

# Findings from Project EAT: Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stress, mood, and substance use among young adults in Minnesota

Participants were 670 cohort members (ages 21-29) of the population-based, longitudinal EAT 2010-2018 study who participated in the C-EAT survey (COVID-19 Eating and Activity over Time) between April and October 2020.

## HIGHLIGHTS

*The majority of young adults reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had some impact on their mood or stress levels and over one-third indicated that their pattern of substance use had changed in response to the pandemic.*

### **Changes in mood or stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

A vast majority (84%) of young adults reported that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their mood or stress. Women and young adults with worse mental health before the pandemic were especially likely to report heightened psychological distress and lower ability to manage stress during the pandemic.

### **Changes in substance use due to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

One-third (33%) of young adults reported that their substance use was impacted “somewhat” or “very much” by events related to the pandemic.

*“I find it harder to control my emotions, and I find it harder to lift myself out of a funk when I am feeling down. I feel more sad, irritable and angry often. It used to be easier to shrug off small things. Small tasks make me feel much more stressed now”*



# THEMES

*Key themes from written survey responses identified several factors related to changes in stress, mood, and substance use during the pandemic.*

Five major themes were identified related to changes in stress and mood during the COVID-19 outbreak:

- **Specific emotional reactions**
- **Stress related to the direct impact of the pandemic**
- **Stress related to connectedness**
- **Economic stress**
- **Strategies for managing stress**

*“Not leaving the house has been a strain. Everyone is always home, and having meetings and I’m taking classes, so it’s nearly impossible to have a quiet moment alone.”*



*“I feel 100% overwhelmed and stressed by the impacts of COVID. I have not been able to pay many bills, I cannot work because I am a single mother who now is home with my child all day, everyday.”*

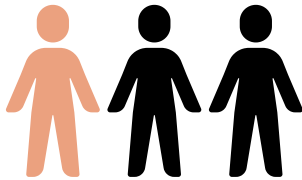
Two major themes were identified related to substance use during the pandemic detailing **specific changes in and motivations for substance use.**



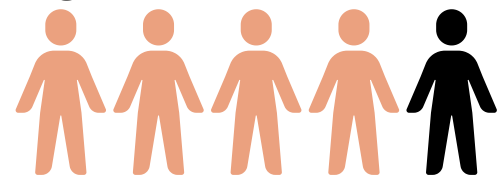
*“I have been so scared about everything going on I have been using coping mechanisms such as eating, drinking and smoking to help with the anxiety and stress.”*

## IMPLICATIONS

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental and behavioral health of young adults.*



**1 in 3 young adults reported a change to their substance use, with many reporting increased use.**



**4 in 5 young adults reported a change to their stress or mood.**

Young adults, especially women and those with worse mental health before the pandemic, are in urgent need of targeted resources, such as **telemental health services and economic relief**, aimed at reducing their unique stressors and promoting more effective coping strategies.

## AUTHOR & CONTACT INFORMATION

This summary was prepared by MPH Nutrition student Tricia Alexander, Dr. Rebecca L Emery, Dr. Jerica Berge, and Dr. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer with the School of Public Health, University of Minnesota. The research was supported by Grant Number R35HL139853 from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (PI: Dianne Neumark-Sztainer). The content is solely the responsibility of the researchers and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute or the National Institutes of Health. Send questions to [emery049@umn.edu](mailto:emery049@umn.edu).