



Stress in the workplace: How to spot the signs and tackle the causes.

Produced by **People Insight**

PeopleInsight

Hybrid working helps improve productivity, flexibility, and work-life balance. But, if not properly managed, it can make stress more of a challenge as people feel more isolated, struggle to switch off, and work longer hours.

Research¹ shows we're at a crunch point for stress and burnout:

- ▶ Two-thirds of staff are struggling with workplace stress²
- ▶ Google searches for 'signs of burnout' have gone up by 221%³
- ▶ 17 million working days were lost to stress in 2022⁴

Employee wellbeing is much more than a nice thing for organisations to talk about. It's a broader societal phenomenon that employees expect organisations to prioritise. And it has significant business impact; resilient, positive staff have been found to be⁵:

- ▶ **More than twice** as willing to consistently give their best efforts at work
- ▶ **Less than half** as likely to give up on their current employer and be in the process of looking for a job elsewhere.



Stress is miserable, and dangerous for the individual, contributing to^{6,7}:

- ▶ Anxiety / depression
- ▶ Insomnia
- ▶ Poor diet
- ▶ Susceptibility to pain and infection
- ▶ High blood pressure, and risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

It is damaging for the team, causing counter productive work behaviours such as:

- ▶ Conflict with co-workers
- ▶ Poor co-operation, collaboration and support
- ▶ Anger toward managers.

A workplace stress problem can have significant organisational impact, such as:

- ▶ Productivity losses due to absenteeism or presenteeism - employees at work but working at a sub-optimal level
- ▶ Rudeness to customers
- ▶ Poor decision making and mistakes
- ▶ Damage to a positive organisation culture
- ▶ Even recklessness in ignoring safety procedures and company policies, resulting in accidents.



The difference between everyday 'stress', intolerable 'stress' and 'burnout'

Officially, stress is "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them"⁸. However, we're probably more used to seeing 'stress' cover everything from small one-off worries to things that make us very anxious in the long-term.

Stress typically involves feeling under too much pressure. Under stress, we are usually still able to cope and can feel relief by taking a break or asking someone to lend a hand.

Chronic workplace stress can lead to burnout⁹. Unlike stress, burnout is when an employee feels mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted. The amount of work is too much, there isn't enough time, and the stress is too great to cope with.

As a result, burned out colleagues might come across as cynical, detached or very negative about their work, colleagues and customers. They may lose confidence and feel incapable of doing their job but unable to ask for help.



Everyday 'stresses'

Usually when we say we're feeling "stressed out" about something, we mean feeling a challenge, stretch, or pressure that we are **resilient enough to manage** without any significant effect.

A stress 'problem'

Stress becomes a problem when we have feelings and behaviours related to **anxiety**, and **can't cope**, which has negative outcomes **right now** that need addressing.

Burnout

Burnout occurs when there is a long-term failure to cope with negative work conditions and stress. It is characterised by **profound exhaustion**, **cynicism** and feelings of **incompetence**, and can lead to **depression**.

How do you really know if you have a workplace stress problem?

Deadlines, change and disruption are inevitable in an organisation. However employers have a duty to assess the risk of stress related ill health arising from work activities and take measures to control that risk¹⁰.

This is easier to do in smaller organisations, or when teams work in the office together. In larger businesses, or those with flexible or hybrid working arrangements it can be harder for organisations to check in on how people are doing.

This where your data comes in. See overleaf for a couple of ways to gather these insights.





1. HR Data

Quantitative data from your HR systems such as absence rates, Bradford factor scores and turnover rates should give you an indication of how people are feeling, particularly if you look at variability across departments, teams or roles. You may see an increase in complaints about employee behaviour, conflict or performance indicating a problem.

Real examples of employee survey responses about stress at work.

“The levels of stress faced by our front-line staff when things go wrong make the job unbearable at times.”

“The workload makes me feel stressed and tired every day. There were 3 days last week alone when our team worked from 7.30am until 7pm and I couldn’t just go home because we have to deliver on schedule. The whole department is so exhausted at the moment it’s becoming too much of a challenge to stay positive...and it needs to change.”

2. Employee survey

Organisations are highly diverse with varied purposes, strategies, settings, activities and contexts. As such, the factors that can influence wellbeing will vary.

Your employee survey is a great opportunity to carry out your stress risk assessment and understand which factors are affecting how people feel.

You can run a wellbeing pulse survey or add a Stress and Wellbeing or Burnout Index into your engagement survey.

People Insight’s [wellbeing survey](#) framework is based on our THRIVE model. It allows you to paint a picture of stress and wellbeing levels in your organisation, and compare this across departments, regions, or other demographics. Crucially, THRIVE also equips organisations with insights about the causes of stress at work that may be holding people back.

Example wellbeing survey questions include:

“I am able to strike the right balance between my work and home life”

“My opinion is sought on decisions that affect my work”

THRIVE: A framework for measuring wellbeing

THRIVE¹¹ has been designed by People Insight's organisational psychologists to help organisations assess wellbeing at work and provide actionable survey data.

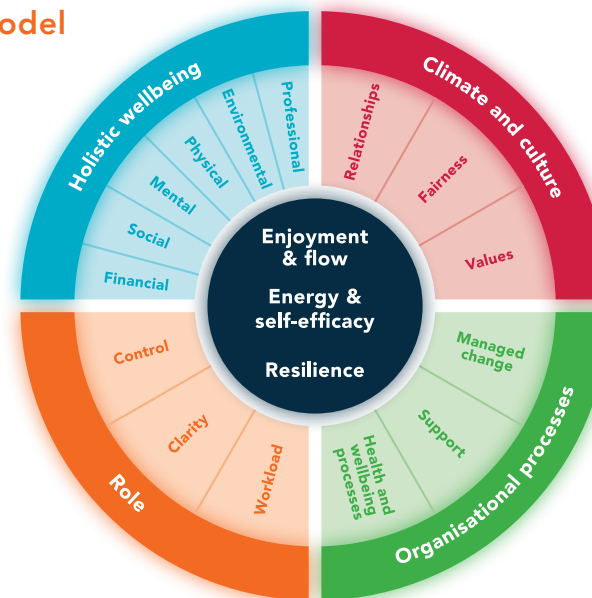
THRIVE is based on extensive academic and applied research, and uses three components to demonstrate the outcomes of an individual experiencing positive workplace wellbeing:

1. **Enjoyment & flow** - deriving enjoyment from, and positive absorption in work
2. **Resilience** - capacity to remain buoyant and productive in the face of difficulties.
3. **Energy & self-efficacy** - personal levels of energy and confidence in making a difference.

THRIVE also helps organisations measure what might be causing pockets of stress and burnout, and whether these vary by demographic. While these factors will vary by organisation, research has identified universal factors that influence wellbeing for example, job demands, relationships, role clarity and change.

The THRIVE model

- Centre =**
Positive wellbeing outcomes
- Outer Circle =**
Factors that influence wellbeing
- Middle Circle =**
Sub-factors that influence wellbeing



Trust THRIVE to provide a robust and comprehensive measure of wellbeing.

People Insight are experts at adapting the **THRIVE** framework to your organisation's specific needs, so you can be sure you'll get the insights that are right for you.

[Talk to us today about your wellbeing survey](#)



How to reduce stress at an organisational level

Once you have the broad data, nothing can replace talking to your people. It's the only way to show your intention, by connecting informally, showing personal interest and concern. You can't do that with an app or an email.

Use focus groups, 'reverse charter committees' (where employees' concerns are at the centre of the discussion and leaders have one job – to be open and listen as employees express themselves) to probe the issues and discuss potential solutions.

Here are some suggestions for tackling the common issues in our fast-paced society, based on the common risk factors for stress and burnout:

1. Lead from the front

If you want to break habits, there's no more effective way than leading from the top. If the CEO minimises the amount of email sent, or schedules an hour for uninterrupted work, or always has lunch in the canteen, it sends a powerful message about what the organisation values. As will leaders paying attention to their own wellbeing, explaining what they are doing, and the difference it's making.



2. Check your culture

A company culture that supports wellbeing is based around principles of trust, respect, honesty and inclusion. Without these, fear, anger, worry and mistrust can fester. Trust means that employees trust leaders to 'do the right thing,' even during times of uncertainty, in line with the values that they have signed up to. When there is significant change or bad news, sharing the information thoughtfully and honestly shows employees they are valued and respected. Asking for people's reaction and input shows inclusiveness – supporting their levels of esteem.



Trust, respect, honesty and inclusion also mean it's OK to talk about stress and mental health issues

Until people feel it's safe to talk, they'll keep problems hidden and spiral downwards. Again, this relates to leading from the top, disclosure from senior influencers can have a dramatic impact on improving psychological safety and encouraging helpful conversations.



Train line managers

However, encouraging people to come forward with stress related concerns is no good if they are met with a stiff upper-lipped manager mumbling and dashing out of the office. Unless trained, line managers may feel terrified – Am I responsible? What do I do? Is this a medical matter? What if I say the wrong thing? Training should include how to spot the signs of stress at work, empathy, discretion, an understanding of what resources to sign post staff to, and when to escalate issues further.



Limit email

Put the brakes on the counterproductive always-on culture, and make sure people feel they have a break. Be clear about when people are expected to be available by phone, email or Slack, and limit out-of-hours emails to urgent issues. Encourage employees with flexible working patterns to personalise their email footer and let colleagues know that they don't expect a reply outside of working hours. For example:

"My working day may not be your working day. I work flexibly and sometimes send emails at odd times. Please do not feel obliged to reply to this email outside of your normal working hours."



Prioritise (even when everything is urgent)

Workloads are one of the biggest stress factors for UK employees¹². New research shows that staff are spending over 50% of their working day on "work about work" (including emails and meetings) instead of the core parts of their role¹³.

Help your team prioritise their workloads by asking the following two questions:

1. What can I do that no one else can do better for the organisation?
2. What does the organisation need me to do to achieve our mission?

Talk to your team about their collective capacity, and how they can help each other achieve the tasks. Be super clear on what is a priority and what isn't.

3. Notice what people do

Formal recognition programmes are one way of showing appreciation for achievement, and absolutely have a role to play.

However, time and again we hear employees say they just want their efforts to be noticed. Quietly. With a personal thank you. With some words of encouragement and support from a manager or a colleague.

When everyone is feeling the pressure, making a small effort each day to show interest and realise the efforts of your people will pay dividends. Similarly, regular team progress updates provide a sense of progress and momentum, and a chance to celebrate achievement.



How can managers help individuals cope with stress?

The previous suggestions look at what the organisation can do generally to alleviate stress. On top of these, there are ways to help your team overcome feelings of stress or anxiety in their day-to-day role. Below are some suggestions for how managers can help individuals manage stress at work.





1. Check in with your team

Talking about mental health and wellbeing can feel daunting. Yet many employees would welcome these conversations. In fact, 58% of people would feel comfortable with their manager proactively asking about their mental health. Before jumping in, let them know that you'd like to check in about how they're feeling and suggest that this becomes a regular thing.

2. Point them towards resources

You aren't expected to have all the answers. Simply being present for your team and offering a compassionate ear will go a long way. First, understand what resources your organisation has available. For example you may have access to trained mental health first-aiders, a wellbeing portal, or external partners and resources. Then, if you can't solve an issue, steer your employee in the right direction to find help.

3. Recognise and reward

Time and again we hear employees say they'd just like their efforts to be noticed. With a personal thank you. Or some words of encouragement and support from their manager. In People Insight's employee surveys, Reward is one of the [key drivers of employee engagement](#) meaning it has a significant impact on how engaged your people are. When your team is feeling swamped, make a small effort each day to show interest and realise the efforts of your colleagues will pay dividends. Similarly, make time in team meetings to celebrate achievements, share good news and talk about your team's wins from the week.

4. Lead by example

If you want to encourage positive habits, leading from the top is a great place to start. When your team see that you have cut down on emails sent outside your working hours, scheduled time for uninterrupted work, or blocked out time for lunch away from your desk it sends a powerful message about what your organisation values and what is expected of them.

Conclusion

We all know stress does us no good at all, with significant impact on the individual, on teams and on the organisation.

Working out if you have a real problem with stress involves looking at your HR data, gathering feedback and of course, listening to your people.

Employee surveys enhanced with stress & wellbeing and burnout indices, or stand-alone employee wellbeing surveys provide powerful insights about how your employees are feeling and what needs to be done to reduce stress at work. They also form a stress risk assessment as recommended by the Health and Safety Executive.

Talk to us today about assessing stress and wellbeing in your workplace.



**Intuitive
technology**



**Practical
expertise**



**Continuous
support**

Peopleⁱnsight

**To find out more about People Insight's
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W: peopleinsight.co.uk

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