

# FACTSHEET

## AGE AND MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

Good mental health is a business-critical issue. It has been estimated that mental health problems in the UK workforce cost employers almost £35bn in a year. Business in the Community's (BITC) 2019 [Mental Health at Work: Time to Take Ownership](#) report, in partnership with Mercer Marsh Benefits, recognised the growing momentum on the tangible need for mental health improvements in the workplace, but there is much more that employers need to do.

The UK workforce includes employees aged from under 20 to over 70. Our research throws a spotlight on a dimension of wellbeing that has received less attention: that experiences vary with age and different issues are of importance at different ages and stages of our lives.

- Overall, two in five employees reported poor mental health symptoms related to work in the last year.
- Younger people report more mental health issues overall, but employers should be attuned to issues such as menopause and caring, which particularly affect the mental health of older employees.
- Bullying and harassment is a significant wellbeing issue and behaviours have age-related dimensions. See Chart 2.
- Financial wellbeing is a problem across all ages. Young people are challenged by their current financial situation while older workers are concerned about future finances.

## THE UK WORKFORCE IS AGED FROM UNDER 20 TO OVER 70. MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ARE A KEY CHALLENGE AT THE BEGINNING AND THE END OF WORKING CAREERS

As the UK returns to work after the COVID-19 pandemic, employees who have dealt with isolation and disconnection as they adjusted to remote working now face worries about returning to the workplace and job losses due to economic downturn. Recent polling by Bupa<sup>ii</sup> found that eight in ten UK adults have experienced poor mental health during lockdown, including continuous low mood, anxiousness, low self-esteem or hopelessness.

For employers, it is important to recognise that all mental health issues can impact on an employee's wellbeing and productivity. The challenge is to respond flexibly, including to different responses across age groups, providing the best support for the mental health of all employees. In this way employers can leverage the contribution of all ages and gain considerable business advantage.

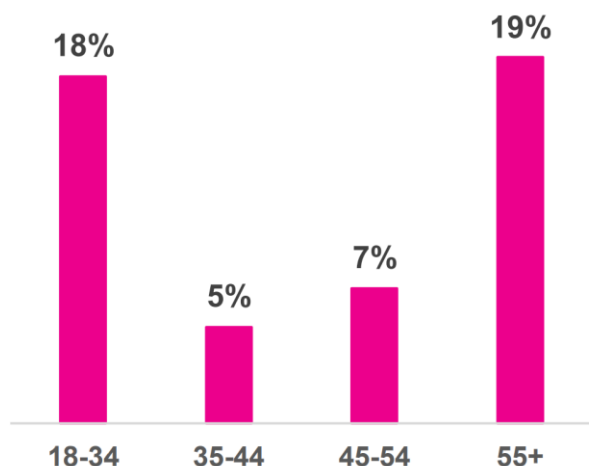
### Attitudes to age

Attitudes to age and age bias can be a contributing factor to wellbeing at work. This problem particularly affects people at the beginning and end of their working lives.

In BITC's Mental Health at Work survey it was the youngest and oldest employees who were more likely to cite age as a factor in mental health symptoms they experienced at work. Employees at the very beginning and end of their careers also

reported a higher risk of not getting a job or promotion due to their age. See Chart 1.

*Chart 1: Those that said age was a factor in developing work-related mental health issues (by age groupings)*



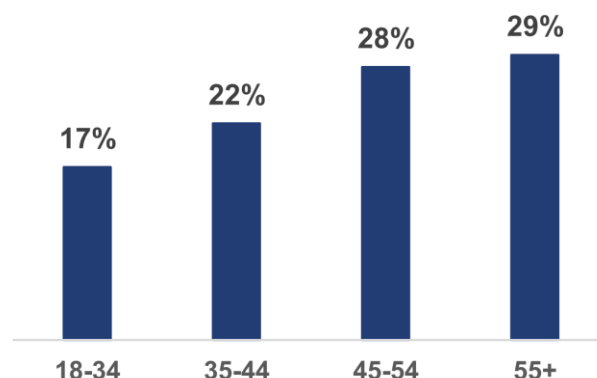
Negative attitudes to age are a risk for businesses, affecting recruitment, development and retention of employees. Evidence from BITC's research into everyday inclusion has highlighted that, while younger employees report more incidences of non-inclusive behaviours, older employees experience these behaviours more frequently. Research by Forbes<sup>iii</sup> found that teams that are fully diverse, across gender, race and age, make better business decisions up to nine times out of ten.

### The impact of work on mental health

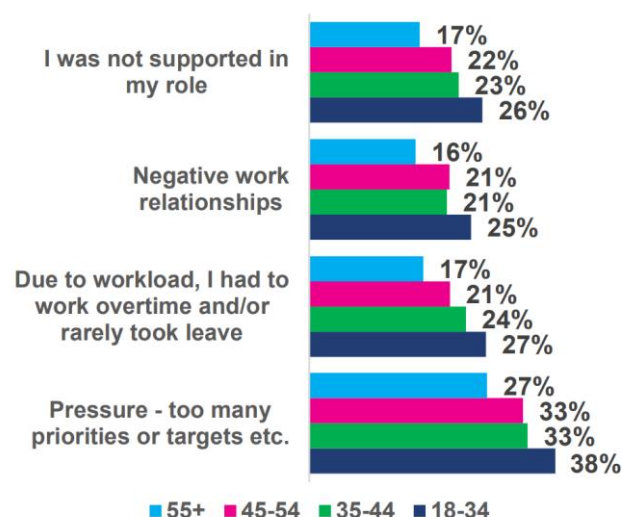
BITC's Mental Health at Work report found that three in five employees have, at some point in their career, experienced the symptoms of poor mental health due to work or where work was a related factor. Two in five employees have experienced symptoms due to work in the past year.

Young people were found to be particularly vulnerable to work-related mental health issues. People aged 18 to 34 reported higher incidences of mental ill-health arising from pressure of work, workload and overtime, lack of support and negative working relationships. See Chart 3. Young people with mental health symptoms also reported higher incidences of loneliness and isolation at work, lack of clarity in their role, being stuck in a job with no progression and being underpaid.

*Chart 2: What caused work-related mental health issues? Of those experiencing mental health issues citing bullying and harassment from managers (by age groupings)*



*Chart 3: What caused work-related mental health issues? (by age groupings)*



Our survey told us that only half of all employees feel comfortable talking at work about mental health problems, with younger people the least happy to discuss mental health at work. Seeking help for work-related mental health issues is more difficult for both youngest and oldest employees, with only a third of both younger and older employees saying that they sought help, from a colleague or human resources, compared to 41% of those aged 40 to 49.

The role of both HR and line managers will be a factor in addressing this problem, and there is an interesting age perspective here also. Our survey

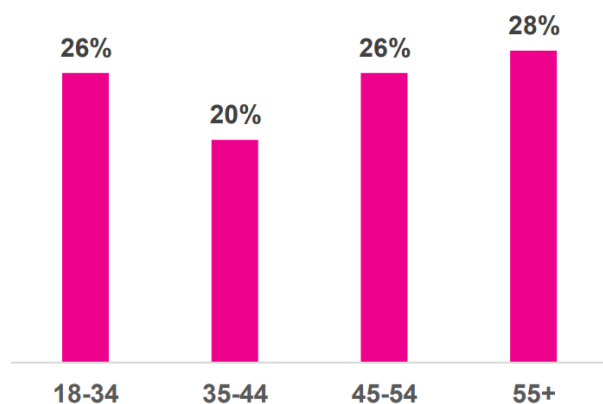
showed that older managers were more confident talking about mental health, but that younger managers felt more confident recognising the potential signs of poor mental health.

These differences are explained by younger managers drawing on their personal experience (with 42% citing this) and older managers looking to general life experiences (76% citing this), highlighting the potential benefits of a cross-generational mentoring approach to developing management skills.

Sadly, many employees feel that they are not treated fairly after talking about a mental health condition. Only just over half (52%) of the respondents to our survey felt that they had been treated fairly when disclosing mental health problems at work. This is a particular issue for older employees, with over a third of respondents (34%) aged over 55 saying that they had been treated unfairly.

Worryingly, nearly a fifth of over-55s with work-related mental health issues reported that they had been laid off or resigned as a result, and a third reported being bullied or harassed by their manager. See Chart 4.

*Chart 4: After disclosing mental health problems those resulting in resignation, being sacked or being forced out (by age groupings)*



### Financial wellbeing

Younger people are particularly challenged by financial wellbeing, with issues arising from personal finances, pay and prospects. Almost half of employees aged 18 to 34 find that their financial situation negatively affects their wellbeing, with key issues being low pay and debt. See Chart 5. Broader wellbeing issues can contribute too; our research showed that 43% of young people reported spending more money than usual when they felt down.

Pensions are the top financial issue in our survey that all employees would like to hear more from their employer about. Perhaps not unexpectedly, it was employees aged over 50 who reported the greatest concerns here, with seven out of ten looking for more employer support.

BITC Age Leadership Team member Aviva has identified a gap between financial worries and action, with 45% of those aged 45+ year-olds saying that they are worried they will not have an adequate income in retirement but only a third saying that they are taking action to prepare<sup>iv</sup>.

Our Mental Health at Work survey found that just over third of employees (34%) reported that their financial situation negatively affects their mental health but 36% were comfortable talking about financial difficulties at work. Yet only 5% said that financial advice or support is available in their workplace.

Chart 5: Percentage who agree or strongly agree with each statement (by age groupings)



### Health conditions and mental health at work

Mental health issues can intersect with other health issues. Research by the Centre for Ageing Better<sup>v</sup> found that health conditions are the main driver of older workers exiting the labour market before they reach state pension age.

This research highlighted that, for over-50s in the workforce, the stress of managing health conditions at work can impact on people's mental health. This in turn could exacerbate other conditions and potentially lead to a situation where an individual might no longer manage to work. For older workers, mental and physical health are inter-related and evidence of physical ill-health may well suggest the presence of mental health issues.

Menopause is a transition that can be associated with both physical and mental health problems. In BITC's Mental Health at Work survey, nearly a third of women aged over 45 (32%) reported that menopause was a non-work-related cause of mental health problems. Menopause is a complex transition but can be effectively supported by often relatively simple employer actions. More detail on this is found in BITC's [Menopause in the workplace toolkit](#).

### Caring and mental health issues

Many working carers struggle to balance work with their caring responsibilities. Research by Carers UK<sup>vi</sup> found that 600 people leave work each day because they find that is too difficult to balance work and caring.

The personal cost of caring on mental health was highlighted by our survey. We found that the pressures of caring could be a cause of mental health problems for employees of all ages. However, caring is a particular issue for older workers. Nearly one in five (19%) employees over 55 said that caring responsibilities were a cause of non-work-related mental health problems compared to one in ten employees aged 18 to 34. It is vital to recognise the risk that caring for another represents to the mental health of care-givers.

### Actions for employers

BITC's [Mental Health at Work](#) report presents recommendations to employers to improve and support the mental health of their employees. The following actions focus on how employer actions can impact on the age dimensions of good mental health in the workplace.

- Ensure inclusive support for employees of all ages and stages of their careers. Use BITC's WorkWell framework to create workplaces that help people of all ages and stages in their careers improve their mental health and wellbeing, and pay special attention to those people who are most at risk of experiencing poor mental health, such as younger workers and carers.
- Provide training to line managers to ensure that they can address the mental health issues of an employee regardless of the employee's age, gender or ethnicity. Mentoring approaches across generations may help too.
- Develop and promote financial education, information and guidance that helps employees get the right support at the right time and appropriate to their age and stage in life.

- Promote better mental health by helping employees to plan and reflect on the relationships between their work, wellbeing and finances. For employees in later careers, a mid-life MOT is a helpful tool to do this and our [Mid-life MOT Getting Started toolkit](#) and [Senior and HR Manager guide](#) help with this.
- Embed good mental health and wellbeing into apprenticeships and other training programmes offered across employees' careers. Signpost ways in which support is provided.
- Promote flexible working, which can support an increase in wellbeing and productivity for employees of all ages.
- Provide support to carers of all ages to help them find a better balance between their work and caring responsibilities. Find guidance on supporting working carers in BITC's [Equal Lives](#) report and in our [Carers toolkit](#) and [COVID-19 carers resource](#).
- Provide support to female employees during menopause. Our [BITC Menopause toolkit](#) provides practical advice and guidance.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> Mental health at work: The business costs ten years on (2017); Michael Parsonage and Geena Saini; Centre for Mental Health; available at [www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> Staff experiencing mental health issues and not speaking to anyone doubles (2020); Darius McQuaid; HR Review; available at [www.hrreview.co.uk](http://www.hrreview.co.uk)

<sup>iii</sup> New Research: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making At Work (2017); Erik Larson; available at [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

<sup>iv</sup> Storm on the Horizon? The UK's mid-life workforce: navigating uncharted waters (2020); Aviva available at [www.aviva.co.uk](http://www.aviva.co.uk)

<sup>v</sup> Health warning for employers: supporting older workers with health conditions (2018); Centre for Ageing Better; available at [www.ageing-better.org.uk](http://www.ageing-better.org.uk)

<sup>vi</sup> Research: More than 600 people quit work to look after older and disabled relatives every day (2019); Carers UK; available at [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)