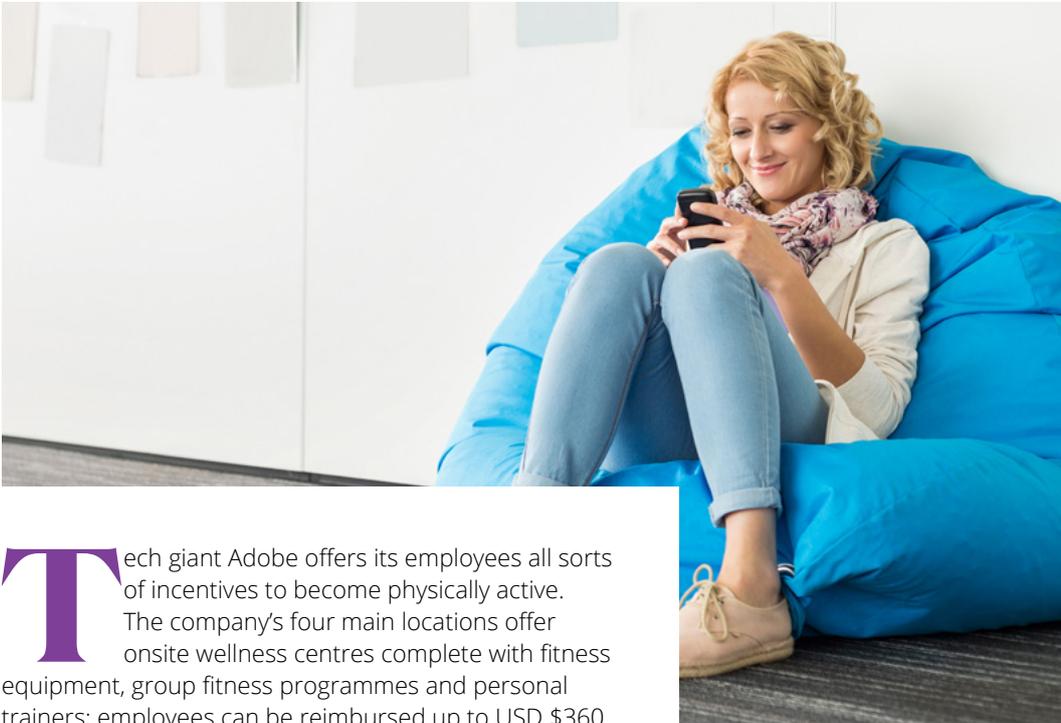


# Fit For Duty



Finding inner peace: How mindfulness and meditation improve workplace culture and business outcomes





**T**ech giant Adobe offers its employees all sorts of incentives to become physically active. The company's four main locations offer onsite wellness centres complete with fitness equipment, group fitness programmes and personal trainers; employees can be reimbursed up to USD \$360 per year for gym and bike share memberships, exercise classes and more; and bike commuters at some offices can receive USD \$20 monthly credits to spend at bike shops.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

But one of the company's most popular wellness benefits actually encourages physical *inactivity*. Called Headspace, it's a meditation app designed to help employees manage stress, find focus, boost creativity, achieve balance and improve sleep habits. Adobe field-tested the app in two locations, then rolled it out to all U.S. employees based on positive feedback. "After reading the employee feedback on Headspace, we knew it was the right choice for us," said Sarah Torres, Global Well-being Strategist, Adobe, in a case study published by Headspace. "With Headspace, we're able to provide an on-demand, approachable solution to support our employees' well-being in a way that works for them."<sup>4</sup>

Adobe is not alone in offering free or subsidised subscriptions to Headspace. More than 300 companies offer the service as a benefit – and Headspace is far from the only app in the growing category. Competing app Calm was named Apple's App of the Year in 2017,

For those reading a printed version of this PDF, head to [aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty-corporate-wellness](https://aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty-corporate-wellness) to access the sleep and mental health-related articles.

1: <https://benefits.adobe.com/us/health-and-wellbeing/wellbeing-resources#WellnessCenters>

2: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohl/2019/03/05/how-adobe-puts-the-employee-at-the-center-of-their-global-well-being-program/#37f639a2189a>

3: <https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/05/09/pizarro-abode-puts-bike-riding-employees-on-the-right-path/>

4: [https://get.headspace.com/hubfs/hs\\_b2b\\_adobe\\_casestudy.pdf](https://get.headspace.com/hubfs/hs_b2b_adobe_casestudy.pdf)

while self-care was the top trend in Apple's App Store in 2018. As Ben Rubin, co-creator of the 10% Happier app, explained to *MarketWatch*, "We're seeing people starting to focus on mental wellness and self-care in the same way that people started to focus on physical fitness in the 1970s."<sup>5</sup>

It might seem ironic that the same digital devices that contribute to stress and insomnia could be used to fight those conditions, but Adobe's Torres points out the benefits of mobile meditation: "For someone who has never done meditation before, it's going to be challenging to leave their desk, find a room they've never been to before, sit down with a group of people they've never met and start a practice that they've never done."<sup>6,7,8</sup>



## The prevalence of workplace stress

Regardless of whether workers download an app or attend real-world meditation classes, it's clear that they need support in dealing with stress in the workplace, says **Dr Stella George, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International**. "Workplace stress is an important, often overlooked, contributor to issues ranging from health to productivity to employee turnover," she says. "Organisations that figure out how to reduce – or better yet prevent – debilitating stress can benefit themselves and their employees in significant ways."

It's no surprise that stress can quickly morph into a host of serious problems, including headaches, fatigue, insomnia, anxiety, depression, eating disorders and drug and alcohol abuse. Moreover, according to the Mayo Clinic, "Stress that's left unchecked can contribute to many health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes."

A few years ago, researchers at the Stanford Graduate School of Business set out to quantify the health effects of workplace stress. What they discovered was sobering. "We find that more than 120,000 deaths per year and approximately 5-8 per cent of annual health care costs are associated with and may be attributable to how U.S. companies manage their work forces," they wrote in the journal *Management Science*.

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**Dr Stella George, Senior Medical Director,  
Aetna International**

5: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-was-the-hottest-app-trend-of-the-year-2018-12-07>

6: <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-your-smartphone-is-doing-to-your-brain-and-it-isnt-good-2018-3>

7: <https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/news/20180525/your-tablet-and-smartphone-is-ruining-your-sleep#1>

8: [https://get.headspace.com/hubfs/hs\\_b2b\\_adobe\\_casestudy.pdf](https://get.headspace.com/hubfs/hs_b2b_adobe_casestudy.pdf)



Workplace stress can also affect productivity. Towers Watsons' Global Benefits Attitudes survey in 2014 drew a direct connection between stress and workplace disengagement. Among employees who were experiencing high levels of stress, 57 per cent reported feeling disengaged at work. And that wasn't the only impact. Disengagement led to absenteeism, with highly stressed employees taking 77 per cent more sick days than their low-stress colleagues. And presenteeism – attending work when unwell and unproductive – was 50 per cent higher for highly stressed employees. (It's safe to assume that many previously unstressed workers become stressed when they have to take up the slack for absent or disengaged colleagues.)<sup>9</sup>

In its report *The Case for Motivation*, Korn Ferry Institute explained the connection between stress and productivity: "Working memory – the capacity for actively holding something in mind to work on, a trait significantly related to ability and potential – is limited. Stress clogs up working memory by impeding the function of the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for high-level thinking such as abstract reasoning, thought analysis, planning and decision-making." The report also noted that the share of workers around the world who report often or always feeling workplace stress has grown nearly 20 per cent since 1989.<sup>10</sup>

How prevalent is workplace stress? Estimates vary but are uniformly, well, distressing. The American Institute of Stress reported in 2011 that "80 per cent of workers feel stress on the job, nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress and 42 per cent say their co-workers need such help." The American Psychological Association's 2017 Work and Well-being Survey found that 37 per cent of workers experience chronic workplace stress or tension. In that survey, the top stressors workers cited were low salaries, lack of opportunity for growth, heavy workloads, uncertain or undefined job expectations and unrealistic job expectations.<sup>11,12</sup>

International workers like those Aetna International serves could add a host of factors to that list, including adapting to new cultures while living oceans away from their typical support systems. "We've seen significant increases in mental health claims in the past five years," Dr George says. "Between 2014 and 2016, the greatest increase in mental health prevalence was recorded among our European population (33 per cent), followed by the Middle East and Africa (28 per cent), Americas' population (26 per cent) and Southeast Asia (19 per cent). And depression and anxiety are the leading mental health issues our members face."<sup>13</sup>

9: <https://www.towerswatson.com/en/Press/2014/09/Workplace-stress-leads-to-less-productive-employees>

10: <https://www.kornferry.com/institute/motivation-stress-innovation>

11: <https://www.stress.org/workplace-stress>

12: <http://www.apaexcellence.org/assets/general/2017-work-and-wellbeing-survey-results.pdf>

13: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/content/dam/aetna/pdfs/aetna-international/Explorer/MentalHealth-Explore.pdf>

What's more, the stakes are much higher for international workers. One global relocation firm calculated that the cost of a failed assignment within the first year can reach USD \$400,000, assuming the worker takes a spouse and two school-aged children. And that doesn't account for lost productivity as the worker returns home – up to 20 days for some international relocations – nor for the psychic damage the worker and his or her family experience.<sup>14</sup>

## The case for mindfulness and meditation

Of course, employers can't eliminate all forms of workplace stress – nor would that necessarily be a good idea. Korn Ferry Institute found that 79 per cent of workers say not having enough work to do is more stressful than having too much to do.<sup>15</sup> And how many of us would be productive if we didn't face stress-inducing deadlines?

That said, employers can play an important role in both reducing the causes of workplace stress and helping their workers manage stress. The key is to help workers lose their edginess without losing their edge.<sup>16</sup> And this is where mindfulness and meditation come into play.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) are deep-rooted in many organisations' benefits strategies, although their availability does vary globally. According to Global Business Group on Health, for instance, 50 per cent of organisations surveyed in the Middle East don't offer an EAP for employees, but of those that do 60 per cent include a strategy or programme to tackle stress. In the UK meanwhile, only 6 per cent of organisations don't offer an EAP, and 74 per cent of the offerings include a programme that focuses on stress. Aetna International's mindfulness-based stress reduction service, Aware, is one such programme.<sup>17</sup>

As **Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International** observes, "Employers are increasingly taking a broader, more holistic approach to health and wellness benefits. Typically, they're looking for the ones that offer a large degree of personalisation as well. These provide people with the opportunity to talk to counsellors and get one-on-one attention, guided sessions and tailored plans to follow. That's why we're seeing a rise in the uptake of our EAP and usage of programmes like Aware, which focuses on personalised mindfulness coaching."<sup>18</sup>



“Employers are increasingly taking a broader, more holistic approach to health and wellness benefits”

**Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director,  
Aetna International**

14: <https://www.fidi.org/blog/real-cost-expatriate-assignment-failure>

15: <https://www.kornferry.com/institute/motivation-stress-innovation>

16: <https://www.tenpercent.com/meditationweeklyblog/edge-vs-edgy>

17: Global Business Group on Health. Mental Health Around the World: Employer Programs and Challenges. May 2019.

18: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/international-health-insurance/aetna-international-eap-employee-assistance-program.html>

Although definitions vary, the Foundation for a Mindful Society defines mindfulness as “the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.”<sup>19</sup> This state of being can be enhanced through practices like meditation. While many people have a sense of what meditation looks like, there are actually thousands of different practices that can be effective.<sup>20</sup>

But how effective can workplace meditation be? A few years ago, the Cleveland Clinic conducted a study among workers in a very high-stress workplace: a call centre where most of the 900 employees worked as debt collectors. Randomly selected employees were enrolled in an eight-week online programme of mindfulness meditation called Stress Free Now; some participated on their own, while others also participated in peer-led weekly group meetings or weekly group meetings led by clinical experts. In all three groups, stress and exhaustion levels came down to moderate levels as a result of participation. Moreover, the benefits continued well after the programme had ended. A full year later, participants said their stress levels had dropped by

31 per cent and their sense of vitality had increased by 28 per cent. As Jennifer Hunter, Director of Wellness, Employer Services, Cleveland Clinic, noted, “What we found is that when employers make a real commitment to building resiliency in their workforce, the benefits are sustainable.”<sup>21,22</sup>

Another study, this one among workers in a California school district, found that a four-month regimen of Transcendental Meditation reduced stress while increasing emotional intelligence (EQ), a form of intelligence the study authors noted impacts job performance, negotiation, leadership, trust and work-family conflict. “Workers, especially in our school districts, are under a growing amount of stress and asked every day to find solutions to increasingly complex problems,” says lead author Laurent Valosek. “This study demonstrates the benefits of meditation in the workplace. And with a growing body of research on the value of emotional intelligence and the harmful effects of psychological stress, organisations are looking to give their employees tools for reducing stress and developing EQ competencies like centeredness, self-awareness and empathy.”<sup>23,24</sup>



19: <https://www.mindful.org/defining-mindfulness/>

20: <https://www.sonima.com/meditation/mindful-living/mindfulness-vs-meditation/>

21: <https://newsroom.clevelandclinic.org/2016/03/09/cleveland-clinic-study-finds-meditation-work-reduces-stress-boosts-morale/>

22: [https://journals.lww.com/joem/Fulltext/2016/03000/A\\_Web\\_Based\\_Mindfulness\\_Stress\\_Management\\_Program.6.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/joem/Fulltext/2016/03000/A_Web_Based_Mindfulness_Stress_Management_Program.6.aspx)

23: [https://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2018-10/cfwa-tme101618.php](https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-10/cfwa-tme101618.php)

24: <https://www.thepermanentejournal.org/files/2018/17-172.pdf>



Smartphone interventions like Headspace, Calm and 10% Happier haven't been studied as widely as other interventions, but one 2015 study found statistically significant improvements in positive affect and depressive symptoms among app users. In the small study, self-identified happiness seekers in 11 countries spent 10 minutes a day for 10 days doing Headspace's daily mindfulness exercises. In reporting the results in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, the study's authors noted that two key factors seem to be participant motivation and the use of scientifically proven interventions. "The translation of empirical findings into interventions that are widely disseminated and readily available to those they were intended for could afford happiness seekers the greatest benefits from their pursuit," the authors noted. "Furthermore, this objective supports the central mission of the founder of positive psychology – to markedly enhance human flourishing worldwide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>25</sup>

## **Nine stress-management strategies to consider in the workplace**

As we've seen, helping workers manage their stress levels benefits them and their organisation alike. Here are nine ideas organisations can implement to help their employees manage stress:

**1 Determine why workers are feeling excessive stress:** It's impossible to treat a problem when you don't know what is causing that problem. If you ask employees, you may be surprised. For example, research has shown that some police officers find filling out paperwork to be more stressful than chasing criminals. In general, according to the American Institute for Stress, "The severity of job stress depends on the magnitude of the demands that are being made and the individual's sense of control or decision-making latitude he or she has in dealing with them." Put another way, as the Demand-Control-Support Model shows, it's important to balance job demands with decision-making latitude and to offer sufficient job social support.<sup>26,27</sup>

**2 Talk with workers about mindfulness and meditation:** If workers think mindfulness is too 'hippy dippy' or too connected to Eastern religions like Buddhism, they'll be unlikely to take part in meditation practices – even through non-threatening smartphone apps. As David Galowich of Terra Firma Leadership notes, "Mindfulness can be frightening to the uninformed. People often do not realise that mindfulness can be accessed through a multitude of approaches. Starting a conversation where other team members reveal the techniques that work for them can help people struggling with the concept understand and demystify the topic."<sup>28</sup>

25: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268033989\\_Putting\\_the\\_app\\_in\\_Happiness\\_A\\_Randomised\\_Controlled\\_Trial\\_of\\_a\\_Smartphone-Based\\_Mindfulness\\_Intervention\\_to\\_Enhance\\_Wellbeing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268033989_Putting_the_app_in_Happiness_A_Randomised_Controlled_Trial_of_a_Smartphone-Based_Mindfulness_Intervention_to_Enhance_Wellbeing)

26: <https://www.stress.org/workplace-stress>

27: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229876354\\_The\\_Demand-Control-Support\\_Model\\_Methodological\\_Challenges\\_for\\_Future\\_Research](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229876354_The_Demand-Control-Support_Model_Methodological_Challenges_for_Future_Research)

28: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/07/19/14-simple-steps-to-encourage-mindfulness-in-your-workplace/#a32979f26e88>

**3 Communicate mindfulness benefits in relevant terms:** As marketing consultant Hank Ostholthoff notes, “A lot of people are reticent to begin a mindfulness regimen because it seems like a waste of time. They wonder, ‘How will sitting in silence for a few minutes help me be more productive?’” says Golbie Kamarei, who leads a meditation programme at asset manager BlackRock. “I don’t ‘om’ in meditation, I don’t use the language that I might hear at a meditation workshop or a yoga class even. I use the language of a high performance work environment. And that’s how people who might say, ‘That’s just hippy stuff,’ say, ‘Oh, I get that!’”<sup>29,30</sup>

**4 Don’t micromanage:** At the same time, if you look at mindfulness as yet another business objective to be measured, you may actually make employees’ stress worse. “Stress is a major block to mindfulness, and one of the biggest stressors is – you guessed it – micromanagement,” says mindfulness coach Andy Bailey. “So, remember, it’s not necessary to hover, and doing so not only affects morale; it prohibits free thinking and creativity.”

**5 Establish designated meditation spaces:** At many companies, meditation rooms have become the natural counterpart to onsite gyms – places where workers can escape from the noise and stress of their workstations (or even of cafeterias and breakrooms). For example, global publishing firm Pearson has turned all its lactation rooms into general-purpose wellness rooms. “You can dim the lighting; you can be in the dark,” says Angela Schwerts, Senior Vice President of Human Resources, Pearson. “The wellness rooms are used every hour of every day.... We get such positive feedback, it’s been such a part of our culture, we’d hear noise if we weren’t going to offer them anymore.”<sup>31</sup>

**6 Be supportive, not prescriptive:** “A personal trainer in a fitness centre would never tell someone that the *only* way to get fit is to use one particular machine,” says **Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International**. “Similarly, you shouldn’t tell someone that Transcendental Meditation or yoga or loving-kindness meditation is the *only* way to increase mindfulness.”



29: <https://www.theladders.com/career-advice/7-ways-to-establish-a-culture-of-mindfulness-in-the-workplace>

30: [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five\\_tips\\_for\\_launching\\_a\\_meditation\\_program\\_at\\_work](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_tips_for_launching_a_meditation_program_at_work)

31: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/meditation-rooms-are-the-hottest-new-work-perk-2018-10-26>

**7 Build mindfulness time into meetings:** “One of the things that I recommend and have practised is to take a few minutes at the beginning of a meeting to meditate, set intentions and take a few breaths,” says leadership coach Manpreet Dhillon. “I have found that this allows for mindfulness to be an action item and incorporated into the culture of the organisation, as it shows the importance of it in all aspects of life.”<sup>32</sup>

**8 Set a good example:** “Managers shouldn’t just talk the talk; they should walk the walk,” says **Aetna International’s Dr Lori Stetz**. When you visit the meditation room or participate in a yoga class, you send the message that self-care is not only acceptable in your organisation but is actually encouraged.

**9 Share tips and advice:** Regularly sharing articles and information with employees can prompt them to make small adjustments to their behaviours, gradually helping to improve their well-being over time. As an example, why not read and share the articles suggested in the box to the right?

**For further reading:**

See our whitepaper Expatriate mental health: Breaking the silence and ending the stigma at <https://www.aetnainternational.com/content/dam/aetna/pdfs/aetna-international/Explorer/MentalHealth-Explore.pdf>.

Read: [A step-by-step guide to meditation at work](#) and [9 fun mindfulness exercises for expat children you can do today](#) and share them with your employees to provide clear guidance on mindfulness and meditation for them and their family.

Find more Fit for Duty materials [here](#).

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**How Aetna can help employers and employees**

**Healthy behaviours and lifestyle coaching:**

Aetna International’s care and response excellence (CARE) team clinicians can work with globally mobile employees and those seeking advice/support around developing healthy behaviours. Contact the CARE team for more information by calling the number on the back of your Member ID card or logging in to the [Health Hub](#) – your secure member website.

**Corporate health and wellness programmes:**

From smoking cessation to mindful eating, we often work with customers to design and roll out in-office health and wellness programmes. These are designed to help employees adopt healthier behaviours, thereby improving their overall well-being.

**Wellness webinars:**

Aetna International also provides customers and their employees with access to wellness webinars to help employees live well and feel better. To find out how to tap into the webinars, email the Aetna CARE team [here](#).

32: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/07/19/14-simple-steps-to-encourage-mindfulness-in-your-workplace/#73e1833326e8>



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