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Poll: Stress Knows Few Borders

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WASHINGTON -- Stress -- that tense feeling often connected to having too much to do, too many bills to pay and not enough time or money -- is a common emotion that knows few borders.

About three-fourths of people in the United States, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea and the United Kingdom say they experience stress on a daily basis, according to AP-Ipsos polling. Those anxious feelings are even more intense during the holidays.

Spaniards, 61 percent, were not as wound up as those in most other countries polled. And they could all take a lesson from Mexico, where more than half of Mexicans said they rarely or never experience stress in their daily lives.

But that is certainly not the experience for most people in the 10 countries polled -- especially women.

When the word "stress" was mentioned to Heidi Zabit of Durham, Conn., recently, it seemed to touch a bundle of nerves.

"My life is just so stressful right now I'm exploding all over the place," said Zabit, a paralegal and single mother of three boys. "Financially, the stresses are putting me under the table. After a full day of work, we finish dinner and do homework. By 9 p.m., I'm fried.

"And it's magnified by the holidays," she said. "They emotionally string us all out, they string our kids out, as far as hopes and expectations."

Germans feel stress more intensely than those in other countries polled. People in the U.S. cite financial pressures as the top worry. About half the people in Britain said they frequently or sometimes felt life was beyond their control, the highest level in the 10 countries surveyed.

In most of those countries, men were more likely to say their lives were never out of control.

"The idea that we French lead the good life is totally utopian," said Pascale Mongay, a counselor at a private Paris tutoring firm.

"We are as stressed as anyone," she said.

The factors that cause stress are on the increase in modern industrial democracies. They include multiple jobs, long commutes and increasingly complex technology.

"The level of stress in fast-paced technological societies has been accelerating," said Gershen Kaufman, a practicing

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clinical psychologist and professor emeritus at Michigan State University. "There's an increased emphasis placed on wealth in this country. We're gradually exporting this around the world."

In the U.S., Britain and Mexico, finances were cited most frequently as the top source of stress. Jobs were the top source of stress in Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, South Korea and Spain. The French viewed jobs and finances equally as top sources of stress.

In several countries, those who earned the highest incomes said their jobs were the leading source of stress while those who made the lowest -- not surprisingly -- said finances.

And in many of those countries -- like Italy, Germany and France -- the word "stress" has such a powerful influence that it has become incorporated into their language.

For the Germans, just over half said they frequently feel stress in their daily lives -- the highest stress level in any country polled.

"During the week, I often don't get home until well after dinner time and then my wife expects me to help with the children, then there's dinner to be made and often I bring work home from the office on top of that," said Roland Reifschneider, 33, of Berlin, who works in public relations. "I'd like to have time to go to the gym, but it's just not possible."

But Germans were the least likely of any group polled to say they felt that life was beyond their control. The polling of about 1,000 people in each country was conducted between Nov. 13-26 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

With all this pressure bearing down on them, people find various ways to deal with it. For Connecticut single mom Heidi Zabit, the key is good friends. "When it gets hardest, they're always there for me." Paris tutoring counselor Pascale Mongay has started taking weekly piano and swimming lessons. And for Mexico City construction worker Javier Juan, one of the reasons he "almost never" experiences stress may be his sense of priorities.

What Juan worries about most are the well-being of his family members, especially his wife and children.

"Their health and how I'm going to obtain money to cure them is the biggest worry," Juan said, "more than anything else."

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Associated Press writers Melissa Eddy in Berlin, Jenny Barchfield in Paris, Kathleen Miller in Mexico City and AP News Survey Specialist Dennis Junius contributed to this story.

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