

The stress tsunami: Taking a holistic approach to mitigate the risk to employees and organizations



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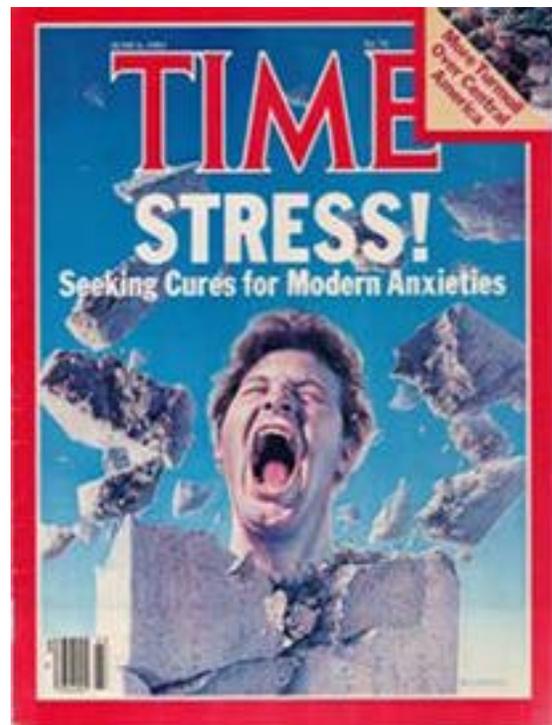
Empowering individuals, teams, leaders, and organizations to Thrive.

Written by Terrie Reeves. November 2021

OVERVIEW

This paper unpacks the complex subject of stress in the workplace and its impact on individuals and organizations. Learn the difference between good stress “Eustress” and bad stress “Chronic stress”, and how bad stress impacts an individual’s health, well-being, and performance. Discover factors within organizations that cause stress and the damage that occurs if those factors aren’t identified and mitigated. Find out how organizations identify what action to take and what they are doing to alleviate the damaging impact of stress. The data validating the impact of stress is undeniable, so forward-thinking organizations are not waiting for the storm they are preparing for it.

Stress is not a new organization challenge. Stress was featured on the front cover of Time magazine in 1986 as America’s #1 health problem, and in 1992, a United Nations Report labeled job stress “The 20th Century Disease” (“America’s Health,” n.d.). A few years later the World Health Organization said stress had become a “Worldwide Epidemic” (“Workplace stress,” n.d.) Yet, despite all the media coverage and data validating the impact that stress has on companies, no one has a cure. Stress is a complex problem, especially in multifaceted systems, and COVID-19 has put an additional burden on employees and their organizations. At best some businesses are providing band-aid solutions, which is like sending someone home after a heart attack with a bottle of aspirin.



Diagnosing stress and developing strategies that work requires a holistic deeper dive. This white paper will highlight the negative impact of turning a blind eye to stress and provide a comprehensive overview of the factors causing it. After offering a better understanding of different types of stress and its impact on individuals and organizations, this paper proposes a change management check list for organizations to use to assess their culture. The conclusion provides training recommendations that progressive organizations offer that reduce the negative impact of stress and drive long-term business sustainability.

The Impact of Stress in Today's Workplace

We will each spend an estimated 90,000 hours of our lifetime at work (Evans, 2021). Meanwhile, work is the third largest contributor to stress, according to the American Psychological Association (“Stress research,” n.d.). These two facts provide a compelling reason for organizations to care about stress and their employees. In addition, workplace stress continues to mount. In a 2018 Korn Ferry survey of nearly 2,000 professionals:

- 76% of respondents said stress at work has had a negative impact on their personal relationships
- 66% said they had lost sleep due to work stress
- 16%, “a small but significant number,” had to quit a job due to stress

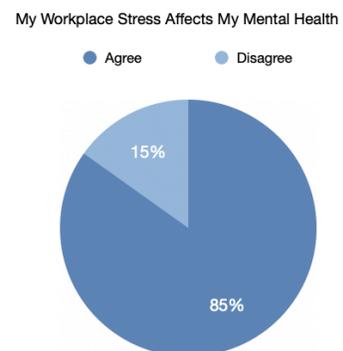
Workers who are stressed are more likely to be unhealthy, poorly motivated, less productive and more accident prone at work. All this means their organizations are less likely to be successful in a competitive market (Sahoo, 2016, p. 1). To quantify the impact of stress, many cite a statistic from the American Institute of Stress suggesting stress costs American businesses \$300,000 billion per year, “including costs related to stress-related accidents, absenteeism, employee turn-over, diminished productivity, and direct medical, legal, and insurance costs” (“Stress and health,” 2017).

Globalization and digital transformation are also adding stress burden to individuals and organizations. Workers are facing a deluge of different communications and are increasingly distracted by the demands of technological innovation. This is also impacting staff productivity and mental health (Digital communication tools, n.d.).

This data does not look promising for a world hit by COVID-19, where reliance on technology is at an all-time high. But, if stress was like a tidal wave buffeting the American workforce before 2020, the global pandemic hit like a tsunami. Changes to the way we work have only exacerbated the highly pervasive problem of stress and its impact on employees and organizations.

Even employees were connecting stress to their suffering mental health as seen in Figure 1. In a 2021 Mental Health America report addressing workplace stress, one in four of the employees surveyed were experiencing “more severe signs of

Figure 1. Minding the Workplace



(Mental Health America, 2021)

burnout, including reduced professional efficacy and cynicism towards coworkers and their jobs” (p. 1). Additionally, in a September 2021 Harris Poll along with the American Psychological Association (APA):

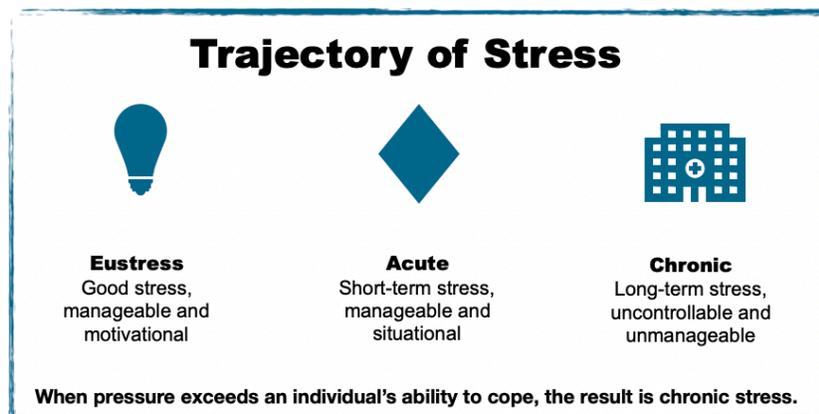
- More than half (56%) of the nearly 115,000 respondents reported their stress was higher than before the pandemic.
- The pandemic itself was “a significant source of stress” for 78%
- 35% were more depressed since the start of the pandemic
- 31% said their stress about their own mental health is increasing (“The great awakening,” 2021)

This is only a small sampling of mounds of research and data affirming unmanageable stress’s devastating impact on individuals and organizations. So, what can be done about this complex problem? First, let’s examine further what we mean by stress in the workplace context.

What is stress?

Not all stress is created equal. As Fink (2016) noted, “stress has a different meaning for different people under different conditions. A working definition of stress that fits many human situations is a condition in which an individual is aroused and made anxious by an uncontrollable aversive challenge” (p. 4).

Good stress or “Eustress” is short-term and can inspire, increase energy and focus, as well as enhance performance. Eustress can motivate people to accomplish things that push them outside of their comfort zones (i.e., learning a new skill, managing a conflict, facilitating a training). But, for eustress to have a positive impact, the person must believe they have the tools and support to overcome the challenges caused by the stress.



When does stress take a wrong turn?

Short-term or infrequent episodes of stress aren't what pose a risk. Instead, the concern is when stressful situations go unresolved and the body stays in a constant state of activation. The stress from lack of resolution increases wear and tear on biological systems. Ultimately, fatigue sets in which compromises the body's ability repair and defend itself causing serious consequences.

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report on stress cites a telling observation by the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Co.: "Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor—more so than even financial problems or family problems" ("Stress...at work," n.d.).

This is reflected also in a Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine finding that "health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress" (as cited in "Stress...at work," n.d.).

Unmanaged stress is like an afternoon rainstorm that turns into a tsunami. Without the ability to successfully navigate the five stages of stress, individuals suffer its long-term impact which contributes to unhealthy coping habits, chronic conditions, burnout, mental health issues, and even death ("Psychosocial and organizational," n.d.).

Working on work stress

Job stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

The concept of job stress is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not the same. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our jobs. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied. Thus, being challenged is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work. Even acute stress, which is triggered by short-term situations, is not the primary culprit. Rather, the damage becomes significant when a person loses hope, and becomes unable to manage the mental, emotional, or physical impact of stress. This stress often occurs over time at work and is referred to as bad or chronic stress.

5 Stages of Stress

- Alarm** — fight, flight, or freeze
- Resistance** — body trying to return to a normal state
- Coping** — behavior used to recover
- Adapting** — behavior when recovery time not taken
- Burnout** — stuck in a heightened state of stress

("The five stages," 2019)

Table 1 lists common indicators within three main categories to serve as a diagnostic chart.

Table 1. Common Indicators of Stress

Behavioral	Physical	Emotional/Cognitive
Smoking, caffeine, alcohol, and drug abuse	Muscle tension	Attitude
Overeating	Fatigue	Mood
Poor dietary habits	Weight gain	Motivation
Decreased libido	Sleep disorder	Self esteem
Inappropriate behavior	Gastrointestinal problems	Self efficacy
Withdrawal	Ulcers	Judgement
Disengagement	Higher blood pressure	Decision making
Low energy	Cardiovascular disease	Concentration
	Musculoskeletal disorders	Memory
	Immune dysfunction	Anxiety and irritability
	Cancer	Burnout and depression
		Psychological disorders
		Suicide

Helping employees avoid states of chronic stress is in the organization’s best interest. A stressed out workforce has a damaging impact on the organization as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The Organizational Impact of Work Stress

1. Job Satisfaction	5. Well-being	9. Short and long-term disability
2. Turnover	6. Productivity	10. Healthcare cost
3. Absenteeism	7. Turnover	11. Company reputation
4. Presenteeism	8. Injuries and litigation	

(Glazer & Liu, 2017; “Psychosocial and organizational,” n.d.; “What is stress,” n.d.; “Workplace stress: A silent,” n.d)

Factors Driving Stress in the Workplace

Before we look at what can be done to mitigate the impact of stress on human lives and the corporate bottom line, let’s examine factors driving job stress. In doing this it is important to recognize factors that are psychosocial (the person and his or her relationships with others) and those that are more tied to the work environment and work processes (Glazer & Liu, 2017). The 12 factors impacting stress in the workplace depicted in Table 3 have also been further exacerbated by COVID-19.

Table 3. Factors Impacting Stress in the Workplace

Factor	Cause of Stress	Exacerbated by COVID-19
1. Job Content	Lack of variety, uninspiring and monotonous work, job misalignment, and unpleasant tasks	
2. Workload	Too much or too little to do, time pressures, deadline overload and lack of work predictability	Too much or too little to do, time pressures, deadline overload and lack of work predictability
3. Working hours	Long hours, and erratic and inflexible	Long hours, and erratic and inflexible
4. Participation and control	Lack of participation in decision making i.e.: work design and process, work environment, hours and pace of work, policies and procedures needed to manage change and disruption	Lack of participation in decision making i.e.: work design and process, work environment, hours and pace of work, policies and procedures needed to manage change and disruption
5. Career development, status and pay	Lack of recognition and advancement opportunities, under or over promoted, unclear or unfair performance process, being under or over skilled, lack of job security	Lack of job security
6. Role in organization	Lack of role clarity, unclear job responsibilities, conflicting demands, responsibility of managing people and their problems	Lack of role clarity, unclear job responsibilities, conflicting demands, responsibility of managing people and their problems
7. Interpersonal relationships	Poor work relationships, lack of support from supervisor and coworkers, discrimination and harassment, isolation and solitary work, lack of social interaction and support, customer pressures, and no procedures for dealing with problems and conflict	Lack of support from supervisor and coworkers, isolation and solitary work, lack of social interaction and support

Table 3. Factors that Impact Stress in the Workplace

Factor	Cause of Stress	Exacerbated by COVID-19
8. Tools, training, and processes	Lack of equipment and resources to do the job, lack of training, and inefficient work processes	Lack of equipment and resources to do the job
9. Work environment	Unsatisfactory conditions, unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems	Unsatisfactory conditions such as crowding, noise, ergonomic
10. Organizational culture	Poor communication and leadership, and lack of clarity about organizational direction, objectives, and culture	Poor communication and leadership, and lack of clarity about organizational direction, objectives, and culture
11. Work-home interface	Conflicting demands of work and home, lack of support for problems at home, and blurred boundaries between work and home	Conflicting demands of work and home, lack of support for problems at home, and blurred boundaries between work and home
12. Mental health, well-being, and stress management	Lack of support and resources needed to help employees manage mental health and well-being issues, and insufficient training to cope with work and life demands and challenges	Lack of support and resources needed to help employees manage mental health and well-being issues, and insufficient training to cope with work and life demands and challenges

Bonde, 2008; Netterstrom et al., 2008, Sahoo, n.d.; Workplace stress: A silent, n.d.)

Number 4, policies, in Table 3 is worth highlighting. **Organizations are having to make many decisions and implement new policies due to COVID. There is no rule book to follow which causes more ambiguity and uncertainty.** The remote work policy alone has polarized workforces causing additional stress and disruption. Some employees are comfortable working from home and are resisting returning to work. Others still have real concerns about their health and safety. Many organizations I consult are spending countless hours trying to reach a consensus on what to do.

As a consultant I work in the eye of the storm to help organizations mitigate risk and implement change. I witness first-hand the pain caused by stress. Table 4 specifies challenges at five organizations in the financial, retail, insurance, architecture, and engineering sectors. These top stressors are extracted from surveys from 653 people between November 2019 and October 2021. The findings highlight COVID’s added impact and the many stressors coming from outside the workplace.

Table 4. Top Employee-Reported Stressors

Reported Stressor	Details
Work-Life Balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurred boundaries between work and home • Too much work and not enough time • Lack of time for hobbies, and self-care
Family/Home Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marital problems • Raising children • Aging parents
Personal Finance Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy • Not enough money to pay bills • Lack of job security
Personal Health Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sickness, both personal and family • Fear of developing sickness, family developing sickness • Lack of sleep and weight gain • Substance abuse
Self-Esteem/Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imposter syndrome • Feeling inadequate • Self-doubt • Lack of hope
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough time to do job • Unrealistic deadlines • Long hours and unpredictable hours • Work pressures due to COVID
Current Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID • Turbulence in the political climate • Inequality and racial unrest
Social Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation and disconnection from work • Lack of connection with friends and family • Technology fatigue
Lack of Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From supervisor(s) • From team • From spouse • Tools to do job well
Lack of Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocation of time • Decision making • Job uncertainty and advancement opportunities • Workload and job responsibilities
Psychological Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being criticized and micromanaged • Excluded and discriminated against • Not valued or appreciated • Lack of mental health support
(Empower Health America, 2019-2021)	

Additionally, a financial leadership team I work with reported in June of 2021 that the following factors caused them the most stress.

1. Workload
2. Maintaining work-life balance
3. COVID health concerns
4. Time pressures
5. Home life issues
6. Personal health
7. Poor time management
8. Lack of self-confidence
9. Hard to separate work and home due to COVID
10. Not equipped to help struggling employees

Taken together, this data underlines the fact that now more than ever, employees are having a hard time checking their anxiety at the door, because stress bleeds into all dimensions of an individual's life, and work is certainly a big one.

To further complicate the dynamics of stress, not all employees experience stress in the same way. There is a distinct relationship between an individual's perception of stress and their ability to cope. Research suggests worker's experience, individual characteristics and personal resources can influence how she or he interprets and manages the specific conditions and demands of the job (Sahoo, 2016, p. 2). Thus, a situation that one person regards as motivating may cause another person to experience extreme stress. For example, an extrovert may be motivated working with other people and an introvert may find this same scenario stressful.

Yet, with individual stress levels continuing to rise, it is more important than ever for companies to face workplace stress head on.

Taking action to downgrade the stress tsunami

Organizations and people are complex systems, so understanding the person and his or her relationships with others and the work environment and work processes will help organizations better manage stress and mitigate its risks. It is clear by now that stress is a complex subject requiring a systems approach to decision making. As a result, taking intentional action requires discovery.

The diagnostic chart presented in Table 1 can help the individual and organization identify stress risks. Identifying these risks is a critical part of the discovery process and should be used to inform the design of solutions.

As a social scientist and organization development consultant, I have partnered with 100's of businesses to institutionalize change. For over two decades I have helped organizations create healthier work environments and mitigate the negative effects caused by stress. The additional impact of COVID-19 is creating even greater damage to the mental health and well-being of individuals and the organizations in which they work.

My consulting work with over 30 companies during COVID allowed me to identify where damage is being done and where changes can be made to mitigate that damage. There was no roadmap to deal with the stress tsunami, so my clients and I designed one together. The Change Management Checklist focuses attention on 17 areas that need thorough evaluation.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT CHECKLIST

Identifying and diagnosing what is causing individual and organizational stress requires a holistic analysis of the organization. Below is a list to help you take inventory in all the right places.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural and psychological safety | <input type="checkbox"/> Social and work connection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Onboarding and integration | <input type="checkbox"/> Diversity, equity and inclusion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Job alignment and design | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work processes, demands, and role clarity | <input type="checkbox"/> Recognition and rewards |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Job autonomy and control | <input type="checkbox"/> Mentorship and training |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decision making | <input type="checkbox"/> Career advancement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tools, technology, and equipment | <input type="checkbox"/> Policies and procedures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work environment and conditions | <input type="checkbox"/> Programs, and training designed to support the safety, health, and well-being of employees |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal relationships | |

This Change Management Checklist provides structure to the organizational assessment process and makes it easier to identify where action should be taken. Still, smart organizations will leverage the expertise of internal and external organization development professionals who understand the change process and how to optimize success. Change is not easy, but it is possible with the right people, plan, and process.

The second whitepaper in this three-part series will provide change management and implementation strategies as well as a step-by-step process to follow to adopt and institutionalize desired change. Additionally, the next paper will explore training

programs progressive organizations provide to help individuals, teams, and leaders better manage the negative impact of stress (see Table 5 for a sneak peak).

Table 5. Training Offered at Progressive Organizations

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Psychological safety• Emotional intelligence• Resiliency• Mindfulness• Coping skills• Mental, physical, and emotional well-being• Work-life balance• Time management• Diversity, inclusion, and equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conflict management• Team building• Virtual communication• Technology• Remote relationships• Leadership development training – designed to equip leaders to better manage and support their team through change and disruption
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Good stress or “eustress” is an important part of the organizational landscape. It motivates and empowers employees, it sparks creativity and innovation, and stress helps to elevate performance outcomes. It is when stress becomes unmanageable and it hits an organization like a tsunami, that damage and devastation occur. The data validating the impact of stress is undeniable, so forward-thinking organizations are not waiting for the storm they are preparing for it.

About Empower Health America
Empower Health America, founded by Terrie Reeves, helps organizations, leaders, teams, and individuals navigate the change process, and our 5P Change Model™ provides framework to make change adoption easier and possible. Terrie is a social scientist, seasoned consultant, coach, and educator who has designed and implemented over 200 programs focused on organizational change. Visit EmpowerHealthAmerica.com today.

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