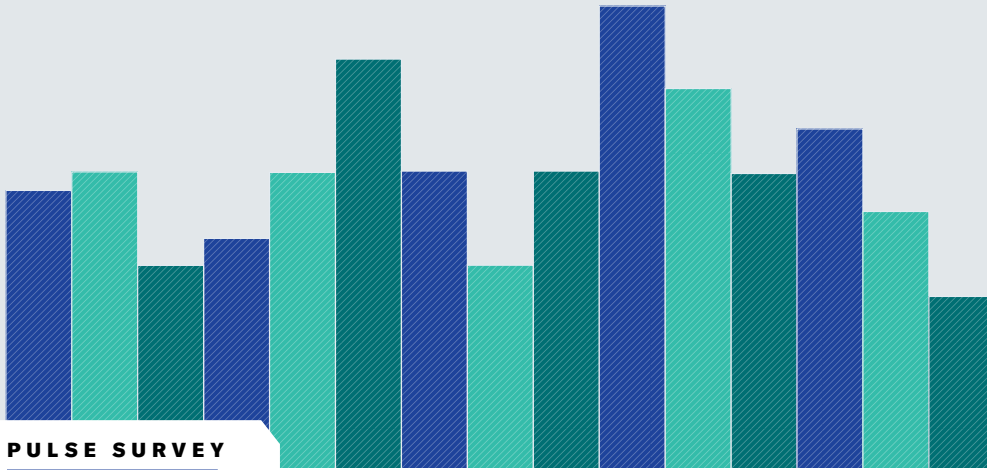




**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

ANALYTIC SERVICES



# The Battle against Workplace Stress:

## How Smart Organizations Are Creating Healthier Environments



Sponsored by



## Introduction: How Ogilvy and Zendesk Are Tackling the Workplace Stress Epidemic

Workplace stress reached an all-time high in 2022, according to Gallup, the survey and analytics company. Although 85% of executives surveyed by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services in February 2023 agree that it's very important for organizations to make workforce mental health a priority, only 27% say their own organizations actually make it a high priority.

Because mental health is the foundation of your workforce's ability to be engaged, productive, and creative, forward-thinking organizations like Ogilvy and Zendesk aren't just making mental health a priority—they're reinventing the way work gets done to support mental health.

In this report sponsored by Calm Business, Harvard Business Review Analytic Services lays out a three-pronged approach to mental health that we highlight below.

**Pillar 1: Proactive vs. reactive.** First, major organizations are taking a proactive, preventive approach to mental health, as opposed to being in a reactive "crisis" mode.

- Ogilvy and Zendesk offer their employees Calm Business' platform as a mental health app and self-care tool to address stress, anxiety, and sleep before they become serious mental health conditions.

**Pillar 2: Mindful manager training.** Second, forward-thinking organizations are training managers to become more self-aware, regulate their own emotions, and create a less stressful work environment for their employees.

- Ogilvy partnered with Calm Workshops' Mindful Manager program to train 800 managers across North America.

**Pillar 3: Integrate mental health breaks into the workday.** Third, contrary to popular belief, research demonstrates that taking a break doesn't reduce productivity but actually increases it. For example,

starting your meetings with Calm's 60-second reboot through Calm Business for Zoom Meetings helps employees feel recharged, more focused, and less stressed.

- Ogilvy gave permission for its consulting workforce to take a break by allowing it to bill its time when it participated in a Calm Mindful Manager meditation, breathing, or movement exercise to help defuse stress and anxiety throughout the workday.

### Partnering with Calm Business Reduces Stress and Improves Mental Health

Clinical studies of Calm users demonstrate:

- 95% sleep better
- 90% feel less anxious
- 81% feel less stressed

Ogilvy's Mindful Manager program in partnership with Calm Workshops resulted in:

- 60% of managers feeling less stressed
- 54% of them being better able to regulate their emotions

In this report, you'll learn more about how smart organizations like Ogilvy and Zendesk are combating the workplace stress epidemic by rethinking how work gets done to enhance employee well-being and productivity.

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# The Battle against Workplace Stress:

## How Smart Organizations Are Creating Healthier Environments

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American workers are struggling with high levels of stress and burnout, often with devastating consequences for employers and employees alike.

In a February 2023 survey of the *Harvard Business Review* audience, 82% of respondents familiar with their organization's mental wellness and stress management programs (or lack thereof) agree that workplace stress is a problem at their organization. Seventy-two percent say stress is contributing to employee burnout.

The fallout doesn't stop there. More than half the survey respondents say workplace stress is hurting employee engagement, contributing to employee turnover, and impacting creativity and innovation. More than four in 10 agree that workplace stress is having a negative impact on teamwork and collaboration, work quality, and productivity. **FIGURE 1** Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents say persistent workplace stress can lead to more serious conditions like depression and anxiety among workers.

Employers aren't powerless to combat these problems. Savvy companies are equipping their employees with tools and programs that can help reduce stress and support mental wellness in the workplace. Some of the most diligent organizations are taking a three-pronged approach. First, they're focusing on being proactive rather than reactive in fighting stress by offering preventive tools to reduce stress and anxiety. Second, they're training managers to be mindful and thus better able to regulate their emotions. Finally, they're giving employees opportunities to take short mental health breaks during the day to destress and recharge.

Unfortunately, most organizations aren't offering these resources as broadly and persistently as the problem warrants. Although 85% of those surveyed agree that it's important for organizations to prioritize the mental wellness of their workforce, only 27% say their own organization makes it a high

### HIGHLIGHTS



82% of respondents say workplace **stress is a problem** at their organization.



53% say senior leadership at their organization feels it is important to **provide proactive mental health resources**.



27% say their organization **highly prioritizes the mental wellness** of its workforce.

Due to rounding, some figures in this report may not add up to 100%.

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More than half the survey respondents say workplace stress is hurting employee engagement, contributing to employee turnover, and impacting creativity and innovation.

priority. That disparity is all the more striking given that 61% of survey respondents agree their organization has been more focused on managing employee stress and mental health in the workplace as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“There has been a growing interest in workplace stress and how we tackle it,” says Megan Reitz, professor of leadership and dialogue at Ashridge Executive Education, part of Boston-based Hult International Business School. “What I don’t necessarily see is a sustained prioritization of it. In some places, they are very definitely tick-box exercises.”

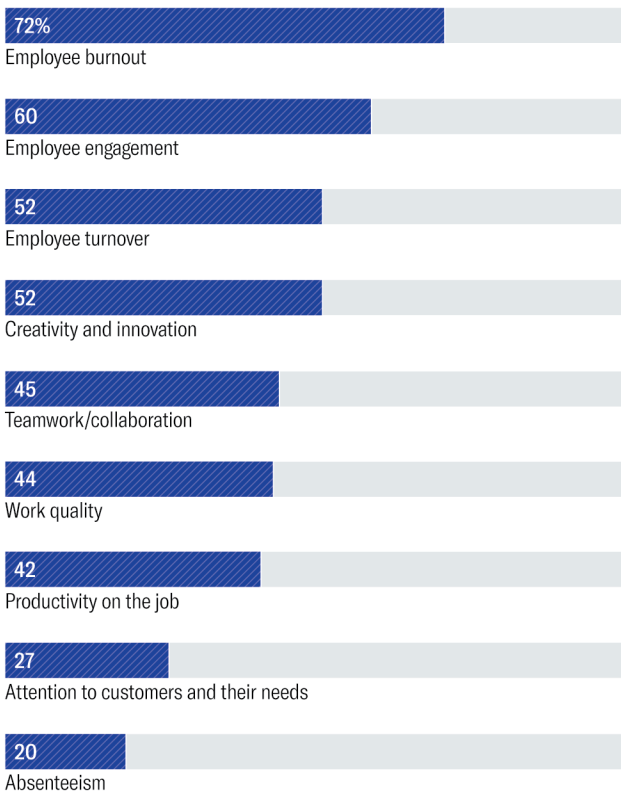
FIGURE 1

### Stress Drives Litany of Employer, Employee Woes

Workplace stress contributes to employee burnout and turnover and reduces creativity and productivity

Which of the following areas are being negatively impacted because of workplace stress at your organization? [Select all that apply.]

Among the 635 respondents familiar with their organization’s status regarding employee mental wellness and stress management programs.



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, February 2023

### Causes of Workplace Stress

It isn’t surprising that stress levels rose during the pandemic as workers coped with threats to their health and the health of their families, and with new ways of working. But a recent Gallup survey shows that workplace stress levels continued to rise thereafter, by 2022 reaching their highest point since the organization began tracking them in 2009.

Reitz attributes the current high levels of stress to a confluence of factors, including societal problems like exclusion, racism, misogyny, and climate change; war in Eastern Europe; and unresolved trauma in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. These issues are compounded by common closer-to-home organizational factors, she says, such as difficult relationships with line managers and team colleagues, threats from restructuring and redundancy programs, and a lack of autonomy.

“At the height of the pandemic, there was an acute existential angst about what was happening, but also a sense that we were all in it together, figuring it out,” adds Lindsey Cameron, assistant professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School. “A lot of leniency was built into the system at that time, particularly for higher-skilled workers able to continue to do their jobs remotely.”

Now, Cameron says, the leniency that infused the workplace is starting to disappear, which may be contributing to workplace stress. Some managers and employers, for example, are becoming less tolerant of the remote work arrangements that workers have come to count on to help them better manage work-life balance.

Survey respondents point directly to employer behaviors as significant contributors to workplace stress, with 72% saying employees are overworked—the most commonly cited culprit.

Ashridge’s Reitz isn’t surprised. “In the business world, there’s a constant search for doing more with less—a constant need to create more than was created last year but with fewer

resources,” she says. “Over time, it squeezes people to such an extent that I think we have to re-look at that model.”

The second-most common cause of workplace stress, cited by 29% of survey respondents, is that managers and colleagues lack strong communication or collaboration skills—e.g., they anger easily or don’t manage conflict well.

In fact, the survey shows managers play a multifaceted role in driving workplace stress. In addition to sometimes angering easily or mismanaging conflict, managers are faulted by survey respondents for prioritizing production over morale (cited by 27% of respondents as one of the greatest contributors to workplace stress), not listening or responding to employee concerns (17%), and micromanaging (17%). Ninety-six percent of survey respondents agree that managers who don’t prioritize their team’s well-being can drive employees to look for a new job.

“When you’re asking what causes the greatest amount of stress in the workplace—or what can ease it—it is your relationship with your manager by far,” Reitz says.

Fifty-eight percent of the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey respondents say the soft skill that managers at their organization most need to work on improving is their communication skills or style, ranking that need higher than any other, including recognizing hard work and achievement (cited by 49%), empathy (41%), transparency (38%), and fairness (23%). **FIGURE 2**

Managers aren’t oblivious to their contributions to workplace stress and its negative consequences. The survey asked any respondent who identified as a people manager (regardless of how familiar they were with their organization’s stress management programs) the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with different statements about their team. Of this group, 89% agree that, as a manager, they play a role in determining the stress levels of their team members. But they often don’t feel equipped to mitigate that stress. Only 48% of managers surveyed say they feel empowered by their organization to prioritize the mental wellness of their team by doing things like giving comp days or allotting money to stress reduction programs. And only 46% say they have the resources they need to support the mental wellness of their team.

When the group familiar with mental wellness and stress management at their organization was asked what could help managers do a better job—which stress management programs, resources, or benefits their organization most needs to increase or expand—61% pointed to policies that would promote a less stressful culture, such as workload assessments and encouraging employees to take days off. Fifty-eight percent call for workshops or programs that train managers on ways to create a less stressful work environment by teaching things like healthier communication styles and skills, helping them become more empathetic, and helping them do a better job of managing their emotions.

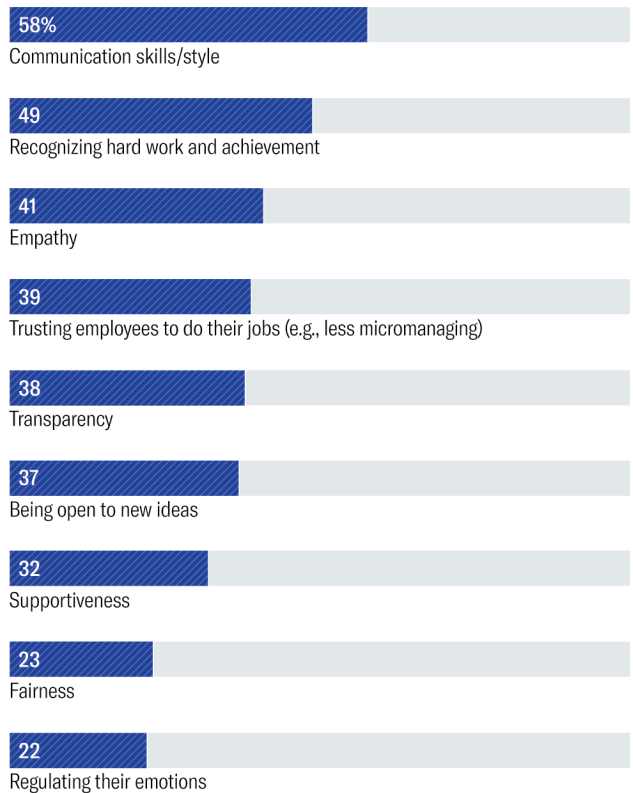
FIGURE 2

### Managers Are Lacking in Some Soft Skills

They most need improvement in communicating and in recognizing hard work

What soft skills do managers at your organization most need to work on improving? [Select up to five.]

Among the 635 respondents familiar with their organization’s status regarding employee mental wellness and stress management programs.



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, February 2023

Ultimately, these survey findings suggest that workers and employers alike are looking for managers who can be more mindful—more aware of what’s happening in the moment, how it’s making them feel, and how their response to workplace developments may affect others.

### Methods of Addressing Stress

As a group, companies already offer a wide mix of programs and resources aimed at reducing workplace stress, even if they don’t always offer them consistently. Fifty-one percent of survey respondents say their organization has implemented employee mental wellness/stress management programs



## Despite the broad cross section of offerings, mental health experts say companies and their employees confront a daunting array of hurdles in realizing full benefit from them.

across the enterprise, and another 19% say their organization has implemented them in at least some areas of the business. Apart from traditional employee assistance programs that offer services such as confidential counseling, financial advice, or legal assistance (cited by 71% of respondents), the most common way organizations are attacking workplace stress is by offering tools or apps aimed at preventing or reducing stress/anxiousness (e.g., tools or apps for mindfulness, stress management, or sleep management), with 39% offering them. Close behind are on-site facilities or reimbursement for wellness activities (e.g., gym memberships, yoga, meditation), cited by 38%, and workshops or programs to help employees manage their stress or anxiousness (36%). (Ten percent of survey respondents say their organization provides no assistance in this area.)

Despite the broad cross section of offerings, mental health experts say companies and their employees confront a daunting array of hurdles in realizing full benefit from them.

“There is a gap between what employers say about employee mental health and its importance, and what they’re actually doing about it,” says Wharton’s Cameron. “There’s always a tension between wanting to do these things and, at the end of the day, the imperative to be profitable.”

“Often companies have very positive intentions, but they just get distracted by the day-to-day stuff that seems even more important,” adds Reitz. “Companies develop a feeling that stress management programs are a ‘nice to have’ rather than a necessity—especially when the quarterly results start to look a little dodgy. In fact, work on mental health is fundamental to those results and requires patience, prioritization, and persistence. Otherwise, it doesn’t get done.”

Other factors that make it harder than it should be to address workplace stress include the long-standing stigma around opening up about mental health issues and a belief among many managers and frontline workers that they don’t have time to devote to stress management programs or use stress management tools.

### The Mindful Way Out

Recognizing that persistent workplace stress can lead to more serious mental health conditions, some organizations are taking a three-pronged approach to creating a healthier workplace that promotes mental wellness.

For starters, they’re taking a proactive and preventive approach to combating stress—providing, for example, employee access to mental health tools and apps that can help them reduce stress and anxiety and improve their sleep. The goal isn’t just to help employees in the here and now, but also to prevent stress from devolving into more serious mental health issues, which research has shown to be a real threat. A study of 972 young workers in New Zealand by researchers at King’s College London, for example, found that 45% of new cases of depression and anxiety in that group were directly attributable to stress in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

Next, forward-thinking organizations are reconsidering how they train managers, in some cases offering “mindful manager” training to teach them to become more self-aware, to better regulate their emotions, and to generally create a less stressful work environment by changing how they interact with their teams and colleagues. Among other things, mindfulness can help managers choose how they respond to a situation rather than simply act out of habit. Reitz notes that her work in this area has shown that mindfulness appears to exert a positive influence on managers’ resilience, empathy, and adaptability. It also can create managers who are more collaborative and focused in complex and uncertain environments—skills fundamental to good leadership.

Finally, organizations at the forefront of stress management are teaching employees that it’s okay to take short mental health breaks during the workday—time they can use to meditate or engage in breathing exercises that can help them destress. Reitz contends that contrary to popular belief, her research shows that taking breaks like these doesn’t reduce productivity but can actually increase it by leaving employees feeling recharged, more focused, and less stressed. By stepping out of autopilot, employees gain perspective and make better choices.

### Two Successful Battles against Stress

As director of people experience for New York City-based creative marketing and communications agency Ogilvy, Erika Sheridan has a front-row view of workplace stress. In her industry, she notes, workloads ebb and flow based on ever-shifting client needs and schedules, which can lead to intense and sometimes untraditional work hours—all while employees are endeavoring to deliver, as she puts it, “the best work of



our lives.” Accordingly, she says, Ogilvy has long looked for ways to mitigate stress in the workplace. Among other things, it offers an employee assistance program; diversity, equity, and inclusion training; and workshops aimed at helping employees understand one another better. Still, the company rolled out several new stress management offerings in the wake of the pandemic.

One new tool Ogilvy debuted is a mental health application that employees and their family members can use to help them with managing stress, anxiety, and sleep. Working with the app’s provider, the company also created a “Mindful Manager” program for its North American operations. The program aims to help managers cope with stress and create a healthier work environment for their teams. More than 800 managers participated in the four-week program, which included training on self-awareness, developing strong relationships with others, regulating emotions, and integrating mindfulness into daily work life. It also included invitations for managers to meditate for 10 minutes during each workday, weekly discussion groups across disciplines and departments, and tools and tips for helping managers continue their mindfulness journey after the program ended.

“We saw a need for the Mindful Manager program because managers have such a holistic, critical role within Ogilvy and the workplace in general,” Sheridan says. “They influence people and events up and down the organization, and without their success, we cannot be at our best.”

Sheridan also noted that employee surveys have shown that managers feel some of the highest levels of stress within the workplace, which lent further credence to the idea of giving them extra support.

Like many other employers, Zendesk, a global producer of customer relationship management software headquartered in San Francisco, quickly recognized that the Covid-19 pandemic was going to require a keener focus on mental health and well-being in the workplace. And like Ogilvy, Zendesk introduced a slew of programs and tools to help in that effort, including a mental health app to help employees—and interested family members—with stress, anxiety, and sleep. Zendesk also offered employees access to a global mental health platform that provides users with both digital mental wellness tools and connections to counselors and coaches. Shortly thereafter, it introduced a new employee assistance program from the same provider. Zendesk also began offering employees access to an online marketplace for child care, senior care, and other care professionals.

Zendesk made changes internally, too. It launched a program called Recharge Friday to give employees designated Fridays off. It created an employee community it calls The Whole Self, whose members come together to bring awareness to, and destigmatize, mental illness, neurodiversity, and persons with disabilities. Finally, it created “empathy circles”

to provide a safe space in which groups of employees meet virtually for open discussion on difficult world events and to support one another through shared experiences. Participants in each session include a representative of the company that provides its employee assistance program and a member of the Zendesk diversity, equity, and inclusion team.

One reason for introducing all these new tools and programs, says Jen Bergman, senior program manager for benefits and well-being at Zendesk, is that the company wants to be proactive rather than merely reactive in addressing mental wellness—to combat stress before it leads to more serious mental health conditions, such as depression.

“We want to help people before things become acute or a crisis,” Bergman says. “Both our global mental health platform and our mental health app have dedicated resources to specifically address stress and burnout. Also, the time we are providing employees for self-care through programs like Recharge Friday, The Whole Self, and empathy circles is laser-focused on reducing employee burnout.”

Bergman says her company considers it important that managers know how to create a psychologically safe environment for their teams. To that end, it offers psychological safety training as part of what it calls its “Manager Essentials” training program.

“Managers play such a critical role in the mental well-being of their employees that you cannot overlook their training,” Bergman says. “We try to promote balanced workloads for our employees, and we train managers to be empathetic to those they work with.”

## Measuring Results: Reducing Stress Yields Positive Benefits

Measuring workplace stress levels is important to determining how well programs aimed at reducing it are working. Employers typically rely on employees to self-report their stress levels via regular surveys that ask about their mental well-being and their engagement with their job. Some also try to infer how well their employees are feeling by extrapolating from metrics such as employee turnover, absenteeism, and productivity. And companies that offer stress reduction tools, programs, or other resources often track how engaged workers are with them to get a sense of whether those resources are providing value.

The most common benefit identified from stress reduction programs is greater employee engagement, cited by 43% of respondents (excluding those who aren’t sure and selected “don’t know”). Other top responses included improved teamwork/collaboration (36%), reduced employee burnout (33%), reduced employee turnover (28%), and improved work quality (25%). **FIGURE 3**

At her company, Ogilvy’s Sheridan says, results from stress reduction initiatives have been very encouraging. Over the

course of 2022, Ogilvy employees spent more than 4,200 hours using the mental health app offered by the company. Among those who had downloaded it, the engagement rate—the percentage actively using it—was 82.4%.

As for Ogilvy’s Mindful Manager program, 70% of the participating managers said it improved their ability to be mindful, 60% reported less stress-related impairment in their day-to-day activities, and 54% said they were better able to regulate and recalibrate their emotions.

Like Ogilvy, Zendesk has seen positive results from its mental wellness efforts. The provider of its global mental

health platform offers regular surveys (called “check-ins”) to Zendesk employees about their mental well-being, Bergman notes, and the Zendesk scores consistently exceed the average for all of that company’s clients. Similarly, she said, registration and engagement levels for the other tools Zendesk is offering its employees routinely exceed the norms across the business done by their providers. As for the mental health app the company offers, 46% of employees have registered to use the app since its introduction in 2020, and among that group 72% remain engaged with it.

“We feel like we are making a difference for people,” Bergman says.

FIGURE 3

### Engagement Jumps When Stress Falls

Employees can become more engaged, collaborative, and productive when stress levels decline

What positive outcomes has your organization realized from the stress reduction programs or resources it’s implemented, if any? [Select all that apply.]

Among the 414 respondents whose organizations currently offer programs or resources to reduce workplace stress, excluding “don’t know.”



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, February 2023

### Tips for Improving Workplace Mental Health

Introducing tools, programs, and other resources designed to reduce stress in the workplace is only a first step in winning the mental health battle. Equally important is making sure those resources get used. The executives and experts interviewed for this report offer these suggestions for getting managers and employees involved in using them, and for maximizing outcomes:

**Be proactive, not reactive.** When companies only launch new programs, tools, or other initiatives to combat workplace stress after something bad has happened, Sheridan says, they risk coming across as “performative” rather than authentic. Workers may sense the company is being disingenuous about an important and sensitive issue.

“Even if that’s not your intention, even if you’re like, ‘Wow, this was a wake-up call—I really need to address this now,’ it just doesn’t come off as genuine,” she says.

Many survey respondents seem to agree with Sheridan. Fifty-three percent say senior leadership at their organization feels it is important to provide proactive mental health resources (i.e., resources that seek to prevent workplace stress rather than treat it after it appears). That said, plenty of organizations have yet to make good on that sentiment. Seventy-one percent of survey respondents say their organization offers an employee assistance program that can help people already struggling with mental health issues, but only 39% say their organization offers tools or apps that can be used proactively to prevent or reduce stress or anxiousness.

**Create evergreen programs, not one-offs.** Rather than offer mental health programs only during obvious moments—like Mental Health Awareness Month—also offer ongoing programs. This constancy can help demonstrate that mental well-being is always a priority and that the program holds just as much weight as other, more traditional development programs your company may sponsor.



**Listen to employees.** Ask employees for feedback to understand whether programs or tools are working for them, and make sure managers join employees in using those programs and tools and can see firsthand how they're working. Sheridan notes that she had never meditated prior to participating in Ogilvy's Mindful Manager program but is now a regular user of the third-party meditation and calming app offered by her employer. "I've even created calendar holds for people for 15 minutes a day to help them make space to use it, and I talk about it with other employees any chance I can get," she says.

**Use anecdotal evidence to help drive buy-in from senior management.** Culture is set from the top. More than a third of survey respondents say a lack of buy-in from executive leadership and a general lack of awareness of the importance of workplace mental wellness are barriers to successfully implementing programs to address it. While employee surveys may help demonstrate the need for mental health and stress reduction tools, programs, and other resources, Sheridan says that hearing directly from senior managers about what their employees are saying can have a big impact, too.

"There are always going to be times when you're trying to convince leadership that you need something with a price tag attached to it," Sheridan explains. "I don't care what the research says about it—I'd much rather be able to approach leadership and say, 'Look, this is something I've shared with a close group of colleagues across departments, this is the feedback we've gotten from employees, and this is the impact we can anticipate based on what we're hearing.' It's just much easier to get leadership buy-in when you can show that you're doing something rooted in reality."

**Don't buy into the notion that there's not enough time to engage with mental health programs.** It's not uncommon to hear employees say they're too busy to spend time working on mental health at work—that they're already short of time to complete their regular duties. Indeed, when asked to identify the biggest barriers to successfully implementing mental wellness/stress reduction programs for their organization, 65% of survey respondents say employees feel too busy with work to find time to participate—making it the most commonly cited hurdle.

"That's our number one battle," Sheridan says. "People will say they're grateful for what we're offering but just don't know how they'll have time for it. They'll even say that trying to find time for it is creating more stress than not participating at all."

Reitz counters that this sort of pushback "shows a misunderstanding of these tools and programs and how they work. We know from our research that 10 minutes spent using them is very likely to improve your outcomes on the other things you are so focused on doing."



**"Making workers feel like they're seen, heard, and valued can, in turn, leave them feeling more attuned to the company and its mission," says Lindsey Cameron, assistant professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.**

**Use mindfulness to become a more transparent and communicative organization.** Cameron says research shows that poor communication with employees can be a significant driver of employee turnover. But managers and other leaders who've been trained in mindfulness are more likely to be truly engaged with employees and attuned to what they're saying when holding conversations with them.

"Making workers feel like they're seen, heard, and valued can, in turn, leave them feeling more attuned to the company and its mission," Cameron says.

Along these same lines, Sheridan urges managers and other leaders to solicit input from employees about their work concerns at a personal level, not just through surveys and other formal programs, as a way to build stronger relationships with them.

"It's all about the employee-manager dialogue," agrees Cameron. "And it becomes especially valuable when you're having difficult conversations. That's when mindfulness, and engaging with a high amount of integrity and emotional regulation, can really pay off."

**Integrate mental health breaks into the workday.** One way Ogilvy sought to counter concerns about making time for its Mindful Manager program—and to demonstrate the company's commitment to it—was to send calendar invites to each participant for the 15-minute block of time they were to commit to meditation each day, along with a job code to account for that activity.

"Because we're in a client-service industry, the way we generate revenue is through our time billed to clients," explains Sheridan. "We literally bill every 15 minutes of work we do to some kind of code. So if you don't have a time code to use, people get a bit hesitant about doing something. Our approach felt simple yet critical—we were giving people

time and therefore permission in their workday to meditate, and it really helped drive participation.”

Other ways to integrate mental health breaks into the workday include starting meetings with a brief meditation and prompting employees to take a midday stretch.

### **Create spaces for managers and leaders to recharge.**

“I’ve taught thousands of leaders and managers, and when they come together at a place like Ashridge to reflect together for a few days, they almost always have really positive intentions—they want to have a really good impact on the people around them,” Reitz says. “But when they get back to their day-to-day work, their attention goes to something else.”

Reitz suggests that employers create spaces at work where people can connect back to what really matters to them. “If we could do that just 10% more of the time, they’d show up differently,” she says. “And that would impact a great number of people.”

### **Fix the system, not just individuals.**

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents say their organization’s overall culture contributes to stress in the workplace. Accordingly, Reitz notes that focusing only on changing individual behaviors may not be enough to meaningfully reduce workplace stress. Training managers to be more mindful, for example, may not be sufficient at a company where senior leadership routinely reinforces the idea that people need to work long hours regardless of the impact on their work-life balance.

“You can certainly do useful work at the individual level,” Reitz says. “But you also have to look at system-wide reasons for workplace stress. What is it about the way we’re working here that is creating these levels of stress?”

Reitz recalls management guru Peter Drucker’s famous quote that “culture eats strategy for breakfast,” and she amends it slightly.

“Culture eats mindfulness for breakfast. Culture eats well-being for breakfast,” she says. “You need to look at the system, not just the individual.”

### **Don’t end stress reduction programs at the workplace door.**

Especially with many people continuing to work from home at least part of the time, helping employees cope with stress extends beyond the workplace to the home. As noted earlier, both Ogilvy and Zendesk make available to employees’ family members the app they offer to help address stress and anxiety and improve sleep.

“When my family is stressed, I’m stressed, and it shows up at work,” notes Sheridan. “But if we’re in a place where my husband and I can actively use these tools at home to destress, that’s going to show up in work, as well.”

Making mental health tools available to employees’ family members, Sheridan says, “is just a more genuine way to help our people.”

## **Conclusion**

Workplace stress is widely acknowledged to contribute to employee burnout and workforce turnover. Many survey respondents say it also reduces creativity and innovation in the workplace and can lead to more serious conditions among workers, including depression and anxiety.

With fewer than a third of survey respondents saying their organization makes employee mental wellness a high priority, there’s clearly room for many employers to do more to create healthier, less stressful work environments. Some organizations are forging a path forward—seizing on new tools and programs that are helping managers and their teams become more mindful in their daily activities, more empathetic with each other, and less stressed on the job.

Forward-thinking organizations are taking a three-pronged approach to workplace mental health that starts with being proactive rather than reactive—leveraging mental health tools and apps to help workers address issues around stress, anxiety, and sleep. They’re training managers to be mindful and better able to regulate their emotions and lead with empathy. And they’re integrating mental health breaks into the workday, giving employees permission to pause and destress.

In all these efforts, manager-led cultural change is critical to creating a workplace where employees believe their mental health is prioritized, and to generating better mental health outcomes and workplace productivity.

Managers often deserve special help in understanding the causes of workplace stress and what they can do to minimize it, both because of the important role they play in setting work conditions for their teams and reinforcing company culture, and because they tend to carry some of the highest levels of stress in an organization.

“Managers play a critical role in the mental well-being of employees,” Bergman says. “Often, they are the ‘first responders’ when it comes to identifying and addressing stress in the workplace, and it only makes sense to give them all the resources they need to create a healthier and less stressful environment for their teams.”

## **Endnotes**

1 Capsi, Avshalom, “Work Stress Precipitates Depression and Anxiety in Young, Working Women and Men,” *Psychological Medicine*, August 2007.

## METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Harvard Business Review Analytic Services surveyed a total of 674 members of the *Harvard Business Review* audience via an online survey fielded in March 2023.

### Size of Organization

**33%**  
10,000 or more  
employees

**28%**  
1,000-9,999  
employees

**9%**  
500-999  
employees

**20%**  
100-499  
employees

**10%**  
50-99  
employees

### Seniority

**18%**  
Executive  
management/  
board members

**41%**  
Senior  
management

**27%**  
Middle  
management

**15%**  
Other grades

### Key Industry Sectors

**13%**  
Government/  
not-for-profit

**12%**  
Technology

**10%**  
Financial services

**10%**  
Health care

All other sectors  
less than 10% each

### Job Function

**16%**  
General/  
executive  
management

**13%**  
HR/training

**8%**  
Administration

**8%**  
Marketing/PR/  
communications

**8%**  
Sales/business  
development/  
customer service

All other functions  
less than 8% each

### Regions

**57%**  
North America

**20%**  
Europe

**13%**  
Asia Pacific

**5%**  
Middle East/Africa

**4%**  
Latin America

**1%**  
Other

Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.



# Harvard Business Review

ANALYTIC SERVICES

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