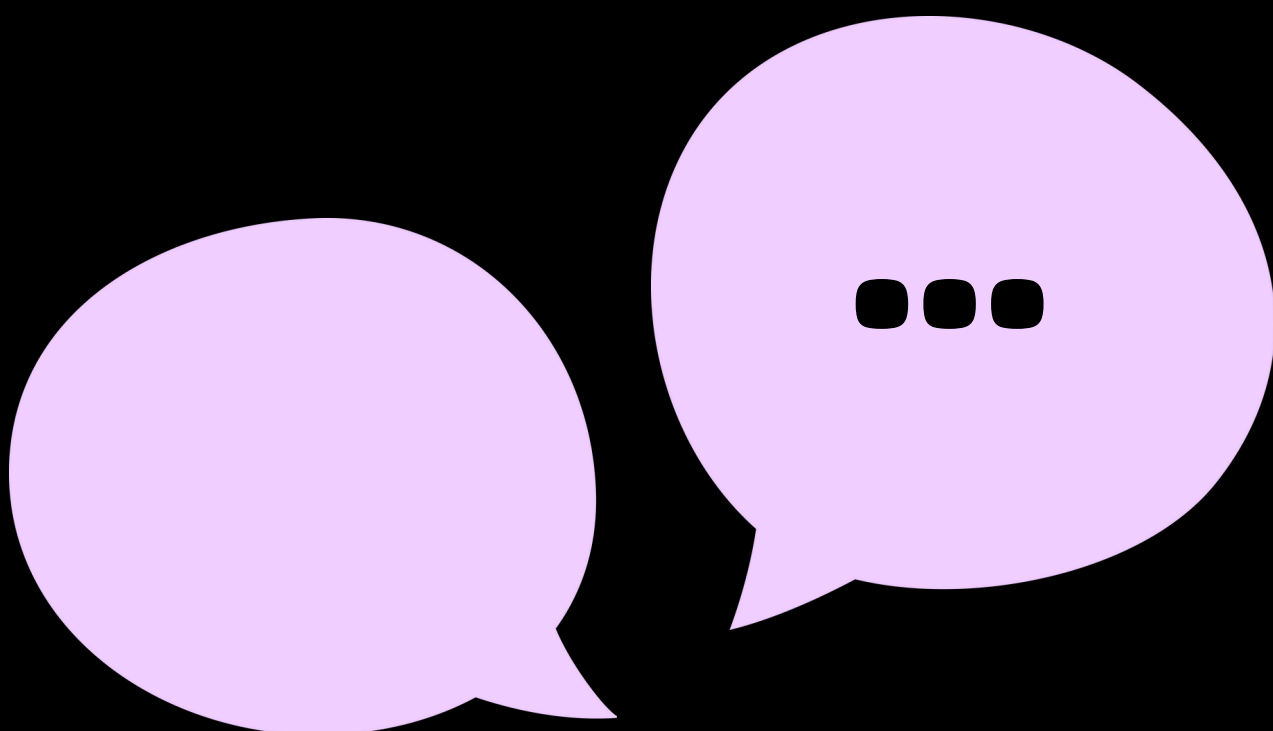


What your employees aren't telling you.

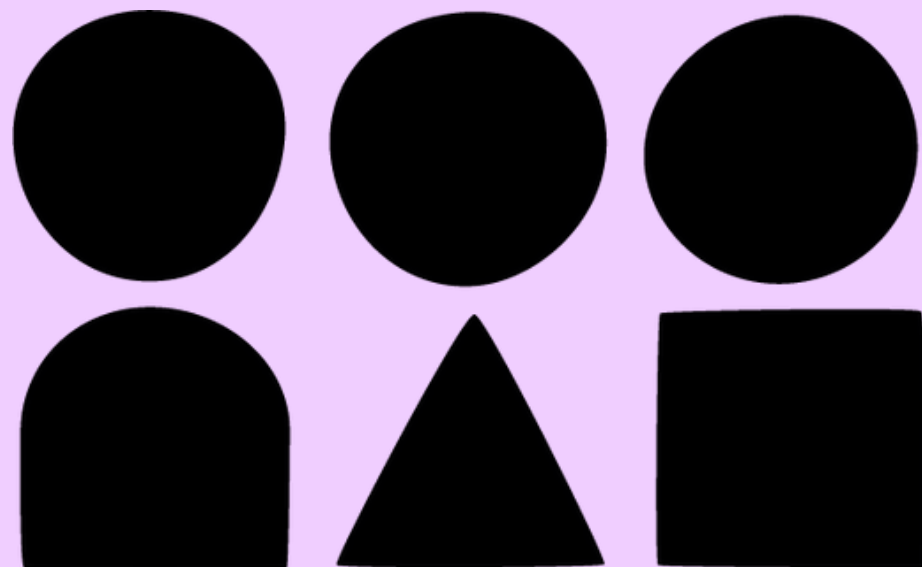


**The truth about wellbeing,
openness, and absence.**



YouGov[®]

**Is stigma
around health
issues
affecting your
organisation's
performance?**



Contents.

- 4 **A message from our CEO**
- 6 **Research methodology**
- 8 **Findings: Stigma and presenteeism**
- 24 **Findings: Seeking support**
- 32 **Conclusions and recommendations**
- 38 **Introducing GoodShape**

A message from our CEO.



"How much do you really know about your employees?"

There's been a sea change in workplace culture over the last few years, but most organisations are still only scratching the surface when it comes to their wellbeing provision.

It's not enough to throw initiatives at the wall and hope that they'll stick; to survive in today's market, you need to truly understand the health issues affecting your employees.

It all starts with instilling a culture where people can open up about the issues affecting them, confidentially and without fear of judgment.

We believe that traditional management processes are beset with barriers to achieving that pixel-sharp picture of wellbeing. The only way to achieve change is through a modern, integrated solution which drives appropriate engagement in wellbeing services and provides transparent, measurable outcomes.

With the right tools, you can begin to manage your people's health and availability with the same level of foresight as other critical assets, such as materials, equipment and services. But without accepting the need for change, you remain open to significant risk, from lower productivity through to losing top talent.

To master today's wellbeing challenges, leaders must heed these three key headlines:

Employees are still hiding their mental health challenges.

Mental health awareness has grown exponentially in recent years, but it's yet to translate into a meaningful shift in business culture. Employees are still wary of stigma, to the point that they will jeopardise their own health rather than share their challenges with a manager. Your people deserve to be taken seriously and have a safe space to discuss mental health issues.

People working through illness puts you both at risk.

Don't underestimate the risks of presenteeism. Working through mental and physical health conditions due to financial or workload reasons is making your employees sicker, and your business more prone to further hidden costs and risks down the line.

Managers aren't the right people to handle employee sickness.

It's time to face the facts: line managers are not the right people to handle absence in the first instance. Piling the pressure onto managers to act as a clinician or counsellor not only presents risks and conflicts of interest, it also compromises their relationship with their team members.

But all is not lost. At GoodShape, we firmly believe there's a solution to the employee wellbeing crisis; one which involves a careful mix of data, clear process, and external support.

This report is a barometer for leaders to gauge what employees really want from their health and wellbeing provision. No two businesses are the same, but this cross-sector snapshot should be a powerful catalyst for you to start focused conversations with your own people.

Alun Baker
CEO, GoodShape

Research methodology.

A comprehensive survey of 2,000 British employees.

Conducted by:

YouGov®

Workforce wellbeing is increasingly topping the corporate agenda, with leaders keen to spotlight their commitment to better health. It's rare, though, to get a glimpse into the true perspectives of those on the receiving end: the employees themselves.

We believe that a lack of insight is one of the biggest reasons that employee support initiatives are so often untargeted and fail to prove effective.

That's why we commissioned leading market research and data analytics firm YouGov to survey a cross section of the British workforce and learn what people really think about health and wellbeing at work.

The research was conducted between 27th October - 4th November 2022 in the format of an online survey.

Survey respondents worked across a variety of sectors, business sizes, and regions within Britain. The figures have been weighted and are representative of British business size. Statistics have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

This report also features qualitative responses from C-suite leaders, collected during research for our March 2022 report, 'Why employee wellbeing isn't working. And what you need to do about it'. Working with leading independent market research company Ipsos, we analysed how the varying perspectives of line managers, HR professionals, and business leaders impact the effectiveness of employee wellbeing support measures.

Scan the QR code (left) to download your copy.



Stigma and presenteeism.

Calling in sick is about much more than just feeling unwell.

55%

of employees would feel worried calling in sick to report a mental health-related work absence.

In this report, you're going to hear a host of reasons why your employees are reluctant to, or simply won't, call in sick despite genuinely needing time off work.

Positive steps are being made to normalise conversations around wellbeing, particularly mental health. But stigma still persists, threatening both the ongoing health of your people, and the success of your business.

We're all aware of the impact absence has on productivity. But recent studies into the effects of presenteeism have revealed that continuing to work while sick is just as detrimental, if not more so, than taking absence leave. And losing valuable time isn't your only worry; unwell workers risk the health and safety of your colleagues, customers, and communities, as well as their own.

Besides being the right thing to do, ensuring your people feel comfortable to express potential health issues and feel confident that they will be supported should be a crucial management concern.

What is presenteeism?

Presenteeism occurs when employees continue to work as a performative measure, despite poor physical or mental health making them unfit to do so.

What are the risks of presenteeism?

Besides decreased productivity and efficiency, employees working while they are unwell can jeopardise organisational health and safety. In high-risk roles such as those involving handling heavy machinery or acting as first responders, it could even endanger lives.

Employees attending work while unwell also slows down their recovery, or might even make their condition worse, risking further absence down the line. This translates into added costs for your business, including those associated with increased attrition when people reach their breaking point.

What causes presenteeism?

Presenteeism is ultimately a manifestation of insecurity about one's job. This could be due to:

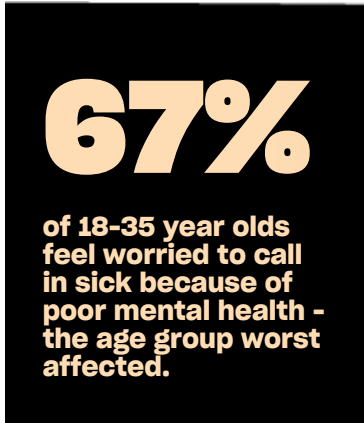
- Pressure caused by unmanageable workloads or understaffing.
- An 'always on' culture where employees feel pressured to show dedication to the business and/or role by working outside their contracted hours.
- A lack of paid sick leave and/or stigma about taking sickness absence.

Over half of employees are worried to call in sick due to poor mental health.

But only 30% feel the same about reporting absence for physical illnesses.

Poor mental health, like poor physical health, can affect anyone at any time. Yet nearly 1 in 4 employees strongly agree that they'd worry about telling their employer they need time off work to put their mental health first. Comparatively, that drops to just 1 in 12 people when it comes to physical health, highlighting a clear difference in perception.

This is a stat that should set alarm bells ringing for employers. Mental health-related absences last three times longer than other absences*, and are proven to correlate with employees leaving their jobs**, so it's crucial that leaders make it abundantly clear that 'it's ok not to be ok'.



* Average absence length: 15.68 days for mental health-related reasons; 4.26 days for all reasons. (GoodShape all-sector data, 1/7/21-30/6/22)

** 54% of people who take two mental health-related absences from work will go on to quit their job. (GoodShape, 2021)

So, ask yourself:

- Does my wellbeing and absence process support employees to be honest about illness, no matter their reason for needing time off?
- Are the people handling that process trained to respond consistently, compassionately, and professionally?
- Do those people have the time and knowledge to advise employees on the best course of action, and signpost or refer to the best sources of support?

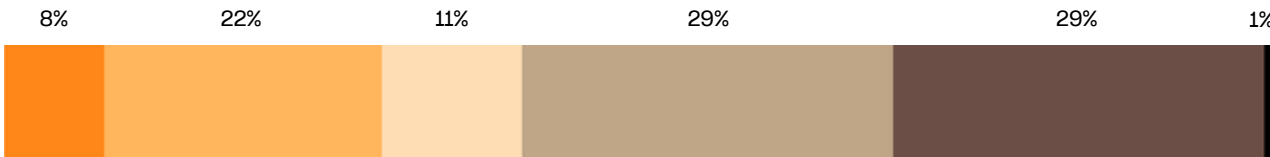
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I would feel worried calling in sick to report an absence from work for:

Mental health. (E.g., anxiety, depression, etc.)



Physical health. (E.g., migraine, menopause, etc.)



- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/prefer not to say

STDs and poor mental health top the list of taboo absence reasons.

68% would feel uncomfortable discussing an STD-related absence with their manager.

It's perhaps no surprise that employees feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive health issues with their managers. But for employers to accept that status quo and wilfully overlook the impact of such stigmatised conditions is short-sighted.

38% don't want to talk about bladder issues, and IBS, UTIs and diarrhoea all place highly on the list of no-go topics too, with 34% of respondents stating they'd be uncomfortable discussing them.

And yet, with 1 in 20 people being diagnosed with an STD in 2021*, up to 10% of women experiencing a UTI each year**, and around 17m cases of acute infectious diarrhoea in the UK each year***, it's statistically likely that your workforce is affected.

Mental health data paints a similar picture. Depression affects 1 in 6 adults in the UK, and 60% of employees experience at least mild anxiety****, but 4 in 10 employees would be uncomfortable discussing depression (42%) or anxiety (41%) with their manager.

So, ask yourself:

- Is it necessary that employees disclose to you the reason for every absence?
- If discussing illness with managers is a barrier to people opening up and getting the support they need, what's your alternative to make things better?

75%

of female employees would feel uncomfortable discussing STD-related absence with their manager, compared to 61% of male employees.

* UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), October 2022.

** London Urology Specialists, retrieved March 2023.

*** National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), May 2021.

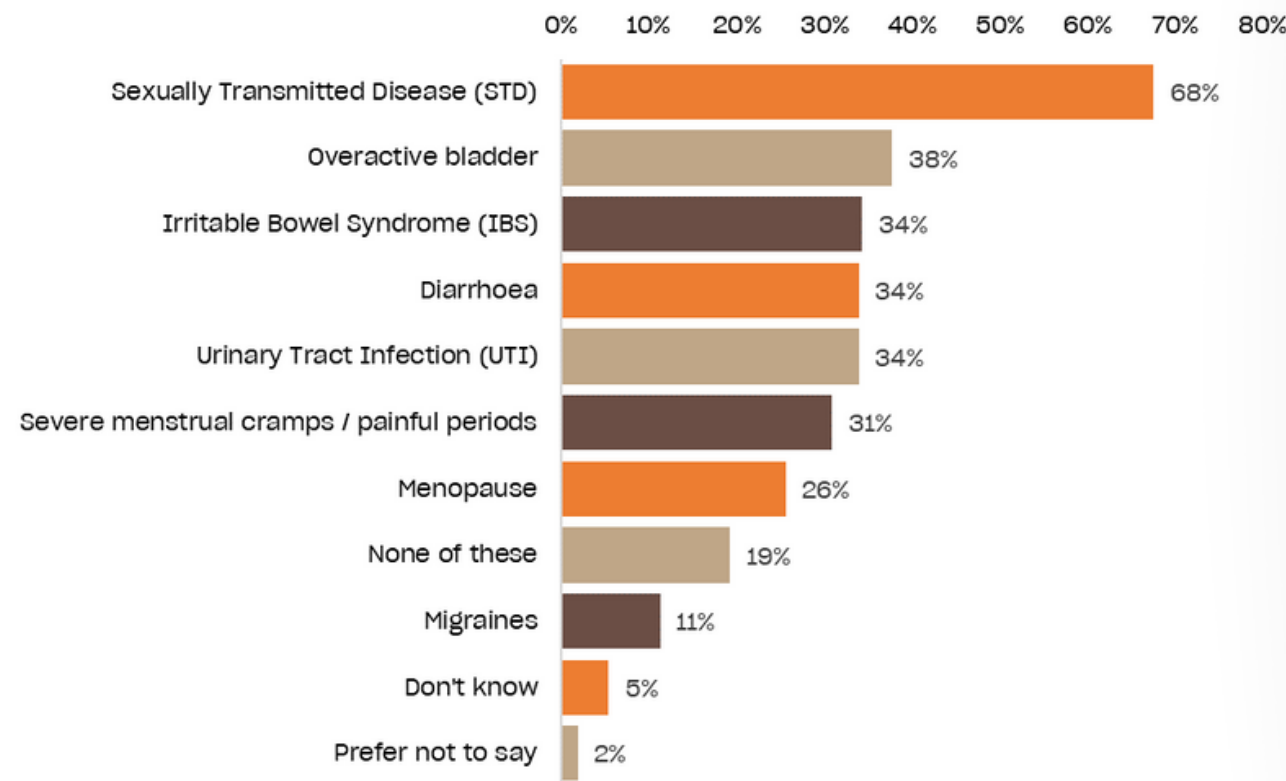
**** 'The Workplace Health Report', Champion Health, 2023.



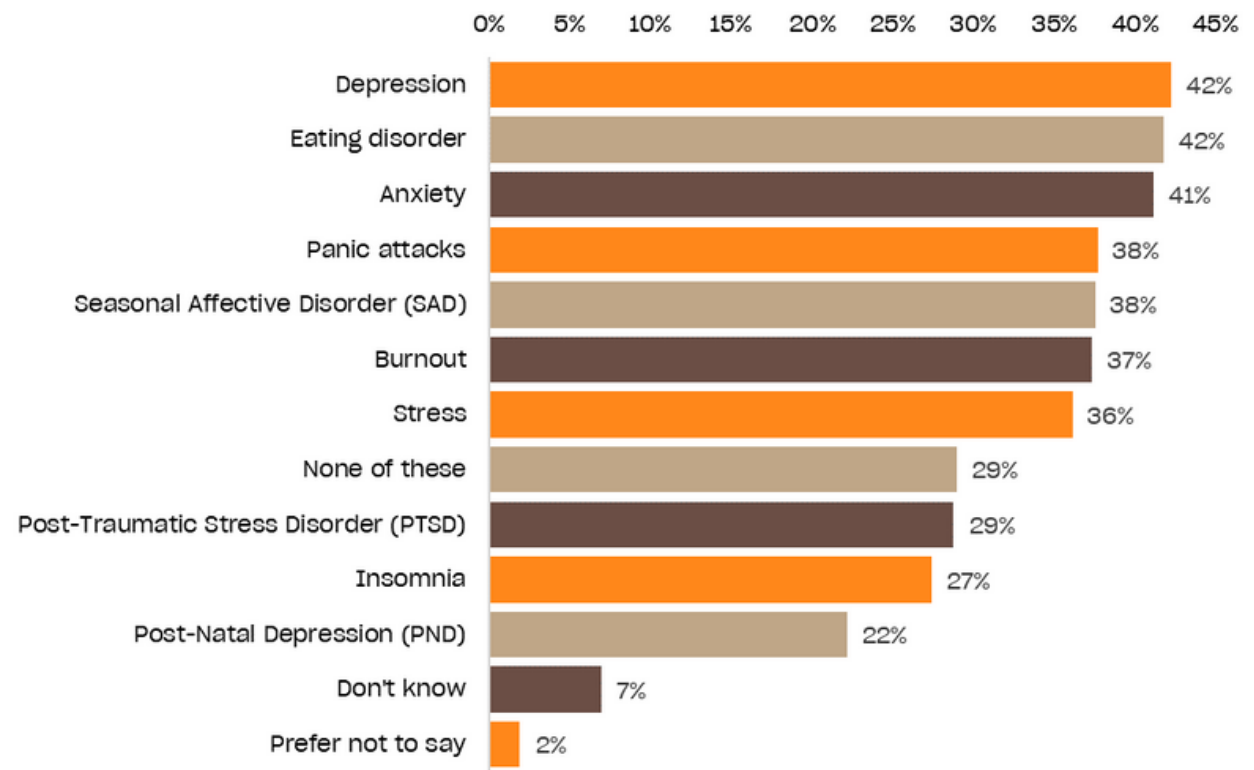
Imagine you had to take time off work due to each of the following conditions...

Which of the following would you not be comfortable discussing with your manager in this situation?

Physical health.



Mental health.



"I think the biggest issue for us as an organisation is to create that platform, environment and culture that says 'speak up if you don't feel 100%'. I've been working from home for nearly two years now. It's got many advantages ... but from a work perspective, it is detrimental."

C-suite member, professional services organisation.

Over half of employees are concerned about the financial implications of absence.

Employees shouldn't need to weigh up whether or not they can afford to be absent.

If someone is physically or mentally unfit to perform their role, their focus should be on getting better, right? Sadly, there are a host of other matters taking precedence for employees.

More people are concerned about the length of time they need to take off (54%) and the financial implications of taking absence (52%) than getting themselves back to optimal health (36%).

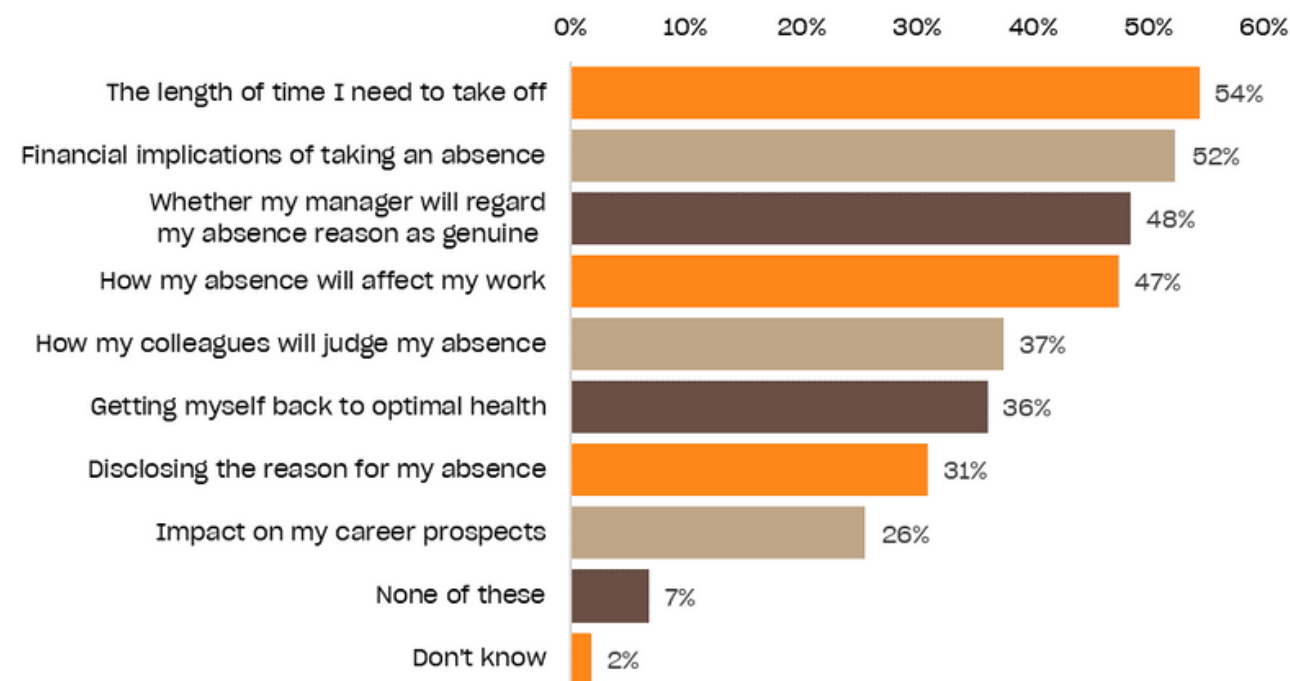
Other top concerns for employees are whether their manager will view their reason for absence as genuine (48%) and how their colleagues will judge their absence (37%),

If employees feel compelled to continue working through illness instead of prioritising their health, employers should expect further absence down the line.

31%

of employees would be concerned about disclosing the reason for their absence.

Which of the following would you feel concerned about if you had to take time off work for illness?



So, ask yourself:

- Are your sickness policies making employees choose between financial security and their physical and mental health?
- How would you know if factors like finance were a root cause of employee absence in your organisation? What mechanism would inform you? And how would you act on that info to provide measurably effective support?
- Are the people who manage your absence process qualified to triage – beyond doubt – accurate reasons for employee absence, the time needed for a safe recovery, and people's support needs – even emergency intervention?

Employees know their health isn't their manager's priority.

Only 29% believe their recovery is among their manager's top concerns.

Organisational matters significantly outstrip wellbeing concerns in how employees perceive their managers' priorities when calling in sick. Absence duration tops the list (selected by 64% of respondents), followed by impact on work (52%).

By comparison, only 29% think their manager will be invested in getting them back to optimal health. There is also a distinct sense of mistrust, with 37% of employees believing that their manager will be concerned whether their reason for absence is genuine.

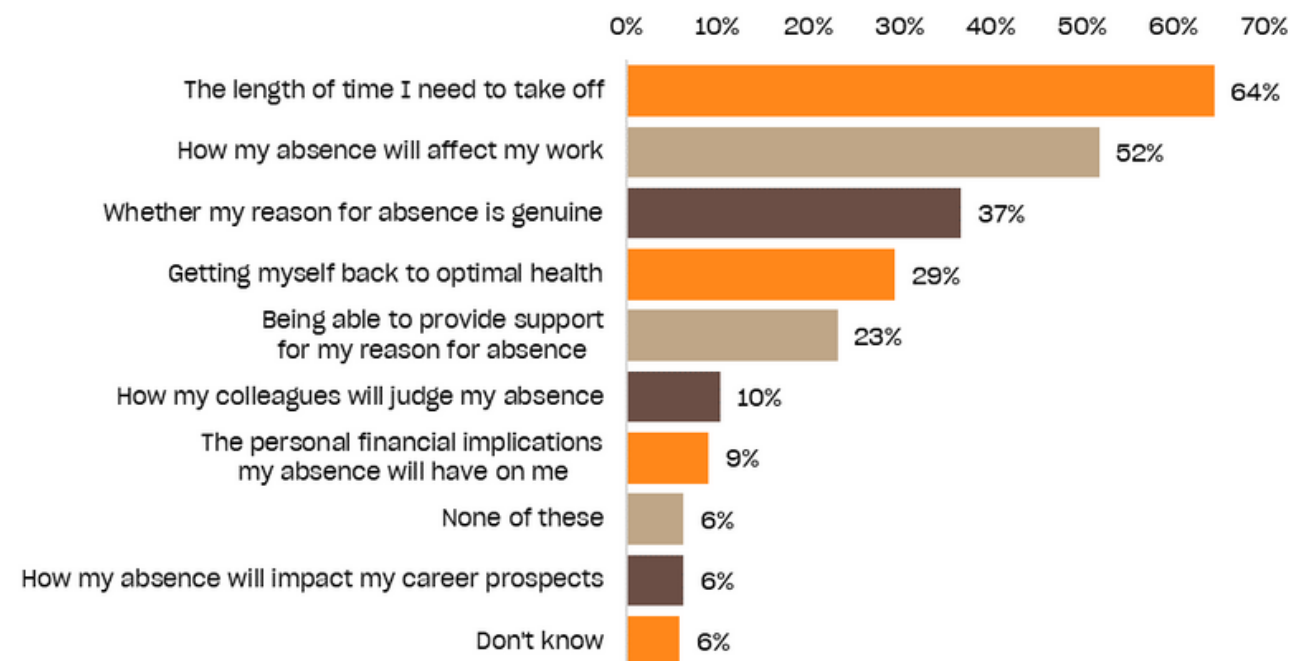
These perceptions perhaps reflect the lack of time managers have to juggle employee wellbeing with the pressures of maintaining a productive team. It's also plausible that managers feel out of their depth supporting employee health, with only 45% having received any training to do so*.

45%

of 18-35 year olds think their manager will question whether their reason for absence is genuine. This drops to between 33-36% for workers over 35.

* 'Why employee wellbeing isn't working. And what you need to do about it.' GoodShape with Ipsos, March 2022.

Which of the following do you think your manager would be concerned about if you had to take time off work for illness?



So, ask yourself:

- How do you ensure employees receive fair and consistent treatment when reporting absence, regardless of who their manager is or the relationship between them?
- How are you ensuring that employees feel free from preconceptions around gender, age, and ethnicity when it comes to reporting and discussing absence?
- Can you be certain that absence data recorded via your managers gives you an accurate picture of the issues affecting your people?
- Are you confident that your managers can advise on wellbeing support, or signpost employees to specialists who can?

The bottom line.

In the last year,

46%

of employees continued to work through a physical health condition. Only 36% took sickness absence.

The current, decades-old way of managing wellbeing and absence is jeopardising the health of your people and your business.

Continuing as you are leaves you open to higher business costs, lower productivity, legal and health risks, and the threat of losing talented people to employers who will support them better.

36%

of employees continued to work through a mental health condition. Just 8% took sickness absence.

It's time to step up to a new way of supporting your people that reflects the conventions of a new, lean, post-pandemic world of work, and the employment-savvy expectations of new generations of workers.

Get it right, and you will not only have healthier, happier employees, but a powerful competitive advantage.

Our results so far have illustrated a broken system, characterised by:

✖ Worry.

Employees are working through illness due to fear of judgement, stigma, or social factors, such as financial stability.

✖ Lack of skills.

Managers aren't trained to support the health of their employees, and are dealing with competing demands on their time.

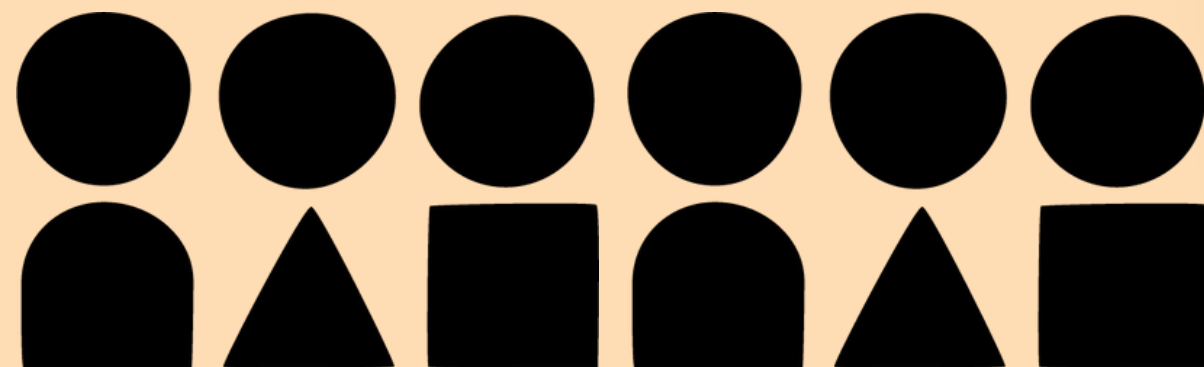
✖ Lack of trust.

Employees feel that their managers doubt their honesty about illness, and that supporting their wellbeing is a low priority.

✖ Risk.

Together, these factors threaten the health of people and business alike, with much of the risk hidden until it's too late.

So, what do people really want?



How can you resolve these challenges and shortcomings?

To find out, we asked employees what's most important to them.

Findings: Section 2

Seeking support.

The support systems available to employees are not fit for purpose.

If you want to retain talent in today's candidate-led market, employee wellbeing support must be seen as a necessary business cost, built into your budget in the same way as you would fleet vehicle or hardware maintenance.

The problem is, people aren't resources. They're people. And that makes them infinitely more complex. Although most employers now offer some level of wellbeing support, not many are seeing returns in terms of reduced absence.

It's time to wake up to the fact that your employees want specialist support. The traditional blanket approach just doesn't cut it anymore, and expecting managers to handle tricky conversations about health is causing more harm than good.

"Where I've seen other organisations fail is when they assume they know the answer to the issues that are trying to be resolved. The more you can work with staff to create the solutions which improve health and wellbeing, the better."

C-suite member, publicly funded organisation.



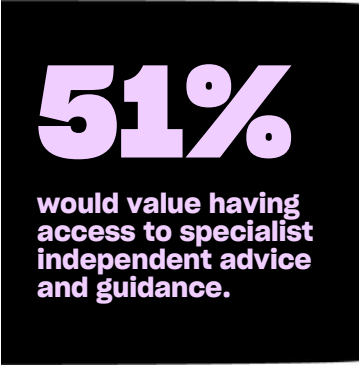
Confidentiality is king for employees calling in sick.

67% would prefer not to disclose their reason for absence to their employer.

However, 63% agree that they would value support and resources to help them get back to work safely and healthily, which presents employers with a catch-22:

How can you support your employees' health needs if you don't know what they are?

The answer may lie in employees' responses to our third question, which found that over half would value specialist independent advice and guidance when calling in sick.



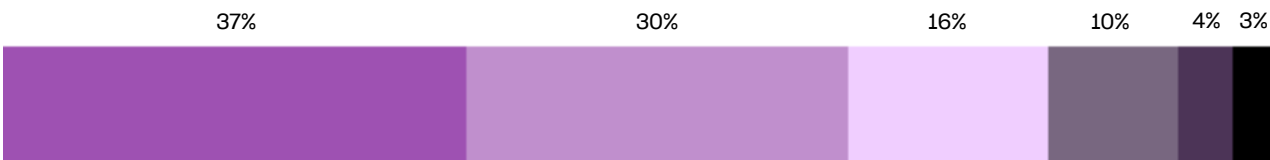
So, ask yourself:

- What reassurances do your employees have about the confidentiality of your absence reporting process? Does it meet ISO standards of data security? Is it clear to them what detail will be shared with whom?
- Could talking to an independent medical professional help to inform your employees about the benefits of disclosing health conditions, such as enabling you to provide tailored support for their specific needs?
- What support and resources do you provide to employees when they are sick? Could you be doing more to help them make a faster, safer return to health and work?

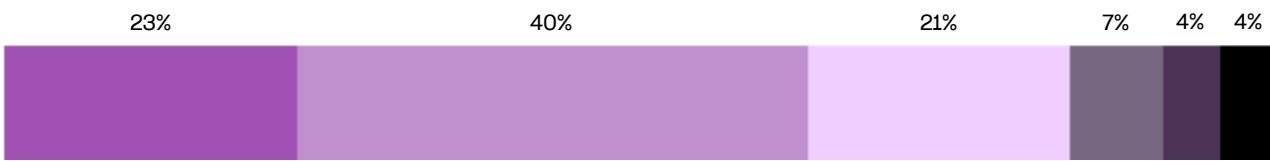
Imagine you had to call in sick from work...

To what extent do you agree or disagree that you would value the following factors?

Confidentiality - only I know my absence reason



Support and resources to help get back to work safely and healthily



Specialist independent advice and guidance



- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

16% of employees have never heard of a Mental Health First Aider.

A further 25% say they have a bad understanding of what mental health first aiders do.

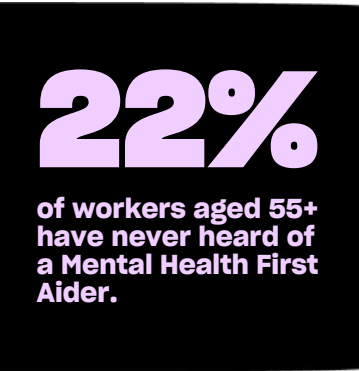
Despite MHFA England having trained more than 77,000 Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAiders) from 2020-2021 alone, general understanding of their role remains low among British workers.

The value of mental health first aid – identifying the signs of new or worsening mental health issues among colleagues and providing first-line support – is not in question. But any support measure that is not well communicated to employees risks being ineffective, or worse, interpreted as a phony ‘wellbeing washing’ gesture by the people it is intended to support.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) are a case in point: traditionally a go-to support initiative for countless organisations, but one that typically engages with only 11% (or less) of a workforce*.

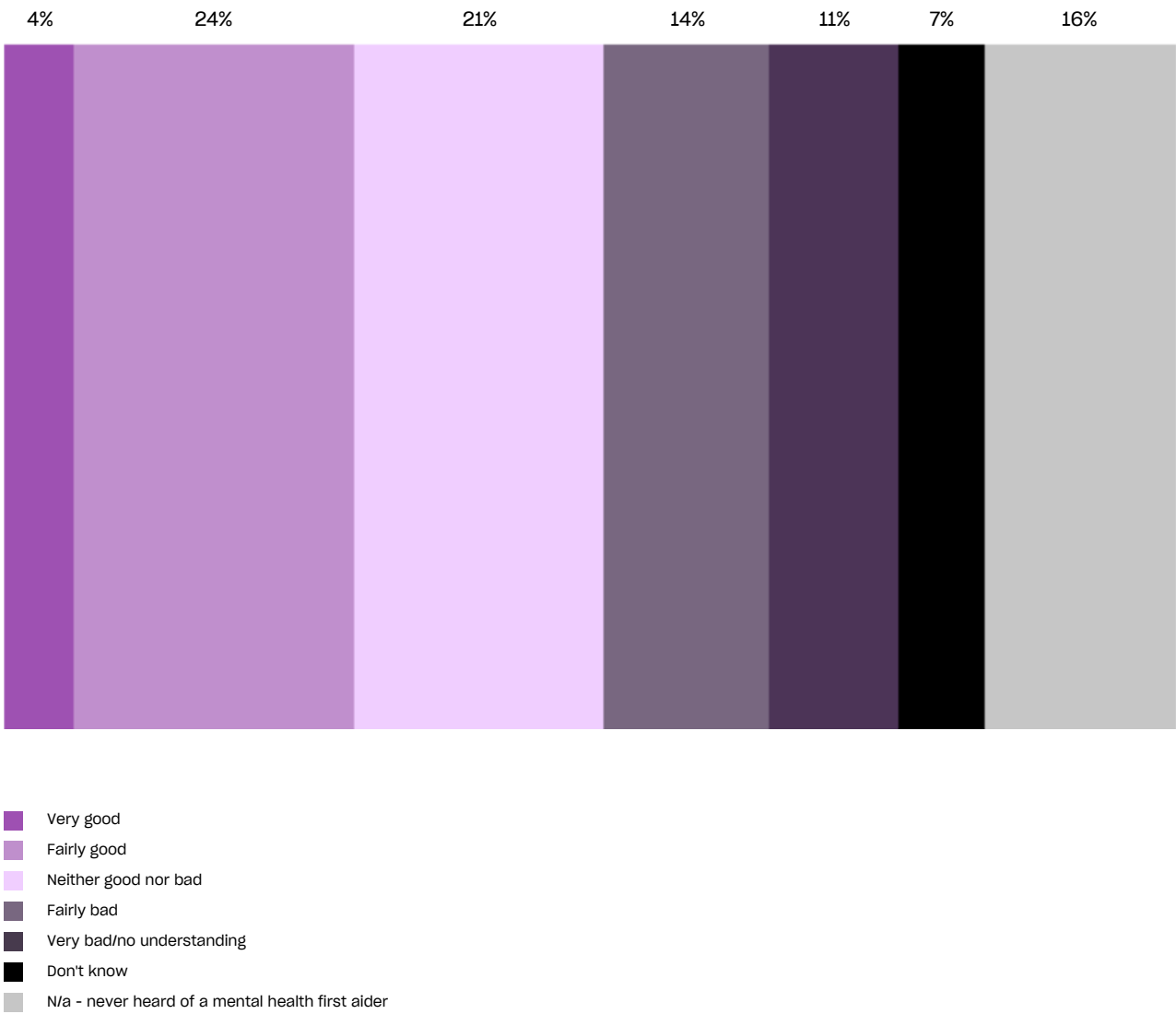
So, ask yourself:

- Can you quantify the engagement rate and effectiveness of your wellbeing support provision? What about their value of return?
- On what basis did you choose your particular initiatives? What data did you use?
- Are you sure that your employees know what support is available to them? If not, what fail-safes are in place to inform them when they are in greatest need (e.g., when calling in sick)?



*Financial return on EAPs 2020: How does your organisation compare?', Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), October 2020.

How good or bad is your understanding of what a Mental Health First Aider does?



"We invested a lot in training mental health first aiders, but making people aware that they are there and encouraging people to use them is very difficult... [in] a largely dispersed workforce."

C-suite member, professional services organisation.

The results are clear: employees want clinical support.

**71% would rather
discuss health issues
with a professional.**

Overwhelmingly, employees would feel more comfortable discussing physical and mental health issues with an independent specialist or UK-based registered nurse than in-house contacts, such as managers, Mental Health First Aiders, or work community support groups.

55% said an independent specialist would be their preferred contact for discussing mental health, with 45% placing nurse support second. For physical health issues, 44% said their preference was for specialist consultation, with 46% placing nurse support as their second choice.

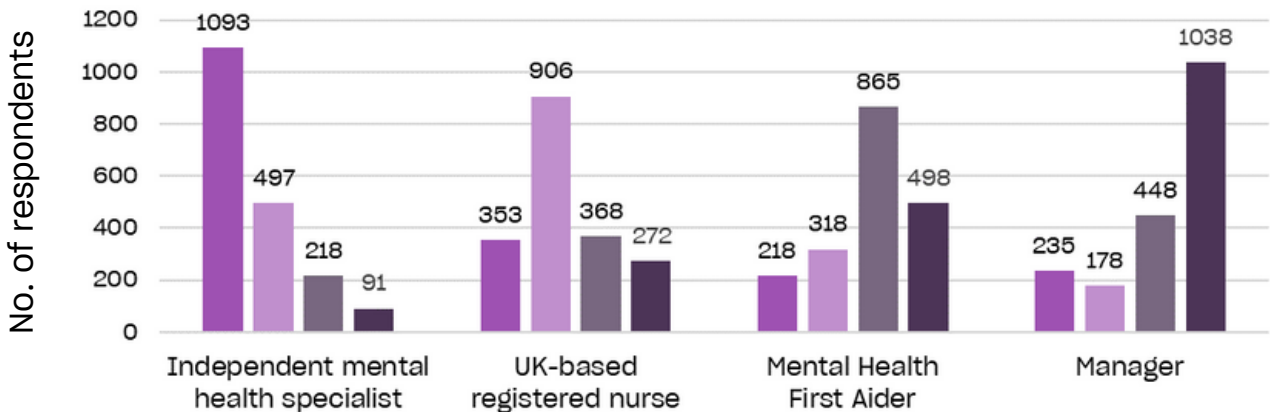
Only around 1 in 5 people (22%) said they'd be most comfortable discussing physical health with their manager. This drops to just 1 in 8 (12%) for mental health concerns.



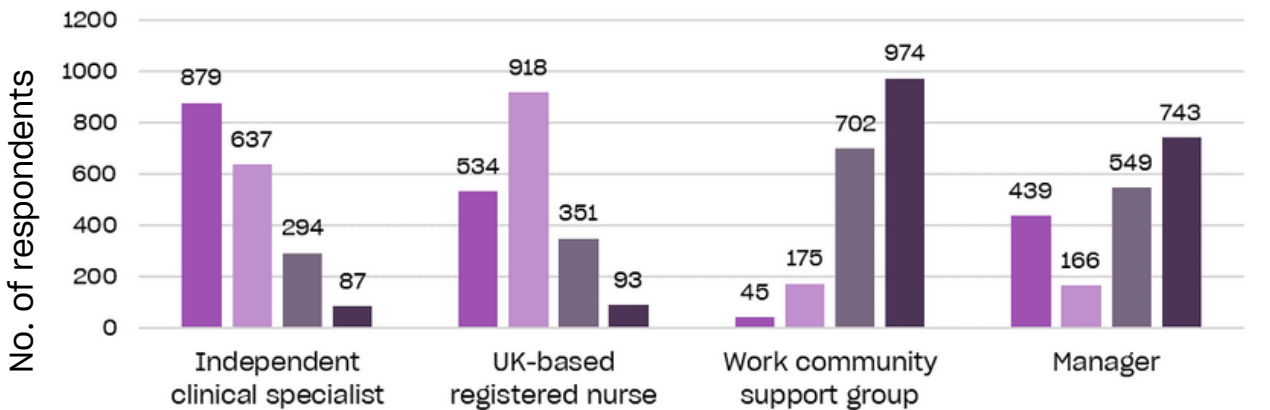
Imagine you were experiencing health difficulties at work and had the following support options available...

Who from the following would you feel most comfortable speaking with?

Mental health.



Physical health.



- 1 - highest preference
- 2
- 3
- 4 - lowest preference

Conclusions and recommendations

So, ask yourself:

Do you employ specialists to support and maintain key business assets such as:



Your fleet vehicles?

Your premises?

Your IT systems?

If so, why not your people?

(Arguably your most important business 'asset' of all.)

The bottom line:

It's time to fix the system. For good.

Your people are more than just assets.

It's time to give them the support they need.

If the findings of this research have made one thing clear, it's that employees are uncomfortable with the way they currently report absence. Ongoing stigma and lack of confidentiality is resulting in increased presenteeism, and decreased trust in their employer.

Managers and HR professionals are already acutely aware of both the drain absence admin has on resource, and the productivity costs and risks of having a siloed absence management process. Yet, so many employers are still blind to the problems and resistant to change.

We strongly believe that clinical care, coupled with a centralised reporting system, is the answer. Like any investment, these solutions come at a cost, but this pales in comparison to the thousands of pounds businesses currently lose each year to the mismanagement of workplace absence.



Managers aren't nurses or counsellors. Don't force them to be.

The current system doesn't work.

Employee-manager relationships are complex, and anxiety around the knock-on impacts of absence, or scrutiny around how 'genuine' their absence is, could be causing your employees to shut down when it comes to health discussions. This makes it impossible to support them effectively.

Relationships are at risk.

Expecting managers to handle absence as well as performing their everyday role blurs the lines between personal and professional matters, and can ultimately be extremely damaging to working relationships.

Although it's important to encourage open conversation around health matters, managers don't need to know the intricate details, and employees shouldn't be expected to disclose them if they don't want to.

Managers aren't wellbeing specialists.

Managers are rarely healthcare professionals, and they shouldn't be expected to fulfil such a role for their employees, with little or no training, and on top of their existing duties. We believe an impartial, specialist third party is required to really understand your people's health and wellbeing – and employees agree.

Leave it to the professionals if you want to make a difference.

Clinical advice on demand.

The length of time an employee must wait to see a health professional can have a huge impact on recovery time. By giving employees access to specialist health services when required, employers can ensure that their people always feel looked after.

Clinicians can also give a better indication of how long an employee may need to take off, and provide advice and signposting to help them get better sooner.

Full patient confidentiality.

The only way to ensure true confidentiality is to involve an impartial third party. Health professionals are duty bound to protect patient privacy, putting your employees' minds at ease when it comes to discussing sensitive matters.

Less admin, better relationships.

Minimising absence-related admin not only gives managers more time to focus on supporting their team, it also ensures their interpersonal relationships are protected. There will always be conflict between business priorities and employee absence, and expecting managers to handle both is unreasonable and potentially damaging to both parties.

Is your organisation in good shape?

Workplace absence is a fact of life: 70% of us need unplanned leave from work each year. But with GoodShape, you have the evidence you need to understand and measurably improve the health of your people and your bottom line.

Using our service empowers you to...

Reduce cost.

- Lower your staff absence.
- Target your wellbeing spend.
- Increase productivity.

Minimise risk.

- Nurture a healthier workforce.
- Be legally compliant.
- Maintain regulatory standards.

Be a better employer.

- Prove your commitment to care.
- Attract and keep the best talent.
- Build your brand reputation.

"Year on year, the figures have improved, and we've saved more than £500,000 since we launched the system."

HR director,
Bouygues Energies
& Services.

"We were able to spot trends in the number of employees suffering with mental health issues, which led to long-term absence. This helped us respond proactively."

HR support officer, Nuneaton &
Bedworth Borough Council.

Introducing the GoodShape Service.

Our clinically-led, evidence-based approach is unique. We're not an EAP or an Occupational Health provider, but we can help you make the most of yours.

24/7 clinical support.

- Accurate absence recording.
- Signposting and referrals.
- Day-one intervention.
- Faster recovery times.
- Fewer repeat absences.
- Lives saved every day.

Single, unified platform.

- Holistic absence management.
- Customisable to your policies.
- Consistent processes.
- Bulletproof documentation.
- HRIS, rostering, and payroll systems integration.

Real-time reporting.

- Respond to staffing challenges.
- Plan around forecasted trends.
- Identify hotspots from individual to organisation-wide levels.
- Make and measure smarter wellbeing support decisions.

Curated care guidance.

- Personalised app-based wellbeing resources.
- Daily care plans for a safer, sooner return to work.
- Trackable engagement.
- NHS-approved content.

Clients include:

Heathrow

PHILIPS

wilko

NHS



**Ready to take
the next step on
your employee
wellbeing
journey?**

**Book your bespoke 1:1
employee wellbeing strategy
consultation today.**



The employee absence, wellbeing
and performance experts.
goodshape.com

+44 (0)345 456 5730
questions@goodshape.com

**GOOD
SHAPE**