

# Present company included: Prioritizing mental health and well-being for all

A McKinsey Health Institute survey across 15 countries highlights how employers can make mental health a reality, especially for young workers.

*This article is a collaborative effort by Jacqueline Brassey, Erica Coe, Renata Giarola, Brad Herbig, Barbara Jeffery, and Roxy Merchand, representing views of the McKinsey Health Institute.*



## To mark World Mental Health Day

**2022**, the World Health Organization has urged making “mental health and well-being for all a global priority.”<sup>1</sup>

With the growing disease burden related to brain-health conditions, moving this aspiration into reality requires bold action and deep commitment from a broad range of stakeholders—with employers playing a critical role.

In our McKinsey Health Institute (MHI) publication, “Addressing employee burnout: Are you solving the right problem?,” we highlighted what affects employee mental health and well-being. Now we examine who is most affected—and how leaders are in a position to improve employee mental health and well-being at scale by rethinking the workplace via a lens of a modern understanding of health. Research indicates that positive outcomes—such as job satisfaction and work engagement—are correlated with feeling included and supported, and with freedom from stigma or overwhelming workloads.

The insights discussed below are based on a global survey MHI conducted across 15 countries and nearly 15,000 employees. To learn more, see the sidebar, “Survey scope and methodology.”

<sup>1</sup> World Mental Health Day 2022, World Health Organization, accessed October 6, 2022.

## Survey scope and methodology

**The McKinsey Health Institute conducted** a global survey in 15 countries between February and April 2022. This survey involved nearly 15,000 employees in 15 countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Workplace factors assessed in our survey included:

- *Toxic workplace behavior*: employees experience interpersonal behavior that leads them to feel undervalued, belittled, or unsafe, such as unfair or demeaning treatment, noninclusive behavior, sabotaging, cutthroat competition, abusive management, and unethical behavior from leaders or coworkers.
- *Inclusivity and belonging*: organization systems, leaders, and peers foster a welcoming and fair environment for all employees to be themselves, find connection, and meaningfully contribute.
- *Sustainable work*: organizations and leaders promote work that enables a healthy balance between work and personal life, including a manageable workload and work schedule.
- *Supportive growth environment*: managers care about employee opinions, well-being, and satisfaction and provide support and enable opportunities for growth.
- *Freedom from stigma and discrimination*: there is freedom from the level of shame, prejudice, or discrimination employees perceive toward people with mental-health or substance-use conditions.
- *Organizational accountability*: organizations gather feedback, track KPIs, align incentives, and measure progress against employee health goals.
- *Leadership commitment*: leaders consider employee mental health a top priority, publicly committing to a clear strategy to improve employee mental health.

- *Access to resources*: organizations offer easy-to-use and accessible resources that fit individual employee needs related to mental health.<sup>1</sup>

Health outcomes assessed in our survey included:

- *Burnout symptoms*: an employee's experience of extreme tiredness, reduced ability to regulate cognitive and emotional processes, and mental distancing (Burnout Assessment Tool).<sup>2</sup>
- *Distress*: an employee experiencing a negative stress response, often involving negative affect and physiological reactivity (4DSQ Distress Screener).<sup>3</sup>
- *Depression symptoms*: an employee having little interest or pleasure in doing things, and feeling down, depressed, or hopeless (PHQ-2 Screener).<sup>4</sup>
- *Anxiety symptoms*: an employee's feelings of nervousness, anxiousness, or being on edge, and not being able to stop or control worrying (GAD-2 Screener).<sup>5</sup>

Business outcomes assessed in our survey included:

- *Intent to leave*: an employee's desire to leave the organization in which they are currently employed in the next three to six months.
- *Work engagement*: an employee's positive motivational state of high energy combined with high levels of dedication and a strong focus on work.
- *Organizational advocacy*: an employee's willingness to recommend or endorse their organization as a place to work to friends and relatives.
- *Work satisfaction*: an employee's level of contentment or satisfaction with their current job.

<sup>1</sup> Including adaptability and resilience-related learning and development resources.

<sup>2</sup> Steffie Desart et al., *User manual - Burnout assessment tool*, Version 2.0, July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> J. R. Anema et al., “Validation study of a distress screener,” *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, September 2009, Volume 19, Issue 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kurt Kroenke et al., “The patient health questionnaire-2: Validity of a two-item depression screener,” *Medical Care*, November 2003, Volume 41, Issue 11.

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Kroenke et al., “Anxiety disorders in primary care: Prevalence, impairment, comorbidity, and detection,” *Annals of Internal Medicine*, March 6, 2007, Volume 146, Issue 5.

## Most survey respondents have experienced mental-health and well-being challenges

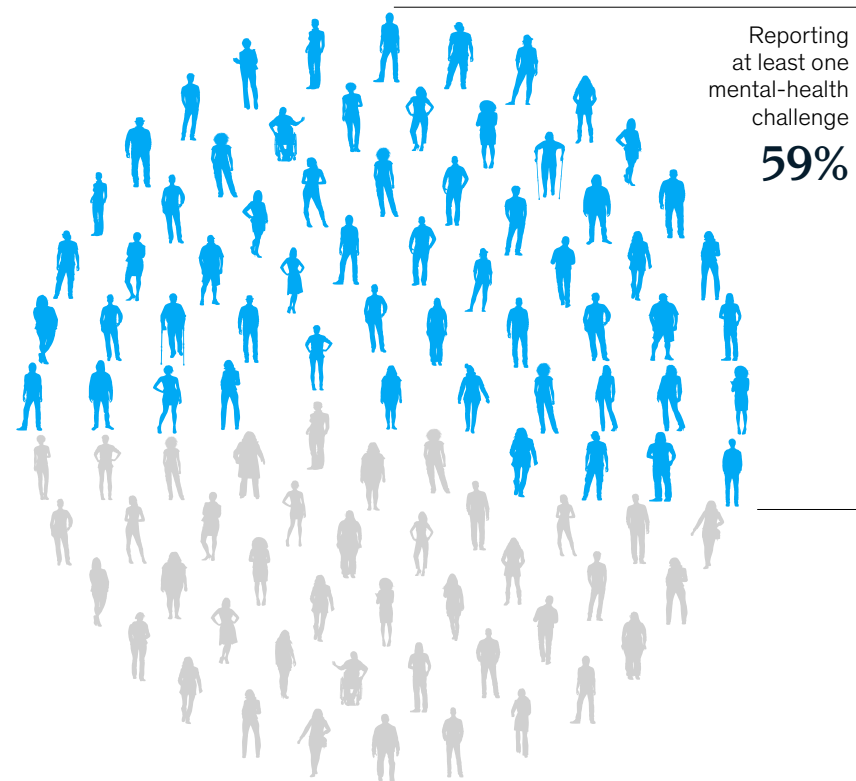
Mental health exists along a continuum, and the majority of employees are likely to experience some symptoms of poor mental health and well-being at some point during their working years.<sup>2</sup>

According to our survey across 15 countries, around 60 percent of employees have experienced at least one mental-health challenge at some point in their lives—a figure consistent with other global research.<sup>3</sup> For leaders, that means that the vast majority of their employees are directly or indirectly affected by mental-health-related challenges.<sup>4</sup>

Companies have a role to play since the implications of inaction in response to this crisis is tremendous. Those touched by mental-health and well-being challenges can't simply be excluded or treated in isolation from the workforce; they *are* the workforce.

## Mental-health and well-being challenges affect the majority of the global workforce.

Share of respondents reporting at least one mental-health challenge<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Responses include reporting having a mental-health or substance-use diagnosis now or in the past; reporting to have sought or considered treatment for a mental-health or substance-use condition; or having listed at least one of the following: high symptoms of anxiety, burnout, depression, or distress. Source: McKinsey Health Institute Employee Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 (n = 14,509, in 15 countries)

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Anas and Kelly Greenwood, "It's a new era for mental health at work," *Harvard Business Review*, October 4, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Includes respondents reporting to have a mental-health or substance-use diagnosis now or in the past, reporting to have sought or considered treatment for mental-health or substance-use conditions, or indicating to have experienced at least one of the following: high symptoms of anxiety, depression, distress or burnout, reporting a mental-health or substance-use-related status; see also Julia Anas and Kelly Greenwood, "It's a new era for mental health at work," *Harvard Business Review*, October 4, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Caryn Pearson, "The impact of mental health problems on family members," Statistics Canada, October 7, 2015.

## No demographic appears immune to mental-health challenges

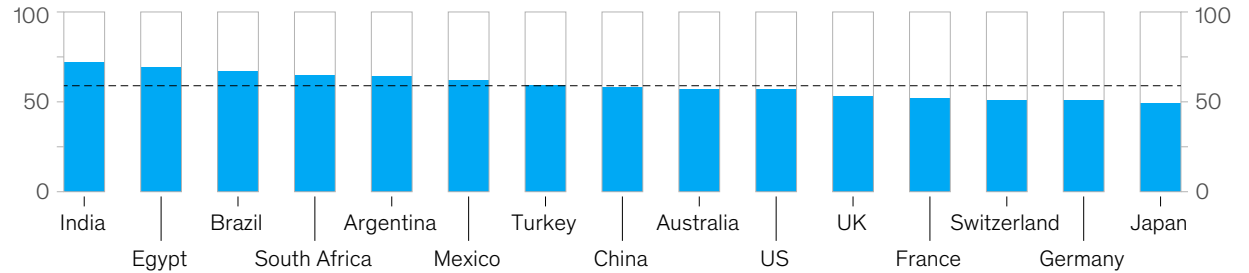
Our survey reveals that employees face mental-health challenges irrespective of their country, industry, age group, role, or gender. Leaders around the world can consider how they want to prioritize helping their employees.

While specific groups may experience different challenges, our survey data reflect that no demographic group is immune. One example: a recent McKinsey Health Institute report found poor and worsening mental health among Gen Z respondents in Europe.

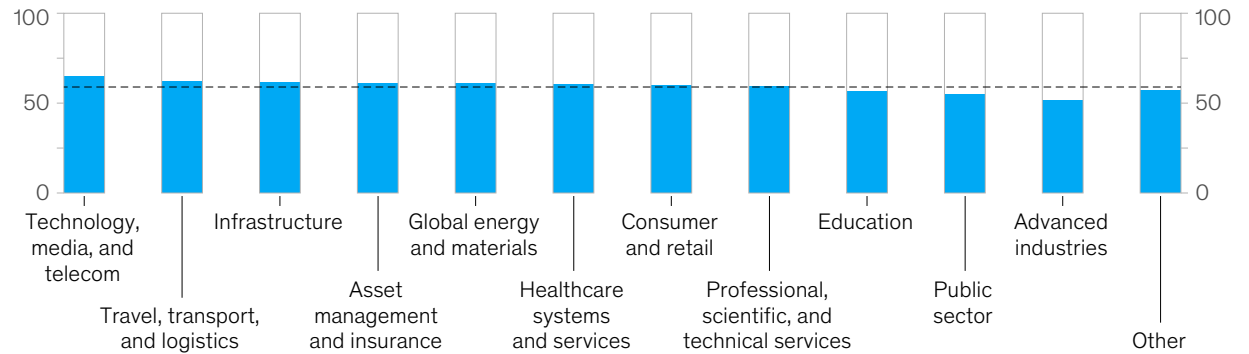
## Mental-health and well-being challenges affect the majority of employees in most demographic groups.

Share of respondents reporting at least one mental-health challenge,<sup>1</sup>% ----- Global average (59%)

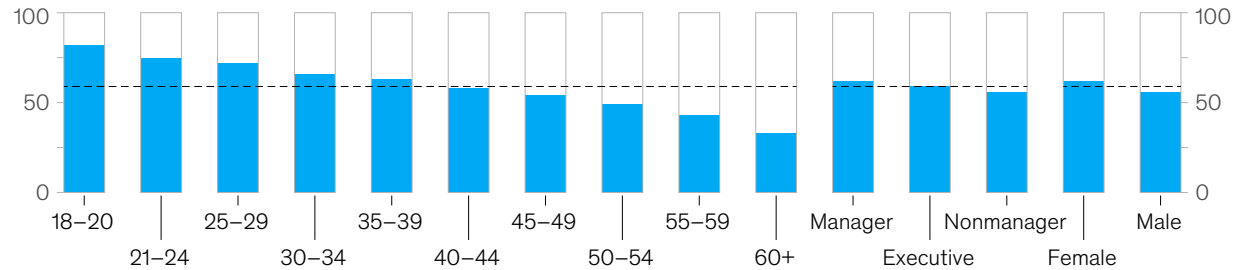
### By country



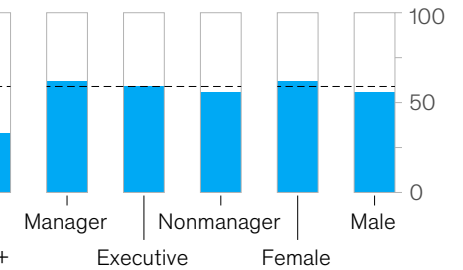
### By industry



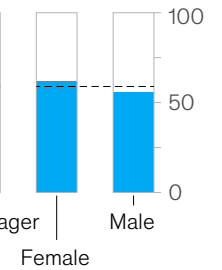
### By age



### By role



### By gender



<sup>1</sup>Responses include reporting having a mental-health or substance-use diagnosis now or in the past; reporting to have sought or considered treatment for a mental-health or substance-use condition; or having listed at least one of the following: high symptoms of anxiety, burnout, depression, or distress. Source: McKinsey Health Institute Employee Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 (n = 14,509, in 15 countries)

## Failing to address the effects of mental-health and well-being challenges is a missed opportunity for employers

Most adults spend at least a third of their employable years at work.<sup>5</sup> The mental-health challenges create a cost for employers. Our global survey finds that employees experiencing at least one mental-health and well-being challenge (nearly three in five)<sup>6</sup> report worse employee experience metrics. They are three times more likely to experience toxic behaviors and four times more likely to want to leave their organization. They are also more likely to report low job satisfaction, engagement, or other signifiers of positive workplaces.

Yet employees may be reluctant to mention mental-health or well-being challenges, as those facing mental-health challenges may grapple with stigma. As observed in a previous McKinsey survey, a substantial share of employees experiencing mental-health-related challenges indicated they would avoid treatment because they didn't want anyone finding out. This terrible paradox can exacerbate challenges that are often invisible to others.

The first step often includes asking employees about the state of their mental health and finding out who may need more help.

## Employees facing mental-health or well-being challenges report more negative experiences at work.

Likelihood of reporting negative work experiences for those with at least one mental-health or well-being challenge relative to other employees,<sup>1</sup> multiple



<sup>1</sup>Responses include reporting having a mental-health or substance-use diagnosis now or in the past; reporting to have sought or considered treatment for a mental-health or substance-use condition; or having listed at least one of the following: high symptoms of anxiety, burnout, depression, or distress. Source: McKinsey Health Institute Employee Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 (n = 14,509, in 15 countries)

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<sup>5</sup> "American Time Use Survey—2021 results," Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, June 23, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Mental-health challenges include reporting at least one of the following now or in the past: high symptoms of anxiety, depression, distress, or burnout, or reporting a mental-health or substance-use-related status currently or in the past.

## Across all 15 countries surveyed, respondents say toxic workplace behavior has the largest effect on their intent to leave and burnout symptoms

Many organizations have responded to the mental-health challenge facing employees by dedicating unprecedented resources to employee mental health and well-being.<sup>7</sup> As laudable as these efforts are, focusing on providing access to resources alone may lead employers to overestimate the impact of their employee programs. They may be underestimating the critical role of other workplace factors in supporting employee mental health and well-being.

Our global survey data suggest that improving workplace factors, such as eliminating toxic behaviors, boosting inclusivity, and creating sustainable work, can be several times more predictive of employee mental health and well-being than providing access to resources alone.

## Toxic behavior is by far the greatest predictor of negative workplace outcomes.

Impact of workplace factors in predicting negative outcomes relative to the impact of 'access to resources,' multiple



Source: McKinsey Health Institute Employee Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 (n = 14,509, in 15 countries)

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<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Lieberman, "What wellness programs don't do for workers," *Harvard Business Review*, August 14, 2019.



## Moving to better mental health and well-being for employees everywhere

As we have discussed in previous articles, employers have the opportunity to move the needle on burnout, to explore ways to help workers struggling with mental-health and well-being challenges, and to explore ways to create the healthiest environments for employees. As employers open the aperture to look beyond the reactive management of poor mental health to the proactive mitigation of its drivers, they can reinforce what is—and is not—acceptable. For example, companies may benefit from reinforcing behaviors that leverage the power of kindness—which recent research has highlighted as a powerful path toward greater empathy and compassion for others, along with greater well-being for the individual practicing kindness.<sup>8</sup>

We also recommend employers revisit the following questions:

- Do we treat employee mental health and well-being as a strategic priority?
- Do we effectively address toxic behaviors?
- Do we create inclusive work environments?
- Do we promote sustainable work?
- Are we holding leaders accountable?
- Are we effectively tackling stigma?
- Do our resources meet employee needs?

A long-term comprehensive approach is likely correlated to organizations gaining the full potential benefits from improved employee health. If individuals, businesses, and countries widen their understanding of health, they may be able reap the benefits of gains in life expectancy and quality of life.

*If you're experiencing a mental-health crisis, please contact a crisis help line in your country (988 in the United States). For more information about World Mental Health Day, please refer to these resources from the World Health Organization. If you are a leader who is concerned about mental-health challenges in your organization, please refer to these resources from the World Health Organization. There are many actions that employers can take, including examples from: MindForward Alliance, One Mind at Work, Mental Health America, and Shatterproof.*

**Employers have the opportunity to move the needle on burnout, to explore ways to help workers struggling with mental-health and well-being challenges, and to explore ways to create the healthiest environments for employees.**

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<sup>8</sup> Julie M. Fratantoni et al., "Parenting with a kind mind: Exploring kindness as a potentiator for enhanced brain health," *Frontiers in Psychology*, March 2022, Volume 13, Article 805748; Joseph Chancellor et al., "Everyday prosociality in the workplace: The reinforcing benefits of giving, getting, and glimpsing," *Emotion*, June 2018, Volume 18, Issue 4.

**Jacqueline Brassey, Erica Coe, and Barbara Jeffery** are co-leaders with the McKinsey Health Institute, where **Renata Giarola, Brad Herbig,** and **Roxy Merkand** are consultants.

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