

# Little change seen in Americans' use of mental health services during pandemic

October 20 2021, by Denise Mann

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(HealthDay)—With all of the fear, grief and isolation the pandemic has

brought, it would stand to reason that there would be a big jump in the number of Americans seeking treatment for anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.

But that doesn't seem to be the case, according to a new report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Instead, the percentage of adults who had received any treatment for their mental [health](#) increased from 19.2% in 2019 to just 20.3% in 2020.

The new report wasn't designed to say why there wasn't a sharper increase in the number of people who received mental health care services, but outside experts have their theories—including a lack of access to much-needed care.

"The mental health care system was already stressed before COVID-19, but during the pandemic the demand for therapists skyrocketed, and the supply didn't go up," explained Dr. Vivian Pender, president of the American Psychiatric Association.

If anything, the supply of available therapists declined as many providers became ill from COVID-19 or opted for [early retirement](#) due to financial stress and personal health concerns related to the pandemic, said Pender, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City.

"The good news is that now more attention is being paid to mental health and well-being than ever before," Pender said.

The number of people receiving mental health care may also be higher now than it was in the earlier part of the pandemic, added Thea Gallagher, a [clinical psychologist](#) and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at NYU Langone Health in New York City.

"It takes time to see an increase in depression and anxiety, and we may see more people seeking treatment in the aftershock of the pandemic," she noted.

In fact, a national survey of psychologists conducted in August and September by the American Psychological Association (APA) looked at 2021 numbers and found the number of Americans seeking treatment for anxiety and depression has soared as the pandemic has continued to wreak havoc on daily life.

"[The findings] highlight what we have been saying since the early days of the pandemic—we are facing a mental health tsunami," APA CEO Arthur Evans Jr. said in an association news release. "We need to continue to support treatment via telehealth, and we must invest in screening, prevention and innovative interventions to expand access to various levels of care."

In all, 84% of psychologists who treat anxiety disorders and 72% of those who treat depression reported an increase in demand for treatment this year, compared with 2020 rates of 74% and 60%, respectively.

Meanwhile, the CDC report was based on data from the 2020 National Health Interview Survey, an annual government survey of health and illness.

The report also highlighted some disparities in access to mental health care. The percentage of people living in rural environments who had taken medication for their mental health increased, and the percentage who had received counseling decreased during 2020, likely due to the known shortage of therapists in these areas.

White adults were more likely than Black, Hispanic and Asian adults to have received any mental health treatment in 2020, the survey found.

It's a double whammy for these folks, said Gabriela Nagy, an assistant professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University in Durham, N.C.

Not only is access to care more of a problem in underserved populations, but these individuals were also harder hit by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic, she said.

"There's a shortage of [mental health care](#) workers, especially those who can provide services in another language," Nagy explained.

And this lack of access to care can have a snowball effect on mental health. "You may not be able to get the care that you need so you experience symptoms longer, which makes your problems worse in the long term," Nagy said.

Unless and until access to [mental health](#) care improves across the board, taking steps to feel better may make a difference, experts said.

"For mild to moderate anxiety or depression, talking to friends and family, exercising, practicing yoga or meditation, and taking care of yourself may help until you can see a professional," Pender said. "Many hospitals and medical centers have implemented crisis hotlines and expanded other programs to help more people get the care that they need."

It's also important to know what to look out for in yourself and loved ones, Gallagher added. Signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and/or stress may include feelings of hopelessness and being overwhelmed, difficulty falling and staying asleep, and/or a lack of enjoyment in things you once loved, all of which affect your ability to live your life to its fullest, she noted.

The CDC data was published on Oct. 20 as an *NCHS Data Brief*.

**More information:** The American Psychiatric Association offers a [list of resources for anyone who is experiencing a mental health crisis](#).

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Citation: Little change seen in Americans' use of mental health services during pandemic (2021, October 20) retrieved 4 February 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-10-americans-mental-health-pandemic.html>

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