

# shining a light on mental health

**The issues facing the  
accountancy profession**





## introduction from Dr Cristian Holmes, Chief Executive of caba

We're more aware now than ever before of the importance of mental health in the workplace. In 2020, Deloitte [quantified](#) the growing impact of poor mental health at £45bn a year to businesses. Within the accountancy profession, we've had conversations with businesses of all sizes about the mental health support measures they're putting in place, as well as the effort they're putting into encouraging staff uptake.

And yet, nine in 10 GPs have [reported](#) an increase in patients suffering work-related stress and anxiety since the pandemic began, while [41% of employees feel](#) their mental health has declined. It seems that despite the efforts of employers to do more – within accounting or otherwise – it isn't helping.

What, exactly, is happening here? Is it that the benefits being offered aren't enough; perhaps employers are focussing so much on one area that they're failing to provide the necessary support in others?

Is the truth that we're actually too nervous to ask for help? Are we worried about what our colleagues and bosses will think of us, or if asking for help will harm our career prospects; do we perhaps believe that the support we're being provided won't actually help at all?

There has to be a reason, when we seem to be so aware of the importance of mental health, and the support on offer is better than ever.

**So why are so many of us still struggling? To help answer this question, caba, the charity helping the ICAEW community thrive in their personal and professional lives with training, advice and support, has commissioned a study to assess the mental health of the accounting industry.**

With the data we've gathered, we can build on our knowledge of the challenges facing our community. We can identify pressure points and seek to understand some of the reasons accountants may not seek help. Crucially, however, we can use this research to inform and develop the services we offer, as we announce the launch of our new brand.

We've completed a significant piece of work to clarify and communicate the support we offer our diverse community, and are now adopting a digital-first approach, with our training and support available via a new website. We will continue to put the mental, physical and financial health of the ICAEW community at the heart of our work, while putting a fresh emphasis on ensuring that our services are highly accessible.

We know that everyone is different, just as the challenges we all face are unique. But whatever the circumstance, caba is there.

**Dr Cristian Holmes,  
Chief Executive of caba**

## introduction from Kirsty Lilley, Mental Health Expert at caba

While the data presented in this study paints a troubling picture of mental health in the accounting industry, it is, regrettably, anything but surprising.

For the past two years, people in all walks of life have suffered with stress. Businesses have faced hardship, as a result of the ongoing impact of the pandemic. One of the key findings of caba's research is that, for two-thirds (63%) of accountants, the complex nature of their work and the lack of room for error is a key driver of stress. Should this really come as a surprise when we consider the challenging circumstances that many of them have been attempting to guide their clients through?

Businesses need to carefully consider the support they're offering to employees and recognise that health and wellbeing are integral to the success of their organisation. Many are doing what they can, but it seems vast numbers of the accountants surveyed aren't using the mental health support that's currently on offer. Some are even worried about how their employers would respond to hearing that they're struggling.

There are many solutions, but we do have to face up to the problem and create environments in which it isn't a taboo to discuss mental health. Education and support around having these conversations is, ultimately, what caba hopes to help achieve with this report.

- For my expert advice to employers on how to take care of teams' mental health, turn to [page 8](#)
- For employees who are looking for everyday ways to take care of their own mental health, turn to [page 10](#)

**Kirsty Lilley,**  
Mental Health Expert at caba



# a spotlight on mental health

## stress and mental health at work

55% of accountants admitted that they were suffering from stress and burnout (compared with 41% of employees in other industries).

Four-in-five (79%) accountants believe that stress and poor mental health are a problem within the industry, with the most common reasons for this being:



**87%**  
heavy workload



**72%**  
long hours



**63%**  
complex work with  
no room for error

Just 7% say that they don't feel stressed at work, with...



**20%**  
saying their work  
environment is  
high-stress



**32%**  
spending a lot of  
their leisure time  
worrying about  
work



**68%**  
feeling more  
stressed than  
usual over the  
past 12 months

Interestingly, the office appears to be a more stressful environment than home-working. 25% said that they are more likely to feel stressed when working in the office, compared to 19% who feel more stressed working from home.

**That said, 87% of accountants still spent a lot or some of their time at home worrying about work-related problems.**



## stigma still plays a part

It seems there's a stigma attached to asking for help.

More than a quarter of accountants believe that if they asked for help with a mental health issue, their management would think they were weak (27%) or unreliable (29%). When asked what knock-on effects they would worry about, the most common responses were:



**48%**  
being treated differently



**42%**  
lack of career progression



**27%**  
not being allocated high-stress tasks



**21%**  
were worried about being labelled as a troublemaker

Many are reluctant to accept workplace-provided help. With one-in-three (36%) saying they don't have time and a quarter (24%) that they don't think it will help. However, there also appeared to be concern surrounding the idea of asking for help:



**17%**  
don't want to be labelled as having mental health issues



**13%**  
afraid of being stigmatised for asking for help



**11%**  
didn't want their medical notes to show that they have mental health issues

# a spotlight on mental health



# a spotlight on mental health

## attitudes towards seeking help



**31%**  
are reluctant to  
take sick days  
when unwell



**32%**  
said their workplace wasn't a  
safe place to talk about stress

When pushed as to why they were not using mental health support tools...



**36%**  
don't have time



**32%**  
don't think their condition  
is severe enough



**23%**  
don't think it  
will help



**17%**  
don't want to be labelled as  
having a mental health condition

**10%**  
of accountants  
were worried  
they'd be fired!

Accountants tend to be more worried about the impact admitting they are suffering with stress would have on their career. When it comes to the knock-on effects of talking to their business about high stress or mental illness...

A third of employees in other industries would be concerned about being treated differently (48% of accountants), while 27% would worry about a lack of career progression (42% of accountants) and 22% would worry about being avoided or ignored (24% of accountants). 10% of accountants were worried they'd be fired!

## how does management view this issue?

42% of HR professionals said they had employees who were suffering from mental health issues. 44% of HR staff believed that employees were faring well mentally.

**43% of HR say that employees have requested more mental health support during the pandemic and 41% have seen an increase in employees using company provided mental health support.**

37% had increased their employee benefits since the pandemic with the priority being wellbeing initiatives (61%) and mental health support or tools (67%). Mental health training and counselling being most popular 61% for each.

Over three quarters (78%) of HR believe their workplace provides adequate support when it comes to their mental health.

Those in HR who have seen a drop in use of the support believe it is mainly down to workers feeling concerned about the business being aware that they are struggling with their mental health (61%).

## who do we turn to for help?

48% of accountants saw increased mental health support since the pandemic. However, it seems they would still be reluctant to access this.

If suffering with high levels of stress, respondents said they would be most likely to speak to a friend or family member (63%), a partner (48%) or a medical professional (31%). They would be least likely to speak to HR (4%) or a helpline (11%).

When asked which employer-funded mental health support services they'd accessed, the majority of accountants had used very little:

- **86% hadn't used a counselling phone line**
- **46% hadn't used reference tools / website**
- **63% hadn't used apps of subscriptions for mental health tools**
- **46% hadn't taken any mental health days**

Accountants were more likely to take low key advice about taking regular breaks (85%), taking lunch away from their screen (85%) or taking proper lunch or going for a walk (84.5%).

69% of accountants had also not used out of work services. 69% of HR professionals believe that employees are turning down support provided by work to use other services, such as the NHS, instead.

When it comes to suffering with stress or mental illness, only 12% would speak to their line manager or management and just 4% would go to HR.

# 42%

of HR professionals said they had employees who were suffering from mental health issues

# 48%

of accountants saw increased mental health support since the pandemic.



# how businesses can prioritise employee mental health

According to caba's mental health expert, Kirsty Lilley, there are some powerful ways that organisations can provide an atmosphere for their people that is conducive to good mental health.

## ● strategise their support

● Wellbeing is often treated as something of a bolt-on, with employee assistance programmes (EAPs) tending to be introduced without a strategy. An approach like this might not have the impact you're looking for, largely because an EAP ultimately has limited influence on culture. If you're turning to an external helpline because your demanding workload is causing you to feel stressed, it's difficult to imagine how the person you're speaking with is going to help.

**Instead, a strategic approach is needed. It must be data-driven, treated with the same importance as productivity and performance, and look at all aspects of a company's culture.**

Businesses need to invest time determining the root causes of the problem, where it lies and who it primarily affects. Putting a support infrastructure into place, with measures such as wellbeing agendas and mental health first aiders, can be incredibly helpful. But those in a position of authority must take care to listen to their people and design their support around what they hear.

## ● introduce role models

● It can be difficult to speak about mental health when these discussions aren't normalised in the workplace. With that in mind,

**One of the most powerful ways to put team members at ease is to have role models within the organisation who can talk about their own mental health journey.**

It's important, however, these role models are credible and trustworthy. It can send a powerful message for senior leaders to share their experiences, but a junior accountant might struggle to truly relate to their CEO. There's a real need for grass-roots movement, so members of the team can hear from someone they relate to.



## develop their line managers

The quality of a team member's relationship with their line manager can do a huge amount to mediate their risk of poor mental health. Line managers must feel confident in having open conversations. They need to receive training and be able to ask questions about mental health when discussing normal management and development processes.

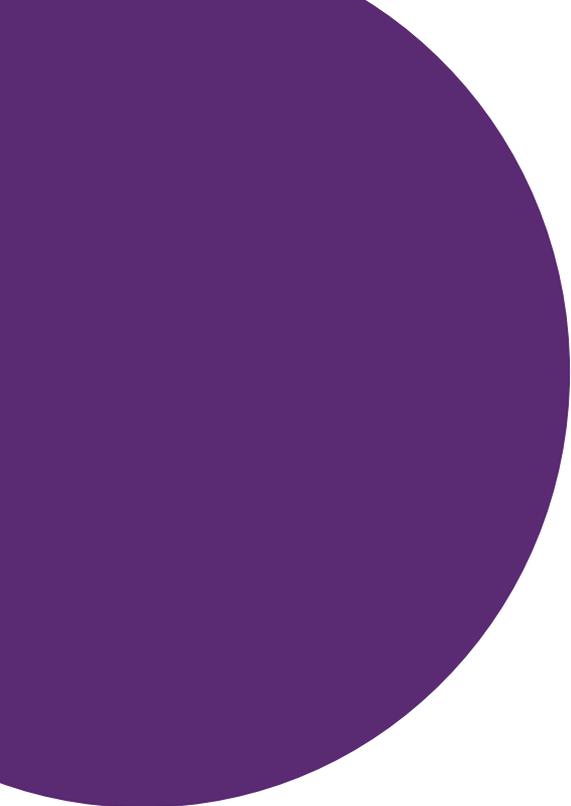
## establish psychological safety

The research suggests accountants have a real fear about being stigmatised for seeking help. To understand this fear, we need to appreciate this is a profession in which precision and competency are highly valued. We shouldn't be surprised to learn that accountants are afraid of having their credibility questioned.

**What's required, before people can even accept their own difficulties, is psychological safety. After all, if you aren't in a safe place it's likely you'll deny what's going on around you, both to yourself and to others.**

A key part of this process is taking the time to understand why people feel unsafe. It's easy to feel frustrated when people are reluctant to open-up, but their resistance is understandable. The first step is to understand where the resistance is coming from and put measures in place so that team members feel at ease.





# how employees can manage their own stress

For those who are looking for ways to manage stress, mental health expert, Kirsty Lilley, has the following suggestions.



## try to take stock



When we're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, we might lose the ability to prioritise effectively. More than that, our perception of what's happening around us changes. Everything becomes threatening and we feel it's on us to sort it out. We often lose awareness of how we're being perceived.

It's incredibly difficult to recognise these signs in ourselves, especially when we don't think to look for them. When we feel our stress beginning to carry us away, it's important to spend a few moments taking stock of our surroundings. What are the pressures we're facing? How are we responding to them, and is there anything in our own actions that we can change? Identify what particular support we might need.



## be kind to yourself



People are often resistant to the notion of self-care. On a cultural level, we tend to feel it makes us weak or self-indulgent. Even the word "self-care" generates uncomfortable feelings in a lot of people, to the extent that we find it much easier to be compassionate to somebody else than we do to ourselves.

It can take a long time to admit to ourselves when we're struggling. The reality is that it can be painful to let go of a certain view we have of ourselves. If you feel yourself slipping, ask yourself what advice you might give to someone who confided in you if they were feeling the same way. Are you, yourself, following that advice?



## don't compare your feelings to others'



It's far too easy to feel as though your stress isn't serious enough to warrant help. We need only look at the suffering being reported every day on the news and then wonder: If I've got a good job, am earning money and have a comfortable home, why should I deserve help?



It's so important not to fall into this way of thinking. There will always be someone else who's struggling, too. But that doesn't make the way you're feeling any less valid. Nor does it make you any less deserving of support. If you're struggling, explore the various support options that are available to you, whether they be provided by your own employer or by an organisation such as caba.

## filter your perfectionism

 Accountancy is a profession in which there's very little room for error, and to be clear: perfectionism isn't bad, but can be troublesome when it turns into unhealthy striving. In certain parts of your life, such as in your work, it can be a real attribute. But what tends to happen is that it starts to invade every area – even those where “good enough” is acceptable. It becomes a way of being and often correlates very highly with burnout.

It's okay to not always be perfect. When push comes to shove, you can't submit a tax return that's peppered with errors. But that doesn't mean you should beat yourself up for being a few minutes late to a catch-up with your team. In a high-pressure environment, this distinction – the ability to recognise when perfectionism is and isn't warranted – is so important to maintaining good mental health.

## help the body take care of the mind

 We need to make sure we're taking care of the body in such a way that it can support the mind. Eating well and taking part in regular periods of gentle exercise are important. However, we need to allow ourselves time to rest, too. Good sleep is essential, as is taking rest breaks throughout the day. Our minds need opportunities to pause and catch up before we throw ourselves into another challenging task.

## seek support

 If you're feel comfortable doing so, seek support when you need to from friends, family or colleagues, or even from organisations like caba or Mind. It can be difficult opening up, but if you feel able to, there is plenty of advice on offer from trusted organisations, which can help you understand how you're feeling and point you in the direction of further support.



## in summary

So many in our industry seem to be struggling with their mental health, and there is clear evidence of the stigma that surrounds asking for help. If this report shows anything, it's that there's work to be done.

It isn't enough for businesses to parachute in a helpline or an app and then expect their people to simply take care of themselves. Employers need to change the way they're dealing with mental health as a business. Support measures don't just require investment but also strategy. Line managers must be equipped with the tools and knowledge to make a real difference. Team members need role models and an environment of psychological safety, if they're to come forward and speak about the way they're feeling.

It is possible to make progress on the issues highlighted in this report. But it will take time, honesty and an appetite for change. So, consider the support available in your business and how open these discussions are.

**We all can play our part in addressing stress and mental ill-health in the accountancy sector.**



**what can we all do to reduce the stigma and enable those conversations?**

# caba and its new brand

This research and whitepaper launch caba's new brand and identity, a significant piece of work that has been undertaken to increase our relevance and appeal to the diverse accountancy community. In addition, we want to be more digitally focussed with the support we provide, as well as ensuring we are accessible to our global community. These significant steps in our journey also see a brand-new website, with a wide range of mental health resources.

We know, historically, that ICAEW members may only have turned to an organisation like caba for help when faced with a crisis. Through our new brand and strategy, we hope that this will no longer be the case, and that our increasingly diverse community can not only see themselves in our brand but can find opportunities to seek assistance and support for the everyday – not just the exceptional.

Our vision is that everyone in the ICAEW community can fully participate in life, and our re-brand is a chance to show that. Our purpose is to work with members of our community to ensure they have the right support or advice, so they can manage whatever's in front of them and thrive.

● for more information  
and support visit  
● [caba.org.uk](https://caba.org.uk)

