

Stressed, Depressed and Burned Out—Are You Helping Employees Deal with Mental Health Challenges?

If you care about the health of your organization, you must care about your employees' health.

People with poor well-being can't serve customers as well. They are less productive, effective, innovative and perceptive. They cost more to insure, they're absent more often, less likely to be engaged and have more safety and theft incidents.

There are many kinds of stress that are causing mental health issues at this point. People are concerned taking care of their personal and family needs and exposure to the virus. Furthermore, the workplace has changed significantly since the start of the pandemic, with more than 40 percent of employees currently working from home and putting in two hours more per day on average. It's hard to keep a work-life balance when you're doing all your working and living in one space!

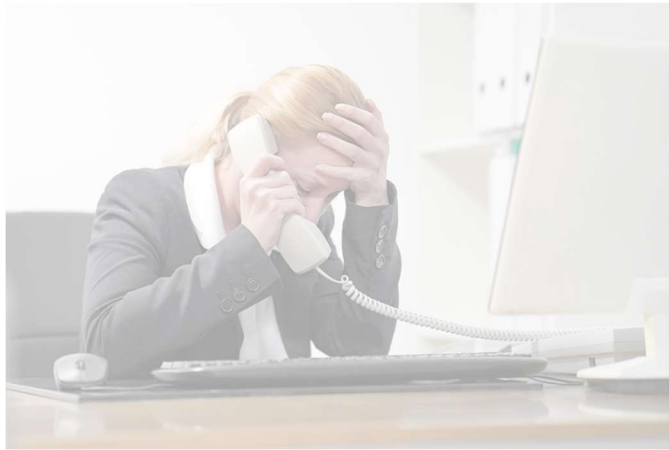
How Are Employees Feeling?

- **Stressed.** In early to mid-March, Gallup Panel surveys showed increases in stress and worry.
 - Just under half of all U.S. employees are moderately or very concerned about being exposed to the coronavirus at work.
 - Over a third of workers say their employers never or only sometimes supply personal protective gear or enough cleaning.
 - Forty-seven percent say safe distancing is never or only sometimes enforced and the same number say employees and customers are never or only sometimes screened for COVID-19 symptoms like fever and cough.
 - Most employees say their job is detrimental to their overall well-being.



Work-related stress was a very real issue for many employees even before the outbreak of the coronavirus, but the pandemic has doubled rates of stress in the workplace. More than 60 percent of employees say that they are experiencing greater stress than before the pandemic started, up from 30 percent pre-pandemic.

- **Depressed.** A new report shows the risk for depression among U.S. workers has increased 102 percent since February. The risk for depression for working adults rose 31 percent from June to July as COVID-19 cases began to surge again across many parts of the U.S. and protests for racial justice and police reform took off. American's have also been faced with one of the highest unemployment rates in decades and an unclear economic outlook.
- **Burned-Out.** Burnout may sound abstract, but it is real and, during the pandemic, it has been on the rise. According to the [World Health Organization](#), burnout results from, "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." The WHO further notes that burnout is characterized by three dimensions:
 1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
 2. Increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism/cynicism related to one's job
 3. Reduced professional efficacy



Since many people have lost work during the pandemic or their ability to make progress on work-related projects, it is not surprising that burnout is on the rise. In fact, according to a Korn Ferry survey of 7,000 employees, [73 percent of American professionals were feeling burned-out](#) by May 2020.

Since May, the pandemic has spread in many parts of the United States and millions of summer vacations have been canceled. People are working harder and with even more uncertainty than they were earlier in the pandemic. Employees are [forgoing vacations](#) and our ability to travel and interact with others plays into how we are feeling as well.

The second wave of COVID is really a mental health wave, which is forcing employers to respond in a different way. What's more, experts predict the numbers will worsen in the coming months. This is because working parents are dealing with the stresses of school beginning. There is also the uncertainty over the upcoming election and how things will change as we head into the colder months.

How Comfortable are Employees with Discussing Mental Health?

According to *Mental Health in the Workplace*, [more than half of employees claimed they were not comfortable bringing up mental-health issues to their managers](#). This could be for [many reasons](#):

- They're afraid they'll appear "weak" to a direct superior.
- They are worried it might affect their job security.
- They don't trust their manager.
- They believe there's a stigma tied to mental health.

All of this underscores the argument that many companies are simply creating the perception of addressing mental health during COVID-19, rather than meaningfully confronting the issue.

What Are Companies Doing?

Human resources professionals know they have a responsibility to monitor the well-being of employees. Many businesses are making strides in helping team members cope with mental health problems.

For instance, many employers that require workers to be physically present (e.g., restaurants, grocery stores, convenience stores, etc.) are hiring contact tracers to help make their workplaces safer, as well as calm anxiety. Meanwhile, companies like Chevron, Financial Times and Culligan Water are partnering with mental-health organizations to develop customized programs for their employees.

In contrast, small-to-midsize businesses are forced to take other approaches to address mental wellness, such as virtual happy hours, virtual team-building, virtual well-being check-ins, virtual stress-management activities and more. They're using tactics that are affordable and achievable. Unfortunately, [more than half of companies](#) do not have adequate resources to support mental health.

Are Efforts Making a Real Difference?

The [stigma around help for mental health is shifting](#) in a very good way. But it is unlikely that virtual happy hours, team-building events or weekly Zoom check-ins with managers, HR representatives or even CEOs are making a substantial contribution to combat mental health issues during COVID-19.

First, [burnout](#) from Zoom, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, etc., is real. Experts believe that video chats, especially contribute to anxiety because they make us very aware of how we look—it's the equivalent of watching one's self in the mirror while socializing. The effect is worse with larger groups because it can cause cognitive overload in individuals trying to pick up social cues from all the other participants. Secondly, without leaders who have the qualifications to provide mental health counseling, these check-ins can't be that meaningful.

What are Strategies to Address Mental Health?

Well-being is comprised of five elements: career, social, financial, community and physical. They affect each other and work affects every element. In fact, [millennials consider support for their well-being as one of the most important aspects of a job](#) because they don't see a sharp distinction between life and work. That's why initiatives must be comprehensive to succeed.

Some suggestions are:

1. **Define your culture with a strong voice.** Leaders must demonstrate a cultural focused on well-being through their actions and use terms that everyone understands. Define and express this culture in your written policies, call-to-action and progress-update communications. That strategy should guide the way you create access to resources. It should also go hand-in-hand with recognition of accomplishments. And employees knowing that leaders care about them could also boost engagement.
2. **Get the word out to everyone.** Leaders need to communicate more often in a crisis, providing information and support while setting the tone. Right now, the priority is probably safety protocols and cleaning schedules. Because they are close to individual employees and know specific concerns, managers are in the best position to communicate daily and weekly updates to them. They should be held accountable and rewarded for creating teams with high well-being.
3. **Cost-optimize the benefits program.** Only 24 percent of workers participate in wellness programs at their companies and only 12 percent say they help well-being. That's why it is important to offer multiple points of access (e.g., in-house, off-site, online, etc.) and support every aspect of their health. Well-being is an investment in the employee experience and the impact on productivity should be measured.

[Companies can and should do everything in their power to help workers cope with pandemic-induced issues.](#) This includes:

- Making sure work environments are completely safe and [compliant](#).
- Using contact tracers to ease the fear of contracting COVID-19.
- Understanding the situation each employee has been thrust into.
- Restructuring health care plans for easier access to psychology professionals.
- Providing mental-health resources.
- Offering financial assistance for counseling sessions.
- Keeping a keen eye out for red flags of mental deterioration.
- Offering more flexible PTO.

Why Should You Offer and Promote Mental Health Resources?

Seventy-eight percent of employees with employers that offer mental health resources said that they have good mental health, compared to 65 percent of those with employers that do not offer such support. Mental wellness can be everything from formal employee assistance programs (EAPs) to internal meetings with team captains to picking up the phone and calling to see how people are doing. Employees will remember and it manifests itself in productivity for your company.

However, although 85 percent of businesses with more than 1,000 people offer wellness programs, only 60 percent of their employees know about them. That means programs are less effective than they could be and the need for mental health counseling, telehealth access and physical checkups is mounting. The knowledge gap makes a bad situation worse and harms business results. Lack of well-being programs is even more damaging, especially when employees are so weighed down mentally.

Employers have an opportunity to change that quickly by getting information to the front lines and making it consistently and clearly visible. Action on well-being shows you care and builds trust when people need it badly. If there is an EAP or other resource that you offer, share the details with your employees.

Employers must increase their support and communicate the benefits that exist to help employees through these challenging times. Continue to stay in close contact with your workforce, communicate and examine whether your tactics are working. If not, be flexible and adjust them.

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