

# The science of stress: What do employers need to know about cortisol, productivity and mental resilience?



We're hearing a lot about stress right now. More specifically, we're hearing a lot about cortisol.

From TikTok influencers to workplace wellness trends, 'cortisol' has become the go-to word for everything from weight gain and burnout to bad sleep and brain fog. But while it's encouraging to see more people talking about mental health, there's a risk in

oversimplifying a complex system and missing what really matters.

## **Stress isn't a trend. It's a health issue.**

Yes, cortisol is a stress hormone. But it's also a vital part of how the body functions. It helps regulate our immune system, control blood pressure, and manage energy. When the stress response is well-balanced, cortisol helps us stay alert and navigate challenges.

The issue isn't cortisol itself, it's the chronic stress that keeps it elevated.

And in today's workplaces, that's increasingly the norm. According to MHFA England, 79% of UK employees are experiencing moderate to high levels of stress, with 63% showing signs of burnout. This isn't a wellness buzzword, it's a wellbeing crisis.

## **What does this mean for productivity?**

Cortisol affects how our brains operate under pressure. In the short term, it can sharpen memory for emotionally charged events. But long term, high cortisol disrupts memory recall, weakens attention and slows decision-making.

That might explain why a high-performing employee suddenly starts missing deadlines, forgetting key details or withdrawing from their team. They're not disengaged, they're depleted.

Over time, stress impacts physical health too. Persistent headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, and digestive issues are just as much workplace red flags as a missed target or an unproductive team meeting.



## What can HR teams

## actually do?

The first step is moving beyond surface-level wellbeing. Branded mugs and resilience toolkits won't fix burnout. But leadership behaviour, smart workload design and psychological safety will.

Three things to focus on now:

**Train your managers:** Many feel under-equipped to recognise stress or offer support. High-quality mental health awareness training, delivered early and embedded properly, can help managers spot the signs and take appropriate, compassionate action.

**Rethink what productivity looks like:** Presenteeism costs UK employers £25bn a year (IPPR, 2024). People turning up, but mentally checked out, doesn't serve anyone. Encourage regular breaks. Challenge the culture of back-to-back meetings. Celebrate calm, focused work, not just long hours.

**Create psychological safety:** Research shows that teams feel safer, and perform better, when people can speak up without fear of judgement. That's not fluff, it's a stress-buffering, performance-boosting cultural shift. It starts with inclusive leadership: listening more, interrupting less, inviting feedback and building in recovery time.

### Cortisol isn't the enemy. Culture is the challenge.

The internet might have gone wild for hormones, but in reality, stress is about systems, not just spikes.

If your employees are overwhelmed, it's time to look at how your workplace is working for them. Not just with crisis response, but with long-term care.

Because a culture that protects against burnout isn't just good for people, it's good for business too.

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