

OPINION

Coping with COVID-19: the benefit of wellness programmes

By Professor Tawana Kupe, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Pretoria

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in our lives. It is not only a disease crisis; it is a crisis of society, the economy, sustainability, of governance on the continent and globally – and of well-being.

When the national lockdown was implemented, we all had to stay at home. This was an incredibly difficult time for many, because normal life as we knew it had disappeared. During this time, the well-being of staff and students at the University of Pretoria (UP) was a priority.

Our Employee Well-being Programme was flooded with calls, and this has continued into Level 1. Even though we've lived with the pandemic for several months, many are still anxious and uncertain about the road ahead, their jobs, their health and their future.

We need to see the pandemic as a wake-up call for South Africa to think and do things differently, and to really start supporting our students, employees and communities. It demands of us to address the situation in several ways. In the immediate sense, we need to continue being vigilant about wearing masks, handwashing, sanitising and social distancing wherever possible; we also need to address the psycho-social issues that have surfaced and develop new vaccines to save lives, as well as new knowledge to live more sustainably.

Solutions to human and global well-being cannot be found in outdated, traditional approaches. They require bold thinking and research, and agile, positive shifts that are both preventive and proactive. UP's Faculty of Health Sciences is currently researching genome profiles to be able to determine risk in the future and identify who in the population is at higher risk of contracting fatal viruses and other diseases.

We are also researching how people and society behave during a pandemic – if we don't understand this, we cannot manage the spread optimally. To achieve this, our Faculty of Health Sciences incorporated COVID-19 into the primary healthcare programmes in communities with which we are engaged. This is how we will need to respond in the future – with rapid responses focused on multisectoral interventions at scale.

To address the immediate psycho-social issues amplified by the virus, several advice platforms and programmes have been made available by a variety of organisations and institutions, including universities, the Motsepe Foundation, the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) and the South African Council of Churches.

UP's Employee Well-being Programme rapidly adapted its service offerings to online platforms; this included individual counselling, and wellness awareness groups on nutrition, stress management, and mental and physical coping mechanisms. The programme also hosts virtual workshops on resilience, mindfulness, anxiety, work-life balance, coping skills and emotional intelligence. Fitness classes – Pilates, FitFlex and dynamic resistance – usually offered on all the campuses shifted to online classes.

Social worker Dr Rina Buys heads the Employee Well-being Programme and has a doctorate in employee assistance programmes. She says the disruption of people's routines has caused their stress levels to soar. Many are experiencing a roller-coaster of emotions: mood swings, anxiety, depression, fear over losing their job, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Behavioural addictions are also a major issue; this includes substance abuse, gambling and overspending, all of which create a downward spiral.

Dr Buys explains that when an individual (or a family member) is diagnosed with COVID-19, they need step-by-step assistance. Not being able to see anyone when they or family members are in isolation or in hospital causes high anxiety all round. This is significantly heightened if a family member passes, which is compounded by the limits on each culture's traditional mourning process.

People need to know that it's okay to go through what they're going through, says Dr Buys. Professionals involved in the Employee Well-being Programme help individuals to differentiate between what they can and can't control, then help them to work on what *is* in their control. Dr Buys emphasises that people need to consciously create a balance between their physical and mental needs and the needs of their soul; they need to take time off to relax and work on being more understanding, flexible and kind.

The Motsepe Foundation has hosted several webinars on mental health during the pandemic, and during one of them, SADAG director Cassey Chambers stressed the importance of talking openly about depression and anxiety. This also helps to dispel the persistent stigma of mental health issues. Chambers says that one in three South Africans will experience a mental issue in their lifetime, and that because men in particular struggle to accept they have such issues, they're far more likely to commit suicide than women.

SADAG also receives many crisis calls from young people, including students, who don't have the coping skills to deal with depression and anxiety, and the various issues they might be facing, be it a break-up, difficult family relationships, abuse, the loss of a loved one or a combination of issues.

Many in senior positions are also battling to cope, as everyone looks to them for answers and they, too, are often at a loss. If they voice this, many fear that their staff will think they're weak. Anxiety left unchecked can manifest in depression or physical symptoms such as sleep disorders and migraines.

Achieving a work-home balance while working remotely is also a challenge. Leaving home to go to work creates a boundary – but with COVID-19, that boundary disappeared overnight. This was only compounded by children not having routine schooling and the multiple roles that many have to fulfil at home. Some people are also finding that because they're at home, they're working far more than eight hours; others think it's a holiday period, which puts undue pressure on those in the same team. Sleep patterns can also change.

Employees need help to navigate these situations and should make use of their company's wellness programmes and online counsellors, religious institutions or organisations like SADAG.

The pandemic has added impetus to the reality of the future of work, in particular the idea of working from home, given the technological possibilities. As the new world of work unfolds, the practices we adopt should not look only at technological facilities, but also holistically assess the impact on productivity, health and well-being, with the understanding that for some, home conditions are not necessarily conducive.

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