

# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE DURING TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY



Ultimate  
SOFTWARE

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# Introduction

The Human Resources profession is often misunderstood. There are several widespread misperceptions about it including that an HR practitioner has to be a “people person” or that their only purpose is to hire, fire, do paperwork, and make life hard for employees by being sticklers for policies and procedures. There is little grace given to HR professionals by the general public. We get a bad rap. Ask any random person on the street their thoughts about HR based on experience and you are far more likely to receive a negative response than a positive one. This is unfortunate because HR practitioners are perfectly positioned to serve as not only business subject matter experts, but as employee advocates and supporters. I take my responsibility in each of these roles very seriously.

I began my career in HR nearly 20 years ago. It was not a career I had grown up wanting or even knowing about, but it has suited me. It has allowed me to combine my communication, analytical and problem-solving skills with my passion for helping people. In recent years, I have turned my attention to organizational culture and the employee experience, specifically inclusion, diversity, belonging, and supporting mental health in the workplace. My personal experience with mental illness inspired me to study it and focus on how employers can support the mental health of their employees as well as why it is critical for them to do so.

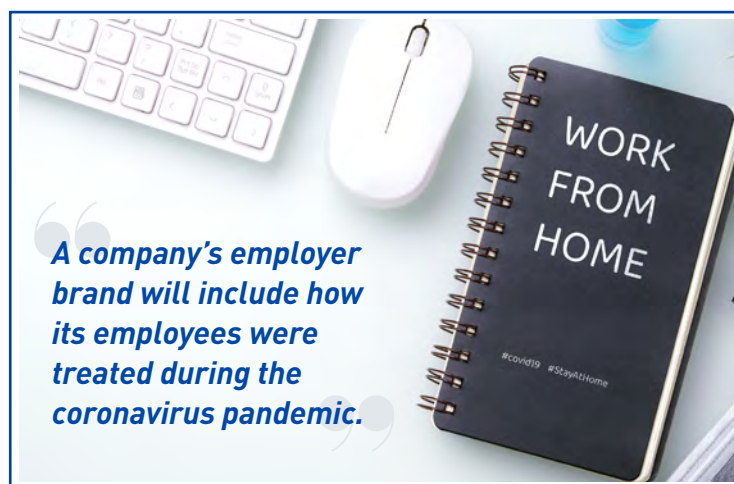
The novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) is affecting people in myriad ways—physically and mentally. States are under shutdown or stay-at-home orders. Families are separated. Stress is at a fever pitch. Furloughs, layoffs, and terminations are happening en masse. Friends and family members are contracting and/or dying from COVID-19 daily. We are sharing a form of collective trauma that many of us have never encountered and there is no playbook for it. It is imperative that individuals pay attention to their mental health and that employers acknowledge the importance of providing a mental health support system for their employees. The uncertainty we are facing has the potential to amplify or be a catalyst for mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse. According to the Cambridge Journal of Psychological Medicine, “large-scale disasters, whether traumatic (e.g., the World Trade Center attacks or mass shootings), natural (e.g., hurricanes), or environmental (e.g., Deepwater Horizon oil spill), are almost always accompanied by increases in depression, PTSD, substance use disorder, a broad range of other mental and behavioral disorders, domestic violence, and child abuse.”<sup>1</sup> The actions employers take to support the mental health of their employees during this critical time will have a lasting impact on employee engagement and organizational culture.

## Crisis Management

Few events in recent history have impacted the world and the workplace like the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to causing several companies to shut down (permanently or temporarily) or furlough, lay off or terminate employees, they have had to figure out how to function during a crisis and find ways to work differently. Employers have had to make a lot of difficult decisions such as which positions are essential, whether employees need to be laid off, how to make up for a loss in revenue, whether employees can work from home, and how to protect employees who must continue to work onsite. **Flexibility and empathy** are critical to exercising good leadership during a crisis. Employees are dealing with losing friends and loved ones to COVID-19, having to care for family members with COVID-19 and having the disease themselves. Many employees are also trying to balance work with home schooling their children. The regular rules of work do not apply here. There is a saying that a company's employer brand is what its employees say when asked how it is to work for the company. Going forward, a company's employer brand will include how its employees were treated during the coronavirus pandemic. If employment had to be terminated, was it done with respect and empathy? If a transition to remote work had to be made, were employees provided with the necessary tools and resources? Were they trusted to do their work offsite? Were employees allowed flexibility to manage family and personal responsibilities, including taking care of their physical and mental health? Current and potential future employees will pay close attention to the level of humanity being shown by employers during this crisis.

One of the most helpful resources employers can provide for their employees during a crisis is an Employee Assistance Program, or EAP. EAPs are programs designed to assist employees and their families in resolving personal problems including marriage/family, financial, emotional health, and substance abuse issues. Having a designated point of contact from which to seek assistance can be particularly beneficial to employees during a stressful time.

There is no denying that we are all doing our best to navigate the uncertainty that has become a constant in our lives. The uncertainty is sure to have a significant impact on individual mental health, even for those who have not previously dealt with a mental health issue. Employers must take intentional steps to support the mental health needs of their employees, even if they are not quite sure what the needs are or that they exist. For example, transparent communication from leadership about business continuity plans, financial status and any potential loss of jobs, reduction in pay, or change in benefits should be communicated swiftly and clearly to help alleviate the anxiety associated with uncertainty. There are multiple methods employers can utilize to communicate with employees, including town hall meetings, small forums, or one-to-one conversations. These methods can be used for remote as well as onsite employees.



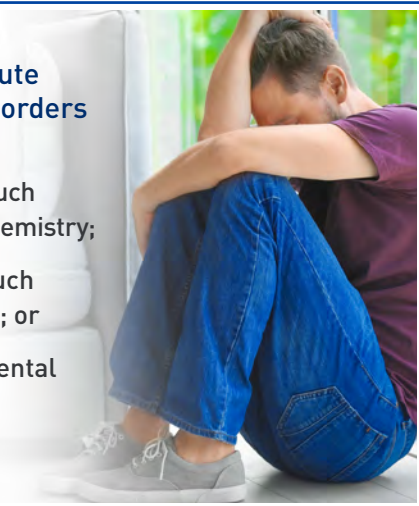
It is also important to acknowledge any feelings, fears or concerns employees may have and that, even if people are still working, business is **not as usual**. In fact, business may not return to usual, as we knew it, at all. In addition to telling employees what is happening with the business, employers should be sure to ask, not assume, how their employees are dealing with new experiences, including shutdown/stay-at-home orders, remote work (if applicable), and school/childcare closures. Leadership should work with HR to assess and support employee needs.

## The Remote Workforce and Mental Health

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to contribute to their community. **Mental health is an integral and essential component of health.** Multiple social, psychological, and biological factors determine the level of mental health of a person at any point of time. Poor mental health is also associated with rapid social change, stressful work conditions, gender discrimination, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, physical ill-health, and human rights violations.<sup>2</sup> A mental illness (also called “mental health condition” or “mental health disorder”) is any illness that affects the way people think, feel, behave, and/or interact with others. There are many mental illnesses, and they have different symptoms that impact peoples’ lives in a variety of ways. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) notes that 1 in 5 adults is living with a mental health condition.<sup>3</sup> This means that out of a staff of 100, it’s likely that at least 20 of them have experienced, are experiencing, or will experience a mental illness during the course of their lives. Major depression disorder and anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental health disorders in the U.S. with a prevalence of 6.9% and 18.1% respectively.

### Factors that contribute to mental health disorders include:

- Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry;
- Life experiences, such as trauma or abuse; or
- Family history of mental health problems.



Times of crisis or uncertainty (life experiences, trauma) can exacerbate mental health disorders for individuals already living with them and be a catalyst for individuals who have not previously experienced them. The coronavirus pandemic is a collective traumatic experience resulting in societal upheaval and great uncertainty. As such, it should come as no surprise that researchers expect this pandemic to set off a second pandemic in the form of an overflow of mental illness. The researchers expect

“substantial increases in anxiety, depression, substance use, loneliness, and domestic violence.”<sup>4</sup> Employees are suddenly dealing with fear, grief, isolation, and significant changes to their routine. Parents with school age children are struggling to manage distance education while teleworking or arranging for someone else to do it if they are deemed essential and are working onsite. Individuals who are working may feel guilty for being employed while friends and loved ones have lost their jobs. Or they may be wondering when they will be next to lose their jobs. Two income households may have been reduced to one income. People in abusive households who looked forward to work as an escape are now stuck in the home with their abuser. People dealing with substance and alcohol abuse may relapse. This is a perfect storm for depression and anxiety.

Employers cannot have a reasonable expectation that their employees will maintain “normal” levels of focus and productivity during this time. An employer’s ability to show empathy and understanding and to be flexible will be critical to a successful employee support strategy. In many workplaces, flexibility will take the form of remote work. The current crisis has forced more employers than ever to implement remote work, including those that were previously against it. In addition to providing business continuity, remote work provides employees with the opportunity to continue working and getting paid while the physical workplace is closed for safety. Individuals who are more productive working away from the office may also experience less stress and anxiety with the removal of stressors such as commuting and disruption from other employees. Conversely, remote work may cause more stress and anxiety for individuals who work better being around other people or who depend on having a workplace to go to as an escape from other familial and household stressors. Employers will need to be mindful of the individual needs of employees. Direct supervisors must pay attention to any changes in personality, productivity, engagement, or behavior that may signal an employee is experiencing a mental health challenge or heading towards one. Consistent communication is key; however, it should be in alignment with the needs of the individual whether it is an email, a phone call, an instant message, or a video call.

## The Role of The Employer

Supporting employee mental health, in and outside of the workplace, is a critical need and will remain so following this crisis. **Taking the right approach can literally save lives.** The primary cause of work-related mental health issues is stress. Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension. People with chronic stress are likely to have a

final breakdown that can lead to suicide, violent actions, heart attacks, and strokes. Burnout is defined as having feelings of both physical and emotional exhaustion usually due to stress related to working conditions. In 2019, burnout was classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an occupational phenomenon. Though it is not classified as a medical condition, burnout victims are now supported by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.<sup>5</sup> The root cause of the unmanaged stress can be the result of the overall culture of the organization that must be highlighted and altered. Thus, the initial role of the employer in supporting employee mental health is creating a supportive organizational culture. Characteristics of an organizational culture that is supportive of mental health include, but are not limited to:

- 1 employees are not consistently overwhelmed by being consistently overworked;
- 2 inclusion, diversity, and equity are valued and demonstrated through intentional behaviors and actions;
- 3 employees are valued as individuals and their lives outside of work are acknowledged;
- 4 conversations around mental health are normalized, and employees are regularly informed of support systems in place (i.e. EAP);
- 5 employees are called out on behaviors such as offensive language, using mental health disorders as adjectives (i.e. "this weather is so bipolar") and microaggressions;
- 6 feedback and recognition are consistent;
- 7 there is a mental health policy and other policies, such as sick leave and bereavement policies, are written in a way that takes employee mental health into consideration;
- 8 employees are encouraged to take vacations and mental health days as needed;
- 9 all communication is required to be respectful; and
- 10 flexibility, including varied schedules and remote work, is not viewed as a privilege.

While HR professionals are not wholly responsible for developing organizational culture, they can play an integral role in creating a safe space in which employees feel comfortable discussing any mental health challenges they may have. Mental illness is so stigmatized that people are reluctant to talk about it, let alone acknowledge they are dealing with one. It is incumbent upon HR professionals to encourage these conversations as part of building inclusive workplaces.



In addition to talking about mental health, HR professionals must educate employees, including managers, on how to support those dealing with a mental health condition, especially if the condition is known, but also if it is not known. For example, if an employee's personality or productivity changes, it could be for numerous reasons including that they may be dealing with a mental health condition. Several of the actions and behaviors that are considered performance issues could be due to mental health conditions. For example:

- Someone dealing with an anxiety disorder may find working in an open workspace overwhelming and thus it may take them longer to finish projects.
- Someone who is frequently "late" to work could be dealing with depression, so it takes them longer to get going in the morning.
- Someone dealing with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) may take longer to leave the house.
- Someone with PTSD may be triggered in certain environments or situations.

Anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, OCD, and PTSD can all affect an employee's work style, preferred working hours, or preferred working environment. Employers need to commit to understanding how various mental health conditions can impact their staff and how they can support individuals who are in the midst of a mental health crisis, may be at risk for one, or may need an accommodation under the ADA to perform at their best.<sup>6</sup>

Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits private employers with 15 or more employees, state and local governments, employment agencies, and labor unions from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment.<sup>7</sup> The ADA also gives employees and job applicants with disabilities a right to a reasonable accommodation. A reasonable accommodation is some type of change in the way things are normally done at work. Many people with common mental health conditions have a right to a reasonable accommodation at work under the ADA. A reasonable accommodation may be obtained for any condition that would, if left untreated, "substantially limit" one or more major life activities, which include brain/neurological functions and activities such as communicating, concentrating, eating, sleeping, regulating thoughts or emotions, caring for oneself, and interacting with others. Federal regulations say that some disorders should easily be found to be disabilities, including major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia. Other conditions may also qualify depending on the individual's symptoms. Additionally, an individual may qualify for a reasonable accommodation if they have had a substantially limiting impairment in the past.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of accommodations that may be useful to an employee with a mental health condition include altered break and work schedules, quiet office space or devices that create a quiet work environment, changes in supervisory methods, specific shift assignments, and permission to work from home. Each of these examples requires employers to be flexible and open to making adjustments that may be out of the norm for that environment but that will support an employee in being their best self—personally and professionally.

It is important to remember that while there are individuals who live with one or more chronic mental health disorders that are biological or genetic in origin, mental health disorders can also be acute and brought on by stressful or upsetting situations such as the loss of a loved one, a serious illness or injury, the loss of a job, a

national emergency, or a global pandemic. Even with chronic disorders, the symptoms can ebb and flow. It is important for the conversations about mental health in the workplace to be ongoing so employees can feel comfortable requesting the support they need, and their managers and colleagues can recognize changes that may signal stress, burnout, or another mental health issue and offer appropriate support.



## Conclusion

Organizations and businesses operate at peak performance when the people who work in them can operate at their peak performance. Employers have a responsibility not only to their bottom line, members, or customers, but more importantly to supporting the health and well-being of their employees. Dr. Brock Chisholm, the first Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), famously stated that "without mental health there can be no true physical health." While it may seem especially critical for employers to provide their employees with sufficient resources to manage their mental health and to offer and give support as needed during times of crisis or great uncertainty, the truth is that it is always important. To truly create a mental health friendly workplace, the adjustments many employers are implementing during the coronavirus pandemic, such as allowing remote work, greater flexibility considering family and childcare responsibilities, and increased communication about important matters with employees must continue when we are out of crisis mode.

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