

The Case for a Pause

Stress has become the default setting of modern work. The research on what a few intentional minutes can do about it is clearer than most leaders realize.



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OCTOBER 2026

8 MIN READ

IN BRIEF

The problem

Half of U.S. and Canadian employees report significant daily stress, and minds drift from the task at hand almost half the time.

The research

Randomized trials show short, structured practices like mindfulness, breathwork, and sound meditation reduce stress and sharpen focus.

The practice

Build the pause into the workday, especially the early afternoon, rather than leaving recovery to evenings and weekends.

Ask a high-performing team how their week is going and you will hear the same words: back-to-back, behind, buried. Demanding schedules, sales goals, constant follow-up, and competing priorities are not a phase. For most professionals they are the job. The question for leaders is not whether their people are under pressure, but whether the workday gives them any way to recover from it.

This paper brings together the strongest available research on that question. It looks at how widespread workplace stress has become, why the early afternoon is a particularly vulnerable point in the day, and what controlled studies show about brief practices such as mindfulness, breathwork, and sound meditation.

1 • THE ALWAYS-ON WORKDAY

Stress is now the norm, not the exception

Gallup's latest State of the Global Workplace report finds that half of employees in the United States and Canada experienced a lot of stress during the previous day, the highest rate of any region in the world.¹ Globally the figure is 40 percent.

EXHIBIT 1

Share of employees who experienced a lot of daily stress



Source: Gallup, State of the Global Workplace (2025 and 2026 reports).¹ U.S. and Canada is the highest of any region.

The American Psychological Association's 2023 Work in America survey reached a similar conclusion: 77 percent of U.S. workers reported work-related stress in the past month, and 57 percent said it had a negative impact on them.² The World Health Organization estimates that depression and anxiety cost the global economy 12 billion working days and about US\$1 trillion in lost productivity every year.³

Stress also has a quieter cost: attention. In a study of 2,250 adults who were sampled at random moments through their day, people's minds were wandering from what they were doing 46.9 percent of the time, and they were measurably less happy when it happened.⁴

Our minds wander almost half the time, and a wandering mind is an unhappier one.

KILLINGSWORTH & GILBERT, SCIENCE, 2010

2 • TIMING

Why the early afternoon matters

Alertness is not constant across the day. Research on the “post-lunch dip” describes a midafternoon decline in alertness and performance that is rooted in circadian biology and appears even when people skip lunch, though a heavy meal can make it worse.⁵ For teams that run on meetings, that dip often coincides with the most crowded part of the calendar.

That makes the early afternoon a natural point for a deliberate reset, rather than another meeting stacked onto the last.

3 • THE SHORT PAUSE

What a few minutes actually changes

In 2021, Microsoft’s Human Factors Lab measured brain activity with EEG while participants sat through four half-hour video meetings, once back-to-back and once with a 10-minute meditation break between each meeting.⁶ Without breaks, beta-wave activity associated with stress built steadily from one meeting to the next. With breaks, it stayed level, and patterns associated with engagement improved.

EXHIBIT 2

Stress-linked brain activity across four meetings

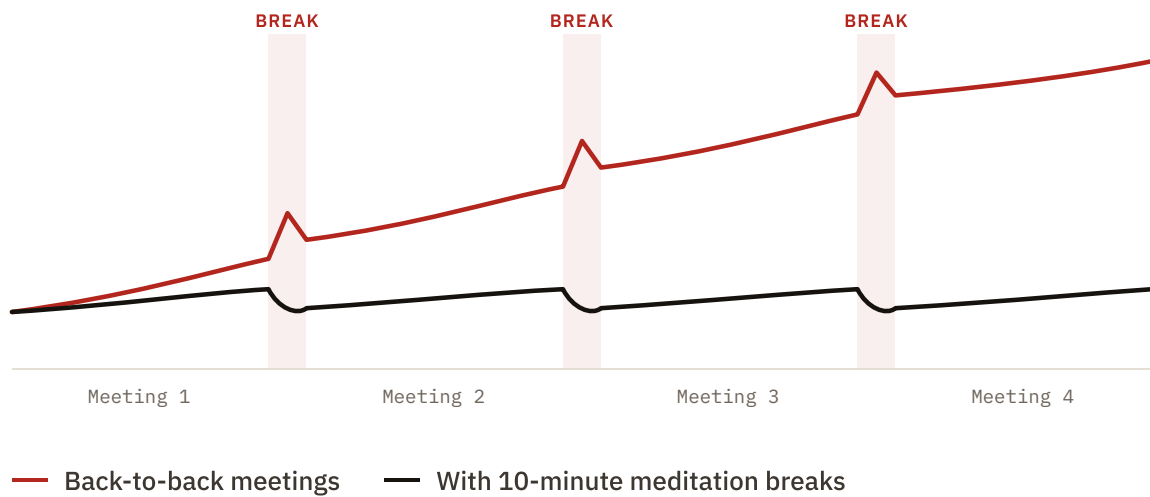


Illustration based on reported findings, not the original data. Source: Microsoft Human Factors Lab, EEG study of 14 participants, 2021.⁶

Breathwork shows a similar pattern. In a month-long randomized trial at Stanford, five minutes a day of structured breathing improved daily mood and reduced anxiety, and an exhale-focused technique called cyclic sighing improved mood more than mindfulness meditation alone.⁷

Even brief training appears to sharpen the mind. Four short sessions of mindfulness training improved working memory and executive function in people with no prior experience, and reduced fatigue and anxiety.⁸ In another randomized study, two weeks of mindfulness training improved working memory and reading comprehension while reducing mind-wandering.⁹

4 • THE EVIDENCE AT WORK

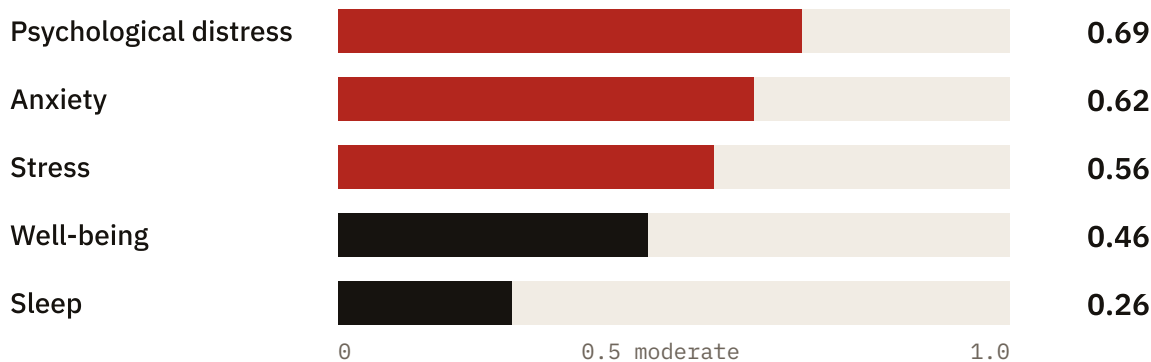
What controlled trials find

The strongest evidence comes from pooling many randomized trials. A meta-analysis of 23 randomized controlled trials of workplace mindfulness training found meaningful improvements in stress, anxiety, psychological distress, well-being, and sleep.¹⁰ A broader review in *JAMA*

Internal Medicine, covering 47 trials and 3,515 participants, found moderate evidence that meditation programs reduce anxiety and depression.¹¹

EXHIBIT 3

Effect of workplace mindfulness training, pooled across 23 randomized trials



Effect sizes (Hedges' g); by common convention, about 0.2 is small, 0.5 moderate, and 0.8 large. Source: Bartlett et al., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 2019.¹⁰

Companies have reported results of their own. After offering mindfulness and yoga programs to employees, Aetna reported a 28 percent drop in participants' self-reported stress and estimated about 62 minutes of productivity gained per participant per week.¹² These figures come from the company rather than an independent trial, but they are consistent with the controlled research above.

5 • SOUND

The role of sound meditation

Sound is a less studied but promising part of the picture. In an observational study of 62 adults, a single session of singing bowl sound meditation was followed by significantly lower tension, anger, fatigue, and depressed mood, with the largest reduction in tension among people new to the practice.¹³ Because the study had no control group, it shows promise rather than proof, and it points to a practice that is easy for newcomers to enter.

WHAT LEADERS CAN DO

1. **Schedule the pause.** Put a short, guided reset on the calendar instead of hoping people find time on their own.
2. **Meet the afternoon dip.** The early afternoon is when attention is most vulnerable and meetings are most crowded.
3. **Protect transitions.** A few minutes between meetings keeps stress from compounding through the day.
4. **Make it easy to start.** Guided formats require no prior experience, which lowers the barrier for skeptics.

A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

The studies cited here examine mindfulness, breathwork, and sound meditation broadly. Some are large meta-analyses of randomized trials; others are single studies, small samples, or company-reported figures, and they are labeled as such. They describe what researchers have found, not guaranteed outcomes from any single session. Nothing in this paper is medical advice.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tina Meckaroski has worked in financial services for nearly 20 years and is a Reiki Master and sound bowl practitioner. Through guided meditation, breathwork, and Reiki-infused sound bowls, she creates intentional wellness experiences for high-performing teams, including the 30-minute Corporate Midday Reset. [Inquire about an experience →](#)

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