

# SUPPORTING MENTAL WELL-BEING

As part of the return to work



Organizations are increasingly returning employees to the workplace. As they do, employers who implement regional guidance regarding health and safety measures, such as increased ventilation, face coverings, and social distancing, can help employees feel protected and valued.

The impact of employment and work on psychological health has long been established. Taking a proactive approach to the emotional impact of the pandemic and return to the workplace positions employers as key players in supporting workers' mental well-being.<sup>1</sup> Here, we review the current scientific evidence regarding mental well-being in the workplace in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight key findings that can be implemented.

## Identifying the most vulnerable

A systematic review of the mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic among the general public revealed lower psychological well-being and higher scores for anxiety and depression.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic has been stressful for the population at large, and certain demographics have been particularly vulnerable. Awareness can help employers identify members of returning workforces who might be in need of additional support. They may include:



### Individuals with existing mental health conditions

In many cases, the pandemic has exacerbated existing psychological disorders, causing reoccurring or worsening symptoms, and increasing anxiety and distress for the individuals affected.<sup>3</sup> Returning to the workplace may present a seemingly insurmountable challenge.





## Women

A review of the global evidence found women who are or were pregnant during the pandemic are at especially high risk for developing mental health problems, due to reduced social support resulting from distancing and isolation precautions. With pandemic-related lockdowns and school closures, parenting has involved home schooling and altered childcare arrangements. Women, often dealing with larger proportions of domestic and caregiving duties, can subsequently feel overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup>



## The bereaved

Those who have recently lost loved ones, to COVID-19 or otherwise, may have been denied goodbyes or grieving rituals, due to pandemic-related restrictions.<sup>3</sup> This disruption to mourning practices can hinder the processing of loss; research from previous disease outbreaks suggests that this can provoke complicated grief, and consequently, mental and emotional health challenges.<sup>5</sup>



## Younger people

Pre-pandemic Cigna research highlighted high levels of loneliness and reduced resilience among younger groups.<sup>6,7</sup> Studies show that repercussions of the pandemic, such as isolation and uncertainty, have had a more profound effect among this age group, increasing their vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>



**Assessing workforce demographics could highlight potential pandemic-related strain and vulnerability linked to factors such as age, gender and dependents.**

## Supporting employees

### Consider the emotional impact of the return to work

Employers will want their employees to have confidence in an organization's reopening strategy. A holistic return to work approach will reassure employees that both their emotional well-being and physical safety are key company priorities.

Research shows that happy, healthy employees are not only more engaged and more productive, but also have an improved quality of life and lower risk of disease or injury.

### Build awareness and encourage the use of available resources

It's important to keep employees up to date on pandemic-related employer policies and supportive resources available to them.

Frequent communication with employees should reiterate the availability of in-person and virtual care for physical and mental health, and reinforce a commitment to safety and overall well-being.



### Realize the potential of virtual health programs

One study found an e-support package of evidence-based advice and signposting relating to psychological well-being was beneficial to workers during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> The e-support was based around self-care strategies of taking adequate breaks, getting sufficient sleep, adopting healthy lifestyle behaviors, and managing emotions. Virtual health programs could continue to play a key role in bolstering resilience upon the return to the workplace.

## How Cigna can help

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to place emotional stress upon the workforce, and initiatives to minimize this and promote health and well-being should form an integral part of employer practices. In addition to health and safety measures, support should focus on building resilience, especially among those in leadership roles, and avoiding burnout.<sup>1</sup> Cigna assists clients with a range of well-being services to support employees as they navigate a return to work, including:



**Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** Counseling and support are available on a wide range of topics; such as legal and financial issues, emotional health including relationships and family life, and substance misuse.



**Global Telehealth:** Convenient access to quality health care includes consultations with a licensed doctor via a secure video or phone conversation to discuss health issues.



**Digital Well-being Solutions:** A range of personalized programs help individuals make successful and long-lasting lifestyle changes. Accessible any time, solutions include health assessments and targeted health improvement programs not only to build resilience, but also to encourage activity, healthy eating, and better sleep.

Together, all the way.®



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