



Opening the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing at Work



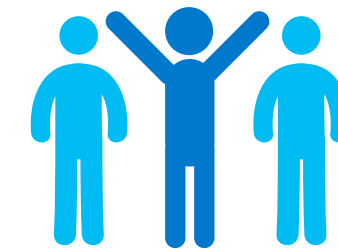
What people think,
feel and do

AT A GLANCE...

26% of workers have never or rarely felt optimistic about the future in the last two weeks

25% of those who struggled with their mental wellbeing didn't take any time off work as they didn't feel their employer would understand

67% of those who have struggled with their mental wellbeing have never told an employer



A third of employees say they aren't offered anything to help them with their mental wellbeing

77% of managers recognise and agree that businesses need more support and education around mental wellbeing in the workplace



FOREWORD

We know businesses need to do more to support workplace mental wellbeing, and even the smallest change can make a huge difference. Mental health was a rather taboo topic in the not too distant past, but progress has certainly been made in recent years! Though there is still a way to go, particularly with regards to mental health and wellbeing at work. We are delighted to share this report to you, which we hope will accelerate change in workplaces across the UK with regards to mental wellbeing.

As you'll see throughout the report, we've uncovered some of the key issues companies need to address, as well as various initiatives that workplaces can implement along with their impact on mental wellbeing.

Addressing mental wellbeing at work may seem like a mammoth task, but it's a journey, and making that first step in the right direction will kick start wider organisational change which will benefit everyone involved.

James Endersby

“We all have mental health”

That's what I said when I proposed running some thought leadership research in this space. Experiences of mental health are so different from person to person, but it affects us all and it's impacted by many different aspects of our lives, including work. So how can workplaces help?

Culture is key here, employers need to create safe spaces where their employees feel comfortable talking about mental health and wellbeing, both good and bad experiences. Culture is hugely important, but it's also important that workplaces have the support structures and initiatives in place. Every workplace is different and different teams may need different things, therefore it is vital that employers listen to their employees and understand what works best for them.

We hope that this audit not only raises awareness of this important issue, but also provides a tool for employers to listen to their workforce and help them nurture a company culture that allows employees to bring their full selves to work.

Mental wellbeing isn't just about surviving, it's about thriving.

Sophie Holland



INTRO

FRONT OF MIND

In the last decade or so mental health and wellbeing has become a crucial societal issue. Increasing numbers of children and adults in the UK are struggling with their mental health. Our recent research found that 75% of UK adults said they had struggled at some point with a mental health related issue*. We also found that 34% have struggled specifically with depression and 29% with anxiety.

Such is the extent of mental health problems and struggles among the population that some in government, healthcare, and the media have begun to talk about it in terms of a 'crisis'. Indeed, there are signs that the government is beginning to look at mental health in the same way as other public health issues; in 2018 the Chancellor's budget included a £2bn increase in funding for mental health services.

Progress has certainly been made; whereas once talking about mental health was considered taboo, conversations about mental wellbeing are now commonplace in the public and in the media, with high-profile celebrities and public figures openly discussing their mental health experiences.

53% of UK workers have struggled at some point with their mental wellbeing

The extent of poor mental wellbeing is also prevalent within organisations and businesses, with 53% of workers self-reporting that they have struggled with their mental wellbeing before. And this is not only impacting employees personal lives, but also their work, with 80% of those who have struggled with their mental wellbeing before saying it impacts their work.

By designing our Mental Wellbeing Audit we hope to enable organisations to assess the mental wellbeing of their staff

Nonetheless, more can be done to tackle the proliferation of poor mental wellbeing in British society. By designing our Workplace Mental Wellbeing Audit we hope to accelerate change by enabling organisations to understand the mental wellbeing of their employees, listen to what their employees want from them, and in turn take steps to help their staff.

We sent our audit out to 2,009 workers based in the UK. Due to the wealth of data we collected we've cherry picked some of the most important and insightful results in this report.

*includes: stress, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety and anxiety disorders, insomnia or sleep problems, paranoia, PTSD, eating disorder, personality disorder, bipolar, psychosis, schizophrenia, other mental health problems

THE WARWICK-EDINBURGH MENTAL WELLBEING SCALE (WEMWBS)

With an issue as complex and abstract as mental health it is important that any research into the subject is rigorous and methodological which is why we've partnered with the University of Warwick to incorporate their mental wellbeing scale into our audit. Not only does the scale give our research a robust method for measuring mental wellbeing it also distinguishes our approach from the myriad of other mental health surveys by giving us a benchmark to work with that is underpinned by academic research.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)* was designed by the University of Warwick with funding from NHS Health Scotland. The scale comprises positive statements, e.g. "I've been feeling optimistic about the future", "I've been feeling useful", "I've been feeling relaxed" and so on. Participants are then asked to say how often they have felt this way in the past two weeks; "None of the time", "Rarely", "Some of the time", "Often", "All of the time". The positive nature of these statements marks the WEMWBS out from other mental wellbeing scales in that it captures feeling good and functioning well, not just an absence of mental ill-health, which is important as mental wellbeing is about thriving, and not just surviving.

Taking an average of their fourteen answers a wellbeing score can be assigned to an individual. By looking at this score the mental wellbeing of an individual can be determined in terms of whether it falls above or below the national average. The scale enables us to quantify mental wellbeing, thus promoting wider understanding of mental wellbeing as a whole. A further use of the scale is to encourage effective improvement of mental wellbeing for the individual, by tracking scores over time, and to equip organisations and wider society to support the enhancement of mental wellbeing.



*Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)
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If you would like to use the scale, please visit the University of Warwick website for more details:
<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>

A quarter of workers say they have rarely or never felt optimistic about the future

Looking at the individual statements that make up the scale a number revealed some alarming statistics. For example, a quarter (26%) of workers say they rarely or never felt optimistic about the future in the last two weeks.

Almost the same number (25%) say they rarely or never felt relaxed and a third (34%) said they rarely or never felt like they had time to spare.

Public sector workers more likely to score below average on the Mental Wellbeing scale

Public sector workers were more likely to score significantly below average (23%) compared to their private sector counterparts (19%).

Differences according to gender and age were also apparent; one-in-five (22%) women scored significantly below average compared to 18% of men and those aged 18-24 and 25-34 were most likely to score significantly below average (22% for both age groups respectively).

Mental wellbeing is worse amongst those in less senior positions

In terms of seniority, those lower down the pecking-order were more likely to score significantly below average. For example, two-in-five (38%) unskilled manual workers scored significantly below compared to 16% of business owners or proprietors.

UNDERSTANDING THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF BRITISH WORKERS

The WEMWBS certainly provides us with an academically robust overview of the mental wellbeing of British workers however it doesn't explore the whys and hows behind the numbers, which is where the core element of our audit comes into play. As the rest of this report will demonstrate, our workplace mental wellbeing audit reveals employees' experiences of mental wellbeing at work and the ways in which they'd like their employers to respond.

It also addresses the point of the view of senior leaders and decision makers in terms of their own mental wellbeing but also the barriers they face when trying to help their staff.

The hope is that this audit will bridge a divide between employees and their employers and help organisations create working environments that are beneficial to everyone's mental wellbeing.

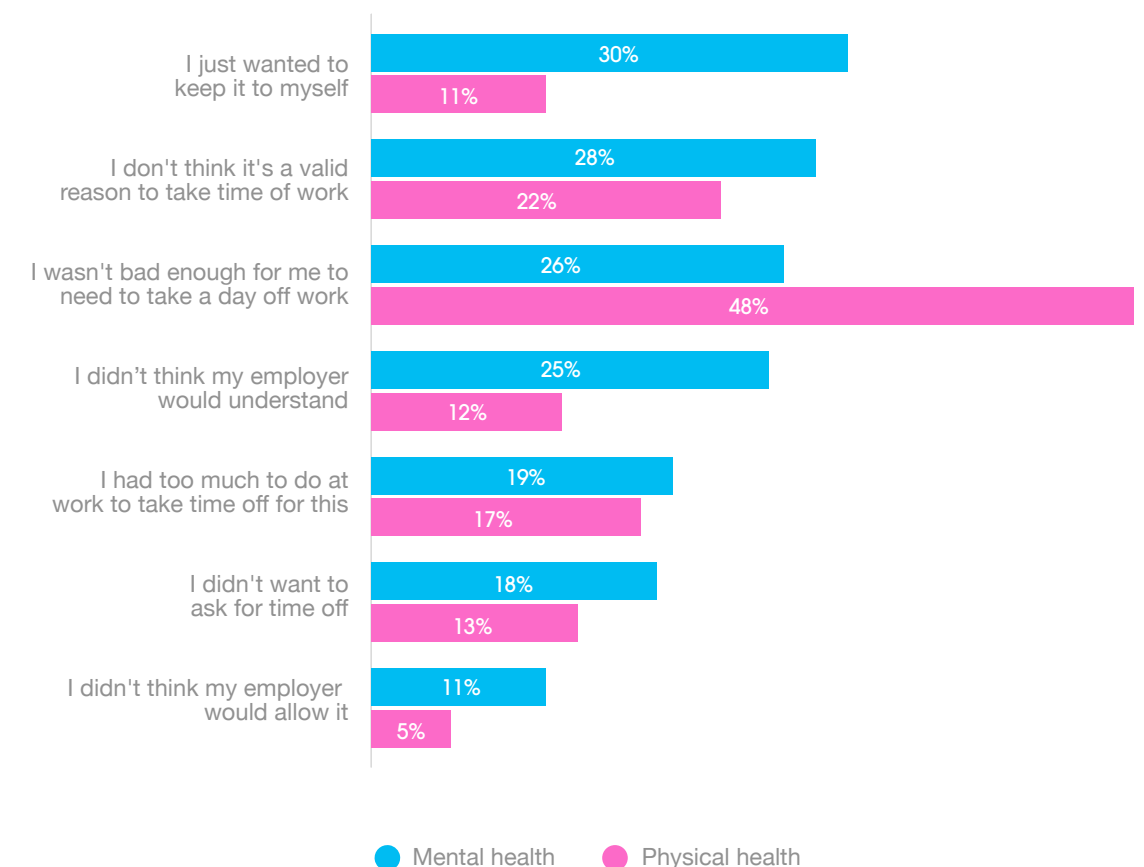
TAKING TIME OFF WORK

THE MIND BODY DIVIDE

When it comes to illness, taking time out to rest and recover is what the doctor orders. However, the difference in approach to tackling periods of mental and physical illness is clear, with just 36% of UK workers who have struggled with their mental wellbeing in the past 12 months taking time off for this, almost half the amount of those taking time out for a physical health problem in the past 12 months (59%).

Concern over employer's understanding of taking time off highlights a disparity in how we approach physical and mental health. A quarter (25%) of those who have struggled with their mental wellbeing in the past 12 months didn't take any time off as they didn't feel their employer would understand, double the number that didn't take time off for this reason when they had a physical health problem (12%).

Why didn't you take time off work?



Struggling with mental health problems is still a topic that people feel uncomfortable talking about at work, with three in ten (30%) not taking time off when they struggled with their mental wellbeing because they wanted to keep it to themselves, compared to just 11% of those experiencing physical ill-health not taking time off for this reason. This ties in with just two-fifths (41%) of workers feeling they can talk openly to their employers about their mental health and wellbeing despite three-fifths (62%) of senior managers stating their employees can talk openly about these issues.

Even though there were concerns around taking time off for mental wellbeing, those who did said that the time they took to rest and recover helped them feel much better on returning to work (53%) and also improve their productivity at work (59%). Despite this time off helping workers to be more productive and effective at work, 54% still felt pressure to come back to work too early, suggesting that employers need to make it clear that employees should take time off for their mental wellbeing when they need to as this can help reduce presenteeism.



OPENNESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Many of those who have struggled with their mental wellbeing have never told an employer (67%). When we asked those who did decide to voice their concerns (30%) experiences varied across the board; some more positive than others.

Below we have shared case studies, which aim to highlight some of the key learnings for employers and recommended attributes to encourage a more open culture about mental wellbeing in the workplace.

FAITH IN EMPLOYER KNOWLEDGE IS CRUCIAL FOR EMPLOYEES TO SHARE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

A quarter (24%) of UK employees who are struggling with their mental wellbeing keep quiet because they don't think their employer can help. This is the 2nd most common barrier to openness. The top barrier is an interesting one; a third (36%) avoid sharing because they feel it isn't necessary to tell them.

So why is this?

Employers aren't perceived as necessary to inform because they aren't appearing knowledgeable. This lack of faith in support systems actively prevents an open culture. Many felt their organisations lacked the tools in place to listen and help; this had a huge impact on willingness to speak about it. Those who did share were often left feeling unsure about what to do next.

"My manager wasn't surprised, and he told me about one of the other managers who experiences the same thing that I do, but he didn't offer any solutions or help with dealing with it."

Female, 48, Retail, Private Sector

"They weren't knowledgeable about mental health and I felt myself having to try and justify time off work because it isn't taken as seriously as physical health."

Male, 21, IT / Computing, Private Sector

"Didn't know what to say and said that I didn't appear that way and looked like I was doing well."

Female, 30, NHS / public sector

FEAR OF EMBARRASSMENT AND IMPACT ON CAREER ARE MAJOR BARRIERS FOR OPENING UP

Strikingly, almost a quarter (23%) felt too embarrassed to tell their company that they were struggling, and 19% thought it could jeopardise their career. When asked why, the key reasons centred around 'fear of appearing weak', particularly amongst men, alongside the risk of detrimental effects on their career and simply not believing their employer could help.

"Because I felt like they would pity me and I would not have wanted that in the work environment."

Female, 21, Hospitality and Leisure

"I am sure that within a very short time of telling them that I would not have a job."

Male, 45, Manufacturing

"I thought the management would think I was weak and useless."

Male, 23, Business services

EMPLOYERS WHO RESPONDED WELL NOT ONLY LISTENED BUT ALSO OFFERED A PROACTIVE SOLUTION

Many were able to report positive experiences of approaching their employer. Having a proactive solution was a common thread and often it wasn't about reinventing the wheel but having those 1-on-1 conversations, creating space for that person and providing professional tools to support them:

"They listened, understood, and helped me develop a way out of the situation that was causing the problem."

Male, 42, Not for profit charity

"We spoke regularly about my progress in dealing with my mental health problem."

Female, 52, Public, Business services

"They made me aware of the counselling that was on offer in the workplace. They also introduced me to the various people that are trained to speak to people about personal things."

Female, 28, Private, Legal services

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Spending so much time at work means that it is vital employees are supported with their mental wellbeing. Many managers have good intentions, but do not know how to support mental wellbeing in the workplace (49%). And worryingly only two thirds of managers would know what to do if an employee told them they were struggling with their mental wellbeing. This highlights a need for employers to be provided with more information about how they can support employee's mental wellbeing in the workplace. Promisingly, 77% of managers recognise and agree that businesses need more support and education around mental wellbeing in the workplace, and we hope this report can enable employers to provide that vital support for their employees.

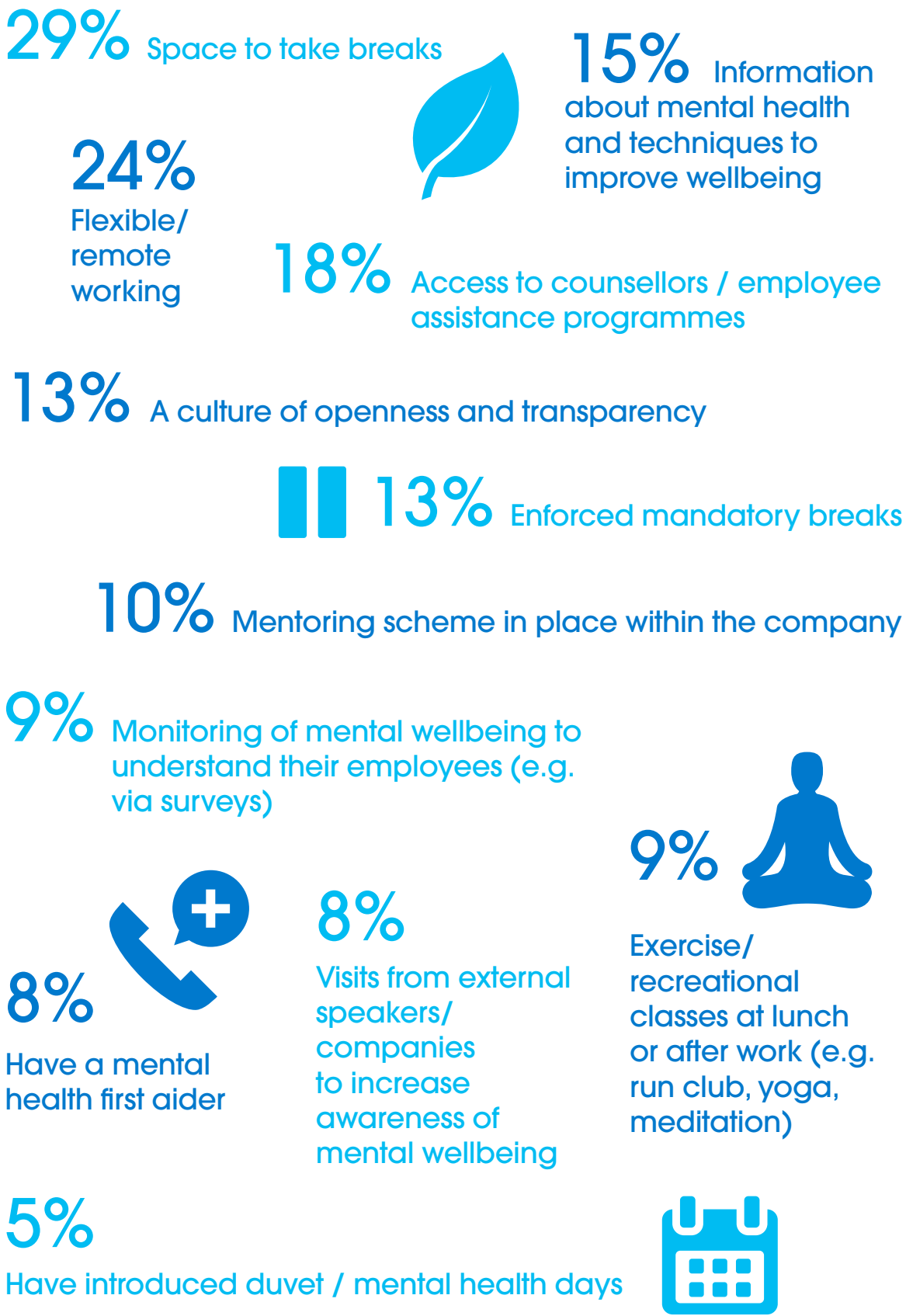
CURRENT SUPPORT

Over a third of employees (35%) are not offered a single thing by their workplace to support their mental wellbeing.

This is shocking enough alone, but even more worryingly this lack of support is having a detrimental effect on their mental wellbeing. This group of workers are more likely to have significantly below average mental wellbeing compared to workers on the whole (27% have significantly below average mental wellbeing, versus just 20% of the total worker population).



The percentage of employees currently offered various programmes and initiatives to improve employee mental wellbeing by their employers is shown below, with dedicated break spaces and flexible working being most commonly offered.

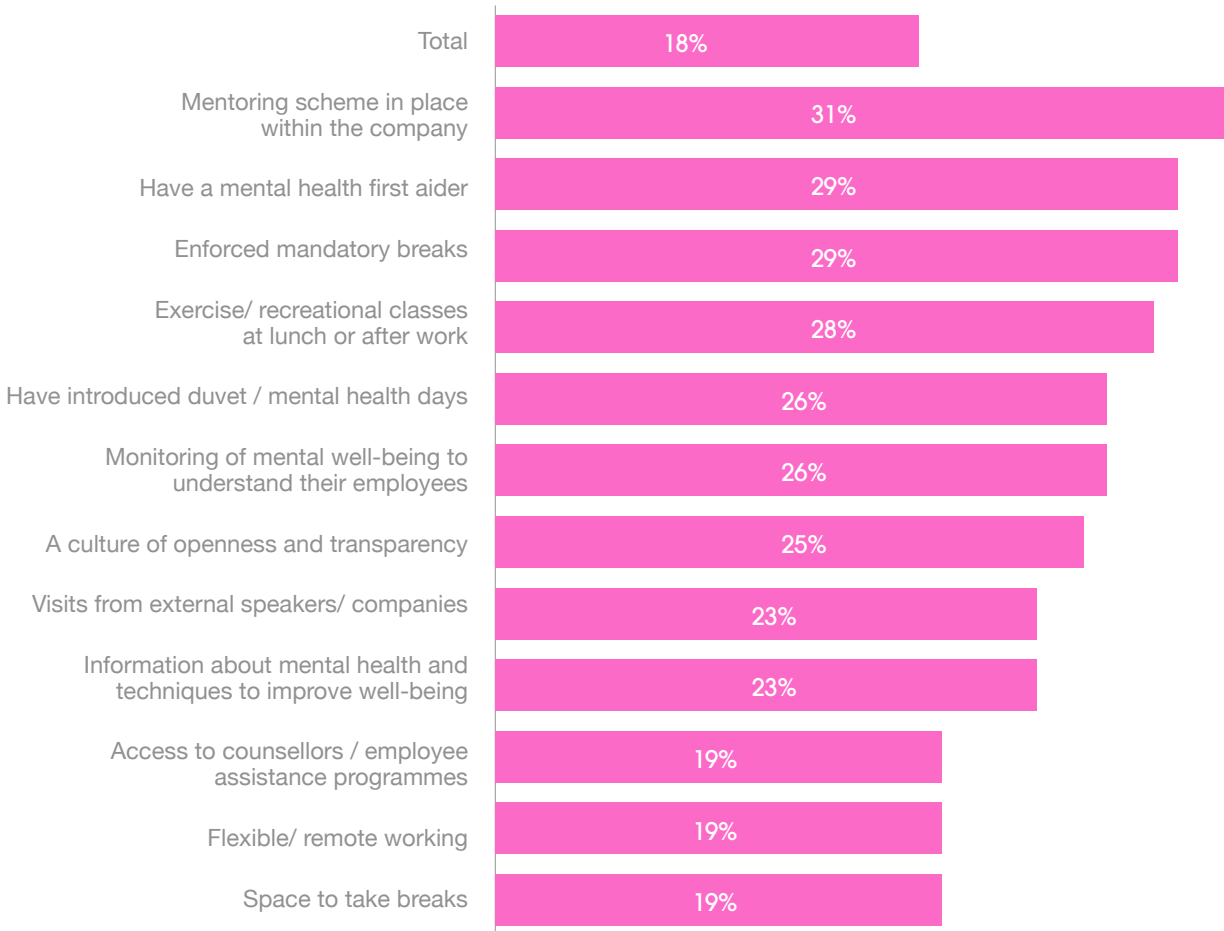


Offering mental health days (days that employees can take off for their mental health with no questions asked) is one of the most popular initiatives that people would like to see introduced, with 21% saying they'd like to see their workplace introduce this, however only 5% of employers currently offer them. Other ways employees would like to be supported at work include flexible working (17%), monitoring of mental wellbeing via surveys (16%) and counselling/ employee assistance services (16%).

BENEFITS OF WORKPLACE MENTAL WELLBEING SUPPORT

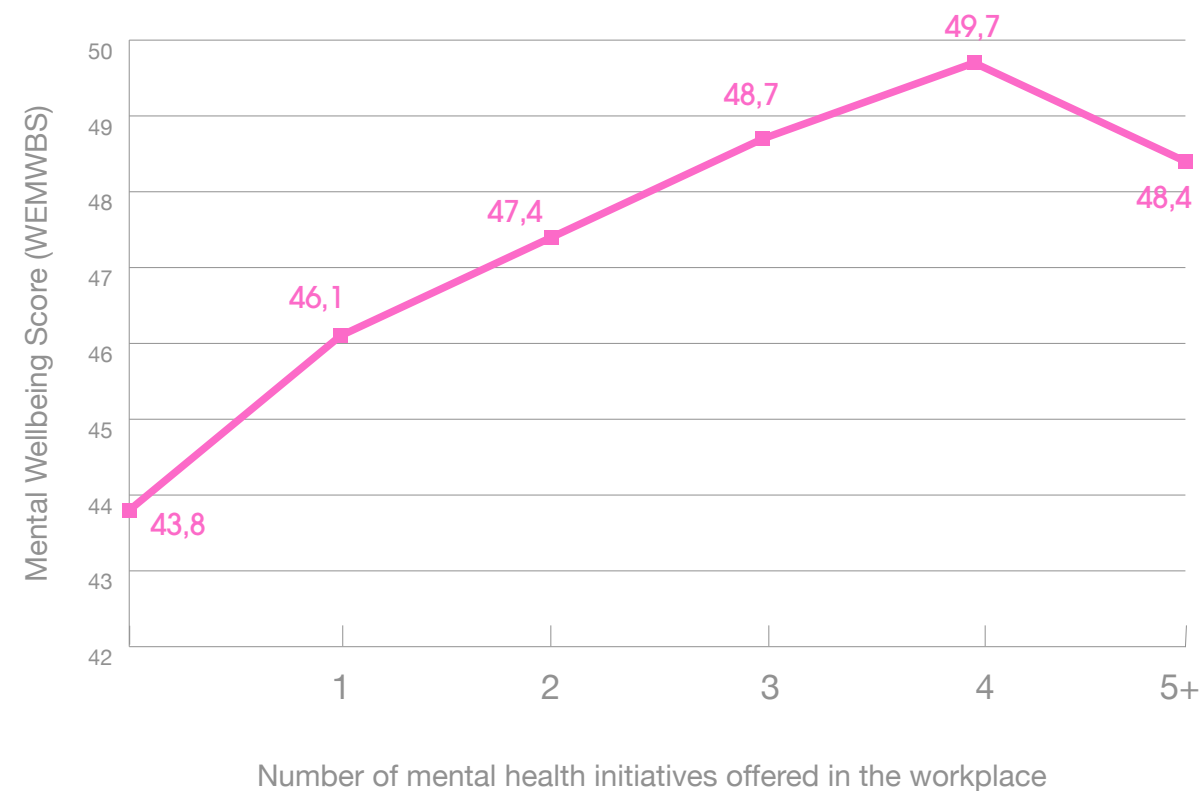
Those who are offered mental wellbeing support at work have higher mental wellbeing than those who are not offered them, with this effect being heightened for certain initiatives, as shown below via the % of those who have significantly above average mental wellbeing as defined by the WEMWBS measure.

% of those with significantly above average mental wellbeing



Improving mental wellbeing in the workplace isn't about ticking a box, it's about offering multiple initiatives and embedding mental wellbeing into the company culture. The more initiatives an employee is offered the higher their mental wellbeing, as shown by the graph below.

Mental wellbeing increases with number of initiatives offered

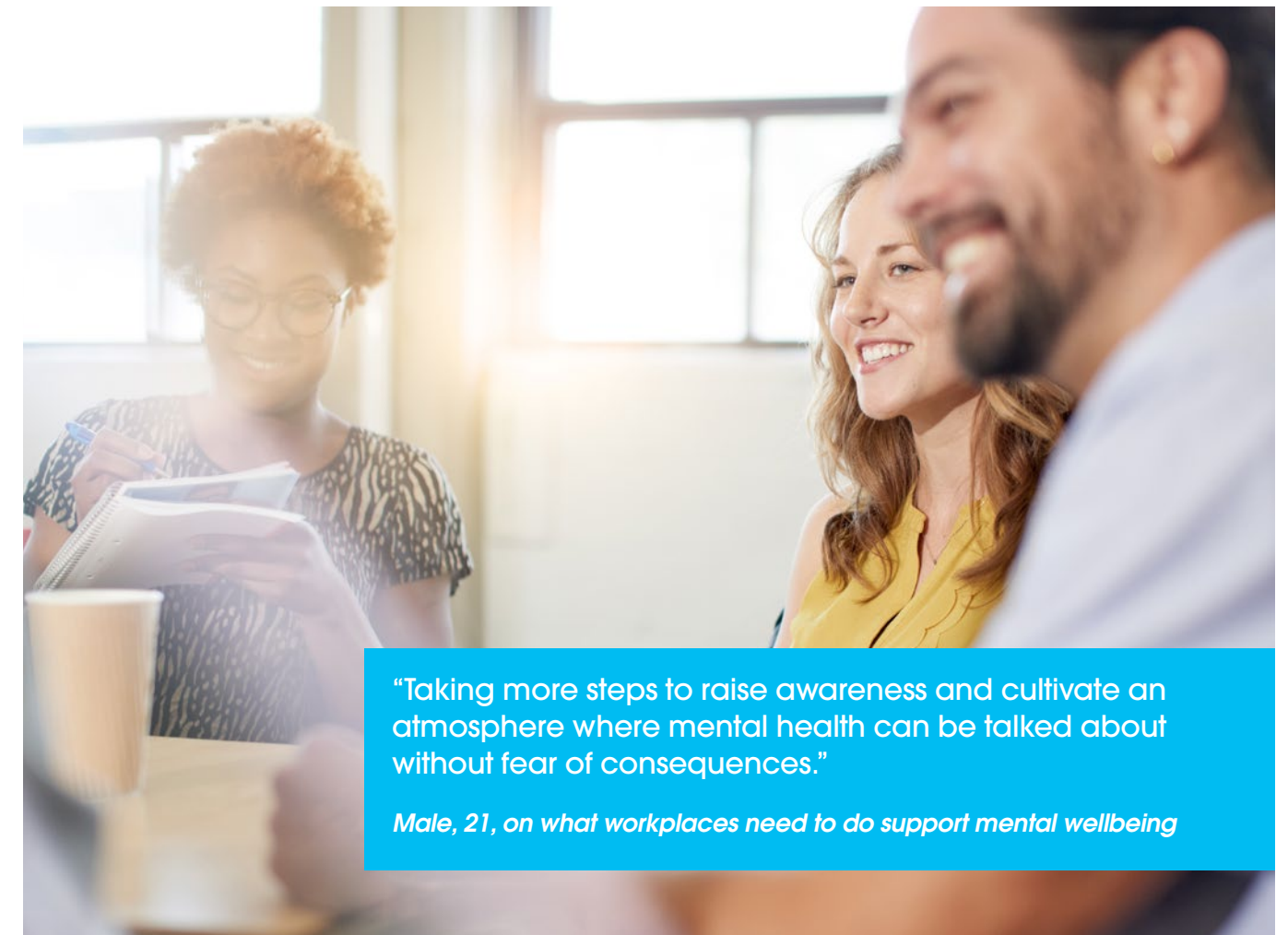


COMMUNICATING SUPPORT INITIATIVES

Employers need to communicate openness and knowledge with their employees when it comes to mental wellbeing and support, less than half of workers think they would be supported at work if they were struggling with their mental wellbeing (47%). And 24% of those who didn't tell their employer they were struggling with their mental health did so because they didn't think their employer would be able to help; this emphasises the need for employers to clearly communicate how they are able to support workers. So, as well as putting these initiatives in place, employers need to also ensure workers actually know about these and feel able to use them.

LISTENING TO AND ACCEPTING EMPLOYEES

As we've seen, employees want to be listened to, shown by the desire of mentoring schemes, counselling schemes and monitoring of mental wellbeing (e.g. via surveys). This boils down to a desire to be understood. If employers can take the time to understand the struggles and needs of their employees when it comes to mental wellbeing, then they are well on their way to building a workplace where employees feel able to share their feelings and experiences. And as a result, employers will be better informed on what needs to be introduced to support their team's mental wellbeing.



"Taking more steps to raise awareness and cultivate an atmosphere where mental health can be talked about without fear of consequences."

Male, 21, on what workplaces need to do support mental wellbeing

As shown throughout this report, the key to employers improving mental wellbeing in the workplace is listening to their employees in terms of what support would be helpful and making them feel safe and able to be open about mental health in the workplace. The most effective way to achieve this is to embed mental wellbeing into your company culture by incorporating the above initiatives and creating a safe space for people to talk about their mental wellbeing at work; allowing employees to thrive, not just survive.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Sophie Holland

Sophie is passionate about mental health and holds a BA Hons in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford. As well as heading up Opinium's mental health research team, Sophie works on a variety of different projects from design to delivery, ranging from large-scale quantitative research and international studies, to in-depth qualitative pop-up communities. Sophie is heavily involved in the brand and comms space, charity sector and social research.

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Joe Curran

Joe works with both quantitative and qualitative research methods across a number of practice areas. Most recently he has helped clients in the social policy space understand how public attitudes are changing and the implications this will have for businesses and government.



Robyn McKane

Robyn works across quantitative and qualitative methodologies and has worked on a number of international studies. Most recently Robyn has conducted research for a market leading healthcare organisation into the availability and awareness of healthcare apps among business decision makers and employees.



Joanna Dorling

Jo specialises in running qualitative research studies across a range of categories and markets. Recent projects include leading focus groups for the government equalities office exploring attitudes towards gender in the workplace. Jo is also a qualified yoga teacher and is passionate about all aspects of wellbeing and healthy living.

About Opinium

OPINIUM is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people think, feel and do. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

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