



Understanding
Workplace
Stress and
Creating a

**HEALTHIER,
HAPPIER
WORKPLACE**

Between 1985 and 1988, a team of British researchers attempted to study the effect of stress and other psychosocial factors on employees' well-being.¹ This was a continuation of a similar study from 1967, that attempted to correlate workplace stress and coronary heart disease. These studies, together called the Whitehall Studies, were one of the first efforts to recognize workplace stress and clearly link it to the physical wellbeing of workers.

Employees in lower ranks face a significantly more demanding workload and subsequently higher psychological stress on the job.

Several studies since then have tried to correlate workplace conditions to stress, anxiety, and depression. In Sweden, a survey of white-collar workers showed that people who had a higher level of influence at the workplace experienced less stress.² In the United States, a 2007 study revealed an inverse relation between workplace conditions and stress.³

Growing Concerns, **Lurking Stigma**

These studies point to lower job control and social support as the common factors for workplace stress. But over the last decade, the sudden exponential rise in workplace stress and anxiety indicates other possible factors that affect workers in higher ranks as well.

The pervasive nature of mental health issues has been a cause for growing concern. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 20.6% of Americans aged 18 or above suffer from mental health issues.⁴

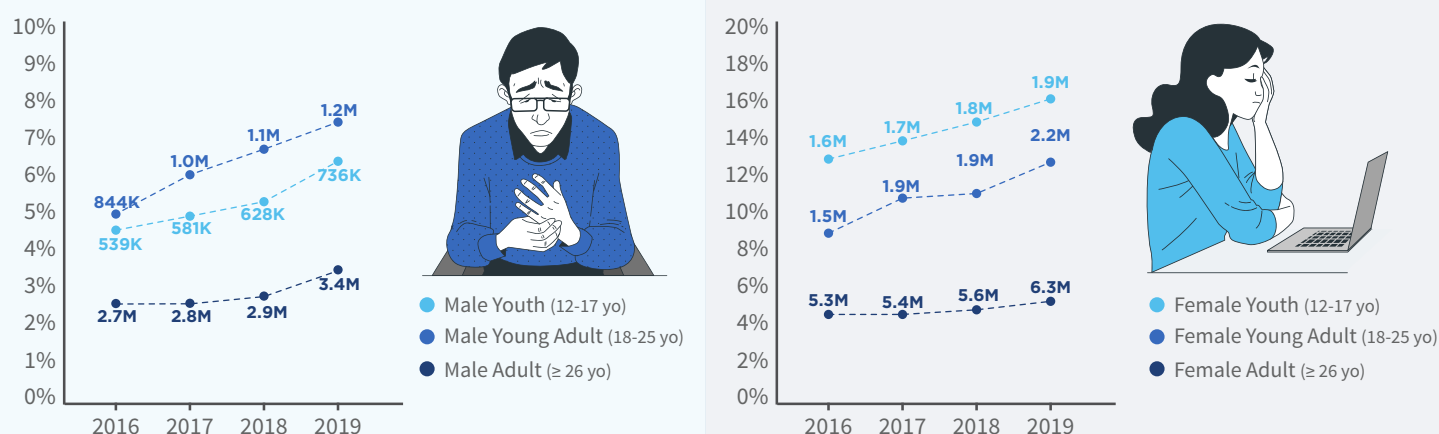
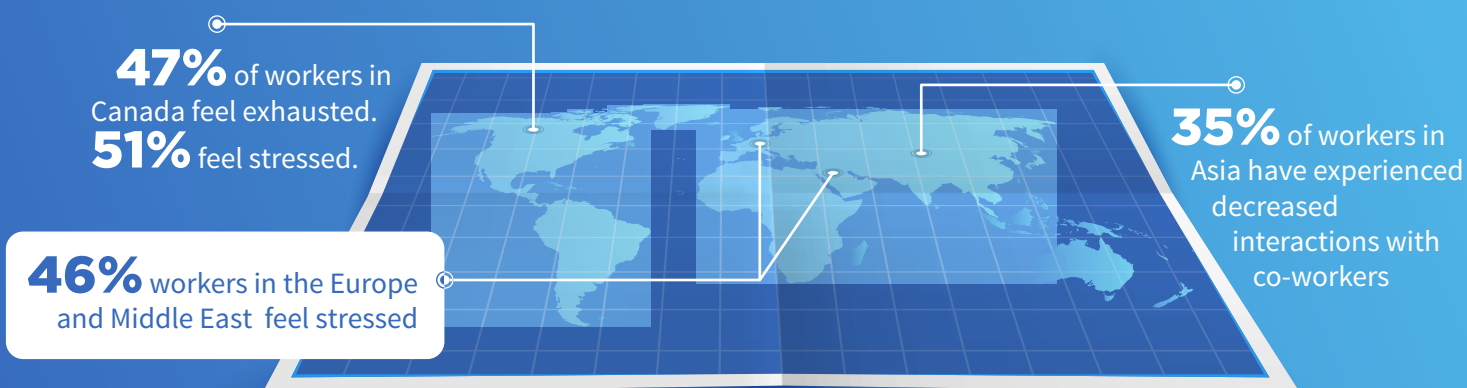


Fig. 1: The rise in major depressive episodes with severe impairment in the US⁵

Across the Atlantic, in the UK, the past decade saw the number of employees reporting workplace stress double from 414,00 in 2008-09 to 828,000 in 2019-20.⁶ In Canada, 53% of workers have considered resigning due to growing stress at the workplace.⁷

Workplace stress stats from around the world:⁸



The global average of people feeling stressed at work stands at **42%**



A Pandemic State of Mind

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has further aggravated the stress and anxiety at work. In September 2020, McKinsey & Company warned against a potential increase in behavioral health conditions stemming from the pandemic.⁹ With the sudden shift to a remote working model, many employees have felt the sting of social isolation and the need to be constantly available. This, combined with several other factors – personal health concerns, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, and increased consumption of caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol – have led to critical situation of workplace stress.

The increase in stressful conditions is also threatening to catalyze the already pressing concern around the risk of prescription drugs. Since the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in prescriptions for anti-anxiety medication. At its peak, new prescriptions accounted for 78% of all prescriptions being filled for stress and anxiety medication.


A Stigma as Old as the Illness

Mental health issues have been subject to stigma since the end of the middle-ages, often leading to the ostracization of the ill. In the 21st century, mental health is comparatively less stigmatized. People are encouraged to speak up about mental health issues. Still, misconceptions remain.

There are several factors that contribute to the situation such as cultural misunderstandings, fear of the unknown, and stereotypes. Often these lead to quick judgments based on a few characteristics. And the fear of being labeled “crazy”, “violent”, and “dangerous” keeps people from openly seeking medical advice.

Creating a **No-Stress Workplace**

Following the pandemic, 99% of the workforce has been struggling to deal with at least moderate stress.¹⁰ And while most employers recognize the importance of mental health, they often find it an uphill struggle to provide employees with the required behavioral health services. And this is having an unprecedented impact on businesses and economies.



According to WHO, anxiety and stress cost the global economy around \$1 trillion worth of productivity every year.¹¹

Unfortunately, most organizations are ill-equipped to address the issue. A 2017 Deloitte study found that only 22% of managers in the UK had been trained on mental health at work.¹² According to the 2020 Workforce Attitude Toward Mental Health by Ginger, 20% of Americans worry that approaching employers with their mental health issues could jeopardize their careers.¹³

To add to the challenge, mental health issues vary with individuals from different age groups, gender, and ethnicity. For instance, Latino and African Americans report greater stress at the workplace than others. In the case of women, the mental toll has led to 25% of women in senior positions to leave their jobs or downshift their careers during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴

It is clear from the above examples that businesses need to do more to ensure the mental health of their employees. To do this, businesses must design and implement a comprehensive psychological safety framework and a culture to go with it.



Fostering a Culture of Openness

One of the most important steps an organization needs to take to create a no-stress workplace is creating a culture that supports employees who want to come forward with mental health issues. This may not be an easy task, however, considering the generations of stigma around mental health. But following a few basic practices can help.

For instance, enterprises can begin by establishing open channels of communication for stressed employees. This allows the employee to feel safe and demonstrates the employer's commitment to a psychologically safe workplace.

Communications can be as simple as asking how employees are doing and reminders to access enterprise mental-health resources.

Once open communications have been established, employers must focus on identifying the needs and the impact of stress on the workforce. While it is always a good idea to listen to employees, it is also important to gather anonymized and confidential data. This will help employers get a comprehensive view of the psychological safety of their workforce.

Finally, employers must encourage self-care practices. By creating a culture of inclusion, organizations can provide the required support to employees who are seeking treatment. With the blurring of the line between personal space and work, it is important for employers to ask their employees if they are getting enough rest and taking breaks at regular intervals.



Focusing on Mental Health Benefits

Mental health benefits are essential to creating a non-stress workplace. In fact, enterprises that invest in workplace mental health plans are mitigating the risk of productivity loss due to stress. Even businesses that have not made the most of an existing mental health program make greater savings than companies that lose productivity to stress.

For every \$1 spent caring for people with mental health issues, \$4 is returned to the economy.¹⁵

To achieve such a position, organizations need to invest in programs that proactively promote positive mental health. Employers can collaborate with health insurance companies to provide the best possible mental health plans to employees. This can be extended further to include proactive tracking to assess barriers to accessing services and best-fit reimbursement rates.

At the same time, mental health must be made an enterprise-wide priority. And finally, employers must make the most of available resources. Organizations are increasingly growing aware of the role digital tools can play in ensuring mental health of the workforce. By providing employees with numerous digital tools to improve mental health.





The Changing Role of Leadership

As the concern for workplace safety grows, leaders need to take on new roles and learn skills that can ensure a happier and healthier workplace. One such skill is encouraging the right environment, behavior, and mindset within teams and across them. Leaders that focus on doing this often act as catalysts in cultivating and reinforcing psychological safety. A team that cares about each other's wellbeing can be an important enabler and model for a psychologically safe workplace.

When considered in the context of the pandemic, a positive team environment can have additional benefits. With the sudden shift to remote working models, a positive climate can help create a more psychologically safe space than other teams.

Similarly, adopting a consultative leadership approach can have a direct impact on psychological safety at the workplace. When leaders consult their teams on issues that affect them, it fosters a culture of inclusion and openness. On the other hand, a supportive leadership role can also have significant impact on mental health. By supporting and demonstrating concern for team members, leaders can encourage members to be supportive of each other as well.

Building Support Through the Supply Chain

Less noticeable, but just as important are the mental health struggles of workers and contractors that work with your brand. Building in mental wellness into your supply chain can seem daunting at first, but it comes with strong benefits, including a more productive workforce, safer sites, and a sustainable brand reputation.

Through a worker management tool like Avetta, businesses can ensure that every worker who comes on site has knowledge or access to mental health resources. This will influence change on the individual level. In addition, on a broader scale, hiring clients can use configurable prequalification forms to ensure their suppliers are systems in place to support the mental health of their workforce. When combined these two strategies will help businesses better manage the stress and wellness of all workers.



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About Avetta

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