

Booming Business for Worsening Mental Health

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✓ Fact Checked

September 07, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › From 2019 to 2022, use of mental health care services increased 38.8% among about 7 million adults with private health insurance
- › Spending on mental health services also jumped – by 53.7% – during that time
- › Americans' mental health reached a new low in 2022, with only 31% describing theirs as "excellent" – the lowest percentage in more than two decades
- › With \$656 million in spending in 2022, it's estimated that the market for mood-boosting supplements will reach \$1.3 billion by the end of 2033, as many seek alternative options to improve their mental health
- › Supplements such as ashwagandha, vitamin B12, omega-3 fats and probiotics may support mental health, but an integrative approach is necessary to get to the root of the problem

Mental health is at a low point in the U.S., even as more people seek out treatment. From 2019 to 2022, use of mental health care services increased 38.8% among about 7 million adults with private health insurance. Spending on such services also jumped – by 53.7% – during that time, according to a study published in JAMA Health Forum.¹

But the rise in treatment doesn't reflect an improvement in mental health. TIME highlighted a flurry of statistics that shine a light on the poor state of Americans' psyches.² For starters, 1 in 8 U.S. adults use antidepressants³ while the number

reporting symptoms of depression or anxiety has risen more than threefold since 2019, from 10.8% to 32.7% in July 2023.⁴

Meanwhile, Gallup reported that Americans' mental health reached a new low in 2022, with only 31% describing theirs as "excellent" – the lowest percentage in more than two decades.⁵

Americans' Mental Health Plummeted During Pandemic

The mental ramifications of years of lockdowns, masks and fearmongering are only beginning to emerge, but Gallup polling reported that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 45% of Americans described their mental health as "excellent."⁶

However, "by November 2020, eight months after the pandemic began in the U.S., Americans' excellent assessments of their own mental health dropped nine points to 34%, a new low since the measure was first tracked in 2001," Gallup reported.⁷ The analytics firm called mental health "the next global pandemic" in 2021,⁸ citing data that 7 in 10 people globally were "struggling or suffering."

The World Health Organization also reported a 25% increase in global anxiety and depression triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, with director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus writing in 2022:⁹

"The information we have now about the impact of COVID-19 on the world's mental health is just the tip of the iceberg. This is a wake-up call to all countries to pay more attention to mental health and do a better job of supporting their populations' mental health."

Further, a report by the Well Being Trust (WBT) and the Robert Graham Center for Policy Studies in Family Medicine and Primary Care estimated that up to 154,037 people may have died during the COVID-19 pandemic from drug or alcohol misuse and suicide. These "deaths of despair" were exacerbated by:¹⁰

- Unprecedented economic failure paired with massive unemployment

- Mandated social isolation for months and possible residual isolation for years
- Uncertainty caused by the sudden emergence of a novel, previously unknown microbe

Economic concerns persist for many to this day, Gallup reported, "precipitated by the highest inflation rate in more than four decades."¹¹ Many are likely burned out on multiple levels, having exhausted their mental, emotional and physical resources.¹² But even as more seek help, Jim Clifton, Gallup's chairman, notes, "Mental well-being remains a medical blind spot compared with physical well-being." He continues:¹³

"Sheltering during COVID-19; daily fear of job loss; daily fear of a compromised loved one dying from COVID-19; kids at home in "remote school" whose learning is set back while they're also cut off from friends; dramatic changes in how and where work is done – and the big one, unimaginable anxiety from not knowing what comes next – all of these create a health injury as or more serious than the virus.

What if pandemic anxiety and depression change the culture of humankind more than COVID-19 has? It is now. It doesn't make the news because the definition and measurement of anxiety and depression have such fuzzy edges compared with the absolute diagnoses of COVID-19 and other diseases ... What action can leadership take to save America and the world from a mental health crisis that is spiking now?"

Pandemic Drove Many to Seek Mental Health Help

The JAMA Health Forum study revealed a surge in spending on mental health brought on by the pandemic. During the pandemic's acute phase, per capita spending increased 29.5% compared to the year prior, which only went up as the pandemic wore on. This covered not only in-person visits but also telehealth services, the latter of which increased about 10-fold compared to the year before the pandemic.¹⁴

"The changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered a significant expansion in the use of mental health services among adults with employer-based health insurance," study author Jonathan Cantor, a policy researcher at nonprofit research organization RAND, explained in a news release. "It remains uncertain whether this trend will continue or return to levels similar to those seen before the pandemic."¹⁵

Now that the public health emergency (PHE) has expired, however, the researchers foresee that many who have come to rely on receiving virtual mental health services may be cut off. Prior to the pandemic, mental health service spending was about \$2.3 million per 10,000 beneficiaries per month, compared to about \$3.5 million after the pandemic's acute phase.¹⁶ According to the study:¹⁷

"This disproportionate increase in spending will likely evolve now that the PHE has ended, with insurers either continuing or stopping coverage for telehealth visits for mental health services ... These findings suggest that telehealth utilization for mental health services remains persistent and elevated.

If this increased utilization affects spending, insurers may begin rejecting the new status quo. This concern is particularly relevant when considered against the backdrop of telehealth policies that expired alongside the national PHE declaration."

Dena Bravata, who co-authored the study, said the findings underscore the need to "integrate behavioral health services into primary care," which could help "address the growing issues around lack of access, affordability, and stigma, while providing a more comprehensive, person-centered approach to overall health."¹⁸

Anxiety Relief Business Is Booming

The Wall Street Journal also highlighted the "booming business of American anxiety," as companies hustle to cash in on the mental health pandemic gripping the nation:¹⁹

"A search for "anxiety relief" on Google pulls up links for supplements in the form of pills, patches, gummies and mouth sprays. There are vibrating devices

that hang around your neck & "tone your vagus nerve," weighted stuffed animals, bead-filled stress balls & coloring books that claim to bring calm.

Ads for online talk therapy apps pop up on social-media sites. Americans are anxious and a flurry of old-line companies, upstarts & opportunistic entrepreneurs aim to fill the demand for relief."

The Wall Street Journal cited a federal study that found 27% of respondents had symptoms of an anxiety disorder, up from 8% in 2019.²⁰ Those with anxiety or depression tend to have 1.9 times higher costs for their health care compared to those without, spending an average of \$1,501 just for out-of-pocket costs annually.²¹

While psychotherapy is the most common service utilized by those with anxiety or depression, nearly three-quarters had one or more prescriptions for antidepressants or anxiety medications.²² Spending on mood support supplements, including saffron extract, ashwagandha, omega-3 fats and B vitamins, is also on the rise.

With \$656 million in spending in 2022, it's estimated that the market will reach \$1.3 billion by the end of 2033,²³ as many seek out alternative options to improve their mental health.

GABA May Support Optimal Mental Health

If you're looking for a natural option for anxiety and stress relief, gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA), widely available in supplement and tea forms, should be on your radar. GABA is a powerful neurotransmitter that inhibits excessive neuronal firing, helping to induce a natural state of calm²⁴ in animal studies,²⁵ while also reducing depression-related behavior.²⁶

Low levels of GABA, or impaired GABA functioning, are associated with multiple mental health conditions, including chronic stress, anxiety disorders and sleep disturbances like insomnia.²⁷

"Specifically, GABAergic neurons and neurotransmitters regulate the brain circuits in ... the amygdala to modulate stress and anxiety responses both in the normal and pathological conditions," researchers explained in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*.²⁸

GABA is also present in the enteric nervous system, and there's evidence suggesting it may act on the peripheral nervous system as well, through the gut-brain axis.²⁹ It also exists naturally in foods such as white tea, tomato, germinated rice and some fermented foods.³⁰

If you could use a GABA supplement to relieve your anxiety, depression and sleeplessness, the drug industry would suffer major losses, however, and it's funded multiple studies to downplay the role of GABA supplements in the brain – even though many of the most popular antianxiety meds, such as benzodiazepines, are GABA agonists. GABA supplements are certainly far safer and less addictive than benzodiazepines.

But if oral GABA can't cross the blood-brain-barrier (BBB), how could GABA-based synthetic alcohol produce alcohol-like effects in the brain when you drink it? The long-held argument against oral GABA supplementation then becomes moot.

Ashwagandha Can Also Be Useful

Getting to the root of anxiety and depression is essential to heal your mental health. However, there are supportive options that may help – and which many are seeking, often because conventional medications have failed them.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) is an herb that's been used in Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years. Known as Rasayana in Ayurveda, ashwagandha is an adaptogenic herb that enhances your body's ability to withstand stress and is considered a rejuvenator.³¹

In a study of 125 adults who took ashwagandha or placebo daily for 90 days, those who took ashwagandha had lower serum cortisol levels – a measure of stress – and higher

scores on a happiness questionnaire, "suggesting significantly lower stress levels and significantly better psychological well-being and sleep quality."³²

Another study involving 64 individuals who had a history of chronic stress evaluated the effectiveness of a full-spectrum extract of ashwagandha root to help reduce stress and anxiety. Those in the study group took 300 milligrams (mg) of ashwagandha root twice a day for 60 days.

Analysis of the data revealed a significant reduction in stress assessment at the end of 60 days when compared to the placebo group. People taking ashwagandha also had substantially lower serum cortisol levels.³³ According to the study, which was published in the Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine:³⁴

"The findings of this study suggest that a high-concentration full-spectrum Ashwagandha root extract safely and effectively improves an individual's resistance towards stress and thereby improves self-assessed quality of life."

In a set of five practical dietary recommendations for the prevention of depression, researchers writing in the journal Nutritional Neuroscience also highlighted "a high consumption of foods rich in omega-3" fats as one of the key strategies.³⁵ This includes anchovies, sardines, mackerel, herring and wild-caught Alaskan salmon.

Improving your gut health with fermented foods or probiotics is also important. High-dose probiotic supplementation is beneficial for people with depression,³⁶ and both vitamin B12 and folate act as antidepressant nutrients.³⁷ Folate, found in dark leafy greens like spinach, avocados and other fresh vegetables, is involved in your body's production of mood-regulating neurotransmitters.

In one study, people who consumed the most folate had a lower risk of depression than those who ate the least.³⁸

It's widely known, too, that people with a vitamin B12 deficiency are at an increased risk of depression,³⁹ which could be, in part, due to resulting alterations in the level of DNA methylation in the brain, leading to neurologic impairment.⁴⁰

What Else Can You Do to Support Mental Health Naturally?

Eating healthy is key. Researchers from Macquarie University, Australia, studied 76 students between the ages of 17 and 35 who followed a poor diet and had moderate to high levels of depression symptoms.^{41,42}

One group of participants was asked to improve their diet by cutting back on **refined carbohydrates**, sugar, processed meats and soft drinks, while eating more vegetables, fruits, dairy products, healthy fats and anti-inflammatory spices such as turmeric and cinnamon.⁴³ After only three weeks of healthier eating, those in the healthy diet group had significant improvements in mood and their depression scores went into the normal range.

There are other tools as well. Getting optimal exposure to sunlight daily and regular physical activity, particularly three to five days a week for 45 minutes,⁴⁴ can improve mental health. You can also use the Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), demonstrated in the video above, or the Neuro-Emotional Technique's First Aid Stress Tool, or NET FAST.⁴⁵ Here is a summary of the FAST procedure:

1. While thinking about an issue that is bothering you, place your right wrist, palm up, into your left hand. Place three fingers of your left hand onto the area of your right wrist where you can feel your pulse.
2. Place your open right hand on your forehead. Gently breathe in and out several times while concentrating on feeling the issue that bothers you.
3. Switch hands and repeat steps 1 and 2.

If you're in the midst of a mental health crisis, get emergency medical care. For serious mental health problems, always seek the guidance of an integrative health practitioner who can help you get started on your healing journey. Making healthy dietary and other lifestyle changes can be difficult when your mental health is suffering, so focus on making small, positive steps in the right direction.

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