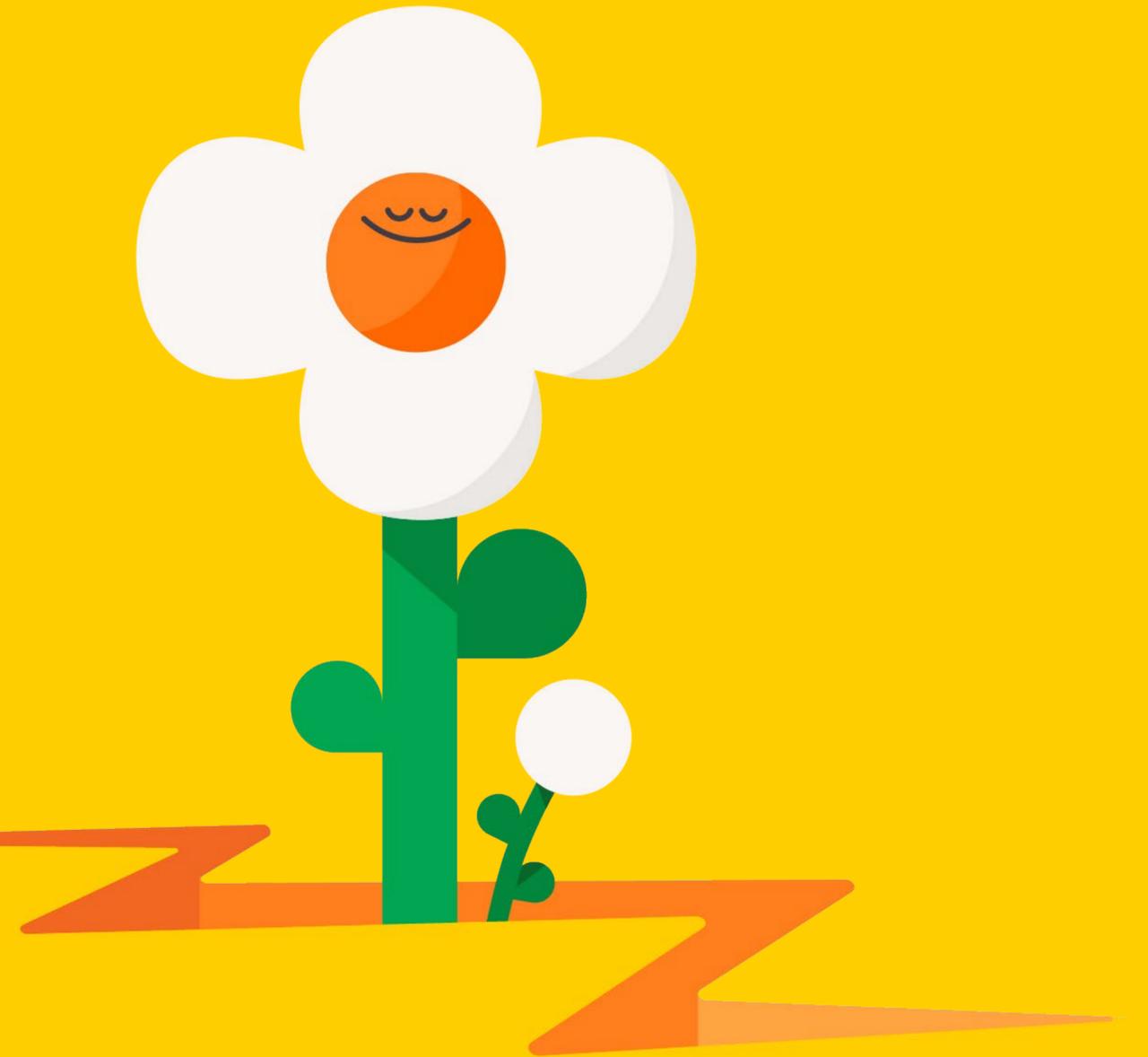


Turning negative stress into positive change



Contents

What we can learn from coping with crisis	3
A mindful approach to stress	4
Mindfulness and meditation to help manage stress	5
Managing stress requires habitual training	6
How to worry less	7
How to reduce negative stress	8
What does stress have to do with employers?	9
Why employees benefit from mindfulness and meditation	10
How Headspace can help	11

What we can learn from coping with crisis

“The effect on business is that 265 work hours go to waste each year due to stress. People are reaching their limits.”

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3

We can all agree the crises of 2020 have taken a toll. The ongoing stressors exist on multiple fronts — economic and job uncertainty, fears of contracting a deadly virus, loss of loved ones, and no access to child care. Considering the blurred lines between work and home life for many this past year, this is all quite a burden to overcome. Extended stress can take a physical and psychological toll, especially when we are ill-equipped to cope with it. But learning to manage how we respond to stress can help prepare us for future challenges.

The good news is that stress can help us grow — personally and professionally. Surviving a pandemic equips us with the knowledge and skills to survive a pandemic. The psychological theory of post-stress growth suggests that as we overcome stress, we learn lessons and skills to better deal with those situations.

At Headspace, we’ve tracked how people are coping with stress — work and personal — throughout the year. What we know is that 7 in 10 workers are extremely stressed and that it is

affecting their performance (62% of workers say so). The effect on business is that 265 work hours go to waste each year due to stress. People are reaching their limits. The risk is burnout, retention issues, and disengaged employees.

In this e-book, we’ll discuss how to leverage good stress (yes, that’s a thing) and better cope with negative stress to become more resilient in a way that leads to growth — in our personal and work lives.

A mindful approach to stress

“Mindfulness training can help a person understand that they have choice. People get stressed when they feel like they have limited choices.”

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4

Now that we've established that people are more stressed than ever, here's the good news: not all stress is bad. Even negative stress can help us grow and become more resilient or better prepared for the next crisis. Now, to “good stress,” or *eustress*.

Eustress is defined as a positive form of stress that often helps us respond with our best and most determined self. This form of stress is linked to psychological flourishing, as it attaches more meaning to what people are going through. Let's tackle how to harness eustress to become more resilient.

We are constantly faced with stress in our lives — physiological and psychological — albeit sometimes at low levels. “What overwhelms people the most is often not the stress itself, but the perception of a lack of control or one's ability to feel like they have control,” said Dr. Christelle Ngnoumen, senior behavioral scientist at Headspace. “Taking a mindful approach to stress builds up self-efficacy, especially in the workplace. Mindfulness training can help a person understand that they have choice. People get stressed when they feel like they have limited choices.”

One way to grow in the face of negative stress is to recognize what is happening around us versus feeling as though it is happening to us. Choosing to respond to adversity, as opposed to reacting to it, can also become the difference between experiencing distress versus eustress.

Another psychological theory, post-traumatic growth, is when people are faced with highly challenging events and experience growth after the crisis because they become wiser and more resilient. While prolonged negative stress can have lasting negative effects, it also develops wisdom and other positive skills to deal with future challenges. Post trauma, people experience increased appreciation for life, closer relationships, greater feelings of personal strength, spiritual growth, and the ability to see new possibilities for themselves.

Now, let's look at some practical ways to experience this kind of growth in the face of negative or positive stress.

Mindfulness and meditation to help manage stress

“Meditation and mindfulness are perfect practices for dealing with daily stress and anxieties, as well as building habits that create sustained change and growth.”

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5

The concepts behind post-trauma growth or the positive effects of eustress do not distinguish between personal or professional growth. We all experience workplace challenges and stress that do not differ from the pressures of our personal lives. As we develop resilience to overcome challenges, post-traumatic growth can equip people in any new crisis.

Not everyone is prepared to harness the power of post-traumatic growth or eustress. Some people could use a little help, or tools. Meditation and mindfulness are perfect practices for dealing with daily stress and anxieties, as well as building habits that create sustained change and growth. The science behind mindfulness has shown positive impacts on stress, anxiety, resilience, depression, sleep, eating behavior and weight, and relationships. We'll get to some tips on developing habits in a bit.

Mindfulness through meditation is about rooting one's attention and focusing on something like breathing, an activity, or an idea. "Mindfulness meditation is attention training that allows people

to build up a part of the brain responsible for higher level skills like critical thinking, decision making and focus. As it enhances these areas implicated in responding thoughtfully to events, it also deactivates regions involved in reacting impulsively to events," says Ngnoumen. "Stress triggers a fight or flight response. When we're reacting to a threat, that's a part of the brain being activated.

"Through mindfulness meditation, we can restructure the same part of the brain to be less reactive and more responsive. Over time, this can shift how the response to stress is happening to help our body and mind self-regulate."

Understanding mindfulness and meditation goes hand in hand with building habits.

Managing stress requires habitual training

“How stress affects us depends on how we choose to think about, use, and respond to it.”

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6

Before we talk specifics about some ways to apply mindfulness and meditation, it might be helpful to address habitual training.

Mindfulness and meditation can become habits that can reshape people’s relationship between themselves and their environments.

New habits require repeating an action consistently in the same context. Take these steps:

- 1 Decide on a goal** that you would like to achieve for your meditation practice.
- 2 Choose a simple action** that you can associate with using mindfulness and meditation that you can do on a daily basis. For example, if you eat breakfast every day, set a goal to meditate directly after breakfast daily.
- 3 Plan when and where you will do your chosen action.** Be consistent: choose a time and place that you encounter every day of the week.

According to habit-formation research, within 10 weeks you should find you are doing it automatically without even having to think about it.

“There is often this view of stress as an experience a person either has or doesn’t have. In reality, our bodies are experiencing all kinds of stressors internally and externally all of the time,” Ngnoumen says. “How stress affects us depends on how we choose to think about, use, and respond to it. We have a choice in how we react to stress, and with habitual training in mindfulness, we can not only convert distress (negative) into eustress (positive), but also create eustress directly.”

How to worry less

“If we learn to step back from thoughts and emotions that lead to worrying, we can decipher when they are less of a threat than our minds have led us to believe.”

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7

Regardless of eustress, there remains some stress that will weigh on our physical and emotional well-being, like impending threats out of our control, chronic pain, difficult relationships, or the daily pressures of work and home. Some of these worries are just our perceptions of things that we fear are happening to us, rather than around us. They can create negative thoughts that ruin our day.

Here are a few tips for putting an end to worry:

- 1 Schedule “worry time” on your calendar.**
Focusing on your worries is the first step to containing them. Do it first thing or at the end of the day. When things come up throughout the day, don't get sidetracked. This will create more time for productive thoughts and work.
- 2 Practice meditation.**
Sit quietly and focus on something as simple as your breath or your chair to ground yourself in the present moment, allowing for a greater sense of calm. Worries won't vanish, but over time you can prevent being caught up in negative thoughts.

- 3 Identify solvable (productive) and unsolvable worries (unproductive).**
Focus on problems you can act on immediately (pay a bill, make yourself breakfast) and identify those with no immediate solution (can't control the weather on vacation, can't make someone like you).

- 4 Write down your worries rather than mulling them over in your head.**
This can help you gain a more balanced perspective.

Worries can interfere with our ability to focus, to take action, or even sleep. If we learn to step back from our own thoughts and emotions that lead to worrying, we can become aware of the stressors, evaluate them, and decipher with clarity when they are less of a threat than our minds have led us to believe. That process can help us become more resilient when we encounter future challenges and issues. We become less reactive, which helps to break the cycle of worrying.

How to reduce negative stress

“Sometimes it’s as simple as pausing, being mindful of what is causing the stress, and knowing whether the issue is solvable or unsolvable.”

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8

We’ve talked about how stress can help us grow and how to bring the right attitude about the things that trigger stress in our lives. The reality is that we will experience positive and negative stress throughout our lives. Worrying less is one thing, but how do we leverage meditation to help reduce stress throughout our lives?

“There is an important first step that is an attitudinal component,” Ngnoumen says.

“Mindfulness practices emphasize approaching things in a non-judgmental and non-attached way. It’s about taking the ego out of our thinking. Stress is often a function of being attached to labels and outcomes.”

The next step is practiced meditation for focused reflection. Sometimes it’s as simple as pausing, being mindful of what is causing the stress, and knowing whether the issue is solvable or unsolvable.

But if you just need an exercise to help create separation from stressful thoughts or situations, here are some ways to start meditation:

- Sit still, focusing your eyes on one point in the room, without moving them
- Be aware of the room and what’s around you, no matter what’s happening
- Take in deep breaths through the nose, exhaling through your mouth
- Try to feel a sense of letting go, no matter what is happening in the mind and body
- Allow the mind to do its own thing, bringing all focus into the body
- Notice what the body is experiencing and what feels comfortable or uncomfortable
- Become increasingly aware of your breathing, and the rising and falling of the lungs

This is just an opening sequence of a typical, short meditation. Longer meditations focus much deeper, providing the time and focus to isolate thoughts without distraction. Scientific studies show that meditation is an effective tool in managing stress and building capacity to manage stress when it is practiced regularly.

What does stress have to do with employers?

42%

of workers cite work/life balance as a major cause of stress

89%

of employees say their employers should offer mental health benefits, even to their dependents

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9

The global economy loses over \$1 trillion a year due to depression and anxiety, according to the World Health Organization. That staggering lost productivity could be dramatically reduced if more people had the tools and support they need to cope with day-to-day stress.

It's no wonder that employers are increasingly expanding support for well-being, including mental health programs and technology platforms. In our recent research, 89% of employees say their employers should offer mental health benefits, even to their dependents.

If lost productivity is the cost driver that catches our attention, the underlying issues that regularly affect businesses and teams are absenteeism, burnout, disengaged employees, and poor retention of talented people. Even if stressed employees show up to work every day and get the job done, they likely are struggling to focus and come up with innovative ideas — and they may be having a poor employee

experience. It may not be a big surprise that in our research, 42% of workers cite work/life balance as a major cause of stress in their lives, especially in 2020. Work stress also affects people's personal lives. That stress becomes cyclical — being stressed at work causes problems at home and vice versa.

The point is, stress doesn't end with work, and people don't show up without it.

Why employees benefit from mindfulness and meditation

\$300 billion

is lost annually in the U.S. due to workplace stress

52%

of workers say mental health benefits are essential post COVID-19

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10

Employers should consider mindfulness and meditation, as 2020 has been a wake-up call. Employers are recognizing that their people need help with many issues, including mental health support. While some business and benefits leaders are doing the right thing by bolstering employee benefits, mental health support is often lacking or does not address a person's holistic needs to cope with stress and anxiety. Even at companies with a strong employee assistance program (EAP), only 1 in 5 people (20%) use the resource.

Here are the business implications of employee stress:

- 83% of U.S. workers suffer from work-related stress ([American Institute of Stress](#))
- \$300 billion is lost annually in the U.S. due to workplace stress ([American Institute of Stress](#))
- 1 million work absences each day are stress-related ([American Institute of Stress](#))

How employees see it:

- 52% of workers say mental health benefits are essential in a post COVID-19 world ([Headspace](#))
- 48% of people said in May that their employer provided increased access to tools and services to support employee mental health as a result of COVID-19 ([Headspace](#)); that slipped to 34% in September 2020
- Just 43% of U.S. workers think their employers care about work-life balance ([American Institute of Stress](#))
- 62% of workers agree that work-related stress affects their performance, "[A Path Through the Storm](#)"

Much of the data in 2020 suggests not enough is being done to support employees coping with stress, especially during a time when people are increasingly exhausted by stress and anxieties at work and home.

How Headspace can help

“Working our way through the crisis may lead to personal and professional growth that lasts well beyond the enormous challenges in 2020.”

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11

Meditation and mindfulness can better set us up for growth as we work our way through crisis — personal or professional.

Let’s admit it: distinguishing between our personal and work struggles is pretty tough these days. Simple steps to reducing stress can help us get through the daily challenges. Building habits from these practices increases our capacity to overcome big obstacles. Even better news: working our way through the crisis may lead to personal and professional growth that lasts well beyond the enormous challenges in 2020. Employers would benefit from providing the tools to practice mindfulness and meditation. Not only does it help people reduce stress, but it builds habits that increase focus, productivity, and resilience in the face of obstacles.

Headspace for Work provides support for companies and teams with a technology-forward solution, backed by science that promotes mindfulness and meditation. The benefits of Headspace for Work lead to less stress, more focus, and easier teamwork.

LESS
STRESS

30 days of Headspace lowers stress by 32%

4 sessions reduce burnout by 14%

MORE
FOCUS

4 weeks of Headspace can increase focus by 14%

A single session cuts mind-wandering by 22%

EASIER
TEAMWORK

3 weeks of Headspace shows 21% more compassionate behavior

Cuts aggression and reactivity to negative feedback by 57%

GREATER
RESILIENCE

10 days of Headspace resulted in a 4.5% increase in resilience

11% increase in resilience after 30 days



Learn more about Headspace for Work

