

### ¿CÓMO ESTÁ LA SALUD MENTAL de tus trabajadores?

A report on the mental health concerns of the Latino workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic and what business leaders can do to support their well-being

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# INTRODUCTION

The economic and social disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a major impact on people's mental health all over the world. Latin America (LATAM) is no exception.

The economic and social effects of the pandemic listed below are likely to exacerbate existing symptoms or trigger relapse among people with pre-existing mental health conditions. This is especially true if they are isolated, no longer have social support or in-home assistance, or have problems accessing their prescription medicines during a lockdown.



# 37,700,000

An estimated 12 million more Latinos became unemployed in 2020 than in 2019, which means a total of 37.7 million people were without a job.<sup>1</sup>

While LATAM's real Gross Domestic Product is expected to grow in 2022, economists predict that it will still not catch up to pre-pandemic levels, <sup>2</sup> further widening the income gaps across the different countries.





There will be a rise of at least 4.4% in poverty in 2022, which means 28.7 million more people will be living in poverty while most probably 15 or 16 million will be living in extreme poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Even those who have previously only experienced anxiety and distress on a few occasions may see an increase in the number and intensity of such experiences because of the intensity and multiplicity of the stressors generated by the pandemic.

Mental health problems (also known as mental illnesses and mental health disorders) refer to a wide range of mental health conditions that affect one's mood, thinking, and behavior. Examples include depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a "state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

Mental health concerns not only impact one's personal life, it can also affect an organization's success because it is a leading cause of reduced productivity.



### **Across the region**

Even before the pandemic, the Pan American Journal For Public Health, a peer-reviewed open-access public health journal covering research and case studies on issues of public health significance in the Americas, has already flagged mental health in the region as concerning.

In addition, as early as 2015, the World Bank has named poor mental health as an obstacle to development in Latin America since it is the leading cause of poor productivity in the country.<sup>4</sup>



In 2019, the World Health Organization said that depression is the leading mental health disorder in Latin America,<sup>5</sup> with 5% of the adult population affected by it.

#### Related to depression is suicide:6



In the Americas, 65,000 people die from suicide every year.



#### Among the working population:

- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death in the group aged 20 to 24 years.
- It is the 4th leading cause of death in the group aged 10 to 19 and 25 to 44.

While deaths from suicide continues to be higher in men than in women, women report more suicide attempts.

Even when it is less severe, depression can affect daily life, work and personal relationships.



#### In Argentina<sup>7</sup>

- The Argentine Department of Health estimates that 25% of people in the country will experience mental illness at some point in their lives.<sup>8</sup>
- In 2018, 1 in 3 Argentines over 18 years old presented a mental health disorder at some point in their life, with depression and anxiety being the most common.<sup>9</sup>





#### In Colombia

- 40.1% of the working population (those between the ages of 18 and 65) has suffered or will suffer from a mental concern at some time in their life.<sup>10</sup>
- Illness, grief, stress, and desire to go to work continues to be the main cause of absenteeism from work."
- 62% of respondents in an online survey that measured the impact of lockdowns in their lives reported negative emotional changes.

#### In Mexico

- 17% of Mexicans have at least one mental disorder, and 1 in 4 will suffer from it at least once in their life.<sup>13</sup>
- Suicide rate increased from 5.7 in 2019 to 6.2 in 2020 per 100,000 people. This is an exponential growth, probably closely related to the damage caused by the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>
- 40% of workers in Mexico say they have suffered mental exhaustion from the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>







### **Inaccessibility of care**

Mental health concerns in LATAM are also worrisome because of several obstacles to proper care and treatment.<sup>16</sup> These include stigma, the culture of familismo (familism) and machismo (masculine pride), and religion. Finally, there is a shortage of physicians with the experience necessary to treat mental illness. There are not enough mental health professionals in LATAM, and care systems have not traditionally prioritized mental health.



### The role of business leaders

Business leaders in LATAM are in a unique position to raise awareness about mental health, increase understanding of it, and provide support to struggling employees who do not know what to do or where to go.

This toolkit will focus on the mental health needs of employees from Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico. It will dive deep into the barriers that prevent Latino employees from seeking help for their mental health needs and show how serious the consequences of unsupported and untreated mental challenges are, not just for the individual but also for the business as a whole.

Finally, it will provide recommendations that business leaders can take to create a workplace culture that builds happier, healthier, and more productive employees.

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### WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN ARGENTINA, COLOMBIA, AND MEXICO DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



The COVID-19 pandemic affected the relationship between work and life almost everywhere in the world and across all industries. Almost overnight, remote work became the mainstream way of working for millions of employees. In LATAM, an estimated 23 million people were made to work from home during the second quarter of 2020 as part of a concerted effort by governments all over the world to reduce the infection rate.



### **Remote work redefined**

Working from home is not a new phenomenon. Before the pandemic, this arrangement was a perk extended by companies to employees who wanted to enjoy work-life balance, so it was largely voluntary. The individual could decide when they wanted to work from home, for how much, and how often.

But because of the pandemic, remote work became required of all employees. This is regardless of their ability to cope with social isolation, their circumstances at home, and their employer's culture. Additionally, remote work during the pandemic was intensive. Whereas before employees could combine working from home with working on the employer's premises, this time around there are no periods of not working remotely; all the work has to be done that way.

All these factors contribute to mental health challenges currently being faced by LATAM employees which include:





#### A. Stress and burnout

A study of the human resources company Adecco found that 40% of LatAm workers have suffered from working too hard or burnout in 2020, mainly from "high workloads" and isolation.<sup>17</sup> This is because overworking is a frequent behavior in those working remotely, due to the extension of working hours, reduced rest periods, increased workload, and pressure.



#### B. Work-life imbalance

Working from home during the pandemic coincided with the closure of schools and other care facilities, as well as a reduction in contact with informal support systems (i.e. extended family, neighbors). This has put additional strain on employees with dependents, particularly if they have children, elderly, ill or family members with disabilities, or if they have disabilities themselves.

The work-life balance of women, in particular, has been affected more because as the default primary caregivers of a household, they need to juggle their paid employment with caring for the children and other family members, supervising home schooling, and doing household activities such as cooking or cleaning.<sup>18</sup>



#### C. Poor social well-being

Working from home reduces personal interactions and weakens links with team members, thus causing employees to feel less connected and supported. This need for relatedness impacts job satisfaction and motivation, which leads to lowered productivity.

#### **D. Other concerns**

Other factors that can negatively impact a person's mental health during a pandemic are fear (of being infected, losing one's job), financial insecurity (i.e. seeing income reduced), and experiencing lower quality of life.





### Implications on productivity

Isolation, blurred boundaries between work and family, increased stress, and job and financial insecurity all negatively impact a person's mental health. But due to the uncertainty of employment during the pandemic, employees will most likely disregard their well-being and continue to work even if they are unwell (sometimes even adopting unhealthy work habits like working overtime) to please their managers and show that they are indispensable. If not appropriately assessed and managed, all these can lead to **mental health problems** such as but not limited to low mood, low motivation, exhaustion, anxiety, depression, burnout, and suicidal thoughts. Accompanying these can be **physical health concerns** such as digestive problems, changes to appetite and weight, dermatological reactions, fatigue, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, headaches, or other unexplained aches and pains. There may even be changes in behaviors, such as a change in activity level or increased use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs as a way of coping.

These may have considerable impact on **workplace productivity**, through increased absenteeism (the practice of regularly staying away from work or school without good reason) and presenteeism (reporting to work despite being ill and not performing to their usual productivity level). Employees who are stressed and fatigued are also likely to commit more mistakes or eventually leave the company.



## BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Despite mental health being a growing concern in LATAM, more so during the pandemic, help-seeking behavior is low among Latinos. A report from WHO<sup>19</sup> states that six out of every 10 people who have depression in Latin America do not seek or do not receive the treatment they need. This can be due to the following:



### A. Stigma and discrimination

According to WHO, stigma surrounding mental ill-health is the biggest obstacle in the way of people seeking treatment. Mental health stigma exists everywhere in the world, but it may be particularly strong in Latin American cultures and communities.<sup>20</sup>

"Stigma" is defined as when someone SEES you negatively because of your mental illness. On the other hand, discrimination occurs when someone TREATS you negatively for the same reason.

#### Stigma can come in two forms: <sup>21</sup>



#### **Public stigma**

Public stigma, which is the reaction that the general population has to people with mental illness. A 2015 report <sup>22</sup> by the Revista Brasileira de Psiquiatria analyzing research on mental health stigma found that Latinos tend to view people with mental health concerns as violent, aggressive, incapable of getting better, dangerous and should be isolated or kept away from the public, and cannot perform the same activities or duties as others.

### Self-stigma

Self-stigma, on the other hand, is defined as the prejudice which people with mental illness turn against themselves (i.e. "I am dangerous," "I am incapable"), which leads them to isolate themselves from family and friends.

The stigma and subsequent discrimination towards people with mental health challenges stem from the following causes:



#### 1. Negative portrayal by the media

Although TV shows and movies are becoming more mindful about how they portray mental health conditions on-screen, many still do not show characters with mental health concerns in a sympathetic light. In fact, characters with mental illness were often depicted as **"crazy," reckless, and even dangerous.** 

#### 2. Familismo (Familism)<sup>23</sup>

This is a Latino value that promotes loyalty, cohesiveness, and obedience within the family. In the context of mental health, this means that most Latin families would **deny the presence** of a mental health condition in a family member unless the condition was life threatening. Parents, in particular, may hide mental health concerns in order to protect the family from **disgrace** because of the belief that children's mental health conditions are due to the **sinful behaviors** of their parents.



#### 3. Machismo

This refers to a patriarchal structure of society whereby the man has the main role as protector and provider for his family. This can lead men to try to **hide or deny** their symptoms of mental health concerns and avoid seeking treatment in order to **keep their status** in society.<sup>24</sup>



### **B. Faith**

Religion also seems to play a large role in shaping the stigma that Latin American people may hold about mental health conditions. This makes sense, given that these communities tend to rely on religious institutions as an important spiritual, educational, and social resource.

According to one 2019 study exploring beliefs about mental health conditions in faith-based Latin communities in the United States, religious beliefs may contribute to stigmas by enforcing the misconceptions that mental ill-health is a moral failing or spiritual dilemma, or that simply praying and having faith in God can help reduce the risk of or treat mental health conditions. Prayer and faith can have a positive impact on mental health because it teaches gratitude and forgiveness. Moreover, religious practices provide a sense of structure and offer social connection to those with similar beliefs. However, it is best to balance faith and spirituality with sessions with mental health experts who can properly assess, diagnose, and treat deeper issues.



# C. Lack of information about mental health

Because of the stigma surrounding mental health in LATAM it has become a taboo topic, with people unwilling or unable to discuss it. This lack of information leads to lack of knowledge. "People do not know that what they are feeling could be what we call depression, or if they do recognize it, they may have a hard time telling others about it," says Paulo Rossi Menezes, a professor of medicine at the University of Sao Paulo in an article<sup>25</sup> published by the World Bank.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the report by Adecco,<sup>26</sup> a large majority (88%) of workers in LATAM say that it's **important** for managers and leaders to **increase the focus on staff well-being** after the pandemic. This is especially important as the majority of workers are now either back to fully working on-site or combining remote work with on-site work (hybrid).

This means that changes must be introduced at the operational and managerial levels to **encourage productivity** but at the same time **guard the physical and mental well-being of the workers**. Specifically, organizations need to search for a middle ground that balances the safety and other benefits provided by hybrid work with the possible future impact it might have on the health and psychological well-being of their employees.

Because of cultural and societal factors mentioned in Section III, **companies must take the lead** to create a workplace environment in which mental health conditions are addressed in these contexts. Some ways to achieve this:

### 1. Create campaigns to reduce stigma and raise awareness of mental health disorders as diagnosable and treatable conditions

- Mental health awareness and prevention campaigns must be part of the company's internal communications.
- Campaigns must also stress the importance of holistic approaches to managing mental-health conditions, preferably drawing on the strong family ties characteristic of the LATAM region.
- Have prominent company leaders champion the agenda to help reduce the stigma from the top down.



Every Monday, MindNation emails Weekly Boosts to client-partners. These are short guides and tips related to mental health and other dimensions of well-being.



### 2. Integrate psychological support initiatives into the workplace COVID-19 response plan

- Create a buddy system to monitor stress and burnout and to provide psychological support.
- Pay attention to workers with pre-existing mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities who may be less able to cope during this period and may need further support.
- Inform both managers and workers about how they can access mental health and psychosocial support services and counselling programmes and facilitate access to such services, including employee assistance programmes (EAP).
- Make stress reduction and self-calming techniques available (such as online relaxation and meditation classes, tutorials, and apps).
- Maintain confidentiality about the services provided to individual workers.



The MindNation CareNow Plan © includes 24/7 teletherapy sessions with licensed Spanish-speaking psychologists and WellBeing Coaches.



Employees can make mental health a daily habit with access to self-paced mental health drills and exercises from MindU.

### 3. Train HR and individuals within the team to be mental health first-aiders

- Managers, supervisors, and workers must be taught to recognize and monitor any sign of depression and stress disorder (such as dissatisfied behavior, destructive behavior, social withdrawal, performance degradation, absenteeism, and presenteeism).
- Provide seminars or workshops that address depression and stress management techniques, like mindfulness, breathing exercises, and meditation, to help employees reduce anxiety and stress and improve focus and motivation.



MindNation conducts webinars on Mental Health First Aid. This is a two-day workshop that equips workplace leaders with the skills and knowledge to notice and support a teammate who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use concern or crisis in a work environment, and connect them with appropriate employee and community resources.

MindNation offers webinars on a variety of mental health and personal development topics, including but not limited to:





Managing Depression



Boosting Productivity



Sleep Is Your Superpower



### 4. Promote social well-being

Use supportive approaches for teams, for example, by recognizing and normalizing emotions related to shared experiences. This can be done by:

- Organizing regular huddles/meetings to enable workers to share their concerns and suggestions with managers/supervisors about the procedures and initiatives implemented to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and ensure that their opinions are duly considered.
- Making sure that workers can ask for support when in need of assistance.
- Establishing channels for workers to express concerns and fears they are facing in this unprecedented situation and to ask questions about the risks to their health and well-being.
- Promoting social interaction among workers, by setting coffee breaks during working hours and encouraging break-time chatter. Encourage those working remotely to join through virtual means.
- Establishing close management-worker relations so that workers and managers can support one another.
- Valuing and recognizing good work performance and the positive contribution of workers.



# 5. Reduce the conditions that cause stress and burnout and work, such as:



• Implementing flexible working hours



• Allowing them to take personal appointments in the middle of the day



 Routinely assessing the workload and work assignments; managers should recognize that productivity levels may not be at normal levels as workers adjust to new arrangements and methods of work



• Adjusting and redistributing work assignments to ensure that workers receive an appropriate amount of work, taking into consideration their individual capacities and particular situations



• Including sufficient breaks (considering both length and frequency) according to workload and working time.



• Encouraging people to do relaxation exercises, stretching or recreational activities during breaks, even those working from home.

MindNation conducts Pulse Surveys with client-partners every six months. The findings will determine what employees are struggling with and what may be causing them to feel stressed or burnt out.

### 6. Promote work-family balance

Have employees fill out a survey about various balance-related factors of your company – hours worked, flexible scheduling, support for working parents, etc. This will help you identify the specific areas in which your company needs to improve, allowing you to focus on implementing achievable solutions for problems that actually affect your employees.

MindNation Pulse Surveys can also determine what adjustments can be made to the Care Now Plan © so that the program stays relevant to the current needs of the employees.

- Promote a focus on the quality of work rather than the quantity of work; communicate clearly the expected outputs, and avoid rewarding faster responses over better responses.
- Offer seminars on what work-life balance is, why it's important, and different things they can do to achieve it.
- Promote health initiatives, such as subsidizing or offering discounts to virtual workout classes.
- Offer equal maternity and paternity leaves.



### 7. Pay attention to physical well-being

Just as poor mental health can negatively impact physical health, leading to an increased risk of some conditions, poor physical health can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health problems. Make physical wellness a priority by:

- Making sure that physical workspaces are well-lit and well-ventilated for those working on-site. For those still working from home, provide resources and funds to support this set-up.
- Encouraging employees to take breaks and/or make exercise part of their routine



# 8. Cultivate a culture of openness and transparency

- Encourage workers to communicate openly by having regular meetings, corresponding by email, and engaging in group projects.
- Remind workers of their rights in terms of leave and reassure them that they will not risk losing their job if they take sick leave, parental, or other available leave to take care of dependents who are sick.
- Introduce temporary measures in order to avoid redundancies, such as temporarily working on reduced hours, reducing or banning overtime, and reallocating workers to tasks which are less affected by the crisis.
- Be a role model for your staff: your behavior at work sends a powerful message to your workers about how seriously they should take health and safety, including in relation to stress and mental health.





Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues of absenteeism and presenteeism at work due to mental health concerns like depression and anxiety cost the global economy an estimated **USD1 trillion a year in lost productivity.** But there is good news: according to a study by MindNation, **for every USD1 that a company puts into scaled-up treatment** for common mental health disorders, there is a return of **USD6 in improved health and productivity.** Companies in LATAM should note this and take steps to address mental health challenges among their staff.



If business owners build a more supportive, inclusive, and respectful workplace, promote work-life balance, ease financial stressors, and proactively implement a mental health program that focuses on holistic health, then employees can realize their full potential, cope with the stresses of life better, work productively, and make meaningful contributions to the company and their communities. Only then can companies remain competitive, innovative, and profitable.



MindNation is a mental health and well-being company that uses a data-based, proactive, and culture driven approach, creating customized solutions that are right for your company. We can partner with you to build a community of happier, healthier, and more productive employees. For more information, visit us at:



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