

Historic Shift in Americans' Happiness Amid Pandemic

In the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, the public's happiness is at a five-decade low despite most Americans being satisfied with their financial situation, according to a new survey from NORC at the University of Chicago.

The study highlights how Americans' outlook and emotional health compare to nearly 50 years of trends in public opinion data from the General Social Survey (GSS). The historical context reveals unique impacts of the outbreak on public sentiment: an all-time low in people saying they are very happy (14%) combined with an all-time high in people saying they are satisfied with their family's financial situation (80%). These contrasting findings suggest that people are comparing their happiness to their own psychological well-being before the pandemic while assessing their finances in relation to the millions of fellow Americans who have lost jobs, wages, or investments following the outbreak.

The results also illustrate how Americans are reacting differently to the coronavirus pandemic compared to previous national tragedies. For example, fewer Americans report crying or feeling dazed than after either the Kennedy assassination in 1963 or the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, but more report having lost their temper or feeling bored during the pandemic.

With many social distancing guidelines in place, about twice as many Americans report feeling isolated at least sometimes compared to two years ago (50% vs. 23%). Since 2018, fewer people are also now satisfied with their social relationships, and more are reporting a fair or poor ability to carry out their social activities.



Three Things You Should Know About the NORC COVID Response Tracking Study Among American Adults:

- 1) Twenty-three percent say they are not too happy—a 10 percentage point jump since 2018 and the highest percentage on record since 1972.
- 2) Fewer people report experiencing stress reactions (80%) than after 9/11 (90%) and the Kennedy assassination (89%).
- 3) Those reporting exposure to someone with the coronavirus are more likely to report one or more stress reactions, including feeling nervous (60% vs. 43%), a desire to drink (45% vs. 24%), having an upset stomach (47% vs. 26%), and feeling dazed or numb (39% vs. 19%).

People who live in a county with a high number of COVID-19 deaths are lonelier than those living in less impacted counties. In addition, those in high-impact counties are more likely to say they are not happy than are those living in less-impacted counties (32% vs. 21%).

Other key findings from the study include:

- Forty-two percent of Americans believe that their children's standard of living when they are older will be better than their own standard of living—a sharp decline from 57% in 2018 and the lowest level of optimism for the next generation since first measured in 1994.
- The percentage of Americans who feel they often lack companionship has risen from 10% in 2018 to 18% in May 2020.
- Compared to after 9/11, fewer Americans report feeling on top of the world (27% vs. 37%) or like things are going their way (63% vs. 70%), and more Americans feel depressed (38% vs. 33%).
- More Americans say they have lost their temper more often after the COVID outbreak (30%) than said the same after 9/11 (20%) or the Kennedy assassination (19%).
- More Americans currently report that they often feel anxious, depressed, or irritable compared to two years ago (18% vs. 13%).
- Those who say they have likely been exposed to someone with the coronavirus are nearly twice as likely to feel like difficulties are piling up so high that they cannot overcome them (21% vs. 11%).

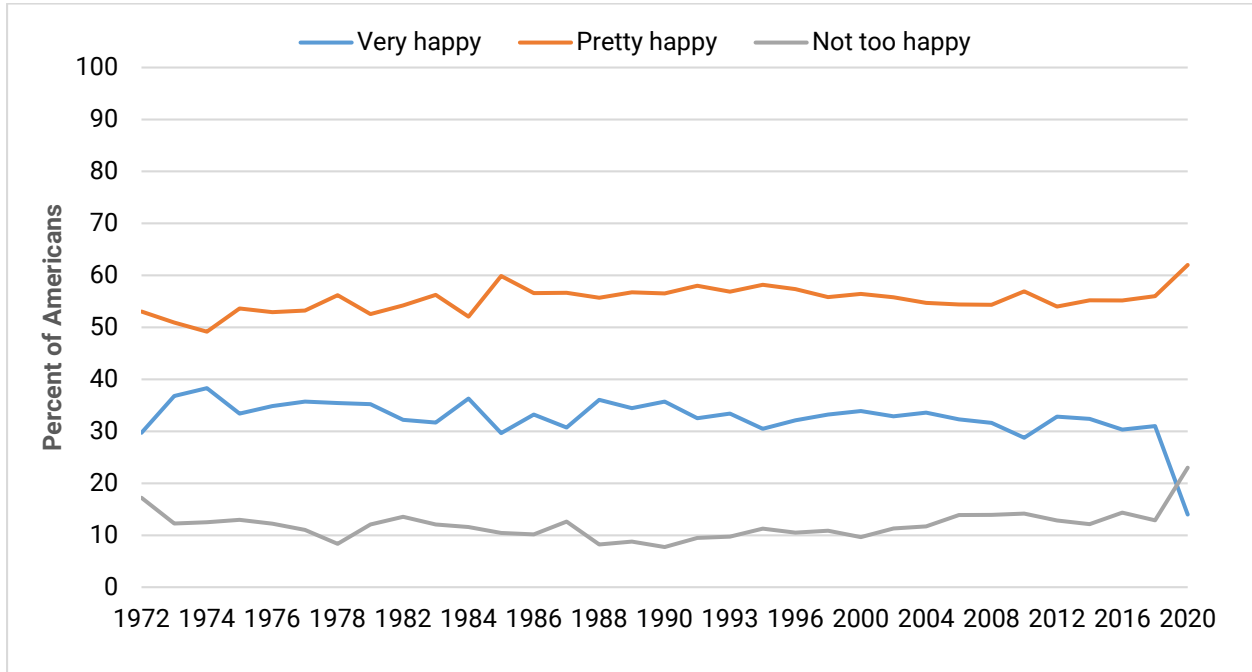
Happiness and optimism for the future reach a decades-long low, while most are financially satisfied.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to two seemingly contrasting shifts in public opinion: More Americans than in previous decades are unhappy and pessimistic about the future, and at the same time, more are relatively satisfied financially.

In combination, these results suggest that people are comparing their finances to that of fellow Americans hurt by the economic fallout from the pandemic while contrasting their happiness to their own mood prior to the outbreak.

For about two decades, 3 in 10 Americans said that, taken all together, they are very happy. In 2020, the number of people who say they are very happy hit a historical low of 14%, a 17 percentage-point drop since 2018. The percentage of people who described themselves as not too happy also spiked to an all-time high since the question was first asked in 1972.

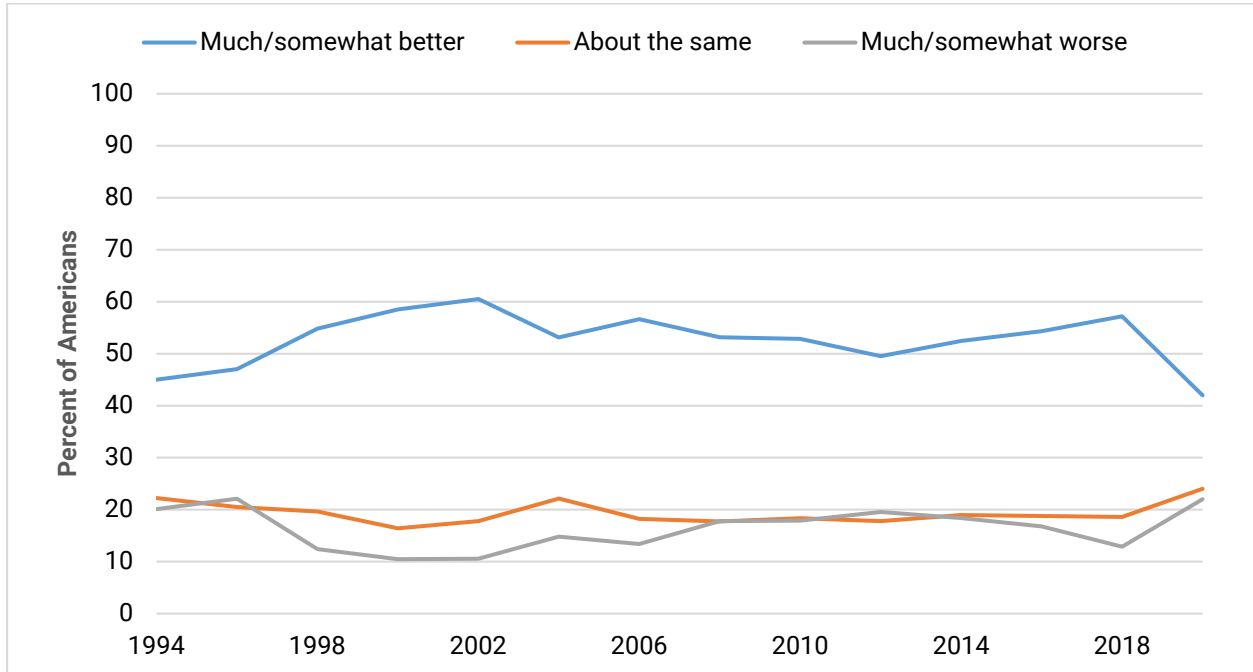
Happiness reaches lowest point in decades.



Question: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?
Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 1972-2018.

Optimism for the future generation has also fallen. In the wake of the outbreak, only 42% believe that when their children are their age their standard of living will be better than their own, whereas 57% said the same in 2018. Since the question was asked in 1994, the previous low was 45% in 1994.

Optimism for the standard of living for the next generation at a 25-year low.

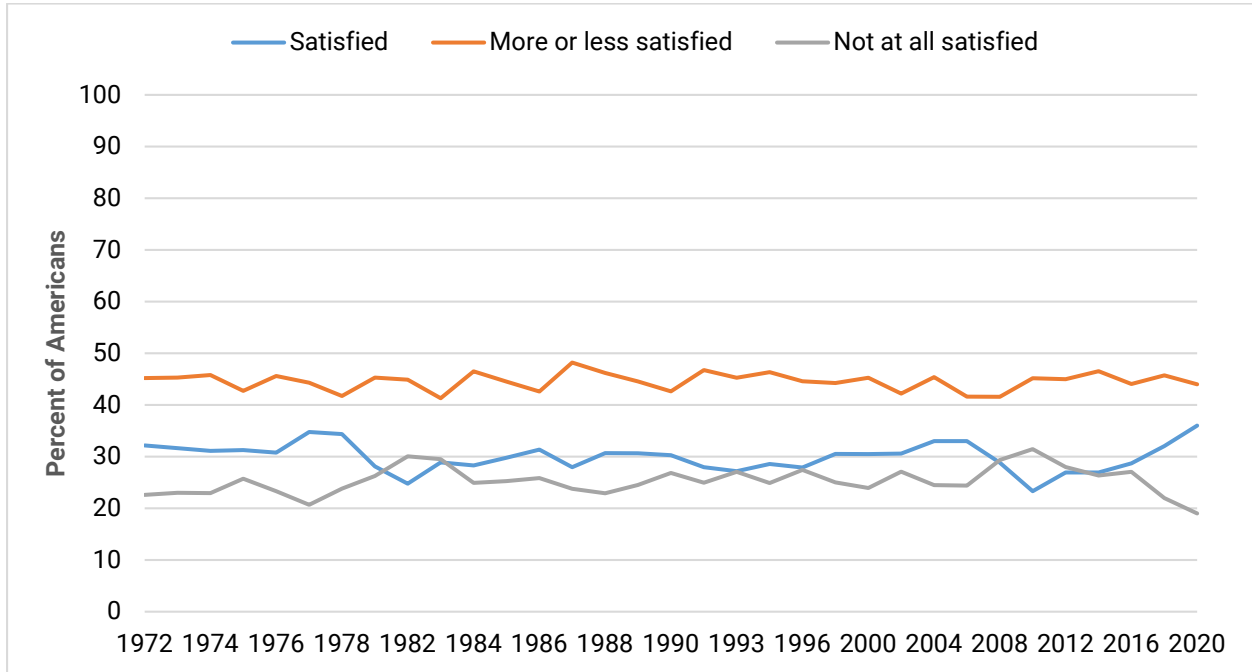


Question: When your children are at the age you are now, do you think their standard of living will be much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than yours is now?

Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 1972-2018.

As happiness and optimism for future generations have plummeted, financial satisfaction has sustained its upward trend since 2010. In 2020, 36% say they are satisfied, and 44% say they are somewhat satisfied. Just 19% say they are not at all satisfied.

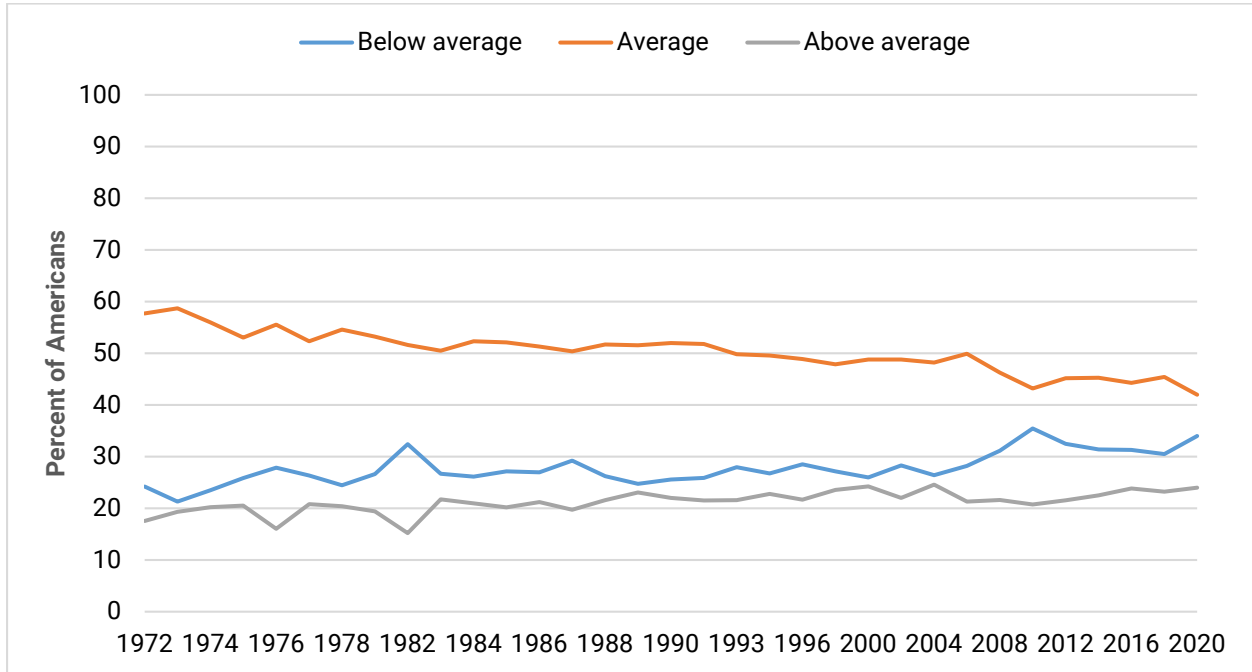
Satisfaction with personal finances has been rising since the Great Recession.



Question: We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. So far as you and your family are concerned, would you say that you are pretty well satisfied with your present financial situation, more or less satisfied, or not satisfied at all?
Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 1972-2018.

Americans' perceptions of their family's income relative to others have also not changed significantly. In the wake of the coronavirus, 42% describe their family's income as average, and 24% report it is above average. These assessments are similar to 2018, when 45% said their income was average and 23% say it was above average.

Assessments of family income are stable.



Question: Compared with American families in general, would you say your family income is far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average?

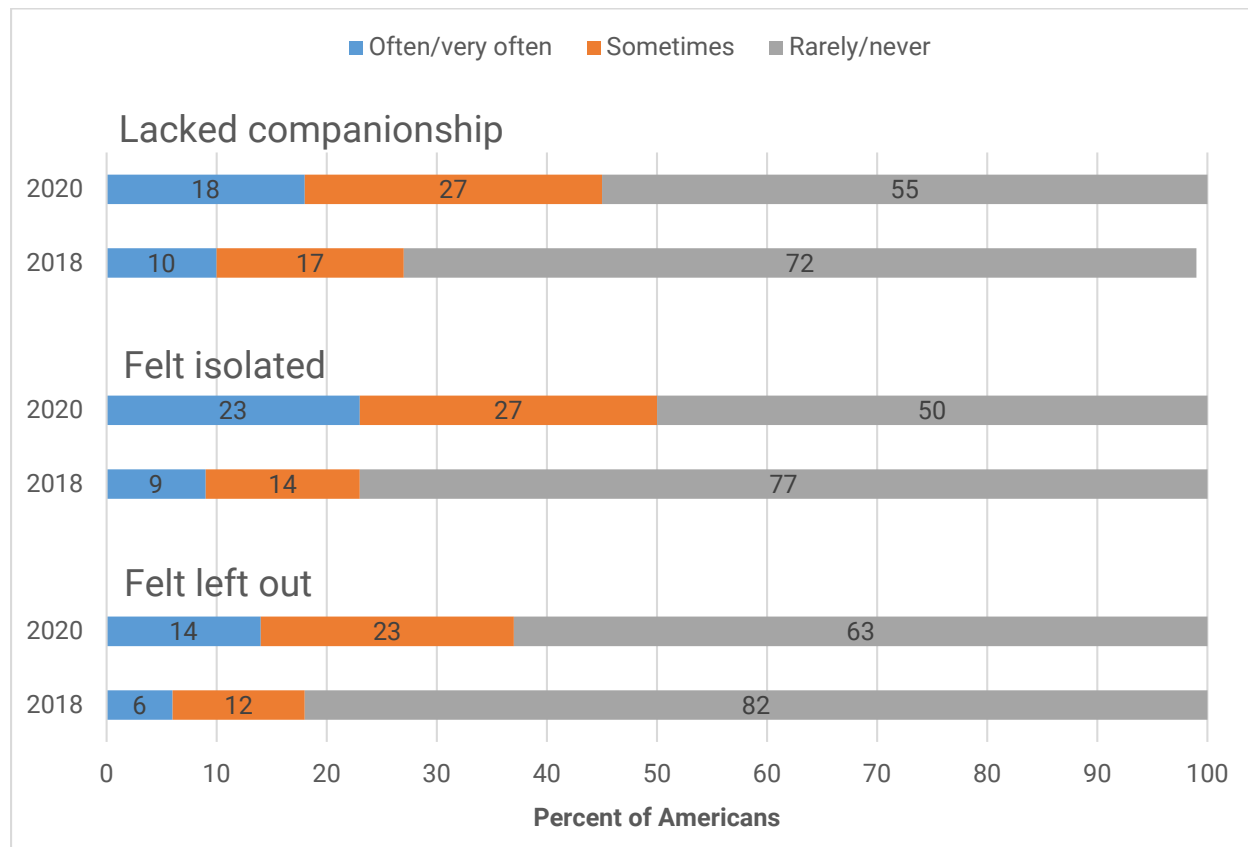
Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 1972-2018.

Americans express increased levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression in the wake of the pandemic.

As various government and public health guidelines have encouraged sheltering-in-place and social distancing in recent months, many Americans are lonely.

In comparison to 2018, many more Americans report having felt a lack of companionship, isolation, and being left out in the past four weeks. For example, 50% say they at least sometimes felt isolated in the past four weeks, while less than a quarter of the public said the same in 2018.

Feelings of loneliness are more widespread in 2020 compared to 2018.



Questions: How often in the past four weeks have you felt that you lack companionship?

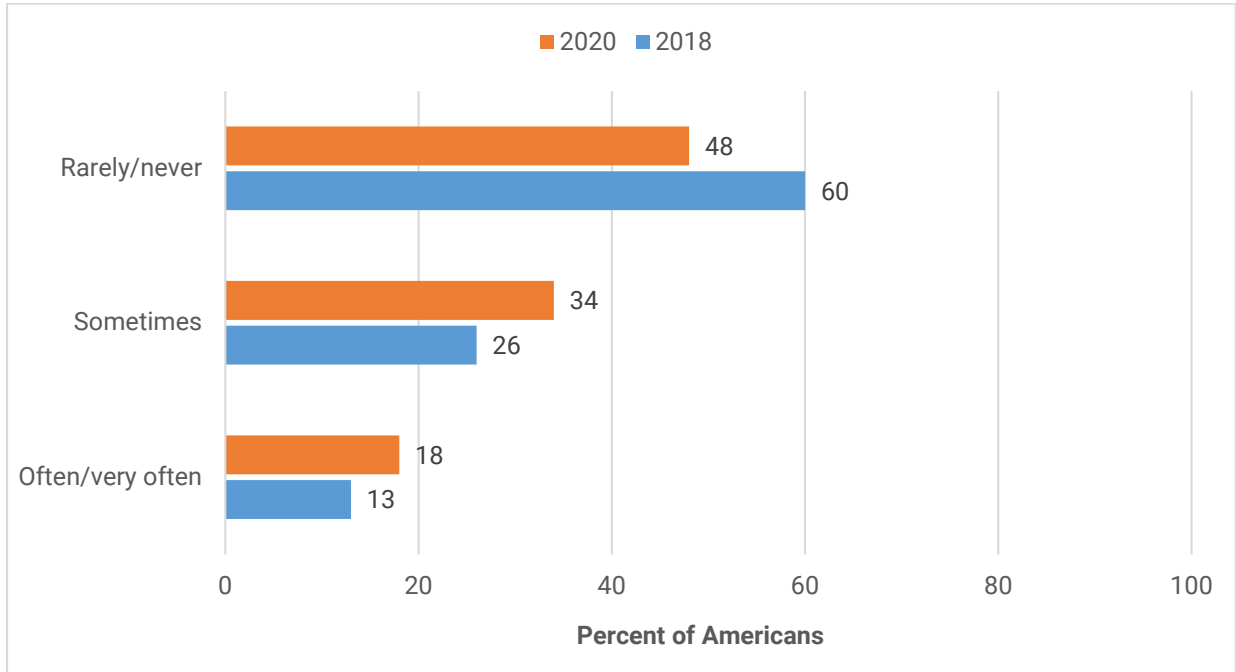
How often in the past four weeks have you felt you are isolated from others?

How often in the past four weeks have you felt that you are left out?

Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 2018.

An increased number of Americans also express feelings of anxiety and depression. Eighteen percent say in the past seven days they have often or always felt anxious, depressed, or irritable, compared to 13% in 2018. Forty-five percent of Americans have also felt at least moderately fatigued in the past week.

A majority felt anxious, depressed, or irritable in the last week.

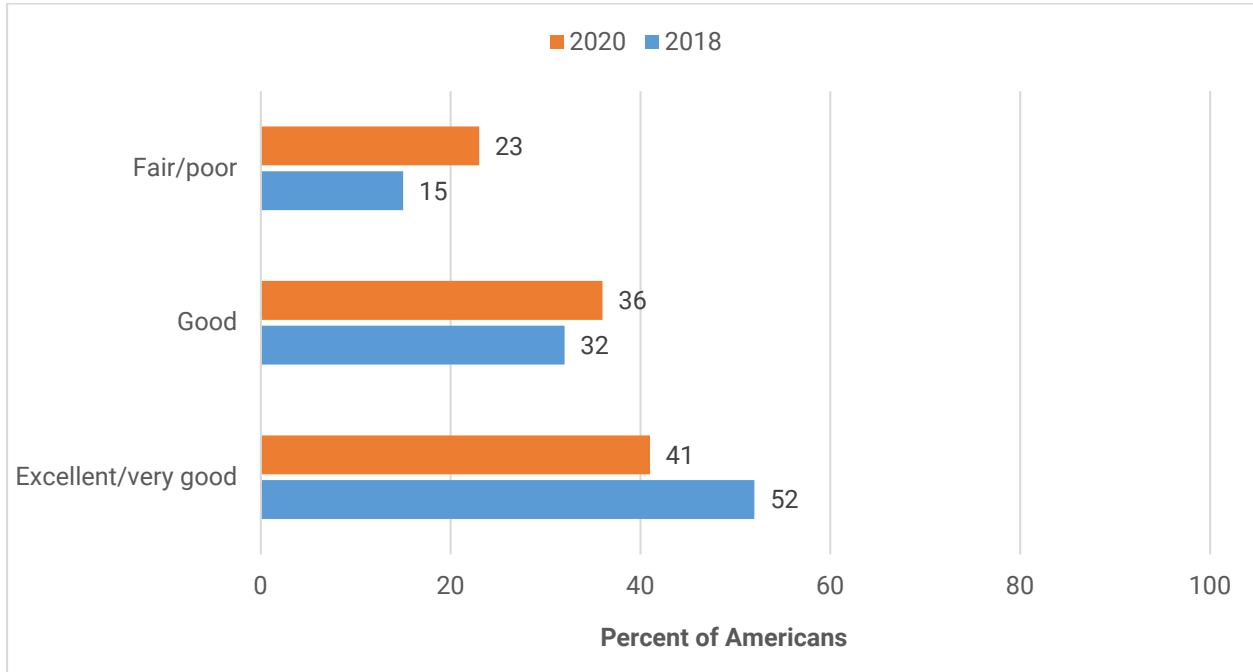


Question: In the past seven days, how often have you been bothered by emotional problems, such as feeling anxious, depressed, or irritable?
Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 2018.

Many Americans feel their ability to carry out social activities has been strained during the pandemic. Forty-five percent describe their ability to carry out social activities as excellent or very good, compared to 59% who said the same two years ago.

Overall, fewer Americans are satisfied with their social activities and relationships. Just 41% say their social activities and relationships are excellent or very good, compared to 52% in 2018.

A quarter of Americans rate their satisfaction with social relationships as fair or poor.



Question: In general, how would you rate your satisfaction with your social activities and relationships?

Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the General Social Survey, conducted 2018.

Compared to the periods after the Kennedy assassination and 9/11, fewer Americans report emotional and psychological stress reactions following the COVID outbreak.

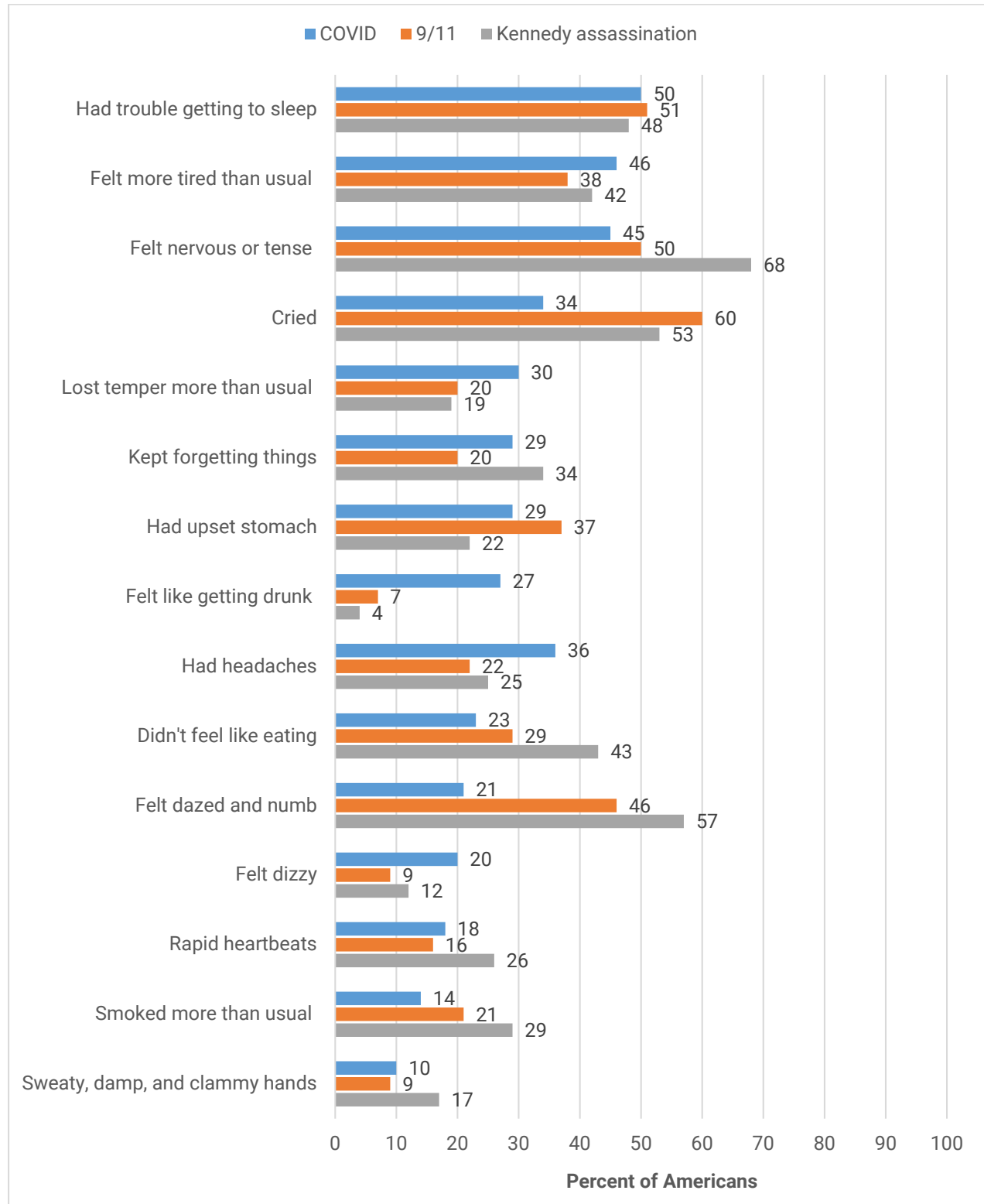
Fewer Americans have responded to the pandemic with negative emotional and physical symptoms compared to previous national tragedies, but more people say they have had an angry outburst following the outbreak.

In terms of emotional and physical symptoms, Americans do not report feeling any more adverse symptoms after the COVID outbreak than after both the Kennedy assassination and 9/11. Twenty percent say they experienced none of the 15 symptoms asked about, compared to 11% after the Kennedy assassination and 10% after 9/11. Americans, on average, report feeling about four of the 15 symptoms, which is similar to the average number of symptoms reported after 9/11.

Compared to the Kennedy assassination and 9/11 tragedies, fewer Americans report that they cried (34% vs. 53% and 60%) or felt dazed or numb (21% vs. 57% and 46%) in response to the COVID outbreak.

However, 30% of Americans say they have lost their temper more often after the COVID outbreak, while 19% said the same after the Kennedy assassination and 20% after 9/11. Additionally, more Americans say they have felt like getting drunk than during these previous tragedies (27% vs. 4% and 7%).

Compared to 9/11 and the Kennedy assassination, some stress reactions are different.



Question: Please indicate whether or not each of the following have happened to you since the outbreak of the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic.
 Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the National Tragedy Study, conducted 1963 and 2001-2002.

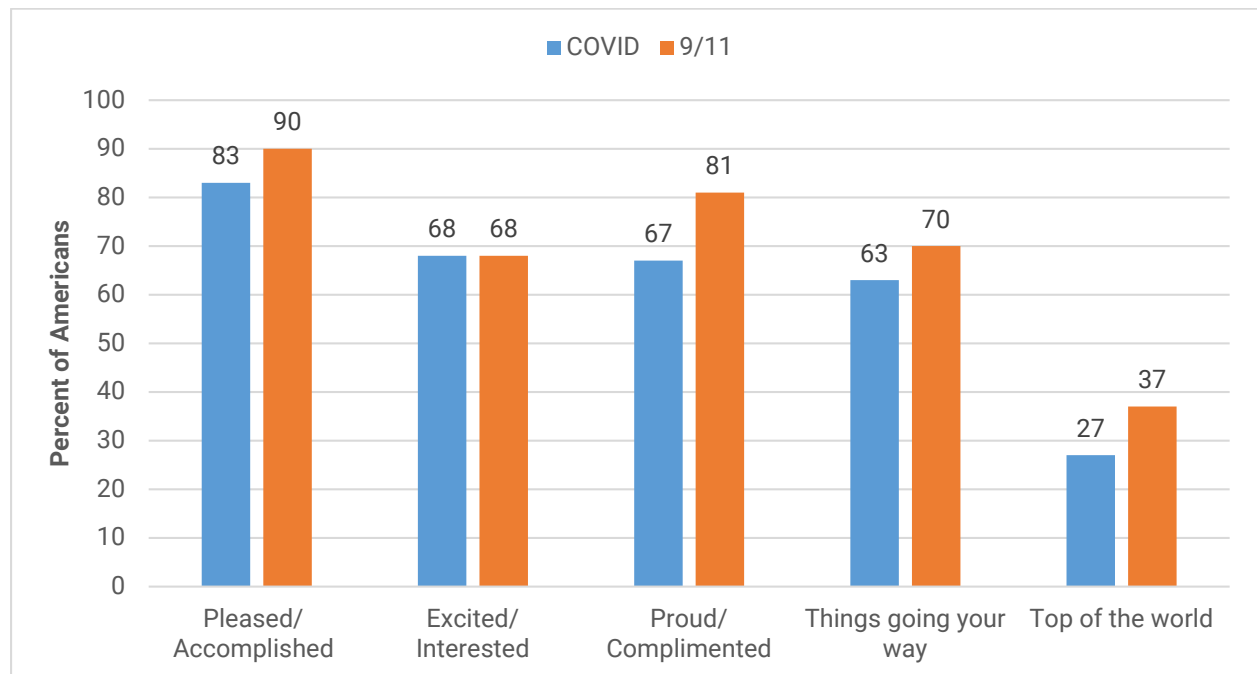
Similar to the period after 9/11, the public tends to report more positive than negative emotional experiences following the COVID outbreak.

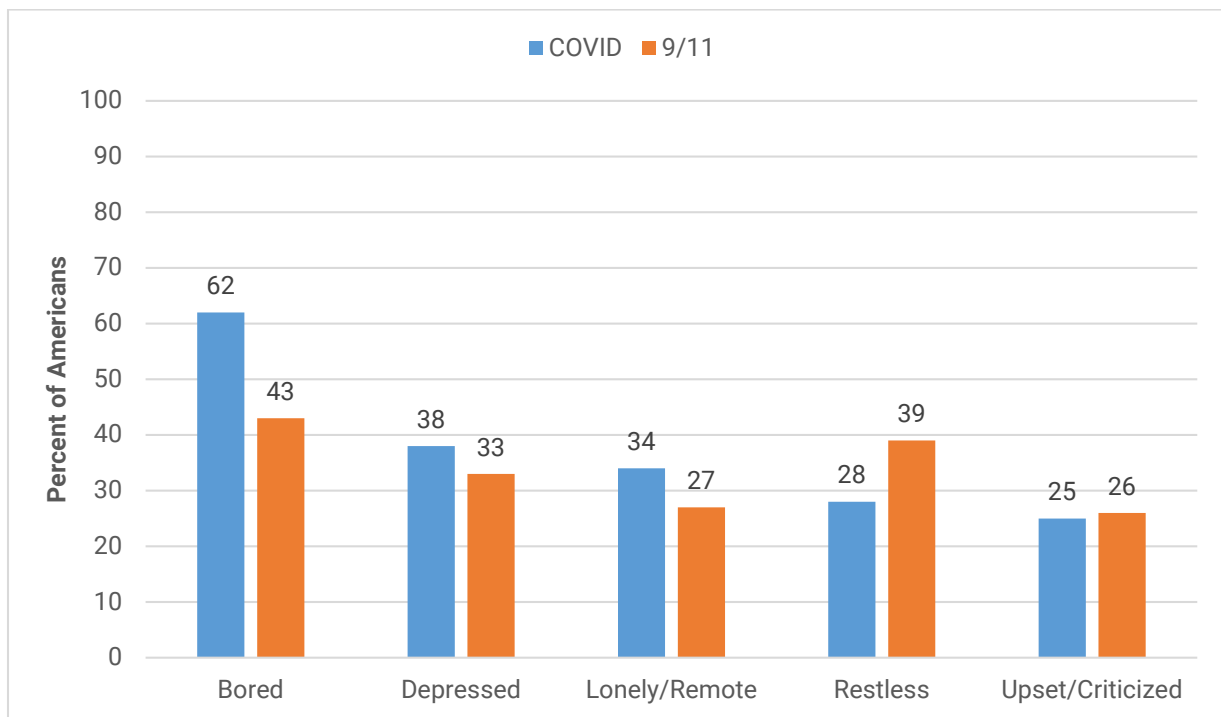
Americans have felt more positive emotional responses than negative ones in the last few months, but the specific feelings emerging following the COVID outbreak differ from those following 9/11.

Sixty-seven percent have felt proud during the last few weeks, compared to 81% who felt proud after 9/11. Similarly, only 27% have felt on top of the world, while 37% did in 2001. Americans are also less likely to feel pleased and accomplished and that things are going their way compared to after 9/11.

In terms of negative emotions, 62% of Americans have felt bored, and 34% have felt lonely in the aftermath of the COVID outbreak; just 43% and 27%, respectively, said the same after 9/11. However, fewer report in 2020 having felt restless than after 9/11 (28% vs. 39%).

Compared to after 9/11, fewer report positive emotions and more report negative emotions in the wake of the coronavirus.





Question: Here are a few questions we have been asking people regularly during the last few years, and we'd like to get your answers now. During the past few weeks did you ever feel...

Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide, and the National Tragedy Study, conducted 1963 and 2001-2002.

Those who live in a county with a high number of COVID deaths are more likely to report being lonely and unhappy.

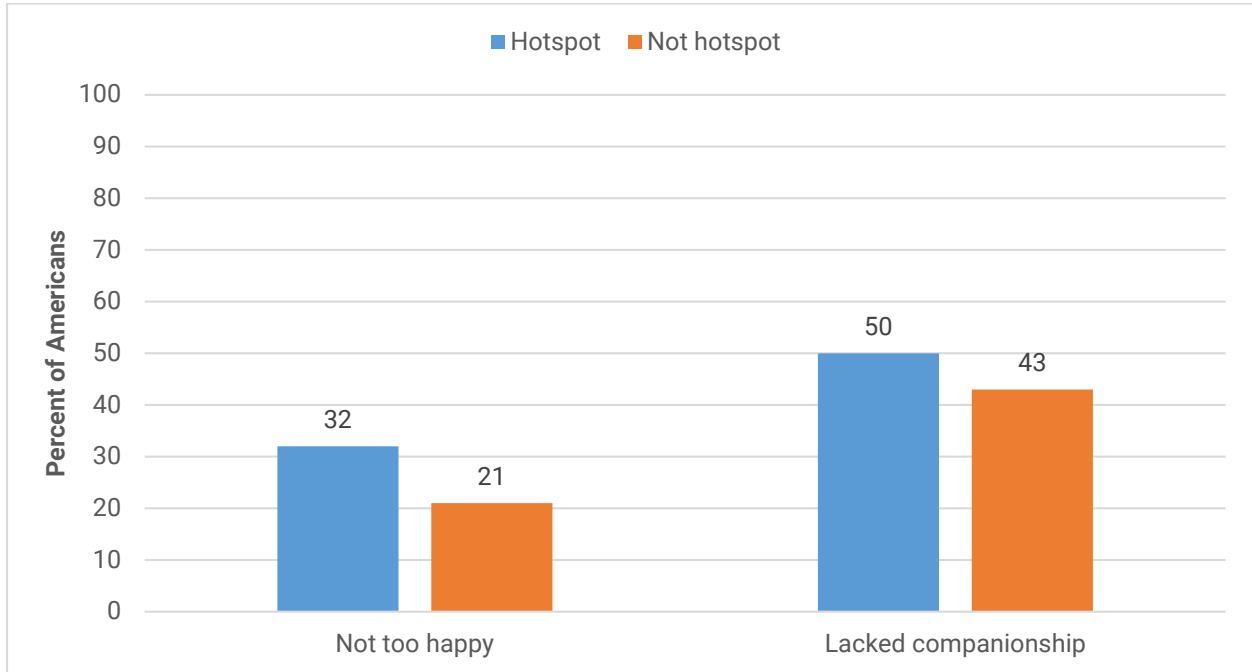
Geographic exposure to COVID-19 is linked with poor mental health. For this study, geographic exposure to the coronavirus is defined as any county with a total of 270 or more COVID-related deaths as of the first day of data collection. About 25% of the U.S. population lives in these exposed or hotspot areas.¹

A majority of Americans are pretty happy, but those living in hotspot counties with a high number of COVID deaths are more likely to be unhappy. Thirty-two percent living in these hotspots say they are not too happy, compared to just 21% in non-hotspots.

Living in a COVID hotspot is also related to higher loneliness; half of Americans living in a hotspot have lacked companionship at least sometimes in the last month, compared to 43% in non-hotspots.

¹ The relationships between geographic exposure and mental health are also statistically significant if a hotspot is defined by deaths per capita rather than total number of deaths. The 25% of the public who live in counties with the highest deaths per capita are more likely than others to report they are not happy and are lonely.

Americans living in hotspots are unhappier, lonelier than those in other parts of the country.



Question: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

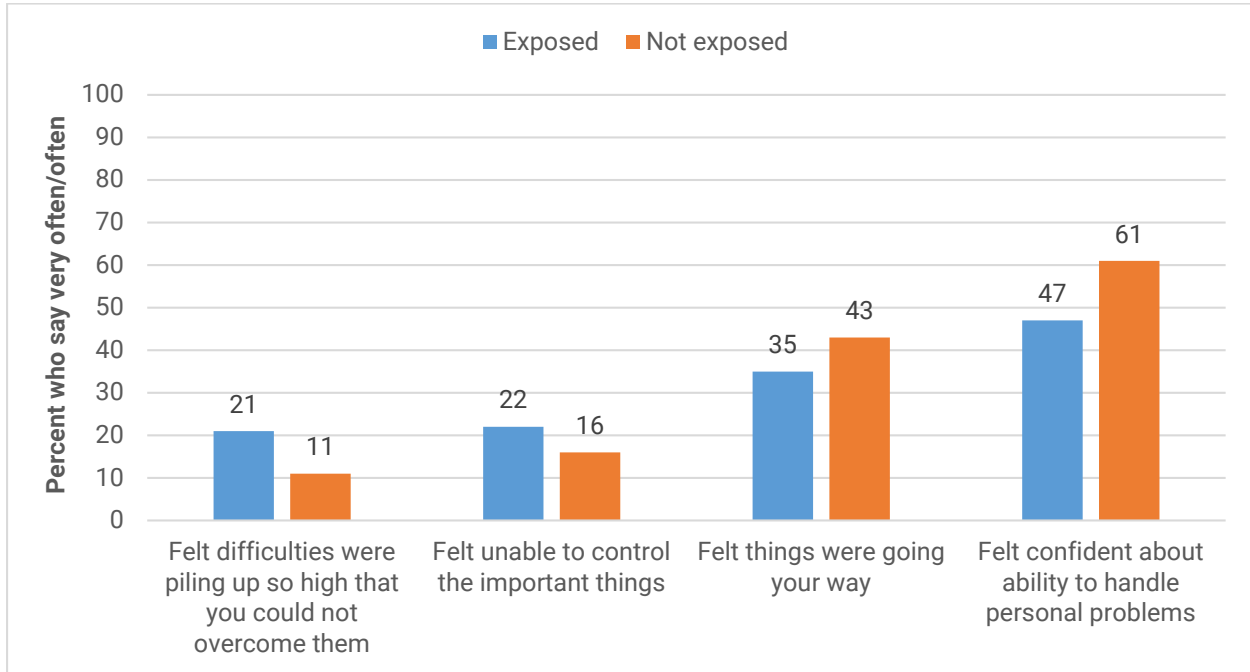
Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide.

Personal exposure to the coronavirus is linked with poor mental health.

Personal exposure to someone who likely had the virus is associated with higher levels of stress, loneliness, and reporting a variety of physical and emotional reactions/symptoms. Personal exposure to the coronavirus is defined in this study as a respondent reporting that, in the past month, they have been exposed to someone who had a positive COVID test, someone who had a medical diagnosis of COVID, or someone with possible symptoms of COVID. Thirteen percent of Americans report having been exposed to someone known or suspected of having the coronavirus.

Americans who say they have been exposed to the coronavirus are more stressed than those who have not been exposed. Forty-seven percent of exposed Americans say they are often confident in their ability to handle their personal problems, compared to 61% of those who have not been exposed. Twenty-one percent of those who have been exposed have felt difficulties were piling up too high to overcome, and just 11% of unexposed Americans say the same.

Americans who report being personally exposed to the virus feel more stressed.

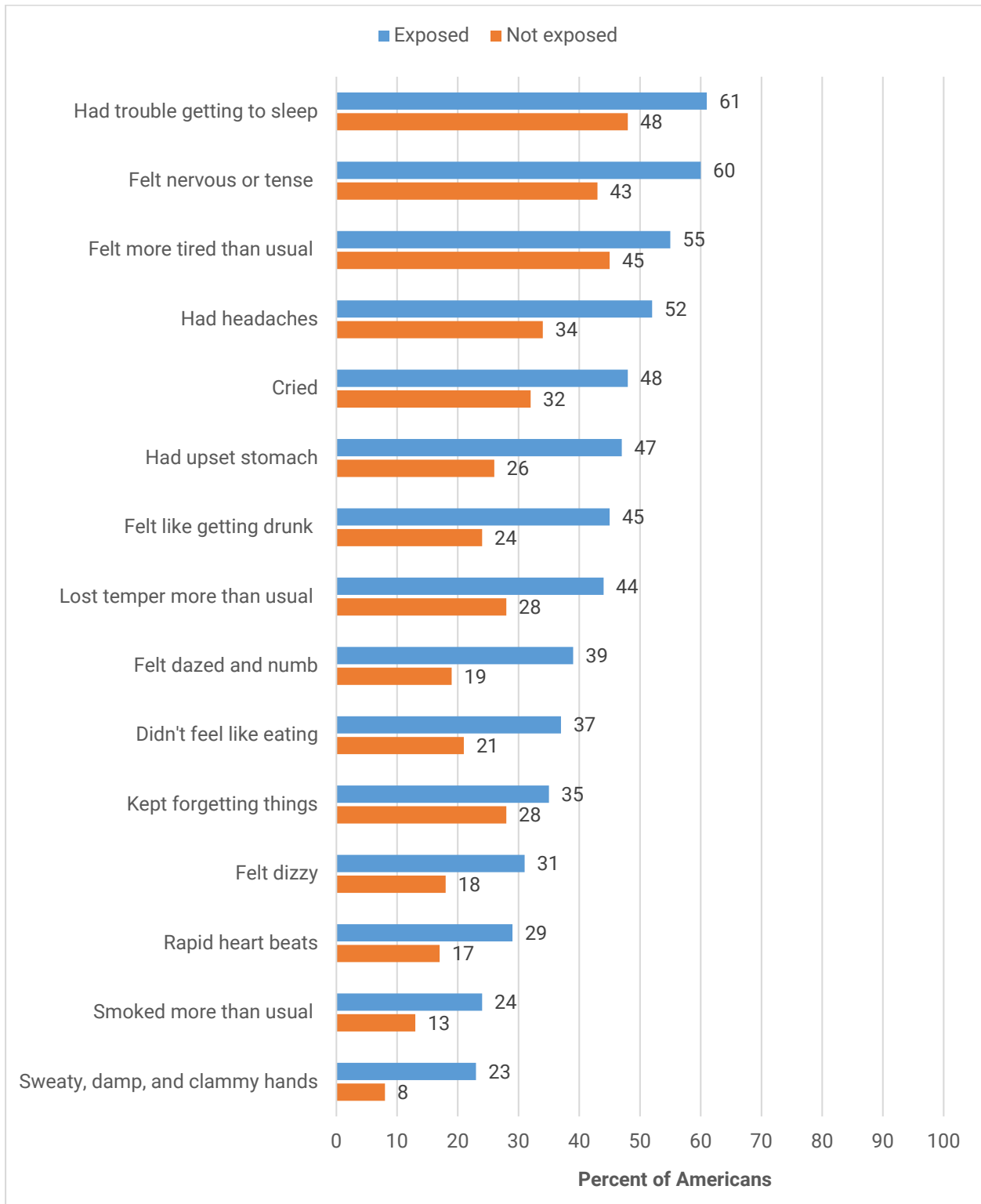


Questions: In the past four weeks, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
 In the past four weeks, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
 In the past four weeks, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
 In the past four weeks, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?
 Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide.

Personal exposure is also connected to loneliness. Sixty-five percent of unexposed Americans say they never or rarely have felt left out, compared to just 48% of the exposed population.

Exposed individuals are also more likely to have emotional and physiological symptoms. Those who have been personally exposed are more likely to have felt dazed or numb (39% vs. 19%), felt nervous (60% vs. 43%), had an upset stomach (47% vs. 26%), and felt like getting drunk (45% vs. 24%), among others. Twenty-one percent of those who have not been personally exposed report none of the symptoms asked about, compared to just 9% of the exposed population.

The pandemic has led to different emotional, physical, and behavioral stress reactions for personally exposed individuals.



Question: Please indicate whether or not each of the following have happened to you since the outbreak of the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic.
 Source: COVID Response Tracking Study conducted 5/21-29/2020, with 2,279 adults age 18 and over nationwide.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The COVID Response Tracking Study is an effort to examine the social, psychological, and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on American society. This is the first wave of the longitudinal study, which will include re-interviewing respondents at various points following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago and with funding from the National Science Foundation.

Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak® Panel, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for the first wave of this study were conducted between May 21 and 29, 2020, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 2,279 completed the survey—2,047 via the web and 232 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. The final stage completion rate is 68.3%, the weighted household panel response rate is 23.6%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 84.8%, for a cumulative response rate of 13.7%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/-2.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2020 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

The analysis was supplemented by data from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is administered by NORC at the University of Chicago, primarily using in-person interviewing. The GSS started in 1972 and completed its 32nd round in 2018. For the last five decades, the GSS has been monitoring societal change and the growing complexity of American society. The GSS is the largest project funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. The typical sample size was 1,500 prior to 1994, but increased to 2,700-3,000 until 2008 and decreased to 2,000-2,500 for the most recent surveys. Resulting margins of error are between +/- 3.1 for the smaller sample sizes and +/- 2.2 percentage points for the larger sample sizes at the 95% confidence level. The GSS 1972-2018 Cumulative File was utilized to produce the statistics presented. Information about the GSS can be found at [gss.norc.org](https://gss.norc.uchicago.edu/).

The analysis also used data from the National Tragedy Study. The first round of the National Tragedy Study was conducted between September 13 and 27, 2001, by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. It was a telephone interview of adults (18+) living in households with telephones in the United States. The survey had a total national sample size of 1,013. The response rate was 56%. The second round of the National Tragedy Study was conducted between January 10 and March 4, 2002. This follow-up survey was also conducted by telephone. Study information for the National Tragedy Study can be found at [norc.org](https://norc.uchicago.edu/).

The study additionally used data from the Kennedy Assassination Study. The Kennedy Assassination Study was conducted between November 26 and December 3, 1963, by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. It was an in-person interview of adults (21+) living in households in the United States and had 1,384 respondents. It used a modified probability sample. Study information for the Kennedy Assassination Study can be found on [Roper iPoll](#).

All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95% level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5% (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling.

A topline with full question wordings is available at [norc.org](#). For more information, email info@norc.org.