

Dealing with the escalating level of mental health challenges due to COVID-19



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We agree that COVID-19 has resulted in various changes – some good and perhaps some not so good. There is an ongoing debate whether these changes are permanent or not, and for now, I will leave that to far wiser scribes than myself to inundate us with their prognostications.

At least these changes are impersonal, and we can decide whether to embrace them. But the real impact that we should be focusing on is the personal impact of COVID-19 - an overall deterioration in mental health. The shortage of beds for COVID-19 is nothing compared to the lack of programs to deal with the

escalating level of mental health challenges.

According to the World Health Organization, mental wellness is defined as *"a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution; to his or her community."*

Feelings of sadness, stress, confusion, fear or worry have and will always exist. But they have never been at the level and as widespread as they are today. Adding to this plight is a growing acceptance that the pandemic is far from being over - who knows how many waves we will face before it is under control (clearly not suggesting it will ever end).



Everyone knows someone or has even felt these past 18 months that include:

- a sense of being socially excluded or judged,
- concern about your children's education and well-being,
- fear of getting sick with COVID-19 or of making others sick,
- worry about losing your job, not being able to work, or finances,

- fear of being apart from loved ones due to isolation or physical distancing,
- helplessness, boredom, loneliness, and depression due to isolation or physical distancing,
- unexplained anger with loved ones over non-events,
- not getting to have the experiences others have had - graduation, weddings (invitations and locations), births, vacations, etc., and
- weight gain.

During the pandemic, various medical agencies and mental health workers have developed multiple tricks that you can use to deal with fatigue, including:

- Stay informed but take breaks from social media and the news.
- Practice physical distancing, but stay socially connected to friends and family through:
 - email,
 - phone calls,
 - video chats, and
 - social media.
- Practise mindfulness by:
 - stretching,
 - meditating, and
 - taking deep breaths.
- Practice healthy measures:
 - eat healthy meals,
 - exercise regularly, and
 - get plenty of sleep.
- Follow safe food handling and cooking practices to keep you and your family safe by killing the virus and lowering your risk of infection.
- Think about how to use any unexpected flexibility in your daily routine.
- Focus on the positive aspects of your life and things you can control.
- Be kind and compassionate to yourself and others.
- If you can, limit your use of substances.
- If you do use substances, practice safer use, and good hygiene.

A convenient "label" for all of these negative feelings is "fatigue."

Unfortunately for law firms that have embraced "hybrid work policies," there is real potential for exposure to mental health issues amongst their firm members, particularly firms that have elected to go with a "Remote-First" policy. The main principle of this approach is that the firm has put no real restrictions on lawyers and staff working remotely.

With increased flexibility comes greater responsibility (if you want to sustain your firm). Potential risks if firms do not develop comprehensive "wellness" programs include:

- a decline in productivity,
- attrition - both Lawyer and staff,
- erosion of firm culture,
- a decline in client service, and
- exposure to extended group insurance claims.

The types of planks you might wish to consider in a wellness program include:

- A monthly allowance that people can use services of their choice for such things as gym memberships, house cleaning, or salons (they submit receipts and receive reimbursements for expenditures);
- Well equipped home office including the provision of items such as:
 - an ergonomic chair,
 - a flexible computer desk,
 - blue light glasses,
 - proper lamps,
 - a humidifier or dehumidifier,
 - an air conditioner, or
 - a white noise machine.
- Host online group workouts - The best way to host an online exercise class for everyone is to send a recurring calendar invite that includes a video meeting link (You could even hire a fitness instructor to lead the session).
- Virtual self-help programs that could include:
 - nutritionist consultations,
 - healthy cooking classes,
 - goal-setting sessions,
 - relationship counseling,
 - mini telemedicine check-ups, and/or
 - information sessions about employee benefits.
- Virtual volunteering - using video calls to write letters of encouragement to front line workers, tutor schoolchildren, lead a community workshop or video chat with nursing home residents;
- Available virtual coaching - both career and life;
- Digital coworking hours help to eliminate remote work-induced isolation. Designate a block of video time where dispersed team members can log in via a video app and work silently together;
- Virtual Buddy Systems are a sort of online pen pal program. It is harder to forge work friendships in remote environments, but the buddy system facilitates the process; and
- Firm anecdote sessions - scheduled weekly or monthly sessions where senior firm members share humorous and proud stories of past achievements/events in the firm.

Wellness programs have been an increasingly important aspect of talent management but never as much as now in light of remote working arrangements. The positive impact of a wellness program on productivity, retention, recruitment, and focus is absolute. That is why so many successful leading companies continue to invest in their wellness programs

Stephen Mabey is a CPA, CA and the Managing Director of Applied Strategies, Inc. Stephen's focus is on law firms in general and on small to medium size law firms in particular. He has written about and advised on, a wide range of issues including - leadership, business development, marketing, key performance indicators, strategic planning, mergers, practice acquisitions, competitive intelligence, finance, mergers, practice transitioning, compensation, organizational structures, succession and transition planning, partnership arrangements and firm retreats. In 2013, Stephen was inducted as a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management in recognition of his sustained commitment to the highest standards of professionalism in law practice management. For more information, visit appliedstrategies.ca or connect with [Stephen Mabey on LinkedIn](#).

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