

# 5 Ways People Managers Can Help Stressed Remote and Hybrid Workers

By Lisa Rabasca Roepe

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**E**mployee stress levels seem to be at an all-time high. Nearly half of employees report they "always/often" feel exhausted and stressed, according to a recent Deloitte survey (<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/leadership/employee-wellness-in-the-corporate-workplace.html>).

As more companies adopt remote and hybrid work schedules, companies should expect employees to feel increased levels of stress. In fact, employees rate hybrid work as substantially more exhausting than either fully in-person or fully remote work, according to a survey (<https://www.tinypulse.com/hubfs/TINYpulseStateofEmployeeEngagementQ32021.pdf>) conducted by employee-engagement software company TinyPulse.

Here are five behaviors people managers can model to help their remote and hybrid employees feel less fatigue and stress.

## 1. Allow workers to turn off the video camera sometimes.

Studies have shown that sitting through multiple video meetings each day can cause exhaustion. "We're expending a lot of cognitive and emotional energy trying to send and receive all these signals of facial expressions and body language," said Adam Grant, professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania specializing in organizational psychology and author of *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (Viking, 2021).

In particular, women feel more exhausted after multiple online video meetings, according to research from Stanford University ([https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3820035](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3820035)). Researchers found that overall, 13.8 percent of women compared with 5.5 percent of men report feeling "very" to "extremely" fatigued after Zoom calls.

Grant recommends that managers allow workers to turn off their video cameras some of the time. "I'm not saying cameras should be off all the time," he said. "If you're meeting somebody for the first time, if you're in a presentation or a large group, [video] can be helpful to coordinate. But if you're with a small group of people who you already know, you don't need to look at each other's faces all the time."

If, as a manager, you prefer that video cameras remain on, consider limiting video calls to 45 or 50 minutes and allowing a 10-minute break between meetings, said Nancy Halpern, leadership coach and founder of Political IQ (<https://getpoliticaliq.com/>), a New York City-based consulting firm focused on diagnosing political dysfunction in organizations. Allowing a 10-minute break enables your brain to reset, increasing your ability to focus and stay engaged, according to a Microsoft study (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/brain-research>).

## 2. Encourage workers to ask questions and seek help.

Employees often feel pressure not to ask too many questions and to know the answers to all of the questions that managers put to them. When managers admit they don't have all the answers, that can make employees feel more comfortable asking questions and seeking help themselves, according to Erica Galos Alioto, global head of people at Grammarly, a San Francisco-based software company that helps people improve their written communications. As a manager, you "don't have to pretend you have all the answers," she said.

### 3. Take sick days and "sad" days when needed, and tell your staff when you do.

When working remotely, many employees tend to feel uncomfortable taking a sick day. Nonhourly workers used just half of their sick days in 2021, according to a study by HR consulting firm Mercer (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/13/business/covid-sick-days.html>).

"In the last couple of years we've had an unprecedented number of events that will lead people to feel increasingly challenged," Alioto noted. As companies increase their focus on and support for mental health, many are adding mental health days or expanding sick days to include mental health days, she said.

To help employees feel comfortable taking days off, managers could tell their hybrid and remote workers that it's OK to call in sick and it's also OK to call in sad, Grant said. "Just as you would take some time off to care for yourself if you got sick with long COVID or you broke your ankle, if you're depressed, if you're anxious, if you're burned out, if you're just languishing, take the time you need to invest in your well-being," he said, noting that employees will be encouraged to do the same if managers are transparent about their need for time off.

### 4. Create a "don't" list.

Managers can help create uninterrupted blocks of time for employees to work on essential projects and tasks by being clear about what employees don't have to work on.

"I recently told my team that we have ruthlessly prioritized," Alioto said. "I want to make sure we're not focused on what's not important." For instance, Alioto told her team that PowerPoint slides don't need to look perfect, and to focus on the content, not the visuals. "Sharing what we don't care about helps to relieve employees of additional work," she said.

### 5. Set boundaries around when to respond to e-mail.

When working remotely, employees often feel pressure to reply to e-mail, even when it's received late at night or over the weekend. Managers should clarify their expectations around responding to e-mail, Grant said. "Giving people a deadline for responding or being transparent about your expectations for receiving a response allows them to prioritize according to what matters for their job and their mission as opposed to this sense that I've got to fight a fire that just showed up in my inbox," he noted.

When an employee answers an e-mail on a weekend or late at night, managers should ask the employee why he or she is working outside of office hours and encourage the employee to go do something else, Grant recommended. "We don't want you to feel like you need to be connected and plugged in all the time, and in fact, it's important to us that whatever matters to you outside of work, whether it's family, health, leisure, friends, we want you to make space for those."

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