



Psychological side effects of the pandemic

Findings by EAP provider ICAS emerging from their counseling

The fact that the pandemic has a negative effect on our mental health has by now been sufficiently proven by various studies and scientific articles. This trend can also be clearly seen in day-to-day counseling provided by ICAS. As an EAP provider, ICAS offers employees 24/7 psychological and emotional support, as well as legal advice. Specifically, the number of complex cases that required face-to-face counseling sessions with a psychotherapist increased by 60% in the first half of 2021 compared to the same period in the previous year.

Significant increase in work-related stress

Big changes were felt particularly as far as workload was concerned. These cases increased dramatically by 105% in comparison with the same period of last year.

Cases where employees suffered from work-related stress saw an increase of 32% and cases of burnout also grew by 63%. The only downward trend in the workplace were conflicts, which, in years gone by, were actually the most frequently mentioned work-related topic. The pandemic, and more specifically its effects on work life, especially the home office, seems to have changed the way people experience and handle stress considerably.

There are numerous reasons for this:

- Working times have increased – subconsciously in many cases – because disengaging from work is more difficult in a home office situation.
- Employees are now entirely responsible for structuring their day, whereas this was previously determined much more by colleagues and processes.
- According to research recently conducted by LinkedIn, 20% of respondents feel more under pressure to reply to emails quicker than before.
- No or too few breaks: Even if it does not seem to make sense to have to slow down to become faster – taking regular breaks can improve mental health significantly, reduce the risk of burnout, and increase productivity.

- No longer seeing work colleagues may result in fewer conflicts, but as can be seen by the ICAS analysis results, social contact in the workplace is an important factor that helps in dealing with stress.

Does this mean that the new working world is bad for us?

It depends what you make of it. On the one hand, a home office may lead to more pressure in that we feel we have to be available constantly so as to prove that we are actually working. This results in increased stress levels and is poison for mental health management, which can then severely impact on our work performance.

On the other hand, many employees say they can concentrate better in a home office and thus work more effectively. They feel that they are more productive and also have a better work-life balance. These employees tend to work for management that recognizes how vital the health of their staff is for successful work in the business. Management often plays a key role in preventing stress dynamics and motivating employees to keep up their performance over the long term. What helps as regards home office work, for example, is clear communication of expectations: Are we expected to be available in the evenings as well and to reply to emails, or can we "switch off"?

Managers' tasks have become more complex

The tasks of managers have grown in complexity and importance. This makes another observation all the more staggering: The percentage of management consulting sessions during the period surveyed between 2020 and 2021 dropped by half. This development suggests that managers were not able to "sense" what employees were feeling in the same way as before because of the remote working situation and therefore were not

aware of any increased stress. Another reason could be that managers feel stressed themselves and consequently struggle to find enough time and energy for their employees.

In any event, an outside perspective is extremely important, especially in these times. Discussions with colleagues or a coach help overcome difficult management situations – when dealing with stressed employees, for example.

Pandemic-related increase of personal problems as well

The pandemic has not only changed our work lives but also affected many aspects of our private lives.

Cases resulting from relationship problems have increased by 22% compared to the same period in the previous year. And an increase of 18% has also been recorded in problems with alcohol, drugs, and gambling addiction.

A particularly significant increase was also seen in cases of depression and anxiety, which were 41% higher in the first half of 2021 than in the first six months of 2020. The longer the pandemic is with us, the higher these cases will be, both in terms of numbers and severity.

Although families with school-age children were particularly affected at the start of the pandemic because of home schooling, this has now changed. Noteworthy is that mostly people who live on their own are currently struggling more with the effects of the pandemic than those who share a household with others. This is largely as a result of feeling isolated and lonely.

Influence of management on personal problems

When it comes to personal problems such as these, most managers feel out of their depth. Naturally, managers cannot solve the personal problems of employees. Nonetheless, personal problems also manifest themselves in day-to-day work by impacting on the performance, which means that they do become relevant for managers. Although it is their duty to ensure the wellbeing of their employees and they should therefore engage with the employee in question, they should take care to separate professional and personal interactions. Mastering this balancing act requires skill, good communication, a clear plan, and sound preparation.

In cases like these, the EAP (Employee Assistance Program) can be a good tool to help address professional problems that employees may have as a result of private issues. Affected employees are provided professional psychological support around the clock, while managers fulfill their duty of care.

ICAS also offers a range of management training programs that help managers to improve and develop the new skills required.

