How to build a proactive mental health strategy in a post-Covid world.
Foreword

It’s been over a year since we published our first blueprint, *Building a proactive and preventative mental health strategy*. The handbook helped many leaders in the HR and wellbeing community to spearhead workplace mental health strategies that are serving their people today.

A lot has happened in the world since then.

March 2020 will be logged in future history books as an abrupt moment of change. Not for a generation had so much of the world’s population been forced to rethink how we live our lives.

While the change compromised our wellbeing – financially, emotionally, and physically – and restricted our freedom, it also thrust upon us the time and conditions required to reevaluate our basic principles.

It made us remember – or realise for the first time – what’s truly important in life. It showed us the environmentally unsustainable way we lived – and how quickly it can be reversed. And, crucially, it shifted the way we think about mental health.

For the first time, mental health gained parity with physical health as a national focus. We must now maintain this momentum and fashion long-term strategies – not just to safeguard our mental health through the next transition, but to realise the human and economic opportunity of proactively nurturing our mental health.
Back in March, here at Unmind, we published *7 areas of mental wellbeing to nurture while working in self-isolation* as a reaction to the outbreak of the coronavirus. The handbook was designed to provide in-the-moment tips to tide employees over in the short-term. Now, this refreshed blueprint will help leaders to plan or upgrade their proactive and preventative mental health strategies for the new working world.

It outlines the importance of taking a whole-person approach to wellbeing before delving into the nine key considerations to forming your initiative, from capturing and applying data, to personalising care and supporting a distributed workforce.

Based on real-world insights from wellbeing leaders and rigorous clinical psychology, it lays out a clear pathway and will prove an invaluable asset to anyone charged with protecting and supporting employee wellbeing.

Here’s to a swift recovery and a new, more mindful, normal.

**Dr Nick Taylor,**
CEO and Co-founder, Unmind
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Now is the time for proactivity

Lockdown forced us to react to events. Organisations had little time to think through new operational policies. Even those with the most robust mental health and wellbeing provisions in place were abruptly stress tested.

According to research we published with the Reward & Benefits Association (REBA), some 78% of organisations experienced an increase in requests for mental health support in the wake of Covid-19. In response, 70% plan to up their investment in mental health support for their teams.¹

Now, as we reemerge, new challenges are posed. For starters, there’s the threat of another lockdown as the result of a second spike – an eventuality we’re already seeing in some countries. There’s also the getting to grips with huge changes to the way the new working world operates. With more people than ever working remotely, leaders must find ways to empower their teams to look after their own wellbeing in a way that’s scalable and effective.

We need to act now to give our workforces access to the right care at the right time, wherever they are, whatever comes next.
The whole-person, whole-organisation approach

The last few months have reminded us of something important: we all have mental health all of the time. And it’s determined not only by psychological factors, like thoughts and emotions, but also by our physical conditions and social environment. Because lockdown compromised all three.

Every mind is unique and each person’s situation is different. We all exist on spectrums from surviving to thriving; disengaged to engaged; struggling to focused. The whole-person approach is a proactive and preventative workplace mental health strategy that supports employees no matter where they are on individual spectrums and scales.

By doing this, organisations improve performance by empowering their employees with the resources they need to thrive in work and life. Company cultures flourish as workforces are united behind openness and authenticity. And reputations are improved as people increasingly want to work with – and buy from – companies that share their own values.

But what are the limitations of reactive mental health support at work?
A sole focus on reactive support feeds into the stigma surrounding mental health and leads to poor uptake and engagement of initiatives. Typical EAP usage can range from 2-4% – this doesn’t correlate with the 1 in 4 people experiencing mental ill-health each year.²

Providing reactive support to those in need – while vital – is just one part of the puzzle. We know that prevention is better than cure, so how do we help employees to understand and nurture their mental wellbeing? It’s not a case of prevention versus reaction – it’s about providing people with the right care at the right time.

Our study found that 90% of businesses have increased their emphasis on the importance of employee mental health as a result of the pandemic. We cannot underestimate the long-term impact the coronavirus will have on our employees’ wellbeing – businesses need to respond to this shift and use it as an opportunity to propel their mental health strategies forward to meet the needs and expectations of their people. And the numbers speak for themselves.

In January this year, before the coronavirus outbreak, Deloitte estimated that the most holistic and proactive mental health strategies deliver an ROI of up to £11.20 for every £1 spent. 'Reactive support', meanwhile, can deliver anything from £1.20 to £4 for every £1 spent. Clearly, providing a holistic approach is not only good for the mental wellbeing of the workforce; it’s also good for business.³ While it’s too early to fully evaluate the ROI of mental health interventions throughout the pandemic, early indicators suggest that increased usage leads to increased financial returns.

So, what needs to be considered when building a proactive and preventative mental wellbeing strategy in a post-Covid world?
1 Accessibility

Ensure employees have access to services anytime, anywhere.

This year, circumstances demanded that working from home became the norm. While some organisations plan for a phased return to the workplace, others are embracing digital and closing their physical premises for good – many more are planning something in between.

Whatever the approach, the point stands: we all have mental health, all of the time. It’s now more important than ever that our workforces can access resources and support wherever they are, whenever they need – regardless of department, role, or location.

As the plans for long-term remote and flexible working policies continue to be rolled out, alternative channels of communication need to be optimised. Crucial to this will be the smartphones, laptops and tablets that we’ve come to depend on.

A digital approach not only opens up access to your entire workforce, but also allows them to engage with resources however and whenever they want. This might be an employee on maternity leave, who can access valuable resilience training through their smartphone, or a remote worker who requires access to their EAP while travelling. Digital tools provide freedom and flexibility to employees, and increase uptake, utilisation, and ongoing engagement.

"While Covid-19 has caused isolation, physically and mentally, having access to tools to support ourselves and each other has been enormously important, and proves massive return on investment."

Stephanie Valles
Benefits & Wellbeing Specialist

asos
Data

Use data and insights to influence your wider strategy.

Without physical interaction and in-person conversations, data has become not just advantageous but simply essential in understanding the wellbeing of your workforce. Covid aside, if you can’t measure something, it’s hard to improve it. So insightful and actionable data needs to sit at the heart of your mental health and wellbeing strategy.

Historically, organisations have focused solely on problems – for example, absenteeism, staff turnover, or EAP usage. While valuable, the impact of Covid-19 challenges us to take a more detailed and holistic approach to interpreting organisational mental health and wellbeing data.

Ideally, you should have data and insights around uptake, engagement, outcomes, improvements, and the collective wellbeing of your organisation; allowing you to track and understand the impact of any new initiative.

Having a real-time dashboard of how your organisation is feeling helps you to make more informed decisions about your mental health strategy – and how to improve it.

69% of employers are now looking to access available data sources to guide their decision-making process and measure impact.⁴

“It’s important for us to understand how our employees across the globe are thinking and feeling, and the resources they’re tapping into most. With these insights, we tailor our communications to ensure that we’re continually meeting the needs of our people.”

Sophie Warren
CULTURE ARCHITECTE

⁴ https://www.thomsons.co.uk
Training

Empower managers to support mental health at work.

Organisation wide mental health training is an extremely effective way to raise understanding and awareness of the topic.

As the first port of call for employees during the pandemic, line managers have themselves been put under new levels of pressure. As well as getting projects over the line, they’re now tasked with navigating the short and long term impacts coronavirus will have on the mental health of their teams.

Our study found that conversations around mental health had increased among 88% of line managers, and that 80% of organisations have either increased their investment into line manager mental health training, or plan to do so.¹

Organisations should look to equip not just line managers but everyone within the organisation to recognise the signs of common mental health problems. This should include practical guidance on supporting others and an understanding of our to navigate supportive conversations.

One-to-one training isn’t always scalable – especially while social distancing measures remain – but digital mental health tools are opening up training to entire organisations, wherever they’re based. It’s just important to find resources that are scientifically rigorous and certified.

80% of organisations are increasing their investment in line manager training in the wake of Covid-19.¹

“Most people experiencing difficulties in life don’t need the support of mental health professionals. Actually, supporting others can start with simply being present.”

Dr Jane McNicholas
Principal Clinical Psychologist

NHS
4 Measurement

Empower employees to measure and manage their mental health and wellbeing.

Through periods of great challenge and change, it can be extremely helpful to check in with ourselves on a regular basis. Just as we measure our physical health through fitness trackers or financial health through digital banking apps, measuring our mental wellbeing helps to raise our awareness and understanding of the way we’re feeling, and how that impacts how we live.

Science has unearthed a tremendous amount about the role emotions play in our lives. Research has found that our emotional awareness and ability to manage feelings play an even larger role in determining overall success and happiness across many areas of life – including family relationships, friendships and work – than even our IQ.

Mental health assessments and mood journals enable employees to become more self-aware of feelings, and to better understand how subtle variations can affect their everyday wellbeing. Tracking these changes over time allows people to identify triggers, and ultimately empowers them to make more informed choices about how best to respond.

Now an increasing number of organisations operate with a combination of remote and in-office employees, digital mental health tools offer a scalable way to empower everyone with the ability to measure and manage their mental wellbeing. When considering these tools, it’s critical to assess their confidentiality, anonymity, and scientific validity to ensure employees feel comfortable engaging with them.

76% of people would be interested in using their mobile phone for self-management and self-monitoring of mental health.⁵
Variety

Cater to a diverse range of needs and preferences.

Our mental health and wellbeing are diverse, vibrant, and ever-changing.

One size doesn’t fit all, and what works for one person might not work for another. From sleep and focus to health and body image, there’s a vast range of topics and experiences that’ll be relevant to your organisation. As such, it’s important to provide variety and choice – our mental wellbeing is a fluid experience and changes throughout our lives.

The lockdown has encouraged many of us to re-evaluate the way we conduct our lives. For some, that means going back to basics, for others it means doubling down on certain pastimes. Being able to offer employees resources to support their new lifestyles – whether that’s parenting, or cultivating a more healthy diet – will improve wellbeing and engagement.

For any organisation, it’s also essential to consider how a diverse population will result in different preferences, requirements, and outcomes. Are your initiatives globally relevant and culturally neutral?

How information and resources are presented is another essential factor to consider. Using a mixture of text, audio, video, and in-person interactions provides a well-rounded approach that can cater to a variety of different needs, increase employee engagement, and maximise overall learnings.

“With such a diverse workforce it’s essential that our mental wellbeing initiatives cater to a broad range of circumstances and needs.”

Yulia O’Mahony
HEAD OF D&I AND WELLBEING
Credibility

Ensure initiatives are designed by experts in their respective fields.

The topic of mental health has dominated a lot of the conversation around Covid-19 and lockdown. While wellbeing taking its place on the agenda is undeniably positive, we need to ensure our information is reliable.

Harnessing expert insights from experienced clinicians and academics allows organisations to provide credible and reliable support, without building everything from scratch.

While not every initiative will be evidence-based, it’s important to assess the scientific validity of any offering and dig into the data that’s available. Research has shown that only a small proportion of the thousands of mental health applications are backed by clinical evidence.⁶

Speaking with the existing users of any proposed initiative – or those with subject matter expertise – can help to ensure that the services, resources, and support being provided to employees will ultimately be of benefit and not lead to misinformation or unintentional harm.

“There’s so much advice out there about wellbeing, it can be hard to know who to trust. As a clinical psychologist, I feel it’s paramount that wellbeing initiatives are underpinned by scientific evidence.”

Dr. Hazel Harrison
Clinical Psychologist, Thinkavellana
Tone

Use aspirational and engaging messaging.

We’ve all witnessed the power of strong messaging over the last few months, having internalised two-word slogans designed to keep us safe – “Stay home”, “Stay alert”, “Save lives”. We need to harness the power of words to change the narrative around mental health, communicating it as something aspirational and relevant to everyone. This will be crucial in reducing stigma and increasing confidence as we commence the new normal.

Mental health as a brand has suffered from the perception that it is synonymous with mental ill-health – with struggling and hopelessness. We’ve become accustomed to black and white pictures of people with their head in their hands. Future generations will look back on this doom and gloom narrative in the same way we look at 1950s advertising today – with quiet disbelief.

Mental health exists on spectrums: from surviving to thriving; disengaged to engaged; distracted to focused. Our position on each changes with life’s twists and turns, but here’s the wonderful thing: we have the power to steer our position and support others – provided we have the right tools.

Using the right terminology and tone can have a significant impact on perception. This can be as simple as using more inclusive terms like calmness, coping, and happiness instead of just anxiety, stress, and depression, respectively. We should also consider the imagery that we use when communicating mental health and wellbeing initiatives. Does the image used really convey the message we want, does it engage the right audience, and will it inspire people to take action?

“Talking about mental health as something to aspire to, rather than to hide from, changes the way that people relate to it, and subsequently determines the way they talk about it elsewhere.”

Dr Heather Bolton
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, UNMIND
Visibility

Combine a top-down and bottom-up approach to communication.

Sharing stories and de-stigmatising the topic of mental health has a significant impact on awareness, perception, and engagement. As humans, we’re hardwired to well respond to stories. The ability to connect or empathise with someone else's journey is very powerful.

Wellbeing champions and guardians play a significant part in communicating mental health initiatives of organisations. On top of this, senior leaders and employees who share their stories are creating an important culture of openness and vulnerability, helping others to understand, appreciate, and embrace their unique circumstances.

One of the key challenges we’ve experienced this year is reaching a distributed workforce, and so it’s important to ensure that any new mental health initiative is accompanied by a well-coordinated communications strategy. Digital signage, coupled with emails and newsletters, are invaluable to reaching everyone with your message.

It's also essential that your communication strategy doesn't just revolve around key dates like Mental Health Awareness Week. There needs to be an always-on approach to ensure that employees are continually reminded of the support, tools, and networks available to them.

33% of employees agree that senior leaders encourage a focus on mental wellbeing through their actions and behaviour.
Signposting

Direct employees to reactive support when necessary.

Over three-quarters (77%) of organisations have experienced an increase in requests for mental health support since lockdown. Our ability to access the right care at the right time is critical for our future wellbeing and recovery. That’s why it’s so important to bridge the gap between preventative and reactive initiatives within the workplace; ensuring that employees can easily understand and quickly access the relevant support for any situation.

A recent report from the We Need to Talk Coalition argues for the importance of both timely help and a sense of choice in treatment – both of which lead to better outcomes. For your organisation, this might include instant access to your EAP or occupational health services at the tap of a button, or it could be providing a list of helplines and charities that offer critical support. Likewise, it might simply be creating a basic directory of internal mental wellbeing champions so colleagues can easily contact them.

An early intervention is the most effective intervention. A proactive approach enables employees to spot common symptoms – in themselves and those around them – as early as possible, provides them with the necessary language to ask for help, and empowers them with transparent sources of support to take appropriate action.

2% of employees sought help from an EAP when experiencing symptoms of poor mental health.⁸

56% of employees said no action was taken when they last experienced symptoms of poor mental health.⁸
Summary

As you shape your proactive and preventative approach to mental wellbeing, bear in mind:

1. **Accessibility** — Ensure that employees have access to services anytime, anywhere

2. **Data** — use data and insights to influence your wider strategy

3. **Training** — Empower managers to support mental health at work

4. **Measurement** — Empower employees to measure and manage their mental health and wellbeing

5. **Variety** — Cater to a diverse range of needs and preferences

6. **Credibility** — Ensure initiatives are designed by experts in their respective fields

7. **Tone** — Use aspirational and engaging messaging

8. **Visibility** — combine a top down and bottom up approach to communication

9. **Signposting** — Direct employees to reactive support when necessary

We all have mental health, all of the time. By taking a proactive whole-person approach to supporting it, we can build a world where mental health is understood, nurtured, and celebrated.
References


3 Deloitte (2020) Mental health and employers: The case for investment. ▶ Available HERE


About Unmind

Unmind is a workplace mental health platform. We empower employees to measure, understand, and improve their mental wellbeing.

Proactive support for all areas of life
We work with clinicians, authors, and academics to provide digital tools that nourish all aspects of mental wellbeing. From sleep to calmness, fulfilment to happiness.

What gets measured, gets managed
Empower employees to track, assess, and understand their wellbeing — and how it changes over time. Enable leaders to make more informed decisions with aggregated and anonymous data.

The right care at the right time
We all have mental health all the time. So wherever your employees are based — in the office, on-site, out in the field, or at home — they can access Unmind from any device, whenever they need.

An ongoing campaign for cultural change
Launch day is when our partnership begins. We’ll help you to engage your people with the platform, and to continue experiencing the benefits of nurturing a healthy mind.

Organisations we work...

Want to find out more? Book a demo today. www.unmind.com