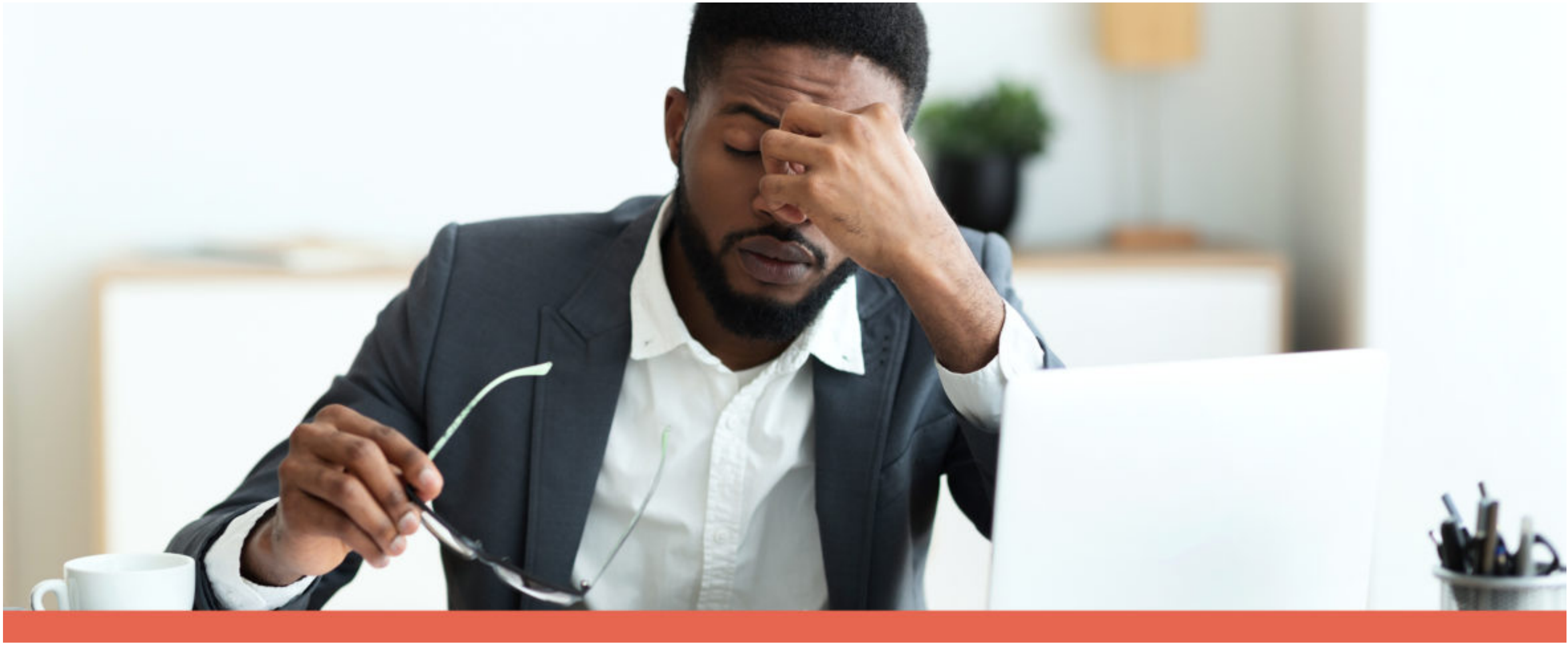


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# How to manage stress in the workplace

From the housing market, to international conflicts, climate change, and a global pandemic, there's no shortage of external stressors beyond the control of the average employee. But what can be controlled at work is how chronic stress is managed and how the organization raises awareness of subsequent health risks.

Though short periods of endured stress are a normal part of almost any work environment and can even have beneficial properties (more on that below), stress that becomes chronic and long-term can severely impact the health and wellbeing of not just employees, but also employee engagement, company culture and the wellbeing of the organization as a whole.

[Statistics compiled by the American Institute of Stress](#) show that on average, work is the leading cause of stress, with data points identifying heavy workload (46%) interpersonal issues (28%), work/life balance (20%), and job security (6%) as the main sources.

To add more weight, COVID-19 has drastically impacted stress levels related to the workplace. An [Oracle report](#) concluded that 2020 was the most stressful year ever. 78% of those polled believe the pandemic severely affected their mental health, 40% are making flawed decisions, and 90% concluded that their newfound work-related stress affected their home lives. The culmination caused unprecedented levels of depression (up 54%), anxiety (up 55%) and even PTSD (up 32%), which is further exacerbated by a growing backlash against [employee surveillance](#).

In Canada, an online survey conducted by [ADP Canada and Angus Reid](#) asked 1,501 citizens working remotely to evaluate their experience during the pandemic. The survey found that 44% logged more hours than in pre-pandemic years, with increased productivity and quality of work, but that was accompanied by a jump in stress levels from 34% to 41%, and 46% of remote workers feeling less engaged.

## What happens biologically

When we're stressed, the brain releases cortisol, triggering a cascade of changes in the nervous, cardiovascular, and immune systems. This triggers the body to divert energy to where it's needed most, its "battle stations", while it down-regulates less critical activities, like digestion.

It's a functional short-term strategy believed to have been developed in prehistoric times when humans were left to fend for themselves from dangerous predators. But, while stress can serve us well in the moment, problems occur when it becomes long-term.

There are many effects of chronic stress. The condition can raise blood pressure, increasing the risk over time of heart attacks and strokes. Moreover, it can encourage unhealthy stress-reducing activities such as reckless behaviour, smoking, drinking, and poor diet (e.g. chronic snacking, increased carb intake, poor food choices), compounding the risks of developing serious conditions or issues like [depression](#).

But what are some of the [key indicators of stress at work](#)? Symptoms can occur on a variety of levels from physiological (e.g. fatigue, headaches, gastrointestinal), and psychological (e.g. depression, anxiety, poor morale), to behavioural (e.g. aggression, disinterest, mood swings, and irritability).

## How to change our relationship with stress

"Stress is a reaction to a situation – it isn't about the actual situation," states the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) (CMHA). "We usually feel stressed when we think that the demands of the situation are greater than our resources to deal with that situation."

For example, someone who feels comfortable speaking in public may not worry about giving a speech, while someone who's less confident in their skills may feel a lot of stress about an upcoming presentation. One's response to the situation dictates whether or not the fight-or-flight reaction is triggered.

One proven tactic for shifting one's relationships with one's self is through self-talk. In a [2014 study](#) in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, researchers checked the stress levels of people preparing for public speaking.

The first group was asked to use motivational self-talk in the first person, such as "I can do this". The second group came at it from the second person, using phrases such as "you can do this". The study found that subjects using second-person pronouns were more likely to influence their ability to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in social situations by allowing themselves to take distance from the stressful situation.

Moreover, organizations can support employees by arranging wellness seminars around boosting motivation or group meditation, yoga, or exercise. These initiatives can [strengthen workplace culture](#) while allowing employees to take a small step outside of their heads, encouraging stress-reducing behaviours.

Studies as far back as 1967's [Whitehall study](#), which investigated cardiovascular disease prevalence and mortality rates among British civil servants, have shown that the strongest factor tied to job stress is the degree of control employees have over their roles.

The study also confirmed the popular belief that management positions experience less stress, but it's interesting to note that recent studies have also explored the phenomenon on a one-to-one level. A 2012 [joint study by Harvard and Stanford](#) found that leadership roles experienced less stress due to the increased sense of control associated with rising to a leadership position. The upward movement and satisfaction experienced in the role offset the stressors associated with the position.

While vertical movement through promotion is not necessarily a solution for every employee or organization, adding an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or encouraging employees to make use of an existing EAP, can increase a worker's ability to manage stress through counselling.

## Good stress

This is not to say that all stress is bad. Eustress, a more recent term coined by the Hungarian endocrinologist Hans Selye in 1956, is a type of stress that's positive, helpful, and motivating. It comes from the Greek prefix eu (meaning "good") and stress, literally meaning "good stress". Unlike distress, eustress motivates people to work hard, improve their performance, and reach their goals in the face of challenges.

By making the distinction between good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress), Selye was able to show that stress, while being a reaction to a stressor, shouldn't always be linked to negative situations.

Therefore, one solution to managing stress in the workplace is to enable workers to change their relationships to stressful situations. [Studies show](#) that the more decision-making power an employee has, the greater their commitment to their role will be, which translates into increased levels of performance and job satisfaction.

Developing a mindset equipped to accept and deal with challenges, rather than fear them, builds resilience. Resilience, of course, empowers employees to feel that they can pursue goals that create meaning in their lives while trusting their own strengths to handle upcoming stressors.

If stressors are perceived as manageable, meaningful, and desirable, a person can develop a predisposition to enter a state of flow, described by Psychologist Brock Dubbels as "[the ultimate eustress experience](#)". A flow state is defined as a state of high productivity in which an individual experiences optimal performance while being completely absorbed in an activity, without awareness of their surroundings.

## Conclusion

By bringing awareness to the unique challenges of stress in the workplace, organizations can help employees combat the effects of chronic stress and burnout, and change their teams' relationships to stress.

Moreover, [organizations](#) shouldn't underestimate the physical toll of prolonged periods of stress on their employees. A quality virtual care solution like Maple can help employees see Canadian-licensed doctors more easily, without having to take time off work. As such, physical health issues can be diagnosed earlier in time, before they worsen.

A virtual mental health solution like Mind by Maple can also provide crucial support for employees dealing with stress. Psychotherapy, CBT, and other counselling techniques can help employees take steps to separate themselves from their stressors and devise solutions for lessening their impact, in turn, boosting company culture, employee engagement, overall mental health and productivity.

If you'd like to speak with a member of our team on how to bring your employee benefits to the next level, please reach out. We'd be happy to share our insights with you as Canada's leading provider of virtual care.

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