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Why Are We So Stressed Out?

The pursuit of wealth may be derailing us from finding happiness

JORDAN LITE ON MAR 10, 2010 AT 6:42PM

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The economy, job cuts, terrorism and war—surveys have shown worrying about those things have caused many a sleepless night. But new research points to a more subtle source for our collective anxiety. A societal shift toward materialism and status seeking may actually be at the root of what some experts contend is an increasingly stressed-out America.

Five times as many current high school and college students score above the cutoff for anxiety as those of the late 1930s, according to a study in the March 2010 issue of *Clinical Psychology Review* that examined rates of psychiatric symptoms among teens and young adults over seven decades. While the results can't be extrapolated to older people, a 2003 study in the *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* found panic attacks to be more than twice as common among adults in 1995 as they were in 1980. And in 2000, a study in *American Psychologist* noted that 26 percent of adults in 1996 said they were verging on a nervous breakdown, compared to 19 percent in 1957.

"All of these studies indicate people are more stressed out than they used to be," says Jean Twenge, Ph.D., a San Diego State University psychology professor who co-authored the study on students. She added that the higher rates of anxiety in her study were still seen after taking into account the increasing openness about mental health problems that might make students more apt to admit to symptoms. Those rates climbed gradually over the seven decades, independently of fluctuations in unemployment that might also be assumed to cause collective spikes in stress levels.

"What did correlate was materialism," says Twenge, author of the 2006 book *Generation Me*, which argues that people born after 1970 are more narcissistic, entitled—and unhappy—than previous generations. Researchers have found that Generation Me is more likely to believe that having a lot of money is important and to have professional expectations that exceed their educational achievements. "The shift in Western culture toward valuing status and money versus placing more value on development as a person and close relationships is a pattern that tends to lead to mental health problems," Twenge says.

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The more people value such goals, the lower their personal wellbeing, says Knox College psychology professor Tim Kasser, Ph.D., who has studied materialism. What we do to get those things comes at the expense of relationships and community involvement that give us a sense of safety, competence, relatedness and autonomy—all psychological needs associated with wellbeing.

"One of the things that is so psychologically appealing about materialism is that it is a culturally sanctioned path to feel like you can be safe and secure," says Kasser, author of the 2002 book *The High Price of Materialism*. "The research shows that this attempt doesn't work very well, as people who care a good deal about materialism are still relatively unhappy."

But if the quest for money and status are causing more stress over the long term, the depressed economy and other world events are having a more immediate and acute effect. A Gallup survey released on New Year's Day 2010 found that slightly more Americans felt more stressed out last year than in 2008, with the most worrisome days coinciding with major financial and world events, such as the day after the House passed the stimulus bill, when Citigroup asked the government to bail it out on the same day the Dow closed near a 12-year low, and the day seven U.S. troops died in Afghanistan (Michael Jackson's memorial service was also being televised that day). Americans' happiest days coincided with national holidays typically spent with family and friends like Easter, Mother's Day and Thanksgiving.

The American Psychological Association found similar trends in its most recent Stress in America survey. Some 42 percent of people questioned last year said their stress had increased since 2008 and a quarter rated their stress as high. Yet those rates were lower than in the 2008 survey, which found 47 percent of people reported greater stress than the year before. The biggest sources of stress were money, work and the economy. Women rated higher than men, especially mothers. They reported higher stress as well as symptoms of anxiety, like insomnia, overeating and headaches.

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The exploding ubiquity of technology that keeps us tethered to work and social obligations 24-7 may also play a role in boosting our stress levels. Nearly 15 percent of email users described themselves as addicted to it, and nearly two-thirds of people with email on their phone or other portable device said they checked email every time a new message arrived, according to a 2007 survey by AOL. While those studies didn't look at whether anxiety was associated with the technology, Scottish scientists who surveyed academics, architects and others who work in creative fields found that a third felt stressed by their email, with women especially likely to feel pressured to answer it, according to a 2007 study in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*.

"It's very stressful now to have all of the pressures of the Internet and feeling like we have to multitask all the time and feeling like we're never turned off. A lot of stress is placed on us in terms of our energy and brain power," said Stephanie Smith, Psy.D., a psychologist and public education coordinator for the American Psychological Association in Colorado. "From a purely functional standpoint, we don't function well if we're doing multiple things at a time."

Nonetheless, as a society we have lived through seriously stressful periods in the past and have come out on the other side.

"I don't know how we can really measure whether one period is more stressful than another. In every era, people think that they're stressed," says Esther Sternberg, M.D., director of the integrative neural immune program at the National Institute of Mental Health. "Change, uncertainty and novelty are all triggers of the stress response, and we're going through that big time. It's a society, en masse, experiencing major, major life stressors all at the same time.

"By comparison with, say, before 9/11 or before the economic downturn, many of these stressors did not

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exist for us," she says. "But we've gone through decades when they probably were about the same, and nevertheless people did come through those terribly stressful times."

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