



DATA INSIGHTS & IMPACT REPORT

A STATE OF CONSTANT CRISIS

3 Ways Americans Are Coping



Stresses-Upon-Stresses Jeopardize Mental Health

COVID-19, market volatility and skyrocketing job loss were still top of mind for Americans when the police killing of George Floyd hit the headlines. The incident sparked protests around the world and ushered in yet another source of stress and anxiety for Americans as many wrestled with new questions and uncertainties.

Almost simultaneously, a separate set of civil protests emerged issues related to government-imposed requirements and restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19. Some businesses reopened to the deviance of state health guidelines, social discourse grew angrier and, once again, many Americans felt conflicted and caught in the middle.

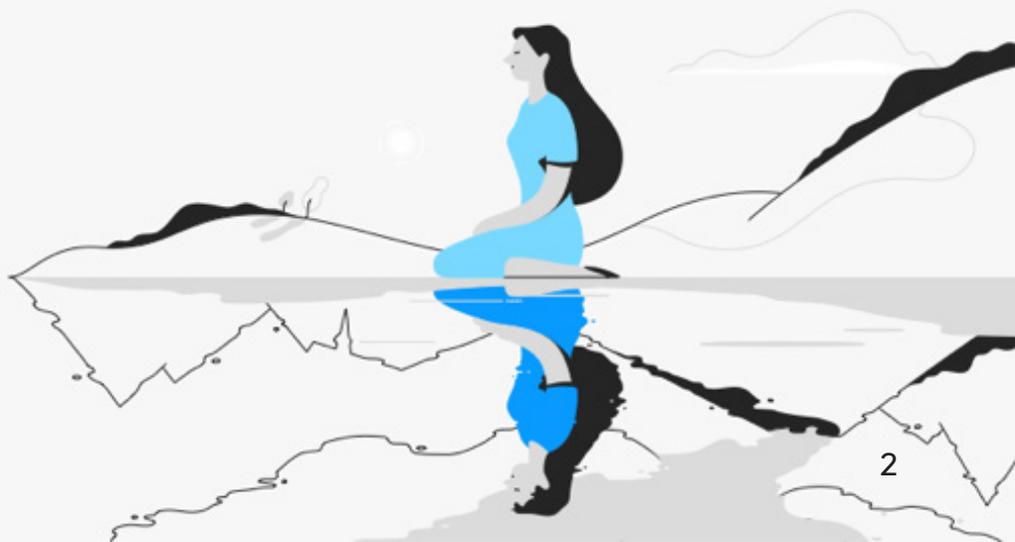
Amid all this, Americans are facing one of the highest rates of unemployment in recent history. According to [Pew Research](#), unemployment rose higher in three months of COVID-19 than it did in two years of the Great Recession. In July 2020, the jobs report showed 21 million Americans unemployed.

What do these “stresses-upon-stresses” mean for the mental health of our citizens? Could Americans be experiencing crisis fatigue, a sense of overwhelm and surrender to what seems inevitable?

Total Brain has endeavored to answer that question through its evolving [Mental Health Index: U.S. Worker Edition](#). Since February, the Mental Health Index has tracked various markers of mental wellness through voluntary weekly self-assessments performed by Total Brain platform participants.

Recent numbers show much higher levels of stress, anxiety and depressive mood than before the pandemic. Younger adults, especially, have struggled with negativity and depression, while men of all ages took an alarming dip in social connectedness during the first weeks of racial protests.

While stress, anxiety, and risk for depression remain elevated since the pandemic hit the U.S., levels are beginning to decline. We will discuss some possible reasons for that change – including crisis fatigue – along with other significant findings from our data in this special Data Insights and Impact Report.



Stress and Anxiety Declining but Still Elevated

In tracking mental health outcomes from Feb. 3 through June 25, we see an alarming rise in stress and anxiety into April, followed by a gradual decline as Americans presumably find new ways to respond to COVID-19. Levels of stress and anxiety have settled into more manageable levels, yet they remain approximately 14 percent and 11 percent above normal, respectively.

Americans Remain **14%** More Stressed

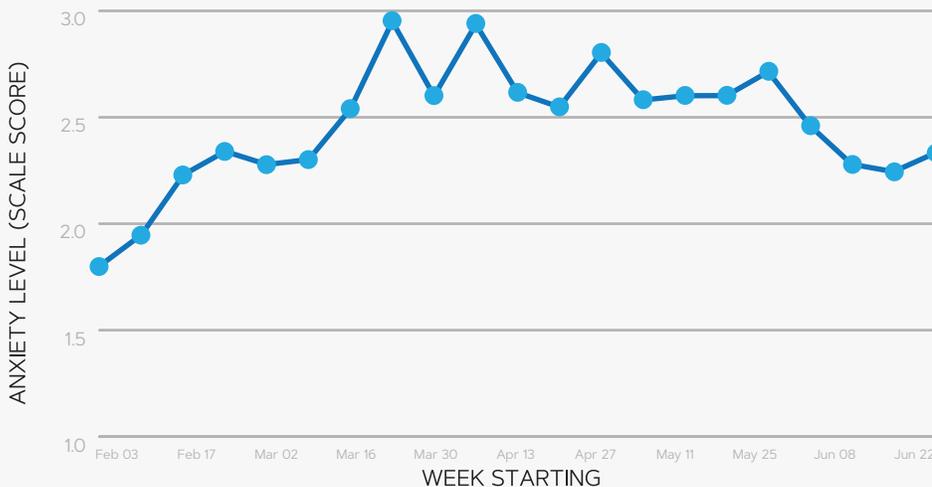
STRESS



Stress continues to remain elevated, with working Americans 14 percent more stressed than they were during the first week of February. While higher than normal, stress decreased somewhat since May when it was up 28 percent.

Anxiety Levels Up **27%**

ANXIETY



Anxiety levels among working Americans have increased 27% since February, peaking at a 54 percent increase in early April 2020. Overall, anxiety decreased 11 percent from May to June.

Results Echoed in Multiple Studies

These results have been echoed in multiple studies conducted since the George Floyd protests began. Two surveys sponsored by the [American Psychological Association](#) found that fear and uncertainty about the state of our nation, coupled with fear about discrimination, have contributed to heightened stress in Americans. Among the findings:



83 percent of Americans say the future of our nation is a significant source of stress, up from 69 percent in 2018.



55 percent of black adults say discrimination is a significant source of stress, an increase of 13 percent since the beginning of May.



71 percent say police violence toward minorities is a significant source of stress.



78 percent say the coronavirus pandemic remains a significant source of stress.

Constant Crisis: How Americans Are Coping

Indeed, stress factors have increased throughout the pandemic and feelings of stress and anxiety remain higher than normal; nevertheless, levels have declined since their peak in early April. How do we explain this?

This pattern points to one of three responses through which the brain copes with sustained pressure: People adapt to the situation, finding ways to cope, overcome and even make the best of their situations; they release stress through aggression or resistance toward their perceived enemy; or, they throw in the towel and resign themselves to the situation. Each of these paths leads to unique mental and emotional outcomes. The following pages provide a deeper look at how Americans are responding to the current state of constant crisis.



Americans Are Adapting

Resilience – the ability to bounce back from adversity and trauma – 2 percent in June, according to Total Brain assessment data. This suggests workers are finding ways to adapt to unrelenting uncertainty and pressure caused by the circumstances around them.

As time goes by, Americans have discovered new ways to operate in the COVID-19 environment. They are working from home, often with technology support from their employers; or they are implementing safety precautions in the workplace. They have developed routines around daily tasks, like grocery shopping. And their kids, who may have struggled with online learning, are now on summer break. All of this has resulted in Americans' resilience slowly creeping upward.

Resilience Is Creeping Upward

RESILIENCE



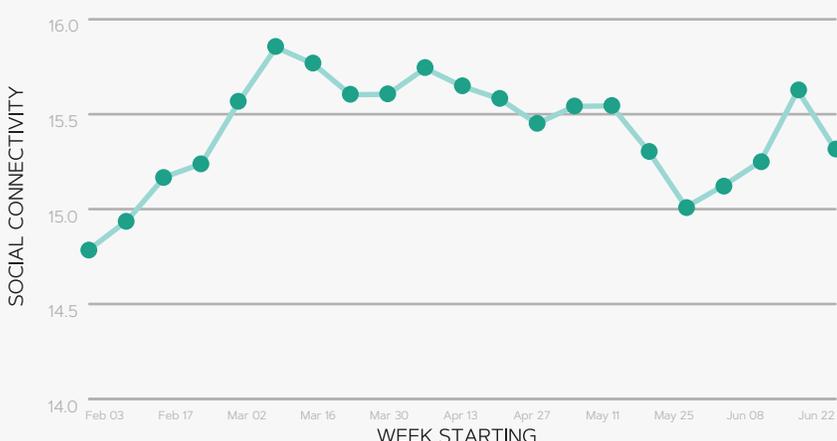
U.S. workers' resilience had been declining during the pandemic. But it inched up 2 percent in June – suggesting workers are adapting to unending pressure.

Many Americans have also adapted by finding creative and safe ways to remain socially connected. Zoom birthday parties, Fourth of July drive-by parades, and socially distanced cocktail hours in driveways are just a few examples of healthy social adaptation.

Total Brain results confirm that most Americans' level of social connectivity – the extent to which people proactively seek and gain enjoyment from one another – remains high. In fact social connectivity scores have increased slightly since February.

Connecting with Others Remains Important, Despite Restrictions

SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY



Social connectivity scores have increased 5 percent since February 2020.

Employers and mental health professionals have contributed to healthy adaptation, in some cases. They have provided workarounds to work hours or expectations. They may have reached out with mental health resources through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), online support groups or mental health televisits, or digital tools like the assessments and exercises provided on

the Total Brain platform. These supports will continue to be essential for American workers as the COVID-19 outbreak continues and pressures at home and work escalate.



Americans in Resistance Mode

When we feel threatened, our brains release extra cortisol and adrenaline to prepare us for “fight or flight.” It alerts us to either flee danger or prepare for battle. For some Americans, civil unrest in the wake of the George Floyd killing provided the perfect battleground, a release valve for pent up stress hormones. This may be especially true for young adults who, according to a [Pew Research poll](#), represented the largest group of racial-justice protestors: 41 percent.

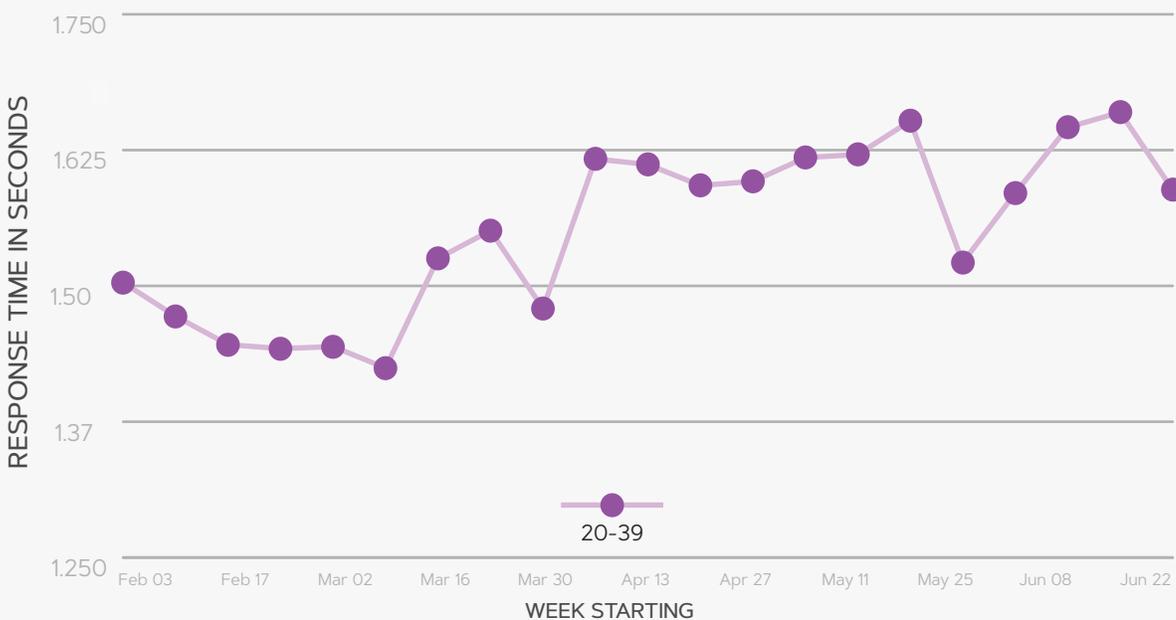
The 20-39 age group has struggled more than older Americans with mental health challenges during COVID-19. They’ve had the highest sustained increases in stress (13 percent), anxiety (25 percent) and depressed mood (30 percent). In addition, their nonconscious and conscious negativity biases have increased 9 percent and 12 percent respectively since February.

Nonconscious negativity bias refers to our natural intuition, formed by life experiences. When people have higher nonconscious negativity bias, they are more likely to make snap judgments and to believe “things are not quite right.”

Conscious negativity bias is the tendency to see the “cup half empty” rather than the “cup half full.” It causes people to focus on problems rather than opportunities and it’s highly contagious, rubbing off on others in a group.

Most Nonconscious Negativity in Younger Workers

NON-CONSCIOUS NEGATIVITY BIAS



Nonconscious negativity bias has amplified most for those in the 20-39 age group, with negativity bias increasing 9 percent since February.



Younger Workers Now More Negative

CONSCIOUS NEGATIVITY BIAS



Conscious negativity bias has increased in workers aged 40-59 and 20-39 by 11 percent and 12 percent respectively.

Many of these young workers have found catharsis in expressing their negativity in opposition to a perceived threat or enemy – for instance, against police brutality in the “Black Lives Matter” protests or in opposition to perceived government overreach in the COVID-19 protests.

[Mental Health Index data](#) also showed a decline in social connectedness in males of all ages immediately following George Floyd’s death and extending through the first weeks of June, aligning with the timing of the racial protests. Social connectedness reflects the extent to which people proactively seek and gain enjoyment from social interaction. A drop in connectedness can be expressed through anger or anti-social behavior like we saw with the more violent and destructive elements of the protests.

The best thing employers and mental health professionals can do to support workers in a “resistance” mode of coping is provide opportunities for open dialogue and positive outlets for civil expression and involvement. [The Total Brain platform](#) can help by offering a regular opportunity for self-assessment and follow-up exercises tailored toward reducing stress and both conscious and unconscious negativity bias.

Prolonged Stress Leads to Feelings of Depression



While some people have adapted to the crisis and others have channeled their stress and anxiety into civil protest, a third group has become overwhelmed to the point of feeling helpless and depressed. Experts call this response “crisis fatigue,” one way the brain copes with unrelenting fear and pressure.

“Experiencing stress increases levels of cortisol in your brain and body. When this continues over a prolonged period of time, it can impact the serotonin system, which increases the likelihood of experiencing depression. For some people this feels like having less motivational energy and failing to achieve things, while others can become more withdrawn and lethargic, and have trouble sleeping or eating” said Donna Palmer, PhD, Chief Science Officer, Total Brain.

The most recent [Mental Health Index data](#) shows a 54 percent increase in risk for depression among working Americans since February. When separated by age, 20-39-year olds showed the highest increase in risk for depressive disorder, measuring 57 percent higher than in February.

Risk of Depression Highest for Youngest Workers



By the end of June, workers in the 20-39 age group had an at-risk screening level for depressive disorder 57 percent higher than it had been in February.

Another factor that can contribute to crisis fatigue is post-traumatic stress disorder. Typically triggered by a traumatic event, this mental condition causes people to have trouble coping over an extended period of time. They may lose sleep, feel anxious or afraid, or get easily provoked or angry.

According to the most recent Mental Health Index data, the number of working Americans flagging positive for risk of PTSD is nearly 50 percent higher now than before COVID began.



Risk for PTSD Significantly Higher During Pandemic

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Studies show civil unrest can increase an individual's propensity toward both post-traumatic stress and depression. One group of researchers looked at the [trajectory of post-traumatic stress and depression](#) in both police and community members following the 2014 riots in Ferguson, Mo. They found that 6.1 percent of respondents showed worsening symptoms of post-traumatic stress and 4.4 showed worsening depression – regardless of race and group – with higher risk among economically disadvantaged people, those without social support and those with a history of trauma.

Another study of [mothers living in Baltimore during the Freddie Gray riots](#) found that up to 50 percent of those in the neighborhoods most affected by the unrest, and up to 40 percent of those living in outlying areas, experienced depressive symptoms during the height of unrest, not returning to normal rates until five months later. This brought up concerns about how lack of maternal well-being might negatively affect parenting and child wellness.



50% of those living in outlying areas, experienced depressive symptoms during the height of unrest

40% of those living in outlying areas, experienced depressive symptoms during the height of unrest not returning to normal rates **until five months later**

Employers and health professionals can assist a worker exhibiting crisis fatigue by encouraging their workers or patients to practice self-care. Experts say wellness practices like adequate sleep, exercise and nutrition can go a long way toward improving mental health outcomes, and education and encouragement by those in authority make a difference. Also, brain training practices like mindfulness and slow breathing promote mental recovery from stress. Total Brain offers many such practices [on its mobile platform](#). In cases where participants are flagged for particular mental health risks based on assessments, Total Brain will automatically encourage them to seek professional help, starting with referral to their employee assistance program (EAP).



Alleviate Crisis by Acting Now

COVID-19, economic hardship and civil unrest are working in tandem to deeply impact the mental health of Americans. Stress and anxiety are trending upward, risk for depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome is elevated, and a strengthening negativity bias has more people viewing life through a fearful and pessimistic lens. Mental health and addiction professionals and employers would be smart to put steps into place immediately to better support their clients and employees. Not only will early response promote better and quicker outcomes, but it will save companies millions of dollars later. A recent report put out by [the American Heart Association](#) stated that depression alone was estimated to cost the U.S. economy \$210 billion annually, with 50 percent of that cost shouldered by employers

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Counselors and mental health professionals should schedule in-person (if allowed) or virtual sessions to talk through the recent events and process the clients' emotions and responses. Those with a history of addiction, especially, may need help putting into place tools and safeguards that will help them identify and respond to emotions in healthy ways.

Employers, too, can influence mental health outcomes during this difficult season by openly acknowledging the mental health impacts of many workers – especially those who live or work in close proximity to the recent protests, those in affected minority groups, or those whose family members are among the millions of unemployed. As appropriate, employers can provide venues for discussion and education – for instance, covering the company's fair employment practices and racial equity policies in internal communications vehicles, or encouraging managers to check-in with workers, privately, about how they're coping. Companies with an EAP should heavily promote that service and make clear to employees how they can find mental health services if they feel a need.



The Total Brain platform offers one helpful option counselors and employers can use. With its monthly, digital self-assessments, participants get a clear and comprehensive picture of their mental wellness in categories like stress, anxiety, depressive mood and conscious and unconscious negativity bias. Comparing that data to the previous month or months allows them to see progress and set goals. Then Total Brain uses the assessment outcomes to suggest a customized mix of science-based activities and practices that will retrain the brain toward a calmer, more positive state. The platform also automatically flags participants for certain mental health conditions (e.g. depressive disorder, PTSD, addiction) and refers them to outside help, including their company's EAP.

With no "back to normal" currently in sight, actions by employers and mental health professionals today will play an important role in preventing more serious and long-term impacts down the road. COVID-19, economic hardship or job loss, and civil protest remain an active reality in our communities, so a proactive response is wise and appropriate.

“We do not have to feel stuck in a cycle of stress, anxiety and depression. Self-awareness combined with proactive, science-based self-care practices can recapture emotional control, calm, positivity and self-awareness even in the midst of very trying external circumstances. That’s the mission behind the Total Brain methodology, and it has never been more relevant or necessary as now,” Palmer said.



The Mental Health Index

Total Brain created the [Mental Health Index](#) to allow the public and corporations to measure mental health progress and performance against a valid national benchmark. The Mental Health Index: U.S. Worker Edition 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

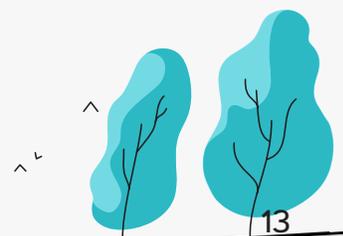
The participant assessments used to compile [the Mental Health Index](#) are taken weekly from Feb. 3 to June 25. The assessment questions are identical to Total Brain's standard weekly assessments. Total Brain collected responses across the entire Total Brain U.S. user base, from all who voluntarily 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).

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.



[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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