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How to Support Employee Well-Being: Peer Examples and Guidance

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The pandemic is taking a toll on employees' emotional and mental well-being. Organizations should provide help. Audit leaders can use this resource to learn about the pillars of employee well-being and actions other organizations are taking to support their workforce.

Employees need extra help to weather the challenges of COVID-19 and organizations should do their best to provide it.

The pandemic has radically changed the way work does (or doesn't) get done. Employees went from having dedicated working and living spaces to having blended working and living spaces; from having equipment (e.g., desks, monitors, chairs) designed for work to at-home equipment and makeshift offices; from relying on schools and day care to becoming at-home teachers and caretakers for their children with no support; and from having regular in-person interactions with colleagues and friends to managing and helping teams remotely.

On top of it all, employees are feeling the pressure to perform and work as hard as possible, either to provide essential services or to do their best to make sure their organizations remain financially stable.

It is no wonder that 69% of workers say the COVID-19 pandemic is the most stressful time of their professional careers (more than Sept. 11 or the 2008 Great Recession). ¹ In fact, 88% of employees report experiencing moderate to extreme stress since the pandemic started, and another 62% reported losing at least one hour of productivity a day due to COVID-19-related stress. ²

To help you and your organization address this challenge, we have provided you with research on supporting employees' mental and emotional health. We also collected an extensive range of actions other companies have taken to support employee wellness. This runs the gamut from taking steps to reduce the stigma around mental health to redesigning the workday to better fit current needs and more.

This research came from our sister program in HR. As an audit leader, you may find some ways to support your team that you can implement and others that you can bring to company leadership for their consideration.

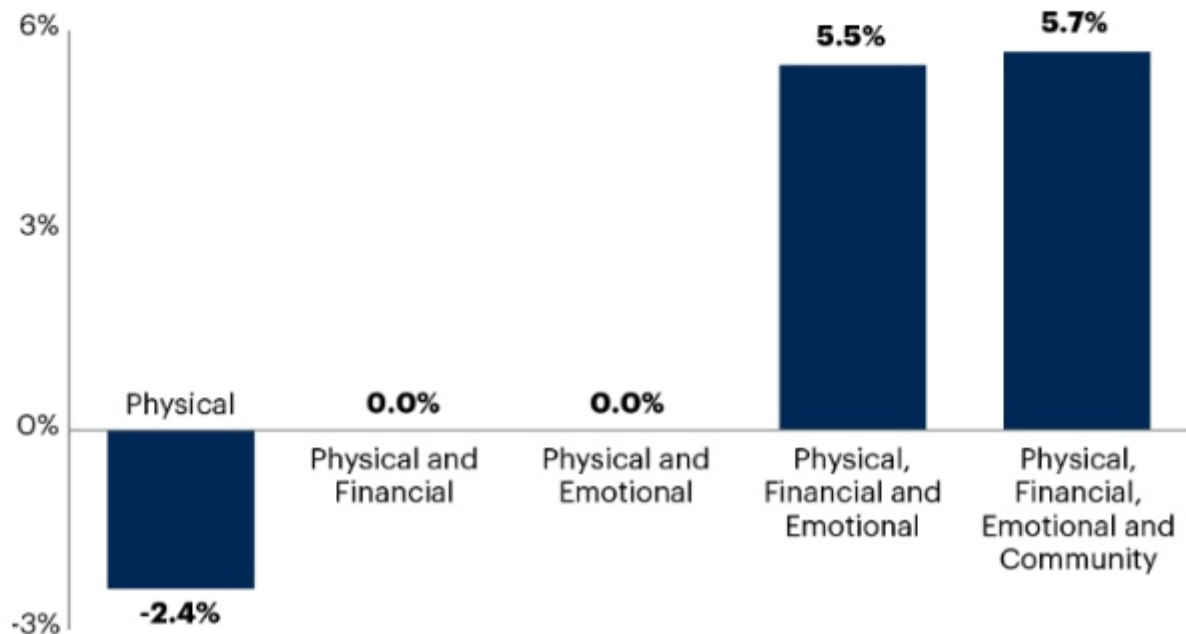
Emotional and Mental Health Support Must Be Holistic

In 2019, 45% of well-being budget increases were allocated to mental and emotional well-being programs, demonstrating the priority being placed on supporting employees' emotional health even before the pandemic. Since the onset of COVID-19, 68% of organizations have introduced at least one new wellness benefit, among which "improving emotional well-being" is the most common addition. ³

Although most employees report heightened threats to their emotional well-being, worries about social, physical, and financial well-being should not be overlooked. The most effective well-being programs consist of a holistic approach, according to our 2019 survey of more than 6,500 employees. Our findings indicate that programs with offerings in at least three of the four well-being pillars – physical, financial, emotional and community – have a 5.5% impact on employee engagement (see Figure 1). ⁴

Figure 1. Impact of Well-Being Pillar Combinations

Percentage Change in Employee Engagement



n = 6,543

Source: 2019 Gartner Total Rewards Employee Survey

Table 1: Mental Health Awareness Campaigns (Organization Examples)

Organization	Campaign Details
Snyk	<p>Declared May 15 a Mental Health Day, and the entire company will shut down to give everyone a moment to recharge. ⁵ The company also established principles for working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The principles include statements like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Structure the day to have time for leisure and relaxation. ■ Feel safe to reach out if help is needed. ■ Take time out during the day to provide homeschooling or other family care
Verizon Media	<p>Featuring, on its intranet, employees who are sharing their difficult experiences in the hopes of sparking important conversations. ⁶</p>
PG&E	<p>Built a website specifically for the topic of mental and emotional wellness that gathers and shares user-generated content that can help with emotional health issues. Sample topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How parents are taking care of children with special needs during the pandemic

- How to access drug and alcohol recovery services virtually ⁷

Source: Gartner

Promoting Help From Professionals and Peers

A couple of common and typically low-cost mental well-being offerings include the expansion (by either increasing the number of employees with access or the number of free sessions) of employee assistance programs (EAPs) and the adaptation of EAPs and mental counseling support to virtual settings when needed. Beyond making your team aware of your organization’s standard well-being offerings, make sure you promote any additional services (see Table 2).

Table 2: Expansions and Adaptations of EAPs and Mental Counseling (Organization Examples)

Organization	Details of Expansions or Adaptions
Starbucks	For eligible U.S. employees, access to 20 sessions a year with a mental health therapist or coach at no cost to the user. Sessions can be in person or via video chat. ⁸
Financial Times	Asked EAP providers to, in addition to their regular one-on-one counseling, provide custom-made webinars on pandemic-related topics such as keeping connected and better sleep. ⁹
Packard Culling Water	One-on-one health coaching for employees and their spouses. ¹⁰
Multiple organizations	Adding coaching and meditation sessions to EAP offerings.

Source: Gartner

In addition to expanding or adapting EAPs, organizations have also built a series of training sessions, tools, and resources employees can use to improve their own mental and emotional health. Make sure you are advertising these resources to your employees, see Table 3.

Table 3: Trainings, Tools and Resources to Support Mental and Emotional Health (Organization Examples)

Type of Offering	Organization	Description
Support HotLines	Aetna	<p>A dedicated company phone line to assist employees with topics such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Medical support ■ Compensation and benefits ■ Substance abuse ■ Domestic violence <p>Employees can text to ask for a counselor at any time of the day, every day. ¹¹</p>
Peer-to-Peer Support Programs	Walmart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employees are sorted into groups based on a common topic (e.g., relationships). ■ Some programs have moved to virtual settings to accommodate stay-at-home orders. ■ With COVID-19, topics have expanded to chronic illnesses, caregiving, job security and being separated from family and friends. ¹²
Trainings and Manager Support	Multiple organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Companywide employee trainings. Topics include spotting signs of depression; resiliency and stress management; watching out for signs of anxiety or stress; how to talk to struggling colleagues and where to refer them; and family dynamics and personal relationships. ■ Manager training to ensure knowledge of what benefits are available to employees and how to access them. ■ Virtual manager meetups to share best practices and support for each other.

Emotional Support Peers	Merck	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employees who voluntarily took an emotional and mental health training course (through Merck) become support peers. ■ Peers can be identified by a custom email signature or small button on their lapels (company is still testing ideas). <p>13</p>
Emotional Support Peers	Financial Times	Internal network of mental health ambassadors/champions – a group of employees who are passionate about helping others and help organize events, share communication and are available to answer questions from peers and direct them to the appropriate support. ¹⁴
Emotional and Mental Health Intranet Sites	Multiple organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Increasing the visibility, via formal and informal communication, of intranet sites with information about emotional well-being offerings and links to resources (e.g., tip sheets, webinars and podcasts on wellness topics, etc.) ■ Resources are typically organized by categories. ■ Common categories include stress, substance abuse, suicide, staying healthy, and panic and depression
Self-Assessment Tools	Multiple organizations	Emotional health self-assessment tools to help employees self-evaluate whether they should look for professional help.

Source: Gartner

Social or Community Offerings

Many of the efforts organizations are taking to create a sense of community and normalcy under the new reality also help to support employees’ emotional and mental well-being. For example, most organizations are setting up a variety of virtual engagements (e.g., happy hours, virtual book clubs and coffee breaks). Devils Backbone Brewing Company holds weekly themed happy hours on Zoom. Employees were asked to participate in a lip sync battle, play Disney characters or pretend it was Halloween. ¹⁵ Another effort worth calling out is Challenger’s interactive week, in which each day, except Friday, has a unique activity and purpose (see Table 4).

Table 4: Challenger’s Interactive Week

Day of the Week	Interactive Virtual Activity
Monday	15-minute meditation sessions
Tuesday	Lunch-and-learn sessions
Wednesday	Companywide trivia competitions and game nights
Thursday	The Chronicles of Challenger – a dedicated story time when employees bring their children to Zoom meetings to play with virtual backgrounds and hear stories read aloud.

Source: C. Lindlaw. "Challenger Life: Connecting During Crisis." Challenger. 5 May 2020.

Focused Support to Alleviate the Stress of Current Working Conditions

When looking at how organizations are changing or adapting work conditions to support employees' mental health, note that while some aspects apply to all employees, others apply only to those on the front lines or working remotely. To learn more about these offerings, see Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Mental and Emotional Health Support for Working Conditions That Apply to All (Organization Examples)

Offering	Organization	Description
Changes to PTO to help employees manage the stress of new working conditions	Microsoft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Twelve-week pandemic school and childcare closure and leave: an additional three-months-paid parental leave to deal with extended school closures Parents can decide when and how to take the leave.

<p>Changes to PTO to help employees manage the stress of new working conditions</p>	<p>McCormick & Company</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Paid leave to care for family members ■ Five days at 100% pay and up to an additional 11 weeks at 75% pay ¹⁷
<p>Changes to PTO to help employees manage the stress of new working conditions</p>	<p>AT&T</p>	<p>Extended original 80 hours of paid, excused time off to up to a total of 160 hours for the following scenarios:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employees who tested positive for COVID-19 ■ Employees who are at a higher risk due to an underlying health condition ■ Parents or guardians of children whose schools or daycares have closed for COVID-19 and for whom another childcare option is not yet available ■ Primary caregivers for someone diagnosed with COVID-19 who is unable to provide self-care ¹⁸
<p>Changes to PTO to help employees manage the stress of new working conditions</p>	<p>PepsiCo</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sick leave for quarantined employees ■ Paying 75% of normal pay for up to 12 weeks for employees who are forced to stay home to take care of their children ¹⁹
<p>Encourage employees to take PTO to give employees a break and help them recharge</p>	<p>Multiple organizations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Constantly reminding employees of the need to take PTO to recharge ■ CXOs are taking PTO while at home to send a message to other employees ■ Asking employees to take a particular amount of days by a particular date

Additional family care to help manage the stress of parents who have to homeschool while they work	Wells Fargo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Eligible U.S. employees are being reimbursed \$100 a day to cover childcare costs ■ Provided information on in-home care options currently available to make it easy for employees to take advantage of the offerings ²⁰
Flexible work arrangements to manage the stress of other at-home responsibilities	Multiple organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Allowing employees to work at different times of the day ■ Setting up part-time or job-sharing opportunities ■ Promoting candid manager-employee conversations to design a work schedule that fits the new schooling and/or caretaking responsibilities

Source: Gartner

Table 6: Mental and Emotional Health Support for Remote Employees (Organizational Examples)

Offering	Organization	Description
Work volume changes to avoid burnout and free up employee time for new urgent needs	Multiple organizations	<p>A purposeful reduction of the number of working hours (e.g., from eight hours a day to six hours a day) or of workloads (e.g., a 20% or a 30% reduction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Often complemented by manager training on setting boundaries
Purposeful companywide breaks	Basecamp	<p>Gave all employees a four-day weekend to prepare for the transition to working remotely. ²¹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Note: While organizations cannot turn the clock back and do the same, most can certainly consider a similar approach when preparing employees to return to on-site work.



Source: Gartner

A few smaller, yet still valuable efforts to support employees who suddenly moved to working remotely include:

- Tips and resources on how to effectively work from home (e.g., how to make sure you take breaks, good habits of successful remote employees, etc.)
- Communication emphasizing that kids, pets and background noise in conference calls are accepted during this new reality.

Laura Reul contributed to this article.

Recommended by the Authors

- [How to Communicate Effectively During the COVID-19 Crisis](#) – Learn basic communication tools to make sure your employees feel supported and heard.
- [Leader Guide to Fostering Psychological Safety During a Crisis](#) – Use this guide to enable open communication and trust with your team during times of crisis.
- [Managing Remote Teams During the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Outbreak](#) – Learn about the three pillars of successfully leading a remote workforce.

Endnotes

¹ [“New Data From Ginger Shows Nearly 70 Percent of Workers Feel More Stressed During COVID-19 at Any Other Point in Their Entire Professional Career,”](#) Business Wire.

² [“New Data From Ginger Shows Nearly 70 Percent of Workers Feel More Stressed During COVID-19 at Any Other Point in Their Entire Professional Career,”](#) Business Wire.

³ [“Dallas Mavericks, Mark Cuban to Reimburse Employees Who Buy From Small Businesses for Breakfast, Lunch,”](#) KTVT-TV.

⁴ [“8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19,”](#) Mental Health America.

⁵ ["Message From Peter McKay," LinkedIn.](#)

⁶ ["8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19," Mental Health America.](#)

⁷ ["8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19," Mental Health America.](#)

⁸ ["Millennial Employees Are Getting Companies to Radically Rethink Workers' Mental Health," Time.](#)

⁹ ["8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19," Mental Health America.](#)

¹⁰ ["8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19," Mental Health America.](#)

¹¹ ["Resources to Reduce Stress and Manage Emotional Health," Aetna.](#)

¹² ["COVID-19 Worries Cause Companies to Seek Mental Health Tools," MedCity News.](#)

¹³ ["COVID-19 Worries Cause Companies to Seek Mental Health Tools," MedCity News.](#)

¹⁴ ["8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19," Mental Health America.](#)

¹⁵ ["8 Employers Supporting Employee Mental Health During COVID-19," Mental Health America.](#)

¹⁶ ["Microsoft Is Giving Workers 12 Weeks of Paid Parental Leave Because of School Disruptions," CNN Business.](#)

¹⁷ ["McCormick & Company Offers Pay Incentives and Extends Workforce Benefits to Maintain Operations," Yahoo News.](#)

¹⁸ ["Our Paid Time Off and Work-From-Home Policies for COVID-19," AT&T.](#)

¹⁹ ["PepsiCo Hires 6,000 Employees, Provides Additional Compensation to Workers on Frontline of Pandemic," Food Navigator USA.](#)

²⁰ ["Teamworks at Home," Wells Fargo.](#)

²¹ ["The CEO of Software Giant Basecamp Gave His Employees a Four-Day Weekend to Prepare Themselves as Schools and Stores Close Across the U.S.," Business Insider.](#)

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