



THE HIDDEN HOSPITALITY CRISIS: THE QUESTION OF THE MENTAL HEALTH OF OVERWORKED STAFF

Abstract

The global hospitality industry, while celebrated for service and experience, is facing a growing mental health crisis. Behind the smiles and seamless guest interactions, workers are grappling with burnout, job insecurity, financial stress, and a persistent stigma around mental health. With a majority of hospitality professionals reporting poor mental health and nearly half of all managers facing burnout, the cost of inaction is mounting, from soaring turnover rates and absenteeism to reputational risks and declining service quality. This article unpacks the hidden toll of poor mental health in hospitality, analyses regional efforts across the globe, and offers actionable strategies for industry leaders. It makes the case for placing mental well-being at the heart of hospitality's future.

In the busy world of hospitality, where everything seems warm and welcoming on the surface, a hidden crisis is brewing. Behind the friendly smiles and excellent service, many workers are struggling with rising stress and serious mental

health issues. Studies show that 85% of hospitality professionals have experienced poor mental health in the recent past. This unseen problem doesn't just hurt the people doing the work — it also puts the future and reputation of the entire

industry at risk.

What is fuelling the growing mental health crisis in the hospitality industry? And what can leaders do to address it?

The stress behind the smiles

The hospitality industry is widely known for its demanding work environment. Long hours, unpredictable shifts, and high-pressure situations are standard. These conditions have caused nearly two-thirds of UK hospitality workers to report feeling stressed at work, and many people say they struggle to unwind once their shifts are over. A culture of constant availability

is often made worse by managers reaching out through personal media. This blurs the line between work and personal life, giving employees little chance to fully disconnect and recharge.

The relentless demands of hospitality work have profound implications for mental health.

- A majority of hospitality workers have

experienced mental health issues during their careers, a significant increase from the previous years.

- Nearly half of U.S. hospitality frontline managers experience burnout due to job demands, with many reporting that their team members have also expressed burnout.

The precariousness problem: Casual work, insecure lives



The transient and casual nature of many hospitality roles adds another layer of stress. Globally, the hospitality sector is one of the largest employers of informal or casual labour, particularly in emerging economies.

In Asia, informal employment accounts for a lot of non-agricultural jobs, many of them in hospitality and tourism. In

Australia, some employees lack paid leave entitlements, a common measure of casual employment, with many identifying as casual workers. Within the tourism industry, a significant proportion of staff in accommodation, travel agencies, and tour operators work part-time.

Job insecurity and financial instability are major contributors to mental health

issues in the hospitality industry. When workers don't know if they'll be scheduled next week or if they'll earn enough to make rent, stress levels escalate. These conditions often force workers to take multiple jobs or longer shifts, exacerbating fatigue and burnout. This unrelenting pressure erodes well-being and performance.

The toll on mental health in the hospitality industry

Despite growing awareness, a stigma around mental health persists in workplaces, especially those rooted in high-performance, customer-facing cultures. Hospitality employees hesitate to speak up about their mental health concerns for fear of being seen as weak or unprofessional. Left unaddressed, anxiety

and stress in the hospitality industry can lead to chronic health issues, reduced job satisfaction, and higher attrition. The ramifications of neglecting mental health in the hospitality sector extend beyond individual employees. High stress levels and poor mental health contribute to increased staff turnover, with over

half of hospitality staff planning to leave their current job in the immediate future. This attrition not only incurs significant recruitment and training costs but also affects service quality and customer satisfaction, ultimately impacting the bottom line.

Global perspectives: A widespread concern

This crisis is not confined to a single region; it spans across continents, affecting workers across the globe. However, this rapid growth comes with mounting challenges: shortage of skilled workers, high employee turnover rates,

and rising concerns about burnout and job dissatisfaction. For an industry that depends on human interaction, emotional labour, and seamless service, the cost of widespread burnout is both operational and

reputational. And yet, many organisations lack the frameworks needed to offer meaningful support. Industry leaders need to invest in employee well-being and smarter workforce strategies.

Pathways to a mentally healthier workforce in hospitality and travel

Tackling the growing mental health crisis in the hospitality industry demands more than surface-level changes. It calls for a holistic, long-term strategy that blends employee well-being with smart business practices. Here's how organisations can create a healthier, more resilient workforce:



Implement comprehensive mental health support systems

Employers must make employee mental health a core priority by establishing structured support systems. This includes implementing Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) for confidential counselling, conducting regular manager check-ins to detect early signs of burnout, and training mental health first aiders to provide on-the-spot support and guidance.



Promote work-life balance through smarter scheduling

Adjusting work patterns to ensure reasonable hours, more predictable shifts, and consistent rest days, particularly weekends can dramatically reduce stress. Respecting boundaries by avoiding out-of-hours communications, such as work-related messages on personal phones or social media, is critical to preserving personal time and mental recovery.



Provide mental health training and awareness programmes

Training staff and management to recognise and address mental health issues helps break down stigma and builds a culture of support. Encouraging participation in mental health awareness sessions, resilience workshops, and peer-support programmes can make it easier for employees to speak up and seek help when needed.



Ensure job security and fair compensation

To address the casual and transient nature of hospitality jobs, employers should focus on creating more permanent roles with paid leave and benefits and ensure fair wages with predictable income to reduce financial anxiety and support long-term employee well-being.



Use technology and process improvements to reduce hospitality stress

Digital transformation and operational streamlining can ease the burden on hospitality staff. These solutions enable organisations to:

- Outsource complex loyalty program management, removing administrative pressure from frontline staff
- Leverage data analytics to better anticipate customer behaviour, reducing last-minute chaos and stress
- Automate repetitive tasks, freeing up employees to focus on service delivery



Recognise and reward staff contributions

Recognition doesn't always require grand gestures; small, consistent acknowledgements go a long way. Organisations can take inspiration from customer loyalty programmes and adapt similar models for internal use, celebrating milestones, exceptional service, or team achievements. This not only boosts morale but also reinforces a sense of purpose and belonging.

By combining thoughtful employee support with smart operational changes, the hospitality and travel industry can move from a model of burnout and high turnover to one of resilience, engagement, and long-term sustainability. Decision-makers must view mental health not as essential for their workforce and their brand's future.

The cost of inaction

Failing to address hospitality stress and mental health isn't just a human tragedy; it's a business risk. High turnover costs the industry billions annually in recruitment, onboarding, and lost productivity. Chronic absenteeism disrupts service delivery. And a damaged employer reputation makes it harder to attract talent in a competitive market.

With Gen Z and younger millennials placing increasing importance on mental health and purpose at work, businesses that ignore these issues risk falling behind, not just in workforce retention but in customer loyalty and brand trust.



Global shifts in hospitality mental health: Progress with gaps

Across the world, hospitality and travel sectors are beginning to respond to the mental health crisis with renewed focus, though progress remains uneven.



In APAC, countries like Singapore are taking proactive steps. AIA Singapore recently enhanced its corporate insurance benefits to include expanded mental health support for employees, promoting initiatives such as mental health days and digital wellness platforms.



In Europe, companies in the UK are leading the way with innovative work models. Trials of four-day workweeks and flexible shifts have shown promising results, with employees reporting better work-life balance, improved productivity, and greater job satisfaction.



In North America, large hospitality chains in Canada are integrating free therapy apps and expanding mental health coverage through employee benefits. Meanwhile, in the United States, grassroots efforts like the Southern Smoke Foundation are filling in gaps by offering free counselling and emotional support tailored to food and beverage professionals.

At the same time, advocacy groups such as Hospitality Action in the UK are pushing for broader industry reform, spotlighting the significantly high percentage of hospitality workers struggling with mental health issues in recent years. These regional efforts signal a growing awareness but also highlight the fragmented nature of change. Without consistent global standards and systemic commitment, mental health risks in hospitality will continue to persist beneath the surface.

Reimagining hospitality with mental health at the centre

The hospitality industry is built on human connection. But for that connection to be authentic and sustainable, the well-being of the people delivering the experience must come first. For decision-makers, now is the time

to act. Addressing mental health in hospitality can become a strategic advantage. By implementing smarter scheduling, fair employment practices, mental health support, and operational innovations, leaders can **transform the**

hospitality industry from the inside out. Because behind every smile at the front desk or dining table, there's a person who deserves to feel seen, supported, and mentally well.

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