African American older adults are more likely to rate their physical health as fair or poor and their emotional/mental health as excellent or very good; however, many have been bothered by negative feelings two weeks prior to our survey fielding.

Three in 10 (31%) African American older adults ages 50-plus say their physical health is excellent (5%) or very good (26%). Comparatively, over half (56%) rate their emotional health high (22% excellent, 34% very good). And when asked about their mental health, nearly six in 10 (58%) African American older adults ages 50-plus say their mental health is either excellent (24%) or very good (34%).

However, when asked about specific emotional/mental health measures, we find a substantial portion of older African American adults say they have been bothered by negative feelings and emotions. For example, four in 10 (38%) say in the past two weeks they have been bothered by anxiety and three in 10 (30%) say they have felt depressed.

Recent survey reveals African American older adults ages 50 and older are poised to bounce back after the pandemic has taken its toll on their mental and emotional well-being.
Frequency in the past two weeks

- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep: 29% several days, 22% half the days or more, total 51%
- Feeling anxious about things: 26% several days, 12% half the days or more, total 38%
- Little interest or pleasure in doing things: 19% several days, 12% half the days or more, total 31%
- Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless: 21% several days, 9% half the days or more, total 30%

While African American older adults rate their emotional health high, they also want to better manage their emotional well-being

Along with feelings of depression and anxiety, four in 10 (41%) African American older adults ages 50-plus say it has been more difficult to successfully manage negative feelings like stress, anger, and sadness. However, these older adults feel optimistic about their ability to better manage negative feelings in the future with half (51%) saying their ability to manage negative feelings will get better in the next six months. Regardless of whether an older African American adult has experienced negative emotions in the past year or not, the majority say they would like to better manage their emotional and mental well-being by getting more rest/sleep (60%) and exercise (53%) as well as eating a healthier diet (53%). And four in 10 say they would like to better manage their emotional well-being by controlling stress (40%) and taking vitamins or supplements (37%).

While the majority of African American older adults have been bothered by various negative emotions recently, most feel optimistic about their ability to better manage these feelings in the future.

How would you like to better manage emotional and mental well-being?

- 60% GET MORE REST/SLEEP
- 53% GET MORE REGULAR EXERCISE
- 53% EAT A HEALTHIER DIET
Managing life through the pandemic shown to negatively impact emotional and mental well-being for many African American older adults

Over half (55%) of African American older adults ages 50-plus say they are anxious about what may happen in the next 12 months. When asked to rate their level of anxiety about what may happen in the next 12 months, four in 10 (39%) rate their level of anxiety in the medium range. Another one in six (16%) say they have a high level of anxiety about what may happen in the next 12 months. Experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as the primary culprit related to the high level of anxiety. Four in 10 (39%) say experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their level of anxiety.

"I feel imprisoned because I don’t really know what COVID has done and how many variants they have. There might be another variant waiting right now being passed around and nobody knows about it. Really, COVID has taken control of my brain thoughts, of actually what I have to do during the day. That’s literally what has happened to me. I have to think about COVID and it’s make sure you’re safe, cover this, wipe this. It’s mind-boggling. It’s like being trapped in a cage.”

Marcus, 63

Experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the African American 50-plus emotionally and mentally in a variety of other ways as well. Half (49%) of older African American adults say experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic increased their level of concern about the future. Two in five say it has increased their level of worry in general (43%) and/or stress (38%). And three in 10 (29%) say experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their level of anger.
Additionally, when asked what is causing angst, many also cite personal issues such as finances and health. Domestic and international issues are also attributed to higher levels of anxiety with many older adults citing the economy and the Russian invasion of Ukraine as sources of anxiety.

**COVID, finances, personal health issues and the economy/cost of living top cited sources of anxiety.**

COVID-19 pandemic has affected level of […] a great/some degree

While older African American adults have faced emotional challenges over the past few years, they are resilient and feel they have what it takes to bounce back and thrive

Even with raised stress levels and anxiety, older African American adults ages 50-plus say they are resilient. When asked to rate their level of resiliency from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) the average rating was between seven and eight. In fact, over six in 10 (62%) rate their level of resiliency as high (8, 9 or 10 out of 10) and, for the majority (72%), their level of resiliency has not changed since the start of the pandemic. Furthermore, nearly a quarter (22%) say their level of resiliency has actually increased in the past two years. Nearly two in five (36%) rate their resiliency in the medium range (4 to 7) and only two percent rate their level of resiliency at 3 or lower.

Still, when asked about specific measures of resiliency a sizable number of African American older adults struggle with adapting and bouncing back when things don’t go as planned and/or during hardship. For example, seven in 10 (68%) say they tend to bounce back quickly after hard times. However, that means a third (32%) do not bounce back quickly after hard times.
“It means you just get up and do it, that’s what you do. And I’ve worked every day, I was a single mother, and you never had enough money for everything. There were times when I went to the store and cried because I couldn’t buy everything on the list. I think you just, you get up and you just go do it. It doesn’t really matter what you’re feeling or how you’re feeling, you’ve just got to go do it.”

Tina, 70

Mind over matter: For African American older adults higher resiliency seems to mean a more positive outlook on aging

Regardless of where an African American older adult is on individual measures of resiliency, there is a relationship between self-rated resiliency and outlook on aging for older African American adults. The chart below shows the percentage of respondents who say they strongly agree with various aspects of positive or healthy aging by reported level of resiliency. We see in every measure those who say they have a high level of resiliency (8, 9 or 10 out of 10) are significantly more likely than those who say they have a medium level of resiliency (4 to 7 out of 10) to also agree they are aging well and have a positive outlook on their aging. For example, nearly six in 10 (57%) older African American adults who rate their resiliency high say they are aging well compared to just a third (32%) of those who rate their level of resiliency in the medium range. Similarly, more older adults with high resiliency say they have a lot to look forward to as they age (57% vs. 36%).
well compared to just a third (32%) of those who rate their level of resiliency in the medium range. Similarly, more older adults with high resiliency say they have a lot to look forward to as they age (57% vs. 36%).

African American older adults who say they have a high level of resiliency are significantly more likely to also say they are aging well and have a positive outlook on their aging.

% Agree (Strongly or somewhat) — total and by age range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n=441)</th>
<th>High resiliency (n=226)</th>
<th>Medium resiliency (n=133)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am aging well</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a lot to look forward to as I age</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe I will have good health as I age</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel very optimistic about growing older and aging</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident about aging</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I will continue to make a difference in the world as I age</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The number of respondents indicating low resiliency (1-3) is too small for separate analysis (n=9).

“You cannot be just stagnant with your physical activity; you need to just be moving. I think that’s just all part of healthy aging you know, engaging your mind and your body as you get older and knowing what your body needs to follow as, you know, you reach certain ages. I think healthy aging is keeping your mind alert and having some sort of purpose, like working, having a job or a career and keeping your independence.”

Ricardo, 52
Implications

Experiencing the pandemic has had a negative emotional impact on most of us. This study illuminates where African American older adults are emotionally right now and how they are managing their emotional and mental well-being. This study also demonstrates that despite the challenges to emotional and mental well-being, most African American older adults say they are resilient and expect to be able to bounce back from these challenges. However, a deeper dive suggests some older adults may benefit from help with managing their emotional and mental well-being.

Though a large portion of African American older adults rate their emotional/mental well-being as excellent or very good, three in 10 or more say recently they have been bothered by anxiety, have had little interest or pleasure in doing things, and have experienced feelings of depression or hopelessness. Furthermore, though the majority say they are extremely resilient, when asked about specific resiliency measures, the outcome paints a different picture. For example, one-third say they aren’t able to easily bounce back from hardship. These incongruencies suggests that some older African American adults may not have a full understanding of how recent experiences are impacting their emotional and mental health.

Regardless of where an African American older adult is on individual measures of resiliency, there is an interesting relationship between self-rated resiliency and outlook on aging. Those who are more resilient are significantly more likely to feel they are aging well. This finding is crucial because one can learn how to build resiliency which in turn suggests building a more positive attitude regarding aging which is a key determinant for healthy aging.

While it is understandable to see a decline in mental health or emotional well-being during trying times, this is not a normal part of aging. To combat possible hesitation on the part of older adults to seek help with managing their emotional health, it is important that access to mental health treatment is easy, seamless and normalized. Ensuring mental health and emotional well-being is addressed during all medical visits is an invaluable step towards ensuring older adults receive comprehensive care.
Mental Health Resources

AARP’s Mental Health Center highlights news and resources for older adults’ mental well-being.

The Disaster Distress Helpline, provides crisis counseling at 1-800-985-5990 or text: TalkWithUs to 66746.

Methodology

The 2022 AARP February Omni was conducted online from February 24 – March 1, 2022 with a total sample of 1,964 adults ages 50-plus (including oversamples of African American/Black (n = 441); Hispanic/Latino (n = 405) and LGBTQ (n = 228). This national survey was conducted using NORC at the University of Chicago’s AmeriSpeak 50+ Omnibus probability-based sample. AmeriSpeak is designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. All data are weighted by age, gender, and race according to the most recent Census population statistics. The margin of error for the African American sample is ± 6.65 percent.

The 2022 AARP Healthy Living Qualitative Study was conducted from March 8 - 16, 2022 by ANR Marketing Research Consultants. The 25 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted by telephone. Participants were recruited by a national recruiting company and screened to be at least 50 years old and to have a variety of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal characteristics.

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