# The intersections of mental health and LGBTIQ+ people in the Indian workplace
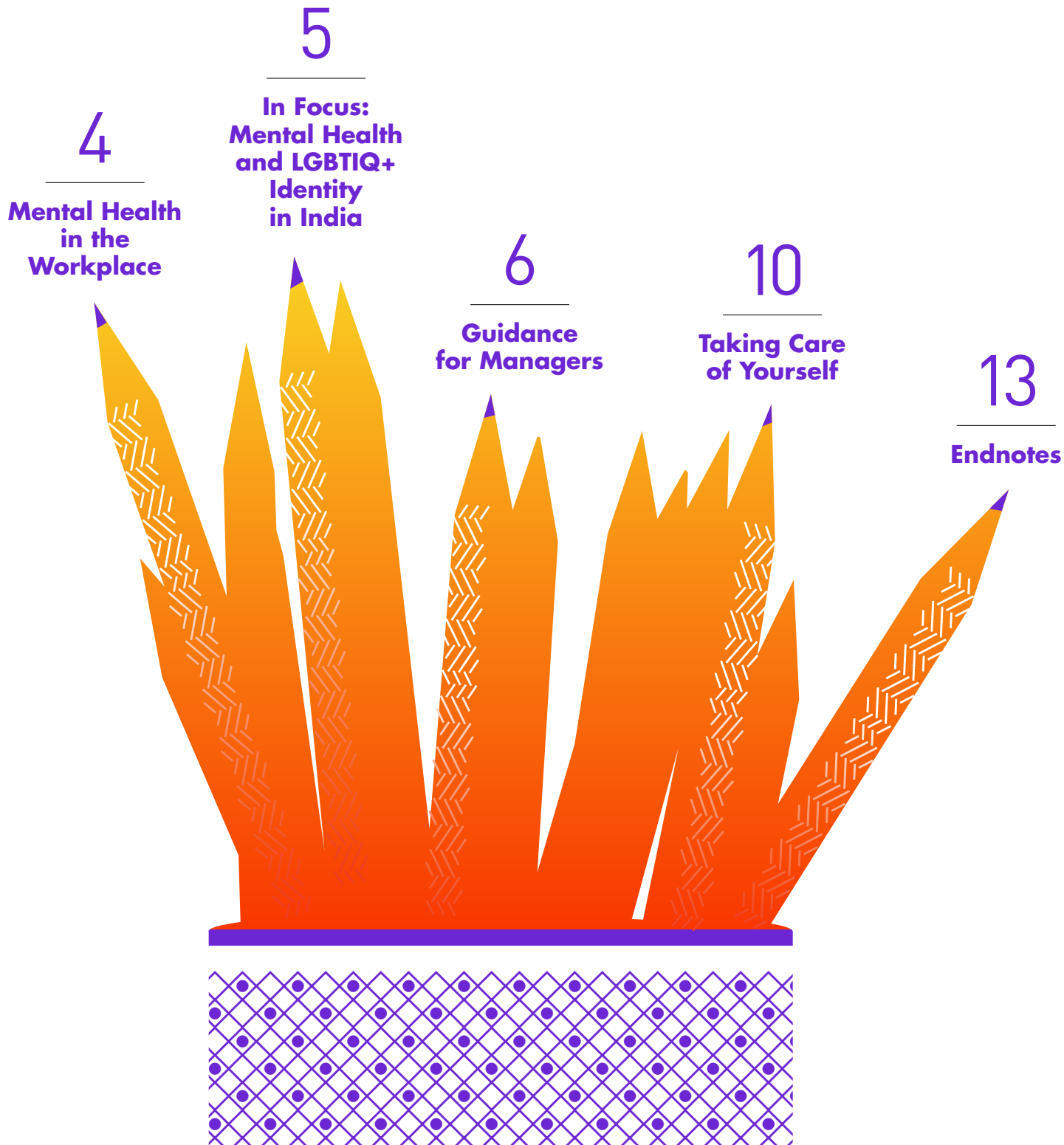
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This guide aims to shine light on mental health and wellness issues that intersect with LGBTIQ+ identities in the workplace, provide guidance for leadership to advance toward solutions and encourage individuals to practice healthy habits.

While the terms "**mental health**" and "**mental wellness**" are sometimes casually used interchangeably, the distinction is important for employers to understand and communicate. Another term to distinguish would be "**mental health disorders**".

**Mental health:** Everyone has mental health, just like everyone has physical health. It refers specifically to a person's psychological and emotional well-being. Mental health is determined by a range of socioeconomic, biological and environmental factors.[1]

**Mental wellness:** Everyone can practice mental wellness, just as they can practice physical wellness. When we refer to the "state of mental wellness" it is very similar to the definition of "mental health". The main difference is that a person can also *practice* mental wellness, which would refer to actions, behaviour, and habits that aim to achieve positive mental health.[2]

**Mental health disorders:** Sometimes called "mental illness". This refers to a broad range of disorders with different symptoms. They are generally characterised by a condition which affects one's perceptions, mood, thinking, and/or behaviour. To name just a few, some examples are generalised anxiety disorder, clinical depression, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[3]

***Note:*** *People can experience mental health issues without being classified as having a mental health disorder.*

# Mental Health in the Workplace:

Mental health and wellness in the workplace should not be equated with addressing mental health disorders in the workplace, as that would often require clinical treatment and healthcare services. As such, it is important to take mental illness seriously by providing or guiding individuals to the resources needed to manage and treat them. This guide aims to give some background on the state of the mental health of LGBTIQ+ people in the Indian workplace and provide guidance on how to promote wellness in the workplace.

**So, what does a healthy workplace look like?** When we feel mentally well, we can work productively, enjoy our free time, and contribute actively to our communities. A healthy workplace is one in which employees feel generally happy, engaged in and connected to their work. It is also a place where employees practice empathy, open communication and where positive thinking and acknowledgement of people's achievements are regularly practiced. These aspects create a non-judgemental environment where employees can openly seek help for mental health issues when needed. Last but not least, **it is a workplace in which folks with marginalised identities, such as LGBTIQ+ people, can bring their authentic selves to work and be celebrated rather than stigmatised.**[4]

Poor mental health can affect work in many ways—communication with colleagues, day-to-day functions, productivity, and more. Additionally, 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.[5]

# In Focus: Mental Health and LGBTIQ+ Identity in India

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 7.5% of the Indian population suffers from a mental disorder. Furthermore, mental illnesses make up one-sixth of all health-related disorders in India. There is also a massive gap, over 70%, in the amount of people who have a mental illness and those who actually get treatment. The WHO also believes that by 2020, about 20% of Indians will suffer from mental health disorders, with less than 4,000 mental health professionals to provide care to that population.[6]

A 2017 study estimated that 792 million people worldwide, slightly more than one in ten, suffer from a mental disorder.[7] With regards to the intersection between mental health and LGBTIQ+ identity, U.S.-based research demonstrates that LGB people are twice as likely to live with a mental health disorder than the general population.[8] Studies focused on the transgender community show that two out of three transgender teens experience depression while nearly half of surveyed transgender adults reported suicidal ideation in the last year, compared to 4% of the general population.[9]
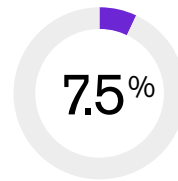
**7.5%**
of the Indian population suffers from a mental disorder.
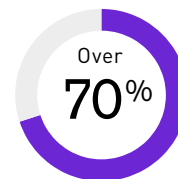
Over **70%**
of people who have a mental illness do not get treatment.
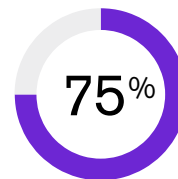
**75%**
of respondents felt it necessary to keep their LGBTIQ+ identity hidden as a result of the stigma surrounding it in India.

In the Section 377 ruling, Justice Chandrachud wrote about the importance of adequate and responsible mental health care and advocacy. In a recent compilation of different research on the intersection of mental health and LGBTIQ+ individuals in India between 2009-2019, it was found that LGBTIQ+ individuals had high rates of mental health concerns. According to this research, one of the primary drivers behind high rates of mental health concerns is the prevalence of stigma surrounding LGBTIQ+ identities in India. In one of the profiled studies, approximately 75% of respondents felt that it was necessary to keep their identity hidden as a result. However, the research also highlights that social support is one of the ways to help those impacted by stigma towards the LGBTIQ+ community. As such, it is important that workplaces have policies and action items to support any employee, including those who are LGBTIQ+, as they face stigma and/or mental health difficulties.[10]

It is our hope that this document and the guidance within it can be used to improve the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people, particularly in the workplace.

# Guidance for Managers:

**We spend many hours of our day at work.**
We are either in an office, a work site, or logging in virtually for the majority of our days, sometimes at odd hours of morning or night. This means that for many, managers and colleagues may be a person's only lifeline or support system, and/or the most readily available resource. This is especially true during the current pandemic when some people are either deemed as essential workers and needing to work during times of high stress, or they are socially isolated. Their co-workers and managers may be the only people they interact with for days, weeks or even months at a time.

Therefore, it is especially vital for managers to understand how to recognise and address the mental wellness of their employees. If an employee is experiencing mental health issues, their performance and mental wellness is likely to worsen if not handled with empathy and understanding. Effectively supporting your employees who are struggling with their mental wellbeing not only enhances the team dynamic and performance, but also provides valuable access to support systems that they may not be able to find elsewhere, thus guiding the person towards healthy solutions rather than risking further negative effects.

## CASE STUDY:

**Rohit\* had not come out at work about being gay and was going through a very difficult time.** His parents were visiting him and pressuring him to consent to a marriage proposal. He finally came out to his parents and it went downhill from there. He was under immense pressure from the family and seeing his parents cry made him feel very guilty. He started slipping into depression and this started reflecting in his work.

**His manager, Seema\*, noticed the change in behaviour** and was concerned by it. She set up a meeting with Rohit to understand if he was facing any issues and if he felt comfortable sharing. She also informed Rohit about the mental health support systems available at work in case he needed them. Moved by the genuine concern, Rohit came out to his manager and shared what he was going through in his personal life.

**Seema informed Rohit about the EAP (Employee Assistance Program)** available at work which provides expert counsellors who could help him cope with the situation. She also encouraged him to seek support from the LGBTIQ+ ERG at work.

Rohit explored the EAP service which helped him deal with the depression and anxiety he was facing. The EAP also connected Rohit with a psychiatrist whose treatment ultimately helped him recover.

Rohit also reached out to the LGBTIQ+ ERG and found a group of supportive LGBTIQ+ people and allies which aided Rohit in embracing his sexuality, and over a period of time Rohit became an integral part of the ERG.

*\*Names changed for reasons of confidentiality and privacy.*

## UNDERSTANDING EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES/GUIDELINES

First off, it is important for managers to understand existing policies and guidance that pertain to mental health and wellness. Some organisations in India provide access to virtual mental health platforms for all employees, regardless of level and type of contract. These platforms, which operate under complete anonymity, can provide the following services:

- **A diagnostics module** to help an employee figure out whether they have a mental health issue, how serious it is and its tentative classification.

- **A preliminary guidance module** to provide AI-based suggestions of simple do's and don'ts as well suggest activities which can give relief to the specific types of symptoms the diagnostic module reveals.

- **An interphase bridge to an array of telephonic counselling services** from which one or two would be recommended for the individual based on the diagnostic outcome. In terms of sequencing, this may precede or substitute the preliminary guidance module.

- **An interphase bridge to a panel of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists**. While it would theoretically be possible to trigger this bridge immediately after the AI diagnostic, it would more usually be preceded by the telephonic counselling bridge.

- **A module for follow-up therapy sessions** and online exercises for ongoing low-intensity support.[11]

*Source: People Matters*

**Interweave Consulting, a Bangalore-based consultancy firm that builds inclusion solutions for companies, specifically builds questions around mental wellness into the inclusion surveys that they conduct for clients.** The responses from these questions are presented to the leaders and next steps are decided accordingly and infused into their workplace inclusion solutions.

Managers should also keep in mind that any mental health accommodations should occur in a flexible format. For example, for someone with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) might need to have instructions written down as opposed to shared orally. Additionally, there is a possibility that no two people require the same assistance, even if they have the same mental health issue. Best practice would be to check in with each employee to gain an understanding of how best to support them.

# GROWTH OF EAP SECTOR IN INDIA

An **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is a work-based program that offers referrals, counselling, and other services that focus on broad mental and physical concerns, abuse, disorders, addictions, and overall employee wellness. Various organisations from diverse industries in India have started adopting EAPs as a way to support their employees.[12]

<u>EXAMPLES:</u>

- **CSC, India introduced SPARSH, an Employee Assistance Program exclusively for the employees and their family members.** CSC has a young workforce with the average age of an employee being 28 years, who face a lot of stress while maintaining work-life balance. It has been launched with 1 to 1 Help, a Bangalore based company that provides counselling sessions to employees.

- **Hexware also provides an EAP in which internal counselling sessions are conducted by an immediate supervisor or HR.** In case there is the need, they provide professional counselling services within or outside company premises.

- **Wipro launched its EAP under the name of MITR for providing emotional counselling, financial and legal advice to its employees and their family members.** The counsellors are accessible 24/7 and are provided at no cost to employees.

- **Net App's EAP provides employees confidential assistance with issues such as individual or family counselling, work/life conflicts, and legal and financial services.** Services are provided through CONCERN and they are free of cost.

*Source: International Research Journal of Management Science & Technology*
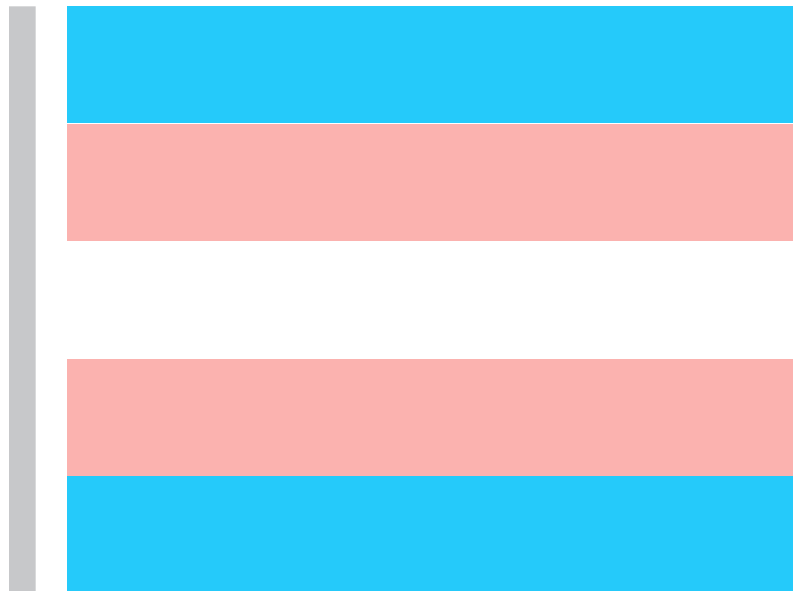
EAPs in India are mostly provided by private and multinational companies. Most of the companies outsource their EAP to third party administrators, such as **1to1 Help**, **InnerSight** and **Sunbeam**. Unfortunately, many Indian companies introducing EAPs have faced challenges, as some employees have the perspective that seeking help from counsellors implies a mental health disorder, which carries a heavy negative stigma. However, in practice, these counsellors help to develop an employee's skills to resolve their problems, therefore companies must continue to encourage employees to utilise these resources.[13]

**HERE ARE SOME WAYS THAT MANAGERS CAN SUPPORT THEIR EMPLOYEES:**

- **Host weekly or biweekly meetings:** Begin with a five to ten-minute conversation about team members' current state, needs, and a mental health check-in. This allows the manager to identify issues and can make the employee feel validated and supported if they have an issue.

- **Be consistent and proactive** (not reactive) with regards to mental health.

- **Empower employees to set their own performance goals.** This encourages accountability and allows the manager to understand how they see their role and what is doable for them.

- **Promote and provide resources** on the company's EAP, if applicable.

- **Have managers take part in mental health awareness training** where they learn to notice "warning signs" and address the issues in the workplace. In particular, given the current situation around COVID-19, managers need to be trained to understand stress in employees when working remotely.

- **Provide space for informal chats with managers** on a regular basis and opportunities for virtual team bonding.

- **Allow employees to use PTO for mental health reasons**, without stigma.

# Taking Care of Yourself

While there are multiple ways that managers and others can provide spaces and policies to address mental health concerns, there are also different actions that individuals can take to improve their day-to-day mental wellness.

As a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many are facing specific challenges and stressors as they adapt to working from home and cope with the state of the world around them. **For this reason, here are a few tips specifically for the current COVID-19 context**.

## 1) Set up your space with your own wellness in mind

a. **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. Prioritise time in your schedule to connect with loved ones, take breaks, and engage in activities that nourish yourself.

b. **Create a comfortable workspace:** If possible, set up a designated workspace in your home where you spend your working hours and bring in items to your workspace which encourage productivity and comfort, such as plants, music, candles, and natural light.

It's important to recognise 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 space when your workday is over.

## 2) Check-in with yourself

**a. Routinely address your needs throughout the day:** While you check-in with co-workers throughout the work week, 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.

**b. Stay Active:** Engaging in regular physical activity is good for mental health overall, especially as shelter-in-place orders remain in effect. _The World Health Organization (WHO)_ highlights that it is critical for individuals of all ages and abilities to take a break from sitting, if possible. Engaging in light intensity physical movement for just 3-4 minutes can improve circulation and muscle activity. If you are able, make a point to regularly engage in your favourite activity—such as going for a walk, yoga, meditation, 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_.

**c. Practice Mindfulness:** In order to maintain a sense of wellness throughout the day, it is important to recognise 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.
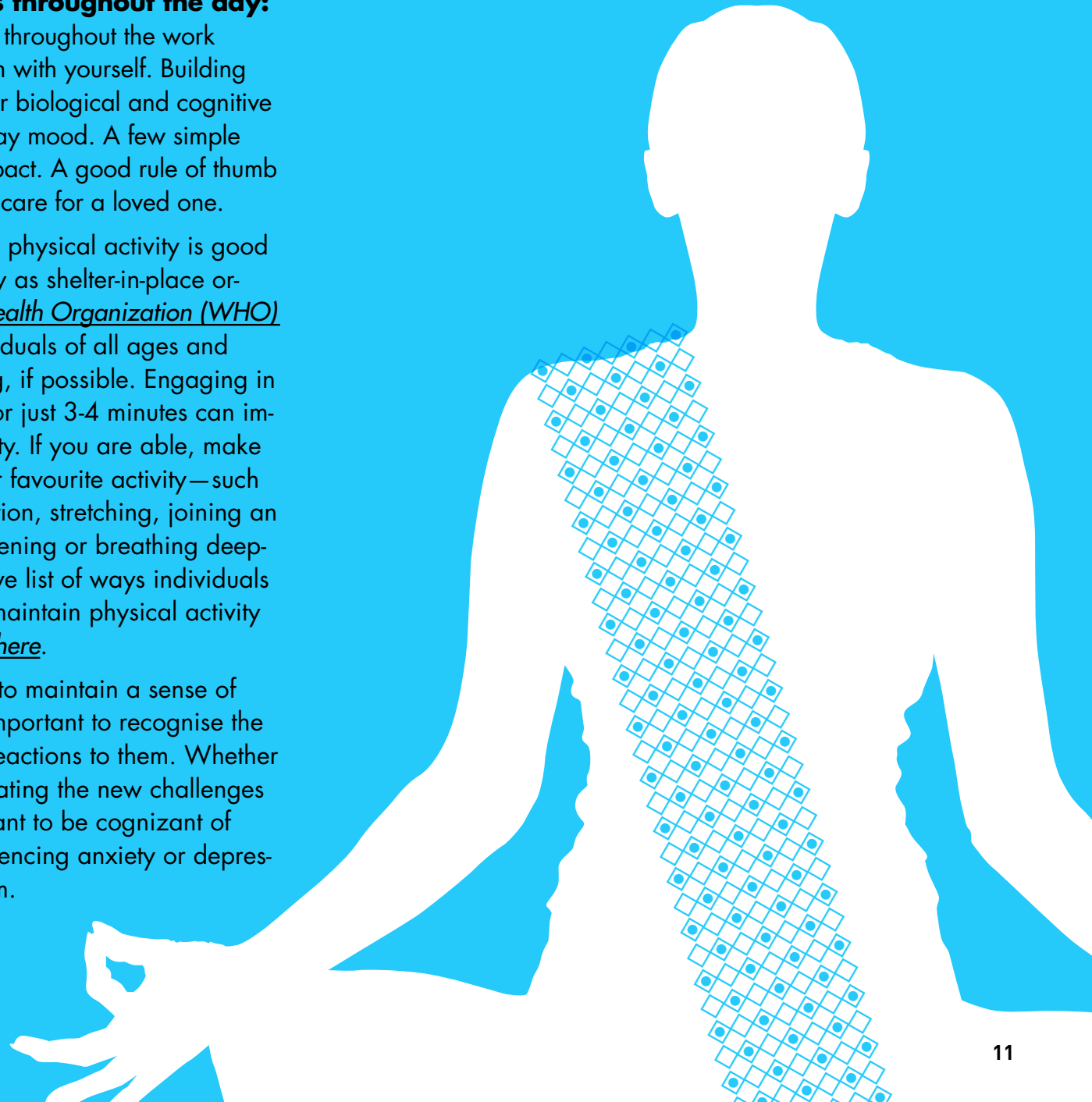
## 3) Reach out to colleagues

**a. 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.

**b. 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 co-workers in mind and reach out to set up virtual informal check-ins over coffee or tea.

## 4) Seek help

**a. It is brave and important to ask for help when you are struggling.** If you are experiencing emotional distress, seek support. As previously discussed, some employees have access to mental health services through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Connect with your Human Resources department to determine what may be available to you.

**b. Mental Health Resources for LGBTIQ+ People in India**

   i. _The Pink List India:_ A list of queer inclusive mental health practitioners across India.

   ii. _LGBTQIA Mental Health 101 - The White Swan Foundation:_ A comprehensive resource on LGBTIQ+ mental health in India. Page 26 offers LGBTIQ+ helplines should you, or anyone you know be in distress.
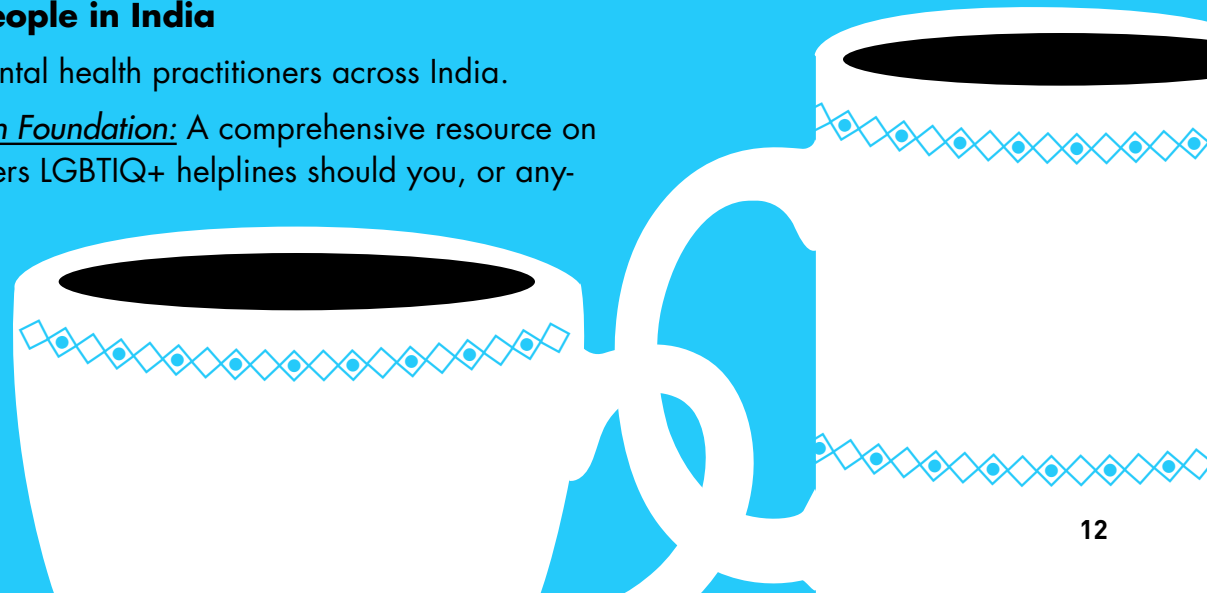
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