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WHITE PAPER

Maturing Your Organization's Approach to Work-from-Home:

A FOCUS ON WELLNESS AND PRODUCTIVITY

How organizations first reacted was necessary and understandable. On a continuum, we, as humans responding to a threat, tend to move from the "*hard*" impacts first, the later to the "*soft*" impacts.

It has been a full year already since the World Health Organization (WHO) first mobilized an incident response to the newly reported novel coronavirus in China. On January 1st, 2020, few individuals or organizations could fully grasp the coming exponential spread or magnitude of impact of this evolving public health crisis. By late in January the first cases were reported outside of China, including in the U.S., leading the WHO to declare a public health emergency. Beginning with Italy, then Iran, and on to Latin America, the terrible march of the newly designated COVID-19 virus began to infect populations in every corner of the world. By the time of the first U.S. death on February 29, the seriousness of the threat was beginning to sink in and businesses started to react.

How organizations first reacted was necessary and understandable. On a continuum, we, as humans responding to a threat, tend to move from the "*hard*" impacts first, the later to the "*soft*" impacts. Hard impacts include business processes, technologies and the physical structures that house organizations. Soft impacts typically involve people, not processes or technologies. For an organization to effectively fulfill its mission, it must attend to both. For many organizations, attention to remote connectivity, IT security, and virtual meeting platforms, became the initial focal points to enable the workforce to efficiently transition from the employer's facilities to their employee's homes. At some point it became more obvious that public health emergencies are also behavioral health emergencies, and that finding a balance between employee wellness and productivity would be critical to sustaining a work-from-home workforce. Performance and wellness, of course, are intimately linked.

60%

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Stress has an impact on an employee's ability to focus and execute tasks, and the challenges related to executing those tasks from home during the pandemic can also create stress. Once the mechanics of working from home (i.e., the hard impacts) are ironed out, it becomes necessary for the organization to mature its approach to working-from-home by attending equally to the human element (i.e., the soft impacts). It is important to keep in mind that the pivot from the traditional workplace to the home office, is in the interest of protecting employee health. Keeping an organization viable through this crisis is also important to employee health, so that people remain employed and financially stable. Employee health and organizational health are inextricably intertwined and mutually dependent. Both need to be healthy to be productive; both need to remain productive to stay healthy.

Maturing work-from-home plans, policies, and procedures may also prove necessary and beneficial, since many organizations report that they are likely to keep those policies in place either permanently or for the long-term.[i] Even when the pandemic threat dissipates, employees are likely to demand a work-from-home option, or at least the availability of a hybrid approach, blending working from the home and office. The U.S. has become a work-from-home (WFH) economy, now accounting for 60% of U.S. economic activity. Almost twice as many employees are working from home as at traditional workplaces.[ii] It seems likely that many will remain working from home, so it will be important for leaders and decision-makers to take the long view and develop strategies that will hold up over time.

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A Duty of Care for Physical and Emotional Wellness

All employers owe a Duty of Care to their employees, regardless of where they work. That Duty of Care extends to physical and mental injuries, including work-related stress. Those working at home should not be at more risk than other employees in the organization. Fulfilling a Duty of Care means that the employer should take all steps which are reasonably possible to ensure the health, safety, and wellbeing of their employees. If an organization does not meet this standard, then its actions or inactions could be considered negligent, and any damages resulting may be claimed for negligence.

While OSHA does not have a specific regulation regarding home offices *per se*, it is clear that "employers have a 'general duty' to provide their employees with a safe workplace. For OSHA the term "*workplace*" is synonymous with "*on the job*" and "*at work*." A workplace may be any location, either permanent or temporary, where an employee performs any work-related duty, including their home. Home-based workers also have the same workers' compensation benefits as those working on the employer's premises. Cases regarding workers' compensation have shown that the law tends to see the home office no differently from the office building.

i 451 Research-S&P Global Market Intelligence. Voice of the Enterprise: Digital Pulse, Coronavirus Flash Survey. June 2020.

ii Ibid.

While it can be more difficult for an employer to ensure that an employee's home-based work environment meets the same standards for health and safety as those on their premises, it is important that employers make every reasonable effort to do so. This idea of viewing onsite and offsite work equally in terms of physical and emotional safety is reflected in both U.S. and international regulations. For example, the International Labor Organization's (ILO's) Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177) applies to employees who perform their work at home on a regular basis, and calls for equality of treatment between homeworkers and other employees in relation to wages and benefits, access to training, occupational safety and health (OSH), and social protections.

A Holistic Approach to Wellness: Attention to Mind and Body

Somewhere between the "*hard*" and the "*soft*" concerns are issues like ergonomics. Many organizations have helped employees transitioning to home offices by equipping their workspace with good quality chairs, desks, lighting and other items that ensure comfort and protection from various ergonomic injuries. Supporting employees in this way is helpful and smart on several levels. While sending a clear message that employees' physical health is important, both in terms of protections from COVID-19 and ergonomic risks, it is of equal importance to address mental health concerns.

Illness or fear of illness, social isolation, economic insecurity, disruption of routine and loss of loved ones are known risk factors for depression and anxiety. Even as vaccines may seem to provide a light at the end of the tunnel for the physical risks of COVID-19, the mental health consequences of the pandemic will likely be more long lasting, and there is no vaccine for that.

The Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 and Working from Home

An organization's employees are exposed to the same physical and mental health risks associated with the pandemic as everyone else in the population. In addition, they may experience some emotional challenges that are unique to working-from-home arrangements. Illness or fear of illness, social isolation, economic insecurity, disruption of routine and loss of loved ones are known risk factors for depression and anxiety. Even as vaccines may seem to provide a light at the end of the tunnel for the physical risks of COVID-19, the mental health consequences of the pandemic will likely be more long lasting, and there is no vaccine for that. Public health crises are known to have long tails in terms of their mental health impact.

A report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published in August found that symptoms of anxiety had tripled and those of depression had quadrupled in the U.S. compared to one year earlier.[iii] Another study release in September by the Kaiser Family Foundation published similar findings with adults reporting mental health issues linked to worry and stress over the novel coronavirus increasing from 32 percent in March to 53 percent in July. Those experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression, for example, reached 40 percent last summer, up from 11 percent a year ago.[iv]

It is important for employers to be cognizant of and prepared to address the multiple of stressors that may all be affecting employees all in a relatively short period of time. Such a large dose of sudden stress may weigh on an employee's ability to cope. These stressors include, but are certainly not limited to:

+ The effects of prolonged isolation
+ Increased financial problems
+ Strained relationships resulting from close quarters with roommates, spouses/partners, and/or children (all who may be working/schooling from home)
+ Fear of illness/death from pandemic for self and loved ones
+ Recent illness/losses due to illness
+ Uncertainty from conflicting or constantly changing messages about the illness, precautions, etc.
+ Anger directed at many targets including government, the medical profession, self and others
+ Exacerbation of existing mental health/substance abuse problems

iii Czeisler M.É., Lane, R.I., Petrosky E., et al. (2020). Mental health, substance sse, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1049–1057. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1

iv Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Orgera, K., Cox, C., Garfield, R., Hamel, L., Muñana, C. and Chidambaram, P. (2020). The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use. Kaiser Family Foundation. Last accessed Jan. 11, 2020 at https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use

Anxiety about exposure to COVID-19, fear about surviving and recuperating from it for those who contract the virus, and the trauma and grief experienced by those who have lost loved ones are all very real, and potentially destabilizing emotional consequences of the pandemic.

While not each of these point requires elaboration, it is important to recognize the two-fold risk of isolation. The first is the recognized link between social isolation and a number mental health problems ranging from simple cases of the "*work-from-home blues*" and "*cabin fever*," to clinical depression.[v] Research shows that loneliness can have significant negative effects on mental health. It can affect sleep quality, the ability to focus, and, overall health and happiness.[vi] The second risk is that when someone is working in isolation, others who might otherwise have in-person contact them may not be available to recognize that their mental health is deteriorating. Picking up on those warning signs via phone and video can be tricky, and many people in emotional distress can effectively "*pull it together*" and present themselves as doing well in brief online meetings. An employee can get far down a pathway toward mental illness before someone in a virtual environment actually notices.

Anxiety about exposure to COVID-19, fear about surviving and recuperating from it for those who contract the virus, and the trauma and grief experienced by those who have lost loved ones are all very real, and potentially destabilizing emotional consequences of the pandemic. As a compounding variable, all of these challenges may be occurring in a pressure cooker if there is tension in the home related to financial distress and/or interpersonal problems arising from people working and living in close quarters for a prolonged period of time. Employers must also be mindful of the potential of domestic violence in a home, and recognize that this form of workplace violence may be made worse by the increased proximity of the abuser and the abused.

Physical Health Challenges

When our daily routines are disrupted, it's understandable that our physical wellness may suffer. While working from home, it can be easy to slip into a sedentary lifestyle which can have a negative impact on our physical and mental health. If the daily commute is limited to the distance from the bedroom to the home office or living room, the reduction in physical activity can quickly begin to take its toll. Research shows that sitting too much is linked with several health problems like obesity, high blood pressure, excessive body fat, and high cholesterol.[vii] Studies also have revealed that working out regularly doesn't completely negate the harmful effects of sitting all day.[viii]

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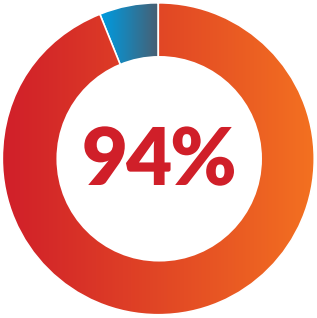
v Alarcon, R. D. (2020). Mental health in a pandemic state: The route from social isolation to loneliness." Last accessed Jan. 11, 2020 at http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/coronavirus/mental-health-pandemic-state-route-social- isolation-loneliness

vi Hawkley, L.C. and Capitanio, J.P. (20150. Perceived social isolation, evolutionary fitness and health outcomes: a lifespan approachPhil. Trans. R. Soc. B37020140114 http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2014.0114

vii Laskowski, E.R. (2020). What are the risks of sitting too much? Mayo Clinic. Last accessed online Jan. 7, 2020 at https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/expert-answers/sitting/faq-20058005

viii Neighmond, P. (2011). Sitting All Day: Worse for you than you might think. National Public Radio, Morning Edition. Last accessed online Jan. 7, 2020 at https://www.npr.org/2011/04/25/135575490/sitting-all-day-worse-for-you-than-you-might-think



Ninety-four percent of 800 employers surveyed by Mercer, an HR and workplace benefits consulting firm, said that productivity was the same as or higher than it was before the pandemic, even with their employees working remotely.

In addition to physical activity, eating and sleeping routines can also be disrupted. Changes in work schedules and a lack of external cues, like seeing co-workers heading towards the cafeteria at lunchtime or filing out of the office at the end of the day, can result in erratic schedules for those working at home. The flexibility of working from home can allow an employee to break tasks up or stretch them out well beyond typically work hours eroding family life and sleep schedules. And, of course, having the kitchen nearby can result in a lot more snacking.

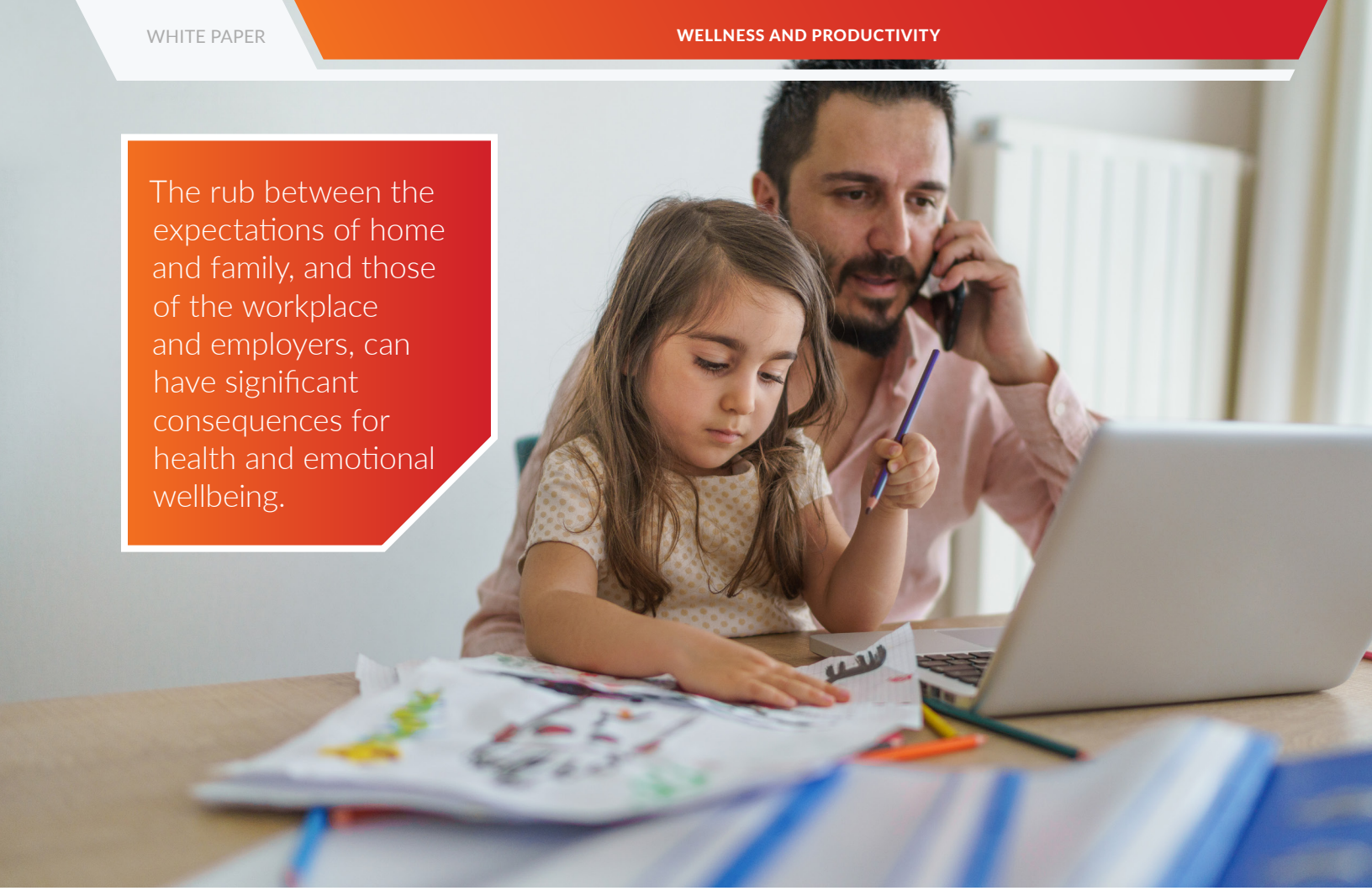
There are also a number of recognized benefits to working from home, but they are not universally realized by all employees. It is important for employers, as well as employees, to be aware of, and address the potential negative effects associated with working from home. It may take some imagination for employers and self-discipline by employees, but it's important for both physical and mental health reasons that people remain active when working from their homes.

Productivity

Like challenges to physical and mental health, working from home affects productivity. While there is not universal agreement, most reports suggest that productivity is either unchanged or improved in work-from-home arrangements. Ninety-four percent of 800 employers surveyed by Mercer, an HR and workplace benefits consulting firm, said that productivity was the same as or higher than it was before the pandemic, even with their employees working remotely.[ix] It also seems that people are working more. Data released from NordVPN indicated that the U.S. increased its average workday by almost 40%, adding an extra three hours, the largest jump worldwide. The UK, France, Canada, and Spain have seen a two-hour increase.[x] The massive work-from-home experiment launched in response to COVID-19 has demonstrated that not only can most employees can be trusted to get their work done from home, they seem to be working more.

ix Maurer, R. (2020). Study finds productivity not deterred by shift to remote work. Society for Human Resource Management. Last accessed Jan. 8, 2020 at https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/study-productivity-shift-remote-work-covid-coronavirus.aspx

x Al-Heeti, A. (2020). US, UK employees working at least one extra week each month during COVID-19. C|Net: Health & Wellness. Last accessed Jan. 8, 2020 at https://www.cnet.com/health/employees-in-the-us-uk-work-an-extra-week-per-month-during-covid-19-report-says



The rub between the expectations of home and family, and those of the workplace and employers, can have significant consequences for health and emotional wellbeing.

Of course, working more is not the only ingredient in productivity; someone can be working longer hours and still not be getting much done. The various sources of stress previously discussed can impact the ability to focus, as can the many distractions ranging from household chores to political crises. Staying focused has become more challenging and it can be complicated by a version of "*person-role conflict*"-the tension between one's obligation to their work, and their home and family. This has also been referred to as "*role blurring*," and it is very different than multi-tasking. Responsibilities in the home sphere, from supervising children who are remote-schooling to moving the laundry from the washer to the dryer, can break a worker's concentration and ability to stay focused. Likewise, when it's time home or family-related activities, the lack of clear boundaries between home and work can ruffle relationships and erode long-standing routines. The rub between the expectations of home and family, and those of the workplace and employers, can have significant consequences for health and emotional wellbeing.[xi]

A byproduct of the social isolation many people are experiencing is "*self-interrupting*" to regain a sense of connection to others or the world around them; this is an attempt by people to at least mentally get out of their pandemic bubbles. For some this may mean keeping a second monitor or a television in the background tuned in to the ever urgent news cycle; for others, it may mean texting or chatting with friends or colleagues just to offset feelings of loneliness. While all of these distractions may play a role in keeping people sane through a public health catastrophe, they can erode productivity. It might be, all or in part, that people are working more hours simply because they have to in order to stay on pace with their work while the usual eight-hour work day is diluted by other attention-grabbers.

xi Powell, G. N., Greenhaus, J.H., Allen, T.D., Johnson, R.E. (2019). "Introduction to special topic forum: Advancing and expanding work-life theory from multiple perspectives." Academy of Management Review 44(1):54–71.

Even the most caring, intelligent, and selfless people might appear to be letting down their guard, being risky or reckless about protecting themselves or others. People are just plain tired and worn out by the constant COVID-19 threat, and they want life to return to normal.

A Threat to Wellness and Productivity: Pandemic Fatigue

In general, the term "*pandemic fatigue*" is being used to explain why people are being less careful, going out more, and social distancing less, even as the pandemic rages on and cases have reached new record numbers. Even the most caring, intelligent, and selfless people might appear to be letting down their guard, being risky or reckless about protecting themselves or others. People are just plain tired and worn out by the constant COVID-19 threat, and they want life to return to normal.

"*Pandemic fatigue*" is an accurate description of what people are currently experiencing. It is more than just being physically and emotional tired; it's even more than being exhausted. People are struggling to cope and trying to survive, and they simply cannot continue to function effectively in a highly activated and aroused state; we're just not wired for that. We are wired very well to respond to sudden, acute threats, but not so much for chronic, ongoing threats. Our "*fight or flight*" response is intended for brief but intense periods of activation. The neurochemistry of our stress response is very effective for short-term challenges, but long-term exposure to stress can have very negative and lasting effects. Right now, our brains and our bodies are habituating to the anxiety in the only way that human beings know how: Getting used to it and becoming less anxious—we have to, we can only run in high gear for so long.

Over time, chronic stress gradually increases resting heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and levels of muscle tension, so the body now has to work even harder even when it's at rest to keep us functioning normally. Chronic stress creates a new normal inside our bodies, which can eventually can lead to a host of health problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, chronic pain and depression.

Changes in one's demeanor, health, and performance are often attributed to "*burnout*," and while that is certainly a real possibility in the current environment, it is quite different than "*pandemic fatigue*." The indicators of pandemic fatigue can include:

- Signs of physical anxiety such as breathing difficulties, muscle tension, and digestive problems
- A sense of hopelessness
- Irritability and impatience
- Decreased productivity and job satisfaction
- A reduced ability to feel pleasure
- Trouble sleeping
- Self-doubt and reduced self-esteem.

One additional performance indicator that someone may be struggling is "*channelizing*." This is the classic "*arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic*" response in which someone is keeping busy being busy, but not necessarily accomplishing anything. This is an attempt to gain control of something—anything-- when

people feel overwhelmed. This may involve activities like making lists of lists of things to do, or spending a great deal of time trying to organize work, but not necessarily getting it done. This, as well as the other indicators, suggest that an employee is having a difficult time and may require additional support.

Recognizing Employees in Distress

A three-filter approach to identifying and assisting employees in distress is needed to effectively address the challenges of the pandemic work-from-home environment. By having all three filters operating simultaneously, there is a better chance of recognizing and intervening with someone who is struggling with work-from-home stress.

The first filter is *self-awareness*. Most individuals are keenly aware of what causes stress for them and how they respond to stress, simply because it makes them uncomfortable. But while working in isolation, having altered routines, and perhaps using less than helpful ways of coping, an employee may also be the last to recognize when they experiencing serious signs or symptoms of stress. Training that introduces and validates these unique types of stress can help in early recognition and course corrections that can help someone avoid more serious problems. Such awareness-level training also can help validate the employee's experience and have them feel less alone, or concerned that they are "*losing it*." Discussion of coping strategies and techniques, as well as information about resource for stress management specific to work-from-home issues round out a training program to optimize this first filter.

The second filter is "*buddy care*." Co-workers and teammates who routinely connect with an individual may recognize changes in their behavior or communications resulting from work-from-home stress. With familiarity, and hopefully some level of trust, a co-worker might let the distressed individual know that they see certain changes, and inquire if they are alright or need help. In organizations with an "*upstander*" culture, rather than a "*bystander*" culture, employees are encouraged to be courageous and speak up if they see someone struggling, rather than simply minding their own business. This may mean speaking directly to the employee of concern and offering them support or resources, or speaking to a team leader or supervisor about what they are seeing or hearing from another that has them worried.

The third and final filter is "*Team Leader/Supervisor Monitoring*," which requires a proactive approach. Rather than wait for an individual to display the warning signs or indicators of stress, team leaders and supervisors may be in

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a position to recognize when someone's demeanor or performance is changing, and reach out pre-emptively to offer help. Leaders should be on the lookout for signs of stress across an entire team or department, and be mindful of the level of stress in their operating environment. This means that if there are changes or sudden spikes in the demand on employees, the leader or supervisor can consider appropriate means of managing that stress to prevent adverse impacts on employee wellness and/or productivity. When all three of these filters are operating in concert, there is greater chance of identifying and intervening with an employee in distress.

The obvious antidote to social isolation is human contact, which of course is greatly constrained during a public health emergency. Many organizations have implemented online activities, such as virtual coffee breaks or happy hours, to supplement business-related remote meetings in order to improve morale and team cohesiveness. Both during work-focused virtual contacts, as well as these social events, there is an opportunity to look and listen for the signals of distress. It is important to remember that people don't just snap. Someone who is struggling with physical or mental health issues while working from home, or having performance-related difficulties, usually displays various warning signs long before reaching a tipping point. It is important for employers, as well as co-workers, to recognize those early warning signs and connect someone with assistance sooner rather than later.

It can be tricky to spot signs of emotional distress in another person even during the best of times. The fact that we may now be primarily communicating with each other from behind a screen can make it even more challenging. Some of the most important indictors of distress include:

Changing Body Language
How it changes depends on the person. During virtual meetings, some people might make less eye contact than usual. Others may have a more slumped posture. Their hand gestures may become less frequent, or slower.

Not Engaging in Conversation
Someone may also speak — or seem to think — more slowly. In a conversation, it might take them longer to respond to what was just said. It might seem that they're not following what being said or processing it as well as they used to. Similarly, they may not answer phone calls or respond to emails or text messages in a timely manner or at all.

Neglecting Responsibilities
A lack of engagement may extend to responsibilities with work assignments, and/or at home. Chores — even personal grooming tasks such as showering— may go undone; performance may suffer; the quality or quantity of work performed may slip.

It is important for employers and employees to beware of sources of ongoing support, as well as emergency assistance through contracted or community-based providers.

Avoiding Favorite Activities
Responsibilities aren't the only things that an employee in emotional distress may avoid. Activities that used to be enjoyable become less so.

Sleeping or eating too little — or too much
Some people who are anxious or depressed lose interest in food. Others have difficulty falling or staying asleep. But the reverse happens, too: Emotional problems may cause people to sleep or eat too much. A lot of people use eating as a way to cope with their distress.

Declining Physical Health
Many behaviors associated with emotional stress or distress can cause or worsen other health problems. Eating too much and not getting enough activity, for example, might lead to weight gain, which in turn can increase a person's risk of developing diabetes or high blood pressure.

Similarly, chronic lack of sleep can weaken the immune system, making people more prone to infection and other illnesses. For some people, weight gain, lack of sleep or physical illness may also cause negative feelings, worsening depression.

There are also a number of high-risk indicators which require urgent attention by medical or mental health professionals. These include:

- References to suicide or self-harm (written or verbal)
- Extreme isolation from friends, family or support persons
- Drastic change in physical presentation
- Signs of injury to oneself, which could include cuts or bruises
- Disclosures of severe anxiety, depression and stress
- Marked change in behavior, mood or relationships
- Impaired speech, garbled, disjointed thoughts
- High levels of irritability, unruly or abusive behavior
- Struggling to make decisions
- Appearing overly nervous, tense or tearful
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Threats to others
- Excessive messaging (both content and frequency)
- Obsessive thinking, compulsive behavior
- Bizarre, paranoid, or confused communications
- Acting erratically as observed by either speaking in a way or at a volume that is incongruent with expectations and norms
- Greatly decreased quality of work
- Displays of firearms or weapons

It is important for employers and employees to beware of sources of ongoing support, as well as emergency assistance through contracted or community-based providers. Anyone experiencing or witnessing these high-risk indicators should not keep it to themselves. They should let others, such as supervisors or human resource representatives know about their concerns immediately.

Staying One Step Ahead of Work-from-Home Stress

Since our health, both mental and physical, and productivity are so interconnected and interdependent, many of the suggested ideas for staying ahead of work-from-home-related stress benefit both. Implementing effective stress control strategies specific to the dynamics of working from home can help someone avoid some of the negative effects of these new work arrangements, and can help get someone back on track if they have been experiencing the ill effects of stress.

Create and Keep a Routine

If for no other reason, developing a routine creates more predictability and certainty into our lives. Uncertainty is one of the greatest sources of anxiety, and pandemics, which are known to be predictably unpredictable, are one of the most anxiety-producing crises we can experience. Health and productivity benefit from routines, relationships in the home do, as well.

Create Boundaries Between Work and Home

Keeping a routine with a regular start and finish time for work can help provide structure for the day. Creating a dedicated workspace can also help. Whether it is at a desk or the kitchen table, working from the same place each day helps create physical cues for us to distinguish between work and non-work time. Try to avoid creating workspaces in the bedroom if possible. Working from home can interfere with sleep, especially for people who find it difficult to switch off from work.

Making a workspace comfortable and organized to one's own liking can also help with a sense of control. Likewise, getting dressed in work clothes, even if they are casual, and changing out of them at the end of the work day, reinforces boundaries and protects both work and personal time.

Build Breaks into the Day

Taking breaks for meals and comfort, to physically move around, or to get outside and connect with nature, are all important. With a lack of external cues, it can be easy to overwork or get lost in a task so deeply that the day may pass without someone leaving their seat. Even with pandemic restrictions, people can still get outside, see the sky, and move around. Physical and mental stimulation are key to keeping us alive and healthy, so it is important to design activity into the daily routine. If not, it can become too easy to put it off or ignore the need to get up and get out on a regular basis.

Eat Well

Eating well also means eating smart. Keeping in mind that working from home may mean a more sedentary lifestyle, it is important to adjust the type and amount of food and drink we consume each day. Snacking can be even more tempting when we know the refrigerator or kitchen cabinet is only steps away. Be sure to fuel your body and mind with healthy meals during this time of unusual stress.

Stay Connected

Social distancing does not have to mean social isolation. Video meetings and conferences, as well as chats and phone calls not only keep employees on task, but also help them feel like part of the larger organization. Video is preferred for all formal discussions, or any discussions intended to check on someone's well-being, since it is important to have both verbal and non-verbal feedback. Staying connected also does not have to be all business. Video calls can be informal, including group video lunch breaks, just catching up with colleagues or after work activities to help with morale and motivation. These can be periodic or scheduled, even creating a virtual lunch table where someone meets each day with coworkers for a lunch break can provide an important opportunity to connect.

Engage in Deep Relaxation

Our relaxation response is actually more powerful than our stress response, but unlike our fight or flight reaction to stress or fear, it is not automatic—we have to willfully turn it on. Known as *autogenic relaxation*, certain techniques can override our stress response and mitigate some of the potential adverse effects of stress. These techniques include breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, meditation and visual imagery. Learning and practicing these techniques is one of the best antidotes to stress. They are low or no cost and portable—you can use them almost any time and anywhere.

Positive Thinking

During a catastrophic global health emergency, serious economic distress, and political tension, it can be difficult to stay focused on the positives in our lives. Newsfeeds and broadcasts typically report on dramatic and sensational stories—they can give the impression of constant danger and instability in the world around us. There is always good news happening around us, although it may be more difficult to find. Finding it, and focusing on some of the upsides of working from home can have a very positive effect on both wellness and productivity. Catching

ourselves when we get caught in a negative spiral, also known as "*spiraling down*," we can change our focus, reverse course, and "*spiral up*." Slow down, take a breath and try to put things in perspective.

Mindfulness is one of the ways we can change our thoughts, change our minds, and take greater control of the way stress impacts our work and our health. People can practice anywhere, without any special equipment. Organizations are increasingly offering mindfulness training and resources through employee wellness programs, but whether there is a formal program or not, it is easy to find countless resources for practicing mindfulness online.

Don't Go It Alone

There is little doubt that COVID-19 has reshaped our world, and will remain a powerful force in our personal and professionals lives, at least for the foreseeable future. The way we live and work has radically changed since the last great pandemic in 1918, and there is no playbook to help employers or employees navigate this tricky environment. It is important for us all to recognize and openly discuss how the various stresses related to the pandemic and working-from-home affect us, especially since many organizations and employees may decide to continue to work from home even after the current health emergency is over.

Individuals and organizations can learn from experts and from each other about the positive and negative aspects of working from home during emergencies, how working from home affects us personally and professionally, and the best ways to ensure wellness and productivity during this challenging time. It may mean addressing some difficult and uncomfortable issues, but the way forward will be together, even during a health crisis that requires us to stay apart.

Let's Chat

Do you have questions? Would you like to know more about Critical Event Management? Get in touch or just call us at +1-818-230-9700 to learn more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Crimando is the principal and founder of Behavioral Science Applications LLC, an operational risk management consultancy located in the New York metropolitan area. He is a consultant and educator focused on the human element in security, business continuity, and emergency management. Mr. Crimando is a Certified Threat Manager (CTM), a Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress (BCETS), and certified Disaster Response Crisis Counselor (DRCC). With more than 30 years of experience in the field, Mr. Crimando was deployed to the 9/11 and 1993 World Trade Center attacks, as well as New Jersey's anthrax screening center and other acts of international crises. He is a published author who is frequently called upon by the media and the courts as an expert in crisis prevention and response. He provides training and support to programs within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, law enforcement, intelligence and military agencies, as well as NGO's, such as the United Nations.

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