

ALEXANDER FORBES PUBLIC RELATIONS

SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING DURING LOCKDOWN

Covid-19 has changed the way we work, and remote working has seen a shift in the way that companies provide support to their employees.

Companies need to be flexible and adapt to help their employees make the remote work experience a positive one, said Myrna Sachs, head of Health Management Solutions at Alexander Forbes.

While there have been benefits, such as time saved on commuting, it also has downsides. A study done by the [World Health Organization](#) shows that the pandemic has disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide while the demand for mental health interventions and services are increasing. Moreover, bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones.

Financial issues affecting mental health

Struggling with financial issues can affect both mental and physical health, while mental and physical health can also affect finances. “This can also reduce productivity in the workplace in terms of ‘presenteeism’ and ability to concentrate. It can cause stress-related conditions such as migraines, as well as depression and in severe cases, suicidal ideation.”

Sachs said employers needed to ensure they have an employee well-being assistance programme to help with both psychological issues and financial issues, including debt management and legal advice. “Employers need to be empathetic towards employee’s needs and realise that no employee has the same needs. Lockdown has emphasised this – employees used to get support from other employees, but now remote working has taken that support away.”

Sachs said there was a need to ensure “transparent, open communication between employees and management”.

Taking leave is healthy

With ongoing lockdown restrictions, Sachs said that mental health, exhaustion and burnout should be an area of concern for companies. They should be encouraging employees to use their leave days and take short local breaks, when and where possible.

“Taking annual leave is not only a benefit provided by your employer but is also a health and safety requirement. Many companies promote taking at least 10 consecutive days of annual leave to ensure that employees are well rested.”

Taking a break can have physical and mental benefits, such as:

- reducing the risk of heart disease by being less stressed
- resetting thoughts so that employees become more creative and productive
- lowering the risk of anxiety and depression
- improving mood, which may help to ease social relationships

When taking leave while at home, employers should encourage their employees to distance themselves from work by:

- switching off smartphones and computers

- informing all relevant people that they are on leave, not available unless in an emergency, and that calls should not be forwarded to their cellphone

Sachs said employees should do a thorough handover so they are free to relax without thinking about incomplete work tasks. “Develop a new routine for your leave, such as waking up earlier and going for a run or not setting an alarm and sleeping in.”

Ergonomics in the work-from-home office

Employees may find themselves spending more time in front of their computer screens, resulting in shoulder, or back strains and acute or even chronic pain.

“Research shows that people spend large amounts of money and time going for treatment related to back pain, neck strain, headaches and other muscular or joint pain. The cause of this pain may be related to ergonomics – the way we are seated as well as the position of our desk, computer and telephone in relation to our bodies,” said Sachs.

“As much as work can be very demanding, remember to take breaks. Try taking a 10 minute break every hour by walking around in the house or garden. You could also attempt doing long-distance viewing (more than three metres) to rest the eyes. For example, look across the room or out of the window. Doing exercises at your desk is another helpful way to avoiding staring at your computer for long periods at a time.”

Sachs said it is essential that companies stay in touch with employees, using individual and team meetings, with cameras on to pick up nuances. “Managers need to develop skills around remote management, as it is not always easy to pick up if there are issues. At first we all thought this would be short term, but with renewed lockdowns we need to equip our managers with new skills.”

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