



AMERICAN
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STRESS IN AMERICA™ 2021

Stress and Decision-Making During the Pandemic



OCTOBER 2021



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More than 18 months into the coronavirus pandemic, Americans remain in limbo between lives once lived and whatever the post-pandemic future holds. For many, the current reality encompasses a daily web of risk assessment, upended routines and endless news about the state of COVID-19 in the world, America and our individual communities.

A new survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association found that stress levels are holding steady from recent years, and despite many struggles, U.S. adults retain a positive outlook. Most (70%) were confident that everything will work out after the coronavirus pandemic ends, and more than three-quarters (77%) said all in all, they are faring well during the coronavirus pandemic.

However, behind this professed optimism about the future, day-to-day struggles are overwhelming many. Prolonged effects of stress and unhealthy behavior changes are common. Daily tasks and decision-making have become more difficult during the pandemic, particularly for younger adults and parents. As each day can bring a new set of decisions about safety, security, growth, travel, work and other life requirements, people in the U.S. seem to be increasingly wracked with uncertainty.

U.S. ADULTS ARE STRUGGLING WITH DAILY DECISIONS, ESPECIALLY MILLENNIALS

For many, the pandemic has imposed the need for constant risk assessment, with routines upended and once trivial tasks recast in light of the pandemic. Many people ask: “What is the community transmission in my area today and how will this affect my choices? What is the vaccination rate? Is there a mask mandate here?” When the factors influencing a person’s decisions are constantly changing, no decision is routine. And this is proving to be exhausting.

According to the survey, nearly one-third of adults (32%) said sometimes they are so stressed about the coronavirus pandemic that they struggle to make basic decisions, such as what to wear or what to eat. Millennials (48%) were particularly likely to struggle with this when compared with other groups (Gen Z adults: 37%, Gen Xers: 32%, boomers: 14%, older adults: 3%).

More than one-third said it has been more stressful to make day-to-day decisions (36%) and major life decisions (35%) compared with before the coronavirus pandemic. Younger adults were more likely to feel these decisions are more stressful now (daily decisions: 40% of Gen Z adults, 46% of millennials and 39% of Gen Xers vs. 24% of boomers and 14% of older adults; major decisions: 50% of Gen Z adults and 45% of millennials vs. 33% of Gen Xers, 24% of boomers and 6% of older adults). And slightly more than 3 in 5 (61%) agreed the coronavirus pandemic has made them re-think how they were living their life.

More than 3 in 5 (63%) agreed that uncertainty about what the next few months will be like causes them stress, and around half (49%) said that the coronavirus pandemic has made planning for their future feel impossible.

When it comes to overall stress, it is not surprising to find that younger generations, who were more likely to say they struggle with basic decisions, also reported generally high stress levels. Gen Z adults (5.6 out of 10¹), 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.



SOMETIMES I AM SO STRESSED ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC THAT I STRUGGLE TO MAKE EVEN BASIC DECISIONS

% STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE

Gen Z adults

37%

Millennials

48%

Gen Xers

32%

Boomers

14%

Older adults

3%

¹ On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means “little to no stress” and 10 means “a great deal of stress.”

MORE DEPENDENTS, MORE DECISIONS — PANDEMIC PARENTING STRESS PERSISTS

Decision-making fatigue is having a disproportionate impact on parents, given changes to work, school and everyday routines during the pandemic. Many are struggling to manage households divided by vaccination status, with one set of rules for vaccinated adults and kids over age 12 and another for younger unvaccinated children — not to mention varying health conditions that may exist.

The ongoing uncertainty and changes seem to be compounding struggles for parents, especially for those with younger children. For instance, parents with children under age 18 were more likely than those without children to say that both day-to-day decisions and major life decisions are more stressful than they were pre-pandemic (daily: 47% vs. 30%; major: 44% vs. 31%), with 54% of those with young children ages 0 to 4 reporting that day-to-day decisions have become more stressful.

Moreover, almost half of parents reported that sometimes they are so stressed about the coronavirus pandemic that they struggle to make basic decisions (e.g., what to wear, what to eat) (47% vs. 24% of non-parents). Meanwhile, the majority made at least one major life decision during the coronavirus pandemic (62% vs. 35% of non-parents), illustrating a decision-making paradox that seems to have emerged: despite uncertainty and decision difficulty, major life changes still occur.

All of this is wearing on parents as the pandemic persists. And while most parents said they are faring well during the coronavirus pandemic, they were less likely to say so than non-parents (71% vs. 80%). Further, compared with 2020, parents were:

- More likely to say family responsibilities (75% vs. 70% of parents in 2020) and relationships (68% vs. 64%) are significant sources of stress in their lives
- More likely to feel they could have used more emotional support than they received over the past year (79% vs. 71%)
- Less likely to feel they are doing enough to manage their stress (58% vs. 67%)
- More likely to nap (35% vs. 30%) to manage their stress, but less likely to spend time with friends or family (35% vs. 42%)
- Less likely to say their mental health is very good or excellent (47% vs. 52%)



STRAIN ON PARENTS IS ON THE RISE

% REPORTING

■ 2021 ■ 2020

Family responsibilities are a very/somewhat significant source of stress



Relationships are a very/somewhat significant source of stress



Could have used more emotional support than they received over the past year



Feel they are doing enough to manage their stress



Naps to manage stress



Spends time with friends or family to manage stress



Mental health is very good or excellent



All differences shown are statistically significant.



PANDEMIC STRESS AMONG PEOPLE OF COLOR IS STILL ELEVATED, ESPECIALLY FOR HISPANIC ADULTS

Hispanic and Black adults were less likely to say they are faring well during the coronavirus pandemic than non-Hispanic white adults, though the levels still speak to an overall positive outlook (81% of non-Hispanic white adults vs. 68% of Hispanic adults and 72% of Black adults). Still, in line with the overall survey findings, this optimistic finding stands in contrast to the reality of compounding pandemic-related stressors bearing down on marginalized communities, especially Hispanic adults.

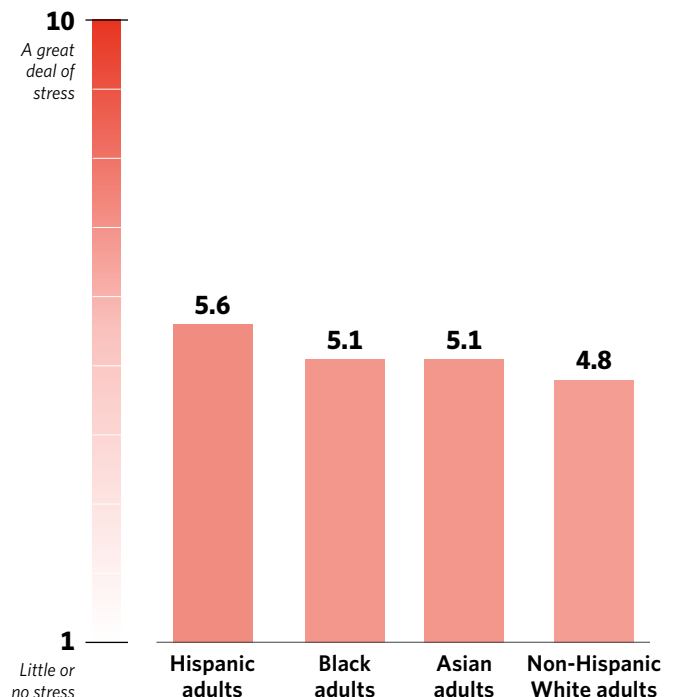
For example, Hispanic adults were more likely than non-Hispanic white adults to say decision-making has become more stressful compared with before the pandemic (day-to-day decisions: 44% vs. 34%; major decisions: 40% vs. 32%), and Hispanic and Black adults were more likely than non-Hispanic white adults to say 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.) (38% and 36% vs. 29%, respectively).

Hispanic adults reported the highest levels of stress, on average, over the past month related to the coronavirus pandemic (5.6 vs. Black adults: 5.1, Asian adults: 5.1, non-Hispanic white adults: 4.8). Moreover, Hispanic adults were most likely to say they are struggling with the ups and downs of the coronavirus pandemic (61% vs. 51% of non-Hispanic white adults and 51% of Black adults) and that they don't know how to manage the stress they feel due to the pandemic (43% vs. 33% and 34%, respectively).

This unequal burden of stress on Hispanic adults was not surprising considering findings from the survey that shine a light on racial and ethnic disparities in relation to the impact of the pandemic. Specifically, Hispanic adults were more likely than non-Hispanic white adults to know someone who had been sick with or died of COVID-19 (sick: 64% vs. 46%; died: 42% vs. 25%).



AVERAGE STRESS LEVEL OVER THE PAST MONTH RELATED TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



STRESS LEVELS REMAIN HIGHER THAN PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS; WORK- AND HOUSING COSTS-RELATED STRESS ON THE RISE

The average reported level of stress during the past month among all adults was 5.0, which has held steady from 2020. Still, this level is slightly elevated from pre-pandemic levels (2021: 5.0, 2020: 5.0, 2019: 4.9, 2018: 4.9, 2017: 4.8, 2016: 4.8).

And while a year over year comparison of significant sources of stress shows a downward trend across most factors, work- and housing costs-related stress slightly increased from 2020. Additionally, all sources of stress remain somewhat higher than pre-pandemic levels, with the economy, housing costs, personal safety and discrimination representing more dramatic spikes.



SOURCES OF STRESS: 2019-2021

% VERY/SOMEWHAT SIGNIFICANT

	2021	2020	2019
Work [Among those employed]	66%	64%	64%
Money	61%	64%	60%
The economy	59%*	63%	46%
Family responsibilities	57%	58%	55%
Personal health concerns	52%	57%	50%
Health problems affecting my family	51%	55%	49%
Relationships (e.g., spouse, kids, girl/boyfriend)	51%	52%	49%
Housing costs (e.g., mortgage or rent)	51%*	48%	45%
Personal safety	44%*	50%	35%
Job stability	43%	46%	40%
Discrimination	32%*	33%	25%

*Denotes a significant increase from 2019.



MANY ARE SUFFERING FROM THE IMPACTS OF STRESS; YOUNGER ADULTS AND PARENTS CONTINUE TO BEAR THE BRUNT

As a result of stress, nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults (74%) have experienced various impacts in the last month, such as headaches (34%), feeling overwhelmed (34%), fatigue (32%) or changes in sleeping habits (32%). Again, younger adults and parents were more likely to report this, with 86% of millennials reporting impacts of stress, closely followed by Gen Z adults (84%) and Gen Xers (77%); only 59% of boomers and 57% of older adults said the same. Parents were also more likely than non-parents to report experiencing impacts of stress in the last month (83% vs. 69%).

Further, the majority of adults (59%) said they have experienced behavior changes as a result of stress in the past month. Most commonly, the changes had been 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 (25% in 2019, 37% in 2020, 35% in 2021).

HAVE EXPERIENCED BEHAVIOR CHANGES IN THE PAST MONTH AS A RESULT OF STRESS

% REPORTING

Gen Z adults



Millennials



Gen Xers



Boomers



Older adults



Parents



Non-parents



RESILIENCE AMONG POPULATIONS VARIES, SOME ARE FARING BETTER THAN OTHERS

Generally speaking, U.S. adults are adjusting through the pandemic, but some show fewer signs of resiliency than others. More than half of U.S. adults (53%) agreed they are struggling with the ups and downs of the coronavirus pandemic. Further, slightly more than one-quarter (26%) have low resilience, as determined by a score of 1.00 to 2.99 on the Brief Resilience Scale. Fifty-eight percent had average resilience (a score of 3.00 to 4.30) and 16% had high resilience (a score of 4.31 to 5.00), the survey found.

Younger adults, parents and those with an annual household income of less than \$50K were more likely than their respective counterparts to have a low resilience score. Those with low resilience scores were more likely than those with average or high resilience to say:

- Their stress level, on average, over the past month related to the pandemic has been higher (average: 6.3 vs. 4.9 and 3.3)
- The level of stress in their life increased compared with before the pandemic (53% vs. 43% and 24%)
- Making decisions has become more stressful compared with before the pandemic (day-to-day decisions: 55% vs. 33% and 16%; major decisions: 54% vs. 32% and 13%)
- Sometimes they are so stressed about the coronavirus pandemic that they struggle to make even basic decisions (50% vs. 31% and 5%)

Further, those with low resilience scores were around three times as likely to have experienced negative impacts of stress in the last month (94% vs. 75% and 38%) — particularly feeling overwhelmed (57% vs. 29% and 12%) — and behavior changes as a result of stress (85% vs. 56% and 25%) — particularly avoiding social situations (41% vs. 20% and 10%).

Speaking to the struggles of this group, those with low resilience scores were more likely to be taking actions to manage their stress (98% vs. 92% and 80%), but also to feel they could have used more emotional support than they received over the past year (88% vs. 60% and 25%).



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+).

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To Cite This Report:

American Psychological Association (2021).
Stress in America™ 2021: Stress and Decision-Making During the Pandemic

