

Adults Over 65 Experience Far Less Stress Than Adults in All Other Age Groups

Adults aged 35-49 generally experience more stress than other age groups, followed by those aged 25-34.

In October, the American Psychological Association published *Stress in America*, the results of a new APA survey by Harris Interactive based on a nationwide survey of 1,848 adults aged 18 and over. Copies of this report are available at <http://apahelpcenter.mediaroom.com/file.php/138/Stress+in+America+REPORT+FINAL.doc>

In this issue of Harris Interactive *Healthcare News* we examine the very substantial differences in stress levels between adults of different ages. Overall the survey found the highest levels of stress among adults aged 35-49, and the second highest among those aged 25-34. But the most striking differences by age are found among adults aged 65 and over, who report experiencing less stress and far fewer symptoms of stress than people in all age groups under 65.

The survey was conducted online in English and Spanish between August 30 and September 11, 2007. The data were weighted by demographic and other variables to ensure that they were representative of all adults aged 18 and over (see methodology on page 5). This survey did not include the institutionalized elderly or those who were unable to be surveyed because of health, disability or other reasons.

One word of caution is necessary. The survey is based on self-reports provided online. No clinical tests were conducted. The meaning of the word “stress”, and self-reports of the experiences, consequences and levels of stress are therefore subjective. This questionnaire was developed with the American Psychological Association to explore many different dimensions of stress, in terms of how individuals report experiencing it.

General Experiences of Stress and Mental Health

Across several key measures of stress, those aged 35-49 are more likely than other age groups to report negative responses, indicating higher levels of stress, while those aged 65 and over are the least likely to do so. In all the relevant questions (see Table 1), people over 65 give the most positive responses and are the least likely to report that they experience severe stress.

For example:

- 38 percent of those aged 35-49 but only 22 percent of those aged 65+ report that they had very high levels of stress in the past month.
- Fully 59 percent of adults aged 35-49 but only 36 percent of those aged 65+ report that they are concerned about the levels of stress in their everyday lives.
- Those aged 35-49 are also the most likely (25%) to report managing their stress poorly and those aged 65+ are the least likely to do so (8%).

However on some questions the youngest age group gave more negative (or more stressed) responses than the 35-49 age group:-

- Adults aged 18-24 are the least likely (41%) to rate their mental health positively, compared to 76 percent of adults 65 and over.
- Adults aged 18-24 are the most likely (69%) to report that the level of stress in their lives had increased over the past 5 years, compared to 29 percent of those aged 65+.
- Fully 68 percent of those aged 18-24, compared to only 29 percent of those aged 65+, say they experienced the highest levels of stress over the past month.

Table 1
General Experiences of Stress and Mental Health

Base: All Adults

	All Adults	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65 +
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Rate mental health very positively (top 2 boxes) ¹	58	41	48	56	61	76
Managed stress poorly during past month ²	18	17	17	25	16	8
Average level of stress very high in past month (top 3 boxes) ³	32	29	29	38	34	22
Very/somewhat concerned about level of stress in everyday life ⁴	52	51	50	59	56	36
Level of stress has increased over past 5 years ⁵	48	69	56	52	41	29
High rating of highest level of stress in past month (top 3 boxes) ⁶	53	68	57	60	51	29

Notes:

¹ And on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means very poor and 10 means excellent, how would you rate your own mental health?

² During the past month how well do you think you managed your stress?

³ On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means you have little or no stress and 10 means you have a great deal of stress, how would you rate your average level of stress during the past month?

⁴ How concerned are you about the level of stress in your everyday life?

⁵ Thinking about the past 5 years, would you say the level of stress in your life has increased over time, decreased over time, or has it stayed about the same?

⁶ During times when you experienced your highest level of stress in the past month, how would you rate your stress where 1 means you had little or no stress and 10 means you had a great deal of stress?

Sources of Stress

Many different factors cause stress. Those mentioned most often by all adults are work (74%), money (73%), workload (66%), children (64%) and family responsibilities (60%).

Four of the causes of stress (see Table 2) are mentioned more often by those aged 35-49 than by those in any other age group – money (80%), children (73%), family responsibilities (67%), and housing costs (62%).

Those over 65 are the least likely to mention money (59%), family responsibilities (55%), housing costs (34%), intimate relationships (32%), work (52%) or workload (41%) as causes of stress in their lives. However, people over 65 are the most likely to report being stressed because of health concerns (72%) and health-related problems of their spouses, partners or children (67%).

Table 2
Sources of Stress

Below is a list of things people say cause stress in their lives. For each one, please indicate how significant a source of stress it is in your life.

Base: All Adults

<i>Summary Table of Very/Somewhat Significant</i>	All Adults	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65 +
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Work	74	83	73	77	71	52
Money	73	77	79	80	69	59
Workload	66	88	63	70	61	41
Children	64	50	72	73	58	55
Family responsibilities	60	57	57	67	57	55
Health concerns	55	41	42	53	61	72
Health problems affecting your spouse, partner or children	55	53	39	51	57	67
Health problems affecting your parents or other family members	53	45	40	59	60	52
Housing costs (e.g. mortgage or rent)	51	44	57	62	46	34
Intimate relationships	47	58	56	51	44	32

The Consequences of Stress

The impact of stress on people's lives varies greatly, causing physical, psychological and behavioral changes. Here again, people aged 65+ are much less likely to report adverse effects. On nearly all 11 measures in Table 3 the proportions of people aged 65+ who report experiencing those effects is substantially lower than for all of the other age groups.

The age groups which were most likely to report these adverse effects of stress are:

- Those who fought or argued with a family member – adults aged 18-24 (55%)
- Those who lay awake because of stress – adults aged 18-34 (52%)
- Those who ate too much or unhealthy food because of stress – adults aged 25-34 (51%)
- Those who experienced fatigue (61%), headaches (62%), lack of interest or energy (59%), feeling as if they could cry (57%), or upset stomachs (46%), because of stress – adults 18-24
- Those who experienced muscular tension because of stress – adults aged 50-64 (38%)
- Those who reported a change in their appetites (36%), experienced irritation or anger (61%) and who reported feeling nervous or sad because of stress (55%) – adults aged 23-34.

Table 3
Consequences of Stress

Base: All Adults

	All Adults	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65 +
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Fought or argued because of stress with family in past month ¹	46	55	53	49	42	32
Lay awake because of stress ²	48	52	52	48	51	38
Ate too much or unhealthy food because of stress ³	43	42	51	45	44	30
Conditions experienced because of stress in past month: ⁴						
- irritability or anger	50	59	61	54	47	31
- fatigue	51	61	53	52	54	37
- feeling nervous or sad	45	53	55	43	47	34
- lack of interest, motivation or energy	45	59	53	46	47	26
- headache	44	62	51	49	40	24
- feeling as though you could cry	36	57	44	36	34	22
- upset stomach/indigestion	34	46	35	38	30	22
- muscular tension	30	27	21	36	38	21
- change in appetite	23	27	36	27	18	10

Notes:

¹ During the last month, did you ever fight or argue with any of the following people because you were feeling stressed?

² During the last month, did you ever lay awake at night because you were feeling stressed?

³ During the last month, did you ever eat too much or eat unhealthy foods because you were feeling stressed?

⁴ Which of the following, if any, have you experienced in the last month as a result of stress?

Afterthought

A major conclusion of this research, fully reported in *Stress in America*, is the very high levels of stress experienced, together with their adverse effects, reported by very large numbers of people. While no comparable data are available from other countries, it has been suggested that Americans in general experience more stress than people in other countries. One, as yet unproven, hypothesis is that this higher level of stress is one reason why many common diseases are much more prevalent in the U.S. than in Europe (see “*Difference in Disease Prevalence as a Source of the U.S. – European Health Care Spending Gap*” by Ken Thorpe et al. *Health Affairs*, W678 October 2nd, 2007).

In this report we highlight the remarkable difference between the high levels of stress reported among American adults under 65 compared to the much lower levels reported among people over 65.

Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the United States by Harris Interactive on behalf of the American Psychological Association between August 30 and September 11, 2007, among 1,848 adults (aged 18 and over), including 316 interviews with people aged 65 or older. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Hispanic respondents were also weighted based on language usage. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

With a pure probability sample of 1,848 one could say with a 95 percent probability that the overall results would have a sampling error of +/- 2 percentage points. Sampling error for data based on sub-samples would be higher and would vary. However, that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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