



## Teens feeling stressed, and many not managing it well TEENS AND STRESS: BAD HABITS BEGIN EARLY

Teens say they're feeling the stress in all areas of their lives, from school to friends, work and family. And they aren't always using healthy methods to cope, finds a new national survey.

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*Experts worry that bad habits for dealing with stress learned early will carry over into adulthood.*

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Teen stress level is higher than adult level much of the year**
- **Stress survey finds teen girls report higher stress and more symptoms than boys**
- **Annual psychological survey focuses on teens for the first time**

Teens across the USA are feeling high levels of stress that they say negatively affect every aspect of their lives, a new national survey suggests.

More than a quarter (27%) say they experience "extreme stress" during the school year, vs. 13% in the summer. And 34% expect stress to increase in the coming year.

Stressors range from school to friends, work and family. And teens aren't always using healthy methods to cope, finds the latest Stress in America survey from the Washington, D.C.-based American Psychological Association.

Findings on more than 1,000 teens and almost 2,000 adults suggest that unhealthy behaviors associated with stress may start early and continue through adulthood. With 21% of adults reporting "extreme" stress levels, the survey says that with teens "mirroring adults' high-stress lives" they are "potentially setting themselves up for a future of chronic stress and chronic illness."

The report warns that teens are at risk of a variety of physical and emotional ills and potentially shorter lifespans than their elders if they don't act to "reverse their current trajectory of chronic illness, poor health and shorter lifespans."

"Our study this year gives us a window in looking at how early these patterns might begin," says clinical psychologist Norman Anderson, the association's CEO. "The patterns of stress we see in adults seem to be occurring as early as the adolescent years — stress-related behaviors such as lack of sleep, lack of exercise, poor eating habits in response to stress."

Teens' average stress level was 5.8 out of 10 during the school year and 4.6 in the past month — the survey was taken in August. Adults reported average levels of 5.1 in the past month.

As a result of stress, 40% of teens report feeling irritable or angry; 36% nervous or anxious. A third say stress makes them feel overwhelmed, depressed or sad. Teen girls are more stressed than boys, just as women nationally are more stressed than men.

The report says stress appears to be affecting teens' performance in all aspects of life:

- 59% report that managing their time to balance all activities is a somewhat or very significant stressor;
- 40% say they neglected responsibilities at home because of stress; 21% say they neglected work or school because of stress;
- 32% say they experience headaches because of stress; 26% report changes in sleeping habits;
- 26% report snapping at or being short with classmates or teammates when under stress.

Hannah Sturgill, 18, of Portsmouth, Ohio, was among those surveyed last summer when she was 17 and heading into her senior year in high school.

"The last two years in high school have been the most stressful for me and my friends," she says. "We have to do everything

and be perfect for colleges and we have a big workload. Most of the time we talk about how stressed we are.”

Sturgill says she skips meals because of stress. Unlike many teens surveyed, she goes to the gym to work out every day. Only about 37% of teens surveyed exercise or walk to manage stress; 28% play sports. Many more choose what experts say are less healthy activities, including playing video games (46%) and spending time online (43%).

This is the first time the group has focused on teen stress. Other research has studied teen depression and other mental health concerns, but officials say this may be the most comprehensive national look at stress in teens to date. Despite anecdotal reports of high stress, researchers say stress itself in adolescents hasn't been studied broadly; global comparisons have focused on adult stress rather than teens.

Despite teens' own perceptions, some experts question whether stress is merely a convenient excuse for teen behaviors.

“It's hard to know” if all the negative effects teens report are “really based on stress,” says clinical psychologist Jonathan Abramowitz, of Chapel Hill, N.C. “It's hard enough for anyone to really explain why they do certain things, like procrastinating. Give a kid any excuse — it may or may not have anything to do with stress.”

Michael Bradley, a psychologist in Feasterville, Pa., who specializes in teens, agrees.

“I'm not sure it would be the clinical definition of stress. I think they get stressed because somebody puts a demand on them and they don't want to do it,” he says. “However, on their behalf, I will fall back on the fact that hard numbers tell us kids are more anxious and depressed than they've ever been.”

A literature review of mental health among U.S. adolescents by the non-profit Child Trends released last year, for example, found that one in four high school students have shown mild symptoms of depression. The report noted symptoms include persistent irritability, anger, withdrawn behavior and deviations from normal appetite or sleep patterns. The report also said 29% of high school students in grades 9-12 reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or longer during the past year.

In addition, a study about depression published in 2012 in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*, found that rates of suicide attempts were significantly higher in adolescents ages 13-17 than in emerging adults (ages 18-23) or adults (24-30).

Kristen Race, of Steamboat Springs, Colo., author of the book *Mindful Parenting*, out in January, says teens are generally honest about responding to confidential surveys.

“They're more honest in that situation than telling their parents how stressed they are,” she says. “When teens report their own level of stress, it is typically much higher than parents would report of their teen's level of stress.”

Anderson says the survey did find enough subtlety to satisfy skeptics.

“While one might argue it's very easy to say everything is affected by stress, what's interesting is they're not doing that,” he says. “They're differentiating between the things they believe are negatively impacted by stress vs. others. Only 10% believe lower grades are due to stress. They seem to be very nuanced in their attributions of what stress does.”

Race says the fact that stress levels dip in the summer suggests how important summer is to kids' mental health.

“If you look at teen suicide statistics, stress is one of the things that leads to suicide attempts,” she says. “It's incredibly important to have the downtime, and it makes sense to have a dramatic shift in the summer. They sleep more in the summer, and that's going to enormously increase their ability to think positively.”

Bradley says teens need help from parents — to a point.

“Some parents set out on a mission to get rid of stress in their kids, but the fact is, some degree of stress is very therapeutic and an appropriate amount of stress is what helps us become strong. The hard part is what's appropriate,” Bradley says. “We do know the more we try to mitigate all stress in our children's life the less resilient that child becomes and they feel hopeless about their own future.”

Among survey findings on U.S. adults:

- 37% report exercising less than once a week or not at all;
- 27% say they eat to manage stress;