

How Workplace and HR Leaders Can Drive Company-Wide Support for Employee Mental Health Initiatives




QUICK READ

Employees Are Struggling, But What Do Workplaces Need to Successfully Support the Mental Wellbeing of Their Workforce?

Mental health is a hot topic as the world copes with a year of social distancing, physical isolation, increased stress and anxiety about the future, both in and outside of the workplace. Nearly 80% of the global workforce feel that the coronavirus pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health, and employees reporting symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders have increased by 11% since 2019.¹ To put this in perspective for business leaders, anxiety and depression alone cost us one trillion dollars each year in lost productivity – and that was before the pandemic.

Employees are looking to their employers for help. According to Forrester, up to 50% of employees actually find mental health services through their employer first. The problem is, employers are confused about where to start because employees are hesitant to ask for what they need to manage their stress, build resilience and improve their mental wellbeing.



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So, what does it really mean to support the mental health of employees?

Understand the Impact Mental Health is Having on Employees

Mental health, as defined by the [World Health Organization](#) is more than simply the absence of mental illness – it's a state of wellbeing, which includes the ability to navigate life, cope with stress and maintain productivity across all areas of life. COVID-19 left individuals and institutions struggling to stay afloat, and while it's natural for workplace leaders to want to focus all their attention on rebuilding or protecting their business, it's important that they take the time to learn how their employees have been affected. It may be beneficial to have your leadership, management and HR teams undergo training on employee mental health to learn how to identify the signs of emotional distress, how to talk to employees about mental wellbeing and how to appropriately respond to an employee in crisis.

Some employees may feel comfortable expressing their desire for more support from their organization; however, HR teams should keep their eyes and ears open and be ready to offer up available mental health resources as needed. Sending out an [anonymous survey](#) to the entire company via email or through your digital wellness platform is another measure HR teams can take to gauge mental wellness across the organization and identify any common sources of stress that can be reduced or managed within the workplace.



Increase Access to Mental Health Resources

Does your organization include and promote the availability of mental health services and resources as part of its employee benefits package? If not, it's time to do just that. Even in 2020, the pandemic had brought on increased mental health issues including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and more,¹ impacting your employees' ability to show up each day ready to perform their best. Preserving the mental health of your workforce is critical to the overall health of your people as well as the overall success of your business.

Communication is key when it comes to raising awareness about the mental health resources that are already available to employees. Employees may not be aware that counseling is covered by your employer-sponsored health insurance, that your company offers free access to mindfulness tools or that you've started an employee support network. Sending out an email about these tools and resources is great but bringing them together in one easy-to-access place is even better. Employees are more likely to utilize the benefits offered to them if they can get to those benefits whenever they need them as part of a tool they already use daily, such as a [digital employee wellbeing platform](#).



Eliminate the Stigma

Mental health issues were common before the arrival of COVID, affecting one in five adults,² and with the increase in reported stress, depression and anxiety linked to the pandemic, it's likely that this number has and will continue to increase—especially if nothing is done. There shouldn't be any shame in needing support, yet so many employees are terrified to express their battle with mental illness or their desire to get help. It's time we normalize conversations about mental health in the workplace.


The workplace is an ideal place to address mental health issues. We spend more than one-third of our lives at work and between deadlines, conflicts, excessive workloads and an inability to disconnect when the workday has ended, the workplace is a major source of stress for many. Less than half of employees are comfortable discussing their mental health needs with their employer and one in three employees fear negative consequences like being fired after disclosing a mental illness.³ Remind employees that it's okay to ask for help when they feel overwhelmed or upset, and that there won't be any repercussions or judgment for doing so.

Encourage Employees to Utilize Employee Assistance Programs and Health Coaching

Giving your employees direct access to on-demand support, whenever and wherever they need it, is a great way to reinforce a culture of holistic wellbeing and remind employees that your organization cares about them. Whether your organization chooses to offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), health coaching or both, your workforce will find comfort in knowing that they have someone to reach out to when they find themselves struggling.

These confidential support networks are each great on their own; together they combat the full scope of employee mental health and whole-person wellbeing to improve their overall sense of wellness and their engagement levels at work. EAPs may look different across organizations, but the end goal is to help employees resolve personal issues (most commonly those related to mental health, such as substance abuse, grief, caregiver issues and financial problems) that are impacting their work performance. And they're effective—providing access to EAPs improves employee resilience by 17%,⁴ resulting in a \$3-\$10 return on investment (ROI) for every \$1 spent on EAPs.⁵

Health coaching, on the other hand, is a one-on-one support system designed to help employees set personal goals related to their wellbeing through behavior change techniques. Coaching may better address health-related issues like condition management and stress regulation, with the goal of improving overall employee health to reduce healthcare costs and boost productivity. With the help of a health coach, employees establish a course of action they will take to reach their wellness goals, checking in with their coach along the way to hold them accountable. The outcomes often include employees who engage in more healthy behaviors like eating well and being physically active, improved resilience and better biometrics like lower BMI and blood pressure, resulting in an average healthcare cost savings of \$600 annually for those with chronic conditions. These lifestyle changes often not only improve an employee's physical health but also their mental wellbeing, as the two are inextricably connected.



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Focus on Whole-Person Wellbeing

It's important to remember that mental health is closely connected to every area of wellbeing. Our physical health, financial wellness and social support systems heavily influence our state of mind, so addressing each of these areas is necessary to truly combat the mental health crisis we're facing today. Unfortunately, only 15% of employers address these four key areas of health in their workplace wellbeing plans.



Why is it necessary to focus on holistic wellbeing to support mental health?



Financial concerns impact our mental wellbeing:

43% of employees who struggle with their mental health cite money-related concerns as one of the main reasons they rate their emotional wellbeing poorly



Loneliness leads to absenteeism:

Lonely workers are 2x as likely to take sick days and 5x as likely to miss work due to stress⁹



Our state of mind impacts our engagement levels:

79% of mentally healthy employees are engaged at work vs. just 47% of employees who are living with mental health issues⁶



Racial inequity fuels mental health issues:

Social change, racial and gender discrimination, social exclusion, violations to human rights and other issues related to the social determinants of health negatively affect mental wellbeing¹⁰



Poor work-life balance increases risk of mental illness:

Workplace stress costs an estimated \$1,685 per employee, contributing to a grand total of \$225.8 billion lost each year in productivity and absenteeism⁷



Holistically healthy workplaces save money on healthcare and lost productivity:

The U.S. could save \$37.6 billion to \$67.8 billion each year by focusing on both medical and behavioral health services¹¹



Healthy employees are at lower risk for burnout:

Employees who report being holistically healthy are more than 50% less likely to experience job burnout⁸

Organizations must do more than simply offer employee benefits targeted at improving the mental health of their workforce. By taking a whole-person approach to wellbeing, employers can address the underlying issues affecting the mental and emotional state of their workforce.

Your workforce is diverse—in age, cultural or ethnic background, gender identity and more—which means their wellbeing journeys will vary greatly. Wellbeing, whether mental, physical, financial or social, is not a one-size-fits-all matter, but it doesn't have to be complicated. Investing in a smart, flexible, AI-powered digital health solution can jumpstart a culture of health and wellbeing at your organization, laying the groundwork for an all-inclusive wellbeing ecosystem designed to meet the unique needs of your entire workforce.

At Virgin Pulse, we believe that wellbeing should be easy to access, easy to use and easy to understand. Our Homebase for Health™ approach creates a unified experience that adapts to the ever-changing needs of your people and will make for a seamless health journey for your workforce and your organization. And it delivers. 68% of high-risk members report lower levels of stress and 44% of members are more productive at work as a result of their organization's investment in the Virgin Pulse platform. You can also expect 28% fewer sick days and an average healthcare cost savings of \$1,029 per employee enrolled each year.



Your people need support from their employer more than ever before. The mental health crisis cannot be beaten without focusing on the entire scope of wellbeing. Ready to go above and beyond for your workforce so they can achieve more for your business? [Request a demo today.](#)

Learn more at virginpulse.com Find us on [facebook](#) | [twitter](#) | [linkedin](#)

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1 <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/post-covid-stress-disorder-emerging-consequence-global-pandemic>

2 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2020/10/09/what-the-future-of-work-means-for-our-mental-health/?sh=6db24e8a60f7>

3 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshiti/2020/05/28/10-eye-opening-statistics-on-the-mental-health-impact-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?sh=6e7403942df0>

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6 <https://www.metlife.com/employee-benefit-trends/ebts-mental-health-2020/>

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10 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

11 <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/workplace-health/mental-health/index.html>