

# Level Up Support For Mental Health

Lin Grensingpophal



## **ENCOURAGE YOUR STAFF ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION TO PARTAKE IN TECH-BASED AND TRADITIONAL OFFERINGS.**

There has been much talk in the media and human resources circles recently about the “great resignation” aka “the talent tsunami”—the burgeoning number of employees who are deciding to leave their jobs or the workforce altogether. According to an April 2021 report from NPR ([tinyurl.com/npriquit](https://www.npr.com/2021/04/01/981111111/great-resignation)), “As pandemic life recedes in the U.S., people are leaving their jobs in search of more money, more flexibility and more happiness. Many are rethinking what work means to them, how they are valued and how they spend their time. It’s leading to a dramatic increase in resignations—a record 4 million people quit their jobs in April alone, according to the Labor Department.”

Some sources (including this article in *Fast Company*, [tinyurl.com/fastcomentalhealth](https://www.fastcompany.com/2021/04/01/great-resignation)) have suggested that to stem the tide of exiting employees, employers should focus on helping them address mental health issues. Considering that credit unions teams have been working through a worldwide pandemic since the early part of 2020, working on mental health is definitely not a bad place to start.

CUES member Trevor Beaton, chief innovation and people officer at Synergy Credit Union ([synergycu.ca](http://synergycu.ca)) in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, which has \$1.6 billion in assets on its balance sheet, is paying attention to people's mental well-being at present.

"Overall, we're being very cognizant of burnout and turnover," he says. "We are aware of the 'talent wars' going on across Canada with remote work and flexibility opening up the possibility that a new job doesn't necessarily mean a physical move to a different community."

Mental health issues affect everyone in an organization—from frontline staff to CEOs. A study by Share Partners, SAP and Qualtrics ([mindsharepartners.org/mentalhealthatworkreport](http://mindsharepartners.org/mentalhealthatworkreport)) found that three-quarters of Gen Z workers said they had voluntarily left roles in the past for mental health reasons. The study also reported that CEOs are as likely to report mental health issues as other employees.

Many credit unions have found and implemented effective ways to shine a spotlight on mental health and promote overall employee well-being.

For example, \$6.5 billion Michigan State University Federal Credit Union ([msufcu.org](http://msufcu.org)) has been recognized for six consecutive years with the National Best and Brightest in Wellness award for its efforts to support a healthy workplace.

Michigan State University FCU CHRO Silvia Dimma, a CUES member, says in the news release ([msufcu.org/press\\_releases](http://msufcu.org/press_releases)): "As an organization, we encourage our employees to improve their health and well-being through a variety of activities and events. Many of the activities involve team-building practices, which lead to a more positive work culture for our employees. As an example, employees can choose to participate in voluntary fitness challenges, financial wellness education classes or the many 5K runs/walks the credit union sponsors to support local charities."

## **CONCERNS CONTINUE TO ESCALATE**

Concerns about employee mental health were already growing before the pandemic. Then, over the past 20-plus months, concerns grew even more dramatically as CU employees at all levels became subject to new stressors ranging from changes in work setting and the need to work from home, changes in children's school schedules and the need for parents to be teachers, changes in child care access that made going to work regularly more challenging, issues related to other family members working from the same spaces, and personal concerns about the pandemic.

If there's a silver lining to all of this, it is that mental health is being addressed more proactively and more publicly than ever before. While some stigma certainly still exists, the willingness of many people to talk openly about mental health issues—including such well-known celebrities as tennis player Naomi Osaka and gymnast Simone Biles ([tinyurl.com/voznaomisimone](http://tinyurl.com/voznaomisimone))—is reducing some of the angst people often have about talking with others about their mental health concerns.

CU leaders, HR staff, managers and supervisors all have a role to play in addressing employee mental health issues. Of course, leaders also need to address their own mental health. Unfortunately, many are still hesitant to do so, says Scott Foster, CEO of Wellco ([wellcocorp.com](http://wellcocorp.com)), a wellness firm he founded in 1996, located near Detroit.

Despite increasing awareness of and conversations about mental health, the adoption rate of benefits and services related to mental health are still abysmally low, notes Foster.

"Benefits can work only for those who use them," he says, adding that based on his research, "the participation rate in mental health benefit programs is lower than 2%."

As the pandemic has heightened mental health concerns, it has also heightened employers' recognition that they need to do more to encourage employees at all levels to access needed resources.

## **THE PANDEMIC EFFECT**

Mental health has been a concern for credit unions, but the pandemic "shone a light on mental health as a top cause of disability and driver of prescription drug costs," Beaton says. Based on data from the credit union's national benefits plan, one in five people experiences mental illness.

*"Our surveys show that nearly 70% of credit union employees eat alone at their desks three or more days a week."*

*– Scott Foster*

"We have known this trend for quite some time, and our own stats prove this out as well," he notes. "We projected higher mental health stress during the pandemic, but fortunately it didn't pan out to a full extent because of actions we took with our benefits package, using quadrants to manage our program: mental, physical, financial and social."

One of Synergy CU's efforts has been adding a "mental health moment" segment to team meetings. Having these conversations has helped, Beaton says.

"Some of the conversations have gone very deep and created a stronger and more trusting environment for my team to share and get support from each other."

He also points to a step challenge program that's helping employees, including Beaton himself, stay more active and keep their minds in a good place.

Other credit unions have also recognized the impact of the long-running pandemic on employee mental health and wellness and taken steps to support staff members and ensure they can access the mental health resources they need. GTE Financial ([gtefinancial.org](https://www.gtefinancial.org)) is an example. Jasiel Legon is SVP/chief talent officer of the Tampa, Florida-based credit union, which has \$2.7 billion in assets.

"During the pandemic, our HR team focused on one-on-one discussion with leaders," Legon explains. "We saw the leader burnout as they handled pandemic-related issues—some new and stressful. We learned that not being able to take real vacations, in which you travel and

completely unwind, was taking its toll during the pandemic. It was so much harder to unplug during short car trips.”

These leaders needed support, Legon says, because they dealt not only with their usual business responsibilities but also with COVID-19 illnesses within their departments, quarantine protocols, all kinds of unanticipated processes, and the overall grief that accompanied witnessing so much illness and death related to the pandemic.

“As Florida became a COVID hot spot, we stepped up our efforts to review PTO balances to ensure that leaders were taking time off—almost forcing them to unplug,” Legon says.

Now, many of the credit union’s employees are coming back under a hybrid work model, in which they are in the office two or three days a week, depending on the needs of individual departments.



## TECHNOLOGY AIDS

While the pandemic heightened mental health concerns, credit unions have had mental health programs and tools in place for some time. Some of those tools leverage technology for delivery.

For example, \$930 million LAFCU ([lafcu.com](http://lafcu.com)), based in Lansing, Michigan, partners with On Target Living ([ontargetliving.com](http://ontargetliving.com)) to offer virtual wellness resources for its employees. "There is much we can't control, so we looked at what we can control, and determined that information and inspiration from this program will better equip our staff to meet today's unprecedented challenges," says CEO Patrick Spyke, a CUES member, in a news release from October 2020 ([tinyurl.com/lafcuontargetliving](http://tinyurl.com/lafcuontargetliving)).

LAFCU Trainer Clare Gomez has this to say about her experiences with the program, which she accesses on her phone and computer.

"After just a few months I feel more energetic ... more in touch with my body," Gomez says. "I'm sleeping better, exercising more, and when I feel stressed, I know it. Then I pull up my favorite three-minute OTL meditation video to reel me back in."

GTE Financial launched its internal GTE Live Well program about five years ago and considers it a key asset in helping employees cope with mental health issues. Legon says the program has four pillars—educate, engage, empower and support—with an emphasis on mind, nutrition, know-how, financial health and activity.

"It's all about healthy lifestyles," Legon says. The Live Well program offers employees stipends for making use of specific wellness activities. In addition, GTE Financial employees have access to a full-service gym, a 1-mile outdoor track, outdoor basketball courts and a game room at its main campus.

"We're constantly creating a sense of balance for our employees to support their mental health," Legon says.

*"We're being very cognizant of burnout and turnover."*

*– Trevor Beaton*

About five years ago, GTE Financial added telemedicine to its list of employee benefits, leveraging the services of Teladoc ([teladoc.com](http://teladoc.com)). More recently it added Teladoc's behavioral health practice, which offers 24/7 access to health practitioners. "It can be difficult to make appointments with therapists; this service is a huge advantage for our employees," Legon says.

Synergy CU initiated its telemedicine program six or eight months before the pandemic, Beaton says. Telemedicine is extremely important in some Canadian provinces, where long distances can create difficulty in getting to in-person medical appointments. Synergy CU serves 11 communities, not all of which have easy access to providers.

"It happened to be a happy accident in terms of timing that the telemedicine program was added to the list of employee benefits before the pandemic occurred," Beaton says.

## **CULTURE SUPPORTS WELL-BEING**

Beaton points to examples of culture change at Synergy CU that are contributing to its employees' well-being:

"We share successes at each meeting," he says. "We want our employees to share happiness and joy. A recognition program helps our employees understand that what they do is important. We have sought to normalize these conversations about mental health."

The CU focuses on key topics on "mental wellness Mondays" on the company's social media applications. "There are posts internally on our Yammer site ([yammer.com](https://yammer.com)), and then our marketing team makes posts on our (external) social media channels," such as LinkedIn. Beaton adds. "Based on page hits and other data, we know that employees are well engaged with these topics."

The organization used its annual benefits review and five-year forecast to focus more deliberately on mental health. "We are finding that our teams are embracing programs and services that will help reduce the costs driven by declining mental health of our employees," Beaton says. To that end, the credit union adopted Virgin Pulse ([virginpulse.com](https://virginpulse.com)), a wellness program offered by Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group. It offers tools that build better mental health habits, such as 100-day challenges on sleep and regular exercise.

Finally, Beaton says, "We're insisting that our employees take vacation and have the power to say 'no' when they are at limits that create anxiety or isolation."

A simple thing that all CU leaders can do to improve staff well-being is to reduce social isolation, says Foster. "Our surveys show that nearly 70% of credit union employees eat alone at their desks three or more days a week," Foster says. "They have no chance to develop a sense of community, which we need to promote along with safety and mutual respect in the workplace."

Leaders need to model a sense of well-being by being open. "The last year and one-half has been hard on everyone," Foster says. "Most employees have suffered from burnout and/or depression. Every leader should focus on being kind."

To that end, Foster says he personally has had to limit his exposure to media outlets and social media and to practice careful replacement of negative thoughts with positivity. "We need to acknowledge our struggles."

## **MOVING FORWARD**

Addressing mental health needs to be an ongoing organizational focus.

Leaders might be deceived into thinking that their organization is doing well, Foster says, but research is showing that employees are struggling. "Long before the pandemic occurred, employees were struggling with staff shortages, long hours, and now with pandemic uncertainty," he notes. "We're hearing employees say they are exhausted. We are helping ... companies figure out where employees can thrive. Leaders can truly make a difference with a focus on overall well-being."

Moving forward, says Legon: "We're putting the joy back into our jobs by putting it (the pandemic) behind us. We want to move forward. For so long, we've been bogged down with

negativity.”

Legon adds that it’s important for those in HR looking out for staff to take care of themselves first.

“We’re like the airlines,” he says. “You put your own oxygen mask on first so you can help others. But we need to recognize that it’s OK to take care of ourselves as well.”

**Lin Gensing-Pophal, SPHR**, is a writer and human resource management and marketing communication consultant in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. She is the author of *The Everything Guide to Customer Engagement* (Adams Media, 2014) and *Human Resource Essentials* (SHRM, 2010).



### **Wellness Tools for Employees**

- On Target Living ([ontargetliving.com](https://ontargetliving.com)) provides educational resources, keynote speaking and coaching to help people experience the power of feeling their best. Its methodology is based on its three pillars: rest, eat and move.
- Teladoc ([teladoc.com](https://teladoc.com)) allows participants in any location to talk to a doctor, therapist or medical expert anywhere by phone or video.
- Virgin Pulse ([virginpulse.com](https://virginpulse.com)), a wellness program offered by Sir Richard Branson’s

Virgin Group, offers tools that build better habits, including 100-day challenges on aspects of mental health, such as better sleep and regular exercise.

- Wellco ([wellcocorp.com](https://wellcocorp.com)), a wellness solutions firm founded in 1996, offers solutions and tools as well as consulting services.

### **MORE ON MENTAL HEALTH**

What Can Credit Union Leaders Do to Mitigate ‘The Turnover Tsunami’?  
([cumanagement.com/1121turnover](https://cumanagement.com/1121turnover))

Podcast: Famous or Not, We All Have to Work on Mental Health  
([cumanagement.com/podcast121](https://cumanagement.com/podcast121))

The Value of Valuing Mental Health ([cumanagement.com/0121mentalhealth](https://cumanagement.com/0121mentalhealth))

Video: Why Managers Need to Sometimes Say: 'Keep It Real; Tell Me How You Feel'  
([cumanagement.com/video040121](http://cumanagement.com/video040121))

Human Resources Analytics Cornell Certificate Program ([cues.org/ecornell-hr](http://cues.org/ecornell-hr))