

The Stress Survival Guide

*How L&D and HR Can Help Spot, Reduce,
and Prevent Burnout Before It Hits*



Table of Contents

02 Table of Contents

**03 Introduction: Stress & Burnout are
not a badge of honour**

04 Why Trust Humour?

**05 Spot stress early – The invisible
warning signs**

**06 Stress isn't a Productivity
Strategy**

**07 – 08 Building Recovery into
Daily Rhythm**

**09 Capacity Conversations Before
Crisis Conversations**

**10 Deep Dive Tools &
Frameworks for L&D and HR**

**11 Final Thoughts on Workplace
Stress**



Stress & Burnout are not a badge of honour

Somewhere along the way, workplace **stress** picked up excellent PR. Busy calendars became proof of importance, late nights signalled **commitment** and running on empty quietly became... normal. But stress isn't a **performance strategy** you want to rely on if you don't want burnout on the cards. **The reality facing organisations today is stark.**



Chronic workplace stress is now recognised by the **World Health Organisation (WHO)** as an **occupational phenomenon** linked directly to unmanaged workplace pressures. Left unchecked, it drives absenteeism, disengagement, presenteeism, and ultimately performance decline.

For L&D and HR leaders, this creates a difficult challenge, such as:

- Spotting stress before it escalates
 - Supporting managers who feel unequipped to respond
 - Building cultures that prevent burnout
- And all of this whilst business demands increase can feel impossible.



The good news?

Burnout is predictable, and knowing what stress looks like is a good starting point. Long before sick leave requests or resignation letters arrive, you'll see:

- Reduced engagement
- Decision fatigue
- Withdrawal
- Sustained overload disguised as productivity

By understanding these often-subtle signs, this eBook explores how L&D and HR teams can move beyond reactive wellbeing initiatives toward practical, everyday systems that protect energy, performance, and people.

Consider this your **practical companion** to our recently released **Resilience Essentials**, which are designed to help your teams embed sustainable performance habits.



Why Trust Humour?

At Video Arts, we don't just talk about stress management as a concept; we're all about seeing the bigger picture and creating learning that survives contact with the real workplace.

Our learning is built on a simple

observation: people rarely change behaviour because of a policy document or a 90-slide presentation. They change when learning feels relevant, realistic, and immediately usable.

Every programme we develop is created alongside **subject matter experts** from across the **world of workplace learning**. Our job is to translate their expertise into practical, actionable behaviours that organisations can implement into their strategies.

Crucially, we use **humour** to make that learning land. This matters even more when the topic is **stress**, where humour can reduce defensiveness, making it easier for people to **acknowledge pressure and engage** with the behaviours that help manage it.

Research consistently shows that **learning transfer improves** when content is **emotionally engaging** and directly applicable, principles supported by organisations such as the *Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)* and the *American Psychological Association (APA)*.

Our approach combines:

- ✓ Evidence-based insight grounded in **behavioural science**.
- ✓ **Storytelling and humour** that reflect real workplace pressure.
- ✓ **Bite-sized learning** designed for busy professionals.
- ✓ **Practical tools** managers can apply immediately.

The result?

L&D and HR teams aren't simply raising awareness about stress.

They're embedding habits that reduce absence, protect performance, and improve engagement across the organisation.

Because managing stress isn't about telling people to be more resilient. It's about giving organisations better systems — and giving managers better conversations.



Spot Stress Early: The Invisible Warning Signs

Stress and burnout are related, but they are not the same thing.

Stress is the body and mind’s response to pressure or challenge. In small doses, it can help us focus and get things done, triggering hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol that prepare the body to respond. Burnout, however, occurs when stress becomes chronic, and recovery never happens.

A useful way to think about the difference is how people experience and respond to their work:

Common Signs	Stress	Burnout
Energy levels	High but strained energy	Exhaustion and depleted energy
Engagement with work	Still engaged but overwhelmed	Detached, cynical or disengaged
Motivation	Urgent drive to keep up with demands	Loss of motivation or sense of purpose
Emotional response	Irritability, anxiety, feeling pressured	Hopelessness, apathy, emotional numbness
Productivity	Busy and overworking	Reduced performance and difficulty functioning
Recovery	Stress may improve with rest or resolution	Rarely improves without intervention

The key difference is that stress keeps people running, even if they feel pressured, while burnout eventually stops them altogether. This is why recognising stress early is so important. When pressure continues without recovery, the risk of burnout increases significantly.



Top Tip: Help Teams Share Challenges Early

One of the **most effective ways to prevent burnout** is simply making pressure easier to talk about. **L&D and HR teams can support** this by introducing low-friction ways for employees to surface workload challenges early.

- Short pulse surveys
- Reflective questions during team meetings
- Regular manager check-ins.

It’s unrealistic and even unproductive to try and eliminate pressure all together. The aim should be to **ensure organisations can see when pressure is building** and respond before it becomes unsustainable.

Stress isn't a Productivity Strategy

Stress can feel rewarding in the moment.

When deadlines are looming, and the to-do list is shrinking, crossing tasks off can produce a genuine sense of satisfaction, a bit like reaching for a quick sugar boost – it feels good in the moment, but it doesn't sustain you for long.

That's because something often described as "stress addiction" can develop. When we operate under pressure, the body releases not only adrenaline and cortisol, but also dopamine, a chemical linked to motivation and reward. The short-term payoff can feel energising, even exhilarating.

But you might be wondering: if a little stress helps us get things done, why can't we simply rely on it as a productivity strategy?

Well, as with most quick rewards, the effects don't last.

Over time, repeated cycles of high pressure and short-term reward can create physical and mental strain. Chronic stress can impair concentration and decision-making by disrupting activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex, reduce memory formation through its impact on the hippocampus, and heighten emotional reactivity by over-activating the amygdala.

What that means (minus the science jargon) is stress may create bursts of activity, but it doesn't support sustainable productivity. It's why high-performing organisations don't rely on stress to drive output and instead design systems that help people prioritise effectively and manage workload, before pressure becomes overwhelming.

Our **Resilience Essentials** learning series is a great example of the sort of learning that encourages these effective practices.



Building Recovery into Daily Rhythm

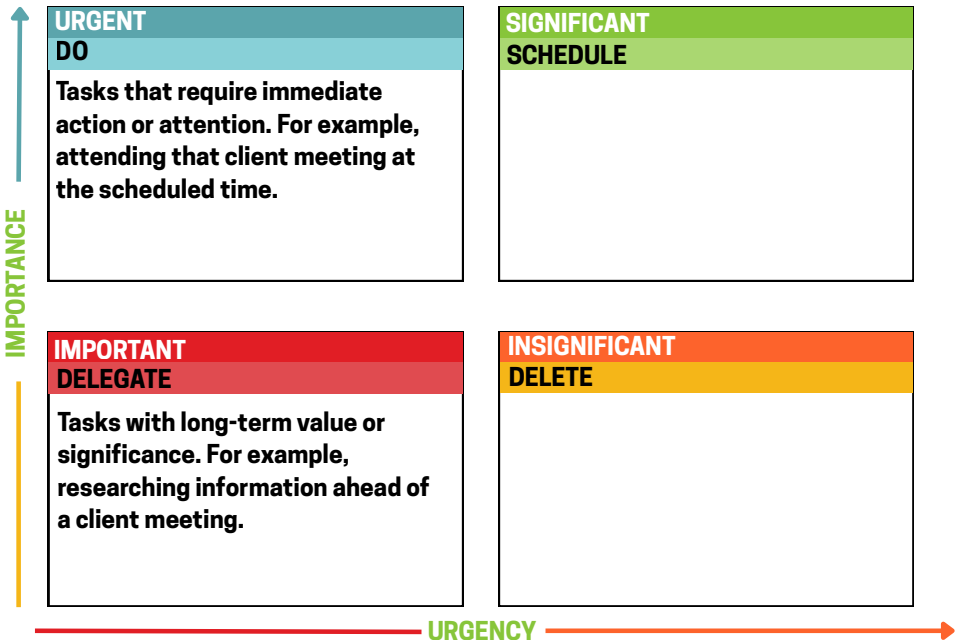
So far, we’ve explored how to identify stress, how it can become a problem, and why it matters for organisations. The next step is solutions.

Implementing structural methods like the **Urgent vs Important Matrix** is a great start to developing a sustainable wellbeing strategy.

The Eisenhower Matrix

Also known as the Important vs Urgent matrix is a **task management tool** which helps you visualise the chaotic to-do list in your mind into matters of importance or urgency.

Both may strike fear in similar ways but there is a nuanced difference that can put your mind at ease:



Understanding the difference helps people prioritise more clearly and avoid treating everything as an emergency.

Building Recovery into Daily Rhythm Continued...

Other Ideas to try

Micro-breaks:

Organisations that have a hybrid or remote working style may naturally encourage this practice. It's safe to say that you feel less guilty stepping away from a desk at home, but in the physical workplaces, there's still an **unspoken stigma** around taking mini breaks. Perhaps it's a leftover instinct from our school days when you had to ask permission just to go to the bathroom. Either way, breaking this mindset is **a good step towards making sure people aren't quietly overworking**. After all, the human body isn't meant to sit still for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week.



Energy management:

Energy management is about **considering the demands placed on you and balancing them with rest and recovery**. It can help to visualise energy as something that can be drained or replenished.

Things like **exercise, sleep, social interaction, and personal reflection** are classic ways to recharge. But energy management is also highly personal. A chat in the break room might refill one person's energy levels while completely draining another, whose ideal reset might be a quick walk around the block.

Either way research demonstrates that when organisations encourage employees to reflect on how work affects their energy levels, it can improve job satisfaction and reduce emotional exhaustion.



Mental reset:

"Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

When it comes to the brain, this idea isn't half bad.

A **mental reset** is the deliberate act of stepping away from your routine to check whether you're functioning at a sustainable level. When everything is constantly go-go-go, **cognitive fatigue** can creep in without us even noticing. Micro-breaks, digital detoxes, creative pursuits, practising mindfulness and stepping outside for some fresh air (literally touching grass) are all ways we can mentally reset. Once again, these will look different for different people, which is why a personalised learning approach often achieves better results. Imagine a chatbot tool that assesses an individual employee and guides them to the best styles for them (we have one of those, wink wink).



Bringing it all together

Ultimately, preventing burnout isn't about asking people to simply tough it out. It's about creating systems and habits that allow people to perform well without constantly running on empty.



Capacity Conversations Before Crisis Conversations

Without **open communication**, pressure can quietly build until organisations find themselves dealing with a crisis, which isn't ideal for anyone involved.

Problems often arise when organisations treat capacity as if it were fixed. Because stress can be surprisingly silent, it's easy to assume everything is fine. "Stacy was managing her workload last month, so surely she's fine now?" especially if the tasks themselves haven't changed.

But that assumption doesn't always hold up. Stacy might have been operating right at the edge of her capacity last month and simply didn't mention it because she was just concerned about managing. Additionally, if something changes **outside of work** such as family pressures, health issues, or simply a run of bad sleep, the same workload can suddenly feel very different.

The point here is that capacity isn't static; it shifts constantly.

This is where one of the simplest management skills becomes one of the most powerful: checking in. **Regular check-ins** give managers the chance to notice when pressure is building and adjust workloads before it becomes unsustainable.

The Role of Managers

For many employees, the first place they raise concerns isn't HR, it's their manager. And that's usually a good thing. Escalating something formally can feel like a big step. Not intimidating exactly, but often a last resort when smaller conversations haven't solved the problem.

Managers, therefore, play a crucial role in **spotting early signals** and **creating a space** where people feel comfortable saying things like:

- “My workload is getting a bit stretched”
- “I might need help prioritising this week”
- “Something has to give if this new task is urgent”

Like anything worth doing, building communication like this with teams takes time, trust, and practice. That's why we encourage organisations to put **practical leadership learning** in place to support managers' upskilling.

When Crisis Conversations Are Needed

None of this means crisis conversations never happen. Sometimes pressure has already built to the point where someone is exhausted, disengaged or overwhelmed.

When that happens, the priority shifts from prevention to support and recovery. That might involve redistributing work, adjusting expectations, or involving HR and wellbeing specialists where appropriate.

The key difference is that organisations with strong day-to-day conversations tend to reach this point far less often.



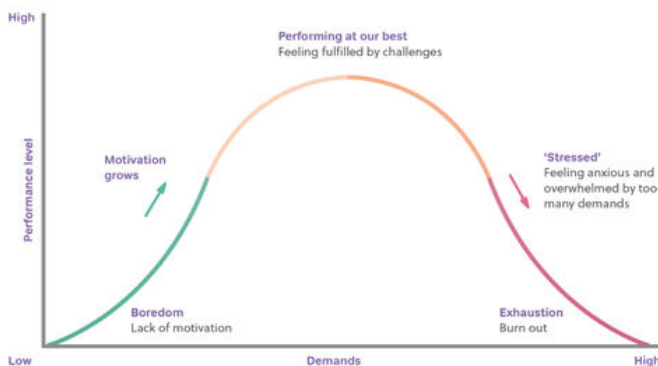
Deep Dive Tools & Frameworks for L&D and HR

Practical tools can make it much easier for managers and teams to recognise pressure, adjust workloads, and build recovery into the working day.

The Stress Curve

Based on the Yerkes-Dodson Law, the **stress curve** shows how **pressure affects performance**.

Too little pressure and people get bored and lack motivation to do their best work. On the other hand, piling too much and people get overwhelmed, and productivity is outweighed by stress. Where you want to be is right in the middle.



(The Stress Graph Curve – provided by MindWell (NHS))

Workload Thermometer

Not all tasks are created equal. Some energise people, others quietly suck the life out of them. For example, constantly working to tight deadlines, managing conflicting priorities, or handling high volumes of reactive work (like emails or urgent requests) can quickly become draining.

By contrast, tasks that align with upskilling, provide a manageable challenge and boost engagement tend to be energising. This might include focused project work, learning a new skill, or working towards a clear, achievable goal where progress is visible.

Research shows that chronic high-demand tasks without recovery impair focus, decision-making, and motivation. By contrast, tasks that align with upskilling, provide a manageable challenge and boost engagement tend to be energising.

The Workload Thermometer is a simple visual tool to help teams spot **high-drain** versus **energising work**, so managers can balance workloads before stress spirals.

Draining

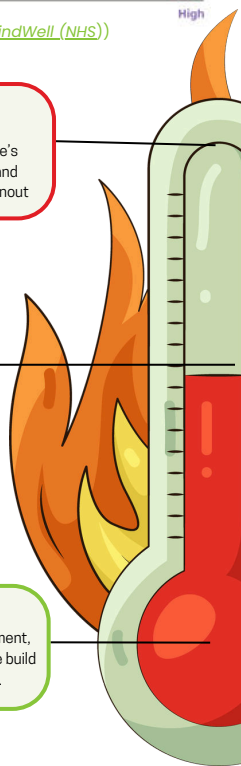
Tasks that feel overwhelming, monotonous, or outside someone's capacity. These deplete energy and increase the risk of stress or burnout

Neutral

Routine tasks that neither drain nor energise, these are important to get done but should be balanced with more fulfilling work.

Energising

Tasks that give a sense of achievement, flow, or creative satisfaction. These build resilience and keep motivation high.



These tools give L&D and HR teams (and their managers) a first step: spotting pressure early, rebalancing workloads, and building recovery into the day. For organisations looking to take it further, our **Resilience Essentials: Stress and Burnout series** complements these frameworks with expert-led learning that helps embed sustainable habits and practical skills across teams.

Final Thoughts on Workplace Stress...

Stress is inevitable. Burnout doesn't have to be.

Prevention is far easier and far less costly than firefighting. By recognising pressure early, balancing workloads, and embedding recovery habits into daily routines, organisations can protect performance, improve engagement, and support wellbeing.

Achieving these outcomes doesn't have to be complicated. Simple, bite-sized learning experiences, like microlearning modules, can equip managers and teams with the skills to spot stress, support recovery, and embed resilient behaviours every day.

If you want to explore how practical, expert-led learning can help your organisation make this happen, **get in touch** to find out more. Remember, stress is part of work, but burnout does not have to be. Spot it, manage it, and build resilience before it hits.



Explore the new Resilience and Stress courses from Video Arts...

When your people bend without breaking, your organisation moves further, faster. Strong resilience skills don't just help individuals feel better, they strengthen collaboration, reduce stress-related absence and lift overall performance in ways that are felt across teams.



AI Anxiety



Mental Health & Wellbeing



Human-Centric Leadership



Diversity & Inclusion



Management Essentials:
Motivating your Team



Embracing a Learning Culture

Want to build a workforce that adapts confidently? Stays engaged under pressure and maintains performance without burning out?
Look no further...

