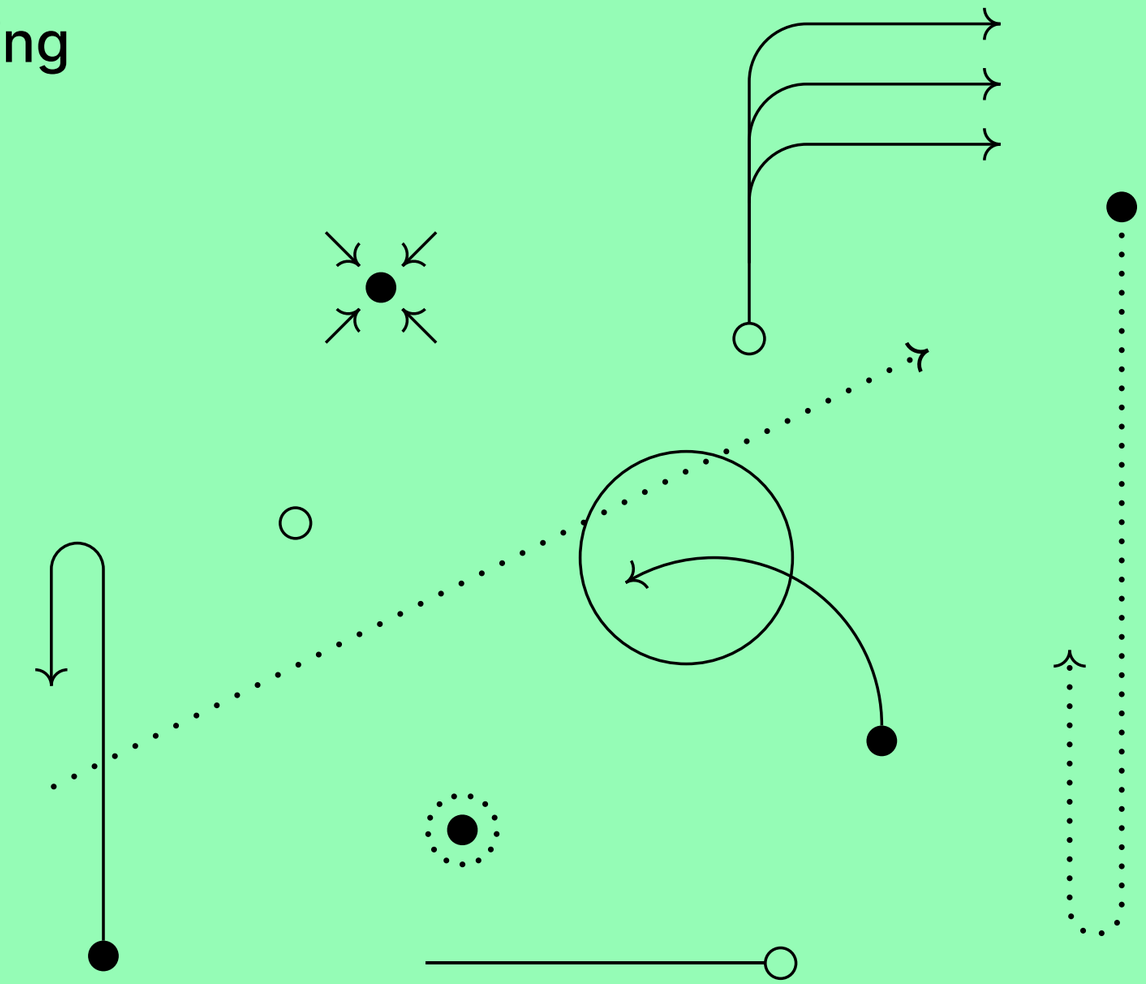
THE MENTAL HEALTH & PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOK

Tools & tactics to beat burnout and boost performance in advertising, media & marketing



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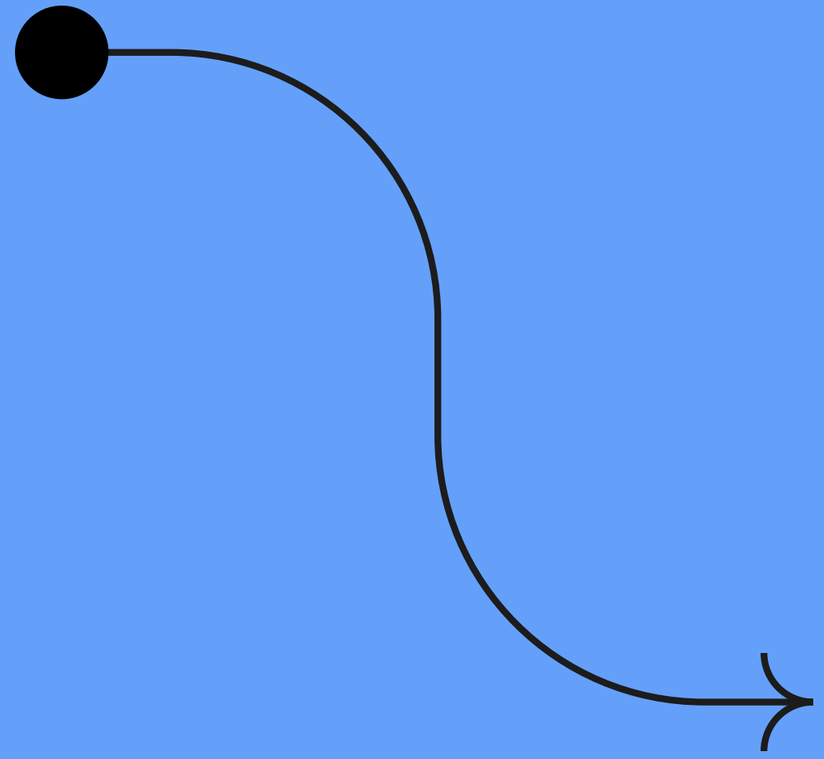

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USING THIS PLAYBOOK

WHO IS IT FOR

- Anyone navigating high-pressure in Advertising, Media, or Marketing
- Leaders: whether you have one or one thousand direct reports
- Emerging Talent: anyone who wants to support a teammate or lead change

WHAT YOU'LL GET

- **Self-assessment tool:** Spot signs early and move from 'Survive' to 'Thrive'
- **Checklist:** Know what "good" leadership looks like on mental health
- **Real-world examples:** Ideas and inspiration to apply for yourself and your team
- **Industry stories:** Feel less alone in the challenges you face

HOW TO USE IT

- Print it, scribble on it, refer back to it.
- This is not about being perfect. It's about progress.

WHY NOW

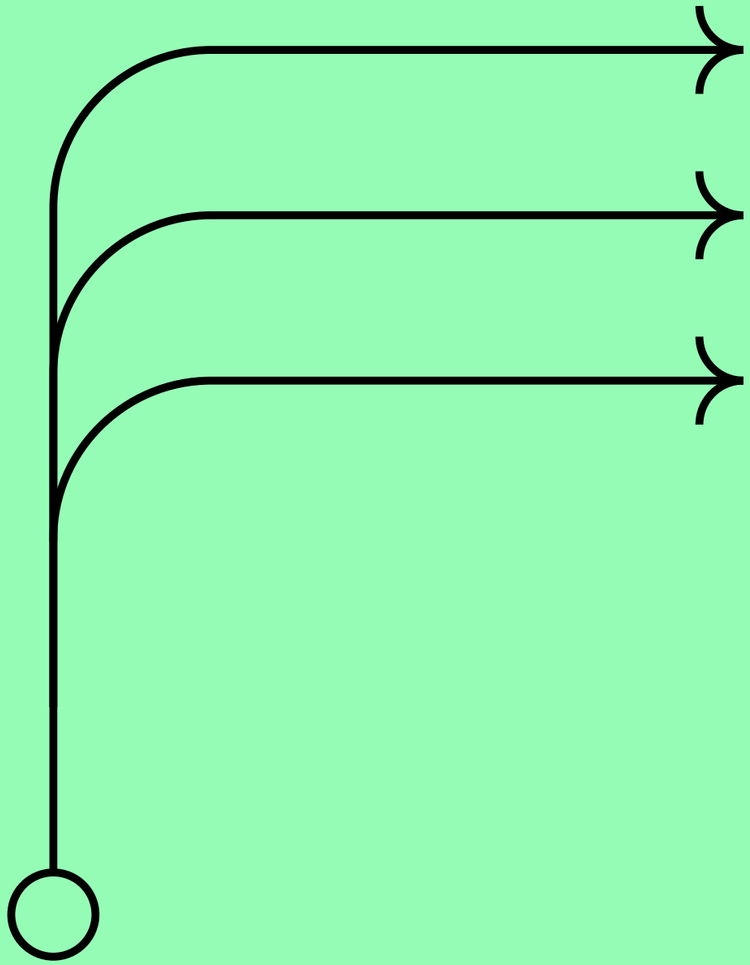
- 70% of professionals in the media, marketing and creative sectors say they have experienced symptoms of burnout in the past 12 months
- 78% of advertising, marketing, and PR professionals say their organisation should do more to support mental wellbeing, compared to a UK average of 49%
- 60% of comms and marketing professionals said that mental health is a bigger problem in the industry now, than two years ago
- Change, workload, and client demands are all increasing

WHO CONTRIBUTED

100+ professionals in advertising, media, and marketing across 40+ organisations and all levels (including 30 Line Managers, 25 Senior Leaders, and 15 HR or Learning professionals)

YOUR ROLE

MENTAL HEALTH IS A TEAM SPORT



YOUR ROLE

MENTAL HEALTH IS A TEAM SPORT

60% of marketing leaders are promoted without any formal training, and only 18% receive mental health training.

So, if you've ever felt underprepared or overwhelmed trying to support you or your team's wellbeing, you're not the problem. It can help to recognise that **mental health should never rest on one person's shoulders.** Not yours. Not your leader's. It's a team effort - and it works better when you don't go it alone. Tap into your HR, People, or Learning team. Learn from your peers. Share the load.

01 SELF-CARE

- Looking after yourself is leadership.
- Reflect: What behaviours are you role-modelling right now?

02 HUMAN CARE

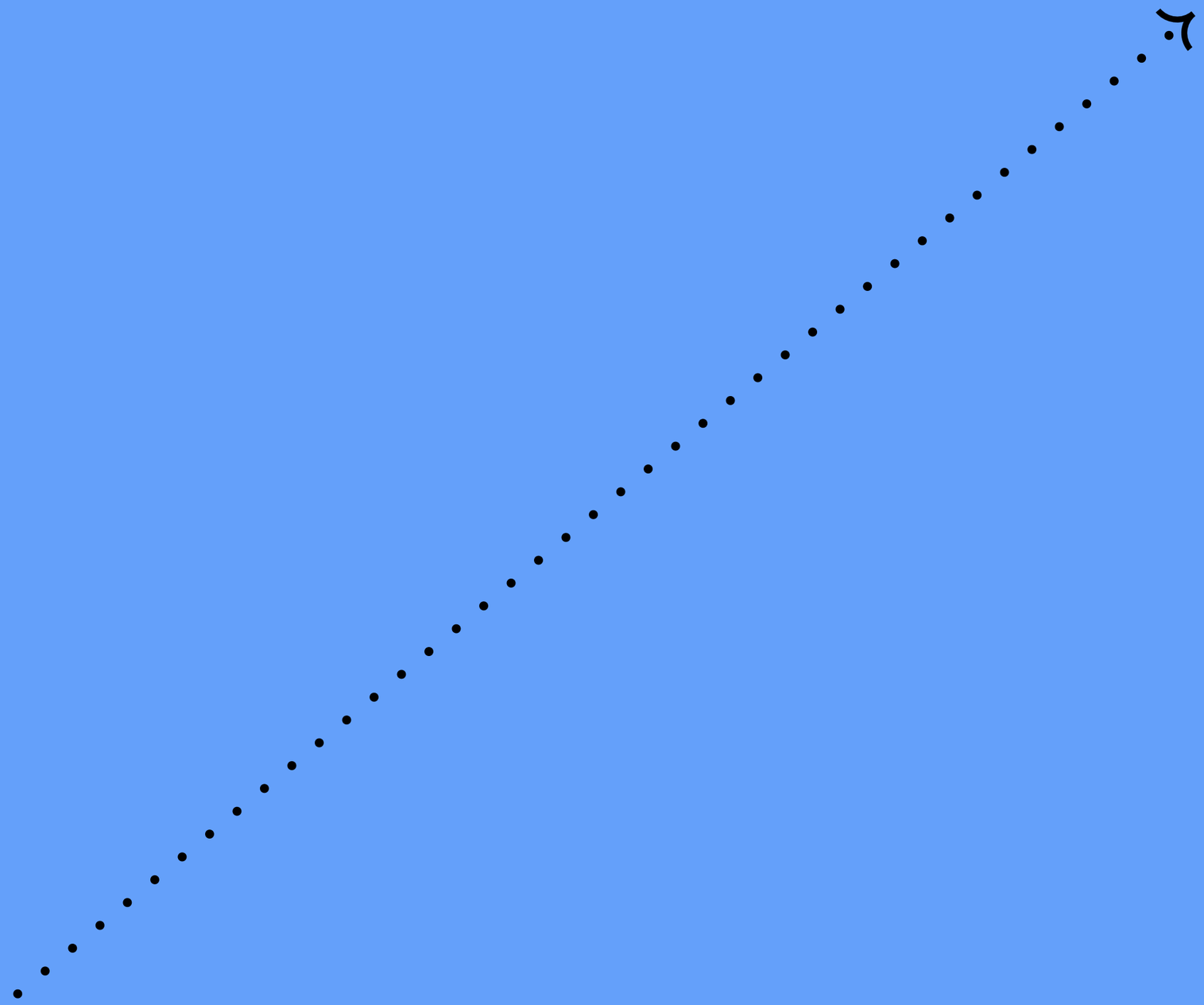
- Care out loud.
- You do not need to be a fixer. But you do need to show up.

03 DUTY OF CARE

- Remember: You are not a therapist - and no one expects you to be. But you can notice when something is not right and take it seriously.
- Always err on the side of caution.

INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

RECENT TREND



BURNOUT ISN'T A PERSONAL FAILURE - IT'S AN INDUSTRY ISSUE

58%

of marketers said they felt **overwhelmed** in the past 12 months

Marketing Week 2025

64%

of comms and marketing professionals have experienced extreme **stress of burnout** at work in the last 12 months, up from 51% in 2022

State of Us, 2025

64%

of media professionals say **pitching** negatively impacts their mental health

MediaSense, 2024

70%

of new business practitioners report their role becoming **more stressful** over the last 12 months

JFDI business barometer 2024

TALENT IS LEAVING THE INDUSTRY

42%

of pitch professionals say stress has made them consider changing jobs

The Great Pitch Company, 2024

26%

plan to leave their job within 12 months

All In, 2025

47%

were considering leaving the marketing industry due to stress or burnout in 2023

NABS, 2024

PRESSURE IS INCREASING

60%

say the intensity of their role - in-house and in agency - in terms of workload and pressure has increased over the last 12 months, up 13% vs 2022

State of Us, 2025

69%

feel that their work exacerbates pre-existing **mental health conditions**

State of Us, 2025

83%

of employees in advertising, marketing, and PR are concerned about **taking time off** if there's a high workload

IPA, 2024

42%

of those who experienced severe stress, anxiety or burnout at work, attributed this to '**too many demands** on my time' vs. 29% in 2022

State of Us, 2025

MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE

66%

of marketing professionals say their company is more reactive than proactive when handling mental health issues

State of Us, 2025

51%

say that while mental health is talked about lot within their company, more could be done to effectively support employees

State of Us, 2025

42%

of comms professionals who have experienced mental health challenges said their employer is doing the bare minimum to help employees with mental health problems

Marketing Week 2025

35%

feel unable to talk about mental health challenges at work

NABS, 2024

BUT THERE ARE POSITIVES TO BUILD ON

49%

of marketing professionals who experienced mental ill-health say they are likely to stay in a role because of mental health support they received

State of Us, 2025

59%

of industry professionals feel comfortable talking to their employer about taking time off for mental health difficulties not related to work, compared to 48% in 2022

State of Us, 2025

71%

of industry professionals their company's approach to mental health has improved over the last two years

State of Us, 2025

30%

receive mental health training at work vs. 15% UK average)

NABS, 2024

25%

more agencies now offer dedicated time off for staff involved in pitches compared to last year

State of Us, 2025

"Burnout isn't just a wellbeing issue - it's a business risk. Spot it too late, and it drains performance, creativity, and culture. Progressive organisations are moving away from the old 'rinse and replace' mentality. In a talent-led market, especially with Gen Z expecting more, culture is no longer a soft topic - it's a strategic edge."

Oli Richards
Chief Growth Officer,
Saatchi & Saatchi

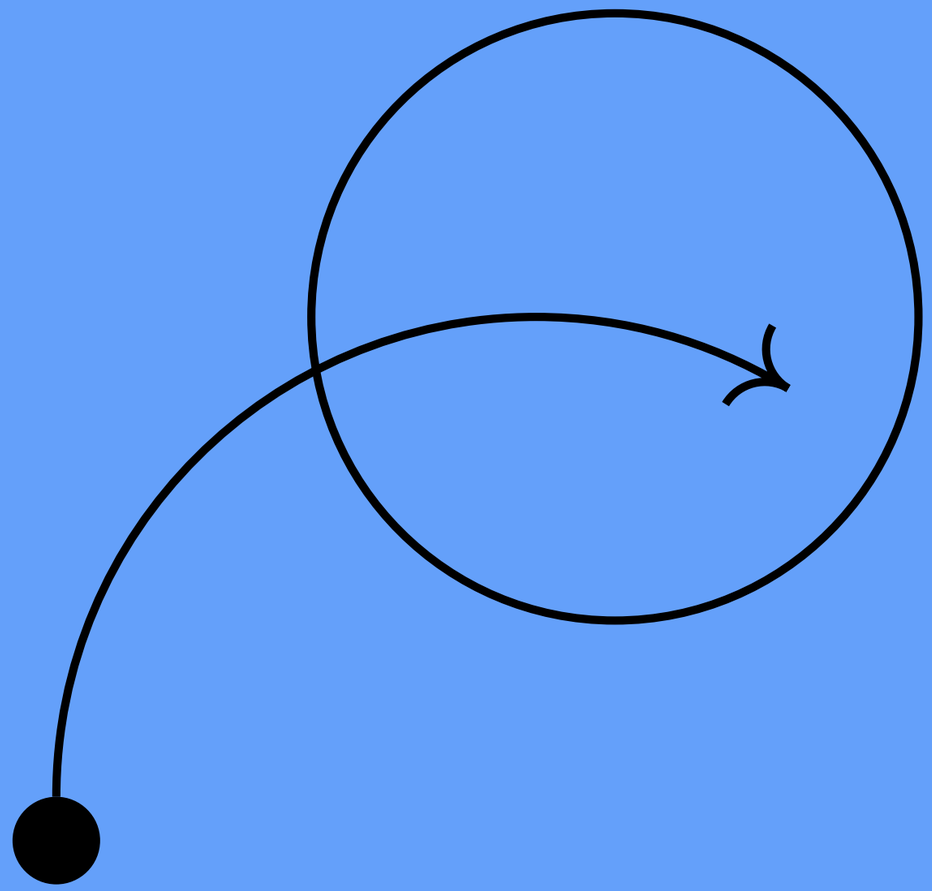
BURNOUT

"Burnout is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy."

Source: World Health Organization – ICD-11: Burn-out an occupational phenomenon

SELF-ASSESSMENT

WHERE ARE YOU (REALLY)?



SELF-ASSESSMENT

WHERE ARE YOU (REALLY)?

- 79% of marketing professionals say they are motivated to perform at their best (Marketing Week Career & Salary Survey, 2024).
- But in the wrong conditions, that same drive can take a toll on mental health.
- Burnout can creep up silently. It often builds from Stage one of Freudenburgers' 12-stages of burnout: "a compulsion to prove oneself."
- The Survive–Thrive framework helps you take stock.

WHERE ARE YOU RIGHT NOW?
AND WHAT ABOUT YOUR TEAM?

01 SURVIVING

Burnt out, ready to leave

- I am working 60+ hour weeks
- I am exhausted, cynical, and running on empty
- I feel detached from teammates
- Staff turnover is through the roof
- Nobody feels safe speaking up

02 STRUGGLING

Delivering, but barely

- There is no room to push back
- I feel guilty for switching off
- Back-to-back pitches and meetings are BAU
- People are burning out but staying quiet
- Mental health is not being discussed - let alone protected

03 COPING

Doing okay, but fragile

- We are reactive and stretched
- Some leaders are great, but some don't care
- There's an over-reliance on HR for mental health and wellbeing
- We are holding on

04 DOING WELL

Going strong, with room to improve

- Scope creep is challenged
- Leaders model healthy boundaries
- People stay because the culture works for them
- Most of the team log off - and switch off

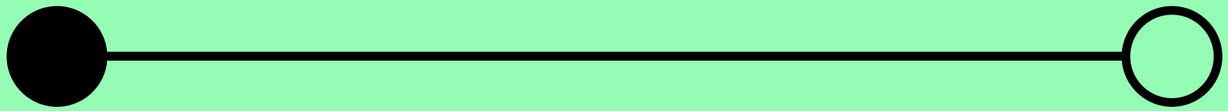
05 THRIVING

High (sustainable) performance

- Burnout does not exist
- People are learning, progressing, and working with purpose
- There's headroom - time to coach, build culture, and think ahead

SURVIVE TO THRIVE

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

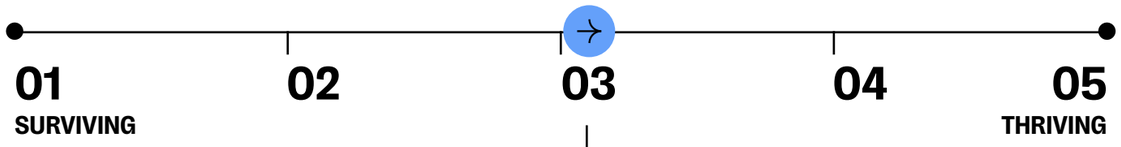


SURVIVE TO THRIVE

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

We surveyed 100+ professionals across advertising, media, and marketing to uncover:

- How close the industry is to burnout
- The biggest blockers to better mental health
- Real-world examples of leaders beating burnout



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INDUSTRY AVERAGE

Right now, I would describe myself as...

27% Surviving

38% Neutral

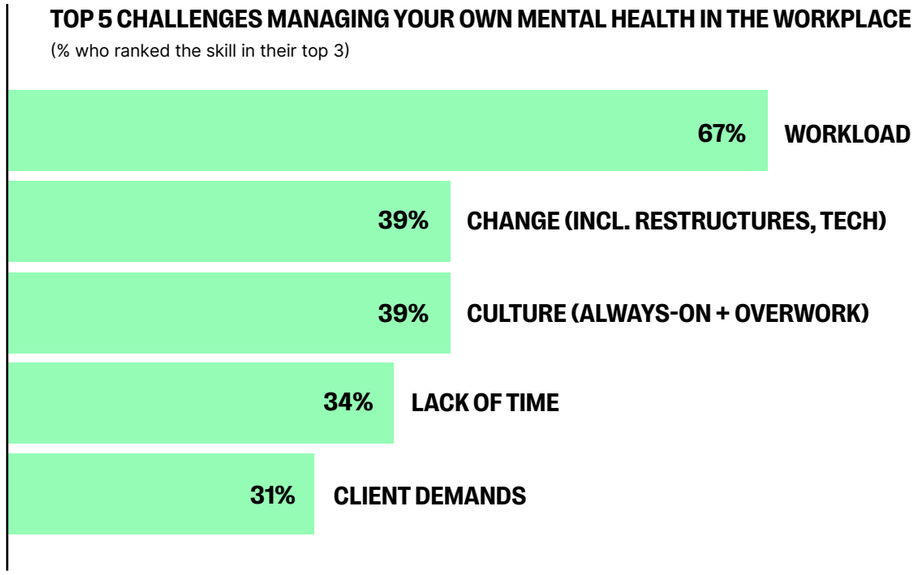
35% Thriving

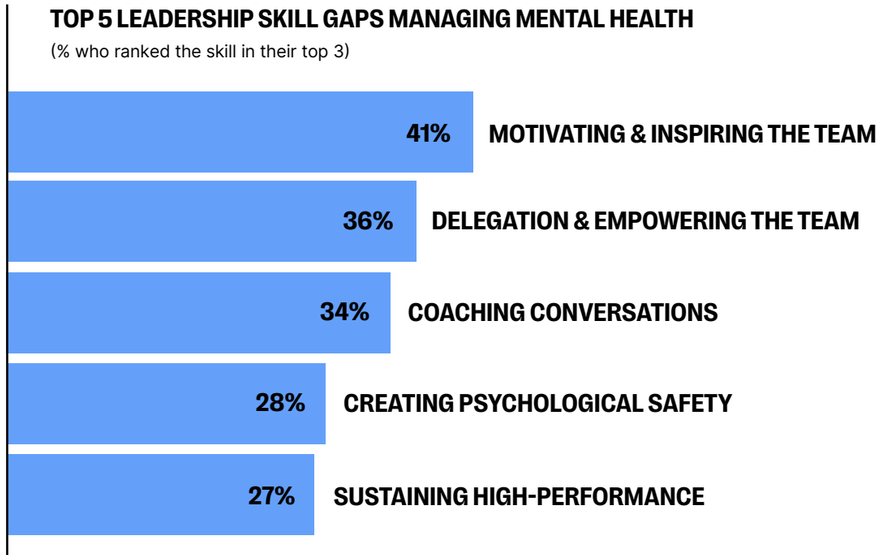
Right now, I would describe my team as...

20% Surviving

50% Neutral

30% Thriving





100 INSIGHTS

WHAT GREAT MANAGERS DO DIFFERENTLY

We asked 100+ professionals in advertising, marketing, and media:

> **WHAT'S ONE THING YOUR MANAGER HAS DONE TO SUPPORT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?**

Here are the insights that stood out.
Borrow them. Adapt them. Share them.

01 CREATE TRUST & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Great managers: create an environment where teammates can speak up without fear, making meaningful conversations about mental health possible.

"Creating a space for open and honest feedback loops. I've felt it both ways – that I can bring up any issues or concerns, and that I will get **honest and constructive** feedback in return."

Line Manager, In-House Marketing

"My current manager is honest about their mental health and how they are coping, rather than putting a brave face on it and making me feel like it's a 'me' problem. I need a manager who can support me to decompress and get things off my chest **without judgement or advice.** The impact is that I don't feel burdened and my thinking outside of work is less consumed by work issues."

Line Manager, In-House Marketing

"Been supportive and openly available. This encouraged me to be open and seek support."

Senior Leader, Media

"Created an open environment and emotional safety to ensure I never feel self-conscious about sharing struggles, and the security to know this will not impact any performance reviews or promotions."

Media Professional

"When I experienced a family grievance, my manager showed exceptional compassion. They encouraged me to take the time I needed without pressure to be 'back to normal' straight away. It helped me process things properly and return feeling grounded and valued. It **strengthened my trust** in their leadership and helped me perform at my best."

Advertising Professional

"They have created a safe space where **open communication** about how I feel is welcomed and encouraged. I feel more than comfortable going to them when I feel overwhelmed or I'm struggling, and I know that when I come out of that conversation I feel heard and a plan will be in motion."

Manager, Media

"Is very open about when they are taking time to look after their kids, do some life admin, or just take a few hours away from the computer. It shows **it's okay** to do this sort of thing and that nobody is sitting at their laptop 24/7."

Senior Leader, Marketing

"Conveys a sense that they **genuinely have my back** and are willing to support me, even if it's inconvenient for them (vs just when it's easy). For example, offering to cover me themselves when I have a day off booked - even if it means increasing their own workload."

Line Manager, Advertising

"A few weeks ago, I was anxious about something at home and said I was struggling to hold it together at work. Without missing a beat, he told me to take the afternoon off. It helped just having a couple of hours off work and home responsibilities."

Senior Leader, Advertising

3 ACTIONS TO TRY

- **Role-model vulnerability** (e.g. share a time you struggled or felt over-capacity and how you learnt to deal with it)
- **Care out loud** (e.g. encourage teammates to take time off when they need it, tell them you care)
- **Normalise mental health** (e.g. remind people that it's okay to not be okay, and that asking for support is a strength)

02 SPOT THE SIGNS AND SIGNPOST TO SUPPORT

Great managers: feel confident spotting early signs someone is struggling, and know when and where to signpost to support.

"The company has a **mental health service** available to everyone called 'Spill.' You get two free sessions paid for by the company each year. What I love is that you're signed up automatically. The first two are covered, and the next are easy to book as you're already set up to go in times of crisis."

HR, Learning, or P&C Leader, Media

"I've had a tricky year managing a team member with severe mental health challenges. As it got more difficult, my manager was great at giving me space to decompress. I've also had **access to EAP services** if I wanted to use them."

Senior Leader, Marketing

"I am very lucky to have a great manager who supported me to access counselling through our employee assistance programme. Talking therapy has helped me feel grounded and better able to cope with change."

Marketing Professional

"My manager recommended I use NABS when I was dealing with anxiety. It was hugely beneficial – I was able to get **talking therapy sessions** free of charge. It helped me see things from a different perspective and gave me my confidence back."

Manager, Advertising

"When a friend passed away this year, my line manager was incredibly supportive. I was given enough time off to properly grieve and was pointed in the direction of company **mental health resources** on my return. It was incredibly encouraging to know I had this support when needed."

Media Professional

"My workload led to a recurring state of panic that I wasn't performing as well as I should. I raised it with my manager, and they helped lighten the load, shared their own experiences with exhaustion and how they manage it, and supported me while I got professional help – including medication and therapy."

Advertising Professional

WHAT MATTERS MOST

These three words came up most often in comments about great managers:	% OF RESPONSES:
CHECK-IN	21%
SUPPORTIVE	20%
WORKLOAD	17%

3 ACTIONS TO TRY

- Know the difference between stress, and burnout
- Get familiar with your organisations' mental health resources and mental health protocols
- Call the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and find out what they offer

03 CHECK-IN AND HAVE OPEN CONVERSATIONS

Great managers: check in regularly, listen with empathy, and hold conversations where people feel heard and supported.

"Spoken to me genuinely about my personal life in a non-intrusive way – spotting I enjoy certain workout classes or artists and showing interest and enthusiasm beyond my work."

Advertising Professional

"I love that, no matter how busy we are, my manager takes time every 2–3 weeks to take me out for lunch or coffee to chat about how things are going, what I'd like to improve on, what I'm finding difficult, etc. She really lets me talk everything out with no judgement. I feel like it's a safe space to be honest and work towards improving my work environment."

Media Professional

"Basically, just listening! It made a whole difference."

Line Manager, Marketing

"Put in a one-to-one weekly to check in and give the opportunity to raise anything – even though he's not involved in my day-to-day."

Media Professional

"I have a **weekly meeting** with my manager which always starts with a check-in on how I am – unrelated to the role or work – just a quick check-in so that if anything is going on, or I'm feeling overwhelmed, I have an opportunity to share it. Additionally, they check in on my workload to make sure I'm not taking on more than I need to."

Marketing Professional

"Regular, honest conversations – not solely focused on performance and targets, but simple questions around how I'm feeling, how I'm coping, how full my resilience tank is, and importantly, what they can do to **help or support me**... Simple stuff, and my mentor is brilliant at it."

HR Leader, Advertising

"Deadlines are deadlines. The brief is the brief. Whilst we're not saving lives, ads are very public, so there can be real pressure. Add to that the prestige and client demands, and it's easy to find yourself working 60-hour weeks. After my own experience with burnout, I changed jobs. Now, as a leader, I put informal check-ins with my team in the diary."

Simon Schwarz,
Account Director, AML Group

"They've always demonstrated a great deal of **emotional intelligence** and understanding, and regularly check in on how I feel about my work-life balance. It's created an environment where I can be really honest about how I'm managing stress and workload."

Media Professional

"We have weekly check-ins, and they also **tailor the conversations to me.** For example, it might sound silly, but after learning that I like crystals, they bought me some they saw on a work trip – ones meant to bring good energy and calm. It made me feel really seen and understood."

Line Manager, Advertising

3 ACTIONS TO TRY

- Ask-open ended questions (e.g. "How long have you been feeling this way?")
- Listen non-judgementally (and don't be afraid of silence)
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality where appropriate

04 EMBED MENTAL HEALTH AND FLEXIBLE WAYS OF WORKING

Great managers: empower people to set boundaries, manage energy, and work in ways that make mental health and performance part of the everyday.

"Understands work/life balance – and not just the usual stuff like school pick-ups. It's the other inconveniences life throws at us too: appointments, school events, trips to the vet! My manager fully **trusts** what I do and my limitations - knowing that I'll always work my hardest, but I need flexibility."

HR Leader, Media

"Listens to the concerns or problems at hand, and provides the **space and flexibility** needed to step back. Will stand up for the team when needed. Gives me the confidence to perform and deliver."

Patrick Harding,
Business Director, Sport Five

"Trusts me to manage my own time, which has given me flexibility to deal with responsibilities as a carer while still performing at work. It's also made me a loyal employee."

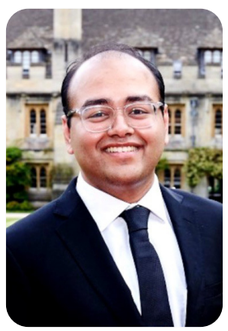
HR Leader, Advertising

"Prioritisation of workload and help with workload. Recognising that I wasn't coping and helping me shape my working days through organisation, prioritisation, and daily check-ins. Plus, leading on projects to reduce workload."

Manager, Advertising

"My team actively take work off me and encourage me to take holidays. Knowing there's a team fully on board, willing to share the **pressure** and initiate new ideas and ways of working that improve the business, is a huge relief."

Neil Henderson, CEO, St Luke's



"Giving me flexibility. It's really important to be flexible and adaptable at work – with things like working hours, making mistakes, and more. It takes the stress down a notch."

Amitesh Das,
Line Manager, Advertising & Account Director, EssenceMediacom UK

"My line manager was very supportive while I was going through fertility treatment. They were flexible with appointments and understood when I said I couldn't cope with working on a pitch. They didn't ask too many questions - just gave me **space and trusted me** to do my job on my own terms and timeline. That enabled me to keep working, which I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise, and it took the pressure off when I needed it most."

Senior Leader, Advertising

3 ACTIONS TO TRY

- Build wellbeing communication into the day-to-day (e.g. start weekly meetings with a check-in, complete Wellness Action Plans)
- Empower teammates to choose how, when and where they get things done.
- Agree, and stick to, healthy boundaries (e.g. if agency-side, work with clients to sign up to the Positive Pitch Pledge)

05 SUSTAIN (HUMAN FIRST) PERFORMANCE

Great managers: prioritise people over perfection, enabling sustainable high performance through empathy, encouragement, and care.

"Pulled me aside before a big meeting and told me there was no way for me to fail – that he had full confidence in me and I should **relax and be myself**"

Senior Leader, Advertising

"We have a 'home life comes first' attitude. If anything occurs at home that impacts work, we're encouraged to look after ourselves first."

Advertising Professional

"My manager takes the time to have genuine conversations about life with me. It's really helpful, as it acknowledges that we're all human and that life's ups and downs can affect how we show up at work."

Advertising Professional

"Moved his meetings to come and support me in a big pitch. It meant a great deal and made me **feel supported**."

Media Professional

"Not my manager, but someone up another level - she ran through her career path when she took over the department. She talked about her own fears, setbacks (even being fired once), leadership style, and priorities (her family comes first). It was **inspiring and reassuring** to hear all that."

Line Manager, In-House Marketing

"When I joined, I scheduled skip-level meetings every 1–3 months. It stops me being the 'scary boss' and builds genuine **connection**. Nothing's off limits. I often come away with more insight than I share."

Anna Forbes,
Regional Vice-President, DoubleVerify

3 ACTIONS TO TRY

- Reward role-modelling (e.g. celebrate the people who set boundaries, not just those who power through.
- Focus on what's strong (e.g. share strength-based compliments)
- Play the long game (e.g. adopt a 'corporate athlete' mindset, make time for recovery and growth)

WHAT NOT TO DO:

GREAT MANAGERS AVOID THESE COMMON PITFALLS

Great managers know that even well-meaning actions can miss the mark, and stay curious about the impact they have on others.

"As the senior team, I think we often feel pressure to be the positive, consistent, in-control ones - and so we don't always have the time or tools to give or receive the support we need ourselves. I've seen and felt the **negative impact of this pressure** in the last few years. There's always a need to find solutions and project positivity to clients and our team, without recognising the need to look after our own mental health too."

Senior Leader, Advertising

"Been critical of completed work, even when the brief was incomplete or **poorly communicated**."

Senior Leader, Marketing

"My manager doesn't support my mental health – she **criticises**. She has no leadership experience or skills and is there purely on creative merit. She thinks a leader's role is to be the best in the team, rather than getting the best out of the team. Her EQ is lower than low."

Senior Leader, Advertising

"A few hours before our festive party, our team lead asked a new 22-year-old Account Executive to run a report. She had never done it before, but was told she couldn't join the party until it was done. While everyone was upstairs enjoying themselves, she was downstairs struggling. It was **brutal**. They left six months later."

Account Manager, Media

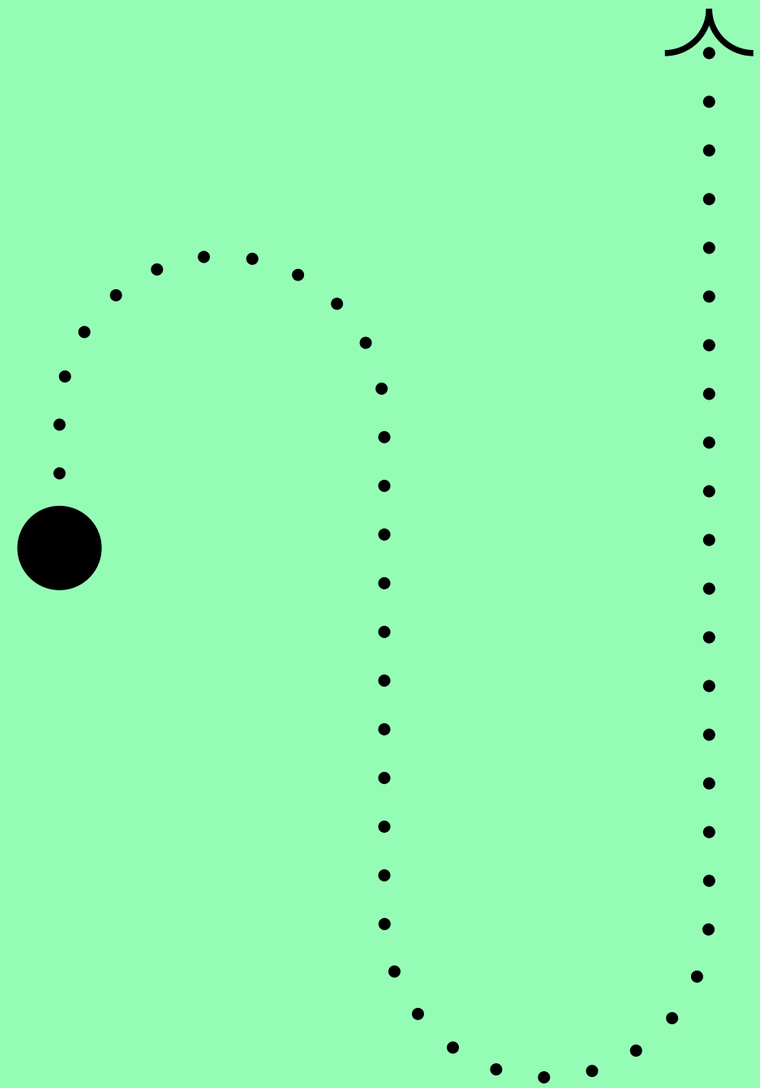
"She's tried to help by making it clear that, even though she responds to texts and emails after 7pm - and is a self-diagnosed but likely accurate **workaholic** - there's no expectation for the rest of us to do the same. Trouble is, it's simply not true. People who are responsive out of hours get more praise and more promotions."

Senior Leader, Advertising

- **Comparing, fixing, and problem-solving** (e.g. using words like "at least" or offering advice instead of listening)
- **Being over-reliant on HR** (e.g. not knowing what mental health resources are available)
- **Focusing on tasks before people** (e.g. only ever talking about work, checking the phone or laptop mid-conversation)

WHAT ‘GOOD’ LOOKS LIKE

HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP?



WHAT ‘GOOD’ LOOKS LIKE

HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP?

The top two things creative professionals want from their workplace are:

- **Empathetic, educated leaders** - 69% say it’s absolutely essential
- **Leaders who lead by example** - 64% say the same

So - what does that look like?

The five below are **not exhaustive**, but they’re a strong starting point to help you reflect, benchmark yourself, and identify where to focus next.

SELF-ASSESSMENT: HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP?

Score each from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree):

01 I create trust and psychological safety with my teammates

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

02 I feel confident spotting the signs of stress and burnout - and where to signpost for support

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

03 I feel confident checking-in with my teammates and navigating mental health conversations

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

04 I embed mental health and flexibility into how we work

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

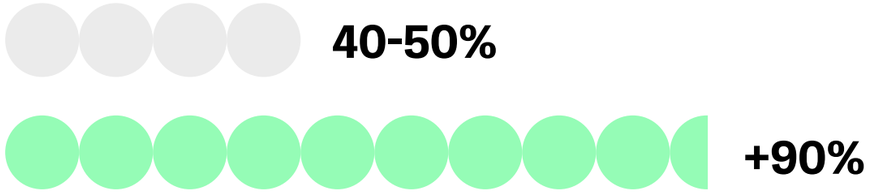
05 I help sustain team performance in a human-first way

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

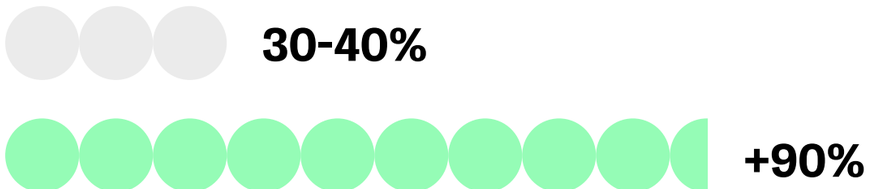
WHAT ‘GOOD’ LOOKS LIKE

HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP?

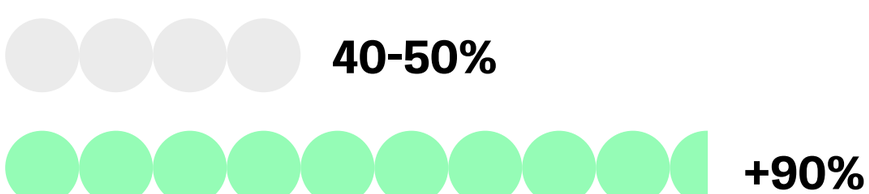
I know how to check in effectively with my teammates



I know how to signpost to the right support when it’s needed



I can spot early signs of stress or burnout in others



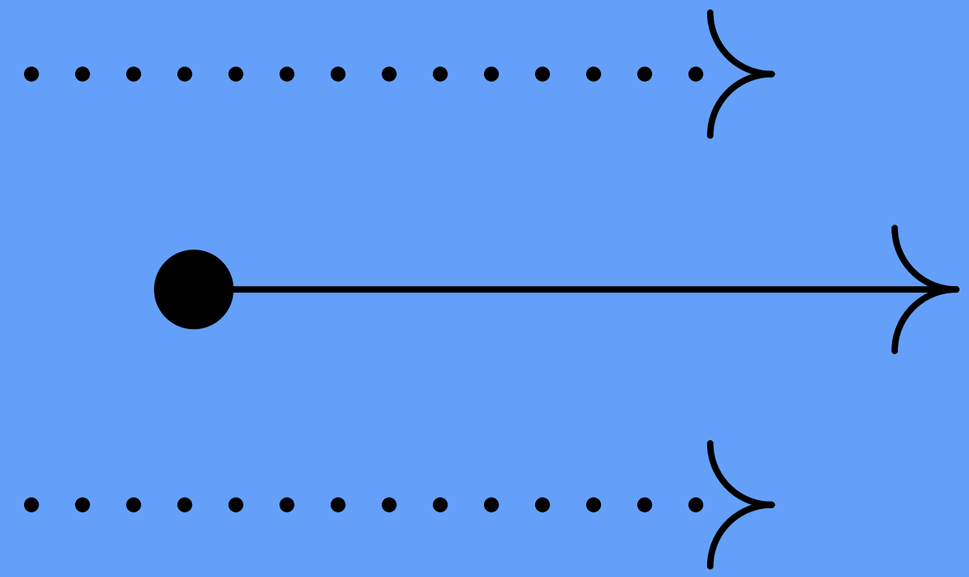
KEY

BEFORE INNERFIT

AFTER INNERFIT

LEAD THE CHANGE

YOUR ACTION PLAN



LEAD THE CHANGE

YOUR ACTION PLAN

YOU'VE READ THE PLAYBOOK. NOW LET'S TURN INSIGHT INTO ACTION.

Change is Inevitable - But Burnout is Not

- Over half of marketing teams, and 70% of large businesses, restructured in the past 12 months (Marketing Week).
- 47% of comms and marketing professionals say new technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) have increased their stress levels (State of Us 2025).
- Human Skills (like empathy, active listening, self-awareness) will be increasingly important by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025).
- These skills can be learnt. 70% and 66% of marketing professionals agree that training on how to manage their own mental health and how to support others, respectively, is beneficial.

ACTION PLAN

QUESTION 01

What is one action I could take this week to support my own mental health & performance? (How & when will I make it happen?)

QUESTION 02

What is one action I could take this week to support my team? (How & when will I make it happen?)

QUESTION 03

What impact will this have (for me and/or my team) if I make it happen?

BONUS ACTIONS

NEXT STEPS

- **Pass It On** - Know someone who needs this? Share it.
- **Keep Learning** - explore the Innerfit website for more resources
- **Get In Touch** - Want to see what this could look like for your team?

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FIND OUT MORE

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