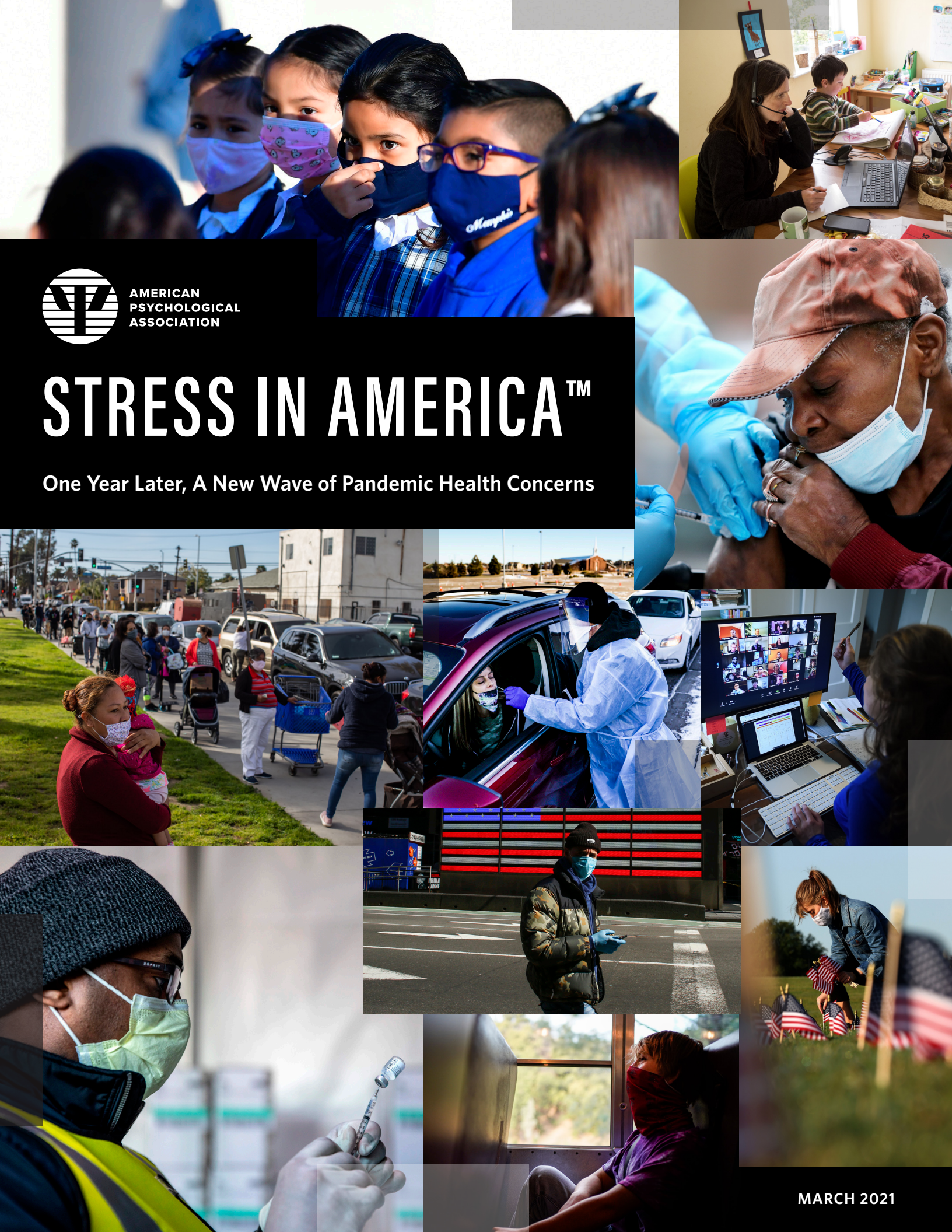




AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

# STRESS IN AMERICA™

One Year Later, A New Wave of Pandemic Health Concerns



MARCH 2021





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PSYCHOLOGICAL  
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## One Year Later, A New Wave of Pandemic Health Concerns

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization [declared COVID-19 a global pandemic](#). Within a week, millions went home to shelter in place for what they thought would be a few weeks, hoping that their sacrifice would stop the spread of the coronavirus.

One year later, more than 500,000 U.S. residents [have died from the coronavirus](#), while the nation also has grappled with racial injustice, a brutal election cycle and civil unrest.

In our October 2020 report, *Stress in America™ 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis*, the American Psychological Association issued a warning about the impact of these stressful events on long-term physical and mental health. We warned that Americans faced a second pandemic — one that would persist even after the physical threat of the virus has been addressed. Our most recent survey of U.S. adults, conducted in late February 2021 by The Harris Poll, indicates that this is coming to fruition.

Survey responses reveal that physical health may be declining due to an inability to cope in healthy ways with the stresses of the pandemic. Many reported they have gained or lost an undesired amount of weight, are drinking more alcohol to cope with stress and are not getting their desired amount of sleep. This is particularly true of parents, essential workers, young people and people of color. These reported health impacts signal many adults may be having difficulties managing stressors, including grief and trauma, and are likely to lead to significant, long-term individual and societal consequences, including chronic illness and additional strain on the nation's health care system.

### KEY SURVEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- » **A majority of adults (61%) reported experiencing undesired weight changes since the start of the pandemic**, with more than 2 in 5 (42%) saying they gained more weight than they intended. Of this group, adults reported gaining an average of 29 pounds (with a typical gain of 15 pounds, which is the median).
- » **Two in 3 Americans (67%) said they are sleeping more or less than they wanted to since the pandemic started**. Similar proportions reported less (35%) and more (31%) sleep than desired. Nearly 1 in 4 adults (23%) reported drinking more alcohol to cope with their stress during the coronavirus pandemic.
- » **Nearly half of Americans (47%) said they delayed or canceled health care services** since the pandemic started.
- » **Nearly half of parents (48%) said the level of stress in their life has increased compared with before the pandemic**. More than 3 in 5 parents with children who are still home for remote learning (62%) said the same.
- » **Essential workers were more than twice as likely as those who are not to have received treatment from a mental health professional (34% vs. 12%)** and to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the coronavirus pandemic started (25% vs. 9%).
- » **Black Americans were most likely to report feelings of concern about the future**. More than half said they feel uneasy about adjusting to in-person interaction once the pandemic ends (57% vs. 51% Asian, 50% Hispanic and 47% white).
- » **Gen Z adults (46%) were the most likely generation to say that their mental health has worsened** compared with before the pandemic, followed by Xers (33%), Millennials (31%), Boomers (28%) and older adults (9%).

This report elaborates on these findings and proposes strategies to help us navigate this secondary crisis. APA is committed to helping people emerge from this challenging time poised to embrace and shape a brighter future together.

## **PANDEMIC-RELATED STRESS COMES WITH SERIOUS HEALTH CONSEQUENCES**

The prolonged stress experienced by adults, especially the high levels of stress reported by Americans directly linked to the pandemic, is seriously affecting mental and physical health, including changes to weight, sleep and alcohol use.

Weight change is a common symptom when people are having difficulty coping with mental health challenges. A majority of adults (61%) reported experiencing undesired weight changes since the start of the pandemic, with more than 2 in 5 (42%) saying they gained more weight than they intended. Of this group, adults reported gaining an average of 29 pounds (with a median gain of 15 pounds), and 1 in 10 (10%) said they gained more than 50 pounds. For the 18% of Americans who said they lost more weight than they wanted to, the average amount of weight lost was 26 pounds (median of 12 pounds).

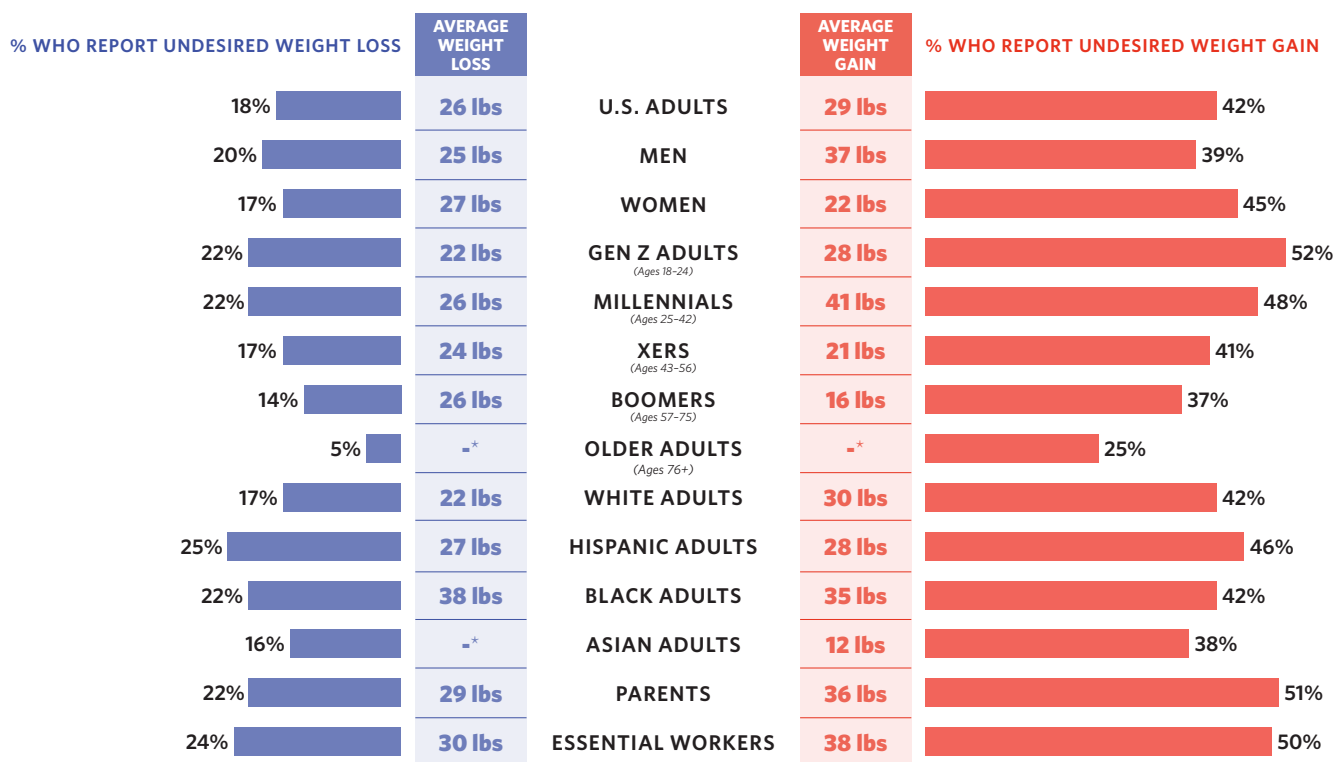
Significant weight gain poses long-term health risks. According to the [National Institutes of Health](#), people who gain more than 11 pounds are at higher risk of developing Type II diabetes mellitus and coronary heart disease, and people who gain more than 24 pounds are at higher risk of developing ischemic stroke. And according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), people who are overweight are more likely to develop serious illness from the coronavirus.

Adults also reported changes in sleep and increased alcohol consumption. Two in 3 Americans (67%) said they are sleeping more or less than they wanted to since the pandemic started. Similar proportions reported less (35%) and more (31%) sleep than desired. Nearly 1 in 4 adults<sup>1</sup> (23%) reported drinking more alcohol to cope with their stress during the coronavirus pandemic. This proportion jumps to more than half of adults (52%) who are parents with early elementary school-age children (5-7 years old).

Overall, physical health has taken a back seat. Nearly half of Americans (47%) said they delayed or canceled health care services since the pandemic started. Additionally, more than half of U.S. adults (53%) said they have been less physically active than they wanted to be since the pandemic started.

Three in 4 adults who reported a high stress level (rating of 8 - 10 on a scale where 1 means "little or no stress" and 10 means "a great deal of stress") during the past year related to the pandemic (75%) reported undesired weight changes since the start of the pandemic, compared with 43% of those who reported a low stress level (rating of a 1-3). They also were more likely to report sleeping more or less than they wanted to since the start of the pandemic (84% vs. 42% for low stress) and drinking more alcohol to cope with stress (38% vs. 10% for low stress). Further, more than 3 in 5 of those who reported high stress (63%) said they have been less physically active than they wanted to be since the start of the pandemic, compared with 42% of those who reported a low stress level.

### **SLIGHTLY MORE THAN 6 IN 10 U.S. ADULTS (61%) REPORT UNDESIRABLE WEIGHT CHANGE SINCE START OF PANDEMIC**



<sup>1</sup> Data among adults ages 21+

\*Insufficient sample size for reporting

# How to Identify Unhealthy Habits, Change Behavior and Manage Weight

## IDENTIFY UNHEALTHY HABITS

- » Take note of when you are overeating, making poor food choices or drinking alcohol: What time of the day is it? Did something stressful happen? Are you bored? Answering these kinds of questions can help you determine if your habits aren't healthy.
- » Pay attention to how you feel after a certain activity. For instance, drinking might make you feel better in the moment but worse the day after. If you notice this is happening, try substituting this behavior with another activity that doesn't make you feel worse later.

## CHANGE BEHAVIOR

- » Make the goals you set for yourself specific and attainable. For instance, if you're trying to drink less during the pandemic, determine a specific number of days and drinks by which you want to limit your alcohol consumption.
- » Find an accountability buddy. Telling a close friend or family member about your goals can help you stay on track and they can check on your progress.

## MANAGE WEIGHT

- » If you are feeling stressed and are gaining weight, instead of trying to lose weight, start by trying to maintain your weight by not overeating and staying active. This can help you develop healthy eating habits.
- » To maintain weight or stop yourself from losing weight, establish a routine for eating three meals a day — either by setting an alarm to signal mealtimes or blocking off time in your calendar. If trying to decide what to eat feels overwhelming, repeating the same breakfast and lunch every day can help build routine.
- » If you can't get outside, go for a walk inside. Plan a route through your home that lets you take about 25 steps and take this route while you're in a meeting, catching up with a friend on the phone or taking a 5-minute break during your workday.

**Fathers (82%)** were significantly more likely to say **they could have used more emotional support** than mothers (68%).



## MOTHERS — AND FATHERS — REPORT MENTAL, PHYSICAL HEALTH DECLINES

Since March 2020, life has changed radically for parents of children under 18. Not only have they had to deal with the universal pandemic disruptions on their work and social lives, but also grapple with the pandemic's impact on their children. Nearly half of parents (48%) said the level of stress in their life has increased compared with before the pandemic. More than 3 in 5 parents with children who are still home for remote learning (62%) said the same.

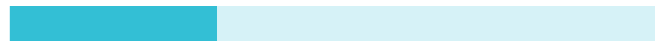
Similarly, while slightly more than 3 in 10 adults (31%) reported their mental health has worsened compared with before the pandemic, nearly half of mothers who still have children home for remote learning (47%) reported their mental health has worsened; 30% of fathers who still have children home said the same. And while 3 in 4 parents (75%) said they could have used more emotional support than they received since the pandemic started, fathers (82%) were significantly more likely to say they could have used more emotional support than mothers (68%).

### PARENTS' MENTAL, PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTED SINCE START OF PANDEMIC

**75%** say they could have used more emotional support than they received



**32%** received treatment from a mental health professional



**24%** were diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the pandemic started





When it comes to seeking treatment, parents were more likely than those without children to have received treatment from a mental health professional (32% vs. 12%) and to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the coronavirus pandemic began (24% vs. 9%). Here, too, fathers were more likely than mothers to have received mental health treatment (38% vs. 26%) and to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the start of the pandemic (29% vs. 19%). Additionally, more than half of parents (54%) said they feel like their children could have benefited from receiving treatment from a mental health professional since the pandemic started, particularly parents of tweens ages 8-12 (63%).

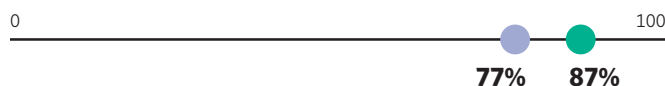
Regarding physical changes, 8 in 10 fathers (80%) reported unwanted changes in weight, compared with 66% of mothers since the start of the pandemic. Specifically, 55% of fathers reported gaining weight, with an average weight gain of 45 pounds (median of 20 pounds). On the other hand, 47% of mothers said they gained weight, with an average weight gain of 27 pounds (median of 15 pounds).

Fathers (87%) also were more likely than mothers (77%) to report sleeping more or less than they wanted to since the pandemic started and to say they are drinking more alcohol to cope with stress (48% of fathers vs. 29% of mothers).

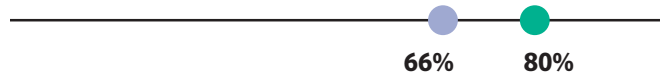
**Mothers are more likely than fathers to say their mental health has worsened compared with before the pandemic (39% vs. 25%), but fathers are more likely to report behavioral and physical changes:**

■ MOTHERS ■ FATHERS

% report sleeping more or less than they wanted



% report unwanted weight changes



% report drinking more alcohol to cope with stress



## How Parents Can Support Their Children and Themselves, and Stay Healthy

- » Practice self-care in 15- or 30-minute increments throughout the day and help your kids to do the same. This can include taking a short walk, calling a friend or watching a funny show.
- » Stay connected with each other, your friends and family. This will help you build emotional resilience so you can support the needs of your children.
- » Try hosting device-free time for the whole family, where you make and eat dinner together or play a board game. Children are more likely to talk about their experiences while engaging in an activity.



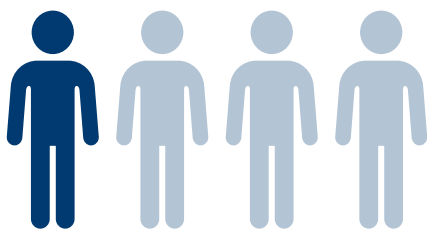
## ESSENTIAL WORKERS MORE LIKELY TO BE DIAGNOSED WITH A MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER DURING PANDEMIC

While some Americans packed up their office supplies and headed home in March 2020, many adults had to continue going into work, despite the health risks. Essential workers, such as health care professionals and law enforcement officers, have had to deal with a special set of stressors that included isolating themselves from their loved ones and witnessing first-hand the effects of the coronavirus. Prolonged exposure to these stressors is taking a serious toll.

More than half of essential workers (54%) said they relied on a lot of unhealthy habits to get through the pandemic. Nearly 3 in 10 (29%) said their mental health has worsened. When asked about emotional support, 3 in 4 essential workers (75%) said they could have used more than they received since the pandemic started. Essential workers were more than twice as likely as those who are not to have received treatment from a mental health professional (34% vs. 12%) and to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the coronavirus pandemic started (25% vs. 9%).

When it comes to physical impacts of stress, nearly 3 in 4 essential workers (74%) reported unwanted changes in weight since the pandemic started, with 50% saying they gained more weight than they wanted to. Of this group, the average amount of weight gained was 38 pounds (median of 20 pounds). Additionally, 80% of essential workers reported sleeping more or less than they wanted to and 39% said they have been drinking more alcohol to cope with stress during the pandemic.

### 1 IN 4 ESSENTIAL WORKERS (25%) DIAGNOSED WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER SINCE START OF PANDEMIC



**75%** say they could have used more emotional support than they received



**34%** received treatment from a mental health professional



## How Employers Can Support Essential Workers

- » Provide flexibility to employees, whether it's what they work on, when they work or how they work (how they work is particularly important for employers of frontline workers). Every person has been affected by the pandemic; providing flexibility at work will allow people to do their jobs while handling new stressors and responsibilities, such as a child's education.
- » Provide support. This can be emotional support through one-on-one check-ins or reducing someone's workload to just essential tasks. Employers also should emphasize that using sick leave applies whether someone isn't feeling well physically or mentally.
- » Ensure that employees' needs are met — make sure they have access to PPE, transportation and other resources to do their jobs.
- » Provide clear communication to employees and supervisors about expectations, support resources and new policies that respond directly to impacts created by the pandemic. This reduces uncertainty at work, which is a major contributor to employee stress.
- » Supervisors should not expect work to continue at the same level as before. Creating this expectation can lead to employee burn-out. Instead, help employees prioritize what work is critical and what can wait.
- » When vaccinations are available, allow employees to take a day off to get the vaccine and deal with any side effects post-vaccination.

## HISPANIC ADULTS MOST LIKELY TO REPORT PHYSICAL IMPACTS OF STRESS; BLACK AMERICANS CONCERNED ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Stress related to the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on communities of color.

When asked to rate their stress over the last year related to the coronavirus pandemic, Hispanic adults reported an average stress level of 6.1 (on a scale where 1 means “little or no stress” and 10 means “a great deal of stress”). This is higher than the average levels reported by white (5.3), Black (5.3) and Asian (5.2) adults.

When it comes to support, nearly 2 in 3 Black (66%) and Hispanic (65%) adults said they could have used more emotional support than they received since the pandemic started, compared with 55% of white and 50% of Asian adults who said the same.

Hispanic adults were most likely to report undesired changes to sleep (78% Hispanic vs. 76% Black, 63% white and 61% Asian), physical activity levels (87% Hispanic vs. 84% Black, 81% Asian and 79% white) and weight (71% Hispanic vs. 64% Black, 58% white and 54% Asian) since the pandemic began.

Among those who gained more weight than desired since the pandemic started, Black adults reported an average of 35 pounds gained (median of 15 pounds), white adults reported an average of 30 pounds (median of 15 pounds), Hispanic adults reported an average of 28 pounds (median of 10 pounds) and Asian adults reported an average of 12 pounds (median of 8 pounds).

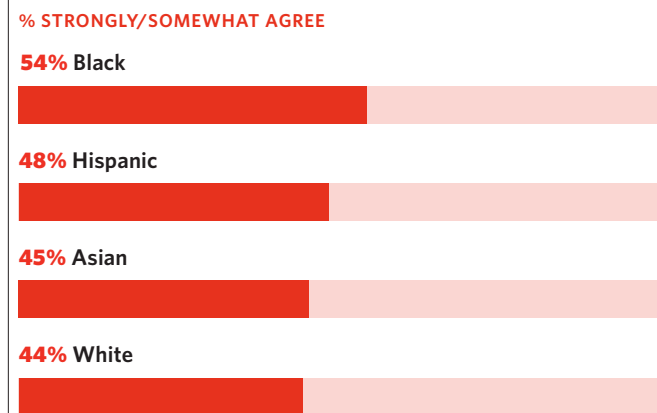
## How People of Color Can Build Resilience

- » Feelings of stress, anger, outrage and frustration, or a host of other emotions because of systemic injustice, are expected. Acknowledge those feelings and do what you can to take care of yourself as you continue to cope and manage in today's reality.
- » Participate in culturally affirming activities and continue to share experiences even if in-person gatherings are not possible. These activities will help you stay connected to your community.
- » Limit exposure to news media and video of people being assaulted, harassed or killed by law enforcement or other groups. For many people of color, watching these videos can cause trauma or trigger other negative emotions. This is particularly true for young people of color.

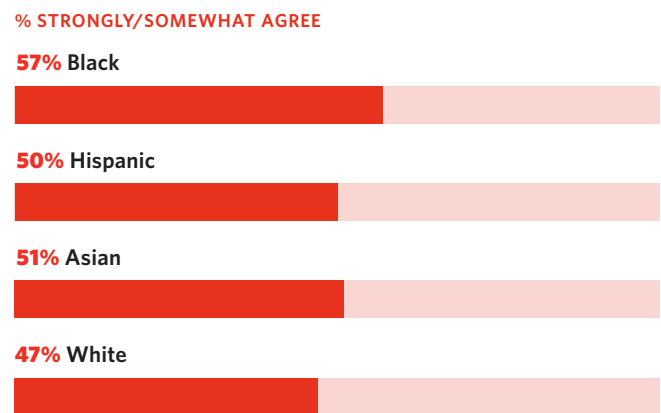
Stress about the future also is having a disproportionate impact on communities of color. Black Americans were most likely to report feelings of concern about the future. More than half said they do not feel comfortable going back to living life like they used to before the pandemic (54% vs. 48% Hispanic, 45% Asian and 44% white) and that they feel uneasy about adjusting to in-person interaction once the pandemic ends (57% vs. 51% Asian, 50% Hispanic and 47% white).

## BLACK ADULTS MOST LIKELY TO REPORT CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE

*I do not feel comfortable going back to living life liked I used to before the pandemic*



*I feel uneasy about adjusting to in-person interaction once the pandemic ends*





## YOUNG AMERICANS CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE

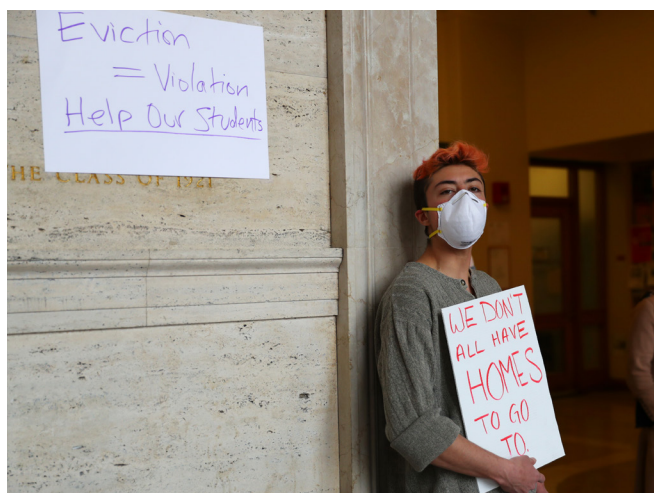
*Stress in America™ 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis*, released in October, revealed that “Gen Z teens (ages 13–17) and Gen Z adults (ages 18–23) were facing unprecedented uncertainty, experiencing elevated stress and already reporting symptoms of depression.” This new survey finds Gen Z adults are also doing worse mentally and physically than other generations.

Gen Z adults (46%) were the most likely generation to say that their mental health has worsened compared with before the pandemic, followed by Xers (33%), Millennials (31%), Boomers (28%) and older adults (9%). Another challenge for Gen Z adults is feeling isolated. Around half of U.S. adults (47%) agreed they have felt very lonely during the coronavirus pandemic, but Gen Z adults (65%) and Millennials (62%) were more likely than their older counterparts to report this (Xers: 41%, Boomers: 33%, older adults: 20%).

Younger generations also were more likely to say they could have used more emotional support than they received since the pandemic started, with Gen Z adults nearly four times as likely as older adults to report this (Gen Z adults: 79%, Millennials: 75%, Xers: 54%, Boomers: 40%, older adults: 21%). When it comes to receiving treatment, Millennials were most likely to have received treatment from a mental health professional (32%) or to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder (23%) since the start of the pandemic.

The reported physical impacts on younger adults are significant, with nearly 3 in 4 Gen Z adults (74%) and a similar proportion of Millennials (70%) reporting unwanted weight changes since the pandemic started, compared with 58% of Xers, 52% of Boomers and 30% of older adults. More specifically, 52% of Gen Z adults reported gaining more weight than they wanted to, as did 48% of Millennials. Among those who gained more weight than desired, Millennials on average reported the highest amount of weight gained (average of 41 pounds, median of 20 pounds), followed by Gen Z adults (average of 28 pounds, median of 15 pounds), Xers (average of 21 pounds, median of 15 pounds) and Boomers (average of 16 pounds, median of 10 pounds).

***Gen Z adults (46%) were the most likely generation to say that their mental health has worsened compared with before the pandemic.***



## How Young Adults Can Build Resilience

- » Create meaningful opportunities for connections with family, culture and community. Although many young adults have left home physically, these connections remain fundamental to youth well-being.
- » Create traditions that celebrate important milestones like graduation and weddings in new ways and are still meaningful.
- » Get regular sleep. Pick a bedtime and try to stick with it (avoid the temptation to stay up late because you don't have to commute to work or school in the morning).
- » Move a little bit more. Attach activity goals to a specific time of day (e.g., pledge to walk 500 steps before breakfast). Small activities throughout the day add up— and if you miss one, you've got another goal later in the day you can still try to meet.



## CORONAVIRUS STRESS: MAJORITY OF AMERICANS NEVER IMAGINED PANDEMIC WOULD LAST THIS LONG

A majority of adults (82%) said they never imagined the coronavirus pandemic would last this long. Nearly 7 in 10 Americans (67%) said that living through the coronavirus pandemic has been a rollercoaster of emotions.

Nearly 1 in 4 U.S. adults (24%) said they or a household member were laid off from a job during the coronavirus pandemic, while 22% started working from home, and 16% of all U.S. adults had a child or children age 18 or younger at home for remote learning. Among parents who had a child home for remote learning, the majority (85%) still had at least one child remote learning from home as of February 2021.

Additionally, 2 in 3 Americans (67%) reported less in-person social interaction since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, but a similar proportion (67%) have had online social interactions (e.g., social media, online chat rooms or video calls) during this time. The majority of those who have had online social interactions since the coronavirus pandemic started (84%) said these engagements have helped them cope with stress.

When asked how the level of stress in their life has changed compared with before the pandemic, nearly half of U.S. adults (47%) said the level of stress in their life has increased.

*The **majority of those who have had online social interactions since the coronavirus pandemic started (84%)** said these engagements have **helped them cope with stress.***

## REGARDLESS OF VACCINATION STATUS, AMERICANS FEEL UNEASY ABOUT IN-PERSON INTERACTIONS IN THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, Americans are hesitant about the future regardless of their vaccination status. Nearly half of Americans (49%) said they feel uneasy about adjusting to in-person interaction once the pandemic ends. Adults who received a COVID-19 vaccine were just as likely as those who have not received a vaccine to say this (48% vs. 49%, respectively).

Similarly, 46% of adults said they do not feel comfortable going back to living life like they used to before the pandemic. Here, too, similar proportions of Americans agreed with this statement regardless of whether they had received a COVID-19 vaccine (44% of those who received a vaccine vs. 46% of those who did not receive a vaccine).



## APA PROVIDES GUIDANCE; CALLS ON POLICYMAKERS TO ADDRESS SEVERE HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

While the situation is critical, it is not hopeless. This report contains small steps Americans can take to stay active, positive and connected on a daily basis. But the U.S. response to this crisis also requires large, systemic changes by health leaders and policymakers.

We need to facilitate access to mental health services during and after the pandemic, including an expansion of congressional pandemic relief efforts that include substantial funding for mental health services and support. This also should include investing in prevention and treatment, continuing support for and expansion of telehealth services, and increasing funding to better support school mental health services.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic turns the corner, we need to invest in helping Americans recover mentally and physically, making us stronger for the future.

A special thank you to our member psychologists specializing in child development, parenting, racial disparities, education, substance use, eating disorders and employment who contributed actionable advice to this report: Dr. Emma Adam, Dr. Mary Alvord, Dr. Leslie Hammer, Dr. Byron McClure, Dr. James Murphy, Dr. Tracy Sbrocco, Dr. Mia Smith-Bynum and Dr. Erlanger "Earl" Turner. A special thanks also to our staff who provided insights on this report: Dr. Lynn Bufka, Senior Director, Practice Transformation and Quality; Dr. Jim Diaz-Granados, APA Deputy CEO; and Dr. Vaile Wright, Senior Director of Health Care Innovation.

## METHODOLOGY

The Pandemic Anniversary Survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association between Feb. 19 and 24, 2021, among 3,013 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, household income and time spent online. Hispanic adults also were 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.) also was included for Hispanic and Asian subgroups. Weighting variables for Gen Z adults (ages 18–24) 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. A propensity score allows researchers to adjust for attitudinal and behavioral differences between those who are online versus those who are not, those who join online panels versus those who do not, and those who responded to this survey versus those who did not. Because the sample is based on those who were invited and agreed to participate in research panels, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

## SUBGROUP ANALYSIS

Throughout the written summary, statistically significant differences by subgroups are noted. Statistical significance testing was conducted at the 95% level of confidence. All comparative claims made in this report are statistically significant. Demographic sub-groups of adults are defined below:

- Essential Worker: Yes (n=784); No (n=2,229)
- Generation: Gen Z adults (18–24 years old) n=522; Millennials (25–42 years old) n=1,022; Xers (43–56 years old) n=563; Boomers (57–75 years old) n=806; Older adults (age 76 or older) n=100
- Parental Status: Any children under the age of 18 (n=1,003); No children (n=2,010)
  - » Parental Gender: Male (n=395); Female (n=607)
  - » Age of Children: Young children ages 0–4 (n=273); School age 5–7 (n=163); Tweens ages 8–12 (n=279); Teens ages 13–17 (n=288)
  - » Still Have Children Home for Remote Learning: Yes (n=506); Yes, Fathers (n=178); Yes, Mothers (n=325)
- Race/Ethnicity: White (n=1,098); Hispanic (n=706); Black (n=703); Asian (n=403)
- Received COVID-19 Vaccine: Yes (n=654); No (n=2,359)

