



**Use this stress performance curve to determine if your team is burning out**

Everyone knows what too much stress looks like. Most of us are experiencing it firsthand as we make our way through the global COVID-19 pandemic.

But it's worth remembering what stress can look like when it's balanced properly.

*"We're not trying to get rid of feelings of stress, we're harnessing them,"* says Dr. Amy Cirbus, director of clinical content at Talkspace. *"We think clearer and sharper under stress, and it motivates us to get things done."*

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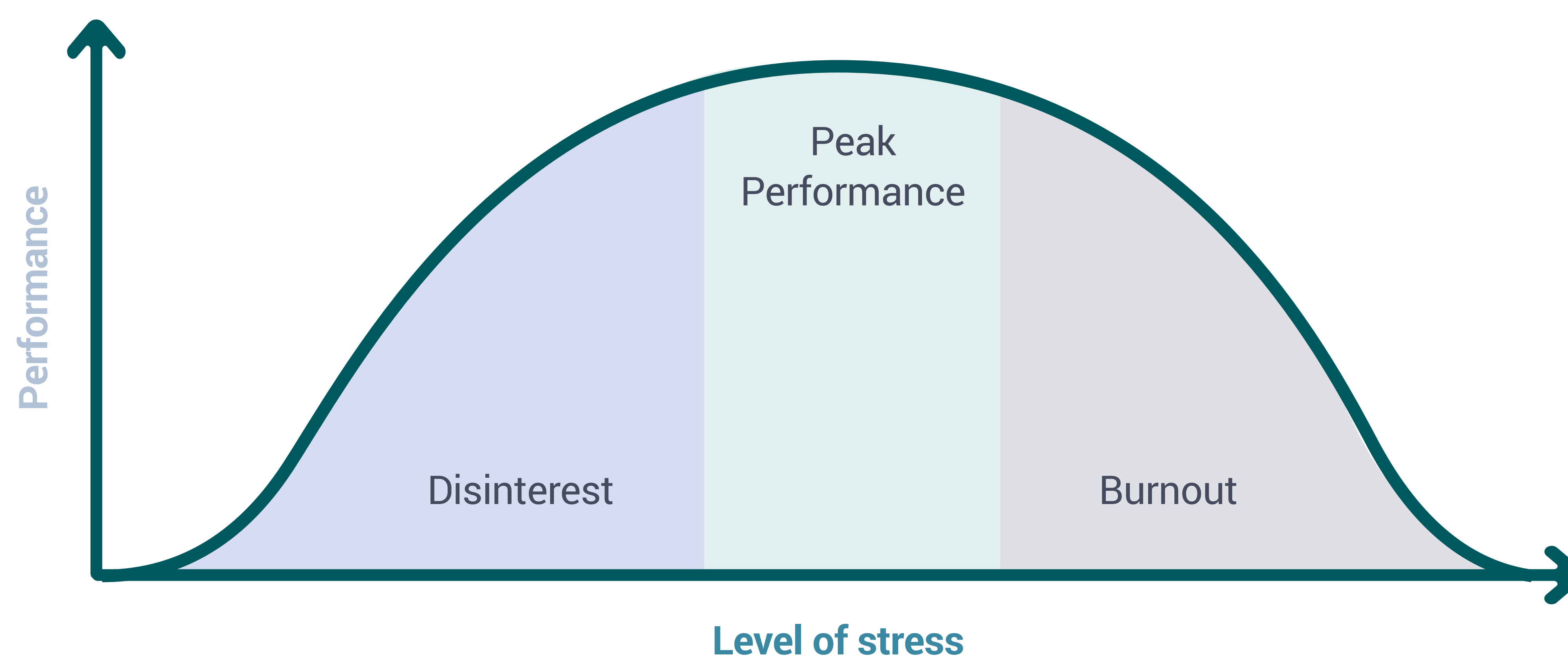
clinical content at Talkspace. *"We think clearer and sharper under stress, and it motivates us to get things done."* But work under too much stress for too long, she warns, and people slip into burnout.

*"When you're in burnout mode, you're paralyzed by stress and not actually able to work through it,"* says Dr. Cirbus.

We are at the forefront of a burnout epidemic. Combating burnout, however, isn't solely a matter of reducing stress. The nuanced approach of viewing performance—and stress levels—on a spectrum is part of building a motivated, healthy workforce. The stress performance curve is one method of understanding that spectrum.

## What is the stress performance curve?

The stress performance curve is a model for mapping the relationship between how much stress someone is experiencing with their ability to achieve their goals.



The idea of the stress performance curve originated in the work of Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in 1908. It's also known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law or the Inverted-U. Yerkes and Dodson posited that performance improves as stress levels rise—but only to a certain point, after which performance drops off.

On the left side of the curve, you have disinterest. Here, employees are bored and unmotivated by their work. They may seek out other opportunities because they feel like they aren't growing professionally.

At the top of the curve, employees are engaged in challenging but exciting work. Stress is there, but it's not overwhelming. This point is where harnessing stress, as Dr. Cirbus recommends, comes into play.

"Setting ambitious goals is good. People want to feel motivated," she says

After the peak, employees can quickly descend into exhaustion and burnout due to prolonged and intense stress. The World Health Organization supports this trend, classifying burnout as a syndrome caused by chronic workplace stress

**What exactly does burnout look like? Dr. Cirbus lists cynicism, dread, apathy, and emotional volatility, alongside trouble sleeping, headaches, stomachaches, and physical exhaustion, as symptoms of burnout. In white-collar workplaces, burnout is often expressed in anger, blame, and poor communication. Meanwhile, in blue-collar jobs, absenteeism and fatigue are highly in play.**



Amy Cirbus PhD, LPC, LMHC

## How to balance stress and fight burnout

Helping employees achieve peak performance is a balancing act. Work should be challenging enough to be engaging, but you also need safeguards to avoid burnout. To get employees to the top of the curve, organizations must help them find purpose in their work while also making sure their plate isn't too full.

### Make work meaningful

Purpose and meaning are essential drivers of employee engagement. One study shows that the majority of employees would even trade lower wages for more meaningful work.

So how do you make work more meaningful for employees? There are a number of ways—but one key method is challenging them. Push team members to do their best work in their favorite parts of their job.

Adding a bit of stress to their plate might sound unkind—but you're actually helping your employees. According to psychologist Kelly McGonigal, stress is a key ingredient of purposeful work.

“Stress and meaning are inextricably linked,” says McGonigal, author of *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It*. “You don’t stress out about things you don’t care about, and you can’t create a meaningful life without experiencing some stress.”

Don’t just crank up the pressure and expect top performance, though. Employees need support and encouragement to do their best work.

### **1. Reward hard work**

This recognition helps make the stress that is a natural part of work feel worth it. “Humans need to feel on a personal level that we’re seen and heard and valued,” says Dr. Cirbus.

Gallup found that recognizing employees increases engagement, improves productivity, and makes employees feel more loyal to their company. Unfortunately, only one in three workers in the United States said they received praise or recognition for good performance in the last week.

Allow employees and managers alike to offer public praise with a tool like Lattice. You may also consider gifts when employees reach a milestone or achievement.

### **2. Offer manager training**

Managers have a huge impact on employee engagement: up to a 70% difference, in fact. Unfortunately, most managers receive little or no training on how to coach employees. Meanwhile, employees who poorly rated their managers were four times more likely to be looking for another job.

Consider including training on coaching and soft skills in a management training course.

### **3. Emphasize learning**

A culture of learning is linked to employee engagement. It also improves retention: 94% of respondents in LinkedIn’s 2020 Learning Report said that they were more likely to stay at a company that invests in professional learning opportunities.

Since many workers will continue to work from home through 2021 due to COVID-19, make sure your learning and professional development plans are adapted to a remote environment.

## **Address burnout**

The reality is that many employees are burned out because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The stress of living through extended isolation and grief is almost, by definition, more than people can manage on their own.

Workplaces can exacerbate that stress when they don’t make accommodations to address burnout. So what can you do to help your employees?

### **1. Watch for signs of burnout in manager one-on-ones**

Managers have the closest day-to-day contact with employees and, therefore, should be trained to help catch the signs of burnout and address them.

If managers notice behavioral changes, they should ask employees questions about their wellbeing and then help them come up with solutions. That may mean taking more PTO or reducing workloads. It can also be powerful for managers to share their own experiences with burnout, stress, or mental health challenges as a way to create space for employees to seek mental health support.

## 2. Adjust workloads

Unmanageable workloads are one of the top five causes of burnout, according to Gallup. And according to a recent survey by Harvard Business Review, 56% of survey respondents said that their workplace wellbeing has declined because of increased job demands.

Reducing meetings is one way to give employees time back. Another is conducting a workload analysis and adjusting productivity goals and hiring in order to more sustainably distribute workloads.

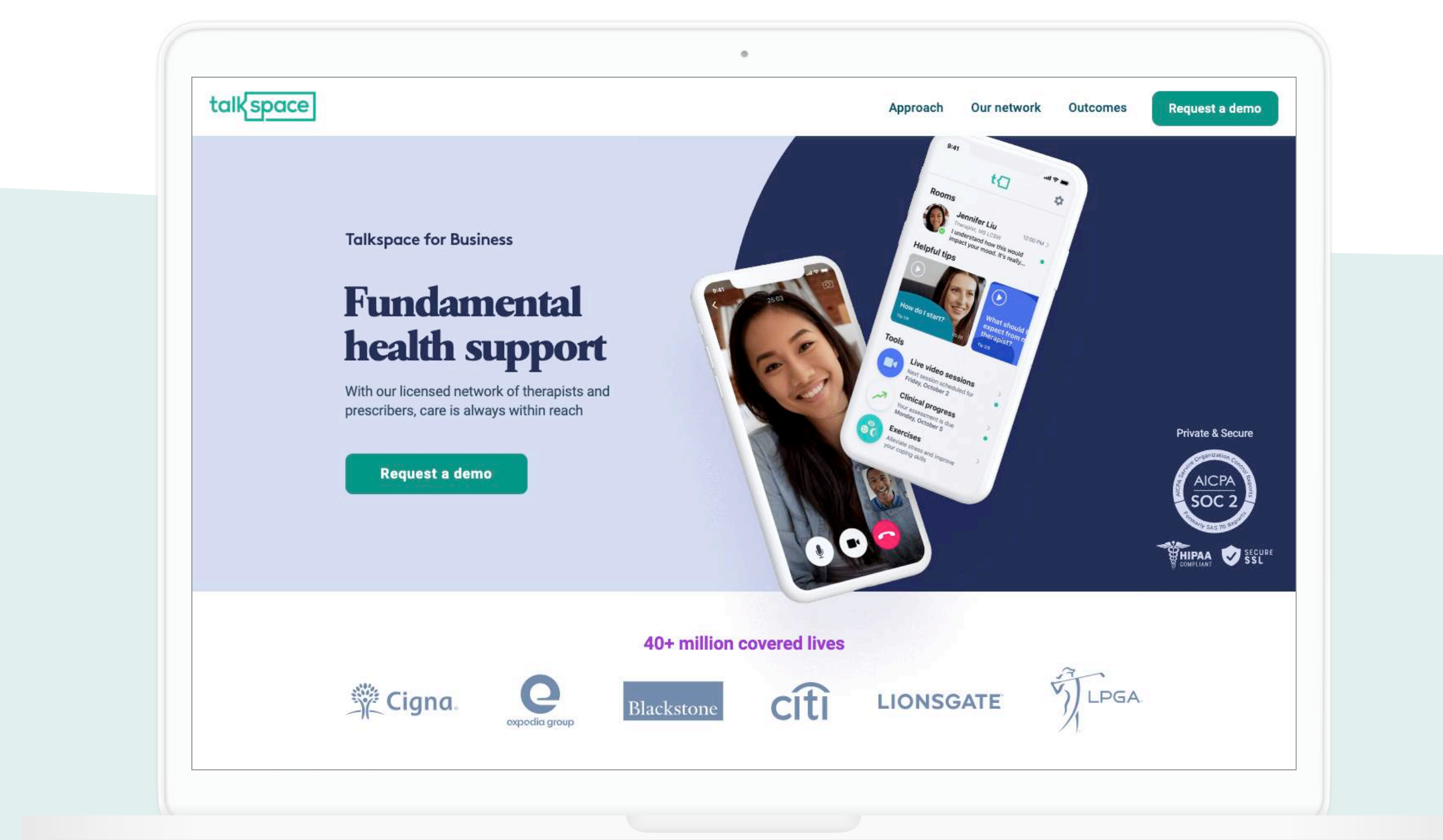
## 3. Promote mental health in the workplace

An HBR survey also found that nearly half of respondents didn't feel safe discussing mental health at work. Sixty-five percent of this group "experienced burnout 'often or always.'" Speaking openly and honestly about mental health at work can reduce stigma and encourage psychological safety.

Providing robust mental health benefits also sends the message that employee wellbeing is a priority. While burnout is an organizational issue and not a personal failure, employees need access to personalized mental health care to cope with and heal from burnout.

# Find the sweet spot on the stress performance curve

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