headspace

2026

Workforce State of Mind

The chronic strain crisis



8th annual workplace mental health trends report

Executive summary

Work has changed faster than most benefits programs have kept pace. The mental health challenges showing up in your workforce today aren't just the dramatic crises that get escalated to HR — they're quieter and far more widespread. In Headspace's 8th annual Workforce State of Mind report, a single, pervasive theme emerged: workers are experiencing strain.

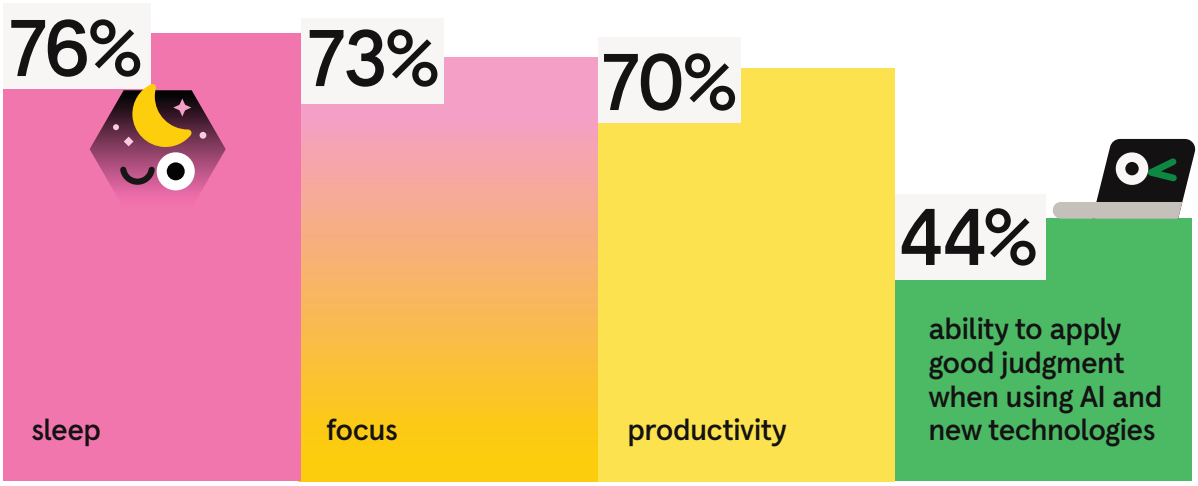
It's a **chronic strain:** a slow, unrelenting accumulation of mental and cognitive strain that builds when demands never let up. It's not burnout or anxiety, but the persistent weight of work that never fully turns off that's showing up in how employees feel and how they function.



Constant context-switching. Focus that keeps slipping. Demands that keep shifting. This is what work feels like now, and most employees have quietly accepted it. Most benefits programs still aren't built for it.

A major contributor to this: AI. 70% of employees say their organization has adopted new AI technologies, ranking it as the most common form of organizational change employees experienced in the past year. The same technology promising to make work easier has also added additional strain for employees, fueling job displacement anxiety, accelerating the pace of change, and adding a new layer of pressure on top of an already stretched workforce.

WORKERS REPORT THAT MENTAL OR COGNITIVE STRAIN HAS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED THEIR:



The good news: the organizations getting this right aren't waiting for people to reach a breaking point. Rather than treating mental health as something to address after the fact, they're helping employees build the resilience skills needed to handle chronic strain before it depletes them, and building systems that support the whole workforce, not just ones who ask for help.

In this report, we explore the challenges facing employees and employers today, and what leading organizations are doing differently — including a shift toward population-level mental health strategies that reach the whole workforce — to build employees' resilience and create happier, healthier, and more productive teams.

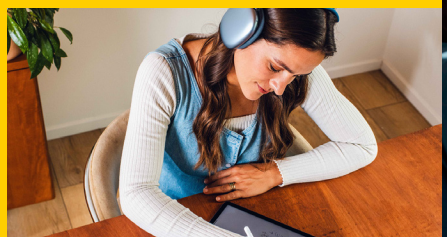
About the survey

In our 8th annual survey on workplace mental health, we commissioned YouGov to conduct a survey among more than 700 employees and people leaders in the U.S. from April 3, 2026 to April 16, 2026. All respondents worked at companies with more than 1,000 employees.

Employees

505 RESPONDENTS

- U.S.-based respondents working full time and spanning knowledge, service, and manual workers across industries
- Individual contributors without direct reports



People leaders

219 RESPONDENTS

- U.S.-based respondents who manage at least one direct report, ranging from managers to C-suite leaders



All respondents were asked a variety of questions about their perspectives on workplace mental health and well-being. Throughout this report, "employees" refers to individual contributors and "employers" refers to people managers, unless otherwise noted. "Workers" includes both.



A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this report, you'll see two terms used with intention: mental strain and cognitive strain. They're related, but they're not the same and the distinction matters.

Mental strain is the emotional and psychological weight of work. It's stress, anxiety, and the feeling of being overwhelmed. It's how work makes employees *feel*.

Cognitive strain is what happens next. When mental strain goes unaddressed, it depletes the mental capacities that drive performance: focus, decision-making, the ability to absorb new information and adapt to change. It's how work affects employees' ability to *function*.

One feeds the other: mental strain is the input, and cognitive strain is the cost. In 2026, most employees are experiencing both, which is why in our survey, we deliberately asked about mental *or* cognitive strain. Not because the two are interchangeable, but because they're closely interconnected.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

Key insights on mental health at work in 2026

Chronic strain has become the baseline

Most employees are managing a level of chronic strain that would have seemed alarming a decade ago. Now it just feels like any other Tuesday.

92%

of workers report experiencing mental or cognitive strain at work

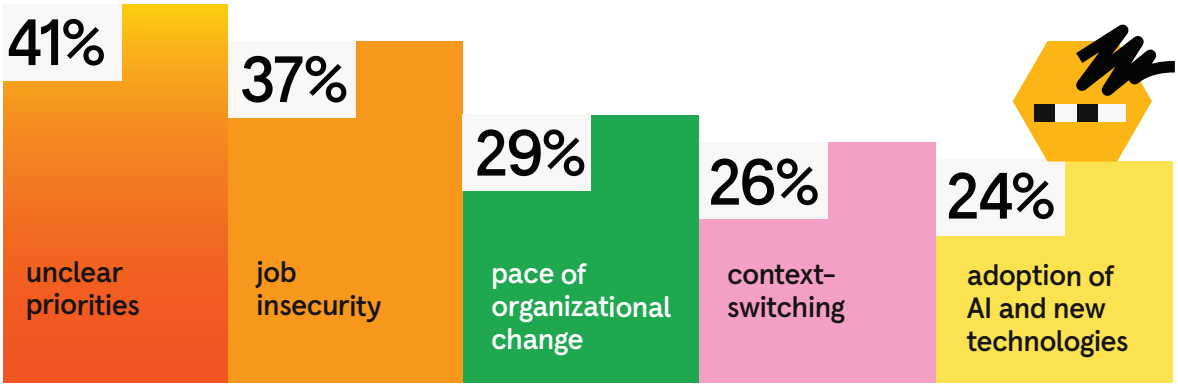


The new strain is quiet, and it never turns off

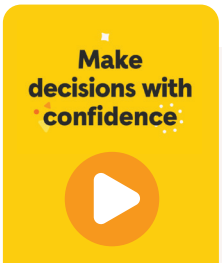
Something has shifted in how work feels. It's not just the acute stress of a high-stakes deadline or a single bad quarter. It's now a persistent hum of work that is always on, competing demands, shifting priorities, and the pressure to keep pace with AI tools and changes that keep coming. This widespread and ever-present chronic strain has become the baseline condition of work, and most organizations haven't caught up to it yet. In fact, 92% of workers report experiencing mental or cognitive strain at work, and 37% say that strain has increased in the last year.



TOP DRIVERS OF STRAIN



The last driver deserves attention. AI and new technology adoption ranked as the most common form of organizational change employees experienced in the past year, and it's become a distinct and significant source of chronic strain in its own right. Job displacement anxiety — the fear of being replaced, made redundant, or left behind as AI reshapes roles — is now woven into the everyday experience of work. Employees are being asked to learn faster, adapt more, and perform better, all while managing the quiet fear that the tools they're adopting might eventually make them redundant. This is the AI paradox playing out in real time.



In the Headspace app

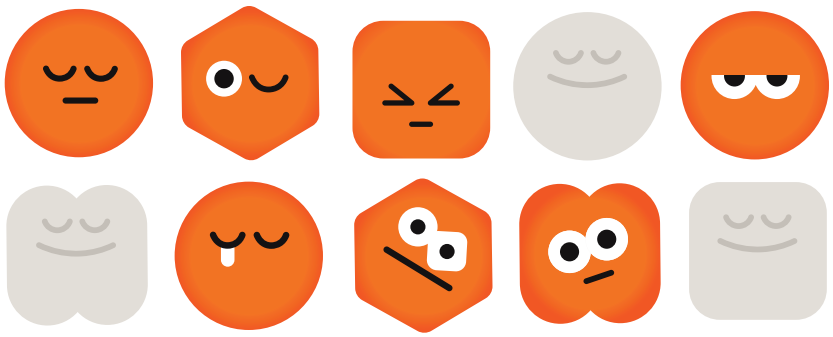
Make Decisions with Confidence helps employees navigate the emotional weight of high-stakes choices — teaching them to decode what they're feeling and use it as information.

The normalization trap

When chronic strain becomes the norm, it stops registering as a problem. Employees adapt. They absorb more. Organizations stop treating it as something that needs to be addressed. That's where the real costs show up: in the slow erosion of output and engagement. 76% of workers say mental or cognitive strain has negatively affected their sleep; 73% their ability to focus; 64% their engagement with colleagues; and 61% their confidence in decision-making.

44%

of workers agree that feeling mentally strained at work has simply become part of the job



7 in 10

workers say mental or cognitive strain has negatively affected their productivity

WOMEN ARE CARRYING MORE, AND RECEIVING LESS. THE DATA REVEAL A CONSISTENT AND TROUBLING GAP.

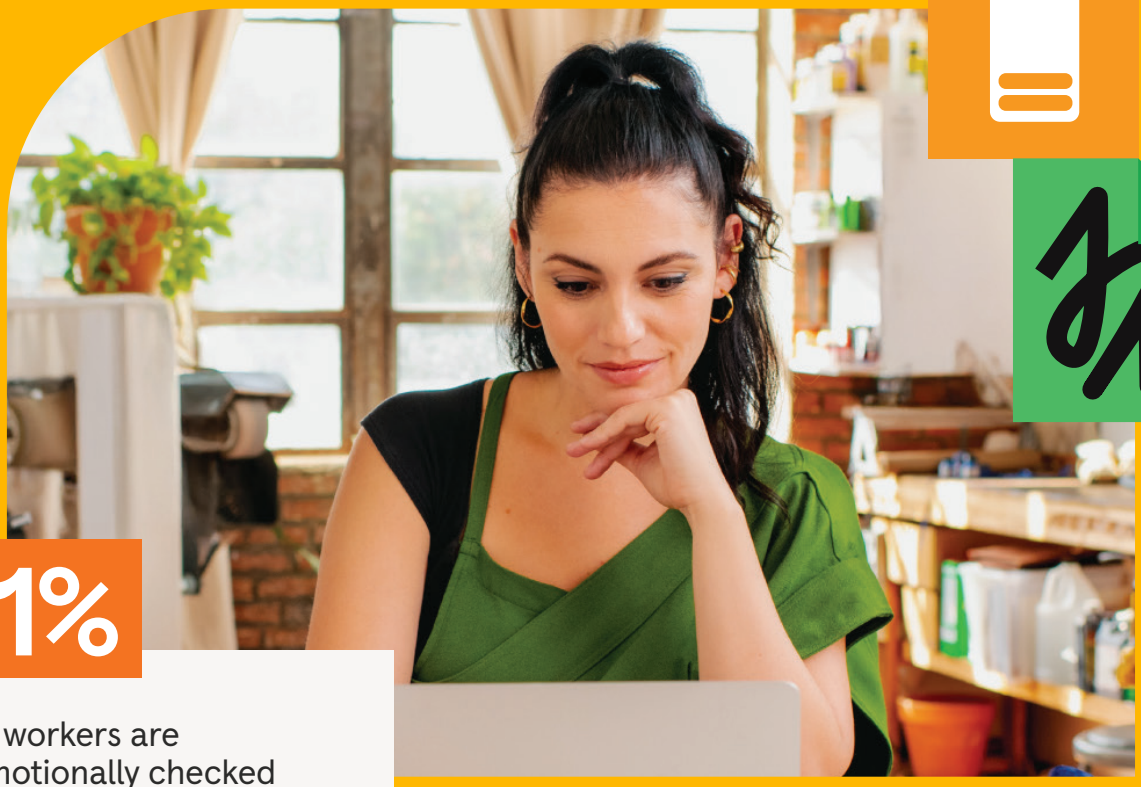


- 73% of women report cognitive or mental strain negatively affecting their productivity, compared to 67% for men.
- Women are more likely to report strain affecting their sleep quality (83% vs. 70%), their ability to focus (80% vs. 67%), and their engagement with colleagues (69% vs. 59%).
- And yet, fewer female employees say their organization is meeting their mental health and resilience needs: only 27% report their needs are mostly or fully being met, compared to 34% of males.

Why this matters for employers: Normalized strain is still costly. When employees stop reporting it, it means they've stopped expecting help. The organizations that intervene early are the ones that see it reflected positively in productivity, retention, and engagement.

AI is accelerating change fatigue, and it's negatively impacting performance

When employees feel stretched too thin for too long, they don't just burn out. They check out.



51%

of workers are emotionally checked out, going through the motions with no interest in new initiatives

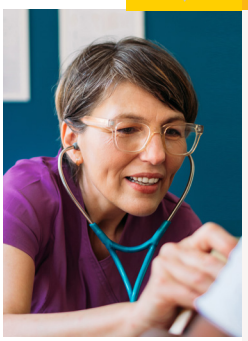
The change fatigue crisis

Organizational change shows up in many forms: new leadership, shifting priorities, budget cuts, restructuring or layoffs. But the fastest-growing and most disruptive source of change right now is AI, with 70% of employees saying their organization adopted new technologies like AI. It's reshaping how jobs are done, how performance is measured, and whether employees feel secure in their roles. Each wave of change adds to the chronic strain already building in the workforce. Engagement scores may hold steady on the surface, but underneath something is giving way – a quiet withdrawal from the work, from leadership, and the future of the organization. That's change fatigue, and it's the difference between a workforce that's engaged and productive, and one that's just going through the motions.

The connection to chronic strain is direct. Every wave of change, especially AI-driven change that touches job security and identity, adds to the mental and cognitive load employees are already carrying. Without the tools to process it, that load accumulates.

AMONG WORKERS EXPERIENCING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE:





HEALTHCARE WORKERS ARE AT A BREAKING POINT

- 66% of healthcare workers are emotionally checked out.
- Only 33% of healthcare employees say their mental health needs are being met.

In a sector where chronic strain affects the quality of care patients receive, the absence of meaningful support has consequences that extend well beyond turnover and absenteeism. When the people responsible for others' health are running on empty, the cost is measured in more than dollars.

Why this matters for employers: Change fatigue has a direct bottom-line cost: it shows up in declining productivity, higher turnover, and change initiatives that stall or fail to deliver. When employees are asked to absorb wave after wave of transformation without the tools to process it, organizations pay for it in the outcomes they care about most. Ensuring employees can navigate change requires continuous support that evolves with each stage of a transition and meets employees where they are in their ability to adapt.



In the Headspace app

In Recognizing Anxiety at Work, a Headspace therapist walks leaders through how to spot the signs of anxiety in their team and create the kind of environment where people feel safe enough to ask for help.

Why resilience skills are the missing piece

Employees want to handle pressure better, but most haven't been given the tools or guidance to do it.



58%

of workers have not participated in any resilience, stress management, emotional intelligence, change management, or other cognitive skill training in the past year

Resilience is what allows organizations to convert pressure into adaptation rather than exhaustion. Research consistently shows that:

Emotional regulation skills are associated with lower burnout, better decision-making, and stronger team relationships. The ability to manage and respond flexibly to emotions is foundational to maintaining goal-directed behavior under stress.

Cognitive flexibility, or the ability to shift perspectives and adapt thinking, predicts problem-solving, innovation, and resilience during organizational change. Cognitive flexibility is critical for adapting thoughts and behaviors in response to changing demands, making it critical for employees navigating today's workplace.

Attentional control is directly linked to productivity, error reduction, and the ability to manage competing demands. When employees switch between tasks, cognitive activity from the prior task remains, reducing accuracy, slowing processing speed, and impairing performance on the new task.

Recovery and stress modulation practices (e.g., brief resets, sleep quality, physiological downregulation) are associated with sustained performance, reduced fatigue, and lower risk of long-term mental health conditions. Employees who mentally disengage from work during non-work hours show significantly lower burnout and higher well-being.

> Now, more than ever, it's crucial for employers to show their employees how valued they are as individuals by offering comprehensive, quality programs that support their mental wellbeing. After launching Headspace's full suite of offerings to our Regions Bank employees, we are already seeing solid results.
>
> MIKE BRANCA, EVP AND HEAD OF CORPORATE SERVICES, REGIONS BANK



In an era defined by AI transformation, the ability to learn, adapt to, and integrate new tools with intention is increasingly part of this equation, too.

When organizations don't build these resilience capabilities, the result is predictable: employees rely on unsustainable coping strategies that erode performance over time. When they do build them, the outcomes extend beyond well-being to measurable business impact, including higher productivity, lower absenteeism, improved retention, and greater adaptability during change.

> In the era of chronic strain, resilience is about staying steady when the pressure never fully lifts. If we care about longevity — not just in life, but in careers — we have to build the conditions and the capabilities that allow people to keep going without burning out. The organizations that invest in resilience are both supporting their people and protecting their ability to perform over time.
>
> JENNA GLOVER, CHIEF CLINICAL OFFICER, HEADSPACE



Coping, not thriving

Chronic strain has become the norm, and employees are running low. Resilience is a set of trainable capacities that determine how effectively employees can function under sustained demand. In an environment defined by constant change and accelerating AI transformation, they're foundational to performance. 58% of workers say they have not participated in any resilience, stress management, emotional intelligence, change management, or other cognitive skill training in the past year.

WORKERS' TOP SUPPORT NEEDS:



43%

of employees feel confident protecting their focus during periods of high change

52%

of employees feel confident in their ability to recover after high-stress periods



BUILDING RESILIENCE SKILLS IN PRACTICE

Headspace supports resilience and skill-building through science-backed content, including Pomodoro-based focus techniques, stress regulation exercises, sleep improvement programs, and mindfulness-based emotional regulation tools. Research shows that 30 days of using Headspace improves resilience by 11% in employees.

Why this matters: Most benefits portfolios are designed to help employees after things go wrong. But the data show that employees need support that builds their capacity before they hit a wall and disengage altogether. Closing the resilience skills gap is both a wellbeing investment and a productivity investment. Employees who have the skills to manage stress, protect their focus, and recover after hard stretches are more effective, more present, and less likely to leave.

Employers think they're building employee resilience. Employees disagree.

There's a significant gap between the support employers think they're offering and what employees say they're actually getting.

44%

of employers believe they're equipping employees with resilience skills

23%

of employees agree



The resilience disconnect

While nearly half of employers report that they're giving employees the tools and support they need to build resilience, only one in four employees agree. Employees point out this disconnect further — few say resilience is discussed at work, and 40% say support is only provided once they ask for it.



Support can't live in one place. It has to be woven into company culture and how the organization actually operates.



THE RESILIENCE GAP EXISTS FOR BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS

- Only 25% of blue-collar employees say their organization is mostly or fully meeting their mental health and well-being needs, compared to 31% of desk-based employees.
- 25% of blue-collar workers say they receive no support for workplace resilience, compared to 20% among those desk-based.
- Blue-collar employees are less likely (20%) to report that mental or cognitive support is embedded into the company culture than desk-based employees (32%).

The manager trust deficit

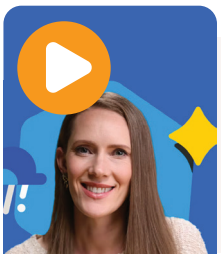
For many HR leaders, it's clear that mental health support often breaks down somewhere between managers and their direct reports. Managers are often the first to notice when chronic strain is building on their team, but most haven't been given the training, tools, or clear direction to actually do something about it.

Only 14% of employees say they turn to their manager when they're feeling mentally stretched at work.

40%

of employees say support is only there if they go looking for it; **12%** say it only shows up when things are already at crisis point.

Only **11%** of organizations invest primarily in preventive resilience programs. **20%** are primarily reactive, investing in behaviors or programs that treat cognitive strain after the fact.



In the Headspace app

Lead Your Team Through Tough Times gives managers practical tools for offering stability and clarity to their teams — even when big decisions and external pressures are outside their control.

Your mental health strategy is only as strong as your managers' ability to carry it. Investing in their readiness with real training and clear guidance is what turns a benefits program into a culture.

Most managers haven't been trained to recognize strain or talk about mental health, and it shows. The GLOW model gives managers a simple, human-centered framework for navigating these conversations with care and confidence: Get curious, Listen, Observe, and chart a Way forward.



Why this matters for employers: When employees don't trust that support is there, they stop looking for it. The cost of missing support shows up in turnover, absenteeism, and teams that are checking the boxes but never quite at full strength. Closing the gap between what you think you're offering and what employees actually experience is one of the highest-leverage moves an HR leader can make.

What high-performing organizations do differently

A few organizations are getting this right. Here's what they have in common.



45%

of employers say culture change is what would help most — ahead of leadership buy-in or new benefits.

41%

say the real unlock is resilience training for all workers.

The organizations pulling ahead on workforce well-being are the ones that aren't treating mental health as a benefits checkbox. They've built it into how the work actually gets done — at every level, for every employee. Importantly, they've recognized that chronic strain isn't a personal problem to be managed by individuals. It's an organizational condition that requires an organizational response.

FOUR PRINCIPLES DEFINE THE ORGANIZATIONS GETTING THIS RIGHT:

1

They recognize resilience as renewable capacity, not personal sacrifice. High-performing organizations set guidelines around meeting volume, after-hours communication, AI utilization best practices, and context-switching requirements, and they build recovery into the rhythm of work. They recognize that energy is a renewable resource only if it's able to replenish.

2

They use managers as the multiplier. Managers are often the first to see when someone is struggling, but not all know what to look for or feel equipped to act. The best organizations make mental health training mandatory for managers, giving them a clear playbook and guidance on where to turn to support their teams.

3

They focus on integration over isolation. If employees have to navigate six different portals to find help, most won't bother. Leading organizations offer a single front door to support that includes daily tools, skill-building, mental health coaching, and higher levels of care, all working together.

4

They measure what actually matters. Tracking benefit utilization, leave trends, and retention data gives you the signals to know whether your investment is working and when you need to adjust. Right now, most organizations don't have that visibility.

> The most forward-thinking organizations treat employee resilience and overall well-being as a core business capability. As AI reshapes how work gets done and how we think about productivity, the organizations that come out ahead will be the ones that have invested in their people's capacity to navigate change and integrate new tools, not just their ability to execute.

LISA MULROONEY GROSS, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, HEADSPACE



While a few organizations are leading the way in building resilience, the data show where most organizations still have work to do:

45%

of employers say culture change would help build resilience. 41% say the real unlock is resilience training for all workers.

Employers are fairly split on what drives investment decisions: **36%** say it's employee well-being, while **28%** say it's the impact on productivity and retention

Only 21%



of organizations track how much employees are using mental health benefits, and only **19%** track mental health-related leaves — making it nearly impossible to know whether the investment is actually working

A strong mental health strategy requires ongoing support across the full spectrum of need. This includes everyday self-guided tools for stress management, focus, and sleep; coaching for skill-building and self-efficacy; and clinical care for those who need it.

A blueprint for workforce resilience

Most organizations are stuck in reactive mode. Here's how to move forward.



49%

of employers track retention. Only **21%** track mental health utilization and only **19%** track mental health-related leaves.

Resilience maturity self-assessment

The way you design your benefits programs determines how effective the support you offer really is. The question is whether your benefits reach the majority of employees carrying chronic strain every day, or only those who've already reached a breaking point.

Use this checklist to assess where your organization is today by counting which level you check the most boxes for. Keep reading to see what it takes to level up.

LEVEL 1: FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT

Support shows up when things break. There's little investment in prevention, and most managers are on their own when someone on their team is struggling.

- ☐ Mental health support is available primarily when employees are in crisis or seek it out
- ☐ Manager support for team well-being is informal and relationship-based
- ☐ Resilience and well-being are addressed reactively rather than tracked
- ☐ Managers receive little to no training on mental health or workload management
- ☐ No mental health benefit measurement beyond basic utilization rates, if any

LEVEL 2: PROGRAMMATIC SUPPORT

Programs exist, but they're not connected. Employees have to find their way to support themselves, and there's no clear picture of whether it's working.

- ☐ Benefits and periodic awareness campaigns are in place
- ☐ Resources are available across multiple channels, with employees navigating to what fits their need
- ☐ Manager-facing resources exist and can be drawn on as situations arise
- ☐ Annual engagement surveys track morale, but resilience-specific metrics are absent

LEVEL 3: EMBEDDED SUPPORT

Mental well-being is part of how the organization operates, not just an offering on a benefits page. Managers are trained and supported. There's a clear path for employees to get help at any level of need.

- ☐ A stepped-care pathway is in place: everyday tools, coaching, and clinical care all connect
- ☐ Managers receive structured training on mental health, workload, and psychological safety
- ☐ Workload norms and boundary-setting are actively reinforced by leadership
- ☐ Mental health utilization, leave trends, and manager readiness are tracked quarterly

LEVEL 4: ADAPTIVE SUPPORT

Employee well-being is a strategic priority, tracked and adjusted like any other business capability. The organization responds to change and helps employees build the skills to navigate it.

- ☐ Communications and pathways are personalized by role, population, and need
- ☐ Manager and team resilience capability is measured as part of leadership performance
- ☐ Workforce data — engagement, utilization, leaves, productivity — informs benefit design
- ☐ Resilience strategy is continuously adjusted as part of the talent, culture, and wellness strategy

ARE YOU MEASURING WHAT MATTERS?

49%

of employers track retention; only **21%** track mental health utilization and only **19%** track mental health-related leaves

30%

say measurement and insights would most help their resilience strategy advance

TAKE ACTION

How can you level up your resilience strategy?

Set norms for recovery, not just performance. How many meetings is too many? At what time is it okay to stop responding to messages? What does it actually look like to recharge at work, even with a demanding job? Make sure your organization has clear answers to those questions, and that your employees feel supported with mental health and wellness tools and resources to help them do their best work.

Equip managers before you ask them to support others. Managers need to know what to look for, how to have the conversation, and where to point someone who needs more help. Make mental health training a standard part of managing people at your organization.

Make sure help is easy to find — and it's something employees want to do. Walk the path your employees are supposed to take to get support. Is it obvious? Is it fast? Does it feel like something they'd actually use before things get worse? If not, that's where to start. Making sure employees have easy access to proactive, skill-building support before they reach a breaking point is key.

One of the most effective ways to support your teams is to create programs that see employees in their full humanness. The more organizations recognize the importance of increasing flexibility at work, facilitating honest conversations about workload, and better respecting life that exists outside of work, the more leaders will see their employees being engaged, present, and fulfilled.

TRACY CLEMENTE, FORMER DIRECTOR, NORTH AMERICA BENEFITS AT CHEGG



Ready to build a more resilient workforce?

The gap between what employees need and what most organizations currently offer is substantial, but it's also closeable. The data point to a specific, actionable opportunity: build support that addresses chronic strain and reaches your whole workforce before they reach a point of crisis.

Headspace's population mental health-led model supports the full workforce with the tools and support your employees need.

- **The right level of support for every person.** Our stratified care model meets each employee where they are — from daily mindfulness and skill-building to coaching, therapy, and psychiatry — without defaulting to one-size-fits-all clinical care.
- **Engagement that actually moves the needle.** Headspace drives 5–10x higher engagement than traditional EAPs, backed by 65+ peer-reviewed publications and a trusted brand employees already know and love.
- **Resilience skills, built at scale.** Our science-backed content is proven to reduce stress, increase focus, and improve sleep, emotional regulation, and change navigation.
- **Manager training and support.** Built-in toolkits, leadership trainings, and consultation support give managers what they need to spot strain early and connect their teams to the right resources.
- **Visibility into what's working.** Robust reporting on utilization, engagement, and workforce trends gives HR and benefits leaders the data they need to demonstrate impact and keep investment aligned with employee needs.



Interested in learning more about how you can move the needle on employee resilience and build a healthier, happier workforce? Contact us today.



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