

Stress and wellbeing in Australia in 2011: A state of the nation survey

The Australian Psychological Society

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The Australian Psychological Society commissioned a survey of the stress and wellbeing of Australians to provide insight into the psychological health of the Australian population. Research to date demonstrates a strong relationship between stress, wellbeing and psychological and physical health and functioning. While stress is a part of everyday life, excessive amounts of stress have been linked to impaired functioning across a range of areas including home, work life and relationships and can impact on physical and psychological health. The assessment of the population's level of stress and wellbeing is important in understanding and enhancing the psychological and physical health of all Australians.

Summary of key findings

- Twelve percent of Australians reported experiencing levels of stress in the severe range.
- Young adults reported experiencing significantly higher levels of stress and significantly lower levels of wellbeing than the general population.
- One in three Australians reported experiencing depressive symptoms with 10 percent of these being in the severe range.
- One in four Australians reported experiencing anxiety with 9 percent of these in the severe range.
- Young adults (18 to 25 years of age) reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression than the general population.
- Although women reported significantly higher levels of perceived stress than did men, this did not lead to differences in reported levels of anxiety, depression and wellbeing.
- Those experiencing family or recent relationship breakdown and those separated reported significantly higher levels of stress and distress on all measures. If the relationship breakdown had occurred more than one year earlier, reported stress levels were the same as for the general population.
- Education and income were associated with higher levels of wellbeing and lower levels of stress.
- Women were significantly more likely to identify family issues and personal health issues as sources of stress while men were more likely to be concerned with the economy and the political climate.
- Thirty percent of people identified the workplace as a source of stress with younger people more likely to report work stress than older adults.
- The most effective strategies for managing stress were reported to be spending time with friends (60%) followed by listening to music (55%) and watching television (55%).

Stress and wellbeing survey detailed report

A total of 1537 people completed an online survey which included standardised measures of stress, wellbeing, anxiety and depression.

Measures administered

The stress and wellbeing of the nation was assessed using the following measures:

- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)
- Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10)
- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)
- Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS)
- Workplace subscale of the National Accounts of Wellbeing Survey

In addition, a number of survey items focused on the major domains of stress for Australians (e.g., work, family, finances), strategies people use to manage their stress, the effectiveness of these strategies, service utilisation, workplace satisfaction and demographic information. The results of this survey provide a snapshot of the stress and wellbeing of the Australian population.

Characteristics of survey participants

Approximately equal numbers of men and women took part in the survey and participants represented a spread across age range and population location. Shown below are the weighted sample proportions after the survey data was adjusted to be representative to the Australian adult (18 and above) population, and how these match with ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) data.

Table 1. Gender of survey participants and ABS data comparison

	Survey participants	ABS
Male	49.0%	49.4%
Female	51.0%	50.6%

Table 2. Location of survey participants and ABS data comparison

	Survey participants	ABS
NSW	34.4%	34.1%
VIC	24.8%	24.6%
QLD	19.8%	19.1%
WA	9.8%	9.6%
SA	7.7%	7.6%
TAS	1.8%	1.8%
ACT	1.2%	1.4%
NT	0.5%	0.9%

Table 3. Age range of survey participants and ABS data comparison

	Survey participants	ABS
18-25	14.0%	14.17%
26-35	18.0%	18.07%
36-45	19.0%	19.41%
46-55	18.0%	17.96%
56-65	14.0%	13.95%
66-75	9.0%	8.80%
76+	8.0%	7.65%

How stressed are Australians?

On average Australians report experiencing levels of stress and distress that is comparable to that of other western countries such as the United Kingdom and the US, with some population groups scoring much higher on some of the measures of stress and wellbeing than other groups in the community. However, a substantial percent of Australians (12%) reported experiencing a level of distress considered to be in the severe range.

In addition, younger adults are reporting much higher levels of stress than the general population. On all of the key measures older Australians reported significantly lower levels of stress and distress, anxiety and depressive symptoms and significantly higher levels of wellbeing when compared to those in the younger adult age groups. In particular, those in the 18 to 25 age group reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms when compared to the older age groups. Again, these results are comparable to those of other countries where older adults report lower levels of stress and higher mental health and wellbeing.^{1 2} Nevertheless, the high levels of stress experienced by younger adults as indicated here is concerning and warrants further investigation.

Women reported significantly higher levels of perceived stress than men but did not score differently to men on measures of wellbeing, anxiety and depression. Previous research shows that women report more stressful life events than do men³ and the results of this study confirm this finding but may also indicate that high levels of perceived stress may not necessarily have a higher impact on women's mental health and general wellbeing.

Those who were retired, married or in a relationship but without children reported significantly higher levels of wellbeing than the general population while those who had had a relationship breakdown in the past 12 months and those who were separated but not divorced reported significantly lower levels of wellbeing. Sole parents and those who were not married reported significantly higher levels of perceived stress.

Education and income levels also appear to play a role in reported wellbeing with a higher education and income associated with higher levels of wellbeing while those with lower levels of education reported significantly more perceived stress when compared to the general population.

The mental health of Australians

Almost one in three Australians (32%) reported experiencing depressive symptoms with 10% of these indicating symptoms in the severe or extremely severe range. Similarly, one in four of the population reported experiencing anxiety (26%). Of these, 9% scored in the severe or extremely severe range. As with the results on the stress measures, measures of anxiety and depression decreased in a graded fashion with increasing age. As already indicated, younger people scored significantly higher on measures of anxiety and depression. There were no significant gender differences reported for anxiety or depression.

In looking at specific characteristics of the population, those who reported not being married or, those with a recent relationship breakdown and those separated but not divorced reported significantly higher levels of both anxiety and depression when compared to the remainder of the population. Interestingly when the relationship breakdown occurred more than one year earlier, there is no significant difference in reported symptoms of anxiety and depression between this group and the general population suggesting that the most stressful period following a relationship breakdown is the first 12 months.

¹ Taulbut, M., Parkinson, J., Catto, S. & Gordon, D. (2009). *Scotland's Mental Health and its Context: Adults 2009*. Glasgow: NHS Health Scotland.

² Cohen, S. & Janicki-deverts, D. (in press). *Who's Stressed: distributions of Psychological Stress in the United States in Probability Samples from 1983, 2006 and 2009*. Journal of applied Social Psychology.

³ *Ibid*.

Interestingly, full-time students also scored significantly higher on the measures of anxiety and depression when compared to the general population. However, this may partly explain the experiences of young adults in this study as full-time students represent more than a third of the adults in the 18 to 25 age range. Another source of stress for the younger adult group may be in the workplace with those in the 18 to 25 year age range reporting significantly lower levels of job satisfaction, job interest and work life balance than the general population.

What is causing stress in the Australian population?

When asked about the primary sources of stress, financial issues, personal health issues, family issues and the health of others were identified as generating the most stress (see Figure 1). People who have experienced a recent family or relationship breakdown, people who are currently separated but not divorced, sole parents and people living with their parents reported higher levels of stress and distress and lower levels of wellbeing than the general population suggesting that difficult interactions with others may be a considerable source of stress.

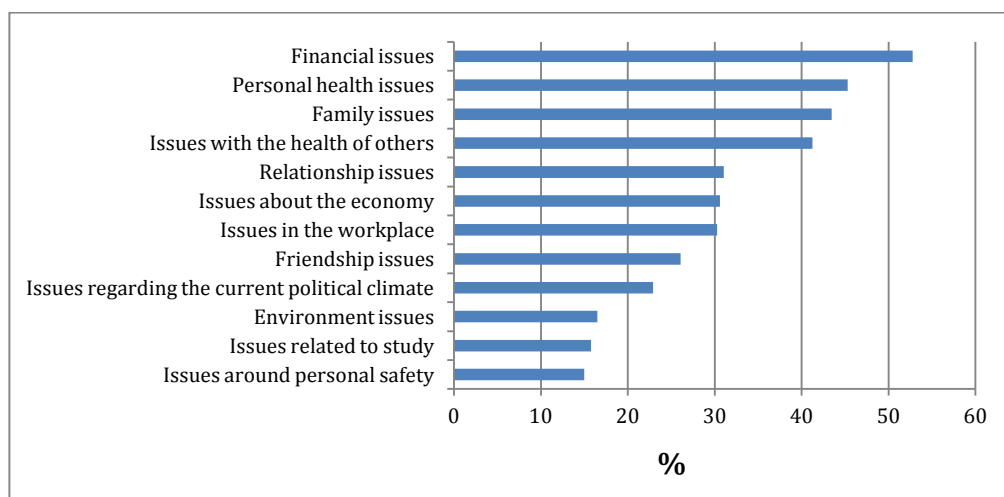


Figure 1. Sources of stress in the Australian population

Some gender differences in the issues that cause stress were found. Men were significantly more likely to be concerned about the economy and the political climate, while women were significantly more likely to be concerned with family issues and personal health issues (see Figure 2). Differences were also found across the age range with younger people, particularly those below 35 years of age being more concerned about friendships, relationship issues, environmental issues and matters related to work and study. Concerns about these four issues reduced significantly with increasing age. Sole parents and those who were separated also reported being significantly more concerned with friendship and relationship issues than the general population.

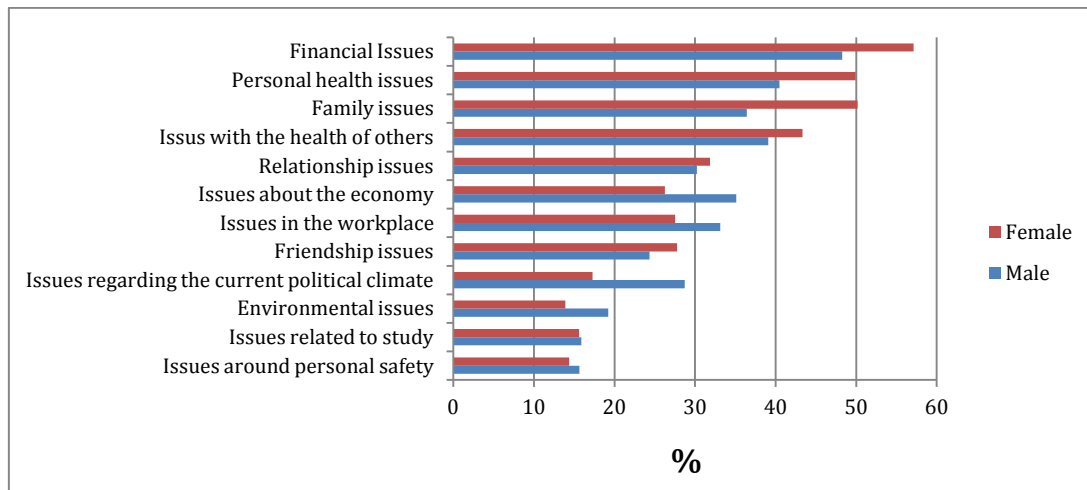


Figure 2. Sources of stress for males and females

Work-related stress

Not unexpectedly, a considerable number of people (30%) identified issues in the workplace as being a contributor to their stress levels. Men were more likely to report workplace issues as contributing to their stress (34%) than were women (28%) and these figures are relatively consistent with international research on the workplace as a contributor to stress⁴. Considerable age differences in reports of workplace stress were found with a gradual reduction in identifying work issues as contributing to stress with increased age. In particular, those in the 26 to 35 age bracket were significantly more likely to report the workplace as a source of stress (43%) and as previously indicated those in the 18 to 25 age group reporting a significantly lower level of positive experience in the workplace. Nevertheless, for some people aspects of the workplace contributed to positive health and wellbeing with lower scores on stress, distress, anxiety and depression. These people reported that their job was interesting, they were paid appropriately, felt valued by their employer and were satisfied with their work/life balance. This was particularly true for older adults and especially for those over 55 years of age. These findings are in line with research looking at work practices which indicates that the workplace can be a source of wellbeing, providing a means for individual satisfaction and accomplishment.⁵

⁴ American Psychological Association. (2008). Stress in America. Author. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2008/10/stress-in-america.pdf>

⁵ Blustein, D.L. (2008). The role of work in psychological health and wellbeing. *American Psychologist*, 63, 228-240.

Activities to manage stress

Australians reported engaging in a range of activities to manage their stress (see Figure 3). However, when asked to rate the effectiveness of these activities many were considered to not be successful in dealing with the stress. Of some concern is that 40 percent of Australians reported drinking alcohol to help them to manage their stress and almost half found this an effective strategy. A large proportion of people reported using strategies that would either distract them or relax them (e.g., watching television, reading, listening to music). The most effective strategy for managing stress was reported to be spending time with friends (60%) followed by listening to music (55%) and watching television (55%).

Women were significantly more likely than men to report spending time with friends, using social networking sites, watching television, shopping or turning to food to manage stress, while men were significantly more likely to gamble or play video games than women. There were no differences between males and females on other strategies identified.

Some age differences also were found in choice of strategy with younger people being significantly more likely to use self-oriented and hedonistic means to counter stress, such as gambling, alcohol consumption, recreational drugs and electronic media while older adults were more likely to pursue hobbies, read and engage in spiritual activities.

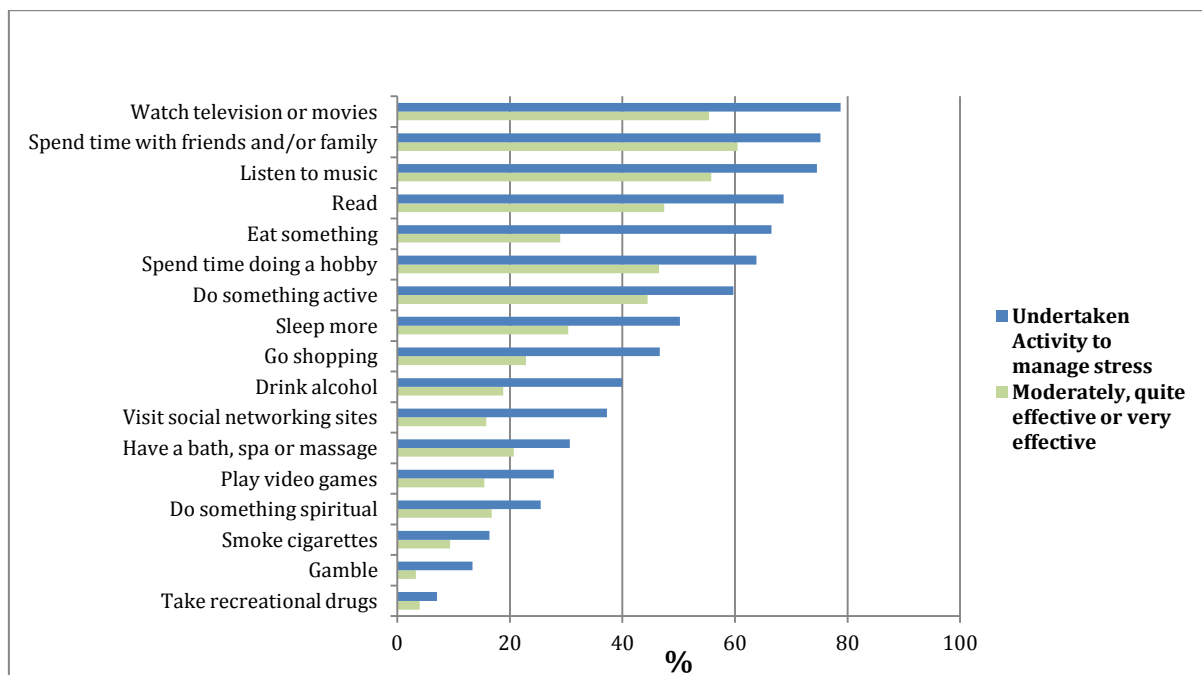


Figure 3. Activities undertaken to manage stress and the level at which these activities were endorsed as either moderately, quite effective or very effective

Seeking professional help

People were asked whether they sought professional help to manage their symptoms of stress. Almost 20 percent of people reported seeking help from their general practitioner or other medical professional and 15 percent reported that they had sought help from a mental health professional. However, it seems that people are more likely to seek help from those around them than from professionals with 22 percent of people reporting that they sought help from a family member and 25 percent sought help from a friend.

Of particular interest was the help seeking behaviour of those experiencing a high level of distress. This was investigated by looking specifically at scores on the K-10. The K-10 is a measure of psychological distress based on symptoms of anxiety and depression. Cut-offs for scores on the K-10 have been developed⁶ with scores below 15 indicating little or no risk of an anxiety or depressive disorder, scores between 16 and 29 indicating medium risk and scores 30 and above identifying people at high risk. When looking specifically at help-seeking behaviour of those people in the high risk group, contact with health professionals increases considerably with 42 percent of this group seeking help from a general practitioner or other medical professional, 20 percent seeking help from a psychologist, 15 percent from a counselor and 10 percent from other mental health professionals as outlined in Figure 4. Not surprisingly, those scoring in the low risk range of the K-10 were the least likely to report seeking help to manage their stress.

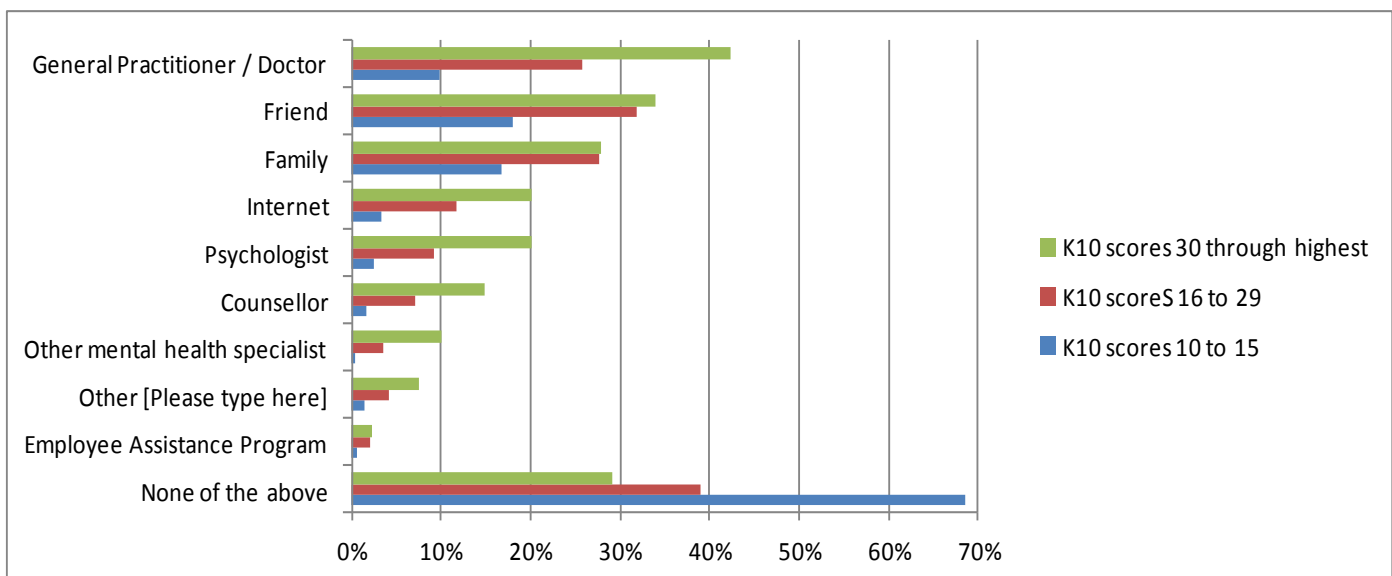


Figure 4. Help seeking behaviour of those scoring in the low risk, medium risk and high risk categories of the K-10

⁶ K10 Symptom Scale. Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression. A WHO Collaborating Center. School of Psychiatry, University of NSW, 2000. [Online] Available at: <http://www.crufad.unsw.edu.au/K10/k10info.htm>. [Accessed: 30/3/2001]