

Navigating the New Normal:

A COVID-19 Supplement to CAMH's Mental Health Playbook for Business Leaders

Tips and Strategies for Workplace Mental
Health During and After COVID-19

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To download CAMH’s Mental Health Playbook for Business Leaders, visit camh.ca/workplacementalhealth.

A Message from Deborah Gillis

Leading with Mental Health in Mind—During and After COVID-19



The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way the world works. In these unprecedented times, business has become anything but “usual.” As we navigate the “new normal” of work, one thing remains clear: Employee mental health is still one of the most important issues facing workplaces today.

Prior to the pandemic, we were already in the midst of a mental health crisis. In any given year, one in five Canadians experiences a mental illness, including addiction. Now, new data from Angus Reid Institute shows us mental health has become even more precarious. Half of Canadians report a worsening of their mental health, with one in ten saying it has worsened “a lot.”¹

Now more than ever, Canadian employers have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to lead with mental health in mind. Earlier this year, we released [CAMH's Mental Health Playbook for Business Leaders](#) to provide a path to more effective solutions and better outcomes for employees and businesses. The Playbook's five powerful recommendations, which are based on the best available evidence and were shaped by feedback from business leaders, as well as CAMH researchers, clinicians and experts, include:

- Create a long-term organization-wide mental health strategy
- Institute mandatory mental health training for leadership
- Develop tailored mental health supports
- Prioritize and optimize your return-to-work process checklist
- Track your progress

Even in the midst of the pandemic, business leaders can rely on this resource as they build mentally healthy workplaces where everyone can reach their full potential.

As we look toward the future of work, it's likely that most of us have more questions than answers. But we want business leaders to know CAMH is here for you. We've developed this new, pandemic-specific supplemental resource—designed to work hand-in-hand with the existing Playbook—to help you support your employees' mental health through this time and beyond.

Over the past few months, I've asked my team to focus on “progress over perfection.” We are all doing the best we can and some days will be better than others. That's what I'm asking of business leaders, too. I urge you to do your best to take care of your employees' mental health by communicating with transparency, acting with compassion and leading by example. It won't always be perfect, but I promise you, it will always be worth it.

Deborah Gillis

President & CEO, CAMH Foundation

The Mental Health Impact of COVID-19

The Mental Health Index by Morneau Shepell puts a spotlight on the impact of COVID-19 in Canada and around the world:

96.2%

of Canadians have experienced some level of personal disruption due to COVID-19.²

-12

A statistically significant decrease in Canadians' overall mental health, when compared to pre-COVID-19 benchmarks.²

The Mental Health Index Score



80%

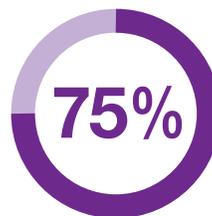
of Canadians indicate the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health.³

COMPARED TO



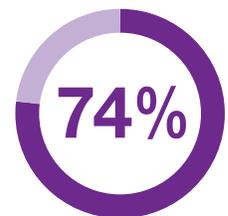
81%

IN AUSTRALIA



75%

IN THE UNITED STATES



74%

IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

For Canadians, the most prevalent pandemic concern is finances.²

54.8%

say financial stress has impacted their mental health.

27.4%

indicate finances are the single greatest concern impacting their mental health.

A COVID-19 Checklist for Business Leaders

How business leaders can support the psychological health and safety of employees during and after the pandemic:



Update and evolve your workplace mental health strategy, with particular focus on inclusivity. Tailor mental health programs to your employees' unique contexts. New research from CAMH and Delvinia shows those who have switched to working from home are more likely to have moderate to severe anxiety levels compared to other groups.⁴ Think about how your employees will access your programs in a way that works best for them.



Ensure your mandatory mental health training for leadership includes resiliency workshops. Be sure to provide opportunities for employees to develop their own skills. Mentally healthy organizations are resilient organizations—business leaders and employees alike need to be ready to deal with new and existing challenges in a constructive way.



Review your organization's benefits plan and consider including Internet-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (iCBT) coverage and access. While iCBT is still being studied, we do know that every dollar invested in conventional workplace CBT programs could return about \$1.79 per participating employee after one year. As virtual health becomes more widespread, employers who commit to providing iCBT may not only see a return on their investment, but most importantly, help employees get safe, flexible and quality care.



Put the right people and systems in place to help employees feel supported—whether remotely or in their return to the office. Business leaders don't always have all the answers, and that's okay. It's important to rely on strong human resources professionals, who are trained in mental health and wellness and take a systems approach, to help guide you and your employees through this process.



Update, track and monitor KPIs. We are in uncharted territory and most business leaders are not entirely sure what success looks like in the time of the pandemic. But we can measure progress by relying on indicators like absenteeism, presenteeism, and successful return to the office, as well as the use of short- and long-term disability, and Rol on mental health supports.

Clarity is Compassion

Effective business leadership and compassion are not mutually exclusive. In fact, research shows that cultivating compassion creates positive work relationships and increases positive emotions in the workplace.⁵ It starts with business leaders having self-compassion. Leaders are expected to make difficult decisions that have significant impacts on people's lives every day—paying attention to your own mental health and practicing self-compassion will help you be more compassionate toward your employees.

With each passing day, we are being inundated with new, sometimes conflicting, information about COVID-19. Employees are not likely processing information—whether from the workplace or from the news—in the way they normally would. Being clear is one of the easiest—and most compassionate—ways to support your team.



Succinctly communicate what you know and don't speculate on things you do not know. Keep your messages concise and actionable.

Walmart published its 6-20-100 guidance: Stand six feet away to maintain a safe physical distance, take 20 seconds for good hand washing, consider a body temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit the signal to stay home from public activity.⁶

Be consistent and do not underestimate how frequently your messages should be reinforced.

In a health crisis, repetition becomes even more critical: One study showed that an audience needs to hear a health-risk-related message nine to 21 times to maximize its perception of that risk.⁷ For example, following a virtual meeting, circulate your key points to account for employees who are balancing other priorities at home or those may feel too overwhelmed to retain information.

Plan for early and regular check-ins with employees to provide clarity on expectations and plans.

The return to the office is a process and not a singular event. We have all experienced the pandemic differently and each employee has unique circumstances and concerns. Pragmatic challenges such as child care, elder care, personal vulnerability for those with health considerations and commutes, as well as general anxiety about the virus, will all play a role in how people feel about returning to the office. Supporting employees with compassion and flexibility will bridge the transition process and help them feel more comfortable.



Communicating with clarity is leading with compassion

In a time of stress and anxiety, business leaders can help employees feel more at ease by providing clear, concise and consistent information. Remind your employees that the plans you are making today are based on the most up-to-date information. Be prepared to make adjustments as new knowledge, data or best practices become available. **Continued commitment to clarity will ensure that everyone feels informed, included and supported as things evolve.**



When it comes to clear communication, business leaders should engage middle management early and often. Most employees have a direct line to their manager, and not always to senior leadership. Leaders and middle management must be on the same page, delivering the same message. Inconsistent communication between these levels has the potential to greatly increase stress for employees.

“Like all facets of mental health, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for the stresses caused by COVID-19. Organizations should look at accommodations for various scenarios, including those who have a compromised immune system or those who live with someone who does. Some people may feel some unique stresses and be particularly concerned about what may be perceived as a too early return to the workplace. Most of all, equity and clear process are crucial.”

– Dr. Sean Kidd, Chief, Psychology Division and Senior Scientist, CAMH

COVID-19 CASE STUDY

Working for Mental Health: BMO

When the pandemic took hold across the globe in March, BMO mobilized to protect our teams, customers and bank.

Mobilizing and responding to support employees and customers

Banking is a core service for Canadians and BMO remained open to support our customers. We prioritized the health and safety of employees and customers by managing our branch footprint and employee capacity at call centres and offices to ensure a safe two-metre distance.

Many teams moved quickly to work entirely remotely, with 30,000 employees switching to alternative work locations. During this time, many employees were facing increased responsibility at work and home, caring for children out of school and daycare, while also experiencing heightened anxieties and stress due to the pandemic. Our customer-facing employees were also tasked with supporting customers during one of the most difficult financial times in history. We recognized mental health support would be critical for employees and their families, and knew we needed to act with thoughtfulness and speed.



In addition to the many employee mental health support strategies already in place, we provided an increased level of outreach and resources.

- We hosted medical and mental health Q&A sessions. These calls—which had over 15,000 employees registered to attend—featured medical doctors and mental health professionals who provided information, tips and answers to questions on various topics, with a specific series focused solely on supporting parents and caregivers.
- We ensured that employees were well informed and supported through a variety of programs to support mental health through BMO's benefits coverage and Employee Assistance Program (EAP). We also launched new software to support remote employees with enhanced technology to stay connected (including video).
- We developed and distributed a fulsome guide to help managers lead through change. This guide was updated to help them address any concerns around economic re-opening.
- We emphasized flexibility, ensuring employees received full manager support to adjust their working schedules and address concerns where possible.
- We shared information on a dedicated COVID-19 Response Hub, Wellness Bursts focused on breathing, meditation, stretching, resiliency and parenting, and a BMO-U learning pathway specifically focused on well-being including tips on resilience, and supported mental, physical and emotional health.
- We launched an email inbox for employees to submit questions about working during COVID-19 (on policies, their workspace, protecting their families, well-being tips, etc.). We gave employees and their families access to a healthcare app to connect with physicians and nurse practitioners instantly via text and video chat without an appointment.
- We conducted bank-wide anonymous surveys that polled employees on their experience and engagement (whether they were working from the office or from home), specific needs and areas of concern.

Amplifying our mental health support in May

We developed a robust outreach plan for employees that included a series of articles, tips, resources and advice focused on meditation, physical activity, stretching, breathing and honing resiliency, along with advice for detecting individual and others' mental health changes.

During Mental Health Week (Canada) and Month (U.S.) we continued our efforts to encourage conversation and connection, sharing personal journeys from across the organization and holding a virtual event with BMO's benefits provider to discuss resiliency tips and available employee programs that had nearly 1,000 employees register to attend. Our intranet portal messages shared during this month attained a combined 50,000 views. Communications were also shared that encouraged employees to take their allotted paid vacation time: even though travel plans may have changed, they are encouraged to take scheduled time away from the office to reset, recharge and relax.

BMO was also the title sponsor of the first Never Dance Alone-a-Thon to support Kids Help Phone, which encouraged employees to fundraise and share a video of them dancing in support of mental health awareness and action.

As we look to the future

We know that we will be operating in a 'COVID-19 world' over the medium- to long-term, and we will continue to prioritize the health and safety of our employees, including a focus on supporting their mental health. This will include ensuring that we continue to enable employees to stay connected with remote team members and customers, and amplifying and enhancing our mental health programs.



Authenticity Above All Else

The pandemic has revealed, among many other things, our shared humanity. At every level of every business, people are feeling uncertainty, stress and anxiety, both personally and professionally. Right now, we need business leaders to be Normalizers-in-Chief. Role model behaviours that you hope to see from your employees. Be open and honest about your experiences in a way that is true to who you are. Your vulnerability and courage will inspire your employees to follow your lead.

Be Helpful

Many people respond to crises by trying to be of service to others. Business leaders can help employees by checking in on them periodically. Ask them how they're doing at work and outside of it. Employees thrive in environments where employers show they care—it is critical not only to work performance but also to mental and emotional well-being. If one of your employees is struggling, do your best to connect them with appropriate and available mental health supports and resources provided by your organization. Keep in mind that, with many employees working remotely, your mental health strategy and programs may need to be updated so they can be accessed by those who need them.

Be Understanding

Business leaders can support employees during this time by understanding that everyone has different needs and circumstances, while remaining flexible and accommodating. Employees are more than their jobs. Like you, they are people with vibrant and full lives outside of the office. Respecting work-life boundaries and recognizing that everyone has competing priorities is an act of kindness. While working remotely, employees might be available at off-hours because they are homeschooling their children during the day, and those returning to the office might show up later than usual because they want to avoid public transit. Do your best to put yourself in their shoes—it will go a long way in building a culture of trust in your workplace.

Be Grateful

Right now, our teams are physically distant, but in many ways, business leaders can help create more meaningful relationships with employees through this experience. As you and your employees get used to new ways of working and overcoming challenges, you should take every opportunity to thank them for their efforts. Seemingly small gestures like a “thank you” can have a big impact on someone's day or week.

Employees are at their best when they feel free to bring their whole selves to work. Even in the most mentally healthy workplaces, that level of comfort may need to be rediscovered as organizations get used to new ways of working. **But no matter what, it starts with business leaders setting the tone from the top—and doing it in a way that is authentic and true to their values and the values of the organization.**





The intersectionality of mental health and other dimensions of diversity should be top of mind as employers strive to create safe, inclusive workplaces during and after COVID-19. Business leaders and employees must work together to expose and address stigma and discrimination—such as “COVID-shaming”—if someone contracts the virus in their workplace.

“Recognize that the pandemic has affected everyone differently. Some may have experienced unresolved grief over the loss of a loved one; others may have marital discord; others might be experiencing a worsening of their mental illness due to the stress. Making sure that everyone knows that a variety of reactions are possible at the workplace is paramount—we must ensure to normalize, and not stigmatize, these reactions.”

– Dr. Peter Selby, Senior Medical Consultant and Clinician Scientist, CAMH

What are signs an employee is in distress?

Like physical illnesses, mental illnesses present differently. Observable signs that seem out of character or noticeably more obvious, including absenteeism, missed deadlines or unexplained absences could be cause for concern. Withdrawing from others or communicating excess worry and fear could also signal an employee is struggling. Business leaders should keep in mind that these signs can have a variety of causes, and above all else, they should be there to listen and help employees connect with the appropriate supports and services.

COVID-19 CASE STUDY

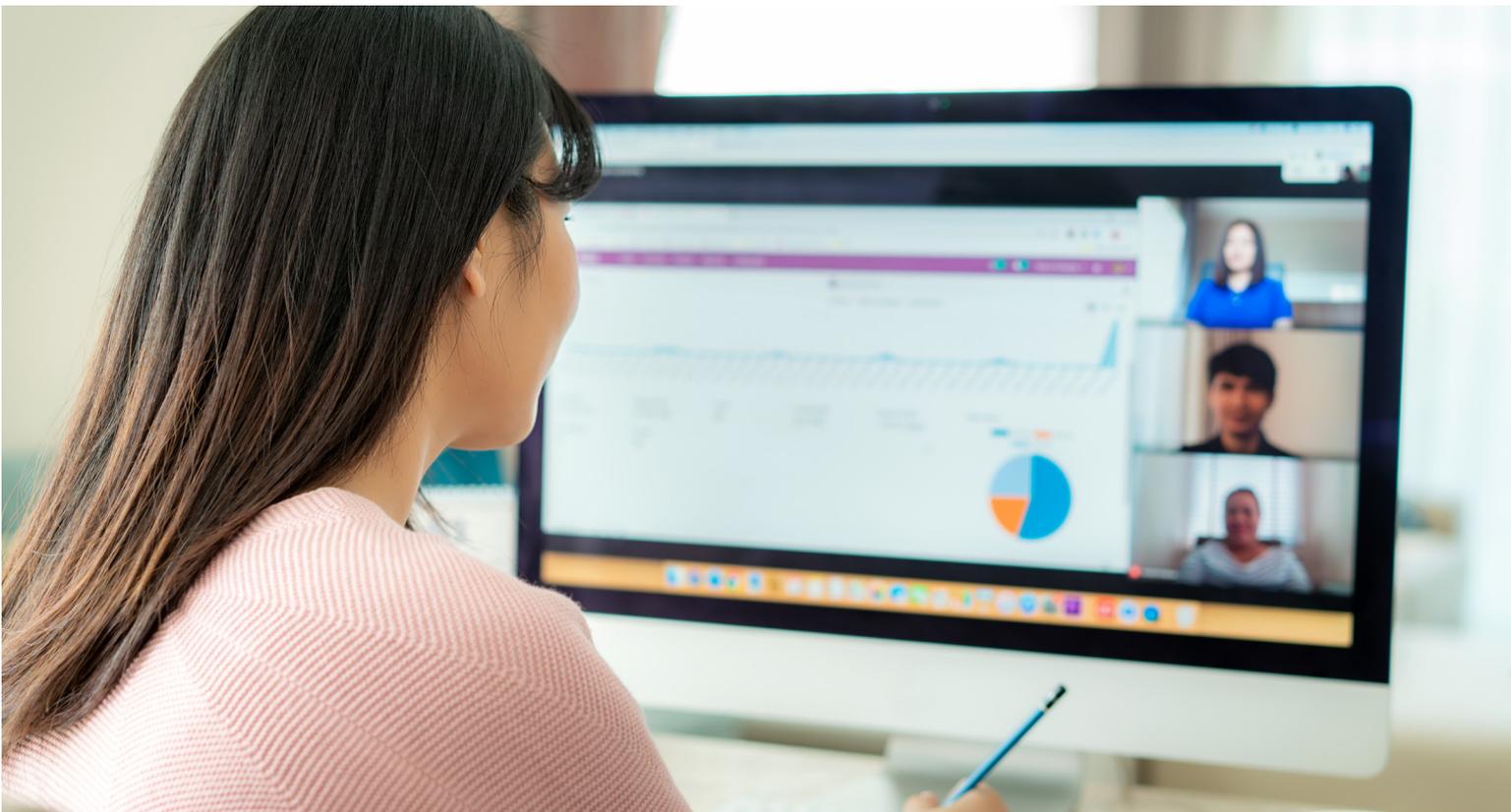
Working for Mental Health: Cisco

The pandemic we've been facing has meant dramatic change for everyone. Nobody went to bed one night in March expecting to wake up the next morning to a virtual world. But here we are. And with thousands of employees across Canada migrating to remote work, students moving to on-line classrooms and hospitals preparing for unprecedented demand—there was no question that our new reality would lead to issues around mental health. We needed to immediately prioritize the safety and well-being of our employees, and act to help those around us.

At Cisco, it meant putting people first—including by relying more deeply on our own Webex technology to keep our teams connected and supported with secure videoconferencing.

It's also meant stepping up to the plate and investing huge efforts in supporting our customers and partners, communities and employees in crucial new ways. We've been very proud of our work helping organizations across the country to stay up and running and to adjust to the new reality using technology—including CAMH, Food Banks Canada, and Kids Help Phone to name just a few.

We've all had to adapt. We're inviting people into our homes on a regular basis over video calls, adjusting meeting times so that we can care for young kids or elderly parents who are sharing space with us, and coping with the fact that, because of our overlapping work and personal lives, our patterns of human entanglement have been completely altered. For some, their situations might be isolating—and for others, it might be overwhelming.



To manage all of that, we've made virtual employee check-ins with small and big teams a regular part of our work. They've been crucial forums to collect important feedback about operational changes we've had to make, to get a pulse on individuals' morale, answer questions, deliver reassurance and ensure employees spread out across the country are staying connected and informed.

We've also ensured all Cisco Canada employees were reminded of the comprehensive and unlimited mental health resources available to them, and shared clear instructions on how to access them.

Finally, Cisco's global leadership also took a key step to lean in and support our team members. In late May, our global CEO, Chuck Robbins, announced that every employee across the entire organization would be getting a day off—officially called “Me Day.” It was done in recognition of the enormous amount of work that's been tackled, and the need to ensure employees would all have the opportunity to clear their heads, catch their breath and recharge their batteries.

We're in a new normal. And we will likely be here for many months to come. At Cisco Canada, we'll continue to focus on staying close to our people, our customers and partners, and our communities. We'll continue to learn from our experience so we can share it with others—and use those lessons to inform a better way forward.

We have an opportunity in Canada to re-imagine the way we work, learn, support and engage with each other. We need to understand and embrace that—because while this has been a difficult period for so many, it can lead to great innovation that will move us all forward.



– Rola Dagher, President and CEO,
Cisco Canada

Respond with Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new stresses when it comes to our professional lives: uncertainty about working remotely, anxiety about workplace safety and difficulty managing work-life balance, to name a few. Although we did not choose to be in this situation, we can choose how to respond. Business leaders can show employees the way by responding with resilience.

Resilience is the ability to adapt or recover in the face of adversity—and it's a skill that is built over time. As COVID-19 continues to change the way we work, it's more important than ever to help your employees build resilience skills to effectively navigate the workplace during and after the pandemic.

Resilience is a proactive strategy

In the best of times, workplace stress is inevitable. In the age of COVID-19, work-related stress will likely become even more acute. Business leaders should acknowledge potential stressors and how employees will perceive them. For example, employees returning to work in an office environment may feel anxious about proximity to their colleagues. Employees who are supported, motivated and prepared are best positioned to deal with stress and overcome obstacles.

Resilience thrives on relationships

Some of the most resilient employees have strong relationships with their colleagues.⁸ They are able to rely on these connections for guidance or support during times of stress. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees have likely turned to their most trusted colleagues in difficult moments. Encourage these connections by cultivating compassion and respect in the workplace, and allowing cooperation and collaboration to flourish. Whether your team is working remotely or in the office, think about creative ways you can foster social cohesion and camaraderie, while adhering to public health guidelines. Business leaders should also reach out to their peers in their own sector or across different ones. It's important to have a network of people who are experiencing the same challenges so we can learn from each other.

Resilience is an ongoing process—and a good investment

Resilience is not about avoiding stress—it's about learning how to deal with it. In stressful situations, people often underestimate how well they will be able to manage. Most employees already have coping skills they use every day. As with any skill, resilience increases with experience and education. Resilience training provides a good return on investment; a study by PwC showed that initiatives and programs that fostered a resilient workplace returned \$2.30 for every dollar spent.⁹ Businesses are strongly encouraged to invest in mandatory mental health training for leadership, including sessions focused on resilience, and to provide opportunities for employees to participate and develop awareness and understanding.

What can we learn from past crises?

In a study of people affected by the 2011 Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand, the return to work was noted to be a positive factor in recovery, helping to rebuild normality after a tragic event. Social and emotional support in the workplace facilitated successful return to work, as did early engagement by employers.¹⁰

After 9/11, workplaces noted an urgent need for mental health response capability, as unaddressed emotional distress could have significant effects on both productivity and morale. In one study, managers felt ill-prepared to manage the intensity of employees' emotional responses. Rapid return to work, provision of workplace mental health services, and peer support were found to contribute to emotional recovery. Study authors recommended ready access to information and training for leaders to prepare them to support employees emotionally following return to work.¹¹



“The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in our lifetimes and has had a massive effect on reorganizing the way we work. We can draw from other experiences—mental distress in the workplace, returning from a personal leave, dealing with the aftermath of a tragic event—and apply these insights to our post-COVID-19 plans. What’s unique to the COVID-19 pandemic is the added stress of the ongoing worry about personal health and safety in a frightening and unpredictable time. COVID-19 is a shared trauma that affects us all, reminding us to be empathetic and kind to each other and understanding of each others’ struggles. We are all adjusting, and everyone is in it together.”

– Dr. Juveria Zaheer, Clinician Scientist, Institute for Mental Health Policy Research and Education Administrator, Gerald Sheff and Shanitha Kachan Emergency Department, CAMH

Looking Ahead

Business leaders and employees can work together to prioritize mental health in the workplace during and after COVID-19.

As we work through the pandemic, some of us may continue connecting remotely from our homes while others return to office spaces with new safety and hygiene protocols. No matter what our workplaces look like, business leaders have a responsibility to make them mentally healthy and psychologically safe for each and every employee.

Business leaders should focus on clear and transparent communication not only about plans for the future, but also about how they're coping. It is one of the most compassionate things they can do for employees because it opens the door to important conversations about mental health in the workplace.

Employees can role model this behaviour by sharing their own concerns. Whether it is dealing with responsibilities at home or experiencing anxiety about returning to work, talking about these experiences can help leaders understand how employees are feeling and what they can do to support them.

A steadfast commitment to openness—by business leaders and employees—will also enable health organizations and researchers to develop new, evidence-based recommendations for better workplace mental health during COVID-19 and beyond.



Your COVID-19 Checklist

FOR WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

How business leaders can prioritize workplace mental health during and after COVID-19

- Update mental health programs so they can be delivered and accessed remotely.
- Include resiliency workshops in mandatory mental health training for leadership.
- Consider providing coverage and access to Internet-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and other virtual mental health supports.
- Seek guidance from human resources professionals trained in mental health and wellness.
- Update, monitor and track KPIs so you can learn and adapt, and share successes and challenges with the business community.



For resources on managing your mental health during COVID-19, visit CAMH's Mental Health and COVID-19 resource and education hub at camh.ca/covid19.

For general information about workplace mental health, including the Mental Health Playbook for Business Leaders, visit CAMH's Workplace Mental Health Resource Centre at camh.ca/workplacementalhealth.

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