

# Mental health for people leaders during COVID-19: Leading on the edge

April 2021



## I<sup>2</sup> Inspiring Insights



The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to extraordinary changes for workplaces, workers, and their managers around the globe. We made massive shifts in how and where work gets done and how we connect with one another. Millions of people moved out of their workplaces to work from home, while others were forced to change *how they worked* to minimize serious health risks to themselves, their families, and our communities.

We learned what was possible and how profoundly such changes, made so quickly and under duress, can impact people. We learned that the day-to-day things we take for granted can change or disappear overnight. Thriving businesses were closed, our routines were upended, vulnerable loved ones became instantly more vulnerable.

We also learned, in real time, that changes and uncertainties unrelated to work have a definitive impact on worker health, productivity, and the resilience of businesses.

Through this pandemic, we depended on people leaders more than ever before. Decisions needed to be made and executed quickly and without the benefit of experience or mentorship. The requirement for high-stakes decision-making was relentless. Appropriately, organizations began to focus more closely on the wellbeing of their people: how they were adjusting to changes in work, their anxiety about job stability, their personal situations, and how they were coping during the upheaval of lockdowns and new fears.

### **The boss reborn**

As the way we toil is transformed, a new definition of leadership emerges. A fundamental shift is underway as face-to-face interaction vanishes.... The traits required to inspire and succeed will morph to both express deep empathy and a thirst for efficiency.... PTSD will be rampant in our culture after the COVID-19 pandemic and massive unemployment, and the manager will become a compassionate caregiver to employees.

**Faith Popcorn, *The Radical Reinvention of Work: 5 Ferocious Leaps Forward*, June 2020.**

There is significant benefit to this focus: **Employers who paid close attention to their employees' mental health found their workforces much less negatively impacted by the pandemic than those who did not.**

The fact is, though, all this change revised the role of leaders – both as it was happening and for the foreseeable future. It appears certain that the pandemic is not just about a crisis response. Its impact and what it has put in motion has led to indelible change the extent of which is still unclear. What is starting to become clear, however, is how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the personal wellbeing and mindset of leaders.

This report explores the key findings from Morneau Shepell's *Mental Health Index™* (MHI), April to December 2020, as they pertain to people leaders.<sup>1</sup>

## Key finding #1

### The mental health of working Canadians declined significantly during the pandemic and continues to be strained.

It will come as little surprise – and is clearly demonstrated in the April through December 2020 MHI data – that workers showed a marked decline in their mental health during the pandemic.

In April 2020, average MHI scores of workers across Canada were down 11.7 points from the pre-pandemic benchmark. By December 2020, with an MHI score of -11.8, there was no improvement.

The size of this decline is significant. Any negative score represents a decline in the collective mental health of the working population compared to benchmark, which is an average of 2017, 2018 and 2019 data. A positive score would represent an improvement. A change of two points is noteworthy and would be concerning in the negative direction. A decline of almost 12 points indicates a population experiencing crisis-level risk.

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<sup>1</sup> A people leader is defined as someone who has a formal leadership role with one or more individuals reporting directly to them. This includes supervisors, managers, and executive leaders. In this report, the terms manager, leader and people leader are used interchangeably.

The *Mental Health Index™*, informed by a representative poll of individuals conducted monthly, provides a measure of the mental health of the working population. The MHI score shows the deviation from the benchmark period of 2017 to 2019. A negative score represents a decline in mental health compared to the benchmark period and a positive score represents an improvement. The *Mental Health Index™* is published monthly for four regions: Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

The *Mental Health Index™* is a trademark of Morneau Shepell Ltd.

### As a leader, there are several things to keep in mind with respect to burn-out:

**Be deliberate in your support for mental health:** Show empathy by stating openly that you understand the situation has been difficult. Listen without judgment. Help your employees in their next steps by reminding them of resources such as the employee assistance program even before a need becomes evident, and helping them to problem-solve regarding work issues.

**Offer flexible, not just remote, work options:** Consider that employees are often contending with the demands of childcare, home schooling, and multiple members of the household working or learning from home. Offer flexibility wherever possible with respect to when employees are expected to be online or when meetings are held, for example, to support employees with the juggling act.

**Show recognition:** In times of stress and uncertainty, people have a higher need for recognition and validation of their day-to-day work.

**Ensure that employees take down time:** While working from home has eliminated the commute for many, others are using those “found” hours for work. Encourage employees to log off and build transitional routines that enable them to separate work time from personal, family and leisure time, even when it takes place in the same room!

**Model what you want for employees.** In particular, recognize when stress is impacting you. Take a moment and allow your mind to calm before interacting with employees or making decisions.

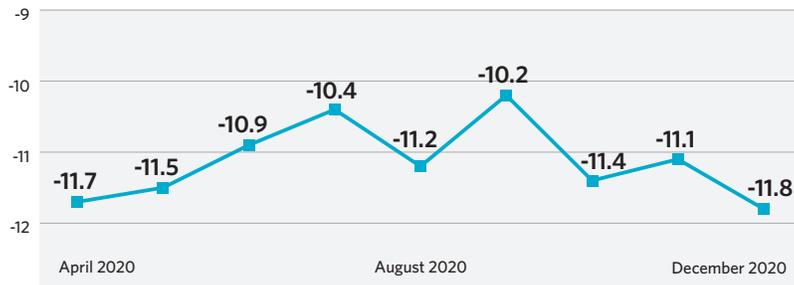
### The impact of the pandemic on mental health

- Loss of sense of control/security
- Increased isolation
- Heightened vigilance
- Increased care and concern for others
- Decreased optimism

### The effect of mental health impacts in the workplace

- Increased disengagement
- Lower productivity
- Increased interpersonal conflict
- Increased risk of accidents and errors
- Higher rates of burn-out

### Mental Health Index™ in Canada



Of great concern, the proportion of the working population with burn-out risk **tripled** in 2020 compared to 2019. Burn-out is characterized by feelings of a lack of accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, and decreased motivation or caring for daily activities. It arises when excessive, prolonged or inescapable stress occurs without sufficient recovery. The prolonged period of change and uncertainty coupled with the disruption of routines that support recovery are clearly factors in the current state of emotional depletion that is being experienced by approximately one in three working individuals.

The ultimate consequence of these risks, especially the high levels of burn-out being experienced by workers, is being seen in the number of people leaving the workforce. Some feel they have no choice but to leave their jobs given the increased stress and demands in their home and work lives. Others are re-evaluating their priorities and leaving their current role coincides with making a broader life transition.

- **One-third of managers** (34 per cent) and **one-quarter of non-managers** (26 per cent) are considering leaving their role since the start of the pandemic.
- The primary reason cited by both managers and non-managers is **stress at work** (57 per cent of managers and 53 per cent of non-managers); followed by their employers' response to the pandemic (38 per cent of managers, 24 per cent of non-managers) and, in third place, stress in their personal life (35 per cent of managers, 22 per cent of non-managers).

COVID-19 rolled back the clock on three decades of advances in women's labour-force participation, setting Canada's economy up for a slower recovery than might otherwise be the case. Despite notable rebounds in overall employment and GDP in recent months, the pandemic continues to cloud the future for many industries in which women had significant representation. What's more, the pandemic has made the family responsibilities that women typically shoulder that much heavier.

#### [Canadian Women Continue to Exit](#)

[the Labour Force](#), RBC, November 19, 2020.

- Without an effort to ameliorate this movement out of the workforce, there will be detrimental and potentially long-term human, workplace, and societal costs. This is particularly true in sectors like education and healthcare, where we may also face a disproportionate loss of access to the resources and services these workers provide.

## Key finding #2

### Managers' mental health scores are lower than those of non-managers.

The *Mental Health Index*™ findings show that managers are experiencing greater levels of mental distress than non-managers. Among those surveyed, managers' average MHI score is 13.2 points lower in 2020 than in 2019 compared to non-managers' scores (10.7 points lower in 2020 than in 2019).

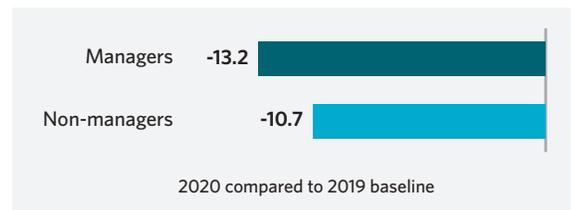
There are multiple drivers of mental health decline among people leaders. They contend with the same pressures, changes, and disruption in their personal and work lives as everyone else. On top of that, they hold the responsibility for business continuity during a time of unprecedented volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Finally, they are responsible for their people, and for ensuring that their teams are well-supported.

This combination means a significant change in the managers' role overall.

- More than half** (56 per cent) of managers say their role has changed significantly since the pandemic began.
- Of those, close to **two-thirds** (63 per cent) believe the change will be permanent.
- 1 in 4** (24 per cent) feel unsure of their ability to meet the new job expectations or do not believe they can.

Maintaining connection with employees is an essential component of the manager's role and one that has likely required managers to exert great effort given the challenges of remote work and social isolation. To their credit, most people leaders have been successfully maintaining a relationship with their employees: 85 per cent of workers report that their relationship with their supervisor has remained the same since the pandemic began. Moreover, this stability has resulted in these employees experiencing less severe mental health stress, with MHI scores of -9.8 compared to -27.2 for workers who reported a deterioration in their relationship with their manager.

Managers vs non-managers MHI scores



As it is for their employees, employer support is an important factor in mitigating managers' own mental health risks:

- **6 in 10** believe they have the support they need from their employer to deal with emerging issues in their workplace. This perceived support was strongest for new issues at the worksite (68 per cent) and managing remote teams (67 per cent).
- **7 in 10** consider working from home beneficial to their mental health. The shift to working remotely, especially accompanied by support for managing remote teams, seems to bring with it a benefit that offsets some of the permanent role changes that managers believe they will be facing.

While overall managers felt supported, a not-insubstantial minority of managers (four in 10) felt they did *not* have support regarding some key managerial challenges, including:

	Felt supported	Did not feel supported
Additional duties	60%	40%
Employee concerns about job security	59%	41%
Employee mental health	59%	41%
Diversity and racism	59%	41%
Changes in staff productivity	58%	42%

What emerges from these findings is that many managers are struggling to cope with the changing nature of their role brought about by the pandemic. As they look to a post-pandemic future, high on many managers' list of concerns is their ability to address the ongoing and likely long-term consequences of pandemic stress: financial, job and role insecurity, anxiety and declining optimism, burn-out and staff departures, and overall negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing that they and their staff will continue to experience.

## Key finding #3

### Managers know their employees are experiencing mental health challenges but most do not know what to do about it.

An unequivocal good news finding in 2020's MHI is that **better employer support correlates positively with better mental health scores.**

To state it another way, employer support appeared to be a buffer that reduced the negative impact on workers' mental health during the pandemic. By extension, ramping up employer support could be expected to mitigate the longer-term mental health

In IBM's 2021 *CEO Report*, 77 per cent of outperforming company CEOs planned to prioritize employee wellbeing even if it affects near-term profitability, compared to 39 per cent of underperforming CEOs, reflecting that the surveyed leaders of top organizations are heavily focused on their people in this moment.

*Find your essential: How to thrive in a post-pandemic reality*, IBM Institute for Business Value, February 2, 2021.

“The COVID-19 pandemic challenged many leaders to focus on what’s essential, like their people. Many employees’ expectations of their employers have significantly changed. The ‘anywhere’ workforce can require leaders to provide agile technology, to adopt more empathetic leadership models that prioritize employee wellbeing and to champion flexible and inclusive cultures.”

**Mark Foster, Senior Vice President, IBM Services**

Top 5 supports managers want from their employers	
More support for the mental health and wellbeing of my team	38%
Additional policies and guidelines	36%
More training	32%
More support for my own mental health and wellbeing	29%
Coaching from my manager	23%

impacts, prevent or reduce burn-out and employee departures, and support recovery to a new, post-COVID-19 normal.

Managers also specified the types of support they felt would be most meaningful. Leading the list was more support for the mental health and wellbeing **of their teams**, cited as the number one requirement by more than one-third (38 per cent) of managers, slightly ahead of support for their own mental health and wellbeing, cited as number one by 29 per cent of managers.

Managers – and employees overall – are keenly aware that people are experiencing significant levels of distress in the workplace since the pandemic began:

**36%**

**Employees** concerned about a co-worker's mental health since pandemic

**35%**

**Managers** concerned about a co-worker's mental health since pandemic

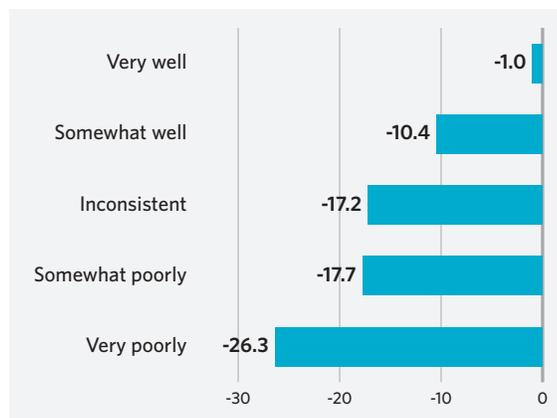
Yet, while managers are aware of the need for mental health and wellbeing support for their staff, most do not know *how* to extend support. **Four of every five managers** have dealt with a specific mental health issue with at least one employee since the pandemic began. However, of these, **more than half** (55 per cent) either saw concerning behaviour changes or had an employee express their concerns directly to them **but were not sure what to do**. Just 25 per cent felt confident about being able to provide support or remind people how to get support.

## Key take-aways

- We finally realized that mental health is an issue for **all**, although some are more vulnerable.
- We depended on managers and recognized the need to support their mental health.
- We saw that employer support for mental health truly makes a meaningful difference.
- We learned that managers are highly aware of the need for mental health and wellbeing supports in the workplace but are unclear on how to extend that support.

The findings of the 2020 *Mental Health Index™* give us a roadmap to sensitize employers, managers and workers about the pandemic's impact on mental health risk in the workplace and to understand the nuances of who is most at risk. Most importantly, it suggests some concrete supports we can put in place to make a meaningful difference for individuals and organizations as we look toward recovery and a post-pandemic future.

### MHI score by employer support for the mental health of employees



## If you notice changes in your employees' behaviour, or if an employee approaches you with a mental health concern, keep the following things in mind:

### DO

- If you suspect an employee may be struggling with a mental health issue, approach the employee with sensitivity and respect and be prepared to discuss the issue as it relates specifically to work performance and to listen empathetically and without judgement.
- Work with the employee to understand what they think they need to address their concerns: it could be time off, access to a specific benefit or program, or something else.
- Know what resources your organization has in terms of policies, benefits and resources and be prepared to offer them if appropriate.
- Honour the privacy of your staff and keep medical information confidential. If the employee will be taking time off, discuss with them how they would like the matter communicated with colleagues, clients, suppliers, etc.
- Recommend that the employee contact the employee assistance program and remind them it is available 24/7 and completely confidential.
- Engage your HR department (protecting your employee's privacy) and/or consult directly with your employee assistance program to ensure you know how to best support employees with mental health concerns.

### DON'T

- Diagnose, interpret, advise or recommend mental health treatment.
- Break the confidence of the employee who has shared their issue without their consent before interacting with employees or making decisions.

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