

# Strengthening teams by reducing group stress



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# The ripple effect of emotions

**“It’s important to be mindful of how our moods and feelings can affect others.”**

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We all know how it feels to be around someone who is happy, upbeat, and calming. Likewise, we know how it feels to be around someone who is angry, easily irritable, or stressed.

Whether it’s one person we are interacting with, a team we are part of, or a room we walk into, we come to learn the ripple effect of emotions. It’s why people say things like “I just feel good around that person” or “Being with them just brings me down.” So it’s important to be mindful of how our moods and feelings can affect others.

The phenomenon of our emotional states transferring to others is known as emotional contagion. Humans are hardwired from birth to mirror or mimic surrounding moods and energy, whether it’s from the people we grow up with, live with, or socialize with.

Through several physiological and neurological processes, we internalize emotions that we have learned over time.<sup>1</sup> This science behind empathy describes why it’s possible for

emotion to spill over between two people or across a group.

“Spillover happens first within yourself, where something triggers a physiological and emotional response to something, and then between two individuals — typically a spouse or partner,” says Clare Purvis, PhD and director of behavioral science at Headspace. “A person can watch a video, for example, and begin to feel a sense of empathy or dread just by watching a stressful situation.”

To manage a spillover in a household or workplace, especially when it comes to stress or anxiety, it’s important to understand how it happens in the first place. The more aware we are about how our emotions can influence or perhaps even shape our environment, the more we can promote health and happiness within our communities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/03/the-contagion-we-can-control?registration=success>

# When stress spills over — the science

**“Learning to reduce and manage stress can lessen the impact on ourselves and others.”**

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In today’s fast-paced world, stressful situations can be a daily occurrence, leaving us feeling frazzled and overwhelmed. Within this reality, there is always the risk that stress spills into our relationships at home or at work.

We might, for example, become snappy or distant, and, before we know it, this spillover stress is now being experienced by people around us. The difficulty is that most people don’t know how to contain their emotions when stressed out. But learning to manage stress can lessen the impact on ourselves and others.

To manage stress, it first helps to understand stress. In short, it is a physical or emotional tension experienced in reaction to a challenge, a sense of being out of control, or to triggers around memories, finances, relationships, or work.

When this happens, the amygdala — the emotional thermostat in our brain’s limbic system — sends a stress/fear signal to the hypothalamus; this then places the rest of the body on alert, leading to the release of the “stress hormone” cortisol which

causes our heart rate to quicken and blood pressure to rise. As part of this chain reaction, our mind tends to go into overdrive.<sup>2</sup>

“While most of the studies focus on the interpersonal relationships within households, it is easy to correlate the same phenomenon between close team members in a work environment,” Dr. Purvis says.

In the past year, work and home life overlapped more than ever, creating a challenging cycle of stress between roommates, or families, or teams. But this has presented an opportunity for us to be more aware of how one environment can affect the other, and it means we can learn to use positive emotional contagion to our advantage.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/stress>



# When stress spills over at work

“The effects of stress cost businesses over \$300 billion a year.”

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Spillover stress in the workplace can lead to consequences for individuals, teams, and employers. The [American Institute of Stress](#) estimates that the effects of stress cost businesses over \$300 billion a year:

- **Stressed employees are often chronically absent or unproductive.** Worst-case scenario, they lash out at others or create negative experiences for customers.
- **Job stress leads to high employee turnover.** A [2020 survey by SAP](#) revealed 1 in 4 workers considered quitting their jobs due to COVID-19 related stress.
- **In some jobs, stress can also lead to accidents.** Stress can lead to a lack of focus in the workplace.

Working from home has not reduced spillover stress. If anything, with the lack of separation between office and family life, different priorities and conflicting pressures are more likely to collide.

In the workplace, even when operating remotely, we can transfer emotional responses, virtually – via video chat, email, or instant messages. A 2011 study found that just one team member can increase anger or happiness for the rest of the team based on how their communication comes across.<sup>3</sup>

With the right tools, companies can help their teams manage stress and prevent it from spreading to others, whether virtually or in person.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749597811000756>

# Ways to reduce spillover stress

**“Over time, becoming more mindful can decrease stress and its impact on a community.”**

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Reducing reactivity to stressful situations, and instead fostering a more positive, harmonious workplace, starts with the mind. Imagine a workforce or team that shows up feeling calmer, clearer, and more at ease, with a newfound ability to manage stress.

Cultivating that kind of environment can be achieved through the practice of mindfulness techniques, like meditation. Developing these life skills helps us to prevent emotions spilling over, and also enhances our awareness and compassion. What’s more, research suggests that employees with higher emotional intelligence are more innovative, and experience higher degrees of job satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

Mindfulness is the ability to stay present, no matter where we are or what we are doing. We develop mindfulness through meditation, which is training in awareness that arises from deliberately paying attention, in the moment, free from distraction or judgment. The more we practice, the more mindful we can be in everyday life — focused and fully engaged with

every task at hand, project, meeting, and decision.

What we’re actually doing when we meditate is observing the mind — the way it behaves, the way it thinks, and the storylines it weaves, especially when stressed, pressured, or bored. Meditation shows us how to step away from these patterns of thought and instead stay with what’s happening in any given moment. It hones our focused attention.

Headspace behavioral experts explain that meditation can help develop areas of the brain that allow individuals to respond thoughtfully to events, while deactivating regions of the brain that lead to impulsive choices. Over time, becoming more mindful can decrease stress and its impact on a community.

<sup>4</sup> Azadeh Rezvani, Artemis Chang, Anna Wiewiora, Neal M. Ashkanasy, Peter J. Jordan, Roxanne Zolin, Manager emotional intelligence and project success: The mediating role of job satisfaction and trust, International Journal of Project Management, Volume 34, Issue 7, 2016, ISSN 0263-7863, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2016.05.012>.

# The positive power of mindfulness

**“Less stressed employees mean more focused and engaged teams.”**

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Just as stress can have a ripple effect, the gentler qualities of mindfulness can spread, too. That means mindfulness through meditation could be a powerful antidote to negative stress contagion. In learning how to regulate emotions and not get caught up in stress, individuals are essentially fencing off their stress from loved ones, friends, or coworkers.

“Mindfulness presents itself as a very apt way to interrupt the cycle of stress, because we learn to deal with issues in the moment and get some distance from our stress,” Dr. Purvis said. “Reducing our own stress can have a cascading effect for those around us — whether that is at home or at work.”

Mindfulness is a powerful tool in fostering compassion because in letting go of negative storylines, judgmental thinking, and reactionary behavior, we naturally become kinder to ourselves and to those around us.

Less stressed employees mean more focused and engaged teams.

Decreasing stress levels for individual employees, as well as their dependents or loved ones, can affect the way they're able to show up to work, positively influence their teams, and be successful in their roles.

# How to build a mindful community

**“Mindful communities start at the top. When leadership embraces mindfulness, it goes a long way for the rest of the organization.”**

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Building a mindful community is the key to a happier, healthier workplace. It's great to help employees cultivate mindfulness within themselves, but to make the greatest impact on company culture, businesses must be consistent with mindfulness offerings and programming.

Mindful communities start at the top — when leadership embraces mindfulness, opens up dialogue, and helps to normalize taking time to reset and recharge, it goes a long way for the behavior, creativity, and productivity of the rest of the organization.<sup>5</sup>

Having mindfulness advocates in other parts of the business can help to encourage others, too, and would likely improve the overall employee experience.

The next step in creating a like-minded community is to create offerings and programming. It could be something as small as including a short meditation at the beginning of a meeting, so everyone can take a deep breath before diving in. It could also mean offering benefits to

employees and their dependents to equip them with the tools — like guidance, in apps — to maintain their own mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness is called a “practice” for a reason. Your community will grow and the benefits will start to be felt if employers are supported and encouraged to maintain a consistent practice, at home and at work.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6529524>



# What employers can do

# 87%

of respondents said employers should provide mental health benefits to employees and their dependents

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Amid a pandemic, social unrest, and an economic downturn, the companies that thrived in 2020 were the ones that cared for and supported their employees. Organizations turned to well-being solutions ranging from financial wellness to mental health support. Before the pandemic, about 45% of employers increased spending on well-being in areas focusing on mental health and emotional support.<sup>6</sup> By late March 2020, 68% of employers added at least one additional wellness benefit to help their people through the pandemic.

In May and September of 2020, Headspace for Work surveyed thousands of employees in the United States and United Kingdom to take a pulse on the state of employee mental health and uncover what the top stressors might be.

As the pandemic continued, data showed that relationships with others ranked among the top five sources of stress in September, at 22%. It was not in the top five in the May survey. Over the past year, there has been a significant rise in employee demand for mental health

benefits from their employers, not just for themselves, but for their families as well — 83% of respondents said employers should provide mental health benefits to employees and their dependents.

Mental health benefits are no longer just “nice to have.” Employees are feeling the need to address the cycle of stress between work and home life. Providing tools that help employees practice mindfulness can reduce stress, encourage self-care, increase focus, and build resilience in the face of obstacles.

Mindfulness is a team sport — employees practicing mindfulness together will also have a stronger chance of boosting an organization’s collective well-being.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-06-16-gartner-says-two-thirds-of-organizations-have-introdu>

# A mindful solution from Headspace

**“The Headspace Partner Family Plan offers a secure, scalable way for organizations to offer Headspace access to their employees’ family or friends.”**

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

Headspace for Work has launched a new [Partner Family Plan](#) this year to help employees and those closest to them to break the cycle of spillover stress.

The Headspace Partner Family Plan offers a secure, scalable way for organizations to offer Headspace access to their employees’ family or friends. By extending Headspace for Work to employee dependents, together we can help communities minimize the effects of stress at home and at work.

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LESS STRESS

30 days of Headspace lowers stress by 32%

4 sessions reduce burnout by 14%

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MORE FOCUS

4 weeks of Headspace can increase focus by 14%

A single session cuts mind-wandering by 22%

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EASIER TEAMWORK

3 weeks of Headspace shows 21% more compassionate behavior

Cuts aggression and reactivity to negative feedback by 57%

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GREATER RESILIENCE

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

11% increase in resilience after 30 days

<https://hbr.org/2020/03/the-contagion-we-can-control?registration=success>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749597811000756>

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# Learn more about Headspace for Work

