

Where We Go From Here

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As COVID lingers on, and the world slowly begins to reopen, there's no better time to look closely at the effects of over a year of social distancing, isolation, uncertainty, and fear on our mental health. With a clear picture of the statistics — and what they tell us — we can strategize and plan to put in place effective supports and practices for our greatest resource and asset: our employees.

As we enter into a second summer under the cloud of COVID-19, and with the end (hopefully) in sight, current mental-health statistics reveal the extent of the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Canadians.

The numbers

The numbers provide us with a very clear picture of how COVID has impacted our mental health. According to a March 2021 Statistics Canada survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health, one in five Canadians 18 years of age and older screened positive for symptoms of a major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety, or PTSD.

Young adults, women, and parents

A February 2021, IPSOS poll, *COVID Continues to Take Heavy Toll on Canadians' Mental Health*, reports that 56 percent of respondents report feeling increased stress or anxiety, with young adults (18 – 34), women, and adults with children at home particularly impacted. A CAMH poll released from July 2020 found that 7 out of 10 Ontarians believe that there will be a '*serious mental health crisis*' as a result of the pandemic. Due to the isolation that has been necessary for the prevention of the spread of the virus, people of all ages are experiencing an increase in symptoms of social anxiety. The same study also reports that 25 percent of Canadians, aged 35-54, and 21 percent, aged 18-34 have increased their consumption of alcohol since the outset of COVID-19 isolation.

Essential workers, COVID-19 Survivors, and others

Further statistics reveal that essential workers dealing with the daily threat of exposure, healthcare workers, who have been traumatized by their exposure to suffering and death, COVID-19 survivors, people who have lost their livelihoods (even temporarily) who have faced or are facing financial instability and uncertainty, and people with pre-existing mental illnesses are — and will be — in need of mental health supports in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The way forward

The numbers show that we are in the midst of an unprecedented long-term mental-health crisis. Just as COVID-19 has strained medical system resources over the past year, the increased need for mental health services will present yet unseen challenges to our mental-health system, which was already struggling to meet the needs of Canadians.

As we transition in the months ahead into a new normal, workplaces will be looking for effective strategies to raise the bar of support for employees, who have endured a shifting landscape of their workplace environment while coping with social isolation, and will continue to struggle with the long-term stress and anxiety. Furthermore, particular attention must be paid to supporting employees who are experiencing social anxiety. Due to an unprecedented and protracted period of social isolation, many people are feeling disconnected and alone, and concerned about fitting in both in the workplace and

social circles. Thoughts of re-entering work and social spheres are sending anxiety levels soaring ... a situation that is likely to linger for a prolonged period. Genuine, meaningful support will go a long way to mitigate the high cost of mental health-related absenteeism and presenteeism (where employees are present yet struggling with an undermining physical, emotional, or mental health-related issue that negatively impacts their productivity).

Creating a healthy, supportive -post-COVID workplace

Employees spend a full one-third of their life on the job. In the challenging times ahead, as people adjust to a return to a more traditional workplace environment, the way this significant portion of their time feels and looks will be of great importance. A three-pronged approach, with effective communication, enhanced mental-health supports and wellness initiatives, and a focus on creating a compassionate and balanced workplace culture, will go a long way toward supporting, retaining, and attracting the talent your organization needs to thrive.

Effective communication

Moving forward, HR executives and team leaders will need to pay close attention to communicating with employees, keeping them up-to-date on shifts and changes to workplace dynamics, protocols, and safety measures. Sharing company plans and measures, and holding regular team meetings will help employees feel connected and up-to-date. Further, creating a positive work environment and culture, with reasonable workloads, safe working conditions, and minimizing barriers and obstacles to accessing support when needed will go a long way to making employees feel valued and supported.

Enhancing EAP Mental Health options

Enhancing EAP's mental-health supports will remove barriers to mental health professionals, and allow employees to seek effective treatments for anxiety and depression, and other mental health issues.

Effective treatment protocols, like CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy), have proven effective in treating mood disorders and other mental illnesses. Expanding employee access to mental health treatment through an enhanced EAP paves the way for a timely and effective treatment that might otherwise be too expensive.

Workplace wellness programs

Many employees returning to their workplace have felt the negative effects of isolation from their team members, and, without the structure of the workday, may have struggled to structure their work and personal lives, and find themselves off balance as they return to their place of work.

Custom workplace wellness programs designed specifically to address employee challenges can provide valuable coping strategies for individuals who are over-stressed and anxious and need to refocus and readjust. They foster resilience, trust, loyalty, and team cohesion, and provide awareness and strategies about dealing with mood and anxiety. They provide powerful tools for preventing burnout and stress build-up. And — of special importance for workplaces transitioning from their home office to a reunited, in-person team — a wellness program can help reorient and rebuild team cohesion, resolve conflicts, and help employees reset their work-life balance. Wellness programs also open the channels of communication between management and staff that lead to greater collegiality and team cohesion. Further, wellness programs can also support the management team as they lead their organization through these uncharted waters.

Holding on to the good

COVID has set the stage for incorporating positive habits as well. Many people report that they have been positively impacted by reduced commute times allowing for more 'down' time, and time to connect with family daily. Many people have great strides in establishing healthier eating habits, and other lifestyle improvements, like incorporating an

exercise or routine or meditation practice into their daily life. Some people fear losing the momentum and progress they have made in creating healthier routines, habits, and a better work/life balance when they return to a more normal workplace setting. Employers should look for ways to support the positive changes employees have made.

A final statistic

According to a January 2020 CAMH study, the economic burden of mental illness in Canada alone is a staggering \$51 billion, and the estimated accumulated cost of mental health to the Canadian economy will surpass \$2.5 trillion. Organizations that position themselves to meet the challenges of the post-COVID employee mental health crisis will be better prepared, not only to retain and attract talent but to mitigate the financial and human impacts of mental health.

Creating a supportive, transparent post-COVID workplace culture is a winning approach for a successful re-opening. Compassionate and communicative leaders dedicated to supporting employee challenges with an EAP that includes effective mental-health support that meets the specific needs of your workforce, and a commitment to employee wellness will provide a workplace where both employees and your organization can thrive as the world reopens.

It is critical that organizations align with the unprecedented needs of the current time. Awareness and understanding of the impact of the pandemic on employees, allows organization to implement supports to alleviate and manage post-COVID symptoms. And finally, adding in preventative care measures can avert relapse, and burnout and address patterns of symptoms that lead to loss of productivity, illness and disability.



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About the author

*Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, *A Deeper Wellness*, is scheduled for publication in 2021.*

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Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, [A Deeper Wellness](https://www.adeeperwellness.com/), delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>

