

● 2023 Alight international workforce and wellbeing mindset study

# Healthy mind

Supporting employees on their path to better mental and emotional wellbeing

**alight**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Mental wellbeing is a critical component of a healthy, happy life. Yet much of the time, stress, anxiety and depression are viewed as something we must simply learn to live with or worse yet, as something to hide.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought mental health out of the shadows and opened employers' eyes to the mental health challenges their people face daily. This prompted many companies to expand their investments in mental health programs.<sup>i</sup> Now that COVID fears have waned, employers have cut back on wellbeing budgets,<sup>ii</sup> while the number of employees rating their mental and emotional wellbeing positively remains stagnant.<sup>iii</sup> And this despite the persistent economic uncertainty, which one-third of employees say has negatively impacted their mental and emotional health in the past year.<sup>iv</sup>

Employers are in a powerful position to help their people improve their mental and emotional wellbeing. Employees expect it. However, it's not just the employees who stand to benefit from a focus on wellbeing. An investment in employee wellbeing results in a significant positive impact on a company's financial health as well. According to research from The Josh Bersin Company, organizations that leverage the right wellbeing strategies are more than twice as likely to outperform their peers financially, five times more likely to have lower annual healthcare claim costs and do three times better at engaging and retaining their employees.<sup>v</sup>

First, employers must discover where employees are struggling, continue to show their commitment and explore how they can deliver much needed support.

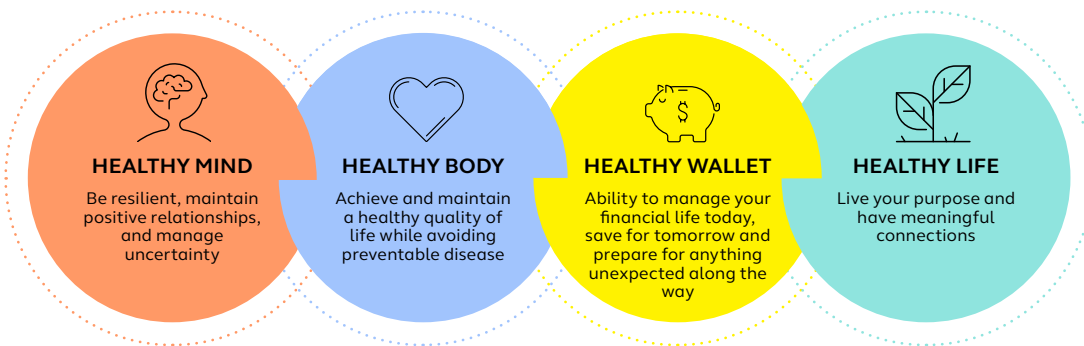


# Mental wellbeing: a post-pandemic assessment

Emerging from the events of 2020 to 2022, you would expect people to be feeling rather good. After all, life has returned to normal (or close to it) after pandemic-induced lockdowns kept most of us from fully enjoying life for an extended period. Even with economic uncertainty, geopolitical conflict and ongoing debate over hot button issues, we've achieved the long-awaited return to normalcy.

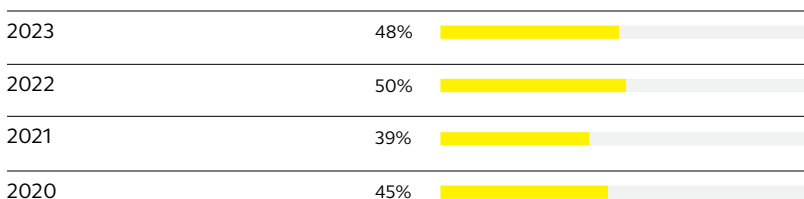
With the lockdowns increasingly in the rearview mirror, it would be natural to assume people's mental and emotional wellbeing would just keep getting better and better. Unfortunately, that's proving not to be the case. Across the globe, worry, stress and sadness stayed near the record highs set in 2021 and the world remains in "a heightened negative state," according to the 2023 Gallup Global Emotions report.<sup>vi</sup>

## Alight's Wellbeing Framework



That's in line with the 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study. While wellbeing numbers across all measures of wellbeing – mind, body, wallet and life – rebounded from historic lows in 2021, we haven't seen any further growth. This holds true for perceptions of personal mental and emotional health.

## Positive view of mental and emotional wellbeing



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

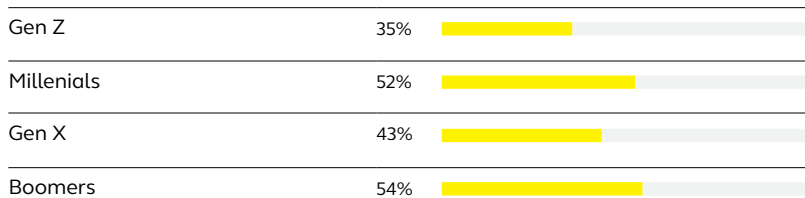
Younger workers and women rate their mental and emotional wellbeing significantly worse than their older and male counterparts. Just 44% of women have a positive view of their mental/emotional wellbeing, compared to 53% of men. Gen Z is feeling the most negative, with only 35% rating their mental and emotional wellbeing positively, compared to 55% of Baby Boomers. Interestingly, Millennials feel more positive (52%) about their mental and emotional wellbeing than Gen Xers (43%).<sup>vii</sup>

**Positive view of mental and emotional wellbeing by gender**



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

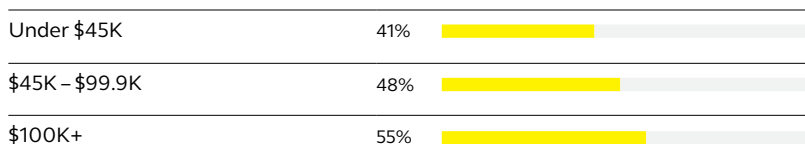
**Positive view of mental and emotional wellbeing by generation**



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

Surprisingly, tech workers rate their mental and emotional wellbeing quite high (62%), despite the threat of widespread layoffs. They are bested only by workers in the utilities industry at 73%. Not surprisingly, higher-income workers rate their mental and emotional wellbeing more positively than those earning less. This is likely related to the inflationary environment and the elevated levels of stress brought about by financial concerns, particularly for those living paycheck-to-paycheck. However, pay is not a panacea. Only slightly more than half (55%) of people earning a six-figure salary or more have positive mental and emotional wellbeing scores.<sup>viii</sup>

**Positive view of mental and emotional wellbeing by income**



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

## Work-from-home: stress relief or stress grief?

One positive outcome of the pandemic was employers' rapid ability to shift to remote work to keep their business operational. Now that COVID has entered the endemic phase, employers are embroiled in a rigorous debate over whether to require workers to return to the office, adopt a hybrid working arrangement or allow people to continue working remotely. And where you work has some interesting correlations with how you're feeling about your wellbeing, mental health and stress levels.

With unemployment at a 50-year low, millions of jobs sitting open and geography no longer a limiting factor in employment opportunities, employees are firmly positioned in the driver's seat. Among companies that have enacted strict return-to-office mandates, some have faced strong opposition, as workers made it clear they wanted to remain remote.<sup>ix</sup> One-third of U.S. employees say they would look for another job if their employer asked them to return to the office even half of the time, while 10% say they would resign immediately.<sup>x</sup>

This could partially explain why nearly one-third (29%) of work-from-home employees have left their previous employer in the past 18 months and started working at a new one.<sup>xiii</sup> If their employer refused to let them continue working from home, they may have left for an opportunity with another company that allowed more flexible work arrangements.

Why are so many people dead set on working remotely? Could it be the joy of leaving the commute behind and enjoying a little extra time with family, hobbies or sleeping? Perhaps it's the ability to make a healthy, low-cost lunch from food that's already in the fridge. Or the flexibility to carve out time for family or community commitments.

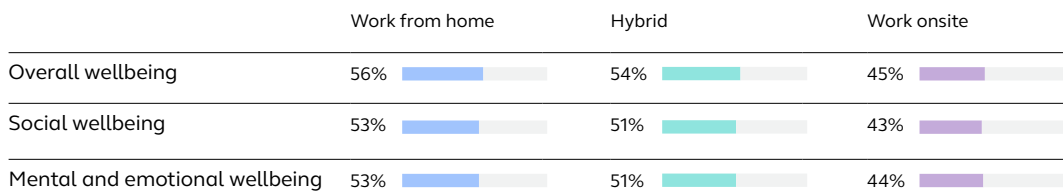
Whatever the motivating factors, one thing is clear: Employees working from home are not only happier, they're also more engaged and productive than their work-from-office counterparts. When asked how often they are able to be fully productive while working, 76% of work from home employees said always, almost always or often, compared to 69% of those working from the office or onsite.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Even in the tech industry, where nearly 225,000 workers were laid off in the first seven months of 2023,<sup>xi</sup> employees are rebelling against return-to-office directives.**



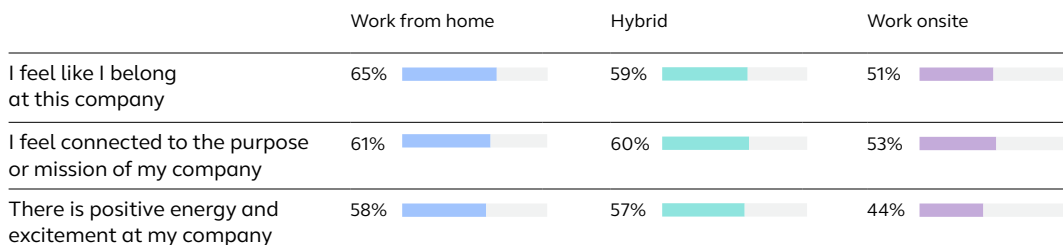


They also rate their wellbeing much higher across all measures — including social wellbeing — disproving the theory that remote workers suffer from isolation and loneliness.



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

Remarkably, remote workers vastly outpace their office-bound counterparts when it comes to feeling a sense of belonging, positive energy and excitement and being connected to the purpose or mission of the company. This dispels another popular myth, that employees working from home don't feel connected to company culture or mission and struggle to build a community with their colleagues.



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study



Yet for all the positive feelings about working from home, remote workers are struggling when it comes to stress. Significantly more work-from-home employees rate their stress level as high, while work-from-office employees are far more likely to rate their stress level as low. Notably, while employees working from home may be more stressed, they also feel more in control of that stress. Nearly half (49%) of work-from-home employees say they have a great deal of control over their stress, compared to just 39% of those working from an office or onsite.<sup>xv</sup> The reasons for that finding are unclear, although it stands to reason remote workers may feel empowered to engage in stress-busting activities, like walks or mindfulness breaks, because of the flexibility the arrangement affords them.

**My stress level is usually:**

	Work from home	Hybrid	Work onsite
High	28%	16%	19%
Low	19%	22%	30%

Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

Despite their overall satisfaction with the arrangement, work-from-home employees are still willing to make a change if the right opportunity comes along. More than four in 10 (41%) are concerned about their long-term job stability, with nearly one-quarter (24%) expecting to be actively looking for a job with a different company or doing their own thing/becoming self-employed within the next 12 months.<sup>xvi</sup>

More than half (52%) of work-from-home employees say wellbeing benefits and programs are a key reason for joining or staying with their employer.<sup>xvii</sup> As employers seek to retain this highly productive and positive group of workers, they would be wise to emphasize human interaction over physical proximity and focus on providing wellbeing support and resources that employees are comfortable using how, where and when they want.

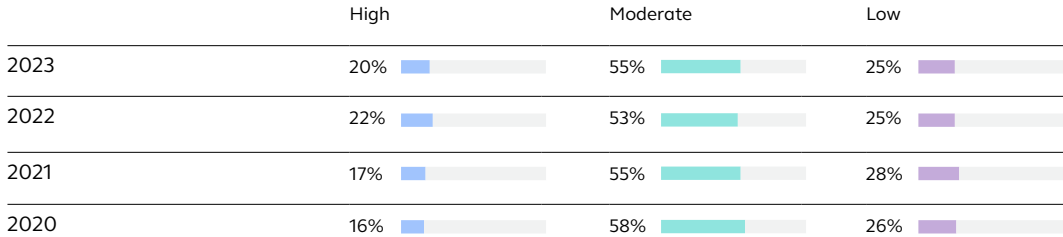
# Reaching the tipping point

Stress is a normal part of life and something we all experience daily – regardless of where we work. While we tend to think of stress as a bad thing, it can be beneficial, but only when we achieve the right level of it. More than a century ago, scientists discovered an empirical relationship between stress and performance.<sup>xviii</sup> Too much or too little stress results in poor performance, but a moderate amount of stress increases alertness, enhances productivity and corresponds to an optimal level of performance. For most of us, achieving that sweet spot midway between high stress and low stress is elusive.

Not surprisingly, stress levels have spiked in recent years, as we have found ourselves struggling to cope with a global pandemic, growing social unrest and a volatile economy — in addition to the everyday stresses woven throughout our lives. When stress becomes chronic or reaches unmanageable levels, it can be quite detrimental — to our health, happiness and success in life and at work.

Stress levels have stabilized, but more than half (55%) of U.S. employees still say they usually feel moderate stress. Another 20% routinely feel high stress. With three-quarters of the workforce experiencing statistically significant stress levels at any given time, clearly the overall situation is not improving.

### My stress level is usually:



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study



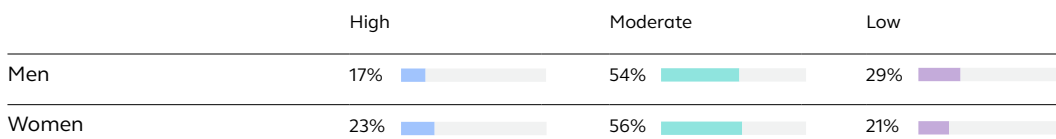


In what is likely a sign of these inflationary times, personal finances are overwhelmingly the top source of stress for more than half (56%) of employees, followed by their job (52%) and their physical health (32%). Nearly one-third (29%) say their mental health has declined due to the current economic climate.<sup>xx</sup> Clearly, people are exhausted, detached and disengaged.

What's more, key demographic groups report feeling more impacted by stress. More women than men say they are experiencing high stress levels, while Gen Z is faring worse than all other generational groups with more than one-third (35%) reporting high levels of stress, compared to 21% of Millennials, 20% of Gen Xers and just 9% of Baby Boomers. Nearly nine in 10 (88%) Gen Z employees say job-related stress has impacted their lives, while just under half (49%) have suffered anxiety and panic attacks, compared to 37% of all workers.<sup>xxi</sup> This heightens worries about young workers potentially suffering mental breakdowns due to the massive amount of stress they have encountered in their short lives.

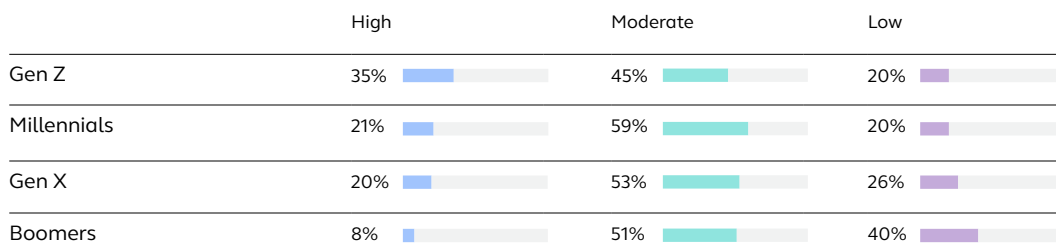
**My stress level is usually:**

**By gender**



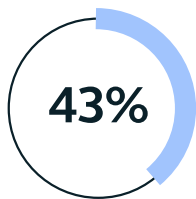
Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

**By generation**

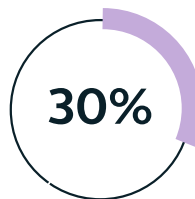


Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

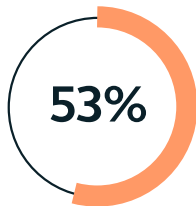
Even more importantly to employers, 75% report impacts to their daily lives due to job-related stress. Across generations, employees report a number of harmful impacts from the job-related stress they are experiencing:



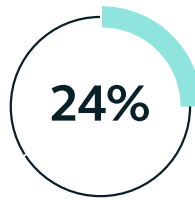
low morale



poor nutrition



inability to sleep



missed work

Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study



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## Why employers need to be concerned

It's not a leap to say that poor sleep, low morale, poor eating and missed work is going to take a toll on productivity, engagement and retention. Absenteeism due to stress alone would mean a hit to the bottom line.

Perhaps most concerning, a growing number of employees feel their stress is out of control. Just 43% of workers say they have the ability to control their stress, down five points in just one year. Even fewer Gen Z workers (31%) feel in control of their stress.<sup>xxii</sup> Considering that younger workers are disproportionately impacted by high stress, companies risk losing their future workforce if they don't help employees manage their stress.

Left unchecked, stress leads to burnout, which the World Health Organization (WHO) has branded an “occupational phenomenon.” Classified as a syndrome resulting from “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed,” burnout is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job/feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- Reduced professional efficacy<sup>xxiii</sup>

By all accounts, burnout is rampant – and on the rise. According to our 2023 Mindset Study, 46% of employees have suffered symptoms of burnout, up 5% from 2022. In the workplace — virtual or brick and mortar — burnout can be catastrophic to employee wellbeing and workplace performance.

With that many employees reaching the breaking point, it comes as no surprise that just over one-third (34%) dread going to work or starting their workday. Nearly one-third (31%) of high stress workers say they are actively looking for a new job, compared with 11% of those reporting low levels of stress. All of this leads to a challenge for employers in managing, keeping and motivating their workforces.

## Helping employees gain control over stress

When stress levels are low, employees are more engaged; creativity and innovation soars; and productivity skyrockets. For companies seeking to retain valued workers and grow the bottom line, helping employees get a handle on their stress clearly should be a priority.

As workers struggle to get their stress under control and improve their overall mental and emotional wellbeing, they are looking to their employers to provide the support and resources they need. Half of employees would like to receive more time off to address mental wellbeing, while 39% wish their employer had more mental health resources available. Just under half (49%) consider work-life balance to be an important contributor to good mental health.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Despite increased investments in mental health support during the pandemic, there appears to be less talk and less action around mental health as the lockdowns become a distant memory. The number of employees saying their employer has made changes to the work environment to better support mental and emotional health fell to 36% from 40% just last year.

### My employer has made changes to the work environment to better support mental and emotional health.



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study



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Employers are also apparently pulling back on the number and/or frequency of communications about mental and emotional health. That could explain why just 41% feel they can speak openly at work about their mental and emotional health challenges without fear of consequences.

**My employer has actively communicated more about mental and emotional health in the past year.**



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

**I feel like I can speak openly at work about mental and emotional health challenges I may be facing without fear of consequences.**



Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

Erasing the stigma around mental health and making stress an acceptable workplace topic may encourage people to reach out when they are feeling overwhelmed. Less than half of workers (47%) have taken the initiative and opened a dialogue with their boss. Of those, however, more than three-quarters (77%) are satisfied with their supervisor’s handling of the conversation and 75% say their manager provided support or solutions to help address their job-related stress.<sup>xxv</sup>

Employers should endeavor to create a culture of openness and acceptance regarding mental health challenges and offer guidelines on how supervisors — and colleagues — can respond empathetically to employees discussing their mental health concerns.



While availability of mental health-related programs like caregiver support/resources, stress management, sleep improvement and mental/emotional health apps remains low, such resources prove extremely popular with employees when their employer invests in them.

### Availability

	2023 U.S.	2022 U.S.
Mental and emotional health apps	24%	17%
Telephonic, virtual or online visit with a mental health professional	23%	19%
Stress management program	19%	16%
Caregiver support/resources	17%	11%
Parental support	16%	11%
Sleep improvement program or resources	12%	10%

### Value

	2023 U.S.	2022 U.S.
Mental and emotional health apps	82%	88%
Telephonic, virtual or online visit with a mental health professional	81%	94%
Stress management program	84%	93%
Caregiver support/resources	83%	82%
Parental support	75%	88%
Sleep improvement program or resources	87%	88%

Source: 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study

Clearly, employees need help managing their stress, dealing with anxiety and depression, and coping with mental health issues that are plaguing them or one of their family members. It's incumbent upon their employer to take an active role in providing them with support and resources to improve their mental and emotional wellbeing so they can live their best lives at work and at home.

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## How Alight can help

At Alight, we believe employers have no higher calling than to care for the wellbeing of workers and their families. In everything we do, we seek to improve employee wellbeing across all four pillars — healthy mind, healthy body, healthy wallet and healthy life, grounded in inclusion — so that all employees can live their best lives at work and at home.

We're leading the wellbeing revolution with Alight Worklife®, a high-tech platform with a human touch, delivering integrated wellbeing solutions and driving better outcomes for organizations and individuals. The Alight Worklife platform seamlessly integrates with our digitally enabled and data-driven employee wellbeing solutions, including several Healthy Mind resources:

- 1 Alight Well** is a wellbeing platform that engages employees across multiple dimensions of wellbeing through team and individual challenges, incentives, digital therapeutics, gamification and emotional wellbeing activities like daily mediation, setting reading goals, boosting vocabulary or setting daily gratitude. Employees also may connect with other resources for additional live coaching and therapeutic support, resulting in better health, a better sense of connectedness and overall improvements in engagement.
- 2 Alight Behavioral Health Guidance** breaks down the emotional and structural barriers to care and lowers the threshold for them to take that all-important first step. Every participant is matched with a registered nurse and has access to a range of clinicians: licensed mental health counselors, licensed social workers, psychiatric nurse practitioners, psychiatric advanced practice registered nurses and psychiatrists who provide a completely confidential, non-judgmental space to ask questions, be vulnerable, talk about their symptoms and understand the options for help.
- 3 Alight Engagement Services** uses multi-media campaigns and AI-based content to increase awareness, understanding and utilization of holistic and emotional wellbeing programs and partners, driving greater engagement in the moments that matter. Participants experience amped-up wellbeing messaging through creative, interactive channels, including a Tik Tok-style video channel, AI avatar options for video and personalized high-impact emails and podcasts, along with personalized enrollment guides and concierge guidance services to power more confident decisions.

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4 Through the **Alight Partner Network**, we combine content, solutions and delivery services to deliver high-value options that promote employee wellbeing. This enables us to offer access to trusted 360-degree mental health providers:

- **meQuilibrium** delivers a personalized, 24/7, clinically validated resilience/ emotional wellbeing and performance solution that effectively impacts stress, burnout, agility and engagement and optimizes potential for individuals, teams and organizations.
- **Vida** empowers people to prevent, manage and reverse chronic physical and behavioral health conditions through dedicated, one-on-one support from an integrated virtual care team, including a personal health coach, licensed therapist and care navigator. Together, they provide personalized, one-on-one support and motivation, helping employees set goals and address mental stressors, from everyday irritations and poor sleep to anxiety and depression.
- **Cariloop** helps working caregivers and their families plan for and manage the care of their loved ones throughout their caregiving journey. A dedicated Care Coach guides them to confidently design and manage their individualized care plan. Cariloop's human-powered Caregiver Support Platform is available to grandparents, parents, siblings, children, spouses, best friends, neighbors — anyone who is doing the caring.



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For the past several years, the workforce has been facing unrelenting waves of unprecedented challenges. The pressure they are feeling is causing a detrimental impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Coming out of the pandemic, employee perceptions of their mental wellbeing rebounded briefly, but have already begun backsliding. Burnout is a major concern among the workforce (particularly younger workers) companies are relying on to drive their future success. Left unchecked, burnout often leads to a lack of motivation, reduction in productivity, poor performance, increased absenteeism and even “presenteeism,” where staff physically come to work but are not fully functioning.

If employers ever needed a call to action, this is it. Their people need help with their mental and emotional wellbeing and it’s incumbent upon them to erase the stigma and create a culture where people feel comfortable discussing their mental health challenges. By providing employees with robust tools and resources, employers empower them to take charge of their mental health and improve their overall wellbeing.

**We are experiencing a mental wellbeing crisis. Employees are struggling. Alight can help.**

## About Alight

Alight is a leading cloud-based human capital technology and services provider that powers confident health, wealth and wellbeing decisions for 36 million people and dependents. Our Alight Worklife® platform combines data and analytics with a simple, seamless user experience. Supported by our global delivery capabilities, Alight Worklife is transforming the employee experience for people around the world. With personalized, data-driven health, wealth, pay and wellbeing insights, Alight brings people the security of better outcomes and peace of mind throughout life’s big moments and most important decisions. Learn how Alight unlocks growth for organizations of all sizes at [alight.com](https://alight.com).

**Powering confident decisions, for life.**

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- <sup>i</sup> <https://www.benefitspro.com/2022/01/05/90-of-employers-say-theyre-investing-more-in-mental-health-programs/>
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/10/companies-are-pulling-back-on-much-needed-mental-health-benefits.html>
- <sup>iii</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>iv</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>v</sup> <https://joshbersin.com/just-released-research/healthy-organization-definitive-guide-to-wellbeing-2021/>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/349280/gallup-global-emotions-report.aspx>
- <sup>vii</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>viii</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://fortune.com/2022/06/14/workers-rebelling-against-return-to-work-policies/>
- <sup>x</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://layoffs.fyi/>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/07/even-as-layoffs-increase-employees-are-pushing-back-on-return-to-office-mandates.html>
- <sup>xiii</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xiv</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xv</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xvi</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xvii</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xviii</sup> <https://www.healthline.com/health/yerkes-dodson-law#>
- <sup>xix</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xx</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xxi</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xxii</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xxiii</sup> <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/physician-health/who-adds-burnout-icd-11-what-it-means-physicians#>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study
- <sup>xxv</sup> 2023 Alight International Workforce and Wellbeing Mindset Study