the migraine trust

Unbelievable

The mental health toll of not being believed about the severity and impact of migraine

Migraine affects around one in seven people in the UK, yet it is still too often dismissed as 'just a headache'. In reality, migraine is a complex neurological condition. Attacks can last for days and can involve nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light and sound, and visual disturbances.

This report draws on a new survey of people with migraine about their experiences of being believed, alongside The Migraine Trust's wider research on migraine and mental health.

The findings are stark: nine in 10 people with migraine (90%) have felt disbelieved, and over three-quarters **(76%)** say the condition has significantly harmed their mental health. Over three-quarters **(77%)** say not being believed has made that impact worse.[1]

> ***"The mental health impact of migraine cannot be overstated. This report shows how disbelief compounds that harm. Too many people are dismissed in healthcare, at work and even by those closest to them. The consequences can be devastating, and our message is clear: believe people with migraine."***
>
> – Rob Music, Chief Executive, The Migraine Trust

1. Poll conducted via SurveyMonkey of 594 people with migraine, between 31 July 2026 and 17 August 2026.

Difficult to explain, difficult to believe?

Migraine can look very different from person to person. Symptoms, severity and frequency vary widely, and attacks can last from a few hours to several days.

Some people live with chronic migraine, meaning headache on more than 15 days a month, with migraine symptoms on at least eight of those days for three months or more.

Less well-recognised types of migraine, such as vestibular and hemiplegic, can be even harder to explain, making it more difficult for others to understand or believe. As a result, many people with migraine feel lonely, isolated and invisible.

Migraine's mental health toll

A significant and worsening impact

The Migraine Trust's previous research has shown the serious mental health impact of migraine. According to our *Migraine Hurts* report, **89%** of people with migraine said the condition had affected their mental health.[2]

More than half **(55%)** said this impact was significant, 34% had experienced suicidal thoughts because of migraine, and **48%** had been diagnosed with a mental health condition, most commonly anxiety or depression.

Barriers to care are adding to this strain. Our *The Cost of Waiting* report revealed that three-quarters **(76%)** of people with migraine said trying to find satisfactory treatment had negatively affected their mental health or mood.[3]

Our new research suggests this burden has not eased: more than three-quarters **(76%)** of people with migraine say their mental health has been significantly negatively affected.

An urgent issue

The Migraine Trust's helpline has seen a sharp rise in calls about mental health and wellbeing, suggesting the mental health impact of migraine is becoming more acute. Comparing the last six months (February to July 2026) to the previous six-month period (August 2025 to January 2026), calls discussing:

- feelings of isolation increased by **15%;**[4]
- a decline in wellbeing increased by **26%;**[5]
- suicidal thoughts increased by **54%.**[6]

2. Migraine Hurts: From physical pain to mental health effects and the pain of being misunderstood: exploring the impact of migraine. The Migraine Trust, September 2024
3. The cost of waiting How the migraine treatment gap is failing patients. The Migraine Trust, June 2026
4. 1 Feb–31 Jul 2026 (327 calls) compared to 1 Aug 2025 to 31 Jan 2026 (282 calls)
5. 1 Feb–31 Jul 2026 (691 calls) compared to 1 Aug 2025 to 31 Jan 2026 (548 calls)
6. 1 Feb–31 Jul 2026 (37 calls) compared to 1 Aug 2025 to 31 Jan 2026 (24 calls)

Even more concerning, calls discussing suicidal thoughts more than doubled year-on-year, rising by **270%** in the last six months compared to the same period the previous year.[7]

Yet despite this impact, in *The Cost of Waiting* report we found that only **10%** of people with migraine had been offered mental health support by the NHS.

Disbelief makes the mental health impact worse

Our new poll shows, for the first time, how not being believed worsens the mental health impact of migraine.

Nine in 10 people with migraine **(90%)** say they have felt disbelieved at some point, including:

- **31%** in the workplace;
- **20%** in healthcare settings;
- **24%** by friends;
- **24%** by someone they live with.

Nearly three-quarters **(77%)** say this disbelief has contributed to the negative impact migraine has had on their mental health.

Worries about being believed are amplified for marginalised groups

Our 2025 report, *The Migraine Divide*, found that concerns about being believed were higher among people from Asian and Black backgrounds than among people from White backgrounds.

People from lower socio-economic backgrounds were also more likely to worry that others would not believe them about their migraine.

In healthcare settings, people from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to report being ignored, disbelieved or stereotyped when discussing their migraine.

> ***As a young girl, my migraine symptoms were brushed off as 'just hormones.' Later, as a Black woman, the stereotype that we can tolerate more pain deeply affected the care I received."*** – Abigail

7. 1 Feb–31 Jul 2026 (37 calls) compared to 1 Feb – 31 Jul 2025 (10 calls)
8. The Migraine Divide: How gender, ethnicity and social grade impact experience of migraine in the workplace, in healthcare and day to day life, The Migraine Trust, December 2025

Public misconceptions fuel disbelief

People with migraine's fears about not being believed are well founded. In our 2025 report, *Challenging Stigma*, we found that a third of people who do not live with migraine **(32%)** admitted there had been a time when they did not believe someone was having a migraine attack.[9]

Their explanations reveal how persistent misconceptions continue to shape public attitudes:

> ***[I didn't believe them because] they looked fine."***
>
> ***[The person was a] drama queen looking for sympathy."***
>
> ***I just thought it was a headache."***

In the workplace

Our new research shows the workplace is the setting where people with migraine are most likely to feel disbelieved, with **31%** reporting this experience.

This reflects findings from *Challenging Stigma*, which showed that fewer than two in five people without migraine **(35%)** said they would be very likely to believe someone who could not finish a work task, had to log off early, or called in sick because of migraine.

Nearly two-thirds of managers **(60%)** said they would be concerned about hiring a qualified candidate who disclosed migraine, rising to **83%** among C-level executives.

> ***After calling in sick with migraine three times in six months, senior management called me into a meeting and said, 'We don't believe you. You're using migraine as an excuse.' Shortly afterwards, I was violently sick in front of them and blacked out. Even then, my employer continued to distrust me."*** – Claudia, who lives with migraine

9. Challenging stigma: The urgent need to improve workplace support for people with migraine. The Migraine Trust, September 2025

In healthcare settings

Too many people with migraine tell us they do not feel believed or taken seriously by clinicians. One in five **(20%)** say they have felt disbelieved in a healthcare setting, raising concerns that disbelief may be a barrier to appropriate care.

> ***I feel let down by my GP and neurologist. I don't feel listened to or believed, so I have now given up going to the GP."***
> – Anonymous

For some, even carefully recording and explaining severe symptoms has not been enough to be taken seriously.

> ***Before each GP appointment, I prepared pages of notes and kept a detailed diary of my symptoms. I often felt dismissed and not taken seriously. I also learnt that taking my mum or aunt with me led to different outcomes."*** – Milly, who lives with chronic and hemiplegic migraine

Among friends and family

Perhaps most painful is the disbelief people with migraine can face from those closest to them.

One in four **(24%)** said friends, family and people they live with had not believed them about the impact of migraine.

Low awareness of migraine symptoms, and the misconception that it is 'just a headache', mean many struggle to be taken seriously at home or by loved ones.

> ***Friends and people in my year often thought I was skiving from school, ignoring them or using migraine as an excuse. Sometimes it led to arguments. My parents are incredibly supportive, but even they thought I was skiving at first, and we had lots of fights."*** – Maisie, who lives with chronic migraine

What needs to change?

This report shows that being disbelieved about migraine has far-reaching consequences and can worsen the mental health impact of the condition.

The solutions are clear. The Migraine Trust is calling for:

- **Better public awareness of migraine,** including its fluctuating nature and wide range of symptoms. We encourage people to support our campaigns and urge healthcare organisations and professionals to help raise awareness.
- **More extensive training on migraine for healthcare professionals,** so they better understand symptoms, impact and the potential mental health consequences.
- **Better mental health support for people with migraine,** ensuring everyone with migraine is offered dedicated support when they need it.
- **Easy, equal access to effective treatments.** New migraine treatments can reduce the mental and physical toll of the condition, but too many people still face restrictions or long waits. Effective treatment should be accessible to all who need it.
- **More supportive workplaces,** where employers understand migraine and provide timely, appropriate support for employees.

The situation is urgent. No one with migraine should face disbelief, doubt or dismissal when seeking understanding, support or care.

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About The Migraine Trust

The Migraine Trust is dedicated to helping people affected by migraine. We are the only UK migraine charity providing information and support, campaigning for awareness and change, and funding and promoting research.

Visit our website migrainetrust.org/ to subscribe to email updates and news, access migraine information and to learn more about The Migraine Trust including our support services, research and events.

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