

Gartner for HR

Support Well-Being in 2021 and Beyond

Human Resources Research Team

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Organizations' emergency actions to help employees through the pandemic include meditation groups and paid time off for eldercare, but the suffering continues. Total rewards leaders should sustain new offerings, personalize support and equip the enterprise to engage in uncomfortable conversations.

The need for well-being support has skyrocketed since the pandemic struck, giving organizations a new mandate to offer more and better programs. Organizations must respond to *all* facets of the individual, from the physical to the emotional, and address some of the new burdens that emerged over the past year, such as homeschooling.

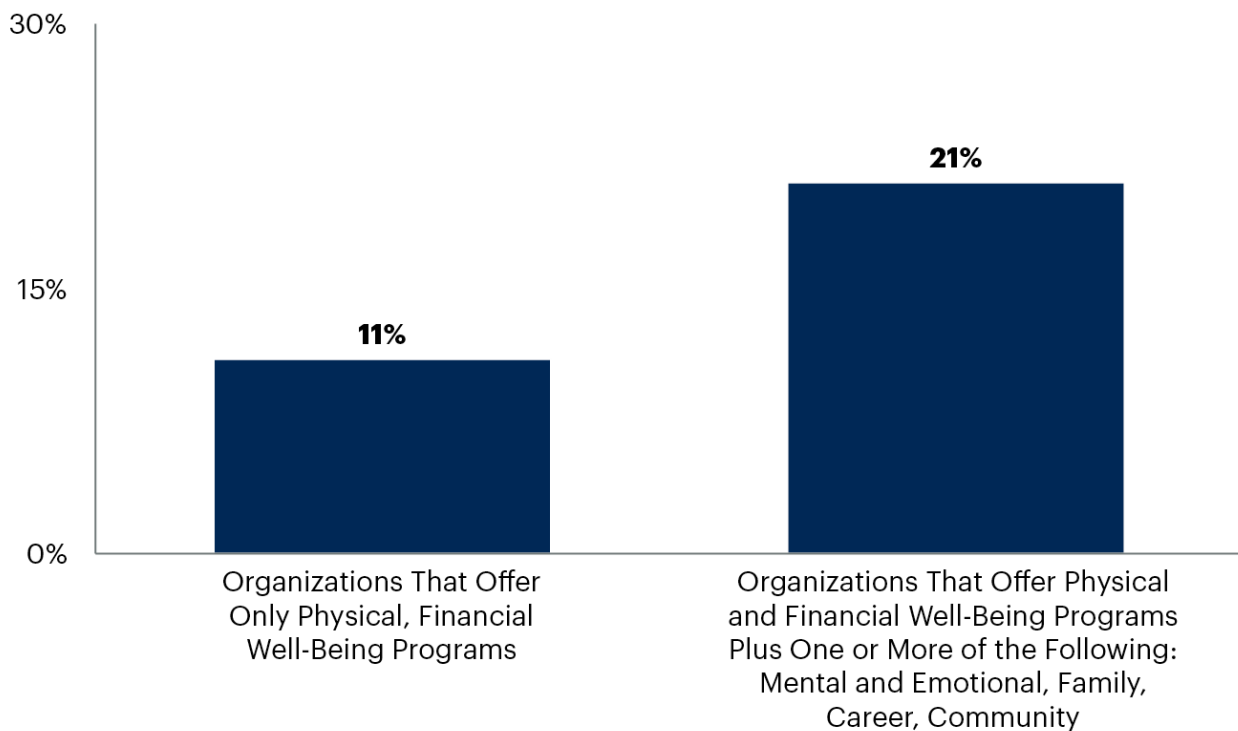
While employees maintained productivity in the crisis year of 2020, even as they worked from home and juggled new demands, the grueling circumstances took a toll. Over a quarter of the workforce (29%) described itself as depressed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. HR leaders also tell us that after many months of restrictions on daily life, employees are joining COVID-19-specific webinars by the thousands, attending support groups for depression, anxiety and grief counseling in record numbers and discussing topics such as domestic violence and suicide prevention. Of employees who report their organization offers a mental well-being program, nearly half (49%) participated in 2020. For financial well-being, it is almost two-thirds (62%).

Helping employees manage all aspects of their health during turbulent times is not just the right thing to do, it's also good for business. Providing holistic well-being support can boost discretionary effort by 21%, twice as much as companies that provide traditional (physical and financial) programs alone (see Figure 1). As many employees brace for a prolonged period of stress, don't risk a decline in discretionary effort at the very time your enterprise needs productive employees the most.

Figure 1: Impact of Well-Being Categories on Discretionary Effort

Impact of Well-Being Categories on Discretionary Effort

Percentage Difference Compared to When No Well-Being Programs Are Offered



n = 5,055

Source: 2020 Gartner Well-Being Employee Survey
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However, providing well-being support that works in 2021 and beyond requires addressing three challenges identified through conversations with over three dozen HR leaders (see Table 1). Progressive organizations are addressing them by:

- Committing to help employees cope with emerging and exacerbated stress factors even after the pandemic ebbs.
- Personalizing support to meet varied employee needs.
- Establishing programs, processes and guidance that enable discussion of uncomfortable topics.

Table 1: Fulfilling the New Well-Being Mandate

Challenges HR Leaders Must Overcome*	Action	Why It Works
Employees have new and intensified needs.	Commit to help employees cope with emerging and exacerbated stress factors even after the pandemic ebbs.	When the pandemic ends, new and intensified needs will not disappear, so continued help will be necessary and providing it boosts talent outcomes.
Employees have a greater variety of needs.	Personalize support to meet varied employee needs.	The more varied the needs, the more personalization becomes essential, or else needs can go unmet.
The pace of disruptions is increasing.	Establish programs, processes and guidance to enable discussion of uncomfortable topics.	It builds employee resilience and allows the organization to respond more swiftly when disruption occurs.
* Challenges, actions and justifications identified based on dozens of conversations with HR leaders.		

Source: Gartner

Commit to Help Employees Cope With Emerging and Exacerbated Stress Factors Even After the Pandemic Ebbs

In response to challenges exacerbated by the pandemic (e.g., suffering from anxiety) or generated (e.g., homeschooling), most organizations took emergency measures to support their staff. For example:

- Sixty-four percent of companies offered a new well-being benefit in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; 85% introduced additional mental health support.
- Eighty-seven percent of businesses provided flexible work hours to employees taking care of children or parents.
- Twenty-six percent gave employees paid time off (PTO) for child care and 21% gave PTO for eldercare.
- Eighteen percent reimbursed childcare expenses.

Mastercard, a U.S.-based multinational financial services corporation, even let employees enroll their children in a free online summer camp to support families when school was not in session.

This type of assistance is crucial because 59% of employees report they have primary caretaking responsibilities for children during the pandemic, and 31% are taking care of adult family members.

Only 27% of organizations report that they plan to maintain the programs introduced during the pandemic for the foreseeable future.⁵ The rest should consider sustaining these programs beyond the pandemic because the hit to household finances and lingering stress will persist even after the outbreak subsides.

Personalize Support to Meet Varied Employee Needs

A working parent trying to manage homeschooling on top of a job has different needs than those of a single employee who is feeling lonely. But less than half of employees (46%) agree their organization's well-being programs are personalized. Organizations can take specific steps to achieve alignment between support and demand.

Offer More Choice

Establish a range of options to address a single issue (e.g., stress) so employees can choose the one that best suits them. Currently, only 19% of employees working for organizations with mental well-being programs report having access to five or more offerings.

Solutions need not be high cost. What's important is that they require different levels of effort to use, appealing to employees with varying amounts of time, energy and motivation.

For instance, to alleviate anxiety, selections might include:

- Meditation guides
- Support groups
- Emotional encouragement peers (employees who volunteer to explain available mental health support options or discuss the state of a colleague's emotional health)
- Employee assistance programs, which provide professional counseling services

Provide Tailored Guidance

Give employees the tools to navigate challenging moments on their own and at the right moment. For example, Red Bull, an Austria-based energy drink manufacturer, uses a roller coaster analogy to share the common emotional stages people experience during times of change and gives examples of what each one might feel like for employees with and without children (see Figure 2). The company also provides suggestions on how to avoid pitfalls while navigating each phase (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Red Bull's Change Curve and Example Curve (Parents and Nonparents)

Red Bull's Change Curve

THE EMOTIONAL STAGES AREN'T LINEAR AND MAY NOT HAPPEN IN THE SAME ORDER (WE'RE INDIVIDUALS, AFTER ALL), BUT THEY TEND TO FOLLOW A SIMILAR CURVE:



Change Curve Examples (Parent and Non-Parent)

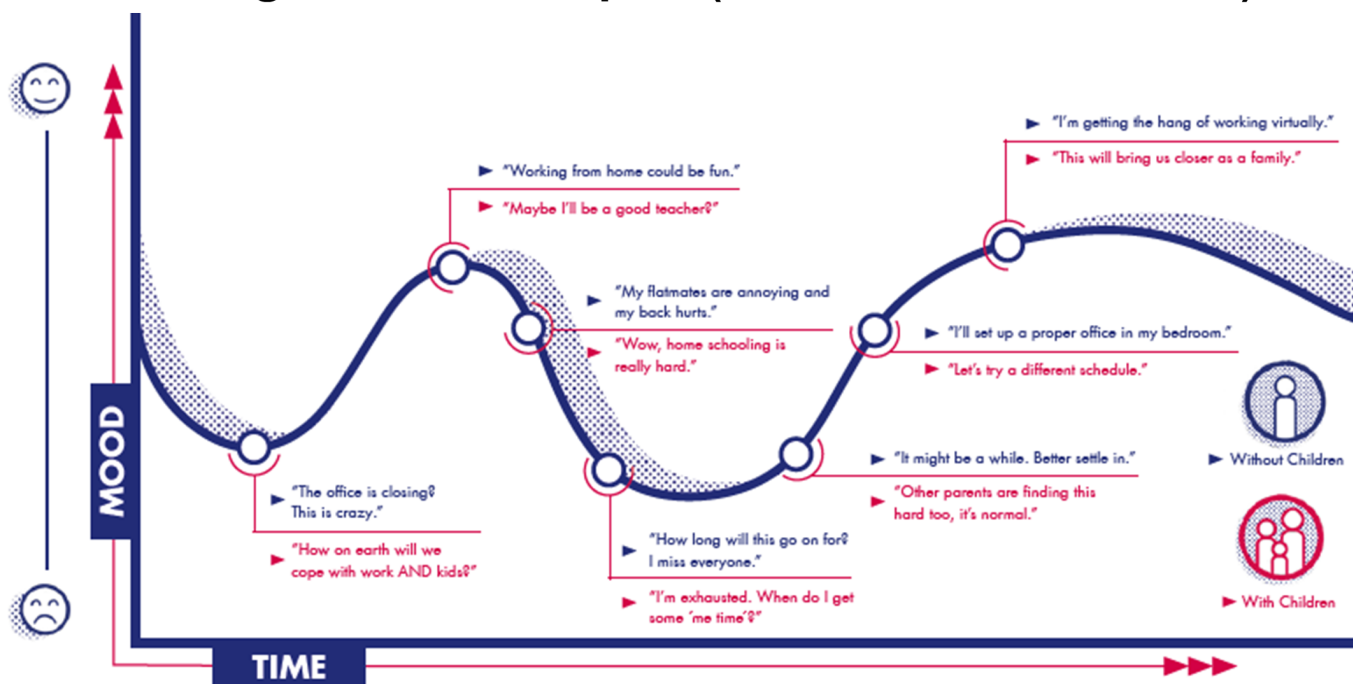


Figure 3: Red Bull's Suggestions for Avoiding Common Pitfalls

COMMON PITFALLS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM	
PITFALL	HOW TO AVOID
<p>1 GETTING STUCK IN 'DENIAL' Burying your head in the sand is comfortable but doesn't help you to get through the curve.</p>	<p>FIND TRUSTED SOURCES to inform yourself about what is going on.</p> <p>RECOGNISE THE IMPACT of the change on others around you.</p> <p>PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR FEELINGS, and allow them to bubble up – even the difficult ones.</p>
<p>2 FEELING LIKE YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN "Everyone else is fine, I'm the only one finding this hard".</p>	<p>REACH OUT FOR SUPPORT when you need it, and offer it to others.</p> <p>SCHEDULE VIRTUAL RED BULL BREAKS to have social chats with team members and ask how they are.</p>
<p>3 EXPECTING EVERYONE TO FEEL THE SAME AS YOU Especially when you're adapting more easily than others.</p>	<p>Understand that EVERYONE HAS DIFFERENT PERSONAL IMPACTS and responses to change. As the situation continues to unfold, reality bites and can send people back into the dip.</p> <p>Instead of judging or trying to turn negatives into positives, JUST LISTEN. All of us might need to vent at times, and that's ok.</p>
<p>4 GETTING STUCK AT THE LOW POINT Unable to accept the change or adapt to the new situation.</p>	<p>Work out WHAT YOU MISS THE MOST (e.g. alone time) and find small ways to build that into your day.</p> <p>FOCUS ON THE NEXT STEP, rather than the mountain you're climbing.</p> <p>EMBRACE A 'GROWTH MINDSET' and look for the learning opportunities e.g. now is the time to master virtual meetings.</p> <p>Accept that SOME THINGS JUST SUCK, and there are no upsides. Give yourself time to mourn what's lost.</p> <p>FOCUS OUTSIDE YOURSELF. ASK QUESTIONS LIKE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does this new situation require? • Who needs support? • How can I contribute? • How can I best help the business?

Source: Red Bull

At Mashreq, a bank based in the United Arab Emirates, employees are encouraged to self-assess their well-being across six dimensions. The results inform a development plan they are expected to create to hold themselves accountable for their wellness and take advantage of the offerings the organization provides them. Some employees focus on the areas where they scored low, others choose to continue strengthening their top areas and others do a little bit of both.

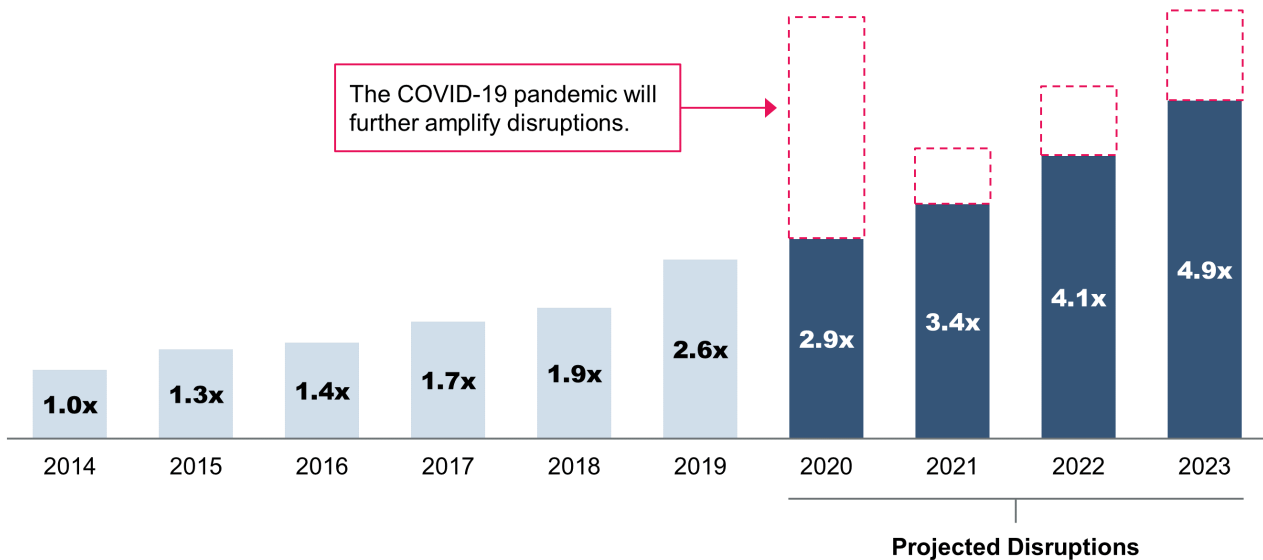
Establish Programs, Processes and Guidance to Enable Discussion of Uncomfortable Topics

While 2020 is an anomaly, disruptions are increasingly common, which means organizations will more often experience the emergence of uncomfortable topics that have a direct impact on employee well-being (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Organizations Grappling With Unprecedented Disruption

Organizations Grappling With Unprecedented Disruption

Annual Growth of Business Disruptions
 Number of Business Disruptions, Indexed to 2014



n = 1,996 Forbes 2000 companies

Source: Gartner analysis of Capital IQ data

Note: The business disruptions measured here are executive leadership turnover, mergers and acquisitions, and international expansions.

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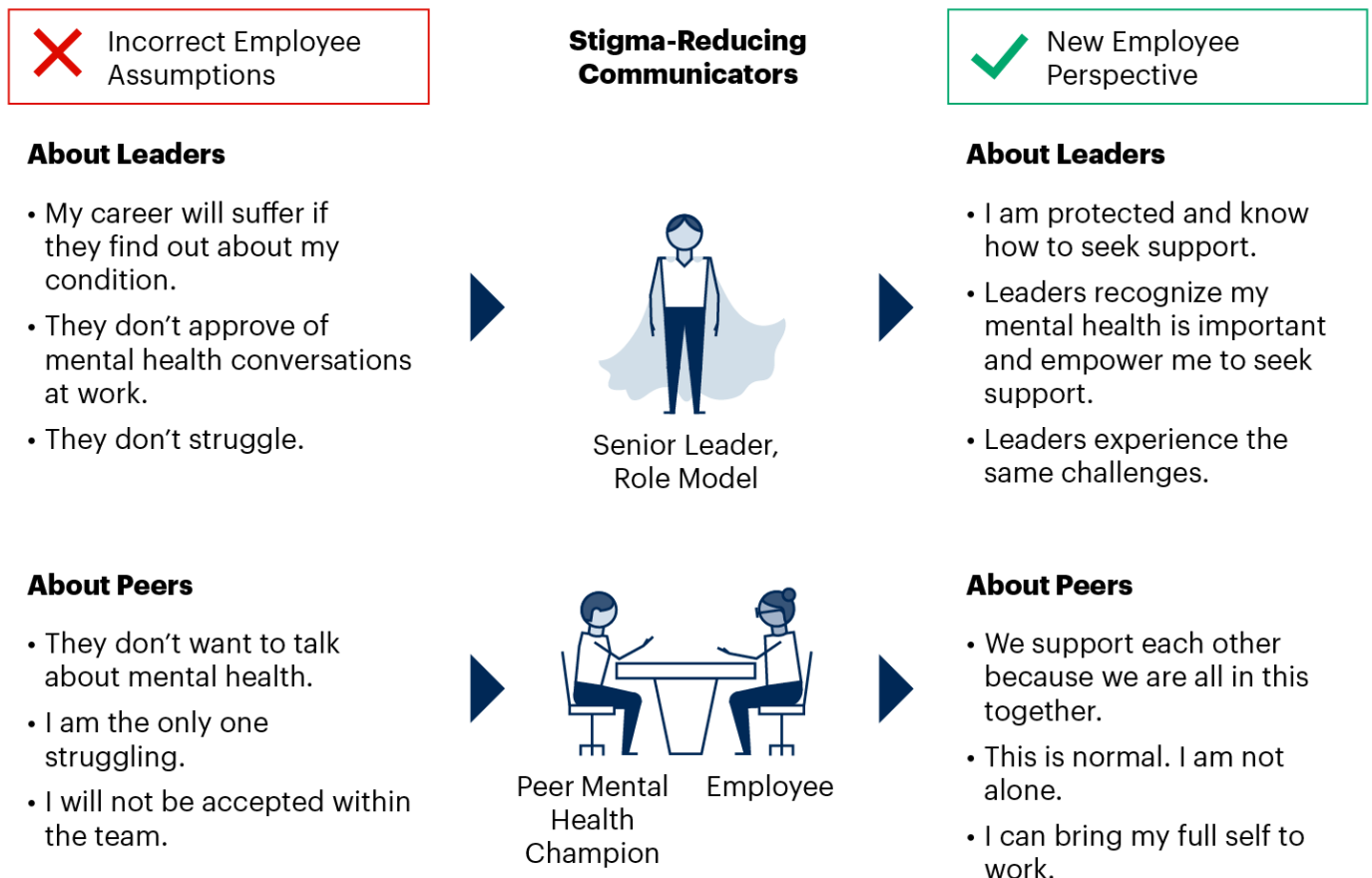
Rather than wait, organizations need to establish programs, processes and guidance in advance of whatever unexpected event comes next. These efforts should empower – but not force – employees to discuss subjects they may otherwise be nervous to bring up, either because they perceive the topic as being historically stigmatized, contentious, too personal or a mix of all three.

Establish Programs to Encourage Talking About Historically Stigmatized Subjects

At Genentech, a member of the Roche Group, leaders reduce stigma by sharing their own mental health challenges, while employee mental health champions guide the conversation and direct employees to the appropriate resources (see Figure 5). HR at the pharmaceutical company gives the champions clear instructions on which conversation topics are appropriate and which ones should be held in a clinical setting, to make them safe and productive. The combination of senior and peer communication with some HR oversight has brought more comfort to conversations about mental health at Genentech and Roche in the U.S.

Figure 5: Employee Experience of Multilevel, Stigma-Reducing Communicators

Employee Experience of Multilevel, Stigma-Reducing Communicators



Source: Adapted From Genentech
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Create Processes That Allow Employees to Easily Resolve Conflict

Western Health, a medical provider based in Australia, provides a lower-stakes alternative in addition to the formal complaint process for reporting and resolving tensions. Employees have a choice: they can turn to friendly volunteers if they are intimidated by organizational representatives. Volunteers then facilitate resolutions between employees. The entire process is “no blame,” and either party can opt out at any time. It is important to note that this process was developed by employment lawyers, who also provided the training for the volunteers. Thus, it was designed to protect the interest of all stakeholders. Since the program’s inception, perceived instances of discrimination have declined 25%, according to Western Health HR leaders.

Prepare Managers to Have Conversations About Personal Topics With Employees

At one organization in the services industry, HR provides easy-to-understand information (i.e., do’s and don’ts, conversation guides) that defines the level of involvement managers are expected to have when supporting their employees with mental and emotional health issues. This information is important

because only about half of employees (49%) agree their manager understands their problems and needs.

When creating mechanisms, processes and guidance to discuss historically stigmatized or personal topics, organizations must decide what balance they want to strike between needs and employee privacy. There is no one best place to draw that line, but organizations should be consistent and transparent with employees about the policy and make sure it is legally sound.

by [Ben Szuhaj](#) and [Carolina Valencia](#)

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