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THE HIDDEN PANDEMIC: FIVE EXPERT OPINIONS ON WHY EMPLOYEE WELLBEING MATTERS MORE THAN EVER



A Leading Practice E-book produced by Make A Difference Media
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MAKE A DIFFERENCE MEDIA FOREWORD



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For this Leading Practice E-book, the digital workplace wellbeing provider Happence asked five experts, from their core team and wider network of psychologists and psychiatrists, to comment on the mental health impact of the pandemic and the challenges this has created for businesses in 2021 and beyond.

The e-book summarises essential considerations for every leader seeking to build a strong, positive workplace culture that promotes wellbeing and boosts overall success and productivity.

It also includes key tips for creating a culture of mental health inclusivity, and provides a concise resource for anyone making the case for investment in employee mental health and wellbeing.

We welcome your thoughts. Send your comments to Claire@makeadifference.events. Or be part of the discussion through our posts on LinkedIn.

You can also contact the author directly at hello@happence.com.

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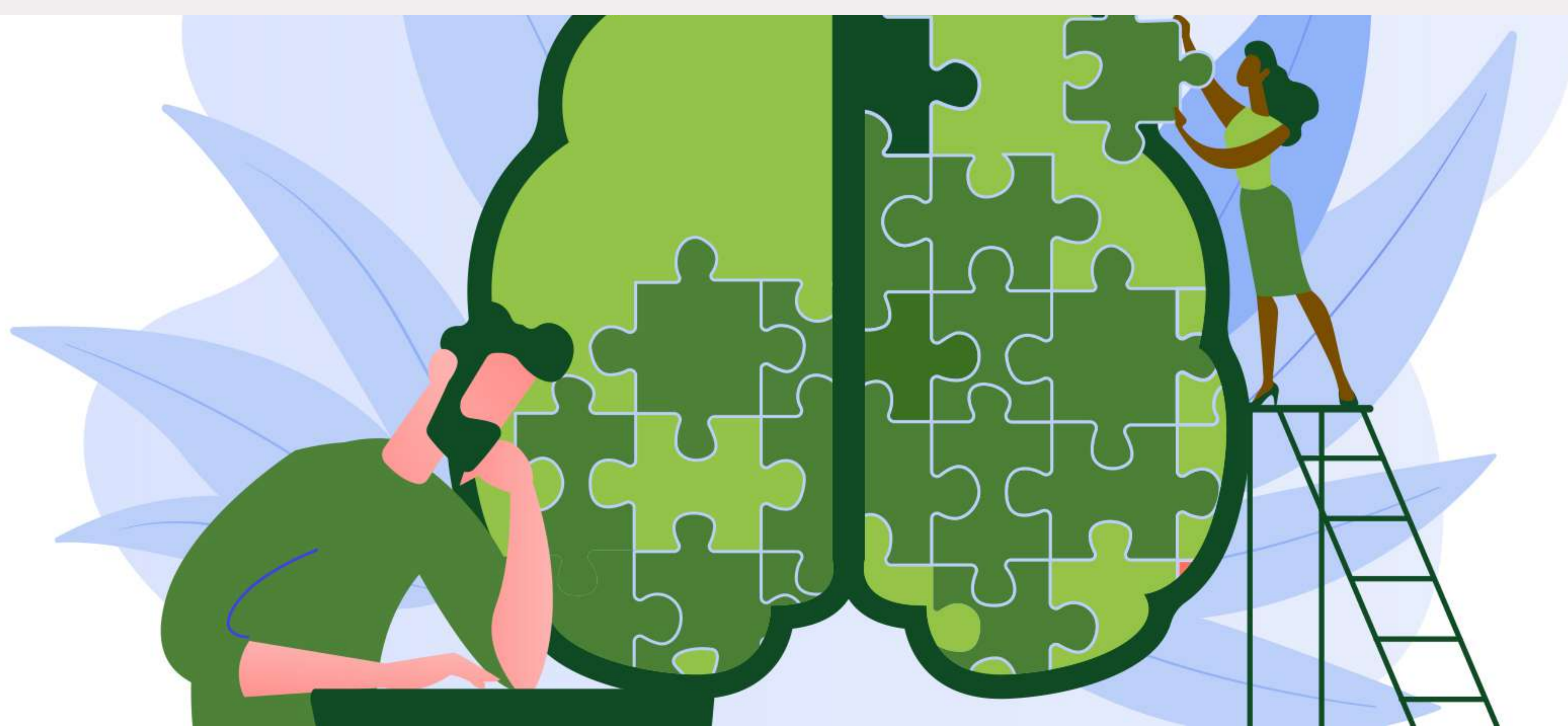
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Introduction

2020 was a year we're unlikely to forget. While everyone has had their own unique experience of Covid-19, the impact on the nation's mental health has been significant. Mental health charity Mind reports more people have experienced a mental health crisis during the coronavirus pandemic than ever previously recorded.

The pandemic has encouraged positive conversations about mental health among friends, families, and colleagues, but the conversation is just the first step. Some employers already acknowledge mental health issues in the workplace and do what they can to help, but many are still unsure what measures they can take to support their workforce following a catastrophe of this magnitude.

In recognition of this, we asked five experts from our core team and our wider network of psychologists and psychiatrists to comment on the mental health impact of the pandemic and the challenges this has created for businesses in 2021 and beyond. We also sought advice from these experts on how to build a strong, positive workplace culture that promotes wellbeing and boosts overall success and productivity.

Meet the experts



Dr Stephen Pereira is founder-CEO at Happence. With over 32 years' experience in psychiatry, Dr Pereira has devoted his career to searching for best practice in mental health care, and founded Happence to support wellbeing in the workplace. In addition to being Consultant Psychiatrist at Keats House and Medical Director at The Insight Network, he is an Honorary Senior Lecturer of Psychiatry at Guys, Kings and St. Thomas' School of Medicine.



Dr Nick Earley is Head of Psychology at Happence and a Clinical Psychologist. He has extensive experience supporting people with common and complex mental health difficulties and helping individuals maintain wellbeing in the workplace. He is also a keen advocate and speaker on topics relating to mental health, resilience and wellbeing, particularly relating to public health and corporate wellbeing.



Dr Helen Kennerley is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and a founding fellow of the Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre. Her teaching and writings are committed to the dissemination of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) within and beyond the clinical world. She has published several self-help books and CBT texts, including *Overcoming Anxiety*, *Overcoming Childhood Trauma*, *Surviving Stroke* and *The ABC of CBT*.



Prof Jon Simons is Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge, where he leads a research programme seeking to understand the brain mechanisms involved in cognition, mental health and wellbeing. He has published more than 100 papers in leading international journals and served on editorial boards, funding panels, search committees and scientific advisory boards. His work has been recognised with numerous prizes and honours.



Prof Ted Dinan is Principal Investigator at APC Microbiome Ireland and Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at University College, Cork. He was previously Chair of Clinical Neurosciences and Professor of Psychological Medicine at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London. In 2019 he was ranked by Expertscape as the number one global expert on microbiota and listed in the top 100 Global Makers and Mavericks.

2020 dealt a very rude and sharp shock to individuals' psychological and social resilience. Over the next couple of years, we'll see the expression of those struggles.



Measuring the mental health impact

The adverse mental health effects of an event like the coronavirus pandemic typically impact more people and last longer than the physical health effects. We asked our panel of experts how the past 12 months have affected our nation's mental health, and what we can expect to see moving forwards.

Dr Stephen Pereira: *"2020 dealt a very rude and sharp shock to individuals' psychological and social resilience. Over the next couple of years, we'll see the expression of those struggles. The trauma people have experienced during the pandemic will become more evident after the initial shock has faded away".*

Dr Nick Earley: *"As a nation, we've shown great solidarity and resilience and this has moved the mental health conversation forward, yet the stigma around talking about mental health still exists. People may be more aware, but it doesn't necessarily mean they're open to sharing or confronting those issues".*

Dr Helen Kennerley: *"The mental health threat goes beyond Covid per se. There are also people who have suffered chronic stress levels as a result of having to balance their home and work life, as well as those who have suffered acute stress, perhaps due to job loss or non-Covid related medical care that has been impacted or delayed by the pandemic. At such times, feeling that support has been lacking or that a sense of community has been lost has an even greater negative impact on mental health".*

Prof Ted Dinan: *"Working from home doesn't always lead to the healthier, happier lifestyle some might expect. It makes it hard to develop a team spirit and can lead to feelings of isolation".*

Prof Jon Simons: *"There's a temptation – particularly in a time of crisis – to feel like we have to be on top of everything, to still be as productive, to know about the latest news all the time. There's good evidence that these pressures can be detrimental to our mental health".*

Dr Stephen Pereira: *"Social media can encourage people to obsessively follow the news cycle. Some news outlets rely on scaremongering and sensationalism to keep their audiences engaged. These factors will also contribute to poor mental wellbeing".*



The increasing demand for mental health support

While many employers already have mental health initiatives in place, the level of support they offer will need to be increased in response to the pandemic. We asked our experts how employers are doing when it comes to supporting their workforce during Covid-19.

Prof Ted Dinan: *“Many companies have gone to significant lengths to alleviate stresses and strains, but unfortunately there are also organisations that could be doing more to acknowledge employee mental health”.*

Dr Helen Kennerley: *“In many cases I don’t think it’s that employers aren’t prepared to do more to support mental health, it’s simply that they’re unsure of where to start and what to do”.*

Dr Nick Earley: *“Employers themselves would benefit from more education about the importance of mental health initiatives; for example, to help them realise they’ll get more out of their workers when they invest in employee mental health”.*

Dr Stephen Pereira: *“Tokenistic gestures such as introducing a free salad bar or gym memberships cannot safeguard mental health. Your most precious resource is your people. If you don’t look after your people and if you don’t help improve their resilience, all you get is mediocre levels of productivity and efficiency”.*

Dr Nick Earley: *“The issues are clear and part of the problem is a lack of preventative mental health strategies. Employers need to understand how to recognise the warning signs of increased stress and mental health issues and they need to have useful strategies in place to help prevent these issues from escalating”.*

In many cases I don’t think it’s that employers aren’t prepared to do more to support mental health, it’s simply that they’re unsure of where to start and what to do.



Essential considerations for every employer

Employees are the most valuable asset of any organisation, so supporting their mental and physical wellbeing has to be a priority. We asked our experts to share their thoughts on the impact mental health issues can have in the workplace and their tips for employers that want to improve the support they provide.

Prof Jon Simons: *“Mental health issues affect our productivity, cognitive performance, and our ability to think flexibly and make sensible decisions. It only takes one employee’s cognitive ability to be affected by a few percent and a significant mistake can be made at work that could have been avoided if they were better supported”.*

Dr Helen Kennerley: *“Mental health affects performance in every occupational arena, at a physical level and at a cognitive level. If not protected and supported, employees will begin to spiral downwards”.*

Prof Ted Dinan: *“The impact poor mental health can have on productivity is enormous. Any organisation that doesn’t pay due attention to the mental health of its workforce will experience high levels of disengagement”.*

Prof Jon Simons: *“It’s often assumed that it will be obvious if someone has a mental health issue – that if people look okay, they must be doing okay. The challenge for employers is creating a culture that allows people to feel comfortable with being open about their mental health”.*

Dr Nick Earley: *“A culture of psychological safety needs to be championed from the top down. Employees need a clearly defined point of contact and managers should be instilled with an awareness of some of the mental health challenges their teams might have and have a good knowledge of the internal support available”.*

Working from home doesn’t always lead to the healthier, happier lifestyle some might expect.



5 tips for creating a culture of mental health inclusivity

Dr Stephen Pereira:

“Communication is key. Employers need to ask their people what the business is doing well in terms of supporting wellbeing, and where and how this can be improved”.

Prof Ted Dinan: *“A wellbeing committee should be established and chaired by a business leader. The committee should decide what the overall mental wellbeing strategy should look like, and this should not be tokenistic or reactive. Proactivity is key. Digesting research and reports on how people have suffered physically and mentally from the pandemic can help to inform the strategy”.*

Prof Jon Simons: *“Employers should treat mental health the same way they treat physical health, and this should be communicated regularly to the workforce. There shouldn’t be any negative connotations around mental health issues in the business. Employers need to embed a culture where staff are happy to talk to their line manager or another colleague about the issues they’re experiencing”.*

Dr Helen Kennerley: *“Investing in employee mental wellbeing can be as simple as having a range of self-help books on the shelf available for employees to read, or digital access to mental health support and solutions for those working remotely. This sets a culture that embraces mental health. Larger businesses should be investing in resilience and wellbeing programmes tailored to their organisation”.*

Dr Nick Earley: *“There’s no doubt that a mental wellbeing strategy helps to improve productivity and performance and it must be championed by senior management. For larger organisations, enlisting external expertise is a great way to implement a wellbeing strategy that is tailored to the business and delivers return on investment”.*

The lasting effects on mental health

With mass vaccinations taking place and the government's roadmap to recovery providing much needed clarity for the public, we appear to be approaching the light at the end of the tunnel. Many will be relieved that life is expected to return to normality this year, but others will be feeling anxious about the prospect and employers needs to take this into consideration.

Businesses should also be aware that the mental health issues that have been caused or exacerbated by the pandemic won't disappear as soon as the restrictions are lifted. Companies that have effective wellbeing strategies in place will be best placed to support their workforces through the exit from the pandemic and beyond.

A culture of psychological safety needs to be championed from the top down.





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