

Stress and Generations

Older adults are less likely than younger generations to report that they experience high levels of stress, perhaps in part because they are also more likely to recognize the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle or have been told by a health care provider to reduce their stress.⁵ Indeed, they are more likely to report successfully coping with the stress they do have, according to results from the latest *Stress in America™* survey.

- Adults are twice as likely to report increased (39 percent), rather than decreased (17 percent) stress levels over the past year. Boomers, however, (23 percent) are somewhat more likely than others to report a decline in their stress.
- Matures, who historically have lower stress than younger generations, continue to report lower stress than the other generations. On a 10-point scale where 1 is little or no stress and 10 is a great deal of stress, Millennials average 5.4 and Gen Xers average 5.6, compared to 4.9 for Boomers and 4.5 for Matures.
- Though their average stress level increased from last year, Matures' stress differential (the difference between what they see as a healthy level of stress and where they place their own) is lower (0.7) than the other generations and at the lowest level of the past five years (tying 2008).
- Gen Xers' and Millennials' stress differentials — the difference between each generation's average personal stress level and their average perceived healthy stress level — are higher than Matures and Boomers. Gen Xers have the highest differential of 2.0, but Millennials' differential of 1.7 is the highest it has been in 5 years.
- Boomers' average assessments of their personal stress levels have declined steadily, from 6.5 in 2007 to 4.9 in 2011. Their perceptions of healthy stress levels have also shifted from 4.5 in 2007 to 3.4 in 2011. Overall, their stress differential has declined to the lowest level of the past 5 years — 1.5 — which suggests a movement toward more manageable stress.
- Overall, adults are more likely to believe that their stress levels have increased (44 percent) rather than declined (27 percent) over the past 5 years. Millennials, in particular, have noted increased stress levels during this timeframe (52 percent).

Sources of Stress Differ Among Generations

Not surprisingly, the types of things causing stress among adults differ by generation.

- Significant stressors for Millennials, Gen Xers and Boomers are money (80 percent, 77 percent and 77 percent), work (72 percent, 77 percent and 64 percent) and housing costs (49 percent, 51 percent and 54 percent). But Matures (63 percent) are more likely to cite health problems for their families as a source of stress (compared to 60 percent of Boomers, 45 percent of Gen Xers and 46 percent of Millennials).
- Millennials (54 percent) are less likely than older adults to be stressed by the economy (66 percent of Gen Xers, 76 percent of Boomers and 71 percent of Matures).

- Relationships are particularly problematic for younger adults (63 percent of Millennials and 65 percent of Gen Xers).

Managing Stress Also Improves With Age

There are some significant generational differences in stress management techniques. Survey findings suggest that it is possible certain stress management strategies could be helping older generations achieve lower stress levels compared to younger generations, especially Millennials.

- To manage stress, Boomers are much more likely than Millennials to report being flexible and willing to compromise (46 percent vs. 33 percent) and to say that they adjust their expectations (36 percent vs. 27 percent).
- Matures are notably more likely than Millennials to report they express their feelings rather than keeping them bottled up (43 percent vs. 32 percent).
- Nearly twice as many Millennials (16 percent) than Gen Xers (10 percent) and Boomers (9 percent) report they do not rely on any commonly reported stress management strategies for dealing with stress.

There are also notable generational differences in means of coping with stress. Millennials are more likely than the older generation to engage in sedentary activities to manage stress. They are also significantly more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as drinking alcohol and smoking.

- Millennials (60 percent), Gen Xers (47 percent) and Boomers (46 percent) are more likely than Matures (32 percent) to say they listen to music in order to manage their stress.
- Millennials (44 percent) and Gen Xers (36 percent) are more likely than Boomers and Matures (25 percent each) to report playing video games or surf the Internet in response to stress.
- Gen Xers (23 percent), and to a lesser extent, Millennials (15 percent), turn to alcohol to cope with stress; considerably fewer Boomers (12 percent) and Matures (3 percent) say they do so.
- Similarly, Gen Xers (16 percent) are more likely than Millennials (8 percent) or Matures (3 percent) to report they smoke as a way of coping with stress.
- Reading is a stress management staple of the Boomer generation (47 percent), more so than the Millennial generation (38 percent).
- Boomers (39 percent) and Matures (39 percent) are notably more likely than younger generations (26 percent of Millennials, 25 percent of Gen Xers) to pray during stressful times.
- Millennials (15 percent) are more likely than Gen Xers (7 percent) and Matures (8 percent) to meditate or do yoga to manage their stress.

Older adults appear to be more attuned to the impact that stress can have on one's health than younger Americans.

- Three-quarters of Millennials (76 percent) believe that stress can have a very strong or strong impact on health; this proportion rises steadily to 80 percent of Gen Xers, 87 percent of Boomers and 92 percent of Matures.

Sizeable proportions of adults report unhealthy behaviors as a consequence of the stress that they are experiencing, regardless of their age.

- More than 4 in 10 adults (44 percent) report that they have lain awake at night in the previous month due to stress. There were no significant differences for each generation.
- Four in 10 adults (39 percent) ate too much or ate unhealthy foods because they were feeling stressed in the past month. There were no significant differences for each generation.
- Three in 10 adults (29 percent) skipped a meal during the past month when they were experiencing stress. Younger adults were particularly likely to do so: roughly one-third of Millennials (31 percent) and Gen Xers (35 percent) skipped meals during periods of stress, compared with 2 in 10 Matures (18 percent).

There are also notable generational differences in how adults experience the physical and emotional symptoms of stress.

- Matures are significantly less likely than the younger generations to report irritability or anger as a result of stress in the past month (23 percent of Matures, 42 percent of Boomers, 51 percent of Gen Xers and 44 percent of Millennials).
- Similarly, Matures are less likely than other generations to report feeling depressed or sad as a result of stress in the past month (24 percent vs. 41 percent of Millennials and 38 percent of Gen Xers).
- Almost half of Gen Xers (46 percent) reported experiencing stress-induced fatigue during the past month, which is significantly higher than the proportion of Matures who reported fatigue as a symptom (28 percent).
- Stress is even taking its toll on younger adults' sex drive: 14 percent of Millennials and 17 percent of Gen Xers reported that stress had affected their sex drive in the previous month, compared with 5 percent of Matures and 8 percent of Boomers.
- Feeling nervous or anxious is a particular problem for Millennials: Almost half (45 percent) said they experienced this symptom as a result of stress in the previous month, which is significantly higher than the proportion of Matures (29 percent) who felt this way.

All Generations Said They Could Do Better

Even though the stress differential for some generations is decreasing, adults of all generations seem to be struggling with managing stress. All generations report a considerable difference between how important they believe it is to manage stress and how well they believe they are doing in achieving that goal, a gap that is most notable among younger Americans.

- A majority of Matures (66 percent) consider managing stress important, while less than half (46 percent) rate themselves excellent or very good at this lifestyle challenge.
- Six in 10 Boomers (62 percent) think managing stress is important, but less than 4 in 10 (38 percent) do it well.
- Almost 6 in 10 Gen Xers (58 percent) say they believe managing stress is important, but just one-quarter (27 percent) rate themselves highly on doing so.
- Almost 6 in 10 Millennials (58 percent) consider stress management to be important, but only one-third (32 percent) think they are excellent or very good at it.

* The four generations are defined as the following: Millennials (18 – 32 year-olds), Gen Xers (33 – 46 year-olds), Boomers (47 – 65 year-olds) and Matures (66 years and older). This section of the report primarily focuses on Millennials (2007 n=294; 2008 n=406; 2009 n=504; 2010 n=268; 2011 n=420), Gen Xers (2007 n=426; 2008 n=478; 2009 n=369; 2010 n=293; 2011 n=274), Boomers (2007 n=743; 2008 n=651; 2009 n=464; 2010 n=396; 2011 n=361) and Matures (2007 n=385; 2008 n=256; 2009 n=231; 2010 n=177; 2011 n=171) within the general population (2007 n=1,848; 2008 n=1,791; 2009 n=1,568; 2010 n=1,134; 2011 n=1,226).