

State of Mental Health at Work Report 2021



Table of Contents

Introduction	03
State of Mental Health at Work 2021: Top 5 Insights	05
Conclusion	10
Employers, It's Your Move	11
Key Dimensions	18
Survey Demographics	36
Methodology	42

Introduction

Mental health at work is undergoing a rapid transformation. Even before COVID-19 upended life as we know it both on and off the job, workforce mental health was under pressure. The unrelenting nature of the global pandemic, plus a steady stream of additional stressors from economic uncertainty to political turmoil and a reckoning with racial injustice have only deepened the strain.

Employers were already getting savvier about the need for workforce mental health support pre-pandemic, observing that providing the resources employees need not only saves money otherwise lost to costly medical and disability claims, and the productivity-killing scourge of absenteeism and presenteeism—but also could save lives. Any human resources department that was unaware of this necessity got a crash course in it over the past year amid the unprecedented mental health fallout of COVID-19.

Today, companies across a range of industries are rising to the challenge to prioritize workplace mental health. The vast majority of HR and benefits teams say they plan to invest in it this year, and some are also launching a company-wide dialogue about mental health challenges. Meanwhile, many workers are still unaware of what behavioral health benefits are available to them, and view discussing mental health in the workplace as taboo.

As employers assume more responsibility to address American workers' well-being, the imperative to support workforce mental

health appears to be abundantly clear to most companies. They recognize the high stakes of failing to address the workforce's soaring rates of mental health problems—from rising health care costs, reduced productivity, and employee turnover to the life-altering impact of untreated mental illness on workers and their families. The question of how organizations tackle this issue in the months and years ahead could make all the difference for individual employees, and entire businesses.

We surveyed 1,000 full-time workers and 300 HR and benefits leaders across the United States to better understand both groups' current attitudes and experiences related to workplace mental health and behavioral health care.

State of Mental Health at Work 2021: Top 5 Insights

1. We are in the midst of a workplace mental health crisis that's affecting individual employees and entire companies.

Nearly a quarter of U.S. employees in our survey report their mental health has declined over the past year. This finding is alarming, especially given the dire mental health status of many American workers pre-pandemic, as well as record-high rates of “deaths of despair” such as suicides and fatal drug overdoses nationwide. Our research bears this out: Employees’ survey responses indicate that the prevalence of diagnosable mental health conditions has doubled over the past year. While about two-thirds of respondents said their mental health stayed the same over the past 12 months, 40 percent of workers today report dealing with one or more acute mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, or post-

traumatic stress disorder versus 20.6 percent at the start of 2020.

Not surprisingly, even more employees are dealing with less acute yet disruptive mental health challenges including stress, burnout, and relationship issues.

Individual health and well-being is always the primary concern. It is also important to understand the deep and protracted impact this decline in population mental health is having on people at work. About half of the workers we asked (48 percent) say their mental health has impacted their capacity to work over the past year. It is difficult to contend this is a startling result in a time of such broad and complex social disruption. However, it does provide an objective reminder that the mental health impacts are here, broadly felt, and likely to continue for a long period of time.

Percent of workers dealing with one or more acute mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression.

21%  Start of 2020

40%  End of 2020

2. People aren't getting the mental health care they need.

Fully 56 percent of employees reporting a diagnosable mental illness did not receive mental health care last year. This is not a new issue, as 55 percent of U.S. adults with a mental health condition went without care the previous year as well, according to the [National Institutes of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#).

A major contributor to this issue continues to be access to care, especially when it comes to traditional health insurance plans and programs. Of the one in five employees in our survey who did see a mental health care provider, nearly half (45 percent) paid out of pocket for it. This is down from the [60 percent](#) of insured U.S. workers who reported paying out of pocket for mental health care in mid-2020, but still underscores the health care system's failure to provide the mental health care people need.

The lack of available providers through traditional health plans, long delays to get an appointment,

and poor tools for finding the right provider are all factors that drive many insured employees to resort to out-of-network care, despite the high costs. What the survey cannot show directly is the number of workers with or without insurance who forego care because of the complexity and cost of finding mental health services on their own.

[2018 research](#) by the National Council for Behavioral Health and our own survey of employees points to yet another common roadblock to care: the lack of knowledge about what services are available to workers through their employer.

To illustrate that point, more than a third of employees we asked have not tried to access mental health care through their company-provided benefits, and an additional 40 percent don't know about the benefits available, or told us they're hard to access.



36% of employees said they had not tried to access health care using their employer-sponsored benefits.



31% of workers say they think their employer offers mental health benefits, but they're not sure what they are.

3. Many employers believe they are addressing access to mental health care, but the data reveals a still-widening gap in quality of care.

With workforce mental health top of mind, many organizations are focused on expanding access to care. Meanwhile, the issue of quality in mental health care isn't being addressed as effectively. There is a school of thought that says any mental health care is better than none, but a [review of mental health outcomes](#) shows that quality matters. Quality mental health care includes a constellation of factors, from access to a variety of care providers who are trained to treat the diverse spectrum of mental health needs, to enough sessions of treatment for most people to show reliable improvement or recovery from their condition.

But among the most important criteria for quality mental health care is the ability to measure clients' outcomes to verify that the treatment is working. Our surveys suggest that

many well-meaning employers today lack that information. In fact, just 21 percent of HR and benefits pros said they consider demonstrated clinical outcomes (clients' clinical improvement or recovery with care) to evaluate a program's impact on employee well-being. Most rely more on workforce productivity or surveys to gauge the value and impact of their mental health benefits.

That unfortunate lack of oversight is reflected in employer confidence in the programs they have in place. Many employers doubt whether the mental health care available to their workforce is helping employees get better. In fact, only half of HR and benefits pros (50 percent) deem the benefits they provide as "effective in addressing employees' mental health needs."



of HR and benefits pros say their benefits are **effective in addressing workforce mental health needs**

4. Investment in mental health may help keep companies competitive.

Here's the good news. The vast majority of employers (73 percent) we surveyed are responding to the current mental health crisis with plans to increase behavioral health-related investment. More than half (58 percent) report prioritizing mental health benefits this year over a long list of other possible offerings. And roughly a third (29 percent) of HR and benefits professionals think their company "should be investing more" in employee mental health and well-being.

This is an important shift for the contemporary well-being of employees, as well as the ongoing performance and productivity of the workplace. Additionally, there is good reason to believe that mental health benefits are becoming part of a worker's criteria in selecting an employer. Most employees (71 percent) today say that when considering a new job, it's at least somewhat important to them that the prospective employer offer mental health benefits.

This is a trend that can be expected to deepen over time as millennials and Gen Zers comprise ever-larger shares of the workforce. Ninety-one percent of Gen Z employees (aged 18-24) said it was at least somewhat important that a prospective employer provide mental health benefits, as did 83 percent of younger millennials (aged 25-34) and 80 percent of older millennials and younger Gen Xers (ages 35-44).

As employees increasingly expect mental health care and support from their employers, companies will likely find it necessary to offer these benefits in order to recruit and retain top talent.



Of employers in our survey are responding to the current mental health crisis with plans to increase behavioral health-related investment.

5. Company cultures are becoming more open toward mental health, but there's still a lot of work to do.

Unfortunately, our survey suggests that stigma remains a powerful force in the workplace. Many employees say they would feel uncomfortable discussing their mental health at work, even with their peers (36 percent) or managers (42 percent). Half said they wouldn't feel comfortable talking about their mental health with an HR leader, and 56 percent said they'd feel uncomfortable discussing it with another company leader.

While it is encouraging to find that the vast majority (88 percent) of HR and benefits professionals we surveyed say mental health is discussed in some form in their organizations, those efforts may not be landing with the workforce they way leaders hope. Fewer than half of employees (41 percent) indicate that mental health is discussed in the workplace.

The bright spot, when it comes to stigma, seems to center on those

with direct experience with mental illness. Nearly half of employees with (self-reported) mental illnesses appear to be speaking up about their challenges in the workplace (on average, 44 percent of those we surveyed with diagnosable conditions). This is a major shift from even the mid-2000s, when 80 percent of HR managers said they believed employees with mental illness might refrain from getting care due to "shame and stigma."

That potential shift toward more acceptance and openness around mental health issues at work may provide a foundation on which to build future communications and programs, and to overcome cultural taboos within the workplace. Both social stigma and internalized stigma (concern that you'll be judged by others for seeking care, or ingrained beliefs that needing care is a weakness, among other common attitudes) keep too many people from speaking up and getting the help they need.



Of employees reporting a diagnosable mental health condition discussed their mental health at work over the past year.

Conclusion

These survey data paint a picture of a workforce dealing with skyrocketing mental health issues amid the global pandemic, economic crisis, uncertainty, and social upheaval of the past year.

Employers' ever-evolving awareness of this reality is bringing more attention and investment in mental health-related benefits and programs. Yet, we see throughout the survey responses that workers' mental health struggles are only increasing. That's likely in part because many employers are still in the process of evaluating and implementing new solutions to meet the escalating needs. Our data suggest that it's also at least partially due to a lack of access to any mental health care, let alone quality care. At the same time, the findings illuminate the need for a different approach to normalize mental health needs in the workplace.

Luckily, there's also cause for optimism. More and more people with mental illnesses are seeking help and opening up about it at work. And the overwhelming number of companies

plan to invest in workforce mental health indicate a strong willingness to address the issue.

As COVID-19 has permanently shifted the way we work, HR leaders today have an extraordinary opportunity to reset the status quo approach to mental health in the workplace. That will mean bold action to effectively address the persistent problem of access to quality mental health care. In doing so, these professionals can raise the bar so current and future employees—and entire companies—have the resources and support they need to weather the inevitable challenges that arise.

Employers, It's Your Move

The following best practices from clinicians and HR leaders can help organizations take essential next steps as they seek to better support employees' mental and emotional well-being in the months and years ahead.

Talk about it

Talking about mental health within your company is an essential first step in sparking an ongoing conversation and creating an atmosphere where employees feel safe to voice their struggles. This dialogue should occur regularly and across multiple channels, from company-wide forums and emails to educational workshops on mental health topics. Your communications can not only help normalize mental health needs, but are also opportunities to remind employees about the resources available to them.

Where you focus your communication efforts first should depend on how much you're already discussing mental health in your organization, said Joe Grasso, PhD, a clinical psychologist and Clinical Director of Partnerships at Lyra. "For an organization that's not having this conversation at all, it needs to start with leadership to establish mental health as a legitimate company priority," he said. "In an organization that already initiated

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COVID-19 has put a spotlight on mental health in a way that it can no longer be ignored. Everyone is somewhere on the scale, whether they are thriving or having difficulty getting out of bed. For me, treating mental health needs to be on the same level as treating shoulder pain.

DO

Deborah Olson, Lead Strategist of Well-Being, Genentech

a conversation about mental health at work but wants to build momentum, the next step is to promote mental health dialogue at all levels of the organization, including testimonials from executives, training for managers on how to support team members with distress, and identifying mental health champions among individual contributors.”

As awareness and acceptance of mental health needs grows, so too do the opportunities for companies looking to educate employees at all levels about mental health. That might include training sessions or workshops about broader mental health topics such as how to manage stress, cope with uncertainty, or develop resilience. It can also mean peer support programs or employee resource groups (ERGs) dedicated to mental health.

“

The more we talk about it and make it easy for people to access care versus treating it as taboo, the more we’re going to help people.

SS

Sandi Stein, Senior Vice President, Human Resources & Global Head of Benefits at Brown Brothers Harriman

The way you talk about it matters

With our research demonstrating the persistence of stigma, it's essential that employers' efforts affirm their acceptance of mental health challenges as an expected part of life. Another important part of overcoming mental health-related stigma is dismantling its root causes, including perceptions that mental health care isn't for everyone, or that it's ineffective. "It's not enough to say that you have these benefits—you need to convince people to use them by demonstrating that they work," said Grasso.

One strategy to help normalize care-seeking is tailoring your mental health-related communications to your industry and company culture, said Grasso. For example, a health care organization might host a forum in which leaders share personal testimonials about receiving mental health care or support that helped them better serve their patients. In industries like finance or law, those personal stories might acknowledge

how seeking mental health care helped remove barriers to their productivity and work performance.

“

We launched a mindfulness and meditation app with the primary goal of diminishing stigma around mental health, and we've found that it transformed the ease with which people talk about their health. It was a great stepping stone to encouraging people to be more open about seeking additional support like Lyra.

RC

Ron Crawford VP of Global Benefits, Starbucks

Make sure it's a two-way conversation

Regular communications with employees can help HR and benefits teams better understand how workers are faring and what hurdles to care they might be facing. Create and take advantage of anonymous surveys to gauge how many employees are experiencing issues like stress, burnout, or challenges with on-the-job functioning.

“

We're very focused on our employees and their needs. We host focus groups facilitated by third parties and conduct surveys to better understand the effectiveness of our offerings. We also review data related to critical incidents to make sure we're always improving.

KR

Kim Ramos, Director of Benefits,
The Mosaic Company

“

I was approached by one of my employees who helped me to realize we'd been communicating so much about how we're supporting parents but hadn't focused enough on people who are single and spend most of their time alone these days. We worked together to start a virtual chat group for people who were feeling alone, and now focus on providing resources for that part of our population.

SK

Sheila Krueger, Head of
Global Benefits, Zoom Video
Communications

Consider partnering with ERGs to better understand mental health-related needs that might not be captured via survey or that reflect the unique needs of underrepresented employee groups. This might include soliciting input on what would make for a more mental health-friendly work culture and ways to ensure the mental health care and support available is more culturally responsive.

Implement mental health-oriented policies and practices

In order to create a sustainable impact on your workforce's well-being, it's essential to do more than just talk about mental health: Your efforts will be most successful if you also weave it into company processes and policies.

In addition to regular communications about mental health, training to help managers detect and respond to employees' mental health challenges can have a far-reaching impact. This training can help teach managers to foster a psychologically safe environment where team members feel like they can speak up—whether about mental health issues or other challenges—without fear of retribution, said Grasso.

He added that managers can promote psychological safety at work by “readily acknowledging challenges, successes, and wins, proactively offering resources, and promoting a culture of mutual support.” With our survey results showing that more than two in

five employees are uncomfortable discussing their mental health with their manager, the need for this type of education is clear. Providing training that encourages managers to more proactively check in with team members to better understand how they're doing can help empower employees to feel more comfortable discussing mental health challenges when they arise.

With nearly 60 percent of employees today experiencing either stress, burnout, or both, it's also more critical than ever that your company policies support employees in keeping a healthy work-life balance and seeking care and support when needed. Think paid time off, flexible work schedules, parental and short-term disability leave policies, and designated mental health days.

“

We've partnered internally with our safety group to focus on psychological wellness education training.

KR

Kim Ramos, Director of Benefits,
The Mosaic Company

Offer a dedicated mental health benefit that addresses both access and quality of care

As crucial as an open culture and mental health-oriented company policies are for employee well-being, these efforts have a diminished impact if your workforce lacks access to quality mental health care and support. And as our research reinforces, entrenched health care system obstacles and high out-of-pocket costs are among the most impactful barriers to behavioral health care.

With most companies planning to ramp up offerings to address the current workforce mental health crisis, employers have a momentous opportunity to provide access to life-changing care and support. For that reason, it's all the more crucial to ensure the benefits and programs you provide offer care is both easily accessible and effective.

“

We've heard from employees that having Lyra as part of our core benefits offerings has resulted in invaluable and positive outcomes. We believe supporting people to be their whole self, from the physical to the mental, ultimately leads to happier, more productive employees.

AV

Alice Vichaita, Head of Global Benefits, Pinterest

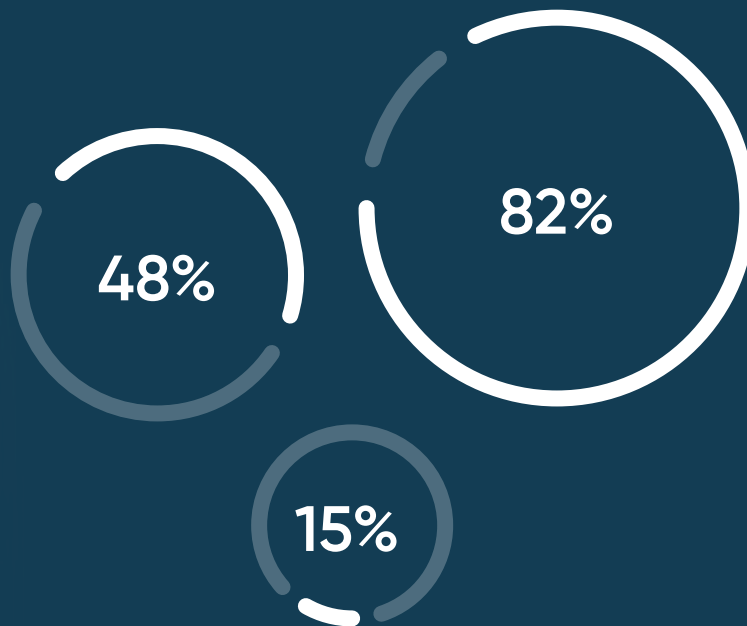
Here are some key criteria to look for when evaluating a mental health benefit or employee assistance program's quality.

- Measurement-based care that offers employers access to aggregated data showing whether people are improving or recovering from their mental health symptoms with treatment based on validated clinical measurements
- A network of highly trained and vetted care providers who are available to see new patients and committed to practicing evidence-based therapies—treatments that have been rigorously tested in randomized controlled trials and shown to be effective in treating various mental health conditions.
- Comprehensive care to address the full spectrum of mental health needs, from stress and burnout to complex or chronic mental health diagnoses. To make an impact on employee mental health, you'll need something more meaningful than a one-size-fits-all solution. Your benefits should cover a range of care options such as mental health coaching, therapy, and medication prescribing to ensure members receive personalized care that's designed to address unique issues at every point along the continuum of mental health needs.
- A proven mental health care partner that has demonstrated the efficacy of its treatments in peer-reviewed scientific journals and can offer reliable customer references.

For more information about the necessary criteria to evaluate a future or existing mental health care benefit, see [A Buyer's Guide to Evaluating Quality in Mental Health Care](#).

Key Dimensions

Here is a deeper dive into key results and demographics from our survey research.



1

Prevalence and types of workforce mental health needs



Employee Survey

How would you assess your mental health over the past 12 months?

24%



My mental health has declined.

65%



My mental health has stayed the same.

11%

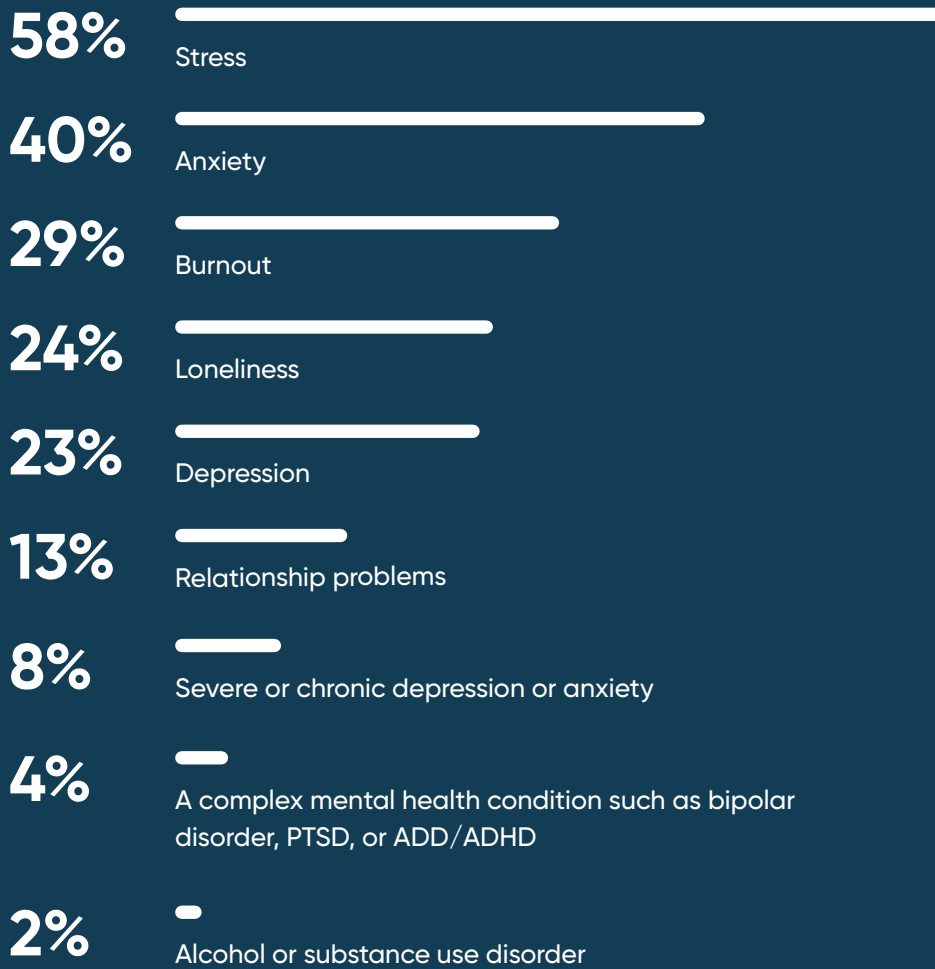


My mental health has improved.



Employee Survey

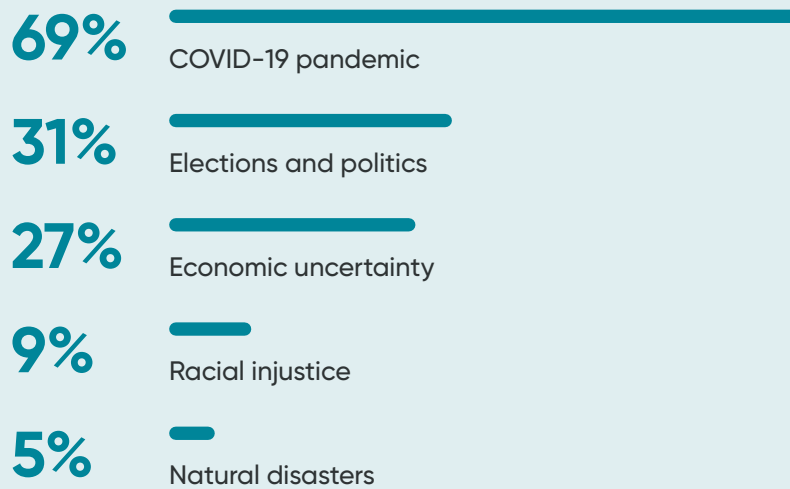
Over the past 12 months, which of the following behavioral health issues have you experienced? (Select all that apply.)





Employee
Survey

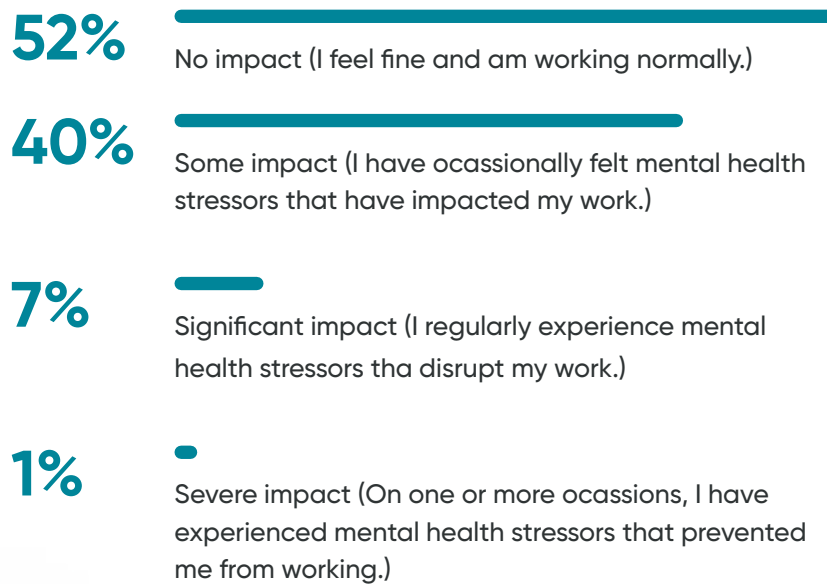
Over the past 12 months, which of the following factors negatively impacted your mental health? (Select all that apply.)





Employee Survey

Over the past 12 months, what impact has your mental health had on your ability to do your job?



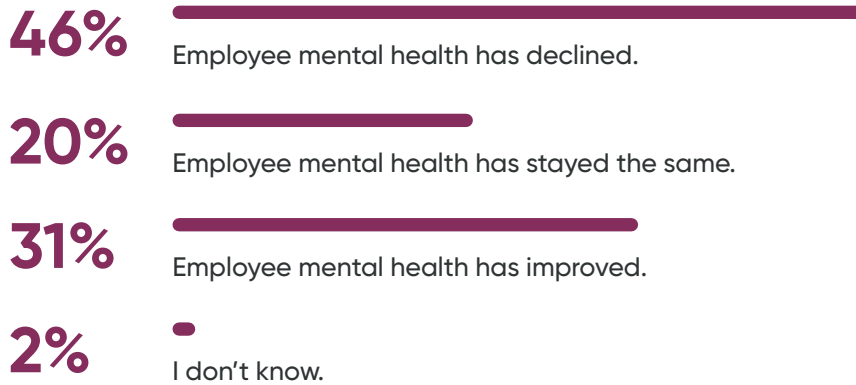
2

Employers' perceptions of workforce mental health challenges today



HR and Benefit
Leader Survey

Over the past 12 months, how would you assess the state of mental health at your workforce?



3

Access to mental health care and support



Most common mental health-related benefits



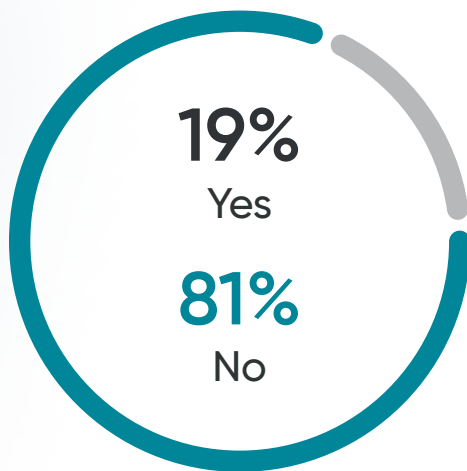
— According to employees

— According to HR and benefit leaders



Employee
Survey

Have you spoken to a mental health professional over the past year?



Are you paying out-of-pocket for these sessions or are fees covered as part of your mental health benefit?



4

Ease of access to mental health benefits



HR and Benefit
Leaders Survey

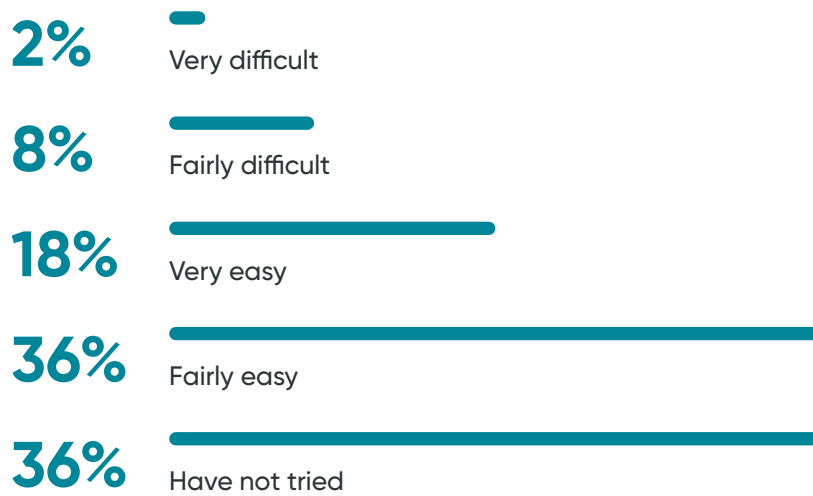
How easy is it for employees to access mental health care using benefits provided?





Employee
Survey

How easy is it for you to access mental health care using benefits provided by your employer?



5

Quality and breadth of available care and resources



Employee Survey

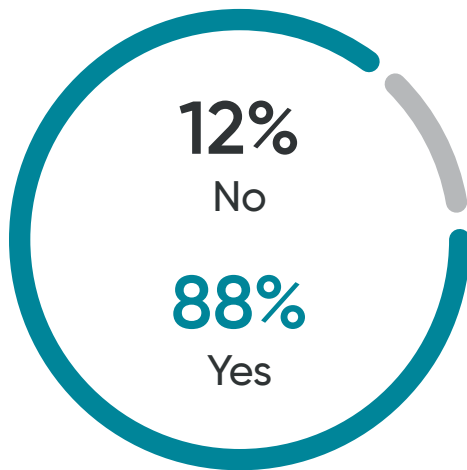
How would you describe the resources your employer provides for mental health care?





Employee
Survey

Did the care you received from this professional help you feel better?*



* Of the 19% employees who saw a mental health care provider over the past year

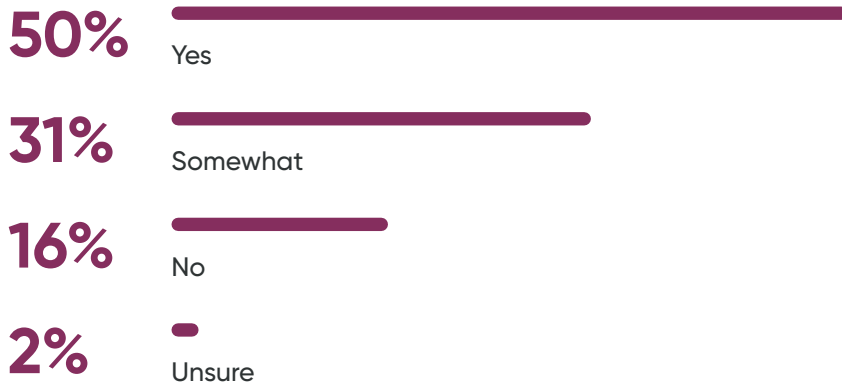
6

Employers' assessment of their mental health benefits' efficacy



HR and Benefit
Leader Survey

Do you believe your current benefits are effective in addressing your employee's mental health needs?



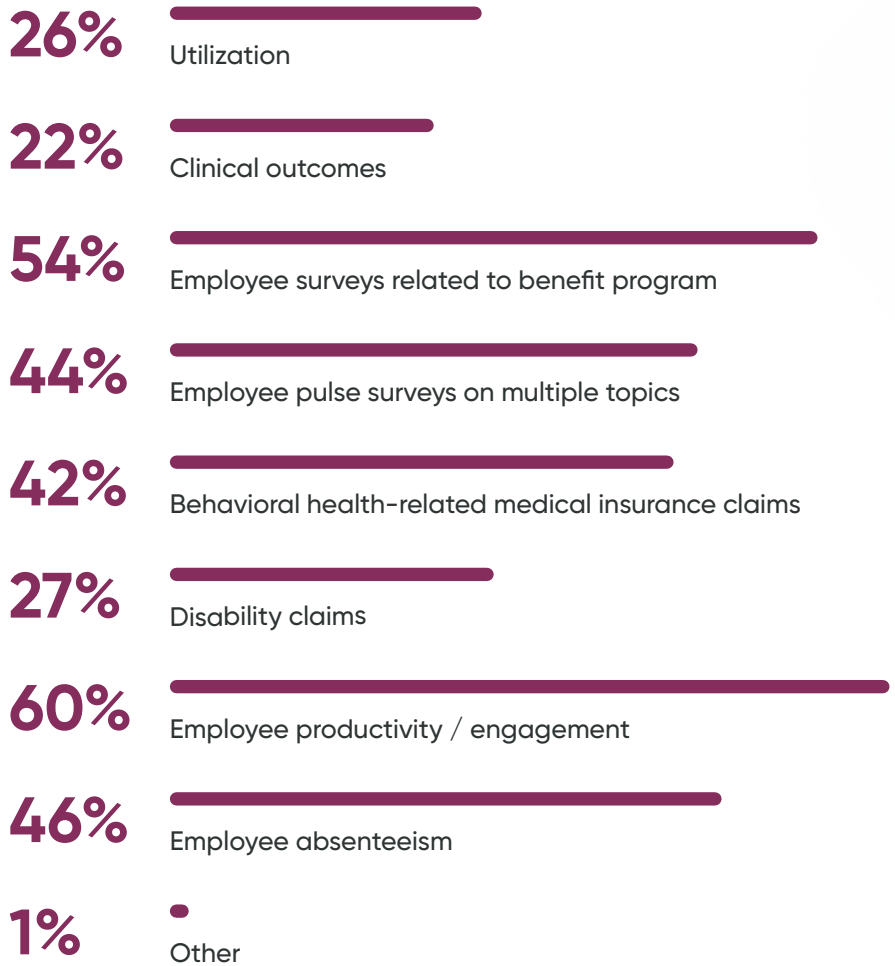
7

How employers measure mental health benefit effectiveness



HR and Benefit
Leader Survey

What measures do you use to evaluate the impact of mental health benefits on employee well being? (Select all that apply.)



8

Openness around mental health in the workplace



How would you characterize your company culture with regard to its openness to discussing mental health?



— Employees — Employers

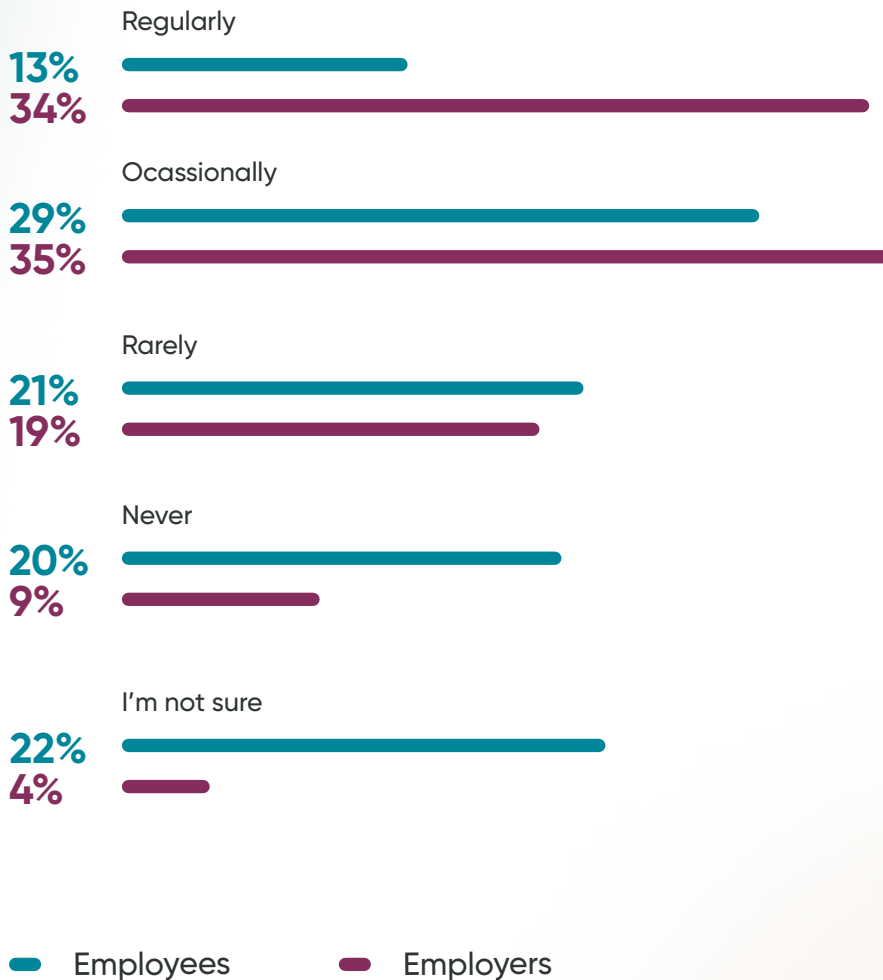


Employee Survey



HR and Benefit Leader Survey

How often is mental health discussed publicly by leaders at your organization?





Employee
Survey

Employees' comfort level discussing mental health with others at work

56%

Would feel uncomfortable speaking about their mental health to a non-HR leader in their company

50%

Would feel uncomfortable speaking to a company HR leader about their mental health

42%

Would feel uncomfortable speaking to their manager about their mental health

36%

Would feel uncomfortable speaking to a peer about their mental health

9

Generational differences



Millennial employees are more than twice as likely to talk about their mental health challenges at work than their older colleagues.

18% Gen Z (ages 18-24)

38% Millennials (ages 25-34)

35% Gen X (ages 35-44)


14% Baby Boomers (ages 55-64)

9% Silent Generation (ages over 65)

10

Survey Demographics

 Employee Survey

 HR and Benefit Leader Survey

Gender identity



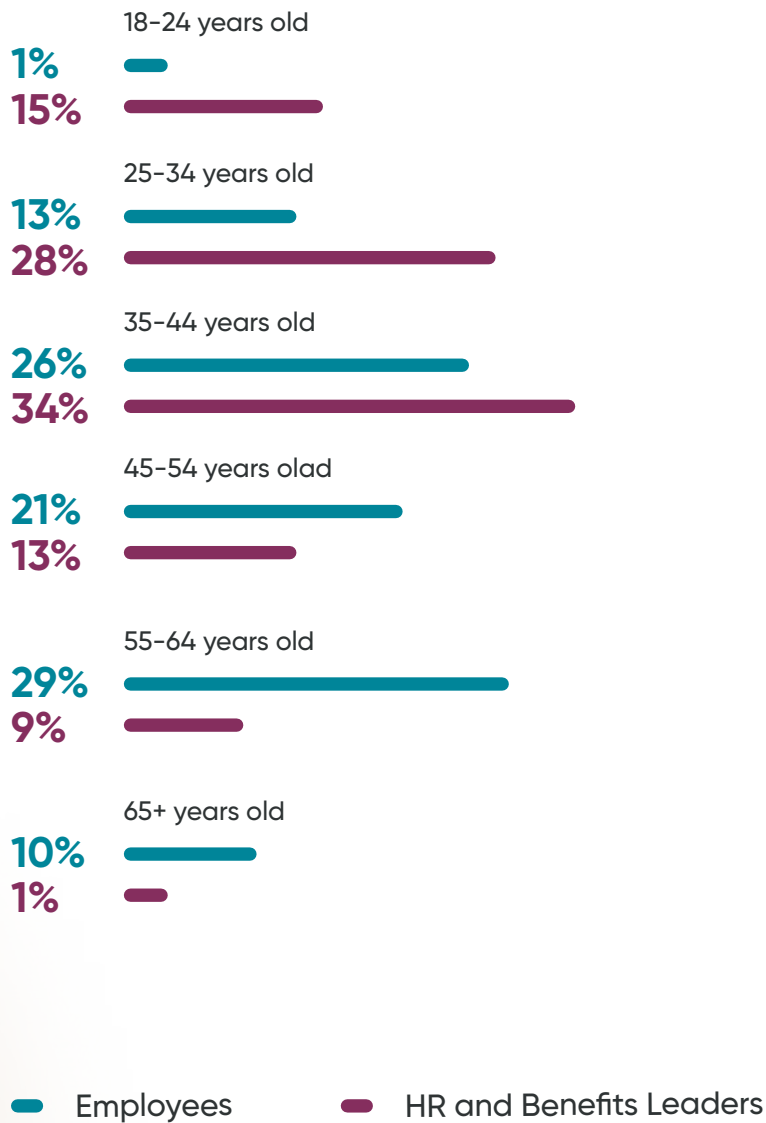


Employee Survey



HR and Benefit Leader Survey

Age



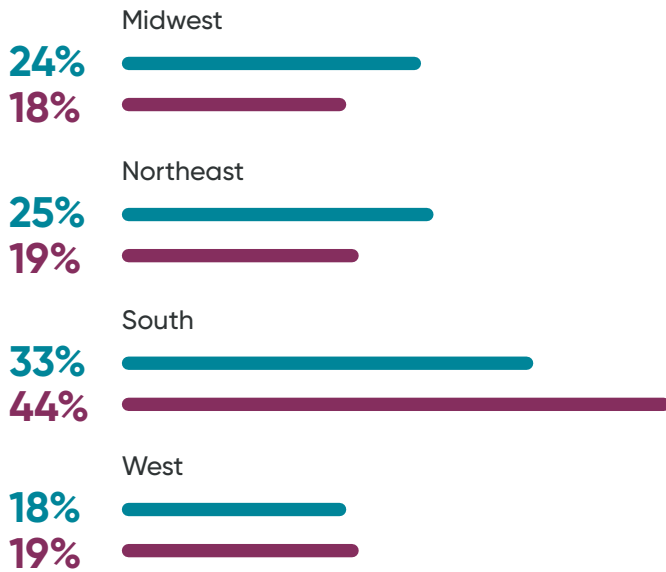


Employee Survey



HR and Benefit Leader Survey

Region



■ Employees
 ■ HR and Benefits Leaders

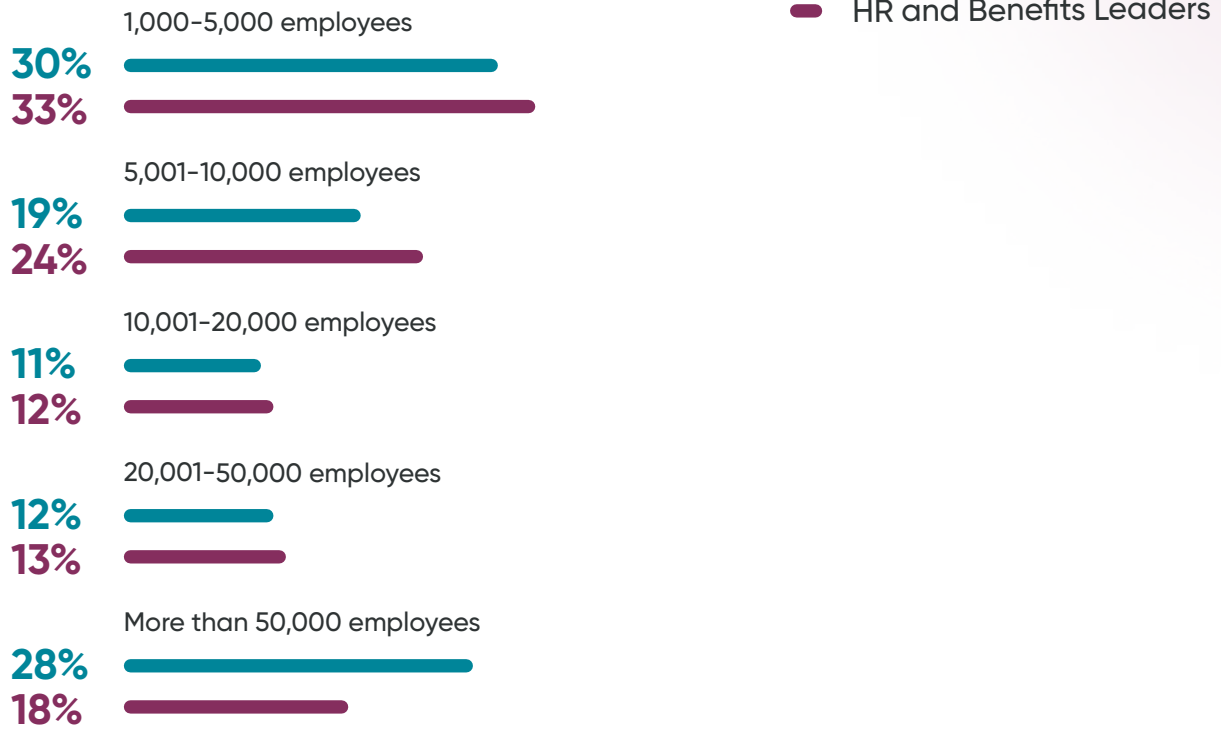


Employee Survey

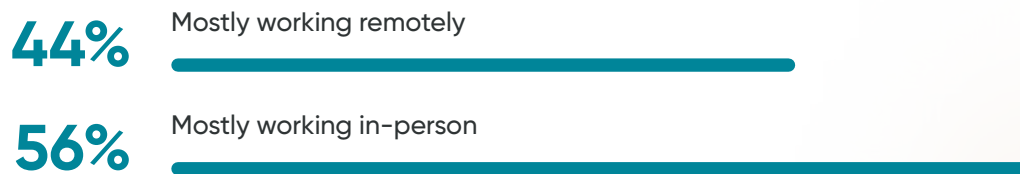


HR and Benefit Leader Survey

Company size



Remove vs. in-person work





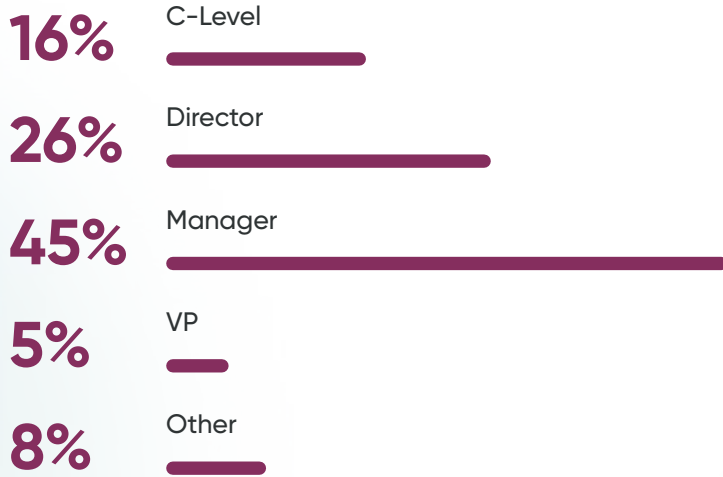
Employee Survey



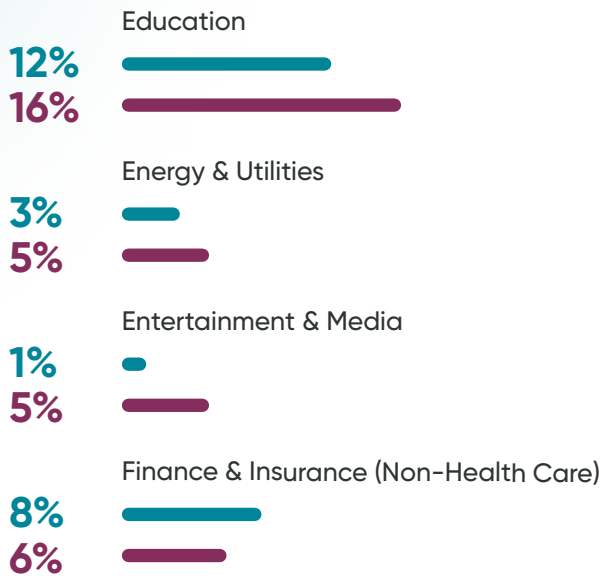
HR and Benefit Leader Survey

Current role level

- Employees
- HR and Benefits Leaders



Industry

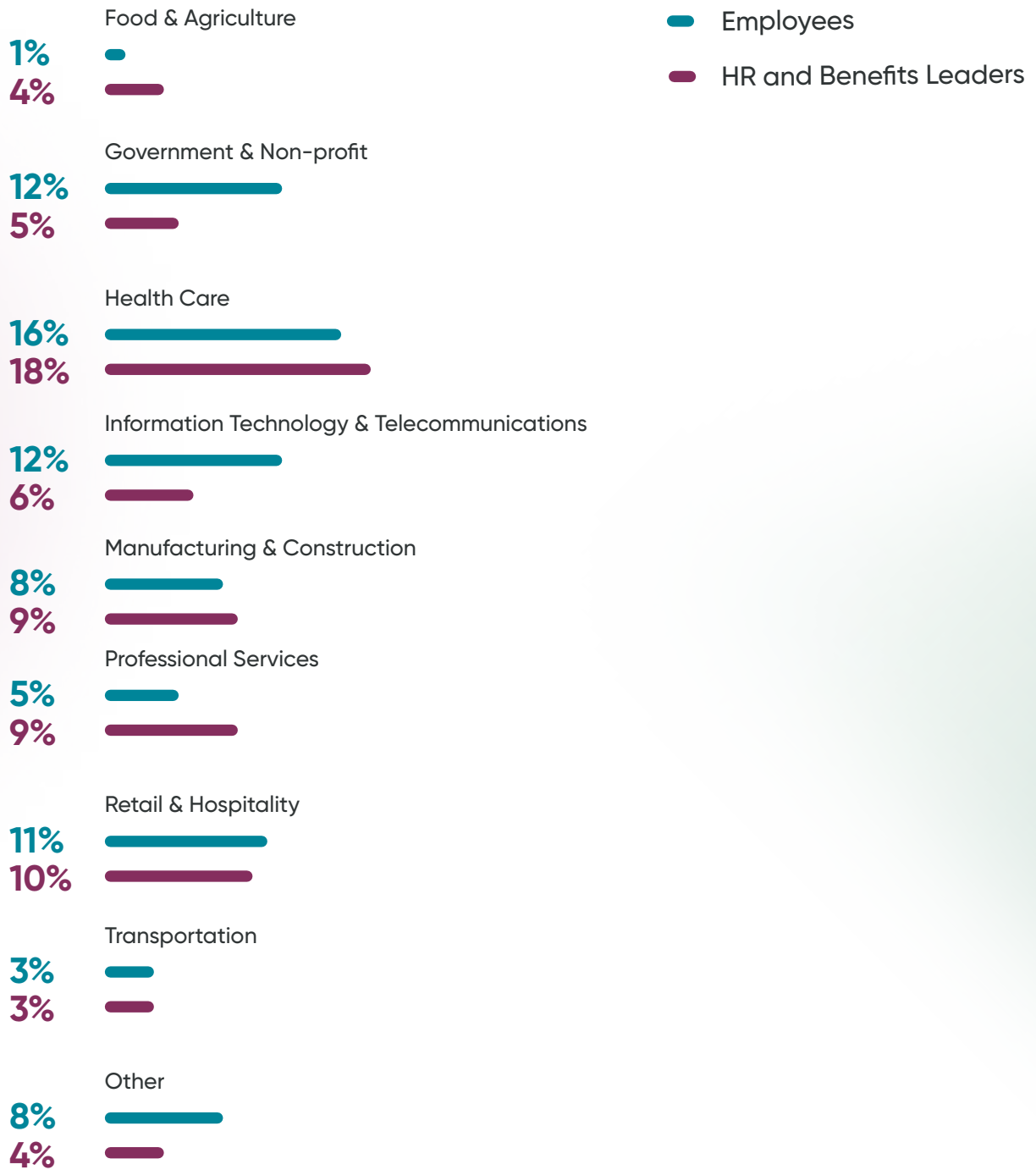




Employee Survey



HR and Benefit Leader Survey



Methodology

These surveys were conducted by Lyra Health with the goal of better understanding employees' and HR and benefits' professionals' views and experiences related to workforce mental health.

We gathered responses from 300 HR and benefits leaders via an online survey from independent brand intelligence firm Upwave between Nov. 19, 2020, and Jan. 14, 2021. We also gathered responses via Upwave from 1,001 employees between Dec. 14 and Dec. 16, 2020. All respondents were at least 18 years of age, employed full-time, and living in the U.S. when the survey was completed.

Upwave gathered survey data with a combination of proprietary measurement tools and third party data validation with panel choices verified to provide consistent access to respondents from different job levels, titles, departments and industries. Respondents were interviewed in exchange for access to content or a service, such as free WiFi. Participants did not receive monetary compensation for completing the surveys.

Interested in learning more about how your company's mental health offerings stack up against others? Take our [Essentials of Workplace Wellness Quiz](#).



About Lyra Health

Lyra Health, a leading provider of innovative mental health benefits for more than 2 million U.S. employees and dependents, is transforming mental health care by creating a frictionless experience for members, providers, and employers. Using matching technology and an innovative digital platform, Lyra connects companies and their employees—plus spouses and children—to world-class therapists, mental health coaches, and personalized medication prescribing. Leading self-insured employers partner with Lyra to tailor value-driven mental health benefits programs specific to their workforce. With Lyra, benefits leaders can offer employees fast, reliable access to clinicians who practice evidence-based mental health care approaches that have been proven effective. For more information, visit: lyrahealth.com, and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).