



**Time out** An employee taking a moment to herself

▪ GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

## Corporate therapy

With employees reporting mental health challenges, companies are turning to mentors and townhalls to help them cope

∴ REGI VARGHESE

Undeniably, the pandemic has changed us. Two years of battling a host of mental health concerns ranging from stress, fear, uncertainty and anxiety, to dealing with grief over the loss of a loved one, has had a powerful impact on corporate structures. Companies are working on supporting employees by changing their approach to mental health.

"The issues in wave one, wave two and now with Omicron have been very different," explains Piyali Maity EAP counsellor, who heads the client care operations of Itohelp.net, one of India's leading Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providers.

She adds, "Wave one was something no one was prepared for and we had a marked increase in distress calls. We set up a dedicated team just to attend to COVID-related psychological first aid, and to provide immediate support to those who were experiencing panic or high distress. When wave two hit, people experienced death and loss very closely and we did a lot more of grief therapy, narrative therapy and group therapy intervention sessions."

Now, Piyali says, people are exhausted, fatigued with loss of sleep and appetite. "They reported feeling demotivated for a while and now want to give a healthy direction to their life. EAP usage has

tripled in the last two years."

Under pressure to offer support to their employees, corporates have played a pivotal role in bringing the spotlight to mental health through the pandemic. However, it has not been easy to reach out.

Deepa Agarwal, founder of Re-Link Consulting, an advisory firm, that helps organisations design mental health interventions says, "We used different ways to sensitise employees: comedy, self-care videos, and manager training for recognising stress in team members."

Adding that they work with more than 15 organisations across sectors she says they have noticed a definite shift in people's attitudes to mental health. "In fact, several people have started to work with therapists to overcome past issues, which they were experiencing before the pandemic too," she states. Nimisha Das, director HR, Kellogg South Asia, who oversees 900 employees and another 1,500 associates and partners, says, "Our EAP encourages employees and their families to access therapy from empathetic counsellors."

She says they also started simple initiatives like Zero Hour Thursdays, where no meetings are scheduled on the second Thursday of every month, and Free-up Fridays, where teams are urged to not work beyond business hours on Friday evenings thus freeing up about 16 hours a month on employee calendars.

"The pandemic has also busted the myth of productivity while working remotely, hence the concept of flexi working must become an integral part of work culture in the future," adds Nimisha. Stating that these "pandemic practices" are here to stay, Ashutosh Telang, chief people officer, of Private Equity firm says, "The core philosophy behind these practices is care and concern by an organisation. To the talent, these signify empathy in an organisation's culture."

