

What are young members going through?

Mental health has always been an important issue for UNISON's young members, so in May 2022 we surveyed young members to get a clearer picture of what their experiences are and how these are related to their working conditions.

The response was shocking. 81% of young members told us they had experienced a mental health problem in the last year, and a large majority of young members said their mental health had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with 22.0% saying their mental health had been 'seriously' affected and over half (55.5%) saying the pandemic had 'slightly' affected their mental health.

A large majority of young members with mental health problems had experienced depression (88.2%) or anxiety (87.1%), but other mental health problems included anorexia, bulimia and disordered eating (15.1%), seasonal affective disorder (SAD) (15.7%), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (14.2%), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (9.8%), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (8.2%).

Although many young members experiencing mental health problems (38.5%) had got help from the NHS, mental health support is not adequate to give everyone the support they need: 17.8% told us they had tried to get help from the NHS but had not been successful.

Organisations other than the NHS, such as mental health charities or workplace counselling services, had been helpful for 29.9% of people experiencing mental health problems, but a further 12.1% of these also told us they had tried to access support and not been successful.

In this report we will look at the ways in which work can impact negatively on mental health – and some of the things that unions can do to address this.

Are mental health problems caused by working conditions?

We asked young members if their mental health problems were related to their work. Approximately one in five (19.8%) said they were not, and a further one in five (19.8%) said they were, citing overwork, stress, and the increased pressure that the Covid-19 pandemic had put on public services.

“Working in a mental health ward for the NHS has taken a massive toll on my own mental health. I feel as though the decline of my own mental health would not be as apparent if there was help for NHS workers. This has affected many of my colleagues who have turned to going off on sick as there is nowhere to help us after the hours and dedication we put in to helping others.”

“Physical symptoms associated with stress - unable to eat, or sleep without waking frequently thinking about work.”

“My work causes a lot of stress and anxiety.”

A large majority (59.3%), however, said that their mental health problems were ‘partially’ related to their work, and this was for a wide variety of reasons. Stress, understaffing, and experiences with discrimination at work all impacted on members’ mental health.

“My office was on and off understaffed and our responsibilities changed rapidly during the pandemic. I was struggling to keep up with these changes and contribute as much as the others when my mental health was low.”

“I am trans and a part-time carer, and I have also experienced significant stress and anxiety from these other aspects of my life, and have continuing problems with social anxiety. I have found it hard to maintain a healthy work-life balance since I started working for the NHS but these other factors have made it even more difficult.”

“Not enough staff and rising responsibility meant I was very stressed, this triggers my underlying conditions much more.”

Most UNISON young members thought their employer would be very supportive (19.4%) or quite supportive (52.7%) if they reported a mental health problem, but 8.6% of members said they thought their employer

would not be at all supportive, and that they would be worried about raising this at work. Nearly half of members who had actually experienced mental health problems (45.5%) chose not to tell their employer about it.

“As someone who has suffered with ongoing mental illness for years, I am reluctant to tell my employer. I feel that although they seem to advocate for it, if I was to phone in sick due to bad mental health I feel it would be deemed unacceptable. There is still a long way to go in regards to genuine mental health support and empathy in the workplace.”

“[My employers] were supportive with time off I needed, helped in every way they could and accessed counselling through work when NHS told me I would have to wait minimum 10 months -1 year.”

The relationship between mental health and work is complex, as we see – and work is not the only factor for most young people experiencing mental health problems. But work is a big part of life, and for many people it can have a big impact on mental health.

How do young members feel about their working lives?

Our survey gave a mixed picture of how young members feel about their workplaces and how they are treated.

42.5% agreed with the statement “I feel valued at work” and 43.7% disagreed, with 71.7% agreeing with the statement that their job “is underpaid, for the work [they] do”. Nearly a quarter (23.6%) of young members had ‘regularly’ found it difficult to afford food, utilities or other essentials in the last year, with a further 38.2% saying that they had occasionally struggled with the cost of living.

“A lot of the stress and anxiety was related indirectly to work - the cost of living and being unable to afford it was the main stress.”

“[My employer] have mental health support in place, and within the library service campaigns are run to support colleagues who are struggling. However, it goes unsaid that the greatest support would be a pay rise.”

“Living paycheque to paycheque takes its mental toll on top of the inevitable burnout of being overworked and isolated from my colleagues as a lone worker. Combined with unsociable hours, this is a recipe for, I think, creating mental health problems, but certainly exacerbating them at the least .”

Young workers had mixed views of their own job security, with 45.1% agreeing that they could plan for the future and 42.0% disagreeing, and nearly a quarter (23.7%) saying that they did not expect to be working in the same job in a year's time.

“I feel a lot of pressure, imposter syndrome and I feel uncertain about my future. I worry about fitting work around my own life and balancing time working with time off.”

“Temporary contract means worrying about being kept on.”

Stress and workload are major issues for young members, with over two-thirds (69.6%) of young members saying that they “often feel stressed at work” and 59.7% agreeing with the statement “No matter how hard I work, it's difficult to get everything done”. A similarly large proportion (57.5%) said that they “find it difficult to switch off from work at the end of the

day". Members were divided on workload, with 41.1% agreeing with the statement that their workload is "about right" and 47.5% disagreeing.

"The work load I have been expected to take on as a relatively new employee paired with a general lack of support, as well as concerns around the cost of living in regards to my wage, have had an incredibly negative impact on my mental health and in particular my anxiety."

"Prior to starting my current position I had very rarely experienced any negative mental health, since starting due to immense pressure, lack of staffing and increased demands in my job role it has had an extremely detrimental effect on my mental health."

Many members recognised the strain that the Covid-19 pandemic has created in already stretched public services, with staff reluctant to take time off even if needed, due to understaffing and pressure to keep services going. Isolation due to working from home was also identified as a pressure on mental health.

"Understaffing and constant pressure is causing so much stress to workers. Feel burnt out and I have been a qualified nurse 1.5 years. Experienced panic attacks and anxiety before a shift. Stress levels are high everywhere with the demand being hard to achieve with staff being stretched to their limits."

"Working from home and lack of contact, lack of support from manager, lack of job security with contract not being renewed when it is meant to be."

"The staffing crisis and lack of support makes me feel unable to take time off when needed ."

There is a more positive picture of relations with colleagues, with 74.3% agreeing that their colleagues treat them with respect, and 65.0% saying that "Bullying and harassment are not tolerated by my employer".

"I was struggling working in certain environments with certain people, once I spoke up about this I was supported and moved elsewhere."

However, that left 18.3% of young workers who did *not* agree that their employer would not tolerate bullying: 21.6% of young members said that they had been bullied at work, and 20.6% agreed that that had

“experienced discrimination at work”. Over a quarter (28.6%) agreed with the statement “Staff are not treated with dignity”.

“Most of my issues are caused by "banter", unconscious bias and bullying from my manager who is not experienced enough to be a team leader and uses his position to mock his staff .”

“I was redeployed from my old job to a job I wasn't trained in or enjoyed. I had to call vulnerable people in the community to make sure they were ok and often experienced abuse from frustrated members of the public.”

“I am not out to my colleagues as trans, so while I find it uncomfortable to be referred to as the gender I was assigned at birth I have no way of expressing this at work, and I am afraid that coming out would open me up to bullying and discrimination from other colleagues.”

“I had to deal with workplace bullying and racism and went through a HR case during my first 6 months at the job.”

Many different aspects of work can affect mental health – from understaffing, pressure and stress, to isolation and bullying. Discrimination can also be a major factor, whether it is direct harassment and abuse, or a feeling that you cannot be your true self in the workplace. Addressing mental health in the workplace requires a number of different approaches to address these different factors.

What can employers do to support workers' mental health?

There are many things that employers can do that are known to support people with mental health problems, and to make workplaces more mentally healthy. These can include health and safety measures, strong reasonable adjustments policies, and specific mental health support such as employer-provided counselling.

We asked young members if they were aware of policies that can mitigate mental health problems and there was a mixed picture. Over half (55.2%) said their employer offered occupational (ie. paid) sick leave, with 11.7% saying that specific mental health leave was available. 17.8% of young members said their employer had a 'Right to disconnect' policy, meaning staff were not expected to check messages or be available out of working hours. 37.0% of members said their employer had a flexible working policy.

Less than one in five said they were aware that their health and safety policy directly addressed mental health, but a quarter (25.9%) of members said there were staff in their workplaces trained in mental health first aid. Only 11.1% said that risk assessments in their workplaces addressed mental health. Over half of young members (57.2%) agreed with the statement that "my workplace is healthy and safe" but 28.0% disagreed.

Fewer than a quarter (23.8%) of young members were aware of a reasonable adjustment policy on their workplaces – which reflects the previously expressed concerns of UNISON's disabled members. Reasonable adjustments are a legal right, but there is a continuing issue with organisations being unaware of their duties to put these in place, or being slow to do so.

"I had to ask my previous manager 4/5 times to be referred to occupational health. The adjustments he agreed to put in place had not been put in place. I've since has a new manager that did help and had my meeting with occupational health."

A third of members (33.9%) were aware of an employee support programme in their workplaces, with 44.4% saying that counselling or therapy were provided by their employer. Over a fifth (21.3%) of members

said that training such as stress management or resilience was available in their workplace, but responses were mixed on whether this was always helpful.

“I self referred to my organisations wellbeing department and received multiple counselling sessions which helped me improve my mental health and put boundaries in place to help prevent this going forward.”

“I explained that I was becoming stressed and it was giving me anxiety and a heightened sense of angry outbursts but I got told to 'do a stress workshop' without addressing the issue that my colleague was making the workload fall on to my shoulders alone.”

However, one repeated issue was with employers offering different support, but it being difficult to access. Frustration was expressed about managers and staff not being aware of what support should be provided, or how it could be accessed.

“Work say all the right things but they don't actually follow through with them. They say we have flexible working policy but not for my department. Say they have employee support but I have tried to contact them on numerous occasions with no success. Made HR aware but nothing still done. They have all the things 'in place' but find it difficult to access them.”

“I think [management] need training on how to handle mental health, how to communicate without judgement and how to deal with their staff appropriately.”

Although many young people did tell us they were aware of positive policies in their workplaces, these are by no means universal – so there is a lot of scope for trade unions to negotiate improved conditions. It is also important not just to have the right policies in place but to make sure that staff are aware of these, can access them, and that management can signpost the appropriate support when needed.

What can UNISON branches do?

As the comments above show, there is no single cause of mental health problems, and no single measure will address all mental health problems in the workplace. For this reason, UNISON's [guide to bargaining on mental health policies](#), updated last year, identifies a number of different approaches which can be taken by branches wanting to support and improve staff mental health, including improving awareness, health and safety measures, workplace adjustments, and handling absences from work.

Branches wanting to improve mental health at work can also consider a number of different bargaining approaches:

- **Decent terms, conditions and pay at work**
UNISON's [Young Workers Charter](#) sets a basic level of conditions at work, highlighting the priorities that young workers have identified, including fair pay and secure contracts of employment. But a [wide range of guidance](#) is available for branches bargaining to improve pay, terms and conditions.
- **Manageable workloads**
UNISON's guidance on [bargaining on workload](#) includes a model workload policy and a draft survey to identify workload problems.
- **Good provision for sickness and absence**
Staff who can take the sick leave they need are more likely to be able to recover from health problems, whether physical or mental. UNISON's guide on [negotiating sickness absence agreements](#) advises branches on negotiating policies that are supportive rather than punitive.
- **Strong policies on accessibility and reasonable adjustments**
Reasonable adjustments are changes to the workplace which prevent or reduce the barriers that disabled people face. UNISON's [bargaining guide to reasonable adjustments](#) sets out the statutory duties on employers to make adjustments and contains a model

policy on workplace adjustments.

- **Active commitment to strong equality policies and inclusivity at work**
Discrimination and intolerance can have a huge impact on young workers. UNISON's guide on [bargaining for equality](#) sets out the law on equality in the workplace and also suggests model policies to improve diversity and fairness at work. A variety of guidance is available on bargaining for LGBT+ equality, including guides on [gender identity](#) and [lesbian, gay and bisexual workers' rights](#).
- **Zero tolerance of bullying, harassment and discrimination**
UNISON's [guide to race and sex discrimination](#) explains how to identify unlawful discrimination at work and what to do about it. Guidance on [tackling bullying at work](#) includes a model survey for staff.

This report is based on responses to a survey of UNISON young members which ran from 8 April 2022-15 May 2022. 630 young members responded.