

REACH OUT

An employer's guide to using behavioral insights in supporting staff mental health and wellbeing

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

"If the country continues to ignore the collateral damage -- specifically our nation's mental health -- we will not come out of this stronger."

- Benjamin F. Miller, PsyD, Chief Strategy Officer at Well Being Trust.

The societal side-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are harmful and wide-reaching. People are living through unprecedented unemployment, economic hardship, and startling increases in domestic and child abuse. As a result, these overlapping crises are taking a toll on people's mental health and wellbeing. A recent report found that 45% of adults say the pandemic has worsened their mental health. Some of this impact can be seen in the dramatic rise in the use of hotlines for emotional distress – one federal emergency hotline saw a 1,000 percent increase in April 2020 compared to the same time last year.

Employees are also experiencing these mental health impacts. In a new report from Ginger, 88% of workers recently reported experiencing moderate to extreme stress.



Among those reporting stress, almost two-thirds of workers reported significant productivity losses due to COVID-19-related stress.

Employers are a critical touchpoint for mental health support, but in a global study across 10 industries, 40% of employees reported their company had not even asked them how they were doing in light of COVID-19.

Checking in with employees may seem insignificant, but small actions can have a meaningful effect on staff wellbeing. These actions alone cannot fix the structural issues with our mental health system exposed by COVID-19, but they are a start. Employers have a critical role to play in building the mental health system of tomorrow by supporting their employees today.

How can behavioral insights help?

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, behavioral insights have been used to help promote compliance with health behaviors such as mask-wearing, hand-washing, and social distancing. Similar principles can be applied to support mental health, increase wellbeing, and reduce burnout. In one BIT trial, 911 dispatchers received emails that encouraged a stronger sense of professional identity and a shared sense of community. Receiving the series of emails and accompanying stories led to a 39% reduction in burnout.

Drawing on this research, the following guide provides solutions for employers to consider. These solutions can help shape companies' immediate response to workplace mental health in light of COVID-19 and lay the foundation for longer-term changes.



Behaviorally informed solutions for employers

Below, is a summary list of behaviorally-informed solutions to improve mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. More details on each of these solutions are on the following pages. We encourage employers to use this list as a starting point for ideation, which should be tailored to fit the tone and values of your organization.



Reduce friction and cognitive load

- Simplify communications by presenting the most important points first, removing all non-essential content, and remembering that the message is more important than the design.
- Make it easy to pick and choose resources.



Create a shared sense of community

- Use influential messengers to de-stigmatize mental health and promote healthy behaviors.
- Use simple prompts to promote 1:1 connections.



Promote opportunities for altruistic activities

- Make it easy for people to engage in volunteer activities.

Reduce friction and cognitive load



People tend to take the path of least resistance. One reason for this is our finite cognitive bandwidth: we have limited ability to consider and process information. In light of COVID-19, people's cognitive bandwidth is, understandably, lower. This, paired with small details that make a task more challenging – or friction costs – can make people less likely to sift through complex information and take appropriate action.



Simplify communications

BIT has run trials in the UK, USA, and Canada to test the most effective communication strategies during COVID-19. Employers can harness the following principles to reduce the friction and cognitive load associated with uptake of existing mental health and wellness resources:

- Present the most important facts first. The hierarchy of information presented significantly affects recall.
- Remove all non-essential content. Use as few words as possible.
- The message is more important than the design. Many of the best performing communications we have tested are pictureless.



Make it easy to choose resources

- In addition to clearly communicating what is available, employers can create guidelines on when and how their employees can make use of resources. Implementation intentions – or “if-then” statements can be used to help guide employees through making a plan to address their mental health and wellbeing (e.g., If I feel x, then I will y; If I feel stressed, then I will do 30 minutes of mindfulness activities using the free [link to mindfulness app]).

Create a shared sense of community and identity



Use influential messengers to de-stigmatize mental health and promote healthy behaviors.

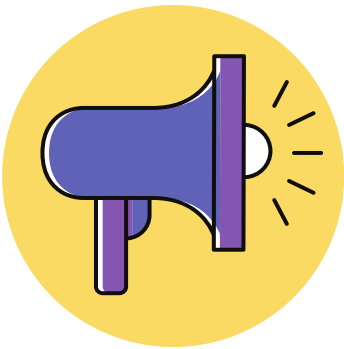
People are heavily influenced by who conveys messages. Otherwise known as the messenger effect, choosing an appropriate messengers has been shown to increase trust and perceived credibility of the message. Research shows that mental health stigma is prevalent in the workplace, and that combatting this stigma should not only be outsourced to human resources. Instead, leaders at all levels can become allies by speaking more publicly about their own experiences and directing people to resources.



Use simple prompts to promote 1:1 connections.

People are inherently social. In this time of physical distancing, our words have become the biggest tool for staying connected with others. Gallup research has shown the protective benefits of having one “best friend” at work on employee engagement and experience of negative emotions. In light of our new reality, it may be more difficult to find that person or the time to connect - finding innovative ways to create a shared sense of community is more important now than ever. While virtual happy hours can be energizing for some, research has found that encouraging 1:1 conversations can have a more meaningful impact. Employers can facilitate these conversations by encouraging 1:1 virtual meetings during the workday and providing simple conversation prompts that go beyond “how are you?” (e.g., How are you coping? What has been the best part of your week so far?)

Promote opportunities to participate in altruistic activities



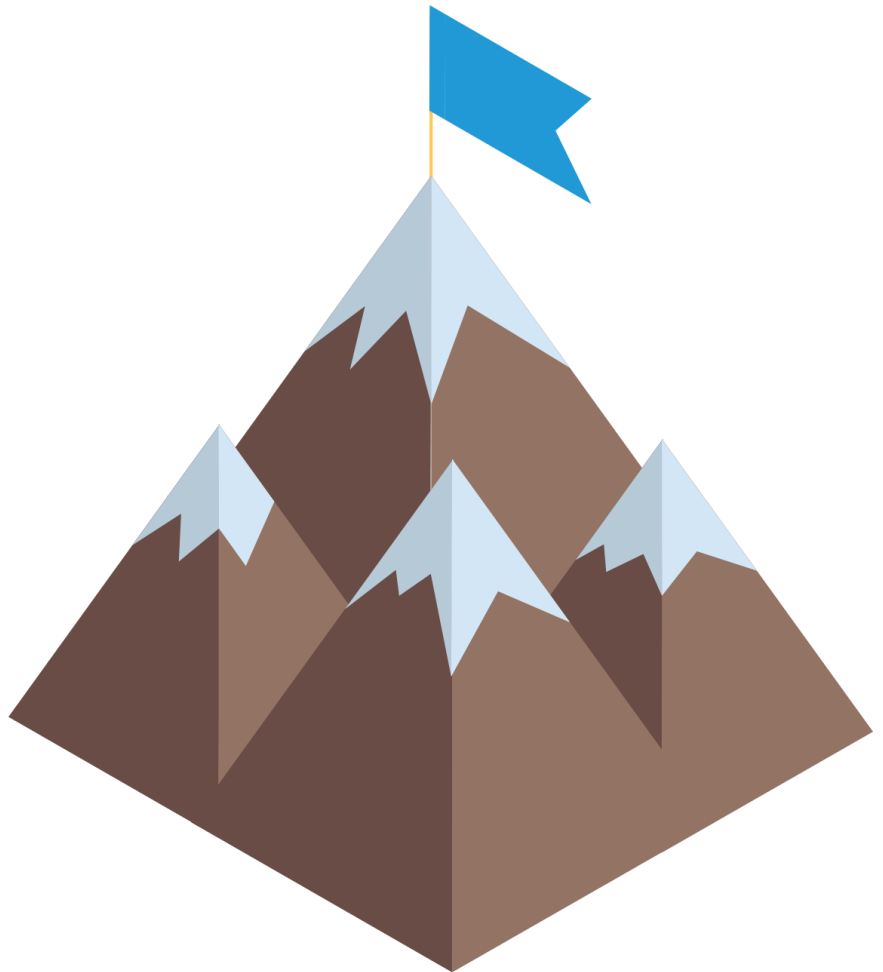
Make it easy for people to engage in volunteer activities

Helping others improves overall wellbeing and happiness, especially at a time when many people feel helpless. Research from BIT's UK office has found that there is not a lack of willingness to volunteer - but there are barriers stopping them, such as lack of time, not having time off, work, or not knowing how to help. Employers can help people overcome these barriers by proactively encouraging employees to take time to volunteer, linking them to volunteer opportunity resources, and coordinating organization-wide volunteer events.

Conclusion

While long-term improvements to mental health and wellness in the workplace will require structural and institutional change (e.g., increase in funding and access to tele-therapy and other mental health screening), behavioral science can be used to help employers act right now.

For more information and behavioral insights that can support mental health and wellness, see www.bi.team.



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