

**IADC**  
NORTH SEA  
CHAPTER

# Changing minds: saving lives

An urgent new approach to mental health  
in the North Sea.



# Introduction

## About this report

There is a silent global challenge that is affecting some of the richest and most developed countries in the world – Mental Health. From low moods to loss of life, the mental health crisis among employees is deepening due to factors such as the pandemic, the war in Europe and the rising cost of living.

This crisis must be respected with the same importance as health and safety because it is an integral aspect of the performance of health and safety.

Inroads have been made to improve mental health support, but more needs to be done, and it is the responsibility of industry leaders to make this change happen.

**A top-down driven cultural change is needed to move the industry in the direction required to effect lasting and meaningful change in how it deals holistically with mental health – it is time for a more joined-up approach.**

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Supported by:



Highlighting some of the key points raised at a recent focus group meeting in Aberdeen, made up of operators and supply chain companies, this report will discuss ways to best support the mental health of workers in the UKCS.

The report examines a range of important issues impacting the mental health of onshore and offshore workers in the UK's energy sector today and suggests a way forward. It does not aim to answer all the questions, but simply to encourage further debate toward the development of a mental health strategy that meets the needs of current and future employees.

**Its key themes, intended to stimulate more consideration and detailed discussion, are:**

- The standardisation of mental health care for all our people, from procurement to governance.
- The importance of appropriate policies and procedures for mental health and whether these should be mandatory for employees onshore and offshore.
- The importance of ensuring organisations are going beyond minimum care provision.
- Recognition that while mental health support may include involvement from human resources (HR) teams, it is not the preserve of HR. Mental health is a company, people and human performance matter.
- The importance of mental health being a priority issue for leadership and a commitment to take action to improve how we as an industry care for the mental well-being of our employees.

# The issue

There is a correlation between accidents at work and peoples' state of mind. Suffering from poor mental health while working can have catastrophic consequences, especially in the inherently high-hazard energy industry. A lack of sleep due to stress or anxiety can lead to concentration lapses and potential accidents - putting the lives of the individual concerned and those nearby at risk. It can also have financial consequences for employers through increased downtime, lower productivity of workers, reputational damage and a reduction in company profits.



In the UK, studies suggest one in six workers experience a mental health issue a week, and one in four a year.

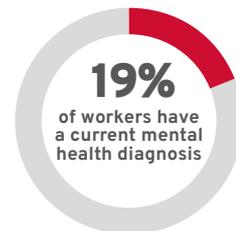
UK-based Champion Health's Workplace Health Report 2023 found the number of employees experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm had increased to 9% since the previous year and **19% of workers have a current mental health diagnosis.**

According to the McKinsey Health Institute "across 15 countries, **around 60 percent of employees have experienced at least one mental-health challenge** at some point in their lives. For leaders, that means that the vast majority of their employees are directly or indirectly affected by mental health-related challenges. Companies have a role to play since the implications of inaction in response to this crisis is tremendous. Those affected by mental-health and well-being challenges can't simply be excluded or treated in isolation from the workforce; **they are the workforce.**"

Research from culture change business Utopia and market research company Opinium shows **three in four employees struggle with their mental health at work**, with two in three saying that their employers are not doing enough to support them.

The results are in line with research from the Office of National Statistics which found rates of depression in Britain doubled from one in 10 in March 2020 to one in five in November 2021.

Offshore workers are 15 times more likely to commit suicide than those onshore.



**Three in four employees struggle with their mental health at work**

In the energy industry, the problem can be exacerbated by isolation, the impact of the pandemic, negative perceptions of the oil and gas industry, the cyclical nature of activity, the macroeconomic environment, climate change and war in Europe. This has created a tipping point for many individuals working in the sector.

Some things which may have been perceived as benefits in recent years, such as single cabins, and internet access on-board assets may have inadvertently contributed to the problem by creating a contained environment with limited opportunities for pressure release.

## Facing the problem

In the offshore energy and marine sectors, industry-specific pressures add to general workplace stressors. These include:

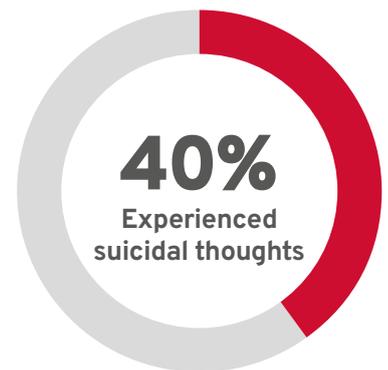
- The remote and isolated location of many offshore installations and vessels
- Confined work and living spaces
- A lack of privacy
- Perceived work hazards, travel to offshore installations and adverse weather
- Separation from family and community
- Regular and prolonged periods away from home
- Rotational shift working patterns
- The cyclical boom and bust/recruitment and redundancy nature of the business
- Retraining due to procedural changes in existing jobs or for new roles (such as the growing renewable sector)

**A recent study by the International SOS Foundation of onshore and offshore remote rotational shift workers found 40% experienced suicidal thoughts some or all of the time while on duty.**

Furthermore, nearly a third met the benchmark for clinical depression while on rotation and more than a third experienced a worse quality of sleep.



**Single cabins, and internet access on-board assets may have inadvertently contributed to the problem.**



## A changing environment

The North Sea energy industry has traditionally been a male-dominated and “macho” environment in which to work. There are still many in the industry – and beyond – who consider it to be a sign of weakness to show that they are struggling with their mental health.

**An old industry adage is: “When I started, we had wooden derricks and iron men. Now our derricks are iron, and our men are wooden”. Although normally said in jest, it reflects how the industry viewed changing attitudes and the feelings of colleagues.**

However, the offshore energy industry has changed significantly since the 1970s, and recently at a far more rapid pace. High commodity price volatility and the cyclical nature of activity, particularly over the past 10 years due to downturns and supply/demand imbalances, have triggered recruitment, training and mass redundancies on several occasions.

The middle of the last decade saw the biggest and deepest downturn ever in the energy industry, followed by the global pandemic. These events generated significant uncertainty, anxiety and pressure for many people. Tragically, for some, the pressure has been intolerable.

**Speaking up about issues is critical. The Dräger UK Safety at Work Report 2022 - which surveyed workers from a range of industries including oil and gas - found 56% of respondents felt being able to bring up safety fears – whether related to mental or physical health – was the main factor that helped them feel protected.**



**The offshore energy industry has changed significantly since the 1970s, and recently at a far more rapid pace.**



It is essential for the offshore energy industry to de-stigmatise negative connotations about showing vulnerability and to provide clear, sector-wide support on how workers can ask for help when they feel overwhelmed, through practical and easy-to-follow guidance.

The challenges and difficult nature of the energy industry are unlikely to change significantly – energy extraction from the North Sea will always require people to work long and demanding hours far from home. It is unrealistic to expect that individual companies and industry bodies can provide a solution to every individual's mental health concerns. However, the industry has a responsibility to ensure that places of work are safe environments in which to operate – not only physically but also mentally.

The industry has always strived to deliver world-class HSE (Health, Safety and Environment) performance. It has developed stringent operating policies and procedures. It has implemented robust training and competence programs and it has automated processes to remove the individual from harm's way. When it comes to mental health a lot of good and important work has been done. Step Change in Safety, for example, has delivered excellent material covering awareness and many other organisations are engaging with the issue at differing levels. However, despite efforts so far, mental health issues from burnout to suicide remain a prevalent issue within the industry.

**Furthermore, the future for many employees is uncertain. Key to an industry undergoing transition will be the creation of sustainable careers for workers, including training for other skills and sectors, to ensure employees have a clear future career path.**

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Alongside industry changes, workforce expectations are no longer the same as they were in the past. Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2015) and millennial (born between 1980 and 1994) employees have a greater focus on work/life balance and personal fulfilment than their older colleagues.

In recent times, the energy industry has made great strides in improving its approach to health and safety. These advances have generated a cultural change in how the industry approaches HSE.

Improvements have been made to the industry's approach to mental health, including its inclusion in employee assistance programmes and campaigns. However, it does not appear like they have been sufficiently impactful and have been subject to criticisms of mere signposting or box-ticking.



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# What needs to be done

## Focusing on the H in Health, Safety and Environment

The industry has made considerable strides in improving the physical safety of its people, and despite still having high operational risk, it has become one of the safest sectors to work in.

Measures that have enhanced physical safety include improving procedures, increasing digitalisation and automation and introducing practices such as Time Out for Safety giving the employee a lead role in stopping unsafe acts and conditions.

**It is vital now that more is done to improve psychological safety.**

**Research from Dräger found only 40% of managers believed that treating mental health equally to physical health was important for safety. By contrast, 56% of employees believed mental health and physical health should be treated the same.**

Benenden Health's [Mental Health Report 2022](#) found that only 38% of employees surveyed believed mental well-being was a big priority for their employers and that they felt employers genuinely cared about their mental well-being. By contrast, 52% of employers said it was a big priority for their business and cared about the mental well-being of their staff.

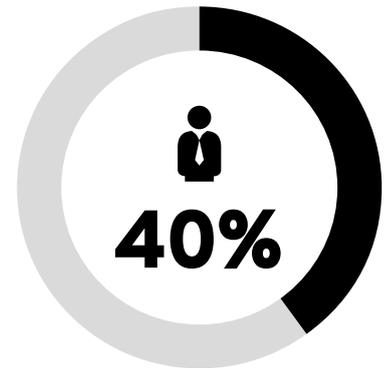
The Dräger research found younger employees felt less supported than older ones. Nearly a third (32%) of 18-24-year-olds claimed their workplace did not take mental health as seriously as physical health. This view was particularly prevalent among oil and gas workers (33%) and those in renewables (30%) but less prevalent among employees in utilities (18%).

It is time to ensure that the exceptional focus the industry has placed on physical health and safety is matched by an equal commitment to the mental well-being of its people.

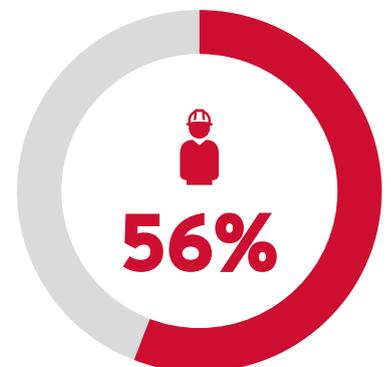
A major cultural change is required for the energy industry to effectively reduce the potential risks of poor mental health as current measures, whilst positive, have yet to yield the desired impact.

**A joined-up cultural shift is not only important but necessary, if we are to leave a legacy of change.**

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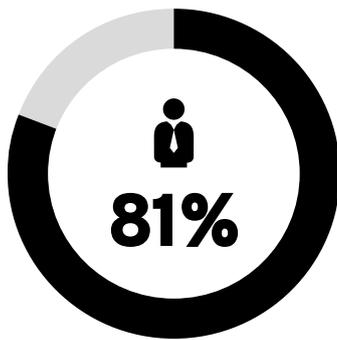


**40% of managers** believed that treating mental health equally to physical health was important.

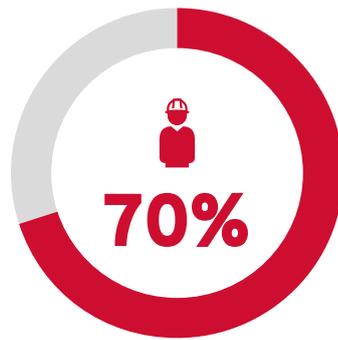


**56% of employees** believed that treating mental health equally to physical health was important.

This cultural change will have to be driven from the top down and will require time and investment. Industry leaders must be empowered with adequate support and expertise to drive a change in values, education and behaviour. It will require leaders to be accountable and equipped with the training and management skills necessary to drive a lasting cultural shift throughout their own organisations and the industry. Findings from the Benenden Health Mental Health Report 2022 show the biggest concern reported by both employees and employers when it came to having open conversations about mental well-being was a fear of saying the wrong thing, with 81% of employers and 70% of employees saying it affected their decision on whether or not to speak. Leaders will have to establish a framework for what a “culture of care” looks and feels like.



**81% of employers** had a fear of saying the wrong thing when it came to having open conversations.



**70% of employees** had a fear of saying the wrong thing when it came to having open conversations.

It will also require middle managers to be given the appropriate support, training and skills necessary to properly manage colleagues and create the safe psychological spaces conducive to mental well-being. This may in turn improve the effectiveness of existing employee mental health assistance programmes.

It will also require a more proactive approach to mental health at every level of the workforce, including the adoption of best practices and potential regulation for mental health care, assessment and implementation.

To ensure the mental resilience of its workforce it is essential that the industry acts now to ensure that it addresses the H in HSE (Health, Safety and Environment) with much greater focus and intent.

## Are we doing enough and are we doing it right?

In recent years, many organisations and companies have introduced mental health awareness campaigns and employee assistance programmes, including establishing training courses, appointing mental health first aiders and developing toolkits.

However, the industry’s response to mental health appears to be characterised by organisations working independently of each other. Developing solutions in a siloed and independent manner bypasses the benefits to be gained from sharing best practice. Over the decades, numerous health and safety campaigns delivered by the likes of IADC, Step Change in Safety and other industry bodies have shown repeatedly that when the industry works together it can deliver world-class HSE and operational performance. The ambition is to achieve similar success in mental health support.



**To ensure the mental resilience of its workforce it is essential that the industry acts now to ensure that it addresses the H in HSE.**

**Research by the McKinsey Health Institute found that workplace factors such as improved behaviours, inclusivity and sustainable work played a far greater role in supporting the mental health of employees than access to employee assistance programs.**

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Unsurprisingly, toxic workplace behaviours were by far the greatest predictor of negative workplace outcomes.

Findings from the Benenden Health Mental Health Report 2022 indicate employers clearly appreciate that it's simply not enough for employers just to talk about support, but instead they must make sure they have an appropriate strategy and policy in place that effectively delivers for their workforce. There appears to be a growing understanding that mental well-being needs to be managed on the same level as physical health. The research also shows that when people are seeking new jobs, the support on offer for their mental well-being is as important a factor in deciding where to work as traditional, long-standing benefits like annual leave and salary levels.

Considering this, it is important to ask; are we really ensuring that our workers are our most important asset? Are we really creating the safest and healthiest environments for our employees?

### **The McKinsey research proposes the following questions for consideration:**

- Do we treat employee mental health and well-being as a strategic priority?
- Do we effectively address toxic behaviours?
- Do we create inclusive work environments?
- Do we promote sustainable work?
- Are we holding leaders accountable?
- Are we effectively tackling stigma?
- Do our resources meet employee needs?



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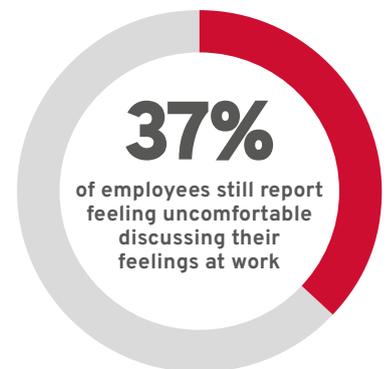
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## Changing the mindset

**A cultural change is critical. In the energy industry, changing the mindset and culture will require an emphasis on employee care and creating a safe psychological space in the workplace as the core of business.**

Our industry will need to reflect on several key areas as part of this cultural transformation:

- Accepting personal vulnerability is important. According to renowned vulnerability research professor Dr Brené Brown, vulnerability is our most accurate way to measure courage. Historically, signs of vulnerability have not been encouraged in the energy sector.
- The Benenden Health Report 2022 found when faced with deteriorating mental well-being as a result of work, **37% of employees still report feeling uncomfortable discussing their feelings at work**. However, accepting and recognising vulnerability are where the industry needs to move to. How do we achieve this?
- It is time for all energy companies to recognise the importance of work-related stress and review their approach to mental health support. However, this must be undertaken in a coordinated manner. A shift in approach must be underpinned by an industry-wide cultural change so that mental health is no longer treated as a taboo subject. How do we achieve this?
- In the first instance, a coordinated industry-wide review must be held to identify both good practices and gaps in existing mental health support systems for offshore and onshore workers.
- Several organisations have already developed excellent resource material and many toolkits and guidelines are already available. An important task would be to compile these into a single systematic approach. Individuals concerned must have immediate access to support. Where would this be held?
- An important element of the required organisational and cultural change in mental health provision is to identify those with responsibility for implementing it – such as the leadership team, the Health and Safety Executive, HR personnel and middle management – and ensure they fully understand and appreciate their roles.
- HR departments must have adequate funding to promote the cultural change and implement mental health programmes. Mental health first aiders may face pitfalls including accusations of bias, having a vested interest or a lack of objectivity. Mental health first aiders must be properly identified, selected, trained, and given mental health support, to allow them to offer effective counsel to their colleagues and to continue their professional and personal development. Rewarding and recognising their role is important.
- The widespread cultural change in the industry's approach to HSE means previous fears of whistle blowing have been overcome and individuals reporting HSE concerns is now an accepted practice in support of workers' safety. How do we achieve the same priority for mental health issues?
- How do we ensure regular engagement and review with employees on their mental well-being. Does it need to become part of our review before going offshore?



**HR departments must have adequate funding to promote the cultural change and implement mental health programmes.**

## A mental health charter

The establishment of a mental health charter by the industry will help to kick-start the necessary cultural change and universal approach.

### **The charter must be truly inclusive. Its aims will be:**

- To lay out principles that are deemed to be fundamental to creating a safe psychological and caring working environment and set a minimum standard for mental health care provision.
- To frame on-boarding training for industry leaders on people skills. To establish a commitment from them to care for and improve the mental health of their people.
- To make the best use of appropriate existing tools to develop an improved mental health framework designed to deliver on industry goals and objectives.

The charter will be free to download. Each company that signs up to the pledge will be required to provide evidence that it has been shared with all staff. The goal is for every member of the offshore and onshore energy industry to have a copy of the charter. But beyond this, we will establish shared values, which will help to inform and guide a change in behaviour.

A cultural change and a universal energy industry approach underpinned by affirmation of commitment through a mental health charter will represent a significant advance on the current levels of support available.

**The North Sea Chapter of the IADC, in conjunction with Energy Voice, intends to hold a panel session and workshop aimed at developing such an industry charter. It will also be aimed at addressing the questions and important topics raised in this paper.**

## Conclusion

# Advancing the debate

The industry has done much in a short time to consider and address mental health issues. However, it is time for a new approach, including improved training, awareness and education combined with a better engagement with, and embedding of, existing materials.

**The fear employees have that they might lose their job if they speak out has increased by an astonishing 1100% since 2020.**



A cultural shift, driven from the top down through changes in values, behaviours, education and training, is essential to de-stigmatise and prioritise mental health so that workers can understand the issues affecting them and can feel confident about seeking support.

In a challenging skilled labour market, ensuring the provision of effective mental health services in the energy industry can play a major role in retaining today's employees and attracting the workforce of the future.

The journey towards the provision of better mental health support must begin today. It is essential that the industry starts the process now by creating a charter that companies and relevant organisations can commit to as part of a uniform approach and cultural change to improve mental health.

**While there is no time to waste, this new approach must be considered, comprehensive and clear.**

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Critically, the industry must shake itself from the current perception that it is doing everything it can to support the mental health of workers but is failing in making headway. This perception is no longer acceptable.

The situation simply must improve as a matter of urgency. The dramatic turnabout in the energy industry's HSE culture, backed by regulatory and legal requirements, shows that it can be done. The same cultural change can be achieved for mental health.

**The lives of our people depend on it.**

The major questions on how to improve mental health services, and the launch of the mental health charter, will be the focus of the event organised by the North Sea Chapter of the International Association of Drilling Contractors (IADC) in collaboration with Energy Voice.

The event will be held on **Tuesday 25th April 2023, at The Chester Hotel, Aberdeen**. Leaders from across the energy industry are invited to come together to consider the pressing challenges that drive negative mental health issues.

**If you feel more needs to be done to support the mental health of energy employees and would like to join this important debate, register here.**

### About the IADC

The International Association Drilling Contractors (IADC) is a non-profit trade association that is the global leader in advancing and promoting innovative technology and safe practices that bring oil and gas to the world's consumers. For more information, visit [www.iadc.org/government-industry-affairs/briefing-book/](http://www.iadc.org/government-industry-affairs/briefing-book/)

### About Energy Voice

Energy Voice is a digital and print news platform, which investigates and reports on what matters in oil, gas, power, and the energy transition to a global audience. Energy Voice helps companies and organisations understand the geopolitical, economic, and financial factors that underpin current market events, and give them a view on what's coming over the horizon. <https://www.energyvoice.com/>



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