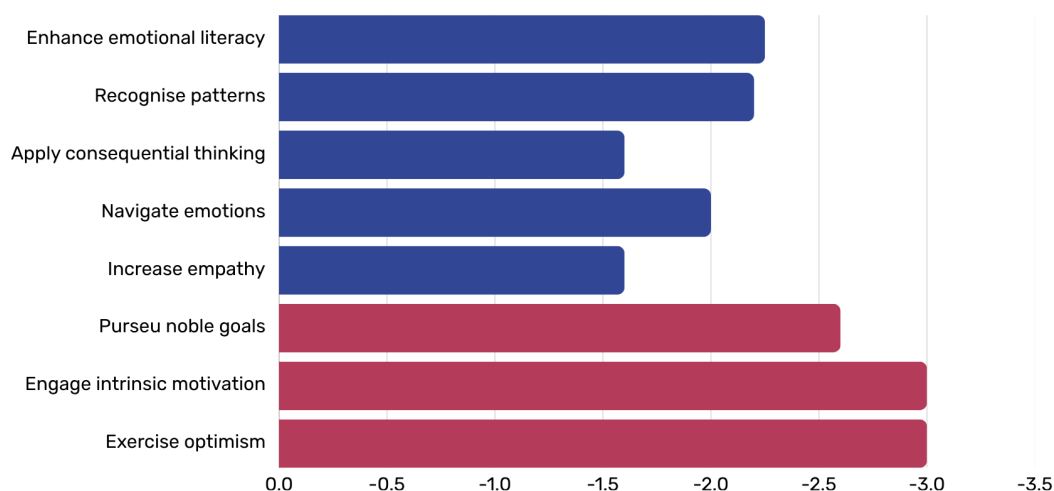


Global Declines in Emotional Intelligence and Its Impact on Organisational Retention, Burnout, and Workforce Resilience

What the researchers did

This large-scale longitudinal study analysed EQ trends from 2019 to 2024. The stratified sample comprised 28,000 adults across 166 countries - one of the most geographically comprehensive EQ datasets ever published. The study set out to examine whether emotional intelligence had changed over the pandemic period, and what those changes meant for organisational resilience, burnout risk, and retention.

Declines in Emotional Intelligence



Source: Freedman, J. M., Freedman, P. E., Choi, D. Y., & Miller, M. (2025). The Emotional Recession. Frontiers in Psychology, 16. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1701703>. Mean score differences shown; all declines statistically significant $p < 0.001$.

What they found

The headline finding is stark: global EQ scores declined by 5.79% across the six-year period, with statistically significant decreases across all eight competencies measured. The researchers introduced the term Emotional Recession to describe this pattern - a sustained, measurable contraction in emotional and relational capacity with direct consequences for how people work, lead, and connect.

As the chart above shows, the steepest declines occurred in what the researchers call the Drive strand — Exercise Optimism, Engage Intrinsic Motivation, and Pursue Noble Goals — each falling by 7–8% over the period, roughly double the rate of decline in the other competencies. These are precisely the capabilities that sustain purpose, persistence, and forward focus under pressure. Their erosion helps explain what many leaders are currently experiencing: a workforce that is technically present but emotionally running on reduced reserves.

Overall EQ decline 2019–2024

-5.79%

across 28,000 adults in 166 countries

Higher EQ individuals are more likely to report strong life outcomes

10.18x

odds ratio vs. lower EQ individuals

The study also examined what higher EQ actually predicts. Individuals scoring above the mean on EQ were 10.18 times more likely to report strong outcomes across effectiveness, relationships, quality of life, and wellbeing combined. That is not a marginal difference. It is a tenfold gap and it makes the development of emotional intelligence one of the highest-leverage investments an organisation can make.

Why it matters

The most significant finding for leaders reading this issue is the collapse in Exercise Optimism - one of the three subscales in the EQ-i 2.0 Stress Management composite. The research confirms that optimism, as a functional EQ capability rather than a mood, has been one of the hardest hit since 2019. This is not a coincidence.

Optimism is a stress-regulating mechanism i.e. the capacity to maintain a constructive outlook when circumstances are genuinely difficult. When it declines at a global scale, burnout risk rises, leadership pipelines thin, and the capacity to lead well under pressure diminishes.

 Read the full study: *The Emotional Recession: Global Declines in Emotional Intelligence and Its Impact on Organisational Retention, Burnout, and Workforce Resilience*, Freedman, J. M., Freedman, P. E., Choi, D. Y., & Miller, M. (2025). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16.  doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1701703