



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

# Stress in America

Mind/Body Health: For a Healthy Mind and Body, Talk to a Psychologist

## KEY FINDINGS

As the U.S. economy continues to struggle for the third year, findings from the 2010 Stress in America survey paint a picture of an overstressed nation. Feeling the effects of prolonged financial and other recession-related difficulties, Americans are struggling to balance work and home life and make time to engage in healthy behaviors, with stress not only taking a toll on their personal physical health, but also affecting the emotional and physical well-being of their families.

Children and adults alike who are obese or overweight are more likely to feel stress, and overweight children are more likely to report that their parents were often or always stressed over the past month. Children, regardless of weight or age, say they can tell that their parents are stressed when they argue and complain, which many children say makes them feel sad and worried. Parents, however, are not fully realizing the impact their own stress is having on their children.

In general, Americans recognize that their stress levels remain high and exceed what they consider to be healthy. Adults seem to understand the importance of healthy behaviors like managing their stress levels, eating right, getting enough sleep and exercise, but they report experiencing challenges practicing these healthy behaviors. They report being too busy as a primary barrier preventing them from better managing their stress, and a lack of motivation, energy and time as the chief reasons for not being more physically active. In 2009 and again this year, lacking willpower was cited as a barrier to adopting healthy behaviors when lifestyle changes were recommended by a health care provider. Yet the majority believes willpower can be learned as well as improved, if they only had more energy and confidence.

The survey found that although reported average stress levels have remained much the same as they were last year, fewer adults report being satisfied with the ways that their employer helps employees balance work and non-work demands and, in general, concern about job stability is on the rise.

Survey findings have consistently shown that the majority of Americans are living with moderate (4 – 7 on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means you have little or no stress and 10 means you have a great deal of stress) or high (8 – 10 on a scale of 1 to 10) levels of stress, and while they understand that this is not healthy, they're stymied in their efforts to make changes.



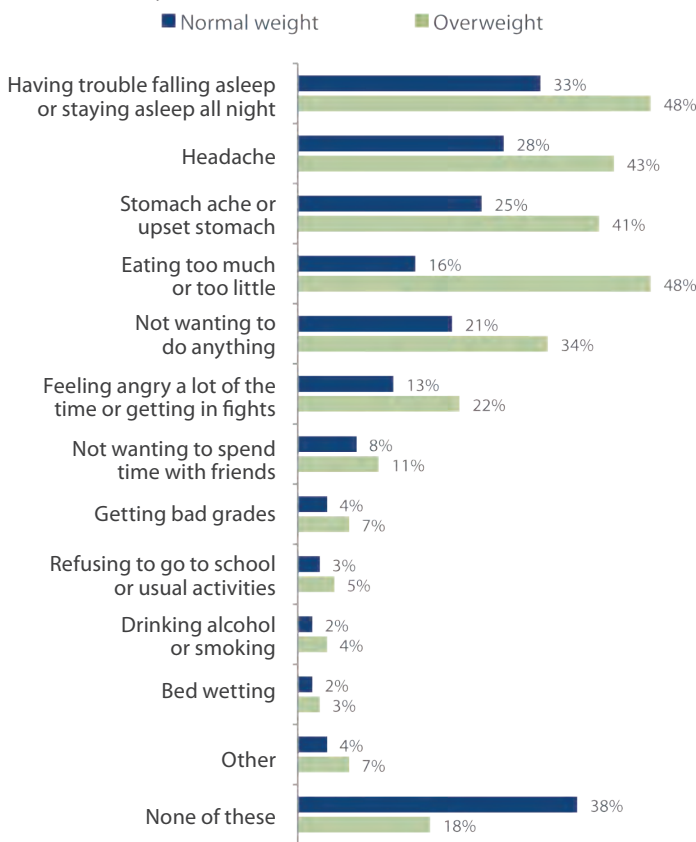
# KEY FINDINGS

Findings suggest that children are aware of the difference between healthy and unhealthy weight.

## Stress Taking a Physical Health Toll on Children

Perhaps most notable are what the survey results suggest about the connection between overweight children and stress. When asked, one-third (31 percent) of American children report being very or slightly overweight, a figure that is in line with nationally reported trends about overweight and obesity.<sup>1</sup> Children who are overweight are more likely to report they worry a lot or a great deal about things in their lives than children who are normal weight (31 percent vs. 14 percent). Overweight children are also significantly more likely than normal-weight children to report they worry about the way they look/their weight (36 percent vs. 11 percent).

### Health Conditions Experienced by Children in the Past Month



BASE: Youth (n=1136); Underweight (n=169); Normal weight (n=640); Overweight (n=327)  
Q730 Which of the following, if any, have you experienced in the last month? Please select all that apply.

Although parents, regardless of their weight, are likely to report they feel it is important for their child to have healthy behaviors, there are findings that suggest that leading by example is also very important. Children who believe they are overweight are significantly more likely than those with a normal weight to report that their parent has been always/often worried or stressed about things in the past month (39 percent vs. 30 percent). While obese parents are equally as likely as those of normal weight to say it's important to them that their children eat healthy foods and stay physically active (77 percent of normal-weight and obese parents), survey results suggest parents who are overweight are less likely to engage in the healthy behaviors they value.

- Parents who are obese are more likely (28 percent) than those of normal weight (16 percent) to report having children who are overweight.

<sup>1</sup> Health, United States, 2009. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/09.pdf#073](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/09.pdf#073).



## KEY FINDINGS

- How often adults eat healthy foods can be related to their child's weight. Parents of overweight children are less likely (14 percent) to report that they (the parents) eat healthy foods very often or almost always than parents of normal-weight children (26 percent report eating healthy foods very often, almost always or always).
- Parents who are normal weight are more likely than those who are obese to say they engage in physical activity with their families (69 percent vs. 53 percent) and do activities together at home on a weekly basis or more often (68 percent vs. 54 percent).

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Findings from the survey also suggest a relationship between stress and obesity in children.

- Children who are overweight are more likely to report having trouble falling asleep (48 percent vs. 33 percent), headaches (43 percent vs. 28 percent), eating too much or too little (48 percent vs. 16 percent) or feeling angry and getting into fights (22 percent vs. 13 percent), which are often symptoms of stress.
- Children who believe they are overweight are more likely to report that their parents have been always or often stressed or worried in the past month than children who see themselves as having a normal weight (39 percent vs. 30 percent).
- Children who are normal weight are more likely to report doing healthy things to make themselves feel better when they are worried or stressed, such as playing sports (21 percent vs. 13 percent).
- Children who are overweight are more likely than children of normal weight to report eating



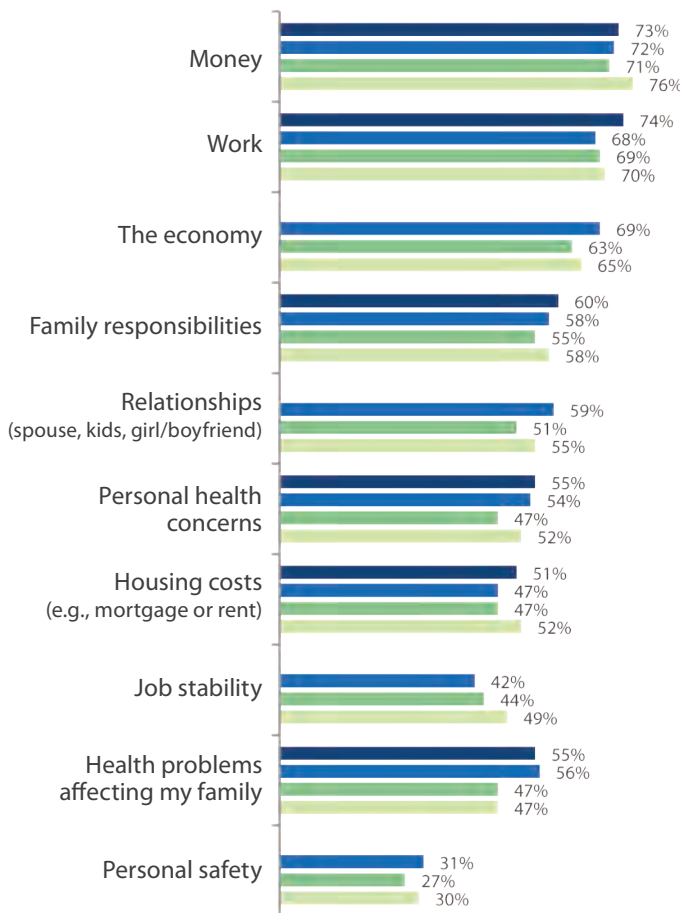
# KEY FINDINGS

Money, work and the economy remain the most oft-cited sources of stress for Americans.

### Causes of Stress

% Somewhat/Very Significant

■ 2007 ■ 2008 ■ 2009 ■ 2010



BASE: All respondents 2007 (n=1848); 2008 (n=1791); 2009 (n=1568); 2010 (n=1134)  
Q625 Below is a list of things people say cause stress in their lives. For each one, please indicate how significant a source of stress it is in your life.

(27 percent vs. 14 percent) or taking a nap (26 percent vs. 15 percent) to make themselves feel better when they are stressed.

## Stress: Perception and Reality — How It’s Hurting American Families

As the aftershocks of the Great Recession continue to be felt across the country, money (76 percent), work (70 percent) and the economy (65 percent) remain the most oft-cited sources of stress for Americans. Job stability is on the rise as a source of stress; nearly half (49 percent) of adults reported that job stability was a source of stress in 2010 (compared to 44 percent in 2009). At the same time, fewer Americans are satisfied with the ways their employer helps them balance work and non-work demands (36 percent compared to 42 percent in 2009).

While parents report similar sources of stress as the rest of the population (80 percent cite money, 72 percent cite work and 72 percent cite the economy as stressors), many also report that family responsibilities are a significant source of stress (73 percent). Results from the survey suggest that parents feel that they are under a great deal of stress (nearly one-third report feeling this way) and understand the importance of managing it (69 percent say managing stress is important). However, only one-third (32 percent) believe they are doing an excellent or very good job of managing their stress.

While the majority of parents don’t think their children are strongly affected by their stress, children report otherwise. Nearly three-quarters (69 percent) of parents say that their stress has only a slight or no impact on their children, yet 91 percent of children report they know their parent is stressed because they observe a multitude of behaviors, such as yelling, arguing and complaining. When their

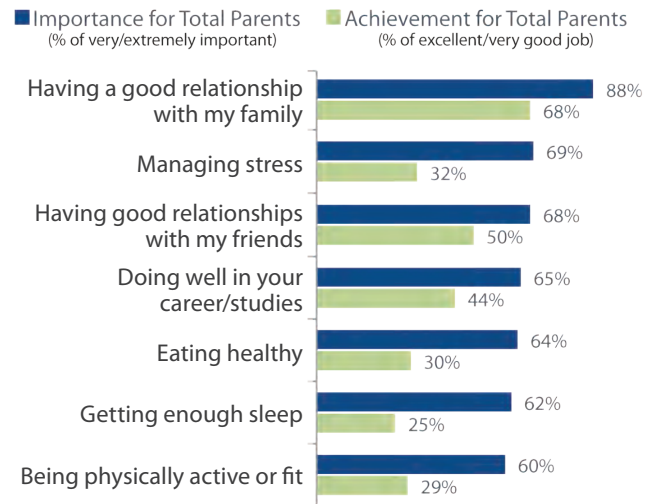


# KEY FINDINGS

parents are stressed or worried, nearly half of tweens (47 percent) and one-third of teens (33 percent) say that they feel sad; one-third of tweens (36 percent) and 43 percent of teens say that they feel worried; and one-quarter (25 percent) of tweens and 38 percent of teens feel frustrated when their parents are stressed. Children who say their parents are always stressed are more likely to report having a great deal of stress themselves than those who say their parents are never stressed (17 percent vs. 2 percent). Just 14 percent of all youth say that their parent's stress doesn't bother them. Overall, these findings suggest that parents are underestimating their child's awareness of their stress and, therefore, the impact it could be having on their child's emotional well-being.

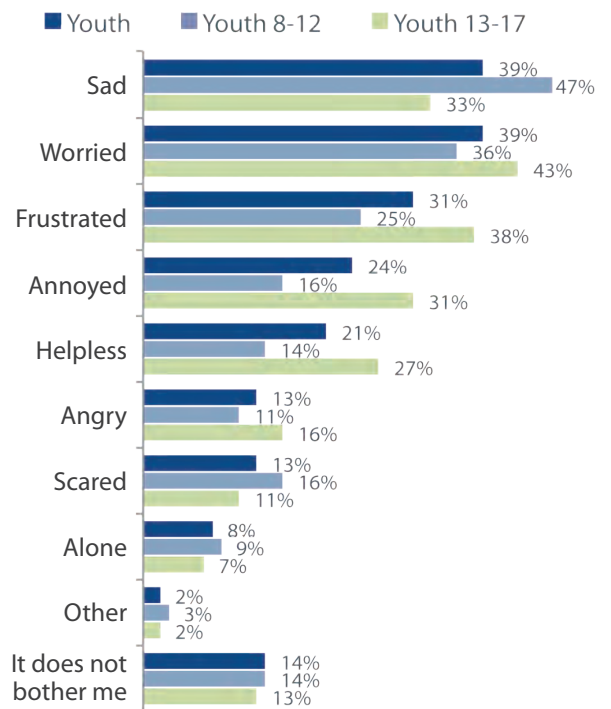
- One-third of children age 8 – 17 believe their parent has been always or often worried or stressed out about things during the past month.
- Four in 10 children say they feel sad when their parent is stressed or worried.
- One-third of children (34 percent) say they know their parent is worried or stressed out when they yell. Other signs of parental stress recognized by children are arguing with other people in the house, complaining or telling children about their problems and being too busy or not having enough time to spend with them.
- One in five children worry a lot or a great deal about things in their lives but very few parents (8 percent) report that their child is experiencing a great deal of stress (8, 9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10).
- Nearly a third of children indicated in the past month that they experienced physical health symptoms that are often associated with stress: 38 percent reported trouble falling

## Aspects of Well-Being: Importance vs. Achievement of Parents



BASE: Total Parents (n=1037)  
 Q7005 How important are each of the following to you?  
 Q7010 How well are you doing at achieving each of these?

## How Children Feel When Their Parent is Stressed



BASE: Youth (n=1032); Tweens (n=460); Teens (n=572)  
 Q4016 When your ADULT is stressed or worried how do you feel?



# KEY FINDINGS

Learning early in life to rely on sedentary behaviors to manage stress could have serious implications for the health of young Americans.

asleep or staying asleep at night. Thirty-three percent experienced headaches and 31 percent reported having an upset stomach in the past month.

The vast majority of tweens (86 percent) and teens (74 percent) said that they are very or somewhat comfortable talking to their parents about the things that cause them stress, yet only half (50 percent of tweens and teens) have talked to their parents about things they are worried or stressed about in the past month. On the other hand, 61 percent of parents indicate that they have asked their child about their stress or worry in the past month. The difference in these findings suggest that parents and children may interpret what it means to talk about stress and worry differently, which could have negative implications.

Currently, tweens and teens report that they turn to sedentary behaviors to make themselves feel better when they are really worried or stressed, such as listening to music (36 percent of tweens and 66 percent of teens), playing video games (56 percent of tweens and 41 percent of teens) or watching TV (34 percent of tweens and 30 percent of teens). Learning early in life to rely on sedentary behaviors to manage stress could have serious implications for the health of young Americans, who, according to data reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are already experiencing rampant rates of obesity — nearly one in five young people is obese (19.6 percent of youth ages 6 – 11 and 18.1 percent of youth ages 12 – 19).<sup>2</sup>

## Aspects of Well-Being: Importance vs. Achievement



BASE: All respondents (n=1134)  
\* Multiple responses are possible  
Q7005 How important are each of the following to you?  
Q7010 How well are you doing at achieving each of these?

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Childhood Overweight and Obesity. <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/index.html>.



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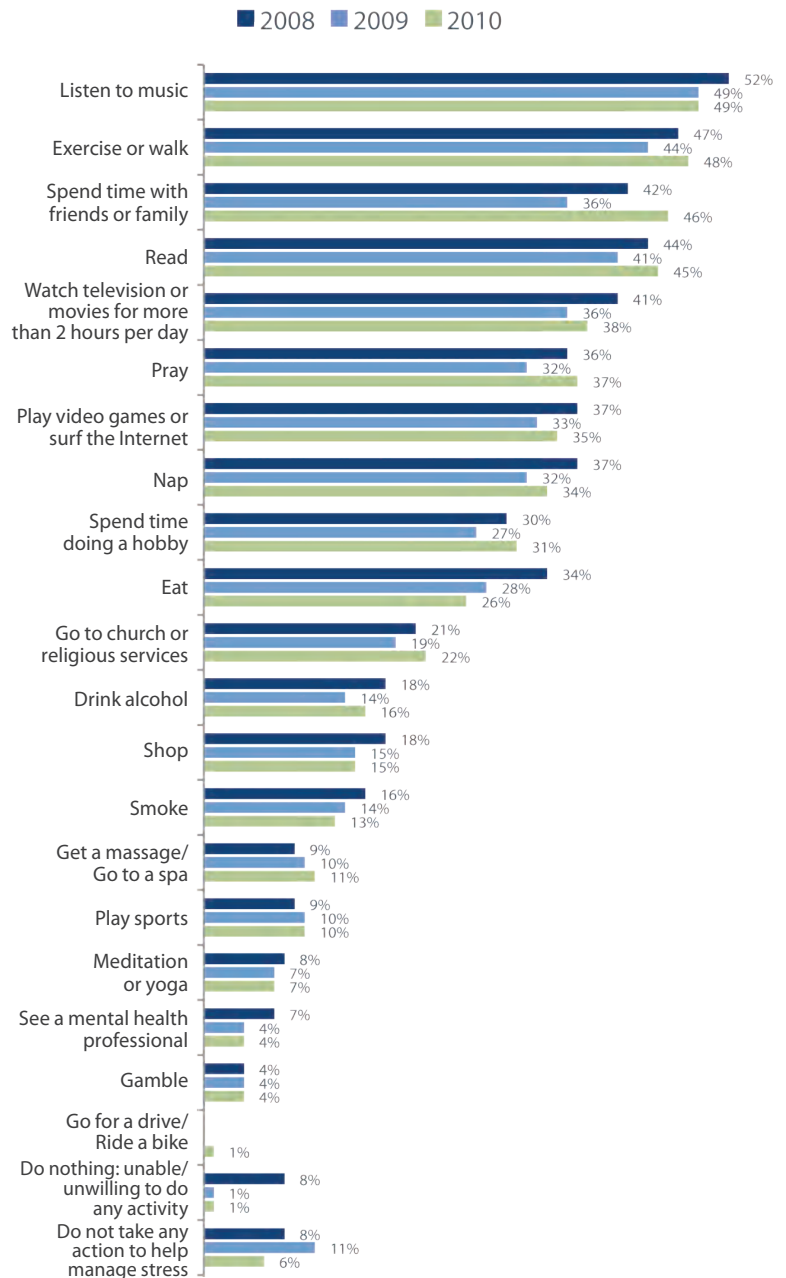
There is also a disconnect between the health behaviors parents and children perceive as important.

- Only 43 percent of young people believe eating right is extremely or very important (versus 78 percent of parents); just 51 percent believe it's important to be fit (versus 78 percent of parents who think it is extremely or very important for their child to be physically active or fit); and only 31 percent think it's important to find activities away from the computer (versus 75 percent of parents).
- More than half of parents (56 percent) say that it takes some or a great amount of effort to get their families to eat healthy foods. Similarly, 54 percent of parents say it takes the same amount of effort to get their families to be physically active.

## Our Bodies, Our Stress

Less than half of all Americans (40 percent) perceive themselves to be in excellent or very good health. A similar number of Americans say their stress levels have increased over the past five years (44 percent). Similar to 2009, however, there continues to be a large gap between the level of stress Americans say they are experiencing (the average reported stress level is 5.4 on a 10-point scale) and what they perceive to be a healthy level (the average reported healthy stress level is 3.7 on a 10-point scale). The most common reason given by adults for not doing more to manage their stress was being too busy or not having enough time.

## Stress Management



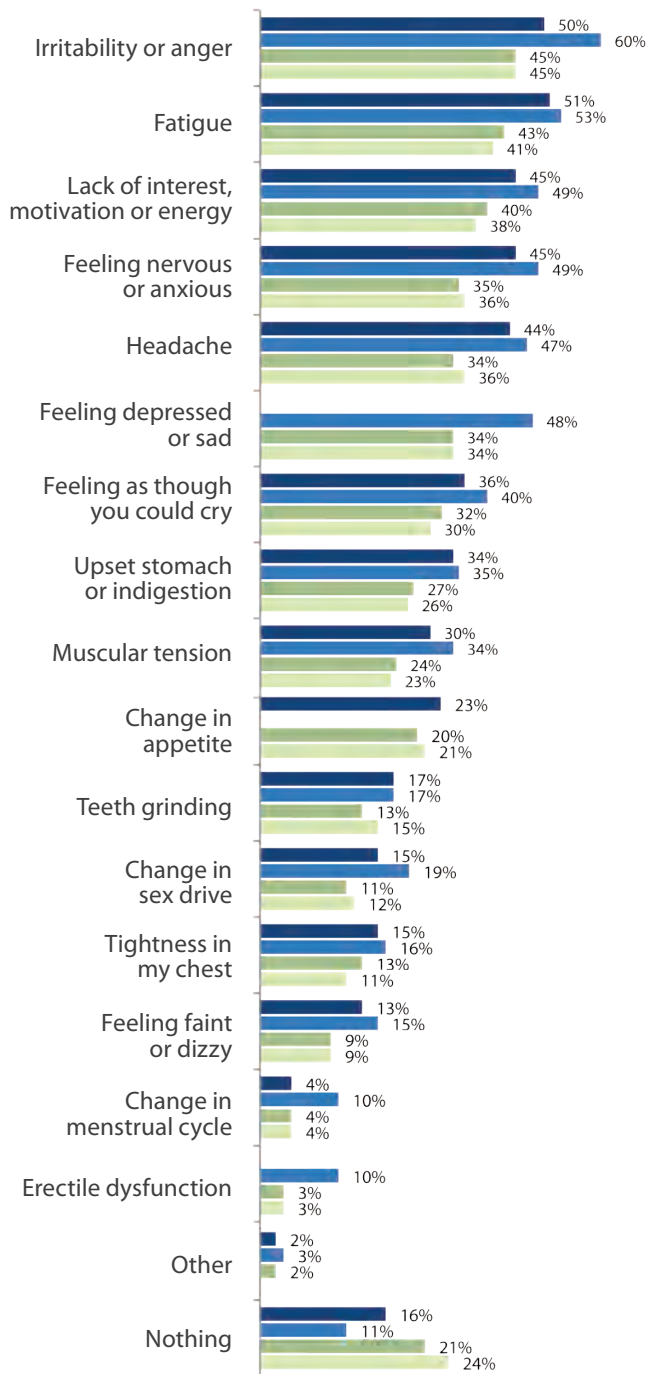
BASE: All respondents 2008 (n=1791); 2009 (n=1568); 2010 (n=1134)  
Q965 Do you do any of the following to help manage stress? Please select all that apply.



# KEY FINDINGS

## Physical Symptoms of Stress

■ 2007 ■ 2008 ■ 2009 ■ 2010



BASE: All respondents 2007 (n=1848); 2008 (n=1791); 2009 (n=1568); 2010 (n=1134)  
Q810 Which of the following, if any, have you experienced in the last month as a result of stress?

Americans also recognize that they are falling short in just about all areas of well-being, from the quality of their relationships with family and friends to getting enough sleep. Though many Americans reported that health care professionals recommended they exercise more (39 percent), lose weight (36 percent) and eat a healthier diet (30 percent), and many agree that these are important behaviors, they also reported a considerable gap between the importance they place upon these activities and their personal track record of achievement. That is, 58 percent agreed eating healthy was extremely or very important but just 31 percent thought they were doing an excellent or very good job in doing so. Likewise, 54 percent agreed that being physically active was extremely or very important, but just 27 percent were happy with their achievement in this area.

Stress has behavioral consequences which in excess could have physical consequences.

- Two-fifths of adults reported overeating or eating unhealthy foods because of stress in the past month.
- Nearly one-third said they skipped a meal because of stress in the past month.
- More than four in 10 said they had lain awake at night in the past month.
- The most common physical symptoms of stress reported were irritability (45 percent), fatigue (41 percent) and lack of energy or motivation (38 percent).

With the nation currently experiencing epidemic rates of obesity and overweight, it should come as no surprise that nearly one-third of adults exercise less than once per week. Those who exercise once a week or less say they don't do it



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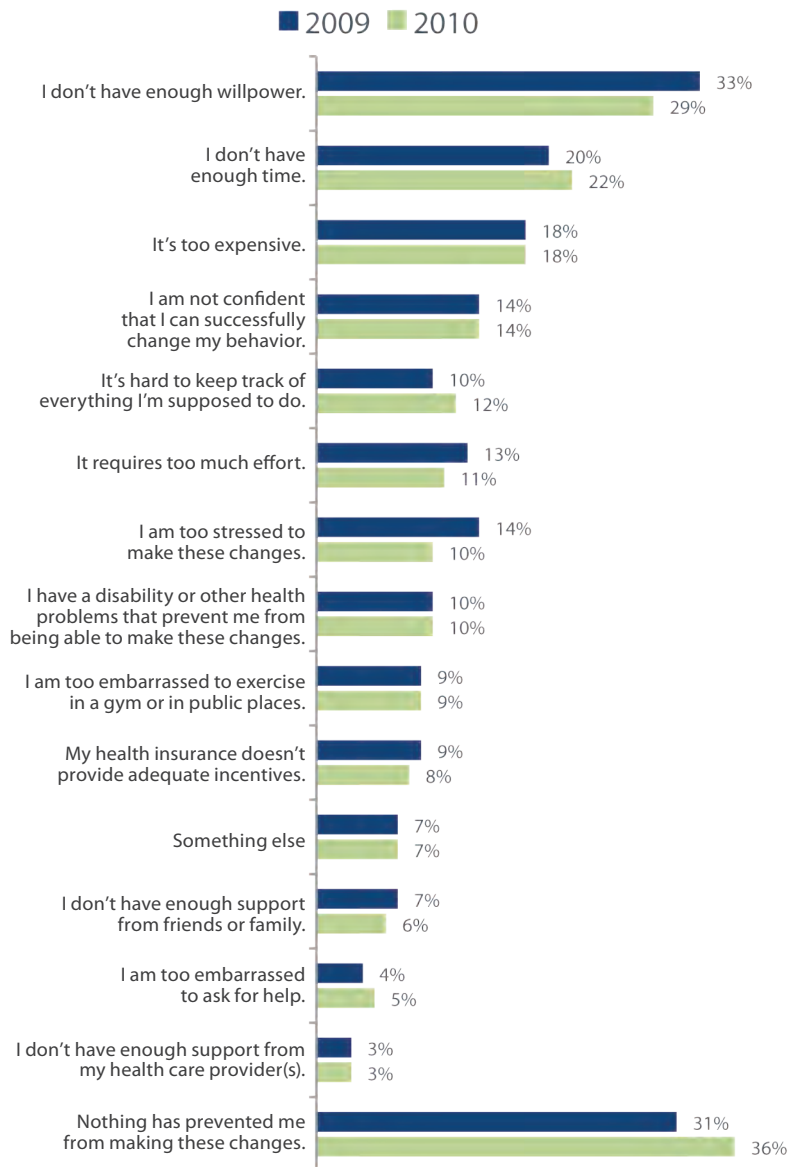
because they are not motivated (44 percent), are too tired (33 percent), are too busy (28 percent) or don't like to (26 percent), among other reasons.

## The Role of Willpower

As they did in 2009, adults again cited a lack of willpower as the most common reason (29 percent) for not following through with recommended lifestyle changes. While the majority of adults (70 percent) believe willpower — defined by respondents as self-control/resisting temptations/urges, sticking to a decision and accomplishing a goal — is something that can be learned, many saw money as an important factor in willpower. Four in 10 adults said money would help them improve their willpower. Similarly, having more energy/less fatigue and more confidence in their ability to change were most commonly cited as what would be needed to overcome a lack of willpower.

While many adults report that they lack willpower, their belief that having more money and more energy would help them accomplish their healthy living goals suggests there is an opportunity to educate adults about effective strategies for adopting healthy behaviors and incorporating these behaviors into their daily lives.

## Barriers to Change



**BASE: HCP Recommended Changes 2009 (n=1068); 2010 (n=735)**  
\* Multiple responses are possible  
**Q2255** Which of the following, if any, have prevented you from making the lifestyle changes your health care provider has recommended? Please select all that apply.