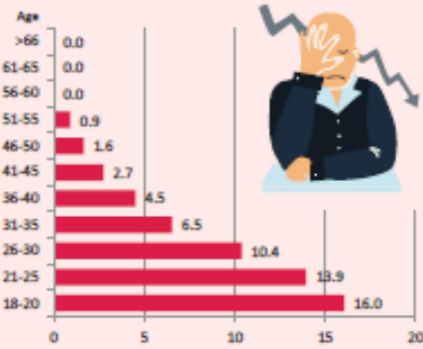




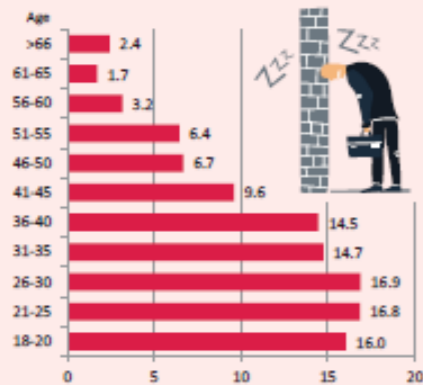
# Millennials are the most stressed-out generation at work

## Mental health and stress

% of employees in Malaysia with moderate to severe symptoms of depression



% of employees in Malaysia reporting poor or very poor quality of sleep

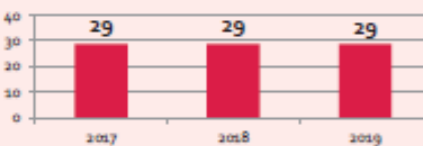


## Mental health and work environment

% of employees in Malaysia who cannot decide when to take a break



% of employees in Malaysia who do not feel they have a choice in deciding what they do at work



Malaysia's Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality — the first science-backed survey commissioned by AIA that analyses productivity for companies as well as employees' health — has found from its 2019 survey that 51% of the 17,505 employees polled suffer from work-related stress, and 53% get less than seven hours of sleep each night.

Notably, 7% of the respondents experience moderate to high levels of anxiety or depressive symptoms, with the bulk of them aged 18 to 40.

These mental health indicators show that half of the Malaysian workforce are stressed out and not getting enough sleep, and about one out of 10 Malaysian employees is either anxious or depressed, with most of them being millennials — those born between 1981 and 1996, and who will turn 24 to 39 in 2020.

A few years ago, the American Psychological Association's annual survey found that millennials in the US were the most stressed-out generation. The same is true in Malaysia today, according to Malaysian Mental Health Association president Dato' Dr Andrew Mohanraj.

"Yes, [they] most certainly [are the most stressed out]. It's simply because they are synonymous with the digital boom. Being more connected and, ironically, more isolated from the real world, being exposed to cyber bullying, with little opportunity for real interaction, or having limited actual interactions — all these have a negative impact on one's ability to handle stressful situations. What is ordinarily not deemed to be stressful may seem like a psychologically overwhelming situation to millennials, who are immersed in the digital world," says Mohanraj.

In addition to the "digital factor", millennials also experience more competition and the need to compete with and outdo one another. "It is natural for every generation to be more competitive and upwardly mobile compared with the preceding generation. Millennials, however, have to grapple with the demands of the digital world as well, and that becomes a double whammy," says Mohanraj.

There are indeed pressures on as well as opportunities for this generation that no previous generation has had to contend with, says Margo Lydon, CEO of SuperFriend, a workplace mental health and well-being organisation in Australia that advocates for mentally healthy workplaces.

"For example, social media and technology play a big part in the lives of millennials, with constant bombardment of Photoshopped lives of perfection, new ways to communicate and language [digital language] used, and the pressure to stay on top of the constant change that digital innovation brings. These, coupled with often higher levels of education, increased debt and employment/career challenges of very long working hours and lack of sleep, can take a toll. This can be especially impactful when comparing oneself with the 'images of perfection' that others publicise," says Lydon.

In particular, she singles out the pace of change and the levels of uncertainty that the digital or disruption age brings as the biggest challenges faced by workers now and millennials in particular, adding that the younger group may not have the personal resilience and external support and resources required — including financial — to navigate these challenges.

"Traditionally, work-related challenges for young people were often about building careers — and this is no different from any other generation. Except that, in 2020, we have a more globally connected world that is moving at a much faster pace, with greater levels of social, political and economic uncertainty, plus in-



creased expectations of productivity — which often mean longer hours and increased work stress.

"We are also seeing an increasing trend in casual work, with many younger people having several jobs and needing to balance the demands that each job brings. If people don't have enough work (underemployment) or have too much debt (student loans, for example), this can lead to financial stress and increases their risk of experiencing mental health issues," Lydon says.

### Higher expectations on both personal and professional fronts

Millennials are also more stressed out because they generally have to meet higher expectations — on both the personal as well as professional fronts, says Jaya Dass, managing director of human resource solutions provider Randstad in Malaysia and Singapore.

While workers from different generations are doing their best to earn more to support a higher standard and cost of living, millennials bear the brunt of such high expectations, as most of them are also starting or raising a family while being at the active wealth accumulation stage — investing besides working — to become more financially independent.

"Taxed with the responsibility of providing financial and emotional support for both their parents and children, this group of people is also known as the new sandwich generation, taking after Generation X. In addition to being concerned about their personal expenses and investments, millennials face increasing pressure to perform in their jobs," Dass says. "When companies strive to attain higher productivity, many workers feel it means they have to wear multiple hats and work overtime to meet tight deadlines. They may also feel they have to spend less time socialising with family and friends. The thought of this could send any worker down a spiral of burnout, work dissatisfaction and unhappiness. While this could happen to any worker, it is mostly seen in millennials, owing to the perceived higher levels of expectations on them," she notes.

According to Befrienders KL publicity director Ardy Ayadali, such workplace issues are among the factors that have led to a spike in mental health problems such as depression, bipolar disorder and ADHD, or attention deficit

## Why employers should care and what they can do

Employers' mental health is just as important as physical health, as it can affect their productivity and innovation.

Improving the mental health of employees — making them mentally resilient to stress — can boost thinking, decision-making, workflow and relationships at work. Conversely, it can be very costly for organisations if their employees' stress is not managed well, says Jaya Dass, managing director of human resource solutions provider Randstad in Malaysia and Singapore.

Apart from loss of productivity, an employer may lose good talent if the cause of stress is found to be in the workplace and the frustrated employee leaves. In severe cases, a deeply troubled employee may become suicidal.

It is essential for everyone to recognise the symptoms of burnout and depression and where they can seek professional treatment, Dass says. Similar to any other ailment, early intervention is extremely important for mental health patients, she says.

"Mental health issues are highly stigmatised in Asian culture, and in some more traditional communities, seeking therapy is not allowed, as it brings shame to the family. It is the employers' responsibility to create a safe and healthy working environment for their employees. The first step to break the stigma is ensuring adequate and proper education. When people are more aware of the different types of mental health conditions as well as the associated triggers and symptoms, it will foster a friendlier and healthier work environment.

"The second is to provide channels for people to seek professional help. Many mental health patients face similar issues of finding professional help that is both suitable for their condition and affordable in the long term. Instead of just sending out a list of mental health and therapy clinics to employees, employers can provide support by ensuring that the case is being followed up," Dass says.

Providing a mentally healthy workplace can make a huge difference, says Margo Lydon, CEO of SuperFriend. "We describe a mentally healthy or thriving workplace as one where someone can come to work and do good work, be their best selves and go home with enough energy to spare for other important aspects of their lives. Employers therefore can focus on creating a positive culture, devoid of bullying and unrealistic work

pressures and deadlines. A positive culture is one that promotes good leadership practices, connectedness and meaningful contribution among workers, and opportunities for developing professional capabilities," Lydon says. "Creating a thriving workplace takes time and is more like a journey rather than a destination."

Do not be judgmental, says Malaysian Mental Health Association president Dato' Dr Andrew Mohanraj. Have a frank discussion with the affected employee about having him or her take time off or be reassigned if necessary, but make it clear it will not jeopardise the individual's career prospects, he adds.

Employers should keep in mind that they can be instrumental in supporting an employee's positive recovery by providing reasonable support, such as time off work to attend appointments, co-developing a plan for a graduated return to work, or changing work duties to help a person affected by mental illness to remain at work, says Lydon.

"Some employers have supports in place, such as employee assistance programmes, which provide (anonymous) counselling supports at the employers' expense. Furthermore, some employers arrange for insurance coverage for their workforce, and include coverage in the event of mental illness (and someone being unable to work). If an employer responds supportively, from the very first instance of the person's being unwell, then the recovery experience can be considerably more positive for all involved. It can mean that the unwell employee returns to work sooner — which is good for business as well as everyone involved," says Lydon.

"It is also very important that the employer maintains confidentiality for the person who is unwell. We strongly recommend that the employer have a single person who maintains regular contact with the unwell employee, and who works with him or her to co-design a return-to-work plan or changes to duties if staying on at work," Lydon adds.

Lastly, as people now spend a lot more time at work than at home, small things, such as ergonomic furniture and non-intrusive seating arrangements, also help improve a workplace environment and alleviate employees' stress, says Mohanraj.

hyperactivity disorder, among millennials. Befrienders KL is a not-for-profit organisation in Malaysia that provides free emotional support to those who need it via a 24-hour helpline.

The increased use of social media, which leads to social isolation and fewer physical interactions and activities, is also seen as a contributing factor, Ardy notes. "This can also contribute to millennials' lack of self-confidence and a high level of insecurity, which can lead to an increase in anxiety and stress at the workplace. Also, with the internet having all the information and 'answers' for them, the information overload is more than they can handle," he adds.

Burnout and depressive symptoms are not issues that can be taken lightly, as they may lead to more serious issues, such as suicidal behaviour. The problem may be exacerbated if the work environment does not meet the mental health needs of people with emotional problems, or if one is a victim of workplace bullying or harassment, which is often seen as a rite of passage in the workplace, says Mohanraj.

It should be noted that 20% of Malaysian employees polled in Malaysia's Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality in its 2019 survey have reported that they are subject to bullying in the workplace. It is also telling that 29% feel they do not have a choice in deciding what they do at work, while 20% cannot even decide when to take a break from work.

### The generation more likely to reach out for help

Ironically, but encouragingly, millennials are also the generation that is more likely to reach out for help when they feel stressed or are not coping.

"Another encouraging trend is that younger people typically have better levels of literacy about mental well-being, mental illness and suicide. This means they know more about the warning signs, the symptoms of anxiety and depression and the more helpful language to use that is less stigmatising. They certainly know how to navigate the internet to find out about it," says Lydon.

"However, we sometimes find that younger people prefer to reach out to friends (or family) rather than access professional assistance and support, such as visiting a psychologist or doctor. It's important to acknowledge that friends and family are essential in supporting a loved one through these difficult times. However, professional help, such as working with a qualified psychologist, can also be incredibly beneficial. Some of the reasons for [not getting professional help] are that younger people prefer to access support privately or may not have the financial capacity to pay for ongoing treatment," Lydon notes.

Increased awareness helps, says Mohanraj, as it has led to more people being able to have frank discussions about issues they face without feeling alone. "Subjects previously deemed taboo and shameful are also now being discussed on social media and appropriate treatment sought because of proper and sympathetic advice available on the right forums," he observes.

"The involvement of famous personalities in the mental health movement has also given courage to others to come out and say they need help. In the UK, the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, and her family have thrown their weight behind mainstreaming mental health [issues]. Similarly, in Malaysia, we have Tengku Puteri Raja Iman Al Sultan Abdullah becoming an iconic advocate for mental health," Mohanraj says.

"In addition, well-known individuals, public figures and influencers are sharing their personal experiences about coping with mental health [issues], which 'normalises' the condition and encourages others to seek early treatment," Dass says. There are also more youths speaking candidly about their personal experiences with mental health issues at work, which helps others better understand the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives, she adds.



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— DATO' DR ANDREW MOHANRAJ



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