

A turn of the tide: Employee mental health in 2023



INTRODUCTION

We've come a long way

The goal of our fifth annual report is to reflect on the advancement we've seen in recent years in the way we recognize, value, and support mental health at work – while also sharing new challenges and ways we can address them.

We've seen a lot of positive progress in a short amount of time. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, organizations and employees were forced to adapt, and quickly. Many switched to a remote setting, and HR leaders went to work finding ways to support employees' mental health for a new type of workplace.

It's important to recognize how far we've come. CEOs and employees overwhelmingly agree (95% and 92%, respectively) they are better at work when their mental health is strong. More than ever before, CEOs and employees are regularly using their mental health benefits, and they're seeing a positive impact on their mental health in and out of the workplace. With this greater recognition of the value of mental health in the workplace comes greater opportunity to create supportive workplaces that fosters deeper engagement and healthier teams.

There is a changing of these tides surrounding workforce mental health – and that brings a new set of challenges revolving around the state of our world in 2023. Employees, HR leaders, and CEOs alike report global events like economic uncertainty, war, and inequities toward marginalized communities impact their mental health at work. Inside the workplace, we're also

seeing layoffs putting pressure on employees and causing an increase in financial stress. HR teams are increasingly feeling the burden, as they take on emotionally supporting employees while also fulfilling their roles at work.

Uncertainty and instability have become the norm in today's world, and that can take a toll on anyone's mental health. It also brings new challenges for leaders. How do you instill hope in the workplace while balancing transparency and the challenges of today's economy on business? How can you more proactively address employee concerns to drive better mental health – and ultimately, a more effective workforce?

Together, we can progress with the times to create a workplace that is supportive, inspirational, and a place where employees can be their full selves.

“There's no more important action today's CEOs can take than investing in the mental health of their teams. It's not only the right thing to do – but it's also beneficial to the bottom line.”

– Russell Glass

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, HEADSPACE

What we measured

In March and April 2023, Headspace partnered with Dimensional Research to conduct three surveys to get a pulse on the state of mental health in the workplace today.

To enable trend analysis, certain questions were repeated from similar 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 surveys.

Employees

4,050 RESPONDENTS

Respondents in Australia, Germany, the UK and the US

Knowledge, service, and manual workers

All surveyed worked >30 hrs per week

Survey asked wide range of questions about experiences with mental health and employee benefits

CEOs

426 RESPONDENTS

Respondents in Australia, Germany, the UK and the US

CEO, president, or an equivalent business leader at a company that offers job benefits and has at least 100 employees

Asked about their experiences with mental health and about their company's mental health benefits for employees

Benefits Leaders

269 RESPONDENTS

Respondents in US and UK

Survey includes wide range of questions about their experiences with mental health, including questions on company benefits for employees

WHAT WE LEARNED

Five key insights about workforce mental health

1

Instability, productivity pressure, and rising expectations for all are driving a sense of dread in the workplace.

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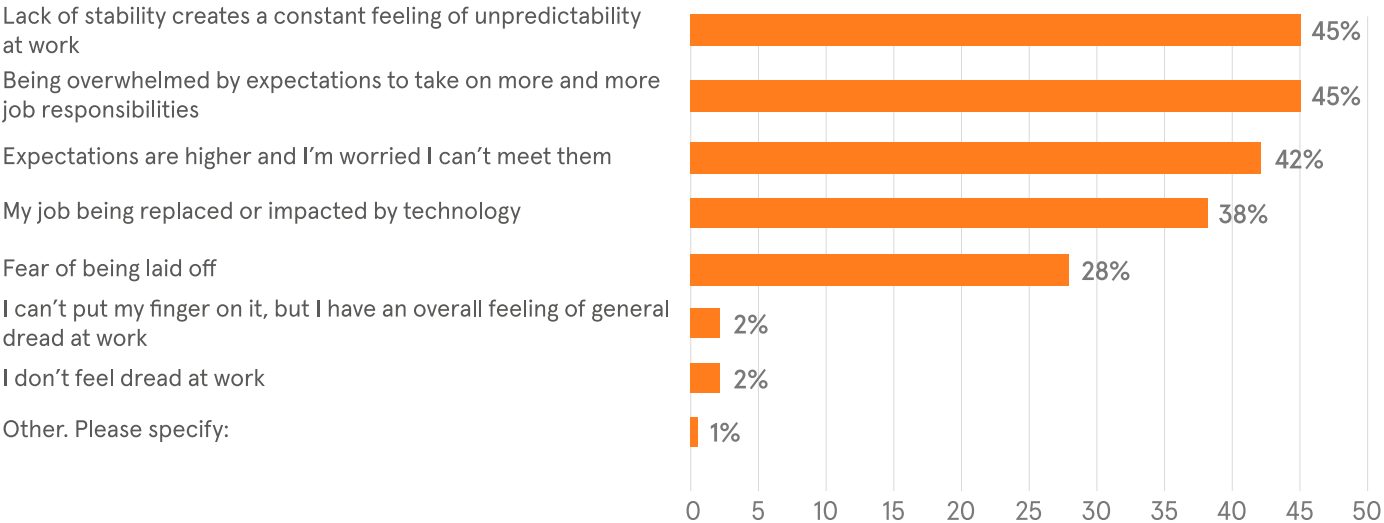
In the past few years, we've seen the stress that employees and leaders are under shapeshift, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts of different life stressors on work. Now, we're seeing a new trend emerge: a sense of dread.

This sense of dread only increases for leaders: 55% of executive-level employees and 59% of CEOs are feeling dread at least once a week.

87% of employees say they feel a sense of dread at least once a month, with nearly half (49%) saying they feel a sense of dread at least once a week.

The majority of executives and CEOs feel a sense of dread at work at least once a week

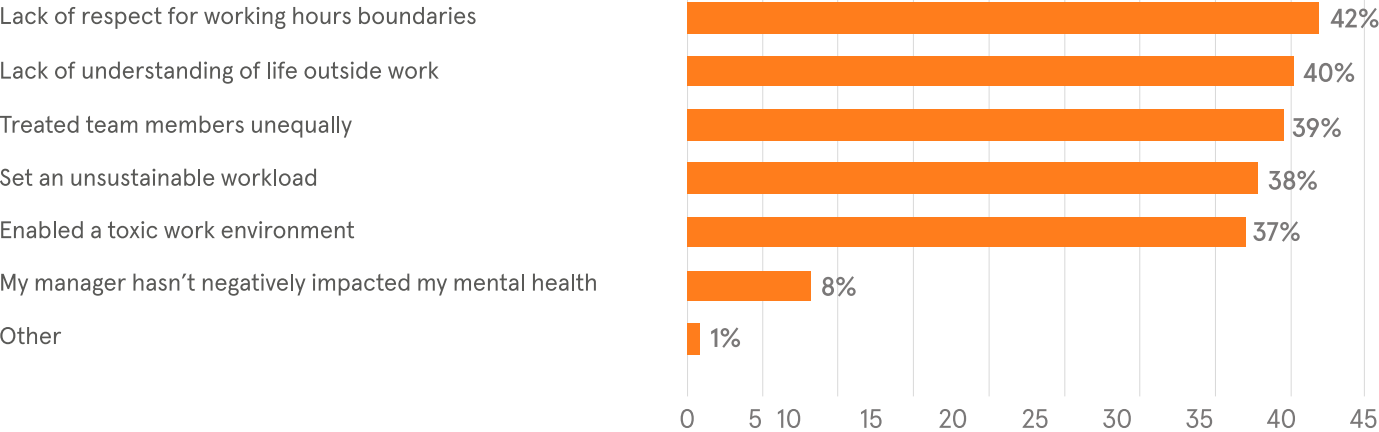
Employees: What's the biggest driver of dread for you at work? Choose all that apply.



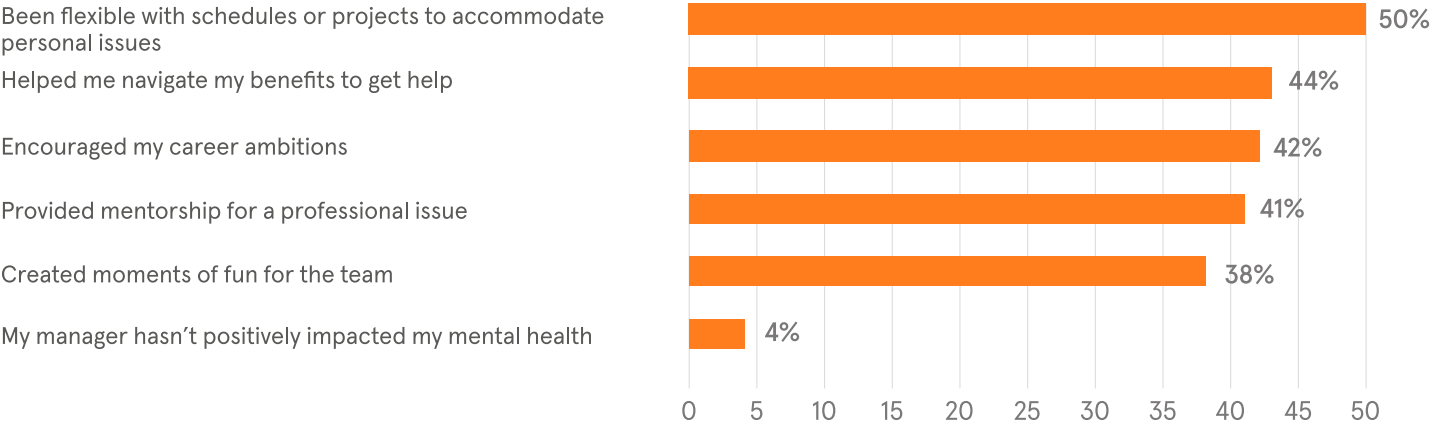
Survey respondents say what drives this dread the most is rising expectations to take on more responsibilities (45%) and a lack of stability at work (45%). With rounds of layoffs, employees who remain on the job are dealing with additional roles and responsibilities to compensate for a loss of their teammates – while also processing the emotions of saying goodbye to coworkers and worries that they could be the next to be laid off.

Our research shows managers play a large role in mental health. The top three drivers of managers having a negative impact on their employees' mental health are (1) a lack of respect for working hours, (2) a lack of understanding of life outside of work and (3) creating an unsustainable workload. In contrast, half of employees say their manager has **positively** impacted their mental health by being flexible with schedules or flexible with projects to accommodate personal issues.

Employees: In the past year, has your manager ever *negatively* impacted your emotional and mental health? Choose all that apply.



Employees: In the past year, has your manager ever *positively* impacted your emotional and mental health? Choose all that apply.



What can you do to reduce feelings of dread for yourself and your team?



Clearly outline responsibilities and allow for flexibility to create a more positive work environment.

Managers should make it clear when employees are expected to be available and where there is flexibility, and invite open communication so employees feel comfortable speaking up, clarifying roles, and collaborating.

Consistently communicate “The Why.”

Ground your team in the mission by consistently communicating the why behind the work you do. Whether that’s sharing testimonials at team meetings, spotlighting employees who brought the mission to life with a recent project, or speaking about your personal connection to the mission — support your employee’s commitment to the mission through ongoing communication.

Practice “Ruthless Prioritization.”

Help you and your team focus on the most important priorities by asking, “what’s the risk of not prioritizing this task?” By challenging the value of each initiative, you reset the workload with more intention for you and your team.

Focus on what you can control.

Invest time and energy into actions that are in your personal control as a leader. Recognize your team’s achievements and make time to celebrate the wins, both big and small. Create constants to maintain a sense of stability in your life, like a consistent bedtime or regular exercise. If it feels overwhelming to figure out where to begin, start small: ask yourself “what would make me feel just 1% better today?”

Flex daily self-compassion.

In order to best support others compassionately, we need to first start with ourselves. Notice the tone of how you speak to yourself when something doesn’t work out. How might you re-frame this to a gentler tone, similar to how you might speak to a friend? Consider for the next week, counting on a sticky note how many times you catch yourself in a negative storyline. Practice both being aware when it happens and being non-judgmental towards yourself in those moments.

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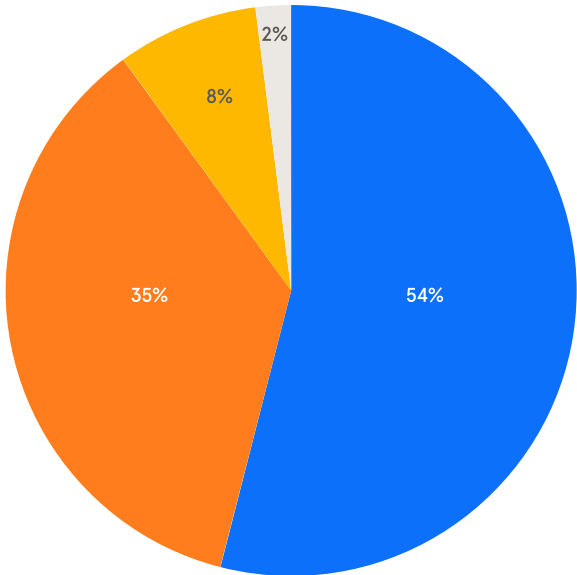
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As diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) efforts continue to become a more ingrained part of organizations’ policies and culture, we’re beginning to see the impact. Encouragingly, we’re seeing DEIB benefits marginalized communities and the full workforce. Over half of employees (54%) say their employer’s DEIB policy has a positive impact on their mental health. This is especially true for marginalized groups – non-binary employees, for example, are more likely to say they are positively impacted by their companies DEIB policy (75%) – but also true for white (50%) and male (52%) employee populations.

Employees: How would you describe the impact of your company’s policy to support DE&I (diversity, equity, and inclusion) on your mental health? Choose the one answer that most closely applies.

- It is a good policy that has had a positive impact on my mental health
- It is a good policy, but it hasn’t impacted my mental health
- The policy is inadequate and hasn’t helped my mental health
- We don’t have a DE&I policy

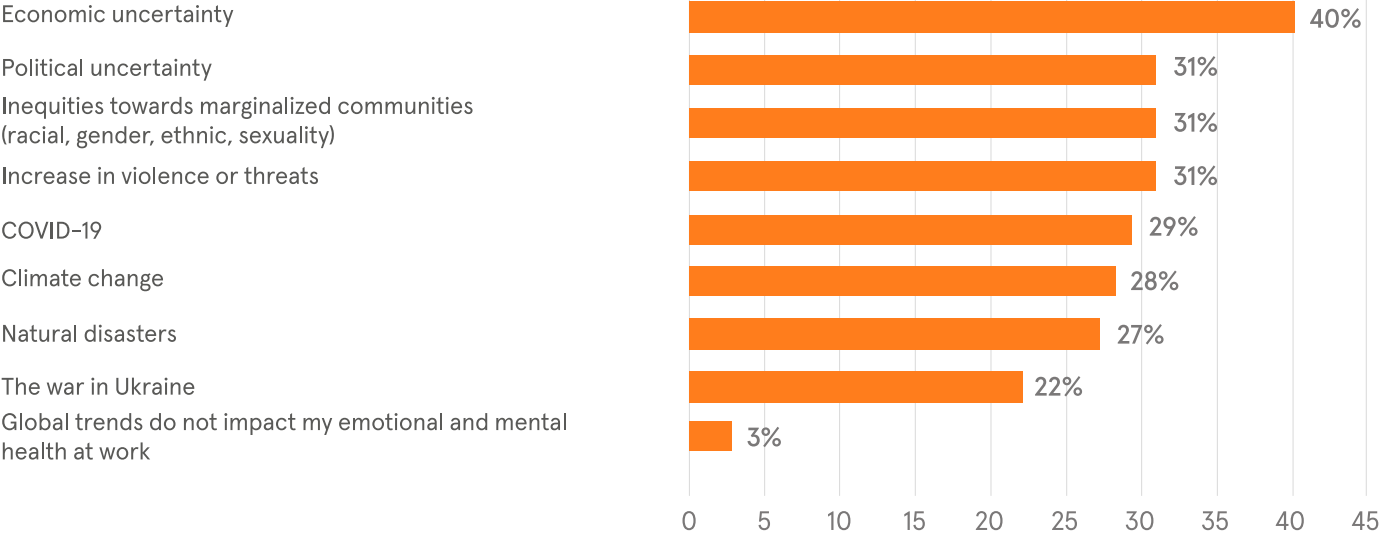


Over half of employees (54%) say their employer’s DE&I policy has a positive impact on their mental health.

We’re also seeing the importance of addressing the intersectionality of mental health. We know traumatic events in the news may impact someone’s mental health and their ability to fully show up for work, based on their identity and lived experience.

With 97% of employees saying global events, like war, economic uncertainty, and acts of violence impact their mental health at work, DEIB efforts can better equip organizations to respond to global events and provide employee support. By infusing DEIB efforts into every aspect of your organization, you're better prepared to support all employees as their full selves.

Employees: What are the top global trends that impact your emotional and mental health at work? Choose all that apply.





How can you center DEIB at your organization?

Train managers on how to talk about race and other aspects of identity in the workplace.

Identity cannot be put on a shelf when a person arrives at work. Organizations that create spaces and norms where identity differences can be identified, discussed, and celebrated create inclusive environments that alleviate stress and allow employees to be fully present and themselves at work.

“In times of economic downturn, investments in DEIB improve the mental health of the entire employee population and the overall prosperity (profitability) of organizations. In other words, centering DEIB as a key strategic lever is a business imperative. It’s critical that we create workplaces that help everyone thrive – not just a select few.”

– Dr. Wizdom Powell

CHIEF DIVERSITY & SOCIAL IMPACT OFFICER,
HEADSPACE

Ensure DEIB initiatives are set up for success. Address key challenges to DEIB policies head on. Make sure your DEIB priorities map to organizational outcomes (e.g. employee engagement or retention) vs. being siloed from the core business. Support ERG leaders with tangible resources like dedicated time within the work day to lead an ERG or a budget to bring in guest speakers vs. putting the burden on marginalized team members to do more work without additional support.

Create guidelines for inclusive meeting practices.

Consider how accessible your meetings are to those with disabilities. What structures are in place to ensure that those attending have an equitable chance to share and be heard? Answering these and other questions help companies develop templates for meetings that provide employees with a sense of inclusion and belonging in these spaces.

Utilize a DEIB lens as the starting point for messaging and communication.

Start website, social media, and marketing efforts with consideration of diverse perspectives, inclusive language, and accessible content. Too often DEIB is an afterthought, used for content review rather than a guide for content creation – consider it a core part of strategy, rather than a box to check.



How can you center DEIB at your organization?

Create both an internal and external communication strategy to address how to respond when identity-based traumatic events occur (e.g. mass shootings or hate crimes targeting Black, AAPI, LGBTQIA+ individuals).

Internal messages should include resources to support employees who may be differentially impacted by these events based on their identity. A lack of proactive strategy results in delays in providing support and solidarity which can isolate and exclude employees. If you need help getting started, try out a “Care, Act, Educate” framework with these prompts:

- ★ **Care:** How can we care for employees who are the most impacted and/or most vulnerable at this moment?
- ★ **Act:** How can we take supportive action as an organization?
- ★ **Educate:** How can we use our platform as leaders to educate lesser impacted team members on how and why the issue is impacting marginalized communities?

3

Check in on your HR leaders.

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With continued change, rolling layoffs, and shifting workplace realities, HR teams are under increasing pressure to support employees while maintaining their work responsibilities. They're feeling the burden from a number of directions.

HR leaders report the biggest drivers of dread at work are burnout from emotional caregiving for employees (36%) and feeling overwhelmed by the expectations to take on more job responsibilities (36%).

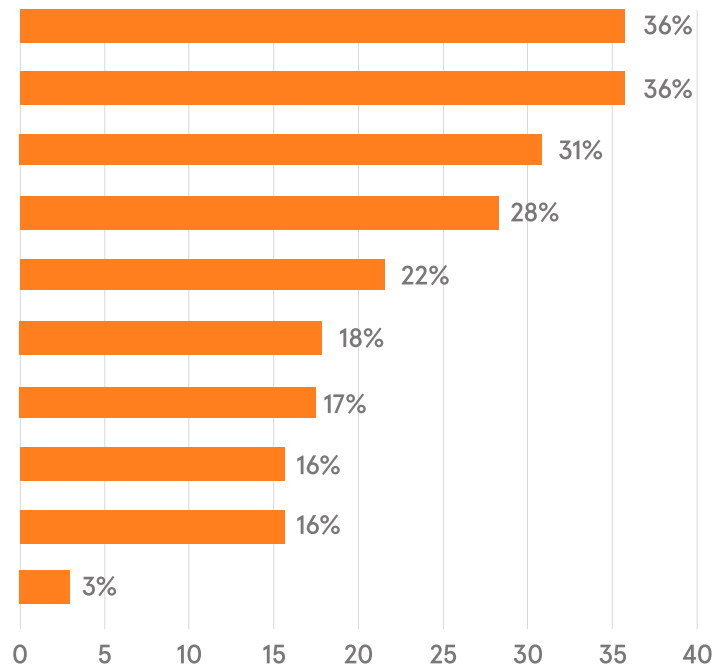
“People leaders are exhausted, with many of us asking – ‘How do we sustain ourselves amidst all this uncertainty and change, while continuing to create stability for others?’ We owe it to ourselves, and our teams, to carve out time each and every day to take care of ourselves first and foremost.”

– Désirée Pascual

CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, HEADSPACE

HR leaders: What’s the biggest driver of dread for you at work? Choose all that apply.

- Burnout from emotional caregiving for employees
- Being overwhelmed by expectations to take on more and more job responsibilities
- Expectations are higher and I’m worried I can’t meet them
- Lack of stability creates a constant feeling of unpredictability at work
- Pressure to justify the ROI of mental health benefits investments
- My job being replaced or impacted by technology
- I don’t feel dread at work
- Being overwhelmed by vendor management
- Fear of being laid off
- I can’t put my finger on it, but I have an overall feeling of general dread at work



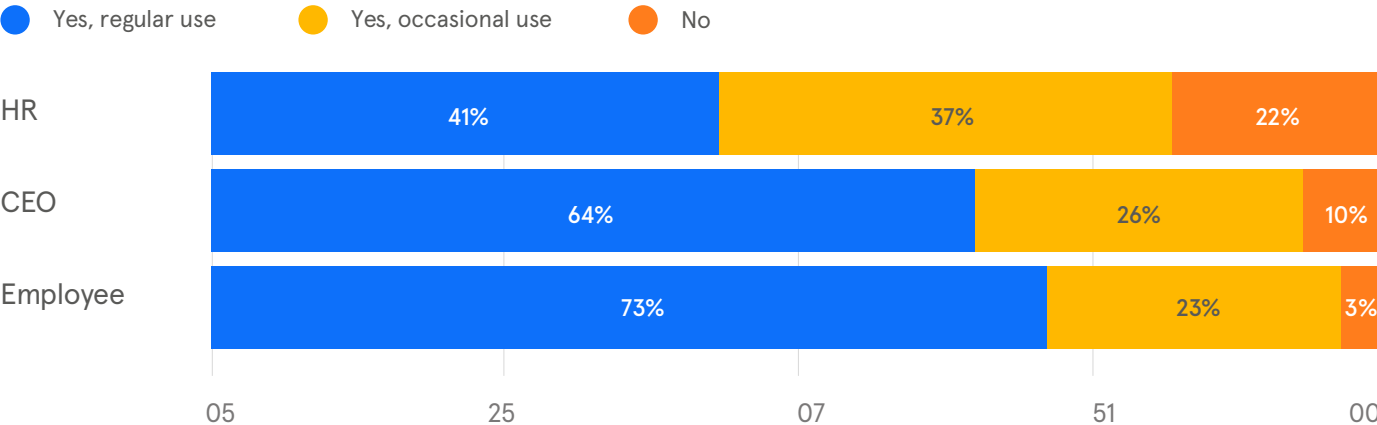
For HR leaders, there's an increasing pressure to support employees who are feeling stress as a result of changes in the workplace and uncertainty in the world. In fact, 94% of HR leaders feel an increasing responsibility to improve company culture by supporting employee mental health. At the same time, they're feeling pressure from leaders to take on more responsibility, and serve as emotional caregivers for employees in addition to their traditional job roles.

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Despite this, it seems HR leaders aren't getting the support they need to deliver. HR leaders use mental health benefits less than any other group surveyed. **Only 41% of HR leaders use mental health benefits regularly, compared to 64% of CEOs and 73% of employees.** And, they're not using benefits despite viewing them favorably: 91% of HR leaders rate their mental health benefits program positively.

HR leaders are having a hard time supporting their own mental health when they're shouldering the burden of encouraging mental health for employees.

HR leaders: Have you taken advantage of any of the emotional and mental health benefits that your employer offers?



How can we make sure HR leaders are investing in their own mental health?



Encourage HR leaders to put their “own oxygen mask on first.”

In order to be the best advocate for a healthy workplace, HR leaders need the time to care for their own mental health first. HR use of mental health benefits sets the tone for the organization: modeling positive behavior, like taking the time to care for your mental health, can encourage others to do the same. Consider what systems are set up to provide more support to your HR team (e.g., reducing meetings leading up to Open Enrollment).

Proactively check in with your HR leader.

It can feel difficult to ask for help, especially when you're feeling overwhelmed. To help combat the rising burnout of HR leaders, instead of asking “do you need support?” get specific and show your commitment by asking “what's one thing I can do to support you this week?” That simple prompt can give your HR leaders the chance to take a step back, reflect on their needs, and make it easier to accept support.

Create a system for growth.

To ensure you are providing your HR leaders with the opportunity for growth, set up dedicated time, within working hours, for leadership & development. Whether it's a few days a year or once a quarter, show your commitment to their growth by giving them the emotional space to take a step back and learn.

Create a boundary statement.

To help overcome ‘compassion fatigue,’ HR leaders should consider setting a boundary statement to ground them throughout the day. For example, author and psychologist Dr. Karyn D. Hall suggests saying, “not my experience, their experience” as you navigate emotionally heavy conversations.

4

CEOs feel the need to keep a positive attitude, which is creating stress and a disconnect with employees.

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Business leaders today are facing a variety of challenges, and it has become increasingly difficult to find ways to lead through change. With looming economic uncertainty and traumatic events impacting employees and businesses alike, CEOs are challenged to ensure they're leading with authenticity, while also inspiring hope.

This can be a challenge, though. **In fact, 49% of CEOs feel that when communicating with employees, it's most important to be positive for the team**, whereas only 33% of CEOs feel that it's important to tell employees the truth when it may be hard to hear.

CEOs: What is your personal philosophy of communicating to employees during times of business uncertainty? Choose the one answer that most closely applies.



Employees may feel confused and stressed when they're unsure if their employer is communicating honestly. With fears around layoffs and potential recessions, employees are seeking transparency and assurance that their employer is taking steps to prepare their company for future challenges while protecting employees.

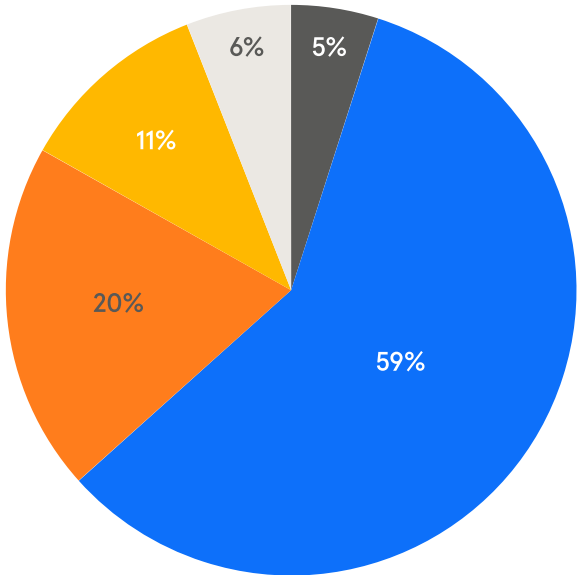
75% of employees worry their company will cut back on mental health support and benefits if there is a recession.

However, these concerns may be unfounded – and a result of poor communication. **In fact, 64% of CEOs say they would increase mental health benefits in a recession.** CEOs overwhelmingly see the value of mentally healthy workplaces. 93% of CEOs agree that it’s important that their company encourages the mental health of employees.

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CEOs: Which of the following describes how a recession would likely impact the emotional and mental health benefits your company offers employees? Choose the one answer that most closely applies.

- There will be an INCREASE in the level of benefits
- We won’t make any changes
- There will be a DECREASE in the level of benefits
- These benefits will be eliminated
- We will start to offer these for the first time



The disconnect is clear: employees don’t know where their mental health benefits may stand in the case of financial challenges for their employers. This ambiguity can cause stress and concern, negatively impacting mental health.

How can CEOs effectively communicate through times of uncertainty?



Bring awareness to how you show up.

Taking time to understand ourselves, using mindfulness and mental healthcare as tools, can help us explore our inner experiences and how we show up for others. In order to bring thoughtful authenticity, think about what you feel comfortable sharing with your team, and how your audience may receive it. Figuring out what feels most natural to you as a leader, to be both vulnerable and authentic, is key.

Set a “to be” list.

Before meeting with your team, set a “to be” list to get intentional about how you want to communicate. For example, you may list out “I want to be clear, compassionate, and direct” ahead of a team-wide meeting. Let your “to be” list ground you to not just what you’re communicating, but also how you’re communicating to your team.

Set ‘methodological goals’ as a company.

To help your company work toward your measurable goals, like revenue or retention, support your team in how they approach reaching those goals, especially during more stressful times. For example, you could present guiding principles ahead of your next monthly or quarterly meeting, speaking to themes like “proactively asking for help, ruthless prioritization, and celebrating small wins.”

Create an open space to talk about the state of the business.

Solicit questions from your team (e.g., an “Ask Me Anything” with the CEO or Exec team). Be open to opportunities to share more transparently.

5

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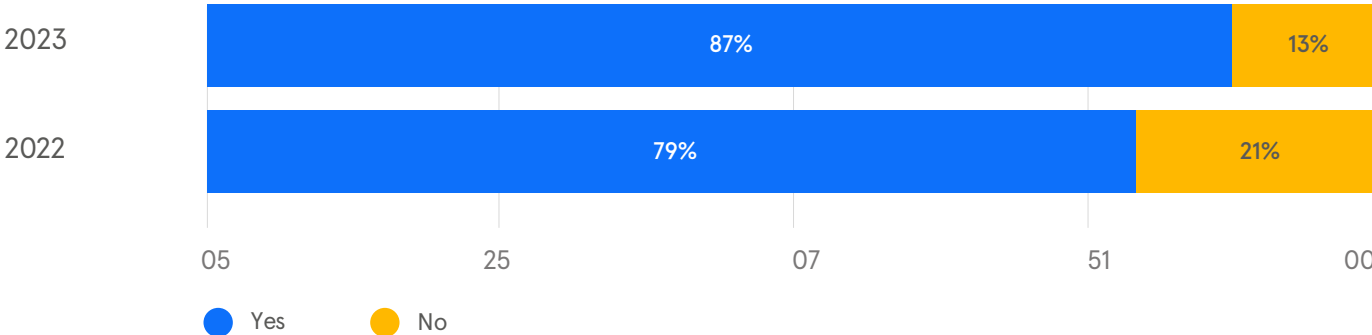
While there remains some misalignment between CEOs and employees' perception of workplace mental health, data shows we've made impressive progress toward closing that gap. In fact, 91% of CEOs and 89% of employees agree that their company sufficiently supports the mental health of its employees compared to 94% and 67% (respectively) in 2022.

76% of employees say they appreciate it when leaders discuss emotional and mental health

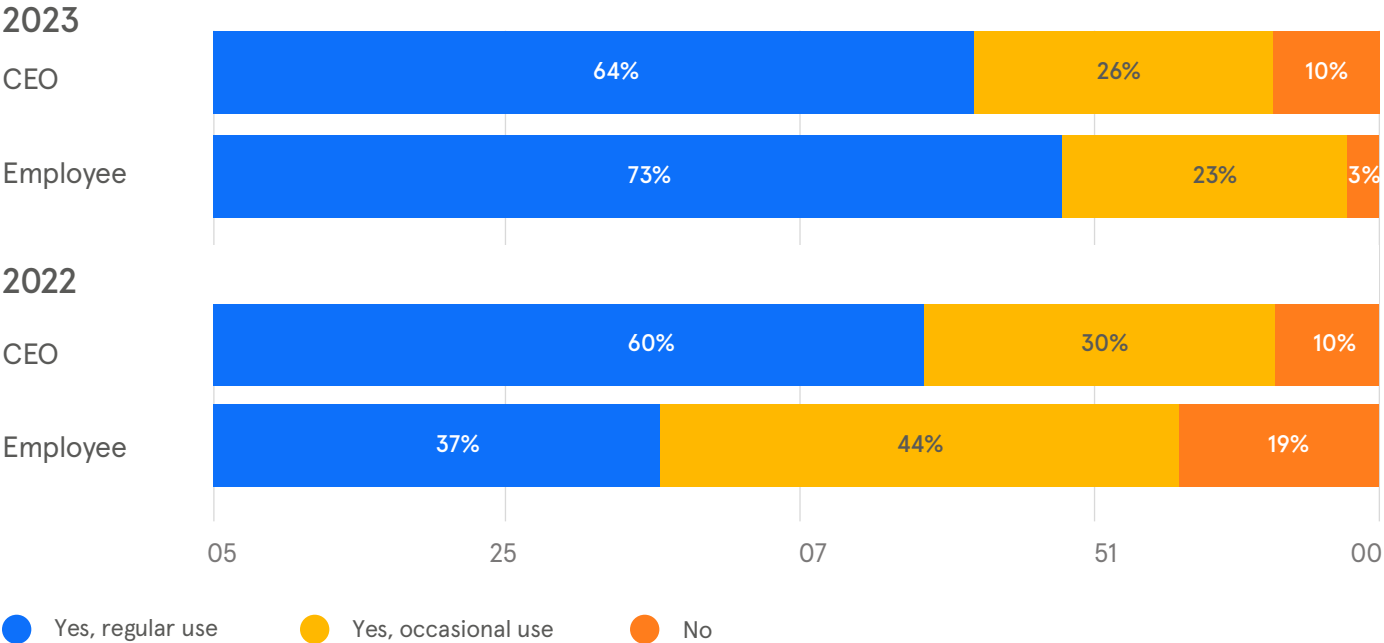
CEOs have also come a long way in communicating and advocating for mental health in the workplace. 87% of CEOs have talked to their staff or employees about their own mental health, a remarkable jump from 79% that did the same in 2022. That's great news, as 76% of employees say they appreciate it when leaders discuss emotional and mental health.

Beyond just talking the talk, CEOs are also beginning to walk the walk. 92% of CEOs say they model best practices of how to care for mental health to their employees, and 64% regularly take advantage of mental health benefits.

CEOs: Do you ever speak to your employees or staff about your own emotional and mental health?



CEOs: Have you personally taken advantage of any of the emotional and mental health benefits that your company offers to employees?



Yet, there’s room for improvement. 59% of CEOs feel dread at work at least once a week – more than any other group surveyed. Despite feeling this dread, 35% say they don’t take advantage of mental health benefits because they don’t believe they need emotional health support.

59% of CEOs feel dread at work at least once a week

More than half (54%) of CEOs strongly believe that due to the job market, inflation, and general “burnout,” it is important for companies to do more to support employee mental health – and nearly half of employees agree. Demonstrate this to your teams, and they will feel the impact.

How can CEOs model what matters when it comes to workplace mental health?



Be honest and authentic when discussing mental health.

As you feel comfortable, share challenges you've faced and the steps you've taken to care for your mental health. Create space for open and vulnerable conversation, so employees feel comfortable talking about mental health – and making time for mental wellness.

Lead by example.

Demonstrate to your team how you make mental wellness a daily practice: start all-hands with meditations, or block time on your calendar for therapy. Encourage all employees – including, and especially, HR – to take advantage of mental health benefits and to take the time they need to reset if they are feeling overwhelmed or on the brink of burnout.

Approach mental health support like taking a vitamin, versus an aspirin.

Identifying and continually incorporating practices that support our mental health – such as mindfulness, exercise or sleep – should be approached on an ongoing basis. This means we're better equipped to cope when hard times come along. We can start small – with a short break between meetings or quick mindfulness exercises before we start work.

“People are often reluctant to discuss their mental health challenges, especially at work. And though we should ensure that managers aren't being asked to act as therapists, managers can play a powerful role in supporting employee mental health in a few key ways. They can use active listening skills to create psychological safety and help the employee feel understood; they can route employees to relevant mental health resources; and they can share any tips and tricks they use to care for their own mental health, from meditating to setting boundaries around work to seeking help from mental health professionals. These actions send employees a clear message: you're not alone and it's okay to ask for help.”

– Dr. Dana Udall

CHIEF CLINICAL OFFICER, HEADSPACE

Looking Ahead

The future is promising. With more employees and leaders feeling comfortable talking about mental health and utilizing benefits, there are more opportunities to push the boundaries on what it means to be a positive, healthy, productive workplace. As caring for your mental health becomes more destigmatized, organizations and individuals alike can find more ways to invest in their own mental well-being and support the well-being of those around them.

Yet, we must keep in mind that we live in a world of uncertainty. Employees, HR leaders, and CEOs are all feeling the impacts of daily stressors, global events, and economic challenges while at work. It's important to recognize these new challenges and shift mental health efforts to address the issues of today.

With more openness around discussing mental health, and more leaders modeling positive behaviors, workplaces have the opportunity to reach new heights – becoming sources of inspiration, productivity, and joy.

Interested in learning about how Headspace can support your organization and the mental health of its employees? Contact us [here](#).





About Headspace

Headspace is your lifelong guide to better mental health. We make mental health support accessible to everyone, no matter their background or experience. Through our flagship Headspace app, we provide mindfulness tools for everyday life, including meditations, sleepcasts, mindful movement and focus exercises. Our **enterprise offerings** combine this experience with a human-centered model of care, with coaching, therapy, psychiatry and EAP services under one roof. Our team of experts ranges from mental health clinicians, to Emmy award-winning producers and data scientists, working together as one to help millions of people around the world be healthier and more productive.

To learn more, please visit [headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com).

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