

The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Focus on... Reading, Health and Wellbeing

Introduction

[New research](#) from The Reading Agency reveals that half of all adults in the UK don't read regularly for pleasure, with 35% of adults having dropped their regular reading habit.¹ Critically, The Reading Agency's research also shows that 7.3 million UK adults say poor mental health is to blame for stopping them from reading,² although those who do read testify to the proven health and wellbeing benefits of a regular reading habit.³

Sadly, lack of engagement with reading limits life chances and choices. The Reading Agency's work with adults aims to create a world of opportunity where everyone can access the benefits of reading.⁴

For 22 years, The Reading Agency has built a robust evidence base relating to the reading habits of people of all ages across the UK, supported by extensive research and evaluation. Through this work, we've identified a gap in the evidence base on adult reading in the UK. Using our expertise in this field, we're now releasing the second set of insights from our nationwide survey tracking adult reading engagement in the UK, currently the only report of its kind. The following research focuses on the nation's relationship with reading and the potential health and wellbeing outcomes of a regular reading habit.

Key findings: Reading, health and wellbeing

Motivations for reading

Three in five UK adults (59%) agree that reading is important to help them relax, with the ability to escape into another world (43%) and stress reduction (37%) also being key motivations.

Barriers to reading

Many UK adults face challenges starting or maintaining a reading habit due to poor mental health, difficult life events, and vision-related reasons.

Benefits of reading

A regular reading habit is associated with 15% higher life satisfaction, compared to lapsed and non-readers. Regular readers also benefit from improved mental health and wellbeing, sleep, concentration and the ability to cope with difficult situations.

¹ Reading engagement measures and survey developed by The Reading Agency using our Reading Outcomes Framework. The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,003 UK nationally representative consumers, between 02/04/24 - 04/04/24. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council.

² Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'Mental health-related reasons, such as depression or anxiety' answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.1333 \times 55,190,347 = 7,356,873.26$

³ Hilhorst, et al. (2018) [A Society of Readers](#), Demos for The Reading Agency; The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

⁴ The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

Health literacy

Improving health literacy is key for reducing health inequalities, and The Reading Agency's research shows 1 in 3 UK adults say they want to read more books about how to manage their health and wellbeing, rising to almost half of those aged 25-44 (49%). However, 1 in 5 (19%) also shared that, in their experience, it's difficult to find usable health information.

Methodology

This survey and the reading engagement measures used to understand adult reading habits in the UK were designed by The Reading Agency using our Peter Sowerby Foundation-funded Reading Outcomes Framework. This Framework identifies the outcomes of reading for pleasure and provides a set of tools to help us measure these.⁵ For the purposes of this survey, 'reading for pleasure' was defined as reading that takes place by choice rather than for work or education, and could include reading material such as books, e-books, magazines, audiobooks, graphic novels, poetry, blogs and more.

The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,003 UK nationally representative consumers aged 16 years and over, between 2 and 4 April 2024. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council. The results have been statistically weighted according to current data on age, gender, region and socioeconomic status from the most recent Census data to ensure the sample is representative of the entire adult population of the UK.

Focus on... Reading, Health and Wellbeing

Motivations for reading: Health and wellbeing

To explore people's motivations for reading, we asked UK adults to share why they find reading important. Motivations related to health and positive mental wellbeing came in as the top two reasons cited – to relax (59%) and to enjoy myself (45%).

Looking specifically at these health and wellbeing-driven motivations, UK adults told us reading is important to them...

...to relax (59%).

...to enjoy themselves (45%).

...to escape from the real world (43%).

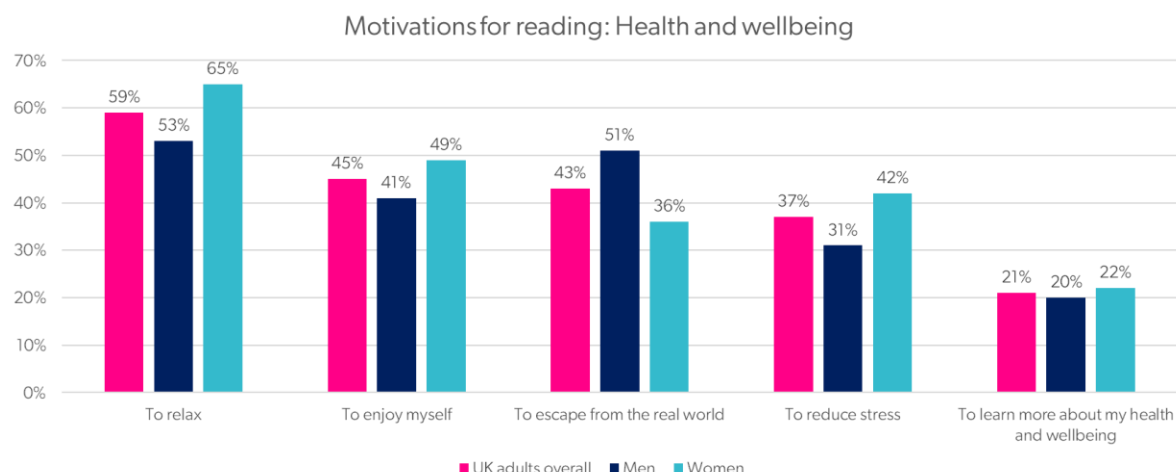
...to reduce stress (37%).

...to learn more about their health and wellbeing (21%).

⁵ The Reading Outcomes Framework was developed in collaboration with stakeholder organisations including Arts Council England, Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL), BookTrust, Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), National Literacy Trust, Publishers Association, Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL).

The data showed that UK women are more likely than men to see reading as important to relax (65% vs 53%), for enjoyment (49% vs 41%) and to reduce stress (42% vs 31%); whereas men are drawn more closely to the escapist nature of immersing into reading material, with over half of men (51% vs 36%) agreeing that reading is important to 'escape from the real world'.⁶ A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Breakdown by gender of health and wellbeing-related responses to 'Why, if at all, is reading important to you?'



Barriers to reading: Health and wellbeing

The data captured through this research has also helped us better understand the challenges people face along their reading journeys. For many UK adults, factors affecting their health and wellbeing have acted as a barrier to starting or maintaining a regular reading habit:

- Over 7.3 million UK adults (13%) said **mental health-related reasons**, such as depression or anxiety, stops them from reading.⁷
- **A difficult life event**, such as ill health, bereavement, losing a job or getting divorced, has stopped 4.96 million UK adults from reading (9%).⁸
- Over 4.9 million UK adults said **vision-related reasons** have prevented them from reading (9%).⁹
- **Physical health-related reasons** are a barrier to reading for almost 4 million UK adults (7%).¹⁰

⁶ N=1013 and N=956, respectively

⁷ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'Mental health-related reasons, such as depression or anxiety' answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.1333 \times 55,190,347 = 7,356,873.26$

⁸ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'A difficult life event, such as ill health, bereavement, losing a job or getting divorced' answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.0899 \times 55,190,347 = 4,961,612.2$

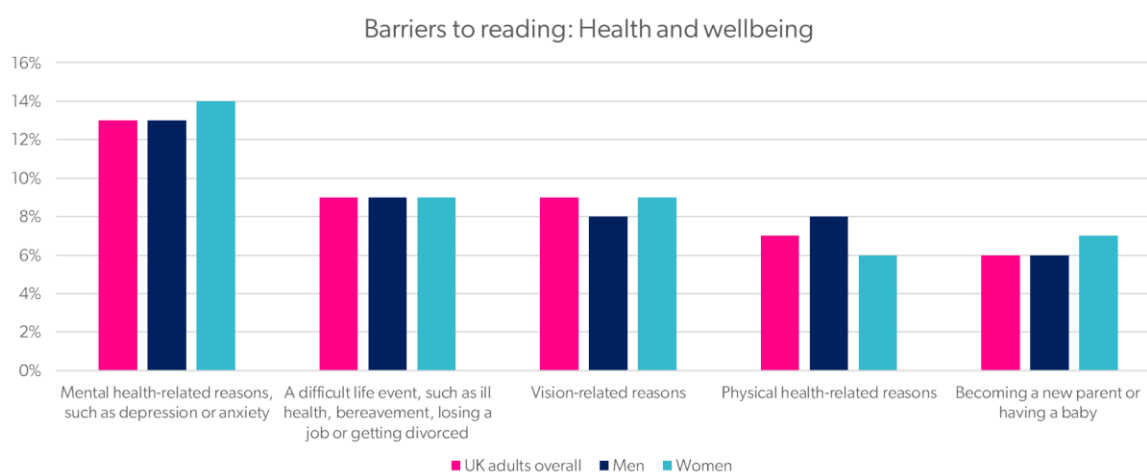
⁹ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'Vision-related reasons' answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.0889 \times 55,190,347 = 4,906,421.85$

¹⁰ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'Physical health-related reasons' answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.0724 \times 55,190,347 = 3,995,781.12$

- More than 3.5 million UK adults (6%) have stopped reading since **becoming a new parent or having a baby**.¹¹

The data showed that a higher proportion of men than women (8% vs 6%) experienced physical health challenges that had stopped them from reading, whereas slightly more women than men were stopped by poor mental health (14% vs 13%), vision-related reasons (9% vs 8%), and becoming a new parent or having a baby (7% vs 6%).¹² A breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Breakdown by gender of health and wellbeing-related responses to ‘What, if anything, stops you from reading?’



Benefits of reading: Health and wellbeing

We also asked people to share the difference reading has made to their lives. Benefits related to health and positive mental wellbeing came in as the top three positive outcomes cited across all UK adults regardless of their reading habits – improved mental health and wellbeing (33%), getting a better night’s sleep (31%), and improved concentration levels (27%).

For regular readers, however, these health and wellbeing-related benefits had even more of an impact. More regular readers said that they had experienced positive health and wellbeing impacts from reading than lapsed and non-readers.¹³

- 44% of regular readers said reading had **improved their mental health and wellbeing**, compared with 23% of lapsed and non-readers.
- Over 2 in 5 regular readers (41%) said reading had helped them **get a better night’s sleep**, compared with 20% of lapsed and non-readers.

¹¹ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of ‘Becoming a new parent or having a baby’ answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.0639 \times 55,190,347 = 3,526,663.17$

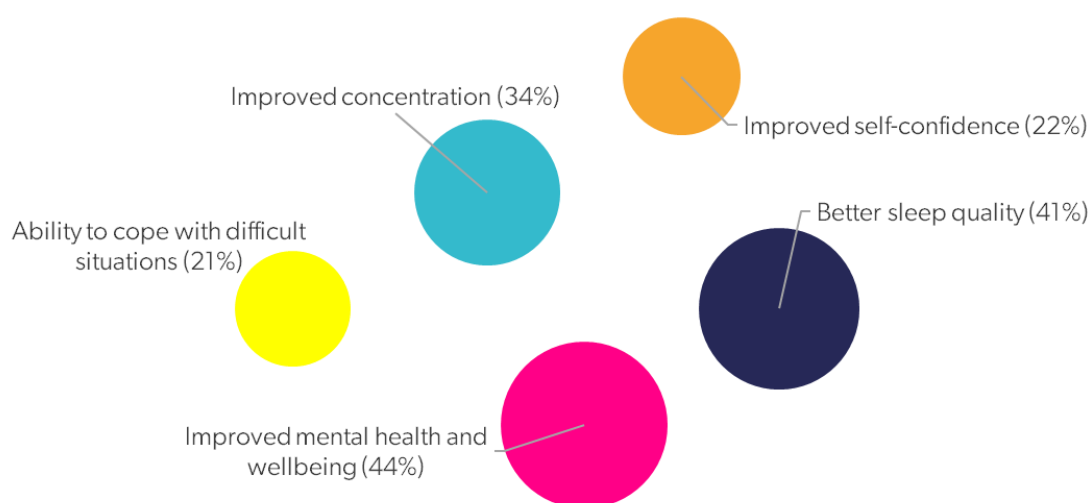
¹² N=956 and N=1013, respectively

¹³ N=998 and N=990, respectively. Sixteen response options provided. Response options available as ‘tick all that apply; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

- More than 1 in 3 regular readers (34%) said reading had **improved their concentration levels**, compared with 20% of lapsed and non-readers.
- Over 1 in 5 regular readers (22%) said reading had **improved their self-confidence** – a similar proportion of lapsed readers (19%) had experienced this too.
- More than 1 in 5 regular readers said reading had helped them **cope with difficult situations** (21%), compared with 23% of lapsed and non-readers.

Regular readers' responses are highlighted in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Regular readers' health and wellbeing-related responses to 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'



Reading and life satisfaction

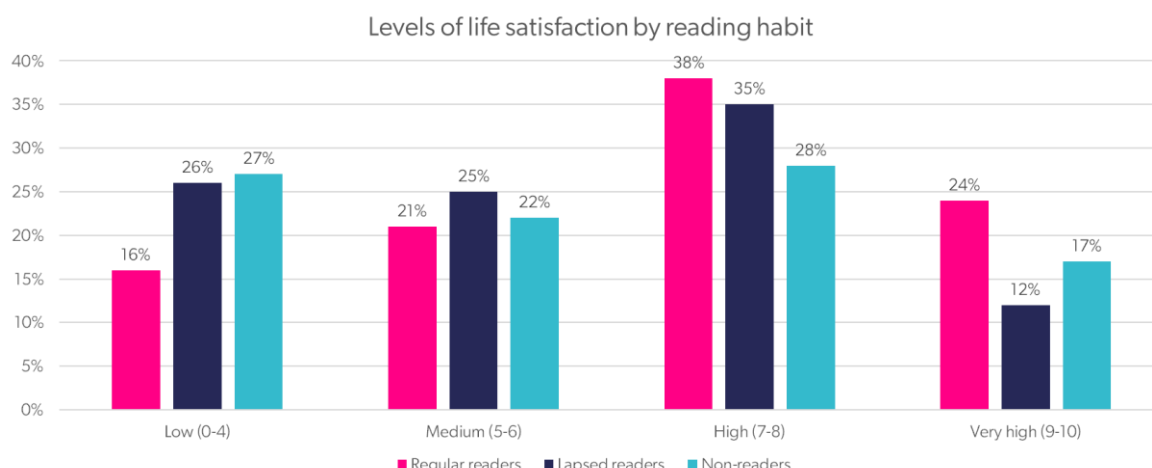
Our research shows that a regular reading habit is also associated with positive subjective wellbeing, with the UK's regular readers reporting 15.3% higher average levels of life satisfaction than lapsed and non-readers.¹⁴

That correlation holds when looking more closely at those reporting the highest levels of life satisfaction. Almost half of regular readers report 'high' or 'very high' levels of life satisfaction (46%) compared to lapsed readers (27%) and non-readers (31%), as outlined in Figure 4 below.¹⁵

¹⁴ Regular readers report mean average life satisfaction of 6.774291 compared with 5.874476 for lapsed and non-readers.

¹⁵ N=998, N=699 and N=291, respectively. Life satisfaction measure and categories in line with ONS [Personal well-being guidance](#)

Figure 4. Levels of life satisfaction by reading habit



Reading and health literacy

Our [first set of insights](#) from this research highlighted the challenge of low reading confidence for many UK adults, with 1 in 10 (11%) saying they find reading ‘always’ or ‘usually’ difficult, rising to 22% of 16-24-year-olds. Reading skills and confidence are fundamental building blocks for health literacy, so it’s not surprising that 4 in 10 adults struggle to understand health information.¹⁶

Improving health literacy is key for reducing health inequalities and enabling people to make informed health decisions.¹⁷ Reading of any kind – for enjoyment, empowerment or information – can boost literacy, and thereby empower people to increase their health literacy. Research conducted in Canada found that reading frequently helped to ‘sustain or improve health-literacy rates, regardless of education level’.¹⁸ The study found that a daily reading habit – with reading including everything from books, magazines and newspapers to websites, letters or emails – has the ‘single strongest effect on health-literacy proficiency’.

Reading for health information

While our data and the wider body of research on reading clearly shows that reading can help with improved mental health, especially for those who are regular readers,¹⁹ it also highlighted the ways poor mental health can act as a barrier to maintaining a reading habit.

¹⁶ Rowlands et al. (2015) ‘[A mismatch between population health literacy and the complexity of health information: an observational study](#)’, *British Journal of General Practice*

¹⁷ Gibney, et al. (2020) ‘[Increasing Health Literacy May Reduce Health Inequalities: Evidence from a National Population Survey in Ireland](#)’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*; Public Health England (2015) [Improving health literacy to reduce health inequalities](#)

¹⁸ Adults aged 16 to 65 who engage in daily reading of any type of reading material can score up to 38% higher than the average. Daily readers over the age of 65 can score up to 52% higher than the average for their age. Canadian Council on Learning (2008) ‘[Health Literacy in Canada: A Healthy Understanding](#)’

¹⁹ The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#); Hilhorst, et al. (2018) [A Society of Readers](#), Demos for The Reading Agency

This is even more pressing in light of the current mental health crisis facing the UK. The NHS reports that 1 in 4 adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any given year, with mental health conditions representing the largest single cause of disability in the UK.²⁰

Despite these challenges, our data shows that 1 in 3 UK adults – about 18.4 million people in the UK – want to read more books about how to manage their health and wellbeing.²¹ That number rises to almost half of those aged 25-44 (49%).²²

However, despite this demand, 1 in 5 UK adults (19%) say that, in their experience, it's difficult to find usable health information. This rises to 1 in 4 (24%) aged 35-44 and 1 in 3 aged 16-34 (33%).²³

Our research as well as external studies highlight the difficulties of finding, accessing and using accurate and reliable health information.²⁴ Programmes such as The Reading Agency's [Reading Well](#), a national books on prescription programme developed and delivered in partnership with Libraries Connected and public libraries, provide quality-assured, recommended reading to help people understand and manage their health and wellbeing. Independent evaluations of the programme consistently find that it helps users to better understand and manage their mental health and wellbeing.²⁵

What's next?

This second set of insights into the nation's reading habits demonstrates the positive difference reading can make to our lives, with a regular reading habit being associated with a range of health and wellbeing-related benefits including higher levels of life satisfaction. However, it also brings to light the ways that poor physical or mental health can be a barrier to starting or maintaining a reading habit, making it even more important to support UK adults to continue reading throughout these challenges.

We have launched our [State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Overview Report](#) and will be releasing our 'Focus on...' series of reports over the coming weeks, including:

- Focus on... Reading, skills development and career opportunities
- Focus on... Reading and social connections
- Focus on... Family reading
- Focus on... Regional insights

²⁰ NHS England Independent Mental Health Taskforce (2016) [The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health](#)

²¹ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'I want to read more books about how to manage my health and wellbeing' multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.335 \times 55,190,347 = 18,405,980.7$

²² N=649

²³ N=318 and N=604, respectively

²⁴ Hilhorst, et al. (2018) [A Society of Readers](#), Demos for The Reading Agency; Patient Information Forum (2024) [Users regret health decisions based on bad information](#); Healthcare Information for All (2024) [Press release: Global health advocates call on the World Health Organization to explicitly champion the goal of universal access to reliable healthcare information](#)

²⁵ Hilhorst, et al. (2018) [A Society of Readers](#), Demos for The Reading Agency; University of Westminster (2017) [Evaluation of the Reading Well for young people scheme](#); Wavehill (2019) [Reading Well: Books on Prescription Evaluation](#); The Reading Agency (2023) [Reading Well evaluation infographic 2020/22](#)