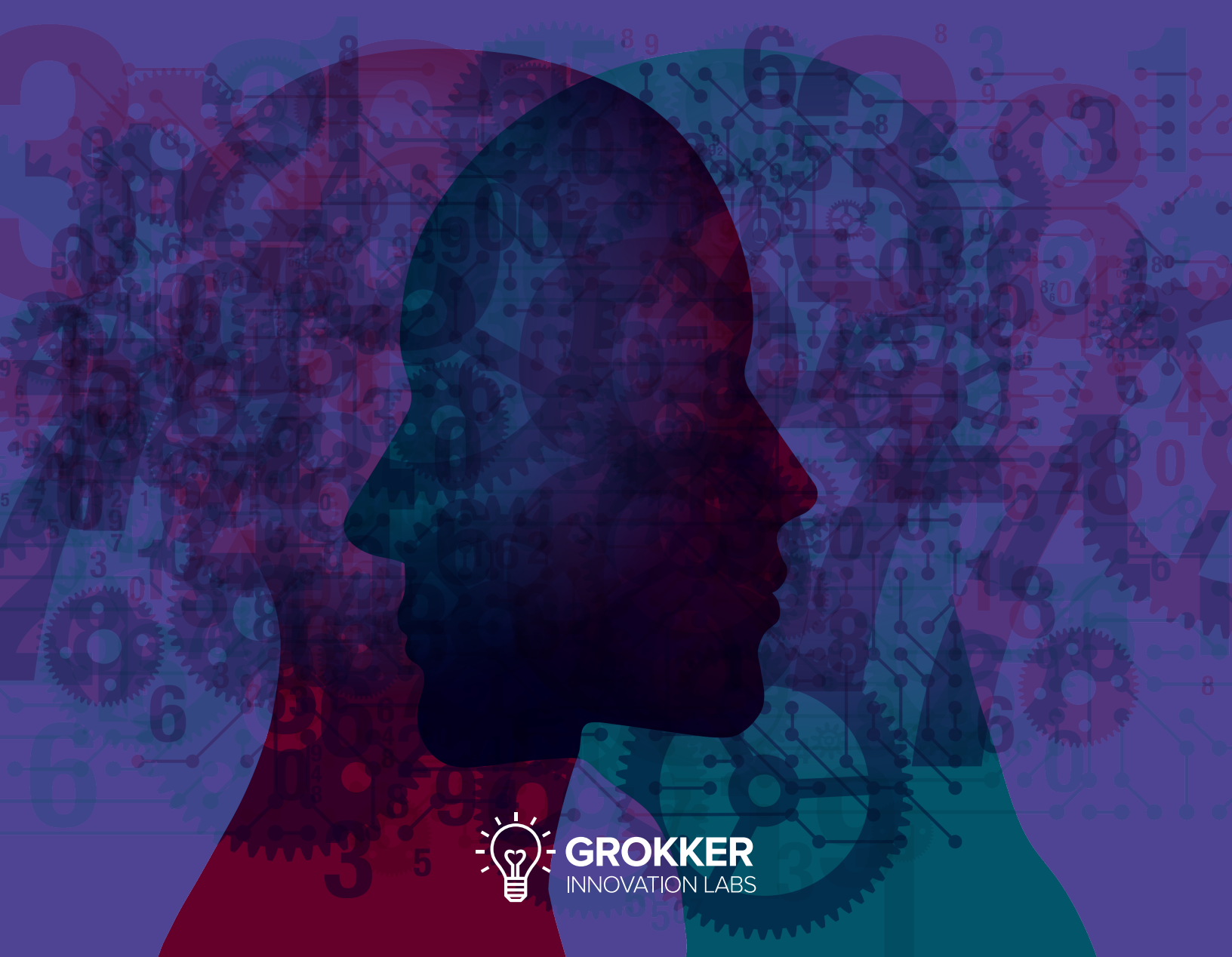


2021

WORKING AMERICANS' STATE OF STRESS REPORT



GROKKER
INNOVATION LABS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2021 Working Americans' State of Stress research produced a series of results that should surprise few in a year that brought not only the global COVID-19 pandemic but considerable social and political unrest. The research found high levels of stress within the U.S. workforce that is often overwhelmed by the present and generally trepidatious about the future.

To help employers reverse these trends, the research identifies the specific causes of worker stress, its effects on both professional and personal life, and various popular methods of stress management. By juxtaposing the needs of workers with the characteristics and policies of the organizations that employ them, more effective stress management measures can be developed, leading to a far healthier, engaged, and productive workforce.

In 2021 and beyond, there is no doubt that stress management will play an increasingly important role in the overall success of organizations in all sectors and industries.

KEY FINDINGS

- Stress is a widespread problem – 76% of workers describe themselves as currently “stressed,” and 46% of workers describe their stress levels as moderate or higher.
- Stress is a problem for nearly all employers – Reported levels of employee stress remain relatively constant across organizations of all sizes.
- Stress is a problem at all levels of seniority and pay – Although stress levels are generally lower among senior executives than among middle managers, general employees, and entry-level workers, executives are well over three times more likely to feel “overwhelmed” by stress.
- Young workers are more stressed than older workers – While only 67% of workers 60 years of age or older reported significant stress, this rate increases steadily across younger demographics with 73% of workers 45 to 59, 76% of workers 30 to 44, and 84% of workers 18 to 29 reporting significant levels of stress.
- Stress reduction must be fought on a number of fronts – Considering the deadly threat of COVID-19, it is perhaps unsurprising that employers have provided work-related mobile applications and virtual/video resources that can be safely accessed remotely.
- Stress impacts workers both mentally and physically – In addition to reporting considerable psychological and mood problems at the present time, 48% of workers report increased consumption of unhealthy foods, 42% of workers report decreased physical activity, and 25% report increased use of alcohol or other controlled substances.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Using nine carefully formulated core questions, the 2021 Working Americans' State of Stress research gets to the heart of worker stress, its impact, and its management. By analyzing the findings on the following pages, HR professionals can not only boost organizational efficiency but protect (and potentially even save the lives of) American workers.

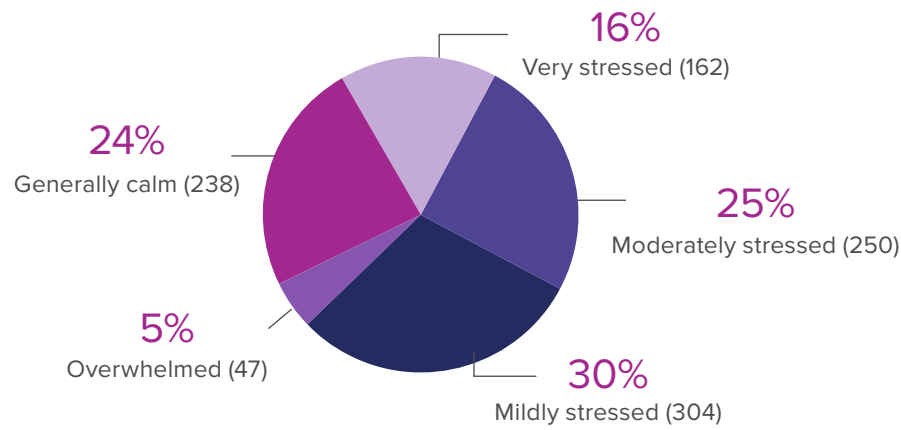
Q1: WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT BASE STRESS LEVEL?

While the relatively low number of American workers who feel “overwhelmed” by stress is somewhat encouraging, the detrimental health effects and poor physiological functionality that go hand in hand with overwhelming stress are cause for concern at any level. With fewer than one in four recipients remaining “generally calm” in 2020, the big takeaway from this base stress assessment is the sheer number of workers who are living with elevated stress levels as a general rule.

Interestingly enough, stress levels remain generally consistent among workers who are working on-site with social distancing precautions, on-site with no social distancing precautions, and from the safe seclusion of home. And the biggest discrepancy between these groups is also quite surprising. It may seem counterintuitive, but employees who work from home are more than twice as likely to feel completely overwhelmed by stress.

Another notable finding is that more men than women reported feeling generally calm (30% and 17%, respectively) and more women than men reported feeling overwhelmed (7% and 2%, respectively).

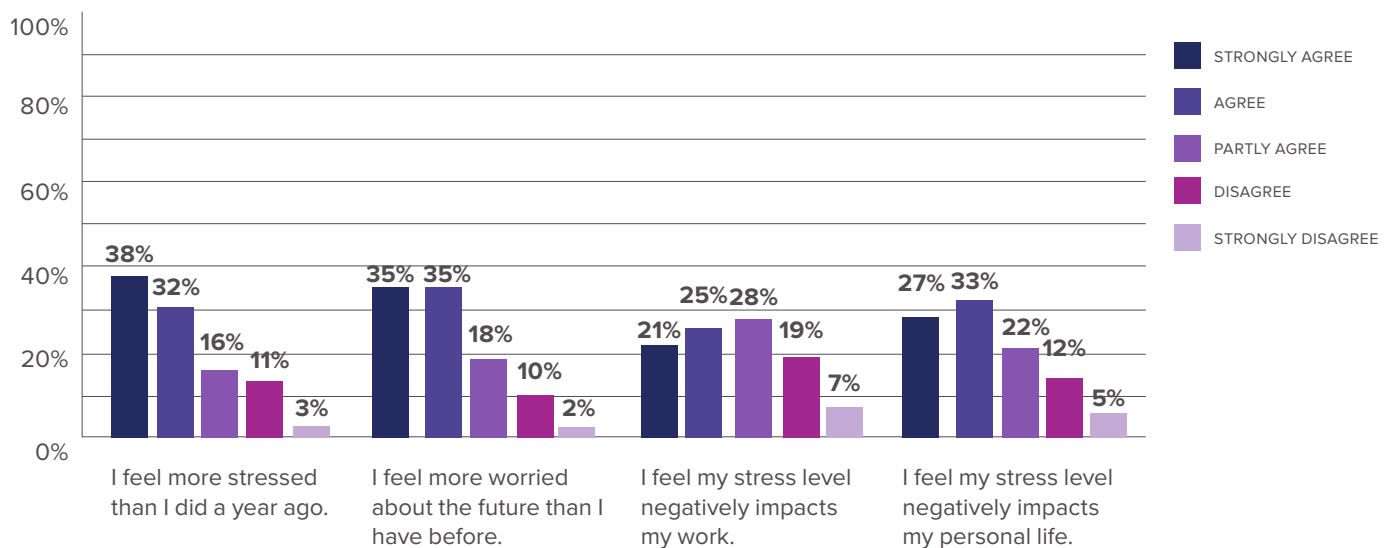
While stress levels decrease significantly with age, stress runs quite rampant among adult workers under 30, with approximately one in ten feeling entirely overwhelmed in the current environment.



Q2: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

For the majority of people, stress is a far larger problem than it was just a year ago. While this seems perfectly natural in a year that was plagued by a global pandemic among other serious social unrest and political issues, it is particularly troubling to find that a majority of people see no immediate end to their stress. Perhaps unsurprising in light of the fact that younger workers tend to feel more stressed in general, younger workers are also more likely to feel more stressed than they did a year ago and more worried about the future than they have been before.

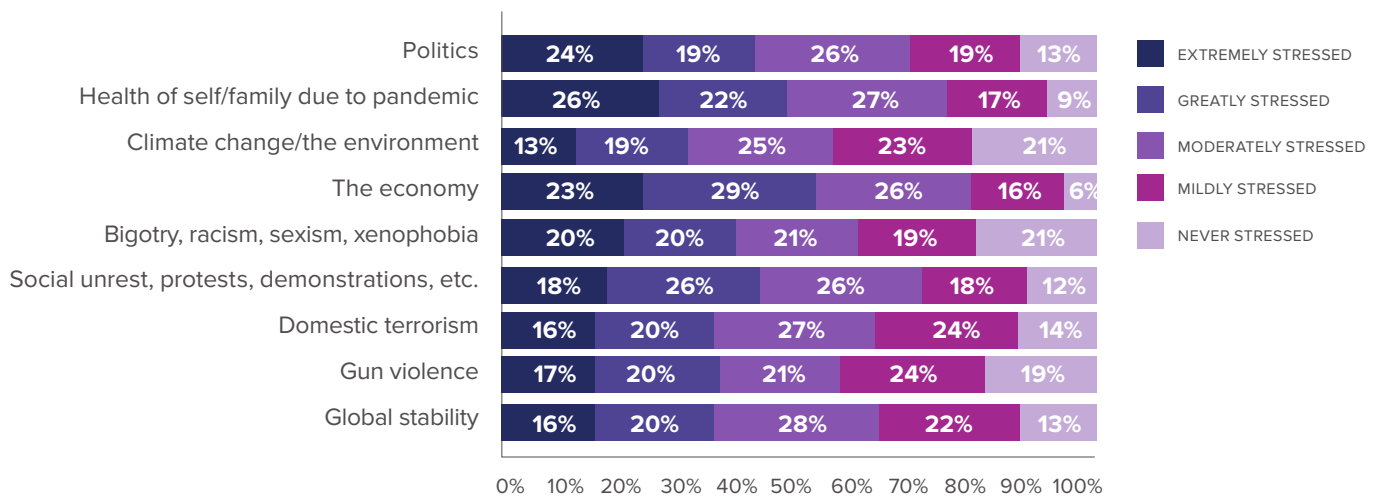
While organizations might be pleased to see that only roughly one in five workers feel that stress has had a negative effect on their professional performance, it is important to remember that the negative effects of stress are often difficult to recognize and ascertain. In any event, the majority of workers who claim that elevated stress levels are negatively affecting their personal lives should give pause to employees and employers alike.



Q3: TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU STRESSED ABOUT THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?

As COVID-19 continues to threaten the health of American workers as well as their pocketbooks, it is anticipated that “health of self/family due to pandemic” and “the economy” rank as the top general stressors today. It is interesting, however, that the economy causes slightly higher levels of stress overall than personal and family health. Furthermore, individuals who are working on-site with social distancing precautions are more likely than individuals who are working on-site without social distancing precautions to feel “extremely stressed” about “health of self/family due to pandemic.”

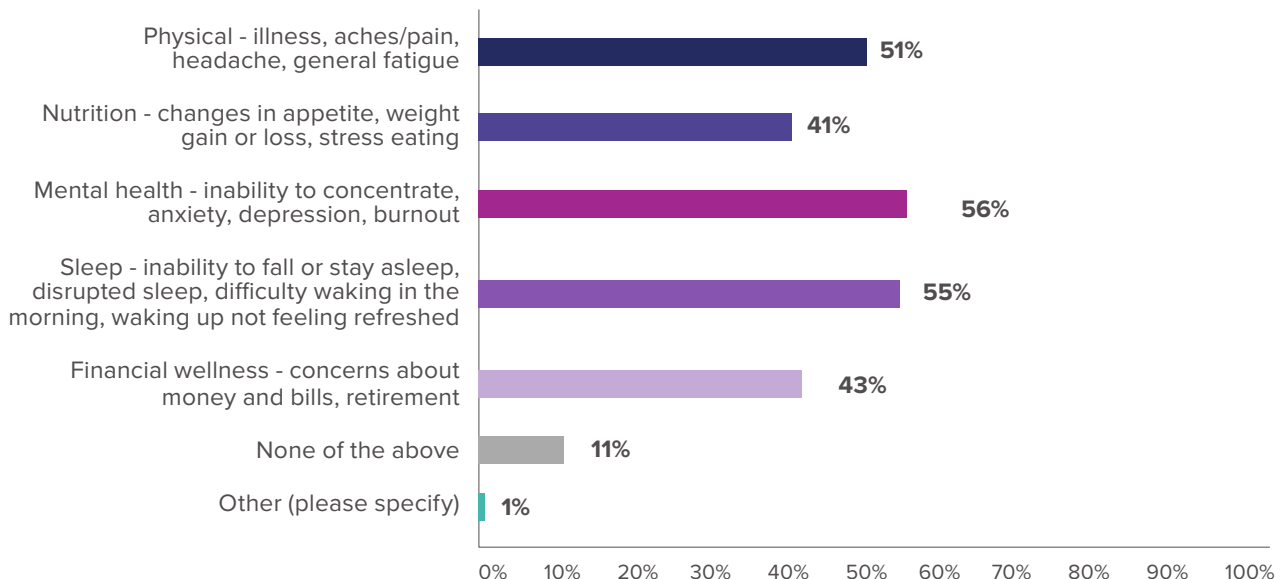
This suggests that, while social distancing and other preventative COVID-19 measures are certainly essential pieces of the workplace stress management puzzle, addressing job security and other basic financial concerns is at least as important. And these trends are relatively constant among all age groups and levels of employment.



Q4: IN WHAT WAYS IS STRESS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING YOUR HEALTH? (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

The sheer number of workers who claim multiple categories of negative stress health effects should concern any employer in 2021. In terms of workplace productivity, employers will want to pay particular attention to the majority of employees who tie their elevated stress levels to mental health issues such as inability to concentrate, anxiety, depression, and burnout.

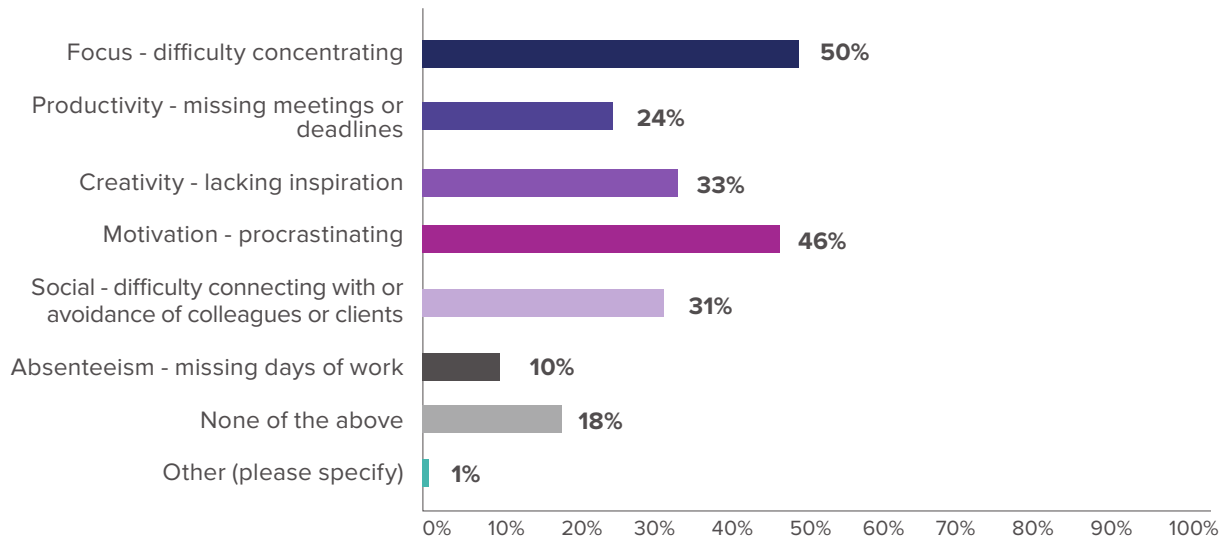
In light of this information, the fact that merely one in approximately five (21%) participants reports negative workplace impacts due to stress must be carefully re-examined. Considering that nearly 60% of workers report stress-related issues such as burnout and lack of concentration, it’s conceivable that many employees may not be aware that their stressors are, in fact, impacting their work performance. By the same token, other leading categories of negative stress impacts, from physical illness (reported by 51% of respondents) to sleep problems (reported by 55% of respondents), are bound to reduce productivity in the workplace.



Q5: IN WHAT WAYS IS STRESS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING YOUR WORK? (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

Consistent with the findings from the previous question, a majority of participants report an inability to focus or difficulty concentrating as a stress-related hindrance in the workplace. The 46% of workers who report a lack of motivation and a tendency to procrastinate is also particularly problematic. Similar to the ways in which stress is negatively affecting worker health, the sheer number of workers claiming multiple categories of negative stress work effects should concern any employer in 2021. It is also important to realize that younger workers (those under age 45) are significantly more likely to experience stress-related work problems than their older counterparts.

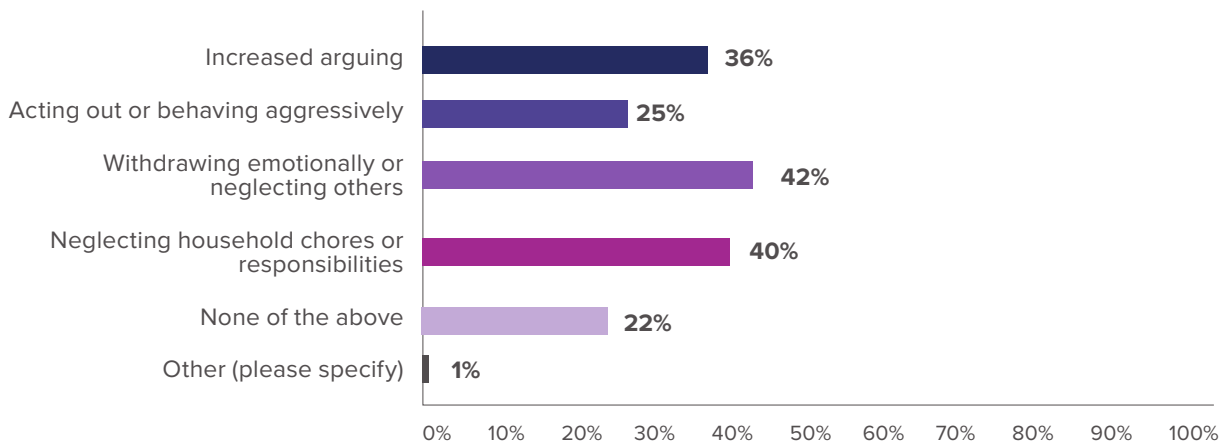
Although concentration and motivation issues are the primary concerns of workers who classify themselves between “generally calm” and “moderately stressed,” a broad variety of stress-related problems plague workers who classify themselves as “very stressed” or “overwhelmed.” These problems range from a lack of creativity and inspiration to a difficulty connecting socially with or a general avoidance of colleagues or clients.



Q6: IN WHAT WAYS IS STRESS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING YOUR HOUSEHOLD? (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

Every HR professional knows that any employee who faces challenges at home is far more likely to encounter similar challenges at work. For example, the high percentage of respondents who report procrastination and lack of motivation as a common work problem (46%) reflects a similar percentage of respondents who report neglecting household responsibilities or chores (40%). Furthermore, the relatively high rates of people who are withdrawing emotionally/neglecting others (42%) or arguing more often (36%) bodes ill for success both at home and at work.

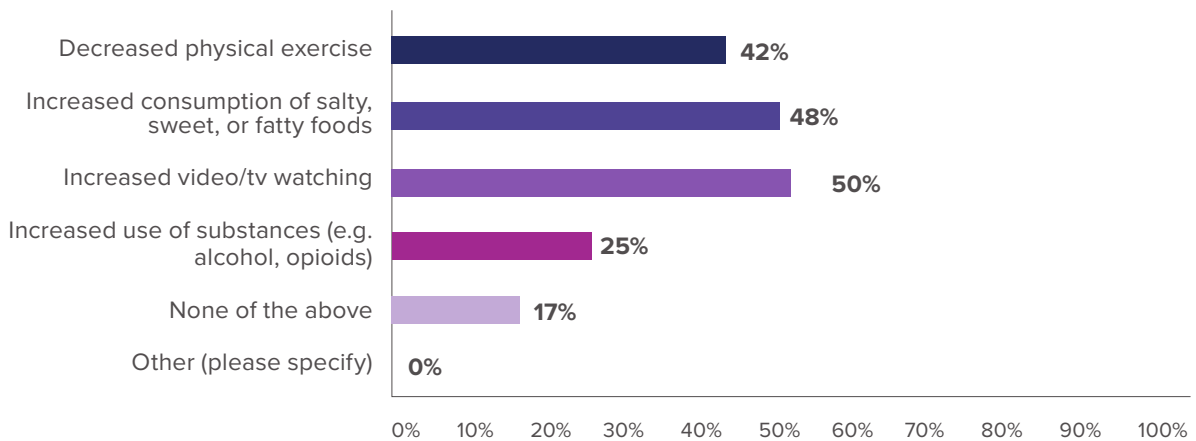
In addition to experiencing greater stress-related work problems and higher levels of stress in general, younger workers are more likely to let stress affect their immediate households. In fact, workers ages 44 and under are more than twice as likely to experience stress-related household problems than workers who are 45 and above.



Q7: IN WHAT WAYS IS STRESS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING YOUR WEEKLY ROUTINES? (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

With at least half of all participants reporting increased video/television viewing and the consumption of more salty, sweet, or fatty foods, the negative health implications on the current workforce are strikingly clear. This boost in overall couch time and unhealthy eating might not be quite as terrible if people were compensating with more exercise. However, 42% of respondents also report a decrease in overall physical activity. Add the fact that one in four people have also increased their average intake of alcohol and/or drugs, and you have a recipe for poor health that is bound to have significant repercussions in both the private and the professional spheres.

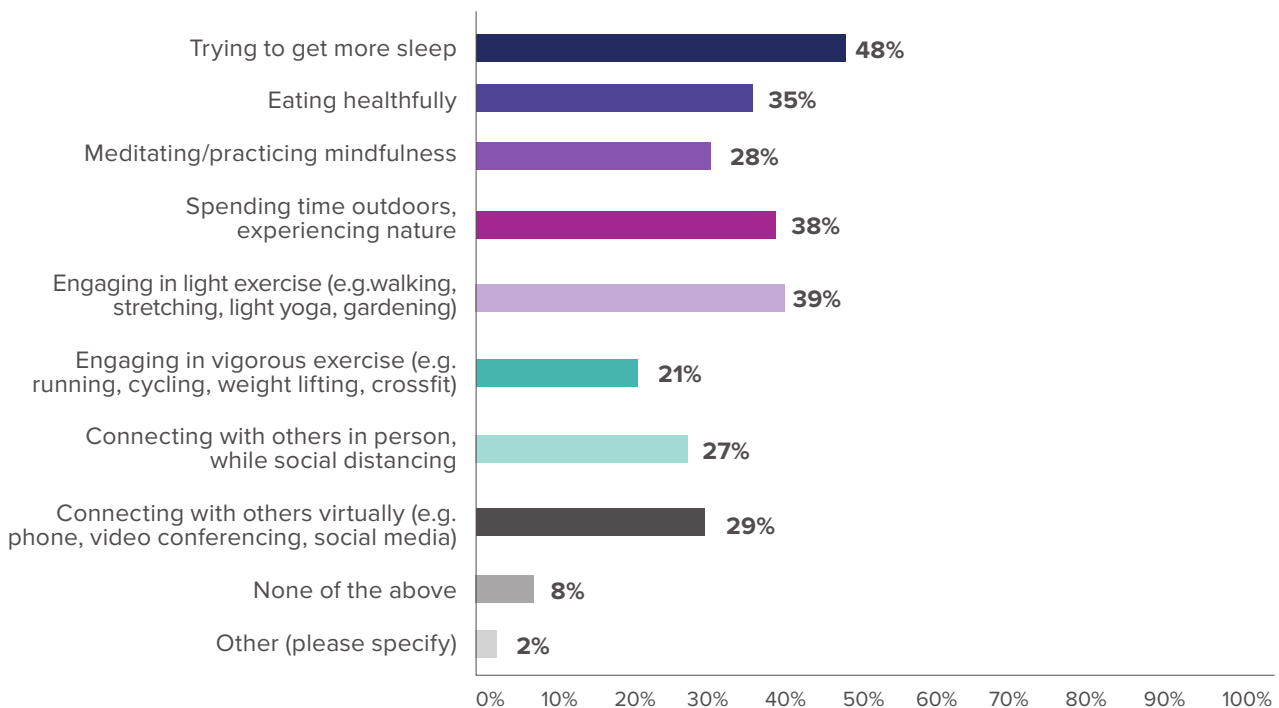
While negative stress-related habits are fairly consistent across all levels of employment, they tend to impact men and women differently. For instance, 54% of women (compared to 41% of men) report increased consumption of unhealthy foods, while 27% of men (compared to 22% of women) report increased use of substances.



Q8: WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MANAGE YOUR STRESS? (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

In general, workers are making a concerted effort to combat stress on a number of fronts. While significantly fewer report engaging in vigorous exercise, it is encouraging that 39% of respondents regularly walk, stretch, garden, participate in light yoga, or commit to other forms of relatively light activity on a regular basis. In fact, this method of stress management is only marginally exceeded by efforts to get more sleep, which is also tremendously important to overall good health.

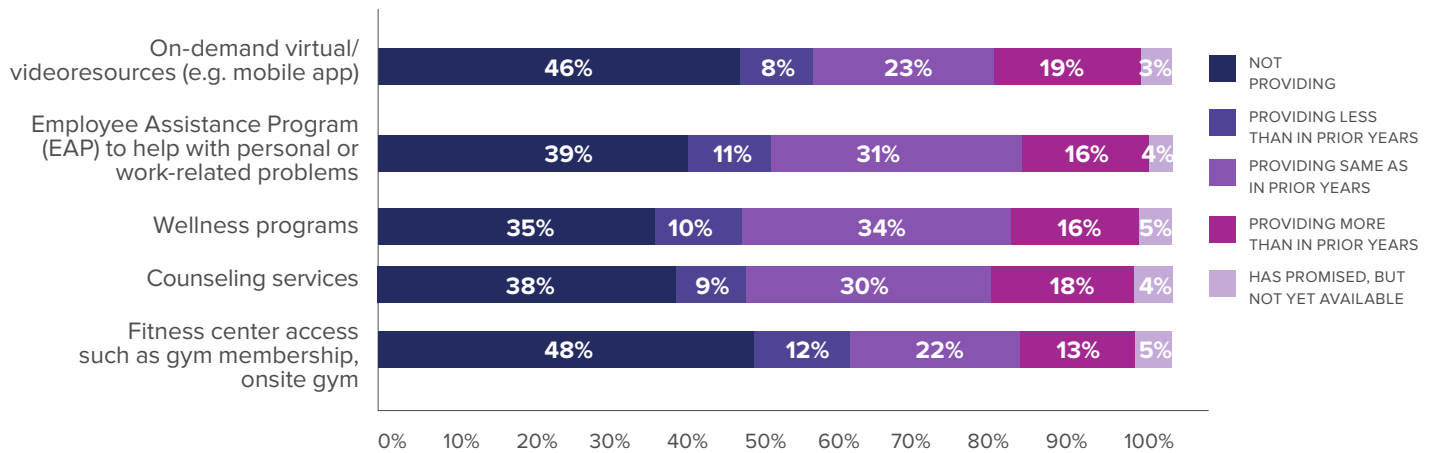
There are, however, a few stress reduction methods that employers may want to further encourage through various programs and initiatives. For example, only 35% of workers are fighting stress by maintaining a healthy diet and only 28% of workers are meditating or engaging in mindfulness practices. Setting up ways for employees to safely connect through virtual channels or with recommended social distancing are other effective measures that employers can pursue.



Q9: TO WHAT EXTENT IS YOUR EMPLOYER HELPING YOU MANAGE STRESS WITH THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES?

Considering that the threat of COVID-19 loomed large throughout 2020, it is entirely logical that the biggest increase in employer-provided stress management initiatives came in the category of on-demand virtual/video resources such as mobile digital applications that employees can access anytime and anywhere. While organizations also looked at EAPs, wellness programs, counseling services, and to a lesser degree, fitness center access, the high incidence of these resources not being available to employees signals the need for employers to reevaluate their existing benefits packages and increase the availability of stress-management tools.

If employers have reduced any significant area of stress and health management in 2021, it is surely in-person physical fitness. Nearly half of all companies offered no on-site physical fitness initiatives whatsoever and 11% cut back on their existing physical fitness initiatives. These initiatives are particularly lacking among the younger and entry-level workers who are at the highest risk of stress and its damaging effects. However, it should be noted that the on-demand virtual solutions being newly introduced to employees likely provide fitness content that people can consume in the safety of their homes while social distancing.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR EMPLOYERS

- While employees are moderately more stressed in on-site work environments that do not incorporate social distancing requirements, employers must go beyond these general precautions if they want to reduce overall workplace stress.
- Employees working from home are at least twice as likely to feel “overwhelmed” by stress when compared to employees who are working on-site with or without social distancing requirements in place.
- Salaried employees with benefits are the least likely group of employees to feel stressed in the current environment; however, it should be noted that their reported “stressed” rate of 73% is still substantial. They are followed by salaried employees without benefits (at 75%), hourly employees with benefits (at 77%), and hourly employees without benefits (at 80%).
- A full 60% of workers engage in light or vigorous exercise to combat stress, but less than half work for organizations that offer fitness center membership or on-site gyms as an employee benefit.

NEXT STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

Although mobile apps and other on-demand virtual/video resources constitute the top area of employer-led stress management expansion, it is surprising that only 21% of organizations have enhanced these efforts. Not only could employers do more in 2021 to make workers feel safe in the physical workplace, they must do far more to quell the skyrocketing levels of stress among employees who work from home.

Evidence suggests that employers would be wise to begin with their hourly employees when planning their targeted stress management initiatives. Stress is a considerable problem at all levels of employment but salaried levels with benefits are at a significantly lower risk of burnout.

In light of the challenges facing today’s workforce, employers are lagging in the provision of wellness programs, counseling services, and general employee assistance. However, considering the high value that workers tend to place on effective physical fitness, organizations are dramatically and woefully inept when it comes to providing gym/fitness center benefits.

In summation, U.S. workers need more support than ever before when it comes to effective stress management. And, as the damaging effects of 2020 continue to linger, organizations that understand the productive value of workers who are both healthy and happy must move stress reduction measures far higher on their list of overall priorities.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

AGE GROUP

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
18-29	22%	223
30-44	47%	468
45-59	23%	231
60+	8%	79
TOTAL		1,001

EMPLOYER SIZE

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
1 - 499 employees	44%	439
500 - 999 employees	23%	226
1,000 - 4,999 employees	13%	132
5,000 - 9,999 employees	8%	77
10,000 - 19,999 employees	4%	37
20,000+ employees	9%	90
TOTAL RESPONDENTS		1,001

HOW PAID BY EMPLOYER

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Hourly with benefits	41%	406
Hourly without benefits	22%	222
Salaried with benefits	33%	333
Salaried without benefits	4%	40
TOTAL RESPONDENTS		1,001

GENDER IDENTITY

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	49%	490
Male	50%	503
Non-binary	0%	4
Prefer Not to Answer	0%	4
Other (please specify)	0%	0
TOTAL		1,001

JOB LEVEL

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Entry-level	24%	241
Individual contributor	31%	314
Manager	35%	348
Director	6%	56
Executive	4%	42
TOTAL RESPONDENTS		1,001

CURRENT WORKING ENVIRONMENT

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I am working on-site with social distancing precautions	62%	620
I am working on-site with no social distancing precautions	14%	143
I am working from home	24%	238
TOTAL RESPONDENTS		1,001

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Grokker Innovation Labs conducted its State of Stress research from November 10 - 11, 2020, releasing the report in December 2020. The source survey, which was completed by 1,000 working Americans through an online tool, focused on respondents' stress factors, the impact of stress on their work and life, and the strategies and tools they use to manage stress. All percentages in the charts and tables are rounded to the nearest percent; therefore, totals may not always equal 100%. Full reported data is available upon request.

The report was analyzed and authored by Chad Deitchley, a writer, editor, and researcher currently serving as an Adjunct Professor of Communications with Holy Cross College in Notre Dame, Indiana. Formerly an Adjunct Professor with the University of Alaska, he holds a BA in Communications from Indiana University at Bloomington and an MA in English from Portland State University, where he was a finalist for the Phillip Ford Award for outstanding essay writing.