

More Americans have gotten mental health treatment since 2019, especially younger adults and women

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More adults are seeking out treatment for mental health issues.

The percentage of adults getting [mental health](#) treatment increased from 19.2% in 2019 to 21.6% in 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in data published this month.

Those more likely to have received treatment? Younger adults, those aged 18 to 44, especially women in that age group, according to findings from the National Health Interview Survey, a nationally representative household survey done by the CDC.

Participants who received mental health treatment were either on [prescription medication](#) for their mental health, in counseling or therapy from a mental health professional, or both over the past 12 months.

Mental health treatment on the rise

Previous research has shown that symptoms of anxiety disorders or depressive disorders increased from 2020 through the beginning of 2021, especially among younger adults.

This most recent survey also found that among adults aged 18 to 44, both men and women were more likely to have received any mental health treatment in 2021 compared to 2019.

It might be natural to expect mental health treatment would increase during 2020 and 2021, a period that included a nationwide shutdown to contain COVID-19 and the killing of George Floyd and subsequent protests across the U.S.

The survey questions were not designed to assess whether pandemic stress or [social issues](#) led to treatment, said Jeannine Schiller, chief of the data analysis and quality assurance branch in the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics and the study's second author.

Questions covered the 12 months prior to the interview.

"Interviews occur throughout the year," Schiller told U.S. TODAY. "So when you look the percentages from 2021, they are definitely covering some portion of the pandemic period."

Mental health among women and minorities

Schiller from the CDC said the difference in mental health treatment between men and women aged 18-44 for all three years was "striking."

"Women tended to have percentages that were about 10 percentage points higher than men," she said. "It was interesting to see that the increase in the youngest age group from 2019 to 2021 was what was driving the increase for adults overall."

The percentage of non-Hispanic Black adults who received mental health treatment went from 12.4% in 2019 to 17% in 2020, and 14.8% in 2021.

Schiller said the decline in non-Hispanic Black adults from 2020 to 2021 wasn't "statistically significant," but it'll be interesting to see if the percentage for 2022 is lower and significantly different from previous years.

The decline in non-Hispanic Black adults who received [mental health treatment](#) could be due to resiliency and the resumption of daily activities, said Sonya Clyburn, a licensed clinical psychologist and director of Morgan State University's counseling center.

"In 2020, individuals were at home most likely, dealing with grief, loss, isolation and things that they may have repressed came to light," said Clyburn, who was not involved in the CDC research. "Hence, the increase of seeking [mental health service](#)."

More than just pandemic weighing on people

Clyburn said the survey's findings make sense, but she would've liked to see more information related to other stressors such as social injustices, racial discrimination, or finances.

Social injustices such as George Floyd's murder have increased anxiety and depression in some Black people, she said.

"They were more sensitive and more vulnerable," she said. "People wanted to seek help. They wanted some resource, and that was probably one of the reasons why."

This doesn't mean more patients have diagnosable mental disorders, but [mental health professionals](#) are seeing more people dealing with [psychological distress](#) from [current events](#), said Brian Turner, the department head in Xavier University of Louisiana's department of psychology and a licensed clinical psychologist who wasn't involved in the research.

"Psychological distress does not denote, necessarily, a diagnosable mental disorder. It means that people are experiencing greater events or issues that will cause them to feel distressed," he said. "It's kind of akin to the cumulative straw that broke the camel's back. We had the pandemic. We've got economic strife. We've got a war in Russia. We've got the insurrection. ... It would make sense that people's Spidey senses would tick up and they would seek help for that."

Another increase he noted is in the promotion of mental health services due to programs like the Affordable Care Act and The Black Girl Doctor, a website that connects people in need to Black women therapists online.

Hurdles to mental health treatment

More people are seeking treatment, but there remains a stigma surrounding it, experts say.

Still, some students don't know services are available at the university, or they worry about how it'll look to seek treatment, Clyburn said.

In addition to the treatment listed in the CDC's report—counseling and prescription medication—many people seek alternative forms such as CBD, acupuncture, herbal remedies and over-the-counter products, she said.

And some Black people are hesitant to take medication because of traumatic experiences throughout history, like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where researchers withheld treatment from about 400 black men in Tuskegee, Alabama from 1932 to 1972 to study the untreated disease.

Clyburn recommends people try to create support systems such as people at church, a hairstylist, pro bono counseling services, the American Psychological Association and social workers.

She takes it as a good sign that more people sought help.

"It's serious," Clyburn said. "It can harm you. It's important that just as you take care of your physical health, you take care of your mental [health](#)."

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