



Editorial

The COVID-19 pandemic started a conversation about mental health, especially as many began working from home for the first time – business as usual for us freelancers. During that time, in 2021, authors Shaun Foley and Matthew Knight contributed an insightful article to this journal section, focussing on the mental health of freelancers.

Fast-forward to 2025. We have more awareness around mental health, but also new and challenging stressors. What does this mean for freelancing? I invited Shaun and Matthew to revisit this topic and reflect on what has changed since 2021. What worries us today? What do the data say about our mental health? And, more importantly, how can we support

ourselves and find help?

Prioritising our mental health is crucial not only for our overall wellbeing, but also for our freelance business. I'm confident that this article will be a useful resource to support us in both.

Happy reading!

Adriana Rocha

Supporting mental health for freelancers in medical communications in 2025

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Stress and mental health as a medical communications freelancer

It has been almost four years since we wrote our original article, "Supporting mental health for freelancers in med comms", in December 2021.¹ While all of us freelancers are now definitely older – and hopefully wiser – are we any less stressed? Have the stress triggers changed at all since 2021? And how do we cope in 2025?

Are we less stressed?

Back in December 2021, we found very little available information about stress and mental health in medical communications (med comms). How times have changed – and it only took a global pandemic to do so! Reducing stress and protecting our mental health are now widely discussed and prioritised as part of daily life. For example, the UK Government introduced a Mental Health bill in 2024, with the aim of modernising mental health legislature and preventing poor mental health.²

Now that we can talk more about stress and mental health, do we know whether freelancers



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are still as stressed in 2025 as in 2021? The 2024 Leapers survey about mental health in freelancing is hot off the press, and captured data from 715 freelancers who shared information about their experiences.³ Overall, 45% of freelancers saw their mental health decline in 2024, 90% experienced feelings of low confidence at some point, and 31% were unable to work for three or more days during the year due to poor mental health.³ These statistics sadly suggest that freelancers overall still need support to protect their mental health.

In med comms, the MedComms Freelancing Barometer 2025⁴ and WE3 Salary and Insight 2024 survey⁵ both captured data on industry-specific sentiment and stress, and both had massive responses: 344 med comms freelancers and 712 med comms professionals (employees and freelancers), respectively. NetworkPharma.tv also ran a webinar in 2024 on “Working effectively in healthcare communications: Turning stress into a force for good.”⁶ The webinar concluded that stress in med comms remains an industry-wide problem and therefore industry-wide improvement is everyone’s responsibility. This new focus on identifying and dealing with stress and burnout and protecting mental health is of course fantastic news for supporting freelancers in med comms.

But are we less stressed? In the WE3 Salary and Insight 2024 survey, nearly a third of respondents (employees and freelancers) felt neutral or disagreed that med comms was a good industry to work in.⁵ Key factors included the demanding nature of med comms, which makes long-term sustainability difficult, and many med comms professionals feeling overworked, leading to burnout and mental health concerns.⁵

Similarly in the MedComms Freelancing Barometer 2025, 26% of all respondents felt neutral to very dissatisfied about freelancing in med comms. One responder stated that “[Freelancing is] becoming less attractive and quite stressful”.⁴

Sources of stress

Freelancing comes with its own risk factors: variable and unpredictable workload, financial worries, work-life balance, and risk of burnout (Figure 1). When our original article was published in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also had to contend with additional stresses such as changing workload, disruption to childcare/schooling, isolation, travel restrictions, and risk of coronavirus exposure.¹

While the previous survey data show that there are still stress and burnout in med comms, the major causes for stress are different now. Over 2023 and 2024, we have seen new issues such as global economic instability and budget restrictions for our usual clients, resulting in less demand for work. The risk posed by artificial intelligence (AI) on writing opportunities has also been a major concern for med comms freelancers (Figure 1).

1. Economic instability and changing industry dynamics

Europe has been experiencing a period of economic instability since 2022, with persistent high inflation and market volatility, coupled with a cost-of-living crisis and a drop in household disposable income.

This instability has had a wide-reaching impact, directly affecting the biopharmaceutical and med comms industries. In particular, volatile

job markets and political and economic instability have led to budget restrictions for our usual clients – typically biopharmaceutical companies and med comms agencies – as well as restructuring of biopharmaceutical companies.⁷ In the MedComms Freelancing Barometer 2025, many freelancers were concerned about the rising cost of living, as well as professional uncertainty and instability in light of these industry changes.⁴

2. Demand for work

In the MedComms Freelancing Barometer 2025, 45% of freelancers didn’t work as many hours as they wanted and 35% reported that their freelance income was less than expected.⁴ Some individuals reported extensive quiet periods and delayed or cancelled work, with fewer opportunities since COVID-19. Others were “worn down by the uncertainty of freelance workload”.⁴

Several factors may have contributed to this lower demand for freelance med comms opportunities. First, budget restrictions for biopharmaceutical companies have probably filtered down to med comms agencies, reducing their reliance on freelancers. Certainly, since COVID-19, many med comms agencies have also started medical writer in-house training programs, further reducing the need for freelance support. Lastly, and although it is hard to quantify, many think that there are just more freelancers in med comms in general, which increases the competition for work.⁴

3. Artificial intelligence

The rapid development of generative AI models such as ChatGPT has revolutionary potential for natural language processing tasks and assisted writing. It is clear that AI is here to stay, but there

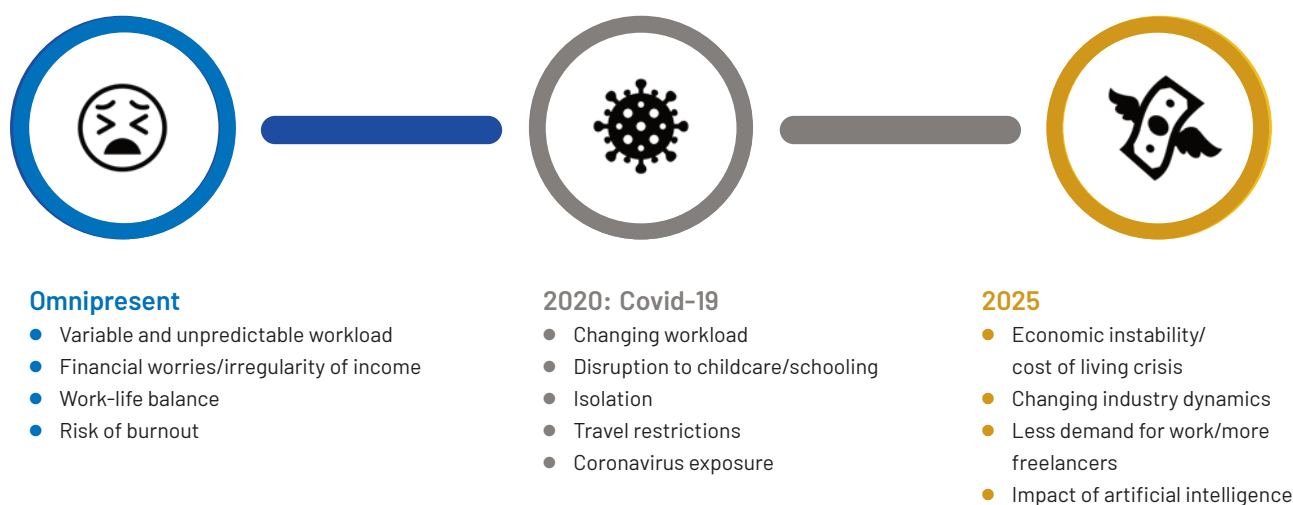


Figure 1. Sources of stress as a freelancer in med comms



Photo: Freepik

are also serious concerns about job displacement. Norman and Chamberlain James described the paradox of AI in medical writing,⁸ by outlining that, in a perfect world, we want AI to pay our bills, do our menial chores, and make working easier, so that we have more time to do the things that we like. But we don't want AI to do the things that we like for us so that we have more time to work, or replace our jobs altogether!

It seems that the biggest source of stress for freelancers in med comms regarding AI is the unknown. In the MedComms Freelancing Barometer 2025, 42% of freelancers were not routinely using AI and many worried about its potential to devalue their skills and the need to adapt to working with AI-generated content.⁴ Similarly, in a 2024 survey by the MedCommsTech Medical Writers Collective, 44% of med comms freelancers believed that AI would have a detrimental impact on the available work and opportunities for freelance medical writers, and 27% believed that it would decrease job satisfaction.⁹

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Since the data paint a very clear picture of freelancers facing many challenges to their mental health – across macroeconomic factors, changes in technology and attitudes towards work, and an increasingly volatile and supply-heavy market – what can be done to take care of our mental health?

Leapers works with organisations who want to put support in place for their freelancers, through its research and resources. It has developed the ABC of wellbeing for freelancers:¹⁰

- A: Active Awareness
- B: Behaviours and Boundaries
- C: Community and Connection

Active awareness

Since Leapers.co started work back in 2017,¹⁰ there has been a notable improvement in conversations around mental health in freelancing. But while the conversation at large has improved, freelancers are still not always caring for their own mental health.

Active Awareness means taking a little bit of time every day, every week, or even just once a month, to check-in with yourself, ask “How am I doing?”, and reflect on the root causes. Taking just 15 minutes a week to reflect on what contributes to positive and negative experiences as a freelancer can help you better understand what shapes your mental health. For example, late payments. Not a mental health issue *per se*, but one that can lead to it, as increased anxiety around cash flow or financial wellbeing has dramatic effects on our health.

Keeping track of what influences your

emotional health, following patterns and trends over time, and realising when you're feeling stressed helps you to be more aware and take action.

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Behaviours and boundaries

Once you understand what is affecting your emotional health, you can start improving or continuing to build positive influences. For example, if you're aware that you have a worse week when you're not sleeping well, improving your sleep health can be your priority. If you have a great week when you're working alongside others, finding collaborators can be at the top of your list for future projects. And if you realise you're less productive after weeks without rest, then putting a holiday policy in place can help.

When you're a freelancer, you no longer have an employer's workplace structure and habits. Putting some structure back in place, identifying positive behaviours, and avoiding negative ones will help.

We say Behaviours and Boundaries because stress can come from external sources outside of our control too. Last-minute changes, unpaid invoices, unclear communications, refusal to sign a contract, emails out of hours, ghosting... the

list is potentially endless. Putting boundaries in place is essential to protect ourselves wherever possible from bad external behaviours. Perhaps this is defining your own working hours, automation to deal with late invoices, or using a different email account for work than the one on your personal devices.

Community and connection

The final, and perhaps most important, pillar is Community and Connection. We know that isolation is an epidemic in the UK, and freelancers are three times more likely to face frequent feelings of loneliness at work than the employed population.³ The causes are not surprising: we don't have a ready-made team or colleagues around us! This means that we need to proactively invest in building our own support networks.

Fortunately, it's never been easier to find supportive communities, fellow freelancers who understand the experience and can share their insights into tackling a problem, or just having a cuppa when needed. Indeed, within med comms freelancing, there are many communities to choose from.¹¹ Community doesn't need to be large online platforms, it can be a smaller intimate group offline in a coffee shop or coworking space, or a group of trusted people you turn to in times of need. And even if your mental health is absolutely fine, building a support network gives you the opportunity to support others who might need it more, folks who can step in when you need to take a break or are feeling unwell, or just be present. Whilst freelancers need to take individual responsibility for their own wellbeing, the entire freelancing ecosystem needs to play its part to support its freelancers. This includes communities, policy makers, unions, service providers, and of course the hirers themselves.

Freelancers can demand better behaviours from their clients – and not just accept poor practices such as late payments or lack of onboarding. Whilst not every freelancer can afford to turn down work, setting our own

boundaries and establishing good ways of working with clients can go a long way to avoid situations which negatively impact mental health.

We are in a very different place today, compared with 2021, in terms of the conversation around mental health. However, preventing and dealing with poor mental health and stress continue to be a challenge for freelancers in med comms, and it is important that they are prioritised. The resources and support to do so are out there, but finding them, accessing them, and making the most of them takes a little bit of effort. And if freelancers aren't investing in their own mental health as a critical part of their business, there is a risk of their business being less sustainable.

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Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

Shaun Foley is the proprietor of Biome Professionals and declares no disclosures or conflicts of interest. Matthew Knight is the proprietor of Leapers.co and declares no disclosures or conflicts of interest.

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