

# The Impact of Past Year Difficult Worries on Recency of Adolescent Mental Health Outcomes By Gender, Age, Sexual Orientation And Race/Ethnicity- Results From a Nationally Representative Probability Survey of U.S. Adolescents 14-17 Years

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**Purpose:** Although learning to manage day-to-day worry is an important developmental skill for adolescents, research generally shows that young people who experience exceptionally difficult or traumatic worries may be at heightened risk for poor mental health outcomes. We used nationally representative probability data to examine the prevalence of difficult worries and their impact on recency of mental health outcomes.

**Methods:** Data are from the 2018 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB) e a nationally representative, online probability survey of individuals 14-49 years of age in the United States (GfK Research [GfK]). Design weights adjust for population characteristics and any nonresponse. The analytic sample for the current study included 820 (18.0% of total sample [N=4554]) adolescents who were children of adult household heads who also participated in the survey. Outcome variables were: past year difficult worries (“Which were traumatic or difficult to handle?”; all no/yes: school/academics, job or career, death of family/friend, racism, family problems, friendships, dating/romantic relationships, sexual experiences/situations, finances, health problems, personal appearance) and mental health recency (all 4-point: never, yes>12 mos, yes<12mos, yes<30 days: excited for future, anxiety, sadness, life feels meaningful, so depressed couldn’t function and lonely). We used logistic and ordinal regression, respectively, to examine differences in the odds of past year worry, and the impact of worry on recency of mental health. All models were conducted separately by sexual identity (sexual majority [heterosexual]/sexual minority [lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or something else]), age (14-15

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vs. 16-17), gender (male/female) and race/ethnicity (majority/minority). All estimates were adjusted for complex sampling design and population weights in Stata (15.0; all  $p < .05$ ).

**Results:** Sexual minority and female adolescents were more likely to have academic school worries (OR=1.32-1.94). More adolescents of color reported significant worries about the death of a family member/friend and finances (OR=1.93-3.37). Sexual minority youth were about twice as likely to worry deeply about family problems (OR=1.56) and about three times more likely to worry about dating/romantic relationships and sexual experiences (OR=2.68-3.71). Past year worries about friendships were more frequent among young women and sexual minority youth (OR=1.85-2.32). Older adolescents and adolescents of color had higher odds of traumatic worries about finances (OR=1.76-2.89). Sexual minority and female adolescents worried more about personal appearance (OR=1.84-3.43). A greater number of past year difficult worries was associated with less recent excitement about the future (OR=0.88), particularly for sexual and ethnic minority adolescents. More worries increased the recency of experiencing overwhelming anxiety (OR=1.51-1.88), feeling very sad (OR=1.69-1.83), being so depressed it was difficult to function (OR=1.70-3.15) and very lonely (OR=1.59-1.90), especially for sexual and ethnic minority adolescents.

**Conclusions:** Deep worry about even “common” life issues - particularly among sexual and ethnic minority youth - can negatively affect adolescents’ mental health. Regular assessment of worry types and valence may help parents/providers proactively anticipate when young people need additional support processing worry. Targeted intervention efforts should focus on alleviating elevated worry among minority adolescents, especially as they contribute to other minority-focused health disparities.

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