

Guide

# Making Mental Health & Wellness a Priority During COVID-19

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**HOT TOPIC**

# Making Mental Health & Wellness a Priority During COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and wellness of the nation’s labor force and society overall may be one of the longest lasting consequences of the current crisis. Life during the pandemic is leaving even the most resilient among us feeling anxious and vulnerable. The crisis may also have a disproportionate impact on already marginalized groups across all dimensions of diversity.

Now more than ever, it is crucial for organizations to focus their attention on efforts to support the mental and physical well-being of their employees. Below we provide key aspects of a strategy and additional resources to support you along the way.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**25%** of older adults fit the definition of socially isolated;

**43%** said they felt lonely

[National Academies of Sciences](#)

**75% of younger workers** - millennial and Gen Z groups - feel isolated in the office; the potential for loneliness, anxiety, and depression is higher for those who work alone at home

[Cigna](#)

**Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual adults are more than 2Xs as likely** as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition

[National Alliance On Mental Illness](#)

Of adults who experience mental health issues,

**48% of Whites** received mental health services, compared with **31% of Blacks and Hispanics**, and **22% of Asians**

[Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#)

American Indian/Alaska Native populations have **disproportionately higher rates of mental health challenges** than the general population

[Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#)

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates **depression and anxiety alone cost the global economy US\$ 1 trillion per year** in lost productivity.

**Prolonged social isolation can have a negative impact** especially individuals with disabilities, individuals with pre-existing conditions, and older adults who may be cut off from essential support services and accessible communication channels.

[World Health Organization](#)

### Prevalence of mental illness among U.S. adults, by demographic group

White	<b>20%</b>
Hispanic	<b>17%</b>
Black	<b>16%</b>
Asian	<b>15%</b>
Mixed/multiracial	<b>27%</b>
Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual	<b>37%</b>

[National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)

## Organizations should clearly recognize and prioritize mental health

Many people with mental health concerns struggle in silence. A 2019 report from [Mind Share Partners](#) found that 80 percent of workers with a mental health condition said that shame and stigma prevent them from seeking treatment. Many fear disclosing a mental health condition will be viewed negatively and could limit opportunities and advancement. Just 37 percent see their company's leaders as advocates for mental health at work. According to a study by [Accenture](#), **only 14 percent of workers have heard senior leaders discuss the importance of mental health.**

Organizations that communicate openly and frankly about mental health reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions and set the tone for transparency. Start by acknowledging the situation and asking employees what support they need. Keep in mind that it's important to respect privacy policies; under the ADA, an employee is not required to disclose a medical or mental health condition.

### Tips

- **Charge** your ERGs to address health and wellness as part of their objectives
- **Encourage leaders** to share their stories and how they are managing their own mental health during the crisis
- **Create safe spaces** and forums for employees to share concerns and support each other
- **Provide and communicate** resources, links, and support
- **Establish** an employee hotline for employees to seek help if they need it

#### NEXT PRACTICE COMPANY

**EY** launched a program called We Care, designed to destigmatize mental health issues, educate employees on the signs of mental illness, and encourage people to seek help if they need it. The company reports calls to EY Assist have increased 32 percent since We Care began.

**RESOURCE:** Working Mother's research on the topic, [Uncovering Hidden Potential: Non-Apparent Disabilities in the Workplace](#), provides insight on the experiences and challenges employees with non-apparent disabilities face and a wide range of strategies organizations can utilize to reduce stigma and remove barriers.

## Provide employees with resources and support

Some organizations have established mental health and wellness ERGs to engage at risk employees and connect them with resources and support.

For example, companies including **Merck** and the **Mayo Clinic** have trained and empowered a cadre of employees as mental health ambassadors and allies to serve as an in-house support system.

Provide a range of resources, tools and coping mechanisms to support employees, communicate regularly and make sure they are easy to access and affordable to use. New trends include connecting employees with remote telehealth counseling and support services. According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), 60 percent of U.S. counties do not have a single practicing psychiatrist. Providing telehealth options and on-line resources (many free) can have particular impact with under-served communities. Below are some helpful resources.

- The [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA](#) website
- [National Council for Behavioral Health Best Practices for Telehealth](#)
- The [LGBT National Help Center](#)
- Bender Consulting, a Disability:IN certified Disability Owned Business Enterprise, is offering two free modules on COVID-19 response strategies for PWD, at [iDisability](#)

### Tip: Get outside, connect with nature

Social distancing guidelines do not limit people from exercising and getting outdoors. There is growing scientific evidence that outdoor settings are good for mind-body health. In Japan, citizens practice **forest bathing**. This is not a form of exercise but simply being in nature and connecting through the senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch). A [National Institutes of Health](#) study found forest bathing significantly reduced pulse rate and decreased depression, fatigue, anxiety, and confusion.

#### NEXT PRACTICE EXAMPLES

**Starbucks** is offering its 220,000 U.S. employees and their dependents 20 annual therapy sessions through a platform called Lyra, in addition to access to Headspace, a popular meditation app.

**Big Health**, a digital therapeutics company, offers free programming that uses cognitive and behavioral techniques to combat poor sleep and anxiety. More than 50 companies have signed up or expanded their use of programming, including big employers such as Nike and Target.

## Stay connected and engaged with your workforce

Working in an environment of social distancing may make it more challenging to truly understand how your employees are coping with their many new “norms”.

**Social contracts** are an impactful way for teams to come together to design how work will get done in a way that works for everyone. Social contracts are a set of “ground rules” based on the need to recalibrate and establish expectations between employees and the workplace. For example, it may not be feasible to require employees to work consecutive hours of uninterrupted work. Some employees may need to balance home schooling or eldercare at certain times. Establishing ground rules and two-way expectations provides employees with the support to do what is necessary to keep themselves and their families safe while maximizing work productivity.

Additional measures to consider putting in place are:

- creating intentional opportunities for regular check-ins with your employees
- ensuring every employee receives timely and credible information about the situation and its impact on the organization
- establishing group chats
- encouraging video calls among colleagues
- dedicating a COVID-19 communications channel

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### RESOURCE:

#### Social Contract Lab

Culture@Work offers this session for managers as they lead in this new normal, providing the tools to craft an explicit set of group cultural norms, guidelines and shared practices. This E-learning can also include a follow-up toolkit and manager guide. For more information, contact [Shane.Nelson@cultureatwork.com](mailto:Shane.Nelson@cultureatwork.com).

### NEXT PRACTICE EXAMPLE

**Basecamp's** CEO Jason Fried announced to employees with any caretaking responsibilities that they could set their own flexible schedules, even if it meant working less. “All we ask is that you find a balance that works for you. *Whatever works for you works for us.*” Whether employees work a few hours a day, or, on some days, not at all, they will still be paid their full-time salaries.

## Don't forget to take care of yourself

- Acknowledge and own the mental health challenges you are experiencing personally
- Find ways to decompress, destress and celebrate success
- Take breaks from watching the news and checking social media
- Explore new ‘virtual’ ways to get exercise and remain physically active
- Pay attention to your diet and nutrition
- Engage your social network for regular communication and support
- Find ways to connect with purpose and make a difference in your community

*“Research has shown a simple act of kindness directed towards another improves the functioning of the immune system and stimulates the production of serotonin in both the recipient of the kindness and the person extending the kindness. Even more amazing is that persons observing the act of kindness have similar beneficial results.”*

—Dr. Wayne Dyer, *The Power of Intention*

## Shine a Spotlight on the Positive

Remarkable stories of solidarity are emerging every day. Sharing these stories with employees can provide a much needed respite from the deluge of hard news covered on cable television and across social media.

- School bus drivers in the U.S. deliver meals to students who rely on free lunches
- The Metropolitan Opera, Museums, Broadway are offering free streaming and online events
- Citizens in Milan serenade one another from their balconies to keep spirits up
- Police officers in Spain sing and play guitars to cheer up citizens
- A shelter for homeless people and refugees in Barcelona produce face masks for hospitals and nursing homes
- Voices from Nashville unite to sing "It is Well with my Soul"
- On-line learning platforms and universities offer free courses for individuals who have been let go because of the coronavirus
- China is manufacturing medical supplies and sending them to countries in need

Although there are many examples of generosity to be found all around the world, don't forget to look to your employees and communities for stories to share about what they are doing to spread joy and kindness during this time.

### NEXT PRACTICE COMPANY

Companies like **Medtronic** are working across industry sectors by making resources free and accessible to help individuals, other organizations, and even competitors move through the crisis. Medtronic announced they are generously sharing their respirator patents so others can produce them.

## Additional resources

World Health Organization: [Mental Health Considerations during COVID-19 Outbreak](#), including for healthcare workers, caretakers of children, caretakers of older adults, and people in isolation

[Centers for Disease Control](#). Stress and Coping during COVID-19.

[International Federation of the Red Cross, UNICEF and WHO](#): Social Stigma Associated with COVID-19

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#): Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty

## And for a well-deserved break...

[Seven Videos to Recharge Your Mind and Your Body](#) The DBP team has curated a list of videos (all under 10 minutes long), some related to work and D&I, others purely for fun, to watch and/or listen to when you need a quick break from work and the constant news cycle.

[Some Good News Weekly YouTube Series](#). Hosted by John Krasinsky, these weekly episodes are exactly as advertised: a report on the good news and the amazing acts of generosity and kindness happening every day around the world.

For more information about Diversity Best Practices and to access additional resources, please contact Donnice Peterson at [donnice.peterson@diversitybestpractices.com](mailto:donnice.peterson@diversitybestpractices.com).