



Everyone Tracks Activity. Almost No One Tracks Recovery.

Why Heart Rate Variability Changes How
We Think About Wellness at Work



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Introduction

Most workplace wellness programs focus on what employees do: how much they move, how often they exercise, how many steps they take, or whether they meet certain biometric targets. These measures are easy to track and easy to explain. **But they miss something critical: recovery.**

Recovery is not just “rest.” It is the body’s ability to manage stress, repair itself, and adapt to ongoing physical, mental, and emotional demands. When recovery cannot keep up with stress, even high-performing, health-conscious employees can start to wear down. Over time, that imbalance increases the risk of burnout, disengagement, injury, illness, and inconsistent performance.

That is where **Heart Rate Variability (HRV)** comes in.

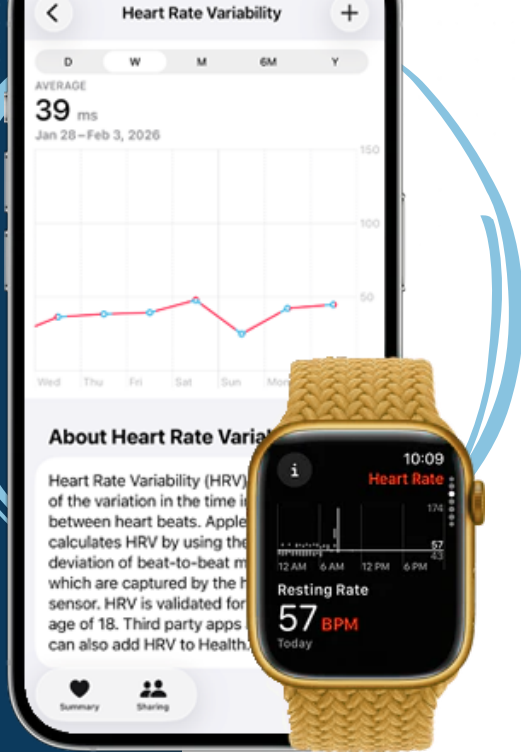
HRV offers insight into recovery that traditional wellness metrics simply do not capture.

“

Most wellness programs focus on what employees do —but they miss something critical:

RECOVERY.

”



“An employee can exercise regularly, hit step goals, and maintain a healthy weight – and still show low HRV.”

What HRV Measures – and Why it Matters

Today, many of us are seeing HRV for the first time on wearable devices like smart watches and rings. They open an app, see a number labeled “HRV,” and wonder: **What is this? Should I care about it? And what does it mean for my health or performance?**

HRV measures the small differences in time between heartbeats. Even when heart rate appears steady, the time between beats naturally varies. Wearable devices calculate HRV by tracking these tiny changes (often during sleep or quiet rest) and summarizing how much variation exists over time.

This variation reflects how well the nervous system shifts between stress (being “on”) and recovery (being able to “turn off”). In general, a higher HRV indicates greater adaptability and resilience, while persistently low HRV can signal chronic stress, inadequate recovery, or physiological strain.^{1 2}

Traditional wellness metrics tell us how much effort someone is putting in. **HRV tells us whether their body is keeping up.**

An employee can exercise regularly, hit step goals, and maintain a healthy weight – and still show low HRV. When that happens, it is often a sign that recovery is not keeping pace with daily demands. Left unaddressed, that gap can affect both individual health and organizational performance.

HIGH HRV

- Resilient
- Engaged
- Adaptive

LOW HRV

- Burnout Risk
- Fatigue
- Inconsistent Performance

HRV, Mental Health, & Emotional Regulation

HRV is closely connected to mental and emotional health. Lower HRV is often seen during periods of high stress, anxiety, depression, and difficulty regulating emotions.^{3 4} Because HRV reflects how flexible the nervous system is, it can offer early insight into how well someone is coping with daily pressures and recovering from them.

In the workplace, this particularly matters. Employees with limited recovery capacity might struggle with focus, decision-making, and emotional regulation – long before these challenges show up in performance reviews or engagement surveys.

At a broader level, reduced recovery can show up as decision fatigue, emotional reactivity, or difficulty concentrating across teams. When low HRV patterns appear across groups, they may point to organizational stressors like workload imbalance, unclear expectations, or leadership practices that unintentionally limit recovery.

HRV and Longevity

HRV is also linked to long-term health. Lower HRV has been associated with higher cardiovascular risk and increased all-cause mortality, while higher HRV is associated with greater physiological resilience over time.^{5 6}

For organizations, this makes HRV more than a wellness metric. It becomes a **leading signal of workforce sustainability**, connecting daily stress exposure to long-term health, retention, and readiness.

“
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What HRV Reveals – and How to Use It

HRV does not reflect one habit or behavior. It is influenced by many parts of a person's life and work, which is why it is so useful. Moreover, it helps individuals and organizations see how different behaviors and conditions work together to support (or undermine) recovery. Because HRV integrates signals across so many aspects of a person's wellness, it aligns naturally with [Millennium's WELL Culture](#).

HRV is affected by the following as shown in Figure 1:

- **Move WELL:** training load, overuse, and physical strain
- **Sleep WELL:** sleep quality, duration, and consistency
- **Think WELL:** mental workload, focus, and cognitive fatigue
- **Feel WELL:** stress response and emotional regulation
- **Connect WELL:** social support and interpersonal stress
- **Lead WELL:** leadership behaviors that shape workload, trust, and recovery norms

“Because HRV integrates signals across so many aspects of a person's wellness, it aligns naturally with **Millennium's WELL Culture**.”

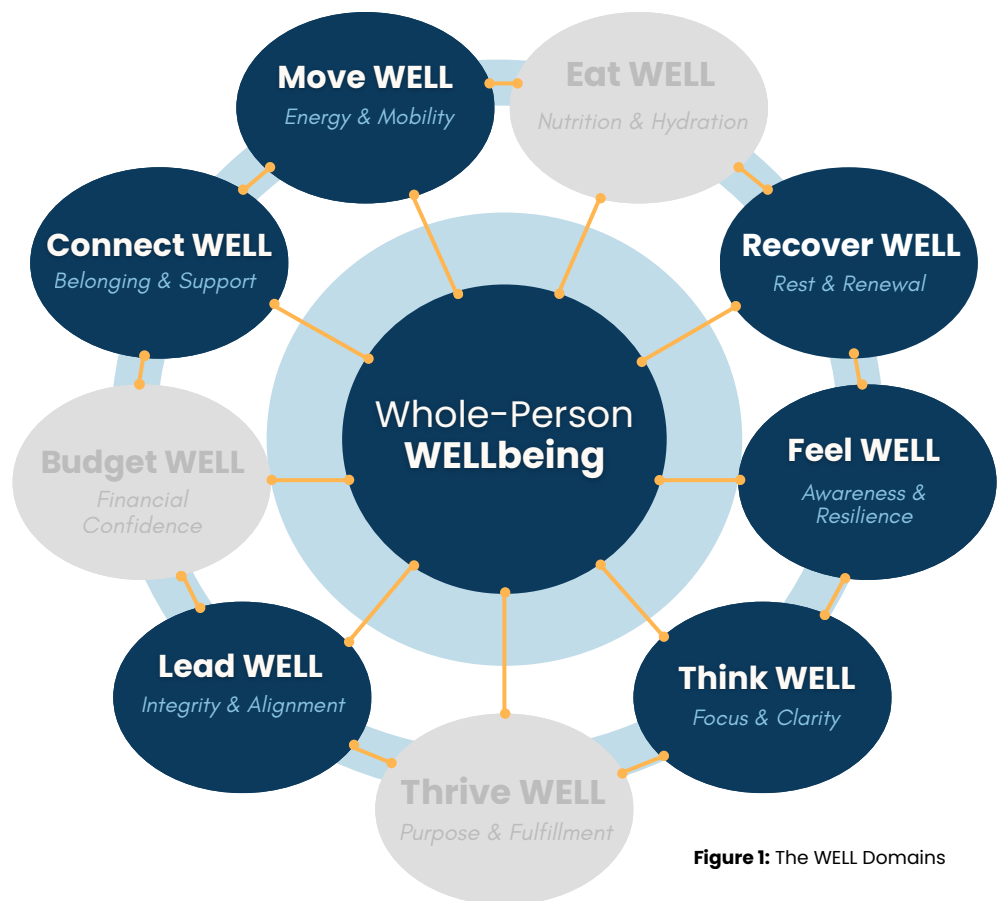


Figure 1: The WELL Domains

From Individual Signals to Organizational Impact

HRV is most useful when viewed over time and in context. There is no single “ideal” HRV value that applies to everyone.^{7,8} Instead, individuals should track their HRV using personal wearable devices and look for changes relative to their own baseline. Those trends are interpreted alongside how someone feels and functions day-to-day, not in isolation.

The examples below show how HRV trends can inform individual behavior change and organizational decision-making.



Example 1:



Low HRV =
Early Burnout
Warning Sign

Name: Sarah

Job Title: Project Manager at a large government services contracting agency.

Data: Wears a smart ring that tracks her HRV while she sleeps. Over several weeks, she noticed her HRV trend is consistently lower than her usual range. Her wearable app flags this change, and Sarah also begins to feel persistently tired, mentally foggy, and more irritable at work.

Despite exercising regularly and meeting activity goals, Sarah feels like she is “never fully recovered.” Her sleep is inconsistent due to long workdays and late-night email catch-up.

Individual impact:

- Reduced focus during meetings
- Slower decision-making
- Emotional fatigue and frustration

WELL domains most affected:

- Sleep WELL
- Think WELL
- Feel WELL

Organizational impact:

- Sarah avoids volunteering for new projects
- Sarah takes more sick days
- Sarah’s team experiences slower turnaround times
- Sarah’s manager notices increased tension during high-pressure periods

Example 2:



**More Activity ≠
Better Health or
Performance**

Name: Marcus

Job Title: Marketing specialist at a mid-sized corporate office

Data: Wears a smart watch and prides himself on staying active. He exercises intensely most days and consistently meets his activity goals. However, his HRV trends show a gradual decline over several weeks.

Although Marcus feels accomplished physically, he reports persistent soreness, poor sleep quality, and mental fatigue.



Individual impact:

- Increased fatigue
- Reduced creativity
- Difficulty focusing on complex tasks

WELL domains most affected:

- Move WELL
- Sleep WELL
- Think WELL

Organizational impact:

- Marcus's productivity becomes inconsistent
- Marcus begins missing deadlines
- Marcus's manager notices fluctuating performance despite strong effort

Individual impact:

- Improved energy levels
- Better emotional regulation
- Increased confidence in managing workload

WELL domains most affected:

- Sleep WELL
- Think WELL
- Feel WELL

Organizational impact:

- Elena reports fewer mistakes during long shifts
- Elena improves communication with her team
- Elena's department sees fewer safety incidents
- Elena's department improves consistency during peak production periods



**HRV-Informed
Behavior Change
= Operational
Performance**

Name: Elena

Job Title: Operations supervisor at a manufacturing company

Data: Uses a smart watch that tracks her HRV daily. After a period of sustained overtime, Elena notices her HRV has steadily declined. She also reports poor sleep and difficulty staying focused late in the day.

After noticing this, Elena works with her organization's wellness resources to focus on **Sleep WELL** and **Think WELL** strategies. She adjusts her sleep schedule, limits late-night screen use, and incorporates brief stress-management practices during the workday.

Example 3:

Example 4:



Healthy HRV =
Organizational
Resilience

Name: James

Job Title: Senior leader at a professional services firm

Data: Uses a wearable device primarily to track his sleep and recovery. Over time, his HRV has remained stable within his personal baseline, even during high-demand periods.

James prioritizes consistent sleep, balanced movement, stress management, and strong social connection at work.



Individual impact:

- Clear decision-making
- Emotional steadiness under pressure
- Sustained energy throughout the workday

WELL domains most affected:

- Sleep WELL
- Think WELL
- Connect WELL
- Lead WELL

Organizational impact:

- James models recovery-aware leadership
- James's team reports higher trust, lower burnout, and stronger engagement
- Turnover on James's team is lower than organizational averages

> Together, these examples show why HRV matters. HRV serves as:

- An early indicator of recovery strain
- A guide for targeted behavior change
- A lens for understanding workforce readiness, resilience, and long-term performance

HRV Within the WELL Culture

When organizations align **HRV insight with the WELL Culture**, they move beyond surface-level wellness metrics and begin addressing the conditions that shape how people actually show up at work. The result is not just healthier employees, but stronger teams, more effective leaders, and a more sustainable organization.

HRV does not replace traditional wellness metrics. It fills a gap they leave behind. In a workforce facing constant demands and ongoing stress, **recovery is not optional**. It is foundational.

If you are seeing signs that your people are not fully recovering between demands, [let's talk](#). Our WELL strategies are built to support recovery where work actually happens, and we would love to explore what that could look like together.

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