THE COMPLETE **POST-COVID HR GUIDE** TO SAFEGUARD **MENTAL HEALTH** & **MANAGE** WORKPLACE STRESS

feel

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Mental health conditions have a major impact on employee well-being and are one of the biggest causes of long-term absenteeism at work. Employers should promote good mental health in the workplace and implement policies that not only address mental health issues but also prevent them.

According to WHO, mental health disorders affect 1 in 4 globally, and depression and anxiety have an estimated cost of $1 trillion per year in lost productivity to the global economy. Depression is the #1 cause of disability worldwide, and this of course does not leave the workplace unaffected. The numbers speak for themselves. 400 million work days are lost every year due to mental health issues.

On top of that there is a shortage of therapists and people experience long waiting times before receiving the support they need, by which time it may be too late.

This situation has significantly deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and during lockdowns many people not only experienced extreme stress about their health but also about their financial well being and that of their employer.

Returning to work post COVID-19 will not be an easy task. The executive team and the HR division should implement new policies and programs to address their employees' increased anxiety and maintain their motivation and productivity
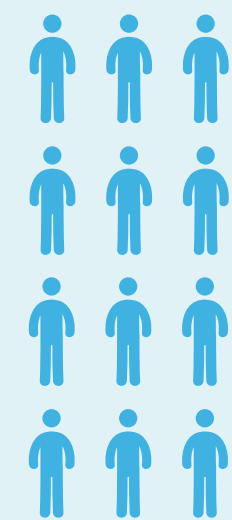
This guide was designed to help HR professionals navigate the new reality and provide actionable advice on how to safeguard their workforce's mental health, and also highlight the importance of including mental health programs into the employee benefit programs.

COMMON MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN THE WORKPLACE

Of those suffering from mental health issues, **the National Institute of Mental Health** estimates:

18%
have some form of **ANXIETY DISORDER**

9.5%
have **DEPRESSION**

4%
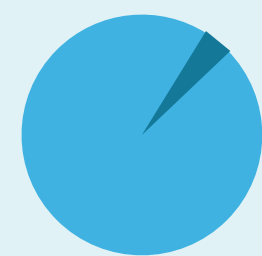have **ATTENTION DEFICIT/ HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)**

Businesses cannot afford to ignore mental health any more because it costs them both time and money. People with mental health conditions on average make 6 times more emergency room visits and consequently 4 times more medical claims compared to people without a mental health diagnosis. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

According to the **'Mental Health Conditions in the Workplace'** prepared by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) national network approximately:

> ❝ *A study by Feel revealed a 200% increase in negative emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic* ❞

44 Million ADULTS
18.5% OF THE US POPULATION
REPORTED HAVING HAD **MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES** IN THE **LAST YEAR**

For those in need of mental health support services, post pandemic there will be barriers to receiving those services with an increase in waiting times for appointments and the shortage of therapists even more of a hindrance. Trauma and PTSD symptoms are becoming more common now following intense social distancing and isolation, not to mention the COVID-19 survivors, those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 and those who already suffer from long-term mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, who are predisposed to having an increased risk of developing PTSD.

Now is the time to identify how your organization can procure mental health services that meet the needs of your employees.

18%
OF US WORKERS
REPORT HAVING A **MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION** IN **ANY GIVEN MONTH**.

Anxiety in the workplace has always been high, but the circumstances of COVID-19 show an even quicker deterioration in mental health, loss of motivation and productivity. **A study by Feel revealed a 200% increase in negative emotions** during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is quite an extraordinary indicator of how mental health was affected.

Over the course of eight weeks, between February and April 2020, Feel collected data from participants in Europe and the USA, and analysed more than 590 million samples from biosignals. Analysis of the data showed that:

- There was a significant change in people's emotional state

- The number of negative emotions experienced almost doubled after lockdown

- More than 60% of those negative emotions increased in intensity

- The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have triggered the occurrence of novel emotions such as feeling vulnerable, empty, terrified, fearful and miserable.

However, this does not mean that the condition is permanent or even severe enough to be substantially limiting for people, but rather that some everyday life or work activities may be more time-consuming or difficult compared to others.

The workplace needs to change and adapt quickly, and now is the perfect time for the HR department to rethink its policies and take advantage of the opportunity to create a workplace culture that destigmatizes mental health, and communicate clearly that mental health issues are actually very common and that it doesn't make an employee incapable.

One step towards this is promoting the use of mental health services, such as **the Feel Relief Program**, and sharing information about the benefits of supporting mental health in the workplace. Below is a short description of some common mental health disorders experienced in the workplace.

ANXIETY DISORDERS:

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2020), "the term "anxiety disorder" refers to specific psychiatric disorders that involve extreme fear or worry, and includes generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder and panic attacks, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, selective mutism, separation anxiety, and specific phobias".
The symptoms usually include shortness of breath, pounding heart with no apparent trigger, dizziness or tunnel vision. In most cases the symptoms pass as quickly as they come and don't readily return. But when they do continually return, that can be a sign that the different negative feelings have actually turned into an anxiety disorder.

DEPRESSION:

It is the most common mental disorder and the number one cause of disability worldwide, affecting more women than men. Depression involves a persistent feeling of sadness, guilt or low self-worth and should not be confused with mood fluctuation. Other symptoms include disturbed sleep patterns, loss of appetite, tiredness, and inability to focus. Depression can be long-lasting or recurrent, but in the long run it's a major hindrance in functioning at work or school and coping with daily life. High severity depression increases the risk of suicide.

PANIC ATTACKS:

These are sudden periods of intense terror when there is no reason to feel fear, with symptoms that include shortness of breath, sweating, pounding heartbeat, choking sensations, chest pain and nausea. Bringing to mind a panic attack can provoke terror and trigger another one.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER:

Also known as OCD, is a type of anxiety disorder, and often confused with the situation where people seem obsessed with keeping things clean and tidy. Unfortunately, OCD is much more complex and, as the name implies, consists of two main parts: a) obsessions, which are unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly come into mind, and b) compulsions, which are repetitive actions that you feel will reduce the anxiety caused by the obsession.

Both the Feel Relief Program and the Feel Program are designed to support these common mental health disorders and provide your employees with the tools they need to manage their symptoms and productively engage in the workplace.

DOES YOUR WORKFORCE HAVE LEGAL RIGHTS REGARDING THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

Of course.

It is not unusual to hear cases about people with mental health disorders being treated unfairly. It is illegal for an employer to discriminate against employees who have a mental health condition, this includes layoff, rejection for a job or promotion, or forcing them to take leave.

As an employer it is very important to stay informed about the legal rights of your employees facing mental health conditions and be prepared to provide reasonable accommodations. HR professionals are a valuable resource to managers as they know how to address employees' mental health when it is disclosed.

SOME KEY FACTS TO KEEP IN MIND ARE:

- It is illegal to discriminate or lay-off an employee because they have a mental health condition

- An employee is allowed to keep their condition private

- As an employer you are only allowed to request access to your employee's medical record in 4 specific **situations**

- Your employee is allowed to make reasonable requests to accommodate their condition, such as remote working, change in shifts, more breaks, adjustments in office space, etc., and you are required to provide it as long as it does not require significant cost or difficulty

- You are not allowed to fire your employee because they made a reasonable request to accommodate their condition

For a detailed analysis of the general principles of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and additional rights under other laws not discussed here, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and various medical insurance laws, you can see **here** & **here**.

THE ROLE OF HR IN MAINTAINING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

As people practitioners, HR professionals have the onerous task of maintaining a balancebetween the best interest of employees and the organization. Tackling mental health issues in the workplace may not fall entirely to HR but the organization, however it is the HR department that should drive the change. The productivity and mental well-being of employees greatly depends on the way they are treated and managed on a regular basis, and defines the level of trust they put in the employment relationship.

How can we prioritize mental health?

This begins by creating a culture of openness and raising awareness about mental health problems, and continues with making sure that the right resources and channels are in place. On a larger scale, according to HR Magazine (2016), "this means fostering and maintaining a workplace culture that is supportive and understanding, and helping all employees to feel accepted wherever they work in the organization and whatever their background".

Any initiative aimed at establishing mental health standards will fail unless it is a coherent effort that begins with the HR managers themselves.

On a personal level, HR staff might try a more personal approach and schedule 1-2-1 meetings with all employees to monitor and review an individual's personal goals and workload, this will promote both encouragement and guidance. A good example at the company level is for HR to raise awareness of the issues surrounding mental health to help break the taboo, and all personnel should be able to talk openly to reduce the stigma. According to People Management (2019), "inviting guest speakers to talk about their journey with mental health and/or encouraging managers and senior leaders to speak about their own experiences can help to get the conversation started".

> " *Most employees don't know how to behave towards a colleague with mental health issues. So, apart from equipping teams with the right resources to support colleagues, HR could provide training courses to teach everyone how to recognize the symptoms and help colleagues who are affected.* "

Last but not least, managers need to understand their legal obligations with regard to health and safety which impacts the whole organization. HR can help managers understand these obligations, and at the same time prepare them with skills and resources they need to be able to have conversations with their team properly.

THE MONETARY COST OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

One of the biggest growing challenges facing employers today is the management and support of their employees' mental health. Another significant impact is the decrease in productivity as an employee might choose to keep working, instead of taking time off, but in detriment to his motivation and productivity.

Studies carried out by WHO on mental health and the workplace showed that approximately:

1 in 4

OF THE GLOBAL POPULATION EXPERIENCES MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES EACH YEAR, WITH

DEPRESSION

ACCOUNTING FOR UP TO

400 Million

LOST WORK DAYS ANNUALLY

Mental health tand substance abuse alone costs US businesses

$80 - $100 BILLION ANNUALLY

against a global estimate of

$1 TRILLION

whilst **serious mental illness costs up to**

$193.2 BILLION A YEAR IN LOST EARNINGS

The current COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the number of people struggling with mental health issues. From a Kaiser Family Foundation poll, which surveyed 1,226 Americans during March 25–30,

45% OF ADULTS

said the crisis had had **A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THEIR MENTAL HEALTH**

19% OF ADULTS

saying it had had a **"MAJOR IMPACT"**

This, along with the amount of money lost by businesses due to mental health it's currently a lose-lose situation.

Fortunately, employers have started taking actions to safeguard mental health in the workplace. Indeed, the WHO estimates that for every **$1 invested in the treatment and support of mental health disorders sees a return of $4 in improved health and productivity.** Researchers have also found that businesses who invest in mental health programs for their employees to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health, train managers and improve the culture around mental health in the workplace, see a $10 return for every $1 invested.

With 63% of the US population making up the US workforce, health promotion programs that combine mental and physical health interventions can be successful. This is because they can identify those at risk, put in place a support structure and offer them treatment, which in the long-term means employers can reduce their healthcare costs, which in turn should improve productivity.

COMMON CONCERNS YOUR WORKFORCE IS FACING WHEN RETURNING TO WORK POST-COVID

When it comes to the post quarantine return to normality and routine, many employees will face a lot of challenges and concerns when they return to the office. It is not surprising to hear that:

- Employees are afraid of getting sick
- Employees feel the future of their job is unstable, and they are scared of layoffs and their financial future
- For those who got used to, and enjoyed working from home, going back to commuting or returning to an environment that is not as safe as their home is a disturbing thought
- Parents, of course, have an added stress if their children are still at home, with or without schooling
- Employees who got sick but are now declared fit for work are concerned to return because they might not yet feel 100%
- There is always the risk that employees who have been ill with COVID-19 may suffer stigma and discrimination

A study by The Skills Network shows, employees have concerns that are rooted in the return to the routine itself and the logistics of it:

- Mixing with co-workers (49%)
- Communicating face-to-face (32%)
- Going back to a set routine (30%)
- Commuting (30%)
- Dealing with office politics (13%)
- Having to look presentable (9%)

Therefore, companies should demonstrate effective safety protocols, stating what tools are being implemented and why, such as space markers on the floor, plastic guards or taking temperatures prior to entering the building.
Employees should be invited to share their perceptions of the safety protocols to help alleviate their concerns and support them in grounding their thinking.

ACTIONABLE MEASURES TO HELP YOUR WORKFORCE IMPROVE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH TO AVOID MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Here are 5 steps you can implement to keep your workforce productive.

CHANGE STARTS AT THE TOP

In front of your team it is vital that you model an air of calm, think rationally and focus on what you can control to find solutions. Use positive, motivational language to keep them briefed with accurate and up-to-date information.
But, keep any personal worries away from them by giving yourself the time and space you need to express your fears in private which will not risk your team's confidence.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Check in with your team daily to avoid any misunderstanding or assumptions, a simple email sharing updates will suffice. If you get any questions that you cannot answer, reassure them that you will do your best to find out.
Empathize with any challenges your employees are facing, such as lack of child care or child educational demands. Ask specific questions such as 'do you need any support?' or 'would a 1-2-1 help in this situation?' to validate any concerns your employees may have.

If you need to deliver difficult news, you should do this face-to-face so your team trusts what you say.

- Before delivering the news anticipate any concerns or worries you think are likely to arise

- Acknowledge the challenges you face including the worst-case and best-case scenarios, and the most likely outcome

- Listen carefully to any concerns that are put forward

- Communicate clearly that you have a plan in place, and outline the steps that need to be taken to resolve the challenge. Make sure that the steps are practical and achievable

- Be positive and reassure your team that you will be with them every step of the way

SMARTER WORKING

Set up policies that allow people to work smarter with minimal risk to productivity and maximum benefit to mental well-being:

- Continue to allow people to work from home and/or introduce staggered and flexible work days so they can continue working productively

- Ensure those employees working from home have the right tools they need to work smarter, such as a headset, high-speed internet connection or office furniture

- Communicate individual and team goals and responsibilities clearly to help keep your workforce focused, engaged and connected.

- Encourage your team to take regular, planned breaks throughout the day to rejuvenate their energy and focus such as taking walks, listening to meditation or doing some breathing exercises

- Manage unnecessary technology usage by downloading website blocking software or apps that limit time on certain sites to stop the COVID-19 noise from distracting your team

BUILD POSITIVITY

A happy team is a productive team.

By focusing on deliverables and outputs instead of micromanaging how their time is spent at home can ease employees' worry of negative perceptions of working from home. During these uncertain times it is also even more important to celebrate team progress and wins, however large or small, and acknowledge those that have gone above and beyond the call of duty. This will help cultivate positivity and boost morale, and is the ideal way to change your current workplace culture and create new messaging about empathic leadership and being people-centric.

EMPLOYER'S RETURNING TO WORK POST COVID-19 CHECKLIST

What do managers need to plan to ensure a good return from the home office?
All measures should describe the new ways of working, which then need to be communicated to the employees:

- Office organisation: determine the number of employees on the floors and in the offices, describe guidelines for the use of meeting and conference rooms, coffee and communication corners, define rules for visitors

- Collaboration and communication: aim for employees to gradually return from the home office, clarify retention of virtual "check-in" meetings, introduce "clean desk" policy, redefine home office facilities

- Health and hygiene: communicate hand washing and distance rules, regularly clean desks, door handles, printers, provide masks for employees using public transport, define travel guidelines.

What are the key questions the manager has to ask himself before resuming normal operations?

Operations related:

- Do we really need the entire workforce working in the office, or can we still have a few days of remote working and keep the positives of working from home?

- Have we created tiers of who really needs to be in the office?

- Have we made space layout adjustments in the office?

- Have we invested in new technologies to facilitate online meetings and remote working if needed again in the future?

Health Related:

- Have we planned for cleaning and sanitization protocols, both inside the office and in common spaces like the elevators? Should we plan for cleaning the toilets more times per day?

- Will we keep common places like the cafeteria open?

- Can we implement periodical COVID-19 testing for our employees?

- Have we set up a process should one of our employees contract COVID-19? Will we close the entire office?

- What is our travel policy? Will we allow business trips?

- Have we purchased enough equipment such as masks and hand sanitisers to last for the next 3 months at least?

Internal Communications & Policies Related:

- Are we ready to make accommodations for those who need it, such as parents or vulnerable employees?

- Do we have a communication plan to educate our employees about the new policies?

- Have we considered offering new benefits such as telehealth or mental health programs?

- Do we really have an open culture as a company based on empathy?

- Are we ready to welcome and accept feedback from our employees?

- Which positive COVID-19 experiences do we want to keep alive? For example, how to deal with improvisation and mistakes, forms of communication for team cooperation, interfaces, information and coordination via virtual meetings, and more efficient time management

- How can we encourage team working & social interaction without putting employees in danger?

- Should we offer online seminars to equip our employees to adjust to the new way of doing business online, e.g. digital marketing workshops, content writing seminars, website management courses, etc?

Uncertain how this can look like in practice? Here are some additional ideas:

1 Encourage your employees to stay active while staying safe. While gyms, swimming pools and other sports facilities might be closed, it is safe to exercise outside as long as the rules of personal space and non-contact are respected. A positive side effect is that spending time outside improves our mood and well-being, which is a great advantage especially in times of fear, stress and insecurity.

2 Create a slack channel or a special area on the intranet where the communication plan can be updated when necessary, employees can exchange ideas and HR managers can offer as much transparency as possible in providing status updates on key concerns, such as safety and expectations of working from home, tips on dealing with stress, or even more information such as sports activities or healthy recipes.

3 Minimize the risk of burnout while working remotely by creating official company guidelines for working from home. Define working hours, schedule breaks and encourage your managers to help their employees adapt to the new work situation. A home office does not mean that you and your employees have to work all the time. Communicate these policies so that your employees have a secure foundation and feel that their employer cares about their well-being.

4 Create clear policies regarding harassment and stigmatizing. Build a working team from employees from each division who will be able to discuss top concerns and come up with solutions. Maintain an open dialogue between employees and management.

5 Practice compassionate management. Perform back to work interviews with your employees individually or with the entire department. Walk them through the new policies, ask them how they feel, collect any ideas they have, and follow up on any concerns or complaints that have been shared.

6 Train people managers and encourage them to follow the below good practices:
a. Lead by example. Wash your hands or remind your employees to wash their hands, respect physical distance while working, using mental health resources & tools
b. Reassure your team that your door is open and you are there to help them out
c. Encourage your team to seek support when they need it
d. Stay focused on work and reaching results. Do not appear disoriented, scared or demotivated
e. Do not make assumptions or stigmatize people

7 Adjust your company's performance management system to the new circumstances. Set clear goals and stick to them to drive profitability, but adjust the expectations and the performance review to the new way of working, for example maybe more frequent check-ins are required. Also consider adding new goals related to the new reality, such as evaluating success while working remotely, setting KPIs for new areas such as online marketing, etc.

8 Offer your employees access to stress and time management resources. Start by checking what content you already have on the topics and then search for additional resources.

Other ideas could be to:

- Consider organising meditation lunch break sessions
- Include a mental health program into your benefits scheme
- Provide resources for your employees to do breathing techniques
- Give your employees time off to see their therapist
- Set up a mentoring program where your employees can talk about their concerns
- Encourage your employees to practice at least one grounding technique to bring your thoughts back to the present and gain control over your physical response to fear and distress. The image below shows some popular techniques

6 **ways to practice grounding**

1

Body

Lay on the ground,
press your toes into the floor,
squeeze playdough

2

5 senses

Wear your favorite sweatshirt,
use essential oils,
make a cup of tea

3

Breathe

Practice 4-7-8 breathing:
inhale to 4, hold for 7,
exhale to 8

4

Self-soothe

Take a shower or bath,
find a grounding object,
light a candle

5

Observe

Describe an object in detail:
color, texture, shadow,
light, shapes

6

Distract

Find all the square or
green objects in the room,
count by 7s, say the date

ABOUT US

Sentio Solutions is a San Francisco based company, which develops biomarkers and digital therapeutics to change the way we diagnose, manage and care for mental health.

The company's premier offering **Feel is a 16-week holistic mental health program** for people facing mild to moderate mental health disorders, that combines our proprietary Feel Emotion Sensor and evidence-based techniques to quantify a person's emotional state for the very first time and deliver on-time 24/7 emotional health support to those in need.

Feel Relief Program is a new 4-week tailored and structured mental health program to meet the demand and need for emotional help during the COVID-19 pandemic and includes online mental health resources, the Feel app to journal emotions and weekly digital sessions with qualified coaches.

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