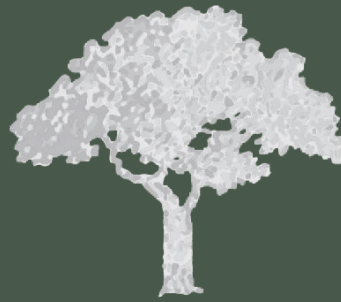




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THE GLOBAL MIND HEALTH CRISIS, ITS ROOT CAUSES, AND HOW THE FAMILY OFFICE CAN SUPPORT DEEPER ENGAGEMENT ACROSS GENERATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A major international research study, the Global Mind Health Report 2025, published by Sapien Labs, has confirmed what many families are quietly observing in their own homes: the mental functioning and day-to-day resilience of young adults has declined dramatically over the past two decades, and the decline is sharpest in the world's wealthiest countries. Almost half of adults aged 18 to 34 now experience mental health challenges of clinical significance. Adults aged 55 and older, by contrast, are largely unaffected.

This memo summarizes the research, explains the four root causes the study identifies, and then sets out how our family office can take a proactive and thoughtful role in supporting the wellbeing of family members across generations. We give particular attention to a dimension the research points toward but does not fully explore: the importance of right-hemisphere brain engagement, the mode of attention associated with creativity, relationship, meaning, and presence, and the role that practices such as photography, craft, music, and contemplative activity can play in restoring it.

We believe this is not peripheral to the family's interests. It sits at the heart of what it means to raise flourishing, capable, and purposeful people across generations.

KEY FINDING FROM THE RESEARCH

Young adults aged 18–34 have an average Mind Health Quotient score of just 36 out of a possible 200, compared to 101 for adults aged 55 and over. The four drivers identified are: weakening family bonds, declining spirituality, early smartphone ownership, and consumption of ultra-processed food. Countries with the worst outcomes are, counterintuitively, the wealthiest including the UK, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States.

PART I

UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS

WHAT IS BEING MEASURED

The Mind Health Quotient (MHQ) is not a measure of happiness or life satisfaction. It is a composite score drawn from 47 different aspects of mental functioning emotional regulation, social capacity, cognitive performance, resilience, drive, and the connection between mind and body. A score of 100 represents a normally functioning adult population. A score of 36, which is where young adults now sit globally, represents what the researchers call the “Enduring” range: people who are managing to get through life, but who are fully productive and mentally well for only around 70% of the time. Those in the “Distressed” or “Struggling” categories, currently 41% of all 18–34-year-olds, meet criteria for one or more diagnosable mental health conditions in 89% of cases.

This is not a matter of young people being more willing to talk about how they feel, or of assessment tools becoming more sensitive. The researchers control for these effects. Something has genuinely and measurably changed in the functional capacity of younger generations.

THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS

*The wealthier the country, the worse the mind health of its young adults.
Increased spending on therapy and psychiatric services
has not moved the needle.
The problem lies upstream of treatment.*

The research reveals a striking geographic pattern: the countries with the worst mind health outcomes for young adults are the most developed and the most affluent. Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania sit at the top of the rankings. The United Kingdom, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong sit at the bottom. Most English-speaking Western nations, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, cluster in the lowest quarter.

This is not what economic theory would predict. It points to something specific about modern affluent life that is actively damaging the mental functioning of younger generations even as, and perhaps in part because of, the material conditions of that life have never been more comfortable.

THE FOUR ROOT CAUSES

The research identifies four factors that together explain the majority of the gap in young adult mind health. These are not speculative; they have been tested across large datasets in multiple countries and over several years.

1. Weakening Family Bonds

Only 61% of 18–34-year-olds globally report being close to some or many family members, compared to 75% of those aged 55 and over. Young adults with poor family relationships are nearly four times more likely to score in the clinically distressed range. The research finds that this is not simply a life-stage phenomenon where young people naturally drift from their families and return later. It reflects a genuine generational decline in the quality and depth of family connection. Each younger generation also reports higher levels of parental neglect and emotional unavailability.

2. Declining Spirituality

Spirituality, defined here as a felt sense of connection to something greater than oneself, not necessarily tied to formal religious practice, is a powerful predictor of mind health. Countries where young adults score high on spirituality have MHQ scores around 30 points higher than countries where they score low. Western Europe and the Core Anglosphere sit at the very bottom of the global spirituality rankings for young adults. The research notes that active religious participation is one of the strongest paths to cultivating this sense of connection, but that spirituality is the broader phenomenon and it can be developed outside of formal religion.

3. Early Smartphone Ownership

Gen Z is the first generation to have grown up with smartphones. The global average age of first smartphone ownership among 18–24-year-olds is 14, but the variation is striking: Finland averages 9.9 years, Tanzania and Uganda average 18. The negative effects of earlier smartphone ownership are well-documented: disrupted sleep, exposure to harmful content and cyberbullying, reduced development of social cognition, and a range of adult outcomes including suicidal thinking, dissociation, and aggression. The effects are particularly sharp for children who received a smartphone before age 13. Among the generation following Gen Z, the average age of first ownership is now two years younger still.

4. Ultra-Processed Food Consumption

54% of 18–34-year-olds consume ultra-processed food on most days of the week, compared to 26% of those aged 55 and over. In the United States the figure for young adults reaches 79%. Ultra-processed food is associated with increased depression and with impairments in emotional and cognitive regulation, two of the core capacities the MHQ measures. After controlling for other variables, the researchers estimate that ultra-processed food consumption accounts for 15–30% of the total mental health burden in young people.

PART II

THE RIGHT HEMISPHERE & WHAT IS BEING LOST AND WHY IT MATTERS

TWO MODES OF ATTENTION

To understand what is happening to young people at a deeper level, it helps to draw on the work of psychiatrist and scholar Iain McGilchrist, whose book *The Master and His Emissary* (2009) argues that the two hemispheres of the brain do not divide work along the familiar lines of “logical vs. creative.” Rather, they represent two fundamentally different modes of attending to the world.

The right hemisphere holds the world in broad, open, contextually sensitive attention. It perceives wholes rather than parts, attends to relationship and atmosphere, reads faces and tones and silences, is attuned to the novel and the living, and is the seat of our sense that things matter — that life has meaning, depth, and significance. It is the hemisphere of genuine connection, of contemplative experience, of the sense of the sacred. McGilchrist calls it the Master.

The left hemisphere attends narrowly, analytically, and instrumentally. It takes what the right hemisphere has broadly perceived and breaks it into usable parts. It is the hemisphere of focused problem-solving, literal language, quantification, efficiency, and the manipulation of known things. It is indispensable but only as a servant. McGilchrist calls it the Emissary.

His civilizational argument is that modern Western culture has increasingly allowed the left hemisphere to usurp the role of the right: that we have built a world organized around the left hemisphere’s values, which include speed, productivity, measurability, utility, explicit communication, at the expense of the right hemisphere’s capacities for depth, relationship, meaning, and presence. The result is a world that becomes progressively more efficient and progressively less inhabitable.

The algorithmic feed, the productivity dashboard, the engagement metric — these are not neutral tools. They are the purest expression of left-hemisphere world-building ever devised. They reward what the left hemisphere values and starve what the right hemisphere needs.

HOW THE FOUR FACTORS MAP ONTO THIS FRAMEWORK

Each of the four root causes identified by the Sapien Labs research reflects, in a different way, the progressive starvation of the right hemisphere.

Family Bonds

Family bonds require right-hemisphere capacities to form and sustain: open, receptive attention to another person; sensitivity to the implicit meaning to tone, mood, and what is left unsaid; the willingness to sit with ambiguity and complexity rather than resolving it immediately. A culture organized around left-hemisphere values of efficiency and explicitness quietly erodes these capacities.

Spirituality

Spirituality is precisely what the right hemisphere generates when it attends openly to the world: the sense of connection to something greater, of depth beyond the immediately useful, of meaning that cannot be reduced to function. A culture that measures and optimizes everything leaves no space for the right hemisphere's kind of knowing.

Smartphones

Early smartphone use during childhood and adolescence, the years when both hemispheres are most plastic and most in need of the right experiential nourishment, delivers almost entirely left-hemisphere stimulation: fast, categorical, reactive, explicit, quantified. The right hemisphere, which requires slow, embodied, contextually rich experience to develop, is systematically undernourished during the window when its development matters most.

Ultra-Processed Food

Ultra-processed food is the left hemisphere's answer to nutrition. It extracts the measurable components of food, recombines them efficiently, and delivers them in a form optimized for consumption. It severs the eater from every dimension of relationship that traditional food sustains such as with the natural world, with seasons, with culture, with the people who grew and prepared it. The brain, which is an organ of relationship, registers this severance.

THE FIFTH FACTOR: THE DECLINE OF CREATIVE PRACTICE

There is a fifth dimension that the Sapien Labs research does not address directly but that McGilchrist's framework illuminates clearly: the displacement of active, embodied creative practice by passive digital consumption.

For most of human history, making things like images, music, food, objects, stories was a central feature of daily and community life. These activities were right-hemisphere nourishing in exactly the way that screens are not: they were slow, embodied, contextually sensitive, open to the unexpected, and invested with intention and meaning. They exercised the capacity for sustained attention, for tolerating the productive frustration of working toward a difficult goal, for developing taste and judgment that cannot be reduced to a rule.

Photography is a particularly clear example. A genuine photographic practice, not the reflexive documentation of a smartphone but the disciplined, intentional practice of learning to see, engages both hemispheres in the healthy relationship McGilchrist describes. The act of seeing is right-hemisphere work: broad, open, peripheral, receptive to the whole scene before any element has been named or categorized. The craft of composition, exposure, and printing is left-hemisphere work: precise, sequential, technical. But the left hemisphere here is genuinely in service providing the tools and vocabulary that allow the right hemisphere's vision to be realized. The Emissary serving the Master.

The same is true of music-making, drawing, writing by hand, cooking from ingredients, gardening, woodworking and any other skilled creative practice that requires sustained engagement with the physical world and the development of embodied judgment. These are not hobbies. They are one of the primary ways in which the right hemisphere has historically been nourished and exercised. Their displacement is not culturally neutral.

PART III

HOW THE FAMILY OFFICE CAN HELP

THE ROLE AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Family offices have traditionally focused their human capital work on education, career development, governance, and philanthropic purpose. The research summarized in this memo suggests that there is a deeper and more urgent dimension of human capital that warrants direct attention, the mental functioning and attentional health of family members, particularly those in the 18–34 age range.

We are not proposing that the family office become a mental health provider. We are proposing something more specific and more consonant with our role: that we use the resources, relationships, and convening capacity available to us to create conditions in which family members, particularly younger family members, have genuine access to the experiences, practices, and environments that support right-hemisphere development and overall mind health.

This means addressing each of the five factors, the four identified by the research and the fifth implicit in McGilchrist's framework, in ways that are appropriate to our family's context, values, and resources.

RECOMMENDED AREAS OF ACTION

1. Strengthening Family Bonds

The family office can take a deliberate role in creating the conditions for genuine family connection and not merely family governance or family meetings, but the kind of unstructured, unhurried time together in which real closeness develops.

- Design family gatherings that prioritize shared experience and unstructured time over agenda-driven programming. Meals prepared and eaten together, walks, creative projects, and intergenerational storytelling all support the right-hemisphere relational mode.
- Commission an oral history or visual archive project in which older family members share their life stories with younger ones, creating both a lasting legacy and a context for genuine intergenerational relationship.
- Consider a family sabbatical or retreat program which supports extended time away from professional pressures, designed around shared creative, physical, and contemplative experience rather than productivity.
- Where family members are geographically dispersed, invest in the design of gatherings that are long enough and relaxed enough for genuine connection to develop while resisting the tendency to compress family time into efficient, structured formats.

2. Supporting Spiritual Development and Meaning-Making

The family office can support the conditions in which family members across generations develop a felt sense of connection to something larger than their immediate self-interest — whether that takes the form of active religious practice, contemplative discipline, engagement with the natural world, or deep involvement in a purposeful philanthropic mission.

- Facilitate access to contemplative practice such as meditation retreats, silent retreats, mindfulness programs, or religious community engagement for family members who are interested, without prescribing a particular tradition.
- Ensure that the family's philanthropic activity is genuinely participatory for younger family members, not merely nominal. Hands-on engagement with causes that matter including field visits, relationships with beneficiaries, and involvement in decision-making supports the kind of meaning-making that the right hemisphere is built for.
- Create space for conversations about purpose and meaning within the family council, not only as a governance exercise but as an ongoing practice of reflection and articulation.
- Support access to time in the natural world for extended time, not merely recreation. The relationship between sustained exposure to natural environments and right-hemisphere activation is well-established. This might include family properties designed to facilitate this or supported wilderness or nature immersion experiences.

3. Establishing Healthy Norms Around Technology

The research is clear that the age and manner of smartphone introduction is one of the most powerful determinants of young adult mind health. The family office can support a family-wide conversation and a set of shared norms around technology, particularly for younger family members and the children of the next generation.

- Facilitate a family conversation (ideally with expert input) about smartphone introduction age, social media access, and screen-time norms for children in the family. A shared framework, even a loose one, is more effective than individual family units navigating this alone.
- Ensure that family gatherings are genuinely device-light. Modelling by senior family members matters enormously here.
- Consider funding or facilitating access to specialist support for family members who are already experiencing difficulties with screen dependency or the downstream effects of early smartphone use.
- Where the family has influence over schools or educational institutions through philanthropic relationships, advocate for and support smartphone-free school environments.

4. Nutrition and Physical Wellbeing

The research connection between ultra-processed food and mental health is robust and actionable. This is an area where the family office can support practical change with relatively modest investment.

- Ensure that food provided at all family gatherings and family office events is prepared from fresh, whole ingredients. This is both practically impactful and symbolically significant as it signals that the family takes the relationship between nourishment and wellbeing seriously.
- Support family members who wish to develop their cooking skills as a deliberate creative and wellbeing practice whether through classes, access to a private chef for instruction, or structured cooking experiences during family gatherings.
- Consider a family wellness program that includes personalized nutritional guidance alongside physical and mental health support.
- For family members in educational settings away from home, consider nutritional support packages or access to nutritional advice that helps them navigate food environments that default to ultra-processed options.

5. Supporting Creative Practice as a Right-Hemisphere Discipline

This is the area where the family office has perhaps the most distinctive and underused capacity to act. The restoration of genuine creative practices that are slow, skilled, embodied, intentional is one of the most direct pathways to right-hemisphere engagement available. The family office can make this accessible, credible, and culturally valued within the family.

Photography

Photography is an excellent entry point because it is culturally familiar, requires no special prior skill, and can be engaged at whatever depth suits the individual. The family office might consider:

- Commissioning a family photography program led by a serious practitioner, not a smartphone photography workshop but a course in genuinely seeing. This includes learning to work with a dedicated camera, to compose, to understand light, to wait for a moment rather than document everything.
- Establishing a family darkroom or analogue photography facility at a family property the darkroom as a space for slow, embodied, chemistry-based image-making is one of the most thoroughgoing right-hemisphere environments available.
- Creating an annual family photography exhibition or book with prints made and curated by family members of different generations, shared and discussed together. The physical print is something made, something held, something given and is itself a right-hemisphere object in a way that a digital file is not.
- Supporting family members who wish to develop a serious photographic practice with access to mentorship, equipment, and time and treating it with the same seriousness as a professional or academic development investment.

Other Creative Disciplines

The principles that make photography a right-hemisphere practice apply equally across a range of creative disciplines. The family office might consider:

- Music: Supporting the learning or re-engagement with a musical instrument for interested family members, with access to skilled teachers. Ensemble playing adds the relational dimension that makes music a particularly powerful right-hemisphere practice.
- Drawing and visual art such as life drawing, painting from observation, or printmaking are all practices that require sustained attention to the actual appearance of things rather than our mental categories for them.
- Craft and making: Ceramics, woodworking, bookbinding, textiles, knitting and any other skilled practice that involves sustained engagement with physical materials and the development of embodied judgment.
- Writing practices including longhand journalling, letter-writing, or the keeping of a personal notebook all slow down thought and bring the hand and mind into relationship in ways that typing does not.
- Cooking can also be practice. Not efficient meal preparation but the learning of traditional techniques, the engagement with seasonal and locally sourced ingredients, and the shared act of preparing food for others.

SUMMARY

FAMILY OFFICE ACTION AREAS

AREA	RECOMMENDED FAMILY OFFICE ACTIONS
Family Bonds	• Redesign gatherings around shared experience rather than governance • Commission oral history and visual archive projects • Fund family sabbatical and retreat programs • Ensure gatherings are long enough for genuine connection
Spirituality & Meaning	• Facilitate access to contemplative practices across traditions • Make philanthropic engagement hands-on and participatory • Create space for purpose conversations in family council • Support extended access to natural environments
Technology Norms	• Facilitate family conversation on smartphone age norms • Establish device-light culture at all family gatherings • Fund specialist support for screen-dependency issues • Advocate for smartphone-free schools through philanthropy
Nutrition & Physical Health	• Ensure all family events use fresh, whole-food catering • Support cooking skills as a creative and wellbeing practice • Introduce a family wellness program with nutritional guidance • Provide nutritional support for family members in education
Creative Practice	• Commission a serious photography program with a practitioner • Establish a darkroom or analogue photography space • Launch annual family photography exhibition or printed book • Support music, drawing, craft, writing, and cooking as disciplines • Fund mentorship and tuition for sustained creative development

CLOSING NOTE

The Global Mind Health data is sobering, but it is not fatalistic. The four factors it identifies along with the fifth that McGilchrist's framework illuminates are all, in principle, addressable. They are not fixed features of modern life but consequences of specific choices: choices about how time is spent, what children are given access to, what is modelled and valued within a family, and what structures are put in place to protect what matters most.

Families with the resources and institutional capacity of a well-run family office are in a rare position. They can make these choices deliberately and at scale, creating environments and opportunities that most families cannot. This is not a peripheral responsibility. The quality of attention, relationship, meaning, and creative engagement that the next generation develops or fails to develop will shape not only their individual wellbeing but the character and capability of the family itself across the decades ahead.

The most important investment a family can make is not financial. It is the cultivation of people who are fully present, genuinely connected, and capable of finding meaning in the world they inhabit. The research tells us what threatens that. It is within our power to respond.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

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Tim focuses his practice on helping self-made families align the power of their financial assets with their long-term goals for flourishing as individuals and families across generations.

After graduating from the Marine Military Academy in Harlingen, Texas, Tim earned a business degree from Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a law degree at night from Seton Hall University. His commitment to law school was led by the belief that it would make him a better advisor to established families. He also holds the Accredited Estate Planner AEP® designation.

Tim is a member of the Society of Financial Service Professionals (1983), The Legacy Wealth Coach Network (2000), The Copper Beach Tree Society (2004), a founding member of The Collaboration for Family Flourishing (2006), and a Dean for the Purposeful Planning Institute (2013). He speaks frequently on the subject of incorporating ethics and values into long term financial and estate plans. Tim is the author of The Middle Way: Using Balance to Create Successful Generational Family Wealth Transition Plans. He has published several articles on this subject and has been quoted in periodicals such as the Wall Street Journal. Tim is an Adjunct Professor of Graduate Estate Planning at the American College.

Tim has been married to Donna for 46 years and together they have been friend and guardian to numerous dogs. Tim is an avid fly fisherman, photographer, cyclist, reader, and traveler. He speaks passable Italian.

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