

Placing
mental
wellbeing
at the heart
of your
business



The importance of mental health

Professor Ella Arensman,
Professor of Public Mental Health within University
College Cork's School
of Public Health



Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic last year, the attention for public mental health and suicide prevention has been greater than ever.¹

Mental health is the way we think and feel, and our ability to deal with ups and downs. In our personal lives, these ups and downs can include everything from moving to a new house or the end of a relationship, to a new child or illness in the family.

All of these circumstances could understandably create feelings of stress or fear. However, over the past year, we've witnessed unprecedented changes in our lives and society that have potentially prompted additional emotions such as anxiety, loneliness and financial concerns. But what does this have to do with the workplace?

Negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and sadness don't exist solely between the hours of nine and five. They equally don't appear only during 'non-work' hours. The fact is, our lives are a rich tapestry, and our feelings about our personal and professional lives bleed into each other regularly. This means that emotions experienced at work can compound existing mental health concerns and vice versa.

As an employer, it's worth noting that workplace mental health (impacted by the likes of high pressure and stress) can result in higher absenteeism, presenteeism and reduced productivity. So, it's clear that in order for your employees to be happier both at work and in their personal lives, you need to continue doing what you do best – supporting your people to live healthier and more fulfilling lives – **and this means placing mental health at the heart of your business.**

The impact of COVID



70% of the global workforce say 2020 was the most stressful year ever.²

As a result of the pandemic, businesses had to react and respond as best they could to the challenges that presented themselves, on an almost daily basis. The response was admirable, and most businesses did all they could to support their employees. However, COVID-19 has had a lasting impact on our work lives and in turn, the mental health of workers across the world. **In the new landscape of increased remote working, workplace mental health is now home mental health.** Where some employees found the transition easy and painless, others experienced difficulties, and many required additional support.



Where many believe that the dangers associated with COVID-19 were exclusive to physical symptoms, it's now clear that the new and prominent risk is the ongoing mental health of employees. Even as businesses begin to return to their workspaces in varying degrees, there will still be a need to support the emotional health and wellbeing of your employees in order to benefit both them and your business output.

In 2020, 3.1 hours were lost per workday for working parents due to stress, anxiety and caregiving.³



As remote working becomes more 'normal', many employees are finding their new environment isolating and lonely, whilst some are struggling to achieve the same level of motivation they enjoyed in the office environment.

Others are finding that the work-from-home methodology is leaving them without the structure they are used to. On top of these challenges and reactions, the lack of physical distinction between work and home means that many **people are finding it difficult to detach from their job and as a result are working longer hours and experiencing greater stress.**



41% of Irish people reported negative wellbeing as a result of loneliness exacerbated by COVID-19.⁴

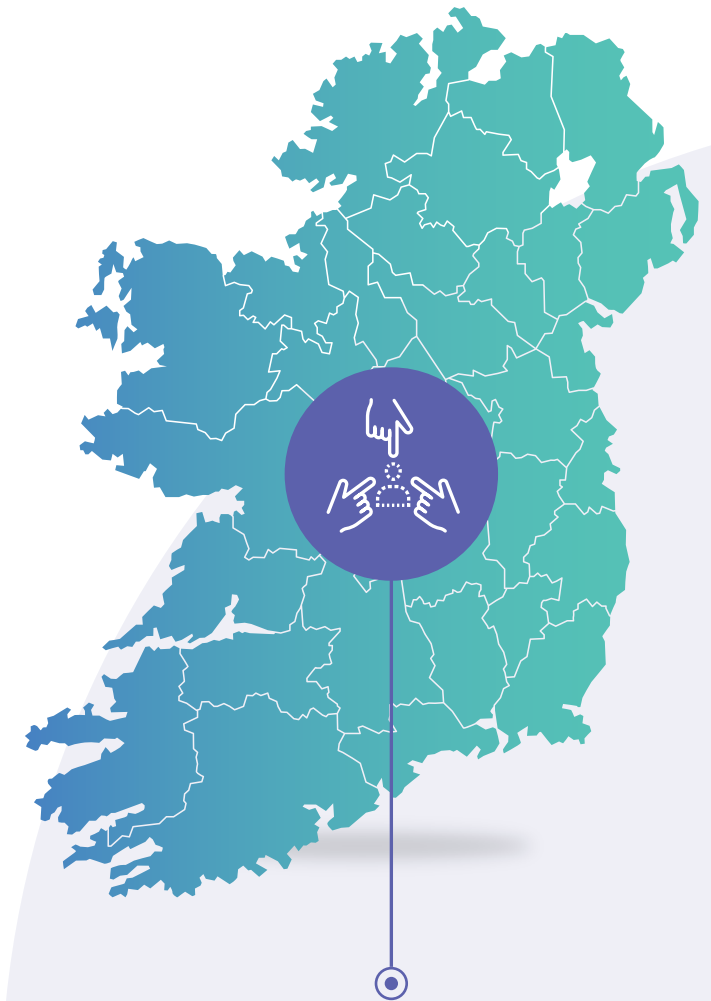
The business cost of workplace mental health

Workplace mental health does not just impact the quality of life of your employees – it also affects their attendance and productivity at work, thereby causing costs for your business. The first and most obvious impact of poor mental health is absenteeism. **In fact, mental health was the highest cause of long-term absenteeism in 2020 (22%).⁵**

When your employees are too unwell to attend work, you are left with a resource issue and potentially a reduction in output too. But this isn't the only damaging impact of mental health. Increasingly, we are seeing the occurrence of presenteeism – where employees attend work but are in fact too ill to work effectively. In the case of mental health issues, this could mean that employees are depressed, anxious, or unhappy and are therefore unable to concentrate and perform their duties as required. You may not have to incur the cost of replacement resources here, but your output could be just as badly impacted. There are instances too where workplace stress and pressure can exacerbate existing mental health concerns – thereby making the problem even worse over time.

In the cases of absenteeism and presenteeism, your employees are ultimately able to return to work and 100% productivity given the right support. However, in some instances, mental health issues and a lack of business support may in fact lead to an increase in employee turnover. This has the capacity to cost you in terms of resources and productivity, and also in the cost of recruitment. It also removes any opportunity you have to support your employees and aid their recovery. It is vital to recognise the link between employee mental health and business performance.

When your workforce is happy and content, your business not only benefits from improved productivity and output, but is also able to minimise unexpected costs and turn more revenue into profits. A company's bottom line may not be the main focus for individuals in people-focused roles such as HR, but it will certainly matter a great deal to board members and chief finance officers.



In Ireland, up to 11 million days are lost through absenteeism every year at a cost of €1.5bn to the Irish economy.⁶

Why it pays to consider workplace mental health



Providing mental health support for your employees isn't just a 'nice to have', **it's a legal necessity.**



In accordance with the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, you are required to ensure that, as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of all your employees is not at risk in their work. This means that you are required to ensure that the demands placed on employees in their work are reasonable. With regards to scenarios and situations that may impact your workers' mental health, you must have a statement that explains the measures you've taken to provide a healthy workplace, plus a code of practice on topics such as bullying and harassment.

Just like carrying out risk assessments for physical dangers, it's important that you identify and do all you can to prevent psychosocial hazards, too. This process involves identifying hazards and risks, consulting with employees, and where necessary, seeking external expert advice. In an instance where you become aware of an employee's mental health issue, you have (under common law) a duty of care to ensure the person has access to suitable arrangements and facilities. This could mean reduced hours, alternative employment, or access to an employee assistance programme (EAP). We all want to ensure employees have the best possible working environment and support around their mental health, **but it's always worth remembering that a failure to provide such assistance could result in more than just an unhappy worker and reduced productivity.**

What workplaces can do for better mental health



The benefits of workplace wellbeing programmes have been well-established: **improved employee engagement, retention, enhanced productivity, and general health and wellbeing, among others.**⁷



One of the key factors in any improvement project is identifying what your business needs. Making investments with no understanding of requirement or appetite is a sure-fire way to lose time, money and resources. **So, the starting point with regards to improving employee mental health is speaking to your employees directly.** Having understood their requirements along with the needs of your business, there is a variety of established solutions.

It's important to note that mental health is not necessarily a standalone topic - it forms part of a complete life, which is also reliant upon wellbeing in other areas such as physical fitness, nutrition, financial stability, and social interaction. It's for this reason that offering your employees a wellness programme is a great way to supplement other, more targeted support. By covering a range of topics and providing support in a variety of areas, you are inspiring your employees to live healthier lives, which in turn can help improve mental health. For challenges and issues that need support in

the form of therapy and counselling, an employee assistance programme (EAP) is a highly valuable tool. By giving your employees access to a free and confidential support tool, you are giving them the ability to talk about their feelings and emotions with a trained professional, without any input from or impact on their employer.

In the pursuit of better mental health for your employees, a valuable activity is training your managers to identify and spot potential mental health symptoms before they turn into issues. As the first port of call, your managers will likely hear first-hand about the way employees are feeling. **Investing in their training and enabling them to raise flags and suggest solutions as early as possible is a great way to avoid any unnecessary ill health.**



Supporting managers

As part of our Healthy Minds programme, we will also work with your managers to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge and tools to identify where employees may need additional support. We will also work with you as part of your wellbeing programme to identify training opportunities for your managers. Similarly, managers can avail of the counselling service themselves and can also call up and ask for advice on how to deal with an individual who has asked for help.

The Healthy Minds programme also gives your employees access to digital support. This includes the LifeWorks website and app, where they can access a variety of articles, toolkits, podcasts and self-assessments, all developed to help your people to stay on top of their mental wellbeing.

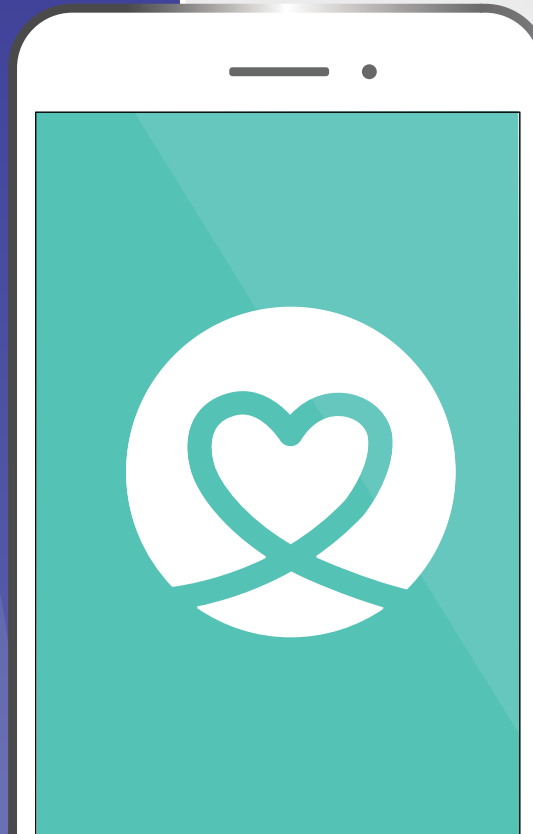
In a recent survey conducted by Morneau Shepell, 63% of people who accessed counselling through instant chat, said they would not have reached out through traditional methods.

Service provided by LifeWorks by Morneau Shepell. Available to members 16 years old and over. If deemed clinically appropriate, up to 6 counselling sessions may be arranged through LifeWorks.

Healthy minds make a happy workforce



At Irish Life Health, we're committed to ensuring every employee has the mental health support they need to stay happy, healthy and fulfilled. That's why our Healthy Minds benefit delivers all-round support with professionally trained counsellors on hand 24/7 to listen and provide your people with considered and practical advice, **no matter how small or challenging the problem.**



Make mental health your priority with Irish Life Health

Mental health is, and will continue to be, a key focus for organisations going forward. By providing your employees with support across all areas of their lives and supplementing this with expert services, you are best placed to help create a healthy environment for body and mind. The outcome is not only improved productivity, but happier and healthier employees.



To find out more about how we can help you to keep on doing what you do best – supporting your people to live healthier and more fulfilling lives, speak to one of our experts today on:

01-5625248

or visit

irishlifehealth.ie

Irish Life Health dac is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland.

**Professional counselling is provided through Lifeworks by Morneau Shepell and is available to age 16+. Virtual Physiotherapy and Virtual Dietician services are provided by Spectrum Health. Members must be aged 18+. Digital Doctor service provided by Health Hero. Nurse on Call provided by Healix Medical Partnership LLP. General terms and conditions apply, see your Table of Cover and Membership Handbook for details of exactly what's covered. Virtual Physio and Virtual Dietician have separate terms and conditions and they can be viewed [here](#).*

Sources:

¹TheJournal.ie | ²Oracle | ³U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics | ⁴Irish Medical Journal, Vol 113; No. 10; P214

⁵IP Claims data, Irish Life | ⁶MetLife | ⁷The Irish Times