

# Work-related stress and mental health

**An extract from:**

The CIPD/Simplyhealth Health and  
Well-being at Work Report 2020



In partnership with

**CIPD**

# Key findings

**Some organisations are making more progress than others in tackling work-related stress and supporting good mental health.**

A third of those who report that stress-related absence has increased in their organisation are not taking any steps to address it, and respondents are still more likely to disagree than agree that managers have the skills and confidence required to manage mental health effectively.

These findings point to the need for employers to identify and manage the main psychological risks to people's health, and invest in the managers to support people's mental well-being on a day-to-day basis:

- **Nearly two-fifths** of respondents have seen an increase in stress-related absence over the last year, while **three-fifths** report an increase in common mental health conditions.
- Our data shows a gradual increase in the proportion of organisations that are taking steps to identify and reduce stress at work. In particular, **more organisations are training line managers to manage stress**.
- **More organisations are also taking steps to manage employee mental health**. In particular, more are increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce (70%, up from 31% in 2016) and training managers to support staff with mental ill health (51%, up from 22% in 2016).
- **Just half** of respondents believe their organisation's efforts to manage workplace stress are effective and just **under three-fifths** agree their organisation actively promotes good mental well-being.

# Causes of absence

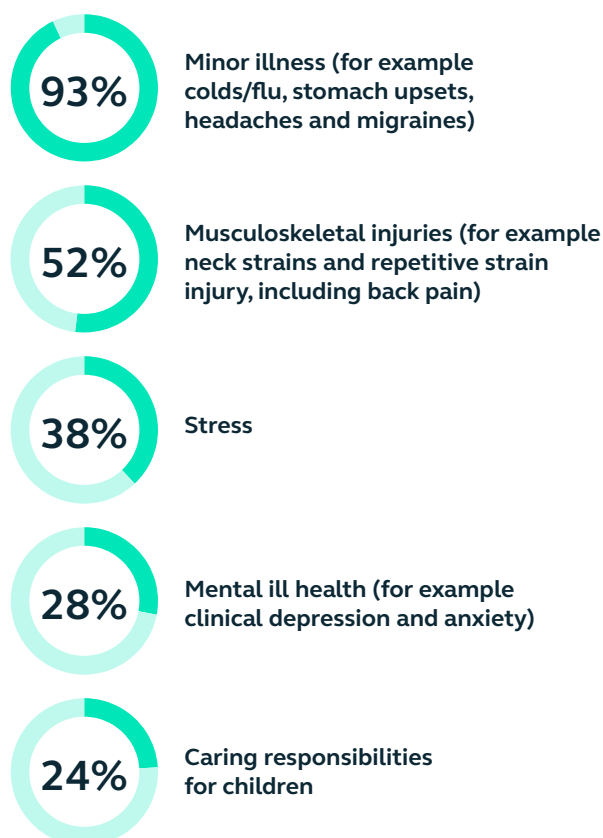
Mental ill health remains the most common cause of long-term absence, with nearly three-fifths (59%) of organisations citing this among their top three causes (Figure 1).

Stress continues to be one of the main causes of short- and long-term absence with 38% and 46% of respondents including it in their top three causes.

A minority of people professionals report their organisation had no stress-related absence in their organisation over the last 12 months, showing how prevalent work-related stress is in UK workplaces.

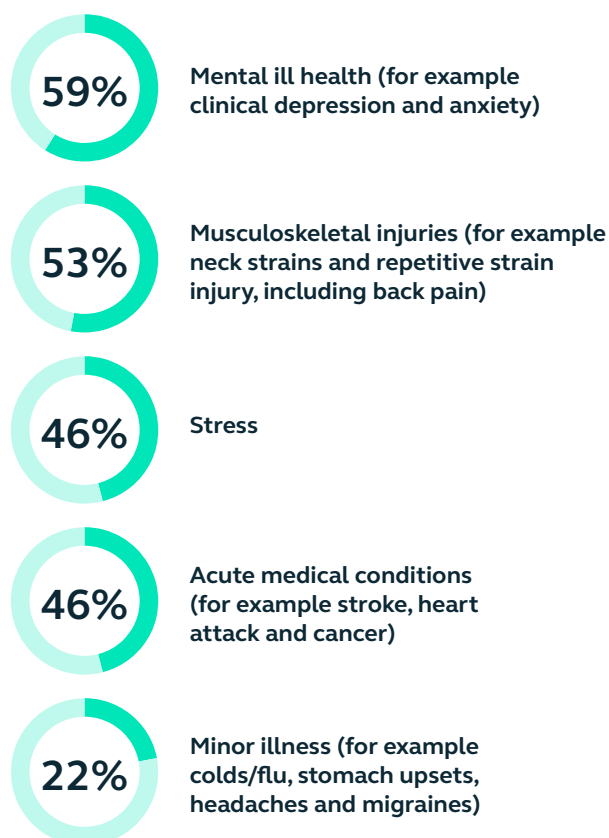
**Figure 1: The most common causes of absence (% of respondents who include in their top 3 causes)**

## In top 3 causes of short-term absence



Base: 689

## In top 3 causes of long-term absence

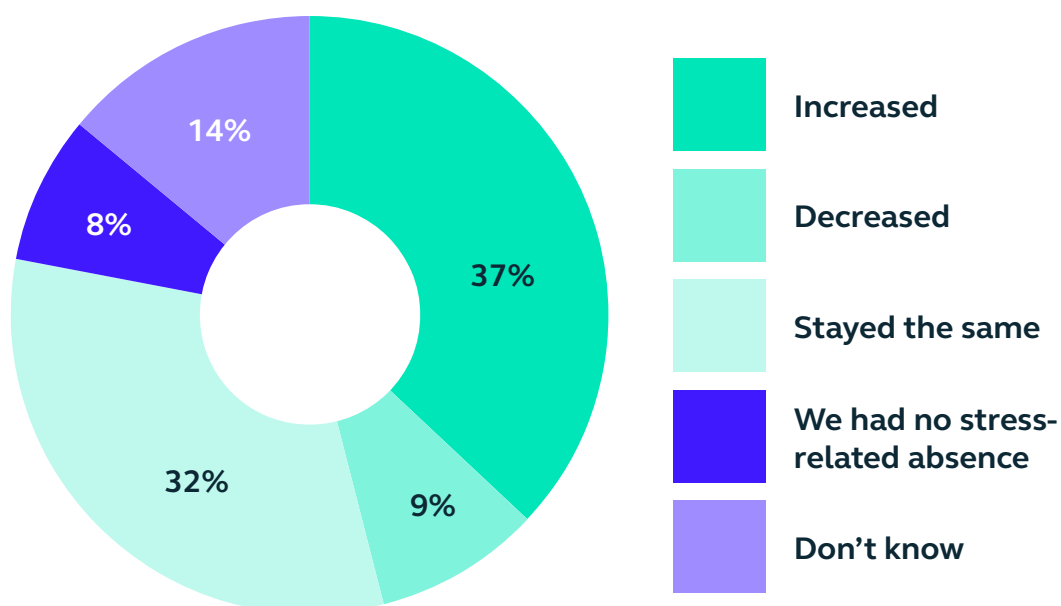


Base: 650

# Causes of absence

Despite a small decrease this year in the proportion of organisations including stress among their most common causes of long-term absence, nearly two-fifths of respondents report that stress-related absence has increased in their organisation over the last year (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Has stress-related absence increased or decreased in your organisation over the past year? (% of respondents)**



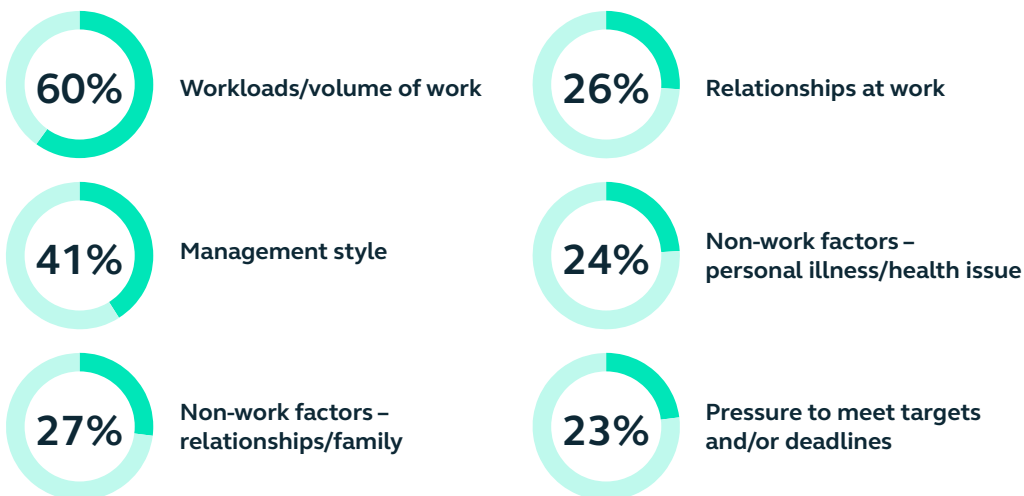
# Heavy workloads remain the main cause of stress

The two main causes of stress at work are similar to previous years. A heavy workload remains by far the most common cause (Figure 3), followed by ‘management style’.

Both these findings show the crucial role managers play in influencing people’s well-being. Managers are often trapped in the middle, under pressure to delegate due to operational targets. But if they don’t approach their people management role in the right way, build supportive relationships with team members, and ensure workloads are manageable, the effect can be very harmful in terms of employee stress.

Relationships, both outside and within the workplace, are also commonly blamed for stress at work. This is why employers need to include positive collective/social relationships and good people management as part of their holistic approach to well-being.

**Figure 3: The most common causes of stress at work (in top three causes, % of respondents)**



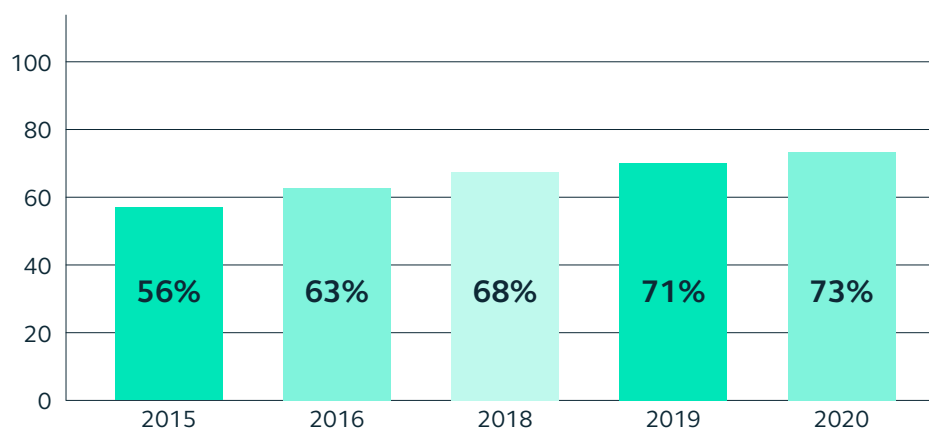
“We seem to accept that stress and exhaustion are the new normal – we shouldn’t. Reports show that the UK workforce are working some of the longest hours in Europe, but it’s not reaping any rewards in terms of health, quality of work and productivity.”  
**Richard Gillies, Chief Operating Officer, Simplyhealth**

# Organisations are taking steps to identify and reduce stress

Year on year, our findings show employee well-being is creeping up the corporate agenda and, in line with this, Figure 4 shows a gradual increase in the proportion of organisations that are taking steps to identify and reduce stress at work.

Despite this welcome trend, a third (33%) of those who report that stress-related absence has increased in their organisation over the past year are not taking any steps to address it. Organisations that have senior leaders with well-being on their agenda are more likely to be taking steps to identify and reduce stress<sup>1</sup>.

**Figure 4: Proportion of organisations that are taking steps to identify and reduce stress at work (% of respondents)**



Base: 704 (2020); 626 (2019); 614 (2018); 682 (2016); 513 (2015)



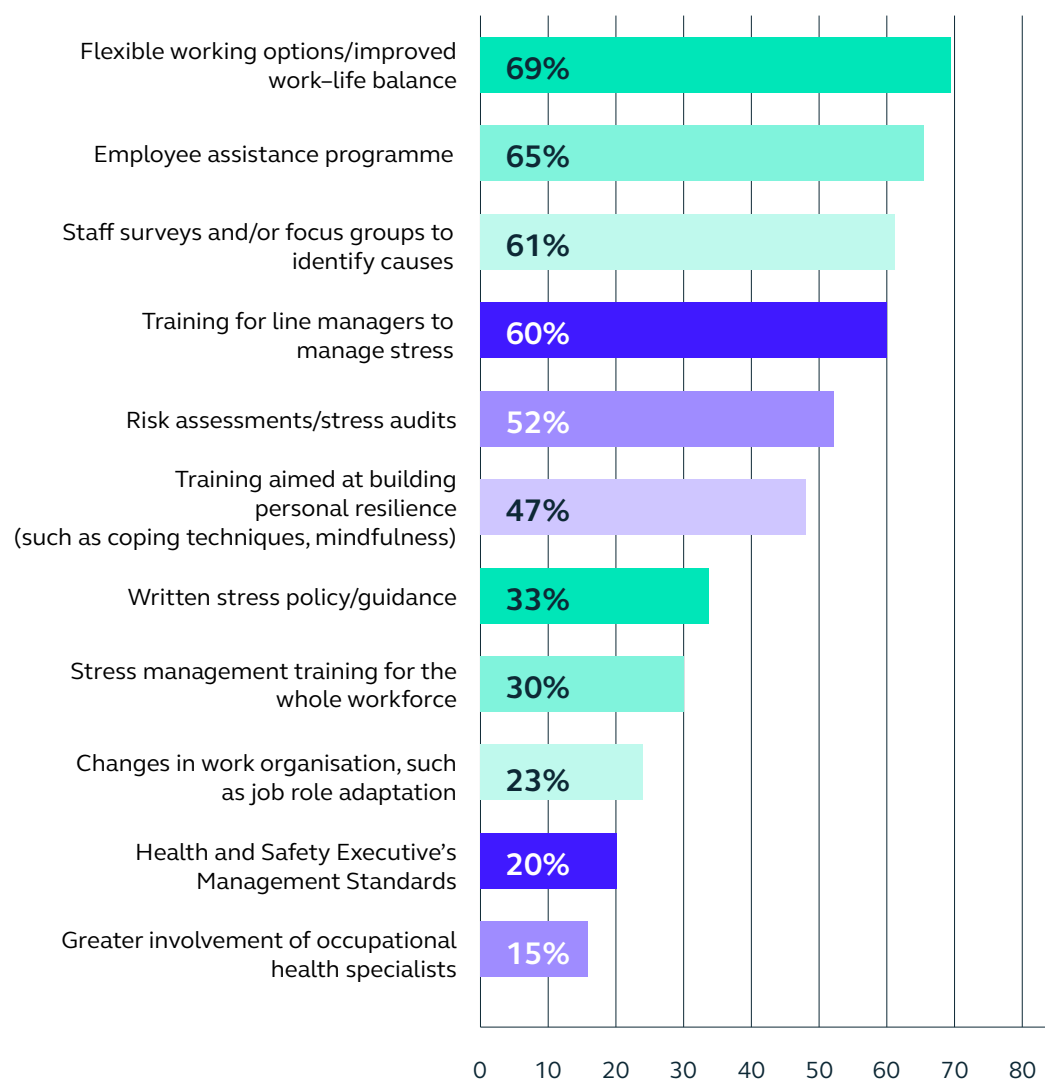
<sup>1</sup>rs =.50, p<.001, n=699.

# Methods used to identify and reduce stress

Organisations that attempt to identify and reduce stress do so using a range of methods (Figure 5). Flexible working options/improved work-life balance and employee assistance programmes remain the two most common methods used.

Just over three-fifths of organisations attempt to identify the causes of stress through staff surveys and/or focus groups and line manager training, while just over half conduct risk assessments/stress audits.

**Figure 5: Methods used to identify and reduce stress in the workplace (% of respondents)**



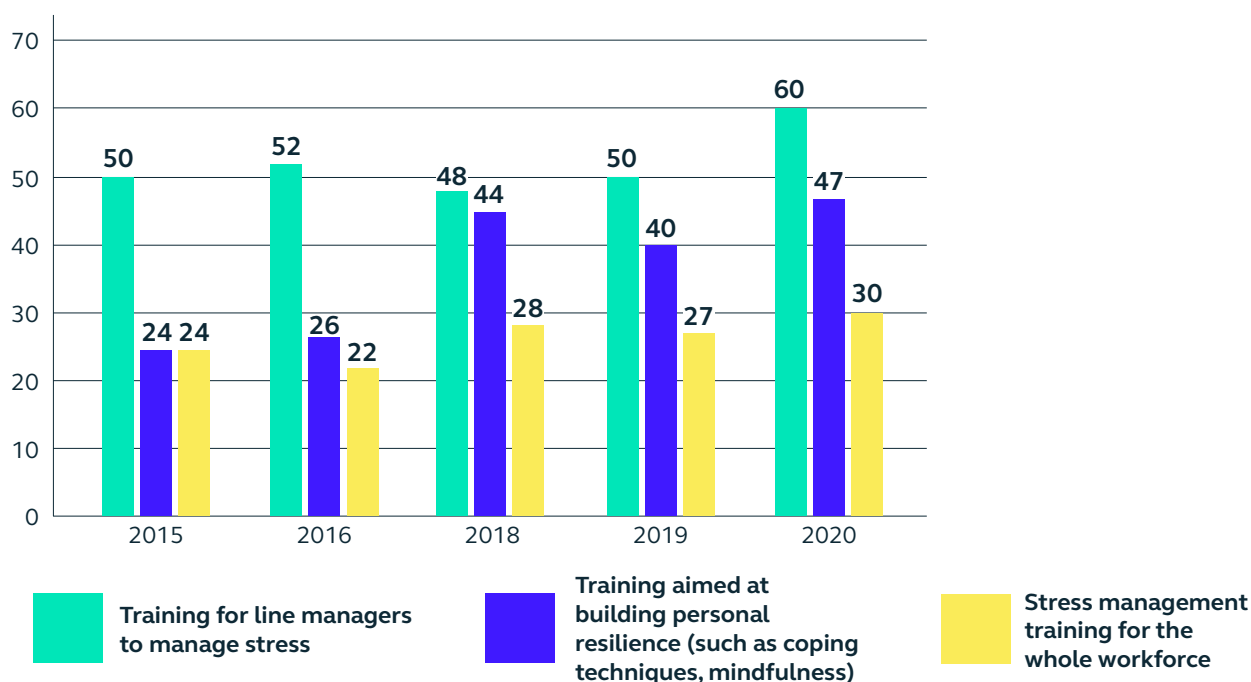
# Methods used to identify and reduce stress

It's disappointing that we have seen very little increase this year in the proportion of organisations taking a preventative approach to managing stress—for example, by carrying out stress risk assessments/audits. Last year, we expressed concern that under half (48%) of organisations adopted this approach and our current findings show the percentage doing so has crept up to just over half (52%). Implementing a stress risk assessment or audit can help organisations to identify the main risks to employees of work-related stress and put in place effective preventative steps.

The Health and Safety Executive has developed a range of practical tools and resources to support employers (see [Stress Risk Assessment](#))<sup>2</sup>, including the [Talking Toolkit](#)<sup>3</sup>. This guidance is designed to help managers start a conversation with their employees in identifying stressors and to help manage and prevent work-related stress. It's a simple, practical approach that enables employers, particularly SMEs, to begin the process of identifying and managing risks.

More organisations this year report they are attempting to address workplace stress through training provision, in particular through training line managers to manage stress (Figure 6). There has also been an increase in the proportion providing training aimed at building personal resilience and, to a lesser extent, providing stress management training for the whole workforce.

**Figure 6: Changes in methods used to identify and reduce stress (% of respondents)**



<sup>2</sup>HSE. [Stress risk assessment](#). Webpage. Bootle: Health and Safety Executive

<sup>3</sup>HSE. [Talking Toolkit](#). Bootle: Health and Safety Executive



# Senior leaders and line managers are key to effective stress management

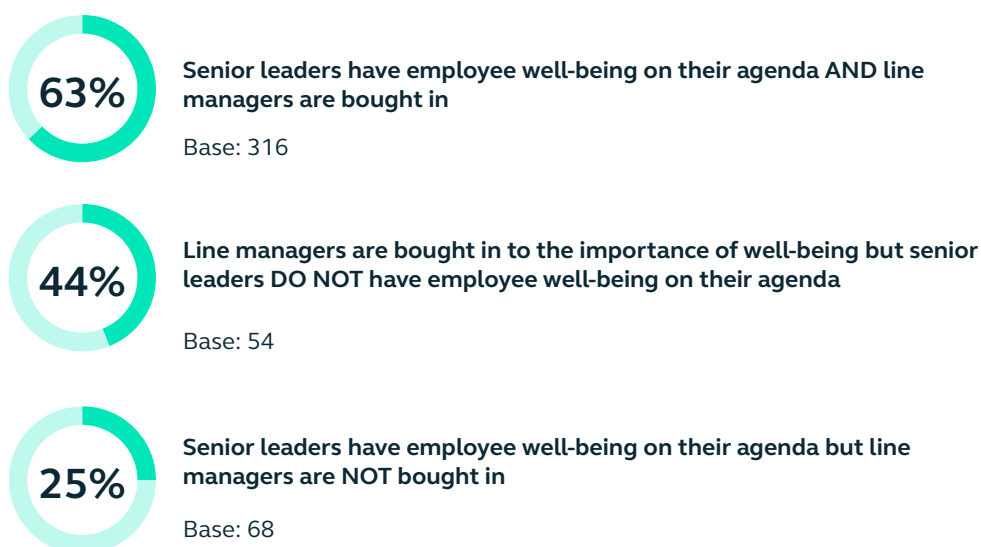
**51% of respondents from organisations that are taking steps to tackle workplace stress believe their organisation is effective at reducing workplace stress.**

One in seven (15%) disagree that their efforts are effective, while the rest neither agree nor disagree. This is a small improvement on last year's findings (where 46% of those taking steps agreed their organisation was effective, while 17% disagreed), perhaps reflecting the increased focus this year on training line managers and employees to manage stress.

Nevertheless, these figures highlight the challenges many organisations face in managing work-related stress effectively. They also suggest that many organisations are not taking the most effective steps to prevent and manage stress, such as basing their approach on preventing risk and having the right organisational building blocks in place to tackle the issue.

For example, our findings emphasise the importance of having line managers and senior leaders engaged in an organisation's efforts to manage stress. As noted above, organisations that have senior leaders on board are more likely to be taking steps to identify and reduce stress. Moreover, those taking steps are more likely to be effective if both senior leaders and line managers are on board (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Proportion who agree/strongly agree their organisation is effective at managing work-related stress (% of respondents in organisations that are taking steps to address stress)**



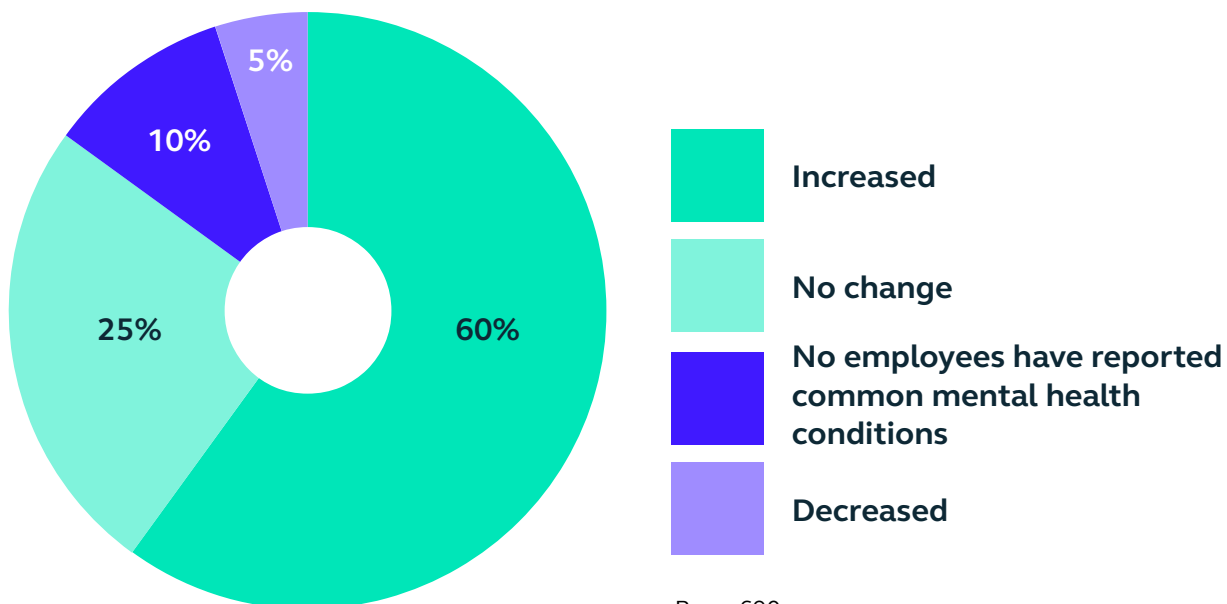
# Managing mental health

**Mental ill health remains the most common cause of long-term absence and is also among the top causes of short-term absence (see Figure 1).**

Overall, three-fifths of respondents report an increase in common mental health conditions (such as anxiety and depression) among employees over the past 12 months (Figure 8).

This compares with 58% in 2019, 55% in 2018 and 41% in 2016. Clearly, mental ill health is a significant and growing challenge for employers despite their increased focus in this area. Hopefully greater awareness in some organisations is contributing to a higher reporting level, but organisations still need to do more to target the right support to those who need it, and at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Figure 8: Change in the number of reported common mental health conditions among employees in the last 12 months (% of respondents)**



Base: 690



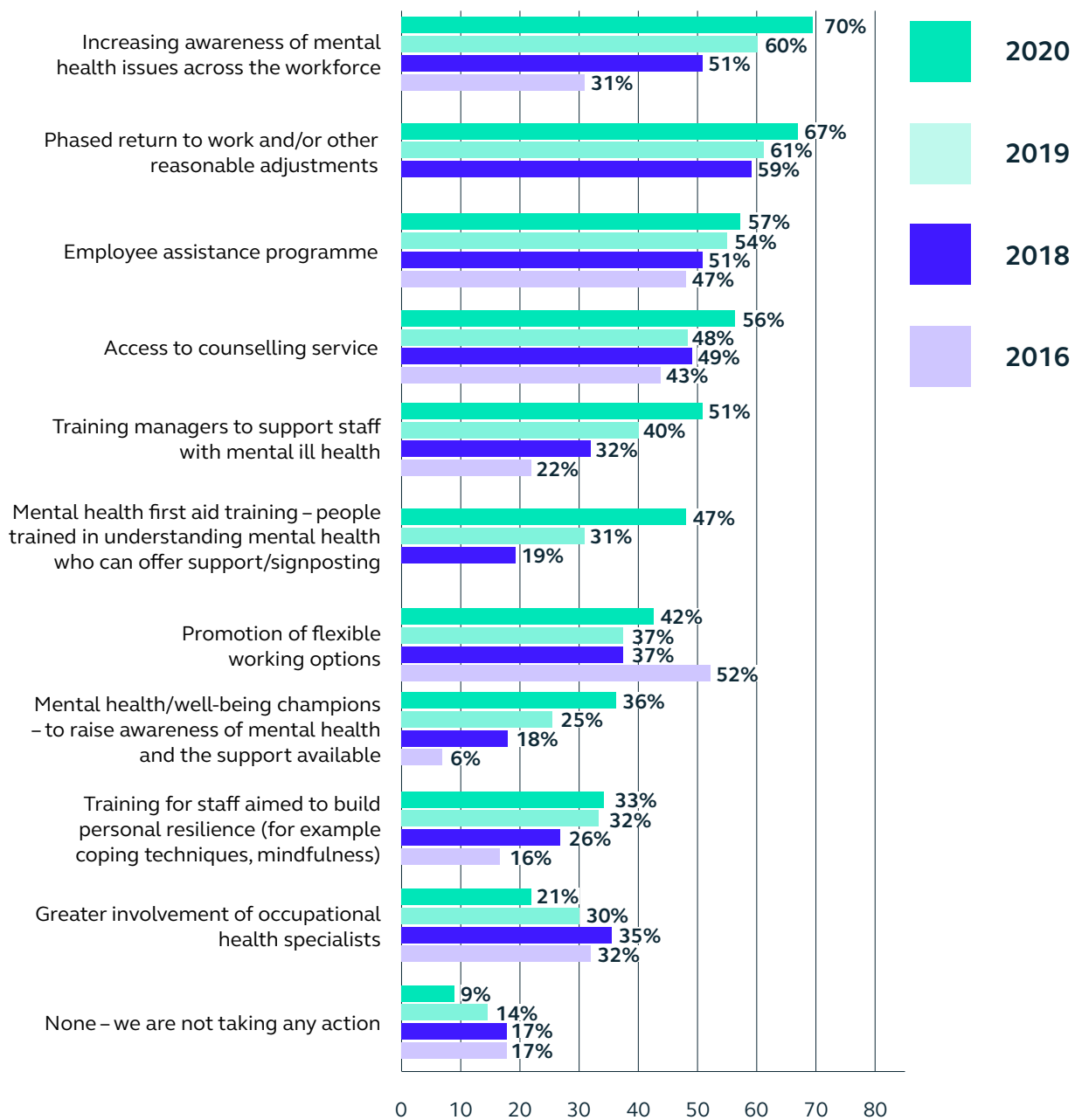
“The increase in poor mental well-being cases may partly be contributed to by greater willingness on the part of some people to talk about psychological ill health and seek support. Over the past few years our findings show that more employers are indeed taking mental health seriously and stepping up their efforts to increase awareness about it across their workforces.”

**Rachel Suff & Professor Sir Cary Cooper, CIPD**

# Managing mental health

Figure 9 shows that organisations are taking action to improve people's mental well-being through an increasing range of initiatives. In particular, there has been a dramatic rise in the proportion of organisations increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce, training managers to support staff with mental ill health, providing mental health first aid training and mental health/well-being champions.

**Figure 9: Actions taken to manage employee mental health at work (% of respondents)**

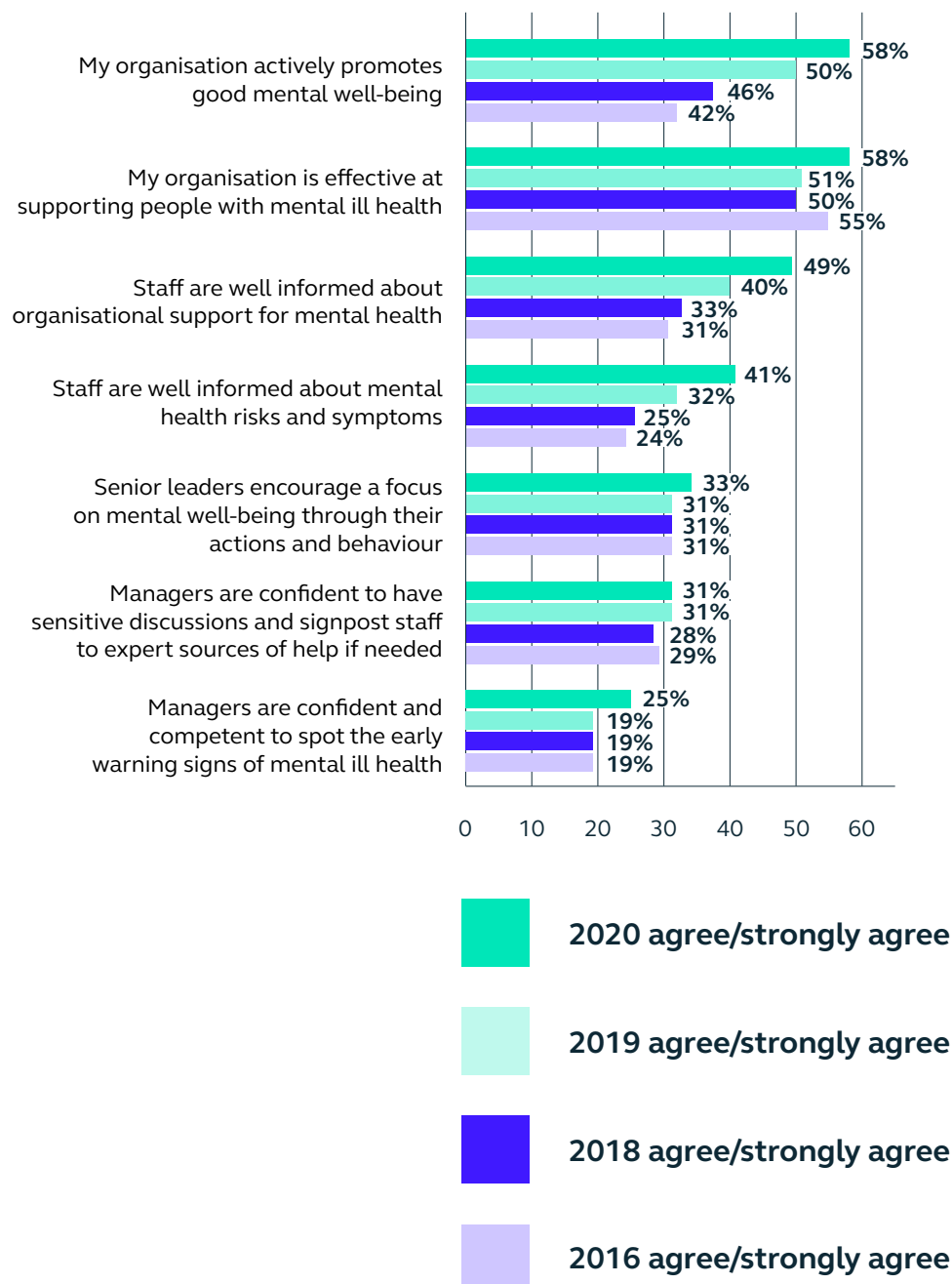


# Promoting good mental health

Figure 10 shows the increase, since 2016, in how positive respondents feel about their organisation's attempts to promote good mental well-being, and how well staff are informed about mental health issues and support.

There is also some indication that the increase in training for managers to support staff with mental ill health is beginning to pay off, with more organisations this year agreeing that managers are 'confident and competent to spot the early warning signs of mental ill health'.

**Figure 10: Effectiveness in promoting positive mental health (% of respondents)**



# Promoting good mental health

There has been no change since last year in the proportion of respondents reporting managers are 'confident to have sensitive discussions and signpost staff to expert sources of help if needed'. And respondents are still more likely to disagree than agree that managers have the skills and confidence required to manage mental health effectively.

Increasing responsibility is now placed on line managers to support people's mental wellbeing, but we are not seeing a big enough increase in the level of training and support they receive so they can rise to this challenge.

Organisations are also split on whether senior leaders encourage a focus on mental well-being through their actions and behaviour (33% agree that they do, while 38% disagree). Despite our positive findings that organisations are increasingly stepping up to manage and support mental health at work, it's clear that the effectiveness of their efforts to date is mixed and that most would benefit from a more holistic approach.

To be effective, we need leaders who lead on this agenda, as their actions will send a powerful message to all employees – for example, that it's okay to talk about mental health, and that the organisation will support you if you experience mental ill health. Senior people are also important role models and should live the positive values of the organisation; for example, by treating everyone with dignity and respect and not practising unhealthy working practices like working long hours, 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism', which can all adversely affect well-being.



"Knowing that poor mental health is the biggest cause of long-term absence at work, our aim at Simplyhealth is to nurture a culture of well-being from the inside out. For example, we have a trained group of Mental Health First Aiders who are actively supporting our colleagues."

**Richard Gillies, Chief Operating Officer, Simplyhealth**



# Get more valuable insights with the full report

With analysis based on responses from over 1,000 organisations, representing more than 4.5 million employees, the report offers a clear picture of the state of workplace well-being in the UK – a real must-have for every HR professional's toolkit.



## The report highlights:

- Key findings and what the findings mean for HR
- Employee health and well-being
- Causes of, and ways to manage, absence
- Evaluating health and well-being activity
- 'Presenteeism' and 'Leaveism'
- Work-related stress and mental health
- Well-being benefits on offer by sector
- And more...



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