



Wise Up

The latest on AI for Mental Health: Brought to you by Wysa

Colleagues contemplating suicide

The gaps in mental health crisis support and HR training

AI chatbot found to reduce prenatal and postnatal depression

When sleep isn't enough:
Determine what type of rest you need

Therapist answers your most asked questions on anxiety

Real life user story:

"This app has been a life saver"

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Welcome

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second issue of Wise Up! Are you ready to dive in? Start with our news roundup, which keeps you informed about the latest developments in AI and mental health care from around the globe. Then, explore more insightful research and practical tips to help you navigate emotional and mental wellbeing in today's fast-paced environment.

In this issue, we explore autonomy in mental health care with an article by Dr. Nicola Main, Clinical Lead at Wysa. We also examine research on AI chatbots and their impact on women facing pre- and postnatal depression.

Our special guest, Zoe Walters, provides a unique opinion piece on the role of spirituality in HR.

With a focus on suicide awareness and prevention this September, we highlight concerning new figures that suggest your colleagues may be in crisis and discuss what can be done to better support employees.

In a real-life user story, 38-year-old Amanda shares the challenges of new motherhood, the stigma she has faced in accessing mental health support, and how Wysa has guided her through the years.

Sleeping enough but still feeling tired? Take a look at your energy levels; perhaps you require a different type of rest.

Finally, we address your questions about using AI to monitor and enhance employee wellbeing in our "Ask Smriti" column. How does it work? What are the benefits and risks? Find out inside.

Thank you for being here, and happy reading!

Megan

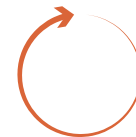
[Megan Kirk](#), Marketing Manager, Wysa

P.S. if you have a question about mental health technology, employee wellbeing, AI, or population health, please write to us at press@wysa.io.

Your question might feature in our next issue!



Wise news round-up



Balancing innovation and trust: Experts assess the EU's AI Act

As the EU's AI Act is set to come into force, industry experts highlight its potential to build trust and encourage responsible AI adoption. Curtis Wilson from Synopsys notes the regulation addresses the AI industry's primary challenge: lack of trust. Paul Cardno of 3M echoes this, emphasizing that with 80% of UK adults favoring heavy AI regulation, the Act is timely. Both experts see the Act fostering confidence in AI technologies, with Wilson adding that it complements internal trust-building measures.

The Act focuses on high-risk systems and aligns with best practices like risk management and testing. UK businesses, including those in Northern Ireland, will also be impacted due to the Windsor Framework and upcoming UK regulations. Despite potential challenges for small companies, the Act includes provisions like innovation sandboxes. Cardno concludes that the Act will help hesitant companies embrace AI, ensuring safe and positive advancements.



Using AI and social media to track depression in communities

A study by Stony Brook University, Stanford, and the University of Pennsylvania used AI and social media to track depression and anxiety more accurately than traditional surveys.

Published in Nature Digital Medicine, it analyzed nearly one billion tweets from over two million users across 1,418 U.S. counties. The AI system, Language-based mental health assessments (LBMHAs), provided reliable, real-time insights into community mental health, predicting related metrics like mortality rates better than surveys. This method outperformed traditional surveys by 10 percentage points in correlating with factors like education and income.

The study recommends using language-based assessments alongside surveys for improved public mental health tracking, with plans to refine the system as social media evolves.



The majority of NHS staff support use of AI, finds the Health Foundation

A recent survey by the Health Foundation found that most NHS staff support using AI to help with patient care. About 76% of NHS staff and 54% of the public are in favor of AI in healthcare. NHS staff are even more positive about using AI for administrative tasks, with 81% in favor.

Tim Horton from the Health Foundation believes AI could help reduce NHS pressures and support the workforce. He emphasizes the need to keep human involvement in AI decisions to maintain the personal touch in patient care.



High unmet need for mental health care among adolescents in Asia and Europe

A study by the University of Turku found that many adolescents in Asia and Europe with significant mental health issues do not seek professional help.

The research, covering eight countries, revealed that less than 1% of adolescents in middle-income countries and 2%–25% in high-income countries turn to formal sources like school counselors or psychologists. Informal help from friends and family is more commonly used, especially in lower-income countries. The study highlights the need for improved mental health awareness and literacy globally.



Bringing open, accessible women's healthcare to tier II India with AI

AI has the potential to transform women's healthcare in Tier II cities in India, where access to quality care is limited. Despite rising smartphone use and economic empowerment among women, many face barriers due to social taboos, high costs, and a lack of healthcare infrastructure.

AI can tackle these challenges by providing accurate diagnostics, aiding local clinics, and improving patient interactions. However, for AI to be fully effective, it must address gender-specific health needs and ensure robust data protection. By overcoming these hurdles, AI could greatly enhance healthcare outcomes for women in these underserved areas.

AI and Mental Health



Uncovering Spirituality's Role in HR

With Zoe Walters

Zoe Walters is a Transpersonal Psychologist with a background in Human Resources Management and a PhD candidate in Transpersonal Psychology and consciousness. Her research is focused on integrating spirituality into organisational culture and well-being. Her quest is to teach others how to cultivate inner peace, harmony, and self-fulfilment through spiritual practice.

The Soul of Success: Is Spirituality the Underdog?

In an age where the quest for fulfilling work continues to grow, health is in crisis, and the role of spirituality within Human Resource Management (HRM) emerges as a revolutionary yet underexplored frontier. This isn't about merging religious practices into the workplace but instead harnessing the profound potential of spirituality through the lens of transpersonal psychology (TP), a relatively new discipline of psychology (Friedman & Hartelius, 2015) that focuses on transcending beyond one's authentic self and can be equated to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model of 'self-actualisation'. By understanding our true selves, we can consciously create environments that positively impact health and wellbeing and feed the business's financial bottom line.

Why spirituality in HR?

The discussion of spirituality in the workplace is increasingly popular, especially considering the rapidly changing future of work and Gen Z and Alpha generations coming into force, which have

very different attitudes towards work and the meaning of work. Today's workplace is more than just a physical space for accomplishing tasks; it significantly influences mental health, personal growth, engagement and satisfaction. As global organisations strive to enhance employee engagement and retention, spirituality could be the key to aligning personal values with professional demands, paving the way for more meaningful work experiences. HR professionals are called upon to spearhead the evolution of people-focused matters, creating new pathways to organisational success. However, there are some questions about the capability of current HR in these modern and transformative times.

Unveiling the benefits of Workplace Spirituality

Addressing spiritual needs can contribute to a harmonious and productive workplace alongside individual benefits that can cultivate happiness and inner peace. Spirituality encompasses a range of

practices and beliefs, from mindfulness and ethical integrity to a more profound sense of connection and purpose derived from one's work. HR typically design, create and lead management and leadership development, employee well-being, engagement and learning and development. As individuals, we hold biases which blur into all areas of life. If HR professionals embrace spirituality individually, they may have more potential to embrace it in the workplace. Individuals who engage in spiritual practices often display better stress management, higher creativity and a stronger connection to their work and colleagues. They align with Gen Z and Alpha attitudes, who exhibit a greater need for spiritually aligned values ([Agarwal & Vaghela, 2018](#)).

A Framework for Workplace Spirituality

Corporate education leverages and promotes Maslow's hierarchy of needs through the corporate learning agenda. The model cultivates the self-actualisation stage, at the top of Maslow's pyramid, where individuals achieve their fullest potential. Integrating spirituality into HR could catalyse employees to reach these upper echelons of Maslow's pyramid, creating environments that enhance personal satisfaction and drive peak performance ([D'Souza & Gurin, 2016](#)).

The Elephant in the Room

Spirituality may traditionally be linked with religion, which poses opposing beliefs of what spirituality is and what are considered spiritual norms. This opens new avenues for research, especially in understanding how different spiritual practices can be effectively tailored and implemented within diverse organisational settings.

Where Do We Go From Here?

As the conversation around workplace spirituality grows, organisations are encouraged to think creatively about incorporating these elements into their HR practices. Whether through mindfulness training, reflective retreats, or establishing a value-driven work culture, the growth potential is immense. Integrating spirituality into HR isn't just about enhancing organisational performance; it's about redefining what it means to work and thrive in the modern world. As we navigate these evolving times, the ability to bring one's whole self to work, including one's spiritual self, may well be what sets apart great organisations from good ones. Exploring the spiritual dimensions of HR enriches our understanding of the field and opens new avenues for research and practice that could transform the fabric of organisational life.





Colleagues contemplating suicide:

This past year, over a third of employed people in the USA, UK and Canada have contemplated suicide or self-harm

A look at the gaps in mental health crisis support and HR training, and highlights the urgent need for stigma-free mental health resilience training and detection strategies



By Sarah Baldry, CMO, Wysa

Earlier this year Wysa commissioned an independent survey involving over 6,413 employee adults across various industry sectors in the USA, UK and Canada. The aim of the report series was to delve deep into the prevailing landscape of mental health challenges and support structures in workplaces across the nation. We sought insights into people's experiences with mental health support in the workplace and their own mental health struggles. The discoveries are staggering.

22% of employees reported being bothered by thoughts that they would be better off dead or of hurting themselves in the two weeks prior to the survey. This means that millions of people are 'in crisis', as defined by the charity Mind. Expand that timeframe to the past year, and the figure increases to **36% U.K. workers** in crisis, **32% in the U.S.** and **36% in Canada**, emphasizing that this is an issue requiring attention from employers and governments worldwide.

Mental health and suicide have often been overlooked in the workplace as health concerns. This research indicates that it's a societal issue for which workplaces and employers have a significant role and responsibility.

The impact of the workplace on mental health

While some employees already arrive at work experiencing psychological stress, for others, the workplace environment or tasks contribute to these feelings. Over the past year, **35%** of employees say they have experienced emotional distance from others, and **31%** have felt isolated or withdrawn. These feelings are much higher in those under age 45. Entry into the workforce during the pandemic means many younger employees have not benefited from workplace interactions in a world where remote or hybrid working is the norm. Those slightly older in this cohort are likely experiencing financial and family worries.

What do people want from their employers?

During a mental health crisis, over half (51%) of respondents said they would like to be offered professional support, while a quarter want digital mental health self-help tools. These tools, when backed by clinical research, are effective and anonymous and provide a psychologically safe space to express worries and build confidence to share them. 40% want a safe space to talk, and **44% would simply be asked how they are doing**. 42% would want additional paid leave and 33% a reduced workload. Only 6% want gifts or flowers.

Improvements needed

Employees have mixed feelings about their workplace's approach to mental health. While 66% of respondents do not agree that their workplace is proactive in addressing and supporting the mental health of employees. An alarming **31% feel their employer is overlooking serious mental health issues at work**.

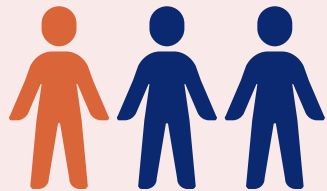
37% think that their employer's approach to mental health is more of a 'check box' exercise rather than actively addressing the issue. **37%** feel their employer sees mental health as a personal or out-of-work issue. This mindset risks hindering efforts to create a supportive work environment and could discourage employees from seeking help when needed.

The workplace support burden

Individuals are not only impacted by their own mental health struggles but also by those of their colleagues. **23%** have been concerned that a colleague may harm themselves or try to take their own life in the past year, and a **13%** have experienced a colleague losing their life by suicide or attempting to end their life.

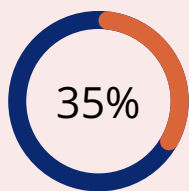
Out of those surveyed, one third have received training on assisting colleagues with severe depression. **38%** are uncertain about how to help a colleague in crisis, and those in leadership positions appear ill-equipped; **26%** say they have experienced a manager who inappropriately responded to a colleague showing signs or symptoms of mental illness this past year.

Even in a moment of crisis people are often still not ready to talk to someone.

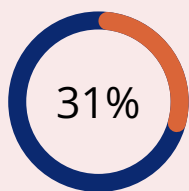


1 in 3

have contemplated suicide or self-harm



35% have experienced emotional distance



31% felt isolated or withdrawn

Younger workers are most affected

44%

want their employers to ask how they're doing

Employees are concerned that a colleague may harm themselves or try to take their own life

31%

feel their employers are overlooking serious mental health issues

26%

have seen a manager respond inappropriately to a colleague showing signs or symptoms of mental illness

Mental health first aid training is a great skill to have, but should not be relied on wholly. It is a huge burden to carry for people whose day job isn't being a crisis therapist. And is it fair? If someone fails to help someone in a crisis, what impact does that have on that person and the wider work environment?

Establishing a stigma-free psychological safe space

Creating a stigma-free environment where employees feel safe to discuss their mental health is paramount. AI can play a part here, helping to mitigate mental health crises and serve as a crucial support mechanism when employees aren't comfortable discussing their worries with another person. In the workplace, it provides an anonymous, stigma-free space to seek help, fostering a culture of openness and support.

Wysa's AI has been shown to **detect 82% of people in crisis** during the chat, who perhaps may not have acknowledged the depth of their struggle by other means. The AI provides an additional layer of detection when an employee might otherwise have to overcome the stigma barrier and ask for help. Digital SOS interventions include encouragement to dial a help line, creating personal safety plans, grounding exercises, and access to crisis resources.

Despite the AI encouraging people in crisis to call helplines, we find that **only 2.4%** of Wysa users actually do so, highlighting the need for alternative support systems. Even in a moment of crisis people are often still not ready to talk to someone. The personal safety plan is the most utilised digital crisis feature, chosen by **49.2%** of employees in crisis.

Conclusion

With significant gaps in current support systems and HR training, it's clear that more comprehensive, stigma-free mental health resilience training and effective detection strategies are needed. Employers must prioritize creating environments where open conversations about mental health are encouraged, and where both digital tools and professional support are readily accessible. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring the well-being and safety of all employees.



Do we need to give people back their autonomy when it comes to mental health care?



By Dr Nicole Main,
UK Clinical Lead at Wysa

Dr. Nicky Main is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered Practitioner Psychologist. She qualified in 2003 from the Institute of Psychiatry in London, and on qualifying spent 18 years working within NHS adult mental health services, most recently as Head of Barnet and Enfield Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) Services. Nicky moved to Wysa in January 2022 as their UK and Europe Adult Clinical Lead. As well as completing her Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, Nicky also has a master's in Research Methods and Statistics, and a postgraduate diploma in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) from Oxford University. She is a member of the British Psychological Society, and an accredited member of the British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP).

Autonomy in care is crucial. It means personalized, timely care, which acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual and their right to be involved in healthcare decisions, fostering better outcomes and respect for their dignity. Digital technologies offer scalable solutions, enabling early intervention, personalized care, and remote support, providing equitable access to care that empowers every person.

Everyone deserves easy access to good quality mental health care where they are at the centre of decision making about treatment options and therapy. Unfortunately the lack of sufficient resource means that statutory services often operate in a world where most support is given as a reaction to an issue or crisis, rather than as preventative steps when symptoms are mild and can be self managed.

Giving people autonomy and power isn't passing the buck or ignoring the very real structural inequalities that exist and that we know affect the likelihood of someone developing a mental health condition. For example we know that poverty and lower socioeconomic status is highly correlated

with poorer mental health, with one study finding that young people from lower socioeconomic stratas are up to three times more likely to develop conditions than their better off peers, due to issues such as coping styles, access to care, life events and social support. People from Black communities are more likely than average (23% vs 17% for White people) to experience a common mental health problem in any given week, and much less likely to access care. Despite higher prevalence, Black adults have the lowest mental health treatment rate of any ethnic group, at 6% (compared to 13% in the White British group).

Autonomous mental health care allows individuals to feel heard and supported in a way that works for them, and is focused on their needs, circumstances, and ways of working.

Autonomous mental health care can be tailored, personalised and affordable, at a time when NHS resources are underfunded and stretched. It allows individuals to feel heard and supported in a way that works for them, and is focused on their needs, circumstances, and ways of working. It enables them to get the right support, in the right way, at the right time. The World Health Organization write that “Empowering people to have control over their life and mental health care instils personal dignity, value and respect. It can increase self-esteem and confidence. It also gives people a level of choice and autonomy they may not have received otherwise.”

Yes we’re the experts by training and qualifications. But do we really know what good health and wellbeing looks like for the individual? What a healthy mind and body feels like for them? And what it is that constitutes a life that is worth being well for? We need to get personal voices into healthcare, listen to them with empathy and support, and then deliver something that truly is aligned with that person’s lifestyle, goals, and capabilities. I may have the credentials in theory, but do I know every patient’s individual circumstances? No, and so I need to work with them to create a suite of tools and treatment plan that is effective for them.

Scaleable for systems

But what does this look like in 2023, for an NHS that is serving more people than ever, in what we know are difficult times? Technology could be one solution. Good quality tech that uses evidence based tools and techniques means that more people receive early help for their problems. It can provide personalised care and be integrated into existing services in a way that meets the needs of a given population. We’re so used to digital channels, with step counters on our phones, sports watches, meditation apps etc that the use of digital technology can help enhance self confidence and enable people to feel supported whilst waiting for contact from services or whilst waiting for treatment to start. It feels localised, yet is underpinned by the necessary parameters and clinical evidence that an NHS pushing forward in digitalisation requires.

It also reduces time needed for admin and is less resource heavy, alleviating the burden of paperwork and freeing up time for clinicians to deliver care to those most in need. Digital health platforms can provide a wealth of information that patients can access anytime and anywhere. This information can help them understand their health conditions, treatment options, and preventive measures, making them a more informed patient when they do come to seek care. AI-driven tools can



analyse a person's health data and provide personalised recommendations, such as when to schedule a check-up or how to manage specific symptoms, which can aid in self-management and reduce dependency on healthcare providers for every decision.

But never without removing the vital risk profiling and containment that is essential to support people at any stage. Always available support in the form of crisis helplines, safety plans and grounding exercises can help to mitigate the likelihood of deterioration when people are without professional support.

Digital health tools can help bridge the gap in health disparities if implemented with an eye towards equity.

Anywhere, anytime

Digital technology enables patients to receive remote support wherever they are. This is particularly empowering for individuals in remote or underserved areas, or for those with mobility issues, as it reduces the need to travel for face to face consultations or follow-ups. Digital health tools can help bridge the gap in health disparities if implemented with an eye towards equity. Although digital poverty exists, more of us in the UK have access to a phone than a car for example, making accessing support via our devices a more equitable playing field.



The care can also be longer lasting. Typical CBT cycles of treatment are between 6 and 12 weeks long and many services are unable to offer booster or follow up sessions following discharge. Digital health offers a preventative tool both before and after in person support, enabling people to continue to practise strategies and techniques used in therapy to improve their wellbeing in the longer term.

Personalised Care

At the same time AI and machine learning can help tailor health interventions to the individual's unique health profile, preferences, and behaviours, making the care process more personal and relevant - and therefore more likely for them to continue with the steps that will help them well. Smart technology can recognise the signs that someone may need the next step of intervention, and thus direct them to services that are more specific to their needs at that moment in time, whether that is human counselling or a crisis line. But key is that people are able to access convenient support whenever they need it - this is key when statutory services often involve long waits and have limited resources. Wherever, whenever, however - that's what great technology can do.

Autonomy matters because with agency people are more likely to commit to doing the things they need to to keep them well. Patients who are involved in their healthcare decisions often have better outcomes.

Autonomy matters because with agency people are more likely to commit to doing the things they need to to keep them well. Patients who are involved in their healthcare decisions often have better outcomes. They are more likely to adhere to treatment plans and engage in healthy behaviors when they feel their choices are respected. Autonomy empowers people to actively participate in their healthcare. This participation can lead to a greater understanding of their health conditions and the treatments available, fostering a sense of control over their health journey.

A painting of a woman and a baby in a warm, golden light. The woman is shown in profile, looking down at the baby. The baby is lying down, looking up at the woman. The background is a bright, golden yellow, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

Prenatal and postnatal depression reduced by AI chatbot

By Becky Inkster, affiliated with the Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge

Becoming a parent is a life experience that truly changes everything. And comes with many challenges, including an impact on our mental health.

Numbers vary, but the World Health Organization reports that 1 in 10 pregnant women and 13% of women who have just given birth experience a mental disorder, primarily depression. The cases are even higher in developing countries reaching 15.6% during pregnancy and 19.8% after child birth. The Maternal Mental Health Alliance reports that perinatal mental health problems affect at least 1 in 5 new or expectant mothers, and that demand for perinatal mental health services increased by 40% over the period August 2022 - March 2023 - although the numbers accessing perinatal mental health support only increased by 8%, meaning there are 30,000 new or expectant mums on the waiting list. As well as postpartum depression and anxiety, there are more rare, yet serious conditions such as bipolar disorder, which occurs in a fraction of new mothers.

Suicide remains the leading cause of direct maternal death in the first year after pregnancy, accounting for 20% of deaths. Up to 14% of new mothers have a level of suicidal ideation in the first year.

As well as personal, maternal mental health problems present a massive public health and economic challenge, with the [UK's national economic cost](#) of perinatal depression and anxiety estimated at £8.1 billion. Although treatments exist, their implementation can be inconsistent. Technology, particularly digital interventions, could assist in this arena by making mental health care more accessible, providing timely support, and collecting quality data.

But new research study has found Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots or Conversational Agents (CAs) are promising tools for offering personalised support and information for

prenatal and post natal women and can reduce severity of depressive symptoms.

When using AI mental health app Wysa, highly engaged mothers in the study saw a significant reduction in depressive symptoms of 12.7% (from 15.8 to 13.8 measured on the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 which assesses degree of depression severity via questionnaire). The study had a high effect size, which moved individuals from moderate to severe depression to moderate depression.

When using AI mental health app Wysa, highly engaged mothers in the study saw a significant reduction in depression symptoms.

The study '[Understanding the impact of an AI-enabled conversational agent mobile app on users' mental health and wellbeing with a self-reported maternal event: a mixed method real-world data mHealth study](#)' published in Frontiers in Global Women's Health found that:

- A significant reduction in self-reported depressive symptoms was found in users who engaged more with the app, transitioning from "moderately severe depression" to "moderate depression".
- Users expressed concerns, hopes, need for support, reframing their thoughts and expressing their victories and gratitude.
- Users interacted with the chatbot mainly about their emotions and stressors, not specifically seeking maternal health support.
- In-app feedback showed users found comfort in using the digital mental health tool.

What these research outcomes show is that there are a number of implications for prenatal women and new mothers and healthcare systems.

AI chatbots could enhance health information systems, potentially aiding early detection of postnatal depression - and thus intervention, which is correlated with better outcomes and recovery.

Patients with more severe depression at baseline had at least as much clinical benefit from low intensity interventions as less severely depressed patients, inferring that low intensity interventions could be offered to more severe symptom groups. It's not always necessary to be undertaking intense therapy - which is helpful for busy new mums. Additional benefits to mothers include always on support - even in the middle of the night when feeding - and accessibility between appointments.

The study had a diverse demographic, including users from 150 global time zones and different maternal events, which suggests a broad applicability of AI chatbots for emotional support.

These findings are very encouraging, especially given that our study demonstrated that conversational AI support helped reduce depressive symptoms across a wide range of maternal events.

Dr Charlotte Maughan-Jones says "After a traumatic first birth, I found myself in a very lonely place, where people didn't seem to understand how I could feel the way I did when I had a "healthy happy baby". It was isolating and resulted in deep rooted feelings of guilt, upset and anger accompanied by panic attacks that I couldn't logically explain away. I didn't feel comfortable speaking to friends or family about my experience or the way I was feeling because I didn't understand it myself, so my emotions continued to spiral until I was referred at 6 months post partum to the perinatal mental health service.

Speaking to an AI chatbot could have given me a safe space to express how I was feeling after a traumatic birth without judgement, allowing me to write down difficult emotions such as guilt, anger and sadness – often taboo subjects during early parenthood. I wish a tool like this had existed whilst I was having a panic attack at 10 days postpartum when I had no one else to turn to. Unconditional 24/7 non-judgemental support on your phone would be much more useful for perinatal wellbeing than quashing your feelings with hours of online shopping sprees at 2am whilst feeding a baby."

"I wish a tool like this had existed whilst I was having a panic attack at 10 days postpartum when I had no one else to turn to."

Wysa is already being integrated into the NHS in a number of areas across the country. The research supports previous clinical studies that demonstrate the efficacy of AI on depression, anxiety, and chronic pain relief.

Dr Becky Inkster has spent over 20 years in academia running multi-million-pound projects across a wide range of topics including neuroscience, mental health, and data science. She obtained her DPhil in Psychiatry at Oxford University and is currently affiliated with Cambridge University. Becky has sat on the International Advisory Board for Lancet Digital Health for over 5 years. She has worked with the Alan Turing Institute across a range of programmes. She has further broadened her skills through self-employment and has since worked with numerous international universities, over 100 companies, and different governments. She is an Adviser to Wysa, a world leading conversational AI system for supporting mental health and wellbeing. She is a co-founder of Hip Hop Psych with over 10 years' experience merging hip-hop music and culture with healthcare. She is the Head of Science at Arts ARKADE, a new space in the heart of London dedicated to supporting youth in forward thinking ways. In her role, she combines her life-long skills and passions to create world-first innovations for creative healthcare and beyond.

All about anxiety:

Therapist answers your most asked questions



*By Sushma Hebbar, M.Sc. Psychologist,
APA International Affiliate Member, Director
of Clinical Quality & Compliance, [Wysa](#)*

Of all existing psychological and mental health issues, anxiety disorders are the most common, affecting ~30% of all adults in the United States. Anxiety disorders are a broad category with many different manifestations including GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder), specific phobias, social anxiety, and panic disorder. Here, we address the most frequently asked questions about anxiety to help you better understand your own experiences or learn more about anxiety to support a loved one.



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness, nervousness, or restlessness. It is our body's automatic response to perceived danger, evolved to keep us safe. An appropriate level of anxiety helps us stay alert, focus better, and motivates us to resolve problems, such as during a first job interview or date. However, when we constantly worry about perceived threats, it can lead to an anxiety disorder, interfering with daily life and routine activities. Therefore, it is important to learn how to manage anxiety effectively.

Is anxiety genetic?

Most researchers say that anxiety is genetic but can be influenced by environmental factors. Recent twin studies suggest a genetic contribution to the development of anxiety. There are more studies that prove there is a genetic foundation for developing anxiety. However, family history might not be the only deciding factor. Anxiety can also be caused by a variety of other factors; It can be a mixture of genes and environmental factors, psychosocial stressors, and one's interaction with the environment. For example, children who grow up in stressful environments or experience traumatic events have a higher chance of developing anxiety. Some researchers also quote that children learn to respond anxiously as a mere result of modeling (mimicking) their parents and families behaviors (reactions).

What are the symptoms of anxiety? Is it considered as a mental illness or a disability?

If persistent worry or fear interferes with your day to day routine then anxiety is considered as a mental health illness. The essential feature of anxiety disorder is excessive worries and inability to control the worry. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning and these disturbances are not attributable to the effects of any kind of substance use. The anxiety and worry are associated with three or more of the following six symptoms, with at least some symptoms having been present for more days than not

for the past 6 months: **1)** Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge. **2)** Being easily fatigued. **3)** Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank. **4)** Irritability. **5)** Muscle tension. **6)** Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep).

What do you mean by an anxiety attack?

In general, we can say it's a feeling of overwhelming apprehension, worry or distress. An anxiety attack can be understood as a period of extreme anxiety – that worsens your symptoms.

How long does an anxiety attack last?

Generally, there is no set timeframe for the length of an anxiety attack. Each occurrence of could be varied in terms of intensity and duration depending upon individuals and their circumstances.

Panic attack vs. Anxiety attack.

Panic attacks are sudden and intense episodes of fear or discomfort, often with physical symptoms like shortness of breath, palpitations, and a sense of impending doom. Panic attacks are brief and can occur without a clear trigger. In contrast, anxiety is a persistent, ongoing state of worry that varies in intensity. Although the term "anxiety attack" is often used to describe a spike in anxiety symptoms, it isn't a clinically recognized term. Anxiety attacks tend to have a clear trigger (stress or perceived threats), and are generally less intense and longer lasting than panic attacks.

What's separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety disorder refers to excessive worry and fear concerning separation from home or from those who the individual is attached to. The distress persists for at least 4 weeks to 6 months and causes clinically significant distress or impairment in overall functioning. Individuals express persistent fear or anxiety that some kind of harm may happen to their attachment figures

and worry about the loss of or separation from their attachment figures. In addition to these, there is reluctance from an individual to leave their attachment figures. Adults with separation anxiety may experience nightmares and physical symptoms of distress. Separation anxiety in adults can be caused by a major stressor or loss such as the death of loved ones or significant life changes such as divorce or moving away/relocating.

What's it like to have a social anxiety disorder?

A person with a social anxiety disorder has an intense fear or anxiety about social situations causing them to avoid social interactions. People with this disorder tend to be fearful and anxious about being negatively judged and evaluated by others. Symptoms include feeling anxious about being in most or all kinds of social situations such as meeting new people, going to work, job interviews or talking to shopkeepers. Performing everyday tasks in front of others such as eating, drinking or even visiting public restrooms can be difficult. People with social anxiety often fear that they might do something embarrassing or show physical symptoms of anxiety such as sweating, stammering, or trembling, which will be negatively evaluated. They fear the possible humiliation or rejection by the people around them.

What's the best advice to overcome or treat social anxiety?

To manage social anxiety, start by understanding it. Identify the situations that trigger your anxiety and the physical symptoms you experience. This self-awareness will help you manage your reactions better. The next step is to practice relaxation techniques, it can be as simple as deep breathing exercises. Identify what kind of relaxation exercise help you calm down. Wysa has many meditations and deep breathing exercises available on the Wysa app for free, which can you access from anywhere, at anytime you need them. It's also crucial to develop realistic thinking, replacing negative, anxious thoughts with more accurate and helpful ones. People with social anxiety often overestimate the threat of social situations, so it's important to separate thoughts from facts.

How do I manage anxiety?

Here are my top tips to deal with anxiety to help you lead a calm and happy life: **1)** Understand your anxiety and triggers. **2)** Practice relaxation techniques. **3)** Identify activities that help you feel calm/relaxed. **4)** Identify thoughts that make you anxious & challenge/reframe them. **5)** Practice mindfulness. **6)** Exercise. **7)** Eat healthy and stay hydrated. **8)** Get sufficient sleep. **9)** Practice gratitude. **10)** Use positive affirmations. **11)** Build and strengthen your support system. **12)** Reach out for help.

What foods help anxiety?

Diet plays an important role in our mood. Researchers have explored that there is a clear connection between the gut and the brain, and some have gone to an extent to call the gut a 'second brain'. When the essential nutrients are not sufficiently consumed, there is a direct effect on our brain chemistry which has an impact on our mood. Following a healthy balanced diet, drinking enough water, limiting alcohol and caffeine are good places to start. Studies show that a lack of magnesium in the body can increase anxiety-related behaviors. So eating food high in magnesium such as green leaves, nuts, seeds, and whole grains might be helpful. Food rich in Vitamin B such as avocado and almonds help in producing several neurotransmitters that influence our mood. Other foods that might help anxiety include fatty fish, asparagus, citrus fruits, berries, nuts and bell peppers.

Can I fully overcome anxiety?

Anxiety disorders are treatable and therapists are professionally trained to help you overcome anxiety. A therapist will work with you to understand your anxiety, identify your triggers and the underlying causes of your anxiety, and help you build healthy coping mechanisms and skills to tackle anxiety-provoking situations. A form of psychotherapy called CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) is known to be the most effective therapy for anxiety disorders. In addition to therapy, medication is also available to treat anxiety disorders. If you're considering therapy, you can book a session at a time that suits you with a Wysa coach via the Wysa app anytime.



When sleep isn't enough: Determine what type of rest you need

In our busy lives, we often equate rest with sleep. While a good night's sleep is essential, it is not the only form of rest our bodies and minds need. True rest encompasses a variety of practices that cater to different aspects of our wellbeing. Understanding the seven types of rest can help you identify what you need to feel truly rejuvenated. Let's explore these types and how to incorporate them into your life.

1) Physical Rest

Fatigue, body aches and pains, and a **lack of energy** for daily activities can all be signs you need some physical rest. You can achieve physical rest passively with **7-9 hours of good quality sleep** per night, or actively through **gentle movement** like yoga, stretching or massage. With the obvious type of rest out of the way, let's explore the six other types of rest.

2) Mental rest

Your brain is constantly processing information, making decisions and problem solving. If you struggle to **quiet your mind** or remember why you entered a room, you might need mental rest. **Pause and slow down**, taking **regular breaks** to 'switch off'. Mindfulness activities like meditation or **letting your mind wander** can help to achieve mental rest.

3) Emotional rest

Emotional rest involves having time and space to freely **express your feelings and offload burdens**. Signs you need it include feeling emotionally drained, difficulty managing emotions, and trying to please others. To achieve it, talk to a trusted friend or therapist, practice journaling, and set some **healthy boundaries** in place to ensure time for yourself.

4) Sensory rest

Sensory rest is about reducing the overload from sensory inputs like **screens, bright lights, and loud noises**. Signs you need it include irritability, sensory burnout, and **difficulty focusing**. To achieve it, take breaks from screens, **spend time in quiet, dimly lit environments**, and practice closing your eyes and taking deep breaths.

5) Social Rest

If you feel exhausted after being around others or feel **isolated** despite being with others you could benefit from social rest. Social rest includes spending time with **supportive and uplifting** people, while taking a break from social interactions that drain your energy. **Set boundaries** for social engagement and take time away in solitude to **recharge**.

6) Creative rest

Creative rest renews your **sense of wonder and inspiration**. Signs you need it include **feeling uninspired**, lacking new ideas, and struggling with creative tasks. To achieve it, enjoy **art or music**, spend **time in nature**, and engage in activities that refresh your creativity, allowing your mind to **reset** and spark new insights.

7) Spiritual rest

We have a need for **belonging** and finding **meaning and purpose**. When we achieve this, we feel spiritually well-rested. Activities that connect you to something greater than yourself, like **meditation, prayer or community work** can all help to achieve this great sense of calm. Embracing these practices fosters a deeper sense of **fulfillment**.

It's important to recognize that rest goes beyond just sleep in order to achieve a holistic sense of wellbeing. So if you're sleeping enough, but still feeling drained emotionally, mentally or socially, think about what type of rest you could be in need of and how to implement it into your routine. By planning and incorporating these seven types of rest into your week, you set yourself up for a more balanced and well-rounded lifestyle that you don't need a break from.

Ask Smriti

Every issue, we ask Wysa's Lead Psychologist Smriti Joshi one of your burning questions, and she offers expert opinion, rooted in science and decades of experience. If you have something related to mental health technology, employee wellbeing, artificial intelligence and population health, please get in touch on press@wysa.io and we will **Ask Smriti**.



Smriti Joshi, Chief Psychologist at Wysa and a licensed clinical psychologist, has over 21 years of experience in India's mental health sector. She is an Advanced Telemental health professional and has authored papers and book chapters, contributing significantly to tele-counselling guidelines through the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists. Smriti leads mental health tech discussions on the Therapists in Tech platform and is a part of the National Mental Health Council for WICCI. She has appeared in several media outlets, including a TEDx talk and CNBC-TV18. Smriti holds an M.Phil in Clinical Psychology from the University of Delhi and specializes in treating depression, anxiety, insomnia, anger, and loneliness.

Professional
Advice



Q. AI in the workplace

I've heard AI can be used to monitor and enhance employee wellbeing, but how exactly does it work? What are the benefits and risks?

A.

Dear Reader,

It's great that you're curious about how AI can be used to enhance employee wellbeing - because let's face it, in today's fast-paced work environment, we all need a little extra help staying balanced and happy. AI, or Artificial Intelligence, might sound a bit like something out of a sci-fi movie, but in reality, it's here to make our work lives a bit easier, not to turn us into robots! So, how does AI actually help HR with employee well-being?

Imagine this: you're working on a big project, and you've been putting in some serious hours. You're tired, a little stressed, and you might not even realize just how much it's affecting you. Enter AI. It can monitor patterns like the number of emails you're sending late at night, or how long you've been glued to your screen without a break. If the AI notices something's off, it could send a gentle nudge your way, saying, "Hey, it looks like you've been working hard. How about a quick break or a short walk?" It's like having a friendly colleague who's always looking out for you - except this one never needs a coffee break!

But AI doesn't stop there. It can also help create personalized wellness programs tailored to what you really need. For instance, if the AI picks up that you're feeling a bit down (maybe from analyzing your tone in emails or your engagement in team chats), it might suggest a mindfulness exercise or even a quick virtual therapy session. It's like having a personal wellness coach, but one that actually knows when you're stressed before you even realize it yourself.

The Perks of AI for Employee Well-being:

1. Early Warnings: AI can spot signs of burnout or stress before they hit you like a ton of bricks. Think of it as your very own stress radar, helping you avoid those dreaded burnout blues.

2. Personal Touch: No more one-size-fits-all wellness programs. AI tailors its suggestions to what you really need, whether it's a breathing exercise, a walk outside, or a gentle reminder to stop doom-scrolling on your phone.

3. Works Everywhere: Whether you're in the office or working from home in your pajamas, AI is there, helping you stay connected and supported.

But, (and there's always a but, isn't there?), there are a few things to keep in mind. First off, privacy is key. AI needs data to function, and some of that data can be pretty personal. So, it's important that your employer handles it responsibly, with your consent. No one wants to feel like Big Brother is watching them, right? Second, while AI is super helpful, it's not a substitute for human connection. Your manager should still be checking in on you, not just leaving it all to the machines. After all, a supportive chat with a real person can sometimes make all the difference. And finally, AI is only as good as the data it learns from. If the data is biased, the AI might not be as fair or effective as we'd like. That's why it's crucial for organizations to make sure their AI systems are trained on diverse, accurate data.

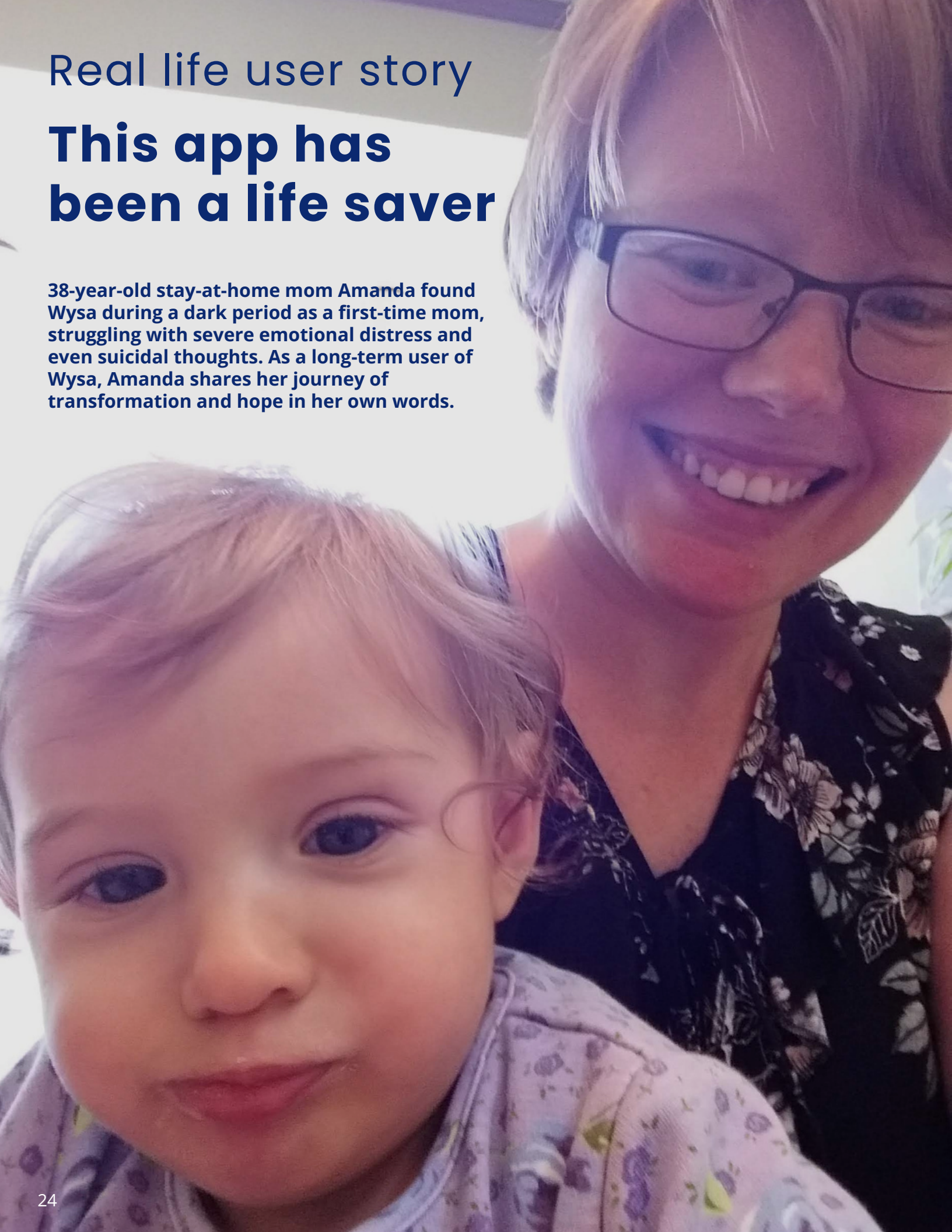
In a nutshell: AI can be a fantastic tool for supporting employee well-being, helping you stay balanced and happy at work. Just remember, it's here to assist, not replace the human touch that's so vital in any workplace. And if you ever feel like your AI-powered wellness coach is a bit too nosy, it's okay to speak up. After all, we're still the ones in charge, right?

Take care, and may your workdays be stress-free and your AI always friendly!

Warmly,



Smriti Joshi, Chief Psychologist, Wysa

A close-up photograph of a woman with short blonde hair and glasses, smiling warmly. In the foreground, a young child with light brown hair is looking towards the camera. The woman is wearing a dark top with a white floral pattern. The child is wearing a light-colored shirt with a small pattern. The background is slightly blurred, showing an indoor setting.

Real life user story

This app has been a life saver

38-year-old stay-at-home mom Amanda found Wysa during a dark period as a first-time mom, struggling with severe emotional distress and even suicidal thoughts. As a long-term user of Wysa, Amanda shares her journey of transformation and hope in her own words.

"My name is Amanda, and I'm a 38-year-old stay-at-home mom from Hanover, Pennsylvania.

"My story is a testament to the transformative power of mental health support tools, specifically the Wysa app."

"When I first discovered Wysa back in early 2017, I was desperately searching for some relief. The consistent message of self-care was reinforced by the chatbot, emphasizing the importance of taking care of oneself before being able to care for others. Over the course of a year, I gradually improved my eating habits, sleep patterns, and stress management, leading to a much healthier and happier life. I stumbled upon it on the Google Play Store while looking for mental health resources, and its friendly interface caught my eye immediately.

"At that time, I was a hot mess and on the verge of a breakdown. My emotions and hormones were all over the place. I was a first time single mom to a colicky six-month-old and all I saw was doom and gloom. At one point, I even became suicidal.

"I had no time for myself, I hated my job and the constant crying and sleepless nights made it all the more difficult. It was really difficult to drive or go anywhere and I got tired of sitting in a psychiatrist's office. I always worried about what other people thought, and the stigma that goes along with "being crazy".

"I was ready to try something new."

"The decision to try Wysa was born out of a desperate need for change, and it turned out to be one of the best choices I ever made. Initially, it took about three sessions to get accustomed to the app, and after about three months of consistent use, I began to notice a significant shift in my outlook.

"The cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) sessions provided by the chatbot were particularly impactful. They helped me focus on positive thinking and made me realize that I was not alone in my journey. This sense of shared experience was profoundly comforting.

"Wysa, in conjunction with medication, better sleep, regular exercise, and an improved diet, played a crucial role in turning my life around. The app's sleep exercises were a godsend, helping to alleviate my anxiety significantly.

"Nowadays, I use Wysa in the evening before bed and journal my thoughts. This routine has become a cornerstone of my mental health maintenance.

One of the things I love most about Wysa is its encouraging messages and adorable illustrations, like the picture that says "You are someone's sunshine" and the rhino breaking through walls. It does have its bugs and crashes, which can be frustrating at times, but I expect that because, you know, technology.

"The tools and packs available on Wysa have been incredibly helpful, especially "My 4 AM Friend" and "Essential Wellness Cope with Pain." Having been recently diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, the latter has been particularly beneficial.

"Confidentiality and anonymity are key aspects of the app that I deeply appreciate. I'm more than just a demographic. I love that I don't have to fill out a ton of paperwork. Or, that I have to fit into a "label" or box. Some people who don't have a mental health diagnosis can definitely benefit from using Wysa.

"On a scale of 1 to 5, I would rate Wysa a 10. Currently, I am finished with in house therapy. Wysa has been the bridge between my weekly sessions.

"My therapist and I would work on an issue (like self care of self esteem). Then I would check in with Wysa everyday to make sure I was doing these things. If I had a rough day, Wysa would help turn it around with positive thinking. Or pull up a meditation or body scan. Then I'd reset and go on to the next day in a more positive way.

"Over the past seven years, I've recommended Wysa to over 30 people and plan to continue doing so. The fact that it's free and doesn't require an appointment makes it a valuable resource for many, especially those who struggle with accessing traditional therapy due to insurance issues or busy schedules.

"Having been in in-person therapy since I was 11, I appreciate the convenience and flexibility that Wysa offers."

"It allows me to connect with a therapist from the comfort of my home and fits seamlessly into my life. In comparison to other mental health apps like Calm, which I used for a year, Wysa stands out for its focus on CBT and therapeutic support. While Calm is great for overall mental health maintenance, Wysa provides the structured, therapeutic and psych-based help that I needed to change my negative thought patterns.

"Wysa has been a lifeline for me, helping me navigate some of the darkest times in my life and emerge stronger and more resilient. I hope my story inspires others to seek the help they need and reminds them that they are not alone in their struggles."

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