

Jake Breeden
Detoxing Management

STRESS

The Silent Rhythm of Workplace Stress

New study reveals link between white-collar work and atrial fibrillation.

Updated August 19, 2024 | Reviewed by Jessica Schrader



THE BASICS

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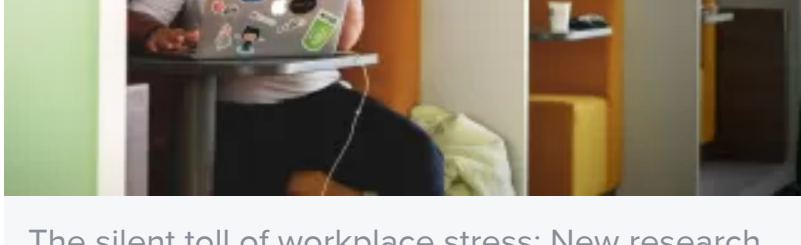
KEY POINTS

- A new 18-year study links job strain and effort-reward imbalance to the risk of atrial fibrillation (AFib).
- Workers experiencing high job strain had an 83% higher risk of developing AFib.
- Creating healthier work environments could potentially reduce AFib risk among employees.

Your heart races unexpectedly, pounding against your chest. You feel a flutter, an irregularity in its beat. Shortness of breath follows, accompanied by weakness and fatigue. These aren't just symptoms of a stressful day at the office—they could be signs of atrial fibrillation (AFib), a heart condition that new research suggests may be linked to the very nature of our work lives.

Consider Jay King, an engineer at Abbott with over 16 years of experience in high-stakes roles. From vascular production to leading special projects in rapid diagnostics, Jay's career mirrors that of many professionals navigating today's demanding corporate landscape. In 2020, he even played a crucial role in Abbott's COVID-19 testing ramp-up. Yet, despite his active lifestyle, a routine physical revealed an unexpected diagnosis: Jay was in AFib.

New Research Unveils Workplace-AFib Connection



The silent toll of workplace stress: New research suggests that the pressure felt at workers could be more than just a productivity issue—it may be a heart health concern.
Source: Tim Gouw/Pexels

A recent 18-year prospective study published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* sheds light on why professionals like Jay might be at risk. The research, led by Canadian researchers and published last week in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, examined the relationship between psychosocial stressors at work and AFib incidence among nearly 6,000 white-collar workers.

The findings are striking:

- Workers exposed to high job strain (high demands combined with low control) had an 83% increased risk of developing AFib.
- Those experiencing an effort-reward imbalance at work (high effort with low recognition or compensation) faced a 44% higher risk.
- Individuals exposed to both these stressors had nearly double the risk of AFib compared to their less-stressed counterparts.

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But what exactly is AFib? It's the most common form of heart arrhythmia, affecting about 1 in 4 middle-aged adults in their lifetime. During AFib, the heart's upper chambers beat chaotically and irregularly, out of coordination with the lower chambers. This can lead to blood clots, stroke, heart failure, and other heart-related complications.

The study's findings illuminate how our modern work environments might be contributing to this health risk. Long hours, high-pressure deadlines, constant connectivity, and the blurring of work-life boundaries are all hallmarks of many white-collar jobs. These factors can create a perfect storm of chronic stress, potentially setting the stage for heart issues like AFib.

Detoxing Management: A Heart-Healthy Approach

This research underscores the critical need for what I call "detoxing management." It's not just about productivity anymore; it's about creating work environments that don't jeopardize our health. Managers and organizational leaders have a crucial role to play in mitigating these risks.

While the link between workplace stress and AFib risk is concerning, there are proactive steps both managers and employees can take to create healthier work environments. My own heart attack last year sparked a deep curiosity about the relationship between work and heart health. This personal experience, combined with my work on detoxing management, led me to develop the RISE Framework for Healthy Leadership, which offers guidance that can be particularly relevant in light of this new research:

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- Relate:** Managers should get to know their team members as individuals. Understanding each person's strengths and how they best contribute can reduce stress and increase job satisfaction.
- Inspire:** Foster a sense of purpose in your team's work. When employees believe in the meaning of their efforts, it can make hard work feel rewarding rather than draining.
- Simplify:** Clear expectations and focused priorities can significantly reduce workplace stress. Conflicting demands are often more stressful than hard work itself.
- Empower:** Give employees a sense of control over their work. This agency can act as a buffer against the negative effects of job strain.

By implementing these principles, leaders can create work environments that are not only more productive but also potentially healthier for employees' hearts.

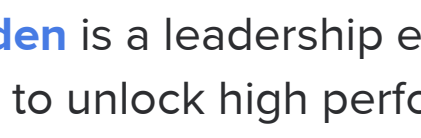
The implications of this research extend far beyond the individual. They challenge us to reconsider our work cultures and management practices. As we strive for success in our careers, we must also prioritize creating environments that support our health and well-being.

Awareness is the first step. By recognizing the potential health impacts of workplace stress, we can begin to make informed choices—both as individuals managing our own careers and as leaders shaping our organizations. The rhythm of our work lives shouldn't come at the cost of our heart's rhythm. It's time to listen closely to what our bodies are telling us about our work, and to create workplaces that truly work for our health.

References

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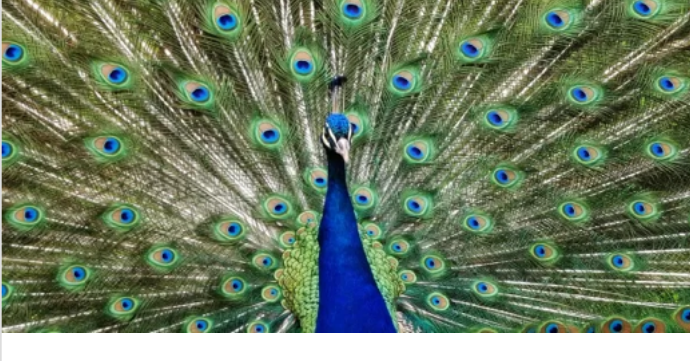
About the Author



Jake Breeden is a leadership expert who partners with companies to unlock high performance through workshops on influence, trust, psychological safety, team performance, innovation, and challenging the status quo.

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