

INTERACTIVE

Anxiety Britain: Why so many of us are being signed off work

As the government reveals plans to tackle the impact of mental health issues on the workforce, how anxious are you? Check your score with our interactive questionnaire



Tom Calver, Data Editor

Saturday September 09 2023, 6.00pm, The Sunday Times

Britain is worried sick. A quarter of us have “high” levels of anxiety, according to the Office for National Statistics. Prescriptions for anti-anxiety medications such as serotonin re-uptake inhibitors are at record levels. Talking therapies are booked out. Celebrities flog anti-stress skin patches and cannabidiol treatments.

Anxiety is increasingly hitting the workforce. Of the 2.5 million people who are economically inactive due to long-term sickness, a quarter — 635,000 — are not working because of anxiety, depression, nerves, phobias or panics, up from 545,000 in 2019.

The government thinks many of them could be working. Last week, the work and pensions secretary, Mel Stride, announced

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Is he right? And when did we become such an anxious nation?

Deep in a London laboratory, Professor Oliver Robinson is trying to find out. The scientist, who runs the University College London (UCL) Anxiety Lab, intentionally scares people by showing them horror films or, in some cases, giving them mild electric shocks. Their brains are scanned to see how people with and without anxiety respond to these impulses. Yet the differences between those who have “anxiety” and those who are merely “anxious” can be hard to discern.

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“Anxiety is probably the only type of mental health issue that everyone experiences,” Robinson says. Anxiety – nervousness about the future – has traditionally been one of humanity’s more useful traits. It kept our hunter-gatherer ancestors alert to the dangers of being eaten.

Young nerves

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1,000 patients

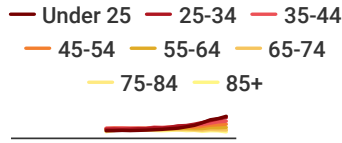


Chart: @TomHCalver | The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: University of Bristol

Yet “generalised anxiety disorder” was listed as a condition in its own right only in 1980, when it made its way into the US Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Anxiety became something you could have, rather than merely something that you felt.

What’s the difference? “We can’t just do a blood test and say, ‘Right you have a pathological anxiety disorder’,” Robinson says. “If you’re walking home in the dark and you’re worried that you’re going to get mugged, that’s normal anxiety. When you get home and have a cup of tea, that anxiety should dissipate.

“But if you continually feel primed, on edge and worried — and it’s stopping you from doing things — that’s different.”

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To see where you sit on a sliding scale, take the generalised anxiety disorder assessment, a seven-question test known as

GAD-7 used by GPs as a screening exercise. Patients are given a score of 0-2 for each question; your anxiety category can range

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score is thought to be about 5 but jumped to 6 during the first Covid lockdown.

Generalised anxiety disorder

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

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Not at all

Several
daysMore
than half
the daysNearly
every
day

Not being able to stop or control worrying?

Not at all

Several
daysMore
than half
the daysNearly
every
day

Worrying too much about different things?

Not at all

Several
daysMore
than half
the daysNearly
every
day

Trouble relaxing?

Not at all

Several
daysMore
than half
the daysNearly
every
day

Being so restless that it is hard to sit still?

Not at all

Several
daysMore
than half
the daysNearly
every
day

Becoming easily annoyed or irritable?

Not at all

Several
daysMore
than halfNearly
every

the days

day

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Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen?

Not at all

Several days

More than half the days

Nearly every day

[View your score](#)

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The number of people presenting to their GP with symptoms of anxiety was fairly level in the 2000s. But in the 2010s, under-25s went from being one of the least-anxious groups to one of the most. Rates of anxiety more than doubled: in 2018, nearly one in 20 adults aged 18 to 24 who presented to their GP were found to have anxiety.

Azeem Majeed, a professor of primary care at Imperial College London who also works as a GP in Clapham, said: “In my own practice, I do see many people who are signed off work for periods (sometimes quite lengthy) with stress and anxiety. This is something that I saw far less frequently earlier in my medical career.”

Drugs including serotonin re-uptake inhibitors and beta blockers can be started at any stage of treatment, but in recent years, Majeed says, “there has been a trend to use interventions such as online therapies, counselling and CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] before considering the use of drugs”.

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Robinson remains unconvinced that we are genuinely more anxious than we used to be. If humans were rational, this would make sense: the chances of being killed in battle, catching

bubonic plague or being stabbed by your neighbour have never been slimmer.

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There are several reasons why anxiety runs high in modern Britain even as “real” danger has subsided.

First, work has become more cognitively challenging. For centuries, we mainly did manual jobs that strained the body, whose limits we are well versed in. Today, most of us are stationary, hunched over computers, and the strain has moved from the body to the mind. And while physical work usually happens in a fixed place we can leave, cognitive tasks can follow us around after hours, says Claire Neal, head of workplace mental health at Mental Health UK. “People are just not putting boundaries in place and recharging their batteries.”



Professor Oliver Robinson, who runs the University College London Anxiety Lab, is unconvinced that we are genuinely more anxious than we used to be

Second, we live in a much more individualistic society. The Dutch writer Daan Heerma van Voss, whose new book *The Anxiety Project* explores his family’s battle with mental illness, believes the plight of the anxious is made worse by the feeling of being disconnected from society. In modern society we are “in competition” with one another, he suggests, a feeling exacerbated by social media. He began investigating anxiety after yet another of his relationships broke down because of his crippling fears. As it turned out, the cortisol levels in his hair suggested he was 74 times as anxious as the average person.

- [Eight ways to beat autumn anxiety](#)

“A century ago, people weren’t speaking about anxiety directly — you wouldn’t find workers discussing how they were

anxious,” he says. “But the act of standing next to another human being and talking about your life was, in itself, a form of

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A third theory behind Britain’s latest rise in reported anxiety levels is linked to financial health. It is no coincidence that, according to the ONS’s wellbeing barometer, there have been three recent peaks in the anxiety levels of the British public: the financial crisis, Covid and the cost of living crisis.

On edge

Percentage of people who reported high levels of anxiety



UK respondents were asked how anxious they felt yesterday on a scale of 0-10. "high" is a score of 6 or higher
Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times

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Tom Dunning, 32, a mechanical engineer from Lincoln, comes from a military family: his father has been in every war since the Falklands and his two older brothers fought in Iraq. As a

result, he struggled to open up to his family about his anxiety.

“My brothers have been to war — I’ve been to war with myself.”

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Several years ago he was diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder, but his symptoms worsened when the cost of his mortgage nearly doubled last year. “I was in work but didn’t feel present. I stopped making an effort with myself — even stopped wearing socks and underwear. I’d hide the bills from my wife.

“As the main breadwinner, I felt I couldn’t speak to anyone, because I felt like I’d failed.” It was only when he sought the help of debt charities that his symptoms lifted.

Corporations are increasingly realising that anxiety and financial resilience are closely intertwined. The financial services company Hargreaves Lansdown introduced one-off payments for its younger staff and allowed them to draw their salaries early as part of its drive to improve mental health.

Stride’s plan to get more people into work involves a shake-up of the work capability assessment, which scores people based on how they do in 17 “activities”.

In the key section on anxiety, people can be signed unfit for work if the assessor feels “engagement in social contact is always precluded due to difficulty relating to others or significant distress experienced by the claimant”. Given that sufferers often have good and bad days, critics say it is inadequate.

And while ministers are desperate to solve the inactivity problem, data suggests pinning the blame on “work-shy” mental health sufferers might be somewhat missing the mark.

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Between 2019 and 2023, the number of people off work primarily for mental health reasons increased about 16 per cent

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jumped 50 per cent, while those with musculoskeletal problems rose 27 per cent.

Sick note

Change in economic inactivity due to poor health since 2019, by main reason

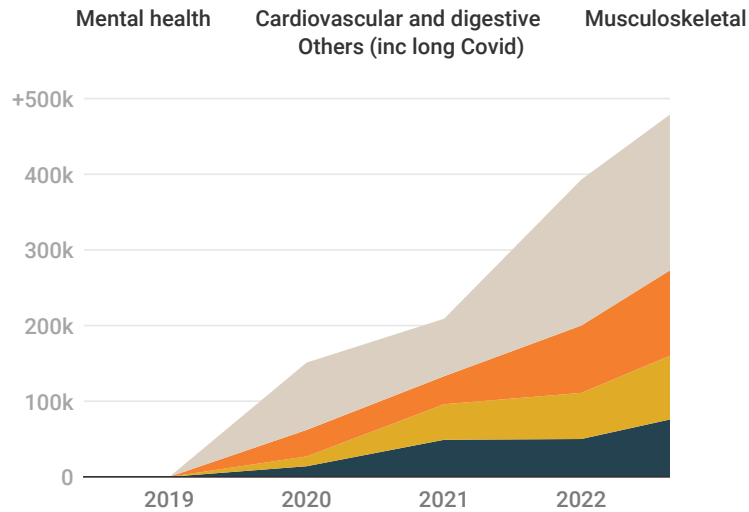


Chart: @TomHCalver | The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: ONS

An increase in over-50s waiting for new knees and hips has had a far bigger impact on inactivity than young people struggling to work for mental health reasons. In truth, three-quarters of people reporting depression, bad nerves or anxiety are able to work with the condition.

A few years ago, the psychologist Lucy Foulkes proposed that anxiety rates are boosted by what she calls a “prevalence inflation hypothesis”. Campaigns around mental health are primarily a good thing because they help bring to light suffering that previously went unnoticed.





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Lucy Foulkes believes people are interpreting mild distress as a mental health problem and it is becoming a “self-fulfilling prophecy”

CHRIS MCANDREW

But, according to Foulkes, there is a second, more problematic consequence of increased awareness: people are interpreting and reporting milder forms of distress as mental health problems. And, in a strange self-fulfilling prophecy, this leads in turn to an increase in genuine symptoms in some people. One recent study found that mindfulness lessons actually resulted in an increase in genuine depressive symptoms in adolescents.

Admitting your anxiety once risked making you a pariah; now, anxiety can even show one’s alignment to certain social values. A poll last week suggested that 29 per cent of 18 to 34-year-olds had sought support from medical professionals over “eco-anxiety”, for example.

James Kirkup, the former director of the Social Market Foundation, believes society needs to have a proper conversation about where anxious feelings end and anxiety begins — or mental health risks being dragged into a generational culture war.

“I don’t think many people think that keeping that stiff upper lip was a good thing,” he says. “It has to be better that we, as a culture, are more accepting of people having mental health challenges. The question is whether it has tipped too far the other way. How unhappy is it OK to be?”

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Andrew Lamb

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Mental health, it's all we hear about these days.

People just need to get on with life - just like they always used to.

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Too much molly coddling and easy benefits.

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There are people who genuinely have issues and I sympathise with them, but I think a lot of people think feeling a little down or being stressed is depression or some kind of sickness. It isn't.

Also I think we have this negative mindset that is very prevalent in our society. We constantly talk down...

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Martin Burke

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Lucy Foulkes is spot on. The phrase "mental health" used to mean a serious problem needing intensive medical intervention. For some people it still does. For others it's how they feel if their boss isn't happy with their work.

The words have been utterly devalued.

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Smartphones and social media must also have something to do with it.

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The test isn't very helpful. There's a big difference between 'not at all' and 'several days'.

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I do wonder if there is a link between mental health issues and

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even if for a few hours . These could contribute to declining mental health? I'm not sue of course but jus...

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People have clocked on that they are not that much worse off by not working and claiming benefits than actually working. I do not blame them for exploiting a ridiculous system and not working for a slave wage. My dad has had 5 major spinal operations (I am not exaggerating), and has been hit by a c...

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Sorry to be so blunt but by comparison with Britain in any other century or with most other countries in the world today nobody in the UK has anything to worry about.

We live in the easiest times in the last 2 million years, enjoying comforts and magical technology that almost all of our ancestors

c...

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