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Career & Workplace

Women are reporting higher levels of workplace stress. Here's what they want employers to do about it.



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Stress and burnout have been a top concern for employers and employees alike in the Covid-19 era, and new research shows women are reporting an outsized impact from workplace stress – as well as their preferred solutions to combat it.

About 20% of women reported feeling constantly stressed or overwhelmed at work, compared to just 10% of men. That's according to an exclusive new survey conducted by *The Business Journals* in conjunction with the 10th annual [Mentoring Monday](#) – a national event taking place Monday, Feb. 27, that is designed to be a catalyst for meaningful introductions and engaging conversations with businesswomen from a variety of industries.

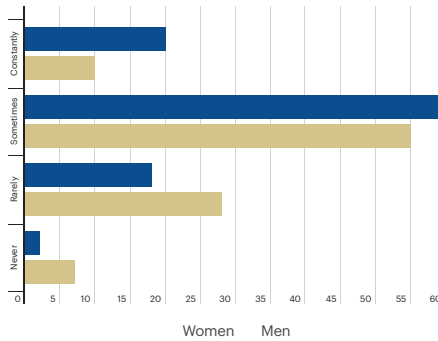
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The survey explored the state of women in the workplace, including challenges, opportunities and trends that have taken hold since the start of the pandemic.

When it comes to workplace stress, the survey highlighted some disconnects between the feelings of men and women not only in the frequency of feeling workplace stress but also the potential solutions.

Stress levels

Here's how the frequency of feeling stressed at work compares for women and men



Source: The Business Journals Research

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Experts point to a kaleidoscope of issues that contribute to women's overall stress levels in the workplace, including often being the primary caregivers for children and other family members, and they urge companies to tackle workplace inequities if they want to keep talented workers and boost retention in this tight talent market.

That means giving employees the benefits and tools to better manage their lives and workloads.

"The more flexibility that you can allow, the better that will be to meet the needs of your workforce," said [Kate Field](#), the global head of health, safety and well-being at BSI, adding that women are often the ones tasked to do household tasks. "Men might not be as involved in the school runs. They go to work and finish at 6 [p.m.]. They don't have to think about juggling all of those different responsibilities."

When asked which benefits would be most likely to combat workplace stress, 59% of women said flexible hours would help, alongside 57% of men.

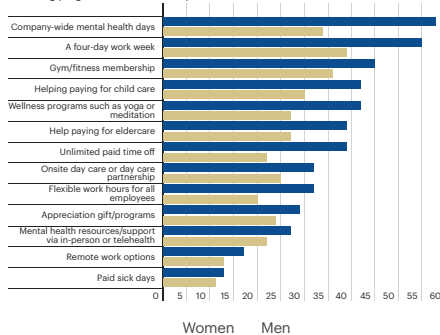
But the gaps between men and women widen when it comes to which specific benefits would help.

About 45% of women said an employee assistance program would help combat stress, compared to just 35% of men.

About 58% of women said they would like more company-wide mental health days, compared to just 34% of men. About 55% of women said a four-day workweek would help, compared to 39% of men.

Stress solutions

Percent of women and men who believe their employers should implement the following programs to combat workplace stress



Source: The Business Journals Research

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Across the board, women were more supportive than men of a range of benefits, from gym and fitness memberships to child care stipends, additional paid time off and onsite day care services.

But the best a company can do is not create a one-size-fits all approach but instead a set of programs that offer flexibility for employees, Field said.

She said companies should start by asking their employees how they feel and what would make them feel better.

“If you are asking the question, that's a good start. Statistics around the world show that occupational stress is a leading cause of absence from work,” Field said. “If it's not caught, people will just get unhappy and leave.”

She said businesses can tackle workplace stress the same way they would tackle any other workplace risk or issue – and the [Occupational Safety and Health](#)

[Administration even has a section on its website dedicated to identifying and defusing workplace stress.](#) But the topic is often tougher to talk about in the workplace, she added.

“A lot of people are worried about occupational stress and burnout because it’s associated with mental health, and there is a lot of stigma associated with that,” Field said, adding managers just need to show empathy and understanding. “It’s about being human.”

[Rosina Racioppi](#), president and CEO of WOMEN Unlimited Inc. a leadership development organization working with Fortune 500 companies, said companies need to give their workers the tools to manage their private lives in a way that allows them to focus on work when they are at the office.

“The challenge is that, for the most part in 2023, most women bear the burden of managing their family in addition to the burden of whatever the work has to be,” Racioppi said. “If your goal is to retain your workforce and attract more women in your organization, you need to ask yourself how to create an environment where they can be effective without having the burden of the other things in their life weighing on them.”

But she also stressed that one pattern she has seen among the women who take her development courses is that sometimes women do not properly prioritize the tasks they are given – and treat everything as just as important as the other. But not every task is important, and recognizing what needs to be done now and what can be done later, even if it means asking your manager, is vital.

“I think for many of us, we want to do this and do that. Well, you can’t do it all and do it well,” Racioppi said. “If you are not being honest with yourself, you can easily overwhelm yourself.”

Other surveys show women are suffering from burnout and lack of flexible work support, including a Deloitte survey of 5,000 women across 10 countries as part of its [Women @](#)

[Work 2022: A global outlook survey](#) released last year. More than half reported higher stress levels than in 2021 and about half said they felt burned out. Only 43% felt comfortable talking about their mental health concerns in the workplace.

"The number of women reporting increased stress and burnout is of significant concern, and employers are struggling to address it as seen by the fact that burnout is the top driver for those women currently looking for new employment," said [Emma Codd](#), Deloitte global inclusion leader, in a press release. "The findings of this research show the importance of actions beyond policy—those that truly address and embed wellbeing, flexibility, and a respectful and inclusive ‘everyday culture.’"

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