



The State of

Stress & Joy at Work®



Amy Leneker

THE CENTER FOR
JOYFUL WORK

2026



WELCOME

TO THE STATE OF STRESS & JOY AT WORK[®]

The Center for Joyful Work is pleased to share the latest findings from our State of Stress and Joy at Work[®] National Research Study. The purpose of this report is to provide practical, actionable insights for leaders, teams, and organizations.

For decades, workplace culture has normalized stress as the cost of success and dismissed joy at work as frivolous. The data in this study show the opposite is true for American workers.

The findings in this study point to a hard truth—and a hopeful one: stress is systematically undermining success, and joy is part of the solution.

Why Studying Stress and Joy Matters Now More Than Ever

Stress isn't just a performance problem today; it's a leadership problem for tomorrow.

Stress is reshaping careers and leaving leadership pipelines at risk. Large numbers of working Americans are opting out of leadership altogether due to stress.

Key Findings

American workers report due to work stress:

- 63% have considered leaving their career
- 63% say their work success feels unsatisfying (76% of fully remote workers)
- 61% have avoided managing others
- 45% have lowered their career goals
- 44% have avoided promotions

Significant differences in expectations and experiences of stress and joy at work exist across generations, working arrangement, and job role/level of responsibility.

The vast majority of American workers (79%) report that joy is essential to doing their best work, with the percentage rising to 89% among executives. Yet 57% report feeling far less joy than they want.

This creates a unique opportunity to increase both engagement and performance by creating the conditions for less stress and more joy at work.

Let's Work Together!

The Center for Joyful Work is a research and leadership firm focused on separating myth from truth about stress, joy, and success at work. We lead national workforce research and convert findings into practical, actionable insights and recommendations.

We love providing customized keynote presentations and trainings—we have facilitated leadership training for over 100,000 leaders and teams, including public sector organizations and Fortune 100 companies.

Reach out - we would love to hear from you.

To your success,



Amy Leneker

Founder & CEO

The Center for Joyful Work



Amy Leneker

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Insight 1

STRESS IS UNDERMINING SUCCESS



OVER 80% REPORT WORK STRESS

Over 80% of working Americans report being affected by all five types of work stress included in the study. While Schedule Stress occurs most often, Sudden Stress was shown to have the greatest negative impact.

Stress Type	Description
Schedule	Stress from having too much to do and not enough time. Back-to-back meetings, endless commitments—you barely have a moment to breathe.
Suspense	Stress from waiting for what's uncertain or looming. The deadline, decision, or tough conversation isn't here yet, but the anticipation is already wearing on you.
Social	Stress from tension in relationships and team dynamics. You can feel it in the awkward silences and unresolved conflict.
Sudden	Stress that arrives unannounced and demands a response. An urgent request or a last-minute change throws your day off course.
System	Stress from structures, processes, and culture. Unclear expectations, power imbalances, inequity, and inefficient processes that create stress.

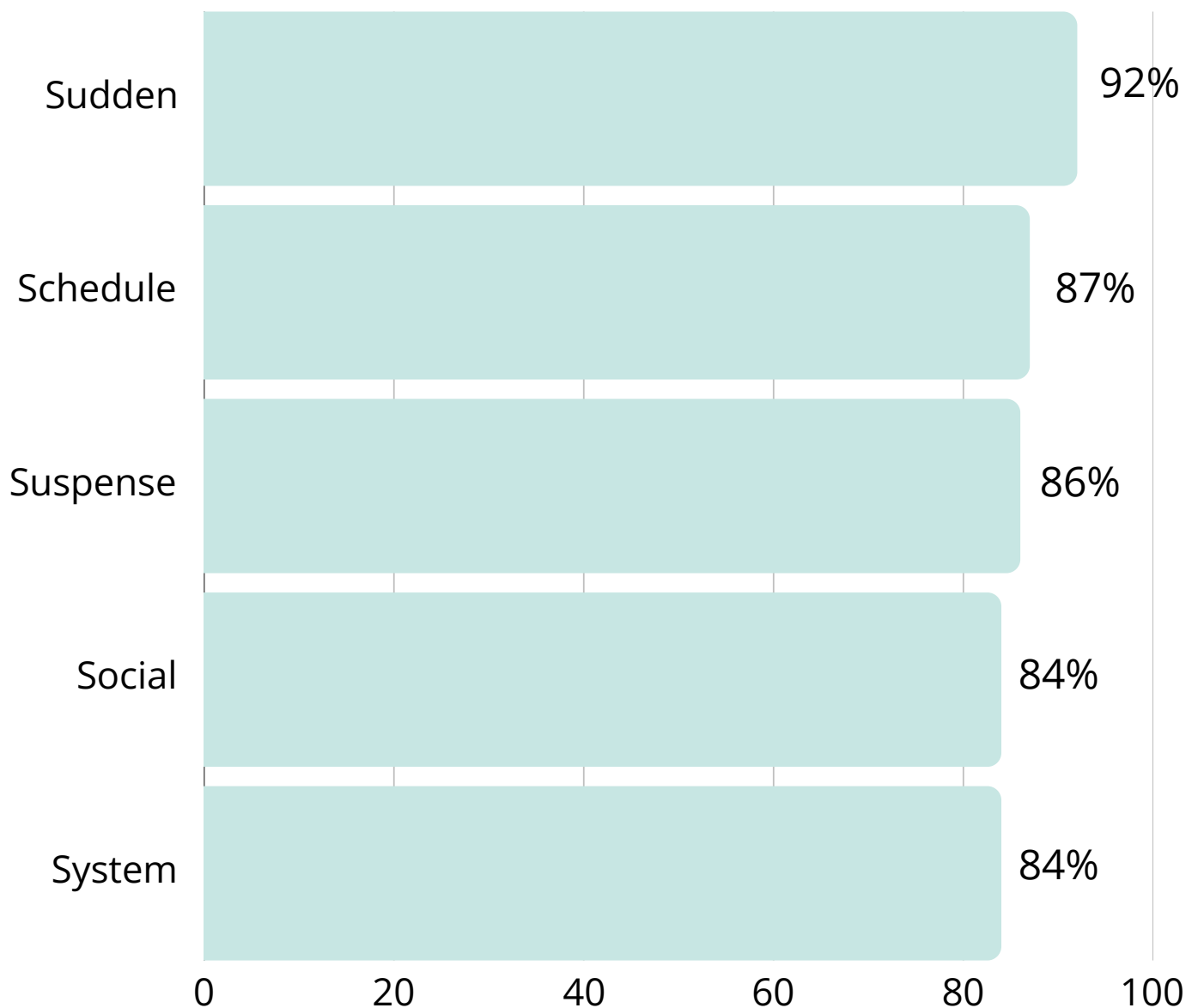
Excerpt adapted from *Cheers to Monday: The Surprisingly Simple Method to Lead and Live with Less Stress and More Joy* (Wiley, 2026) by Amy Leneker. Note: The first four types align with Dr. Karl Albrecht's work from 1979 with four categories of stress in workplaces: time, anticipatory, encounter, and situational stress.

SUDDEN STRESS HAS BIGGEST IMPACT

The data show that work stress is layered, cumulative, and rarely driven by a single source. Stress is built into how work operates—not just how individuals cope.

Of the five types of work stress in the study, Sudden Stress was shown to have the greatest negative impact on American workers' day-to-day work experience.

Percentage of American Workers Impacted By Each Stress Type



Compounding Stress Requires System-Level Solutions

Work stress creates a compounding effect because multiple stressors draw on the same finite resources of attention, energy, and emotional capacity. Over time, this accumulation fuels fatigue, cognitive overload, and emotional strain, making even small challenges more difficult.

The data show that this layering of stress is the norm, not the exception, with 80% reporting they experience all five types of work stress. This means stress reduction cannot be approached as a single-issue problem or solved through isolated wellness efforts.

Instead, there must be a systems-level approach, including redesigning workload expectations, reducing unnecessary urgency, strengthening team relationships, and improving structures and processes, in order to meaningfully reduce the cumulative impact of work stress.

Everyone Has a Role in Reducing Stress

Leaders, teams, and organizations each play a distinct role in reducing stress for themselves and others. Leaders set priorities, pace, and expectations. Teams shape everyday norms, communication, and psychological safety. Organizations design the systems, structures, and incentives people work within.

When leaders, teams, and organizations work together toward a shared goal of reducing stress, the burden doesn't fall on individuals to simply cope. Instead, stress is addressed by redesigning the conditions that create it, rather than managing the consequences after the damage has been done.





Insight 2

STRESS IS NARROWING LEADERSHIP PIPELINES



LEADERSHIP PIPELINES AT RISK

The data reveal a clear and growing threat to organizational sustainability: **work stress is narrowing leadership pipelines.** This is not a future risk; it is already reshaping who is willing to lead, how long people stay in roles, and whether employees pursue advancement at all. The following five findings illustrate how stress is putting leadership pipelines at risk.

1

Nearly two-thirds of working Americans (63%) report work stress has caused them to consider leaving their career entirely.

This affects current retention and future leadership pipelines. When experienced professionals contemplate exiting their field, organizations lose expertise, institutional memory, and potential leaders who might otherwise progress into senior roles. The result is a narrowing pipeline of leadership-ready talent.

2

More than half (53%) report they have avoided managing others because of stress.

When management is perceived primarily as a stress multiplier rather than a meaningful leadership opportunity, fewer high-potential employees will accept first-line leadership roles. Over time, this reduces the pool of candidates with people-management experience—experience that is essential for senior leadership.

3

Nearly half (44%) report avoiding a promotion because they did not want additional stress.

Promotions are a primary mechanism for developing leaders. When stress deters advancement, organizations lose momentum in leadership development and succession planning. High performers may remain in roles that underutilize their capabilities, while leadership roles become harder to fill with prepared candidates.

4

Nearly half (45%) say work stress has caused them to lower their career goals.

This is an early warning signal for leadership supply. Over time, fewer employees pursue stretch roles, cross-functional experiences, or leadership pathways. The leadership pipeline narrows not only because people leave, but because those who stay have lowered career aspirations.

5

A majority (61%) report staying in a job longer than they wanted because stress made it hard to make a change.

Chronic stress reduces perceived mobility by draining the energy required to search, interview, and transition to a new position. This creates a stagnation within organizations: people remain in roles that no longer fit; engagement declines; and growth and development slows.

Stress pushes talent out while also limiting upward mobility for those who remain.

Organizations can't build a strong leadership pipeline on a foundation of chronic stress—less stress today is how organizations secure their leadership pipeline for tomorrow.





Insight 3

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BY GENERATION



SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN STRESS AND JOY BY GENERATION

The data reveal significant generational differences in how stress and joy are experienced at work. These differences shape engagement and performance.

Younger Generations Experience More Work Stress

Younger generations carry a disproportionate share of workplace stress, experience greater negative impact from that stress, and face more frequent barriers to joy compared to older generations. These patterns demonstrate work stress reduces younger generations' ability to feel joy at work more sharply than it does for older generations.

Across all five types of work stress—Schedule, Suspense, Social, Sudden, and System—Gen Z and Millennials report experiencing stress weekly or more often at significantly higher rates than older generations. This frequency of exposure may be limiting recovery between stress cycles. Over time, this frequency accelerates fatigue and increases the likelihood of disengagement and burnout.

Younger Generations Experience Stronger Negative Impacts

Stress also has a stronger negative impact on younger generations. The same stressors that older workers may experience as manageable are more likely to feel overwhelming to younger workers. This higher-impact experience compounds frequency with intensity, and as a result, **younger workers face a double burden: they experience work stress more often and feel its effects more strongly.**

Because joy is closely tied to meaning in work, mattering in relationships, and momentum in progress, its erosion undermines engagement and performance. Over time, this pattern weakens connection to work and increases the likelihood of leadership avoidance, as advancement becomes associated with increasing levels of stress.

Importantly, younger generations also show a greater desire for practical, shared tools for managing stress. This signals readiness for organizational change.

Addressing generational disparities in stress and joy requires more than individual coping strategies; it requires redesigning work to protect capacity, clarify priorities, reduce unnecessary urgency, and strengthen support systems.

Without significant changes, generational gaps in stress and joy will continue to compound—reducing engagement and performance today and leadership capacity tomorrow.

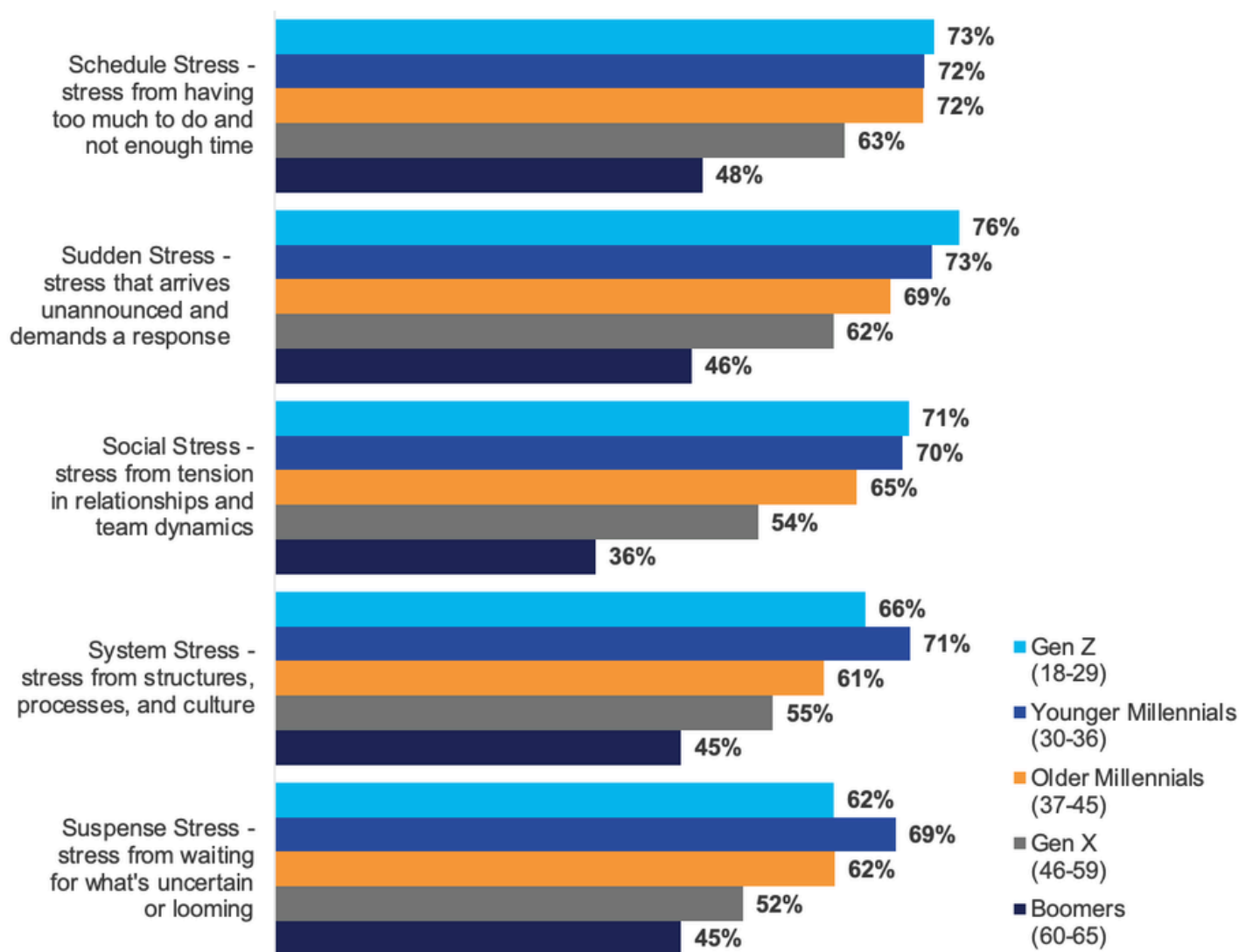




Younger generations experience work stress significantly more often than older generations.

Experienced Each Type of Stress at Work Once a Week Or More Often

American Workers by Generation

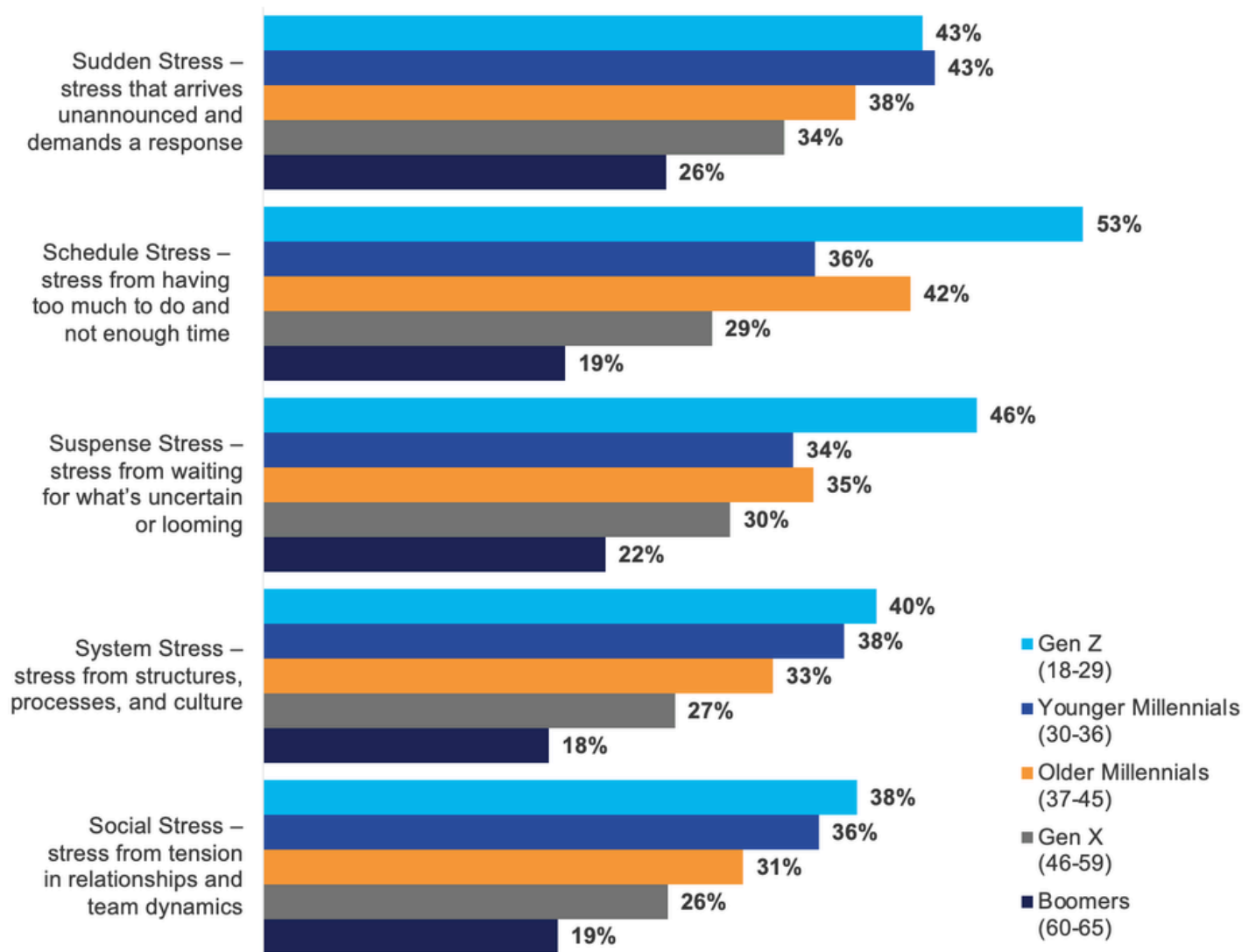




Younger generations are significantly more impacted by work stress than older generations.

Experienced a “Great Deal” or “A Lot” of Impact from Each Type of Stress

American Workers by Generation

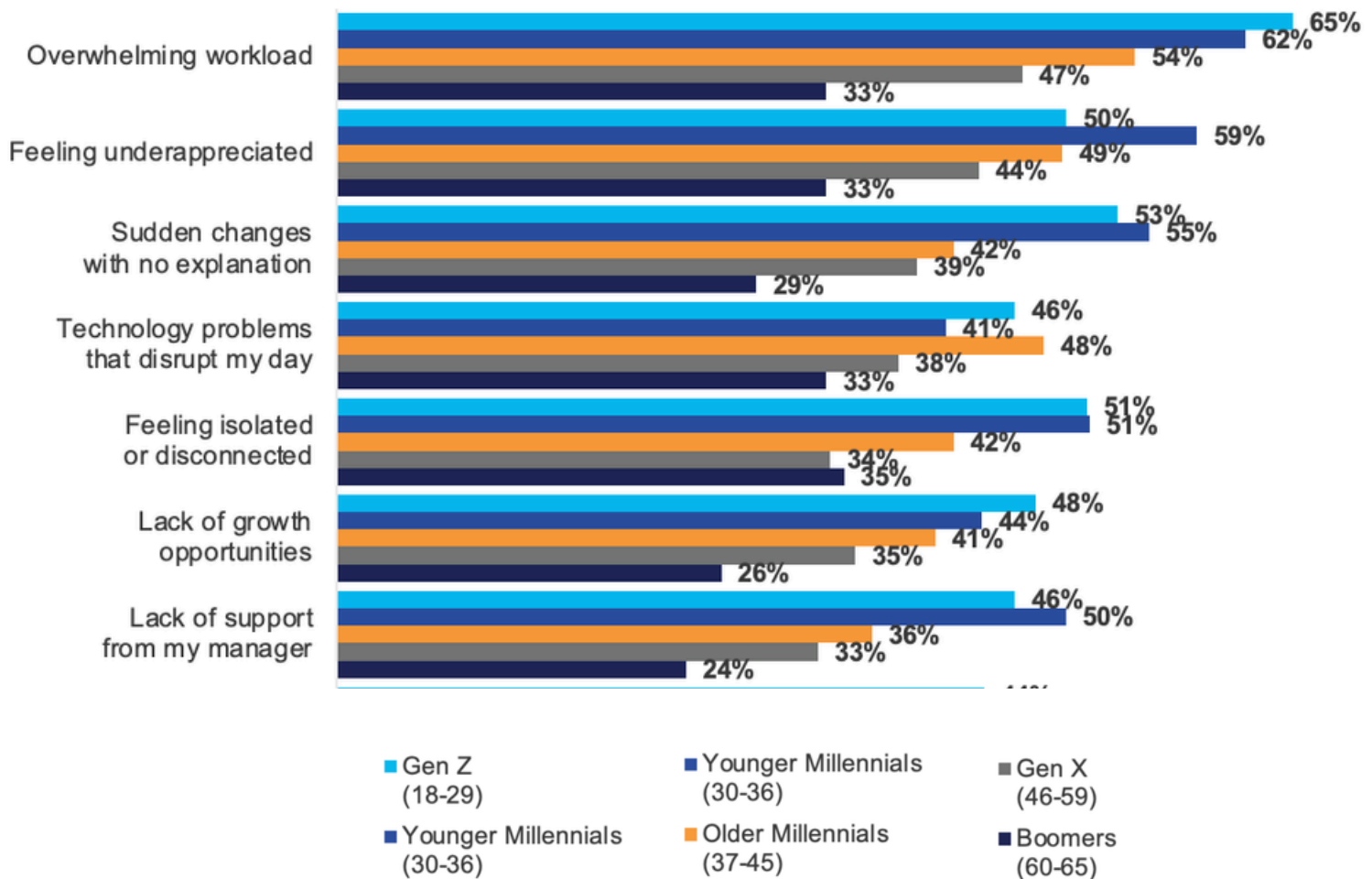




Younger generations experience more barriers to joy at work than older generations.

Workplace Situations Associated With Lower Frequency of Joy at Work

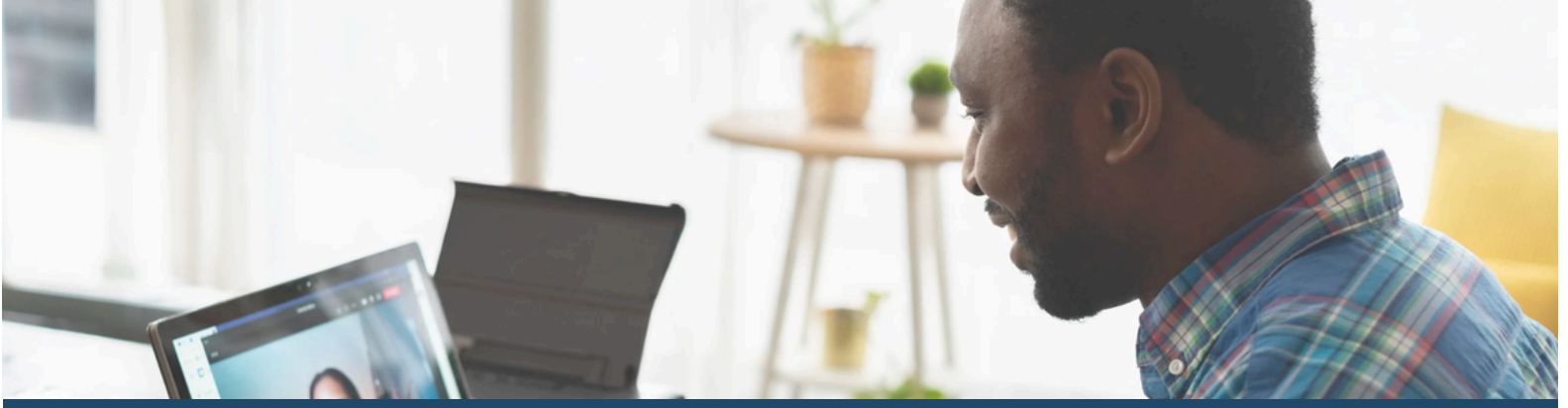
American Workers by Generation, Top seven





Insight 4

REMOTE WORK AND ROLES IMPACT STRESS AND JOY



IMPACT OF REMOTE WORK AND ROLES

Experiences of stress and joy vary meaningfully by both work mode (in-person, hybrid, remote) and role level (employee, manager, executive). These differences shape how supported people feel, how stress is experienced, and whether success feels sustainable. Understanding where stress and joy concentrate across work modes and roles helps leaders, teams, and organizations put preventative measures in place, and target changes where they will have the greatest impact.

1

Over 75% of fully remote workers report work stress makes their success at work feel unsatisfying.

Fully remote workers are significantly more likely to report that stress makes their success at work feel unsatisfying (76%) compared to fully in-person (63%) and hybrid workers (61%).

2

Stress exposure and impact increase with role level.

Executives experience all five types of work stress weekly or more often at rates nearly 19 percentage points higher than managers, and managers about 11 points higher than employees, concentrating stress among those with the greatest responsibility.

3

Feeling valued by their manager matters most to hybrid workers (83%).

Hybrid employees are significantly more likely to say feeling valued by their manager impacts their joy at work (83%), compared to those working fully in person (66%) and fully remote (61%).

4

Lack of flexibility prevents joy for in-person workers.

Those working fully in person are significantly more likely than those working hybrid or fully remote work schedules to say that a lack of flexibility in how they work prevents them from feeling joy at work once a week or more often.

5

In-person workers impacted most by forced positivity.

Those working fully in person are significantly more likely than those with hybrid or fully remote work schedules to report:

- They are expected to appear positive at work, even when they don't feel that way.
- Forced positivity makes it harder to feel genuinely connected to others at work.
- People who raise concerns at work are often labeled as negative.
- Expressing frustration or stress at work feels unacceptable in their organization.

6

Forced positivity increases stress, weakens trust and joy.

Forced positivity is widely experienced and perceived as harmful across generations and roles. Forced positivity makes work more exhausting (65%), weakens trust in leaders (63%), discourages raising concerns about stress (62%), and makes it harder to feel genuinely connected at work (62%).

Executives are more likely to say positivity is valued more than truth at work, suggesting that performative positivity is especially pronounced at the top of organizations.

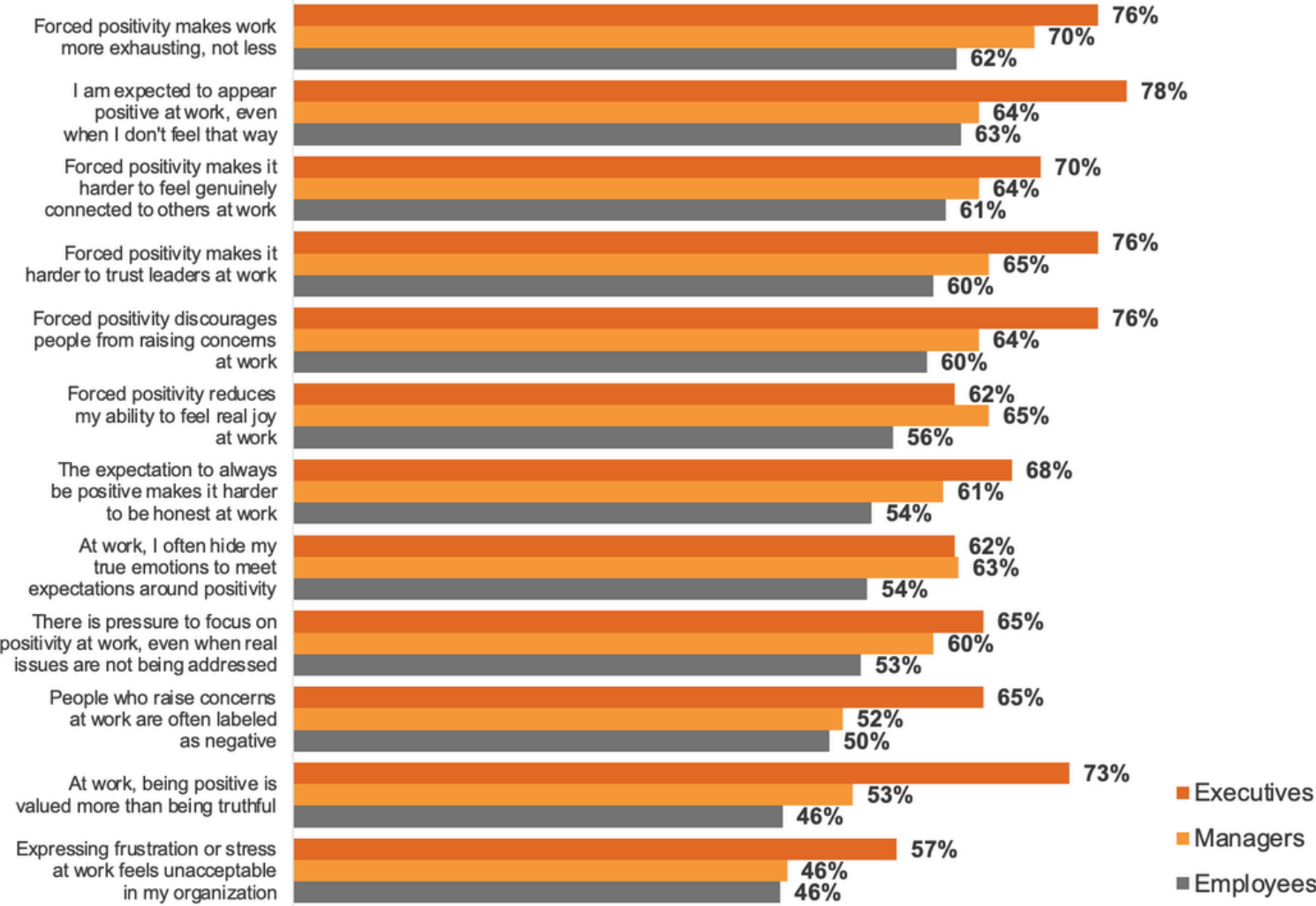




Forced positivity makes work exhausting.

Negative impacts of forced positivity at work.

Forced positivity: The pressure to stay positive while stress and challenges are being ignored or dismissed.
American Workers By Job Role/Level of Responsibility; Strongly/Somewhat Agree





Insight 5

UNEXPECTED DRIVERS OF STRESS AND JOY

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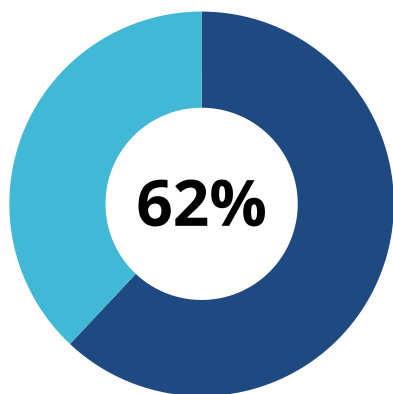
WORKING AMERICANS WANT LESS STRESS AND MORE JOY AT WORK

The data highlight a strong and reciprocal relationship between stress, joy, and work performance.

- 80% of working Americans feel all five types of work stress.
- 79% report feeling joy is essential to doing their best work (89% of executives)
- 75% report feeling joy at work helps them better cope with work stress.
- 72% report feeling joy at work is important to them.
- 57% experience far less joy at work than they want.

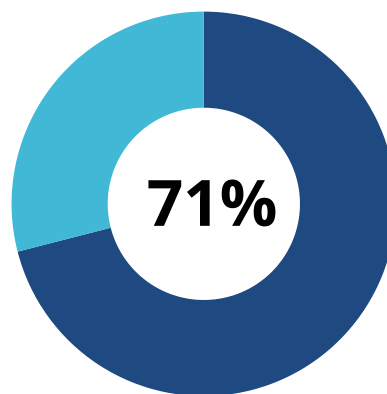
Stress Ripples Beyond Work

Sixty-two percent report when they experience **stress** at work, it carries over to their life outside of work.



Joy Ripples Beyond Work, Too

Seventy-one percent report when they experience **joy** at work, it carries over to their life outside of work.



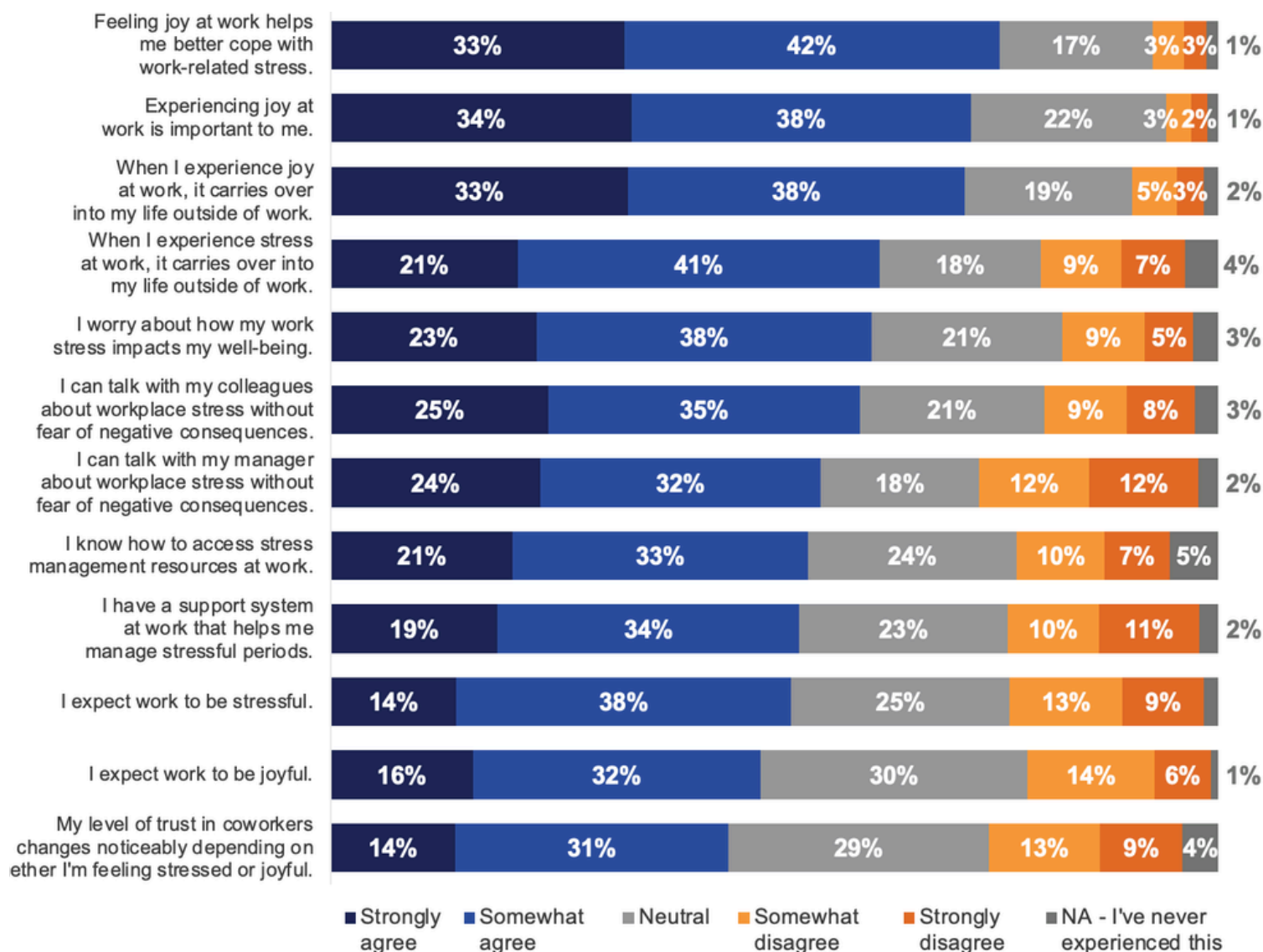
Together, these findings underscore that stress and joy are not contained within the workplace; they meaningfully shape life beyond work.



75% report joy helps them better cope with stress.

Stress and joy impact work performance and engagement.

American Workers By Total



Joy Builders

Top 5 Workplace Situations With Greatest *Positive* Impact on Joy

By Total

1

Experiencing a sense of purpose in my role.

2

Making a meaningful impact.

3

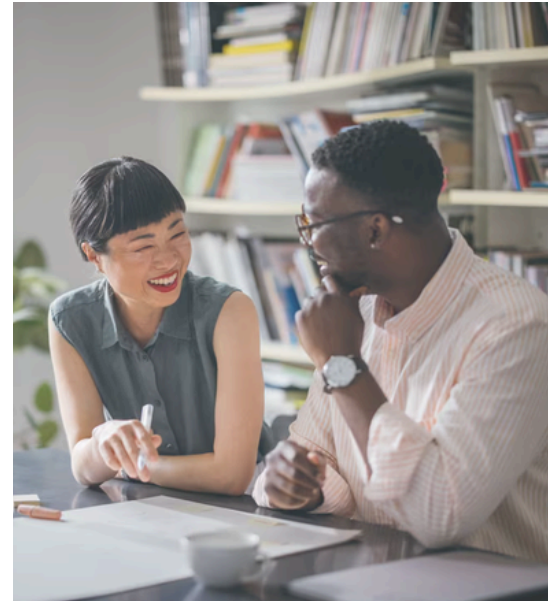
Making progress toward meaningful goals.

4

Feeling valued by my manager.

5

Completing a challenging project or task.



Joy Busters

Top 5 Workplace Situations With Greatest *Negative* Impact on Joy

By Total

1

Overwhelming workload.

2

Feeling underappreciated.

3

Sudden changes with no explanation.

4

Technology problems that disrupt my day.

5

Feeling isolated or disconnected.





Insight 6

JOY IS ESSENTIAL FOR PERFORMANCE



A JOY GAP IS HARMING PERFORMANCE

Performance is shaped not only by effort and skill, but by the conditions in which work is done. When joy is present, people are more focused, make better decisions, and are more resilient against stress.

The vast majority of working Americans (79%) report that joy is essential to doing their best work, with this belief even stronger among executives (89%). Yet 57% report feeling far less joy than they want.

This significant joy gap is harming engagement, retention, and performance.

Joy Helps Buffer Stress

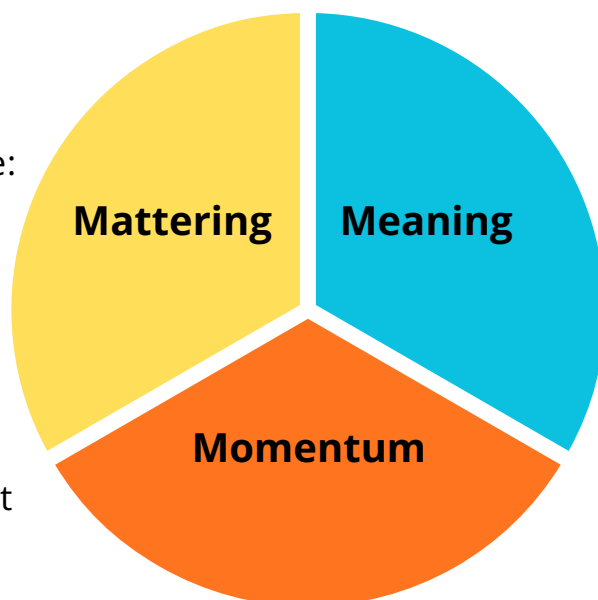
Joy directly supports performance by buffering the impact of stress, with 75% of working Americans reporting feeling joy at work helps them better cope with work-related stress, and 71% say that joy at work carries over into their life outside of work.

Three Components of Joy at Work

The three strongest drivers of joy at work are:

1. Meaning and purpose
2. Mattering in relationships
3. Momentum and progress

By stark contrast, forced positivity increases stress and decreases joy. Forced positivity was also shown to decrease trust and connection at work.





Insight 7

THE SUPPORT GAP IS WIDENING



SUPPORT VARIES BY AGE AND ROLE

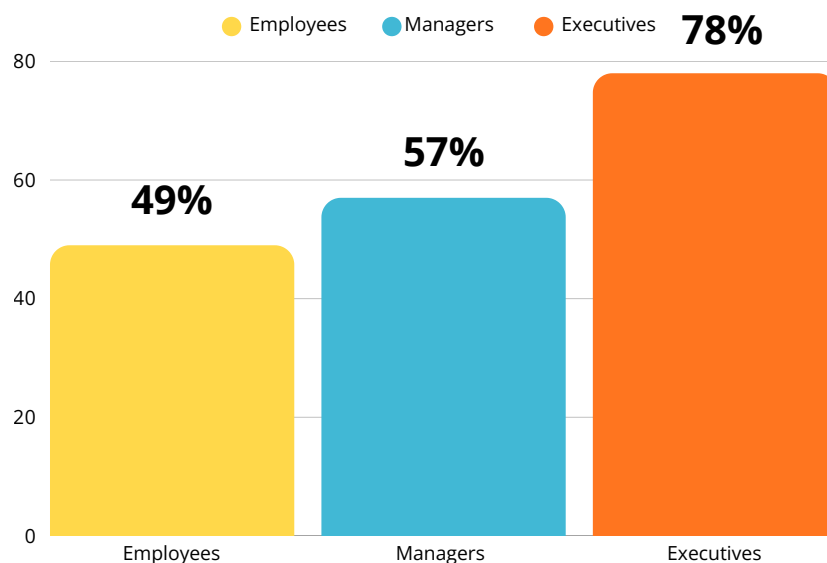
The findings reveal a clear support gap in how work stress is currently experienced and managed. While the majority of executives report having a support system at work, access to reliable support is uneven—and the need for additional support is nearly universal.

Less Than Half of Employees Have A Support System

Access to support varies by role. Executives are most likely to report having a support system at work that helps them manage stressful periods (78%). Access drops for managers (57%), and is lowest for employees (49%).

Uneven access to support leaves large portions of the workforce navigating stress without reliable support, contributing to significant differences in how stress is experienced at work.

I have a support system at work that helps me manage stressful periods.



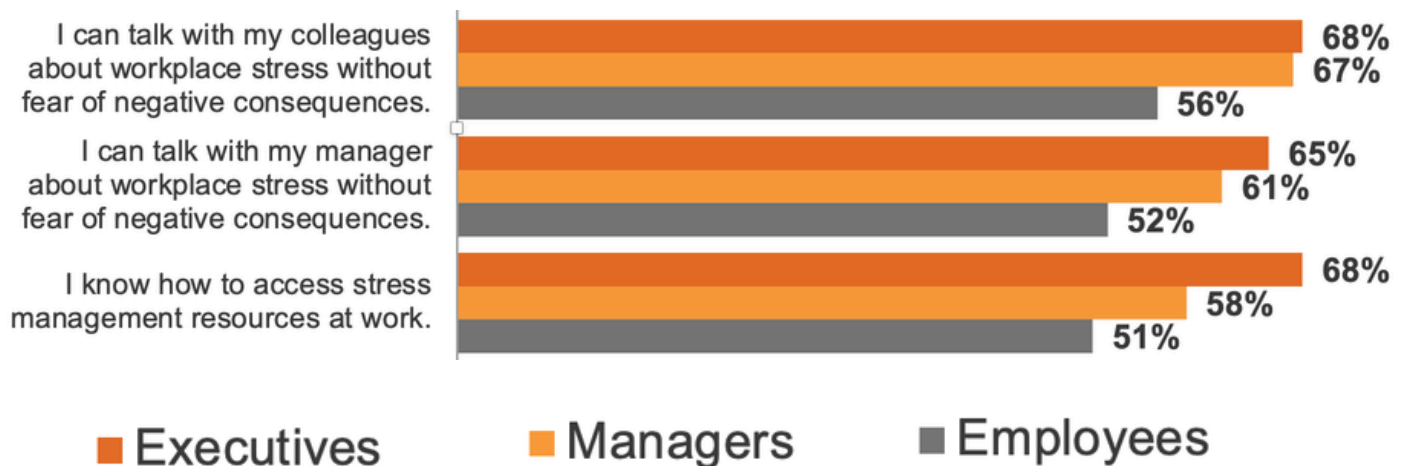
Only Half of Employees Know How To Access Support

Access to support and psychological safety declines by role. The data show that the further down the employee in the organization, the harder it is to speak up about stress or find support.

Executives are most likely to know how to access stress management resources at work and feel safe doing so, followed by managers, and then employees.

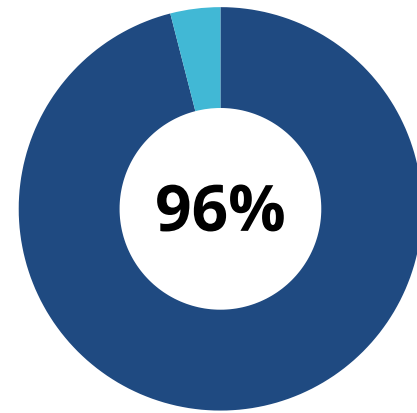
Most workers feel safer talking to peers about stress than to their manager.

American Workers By Role/Level of Responsibility



The Un-Stressing Method™ is Effective

The vast majority of America's workforce (96%) report using The Un-Stressing Method™ would help them understand and manage their stress more effectively.



This reflects strong value in the method's three-step structure: seeing stress differently, sorting stress into actionable categories, and solving stress without spinning.

Interest in a shared process for managing work stress is especially strong among younger generations, who face more frequent and higher-impact stress, and among managers, who are often responsible for supporting others without tools or resources for doing so.

Participants also report that The Un-Stressing Method™ would help them manage stress outside of work, reinforcing that stress skills transfer across life domains. Together, these findings suggest that simple, structured approaches to stress reduction can support clarity, better decisions, and more sustainable success and well-being both on and off the job.





Conclusion

5 ACTIONS FOR LEADERS, TEAMS, AND ORGANIZATIONS TO TAKE NOW



FIVE ACTIONS TO TAKE NOW

Stop overwhelming people. Start protecting capacity.

1

Joy at work is the feeling we experience through meaning in our work, mattering in our relationships, and momentum in our progress. **An overwhelming workload is the single biggest barrier to joy at work.** When leaders provide reasonable priorities and protect capacity, joy increases—and performance improves.

Stop ignoring stress. Start addressing it together.

2

Expecting people to “figure it out” on their own doesn’t work. Stress is contagious—activated nervous systems influence one another, which is why stress spreads like wildfire at work. Instead, equip teams with The Un-Stressing Method™ a simple way to see, sort, and solve stress.

The vast majority of America's workforce (96%) report using The Un-Stressing Method™ matrix would help them understand and manage their stress more effectively.

Stop faking positivity. Start creating conditions for joy.

3

The majority of working Americans say they feel pressure to “stay positive” at work and that it causes exhaustion, erodes trust, and weakens connection. Forced positivity and forced fun don’t produce joy. **Joy occurs at work when one experiences meaning and purpose in their work, mattering in relationships, and momentum and progress.**

Stop blaming generations. Start redesigning work.

4

Younger workers experience all five types of work stress (Schedule, Suspense, Social, Sudden, and System) more often and with greater impact than older generations.

The data point to workload, schedules, and unmanaged urgency as work-design conditions leaders, teams, and organizations can prioritize to reduce not only the amount of stress, but also its impact.

Stop confusing urgent with important. Start pausing for clarity.

5

Sudden Stress arrives unannounced and demands a response—urgent requests, last-minute changes, or full-blown emergencies. **Sudden Stress was shown to have the greatest negative impact on joy and performance.**

Instead of assuming everything is urgent, pause for clarity before redirecting attention and resources.

See reflection questions on page 34, and team reflection questions on page 35.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Examine the 5 Types of Stress and take practical steps as an individual toward less stress and more joy.

Which of the five types of stress am I experiencing at work and why?

Which of the five types of stress is most challenging for me and why?

Who could I ask to support me in reducing and managing stress at work?

In what ways might I be contributing to stress for others—intentionally or unintentionally—through my habits, expectations, or communication?

What is one clear, realistic commitment I'm willing to make this week to respond differently to my stress?

TEAM DISCUSSION

Examine and discuss the 5 Types of Stress and take practical steps as a team toward less stress and more joy.

Which of the five types of stress do we experience most—and why?

Where do systems, structures, or expectations create stress for our team, regardless of individual effort?

What support do we need from one another—or from others outside the team—to respond better to the stress we're facing?

How might our habits, norms, or communication styles unintentionally add stress for one another?

What is one clear, realistic commitment we are willing to make this week to respond differently to our stress?

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Examine what the organization can do to reduce unnecessary stress and create conditions where people can do their best work with less stress and more joy.

Where in our organization has stress quietly become normalized—and what impact is that having on performance, retention, and well-being?

Which aspects of our culture reward constant availability instead of sustainable performance?

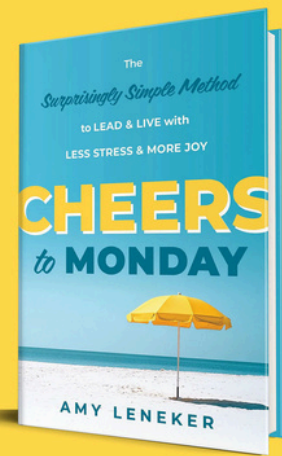
What signals do employees receive about success here—and do those signals encourage burnout or healthy achievement?

If we reduced unnecessary stress across the organization, what would become possible for innovation, collaboration, and performance?

Where do our systems, structures, or expectations make work harder than it needs to be—and what would it take to redesign them for more joy?

"A beautifully honest and immensely practical guide that reminds us we are built not just to work, but to live—and to live with joy. **For those who care about both people and performance, I highly recommend this wonderful book."**

—Stephen M. R. Covey, *New York Times* and #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author



In Amy Leneker's groundbreaking book, ***Cheers to Monday: The Surprisingly Simple Method to Lead & Live With Less Stress & More Joy*** (Wiley, 2026), you'll learn specific, research-backed solutions for leaders, teams, and entire organizations to have less stress and more joy at work, and beyond.

Cheers to Monday is packed with practical, evidence-based strategies to:

- **See stress differently** and finally break the cycle of exhaustion, overwhelm, and self-doubt.
- **Sort stress into five actionable categories** so you know exactly what to do with each one.
- **Solve stress without spinning** using a simple framework to reclaim your time, energy, and focus.
- **Celebrate the shift** because reducing stress isn't just a wellness strategy, it's a joy strategy.

Learn more at
AmyLeneker.com/book

"Profound and practical!"

Read it and do it, for yourself and the people around you."

—Patrick Lencioni, national bestselling author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

"A **masterclass** in how to achieve more with less effort."

—Greg McKeown, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Essentialism*

"Amy's **joyful rebellion** against the dread of Mondays is both needed and doable."

—Jenn Lim, cofounder of Delivering Happiness, national bestselling author

RESEARCH TEAM

amy leneker

Amy Leneker is the founder and CEO of the Center for Joyful Work, LLC. She has trained over 100,000 leaders, including those at Fortune 100 companies, and leads the annual national workforce study, *The State of Stress and Joy at Work*. Her work has been featured in Forbes, Inc., Fast Company, and more. Amy is the author of *Cheers to Monday: The Surprisingly Simple Method to Lead and Live with Less Stress and More Joy* (Wiley, 2026), and hosts the Less Stress, More Joy with Amy Leneker podcast. Learn more at AmyLeneker.com.

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The Center for Joyful Work, LLC is a research and leadership firm focused on separating myth from truth about stress, joy, and outcomes at work. The Center leads national workforce research and converts findings into practical, actionable insights for leaders, teams, and organizations. The Center for Joyful Work partners with Fortune 100 companies, public sector organizations, and nonprofits to improve how work works. Learn more at JoyfulWorkCo.com.

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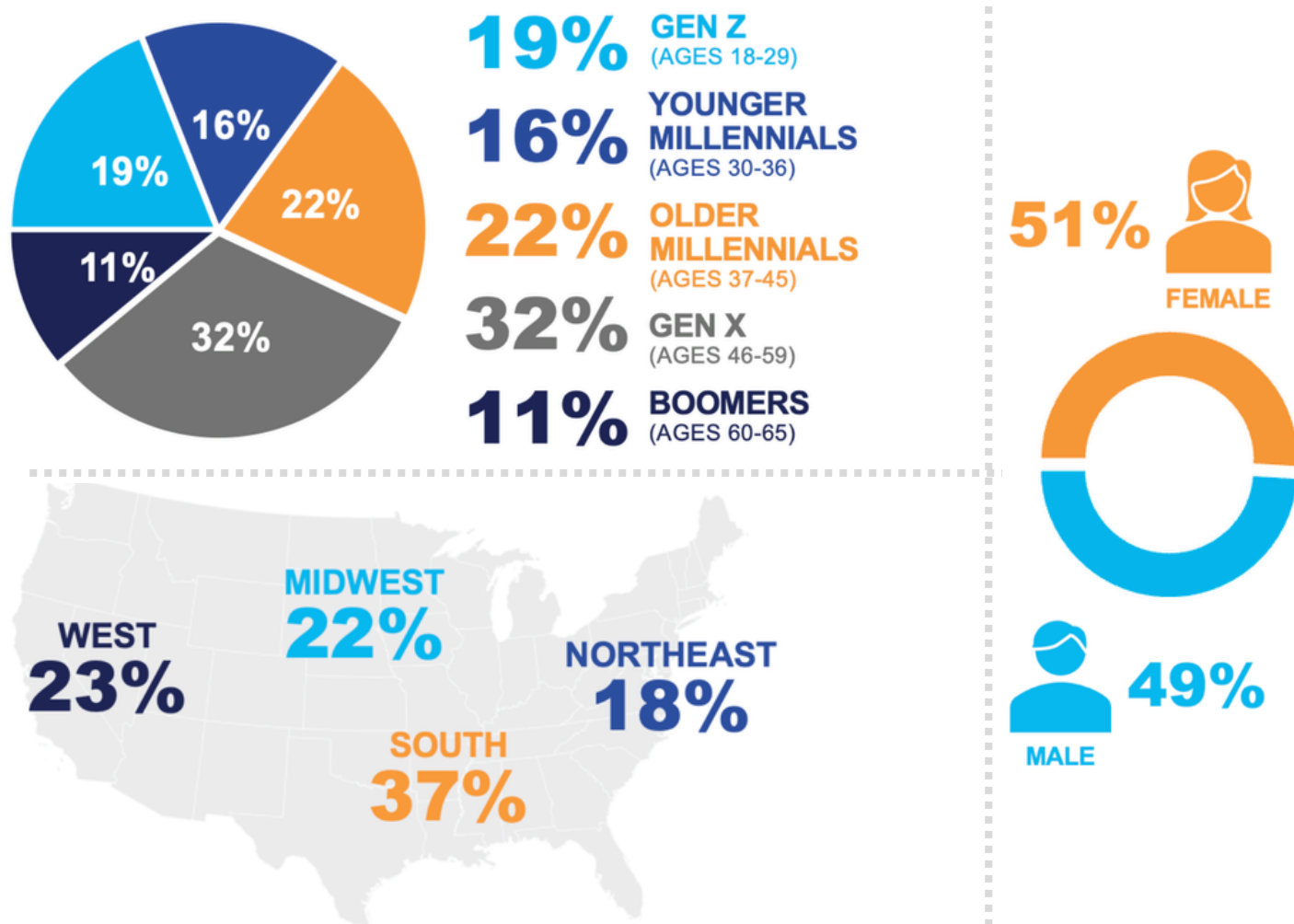
The Center for Generational Kinetics, LLC (CGK) is the leading custom research firm focused on hidden drivers of change, must-know emerging trends, and actionable leadership insights. CGK has led more than 120 custom research studies for clients around the world. CGK's team has worked with over 700 organizations, from technology companies to financial services, retailers, hospitality, and private equity. Learn more at GenHQ.com.

METHODOLOGY

This National Research Study included 750 participants weighted to the 2020 U.S. Census for age, gender, geography, and ethnicity.

The participants were ages 18 to 65 at the time of fielding. The study's margin of error is +/- 3.58%. Any findings labeled as significant are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

All participants in the study were employed part-time or full-time for a true "Snapshot of Working America," which is ideal for the workforce-focused analysis of the study. The research study was conducted online from December 23, 2025, to January 12, 2026.



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CONTACT

Amy Leneker

Founder and CEO

The Center for Joyful Work

Amy@AmyLeneker.com

(360) 529-0290

AmyLeneker.com

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