

Middle age may be much more stressful now than in the '90s

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If life feels more stressful now than it did a few decades ago, you're not alone. Even before the novel coronavirus started sweeping the globe, a new study found that life may be more stressful now than it was in the

1990s.

A team of researchers led by Penn State found that across all ages, there was a slight increase in [daily stress](#) in the 2010s compared to the 1990s. But when researchers restricted the sample to people between the ages of 45 and 64, there was a sharp increase in daily stress.

"On average, people reported about 2 percent more stressors in the 2010s compared to people in the past," said David M. Almeida, professor of human development and [family studies](#) at Penn State. "That's around an additional week of stress a year. But what really surprised us is that people at mid-life reported a lot more stressors, about 19 percent more stress in 2010 than in 1990. And that translates to 64 more days of stress a year."

Almeida said the findings were part of a larger project aiming to discover whether health during the middle of Americans' lives has been changing over time.

"Certainly, when you talk to people, they seem to think that [daily life](#) is more hectic and less certain these days," Almeida said. "And so we wanted to actually collect that data and run the analyses to test some of those ideas."

For the study, the researchers used data collected from 1,499 adults in 1995 and 782 different adults in 2012. Almeida said the goal was to study two cohorts of people who were the same age at the time the data was collected but born in different decades. All study participants were interviewed daily for eight consecutive days.

During each daily interview, the researchers asked the participants about their [stressful experiences](#) throughout the previous 24 hours. For example, arguments with family or friends or feeling overwhelmed at

home or work. The participants were also asked how severe their stress was and whether those stressors were likely to impact other areas of their lives.

"We were able to estimate not only how frequently people experienced stress, but also what those stressors mean to them," Almeida said. "For example, did this stress affect their finances or their plans for the future. And by having these two cohorts of people, we were able to compare daily stress processes in 1990 with daily stress processes in 2010."

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that participants reported significantly more daily stress and lower well-being in the 2010s compared to the 1990s. Additionally, participants reported a 27 percent increase in the belief that stress would affect their finances and a 17 percent increase in the belief that stress would affect their future plans.

Almeida said he was surprised not that people were more stressed now than in the 90s, but at the age group that was mainly affected.

"We thought that with the economic uncertainty, life might be more stressful for younger adults," Almeida said. "But we didn't see that. We saw more stress for people at mid-life. And maybe that's because they have children who are facing an uncertain job market while also responsible for their own parents. So it's this generational squeeze that's making stress more prevalent for people at mid-life."

Almeida said that while there used to be a stereotype about people experiencing a [midlife crisis](#) because of a fear of death and getting older, he suspects the study findings—recently published in the journal *American Psychologist*—suggest midlife distress may be due to different reasons.

"It may have to do with people at mid-life being responsible for a lot of

people," Almeida said. "They're responsible for their children, oftentimes they're responsible for their parents, and they may also be responsible for employees at work. And with that responsibility comes more daily stress, and maybe that's happening more so now than in the past."

Additionally, Almeida said the added [stress](#) could partially be due to life "speeding up" due to technological advances. This could be particularly true during stressful times like the coronavirus pandemic, when tuning out the news can seem impossible.

"With people always on their smartphones, they have access to constant news and information that could be overwhelming," Almeida said.

More information: Almeida, David M et al. Charting adult development through (historically changing) daily stress processes. *American Psychologist* , Vol 75(4), May-Jun 2020, 511-524
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