

Research Summary

Creating more psychologically healthy organizations: What therapists and employees want organizations to know

Research conducted by:

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Primarily because of the global pandemic and the “great resignation,” significant changes are taking shape regarding mental health in many organizations. Fortunately, it is much more socially acceptable to talk about mental health, needing/having a therapist, and burnout in many organizations than it was only a few years ago. Although this is encouraging, we are still pointing our employees outside of the organization to go “fix themselves.”

For good reason—the wall is (and should be) high between mental health services and organizations. But if we knew more about what mental health professionals, therapists, and coaches were hearing from their clients, we could gain important insights about what organizations need to do differently.

The underlying premise that we wanted to understand more about through this research study is how we can do better at creating workplaces that are psychologically healthy-- we can't just keep telling people to go fix themselves. That is, how can organizations prevent the distress and suffering that impacts employee mental health in the first place. This document is a summary of the research we have conducted to address this idea.

Research Overview

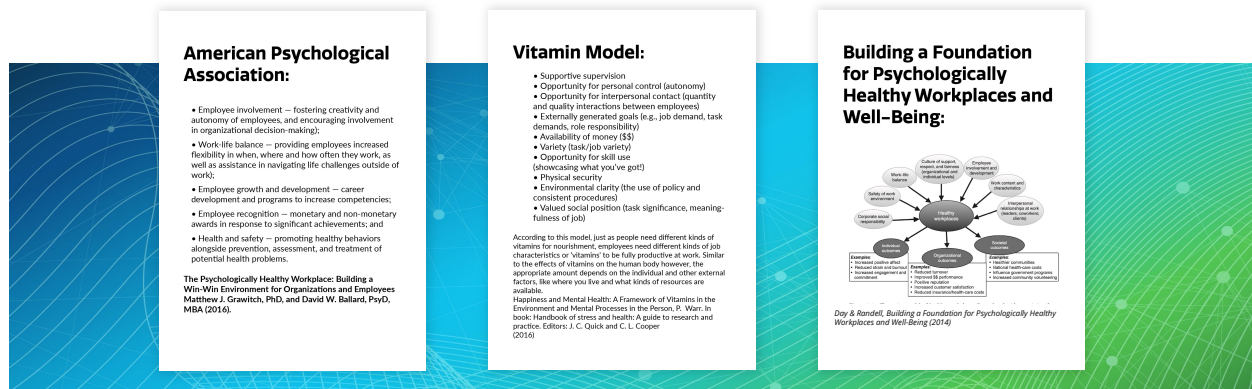
There were three phases to this research study--below is an overview. Following the overview, you will find a summary of the results for each phase.

Phase 1: Literature and model review	Phase 2: Therapist Interviews	Phase 3: Employee Survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of Psychologically Healthy Workplace Models• Determination of opportunities for evolving these models	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 12 therapists participated in confidential interviews• 7 with Masters Degrees, 1 with Psy. D., 3 with Ph. D.s, 1 with MD• Structured interview protocol was used and content analysis was conducted	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5,073 employees from 5 different countries participated• Our focus: To understand employees' current mental health struggles and the role work might play and to understand opportunities for creating more psychologically healthy organizations (PHO)• Statistical analysis of items, including demographics were conducted

Phase 1: Literature and model review

The idea of psychologically healthy workplaces is not a new one--there have been multiple research studies and models that have been created that address this idea.

Existing Psychologically Healthy Workplace Models



Models like the American Psychological Association (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016), Vitamin Model (Warr, 2016), and other models like those from Day & Randell (2014) have foundational elements, but they don't seem to quite get at where we are now. The "great resignation" coupled with the changes in how and where work is conducted have caused a fundamental shift in what employees want and expect from work.

We propose that understanding basic principles related to clinical psychology like our relationship with stress, how we can be more self-aware, and the role of trauma in our lives, are important ways to create psychologically healthy organizations, which, for the most part, are not covered in these models.

Another key element that seems to be missing from these models are how organizations can work to decrease the amount of unnecessary distress they are causing employees—for example, ensuring that workloads aren't extreme and jobs are meaningful and "do-able," making sure bad behavior from managers, leaders, and team members isn't tolerated, and overall reducing the burden people are feeling from work through demonstration of vulnerability, empathy, and kindness.

Given the focus on distress, burden, and "what's wrong with work" in this study, it's important to remember that work can also be a very positive contributor to our overall well-being. Work provides us (among other things):

- A source of meaning and purpose in our lives

- A path to financial well-being
- Social connections, and
- In some companies, humanity, care, and support

The role of stress

An important part of this research is understanding the role of stress at work. Our and other research shows that workplace stress is not in and of itself the issue. However, stress can amplify or put pressure on other areas of one's life (relationship, sleep, physical health, social life, financial issues, etc.).

Stress is a part of the human experience. Modern lives involve stress, especially considering the pandemic and the myriad of adjustments we've all had to make to our lives in recent years. But there's more to understand about stress at work, like what makes stress go from feeling manageable to unmanageable? Or how does stress sometimes feel like a positive force (e.g., eustress) and sometimes feel like a negative one (e.g., distress)? And what steps can we take to have a better understanding and relationship with the stress in our lives?

Eustress	Distress
Provides productive energy	Provides restless energy
Helps increase focus	Decreases focus
Increases motivation	Increases procrastination/avoidance
Is often experienced as excitement	Is often experienced as fear/concern
Feels manageable	Feels overwhelming
Improves performance	Impairs performance
Associated with confidence	Associated with insecurity
Expectation of a positive outcome	Fear of a negative outcome

The American Institute of Stress (2020)

What, then, is a psychologically healthy organization?

An organization that has a **positive and thriving climate and culture**, with authenticity between what it says it stands for and what employees actually experience. A psychologically healthy organization **prioritizes the well-being of its employees** and ensures that the way the organization operates (from how work is designed to how the organization delivers value) is **sustainable and positive for employees and customers**.

Phase 2: Therapist interviews

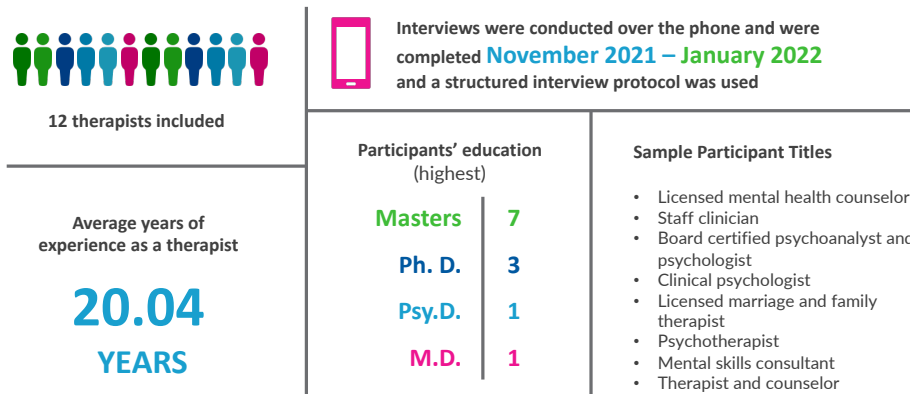
For the second phase of this study, mental health professionals were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives regarding the impact work has on their clients' mental health and how they would like to see organizations approach mental health differently. Participants were asked to participate via several mental health/therapist networks and via LinkedIn posts.

A structured interview protocol was used. In addition to demographic questions, the following questions were asked:

- Approximately what percentage of your clients work full-time?
- Of those clients who have full-time jobs, do you discuss issues related to their workplace?
- If no, why do you think that is?
- If yes, what are the top 3 workplace issues that you tend to discuss? Can you describe each of these issues for me?
- How do you help your clients address those issues? That is, what are the strategies you suggest/implement?
- How have those issues changed/remained the same during the pandemic?
- What role do you see stress playing in the issues that your clients discuss with you regarding work?
- What are the primary sources of stress?
- To what extent do you see your clients being impacted negatively by their work? Or do you see work being one of many stressors?
- What strategies do you work with your clients to better understand and manage stress?
- What do you wish organizations would understand and do differently when it comes to mental health?
- What role do you think organizations should play regarding employee mental health?
- How could organizations change their cultures to better support mental health?
- What's the most important message that leaders of organizations should hear when it comes to creating psychologically healthy workplaces?

On average, the therapists who participated in this study had over 20 years of experience. Most had earned Masters degrees, with three participants having a Ph. D., one with a Psy. D., and one with a M. D.

Therapist Interviews Overview



Results from therapist interviews

Verbatim notes were taken during the interviews and a content analysis was conducted by separate researchers from the interviewer.

Note that all participants were promised confidentiality in that no identifying information will be shared about the participants or their clients in example quotes used in this summary.

Please note that this research is qualitative in nature and has a relatively small sample size meaning there are no assumptions of generalizability of these results. Instead, these results can provide us more of a flavor of what therapists are experiencing.

Below are some of the key highlights of this section of the research study. Note that the sample comments in the word “bubbles” are select verbatim comments from the study and that the tables with themes are the results of the content analysis.

Top 3 Workplace Issues Discussed in Therapy

If I want to move up, if I want to be seen, to be considered, I better be working more, better compromise my boundaries.

Receive email from co-worker, interpreted as demeaning, critical, hostile ... now we are working on response to an electronic communication ... how that gets interpreted according to shame, self worth, competitiveness.

Very high achieving doctor mother of two small children. Probably as smart or smarter [than colleagues] but they don't think they are ... think there is something wrong with them ... think they are the only ones who feel this way.

%	Theme	%	Theme
27%	Conflict between work and life demands	6%	Communication pattern issues
24%	Disrespectful leaders, managers, coworkers	3%	Gender Issues
21%	Anxiety about work demands	3%	Seen as a number and not as a human
12%	Lack of motivation	3%	Lack of growth/development

Strategies to Address Workplace Issues

Let's write down changeable goals for yourself, what can you do to get work/life balance, get boundaries back, what can you do for your own career growth.

First I teach the client that stress is okay; good stress and bad stress, from the lens of acute vs. chronic. ACT - accepting what is happening, not getting rid of thoughts. If I need to change, then we will do it.

*Mindfulness and deep breathing
Deep breathing and happy hormones, that's the quickest way to eliminate stress so you can think and function correctly*

%	Theme
22%	Coaching and goal setting
16%	Trauma treatment
13%	Supportive/Acknowledge
13%	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
10%	Reframe thinking
6%	Mindfulness
6%	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
3%	Systems therapy
3%	Boundary setting
3%	Self-compassion
3%	Understanding how your body is responding and what subtle cues your body is giving you

How Issues Changed During Pandemic

This has hit our parents, working and helping kids, really struggling. Something has to give. People feeling like they aren't doing a good job in either domain.

Workflow, routines, structure, schedule, so much worse ... remarkably worse.

The disconnect from employees to the company to the people. WFH has had huge strain. But interestingly, they don't want to go in. Pandemic allowed people to be home but it has been over-utilized and now lack of motivation across the board.

%	Theme
47%	Conflict between work and life demands
19%	Disconnect/Isolation
14%	Fears about COVID
10%	Sense of being overwhelmed
10%	Uncertainty of/Rethinking systems

Role of Stress

To me stress is this amplifier of everything, fuel to the fire, if you are anxious, throw in more stress, with any thoughts and any emotions, turns up pressure, turns up criticalness in self talk.

Stress heightens it. Covid creates stress and stress is heightened from what they would have already experienced. It exacerbates it. Lots of different kinds of stress-relational, political, time limitations (e.g., 16 meetings in a day), also workload—too much work to do, on all the time, no boundaries, expected to do more with less. Lot of stress with that. A lot of burnout.

%	Theme
57%	Stress amplifies all issues
29%	Powerlessness
14%	Lack of acknowledgement/recognition of the human being

What Orgs Should Understand/Do Differently?

Do the work to make sure your culture is being carried out in every way

So many ways you can damage someone's mental health- Being overworked is one of them

Supervisor huge part of this – how receptive are they to your needs? Do you feel safe talking about what's really going on? Up the chain of command, what's the culture about work/life balance?

%	Theme
39%	Top down authentic discussion and action about mental health
19%	Mental health education
12%	Improving organizational behavior to better support mental health
12%	Connect more with employees as human being
8%	Make therapy accessible to employees
4%	Apply therapy/clinical interventions to organizations (not just employees)
4%	Adjust demands of work
4%	Paid time-off for mental health

What's the most important message that leaders of organizations should hear when it comes to creating psychologically healthy workplaces?

Wish organizations to be safe for people to be open with their struggles, challenges, and fears

The hard task is addressing productivity tasks, the easy part is performative wellness

Most important message for organizations: To create a safe space for expression

%	Theme
28%	Understand more about psychology
27%	Create safe and secure environments
23%	Starts with leaders and needs to be woven through all aspects of work
23%	Acknowledge people as human beings and treat them with care

Key takeaways from therapist interviews

Top stressors from work that therapists see are:

- Conflict between work and life demands
- Disrespectful leaders, managers, coworkers
- Anxiety about work demands

Stress is not the cause of mental health issues--stress exacerbates mental health issues

Key messages therapists want organizations to hear are:

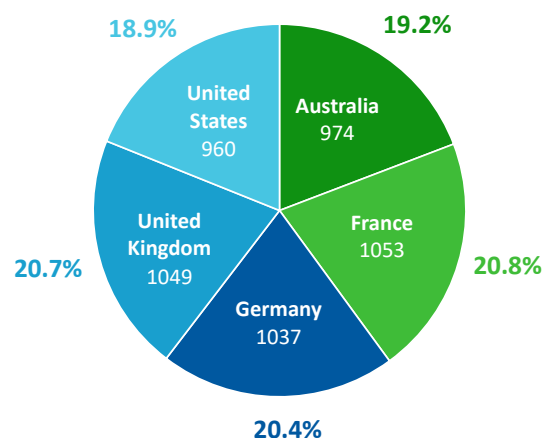
- Understand more about psychology
- Create more safe and secure environments
- Starts with leaders and needs to be woven through all aspects of work
- Acknowledge people as human beings and treat them with care

Phase 3: Employee survey

The intent of this survey was to understand employees' current mental health struggles and the role work might play and to understand opportunities for creating more psychologically healthy organizations (PHO).

Survey overview:

- 5,073 people participated in this online survey.
- Participants had to be working full-time in order to participate.
- Survey was programmed in English (US), German, French, and English (UK).
- Survey was live December 17-24, 2021.
- Participants from five countries were asked to participate:

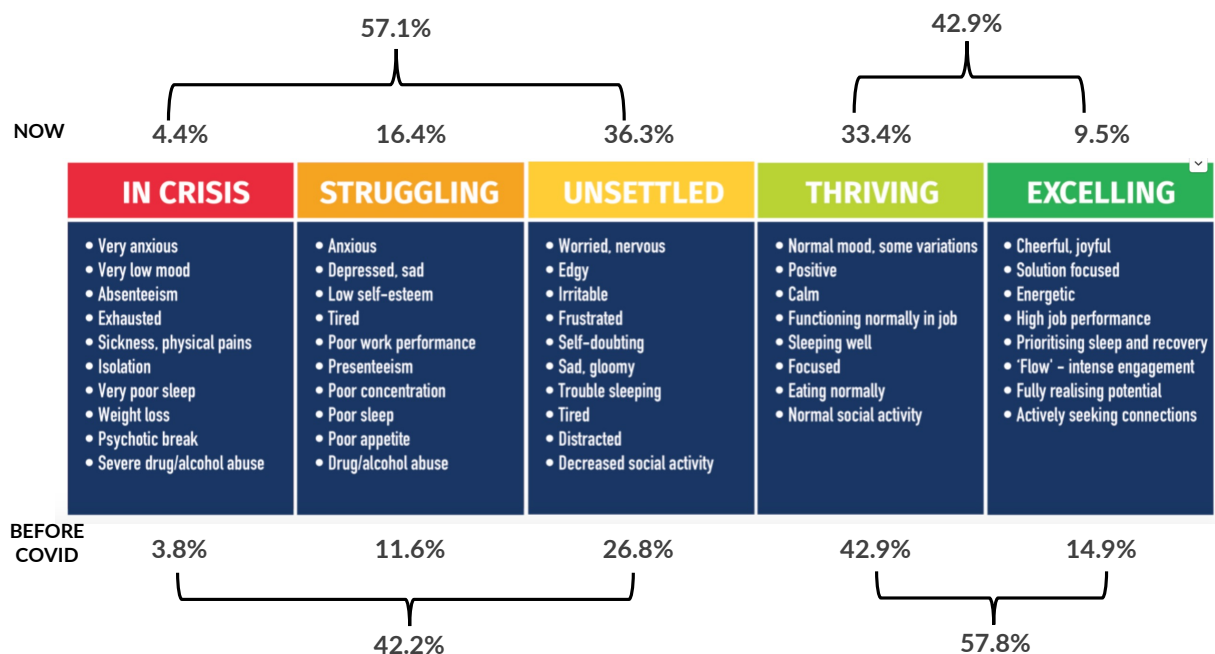


Results from employee survey

Survey results were gathered via SurveyMonkey panels and were analyzed using SPSS. The following describes the high-level results of this study.

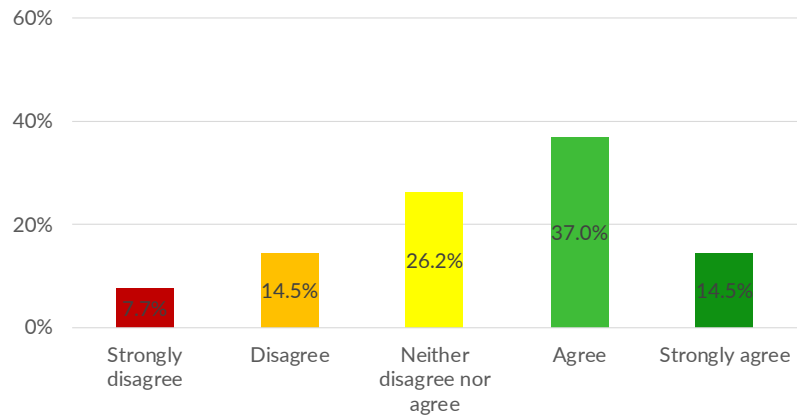
One of the first intentions of this survey was to better understand the current state of employee mental health. Below is a summary of the current state, using a mental health continuum that helps to describe in more behavioral terms how employees are feeling from a mental health perspective. In addition to asking about current state of mental health, we also asked participants to think back to before COVID and use the continuum to describe what they remember their mental health to be. Optimally we would have liked to have a true pre-measure but thought it was still useful to include.

As you can see, there is almost a 15% difference in people who are in the yellow, orange, and red categories now compared to how they recall their mental health before COVID. And, as a reminder, 57.1% is 2855 human beings in this study.

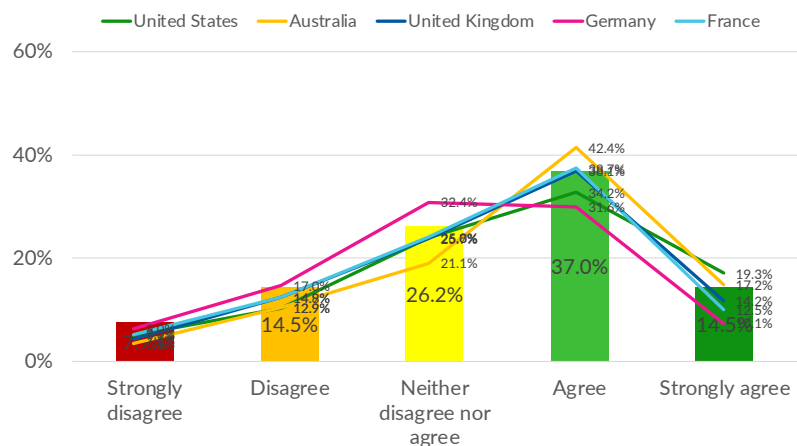


Next, we wanted to understand the extent to which participants felt that their organizations were psychologically healthy places to work and whether that varied by country and demographics like gender.

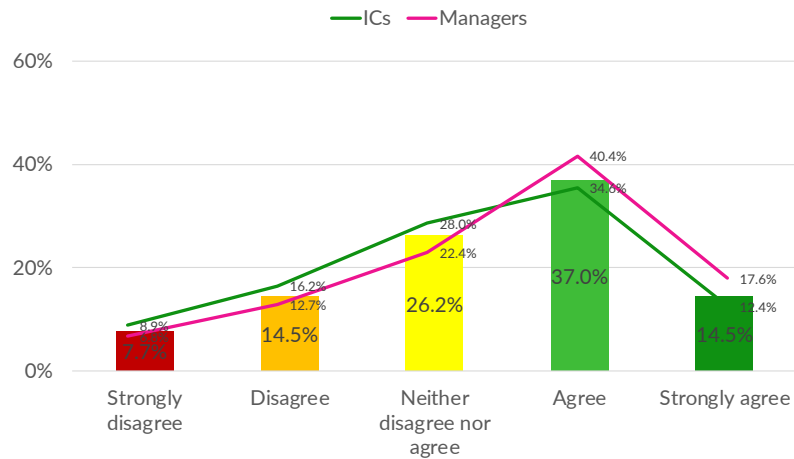
Overall, my organization is a psychologically healthy place to work.



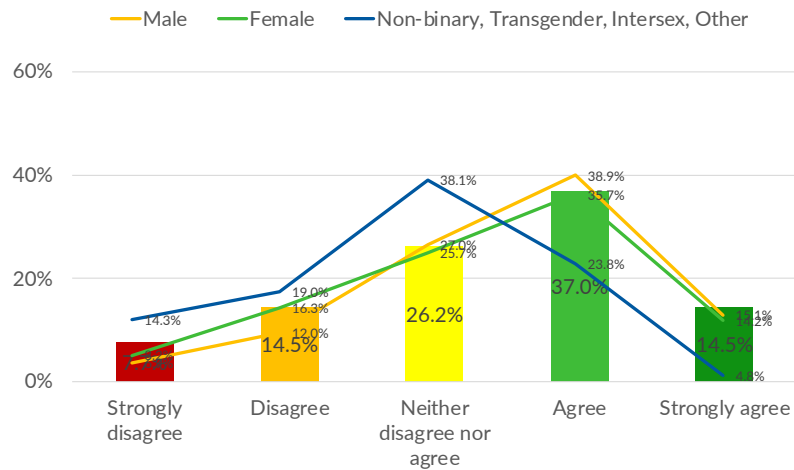
Overall, my organization is a psychologically healthy place to work. (by country)



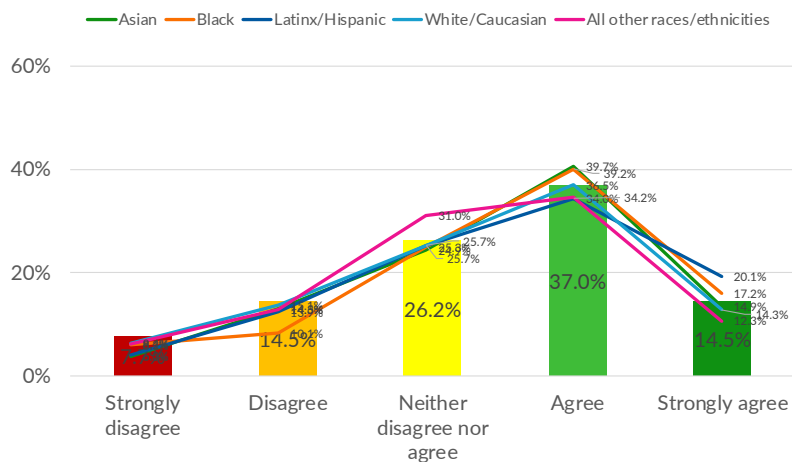
Overall, my organization is a psychologically healthy place to work. (by role)



Overall, my organization is a psychologically healthy place to work. (by gender)



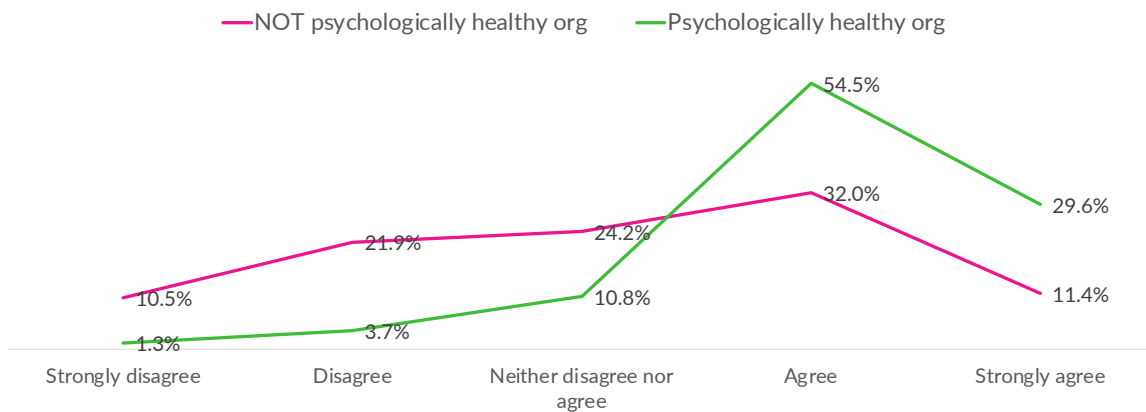
Overall, my organization is a psychologically healthy place to work. (by race/ethnicity)



Next, we wanted to understand how employees who feel that they work in more psychologically healthy organizations differ from those who do not. For this set of analyses, we selected the employees who answered “Strongly disagree” or “Disagree” to the above item: “Overall my organization is a psychologically healthy place to work” and combined them to form a group “NOT psychologically healthy org.” Then we selected the employees who answered “Strongly agree” or “Agree” to the same item and combined them to form a group “Psychologically healthy org.”

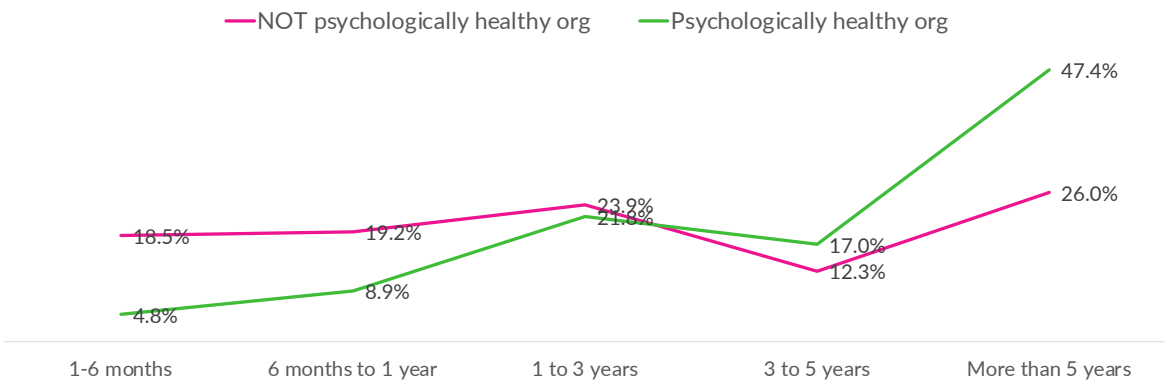
PHO & Engagement

I feel personally engaged in my work.



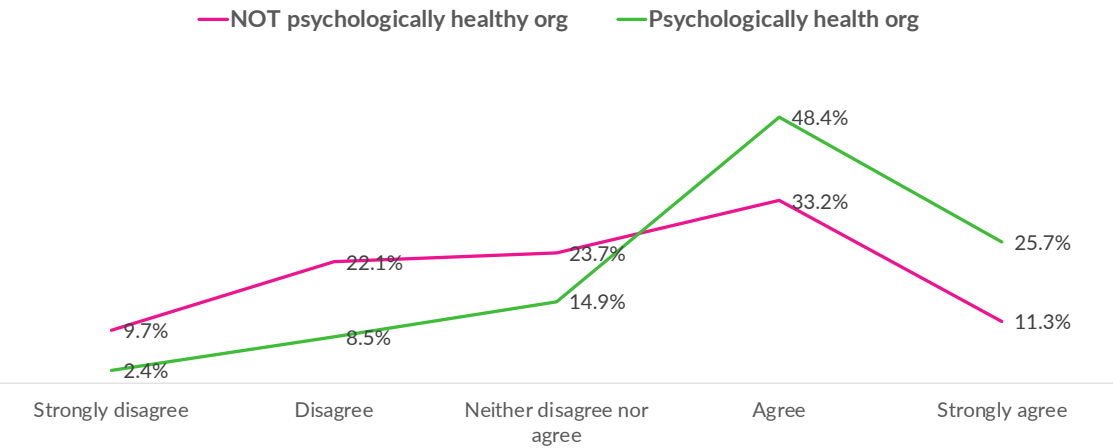
PHO & Intention to stay

I intend to stay at my organization for at least:

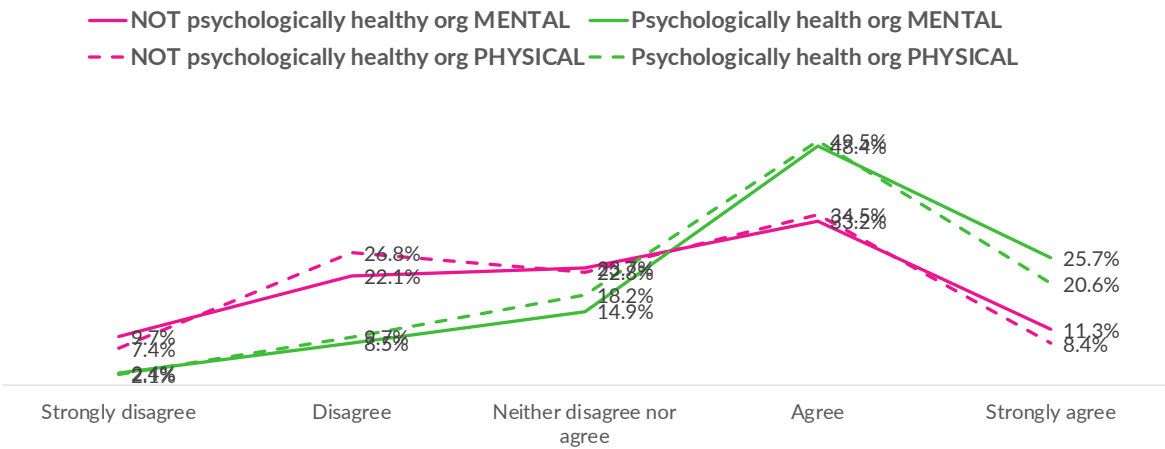


PHO & Mental health

I feel like I have good mental health.

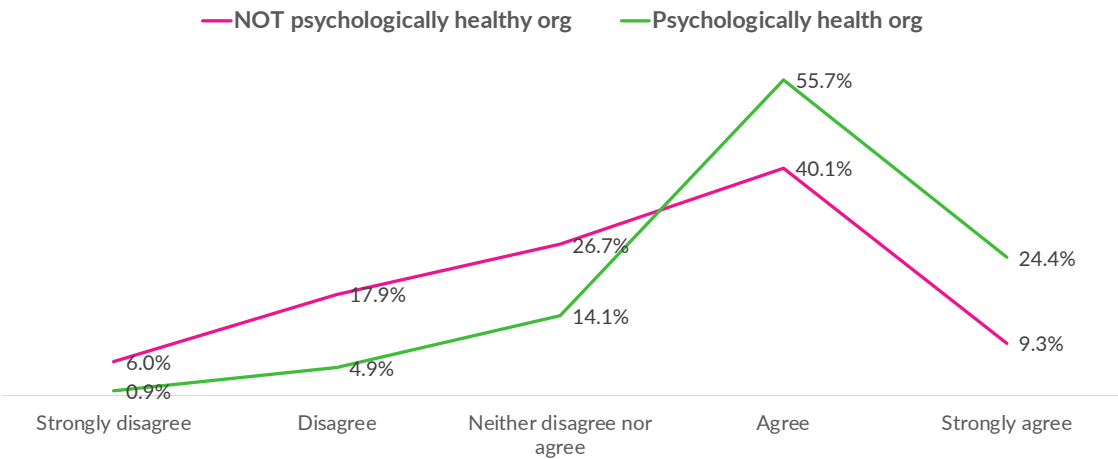


PHO & Mental Health + Physical Health



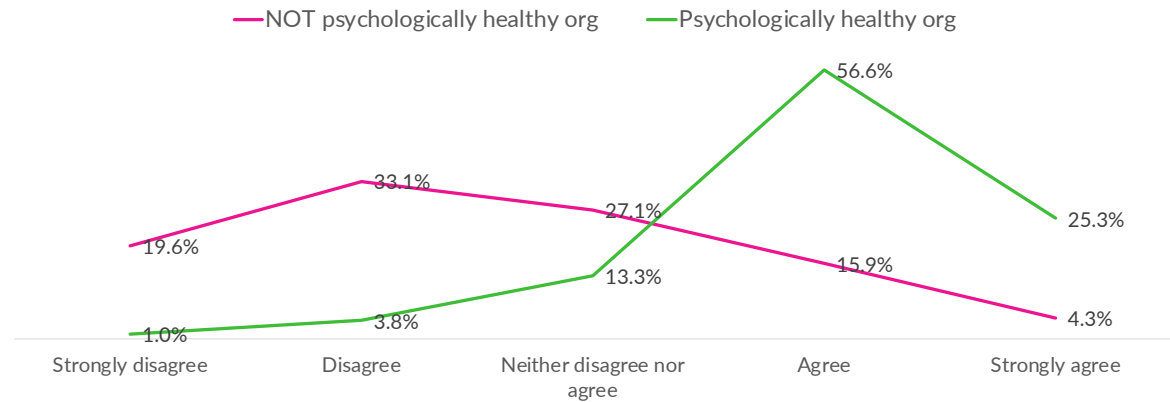
PHO & Well-being

Overall, I have well-being in my life.



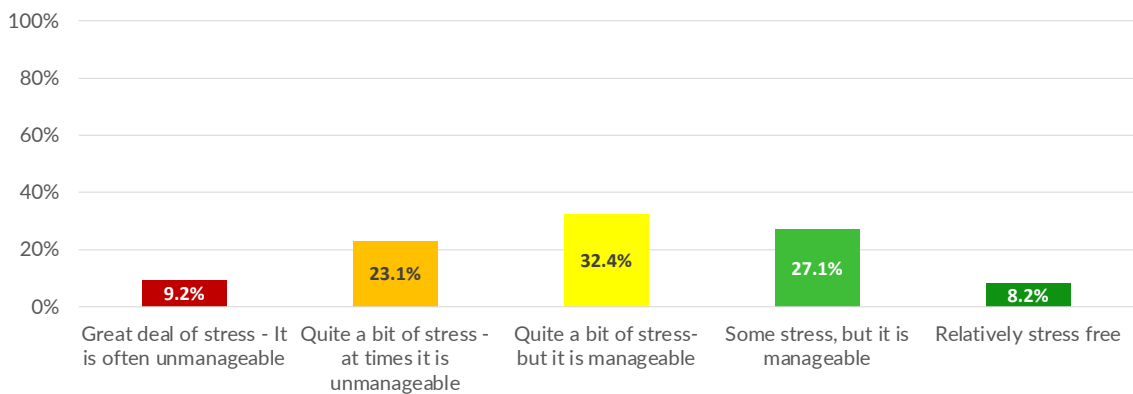
PHO & Positive EX

The employee experience in my organization is a positive one.



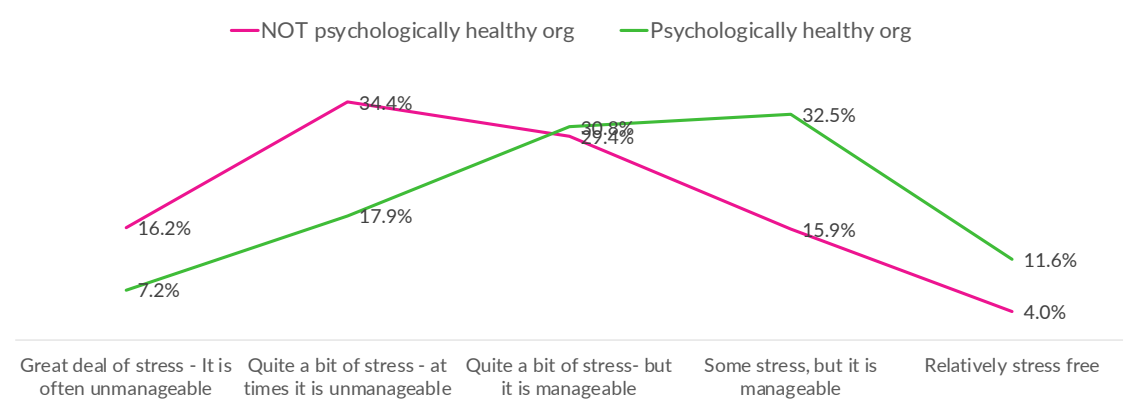
In addition, we specifically looked at the current stress levels of employees, including the biggest contributors to stress at work, and how that differs for those from a PHO compared to those who do not work in a PHO.

Which of the following best describes the current level of stress in your life?



PHO & Stress

Which of the following best describes the current level of stress in your life?



What are the biggest contributors to your stress at work?

Select the top 3 contributors from the following list.



Finally, we were interested to hear, in their own words, what messages employees have for leaders and organizations on this topic.

What's the most important message that leaders of organizations should hear when it comes to creating psychologically healthy workplaces?



If you could ask your employer to change only one thing that would have the most positive impact on your mental health, what would that be?



Key takeaways from survey

- Of the survey participants, 57.1%, or 2,855 respondents, reported they are “in crisis,” “struggling,” or “unsettled” from a mental health perspective
- Employees were asked to recall their mental health prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and there was a roughly 15% increase in those who reported a more negative state of mental health
- Employees who reported working in psychologically healthy organizations also reported (in comparison to employees who work in organizations rated “not psychologically healthy”):
 - Higher levels of personal engagement in their work
 - Greater intent to stay at their organization
 - Higher mental and physical health
 - Higher overall well-being
 - Higher agreement that their employee experience is a positive one
 - Lower levels of stress overall
- The top 3 contributors to stress at work among all employees surveyed were:
 - Too much work
 - Lack of recognition/not feeling valued
 - Fast pace

Stress at work, in addition to the pandemic, is impacting mental health. Employees working in psychologically healthy organizations do better overall across several measures that positively impact both the employees and the organizations.

Employers are going to continue to struggle with retaining employees and the cost to organizations is likely to be staggering; according the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the cost of one employee who quits is 6 to 9 months of salary. Organizations must adapt—treating employees the way we always have will not be tolerated. Humanizing work by focusing on creating psychologically healthy organizations is a meaningful place to start.

So, how do we create more psychologically healthy organizations?

With a desire to help evolve how we think about this idea of psychologically healthy organizations, we have created a model to help organizations get started.

The idea with this model is that there are many roles in organizations, but also many levers to make improvements. Each of the boxes below can be learned and skills can be built.

Creating a Psychologically Healthy Organization (PHO): Where to start



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We are excited about helping organizations to become more psychologically healthy places to work. Please contact Laura Hamill, Ph. D., at laura.hamill@parisphoenixgroup.com to learn more about this study, for presentations of these results, or for more information about the workshops we offer for HR, employees, managers, and leaders on this topic.