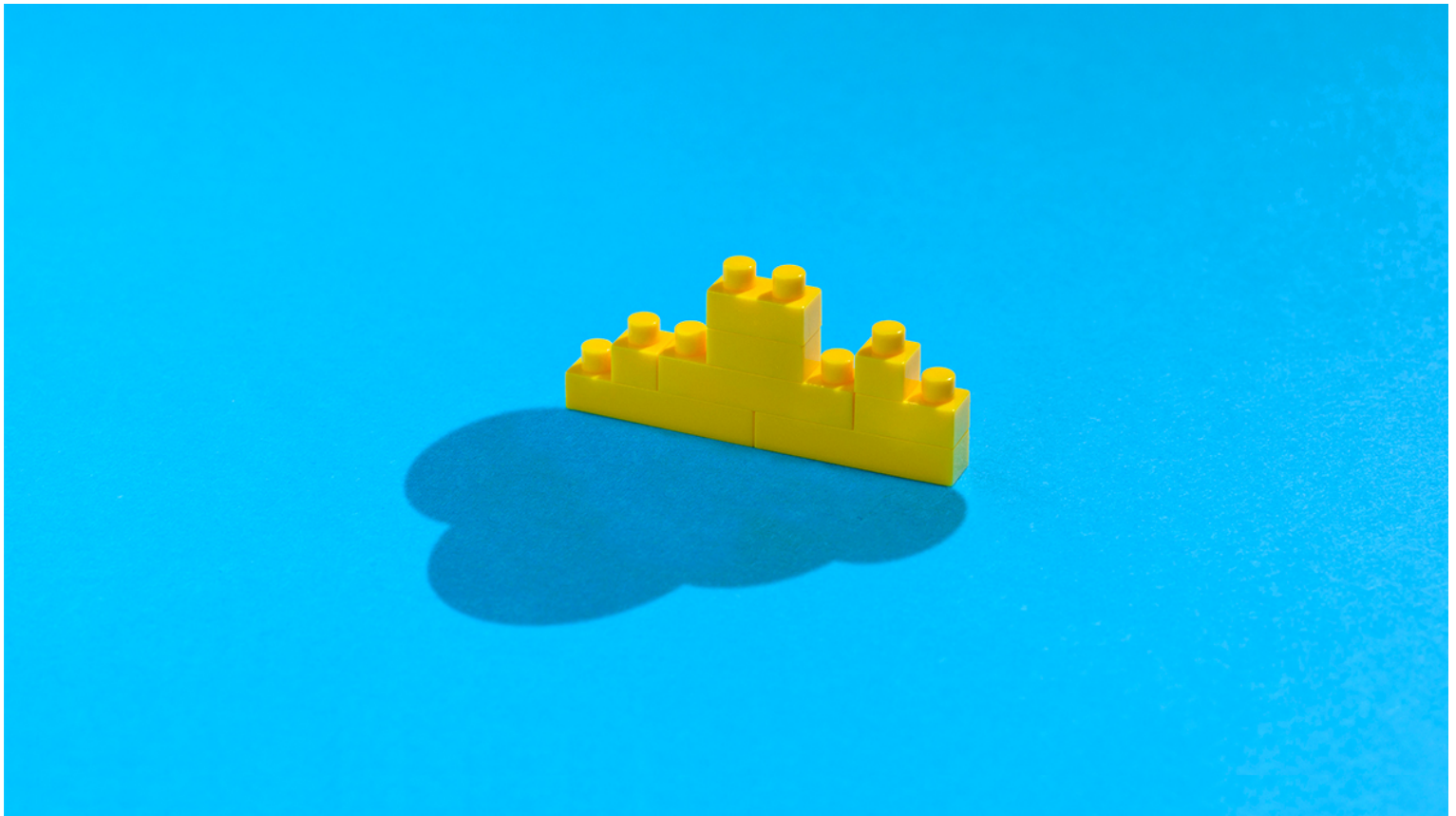


STRESS

Can Online Tools Help Employees Build Resilience?

by [Allison Williams](#), [Acacia Parks](#), and [Ashley Whillans](#)

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You have had a tough day at work. Your presentation did not go well; your boss harshly critiqued your performance; a colleague was promoted to a position you had hoped to fill; and, on top of it all, some of your coworkers planned to go out after work and you were not invited.

Anyone would feel lousy at the end of this day. But what helps you learn from these experiences and get back to business tomorrow is resilience. Resilience, the ability to adapt and recover from personal and professional setbacks, is increasingly recognized as a key driver of job performance. For those who lack resilience, a bad day can seriously throw them off their game, lowering their sense of worth, attitude toward their job and work performance.

In our recent research, we looked at whether using a brief, online intervention could build resilience in employees. We found that distressed employees who used such an intervention a few times per week showed significantly greater increases in resilience than employees who did not.

Resilience is a critical ingredient of workplace success

Resilience is especially important for employees who suffer from anxiety and depression, where daily stressors can make their condition worse. Given that anxiety disorders are estimated to affect 15.7 million people annually and over 20% of U.S. employees report experiencing depressive symptoms, improving employee resilience is a business imperative.

Research indicates that employers lose around 32 days annually due to reduced productivity for every depressed employee, which may cost employers as much as \$44 billion annually. To put this in perspective, an employer with 1,000 employees might have as many as 200 employees with depression and a combined 6,400 lost days of productivity each year. It is no wonder, then, that in one survey of 487 employers, 75% reported that “stress” was their number one workplace health concern.

This is where resilience training comes in. While it is often successful, it can be time consuming. Resilience training, which teaches people how cope with and recover from adversity, decreases depression and anxiety and effectively improves employees’ workplace performance, well-being and social functioning. Resilience training can also positively impact physical health outcomes tied to the stress hormone cortisol, such as heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol.

Despite the growing need for resilience interventions in the workplace, a variety of obstacles have limited their adoption. Resilience trainings typically require in-person facilitation and logistical and financial resources that make them difficult to scale. In fact, only one in ten employers offer onsite stress management programs, like resilience training programs. These programs also struggle with low participation due to myriad reasons, including the stigma of being seen at work as needing help.

Can we make resilience training simpler?

We wondered whether online resilience interventions and tools could be effective at overcoming these barriers and increasing resilience among stressed out employees. To answer this question, we conducted a study with 591 U.S.-based users of Happify (where two of us work), which is an online platform that has stress-reducing exercises. All participants in our study reported experiencing emotional or workplace distress when they registered for the Happify website. We asked them to use the platform two to three times per week for eight weeks, and looked at their change in resilience, which we measured by looking at their sense of optimism, perceived stress, and positive emotions, over that time period.

The core activities that users engaged in were focused across five areas: mindfulness, gratitude, goal-setting, forgiveness, and self-compassion. To ensure that use of the online platform was causing changes in resilience, we compared the employees completing the online activities to employees randomly assigned to a control group and given access to content typically found while surfing the web for mental health and well-being topics, as well as a group that didn't use either program.

We found that after eight weeks, there was a 25% improvement in resilience among employees with severe emotional and workplace stress who completed two to three online activities each week. This was roughly double the improvements seen in the other two groups of employees.

What's more, these improvements were more pronounced among the most stressed out employees — those who often require the greatest amount of resources to treat. These results, together with other research showing resilience training also benefits less stressed populations, suggest that any employee could be helped by these programs before they reach a breaking point.

These findings show that building resilience, something that was once believed to require a great deal of time and money, may be accomplished via online intervention programs and tools in a matter of weeks. Additional studies, however, are needed to determine how long-lasting these effects are.

For employers, this means you can offer resilience training that is not only affordable and effective, but also provides flexibility that is more conducive to the needs of employees, allowing them to engage at their own pace, and avoid the stigma of more public, workplace-based training programs. Online resilience programs can also be delivered in multiple languages, making them a more inclusive solution for employers with a diverse and global workforce. By expanding existing employee wellness programs to include stress management and resilience tools, employers can better promote workplace well-being.

Allison Williams is a Research Associate at Happify in charge of data analytics. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Minnesota.

Acacia Parks is Chief Scientist of tech startup Happify, where she has worked to bring the cutting edge in research-based well-being interventions to large businesses, health plans, and consumers. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, where she studied the science of happiness with Martin Seligman, and her research spans across the whole spectrum of wellness, from non-distressed consumers to stressed employees, sufferers of chronic health conditions, and individuals with depression and/or anxiety.

Ashley Whillans is an Assistant Professor in the Negotiations, Organizations, and Markets unit at the Harvard Business School. Her research focuses on time, money, and happiness.

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


Great article and results. In my experience, the most successful digital resilience programs include some element of face-to-face training sessions, whether delivered via webinar or workshop. Nudging participants toward ownership of the ideas and deliberate practice are the keys to long-term success.

When measuring the impact of a resilience intervention it is important to include factors relating to mental health, withdrawal, overload, stress management, connection, well-being, EQ, focus and even flow state. This provides an integrated perspective of the individual's ability to bounce, stay calm, craft a supportive lifestyle and be effective.

By providing training that includes a broad spectrum of competencies we found users are more likely to engage at the level that is appropriate for them. Some people are at the bottom of the spiral while some are thriving. Providing a customised blueprint of the person's resilience makes the intervention sustainable as they get to track the evolution of their risks and strengths. I find providing weekly practice tips for teams an additional, remarkably effective, tool in terms of driving program engagement and sustainability.

Research by the Resilience Institute showed a 38% growth in resilience after interventions. Most notable was a 30% reduction in depression symptoms and a 47% increase in vitality. <https://resiliencei.com/resilience-research/>

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