2016 Survey on Healthy Behaviors and Well-Being

Findings from a national survey of adults ages 18 and older conducted in March 2016

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The views expressed herein are for information, debate, and discussion, and do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

Acknowledgments

GfK conducted this survey for AARP using its nationally representative online panel, Knowledge Panel. This report was prepared by Chuck Rainville, Laura Skufca, Cheryl Lampkin, and Laura Mehegan in AARP Research. For additional information about the survey, contact Chuck Rainville at grainville@aarp.org. Media inquiries should be directed to Greg Phillips at gphillips@aarp.org.
Objectives

• To examine mental well-being among American adults age 18+.

• To understand the link between mental well-being and the engagement in healthy behaviors.

• To determine what motivates engagement in brain-healthy behaviors and which healthy behaviors adult are most likely to engage in, if the health benefits were known.
Methodology

- An online survey fielded March 11-27, 2016 among a nationally representative sample of 1,609 adults age 18+.
- Additional interviews were conducted to achieve the following samples:
  - 492 Acculturated Hispanic/Latino adults age 18+ (English-language only: not all included scales validated for in-language administration)
  - 502 African-American adults age 18+
  - 353 Asian-American adults age 18+.
- The data was weighted by age, gender, race, ethnicity, employment status and income.
- The margin of error for the national sample of 1,609 adults age 18+ is +/- 2%. The margin of error among subgroups (e.g., age) is higher.
- Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.
Key Findings

• Mental well-being scores increase with age. Those age 54 and older have higher than average mental well-being scores (assessed on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale). Mental well-being is low during middle age but, after midlife, it markedly improves.

• Managing stress effectively and pursuing a purpose in life are the two activities most closely-associated with mental well-being. Socializing with friends and family, learning new things, getting enough sleep, reading, and eating a healthy diet, are also consistently linked to mental well-being.

• The more brain healthy activities an adult engages in, the higher their mental well-being. Conversely, failing to engage in healthy behaviors (e.g. socialize, to manage stress effectively, exercise and diet, etc.) is linked to below average mental well-being scores.

• Getting 7-8 hours of sleep and drinking up to two alcohol drinks a day are associated with above average mental well-being. Majorities of those sleeping or drinking under, or in excess of, these thresholds tend to have below average mental well-being scores.

• There is a general desire to maintain brain health driven mainly by personal motivations of independence and ongoing personal achievement/enjoyment of life. “Maintaining independence” and “maintaining overall health” are the two most-cited motivators for maintaining brain health.
Key Findings (continued)

- Those who know someone with dementia or some other form of cognitive decline are more concerned about their future brain health than individuals who do not know someone with dementia.

- Most adults believe they can improve brain health. Eight in 10 Americans say behaviors can improve brain health and 7 in 10 say they engage in such behaviors.

- Those not engaging in brain-healthy behaviors often cite a lack of time or a lack of knowledge about which behaviors are brain-healthy as the reason for failing to do so.

- Women are more likely than men to be motivated to engage in brain-healthy activities by a sense that their memory or focus is not what it used to be.

- Limiting alcohol is what the largest percentage of adults say they would do for the sake of their brain health. Other activities they would engage in include reading, various forms of increased physical activity, and prayer. Likelihood to engage in these top activities increases with age and personal experience (e.g., those knowing someone with dementia).
Detailed Findings
The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale: Demographic and Behavioral links to Mental Well-being
The Warwick-Edinburgh Scale is based on the 14 items below. Each item is scored on a 5-point scale (1=None of the time, 2=Rarely, 3=Some of the time, 4=Often, and 5=All of the time). The overall scale is the sum of these items. The majority of respondents say they feel these certain ways all the time or often for 13 of 14 items (see following slide for remainder of items).

Q4: Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please select what best describes your experience over the last two weeks.

**Average Score**

- Able to make up my own mind: 4.2 (79%)
- Thinking clearly: 4.0 (74%)
- Feeling loved: 3.9 (69%)
- Feeling useful: 3.8 (65%)
- Dealing with problems well: 3.7 (65%)
- Feeling good about myself: 3.7 (64%)
- Feeling confident: 3.7 (63%)

Feel this way all the time or often: 3.7 (64%)
The Warwick-Edinburgh Scale is based on the 14 items below (continued from previous slide). Only about one-third (36%) say they have energy to spare all the time or often.

- Feeling cheerful: 3.7
- Feeling close to others: 3.6
- Interested in new things: 3.6
- Feeling optimistic: 3.6
- Feeling interested in other people: 3.5
- Feeling relaxed: 3.4
- Have energy to spare: 3.2

Q4: Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please select what best describes your experience over the last two weeks.
The overall mental well-being scores range from 14-70. Adults age 54+ also have relatively high mental well-being scores. For mental well-being, a pronounced trough occurs between age 27 and ends in late middle age. At ages beyond that, above average mental well-being scores are observed.

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale

Although men are more likely to self-report an excellent brain health status (23% v 18%), they do not have higher mental well-being scores.
Married adults and African-Americans have the highest average mental well-being scores.

**Average mental well-being scores by marital status and by race/ethnicity group**

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale.
Mental Well-Being and the Relationship to Healthy Behaviors
Mental well-being is related to engagement in healthy activities. Those who engage in healthy behaviors have statistically higher mental well-being scores than those who do not. In particular, those who say they manage stress effectively and are pursuing a purpose in life have the highest average scores.

Average mental well-being score by engagement in various healthy activities (yes/no)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Yes, regularly do</th>
<th>No, do not regularly do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing stress effectively</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing a purpose in life</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning new things</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating a healthy diet</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with friends or family</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting enough sleep</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising your body</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale

Overall average=51.6
Another way of looking at mental well-being is in terms of the groups with higher percentages of below average mental well-being scores (average being 50%). **Large percentages of those failing to engage in healthy behaviors have below average mental well-being scores.**

Percentages of those with below average mental well-being scores failing to engage in various healthy activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>% Below Average Mental Well-being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not socialize</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not manage stress effectively</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not learn new things</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not Exercise</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not eat a healthy diet</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale.
Some behaviors are associated with above average mental well-being *up to a certain point*. Getting 7-8 hours of sleep and drinking up to two alcohol drinks a day are associated with above average well-being. Majorities of those sleeping or drinking under, or in excess of, these thresholds tend to have below average mental well-being scores.

**Percentages of those with above, and below, average mental well-being scores, by sleep and alcohol consumption levels**

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale
Unlike alcohol consumption and sleep, the percentage of those with above average mental well-being scores increases with the number of days one engages in aerobic exercise. Progressively more exercise could mean greater mental well-being.

Percentages of those with above, and below, average mental well-being scores, by frequency of aerobic exercise

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale.
Life stressors are associated with below average mental well-being scores. Job loss and personal injury/illness are most-associated with below average mental well-being scores. Several stressors (e.g. job loss, family and marital issues, injury, etc.) are relatively common in the 27-54 age range, previously seen as the “trough years” for mental well-being.

**Percentages of those having experienced life stressors that fall above, and below, the average mental well-being score**

Scores based on the validated 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale.
What Motivates Healthy Behaviors?
Engaging in healthy behaviors can improve moods and certain health outcomes. Eight in 10 adults think that behaviors can improve brain health to at least some degree. Those 50 and older are more likely to hold this view than those age 18 to 49.

Eighty-four percent of those 50 or older think behaviors can improve brain health compared to 77% of those 18-49.

Q25: To what degree do you think that the behaviors people engage in can improve their brain health?
Seventy percent of the 18+ population say they engage in activities that are good for brain health. Among those that do not engage in such activities, at least a third say it is because they don’t have time or they do not know what activities are good for brain health.

Report they currently engage in activities good for brain health. Of these, 93% engage in at least one behavior proven to benefit brain health.

Percentage of the population that says their brain health is excellent or very good

Top reasons adults DO NOT engage in activities good for brain health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have time</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know what activities are good for my brain health</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t feel it’s necessary</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have the energy for it</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t believe it will make a difference</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is too costly</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think I’m too young</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q3: Would you say that your brain health or mental sharpness is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Q26: Do you currently engage in any activities that you think are good for your brain health? If “No”, why do you not currently engage in activities that you think are good for your brain health?
Knowing someone with dementia is related to concern about one’s own future brain health. Seven in ten adults who know someone with dementia are “somewhat” or “very” concerned about their own future brain health (compared to 51% who do not know someone with dementia or cognitive decline).

Fifty-seven percent say they know, or knew, someone with dementia or another form of cognitive decline.

Q23: How concerned are you, if at all, about your brain health declining in the future?
Q24: Do you know someone who has, or had, dementia such as Alzheimer's disease or another condition causing a decline in their mental sharpness?
More than 2 in 10 adults say a family history of cognitive decline or their personal feeling of memory loss would encourage them to “a great degree” to engage in brain-healthy behaviors. Females (26%) are more likely than males (19%) to say a personal feeling of a declining memory would encourage, to a great degree, engagement in brain-healthy behaviors.

Q27: To what degree would each of the following things encourage you to engage in behaviors to improve your brain health?
At least half of adults say maintaining overall independence and maintaining overall health/well-being are “very important” motivators for maintaining brain health. There are noteworthy race/ethnicity differences in the percentages saying “achieving personal goals” is a very important motivator.

Fifty-four percent of African Americans say achieving personal goals is a very important motivator for maintaining brain health compared to 46% of Hispanics and 38% of both Asians and White, non-Hispanic respondents.

Q28: How important is each of the following when it comes to motivating you to maintain your brain health?
When it comes to a willingness to engage in healthy behaviors, adults are most likely to say they would limit alcohol, read, and increase their physical activity if they knew that the activities were good for their brain health.

Q30: How likely would you be to do, or continue to do, the following activities if you knew they had positive brain health (or positive general health) benefits?

- **Limit alcohol**: 48% very likely, 26% somewhat likely
- **Read**: 45% very likely, 35% somewhat likely
- **Engage in physical activity at work**: 44% very likely, 36% somewhat likely
- **Walk at least 20 minutes a day**: 44% very likely, 38% somewhat likely
- **Pray**: 44% very likely, 23% somewhat likely
- **Challenge the mind (games/puzzles)**: 40% very likely, 39% somewhat likely

Likelihood to engage in each of these behaviors increases with age.

Adults who know someone with dementia are more likely to say they would engage in these behaviors.