

Strengthening Employee Emotional Fitness

Anticipating the
Needs of Employees in
Response to COVID-19

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Supporting Emotional Fitness During a Pandemic

Everyday we are all doing the best we can to remain strong in the face of what life throws our way. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic will likely magnify many of the problems that already exist. Now, perhaps more than ever, employers must play a critical role in promoting and supporting the emotional fitness of their employees.

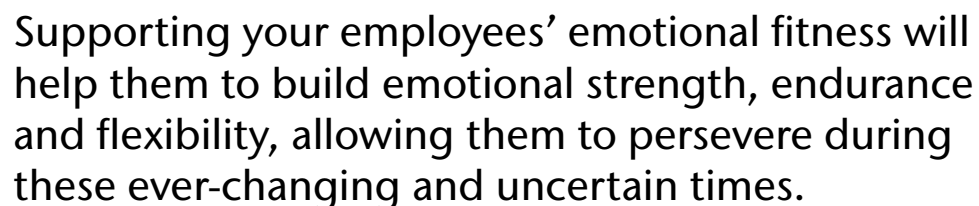
Today's pandemic is uncharted territory, and employers will need to listen to employees to understand how to best support them. Needs may change week to week as the situation continues to evolve. Altered work routines, changing family situations and requirements to maintain physical distance will test the emotional fitness of employees during the next few weeks and months. Financial stress, caregiving responsibilities, fear of infection, social isolation, and increased demands both at work and at home (and now where they often intersect) are just some of the day-to-day challenges facing your employees.

The first step in supporting your employees in their emotional wellbeing is to fully understand what that means. Many people believe if they aren't feeling ill, they don't have to attend to their health. But people who are physically fit (i.e. they exercise, eat well and get enough sleep) know that just because you are not ill, it does not mean you are healthy. Although not everyone has a chronic illness such as diabetes or high blood pressure, everyone catches a cold sometimes and one of the best defenses against illness is fitness. Emotional health and wellbeing is no different.

What is Emotional Fitness?

Emotional Fitness is the capacity to build emotional strength, endurance, and flexibility through meeting essential needs, securing a sense of belonging, cultivating a sense of purpose, and finding opportunities to flourish. It is not characterized by the absence of a mental health disorder, in fact, a person can be dealing with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder or ADHD and still have the capacity to be emotionally fit. It is about being resilient, positive and focused. Just like physical fitness, emotional fitness is one of the best defenses against emotional fatigue, illness and injury. Supporting your employees' emotional fitness will help them to build emotional strength, endurance and flexibility, allowing them to persevere during these ever-changing and uncertain times.

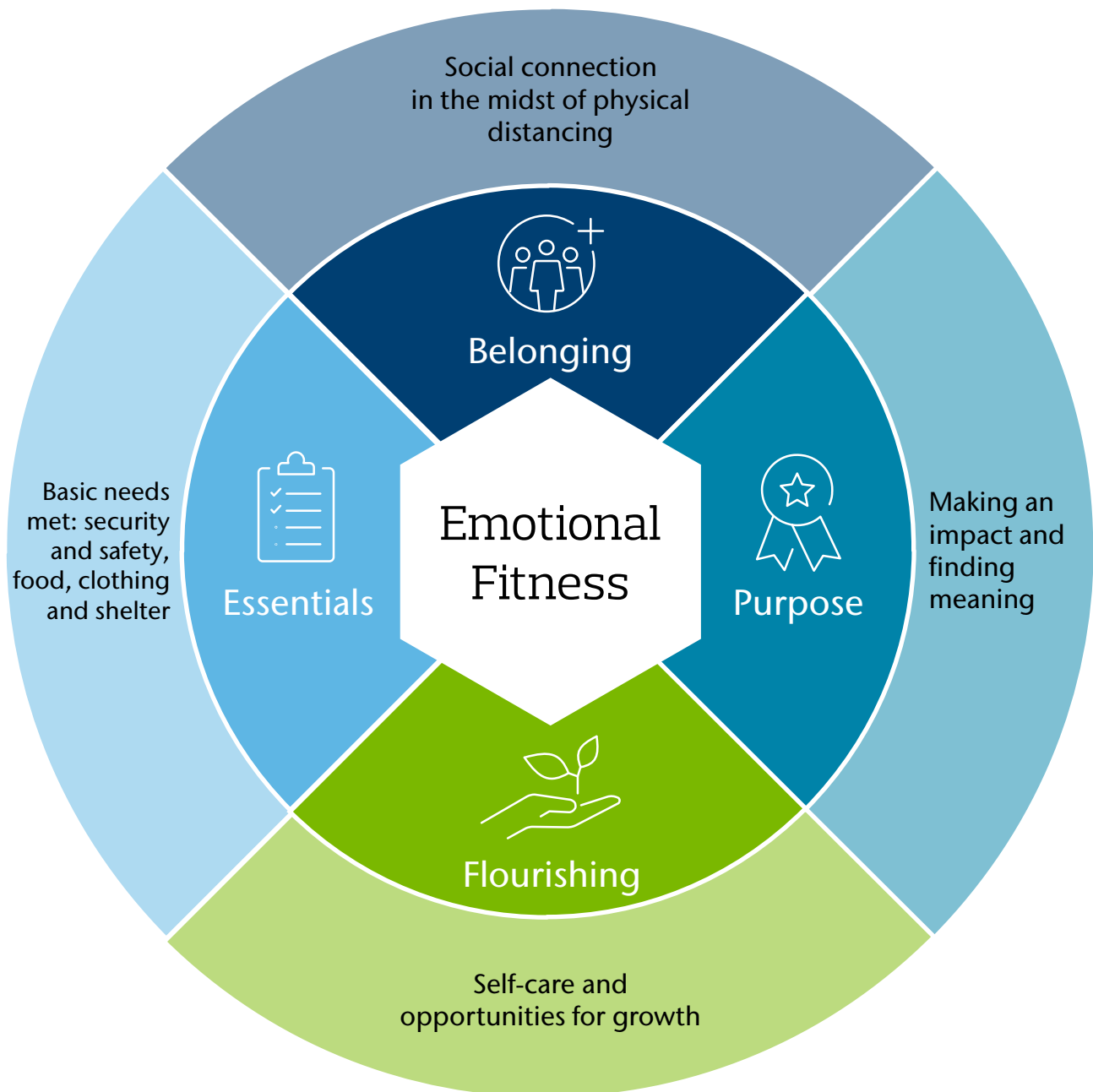
At this time, and into the foreseeable future, employers have a significant role to play in helping their employees thrive in whatever their new working environment may be, however temporary. The purpose of this document is to outline suggestions we believe employers should consider as they adjust to support their employees' emotional fitness.



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Recognizing the Emotional Fitness Needs of Your Employees

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Sources: Emotional Fitness at the Workplace, ACSM, IAWHP, Volume 21 / Number 5, September 2017; Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review, 50(4), 370-396.

Meeting Essential Needs



Before you can help your employees to thrive, they must first feel their basic needs are being met. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the two most basic needs are physiological (food, water, warmth and rest) and safety/security. In the midst of job insecurity and financial distress, it may be hard to experience anything other than fear and anxiety.

In addition to the anxieties of fulfilling our basic needs, changes with job conditions could mean increased pressure to balance the demands of work while simultaneously being a caretaker for children or loved ones. Or perhaps, it's the unexpected new responsibility of becoming a caretaker for family or friends in need.

Of course, within all of this, we are all experiencing loss like no other. Whether it's the loss of a routine, a job, or a loved one, we are all experiencing grief.



Care for Caregivers

Provide access to back-up care, tutoring, maternal health, and eldercare vendors.

Proactively communicate with your team about the need for flexibility (and model it for them), allowing employees to set the boundaries they require.

Reach out to employee resources groups (ERGs) or champion networks as "boots on the ground" to identify employees' emergent needs.



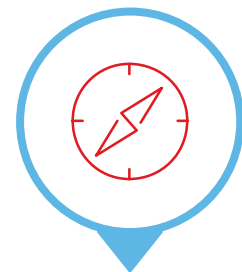
Ensure Safety and Security

Establish a listing of local resources/ assistance for employees to meet their basic needs i.e., food, shelter and safety.

Communicate physical and psychological safety protocols often, based upon industry and roles.

Increase options to support financial security by:

- Leveraging the temporary flexibility authorized under the CARES Act by adopting the increased 401(k) loan limit, highlighting the ability for those affected by COVID-19 to take early 401(k) withdrawals without penalty, and taking advantage of tax-preferred student loan reimbursement.
- Considering life planning accounts in strategy design.
- Modifying PTO accrual, use, carryover and cash out policies.



Provide Support

Identify and aggregate all internal resources to support employee emotional health and make the contact information easy to find.

Create a strategy with your health plan, EAP or behavioral health partners to prepare for what's going to come.

- Increased risk of anxiety and depression.
- Mental health crisis, grief, bereavement, violence, workplace safety events.

Communicate coverage of COVID-19 related costs through all benefit offerings (health plan, pharmacy, COBRA, disability, life insurance, 401k loans).

Securing a Sense of Belonging



A 2019 survey found that 3 in 5 Americans reported feeling lonely¹. With current shelter-in-place orders and recommendations for physical distancing, those numbers will likely only increase. Another study found that lack of strong relationships increased the risk of premature death from all causes by 50% — an effect on mortality risk roughly comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and greater than obesity and physical inactivity².

Humans are hardwired to connect, and isolation can have a huge impact on us emotionally. Connecting with others is one of the most powerful healers. In a time when everyone is encouraged to physically distance from one another, it has never been more important to encourage social connection. We are all in this together. Your leadership has an unprecedented opportunity to set the tone and create a culture of belonging to combat social isolation.



Driving Connections

Increase opportunities for social connection and camaraderie in spite of ‘physical distancing’, i.e. video meetings, virtual coffee or happy hours even for those currently not working.

Encourage employees to choose a work-buddy with whom they connect daily.

Provide manager training to identify employees who live alone and may need additional support.



Share the Good

Kick off team meetings by checking in on an emotional level. Inquire if anyone has a positive story or “silver linings” to share.

Leverage company social media sites to post sentiments of gratitude or share inspirational quotes and encourage employees to join the group/page.

Recognize collective business impact successes; i.e., the capacity to have xx employees working virtually simultaneously, xx packages delivered.



Demonstrate Empathy and Compassion

Feature your CEO sharing regular updates and his or her own stories of adjusting and connecting to reassure, normalize, and humanize feelings and emotions.

Encourage leaders to be available and engage in authentic conversations with teams and individuals, inquiring how they are and what they need. Share current personal experiences.

1. 2019 Cigna Loneliness at Work Survey
2. Social Relationships and Mortality; A meta-analysis, <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

Cultivating a Sense of Purpose



A sense of purpose not only helps us to find and do things that add meaning to our lives, it also helps when things go wrong. Life has presented us with an unforeseen event that, outside of anything we can control, may be hindering our ability to achieve the things for which we were striving. A healthy sense of purpose helps us to put these events in perspective, to refocus on the things that are meaningful, and move ahead.

Having a sense of purpose is not only good for our health, it is good for business. Purpose is correlated with 32% fewer hospital visits, and 61% fewer overnights in the hospital¹. Employees are more satisfied at work when their jobs feel meaningful. The resulting gains in worker productivity add up to over \$9,000 per worker, per year.²

Although you aren't responsible for helping your employees find their purpose in life, you can help them build purpose in the work they do and find meaning in the midst of chaos. Everyone has an opportunity to make a contribution to the world, and it's important to highlight how the work being done has a positive influence even during a global crisis.

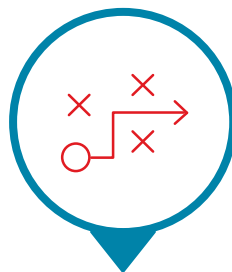


Giving Back

Facilitate employee charitable donations programs, especially those related to COVID-19.

Encourage acts of kindness and community support i.e. helping colleagues, volunteer from home opportunities, groceries for neighbors, food for front line workers.

Allow employees with surplus PTO to donate time to co-workers exceptionally impacted by COVID-19 and unable to work.

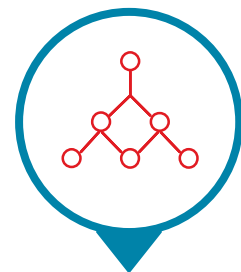


Understanding Impact

Connect work tasks to the impact they are having on the world.

Share customer success stories so employees hear how their work is making an impact.

Provide company charitable donations based on employee participation in healthy habits or community giving; i.e., 10 day plank challenge, weekly walk/run mileage, mask-making, food shelf donation.



Creating Meaning

Create your vision statement of how the organization is supporting or positively contributing during the current crisis.

Encourage employees to take time to talk one-on-one and reflect on ways they made a difference this week.

1. BetterUp. Meaning and Purpose at Work. 2019. Retrieved from <https://get.betterup.co/rs/600-WTC-654/images/betterup-meaning-purpose-at-work.pdf>
2. Kim ES, VJ Strecher, CD Ryff. Purpose in Life and Use of Preventive Health Care Services. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. Nov. 18, 2014; 111(46): 16331–16336. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4246300/>

Finding Opportunities to Flourish



It is possible to thrive and flourish during times of crisis, but it may look different than we typically expect. We can adjust how we define flourishing in the face of a pandemic. As employers, it's important to acknowledge that each individual employee is processing external events and their own situation at their own speed. While some may be adaptive and flexible, others may be truly struggling to find their new normal. There are opportunities, however, to help your employees grow, develop, and become their best selves.

Inner strength, fortitude and grit are built in times of stress and discomfort¹. It is, in fact, in those moments that exists the most opportunity to build resilience, learn and grow both as an individual and organizationally. Our capacity to cope with and recover from hardship has a big impact on our overall happiness and ability to thrive in life.

During this time of crisis, employers have the opportunity to leverage what is learned to move forward in ways never thought possible. "Necessity," it is said, "is the mother of invention."



Practice Self-care

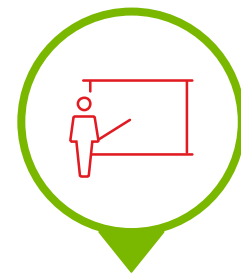
Promote the importance of self-care through high-traffic communication channels and include the importance of staying active, eating for energy, getting quality sleep, keeping a regular schedule including breaks, and prioritizing personal hygiene.²



Strengthen Resilience

Share inspirational stories of employees who have overcome challenges related to COVID-19.

Aggregate free trial options from vendors for mindfulness and resilience and make accessible to employees.



Learn and Grow

Encourage employees to embrace extra time they may have gained from shelter in place for bonding with family, connecting with old friends, starting a book club, or daily walks.

Initiate professional growth opportunities like mentorships, industry certifications, job sharing from home, connecting with others in the organization.

Allow time for innovation and reinvention during a time of need - it may create business opportunities.

1. <https://www.mindful.org>

2. Extracted from below reference <http://workplacemetalhealth.org/covid19tips>

A Word on Grief

Grief is the process of reacting to a loss. It is a normal response to an abnormal situation. In this time of pandemic, we all are experiencing loss in one way or another. For some it may be loss of loved ones, for others it is missing time spent with family and friends, the cancellation of hallmark events such as graduations or weddings, or even the inability to do the things we love on a daily basis. Experiencing grief will look different to all of us, but it's commonly expressed through symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, change in eating and sleeping patterns and agitation or sadness. There are six main stages of grief shown below. People may bounce from stage to stage during this time and it is important to allow for flexibility, adequate transition time and resources to allow your employees to grieve.

How Employers Can Help

- Recognize and acknowledge that employees are grieving, and talk about it openly with them
- Leverage the resources and communications of your EAP to support members experiencing grief
- Promote or add virtual counseling option through health plan, EAP and/or behavioral health provider
- Be empathetic and compassionate – proactively reach out to managers so they can support employees through various stages and types of grief



On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss, 2007, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, David Kessler. Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief, November 5, 2019, David Kessler

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Resources

Call Centers and Hotlines

If you are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety or depression, reach out for support.

Crisis Text Line:	Text “Home” to 741741
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:	1.800.273.8255
SAMHSA’s Disaster Distress Helpline:	1.800.985.5990

Links to Additional Reliable Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
[COVID-19: Managing Stress and Anxiety](#)
- American Psychiatric Association (APA)
[COVID-19/Coronavirus Resources and Information Hub](#)
[Coronavirus and Mental Health: Taking Care of Ourselves During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
- World Health Organization (WHO)
[COVID-19/Coronavirus: Mental Health Considerations](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
[Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine and Isolation](#)
- National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI)
[COVID-19 and Mental Illness Guide](#)

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