

# Simple Skills to Reduce Staff's Mental and Physical Stress – and How To Introduce Them



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## Introduction

This article and associated coaching sheet were created after growing calls from frontline leaders for practical ways they can help reduce the mental stress so prevalent in today's screen-intensive workplace. This article outlines strategies that provide immediate benefits and, when reinforced over time and used in collaboration with the [coaching sheet](#), support reductions in absenteeism, presenteeism and attrition associated with work-related stress.

Managers and frontline leaders play a vital role in creating a health, safety and wellbeing business culture. While not expected to take personal responsibility for the health, safety and wellbeing of staff, it is managers language, guidance and actions that support staff's ability to build the self-care competencies needed to take greater care of themselves at work.

## The Benefits

The research increasingly shows the need and benefits of business providing additional mental and physical wellbeing support to staff, and not just because these programs make good business sense, although...



**For every \$1 invested in workplace health and wellbeing programs, there is a return of \$5.81. That's over 500% return on investment.**

Put simply on a personal level, individuals experiencing ongoing stress, will also be experiencing headaches, low energy, aches and pains, difficulty focusing, and taking care of themselves or ask for help becomes a low priority.

Sometimes it is only through gentle reminders and making work habits helping to manage mental and physical stress commonplace, that individuals reflect on their own stress levels and begin to implement these skills into their own life.

Health, safety and wellbeing programs showing managers value staff and are serious about their wellbeing, doesn't need to be all ping-pong tables and exciting murals. The ideas and actions outline in this article are simple, cost nothing, and with the aid of the coaching sheet will be easy to implement.



**Frontline Leader:** I'm concerned. Now I've done a Mental First Aid Course my team expects me to be constantly alert for signs of distress and have a toolbox full of solutions. This is very stressful.

**Answer:** It is not your job to take personal responsibility for the mental and physical health of staff. However, managers are well placed to play a significant supporting role in the wellbeing of staff.

This outline is not designed to replace a Mental First Aid course. These are simple, no-cost ideas and actions that can be immediately and easily implemented by frontline leaders.

Workplace health, safety and wellbeing should be a partnership between managers and staff. Management has an obligation to create a safe working environment, and by providing the right support and resources, staff can build the belief, skills and work habits needed to take greater care of themselves. However, even with encouragement and support, ultimately, it's the individual's decision and responsibility to use these resources and build important wellness skills.

The strategies described in this article and coaching sheet are designed to engage and support your staff's efforts to build self-care competencies; the new personal protective behaviours (PPB's) needed in these modern, intense, physically (and often emotionally) demanding screen-based work environments.

[Click here](#) to download this article and associated coaching sheet.

## What is Stress?

"**Stress is the mind's and body's way of preparing us to face a challenge.** A certain level of stress is necessary to not only function but to motivate us to reach our full potential. Too much stress, however, can be a health hazard. The first important step in stress management involves noticing when our stress levels have become unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised, there is a range of stress management skills available to address the problem." (<https://wayahead.org.au/get-the-facts/recognising-and-managing-stress/>)



**Simply**, two factors affect feelings of stress. The environment around you (e.g. stressful events) and your way of dealing with that environment (e.g. your personality, self-care skills)



**Did you know:** When we experience stress, our bodies use up enormous amounts of **vitamins and minerals**. That's why we get so tired, irritable and less able to cope with everyday activities.

**Coaching Tip:** Here is an easy way to introduce mental health care without launching into a mental health discussion, which may be a step too far.

If worried a staff member is experiencing high levels of stress, suggest they look tired, or a little run down. This easily leads to suggesting they may be low in Iron or Magnesium, and a trip to the doctor could be wise.

Now you have shown your concern and helped that member of staff take positive action. ***It is hard to know what steps to take when you are stressed. You are too busy surviving.***

## Mental and Physical Stress are Linked

***Mental and physical wellbeing are strongly linked***, making it essential to build strategies to manage both.



**For example:** If you are feeling anxious or nervous before a meeting, your body is tense, your breathing quickens, and your brain literally starts going into fight or flight, which impairs your thinking.

**BUT,** if you do 20 wall push-ups to get rid of the adrenaline, then take a deep breath and consciously relax, you walk into the meeting feeling calm and focused.

**The physical effects the mental, just as mental effects the physical.**

In Dr Jackson's article on [Unifying the Mind and the Body Through Aerial Therapeutics](#), Sue notes:



"In reality, our minds and bodies are intimately connected, and what happens to one affects the other. If our mind feels fear, our body reacts in kind with an accelerated pulse, sweat and rapid eye movements. If we exercise our body, [research shows it can ease symptoms of anxiety and depression](#). More and more health professionals worldwide are recognising the connection between mind and body and refocusing to a holistic approach to wellness. Integration of [mind and body is increasingly seen as a global wellness trend.](#)"

## Practical Tips and Tool for Frontline Leaders

### Supporting Mental Wellbeing

Building relaxation and mindfulness skills provide significant benefits, including an increased ability to sustain focus and refocus, release stress and reset back to a calm space. These simple skills (which should become everyday work habits) ensure stress does not build into overwhelm throughout the day and help staff leave work pressures at work.

Dr Jackson recommends simple strategies that managers, especially frontline leaders, can share with teams to help them manage stress. However, Sue notes that while interventions can be implemented at little cost, they do need some guidance and support to get habits established.

### Supporting Staff at Work

**Encourage Mindfulness Breaks:** These simple mini and micro-breaks encourage staff to be mindful of how they feel and to take action to release mental and physical stress throughout the day. These short mindfulness breaks stop stress and tension building and help prevent feelings of overwhelm.



For example, you may realise you are frustrated, angry or anxious. By being mindful of those feelings, you can consciously release the tension, relaxing and reset. Then think 'okay, what is the next thing I want to do?'

This practice may be as **short as a single breath and as simple as focusing on your breathing for 30 seconds,**

**Introduce a Formal Practices:** Consider providing a Lunch & Learn or short 6-week program run by a [Mindfulness Practitioner](#). Initially, it's hard to know when and how to reset, so providing guidance shows staff how to reflect on the present moment and take action to reset. This important first step helps avoid frustration and encourages the application of these simple practices in the workplace.

## One example of a mindful moment or self-reflection is a practice called 'Cues'



**Cues involve taking a moment when you realise your stressed, anxious etc. (e.g. after an irate customer or complicated sequence of customer enquiries).**

- Settle back in the chair,
- Check-in with how you're feeling,
- become aware,
- take the breaths and consciously relax and release tense muscles (focus on shoulders and stomach),
- releasing the negative thoughts, coming back to be calm
- then decide what needs to happen next

## Supporting Physical Wellbeing

### General Advice

As mentioned above, there is a strong connection between physical and mental wellbeing. Taking time to be physically active is an invaluable tool for managing stress. Exercise releases muscle tension, boosting brain function and builds the physical conditioning needed to help avoid aches and pains. Sitting for long periods is surprisingly tiring.

While it's important to find an aerobic exercise you enjoy, here are a few good choices if looking for inspiration.



- **Dancing** is joyous and social
- **Swimming** is a bilateral exercise and weight supported. A good exercise if you are carrying injuries like bad knees or arthritis. However, avoid breaststroke if you have neck issues
- A **martial art or boxing**, because sometimes you just want to beat the living bejeebas out of something (which is fantastic stress release)
- **Rowing or rowing machine**. Again, great bilateral exercise and rowing uses more muscles in the body than any other exercises
- **Gardening** involves dynamic movement and is very fulfilling as you feel physically tired and you see what you have achieved
- **Walking in green spaces** relaxes the mind and body. There is something restorative about taking time to immerse yourself in your local park, botanic garden, or state forests, especially if combined with water.

## VERY IMPORTANT



- **Don't say, 'If I have time'**. Make a commitment and put it in your diary
- **Routine** is crucial. Make a plan and stick to the plan
- **Start with simple and achievable goals**. As simple and achievable as standing up for your favourite TV program or walking just one block each day
- **JUST START**

## Managing Physical Stress to Reduce Mental Stress at Work

### *A significant factor contributing to mental stress is physical stress and pain?*

Professor Alan Hedge's research reveals **at least 80%** of employees in offices, contact centres and similar settings report aches, pains and musculoskeletal discomforts related to work. I know from **my PhD research** that **over 11%** of the contact centre consultants experience **chronic pain every day!** That's pain that **DOES NOT** go away after rest.



**Chronic pain is costing the Australian economy \$55 Billion a year, and of that, \$7 Billion is simply lost productivity, before adding any other health issues or business expenses.**

### *Work Posture Check*

**Encouraging staff to be mindful of their posture is very important.** All the ergonomic and wellbeing recommendations make it possible to avoid discomfort and injury, but it is only through implementing those recommendations as work behaviours that we can prevent aches from becoming muscle pain or an injury.

**THIS IS IMPORTANT:** All the ergonomic and wellbeing recommendations only make it possible to avoid discomfort and injury. It is only through ensuring staff develop the right self-care competencies that allow them to implement those recommendations as everyday work habits, that you give staff the best chance of avoiding musculoskeletal pain or injury.

**REMEMBER,** physical pain adds to mental fatigue and stress. This, in turn, contributes to increasing levels of absenteeism, presenteeism and attrition.

### *Introducing the Roll-Reset-Relax*

**However,** there is a simple set of actions that can reduce upper-body discomfort and headaches by up to 50%. I call it the **Roll-Reset-Relax** and this one sequence helps staff become mindful of their work posture, it releases upper body tension and importantly, resets work posture back to relaxed and neutral.

The goal of all ergonomic furniture, equipment and recommendations are to ensure everyone can work in a relaxed neutral work posture. But that posture is hard to achieve or sustain if staff are unaware they are sitting in an awkward position or don't know how to reset back to the best possible posture placing the lowest stress on the body.

### *The ROLL-RESET-RELAX sequence needs to become an everyday work habit*

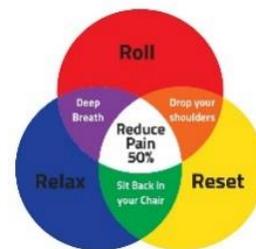
This one activity provides immediate benefits, and when staff repeat this regularly (five or six times a day), it supports recovery from current aches and pains associated with work-related mental and physical stress. All managers need to do is share and demonstrate this one sequence with staff and encourage them to repeat it throughout the day.

### **Easy**

## Coaching Roll-Reset-Relax

[The Coaching Sheet](#) includes a script you can use to introduce this activity to staff.

And here is the link to [download your Roll-Reset-Relax poster](#).



## Using the Coaching Sheet

As stated above, managers play a vital role in creating a health, safety and wellbeing business culture. While not expected to take personal responsibility for the health, safety and wellbeing of staff, it is managers language, guidance and actions that support staff's ability to build the self-care competencies needed to take greater care of themselves at work.

[The Coaching Sheet](#) outlines some signs a person may be experiencing ongoing stress and provides activities and coaching tips for managers, especially frontline leaders, to share with staff.

These activities can be used in a few ways.



- Used as talking points to create awareness and start the conversation
- Becomes a useful reference if concerned about a staff member
- Share as a handout to all staff during team meetings
- Encourage application by introducing, demonstrate and practice a different activity with staff during a team meeting. This helps break down that barrier of feeling to awkward to try this solo at work (a barrier that is even harder to break down when you are stressed).

**But do you want to know the GOLD STANDARD?** The action plan giving businesses the greatest long-term benefits and positively effecting absenteeism, stress, productivity and attrition.

***The very best course of action is to build these activities into an ongoing routine of review, practice and reinforcement.***

As with any new work routine or procedure, getting transfer to the workplace is hard unless there is a felt obligation to implement. Staff are busy and old routines are hard to break even when promoting increased comfort and wellbeing. If used just as a handout at a team meeting with no follow-up actions to implementation, all the handouts will go into a draw and never be seen again.

Managers and frontline leaders can reinforce transfer by introducing an activity (outlining its purpose and benefits), demonstrating then rehearsing the activity with the team and finally, showing staff they have implemented the activity as a new work habit.

**Remember,** – Management has an obligation to provide a **safe and supportive work environment**. Part of that obligation is ensuring staff have the knowledge, expertise and resources needed to ensure they can take reasonable care of themselves and not do anything that would affect the health and safety of others at work.

## It's a Wrap

This short outline does not replace a Mental First Aid talk or program. It has been designed to provide managers, especially frontline leaders, with practical ideas and actions to support staffs' mental and physical wellbeing. More specifically, to help staff build certain self-care competencies that allow them to release stress and tension and recentre to a calm space, which increases their ability to care for themselves at work.

**These are some of the new ergonomic and self-care competencies staff can and should automatically apply every day, no matter where they work.**

We hope you find [this article insightful, practical and useful](#). Everything we do at Beyond Ergo focuses on translating the latest research and recommendations in practical and actionable work skills. **These become new self-care competencies; the new personal protective behaviours (PPB) staff need to care for themselves**, especially as staff embrace an increasingly complex array of work choices including activity-based workplaces, telecommuting, hot-desking, sit-stand workstation, multiple screens, mobile devices, and a range of health risks associated with increasingly sedentary work.

## Conditional Offer

**It's time to expand our vision of the training needed to keep your staff safe in screen-intensive work environments.**

Don't leave office ergonomics out of your wellness strategy. By helping your staff to build simple ergonomic and self-care competencies, you are creating a healthier and more productive workforce, as well as building a healthier, stronger and more profitable business.

Managers who provide this training to their teams signal their support and value for their staff's health, safety and wellbeing. Employees feeling supported helps ensure the successfully transferred of training to the workplace.

The Beyond Ergo programs have several significant points of difference to current office ergonomics and wellbeing training programs.

**To demonstrate those differences and the additional training content and cost benefits, I am pleased to offer OUR NEW ONLINE BEYOND ERGO INTRODUCTORY WORKSHOP - for the special opening price of \$50/person for 14 days unlimited access, or \$65/person for one month's unlimited access.**

### [Self-Care Skills Training for Screen-Intensive Workers](#)

Introduce your staff to the **new personal protective behaviours (PPB)** staff need to

- Adjust their immediate work environment
- Apply the simple action sequence enabling every individual to instantly refine and apply office ergonomic recommendations to match their stature
- **Most Importantly** – the **new work habits and behaviours** essential for health, safety and general wellbeing when working in screen-intensive work environments

**For more information, [Click Here](#)**

To gain the greatest benefit from these ideas and actions, [click here to download](#) this FREE article and coaching sheet.

## Meet Dr Elizabeth Kirk (PhD)

Dr Kirk built the unique Beyond Ergo program through PhD research at the University of Queensland and in collaboration with major Brisbane-based contact centres.

Grounded in research and informed by client feedback and industry trends, Liz has developed a clear focus on developing programs to ensuring Beyond Ergo training can help as many people as possible to reduce chronic pain and the risk of acquiring injuries.



**Our Purpose: We help businesses (specialising in Contact Centres) reduce rates of absenteeism, stress and attrition** by training frontline leaders to coach simple changes in ergonomic adjustments and work behaviours that decrease work-related pain, increasing comfort and productivity, and improving labour cost efficiency.

**Beyond Ergo programs** provide more than knowledge and talks – they translate into actions that **build self-care competencies**



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