

I Hope This Message Finds You Well:

Mental Health Awareness Month,
The Workplace, and COVID-19

OUT & EQUAL
WORKPLACE ADVOCATES



Introduction

As COVID-19 impacts the health and wellness of individuals across the globe, many are left to contend with new challenges to mental health both in and out of the workplace. Job security, financial wellness, major changes in everyday activities, social isolation, and concerns about safety and wellness about oneself and loved ones are weighing heavily on individuals and whole communities across the world.

In addition to the most immediate effects of COVID-19, the current and longer-term mental health crisis has the potential to multiply if left under-discussed and under-treated.

Since 1949, [Mental Health Awareness Month](#)—observed annually each May—is a time in which communities across the country raise awareness of those living with mental health conditions, aim to eliminate the associated stigma, and encourage individuals to practice habits that support wellness and mental health. Across the world, [450 million people live with mental illness](#), while 1 in 5 experiences a mental health issue throughout the year.

Research demonstrates that LGB people are [twice as likely to live with a mental health condition than the general population](#). The likelihood is even higher for the transgender population, as a recent study published in The Journal of Endocrine Society demonstrated that two out of three transgender teens experiences depression while [nearly half of transgender adults have reported suicidal ideation in the last 12 months](#) (compared to just 4% of the general population.)

As society enters unprecedented territory with the COVID-19 pandemic, talking about mental health has never been more important. This year, in commemoration of Mental Health Awareness Month and in-light of the ongoing pandemic, O&E is releasing the following practical guidance on how LGBTQ workers can maintain good practices around mental health and wellness during this time.

“Caring for myself
is not
self-indulgence.
It is
self-preservation.”

- Audre Lorde

Additional Context

The [International Labour Organization](#) reports that COVID-19 is significantly affecting the livelihood of more than 4 out of 5 workers worldwide, as over 26 million Americans have lost their jobs due to pandemic. Out & Equal recognizes the varying impact that COVID-19 continues to have on the world's workforce. While some are able to continue working from home, many must continue to be physically present for work, have been furloughed, or have lost their livelihoods all together. While this resource focuses primarily on recommendations for supporting the mental health and wellness while working from home, it is critical that employers continue to support all of their employees during this difficult time.

While the terms **mental health** and **mental wellness** are sometimes casually used interchangeably, the distinction is important for employers to understand and communicate. Mental health should not be equated with overall ideas of workplace wellness, as addressing mental illness often requires critical treatment and healthcare services. It is important to take mental illness seriously by providing or guiding individuals to the resources needed to manage and treat them. While promoting wellness in the workplace (i.e. implementing daily activities centralized around fostering individual health-focused habits) can support overall positive mental health, they are not meant to substitute the important services and strategies needed in place to support those living with mental health conditions. Throughout the resource, Out & Equal provides some recommendations that can support those living with mental health conditions and others that promote wellness in the workplace.

For a detailed look on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting LGBTQ workers, check out Out & Equal's latest resource,

What Your Company Needs to Know: LGBTQ Employees and The COVID-19 Pandemic



Four Ways to Communicate that Mental Health is a Priority in the Workplace

According to the CDC, poor mental health can affect work in numerous capacities—negatively impacting communication with colleagues, day-to-day functions, productivity, and more. Furthermore, depression can impede an individual's capacity to complete necessary tasks, hindering a person's ability to complete physical tasks in 20% of cases and cognitive tasks in 35% of cases.

Employers can take actions which have considerable impacts on the mental and wellness of employees. In fact, the CDC also notes that "the workplace is an optimal setting to create a culture of health," due to the fact that companies often have existing communication structures, centralized programs and policies, and social support networks set in place.

Here are four ways your company can communicate mental health is a priority in the workplace:

1

Foster Cultures of Inclusion and Belonging

Prioritize Positive Feedback: As COVID-19 continues to afflict business operations across the globe, many companies are in crisis mode, aiming to rapidly adapt to changing circumstances. Amid the frenzied adjustments, it can be easy to forget the importance of positive feedback in ensuring your employees feel recognized and motivated. For those able to work during the COVID-19 pandemic, flexible and positive communication between employees and managers during check-ins and meetings is critical. Ensure that employees know how much they are valued and focus on giving positive reinforcement and feedback as much as possible. Affirmative feedback can go a long way to foster wellness and ensure employees feel encouraged and seen throughout this difficult time. Encourage employees to utilize a 360-model of feedback with managers for voices to be heard and needs met.

Address Additional Pressure for Productivity: For many, COVID-19 has increased demands for productivity as companies aim to ensure they remain viable throughout the crisis. Employers should be mindful of the additional weight placed on employees by the pandemic itself—including overall increases in stress and anxiety, caretaking and homeschooling responsibilities, loneliness and grief, and concerns around health risks of oneself and loved ones. Additional pressure from employers for constant communication, increased productivity, and extended work hours can have negative effects on an employee's mental health. Employers should practice flexibility and demonstrate understanding during these uncertain times.



2

Be Proactive: Implement Policies and Practices that Support Mental Health and Wellness in the Workplace

It is important to implement policies and practices to support mental health before issues arise.

Provide and Promote Employee Assistance Programs that Include Free Counseling: An [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) is a [work-based program](#) that offers free referrals, counseling, and services that focus on broad mental and physical concerns, abuse, disorders, addictions, and overall employee wellness. HR and DEI professionals should ensure that mental health is addressed and prioritized in the company's EAP, employee handbooks, and manuals.

Train Managers to Notice Warning Signs: Mental health awareness training should be available for employees in managerial or leadership positions to learn how to notice and address worsening mental health conditions in the workplace. If training is not currently offered or advertised, now is a crucial time to make these trainings a priority. Also consider distributing messaging to all employees that raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of mental illness.

Here are a few additional opportunities for employers to be proactive in addressing mental health in the workplace:

- Host webinars or other virtual programming that address mental health conditions and techniques for coping with and treating symptoms
- Allow employees to use paid time off for mental health reasons
- As a longer-term solution, offer [health insurance](#) with little to no out of pocket costs for counseling or depression medication

3

Raise Awareness of Internal Support Systems for Mental Health

Do your employees know who to approach if they experience mental health issues in the workplace? Is there an open-door policy with HR? What does your employee handbook or Employee Assistance Program cover regarding mental health?

Now is a critical time to clearly communicate the internal processes and systems in place to support mental health and wellness in the workplace. It is important to ensure employees are aware of the available company resources—like your company's Employee Assistance Program—should they need guidance or support.

Furthermore, if your paid time off policies explicitly include time off for mental health leave, ensure this is communicated broadly to employees vs. a case-by-case basis with supervisors. If it is not included in paid time off, it is time to revisit paid leave policies that include mental health. As the [effects of the pandemic increasingly reach into the realm of mental health](#) it is important to encourage HR and DEI professionals to update manuals to include additional mental health support accordingly. Note that the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) does include mental health conditions](#) and employees can reference that for questions as well as their HR and Benefits leaders.



4

Engage in Mental Health Awareness Month

Mental Health Awareness Month provides important opportunities to engage in both internal and external communications and commitments regarding mental health. Make it a priority to communicate to employees that the organization prioritizes mental health and wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic and year-round. Additionally, continue to emphasize the organization's commitment to mental health externally by using social platforms or blogs to discuss Mental Health Awareness Month.

THIS COMPANY SUPPORTS

Mental Health

All Year Long.

[YOUR COMPANY LOGO]

DOWNLOAD TEMPLATE HERE

Four Ways Your ERG Can Engage

ERGs are emerging as vital mechanisms in which to check in on the wellness of employees during the pandemic. Recent studies have demonstrated that ERGs are playing a critical role in the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing employers to better understand the needs and concerns of certain employee populations. In fact, nearly 40% of ERGs in the recent survey were playing this critical role in their companies. We recommend that employers support and encourage your ERG leaders to provide programming and check-ins, to build in safe spaces to share concerns, voice struggles, and gain assistance from peers.

Here are four ways your ERG can engage:

1

Regularly Check in With Your Members

Weekly Check-ins: Setting up check-ins—virtual check-ins for remote work—specifically focused on mental health and wellness is a great way to:

- 1** Set the tone that mental health is an important part of work—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2** Give employees a platform to voice needs and concerns.
- 3** Encourage open and honest communication about the feelings that come up in day-to-day life.
- 4** Build support systems between group members. In the face of COVID-19, LGBTQ individuals face social predispositions to experiencing mental health issues due to existing stigma, discrimination, and a lack of access to critical resources. LGBTQ-specific support systems have proven to be useful in mitigating some of the impact that existing stigma can have on depression and suicidality for LGBTQ individuals. Thus, it is especially important for LGBTQ ERGs to continue providing opportunities for members to connect throughout the pandemic.

Weekly check-ins can revolve around a central question focused on current mindsets. When structuring your meeting, designate a facilitator to ask the check-in question and keep the conversation moving. Give each ERG member an opportunity to respond.

While asking your ERG members to submit check-in questions is a good way to determine what questions you will ask each week, here are a few ideas:

What was your highlight of the today?

What was a lower point?

What do you find easy to do today?

What was difficult?

What kind of day (or week) have you had so far?

Implement a Buddy System: ERG leaders can pair up ERG members or groups of members to check-in on another, offer validation, and support in informal ways throughout the crisis. This may also be an opportunity for cross-ERG collaboration across the company.

2

Implement Virtual Programming

Business-as-Usual ERG Programming: Set up ERG Lunch & Learns, plan cross-ERG programming, or bring in presenters from community organizations or nonprofits. Mental Health Awareness Month presents a great opportunity for ERGs to discuss ways your company can more deeply engage in and support initiatives that revolve around mental health in the workplace. During the pandemic, it is important to continue the critical work your ERG delivers throughout the year.

Virtual Office Hours: ERG leaders can set up office hours during the work week so ERG members can pop in virtually to chat about any concerns, how they are managing during the pandemic, or brainstorm programming ideas.

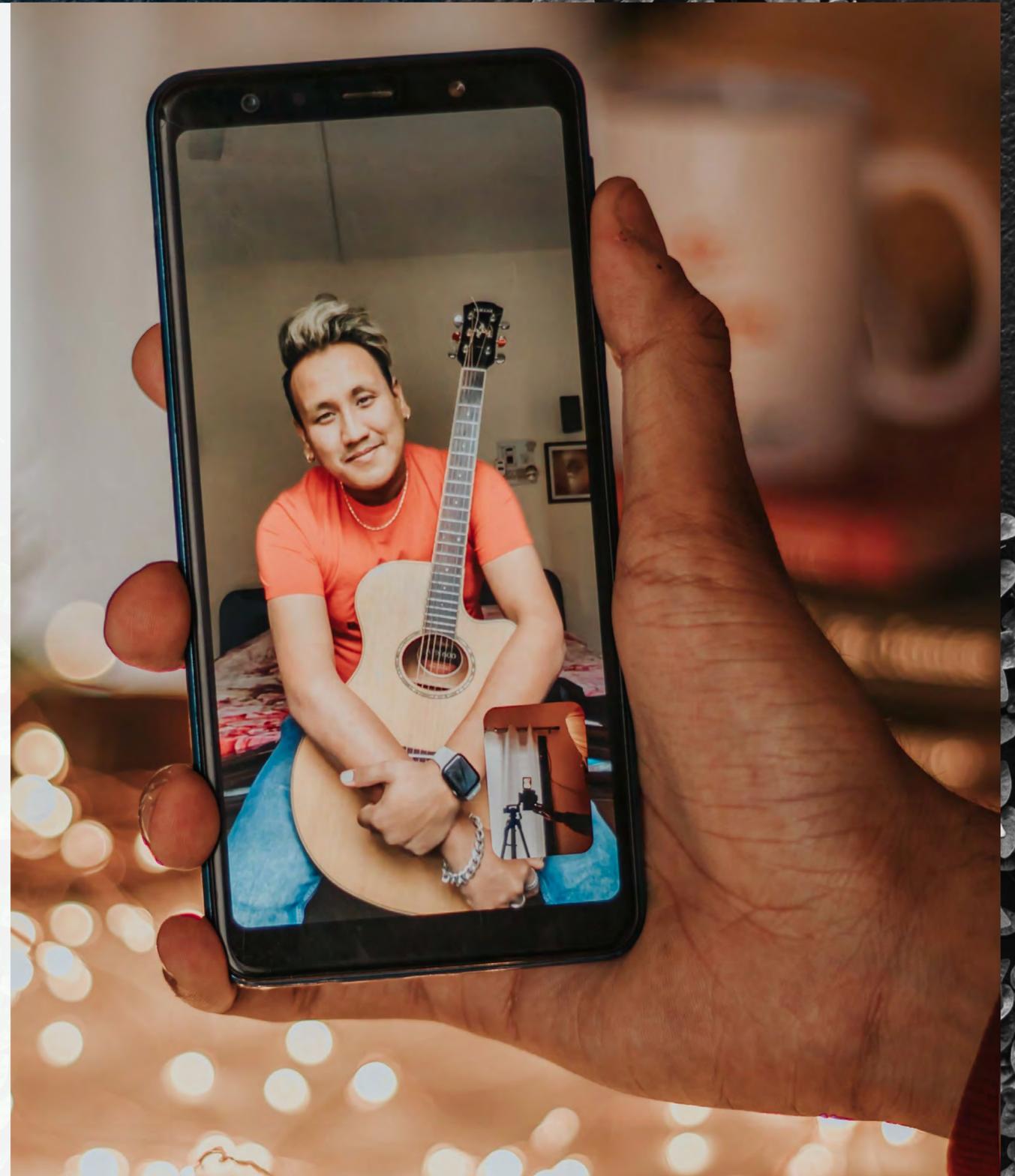


3

Build In Time For Fun

Here are a few ideas for virtual activities your ERG can do for fun:

- 1 ERG happy hours or afterwork gatherings
 - *It's important to make sure programming is comfortable for members who don't drink so try to keep alcohol-focused activities to a minimum.*
- 2 Trivia
- 3 Bingo
- 4 LGBTQ book or movie club
- 5 Talent show or musical performances



4

Continue Building Member Engagement

Now more than ever it's important to foster communities of belonging in the workplace. Utilize the opportunity to bring people together across different locations as people may be more inclined to join virtual meetings during this time. Encourage friends to hop in a meeting. Open-up programming to continue to build strong allies. It may be less intimidating for some to join a zoom call than in-person meetings, so take advantage of the opportunities now to get people involved. Continue to advertise your ERG on company channels, such as: company intranet, email, or social media.



Four Ways You Can Take Care of Yourself

A recent [Washington Post-ABC News poll](#) found that **69% of Americans** are experiencing major stressors surrounding the pandemic, as calls to mental health hotlines have significantly increased.

The Trevor Project, an LGBTQ crisis hotline for youth and young adults, reports that calls to their service have nearly doubled since the beginning of the pandemic.

Similarly, the [American Psychiatric Association](#) found that over one third of Americans reported that COVID-19 is having considerable effects on their psychological health, including sleeplessness, increased irritability, decreased focus, productivity, and memory.

Here are four ways you can ensure you are taking care of your own mental health and wellness during the pandemic:

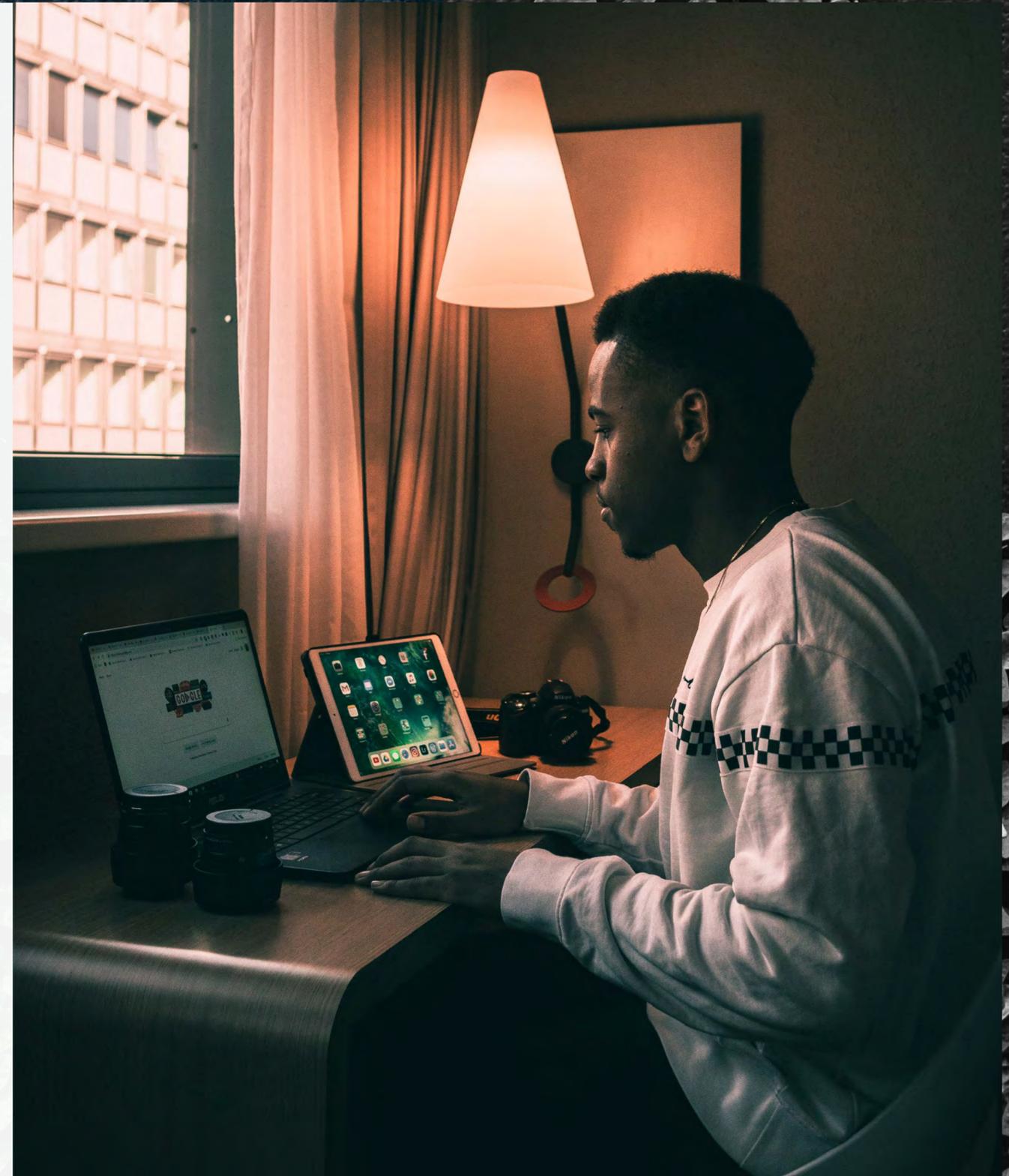
1

Set Up Your Space with Your Own Well-ness in Mind

Maintain Schedules and Routines: It is easy to ignore typical routines and schedules with remote work, as work and home life are potentially happening in the same space. Try to set a work schedule and routine for yourself to keep your day on track and help you feel a sense of comfort and normalcy during this time. Prioritize time in your schedule to connect with loved ones, take breaks, and engage in activities that nourish yourself.

Create A Comfortable Workspace: To continue to build a healthy balance between home and work life, if possible, set up a designated workspace in your home where you spend your working hours. Bring items into your new workspace encourage productivity and comfort, such as: plants, music, candles, or setting up a space with natural light.

It's important to recognize that creating completely separate work and living spaces is challenging or impossible for some employees – especially during this time when family members, partners, and children may also be in the home. If it's impossible to designate a separate place in the home to work, try to remove any work-related supplies from your living space when the day is over.



2

Reach Out to Colleagues

Maintain or Establish Relationships with Mentors: Set up regular check-ins with an existing mentor or reach out to other colleagues in your network to build mentor-mentee relationships. It's important during this time to lean on people who can give advice and support both on a professional and personal level.

Virtual Coffee Chats: Workplace conversations that are not directly work-related are still important for employee engagement, retention, and company culture. If you transition to remote work, it is important to continue building relationships and a strong, inclusive office culture. Reaching out to colleagues for informal conversation is helpful in nurturing these relationships and communities of support. Reflect on your typical interactions in the office: Is there a colleague you usually catch up with over coffee? Is there a colleague you've been meaning to get to know better? Keep these coworkers in mind and reach out to set up virtual informal check-ins over coffee or tea.



3

Check-in with Yourself

Routinely Address Your Needs Throughout the Day: While you check-in with coworkers throughout the workweek, it is also important to check-in with yourself. Building in time each day to assess both your biological and cognitive needs can improve overall day-to-day mood. A few simple changes can make a significant impact. A good rule of thumb is to care for yourself as you would care for a loved one.

Take Microbreaks: If you don't have time your day to take a longer break, microbreaks can have a powerful impact on mood and productivity. Research indicates that [microbreaks enable "psychological detachment"](#), allowing individuals to recover by disengaging briefly in work tasks. Take small breaks each hour to stretch, take your eyes off of your screen, and move throughout the workday.

Stay Hydrated: Research demonstrates that simply [drinking water can decrease risks of depression and anxiety](#) in adults. Maintain hydration throughout the day by keeping a glass of water near your desk to drink and refill regularly.

Get Enough Sleep: Sleep can improve thinking and emotional regulation. [The National Sleep Foundation](#) recommends getting 7-9 hours of sleep per night.

Stay Active: Engaging in regular physical activity is good for mental health overall, especially as shelter-in-place orders remain in place. The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) highlights that it is critical for individuals of all ages and abilities to take a break from sitting. Engaging in light intensity physical movement, like stretching or walking, for just 3-4 minutes can improve circulation and muscle activity. If you are able, make a point to regularly engage in your favorite physical activity—such as going for a walk, stretching, joining an online workout class, or even gardening or breathing deeply. The WHO provides an expansive list of ways individuals of varying abilities and ages can maintain physical activity at home. [Check out the WHO's list here.](#)

Practice Mindfulness: In order to maintain a sense of wellness throughout the day, it is important to recognize the stressors you encounter and your reactions to them. Whether it's back-to-back meetings or navigating the new challenges of working from home—it's important to be cognizant of indications that you may be experiencing anxiety or depression and take steps to address them. For additional guidance on practicing mindfulness, Deloitte offers two useful resources: [Managing Your Relationship with Stress](#) and [Managing Emotions](#).

4

Seek Help

It is brave and important to ask for help when you are struggling. If you are experiencing emotional distress, seek support. Many employees have access to mental health services through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provided through your employer's health insurance plan. Connect with your Human Resources department or health insurance provider to determine what may be available to you.

If you or someone you know is in crisis or feeling suicidal, seek help immediately and call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **1-800-273-8255**. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides free and confidential support to people in crisis or emotional distress, available 24/7.

There are also LGBTQ-specific resources to utilize if you are in crisis:

[TrevorLifeline](#) An LGBTQ-specific crisis intervention and suicide prevention phone service conducted by The Trevor Project, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:
1-866-488-7386

[SAGE LGBT Elder Hotline](#) A 24-hour hotline dedicated to LGBT older people needing support or dealing with crisis:
877-360-5428

[Trans Lifeline](#) A peer support service line for transgender people in crisis, run by trans-identified individuals:
877-565-8860

[The LGBT National Hotline](#) A national service which provides telephone and online peer support for the LGBTQ community. See website for hours.
(888) 843-4564



Closing

Take advantage of the numerous opportunities available to preempt and manage mental health issues during the COVID-19 crisis. For additional guidance on how your company and LGBTQ ERG can contribute to this important area of work, contact Out & Equal at hello@outandequal.org.

Lead Contributors

Madelyn Gelpi, Sr. Manager of Stakeholder Engagement

Madeline Perrou, Sr. Associate, Communications

Designed by Maddison LeRoy, Sr. Manager of Art & Communications