

Survey discusses parent perceptions of their children's stress

Stress related to school pressure and family finances has a greater impact on young people than parents believe, according to a new national survey released today by the American Psychological Association (APA). Building on past research indicating that stress is a top health concern for U.S. teens between 9th and 12th grade, psychologists say that if they don't learn healthy ways to manage that stress now, it could have serious long-term health implications.

Teens and tweens were more likely than parents to say that their stress had increased in the last year. 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 rate 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 say they worry a lot or a great deal.

"It's clear that parents do not fully appreciate the impact that stress is having on their kids," said psychologist Katherine C.

Nordal, PhD, APA's executive director for professional practice. "What we're seeing with stress is in line with existing research about parents' perception of their kids' engagement in risky behaviors. Parents often under report drug use, depression and sexual activity in their children. Now it appears the same may be true for stress."

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). Results are similar for doing well in school (44 percent vs. 34 percent of parents). In general, children also were more likely to report having experienced physical symptoms often associated with stress than parents were to say their children experienced these symptoms, including headaches, difficulty sleeping, and changes in appetite.

- Tweens (30 percent) and teens (42 percent) say they get headaches vs. 13 percent of parents

- Tweens (39 percent) and teens (49 percent) cite difficulty sleeping vs. 13 percent of par-

ents

- Tweens (27 percent) and teens (39 percent) report eating too much or too little vs. 8 percent of parents

Stress in America survey results show that adults continue to report high levels of stress and many report that their stress has increased over the past year. Additionally, many adults are reporting physical symptoms of stress.

Seventy-five 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 report 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.

"The prevalence with which Americans continue to report increasing and extreme stress levels is a real concern," said Dr. Nordal. "Also, people say that their levels of stress and lack of willpower are preventing them from making lifestyle and behavior changes that are necessary for improving and maintaining good health. It's clear that people need tools and support to better manage extreme stress in order to prevent serious health consequences. Unfortunately, our current health-care system does not do a very good job in this regard. And insurance companies often don't cover preventive services or the kinds of services people need in order to better manage chronic illness."

Two-thirds (66 percent) of adults living in the U.S. 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 recommended lifestyle and behavior changes (70 percent).

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.

In general, people cited a number of barriers in their efforts to make lasting lifestyle and behavior changes – 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).

Stress in America is part of APA's Mind/Body Health public education campaign. For additional information on stress and lifestyle and behavior, visit www.apahelpcenter.org, read the campaign blog www.yourmindyourbody.org, and follow @apahelpcenter on Twitter.

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