Avoiding the mental health tsunami

Are we really looking after people's well-being in the Covid age?

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Introduction
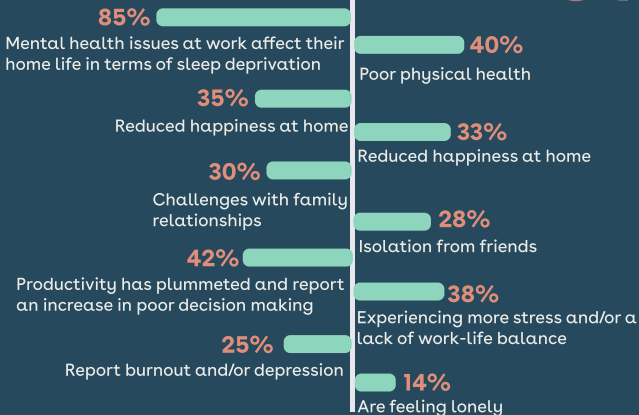
As we gradually move towards the white light at the end of the Covid tunnel, there's increasing concern surrounding potential mental health issues resulting from the prolonged impact of remote working and isolation in the workforce.

According to a Forbes.com article published during the first UK lockdown in April 2020, 75% of people were experiencing social isolation - a statistic which positively correlates with spending more time at home.

A more recent study has reported even greater mental health challenges as the period of home working, and therefore isolation, increases.

Another study released by **Oracle and Workplace Intelligence** surveyed 12,000 people across 11 countries and found the following

85%
Mental health issues at work affect their home life in terms of sleep deprivation

40%
Poor physical health

35%
Reduced happiness at home

33%
Reduced happiness at home

30%
Challenges with family relationships

28%
Isolation from friends

42%
Productivity has plummeted and report an increase in poor decision making

38%
Experiencing more stress and/or a lack of work-life balance

25%
Report burnout and/or depression

14%
Are feeling lonely

While there are benefits to working from home, we are seeing an increase in people suffering from an 'always on' mindset where the boundaries between work and personal life have been further blurred. Of those surveyed, 41% say they are challenged because there is less distinction between their work life and home life - these two important aspects of our existence are now more readily cohabiting the same space.

We need to put in place a well-being strategy and approach to combat this, otherwise, we are heading towards a wave of mental well-being issues spanning the whole spectrum and leading to potentially catastrophic consequences.

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Social needs

In our article on **supercharging remote teams**, we used David Rock's SCARF© model to help understand how we can support people through targeting their specific drivers, and how they are being impacted by the change in the way we now work.

Rock likens our social needs to our need for food and water

Two themes are emerging from social neuroscience.

Firstly, much of our motivation driving social behaviour is governed by an overarching organising principle of minimising threat and maximizing reward (Gordon, 2000).

Secondly, that several domains of social experience draw upon the same brain networks to maximize reward and minimize threat as the brain networks used for primary survival needs (Lieberman and Eisenberger, 2008). In other words, social needs are treated in much the same way in the brain as the need for food and water.u

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He identified that a threat to one of the key social experience domains triggers **the same response in the brain as a threat to life**.

We all know about our fight, freeze or flight responses; but what does that mean in the workplace? The fight response could look like confrontation, over-defensiveness, or obstructing progress. Freeze could look like paralysis in decision making, lack of progress or productivity; and flight could look like **dis-eng**agement from the rest of the team and a lack of desire to muck in and support colleagues.

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Social domains

So, what are the social domains and how are they triggered in the current environment?

Remember that different people will have a different need when it comes to each of these domains. For some, a domain can be an important driver and they will thrive on the reward response from that domain being satisfied. For others, that domain may not be important.

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Let's look at each in turn:

1. Status

2. Certainty

3. Autonomy

4. Relatedness

5. Fairness

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Status

This is defined as the relative importance of seniority to an individual, and where they stand in the 'pecking order'. If status is very important to an individual, and they seek status validation during their interactions with others, then working in isolation and not being able to meet people face-to-face could be eliciting a threat response.

Certainty

For those with a strong need for certainty, this year has been extremely challenging. We crave certainty because our brain wants to conserve energy, and the prefrontal cortex has limited capacity for **executive function**. While mild uncertainty can be helpful (it triggers a mild threat response which generates enough adrenalin and dopamine "to spark curiosity, and energise people to solve problems", excessive uncertainty causes panic and bad decision making.

At present, many people are struggling with numerous uncertainties (**Batista**):

- "Am I safe from Covid-19? Is my family vulnerable?"
- "What does the future of our company hold?"
- "What will work look like in the future/ Am I going to be at home for good?"

If their need for certainty is not being (or cannot be) addressed, it will trigger a threat response and they will feel their stress levels rising.

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Autonomy

This relates to our ability to exert control over our environment and has a direct link to stress. If we feel we have control and are autonomous, we are more able to handle stress. However, if we feel we have lost control of our environment, things can *feel* much more stressful.

We've seen an increase in micro-management of people in an attempt to keep a grip on productivity. That certainly won't help people who attach a high importance to autonomy.

Relatedness

This is our desire to be connected with people to whom we have a strong social connection ie, colleagues, friends and family. Many people are currently having this domain challenged, and those feelings of isolation - and that missed contact - are exacerbated by other manifestations of 'Relatedness'.

For example, Rock says that, "The ability to feel trust and empathy about others is shaped by whether they are perceived to be part of the same social group... When [a] new person is perceived as different, the information travels along neural pathways that are associated with uncomfortable feelings (different from the neural pathways triggered by people who are perceived as similar to oneself). Peop*le* who have started a new job or joined a new team have reported that it has been harder to build that dynamic and build that relationship with their new colleagues.

There are two generators of stress here; one for the new person and their feelings of alienation from the team; and one for the established team and the introduction of the new 'interloper'.

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Fairness

Rock writes that
"Managing unfairness generates a strong response in the [brain], stirring hostility and undermining trust...

In organisations, the perception of unfairness creates an environment in which trust and collaboration cannot flourish." The current environment is throwing up a number of communication challenges, particularly around the quality of communications, so if someone is feeling isolated and, for example finds out something through a colleague that they should have found out through their boss,
it could trigger a 'Fairness' related threat response.

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How does this apply in the context of remote working?

This is where the well-being needs of the individual sometimes clash with the (albeit well-intentioned) well-being approach of a company.

Are companies asking the right questions about how people are feeling? Are they properly listening to the answers?

Are they making assumptions or are they doing little more than putting content on the intranet?

Let's investigate just two current scenarios, based on stories from recent discussions with multiple people across a variety of different companies (sector, size and culture)

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Scenario 1

The diary is filled with calls – back-to-back with no gap – this is common now. We don't have to travel between meeting rooms or between offices, so people fill our diaries wherever they see a space. People have been seeing an increase in calls and reduction in diary space since lockdown 1.

Additionally, the company is aware that people feel isolated, so they try and connect them with pub quizzes and social calls. With a full daytime diary, the quizzes are in the evening and therefore lengthen the day (and the time on the phone/ conference calls) further.

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Scenario 2

The workforce is flooded with well-being information, advice, options and activities. Its coming from multiple sources and through multiple channels – daily emails, intranet, webcasts etc.

Although there can be benefits to this plethora of information (suggestions, competitions and conversations), one of the unintended consequences of this approach has been 'toxic productivity'.

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Toxic productivity

There are multiple definitions of toxic productivity, but in this context I am going to go with psychologist Dr Julie Smith –

"Toxic productivity is an obsession with radical self-improvement above all else. The result is that no matter how productive you are, you are always left with that guilty feeling of not having done more."

The issue here is that feeling like you never get enough done becomes a vicious cycle of overworking oneself. Uncoordinated and overwhelming attempts to target well-being, with no underpinning strategy, can do as much harm as they do good.

For every person filling their company intranet and their social media with the new languages they have learned, their new healthy lifestyle and their recently acquired baking skills, there are 10 people struggling to balance their work and home pressures (home schooling, partner working from home too, lack of quiet space, sporadic internet issues – you get the picture).

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Furthermore, one almost forgotten element in the lockdown period is the people who have simply been 'getting on with it'. While colleagues have changed their working patterns to accommodate these home challenges etc, many have carried on as they were.

One particular situation that was echoed multiple times was as follows

"Due to family requirements, one colleague was no longer working in the morning so they would work later into the evening. Another was starting early so they could finish early in the afternoon.

The person in the middle found there was an unintended consequence in that suddenly, their day been had elongated to accommodate these colleagues, who both expected to be able to interact with the team."

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Prolonged Adaptive Stress Syndrome (PASS)

Most leaders in business have been through some sort of psychometric profiling – Myers Briggs, Emergenetics, Game Changer Index etc. There are many different ways to communicate, gather information, make decisions, interact with colleagues and engage with others. One only needs a rudimentary understanding of these principals to understand that it's possible to work outside of one's normal preferences. However, there is a cost – it takes more energy, and it causes more stress.

Video conference fatigue (sometimes called Zoom fatigue but equally relevant to any video conferencing platform) is another great example of the energy sapping nature of prolonged remote working. Anyone who has had a 4-5 hour stint of back-to-back video calls (or delivered virtual training sessions), when you are trying to read people's body language from a 2x1cm image, when people don't **have** their cameras on, and when you know they're doing other tasks while you are running your meeting, will know just how exhausting it is.

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If you are energised by being in a group and by social interaction, and you have been working from home and seeing only the people in your bubble, then it doesn't mean you can't work from home. However, it does mean that the longer this has gone on, the more it may have sapped energy and impacted individual resilience. Some of the most **resilient** people I know are currently feeling the isolation more strongly than ever before.

If you require the comfort of a plan, of structured working and surety in your life, then the uncertainty of the last year could be a major drain on your energy and a significant cause of stress in your life.

If you need to complete tasks to be able to park them, and you're struggling with workload or balance, your boss saying "If it doesn't get done, it doesn't get done" is not helpful. In fact, it could be a major contributor to stress, as it was for the person who shared this example.

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The fix

So, what is the fix? How do we get this right for our people?

Strategize

First off all, you need a coordinated and cohesive well-being strategy. That strategy should allow for the different needs of individuals. Surveys can help with understanding the range of needs your people have - though once again, coordinate beforehand and don't bombard them with questionnaires (another common complaint.

The strategy should offer support on the following topics

Clear communication

So many problems in the workplace begin with poor communications. Have a single coherent line on well-being and a communications strategy that keeps people informed of well-being topics without making them feel that they are underachieving in their lives (toxic productivity)

Provide the right equipment for the job

Do people have the equipment and the work area they need to be productive for prolonged periods at home? Sitting on a bed for 8 hours or using the top of a chest of drawers as a desk (both real examples) will lead to back and neck problems and do not support productivity. This is still an issue for a surprising number of people I have spoken to recently – some 11 months into the remote working period

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Separate work and home life

- Offer support with times people can be logged on and off
- Creating a 'virtual commute' – such as taking the dog (or just yourself) for a walk before and after work. Even a physical and conscious environment change can help, such as taking your laptop out at the start of the day, and putting it away at the end of the day
- Talk about dress codes – some feel that 'dressing for work' as if in the office helps shift focus, and gives some demarcation between work and home
- Creating 'Teams free' zones in the diary when people can work but are not on calls

Help to avoid isolation

- Regular check-ins from managers. Not just work-related, but also checking in on individual well-being
- Peer / colleague mutual support plans
- Encouraging use of cameras where possible

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Support managers

- Ensure your managers have the tools needed to both support their people and recognise when someone is struggling

- Have a psychological 'first aid' policy so they know what to do when a problem becomes apparent, and who to get expert support from

- Managers need support too. The more senior they are, the more often they are forgotten, and everyone has a limit to their resilience, no matter how high it is – as they say in a pre-flight safety briefing, **'remember to put your mask on first before helping those around you'**

Manage workload

- Include call and meeting strategies, encourage good call disciplines around time keeping, and ensure healthy gaps between meetings

- Use the tools available through your work packages like planners, whiteboards etc to help stay in control. Focusing on things that are within your control can help to relieve stress and provide positive reinforcement

Manage diaries

- Diarise 'away from screen time' so it's blocked out

- Use the **50 minutes in 60** or **25 minutes in 30** meeting rule, so people have time to get a drink or have an 'admin break'

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Tools

There are some great tools out there that can help you understand your people, and track how they are doing.

As an example, many companies are using the **Game Changer Index©** to understand their people, and to ensure that the way they are currently working suits their natural proclivities.

Beaconforce have a fantastic behavioural science-based app which tracks, on a daily basis, how people are feeling, and spots not only when stress levels are increasing, but also the parameters contributing to that increase.
Early adopters of these strategies and tools are reporting a positive impact and an enhanced ability to deal with potential issues much more quickly.

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Conclusion

If we implement these strategies now, and the mental well-being concerns discussed here are not realised, this is still a positive.

You have a better connected and disciplined culture that respects people's time, and their need for work / life separation. Your people are **happier, more comfortable, more engaged and more productive**. Sickness and attrition rates drop, and you gain a reputation for having a culture that respects psychological safety and encourages talent.

Ignore it, and we face the potential for inefficiency, reduced output, customer reputational damage, and financial loss. Individuals who feel they've not been supported in the right way may turn to litigation because we have ignored, or superficially addressed, our duty of care to our people.

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About the author

A senior operations leader, coach and facilitator with a wealth of experience training and mentoring in a wide range of sectors. A passion for developing people to achieve their potential.

Mark is the MD responsible for Gobeyond Partners' rapidly growing Organisational Excellence practice. Specialising in the psychology of high performing teams, Mark has global experience of coaching senior executives and managers in operational excellence. A Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, he is passionate about helping people realise their full potential, and helping senior leaders get the best from their teams.

He has trained over 6000 people in locations all over the World; from Egypt to the USA, Singapore to Romania, as well as the UK. He has significant experience in financial services, utilities, transport, and telecoms.

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About
Gobeyond Partners

Customer behaviour is changing. But many organisations are not keeping pace.

With legacy systems, cost pressures, and agile new competitors, businesses need to think differently about the way they look at things.

Gobeyond Partners is a new type of consulting firm that partners with you to solve complex customer journey challenges.

By combining deep sector expertise with an award-winning approach to client service and value, we bring your transformation vision to life.

As part of the Webhelp group, our people understand what it takes to deliver great customer experience. This means we connect design and transformation with the real world, working alongside your people to embed lasting change.

Our customer journey view is broader and deeper, so we help you break down organisational silos and deliver a fully connected omnichannel experience.

Every client and engagement counts, and every objective is guaranteed.