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Stress in America™ 2023: A nation grappling with psychological impacts of collective trauma

Pandemic aftermath includes more stress, chronic health issues

WASHINGTON — U.S. society appears to be experiencing the psychological impacts of a collective trauma in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the results of a new survey by the American Psychological Association. Psychologists warn that a superficial characterization of life being “back to normal” is obscuring the post-traumatic effects on mental and physical health.

The long-term stress sustained since the COVID-19 pandemic began has had a significant impact on well-being, evidenced by a significant increase in reported mental health conditions and chronic illnesses, according to the results of [Stress in America™ 2023 \(/news/press/releases/stress/2023/collective-trauma-recovery\)](#), a nationwide survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of APA among more than 3,000 U.S. adults age 18+.

The survey revealed that those ages 35 to 44 reported the most significant increase in chronic health conditions since the pandemic—58% in 2023 compared with 48% in 2019. Adults ages 35 to 44 also experienced the highest increase in mental health diagnoses—45% reported a mental illness in 2023 compared with 31% in 2019—though adults ages 18 to 34 still reported the highest rate of mental illnesses at 50% in 2023. Adults ages 35 to 44 were more likely to report that money (77% vs. 65%) and the economy (74% vs. 51%) were the factors that cause them significant stress today compared with 2019.

“The COVID-19 pandemic created a collective experience among Americans. While the early pandemic lockdowns may seem like the distant past, the aftermath remains,” said Arthur C. Evans Jr., PhD, APA’s chief executive officer. “We cannot ignore the fact that we have been significantly changed by the loss of more than one million Americans, as well as the shift in our workplaces, school systems and culture at large. To move toward post-traumatic growth, we must first identify and understand the psychological wounds that remain.”

APA psychologists noted that many people had generally positive perceptions of their physical health even when they reported being diagnosed with a chronic condition. More than four in five adults rated their physical health as good, very good or excellent (81%), yet 66% of adults said they have been told by a health care provider that they have a chronic illness.

Furthermore, 81% of adults reported their mental health as good, very good or excellent, while more than one-third (37%) said they have a diagnosed mental health condition—a 5 percentage point increase from pre-pandemic levels in 2019 (32%).

The majority of adults also downplayed their stress; 67% said their problems aren’t “bad enough” to be stressed about, knowing that others have it worse. When asked why they don’t seek treatment, adults’ top reasons were the belief that therapy doesn’t work (40%), lack of time (39%) or lack of insurance (37%). Despite these reasons, nearly half (47%) said they wish they had someone to help manage their stress, and 62% reported they don’t talk about their stress because they don’t want to burden others.

Nearly a quarter of adults (24%) rated their average stress between eight and 10 on a scale of one to 10 where one means little to no stress and 10 means a great deal of stress. This is up from 19% in 2019, before the pandemic. This increase was mirrored across all age groups except those age 65+: 34% of those age 18 to 34 reported this in 2023 (+8 percentage points from 2019); 31% of those 35 to 44 (+10 percentage points); 22% of those 45 to 64 (+4 percentage points); and 9% of those 65+ (-1 percentage point). Parents of children under the age of 18 who ranked their average stress between eight and 10 also saw a significant increase (33% in 2023 vs. 24% in 2019).

In 2023, parents were more likely than other adults to report that financial strain increased in their household (46% vs. 34%), that money is a cause of fights in their family (58% vs. 30%) and that they are more likely to feel consumed by worries regarding money (66% vs. 39%). Most troubling is that compared with other adults, parents of children under the age of 18 were more likely to report that on most days their stress is completely overwhelming (48% vs. 26%), they are so stressed they feel numb (42% vs. 22%) or on most days they are so stressed they can't function (41% vs. 20%).

"Stress affects all systems of the body, so it is crucial that Americans know the serious impacts of stress and what they can do to reduce the effect of stressors in their life, as well as receive help from their health care providers, workplace and support systems to prevent further health crises," said Evans.

More information on the survey findings and how to handle stress is available on the [Stress in America webpage \(/news/press/releases/stress\)](/news/press/releases/stress).

Methodology

The research was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association among 3,185 adults age 18+ who reside in the U.S. (i.e., a national sample). In addition, oversamples allowed for increased totals by race/ethnicity: 805 Black, 811 Latino/a/e and 800 Asian individuals. For adults who identify as Latino/a/e, interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The survey was conducted Aug. 4-26, 2023.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris' surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data for the national sample is accurate to within + 2.5 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

[A full methodology is available](https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2023/collective-trauma-recovery#methodology)

[\(https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2023/collective-trauma-recovery#methodology\)](https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2023/collective-trauma-recovery#methodology).

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