

The Most Stressed Out Generation? Young Adults

The latest survey shows [stress](#) is on the decline overall, but still hover above healthy levels, especially for young adults.

In the national *Stress in America* [survey](#), an annual analysis by Harris Interactive for the American Psychological Association, 35% of adults polled since 2007 reported feeling more stress this year compared to last year, and 53% said they received little or no support from their [health care](#) providers in coping with that heightened stress. The survey involved more than 2,000 U.S. adults ages 18 and older who answered an online survey in August 2012.



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The participants ranked their overall stress level on a scale from one to 10, with 1 being "little or no stress" and 10 being "a great deal of stress." Overall, stress in America has been declining since 2010, when 24% of Americans reported experiencing extreme stress compared to 20% in 2012. And on average, the participants reported a stress level of 4.9, compared to the 5.2 they reported in 2011.

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But that trend masks some concerning hints that those declines aren't deep enough. Most adults said that they considered a stress level of 3.6 to be healthy, or manageable, and current levels remain stubbornly above this mark. The common source of stress involved money, with 69% of participants citing financial problems and conflicts as the primary cause of their anxiety, while 65% fingered work, 61% noted the economy, and 56% pointed to relationship angst.

The most concerning trend emerging from the data, however, is the fact that most Americans don't feel they are managing their stress well, and that the healthcare system isn't there to help them cope. A little over half of the participants said they received little or no support for stress management from their health care providers and while 32% felt it was important to discuss their concerns about stress with their health care providers, only 17% said they actually did.

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"Unfortunately, our country's health system often neglects psychological and behavioral factors that are essential to managing stress and chronic diseases," Norman Anderson, CEO of the APA said in a [statement](#). Among the 69% of high-stress Americans who said their levels have increased in the past year, 33% had not discussed stress management with their provider.

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Despite the fact that stress increasingly touches the life of almost every American, and that there are lifestyle changes that can help to relieve some of the worst aspects of stress, once the doctor's office, it's not a common topic of discussion. About 20% report never talking to their health provider about lifestyle changes to improve their health, 27% don't discuss their progress in making behavior changes to curb stress, 33% never talk about how to manage stress and 38% never discuss their mental health.

Not treating stress can have serious health consequences. The authors write:

Many living with high stress are at a tipping point, faced with potential physical and emotional health challenges if they are not able to get the support they need to manage their stress well. If untreated, consistently high stress could become a chronic condition, which can result in serious health problems including anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system. Research shows that stress can even contribute to the development of major illnesses, such as heart disease, depression and obesity, or exacerbate existing illnesses.

These potential consequences are especially worrisome since the survey showed that young adults, between the ages of 18 to 33, reported the highest average level of stress at 5.4, meaning they may have to bear the brunt of the long term effects of stress throughout their lives. Thirty nine percent of this younger generation reported that their stress level had increased in the past year, compared to 29% of those aged 67 or older. These young adults also admitted to feeling the least equipped to manage their stress well.

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What is triggering all this worry? Among those aged 18 to 47, work, money and job stability contributed the most anxiety, while those aged 48 and older were more likely to be concerned with either their own health or that of their families.

“Millennials [those aged 18 to 33] are growing up at a tough time,” Mike Hais a market researcher and co-author of two books on that generation, including *Millennial Momentum*, told USA Today. “They were sheltered in many ways, with a lot of high expectations for what they should achieve. Individual failure is difficult to accept when confronted with a sense you’re an important person and expected to achieve. Even though, in most instances, it’s not their fault — the economy collapsed just as many of them were getting out of college and coming of age — that does lead to a greater sense of stress.”

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Women reported feeling more stress than men, with an average rating of 5.3 vs. 4.6, and women were also more likely to feel that their stress levels increased over the past five years. Men, however, are making more strides in managing their stress, primarily through exercise or listening to music; 39% of men reported being able to cope with anxiety in the most recent survey, compared to 30% in 2010, while 34% of women felt they were able to manage their stress successfully.

Despite the encouraging signs that overall stress levels appear to be dropping, the researcher say that the lack of adequate stress management could end up reversing that trend. More discussions about stress in the doctor’s office, as well as support for lifestyle and behavior changes to cope with people’s major worries, could significantly improve the anxiety that inevitably comes with living in difficult economic times. As the authors write in the report, “If left unaddressed, this disconnect between untreated stress and chronic illness could contribute to a continued and unnecessary increase in the number of chronically ill Americans, along with a further escalation in health care costs.” Stress may be unavoidable, but managing it shouldn’t be so out of reach.