



# **Resilience and Agility: The Dynamic Duo for the New World of Work**

**meQ**uilibrium

# The Essential Adaptive Capabilities for Work & Life

## About This Study

meQuilibrium's new study is the first to investigate the interaction between resilience (the ability to rebound productively in challenging situations) and agility (the ability to adapt to changes), in the context of crucial burnout and work-related performance consequences.

## KEY FINDING

### **Resilience & Agility are Better Together. But, Agility with Low Resilience is Risky.**

Improving both resilience and agility shows strong benefits across many outcomes and important performance attributes. However, building agility alone in low resilience employees may produce unanticipated consequences in the form of increases in depression and anxiety with increased risk for absenteeism and burnout.

Digital has changed the workplace and that has transformed the capabilities essential for optimal employee performance. The digital paradigm is characterized by rapid change, constant disruption, democratization of information and competition for talent.<sup>1</sup> At the corporate level, organizations are evolving and adapting to perpetual change with new forms of leadership, strategy and systemic adaptability.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

To succeed in an environment of rapid change and disruption, individual employees also require a different set of skills and talents than their predecessors. It's no longer simply how well a person can perform in a typical situation, but how quickly they can manage rapid and disruptive change. These are the critical skills of the workforce of today and tomorrow.

Two psychological constructs that have gained significant attention in the human resource and psychological literature are resilience and, more recently, agility.

**Resilience has become recognized as a set of learnable skills that mitigate the experience of stress and speed productive responses when setbacks occur.<sup>6,7</sup> Specifically, resilient employees have the ability to apply these positive mental skills—which include emotion control, optimism, self-efficacy, and problem-solving—to remain psychologically robust when faced with challenges, adversity or setbacks.**

While **resilience** represents the ability to rebound productively in challenging situations, **agility** refers to the ability of an employee to react and adapt to changes quickly and appropriately and take advantage of new opportunities.<sup>8,9</sup> It is characterized by being proactive and adaptive,<sup>10</sup> anticipating and acting decisively.<sup>11</sup> Employees with high agility (as defined by adaptive performance) are more comfortable with changes, new ideas, and novel technologies via commitment to continuous learning.<sup>12</sup> Agility is hypothesized to provide a competitive advantage at both the individual and organizational levels.<sup>3,4,10,11</sup>

Resilience and agility have been investigated most often as separate constructs. Because they are positively related, authors have described their overlap in various ways: where either agility is a component of resilience,<sup>3,2</sup> or resilience is component of agility.<sup>12,13</sup> However, more recent discussions have identified these psychological constructs as distinct and complementary.<sup>12,14,15</sup>

There is a need to better understand how agility and resilience combine to affect aspects of mental health and work performance. The current study examined the direct and interactive associations between employee resilience, employee agility, and a set of stress- and work-related outcomes.

Is one better in the business context than the other? Our research shows that both are critical to high performance and when found together, they enhance and reinforce one another to such a degree as to multiply the effect of each. However, building agility alone in low-resilience employees may produce unanticipated consequences in the form of increases in depression and anxiety with increased risk for absenteeism and burnout.

**Together resilience and agility provide the 360 boost and protection employees need to succeed in the new world of work.**

# Methods

In order to better understand the relationship between resilience and agility, and the benefits of these combined adaptive capabilities for business outcomes, meQuilibrium behavioral and data scientists conducted a study including over 2,000 full-time employed respondents from a national panel. The study featured a web-based survey that included items from the clinically validated meQuilibrium assessment survey and many other instruments, including:

- The Psychological Capital Scale<sup>16</sup>
- Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire<sup>17</sup>
- Perceived Stress Scale<sup>18</sup>
- Work Productivity and Activity Impairment Questionnaire (WPAI)<sup>19</sup>
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder measure<sup>20</sup>
- Depression measure (PHQ-9)<sup>21</sup>
- Adaptive Performance measure<sup>22</sup>
- Work engagement score (Utrecht)<sup>23</sup>
- Burnout measure (Copenhagen)<sup>17</sup>
- Work as Meaning Inventory<sup>24</sup>

Scores on the meQ scale were tested for their correlation with other measures and differences in outcomes were compared across levels of meQ score. To simplify comparisons, respondents were divided into four equal groups according to quartiles of their meQ scores or their combined meQ Score and adaptive capability.

## THE meQ SCALE IS A MEASURE OF 18 FACTORS RELATED TO EMOTIONAL WELLBEING AND COGNITION.

Agility was measured using a validated, 19-item Adaptive Performance Scale designed to assess “the ability of an individual to change his or her behavior to meet the demands of a new environment.”<sup>22</sup> The scale includes items measuring creativity, quick thinking in the face of emergencies or unexpected circumstances, interpersonal adaptability, and training and learning effort.

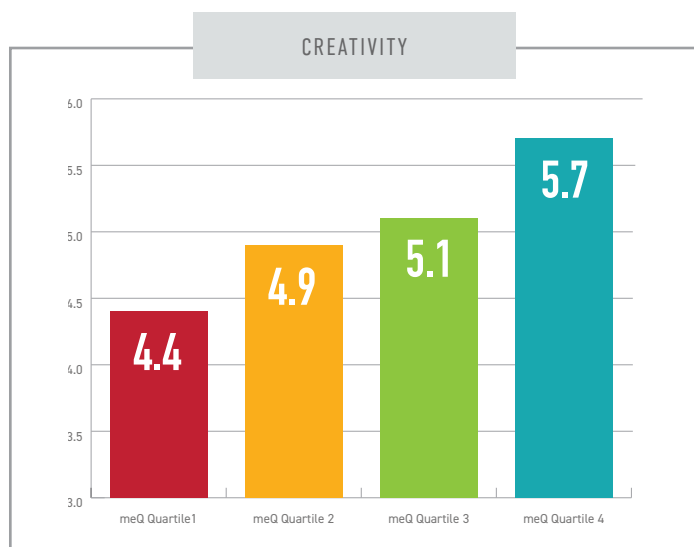
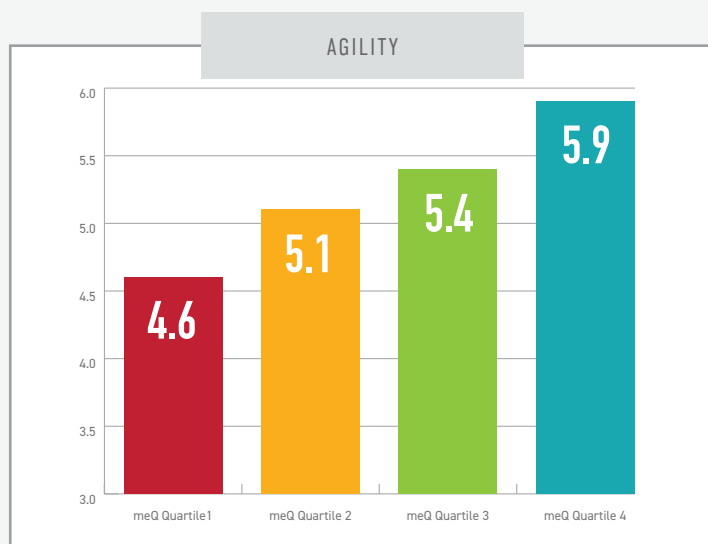
# Resilience is foundational to optimizing agility and exerts an additional effect on wellbeing.

In today's fast-paced, constantly-changing work environments successful employees need the ability to adapt and respond. This next series of outcomes describes how resilience relates to agility which includes agile attributes such as creativity, acquiring new skills, adapting to others and responding quickly to new challenges.

Highly resilient people are 28% more able to adapt to changing circumstances and score significantly higher on important agile attributes: Critical Thinking, Creativity and Skill Development Effort.

## Resilience is a key driver of the ability to adapt to change.

Employees who had the highest resilience as measured by meQ score also scored **28% higher in agility** and are more likely to display creativity, acquire new skills, adapt to others and respond quickly to new challenges and new circumstances.

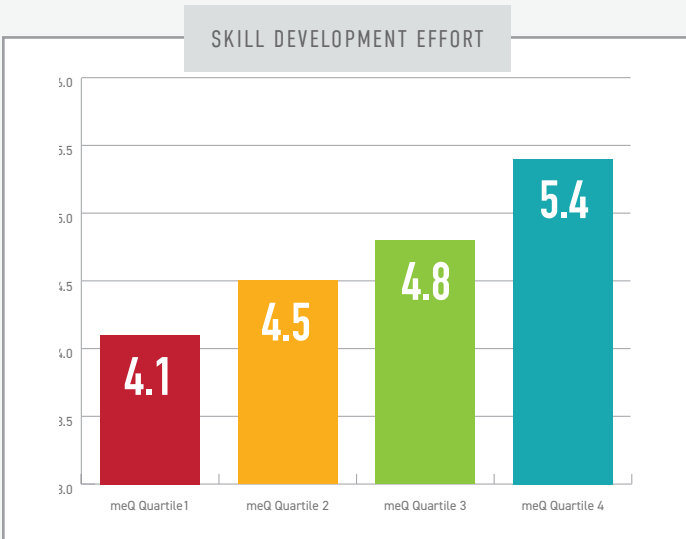
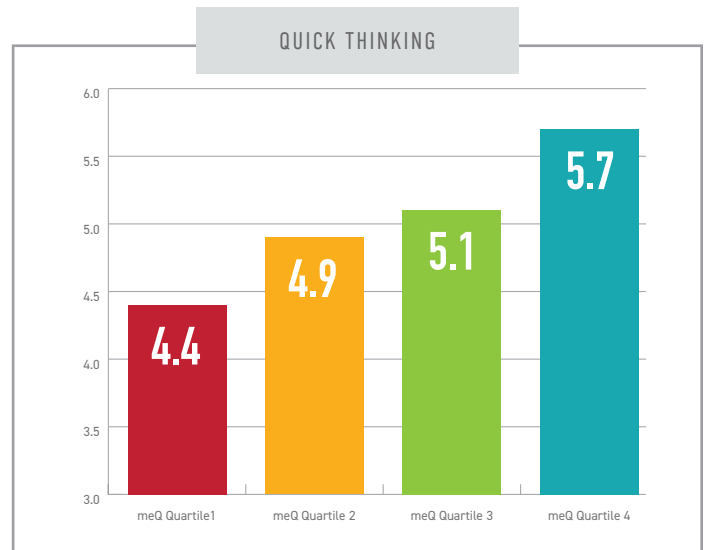


## Resilience is highly associated with important attributes of agility.

In specific areas of agility, we see similar patterns where resilience is associated with important attributes. For example, high resilience scores correspond to **30% higher in creativity**, with includes a willingness to go beyond the status quo, a desire to be innovative and a pattern of trying numerous methods to find new solutions.

## Because the business climate can change on a daily or hourly basis, the ability to respond swiftly is paramount.

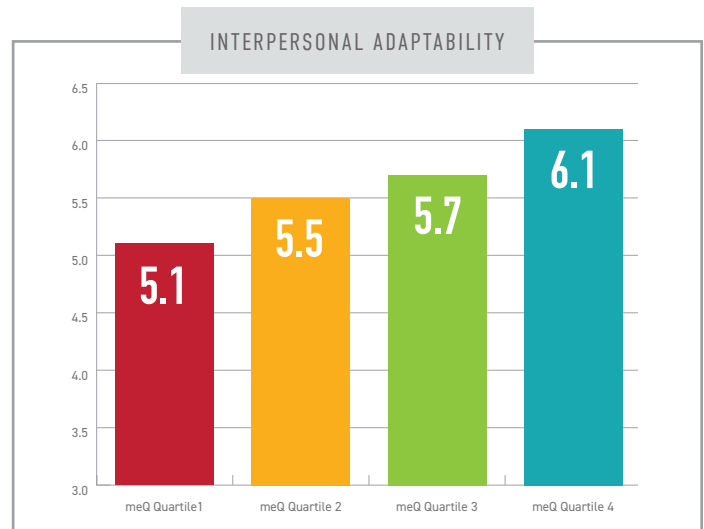
High resilience scores correlate to a **30% higher ability to respond quickly to unforeseen challenges**. This includes characteristics such as reorganizing work to adapt to new circumstances, quickly resolving problems that arise and rapidly analyzing novel situations.



With the half-life of a job at 4.5 years<sup>25</sup>, and digitalization, openness to on-going learning and new roles is a critical talent attribute.

Tight labor markets make retention and growth of talent more important than ever. Those with low resilience are **32% less likely to engage in training and skill-improvement to enhance their performance** compared to those with highest resilience. Those with high resilience and agility are 78% more likely to volunteer for new and different assignments to improve their skills, proactively find training opportunities and search for innovation methods in their fields.

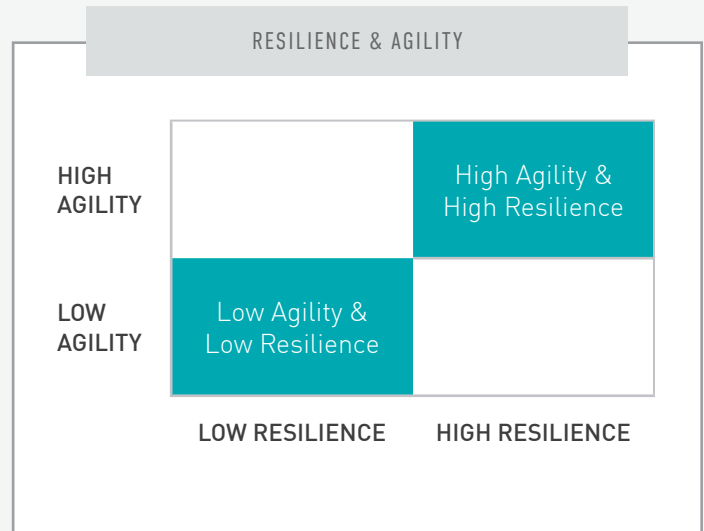
People with high resilience also score **20% higher on the agile attribute necessary to work well with different kinds of people** that is critical for optimal performance in rapid response teams and new job roles. Interpersonal agility attributes include openness to other viewpoints, placing a high value on relationships and collaboration along with a willingness to adjust communications style to fit different circumstances.



# The Dynamic Duo of Resilience and Agility Has a Positive Impact on Business Outcomes

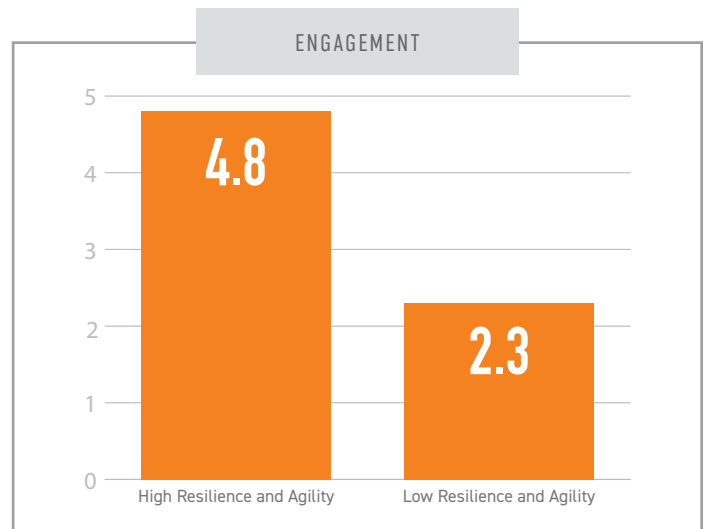
**The synergy of resilience and agility have important consequences for human capital management and company performance.**

To illustrate, we compared four key business outcomes between two types of individuals, those with advanced resilience and adaptive skills (highest quartile on meQ score and overall adaptive capability) and those with weak resilience and adaptive skills (lowest quartile on both).



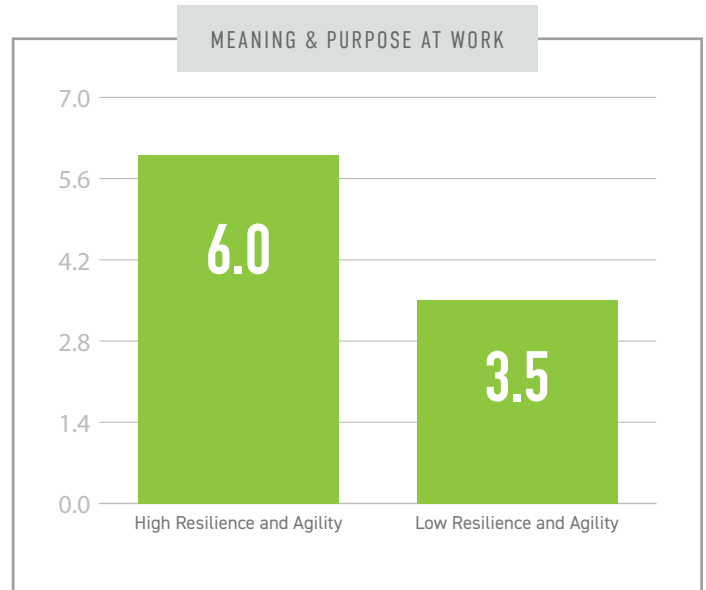
**Resilience and agility together provide a 2x work engagement boost: employees with high resilience and high agility are more than twice as engaged than those who are low in these capabilities.**

Employee engagement is valuable not only as a prerequisite for organizational agility, but also as a competitive advantage. More than 20 years of research by Gallup shows that employee engagement is strongly connected to outcomes essential to a business's financial success, including profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction.



**Resilient and agile employees have almost twice the sense of connection to meaning and purpose at work, which is key to ensuring a high functioning competitive organizations.**

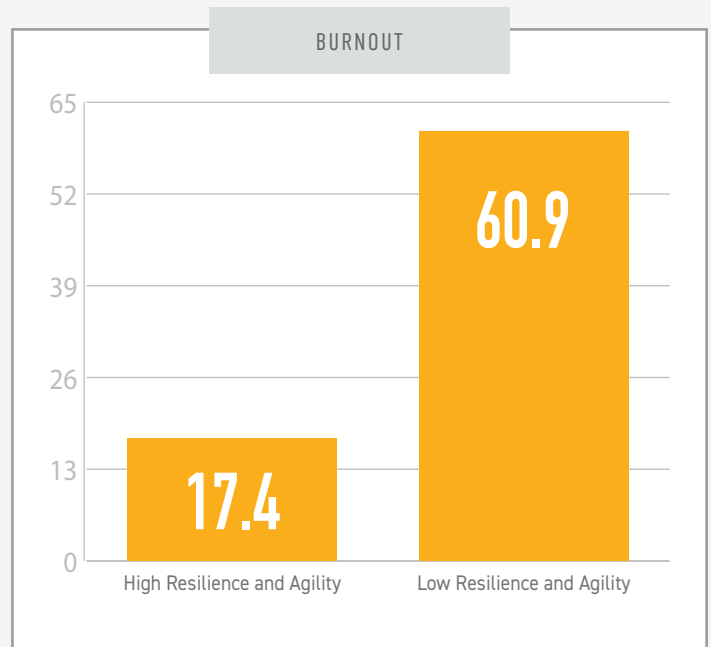
Employees who have a personal connection to their work and see how their work and life purposes intersect are more committed and motivated on the job.<sup>5</sup>



**Average burnout scores were 71% lower among employees with high resilience and agility.**

Employees faced with the stress that comes with an environment where change is the only constant are at high risk for burnout, which can show up as physical or emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, or feelings of being ineffective.

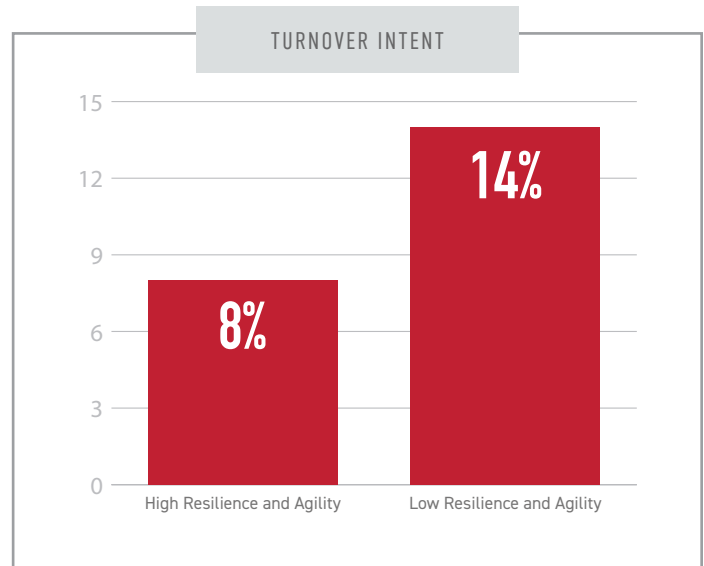
Resilience and the agile attributes associated with adaptive capacity are strongly protective against work burnout. **In addition, 44% of those with low resilience and agility had scores indicating they are at risk for burnout vs. 6% of those with high resilience and agility.**





## Resilient and agile employees are almost 50% less likely to quit.

The positive impact of resilience and agility extends beyond burnout to turnover intent. Employees who are both highly resilient and have higher agility are about half as likely as those with low resilience and agility to plan to leave their job in the next six months.

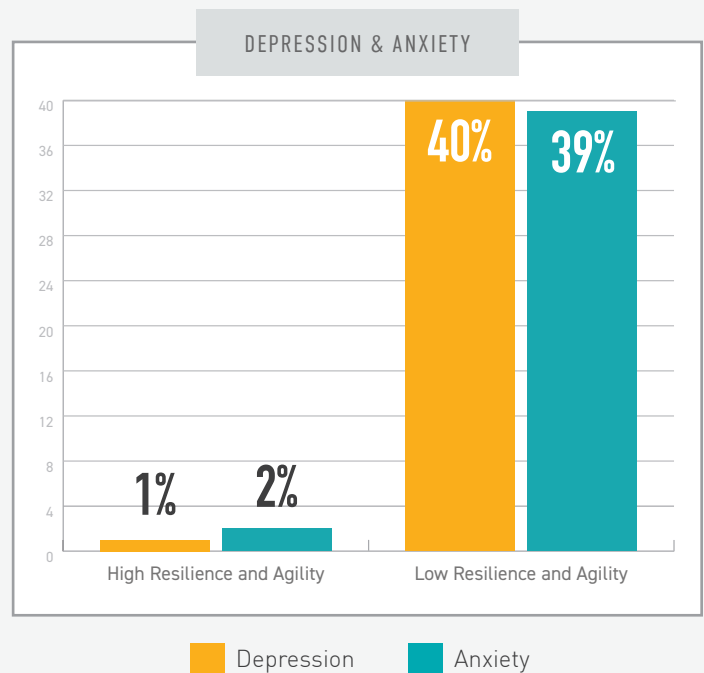


## There is also a significant impact to health.

In addition to outcomes such as turnover, burnout and engagement which have significant direct cost implications for organizations, resilience and agility also have important indirect costs, particularly related to behavioral health.

meQuilibrium's research shows a stark contrast in rates of anxiety and depression between employees who have high resilience and agility and those who have low resilience and adaptive capacity.

Based on data from clinically validated assessment tools, about 40% of individuals with low resilience and agility show signs of moderate or worse anxiety and depression while **among those with high resilience and adaptive capacity the rate of anxiety and depression is 2% or less.**

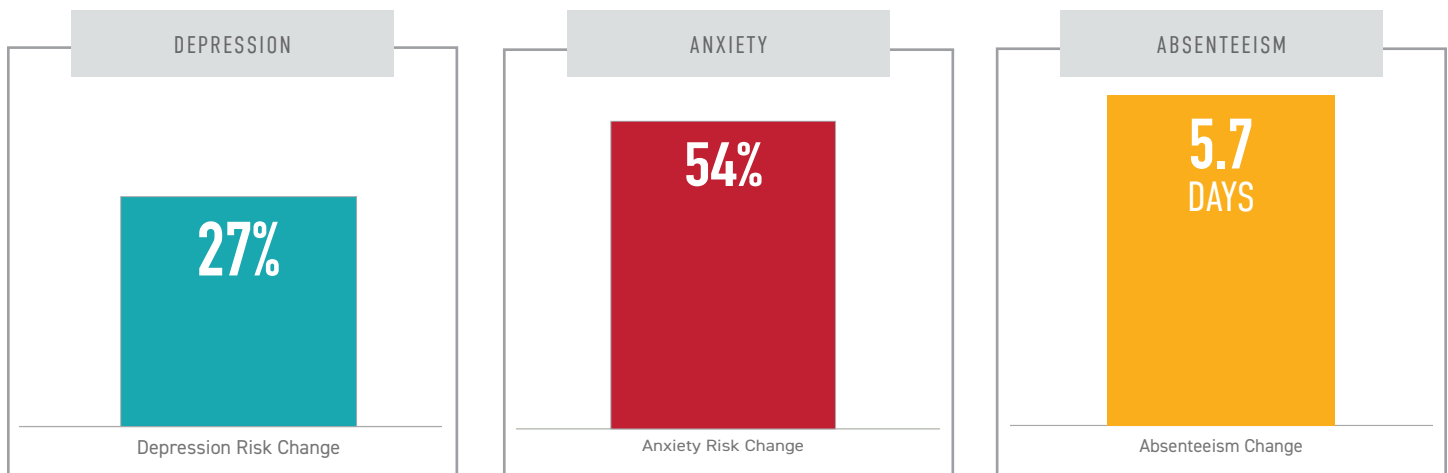


# Beware Increasing Agility but not Resilience

Most notably, this study shows that high agility is associated with much higher levels of depression and anxiety risk when combined with low resilience. In essence, agility produces negative mental health consequences when the employee cannot be resilient. Because agility requires constant reaction and adaptation, its effects cause greater anxiety and depression if not accompanied by resilient, psychological skills that keep their emotions under control. This supports other findings where high agility and low resilience were found to be a detrimental combination.<sup>26,27</sup>

Improving both resilience and agility show strong benefits across three outcomes: depression, anxiety, and absenteeism. However, building agility alone in low-resilience employees may produce unanticipated consequences.

- Depression risk rises by **27%**
- Anxiety risk rises by **54%**
- Absenteeism increases by **5.7 days/year**



## THE BOTTOM LINE

**Resilience & Agility are Better Together.  
But, Agility with Low Resilience is Risky.**

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## About meQuilibrium

meQuilibrium builds, delivers, and supports the only clinically validated resilience program on the market today. Its mission is to help both individuals and organizations unleash and realize their potential, achieving measurable improvements in wellbeing, adaptive capacity, purpose, and performance. To achieve this, meQuilibrium combines behavioral psychology, neuroscience, and data with its proprietary algorithms. On a cloud-based platform, meQuilibrium delivers the insights that lead to resilient transformation.

For more information on how you can improve resilience in your organization, contact meQuilibrium at 617.274.8830, email [sales@meQuilibrium.com](mailto:sales@meQuilibrium.com), or visit us at [meQuilibrium.com](http://meQuilibrium.com)

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