

Wellness and stress

The Health Column

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Stress is a dominant feature in our everyday lives but the good news is that we seem to be coping better with it, at least marginally.

The impact of stress should not be discounted as it affects the mental and physical health of Australians.

The *Stress and wellbeing in Australia survey 2014*, an annual Australian Psychological Society report released late last year, found just over 72% of Australians reported that current stress was having at least some impact on their physical health, with almost 17% reporting that current stress levels were having a strong-to-very strong impact on their physical health.

Similar to findings in the 2013 survey, almost two-in-three Australians reported that current stress was having at least some impact on their mental health (64%), with almost one-in-five (19%) reporting it was having a strong-to-very strong impact. Some 22% reported mental health issues as a source of stress.

For people aged 46 years and over, personal health issues were the leading cause of stress.

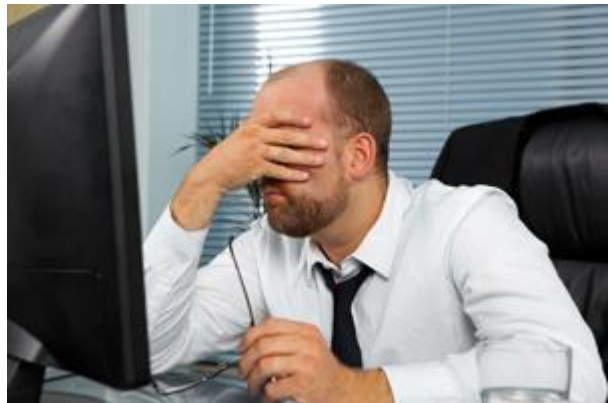
The annual survey measures the stress and wellbeing levels of Australians and provides a year-on-year comparison of how they are faring.

While the good news from the 2014 survey is that as a nation we are faring slightly better than last year, the bad news is that levels of wellbeing are still lower than the first survey in 2011, and stress and distress levels are higher than those reported in 2012 and 2011.

A breakdown of the survey reveals that 25% of Australians reported moderate-to-severe levels of distress and the highest levels of stress and distress were reported by young Australians (18–25 and 26–35 year age groups).

Older Australians, those aged 66 years and above, continued to report significantly lower levels of stress and distress.

In contrast to previous years' findings, men reported significantly higher levels of wellbeing than women and older Australians continued to report significantly higher levels of wellbeing compared with other Australians.



The bad news again was for those aged 18–25 and 46–55 years reporting the lowest levels of wellbeing.

The survey also examined mental health and found that almost two-in-five Australians reported experiencing some depression symptoms, with 13% of these reporting depression symptoms in the severe-to-extremely severe range.

More than one-quarter of Australians reported experiencing at least some anxiety symptoms, with 13% reporting severe-to-extremely severe levels of anxiety.

Similar to previous years' findings younger adults continued to report significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms compared with older Australians.

The quantified impact of stress as outline in the survey shows how important it is to do something to minimise its effects – such as have a healthy lifestyle – but paradoxically the effort to maintain a healthy lifestyle emerged as a key source of stress for Australians.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important to the majority of Australians, with four-in -five (79%) agreeing it is important.

Many Australians are actively trying to improve their health: 87% of Australians had made an effort in the past 12 months to maintain a healthy lifestyle, with the most common reasons being because it's the right thing to do (97%), to feel better about themselves (95%) and to reduce stress (90%).

Some 66% agreed that maintaining a healthy lifestyle provided opportunities to get together with others.

Few people are unaware of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. People who had made efforts to be healthier (e.g., eating healthily, exercising regularly and getting adequate sleep) reported significantly higher levels of overall wellbeing and lower levels of stress and distress, and significantly lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms than those who didn't engage in those activities.

You can get more detailed information on stress management from the Self Care Fact Cards titled *Relaxation techniques* and *Post-traumatic stress disorder* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.