

# Employee wellbeing during COVID-19: What we can learn from Behavioral Science



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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has swiftly changed how people work around the globe. And right now, no matter your business, there are more questions than answers. How long will we work remotely? What factors need to happen for this to end? Will this affect my employment?

There aren't easy answers, and this uncertainty can affect your team members' wellbeing. After all, uncertainty causes anxiety, which can lead to depression, frustration, and a lack of motivation and productivity.

Thankfully, there's a lot that behavioral science can teach us about how to help teams during tough times. By understanding how people cope with uncertainty, we can begin to take steps to offer adequate support.

We can remind people what they can control and provide one source for information. We can also combat frustration by having open, empathetic conversations. Many are creating mental health action plans to better support their employees.

As an employee communications professional, there's much you can do to help your employees sort through these uncertain times. This guide will explore how you can:



**Understand how people cope with uncertainty**



**Remind people what they can control**



**Provide one source of truth to battle misinformation**



**Combat frustration with open, empathetic conversations**



**Watch for signs of isolation and deteriorating mental health**



**Use a mental health action plan**

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# Understand how people cope with uncertainty

One of the biggest challenges during this pandemic is the lack of certainty. People don't know if their health or the health of their loved ones is at risk. They don't know if their jobs are safe. They don't know what changes are in store.

Although none of us have confronted COVID-19 before, organizations often undergo substantial changes. That's why many have change management teams. Events happen – such as the addition of a new CEO or a round of lay-offs – that will result in feelings of uncertainty for the team.

## Take stock of risk preferences

Uncertainty is fundamentally tied to how risky things feel. These risk preferences – attitudes towards risk and risk-taking – are one of the fundamental areas of behavioral science. These preferences range across individuals. Someone might have a different attitude towards the risk of changing career than they do to a risk of personal safety.

Risk preferences matter because they partially dictate how your employees will react to the changes that your business goes through and the changes in the world around us.

**💡 COVID-19 is particularly troubling because people feel the risk is larger based on how dreadful it is, the more unknown it is, and the more people are involved in it.**

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# Remind people what they can control

There's no doubt that these are uncertain times, which can make the team feel lost and uncomfortable. There are a few types of uncertainty you may be seeing in your organization right now. Identifying the sources of uncertainty helps us better prepare to solve for them with the right mix of messaging and action.

Thankfully, there's a good defense against uncertainty – the sense of control. The feeling of control is a mental health coping mechanism, and encouraging your employees to control what they can is key to supporting them.

**“None of us can control the world around us. But we can control our schedule during the day. We can control our attitude. We can control what we spend time learning. There's always something that's in our power to control. So, remind people where and how they can gain control. Get that message across loud and clear.**

**— Lindsay Kohler**

As an employee communications professional, you need to find ways to remind your team what's in their control, as control will bring psychological safety back. The communications you send need to remind people that they have the ability to control their schedules, attitude, work plan, and so on.

Part of this effort is enabling your employees to keep performing actively. That means having the right tech in place to ensure meetings and projects run smoothly. But it also means making sure your team has good mental and physical health.

**Ask yourself:**

- What are things that your employees can control? These may be things like decorating a home office or workspace, choosing work hours, creating a new workout plan, or deciding what types of meetings suit them best.
- How have we reminded people what they can control? How can we continue to remind people of what they can control?
- Have we enabled our employees to perform via the tech tools we've chosen to use? Perhaps, the tools you use may get the job done, but are they helping employees or hurting them?
- Are we consistently reminding employees of the support that's available?

# Provide one source of truth to battle misinformation

Although it's helpful to focus on what we can control, control as a coping mechanism can be unhealthy.

For example, your employees probably want to feel they have control over the world around them. As a result, they're keeping themselves more informed than usual: watching the news, reading analysis, seeking out opinion, scrolling through their Twitter feed, and engaging in discussions with family via text or video chat.

This activity can give people a fleeting sense of control, but it has little effect on the actual control they do have and it sends them into a hyper alert state. This constant information overload breeds anxiety, puts employees into a high alert mental state, and makes it difficult to focus.

**“ People are taking in information to try to give themselves a feeling of control, but this keeps them in a hyper alert, potentially anxious state. Whenever they read something that sparks a pang of anxiety, their brain releases cortisol, the stress hormone, into their system. By seeking out too much information, we flood our systems with stress, which triggers and perpetuates the fight or flight response which essentially perpetuates anxiety.**

— Jo Hooper

To combat this information overload, it's best to encourage employees to seek one source of truth, both in the organization and outside of it. Your information should come from leaders, and you should provide it consistently on one key channel.

## Make leaders the trusted source of information

Research has shown that leaders can and should be the most trusted source of information. While we're living through this period of extreme uncertainty, our leaders – and what they share with us – is more important than ever before. People are looking to their leaders for reassurance.

Research has also shown that the most valued medium is face-to-face, though this isn't a possibility at the moment. Essentially, you want to do the best you can to take the idea of a traditional townhall and move it online. No matter how you make your leaders available, it's essential to give your team the ability to ask questions.

The good news is that 92% of leaders are open to being more visible, according to a poll conducted during a recent Poppulo webinar. Some leaders, however, may struggle with what to do or say, especially when they are battling anxiety themselves.

**“ I would remind leaders that all of us are uncertain about our future. The fact that leaders are uncertain only gives them another way to relate to their people. I would also remind them that in the absence of information, support, and visibility from leaders, a vacuum forms and that vacuum will be filled by misinformation.**

— Jo Hooper

## Stick to a consistent rhythm

Maintaining a consistent rhythm in communications is essential right now, as employees will read into any changes of tone or frequency in communications. If you tell your employees that you'll be sending a weekly email update, that email needs to go out like clockwork.

Why is this so important? Employees are on high alert, concerned about the future of projects, jobs, and the company as a whole. When you don't communicate or suddenly change your communication strategy, this leaves employees to wonder what's going on. The problem? A lack of information results in misinformation.

## Use one key channel

As mentioned, employees are taking in a lot of information. You don't want to add to the noise by communicating in multiple places. It's best to use a key channel to communicate important information.

One recommendation is to take a look at your internal homepage – what employees see when they begin work each day. Most companies fill this with many different feeds – there might be an RSS feed, a Twitter feed, recent blog posts, and more. Although all these might be helpful, consider slimming down what you have to keep things clear and streamlined.

“ *Because people are drowning in a cacophony of noise, we need to encourage them to seek and listen to one source of truth so they can quiet their minds and focus.*

— Jo Hooper

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## Combat frustration with open, empathetic conversations

Times of uncertainty can understandably lead to feelings of frustration. When we get frustrated, it triggers other emotional responses such as anger, annoyance, and impatience. These negative emotions can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as stress eating or alcohol consumption. People are also very hard on themselves when they're in a bad mood.

It's highly likely that your teams are feeling more frustrated than usual. In fact, when we polled attendees at a [Poppulo webinar](#), 66% said that they are seeing higher levels of frustration on their teams. Frustration is difficult to manage, but you can be mindful of new frustrations that are emerging and prioritize communication, which is the best remedy.

### Frustration can disrupt reasoning

Frustration can be a tricky emotion for people to manage, making it even more difficult for employers to offer support. That's in part because a strong emotion like frustration can disrupt how we reason. When we're frustrated, we start becoming more biased and prejudiced, as well as less patient. We make sweeping generalizations that don't serve us or our teams. This frustration negatively impacts our work performance.

### Be mindful of new frustrations

Frustration crops up all the time at work. Team members can get frustrated about layoffs, certain colleagues, managers, or company wide decisions they don't agree with. All this frustration can have huge effects on employee wellbeing.

In our current climate, there are new forms of frustration that may be impacting employee wellbeing. For example, working from home causes new tensions. Some are noticing how loud and disruptive their neighbors are, while others have children that they are trying to care for and home-school. Some are frustrated at being cooped up in a small apartment with a tiny workspace. The first step in combating these frustrations is to be mindful of what they are, and recognize that everyone has different triggers. Some may find video chat hugely frustrating, while others might enjoy it.

## Prioritize communication– it’s the best remedy

It’s impossible to make frustration disappear, but internal communications professionals, managers, and employees need to talk to each other. Although you might think you know what someone is thinking or feeling, it’s best not to make assumptions and to keep the lines of communication open.

This is especially important for workplace frustration because much of this is caused by fundamental attribution error. This error causes us to explain other people’s behavior as a character flaw rather than because of situation or circumstance. We are quick to say someone is “annoying” or has bad motives, when there may be underlying frustrations we don’t know about.

**“Most ‘bad’ behavior is due to a situation, rather than someone being a fundamentally bad person. Think of the driver who cut you off in traffic who angers you. Later, you learn they were rushing to the hospital.”**

— Lindsay Kohler

As a leader at your company, remind people to take a deep breath and pick up the phone or send a quick chat if they can’t walk over to clarify a question. Chances are your colleagues are stressed and could use the extra communication.

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# Watch for signs of isolation and deteriorating mental health

You not only need to watch for signs of isolation and deteriorating mental health in those around you, but encourage managers and team members to do the same. This is an easy time for people to isolate themselves, which is a common coping mechanism to mental health struggles.

There are some common signs of deteriorating mental health, particularly low mood and anxiety, that you can watch for. They can be broken down into thoughts, behaviors, and physical feelings.

**Thoughts** – During a time of such uncertainty, many will catastrophize. That’s when someone takes a possible negative outcome and takes it to the worst possible end. This is not a conscious decision, but it perpetuates negative thought patterns. Right now, these kinds of thought patterns may crop up around job security and economic impact. It’s normal to have some worry, but if someone is constantly catastrophizing, that may be a sign they could use some support.

**Behaviors** – Behaviors are how people act, and you’re more likely to see behaviors than thoughts or physical feelings in the workplace. For example, people may have higher levels of irritability and are more prone to being short. Some may be more isolated and quieter – they’ll most likely have reduced decision-making ability because their systems are being flooded with cortisol, which affects mental capacity. They might be slow to respond and have less attention to detail than usual.

**Physical Feelings** – Although anxiety is often thought of as something happening in our minds, it can have a physical impact on us as well. Issues with mental health can affect us physically. This can include things like frequent headaches, poor and interrupted sleep, general exhaustion, digestion problems such as nausea, as well as random aches and pains.

## Bringing your team back into the fold

Social isolation is a problem because we are uniquely social creatures. We have a high need to belong, and social connectedness is related to mental health. That’s why it’s so important to identify signs of isolation so we can bring team members back into the fold.

**“ Throughout our history as a species, we’ve developed complex social networks to survive. We need that connection, and it permeates everyday life. It’s why going to a sports event in-person with a large crowd is so much more exciting than watching it on TV. During this time, we need to find ways to connect more.**

**— Lindsay Kohler**

We have a need for belonging and connectedness, and a challenge for us is to find ways to connect more. For example, are there ways to get more people more involved with projects? Or connect with different people you wouldn’t normally include? It feels good for people to be part of a bigger project and when people work together toward a goal, it can make them feel more connected. This also has the added benefit of keeping project momentum going.

**Think about how you can have fun with this— clearly we don’t want to trivialize the situation – but we can experiment with ways we can share information in a lighthearted way and maintain team culture through creative communications. For example, we can share our work from home setups, photos of our pets, or fun facts of the day.**

**— Jo Hooper**

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## Use a mental health action plan

All of us want our employees to have good mental health, but how do we actually support them? One recommendation is to create a mental health action plan, which is a simple framework that supports people and enables them to support themselves.

It’s good practice for everyone to do a mental health action plan for themselves, as doing it yourself is a good way to understand the framework before using it with your teams. The tool can be used reactively with people you might be concerned about, or proactively with everyone on the team to let them know you’re supporting them.

Mental health action plans help you understand your people's needs. They can and should be used year-round, not just during a crisis. This plan essentially consists of answering the following four questions:



### 1. What are your triggers?

What causes you to have negative thoughts, spiraling anxiety or feelings of overwhelm? Identifying what triggers you can help you contextualize and manage these triggers to prevent them from deteriorating your mental health.



### 2. What are the signs and symptoms of your mental health deteriorating?

Think about thoughts, behaviors, and physical symptoms that happen when your mental health is affected. What are some common things you worry about? What are the physical markers? It's important to understand how these symptoms manifest.



### 3. How can the organization support you?

If you know what your triggers are and how they affect you on a behavioral and physiological level, you may be able to find ways that the organization can help you manage these triggers, especially if they are exacerbated through work.



### 4. How will you support yourself?

Unlike any other health condition, we are the only ones that can figure out how to improve our mental health and how to get back to a place of positive mental health. This question is really important for people to take ownership of, and how to work on improving it, with any help they might need along the way.

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*This Executive Brief is based on a Poppulo webinar presentation by Lindsay Kohler, Lead Behavioral Scientist, scarlottabbott and Jo Hooper, Former Head of Corporate Communications & founder of Mad and Sad Club. You can download the full webinar here: [Employee wellbeing during a crisis – What behavioral science can teach us.](#)*

## About the authors



**Lindsay Kohler**,  
**Lead Behavioral Scientist, [scarlottabbott](#)**

With a knack for building relationships and an eye for what motivates people to act, Lindsay specializes in crafting communications and game plans that are designed to change behaviors.

Her expertise is in the application of behavioral economics to improve employee engagement and internal communication efforts, as well as how to use the appropriate communications, timing and messaging to create behavior change in tough to reach areas like healthcare, wellness and financial well-being.

She works best with roles and projects that need a big picture viewpoint to really push the dial in terms of creativity, but then require precise business planning and execution for a successful implementation. She has worked with and supported clients at all levels within organizations—including C-suite executives.



**Jo Hooper**,  
**Former Head of Corporate Communications & founder of [Mad and Sad Club](#).**

After two years, two breakdowns, three therapists, and countless pills, podcasts, and walks, Jo became a bit of an expert on mental health at work.

She set up Mad and Sad Club in 2019 to use her communication background and lived experience of managing mental health issues to support people to manage their mental health at work and not just survive, but thrive. She does that by working with organizations to develop strategies around mental health in the workplace, provide training and resources for managers, and raise awareness of mental health issues. Jo also works 121 with people trying to manage their own mental health at work – whether employed or self-employed.

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