An AARP Healthy Living Survey of Adults Ages 50 and Older

While most older adults say their mental well-being is very good, men are significantly more likely than women to rate their mental well-being as excellent

When asked about mental health, two-thirds of older adults ages 50-plus say their emotional (64%) and mental (66%) well-being are excellent or very good.\(^1\) Men are significantly more likely than women to say their emotional well-being is excellent (28% for men vs. 19% for women) and their mental well-being is excellent (33% vs. 21%). Additionally, while two in five men (39%) say it has been more difficult to successfully manage negative feelings like stress, anger and sadness, women are significantly more likely to say this has been the case for them (46%).

When examining specific emotional health measures, we find women are significantly more likely than men to say they have been bothered by several measures. For example, three in five (59%) women ages 50-plus compared to two in five (44%) men in the same age group say in the two weeks prior to the survey they had difficulty falling and/or staying asleep. Women are also more likely than men to say they have been bothered by feelings of anxiousness (49% vs. 40%) and depression/hopelessness (36% vs. 26%).

\(^1\) Lampkin, Cheryl. Healthy Living: A look at how older adults are managing their emotional and mental well-being. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2022. https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00533.001
“It’s just worse because of current financial issues and things. I was never diagnosed with it, but I’d say I’d easily be diagnosed with some type of social anxiety problems, and now probably depression too. So, that’s hard. It’s just hard getting up every day, but I do.”

Alicia, 56

Frequency in the past two weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep*</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling anxious about things*</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little interest or pleasure in doing things</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless*</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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*Difference is significant

Experiencing COVID-19 increased anxiety, worry and stress among the 50-plus especially for women

Most (61%) older adults ages 50-plus say they have experienced some level of anxiety in the past year. Experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as the primary culprit related to the level of anxiety felt by those ages 50-plus. Three in 10 (31%) older adults say experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their level of anxiety. Women are significantly more likely to say the pandemic increased their level of anxiety (34% for women vs. 27% for men). Women are also more likely to say experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic increased their level of worry in general (41% vs. 29%), stress (35% vs. 29%) and sadness/depression (27% vs. 19%).
COVID-19 affected a great deal/some*

**Women**
41% Worry
35% Stress
34% Anxiety
27% Sadness/Depression

**Men**
29% Worry
29% Stress
27% Anxiety
19% Sadness/Depression

*All differences are significant

[During the height of the pandemic]

“If I went outside, I literally did not want anybody around me, even though I just went to the mailbox or the dumpster, maybe 100 feet away from the house. That was very stressful. It was very overwhelming and very tense. A lot of pressure, a lot of tension.”

Madeline, 51
Older adults are optimistic about their ability to manage their negative emotions and feel they will get better at managing their emotions in the next few months

Regardless of whether an older 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 exercise (57%) and rest (51%) as well as eating a healthier diet (50%). Generally, the same proportion of men and women say they are interested in managing their mental well-being by exercising, resting and eating healthy. Women are significantly more likely to say they want to manage their mental well-being by incorporating yoga/meditation (23% vs. 12%) in their routine and by speaking to a mental health professional (12% vs. 7%).

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

- Get more exercise
- Eat a healthier diet
- Get more rest/sleep
- Practice yoga/meditation
- Speak to a mental health professional

Women are significantly more likely than men to say they would like to practice yoga/meditation to help manage their mental well-being.
While about a third (37%) of the total older adult population say they think their ability to manage negative feelings will get better in the next six months, four in 10 (42%) older women believe they will get better at managing their negative emotions compared three in 10 (31%) older men. This is more likely reflective of the fact that across the board, older women are more likely to say they experience these negative feelings often and they are more likely to say they would like to speak to a mental health professional to help them manage these emotions.

**Generally older adults say they are resilient, however older women are significantly more likely than men to say they struggle with bouncing back after hardships**

Older men and women are equally likely to rate their level of resiliency as high (60% of older men and 60% of older women rate their resiliency level as an 8, 9 or 10 out of 10). However, when asked about specific measures of resiliency, older women are significantly more likely than older men to say they struggle with adapting and bouncing back when things don’t go as planned and/or during hardship. For example, two thirds (65%) of men ages 50-plu say they tend to bounce back quickly after hard times compared to less than six in ten (58%) women ages 50-plus.

**Percent agree (strongly or somewhat) by gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times”</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event”</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I usually come through difficult times with little trouble”</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Men ages 50-plus are more likely than women ages 50-plus to say they bounce back quickly after hard times and usually come through difficult times with little trouble.*
My thing is just to keep moving and keep doing . . . push through when there’s a little pain, or even when there’s a lot of pain. I just have that attitude of I’m not going to let it stop me, not let it defeat me.”

Jay, 62

While older women are more likely to have challenges related to their emotional well-being, they are also more likely to say they are aging well

The vast majority (81%) of older adults say they are aging well. Older women ages 50-plus are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to say they are aging well (84% for women vs. 78% for men). Women are also more likely than men to say they will continue to make a difference in the world as they age (73% vs. 63%). Some older adults do express concerns relating to getting older. For example, one-third (33%) say they worry about being treated disrespectfully when they get older. Comparatively, women are significantly more likely than men to express this concern with over one-third (36%) of older women saying they are concerned about this issue. Fewer, (29%) older men say they are concerned about being treated disrespectfully as they age.

% Agree (strongly or somewhat) by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am aging well*</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a lot to look forward to as I age</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I will continue to make a difference in the world as I age*</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry about being able to live independently when I get older</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m concerned I will be a burden on my family when I get older</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry about being treated disrespectfully when I get older*</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference between men and women is statistically significant
[On why aging well]

“For me, I enjoy life. Every single day at 10:30 in the morning, I tell myself to say three things that make me happy. So, to me, healthy aging is thinking positive, talking positive, not thinking about all the bad things that have gone on in your life.”

Tammy, 61

Implications

Experiencing the pandemic has had a negative emotional impact on most of us. This study illuminates where 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 older adults say they are resilient and expect to be able to bounce back from these challenges. However, there are significant differences between men and women ages 50 and older.

For example, women ages 50-plus are significantly more likely than men ages 50-plus to say in the two weeks prior to the survey they had been bothered by feelings of anxiousness and had feelings of depression and hopelessness. Older women are also significantly more likely than older men to say the pandemic increased their level of anxiety, stress and sadness/depression.

The encouraging news is older women are also significantly more likely than older men to say they will get better at managing their negative emotions in the next six months. This is reflective of the fact that across the board, women are more likely to say they experience these negative feelings often and they are more likely to say they would like to speak to a mental health professional to help them manage these emotions.

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.
These findings suggest that experiencing the pandemic has impacted men and women differently which may require different approaches and more nuanced pro-mental well-being communications when talking to older adults about ways to protect or improve their mental and emotional health.

**Mental Health Resources**

AARP’s [Mental Health Center](https://www.aarp.org/research) highlights news and resources for older adults’ mental well-being.

The [Disaster Distress Helpline](https://www.aap.org/research), provides crisis counseling at 1-800-985-5990 or text: TalkWithUs 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 national survey is ± 3.33 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.

For more information on the survey and methodology please contact: Cheryl Lampkin, clampkin@aarp.org

For media inquiries please contact: media@aarp.org

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