

General

General Anxiety Disorder in Youth: A National Survey

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General Anxiety Disorder has become an increasing problem in the youth population. The authors conducted a survey of youth ages 16-24, on what life is like for those who are living with anxiety. In this cohort of 200, the youngest participants were the least likely to be diagnosed, see a professional, and take medication for their anxiety. A significant number said that anxiety affects their day-to-day lives and also causes many physical side effects.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health disorders that affect the youth population. Anxious people not only suffer from struggling to control their worrying, but GAD (General Anxiety Disorder) also has adverse physical symptoms, such as irritated bowels, profuse sweating, difficulty sleeping, muscle tension, nausea and vomiting, and difficulty concentrating.¹ Those who live with anxiety also tend to have been diagnosed with other mental health disorders such as depression, OCD, ADD, ADHD, etc. Most people who suffer from anxiety also suffer from depression, and vice-versa, since both of those mental ailments often trigger each other, comorbidity with mental health disorders is very common.²

Almost 32% of adolescents suffered from overall anxiety in America in 2001-2004, with the majority being women or those ages 17-18.³ Since 2016, there has been a 7.1% increase in anxiety diagnoses as recorded in 2020.⁴ Over the years, the percentage of the youth population who have been diagnosed with anxiety has also increased.

While anxiety has become more prevalent, most adolescents don't get diagnosed, don't see a professional, and don't have medication. This is because a lot of them don't have the resources to get the help they need likely because mental health disorders are not talked about enough.

METHODS

200 Americans, ages 16-24, answered questions about anxiety through an anonymous online third-party polling service. In order to be eligible for the survey, respondents had to be between 16-24 years. The survey consisted of 10 questions. For some of the questions, multiple selections amongst the multiple choices were allowed, so that percentage totals could exceed 100%. The final question was an open-ended one designed to capture the students' verbatim feelings. HCA Centralized Algorithms for Research Rules on

IRB Exemptions (CARRIE)/ IRB manager issued study exemption number 2022-

RESULTS

The median age of the cohort was 22 years with an interquartile range of 20 to 23; 58% of the cohort were female, and 42% were male. Other demographics including race, marital and employment status are summarized in [figure 1](#).

For the first question, 68% of participants reported being officially diagnosed with anxiety and 46% did not take medication for their anxiety. In a nominal logistic regression model, older age was more likely to be associated with an official anxiety disorder, meaning age was a significant factor for having a formal diagnosis ($p = 0.0008$). For every one year increase in age, there was 27% higher odds of being diagnosed with anxiety.

There was also a strong relationship between seeing a professional and age. The older the participant was, the more likely they were to see a professional ($p = .0002$).

It was more common for 16-year-olds to not take medication than it was for 24-year-olds. 84% of those who were surveyed also said that their anxiety affects their daily lives and 48% said that they do see a professional for their anxiety. The majority of the cohort copes with their anxiety by doing a combination of things, including meditation, journaling, and working out/yoga. 58% of the cohort said that they have been diagnosed with other mental health disorders along with anxiety, the most prominent one being depression. 72% do not receive accommodations for their anxiety. 56% of the cohort said that anxiety does affect their physical well-being. The most common ailments included irritability, difficulty concentrating, profuse sweating, muscle tension, and sleep disturbances ([figure 2](#)).

The free-response answers all had similar statements that discussed how it makes life much more difficult and that it prevents them from being able to do certain things that non-anxious people can freely do. When asked about

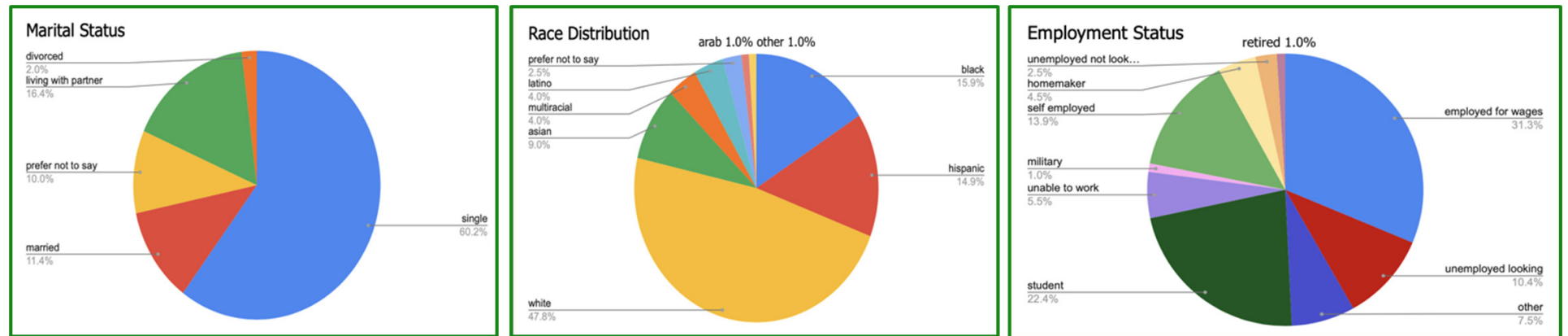


Figure 1. Marital status, race distribution and employment status of cohort

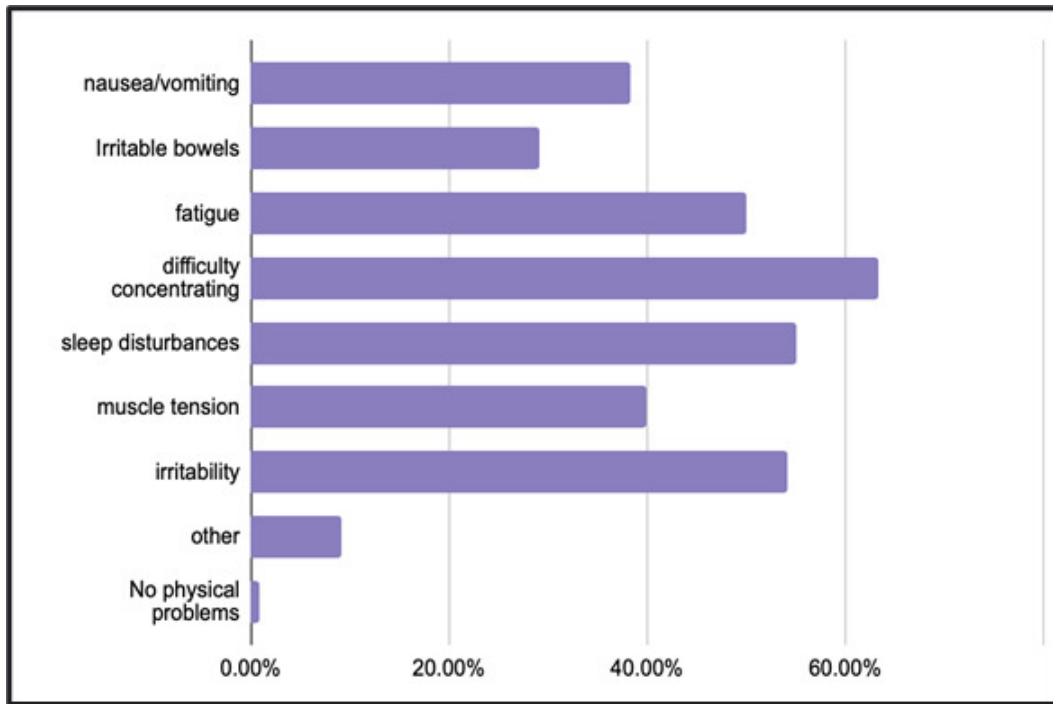


Figure 2. Commonly reported physical ailments associated with anxiety

what adds to their stress, participants mentioned busy places, loud noises, and stress from work, school, and family.

DISCUSSION

Anxiety has become a much more prevalent problem in the youth population as years have passed. Many adolescents don't get officially diagnosed even though they have anxiety, and even fewer minors receive medication for this problem. Since the majority of the cohort said that anxiety hinders their daily lives and that they often experience adverse physical side effects, it is clear that anxiety should be a serious topic in youth healthcare. Unfortunately, mental health disorders like anxiety are not discussed enough, which is what leads to so many people living with undiagnosed anxiety.

The survey does have limitations because it only included those who lived in America and it was only focused on those who know they have some form of anxiety. To make this more accurate of the worldwide concern for anxiety in the youth population, it would've been better if the only restriction was age, and if there was no screening question so it would be more random.

The comments in the free-response section often mentioned the use of substances to help them feel better and thoughts of suicide. This is very concerning that young people are turning to substance abuse and self-harm. Studies have shown that the comorbidity with other mental illnesses was also very high since anxiety often triggers other mental health disorders. One study, in particular, discussed how anxiety sensitivity affects childhood depression and anxiety disorder. In this investigation, it is shown that "anxiety sensitivity can be considered among the char-

acteristics that are closely connected with depression and anxiety disorder in children and adolescents. Reiss and McNally (1985), define anxiety sensitivity as a state of extreme fear which is the result of the sense of unease and symptoms with negative effects." The study goes on to explain that the increased rate of anxiety sensitivity in children and adolescents is something of concern due to the fact that it can often lead to the development of anxiety and depression disorders as someone grows.⁵

The passage from childhood anxiety sensitivity to anxiety disorder has been exponentially increasing, which should be causing some apprehension for the mental health and well being of future generations.

CONCLUSION

A significant proportion of youth struggle with anxiety and don't get the help that they need. Anxiety is a widespread mental health disorder that impedes people's ability to do day-to-day activities. By making more efforts to discuss mental health, more people can get diagnosed and hopefully learn how to manage their worrying.

DISCLAIMER

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