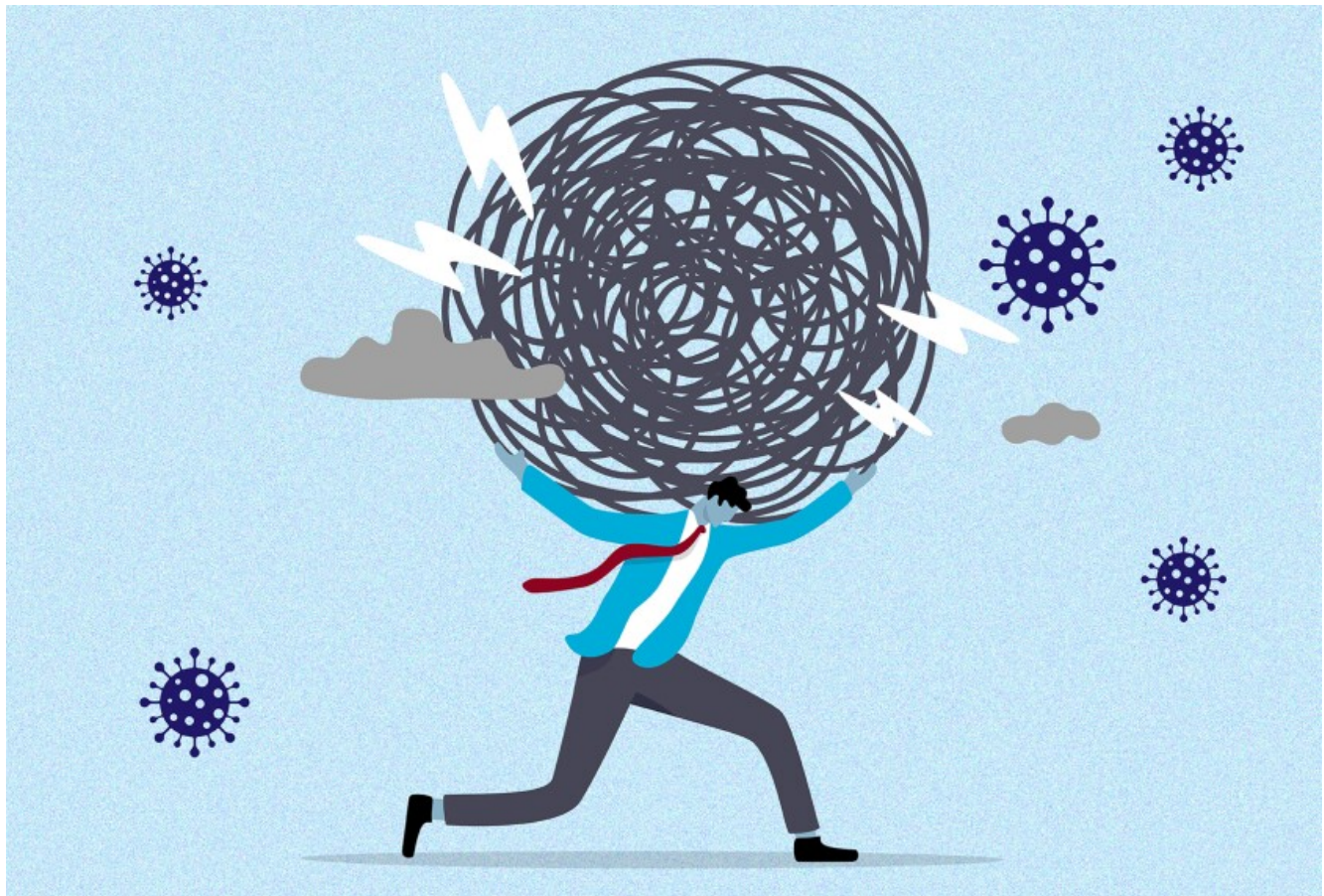


# Pandemic Anxiety Was Higher for Teachers Than for Health-Care Workers



The return to class has not meant a return to normal for many teachers. Students need more help to recover both academically and emotionally from pandemic disruptions. Staffing shortages mean more teachers are overworked and overwhelmed. And many still come to school at risk of illness from COVID-19.

All those stressors take a toll on teachers' mental health. Regardless of whether they taught in person or online, teachers have experienced significantly higher rates of anxiety during the pandemic—even more than health-care workers, according to a [new study](#)

, published this morning in *Educational Researcher*, a journal of the American Educational Research Association. It's based on a survey of millions of American workers conducted over seven months in 2020 and 2021.

The challenge of remote instruction did affect teachers' mental health. Remote teachers were 60 percent more likely to report feeling socially isolated than their colleagues who were back in the classroom, and remote teachers also showed more symptoms of depression than in-person teachers.

However, the study found that nearly 18 percent of both remote and in-person teachers showed significant anxiety symptoms during the pandemic—such as trouble sleeping or panic attacks—suggesting severe stresses that are less likely to relax as schools return to pre-pandemic instruction.

Teachers in the study were 40 percent more likely to report symptoms of anxiety than health-care workers, 30 percent more likely than those in military or farming professions, and 20 percent more likely than office workers.

“I think an argument can be made that healthcare workers know how to act in these high-stress situations. They've dealt with extreme scenarios before and it's a part of their training,” said Joseph Kush, an assistant psychology professor at James Madison University and co-author of the study. “Unfortunately now, teachers are being exposed to that as well.”

Kush said he had been expecting older teachers would be “COVID cautious” and have higher rates of anxiety as a result of health concerns, but the study showed teachers under 30 were more likely to show anxiety and depression than those over 50.

“You know, someone who is fresh out of college in their first years of teaching, it's all new. It might be very overwhelming. They might not have gone through a global pandemic,” Kush said. “So I think, older teachers may have been in the profession and dealt with emergencies, so they're just kind of all-around better equipped” to deal with ongoing stress, even though the pandemic was new to them as well.

Researchers analyzed survey data from nearly 3 million U.S. employees—including 130,000 pre-K-12 teachers—who participated in the COVID-19 Trends and Impact Survey from September 2020 through March 2021. That survey, conducted by Carnegie Mellon University’s Delphi Group and Facebook, asked workers about their symptoms of anxiety, depression, and isolation during the prior seven days.

Kush said the study did not distinguish mental health symptoms for teachers of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, grade levels, or subject areas. However, it did find that women teachers and other workers had much higher symptoms of mental health problems than their male peers. They were 20 percent more likely to feel isolated, 40 percent more likely to show depression, and nearly twice as likely to show symptoms of anxiety.

## Studies mount on teachers’ stress

The study is just the latest and most nationally comprehensive of a slew of new research on the pandemic’s effects on teachers’ mental health. Earlier this summer, the [RAND Corp.](#)

found nearly 60 percent of [teachers report they are](#)

[burned out](#), compared to 44 percent of other workers. The National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers’ union, reported that more than half of their teachers in 2021 said they were more likely to quit or retire early because of ongoing job stress.

Even before the pandemic, studies have shown teachers to report higher stress than those in other professions. But high anxiety is different and can be more damaging to teachers’ relationships with students and their likelihood to continue teaching. Students of highly anxious teachers can both

[perform worse academically](#)—particularly in subjects like math—and have more negative feelings and behavior.

In a separate survey this summer, more than 40 percent of teachers surveyed told the [EdWeek Research](#)

[Center](#) they feel less effective in their job as a result of stress. Teachers also reported more trouble sleeping and enjoying downtime with friends as a result of stress.

While many school districts are expanding mental health services and counseling for students, Kush said, “teachers’ voices need to be included” in both the mental health services offered and ongoing decisions about when to remain in-person or go to remote instruction during future outbreaks.