

Health issues in the Workplace

July 2017

This work was carried out by Healthwatch Bolton with the cooperation of NHS Business Services (Prescription Pricing Authority) at Middlebrook, Bolton

Engagement: Karen Wilson, Gail Gregory, workplace volunteers
Report: Alice Tligui, Alex Tan

Introduction

Healthwatch Bolton is the local consumer champion for health and care services. Its core function is that of gathering comment from its resident and transient populations, aiming to influence local health and care services.

Historically access to the 'working population' of Bolton has been somewhat difficult since working people tend to be under represented in many community groups and at many of the community events run or attended by Healthwatch. This study seeks to understand what health and care concerns are faced by those in work by focussing on workers at a single, large office site in Bolton.

Purpose of research

Our proposal was to work with staff from NHS Business Services known locally as 'Prescription Pricing' which has a large service centre in Bolton.

Healthwatch Bolton and NHS Business Services are interested in the particular experiences of this workforce from an occupational health perspective.

Healthwatch Bolton was also interested to gather evidence as to how working people cope with health problems and with relationships with health and social care services.

Methodology

We recruited and supported a team of staff from 'Prescription Pricing' to record conversations with colleagues about their views of health and care services..

A proforma was prepared by engagement workers at Healthwatch Bolton with agreed questions. The questions were devised to elicit information that would provide a picture of the issues and pressures working people are facing both in terms of health problems and in relation to accessing health and care services. We were particularly interested to understand how people felt about mental health issues in the workplace and in what people felt and did in terms of staying fit and well.

Participating staff were introduced to the prompted questions at a session facilitated by Healthwatch Bolton staff. Employees used allocated annual volunteering time to gather interview responses for this report from their colleagues.

Comments were collected, anonymously, over a month and then supplied to Healthwatch Bolton for analysis by the Healthwatch Bolton research team; with this resulting report produced to identify key themes.

Key findings

Employees perspectives on health

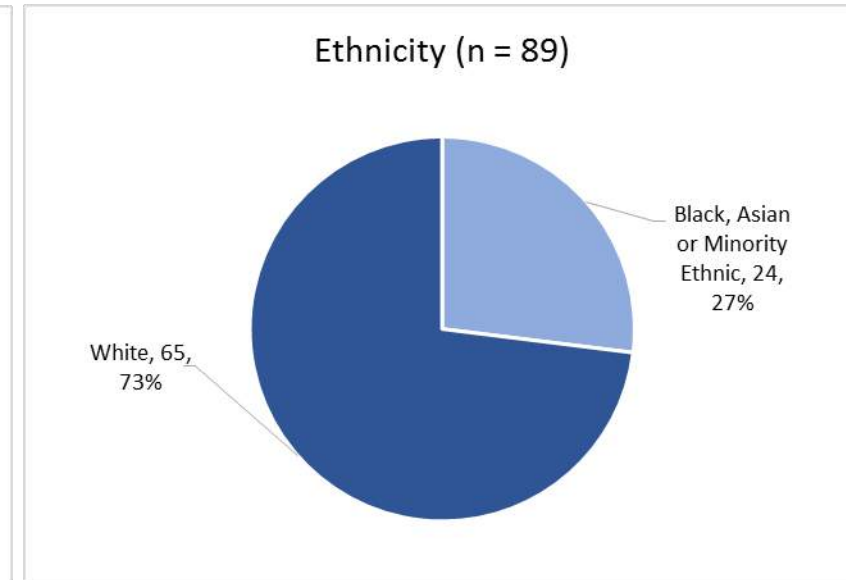
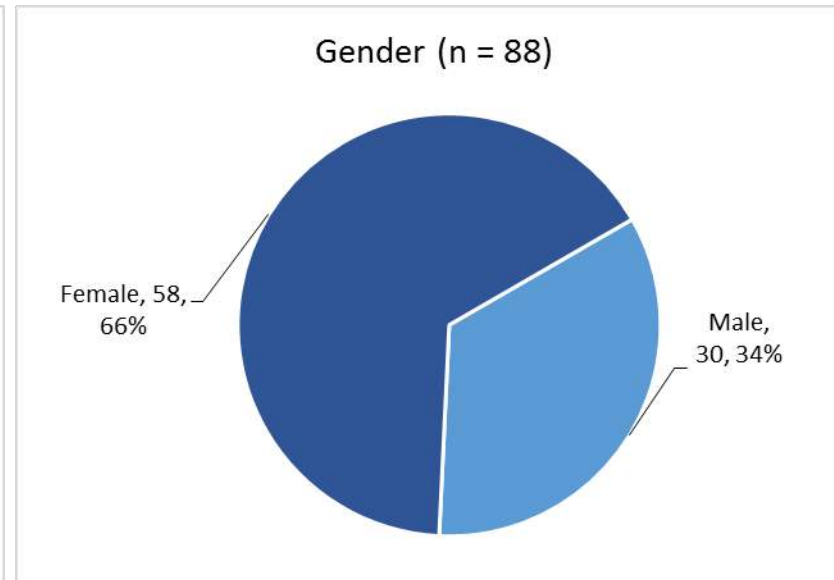
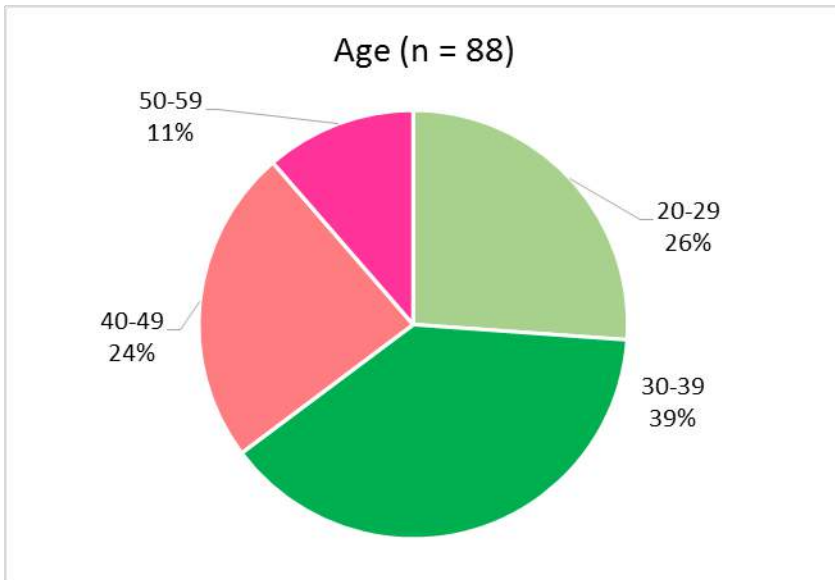
- The most common health related issues were associated with family health problems, personal health concerns, mental health and finances.
- This research revealed the existence of several work place challenges faced by workers; pressure at work and stress being key.
- In this study staying healthy was most commonly equated with diet and exercise, closely followed by relationships as key to health.

Mental health – experiences in the workplace

- Whether employees were confident to talk to their employer was dependent on personal relationships and trust, though half of the respondents stated that they would speak to their employer about mental health issues, almost one third would not.
- A high number of respondents felt able to assist colleagues in need of mental health advice.
- Participants felt they would know how to access mental health help if they needed it, either through a doctor, or the workplace.

**A separate report details findings about workers views on local services.*

Who we spoke to



We gathered the views of **89** people during this engagement. Responses were uploaded to Survey Monkey to help with later analysis.

Those taking part were mainly from three **age** groups – 20-29 (26%), 30-39 (39%) 40-49 (24%)

Regarding **gender**, there were more female than male participants – with 66% females and 34% males.

The majority of the participants said their **ethnicity** was white (73%) however there was a relatively high proportion identifying as BAME (27%) compared with the overall population.

Employees Perspectives on Health

Many participants were facing health issues related to their family/relationships, physical health, mental health and finances. A whole range of health issues were mentioned including the stress of caring for a relative.

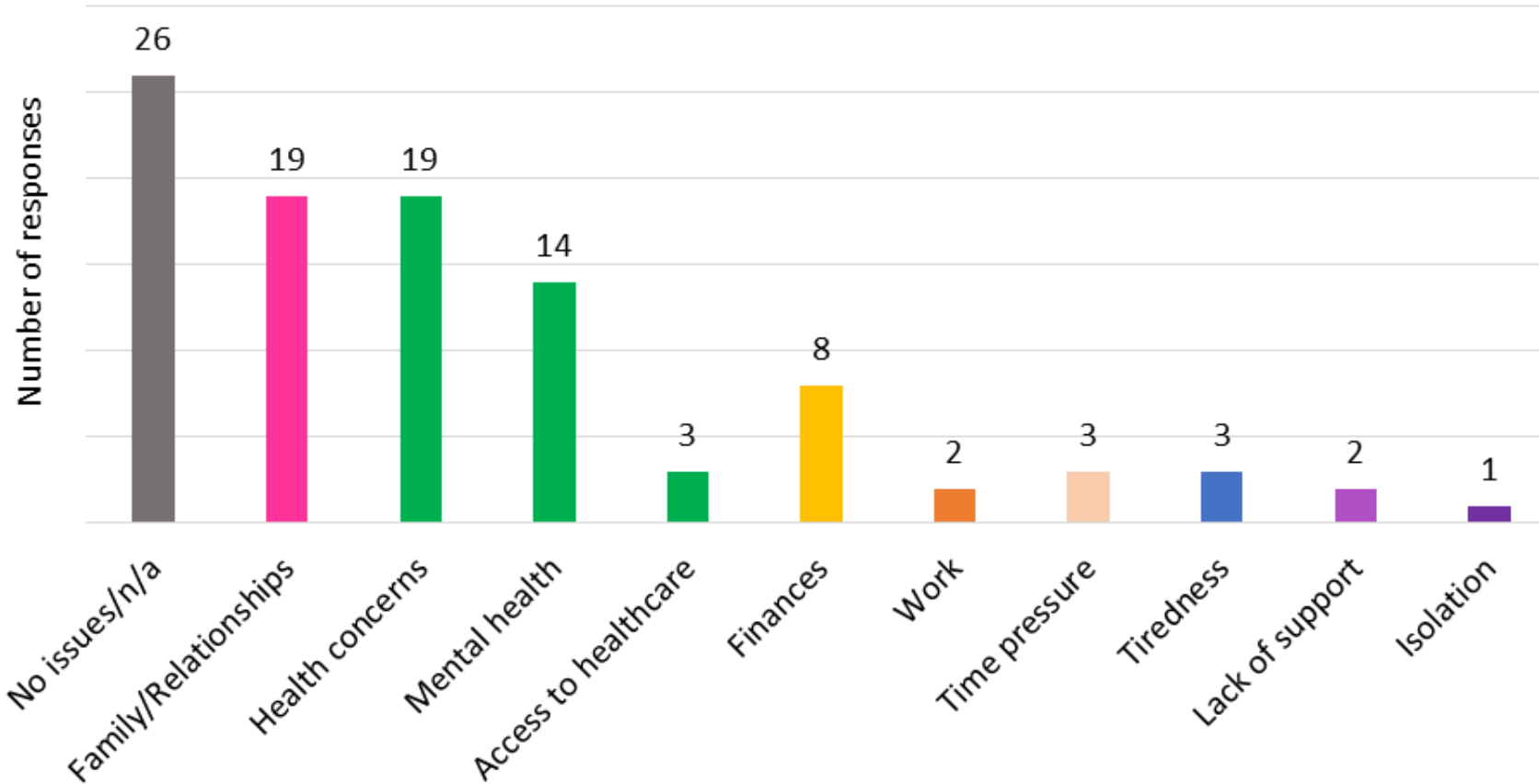
Nearly one third of participants felt that health and care services could not cope.

Personal efforts to staying healthy was most often associated to diet and exercise, closely followed by relationships.

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health

What is the biggest issue that affects your health or that of your family?

Biggest issue affecting self or family health (n = 100)



- ‘No issue’ greatest single mentions (26%).
- Significant other concerns included;
 - Family/relationships (19%)
 - Physical health concerns (19%)
 - Mental health (14%)
 - Finances (8%)
- Respondents sometimes mentioned multiple issues.

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health

What is the biggest issue that affects your health or that of your family?

No issues

‘No big issues that affects my health or my family.’

‘Not that I know of, my health is very good and so is my family history. There is nothing that runs in the family such as diabetes or breast cancer etc.’

Family/relationships

‘A few members of my family are in poor health, which is stressful for everybody.’

‘Caring for elderly relative responsibilities and home work life balance.’

‘Trying to juggle work with family issues and running a home. Having an elderly relative that we have to travel to.’

‘Heart problems, both parents and a brother and diabetes, my mum.’

Mental health

‘Hopefully nothing impacting my family; but for me my mental wellbeing would be my own biggest concern.’

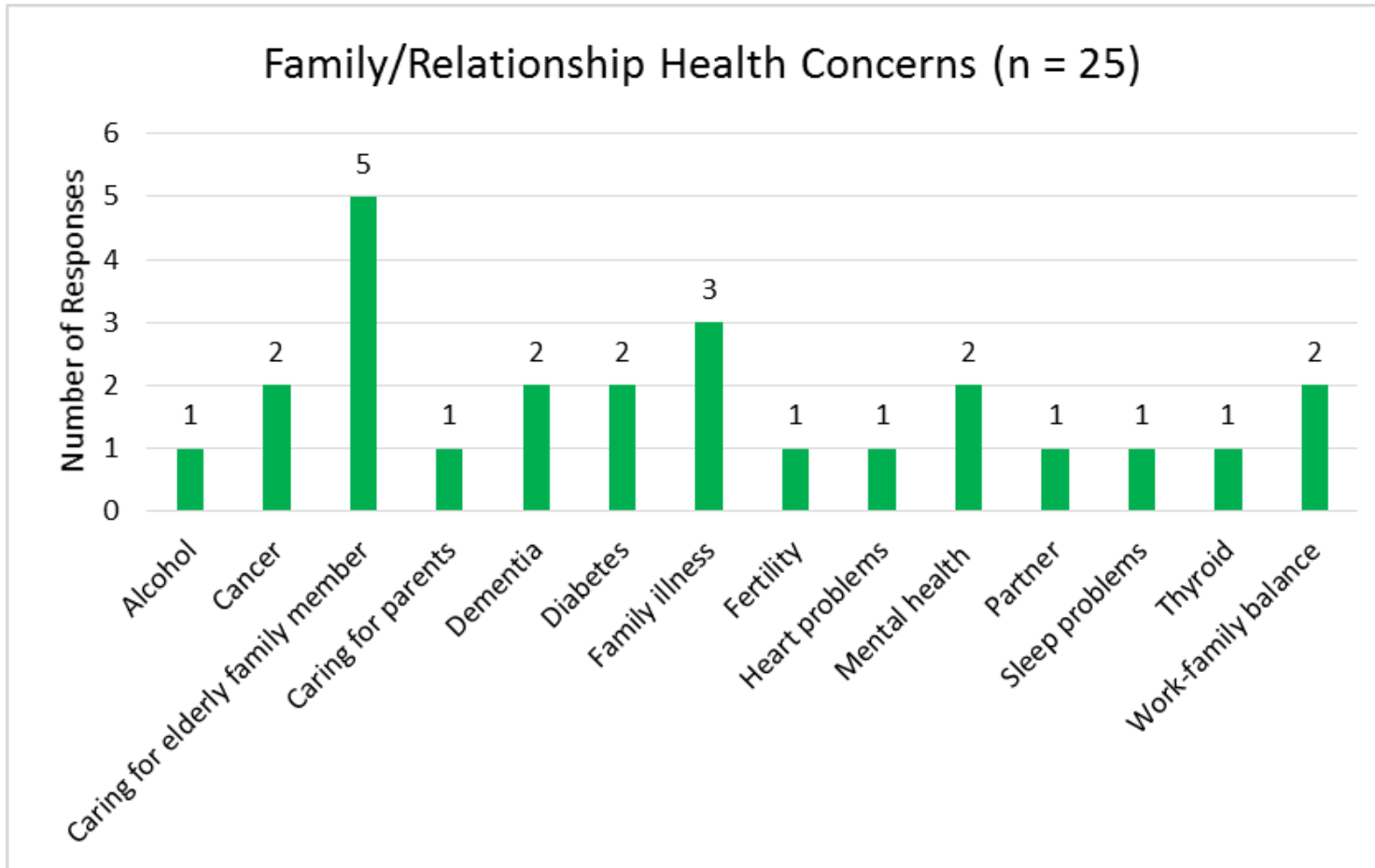
‘Mental/chronic pain. As for family, it would be my mental issues that have unfortunately come with consequences.’

‘Mental health problems, anxiety, depression.’

A range of hidden issues mentioned which are either not always visible or happen outside of work, and yet these can impact on working life.

Experience both of personal and family illness, even those that are not ill may still be caring for others. Complexity of potential issues mentioned, one issue can create others.

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health



This chart details the number of family/relationship health concerns affecting respondents.

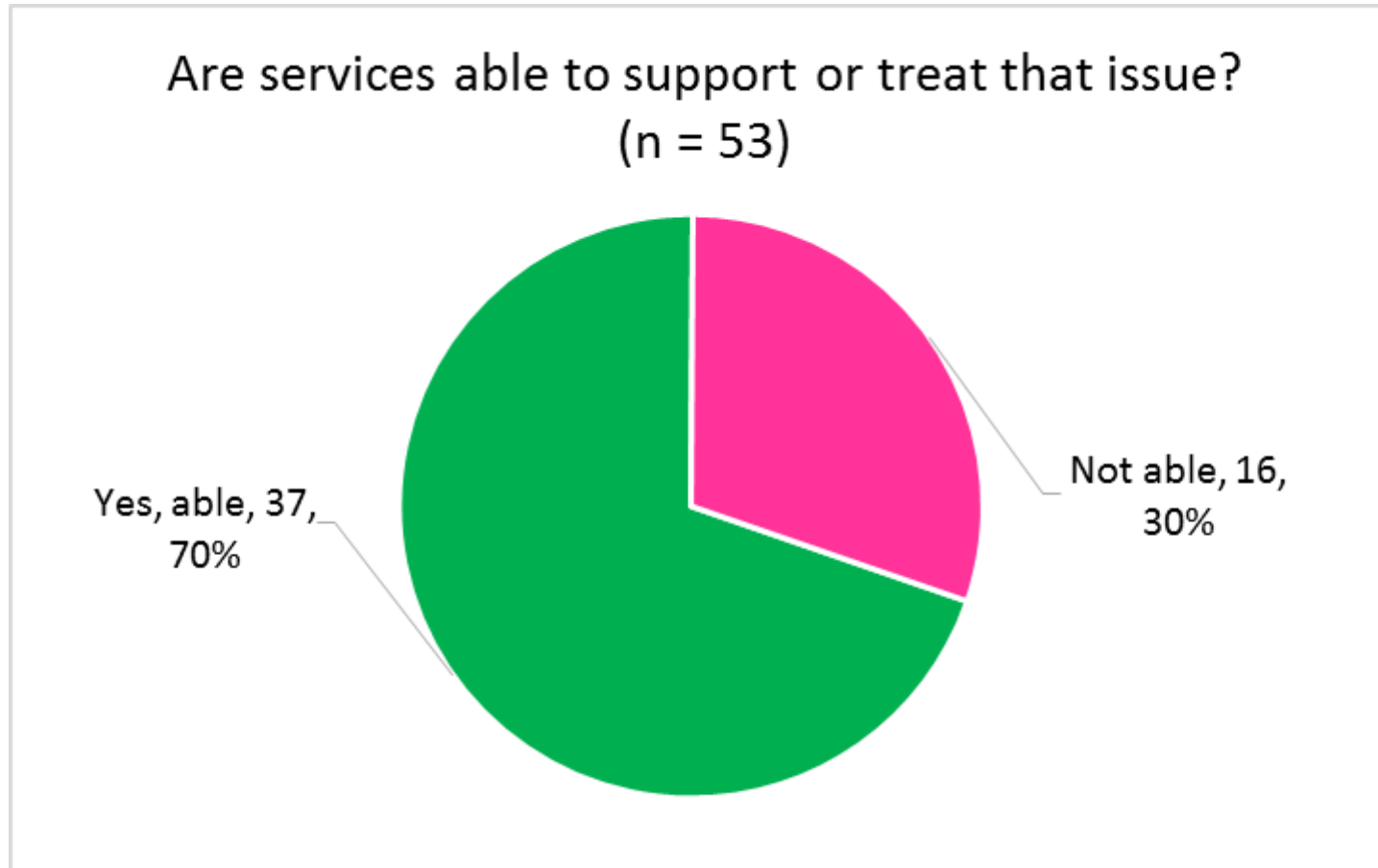
While some of the respondents were not specific about the issues affecting them, stating ‘family illness’, there was otherwise a range of challenges being faced.

Notable is the:

- Long term nature of many illnesses.
- Ongoing concern over health of relatives.
- Impact on work/life balance.
- Elderly/aging particularly associated with additional responsibilities.

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health

Are services able to support or treat your issue? If not what is happening?



Majority feel services are able to cope with their needs (70%).

However, a significant portion of respondents did not agree with this and had concerns about services ability to support them well (30%).

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health

Are services able to support or treat that issue? If not what is happening?

Yes, I am well supported by services

‘Yes, I’m currently having counselling, not on a regular basis but enough for now.’

‘I regularly have asthma reviews with my GP practice.’

‘We were referred to our Local Integrated Neighbourhood Team and they really helped. It was a fantastic service for us.’

‘Yes - own GP is very good’

‘There are services that provide emergency appointment but would prefer if this was with GP or your regular person you feel comfortable with.’

No, I am not well supported

‘No there is no help once you are dismissed from hospital there is no treatment to help with the addiction.’

‘The health issues have support, but not the resulting stress put upon their carers.’

‘Not really, Services seem to have too much red tape and aren't available out of office hours.’

‘My GP surgery is awful in terms of services, the staff that work there and the doctors themselves.’

‘Macmillan help my mother with her cancer. I have found over the years that the NHS doesn't really help me with my anxiety and depression as there is not enough support for mental health issues.’

Those that felt well supported by services mentioned on going and consistent support.

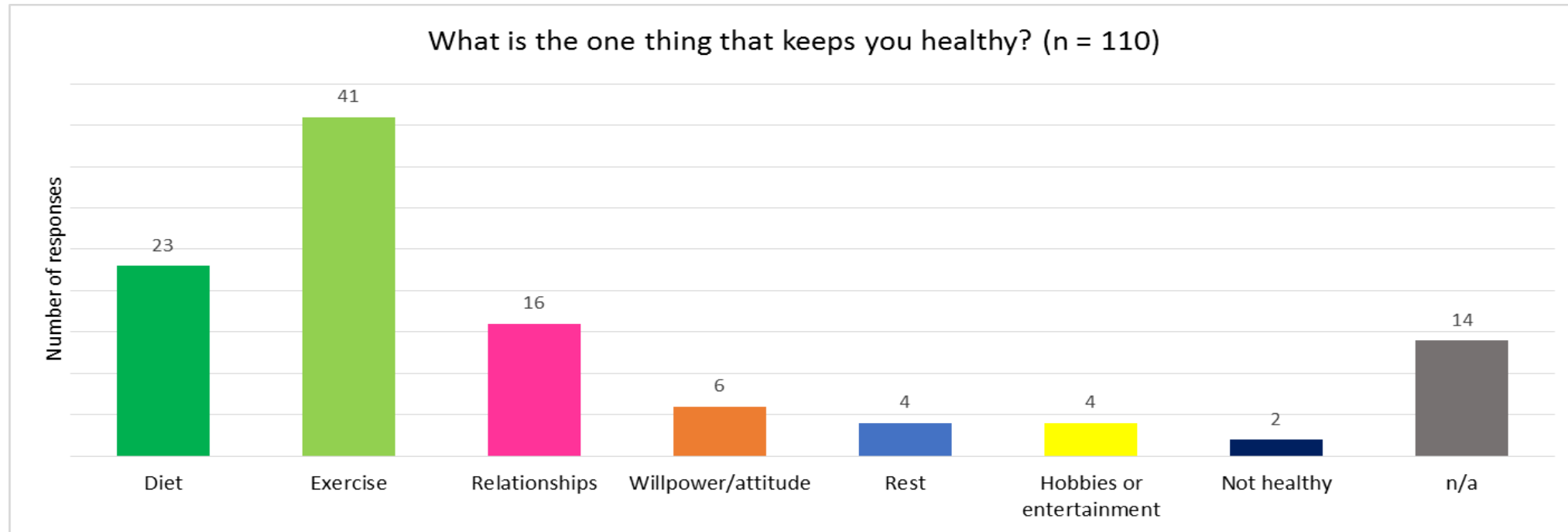
Some people reported having engaged with services successfully, but as yet not having resolved their problem.

When people felt less well supported they mentioned, inflexibility, inconsistency and specific problems; such as not liking staff.

Others mentioned a more mixed situation. For example those with multiple conditions receiving patchy services.

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health

What is the one thing that keeps you healthy?



We asked participants what they thought kept them healthy;

Diet and exercise were key mentioned most frequently, with exercise coming top with 41 (37%) mentions. Lots of participants mentioned both diet and exercise.

Relationships– support gained from friends and family - were also considered to be important

Analysis – Employees perspectives on health

What is the one thing that keeps you healthy?

Diet

‘I drink lots of water and try to eat plenty of veg.’

‘Myself, I go to the gym regularly and try to keep my water intake really high.’

‘Exercise and healthy eating.’

‘I eat a lot of fruit and vegetables and do a lot of walking.’

Exercise

‘Active lifestyle’

‘I have taken up personal training at the gym which is keeping me much healthier and I feel much better for it.’

‘My dogs/walking’

‘Getting out and about and cycling.’

Relationships

‘Spending time with my kids.’

‘Support of my family/partner and keeping active.’

‘Smiling and socialising.’

‘Happiness and contentment of all members of my family.’

‘Friends and breaks from work.’

Mental health – experiences in the workplace

If affected, participants thought work influenced their mental health through pressure, stress, and overthinking.

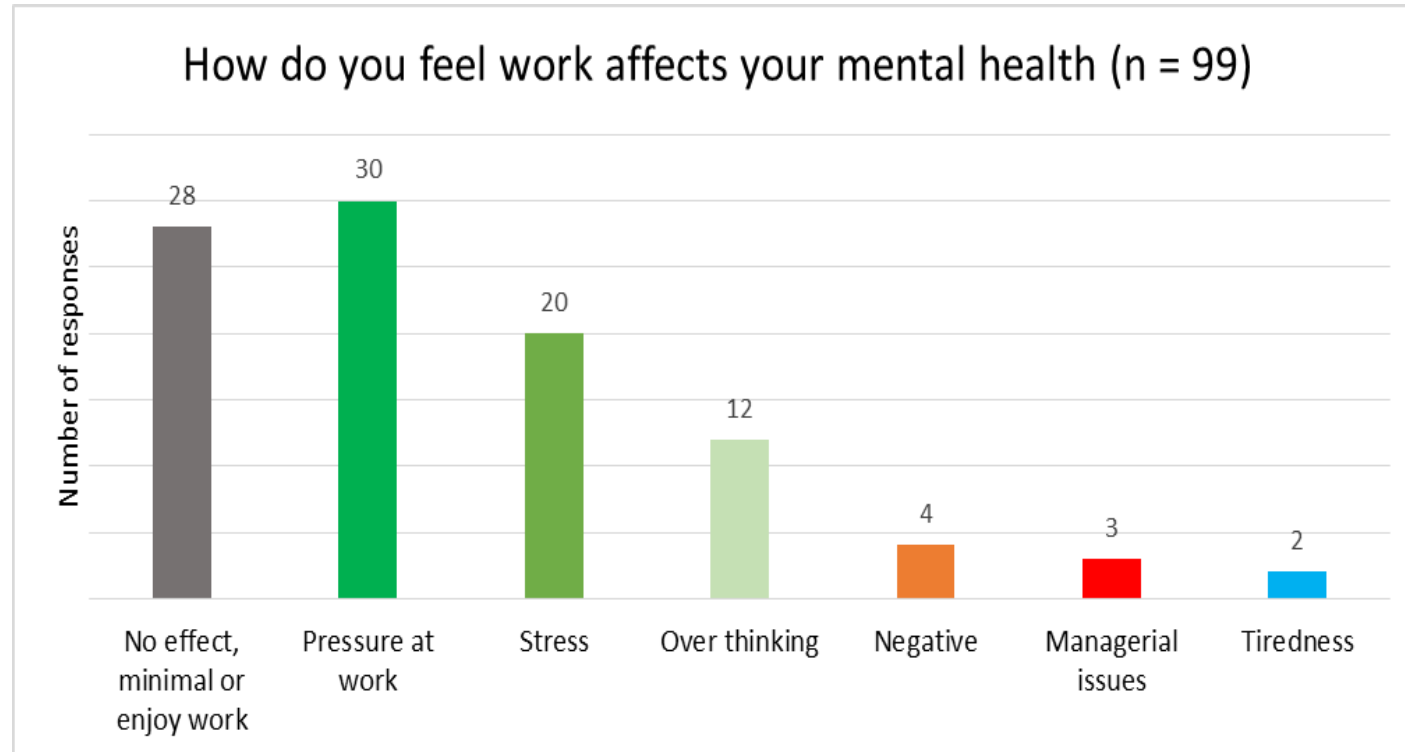
About half of respondents would speak about stress at work with their employer. Almost one third would not do so.

A majority would be willing to advise a colleague in need of mental health support.

The doctor (GP) and the workplace were preferred routes for seeking mental health help.

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

How do you feel work impacts on your mental health?



Pressure at work main contributor to mental health pressure (30%).

Stress also a contributing factor (20%).

Many also said there was 'no effect' on their mental health from work (19%).

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

How do you feel work impacts on your mental health?

No effect

'I try not to let work impact where possible.'

'I don't think it does, I feel it's the other way round. When I am feeling low or stressed I lose motivation at work.'

'Work doesn't really impact in anyway at this moment in time on my mental health.'

'The job is fine but some people affected it's like any other workplace and feel like you just have to get on with it.'

'It doesn't affect me. As soon as I leave this building, I don't think about work. Stress/mental health can only be as big or a little as a problem as you allow it to be.'

Some people felt that work had no particular impact on their mental health.

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

How do you feel work impacts on your mental health?

Pressure at work

'A lot, especially as the work is repetitive and straining, and the work pattern cannot be changed.'

'You can feel under pressure if you are on an action plan and make you feel stressed.'

'Sometimes when I am struggling with mental health issues and want just some time off, I don't want to go off sick and hence it adds to the stress.'

Stress

'Quite a lot, it all depends if I am starting a new role and whether I am confident in what I am doing. I get stressed when I am unsure about what I am doing. Also if you are moved to a new desk/floor away from where you have sat and been happy for a long time, this can also affect overall happiness.'

'Tiredness, stress and fatigue.'

'I feel that it can be stressful and sometimes affects my mood negatively, usually dependent on how I'm doing in quality checks and reviews.'

Overthinking

'I think the monotonous nature of our work gives our minds too much time to think, so if we have problems at home, it is too easy to be dragged down as the work is not distracting enough to take your mind off the problem. The option to mix up the tasks during your day would be helpful.'

'Particularly data input can affect massively, as you have time to think, it's not conducive with staying positive and having a good outlook.'

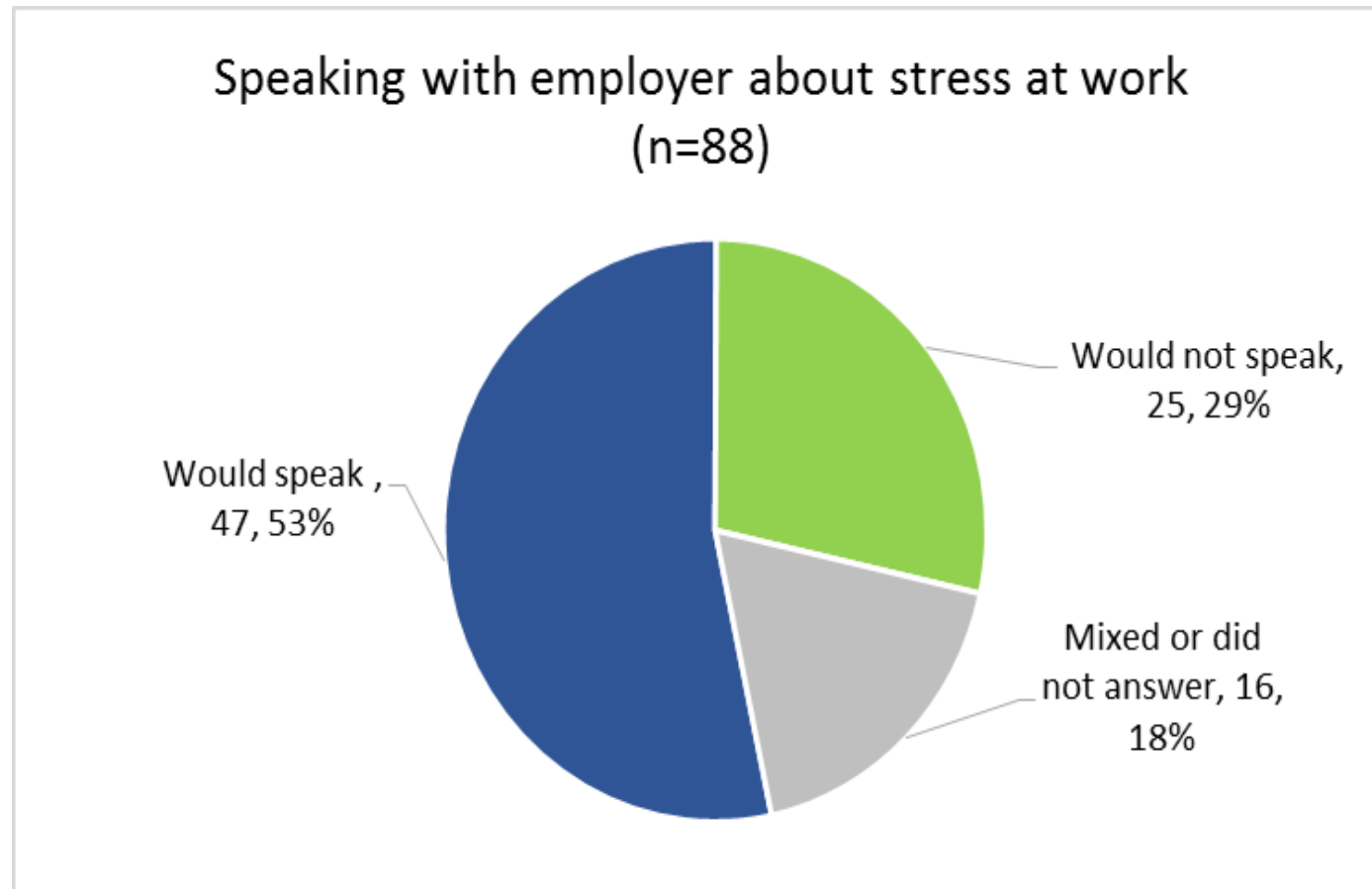
'If for example, something that you thought was correct and you've been told to do otherwise without insight or common sense then this would have an indifferent reaction to my feeling about work and would play on my mind for a long time.'

The repetitive nature of the work causes people to overthinking about problems at work or outside of work was an issue.

A range of pressures from work were affecting workers; The nature of the tasks, pressure, and targets.

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

If you are feeling stressed at work would you feel comfortable and/or confident talking about your experiences with your employer? What helps that conversation or doesn't help in that situation?



Over half would speak with their employer regarding workplace stress (53%).

Nearly one third would not speak to an employer (29%).

Almost one fifth offered answers which were mixed or indicated they did not have an opinion (18%).

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

If you are feeling stressed at work would you feel comfortable and/or confident talking about your experiences with your employer?

Would speak to employer

'I would feel comfortable with about two managers and be confident that it wouldn't go any further.'

'Would be comfortable talking to an employer but would prefer talking to a specific manager who I feel comfortable with.'

'I would prefer to deal with it by myself or through talking it through with those important to me outside of work but once I had exhausted that avenue I would definitely be comfortable to talk to someone at work. The thing that would make such conversations easier is simply having seen people in and about the office to know who is the most appropriate person to talk to.'

'I would feel confident talking to my line manager as we have regular meetings where we discuss my workload etc.'

Would not feel comfortable to speak to employer

'I don't feel too confident talking to managers at work cause there isn't a regular contact or rapport with them.'

'No I wouldn't want to confide in my employer for fear of being judged as incompetent. I would probably confide in my workmates for support and help.'

'No, I feel I would be judged and it would be made in to gossip.'

'Not really, wouldn't feel comfortable being that open with management.'

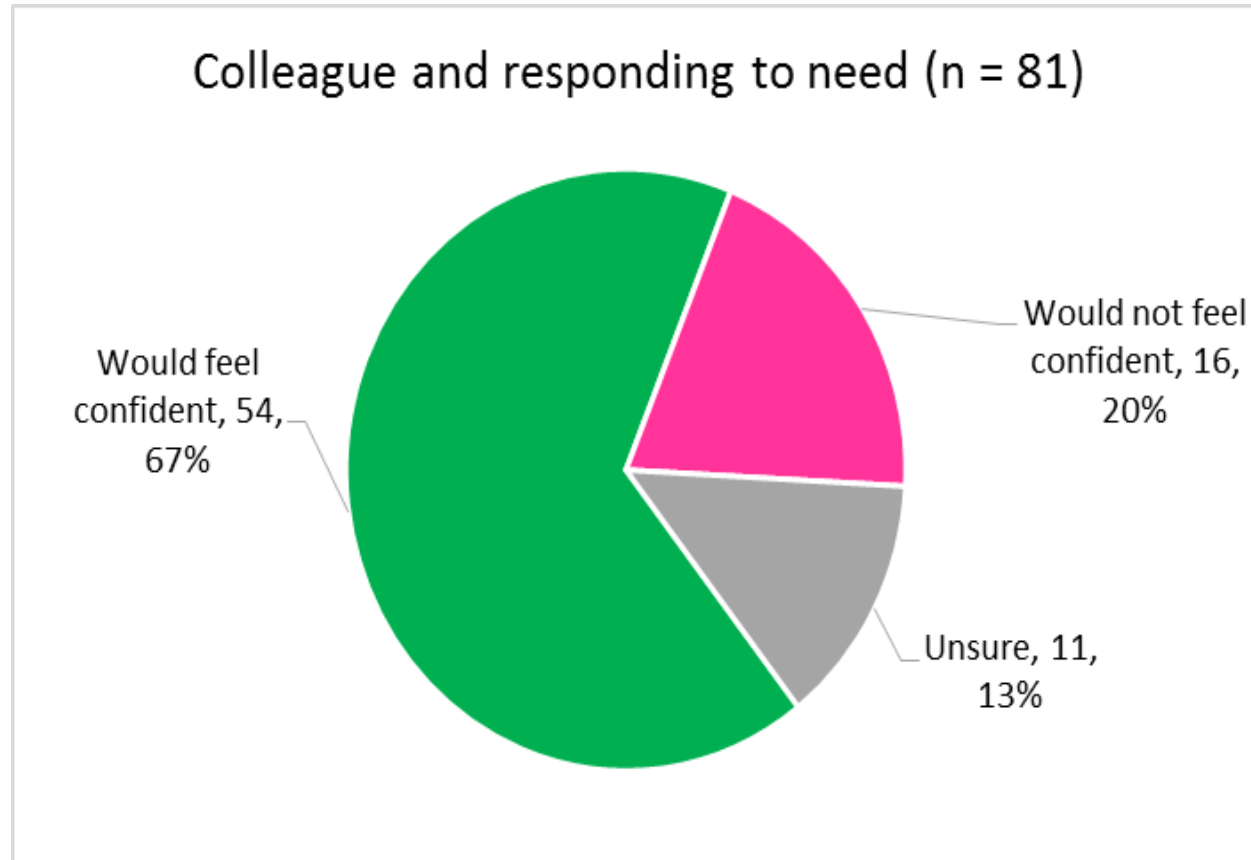
'Not really, I have only ever spoke to managers etc. when they have arranged the meetings. If I have a problem I tend to deal with it on my own.'

Confidence important in encouraging discussion. Many mentioned need to confide in a certain manager of choice.

For those not willing to speak to employer, the reasons were related to lack of a relationship, lack of trust, fear of being judged, and worry about a lack of understanding.

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

Do you feel confident to respond if a colleague is in need of support?



Most of the participants would feel able to respond to a colleague in need of support (67%).

One fifth would not feel confident to respond (20%).

A smaller proportion (13%) were unsure.

Analysis - mental health experiences in the workplace

Confident to respond if a colleague is in need of support ?

I would feel confident

'I would probably offer to listen to them myself. I would approach a manager for assistance in acquiring a quiet space. I would direct them to all the services I have tried myself.'

'If a colleague expressed concerns about their mental health to me, that would mean that they trust me enough to discuss this with me. I would happily talk things over with them, but at the end of the day, I would probably advise that they tell their GP what they have just told me, as the GP would be able to give them better advice than I could.'

'Sort of, I've supported staff in the past and use a common sense and empathetic approach - directing them for further support if needed.'

I wouldn't feel confident

'No I would not as I wouldn't want to send them deeper into their condition.'

'No, I wouldn't.'

'Not really but would just listen to them and offer support.'

'No, I wouldn't know how to respond.'

I'm not sure

'I would try to help the best I could but wouldn't really feel very confident.'

'I would be confident to suggest they try speaking to a mental health first aider or speaking to their GP, beyond that I wouldn't feel I had the right skills or knowledge to advise.'

'I think it would depend who it was and the relationship I had with that person.'

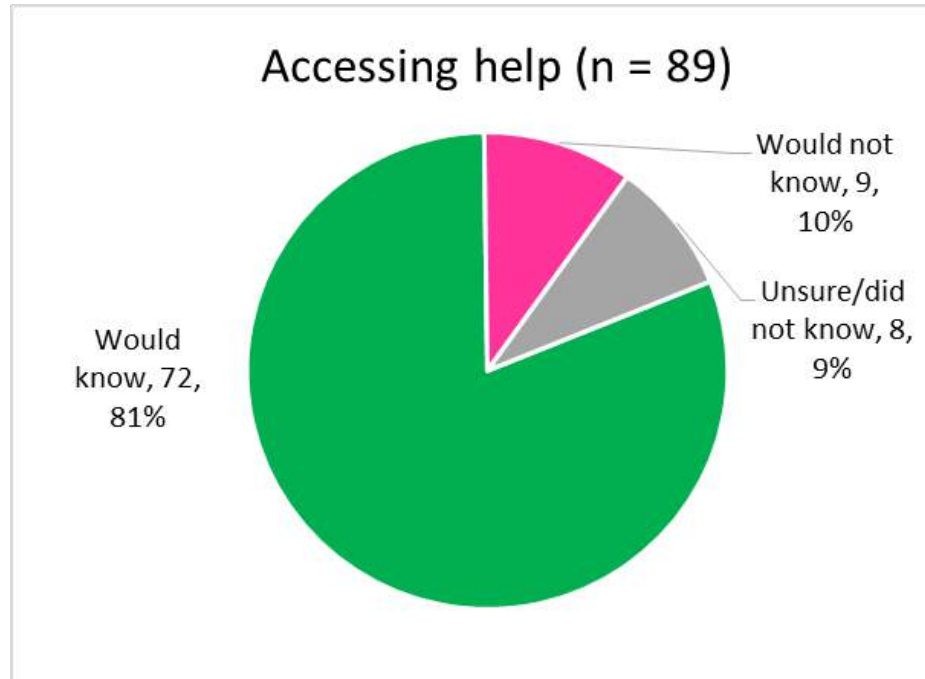
'I think so but mental health is a tricky subject. Good advice for one person is bad advice for another.'

Many would feel confident to respond to colleagues needs – either signposting them to professionals or based on own experience.

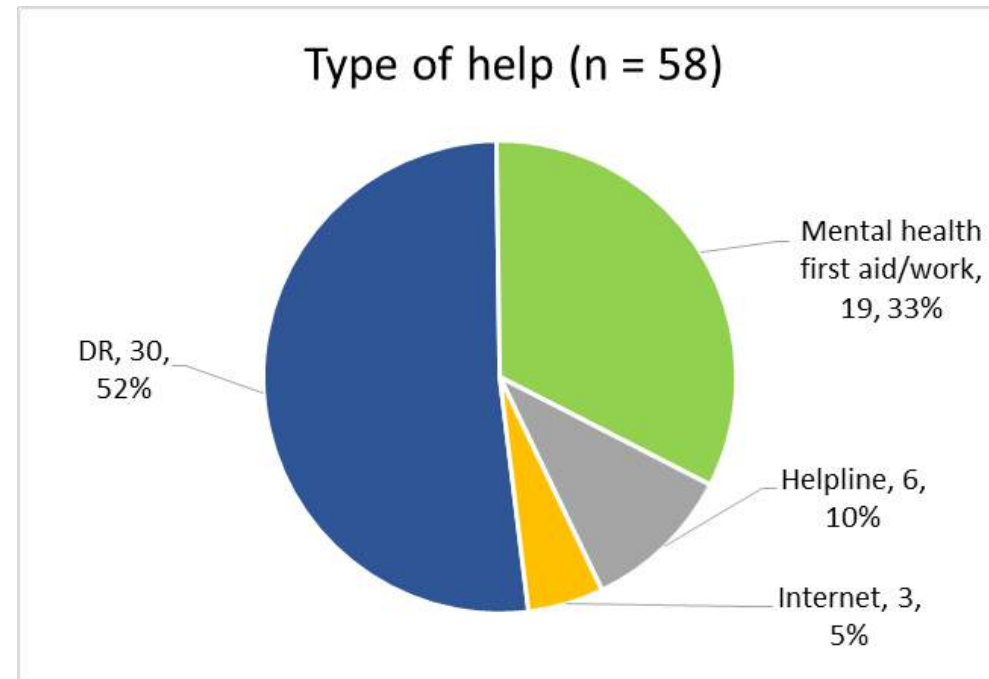
Some people lacked the confidence and worried about 'saying the wrong thing'.

Analysis – mental health experiences in the workplace

If you felt that you were experiencing poor mental health, would you know how to access help?



Most people were confident they would know where to go to access mental health help (81%).



The doctor (GP) was the most favoured option as a first line of support for mental health needs, second most popular choice was mental health first aider at work or another member of the company. A helpline that had been given out was mentioned as part of the workplace help available.

Analysis - overall health experiences and concerns

If you felt that you were experiencing poor mental health would you know how to access help?

I would see the doctor

'Yes, I would either go to my own doctor's or use the card I've been given at work with a phone number to ring on it.'

'I would probably go to see a doctor but apart from that I wouldn't really know what else was available.'

'Yes. I would be most likely to visit a GP rather than access the support available through the healthcare provisions provided by the employee advice service.'

'Yes. As I have done in the past I have sought help from the GP and kept work informed of what's going on.'

I'd see the mental health first aider work

'We have several people in the office that we have details of that are supposed to be able to support and listen to us. This may be the way to approach it.'

'Yes I would know what to do as facilities are in place at work when needed to be used if experiencing poor mental health.'

'Yes. I would speak to a manager or someone from the group that deals with mental health problems, someone who I am comfortable speaking with.'

I would contact the Helpline

'Yes. I would go to my GP or phone the helpline given by work.'

'Yes, I have the number for the crisis team at home.'

Conclusions

Common Problems

- When asked the 'biggest issue affecting health', about two thirds of responses mentioned ongoing health or care issues (74%); a total of 33% were associated with personal health problems, of which 'physical' and 'mental health' were the most commonly mentioned.
- The responses of those highlighting 'family/relationships' were further analysed, showing that within this set of responses 32% were associated with caring for someone with health problems or care needs.

Support from Services

- About 30% of respondents felt that services did not support them well, lack of support for carers, lack of support for anxiety and depression and lack of out of hours services were all mentioned in this regard.

Healthy Lifestyles

- Most respondents recognise diet and exercise as health giving activities with many being active in these spheres.

Mental health in the workplace

- In this workplace many people found their work repetitive and unvaried which can cause problems.
- The workplace culture was often described as stressful as a result of being target driven.
- Employees were broadly confident to speak to someone at work about mental health issues and many felt confident to support a colleague. The company has an employee assistance program and a mental health team that most people knew about.
- Lack of trust and/or lack of confidence remained for a significant majority suggesting that stigma around mental health continues for some people.

Recommendations

1. Workplaces need to give due recognition to the realities of ill health and caring for others among the working population.
2. Workplace occupational health schemes should consider how to better understand and support carers in order to better support the increasing number of people who find themselves in this position.
3. Workplaces could do more to promote relevant support e.g. carers helpline, debt advice and extended GP arrangements for example.
4. Initiatives such as mental health first aiders, mental health units and employee assistance lines are recommended as they seem to increase confidence in discussing mental health problems. However approachability and visibility of managers (and mental health team) is seen to be equally important. People need to feel they have a positive relationship with people in order to be open about any problems they have. Managers/support workers need to be visible to all staff.
5. In this particular workplace more thought could be given to varying the workload/working day (described as problematically repetitive) and in considering request for hours variations in a timely way.