

RESILIENCE AMID COVID-19: HELPING EMPLOYEES COPE WHEN THEY HIT A WALL

A guide for employers

SUMMARY

At the beginning of COVID-19, Americans felt fear, anxiety, distress, irritability and, even anger, but adapted to the feelings brought on by the pandemic. Many felt that while the situation was challenging, they felt they had the resources to adequately cope; so, they did.

As the pandemic continues, the economy has upturns and downturns, and with significant civil unrest due to racial inequity, mental health professionals question how long people's resilience will last. They're also concerned about what could happen once people hit a wall in their resistance and are unable to function in the productive way they're used to, which can lead to depression and anxiety.

This white paper provides employers with insights into how the pandemic could impact their employees' mental health and how they can help them replenish their resilience.

COVID-19 IS CHALLENGING AMERICANS' RESILIENCE

When the pandemic hit, many Americans felt fear, anxiety, distress, irritability and, even anger. If left unchecked, these emotions can lead to major depression, clinical anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

From the beginning, the mental health community assured people that feeling stressed, isolated, and sad was normal, and that developing coping mechanisms could help them manage these strong emotions.

Mental health professionals applied a concept called cognitive appraisal theory to understand how people cope. The theory suggests that people constantly assess the world around them for threats and if they find something they consider a threat, such as a pandemic, people determine whether they have the resources to overcome the threat. When people feel they have the resources they need, they tend to cope effectively using those resources. When people feel they don't, they tend to cope by avoidance, which can lead to depression and anxiety.¹

At the start of the pandemic, many people felt that while the situation was a challenge, they had the resources to adequately cope; so, they did. They became resilient by adapting well in the presence of trauma.²

People adapted work, fitness, and nutrition routines; stayed connected to family and friends through video chats; and set time aside to enjoy immediate family.

Some even felt more productive in the face of adversity; they wrote more, read more, produced more work and knew they had to do what was necessary to help families and society get through the crisis.

But, as COVID cases rise, the economy experiences upturns and downturns, and there is significant civil unrest due to racial inequity, mental health professionals question how long people's resilience will last.

AMERICANS COULD FACE A NEW WAVE OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

While people's minds are designed to handle and adapt to intense, stressful situations, they're only able to do so for a short time. For many, it's not just about the pandemic, social changes, and the economy—it's managing life's demands, including work, children, and school, that really tests surge capacity.³

Surge capacity suggests that people have considerable resilience at the beginning of a traumatic event or crisis, but as the event draws out, they're at risk of becoming less resilient.⁴

Mental health professionals feel that, eventually, people will believe their access to adequate resources may not continue, and there is a clear risk that they will become less resilient, which is characterized by exhaustion, lack of motivation, frustration, irritability, and even despair.

Ultimately, people can hit a wall and are unable to function in the productive way they're used to, which can lead to depression and anxiety. When their resilience is depleted, people need to determine the best way to fill their bucket.

SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND WANING RESILIENCE⁵

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people
- Having low or no energy
- Having unexplained aches and pains
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Excessive smoking, drinking, or using drugs
- Constant worry
- Feelings of guilt without cause
- Difficulty adjusting to changes at home/work

GRIEF CAN DRAIN RESILIENCE AND LEAD TO MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

As a life and society changes, some people may feel they've lost something and are experiencing a condition called ambiguous grief.

Types of ambiguous grief include being physically present but psychologically absent and being psychologically present but physically absent. Physically present but psychologically absent grief occurs when a loved one is in a coma, for example. The patient is physically present but can't communicate and is psychologically absent.

Today, people experience ambiguous grief as psychologically present but physically absent. For example, this can happen when a family member is hospitalized with COVID-19 and visits aren't possible. Or when people can't see family and friends due to COVID-19 risk and don't know when the situation will change, creating an ambiguity that puts them at risk for significant distress, anxiety, and depression.⁶

This type of grief can keep people feeling frozen in their emotions because there's no closure.⁷ It can also put people at risk of experiencing prolonged grief, leading to depression, anxiety, and significant distress.

Ambiguous grief and capacity depletion of resilience can leave many feeling overwhelmed. Financial stressors, job loss, schooling children at home, working from home, and being with loved ones day in and day out without a break can cause strain on our emotional well-being.⁸ Heightened emotions can cause people to communicate in ways that are often inappropriate, such as yelling, blaming others for things outside of their control, and lashing out physically and/or emotionally.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN TAKE AWAY FROM THIS STUDY

EMPLOYERS CAN HELP EMPLOYEES BUILD UP RESILIENCE BY SHARING THESE BEST PRACTICES WITH THEM



- **Accept that life is different right now.** Employees can remain aware that life will not go back to normal immediately, but they can notice and appreciate the small things they've returned to, like eating out at a restaurant with family.



- **Expect less of themselves.** This is hard, but employees must allow themselves to replenish. They cannot be expected to be at full capacity all the time. Employees can do something at least once a week that's only for them and their physical and mental health.



- **Recognize that everyone's grieving:** Ambiguous grief is a challenge. No one knows when this will end, so employees must allow themselves to grieve what they lost.⁶



- **Focus on maintaining important relationships and staying connected:** Employees can spend time with close family and friends even if meeting in person is not an option.



- **Build their resilience bank** by focusing on self-care, nutrition, exercise, and having compassion for themselves. It's okay to say, "No."



- **Remember that it's okay to not be okay** and to reach out and ask for help.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE: 800-799-7233

CRISIS TEXT LINE: TEXT HOME TO 741741

Use this piece to help you share this important information with your employees.

DOWNLOAD TIPS FOR EMPLOYEES

PRUDENTIAL CAN HELP YOU MEET THIS CHALLENGE

Prudential's Health and Productivity Analytics and Consulting Practice (HPAC), in partnership with our claims team, can help organizations identify programs to provide employees with the resources they need to recover, get them back to work safely, and help keep them financially sound.

We invite you to examine our other thought leadership content that provides insights on other topics of interest within our industry by visiting <https://www.prudential.com/corporate/insights>.

Contact your Prudential representative for more ideas about helping employees to remain as productive as possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Dr. Kristin Tugman has more than 20 years' experience as a health and productivity consultant. Her work is founded on a specific cognitive behavioral model to help individuals overcome psychological barriers and return to productivity. In addition, she's the author of several publications on the psychological aspects of disability. A certified rehabilitation counselor and licensed professional counselor, Dr. Tugman earned a master's in rehabilitation counseling from Georgia State University and a Ph.D. in industrial and organizational psychology from Capella University. Dr. Tugman leads a team focused on identifying disability trends that impact Prudential customers and making actionable recommendations to help maximize productivity and minimize absence.

GAIL S. BALLIN

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Gail Ballin is a clinical leader with proven success in all areas of operations. She is solution-focused with solid ability to assess business needs and identify efficiencies that result in better workflows, cost savings, and an improved client and employee experience. She has a master's degree in counseling from Nova Southeastern University and is a licensed professional counselor with over 20 years of experience as a clinician. She spent close to 20 years in the disability and absence industry before joining Prudential in 2019. Gail leads a team of professional resources with clinical, medical, behavioral health, and vocational rehabilitation expertise. Her teams focus on assessing wellness, functional capacity, and return to work.

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