

A Potential Downside to Remote Work? Higher Rates of Depression

Kathryn Mayer

March 10, 2023



Remote and hybrid work have become highly desired workplace perks, with plenty of research showing their advantages. In fact, employees who work remotely often say they're [happier](#), [more productive](#) and [more likely to stay with their employer](#).

But new research shows there's at least one drawback to these arrangements: Remote and hybrid workers tend to experience higher rates of mental health issues.

Fully remote (40 percent) and hybrid work (38 percent) are associated with an increased likelihood of anxiety and depression symptoms compared to in-person work (35 percent), according to an analysis by the Integrated Benefits Institute (IBI), an Oakland, Calif.-based nonprofit research organization. For its report, IBI analyzed data from the Household Pulse Survey, an online resource created by the U.S. Census Bureau to determine how households

were impacted by the pandemic. IBI partnered with Elevance Health (formerly Anthem) to analyze claims data related to mental health.

Although there isn't a massive disparity between in-person and remote workers' likelihood of depression and anxiety, it's an important difference that employers would be wise to pay attention to, researchers said.

"The differences in prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms between hybrid, remote and onsite are statistically significant. Our research illustrates that remote work may not be the ideal solution for every employee," said Candace Nelson, director of research at IBI, adding that more exploration of the topic is needed.

IBI's analysis isn't the only research to have found more mental health problems associated with remote and hybrid work: A majority of executives (64 percent) said remote work negatively affected their employees' mental health in 2022, up from 55 percent the previous year, according to [an October survey by RSM US, a professional services firm, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#). Seventy-three percent of executives said workers felt isolated, an increase from 68 percent in 2021.

So what's behind the increase in mental health issues for remote and hybrid workers?

While the new IBI report does not address that question, Nelson noted that IBI researchers saw some evidence in their previous analysis on hybrid and remote work. Among the factors: Many employees are dealing with constant interruptions (cited by 43 percent of remote workers) and battling for home office space (23 percent), as well as dealing with "slow internet connections, isolation, a house in disarray, and a seemingly endless workday," she explained. Twenty-seven percent find it harder to balance work and family responsibilities; nearly half report spending too little time with their children under 18; and 40 percent say they spend too little time with their partner. Some remote workers (30 percent) also feel disconnected from their colleagues, IBI found.

The research comes at an interesting time in remote work: Some large employers, including the [Walt Disney Co.](#) and Amazon, recently announced they will be requiring employees to come back to the office most of the week, but many of those workers—despite the aforementioned challenges—are [pushing back on such policies](#) and petitioning to continue working from home. Employees and employers are engaged in a tug of war over working arrangement preferences.

More Mental Health Help Needed

It's worth noting, though, that mental health issues have been a growing concern for all workers, regardless of their working arrangement. The ongoing pandemic, sky-high inflation and social unrest have all contributed to a decline in employees' well-being over the last few years, and there hasn't been significant improvement since a startling decline in mental health was first seen at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Three years ago, when the pandemic began, the rug was pulled out from under us. We lost a sense of control, and that greatly affects our mental health. Nothing really has turned around since," Paula Allen, global leader of research and total wellbeing at Telus Health, a health care firm in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, [recently told SHRM Online](#). "What you see now is likely not going to change without some significant interventions."

Meanwhile, the rate of individuals taking a prescription medication for a mental health condition has increased to 22 percent from 20 percent year-over-year, and the unmet need for counseling has increased to 14 percent from 12 percent, IBI found.

Employers can do several things to help improve the situation for all employees, Nelson said. Those include increasing access to mental health care; offering programs that help employees coordinate physical and mental health care, as conditions such as diabetes and heart conditions often occur alongside anxiety and depression; and prioritizing inclusivity and access to culturally appropriate mental health care. Improving workplace culture to reduce stigma around mental illness and committing to proactively improving mental health outcomes, such as by adding programs that help employees work through day-to-day life challenges, is also important, she said.

For remote workers in particular, employers might allow flexible scheduling, emphasize connection so remote employees feel less isolated and offer benefits and programs to help employees with child care or pet care. Employers may also consider helping workers prioritize work/life balance—perhaps by encouraging them to log off from work at 5 p.m., for instance.

IBI President Kelly McDevitt said the research is just one example of the complexities of an evolving workplace that has shifted dramatically as a result of the pandemic, and it illustrates the need to support overall employee well-being.

"It highlights the fact that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach for employers to meet the needs of the business and the workforce," she explained. "A single-model approach—whether hybrid, work at home or in-office—may never satisfy the needs of all."

Especially as organizations consider whether to bring employees back into offices or allow them to continue working remotely, McDevitt said employers "should take a step back and evaluate what works best for their people, their business and their culture, and it may turn out to be more than one solution."

Likewise, employees should speak up about what's best for their own mental health.

"Employers may also consider evaluating whether employees are well-suited to working from home (as we did pre-pandemic)," McDevitt said. "Just because we can work at home, doesn't mean we should work at home."

This article is reprinted with permission from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM.org), © 2023. All rights reserved