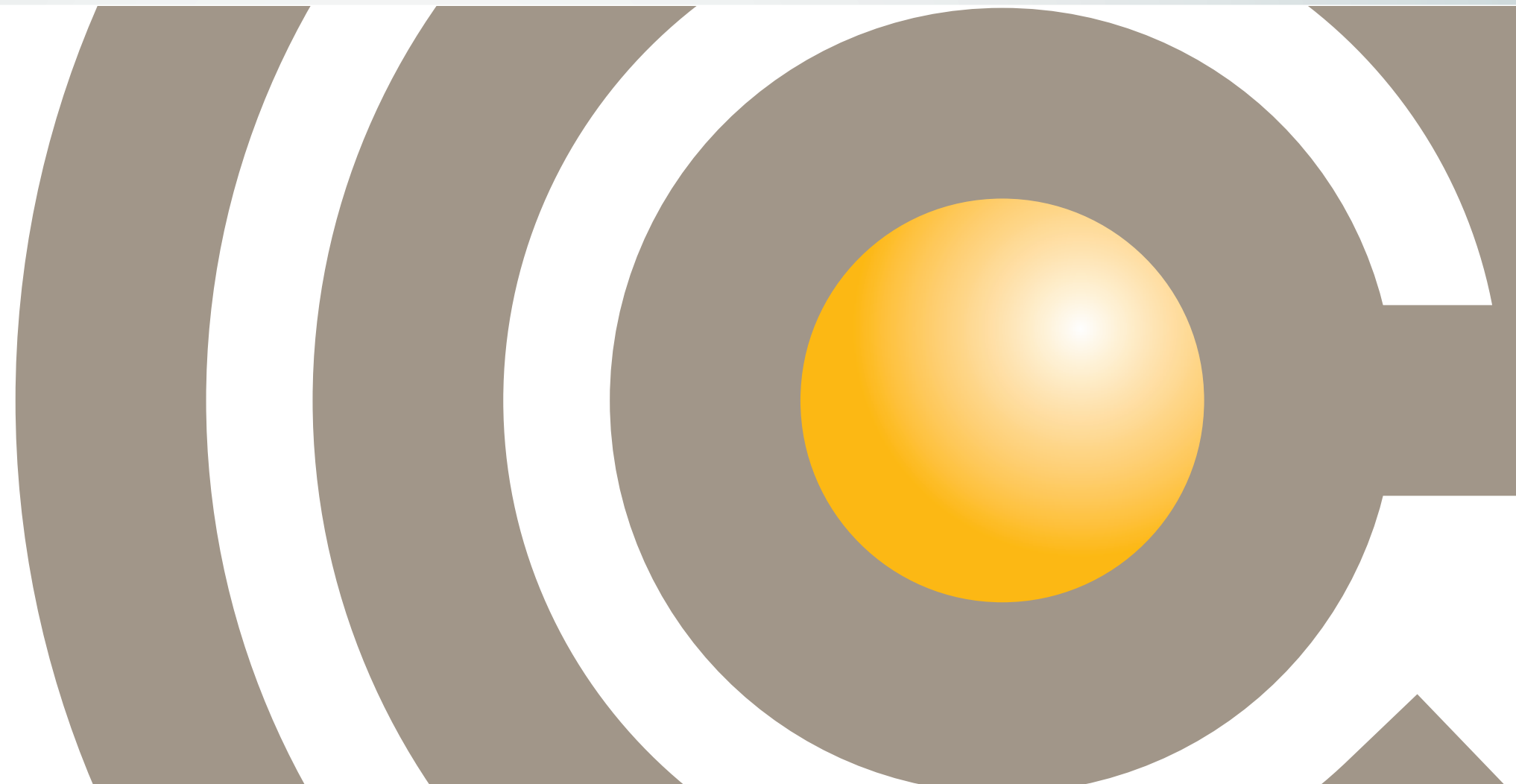




School for CEOs
the alchemy of leadership

The Psychological Impact of Covid-19:

How senior executives are impacted by lockdown



Foreword

To address the growing public health crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries around the world introduced drastic measures to reduce transmission of the virus. On 23 March 2020, the UK entered a period of lockdown, forcing many businesses to close their doors and millions of individuals to adapt their working practices and establish new professional and domestic routines.

At School for CEOs we wanted to understand how well these leaders had adapted to their new environments; whether their ability to lead their businesses through a crisis had been hindered during lockdown and whether they were at risk of suffering from emotional exhaustion.

While burnout is traditionally associated with long days at the office, it isn't limited to that scenario. The burnout syndrome is described as a

progressive loss of idealism, energy and purpose as a result of work conditions. Had these changes in work conditions put senior leaders at risk of burnout?

Partnering with Dr Mioara Cristea from the Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences at Heriot-Watt University, this study sought to understand what the psychological effect of lockdown has been on senior leaders, and what coping strategies they have drawn upon to support them through this period of disruption and prolonged ambiguity.

We are very grateful to all of our participants for their time and input which we hope in turn will support future leaders with the challenges of leadership through uncertain times.

Executive Summary

School for CEOs invited business leaders to answer a short survey that explored leaders' emotions, their psychological resilience, risk of burnout and leadership style during lockdown. It also explored their living and employment situations during lockdown and strategies they used to deal with the challenges they encountered.

Our results revealed the following:

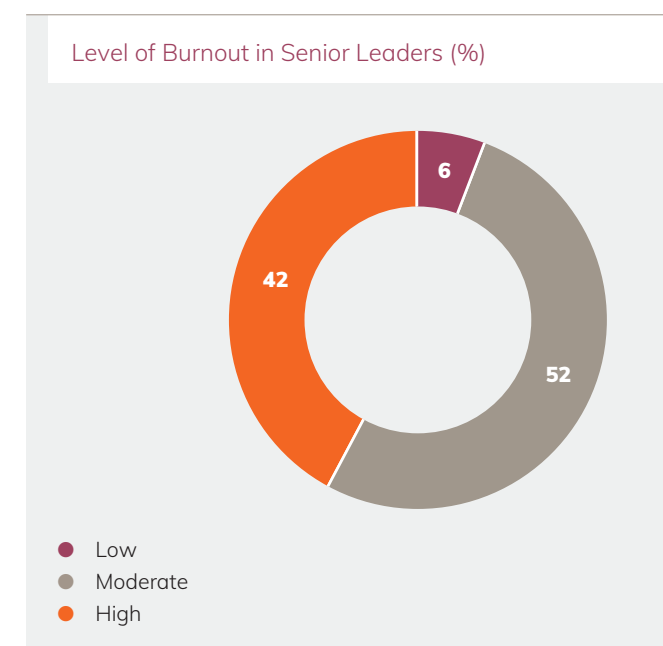
- **42% of senior leaders were at a high risk of burnout** during lockdown, despite being highly confident and psychologically resilient individuals.
- **Women found themselves at higher risk of burnout and exhaustion** (47% compared with 40%) and they expressed more negative emotions during the lockdown than their male counterparts.

- Evidence revealed that **women leaders assumed greater home-schooling responsibilities compared to male leaders** which may have had a negative effect on their mental health.
- **61% of younger leaders (aged 24-38) were at high risk of burnout**, compared with 36% of leaders over 50.
- Despite their increased responsibility and public scrutiny, **CEOs exhibited lower levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion** with 22% at high risk. By comparison, 34% of executive level leaders and 43% of senior divisional leaders were at high risk.
- **CEOs expressed more positive emotions** than others in the sample, complementing existing research on optimism as a salient characteristic among successful leaders.

The study also uncovered a number of psychological and situational factors that had significant relationships with risk of burnout, from leadership style and psychological resilience, to living status and length of service in an organisation.

The importance of 'Managing In' was critical and leaders actively adopted strategies to look after their physical and emotional wellbeing. Those with greater confidence, a higher sense of self-efficacy and a higher psychological resilience were at a lower risk of burnout.

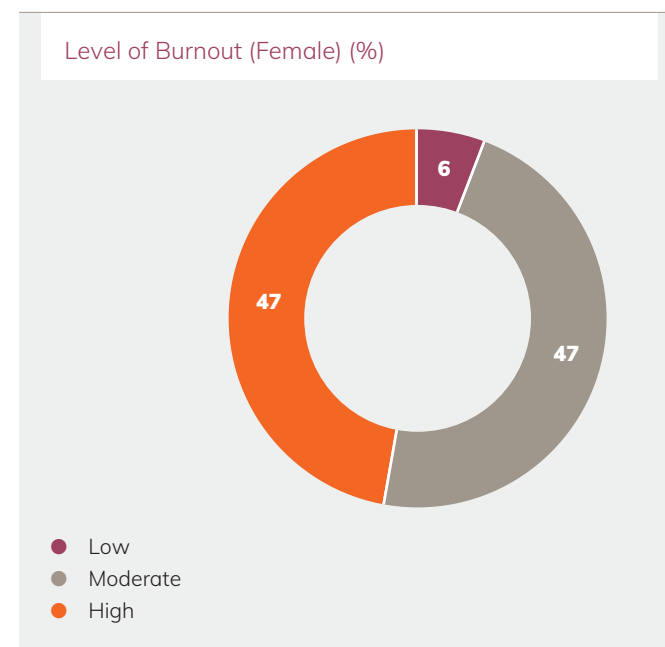
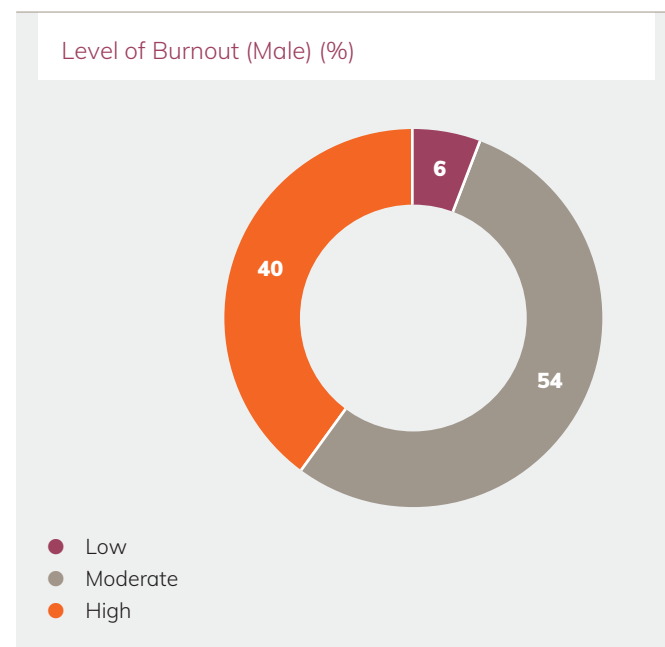
Social interaction played a key role in helping leaders limit the harmful effects of isolation. CEOs and leaders leaned on their personal connections, partners and friends before reaching out to key internal stakeholders or colleagues in their organisations for support during lockdown.



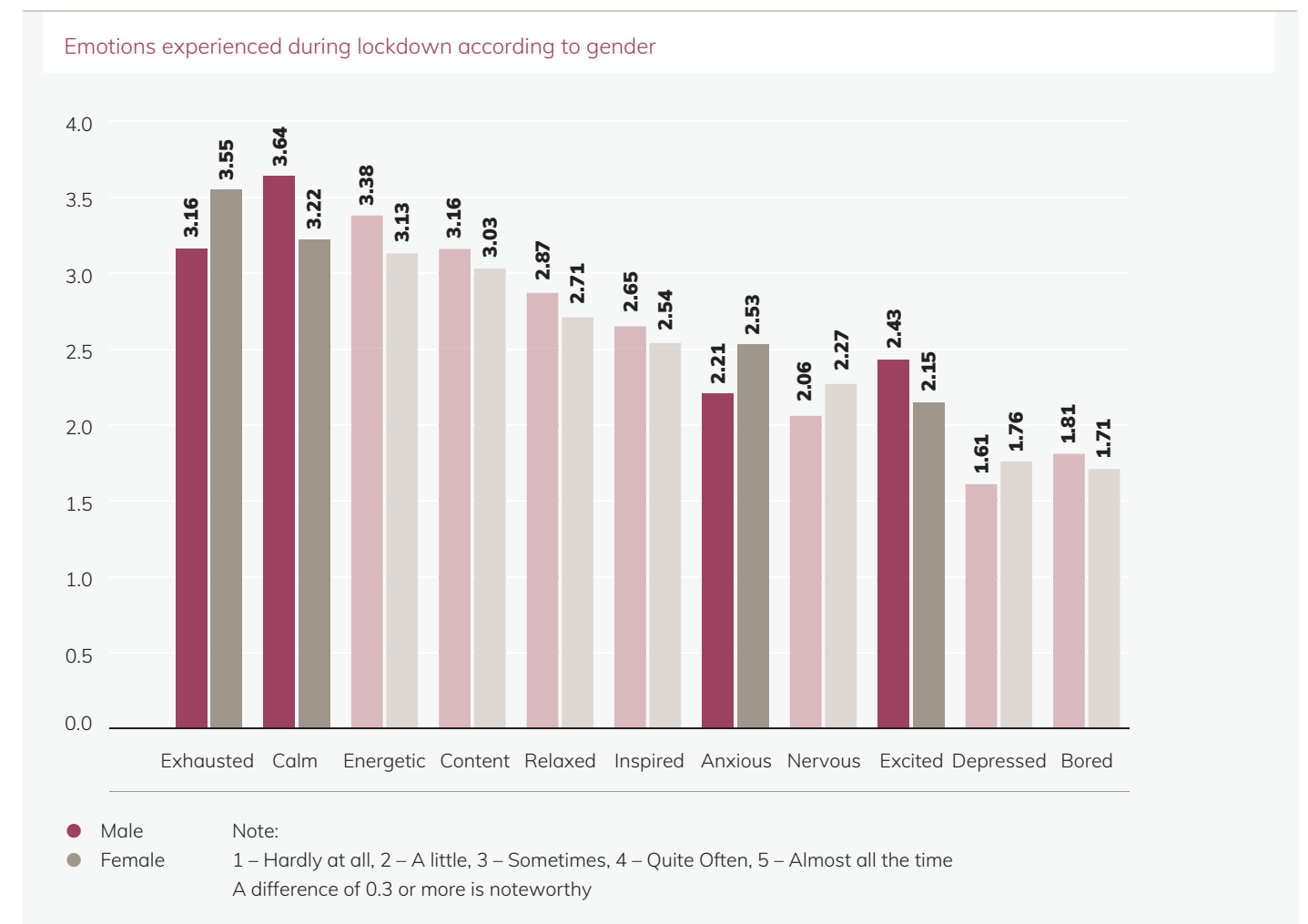
Experiences of Women and Men

Our findings show significant differences in the experiences of female leaders when compared with their male counterparts with **47% of women at high risk of burnout, compared to 40% of men.**

47% of women at high risk of burnout, compared to 40% of men.



Women were more likely to experience negative emotions and less likely to experience positive emotions during lockdown, feeling more exhausted, anxious and nervous while men felt more excited, energetic and calm. These feelings of exhaustion and anxiety were most intense among younger women, aged 24-38.



When examining burnout scores, women also scored significantly higher than men on exhaustion. These results maybe be linked to the fact that women in general had more caring responsibilities during lockdown.

25% of female leaders living with school aged children took full schooling responsibility compared with only 3% of male leaders.

Experiences of Young and Mature Leaders

Leaders in this study represent multiple generations, spanning from ages 24 to 68. Their experiences of lockdown were therefore diverse.

Living status

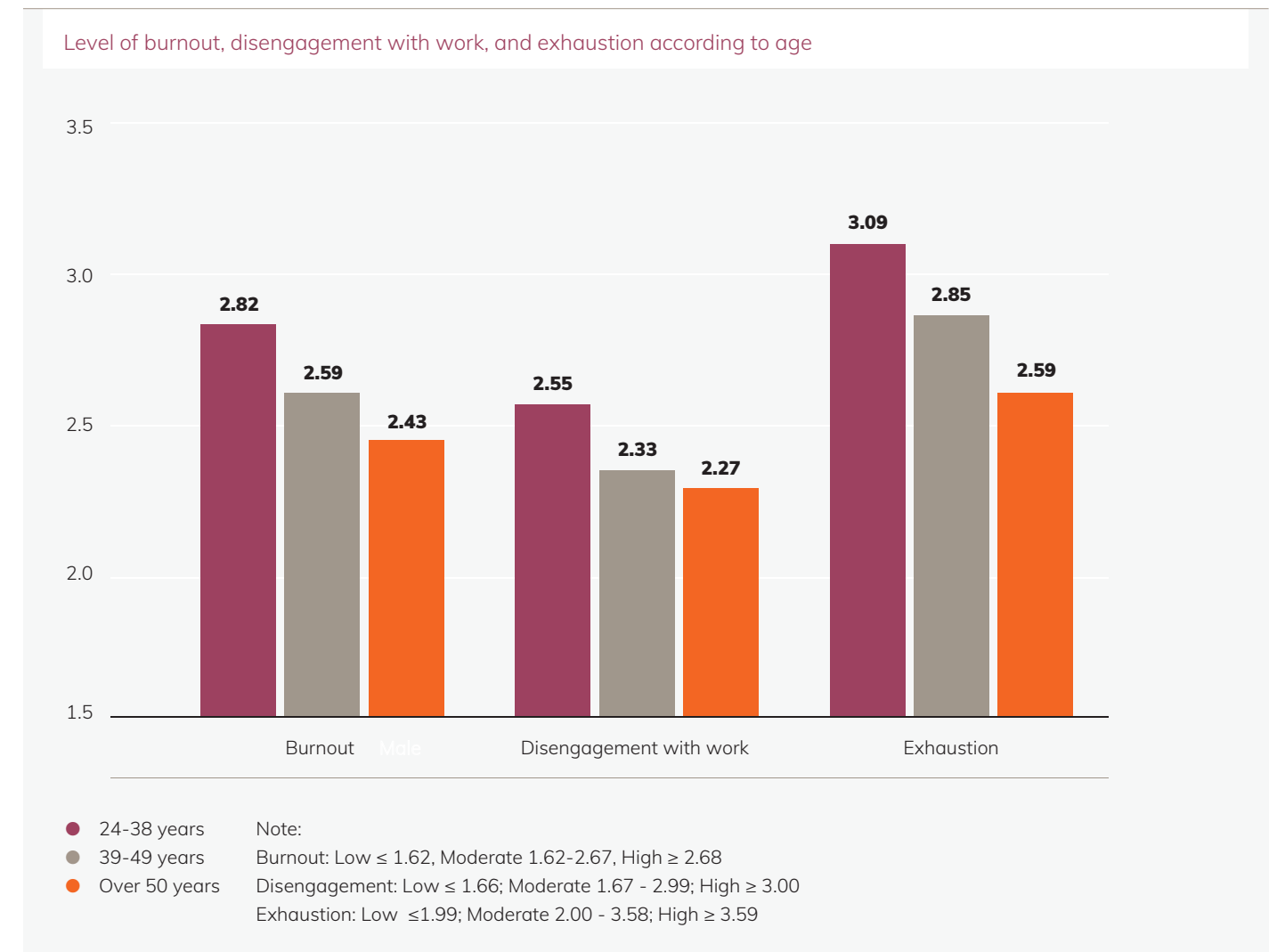
| | School aged children | Elderly parents | Living alone |
|-------|----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 24-38 | 39% | 7% | 12% |
| 39-49 | 75% | 2% | 6% |
| 50+ | 30%* | 2% | 7% |

* 86% of leaders age 50+ living with school age children had limited or no home-schooling responsibilities.

Results found that **younger leaders aged 24-38 were at significantly higher risk of burnout** than their older colleagues. They were also more likely to feel disengaged with work and exhaustion (two key facets of burnout).

Leaders over 50 were at the lowest risk of burnout, with a low to moderate average response.

Younger leaders aged 24-38 were at significantly higher risk of burnout.



Are CEOs at a Higher Risk Than Their Teams?

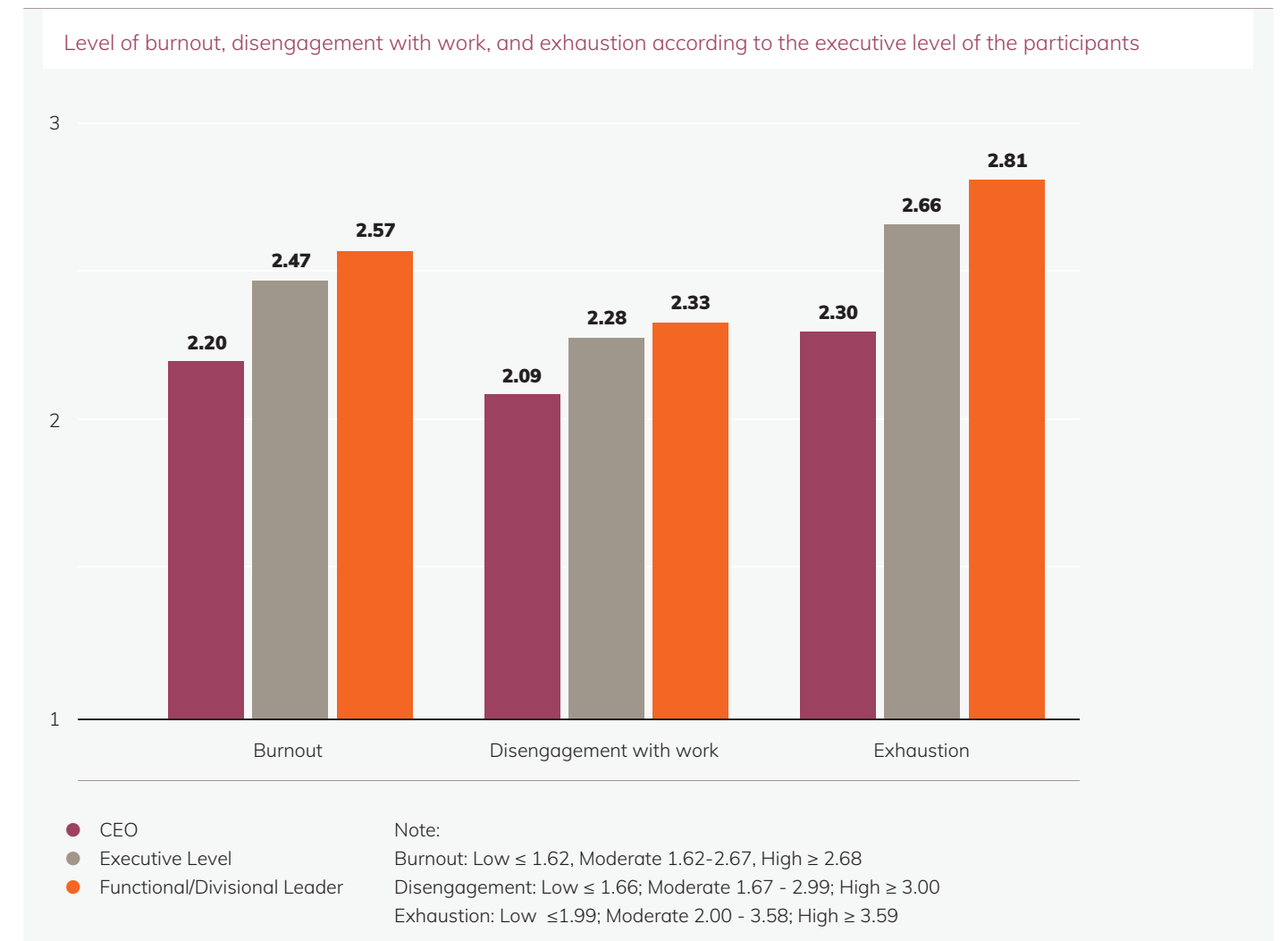
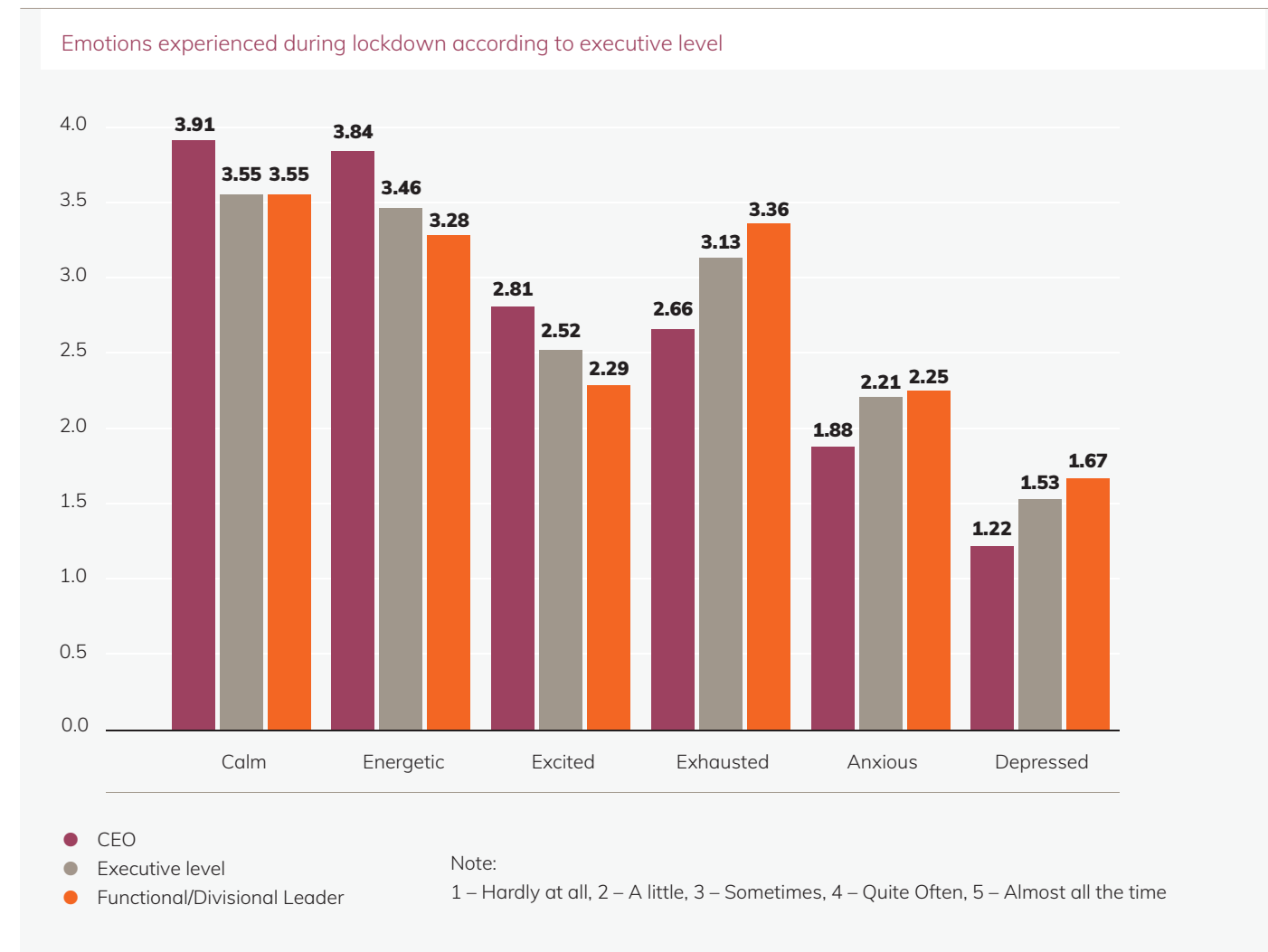
While the Covid-19 crisis has undoubtedly placed pressure on the shoulders of Chief Executives, we discovered that these leaders remained optimistic and positive during lockdown.

Overall, CEOs expressed feelings of calm, energy and excitement more regularly than executive leaders and their teams who were more likely to experience negative emotions such as exhaustion, depression, and anxiety by comparison.

These results echo existing research that highlights the prevalence of optimism among successful Chief Executives.

22% of CEOs reported a high level of burnout but they were at a significantly lower risk of burnout than their executive teams (34% high), and their direct reports (43% high). CEOs also felt less exhausted and more engaged.

22% of CEOs reported a high level of burnout.



Other Contributing Factors

Psychological

Psychological Resilience

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more resilient the leader, the lower their risk of burnout.

Leadership Style

Most leaders adopted a democratic style of leadership and they adapted better to remote leadership than more authoritarian leaders. Employees who were led by authoritative leaders were also more likely to feel disengaged.

Self-Efficacy and Self-Confidence

Leaders with a strong natural sense of self-efficacy and confidence in themselves were less likely to be at risk of burnout or feel disengaged at work.

Social Support

The more often leaders interacted with friends and family, the less likely they were to feel disengaged or exhausted because of work.

These factors all helped reduce the risk of burnout. However, it is worth noting that overall, while participating leaders expressed high levels of psychological resilience, self-efficacy and self-confidence, 94% also showed moderate to high levels of burnout – a reminder that there is a limit to what individuals can withstand psychologically.

Situational

Length of Service

Leaders who were relatively new to an organisation (less than one year in the business) were at a lower risk of burnout and less likely to feel disengaged with work than their colleagues who had spent 4 years or more as part of the organisation.

One theory to explain this could be the higher motivation to deliver that is instinctive when joining an organisation; to build a reputation and to 'prove your worth'.

Time in Role

Those who had spent longer in their role (more than one year) were more likely to become disengaged with work than colleagues who had spent less than one year in role.

Employment Status

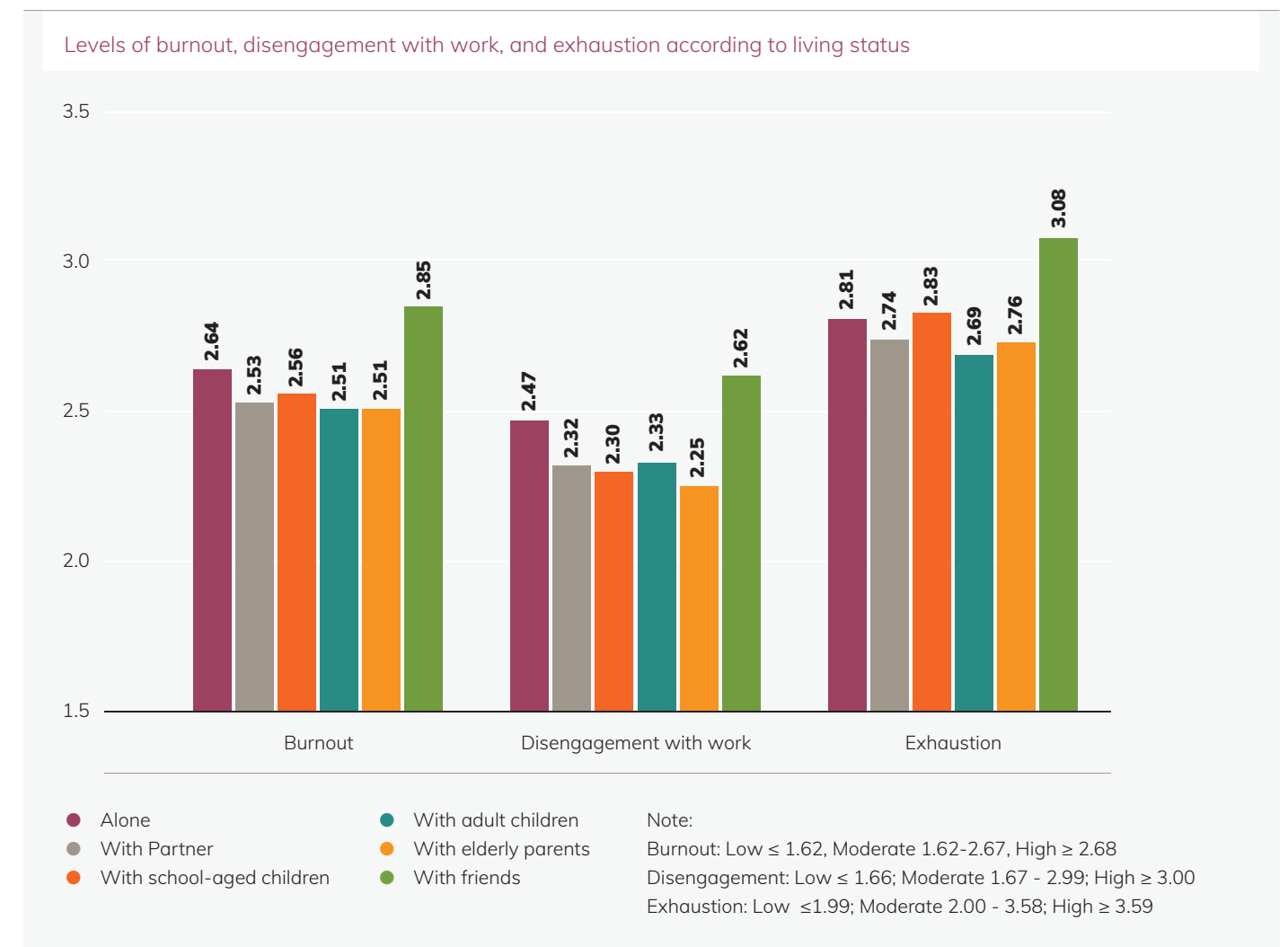
Across our sample, most leaders continued to work their contracted hours or more, on full pay (68%). However, some continued to work their contracted hours or more, on reduced pay (29%), while a small number worked reduced hours, on reduced pay (2%) or took a short period of furlough (2%).

We did not find significant differences between these groups although the small number of furloughed leaders did express slightly higher levels of disengagement and exhaustion. Those whose working hours and remuneration were not reduced during lockdown expressed the lowest risk of burnout.

Among the wider leadership population who took furlough, 28% mentioned having partners working outside their home during lockdown and 49% mentioned having full responsibility for schooling their children which might explain why they experienced higher levels of exhaustion.

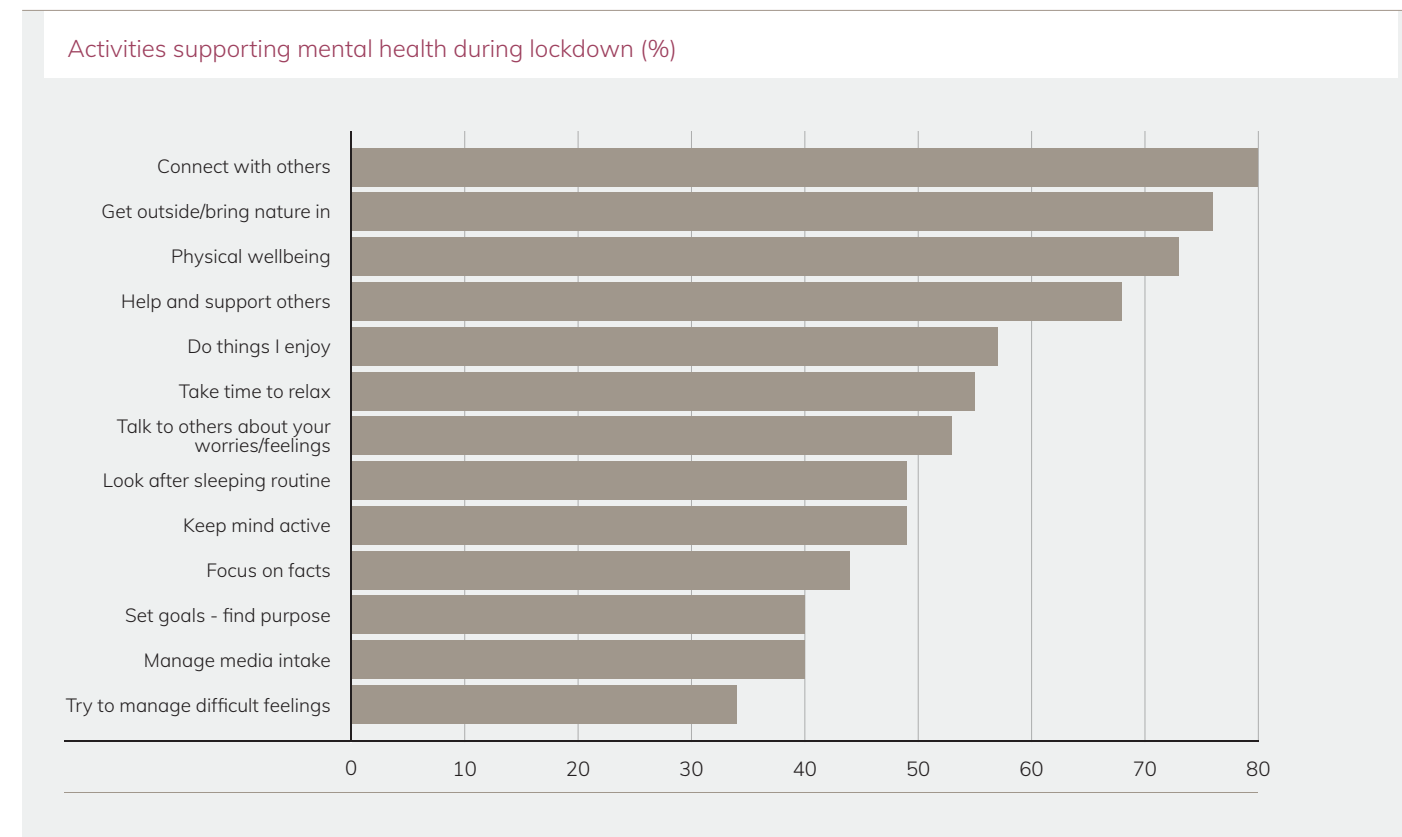
Living Status

Those living alone or with friends expressed slightly higher levels of overall burnout, disengagement with work, and exhaustion compared to those living with family (e.g., partner, children, parents). This could suggest that living with family helped to slow the energy drain and maintain positive engagement while leading through Covid-19. Conversely, it could imply that those living with friends or on their own generally found it more challenging.



Reducing the Risk of Burnout

During the lockdown, Public Health England published a list of 14 activities recommended to help individuals adapt to the restrictions of lockdown in the UK and to support positive mental health.



Irrespective of gender, age and executive level, the most frequently adopted activities were connecting with others and getting outside.

Both men and women spent time outside and connected with others as a priority. This was followed by looking after physical wellbeing for men and helping and supporting others for women.

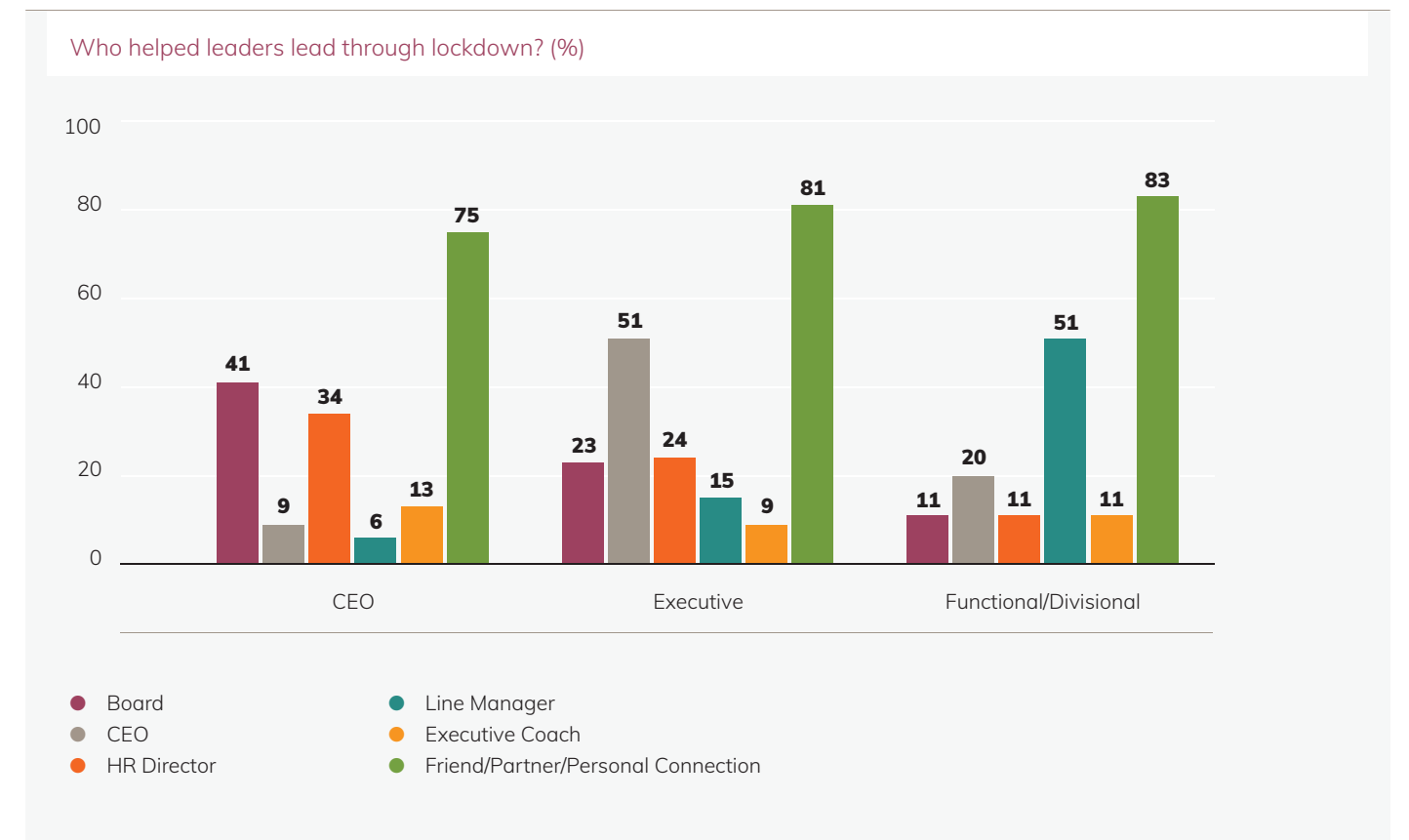
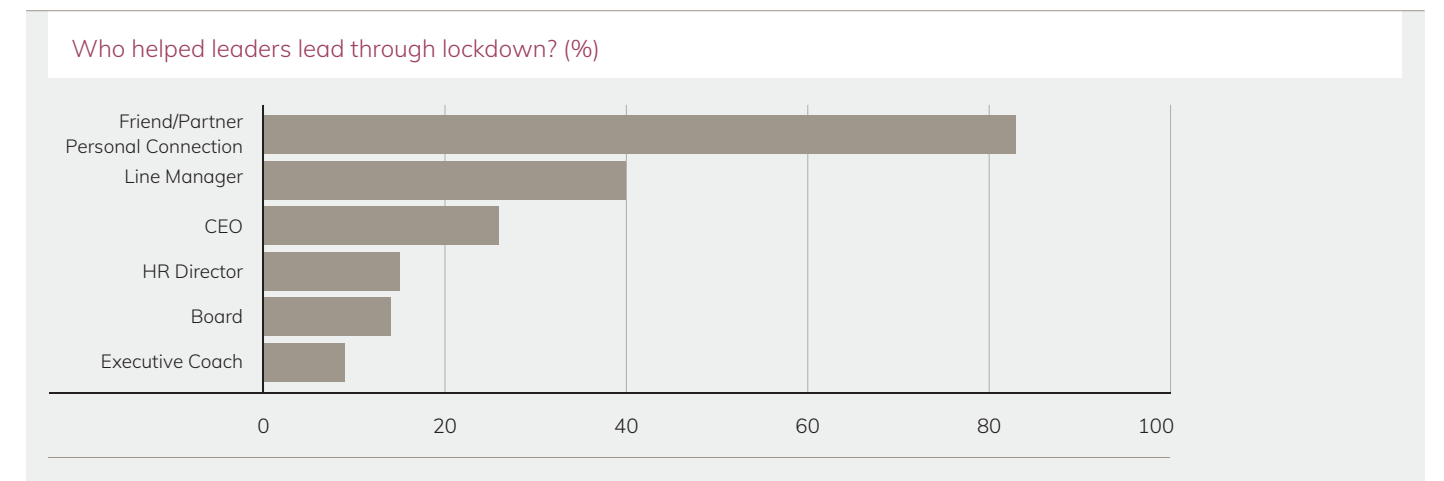
Similarly, the focus on getting outside and connecting with others was widespread among all ages while older adults also highlighted physical wellbeing.

Finally, CEOs were aligned with their executive and divisional leaders in emphasising physical wellbeing and connecting with others, while they also spent time providing help and support to others.

Social Networks

A strong emphasis on human connection and social support is already frequently referenced in this report. Across all executive levels, leaders lean more heavily on their friends, partners and personal networks for support, compared to their boss, HR Director or Board when leading through lockdown.

Beyond their personal networks, CEOs looked to their Boards for support, closely followed by their HR Director.



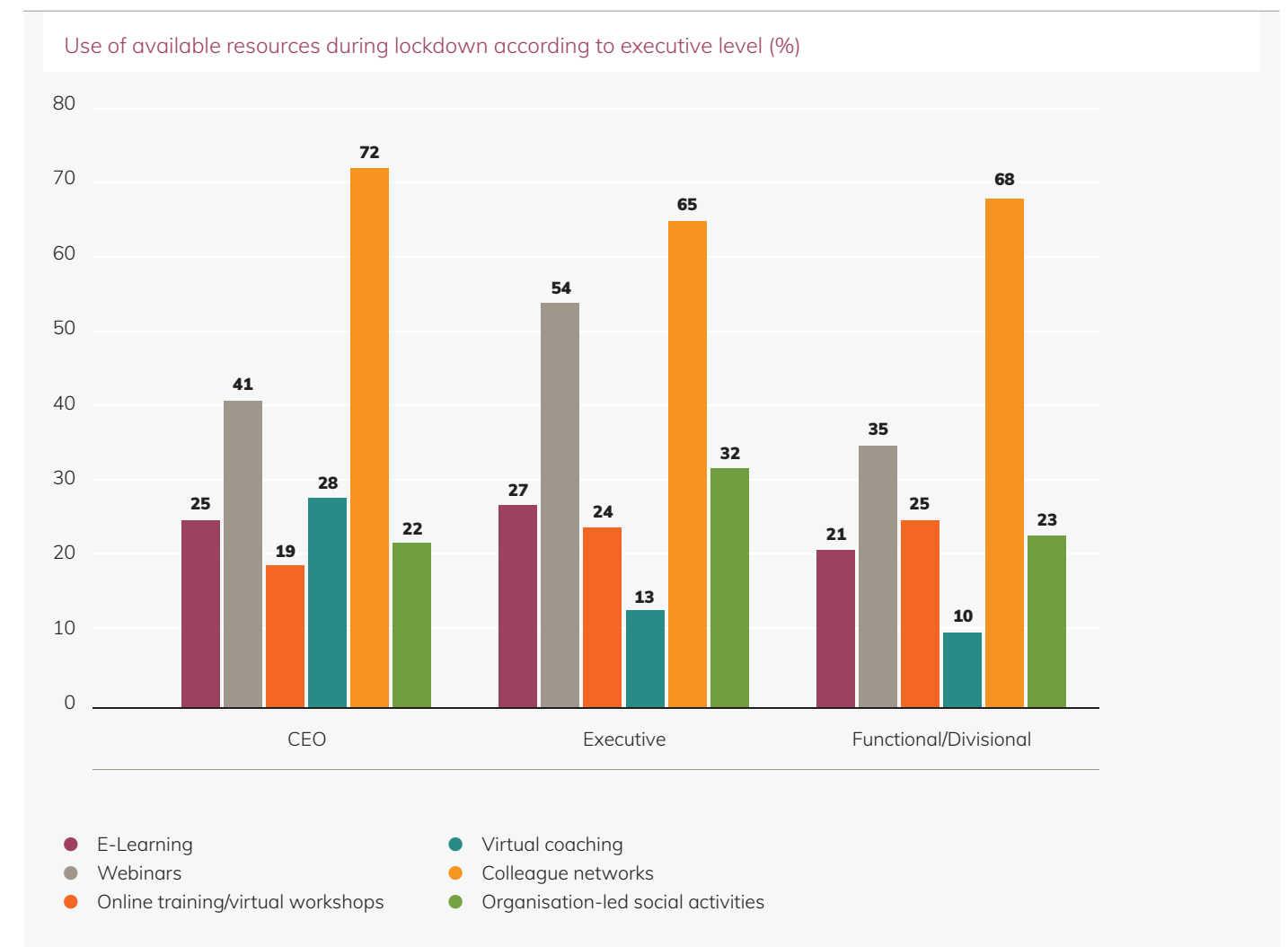
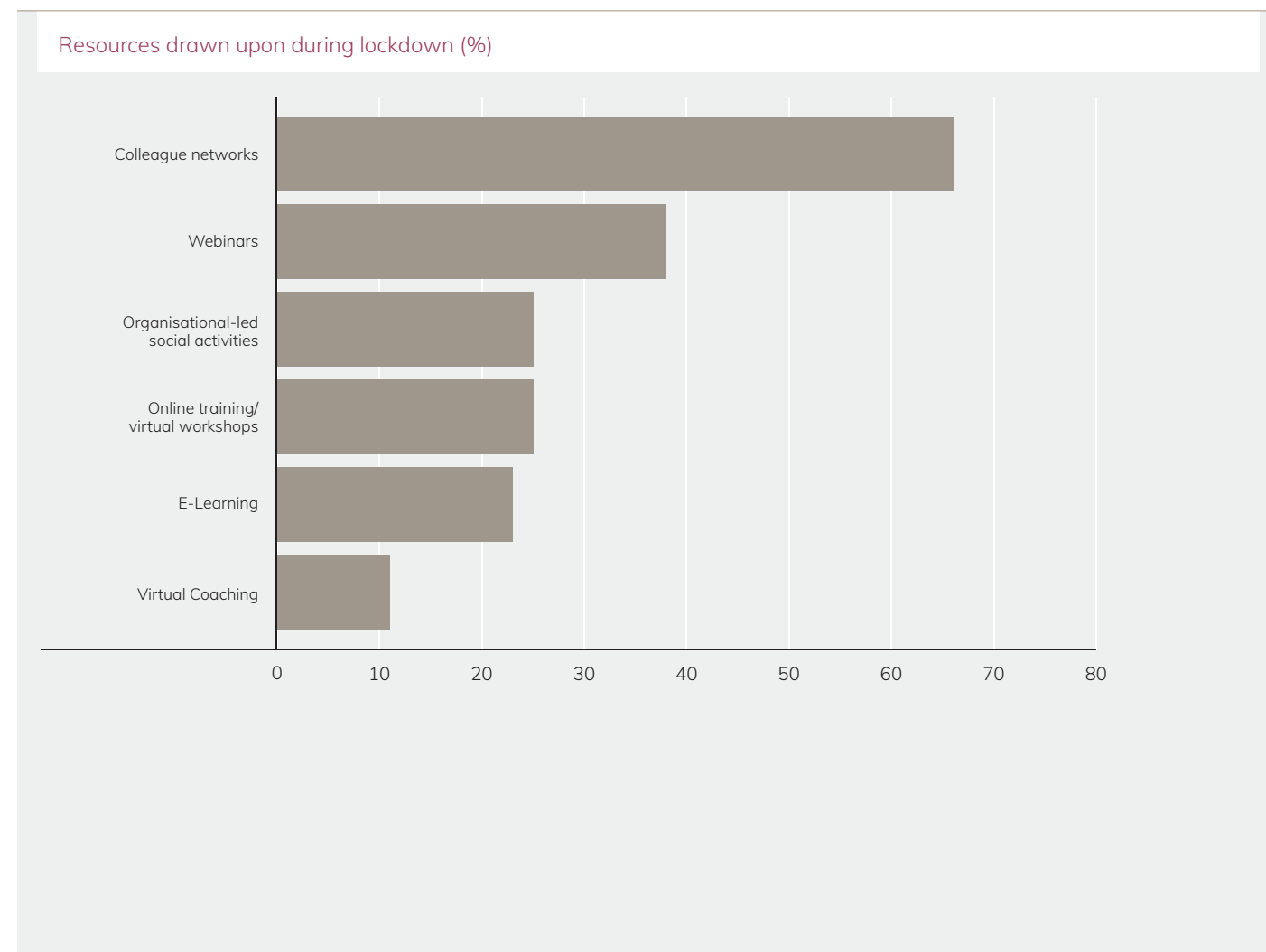
Resources to draw on during lockdown

Many organisations adapted quickly to implement measures to support their workforces virtually through lockdown.

CEOs were twice as likely to engage in virtual coaching as Executive Committee members and they actively engaged in colleague networks and webinars.

66% of our participants engaged in virtual colleague networks; 57% of leaders engaged in virtual learning opportunities including webinars, e-learning, virtual coaching or online training and 25% of participants also participated in virtual social activities.

66% of our participants engaged in virtual colleague networks.



Recommendations

At the time of publishing this report, health experts, scientists and governments are still grappling with the direct and indirect effects of the virus and struggling to reduce the harmful impact on individuals, healthcare, education and the economy.

Senior leaders are not immune to the mental health challenges that many predicted at the start of lockdown. As we look forward to an uncertain future,

Keep Managing In

Take care of personal, physical and emotional needs to ensure that leaders and colleagues have both the energy and psychological resilience to deal with ambiguity, remote leadership and the possibility of a future lockdown.

Stay connected

Connecting with others, both in personal and professional networks helped leaders cope with the demands of leading through lockdown. Make time to maintain these connections.

Empower others and inspire confidence in your teams

Leaders who adopt a democratic leadership style are less likely to burnout while leaders with high self-confidence and a strong sense of self-efficacy are also less likely to burnout. Empowering others and inspiring confidence in them will help protect both leaders and their teams from burnout.

it is vital that leaders equip themselves as best they can so that they can remain physically and emotionally fit to lead their organisations.

Our findings lead us to share the following recommendations for leaders, as they continue to lead through the Covid-19 pandemic:

Support individual needs

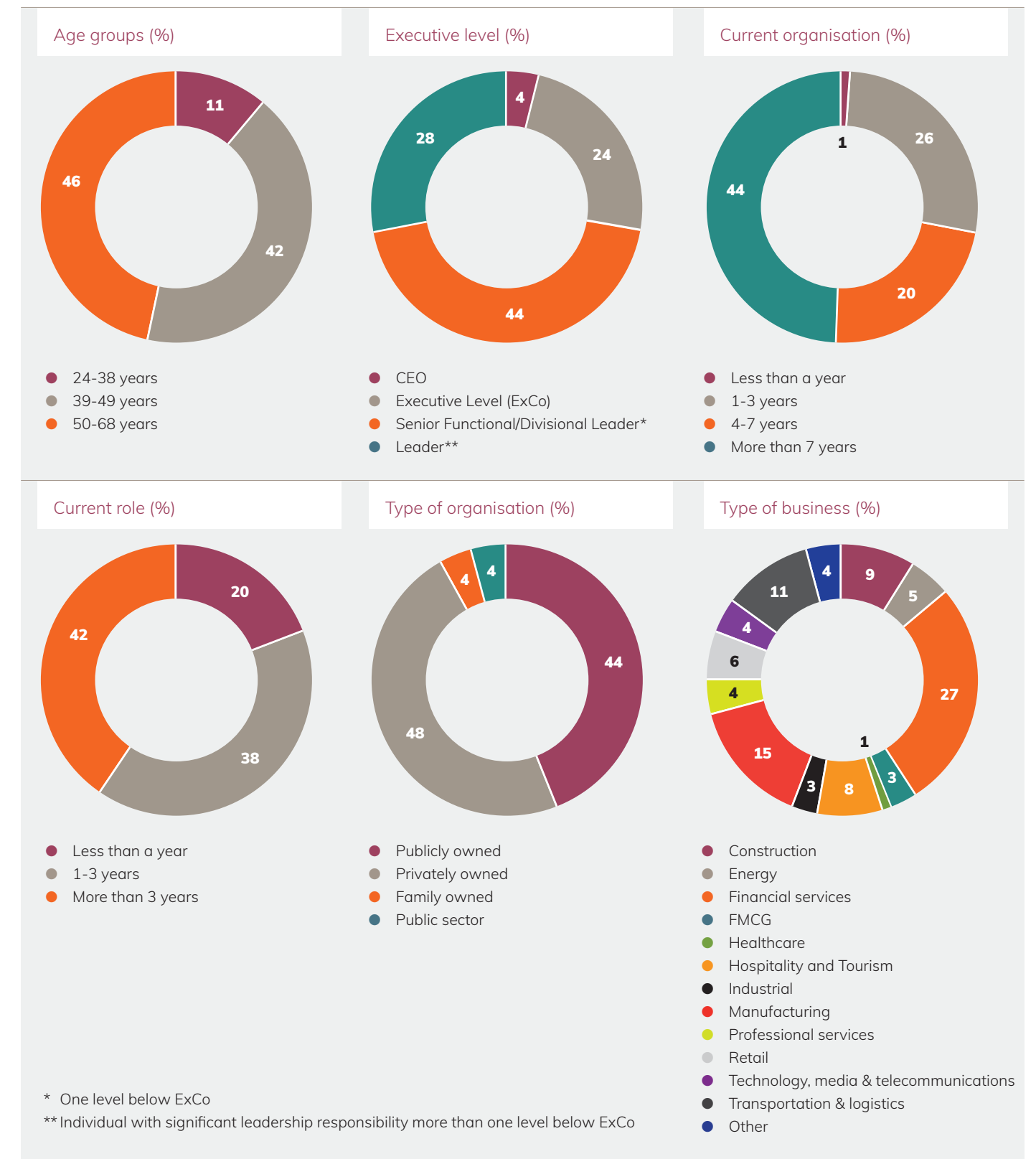
Our results show that some individuals are more likely to be at risk than others – look out for these individuals and take care to notice warning signs and seek out support to alleviate potential strains.

Engage in virtual opportunities provided by your organisation

Whether it's hunkered over the handlebars in an online peloton or taking up structured learning development interventions, the adjustment to virtual socialising and learning has been rapid to help nurture social support, confidence and focus.

Appendix One Contributors

The final sample included 733 participants aged between 24 to 68 years old. 71% participants were male and 27% were female.



About the School for CEOs



The School for CEOs was co-founded by experienced Chief Executive and Chairman Patrick Macdonald and Executive Coach David Sole OBE in 2011. The purpose was to create a programme to support leaders as they transitioned into the role of CEO and other senior roles in organisations by offering practical lessons for immediate use.

David and Patrick recruited a Faculty of experienced business leaders and began by designing the Vital Few programme; a short intensive programme for small groups of senior executives, designed to help them step up to the CEO and other senior executive roles.

Since the first Vital Few programme in 2012, the School has continued to grow, developing the Alchemy Suite of six complementary leadership interventions to support leaders at different levels, while maintaining the ethos of purposeful and pragmatic learning on a personal level.

Interventions range from one to one development through Executive Coaching, to open programmes and also consolidated in-house leadership development programmes for larger groups.

School for CEOs also promotes Inclusive Leadership through tailored development programmes and have a number of programmes available to all-female audiences to help address gender imbalance in executive roles. Since the #blacklivesmatter campaign, this work has extended to inclusion as it relates to ethnic diversity.

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