

How Work Can Help Us Thrive

A conversation with McKinsey's Jacqui Brassey on holistic health and burnout.

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As organizations worldwide grapple with how to support employee wellbeing, the conversation is shifting from surface-level perks to deeper, more systemic change.

Jacqui Brassey, co-leader of Healthy Workforces and director of Research Science at the McKinsey Health Institute, has been at the forefront of this shift. Her work focuses on how organizations can foster holistic health – mental, physical, social and spiritual – and why understanding the difference between burnout and exhaustion is critical to creating healthier workplaces. Work Better recently sat down with Jacqui to explore what it takes to help people thrive at work.

Work Better: What does ‘holistic health’ mean, and why is it important in the workplace?

Jacqui Brassey: At the McKinsey Health Institute, we define holistic health as integrating four dimensions: mental, physical, social and spiritual health. These are deeply interconnected. For example, physical health supports mental clarity, and social relationships can enhance emotional resilience. Spiritual health, which we define as a sense of meaning and purpose, is often overlooked but incredibly important. We’ve found that positive experiences at work are strongly associated with better holistic health.

“Work isn’t just a source of stress – it can be a powerful enabler of wellbeing when designed thoughtfully.”

JACQUI BRASSEY

WB: Burnout is on the minds of many people. How do you distinguish between burnout and exhaustion?

J.B.: That’s a crucial distinction. Burnout is often misunderstood as being tired, but it’s a multi-dimensional construct. It includes exhaustion, yes, but also mental distance (feeling detached from your work), cognitive impairment (difficulty concentrating), and emotional impairment (struggles with empathy or emotional regulation). Most surveys only measure exhaustion, which gives an incomplete picture. You can feel exhausted without being burned out, and vice versa. Understanding the full scope of burnout helps organizations respond more effectively.

WB: What are some of the most significant factors contributing to burnout today?

J.B.: Our research points to several converging trends. First, the pandemic increased awareness of health and wellbeing, especially as people began working from home. Second, the way we work has changed dramatically – hybrid models, global collaboration, and 24/7 connectivity have all added complexity. Third, the rapid acceleration of technology, including AI, is transforming jobs and creating uncertainty. All of this contributes to a sense of unpredictability and pressure. And when people don't have the tools or support to manage these demands, burnout becomes more likely.

WB: You've done global research on what drives burnout and wellbeing. What did you find?

J.B.: We surveyed 30,000 people across 30 countries and used a model that looks at job demands and enablers. Demands are things like role ambiguity, job insecurity and toxic behavior – factors that require sustained effort and can lead to stress. Enablers are resources that help people manage those demands, such as psychological safety, growth opportunities and a sense of belonging.

We found that demands are more predictive of burnout, while enablers are more predictive of positive holistic health. That means reducing burnout and promoting wellbeing require different strategies.

“You can't solve burnout with a yoga class if the real issue is toxic leadership or unclear expectations.”

JACQUI BRASSEY

WB: What should organizations be doing differently?

J.B.: First, they need to understand their baseline. Are people experiencing burnout symptoms? Are they thriving? Without that data, it's hard to know where to start. Second, interventions need to be targeted. Many organizations invest in reactive solutions, like employee assistance programs or mental health support, which are essential but insufficient. You also need proactive strategies that address the root causes of stress. And third, the most effective solutions often happen at the team level. Different teams have different needs, and empowering team leaders to recognize and respond to those needs is key.

WB: What role does the physical workplace play in all of this?

J.B.: The physical environment can either support or hinder wellbeing. Natural light, greenery and spaces for movement can boost physical and social health. On the other hand, noisy open offices or poorly designed virtual meeting schedules can increase stress. We also see the impact of screen-based work – back-to-back virtual meetings, extended work hours and reduced social interaction. Designing spaces that support sensory regulation and social connection can make a big difference.

Listen now to the full conversation in the Work Better podcast: “Burnout Isn't What You Think It Is with Jacqui Brassey.”

WB: What personal practices do you follow to maintain your wellbeing?

J.B.: I have a “personal operating model,” which includes a few non-negotiables. I walk every day between meetings or in the evening with my husband. I use a standing desk and a treadmill, and practice breathing exercises when I need to relax.

I also manage my calendar carefully. If I see a day full of back-to-back meetings, I’ll reorganize it to create breathing space. And I always block time for dinner with my family. These routines help me stay grounded and energized.

WB: Any final thoughts for leaders trying to support their teams during these uncertain times?

J.B.: Start by listening. Understand what your people are experiencing and what they need. Then build a strategy that includes both responsive and preventative measures. And remember, this isn’t just about doing the right thing – it’s also about performance. When people are well, they do better work.