

In search of self and something bigger: A spiritual health exploration

McKinsey Health Institute's global survey of 41,000 people finds that spiritual health matters to many, regardless of age, country, or religious beliefs.

by Erica Coe and Kana Enomoto with Jacqueline Brassey and Victoria Bennett



At a glance

- Spiritual health encompasses having meaning in one's life, a sense of connection to something larger than oneself, and a sense of purpose. Finding this meaning is associated with strong mental, social, and physical health.
- While assessment of spiritual health ranges widely across ages and locations, McKinsey Health Institute's Global Gen Z Survey in 26 countries found that across generational cohorts the vast majority of respondents said spiritual health is “somewhat” to “extremely” important to them.
- Social, public, and private stakeholders can explore ways to help people find purpose and space to reflect on their lives. This includes employers seeking to help individuals find meaning in their work.

In McKinsey Health Institute's (MHI's) vision of a [modern understanding of health](#), spiritual health is not a “nice to have” but a core dimension, along with physical, mental, and social health. But spiritual health can be hard to define. For many, it invokes a variety of feelings. There are those who see it as inseparable from religion, as well as those who associate it with following an internal moral compass or finding peace and calm through meditation. While those feelings can overlap, MHI's concept of spiritual health¹ is not necessarily tied to religious beliefs but rather to meaning in one's life, a broad sense of connection to something larger than oneself, and a strong sense of purpose. These can be found within a community, a calling, a form of divinity, the ability to feel rooted and mindful in the present moment, or all of the above. And those who are able to develop their spiritual health often see positive overlaps with the other dimensions of health.

However, there are differences between generations as to how they report spiritual health. MHI's recent Global Gen Z Survey—a cross-generational survey that oversampled Gen Z in order to yield insight into the generation, while still sampling all other generations for comparison purposes—highlights the complexity of how spiritual health is perceived and practiced around the world and the way spiritual health affects overall well-being.² Among 41,000 respondents across generational cohorts in 26 countries, the vast majority said spiritual health is “somewhat” to “extremely important” to them (see sidebar, “Methodology”). This finding is similar to those of [previous MHI surveys](#). This survey also highlights the varying global perspectives regarding the importance of spiritual health. More than 80 percent of respondents in Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Vietnam said spiritual health was very or extremely important, for instance, compared with less than 45 percent of respondents in Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Understanding how

¹ The subcomponents of spiritual health have been recognized for decades, as discussed in [Adding years to life and life to years](#), McKinsey Health Institute, March 2022. For more, see S. K. Chaturvedi, Neera Dhar, and Deoki Nandan, “Spiritual health, the fourth dimension: A public health perspective,” *WHO South-East Asia Journal of Public Health*, January 2013, Volume 2, Number 1; Francesco Chirico, “Spiritual well-being in the 21st century: It is time to review the current WHO's health definition,” *Journal of Health and Social Sciences*, March 2016, Volume 1, Number 1; Christina M. Puchalski, “Integrating spirituality into patient care: An essential element of person-centered care,” *Polish Archives of Internal Medicine*, September 2013, Volume 123, Number 9; Giancarlo Lucchetti et al., “Spirituality and health in the curricula of medical schools in Brazil,” *BMC Medical Education*, August 2012, Volume 12, Number 78; South-East Asia Advisory Committee on Medical Research, “Spiritual aspects of health: Global strategy for health for all by the year 2000,” World Health Organization, March 1984.

² The survey asked questions based on the four dimensions of health: mental, physical, social, and spiritual. MHI then analyzed differences and similarities across generations and countries, with the hope of informing the broader dialogue around Gen Z mental health. Additionally, while Gen Z tends to report worse mental health, the underlying cause is not clear. There are several age-specific factors that may impact Gen Z's mental health independent of their generational cohort, including developmental stage, level of engagement with healthcare, and familial or societal attitudes.

much spiritual health varies in level of importance could create better understanding in a globalized world, including for those working in the social, public, or private sector.

This is also an area with potential for more research: an MHI analysis found that about 75 percent of studies related to health primarily measure physical

health, while just 12 percent measure mental health, 6 percent social health, and 1 percent spiritual health.³ MHI has conducted multiple global surveys to understand how individuals perceive the four dimensions of health and what gaps exist. In a recent MHI [survey of employees](#), for example, more than half of respondents across 30 countries reported positive overall holistic health, but

³ *Adding years to life and life to years*, McKinsey Health Institute, March 2022.

Methodology

To gain a better understanding of Gen Z in comparison with other generations, the McKinsey Health Institute (MHI) conducted an internet-based survey in May 2022 in ten European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom), with approximately 1,000 completions per country. In August 2022, an additional 1,600 completions per country were collected from 16 mostly non-European countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Vietnam). In total, the survey collected responses from 42,083 people, including 16,824 Gen Zers (mostly 18- to 24-year-olds and including a negligible minority of 13- to 17-year-old non-European respondents), 13,080 millennials (25 to 40 years old), 6,937 Gen Xers (41 to 56 years old), 5,119 baby boomers (57 to 75 years old), and 123 from the Silent Generation (76 to 93 years old).

Within each country, the survey applied weights to match the distribution of age cohorts, gender, and share of population with tertiary education in the sample to the country's national census. The sample was drawn from populations with access

to the internet, which made the samples more representative of Gen Z respondents. With this age cohort, nearly all individuals with access to the internet are active technology users; however, for other generations, this is less likely to be the case. This analysis reflects self-reported results in 2022.

Considerations for cross-generational surveys

The survey focused on how respondents—mainly Gen Z—were feeling at the time they were surveyed. Therefore, we cannot determine whether differences in answers between age cohorts are caused by an intrinsic difference in attitudes and behaviors or are merely induced by age differences: it is possible that Gen Z will eventually think and behave like millennials, Gen X, or baby boomers, when they reach those ages.

Considerations for surveys conducted online

The survey was conducted online. Therefore, it may not accurately reflect the behaviors or attitudes of individuals who don't have reliable online access. This can be particularly significant in various aspects of life, given that the internet can have a profound impact on the information we access and how we process it.

Considerations for cross-country surveys

Cross-country, sociocultural differences can affect perceptions, scale of use, and other factors that may influence responses. However, we cannot automatically conclude that these differences are objective. The variations in answers on an agreement scale, for example, may be due to the respondent's inclination to agree or disagree and their propensity to choose extreme answers such as "strongly disagree" or "strongly agree."

Although we relied on cultural experts and youth reviewers to ensure equivalence of meanings across languages during translations, some observed differences across countries may still be induced by the translations.

To measure differences, we computed country averages and used them to calculate simple averages across countries. By doing so, we treated each country equally, regardless of its population size.

For more on physical, mental, social, and spiritual health definitions, see the interactive, "A modern understanding of health," in the MHI report, *Adding years to life and life to years*.

respondents reported the lowest proportion of positive scores when it came to spiritual health. This may indicate that some employees, regardless of country, may be struggling to integrate meaning into their lives and work, which could, in turn, affect their physical, mental, and social health.

The series of insights below illustrate what cross-generational respondents said about their spiritual health in the Global Gen Z Survey, how to better understand the differences based on age and country, and how everyone has a role to play in helping people have lives with purpose. This can begin by understanding how spiritual health intersects with other dimensions. MHI highlights Gen Z specifically because of the many challenges young people face in the transition to adulthood, and how insights into aspects of health can lead to better resilience.

While the Gen Zers who have good spiritual health appear to be doing well in all dimensions,

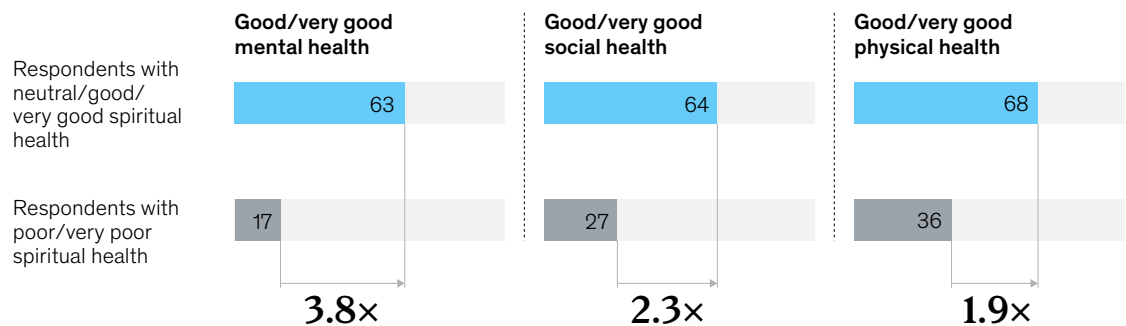
those with poor spiritual health may be struggling (Exhibit 1). Individuals reporting poor spiritual health were up to about four times less likely to say they had good or very good mental health than those reporting neutral or good spiritual health. In addition, those with poor spiritual health were about two times less likely to report good social or physical health.

The Gen Z survey is not the only research being done to find out how spiritual health can overlap with other dimensions. Spiritual health has been correlated with multiple dimensions of quality of life in other studies,⁴ and there has been growing discussion on the role of spiritual health in holistic medical care.⁵ This can include the role of spiritual beliefs in mental health, with some studies finding that higher spirituality scores correlated with fewer depressive symptoms or that spiritual health and perceived social support is associated with less death anxiety in the elderly.⁶

Exhibit 1

Among Gen Z, there is a positive association between spiritual health and other dimensions of health.

Health status by category, by status of spiritual health, Gen Z respondents, %



Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Brain Health Survey (2022), Gen Z oversample (includes respondents aged 13–24); weighted by gender, age, and education level. Dates fielded: Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022; n = 16,635

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⁴ WHOQOL SRPB Group, "A cross-cultural study of spirituality, religion, and personal beliefs as components of quality of life," *Social Science & Medicine*, March 2006, Volume 62, Number 6.

⁵ Tracy A. Balboni et al., "Spirituality in serious illness and health," *JAMA*, July 2022, Volume 328, Number 2.

⁶ Benjamin R. Doolittle and Michael Farrell, "The association between spirituality and depression in an urban clinic," *Primary Care Companion to the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 2004, Volume 6, Number 3; Mehrdad Hajihassani and Nahid Naderi, "Death anxiety in the elderly: The role of spiritual health and perceived social support," *Aging Psychology*, 2021, Volume 6, Number 4.

Other studies have found that spiritual and physical health are strongly connected for some patients, with a 2011 US study finding that 41 percent of patients desired a discussion of religious and/or spiritual concerns while hospitalized.⁷ There is also some evidence of the connection between spiritual, social, and mental well-being, with a 2017 study finding that seniors in Iran who had spiritual behaviors and good social health were more likely to have self-care capacity.⁸

Overall, Gen Z respondents reported challenges with spiritual health at a higher rate than non-Gen Z respondents; about three times as many Gen Zers reported poor spiritual health as did baby boomers.⁹ Gen Zers with poor mental health were three times more likely to report a lack of meaning in their lives than those with good mental health (Exhibit 2). And while Gen Z reports struggling the most with spiritual health, it's not the only generation where spiritual and mental health are connected: non-Gen Z respondents with poor mental health were more than four times more likely to report a lack of

meaning in their lives, compared with those with good mental health.

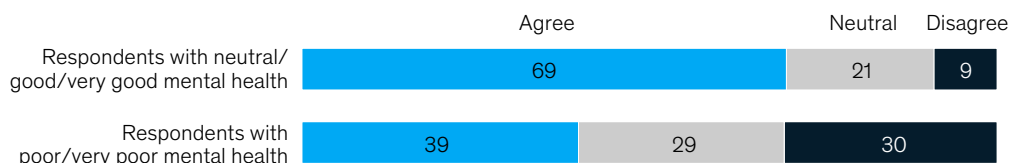
While the survey findings across countries affirmed that those with lower spiritual health had lower mental health scores, the perception of that connection varies by country. Eighty-eight percent of respondents in Indonesia, for instance, said positive spiritual health helped their mental health, while only 15 percent of respondents in Japan agreed with that sentiment.¹⁰ That means it may be harder in certain countries to make the case that investment in better spiritual health can improve mental health.

By encompassing 26 countries, the Global Gen Z Survey offers insight into distinct regional differences in the way individuals perceive spiritual health (Exhibit 3). Respondents in higher-income economies, for example, were substantially less likely than those in lower- or lower-middle-income economies to indicate spiritual health was “extremely important” to them (27 versus 43 percent).

Exhibit 2

Gen Z respondents with poor mental health were less likely to say they had meaning in their lives.

Responses to the statement ‘I have meaning in my life,’ Gen Z respondents, %



Note: Respondents who replied “Prefer not to answer” are not shown (2% for each group). Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding. Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Brain Health Survey (2022), Gen Z oversample (includes respondents aged 13–24); weighted by gender, age, and education level. Dates fielded: Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022; n = 16,824

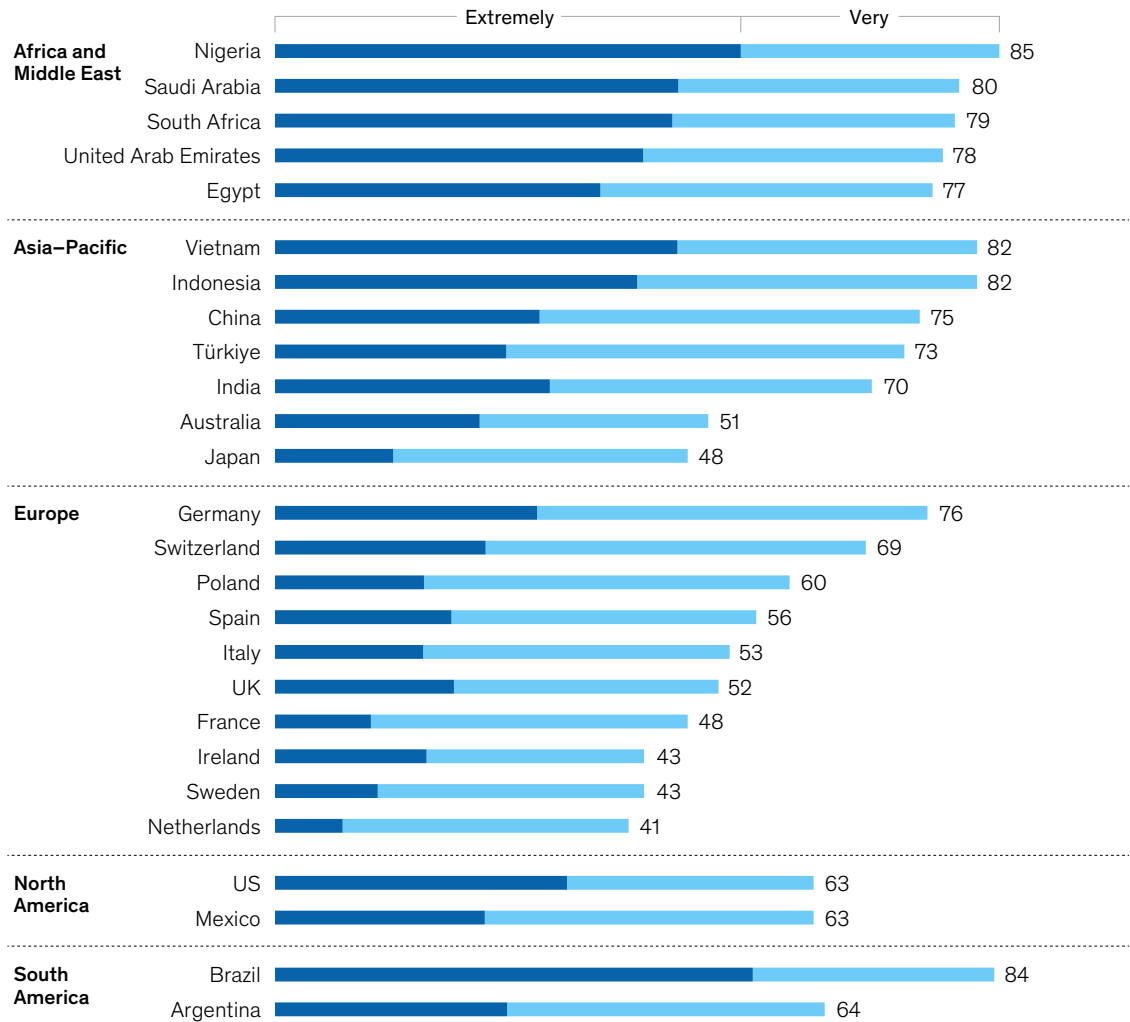
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⁷ Joshua A. Williams et al., “Attention to inpatients’ religious and spiritual concerns: Predictors and association with patient satisfaction,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, July 2011, Volume 26, Number 11.
⁸ Mahboobeh Mohammadi et al., “Assessment of the relationship between spiritual and social health and the self-care ability of elderly people referred to community health centers,” *Iranian Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Research*, December 2017, Volume 22, Number 6.
⁹ Erica Coe, Andrew Doy, Kana Enomoto, and Cheryl Healy, “Gen Z mental health: The impact of tech and social media,” McKinsey Health Institute, April 28, 2023.
¹⁰ As with all cross-cultural research, differences in scores across countries can be driven by the following two factors: true differences between countries on variables of interest and differences between countries because of artifacts such as within-country response styles or context-driven stigma. As an example, in our current survey, we observed lower scores across many variables of interest in Japan compared with other countries. When reviewing cross-cultural findings, we recommend the reader considers the cultural context of the country and region.

Exhibit 3

The importance of spiritual health among respondents varied from 41 to 85 percent, depending on where the respondents reside.

Share of respondents who said spiritual health is ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’ to them, %



Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Brain Health Survey (2022), Gen Z oversample (includes respondents aged 13–24); weighted by gender, age, and socioeconomics. Dates fielded: Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022; n = 41,960

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While spiritual health is not confined to religion, these complex differences around the world *sometimes* correlate with religious observance. Under half of respondents in France, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden, for instance, said spiritual health was extremely or very important to them, compared with 85 percent of respondents

in Nigeria. But it's relevant to remember that many evaluate their spiritual health outside of traditional religion: in 21 of the 26 countries surveyed, the majority of respondents in each country said spiritual health is important to them, while far fewer reported regularly practicing religious habits, such as going to a faith-based service.

Recent Pew research supports this idea that there is a middle ground between the absence of spiritual beliefs and full religious or spiritual practice, finding that almost a third of US respondents say they are atheists (17 percent), agnostic (20 percent) or list “nothing in particular” (63 percent). Almost half of “religious nones” said their reasons relate to disliking religious organizations, and a third gave a reason related to negative experiences with those who described themselves as religious. Yet in this group, almost half said spirituality is important or that they considered themselves spiritual.¹¹

By exploring the differences in spiritual health’s importance across countries or regions and by understanding the varying feelings on religion,

organizations and individuals could potentially have a deeper understanding of how to advance holistic health.

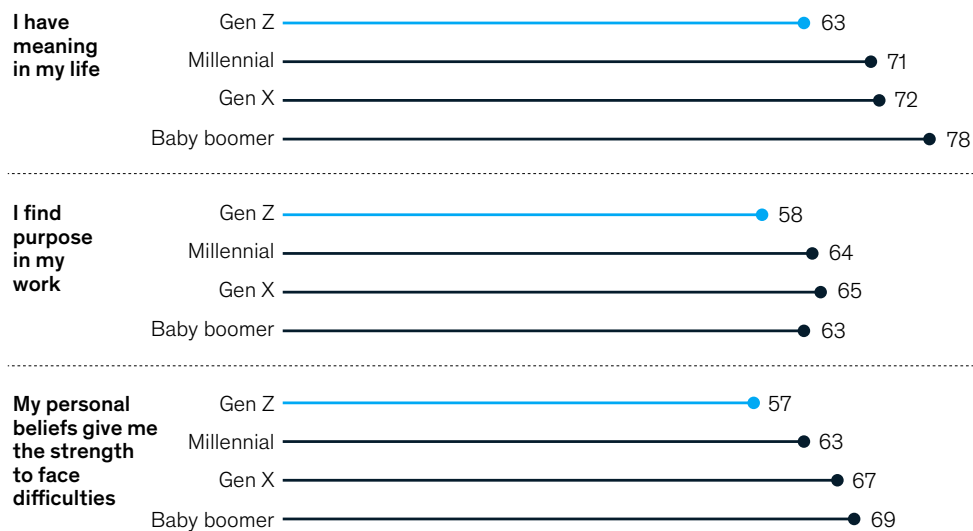
This can invite conversation within social, public, and private settings on factors that influence spiritual health. For example, asking someone, “What ways do you find purpose in your life?” or “How are you helping others find meaning?” can yield fruitful discussions.

While finding pathways to pursue individual spiritual health is important across generations, our data suggest that this is especially important for Gen Z (Exhibit 4). When surveyed, Gen Z was the least likely to endorse positive statements about spiritual

Exhibit 4

Based on statements about purpose and meaning, Gen Z is the generation with the lowest level of spiritual health.

Share who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly’ agree with each statement, by generation, %



Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Brain Health Survey (2022), Gen Z oversample (includes respondents aged 13–24); weighted by gender, age, and education level. Dates fielded: Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022; n =41,960

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¹¹ Gregory A. Smith et al., *Religious ‘nones’ in America: Who they are and what they believe*, Pew Research Center, January 2024; when asked about their beliefs regarding the presence of spirits or spiritual energies in the following, 69 percent of “religious nones” and 71 percent of the religiously affiliated chose at least one of the following when answering whether they believe the following can have spirits or spiritual energies: animals other than humans; elements of nature such as mountains, rivers, and trees; graveyards, cemeteries, or memorial sites; certain objects such as crystals, jewels, and stones.

health: over a third of respondents reported a lack of meaning in their lives. Gen Zers were also the least likely to report finding a sense of purpose in their work and having personal beliefs that give them the strength to face difficulties. One potential explanation is that individuals in this phase of life may still be actively developing their sense of purpose, which lends credence to supporting younger generations in this important element of their health.

Earlier MHI work has highlighted the challenges among younger generations in maintaining their health and how employers can play a role in improving it. For example, workplace interventions that promote positive behaviors and limit negative

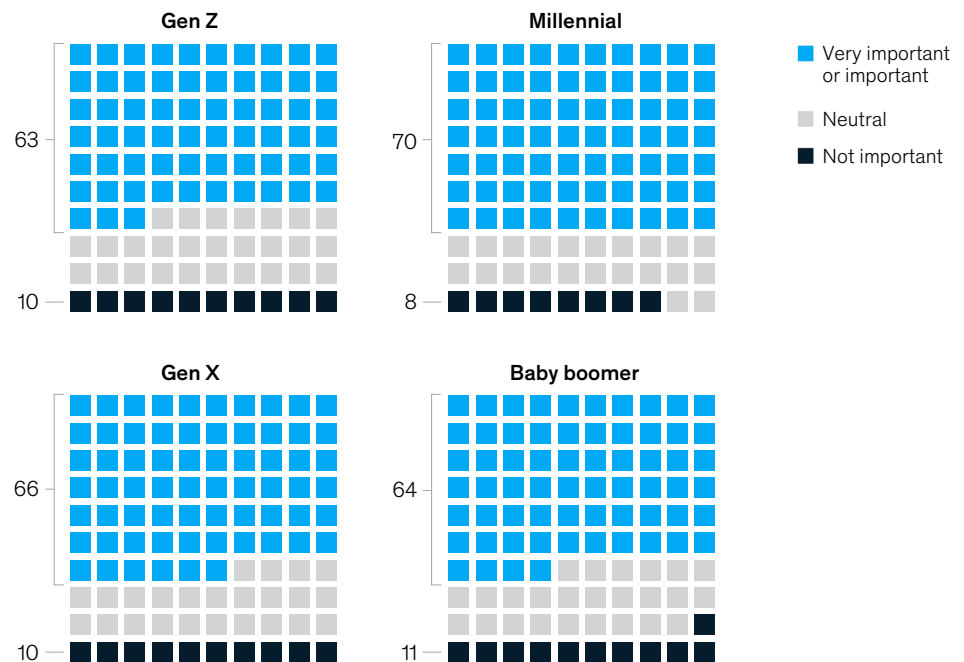
ones can help create organizational climates that promote holistic health. In the search for meaning, some individuals may find a sense of purpose in their jobs. Others, however, may feel strongly that work is an intellectual or necessary part of life but that their primary purpose comes from volunteering in their communities, raising a family, creating art, engaging in activism, or doing other actions.

Spiritual health can be deeply personal, but MHI findings suggest that the workplace may be one of many places where individuals experience a sense of purpose and positive spiritual health overall (Exhibit 5). A person may find their job unfulfilling, but the flip side could also occur: people can find deep fulfillment in paid or unpaid work. About two-

Exhibit 5

Across all generations, spiritual health factors, such as mission-driven work, are important to respondents when considering a future employer.

Importance of spiritual health considerations when selecting a future employer, by generation,¹ %



¹Question: How important do you think spiritual health considerations (such as strong, purpose-driven work; mission statement; opportunity for pro bono work) are in selecting a future employer?
 Source: McKinsey Health Institute Global Gen Z Brain Health Survey (2022), Gen Z oversample (includes respondents aged 13–24); weighted by gender, age, and education levels. Dates fielded: Aug 26–Nov 2, 2022; n = 31,819

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thirds of Gen Z respondents, for example, said spiritual health considerations, such as a purposeful mission statement and opportunities for pro bono work, were “very important” or “important” when it came to selecting an employer. Seventy percent of millennials and 66 percent of Gen X reported the same.

However, having a sense of purpose at work cannot override negative elements, such as toxic behavior and burnout.¹² Additionally, individuals may prefer not to seek purpose in the workplace; instead, they may turn to avenues like volunteering, helping family members, participating in a religious or spiritual community, or all of the above. Still, recognizing the role the workplace can play in promoting spiritual health is an element of total employee holistic health, and creating opportunities for purpose in the workplace may be essential to the future of work.

Spiritual health can be framed as part of an individual’s overall well-being. Seeking purpose and meaning, connecting with what matters, and acting with intention can be a lifelong journey, much like the need to regularly assess one’s physical, mental, and social health. “Some of us are more predisposed than others to feeling spiritually connected. . . . But we can all cultivate this natural

capacity and build our spiritual muscle,” notes [Lisa Miller](#), researcher on spiritual health and author of *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (Random House, August 2021).

Similar to mental health, while spiritual health is personal to each individual, strong communities can be essential to increasing spiritual well-being for people around the world, along with other dimensions of health. Social, public, and private stakeholders can explore ways to help people find purpose and space for self-reflection in order to boost holistic health. These ways may include ensuring city residents have access to natural or green spaces that provoke reflection or exploring how community-level endeavors can improve people’s overall well-being. Another consideration for employers is how to better convey their appreciation for mission-based work to employees or how workplaces can encourage a holistic view of health. Other potential actions may simply include decreasing stigmas about discussion of spiritual health.

For those who want to cultivate spiritual health, the path may begin with recognizing its role in overall well-being. And starting the conversation on spiritual health could be an important first step to improving the health of ourselves and others.

¹² Jacqueline Brassey, Brad Herbig, Barbara Jeffery, and Drew Ungerman, “[Reframing employee health: Moving beyond burnout to holistic health](#),” McKinsey Health Institute, November 2, 2023.

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