MENTALLY PREPARED?

An employer's checklist for staff wellbeing as we leave lockdown

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Introduction

Spikes in mental health troubles during the pandemic show that Covid-19 is far from the only threat to workforce wellbeing. As lockdown lifts again, we talk to employers embracing both tech and touch to support the health of employees and business alike.

In brief:

- Months of physical isolation and mental overload are wreaking havoc on our mental health. Lost working days due to poor mental health rose sharply in 2020, costing UK companies billions in lost productivity.

- There are many practical ways employers can help, but first, they need to understand the scale of the problem and the pinch points within their organisations. Having real-time insight into the issues affecting employees provides vital context for meaningful conversations and – crucially – early intervention.

- Technology can play a valuable role in opening access routes for people to reach out for help, but tech alone can't solve a mental health crisis. People want to feel listened to, and it can really help to understand that they are not alone. High-tech systems are a modern HR prerequisite, but employers should never overlook the importance of human interaction in supporting staff wellbeing.

- Senior management should lead by example and show employees that they are not merely paying lip service to wellbeing. Leaders have an important role to play in modelling healthy behaviours and should be visible proponents of any wellbeing strategy – from taking walking meetings to championing new support services.

> "Tech alone can't solve a mental health crisis... employers should never overlook the importance of human interaction in supporting staff wellbeing"

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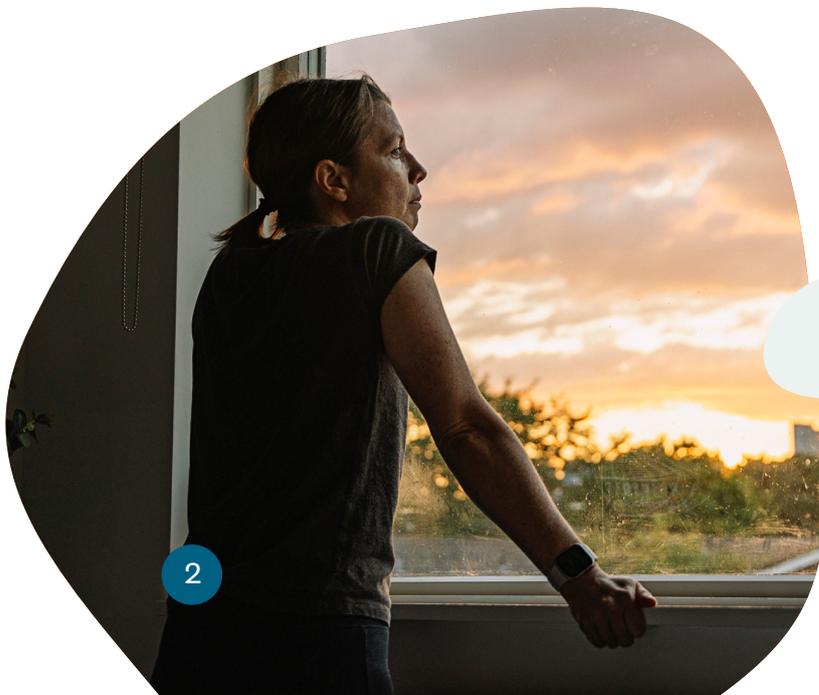
Out of sight, not out of mind

Beneath the surface of the Covid-19 pandemic, another crisis is simmering. Enduring months of physical isolation and mental overload is wreaking havoc on mental health.

This crisis is impacting people's ability to work. 2020 recorded a 17% year-on-year jump in the number of employees needing time off due to poor mental health. That's according to FirstCare – a company that provides nurse-led clinical support, digital management tools, and workforce analyses to improve wellbeing and productivity in large organisations. Their statistic is all the more striking given the large numbers of workers who were furloughed in 2020, and therefore not likely to call in sick.

It's clear that UK workers have struggled enormously with mental health during the pandemic. On average, spells of unplanned leave due to poor mental health have lasted four working weeks: 20.68 days. And spells of poor mental health following Covid-related work absences account for almost half (45%) of all working time lost to mental health issues since the pandemic began.

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Even with the remarkable pace of the vaccine rollout, anxiety levels related to catching the virus remain high, and it can take time for people to recover their equilibrium after being affected by the pandemic, even if they did not actually have Covid-19.

FirstCare figures show that one in seven workers who have needed Covid-related time off (including quarantine and caring for dependents, as well as confirmed cases) will subsequently take further time off for poor mental health. And those absences last 63% longer than other mental health-related spells – over a month, on average.

FirstCare estimates that in 2020 **working time lost due to mental health troubles** equated to costs of
£5.32bn

The impact on productivity is costing UK businesses billions of pounds. FirstCare estimates that working time lost due to mental health troubles equated to costs of £5.32bn in 2020; a £360m increase from 2019 – and that's before administration or replacement worker fees.

How lockdown changed us

When restrictions were eased following the first national lockdown, there was – perhaps counter-intuitively – a notable spike in mental health-related absence. From May to July, workplaces, schools and non-essential businesses re-opened, and days lost to poor mental health soared by 47%. But fast-forward to November and lockdown 2.0, and the overall trend was reversing, with spells of poor mental health falling more closely in line with 2019 levels.

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> **Stephen May, chief revenue officer, FirstCare**

Could it be, then, that over time we've gotten more used to the tedium of Zoom calls, the nagging anxiety of the weekly shop, the juggle of looking after our families or the isolation of living alone? Perhaps. Another factor may be that HR leaders have sprung into support mode. Many understand the mental health challenges just as well as their team members (indeed, HRD Connect's *HR Leaders' Wellbeing and Engagement Report* found that 74% of the 250 it surveyed had been "under either quite a bit or a great deal of stress"). And they are finding creative ways to extend support and compassion in this most difficult of times.

"Leaders of people have faced an all-encompassing challenge during this pandemic, which makes it even more impressive to find a positive in its midst," says Stephen May, chief revenue officer at FirstCare. "We're working with organisations from FTSE 100 companies to NHS Trusts that are taking a more analytical approach to staff support now than ever before – particularly mental health. Workers' varying reactions to leaving lockdown highlights how everyone is different, and by working proactively with staff now, these organisations are boosting their resilience for 'the new normal'."

So, there's good news; there is light at the end of the tunnel, and not just because of the cheering numbers of people receiving vaccines. Many employers are already doing a great job of supporting staff, and plenty are hungry for new ways to support their people's mental health. Here, inspiring HR leaders from a cross-section of industries share some practical ideas.

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Realise that knowledge is power

Understanding how people are feeling is a vital first step towards addressing issues within a workforce. By tracking the reasons why people need unplanned leave from work, using a service like FirstCare's, you can analyse which groups are finding life especially challenging and put in place specific initiatives to help. Over time, you will be able to examine the effect of that support – whether it be a reduction in people affected, fewer lost working days, or a lower recurrence of spells, for example.

David Blower, executive director of corporate services for housing association Stonewater, says: "We monitor absences and the reasons for absences, as well as where those sit within our organisation. Our absence is below external benchmark levels, which is good, but our highest area of absence has been around mental health.

"We find that the colleagues reporting mental health absences tend to be predominantly female and in that middle-age period where they have elderly parents, university-based children, and they might be experiencing menopause – there are all sorts of factors. Alternatively, you have parents who are trying to homeschool. [Being able to pinpoint] that has helped us to look at the levers and pulleys we can use to help."

Increases in working days lost to **poor mental health** in 2020 were

10%
for men

19%
for women

The trend that Blower observes within Stonewater is apparent across the UK workforce. Women are reporting more mental health-related absences than men; working days lost to poor mental health increased for both genders in 2020, but the increase was 10% for men and 19% for women, according to FirstCare's data.

The pandemic and its economic fallout have had a regressive effect on gender equality, according to *Covid-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects*, a July 2020 report by McKinsey. Women often tend to take on more unpaid care than men – meaning that their careers suffer, as does their mental health, as they try to juggle impossible burdens. Observing this trend and putting steps in place to support the most stressed employees is one way to ultimately improve organisational productivity and resilience, as we'll explore later.

Use technology to open conversations

Technology can help employers to take the temperature in other ways. Using a daily mood monitoring app has proved a successful strategy for Ford of Britain, explains Debbie Francis, a senior HR business partner at Ford who has a particular focus on mental health.

Via an app called TeamMood, a daily email is sent to teams at a time of day chosen by their team leader. Each person says (anonymously) how they are feeling by clicking on a smiley face or an unhappy face, and then can comment on why it was a great or difficult day.

"I can't see my team, they are all working from home and I don't have the luxury of being able to pop my head out of the office and say 'Hey, how is it going?'. The TeamMood app gave me the ability to have those conversations," says Francis. "If I see that quite a few of my team are struggling today, it enables me to have conversations about how I can help."

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> **Debbie Francis, senior HR business partner, Ford**

Similarly, FirstCare enables its members to open up in a way that they perhaps wouldn't directly with their line manager – while helping to ensure the accuracy of its data, too. When members phone in for medical advice or to report unplanned leave, they can speak to a registered nurse. The multi-disciplinary team can respond to virtually any query, from self-care advice for coughs, colds and gastrointestinal complaints, to truly life-and-death 'Code Red' interventions.

In 2020, FirstCare nurses handled 614 such life-threatening emergencies, potentially saving the life of a client's employee more than once every day. Around half of those calls came outside normal office hours (FirstCare operates 24/7), and 26% were related to mental health. ▶
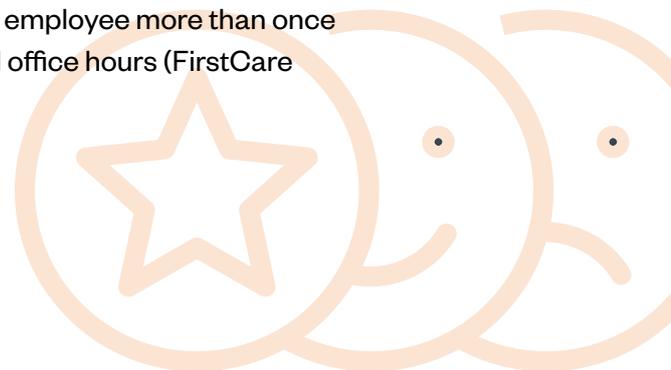
Use technology to open conversations / 2

The nurses follow a unique telephone triage process called STRAWS – developed in-house and approved by the NHS – which assists in gauging callers' answers to assess the nature, severity and appropriate action for their illness. "When the pandemic hit late last March, we were handling a month's worth of calls in a day. People were struggling to contact 111 at that time, and we were fulfilling that role for our members. It was crucial to update STRAWS continually, in line with the latest Covid guidance, so we could help members understand if they had a mild cold or flu, or needed to immediately self-isolate and get tested," explains Suzanne Marshall, FirstCare's clinical governance officer.

Equally, though, STRAWS could also mean the difference between mental health troubles that are manifesting as a stomach complaint being addressed, or simply shrugged off and bottled up until next time – a significant risk, when more than 60% of workers will leave their job after two spells of mental health-related absence.

By accurately identifying these trends, FirstCare helps employers to take action. For example, one client – a large utilities company – has on-call employees, such as engineers responding to emergencies, who work remotely. Working through the night can be a lonely existence and the company noticed a prevalence of mental health issues among those workers. With FirstCare, they introduced a system where if any of their employees called and reported a mental health-related absence, a link to the company's EAP was included within the confirmation notification they received by email or SMS. The triggers are customised according to whether the absence is work-related or not, and to the business area the person works within. They also act as a prompt for line managers and the organisation's Occupational Health team to contact employees who are absent when they are struggling with their mental health. ▶

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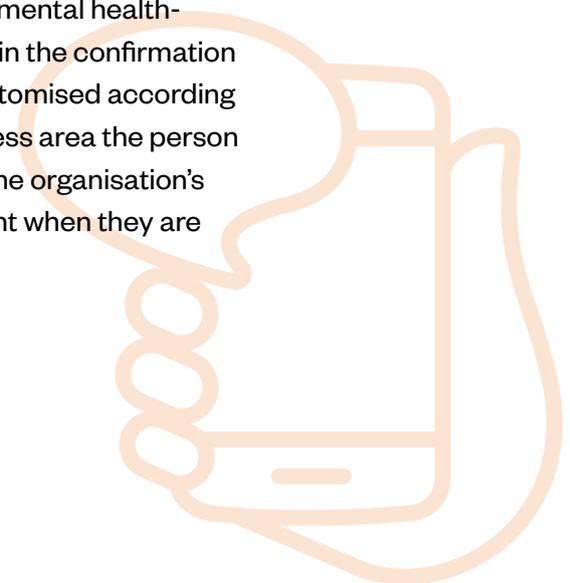
Use technology to open conversations / 3

The intervention has had impressive results. The average length of a mental health-related absence has dropped by just over 20% from 2017 to 2020, which represents 4.35 fewer days per spell. This suggests that employees are benefitting from the extra support and are able to return to work sooner.

Open conversations about what employers can do to help can often lead to meaningful change, as Victoria Manning, health and wellbeing lead for the London North West University Healthcare Trust, has found. The trust provides healthcare services in North London through hospitals including Harrow's Northwick Park and Ealing Hospital, and Manning has been in the challenging role of supporting frontline NHS workers.

"We were aware that the first thing we needed to do was to get emotional support in place," she says. Manning and her colleagues, including consultant psychologists and occupational health physicians, offered their services to people at the start and end of their shifts. "We found that what people wanted wasn't necessarily emotional support, specifically; it was useful for them to have a space to rant, if you like, but what they needed first and foremost were the practical things."

The length of **mental health-related absence fell by**

20%*

at a large utilities company after introducing links to EAP sent via SMS to affected employees

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Victoria Manning, health and wellbeing lead, London North West University Healthcare Trust

From these initial conversations, Manning and her colleagues found that staff could not access water from the water fountains on their shifts in the early days of the pandemic when the virus was still such an unknown, and changes of PPE were very limited. With coffee shops and cafés shut in hospitals, exhausted doctors and nurses couldn't access all-important caffeine and sandwiches. Getting these basics sorted was the first step.

* Spells of absence were reduced by 4.35 days on average from 2017 - 2020

Sharing experiences can be very powerful

Once the immediate practicalities were in place, the London North West University Healthcare Trust team were able to introduce extra psychological support for NHS workers, such as counselling and CBT, which has been coordinated across the trust.

Manning and her colleagues have also recently brought in a group of coaches with backgrounds in organisational development (OD) and life coaching. They are currently holding team support sessions, either virtually or in person, which are rooted in reflective practice and psychological first aid. "They are an opportunity to get staff together to discuss any challenges they might face and build resilience as a team and as individuals," says Manning.

She adds: "We have found the team support sessions, where teams got together and discussed their challenges, were the best therapy. It has been so helpful to have a discussion as a team and understand that you're not alone."

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Pam Parkes, director of organisation, development and people at Essex County Council, has also witnessed the power of the collective. As part of the council's Winter Wellbeing campaign, Parkes and her colleagues (including wellbeing lead, Dr Sabrina Robinson, who spearheaded the campaign) reached out to its employee network.

There was already an active parents' online community, notes Parkes: "Knowing we were likely to go back to home schooling, we asked: what help do you need and how can we facilitate it?" She adds: "That community has grown, and we are pointing staff towards it. They are sharing their tips and suggestions, supporting each other with homeschooling tips and curating all the information that's already out there."

Set realistic expectations – and emphasise the importance of switching off

Juggling work and home-schooling has been an immense challenge for parents. Understanding and flexibility were two key themes which came up within Essex County Council's online parenting community, and Parkes and her team have sought to embed that culture within the organisation. "We have been putting out lots of communications and messages showing that we understand that people have homeschooling duties," she says. "We're asking questions like: would you like to take some time off or borrow some leave from the next year to come?"

The same is true at Stonewater, where David Blower says: "We have introduced a much more flexible approach to work. You can do your work over a seven-day period rather than a five-day period if you have childcare responsibilities."

Organisations have also recognised the mental health struggles associated with short, dark days in the winter months and the limited windows of opportunity to get out of the house for exercise. "We have asked our organisation to really think carefully about the 12-2pm period of the day," says Parkes. "Are you really going to put meetings in, or will you encourage teams to get outside and connect with colleagues?"

HR consultant Angela O'Connor applauds companies who have implemented limits of 50 minutes for online meetings, giving people a break between commitments. She is also seeing organisations introducing no-meeting rules over lunchtimes, permission to decline meetings and protected diary windows. "I am fully anti systems where people can put anything in your diary," she says. "I don't agree with the idea that anyone can steal one of your most precious commodities: time."

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Try to create some light relief

Lockdown life can feel joyless. So companies are trying to come up with light-hearted ways to elevate people's moods and energy, which aren't just another Zoom pub quiz. Ford's Debbie Francis says: "We came up with scavenger hunts at the start of the meeting to get energy into the discussion."

Stonewater's David Blower agrees. "We are trying to make work a bit of fun and a bit of a sanctuary. We had our virtual Christmas lunch, with hampers arriving, that sort of stuff. We are also calling out to colleagues to showcase their talents. One of our colleagues, Linda, was on the Great British Bake Off this year and afterwards, we did a lunchtime baking competition. One of our finance colleagues is into fitness, so she did a Joe Wicks-style fitness class online. Our FD, who won a marmalade making competition, did a marmalade-making class – he really did deliver jam today, not tomorrow!"
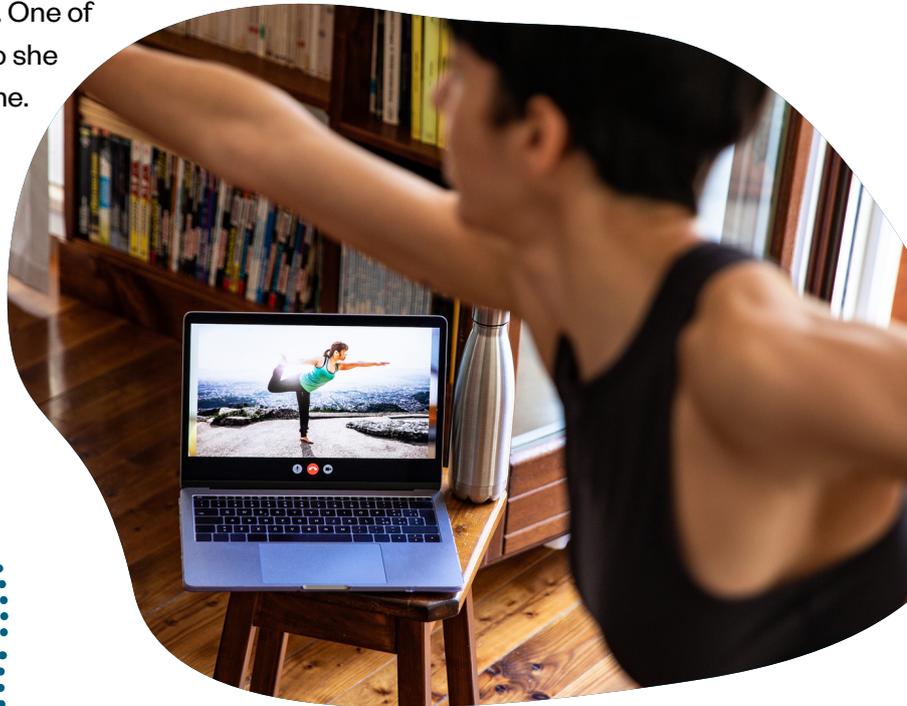
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The silver lining

One positive outcome from the pandemic is that talking about mental health has been normalised. The pandemic has naturally meant that employers have recognised there will be mental health challenges within their organisations and worked to address them more proactively than ever before. This focus on mental health will help organisations to emerge from the pandemic with greater resilience.

"It has now come to the surface and is being talked about in a far less taboo way," says Essex County Council's Pam Parkes. "That has allowed us to do practical things within our organisation. We now have people wanting to drop into mindfulness and meditation sessions, online physical health exercise sessions and the weekly drop-in sessions that we term Wellbeing Wednesdays. People are more able to do that without stigma, and I think that is a really important aspect of where we are now, compared to where we were before. Mental health and a focus on wellbeing had been taboo and deemed for the less resilient. Now, people understand their mental health and wellbeing are important facets of their resilience."

People are willing to be more vulnerable now, says Francis. Some of Ford's mental health first aiders filmed themselves speaking openly about some of the challenges they had faced, and the tools or help they had received which helped them. The feedback on the video was "overwhelming", she says. "So often, it means so much to hear 'It's not just me', or 'I know that person and I never would have known they were experiencing that." ▶

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The silver lining /2

◀ But before HR leaders can start to brainstorm solutions, they must make sure it's possible to see the full, three-dimensional picture of mental health within their organisations. Without that understanding, they will face significantly lower productivity and risk losing talented people to other organisations.

The range of situations HR leaders have described in this report show the multitude of ways people's mental health has been affected in the pandemic. Every organisation will have its own unique set of circumstances and challenges, making the universal principle of listening to your staff as vital as ever. Tech-based insights can help pinpoint where those conversations should begin. Support measures don't always need to be complicated or costly; often, making sure that people know how to reach support, and that they will be listened to, can be enormously reassuring.

"Employers are working hard to adapt to an ever-changing set of circumstances; but they will need to keep measuring the success of their initiatives"

While it's great news that we will soon be able to return to a degree of normality in our home and work lives, adjusting to the new normal will be another deeply personal experience. From the inspiring stories featured here, it is clear that employers are working hard to adapt to an ever-changing set of circumstances; but they will need to keep measuring the success of their initiatives. Now is the time that employers should equip themselves with the tools and services to lay the foundations for a happy, resilient and productive workforce post-lockdown.

About FirstCare

FirstCare's award-winning workforce health management platform has 16 years, 750,000 people, and 20 million sick days of experience in helping Britain's largest employers improve the health of their people and their business.

We own and maintain the UK's largest data set on employee absence, giving us deep insight into how wellbeing drives organisational efficiency and empirical evidence, to demonstrate how our support improves workforce productivity and strengthens business resilience and growth. (We engage on average 66% of an organisation's workforce in a year.)

We are revolutionising the way workforce wellbeing and productivity are understood and supported at a national, corporate, and personal level - with our research recently cited in a parliamentary bill proposal to make Mental Health First Aid compulsory in UK workplaces.

We believe we have the most effective platform to save lives and livelihoods and help Britain's businesses thrive.

To find out how we can help you, please contact us:

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