feel care about them (54%). They were also the least likely to never experience meaningful contact (1%) and to never have contact with those who care about them (1%), and more than twice as likely as the 18–24 group to report never feeling as though they had no one to rely on (56% of those aged 65+ compared to 24% of those aged 18–24).

This finding connects to our observation that although respondents aged 65+ showed the lowest preference for being alone when distressed, they were the least likely to believe that talking to others would resolve their problems.¹³ Their social interaction is therefore probably valued for companionship and solidarity, rather than for practical problem-solving.

A Shia Muslim respondent reflects on the differences in the social interactions of those aged 65+ and young people:

“What I think is different in the older generation is there’s a lot more real-time physical interaction . . . they go to the mosque for prayers and that becomes a social activity, and they see other people their age . . . All of a sudden, the religious practice has become a space for social connection. I imagine especially for the older generation, faith-based spaces actually become really vital . . . I can imagine it happens in churches, gurdwaras, and temples.” (35–44, Female, Shia Muslim)

Here, a Sunni Muslim speaks to how cultural differences might be reducing loneliness for older generations:

“It’s not a surprise that loneliness decreases because you have the joint family setup, meaning you have multiple generations living in one household . . . my maternal nan lived with us for the best part of two decades and she never presented with any worries, or anxieties, any kind of depression or loneliness, because she was always surrounded by family . . . Being of Pakistani heritage . . . for us to even contemplate putting our elderly relatives in a care home would be completely against our religious teachings as well as the cultural norms.” (35–44, Male, Sunni Muslim)

¹³ See section on Life Satisfaction and Age, p.7.

The quality and depth of social contact play a larger role in enhancing wellbeing than the quantity of social contact alone. Loneliness diminishes when we have meaningful contact with those we feel care about us. This indicates that the quality of social interaction is more important than its amount. Young people are more remotely connected than ever, yet they appear to be experiencing the greatest sense of loneliness.

However, as this Anglican Christian noted, reductions in loneliness among the oldest members of society might also be attributed to a deepening faith, an experience of a deep connection with God over religious obligations:

“You could argue that maybe people in their 60s who live alone, might not live alone because they’ve got God with them in the room . . . they’ve always got somebody sort of with them. That’s a nice thought, isn’t it?” (45-54, Female, Anglican Christian)

Attitudes to mental health

Faith and non-faith groups

There were notable differences in attitudes towards mental health between people of faith and those without. These differences were most evident in whether they believed they controlled their mental health and the role of resilience in supporting it. People of faith were more likely to see their wellbeing as influenced by internal factors and to advocate for stronger resilience to life's challenges to maintain emotional health. Our interview data suggests this may stem from a view of human potential as extensive within God's grace; that through faith, people can develop the personal resources needed to face whatever life brings.

Muslims (81%) and Christians (78%) were more likely to feel in control of their own mental health compared to those without faith (69%). 85% of Muslims and 82% of Christians advocated the need for greater resilience to hardship to support mental health compared to 70% of those without faith.

However, Muslims (73%) were significantly more likely to attribute personal struggles with mental health to difficult times in life (something external rather than internal) than those of no faith (61%) and Christians (60%). All groups were in similar agreement that everyone experiences mental health struggles in life (85% of Muslims, 84% of those with no faith and 81% of Christians).

Responses varied significantly across groups regarding the possibility that mental health struggles could have a spiritual cause. 70% of Muslims agreed with this view, followed by 53% of Christians, and 33% of those without faith. However, uncertainty was more common among those without religious affiliation: 38% said they were unsure whether spiritual causality was possible, compared to 29% who said they did not believe it at all.

Christians also showed more uncertainty than Muslims. Nearly one-third of Christian respondents (31%) said they did not know whether mental health issues could have a spiritual cause - almost three times the rate among Muslims (11%). These findings suggest that while Muslims were most confident in attributing spiritual meaning to mental health challenges, both Christians and non-religious respondents were more ambivalent.

People of faith reported a greater sense of personal agency in managing life's difficulties. This may partly stem from a stronger belief that they have someone to rely on in tough times (85% of Muslims and 76% of Christians compared to 54% of those without faith). A sense of personal agency is further boosted by belief in divine provision to handle whatever life brings (66% of Muslims and 48% of Christians compared to 36% of those without faith). This sense of self-efficacy does not replace the need for social networks, but allows us to draw support from relationships that empower personal agency rather than foster passive dependency. When combined with compassion, this becomes a strength that might be crucial to the support offered through faith relationships.

These findings demonstrate that religion promotes wellbeing not only by providing ways to manage difficult emotions but also by helping individuals develop character strengths and virtues. Our interview data supported these findings. Here, a Sunni Muslim respondent explains how her faith increases her resilience:

"I often become more compassionate and stronger after I go through some difficulties. So I believe that difficulties can become opportunities to deepen my resilience." (25-34, Female, Sunni Muslim)

Character strengths linked to resilience were attributed to a deeper relationship with God. These qualities help us face tough times by building confidence that we can rely on faith to handle whatever life presents, as this Pentecostal Christian explains:

"The Bible has made me understand that tough times will definitely be part of a believer's life. You have to be prepared for them spiritually . . . pray for strength, for grace to overcome such times even before they happen . . . I think my faith keeps me ready emotionally for whatever might come up in the future because we cannot really control what happens in the future, so when it happens, just being ready to accept it, and face it head on." (18-24, Male, Pentecostal Christian)

Gratitude was recognised as a vital character strength, through which other virtues like joy and hope naturally develop. It is grounded in an innate belief in God's benevolence and omnipotence, enabling us to approach situations with greater optimism. Here, an Anglican Christian describes her experience of the connection between gratitude and emotional health:

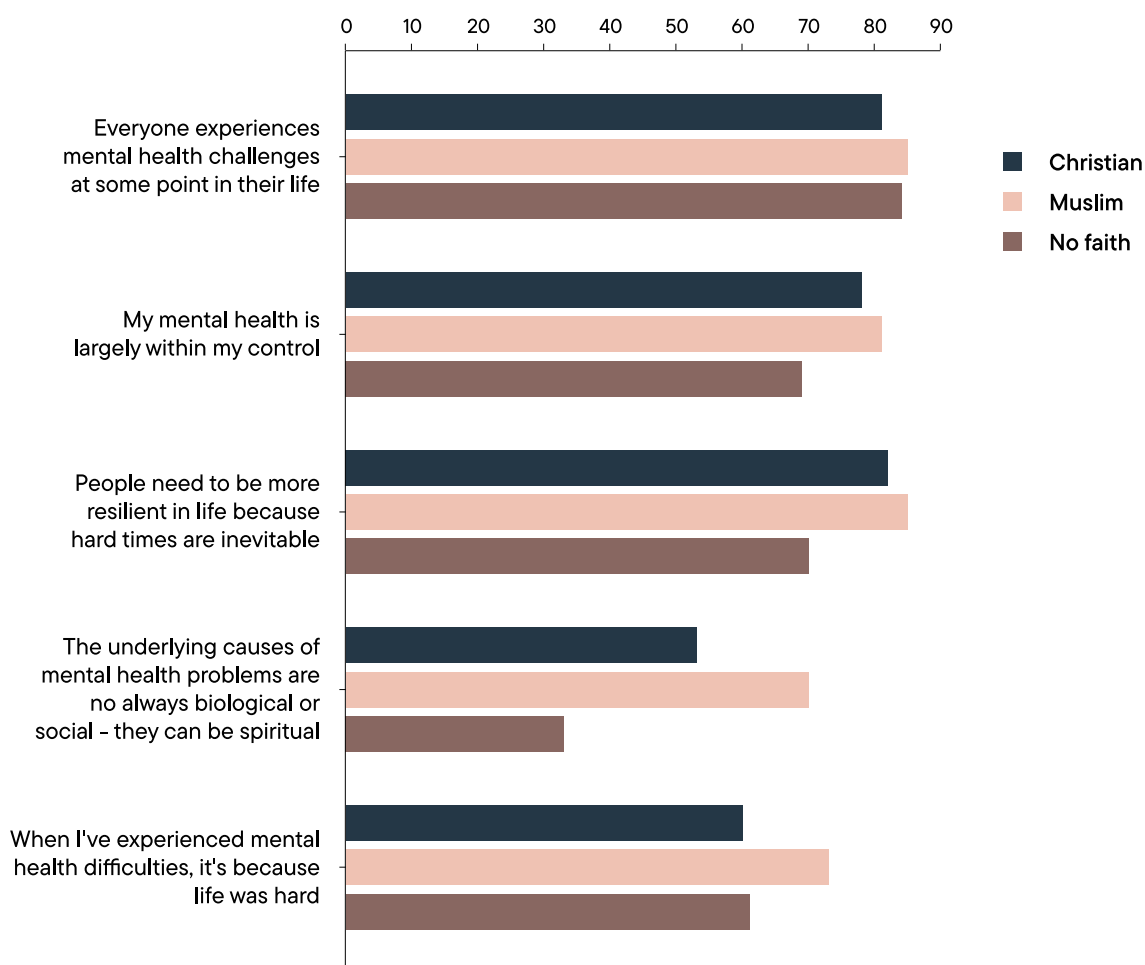
"I can really look back and think, 'Wow, I didn't think things were going to work out positively in this way.' He always has a better plan for me than one I ever could have imagined . . . I'm just grateful for that. I used to struggle a lot more with being stressed and being anxious than I do now, which I'm really grateful for. And I think that's because I know when times are difficult, I don't have to worry as much." (18-24, Female, Anglican Christian)

The opportunity for growth in character strengths and virtues through suffering also comes from viewing hardship as a resource God uses to deepen our faith. People of faith may believe that God draws us closer in our dependency during difficult times and uses this space to bless us with virtues that make us stronger, helping us to grow in character and to remember God's unconditional, eternal love for humanity, as this Sunni Muslim respondent explains:

"I always ask, what am I learning from this situation? What are you teaching me? . . . The lesson is always about making you stronger or helping you to grow and become more of who I can be . . . I have conversations with the Creator. I look for answers and I always get answers." (45-54, Female, Sunni Muslim)

Our findings suggest that people of faith tend to emphasise personal agency over the environment when discussing wellbeing. This may originate from a stronger sense of self-efficacy, rooted in the belief that faith can help develop all the character strengths and virtues needed in life with divine support. Consequently, this could enhance their perception of personal resources, possibly leading to an approach to mental health that is more influenced by a view of the vastness of human potential in God's grace.

To what extent, if at all , do you agree or disagree with these statements? [% NET AGREE by FAITH]



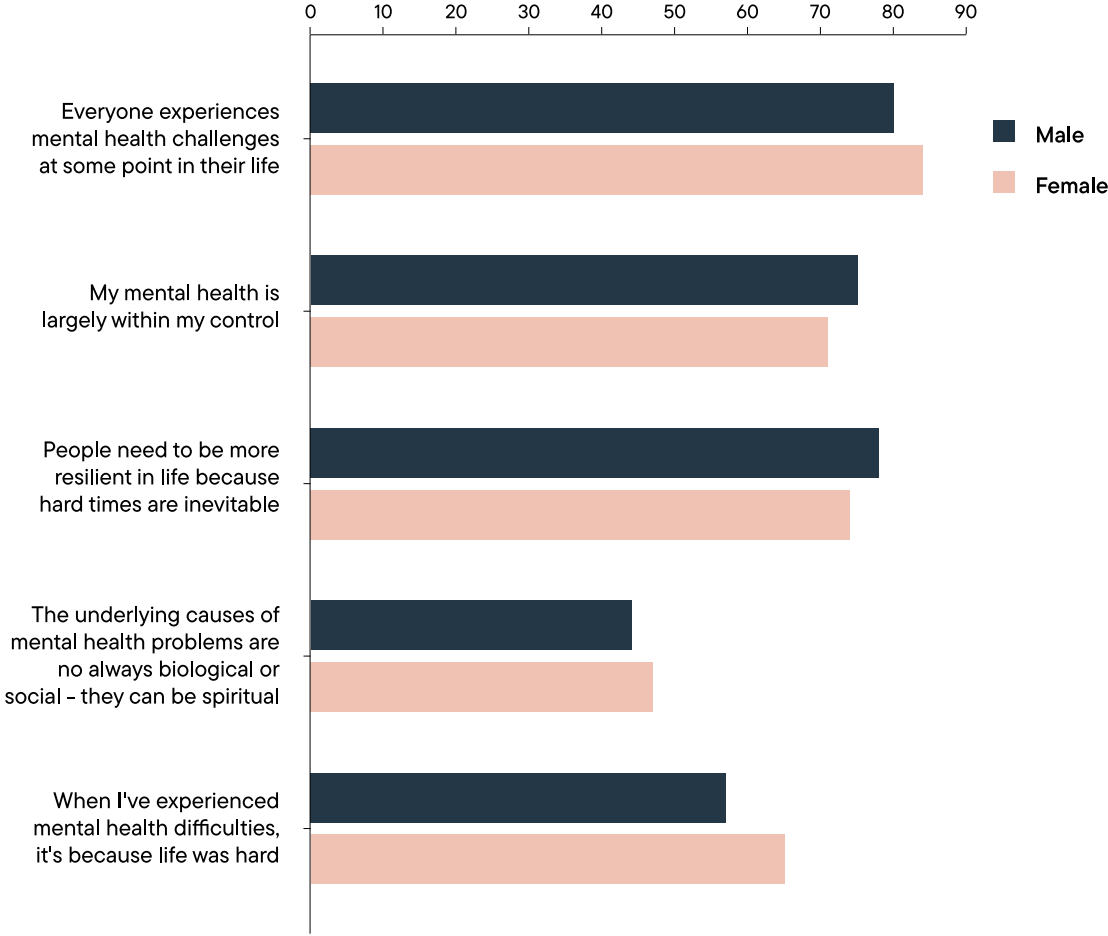
Differences between men and women

While the differences between men and women were marginal, women showed a greater tendency to attribute external causation to mental health difficulties than men, who showed a greater tendency to attribute internal causation. Women were more likely to agree that everyone experiences mental health struggles in life (84%), to attribute personal mental health difficulties to hard times in life (65%), and to believe that mental health struggles could have a spiritual cause (47%).

However, men were more likely to feel greater control over their mental health (75%) and to advocate greater resilience in life to support mental health (78%). While men and women were nearly equally confident that spiritual causality could underpin mental health struggles (44% of men and 47% of women), men were much less open to the idea. Men's responses showed an equal split between disagreement (27%) and uncertainty (29%), while more women stated they didn't know (36%) than were sure the statement was false (16%).

These findings suggest that men may be more inclined toward a self-deterministic or stoic framing of mental health - emphasising internal control and personal resilience - whereas women may approach emotional distress with a broader lens that acknowledges external hardships and ambiguity. Women's greater openness to uncertainty and spiritual causality may reflect a more relational or holistic framework for understanding mental wellbeing, one that integrates personal, social, and existential factors. This divergence in attribution styles could have implications for how different genders engage with mental health support, with men potentially underutilising external help due to a stronger emphasis on self-reliance, and women perhaps being more receptive to social and contextual interventions.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with these statements? [% NET AGREE by GENDER]



Age differences

Young people showed a greater tendency to attribute mental health struggles to external causes than older people, who were more likely to attribute internal causes. Those aged 18-24 (68%) were the most likely to link personal mental health issues to tough times in life, and the least likely to believe they could control their mental health (63%) or to promote resilience as important for mental health (66%). Conversely, respondents aged 65+ were most likely to believe they can control their mental health (86%) and to advocate resilience (88%), while being least likely to attribute mental health issues to life difficulties (46%).

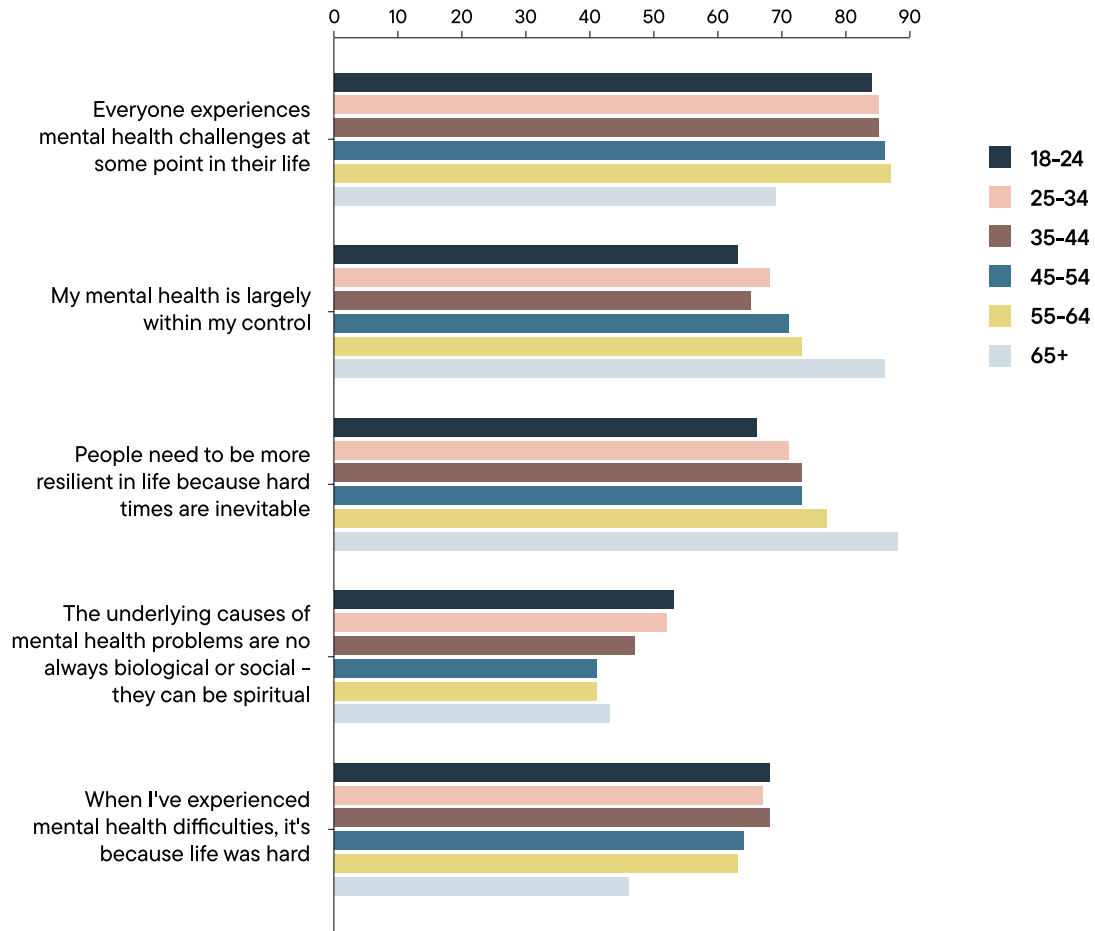
A young member of the Eastern Orthodox Church explains how resilience and other character strengths and virtues are viewed within his church:

"We call it spiritual delusion because we believe resilience takes aestheticism . . . we don't like using these words lightly because we don't want young people (novices to the faith) to believe that it's possible just to say through prayer or faith alone 'I've become resilient, I'm impervious to setbacks or hard times.' It's really spiritually perilous or . . . dangerous to start saying these things . . . Not that you can't say it, it's just I personally don't like using those words." (18-24, Male, Eastern Orthodox Christian)

53% of respondents aged 18-24 agreed that mental health struggles could have a spiritual cause compared to 41% of those aged 65+. However, significantly more respondents aged 65+ reported they didn't know if there could be spiritual causes (41%) than claimed it was impossible (16%).

These findings indicate that the feeling of being in control of our wellbeing tends to increase with age, which aligns with our observation that older groups exhibited the highest sense of autonomy in handling life's challenges, believing they were better equipped than others to resolve their problems.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with these statements? [% NET AGREE by AGE]



Regional and Ethnic Differences

This report's main focus is on faith and emotional wellbeing - however, regional and ethnicity differences add interesting insights. The consistently high scores from Northern Ireland suggest that community identity and regular interpersonal interactions may foster a social environment conducive to emotional wellbeing. In contrast, urban isolation and weaker community ties in regions like London and the East Midlands seem to correlate with higher distress and loneliness.

Although responses varied across ethnic groups, Black respondents consistently reported higher levels of life satisfaction, personal confidence, social embeddedness, and a tendency to interpret life events within spiritual frameworks, distinguishing them as the most resilient across multiple indicators.

These findings emphasise the need to consider not just faith identity, but the context in which it is lived, regional and ethnic cultures, community structures, and public infrastructures, which all shape how faith operates as a protective or stable influence on wellbeing.

Region

Respondents from Northern Ireland exhibited the most consistent and positive wellbeing outcomes across all measured dimensions. They reported the highest levels of:

- Harmony in life (69%, compared to the lowest of 61% in London).
- Acceptance (75%, compared to the lowest of 63% in the East Midlands and Yorkshire/Humberside).
- Low regret (40% stated they would change almost nothing if they could live life over again, compared to the lowest of 31% in the East Midlands).
- Satisfaction with physical surroundings (90%, compared to the lowest of 74% in London).

In terms of emotional outlook, respondents from Northern Ireland also stood apart in the following:

- General positivity in life (83%, compared to the lowest of 65% in Yorkshire/Humberside).
- Optimism about the future (62%, compared to the lowest of 48% in the East Midlands and the East).
- Acceptance of difficult periods (86%, compared to the lowest of 75% in the East).

A particularly striking divide emerges in experiences of social connection. Respondents in London, the East Midlands, and Yorkshire/Humberside reported the most frequent lack of companionship (15%). Those in London, Yorkshire/Humberside, the North East, and the East area were also the most likely to experience a sense of being alone (18%) and to feel they had no one to turn to for support (15%). By contrast, Northern Ireland again stood apart, showing the strongest positive social indicators:

- Frequent sense of togetherness (36%).
- Frequent meaningful social contact (52%).
- Contact with those who care (59%).

It also showed the lowest prevalence of social disconnection:

- Lack of companionship (6%).
- Feeling alone (3%).
- Feeling unsupported (6%).

These figures suggest a powerful regional contrast in the social determinants of wellbeing, underscoring the potential role of community infrastructure and social cohesion in shaping emotional health.

Ethnicity

Differences between ethnic groups were most pronounced in perceptions of personal agency and resilience. Black respondents reported the highest levels of confidence in their ability to manage mental health (92%) and the greatest emphasis on the importance of cultivating resilience (93%). In contrast, White respondents were the least likely to attribute mental health difficulties to life struggles (61%) and among the least likely to affirm resilience as key to mental wellbeing (75%).

Respondents of Chinese and Black backgrounds were most likely to acknowledge spiritual causes for mental health struggles (80% and 75% respectively), while Asian (61%) and White (42%) respondents were the most likely to deny spiritual causes. White participants were also the most uncertain about the possibility of spiritual causes of mental health difficulties (36%).

This divergence illustrates how cultural frameworks influence interpretations of mental health, with Black and Chinese communities more inclined toward holistic or spiritual perspectives, and White and Asian respondents tending toward more secular interpretations.

While negative indicators of loneliness (e.g. feeling alone, lacking companionship) showed few strong patterns among ethnic groups, positive indicators of social connection revealed more variation:

- Black (39%) and Asian (31%) respondents were most likely to feel a regular sense of togetherness with others (compared to Chinese respondents, who were the least likely at 28%).
- Black (45%) and White (38%) respondents reported frequent meaningful interactions (compared to Chinese, who were the least likely at 24%).
- Black (51%), and both White and Asian (43%) respondents were most likely to experience frequent contact with those who care about and understand them.

In contrast, Chinese respondents were consistently the most socially isolated group:

- Highest rate of frequent feelings of being alone (21%).
- Lowest rates of meaningful social interactions (24%).
- Lowest rates of contact with caring individuals (33%).
- Lowest levels of togetherness (23%).

Black respondents were most likely to report emotional resilience and optimism:

- Positivity in life (89%, compared to the least likely at 51% among 'Other').
- Optimism for the future (87%, compared to 43% among 'Other').
- Acceptance of hardship as temporary (88%, compared to 70% among Chinese respondents).

They also expressed stronger confidence in managing stress and adversity:

- Not worrying excessively (39%, vs. lowest of 29% of White respondents).
- Confidence in problem-solving ability (74%, vs. lowest of 63% of Asian respondents).
- Belief that no challenge would be too great (78%, vs. lowest of 40% of White respondents).
- Greater assurance in having someone (including God) to rely on (85%, vs. lowest of 58% from Chinese respondents).

Black respondents showed the highest agreement with statements indicating:

- Life acceptance (73%).
- Satisfaction with physical surroundings (84%).
- Value in talking to others when solving problems (60%).
- Low preference for isolation in distress (66%).

The consistency of responses among Black participants indicates a well-established support system, both spiritually and socially. Their higher levels of life satisfaction may stem from strong relational networks, community involvement, and, for those of faith, a religious worldview that affirms meaning, purpose, and resilience. In contrast, Chinese respondents exhibited the most signs of disconnection.

Conclusion

This report found that emotional wellbeing was higher among people of faith compared to those without faith, and that people of faith demonstrated a range of character skills and strengths that could explain this finding. In other words, employing a mixed-methods approach enabled us not only to identify differences in emotional wellbeing between people of faith and non-faith individuals, but also to explore the reasons for these differences. Faith groups reported greater life satisfaction, worried less, were less prone to low moods and depressive thoughts, and experienced less loneliness than those without faith. In summary, they experienced fewer negative outcomes like anxiety, depression, and loneliness, and more positive outcomes like resilience, optimism, gratitude, and self-efficacy than those without faith.

Participation in regular communal worship was associated only with slight improvements in these figures across most positive measures, and this effect was marginally more evident for Christians than for Muslims. This suggests that faith identity alone has the strongest influence on emotional wellbeing, rather than regular communal worship.

Faith was linked to greater life satisfaction. Character strengths such as fostering a stronger sense of balance and harmony, accepting life circumstances, and having fewer regrets contributed to this finding. Other strengths included more confidence in handling life events, a greater tendency to see positives in life, staying optimistic, and accepting the flow of life's unpredictability, trusting that all difficulties would pass.

People of faith experienced more meaningful connections with others, where they could truly be themselves, share their challenges, and both give and receive support. While they valued such genuine, authentic, and mutually supportive relationships, they were also not passively dependent on others or their life circumstances for their sense of wellbeing. Instead, the benefits of social interactions were complemented by a strong sense of self-sufficiency. People of faith showed greater confidence in their personal resources to handle whatever life throws at them and were more likely to believe they have control over their wellbeing. This might be due to feeling unconditionally supported by others and God. Perhaps this allows individuals to enjoy and cherish relationships more fully, and fosters more genuine reciprocity.

This strong sense of self-efficacy was a notable and potentially vital character strength shaping wellbeing for people of faith compared to those without. Faith was associated with greater trust and reliance on personal resources to manage life. This may stem from a sense of unbreakable connection to something solid and stable that transcends life's unpredictability and impermanence, which can strengthen personal resources to face all seasons of life. This paradoxical sense of self-efficacy – a belief in our capacity to influence life's circumstances without trying to control how they develop – achieved through trusting in God, offers a sense of order and stability, fostering feelings of safety, confidence, optimism, and contentment. Feeling secure because we know we have the resources to cope with life's unpredictability, and that we are never alone in doing so, may be crucial for enhancing our emotional health.

By emphasising the importance of faith in emotional health, this report also underscores the need to recognise faith as an essential aspect of how wellbeing is understood and navigated among people of faith. The NHS provides some faith-integrated counselling options, and our research shows that religious beliefs often serve as the lens through which people of faith interpret and respond to their emotional health.¹⁴ IIFL's recent report, 'Belonging, Belief and Britishness: Exploring the British Muslim Experience on Their Own Terms', found that 42% of Muslims prefer to see a counsellor of their own faith.¹⁵ This emphasises the essential role faith-led therapies play in shaping therapeutic outcomes.

A Pentecostal Christian respondent explains why shared belief systems matter when seeking support from others:

"[In] difficult situations I just want to be around people of the same belief . . . I can't just be around people who are not of the same faith as me at that time . . . I think they might not really understand what I'm going through, or they might not give me the kind of support I need at that time . . . The relationship is quite different from those that do not share the same faith as me . . . personally there is this peace I get just being in the presence of God, in the presence of those that share the same belief." (18-24, Male, Pentecostal Christian)

Faith plays a vital role in our emotional wellbeing. Through faith, we develop character strengths and skills that help us cope with tough times and maintain happiness. However, these resources reflect a much deeper effect of religiosity. Faith works because it is a way of life. People of faith can respond to life with more optimism and courage and find greater happiness and contentment mainly because of how they view the world. Life is always open to more, to something greater than personal fears and circumstances. The key to faith's influence on wellbeing is the perspective it offers for seeing, interpreting, and navigating life.

14 The NHS can provide therapy through the ACC (Association of Christian in Counselling). The ACC comprises counsellors and psychotherapists who are Christians who work with those of all faiths and without.

15 Rania Mohiuddin-Agir., "Belonging, Belief and Britishness: Exploring the British Muslim Experience on Their Own Terms", The Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life (March, 2025), p. 50.

Appendix

Interview questions

1. How do you respond to hard times in life, and what role does your faith play in this process?
2. Let's turn now to positive emotions. Religion helps us work through difficult emotions, but there are other ways it can support our wellbeing. How do you think your faith might help you cultivate strengths that support you in hard times and even allow you to grow through difficulties?
3. How do you think the ways you care for yourself are connected to your compassion for others?
4. Thinking now about the relationships you have through your religious group. What do you get from these relationships that helps with your wellbeing? In what ways, if any, are these different to your secular relationships?
5.
 - a) In our survey, women reported higher levels of worry and anxiety than men. Thinking about your own experience, what do you think about this finding and the role of faith in supporting women's needs?
 - b) In our survey, men reported being less sociable and having fewer close connections than women. With this in mind, how do you think religion might be supporting men's needs?
6.
 - a) Our survey showed that young people reported the highest levels of religious interest and practice. They also reported higher rates of worry and loneliness. What do you think of this finding?
 - b) Our survey found that worry and loneliness *decreased* with age and were particularly low in those 65 and over. What are your thoughts on this finding and the potential role of religion in improving wellbeing with age?



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