

Here's how Americans coped during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic

10 April 2020, by Melissa Cyders, Christiana Prestigiacomio and Melissa Liu



Most people felt they were doing OK – with lots of TV and news updates. Credit: Erik Mclean/Unsplash, CC BY

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed everyday life for Americans. How well are people across the country dealing with the new reality of closed businesses, shuttered schools, social distancing and the threat of the coronavirus itself?

As [psychology researchers](#), we decided to conduct an [online survey](#) to find out. On March 26, we asked 500 adults from age 19 to 78 a series of questions to help us better understand how Americans are mentally coping with the pandemic. The group represented 47 U.S. states and roughly matched the age, race and gender demographics of the nation.

Though not yet peer-reviewed, these responses provide a snapshot of Americans' mental health as the [coronavirus](#) pandemic really started to ramp up, as well as a hint about groups who might struggle during this unprecedented time.

Doing basically OK

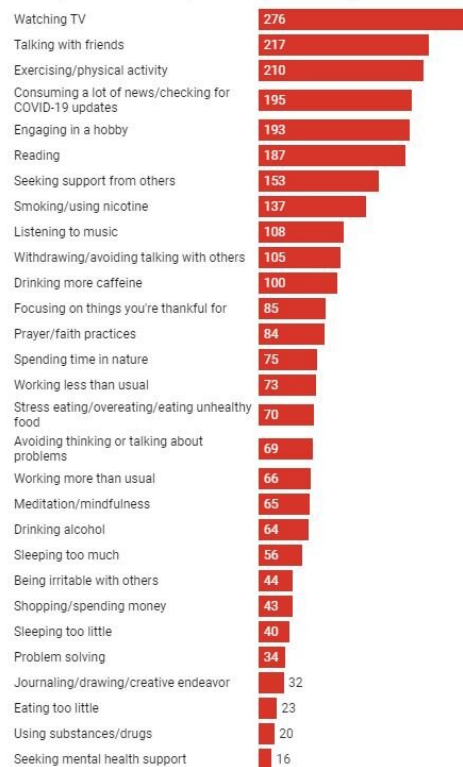
Overall, our survey indicated that Americans were coping fairly well as of late March. Our respondents reported only moderate levels of stress and worry about COVID-19, estimating their

individual likelihood of becoming infected as only around 30%, on average.

Despite the anecdotal impression that [younger people](#) are less worried about the pandemic, all age groups reported similar levels of worry and estimated they had about the same chance of being infected.

How Americans are coping with the pandemic

Researchers surveyed 500 adults in the U.S. on March 26 to see how they were dealing with the challenges and stresses of the coronavirus pandemic. When asked what they were doing to cope – both good and bad – respondents reported a range of activities.



Credit: The Conversation

There were no big surprises in how individuals reported most commonly coping with pandemic-related challenges: They were talking with friends,

watching TV, exercising, listening to news and engaging in hobbies. The most effective coping strategies included problem-solving, exercising, engaging in hobbies and focusing on what they felt thankful for. These strategies were associated with lower self-reported stress and better self-reported coping with the pandemic.

Some people having a tougher time

However, not all Americans were coping well. There were some groups who appeared more vulnerable to negative effects of pandemic stress.

About 35% of our survey respondents reported changes in their employment since the beginning of the U.S. COVID-19 pandemic. This is an increase from earlier estimates in mid-March that [1 in 5 American workers had lost their jobs](#) or had them reduced.

Not only are they dealing with the usual stressors related to the pandemic; they also have to worry about whether they're going to make it through this period financially. Unsurprisingly, these individuals reported more stress and worry, rated their chances of being infected with COVID-19 as higher and said they were coping less effectively with the pandemic.

Americans living in urban regions also reported more worry about the pandemic and were coping less effectively than those in suburban and rural regions. This might be because COVID-19 first hit urban areas, including Seattle, New York and Los Angeles. However, people across rural, urban and suburban regions all put their own odds of getting infected with COVID-19 around the same 30% chance.

About 18% of the sample reported being at a higher risk for COVID-19 due to a pre-existing condition, including being immunocompromized, having a respiratory illness or being over the age of 65. Unsurprisingly, people in this group reported more worry, rated their chances of becoming ill as higher and stated they were coping less effectively.

Women bearing more, coping less well

Women reported more anxiety, stress and worry, believed they had higher chances of being infected with COVID-19 and were coping less effectively than men.

We suspect this increased vulnerability may in part be due to caregiving responsibilities. Women in our sample disproportionately reported taking care of kids, experiencing a loss of privacy and personal time, and struggles between work and family responsibilities during this pandemic.

Women reported engaging in more coping strategies than men did, by seeking out support from others, engaging in faith practices and focusing on what they are thankful for. Those strategies were associated with better self-reported coping. However, women also reported more maladaptive coping strategies, like stress eating and irritability.

Hazardous alcohol drinkers drinking more

Alcohol use may be on the rise with this pandemic, with some reports indicating [large increases in alcohol sales](#). In our sample, about a quarter of current alcohol drinkers reported drinking more since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. They attributed this mostly to "boredom" or to "dealing with the stress" of the pandemic.

This same group in our sample who'd increased their drinking are particularly vulnerable since for the most part they were already drinking hazardously before the pandemic, meaning that any increase could be harmful for their health.

On average, these people are now drinking at "[binge levels](#)"—four drinks per drinking occasion for women, five drinks for men—which is associated with worse alcohol-related health outcomes. These individuals tended to live in urban or suburban areas, be quarantined with others, report more [stress](#) and worry about the pandemic, and were coping less well than other alcohol drinkers.

Importantly, about 30% of drinkers reported drinking less since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. This was mostly due to not being able to go out to bars or restaurants, trying to

save money or as an effort to not suppress their immune system.

Life in the U.S. during the time of coronavirus continues to change rapidly. We hope to track Americans' [mental health](#) as the [pandemic](#) progresses, especially as typical coping strategies and treatment options become less accessible.

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