The Mental Health Wake-Up Call: Building a Resilient Workplace for a Sustainable Future

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Abstract

Mental health challenges have become increasingly critical organizational concerns that affect employees' productivity, creativity and overall employee well-being. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), 2022, workplaces with strong mental health initiatives report a 30% decrease in absenteeism and a 40% improvement in employee engagement. This paper explores the structural factors influencing workplace mental health, the foundations of resilience for combating mental health concerns, and practical strategies for building a resilient workforce. Drawing inferences from positive psychology, organizational behavior research and trauma-informed frameworks, the study emphasizes that workplaces that lack psychological safety can trigger stress responses, including fight, flight, freeze, and fawn, that are survival-based responses. These responses, while adaptive in threatening environments, often manifest in the workplace as conflict escalation, disengagement, paralysis in decision-making, or excessive people-pleasing, ultimately impairing both individual functioning and organizational performance. The emphasis is also placed on resilience that extends beyond individual strength, and it is shaped by a culmination of factors such as workplace systems, leadership, and cultural dynamics. By doing a short survey and qualitative observations, this study aims to highlight that systemic issues lead to burnout and also presents evidence-based approaches for cultivating psychological safety and sustainability in modern organization.

Keywords: Workplace Mental Health, Resilience, Burnout, Leadership, Neurodiversity, Psychological Safety

Introduction

Mental health challenges are not just confined to one's personal life, but they have a spill over employees' in the workplace by affecting their productivity, creativity and overall job satisfaction. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), an estimated 12 billion workdays are lost every single year due to mental health concerns like depression and anxiety that result in an alarming global economic loss. CBM Global, 2024 states that around 70% of employees feel overwhelmed because of their workloads and expressed concerns related to lack of adequate mental health support. There is also a constant pressure to perform and be productive, combined with the stigma related to mental health, which makes it all the more challenging to seek help.

Workplace stress has reached critical levels with burnout rates rising up to 66%, an all-time high. The study states that younger generations are facing significantly higher rates of burnout compared to the older

generations. Robinson, 2025 findings indicate that over 81% of those who suffer from burnout are between the ages of 18-24, 83% fall between the age group of 25-34 years, whereas only 49% are above the age of 55 years. Organizations have the power to dramatically improve or worsen these issues through their workplace policies and culture. Hence, addressing mental health is no longer an ethical choice but a necessity for sustainable success.

Although workplace mental health has been an ongoing discussion, most existing approaches focus on surface-level coping rather than addressing deeper systemic and organizational factors like leadership, workload structures & dynamics and psychological safety. There is also limited empirical evidence on how these structural issues contribute to burnout and reduced resilience. This gap highlights the need for the present study, which examines workplace mental health through a systemic lens.

Review of Literature

Several research studies on workplace mental health emphasize that resilience is not solely an individual trait but a product of interaction between employees and their organizational environment (Robertson et al., 2015). Zhu et al. (2024) describe resilience as a dynamic process in which people react to stressors and modify their performance accordingly. There as several studies that show systemic stressors like excessive workload, poor communication, and lack of support are significant predictors of burnout and disengagement. Positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) emphasizes the value of emotional stability, optimism, and composure in managing stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

The past decade has seen significant changes in workplace structure and organization, such as the rise of remote work, the gig economy, and constant restructuring (Hwang, 2025). The corporate world is subjected to stressful factors that include economic pressure, competition, long working hours, downsizing, tight budgets, overall uncertainty, lack of support, unfair treatment, low decision latitude, conflicting roles, poor communication, a low sense of contribution to society, gender inequality and workplace bullying (Kermott et al, 2019). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted employee well-being and productivity, leading to various post-pandemic symptoms, including anxiety, stress, remote work fatigue, depression, isolation, and fear of returning to the workplace (Tawk, 2023).

Chronic exposure to such stressors can trigger maladaptive coping responses in employees, which include stress responses, fight, flight, freeze or fawn, which negatively impact decision-making, interpersonal relationships and overall organizational performance (Sapolsky, 2017). The fight response involves a release of hormones (primarily cortisol and adrenaline) in the body that trigger a reaction to stay and ward off or "fight" the apparent threat. On the other hand, flight response involves a release of stress hormones that signal us to flee from danger or threats. Instead of staying in a dangerous situation, this response causes one to literally run from the apparent threat. While freeze response leaves us temporarily paralyzed by fear and unable to move. In this response, rather than fighting off the danger or running away from it, one does nothing; the perceived threat causes an immobile reaction. Someone in a freeze response may experience numbness or a sense of dread. And finally, the fawn response may show up as people-pleasing, even to one's own detriment. All these responses are one's default responses based on their life experiences and conditioning, and are considered to be trauma responses. It is used to escape the threat/conflict and return to a feeling of safety (All Points North, 2021).

Given the systemic nature of these stress responses, addressing workplace distress requires interventions that go far beyond individual-level solutions. Organizational level strategies such as accessible mental health support, promotion of work–life balance and flexible work arrangements have been shown to buffer

and manage the negative effects of chronic stressors. At a broader level, organizational interventions that include mental health policies, employee assistance programs, and inclusive workplace cultures reflect on reduced absenteeism, improved engagement and enhanced overall employee well-being (APA, 2022). AI-driven mental health chatbots can also play a supportive role in strengthening employee resilience by offering evidence-based self-help and emotion regulation strategies (Aggarwal et al., 2023). Chatbots are freely available 24/7 for users to converse, obtain information and/or self-regulate. Chatbots like Infiheal's digital AI therapy solution, Healo, Anna, Woebot, Earkick, Virtua Health, Wysa etc. can complement human resource interventions by providing continuous psychological support and reducing stigma.

Building on these efforts, inclusive policies that can accommodate not just neurotypical employees but also neurodivergent employees that include individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), can further strengthen engagement and reduce discrimination when paired with flexible work structures and supportive leadership practices (Scott et al., 2019). Generational shifts in workforce expectations have increased the emphasis on psychological safety and recognition of diverse working styles, particularly among younger employees from Generation Z (GenZ) (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Together, these trends highlight the growing importance of organizational responsibility in shaping employee resilience.

Despite the increasing focus on resilience, there remains limited empirical evidence on how it can be systematically developed or strengthened within organizations, health systems or other sectors. Much of the resilience literature remains conceptual, emphasizing theoretical frameworks rather than practical implementation. Yet understanding how organizations maintain functioning and adapt under sustained pressure is essential for developing effective resilience-building strategies (Barasa, 2018). Organizational resilience has been defined as the capacity to maintain positive adjustment under challenging conditions, allowing organizations to emerge strengthened and more resourceful (Hilton, 2025). When resilience is embedded within organizational systems, leadership behaviors, and everyday employee experiences, organizations become more adaptable, innovative, and future-ready. Central to this process is leadership, as emotionally intelligent leaders model adaptive coping, foster psychological safety, and shape collective responses to stress (Gallup, 2021; Edmondson, 2018). From a psychodynamic perspective, such leaders act as emotional containers absorbing and regulating team anxieties, reducing stress spillover, and safeguarding both employee well-being and organizational productivity.

Methodology

To identify the primary source of stress and the coping mechanisms of employees, a brief survey was circulated across our social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube), gathering responses from 50 working professionals. Participants reported on their primary sources of energy depletion, coping styles under stress, and recovery preferences, guided by the *Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn* framework. Drawing on this trauma-informed psychological model, responses were thematically coded and qualitatively analyzed to surface recurrent patterns across employee experiences.

Findings and Discussion

Organizational culture plays a key role in determining employee performance and motivation. With increasing rapid technological advancements, global competition, and changing work patterns have significantly increased the complexity of organizational dynamics. To better understand these challenges, Figure 1 shows the survey asked participants to identify which aspects of their workplace drain them the

most (Piero, 2024). It helped us gain insight into the specific stressors employees encounter within modern organizational settings. Out of 50 participants in the survey, the following were the key stressors identified:

Figure 1- What's Draining Your Energy at Work? Here's What People Said
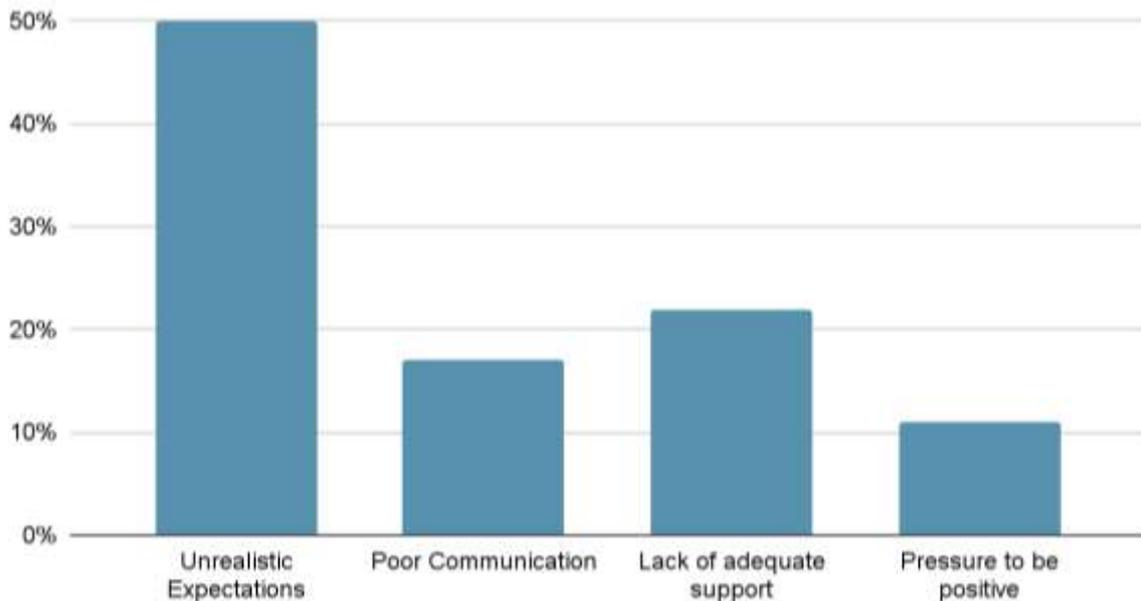
50% feel unrealistic expectations are the biggest drain. When demands exceed capacity, burnout becomes inevitable. 22% say lack of adequate support leaves them struggling alone. 15% blame poor communication, which creates confusion and frustration. Whereas 11% found the pressure to stay positive unexpectedly exhausting, proving that toxic positivity is real.

These insights highlight a critical need to build realistic goals, develop effective communication systems and provide adequate support. From the data, it is clear that the root of workplace stress isn't just a lack of resilience, it's a lack of structural support. Simply encouraging employees to "bounce back" isn't enough when the workplace itself is the source of stress. If companies fail to address these core issues, no amount of stress management workshops can prevent employee burnout. The future of workplace success depends on fixing the system as a whole, and it's not just about fixing employees.

Authentic Versus Performative Well-being Initiatives

Employees can distinguish between genuine mental health efforts and superficial perks. For example, wellness perks like yoga sessions and meditation apps are ineffective when underlying toxic work conditions persist. Such systemic issues require big organizational changes, but these are often more difficult, uncomfortable, and expensive to address. Instead, companies funnel money into superficial solutions that look good on paper but don't solve the problem (Porter, 2024). Instead, organizations must prioritize meaningful cultural changes, such as workload redistribution, mental health days and flexible work arrangements.

Workplace stress activates deep-rooted survival mechanisms, which are otherwise called the coping mechanism that influences how employees respond to challenges. By using fight response, employees tend to confront challenges aggressively, which can escalate and lead to aggressive or abusive workplace toxicity. On the contrary, flight response makes an employee flee from the challenge and leading to

disengagement or job-hopping. An employee with a freeze response becomes paralyzed by stress, resulting in decision fatigue and finally, with the fawn response, employees can resort to people-pleasing or suppressing personal needs to avoid conflict. (Feel good psychology and counselling, 2025) We also asked those 50 working professionals how they respond to workplace stress, and the results highlight the different ways people cope under pressure which is shown in Figure 2

Figure 2- How Do Employees Handle Workplace Stress? Here's What They Told Us
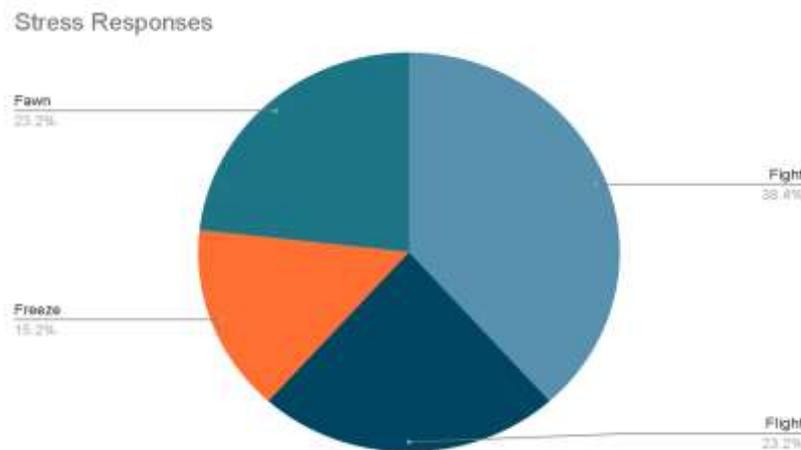

38.4% adopt a Fight response, tackling challenges head-on by sometimes escalating conflicts. 23.2% choose Flight, disengaging or even quitting to escape toxic environments. While 15.2% experience a Freeze response, feeling paralyzed by stress and struggling with decision-making. 23.2% default to Fawn, prioritizing people-pleasing to avoid conflict, often at their own expense

These findings reveal that many employees are in survival mode rather than thriving at work. A psychologically safe workplace ensures that employees do not have to resort to these responses to navigate their roles. Psychological safety, as defined by Dr Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School 2025, fosters an environment where employees feel secure in taking risks, asking questions, and expressing concerns without fear of judgment. The fearless organization is one in which interpersonal fear is minimized so that team and organizational performance can be maximized in a knowledge-intensive world.

Leaders as Emotional Regulators

A leader's tone, presence, and response to crises shape the emotional climate of an organization. Research from Gallup (2021) found that employees with emotionally intelligent leaders are 70% less likely to experience burnout. Effective leadership includes creating psychological safety. To assess the levels of psychological safety, we asked the participants in our survey shown in Figure 3, and 58% of people said they feel safe and supported being honest with their workplace struggles, although 45% of people feel they stay silent about their struggles at the workplace.

Figure 3- Psychological Safety at Workplace
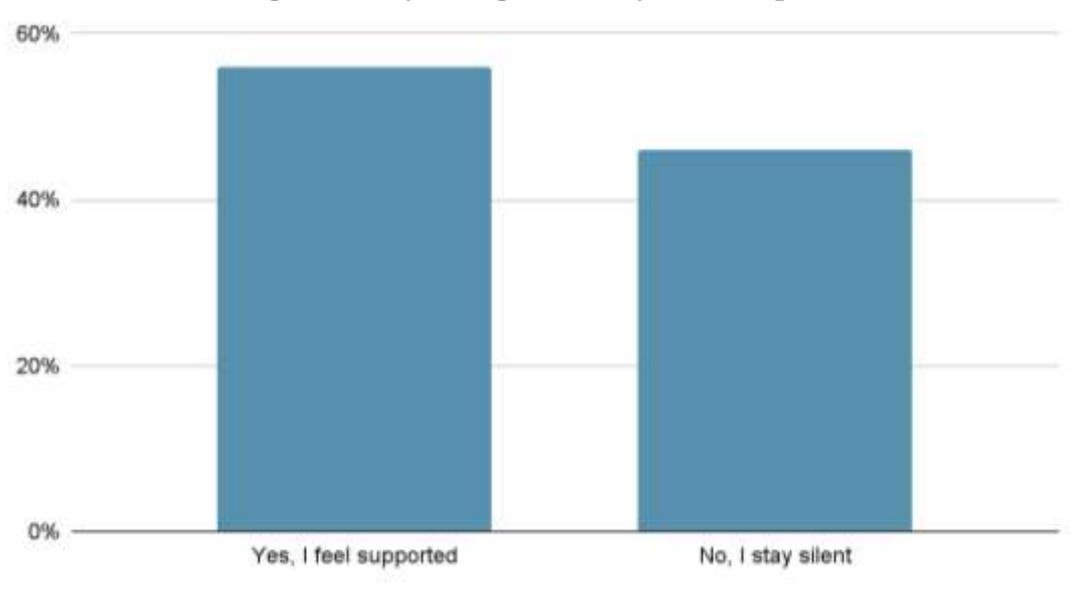
Cultural differences impact how mental health is perceived and addressed in workplaces across the globe. Additionally, toxic leadership and unaddressed workplace trauma exacerbate mental health challenges. The hidden costs of mental health neglect extend beyond productivity loss, leading to higher attrition rates, employee disengagement and reputational damage for organizations. The outcomes of employee mental health and well-being, however, can be negatively impacted by unfavorable workplace cultures, which are defined by unsupportive leadership, a lack of social support, excessive job demands, a lack of work-life balance, and insufficient policies. Addressing these issues requires a shift toward emotional regulation, self-compassion, and cognitive agility in leadership and policy frameworks. (Monteria & Joseph, 2023)

Understanding Resilience Beyond Definition

Resilience, in this context, shifts from being a personal attribute to an organizational competency rooted in empathy, adaptability, and design. In positive psychology, resilience is often defined as the ability to recover and adapt quickly from stressors or traumatic events (Pennock, 2017). It's commonly viewed as an inner strength that helps individuals navigate adversity effectively. In an organization setting, it involves a combination of factors, of which one major could be deeply influenced by the work environment. While resilient employees may demonstrate a consistently positive outlook, the ability to manage challenges with composure, emotional stability under pressure. None of these qualities can thrive in a toxic or high-pressure work environment (Sandhya, 2024).

Whereas organizations with resilient employees can thrive, not just survive. They are better able to rebound and learn from adversity and uncertainty. As individuals engage in more work and have more flexible work arrangements, such skills become more and more important. Therefore, employee resilience should be viewed as a set of skills and attributes that can be developed through appropriate human resource intervention. (Liang & Cao, 2021). Organizations that rely solely on resilience training without addressing structural stressors are merely placing a band-aid on a deeper issue. World Health Organization, 2024, research highlights that chronic workplace challenges such as excessive workloads, poor communication, and lack of support are the real drivers of burnout and mental health struggles.

Leaders Shaping the Emotional Climate of Organization

In complex or uncertain environments, leaders often serve as emotional shock absorbers for their teams, containing anxiety, setting tone, and modeling resilience. They may be able to customize their leadership style to their followers' emotional reactions and pattern responses if they are more aware of their followers' emotional reactions and pattern responses. (Powlus, 2017). It is the responsibility of leaders to provide effective containment for their employees in times of anxiety. As unprocessed anxiety may call up other problematic feelings, which may have very unproductive and undesirable effects in the workplace (White & Ralph., 2016). And finally, adaptive leadership (Heifetz), in which leaders must regulate the distress in a system, ensuring it is not overwhelming but still productive. A healthy organization needs emotionally attuned leaders who can metabolize chaos and frame challenges constructively (Cavins, 2021).

Organizations should support leaders through coaching, reflection spaces, and peer support, helping them manage the emotional load without burnout. Shock absorption is not about suppressing emotions, but about pacing emotional exposure so teams can process, adapt, and perform. In times of turbulence, the emotional climate of an organization is a reflection of its leadership. Strong shock absorbers make resilient cultures (Skagert, 2007).

Managing the Hidden Workforce: Neurodivergent Employees

Many high performers are autistic, have ADHD, or are highly sensitive, yet workplace policies often fail to accommodate their needs. Despite a growing awareness of ADHD and autism in our society, pervasive misconceptions continue to hinder the acceptance of neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. Both conditions are often associated with challenges in executive functioning, such as planning, organization, and self-regulation difficulties, which can be misinterpreted as barriers to professional success (Quintero et al., 2025). Recent surveys show that between 20% and 29% of neurodivergent employees report experiencing workplace discrimination or harassment because of their neurodivergence" (CIPD & Uptimize, 2024; Autistica, 2024). There is a need for inclusive policies that do not rely solely on formal diagnoses to offer accommodations. Universal design principles in workflows, communication norms, and feedback styles can benefit all employees.

When we look into the generational differences in neurodiversity awareness. Older generations (Gen X, Boomers) were raised in times with low mental health and neurodiversity awareness. Many may be undiagnosed or stigmatized. Whereas the younger generations (Millennials, Gen Z) are more likely to seek diagnoses, self-identify as neurodivergent, and expect psychological safety and flexible work environments. These generational differences can lead to conflicts in expectations around communication, productivity, and work-life balance (Zahra et al., 2025)

Work culture is often a top-down reflection of leadership behavior. If the leader is neurotypical, expectations of constant availability, fast processing, and emotional regulation may be unspoken norms. Conversely, a neurodivergent leader may prioritize deep focus, asynchronous communication, or innovative problem-solving, shaping a very different environment (Doyle, 2020). Understanding the neurotype of leadership can explain a lot about team dynamics, communication flow, and implicit behavioral expectations.

Organizations can support this workforce by providing sensory-friendly workspaces. These environments are designed to reduce sensory overload and support different sensory needs (sound, light, smell, touch), especially individuals who are neurodivergent, to stay regulated, focused, and comfortable. This allows flexible work structures and training managers on neurodiversity inclusion. Edmondson (2018) highlights

how emotionally intelligent leadership directly contributes to team well-being, trust, and performance. When organizations intentionally cultivate inclusive cultures that recognize neurodiversity and train leaders to provide emotional containment, they not only protect mental well-being, they unlock the full potential of their people. Together, these strategies form a powerful foundation for resilient, innovative, and future-ready global workforces.

Psychological Flexibility in Work Policies

A holistic resilience should integrate mental health considerations into KPIs that allow psychological flexibility in work arrangements, and adopt evidence-based recovery practices like micro-restoration breaks. Companies that offer autonomy, remote/hybrid options, and results-driven models outperform rigid traditional structures. Psychological flexibility enables employees to adapt to changing work environments while maintaining productivity (Albashir et al., 2025). Short recovery cycles, such as taking brief walks, implementing deep-focus work sprints, and structured downtime, recharge cognitive energy more effectively than occasional long vacations. At work, micro-breaks are beneficial for the worker's well-being and job performance (Albulescu et al., 2022)

Future Directions: Rethinking KPIs for Mental Well-being

Beyond productivity, organizations must integrate well-being metrics into their key performance indicators (KPIs). Metrics can include psychological safety assessments, emotional exhaustion rates and employee satisfaction surveys. Resilience isn't about individual toughness; it's about structural redesign that prevents burnout in the first place. Organizations that invest in employee well-being report higher retention rates, increased job satisfaction, and stronger business outcomes.

Limitations & Future Directions

There are several limitations in this study that have to be acknowledged. The sample size is relatively small and drawn through convenience-based sampling and through social media platforms. This limits the generalizability of the findings across organizational and cultural contexts. The reliance on self-reported data could also have response bias, as participants' perceptions of stress and coping styles can be influenced by social desirability or current emotional states. Also, the cross-sectional nature of the study restricts causal interpretations between organizational factors, leadership practices, and employee resilience.

Future research can address these limitations by using larger and more diverse samples across different sectors, as well as longitudinal designs to examine how resilience and burnout evolve over time. Incorporating mixed-method approaches, including in-depth interviews and organizational case studies, would provide richer insights into systemic stressors and leadership dynamics. Further exploration of neurodiversity-informed leadership practices, sensory-friendly workplace design, and culturally responsive mental health interventions would also strengthen the evidence base for building sustainable and resilient organizations.

Conclusion

Building a resilient workforce requires a systemic approach. By integrating evidence-based mental health strategies, fostering supportive leadership, and redesigning work structures, organizations can create environments where employees can thrive. As mental health challenges continue to rise globally,

businesses that prioritize resilience will gain a competitive edge while cultivating a healthier and more engaged workforce.

Conflict of Interest

Authors of this paper belong to the company Infiheal Healthtech Private Limited, which is responsible for the creation of the mental health chatbot Healo. No other conflicts of interest.

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