STRESS -
THE HIDDEN THREAT IN EVERY WORKPLACE

GCC Insights draws upon the latest aggregated health information and outcomes shared by the 1.5 million employees who have successfully completed the Global Corporate Challenge’s (GCC) award-winning health and performance program.

These insights, from 4,500 of the world’s leading companies across 185 countries, combined with the latest independent research in the field of human performance, provide employers with new perspectives and practical recommendations to improve the health and performance of their workforces.
ABOUT GCC

GCC works with businesses all over the world to improve the health and performance of their employees.

Over the past 12 years, our program has transformed the cultures of thousands of the world’s leading organisations and changed the lives of more than 1.5 million employees across 185 countries.

Our scientifically developed, independently proven program takes employees on a journey that fundamentally improves their relationship with exercise, nutrition and sleep, and instils in them a new sense of personal responsibility, self-belief and resilience.

In other words, we deliver a simple and effective solution that optimises your most valuable asset – your people – and ensures they arrive each day in the right physical and mental shape, so that they are fully engaged and ready to take on the world.

www.gettheworldmoving.com
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GCC has spent 12 years improving the health and performance of employees around the world, and we know that workplace stress is one of the most misunderstood issues in modern organisations. As managers and human resource professionals, you will be responsible for managing a host of problems that are recognised signs of stress – including sickness and absenteeism, low productivity and low engagement levels. While employee assistance programs and stress management courses have a role to play in managing stress, a more sustainable and cost-effective approach to workplace mental health involves helping employees improve their resilience so that they are better prepared and better able to cope with the cut and thrust of their working lives.

This GCC Insights report aggregates the voices of more than 160,000 employees spread over 185 countries and industries of every kind. The results, independently verified in 2014 by Paul W. Fombelle, PhD, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Northeastern University Boston and D’Amore-McKim School of Business, shine a light on the workplace challenge that could be affecting your business’s long-term health right now, showing that:

• one in every three employees (36%) reported feeling stressed, highly stressed, or extremely stressed at work, with a further 39% reporting moderate levels of workplace stress
• women reported feeling higher levels of stress than men, although, as we explore later, this may partly be attributed to a willingness to talk more openly about the subject
• workers with high to extreme levels of stress reported poorer sleep quality, higher fatigue and lower productivity than their less stressed colleagues
• workers who are more physically active, particularly those who increase their activity levels, were able to most effectively reduce their stress.

It also provides insight into how GCC’s approach reduces employees’ stress levels by:

• delivering a program that helps build a more resilient workforce, effectively and affordably
• engaging employees and avoiding the stigma that may be associated with traditional stress management solutions
• improving physical and mental health, and measures of workplace performance, such as productivity.

“The data suggests that GCC engages employees in a health program that aids in increasing both physical and mental well-being while simultaneously increasing workplace performance.”

– Paul W. Fombelle, PhD, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Northeastern University Boston and D’Amore-McKim School of Business.

2. GCC Insights data; 285,000 people participated in GCC 2014, this paper focuses specifically on the 160,000 people who provided sufficient data in response to physical activity, nutrition, sleep, stress and productivity questions.
“A successful well-being offering will free us from the collective delusion that burning out is the necessary price for accomplishment and success. Recent scientific findings make it clear that this myth couldn’t be less true.” – Third Metric founder Arianna Huffington talking exclusively to GCC in 2014.

By making people healthier, you make them more resilient, and the primary way to do this is to get them moving. GCC can demonstrate that increasing an employee’s amount of physical activity makes a difference to non-physical, psychological factors such as stress levels. Mental health issues are one of the biggest economic burdens of our time, and the responses of the 160,000 employees surveyed by GCC are reflective of this downward trend in emotional (and physical) well-being which increasingly comes second to frenetic professional demands.

Even though mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and exhaustion are familiar to most of us, spending on cure and prevention doesn’t reflect this familiarity, or the scale of the problem.

In 2014, authorities in the developed world allocated just 5% of their health budget to mental health, with a far lower amount spent in developing countries. This allocation is surprising, given that the cost for stress-related complaints is estimated to be $300 billion annually in the United States alone.

Part of the reason for the discord is as simple as it is problematic: there is often low awareness – and understanding – of mental health issues, with those who do feel stressed, anxious or depressed in their job choosing to hide the fact, fearing recrimination or damage to their career prospects. This, combined with the fact that “burnout” is often seen as the price for success, means businesses’ long-term objectives and profitability are increasingly at risk.

The many causes and effects of stress are too complex to address in one report, but here GCC Insights data, which is independently verified by Northeastern University in Boston, clearly profiles the trends and correlations that can make the problem more visible in your workplace. It also demonstrates how subtle interventions, ones that don’t necessarily require employees to ‘admit’ needing help, can increase employee resilience across your wider workforce, reaching those people who otherwise might not opt in to traditional stress management initiatives.

WHAT IS “STRESS”? 

Stress is a response, not a condition, and as such is difficult to pin down. Perhaps the first step is defining what harmful stress in the workplace is not. It isn’t the flutter that comes from impending deadlines, or locking horns during an energetic meeting. This stimulating, almost exciting, sensation is **positive stress**, [EUSTRESS]. It is **short term, motivating** and, above all, perceived to be **manageable**.

Negative stress [DISTRESS] by contrast, is an adverse response to persistent or extreme external stressors. It is a **prolonged state** that can not only **impair performance**, but may also lead to **anxiety and/or depression**. Research also suggests that if stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol remain in the bloodstream for long enough, physical symptoms such as high blood pressure and heart disease may also begin to manifest in employees.

Ultimately, whether stress is positive or negative is as much based on individual, psychological perception as it is on the biological ‘fight or flight’ response. In their study exploring the role of mindset in the stress response, Shawn Anchor – a leading expert on the link between happiness and success – and his colleagues sum it up when they say stress is, “the extent to which an individual believes that the effects of stress are either enhancing or debilitating”?

Unfortunately, too many people consider themselves to be highly stressed. Data from the pre-GCC survey – which was completed by almost 160,000 participants before taking part in the GCC’s 100-day health program in 2014 – shows that one-third of employees (36%) were experiencing worse than moderate stress as a result of workplace factors. Another third reported feeling moderate stress in the workplace (Chart 1, overleaf).

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1. STRESS FROM WORK
(PRE-GCC SURVEY)

36% of employees report above moderate stress levels

Sample: 159,840 respondents who rated their stress pre-GCC

Stress related to work (Chart 2) is generally higher than ratings of stress from home factors, which are discussed further in the demographic breakdown which follows on page 5.

2. SOURCES OF STRESS
(PRE-GCC SURVEY)

36% of employees

Sample: 159,840 respondents who rated workplace stress and 160,531 respondents who rated home stress pre-GCC
Drilling deeper into the demographics (Chart 3), we see that workplace stress is reported to be more extreme for employees between the ages of 31 and 50 - those likely to be at the peak of their career.

Proportionally, more women reported feeling higher levels of stress than men, be it from work or home sources (Charts 3 and 4). It's interesting to note that the gender gulf is more pronounced between the ages of 18-35, with younger women reporting feeling significantly more stress than their male counterparts. It is also important to note that “home stress” is not confined to home; the aggravators may be located outside work, but they still affect performance on the job.

Other studies have indicated that the higher stress levels reported by women could be linked to the dual demands of work and family, which is largely skewed towards women. The fact that women are more likely to acknowledge and discuss the fact that they feel their stress levels are on the rise is also a factor.

Countless clinical and academic studies reveal that those who are physically active may be better equipped to manage their mental health\(^\text{12}\). GCC Insights data (Chart 5) supports this, showing that only 30% of highly active people (taking 15,000+ steps per day) reported stress, high stress or extreme stress, compared to 40% amongst the sedentary group, (only taking under 2,500 steps per day). In other words, the higher a participant’s level of physical activity, the lesser their likelihood of reporting stress, high stress or extreme stress.

It is interesting to note, however, that even within the most active employee segment, just under one third (30%) reported feeling some stress. This is a warning to employers: stress is present across the whole workforce – sedentary, active, male, female, young and old. Therefore, any mental health strategy must be universally accessible and relevant across these different demographics.

## 5. Correlation Between Physical Activity and Stress (PRE-GCC Survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRE-GCC STEPS PER DAY</th>
<th>% EMPLOYEES REPORTING STRESS, HIGH STRESS OR EXTREME STRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;2.5k</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5k</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;7.5k</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;10k</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;12.5k</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;15k</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;15k+</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample: 159,003 respondents who rated their stress and physical activity levels pre-GCC

It is also important to understand that many of the mental health improvements that come from increased physical activity may be invisible to you as the employer. As medical research shows\(^\text{13}\), the benefits of increased physical exercise are not limited to those who lose weight or reduce their BMI. It may well be that an employee who increases their step count does not lose weight, but will feel an improved sense of mental well-being. It is a mistake, therefore, to measure the success of a well-being program solely in relation to weight loss. Rather, it should be acknowledged that physical exercise buffers against the “hidden” symptoms of stress, regardless of physical shape, size or BMI.

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THE IMPACT OF STRESS ON BUSINESS

**GCC Insights** data helps interpret stress in relation to employees’ sleep quality, and their resulting fatigue and productivity levels at work. Only one-quarter (23%) of extremely stressed employees reported above average sleep quality at the outset of the GCC program (Chart 6), compared to nearly two-thirds of employees (62%) who reported feeling not stressed at all.

### 6. CORRELATION BETWEEN STRESS AND SLEEP QUALITY (PRE-GCC SURVEY)

![Chart showing the correlation between workplace stress and sleep quality.](chart)

Sample: 158,722 respondents to the pre-GCC survey, who answered both stress and sleep quality questions.

**GCC’s Chief Medical Officer, Dr David Batman**, explains:

“Sleep disturbances are often the first indicator of a stressed employee and it is widely accepted amongst clinicians that those who are least stressed sleep better, have more energy and less fatigue, concentrate better and are consequently more productive - a position which is strongly supported by GCC Insights data.”

*Dr David Batman MB.ChB. MSc. DIH. FFOM*
With sleep quality and stress so integrally linked, it’s not surprising that 77% of extremely stressed employees reported above average levels of fatigue, whereas only 7% of people who weren’t stressed at all reported feeling highly or extremely fatigued (Chart 7).

7. STRESS LEVELS AND FATIGUE AT WORK  
(PRE-GCC SURVEY)

If higher stress leads to poorer sleep quality and higher levels of fatigue, what does this mean for workplace performance?

Not only does higher fatigue significantly increase the likelihood of mistakes and accidents, we also see that the higher an employee’s self-reported level of stress, the lower their levels of productivity (Chart 8). While only 63% of extremely stressed employees reported above average productivity, this number rises significantly to 87% amongst those who were not at all stressed.

8. CORRELATION BETWEEN STRESS AND PRODUCTIVITY

(PRE-GCC SURVEY)

The conclusion that can be drawn from the data is clear: the more stressed employees are, the less productive, alert and mentally resilient they are. In other words, those employees who report feeling stressed may be displaying the signs of “presenteeism”, a hidden, $150 million USD business cost that is defined as “being present at work, but limited in some aspects of job performance by a health problem”.

The numbers above do not account for absenteeism, which often occurs thanks to low resilience in the face of job stressors and not due to physical sickness. External research confirms this: the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that more than half (60%) of sickness absence is actually stress-related.

“When I started (the GCC), I was so stressed at work I couldn’t concentrate, I had daily headaches and severe muscle tension, was irritable, ate poorly and exercised infrequently. Now I am much happier, healthier and productive, averaging 15,600 steps per day, eating well and have lots of energy.”

– Cheryl King, BC Nurses Union, Canada

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

**GCC Insights** data drawn from the GCC 2014 post-event survey shows significant improvements to the stress levels reported by participating employees, finding that nearly half of them (45%) decreased their stress levels after the 100-day event (Chart 9).

### 9. CHANGE IN STRESS LEVELS AFTER 100 DAYS  (POST-GCC SURVEY)

- **WORK STRESS**
  - Increase: 16.8%
  - No Change: 37.5%
  - Decrease: 45.7%
  
  Sample: 56,949 respondents who rated their stress from work pre and post-GCC

- **HOME STRESS**
  - Increase: 18.9%
  - No Change: 35.2%
  - Decrease: 45.9%
  
  Sample: 57,129 respondents who rated home stress pre and post-GCC
STRESS STRATEGY #1: BUILDING A RESILIENT WORKFORCE

So, how can you get results like these and begin to reduce the impact of stress in your workplace? Firstly, by implementing a program that gets people moving. This then gets employees thinking about how well they eat and sleep, and they start to become aware of all aspects of their well-being. By addressing physical health, you also address mental health, and this develops higher individual resilience within the collective working environment.

Cultivating resilience, defined as the ability to recover from and adjust to adversity, involves making employees aware of all aspects of their physical and mental well-being during the working day. This could be as simple as encouraging walking meetings outside of the workplace, highlighting the importance of taking the full lunch allocation, or even removing the expectation to answer out-of-hours emails.

GCC can demonstrate that increasing an employee’s amount of physical activity makes the greatest difference to employees’ reported stress levels. The data (Chart 10) shows that respondents who increased their physical activity the most, displayed the greatest reduction in stress. This “dose-response” was greatest among those who moved an extra 15,000-plus steps each. They improved their stress rating by almost one whole category, for example, from moderately stressed to low stress.

10. CORRELATION BETWEEN INCREASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND STRESS REDUCTION (POST-GCC SURVEY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHANGE IN DAILY STEPS</th>
<th>AVERAGE STRESS REDUCTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 +2.5K +5K +7.5K +10K +12.5K +15K</td>
<td>-0.37 -0.37 -0.43 -0.48 -0.59 -0.65 -0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample: 159,840 respondents who rated their stress and physical activity levels pre and post-GCC.

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The prior-mentioned “dose-response” is also reflected by the reported change in employee nutritional habits, with those employees who improved their awareness of what they ate (Chart 11) the most also decreased their stress by almost two categories. Sleep shows the greatest improvement, with employees who improved their rest reducing stress by more than two full categories (Chart 12).

### 11. Correlation Between Improved Awareness of Nutrition and Stress Reduction (Post-GCC Survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in Awareness of Nutrition</th>
<th>Average Stress Reduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+1</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>-1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+5</td>
<td>-1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+6</td>
<td>-1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+7</td>
<td>-1.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Change in Awareness of Nutrition**  
Nutritional awareness graded from 0 = extremely poor to 6 = excellent  
Sample: 46,221 respondents who rated their stress and nutritional awareness pre and post-GCC

### 12. Correlation Between Improved Sleep Quality and Stress Reduction (Post-GCC Survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in Sleep Quality</th>
<th>Average Stress Reduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+1</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+5</td>
<td>-1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+6</td>
<td>-1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+7</td>
<td>-2.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Change in Sleep Quality Grading**  
Sleep graded from 0 = extremely poor to 6 = excellent  
Sample: 49,700 respondents who rated their stress and sleep quality pre and post-GCC
GCC Insights data captured at the completion of the GCC 100-day journey we saw that participants who felt the greatest reduction in stress also improved their productivity ratings (Chart 13). More than 30% of employees reported improved productivity after completing the GCC program.

What does this mean in monetary value? At the beginning of the paper, sleep, fatigue and low productivity were identified as three of the contributing factors of presenteeism (page 9), which totalled estimated hidden costs of $150 million15.

This suggests that the more employees are able to manage their stress and fully engage, the better it is for a business’s bottom line.

**13. CORRELATION BETWEEN STRESS REDUCTION AND IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY**  
.POST-GCC SURVEY

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STRESS STRATEGY #2: OVERCOMING STIGMA

Overcoming the stigma of mental health issues is arguably the biggest challenge you will face when trying to engage employees in certain stress management solutions. Your employee assistance and stress management programs may suffer low uptake due to people’s fear of judgement or seeming “not up to the job”. It is easy to imagine the potential anxiety such a direct “intervention” could create where stigma exists: fear of damaging career opportunities, or of a loss of respect, or gossip from peers.

Also, while these solutions have an important role to play in your organisation’s health strategy, ongoing counselling and medication may not be effective for those individuals who are reluctant to admit a problem. Research shows that, for them, a strategy that is universal and motivating across the whole organisation can be more effective in managing workplace stress.

GCC’s solution sees employees sign up in teams of seven and aim to take 10,000+ daily steps (or equivalent – be it cycling, swimming or other physical activity) and their progress is tracked across a 100-day virtual journey around the world. Once they’re moving, the program gets them eating and sleeping better until they come to understand how easy change can be and how beneficial the effects of a better lifestyle are on their levels of energy, stress and productivity, as demonstrated in the previous section.

The GCC’s 88% completion rate is further confirmation that this subtle and indirect approach can engage an entire workforce. GCC has learned, through the tens of thousands of stories participants have submitted on our website, that reduced stress and increased resilience didn’t occur simply because employees walked or took part in a program, they occurred because employees participated in an engaging, team-based event that was an open invitation across the organisation. That it addressed their physical and mental health was a significant – but seemingly secondary – benefit in their minds.

“A colleague and I started walking together for the GCC (program). Over the last few months we have solved all the world’s problems on our walks. Walking and chatting for an hour four times a week has been great for unwinding and de-stressing.”

Employee, Department of Education, Australia.

“GCC has made me shrug off tiredness and laziness. I am much more relaxed and I always wake up energised. More importantly I am no longer stressed and I am more productive at the office.”

Employee, Shell, UK.

“I’ve seen employees become more motivated and engaged, and the GCC has paid off in terms of reduction in sickness and people’s will to want to come to work.”

Liz Crossley, HR Administrator, Kent Community Health NHS Trust, UK.

CONCLUSION

As an employer or manager of an organisation, you will, no doubt, be all too familiar with the pressures of addressing employees’ physical and mental health, and with educating and motivating your employees to make behavioural changes that make them more resilient to work pressures.

Resilient employees are better placed to fend off a health issue that is fast approaching epidemic proportions, but how do businesses overcome the roadblocks of stigma to engage people in the services that are available to help manage stress levels? This report, and indeed more than a decade of results reported by GCC clients and their employees around the world, has shown that a solution that improves employees’ relationship with exercise, nutrition and sleep – and doesn’t require them to admit to a problem – can provide impressive results for both physical and mental well-being.

As a final thought, consider this: a key study in resilience established a proven link between positive psychology practiced by business leaders and the effect this has on their employees20. The findings suggested that forward-thinking leaders have a “contagion effect” in their workplace, and say, “employees perceive their leader’s hope and take on this hope state, which affects their resilience and the overall organization’s resiliency”. Clearly, employers who are ready and willing to tackle the economic and emotional costs of workplace stress have a competitive advantage. They also have the power to do great good, both for the health of their people and for their organisation.

“Employers who are ready and willing to tackle the economic and emotional costs of workplace stress have an advantage... and the power to do great good.”