



The Institute of Sales Management

# STRESS IN SALES

By Dr Zoë Douglas-Judson

Mindologists Limited

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## Foreword

Interest in mental health in the workplace has grown exponentially in recent years. What was until recently a “taboo” subject is now discussed widely and many organisations are looking to understand better how to prevent problems occurring where they can and to intervene effectively when their people become unwell. The Stevenson / Farmer review of mental health and employers (*Thriving at work*), published in late 2017, provided a comprehensive picture of the scale of the problem in the United Kingdom together with pragmatic proposals for improvement.

Examining issues at a national level is valuable but crafting effective interventions for individual companies requires greater granularity. Within any business there are different groups facing different pressures on a day to day basis and the salesforce can be a neglected community. Many sales people operate primarily on their own and often remotely from other colleagues in the business. The work requires not only a good understanding of the product range but also strong communication skills and a talent for relationship building with clients. Targets are the norm and reward is usually closely aligned to short term performance. Those targets may be adjusted in response to the economic cycle but generally the salesforce is exhorted to win more business, often with less resource, when there is a downturn. As a consequence, this group can frequently “tick all the boxes” when it comes to the Health & Safety Executive Stress Management Standards of demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.

This survey by the Institute of Sales Management therefore provides an invaluable insight into the pressures that sales people are currently facing and the measures that their organisations are taking to control the risk of harm to their mental health and wellbeing. The recommendations are likely to be relevant to most organisations with sales teams and should be used to inform the management practices of every sales director.



Paul Litchfield  
CBE OSTJ FRCP FFOM  
March 2019



## Executive Summary

Commissioned by the Institute of Sales Management, the Stress in Sales 2018 Survey conducted by Dr Zoë Douglas-Judson, a respected professional in the study of mental health and author of the newly published [SOS code](#) has worked with the ISM to complete a study of mental health impact and approach for ISM members.

This survey marks the start of the organisation's commitment to close the gap of Mental Health support and specifically Stress in Sales, for the Sales Professional community it seeks to serve.

*“The results we have gathered are more than a paper exercise for the members of the ISM. They provide a real time, in-depth look of what our members are experiencing and feeling; right now. With such great insights, from within our own specific area of specialism [sales], we are more equipped than ever to support our members in ways they truly need. Our members are more than a bunch of national numbers or international statistics.*

*In Sales, we have our own nuances, so gleaning first hand insight from our members on the issues of stress, has been an imperative exercise if we're to effectively develop appropriate interventions and be more equipped to support in these changing times.*

*Building a stronger awareness of stress and understanding the tipping point of good stress before it becomes distress, for our growing community cannot be underestimated. The insights our member have provided are invaluable and will help us to continue our mission in raising the value of sales.”*

**- Thomas Moverley, Director, ISM**

In October 2018, the Health and Safety Executive<sup>i</sup> published its annual statistics 'Work related stress, depression or anxiety statistics in Great Britain, 2018' and claimed 15.4 million work days were lost during 2017/18, according to its Labour Force Survey. This loss equated to 595,000 workers, with 44% of those reporting *workloads* as the primary cause of the issue, with a further 14% stating a *lack of support*. The Stress in Sales survey supports this view.

Since 2011, stemming from an original study by the Centre for Mental Health<sup>ii</sup>, it has been frequently documented that 'Presenteeism' costs the UK economy £15.1bn per year, from Mental Health issues alone. And, an estimated cost of £8.4bn because of 'absenteeism' suggesting workers are more likely to go to work, with hidden issues, than go absent and reveal them. The survey findings support the view that due to self-stigma, there is a likelihood of presenteeism among the sales community.

Furthermore Mind<sup>iii</sup>, one of the UK's leading organisations 'for better mental health' state that *'there's no medical definition of stress, and health care professionals often disagree whether stress is the cause of problems or the result of them'*.

The Mental Health Foundation<sup>iv</sup> suggest 'at the most basic level, stress is our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event' and go on to describe stress as something that varies from person to person. Biologically, it is the body's natural survival response triggering a *fight, flight or freeze* response to stimuli. As the survey reports, there is a good level of stress within sales, not only is it expected, some purport it's needed.

To define the term *stress* for World Mental Health Day in 2018<sup>v</sup> Mental Health Organisation stated it as *"the degree to which you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope as a result of pressures that are unmanageable"*.

This remains the biggest challenge for the sales community and our results suggest improvements would be best achieved through changes to performance management and leadership style.



However, with such limited clarity, to what stress is and isn't, it is no wonder the world is struggling to effectively deal with, never mind wipe out stress at work. Whilst stress is not considered a mental health issue, it is closely connected to it.

Too much stress can cause mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. And, prolonged periods of stress, including feelings of overwhelm, can affect both the physical body and mental state, giving rise to terms such as distress, chronic stress or long-term stress.

*“Stress is a response to a threat in a situation,  
whereas anxiety is a reaction to the stress”*

### **The Mental Health Foundation**

Recent studies conducted by the World Health Organisation<sup>vi</sup> suggest as many as 83 million people across Europe suffer with Mental Health Issues, which equates to 1 in 4 adults in the UK, according to Mind<sup>vii</sup>. Scaling the lack of prevention and cure is widespread geographically and is not culturally bound.

According to the World Health Organisation in June 2018, their report revealed a ‘*global shortage of health workers trained in mental health*’. In its latest Mental Health Atlas, they highlight ‘*that scale-up of resources for mental health is not happening quickly enough*’ and that a ‘*failure to invest in mental health as a matter of urgency will have health, social and economic costs on a scale we have rarely seen before*’<sup>viii</sup>.

Stress in Sales is not just a local phenomenon, it's not a blip in the system and it's not more likely to appear in one sector over another. Stress in sales is real, it's shrouded by stigma and self-stigma, as the results reveal.

Alarming, despite reports in the press on the contrary, over half of the respondents did not feel secure or were unsure, about telling their manager they were feeling stressed.

Sadly, almost 80% of respondents reported negative feelings as a direct result of needing to take stress related time off work, regardless of it being caused by work or not, with *guilt* and *disappointment* being the strongest feelings.

Whilst many comments in the survey suggested a growing belief that more awareness around mental health and stress was being generated, many commented that more effort was still needed.

When considering proactive interventions and even prevention, it is clear from the responses that emotional suffering can be eased with more support. Whilst the report identified that organisations are making pockets of change, over 38% of Line Managers claimed ‘none or very little’ was being done to prevent mental health and stress in their workplace.

Less than 5% of Leaders noted Mental Health First Aid or similar programmes in their workplace. The most frequent suggestion for support was improved preventative measure and training.

And finally, on a more positive note almost 30% of Leaders felt confident that they could deal effectively with stress in their team and 55% highlighting some confidence but would like to know more.

As the report reveals; it's time to turn stress on its head, shake off the costs and value mental health at work not because it is a sign of the times, but because it potentially impacts everyone within an organisation.



## Thanks to



**Dr Zoë Douglas-Judson** is founder and CEO of mental health consultancy Mindologists. She is a Doctor in strategic change and performance, a consultant, practitioner, motivational speaker and coach. She has over 20 years' experience delivering customized strategic change solutions to positively impact mental health, culture and performance.

support service.

Mindologists are specialists in people thinking, behaviour and mindset transformation. We deliver on the whole mental health spectrum, from shifting severe negative mindsets in our private practises, to enabling and developing high-performing behaviours, individually and in teams, through our outsourced



**Astrid Ennis, ISM Fellow** - After spending 20 years in Sales, Management and Learning & Development in fast-paced large organisations, Astrid's purpose is to inspire and enable people to achieve personal growth and success by empowering them to think differently and live the best versions of their lives.

She brings her consultancy skills, coaching, mental wellbeing and learning and development expertise together in her role as a people development consultant. Combining her sales & business operational background with her coaching & therapy expertise she adds significant business and personal value.

## Section One - Survey Overview

The data set for the Stress in Sales 2018 Survey was collected through two release points, providing exclusive insights into how our members are feeling right now, what they are experiencing and importantly, what can be improved at work to better support stress and good mental health.

Following the collection of data this comprehensive report has been written for the benefit of the ISM Member Community, Business Leaders and HR Professionals seeking to positively impact Mental Health at work.

### Survey Design & Data Collection

The process of data gathering was enabled with an online survey tool, through an embedded link in an email distributed to the ISM members. The survey was a short multi-choice questionnaire which required respondents to provide a mix of both qualitative and quantitative insights.

To increase participation and completion rates, the design of the survey was developed with the intention of allowing the respondents to feel the survey would be quick, easy and add value. The survey was structured in two main parts; the first consisting of 9 questions for all members and the second part for Line Managers with only 6 questions.

Whilst this paper reveals the responses of the Institute's first ever Stress in Sales Survey, it recognises the value of additional follow-up discussions with member organisations. It is anticipated that focus groups and 1-2-1 interviews with member Leaders would help to test and validate the key findings, thus adding richness to the quality of the recommendations.

Additionally, releasing a survey annually would enable the sales community to continually benchmark their progress, share ideas and learn from best practice.

### Survey Limitations, Challenges and Considerations

As with all surveys, several limitations, challenges and considerations were presented to ensure the participation and accuracy of member responses prior to interpretation. These were mostly around the term 'stress' to ensure the survey was developed in a way that was free of influencing terms or containing an unconscious bias.

At the start of the survey, following initial discussions and consultation sessions, it was clear that whilst 'stress' is more recently quoted as a negative term in the workplace, for Sales Professionals it's something they often thrive upon.

This presented the first challenge for the survey and highlighted the need to 'consider' stress positively. As a result, the scales and multiple choices used in the survey were designed to allow stress to be considered by the respondents negatively, neutrally and positively. The second challenge of the survey was the ability to use the term stress in a manner that could be universally accepted. This challenge could not be entirely met.

In line with the Mental Health Foundation's view that stress varies with each person and further, with consideration to the apparent lack of a clear definition for stress, the survey was at risk of becoming something it wasn't trying to be – a survey to generate a definitive answer to 'what is stress?'

With these points in mind, the survey purported to accept stress as individual as the respondent, and further sought to understand causes and outcomes of stress and not a definition of it. This approach met with only one direct challenge from a member, who felt the descriptions used on the scale could be "demeaning" and would be better left to individual interpretation. A fair challenge and something that has been considered when reviewing and interpreting the results and to be reflected in the Stress in Sales 2019 Survey.



## Data Size and Quality

The survey yielded 231 sets of data from a potential 325 respondents. Potential respondents were those whom opened the survey but did not necessarily complete it. Of those 325, an average 231 respondents answered, it should be noted that when faced with Q7 *'What does your workplace provide to help maintain good mental health?'* The response level dropped to 205. This changes in responses is reflected throughout the survey.

Additionally, when the survey presented the opportunity for respondents to provide qualitative feedback as with Q9 *'What could your company introduce to do more or prevent stress at your workplace?'* responses dropped again, this time to 144. Of those 144 respondents, 10 either stated N/A or had nothing to add, providing 134 qualitative comments.

These comments have been categorised to simplify the findings and to make valuable use of them in the recommendations section, at the end of the report.

Q10 *'Has your organisation provided you with training to support your team dealing with Mental Health and Stress?'* were the first of six Line Managers questions in this section. It must be noted that there was a decrease in responses, as expected.

Whilst Q10 received 171 responses, Q11, Q12 and Q13 received 163 responses on average. In line with earlier trends, respondent numbers dropped once again for qualitative based questions.

Q14 *'What tools, techniques and/or systems does your organisation have in place to help prevent Mental Health and stress at work?'* and Q15 where Line Managers were given the opportunity to provide further information and insights, they felt would benefit the sales community, which yielded 105 and 56 responses respectively.

Ahead of the detailed analysis and interpretation of the survey data, the reduction in qualitative responses has been considered as either a time-based reaction or lack of valuable comment or suggestion.

As this was an anonymous survey these options provide the fairest interpretation for response reduction.

Additional validation with member focus groups and Leader 1-2-1 interviews would help to support these assumptions.

## Section Two – Scale and Impact

This section aims to present a clear picture of the current levels of stress in sales, amongst our ISM community.

Initially the report seeks to present the results for each question and then endeavours to validate the them by comparing each with other questions, qualitative responses and additional secondary research.

### Scale and Impact of Stress in Sales

The opening questions of the survey targeted the respondent's reaction to stress on performance in their sales career. Whilst less than 5% stated no stress at all in Q1 when asked about work-related stress, their response more than doubled, for non-work-related stress.

This suggests there is more resilience of none work related stress than work related stress at work.

*10.82% stated 'frequently, I often think about a change of career' which is 3 times higher than the opposing none work related stress claiming just 3.9% marking 'frequently, it's hard to be in sales with my life'.*



Looking further at the potential hindrance of stress on their performance, it was found that the initial dynamic changed when considering a change of career or the need to take time off due to stress.

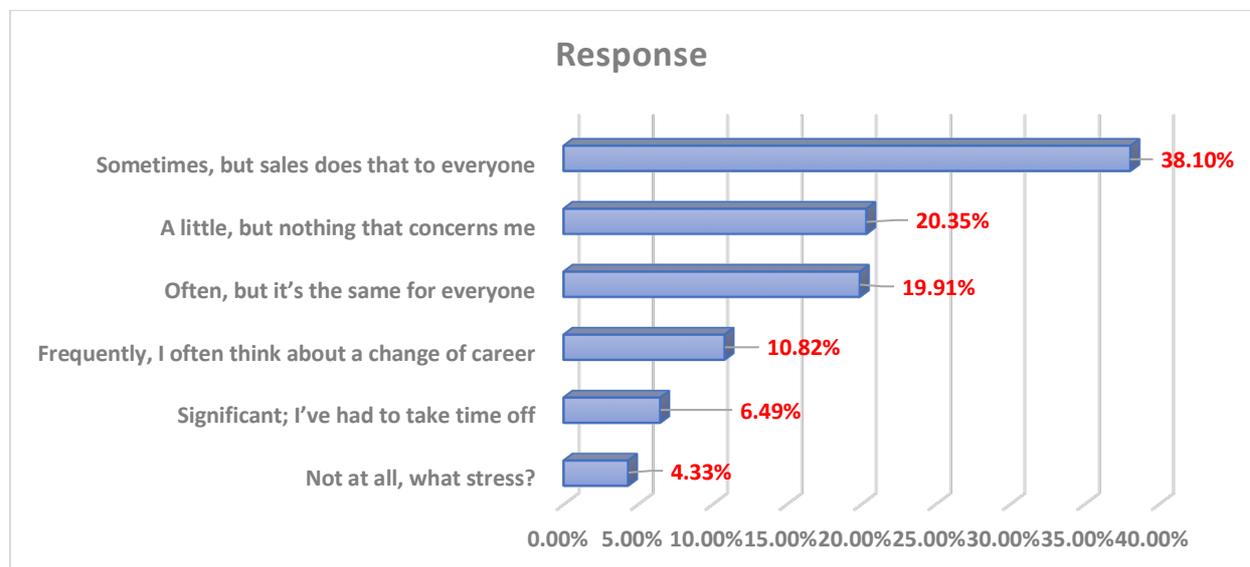
For work related stress almost 20% had either taken time off or frequently considered a change of career. Whereas less than 7% reported the same, for none-work related stress.

Comparing the two results may suggest that sales as a career is stressful.

It would be useful to compare these results to other careers, to understand if it is typical of this sector or not and help support greater understanding of the tipping point of good stress levels as a necessary enabler for high performing sales professionals.

## Question 1, Results Chart

Using a scale of 0 – 5 please state if work related stress has hindered your performance in your sales career.



It is worth noting that the sliding scale of 0-5 with supporting statements was highlighted as 'unhelpful' and potentially 'demeaning' by one respondent. This was a fair observation and whilst this may be true, the absence of supporting statements would leave the sliding scale open to wider interpretation e.g. a little to one maybe considered 'often' to another.

Considering further those who *had to take time off* was double for work related stress at 6.49% than those taking time off for none work related stress at 3.03%. However, those who stated their performance had '*often*' been hindered represented over 16% of sales professionals for none-work related challenges and almost 20% for work related ones. Whilst the phrase provided a sense of *normality* for work related stress, it still highlighted that one fifth of sales professionals believe their performance is negatively impacted.

This result supports the earlier view on resilience at work and could suggest presenteeism maybe more likely, because of work-related stress than none-work stress. It also supports the view that the sales force is more likely to be absent due to work related stress than life events and challenges.

This finding becomes more prevalent when combining the top three scores of 'often' to 'significant' which highlights work related stress at 37% compared to none-work related stress significantly lower at 23%. The value

of this finding is critical especially at this time given the growing pressure and prevalence of organisations to better support mental health at work.

Whilst leaders struggle to ascertain their level of responsibility and boundaries with employees' mental health and well-being, further insights into root causes become invaluable.

Given one cannot separate oneself from oneself, knowing what to provide support for and how, will undoubtedly provide a direct benefit to the workforce performance and the bottom-line.

## Question 2, Results Chart

### Using a scale of 0 – 5 please state; if non-work-related stress has hindered your performance in your sales career

All in all, it's fair to state that Q1 and Q2 suggest a strong sense of 'good stress' which could be considered in line with expected sales performance. This highlights a very healthy 79.5% average of 'not at all to sometimes' having a hindrance on performance.

This presents favourable results and suggests the likelihood of improvement in presenteeism more controllable, if it were to be acknowledged and addressed, given the sales force accept and expect it.

### Critically, how confident is the sales force in sharing their stress issues with their manager?

As shown in the chart below, the survey results start to look a little more alarming for the potential issues and risks in sales for Leaders. The data shows almost 50/50 response to how 'secure' the sales professional feels, in telling his/her manager that they are stressed.

Unfortunately, this number tips negatively to over 56% when you add nearly 10% of respondents who stated 'don't know' in feeling secure telling their manager about stress. This must present a significant area for improvement especially when considering the cost of presenteeism in the UK at £15.1bn and \$150bn for the USA.



Imagining a sales professional feeling unable to be open about their mental state supports the view of that stigma remains an issue, nationally and globally. According to Psychology Today<sup>ix</sup> reactions to those with mental health issues can lead to "forms of exclusion and discrimination – either within social circles or within the workplace".

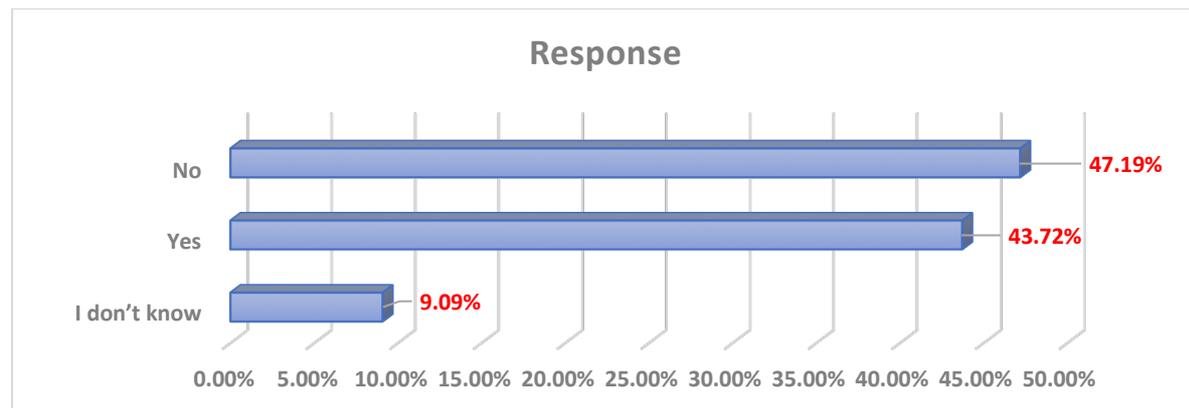
As stated earlier, stress is not defined as a mental health issue, however when considering a lack of feeling secure in over 50% of respondents to openly discuss stress with their manager, we must consider the

compounding impacts of stigma and self-stigma. This data finding potentially presents the key area for improvement for leaders determined to better support their salesforce and managers.

Whilst not conclusive, later qualitative responses suggest a variety of issues supporting this finding including; blame culture, lack of awareness, lack of training, work processes and leadership styles.

## Question 3, Results Chart

**Would you feel secure telling your manager that you're feeling stressed?**



There is a real opportunity here for Leaders is to foster and develop a culture of bravery within their organisation; where their professionals feel safe to 'be human' as one respondent stated:

*"Companies appear to talk about support, but really go down a HR route very quickly to manage, rather than go down the "human" side of support to assist that team member.*

*In the private sector, in my experience there is a reluctance to raise mental health issues early for fear of being quickly managed out".*

The survey presents some interesting findings for question four, as it queries the sales professional's 'performance' and asks indirectly the personal impact their sales role has on their life.

We may consider the impacts here as personal performance, life style or work life balance expectations. As illustrated in the chart below, over one third of respondents claim they 'frequently find it difficult' to switch off from work when they get home.

Add this third to a further 9.91% who claim their 'job takes over their life' and the study shows disappointingly that almost half of respondents, 43.53% are on the negative end of the scale, when it comes to switching off from work.

## Question 4, Results Chart

**Using a scale of 0 – 5 please state how difficult you find it to switch off from work when you get home?**



Whilst the survey doesn't ask it specifically, it would be rather remiss not to consider the *impacts* of the sales professional and their *inability to switch off*. Being unable to switch off raises the risk of negative feeling, emotional and/or behavioural change.

Any changes may be described initially as stress by one but could be equally described in other ways by another such as; irritable, impatient, disappointment or frustration.

If professionals feel like they are not in control or unable to switch off they potentially become more vulnerable to negative consequences, however felt or described. All feelings and emotions have the potential to escalate out of control, and therefore becoming stress, distress or some other negative behavioural symptom.

As it has already been noted, stress is not considered a mental health issue, however it is known to be a cause of them such as anxiety, OCD or depression. Furthermore, it is often documented that stress can be a factor in relationship break-down<sup>x</sup> and can cause escapist or addictive tendencies such as alcohol abuse, gambling or drugs<sup>xi</sup>.

*This report does not purport to claim that the level of stress documented in this survey is a cause of any of the latter. However, it does highlight that being ignorant to the potential knock-on effects of stress could have greater impacts elsewhere<sup>xii</sup>.*

*This certainly raises the debate of boundaries and responsibilities in organisations.*

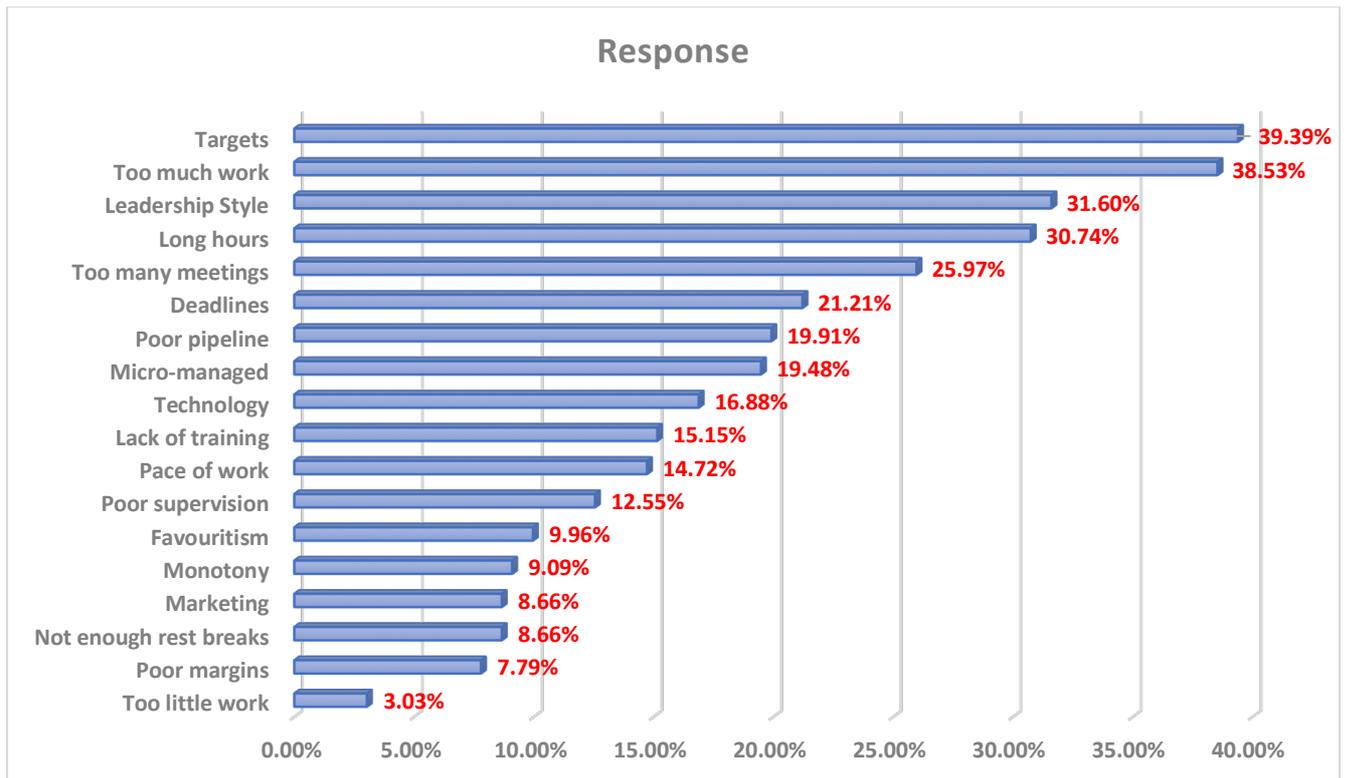
This view is echoed later when reviewing the responses from Q7 and Q9, where individuals describe what their organisation offers to help maintain good mental health and provide ideas on how to prevent stress at work. As any good manufacturing operations manual will tell you '*prevention is better than cure*'.

Ask any psychotherapist or mindologist and they will tell you '*they seek the root cause to human issues, thoughts, symptoms, feelings, emotions and behaviours to develop a remedy to solve them*', acting initially as a cure, which must be maintained for future prevention. Just like going to your G.P, diagnosis is key.

When the survey respondents were asked '*what are their main causes of stress in sales*' in their workplace, they were able to choose up to three from a list of 18, as shown in the chart below. This chart presents a diagnostic of the primary stress symptoms felt by sales professionals.

## Question 5, Results Chart

**Please choose 3 – what are the main causes of stress in sales at your workplace.**



The results presented in the chart above show *'targets'* and *'too much work'* virtually neck and neck at almost 40% as the lead causes of stress in sales.

Close behind are *'leadership styles'* at just over 30% and *'long hours'* effectively the same.

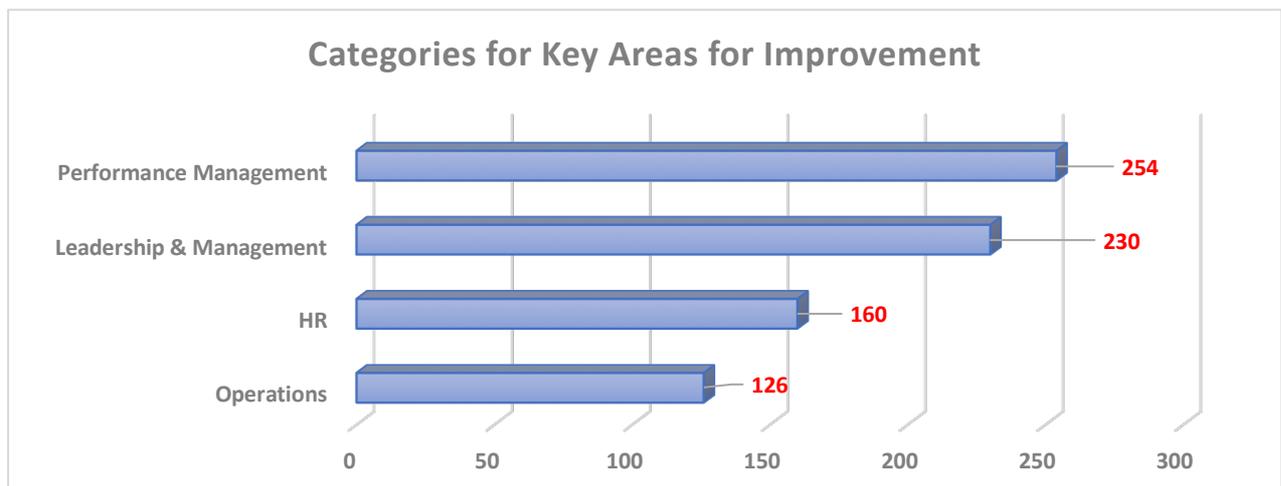
For clarity purposes, the findings from question five have been categorised into 4 key target areas to support highlighted areas of improvement.

Whilst this question was quantitatively based, written responses extracted from question nine clearly support these results.

## Categories for Key Areas for Improvement

Operations	Response	HR	Response
Marketing	20	Not enough rest breaks	20
Monotony	21	Pace of work	34
Technology	39	Lack of training	35
Poor pipeline	46	Long hours	71
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>160</b>

Leadership & Management	Response	Performance Management	Response
Favouritism	23	Too little work	7
Poor supervision	29	Poor margins	18
Micro-managed	45	Deadlines	49
Too many meetings	60	Too much work	89
Leaderships styles	73	Targets	91
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>254</b>



This question provides an abundance of information to help support any opportunities for improvement and immediate action, by leaders in any sales environment and to potentially improve organisation performance.

What is apparent in the chart above, from the collective responses, are the overall weaknesses of 'how' the sales professional is managed through their performance.

Categorisation allows the report to highlight performance management as the most likely area to provide positive impact in reducing stress.

Whilst subsequent questions highlight potentially localised issues with process, such as "better flow, fewer miles travelled", "accept that sales administration / order processing ... takes time" or people issues including "more people" for HR and Operations, these areas for improvement were less dominant, as causes for stress. Whereas management or behaviours-based suggestions, such as "remove blame culture" and "more training" were more prominent.

As the World Health Organisation highlights 1 in every 10 people need mental health care at one time or another.

If leaders were to truly see and understand the value in improving the mental state and well-being of their workforce real benefits would be realised.

## Section Two – Personalisation and Proactivity

There is much talk these days about the *stigma* around mental health and stress. It was noted earlier in the report, over 50% of sales professionals were either unsure or would NOT tell their line manager they were feeling stressed.

Latest reports, especially around suicide, highlight how little the individual confides in others and fails to get the support they need to deal effectively with stress-based symptoms and illnesses.

Much of this is believed to be due to a lack of real understanding and clarity around stress and mental health; what is it and what it isn't. As highlighted earlier, this lack of understanding for the person suffering or the potential supporter observing is potentially part of the problem. This view is corroborated through the qualitative responses of the sales professionals.

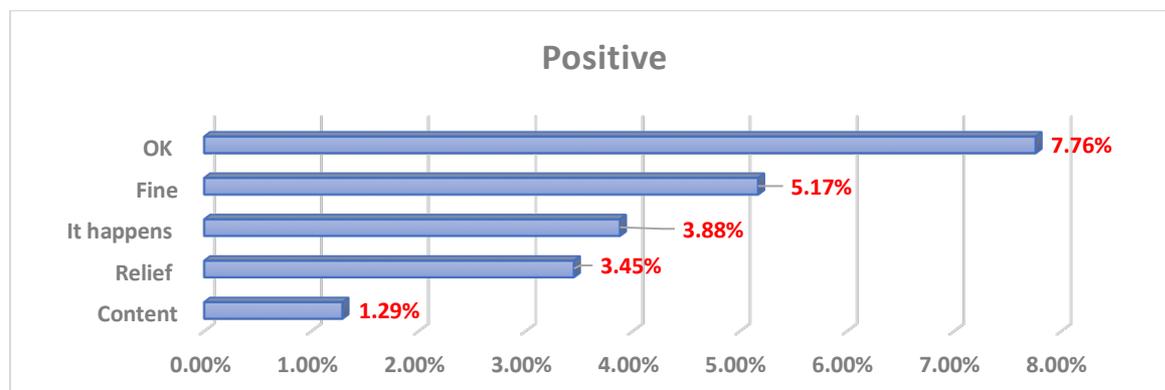
A supporter cannot seek to offer help or guidance to someone suffering, if they do not know what it is, or know how to spot the signs or symptoms, never mind how to best guide and sign-post someone in need.

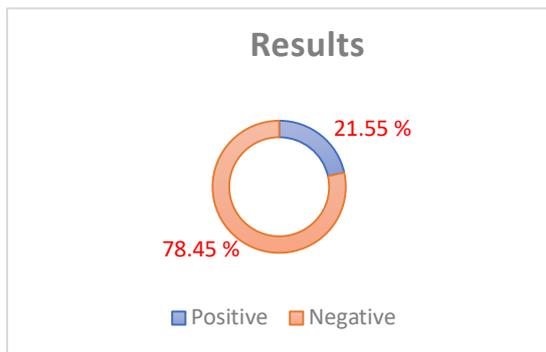
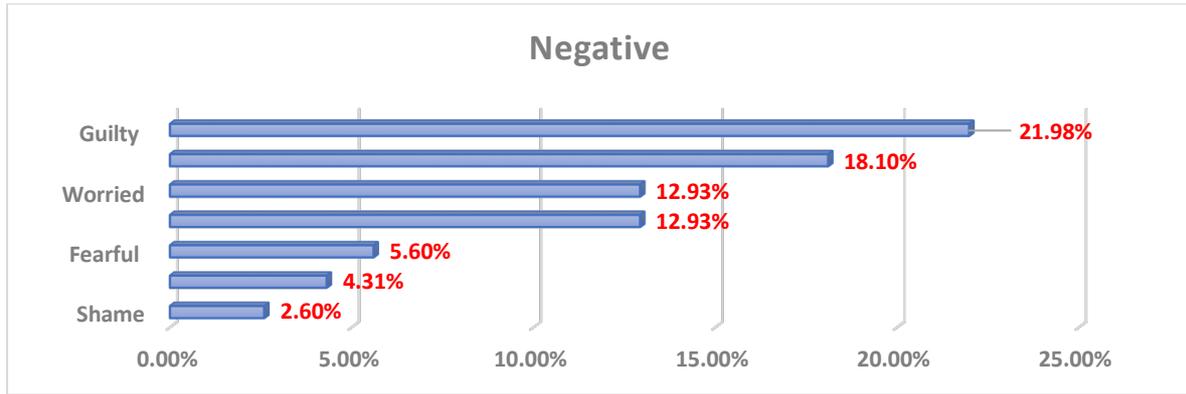
What appears more prevalent and in urgent need of support through this study is the '*self-stigma*' imposed by the individual themselves in acknowledging, discussing and obtaining professional support for their mental health and stress. In the UK, much effort and many campaigns have been created to teach those internally suffering that *it's ok to not be ok*, without fear of retribution or negative consequence.

The real challenge is for both supporter and sufferer to recognise the signs early, to reduce the severity and potential impact of stress and therefore mental health issues. For this to be possible far greater awareness, trust building, skills development, signposting and responsibility of all needs to be achieved. During the design of the survey, it was considered invaluable to ascertain a better understanding of the '*common feelings*' of the sales professional, should they needed to take time off work for stress related issues.

Question 6 enabled this. Understanding these better enables more clarity than ever, on the feelings and potential emotions organisations can proactively seek to support, particularly for those hiding or protecting their mental health and stress issues. Disappointingly, though incredibly valuable, the chart below shows a strong insight and standard 80/20 result on what can be considered negative or destructive feelings versus positive feelings in the scenario given.

### Question 6, Results Table





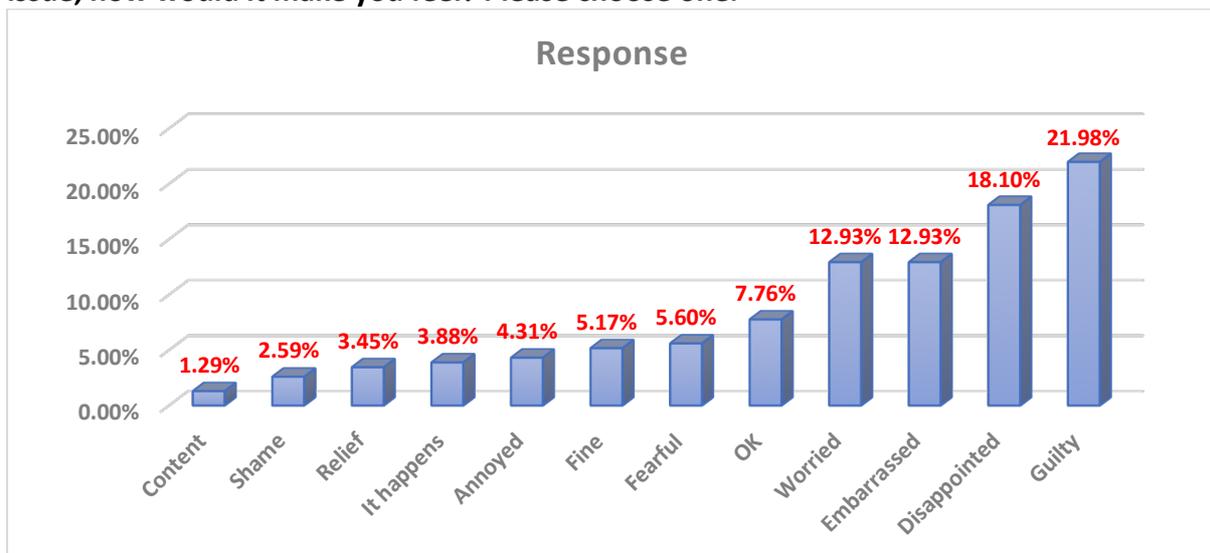
As Leaders, the question really should be not only what can we do to stop this, but how can we help you feel ok with stress?

It appears obvious to state but sales professionals should not be *worried* or *fearful*, let alone feel *guilty* or *embarrassed*, about needing to take time off work due to stress related illnesses, regardless if caused by either work or their personal life.

This simply should not be acceptable in any organisation.

## Question 6, Results Chart

**If you needed to take time off work for stress related illness caused by work or non-work issue, how would it make you feel? Please choose one.**



Mental health is about our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, emotions and ultimately our behaviours so surely it seems fair to say, 'if we look after those more, our workplace performance and ultimately market results including customer satisfaction, market positioning should all go up favourably'.

## How we behave is how we really impact the bottom line, so what are our organisation's doing to help maintain good mental health?

The Stress in Sales survey question seven, tackled that question head on to find out what's already out there and working. Interestingly, there was a notable increase in respondents skipping this question.

With further investigation, it would be prudent to discover if this was due to a lack of awareness by the respondent to what their company was doing to support stress and mental health or if this skip simply highlighted a gap that needed support.

If the latter option is correct, it would suggest that almost 10% didn't feel their company did anything on the list of 21 options provided.

On a more positive note, at the top of the leader board was an *'open door policy'* at 41.35%, which supports the earlier view that sales professionals felt secure in telling their line manager of their stress issues (Q3).

This view was further validated through question nine open responses. Close behind, with over a third of respondents was *'compassionate leaders'* which presents a very interesting finding when viewed against the results of question five; when leadership styles were flagged as a cause of stress.

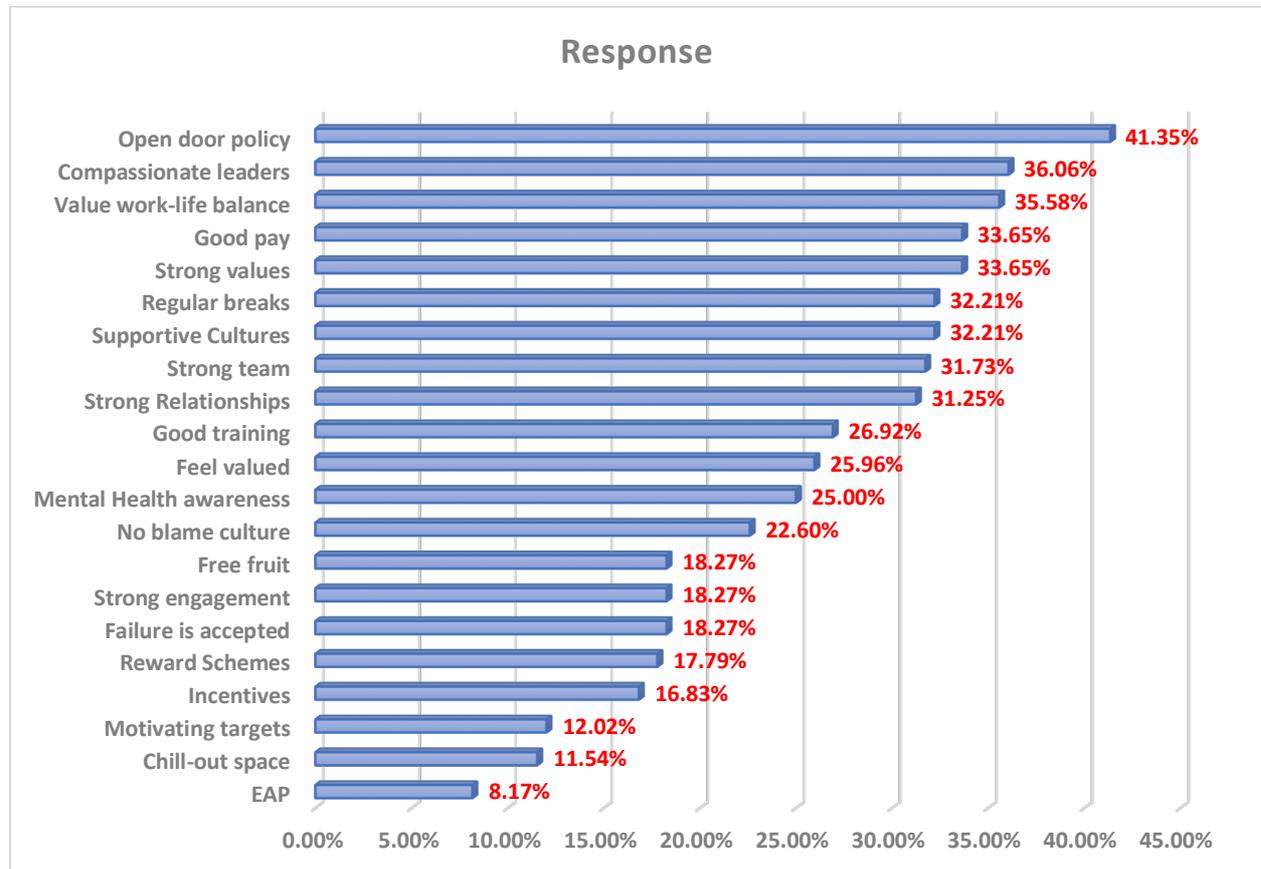
What makes this particularly interesting is the importance of leaders as key enablers and dis-enablers of a perceived culture of stress or good mental health.

This clearly highlights the need for leaders to raise their awareness and become better at dealing with such issues.



## Question 7, Results Chart

What does your workplace provide to help maintain good mental health – please choose all that apply



A surprising result was the lack of respondents who felt that the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) helped to maintain good mental health. At just 9% it could be considered that this could be reflective of the sales community who participated.

If they are part of a small company who does not have EAP then they would have no reason to select it. Alternatively, despite confidentiality an employee may not trust the service for one reason or other for example he/she may fear the level of confidentiality or not wish to discuss their issues with a work-based service.

Despite the high levels of respondents being unable to switch off from work as discussed with question four, over 35% of them stated their organisation 'value work-life balance'.

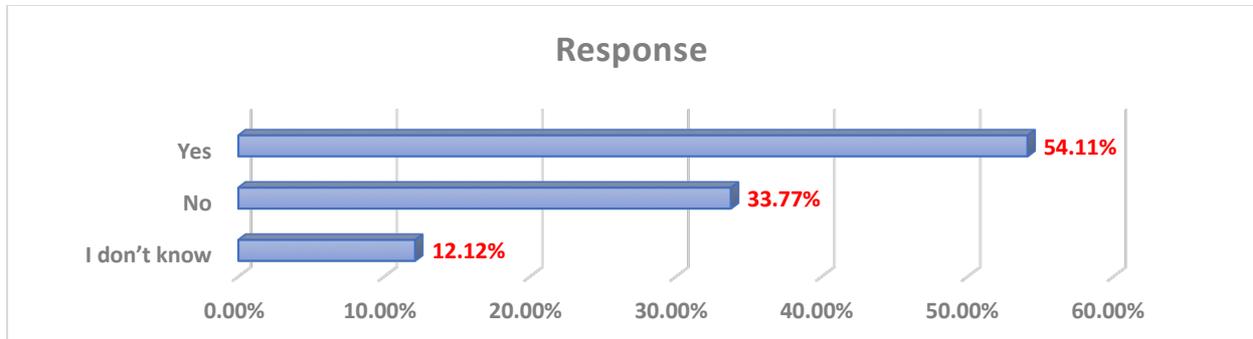
Again, this provides valuable insight of earlier results when *long hours* were highlighted as a source of stress.

This suggests more focus and improvement on working hours would have a beneficial effect on stress levels, mental health and ultimately performance.

When looking at question eight there appears to be quite a mismatch in responses given 54% believe their organisation promote or actively support a good work-life balance. Almost 20% difference, providing an inconsistency in the results.

## Question 8, Results Chart

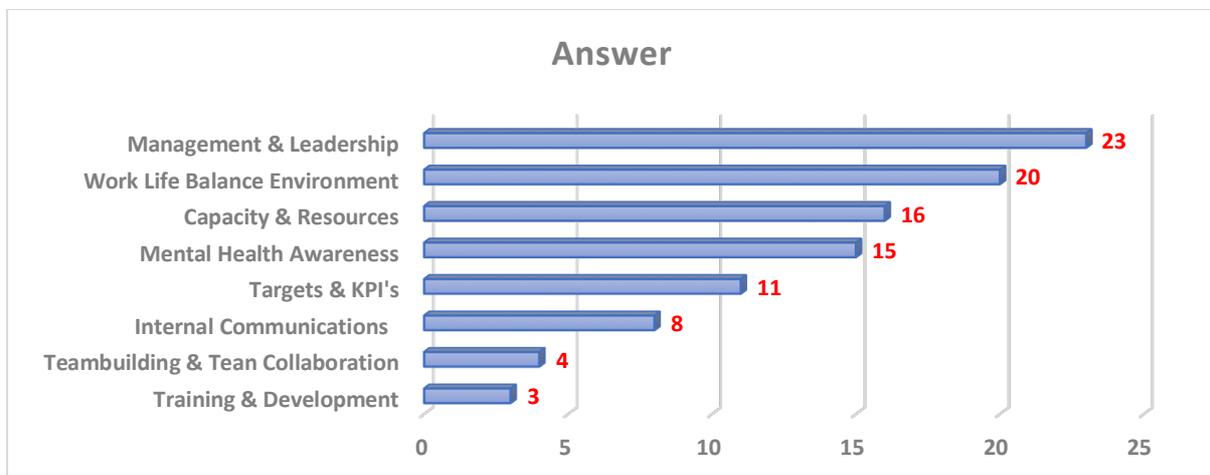
Does your organisation promote or actively support a good work-life balance?



Again, and in line with the 50/50 view of feeling secure talking about stress with managers, question eight illustrates that almost 50% believe their organisation either does not or doesn't know if it promotes a good work-life balance.

At this stage and without additional enquiry, at best it must be assumed that everyone's perceived value of work-life balance could be underpinning this split in decision, however this view is supported from the qualitative responses in question nine, as shown below.

## Question 9, Results Chart



Collating the results for question nine, as with question seven, it made sense to categorise the responses to some palatable format. Whilst wording varied slightly, the essence of the 8 core categories were revealed and demonstrated a significant correlation to earlier findings.

Not least, improvements with Leadership and Management provided the highest results from 23% of participants commenting this was an area for improvement. Reflecting this finding to Q5, causes of stress and Q7, maintaining good mental health, it is apparent these views are consistent from every angle of questioning; positive and negative and should receive due focus for development.

Secondly, and once again resonating earlier findings is work-life balance. Despite the potential contradiction of views in enabling or disabling this, long hours and being unable to switch off effectively these clearly support each other as a key driver for good mental health and avoiding stress. In support of question five, 11% of

respondents highlighted targets and KPIs as an area for prevention of stress at work. This was further supported by 16% of people believing that more capacity and resources would improve stress at work.

Finally, and in-line with Q14 and Q15 were 15% of people recognising the need for more mental health awareness as a preventative approach to stress in the workplace.

## Summary

This key section of the report has provided insights and subsequent interpretation of results from the Institute's sales professional members, on Stress in Sales. It has sought to deliver a fair and balanced view, together with supporting literature to the current scale and impact of stress, specifically in sales. Through a series of nine questions the report has provided clarity on the following;

1. Scale and Impacts of Stress
2. Personalisation and Proactivity of Stress and Stress Reduction

As a result, several key areas have been identified as areas for improvement and future development including; Leadership and Management Development, Hours / Work-life Balance, Increased Mental Health Awareness and Training. Underpinning these key areas and potentially as a primary output from them is a clear need to support a culture of bravery for sales professionals to be able to feel safe in discussing stress and mental health issues and receiving the support they need.

In the subsequent section, the report will focus on the managers' responses to Stress in Sales before a summary of the findings and recommendations are given.

## Section Three – Line Managers & Readiness

In this section, the report focusses on the responses of the ISM's Line Manager members. There are six questions presented, analysed and interpreted, some of which have already been reflected and discussed in the previous section.

The questions in this section were specifically designed to understand the current level of training, confidence, competencies and systems in place to effectively spot and support mental health and stress in the workplace, specifically from a line manager's perspective.

Overall the results provide both encouraging and concerning evidence in dealing with mental health and stress.

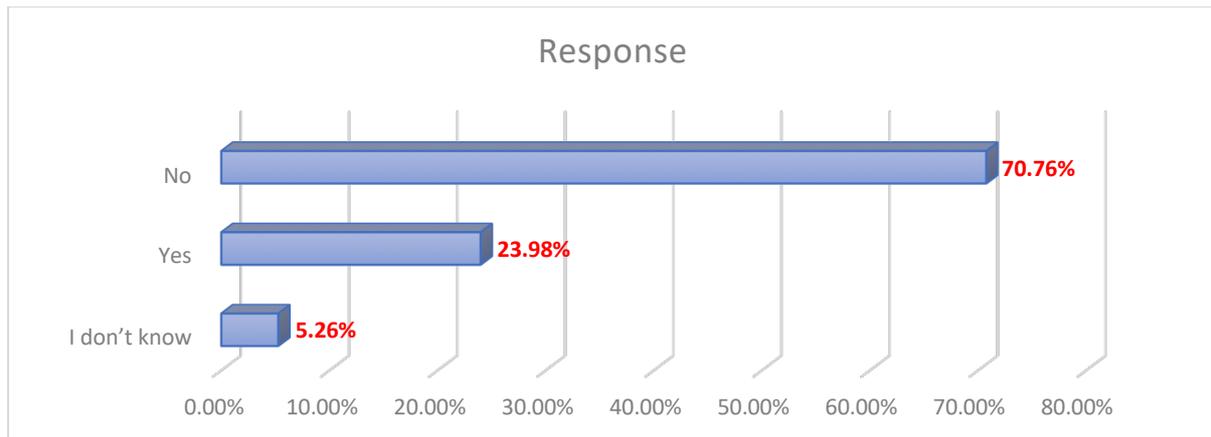
### Question 10, Results Chart

On first impressions, the interpretation of the chart below could be disheartening, however when you consider the rapid rise in awareness of mental health over just a few short years, we must celebrate that almost 25% of managers have received training for mental health and stress.

It's easy to slam other organisations for not yet doing so, nonetheless something is being done which is encouraging, as it shows this issue is no longer being ignored or swept under the carpet.

**Please note: This question is for Line Managers only. Has your organisation provided you with training to support your team dealing with Mental Health and stress?**





Training in mental health and stress at work comes at a cost. It requires significant levels of leadership commitment to ensure it is valuably received, not to mention believed and trusted. In recent years' organisation's such as Lloyds Banking Group, have enabled this agenda to positively grow, through public sharing of their CEO, António Horta-Osório own personal story in battling with stress, anxiety, sleep deprivation and burnout<sup>xiii</sup>.

Additionally, as there continues to be an increase in the number of famous icons such as Prince Harry sharing their story, issues of taboo and stigma appear to be genuinely subsiding.

Furthermore, particularly in the UK, the rise of stories in the press around suicide, especially by those considered famous has shed more light, and in pockets, generated more funding to support those internally suffering with mental health issues.

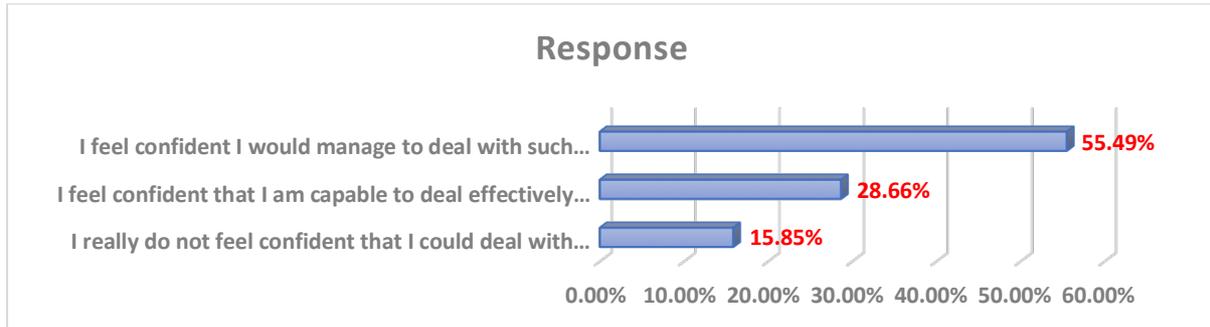
Finally, there has been a significant rise in awareness through planned events such as World Mental Health Day along with the UK's announcement of £2bn per year spend to boost mental health services. All efforts must be having a positive effect.

Despite these efforts, in-line with the responses from question nine earlier and shortly in the last question, over 75% have received no training or do not know if they have. Responding to the last question over 25% believe that training and prevention in mental health and stress, will benefit the sales community, which pertained to be the most frequent suggestion.

## Question 11, Results Chart

When reflecting question 10 against question 11, the numbers correlate when managers were asked 'how confident you are in your abilities to support a member of your team with mental health and stress'.

Almost the same number of those who had received training, also felt confident and capable to deal effectively with such issues.



Given almost 30% of all managers felt confident and capable, a further 55% felt confident but would like to know more, demonstrating a real appetite to be more effective in this area. A little more concerning was the 16% of managers who believed they did not feel confident that they could deal with such issues. This statistic raises a real risk in the workplace and can literally be the difference between life and death.

It's very well documented that work can be a common cause for stress and mental ill health, unfortunately there are many stories of employees taking their own life due to their inability to cope or as an indirect impact of financial issues.

With these points in mind, regardless of the results highlighted in Q1 and Q2, all managers should feel equipped to deal effectively with such issues, to be responsible leaders. If they fail to set this example, it may suggest to the workforce that mental health and stress are not valued or deemed important.

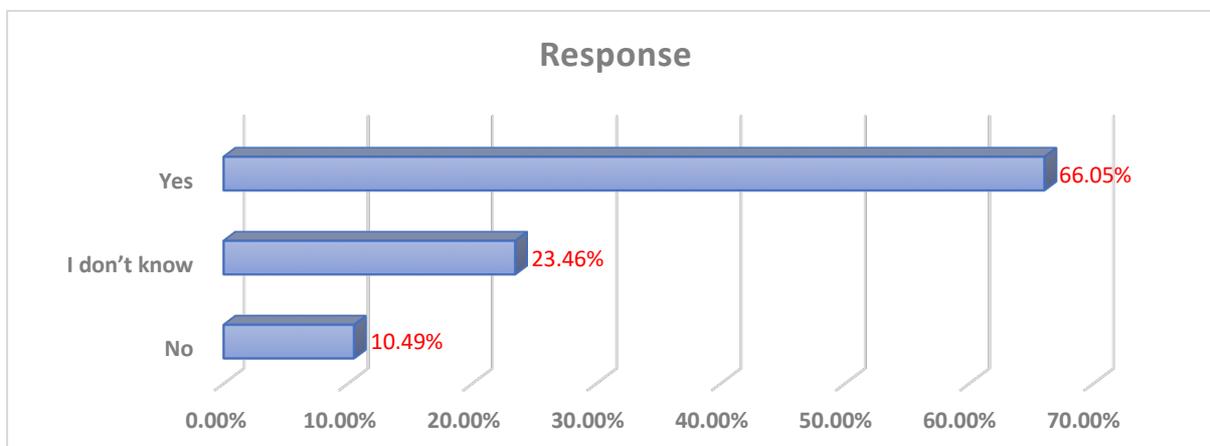
Raising the confidence in managers, should in turn create a positive impact across the organisation and the workforce.

## Question 12, Results Chart

Although over 85% of managers felt confident, according to the results from Q11, only 66% of managers believed they would recognise the signs of mental health and stress in their team. This cannot go unnoticed as the report stated earlier 'prevention over cure'. This finding supports the earlier view of increasing awareness and the need for more training. In addition, over 10% felt sure they would not recognise the signs and almost 25% were unsure.

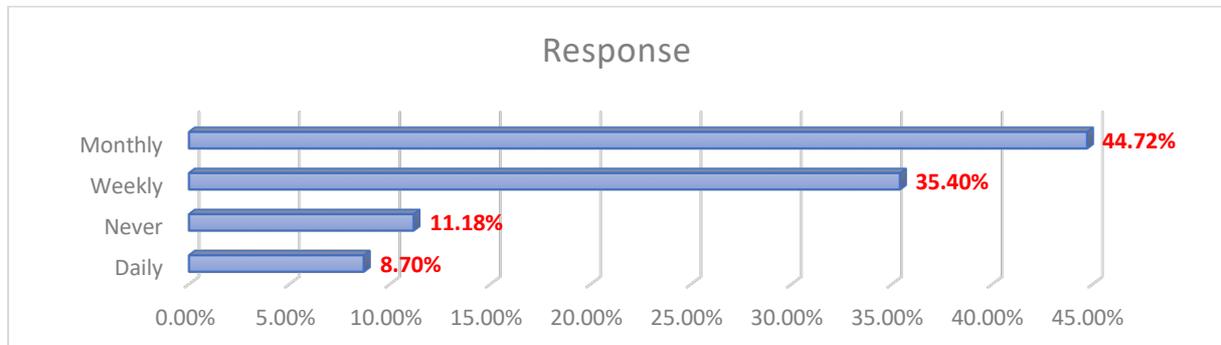
Without doubt recognising the signs are critical should they not escalate further for the individual and the business.

**Please note: This question is for Line Managers only. Would you be able to recognise the signs of Mental Health and stress in your team at work?**



## Question 13, Results Chart

Question Thirteen posed a very sensitive question when it asked managers 'how often do you notice your team experiencing higher than normal levels of stress'. The respondents were only able to select one answer from; daily, weekly, monthly and never. It really doesn't matter which way you look at this question, spotting or not spotting it, both point to an area which needs more support.



From the responses 11% claimed they 'never' noticed, considering this for a moment and you can appreciate the dilemma; does this mean the manager is incapable of noticing or that their organisation has eradicated higher than normal levels of stress? Without further investigation, it really is impossible to tell, however based on earlier results, maintaining and raising competent managers in this area would prove to be a valuable investment. Increasingly so this view is supported when you notice that almost half of managers notice higher than normal stress levels monthly. Similarly, 35% is noticed on a weekly basis.

**As suggested at the start of the paragraph, it doesn't matter which way you look at these answers noticing or not noticing; why is there such a frequency in higher than normal levels of stress?**

Less than 10% notice such issues daily, but over 80% collectively notice issues on a weekly and monthly basis. If any number of the suggestions made in Q9 or commented on in Q14 and Q15 were taken on-board it is expected that these numbers should be directly impacted.

Reflecting on this point, it would be prudent to expand on this question in 1-2-1 leader interviews and focus groups for greater insight and understanding now and for future studies.

## Question 14, Results

In the first of two qualitative questions set for Line Managers, the survey noted a drop of answers to 105. Reviewing the answers revealed almost 40% believed there was "little" or "nothing" by way of tools, techniques or systems in place to prevent mental health or stress in their workplace.

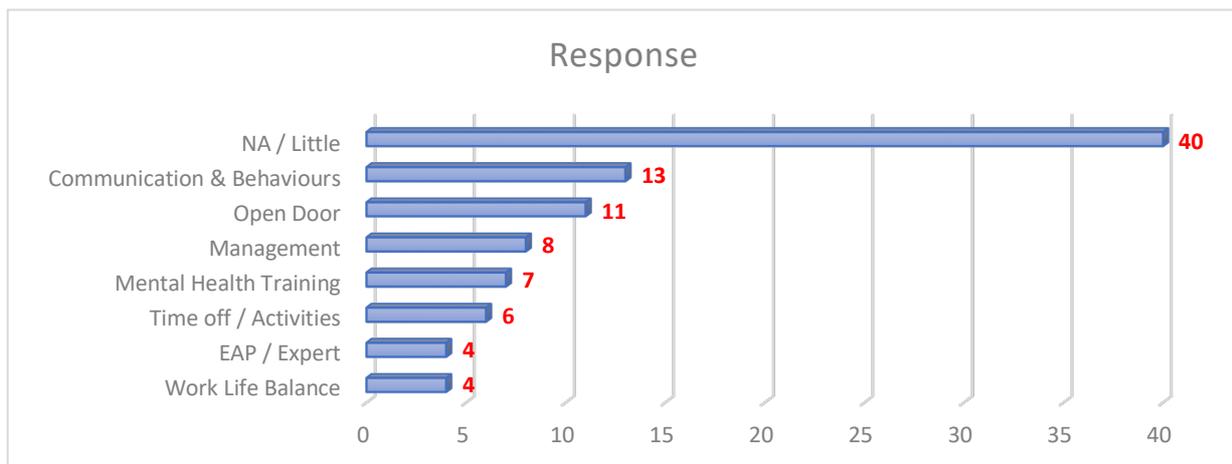
However, 9% stated they had received or were aware of Mental Health First Aid or similar programmes being rolled out. Once again, an "open door" was highlighted, whereas others commented more on behavioural attributes of leaders and others, more than specific tools or systems.

Even with lower responses these remained in line with earlier quantitative results. One Sales Director stated, "the organisation has limited tools" but their role requires them "to take suitable action" and commented "HR can be very black and white in their assessment".

Aligned to the 40% majority one Line Manager stated, *“I think there is still a taboo around mental health stress in the workplace and more should be done by all organisations and the ISM leading this top would be great”*. Most other comments reflected frequent communications and one to ones.

## Question 15, Results Chart

The final question of the Stress in Sales survey encouraged respondents to add any further information and insights, for the benefit the sales community. As a result, it is fair to comment that the responses aligned well to previous answers in earlier questions, providing a general consistency across the survey. In this final qualitative question, most Line Managers either declined to answer, or stated ‘none’ or ‘little’ as they done with Q14. This question represented the fewest number of responses, with only 31% completing it.



Despite the low number of responses, the same key factors were highlighted and for the purposes of clarity eight primary categories were formed. Of those eight, Mental Health Training, Communications and Behaviours, Open Door and Management came out on top.

Comments categorised as *‘Communications and Behaviours’* didn’t just focus on leaders, but also the work-force at large. They supported earlier discussions raised in the report that awareness is key for both supporters and sufferers of mental health and stress issues.

One commented on the need for courses “that build up self-confidence” where another highlighted the need for “empathy” and the need “to ask the question – is there something bothering you, or how are things generally?”

Blending both approach and outcomes together for training and behaviours, some suggested “mindfulness” or “meditation would help everyone in dealing with stress”. Others remained focussed on the need for “improved management styles” and for “senior managers to have the skills to stand up and take responsibility”. What seemed most pertinent was the over-arching view that there is a real perceived need for new behaviours and styles, ranging from “open door” to more “support and guidance” allowing for “compassion” and “encouragement” to come to the fore, regardless of how this is achieved.

## Section Four – Recommendations & Further Research

Throughout this report several key findings have been presented and discussed, with supporting research and industry figures to provide evidence for workplace improvements in sales management.

In this section, those key findings have been gathered and now summarised as recommendations. It is anticipated that these recommendations will enable the people and performance focussed Sales Leader’s to feel informed. The aim of the recommendations is to provide valuable insight and support to decision makers, in

promoting and delivering a brave new workplace; where “the human side of support” will be truly raised, and valued in sales, like never.

## Recommendation One:

The report has demonstrated a clear need for Leaders to seek more clarity in the root causes of stress in sales, to remove them to positively impact performance, presenteeism and work-life balance.

The survey showed that work-related stress was more likely to hinder performance, impacting as many as 37% of sales professionals. Furthermore, of those 37%, over 10% frequently consider a change of career. This recommended clarity should seek to embrace none-work related stress too, by raising the value of the sales professional as a human-being, living a full life; not just a ‘human-doing’ in sales life.

This view is particularly supported by the fact that almost half of sales professional’s struggle to switch off from work.

If Sales Leaders were to improve their awareness and knowledge of the drivers of stress, impacts would be felt through reduced attrition rates, absenteeism and presenteeism. Such favourable improvements and ways of working should naturally affect morale, employee longevity and sales performance.

## Recommendation Two:

The second area for improvement raises a significant need for Leaders to improve a culture of bravery and trust. With almost 80% of sales professionals reporting negative feelings should they need to take time off work, there is much to be done to positively change this.

In addition, with over 50% of respondents lacking a sense of security to confidently discuss stress, an improved sense of ‘it’s ok to not be ok’ must be achieved.

Stress and mental health issues may be considered ‘invisible’ by many, even the sufferer themselves, however this is no excuse for ignorance and dis-ownership of its existence. Whilst clarity and boundaries may still be blurred, responsibility should not be.

When Leaders improve internal communications to improve awareness of what is and what is not stress and mental health, favourable impacts will be noted. Creating a safe and supported place of work will reward the business and its people.

## Recommendation Three:

People often do by how they’re measured, so taking a fresh look at how performance is managed is highly recommended for the sales community. Innovative ways at setting targets and balancing work load must be given a new focus by Leaders to improve motivation.

Understanding that there’s a fine, and often individually unique line, between good stress and bad stress for sales performance, opens a raft of new approaches.

To support this, Leaders should also consider how they are recruiting their sales force to improve the match of performance management techniques with the psychological profile and motivational mind-set of new candidates.

As Leaders become more aligned and creative in how they motivate their sales professionals they will foster improved psychological contracts, performance results and overall job satisfaction.



## Recommendation Four:

Leadership styles provided a much-needed area for improvement, according to 73 of all respondents. As internal communications are increasing awareness, trust and bravery for the sales force to 'talk the talk', leadership styles must receive appropriate training to 'walk the walk'. Demonstrable change must be seen through the behaviours of sales leaders if stigma and self-stigma are to reduce.

Over 80% and almost 90% of Line Managers notice higher than normal levels of stress on a regular basis. Reducing stress requires two-way strength and believe between those supporting and those suffering.

Fostering a culture of bravery and trust needs more than simply telling someone 'it's ok'. Through original and lateral thinking, leaders must be given opportunities to put their training in to action and show how they've changed, to allow others to follow.

When Leaders visually and vocally demonstrate new styles in communicating, leading, listening and motivating, barriers will begin to drop. As the sales community is encouraged to grow in confidence, so will the Leader. Together, the work-place will observe the first-hand the benefits in eradicating the focus on people from one of cost, to one of value.

## Recommendation Five:

The final recommendation may not have been the strongest response, but it has been the most consistent through the survey; the need for more specialist Mental Health training and support. Suggestions given included Mental Health First Aid and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) with some commenting "*it needs to be more than a tick box exercise*".

Though less than 9% choose EAP as a source of help in the workplace, the qualitative responses highlighted the need for more than a change in how sales professionals are managed. This is significantly strengthened by 70% of Line Managers who despite being confident, still wanted to learn more. Additionally, 75% of them declared they had either never, or didn't know if they'd ever, received Mental Health or stress training at work.

Awareness is key, from awareness Leaders can build a better understanding and ultimately improve their effectiveness in both spotting the signs and supporting those suffering internally with mental health or stress.

Promoting an improved understanding of mental health and stress is at the heart of this of challenge if a legacy of prevention over cure is to be achieved for organisations to improve the escalating costs of absenteeism and presenteeism.

You cannot fix what you do not understand, and it starts with you. You all must take responsibility to understand and value your own mental health and the mental health of others. It's no longer about counting the costs of your mind but conquering it!

How you respond next counts ...



## Section Five – Useful Links & Further Reading

- <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/file/2423/download?token=nTp69rEw>
- <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/file/2518/download?token=RU6lzcSK>
- The Chimp Paradox, Professor Steve Peters
- Start with Why, Simon Sinek
- Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself, Dr Joe Dispenza
- The SOS Code, Dr Zoë Douglas-Judson

Please note, if you're currently experiencing high levels of stress and feeling distressed please consult your GP or gain support from one of the following organisations:

- [Rethink](#)
- [Mind](#)
- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#)
- [Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Samaritans](#)



## Section Six – References

- <sup>i</sup> <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>
- <sup>ii</sup> [https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/managing\\_presenteeism.pdf](https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/managing_presenteeism.pdf)
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/#.XEZYei2cbOQ>
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stress>
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stress>
- <sup>vi</sup> <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health/main-activities/mental-health-in-the-workplace>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/#.XEaCAy2cbq0>
- <sup>viii</sup> [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/evidence/atlas/atlas\\_2017\\_web\\_note/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/atlas/atlas_2017_web_note/en/)
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/why-we-worry/201308/mental-health-stigma>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-relationships/mental-health/stress-relationships>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>
- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health/main-activities/mental-health-in-the-workplace>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.managers.org.uk/insights/news/2018/october/this-is-how-lloyds-is-tackling-mental-health-in-the-workplace>