

A TB LABS WHITE PAPER

Trust, Relationship Quality, and Depression at Work

Findings from the Trust and Workplace Depression Survey

Data Collection: February 10 – March 4, 2026 | Report Date: April 15, 2026 | Sample: n=64 | Coded verbatims: n=37

Executive Summary

TB Labs collected 64 quantitative responses and 37 qualitative responses and tracked two outcomes (symptoms) including low interest and feelings of depression in relationship to trust at work and number of trusted relationships. Taken together, both the numbers and the comments point in the same direction: trust behaves as a practical mental-health factor in the workplace.

Key Outcomes

- Trust is not just a soft cultural preference in this dataset; it tracks with fewer depressive symptoms.
- The raw number of trusted relationships matters less than whether the overall climate feels safe or draining.
- Many respondents believe even one additional trusted relationship would materially improve wellbeing.
- The qualitative comments show that trust affects work emotionally and operationally at the same time.

Key Indicators

51.6% of People...	More Trust = Less Depression	+1	Strongest Signal
Work in low trust environments.	As trust rises, depression falls.	46.9% say just one more trusted relationship at work would improve well-being.	Relationship quality matters more than relationship count.

Deep Dive Contents

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Glossary & Examples

Technical Jargon	What It Means	Example From This Study
PHQ-2-style composite	A simple 0–6 sum of the two symptom items in the survey. It is useful for analysis but is not a diagnosis.	A score of 4 means the person reported experiencing symptoms more frequently.
Spearman rho	Shows how strongly two things move together. A rank-based correlation used because several survey variables are ordered categories rather than true continuous measures. Positive means they rise together with +1 being perfect alignment; negative means one goes up as the other goes down with -1 being perfectly opposite.	$\rho = -0.75$ → a strong negative relationship, meaning as trust goes up, depressive symptoms tend to go down in a clear and consistent way
Support gap	Shows whether someone feels under-supported or well-supported. A positive gap means a person reported fewer trusted relationships than they believe they need.	A support gap of +2 means someone feels they need two more trusted relationships than they currently have.
p-value	Used here as a signal for whether a pattern is likely to be more than random noise in this sample. It does not prove causation but $p = .5$ is likely random while $p = 0.001$ is a very strong signal.	People with more symptoms are more likely to see value in one more trusted relationship ($p = 0.001$).
q-value	This is an adjusted version of the p-value used when you run <i>many tests at once</i> . A q-value shows how strong a finding is after accounting for the fact that many different relationships were tested. It runs on a simple "lower is stronger" scale: around 0.05 is borderline meaningful; above 0.10 is likely weak. In plain terms, the lower the q-value, the more confidence you can have that the finding is real.	After testing multiple relationships, the association between higher trust and lower depressive symptoms remained statistically strong even after adjustment ($q = 0.005$).
Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test	A test that produces a p-value. A nonparametric test used to compare two related samples to determine whether their population mean ranks differ.	We compared each respondent's current number of trusted relationships to the number they say they need. On average, employees reported 2 trusted relationships but said they need 4. A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test showed this gap was significant ($p < 0.001$)
Mann-Whitney U Test	Also a test that produces a p-value. A nonparametric test used to compare two independent samples to determine whether one tends to have higher values than the other.	Employees in low-trust environments report more than double the symptom levels of those in high-trust environments. A Mann-Whitney U test showed this difference was significant ($p = 0.002$).
Verbatim coding	We used an abductive coding approach, iterating between participant responses and our trust framework to identify the most meaningful patterns. Ordered from mostly trust to mostly draining. The response "not sure" was excluded.	Quote: "I feel like I can trust a couple people on my team, but not leadership. It makes it hard to speak up, and I mostly keep things to myself." Code: Mixed trust environment, low psychological safety, social withdrawal at work.

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Production Statement

This white paper is designed to be easy to skim and focused on what matters most, using plain language. Our process draws on non-paid participants across industries. AI is used for calculations and as a research assistant. Ultimately, TB Labs studies are human-led research efforts designed to help us better understand human interactions.

Send requests, comments, and questions to info@mytrustbuilder.com.

Deep Analysis

The sections below unpack the survey pattern in more detail. The goal is to stay understandable in the main narrative while preserving enough detail to support decision-making.

1. Survey snapshot: Employees Want More Trusted Relationships Than They Currently Have

The cleaned sample has a mean trust score of 7.23 out of 10 and a median of 8. The mean PHQ-2-style symptom summary is 1.58, with 13 respondents (20.3%) scoring 3 or above. That threshold is often used as a signal for follow-up screening, but it should not be read as a diagnosis in this report.

The support picture is mixed. Nearly half of respondents (46.9%) believe one additional trusted relationship would significantly improve their wellbeing—rating the expected impact as high (7–10 out of 10, meaning a strong positive effect on their wellbeing). At the same time, only 48.4% report working in a mostly trusting environment, while 51.6% experience some level of strain, imbalance, or uncertainty.

Profile metric	Value
Usable quantitative responses	64
Meaningful verbatims coded	37
Mean trust score (1-10)	7.23
Mean PHQ-2-style score (0-6)	1.58
Mostly-trust climate	48.4%
Below estimated support need	37.5%
Benefit rated 7-10 for one new trusted tie	46.9%

Two numbers are especially important for interpreting the sample. First, only 48.4% of respondents described their current environment as mostly trust, which means 51.6% reported some level of relational strain or trust ambiguity. Second, 37.5% appear to be below their own stated level of trusted support, which means they would like at least one more trusted relationship. That combination suggests that relational quality, not just relationship quantity, is a live issue for a large share of the sample.

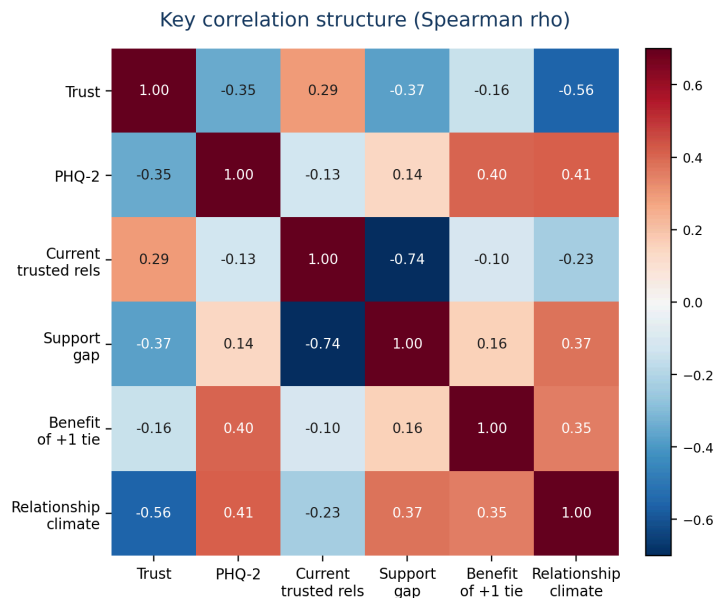
What stood out	Why it matters	Technical note
Higher trust aligns with fewer depressive symptoms	Trust appears connected to lower day-to-day emotional burden, not just to culture sentiment.	$\rho = -0.35, p = 0.005$
Relationship climate matters more than raw relationship count	One or more draining ties seem more consequential than simply having a smaller network.	More draining relationships = lower trust ($\rho = -0.56$)

What stood out	Why it matters	Technical note
People with more symptoms see more value in one new trusted relationship	Connection-building may matter most for people already feeling more burdened.	$\rho = 0.40, p = 0.001$

2. The strongest quantitative signal: trust quality beats trust quantity

The headline correlation is the link between trust and depressive symptom burden. Trust score and the PHQ-2-style composite are moderately negatively correlated ($\rho = -0.35, p = 0.005$). In plain terms, people who feel more trust in their relationships also tend to report fewer recent depressive symptoms.

An even stronger relationship appears between trust and relationship climate. Trust score correlates with the climate item at $\rho = -0.56$. By contrast, the simple count of current trusted relationships is only weakly related to trust ($\rho = 0.29$) and is not meaningfully related to PHQ-2 ($\rho = -0.13, p = 0.319$). This is the clearest indication that the felt quality, safety, and reliability of relationships matter more than relationship count alone.



Higher relationship-climate values indicate a more draining environment. Higher support-gap values mean people report fewer trusted relationships than they believe they need.

Figure 1. Spearman correlation structure for the most decision-relevant quantitative variables.

A useful way to understand the same result is to compare people in a mostly-trust climate with everyone else. The group difference is not subtle: the mostly-trust group reports higher average trust, lower average PHQ-2, and less perceived need for an extra trust-based relationship.

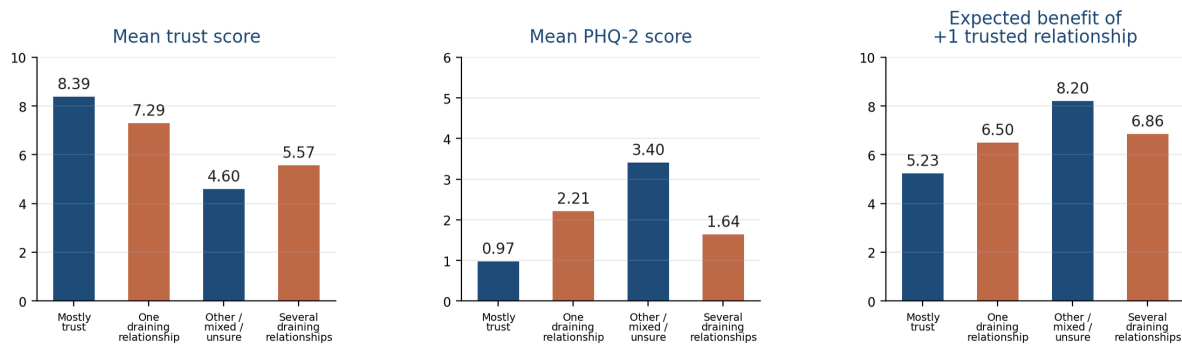
3. Uneven Trust May Be the Most Challenging Environment

The lowest trust scores appear in mixed environments, suggesting that inconsistency (not just low trust) may be particularly challenging for employees. With low trust environments, at least the employee knows what to expect (even if it is looking over their shoulder) and can maintain a steady state. Mixed environments, where trust is uneven, may be particularly difficult for employees, possibly because

siloed or inconsistent relationships create uncertainty. This pattern may help explain how fragmented or oppositional cultures can emerge and become toxic over time. Following this trend, employees in uncertain or mixed trust environments expect to benefit the most from one additional trusted relationship.

Relationship climate group	n	Mean trust	Mean PHQ-2	Mean benefit of +1 trusted tie
Mostly trust	31	8.39	0.97	5.23
One draining relationship	14	7.29	2.21	6.50
Other / mixed / unsure	5	4.60	3.40	8.20
Several draining relationships	14	5.57	1.64	6.86

People outside a mostly-trust climate report worse symptoms and more desire for added support

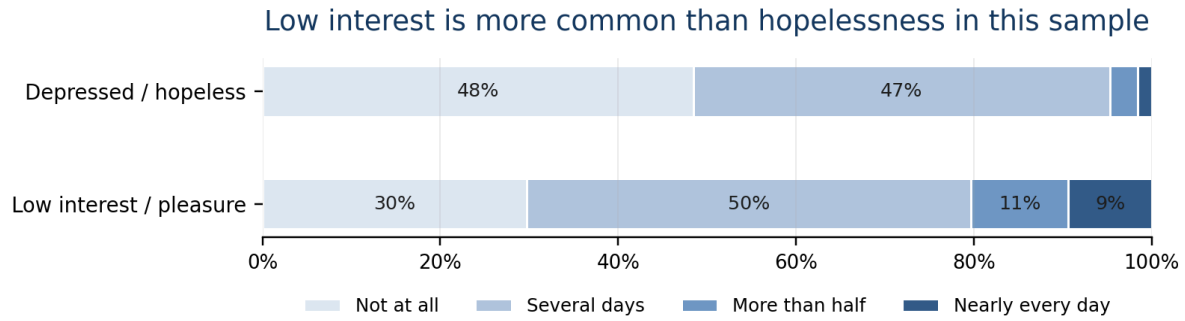


Group sizes: Mostly trust n=31; all other climate responses n=33. PHQ-2 is a 2-item symptom summary, not a diagnosis.

Figure 2. Mean outcomes by relationship-climate group.

4. The symptom pattern looks more like depletion than despair

Across the two symptom questions, low interest is more prevalent than depressed mood. The mean low-interest score is 1.00, compared with 0.58 for depressed/hopeless mood, and the paired Wilcoxon test (checks whether one set of values is generally higher or lower than another for the same group) indicates that difference is unlikely to be random ($p < 0.001$). For workplace interpretation, that matters: low trust may show up first as drained energy, reduced enjoyment, and lower motivation rather than only as overt hopelessness.



Mean low-interest score = 1.00 vs mean depressed/hopeless score = 0.58; paired Wilcoxon $p < 0.001$.

Figure 3. Distribution of responses across the two symptom items.

Note on difference tests: Wilcoxon compares same people, two measures; Mann-Whitney compares two different groups. These are useful when data isn't perfectly normal or is based on ratings or scales.

5. Support gaps sharpen the intervention signal

Using midpoint estimates for the current and needed relationship-count bins, 24 respondents (37.5%) appear to be below their own stated level of trusted support. This derived support-gap measure is associated with lower trust ($\rho = -0.37$, $p = 0.002$) and with a more negative relationship climate.

The same lens helps explain why additional connection feels valuable to so many respondents. People below their estimated support need rated the potential benefit of one added trusted relationship at 6.88/10, versus 5.62/10 among those at or above their stated need. The one-sided Mann-Whitney result ($p = 0.027$) points in the same direction as the correlation analysis: relational reinforcement looks most valuable for people who appear under-supported.

Interpretation note

The support-gap measure is approximate because the survey used bins (for example, 2-3 relationships or 4-5 relationships). The appendix shows how those bins were converted into midpoint estimates. The support-gap analysis is still useful directionally because it reflects each respondent's own stated support threshold, not an externally imposed benchmark. This result also reinforces the notion that trust expectations are highly personalized.

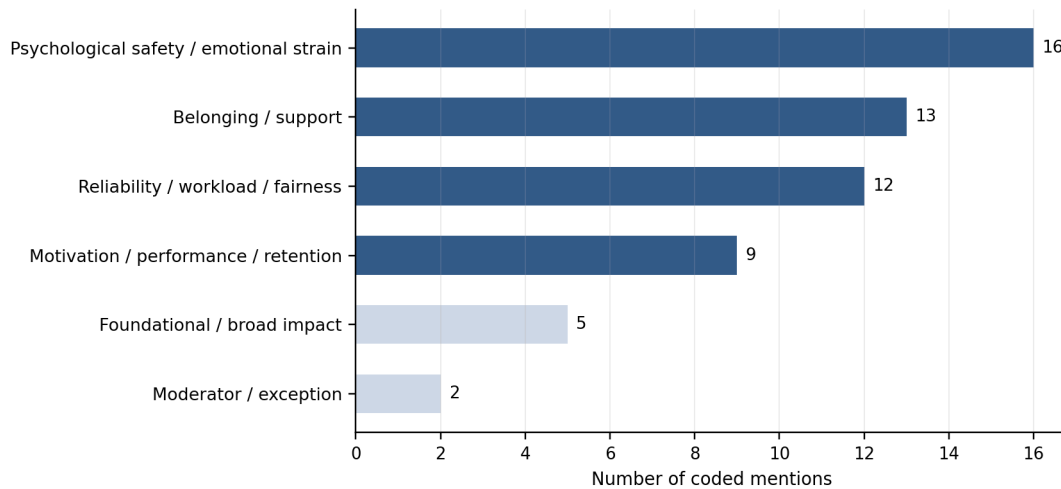
6. What respondents said in their own words

The qualitative comments strongly reinforce the quantitative story. Respondents rarely talk about trust as an abstract value. Instead, they describe concrete effects on emotional safety, reliability, belonging, and work performance. Multiple themes could be assigned to the same comment, so the theme counts below reflect overlap rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Theme	Mentions	Share of coded verbatims	What respondents meant
Psychological safety / emotional strain	16	43.2%	Low trust makes work feel unsafe, stressful, anxious, or exhausting.

Belonging / support	13	35.1%	Trust creates a sense of team, mutual care, and shared purpose.
Reliability / workload / fairness	12	32.4%	Trust is tied to follow-through, role clarity, and not having to pick up the slack.
Motivation / performance / retention	9	24.3%	Trusted relationships improve engagement, output, and willingness to stay.

Qualitative themes confirm that trust affects safety, support, and performance



n = 37 substantive verbatims. Multiple themes could be assigned to the same response.

Figure 4. Frequency of qualitative themes (multi-code allowed).

Illustrative theme	Representative respondent language
Psychological safety / emotional strain	"It affects it a lot. If you don't trust them, it's not a safe environment which leads to anxiety at a place where you spend a majority of your life"
Reliability / workload / fairness	"When I'm at work, lack of trust in others to do their job makes me frustrated in my job feeling like I have to pick up the slack"
Belonging / support	"It's being on a team vs being coworkers. We all want to be apart of something that we all care about. If I can't trust people to be invested, how can I invest?"
Motivation / performance / retention	"The trust and collaboration that I share with my team is the main reason why I want to stay where I work."
Minor counter-theme	"It doesn't significantly impact my emotional health, as I focus on maintaining a positive mindset and have confidence in myself."

The pattern across comments is especially important because it explains why trust matters. Low trust is described not only as emotionally unpleasant, but also as logistically exhausting: people worry about false information, backstabbing, slack pickup, or whether others will do what they said they would do. In other words, trust problems look like both culture problems and operating-model problems.

7. Implications for employers and team leaders

What the data suggest

- Focus on relationship quality before relationship quantity. Adding social touchpoints may help, but the larger risk signal is a draining climate.
- Treat reliability, role clarity, and follow-through as part of trust-building. Many respondents tied low trust to operational friction, not just feelings.
- Watch for low energy and disengagement as early signs. In this sample, low interest shows up more strongly than hopelessness.
- Prioritize people who appear below their own support threshold. They report more upside from a single added trusted connection.

8. Limitations & Questions to Consider

Limitations: This dataset should be read as directional, not representative. The relatively small sample was collected through direct outreach and social channels. The analysis is cross-sectional and self-reported, so it can show association but not causation. The trust score itself asked about trust in people in respondents' lives more broadly, while the verbatims were overwhelmingly workplace-centered. That makes the dataset highly relevant to work, but not purely workplace-exclusive at the item level. Finally, the separate draining-relationships count question was too incomplete to use formally.

Questions to Consider: Survey findings also raise additional questions to consider:

- What specific interventions most effectively increase trust within teams, and which have the greatest impact on wellbeing?
- How does improving relationship quality (not just adding connections) change depressive symptom patterns over time?
- What organizational practices reduce the negative effects of mixed or uneven trust environments?
- How can managers identify and support employees who are likely to benefit most from an additional trusted relationship?

Appendix

This appendix collects the technical and validation material so the main narrative can stay easy to read. Each appendix section begins with a short explanation of what the table or statistic means.

Appendix A. Data construction and missingness

Why this appendix matters

These tables show what was included in the final analysis, what was excluded, and where missing data limited interpretation. This helps distinguish substantive patterns from artifacts of survey design or response quality.

Sample construction step	n
Rows in main quantitative analysis	64
Meaningful verbatims coded	37

Excluded placeholder/test verbatim entries

Variable	Raw non-missing n	Raw missing n	Clean non-missing n	Clean missing n
Trust score	69	0	64	0
Depressed / hopeless item	69	0	64	0
Low interest item	69	0	64	0
Current trusted relationship count	69	0	64	0
Relationship climate item	69	0	64	0
Expected benefit of +1 trusted relationship	69	0	64	0
Needed trusted relationships	69	0	64	0
Verbatim comment	43	26	37	26

Appendix B. Technical definitions and exact tests

Why this appendix matters

The main report uses a few technical summaries - such as Spearman correlations, a PHQ-2-style composite, and a derived support-gap score. This section explains what those terms mean and lists the supporting tests behind key statements in the narrative.

Finding	Comparison	Test statistic	p-value	Interpretation
Paired symptom comparison	Low interest vs depressed/hopeless	Wilcoxon signed-rank W = 486.0	<0.001	Low interest is more prevalent than

				hopelessness in this sample.
Benefit by support-gap group	Below need vs at/above need	Mann-Whitney U = 618.0	0.027	People below their support threshold rate a larger benefit from one added trusted tie.

Appendix C. Sensitivity check and adjusted-significance summary

Why this appendix matters

Sensitivity checks show which correlations remain strongest after accounting for many comparisons.

Sample	Correlation pair	n	rho	p-value
Cleaned sample (main analysis)	Trust score vs PHQ-2	64	-0.35	0.005
Cleaned sample (main analysis)	Trust score vs relationship climate	62	-0.56	<0.001
Cleaned sample (main analysis)	Current trusted relationship count vs PHQ-2	64	-0.13	0.319

The sensitivity check reaches the same practical conclusion as the cleaned sample: trust remains negatively related to PHQ-2, relationship climate remains a strong correlate of trust, and simple relationship count still has little association with PHQ-2.

Variable A	Variable B	n	rho	p-value	q-value
Trust score	Relationship climate	62	-0.558	<0.001	<0.001
Depressed/hopeless	Low interest	64	0.527	<0.001	<0.001
Depressed/hopeless	Relationship climate	62	0.437	<0.001	0.002
PHQ-2 composite	Relationship climate	62	0.412	<0.001	0.004
PHQ-2 composite	Expected benefit of +1 trusted rel	64	0.401	0.001	0.004
Trust score	Support gap	64	-0.373	0.002	0.009
Support gap	Relationship climate	62	0.372	0.003	0.009
Expected benefit of +1 trusted relationship	Relationship climate	62	0.351	0.005	0.013
Trust score	PHQ-2 composite	64	-0.346	0.005	0.013
Low interest	Expected benefit of +1	64	0.346	0.005	0.013

	trusted relationship				
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Appendix D. Qualitative coding notes

Why this appendix matters

The main report summarizes the themes at a high level. This section records the code meanings used to organize the verbatims so the qualitative analysis is transparent and reproducible.

Theme label	Coding meaning
Psychological safety / emotional strain	Low trust makes work feel unsafe, stressful, anxious, or exhausting.
Belonging / support	Trust creates a sense of team, mutual care, and shared purpose.
Reliability / workload / fairness	Trust is tied to follow-through, role clarity, and not having to pick up the slack.
Motivation / performance / retention	Trusted relationships improve engagement, output, and willingness to stay.

Appendix E. Full correlation matrix - Spearman rho

How to use this table

The numbers show how strongly variables move together. Negative values mean that higher scores on one variable tend to go with lower scores on the other; positive values mean they rise together. Values closer to zero indicate weaker relationships.

Variable	Trust	Depressed	Low interest	PHQ-2	Current	Needed	Gap	Benefit	Climate
Trust	1.00	-0.26	-0.33	-0.35	0.29	-0.17	-0.37	-0.16	-0.56
Depressed	-0.26	1.00	0.53	0.84	-0.07	0.20	0.20	0.31	0.44
Low interest	-0.33	0.53	1.00	0.90	-0.16	-0.10	0.07	0.35	0.27
PHQ-2	-0.35	0.84	0.90	1.00	-0.13	0.05	0.14	0.40	0.41
Current	0.29	-0.07	-0.16	-0.13	1.00	0.23	-0.74	-0.10	-0.23
Needed	-0.17	0.20	-0.10	0.05	0.23	1.00	0.43	0.04	0.26
Gap	-0.37	0.20	0.07	0.14	-0.74	0.43	1.00	0.16	0.37
Benefit	-0.16	0.31	0.35	0.40	-0.10	0.04	0.16	1.00	0.35
Climate	-0.56	0.44	0.27	0.41	-0.23	0.26	0.37	0.35	1.00

Figure A1. Full Spearman rho matrix for the cleaned sample.

Appendix F. Full correlation matrix - p-values

How to use this table

Smaller p-values indicate stronger evidence that the observed relationship is unlikely to be random noise in this sample. They do not prove causation. The q-values listed earlier adjust for testing many correlations at once.

Variable	Trust	Depressed	Low interest	PHQ-2	Current	Needed	Gap	Benefit	Climate
Trust	<0.001	0.035	0.008	0.005	0.019	0.171	0.002	0.215	<0.001
Depressed	0.035	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.600	0.115	0.120	0.012	<0.001
Low interest	0.008	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.210	0.432	0.603	0.005	0.031
PHQ-2	0.005	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.319	0.723	0.258	0.001	<0.001
Current	0.019	0.600	0.210	0.319	<0.001	0.073	<0.001	0.432	0.070
Needed	0.171	0.115	0.432	0.723	0.073	<0.001	<0.001	0.733	0.045
Gap	0.002	0.120	0.603	0.258	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.208	0.003
Benefit	0.215	0.012	0.005	0.001	0.432	0.733	0.208	<0.001	0.005
Climate	<0.001	<0.001	0.031	<0.001	0.070	0.045	0.003	0.005	<0.001

Figure A2. Full p-value matrix corresponding to the Spearman correlations.

Appendix G. Pairwise non-missing sample sizes (n)

How to use this table

These counts show how many responses contributed to each pairwise correlation. Most pairs use all 64 cleaned responses. Correlations involving relationship climate use n = 62 because the response "not sure" was excluded from the ordinal scoring used for that variable.

Variable	Trust	Depressed	Low interest	PHQ-2	Current	Needed	Gap	Benefit	Climate
Trust	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Depressed	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Low interest	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
PHQ-2	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Current	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Needed	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Gap	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Benefit	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	62
Climate	62	62	62	62	62	62	62	62	62

Figure A3. Pairwise non-missing sample sizes used in the correlation analyses.