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## White Paper

### Addressing Call Center Stress Syndrome

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Call Center Stress Syndrome (CCSS) is a form of burnout that is highly prevalent among call center agents, mainly due to the unique and high-pressure environment of the job. Those who suffer with CCSS experience emotional exhaustion, detachment, and reduced job-related productivity. The long list of symptoms of CCSS includes:

- Lack of energy or fatigue. Persistent tiredness, chronic exhaustion, insomnia, or difficulty sleeping.
- Frequent headaches, stomach problems, or other stress-related physical symptoms.
- Anxiety and depression. Increased feelings of worry, tension, or low mood.
- Being easily frustrated or more prone to conflict with co-workers or customers.
- Decline in performance. Reduced productivity, lower quality of work, and careless errors.

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- Frequently calling in sick or showing up late.
- Exhibiting a negative attitude, complaining more often, and having a pessimistic outlook about work.

The structure and demands of the job create a perfect storm for burnout. High call volumes can feel relentless, and job performance metrics, such as Average Handle Time (AHT) and First Call Resolution (FCR), add to the pressure. Meanwhile, agents have to constantly manage and suppress their true feelings (e.g., frustration) while maintaining a positive and helpful demeanor with irate or demanding callers.

Sometimes, operators are caught between pleasing a caller and adhering to company policies, or they don't have the autonomy to make decisions.

## CCSS Prevention and Management Strategies



Addressing CCSS requires action from both the employee and management. Ideally, leadership should strive to set realistic goals and ensure that performance metrics are achievable without pushing agents into unsustainable stress levels.

The AHT metric is a major source of stress for everyone. The key to reducing AHT-related stress is to shift the leadership focus from rushing the agent to optimizing the process. When agents feel the clock ticking, they panic and skip steps, which often leads to mistakes, repeat calls, and longer overall handle times—a stressful, vicious cycle.

Below are some strategies that call center leadership can use to reduce AHT stress for operators:

### **Process and Technology Optimization (Call Center Software System)**

Focus on removing unnecessary time drains so agents can be efficient without feeling rushed. Empower agents to resolve issues by giving them the authority to handle common, low-risk matters (e.g., small refunds, credits, payment waivers) without needing a supervisor's approval. Seeking permission is a massive AHT killer and a major stressor.

Streamline after-call work (ACW) with technology. Implement call summarization reports

that automatically generate notes and update the CRM. Use disposition codes to automatically trigger follow-up emails or system updates, reducing manual documentation time. Pre-populate common email templates and forms that agents can use with a click.

Create a single source of truth (SSOT) knowledge base. Provide a comprehensive, easily searchable, and constantly updated knowledge base. When an agent has to hunt for information, it increases hold time and anxiety. The solution should be available in three clicks or less.

Use intelligent call routing to ensure the system is designed correctly to route callers to the appropriately skilled agent the first time. Misrouted calls require transfers and repetition, significantly increasing AHT and customer/agent frustration.

### **Coaching and Skill Development (Agent)**

Shift coaching from a focus on the number to a focus on the behavior that drives that number. Instead of saying, "Your AHT is 40 seconds too high," say, "Let's review this call. We can save 40 seconds by front-loading your authentication and then confirming the solution just once at the end."

Focus on effective call control by training agents on soft skills and program scripting language that efficiently guides the conversation without being rude. Coach agents on active listening to let the customer fully explain the issue once, which prevents mid-call clarification and rework, and teach polite ways to take control of the call, such as: "Thank you for that info, let me look that up for you now," and encourage agents to clearly state the expected total time or next steps (e.g., "This might take me 2 minutes to process; I'll check back in with you in a moment."). This eliminates "dead air" anxiety for both parties.

Have agents listen to recordings or shadow top performers who maintain a good balance of low AHT and high Customer Satisfaction (CSAT). This demonstrates what success looks like without creating fear. Then simulate calls to allow agents to practice complex scenarios and processes in a low-stakes environment, boosting their confidence and speed before they face a live customer.

### **Metric Reframing (Leadership Mindset)**

Leaders must model a balanced perspective on the AHT metric itself. Use AHT as a diagnostic tool and not a punitive goal. Treat high AHT as a symptom of a process problem

(such as bad routing, a poor knowledge base, or new product complexity), rather than an agent performance failure. Investigate the reason before coaching the agent.

Balance AHT with other quality metrics. Avoid using AHT in isolation. A balanced scorecard should heavily weigh other metrics, such as high FCR or CSAT scores, which indicate that issues were resolved quickly or that callers were satisfied with the service they received.

Incorporate short, mandatory, paid "reset" time between calls, or allow agents a brief period to fully complete ACW without the pressure of the next call immediately dropping onto their queue.

By implementing these strategies, the focus shifts from a stressful, agent-centric time race to a streamlined, system-supported process, which ultimately reduces stress, improves efficiency, and enhances quality.

## Using AI Agents to Reduce Stress



Intelligent virtual agents (IVAs) are rapidly becoming a critical tool for call center leadership to address the root causes of operator stress and burnout. They act as either a caller-facing first responder or an agent-facing co-pilot, both of which significantly offload the cognitive and emotional burden of the human agent.

The most direct way AI helps is by providing real-time assistance with instant, context-sensitive suggestions and next-best actions on the agent's screen during a live call. This eliminates the panic of searching for information while a caller is waiting and drastically reduces hold time that would occur if the agent were scrambling to find the correct information.

**[Related White Paper: [Are You Ready for AI and LLMs in Your Contact Center?](#)]**

AI agents can perform real-time and after-call transcription to convert conversations to text. This way, operators can focus on listening to the caller, rather than trying to type notes and listen simultaneously, preventing distraction and error. The AI generates a comprehensive summary of the call, including any issues and resolutions, and automatically updates the CRM. This eliminates one of the most tedious parts of the agent's job—after-call work.

IVAs handle the high volume of simple, transactional, and repeatable inquiries (e.g., "What is my account balance?", "Where is my order?", "How do I reset my password?"). Human agents are liberated from the mind-numbing repetition that leads to boredom, lack of purpose, and burnout.

Many callers are already frustrated when they call. AI can manage this initial frustration by providing a quick resolution or by gathering context before handing off to a human agent. The agent can start with a powerful, stress-reducing line like, "I see you're calling about the charge on May 5th. I have the full details here, and I can help you with that."

Furthermore, AI agents can use sentiment analysis and emotion recognition tools to analyze the caller's tone and language in real-time. If the call reaches a critical level of anger, the AI can automatically transfer to a live agent or supervisor. Afterwards, an automatic mandatory short break can be triggered for the agent immediately following the stressful interaction to reduce the buildup of emotional fatigue.

By mindfully managing your workforce and leveraging technology to automate processes that shift burdens from humans to machines, agents can better focus on the parts of their job that are truly valuable: empathy, complex problem-solving, and relationship-building. This transformation increases their job satisfaction and directly combats the core elements of call center stress syndrome.

Please contact us with questions.

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