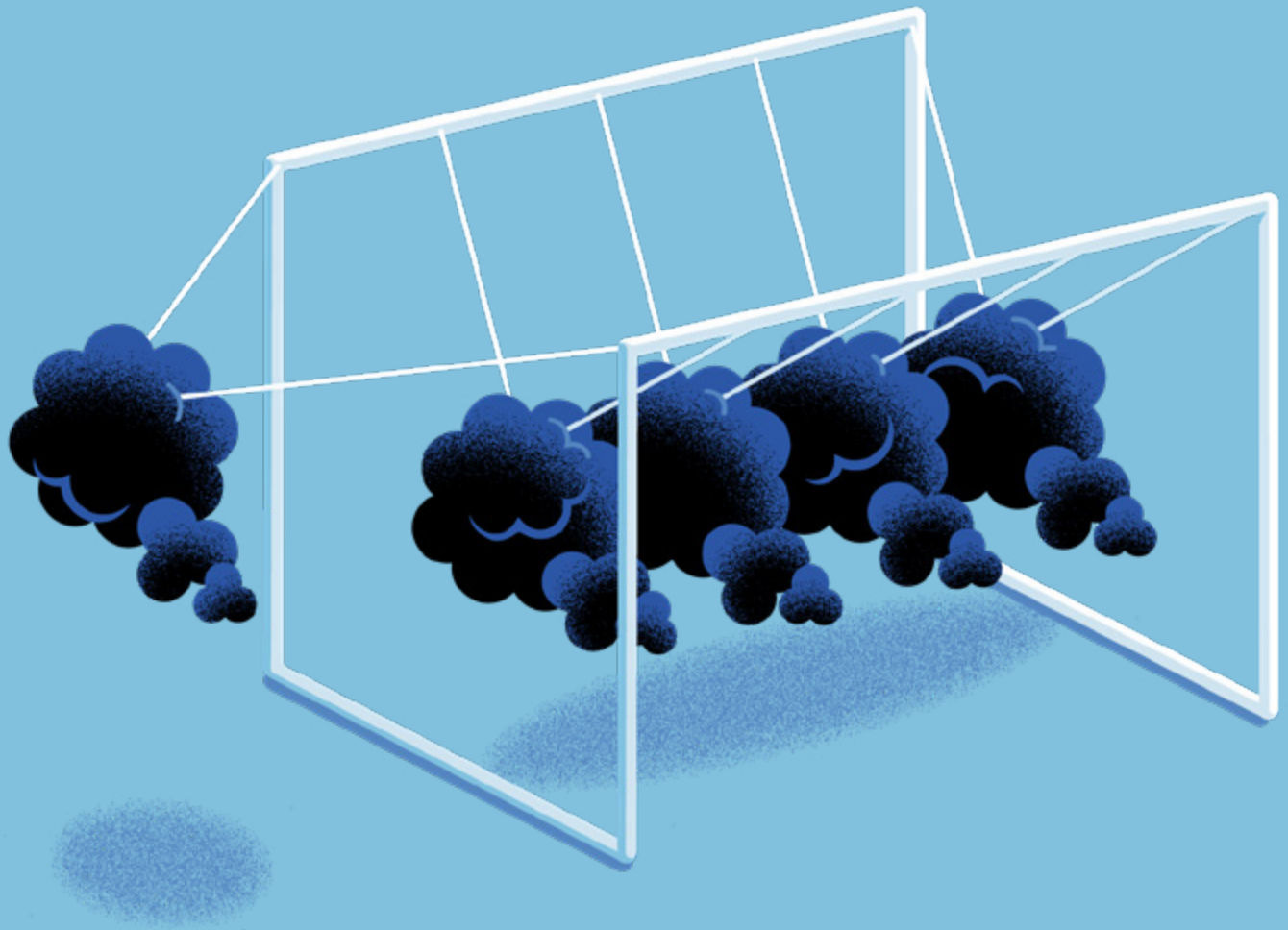


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5 Ways COVID-19 Will
Impact Mental Health
Long-Term & *What HR
Leaders Can Do About It*



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a sudden and dramatic impact on our society – including our collective mental health. Feelings of isolation, parenting and family concerns, financial stress, and health-related anxieties are manifesting globally. Vulnerable populations have been particularly hard-hit, as COVID-19 has worsened already-present health inequities for older adults, low-income families, and people in substandard or congregate living conditions.

While this pandemic will not last forever, there will be lasting impacts, especially when it comes to mental health. In an effort to help HR leaders prepare for this future state, Ginger’s clinical team compiled five mental health-related projections, with recommendations for how to keep employees supported in the process.

1. Augmented anxiety and stress

95% of Americans have been ordered to stay at home. Acceptable activities, such as grocery shopping and pharmacy runs, have become seriously anxiety-inducing. Many people find themselves asking, Am I maintaining a 6-foot distance with the others in my surroundings? If someone in the vicinity coughs or sneezes, am I at-risk for contracting the virus?

In all likelihood, once social distancing measures are lifted, many people will still approach social activity with vigilance. Public transportation, office environments, and other public fora may still cause anxiety for large swaths of the population. If anxiety isn't addressed, it may lead to a diagnosable mental health disorder or endure for years to come.



HR TIP

If symptoms of anxiety don't decrease after an employee returns to work, encourage them to get professional help, whether through coaching, therapy, or psychiatry.



HR TIP

Employees who have a predictable working environment and greater autonomy tend to experience less stress. Empower your staff by defining clear goals, establishing regular routines, and enabling independent decision-making.

2. Perceived loss of control

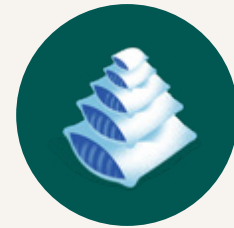
COVID-19 presents a host of unknowns. When will the virus subside? Will I still have a job tomorrow? Will my loved ones be affected? Additionally, for essential workers whose job puts them at an increased risk of contracting the virus, feelings of lack of control can be even more pronounced.

Even when life does return to “normal”, sustained feelings of helplessness across social, economic, and health dimensions may persist. This scarcity mindset—which focuses on what's not in our control instead of on the things we can control—is a known source of stress and anxiety.

3. Enduring sleep disruptions

It should come as no surprise that COVID-related stress and anxiety are causing serious sleep disruptions. Starting in March, Ginger has seen a 56% uptick in nighttime (10pm-6am) conversations with coaches, reinforcing how sleep is suffering. In otherwise healthy adults, short-term consequences of sleep disruption include increased stress, emotional distress and mood disorders, and cognitive, memory, and performance deficits.

However, poor sleep behaviors are hard to unlearn, and may remain an issue beyond COVID-19. Chronic sleep deprivation is associated with a number of physical and psychiatric problems, with men experiencing an increase in mortality.



HR TIP

Promote a healthy work-life balance for your employees. Enforce workforce policies that support boundaries, such as not sending emails late at night, and keeping to time and agenda during meetings.



HR TIP

Keep a pulse on your employees now and later. Be on the lookout for unusual conduct – such as performance disruptions and behavioral aberrations – as these may be symptoms of more serious conditions that call for psychiatric interventions.

4. Substance use

Social isolation is creating barriers to recovery from substance use disorder. The absence of in-person outlets, such as 12-step programs, poses dangerous risks for those segments of the population who have come to rely on them. While in-person interactions will eventually be reinstated, relapse during the pandemic may prevent certain individuals from seeking out those programs in the future.

Other individuals without a history of substance use disorder, have been taking to drinking and drugs as a coping mechanism. The addictive nature of certain recreational substances may create lingering challenges for these individuals, even after COVID-19.

5. Individual and collective grief

Over 200,000 people have already died from COVID-19 globally, and this number continues to climb. What this means is that there are few, if any, degrees of separation between your employee population and those whose lives have been taken by the virus.

Literature from the Spanish flu pandemic suggests that for years to come, we may experience the backlash associated with the vast loss of life – grief from having lost loved ones, guilt over having survived the pandemic when others didn't. The Spanish Flu was associated with an increase in suicide in the U.S., serving as an austere warning for how a pandemic can precipitate additionally preventable loss of life.



HR TIP

HR leaders have the opportunity to normalize grief, which can decrease isolation and shame. Let your workforce know that grief is to be expected during times like these, and that seeking support from others is a great way to move forward.

In Conclusion

As COVID-19 subsides, HR leaders should continue to champion flexible work policies and invest in ongoing mental health resources for their employees, as the emotional impact will likely reverberate for years to come. Planning ahead for the post-pandemic reality will help ensure business continuity, while keeping employees grounded and resilient in an ever-changing world.

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