

Stress In America 2021: Pandemic impedes basic decision-making ability

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Americans are struggling with the basic decisions required to navigate daily life as the effects of pandemic-related stress continue to take a toll, especially on younger adults and parents, according to a national survey from the American Psychological Association.

Stress in America 2021: Stress and Decision-Making during the Pandemic

conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of APA, found that 1 in 3 Americans (32%) said sometimes they are so stressed about the coronavirus [pandemic](#) that they struggle to make even basic decisions (e.g., what to wear, what to eat, etc.). Millennials (48%) were particularly likely to struggle with this when compared with their counterparts (Gen Z adults: 37%, Gen Xers: 32%, boomers: 14%, [older adults](#): 3%); as were parents (47%) vs. non-parents (24%).

"The pandemic has imposed a regimen of constant risk assessment upon many. Each day brings an onslaught of choices with an ever-changing context as routines are upended and once trivial daily tasks are recast in the light of pandemic life," said Arthur C. Evans Jr., Ph.D., APA's chief executive officer. "Sustaining a heightened degree of vigilance inevitably wears on one's [mental health](#). And operating amid so much uncertainty compounds the general state of mental exhaustion being felt by so many right now, especially [young adults](#) and parents."

The survey found that nearly two-thirds of adults (63%) agreed that uncertainty about what the next few months will be like causes them stress, and around half (49%) went further to say that the coronavirus pandemic makes planning for their future feel impossible. More than one-third said it has been more stressful to make both day-to-day decisions (36%) and major life decisions (35%) compared with before the coronavirus pandemic.

Younger adults, especially millennials, were more likely to feel these decisions are more stressful now (daily: 40% of Gen Z adults, 46% of millennials and 39% of Gen Xers vs. 24% of boomers and 14% of older adults; major: 50% of Gen Z adults and 45% of millennials vs. 33% of Gen Xers, 24% of boomers and 6% of older adults). Additionally, parents were more likely than non-parents to report the same (daily: 47% vs. 30%; major: 44% vs. 31%), with 54% of those with children ages 4

and younger reporting that day-to-day decisions have become more stressful. Hispanic adults were more likely than non-Hispanic white adults to say [decision](#)-making has become more stressful compared with before the pandemic (day-to-day decisions: 44% vs. 34%; major decisions: 40% vs. 32%).

More than 3 in 5 adults (61%) agreed the coronavirus pandemic has made them re-think how they were living their life, and more than 2 in 5 adults (44%) made a major life decision during the coronavirus pandemic. Further, the majority of parents made at least one major life decision during the coronavirus pandemic (62% vs. 35% non-parents).

"This datapoint illustrates a decision-making paradox: Amid uncertainty and decision difficulty, major life changes still occur, and we are forced to deal with them," Evans said.

While the overall stress level remained the same as last year—5.0, on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means "little to no stress" and 10 means "a great deal of stress"—the report highlighted how the burden of stress is not being borne equally. Younger Americans, who were more likely to say they struggle with basic decisions, also reported generally high stress levels. Gen Z adults (5.6), millennials (5.7) and Gen Xers (5.2) reported higher average stress levels over the past month related to the coronavirus pandemic than boomers (4.3) and older adults (2.9). This pattern was mirrored in the groups' respective ability to manage stress; around half of Gen Z adults (45%) and millennials (50%) said they do not know how to manage the stress they feel due to the coronavirus pandemic, compared with 32% of Gen Xers, 21% of boomers and 12% of older adults.

The majority of Americans (59%) said they have changed some behaviors as a result of stress in the past month. Most commonly, the changes were avoiding social situations (24%), altering eating habits

(23%), procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities (22%) or altering physical activity levels (22%). In conjunction with changes in eating habits and physical activity, more than one-third said they eat to manage their stress, which remains elevated after increasing during the first year of the pandemic (35% in 2021, 37% in 2020, 25% in 2019).

Despite these struggles, U.S. adults have retained a positive outlook. Most (70%) were confident that everything will work out after the coronavirus pandemic ends, and more than half agreed they tend to bounce back quickly after hard times (57%).

"Americans' optimism about the future is encouraging, but we have real mental health effects emerging from this period of prolonged stress that we have to address now. Pandemic [stress](#) is contributing to widespread mental exhaustion, negative health impacts and unhealthy behavior changes—a pattern that will become increasingly challenging to correct the longer it persists," cautioned Evans. "It is urgent that as a nation we prioritize the mental health of all Americans and provide a universally accessible system of supports."

Methodology

The August/COVID Resilience Survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association between Aug. 11 and Aug. 23, 2021, among 3,035 adults age 18+ who reside in the U.S. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Data were weighted to reflect their proportions in the population based on the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) by the U.S. Census Bureau. Weighting variables included age by gender, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income. Hispanic adults were also weighted for acculturation, taking into account respondents' household language as well as their ability to read and speak in English and Spanish. Country of origin (U.S./non-U.S.) was also included for

Hispanic and Asian subgroups. Weighting variables for Gen Z adults (ages 18 to 24) included education, age by gender, race/ethnicity, region, household income and size of household, based on the 2019 CPS. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

Parents are defined as U.S. adults ages 18+ who have at least one person under the age of 18 living in their household at least 50% of the time for whom they are the parent or guardian.

Generational definitions are as follows: Gen Z adults (ages 18 to 24), millennials (ages 25 to 42), Gen Xers (ages 43 to 56), boomers (ages 57 to 75) and older adults (ages 76+).

Provided by American Psychological Association

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