Working on wellbeing: Mental health and wellness in the UK workplace

2022 report

About Indeed

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At Indeed, our mission is to help people get jobs. We have more than 12,200 global employees passionately pursuing this purpose and improving the recruitment journey through real stories and data. We foster a collaborative workplace that strives to create the best experience for jobseekers.

We promote and support an open dialogue about mental health in the workplace—an especially important conversation during these ongoing challenging times. We know those affected by mental health issues can often feel alone and isolated and one of the ways to help combat these malaises is to talk more. Openly discussing mental health is a significant first step.

Questions?

We'd love to discuss your mental health and wellness initiatives. Please email workingonwellbeing@indeed.com or reach out to your Indeed account manager to arrange a meeting.

Research methodology

Figures are taken from a survey conducted between 9th-22nd March 2022 by YouGov on behalf of Indeed, of 2522 UK nationally representative adults. The survey comprised 1263 employees, 758 senior managers and 502 HR leaders/decision-makers.

Sources:
1 Comscore, Total Visits, September 2021

Contents

Foreword: Leading with empathy is essential

For many employees, if there were any consolation prize for experiencing a pandemic, it would be the added flexibility that came from not having to go into the office. The problem now is that, after considerable time has passed, the potential excitement of wearing comfy casual wear all day every day has worn off and teams are tired of Zoom happy hours. After more than two years of remote work, many people understandably feel burnt out and isolated at work.

Nearly a quarter of workers in the UK are planning on changing employers in the next three to six months, placing a new sense of urgency on employers to take stock of their retention efforts. Recent research has found that almost half of workers in the UK experienced loneliness during the lockdown period; as a result, workers now see it as a requirement that work should provide a sense of meaning, purpose and connection.

While some uncertainty still remains around the duration of the pandemic, what's clear is that some amount of remote work will undeniably exist as a constant in the future of work.

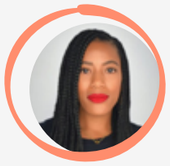
Some companies have said their employees can work from home indefinitely, while others are transitioning to a hybrid model.

With this shift, managers and leaders need to make sure their people are seen and heard now more than ever. After this unprecedented period that has upended both work and life as we know it, leading with empathy and vulnerability is essential and non-negotiable. Compassionate leaders should talk to their teams and see what works best for everyone, factoring in people's differing needs regarding office routines and flexibility to create an environment of psychological safety.

> "Compassionate leaders should talk to their teams and see what works best for everyone."

In this report, we look at the current state of mental health and wellness in the UK workforce and how workplaces can better look out and care for their employees. You will find fresh YouGov data, actionable insights and expert advice from a diverse range of progressive thought leaders.

Our hope is that this report offers a valuable contribution to the awareness and importance of mental health, and encourages employers to proactively ensure that the mental health of their employees is a top priority.



Misty Gaither
Senior Director & Global Head of Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging, Indeed

Occupational health: Exploring mental wellbeing in the UK workforce

Mental health is universal, but employee wellbeing is not equal.

On paper, 2022 meant the dawn of a new (if slightly-belated) era: the 'Roaring Twenties'. Sure, Covid still existed, but its impact on our daily lives had shrunk from all-consuming to mildly irritating. And, much like how society rebounded post-Spanish Flu in the 1920s, this was our moment to reclaim lost time. Relish new experiences. Spend money. Live.

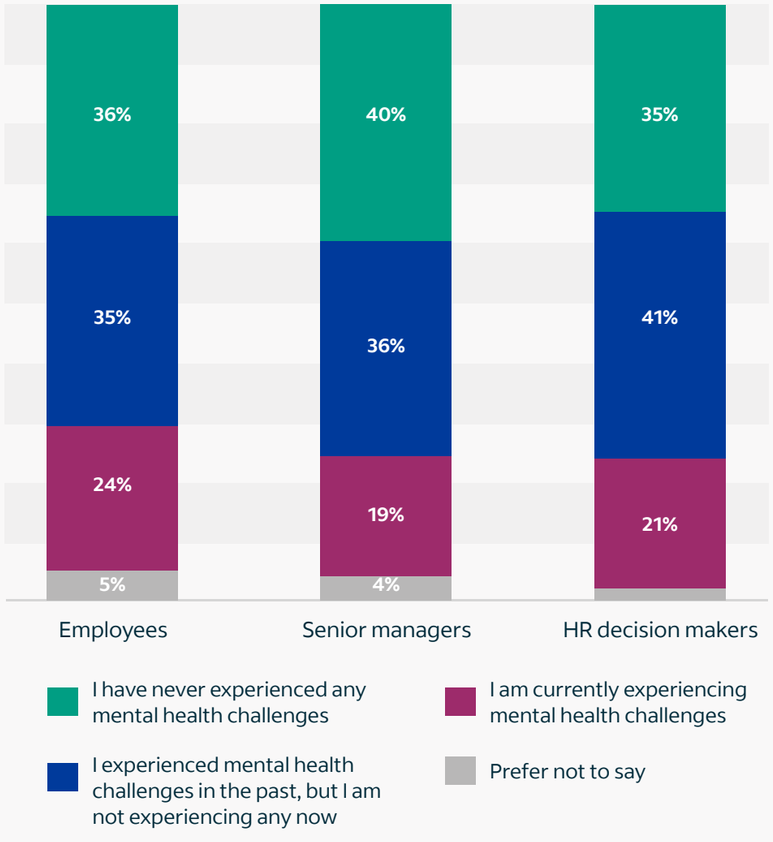
Yet within weeks of Big Ben's bongs, Europe was plunged into war. Though it unfolded on Ukrainian soil, it broke hearts and frayed nerves around the world. At the same time, a creeping cost-of-living crisis began to bite. With inflation at a three-decade high, the soaring cost of fuel, household bills and food is plunging more into poverty (which could peak at 16 million—nearly 1 in 4 people—by 2023). Today, a bleak new buzz phrase has emerged, as far too many UK families face a dismal choice: heating or eating?

Such continued tumult will have an obvious, and ongoing, impact on the UK's state of wellbeing. And, as you'll see from Indeed's in-depth survey with YouGov—that quizzed employees, senior managers and HR decision-makers on many mental health matters—modern life remains a challenge.

Most have experienced mental ill-health

Six in 10 UK workers (59%) are either facing mental health challenges right now, or have done in the past. Within this, 1 in 5 senior managers and HR decision-makers are currently experiencing mental ill-health, as well as a quarter of all employees.

More than half from all audiences say they are either currently experiencing or have previously experienced mental health challenges

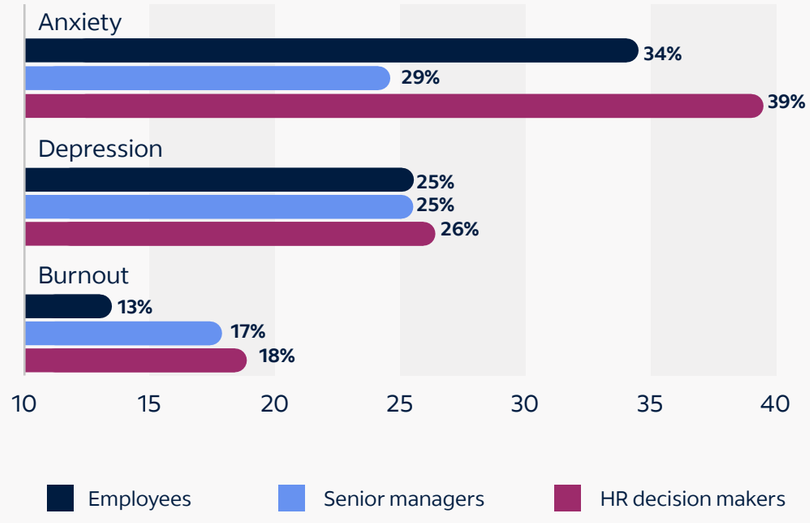


Q. Which of the following best describes your own personal mental health? Please select one.

As for specific disorders, 4 in 10 HR decision-makers (39%), a third of employees (34%) and 3 in 10 senior managers (29%) have experience of anxiety. This is followed by depression—around a quarter for all three audiences—and burnout (employees: 13%; senior managers: 17%; HR leaders: 18%).

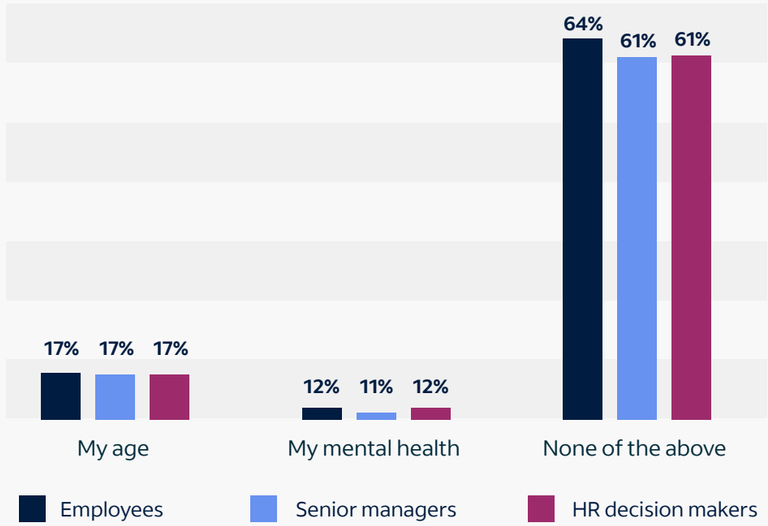
Every company should see this as a metaphorical distress flare. As the data shows, mental illness is not something that unfolds on the fringes of society, or is untethered to the smooth running of a modern workplace. In fact, not only does everyone have mental health (in the same way they do physical health), the majority have experienced a challenge.

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition respondents have faced, followed by depression. Burnout is also frequently mentioned, with incidence of this higher among the senior manager and HR audiences



Q. What kind of mental health challenge/condition(s) did you experience/are you experiencing? Please select all that apply.

Over three-fifths of all respondents say they face no barriers in their job



Q. Which of the following, if any, do you feel are currently a barrier for you in your work? Please select all that apply.

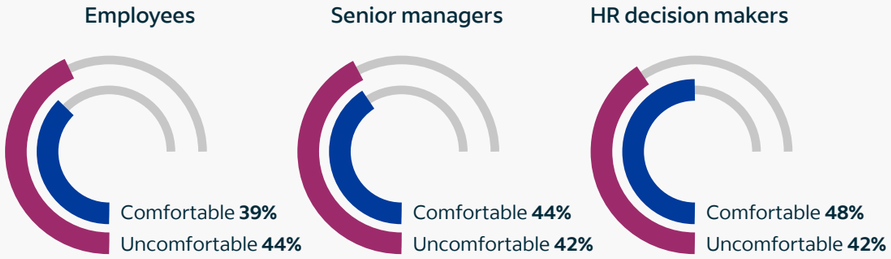
And, while there are bright shoots within the stats—over three-fifths of all respondents (62%) say they face no barriers in their job, and even the most common hurdle, age, is cited by just 17%—digging deeper into the data tells a mixed and blurry picture.

31%

31% of 18-24 year-olds see mental health as a barrier at work. In contrast, just 2% of those aged 65+ agree

Fear and stigma still exist

Despite huge leaps forward, our data shows mental health conversations at work are still not yet the norm



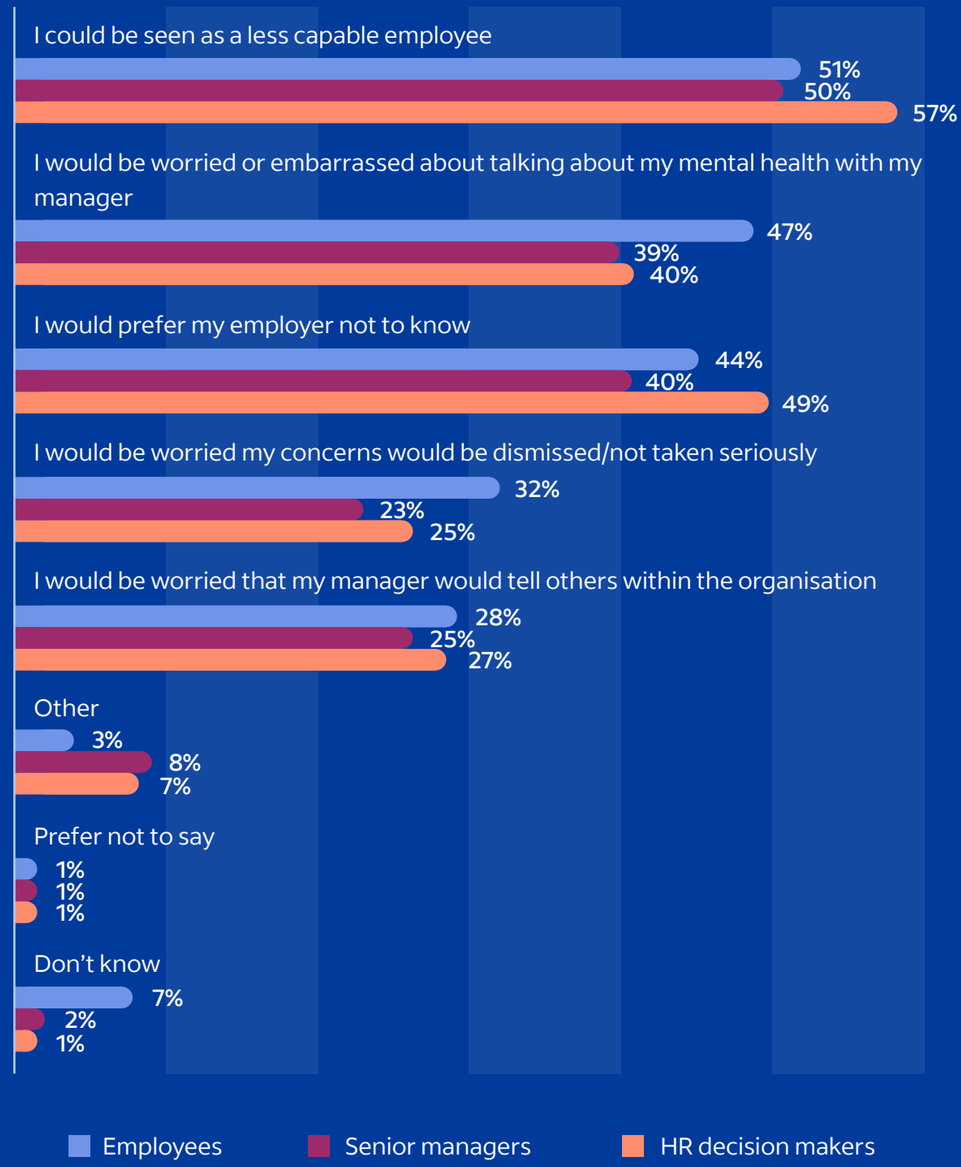
Q. To what extent would you feel comfortable telling your manager you were suffering from poor mental health?

Respondents are split on whether they'd be happy to tell a manager about their poor mental health—44% of employees are 'somewhat' or 'very' uncomfortable, with the opposite true for senior managers and HR decision-makers (44% and 48% respectively, say they'd be happy to).

Asked why they wouldn't feel comfortable confiding in a manager, over half (all audiences) point to a fear of being seen as less capable. Some 47% of employees say they'd be embarrassed, and 49% of HR leaders would prefer their employer didn't know. Maybe most troubling is that at least 1 in 4 worry their manager wouldn't take it seriously, or tell others within the organisation.

Altogether, these findings underline the importance of wellbeing words being matched by real, tangible action. Put another way—a so-called 'conversational culture' soon crumbles if half the workforce is ashamed to talk, or fear that honesty might hurt their career.

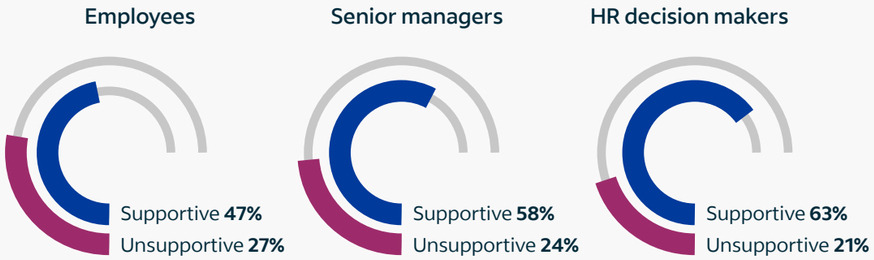
Being seen as a less capable employee is the biggest reason respondents say they would not be comfortable telling their manager about poor mental health. Embarrassment and fears their concerns would be dismissed are also frequently cited.



Q. You say you would feel uncomfortable telling a manager you were suffering from poor mental health. Why is that? Please select all that apply.

Most staff feel their employer's support, but some (who need it) do not

Thankfully, respondents believe their employer supports their mental wellbeing in far greater numbers than those who don't



Sixty-three percent of HR leaders feel supported by their employer—three-times as many as those who don't (21%). The gap is smaller among senior managers (58% feel supported, 24% do not) and employees (47% vs. 27%). This may nod towards HR's proximity to company wellbeing initiatives, or that messaging *from* HR still fails to reach every corner of modern companies.

And yet. Those who are currently experiencing mental health challenges are more likely to believe their organisation is unsupportive (39%) than the overall average (25%). This is a strong hint that supporting employees in times of mental health is a low bar, yet it's the point of mental illness that firms are truly tested. And, though it should be celebrated that many organisations succeed—some, it seems, are failing.

"I have instigated a number of policies, processes and a culture which supports employees."

—HR decision-maker

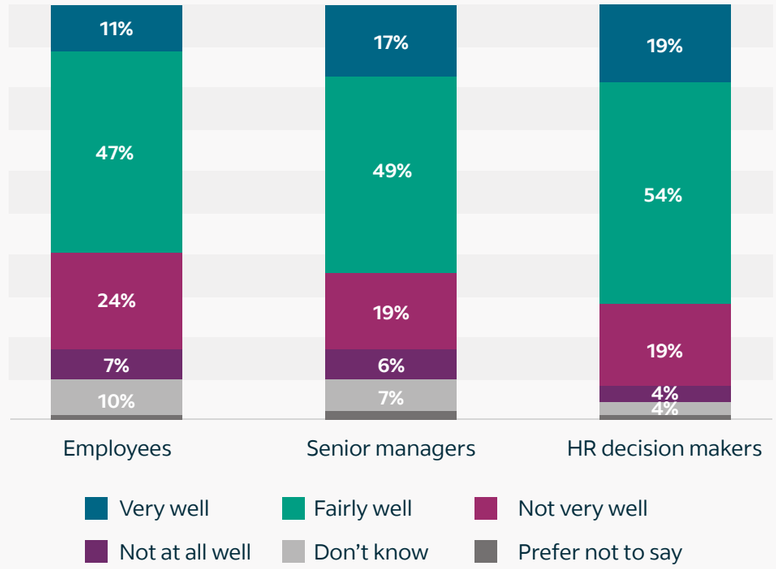
"They don't have any policy in place and I am not confident that they would care about me in the event of a crisis."

—Employee

"Signpost is there but unsure it is clearly promoted and employees understand the details." —Senior manager

Peer-to-peer support is solid

More cheerful news: the UK workforce feels well-equipped to help a colleague in distress

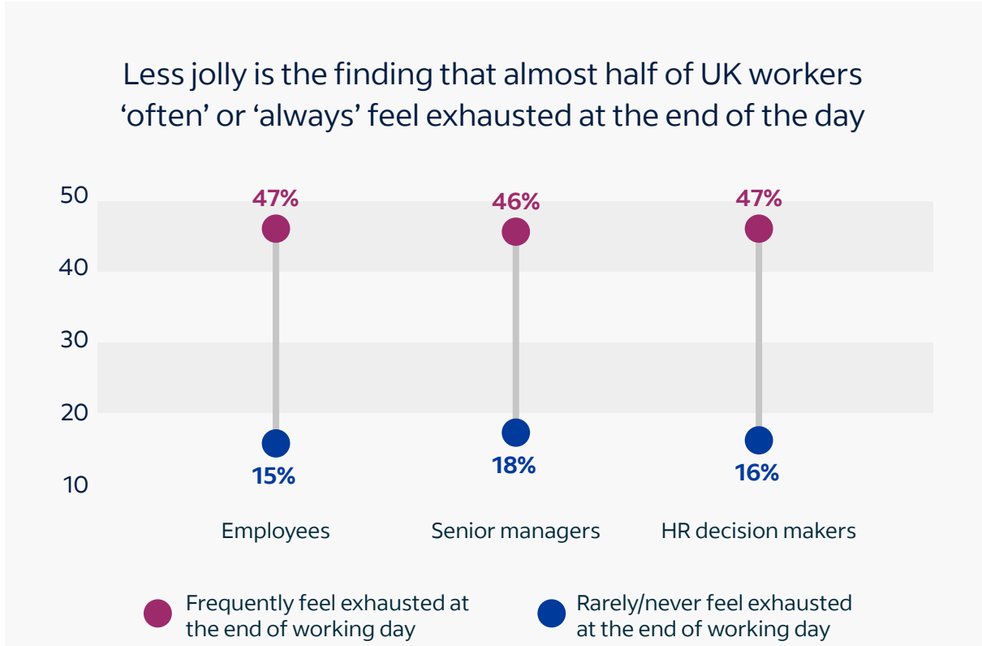


Q. How well equipped do you feel to be able to support an employee or colleague who is struggling with their mental health?

Nearly 6 in 10 employees (58%) feel 'fairly' or 'very' well to support a workmate's wellbeing, with two-thirds (65%) of senior managers and three-quarters (73%) of HR decision-makers confident in their ability to assist.

As before, the sliding scale of data—where HR folk feel best equipped, and employees the least—is noteworthy. Does this imply that part of the HR function is to provide psychological support? That corporate awareness and information campaigns are lacking in scope or impact? Or that employees don't get (but do need) the same mental health education afforded to HR leaders and senior managers?

Nearly half the workforce is worn out—and it's making things worse at home



Q. How often, if at all, would you say you feel exhausted at the end of a working day?

Exhaustion rates are consistent among employees (47%), senior managers (46%) and HR decision-makers (47%), with the most negative consequences unfolding *outside* the workplace.

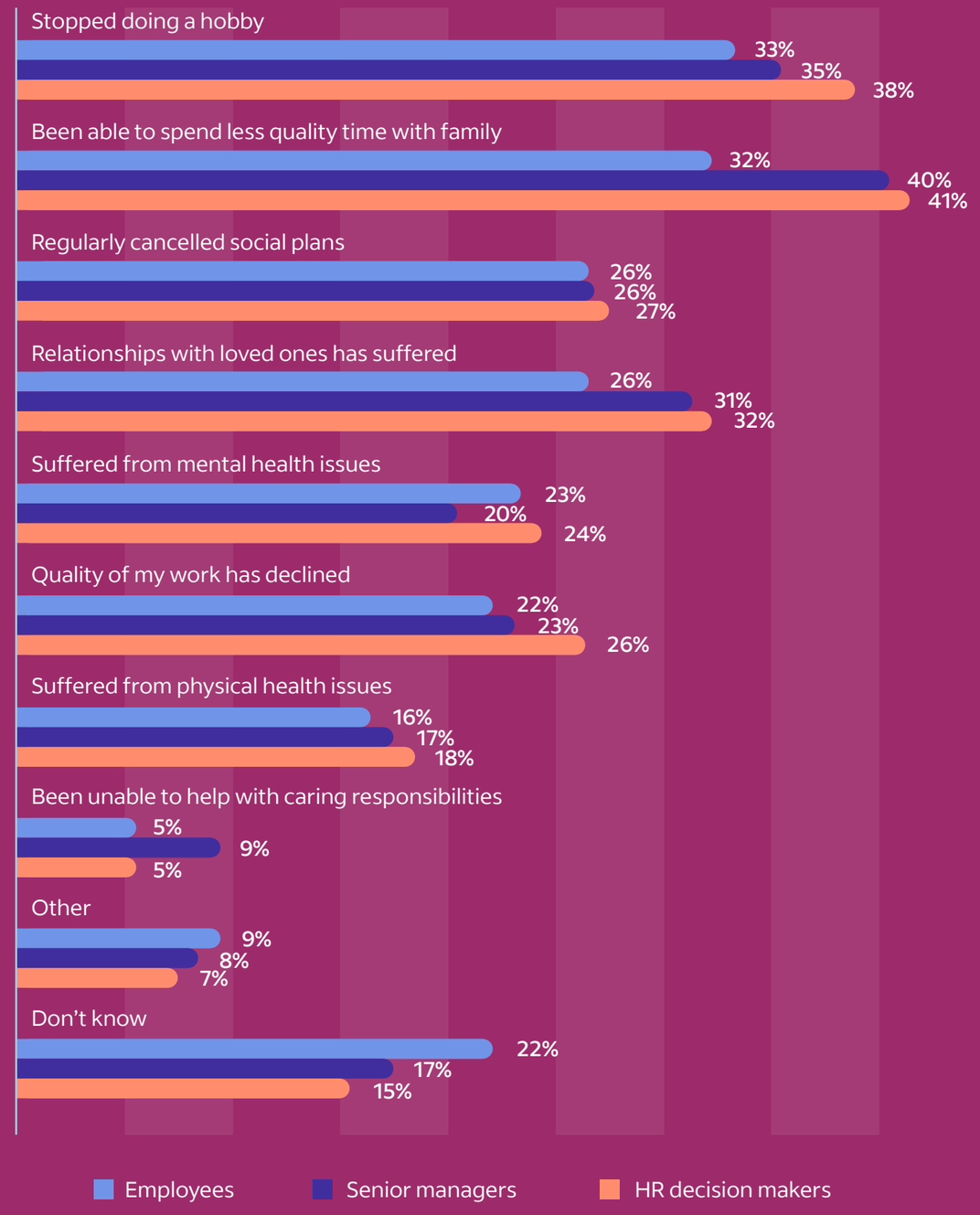
A third of respondents claim exhaustion has stopped them taking part in a hobby, while 4 in 10 HR leaders and senior managers (plus 3 in 10 employees) admit this means they spend less quality time with friends and family. A quarter regularly cancel social plans. Nearly a third of senior managers and HR decision-makers (plus a quarter of employees) say relationships with loved ones have suffered.

Any one of these can make for a worse state of wellbeing. Yet quizzed on their mental health specifically, almost a quarter of HR decision-makers and employees (and a fifth of senior managers) say work-related exhaustion has led to mental health issues.

Likewise, though any of the sad outcomes mentioned could rebound back to the workplace itself, more than 1 in 5 employees/senior managers, and a quarter of HR leaders, say exhaustion from work affects the quality of their work.

What does this all mean? The UK—indeed, much of the world—has a major issue with overwork. Sadly, fixing it will take a seismic shift that's equal parts structural and cultural.

Most negative consequences of feeling exhausted after a working day are unfolding outside the workplace



Q. Which of the following, if any, have applied to you as a result of exhaustion at the end of a working day? Please select all that apply.

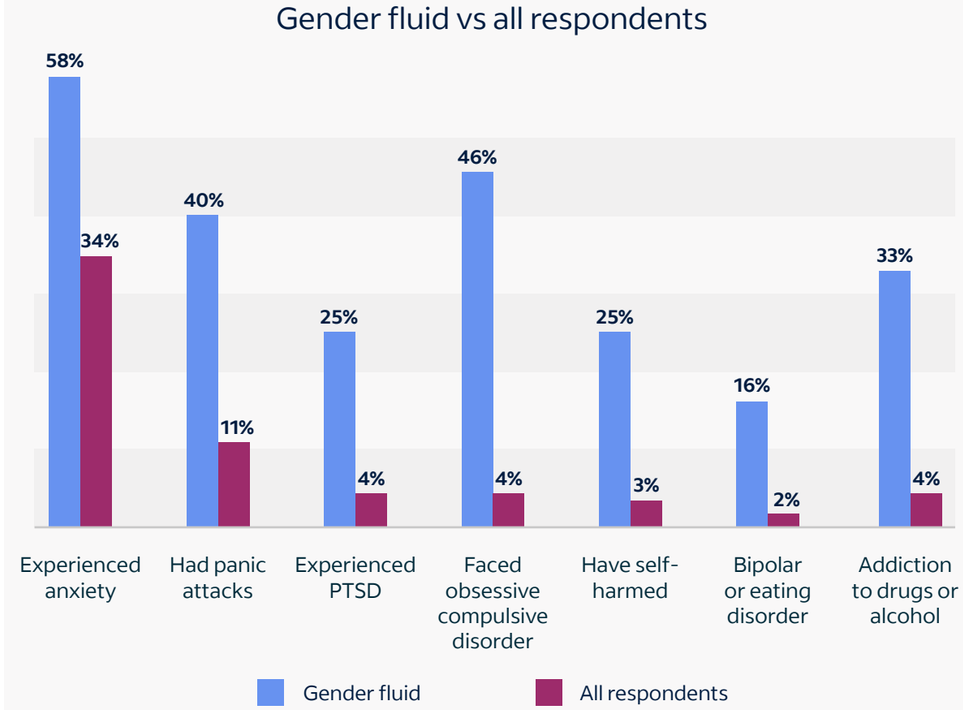
Gender is a spectrum of experiences

According to survey-takers, there are far higher rates of anxiety between the sexes: 45% for women, versus 25% for men. This disparity is shocking, although stepping beyond the gender binary shows an even greater gap.

Compared with 59% of all respondents, 96% of gender non-conforming people say they've faced mental health challenges. Of these, 7 in 10 (69%) are experiencing mental illness right now. Meanwhile, gender fluid people—that is, individuals flexible about their gender identity—have drastically higher rates of mental health problems.

A majority (58%) of gender fluid survey-takers have experienced anxiety, versus 34% of total respondents. Four in 10 (40%) have had panic attacks, versus 11%. And a quarter (25%) have experienced PTSD (vs. 4%). Nearly half (46%) have faced obsessive compulsive disorder—more than 10-times the all-respondent rate of OCD: 4%.

There's more. One in 4 (25%) gender fluid survey-takers admit to self-harm (vs. 3%), and 16% have bipolar or an eating disorder (vs. 1% and 3%, respectively). Last, though just 4 in 100 of all respondents report an addiction to drugs or alcohol, among gender fluid people this is 1 in 3 (33%).

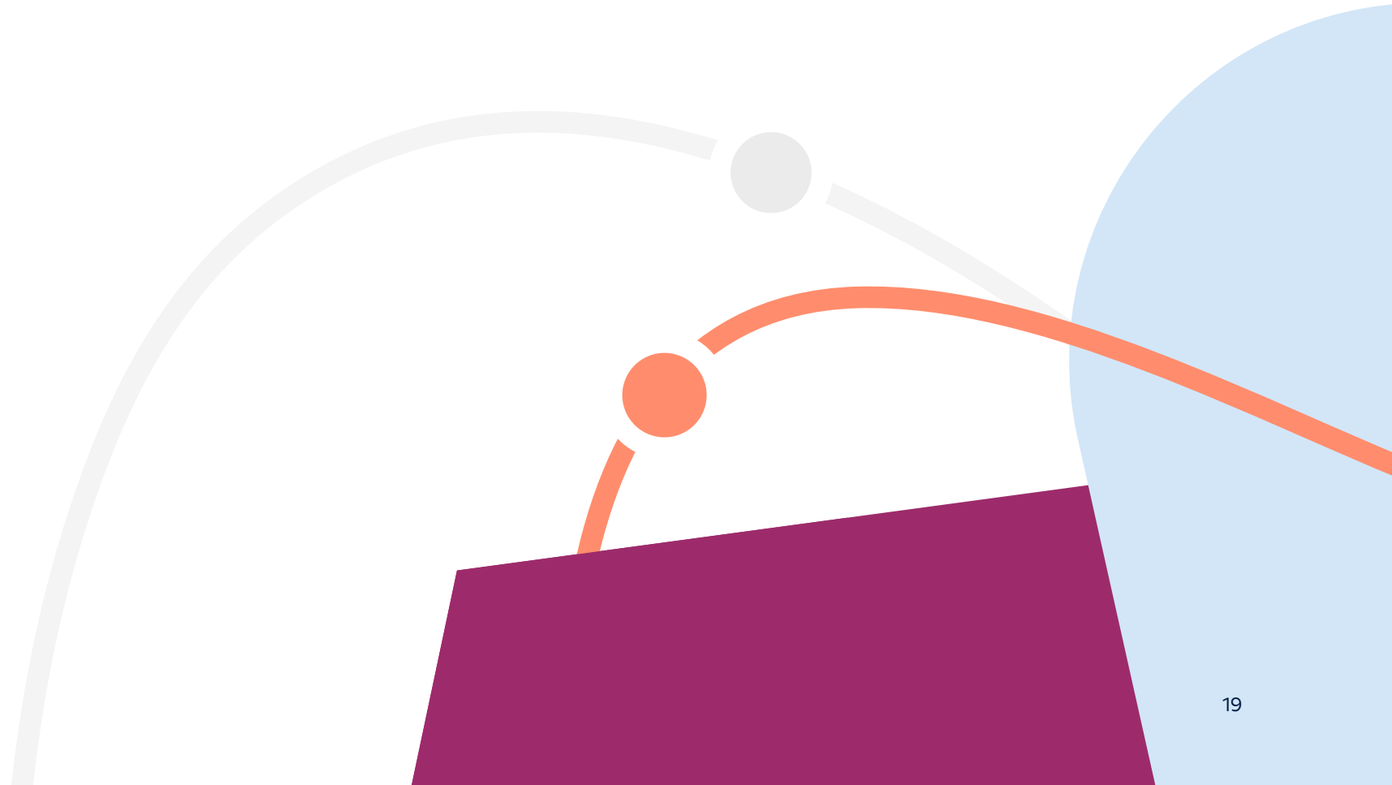


79%

79% of LGBTQ+ survey-takers have experience of a mental health challenge, and 30% frequently suffer from imposter syndrome at work

These stats are stark enough, yet when paired with the finding that survey-takers from these groups are more likely to see their mental health as a barrier at work, this suggests a systemic problem. For all respondents, just 1 in 10 (11%) flag mental health as a hurdle, yet among gender fluid people it's 20%, transgender respondents, 23%, and 32% for both gender non-conforming and non-binary survey-takers.

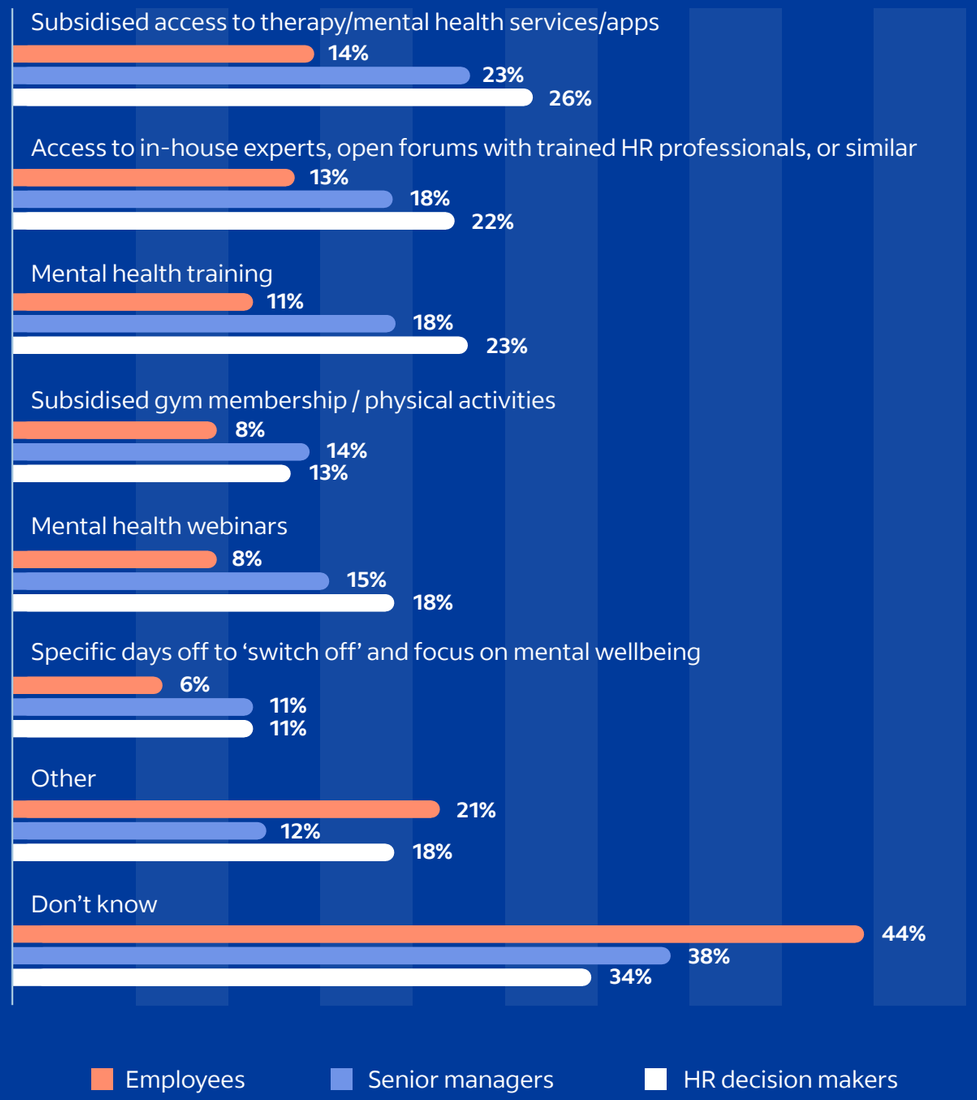
It's clear: workers with different gender identities are not getting the support they need. And, whether due to a lack of awareness, understanding or stigma, they are not thriving in our workplaces. There's no one-size solution, yet initiatives around training, belonging, or sweeping culture change, might make a gradual difference. Either way, it's obvious employers must do more to create a mentally healthy workplace—for everyone.



Corporate wellbeing has a comms problem

Our YouGov survey is a compelling read. In places, it's heartening yet, in others, distressing. Without question, the most awkward finding of all is this:

Question: *'Which of the following resources, if any, does your employer currently offer to support employees with their mental health?'*



Top answer: '*Don't know*'.

So popular is 'Don't know' with employees in particular (44%), it has more than three-times the responses than the next most popular answer ('subsidised access to mental health services or apps'—14%).

As explored earlier, this further fuels the idea that, for all their well-meaning investment, organisations aren't doing enough to spread the word about mental health initiatives. What's more, if you look past this embarrassing oversight, there also seems to be disconnect between the resources staff receive and the ones they want.

Just 1 in 20 employees (and 11% of senior managers/HR decision-makers) say their company offers dedicated 'switch off' days to focus on their mental wellbeing—the least common response. Yet the majority of respondents point to this as an effective resource to support staff mental health—with employees identifying 'switch off' days as the most effective.

Again, employers should view this supply and demand lapse as a warning that warrants urgent action. If you do not constantly speak with staff—in the form of engagement surveys, anonymous feedback, regular team meetings and one-to-ones—don't be shocked when you lose sight of how they feel.

But don't take it from us. Here's a sample of what YouGov survey-takers said, when asked about the one thing their employer could do to improve employee mental health:

"Address email overload. I work 12 hours most days and need to catch up at weekend. Web based meetings and email are a vast part of the problem."

—Employee

"Four day week. Wage rise to today's living cost."

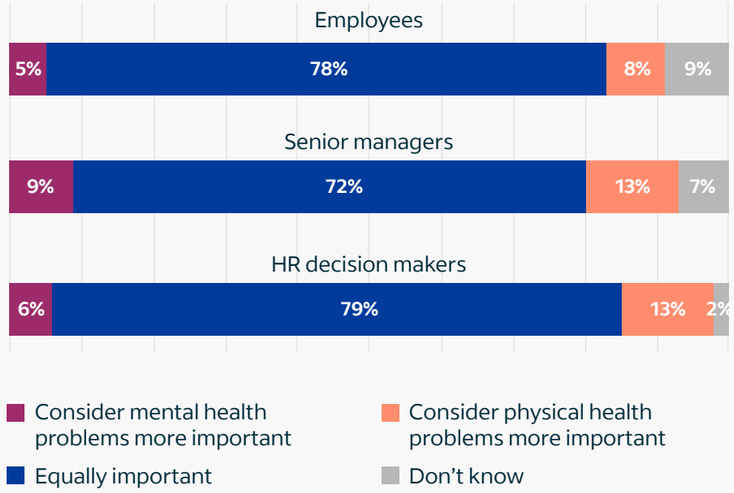
—Senior manager

"Allowing all employees to have a certain amount of days/hours they can utilise to improve their health or wellbeing. This would allow all staff to maintain good mental health and prevent or support bad mental health. This allocates them time to do something for themselves to promote a good working environment in the long term."

—HR decision-maker

Expectations, uncertainty, and evolution

4 in 5 HR decision-makers and employees (79% and 78%) believe society should view mental and physical health issues as equally important, while 7 in 10 (72%) of senior managers agree

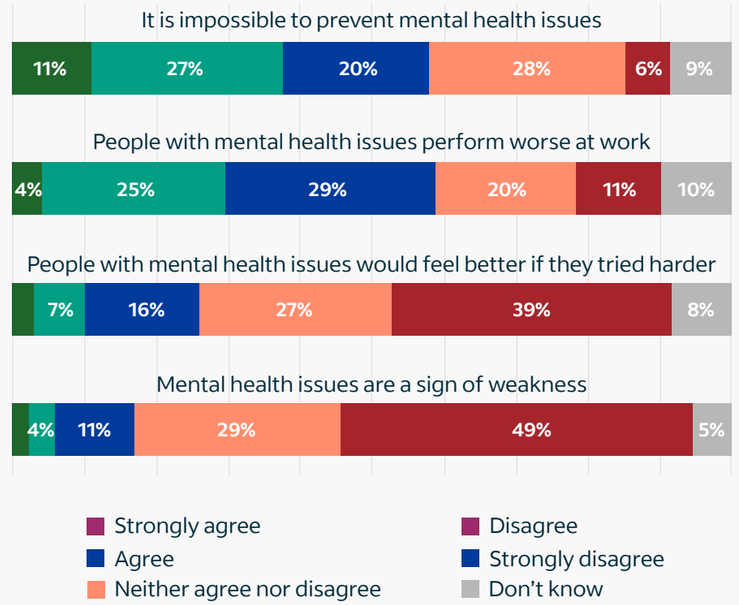


Q. When thinking about mental health and physical health problems, do you personally think society should…

The above feelings are flipped when respondents are asked how society currently thinks: 7 in 10 HR leaders say they believe society considers physical problems as more important, with 61% of employees and 65% of senior managers saying the same.

It's worth bearing in mind survey-takers are being asked to speculate about the collective mood of wider society, but these majorities do hint at a disconnect between today's workplaces and outside world.

Around two-fifths of employees think it is impossible to prevent mental health issues. Disagreement is higher than agreement for all other statements.



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about mental health issues?

That said, there's also uncertainty within organisations themselves. Some 38% of employees agree with the phrase 'It's impossible to prevent mental health issues', whereas 36% do not. Among HR decision-makers, 4 in 10 (40%) believe people with mental health issues perform worse at work, whereas 28% disagree. And just 17% of senior managers agree with the statement 'People with mental health issues would feel better if they tried harder', versus 60% who don't.

One clear sign that the wellbeing conversation has at last evolved beyond outdated stigma: the sizeable majorities for those who disagree that mental health is a sign of weakness. This is the case for 7 in 10 senior managers (70%), as well as 4 in 5 HR decision-makers (79%) and employees (78%).

More than 1 in 10 employees (13%), and 1 in 5 senior managers/HR leaders (18% and 20%) admit they ‘always’ or ‘very frequently’ feel like a fraud

Q. How frequently, if ever, do you think you suffer from imposter syndrome?

There are ‘imposters’ in every workplace

64%

64% of transgender survey-takers say they frequently experience imposter syndrome, which is drastically higher than the all-respondent average of 15%

Imposter syndrome—that is, feelings of self-doubt and failure, that override evidence of work-based success—is surprisingly common. More than 1 in 10 employees (13%), and 1 in 5 of senior managers/HR leaders (18% and 20%) admit they ‘always’ or ‘very frequently’ feel like a fraud.

Over a quarter (28%) of media professionals, for instance, experience imposter syndrome

Going deeper, the issue of imposter syndrome produces some fascinating data points. Over a quarter (28%) of media professionals, for instance, experience imposter syndrome—which is close to double the average rate (15%). Some 23% of Londoners ‘always’ or ‘frequently’ feel a fraud, compared with 12% of Scottish respondents, and 11% of those in Northern Ireland.

Nearly twice as many women (21%) suffer from imposter syndrome as men (12%), while millennial respondents (25-39 years old) are the age group most likely to feel like frauds: 27%. As for workers aged 65 and up, just 3% regularly suffer from imposter syndrome.

All of these stats are dwarfed by transgender survey-takers, however—a massive 64% of whom admit to regularly feeling like a fraud. This is almost 4.5-times higher than the all-respondent rate (15%), which again speaks to the intricate, intersectional role of wellbeing. And, as ever, this underlines the need—and complex challenge—for organisations to make every worker feel truly welcome and valued.

Of the many negative effects of imposter syndrome, procrastination and working longer hours both score high, alongside respondents not applying for a new external job, or going for internal promotions.

3%

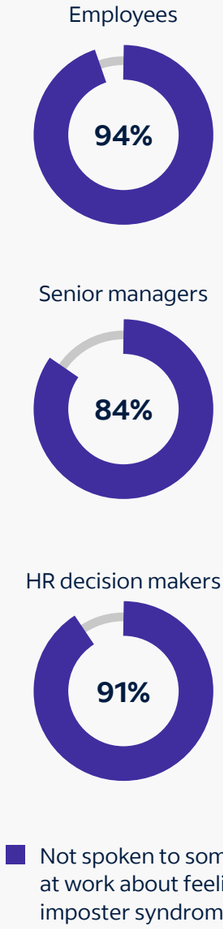
Just 3% of respondents aged 65 and above regularly experience imposter syndrome, vs. 27% of millennials

While imposter syndrome is, by nature, felt on a personal level, smart organisations will look past their perceived powerlessness to proactively tackle the issue. As, though it's scary that 94% of employees say they haven't talked about imposter syndrome with anyone at work (the same is true for 91% of HR leaders, and 84% of senior managers), this represents an open invitation for firms to lead—and start the conversation.

Around 7 in 10 say they feel supported to overcome the negative impacts of imposter syndrome.

In fact, YouGov's survey data backs this up. Among the small number of survey-takers who have reached out to their employer, around 7 in 10 say they feel supported to overcome the negative impacts of imposter syndrome.

The vast majority of those that have experienced imposter syndrome have not spoken to anyone about it at work.



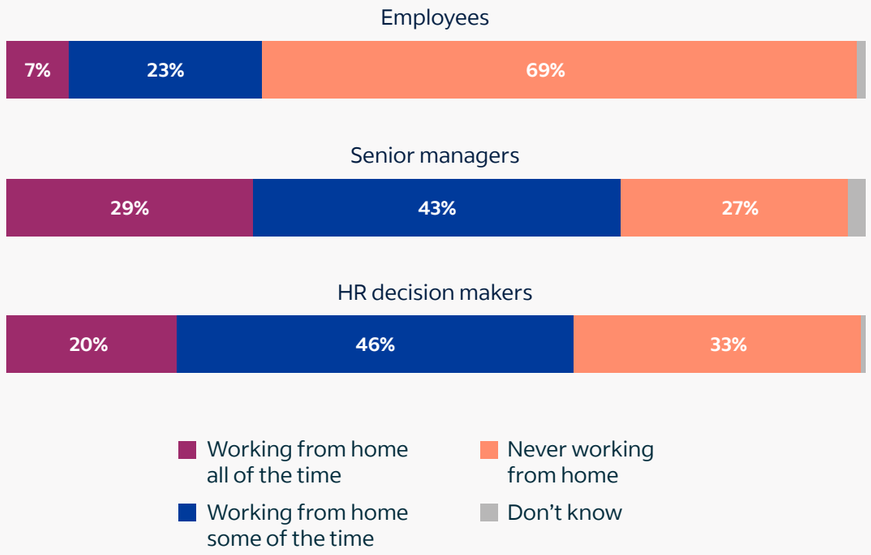
Is homework becoming a high-ranking luxury?

In last year's Working on Wellbeing report, YouGov data showed virtually all employers (94%) saw their shift to remote work as a success. Meanwhile, the bulk of respondents (60%) had a positive experience of WFH. Now, with companies no longer bound by Covid rules, the reality is not only different, but uneven.

Today, 7 in 10 employees (69%) never work from home. This is a major contrast to senior managers and HR decision-makers—72% and 66% of whom WFH some or all the time. While it is worth bearing in mind that not every workforce can accommodate remote work, these findings are cause for alarm.

There's an argument that, a mere two years after the working world embarked on a mass WFH experiment, the conclusion some businesses have come to is that homework is a tremendous idea—though only for a privileged few.

Managers and HR decision makers are most likely to say they are working from home at least some of the time, with over a third of employees saying they never work from home.



Q. What best describes your current working situation?

The workforce favours flexibility

All audiences say their ability to be flexible is what's most improved as a result of WFH. This is the case for 66% of employees, 7 in 10 senior managers (72%), and three-quarters of HR decision-makers (75%).

Quality of work-life balance and the chance to spend time with family also enjoy sizeable majorities—with HR decision-makers, in particular (70% see these as a homeworking bonus).

This thirst for flexibility is evident elsewhere in our data. Over half of respondents from all groups (57%) say they'd ideally work two or three days in the physical office. Tuesday and Wednesday are the most popular 'in-office' days (6 in 10, across all audiences), with just 1 in 5 keen to come to HQ on Friday.

When asked which group most benefits from a shift to hybrid work, respondents are unanimous that it's working parents, followed by single parents. In third, employees and senior managers point to disabled workers, while HR decision-makers feel introverted workers benefit slightly more.

	Employees	Senior managers	HR decision makers
Working parents	42%	45%	54%
Single parents	33%	36%	40%
Workers with disabilities	26%	26%	31%
Introverted employees	25%	23%	32%
Older employees (i.e. those aged 55 and over)	17%	13%	11%
Female employees	6%	10%	9%
Senior management	5%	7%	7%
Employees from disadvantaged backgrounds	5%	4%	4%
Younger employees (i.e. those aged 24 and under)	4%	5%	3%
Extroverted employees	2%	3%	3%
Male employees	1%	3%	2%
Employees from minority ethnic backgrounds	1%	2%	1%
LGBTQ+ employees	1%	2%	0%
Other	2%	3%	2%
Don't know	31%	23%	19%

Q. Which of the following groups, if any, do you think has / will most benefit from a shift to hybrid working? Please select up to three.

Notably, all audiences identify extroverts as the group most disadvantaged by hybrid work measures, followed by younger employees and workers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Employers should pause and reflect on these findings. While many will have committed to hybrid work, and others to fully remote, there'll be some who snapped back to the 'old' normal. If so, ask why. Is it as staff crave camaraderie? (It's valid—half of respondents see this as a drawback of WFH.) Or just because?

Organisations must be mindful of unfair treatment. Whether that's forcing employees back to the physical office—while senior staff are afforded flexibility—or ignoring the varied benefits many groups enjoy when working from home.

Staff might not have the power to reintroduce flexible working on their own but, if their employer doesn't offer the right balance, they may feel empowered to seek it out—at a new company.

	Employees	Senior managers	HR decision makers
Extroverted employees	27%	28%	38%
Younger employees	20%	27%	28%
Employees from disadvantaged backgrounds	12%	12%	12%
Senior management	7%	10%	9%
Older employees (i.e. those aged 55 and over)	7%	7%	10%
Introverted employees	7%	9%	9%
Workers with disabilities	4%	4%	5%
Single parents	3%	4%	3%
Employees from minority ethnic backgrounds	2%	3%	3%
Working parents	2%	3%	3%
Female employees	2%	3%	2%
Male employees	2%	4%	2%
LGBTQ+ employees	1%	2%	2%
Other	2%	3%	2%
Don't know	47%	36%	34%

Q. And which of the following groups, if any, do you think has / will be most disadvantaged by a shift to hybrid working? Please select up to three.

The cost-of-living is an oncoming (corporate) crisis

The timing of our YouGov survey (March 2022) came shortly before the energy price cap rose by 54%—and hit 22 million homes—on 1 April. Looking back over the past 12-months, respondents are split on whether their finances are 'worse', or 'the same' (41% of employees report either option, with just 15% saying 'better'). Though all agree the future is bleaker.

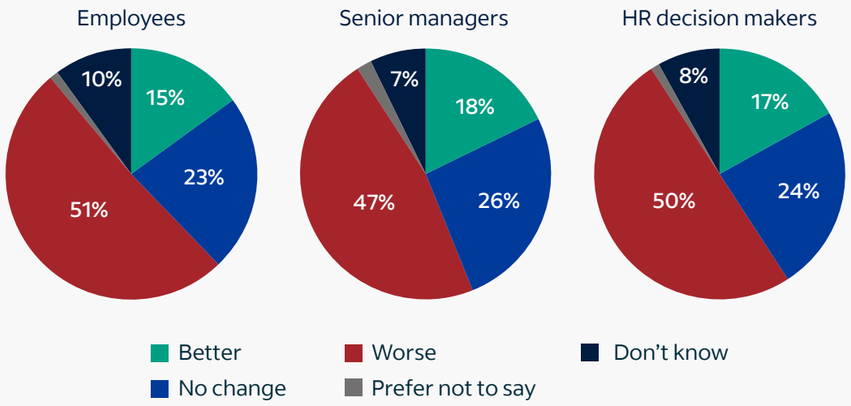
Each audience is far more likely to think their financial position will be 'worse' in a year's time than unchanged or better—with a small majority of employees (51%) saying so, and similar rates among HR decision-makers (50%) and senior managers (47%).

It'll surprise no-one that around 9 in 10 of all survey-takers say food, energy and fuel costs have increased, although the intriguing data surrounds what respondents feel companies should do about it.

A majority—6 in 10 employees, 51% of senior managers, 54% HR leaders—have neither received, or expect a pay rise. Among those who have had a salary bump, less than 1 in 3 (all audiences) say this matches or is above inflation, while a majority of those expecting a pay increase believe it will be under the projected 7% rate.

Fact is, a huge part of the UK workforce will be poorer in 2022. The question for employers is: does the burden to fix this fall on workers? Politicians? Economists? Or organisations themselves?

Looking forward, all groups are pessimistic; all are most likely to anticipate their financial position will have worsened 12 months from now



Q. How do you think your household's financial situation will have changed 12 months from now?

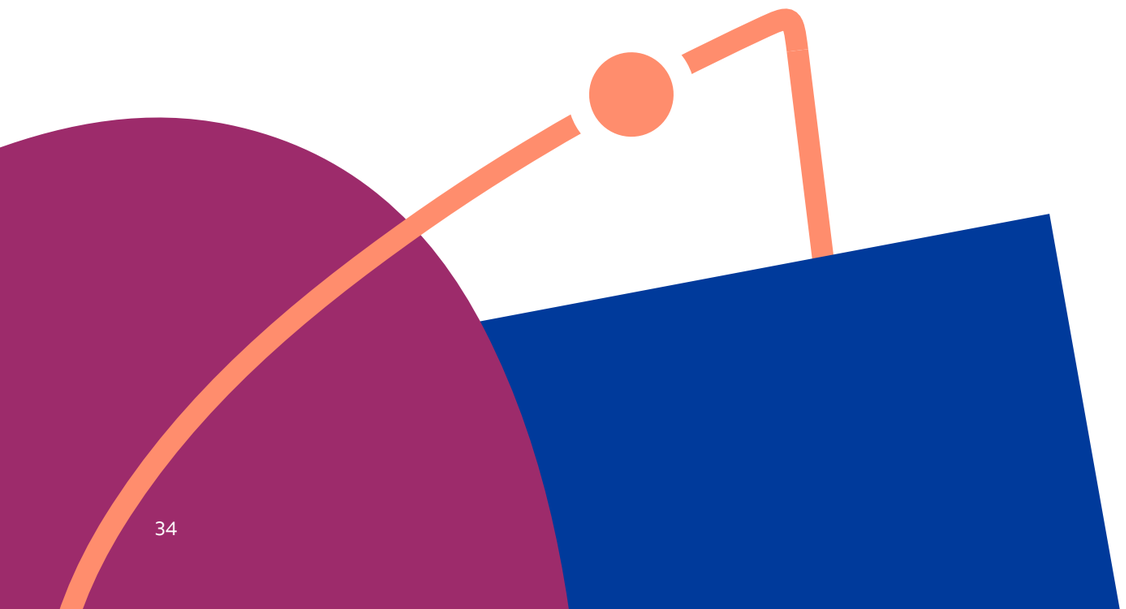
Despite advanced warnings for the looming crisis it seems, so far at least, that the vast majority of employers hope someone else will stump up a solution. Over 8 in 10 employees (86%)—plus 7 in 10 senior managers or HR leaders—say they've been offered no extra help to combat the cost of living. And the majority of employees and HR leaders do not feel supported by their employer.

A greater number of employees feel a pay rise would have no bearing on their loyalty (55%) than those who do (43%).

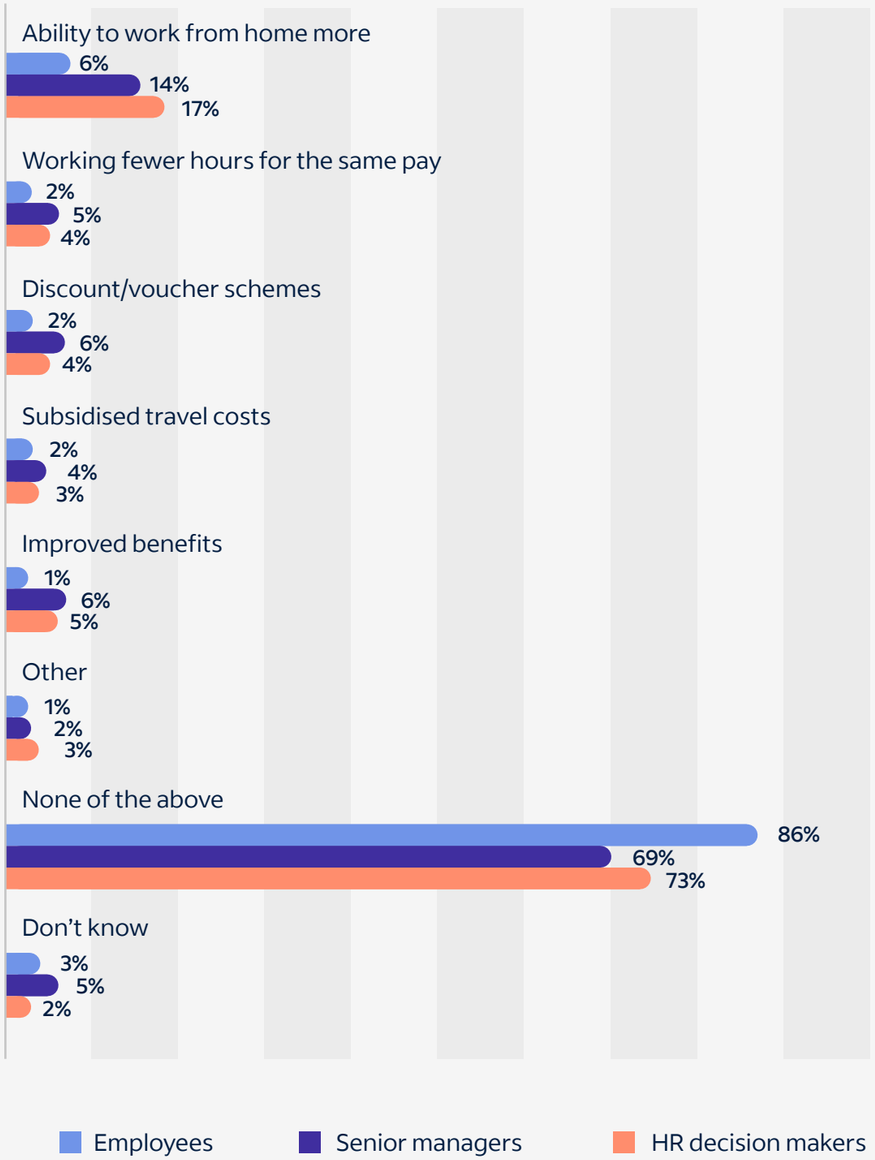
Yet demand definitely exists. Of the small sample who do have access to additional measures, 84% say improved benefits (e.g. childcare support, pension, parental leave) are effective, with equally high approval for subsidised travel (83%), working fewer hours for the same pay (80%), and the ability to work from home more (73%).

These findings are possibly instructive that workers feel it is an employer's duty to act—not a welcome favour. While 60% of senior managers and 59% of HR decision-makers say a pay rise would make them more loyal to their employer, a decent chunk (40% of senior managers; 42% of HR leaders) say this would have no impact. In fact, a greater number of employees feel a pay rise would have no bearing on their loyalty (55%) than those who do (43%).

So, while there is no legal requirement for organisations to step in and help staff struggling with the current crisis, the absence of major intervention on a governmental level suggests employers could well have a part to play—maybe on a financial basis, but also a moral one.



Being able to work from home more is the most frequently offered help for employees handling the cost of living crisis, although the vast majority have offered nothing



Q28. Has your employer offered any of the following to support employees with the increase in cost of living? Please select all that apply.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Reasons to be cheerful: The strategic power of Work happiness

Once viewed as a ‘nice to have’, employee happiness at work matters, making it critical for not only the individual, but for business success.

It’s important to staff

According to the Indeed workplace happiness study conducted by Forrester, 72% of jobseekers said happiness data is important in informing their job search. And a massive 9 in 10 (92%) confessed happiness at work affects their mood at home. There’s no real argument to add here—the data does all the heavy lifting. If happiness matters to such an overwhelming chunk of employees, leaders taking notice is not an option. It’s a necessity.

Understanding employee happiness to guide company strategy

A powerful employee listening approach—e.g. staff surveys, one-to-ones, anonymous feedback—gives employers a live and responsive look at their workforce’s mindset. Data on dimensions of Work Happiness, recently launched in the UK can help company leaders identify areas of opportunity to improve employee wellbeing. Further, knowing what makes people happy at work allows managers to deliver just that and, as a result, empowers employees to thrive. Such detailed insights can help company leaders make company decisions—small and big, short- and long-term—based on fact, not gut feeling.

“Happiness is an accumulation of smaller moments—be it joy, pleasure, meaning or purpose—that add up. In the workplace, if you can create happy moments for your workforce, that’s going to help everybody.

“But also, it’s about having a group of people who trust each other, who work towards and believe in the same cause, and who feel valued, responsible, trusted and necessary within that network.”

Dr. Julie Smith—Clinical psychologist, and author of Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?

Happiness shapes recruitment *and* retention

In the Forrester study, 42% said their expectations around happiness at work have increased over the past five years. Even more revealing—after pay, a lack of workplace happiness is the leading reason employees would consider a new opportunity. For organisations to retain—and recruit—top talent, it's clear, putting people first is key. Now, and in future.

Wellbeing as a business priority is an all-win scenario

Wellbeing initiatives used to be a welcome perk. A meditation app here. A gym pass there. Free bananas all round. Yet armed with the dual insight that wellbeing investment nets a 5:1 return, and Oxford University research that shows happy employees are 13% more productive, there are oodles of measurable upsides for businesses. As for employees? Well, they're happier and more productive, which in turn boosts their chance of better, all-round wellbeing.

"Caring about the happiness of your employees is definitely the right thing to do. Although my gut tells me the way to care is not to focus on injecting happiness into the workplace, but by making a contribution to your employee's lives. Such as the work they do, and the lives they're able to live around their work. This starts with the whole 'why' of the organisation in the first place—why you're doing what you're doing."

Oliver Burkeman—author of Four Thousand Weeks

"Research has shown that happiness is a cause of success: happier people receive more positive reviews, are more productive, creative, earn higher incomes and are less likely to burn out or be absent from work. Happier people are also more likely to get and keep jobs."

Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky—Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Vice-Chair at the University of California, Riverside

Where to go from here?

Starting new things are daunting. But don't worry—you're likely already doing loads to make your employees happy, which means it's already begun. And, don't forget: people don't expect perfection, just progress.

Discover what drives wellbeing—and the impact it can have on your workplace and business—here.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Power to the *people* people: The importance of HR leaders

We didn't clap them on our doorsteps, but be in no doubt: HR helped steer organisations through the pandemic. More so than most CEOs, people leaders were on the WFH frontline—in many cases, drawing up strategy in real time—while also serving as a compassionate, human resource for a frightened and anxious workforce.

Below, HR expert CJ Green unpacks the importance of these lesser-known heroes, why they should have no fear when eyeing exec roles, and the big challenges facing the people function, post-pandemic.

I'm a HR professional by background, so I've done people roles most of my career. I was lucky enough to end up in an organisation that was growing rapidly—when I joined, there were 2,000 people, and 27,000 when I left—yet had pretty much no people function, so I helped build it. We grew, both organically and acquisition-wise, and then I took over as CEO.

I never imagined I would become the CEO. I remember being in South Africa, when I was asked if I'd consider it and thinking, 'What a nonsense'. But I was in an environment where if you worked hard, and leaned in, it was recognised and rewarded.

Should more HR people back themselves to be CEOs? One hundred percent. If that's what you want—perfect. And should organisations take that seriously? Absolutely. Because the pandemic has shown us that the people function can be far trickier than the other stuff within a company.

To all of the 'people people' who were on the front foot—out there supporting people during the pandemic—literally, you are heroes. It was a step into a breach that no one was used to. However, I do think we're in danger of reactionary measures because, as HR people, we had to react to what's happening.

Hopefully, we're not going to live in crisis for the rest of our born days, so the challenge now is having a strategic look to the future. How do we get people ready for something else? How do we convince them there is a different way of doing things? There's a whole load of muscle memory that the pandemic massively helped shift, but we've still got pockets of it to start chipping away at.

We've never lived in a more exciting time when it comes to HR, but I do think there's a danger, if we just stay fire-fighting, that we won't actually make a difference in how HR is viewed.

I'm in danger of being like an accountant who says they're 'Not a traditional accountant', because they know the whole profession is quite irritating. I don't think HR people are irritating, I think the profession gets bogged down in transactional work. Why? Because it can't figure out a way to make the transactional work be something else. That's the pain point for everybody.

All of us in HR world want to do more, but we get sucked back. You've got the basics right before you level up. I fear that's where HR ends up being, but if you can find a way to lift yourself above that, it's quite exciting.

Best practice is wonderful, but it's like the four-minute mile—someone ran it and then, all of a sudden, other people were able to. You are able to do what you can see, so I guess best practice works in that way. HR needs to go from a place of replicating what everyone else is doing, to thinking, 'In my business what will work is this'.

> "We need to find flexibility, we need to find wellbeing, we need to find all of the stuff we talk about, in a way that fits the organisations we're operating in."

I remember my business partner and I laughing at the notion of the 9-5—that makes zero sense in our context. What's happening now is we're all trying to find an approach that applies to absolutely everyone. We need to find flexibility, we need to find wellbeing, we need to find all of the stuff we talk about, in a way that fits the organisations we're operating in.

For years, I remember being very frustrated that almost every conversation was about 'HR's seat at the table'. Because while absolutely, if you're around the table you get to be in conversations you wouldn't normally be in, I think HR's obsession with, 'Am I around the table?' can distract from the work you need to do. I only have my own context to go on, but you make the biggest difference when you know what work needs to be done.

Yes, HR people can be CEOs. And HR having a seat around the table can be really powerful. But every individual context is very different. It's about what you are trying to do, who you are engaging with, how your board are—all of these little nuances and challenges. You have to take what is in front of you, work with it and make it something inspiring for people.

"You have to take what is in front of you, work with it and make it something inspiring for people."

I don't buy the idea that you can't engage some people. At the business I was CEO for, we had 27,000 relatively low-waged people—cleaners, caterers, security guards, the key workers who have been highlighted by the pandemic, but historically undervalued—but people are people.

Most people hate their job because their manager is awful. Now, if you help the managers be better, and upskill them, that will make organisations level up 100%.

It's a very perfect image, but why not try to give people something that helps them do the tough stuff a little bit better? That's what has the biggest impact on wellbeing in an organisation People don't show up to work, or raise grievances, because they don't have people skilled enough to handle what they're going through. Bluntly, if you can give people that, it makes a big difference.

A big challenge in HR is an overload of 'initiative-itis', where we are absolutely hell bent on the next project, the next initiative. Right now, people don't need big, blinking HR projects. They need micro moments that make them feel better.

We need to underpin everything with simplicity and sensibleness and calm, and that good human stuff—that helps people feel connected to the work they do.

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CJ Green *is Executive Director of BraveGoose, and co-creator of CleverGoose.*

PROFILE

Dr. Julie Smith

Clinical psychologist, and author of
Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?

Selfie-help: How bitesize mental health tips are reshaping social media

"I see social media like roads and motorways. It's not going anywhere, and is really useful if you know how to use it safely. We just have to educate people about the dangers."

Hi Julie, could you talk us through the work you do?

I'm a clinical psychologist, and worked in the NHS for about 10 years in adult mental health. Then, once I had children, I began a very small one-man band private practice, so I could manage my work around the family.

It was during that time that I was seeing lots of people coming to therapy [for the first time]. What some people don't realise is that a significant part of therapy is educational. You learn about how your own mind works, and how you can impact your mood and emotions. What I found was, once people learned that bit of information, they became so empowered to deal with their health outside of the sessions.

A lot of them said—and this is where the title of the book came from—'Why on earth has nobody told me this before?'

It's not rocket science—these tools are quite simple to learn and use. I used to come home and harp on to my poor husband about how this stuff should be more available—people shouldn't have to pay to come see people like me to find out basic information about how their own brain works. He said, 'Well, go on then, make it available'. We started to make a few YouTube videos, and put things on Instagram, and around the same time we discovered TikTok. This gave us this incredible reach to be able to connect with millions of people across the world.

You've amassed over 3 million TikTok followers, and more than 36 million likes. It's a platform best known for dance crazes, and popularity among Gen Z, yet you've sparked a whole new trend—the 'therapy influencer'. How did this happen?

Late one night, my husband showed me TikTok. It was all good comedy and light-hearted videos. We were sat there scrolling and laughing along, and he said, 'You should make some short videos'. Up until that point, we'd just done stuff on YouTube. I said, 'Oh, you can't fit that stuff into 60 seconds. Look at all these young dancers—I'll be laughed out of there'. But through that conversation, we decided we'd try it.

"It's quite something for people to click 'follow' on an account that's purely about mental health education."

There were lots of young people on there, expressing their distress, saying they were dealing with mental health issues, and we couldn't find any professionals on TikTok sharing education. I expected either lots of trolls or to be completely ignored and for it to be that little project we did once that fizzled out. Two years later, here we are with, I think, 3.5 million [followers] across all the platforms that we're on. Apparently, people were hungry for that information. It's quite something for people to click 'follow' on an account that's purely about mental health education.

TikTok has upped its max video length a few times, though most—yours included—are a minute or less. When explaining serious mental health topics, is this short-form nature an opportunity or obstacle?

It has enabled me to say things more succinctly. I'm often talking about concepts that might've taken 20 odd minutes to talk to someone about in therapy, but I'm learning to take out all the jargon and fluff, and just go with what the core message is. It was something that really used to annoy me when I was training—going through journal articles and research papers, where you'd have to read for half an hour, then try and decipher the core message, through overly scientific language that was probably not necessary.

How are you adjusting to your new life as a 'celebrity psychologist'?

For a shy introvert from a small town, it has absolutely been a whirlwind. But, because I've stayed true to the reason we started it, whenever something feels like it could be helpful, I say yes to it.

I wrote the book because lots of people were contacting me and saying, 'Give me more details. What's the step by step? How can I do that?'—all the stuff you can't fit into a 60-second video. I put all the details of how to put this stuff into practice into the book, then tentatively put that out into the world. Now, people are coming back saying, 'This book is changing my life', so if I have a chance to get it into more hands, then I've got to say yes to that too.

Yes, it has meant doing things that are really uncomfortable for me—like TV, radio and stuff like this—but I think if you're doing something based on your values, you're then more open to be able to enjoy it. So it's been pretty fun.

Your book is unashamedly about self-help—a much-derided genre. Given yours soared to bestseller status, amid glowing reviews, is the fact you have the expertise to back up your message a key difference?

I think maybe it is around that. The book is not based on any one clinical disorder—I'm quite clear about that, I don't separate it into diagnoses. It was really about saying: Hey, life happens to all of us. No one gets a free pass and comes out clean. It's a rough ride for everybody at different times. So I wanted to fill the book with the sorts of problems that we all face at some point. We all have periods of high stress or low mood, relationship problems, all those kinds of things, but there are tools that can help. These might be tools we teach to people who are suffering with severe depression, but they are also useful for all the rest of us, when we have those low days.

Therapy is by nature intimate, and expensive. At a time of record NHS waiting lists, where many can't afford private therapy, is the fact you can post mental health insights to millions around the world, for free, a motivator?

It is. Not in a way that's arrogant, or where I think I can fix everybody's problems. It's really a way to take this little corner of my world, with access to an arsenal of tools that me and the people I work with are finding really helpful, then making that as available as possible.

Although I am very clear—and I write this in the book's introduction—about how none of this takes away problems that are going to hit you in life. It doesn't make life easy. It gives you the tools to face the really hard stuff life throws at you. But gosh, if I can equip someone with one extra tool that changes their day, or slightly pivots their life in a way that's positive, then job done.

Social media is often seen as damaging to mental health—especially for young people (whether around the risks of cyberbullying, anxiety, self-harm or eating disorders.) As a psychologist, do you worry about these harms when posting on any platform?

It's always been an undercurrent I've been conscious of. I see social media as almost the equivalent of roads and motorways. They're not going anywhere, and are really useful if you know the rules of the road, how to use them safely. We just have to educate people about the dangers.

A few of my videos have been about reminding people that lots of things they see online aren't real. We can't deny the dangers around social media and the risks, but I felt like I couldn't sit in my therapy room seeing one person at a time, then complain everyone's attention was on this place where they were getting misinformation. What I thought was maybe I could get involved, and increase the chance that, if someone is scrolling, they come across my tips rather than someone else who isn't trained, for example.

It's really difficult, but I wouldn't sit at home and not use roads because I worry they're too dangerous for people. And while I don't let my kids go out and play in the road, I educate them about how to cross it, and how to use roads to their advantage—while also staying safe.

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You can follow Dr. Julie on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Learn, baby learn: The facts (and falsehoods) about burnout

Added to the WHO's International Classification of Diseases in 2019—and described as an "occupational phenomenon"—burnout is a legit workplace danger. But it's also massively misunderstood. Even science is unsure, with rates that range from 10-70%, depending on what study you read. In one survey, 96% of millennials claimed burnout impacts their daily lives. Here, Jonathan Malesic separates hot takes from cold facts.

What is burnout?

In the broadest sense, burnout is a chronic experience of being stretched between your ideals for work and the reality of your job.

Ideals can encompass expectations about what the work will look like—levels of autonomy, role, things like that—but also more abstract things, like the meaning you expect from work, or whether the work builds character. When there's a long-term gap between those ideals and the reality, you're at risk of experiencing burnout.

What are the warning signs?

There are three dimensions of burnout:

- **Exhaustion:** Familiar to many, though it's important to note the exhaustion of burnout won't necessarily go away with rest.
- **Cynicism (sometimes called depersonalisation)**: You are frustrated with the people you work with—treating them as less than the full human beings they are—or emotionally distance yourself, becoming cold and disengaged.
- **Ineffectiveness:** You feel like you're not achieving anything.

High scores on those three dimensions—which can be measured on a survey called the Maslach Burnout Inventory—will mean a classic case of burnout.

Where does the term come from?

The real start of burnout, as we understand it, was in the 1970s. Two psychologists—Herbert Freudenberger in New York City, and Christina Maslach on the West Coast—were working independently, but doing complementary research.

I think there's a reason why burnout appeared at that moment. Again, it was first identified in the US, where the economy and work culture was undergoing a major shift. What changed was we shifted from an economy primarily driven by manufacturing, to one driven by services. Spontaneously, wages stagnated in real terms for workers, for the first time since World War II, and they've still not really increased.

Work became much more intense—emotionally and psychologically. In a service economy, your emotions, your mood, your facial expressions, your patience, all of these internal factors become the means of production. Employers capitalise on more and more of who you are, and that exposes more and more of you, potentially, to burnout.

Where manufacturing employees would clock in and out, and work wouldn't follow you home, in the service economy work *absolutely* follows you home. I think that that's why burnout appeared when it did.

What do people get wrong about burnout?

Two big things. First, using the term without clarity about what it means. This is a problem, as you can't help the people suffering from burnout if you don't really understand what it is.

"Burnout isn't just tiredness, it's more than that."

Related to that is the misconception of equating burnout with tiredness, or the (legitimate) dimension of exhaustion. Burnout isn't just tiredness, it's more than that. And it's not super *tiredness*, either. The difference between burnout and feeling tired at the end of a particularly busy week is not quantitative, but qualitative.

Why do many people believe they're burned out?

We live in a society where not just hard work, but *overwork* is valued. We therefore have an incentive to claim burnout for ourselves because, if you're burned out, that's a signal you worked so hard that you destroyed yourself.

Hard work and overwork is a badge of honour. Claiming that you're burned out is a brag. People equate burnout with exhaustion, but there's two other dimensions. No one brags about how cynical they are, how mean they are to their co-workers, or how they feel like their work isn't accomplishing anything. We only brag about exhaustion.

It's why clarity matters. If the definition of burnout is really narrow, then fewer people get to claim it.

Extinguishing burnout: Top tips for employers

Survey the damage

To understand the role burnout might be playing in your organisation, you first need to find out what is going on. That could include a company-wide survey—like the Maslach Burnout Inventory—to observe patterns. Then, the next step is to get qualitative data. What do people say about their ideals for the work, and their actual experience of it?

"What do people say about their ideals for the work, and their actual experience of it?"

Look for patterns that reflect what Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter call the 'six areas of worklife' where burnout is most likely to appear: workload, reward, autonomy, fairness, community and values.

Speak to staff

Before you get to policies, there needs to be another layer of conversation. Obviously, this depends on the size of the organisation—you can't have the company-wide conversation with 20,000 employees—but on a smaller level, encourage departments and divisions to talk honestly about the experience of work.

This can be scary for both employers and employees, but frank conversations do need to happen. If you're worried, think about bringing in a third-party that can offer a safe space for people to talk openly. Then make changes based on that feedback.

Understand that culture fuels burnout (and structure—not self-care—is the solution)

Research indicates the biggest causes of burnout are in organisations. As a result, self-care is not the best solution. It's not totally useless, but the answer has to be bigger than, 'You're burning out, go and do some yoga'. That just adds to the burden.

Jonathan Malesic is a lecturer, speaker and author of
The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

How to set better boundaries

Today's workplace culture encourages overwork, wears burnout like a bleak badge of honour, and exploits all manner of focus hacks to achieve implausible productivity. Moving past this will take work, as well as a shift from personal to collective action. Our experts agree: this starts at the top.

Company leaders set the tone

"There's nothing original about this, but positive role modelling makes such a difference. Don't send emails at 11 o'clock at night, for example. Or at least include a note—as you see increasingly now—that you don't expect *replies* at 11 o'clock at night, just because you're choosing to send emails at 11 o'clock at night."

Oliver Burkeman
—author of Four Thousand Weeks

Be explicit about implicit rules

"Boundaries are personal and very easily eroded, whereas guardrails are structural. These are maintained by the institution, and are essential to protect against the runaway train of work and workism.

"We talk about company culture as explicit rules—of what you do and don't do in a company—but it's also implicit rules, of what is and is not accepted and promoted. So something like when someone is on PTO, you do not respond to emails. And if you do, then someone talks to you, like: 'This isn't what we do here'.

"Instead of being a way to show you're working harder, this actually becomes frowned upon, and is a negative attribute in terms of performance. Same with not taking PTO at all, same with sending emails outside of working hours."

Anne Helen Petersen
—co-author of Out of Office

Ensure the right staffing levels

"Hire enough people so that others don't have to overwork. Often, this comes down to resources and finances, but so much work stress would be solved if there was more manpower for certain tasks. Because it's meaningless to have a policy that you shouldn't email at weekends, if someone's workload is so great that they have no choice.

"Of course, it's senior people who have to make this happen. The people who are suffering often don't have the power to make such big, cultural decisions."

Dr. Lucy Foulkes—psychologist, speaker and author of What Mental Illness Really Is… (and what it isn't)

Let tech lead the way

"An example that gets discussed a lot—and there's actually been legislation about this in some countries—is the right to disconnect. It means no one is obligated to answer an email that comes in after whatever time, or when they have paid time off.

"There's some German company, Daimler, where if an employee gets an email while they're on vacation, it's automatically deleted, and you get an auto-reply saying, 'So and so is on leave, email them after such and such a date'."

Jonathan Malesic
—author of The End of Burnout

Reframe what 'hard work' really means

"For most of us, working longer hours means we are more devoted to our work. For companies that move to a four-day week, in contrast, professionalism is expressed by being good enough at your job to do it in four days, when the other guy needs five or six.

"What they're doing, in essence, is flipping the equation—and seeing themselves as being able to meet the challenge of doing challenging work in shorter periods.

"In just about every company I study, those periods of focus are counterbalanced with periods of leisure. So whether that's everybody having lunch together, or co-workers organically reassembling on Fridays to go hiking."

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang—author of Shorter

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Mental health *issues*: The problems (and possibilities) with 'raising awareness'

In a rare upside for a global health crisis, Covid helped supercharge a slow-yet-growing trend—making mental health talk the norm, both in and out of work. But awareness, on its own, can be meaningless. Or even dangerous. Dr. Lucy Foulkes* explains why, to make a real difference, organisations must act.

***As told to Indeed, via interview.**

Mental health campaigns are everywhere now. Many are led by the NHS or by charities, but there are also lots being run within companies around the world. Broadly, that's a good thing: a lot of people are suffering and need help.

But I don't believe we should just have more and more and more uncritical awareness around mental health. In fact, there might be such a thing as too much awareness. Especially if it's not awareness of the right thing.

It was my own experience of depression at university that got me interested in this subject. This was only 14 years ago, but mental health was shrouded in secrecy back then—no one talked about it. I've since worked as a mental health researcher, and over time I've found the conversation exploding around me.

When I first saw the campaigns and tweets, I asked myself: if these had been part of the conversation when I was unwell, would they have been useful? And I kept finding that the answer was no. I found a lot of the awareness-raising frustrating or alienating, and I really wanted to unpack why that was. That's why I wrote the book.

There's so much good intention—all this awareness comes from the right place, and in some respects it has been a good thing—but I'm very interested in the possibility that it's misfiring, or that there's been some collateral damage to all these efforts.

What's going wrong?

The first issue I found is that people are using psychiatric language both too broadly and too loosely. We've pumped out this language – for example, 'PTSD' and 'social anxiety disorder', but if you don't provide the necessary depth of awareness, these terms get co-opted by people who are really at the milder end of the mental health spectrum.

"The first issue I found is that people are using psychiatric language both too broadly and too loosely."

There isn't a clear black and white between a group of people who have PTSD and a group of people who are 'just' struggling in the aftermath of a really difficult event. But because that is complicated, and the knowledge isn't clear, what happens is that language that really should be saved for the people at the severe end of the spectrum is leaking down. So now, when anything difficult happens, people call it PTSD. For example, when people experienced low mood in the pandemic, there was a lot of discussion about that being depression. Obviously, for some people it was, but for lots of people it was just a 'difficult time'—which is perfectly normal.

This overuse of the psychiatric language has lots of consequences. One is that those terms lose value for the people who really need them. If *everyone* has PTSD, then what about the person who really has been in a situation or an accident in which their life is in danger and subsequently does develop PTSD? That label becomes undermined.

Another problem is that people at the milder end of the spectrum, who are using this terminology when perhaps they shouldn't, become unnecessarily burdened with the idea they now have a mental disorder, rather than a natural, transient—albeit difficult—experience. There are costs to absorbing a diagnosis for yourself, in terms of stigma, and your sense of when, and how, the problem will get better.

Another issue is that this has led to an awful lot of scepticism. There's been a surge in people admitting to having these difficulties, and when terms are co-opted by people who perhaps don't need them, there's a sense of, 'You can't all be unwell'. Ironically, you then have a situation where no one is believed, when the whole point of these campaigns was to get help to people who needed it.

Have times changed?

Time to Change wasn't the first mental health campaign, but it was the first that saw lots of celebrities coming forward—like Steven Fry and Ruby Wax—saying they've had mental health problems. It was born in 2007, but became more well known in 2011 when it launched a series of TV adverts, and promoted the statistic that 1 in 4 people in the past year will have experienced a mental health problem.

> "Suddenly, the conversation became so focused on the pandemic that everyone forgot what people were thinking about this before. "

It's delicate, because in so many ways Time to Change did trigger a useful shift in the conversation. I hope there is less shame now and more understanding, and there are some studies that suggest Time to Change did reduce people's stigma. But, in parallel with those benefits, there are genuine problems that may actually undermine the very thing those campaigns are trying to solve.

Pre-pandemic, there was an awful lot of worry, focus and articles that said young people are experiencing a mental health crisis. Then the pandemic arrived, and it was like, '*This* is causing a mental health crisis'. Suddenly, the conversation became so focused on the pandemic that everyone forgot what people were thinking about this before.

But the pandemic has definitely made people more aware that mental disorders do exist, that extreme forms of mental distress and dysfunction are potentially diagnosable as disorders—which can be a useful way of framing them—and that people with these problems need support and treatment. The campaigns in general have put the idea that there is such a thing as PTSD and OCD into the public consciousness. So in that respect, they has been useful.

Are employers responsible?

There remains a massive grey area—between people who are completely fine, people who have depression, and people across that spectrum who need different degrees of support. It's complicated, and it's not an employer's job to diagnose or make the call on what counts as sufficient distress, or what's worthy of support.

But to be an employer who is doing something truly useful, you really need to embed mental health awareness across your whole organisation. It is time consuming—and therefore, probably expensive—but is where the real-world impact lies.

Actions > words: How employers can upgrade their approach to wellbeing

Dr. Lucy Foulkes identifies what steps companies can take to deliver lasting change around employee mental health. (Hint: knowledge = power.)

Train staff on the truth about mental illness

This, in a way, is the straightforward bit: teach people what mental disorders actually are. They're not that rare—you'll come up against them one way or another across your life. So, if you go to your boss and say, 'I have bipolar disorder', ideally, they'll know what that means. Sounds obvious, but a basic level of understanding, and how it might affect a person's work, goes a long way to helping employees who have these problems.

The best training helps people respond to distress

This is the really tricky bit—which is why it usually gets glossed over—but training should teach people how to respond to distress or an admission of a mental health problem. It's easy to say, 'This is what active listening means' but, long term, are you actually supporting the individuals who have to listen to people in distress? Because someone will not always come up and say straightforwardly, 'I have bipolar disorder'. They might be in the early stages of having symptoms, their work might be affected—yet they don't know why—or they may cry in front of you. None of it is predictable, but in that moment, you have to listen and respond in a useful way.

But employees should never pretend to be experts

It's important to teach the existence of a mental health spectrum, though it's not your job to decide where the person sat in front of you falls on that spectrum. It's useful for people to at least have this awareness—not because they should dismiss any stress that falls beneath the threshold of depression, for example, but because it creates an overall better understanding of the complexity of mental health.

Wherever possible, educate everyone

When I work in schools, we have this idea of a 'whole-school approach'. If you're going to embed an anti-bullying policy, for example, you need to do it at all levels. The caretakers need to know what to look for, so do people working the canteen, and the parents. It's that equivalent in the workplace. You can't just get the five people who'd volunteer to become a Mental Health First-Aider to do training, because the people who don't sign up are probably the same ones who need this education the most.

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Dr Lucy Foulkes is a psychologist, speaker and author of What Mental Illness Really Is… (and what it isn't)

PROFILE

Finlay Games

YouTuber, speaker and author of *Top to Bottom*

Transformation: How understanding, education and flexibility can unlock a better workplace

“Workplaces are failing. If you use a wheelchair, workplaces are expected to provide a ramp. If you have mental health challenges, you should be given the same accessibility needs as anyone else should be.”

Hi Finlay. In your TEDx talk you said that, until recently, your mental health got in the way of any future you might ever hope to imagine. Would you mind talking us through this?

Well, I’ve had mental health problems from a very young age. I didn’t know that was undiagnosed gender dysphoria until I got clean and sober. When I started to get well, I wanted to return to work, but the trouble was, I’d never worked sober. I’ve got generalised anxiety disorder, so drinking and smoking weed was a way to cope.

Once I got clean and sober, and I wanted to go back to work, I had to keep my recovery central in my life. I started sensibly with volunteer work, hoping then to go from that to paid work. The problem was, I couldn’t find the flexibility I needed in a workplace environment.

My life can’t be consistent, because of my mental health—I need that flexibility. Going through gender transition as well, needing time off for that, and managing that. I had nowhere to go. I’m so glad that Covid happened in some ways because we have got so much more flexibility now. Before, there just wasn’t an option for me, and I felt very much like it was my fault that I was failing.

I speak very openly honestly about this, as I think it’s workplaces that fail. If you use a wheelchair, workplaces are expected to provide a ramp. If you have mental health challenges, you should be given the same accessibility needs as anyone else should be. We are getting there but we’re still not quite there.

Alongside the mental health challenges you’ve described, you also have chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), which is often misunderstood in the medical field, as well as wider society. How hard has this been, and to what extent does physical and mental health overlap?

It’s been so difficult. This has been going on for four years, and I’m only now getting a diagnosis. The trouble is, because I already had a mental health diagnosis and I’m transgender, every time I went to the doctors, it was either, ‘Oh, you’re just anxious, have some more tablets’, or ‘You’re transgender, it’s probably that’.

I was having those barriers all the time and I still face those barriers. When a new professional meets me—I’ve got a big file. They make assumptions. And that is such a huge barrier to proper care. ME/CFS has lots of misinformation and stigma around it. And if you add a stigmatised identity into the mix, then trying to get healthcare, being listened to, or being heard, becomes so frustrating. That of course makes your mental health worse. I actually think I’ve developed ME/CFS because of a lifetime of missed problems with my mental health that could have been treated.

Society tends to only hear about the negatives of social media—especially around mental health. Has sharing your experiences of transition, and other aspects of your life, been a source of support?

It's changed my life, opening up. I only did it because I was so fed up with feeling so ashamed for having mental health challenges, and being an addict in recovery, so my sharing was initially a defiant act against that stigma and refusing to take it on board. In doing so, it helped me to manage the shame and start to feel proud.

When people began responding to my videos and my blogs to say, 'I feel the same way', that was just so incredible. Now, it's turned into my job. I used to have this great idea that once I was magically 'fixed', I was going to be a counsellor. I then had an epiphany that I don't need to be fixed, and I'm already doing what I love, so let's turn this into a job that I can do in my own time.

Sharing for me has helped me personally in my own mental health journey, but also in developing a way of earning an income and feeling very good about myself. Where before there was no future—no job I could do, and so I felt rubbish about myself—now I'm an entrepreneur with my own business. It's just incredible, it really is. For me, it's saved and changed my life.

Social media isn't always a nice place to be, of course. Have there been any drawbacks?

The negative is that some people are *horrible*. I don't know how they can get out of bed, go on to social media and say the things they do. Especially as a trans person, every time I share anything, you can guarantee I'll get something that isn't just a little bit off, but *evil*.

"If I share about being trans, people say I've got a mental illness and should get help."

I'm told that I'm an abomination, that I'm sick. If I share about being trans, people say I've got a mental illness and should get help. If I share about having a mental illness, they tell me to stop craving attention. But the thing is, that goes on whether I share or not, and by me sharing, I take the power back.

That must be so hard. Especially as you're not just being attacked for being you, but for *various* aspects of who you are…

I think when you're somebody that has a marginalised, stigmatised identity, you come up against more stuff that people just wouldn't notice. I confuse everybody every day for being both trans and gay. People don't get it. I'm trans, I'm gay, I have mental health challenges, I'm an addict in recovery, and now I've got ME.

Most people—even though they might have challenges—are seen and accepted as who they are. They're represented in television, in books. My identity very rarely is. You rarely see characters who are transgender in books, or characters who are gay and trans. Everyone else gets their identity affirmed—usually on a daily basis—whereas somebody who has any of these identities mostly gets theirs invalidated. If you've got a mental illness, you're somehow less than. If you are trans, you're somehow less human. If you are trans and gay, you are just a confusing mess.

You wrote a book, *Top to Bottom*, about your journey from gender dysphoria through to surgery. It's not the end of the story, of course—mental health is ongoing, and lifelong. How are you now?

That's a really good question. We do have this idea in society around people being fixed or made better. I'm not broken, maybe I'm just made up differently. My mental health challenges are still there. They're managed differently, that's the thing that counts. Now that I know who I am, now that my outside matches my inside, I have the want—because I didn't have the want before—to deal with these things, and to deal with them in healthy ways. I don't drink to manage this stuff any more. I meditate. I eat well. I get good sleep. All the sensible things.

Transitioning has helped me to do that, but there are still challenges. I hear a lot of people say, 'Well, if you've transitioned, why is your mental health not magically better?'. Well, because I'm 48 and I didn't transition until I was 37. I have all those years of undiagnosed gender dysphoria that are still having an effect on my health, and I still need to work through.

Also, being trans in this world is traumatic on a daily basis. It's something you can't just get up and forget. If I've got to go to the doctors and haven't seen that person before, I've got to think ahead—what might happen? What stupid thing might be said? Because it happens all the time. That's why my mental health is still tricky, because I can't just relax and be me.

The problem I'm having with my mental health now is actually less about being trans, it's more about the world. I don't need to change. The world does.

6 steps to a mentally well workplace

Finlay Games outlines some small but mighty measures organisations can introduce to truly support employee mental health.

Flexibility as standard
Not just flexibility in terms of working from home or the office, but also spaces inside workplaces where you can have a quiet place to work. If you're feeling super productive and want to be around people and do all the difficult stuff, great. This also means allowing people to work from home when they need to, and realising it doesn't make them less productive or committed than anybody else.

Mindful managers, empowered employees
We can be much more mindful—not only about an employee's mental health, but also *how* to get the most out of them. You want to get the most out of your staff, so on a day when they're better off doing more designing tasks, or thinking tasks, then give them that choice. Having empowerment within a workplace is absolutely vital.

An individual approach
Think about mental health in terms of intersectionality. When people have mental health challenges, they might also be, for example, transgender. And it's things like having time off for appointments, or surgery, that can cause such stress for trans people at work. So it's about employers understanding that being trans isn't a mental health condition, but it does of course bring mental challenges along with it.

All things that intersect with mental health need to be thought about, in terms of how companies can support people, whatever the reason behind it.

Education for all
Employees, managers, executives—everybody should be aware of various different mental health challenges, not just a chosen few. This would mean in theory that *everyone* can support anyone across an organisation, with the added benefit that education is the best tool to fight against stigma.

Reimagine health and safety
We need to stop thinking in terms of diagnosable mental health or wellbeing, and just think about human beings. In the workplace, when we think about health and safety, we think trip hazards. We don't even question it. Why don't we think about mental health safety?

"We shouldn't ask people to do 60 hours a week—that's awful for their mental health."

We shouldn't ask people to do 60 hours a week—that's awful for their mental health. We need to go one step further, and start thinking about protecting people's mental health as much as we would their physical health. Don't ask them to do a 70-hour week any more than you'd ask them to walk on a wet floor.

Obsess over wellbeing solutions, not schemes
It's about having genuine things to help, not tick-box mental health. During Covid, my partner was told that he had to run wellbeing sessions—they were *prescribed*, it was essentially just a Zoom quiz, but it was frowned upon to not go. That's not helping anyone's mental health.

So often, organisations go through the motions of doing what they think is right, just to fulfil criteria. It has to be more about really fostering a genuine caring workplace, demonstrating that you care about employees' mental health, and that anybody can safely say, 'I'm struggling', without fearing how they're going to be viewed.

Find out more about Finlay by visiting his website or YouTube channel.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Workplace mental health barriers, and how to overcome them

No longer a fringe concern, employee mental health is a major priority for organisations around the world. This is incredible and important, but the battle is not yet won. Here, our experts outline some obstacles that remain, and we offer some advice for how to tackle the issues.

Some mental illnesses are still misunderstood

"Though we've definitely made progress, I think there is still a big gap with more severe mental health problems. People don't feel comfortable talking about bipolar and schizophrenia, for example. And I think there's still lots of work to be done for some of those less common conditions, versus anxiety and depression.

"Everyone has compassion up to a point—we understand someone needing time off, or feeling down—but when it's an ongoing issue, or has an impact on a person's work, how much they're delivering, and other people, that's when it gets tricky. But that's also when it's really, really important."

Conor D'Arcy—Head of Research and Policy at the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute

Indeed's advice:
By investing in mental health training—either for managers, or all employees—you can upgrade workplace conversations from basic awareness to genuine understanding.

A lack of support for LGBTQ+ staff

"LGBT mental health is something a lot of workplaces leave out. They either cover mental health or LGBT life, but not very often the two combined. I think that needs to be more addressed, as well as transgender mental health—specifically in a workplace—because it ties in so differently with the rest of the community.

"What I mean by that is, for LGB people, their sexuality doesn't so much affect their work. For trans people, we need actual physical adjustments. Toilets are a big problem, for example. I know so many people who get stressed out and don't drink at work—because they don't want to use the toilet—and that affects their mental health.

"With these kinds of things, it's intersectionality. It's what I come back to every single time. We don't think about mental health widely enough, in terms of different pockets of people."

Finlay Games—YouTuber, speaker and author of Top to Bottom

Indeed's advice:
Supporting every employee means approaching every one as an individual. Appreciating people's unique needs or challenges is not just good management, but helps empower them to succeed.

Non-white employees still don't belong

"I think there's a massive issue around archetypes and stereotypes. From my personal experience, I've achieved a level of education that puts me in the top, let's say, 1-2%, but when I go to a new place of work, people will still mistake me for the cleaner. Or if I say I'm a psychologist, people will almost fall off their chair, because they thought I was a social worker.

"When I go to a new place of work, people will still mistake me for the cleaner."

"In my thesis, I wrote about 'the talk' a lot of us got when we were younger, which is quite problematic. It depends on your intersectional identity, but as a Black girl, I was told I had to work 10 times harder than my white counterparts. My parents explained that this was the case because of my racial identity and my gender. This talk was meant to help me navigate and survive in society. However, in reality the talk inadvertently reinforces the idea that if you are Black, and female, you are not good enough for the workplace or for the world generally, which is incredibly problematic."

Dr. Fabienne Palmer—Director and Chartered Clinical Psychologist at Wise Mynd

Indeed's advice:
Initiatives around diversity and inclusion, as well as allyship, can help boost belonging. If you want to truly change the narrative, however, show rather than tell. This means diversity across every level of the organisation—in particular, exec roles.

Open conversations aren't a perfect solution

"It can sometimes get lost that people don't want to talk about their mental health because it's private, not just because of stigma. It's private, personal information about you.

"What comes out, when you actually ask people, is that they are still reluctant to talk about mental health for the understandable reason that it's not information they want their work colleagues to know about.

"My personal view is that it would be completely understandable that you wouldn't want your boss to know that you have an anxiety disorder—because what if they don't give you the opportunity to do the big presentation? Or take the trip abroad? Or give you work because they think you won't be able to handle it?

"The actual nitty-gritty and reality is so difficult when, a) you are the person with one of these problems and, b) you are the colleague or manager trying to support them. The conversation in workplaces is still really difficult, and we're not fully appreciating that depth."

Dr. Lucy Foulkes—psychologist, speaker and author of What Mental Illness Really Is… (and what it isn't)

Indeed's advice:
Don't let your open, conversational culture become accidentally oppressive. Include employees' right to privacy into any comms around mental health, and ensure managers never pressure staff to share their problems.

Staff are searching for meaning

"Even before the pandemic, people were reporting feeling like their work was less meaningful, they were struggling with things like reduced autonomy, greater surveillance and greater precarity—that reduced opportunities for making work meaningful.

"Meaning is not something that can only be found at non-profits trying to save the whales, it can be found in all kinds of labour and situations. But lots of managerial practices were making it harder for people to do the work of finding the meaning in their work.

"We have gotten everything we can from yoga classes and mindfulness apps. It is time now to look at collective and structural changes to the way we work and the way we think about time."

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang—Head of Programmes at 4 Day Week Global, and author of Shorter.

Indeed's advice:
The pandemic has shown mass, structural change—at speed and scale—is possible. Whether flexible or hybrid structures, or a wholesale reimagining of the calendar itself (for instance, four-day weeks), organisations don't just have the power to rework work like never before, but also the permission.

Organisations are trying to fast-track a slow process

"I don't think we're skilled as workforces, at the moment, to be able to deal with the challenge. I have quite strong opinions about sticking plaster approaches—mental health first aiders plotted among people can be great in some organisations, but I really feel there is more to be done.

"When there is a challenge, we have a tendency as organisations to roll something out as a programme, and I don't think it's about that. This stuff is not fixable overnight, and we need to start thinking about the fact that different people work in different ways. So how do we appeal to people who don't all operate in the same way? How do we help them feel ok when they're at work, and not feel like their mental health is making them suffer in their performance?

"I don't have the answer, but what I'm saying is, at the moment, we're still at stage one."

CJ Green—Co-founder of BraveGoose and co-creator of CleverGoose

Indeed's advice:
Alongside any wellbeing plans or initiatives for the here and now, set up a taskforce with a brief to plan and work towards long-term change—both structural and cultural.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Imposter syndrome: What it is, who it affects, and how to overcome it

Originally crowned ‘the impostor phenomenon’ (in a 1978 study), imposter syndrome is best described as feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy—that persist despite obvious evidence on the contrary.

While not a medical or clinical condition, Oxford University says it’s “fear of being a fraud … being consistently anxious you’ll be ‘found out’ and convinced you don’t really deserve success.” And, though studies wildly vary (rates range from nine to 82%), what’s clear is that imposter syndrome is very real, and likely present in every workplace around the world.

The slight irony about imposter syndrome is that brighter employees are more likely to experience it. It’s proven that, in the same way individuals who are less skilled tend to believe they’re better than they are, talented workers fail to appreciate their own ability. This is where imposter syndrome sparks—as intelligent folk assume everyone else is just as able, or better.

Hallmarks of imposter syndrome include:

- **A belief that others have an inflated opinion of one’s ability**
- **Fear of being found out**
- **Achievements are seen as luck, or accident**
- **Perfectionism**
- **Self-sabotage**

Believing you’re an imposter’s easy when you feel you don’t belong

Dr Fabienne Palmer—a clinical psychologist who consults organisations in the creative industry—unpacks the science of self-doubt, and how non-white employees, in particular, are at risk of feeling like a fraud at work.

Imposter syndrome is something a lot of people really struggle with. It’s the pervasive and chronic feeling associated with thinking that you haven’t got the skills or right to take up space in an environment. I see and experience it as the feeling of not belonging, and like you don’t deserve to belong—you’re on borrowed time, and are going to get found out.

This is quite common in all workplaces, but has particular implications in corporate and academic environments, where certain jobs hold a lot of power and have a lot of responsibilities. If you feel you don’t fit the mould, or represent something slightly different from the norm, imposter syndrome, or the sense you are left with—the emotions, thoughts, and feelings in your body—can really impact on your sense of self, your confidence, and ultimately your capacity to thrive in the workplace.

It’s important to open up conversations about this within our clinical work—as psychologists and therapists—or even in our positions as managers or colleagues. It might be helpful, in the first instance, for us to show some curiosity. For example, if we notice we’re experiencing thoughts of being a fraud, we can try to externalise this by saying it out loud. Like. ‘Wow, my imposter syndrome is really giving me a hard time today—I wonder what’s causing that?’.

In general, talking more openly about our worries can help reduce the shame and stigma associated with experiencing these thoughts and feelings, especially in high pressure environments. Opening up conversations may also help us to develop stronger connections with our colleagues, and we may also discover new ideas about how to cope.

The better we are at spotting the signs and noticing what it feels like when we experience imposter syndrome in ourselves, the better we are at speaking about it and noticing it in others. Over time, if more people notice and talk about it, there is likely to be a shift in how we deal with it, too.

Imposter syndrome is not equal

Thinking about the different aspects of someone's identity and how they intersect is really important when it comes to imposter syndrome. When you consider the spectrum of what is and isn't acceptable in the workplace, or society, Blackness—being Black, having some relationship proximity to Blackness, or your identification with Blackness—has always been seen as less favourable. In fact, this has been equated with the worst outcomes across various workplace indicators (e.g. disciplinary action, representation at a senior leadership level, salary, job satisfaction).

People from an oppressed group, or who hold minoritised status, will also often experience a more intense and compounded form of imposter syndrome. This is reinforced by a number of different issues, including lack of visible representation across the organisation—especially at senior leadership level. When people don't see themselves in, or feel seen by, an organisation, it leaves them feeling like they don't deserve to belong.

The accidental pitfalls of well-meaning initiatives

The challenge is that, though they are very much needed, some well-meaning initiatives—that strive for equity in the workplace—can sometimes feed people's feelings of imposter syndrome, or felt sense that they shouldn't belong. For example, throughout my journey to become a clinical psychologist, I have definitely had moments where I couldn't believe I was being offered an opportunity because of my skills or my experience—I assumed it was because I helped that service or institution reach some kind of quota. These thoughts were often reinforced when I turned up and was the only Black person in the building. I would think, 'Why did they pick me?', and couldn't believe I was good enough to be accepted when, actually, I often outperformed my peers academically, and had relevant and sufficient experience for the job. Objectively, there shouldn't have been a reason I thought that, but it's not something that is driven by logic—it's something you feel on an emotional level.

In the past, it's also been very difficult for me to accept compliments. I was once told that, 'We were really impressed by the way you spoke' by someone who interviewed me for a role. While I was pleased that they felt this way, my immediate thought was, 'How did you think I was going to speak? What did you think I was going to sound like?'. Even if it is a genuine and well-intentioned comment, it's much more complicated to receive or make sense of it when you are from a minoritised group. I feel there will always be a part of you that has to read between the lines, which can be time consuming and emotionally draining.

As far as imposter syndrome goes, if you feel like your colleagues view you as getting some sort of fast track that you didn't deserve—even if, in reality, they do not think that—that creates a tension. Because actually, on the flip-side, white privilege allows a lot of people to experience that fast track without needing these interventions.

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Dr Fabienne Palmer is Director and Chartered Clinical Psychologist at Wise Mynd.

> ***"I have imposter syndrome, and so does everyone I've ever worked with. It's a very real thing, and it's absolutely everywhere—certainly in HR, but no more so than in any other profession."***
>
> **—CJ Green, Co-founder & Executive Director at Brave Goose**

To feel a fraud is to be human

Oliver Burkeman—author of *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*—explains how imposter syndrome is universal, yet still feels so personal.

At a very abstract and fundamental level, we spend a lot of time and energy trying to feel like the masters of our time—like we have control over our lives, and are not vulnerable to whatever the future holds.

Imposter syndrome obviously relates to that, because it's this feeling that there are people who know what they're doing, and who feel deeply calm and confident that they're in command of events. And then there's you, who somehow got into your job through an oversight and lack the required skills and authority.

> "There's just no reason to assume anyone else really does feel that they know what they're doing."

The argument I usually make is that there's just no reason to assume anyone else really does feel that they know what they're doing. Or, the small number of people who really do think that, are probably overconfident and insufficiently alert to real imperfections.

The main reason you only hear your own monologue of self-doubt—and not anyone else's—is because you only hear your own inner monologue.

It can be misinterpreted. I'm not actually literally claiming airline pilots or heart surgeons don't have a deep sense of what they're doing. But this constant, off-in-the-future notion that there'll be a time when everything is smooth sailing, emergencies can't occur, and nothing can ever penetrate your wisdom, authority and expertise—it's a powerful illusion, but it is an illusion.

Why? Because it would mean achieving God-like status, omnipotence, immortality, and all those things we, as humans, simply don't get to have.

5 steps to stop your inner imposter

from indeed

1. Notice your feelings. Sounds simple, but merely acknowledging you feel like a fraud can help reframe the thought. Think about what you'd tell a workmate. Would you agree they're bad at their job? Or you say they're being too hard on themselves? If the latter, try to take your own advice.

2. List your strengths. One way to fight nagging doubts is to kill them with facts. Rather than dwell on any perceived failures, note down what you've achieved. Surely not *everything* was due to luck or happenstance? Forcing yourself to think positively can slowly rewire your self-esteem. Next time, you're more likely to feel deserving of praise. And, if not, you can use this same list to confront your uncertainty.

3. Appreciate feedback, and embrace failure. 'Constructive criticism' is not a contradiction. In reality, we learn more from slip-ups than we do from successes. Remind yourself that feedback is not an assault on your character, but a chance to get better. If you've made a mistake, admit it. Owning mistakes—rather than searching for excuses—may yield colleagues' respect, not ridicule.

4. Keep a positivity log. It's human to dwell on bad things, not good—science says so. Like with your list of accomplishments, fight your brain's reflex for negativity by maintaining a record of positive feedback. This reinforces the fact you are not a chancer, while also providing the motivation to keep going.

5. Ask for support. Being in a senior position (even when you fear you don't deserve it) doesn't mean specialising in everything. People need help to grow, so asking for guidance is empowering, not embarrassing. Actually, shying away from support means you're far more likely to wing it and fail. The irony? This greatly increases the chance of being a real-life imposter.

PROFILE

Ella Dove

Journalist, speaker and author of Five Steps to Happy

Want to empower disabled employees? Start by asking how.

“It’s weird to say, but losing my leg has given me more opportunity than adversity. There are so many strange positives. I wouldn’t change it.”

Hi Ella, one of your many roles is trustee for the Limbless Association. What does this involve?

When I lost my leg six years ago, I knew straight away that I wanted to give back, and turn a negative into a positive.

I started by doing bits and bobs for the Limbless Association magazine, StepForward, which led to me having a column—Best Foot Forward. I really enjoyed that, but wanted to be a bit more hands on, so I trained to be a volunteer visitor.

This is the charity’s peer support service, where you get matched with another amputee who’s at the start of their journey, and is seeking support or answers to questions.

I’ve also set up a podcast with the Limbless Association, called AmpLAfy. Again, this is me drawing on my journalism experience to interview other amputees, as well as clinicians and family members. I think it’s important that people around the amputee also get support, because I know it was really hard for my family.

You’ve written extensively about the running accident that saw you lose your right leg. It also inspired your first novel. This is hugely inspiring, but obviously followed a gruelling recovery. How tough were those early days?

I was in hospital for six weeks, then in a wheelchair at my parents’ house for four months—because I had to wait for my knee fracture to heal before I could start learning to walk on a prosthetic leg.

From there, you don’t sort of just strap on a prosthetic and off you go—you have to really learn to trust it. So I was walking with crutches for quite a long time, and then I had two walking sticks, and then I had one walking stick, and then eventually I had nothing. So it was probably about a year until I was fully confident without any walking aids, I’d say.

It's easy—and to some extent, natural—to focus on the physical side of a traumatic injury. But what was the impact on your mental health?

Yeah, the mental side was really interesting, because I was very resistant to psychological support for a long time. I was so focused on my physical recovery—I'm quite stubborn, so I was focused on physical milestones—obviously learning to walk, going up and down stairs, managing an escalator, public transport, doing my commute to work again. I was so fixated on them that I definitely did neglect my mental health. I didn't really let myself think about it.

"I definitely did neglect my mental health. I didn't really let myself think about it."

When I was in hospital, because I'm a writer, loads of people bought me notebooks. But the more notebooks I got—this shows you I'm stubborn—the less I wanted to write. I guess that goes hand in hand with mental health, as it was like the denial stage of grief. So I was just pushing away from it, almost like, 'If I don't write it down, it's not happening'.

But through that time I was experiencing really awful flashbacks—which I now recognise was PTSD. Every night I would lay in my hospital bed and it was like watching a film of the accident happening. I couldn't stop it, I just had to watch it. I had to watch myself fall, and it was like I had to do that before I could fall asleep. It doesn't happen any more, but it was really awful to just have to watch it again and again, every single night. But again, I just brushed past it and thought, 'Ah, it's probably just normal, it'll go away'.

Despite your initial resistance, you seem to have a lot of clarity about your mental state, and how you really felt back then. What changed?

So, after hospital, after rehab, you're assigned a prosthetic centre. Your first appointment is normally with the doctor, the prosthetist, the physio, the therapist, everyone. So I went to this meeting and the psychotherapist came up to me and said, 'Hi, I'm Kim. If you ever want to talk, blah, blah, blah, I'm the psychotherapist'. I was almost a bit rude to her, because I was like, 'No, thank you. I don't need that sort of thing'.

I went away and didn't really think about it, but then about a year later, I wasn't having the flashbacks every night, but I was still having them. I'm naturally very optimistic, but I hit this point where I just felt really low. Again, it's the stages of grief, and depression is a stage of grief. I would never say it was depression, but it was the closest I've got to it, where there were lots of positive things happening, yet I couldn't see the joy in them.

Did you seek treatment?

Well I ended up ringing up Kim, the therapist at the prosthetic centre. I said like, 'Hey, I'm not sure if you remember me…', and she said, 'I remember. I wondered when you'd phone'. We've since spoken about it, and she said it's such a common thing—a year on, people suddenly realise there are all these things they need to unpack, but haven't.

"A year on, people suddenly realise there are all these things they need to unpack, but haven't."

In those early days, people who have close families or close friends don't necessarily need psychological therapy—at first, your therapy is through those people—but a year later, I wasn't really talking to my family about it, as the initial trauma had died down. But there were things I needed to unpack that I probably couldn't have spoken to my family about.

So we had our first session, and I carried on seeing Kim for a number of months, for acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). I don't speak to her that often now, but if something happens in my life, we book in a chat. But it is interesting that it took me a while to feel ready to access that support.

Moving on to more optimistic topics. Six years on, what has losing a limb given you, in a positive sense?

It definitely has changed me. I think—I hope—for the better. I'm aware this sounds really cliché, but I think I've learned a lot about the fragility of life, and how it's beautiful and precious. I've always been quite ambitious, but I'm probably more ambitious now because I *know* that life can change in a single moment, and you never know what's around the corner.

I also think I grew up very quickly because, I mean I'm 31 now, but I feel a lot older—in a good way. I feel like before, I was very lucky, I was quite privileged, and I never had to deal with anything awful happening. So yeah, it's given me a bit of perspective, and it's given me a deeper level of empathy, not just in my work, but in life generally.

And definitely a sense of purpose as well. Now, everything I do is driven by a need or desire to make a positive difference in the world. Whether that's my writing, even in my day job, the magazine features I pitch, I think 'What kind of a difference will this have on people's lives? How will it help?'.

That's so heartening to hear. And also important, as people may assume there's no upside or growth to be had as a result of such trauma.

I almost feel like it's weird to say, but it's given me probably more opportunity than adversity. It's given me so many opportunities I never imagined I would ever have. So there are a lot of strange positives.

People often say, 'If you could rewind time, would you have still had your accident?'. Obviously, in the beginning I would've been like, 'No, definitely not', but now I don't know, because I don't actually remember—six years on—what it felt like to have two normal legs. So yeah, I think now... is it weird to say I wouldn't change it, because of all the amazing things it's given me?

It's not weird at all, although it does say something about the power of the human mind, and body, to overcome adversity. Ok, aside from your job as a journalist and author, you now do a great deal of motivational speaking. What do these talks cover?

It's very varied. I'm lucky to be a part of the Speakers Collective, who give me lots of amazing opportunities. It might be talking about diversity and inclusivity in the workplace, or doing school assemblies to teach kids about resilience. That's something I want to do more of, because I really love working with kids—they ask the most hilarious and amazing questions. There's also my speaking work for the Limbless Association, although that's different as it's voluntary.

You mention diversity and inclusion at work—since losing your leg, what have you learned, or feel employers should be aware of?

One thing I have learned is that—and it's the same with the grief of losing someone—disability doesn't go away. It sounds obvious, and though everyone rallied around me in those first few months, we're six years on now, I've still lost my leg and I've still got all the challenges associated with that. People sometimes assume that when the worst is over, you're fine, and you don't need additional support. But actually, that's something I think employers should be more aware of.

> "One thing I have learned is that—and it's the same with the grief of losing someone—disability doesn't go away."

Are there any barriers—physical or mental—that organisations need to address, to help disabled employees to thrive in their jobs?

I guess the obvious thing is that there are still physical barriers, like transport, people not being able to access schemes to get into work, and also juggling appointments with workload. I'm lucky, my hours are fairly flexible, but if you're in a team where you have to have a lot of face-to-face meetings, that's obviously quite challenging.

I do think things have got a lot better, and working from home has been a really positive thing for disabled people. It just gives flexibility that is just so important and, I would say, crucial.

Last, if you could design a workplace that truly empowered disabled people in the workplace, what would it look like?

Accessibility, for sure. Just the simple things, such as like making sure offices have lifts, doorways are wide enough for wheelchairs, there's a disabled toilet. There are still so many old buildings—I see it most often on Twitter, where people say about theatres. I love going to the theatre, and I'm lucky that I've got a prosthetic leg, so can walk upstairs, but it's really sad that some disabled people can't go to the theatre because they can't access it, or there's no disabled toilet, because they're such old buildings. I think that often applies to offices.

> "As line managers and as companies, it's really important to ask that individual what their needs are and just rather than make assumptions."

And I think education as well, just kind of, as we are doing, being open and talking about things. And companies getting external speakers in to raise awareness of different issues. But it's also about taking an individual approach—so remembering not to put people into boxes. I can only talk for myself, I can't talk on behalf of all amputees or all disabled people. I think therefore, as line managers and as companies, it's really important to ask that individual what their needs are and just rather than make assumptions.

I've experienced this outside of work, where people assume that, for example in a supermarket, I can't reach something on a shelf, so they get it to me. And then my stubborn brain kicks in where I'm like, 'Excuse me, I can get it myself'. That's a bad example, but it's more about banishing assumptions and actually talking to the person, rather than being worried to offend, and so you don't ask. Actually, I think it's better to ask and come across as a bit clueless, than to just assume and then potentially offend.

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Ella Dove is an author, journalist, speaker and trustee at the Limbless Association. You can contact Ella through her website or Instagram.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Financial wellbeing: An employer guide to the cost of living crisis

Mental health talk is fast becoming a workplace norm, yet money can still be off-limits. Some 55% of us aren't comfortable opening up about our finances, even though half (48%) have worried about money recently. And two-thirds of employees who are struggling financially show at least one sign of poor mental health that could impact their work performance.

Now, as decades-high inflation and tax rises collide with soaring energy, fuel and food bills, the link between financial and mental wellbeing feels tighter than ever. Here, Conor D'Arcy explains what organisations should (and shouldn't) do to help staff during these tricky, high-priced times.

Do: Speak to staff

If an employee is having a tough time financially, a manager who's understanding and supportive can make such a big difference.

If an employee thinks, 'I'm so stressed out about being able to pay the bills, and my manager is really unsympathetic', this can exacerbate everything, and make life a lot harder. Even worse, it can end up with people going off sick. So understanding is a big first step.

Don't: Think price rises are the same for everyone

If an employee is struggling on a lower wage, any extra pressure whatsoever is massive. You might not know about someone's family circumstances, whether they're having to support lots of other people, or have a lower earning partner. Given the endless possible circumstances, being mindful of other people's struggle is important—especially if you're on a higher salary.

Do: Signpost to external support

Employers pointing staff in the right direction can be really useful. Though you might think, 'All the right help is out there, if someone wants to find it, they'll look', we know that actually having it put in front of you, from a trusted source, is really effective.

StepChange, Citizens Advice or the Money Advice Trust all do great work in this area. And, from a mental health point of view, the likes of Mind and Rethink Mental Illness have loads of good resources. Often, it's as simple as recommending an employee contacts their GP.

Don't: Try to have all the answers

It's tough for most employers to become experts. If you're a large organisation, with a really well-equipped HR, that has thought this stuff through and has a great employee assistance programme, then it can maybe prove valuable. But for the average employer, it's not your job to provide solutions.

Also, pointing to a completely independent source might come across better, as staff will know it's a trusted charity that isn't trying to profit from anyone. Sometimes it can still feel high-risk for employees to share this kind of information with an employer, as they're dependent on you for their income.

Do: Embrace your duty of care

If you want to be a good employer, issues like this are what you have to consider. Especially right now, when there's loads of vacancies—firms are looking to give themselves a bit of an edge. If applicants know your organisation takes this stuff seriously, will be supportive, and has the right interest of employees at heart, it can give a really easy win.

I know, as an employee myself, that having certain measures in place can make such a difference to how you feel about the organisation. In particular, how you feel when things are going badly, can really shape your mindset.

Do: Commit to clear and honest comms

About half the people in problem debt also have a mental health problem. So one of the best things we can all do is realise this is much more common than we think, and that so many people are struggling.

The worst stories we always hear are where people have shared their mental health or financial problems, then felt like it's been used against them—where they've then been judged, or overlooked for promotion.

But if there's messaging to say, 'If you are struggling, come and talk to us', this can have a great impact. When so much of your mental bandwidth is taken up by stress, knowing it's okay to share concerns with a manager can make the situation better.

Do: Educate your managers

I think managers having high-quality, practical mental health training can make a massive difference. There's less stigma than there used to be—especially around things like depression and anxiety—but there's still less awareness of practical stuff. For instance, how it's harder to just do things—in life, as well as work—when your mental health isn't great.

Don't: Treat every staffer the same

A lot of this needs to be approached on a case-by-case basis. Some people will be keen for whatever help they can get, by an employer who's hands on and supportive. Other people will want much more of a light touch, for example some sign posting, then not talk about it again.

Do: Offer flexible working

Flexibility, in terms of working patterns and hours, can make such a big difference. If someone has to sit on hold for two hours—to talk to their energy company about changing a tariff, or why they're not going to be able to meet a payment—their only chance to do so might be during work hours.

This spirit of flexibility—just to say, 'If you need to take a couple hours, you can make them up later'—is key to helping employees thrive during a really difficult time.

Do: Get creative, if you can

If firms can deliver something that will ease the pain, that's great. Like linking pay-rises to inflation—as many organisations do—is a really sensible policy. Ensuring you pay the Living Wage. Or offering an advance on people's salary.

We often find that one missed payment can cause things to spin out of control. So, while you'll want to ensure doing this won't cause problems later on, employees knowing they can get some of their wages early might just solve their financial and mental distress.

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Conor D'Arcy is Head of Research and Policy at the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute.
You can read more about what organisations can do to break the link between money and mental illness here.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

How to solve a problem like productivity

Burnout seems to be everywhere. Employees the world over are trying to squeeze out every last drop of focus. And new ways of working are becoming the norm. What's the answer? We asked an expert.

The hidden perils of peak productivity

Ever wondered why hitting 'inbox zero' never clawed back much time? Or how, even when you've enjoyed a day full of focus, free time still escapes you? Then allow Oliver Burkeman to draw the line between efficiency and output.

The abstract idea, I think, is that if efficiency is what you're pursuing—optimising yourself so you can do more, and process more inputs—you'll just have more to do. That's what happens when you make a system more efficient. The analogy is always about how when they widen motorways by adding a lane, it's to get rid of the congestion. But, in doing so, they make them more appealing to more drivers, the traffic increases and the congestion tends back towards what it was before.

So, if you get really, really good at answering your email at a very speedy tempo, then guess what? You get more email. Why? Because you reply to people, they reply to you and so on. Once you get a reputation for being responsive, the old adage is true: the reward for good time management is more work.

It's why I think just becoming more productive—in a brute sense of efficiency—doesn't work as an antidote to overwhelm. As I argue in the book, it attracts more inputs into your system, but also more *junk* inputs. It doesn't even lead to you getting through more of the things that matter, because the feeling that you can probably find a way to do everything is associated, then, with taking on more than you can do.

When there's no reason to say no to a new incoming demand, you're not thinking about prioritisation clearly any more—you're assuming there will be a way to do it all. And so, all else being equal, your to-do list fills with everything anybody wants you to do, which is an ultimately unsustainable way to be.

Oliver Burkeman is a journalist, and author of Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals

Practical advice from a (recovering) productivity nerd

After devoting his career to self-mastery, Oliver Burkeman wrote the book on time management. Quite literally. Though he now largely renounces the at-times-toxic nature of productivity culture, he's learned a few things along the way. Here are his top, take-home tips for focus.

1. Write real lists—not mental notes

David Allen's book, Getting Things Done, set down a huge number of basic principles that I'm still basically adherent to. For example, the idea that you should not use your brain to store lists of the things that are on your plate. You should get them out of your head into some external system. You can trust that your notebook or your task management app or whatever it is, is keeping track of everything, which allows your brain to focus on solving problems—instead of keeping track of problems and memorising lists.

2. Make space for distraction-free focus

On a very tactical and specific level, the idea of protecting a small number of hours in each day—or at multiple times during a week—for solitary, deep focus is really powerful.

If you can isolate those little islands of focus—and institute policies to do with scheduling meetings, so that time is protected—you can still benefit from the back-and-forth of conversation and interruption-driven workplace the rest of the time. So that sort of understanding of the relationship between solitary focused time and communal interactive working, I think is something I totally stand behind.

3. *Time* your time

I tried the Pomodoro Technique when I was in my sort of mad productivity geek phase, and guess what, it didn't make me superhuman and able to process an unlimited amount of demands. *But*, having got through that phase and being in this new sort of place I am now, sure, the Pomodoro Technique is a perfectly solid and sensible way of organising your day.

It's great to take breaks a little bit sooner than you would, basically. That's what I think is really key—take breaks before your concentration has completely unspooled, and then go back and do more. You get to actually do more concentrated work, in aggregate, than you otherwise would.

"That's what I think is really key—take breaks before your concentration has completely unspooled, and then go back and do more."

"Our natural desire is to feel like we've got a finger in every pie, but that's actually very counterproductive."

4. Mono-task

Last, try to do one thing at a time. Both in terms of not multitasking, but also making big projects sequential—so that you try to do and finish one, and then move on to the next. It's quite hard, because our natural desire is to feel like we've got a finger in every pie, but that's actually very counterproductive, because it enables you to avoid actually finishing anything.

So that ethos of queuing things up, and doing them in a very sort of steady way is another technique I try very hard to implement in my own work.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Is *four* the magic number? How a shorter week could help employers, staff, and society

Ahead of the 2019 General Election, Labour promised a 32-hour work week within a decade. Though some data showed support, critics slammed the pledge as expensive (with Labour's own report calling it 'unrealistic'). That was then, though. Today, seismic change feels more functional than fantasy. So, as 3,000 staff at 60 UK companies prepare to trial a four-day week, Alex Soojung-Kim Pang explains the power, and growing popularity, of spending less time at work.

The pandemic has shown it's possible to change how we work—faster and more dramatically than we ever thought possible. This erases the fundamental idea that something like a four-day week is impossible, because we've made much bigger changes already.

Making remote work a success provided a technical foundation—and in many cases, productivity improvements—to clear the way for a shorter work week. It also revealed two other important things: 1) The extent to which work didn't work for a lot of people. 2) The importance of structural solutions for what we think are individual problems.

Collective action is the most potent form of self-care. Things like health, productivity and work-life balance are not individual problems—they are collective and structural ones. Solving these problems together, rather than asking individuals to figure it out for themselves, delivers better, more stable outcomes.

Even before the pandemic, people were feeling like their work was less meaningful. One of the things a four-day week does is create conditions that are friendlier to that process of meaning construction. It can play an important role in helping us all deal with workplace stress and mental health, in a way that is substantial and enduring.

We've gotten everything we can from the yoga classes and the mindfulness apps. It's time now to look at collective and structural changes to the way that we work, and the way that we think about time.

"Shifting to a four-day week is like the culture shock of moving to another country."

Bosses—especially company founders—are at a higher risk of burnout, substance abuse and other kinds of stresses. This means they benefit just as much, if not more, from a four-day week as the people who work for them. In terms of the business case for organisations, there are some direct improvements in recruitment and retention. Four-day weeks provide an incentive to make company operations more productive and effective. This can also help improve company culture, and encourages more collaboration—because a four-day week is something everyone has to achieve together.

Shifting to a four-day week is like the culture shock of moving to another country. All of a sudden, people are driving on the other side of the road, and using different words. It's very strange, and doesn't always feel good, but eventually you adjust, and the experience has lots of long-term, positive benefits. While the four-day week is not stress free, stresses are concentrated to the first couple of months. It offers similar benefits in terms of helping people become more resilient, taking on more experimental attitudes towards their jobs, and giving them more control and autonomy at work.

Flexibility, hybrid work and four-day weeks are all ways to try and redesign time. These force organisations to refocus, and make other collective changes that clear the ground to help us have better mental health, as well as more meaningful lives at work and in our personal lives.

In the past couple of years, companies have profoundly changed how they talk about a four-day week. Namely, they talk about four-day weeks! When I was writing the book, it was a real struggle finding firms that had actually done it, because they tended not to be very public about it. Now, when you make the shift, or you sign up to one of the four-day week global trials, you put out a press release, or announce it on LinkedIn. Companies want to be seen as employers of choice, as places that are catching this trend, who care about the wellbeing of their workers, and want to find ways to improve their lives.

Resistance is less around the question, 'Can a four-day week work?', and more about, 'Can we do it in our company?'. So I think it's a lot more about logistics and tactics than philosophy these days.

This is not a movement just for elites, professionals and creatives, it genuinely is available to everyone. We have seen the four-day week take off in garages, care homes, restaurants and manufacturing. It's been successful at law firms, where the billable hour reigns supreme. And in what we think of as 'unskilled' or 'non-creative' work that, turns out, requires a lot of problem-solving, creativity and empathy—we just never bothered to recognise it, because those people aren't middle-class university graduates.

If your business model is based on exploiting people and burning them out—if you hire and manage through an algorithm, or have a well-defined pipeline for bringing in young university graduates, putting them through 90-hour weeks before bringing in another class—moving to a four-day week won't work for you. Those funds don't hedge themselves, and young idealistic people are cheap. The other case is jobs you commute to by helicopter. If you are on deployment from the military, or working on an oil rig in the North Sea, odds are you won't be able to move to a four-day week, as the costs and logistics are prohibitive.

To date, the four-day week movement has almost entirely been something that has been pursued by individual companies, and driven by the existential needs of businesses and business leaders. But, in the last year, we have seen two very different countries—Iceland and the UAE—move their public sectors to shorter work weeks. In a number of other countries, we are seeing politicians and policymakers stating to put some money into trials, or expressing an interest in crafting legislation to shorten the work week. It's all still early days, but I think this can only add momentum to the movement.

3 steps to a better workplace: The hidden efficiencies of a four-day week

Fitting five days of work into four is less about speed, more strategy, says Alex Soojung-Kim Pang.

The great secret is that the four-day week is already here. It's just buried underneath overly long meetings, technology-driven distractions and poorly organised time.

All of those things together, according to studies, consume like two or three hours of productive time per day. So, if you get rid of that stuff, you go a long way to making it possible to do five days' work in four.

So, in terms of actual steps:

Make meetings small, short and sharp
The hour-long 'all hands' becomes a 10-minute stand-up, and you limit the number of attendees. This creates better meeting discipline—you've got agendas, decisions to make, and are more thoughtful about who's in the room and who's not.

Rethink tech relationships
You can deal with technology in two ways. One is by eliminating distractions—so email and Slack checks happen twice a day, not continuously. The second is empowering people to automate their least valuable duties, which augments their ability to do the most interesting and engaging parts of their job.

Carve up the calendar
Set aside particular times for focused work, and time for meetings with clients. This will free up time for meaningful social interactions among colleagues, which doesn't need to be tied to specific work projects.

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Alex Soojung-Kim Pang is Head of Programmes at 4 Day Week Global, and author of Shorter.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Building an organisation for the future

Two years into the global WFH experiment, the long-term future of our workplaces remains in-play. With this a unique time of risk and opportunity, Anne Helen Petersen outlines the lessons employers should (and really shouldn't) take on board.

First, ask: is this working?

Look really closely and honestly at what your company is doing. This allows you to understand what parts of work needs to be synchronous—and, depending on the work, in each other's physical company—and what part of the work demands none of that. What part of the work can be completely self-directed, completely at the discretion of the employee, fitting into where it works best for them?

Here's an example: an ad agency noticed that, while working remotely, everyone kept getting interrupted. There was no time for deep work, the creatives had no time to concentrate, and the salespeople were super frustrated—the creative people were frustrated with them, because they were interrupting them all the time.

The agency introduced a 'no contact' period for three to four hours a day, that provided some deep work space for people doing creative work. Salespeople could still talk with one another, but no communication could come in from them—that time is sacred. From the early reports, this really changed how people thought about what they were able to do.

A lot of times people fill their workday with emails and Slack messages and just communicating about things. Communication is so important, but it gives no space to do the actual meat of the work. Oftentimes, people then end up doing that deeper work during off hours, which means they work more, and that leads to burnout. So it's about preserving time to do your actual job during the day.

Don't snoop on staff

Avoid any sort of monitoring technology. Especially keystroke monitoring, or software that takes a screenshot of what someone is working on every 30-seconds. And then also more low-key modes of surveillance—like having to check-in on Slack every 20-minutes, or the implicit understanding that you should be doing that.

This really contributes to people 'live action role-playing' their job, in a way that makes people feel untrusted. They won't want to give their best selves to their job when they don't feel trusted in return.

Let's say you're chopping onions, and there's a chef in the kitchen watching you. You feel very scrutinised, it's uncomfortable—like nothing you're doing is quite right—and soon you won't want to chop those onions any more.

Oftentimes, the goal becomes not, 'How can I do my best work?', but instead thinking about how to circumvent the surveillance. Generally, I think this creates an atmosphere of distrust and toxic culture—that leads to all sorts of other problems.

Whatever benefit you think you're going to get, is it actually worth what is lost in creating a toxic culture, or high staff turnover?

Performative listening is worse than not listening at all

Seeking employee feedback, then refusing to actually heed that feedback, is a symptom of a toxic culture.

This is a very of-the-moment thing—a ton of organisations are saying to employees: 'What do you want?', 'What situation works best for you?', 'How many days do you want to come into the office?'. Employees fill out these detailed surveys, then the company decides to do something very different to what most employees indicated.

> "Seeking employee feedback, then refusing to actually heed that feedback, is a symptom of a toxic culture."

It isn't exclusively the case, but I think a lot of executives enjoy and feel they're doing a good job when they're present with other people. It's what makes it feel like they're doing their job, so it is understandable they want to be back in the office more, and fall back on previous models. But it doesn't mean it's in line with what all employees want, or what would be more productive moving forward.

Why reward performance with people management?

The practice of promoting high achievers to the position of management—because that's the only way to advance in a company—is broken. This leads to a bunch of people without the actual skills for management in those positions.

This was true before the pandemic, but now there's the added problem of hybrid managing. This is a difficult skill, and one that companies really need to think about. Both in terms of offering training—and not a one-hour module, that makes managers feel like they're wasting their time—but also hiring for a different set of skills, or promoting people for the skill of management.

Understand the future is not fixed

The answer, right now, is to be iterative. Whatever you propose now doesn't have to be the way you do it in six months.

You can be very open and communicative with your organisation, and say: 'We're going to figure out what works for us'. Some teams may need more freedom, and others might need to be more present. You might not have a blanket, across-the-board policy.

How do you figure this out in a way that feels equitable? How do you look at your stats in six months and say, 'What are our problems with retention? Are we hiring enough caregivers? Or people from geographically diverse places?'.

I think being able to look at stats—thinking about how you can change policies to attract the talent that you want, and also retain that talent—is going to be a big thing.

> "Organisations have to figure out how to make the workplace a place where people want to work."

Remember: the 'old normal' no longer exists

While many companies will figure out a hybrid solution that suits the work they do, very few are going to go back to anything that resembles what they had, pre-pandemic.

Organisations have to figure out how to make the workplace a place where people *want* to work. Smart companies are realising that one way to do that is to figure out remote, flexible situations. So still having offices for people who want them, and places for in-person collaborative work. In the book we feature the example of Dropbox, where they're like, 'We don't have offices per se, but we have collaborative studios'.

This means that, when people want to be with each other to talk about a project, that's possible, but you don't have a place where employees go just to show their face and get promoted.

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Anne Helen Petersen is writer of the Culture Study newsletter, and co-author of Out of Office: The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home.

TIPS, ADVICE, ACTIONABLES

Health and psychological safety: Introducing ISO 45003, and why every employer should care

By now, every organisation is aware of its duty around health and safety—plus the price for getting it wrong. In the HSE's most recent data, it tallied the cost of workplace injuries at £5.6 billion. Though colossal, it's pennies when compared with the price of poor mental health at work—£45 billion. Now, with the arrival of ISO 45003, these two hazards are, at last, being considered as one. Put another way, health and safety is getting a reboot.

ISO 45003 was published last June by the International Organisation of Standardisation (ISO)—a global, independent body that unites sector specialists to come up with best practice for a range of issues. In the case of ISO 45003, it's a formal framework for how employers should spot, stop and prevent what they term 'psychosocial hazards'.

Of course, there's much more to it. So, in the spirit of the ISO, we invited an expert to outline some best practice. And, by that, we mean answer any question you might have…

ISO 45003 Q&A

Hayley Farrell, Wellbeing Manager at EMCOR UK, explains the ins and outs of the new ISO standard.

What *is* psychological safety?

Psychological safety is the belief that it's ok to take interpersonal risks as a group. In the workplace, it is how organisations prevent work-related injury and ill-health caused by psychosocial risk—that is, the likelihood of exposure to a work-related hazard of a psychological nature. In other words, what is happening in the workplace that could have a negative impact on an employee's wellbeing?

What's in ISO 45003?

ISO 45003 is about the development, implementation, maintenance and continual improvement of psychologically safe workplaces. There are three categories of psychosocial risk identified: how work is organised; social factors at work; and the work environment, equipment and hazardous tasks.

Underneath all three categories are a number of different subheadings—such as job demand, job control, flexibility, relationships with colleagues and managers. ISO 45003 requires companies to identify these systemic workplace hazards and assess the severity, duration and frequency of exposure to these hazards. These indicators present the wellbeing impact and enable organisations to take necessary control measures to mitigate the risk.

What's fundamental is that ISO 45003 demands organisations take a preventative approach—by addressing systemic risk. It is not about individual risk.

There have been many other ISO standards. Does 45003 cross over with any others?

So 45001 is essentially a big sister to 45003. While 45001 focuses more on the physical aspects of safety, 45003 aims to bring parity to the whole-person approach to safety—both physical and psychological. 45003 builds on the existing management framework of 45001, asking: how do you identify psychosocial risk? How do you put control measures in place? And how do you measure the impact that those control measures are having?

Do organisations have to comply?

The standard is not mandatory… yet. However, regulations do require employers to consider the health and safety risks to employees, and carry out a risk assessment to protect employees from exposure to reasonably foreseeable risks. Health has been overlooked for many years, with physical safety front and centre.

> "While ISO 45003 is not compulsory, it is a comprehensive framework to support the management of workplace health and psychological safety."

While ISO 45003 is not compulsory, it is a comprehensive framework to support the management of workplace health and psychological safety, which allows organisations to broaden the safety lens.

If it's not mandatory, why should employers care?

Decreased voluntary turnover. A decrease in absenteeism. Increased engagement. Increased self-management of health and wellbeing. The identification of early warning signs of mental ill-health and early intervention. Increased motivation, happiness, productivity, and a deeper sense of belonging.

More than that, there is a social, moral, legal and sustainable value to health and wellbeing. People are a company's biggest asset—employers not only have a duty of care to protect them from harm, it's also morally right to not expose them to workplace risks that could negatively impact their wellbeing.

To what extent is psychological safety about being proactive to risks?

Prevention is pivotal. I always use the example that you can't tell somebody to go for a walk when they don't have the time to take a lunch break. Instead, identify the hazards that prevent employees from taking lunch breaks, and how you can address it. We must look at the workplace, culture and challenges that impact wellbeing as a whole.

And where should organisations start?

Download the standard. Read the standard. Understand what the definitions mean to you. What does psychological safety mean to your organisation? Match it to your vision, your mission statements. And then, I would say the next step is a gap analysis.

Otherwise, don't be overwhelmed—just jump off the block and start. Be agile and remember risk is not always negative. The identification of risk provides insight into threats and opportunities.

World-leading wellbeing

In October 2021, EMCOR UK became the very first organisation to receive ISO 45003 certification. Here, Hayley Farrell explains how they did it, and why you too should invest in psychological safety (hint: it's not about certificates).

Our mission is a better world at work. How do we make sure that, when you are coming to work, you're safe, secure, feel cared for, and part of the team? For us, ISO 45003 was a natural progression, having adopted ISO 27500—the human centred approach—in 2020. This allowed us to embed our whole-person approach to safety, and bring parity to physical and psychological safety in the workplace.

"The accreditation process involves the implementation of an occupational health and safety management system to monitor psychological safety."

Audits and accreditations

The accreditation process involves the implementation of an occupational health and safety management system to monitor psychological safety. The system contains planning, implementing, reviewing and continuous improvement to prevent work related injury and ill-health and provide safe workplaces.

When it comes to auditing the system, BSI—who were the writers of the standard—came in and conducted an audit. This was about showing we actually do what our management system, processes and policies say we do.

Fast results, but not a sprint

While it's still new—we only got accredited in October—I think the most exciting part is that we have demonstrated our commitment to psychological safety, which is a continuous journey.

I always say psychological safety and wellbeing is not a sprint. We're working towards cultural change—where we can demonstrate impact over the next 10 years, for the future generation—and to ensure sustainable practices. It's not just about saying, 'We've ticked the box, we've got the certificate. Great, job done'.

Now, we'll continue to build on the understanding of the whole-person approach to safety. We've always had a safety-first culture, so expanding our approach is really important. Our safety reporting metrics have changed, and we are starting to see the dialogue change, the barriers to mental health open up and conversations increase around psychological safety.

Strive for change, not certificates

One thing I would say: don't just do this to get accredited. Be authentic in delivery and use the standard to build a business case to mitigate workplace risk, which has a direct negative impact on employee wellbeing. It's all about embedding slow, sustainable cultural change over time.

The road ahead: A mentally healthy workplace is possible. You just have to ~~want it~~ work for it

Here are 5 ways to improve wellbeing—on an employee and organisational level—in a way that's built to last.

1. Turn mental health awareness into action

Normalising the conversation around wellbeing is both worthy and valuable—for employers and their staff. But unless awareness is followed up by targeted action, it can all feel a bit empty. The answer? Company-wide education.

By investing in high-quality training, you can equip every employee with a base level of mental health insight. In doing so, you'll go a long way to squashing stigma, while strengthening support structures (both organisational and peer-to-peer). Long term, this makes the whole company more psychologically safe.

2. Optimise the working day

There's truth in the cliché: *work smarter, not harder*. Long term, wringing out every droplet of worker output is as implausible as it is unsustainable. It's also unsafe—burnout (real burnout, not short-lived exhaustion) thrives in 'always on' cultures. Overwork is not the answer, better boundaries—on an individual and structural scale—are.

This may be shorter meetings. Reducing tech distractions, to clear space for focused work. Respecting (or even enforcing) downtime. Maybe it's a four-day week. Whatever your precise approach, aim for a workforce that has all the right tools to work well, while also feeling empowered not to. Sometimes, rest is the most powerful precursor to productivity.

3. Support staff with non-work issues

Lingering pandemic problems, anxiety over the situation in Ukraine, and a cost-of-living crisis that impacts everyone's pocket to some degree, there is a lot to feel stressed about right now. Our YouGov data shows the UK workforce feels companies have a part to play, so this is a chance for employers to meet the moment.

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Can't increase every salary at a higher rate of rocketing inflation? There's still so much you *can* do. Like consult with staff. Signpost to expert help. And offer creative fixes (from flexible working to salary advances). Combined, this can help to ease the pain of personal problems.

4. Be proactive to wellbeing hazards

Not all companies will want an ISO 45003 certificate. Yet every workplace in the world should strive for a psychologically safe environment. Rethinking your approach—from responding to wellbeing issues, to stopping them from starting—will go a long way to making this a reality.

Commit to an exhaustive review of psychological risks (from obvious factors like bullying, right down to seemingly insignificant ones like bad lighting), think about how these could affect staff, then develop a plan geared around prevention.

Morally speaking, protecting employee mental health is obviously the right thing to do. Yet given the endless gains (such as greater engagement, happiness and productivity, plus less staff turnover and absences), the case for companies is just as clear.

5. Unlock a better culture

Underpinning all of this: culture. It's what fuels a healthy workforce, healthy workplace, and healthy bottom line. Research shows poor mental health costs UK employers up to £56 billion a year. Yet wellbeing spend sees an average return of £5.30 for every pound.

But it's about *so much more* than money. A meaningful cultural shift—away from a workplace that seeks output at all costs, to one that supports employees to take care of their wellbeing, who in turn feel able to share their concerns without fear of punishment or stigma—brings the ultimate reward. A company that is happy and healthy, aware and informed, focused and rested. One that is, well, *well*.

Discover work wellbeing

The **Work Happiness Score** is a new way of understanding how employees feel at work—and why. It uses a scoring system, similar to company reviews and ratings, but gives richer insight into what matters most to job seekers and employees today. Our hope is that these insights help lead people to better jobs, and ultimately, better lives.

Learn more at https://uk.indeed.com/employers/work-happiness


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