

workhuman\*

# How to Build Psychological Safety

FINDINGS FROM THE LATEST WORKHUMAN SURVEY DATA





# What is psychological safety?

Have you ever witnessed something at work that just didn't sit right with you? Did you voice your concern or keep it to yourself? How easy is it sharing feedback with your colleagues?

Your answers to these questions are largely dependent on the amount of psychological safety present in your team. Harvard professor Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as “a shared belief that I can bring my full self to work, that I will not be humiliated or made to feel less good about myself if I speak up with ideas, with questions, with concerns, and yes, even with mistakes.”

And as the world of work evolves, psychological safety only becomes more critical. In fact, Google's People Operations team conducted an internal study of more than 250 attributes of more than 180 Google teams. **They found the number one driver of successful teams is psychological safety – feeling safe to take risks and be vulnerable at work.**

# Why does psychological safety matter?

Psychological safety is linked to several metrics top of mind for any HR or business leader. According to [Gallup](#), moving the needle on psychological safety can lead to:

**27%**

reduction in **turnover**

**40%**

reduction in **safety incidents**

**12%**

increase in **productivity**

“Nearly all of the work we do today is what you might call knowledge work,” says Edmondson. “When people lack a sense of psychological safety, they will be reluctant to share, use, and integrate their knowledge – so it’s absolutely mission-critical to building a healthy and effective team.”

# The state of the workplace in 2021

Let's bring this concept to the current work landscape. More than a year into a global pandemic, how are employees feeling? What impact do those sentiments have on psychological safety in our organizations? Are there opportunities to improve?

The Workhuman research team set out to answer these questions and more in a survey administered to more than 3,000 U.S. workers in March 2021. Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with the following:

- **I experienced burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- **Within the last week I felt lonely during the workday.**
- **On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the most stressed, how would you rate your stress level since the COVID-19 pandemic began?**

## The bottom line?

Employees are burned out, stressed, and lonely. Across industries and employee groups, the data reveals:

**48%**

somewhat or strongly agree they've **experienced burnout**

**61%**

have experienced **elevated stress levels**

**32%**

somewhat or strongly agree they've **felt lonely at work**

These numbers are the aggregate of countless individual stories of hardship and challenges endured this year. But there's more to the story. When the data is filtered by gender, women are shown to be more stressed and burned out than their male colleagues. A deeper dive reveals this difference largely stems from an employee's status as a working parent. Mothers were most adversely affected this year, leading to what some are calling a "she-cession."

# Psychological safety in 2021

When employees are burned out, stressed, and lonely, are they able to speak up and bring their full selves to work? Do they feel they have a level of social support that's critical for innovation and engagement to flourish?

To answer these questions, each person's level of psychological safety was given a rating based on a combination of their answers to these seven statements:

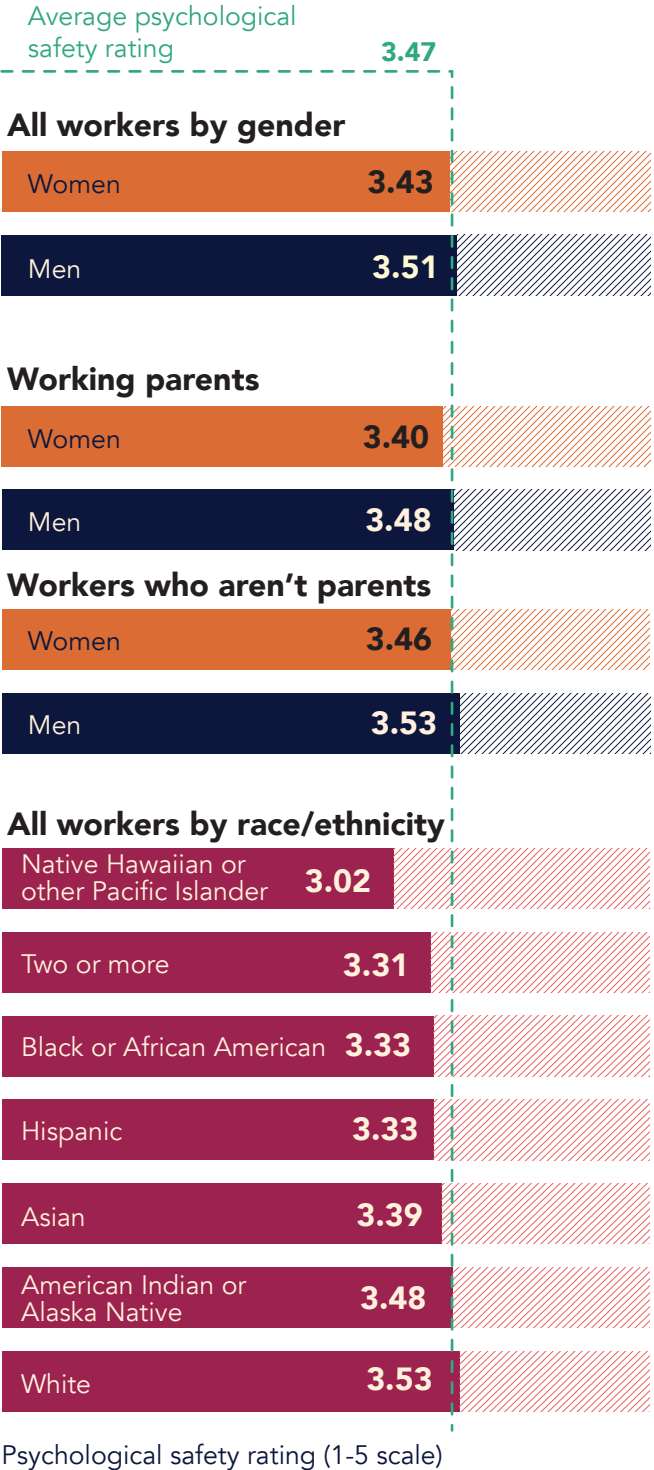
- **If I make a mistake at work, it is often held against me.**
- **People at this organization are able to bring up problems and tough issues.**
- **People at this organization sometimes reject others for being different.**
- **I feel safe to take a risk at this organization.**
- **It is difficult to ask other employees at this organization for help.**
- **No one at this organization would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.**
- **Working with members of this organization, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.**

Across employee groups, the data shows an average rating of 3.47 for psychological safety. That alone doesn't tell us much. Further analysis reveals three critical insights:

**1** Men experience higher psychological safety.

**2** Working parents have lower psychological safety compared to workers who aren't parents.

**3** White employees experience the highest levels of psychological safety.



Imagine how much time and resources would be salvaged if organizations could move the needle on psychological safety – if all employees, and especially underrepresented groups, felt more comfortable sharing ideas and contributing to the success of your organization.

**Based on the data from this survey, there are two practical ways you can boost psychological safety.**

# ONE

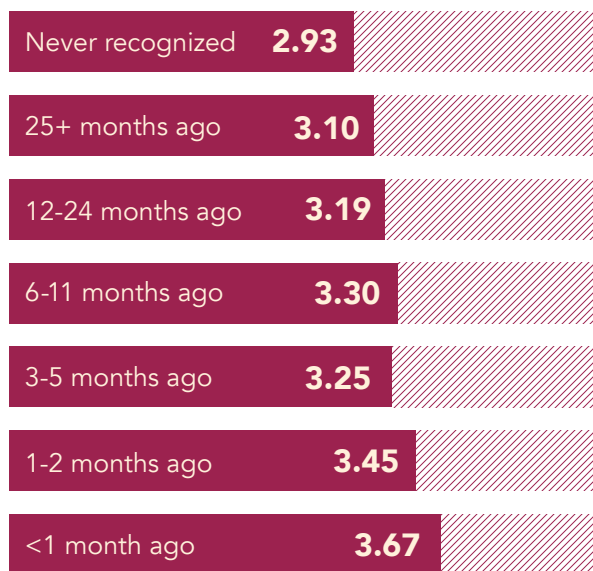
## Say “thank you” more often.

Only 51% of respondents said they’ve been thanked at work in the last month. And yet data reveals psychological safety is highest for employees recognized within the last month and lowest for those never recognized.

To make gratitude a habit, set time aside each week to think about which of your colleagues stepped

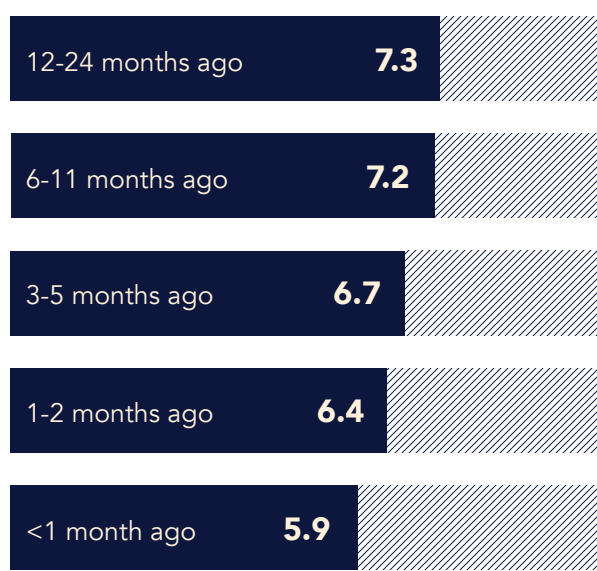
up to deliver for the business. Then take the time to tell that person you appreciate them – and be specific about what you appreciate. You might even be helping buffer stress in the process. For male working parents in particular, recognition is related to significantly lower stress levels.

### Psychological safety highest for employees recognized within the last month



Psychological safety rating (1-5 scale)

### Stress levels lowest for male working parents when recognized within the last month



Stress rating (1-10 scale)

## TWO

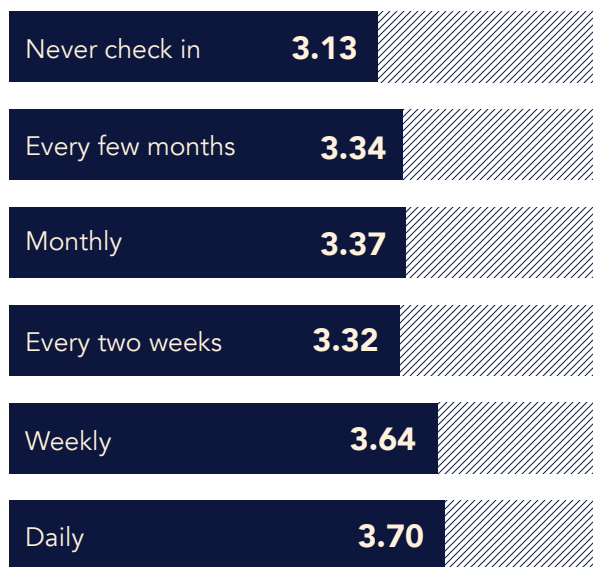
### Check in with employees more frequently.

In a hybrid or remote work situation where priorities constantly shift, this becomes even more critical. Psychological safety is highest for employees who check in with their manager at least once per week and lower for those who check in less frequently. And yet, only 29% of

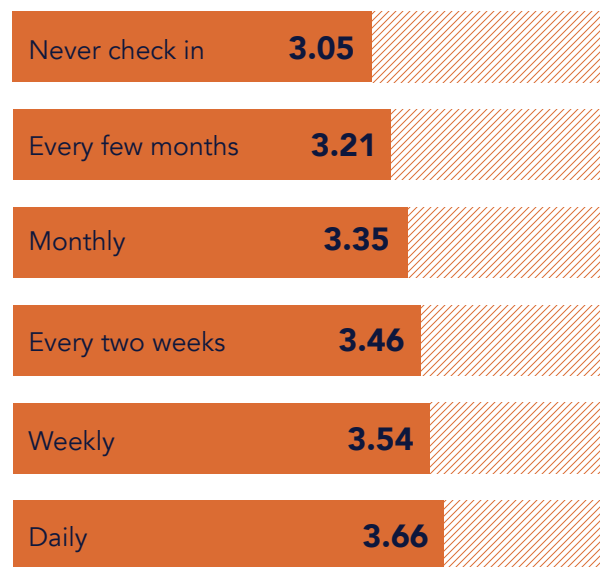
respondents said they check in with their manager every week.

When done right and set up in a regular cadence, check-ins become an opportunity to build trust and set a foundation of positivity for the manager-employee relationship.

#### Frequent manager check-ins are associated with higher psychological safety for men and women.



**Men** Psychological safety rating (1-5 scale)



**Women** Psychological safety rating (1-5 scale)

# In summary

At its core, psychological safety is about feeling comfortable bringing your whole, human self to work. For employers, it's about empowerment – trusting the humans you've hired to do the jobs they were hired to do. Allowing them to use their voices and show up in their teams. These two simple tactics – recognizing more frequently and establishing a cadence of check-ins – can go a long way in creating an inclusive and psychologically safe environment for your people.



**To learn more about how Workhuman Cloud can help build a culture of trust, contact us today.**

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