Mental health: One in three employees are 'merely surviving'

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Globally, one in three employees report "merely surviving" the workday – getting by, but not thriving.

This strain is central to Lyra Health's 2026 *State of Workforce Mental Health* report. The study surveyed over 500 benefits leaders and 7,500 employees across six countries. It reveals multiple crises hitting at once, creating an environment that is tough on HR leaders as well as the workforce.

"The question is no longer whether mental health support exists," says Jennifer Schulz, CEO of Lyra Health. "It is whether it intervenes early and effectively enough to truly improve lives."

Complexity as a clinical issue

The data shows a rise of complex, severe conditions. A decade ago, most workforce mental health conversations centred on stress, anxiety and mild depression. This is the territory where EAPs and short-term therapy were designed to help. According to the study, the territory has expanded.

Ten percent of the global workforce now reports a complex condition such as PTSD or bipolar disorder, a 67 percent increase year over year. More than one-third of employees report personal or family experience with serious conditions, including severe depression, eating disorders and substance use challenges.

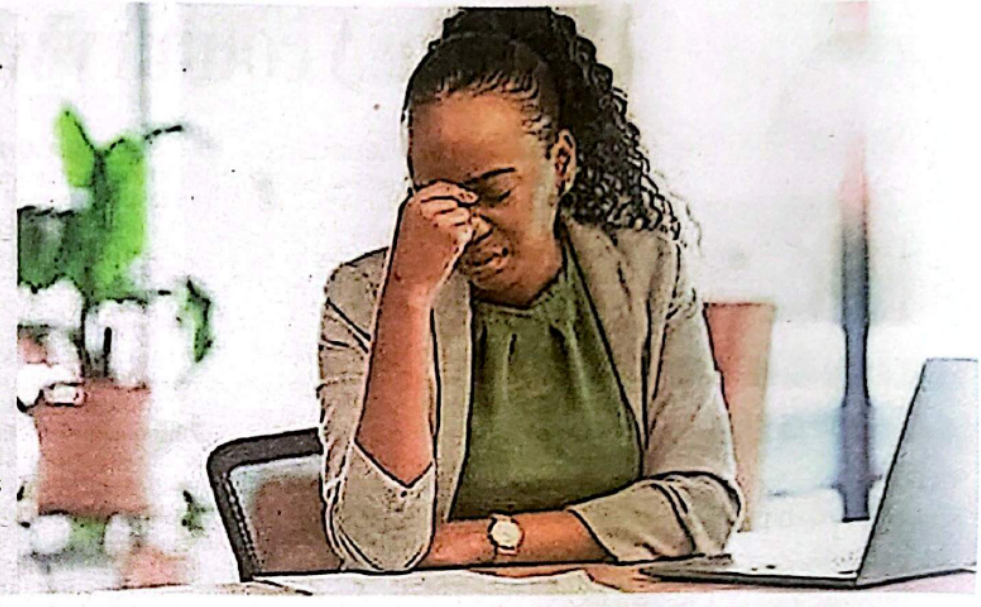
When those employees seek care, they run into a system built for a different level of need. According to researchers, 56 percent struggled to find the right level of care, 55 percent faced long waitlists and 54 percent could not find a specialist or specialty programme.

"Complexity is not just a clinical issue, it is a design challenge," says Sean McBride, president of employer solutions at Lyra Health. "The way benefits are structured determines whether employees get stuck navigating systems or reach the right care quickly enough to make a difference."

Researchers found that nearly seven in 10 benefits leaders say employee mental health challenges significantly hurt performance over the past year, and 65 percent report more mental health–related disability leave. Costs that were once hard to quantify are now visible in lost productivity and rising leave claims.

MANAGING

Managers have become the shock absorbers of organisational strain. They are expected to deliver results, support mental health and absorb change, often without the authority to fix the conditions creating the pressure. That model is not sustainable.



Family-inclusive benefits are good

The paediatric mental health crisis is not staying in paediatrics. Nearly half of working parents supported a child or dependent with mental health needs in the past year. Sixty percent experienced increased stress or burnout as a result. More than a third report reduced productivity or focus at work. Researchers say this is a direct, measurable transfer of strain from the family system to the organisation.

But the left hand does not seem to know what the right hand is doing on this point. Ninety-five percent of benefits leaders believe child and teen mental healthcare is easy to find through their benefits. Employees increasingly disagree, with fewer saying they can access timely paediatric mental healthcare year over year.

The issue, the data suggests, is not the availability of general therapy. The greater tangle is that specialised care for ADHD, trauma, eating disorders and neurodevelopmental needs has long waitlists and is difficult to navigate.

HR leaders may want to consider that family-inclusive benefits are not a perk but a retention sticking point. Seventy-eight percent of employees say they would stay at a job because of strong, family-inclusive mental health benefits. Fifty-four percent say they would consider leaving without mental health benefits at all.

AI is splitting the workforce

AI is not uniformly helping or hurting employee mental health. It is doing both, simultaneously, and the difference comes down to how organisations deploy it. Forty-eight percent of employees say AI makes them more productive. Forty-three percent say it improves work/life balance. But 46 percent feel pressure to always be "on" because of AI, 44 percent feel anxiety about job security and 36 percent feel more isolated.

"AI adoption succeeds or fails based on its human impact," says Joe Grasso, vice president of workforce transformation at Lyra Health. "Organisations that treat AI as a change initiative, with clear communication, expectations and feedback loops, see productivity gains without added burnout."

Courtesy: hrexecutive.com