

2022 Report

The cost of dying

Examining the true impact
of bereavement in America



empathy.

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We asked over 2,000 families from across the US about how they dealt with the death of a loved one and handled the burden it placed on them.

Read on to learn what they told us.

The high price of death

Every loss places a huge burden on those left behind

13 months

to handle all affairs; 20 months if the estate goes through probate

Four family members, on average, were involved in the process of dealing with loss

Harmed
job performance

52% said dealing with loss negatively impacted their performance at work

\$12,702

average expense falling on families after a loved one dies

Poorer health

57% experienced clinical physical or psychological symptoms of stress; the average person suffered from 3 such symptoms

Foreword



Adam Hills
Managing Director, Goldman
Sachs Ayco Personal
Financial Management, Head
of SurvivorSupport®



In this report, Empathy takes a deep look at the true and unexpected costs incurred when a loved one passes away in America—by the family members left behind, by employers and by society at large. The monetary costs are significant but the toll extends far beyond to mental stress, time commitments and more.

At Goldman Sachs, we've long been focused on helping families navigate the financial implications of losing a loved one. Over the past several decades, we've partnered with hundreds of companies across corporate America to offer our SurvivorSupport® service as a benefit to over 3.2 million employees. A number of findings in Empathy's report validate our experience working with more than 80,000 grieving families.

Loss can be paralyzing and it often takes specialized guidance to help survivors get their life back on track. Time-sensitive, complex elections for medical plans,

insurance, estate planning and tax considerations often carry a significant cost and have a long-reaching impact if they're not made the right way.

Families navigating loss need help and this report cites findings validating employees' desire for more flexibility or support from their employers. At Goldman Sachs, we see forward-thinking companies addressing this need through their benefits. There's been a nearly 20% increase over the last 2 years in funeral planning and survivor counseling benefits at the companies across corporate America where we provide financial wellness support.

Empathy is shining a light on grief's full impact in America, against a backdrop of a global pandemic. We see survivors and employers navigating it every day. We hope this report, by outlining the scope and depth of this issue, can lead to increased focus on the way society supports family members following the loss of a loved one.

Expanding the narrative of loss

Meaningful change to help bereaved families shoulder the burden

Families dealing with loss have unique needs, issues that are often insufficiently addressed by the systems meant to support them. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these needs into sharp focus, highlighting the full scope of what families must go through after a loved one dies, and the lack of support that is available to guide them through all the financial, legal, and emotional challenges they face.

This report takes a comprehensive look at the cost of dying in the United States—the massive demands it makes of the family of the deceased. Not only the emotional toll of grief, but the actual, practical burden of dealing with every logistical detail of funerals, paying debts, or administering estates, which requires everyday people to spend their

time, effort, productivity, and mental energy, not to mention significant sums of money, for months and months at a time. It is only once our society gets a clear-eyed view of just how large the toll that bereavement takes is that we can start to make meaningful change in the way we approach the issues involved, so that we can all better support families at this most challenging time in their lives.

We at Empathy and are therefore both proud and hopeful as we share “The Cost of Dying”—our first annual report investigating the range of issues suffered by grieving families, with a particular focus on the tasks that take up so much time, energy, and money but are rarely addressed in our current understanding of what the bereaved really

need. Along with the often startling statistics our research has uncovered, we are gratified to share insights from our advisors, partners, and other renowned experts in the bereavement field on what we can learn from these numbers, and how we can use them to reconsider how best to serve the bereaved, as individuals, as organizations, and as a society.

A crucial part of these efforts will be raising awareness of bereavement as an issue that is not simply on the fringes of human experience, as we have often treated it in the past, but that in fact is central to and ever-present in our lives. For far too many, COVID-19 has been a terrible reminder that death and loss are all around us—but it also represents an opportunity to shift public perception, to bring a topic that has been for far too long shrouded in darkness into the light of day, where we can fully examine it and so figure out how best to help those who have to shoulder its burdens.

Loss doesn't skip any of us, and ignoring this fact only serves to deepen the pain it causes and the scars it leaves. The more we can defeat the counterproductive taboo against openly discussing death and its consequences,

the more understanding and support families will gain from every quarter: from friends, relatives, employers and colleagues, funeral professionals, hospices, life insurers, and more. Only then can we hope to have a lasting effect on the true cost of dying—its cost in money, in time, in stress, in harmed productivity and strained interpersonal bonds—to lessen its load for all families, everywhere.

Read on to learn all about the true dimensions of this cost, and how we might begin to address it as individuals and as a society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ron Gura', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Ron Gura
Co-Founder & CEO

Financial cost.

Financial cost

The high price tag of death

After a loved one dies, nearly every family faces a significant financial burden, with the average total bill standing at \$12,702. Families paid \$7,267 on average for a funeral. The median funeral cost has risen 7.6% in the last 5 years, according to the National Funeral Directors Association.¹ On top of the funeral, the family paid \$5,846 for additional professionals such as lawyers, financial advisors, or realtors.

This average, however, includes families who did not hire any professionals; counting only those who did, the average total cost was a whopping \$12,464. Among these families, lawyers' fees cost an average of \$3,910, an amount that was almost doubled for estates that went through full probate, which was the case for one-third of our respondents.

¹ Median cost of a funeral with viewing and burial with vault, percent change 2016-2021. NFDA News Release, November 4, 2021.

\$12,702

total financial cost of dying, including funeral and professional help

\$7,267

average funeral cost — up nearly 8% in the last 5 years

79%

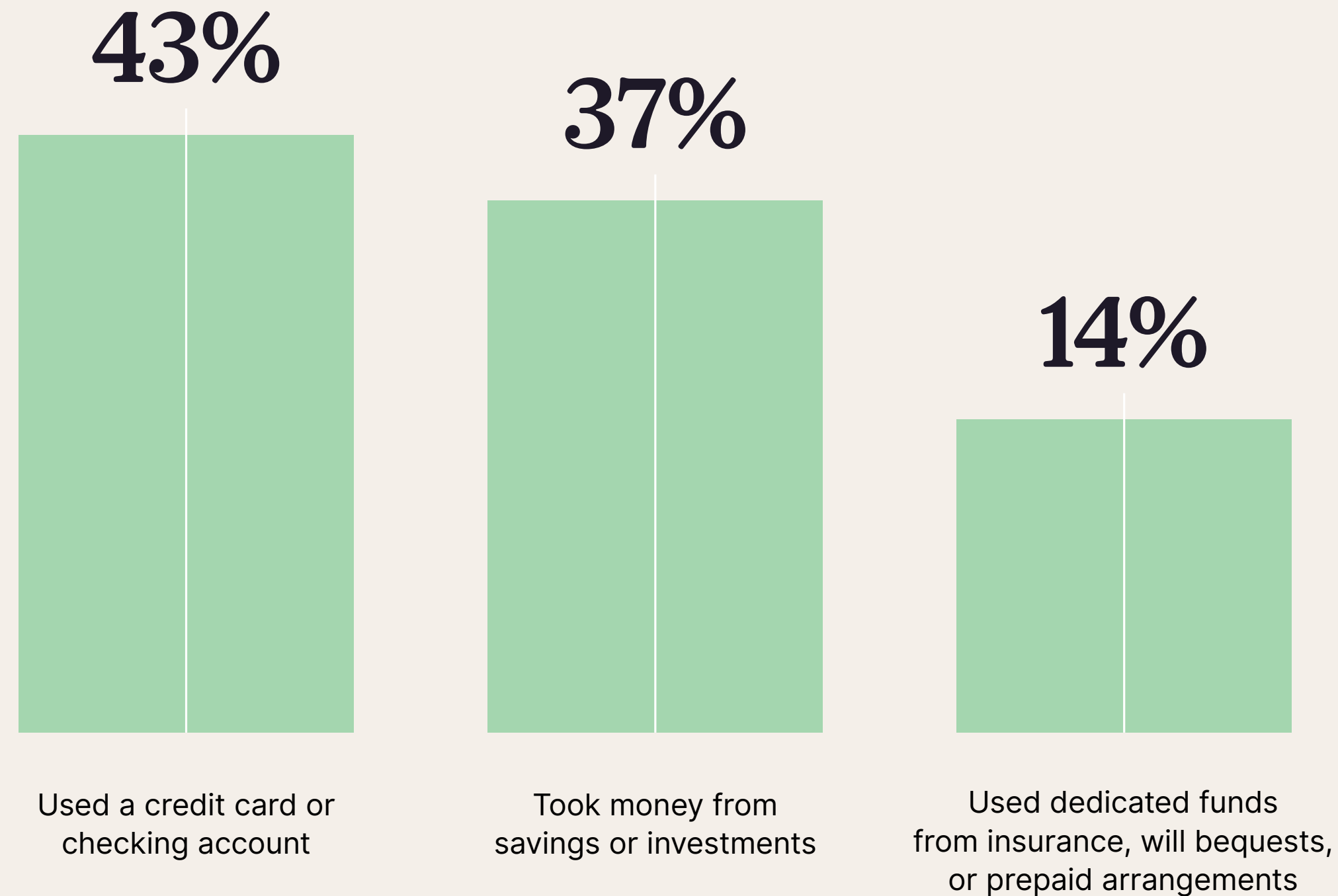
of respondents used funds from their own checking or savings accounts to cover expenses

Over 50%

had to deal with debt

Graph 1

How families paid immediate expenses



Including all court expenses and other fees, the full probate process costs an average of \$16,800.²

Hiring an accountant cost an average of \$2,456, while real estate professionals charged \$4,461. Care for one's mental health was an additional significant expense—therapists or social workers cost families an average of \$1,637.

More than half of families paid for the services of two or more professionals, with nearly a third hiring three or more, most commonly lawyers or realtors. High-income families were significantly more likely to hire professionals than lower earners (69% vs. 51%), and on average they paid twice as much for legal or real estate services, paying \$5,909 to lawyers and \$6,657 to realtors.

Every family had to find ways of covering these and other immediate expenses before potentially being reimbursed by the estate. In terms of funeral expenses in particular, 70% of funeral directors reported that families are less prepared to pay these costs now than they were ten years ago.³

² Based on data provided by Byron Batres, CFP, probate and estate settlement expert.

³ *State of the Funeral Industry*, LendingUSA, updated April 27, 2020.

Only one in seven families had their immediate costs prepaid or were able to use inherited funds. Most others used their own accounts or credit cards, or cashed in investments.

Graph 2

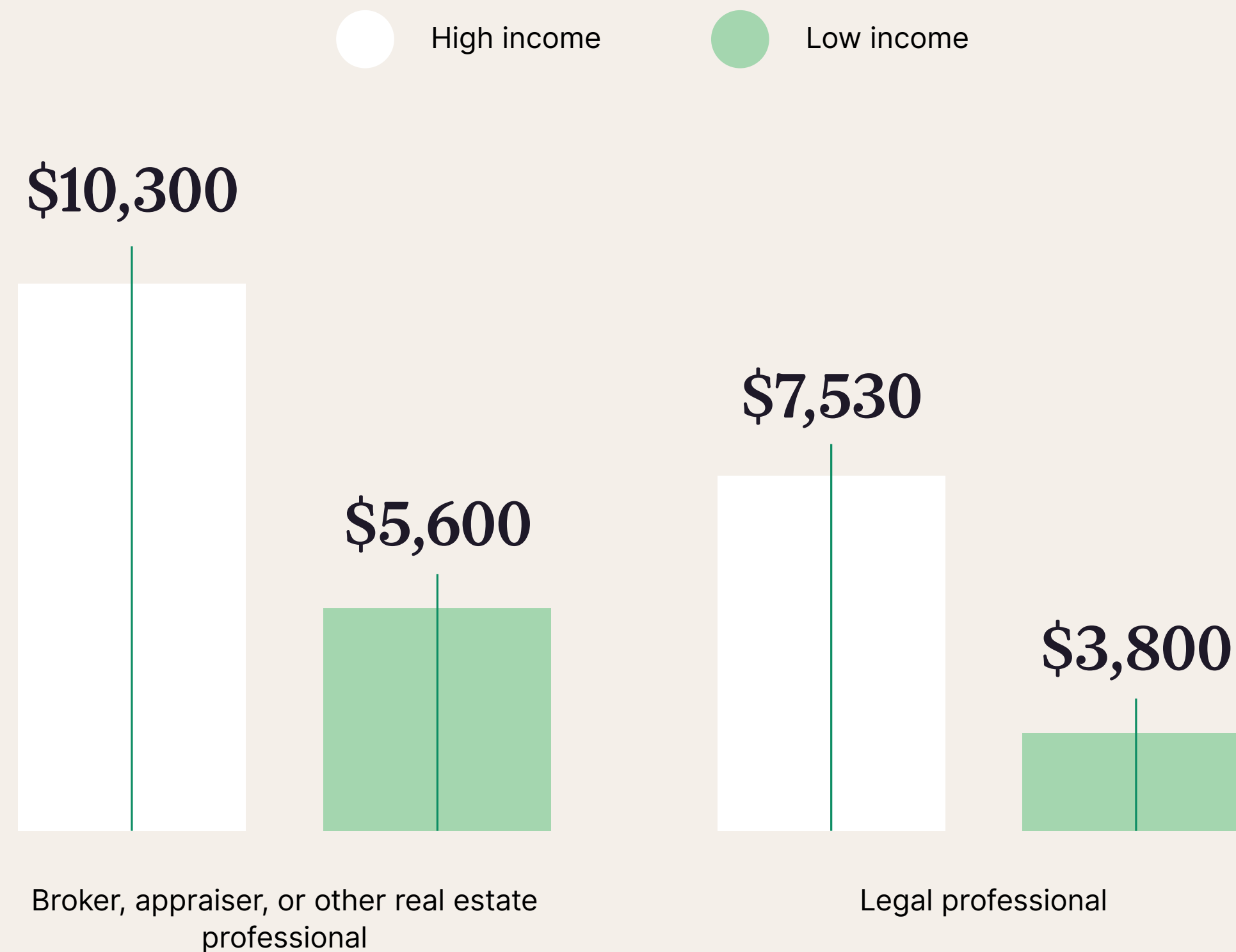
What kinds of professionals did families hire?

Percent of families who paid for professional assistance



Graph 3

Amount spent on legal and real estate services, by income level



Low-income families reported household income of under \$50K a year; high-income families reported household income of over \$125K a year.

Only one in seven families had any of their immediate costs prepaid or were able to use payable-on-death funds. Many used their own funds from savings or investments, with 36.1% paying from these sources, while 42.4% used checking accounts or credit cards. Significant numbers borrowed money from friends or relatives (8.6%) or sold their own belongings (8.4%) to cover costs. Younger people and lower-income families were even more likely to go to these lengths: 21.3% of 18-to-29-year-olds borrowed and 12.3% sold possessions, while 15.8% and 13% of those with incomes under \$50,000 did so.

More than 50% of families had to deal with estates with debt, but 53% of these estates were able to pay their debts in full and leave a sum for their heirs or beneficiaries. Another 16.7% were able to pay their debts, but any inheritance was significantly impacted or totally erased, while 9.25% could not cover their own debts and left some creditors unpaid, including potentially their own estate expenses.

Lower-income families were more likely to have estates that couldn't pay their debts: 38% reported the debts were paid, compared with 68% of high-income respondents.

The financial stress of death

More than just a price tag, high costs can cause their own trauma

by Shoshana Ungerleider, MD

Dying in America is expensive, and those costs fall heavy on those who are left behind. Family members so often aren't just facing immediate costs such as funerals and lawyers' fees. In many cases they are already dealing with a significant financial burden remaining from the days, months, or years prior to their loved one's final breath. According to AARP, family caregivers spend \$7,242 annually, or 26 percent of their income, on expenses related to caregiving.⁴

The family may also be experiencing fatigue and frustration from navigating the complexities around Medicare/Medicaid, private insurance, and estate planning, fields in which a lack

of information or a simple miscalculation has the potential to cause significant added financial burden. Without careful estate planning, for example, a person's home can be seized after death to pay off expenses incurred through Medicaid, even if the family member who was their primary caregiver is still living in the home.

A majority of families find themselves unprepared for and under-informed about the real financial costs of death, with few available resources for finding out, and can spend months or years terrified that a wrong move may wipe out their inheritance or even their own savings.

⁴ "Family Caregivers Spend More Than \$7,200 a Year on Out-of-Pocket Costs" by Nancy Kerr, aarp.com, June 29, 2021.

This trauma in turn reinforces our culture's fear of death, as the systems that govern a loved one's legacy often feel too big to wrap our heads around. Most of us focus instead on what we can handle and hope for the best on all the rest.

Our society has significant work to do to destigmatize death and bring these issues out into the open. We can all contribute to these efforts by being more sensitive to the needs of friends, colleagues, and especially employees who are dealing with recent loss. The larger project, however, will involve transforming the systems, bureaucracies, and laws that trap grieving families in cycles of financial trauma and uncertainty.

Families often spend months or years terrified that a wrong move may wipe out their inheritance or even their own savings.

Shoshana Ungerleider, MD



Founder, EndWell

Internal medicine physician, host of the TED Health Podcast, and leading voice in healthcare, Shoshana founded End Well, a nonprofit dedicated to making the end of life a human-centered experience, in 2017.

Time cost.

Time cost

All the hours lost

Winding down all of a loved one's affairs is a long process—often unexpectedly long. On average, families spend 13 months after their loved one's death completing all the necessary tasks, or 20 months if the estate must go through the full probate process.⁵ Most respondents underestimated how long it would take: 54% said it took longer than they expected, and 31% said it took *much* longer.

⁵ Based on data provided by Byron Batres, CFP, probate and estate settlement expert.

420 hours of work to handle the average estate

5 phone calls had to be made a week; **46%** of people spent more than **26 hours per month** on the phone

54% reported the process took them longer than they expected

13 months to finish the whole process—20 if the estate goes through full probate

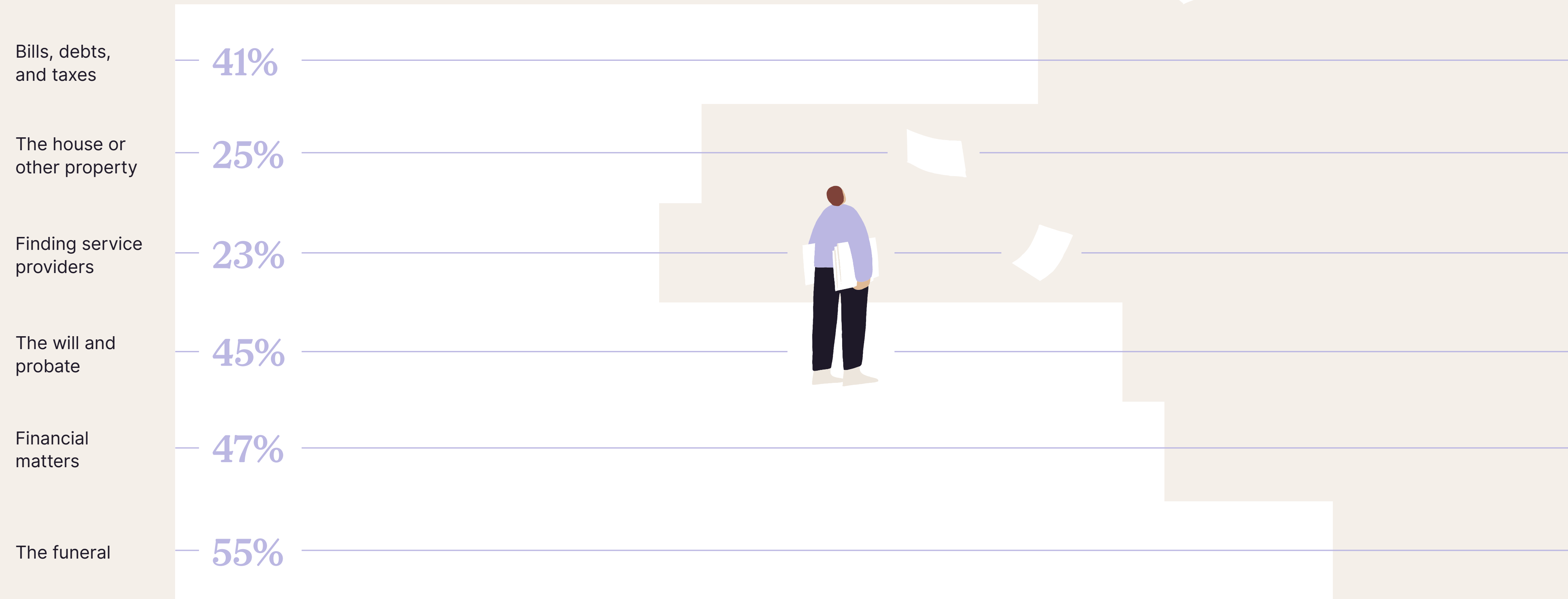
Graph 4

Most time-consuming tasks

55%

Percent of families that spent substantial time dealing with

of people reported that the funeral was very time-consuming.



For most families, it was a long process. Nearly half took on three or more very time-consuming tasks.

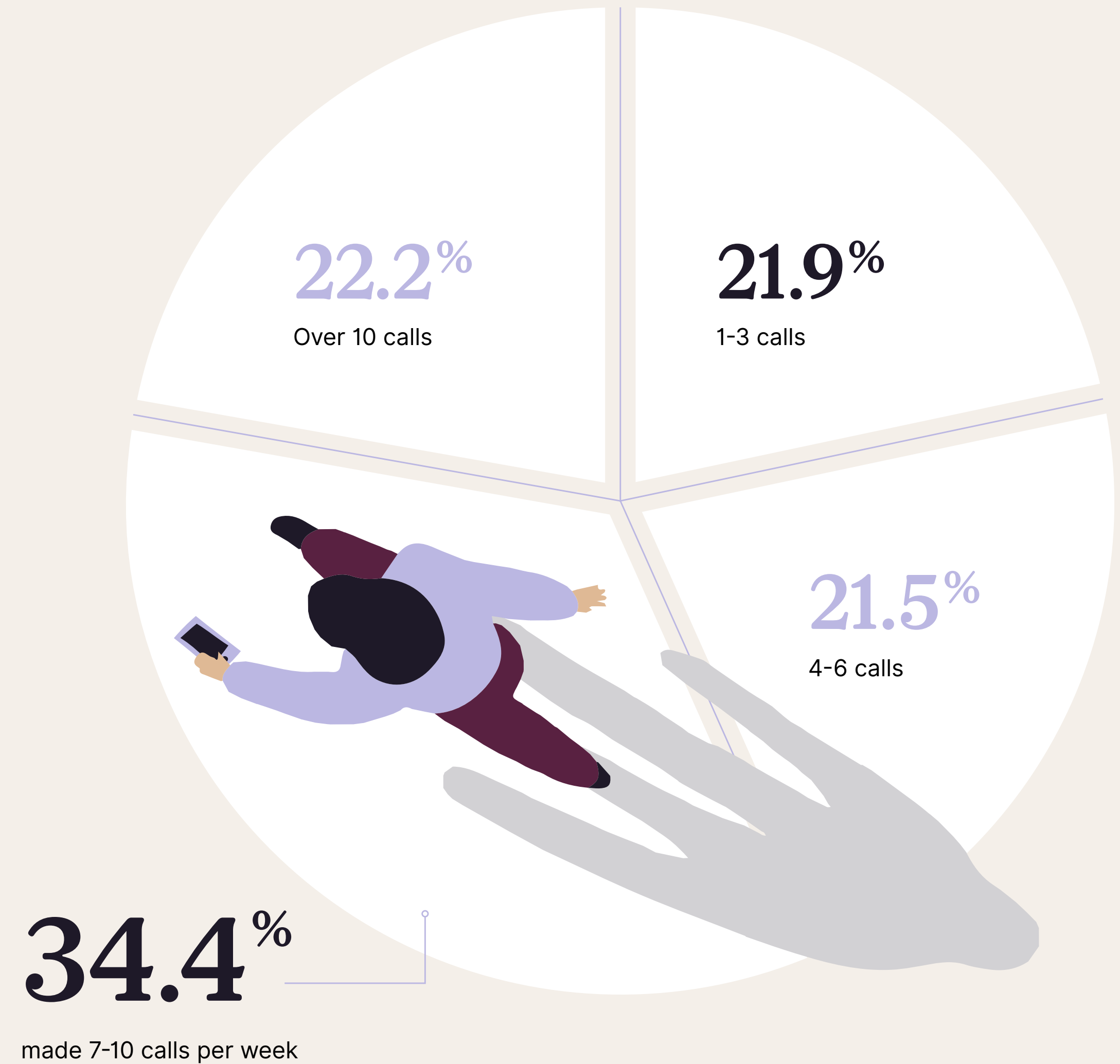
For most families, the process involved several particularly time-consuming responsibilities. Nearly half said that they took on at least three tasks that took a significant amount of time to complete.

These duties also involved spending a lot of time on the phone: 62% of respondents made at least 4 phone calls a week, totaling over 220 calls over the course of the 13 months it took to handle all the details. Estate executors made more than 6 calls a week on average; for those whose estates went through the full probate process, that comes to a total of 520 extra calls over 20 months.

Graph 5

Extra phone calls made each week

Percent of families making calls to settle affairs



Loss is a long road

Time can be its own burden
when there are no shortcuts

by Avi Z. Kestenbaum, Esq.

Every estate is settled eventually. Even the most complex one. But it is very often a long road to get there—and if you think you know how long, you probably don't.

My advice to an individual would always be: Get an advisor—preferably an estate lawyer, but it could also be an experienced accountant for some estates—who will fully explain the process and the expectations. Get help wherever you can, and don't fall into the trap of thinking that it will all be done soon.

This advice is just a stopgap in a system that is often painfully slow, however. The truth is that significant changes

need to happen in our social and professional worlds to accommodate the huge amount of time it takes. We need to recognize fully how much strain this can place on individuals and families and act accordingly.

Because time spent is never just time. It is lost productivity at work. It means extra strain on leisure time and family relationships. And time can place its own burden on finances—as attorneys' fees, property upkeep, taxes, and more pile up as the months go by. Most of all, the more time it takes, the more stress and anxiety increases, especially if you don't know how long it is going to take. There's a difference, after all, between sailing down the highway for

Time spent is never just time. It is lost productivity at work. It means extra strain on leisure time and family relationships.

an hour and driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic for an hour, not knowing if it will take an hour or five. And this stress and anxiety comes right after the loss of a loved one, making it all the more acute.

As a society, then, we can be much more aware not only of the stress that our bereaved friends, neighbors, coworkers, or employees are under, but also understand that the pressure will persist for a very long time. We are good at helping people and providing them with comfort and support in the first few weeks, and of course people need that in their immediate shock and grief. But keep in mind that even once the difficult days of grief are done, they are going to continue to be burdened for many, many months. They may not show it, but it is happening. So even one year later, try to ask: How are you? Is there anything I can do to help? That will be very meaningful.

Avi Z. Kestenbaum



Partner at Meltzer, Lippe, Goldstein & Breitstone

Co-chair of Meltzer Lippe's *Trusts & Estates* Practice Group, nationally ranked Tier 1 by *U.S. News and World Report*, Avi has supported many hundreds of families through the estate settlement process over the course of more than 20 years in the industry. He is an Adjunct Tax Professor at Hofstra University School of Law and an ACTEC Fellow, and he sits on the editorial board of *Trusts & Estates* magazine.

Impact on work.

Impact on work

The cost in productivity and job security

Bereavement has a notable effect on employed family members' job security and work productivity: 46% of respondents had to spend more than 1 hour per workday to deal with tasks related to their loved one, meaning a total of 325 hours of potential lost productivity over the course of the average 13-month process. Nearly 22% reported spending over 40 hours a month on these tasks, or the equivalent of an extra week's worth of work, every month, on top of their regular job.

Of employed respondents, 47.1% said their job performance was negatively affected, while 9.4% felt that the situation harmed their job security, and 7.1% said they felt that their reputation at work had declined. The most common work

52%

reported that their job performance was harmed

31%

said they found it hard to concentrate at work

70%

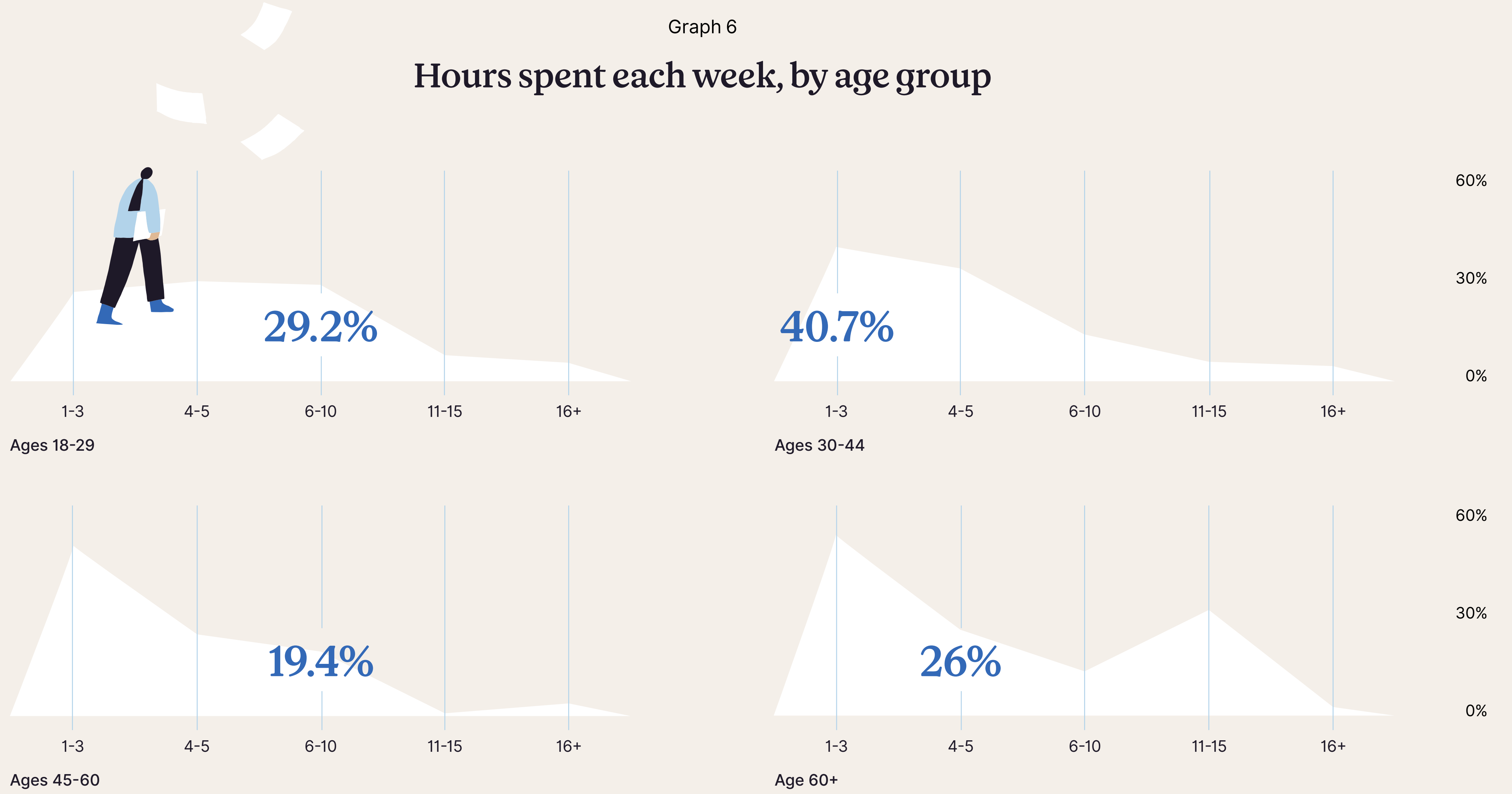
of those under 30 reported concern for their job, lowered performance, or both

1 hour per workday

average time all respondents spent dealing with responsibilities

Graph 6

Hours spent each week, by age group



Nearly half of employed respondents said their job performance was negatively affected by loss: 31% found it hard to focus, and 25% were constantly distracted.

Graph 7

Impact on work, by age group



impact was reduced concentration: 31% said they found it hard to focus at work, and 25% reported being constantly distracted. Job-related effects were particularly prevalent among young people: 18-to-29-year-olds were twice as likely as the general population to suffer from these impacts. Of this group, 30.3% were less productive at work, 40.4% had trouble concentrating, and 12.4% were afraid of losing their job as a result of their bereavement. Among respondents who are employed full-time, 40% said additional paid leave would have been helpful, and 60% wanted more flexibility or support from their employer. Of people under age 45, fully 12.3% considered quitting their job due to the stress of their loss. Surprisingly, however, according to the New York Life Foundation, only 28% of employed adults know about the grief support and/or bereavement resources offered by their place of work.⁶

⁶ *The State of Grief Report: COVID-19's Impact on Bereavement Support in America*, New York Life Foundation, December 2021, p. 6.

Bringing your loss to work

We need to talk openly about how best to support bereaved employees

by David Kessler

It is important to realize how much we underestimate the logistics of loss. We think of a phone call here, a paper that needs to be signed there—but it's so much more. It's months upon months of phone calls, returning calls, getting to the right department, and signing papers, all while contending with intense emotions, and often an inability to fully focus. You don't really fully help your bereaved coworker by saying, "I'm so sorry your loved one died." You help by seeing what they're going through and supporting them. When their phone rings and they've got to step out of a meeting, you understand that this is their reality.

The boss can help and validate these unwanted tasks by telling the team: "Jane will be making some calls that may sound personal in nature. We're going to support Jane in this, as we would want to be supported when this happens to us." Bereavement leave is important, and everyone should be able to take time off to go through the often-exhausting experience of planning and holding a funeral. We also must understand that all the logistical tasks are not going to neatly fit in those days. Another often overlooked mistake is employers saying, "Oh, stay home, take all the time you need. We'll be fine without you." This can backfire, making the bereaved think

they're not valued at work. What they really want you to say is, "You're valuable to us; what can we do to temporarily ease your workload and help you through this period?"

This is all part of taking bereavement out of the shadows, talking about it openly so that we can deal with it realistically. Once it's out in the open, the employee can advocate for themselves and manage expectations.

It will mean a lot for them to be able to say, "I'm having trouble concentrating. I'm not doing as good a job as I would like to." They know better than anyone what their level of focus is. But if they can't talk about it, they become anxious about their performance and job security.

Instead, we want to create an environment where they can ask for what they need. "How can we make sure you are still as effective as you like to be?" That encourages the employee to say, "For the next few weeks, can Sarah double-check my work to make sure I didn't miss anything?"

That level of self-awareness means a lot to an employer in turn. By being upfront about what they are going through, the

bereaved shows that they care about the company and are communicating about their needs, limitations, and desire to do a good job.

There's a paradigm shift happening in workplaces. For decades, the motto was: leave your personal life at home. But that was always unrealistic. More and more, employers are understanding the reality that we bring our whole selves to work. Companies are putting enormous effort into employee engagement—and bereavement is an often-overlooked engagement opportunity. If an employee has the sense that the people they work with understand what they are going through, it will only positively impact their outlook, their loyalty, and over the long term, their productivity as well.

David Kessler



Chief Empathy Officer

David is one of the world's foremost experts on grief and loss, who teaches people around the world how we can live fulfilled lives even in the aftermath of tragedy. He is the author of six books, including the recent best-seller *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

Mental cost.

Mental cost

The effect on the mind and the body

The tasks and duties bereaved families face are confusing and stressful: Over 30% said they simply didn't know what to do. For respondents under 45, that number went up to 43%. Fear of making mistakes was reported in similar numbers. Mistakes can cause an estate to lose money and even land an executor in personal legal trouble, and are often thus a particular source of stress.

Many individual tasks were stressful for a significant number of respondents, including planning the funeral (34%), communicating with family (31%), closing accounts (29%; 36% of executors), dealing with the house (29%; 32% of executors), and probate (25%; 34% of executors). Perhaps unsurprisingly, estates with debt generally caused more

17.5% of respondents had panic attacks—
including 29% of those under 45

57% of respondents suffered from
**clinical mental or physical health
symptoms—**

with most experiencing three different symptoms

80% said they did not know what to do,
lacked guidance, or were afraid of
making mistakes

Graph 8

Most stressful tasks

35%

of families found planning the funeral to a stressful undertaking

Percent of families that found each task stressful

Death pronouncement and certification

24%

Probate and estate administration

26%

Dealing with the house and property

28%

Closing accounts

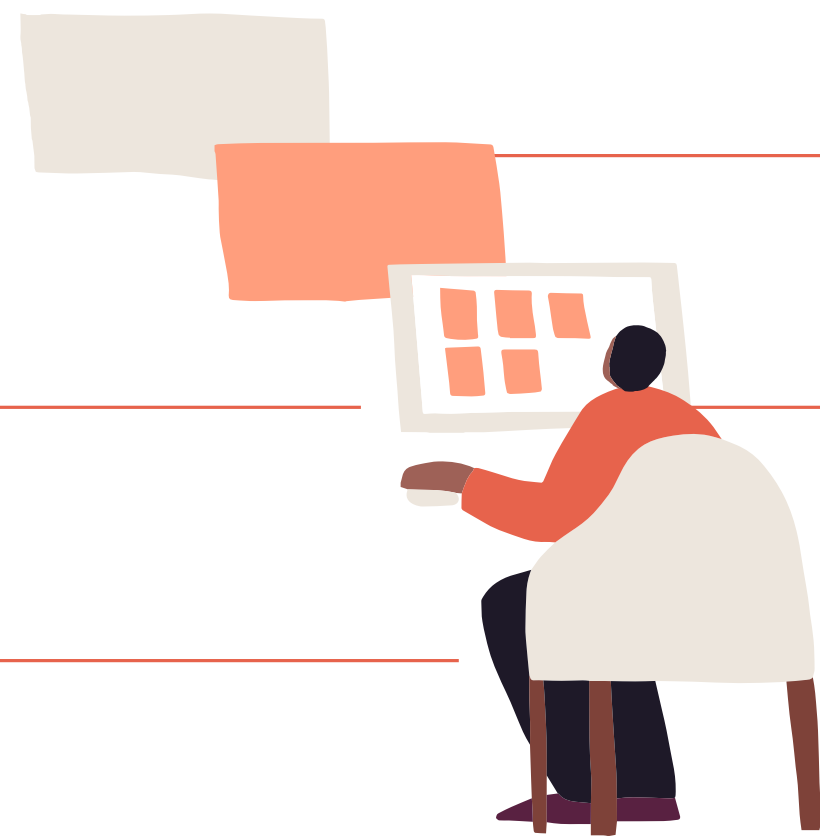
29%

Working with family

32%

Planning the funeral

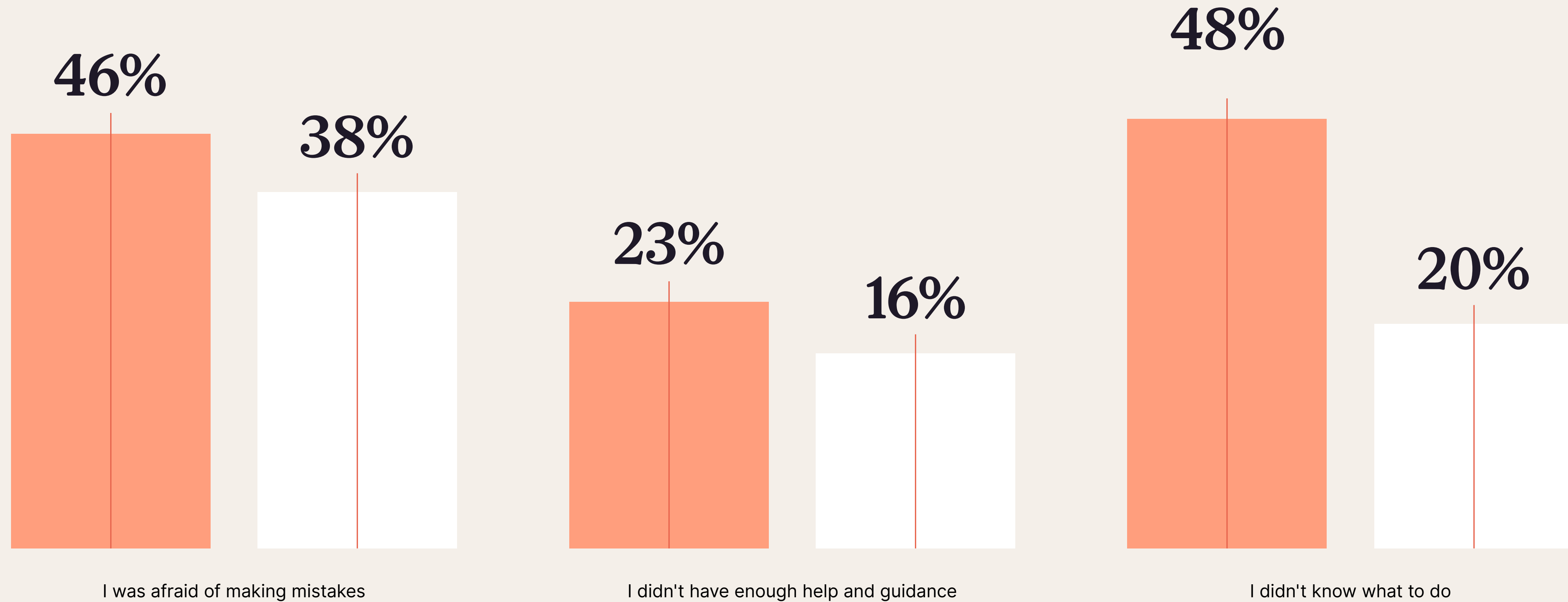
35%



Graph 9

The subjective experience of handling responsibilities

● Low income ● High income



Low-income families reported household income of under \$50K a year; high-income families reported household income of over \$125K a year

Loss-related stress can affect the body and mind deeply: Over 57% suffered from at least one clinical symptom, with the average person experiencing three or more.

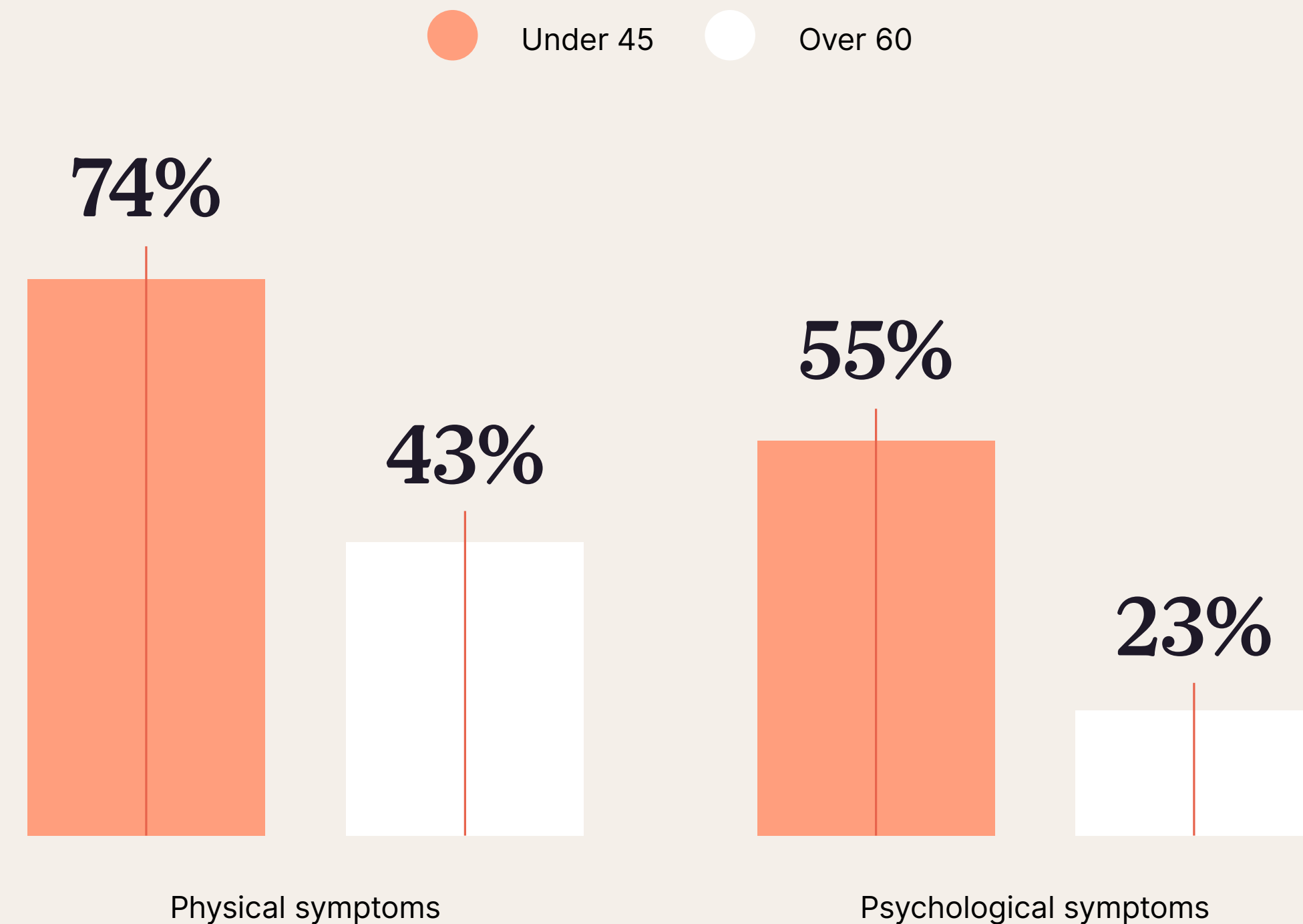
Incidence of stress-related symptoms by age, gender, and income

stress to those who had to handle them, and lower-income families were considerably more likely than higher earners to report feeling lost in the process.

All of this stress can hit a person's body and mind very hard: Over 57% of respondents suffered from at least one clinical symptom of stress, with the average person suffering from three or more such symptoms. Over 30% of people got stress headaches, and 42% percent suffered from stress-related fatigue. Panic attacks were common: 17.5% reported experiencing them, a number that goes up to 29% for those under 45. Bereavement can even impact you cognitively: 16% of respondents were affected by memory impairment, including 20% of women.

Overall, women were almost 40% more likely than men to suffer from physical symptoms of stress, and 60% more likely to experience psychological symptoms. Those under 45 were more than twice as likely to have these symptoms as people 60 or older. Stress symptoms were also much more common for people with lower incomes.

Percent reporting stress-related symptoms, by age group

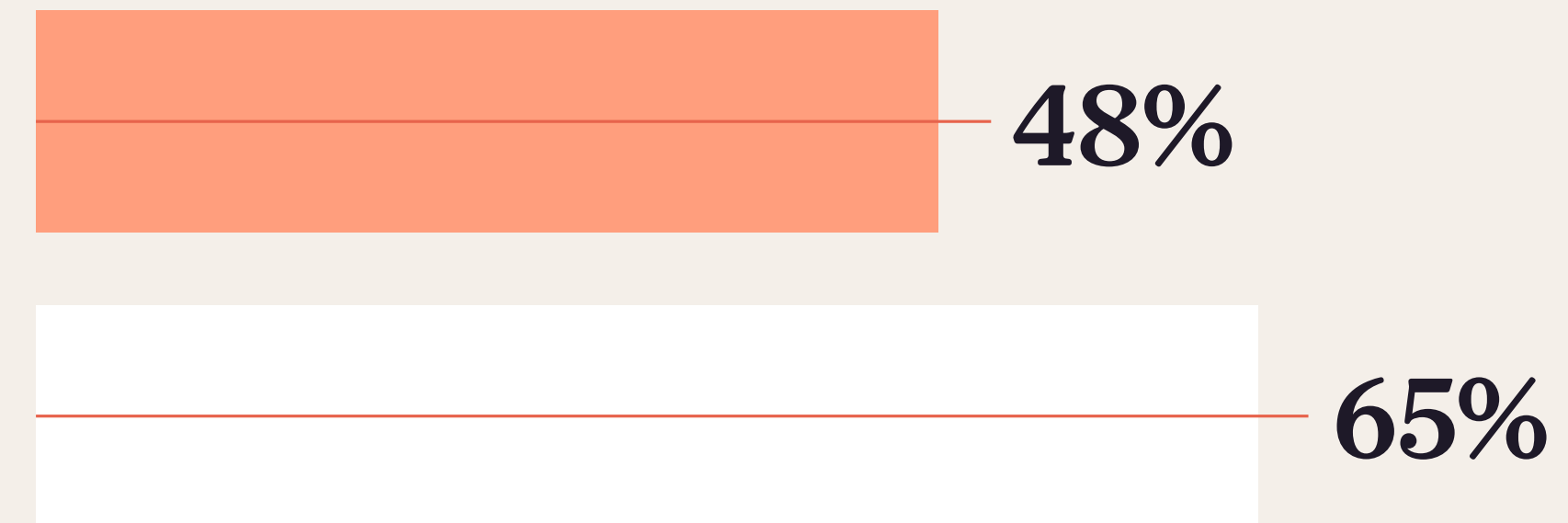


Under-45 group includes those reporting ages 18-29 or 30-44. The differences were particularly stark between the two displayed age groups. Of those 45-60, 56% experienced physical symptoms and 33% experienced psychological ones.

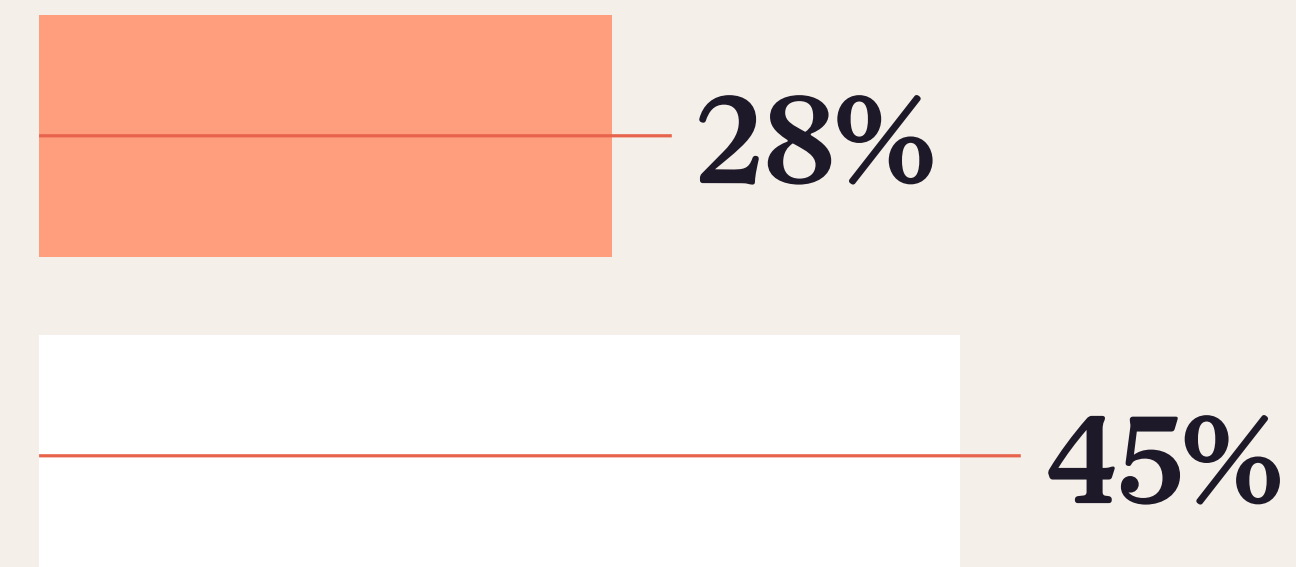
Percent reporting stress-related symptoms, by gender

● Men ● Women

Physical symptoms



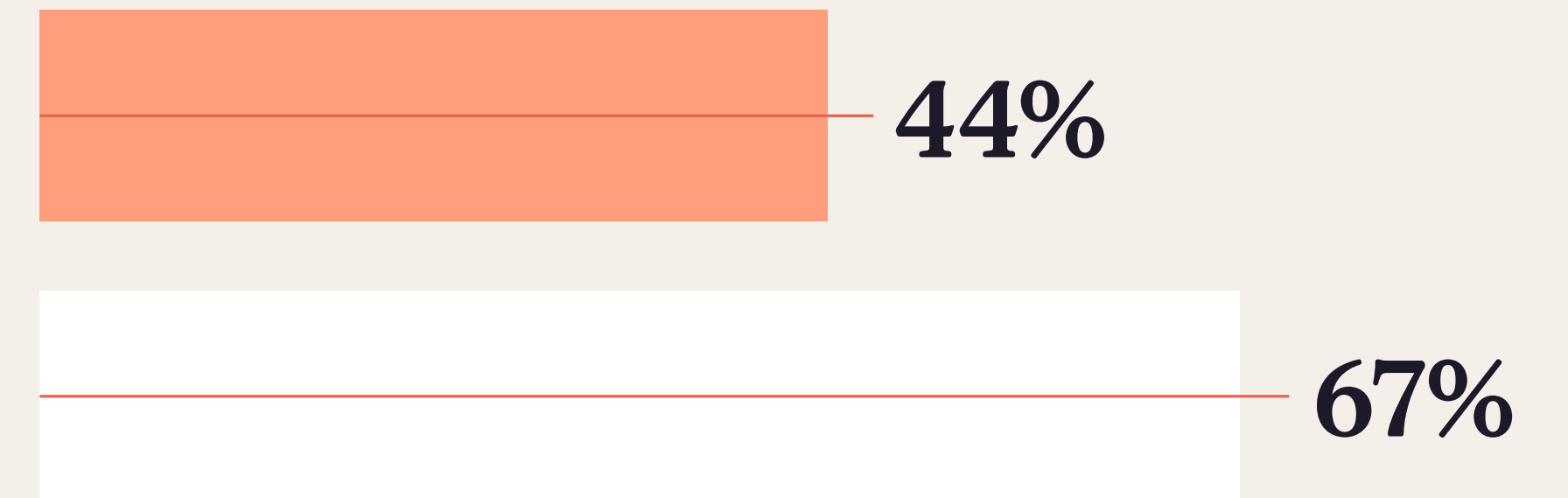
Psychological symptoms



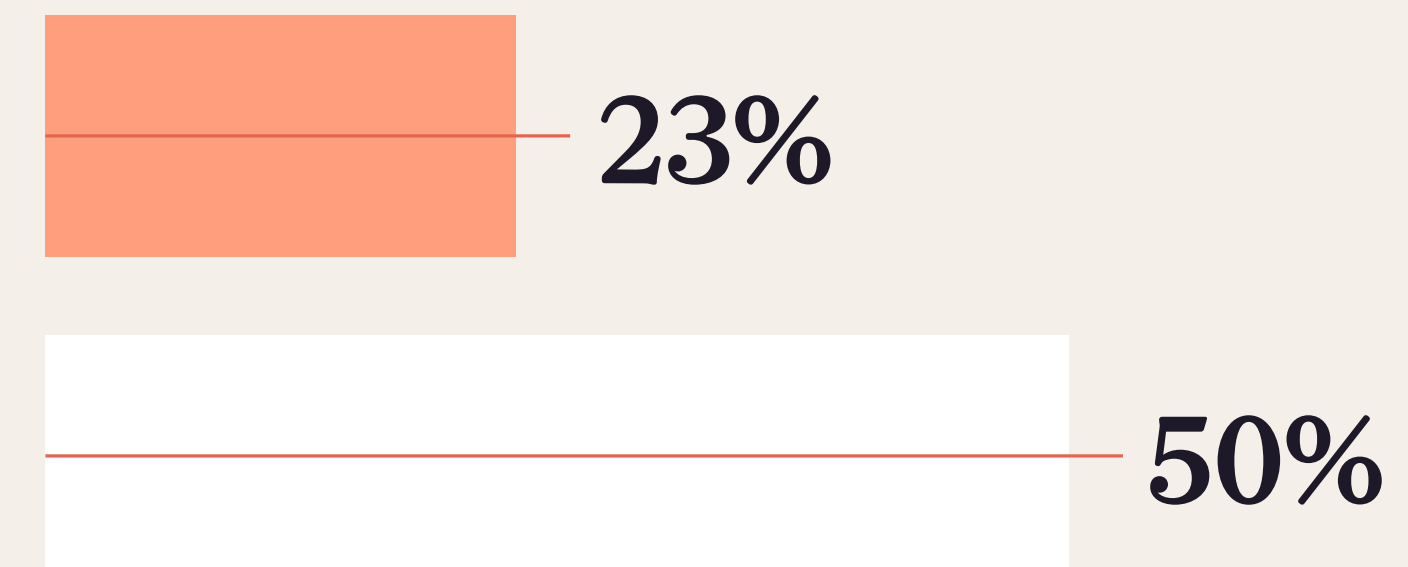
Percent reporting stress-related symptoms, by income level

● High income ● Low income

Physical symptoms



Psychological symptoms



Low-income families reported household income of under \$50K a year; high-income families reported household income of over \$125K a year

Making room for change

Loss alters everything, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing

by BJ Miller, MD

When you lose a loved one, it affects everything in you. We don't talk about this, so people can start to think something is seriously wrong with them. But they're not crazy: Bereavement is emotionally and physically taxing. It is hard on your body, it's hard on your mind, it's hard on your life. By not talking about it openly, we have made it much harder than it needs to be. People aren't informed, so they're unprepared for the clerical to-do lists, the tasks that need to be done, which adds to the mental load and the stress.

The good news is that when we give them the guidance they need, when we fill that knowledge gap, bereft people tend to feel a lot better. But a certain level of stress is built in.

The processes of loss are inherently hard, often profoundly so. They crowd out other things. And so we must do our best to carve out a space for them, and let that stress play out.

Grief is a force that has its way with us – it's never totally in our control. We should build understanding of this altered state into our interactions with the bereft, whether they are friends, neighbors, coworkers, or employees. For example, a bereft coworker may be mentally elsewhere, or unable to pay attention to the norms of professionalism. Or perhaps when everyone else on the team is talking about analytical matters, they're finding themselves in a more emotional place.

People aren't informed, so they're unprepared for the clerical to-do lists, the tasks that need to be done, which adds to the mental load and the stress.

Be kind and forgiving during this period, treating what they say or do with the benefit of the doubt. At the same time, fully honoring the process that they are going through doesn't mean simply giving it a wide berth. Loss makes us more open, more tender. The emotional side of life tends to get dialed up. It can make for very creative moments as we look at old things with fresh eyes. It may be true, then, that a bereft person is not themselves right now. Or rather, they are a different version of themselves. But don't dismiss them; they also might be having some particularly special insights.

A family member or an employer might keep an eye out for and honor these changes. Not only is this the most supportive way to approach them, but this may be a source of powerful insights that may help them, or the company, or the family unit, or society. And, since vulnerability is the very thing that connects us all, whether we realize it or not, tending to those in grief is an effective way to light up the community. After all, someday we will all be in their shoes.

BJ Miller, MD



Compassion Advisor
at Empathy

BJ is a palliative care physician who speaks internationally on how to live well in the face of illness and death. He is the cofounder of online palliative and holistic care provider Mettle Health and coauthor of *A Beginner's Guide to the End*.

Burden on the family.

Burden on the family

The cost shared by all

Although many of the responsibilities involved in settling a loved one's affairs fall on the shoulders of one person (usually the executor), the challenges of these weeks and months impose a heavy load on the whole family: An average of four family members were involved in the various responsibilities. Compounding this, 31% of families reported that communication within the family was one of their greatest challenges.

Different family members tend to take on specific tasks. The duties of planning and arranging the funeral; dealing with bills, debts, and taxes; and engaging with service providers and professional help were more likely (compound average 41.5% vs. 36%) to involve women. Men were more likely to be

75%

of families enlisted help from friends or community

96%

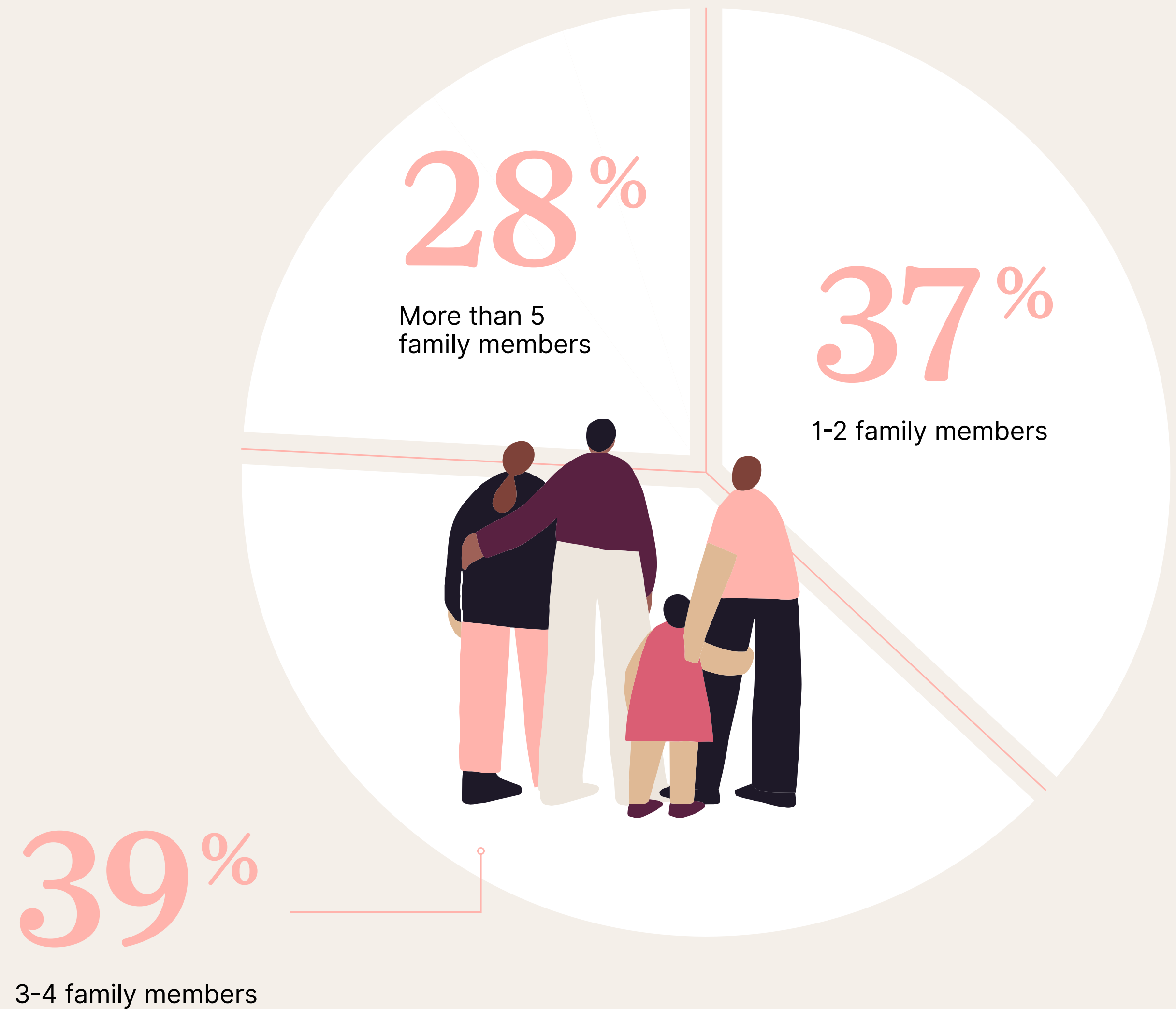
of young people got help from friends or community

An average of four members of each family were involved in the process

involved in dealing with the house, the will or probate, and financial matters like bank accounts, etc.

These responsibilities can in turn have an impact on whole communities. Almost 42% of respondents sought the help of friends or more distant relatives, while 33% depended on assistance from members of their community or their religious circle. Young people were particularly likely to seek help from these sources: 54% asked friends and family to assist and 42.7% involved those they knew from the community or a place of worship.

Graph 13
How many family members were involved



The impact of loss-related tasks extends out from immediate families. Nearly 42% sought help from friends or other relatives, while 33% asked their community or religious circles.

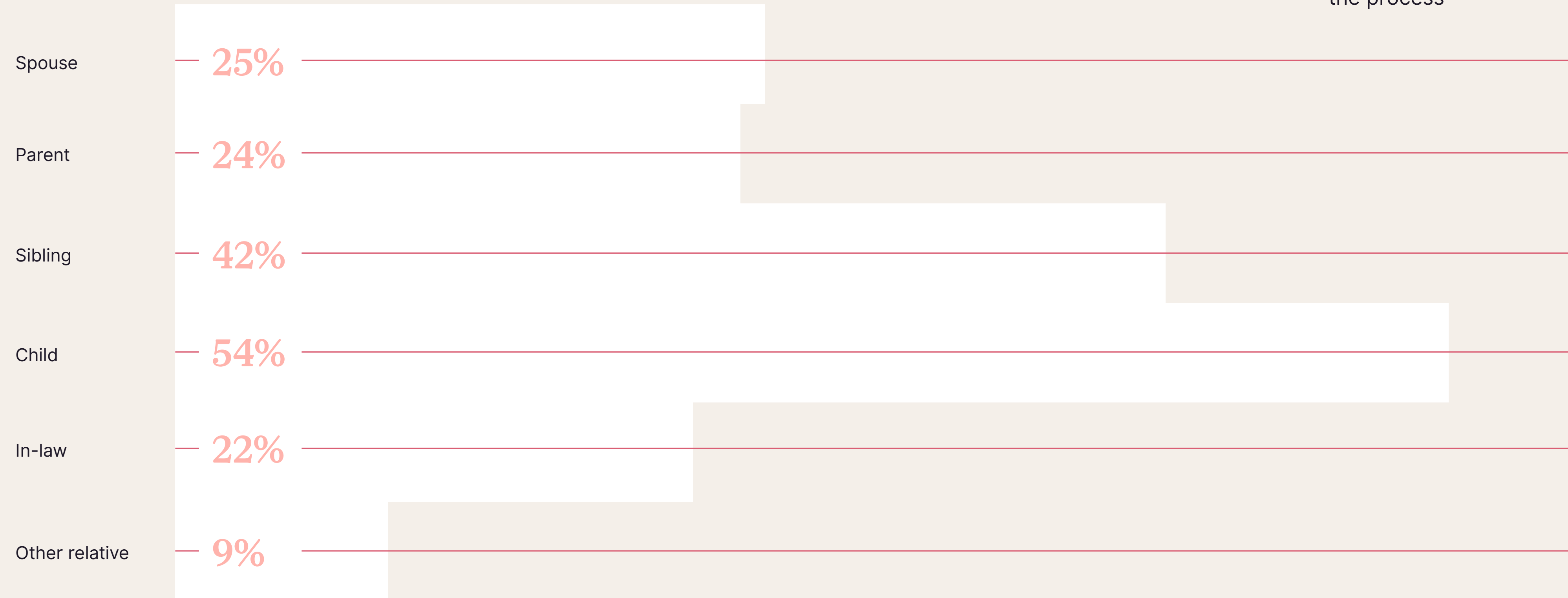
Graph 14

Which family members were involved

54%

Percent reporting that this relative of the deceased helped out

of respondents reported that the deceased's children helped with the process



Community is key

We can't share the burden
if death stays in the shadows

by David Kessler

If there is one takeaway here, it is that the whole process is more than any one person can handle.

No one person's emotional and practical bandwidth can handle it all, nor can one person's skill set handle it all. It has to be spread across families, or across whole communities.

Four family members were involved for the average family—and yet most families also sought outside help. Even when there is a family to rely on, there often isn't anyone who knows what to do, who has the requisite knowledge. In general, this is unfamiliar territory for everyone.

Is there any other important life event that is so cloaked with lack of information?

Most of us know a lot of the details of our friends' lives. We know which of our friends do yoga and what gym they go to. Whose kids go to private school or public school. What restaurants they like; who cuts their hair. But what funeral home does my friend's family use? We've never talked about that. What lawyer did they go to when their mother died? What was the estate process like? I know none of that. We don't talk about those things. When it comes to this aspect of life, the important facts stay hidden.

Of course if you ask someone who's gone through it for help, they're more than happy to share what they know. But then you're getting the information only at the moment of greatest need. In general you want to make sure the phone number for the fire department is handy before your house is on fire. These all-important conversations about loss and everything that comes after, though, we rarely have them ahead of time.

We live in a world where we have become so separated from the dying and grieving process that talking about it has become taboo. And that lack of discussion means that no one shares knowledge. It becomes held in a mystery, and then it really does take a community to help people get through the experience.

We should instead be encouraging family members and community members to talk more openly about this difficult time of life and share the relevant information, so that it doesn't fall heavily on a bereaved family at the hardest moment.

One step might just be being open with people about the resources you know about: I know a good funeral home.

I know someone who's good with dealing with bills. We had a good experience with this lawyer.

This process really does take a village. We tend to look at a family that is going through loss and perceive how sad they are, how deep their grief seems to be. We don't necessarily see how stressed they are, how busy, how lost for practical guidance along with whatever emotional guidance they might need. As a culture, we have to broaden our understanding of all the burdens that come on top of the grief.

David Kessler



Chief Empathy Officer

David is one of the world's foremost experts on grief and loss, who teaches people around the world how we can live fulfilled lives even in the aftermath of tragedy. He is the author of six books, including the recent best-seller *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

Afterword.

Reckoning with the real cost of death

By any measure, the loss of a loved one is a costly process in the United States today. With about 3 million people dying every year even before COVID-19, the average \$12,702 price tag of funeral expenses and lawyers' fees adds up to over \$40 billion spent yearly—a number that is sure to rise even further due to the pandemic and the rising costs of items like funerals and caskets.

As this report demonstrates, however, we may spend the GDP of a medium-sized country on death-related expenses, but the true costs of dying are higher still. Lost work productivity accounts for at least as much (one estimate from back in 2002 put it at over \$37 billion⁷), and that isn't even taking into account the truly massive investment of time and effort: literally hundreds of billions of phone calls, and trillions of hours spent slogging through paperwork and bureaucracy—all time that could have been spent on much more important things, like being there for each other,

sharing memories of those who are gone, and dealing with and healing from the intensity of our grief.

Instead, the processes of loss exacerbate issues both interpersonal and personal, weakening the family unit and piling on the stress. Recent studies reveal that each death leaves behind an average of nine grieving family members. Our numbers thus suggest that are 3.2 million people newly dealing with panic attacks every year, and 2.9 million suffering from memory issues related to their loss, among many other physical and emotional symptoms.

This all adds up to a huge and growing problem: A financial misfortune, a massive drain on resources, time, and productivity, a terrible shock to family relationships, and a mental health crisis whose scope we have only just started to comprehend. Yet for all of these factors—the shocking numbers that will only steadily climb, the looming reality

⁷ “New Index Aims to Calculate The Annual Cost of Despair,” by Jeffrey Zaslow, *The Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 2002.

that they will only become more pressing as expenses rise and our population ages—the vast majority of people are completely unaware of them. The costs of loss are far from a matter of everyday conversation. Our cultural taboo against talking openly about the inevitable fact of death has allowed it to grow in the shadows, its price tag skyrocketing while we pretend it won't affect us.

Recent events have made it clear that we can no longer push this awareness aside. The coronavirus didn't create the problems brought by loss, but it has put them into stark relief, and now we no longer have the luxury of ignoring the crisis that is upon us. It is well past time for us to shift our perspective and face the costs of dying head-on.

But openly acknowledging the inevitability and difficulty of death is only a first step—more than each of us individually becoming more aware of and clear about the challenges of loss, our society and our economy will need to undergo significant changes. Employers, for example, will have to reconsider their approach to bereavement and work. Meanwhile, any businesses that deal directly with bereaved families will have to take responsibility for their part in the

expanding burden of loss, adding safeguards and services to better support their customers and treat them as whole people.

Luckily, we are a notably adaptable society. The innovations and challenges of the last few decades (and of the last two years) have upended our world again and again, and we have rolled with the changes, finding our equilibrium in an ever more digital, virtual, global, and instantaneous world. There is no doubt that once we understand what must be done to counteract the worst consequences of loss, we will adjust to these changes and incorporate them into our perspective and our actions going forward.

We have dedicated our efforts to catalyzing this cultural shift, helping families navigate the challenges they face after losing a loved one, while partnering with like-minded companies to create real change in the way we think about and talk about loss and its aftermath. We are here to offer our support as our society adapts to this crisis—and we invite anyone who wishes to come join us on our mission to change the way the world deals with loss.

Appendix.

Methodology

This study's findings are based on a survey with 2,138 qualified respondents in total. The target group was family members who lost a loved one in the last 5 years and took part in winding down their loved one's affairs. In addition to answers about this experience, respondents supplied demographic information that has been used to break down the data throughout the report.

Survey data was supplemented with quantitative and qualitative data from probate and estate settlement subject-matter experts.

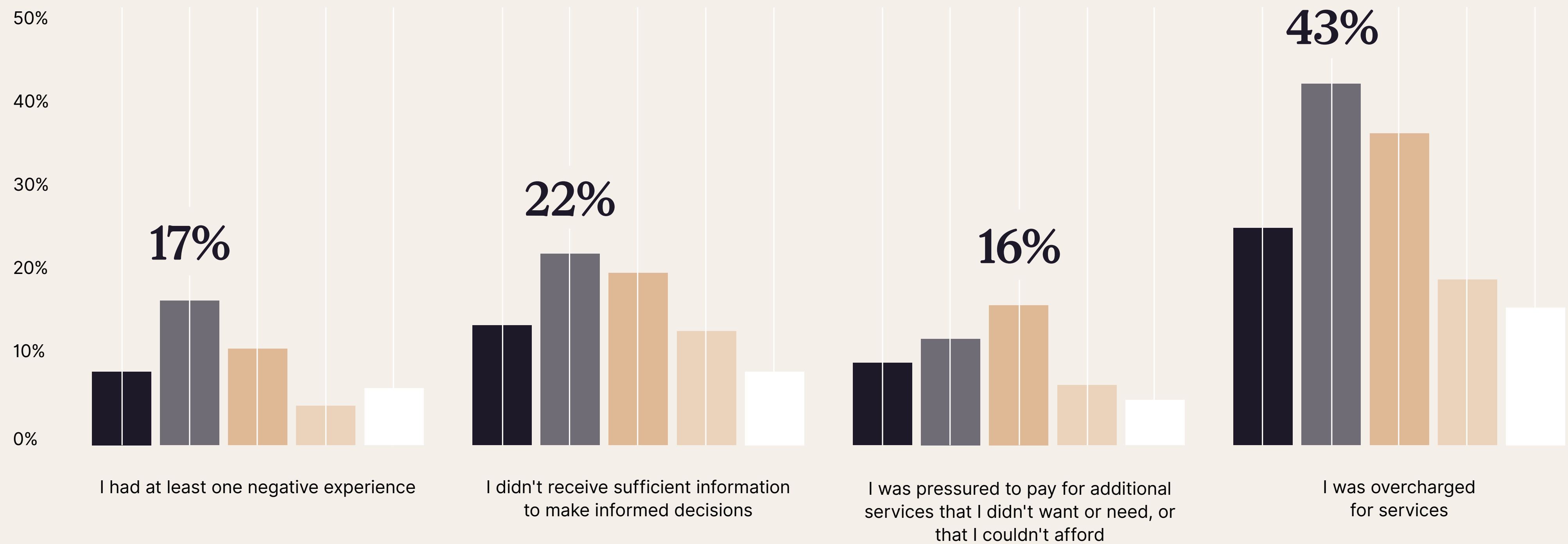
Young people experiencing loss

- Compared with the general population, 18-29-year-olds were almost twice as likely to have made over 10 calls a week to handle their loved one's affairs.
- Of younger respondents, 51% said that five or more family members were involved in the process; this response was twice as common for young people as it was for the general population.
- Young people reported 42% of the time that handling their loved one's affairs took much longer than they expected.
- Out of those 18-29 years old, 23% sold belongings or took out a loan, compared with just 5% of respondents aged 60 or older. Conversely, only 5% of younger people used dedicated funds like insurance proceeds, will bequests, or prepaid funds; those over 60 did so three times as often.
- Younger respondents reported 43% of the time that they had at least one bad experience with a service provider, versus just 25% of the general population. They were also three times more likely than those 60+ to feel they did not receive sufficient information before making decisions.
- Similarly, 18-29-year-olds were three times more likely than those over 60 to report that they did not have sufficient help or guidance, and they were twice as likely to tell us they did not know what to do.

Graph 15

Negative experiences, by age group

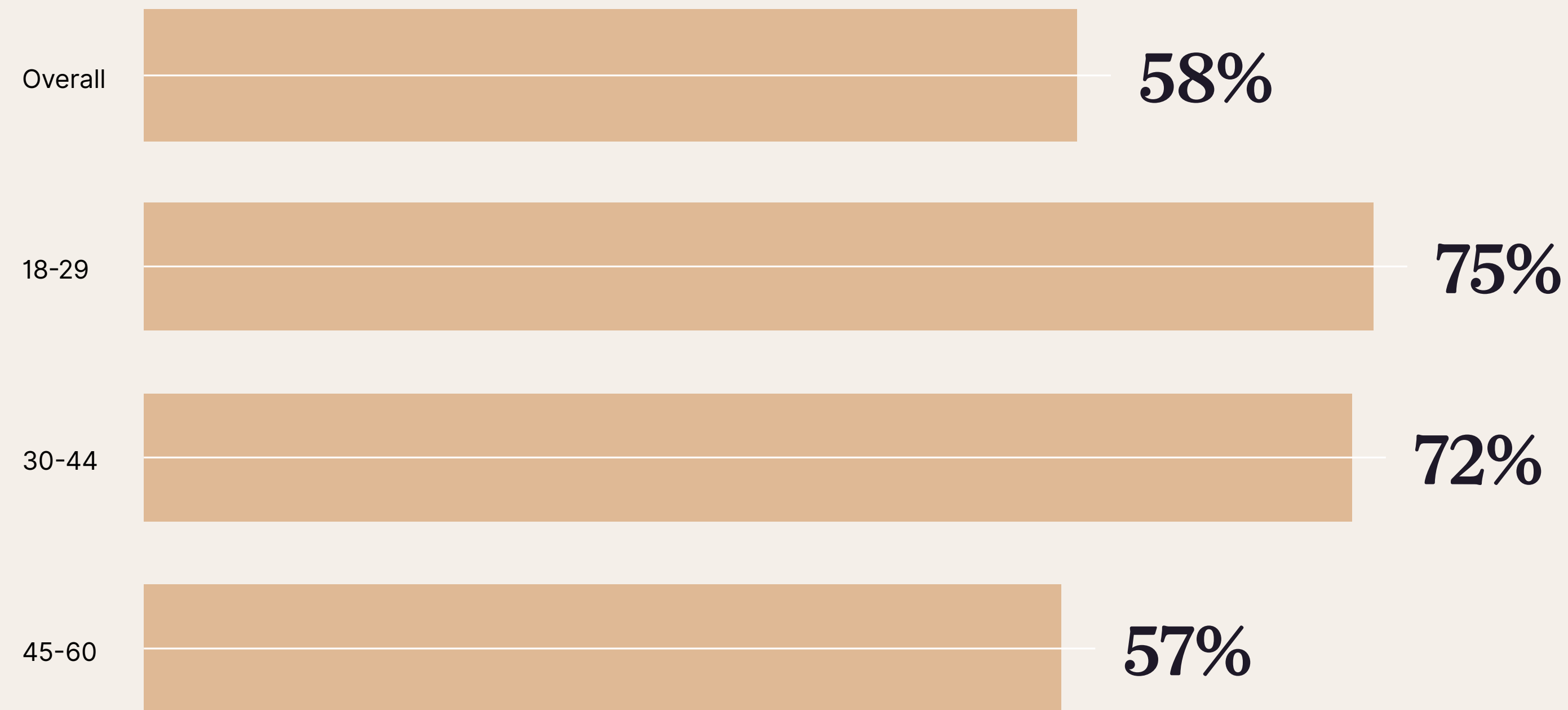
● Overall ● 18-29 ● 30-44 ● 45-60 ● 60+



Graph 16

Physical symptoms of stress, by age group

Percentage reporting one or more physical stress symptoms



empathy.

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