

Teen stress rivals that of adults

APA's *Stress in America*™ survey finds unhealthy behavior in teens, especially during the school year.

By Sophie Bethune

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If you think you're stressed out, imagine being a teenager in today's society. American teens say they experience stress in patterns similar to adults, and during the school year they report stress levels even higher than those reported by adults.

These were the prime conclusions of APA's poll *Stress in America*™: *Are Teens Adopting Adults' Stress Habits?*

The survey of adults and teens was conducted online on behalf of APA by Harris Interactive Inc. last August.

Teens reported that their stress levels during the school year far exceeded what they believe to be healthy (5.8 vs. 3.9 on a 10-point scale) and topped adults' average reported stress levels (5.8 for teens vs. 5.1 for adults). Even during the summer — from Aug. 3 to Aug. 31, 2013, when interviewing took place — teens reported their stress during the prior month at levels higher than what they believe is healthy (4.6 vs. 3.9 on a 10-point scale).

Many teens also reported feeling overwhelmed (31 percent) and depressed or sad (30 percent) as a result of stress. More than one-third of teens reported feeling tired (36 percent) and nearly one-quarter of teens (23 percent) reported skipping a meal due to stress.

Despite the impact that stress appears to have on their lives, teens were more likely than adults to report that their stress levels had a slight or no impact on their body or physical health (54 percent of teens vs. 39 percent of adults) or their mental health (52 percent of teens vs. 43 percent of adults).

"It is alarming that the teen stress experience is so similar to that of adults," says APA CEO Norman B. Anderson, PhD. "It is even more concerning that they seem to underestimate the potential impact that stress has on their physical and mental health."

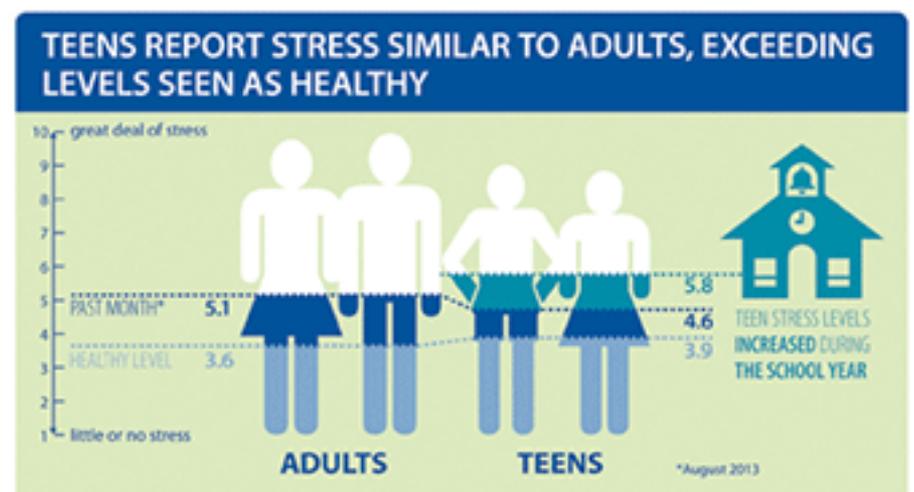
To break this cycle of stress and unhealthy behaviors, says Anderson, "we need to provide teens with better support and health education at school and home, at the community level and in their interactions with health-care professionals."

Too few managing stress

Few teens said their stress was on the decline — only 16 percent reported that their stress decreased in the past year — while approximately twice as many said their stress increased in the past year (31 percent) or believed their stress level will increase in the coming year (34 percent).

Nearly half of teens (42 percent) reported they were not doing enough or were not sure if they were doing enough to manage their stress, and more than one in 10 (13 percent) said they never set aside time to manage stress.

Similarly, stress continued to be a problem for many adults, while high stress and ineffective coping mechanisms remain ingrained in American culture. Forty-two percent of adults reported that their stress level had increased and 36 percent said their stress level had stayed the same over the past five years. Adults' average reported stress level was 5.1 on a 10-point scale, far



higher than the level of stress they believe is healthy (3.6).

Even though the majority of adults said that stress management is important to them, few set aside the time they need to manage it. Some adults said they take no action to help manage their stress — one in 10 adults (10 percent) said they do not engage in any stress management activities. More than one-third (36 percent) of adults said stress affects their overall happiness a great deal or a lot and 43 percent of adults who exercise to relieve stress had skipped exercise due to stress in the past month.

Influence of stress on health behaviors

The survey also explored the relationship between stress and such health behaviors as sleep, exercise and eating — behaviors that people said are important to them but that the survey showed are negatively affected by stress. Survey findings illustrated that when people are living with high stress, it appears that they are less likely to sleep well, exercise and eat healthy foods.

- ■ **Stress and sleep:** When adults do not get enough sleep, 21 percent reported feeling more stressed. On average, teens reported sleeping far less than the recommended amount — 7.4 hours on school nights and 8.1 hours on non-school nights, compared with the 8.5 to 9.25 hours recommended by the National Sleep Foundation. Nearly one in five teens (18 percent) said that when they do not get enough sleep, they are more stressed and 36 percent of teens reported feeling tired because of stress in the past month.
- ■ **Stress and exercise:** Though people said they experience positive benefits from exercise, such as a better mood and less stress, few said they make the time to exercise every day. The survey found that more than one-third of adults (37 percent) and one in five teens (20 percent) reported exercising less than once a week or not at all. Teens who reported high stress during the past school year also said they spend an average of 3.2 hours online a day, compared with two hours among those reporting low stress levels during the past school year.
- ■ **Stress and eating:** Twenty-seven percent of adults said they eat to manage stress and 34 percent of those who reported overeating or eating unhealthy foods because of stress said this behavior is a habit. Of the 23 percent of teens who reported skipping a meal in the prior month due to stress, nearly one in four (39 percent) said they do this weekly or more.

"Parents and other adults can play a critical role in helping teens get a handle on stress by modeling healthy stress management behaviors," says Anderson. "When spending time with teens, we can encourage them to exercise, eat well, get the sleep they need and seek support from health-care professionals like psychologists to help them develop healthier coping mechanisms for stress sooner rather than later."

Methodology

The Stress in America survey was conducted online by Harris Interactive Inc., on behalf of APA between Aug. 3 and 31, 2013, among 1,950 adults ages 18 or older and 1,018 teens, ages 13 to 17, who reside in the United States. This online survey was not based on a probability sample and therefore no estimates of theoretical sampling error could be calculated. To read the full methodology, including the weighting variables, visit Stress in America (<http://www.stressinamerica.org>) .

The Stress in America™ survey is part of APA's Mind/Body Health campaign. Conducted annually since 2007, it seeks to examine the state of stress across the country and understand its impact. The results of the survey draw attention to the serious physical and emotional implications of stress and the inextricable link between the mind and body.

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