

# MENTAL HEALTH:

## Our search for balance



Art by Benjavisia/istockphotos.com

By Joanna Brown

**T**O SEE MENTAL HEALTH SURVEY results, one might wonder why the subject has drawn so much attention in the last few years. But a closer look at the numbers behind the statistics signals a true shift in mental health and tells an emerging story of the evolving attitudes and approaches to mental health and wellness.

For instance, a 2022 Gallup poll on Americans' Assessments of Their Mental Health showed that a combined 75% of adult respondents described their mental health as "excellent" or "good," a reassuring number though down from 89% of respondents in a similar 2009 survey.

The number of us seeking professional help has climbed too. In that same 2022 poll, nearly one-quarter of U.S. adults reported that they had visited a psychologist, therapist, psychiatrist or other mental health professional in the previous 12 months, a sizable uptick from 13% in 2004, when the question was last asked.

([on.cds.org/galluppollhealth](https://on.cds.org/galluppollhealth)).

Even as the world was focused on the physical effects of the COVID-19 virus, mental health and wellness – our emotional, psychological and social well-being – rose in prominence over the last four years. An increasing number of

Out of the shadows, mental health is now top of mind and in the headlines like never before, especially among healthcare workers whose duty is to serve their patients, sometimes at their own physical and emotional expense.

Where earlier generations buried feelings of stress or self-doubt or worse, today's portrait of mental wellness focuses on addressing our challenges and working to balance life's pressures.

In 2024, the CDS Review will explore with experts the issues around mental health: its effects, its treatments, available resources and support. Watch for the May/June issue when reporter Joanna Brown looks at the complexities around mental health as the nation marks Mental Health Awareness Month.

adults are reflecting on their mental health and seeking out ways to improve it. In dentistry specifically, 44% of dentists reported suffering from a mental health issue in a 2021 survey by the Canadian College of Health Leaders for a study published by Healthcare Management Forum.

([on.cds.org/mentalhealth](https://on.cds.org/mentalhealth)).

"We have to invest in ourselves, especially in this space where we are of service to others," said Ben Frank, Chief Wellness Officer at NAMI Chicago, part of the National Alliance of Mental Illness.

### IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM

Mental health describes the totality of how humans think, feel and act. "Good mental health and wellness includes many dimensions, including a sense of life satisfaction, feeling you can successfully manage life stressors, and a feeling of connection and support with others,"

said Sheela Raja, a clinical psychologist and the director of the University of Illinois Chicago College of Dentistry's Resilience Center.

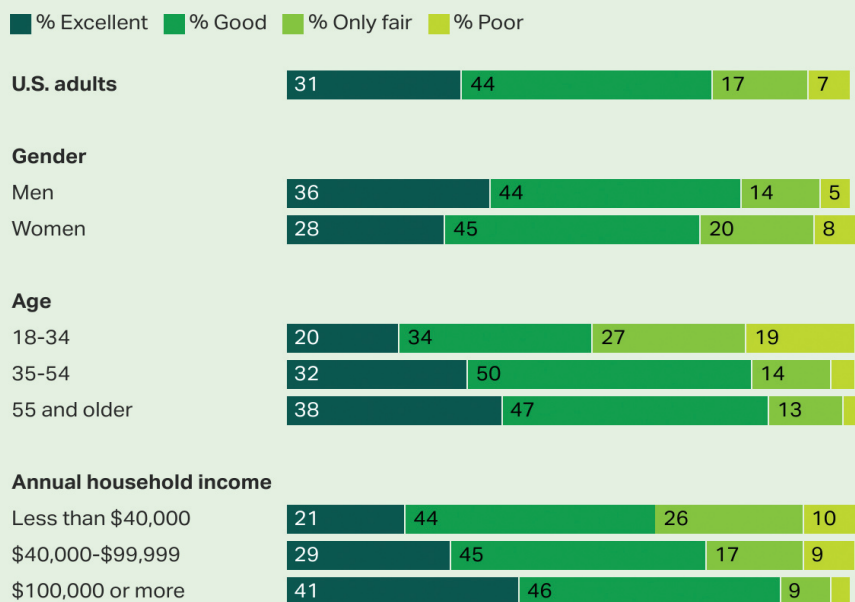
Poor mental health is harder to describe. "The symptoms are diverse and individualized to each person," Mr. Frank said, but the human body's general reaction to stress and anxiety "is experienced in mind and in body as unpleasurable."

"It could be, if you're experiencing a panic attack, it can feel like you're having a heart attack as you feel things coursing through your whole body," he said. But for far more people, it's just a feeling of unease with life in its present state.

"I think it's important to remember, too, that manifestations of mental illness are not always negative," Mr. Frank said. "For some people there comes a hypersensitivity, and they are excellent at making connections with other people through empathy and compassion."

## Americans' Assessments of Their Own Mental Health, Among Subgroups

How would you describe your own mental health or emotional wellbeing at this time? Would you say it is -- excellent, good, only fair or poor?



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GALLUP

## SOURCES OF STRESS

The reasons for these feelings of unease come at us from all sides.

The American Psychological Association (APA) reported in its report *Stress in America 2023* [on.cds.org/apastress](https://on.cds.org/apastress) that the greatest contributors to stress as reported by adults in the U.S. were:

- the future of our nation (68%),
- violence and crime (61%),
- the U.S. debt (57%),
- mass shootings (56%),
- social divisiveness (55%),
- and health care (54%).

Among the day-to-day stress categories, health-related stressors (65%), money (63%), and the economy (64%) were reported among the top significant sources of stress in adults' lives.

For dentists specifically, there are the pressures of starting a career, paying off student loans, growing a business, chronic pain associated with the practice of dentistry, and managing an office staff. "Couple the aforementioned issues with

the fact that about half of dental patients tell their dentists how much they hate dentists, or hate coming in to see them," wrote ShaLyse Walker in May 30, 2023, article for *Ultradent*. ([on.cds.org/ultradentblog](https://on.cds.org/ultradentblog)).

Dr. Raja added, too, that global affairs have affected people deeply. Political unrest, issues of race and identity, and the varied effects of the COVID-19 pandemic should not be understated.

The result: the percentage of dentists diagnosed with anxiety more than tripled in 2021 compared to 2003, according to the American Dental Association's 2021 Dentist Health and Well-Being Survey Report.

"APA psychologists widely agreed there is mounting evidence that our society is experiencing the psychological impacts of a collective trauma," the *Stress in America 2023* report states.

*Story continues on following page*

## It is OK to ask for help

As important as mental wellness is, healthcare workers may be worried that disclosing a mental health or substance use disorder will be made public and have professional repercussions.

In fact, the **Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation** established by rule a program of care, counseling, and treatment for dentists and dental hygienists (225 ILCS 25/5.5). The **Illinois Professionals Health Program** is a statewide program providing support and accountability in the areas of behavioral, mental and physical health for healthcare professionals exclusively.

There is no discipline for taking part in the program, and participation is not published on IDFPR's website as long as the licensee completes the program, explained IDFPR spokesperson Chris Slaby.

The Illinois Dental Practice Act defines an "impaired dentist" or dental hygienist as one who is "unable to practice with reasonable skill and safety because of a physical or mental disability as evidenced by a written determination or written consent based on clinical evidence, including deterioration through the aging process, loss of motor skills, abuse of drugs or alcohol, or a psychiatric disorder, of sufficient degree to diminish the person's ability to deliver competent patient care."

Records that a dental health professional has received care for these conditions are exempt from public disclosure.

The American Dental Association's 2021 Dentist Well-Being Survey Report found only 46% of dentists surveyed were aware of a state dentist well-being program available through their dental association. ([on.cds.org/wellbeing](https://on.cds.org/wellbeing)).

Find information about the Illinois Professionals Health Program at [www.illinoisphp.com](http://www.illinoisphp.com).

# STRESS IN AMERICA

The American Psychological Association's 2023 Stress in America Survey polled 3,185 adults ages 18+ who reside in the U.S.

61%

said people around them just expect them to get over their stress.

47%

said they wish they had someone to help them manage their stress.

36%

said they don't know where to start when it comes to managing their stress.

33%

said they feel completely stressed out no matter what they do to manage their stress.

44%

said they don't feel anyone understands what they are going through.

52%

said they wish they had someone to turn to for advice and/or support.

## Stress impacts physical health and productivity

DECLINES IN YOUR MENTAL HEALTH may impact your physical health – as well as your practice of dentistry.

Physically, the APA reported that, “(s)tress puts the body on high alert and ongoing stress can accumulate, causing inflammation, wearing on the immune system, and increasing the risk of a host of ailments, including digestive issues, heart disease, weight gain and stroke.”

Mental health also affects your performance at work.

Spear Education reported in May 2023 ([on.cds.org/spear](https://on.cds.org/spear)) that a negative mindset can lead to “emotional aging.”

People with a negative mindset may experience a reduction in their focus, overlooking critical details and making errors in diagnosis and treatment planning. They also may feel less compassion for their patients and erode their chairside rapport. Or they might just feel less motivated at the office, cutting corners and reducing productivity.

“THE GREATEST GENERATION LEARNED TO SUCK IT UP. . . IT WAS ALL ABOUT SELF-SACRIFICE. NOW, PROFESSIONALS HAVE A MUCH GREATER SENSE OF SELF-AWARENESS.”

– Dr. Bill Hamel, ADA Wellness Ambassador Program

## SEEKING SOLUTIONS

The shining star in this story is the growing number of people who recognize these threats to their mental health and seek help to improve their state of mind. Gallup offers several possible explanations for the increase, but suggests that it's really a combination of factors, including the growing appreciation for the importance of good mental health; the reduced stigma of seeking help, especially within younger generations; and changes in the way health insurance programs cover mental health treatment.

Chicago Dental Society member Dr. Bill Hamel mans a mental health hotline for dentists in crisis statewide as part of the American Dental Association's Wellness Ambassador Program. “I think the younger generation is more open to getting help, and so they find

help on their own. And I think people are getting help before things get out of control,” he said. “There are just so many more ways to get help right now, and there are certainly more resources for people with money, like dentists.

“The Greatest Generation: they learned to ‘suck it up’ and get through it, whatever it was. No one then sought therapy; no one thought, ‘maybe I'm the problem.’ It was all about self-sacrifice and taking care of the greater good,” Dr. Hamel said.

“But now, professionals have a much greater sense of self-awareness. There's been a maturing of our society that's not a bad thing. It's just happening so rapidly. But if you pride yourself on wanting to keep learning – and I do – that's part of it.” ■