



**MENTAL HEALTH AND THE REMOTE WORKPLACE
PRIORITISING THE WELLBEING OF HOME WORKERS**

A Robert Walters Group Company

ROBERT WALTERS

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£45bn

Untreated mental health in the workplace costs UK employers up to £45bn every year

Introduction

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Over the course of your life, if you experience mental health problems, your thinking, mood, and behaviour could be affected.

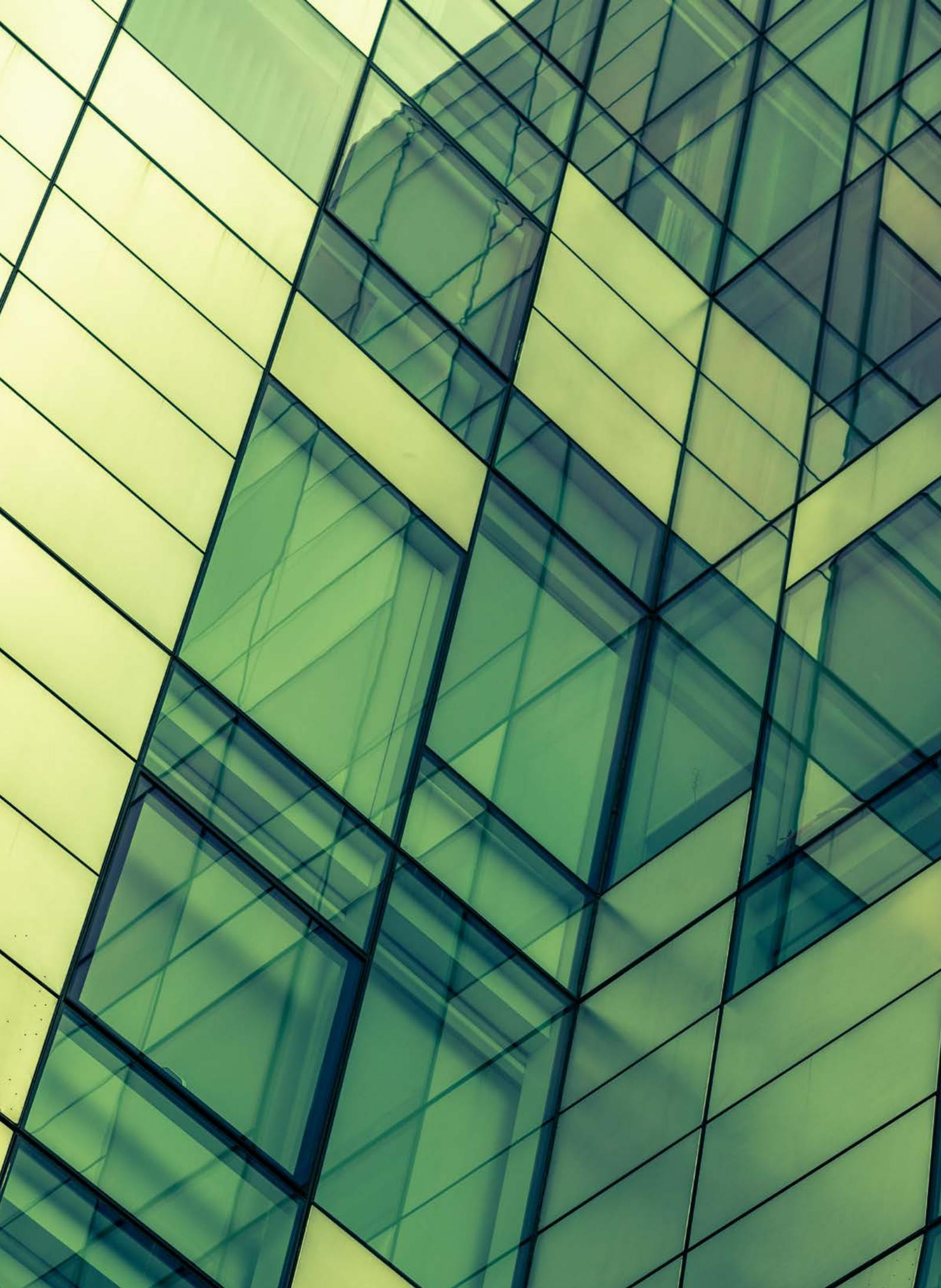
According to the [World Federation for Mental Health \(WFMH\)](#), one in five people in the workplace experience a mental health condition. The effects of untreated mental health in the workplace are well documented, with an estimated cost to UK employers of up to [£45bn every year](#) from employee turnover, absenteeism and reduced productivity.

Despite positive strides made over the last decade to improve access to support and open up the conversation, mental health in the workplace is still surrounded by social stigma. Now more than ever, in the midst of a global pandemic, businesses simply cannot afford to let their commitment to mental health falter.

Although many businesses have begun to embrace the idea of remote working, it is still unclear as to when or if office-based working styles as we know them will return. Adapting to new patterns of working, tied with the financial and health anxieties triggered by the pandemic, has left many workers susceptible to the effects of self-isolation – one of these effects being poor mental health and wellbeing.

For business leaders steering their workforce through this challenging and uncertain time, protecting your mental health, and that of your employees is paramount.

The following guide supports HR leaders implementing accessible wellbeing strategies for remote workers, line managers supporting remote teams, and individuals seeking self-care strategies to sustain positive mental health during times of rapid change or crisis.



The importance of a mental health and wellbeing strategy

A company's people are its greatest asset. Mental health is first and foremost a human concern, and businesses have a moral obligation to create an open and honest environment that supports workers living with mental illnesses.

Improved workplace productivity

A recent cost analysis reveals, on average, for every £1 spent on supporting their staff's mental health, employers get £5 back on their investment in reduced absenteeism, staff turnover and 'presenteeism'. Presenteeism occurs where disengaged employees are present at work but unproductive and unhappy due to having an untreated or unvoiced mental health condition. Workplaces with a proactive approach to mental health will see the positive impact on productivity and business bottom-line.

Improved employee attraction & retention

According to **Robert Walters research**, 88% of professionals consider the mental health policies of a potential employer important when looking for a new role; so companies with a robust, clear mental health policy are more likely to attract wider pools of talent.

Similarly, if your workforce feels that they're part of a team, have autonomy to do their job, are constantly learning and growing, and able to recognise their impact within an organisation, then research illustrates that staff retention will improve.

On the flip side, employees suffering silently from a mental health condition are unable to stay engaged and are therefore more likely to leave- raising staff turnover, causing upheaval within teams, and increasing recruitment costs in the long run.

Establishing an open & positive company culture

To create a company culture where employees feel valued, connected and supported to do their best, businesses cannot afford to ignore mental health in the workplace. Simple and low-cost efforts to replace negative stigma with positive affirmation can significantly improve a workplace environment and employee mental health.

Setting an example by talking about mental health publicly will play a huge role in how it is treated in the workplace. In fact, when polled **during a recent study**, 62% of respondents said that having someone in a leadership role speak openly about mental health would make them feel more comfortable talking about it themselves.

Create better, more proactive relationships between co-workers

In turn, a company culture that facilitates open conversation, universal access to support and workforce engagement helps employees to develop strong social circles in the workplace. This helps to cement healthy team relationships that are motivated to generate and explore ideas, enhancing productivity and innovation. Employees that feel isolated and disconnected from peers are more likely to experience stress and are less likely to confide in others or seek support when they need it.

Link between mental and physical health

Physical health and mental health are intrinsically linked; when one is out of balance, the other will certainly be affected. According to the **Mental Health Foundation**, poor physical health can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health problems. Similarly, poor mental health can negatively impact on physical health, from vulnerability to seasonal illness, to an increased risk of long-term health conditions such as heart disease. Putting equal emphasis on promoting physical health and mental health in the workplace will propel your employee wellbeing strategy, increase productivity and reduce absenteeism costs.

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of professionals consider the mental health policies of a potential employer important when looking for a new role.



Top drivers of poor mental health in the workplace

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant a vast majority of the workforce have had to adapt to working from home to maintain social distancing - leaving us all more vulnerable to the mental impact of remote working and self-isolation.

Added to this are the general health concerns around the virus, anxieties over compromised job security and the impact of loneliness and isolation. Research from Mental Health Foundation and LinkedIn reveals that 57% of professionals more stressed and anxious about work since lockdown started.

Being proactive to protect your workforce requires an employer to understand the red flags and workplace triggers that can cause deteriorating mental health.

Isolation

We know that there is a significant association between social isolation, loneliness, and poor mental health. When employees fail to successfully communicate at work, they may feel isolated or left out. Home workers are more likely to suffer, due to the lack of human connection and the solitude of working remotely. **YouGov** reports that almost 25% of Britons feel more lonely than usual due to coronavirus.

Lack of support

More junior members of an office or new hires may experience stress and pressure differently than more seasoned employees. Working remotely creates another obstacle to accessing support, especially when points of contact or mentors have not been formalised. Having a mentor that has “been there, done that” is a great way to reduce the tension felt by more vulnerable personality types.

28 On average, people are working 28 more hours per month when remote working

Burnout and mounting workloads

Since lockdown started, people have been working **28 more hours per month**, on average. For those suffering from a long-term mental health condition, chronic untreated stress is a huge contributing factor to workplace burnout and illness. A poor work-life balance, mounting workloads, and job pressure are all contributing workplace factors to burnout, leaving remote workers far more susceptible to its effects during these unprecedented times.

Employees are also more likely to feel burdened with a growing workload, especially without the ability to communicate ongoing projects and the support of face-to-face management to help prioritise tasks. Choosing to work mentally demanding hours without any structure in place will undoubtedly result in an adverse impact on performance and motivation.

Lack of job security

Stress also manifests from job insecurity and financial worries, which have no doubt escalated since the COVID-19 pandemic. **YouGov** reveals over 62% of workers think it will have a long-term impact on jobs and unemployment and more than two-thirds believe coronavirus will cause lasting damage to the UK economy. With many workers displaced, furloughed, on fewer hours, or made redundant at this time, there is certainly a feeling of collective anxiety, a reduced sense of security, and a lack of opportunity to confide in colleagues as a coping strategy.

Poor work-life balance

Long working hours may affect an employee’s ability to spend time with their families, practice self-care, and sleep. Remote workers may find work-life balance particularly challenging with no physical separation between work and home-life, especially those with school-aged children. Additionally, remote workers may find themselves working more hours than usual to prove to their superiors that they are reliable.

Stigma

Employees may feel empowered to take time off or reduce their workload when experiencing a physical health problem. But many employees with mental health disorders may suffer in silence for fear or retaliation. 92% of people with mental health conditions believe that admitting to these in the workplace would **damage their career**.

Poor professional self-esteem

Employees lacking confidence at work are prone to impostor syndrome- the overwhelming feeling that you don’t deserve your success or don’t believe you should ask for more. This anxiety can become more acute in uncertain and professionally demanding situations where employees need to assert responsibility and make critical business decisions, spiking our stress levels.

Interestingly, poor self-esteem is more common among female professionals, and does not discriminate in terms of seniority. **According to our research**, nearly double the proportion of women than men (22% v 13%) claim that a lack of self-esteem is one of the main barriers to progress at work, with this issue persisting up to board level.

Lack of value

Employees that feel undervalued in the workplace are more likely to be disengaged and demotivated. This can stem from having a lack of voice or influence within their team, little control or say over decisions that directly impact on their role, or a belief that their remuneration or reward is not an accurate reflection of the work they do.

25%
of UK professionals feel more lonely than usual due to coronavirus.

Prioritising the wellbeing of your team

Think about the tools your team needs to do their job remotely

Frustrations can grow within the team from not having the necessary tools to perform their jobs to their optimum ability. Think about what you offer in the office - such as back supports, dual screens, ergonomic keyboards, additional screens and noise cancelling headsets - and touch base with your team to see whether their home set-up significantly hinders them in any way. Offering what you can to your employees will make them comfortable, boost productivity and raise morale.

[Take a look at our guide to gearing up your business for smart working](#)

Keep your team in the loop

To minimise uncertainty, keep your team up to date with what is going on at an organisation level during group meetings, and send official updates around any specific company news (especially news that affects them) so employees have it for reference.

Almost two-thirds of UK professionals think COVID-19 will have a long-term impact on jobs and unemployment, so do your best to provide clarity on how the business is navigating the situation to stop speculation and panic rising to the surface.

Recreate the team 'social scene'

Uphold the sense of community your team had in the office and think about some of those 'rituals' that you can mirror remotely. There's no reason why you can't continue having 'virtual coffee breaks' or 'sandwich and Skype' team lunches to keep your team camaraderie intact - most importantly, make sure it's not all work chat. Try and keep a degree of separation between work and personal - think for example around conducting social chat around WhatsApp groups and respect the boundaries people have between work and home life.

Encourage a positive work-life balance

Remote working causes the line between working and home to become more blurred, so make sure you instil the importance of unplugging and maintaining a healthy balance among your team. Practices such as setting diary reminders to encourage your employees to wrap up the working day, setting aside full lunch breaks to displace from work, and silencing email notifications in the evening can encourage employees to take valuable personal time and withdraw stress from their system.

And practise what you preach! It's important you look after your own wellbeing so you can also be there to support your team. Sharing your own self-care strategies can help your employees follow your example.

Check-in regularly & be alert to red flags

As well as keeping your collective team spirit alive, one-to-one personal conversations are just as important to get a sense of how your remote team is feeling. It's also a chance to intervene early if you've spotted any red flags that suggest a team member may be struggling- such as fewer e-mails, not responding to messages, inhibition or complete withdrawal in group communications.

Be mindful and alert to the symptoms of mental ill health and ensure all your team are aware that you have a compassionate and supportive relationship to mental ill health and that you are there to support and guide as may be necessary.

Establish a structure

Providing clarity and direction can help teams to focus and feel supported when adjusting to a new way of working. Discuss with your teams how you'd like to run supervision, check-ins, and manage sign-offs remotely. As well as scheduling regular team meetings, let people know how and when to contact you, and provide best practice on how communications channels should be used.



For example, emails for non-urgent requests, IM for quick questions, phone for urgent queries, scheduled calls for project updates and text when you can't reach a team member by call.

Structure should provide staff a clearer sense of direction, but it shouldn't be constricting so don't pack the working week with check-ins. Trust your team to work autonomously and make them feel empowered to use initiative and perform to the fullest.

Take advantage of technology

A lack of face-time or conversation can be isolating for remote workers, so leverage the communication tools you have available so your employees aren't firing off emails all day. Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Skype for Business are examples of the video conferencing software that allow teams to stay connected and collaborate, with screen-sharing and IM functionality to make calls both productive and stimulating.

Be inclusive during your group meetings - aim for inclusion and balance so everyone feels heard; encourage as much participation as you can so everyone feels involved.

Encourage team to utilise support tools

As a manager, be aligned with the organisation's wellbeing strategy and ensure you are aware of all the support your business provides to people who may be struggling with their mental health. From video counselling sessions, virtual exercise classes, to mental health apps such as Headspace and Calm, knowing the spectrum of resources at hand will mean you're equipped to provide the best advice when it's time to talk.

Be understanding of childcare and household arrangements

Be mindful that some of your team will be juggling remote working with childcare or caring for family members at home. This can trigger feelings of guilt and cause employees to lack focus when having to prioritise one over the other. Maybe you'll be able to relate – so share a structured working from home plan that can keep them and their families happy and content.

Take a look at our top tips for remote working parents

Take a look at our top tips for remote working in a shared household

Gain feedback from your staff

Where remote working is new for your business, encourage feedback from your staff about what might improve their experience and make them feel more engaged with the business. Knowing that their opinion matters helps employees who otherwise lack a voice in the team.

Show your appreciation

Use communication platforms at hand to highlight outstanding performances to the team and the wider business that make your employees feel valued. When working remotely, it can be difficult to visualise the impact you're having, so providing a short 'good job' note, highlighting their contribution internally, or even rewarding staff with a thank you lunch delivery can boost morale and help team members regain that sense of purpose.



Enhancing your mental health and wellbeing strategy

Research from [LinkedIn and Mental Health Foundation UK](#) reveals that 50% of HR professionals feel the prolonged period of working from home is having a negative impact on wellbeing. The concept of ‘digital presenteeism’ has emerged – where employees spending more time online is becoming potentially damaging to their productivity.

Working during a global pandemic, while simultaneously adapting to new patterns of working obliges organisations to step-up their wellbeing programmes, making them visible and accessible digitally, in order to prioritise the mental health of their workforce.

With insight from leaders in the mental health and wellbeing sphere, we explore some of the actionable steps business leaders can take now in response to the crisis.

Provide digital solutions that support the spectrum of mental health needs

It's important to provide solutions that support the breadth of mental health needs of your workforce:

- A holistic Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) should provide support to employees with pre-existing mental health conditions, as well as those experiencing feelings of anxiety and depression, numbers of which are prone to increase during these unusual times. Is your EAP easily accessible for remote workers? Making your EAP visible and communicated online is paramount to ensure those employees can access assessment, short-term counselling, or referral services when they require them.
- During lockdown, people are experiencing symptoms of mental health challenges that perhaps they've never experienced before, for example isolation causing depression-like symptoms. Where employees are not comfortable approaching a mental health professional, internal and external organisational sources are important. Virtual mentorships can encourage employees to confide in a trusted colleague during tough periods. Professionals can also access support anonymously from platforms such as **Big White Wall** - a peer support online resource moderated by clinical professionals.
- Mental health is something we all have, so digital support tools should be available to promote and maintain positive mental health and build psychological resilience. Providing your employees access to platforms such as **BetterSpace**, can allow your employees to benefit from wellbeing solutions from exercise classes, mindfulness and self-care strategies, to online yoga, that help your people to stay well.



“While working remotely, organisations have a challenge in reaching their people, and digital solutions are quick and scalable – so it is essential that we look at digital solutions as part of the response, but in a considered way. Technology is not the silver bullet – we need digital and tech solutions to work hand in hand with other aspects of our wellbeing strategy.”

Rob Stephenson, BetterSpace

Understand what your employees are experiencing

There is no 'one size fits all' solution. Your mental health and wellbeing strategy should be tailored to what is going on in your organisation, so look at what challenges your workforce is facing currently. How long are your employees working for? Is lack of exercise, sleep or social interaction common struggles among your teams? Obtaining data will help you to identify your challenges and craft your response. Understanding the issues can come from open discussion across your organisation, but assessments and surveys can be useful – for example, employees are more likely to provide an truthful score when assessing their mental health between 1 and 10, than providing a specific response.

Give mental health valuable airtime

Giving mental health valuable airtime in your organisation is the key to eliminating the stigma that exists within the workplace. From company-wide webinars to team training sessions, providing support to employees on how to manage their own wellbeing, as well as different aspects of mental health, sets a positive tone and can help to spark productive conversation.

Business leaders have an instrumental role to play in giving mental health more exposure and propelling the conversation further. Sharing their own unique vulnerabilities will create safe spaces for people to talk about their own conversation.

Create a sense of community and belonging

Your mental health and wellbeing should align with your company culture. If openness, a people focus, and empathy are part of your values, these should be emulated in the way you support your workforce and be reinforced during uncertain times. Use your communications platforms as touchpoints to create a sense of community – encouraging people to share self-care strategies, creating competitions, and introducing thoughtful topics will inject a sense of fun into your approach, all the while facilitating engagement and fostering kindness.



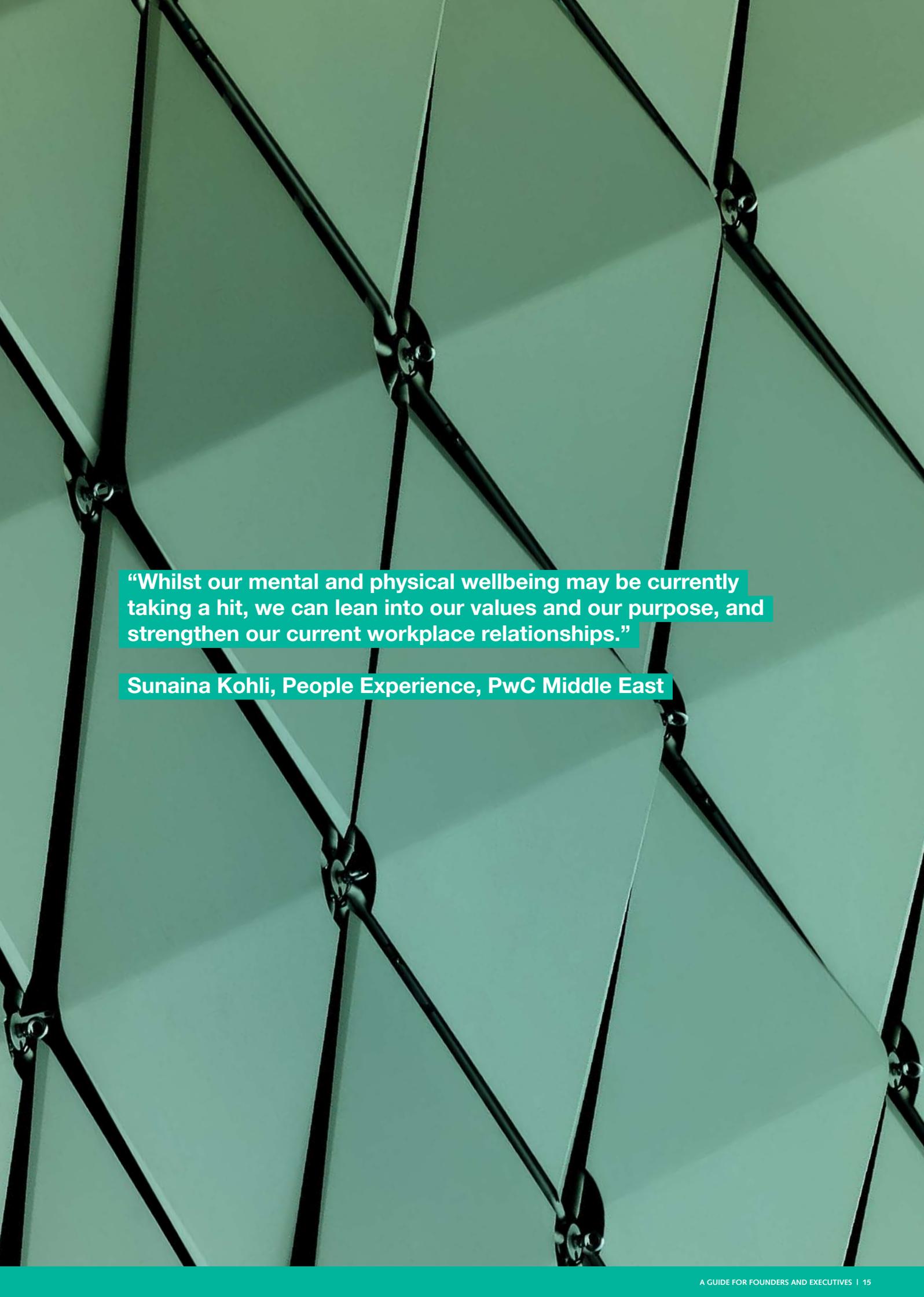
“It can be easy to make assumptions that some employees are more vulnerable than others. For example, you can’t assume that someone is fine if they are surrounded by family, compared to someone that is single in isolation. No-one has it easy during this time.”

Sunaina Kohli, People Experience, PwC Middle East



“When the conversation is happening at the top, it will cascade across the organisation and create the space to break the stigma. Mental health transcends hierarchy – it affects us all – so it’s important these conversations are happening at all levels and functions to really drive the change and unlock the potential.”

Jonny Jacobs, Finance Director, Starbucks



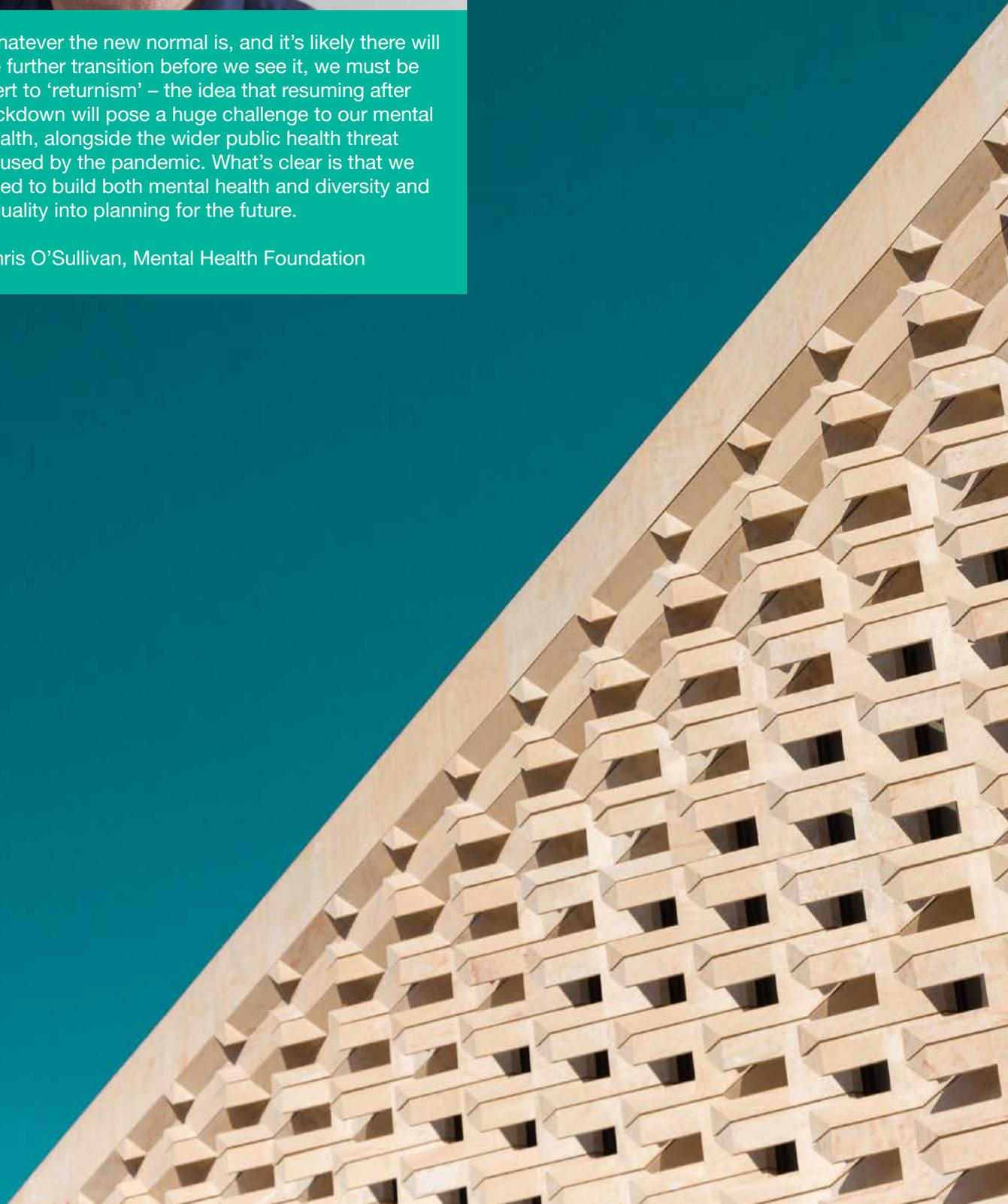
“Whilst our mental and physical wellbeing may be currently taking a hit, we can lean into our values and our purpose, and strengthen our current workplace relationships.”

Sunaina Kohli, People Experience, PwC Middle East



Whatever the new normal is, and it's likely there will be further transition before we see it, we must be alert to 'returnism' – the idea that resuming after lockdown will pose a huge challenge to our mental health, alongside the wider public health threat caused by the pandemic. What's clear is that we need to build both mental health and diversity and equality into planning for the future.

Chris O'Sullivan, Mental Health Foundation





Taking control of your own mental health when remote working



COVID-19 is presenting new and unique major challenges. We are navigating uncharted waters with the virus, making it important to find new ways to work and interact while also taking care of our mental health and well-being.

Many are remote working full-time for the first time, isolated from co-workers, friends and family. Our daily living routines are disrupted causing added anxiety, stress and strain physically, mentally, and financially. It is completely natural for this disruption and uncertainty to lead to anxiety and stress.

Now more than ever, we all must take care of our mental health and well-being. As we protect ourselves against potential exposure to the Coronavirus, keep in mind that social distancing does not mean social isolation.

Take a look at some practical tips on taking care of your mental health and well-being:

Create a dedicated space

In an ideal world, remote employees would have not only a dedicated office, but also two computers, one for work and one for personal use. But not everyone has a separate office in their home and keeping two machines is not always realistic. Instead, dedicate a desk and some peripherals only for work use. For example, when your laptop is hooked up to the monitor and external keyboard, it is work time. When it is on your lap, that's personal time. You may want to go as far as partitioning your hard drive and creating a separate user account for work.

Maintaining structure & routine

Set a schedule and stick to it. Working designated hours, and then stopping when those hours are up, will give your brain time to work and time to rest. While working remotely does mean that there is added flexibility with your personal life schedule, it's best to stick to a schedule where you can be productive, get your work done and call it a day when work hours are up.

Humans are creatures of habit—and that's partly because routine helps us mentally and physically prepare for things. Whether it's having a cup of coffee every morning, doing some morning stretches or taking your dog on a walk, creating a morning routine can greatly help you get ready for the work-day at home. A routine can be more powerful than a clock at helping you get started each day.

When working from home, be sure that you are working reasonable hours. It can be tempting to work given the ease of access and removal of commute time, however it can also be taxing on your health and well-being, so stick to a schedule with healthy boundaries.

Stay connected

For some people who crave the social interaction of the office, working from home can hold unexpected drawbacks. If you're an extrovert and are primarily driven by being around other people, then the sudden change of having to work from home where you don't have that in-person connection, will no doubt be a challenge. And then of course, if you are a person who needs privacy or quiet and now suddenly find yourself having to work around your three kids and spouse, it will be equally as challenging – and at times testing.

If you're feeling isolated or lonely use group chats, videoconferences, and more frequent phone calls to get the connection you need. And if you are someone who needs time alone to think or recharge, discuss that need with your family and work on getting that time into your schedule. Also, pay attention to how your energy ebbs and flows throughout the day and try to schedule the best tasks to your energy level accordingly.

18%
of remote workers struggle
with unplugging

Automatic time-tracking apps, such as [RescueTime](#), let you check in on whether you're sticking to your schedule. They can also help you figure out what times of day you are most productive versus when you slack off. You can use that information to your advantage by reserving your hours of high focus for your most important tasks.

What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?



*State of Remote Report

Maintain your physical health

This is not only good for your physical health, but your mental health too. Periodically, get up and move around your home. Walking, stretching, planks or jumping jacks, whatever works best for you to reduce or alleviate stress and increase endorphins. While our gyms and fitness centres are closed during this time, many are offering free livestreams or app-based workouts for members and the general public, so check online to see what's available.

It's no secret that sleep plays an important role in good physical and mental health. Sleep deprivation can leave you feeling irritable and exhausted in the short-term, but it can also have serious long-term health consequences as well. Lack of sleep is linked to a number of unfavourable health consequences including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and depression. Maintain healthy sleep patterns while working remotely by scheduling 'bedtime' into your routines.

Take regular breaks

Just like any working environment, giving yourself breaks is incredibly important to let your brain and body relax. Take a 15-minute walk, go make some lunch or catch up with a loved one on the phone—whatever you do, though, do not work yourself to the bone without letting yourself take a break away from screens, meetings and work. One [study](#) has shown that breaks can actually significantly improve productivity levels and a person's ability to focus.

Do not short-change yourself during breaks, especially your lunch hour. Launch a simple clock or timer on the screen when you take a break. If you return to your desk after only 40 minutes, walk away for another 20.

Engage with support tools your organisation makes available

This is a challenging time for all of us – and whether we are at work or not many employers provide support.

A number of employers offer Employee Assistance Programmes, and wider benefits. Use these wherever you need - many have dedicated apps and websites and they are not just about counselling.

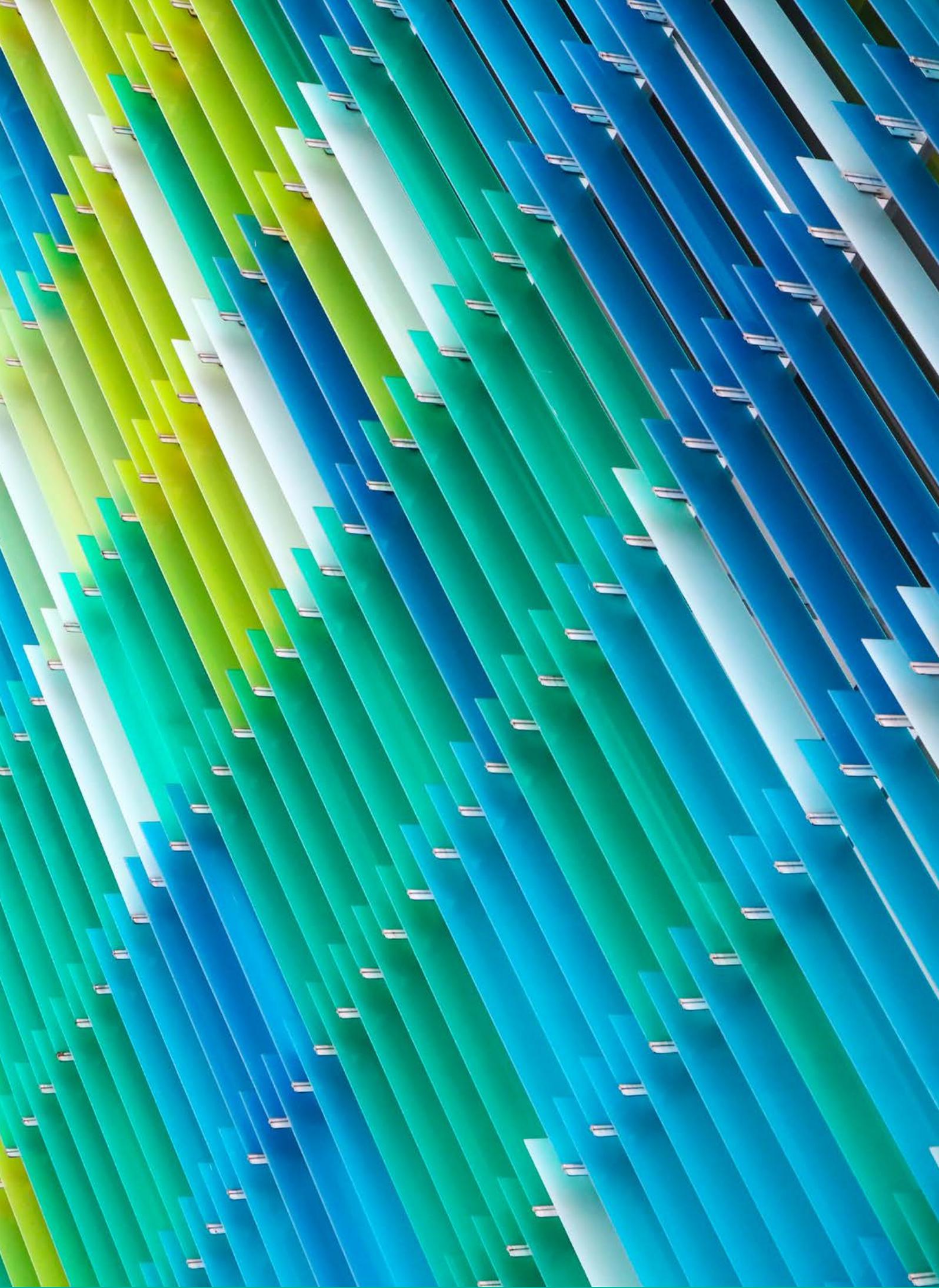
It is quite likely that we will need to accept a certain amount of distress and anxiety in the short and medium term. You may need to think differently - for example doing these [NHS exercise workouts from home videos](#) instead of attending fitness classes. You may want to consider looking at mindfulness practice using apps such as [Headspace](#) and Calm, or finding ways to help others in your community.

Ask for help

If you are experiencing feelings of anxiousness, low mood, or anything else out of the ordinary for you as an individual, it is important that you seek help.

The following resources and contacts may be useful:

- [Mind](#)
- [Mental Health Foundation UK](#)
- [NHS Every Mind Matters](#)

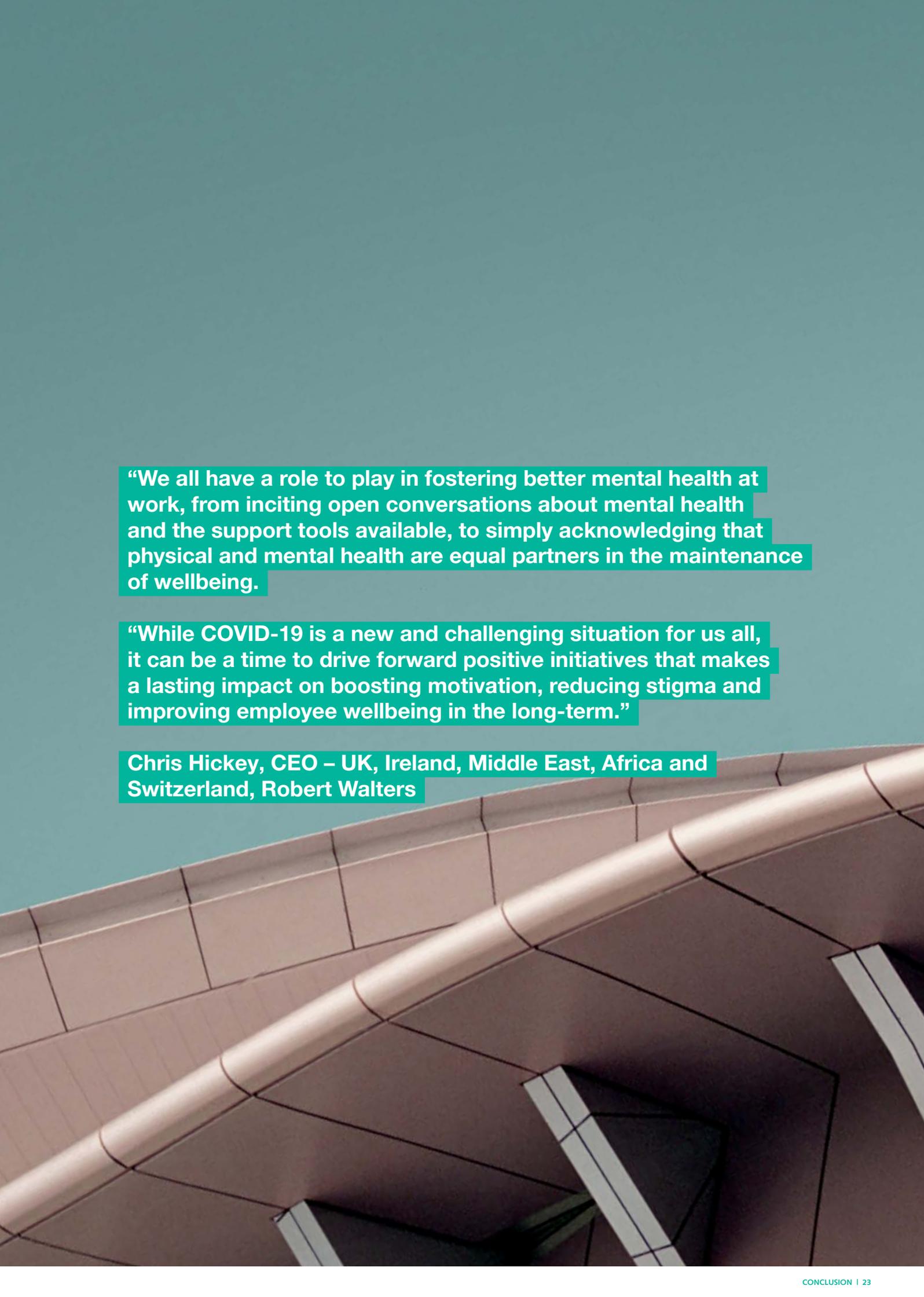


Conclusion

From both a personal and corporate perspective, COVID-19 has compelled us all to scale-up our efforts to protect our mental health, and that of our employees, in order to build a collective resilience and adapt to ‘the new normal’. We’re already seeing the nature of work changing, accelerated by the pandemic, presenting a unique opportunity to open up the conversation about mental health and increased psychological safety at work.

With swift action required to rally teams and ensure optimal performance of remote employees, it is clear that there are actionable steps that can be taken now – such as leveraging technology solutions to pioneer effective communication throughout your organisation.

Moreover, it is a time for greater transparency. Use the digital tools available to encourage a greater breadth of action on mental health, both from the top of the organisation, as well as among teams, with support trickling down across all levels of staff.



“We all have a role to play in fostering better mental health at work, from inciting open conversations about mental health and the support tools available, to simply acknowledging that physical and mental health are equal partners in the maintenance of wellbeing.

“While COVID-19 is a new and challenging situation for us all, it can be a time to drive forward positive initiatives that makes a lasting impact on boosting motivation, reducing stigma and improving employee wellbeing in the long-term.”

Chris Hickey, CEO – UK, Ireland, Middle East, Africa and Switzerland, Robert Walters

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