



Our changing attitudes to mental health

Exploring employee perspectives on mental health throughout the pandemic and how employers can support their people in the post-Covid workplace.



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Introduction

Two years after Covid-19 reached UK shores, the pandemic continues to shape the way we work. One year on from our [Coping with Covid](#) report, we asked 1,500 people from across the UK about their attitudes to workplace wellbeing and mental health.

The results reveal an average of 3.36 days off due to mental health per employee in 2021, up from 3.19 in 2020, at a cost to businesses of £12.7bn. And while workers feel their wellbeing is slightly better than a year ago, 44% find their mental health affects their productivity at least once a week.

For many, the pandemic has prompted a change in perspective, with 51% of workers saying their friends and family are their top priority for the coming months. The majority of workers (68%) think employers are more aware of mental health issues now, but with 73% of people worried about the cost of living, the post-pandemic world looks set to present new challenges for workplace wellbeing.



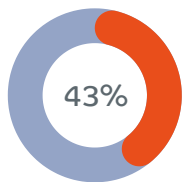
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In 2021, businesses saw an average of 3.36 mental health days off per employee, costing the UK economy £12.7bn.

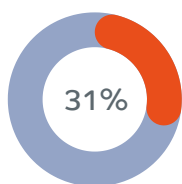
Key findings



43% of workers say their mental health has got worse since the start of the pandemic.



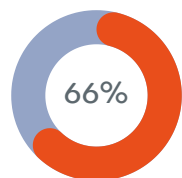
73% of people are worried about the increased cost of living.



31% of UK employees took time off work due to mental health in 2021.



52% of people want to prioritise spending time with their family and friends.



66% of mental health absences are longer than five days.



28% of people want long-term changes to the way they work.



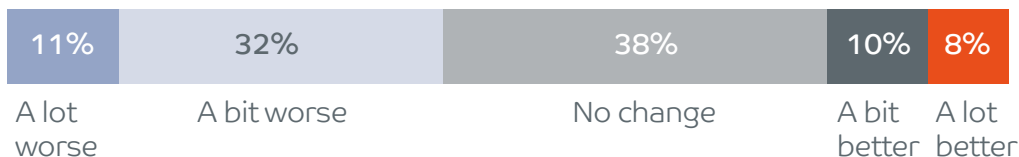
68% of people think the pandemic has made employers more aware of mental health issues.

Revisiting mental health in the pandemic

While the UK looks ahead to a post-Covid world, workers are still feeling the pressure after two years of disruption. Over two-fifths (43%) of employees say their mental health has got worse since the start of the pandemic, while only 18% say it's improved.

We asked:

How do you think your mental health has changed, if at all, since the start of the pandemic?



68%

of people think the pandemic has made employers more aware of mental health issues.

Reducing the stigma

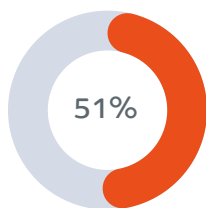
The good news is that attitudes to mental health appear to be changing, resulting in a workforce that feels more comfortable dealing with wellbeing concerns and getting the support they need.

The majority of employees (59%) say the pandemic has helped reduce the stigma around mental health. Over half (51%) of UK workers now feel more comfortable asking their manager for time off or talking to their colleagues about mental health.

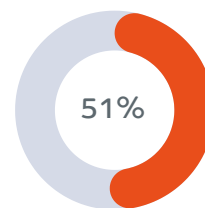
This attitude shift also seems to be reflected in leadership roles, with 68% of workers saying they think employers are becoming more aware of mental health issues.



of employees believe the pandemic has helped reduce the mental health stigma.



of people now feel more comfortable asking their manager for time off due to mental health.



of UK workers are more comfortable discussing mental health with their colleagues.

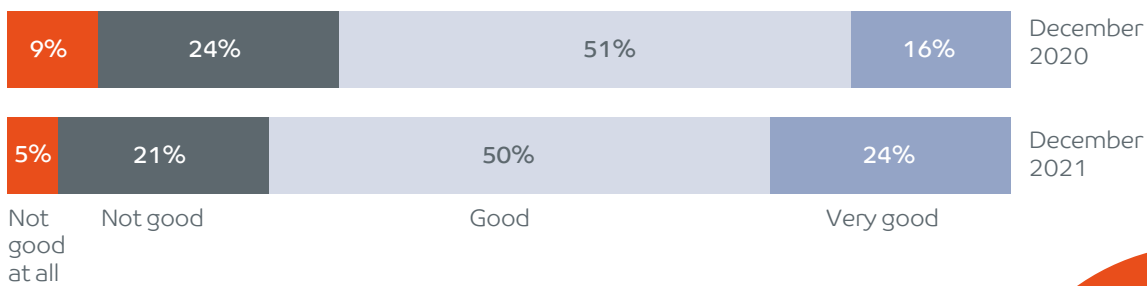


Comparing two years of pandemic mental health

Although many people feel their wellbeing is worse than before the pandemic, our research suggests it's slightly improved on this time last year. Workers report that their morale, mental health, physical health and productivity are better than they were in 2020. All four measures have seen around a 10% improvement in the past year, but over a quarter (26%) of employees still say their mental health at work is 'not good' or 'not good at all'.

We asked:

How would you rate your current levels of mental health at work?



How to help your people

Mental health challenges remain at the top of the corporate agenda, and employers can use this momentum to revisit their approach to employee wellbeing. Over a quarter of workers (27%) are still looking for more wellbeing support from their employer — whether that's [Mental Health First Aid training](#), an updated [wellbeing strategy](#), or wider culture change, leaders will be expected to take action to help their people get back to their best.

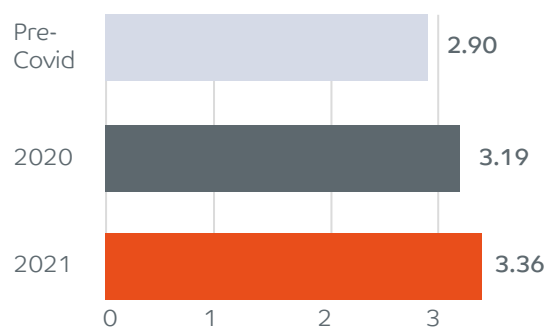
26%
of workers say their mental health is still 'not good' or 'not good at all'.



The business impact of mental health days off

Despite some small improvements in employee mental health, the business impact of poor wellbeing continues to disrupt the economy. In 2021, organisations saw an average of 3.36 mental health days off per employee. These absences cost businesses £12.7bn, slightly down from £14bn in 2020, but a regional divide is now beginning to emerge.

Average number of days off, per year, as a result of mental ill health



In 2021, mental health days off cost UK businesses

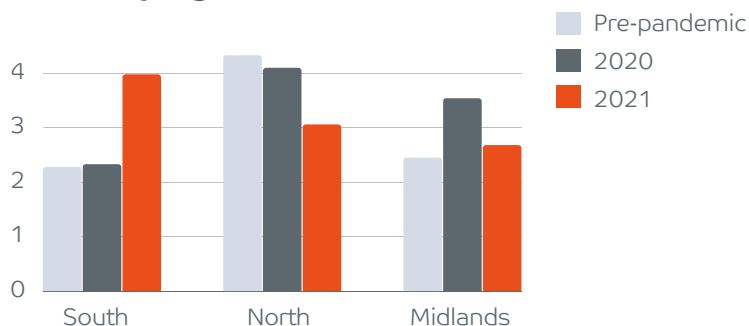
£12.7bn

Mental health absences reveal a North-South divide

Over the course of the pandemic, mental health absences in the North of England have decreased from 4.33 to 3.06 days per employee per year, while in the South this figure has risen from 2.28 to 3.98 days.

With the pandemic creating a volatile backdrop for workplace wellbeing, it's difficult to pin down the specific cause of this divide. Increased absences may be a symptom of stress and burnout, but they could also be a biproduct of the reduced stigma around mental health allowing employees to request time off when they need to recharge.

Average number of days off as a result of mental ill health by region



31%

of employees took time off work due to mental health in 2021.



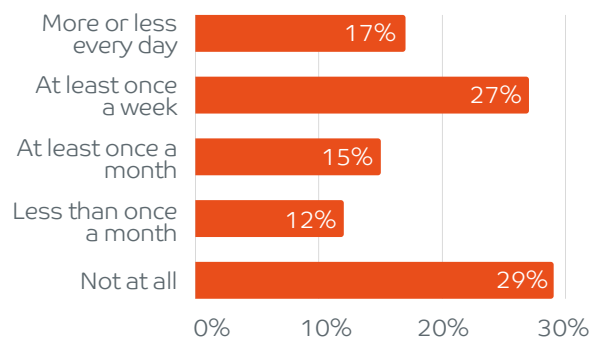


Mental health and productivity

While the stigma may be lifting, mental health is still a barrier to productivity for many workers. Almost half (44%) of people say their mental health affects their productivity at least once a week, signalling a disconnect between employers' attitudes and their actions.

We asked:

This year, how frequently did you feel like your productivity at work was negatively affected by your mental health?



21%

of workers in the South of England say mental health affects their productivity every day.

Two-thirds of mental health absences are longer than five days

Almost a third (31%) of employees say they've taken time off work due to mental health in the past year. Of those, two-thirds (66%) were absent for more than five days, suggesting that employers may be struggling to spot the signs of poor mental health before the problem escalates.



Resources to improve mental health culture

[Westfield Health mental health support resources](#)

Our free webinar and mental health factsheets help you build a culture which supports employee wellbeing.

[HSE mental health advice for managers](#)

Advice to help line managers support their people with mental health and stress.

[Organisational Culture CPD course](#)

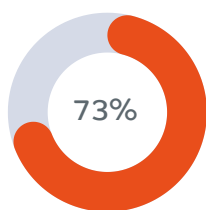
Our free CPD-certified course for HR directors and teams.



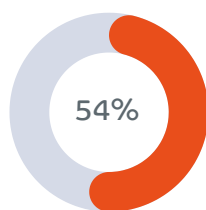
Financial worries heighten stress and anxiety

As inflation hits a 30-year high and prices continue to rise, the Bank of England predicts the biggest financial squeeze in over 30 years. And with National Insurance rates and the energy price cap increasing from April, financial uncertainty looks set to trouble many households throughout the year.

Across the UK, 50% of people say things are 'really difficult' financially at the moment and 54% feel they'd struggle to deal with an unexpected bill. And with inflation predicted to rise further in the spring, this on-going worry presents a real mental health concern as people try to keep up with rising costs.



73% of people are worried about the increased cost of living.



54% of households would struggle to deal with an unexpected bill.



50% of UK workers say things are really difficult financially at the moment.



Money and mental health in the workplace

Employers may be hesitant to broach the topic of personal finance with their people. Our relationship with money can be complex and the conversation is often difficult to navigate, especially in the workplace.

But money worries are a wellbeing concern as much as a financial one, and employers must consider the stress and mental health impact of a workforce feeling the squeeze.



50%

of people say things are already 'really difficult' financially.

How can employers help with financial wellbeing?

With almost three-quarters of the population (73%) worried about the increased cost of living, managers should be prepared to discuss financial wellbeing concerns with their team.

While some employees may approach this conversation with expectations around pay and benefits, many more will value the opportunity to discuss their problems and feel heard, and managers should feel confident to ask what they can do to help. This might be as simple as signposting information and resources for those who need further guidance.

Resources and links to signpost your people to financial support

As an employer, it's often not possible to offer financial advice, but you can share a list of useful resources via email or your intranet to ensure employees have access to professional support.

[Mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)

Exploring the link between money and mental health.

[Citizens Advice](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

Help with understanding debt and money.

[NHS — Coping with financial worries](https://www.nhs.uk/health-wellbeing/mental-health/financial-worries)

Practical advice to manage financial stress.

[Stepchange](https://www.stepchange.org)

Expert debt advice and fee-free debt management.

Post-pandemic priorities and expectations

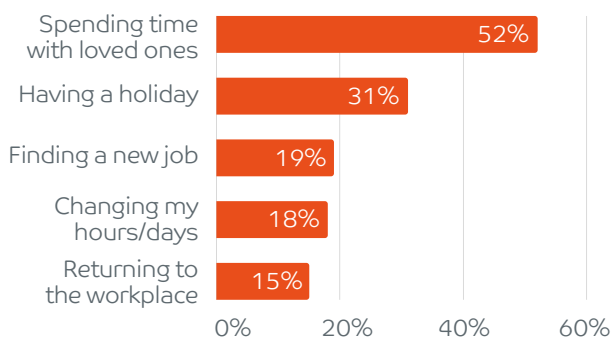
Over the course of the pandemic, the world of work has been transformed. With an increase in hybrid working options and a renewed focus on workplace health and safety, employees are expecting permanent changes to the way they work. For many, the past two years have revealed new perspectives, so what are employees hoping to focus on in 2022?



52%
of people want to prioritise spending time with their friends and family.

We asked:

What are your priorities for the next few months?



After a period of constant uncertainty, it's not surprising that work might take a back seat for many, and people prioritise time spent with their family and friends. More than half the workforce (52%) plan to focus their energy on their loved ones in the coming months, while almost a fifth of UK workers (19%) say they're going to look for a new job.





33%
of employees in large businesses want more wellbeing support at work.

Employee expectations differ by company size

Those who work for larger organisations (over 250 employees) are the most likely to be looking to change their schedule, with almost a quarter (23%) saying adjusting their working pattern is a priority for them.

Larger businesses may also see an increased demand for wellbeing initiatives, with a third (33%) of employees in this category saying they'd like more support compared to just 19% of those in small businesses (under 50 employees).

Changes in the workplace

When asked what they need from their employer, 28% said they would like to see long-term changes to the way they work, suggesting employees are getting ready to leave in search of better benefits such as flexible or remote working.

We asked:

Which of the following would you like from your employer in the next few months?



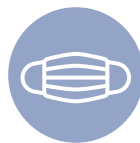
28%
of people want long-term changes to how they work.



27%
want extra wellbeing support.



25%
want more mental health support at work.



21%
want their workplace to be made more Covid secure.

Creating a supportive workplace culture

While these trends can give leaders a head start, it is workplace culture that shapes employee attitudes to wellbeing, and each organisation will face its own unique challenges as we emerge from the pandemic.

The first step to improving this culture is to speak to employees and encourage open discussions about wellbeing, including mental health, to understand their needs and expectations. Our free [Health and Wellbeing Toolkit](#) and [workplace wellbeing solutions](#) help HR leaders transform their wellbeing strategy and influence company culture.



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