



DATA, TRENDS, INSIGHTS

Knowledge Work Mental Health Data 2022 and Forecast for 2023



Helttis!

About a year ago, we shared Heltti's sickness absence data and observations made by professionals specializing in mental health for knowledge workers. Since the release of the previous data package, the landscape of knowledge work and the daily lives of knowledge workers, both at work and at home, have been shaped not only by an uncertain global situation but also by the accelerated transformation of the workplace, the increasing prevalence of artificial intelligence, and the impact of the world's economic conditions on organizations.

It is high time to publish a new, updated version of mental health data and phenomena related to knowledge work, as well as insights into future developments.

Presenting Heltti's data-based **Knowledge Work Mental Health Data 2023 – trends, observations, and phenomena.**

The publication was compiled and additional information is provided by:



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Why this publication and why now?

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consisting of a tall, narrow orange rectangle above a solid orange circle.

In the national discourse, two themes emerge: the economic situation and the deteriorating mental health of Finns, signaling a concerning trend. Finland is currently built on the pinnacle of expertise in knowledge work, providing us with a competitive advantage globally.

However, the majority of working-age individuals are employed in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of our national economy and growth. Nevertheless, we are currently navigating challenging times globally, in Finland, at the corporate level, and as individuals, marked by inflation, higher costs, and uncertainty.

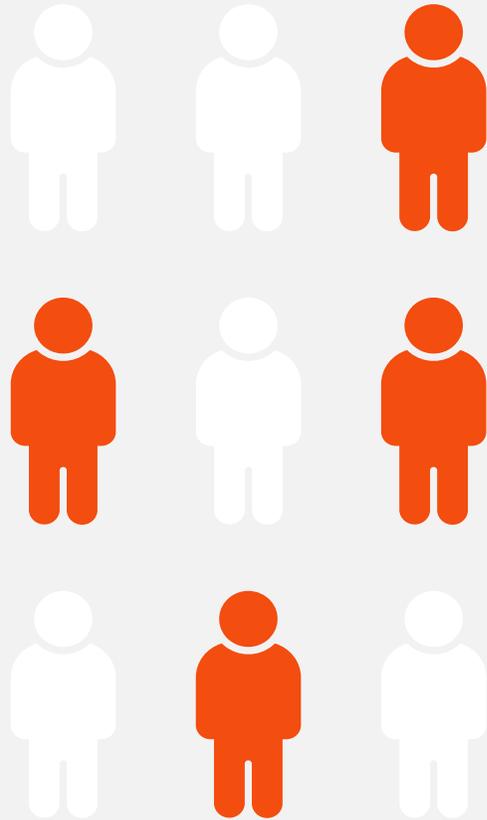
Different industries and organizations are grappling with difficult situations. Concurrently, the mental health challenges of working-age individuals and young people, along with their alarming trends, have come to the forefront in Finland. Efforts are being made to address these issues, starting from the government level.

At Heltti, the only service provider specialized in health and therapy services for knowledge work in Finland, we mainly collaborate with small and medium-sized enterprises.

We witness and hear the challenges at both the organizational and individual levels. We are concerned about the trends in the mental health of working-age individuals and young people, not only from the perspective of individuals but also from the standpoint of organizations struggling in the rapidly changing operating environment, uncertainty, and deteriorating economic situation.

This publication sheds light on the underlying reasons, trends, and tangible costs of mental health-related sick leaves for knowledge workers between 2019 and 2023.

**According to the [Confederation of Finnish Industries \(EK\)](#), the average cost of a sick leave day is 370€. This publication provides concrete examples to illustrate that neither companies nor Finland can afford to continue along the current trend.*



This publication consists of the following background materials and observations made based on them:

- The data for sickness absences in knowledge work, knowledge workers, and knowledge work environments specialized in by Heltti covers the years 2019-2022 and the year 2023 from January to the end of September.
- The data includes both quantitative and qualitative initial and final measurements of short therapies conducted by Heltti psychologists.
- Pages 8-9 take into account the calculated working days for each year from 2019 to 2023. The calculations consider only the F-diagnostic sickness absences recorded in Heltti's occupational health, not self-reported sick leaves. The calculations use the sickness absence cost to the employer according to the Confederation of Finnish Industries, which is €370/day in 2023.

The package has been compiled by Heltti's Chief Occupational Health Physician, Specialist in Occupational Health and General Medicine **Anna-Mari Lahtinen**, Chief Psychotherapist **Aino Juusola**, and Heltti's Director of Mental Health Services, Doctor of Psychology, Training Psychotherapist **Katri Kanninen**, together with Heltti's experts in knowledge work.



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Data and insights

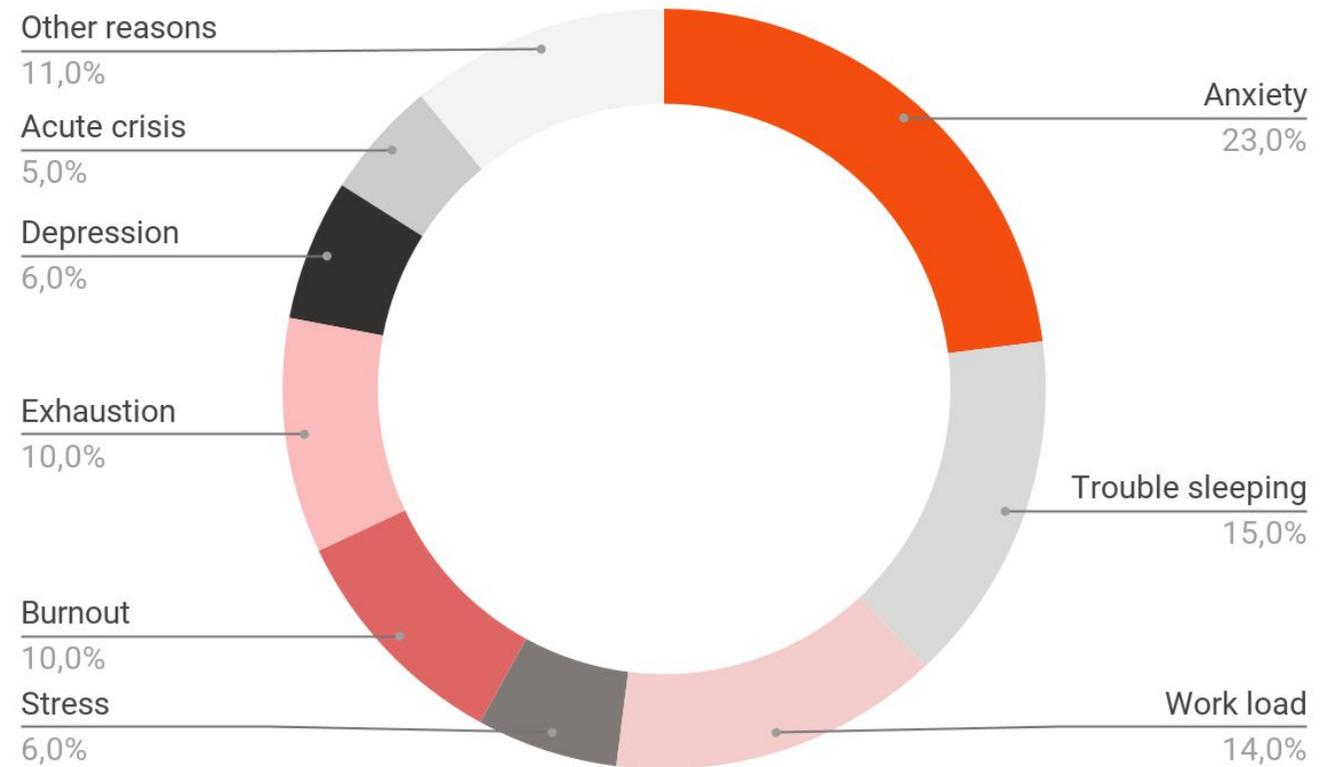
The mental health-related sick leaves of knowledge workers continue to increase.

Reasons why knowledge workers contact occupational health regarding mental health issues

According to Heltti's specialized occupational health data for knowledge workers, in 2022, **the most common reason for mental health-related contacts was anxiety (23%). Various levels of stress (6%), workload (14%), and burnout (10%) together account for 30% of mental health-related contacts.**

The category 'Other mental health related reasons' (11%) includes combinations of various psychological symptoms.

The primary reason for contact is recorded when the client reaches out to occupational health. The nurse makes the notation based on the client's symptoms.



"A person can easily spot a physical symptom, like a fever or a sore throat. *But noticing subtle shifts in our mental well-being can be trickier* – many only become aware of the symptoms when they have been brewing for months, manifesting as recurring issues like sleep disturbances.

Another phenomenon is 'presenteeism,' which is particularly prevalent among knowledge workers. This occurs when the workplace gives the impression of normalcy, with everyone appearing productive. However, in reality, individuals may have been enduring weeks or even months in a suboptimal state – dealing with stress and burdens. The consequences often become apparent after working hours, manifesting as irritability, exhaustion, or impulsive reactions during leisure time."

"When a knowledge worker contacts occupational health with concerns about sleep difficulties, it typically reveals an intricate network of prolonged harmful stress and/or inadequate recovery.

Once sleep disturbances arise, there is a considerable risk of burnout and its potential progression into depression."



Anna-Mari Lahtinen

Chief Occupational Health Doctor at Heltti. Specialist in Occupational Health and General Medicine.



The number of mental health-related sick leave days is increasing year by year

Compared to the year 2019, the number of mental health-related sick leave days has increased by 68% in the year 2023.

+68 %

The sickness absence percentage illustrates how many workdays, on average, an employee is absent from work due to sick leave. According to Heltti's occupational health data, the majority of sick leaves in knowledge work are attributed to mental health reasons.

Heltti's specialized occupational health data for knowledge work from 2019 to 2023 indicates a continuous increase in sick leaves due to mental health reasons year after year.

In 2020, the increase compared to 2019 was **+11,7 %**

In 2021, the increase compared to 2020 was **+31,6 %**

In 2022, the increase compared to 2021 was **+1,3 %**

Prediction:

Based on the data from January to September 2023, the increase compared to 2022 in 2023 is expected to be at least **+13,6%***

** We predict a higher increase, as typically in the last months of the year, mental health-related sick leaves tend to rise proportionally. Reasons including; the winter season, often demanding end-of-year periods, and fatigue towards the end of the year.*



How many days, on average, is a knowledge worker on sick leave due to mental health reasons – and how much does it cost?

Example: 100-person SME (small to medium-sized enterprise)

Based on the specialized occupational health data for knowledge work from Heltti, a company employing 100 people experienced an average of 128 mental health-related sick leave days in 2019.

If the current trend continues similarly to the January-September figures, the number of mental health-related sick leave days in 2023 is estimated to be 216.

How much do mental health-related sick leaves cost on average for a company with 100 employees?

Year	Number of mental health-related sick leave days per year	Cost to the employer [370 € / day according to EK]
2019	128 päivää	47 360 €
2020	144 päivää	53 280 €
2021	191 päivää	70 670 €
2022	192 päivää	71 040 €
2023	216 päivää	79 920 €

Average number of mental health-related sick leave days per year per employee.	2019:	1,28 päivää
	2020:	1,44 päivää
	2021:	1,91 päivää
	2022:	1,92 päivää
	2023:	2,16 päivää



47 360 €
/ year

2019

79 920 €
/ year

2023

The costs to employers from sick leaves due to mental health reasons have **nearly doubled** between 2019 and 2023.

A knowledge work company employing 100 people as an example.

“The number of serious mental health disorders has not significantly increased in Finland. Instead, symptoms related to mental well-being have increased in various age groups.

At Heltti, we closely monitor the work ability and well-being of knowledge workers, and within this group, various mental health symptoms have increased. This is evident in the growing number of mental health-related contacts and sick leaves due to mental health reasons.

A positive aspect of this phenomenon is that individuals are seeking help for mental health symptoms at an earlier stage. However, it is concerning that when a person recognizes symptoms in their own mind, it indicates an increase in harmful stress for various reasons. Since each of us has the same mind at work and at home, distress reflects on both work and workplaces, as well as leisure time, homes, relationships, and parenthood..”

“Concerningly, there is a continuous increase in sick leaves due to mental health reasons among knowledge workers year after year.

Sick leaves for mental health reasons indicate that the symptoms have progressed to the extent that they impede work, requiring sick leave to address and manage the symptoms.”



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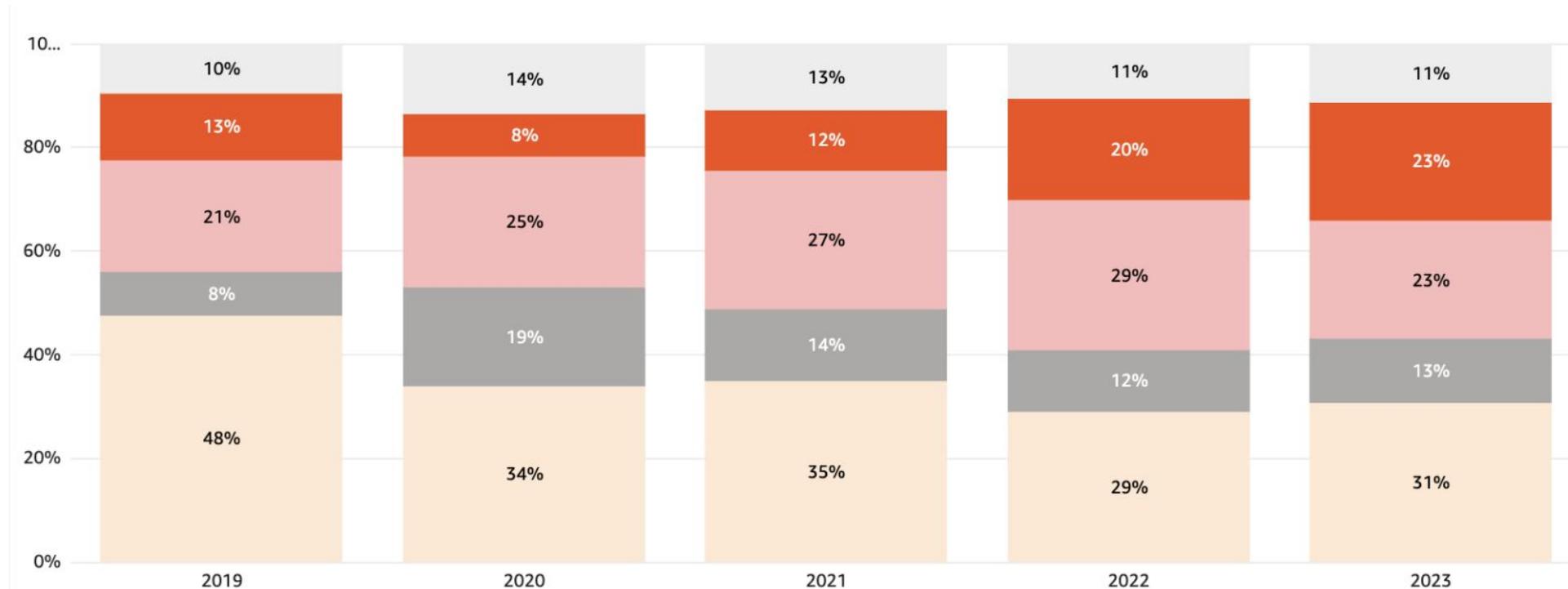
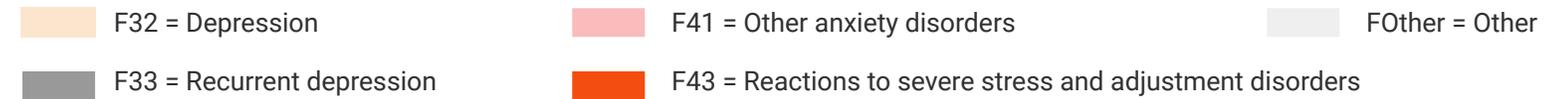
The reason for mental health-related sick leaves among knowledge workers is **increasingly attributed to reactions to severe stress** – with depression being the most common cause for sick leaves.

What to pay attention to?

The proportion of reactions to severe stress and adjustment disorders [F43] as the cause of mental health-related sick leaves has significantly increased during the years 2022 and 2023 compared to previous years.

Depression remains the most common reason for mental health-related sick leaves among knowledge workers. However, sick leaves due to recurrent depression have remained relatively stable compared to previous years.

Diagnosis categories for mental health-related sick leaves.



“Reactions to severe stress and the increasing prevalence of adjustment disorders [F43] as the background cause for sick leaves accurately reflect the world we are currently living in. The overall burden has risen for everyone in the last few years. Some people are experiencing more symptoms—often due to simultaneous, prolonged stress factors at work and in other aspects of life. Particularly for knowledge workers, a lack of recovery exacerbates these symptoms.

The individual's natural safety system is now being put to the test.

In psychology, we talk about the vulnerability model. As the external sense of threat grows, a person can tolerate it up to a certain point. However, everyone has a breaking point when the overall burden becomes too great and overwhelms them. At the same time that a person's overall stress becomes too much, sensitivity to stressors increases, and even a smaller stress factor feels significant. In this situation, a person's brain functions like an oversensitive smoke alarm that eventually reacts to even a small amount of smoke, even if there is no fire nearby.”

“At workplaces, we cannot change the global situation or the personal life situations of individuals, but we can alleviate the role of work as a contributor to overall stress.

Especially at present, workplaces can reduce work-related stressors by implementing structures, clear daily routines, roles and responsibilities, prioritization, and psychological safety. Additionally, in knowledge work, emphasizing cognitive ergonomics and enhancing recovery are crucial. These measures can help reduce work-related stress, which, in turn, can potentially decrease mental symptoms and related sick leaves.”



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The number of contacts related to **mental health issues** received by Heltti's occupational health service

The number of **mental health-related sick leave days** [F-diagnoses]

The number of **long-term, (over 20 days), mental health-related sick leave days**

Burnout the top reason people seek aid from short-therapy, conducted by psychologists

Continuing to grow

COGNITIVE STRAIN

Knowledge workers are concerned about their own difficulties with concentration and memory problems – this concern is also reflected in contacts with occupational health. "Do I have ADHD?" even though the most common reason is acquired attention challenges.

PROLONGED STATE OF STRESS

Continuous state of overactivity and stress is reflected at work and at home as irritability, impulsivity, rapid mood swings, and difficulty sleeping.

APPARENT RECOVERY

The burden of knowledge work is not yet sufficiently recognized. Recovery is sought through demanding sports performances and mobile device screens, which often increase cognitive load and overactivity.

Three orange arrows pointing upwards, positioned below the text boxes, indicating an upward trend or increase in the symptoms described.

On the rise: Symptoms of mental load

Contact us for more information



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More information about Heltti

Heltti is Finland's only specialist dedicated to knowledge work, offering targeted occupational health and mental support services for knowledge work environments. In addition to these services, Heltti provides expertise in work ability management, organizational development, and leadership development.

For consumers, [withHeltti](#), a part of Heltti, offers therapy services, including short-term therapy, psychotherapy, couple and family therapy, as well as therapy for young individuals in knowledge work roles and their loved ones.

[Shortum](#), which is also part of Heltti, provides training for professionals in the social and healthcare sector, offering a short therapeutic approach and supplementary training in therapeutic skills for both private and public sector entities.

Our mission is to help individuals and knowledge work organizations thrive.