

Understanding the Need for Enhanced Mental Health Support in the United States





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Since 1992, World Mental Health Day has been observed on October 10th. The day was established to support education, awareness, and advocacy for mental health. It has since contributed to an increased understanding of mental health on a global scale and the decrease of negative stigma around the topic. In the decades since the first World Mental Health Day, the importance of continuing to understand mental health has been made clear, with the prevalence of poor mental health and its impact impossible to ignore.

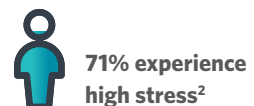
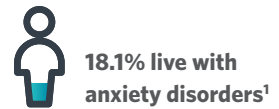
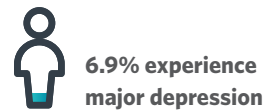
Poor mental health in the workforce has been shown to negatively impact businesses, often contributing to a decrease in job performance, productivity, engagement, and communication.² Work-induced stress has also been shown to negatively impact businesses, often contributing to a decrease in these same areas.³ Along with productivity losses, medical costs for individuals with mental health illnesses are significant. Employees at a high risk of depression have the highest healthcare costs, even after taking other health risks such as smoking and obesity into account.^{4,5} Similarly, medical expenses are increased for individuals living with a mental health issue as they often require care for additional conditions alongside their mental health.

In America alone:

1 in 5 adults experiences poor mental health, totaling over 43 million individuals.



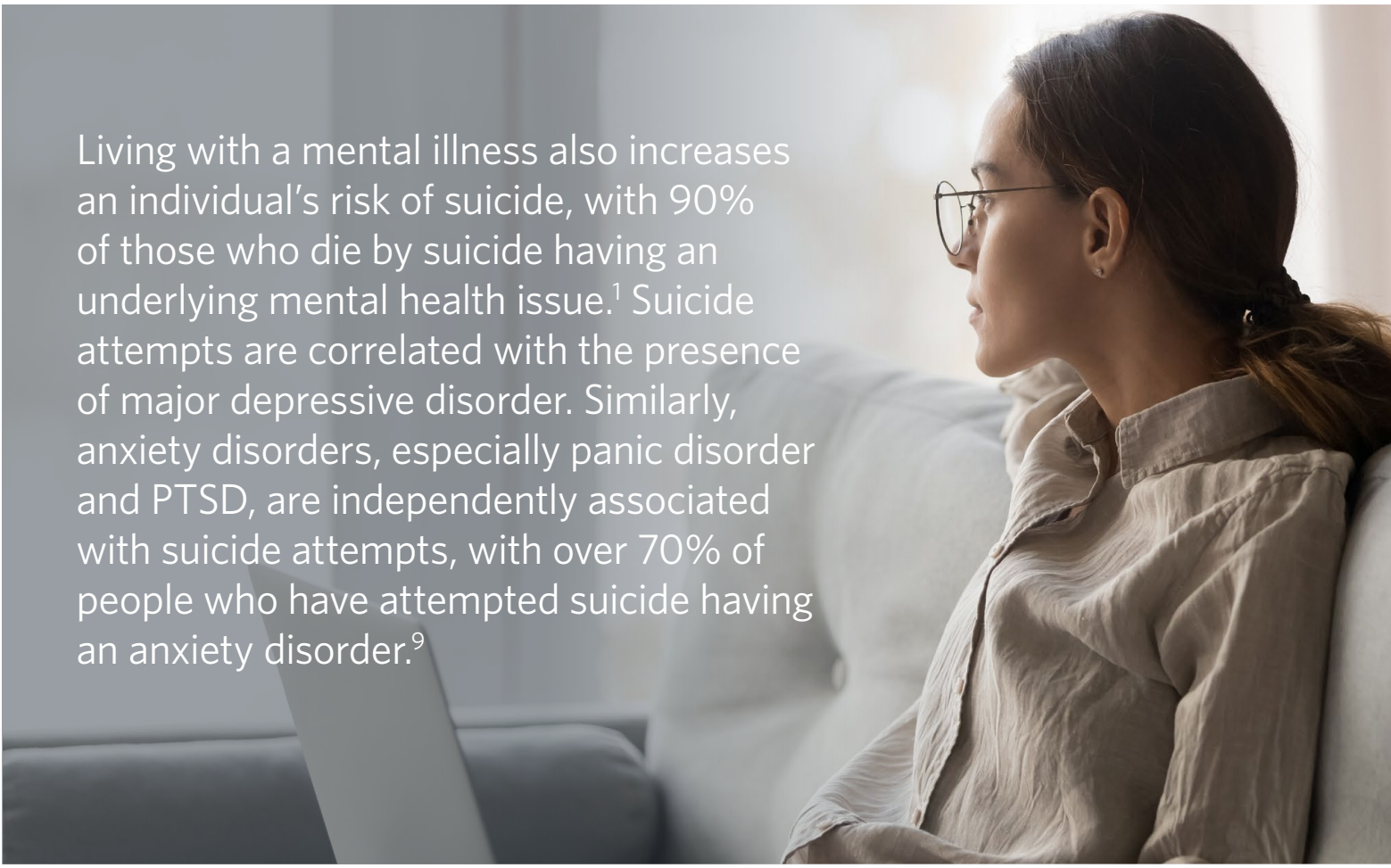
Of these individuals:



It is also common for mental health concerns to arise after an event affecting an individual's physical health occurs. According to the CDC, "Evidence shows that mental health disorders—such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD—can develop after cardiac events, including heart failure, stroke, and heart attack. These disorders can be brought on after an acute heart disease event from factors including pain, fear of death or disability, and financial problems associated with the event."⁷ Whether poor health negatively affects an individual's physical health or the other way around, it is not uncommon for those with poor health to require medical care more frequently than those who are mentally healthy, driving up healthcare costs.

Poor mental health also frequently occurs alongside addiction disorders. In fact, 10.2 million adults had a co-occurring substance abuse disorder and poor mental health in 2019.¹ In the United States, one out of every eleven workers struggle with substance abuse. More than three-fourths of these cases are represented by individuals struggling with alcohol use disorders.⁸ These individuals have a higher rate of absenteeism, higher rate of turnover, and higher average medical costs than their peers—all of which come together to cost their employer an average of \$8,255 per year per employee with untreated substance abuse disorder.⁹ However, employees who receive and respond to treatment for their substance abuse disorder in the last year are less likely to take unscheduled absences, less likely to leave their jobs, and have lower healthcare costs, saving their employers an average of \$8,543 per year.⁹

People with depression have a 40% higher risk of developing cardiovascular and metabolic disease compared to the general population, with that risk nearly doubling for individuals with serious mental illness.⁶

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing glasses and a light-colored button-down shirt, is sitting on a light-colored sofa. She is looking out a window to her right, with her hands resting on her lap. The background is softly blurred, showing a bright, airy interior space.

Living with a mental illness also increases an individual's risk of suicide, with 90% of those who die by suicide having an underlying mental health issue.¹ Suicide attempts are correlated with the presence of major depressive disorder. Similarly, anxiety disorders, especially panic disorder and PTSD, are independently associated with suicide attempts, with over 70% of people who have attempted suicide having an anxiety disorder.⁹



Mental Health by Demographic

Across the Virgin Pulse member population, 59% of members who answered mental health-related questions on the Health Risk Assessment (HRA) in 2020 were identified as being at risk for having poor mental health according to their HRA answers. These individuals' responses indicate that they experience high rates of stress symptoms, depression symptoms, or both.

Mental Health by Gender

Within the Virgin Pulse population, women were more likely to experience symptoms of stress and depression than men, according to their HRA responses. (Figure 1) However, this tells an incomplete story. When mental health is surveyed, men are often not accurately represented. Men are far less likely to seek mental health treatment or report mental health issues, which suggests that mental health issues are often overlooked in males.¹⁰ As a result, men die by suicide at a rate four times higher than women.¹¹ Men also die by causes related to alcohol consumption significantly more frequently than women and are two to three times more likely to misuse drugs.¹¹ These statistics indicate that men may struggle with poor mental health at a higher rate than many surveys suggest and are more likely to turn to dangerous and unhealthy behaviors over treatment than women.

Stigma is largely to blame for this gender gap. While great strides have been made across the globe since World Mental Health Day was first launched in 1992, stigma continues to substantially impact the behaviors and actions of people

suffering from poor mental health, which is especially true for men. The standards of masculinity that American men—and men across the world—face can lead to difficulty expressing emotions, aggression and violence, and discouragement in seeking help. The American Journal of Men's Health reports that the need for self-reliance was identified as the strongest predictor of poor mental health.¹⁰ The increased pressure placed on men to appear in control and powerful does not protect them from struggling with poor mental health but often barricades them from the help they need.

Percent at High Risk for Depression and/or Stress by Gender

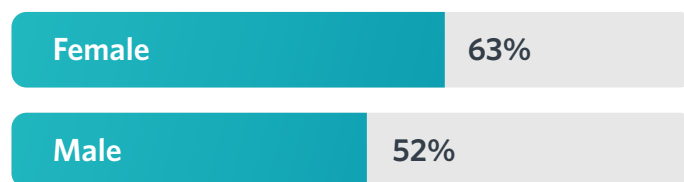


Figure 1



Although women often have an easier time admitting their symptoms and seeking help, social and economic factors increase women's risk of poor mental health.



75% of unpaid care and domestic work in homes and communities is performed by women and girls.



4 hours and 25 minutes
The average time women dedicate to unpaid care work every day vs. 1 hour and 23 minutes for men.¹¹

Along with being responsible for more unpaid work, women are also often underpaid and undervalued in their paying jobs. A 2016 study from Columbia University found that when women make less money than their male counterparts, despite being equally qualified for their jobs, they are 2.4x more likely to experience depression and 4x more likely to experience anxiety.¹²

Women also experience sexual harassment at work, with studies estimating that more than 80% of women experience workplace sexual harassment.¹³ The prevalence of workplace sexual harassment is dangerously impactful, with research

suggesting that this harassment can lead to depression and even showing that one in ten women who experienced harassment had such severe symptoms that they met the definition of PTSD.¹⁶

As a result of these factors, it is difficult to know if female Virgin Pulse members are indeed at higher risk for symptoms related to depression and increased stress or if they're just more willing to report these symptoms. Regardless, these results further emphasize the importance of creating an open, judgment-free environment that actively works to destigmatize mental health and supports all employees.



Mental Health by Age Group

Like gender, different age groups generally experience poor mental health at different rates. Across the Virgin Pulse platform, younger individuals experience poor mental health at a noticeably higher rate than older age groups. (Figure 2) This finding is consistent with existing literature, with the U.S. Census Bureau determining a similar breakdown by age group in their August 18th, 2021 Report.¹⁴ Mind Share Partners' 2019 Mental Health at Work Report notes: "Younger generations were more likely to experience mental health symptoms for longer durations but were also more open to diagnosis and treatment as well as talking about mental health at work."¹⁵

A wealth of research agrees that the population of young adults in the workforce, made up of older members of Gen Z and younger millennials, are reporting higher rates of anxiety, stress, and depression. What factors affecting these two generations have such a significant impact on mental health? The causes are varied. In a survey conducted by Deloitte, when participants were asked to identify which of 20 stressors they were concerned about, more than 60% of individuals selected all 20 options.¹⁶ When asked to limit their list to the top three, climate change, crime and personal safety, and unemployment were selected most frequently.¹⁸ Among those who experienced stress, the welfare of their family, long-term financial futures, job and career prospects, and day-to-day finances were the most frequently selected contributors.¹⁸

Similarly, the American Psychological Association found in their 2020 Stress in America report that current events are a significant source of stress in the lives of Gen Z, citing that this generation has "largely grown up during times of

disruption and unrest."¹⁷ While there is still much to learn about the impact these events and tech-dominated culture have had on Gen Z, we can gain some insight by looking at the previous generation. Millennials, who were also subject to significant unrest throughout their youth and into adulthood, were the first generation to have access to the constant overflow of news and information as they grew up with the rise of the internet and social media. The immediacy of the internet has led to a sense of urgency and constant availability—an expectation that millennials must always be willing to communicate with others and receive information, be it the news or personal updates of their peers. This constant influx of information can be difficult to process—and the pressure to present a perfect life online leads to heightened stress in millennial populations.

Percent at High Risk for Depression and/or Stress by Age

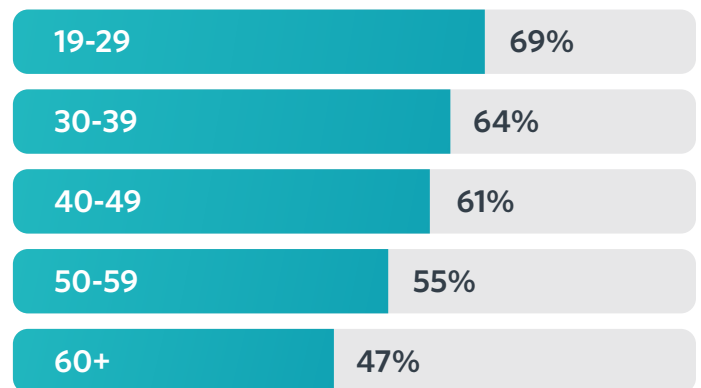


Figure 2

"Millennials often compare their personal and professional achievements to everyone else's. This can result in low self-esteem and insecurity. The world is at millennials' fingertips, but they can also feel its immense weight."¹⁸

The National Alliance on Mental Health

Young adults have been exposed to consistent sources of stress throughout their life. Along with the social pressures they grew up with, they now worry about aging parents, uncertainty around political and current events, and their struggle to establish financial security. Many are professionally unestablished and making entry-level salaries while simultaneously experiencing the financial burden of student debt and inflating living costs.¹⁹

Along with the abundance of stressors that influence mental health outcomes within younger generations, stigma also plays a crucial role in how mental health is reported by age group.

2x

Baby boomers and Gen X-ers are more than twice as likely to have never talked to someone about their mental health at work than Gen Z.

80%

Baby boomers and Gen X-ers are also 80% more likely to have never talked to someone about their mental health than millennials.

29%

Millennials were 29% more likely to believe that an employee with a mental health condition can be just as competent as a professional without one.¹⁵



Along with the distrust that older generations feel about discussing mental health in the workplace, they are also less likely to seek help for symptoms related to poor mental health at all.

As a result, the poor mental health of older generations largely goes unnoticed and underreported.

According to a study conducted by Bupa UK,²⁰ of people aged 55+:

27%

will tell no one about symptoms related to poor mental health

33%

will tell a partner

28%

will tell a friend



Mental Health by Industry

Incidence rates of poor mental health vary significantly by industry. In some ways, this can be explained by factors specific to the industry, such as income brackets, average work-life balance, occupational hazards, and more. However, this variety can also be explained by the demographics that primarily make up the industry.

A report published by Deloitte found that stress levels vary by industry, with public administration, education, and health having the highest rate of individuals who report very high stress, with construction following shortly behind, at 23% and 19% respectively.²¹ This is consistent with the Health and Safety Executive’s (HSE) 2020 report on work-related stress, anxiety, or depression, which specifically identified electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply, alongside public administration and defense, as having the highest rates of stress, depression, or anxiety.²²

Across Virgin Pulse, hospitality and entertainment was tied with educational services at 63% for the industry with the highest rate of poor mental health. Consulting was close behind at 62%, with healthcare, social assistance, and technology at 61%. (Figure 3)

It’s essential to understand the demographics that primarily make up these industries. As previously discussed, age and gender have a significant impact on the reporting of mental health prevalence.

Healthcare and education industries having the highest rates of poor mental health across both the Virgin Pulse member population and Deloitte’s survey population can be explained partly by the industry-specific stressors of these occupations and the demographics that make up these populations. There are hazardous psychological factors specific to the healthcare

industry, including time pressure, low levels of support from supervisors and coworkers, heavy workload, sleep deprivation due to nightshift work, uncertainty regarding decisions, and low autonomy.²³ Healthcare workers are also at a higher risk of burnout, with about 30-40% of healthcare workers reporting burnout.²⁶ These employees are also exposed to higher rates of conflict and violent situations and often have to continue working in an environment where a violent or traumatic event occurred.²⁶ Finally, healthcare workers are required to maintain a positive, empathetic personality throughout their entire shift, often forcing them to leave their own emotions unprocessed and suppressed.²⁶

Percent at High Risk for Depression and/or Stress by Age

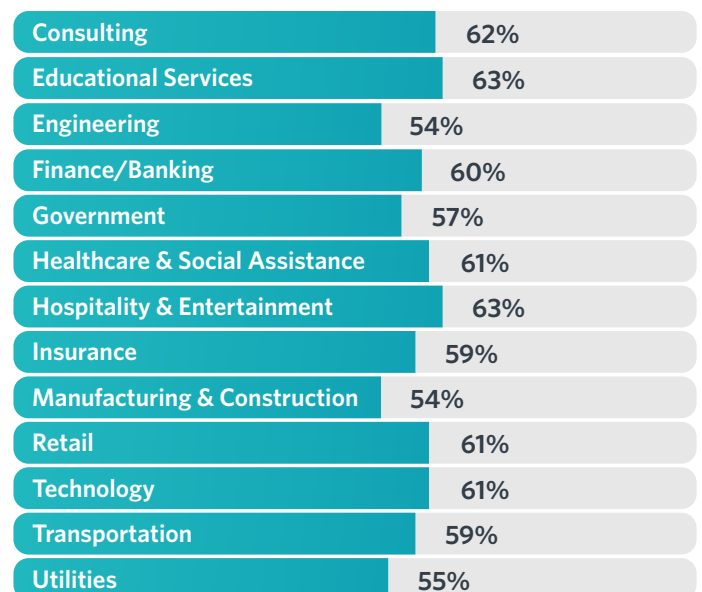


Figure 3

The high rate of reported poor mental health can also be explained by the demographics employed in these industries. As we know, gender has a substantial impact on the reporting of poor mental health, with women more likely to honestly answer questions about their mental health and emotional experiences. With 76% of all healthcare positions made up of women, these individuals are more likely to answer surveys honestly and more accurately represent mental health in their industry.²⁴

Meanwhile, according to national surveys, the construction industry had one of the highest reported rates of poor mental health but one of the lowest within Virgin Pulse data. It is essential to recognize the fact that Virgin Pulse survey data is inherently tied to a person's employer. While data is always anonymous and protected, a survey bias that stems from distrust is difficult to avoid. As previously discussed, older

generations are less likely to discuss mental health concerns at work or with coworkers, and men are less likely to discuss mental health. In fact, 91% of construction workers are men, and the average age of an individual employed in the construction industry is 13% older than that of the average healthcare worker.^{26, 27}

It is crucial to recognize that different industries have different hazardous psychological stressors. The individuals who make up these industries will react to these stressors—as well as to the care that is available to them—differently. With this in mind, industries that want to invest in the mental health of their employees must customize their communications to ensure they resonate with the demographic their workforce represents. Like all other aspects of wellbeing, mental health care is not one-size-fits-all for all individuals, demographics, and industries.





The Accessibility of Mental Health in America

Across the Virgin Pulse member population, 69% of international members report poor mental health, while 59% of members living in the United States report the same. Although we see a higher prevalence of self-reported mental health concerns among our international members, this observation is unlike that reported by worldwide surveys. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that the United States had notably high rates of depression and anxiety, with the second-highest prevalence of depression worldwide.²⁶ Research has also shown that the United States has the highest suicide rate among countries studied and the highest death rates caused by substance abuse disorders.²⁷ The prevalence of poor mental health and its devastating impact is far worse in the United States than in many similarly developed nations.

Part of this can potentially be explained by access to healthcare. According to research conducted by the Commonwealth Fund, one in six U.S. adults could not access or afford professional help when experiencing emotional distress.²⁹ This is likely due to the comparatively low capacity of the U.S. healthcare system to meet the emotional needs of its citizens. It's worth noting that the United States has fewer primary care teams with psychologists or other mental health providers on staff than many other countries included in the analysis. As a result, less than half of U.S. practitioners consider themselves well prepared to manage patients with mental health conditions.³⁰

According to the Commonwealth Fund:

“The U.S. has a smaller total supply of mental health workers, with 105 professionals per 100,000 people. Canada, Switzerland, and Australia have approximately twice that number of mental health workers.”²⁷

The United States is not well-equipped to meet the needs of its population struggling with poor mental health. In addition to staffing and training concerns, U.S. citizens also face a cost-related barrier to access that many similarly developed countries have eliminated. Many countries included in the analysis have eliminated financial barriers to first-level care, and some have also removed copayments for prescription drugs for individuals with mental health conditions.³⁰ Meanwhile, the United States' current healthcare system makes healthcare inaccessible for individuals, especially those struggling with financial stability.



Mental Health During COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on mental health around the world has been significant. In June 2020, 40% of U.S. adults indicated that they were struggling with mental health or substance use, nearly double what the rates were projected to be before the pandemic.²⁸ With job loss, housing instability, and food insecurity disproportionately hitting minority communities, the pandemic has most severely affected the mental health of marginalized populations.³²

This increase in poor mental health has also increased the use rates of urgent mental health services. Crisis intervention services report seeing substantial increases in volume and emergency room department visits related to mental health concerns and suicide risks increased after stay-at-home restrictions were lifted.³²

One positive outcome of the pandemic was the prioritization of mental health across the United States and the increasing awareness of the available mental health resources to the American public. The CDC, NIMH, and other agencies have all created new initiatives to increase awareness of their crisis helplines.³² Mental health care providers also quickly adapted to providing telehealth services.³² Even popular culture has gotten involved with the initiative to destigmatize conversations around mental health and drive awareness to services.

Businesses are doing their best to remove the stigma as well. To increase their employees' comfort discussing mental health within their work communities, 90% of CEOs report that they have taken action to support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees. Furthermore, 98% of CEOs agree that employee mental health and wellbeing will remain a priority even after the pandemic.²⁹



How Virgin Pulse Supports Mental Health

Virgin Pulse's Homebase for Health[®] approach unifies and simplifies the mental health and wellbeing journey for individuals. Our vision is to eliminate uncertainty by creating a familiar, trusted "home" where comprehensive data and solutions are synchronized. We make it easier for individuals to access verified content and seek help from credentialed experts.

By delivering a powerful experience that members enjoy engaging with daily, we can remove the complexity that exists today. Virgin Pulse offers various mental health and wellbeing tools and resources to meet our clients' and members' unique needs as part of our comprehensive, personalized digital health platform.

Coaching and Live Services

A strong support system is the foundation for good mental health. Accessible through VP Live, Virgin Pulse's High Availability Mental Health Coaching provides quick access to individualized mental health support with trained experts to help members cope with life's challenges.

Virgin Pulse has always had the talent, the presence, and the skills to support members with mental and emotional wellbeing, and we continuously enhance our approach to the high-touch aspect of our approach to holistic wellbeing. With mental health concerns on the rise, we invested in increasing

coach availability to better serve our clients and members, so we can continue to be right there with them every step of the way. Our live services and coaching features now allow members instant access to a scheduling service for same and next-day appointments with Anxiety and Depression Coaches. Additionally, unlimited in-platform coach messaging promotes ongoing, consistent member engagement between scheduled coach calls, amplifying the opportunity for members to connect to their dedicated health coach at any time.

Integrated mental health partners

To better meet the increasing needs of our clients, we added three behavioral health partners and one tobacco cessation partner to our [digital wellbeing ecosystem](#) in 2021. Our partners pull in specific point solutions and targeted condition solutions to further enhance the member behavioral health experience beyond what Virgin Pulse develops in-house. We're proud to say we have the largest global partner network on the market, and we continue to expand this network.

Virgin Pulse's growing partner ecosystem includes more than 20 partners addressing stress management, eight dedicated behavioral health partners, three tobacco cessation partners,

a dedicated global substance use disorder partner, and a chronic condition management partner supporting various mental health conditions. Finally, our [VP+ partner bundle](#) solution features [Whil](#), a global resilience, behavioral wellbeing, and performance partner offering more than 9,000 audio video sessions, resources, and tips. No matter how large our suite of partners grows, our Homebase for Health® will always be the single-entry point for all point solutions.



VP GO

According to a recent [Willis Towers Watson survey](#), 92% of employees reported some level of anxiety in 2020 due to the pandemic. As a mission-based company—driven by our mission of Changing Lives for Good®—we understand the importance of our unique opportunity to support our global members' mental and social health. [VP GO](#) is a personalized, turnkey solution that allows members to pick their device

and their areas of focus. Then, members are able to connect with others who are on a similar journey, including wellbeing challenges that improve mental health outcomes. Additionally, clients can launch organization-wide wellbeing challenges to connect further and engage their dispersed teams to promote social wellbeing and strengthen culture—no matter where their employees are.



Creating a Whole-Person Wellbeing Experience

Mental health is a critical piece of the larger wellbeing puzzle. As the lines between life at work and life outside of work continue to blur, organizations have a responsibility to support the holistic wellbeing of their workforce. After all, healthy, happy, energized employees are good for business.

Virgin Pulse is committed to simplifying the whole-person health and wellbeing experience for both clients and members. From mental health to physical, social, and financial wellbeing and everything in between, it's all available in one easy-to-navigate, highly personalized digital platform.

[Connect with a wellbeing expert](#) and discover how you can start building your Homebase for Health® today.

Learn more at virginpulse.com Find us on [facebook](#) | [twitter](#) | [linkedin](#)

About the Author

Gabrielle Hummel has been a Jr. Data Scientist on the Virgin Pulse Insights team since 2019. Since joining Virgin Pulse, she has led and collaborated on a variety of research projects and produced reports on topics such as Location and Wellbeing, Employee Satisfaction and Culture, and more. She has a background in data science, political analysis, and leadership studies.

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