

## RESEARCH BRIEF

# MENTAL HEALTH, RELATIONSHIPS, AND COPING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 1 in 4 respondents knew someone who had been tested for Coronavirus, and approximately 1 in 9 respondents knew someone who had contracted Coronavirus.
- Symptoms of depression were high: 2 out of 3 reported feeling tired or having little energy, trouble sleeping, and feeling hopeless several days or nearly every day since the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Symptoms of anxiety were even more common, with 50% or more reporting symptoms of anxiety nearly every day or several days a week since the Coronavirus pandemic.
- 28% of all respondents said they have used alcohol or other drugs to make themselves feel better. 22% said they were using alcohol more and 1 in 7 (14%) said they were using marijuana more.
- Even though respondents reported relying on their romantic partners to cope with uncertain times, 22% of respondents in a romantic relationship reported having disagreements with their partner related to the Coronavirus, 19% reported more disagreements than usual, and 15% reported more verbal fights than usual.

### INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, Americans are experiencing an unprecedented shift in their social relationships. For many, social distancing and social isolation mandates have resulted in less contact with sources of support, such as friends, neighbors, and loved ones. For nearly all Americans, daily life has been significantly disrupted. People must navigate this unfamiliar terrain under enormously stressful conditions of economic uncertainty. This research brief examines adult coping, mental health, and romantic relationships since the Coronavirus pandemic.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to be eligible for the survey, individuals had to have U.S. nationality and be age 18 or older. The survey was launched on March 24, 2020, approximately one week after the White House administered social distancing guidelines to slow the spread of the Coronavirus. The survey was administered through Prolific, a company that conducts online survey research. 562 adults participated in the study. The survey asked respondents to report on their mental health and wellbeing, parenting, and economic situation during the Coronavirus pandemic.

## STUDY PARTICIPANTS

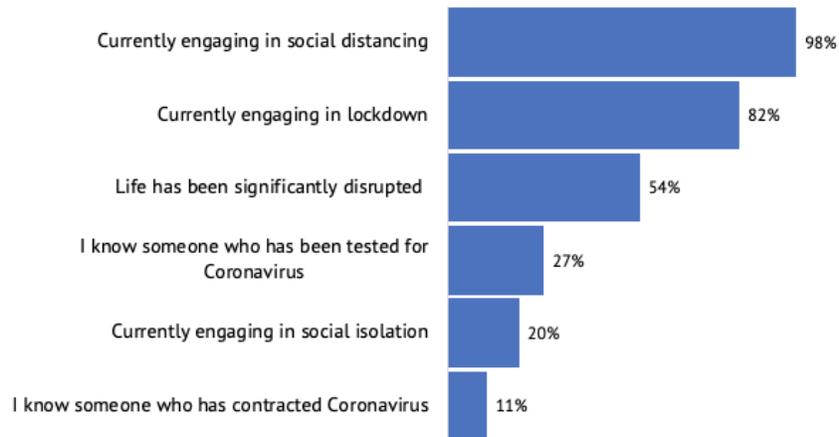
The average age of respondents was 35 years. The majority of the respondents had at least a bachelor's degree (52%) and identified as White (White: 74%, Hispanic: 9%, Black: 8%, Asian: 5%, Other: 4%). On average, respondents had household incomes between \$50,000 and \$70,000. 415 respondents (or 74%) stated they were currently in an ongoing romantic relationship (spouse, domestic partner, boyfriend/girlfriend).

## RESULTS: LIFE DISRUPTIONS AND CONCERN ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

Most respondents were concerned about the Coronavirus pandemic. Respondents rated their concern as a 7.4/10 (with 0 being “not at all concerned” and 10 being “highly concerned”). On the day the survey was completed, 13% of respondents agreed that “*concerns about Coronavirus/ COVID-19 are exaggerated;*” the majority (76%) disagreed. When respondents were asked to provide three words that best described their emotional states since the Coronavirus, most respondents used words such as “anxious,” “nervous,” “scared,” “stressed,” and “uncertain.”

The majority of respondents' lives had been directly affected by Coronavirus (Figure 1). Over 1 in 4 respondents knew someone who had been tested for Coronavirus, and approximately 1 in 9 respondents knew someone who had contracted Coronavirus. Nearly all respondents were engaging in social distancing, but fewer were in lockdown or social isolation. When asked about worries associated with the Coronavirus, 47% indicated they worry they can't afford to pay bills, and 53% worry that money will run out.

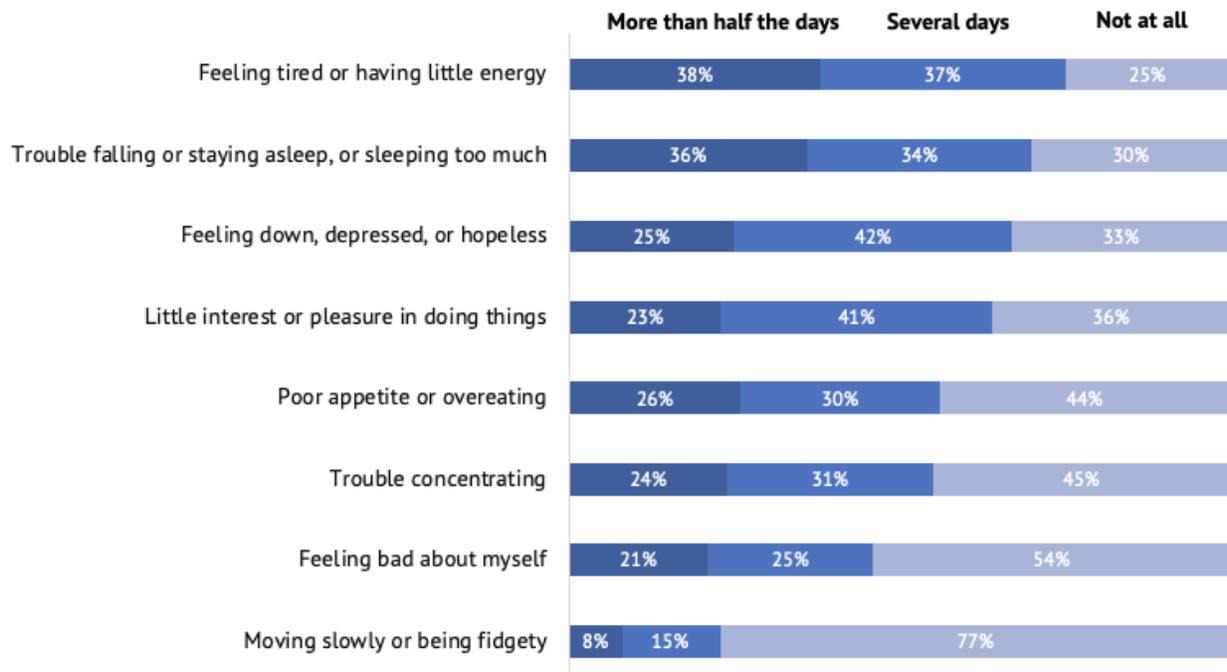
**Figure 1. Most Adults Report Significant Life Disruptions Since Pandemic**



### Symptoms of Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8)

The PHQ-8 is a validated scale (Kroenke et al., 2001, 2009; Spitzer, 1999) that measures symptoms of depression. Respondents were asked to rate the degree (*not at all*, *several days*, *more than half the days*, or *nearly every day*) to which they had been bothered by common symptoms of depression in the last 2 weeks. In Figure 2, *more than half the days* and *nearly every day* are combined for ease of interpretation.

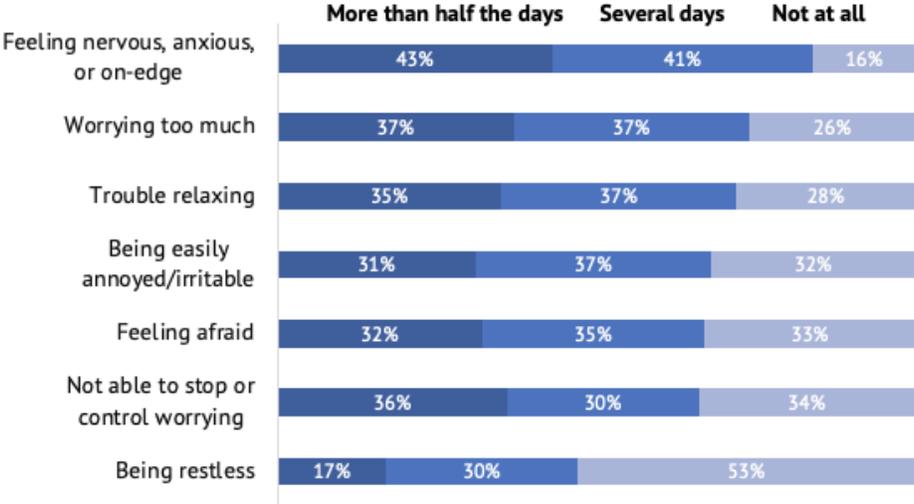
**Figure 2. Symptoms of Depression are Common in the 2 Weeks Since Coronavirus**



### SYMPTOMS OF GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD-7)

The GAD-7 scale is a validation scale for measuring symptoms of anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006). Respondents were asked to rate the degree (*not at all*, *several days*, *more than half the days*, or *nearly every day*) to which they had been bothered by common symptoms of anxiety in the last 2 weeks. In Figure 3, *more than half the days* and *nearly every day* are combined for ease of interpretation.

**Figure 3. Majority of Adults Report Anxiety Symptoms Since the Pandemic**



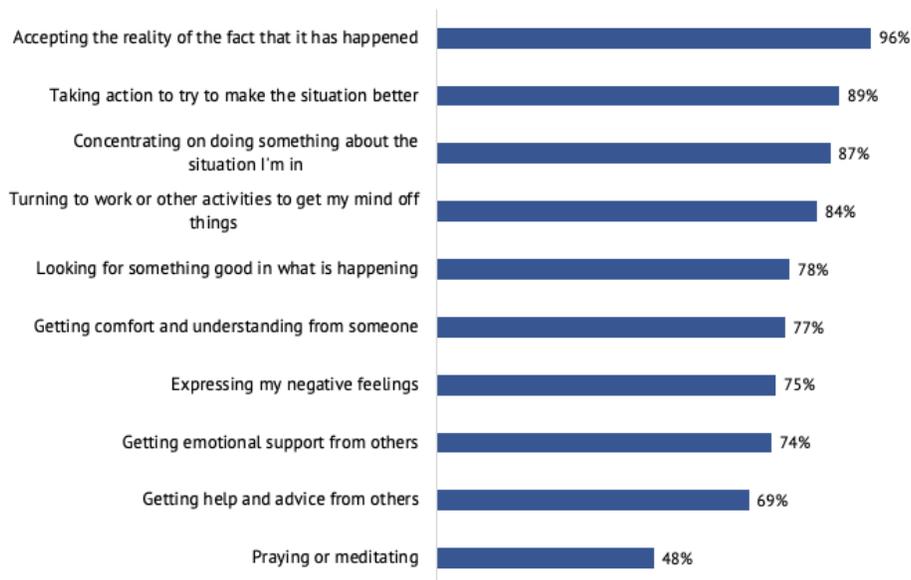
### SLEEP DISRUPTIONS AND WELLBEING

Most respondents reported some form of sleep disruption since the Coronavirus: 58% stated they were waking up in the middle of the night or early morning; 49% said they could not get to sleep within 30 minutes; and 24% said they were having bad dreams.

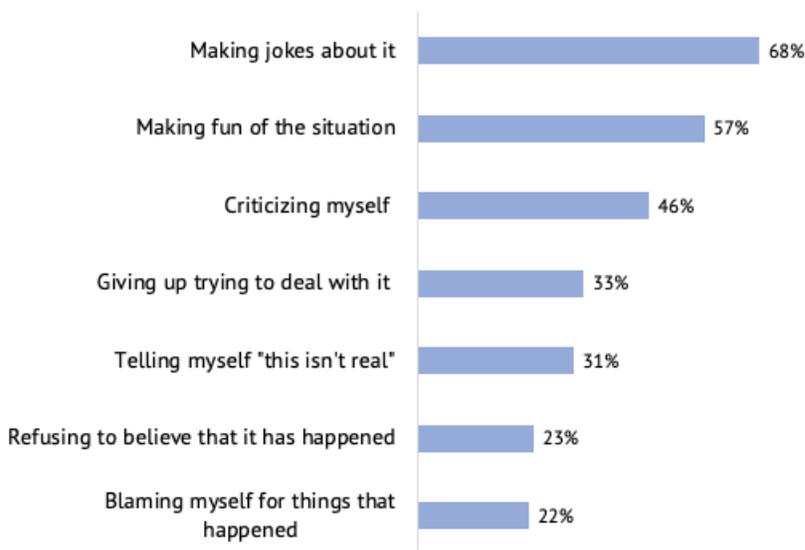
### GENERAL COPING SKILLS

Respondents engaged in a wide variety of coping skills (Carver, 1997) since the Coronavirus pandemic. Figure 4 shows that most respondents reported some form of positive coping, such as taking action to make the situation better (89%) and getting comfort and understanding from someone (77%). Overall, positive coping skills were endorsed at a higher rate than negative coping skills, such as giving up (33%) (Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Most Respondents Report Using Positive Coping Skills**



**Figure 5. Negative Coping Skills Used Less Frequently than Positive Coping Skills**



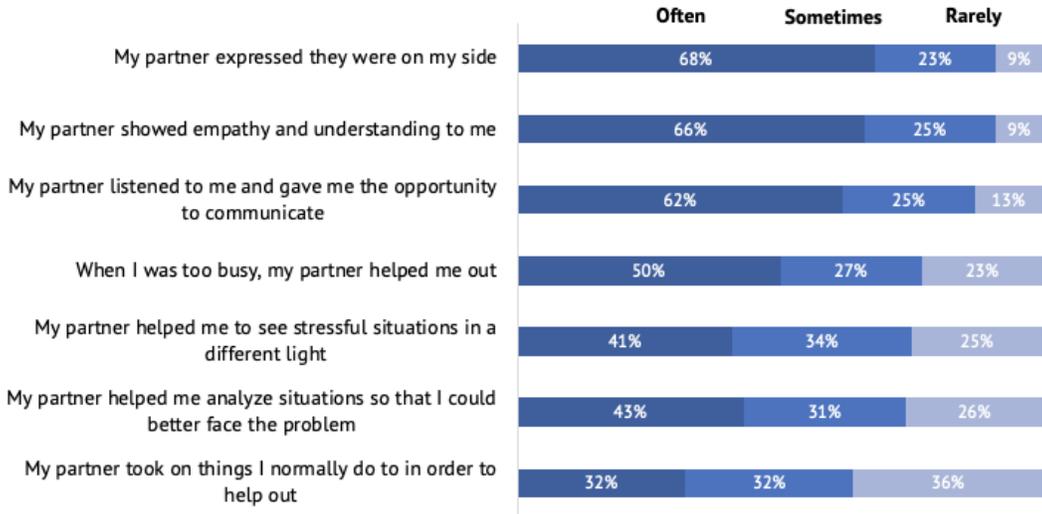
## **ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA USE AS A COPING STRATEGY DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Despite the high level of positive coping skills, more than 1 in 4 respondents (28%) have been using alcohol or other drugs to make themselves feel better since the Coronavirus global health crisis. Of the people who said they used alcohol, 22% said they were using alcohol more. Of the people who said they used marijuana, about 1 in 7 (14%) were using marijuana more. Among medical marijuana users, nearly 6% said they were using medical marijuana more.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND COPING WITH CORONAVIRUS

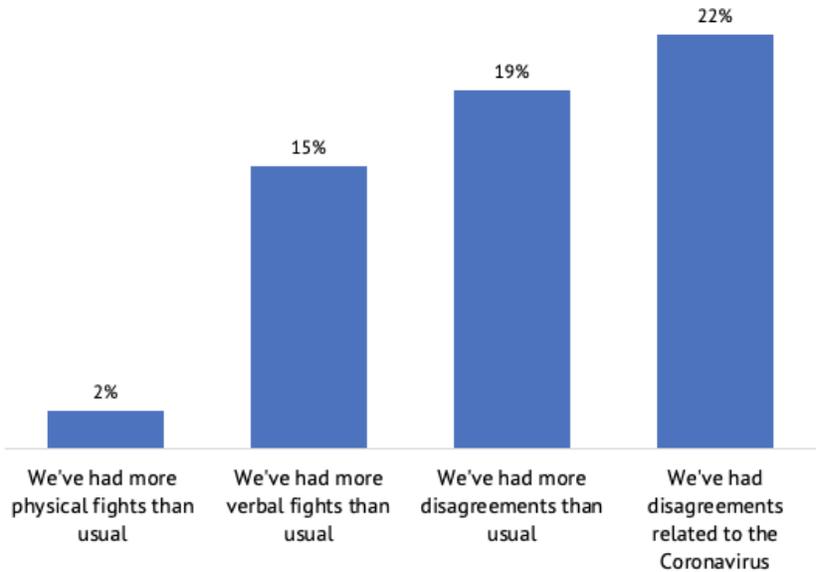
Most respondents in romantic relationships were relying on their partners for support. As seen in Figure 6, 71% reported they have been emotionally closer to their partner than usual, and 58% stated they had been physically closer than usual. Respondents indicated they had been leaning on their partners to cope with the situation.

**Figure 6. Relationships are a Source of Support During Pandemic**



However, even with the overall high levels of partner support during Coronavirus, disagreements and verbal fights were common. As seen in Figure 7, 22% said they have had disagreements related to Coronavirus. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents said they have had more disagreements than usual in the past 2 weeks. More than 1 in 7 respondents said they have had more verbal fights, and 2% reported more physical fights than usual since the Coronavirus.

**Figure 7. Relationship Disagreements and Fights During the Pandemic**



## SUMMARY

The World Health Organization announced that the Coronavirus was a pandemic on March 15, 2020, and shortly thereafter the White House announced social distancing guidelines to slow the spread of the Coronavirus. This study was launched the following week. The results of this study show a high rate of symptoms of depression and anxiety following the announcement of the pandemic. Nearly all respondents' mental health and wellbeing appear to have been affected by the pandemic. Common concerns were feeling tired or having little energy, trouble sleeping, and feeling hopeless. The majority of respondents reported feeling nervous, having trouble relaxing, and being afraid several days or more in the previous 2 weeks. Alcohol and drug use were common methods of coping; however, respondents also reported a high level of engagement in positive coping skills. While romantic partners were a source of support, about 15% reported more verbal fights than usual. On the whole, the results of this study suggest that people are using a variety of coping strategies to deal with the uncertainty of the Coronavirus pandemic. As the pandemic worsens, and disruptions to daily life worsen, mental health professionals need to be prepared for an increase in mental health and substance use problems.

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For more information about the **Stress and Parenting During a Pandemic** study:

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