



# Americans are stressed, but we're getting used to it

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

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Americans' stress is down for the first time in five years and at its lowest point since 2007, finds an audit of self-reported stress to be released today.

The USA's average stress level in 2011 was 5.2 on a 10-point scale, down from 6.2 in 2007, says the survey, by the [American Psychological Association](#). But that doesn't mean we're not feeling stressed — 39% of those surveyed say their stress rose last year; 17% say it dropped and 44% say it stayed the same.

So why the decrease? The economic climate has improved little and stressors remain the same as in past years: Money was cited as a concern by 75% of respondents; two-thirds cited work stress and more than half say they struggle with relationships or health problems.

What's different, experts say, is the way we approach stress and what it means to be under stress. This decline in reported stress, they add, is likely because stress has become "the new normal" for life in the USA.

People have been under so much stress in the past few years that they've "adapted to it," says physician Paul Rosch, a clinical professor of medicine and psychiatry at [New York Medical College](#) and president of the non-profit American Institute of Stress, in Yonkers, N.Y. "We have more or less accepted it as a way of life and it's not a new or novel source of complaint, compared to a couple of years ago. But that doesn't negate its prevalence."

Stress had been rising every year since the APA started tracking it in 2007. But the newest survey of 1,226 adults ages 18 and older not only found the average ranking down to 5.2, the percentage reporting extreme stress — 8, 9 or 10 on the scale — dropped from 32% to 22%. And 27% of adults say their stress has decreased in the past

Michael A. Schwarz, USA TODAY

Kim Poer, 51, cleared out her living room to use as a yoga room at her home in Villa Rica, GA.

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### Tips for handling stress:

**Take a break:** You can't avoid stress, but you can momentarily get away from that project at work, a crying baby or mounting bills. If you give yourself permission to step away for even 20 minutes, you can get a new perspective or practice stress-relieving techniques to feel less overwhelmed.

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**Exercise:** The research is growing that exercise benefits your mind as well as your body. Even a 20-minute walk, run, swim or dance session in the midst of a stressful time can give an immediate effect that can last for several hours.

**Laugh:** Our brains are interconnected with our emotions and facial expressions. Stressed people often hold a lot of the stress in their faces, so laughs or smiles can help relieve some of that tension.

**Get support:** Sharing your concerns or feelings with another person does help relieve stress, but don't share those concerns with someone who adds to the stress; talk to someone you trust and who can be supportive.

**Meditate:** Meditation and prayer practices can help the mind and body to relax and focus. They can help people see new perspectives, develop self-compassion and forgiveness. Meditation can help people release emotions that may have been causing the body physical stress. Research has shown that much like exercise, even meditating briefly can be beneficial.

For more ideas, visit [www.apa.org/helpcenter](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter)

Source: *American Psychological Association*

five years.

"Who's not stressed? That's just life. Life is stress," says Kathleen Hall, founder of the Stress Institute in Atlanta, which promotes stress reduction and work-life balance.

Kim Poer, 51, of [Villa Rica](#), Ga., is among those for whom stress increased. "This past year has been the most stressful year of my entire life," says Poer, a quality technician for a company that makes fiber-optic cable.

Contributing were the loss of her father in February, wanting to sell her new husband's former home in Atlanta, and workforce reductions that resulted in months of 12-hour days and seven-day work weeks.

But now, she says, "I think my personal stress level is actually going down, mostly because I am consciously trying to de-stress my life." In the past six months, Poer transformed her living room into a peaceful area for daily yoga.

She also walks more. Rather than three 20-minute power walks a day, she's now doing one power walk and a longer but more leisurely stroll around her neighborhood to relax and chat with neighbors.

And a weekly one-hour massage is a routine she has kept for the past 18 months.

"Perceptions of stress and what people label as stress is changing," says Rajita Sinha, a clinical psychologist who directs the Yale Stress Center at Yale University in New Haven, Conn.

### **Stress is trendy**

Being "stressed out" has become trendy and a real part of the culture, suggests Marie Dacey, who has spoken about stress and society at meetings of the Popular Culture Association. "Previously it was seen as something to be fought against. People are not identifying stress as stress but as part of the norm," she says. "Our culture really applauds and rewards that."

Dacey, of the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences in Boston, also says reality TV has altered our reactions. "Seeing so many people in distress on reality TV has changed perceptions of stress," she says. "It's normalized."

With the greater visibility of stress, the public has also been hearing more about how to manage it, says clinical psychologist Norman Anderson, the APA'S chief executive officer.

"We like to think what's happening is better management," he says. "Part of the good news from the study is that a majority of people recognize stress as a problem and something that needs to be attended to. I'm not sure that would have been the case a generation or two ago."

Stress occurs when people perceive that the demands placed on them — such as work, school or relationships — exceed their ability to cope, the APA says. While stress can at times be beneficial — producing an energy boost that can help people get through exams or work deadlines — an extreme amount of stress can bring adverse health consequences, including anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system that can lead to major illnesses, such as heart disease, depression and obesity, the group notes.

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Dewey Roen, 38, experienced such reactions in the past few years, having had stroke symptoms related to stress. Roen, of Everett, Wash., served in Iraq in 2003. But the divorced father of a 10-year-old son says in 2011 he changed his ways.

"I've taught myself not to get too stressed. I've taken stuff away that I know has caused me stress," Roen says, noting he has stopped smoking and drinking.

### **More open to alternatives**

Rosch says Americans today are much more interested in stress-reduction techniques such as jogging, yoga or meditation than in the past. "There's a greater acceptance of so-called alternative approaches as opposed to medication. People are increasingly wary of adverse effects of tranquilizers and antidepressants," he says.

More people also are using handheld biofeedback devices to alter breathing patterns, much like meditation, he says.

But the "most successfully used stress management tool is still exercise," says Michael Baime, clinical associate professor of medicine at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), Philadelphia.

"Exercise doesn't just give people a break from their stress, like watching TV, it undoes some of the harmful biological effects of stress and helps the body to restore," he says.

Poer says she actively tries to reduce stress. The massage is a real plus, she adds. "I tried it one time and it was so awesome, I refused to quit."

### **Generational differences**

The APA survey found that young adults ages 18-32 (the so-called Millennials) are less likely than older adults to feel stressed by the economy.

Unlike older adults, who have watched their nest eggs disappear, younger people have been most affected by the downturn's impact on jobs. More than half of Millennials (54%) cited the economy as a stressor, vs. 66% of Gen Xers, 76% of Baby Boomers and 71% of those 66 and older.

Jason Knaggs, 29, says his stress has "decreased compared to a few years ago."

"I got a steady job. I finished college. I am living within my means," says Knaggs, who works for a non-profit in Seattle.

For those in their mid-40s and younger, relationships cause stress, cited by 63% of Millennials and 65% of GenXers, identified as ages 33-46.

Elizabeth Deyling, 29, says she "definitely feels stress" but not just because of her job as a data coordinator at a university.

"I'm single, but that's a whole other stress. You're stressed when you're dating and stressed when you're not," says Deyling, who lives with her mother in [Broadview Heights](#), Ohio.

For many Americans, the job situation hasn't improved, but they're dealing with it. Michael Margolies, 48, of Waukesha, Wis., has been laid off twice in five years from work in advertising and marketing, with this latest lasting 15 months. The father of four, ages 22 to 26, says it's difficult. His wife, Jenene, has worked for the past three years as an administrative assistant.

They used to help the kids with college costs, but no more. "They're struggling and I can't help, which is very frustrating."

"Over time, my stress has gone down, but my depression has gone up," he adds. "If I have a day that's OK, looking for jobs, cleaning the house and cooking dinner, I start

feeling guilty. It's hard to let yourself be OK."

He volunteers as a jobs coach, lifts weights and walks outside listening to music and watching wildlife on the [Fox River](#). "I set goals, how much, how far, and how fast — things to accomplish so I can feel like I've accomplished something that day."

Richard Payton, 30, of Ferndale, Mich., studied acting and lived in [New York](#) after college, but moved home to Michigan and worked at a country club. He was laid off a few years ago, and declared bankruptcy in 2010. So "2011 was a very good year, as opposed to everything leading up to that. My stress has decreased in 2011."

He now works as a receptionist in a doctor's office and works out at the gym several days a week.

"People are tired of talking about stress," he says. "It does no good to talk about it. We want to focus on the positive things in our lives."

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