



REACHING THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PANDEMIC WITH OUR MENTAL WELL-BEING INTACT

Perhaps the largest psychosocial experiment in the history of the world has been going on for more than a year now in the form of a global pandemic and societal lockdowns. Initial research suggests that the average working Belgian is holding strong and that the majority of this country's working population is mentally resilient enough to get through the crisis,¹ but let's not declare victory.

The population of Belgium currently faces three major challenges: declining confidence in protective measures, unreliable information, and a large number of temporarily unemployed people. During the first lockdown, the public had confidence in the government's protective measures and showed creativity in enjoying life under the restrictions. As the pandemic wears on, however, people have begun to color outside the lines more often, behaving in unsafe ways.

Psychologically, the worst is yet to come. Requirements pertaining to physical distancing, sanitation, and masking remain in effect in busy places. Approximately one-tenth of the workforce is expected to become unemployed within 3 to 6 months after the government reduces COVID-19 restrictions.² Reliable and consistent information is needed, yet misinformation is widely available to the public. Experts, politicians, and civil organizations contradict each other and issue their decisions in the press, sowing confusion.

NO MORE PAUSE BUTTON

In my view, it is high time for governments to take up their role in limiting the fallout—first by pulling together. People need reliable information. Governments must communicate to the public how they can have the most fun while remaining safe in order to avoid another lockdown. Government agencies and media outlets must join forces to develop an effective communication strategy that uses language carefully tailored to the targeted group.

Employment is a crucial and immediately deployable lever to pull. Research by the Superior Health Council shows that being able to work is crucial to mental well-being. Employment not only provides financial stability, but it

also provides meaning, purpose, and social connection.³ Countries that invested heavily in bringing all those who dropped out of the workforce back to work after the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008 ultimately suffered less economic consequences. If this scenario holds true for the COVID-19 crisis, governments should invest in long-term sick leave and methods to avoid workforce dropout, and they should focus on the labor market as a whole.

DEVELOP RESILIENCE

The trick is to detect and address warning signs as early as possible. Statistics from the University of Brussels show that only four of every 10 companies have developed a well-integrated welfare policy.⁴

The government cannot do all the work. We physicians must educate our patients and staff on how to strengthen their resilience and adaptability. Not everyone knows the principles of stress management and promoting mental well-being. In my experience, an important step is to monitor which efforts are working and to try new things when something is not. ■

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3. Superior Health Council. Psychosocial care during the COVID-19 pandemic revision. Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment. February 2021. Accessed April 28, 2021. https://www.health.belgium.be/sites/default/files/uploads/fields/fgshealth_theme_file/20210304_shc-9610_covid-19_and_mental_health_vweb_0.pdf

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