



## Impact of Covid -19 on Employee Mental Health: Global managers need new tools for employees to thrive

*\*Ms. Vara Edara*

The global experience of the pandemic these last fifteen months has altered our perspective of thinking, working, bonding, and living. We modified our complete existence around the virus. Overnight, we switched from a physical world to a digital one. Many companies that never imagined working digitally and remotely made the transition; others closed down as they were not equipped to transition to the digital world and struggled financially. The world around us shuttered. Child care and schools became virtual; shops started offering home delivery and curbside pickups. Daily chores like shopping for groceries became a hazard.

As a graduate social work student and a professional in the state of New Jersey, U.S.A., I witnessed many people struggling to maintain the balance of work, child care, and life all within one home. The fear of illness forced us to change our ways of shopping, working, and communicating with one another. Socializing face-to-face became an artifact of a past life; replaced by virtual connection.

It was a gift and a curse in many ways. A few people were happy with the slower pace of life and the immediate end to commuting. They enjoyed newfound bonding time with their immediate families. Forced into close quarters, some families grew closer, while others broke under the stress of 24/7 closeness. Meanwhile, others struggled with the isolation and stillness around them.

At the same time the virus was transforming family connection and dynamics, work seeped deep into many personal lives as

the virus dissolved the boundaries between work and home. Some people began regularly working 12-14-hour days, unable to find separation from work without the physical demands of a commute to divide work from home. Certain segments of the corporate world benefited from this conflation of work and home, even as it took a toll on employee's mental well-being.

Now, the advent and global distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine

offers a return to normalcy. But after 16 months of tragedy and trauma, how do we transition from the virtual back to the physical world? People tapped into so many electronic toys, devices, gadgets, and apps to navigate the demands of life during the pandemic that socialization and human interaction took a backseat. How can someone return to a world full of people, have a meaningful conversation, make eye contact, smile,

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express emotions, and deal with unresolved grief and be present? Is it possible? And what is the incentive to leave the safety of our Covid-19 bubbles?

Anxiety thrives on avoidance—and life during the pandemic was



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an exercise in avoidance. The pandemic also caused many people to grieve—both the tangible loss of friends and loved ones, and the intangible losses of routine, regularity, and normality. The grieving process is slow, and anxiety often causes us to avoid these feelings through self-numbing, immersion in work, or other tactics. But sometimes pushing through grief by multitasking is not correct. Grief must be felt and processed to begin healing from its impact; ignoring it or pushing it aside is not the solution. Rather than burying ourselves in work, we should instead take a moment to ground ourselves in our feelings. Experience them. Acknowledge them. And then after a short period of feeling these emotions, use mindfulness techniques to return our thoughts to the present. When eating, savor the food instead of eating while browsing through your phone; smell the roses; take a walk and see the trees, look for different birds, and make a mental note of it.

Grief and avoidance are common in the aftermath of the pandemic. Likewise, anxiety, social anxiety, and pandemic re-entry anxiety is very real. Research including Khan et al., (2021) underscores this experience. People are ambivalent about their surroundings. There is still fear of the unknown. Corporate leaders must recognize these fears and human needs that drive them. They must strive to see their employees as unique, whole persons, and view their needs holistically.

How, then, can World Policy Bodies, Leaders, and Directors understand what is at stake here? How can they have a compassionate and humanistic outlook towards the people who report to them, keeping in mind the needs of the corporation and the need for employees to maintain a healthy balance in life? Grief is not something you can put on a backburner or lock up in a safe. You cannot avoid it or dismiss it. It is real, and every person grieves differently.

For leaders of Asian and South Asian corporations, attunement to certain cultural considerations can help inform our view of employees. Our ancestors instilled the belief that discussing ourselves in a negative way was a sign of weakness. As such, many of us bottle up our fears and worries to deal with privately. We are not open to addressing our feelings and emotions. The fear of being judged is too deeply ingrained. The Covid-19 pandemic required many of us to challenge those inhibitions. After seeing so much death around us and being simultaneously unable to say goodbye to people we've lost or get closer to those still with us, people have experienced a shift in mindset. This pandemic

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forced many of us to sit with ourselves a bit longer, process our feelings and emotions, and express them outwardly, which I would say, is a good thing. Crying is a healthy way of releasing the pain we feel inside, as is speaking that pain aloud. Never underestimate the power of being heard or validated. Every person deserves a safe space to process their feelings and emotions and find coping strategies to soothe from within. So how do we, as leaders, help them do that? Where do we start?

I am a volunteer counselor for a non-profit organization called VCS, Inc., New York. We run a life transition support group for people who are struggling with loss or trying to transition to the new everyday life post-pandemic. Our groups last for 50 minutes; we do some check-ins, and group members share and support each other. We end each group with Qigong, an ancient Chinese exercise and healing technique that involves meditation, controlled breathing, and movement exercises. This support group create a safe space to help my clients share their grief and feel validated about their experiences. In our present world where many are trying to figure out how to reclaim their happy, content space, this group unites its participants in human commonality and the sharing of difficult experiences, allowing group cohesion and bonding to contribute to the healing process.

These experiences of vulnerability and emotion can have a significant impact on how individuals navigate the corporate world. Work is a results-oriented setting—historically, one with little downtime or compassion for employee's lives outside the office. I asked my good friend, a Global Director at a financial services firm, what the pandemic taught her. How would she do things differently now? Pre-Covid, if a staff member approached her and shared they were having a panic attack, she would sympathize but then stress the importance of the work that needed to be completed. Now, she shared, if an employee tells her the same thing, she connects them to the mental well-being help desk, asks them if they need to take some time off, and offers the work from home option. “I have changed my way of thinking,” she said. For example, before plunging into the details of a conference call, she makes sure to engage participants in personal conversation. “I know I am crossing boundaries by asking personal questions like, how are you, how is the family, how are your kids, how was your weekend?” she continued. However, she believes it is important in the world we are now faced with, to engage personally, as well as professionally, with people who report to her. A manager needs to understand the pulse of their team and the team needs to feel understood, appreciated, and heard.

One way to address the emotional and physical well-being of your employees is to schedule self-care time into the workday. Yoga and meditation were practiced for thousands of years in India, though extensively practiced by westerners more than Asians. These practices work. They calm the nerves and slow our



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anxious “monkey brain,” which tries to make us run in 100 different directions simultaneously. Research has found that calming our nerves and being focused makes us more productive and provides clarity in any space. Scheduling daily, or even weekly, yoga sessions for your employees allows this space for grounding, reflection, and healing.

The takeaway from all this is that we, as organizations, governments, and corporations, need to revisit our global policies and practices regarding employee mental health and well-being. Panic attacks and anxiety episodes are real and not to be taken lightly or dismissed. Being stuck in grief for tangible and intangible losses during the pandemic is not unusual. As such, every organization, small or large, should have a mental health help desk as a resource for their employees. Additionally, directors and other leaders can alert to non-verbal cues and signs that an employee is struggling; for example, an employee shutting down in a group meeting, interacting less, not making eye contact, or not acting their usual self. An attuned manager will speak with this employee, privately and tactfully, to show concern and offer assistance. Help connect the employee to the mental well-being help desk and keep the communication channel open at all times. Encourage employees to share their feelings and emotions and not bottle them up—if not with a manager or colleague, then with a mental health professional, religious leader, or other trusted confidant.

Also, be sure to carve out some light, “personal time” at the start of each meeting. Start with a mental check-in before plunging into metrics and financial benchmarks. This could be a two-minute mindfulness guided meditation or something less formal, like encouraging employees to share their hobbies, weekend plans, or their highs and lows of the day. Or, if you feel many people are struggling with their circumstances and emotions in the moment, have everyone share how they have dealt with challenges during this pandemic. It is good to have professional boundaries, for sure, but delving a bit into the personal realm helps employees feel recognized and appreciated. Create a bonding environment in the workplace so employees feel supported, validated, and heard and can draw strength from the knowledge that they are a valued part of a team. Acknowledgment is huge, especially coming from a senior manager/higher management. It helps set the tone that employees should be valued for their whole selves, not just for their performance.

Happiness leads to productivity. A happy employee is more productive than a sad and unappreciated employee. So, be aware of those around you. Be compassionate, kind, polite, and validate the people who report to you. And encourage others to trickle down this same attitude to the people who report to them. Kabat-Zinn, (2012), describes mindfulness as a part of living, breathing and being aware. Create a culture of awareness and being present in your daily life and the life of your employees. Be

kind to the person standing in front of you. Who knows, he might be grieving and in need of a smile or a hello.

What you put out into the universe, comes back to you. Amazingly, kindness goes a long way. Let's heal ourselves and each other with kindness and understanding. Encourage those in distress to seek the help they need. Support those who report directly to you, and they, in turn, will be better able to support those who work for them. ■

**\*Ms. Vara Edara** attained her Masters in Social Work from Ramapo College, New Jersey, this year. She interned in 2020-2021 with the Department of Veterans Affairs, serving veterans deployed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. She also interned from 2019-2020 at the acute psychiatric hospital, primarily working with suicidal patients. Her goal is to spread awareness about mental health and create a bridge to help everyone she can. Her main focus is to help the South Asian community as they shy away from seeking help.

