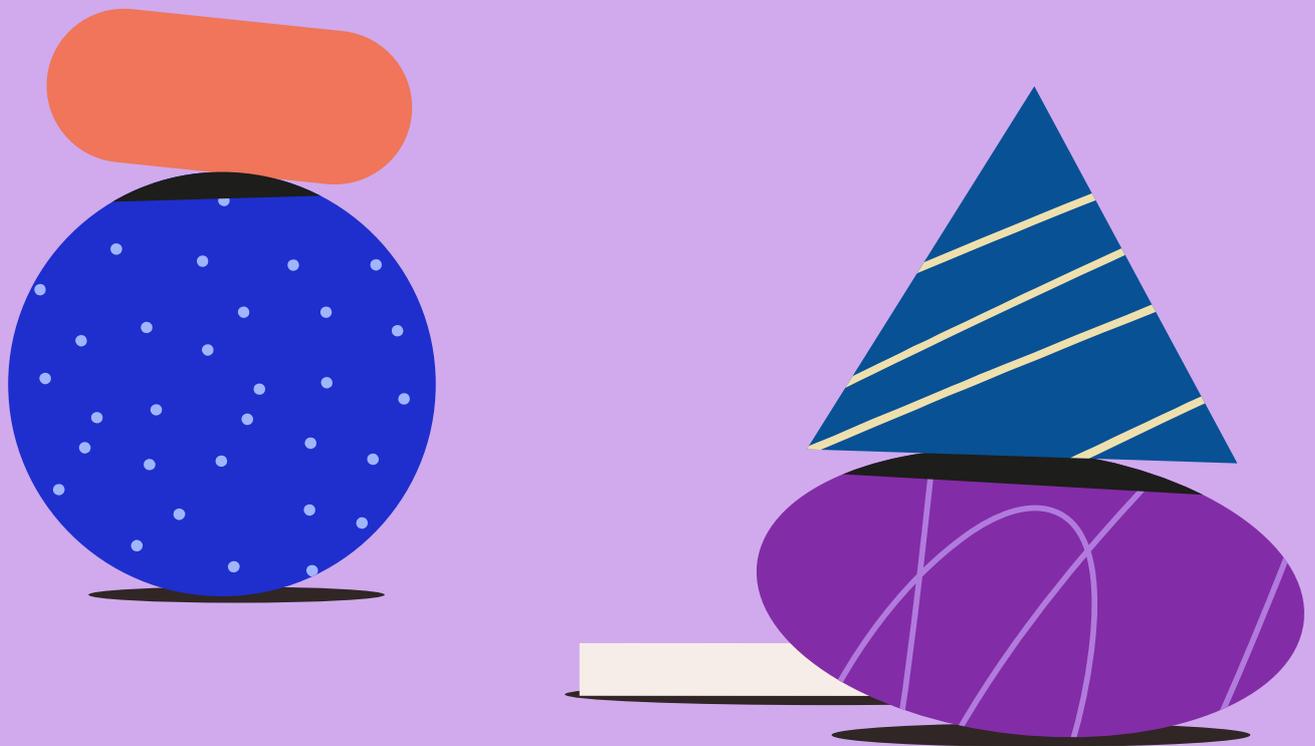


# COVID-19 and stress: a toolkit for businesses

Is stress really *that* bad for your team?  
Read the case.



**72%**

of people feel their lives have been disrupted by coronavirus

**54%**

reported that their mental health has worsened.

**36%**

expect mental health support during this time from their employers.

Covid-19 has brought sweeping, sudden and not always welcome changes to the way we work and run our businesses. Per a **Kaiser Family Foundation** study conducted in early April 2020, 72% of people surveyed felt their lives had been disrupted by coronavirus. It makes sense. Because for many of us, the current global pandemic situation has made just doing our jobs to the best of our abilities a challenge.

But whether you're managing staff as they try to stay productive while working remotely or supporting employees suiting up in protective gear to work on the frontlines, **stress** is likely to be affecting your team's mental wellbeing, and we'd like to offer what help we can.

So we've created a free, downloadable toolkit full of practical, science-based techniques intended to help you and your team manage some of the challenges and difficult circumstances so many of us are going through right now. We understand that every business's situation is unique, but if what we have to offer helps even a few companies get through these uncertain times, we think it's worthwhile.

For ease of use, we've divided this toolkit into sections so that you can skip to the content that's most relevant to the issues your company may be dealing with right now.

Sections include the following:

1. How stress may be affecting your team
2. How to talk about mental wellbeing at work
3. Practical tips to help employees deal with organizational change
4. How to help your team stay creative and productive during difficult times



## Stress isn't good for your team

But the s-word is all around

**43% of all adults** suffer from adverse health effects from stress. And research shows that even without the fallout from a global pandemic to deal with, employees with high levels of stress are less **engaged**, not to mention less **creative** and **productive**. Read on for a few of the nitty-gritty details of how (and why) poor mental wellbeing may be affecting your team as a whole and some evidence-based techniques you can use to help your employees handle stress.

### Stress unmanaged hurts engagement

Poor mental wellbeing and stress that go unchecked are significant factors in employees' engagement levels (**Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development**). And engaged teams aren't just more fun to work with; they're also up to **21% more profitable**. But it's hard to be invested in and excited about your work when you feel 'overwhelmed' or 'spread too thin'. And both are completely understandable complaints for workers of all stripes, whether they're suiting up in protective gear to offer medical care and essential services, or precariously juggling remote work and family obligations.

## Stress is also bad news for creativity and productivity

Long-term stress (like what many of us are experiencing due to Covid-19) can put your body into constant fight-or-flight mode. It also harms the **hippocampus**, the part of the brain responsible for long-term memory. Additionally, this part of the brain has more recently been linked to imagination and **insights in problem-solving** which means anything that damages it is terrible for both creativity and productivity. But your team isn't the only one running on empty—Deloitte reports that only 2 in 5 employees function at peak performance, even under normal circumstances.

## Stress unmanaged can lead to absenteeism

Sure, your staff may not call in 'stressed'. But in the future it may make sense for it to become an option. Poor mental health is a significant factor in absenteeism. In **2015-2016**, 45% of all days missed due to 'ill health' were related to work stress. And an estimated **12.8 million** working days were lost due to stress, anxiety and depression, costing companies **twice the original rate of employees' pay** in lost productivity and related expenses.

## Poor mental wellbeing is linked to presenteeism

**Presenteeism** costs companies nearly **\$225.8 billion yearly**—as much or more as the cost of actual absences. Why? Because stressed people tend to avoid missing work for as long as they can. This often has to do with feelings of being either a) so replaceable no one will notice they're gone, or b) a need to be seen as so irreplaceable that their team can't function without them for any amount of time without all work screeching to a halt. So, since they can't face taking time off, they work no matter what, even when they're feeling physically or mentally under the weather and get significantly less done.

That's why talking about mental health at work has to become a priority for businesses everywhere. By creating a safe space where your staff feels comfortable sharing, you can help ensure that they get the support they need when they need it.



## How (and why) to talk about mental health with your team

Whether or not you've noticed mental health issues at your place of business, your team is likely affected—studies show that **one in four adults** experience mental illness, and **18% of adults** in the US have an anxiety disorder.

Taking care of mental health is a significant challenge for companies and employees. It's made even more difficult by the fact that most people aren't open about mental health challenges with anxiety, depression, and stress, and put forth serious effort to keep them under wraps while they're clocked in.

This need to mask is a lose-lose; **feeling authentic** and open at work leads to better performance, engagement, employee retention, and overall wellbeing. But for managers to get employees to open up about mental health, they need to make them feel safe enough to share. Here's how they can do it:

### Put communication first

Communicate. Then do it some more. Make open and honest (but polite) dialogue between all departments and levels a priority so that all employees know they have a say and they're valued members of a bigger team. Follow-through, and when things go wrong, it's essential to take responsibility and say those magic words: **I'm sorry**.

## Trust and be trusted

Ensure your team feel like they can count on management and the company to be fair and even-handed. When employees trust their managers, they're much more likely to ask for help when they need it. And **don't micromanage**.

## Promote wellbeing on the clock



Bring in experts for wellbeing sessions or even day-long conferences when you can and give staff access to an online or app-based program like **Foundations** that can be used whenever they need it. It's time and money well spent—studies show **\$4 is returned to the economy for every \$1 spent on mental health**.

## Be grateful

Share your appreciation when your people work hard, even if the results aren't what you expected. Thank them for their efforts before you turn your energy towards what went awry and how to fix it moving forward. And gratitude is a multi-tasker—not only does it make your team feel better about themselves and their jobs, according to a study conducted by **Glass Door**, 80% of workers are willing to work harder for an appreciative boss.

## Prioritize breaks, especially on busy days

And take yours too—leading by example is always a good idea. Besides, taking regular breaks is essential to better mental wellbeing at work and **helps restore motivation for long-term goals**.

Creating a safe space isn't a quick fix when it comes to problems. Still, once you've made room in your company culture to talk about mental wellbeing, it'll be that much easier to manage stress and support your team during major upsets like organizational change.



# Supporting your team during organizational change

Organizational change is always challenging. But even during a global pandemic, there are practical steps you can take to make the process as painless as possible for everyone.

## Do your own processing, first

When your boss hands down a memo about remote work policies, moving locations, or a reduction in force, don't sound the alarm too quickly. Give yourself time to check in with your own feelings, first.

Reflect on how this change will impact the company, your team and individual staff members over time to get a better perspective on the 'why' of what's happening. This will help you explain the change in a natural, conversational way. How you share the news matters. **Delivery changes how people feel about the message**, even when what's communicated isn't great news.

## Start a conversation

Share early and often and be transparent about how the change is going to affect the company, the work to be done and employees. Research from the **International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion** suggests stress is worse when changes are ambiguous, uncertain or not communicated well.

Be sure to explain the desired outcomes—it's essential that everyone understands the 'why' for changes to be successfully implemented (**Harvard Business Review**). Finally, **be respectful of the past way of working** so that employees don't end up feeling like past achievements are being devalued.

## Lead the way

Modeling the behavior you want to see shows staff that you (and the company) are invested in the change. When leaders don't spend time and energy working on a change, employees will perceive it as unimportant and act accordingly (Tushman and Nadler, **Beyond the Charismatic Leader**).

Be honest with your team about how hard this is for everyone, yourself included. But move on to the pros as soon as possible. When staff see you working hard to implement the change without complaining, it leaves an impression.

## Keep the dialogue open

Communication can't stop when you break the news. Per **Entrepreneur**, a crucial part of successful, lower-stress change management is ongoing, honest conversations with your staff. So keep your office door open. Ensure everyone knows you're ready and willing to listen to any concerns for the duration.

People don't react on the same schedule. Sometimes, someone will develop doubts and anxiety about the change after it's implemented. Keep the conversation going to keep valued employees from falling through the cracks.

Stress happens. But even in unpleasant situations (like a global pandemic), there are ways to help your team stay creative and productive.



# Helping your team stay creative and productive during difficult times

Some stress at work is to be expected, even without a global pandemic going on. And stress damages more than our peace of mind—it messes with creativity and productivity, too. Here are some things you can do to help your team deal with it:

## Discourage the 24/7 mindset

**Recent research** indicates that feeling like you're expected to answer work communications during off-hours can damage mental wellbeing. So make it clear that you don't expect your team to check in during their free time.

## Make breaks non-negotiable

Studies show **performance increases after breaks**—even following micro breaks as short as 30 seconds—so make sure your team knows to take time, even on busy days, to step away from their screens.

## Be understanding

Studies show being **positive** and **understanding** makes a big difference when it comes to how your team feels. When you work hard to understand your team members, they work hard for the good of the team.

# A few final reflections on supporting your staff during Covid-19



Stress and stress-related problems are serious issues for organizations and their employees across all industries, all the time. These problems are costly, and **they were already on the rise** before the outbreak.

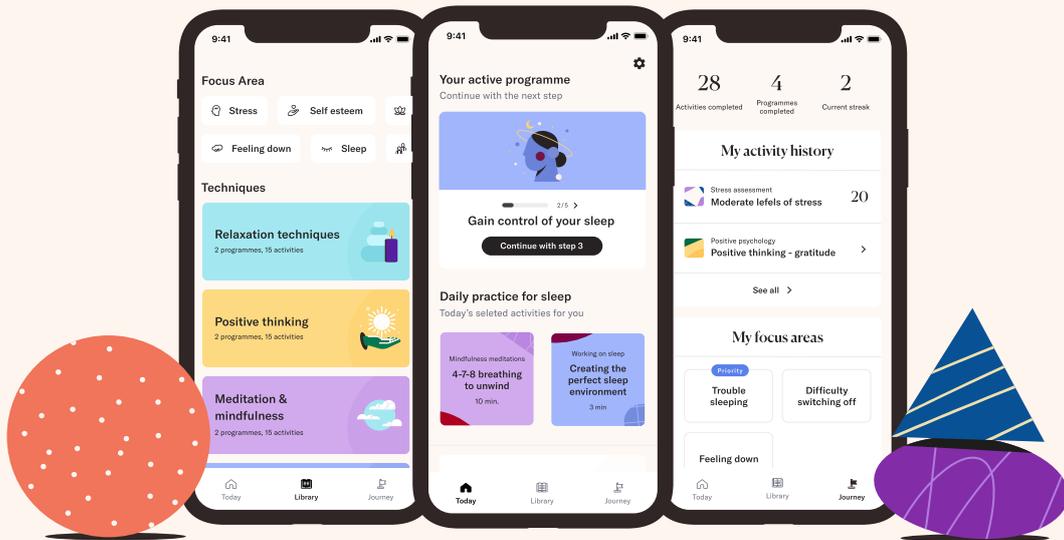
With a majority of the workforce feeling stressed at least some of the time, even under 'normal' circumstances, isn't it time to take action? At Foundations, we believe that we have to start doing better by our teams, by offering them the support they need to handle stress at work and at home.

Mental health problems cost US companies an estimated **\$300 billion** yearly (pre-pandemic) and were predicted to cost the global economy **\$16 trillion** by 2030. Given recent developments, that number is due to rise.

But despite the not-so-inspiring statistics and the scary times we're all living in, there's still a silver lining to be revealed. Studies show that **about half of employees** recognise they need help and are ready to receive it at work.

So what's the solution? It's not enough to simply offer your team the chance to engage in wellness activities at work. Managers like you will have to be the change they want to see. Companies will also need to **offer practical, easy-to-access tools** to help their teams learn to better manage their stress and build resilience over time.

And finally, if you find that you personally or members of your staff have been affected by day-to-day stress, we'd like to offer some help. Our science-based wellbeing app was designed with you and your team in mind. Contact us at **foundations@koahealth.com** for more information.



## About Foundations

Give your employees access to practical, evidence-based tools to help them work towards more balanced wellbeing with Foundations, developed by **Koa Health**.

In our first randomized controlled trial (RCT), Foundations was shown to improve measures of stress, anxiety, resilience, sleep and mental wellbeing and three further trials are underway this year.

We want to help your team work towards a more balanced wellbeing with practical tools they can access from the comfort of their phones at whatever time works best for them. Because getting support should be the easy part.

To find out more about how we can help you support your workforce, contact us at **foundations@kohealth.com** to speak with a Koa expert.

**Note:** Foundations isn't a medical device and isn't intended to be used as one. While third-party research suggests that the techniques used by Foundations can help manage stress, and in turn reduce the risk of and potentially alleviate certain related conditions, Koa Health makes no claims, representations, or guarantees that Foundations provides therapeutic benefits. Foundations isn't intended to be used in the detection, diagnosis, prevention, monitoring, prediction, prognosis, therapy, treatment or alleviation of any mental or physical illnesses, conditions, diseases, or vital physiological processes.