



## Exploring the Lived Experience of Gen Zs with Mild Depressive Tendencies through a Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model

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### Abstract

There is a notable increase in mental health concerns, especially post-pandemic. However, there has not been much research in the Philippines that explored the experiences of young people fighting against depressive tendencies. This paper explores the lived experiences among selected Generation Zs with mild depressive tendencies using an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Twelve participants were individually interviewed. The findings highlight the importance of understanding personal emotions and the factors affecting individual mental well-being. Family interaction, personal relationships, and negative self-evaluation are elements that heighten the risk of depressive symptoms. However, Gen Zs consciously engage in activities that could conquer their feelings of depressive tendencies. An intervention program is proposed for future use among youth and their families.

*Keywords:* depression, depressive tendencies, Gen Z, biopsychosocial-spiritual

### Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the world and the mental well-being of many was adversely affected. Based on the meta-analyses conducted by Racine et al. (2021) mental health difficulties increased during the pandemic, especially depressive and anxiety symptoms. A significant increase in mental health problems occurred in the first nine months of the pandemic, mainly internalized difficulties such as emotional and peer problems (Lehmann et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the increase of psychiatric symptoms, especially in youth. This results in school-related problems, relational issues, and other responsibilities which are associated with an increase in depressive symptoms (Hawes et al., 2021).

Most vulnerable groups at the time were children, youth, and women because of closures of schools and universities, remote work, and strict quarantine measures worldwide. Children's emotional and physical health was negatively impacted by the lack of social interactions with peers. Young adult faced the possibility of being deprived of quality education, employment, and access to other opportunities for growth and development, and women who are often responsible

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for primary caregiving responsibilities, were under stress of contracting COVID-19 (Almaty, 2020).

The present study primarily focused on the population of Generation Z as they cover a great population of “youth” in today. The Gen Z is the age group who face difficult transitions from puberty to young adulthood and is an interesting population to study. Generation Z also known as Gen Z/ iGen/ postmillennial is the generation of people born in the late 1990's early 2000s specifically those who were born between 1996 to 2010. They are also known as the “Facebook generation”, “Digital Natives”, “Switchers”, “Dotcomchildren”, “Net generation”, “iGeneration”, “C - Connection – generation”, “D - Digital –generation”, and “R - Responsibility – generation”. They do not know the world without the internet, they make quick decisions, and engage in multitasking (Csobanka, 2016). Gen Z can function both in the real and the virtual world. They are considered always connected (online) and responsible. So they can be viewed as professionally active despite their young age, making them more mature and independent (Dolor, 2018). It is of interest to explore the life of Gen Zs who have been dealing with depressive tendencies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study utilized a phenomenological approach in understanding reality from individual's experiences and feelings. Thus, this study acknowledged, explored, and understood the lived experiences of our Generation Z with depressive tendencies using the 4Ps formulation: (Predisposing, Perpetuating, Precipitating and Protective Factors). This is a biopsychosocial-spiritual model. Furthermore, the basis for an intervention program was identified.

#### **The biopsychosocial- spiritual Model and Depression Factors**

The biopsychosocial-spiritual model is a holistic approach to understanding one's experiences and is used by social workers in evaluating clients' needs, problems, and strengths from different views (Richman, 2022). Research justified the effectiveness of using this model in understanding clients in a subjective manner and improving the health outcomes of patients (Taukeni, 2020). It was originally proposed by George Engel in 1997 and it was only limited to biological, psychological, and social dimensions of health outcomes (Bolton & Gillett, 2019). Hence, the concept in transpersonal psychology of Assagioli was integrated with the biopsychosocial model in understanding the spiritual side of human life.

The biological domain refers to the physical/ physiological activities and experiences among Gen Zs. Van Den Bosch and Meyer-Lindenberg (2019) stated that chronic stress and dysregulation of the hypothalamic pituitary axis (HPA) change the positive reward pathways in the brain and modify the levels of noradrenergic and serotonergic receptors, which in turn alter the risk of depression. Meanwhile, people who are late or evening types are more vulnerable to depression, specifically in their cognitive reactivity. Eveningness has been linked to an increased cognition (Antypa et al., 2017). This could mean that, because of the silence and being alone at night, a person may feel deeply isolated to the point of feeling soaked in sadness.

The psychological domain deals with their emotions, thinking and feeling towards certain things. Concerning cognitive factors in depression, Beck's idea of automatic thought has been used by some studies to investigate the occurrence and maintenance of depression. Study of Mohammadkhani et al. (2018) found out that patients with depressive disorders scored higher

than non-depressed groups on measure of negative automatic thoughts; highly depressed individuals reported a notably higher frequency of negative automatic thoughts.

The social domain refers to Gen Z's interaction, connection and relationships with people. A higher number of stressful life events (SLE) produce a greater risk of depression compared to those with low or no SLE (Arnau-Soler et al., 2018). Non-disclosure, or avoiding sharing mental health problems with others, could increase the likelihood of isolation and withdrawal leading to depression (Achterbergh et al., 2020). Stressful life events can heighten the possibility of developing serious mental problems during adolescence.

Lastly, the spiritual domain talks about the spiritual practices that Gen Zs do such as prayers, devotions, church services, etc. Some research identified the role of spirituality and religiosity in the life of people. According to Pearce et al. (2015), psychotherapists employed their clients' religious practices to identify clients' negative ideas in an effort to reduce depressive symptoms (as cited in Captari et al., 2018). Religious participation reduces the development of depression among adolescents and young adults as it serves as a protective aid against depression (Aggarwal et al. 2023). Spiritual practices serve as a safeguarding mechanism for someone's feelings of distress and thus promotes better mental health. In fact, Magliano et al. (2020) found that individuals are more likely to seek and consult priests first, rather than psychologists or psychiatrists, due to their warmth and ability to listen quickly.

### **Methodology**

In this study, phenomenological approach, a qualitative design was incorporated to understand and describe the lived experience of Gen Zs with mild depressive tendencies. Phenomenology attempts to unify philosophy, science, and the lifeworld and gives importance to its descriptions based on experience (Davidsen, 2013). In addition, the purpose of phenomenology is to concentrate on the phenomena and explore the complexity of lived experiences from an individual's point of view.

Primarily, phenomenology does not limit itself on describing the structure of experiences alone but it also allows the interpretative approach or hermeneutics, allowing to reject the idea of suspending judgment and opinions which is also considered as one of the major theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological approach.

The current study explored, described and interpreted how selected Gen Zs made sense of their experiences as those with depressive tendencies and gave freedom on the essences of their lived experiences and give meaning to their lived world as it is without being contaminated

#### *Sampling Procedure*

Purposive sampling was used in the study wherein participants were selected based on their shared characteristics and traits. A total of twelve (12) students whose experiences were explored, investigated and interpreted.

#### *Instrumentation*

There were two (2) instruments used prior to and during the individual interviews. The PHQ-9 form was used as an assessment tool to determine the severity level of Gen Z's depressive tendencies. It is a nine-item depression tool to check a patient's overall depression severity. The interview guide was used in pilot testing. A supervising psychologist suggested

questions to revise due to the usage of the word “depression” and advised changing it to “sadness” or “lack of motivation” to avoid self-diagnosis. However, it was anticipated that this will limit the participants’ responses. Nonetheless, during the actual interviews the difference between “depression” and “depressive tendencies” was clearly explained to prevent confusion.

The interview guide was pilot tested on a female student, age 17, after which, some of the questions were modified based on the results of the first pilot testing. Questions were later validated by two psychologists, one registered psychometrician and a faculty with a doctoral degree in psychology. It was pilot tested the second time to see the accuracy of the revised items and the interview flow.

### *Ethical Consideration*

An Informed Consent Form (ICF) was given and discussed thoroughly online via zoom meeting to every participant prior to the data gathering. The researcher preferred to discuss it directly to the participants since they are all students and she wanted to ensure that questions are answered immediately and clearly. The ICF was sent back to the researcher’s email with an electronic signature of the target participants, some are the actual signatures since the researcher had the chance to meet and discuss the ICF face to face.

The ICF explains the following: Nature and Purpose of the research; Participant selection and voluntary participation (rights to refuse and/or withdraw); procedure of the interview; risks and benefits; reimbursements with regard to participation; explaining the security of confidential information of/about participants; rights to obtain the results of the research; certificate of consent; and contact information of the researcher.

With respect to security of recording on the other party, the participants were prohibited to screen or video record any part of the interviews. The researcher obliged the participants to rotate the camera back and forth to make sure that only the participant is in the zoom meeting and no one is beside him/ her such as parents or siblings.

Moreover, since the present research accommodated participants with higher chance of becoming vulnerable, a distress protocol was provided for their protection and making them at ease. If the participant experience higher level of distress or display uneasiness and/or even uncontrollable behaviors such as crying, shaking, etc., the researcher may pause the interview and the standby psychologist will give immediate support.

Participants were also encouraged to journal their thoughts and feelings after the interview. This is useful for their follow up if necessary and it will give additional data to the research. However, none of them did that. After the interviews, the researcher began to carefully analyzed and transcribed in verbatim the recorded interviews. Reading and rereading of transcription was done as preparation for interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Far Eastern University, ensuring that all ethical standards were observed.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

Participants were recruited from the researcher's workplace. A Google Form: Personal Information Sheet was distributed via college advisers after securing a letter of intent from the college dean and psychology department head. The form served as an invitation for college

students in Bocaue, Bulacan, to join the study. A total of 122 students completed the form, but 11 were excluded due to age and family history of depression. The remaining 111 students were then sent the PHQ-9 form via email to assess depression severity, with 99 responding.

Out of 99 PHQ-9 responses, 43 students showed "mild" depression symptoms. Those not meeting this score either had no symptoms or were at a "moderate" level and were referred for counseling. The 43 students with mild symptoms were contacted via phone or email about the study, but only 19 responded.

The ICF was explained to each respondent with mild depression symptoms. Initially, only 10 students agreed to participate. After reaching out again to 2 non-respondents, 12 participants were secured for the study.

Before the interview, the researcher underwent bracketing to examine her own biases and reactions, ensuring no influence on participants' narratives. Afterwards, participants changed their Zoom name to a pseudonym for anonymity. Each one-hour interview was recorded, with access limited to the participants, researcher, and standby psychologist via unique Zoom links. Cameras were required for all except the standby psychologist. Zoom was used due to COVID-19 restrictions in Bulacan, but this limited participants' ability to share deeper thoughts, which is a study limitation.

### **Data Analysis**

Narratives were transcribed and reviewed multiple times to identify significant words and phrases, which were then condensed into themes. Themes were clustered and cross-checked against the data for accuracy. Repeating patterns were noted, and the themes were developed into narrative accounts. To ensure reliability, the transcripts were proofread and member checking was conducted—participants reviewed and validated their transcripts, signing off on their accuracy. This process allowed the researcher to clarify and confirm the data validity.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was used: familiarizing with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. The themes were reviewed by four auditors (two psychologists and two psychology faculty) to ensure accuracy. The study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through member checking, reflective journaling, and multiple data reviews to validate the truth of participants' lived experiences. Dependability was maintained by documenting procedures and processes, allowing for consistency and future research critique. Transferability suggests the findings can be applied to other contexts or populations, such as mental health research in different groups. Confirmability was ensured by bracketing, which eliminated researcher biases, ensuring findings reflected the participants' narratives.

### **Results**

The study aimed to explore and describe the lived world of Gen Zs, through the analysis of coded data, the study formulated a total of ten themes and two subthemes.

**Table 1** Summary table of all themes

|        | Research Question 1                  | Research Question 2 |
|--------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Themes | Personal Difficulties and Challenges | Cognition           |
|        | Emotions                             | Stress Factor       |
|        | Mental                               | Family Factor       |
|        | Social Related Problems              |                     |
|        | Engaging Hobbies and Interests       |                     |
|        | <i>Subtheme: Spiritual</i>           |                     |
|        | Social Support and Relationship      |                     |
|        | Tension Reduction Activities         |                     |
|        | <i>Subtheme: Positive Well-being</i> |                     |

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the themes for each research question. Research question 1 explored the lived experiences of Gen Zs with Mild Depressive Tendencies in relation to the biopsychosocial-spiritual model. Research question 2 described the understanding and interpretation of Gen Zs towards their lived experiences.

**Table 2** Themes and subthemes that emerged in relation to the actual lived experiences (4Ps factor) vis à vis biopsychosocial-spiritual

| Themes                               | Subthemes           | 4Ps Factor                                |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Personal Difficulties and Challenges | -                   | Predisposing, Precipitating, Perpetuating |
| Emotions                             | -                   | Perpetuating, Precipitating               |
| Mental                               | -                   | Perpetuating, Precipitating               |
| Social Related Problems              |                     | Predisposing, Precipitating               |
| Engaging Hobbies and Interests       | Spiritual           | Protective                                |
| Social Support and Relationship      | -                   | Protective                                |
| Tension Reduction Activities         | Positive Well-being | Protective                                |

**Personal difficulties and Challenges**

This theme highlights participants' personal experiences before, during, and after the pandemic. While the focus is on post-pandemic experiences, many responses reflect ongoing concerns from earlier periods that continue to impact their current lives. "Personal" issues include physical challenges (e.g., sleep and eating problems), psychological struggles (e.g., feelings of isolation and reluctance), and social difficulties (e.g., insecurity, adapting to the "new normal," and focusing on others' problems). These themes are evident in the following responses.

Participant FM explained his fear of getting infected, *“takot pa rin ako na makipagsalamuha sa mga taong nakapaligid sakin, kasi po hindi ko po alam kung... yung virus po kasi andito na po talaga sya eh”* (p.3, L.91-93- FM).

Participant AN mentioned her struggle on adjusting, *“pakikihalubilo sa panibagong tao. Nahirapan po akong mag adjust agad dahil ilang taon din akong nasa bahay lang so ayun po, nanibago po ako”* (p.4, L.128-130- AN). The following statements express personal dealings which arose even in the pre pandemic season. Participant JC explained she found herself not meeting the correct sleeping pattern. She stated *“may times na magiging ako, ay matutulog ako ng mga lam, tas parang bago sumikat ang araw, madilim pa din, gising nako, tas hanggang sumibol na po ulit yung araw until sunshine gising pa din po ako. Yun di na po ulit makakatulog”* (p.8, L.316-318- JC).

One common physical depression symptom is the problem of falling or staying asleep, like what Participant JC had experienced. Also, Participant OL expressed her decision to isolate herself due to personal conflict, she stated *“ina- isolate ko po yung sarili ko sa iba kasi alam ko po yung mga nasa isip ko po yun po yung kumokontrol sakin”* (p.9, L.342-344- OL). Meanwhile, Participant MK mentioned about her insecurities towards other people and how it affects her personally. She said *“Nagkakaran po ng com-comparison. within you po, and sa mga nakikita mo. Lumalala po yung insecurities”* (p.6, L.202-203- MK).

This indicates that one of the factors that affects their depressive tendencies comes from their own personal issues in relation to biological (eating and sleeping pattern), psychological (reluctance and insecurities) and social (isolation) aspect.

### Emotions

This theme refers to the emotional disappointment of the participants such as feelings of unworthiness, inability to express emotion and emotions brought by home-environment issues; ruminating thoughts or feelings and emotional distress. Participant MB has mentioned her thoughts of unworthiness, she stated *“pakiramdam ko po kasi yung mga thoughts ko, mga sasabihin ko hindi sya worth it pakinggan.. so ang ginagawa ko po minsan.. sosolohin ko sya iisipin ko ng iisipin”* (p.3, L.91-93- MB). Meanwhile Participant MK stated disappointment towards her father *“may sama po talaga ng loob na hindi ko mailabas”* (p.2 L.82- AB). This could indicate heavy emotions as a whole, defining what they really feel which are associated with their experiences of depressive tendencies. Meanwhile, study shows that ‘envy’ is linked to depression and negative emotions (Cheng et al., 2023). This indicate that the feelings of unworthiness are caused by lack of being acknowledged, validated and heard.

People who experienced this tend to compare themselves to others who have the freedom to feel positive regard.

### Mental

This theme deals with the life stressors among participants caused by a certain situation that brings worry and mental stress which contributes to their depressive tendencies. This includes overthinking, financial problems, academic stress and unexpected scenarios. These claims can be supported by these statements. Participant MJ reported *“pinansyal po. Pag pinaguusapan po yun syempre po may mga moments po na masasaktan ka po talaga so nadadala po talaga yun”* (p.5, L.163-164- MJ). Also, Participant AN said *“Kapag maraming nangyayari*

*sa paligid ko na hindi ko inaasahan po*” (p.5, L171-172- AN). Aside from that, Participant JC mentioned her restlessness due to school and home demands, said *“pagod po from school sa byahe and sa bahay tas parang at the end of the day you have no one on your side”* (p.13, L.487-488- JC). Lastly, Participant AB reported about her tendencies to overthink when alone *“kapag mag isa ka” - you overthink* (p.2, L77-78- AB).

This shows that the presence of depressive symptoms or tendencies is associated with their current mental state usually brought by a problem or any particular event leading them to feel more stressed and exhausted.

### Social

This theme addresses the participants' family and relationship problem including their past negative experiences, painful words that they receive from their family and others and pending disputes within and outside the family or unresolved conflicts. The following responses illustrate this point. Participant DI reported how she felt *“pinafeel nila sakin na wala talaga akong silbi ganun, pinafeel, pinaramdam nila na hindi nila ako kailangan”* (p.7, L.252-253- DI).

Participant JC stated how she felt invalidated, *“parang growing up po kasi parang everytime na magkakamali ako or something, we're a family of invalidators”* (p.4&6, L.157-158&232- JC). Also, Participant OL declared unhealed issues in the past, she said *“mga experiences ko about bullying”* (p.3, L.112- OL)..*tumatak po na hindi ko po makalimutan”* (p.3, L.116-117- OL). Participant AB mentioned her hurt whenever she was told about her unworthiness, *“kapag sinasabi nya walang silbe, or walang kwenta, wala nang ginagawa tas ganyan pa..”* (p.4, L.133-134- AB). Lastly, participant CH expressed her thought of being unloved *“feeling ko hindi nila ko mahal ganun po”* (P.6, L.233- CH). Being unloved and unwanted plays a significant role in one's well-being. A person may have a negative life experience when they encounter rejection, abuse, or neglect (Mandriota, 2021).

This suggests how substantial family relationships are in the lives of youth. Most of the participants commented about their personal experiences within the family, and the negative experiences which affected them the most were the contributory factors of their depressive tendencies.

### Engaging Hobbies and Interests

This theme demonstrated the leisureactivities they engaged with and the way they leveraged or used their skills and talents in managing their sadness, negative thoughts and feelings. It can be seen in these responses. Participant FM mentioned about his favorite hobbies, he stated *“gumagawa nalang po ako ng mga bagay na malilibang po yung sarili ko. Like pag-i-sketch po pagdi-drawing, yung basketball din po. Tapos pakikinig po sa mga musics”* (p.8, L.281-282- FM). One participant mentioned multiple activities which are helpful for her. Participant JC reported *“usually long walks po ganon (p.15, L.581- JC); nanghihiram din po ako ng bike sa kapatid ko, nagba-bike din po ako, then minsan po ano nagluluto rin for someone pero di ko po kakainin yung niluto ko pero ipapakain ko lang po”* (p.15, L.583-584- JC); *nagsusulat po ako ng poems po”* (p.15, L.593- JC).

Biking and long walks as mentioned by Participant JC are perceived to be enjoyable forms of exercises. These kinds of physical activities promote physical benefits that act in opposition of the development of depression (Chen et al., 2022). Others reported that they



commit themselves to writing/ journaling. Participant OL, on using social media stated *“shinshare ko po sa social media ko naka-only me bale sinusulat ko po dun lahat ng mga ano ko po mga nararamdaman ko po* (p.12, L.463-465- OL). Participant AN said *“Sa mga journals po. Isinusulat ko po kung anong nararamdaman ko and then inilagay ko po lahat ng hinanakit ko* (p.8, L.301-302- AN). Several benefits of writing journals have been linked to reducing depression among adolescents and it gives them an opportunity to assess and evaluate previous, present and even future experiences (Istiqomah et al., 2018). This can help one to recognize and assess his negative triggers, thoughts and behaviors (that are negative), and this creates an avenue to control these emotions. Almost all participants have mentioned that one best way to cope up and to lessen or avoid negative emotion and thinking is to participate in activities that interest them.

### **Spiritual**

This sub theme falls under engaging hobbies and interests that deals with participants' connection to higher being and prayer is one of their main protective factors. The subsequent statements highlight this fact. Participant CH stated *“talagang nagpi-pray po ako every night”* (p.25, L.976- CH) and Participant AB said *“Yung mga hindi mo nasasabi sa ibang tao, masasabi through prayers po”* (p.10, L.403-404- AB). Participant MJ on sharing how her prayers have helped her to release emotion, stated *“Yung pagpi-pray po, kasi yung pagpi-pray po kasi is kapag po syempre naiyak mo na po sya tapos bigla ka pong magla-light up, yung parang magiging bright ung side mo”* (p.12, L.449- 451- MJ). It is believed that prayer has good benefits in physical and psychological health; when there is already a strong connection to God, it helps people to become happier and healthier mentally (Bradshaw & Kent, 2017). Ronneberg et al. (2014) show that prayers found to be beneficial in improving depressive symptoms. From the responses above it implies that prayer associated with religious or spiritual practice provides protective influence which can offer emotional support and a sense of purpose.

### **Social Support and Relationships**

This theme presented participants' social connectedness such as bonding, having a support system and taking a breather. This is evident on the following responses. Participant MJ mentioned *“lumalabas labas po ako kasama mga kaibigan”* (p.7, L.224- MJ) and Participant OL expressed her gratitude towards people who believe in her, she stated *“yung mga taong naniniwala po sakin, mga taong nandyan po handa akong tulungan po, advise-an po”* (p.12, L.466-467- OL). Participant MB affirmed her relationship with her family, in particular with being close enough to share personal secrets, she stated *“Yung sa relationship ko po with my family. Kasi nga po since hindi po ko sanay mag-secret po”* (p.7, L.232-233- MB). Meanwhile Participant CH expressed her desire to go out since she was still affected by the past problems when staying at home, she stated *“gustong gusto ko lang po is umalis ng bahay...parang connected pa rin po sya sa past ko kapag nagstay po ako ng bahay”* (p.18, L.713 & p.19, L.726-727- CH). Feeling socially connected brings an ease to adapt to environment, which is an advantage to become more tolerant in social (Satan, 2020). These responses from the participants imply that social connectedness and support provide emotional comfort and understanding. Connection with networks such as family and friends can provide insights and better solutions to problems.

### Tension Reduction Activities

The theme emerged describes the participants' self-gratification, emotion releasing channel and beneficial pastime. Some participants see eating and rewarding oneself as helpful tools to release emotion. Participant JC mentioned "*main routine ko po talaga si kumain ng dark chocolates or kung wala pong chocolates available kumakain po talaga ko ng comfort food ko*" (p.15, L.571-572- JC). Participant AN, on finding way to divert her feelings, stated "*yung pagiging busy, naghahanap po ako ng mga pagkakabusy-han ko*" (p.8, L.302-303- AN). Meanwhile, Participants OL tells how she finds having pet as helpful, she stated: "*Yung pusa ko po..lahat po ng nararanasan ko binubulong ko sa kanya, sinasabi ko sa kanya, sya lang yung nagiging motivation ko sa kanya ko lang po nalalabas lahat kasi alam ko kahit di sya nagsasalita uhm nakekwento ko po sa kanya mga experiences ko po*" (p.14, L.520- 523- OL). Martin et al. (2021) mentioned that pet owners were unlikely to be depressed due to attachment and commitment to their pets. They probably received affection and love which are good for their emotional well-being.

Most of the participants concluded that engaging in such activities helped them reduce tension and assist them in managing their stress well. Engaging in certain hobbies is a good way to divert attention after a stressful day, and it promotes psychological well-being as drawing and creative activities reduce stress and relaxation (Hartono, 2022). Also, participating in youth sports prevents the development of serious mental health problems such as suicidal ideation and attempts (Swann et al., 2018).

### Positive Well-being

This sub theme under tension reduction activities addresses personal empowerment, wellness and relaxation among youth as one of their protective factors against depressive tendencies. This becomes evident through the responses that follow. Participant MK reported "*Meron po akong mindset na "everything happens for a reason."* It's either hindi po ito para sakin o talagang hindi ko pa oras (p.121, L.821-822- MK). Participant DI, on focusing on her skills and talents as part of her coping, stated "*kapag nakafocus po ako sa talents ko sa mag skills ko parang binibigyan ko ng halaga yung sarili ko, ng time po, uhm mas worth it* (p.13, L.501-502- DI). Participant AB highlighted the benefits of crying, she mentioned "*Tapos after mo maiyak makakapag pahinga ka kasi makakatulog ka... And that's the best feeling po..*" (p.10, L.405-406- AB). One participant explained how her experiences have helped her to overcome as well. Participant OL stated "*nagiging strong po ako sa mga experiences ko po* (p.13, L.487-488- OL), she added "*gusto ko pong labanan yung mga tension na naranasan ko po kahit po hirap na hirap po ako*" (p.13, L.497- 498- OL). This appears to convey that the coping mechanisms mentioned previously can positively contribute to participants' comfort and relief, good mindset, self-confidence, making them happy and strong.

### Cognition

This theme discusses the meaning making and interpreting of the lived experiences of Gen Zs with mild depressive tendencies which includes their negative views and depressive thoughts. This is evident in the following statements. Participant OL highlighted her view of the world, she stated "*Unfair po ang mundo sa akin. Parang galit po sakin yung mundo. Parang nacreate lang po ako dito para ano, para saktan*" (p.8, L.296-297- OL). Same thing with Participant AN, she stated "*parang ang bigat ng mundo ko po ganun, tsaka parang gusto ko na*

*lang umiyak*” (p.2, L.55-56- AN). Meanwhile, Participant CH shared her experience whenever she remembered what she went through, she said “*Sinasaktan ko lang yung sarili ko ganon po*” (p.16, L629- CH). It is noticeable in their responses that Gen Zs tend to view their world and self in a negative lens.

### **Stress Factors**

This theme deals with participants' stress factors such as financial difficulties and senses of desolation and rumination. Participant RJ, shared his experience during the time of pandemic, he said “*nagsimula po kalagitnaan ng pandemic dahil sa lockdown kasi yung magulang ko po nawalan po ng trabaho tapos namomroblema din po ako dahil sa pag-aaral ko dati akala ko ‘di ko matutuloy tapos tawag dito, tapos nagkanda utang-utang kami dahil na rin naubos yung ipon namin*” (p.3, L.86-89- RJ). Problems that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic are what Participant RJ was affected about. Financial instability within the family may lead to youth depression and hinder academic performance or achievement (Jiang et al., 2022). Participant FM mentioned that he used to recall his painful experience and how it affects him until now, he stated “*hanggang ngayon po yung sakit andito pa rin po*” (p.5 L.177- FM). This is a proof that stress can be a major factor on Gen Zs depressive tendencies. Prolonged stress and development of depression can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms when not managed properly.

### **Family Factor**

The theme emerged on how Gen Zs make meaning and interpret their experience concerning family matters. This covers parental dynamics like internal family issues, parental attributes and lack of parental presence; negative views and feelings such as envy toward other family members, and feelings of invalidation. It can be seen in the following responses. Participant DI, on her longing for parent's care, she stated “*parang need ko ng pag-aalaga ng magulang, hindi ko kasi naramdaman yun eh*” (p.4, L.147- DI). This is similar to Participant FM, he reported “*kung nasa tabi ko po sila nung mga time na kailangan ko po sila, siguro po hindi ako lumaki na ganito*” (p.2, L.53-54- FM). However, some participants resented when they encounter family arguments. Participant AB stated “*pagka halimbawa nagsasabi sya ng basta ma'am pag galit sya sa isa, galit din sya sa lahat. Tapos hindi ko naman po ano, pero sa akin masakit po talaga na*” (p.3, L.96- 99- AB). Similar with Participant CA, she said “*pag magsasabi ako ng hinanakit baka sabihin ang drama drama mo ganun*” (p.4, L.125-126- CA).

As we all know, family factors play a significant role in shaping the experiences and the well-being of youth. The responses mentioned above indicate that they lack family support, and this bring negative influence at some point to the youth. Studies that supported this claim are provided in the discussion part.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this research is to explore the lived experiences of Gen Zs with mild depressive tendencies. Results show that Gen Zs, regardless of the effects brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced and are still experiencing depressive tendencies prior to the event mentioned. The research explored the experiences using the Predisposing, Precipitating, Perpetuating and Protective factors (4Ps) model in case formulation vis-à-vis biopsychosocial-spiritual.

**Table 3** Themes that emerged in reference to Gen Zs' interpretation and meaning towards the experiences associated with depressive tendencies.

| Themes         |
|----------------|
| Cognition      |
| Stress Factors |
| Family factors |

The participants' depressive tendencies experience lies in different categories. First, the categories under the theme 'Personal' are connected- but not directly to psychological and social related issues. To clarify, participants' statements explained and highlighted their personal concerns which are related to their depressive tendencies such as difficulty adjusting to new normal; being deprived of (with) belongingness; insecurities; comparison between self and others. (, etc.) These kinds of determinants are also found to increase the risk of depression among youth (Remes et al., 2021). Gen Zs were born in a world of technology where social media has to be the standard of lifestyle. According to Hou et al. (2019), too much exposure to social media can harm mental health thus reducing self- esteem. This suggests that participants frequently concentrate on comparing themselves to other individuals, which highlights their shortcomings and imperfections. The results demonstrate that the study's participants have had personal challenges and difficulties in the past and present, particularly with regard to their own concerns about adjusting.

In addition, the negative emotions such as emotional disappointment and distress are one of youth's experiences of depressive tendencies. It is believed that negative emotions might decrease the level of resilience and quality of life among youth (Geng et al., 2020). Thoughts of unworthiness which is the common response of participants of the present study relates to negative self-evaluation in general.

Consistent with Orchard et al. (2018), it was found out that depressed individuals tend to create negative adjectives and evaluate themselves as 'worthless' and 'useless'. In contrast, the ability of controlling and managing one's emotions is linked to fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Somerville et al., 2023). Participants value the strong feelings brought by negative thought patterns, making them more susceptible to emotional distress, as evidenced by their own narratives. However, if they put room for learning how to manage and control emotions, there is a less risk of developing depressive symptoms.

On the other hand, one factor that increases the risk for depression are life stressors such as academic stress, financial instability and unexpected life events related to youth's experiences of depressive tendencies. Mofatteh (2021) mentioned that psychological, academic, biological and lifestyle can be considered as risk factors of stress, anxiety and depression. Similar to Li et al. (2021), present study highlights that the exposure to daily stress and negative life events can increase the risk of depression among young generations. In contrast, while unfavorable life experiences do not directly predict depression, a study by G. Chen et al. (2023) suggests that rumination raises the likelihood of developing depressive symptoms. The general stress our youth is facing is the same with other generations, we face different stressful life scenarios which are not always easy to deal with. Based on Wu et al. (2020), college students experience more

detrimental mental health impact from ‘uncertainty stress’ than either general life or academic stress – due to its inconsistency and unpredictability.

We should also recognize that it is inevitable to personally experience family conflicts; however, it plays a significant role on someone’s personality and behavior. Five out of the twelve participants belong to a broken family, either separated from one or both parents or feeling neglected. Some have a ‘not so good’ relationship within the family. Research says that conflict in the family loses warmth, increases tension and creates a sense of isolation which increases the possibility of depression (Du, 2021), and similar to Ozturk et al. (2021), present study shows that dissatisfaction within the family functioning is found to be related with adolescent’s depression. In contrast, a family's ability to foster "conversation orientation"—that is, candid, relaxed, and nonjudgmental communication—can work as a buffer against an adolescent's depression (Zhou et al., 2022). This emphasized how important family dynamics are to a person's overall wellbeing. Life starts in the family; when someone is unable to received love and support, they lose their emotional attachment to others, which can lead to more significant problems afterwards.

Nevertheless, Gen Zs create personal safe space by engaging in hobbies, talents and interests which serve as participants’ protective factors against depressive tendencies. They make sure that they at least practice engagement to lessen the feelings of depression. Present study agrees Johanna et al. (2021), that shows that the more an individual engages in leisure time activities, the more it has a positive effect on mental health. Young people who develop personal interests, hobbies (taking care of a pet, reading, listening to music, relaxation, etc.), play sports had lower risk of depression (Gawrych et al., 2022). This can aid to lower stress level and to rebuild confidence and sense of purpose aside from being entertained as well. This could reduce the risks of developing depressive symptoms. In contrast, while leisure is generally good for mental well-being, Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020) suggests that excessive leisure time such as social media and gadgets use can lower self-esteem and lead to feelings of life discontentment.

One common practice among the participants is praying. The Philippines is the only Christian nation in South- East Asia. Several people are involved in different religious affiliation or at least do spiritual practices on a daily basis. In the present study, most participants reported how prayers act as a protective factor against negative situations. A meta-analysis of Aggarwal et al. (2023) concluded that the greater religious practices and participation, the lower the depressive symptoms. The study is aligned with Ogletree et al. (2019) findings which indicates that active religious coping, like having peer church support, is linked to lower depression while holding to positive religious belief alone does not strongly correlate with the decrease in depression.

This implies that religious and spiritual practices can be supported by other coping mechanisms to become more effective protective factors against negative mental health outcomes. We have personal encounters on how spiritual practices support us in facing our daily challenges, and we have different interpretations of their effects on us. Being in a Christian country, part of our culture is to get involved in religious and spiritual activities such as going to church and do prayer. The responses of the participants b were supported by Aggarwal et al. (2023) claim. In contrast, there is also called “spiritual depression” a term first introduced in the book of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones – *Spiritual Depression: Its causes and Cures*. It is a feeling of being disconnected with God, hence, having an inability to find hope and purpose. People can

experience spiritual depression when they are disconnected with God because connection implies dependence on the Supreme Being. When man is separated from God, he is said to have spiritual depression. A person with no one to lean on in times of crisis would eventually manifest depression symptoms. Connection with God makes one strong in faith, on the other hand, without God, all effort is exerted by human which is limited. This could be the reason why Philippines has a low rate in suicide compared to neighboring countries. It is the belief in God that makes one hopeful. It is the single word 'hope' that can prevent suicide attempts.

In light of how social support and relationships bring a sense of identity and self-confidence, participants in this study have mentioned how bonding and connection to family members have helped them to cope up properly. Consistent with Badri et al. (2021), it was explained that students with better relationships with family, have social connection to relatives and friends have less psychological distress and are unlikely to feel depressed. Similar to the study of Mariani et al. (2021) that mentioned that social support can lower the risk of anxiety and depression. In addition, Mofatteh et al. (2020) mentioned that supportive social networks strengthen the emotional well-being of an individual which can avoid the risk of having depression. In contrast, lack of social connection has been linked to various conditions related to physical and psychological health including heart disease, poor nutrition, depression, social anxiety, psychosis, and suicidal thoughts (Morina et al., 2021). The findings on the advantages of social connection in the present study is highly much supported by the studies mentioned above.

Strengthening the bond with significant others could save and prevent people from feeling mentally unhealthy. In the Sikolohiyang Filipino, we have this three domains of "hindi ibang tao": "Pakikipagpalagayang-loob" (act of mutual trust); "Pakikisangkot" (act of joining others) and "Pakikipagkaisa" (being one with others). These are Filipino values that show that we loved being with, supported and accompanied by. In contrast, lack of social network and support can impair resilience and may increase the chance to develop depression among young adults. Additionally, traits like low agreeableness and extraversion increase risk of depression (Choi et al., 2019).

On a related note, several coping mechanisms participants used to do, have been linked to tension reduction activities which includes crying, having pets, spending time outdoors, etc. It is undeniable that most of us release heavy emotions through crying, Benton (2022) on Psych Central blog stated, crying provides physical feeling of satisfaction. The findings of the present study agree with Gračanin et al. (2014) which explained that crying is a self-soothing and mood enhancing behavior because it releases 'feel good' hormones. Meanwhile, Chakma et al. (2021) found out that strong bond to pets tends to experience less depression. The tension reduction activities are not limited to those mentioned above. Other activities that participants think effective are spending time outdoors, rewarding self and doing sublimation. Consistent with G. W. Ho et al (2018), the current study claimed that people prioritize companionship, lending ears, prayers and support as their effective health-seeking attitude but it also disagreed in terms of depression literacy, because Filipino youth nowadays are more aware of depressive symptoms.

Lastly, the present study found out that one way to cope up against depressive tendencies is to build positive well-being by having personal empowerment and doing wellness and relaxation. Personal empowerment deals with people's control over their own lives which includes meaning making, building self-confidence and even creating principles and mindsets. It is said that individuals with greater purpose create goals; they become more hopeful and engage

in much more meaningful activities (Barcaccia et al., 2023). Other forms of wellness and relaxation that seem to be effective on participants' end are walking, riding a bike and even find comfort through crying. Consistent with the study of Chekroud et al. (2018), findings suggest that those who used exercise regularly have fewer days of feeling down. Team-based sports like basketball tend to have similar benefit since such activities promotes resilience and reduce feelings of depression.

Most of the participants interpret and make meaning of their experiences as how they actually perceive it. Unfortunately, they view themselves and the world negatively and depressive thoughts occur as well. A theory in psychology called "cognitive triad" states that depression is characterized by a negative outlook, a lack of hope for the future, and a tendency to dwell on negative experiences from the past (Marchetti & Pössel, 2022). Hoffrage (2023) explored that cognition is a cornerstone of our existence that shapes our reality and influences our way of interacting with our world. This is the main reason why most of the participants see their future world based on what they currently see on themselves. In contrast, they do not holistically evaluate themselves negatively; they still use prosocial words such as "kind" and "caring". Just because they view themselves and the world negatively, does not mean they never had positive evaluation (Hards et al., 2023).

Primarily, it was also found that their depressive tendencies are related to their feelings of stress - in financial difficulties, feeling of desolation and rumination. Villafania (2023) found out that during the pandemic, mostly (Filipino youth respondents) are stressed - tend to overreact into situations, getting agitated, trouble to relax, etc. Based on the present study, participants' stress factors are mostly during the effect of the pandemic. This could indicate that since over the 2 years of lock down, they may have highlighted the usual problems they were encountering, resulting from rumination and thinking repeatedly of their stressors aggravated by the unexpected scenarios and problems. However, in contrast to this, the almost two years of lockdown revealed decrease in anxiety and depression as well as insomnia among Chinese adolescents and this pattern is probably due to lower academic pressure (Yang et al., 2023). This gap may indicate that Chinese and Filipino youth differ in terms of problems encountered during the pandemic. Filipino youth were more concerned about social connectedness, family issues and financial instability, while the Chinese youth pandemic is quite an advantage causing them to feel lower academic pressure.

Moreover, there is vast studies that highlights the importance of family relationship and connectedness and how it affects people's well-being. Most of the participants reported that they have limited connection and interaction with their parents. They crave for their presence, love, care and support. Based on the findings, lack of cohesiveness weakens emotional security. In addition, limited peer and teacher support are associated to negative mental health outcomes such as depression (Wang et al., 2023). Butler et al. (2022) claimed that family and school peer support are good factors for children and adolescents' mental well-being. This suggests that if someone receives enough care and support from their significant others, they are less likely to have negative outcomes like stress, anxiety or depression. In contrast, according to Verhagen et al. (2017), individuals who have a strong need of belongingness while experiencing low relationship satisfaction leads to significant loneliness.

### **A Proposed Intervention Program**

The proposed intervention program aims to reach the schools and community in extending their ability to promote mental health awareness and assist those who need help mentally. The researcher wants to tap the following areas of concern:

#### **Negative Cognitions/ Ways of thinking**

Maladaptive thoughts and negative thinking patterns are common to young individuals. They tend to live on what is happening in their mind. Consequently, this influences their emotions and behavior. The researcher wants to tap this concern by providing psychoeducation, seminars and workshops on dealing with cognitive distortions and practice cognitive restructuring.

#### **Problems dealing with emotions**

One way of practicing resilience is through regulating our emotions on how we respond to different situations. Youth should be taught practical strategies on how to face and tackle everyday struggles.

#### **Unmet physical needs such as sleeping, eating and exercising**

There are noticeable differences between generations in terms of lifestyle. Youth nowadays do not prioritize the basic needs of well-being due to distractions and other circumstances. They tend to compromise good sleep, eating habits and exercise leading to an unhealthy living. Taking care of our mental health is as significant as taking care of our physical body, yet if one is deprived of these basic needs, it is difficult to reach positive wellbeing.

#### **Stress**

Another area of concern is personal problems of the Gen Zs. Based on the result of the present study, they show lack or limited resiliency to problems. Struggles are inevitable but it takes courage and ability to face it. That is what the researcher tries to emphasize, to make our youth resilient, ready for the battlefield of life and involve themselves into activities that promote better well-being.

#### **Family relationship problems**

Family and relationship problems are one of the areas of concern among Gen Zs. To address this issue, the researcher aims to facilitate more collaborative engagement between youth and their families. Based on previous studies which are repeatedly mentioned in the discussion part, it explained how family involvement is crucial to one's well-being. By providing activities for each family, not only we promote awareness, but we add another support for our youth.

#### **Social relationship problems**

Common problem among youth is their longing for connection. Building relationships creates a sense of belongingness which is significant for one's well-being. This area targets to empower social relationships for a strong support system. Youth space refers to the 'youth friendly space' wherein young individuals not only have access to mental health but this promotes engagement to recreational activities (Malla et al., 2018) and volunteer works. Youth



suffering from depressive symptoms can find a sense of purpose, hope, expand network and promote positive self- concept through volunteering (Ballard et al., 2021).

### **Lack of mental health resources**

The more they are aware, the more they know what to do. It is our role as mental health advocates to tap schools, barangays and municipalities on promoting easy access to mental health for youth and others. Thus, it is the most convenient and effective way to reach people who are lacking mental health resources. As per the study, the National Center for Mental Health has received a significant increase in funding, amounting to over 2.15 trillion as compared to the budget for 2022 (Statista, 2023). It is thought that the Philippine government has become more aware of the need for additional mental health care facilities, initiatives, and programs.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher encourages other researchers to, first, continue to do qualitative research in line with the youth dealing with depressive tendencies using a wider range of population to get enough and richer accounts. We can see several quantitative researches about Gen Zs; however quantitative studies cannot fully capture the subjectivity of human experiences and it restricts the ability to explore connections of responses and themes.

Second, it is recommended that when writing qualitative research, it is better to have an interrater reliability for the assurance of agreement in assessing participants' responses. This could strengthen more the trustworthiness of participants' narratives analysis.

Third, it is also best to utilize an approach that is connected to the Filipino lens so the experiences of Gen Zs can be better explored and understood. Several researches were done in Western or other Asian countries, and utilizing researches that is Filipino aligned is great in fostering the growth in the Philippine research.

Lastly, other researchers can provide a full-blown intervention that can be used in other settings like clinics or hospitals, and they can also explore other factors that lead to youth depressive tendencies.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the present study is that participants may not cover enough samples as representatives of Gen Zs with mild depressive tendencies. In addition, the individual interviews were done through zoom meetings which may limit the ability and confidence of the participants to share experiences and information that can supposedly be added to obtaining richer data. Moreover, the supporting studies included above were mostly from western countries and may not be completely significant in Asian culture. Nonetheless, it is the edge of the present study to explore these experiences of Gen Zs in the post pandemic era in the Philippines. Also, there are no sub themes that emerged for some of the main themes.

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