

Bupa  
Global

Executive  
Wellbeing Index



**Self-medication during COVID**

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# UK focus:

## UK leaders self-medicating to cope with COVID pressure

### OVERVIEW

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, health concerns continue to be front of mind for many. Besides dealing with the virus itself, reduced freedoms, economic concerns and long periods of being at home have taken a toll on our collective mental health. And with many countries now experiencing a second wave of the pandemic, this is likely to be exacerbated even further.

Mental health issues do not distinguish by wealth or rank, and according to Bupa Global's recent **Executive Wellbeing Index**, eight in 10 (78%) UK business leaders and high net worth individuals (HNWIs) have experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, reporting symptoms such as lack of energy, fatigue, low moods, anxiety, depression and even burnout.

However, rather than seeking medical support or confiding in friends and family, Bupa Global's latest research reveals that the majority (64%) have turned to other potentially unhealthy coping mechanisms. In this next instalment of the Executive Wellbeing Index, we look at how stigmas are still preventing many from speaking out, and in countries such as the UK, the stress of the pandemic has uncovered a prevalence in 'self-medication' with alcohol and substances, as well as potentially addictive hobbies such as gambling and shopping.

#### What is self-medication?

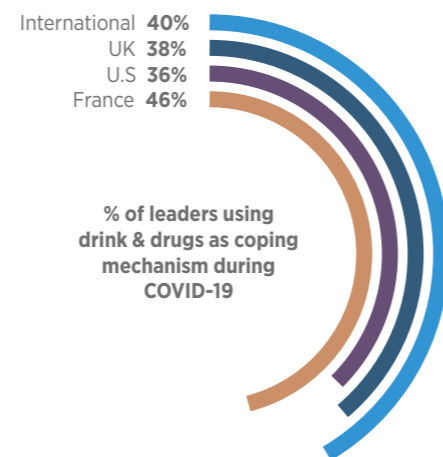
'Self-medication' refers to the practice of self-administering a substance or any external influence to help alleviate a physical or mental health condition, often without medical advice or prescription.

Studies show that people do tend to drink and self-medicate more during major disasters and crises<sup>1</sup>, while The Royal College of Psychiatrists has warned that the number of people in the UK at risk of alcohol addiction has jumped from 4.8 to 8.5 million during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Our research suggests business leaders and high net worth individuals may be at risk with two in five (38%) using alcohol and drugs to alleviate their poor mental health. For many this may have started as a simple quick-fix, but for others an increase in dependency risks becoming a much more serious issue - to both physical and mental health.

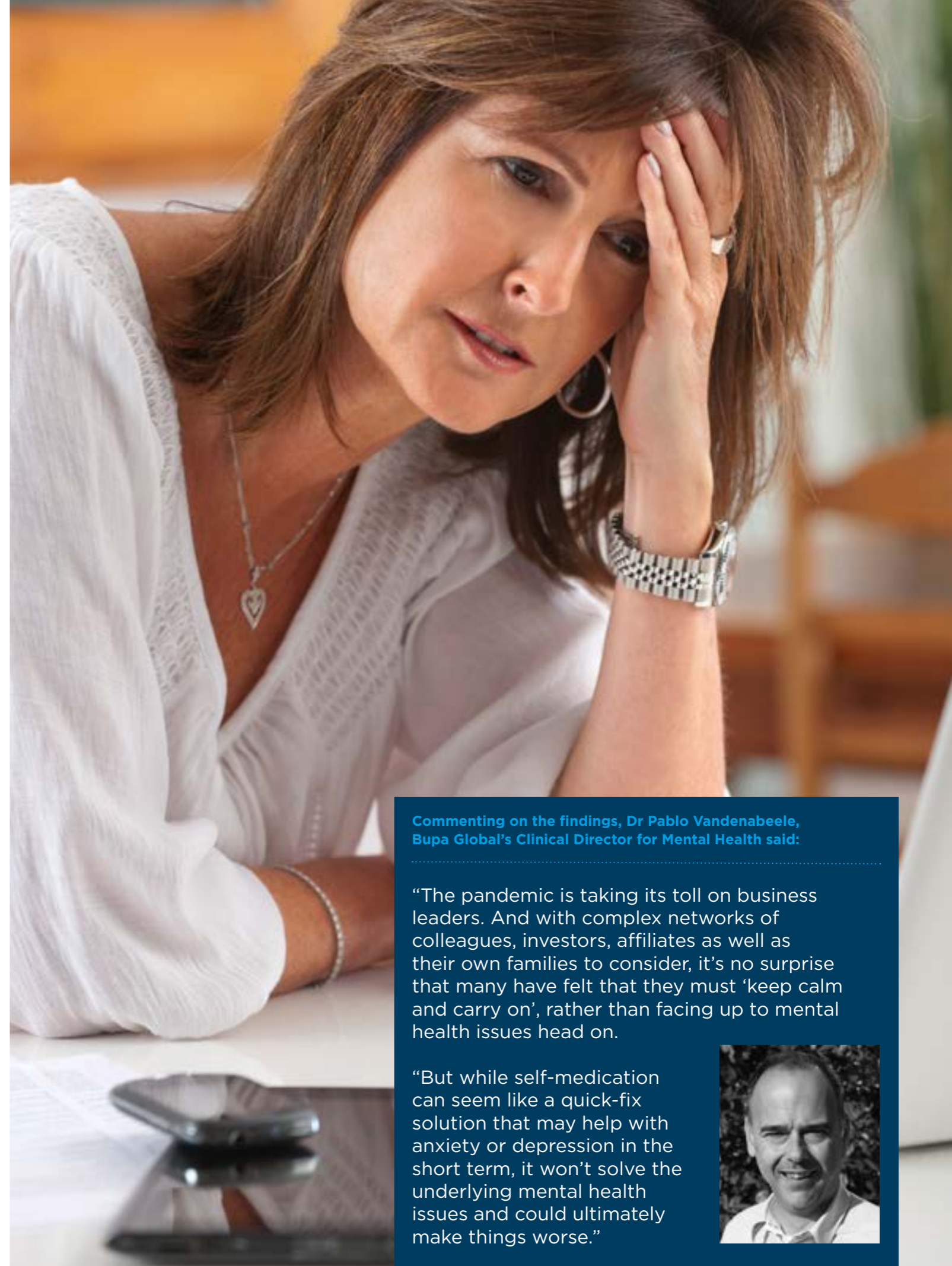
As the pandemic evolves and with the future uncertain, it is important that individuals who are feeling the pressure start taking action now to address the underlying issues, to help protect against immediate and longer-term impacts on their mental and physical health. As well as protecting their business.

Here, Bupa Global's experts and partners explore the findings of the Executive Wellbeing Index and provide advice on addressing mental health concerns; how to identify when a coping mechanism is becoming an addiction; and when and where to seek help.



1. de Goeij MC, Suhrcke M, Toffolutti V, van de Mheen D, Schoenmakers TM, Kunst AE. How economic crises affect alcohol consumption and alcohol-related health problems: a realist systematic review. *Soc Sci Med*. 2015 Apr;131:131-46. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.02.025. Epub 2015 Feb 18. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25771482/>

2. Royal College of Psychiatrists, September 2020: Royal College of Psychiatrists, September 2020



Commenting on the findings, Dr Pablo Vandenabeele, Bupa Global's Clinical Director for Mental Health said:

"The pandemic is taking its toll on business leaders. And with complex networks of colleagues, investors, affiliates as well as their own families to consider, it's no surprise that many have felt that they must 'keep calm and carry on', rather than facing up to mental health issues head on.

"But while self-medication can seem like a quick-fix solution that may help with anxiety or depression in the short term, it won't solve the underlying mental health issues and could ultimately make things worse."



## KEY FINDINGS

- 64% of UK board executives who have experienced mental ill-health during the pandemic have turned to potentially unhealthy coping mechanisms to 'self-medicate' these issues including alcohol, recreational or over the counter drugs, cigarettes or vaping, excessive exercise, over or under eating, shopping and gambling
- 38% are using alcohol or substances to help them cope with poor mental health during the pandemic, the second highest country in the international research behind France (46%)
- 34% are turning to shopping and spending, second after the UAE (49%) and twice the number in France and the U.S.<sup>3</sup> (both 17%)
- 16% use gambling to cope – the highest in the research, ahead of the U.S. (9%) and France (10%)
- 32% of UK board executives have delayed seeking help due to the pandemic
- And stigmas are holding them back; 42% believe that it would damage their reputation to speak out – socially and professionally – higher than in France (33%) and three times the number of HNWIs in the U.S. (14%)
- Only one in four (27%) have spoken to a medical professional
- 36% admit they can't talk to anyone about their mental health problems so self-medicate instead, compared to 43% in France and 42% internationally

## SEEKING HELP

Individuals who are feeling unable to cope with the levels of stress and anxiety that they're experiencing, must seek professional help as soon as possible either by approaching their GP or healthcare provider.

Dr Vandenabeele says: "Definitely seek help if you feel that it is becoming a problem and impacting on other aspects of your life. We know that stigmas and uncertainty around mental health can lead to delays in treatment, but early diagnosis and treatment improves outcomes.

"Although many people may feel like now is not the time to speak up on mental health with so many other pressing issues at hand, I'd urge people to seek help sooner rather than later."

## ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCES: WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO STOP

While alcohol and substances initially relax the body by releasing chemicals in the brain that block feelings of anxiety, the impact on mental health and wellbeing can be much longer term.

"The use of many of these substances can lead to problems in their own right, such as dependency – either physical or psychological," Dr Vandenabeele says. "Plus, they can worsen a person's mental health, for example alcohol is a mood depressant and different drugs can induce psychosis or mood disturbance."

"Furthermore, the acute intoxication with substances can also increase impulsivity and thereby increase risks of behavioural disturbance, self-harm, or suicide; factors or risk that may already have been heightened due to the psychiatric difficulties."

## WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR?

Dr Pablo Vandenabeele says: "It can be difficult to spot the signs that someone is self-medicating their mental health with drugs or alcohol, but I'd recommend seeking medical help either through your GP or health insurer if you notice that you or a loved one is starting to show signs". Signs could include:

- Increased reliance on drugs or alcohol to help deal with stressors such as giving work presentations, or making big business or financial decisions
- A heightened sense of anticipation – for example if you can't stop thinking about the drink you're expecting to have later that day, or if you can't go a day without drinking or taking a particular substance
- In the case of alcohol you might notice a restricting pattern – for example people who develop dependency tend to stick to certain drinks
- Increased tolerance – you might notice that it takes a higher dose or more drinks to reach the desired effect
- Worsening mental health symptoms; alcohol is a depressant which means it can make anxiety or depression worse. Some drugs can also cause mood disturbances or even psychosis
- An impact on appearance or personal habits, for example losing or gaining a lot of weight, losing interest in appearance or personal hygiene, or withdrawing from friends and family. Other people may notice or comment on this too

**TABLE 1:**  
MENTAL HEALTH COPING MECHANISMS USED DURING THE PANDEMIC - INTERNATIONALLY

Coping mechanism	International	UK	U.S.	France	Egypt	UAE
Drugs and / or alcohol	40%	38%	36%	46%	-	-
Drinking alcohol	28%	27%	28%	29%	-	-
Drug use (recreational or OTC)	27%	23%	17%	31%	34% (OTC only)	29% (OTC only)
Shopping or spending	34%	34%	17%	17%	44%	49%
Over-exercising	27%	32%	23%	15%	43%	22%
Over or under-eating	28%	16%	17%	19%	30%	41%
Smoking or vaping	24%	18%	13%	25%	34%	29%
Gambling	12%	16%	9%	10%	-	-

## THE VIEW FROM THE CITY MENTAL HEALTH ALLIANCE

Poppy Jaman, CEO of the City Mental Health Alliance said:

"Leading by example is crucial to breaking the down stigma attached to mental illness. Encouraging compassionate dialogue which leads to positive action is crucial to creating psychologically safe workplace cultures where everyone can flourish. Workplaces that nurture talent, train line managers, put mental health and wellbeing on the Board agenda are building resilient businesses which in turn will be able to face these challenging times."



## OTHER RESOURCES

- City Mental Health Alliance UK
- Mind – mental health at work
- Mind – addiction and dependency

3. All U.S. data is based on responses from all high net worth individuals, including board executives





# About Bupa Global

Bupa Global is the premium health insurance arm of Bupa. Established in 1971, it provides individuals, small businesses and corporate customers international coverage with products and services so they can access the healthcare they need, when they need it, whether at home or when studying, living, travelling or working abroad.

With a multilingual team of advisers, Bupa Global serves customers across the globe and can provide access to c.1.6m medical providers on a direct settlement basis. Offices are located in London and Brighton (UK), Miami and Philadelphia (U.S. - GeoBlue), Dublin (Ireland), Cairo (Egypt), Dubai (UAE), and Hong Kong (China) as well as regional offices in Mainland China and Singapore.

Bupa Global's international private medical insurance offers multiple resources for those affected by mental health issues; access to a network of doctors available 24/7 in multiple languages – enabling individuals and their families to speak to a specialist at a time that is convenient to them.

Bupa Global is also focused on supporting the health and wellbeing of its people through the pandemic. Initiatives include a Covid-19 people hub and a new employee newsletter with a focus on wellbeing and resources, and a digital health and wellbeing programme. Bupa Global's Mental Health First Aid Network has been expanded with more business leaders taking the training and an Employee Assistance Programme has been rolled out across all parts of the Bupa Global business (new to China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Egypt).

For more information about Bupa Global visit [www.bupaglobal.com](http://www.bupaglobal.com).

