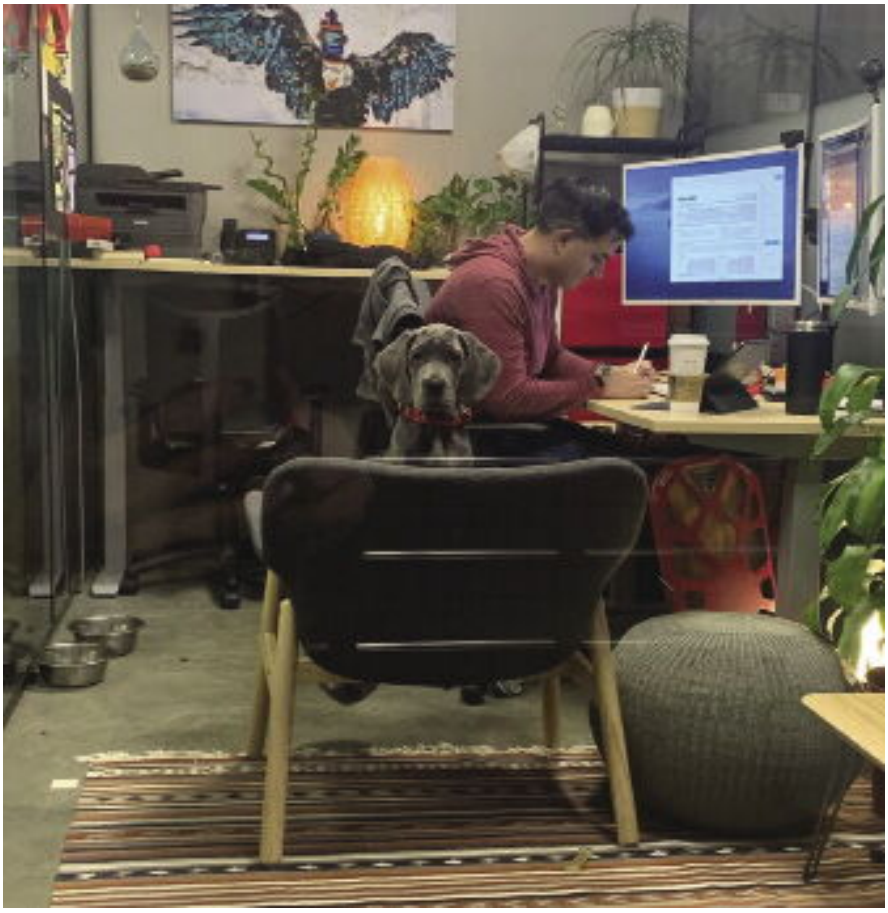
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Calm Together: New ways to help workers cope with stress



Puppy love: A dog day afternoon for workers at District New Haven, where canine companions are always welcome.

BY NATALIE MISSAKIAN
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Araina Martinez settles into a portable massage chair, closes her eyes and lets her work worries melt away. As soothing music plays in the background, a therapist gently kneads the muscles in her back, neck and shoulders.

This is no weekend spa getaway or lunch-break physical therapy appointment. It is a Monday afternoon. In the middle of the workday. And Martinez, supervisor of central scheduling at Griffin Hospital in Derby, is on the clock.

"It's a nice little relaxing few minutes where you don't have to think about anything," says Martinez, 37, who briefly stepped away from her job to get a free chair massage, courtesy of her employer. "It's nice to have that little break during the day."



In the past, workplace wellness programs focused mostly on improving employees' physical health. Programs to help workers lose weight, stop smoking or manage cholesterol were commonplace. But rarely did companies devote resources to helping their workers cope with stressful jobs and lives. That's starting to change.

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While Griffin has been offering on-site chair massage, meditation and other perks to promote mindfulness and relaxation for decades, other employers are now following suit.

Recognizing the toll that anxiety and high-stress jobs can take on employee health — and productivity — companies are introducing everything from yoga classes and meditation rooms to designated napping spaces, sleep monitoring apps, bring-your-pet-to-work policies and even on-site mental health counseling. Others are providing their workers with access to ping pong tables, bocce courts and walking trails to encourage fun activities and help them blow off steam.

New Haven's biggest employer, Yale New Haven Health System, began offering "serenity stations" last year under a pilot program that aims to mitigate both the physical and mental demands of work in the medical field. The stations, which can be requested and set up in any department, include stress-relievers like chair massage, guided meditation and reiki, which is a healing touch therapy.

"Employees have responded really well to it," Lindsay Marone, YNHH's supervisor of well-being programs, told *New Haven BIZ*. "The services have been shown to reduce [their] overall fatigue, stress and anxiety."

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Growing health concern

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Nationwide, employees are reporting more job-related stress and anxiety than ever before. More than 80 percent of U.S. workers report experiencing work-related stress, costing businesses as much as $300 billion annually, according to statistics compiled by the American Institute of Stress.

The World Health Organization shone a spotlight on the problem last year when it officially recognized burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” caused by “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” The condition is marked by exhaustion, negative feelings toward one’s job and reduced professional performance.



At Yale New Haven, reiki therapist Nancy Monk provides a healing touch at a ‘serenity station’ for employees. / PHOTO | Yale New Haven Health

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“People are feeling more fried. They’re overtaxed and, with today’s technology, they’re ‘on’ all the time,” explains LuAnn Heinen, vice president of the Business Group on Health, a non-profit



advocacy group for large employers in health-care policy. “Companies are asking, ‘What else can we do to improve the employee experience and show our understanding and support?”

It’s not just health-care companies offering programs to ease workplace stress. Major corporations like Nike, General Mills and Unilever all offer dedicated relaxation spaces at their headquarters where employees can recharge during the day.

Anne Peabody Brostek, state council director for the Connecticut Society for Human Resources Management, says large tech companies have led the way when it comes to stress-busting perks, but the idea is catching on in other industries.

“It’s the Google effect,” she says, referencing the tech giant known for its over-the-top amenities, including a bowling alley, basketball court, nap pods and stocked ‘micro-kitchens’ at its Silicon Valley campus. “I think [companies] are more open to these new approaches to having their associates or employees be comfortable at work.”

Employers benefit as well. Amenities can help companies compete for new talent and keep existing employees while boosting their performance. “It’s been scientifically proven that if you step away from an intense project and go back to it, your productivity increases,” says Brostek.

At District New Haven, the Elm City’s own Silicon Valley-style innovation and co-working campus, which opened in 2018, tenants can take a break to play bocce, ping pong or hike the nature trails around the campus.

There’s also a yoga studio and sauna in the on-site athletic club, which is free to District tenants, as well as quiet nooks throughout the building where workers can go to relax, explains Erika Stine, director of community and culture. There are now 140 companies that call District home, from small tech startups to major law firms.

“This is where people are most productive,” says Stine, “when they’re not trapped in a space from 8 to 5 or 9 to 5. When they have the liberty to go take a walk and reset their brain and come back refreshed.

“It blows my mind how many people will leave their desks in the middle of the day and go play ping pong,” she adds.

Recently, Stine introduced a “gratitude station” in the shared kitchen. Workers are encouraged to start their workday by writing down what they are grateful for and placing the note in a jar set up alongside a jug of fruit-infused spa water. “It’s just nice to have people start their morning mindfully hydrated,” she explains. Stine shares the messages with District workers at the end of every workweek.

“Anything that we can do to provide a nice working atmosphere for people to de-stress and get work done, I’m trying to make that happen,” she says.

Calming canines



Employers are also harnessing the calming power of animals and allowing their workers to bring pets to work. Companies like Uber, Airbnb and Amazon all welcome dogs in the workplace. At District, there are typically a half-dozen pups on any given day, says Stine, whose French bulldog, Arya Bark, has become an unofficial mascot.

"People definitely like coming in and seeing the dogs," she explains. "It just brings them happiness."

At energy startup Budderfly in Shelton, Mary Ann Jacob brings her two golden retrievers, Calvin and Franklin, to work with her every day. The dogs are good-natured, so her boss mostly gives them free rein around the office.

"If you're a dog lover, you know that having dogs around can be super comforting and can reduce stress," says Jacob, Budderfly's director of incentive management. Studies have shown that interacting with animals can lower blood pressure and levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Jacob says her co-workers seem to enjoy having the dogs around. They've been known to lighten the mood during tense moments.

"A dog will walk around with a ball in his mouth and drop it at someone's feet," she says. "If we're in a meeting and the dogs are there, they can just kind of lower the temperature if there's a stressful discussion going on."

Culture shift

Suzy Clausen, a licensed professional counselor and a health transformation consultant for global professional services firm Aon, says that while perks are great for attracting and retaining employees, they're not enough to keep a workplace emotionally healthy.

Not every company can afford to provide perks like corporate massage — and not all employees feel comfortable taking time off to use them, Clausen notes. Often, participation starts strong but dwindles. She says that's especially true if the services aren't embraced or being used by managers.

"If it's in a setting where you're expected to work 60 hours a week but [you're told to] stop and get a massage, you might not see employees jumping in to use that," she says.

Clausen says that changing a corporate culture to one that embraces emotional fitness "will have a much more lasting impact financially than just putting in place one or two perks."

"It's about creating that sense of belonging," she explains. "Having that really good relationship among teams and with leadership is a great way to reduce stress, and it's something they can start implementing right away."

At Griffin Hospital, emotional wellness is embedded in the hospital culture and has been for decades, says Diane Betkoski, the hospital's director of Planetree Services. (Planetree



International is an organization that emphasizes patient-centered and compassionate health care. Griffin adopted the model in 1992 and is the organization's flagship hospital.)

Caregivers are not only encouraged to take advantage of the healing therapies offered, such as reiki and soft touch, but are trained to administer them to one another.

On a recent visit, a pianist performed soothing music in the hospital lobby, aimed at creating a calm environment for patients and staff.

Other conveniences, such as free dry cleaning and an on-site hair salon, aim to make busy lives a little less hectic, Betkoski said.

For programs like the 20-minute chair massage, which is offered to departments on Monday afternoons on a rotating basis, managers are tasked with spreading the word and encouraging employees to sign up.

"I keep a little list so once our department comes up I will rotate my staff so that everyone has a chance, and if you're not feeling up to it, that's okay. I can shuffle someone else in the slot," says Martinez, the central scheduling supervisor.

She adds that her workers typically return from the sessions refreshed and "not so on-edge."

"We deal with a lot of incoming phone calls that can push you a little bit," she says. "This definitely relaxes them."

"I do try to get people to go," Martinez adds. "And of course, I put myself on the list, too."

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