



DATA INSIGHTS & IMPACT REPORT  
**MENTAL HEALTH UPDATE:**  
Stress and Anxiety Tipping Point



# INTRODUCTION

Stress and anxiety have hit all-time highs in the United States due to the persistent coronavirus crisis compounded by the recent protests and riots related to the death of George Floyd. Fears of disease and job loss; anxiety and outrage related to racial tension; grief over lost loved ones, lost opportunities and lost jobs; financial and relational stress; loneliness or lack of alone time – and above all, enormous uncertainty – have added up to a mental and emotional pressure cooker that has pushed American's into a continuous state of alarm.

Consider one survey recently published in the [American Journal of Managed Care](#) in which nearly 7 in 10 employees called the pandemic the most stressful time of their entire professional career, and 88 percent of workers reported experiencing moderate to extreme stress over the past four to six weeks. In separate research by the [Pew Research Center](#), nearly 1 in 5 Americans (18 percent) reported feeling nervous or anxious most or all of the time during the past week.



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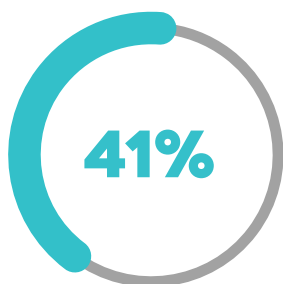
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reported feeling nervous or anxious most or all of the time during the past week.

Experiencing elevated stress for a short period of time can be manageable or even helpful if one is fleeing from danger, for instance, or even pushing hard to meet a deadline at work. However, the prolonged nature of COVID-19 combined with weeks of angry protesting has created a perpetual state of stress that will have lasting effects on our mental, emotional and physical health.

An article published by the Institute for Disaster Mental Health compared the current situation to natural disasters, which take a physical and emotional toll and cause high levels of stress and anxiety. However, victims of natural disasters typically know immediately when the worst has happened, who is affected and when recovery can begin. In contrast, disease outbreaks and civil unrest don't have that kind of clear time boundary, leaving us in an ongoing state of feeling at risk. This is not the type of acute stressor our fight-or-flight system has evolved to deal with effectively.

Notably, stress and anxiety were on the rise in Americans even before the recent crises. One pre-COVID workplace study by the [American Psychological Association](#) reported that 41 percent of respondents felt "tense or stressed out during the workday," up from 36 percent the previous year. Similarly, the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#) published findings that close to 40 percent of workers were experiencing anxiety, depression and disease as a result of pressure on the job.

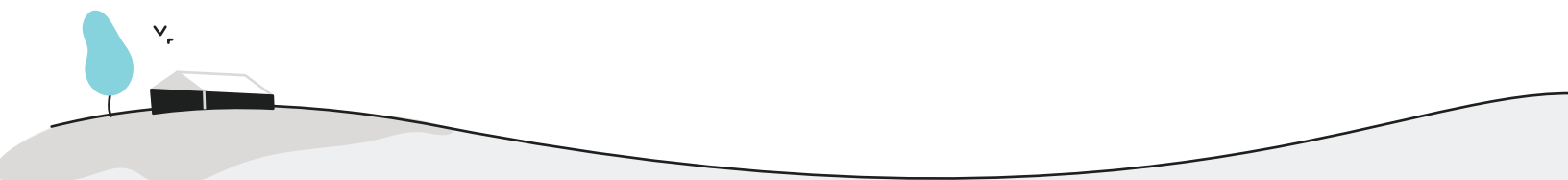


**of respondents felt "tense or stressed out during the workday,"**



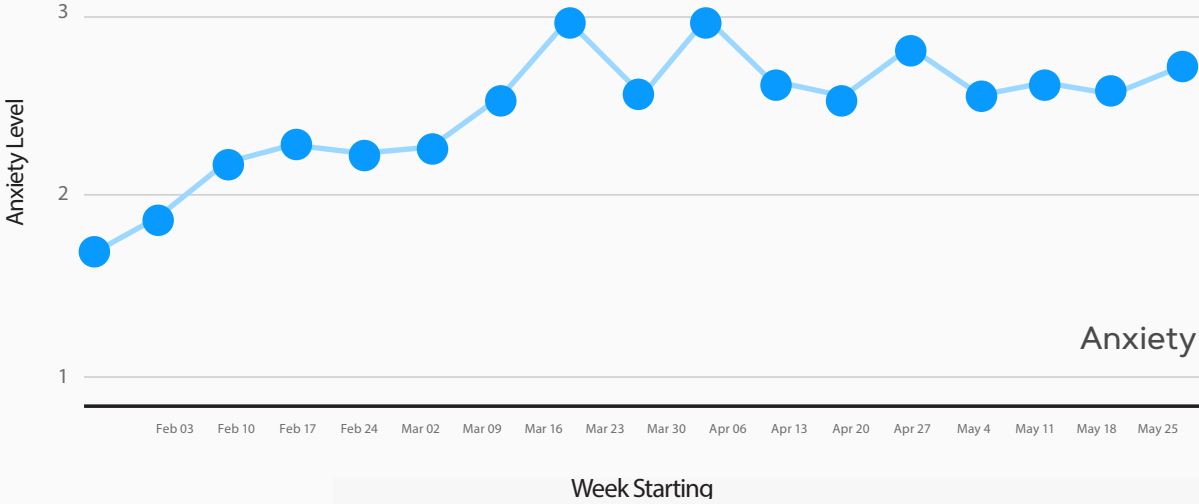
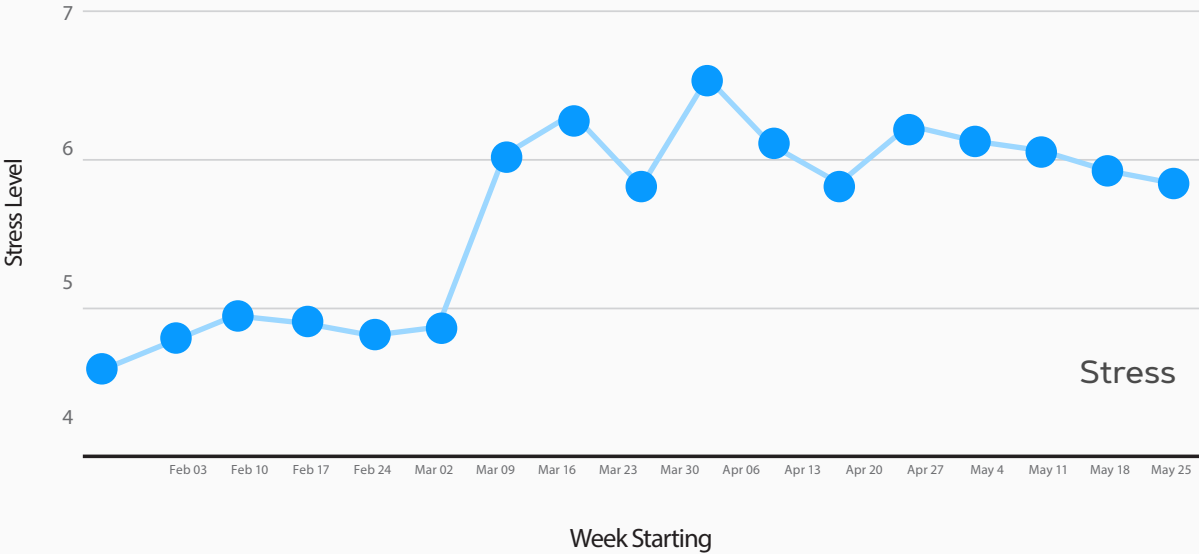
**of workers were experiencing anxiety, depression and disease as a result of pressure on the job.**

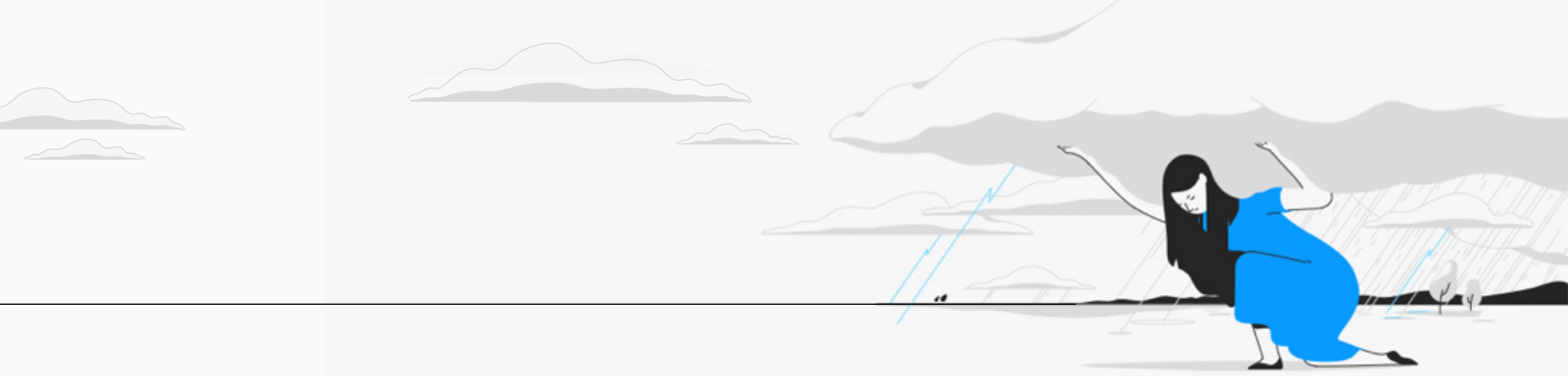
What this contributes to our current situation is a wealth of research on how stress and anxiety can impact individuals at both work and in their personal lives. In this Insights and Impact Report, Total Brain presents this data, along with data from the [Mental Health Index: U.S. Workers Edition](#), to examine what we can expect to see in mental health patterns in the weeks and months to come, and to help employers and health providers anticipate the support and interventions Americans are likely to need as we move forward with recovery.



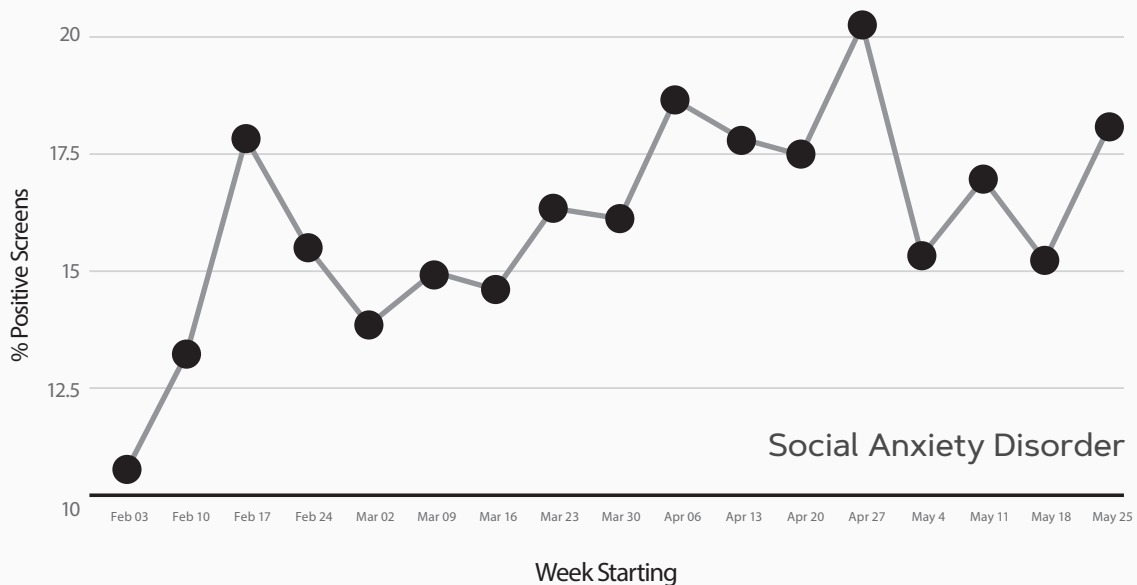
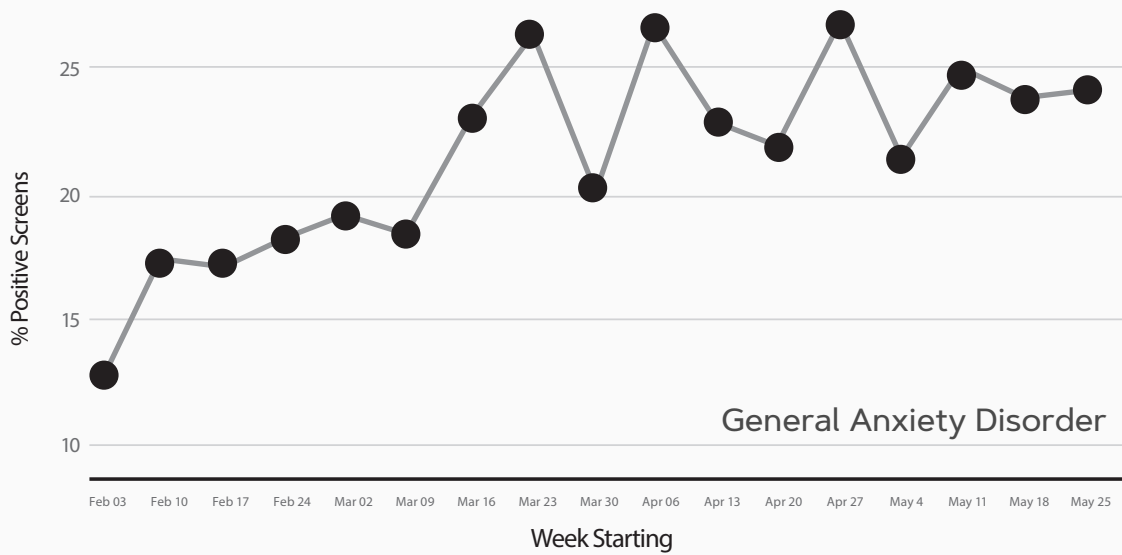
# Impact of Stress and Anxiety on the Workplace

As American workers have adjusted their lives to the new COVID-19 realities, their levels of stress and anxiety have elevated. Total Brain tracked responses from users of its mental health self-monitoring and self-care platform starting Feb. 3 to assess their mental well-being during the outbreak. At the peak of the outbreak in mid-April, the Mental Health Index measured a **38 percent increase in feelings of stress** and a **54 percent increase in anxiety**. By the end of May, both had decreased slightly but still remained substantially elevated compared to the baseline: 28 percent increase in stress and 47 percent increase in anxiety.





Another troubling change was the number of participants flagging positive for general anxiety disorder, nearly double the baseline, and social anxiety disorder, which increased 55 percent, according to the Mental Health Index. People with general anxiety disorder get stuck in a pattern of severe and persistent worry that can cause them to lose sleep and struggle to make decisions. Social anxiety disorder manifests through intense fear of being rejected or judged by others. It can lead people to avoid communication, act aloof or distant toward others and avoid public work situations such as meetings or presentations.



“In our results, we see a complete hijacking of the non-conscious brain by stress, fear and uncertainty,” explained Evian Gordan, M.D., Ph.D., founder of Total Brain. “All of us live in two states of the brain all the time: fight-or-flight (the stress response) versus the ‘calm-flexible’ part of the brain driven by the vagus nerve. The fight-or-flight response is wired into us to keep us safe and is useful in getting us out of danger. It pumps adrenaline, increases our blood pressure and quickens our breathing. But if it stays on for too long, it has enormously damaging effects.”

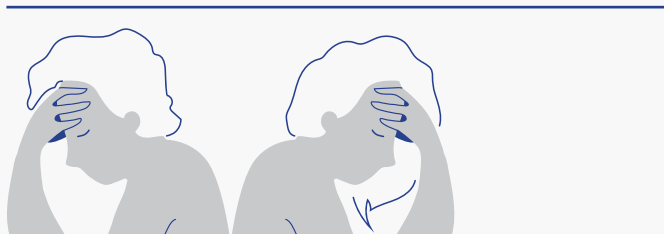


Not surprisingly many of those effects take a direct hit on employee performance, as documented over decades of research on stress and anxiety in the workplace. Here are six ways businesses can expect to be impacted if left unaddressed:

## 1. Teamwork and team relationships break down

People under stress communicate less effectively and completely. They might become irritable, argumentative, or resentful toward their colleagues. In a [survey](#) by the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, almost half of respondents said stress and anxiety interfere with their relationships with people at work, which has led them to avoid social situations (73 percent), become short-tempered (53 percent) and skip meetings (43 percent). This behavior can cause larger problems such as missed deadlines, lost productivity and even sabotage of one another’s work, according to an article published in [TechReporter](#).

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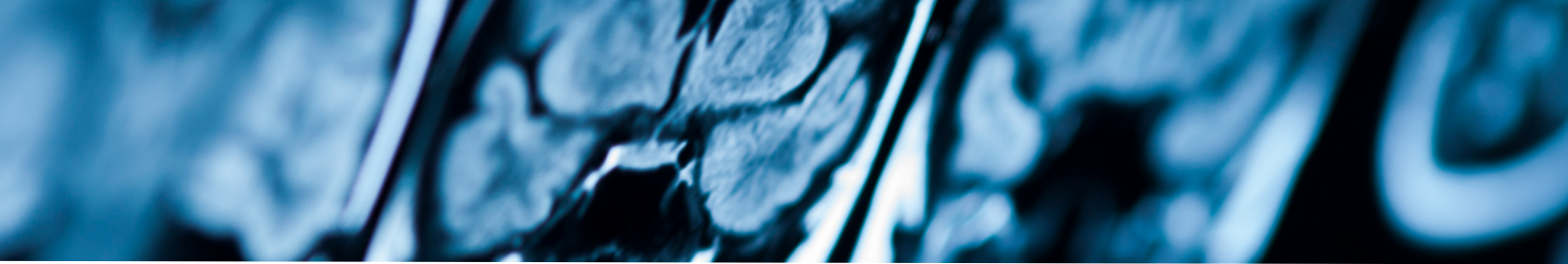
**73%** avoid social situations



**53%** become short-tempered



**43%** skip meetings



## 2. Leadership decision-making plummets

A leader under stress loses both cognitive ability and emotional intelligence when under elevated stress, according to organizational and leadership expert Dick Thompson, Ph.D. His [research](#) reveals high levels of stress affect major brain systems like the prefrontal cortex, which controls higher-level thinking processes such as analysis and decision-making; and the amygdala, which supports emotional responses. When leaders experience enough stress to hamper both parts of the brain, they become prone to “catastrophic leadership failure” marked by not listening, over-analyzing, avoiding decisions, “flip-flopping,” and other damaging behaviors.

## 3. Productivity drops

A classic principal of productivity called the [Yerkes–Dodson law](#) suggests that a certain level of stress and anxiety can be helpful for workers, motivating them to work harder and faster to meet a deadline, for instance. However, that bell-shaped curve takes a dive as stress and anxiety reach a tipping point, as we’re seeing during COVID-19.

One poll published by [Human Resource Executive](#) found that 62 percent of workers are losing one hour a day in productivity, and an additional 32 percent are losing two hours a day due to pandemic-related stress.

Workers with young children at home may have the most stress – and most compromised productivity – of any group. The Pew survey found that 34 percent of those with young children who said childcare responsibilities during the outbreak had been “somewhat” or “very difficult” fell into the “high psychological distress” group; for women, that number was 42 percent.

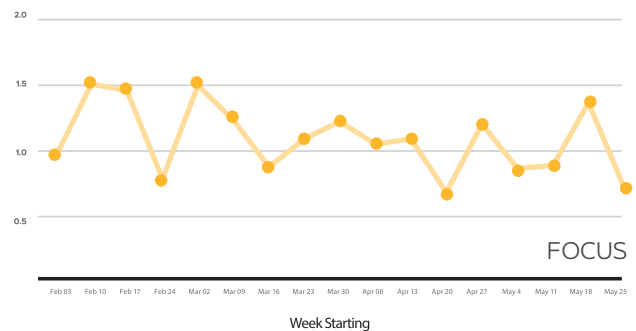
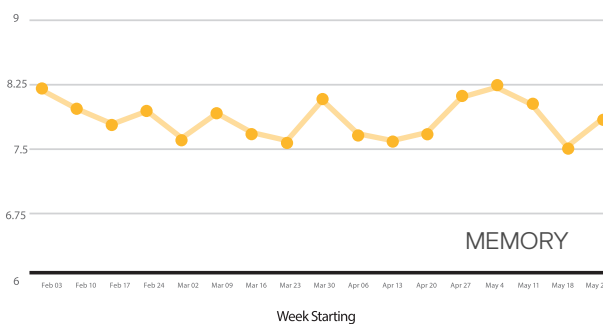
All of this could mean significant financial loss to both individual employers and the larger economy due to loss in productivity. [The World Health Organization](#) estimates that anxiety and depression cost the global economy \$1 trillion per year in lost productivity, a number likely to climb with COVID-19’s added impacts.



## 4. Cognitive functioning declines

When the brain gets stuck in fight-or-flight mode, with high levels of stress and anxiety, its energy goes toward short-term, survivalist thinking. That compromises the brain's capacity for higher-level, intense reasoning, planning and innovating.

That outcome was verified in the [Mental Health Index data](#) that showed drops in cognitive factors like memory and focus, which cause people to make more mistakes. In both these areas, middle-aged respondents performed the poorest: a 7 percent drop in memory (i.e., fewer correct responses) and a 42 percent drop in focus (i.e., more false miss errors).



“The pandemic is affecting how we think and make decisions. It is also causing us to see things more negatively, which impacts our ability to have a clear and open mind. It’s a cascade of affects triggered by heightened stress and anxiety, and the brain’s desperate work to make sense of it all,” Dr. Gordan said.

## 5. Creativity gives way to rote behavior

Creativity is at its highest when people feel safe, happy and relaxed. On the flip side, stress and anxiety are creativity killers.

“When people are stressed, they limit their thinking to the proven and predictable,” explained author and creativity consultant David Birss in his article, [“It’s Time to Make Workplace Stress History.”](#)

Birss cites a study in which rats who had experienced chronic stress fell back on rote and routine activity instead of their usual curious learning behavior.

“The stress also changed their brains. Cortical regions associated with goal-directed behavior shrank, while regions associated with habit formation grew. Stress actually rewires our brains,” he said.





## 6. Health costs increase

Stress has been linked as a contributor or exacerbator of numerous diseases, from asthma, diabetes and heart disease to mental health problems like anxiety disorder and depression. This costs workers in health costs and lost time on the job, but it also costs employers. According to an [Absence Management Survey](#) conducted by CIPD, an HR development organization, stress was the most common cause for long-term sickness in employees. Several U.S. researchers have created a [mathematical model](#) that attributes \$190 billion in excess health costs and 120,000 annual deaths to workplace stress.

**\$190 BILLION**

**IN EXCESS HEALTH COSTS**

**20,000**

**ANNUAL DEATHS  
TO WORKPLACE STRESS.**

Human Resources experts have suggested that employers would be wise to reach out to their workers during this current time of stress and anxiety with assessment tools and resources that can help. This could include mental health benefits, employee assistance programs and financial support programs, as well as online tools employees can use immediately from home.

In one survey of more than 500 HR professionals, 91 percent rated the need for a solution to monitor and measure the well-being of employees as “urgent” or “important,” and 86 percent agreed their employees would benefit from science-backed brain training exercises that reduce stress and improve mental focus, such as the Total Brain platform. The sooner employers make such resources available, the better their chances of preventing serious mental health outcomes and improving worker performance and satisfaction.

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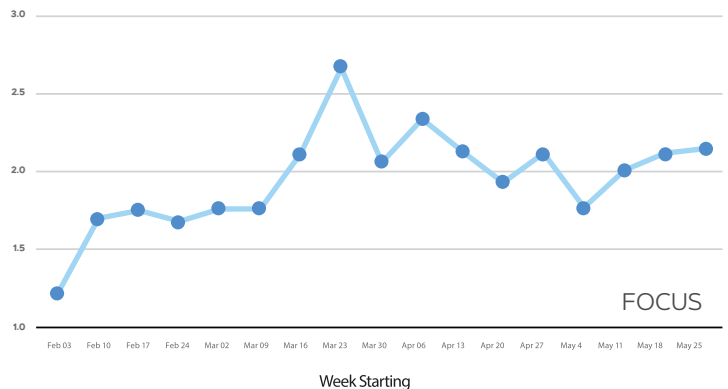
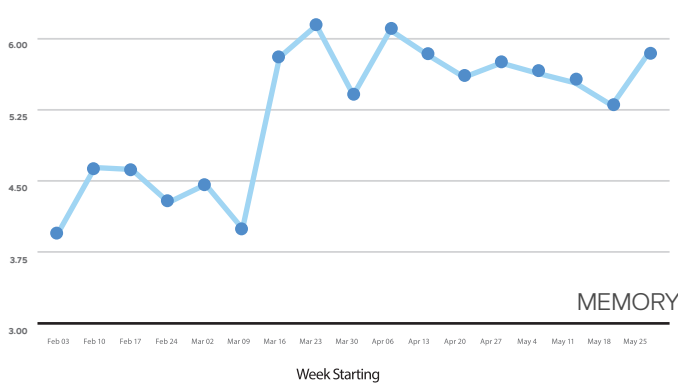
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# Impact of Stress and Anxiety on the Home

In addition to affecting work performance, stress and anxiety have touched every aspect of Americans' personal lives. The outcomes, however, may vary depending on the individual's situation and stage of life.

Data from the Mental Health Index showed that some age groups are coping better than others in terms of their level of stress and anxiety. Younger adults (age 20-39), who exhibit higher stress and anxiety even in normal times, continue to report levels two to three times that of the 60+ age group. They experienced an 18 percent increase in stress (27 percent at the peak) and a 26 percent increase in anxiety (40 percent at the peak) from February through May.

Middle-aged participants, however, fared even worse, showing the largest rise in stress (39 percent overall and 56 percent at the peak) of all age groups and a shocking 75 percent increase in anxiety (83 percent at the peak). Older adults, remarkably, showed little change in stress or anxiety.



“In these age breakdowns, we see how the brain copes differently with fear and uncertainty as we age. Middle-aged adults are experiencing enormous disruptions to their careers, their finances and personal lives – maybe even their health – right at the time of highest responsibility,” said Dr. Gordan.

Here are three ways stress and anxiety can impact our home and personal lives:

## 1. Strained relationships

People who feel stressed or anxious often withdraw from others. They might act more distracted and show less affection toward family members and friends or behave irritably and impatiently. All of this leads to alienation from those closest to them

In a [study](#) conducted by the American Psychological Association, more than half of respondents said stress had caused them to fight with people close to them, a quarter said stress had led to alienation from a friend or family member and 8 percent connected stress to a divorce or separation.



### MORE THAN HALF OF RESPONDENTS

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80%

of patients said that their mental health condition had a detrimental effect on their family.

Anxiety, as well, takes a toll on relationships, especially when it escalates to high levels. People with [anxiety disorder](#) may have trouble sleeping, interacting with others, or performing daily tasks like driving, shopping or caring for children – all of which can increase friction in relationships. In one [survey](#) by a behavioral health provider, 80 percent of patients said that their mental health condition had a detrimental effect on their family.

## 2. Increase in marital strife and divorce

Marriages struggle under the weight of stress, even in the best of times. One [study involving 87 paramedics](#) found that when they ruminated to their spouses about stressful situations at work, the spouses tended to withdraw, which caused marital tension to mount. The study's authors hypothesized that this may lead to a vicious cycle of stress and alienation feeding each other.

Stressed people are more likely to see the negative side of things (or people), which can prove hurtful when displayed through a partner's critical or impatient words. In a recent article in The Atlantic called "[How Not to Tank Your Relationship During Quarantine](#)," one husband mentioned that he and his wife

were having more frequent long conversations since they began sheltering in place, but they were increasingly unpleasant. “She is able to bring up every transgression I’ve ever had,” he said. “I believe she is not finished.”

Stresses caused by money, in particular, can lead to marital conflict – and even divorce. In one [survey](#) by SunTrust Bank, 35 percent of couples who indicated they have relationship stress said finances were the primary cause. Another study of more than 1,000 couples by [Ramsey Solutions](#) found that money was the number-one area of conflict, and the larger the couple’s debt, the more likely those arguments. This could suggest trouble ahead as millions of couples face sudden financial hardship related to the current economic meltdown.



**35%**

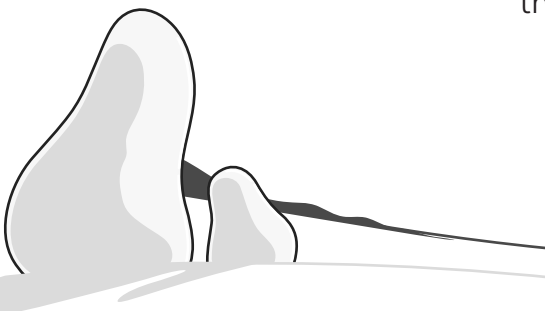
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### 3. Increase in abuse and neglect

Social service agencies have sounded the alarm that more children and spouses may be at risk for abuse or neglect due to the coronavirus. Studies in both [Australia](#) and the [United States](#) suggest that factors such as financial stress, personal stress and lack of social support increase the risk of abuse, and all three of those have increased in the wake of COVID-19. [The New York Times](#) recently reported that calls to domestic violence hotlines have spiked around the world since coronavirus, with stay-at-home conditions creating a perfect storm for abusers to control, intimidate and physically harm their partners and children.

These types of home impacts may require the help of mental health professionals, who are currently ramping up telehealth visits and phone consultations to support desperate clients. These therapists and counselors may find it useful to pair their services with online assessments and tools such as the Total Brain platform that can provide clients support in between appointments. Total Brain provides monthly assessments on measures like stress and anxiety, followed by online exercises and practice tools to train the brain toward better mental health. These strategies have been shown to complement the full range of mental health services and help individuals build better habits that will reduce stress and anxiety.

At home and at work, Americans face an unprecedented mental health crisis, which will require support from both employers and mental health professionals to assess and address. An important first step is to understand the current state of mental health among U.S. workers using resources like the [Mental Health Index](#), and then identify science-based tools and therapies that can promote wellness and success at work and at home.



## THE MENTAL HEALTH INDEX

Total Brain created the [Mental Health Index: U.S. Workers Edition](#) to allow the public and corporations to measure mental health progress and performance against a valid national benchmark. The Mental Health Index contains data drawn from a weekly randomized sample of 500 working Americans taken from a larger universe of Total Brain users that includes workers from all walks of life and regions. The data is not survey data by nature. It comes from a mix of validated tasks and questions that are part of a unique neuroscientific assessment of the Total Brain.

## METHODOLOGY

The participant assessments used to compile the [Mental Health Index](#) are taken weekly from Feb. 3 to May 31. The assessment questions are identical to Total Brain's standard weekly assessments. Total Brain collected responses across the entire Total Brain U.S. user base, from all who voluntarily participated. Total Brain performed statistical analysis of the data from a random sampling of up to 500 users each week since February 2020. Sample is drawn from a universe of US workers that include most US regions, job levels, occupations, industries, and types of organizations (public vs. private).

## ABOUT ONE MIND AT WORK

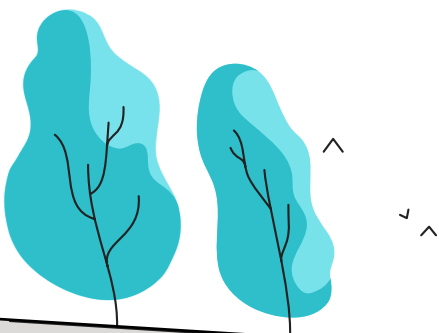


Launched in 2017, [One Mind at Work](#) is a global coalition of leaders from diverse sectors who have joined together with the goal of transforming approaches to mental health and addiction. One Mind at Work now includes more than 25 global employers and 18 research and content partners. The coalition covers more than 3.5 million people under its charter.

## ABOUT THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF HEALTHCARE PURCHASER COALITIONS



The [National Alliance](#) is the only nonprofit, purchaser-led organization dedicated to improving health and healthcare value across the country through constructive and collaborative change. Its members represent more than 12,000 employers/purchasers who, together, spend \$300 billion annually on healthcare.

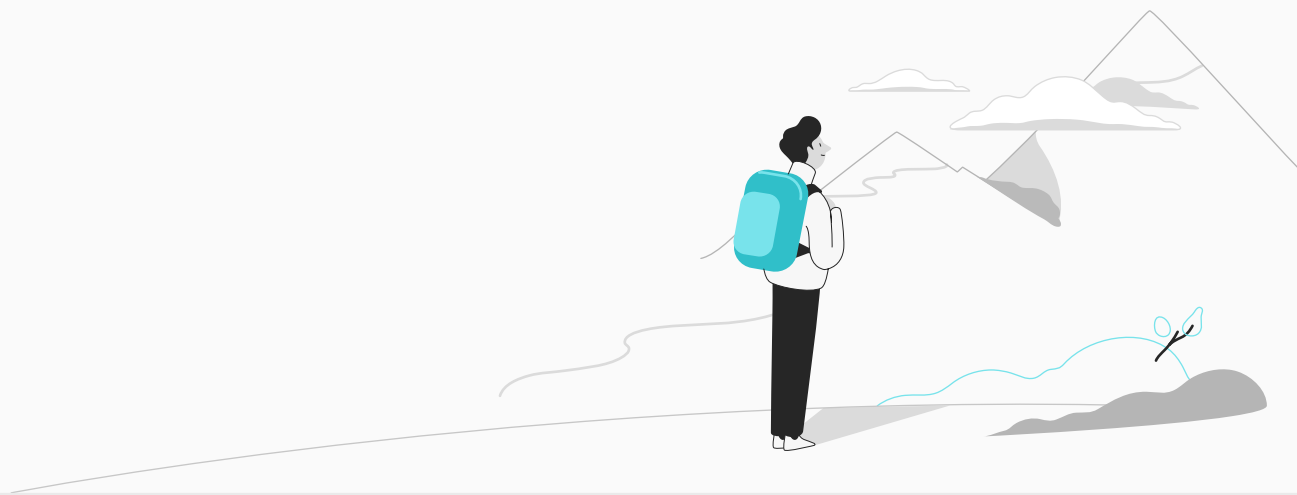


## THE TOTAL BRAIN SOLUTION

The [Total Brain platform](#) offers clients a scientifically proven method for monitoring and supporting mental health and wellness. By building self-awareness and providing tools for transforming fear into opportunity, founder Dr. Evian Gordon, MD, Ph.D., a leading neuroscientist, and his team of scientists, technologists and strategists empower participants to measure, improve and manage their mental health like their physical health.

Our participants take assessments every 30 days to measure their 12 core brain capacities and screen for the risk of seven common mental health conditions. Then each individual receives a customized training plan including online cognitive, emotional and breathing exercises – all designed to improve mental fitness. Those practices are especially critical during times of increased stress, fear, and uncertainty, such as now.

Since 2000, Total Brain has partnered with more than 50 companies to boost productivity and insight, encourage healthy behaviors and lower mental health costs. By measuring, evaluating, and comparing assessment data during the COVID-19 outbreak, we seek to better inform and equip both employers and employees.



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