

# Job loss fears making workers less open about mental health

4 November 2020

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- **'Furlough envy', isolation and additional home stresses have triggered deteriorations in workplace mental health, new study suggests**
- **Workers less likely to talk to managers about experiencing mental health problems since lockdown, fearing 'repercussions'**
- **Study highlights need to raise awareness among employers of resources available to support mental health**

Workers have become less open about their mental health struggles since the coronavirus outbreak because of fears they could lose their jobs if they speak up, new research suggests.

The findings from the [Enterprise Research Centre](#), based on in-depth interviews with managers in UK firms over the summer, also show workplaces have become divided by how different staff have been treated since March – with some saying 'furlough envy' had split teams.

Respondents flagged remote working as a possible cause for less openness, as workers had fewer opportunities to speak about problems, or for behaviour changes to be spotted by others.

*Lead researcher Maria Wishart said the testimonials were "very concerning", especially in light of recent statistics suggesting mental health problems had surged since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak.*

The [ONS's depression survey](#) found that one in five adults (19.2%) were likely to be experiencing some form of depression in June 2020, almost double the rate (9.7%) reported before the pandemic. Younger people, women and people with disabilities saw the highest rises in depression symptoms.

The research was funded by the Midlands Engine as part of the [Mental Health and Productivity Pilot](#), a three-year programme supporting employers to improve mental health at work, reduce stigma and increase productivity.

Participants noted a number of triggers for poorer mental health since the start of the pandemic, ranging from anxiety about being furloughed to feelings of isolation from remote working.

One interviewee, an HR director from a manufacturing firm, was furloughed herself and said the way staff had been treated had *“divided the company”*.

*“There are different factions now,” she said. “There’s the working-from-homes, there’s the people who’ve been furloughed, there’s the people who’ve been in throughout, and there seems to be a lot of resentment between the groups. And a lot of bad feeling.”*

The study also found that younger workers and those having to care for school-aged children had been particularly impacted.

People had also become less likely to admit to experiencing mental health problems since the start of lockdown. This was compounded, according to some participants, by the fact many people were working from home – reducing the regularity of face-to-face interactions where changes in behaviour could be spotted.

The study builds on an [earlier report](#) conducted before the pandemic, that found that a lack of support for workplace mental health problems could reduce the overall productivity of firms by a quarter.

**Maria Wishart, a research fellow at the Enterprise Research Centre who authored the report, said:**

*“Given the stresses many people have faced over the past six months, it’s very concerning that staff appear to be more reluctant to discuss their mental health issues.*

*“One possibility is that the economic outlook is reinforcing stigma around mental health conditions in the workplace and a fear among workers themselves that they will suffer repercussions if they speak up about difficulties they’re facing.*

*“It’s vitally important that firms provide reassurance to staff that they can speak openly about their mental health without being judged. They also need to engage with and signpost their workers to the range of mental health support services on offer, including specialist charities.”*

**Dr Diane Phimister, mental health lead for Coventry University Group, which is leading the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot, added:**

*"It's never been a more critical time to tackle mental health at work. Midlands employers can get free support and resources through the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot and I would urge employers of all sizes and from all sectors to tap into what's on offer – it could make all the difference."*

### **"Mental health of our workforce is still high on the agenda" – case study**

Loughborough-based [CR Civil Engineering Ltd](#) celebrated its 20th birthday in March by signing up to Mind and Rethink Mental Illness' [Time To Change](#) Pledge, joining nearly 1,500 firms that have committed to ending mental health stigma in the workplace.

Business Director Melanie Heath said that, as a key sector, construction firms had not had to close completely in the initial stages of lockdown. But this caused some concern among staff, some of whose families were unhappy about them continuing to work at first. The company saw a 15% increase in calls to its employee assistance programme (EAP), as well as an increase in requests for support via their mental health first aiders and wellness champions.

Despite the challenges, the firm has continued to prioritise mental health at work. "We have continued with the Time to Change training using Microsoft Teams and Zoom," said Melanie. "The mental health of our workforce is still high on our agenda.

"I'm personally spending a lot of my time researching and implementing things we can do to remove any stigma and to get people talking," she added. "We now have 45 mental health first aiders and I am booked on the instructor training course in November, so hopefully we will be able to deliver the course by early 2021 to any other interested employees and our subcontractors.

"We have now established a wellness champion network of 22 employees across all levels of the organisation and our managers have received training on supporting any team members that are having to work from home."

**ENDS**

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## **Notes to editors**

### **1. Full report**

The full report, 'Workplace mental health and Covid-19: experiences of firms in the Midlands', is available [here](#)

### **2. About the Enterprise Research Centre**

The ERC is the UK's leading independent research institute on growth, productivity and innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Innovate UK, The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) and the British Business Bank (BBB).

The ERC is producing the new knowledge around SMEs that will allow us to create a business-friendly environment nationwide, grounded in hard evidence. We want to understand what makes entrepreneurs and firms thrive so we can spread the lessons from best practice and make the UK a more successful economy.

The Centre is led by Professors Stephen Roper of Warwick Business School and Mark Hart of Aston University, Birmingham. Our senior researchers are world-class academics from both Aston and Warwick Universities as well as from our partner institutions which include Queens University Belfast and the University of Strathclyde.

<http://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk>

### **3. About the Mental Health & Productivity Pilot**

The Mental Health and Productivity Pilot is a three-year programme funded by the Midlands Engine until June 2022. It sees the collaboration of a diverse range of partners across the East and West Midlands who will work together to provide an evidence informed, cost effective and sustainable resource to support good mental health at work, reduce stigma and ultimately to increase productivity. It will support employers across the Midlands to understand the link between mental health and productivity by galvanising their employee's engagement with a package of impactful resources which work towards ensuring their employees are happy, satisfied and able to thrive at work. The programme is led by Coventry University in partnership with University of Warwick, mental health charity Mind and West Midlands Combined Authority. Other partners include University of Birmingham, Loughborough University, University of Derby, University of Lincoln and Public Health England.

[www.mhpp.me](http://www.mhpp.me)