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2020 AI@Work Study: Volume Two

Mental Health at Work Requires Attention, Nuance, and Swift Action

The COVID-19 global pandemic is changing the world as we know it. It's changing the conversations we have around work, social interactions, community safety, personal responsibility, and obligations to others. It's also changing the conversations around mental health in the workplace. Once a topic relegated to furtive whispers at lunch or around the water cooler with coworkers, mental health at work is now coming to the forefront as workers seek help for rising stress and anxiety.

Mental health issues do not discriminate, and no one is immune. Stress, anxiety, and uncertainty affect the lives of workers worldwide, regardless of where they live, the work they do, or the generation they were born in. But it doesn't affect each of these workers the same way. As such, there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution to the growing mental health crisis. Organizations should seek to understand what workers are experiencing to help create employee assistance programs that best meet their needs.

To better understand how the pandemic affects the mental health of workers around the world, we surveyed 12,347 people across 11 countries, and our initial findings are enumerated in our first report, **As Uncertainty Remains, Anxiety and Stress Reach a Tipping Point at Work.** That report revealed the significant extent to which mental health is suffering around the world. Now we are delving deeper to learn how individuals were affected, exploring how the pandemic has affected different jobs, generations, and geographies worldwide.

We surveyed
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It's lonely at the top:
C-suite and HR leaders see the
biggest challenges in remote work

While employees at every level of the organizational structure have suffered mental health issues since the rise of the pandemic, executives have struggled the most to adapt to remote work. While 45% of employees said that their mental health has suffered during the pandemic, 53% of C-level executives and 52% of HR leaders said that they struggle with ongoing mental health issues in the workplace. Leading dispersed teams, especially teams that are not used to working remotely, requires a different skill set than in-person leadership. This change may have caused some of the distress executives experienced.

There's good reason to believe that going virtual contributed to the worsening of executives' mental health. Many leadership roles rely on in-person relationships to influence their reports and the direction of the organization overall. Shifting to a completely remote work environment can be incredibly stressful for these individuals. It's not surprising, then, that 85% of executives and 87% of HR leaders reported having difficulty making the switch from in-person to remote work as opposed to 77% of individual contributors.

Some of the stress of going virtual may be because executives had a more difficult time wrangling the technology required to be successful at home. Thirty-six percent said they had difficulty learning the new technologies needed to work remotely, while only 28% of individual contributors felt the same way.

However, once they made the adjustments, executives and HR leaders found more benefits in remote work than their employee counterparts. Forty-four percent of executives and 46% of HR leaders reported that the pandemic made them more productive than before. In contrast, only 35% of individual contributors felt more productive than before.

Perhaps this newfound productivity can be attributed to the fact that executives said they have more time to get things done since transitioning to remote work. Thirty-two percent of executives and 35% of HR leaders said their time has been freed up to accomplish more. Interestingly, only 22% of employees felt that they have more time than they did pre-pandemic.

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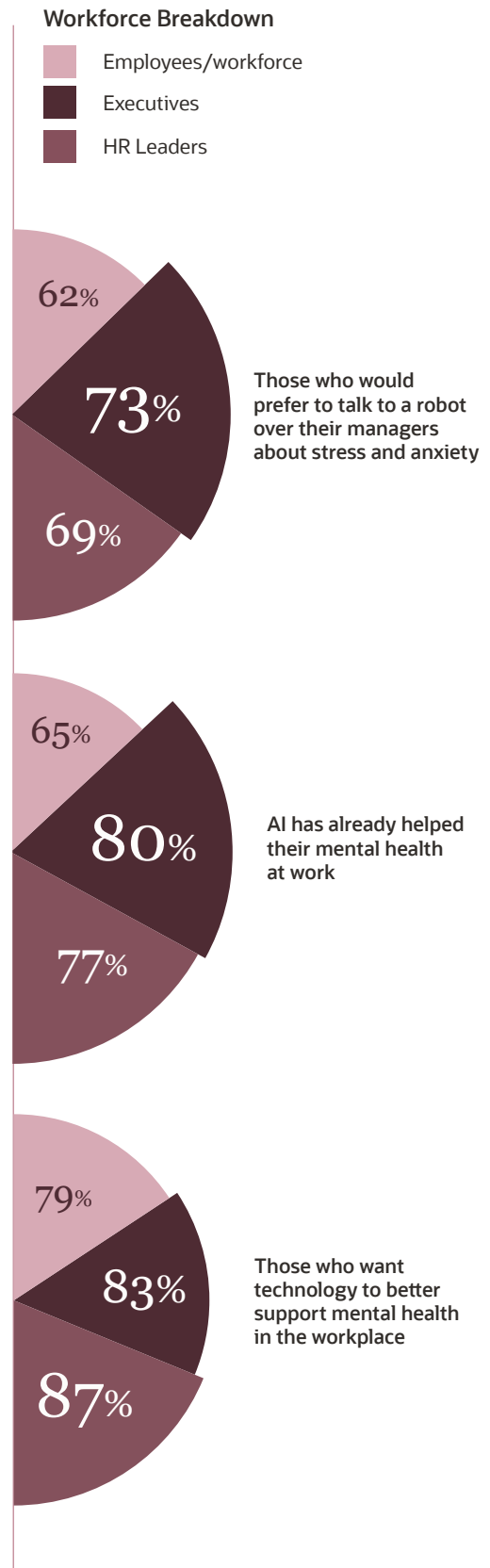
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C-Level executives are the most open to mental health support from AI

Although C-level executives struggled more with their mental health, they are also the most open to getting support from AI. Globally, 62% of the workforce reported that they would prefer to speak to a robot than their manager about mental health. However, that number shoots up for executives and HR leaders (73% and 69%, respectively.) Their enthusiasm for AI support isn't surprising when you consider that 80% of executives and 77% of HR leaders said that AI has already helped their mental health at work. Comparatively, only 65% of employees reported that AI has been helpful in this regard.

However, there may be more to this story. Those in executive positions may be more likely to feel that disclosing mental health issues can be seen as weakness and therefore detrimental to their leadership. To combat this, companies need to normalize asking for help across all levels.

Regardless of role within the company, one thing is clear: Everybody wants help. HR leaders are the most eager for employer-provided technology to support mental health. In fact, 87% would advocate for it. Similarly, 83% of executives also want technology to better support mental health in the workplace, whereas 79% of employees want the same. Interestingly, across all organization levels, 75% of people believe their companies should do more to protect the mental health of their workforce.

Workforce Breakdown

- Employees/workforce
- Executives
- HR Leaders

62% **73%** **69%**

Those who would prefer to talk to a robot over their managers about stress and anxiety

65% **80%** **77%**

AI has already helped their mental health at work

79% **83%** **87%**

Those who want technology to better support mental health in the workplace

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Gen Z and Millennials are hustling harder, suffering more, and seeking support

Workers of all stripes have been negatively affected by the global pandemic, but certain age groups have fared better than others. Our research found that the pandemic affected the youngest workers the most and the oldest workers least. Generation Z (Gen Z) reported the highest mental stress rates, with 89% saying the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health, followed closely by 83% of Millennials. In contrast, only 62% of Baby Boomers said that the pandemic had a noticeable, negative effect on their mental health.

Part of the reason for this deteriorating mental health may be because of overwork. It's understandable that when home and office become one, it can be difficult for workers to establish healthy boundaries between the two. Moreover, it appears that younger workers struggled more with setting those boundaries than their more experienced counterparts. Sixty-six percent of Gen Z and 59% of Millennial workers reported working more hours per week than they did before the pandemic. Comparatively, 48% of Generation X (Gen X) and only 31% of Baby Boomers reported working more hours.

Longer work hours might seem productive for the company, but they take their toll on individual workers. Most workers reported that these longer working hours contributed to higher rates of burnout. 33% of Gen Z and 30% of Millennials reported being burned out because of the pandemic. Older workers seemed to fare better, with only 21% of Gen X and 13% of Baby Boomers reporting becoming burned out.

Our research found that many people had difficulty disconnecting from work even after hours, and this inability to disconnect may have affected younger workers more than their older counterparts. It seems to have affected their enjoyment of home life, too. Ninety-four percent of Gen Z workers and 89% of Millennials said their mental health issues at work affected their home life. Only 69% of Baby Boomers agreed with that sentiment.

> Gen Z reported the highest mental stress rates, with 89% saying the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health, followed closely by 83% of Millennials

Reported working more hours per week than they did before the pandemic

66% Gen Z

59% Millennials

48% Gen X

31% Baby Boomers

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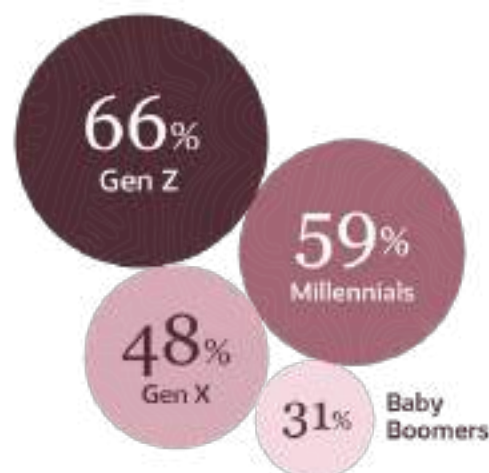
Younger generations are most open to mental health support from AI

While technology may have left the younger generations feeling "always on," they are not turned off by it. In fact, technology is their preferred method for getting mental health support. Both Gen Z and Millennials are more likely than their older counterparts to turn to robots over people for mental health support. Eighty-four percent of Gen Z and 77% of Millennials said they prefer to talk to a robot over their managers about stress and anxiety at work. This number drops to 62% for Gen X and 41% for Baby Boomers. In addition, 93% of Gen Z and 90% of Millennials want their employers to provide technology solutions to support their mental health. Eighty percent of Gen X and 62% of Baby Boomers want the same.

It's not surprising that so many from the younger generations are accustomed to technology, as many of them grew up with it. And not only are they comfortable with it, they've already experienced the benefits of working with AI. The youngest workers said that AI has already helped their mental health in the workplace. Ninety percent of Gen Z say that AI has been a boon to mental health at work compared to only 52% of Baby Boomers.

84% of Gen Z and 77% of Millennials said they prefer to talk to a robot over their managers about stress and anxiety at work

No two countries are experiencing the pandemic in the same way

The global mental health crisis has materialized in different ways across the world. India appears the hardest hit, while Italy seems to have fared the best. Interestingly, in the countries where workers were hit the hardest, employees were most open to welcoming AI support for mental health.

While no two countries had identical experiences, perhaps the greatest differences can be seen between India and Italy. Below, we've highlighted some key differences between these two countries. Analyzing their stories can give us the broadest view of how mental health affects workers worldwide and how companies might tackle the issue.

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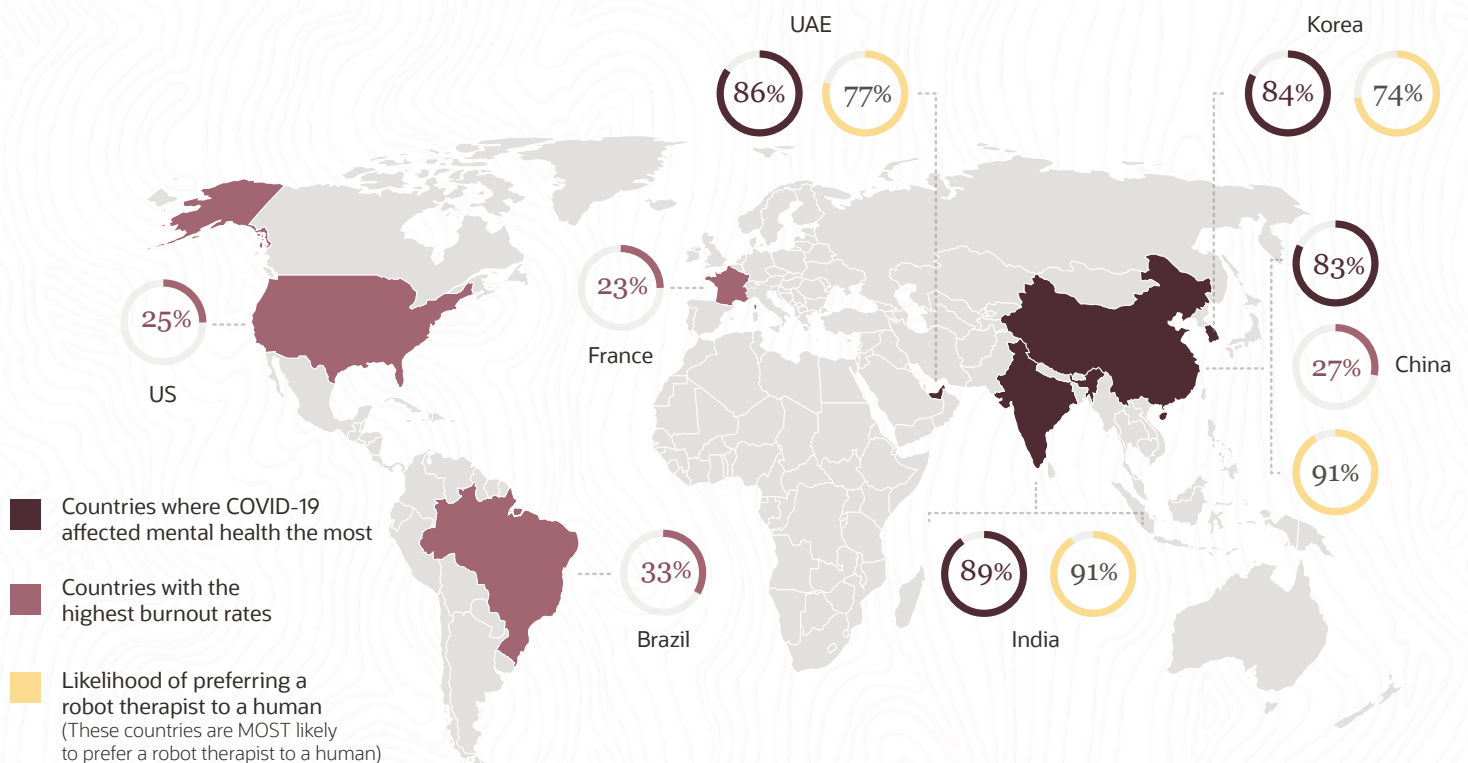# Workers in India are struggling the most

India seemed to suffer the worst mental health crisis of the countries we surveyed. Eighty-nine percent of Indian workers said the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health. India is followed closely by 86% of workers in the UAE, 83% of Chinese workers, and 81% of American workers, all of whom said the pandemic has left them in a worse mental state than before.
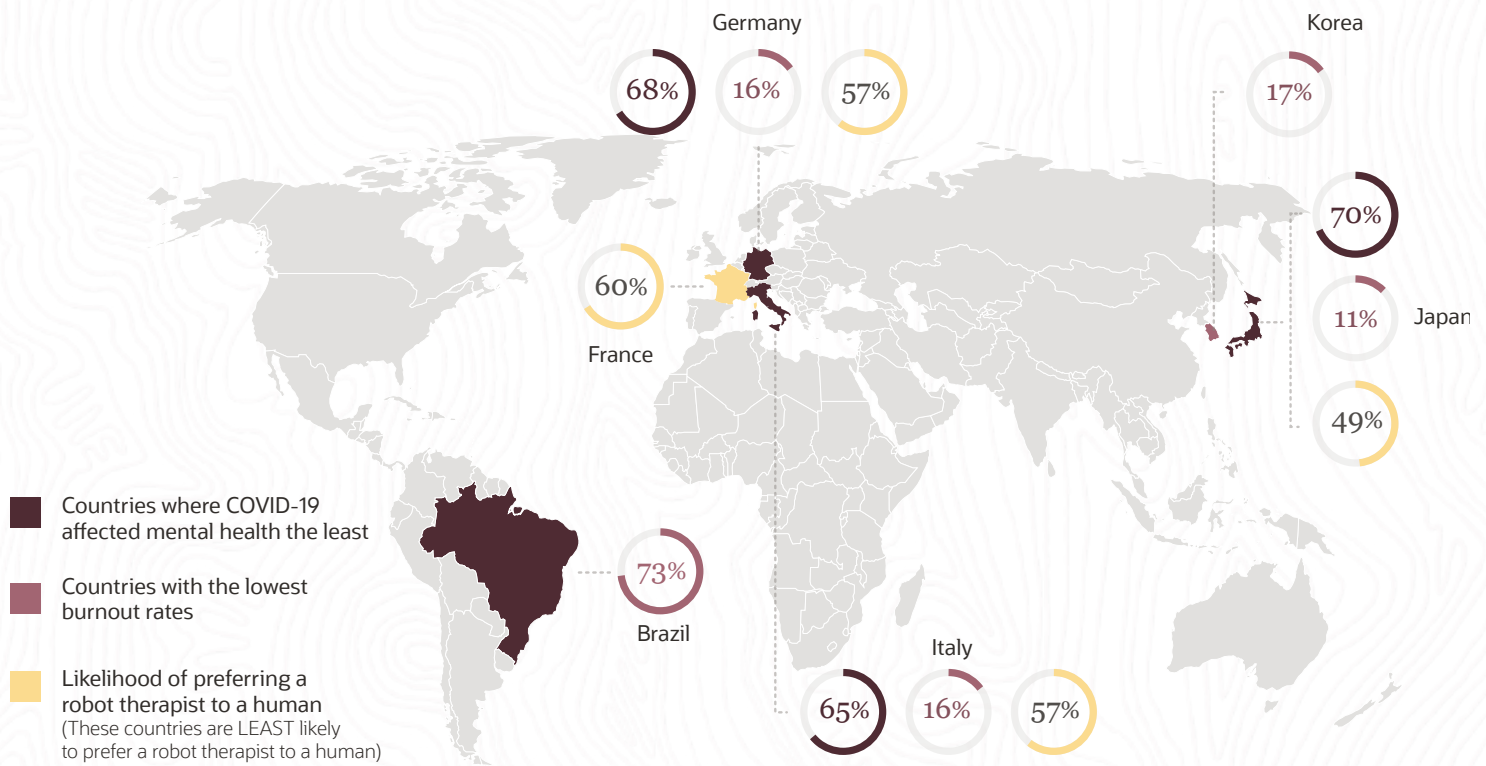
In India, mental health issues resulting from the pandemic affected workers both at work and at home. Ninety-three percent of workers in India said that deteriorating mental health is interfering with their home life. For Indian workers, work-related stress, anxiety, and depression resulted in suffering family relationships, more arguments with a partner or spouse, and disconnection from their children. To make matters worse, Indian workers were the most likely of any country to say that work-related stress caused them to isolate themselves from their friends—a situation that exacerbates depression.

It's probably not surprising, then, that India also struggled with high burnout rates. With 32% of Indian workers saying the pandemic has left them feeling burned out, only Chinese workers had it worse, with 43% of Chinese workers reporting similar burnout.

Struggles with technology may have contributed to high burnout and anxiety levels. India had the highest number of workers reporting that they struggled with technology during the pandemic. Ninety-six percent of Indian workers experienced difficulty with technology while working remotely. This is a stark contrast to the least affected country, Japan, where 71% of workers struggled with technological solutions.

Interestingly, of all the countries surveyed, Indian workers were among the most likely to prefer to talk to a robot than their managers about work stress and anxiety. And it's not a narrow majority—a whopping 91% of both Indian and Chinese workers would prefer a robot therapist.
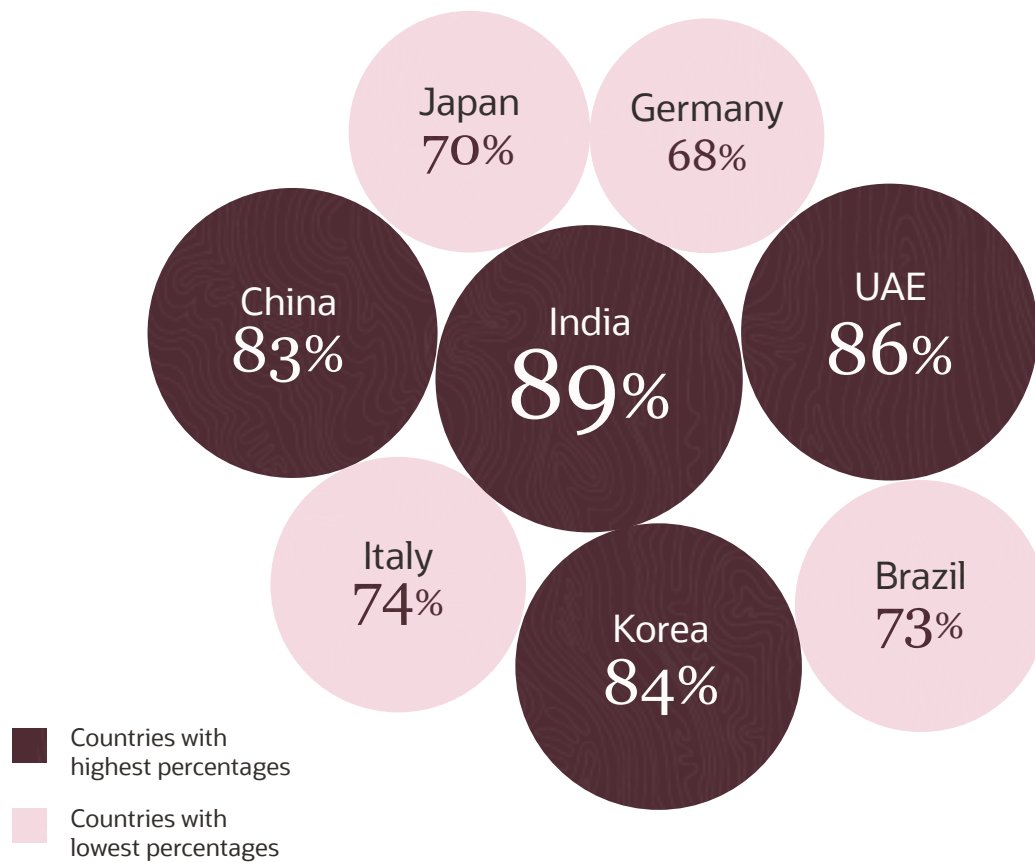

UAE 86% 77%

Korea 84% 74%

France 23%

US 25%

China 83% 27%

91%

Brazil 33%

India 89% 91%

Countries where COVID-19 affected mental health the most

Countries with the highest burnout rates

Likelihood of preferring a robot therapist to a human
(These countries are MOST likely to prefer a robot therapist to a human)

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Legend:

Countries where COVID-19 affected mental health the least

Countries with the lowest burnout rates

Likelihood of preferring a robot therapist to a human
(These countries are LEAST likely to prefer a robot therapist to a human)

Germany: 68% 16% 57%

Korea: 17%

Japan: 70% 11% 49%

France: 60%

Brazil: 73%

Italy: 65% 16% 57%

Workers in Italy are adapting the best

While India seems to be having the most challenging time weathering the pandemic, workers in Italy are the least affected. Sixty-five percent of Italian workers said the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health. Seventy-eight percent of workers across the globe reported adverse effects on their mental health, so this number is unexpectedly low.

Italian workers have a low likelihood of saying that deteriorating mental health affected their home life. In fact, 22% of Italian workers said mental health issues at work don't affect home life at all. Only Japan and Germany (24% and 23% respectively) fared better. Italian workers were the least likely to experience loneliness, isolation, and reduced happiness at home. And it's not just home life that has fared better. Italians also reported the lowest incidences of mental health issues affecting their physical health—a low 27%. Compare this to Brazil, for whom 46% of the workforce said their physical health has been affected—the highest of countries we surveyed.
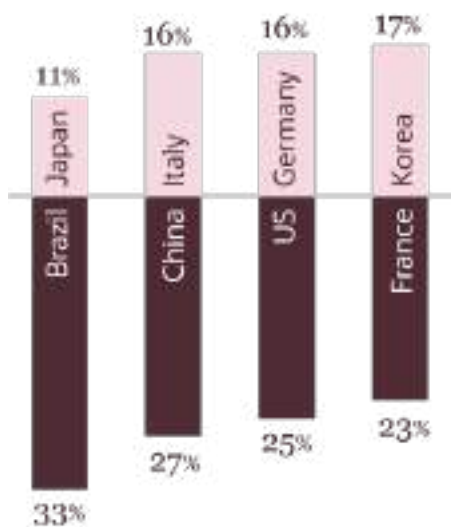
Compared with the rest of the world, Italy seems to be handling the pandemic more evenhandedly, resulting in lower cases of burnout. Only 16% of Italian workers reported feeling burned out because of pandemic overwork. They shared this distinction with Germany, who also reported 16%. The only country reporting less burnout was Japan at 11%.

Italian workers are also the most likely group to prefer a human to a robot therapist. Twenty-eight percent of Italians said they prefer a human, claiming they didn't believe that AI could provide appropriate levels of empathy. But while these workers were least likely to prefer a robot, they also don't think AI has hurt their mental health at work. Forty-six percent of Italian workers said AI hasn't hurt them, a sharp contrast to India, where only 15% of workers say AI hasn't hurt their mental health at work.
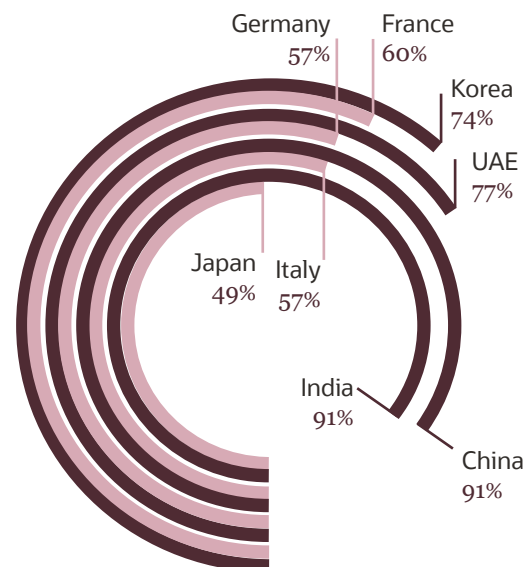
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Countries where COVID-19 has affected mental health

Japan
70%

Germany
68%

China
83%

India
89%

UAE
86%

Italy
74%

Korea
84%

Brazil
73%

Countries with highest percentages

Countries with lowest percentages

Burnout rates by country

11% Japan
16% Italy
16% Germany
17% Korea

Brazil
China
US
France

33%
27%
25%
23%

Likelihood of preferring a robot therapist to a human

Germany
57%

France
60%

Korea
74%

UAE
77%

Japan
49%

Italy
57%

India
91%

China
91%

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Despite demographic differences, people from all walks of life want help

While our survey highlighted some interesting disparities between seniority levels, generations, and geographies, the similarities outshine the differences. People everywhere are hurting, and they want their employers to help.

Globally, 78% of workers said the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health. We've seen that stress and anxiety at work have affected family relationships and physical health. As workers try to rise to new challenges put forth by the global crisis, they've become more fragile and more vulnerable. And if workers are to continue being productive, they need more support.

Seventy-six percent of workers said their companies should do more to support their mental health, but as we've seen, there's no one-size-fits-all approach, as every experience is unique. Different people with different needs require different kinds of help. Organizations must consider nuanced approaches that can be tailored to specific needs. Just as physical wellness programs vary for different body types, activity levels, overall health and more, mental health programs require the same elasticity.

Of course, getting started with a well-rounded mental health program isn't simple or quick. Each organization needs to evaluate their priorities and resources before a long-term plan can be laid forth. Mental health programs need to be flexible enough to accommodate both workers who prefer human therapists and those who don't, and those in immediate crisis as well as those requiring less-urgent but necessary care. Importantly, organizations need to normalize asking for help across all seniority levels and ensure help is easily accessible.

Although a successful mental health program can't be created overnight, technology can provide a good start, and workers welcome the assistance. Eighty-three percent of works globally said they would like their employers to provide technology options to support workers mental health.

As the workplace continues to evolve, we will see new, innovative approaches to mental health. But regardless of what tack companies decide to take, they need to be mindful not just of similarities between workers but also their differences. Providing an array of support through human interaction and technology should help workers all over the globe reduce stress and anxiety at work and ultimately create a more positive work culture for all.

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