meQuilibrium

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The Impacts of COVID-19 on **WORKFORCE RESILIENCE**

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered work and life in unprecedented ways. Lockdowns, quarantines and social distancing have produced equally unprecedented disruptions in employees' ability to adapt and cope with these changes. The accumulated impact of the pandemic has been devastating to employee wellbeing.

To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on employee wellbeing, meQuilibrium invited a sample of members to participate in a wellbeing self-check in June 2020. The self-check consisted of a set of questions spanning topics including sleep, burnout, motivation and stress and including a handful of items on COVID-19 experiences. **RESPONSES FROM THE JUNE SELF-CHECK WERE COMPARED TO A BASELINE FROM DECEMBER 2019 TO EXAMINE CHANGES IN WELLBEING OVER TIME. A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDY DATA FROM OVER 7,000 PARTICIPANTS SUGGESTS SIX KEY FINDINGS:**

1 **BOTH PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SYMPTOMS OF STRESS HAVE SEEN STRONG INCREASES AS COVID-19 IMPACTS HAVE GROWN.** Perceived stress levels are up strongly, with a third more members reporting high levels of job stress in June 2020 compared to December 2019. Members also appear to be facing a greater challenge with more subtle symptoms of stress such as sleep impairment, reduced motivation, burnout, and decreased positivity.

2 **COVID-19 WELLBEING CHALLENGES DIFFER DRAMATICALLY BY INDUSTRY.** Technology Services employees had the most broadly negative changes of any industry, with double-digit increases in job stress, disordered sleep, burnout, and an almost 30% drop in motivation. Healthcare employees had the largest decrease in motivation of any industry, were least likely to say their employer was supportive, most likely to say they were on the front lines and least likely to say their work location has changed. Communications industry employees, despite largely supportive employers and limited front line exposure, experienced the largest increase in job stress and also experienced large decreases in motivation. Finance/Insurance industry employees seem to have avoided COVID-19-related burnout but face significant challenges with motivation and sleep. Employees working in Health Products & Devices (predominantly pharmaceutical companies) and Manufacturing showed some of the least negative outcomes related to emotional wellbeing over the study period.

3 **THE PANDEMIC HAS UPENDED THE LIVES OF NEARLY EVERYONE, BUT WOMEN AND YOUNGER WORKERS HAVE BEEN THE HARDEST HIT.** Women have borne a greater burden of the observed increase in job stress: where the rate of high job stress increased just 2% among men from December 2019 to June 2020, the number of women experiencing high job stress increased by nearly 20% over the same period. The young appear to also bear a disproportionate share of the burden: members under 40 are experiencing disordered sleep, burnout, high stress, and decreased motivation at levels that far exceed the rate of these conditions among their older colleagues.

4 **PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYER SUPPORT SERVE AS A CRITICAL BUFFER AGAINST THREATS TO EMPLOYEE WELLBEING.** The rate of increase in job stress among employees who feel unsupported by their employer was more than 10 times higher than observed among those who felt strongly supported by their employer. Increases in disordered sleep, symptoms of burnout, and motivation difficulties were also all substantially higher among those who reported low employer support than among those who felt well supported.

5 **INITIAL RESILIENCE LEVEL INFLUENCES THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE.** Members with the highest resilience levels at baseline reported significantly better outcomes compared to those with low or moderate resilience, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic began. However, the largest improvements in outcomes were seen among the least resilient group at baseline.

6 **ACTIVE SELF-CARE USING A DIGITAL RESILIENCE COACHING TOOL SOFTENED THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WELLBEING.** Across every outcome from job stress to motivation and from sleep to burnout, members who engaged with digital resilience coaching at the highest levels had the best results.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to alter work in unprecedented ways. Many employees are working in new places and using new technologies to connect with colleagues. Essential employees continue to contribute from frontline work locations, often at risk to their own health. The advent of widespread virtual schooling at every level from kindergarten through college has challenged the ability to maintain a healthy balance between work and family demands. Seismic economic shifts in consumer behavior have led to widespread layoffs, furloughs and pay cuts in many of the hardest-hit industries. And in the face of great uncertainty, anxiety and stress, extended lockdowns and social distancing requirements have disrupted our sense of community and devastated established social support networks compromising individuals' efforts to cope with the changes and challenges that have accompanied the pandemic.

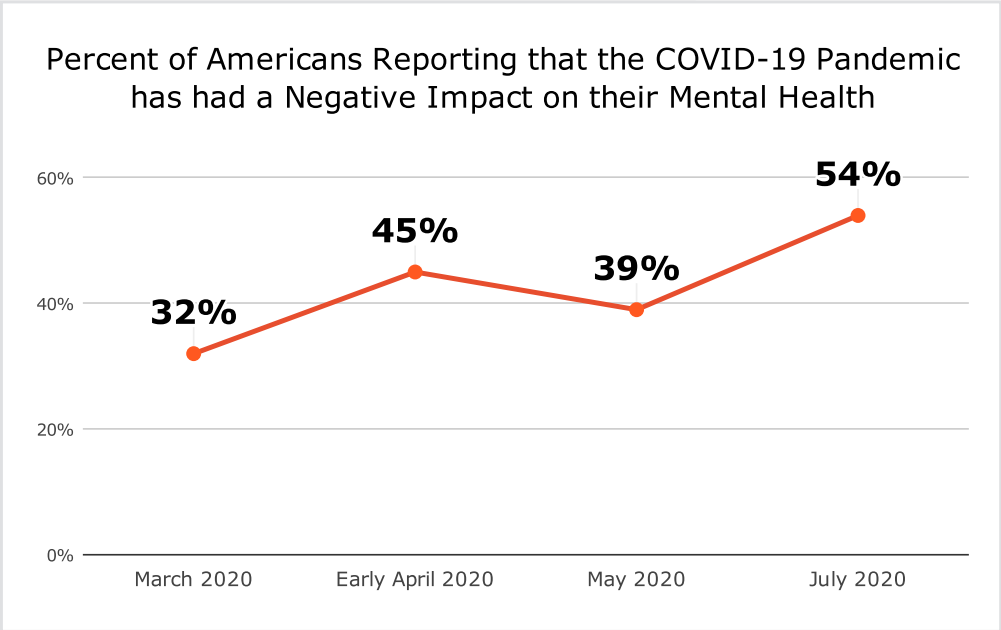

FIGURE 1, Source: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

The accumulated impact of the pandemic has been devastating to Americans' mental wellbeing. In March 2020, just as the breadth of the domestic impact of COVID-19 was becoming apparent, a **KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION POLL** showed that almost a third of adults said that COVID-19 worries were having a negative impact on their mental health (Figure 1). As the pandemic has revealed its staying power, negative impacts on wellbeing have only gained strength, with 53% of the population now reporting that that worry and stress related to coronavirus has had a negative impact on their mental health, up fully 20 percentage points over the March value. This disturbing trajectory reflects a growing national sense of dread, with nearly two-thirds of Americans believing that the worst effects of the pandemic have yet to be felt.

While there is ample data on how COVID-19 has affected mental wellbeing in the general population, there has been less attention to impacts on workforce wellbeing and particularly how those impacts differ across industries and by varying levels of employer support. The present project provides a glimpse of how employee wellbeing is faring across a variety of industries, asks whether employer responses to the pandemic have helped soften the blow to employee wellbeing, and attempts to identify the relationship between self-care, resilience, and wellbeing changes.

KEY TRENDS

Both primary and secondary symptoms of stress have seen strong increases as COVID-19 impacts have widened

The impact of COVID-19 on employees is strongly evident in meQuilibrium members' perceptions of stress. Over a third of members reported increases in their work-related stress levels between December 2019 and June 2020. In addition to increases in perceived stress, members also appear to be facing a greater challenge with more subtle symptoms of stress such as sleep, motivation, burnout, and positivity. The strain of the pandemic was also evident in changes in sleep quality over the study period. The rate at which members reported serious difficulties falling asleep and frequently being tired during the day was up about 9% between December 2019 and June 2020.

The challenges of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic were yet more apparent in members' reports of burnout, motivation, and positivity. Results showed an almost 30% decrease in the number of members reporting strong motivation, a 27% decline in the number of members able to remain consistently positive throughout the day, and almost a 10% increase in the number of members reporting serious symptoms of burnout [Figure 2].

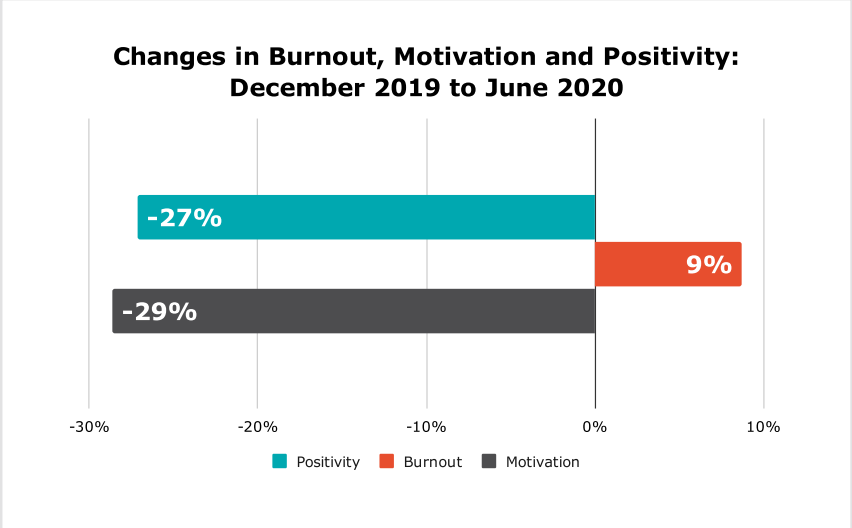

FIGURE 2

COVID-19 Wellbeing Challenges Differ Dramatically by Industry

In addition to the important differences observed across demographic categories, the COVID-19 pandemic and response had a differential impact across industries. Data from the COVID-19 self check represents eight different industry groupings which reflect the composition of meQuilibrium's client population. The largest industry groupings represented are Finance/Insurance and Technology Services, but the sample represents a broad spectrum of other industries, from Healthcare to Manufacturing.

TABLE 1. CHANGES IN JOB STRESS, DISORDERED SLEEP, BURNOUT AND MOTIVATION BY INDUSTRY

	COMMUNICATIONS	ENERGY	FINANCE/ INSURANCE	HEALTH PRODUCTS & DEVICES	HEALTH SERVICES	MANUFACTURING	TECHNOLOGY SERVICES	OTHER
JobStress	30%	15%	16%	15%	8%	-16%	11%	0%
Disordered Sleep	-3%	-6%	11%	2%	9%	-1%	14%	5%
Burnout	7%	6%	7%	9%	8%	-10%	23%	20%
Motivation	-33%	-27%	-32%	-7%	-48%	-18%	-37%	-27%

NOTE: HEAT MAP IS SHADED SUCH THAT MORE CHALLENGING CONDITIONS OR MORE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES ARE DARKER.

TABLE 2: EMPLOYER SUPPORT AND JOB CHARACTERISTICS BY INDUSTRY

	COMMUNICATIONS	ENERGY	FINANCE/ INSURANCE	HEALTH PRODUCTS & DEVICES	HEALTH SERVICES	MANUFACTURING	TECHNOLOGY SERVICES	OTHER
SUPPORTIVE EMPLOYER	76%	86%	75%	77%	60%	75%	79%	66%
FRONT LINE JOB	8%	11%	16%	10%	36%	25%	6%	7%
WORK LOCATION CHANGED	90%	88%	81%	74%	47%	75%	62%	65%

NOTE: HEAT MAP IS SHADED SUCH THAT MORE CHALLENGING CONDITIONS OR MORE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES ARE DARKER.

EMPLOYEES IN HEALTHCARE, COMMUNICATIONS, TECHNOLOGY SERVICES AND FINANCE/INSURANCE (TABLE 1) SHOWED THE LARGEST DECREASES IN WELLBEING OVER THE STUDY PERIOD, THOUGH THE CHANGES IN WELLBEING ARE EXPRESSED INSOMEWHAT DIFFERENT WAYS.

- **HEALTHCARE** employees had the largest decrease in motivation of any industry, likely due to the pivotal and difficult role they occupy in managing the battle against COVID-19. Employee reports about employer support and job changes related to the pandemic shown in Table 2 largely support this logic. Healthcare employees were least likely to say their employer was supportive, most likely to say they were on the front lines and least likely to say their work location has changed. Possibly pursuant to the job security that can accompany being "essential," healthcare employees had one of the smallest increases in job stress of any industry.

- **COMMUNICATIONS** industry employees, despite largely supportive employers and limited front line exposure, experienced the largest increase in job stress and also experienced large decreases in motivation between December 2019 and June 2020. However, employees in this industry had relatively minor increases in burnout and showed slight improvements in sleep over the study period.

- **TECHNOLOGY** Services employees had the most broadly negative changes of any industry, with double-digit increases in job stress, disordered sleep, burnout, and an almost 30% drop in motivation. While almost 80% of Technology Services employees reported feeling supported by their employer, almost 40% reported being in their normal work location -- second only to Healthcare employees.

- **FINANCE/INSURANCE** industry employees seem to have avoided COVID-19-related burnout but face significant challenges with motivation and sleep. Employees in this industry reported double digit changes for the worse in both areas. The noted decreases in motivation and sleep quality occur despite most employees working from home, and feeling well supported by their employer.

The paradoxical finding of wellbeing decreases coupled with feelings of strong employer support and working away from one's normal work location may reflect COVID-19 challenges originating in the home. In industries such as Communications, Technology Services and Finance/Insurance where the transition to work-from-home was likely earlier and broader, many employees now face new challenges trying to balance family caregiving, shopping, cooking and supervising virtual or hybrid schooling all while trying to keep up at work.

In contrast, employees working in Health Products & Devices (predominantly pharmaceutical companies) and Manufacturing showed some of the least negative outcomes related to emotional wellbeing between December 2019 and June 2020. Both groups saw modestly higher job stress, but experienced much smaller increases in poor sleep and smaller hits to motivation than health care services employees. The difference is accounted for, in part, by very different work circumstances: about three quarters of employees in both industries are working in lower risk environments, away from their normal work location. Employees in these industries also report more support from their employer (75-77% report that their employer is strongly supportive around COVID-19). Forced time off due to widespread production shutdowns in both industries may also contribute to smaller increases in sleep and motivation reported by employees.

KEY TRENDS

The pandemic has upended the lives of nearly everyone, but women and younger workers have been the hardest hit

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN STRESS LEVELS over time in our sample are broadly consistent with differences in the way stress burdens are perceived by gender. Women reported higher job stress than men at baseline and also bore a greater burden of the observed increase in job stress: where the rate of high job stress increased just 2% among men, the number of women experiencing high job stress increased by nearly 20% over the study period.

In addition to job related stress differences, women were also more likely than men to experience diminished motivation as a result of the pandemic. The rate of motivational challenges rose across all members but the rate of decrease was substantially higher among women than among men. The gender differences here are due not to inherent differences in resilience but rather stem from the unique challenges faced by women who are simultaneously coping with COVID-19, managing their family's health concerns, engaging in childcare, assisting with virtual schooling, taking care of housework and a host of other "second shift" responsibilities, all while attempting to remain productive at work.

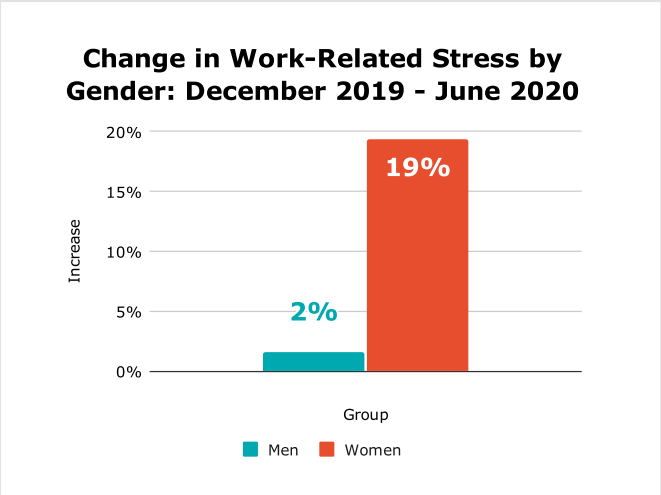

FIGURE 3

The burden of COVID-19 is also experienced unevenly across age groups. Figure 4 shows that members under 40 experienced increases in poor quality sleep, burnout, and decreases in motivation at levels that far exceed the rate seen among their older colleagues. The age difference noted here is consistent with **OTHER REPORTS** which suggest that the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health is greatest among younger people. Heightened effects of COVID-19 on sleep, burnout, motivation and stress among younger members may reflect more numerous stressors associated with an earlier life stage (younger children, lower income levels, higher career pressure), but may also simply reflect the benefit of accumulated wisdom and life experience that their older colleagues possess.

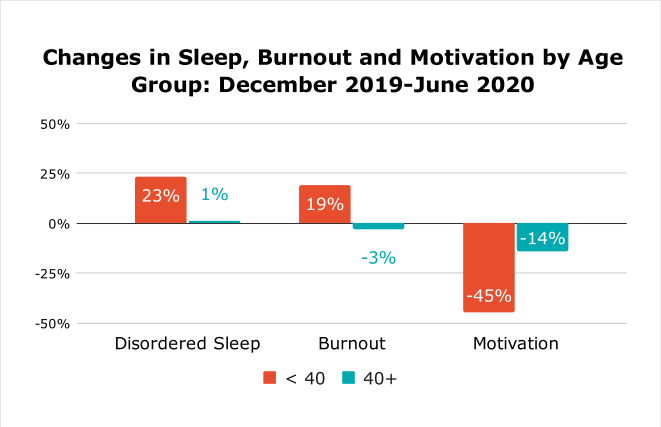

FIGURE 4

Perceptions of employer support are a critical buffer against threats to employee wellbeing.

The important role of employer support for employee wellbeing during the pandemic is emphasized by differences in outcome trends shown in Figure 5. Stark differences in changes across several key indicators of wellbeing are apparent when analyzed separately by perceived degree of support from the employer. While job stress was noted to increase almost universally across study participants, the rate of increase among employees who feel unsupported by their employer was more than 10 times higher than the rate of increase among those who felt strongly supported by their employer. Increases in disordered sleep, symptoms of burnout and motivation difficulties were also all markedly higher (1.9X to almost 30X) among those who reported low employer support than among the well-supported.

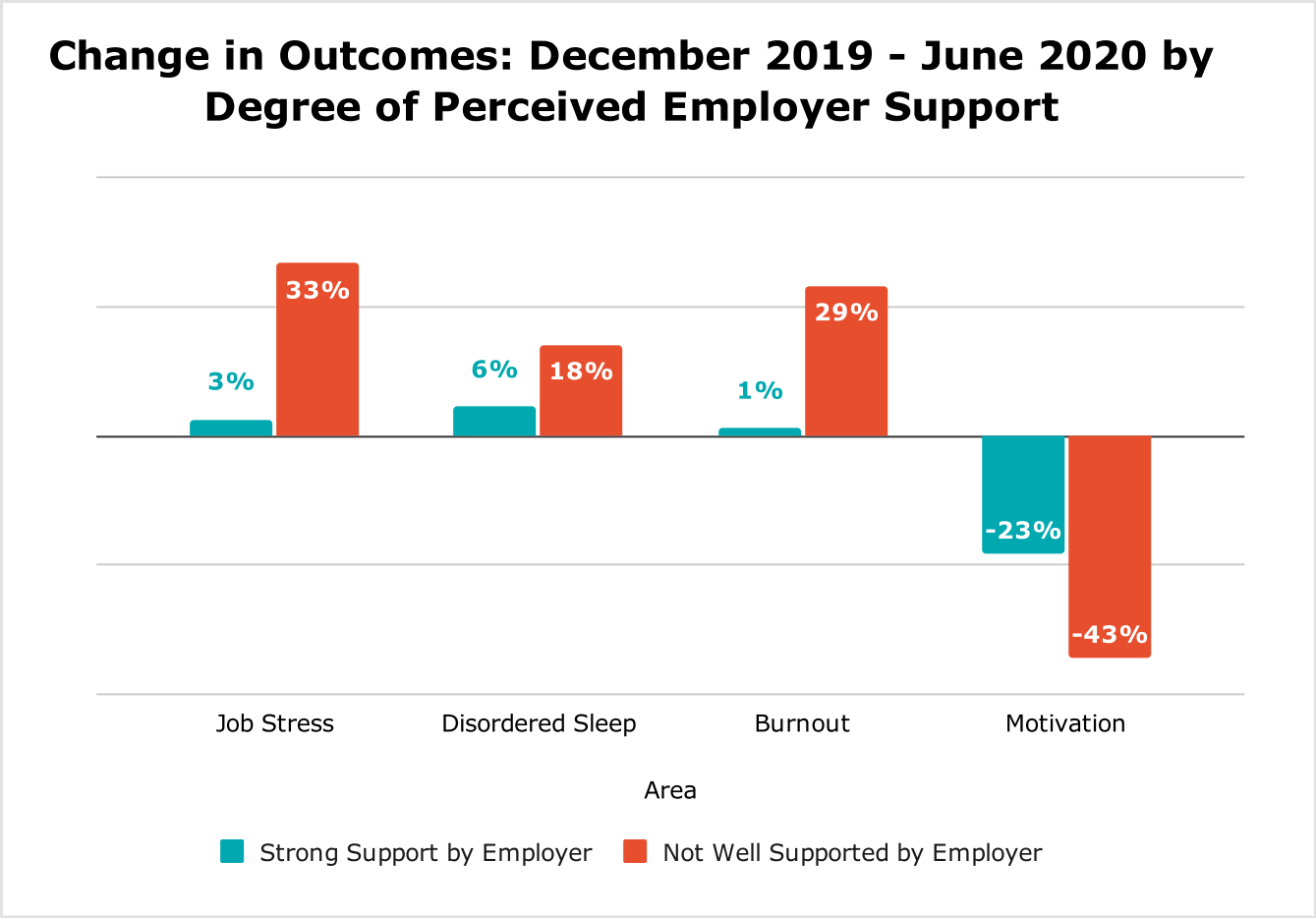

FIGURE 5

Initial Resilience Level Influences the COVID-19 Experience

Grouped by their initial resilience level, members with the highest resilience reported significantly better outcomes compared to those with low or moderate resilience, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Figure 6 shows that the largest improvements were seen among the least resilient group at baseline, but also that highly resilient members retained their advantage across all outcomes in the June 2020 followup. Those with the highest resilience originally did experience some small declines but retained 97% of their original high scores in the post-COVID follow up period. Moreover, even after these minor declines, their scores remained measurably better than members whose resilience levels were lower before COVID.

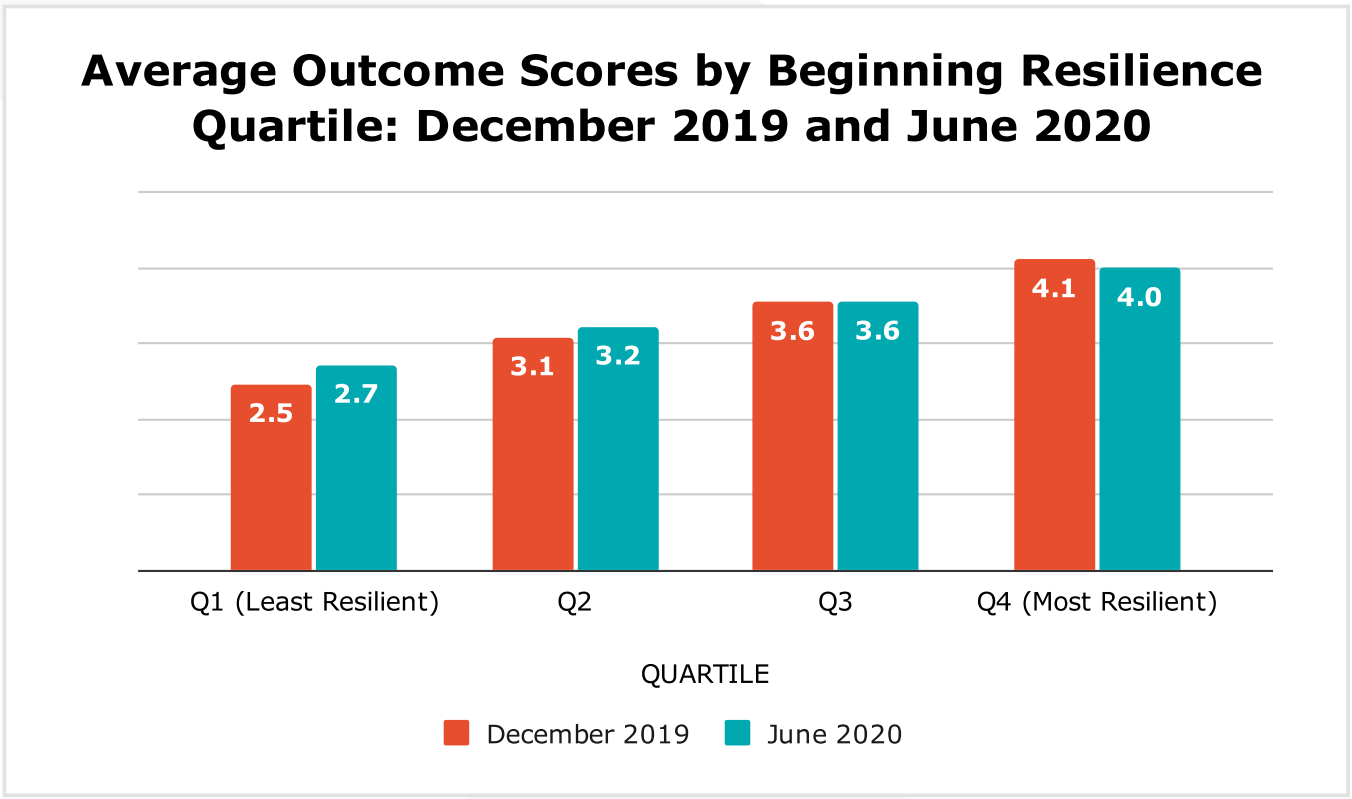

FIGURE 6

Active self-care using a digital resilience coaching tool softened the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing.

Because the study sample was composed of meQuilibrium members who were actively engaged in meQuilibrium's digital resilience coaching tool, it is possible to assess how product engagement impacted change in wellbeing indicators over the study period. Members were divided into groups based on the number of hours they had spent in the product since enrollment. Change in outcomes from December 2019 to June 2020 was assessed across these groups. Figure 7 shows changes in outcomes for the group with the lowest engagement (2.7 hours or less) and the group with highest engagement (15 hours+).

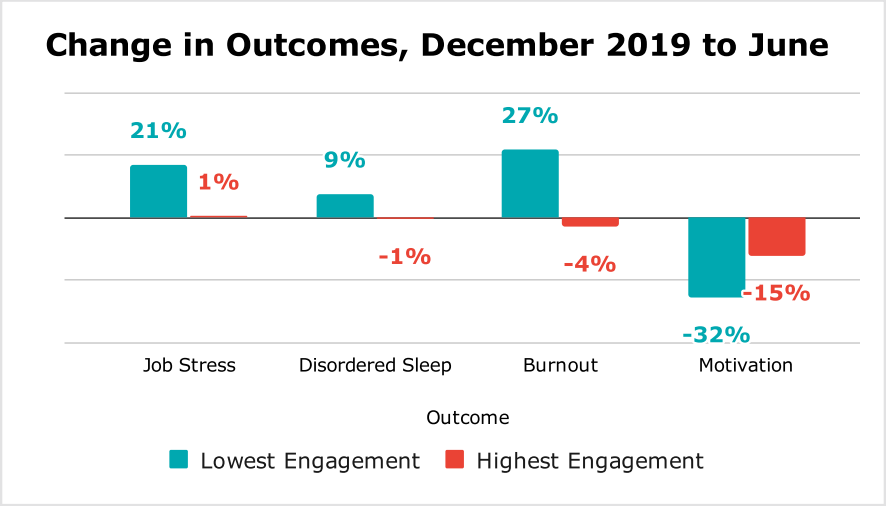

FIGURE 7

ACROSS EVERY OUTCOME, members who engaged at the highest levels had the best results.

Across a population that showed very large increases in job stress on average, members who spent the most time in product had the smallest increase in job stress (+1%). In contrast, those who spent the least time had increases of more than 20% in job stress. Where disordered sleep and burnout were on the rise among most members, highly engaged users actually saw slight reductions in the rates of disordered sleep and burnout.

As might be expected, product engagement rates had larger effects on those with low resilience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic because they had far more room for improvement. As an example, members who were least resilient at baseline and who used the product most saw a reduction from 1 in 2 members at baseline reporting symptoms consistent with disordered sleep to 1 in 3 members reporting such symptoms at follow-up. In contrast, highly engaged members who were highly resilient at baseline saw a small increase in disordered sleep but even after this increase, reports of poor quality sleep were rare among this population (only 1 in 8 members reporting disordered sleep).

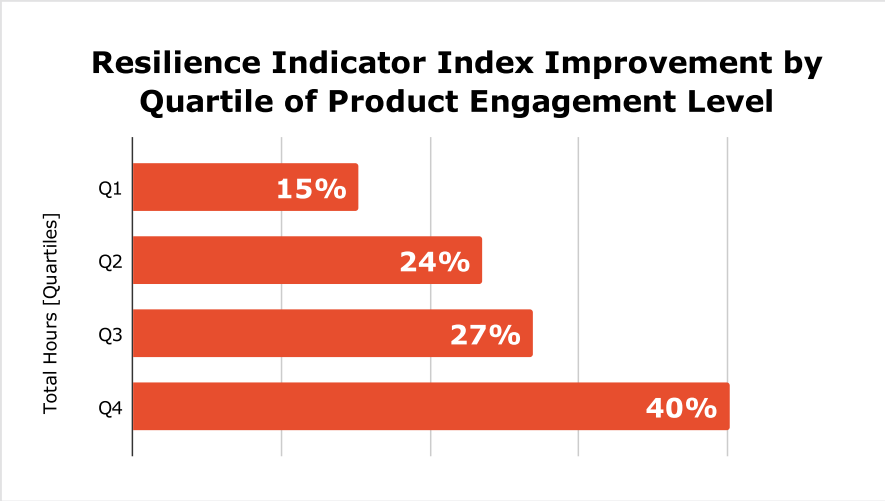

FIGURE 8

The efficacy of digital resilience training as an antidote to the pandemic's threat is also evident in improvements in meQuilibrium's Resilience Indicator Index (RII). Spanning the array of meQuilibrium's 18 resilience factors, RII is computed by averaging the percent improvement from baseline to follow-up in the 4 resilience factors where each member showed the greatest need at their initial assessment. Average percent improvement in RII follows a stair step pattern, indicating a roughly constant level of return to additional time invested in resilience training. Highly engaged members had RII improvements that were more than 2.6X as large as the RII improvements noted in the least well engaged group (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION

WHILE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS TAKEN A SIGNIFICANT TOLL ON WORKER WELLBEING, THESE FINDINGS SUGGEST THREE IMPORTANT AVENUES FOR ACTION.

FIRST, these data suggest that highly significant wellbeing benefits accrue to employer support to employees. Whether support takes the form of more flexible working hour expectations, delivering needed tools and technology to help employees work from home more effectively, or providing resources that support active self-care and help build positive coping strategies, the key element appears to be meeting employees' practical and emotional needs in a genuine way. Benefits are likely to accrue to supportive employers both through reduced behavioral health risk as well as improved engagement and commitment from employees.

SECOND, support should be targeted to the populations where it is most deeply needed. Data from this study suggest that younger employees and women are at particularly high risk for negative outcomes. Where specific high-need populations are not obvious, a short wellbeing inventory and needs assessment may be helpful in targeting assistance where it is most needed.

FINALLY, given the strong relationship noted between resilience and positive outcomes, an investment in resilience-building activities holds strong potential not only for improving near term wellbeing but also in laying a strong protective foundation for the challenges yet to come.

METHODOLOGY

meQuilibrium offers a digital resilience coaching solution that enhances wellbeing and is available to more than 2.5 million employees around the globe. To better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and wellbeing in our member population, meQuilibrium invited a sample of members to participate in a COVID-19-related wellbeing "self-check" in June, 2020. The self-check consisted of a set of questions focused on wellbeing, spanning topics including sleep, burnout, motivation, and stress. Survey items were drawn from meQuilibrium's 92-question, clinically validated resilience assessment and were supplemented by a handful of COVID-specific questions asking about members' work transitions related to COVID, and their perceptions of employer support. A total of 7,233 members, a sample broadly representative of the meQuilibrium member population, provided complete responses to both the pre and post phases of data collection. Changes in stress, burnout, and other outcomes were examined by comparing responses to questions as of December 31, 2019 to responses to the self-check which was administered in June, 2020.

Data for this study were collected in several stages. On June 15th, meQuilibrium sent out a Mental Wellbeing Self-Check to a large portion of its enrolled population. This Self-Check consisted of 16 of the same questions that are asked upon a user's enrollment in meQuilibrium. The 90-question resilience assessment that users take upon enrolling is how meQuilibrium gathers a baseline score and provides a tailored resilience-building program to the user. This baseline score is made up of 18 key factors of resilience which are in turn made up of responses to the questions in the assessment. A user is given the opportunity to reanswer these questions either after completing a skill or upon reaching ninety days in the product.

To determine a proper baseline for this study, participants had their most recent responses to the 16 questions reconstructed as of December 31, 2019. Any user without all 16 questions answered by then was excluded from the study. The responses to all 16 questions at both time periods, on December 31, 2019 and upon taking the Self-Check, were the basis for this study.

Respondents were provided a minor incentive to take the Self-Check: a donation of $1 on their behalf to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Additional data as they relate to usage of meQuilibrium for each of these users were also included in this study. All data collected are anonymized, aggregated, fully privacy protected, and HIPAA compliant.

KEY MEASURES

DEMOGRAPHICS. Data on gender is available for 80% of participants, data on age is available for 64% of participants. Industry classification is known for all but 1% of participants whose employers remain unclassified.

OUTCOMES. Participants answered the same sixteen questions at two different points in time. These sixteen questions are a subset of the 90-question resilience assessment that users take upon enrolling in meQuilibrium and form a reliable scale. The response format for all questions is a 5-point Likert scale.

COVID-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS. Three questions were asked in the Self-Check to gain a better understanding of the specific impact of the pandemic and to gauge perceptions of employer support.

THOSE THREE QUESTIONS WERE:

- My work location has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- My job is an essential front line role with high risk of COVID-19 exposure.
- My employer is doing a good job supporting employees related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SOURCES

Footnote 1-3: **HTTPS://WWW.KFF.ORG/CORONAVIRUS-COVID-19/REPORT/KFF-HEALTH-TRACKING-POLL-JULY-2020/**

Footnote 4: APA Gender and Stress release: **HTTPS://WWW.APA.ORG/NEWS/PRESS/RELEASES/STRESS/2010/GENDER-STRESS**

Footnote 5: **HTTPS://NEWS.USC.EDU/171124/ANXIETY-DEPRESSION-COVID-19-MENTAL-DISTRESS-USC-SURVEY/**