



Executive summary

About the Spotlight Report

The Suicide Prevention Australia Spotlight Report is an annual national survey designed to shed light on key social and economic pressures contributing to distress and suicide risk across Australia. The Spotlight Report provides timely, data-driven insights into specific emerging issues affecting Australians, supporting evidence-based policy, workplace reform and suicide prevention activity.

This inaugural Spotlight Report focuses on workplace and industry distress, examining the prevalence, drivers and cultural conditions shaping work-related strain across the Australian workforce. It explores how distress is experienced across business size, industry, gender and career stage, and assesses the maturity of workplace suicide prevention and mental health support beyond policy compliance.

High level overview

- **Workplace distress in Australia is the norm, not the exception:** Nine in ten Australian workers (90%) experience some level of work-related distress and more than one in five (22%) report extreme distress¹, while only 10% report none. This makes it clear that this is not an issue of individual resilience, but a systemic workplace challenge requiring structural reform.
- **Culture protects, not policy alone:** While many workplaces have mental health and/or wellbeing policies, only 20% of workers say support is strongly encouraged and normalised and just 15% say it is comprehensively embedded into culture. Yet workers reporting no distress are more than twice as likely to say support is strongly encouraged (34%), demonstrating that cultural encouragement, not policy alone, reduces distress.
- **The medium business “squeeze”:** Distress is not evenly distributed; medium-sized enterprises (20-249 employees) show the highest levels of extreme distress at 30%. These businesses often lack the informal support of small teams and the large budgets or infrastructure of major corporations, putting them in a potentially precarious position that requires additional attention and support.
- **Without the right supports, the future workforce is at risk:** Workplace distress is near universal among Millennials (95%) and one in four Gen Z workers report extreme distress, while 31% of entry-level staff lack confidence responding to a colleague in serious distress. This raises serious concerns that high strain is becoming normalised in the next generation of leaders and Australian workplaces.

¹ Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 0-10 how much distress are you currently experiencing related to work, employment or your work environment. Results were categorised using the following:

None at all/No distress (0), Slight distress (1-3), Moderate distress (4-6), Extreme distress (7+)



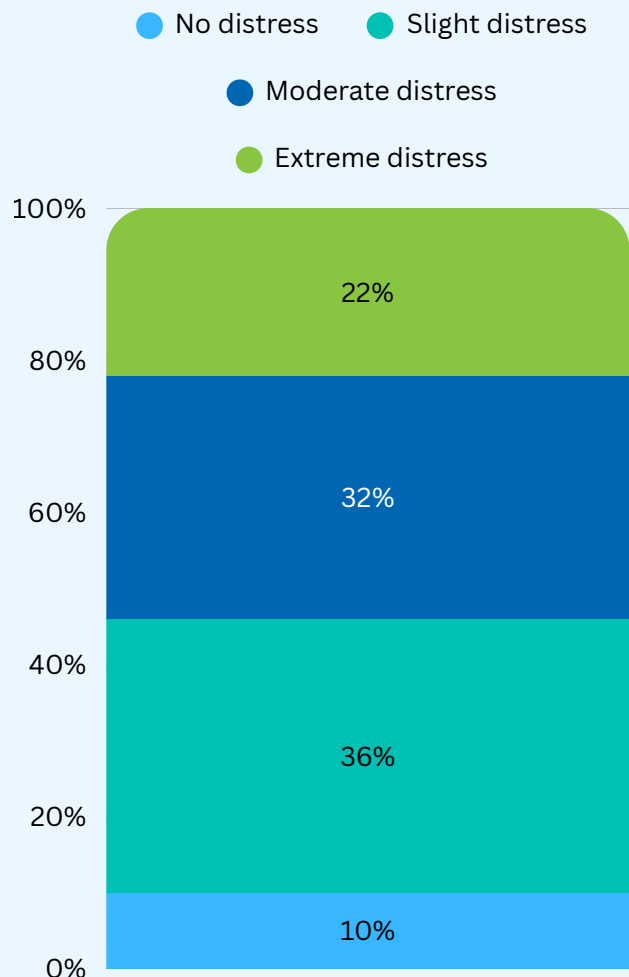
The state of workplace distress in Australia

Work-related distress is a systemic feature of Australian working life. Australians spend more time at work than socialising, relaxing or with family² – meaning that workplace conditions have a compounding impact over time. When distress affects nine in ten workers, it reflects structural pressures, not individual weakness. These extreme distress levels indicate a need for systemic intervention rather than passive or reactive support.

This systemic challenge is demonstrated by:

- More than one in five (22%) workers fall into the extreme distress category.
- Moderate distress¹ represents close to a third of workers (32%), demonstrating the strain is embedded across the workforce.
- Only 1 in 10 workers report being completely free from work-related distress.

How much distress are you currently experiencing related to work, employment or your work environment?



Factors driving distress

The drivers of distress are clear and largely structural. Workload intensity, client demands and management practices feature consistently as leading contributors.

When asked to rank the top 3 factors that contribute most to work related distress:

- 61% cite heavy workload and burnout as a primary contributor to distress, making the most prevalent factor overall.
- One in two workers cite difficult or demanding clients/customers.
- Inadequate pay (39%), and poor management support (39%) rank as the joint third most cited contributing factor.
- One in five (20%) cite lack of mental health support as contributing to their distress.

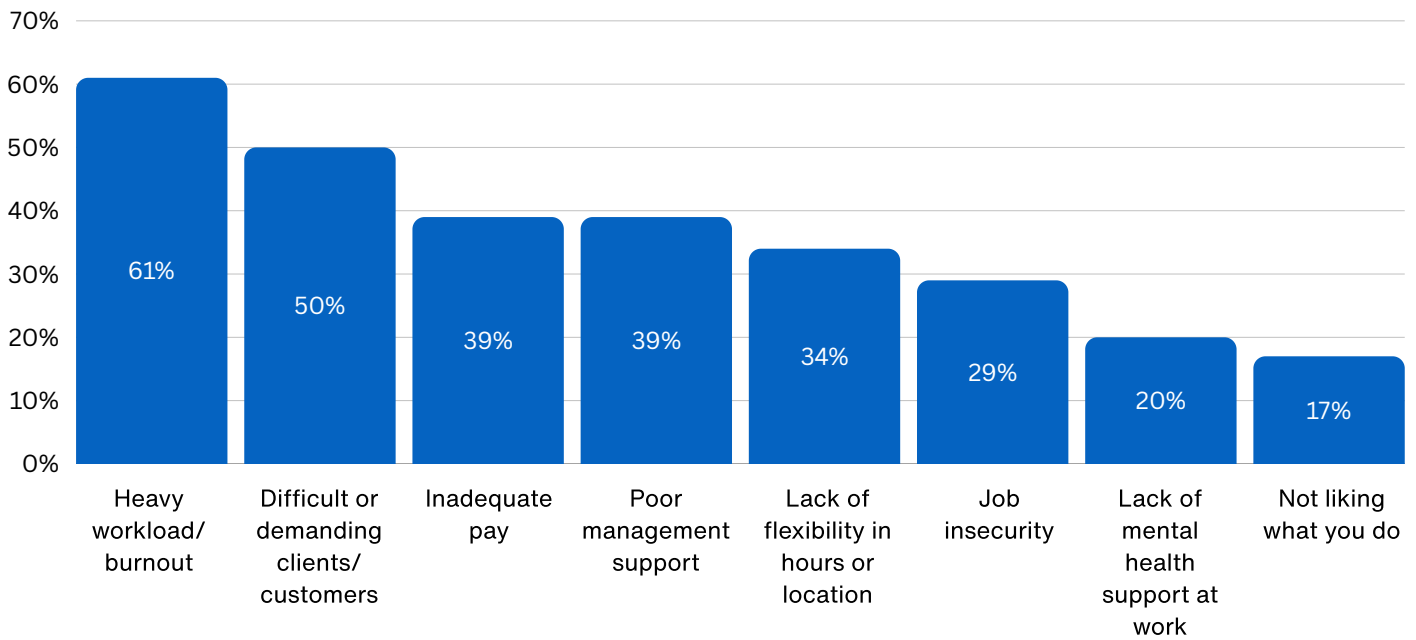
² Footnote: Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). How Australians use their time. ABS.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/how-australians-use-their-time/latest-release>.



Which of the following factors contribute most to your work related distress (Select your top 3)?

Ranking of factors in contributing to work related distress



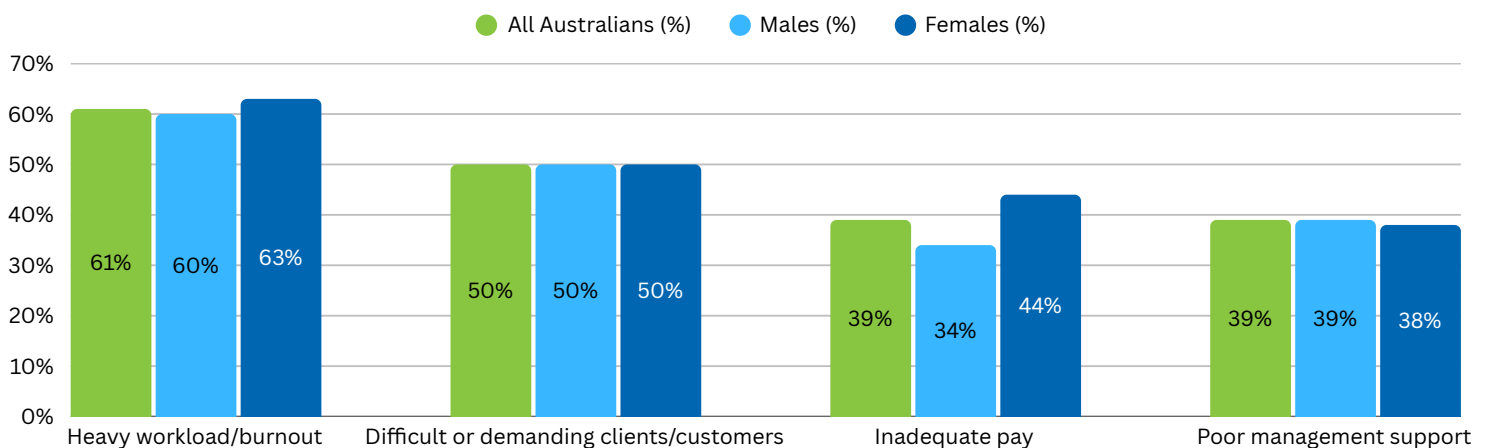
Factors contributing to work-related distress by gender:

- Heavy workload/burnout has the highest percentage of both men (60%) and women (63%) as being in their top 3 stressors.
- Difficult or demanding clients is the second most prevalent stressor for all Australians (50% for men and 50% for women).
- Inadequate pay was the third most prevalent stressor for women (44%) which was 10 percentage points higher than men (34%).
- Poor management support was the third most prevalent stressor for men (39%).

While there are some concerning differences in percentages, the overall consistency in ranking of these top stressors across genders reinforces the structural nature of distress.

Which of the following factors contribute most to your work related distress (Select your top 3)?

Ranking of factors in contributing to work related distress by Gender



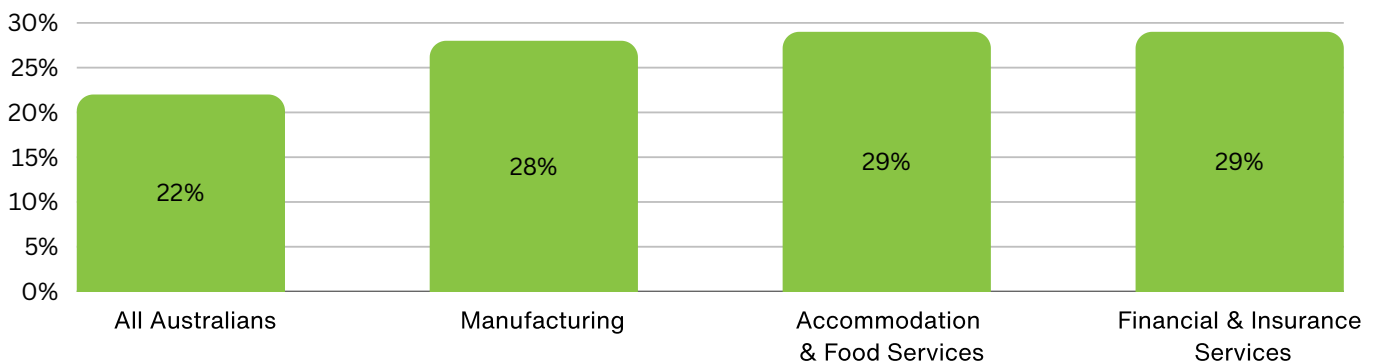


Most Prevalent Stressors in the Top 3	All Australians	Males	Females
1st Highest %	Heavy workload/burnout (61%)	Heavy workload/burnout (60%)	Heavy workload/burnout (63%)
2nd Highest %	Difficult or demanding clients/customers (60%)	Difficult or demanding clients/customers (50%)	Difficult or demanding clients/customers (50%)
3rd Highest %	Inadequate pay (39%)	Poor management support (39%)	Inadequate pay (44%)

Distress defined by industry:

- Heavy workload/burnout is the leading stressor across key industries.
- Poor management support is a top three driver in multiple sectors.
- Job insecurity appears among the top stressors in Accommodation and Food Services.
- Client-facing industries report higher prominence of demanding customers as a stressor.
- The recurrence of workload and management factors across sectors indicates systemic design pressures rather than isolated industry issues.

% Experiencing extreme distress by industry



Most Prevalent Stressors in the Top 3	All Australians	Manufacturing	Accommodation and Food Service	Financial and Insurance Services
1st Highest %	Heavy workload/burnout (61%)	Heavy workload/burnout (63%)	Heavy workload/burnout (65%)	Heavy workload/burnout (72%)
2nd Highest %	Difficult or demanding clients/customers (50%)	Difficult or demanding clients/customers (53%)	Job insecurity (49%)	Difficult or demanding clients/customers (53%)
3rd Highest %	Inadequate pay (39%)	Poor management support (44%)	Poor management support (45%)	Poor management support (39%)

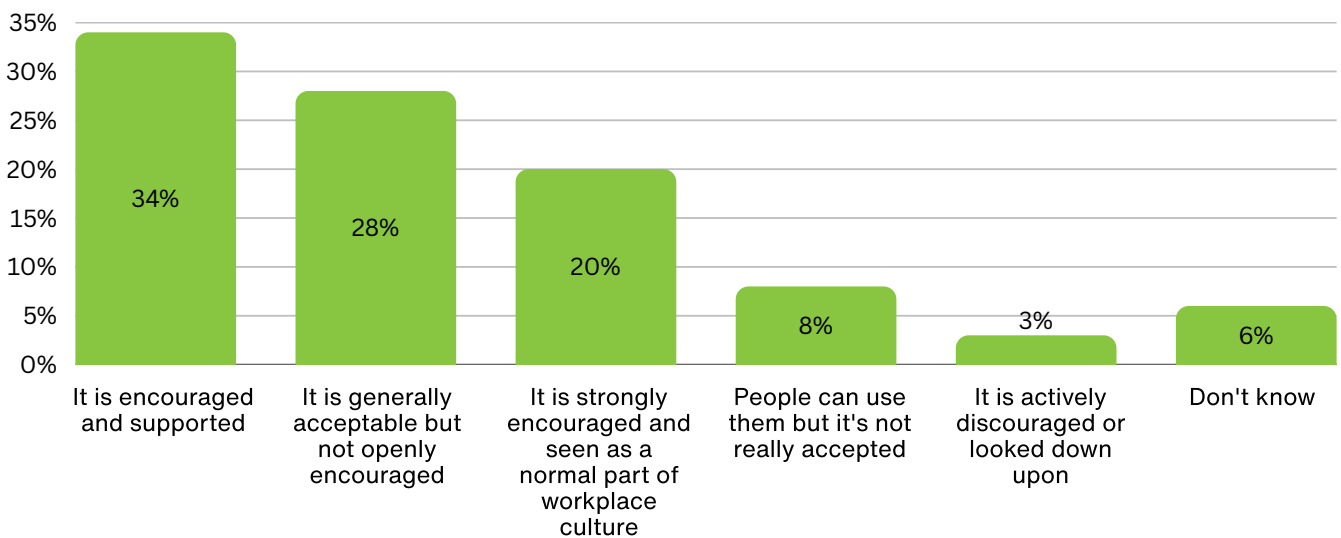


Culture vs compliance: the mental health maturity gap

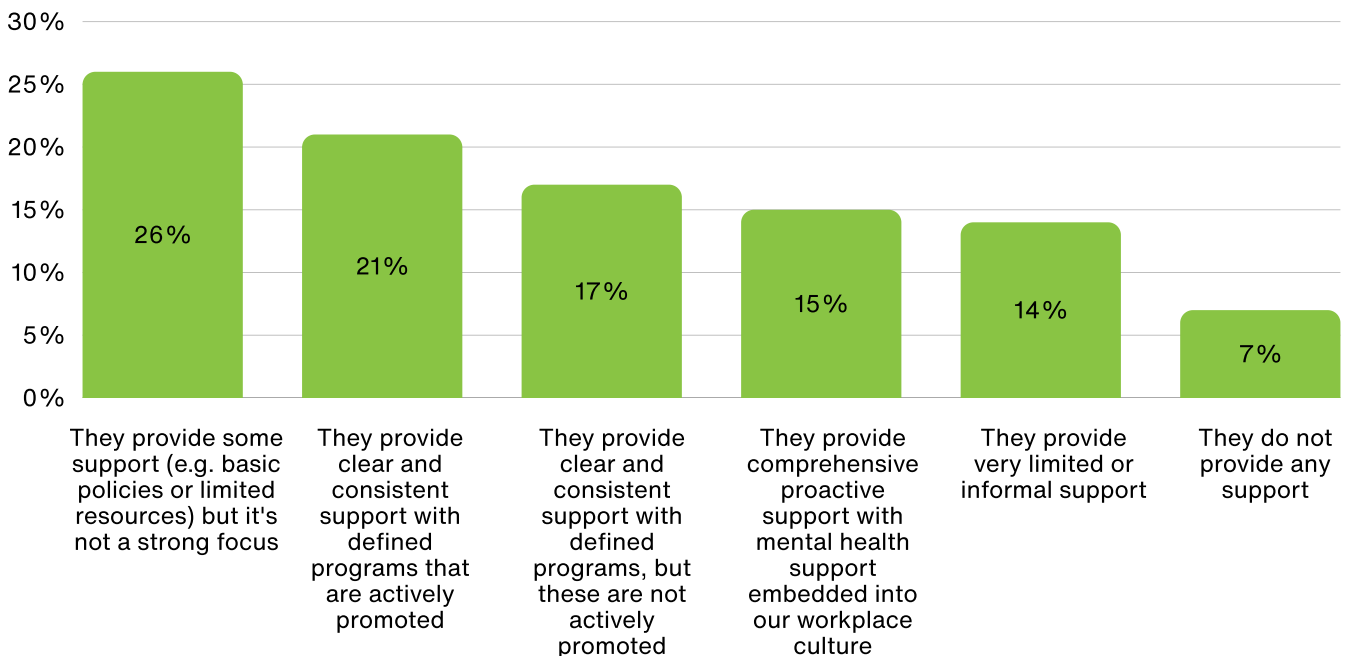
The data reveals a significant gap between the existence of mental health policies and the experience of cultural support. The correlation between cultural encouragement and lower distress suggests culture acts as a protective factor.

- Only 20% of workers say mental health support is strongly encouraged and normalised.
- Only 15% say mental health is comprehensively embedded into workplace culture.
- Workers reporting no distress are significantly more likely to say support is strongly encouraged (34%).
- Among workers experiencing moderate distress, only 15% say support is strongly encouraged.

Cultural acceptance of utilisation of supports

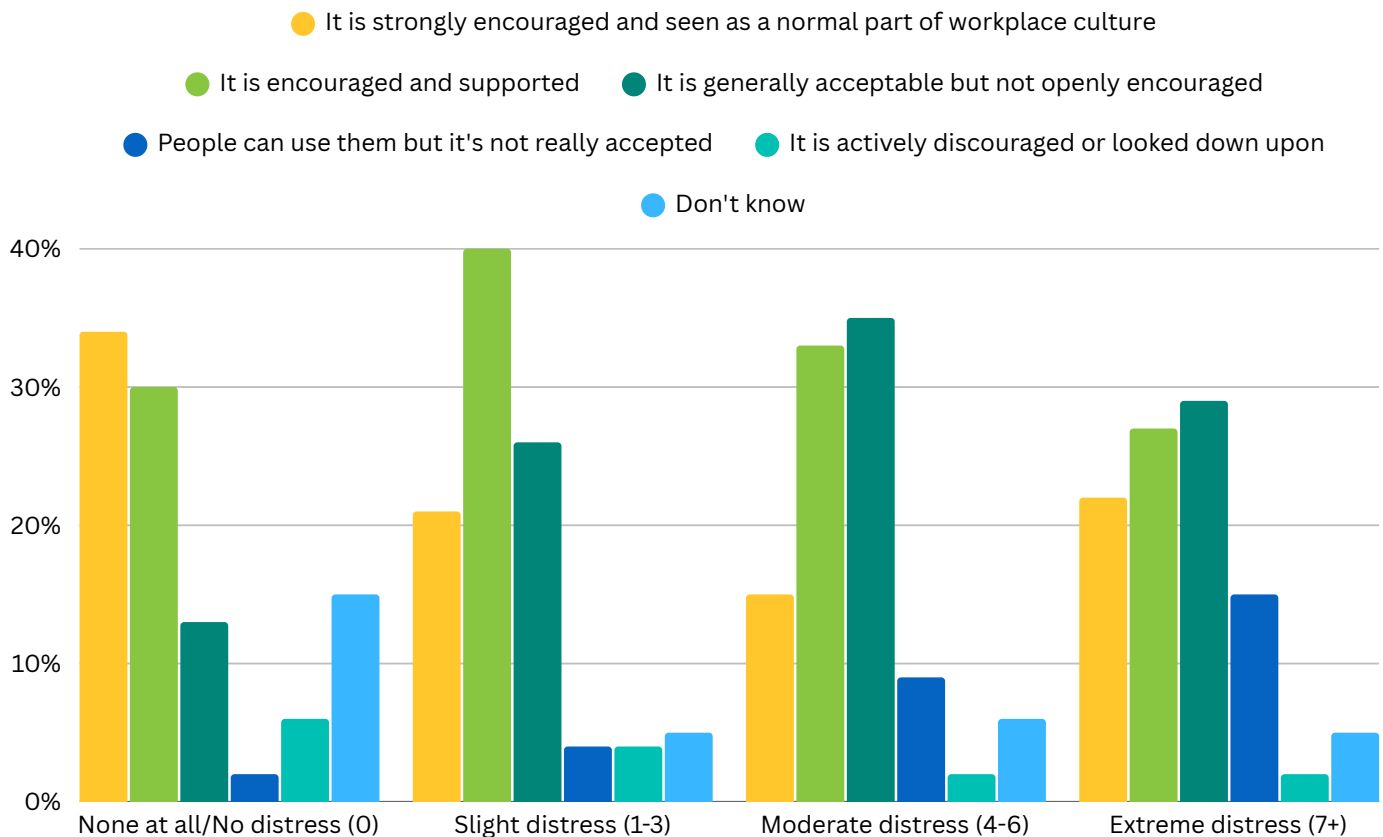


Level of support provided by workplace





Cultural acceptance of utilisation of supports by distress Level



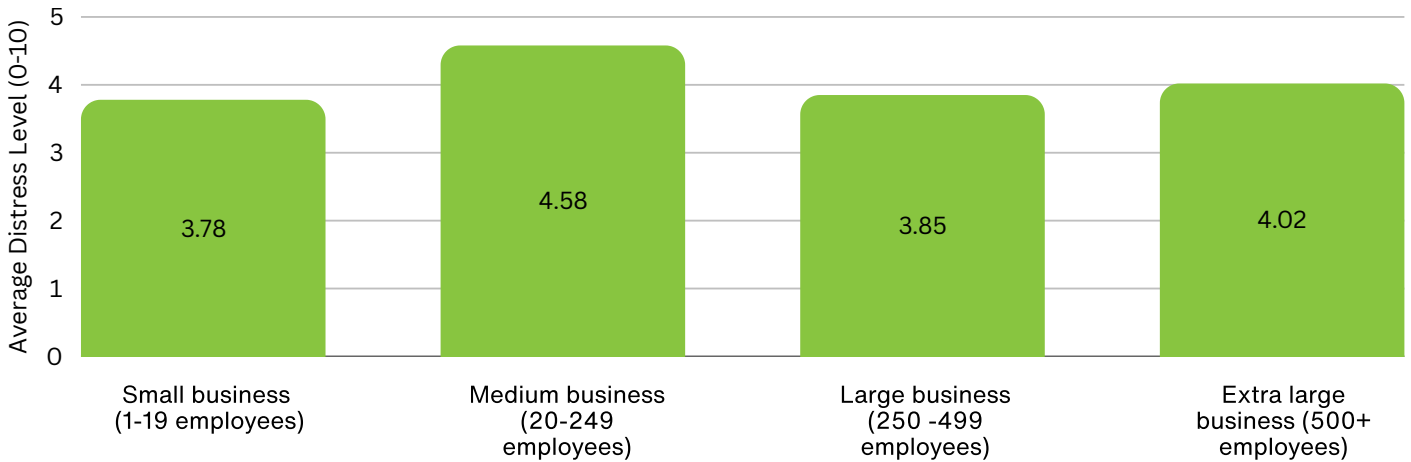
The business size paradox

Distress is not evenly distributed across organisation size. Medium-sized enterprises (20-249 employees) show the highest levels of extreme distress. Extreme distress reaches 30% in medium-sized businesses compared to just 19% in small businesses (1-19 employees) and only 15% in large corporations (250-499 employees).

While 32% of large and 25% of extra-large businesses (500+ employees) provide clear and consistent support with defined and actively promoted programs, as often made possible through required frameworks that are supported by larger budgets, and small businesses rely more heavily on informal support structures, medium businesses seem to struggle. This suggests that medium-sized businesses may be large enough that they cannot rely on the informal support of a small team, but do not have the scale to provide sufficient formal supports. They face high operational pressure without equivalent infrastructure – targeted support is required to address the needs of this engine room workforce.

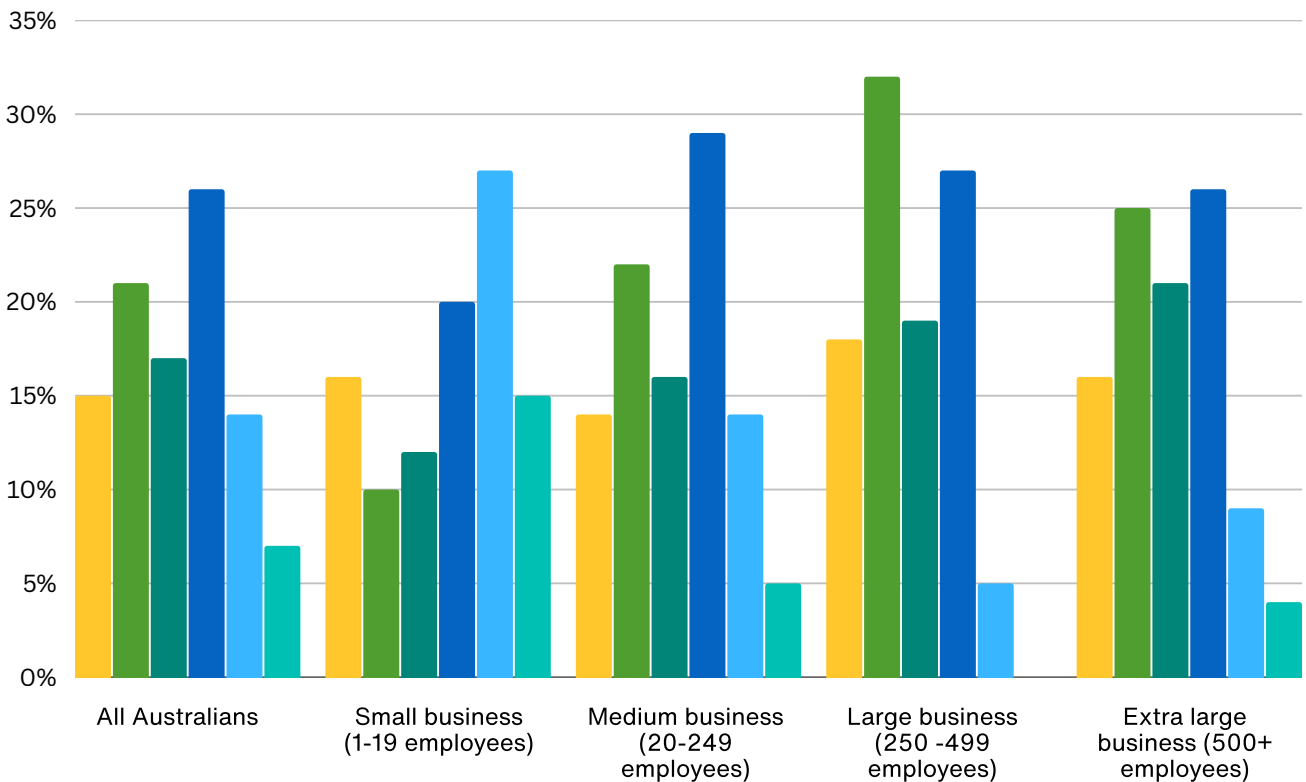


Average distress by Size



Support availability by organisation size

- Comprehensive proactive support with mental health support embedded into our workplace culture
- Clear and consistent support with defined programs that are actively promoted
- Clear and consistent support with defined programs, but these are not actively promoted
- Some support (e.g. basic policies or limited resources) but it's not a strong focus
- Very limited or informal support
- No support is provided



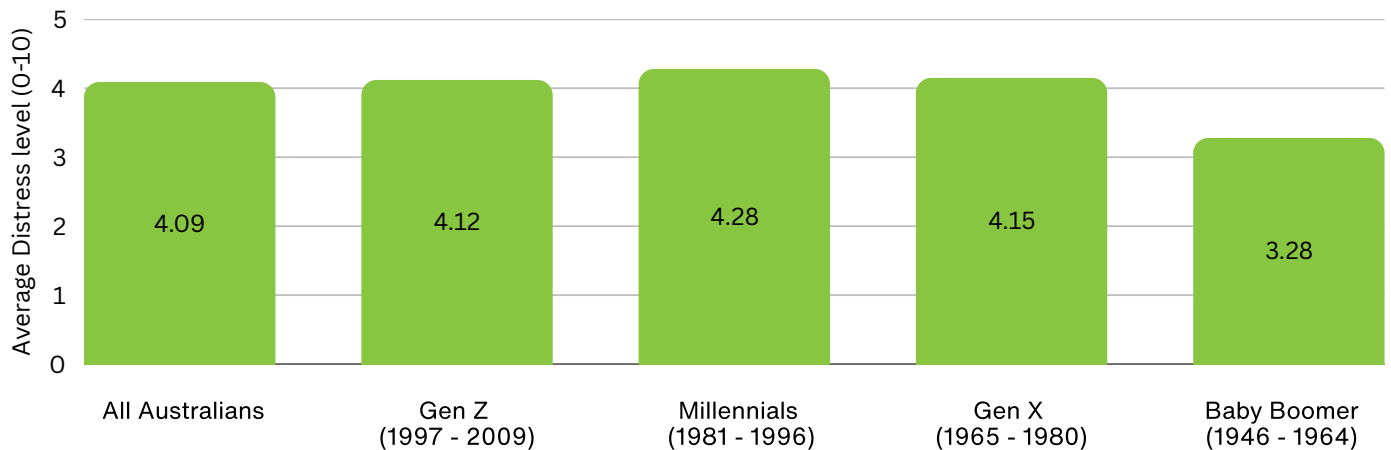


Emerging workforce under pressure

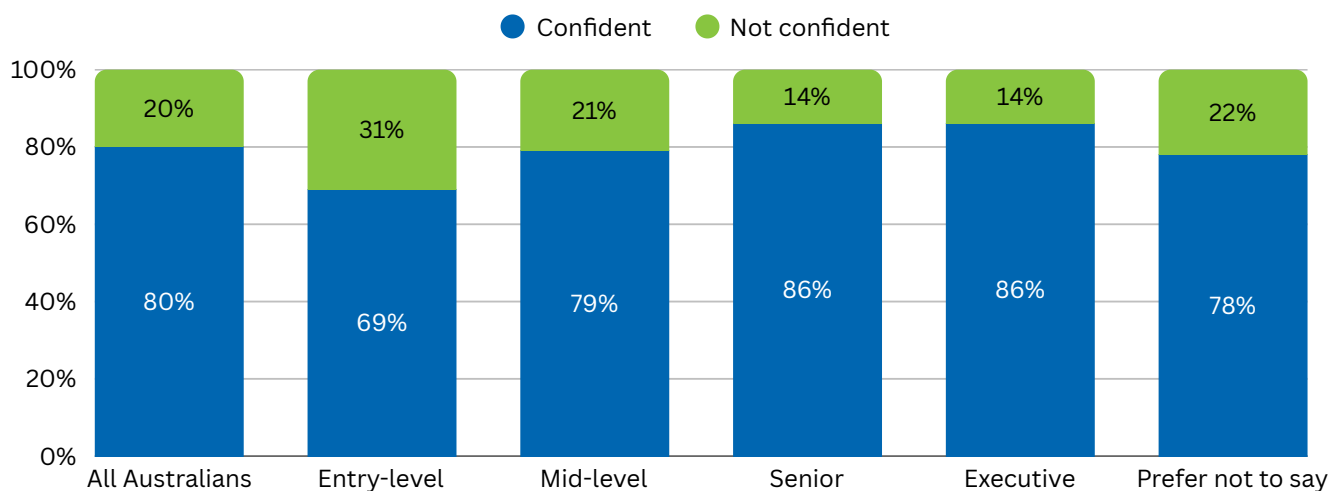
Distress is near-universal among younger cohorts and emerging leaders, raising concerns about long-term cultural normalisation of distress in the workplace. Without early intervention, distress risks becoming embedded in the next generation of workplace leadership, perpetuating harmful attitudes and norms.

- 95% of Millennials report experiencing work related distress while one in four Gen Z workers report extreme distress.
- 31% of entry-level employees lack confidence responding to a colleague in serious mental distress, raising concern for this generation as they move through their careers.
- Younger workers are more likely to cite lack of mental health support than older cohorts (26% of Gen Z workers cited lack of mental support in the top 3 stressors, more than double that of Baby Boomers at 11%).

Average distress by Generations

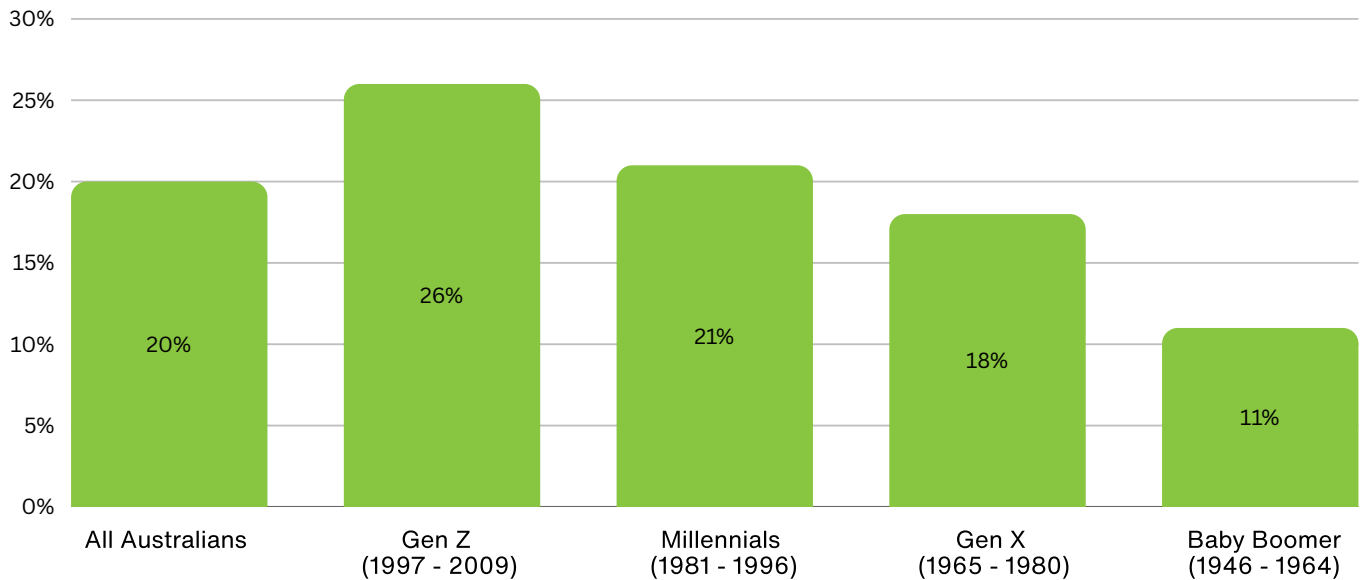


Confidence in knowing what to do if a colleague was experiencing distress by career stage





% Citing lack of mental health support at work in their top 3 stressors by Generation



Conclusion

The inaugural Spotlight Report makes it clear that work-related distress is a systemic structural issue rather than an individual one. Addressing this requires a shift from passive policy compliance to a holistic approach aimed at genuine cultural change.

Building cultural maturity:

For support to be effective, it must be normalised and actively encouraged. The data shows a significant gap where workers feel they can use supports but doing so is not “really accepted” or is “looked down upon”. Workplaces must move beyond the “policy on a shelf” approach to ensure that utilising mental health resources is a standard, approved and celebrated part of the organisational fabric.

Addressing the medium business gap:

Medium sized businesses act as the “engine room” of the Australian economy but are currently among the most at risk. Unlike large corporations, they often lack the scale and budget to implement comprehensive proactive support frameworks independently. These businesses require specific, scalable structures and tools to bridge the gap between informal care and corporate-level programs.



Recommendations for systemic change

To protect the Australian workforce and ensure the sustainability of the next generation of leaders, the following actions are recommended:

- **Development of Competency Frameworks:** There is an urgent need for industry-specific competency frameworks that define the skills and behaviours required at every level to manage workplace distress, particularly for high-risk industries like manufacturing and financial services where work related distress is highest. This ensures that mental health support is a core professional competency, not an optional extra.
- **Targeted Government Funding:** Direct government funding for workplace and industry-based supports is required for meaningful and sustainable change. This is especially critical for medium sized businesses that face high operational pressure without the equivalent infrastructure of larger entities.

By embedding these support into the structural and cultural foundations of Australian industry, we can shift the needle from near-universal distress to a workforce that is resilient, supported, and psychologically safe.

Methodology

All figures, unless stated otherwise, are from YouGov Australia. The sample is comprised of a nationally representative sample of 1,018 Australian workers aged 18 years and older. Fieldwork was conducted between 23-29 January 2026. The survey was carried out online.

Following the completion of interviewing, the data was weighted by age, gender and region to reflect the latest ABS population estimates. This study has been carried out in accordance with the ISO 2025:2019 standards, to which YouGov is accredited.

To get help 24/7, phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467. If you or someone you know are in immediate danger, phone 000 for emergency services.

Help to report about suicide safely is available online: Go to <https://mindframe.org.au/>