



APA Stress Survey: Children are More Stressed Than Parents Realize

By Public Affairs Staff

November 23, 2009—Stress related to school pressure and family finances has a greater impact on young people than parents believe, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) 2009 Stress in America survey. Building on past research indicating that stress is a top health concern for U.S. high school students, psychologists say that if teens don't learn healthy ways to manage that stress now, it could have serious long-term health implications.

The third annual Stress in America survey polled 1,568 adults from around the nation on the stress in their lives and its effects. This year, for the first time, the report also included the results of a YouthQuery survey among 1,206 young people aged 8-17 years old on what causes their stress and how it manifests itself, among other things.

The surveys, conducted online by Harris Interactive on behalf of APA between July and August 2009, are a key component of APA's Mind/Body Health public education campaign. The campaign emphasizes the role of psychologists in health promotion and how they help people with behavioral and emotional issues.

APA released the survey on November 3 at a well-attended media event in New York City. More than 20 prominent outlets—most of which share the campaign's target audience of women and families—attended the event, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Prevention*, *Self*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, *Women's Day* and *Redbook*.

APA Executive Director for Professional Practice Katherine C. Nordal, PhD, health psychologist Helen Coons, PhD, and Barbara Roth, national director for youth and family programs at the YMCA of the USA, addressed the audience.

The YMCA and APA are partnering to provide families with resources and strategies for healthy living. The partnership addresses the impact individual behaviors such as healthy eating and regular physical activity can have on reducing risk factors for chronic diseases and managing stress. Roth spoke about the importance of family-strengthening activities, such as eating meals together or taking walks, to enhance communications in a family, ultimately helping to increase parental awareness of kids' stress and worries.

According to the survey, many parents don't realize how stressed their children are. Nearly half (45 percent) of teens ages 13-17 said that they worried more this year, but only 28 percent of parents think their teen's stress increased.

And while a quarter (26 percent) of tweens ages 8-12 said they worried more this year, only 17 percent of parents believed their tween's stress had increased. Similarly, only 2-5 percent of parents rated their child's stress as extreme (an 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale) when 14 percent of tweens and 28 percent of teens said they worry "a lot" or "a great deal."

Parents' responses about sources of stress for their children were out of sync with what children reported as sources of worry. Children were more likely to say they worried about their family's financial difficulties than parents were to say this was a source of stress for their children (30 percent vs. 18 percent of parents). In addition:

- Tweens (30 percent) and teens (42 percent) said they get headaches vs. 13 percent of parents saying that their children get headaches,
- Tweens (39 percent) and teens (49 percent) cited difficulty sleeping vs. 13 percent of parents saying that their children have difficulty sleeping, and
- Tweens (27 percent) and teens (39 percent) reported eating too much or too little vs. 8 percent of parents saying that their children eat too much or too little.



Lifestyle and Behavior Change

Also new this year, adult survey responders were asked about any chronic health conditions and their efforts to make recommended lifestyle and behavior changes. APA gathered the information in the hopes of illustrating the value of psychologists as health-care providers who serve as agents of lifestyle and behavior change and enhancing the association's health-care reform initiatives. The survey showed that two-thirds (66 percent) of adults living in the United States have been told by a health care provider that they have one or more chronic conditions, most commonly high blood pressure or high cholesterol. The vast majority of adults indicated that their health care provider has recommended lifestyle and behavior changes (70 percent).

But few adults reported that their health care provider offered support to help them make lasting changes: only 46 percent were given an explanation for the recommendation; only 35 percent were offered advice or shown techniques to help make changes; and only 5-10 percent were referred to another health care provider to support the adoption of lifestyle changes.

Further, only 48 percent of adults reported that their health care providers followed up with them to check on their progress in making lifestyle and behavior changes — such as quitting smoking, getting more sleep, reducing stress, exercising, losing weight and choosing healthier foods.

Those polled cited a number of barriers in their efforts to make lasting lifestyle and behavior changes — including lack of willpower (33 percent); not enough time (20 percent); and lack of confidence (14 percent). More than one in ten people cited stress as the barrier preventing them from making lifestyle and behavior changes (14 percent of adults reported they are too stressed to make these changes).

Perceptions of Stress in Adults

Results show that adults continue to report high levels of stress; many said that their stress has increased over the past year. Additionally, many adults are reporting physical symptoms of stress.

Nationally, 75 percent of adults reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress in the past month (24 percent extreme, 51 percent moderate) and nearly half reported that their stress has increased in the past year (42 percent). Nearly half (43 percent) of adults say they eat too much or eat unhealthy foods as a result of stress. Thirty-seven percent reported skipping a meal because they were under stress.

While 44 percent of adults report that they exercise or walk to relieve stress, many Americans also say they rely on more sedentary activities to manage stress (49 percent listen to music, 41 percent read, 36 percent watch TV or movies more than two hours per day, and 33 percent play video games.) While these activities may be helpful in alleviating stress, they do not provide the extra benefit of improving overall physical health or maintaining a more healthy weight that more active forms of stress management afford.

Overall, many adults say they have felt the physical effects of stress in the past month:

- 47 percent of all adults report that they have lain awake at night;
- 45 percent report irritability or anger;
- 43 percent report fatigue;
- 40 percent report lack of interest, motivation or energy;
- 34 percent report headaches;
- 34 percent report feeling depressed or sad;
- 32 percent report feeling as though they could cry; and
- 27 percent report upset stomach or indigestion as a result of stress.

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Also this year, the survey took a snapshot of stress in eight major cities: Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle and Washington, DC, comparing the changes over the past year. The city surveys allowed state psychological associations to localize the survey information for outreach to their local and regional media.