



Where the Best Companies Come Together to Advance Business Integrity

[Home](#) [Topics](#) [Publications](#) [Sign Up](#) [Ethisphere Home](#) [Q](#)

Employee Mental Health is Key to COVID-19 Recovery

[< Previous](#) [Next >](#)

Employee Mental Health is Key to COVID-19 Recovery

COVID-19 has abruptly caused the largest and most rapid disruption to how and where we work since anyone can remember. Company leaders around the world have been called on to establish new work-from-home policies, develop technology solutions to secure remote business activities, and respond to closed national borders, shutdowns of whole industries, and disrupted supply chains. With more than twenty-seven million cases and an anticipated excess of a million deaths before the end of the year, COVID-19 is taking its toll on individuals and organizations alike.

Headlines are predicting that mental health concerns will be the shadow pandemic of COVID-19 as study after study reports dramatically elevated levels of distress, fear, worry, anxiety, and depression. But a mental health pandemic is not inevitable. Fortune favors those who are prepared, and for the working world, this is a moment when leaders have an outsized opportunity to do what is good and right – for employees and business alike.

We believe that companies play a crucial role in promoting well-being in the community, not just through products and services, but also more broadly through company practices and policies. This is why we have brought together accrued wisdom from the business world and current scientific research to develop a toolkit for business leaders on how best to support employee mental health during and beyond



Kathleen Pike, Ph.D

COVID-19. Freely available, **the toolkit** identifies common COVID-19 stressors, the role of effective leadership in addressing mental health, guidance on how to talk with team members about mental health, and how to put it all together to protect employee mental health, promote positive mental health and provide access to appropriate mental health resources and services when needed.

The Benefits of Supporting Employees' Mental Health During and Beyond COVID-19

The meaning of good governance is evolving to recognize that employee well-being is at the heart of a strong, healthy, and ethical workplace. With all the other burdens associated with COVID-19, it can

be tempting to think that attending to mental well-being can wait. This could not be further from the truth. As articulated in our toolkit, research supports focusing on employee mental well-being, indicating that it will yield immediate and long-term benefits in at least the following ways:

Increased Productivity and Improved Work Performance

Employees are better able to focus on work during the workday when their mental health needs are effectively addressed. Organizations can support employees who are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety caused by COVID-19 by ensuring a supportive environment, providing useful information, and facilitating access to treatment. Such efforts prevent problems from growing and promote coping and

resilience, which positively impact for employee health, work engagement, and performance.

Reduced Absenteeism, Turnover, and Injuries

The changes and disruptions in work due to COVID-19 run the risk of exacerbating pre-existing conditions and putting additional stresses on employees. Left unaddressed, employees with untreated mental health concerns are more likely to miss work and leave their jobs. This puts burden on businesses to fill these gaps, which is especially challenging in the context of the pandemic. Taking as a given that a significant percentage of employees are more stressed than usual and providing appropriate care for common mental health concerns during the pandemic has the potential to lower rates of absenteeism among employees and reduce attrition.

Enhanced Reputation, Recruitment, and Retention

Recruitment and retention of the best and brightest employees is enhanced for companies that focus on mental health in the workplace. Such companies are perceived to be more desirable places to work. This is especially true for young professionals today, with over 60% reporting the desire to work for a company that supports their mental well-being.

A Healthier Workforce in All Ways

Having an untreated mental health condition like depression increases risk for other health conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease. Good mental health is associated with lower rates of cancer and heart disease. Employees with better mental health are more likely to attend routine health visits and engage in health activities such as exercise and following a nutritious diet, which means that they can remain well and in the workforce long after the COVID-19 crisis.

Effective Leadership During COVID-19

As business leaders respond to COVID-19, they are not only dealing with the current pandemic, but also shaping the future of their organization. The following leadership actions will help you navigate this difficult time effectively so that employees and the entire company grow stronger during COVID-19 and beyond. We recommend that

leaders adopt a three-tiered strategy: 1) Protect employee mental health by reducing exposure to problematic situations that could cause mental distress or mental health problems; 2) Promote positive mental health by focusing on coping skills, employee strengths, and resilience to enhance your employees' capacity to thrive even in difficult times; and 3) Provide access to services and opportunities for employees to talk about mental health needs. In other words, follow The Three P's: Protect, Promote, Provide.

The following will be key to your success:

Communicate
clearly and often

Share important information and resources. Provide clear guidance on protecting health and safety.

Employees are counting on their leaders and managers to provide credible information, and to be honest when they do not know answers to questions.

Frequent, predictable communications that employees can easily

participate in or access will go a long way to reducing distress, fear, anxiety, and despair. These should be characterized by transparency, authenticity, empathy, and optimism.



Gordon Watson, Chief Executive Officer, AXA Asia

Promote open, two-way communication

It is important that employees not only hear from their supervisors, but also know they can express their fears and concerns to supervisors at this time. Maintaining contact and interaction with others through video calls and group chats—both to complete work and for more informal exchange—relieves anxiety and builds a sense of community. Creating space that gives employees opportunities to speak out about their mental health concerns can help people get support early.

Normalize employees' heightened anxiety and stress

It is important to convey that feelings of stress, worry, and fear are normal during this time of uncertainty. We should expect these among our employees, our coworkers, and ourselves. Although they may impact us and our work environment throughout the pandemic's unfolding, these mental health concerns are common and can be effectively managed.

Remember and remind employees that mental health is important to everyone

Mental health is a specific dimension of health for each of us, in the same way that we talk about cardiac health, for example. It is important to understand that our mental health status changes—sometimes we feel stressed and fearful, sometimes joyful and optimistic. Mental health problems like depression and anxiety are common. Many factors including work, relationships, finances, physical environment, caregiving duties, family, and health influence how well we feel both physically and emotionally, and can change over time. It is important to remember and remind employees that COVID-19 has introduced many new and different stressors to each of us that are taxing our coping skills and ability to be resilient throughout this period, and some employees will have significant mental health concerns that will call for more focused care.

Make mental health a normal part of your communications

Talking about mental health is difficult for many people due to stigma, and this is especially true in the workplace. However, we know that this is to the detriment of employees' well-being and organizational success. COVID-19 has the potential to serve as an entry point for leaders and managers to begin conversations about mental health in the workplace. By actively showcasing your workplace as an open, safe

environment to discuss mental health concerns, and as a place where employees can get support during the pandemic and beyond, overall mental health will improve.

Facilitate peer and team support

Leaders and managers have many competing responsibilities that have been complicated even further by COVID-19. Encouraging the development of online and—where practical and medically-safe—in-person peer support groups and teams can greatly enhance work group cohesion and individual coping skills. Peer support groups and teams can be organized around shared interests (e.g., book groups), athletics (e.g., running groups), common experiences or characteristics (e.g., women in leadership, LGBTQ employees), and professional development and skills building (e.g., public speaking courses). These networks provide opportunities for employees to connect and look after each other in ways that can be a huge comfort. Once established, such internal staff networks can often serve to alert leaders when an employee may need additional support or attention.

Promote and model flexibility

Because we cannot predict the future of COVID-19, our daily routines will continue to be impacted by this pandemic for the foreseeable future. The uncertainty regarding the spread of COVID-19, with possible cycles of viral transmission, requires flexibility and responsiveness. When people aren't sure how they should behave they look to leaders as role models. Employees will follow the example of leaders they respect. When you model flexibility in response to changing policies and practices, employees will likely follow your lead.

Promote and model self-care

The disruptions to personal routines, restrictions on activities, and change in work processes on top of the elevated stresses associated with COVID-19 put many people at risk for neglecting self-care behaviors, such as getting regular exercise and healthy sleep. Social activities and clubs are cancelled. Leaders and managers can model and share creative strategies in this regard. With your visibility, you can model the healthy behaviors you are promoting in your workforce.

A mental health crisis does not need to be the next pandemic. Business leaders have the opportunity to play a decisive role in supporting the mental health needs of their

workforce. Companies that take proactive steps to protect employee mental well-being, promote positive mental health and resilience, and provide access to appropriate mental health care when needed will ensure that their employees, their companies, and ultimately all of society will have the health and strength to build back better.

About the Expert:

Kathleen M. Pike, PhD is Professor of Psychology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. She serves as Director of the Columbia-WHO Center for Global Mental Health and Chair of the Faculty Steering Committee for the Global Mental Health Programs at Columbia. She is Deputy Director of the Health and Aging Policy Fellows Program. She is also Senior Supervising Psychologist in the Center for Eating Disorders at CUIMC.

A long-time advocate for increasing access to care, Dr. Pike has over three decades of experience focused on mental health advocacy, policy, research and training. Kathy has provided consultation on mental health policy in the United States and Japan, where she resided for over a decade.

With increased corporate recognition of the need to address mental health in the workplace, Dr. Pike has consulted to numerous business leaders and corporations in the US and globally to assist them in applying research evidence and best practices to develop and integrate programs that support employee mental health and wellbeing in today's rapidly changing workplace.

As the Chief Executive Officer of AXA Asia, **Gordon Watson** is responsible for overseeing the Group's operations in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, China, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, while he also serves as a member of the Group's Management Committee.

Gordon is a driven leader outside of the insurance industry too. He is the Founding Chair of Shared Value Project (SVP) in Hong Kong, where he works with private companies to tackle social issues. He is also on Cyberport's Advisory Board for Fintech, is a GlobalScot, sits on the Asian Board for the Saltire Foundation and Entrepreneurial Scotland, and is a board member of the Parents' Leadership Council for Boston College.