

# newtopia

## How to Choose the Right Health and Well-Being Benefits for Our New Post-Pandemic Reality



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Where to Begin	3
Focus on Habit Change	4
Choose Their Own Journey	5
Dedicated Coaches to Support the Journey	5
Genetics	6
Measurement and Monitoring	6
The Journey Forward	7

Millions of Americans say the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health and the number of those reporting depression has quadrupled since it began.<sup>1,2</sup> A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association predicts that the emotional, physical, and financial stressors of the pandemic are likely to create a “second pandemic—one that would persist even after the physical threat of the virus has been addressed.”<sup>3</sup>

### Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health<sup>4</sup>

- 67% are sleeping more or less than before the pandemic
- 61% have experienced undesired weight changes
- 48% of parents say their stress level has increased
- 47% have delayed or canceled healthcare services
- 42% have gained weight
- 29 lbs is the average weight gain
- 23% are drinking more alcohol to cope

We’re living in a different world now, one where everyone—employees and employers alike—have suffered physically, mentally, emotionally, and often financially. The pandemic’s ongoing impact, especially on physical and mental health, is likely to weigh heavily on employers as they struggle with growing medical costs and an increasingly sicker workforce. Absenteeism and presenteeism, which the CDC estimates at \$225.8 billion each year, may also become increasingly challenging.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, employers cannot afford to offer their post-pandemic workforce the same health and wellness benefits as they did prior to the pandemic.

## Where to Begin

Employers need a way to help employees cope and recover from the physical and mental impacts of the pandemic while, at the same time, trying to keep costs down. Offering an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)—which most employers already do—is good, but utilization in those programs is far too low to truly address the current and growing need.<sup>6</sup>

**The MMB Health Trends: 2020 Insurer Perspective**, published by Mercer, advises employers to think outside the box as they review their “benefits ecosystem,” which should include health and well-being programs.<sup>7</sup> Rather than think of this as a burden, however, employers should think of it as an opportunity to truly make a positive impact on their employees’ lives. As Julie Wilkes, Senior Manager, North American Well-Being & Resistance Lead at Accenture, says, “When our employees are struggling, it is our responsibility to be at our best because this is a time that we can really make a difference.”

Following are five things to keep in mind when considering a new post-COVID-19 health and well-being program.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm> <sup>3</sup> <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/one-year-pandemic-stress>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/one-year-pandemic-stress> <sup>5</sup> <https://www.ibmadsion.com/4th-covid-wave-could-be-marked-by-absenteeism/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/winter2019/pages/companies-look-to-boost-low-usage-of-employee-assistance-programs.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mercer.com/our-thinking/health/mmb-health-trends-2020-insurer-perspective.html>

# Focus on Habit Change

Well-known motivational speaker Tony Robbins believes that high achievers often embrace coaching and mentorship as part of their strategy to achieve personal growth and accountability. He explains that coaches help in many different ways. First, they are unbiased so they speak the truth about a person's situation and opportunities for improvement. Second, a coach can identify an individual's "true potential," which helps them build on their strengths and develop new skills. Third, a coach can help an individual develop an action plan and then provides guidance and encouragement along the journey. While Robbins isn't speaking specifically about health improvement, the same benefits apply.

## The Impact of Lifestyle on Health and Well-Being

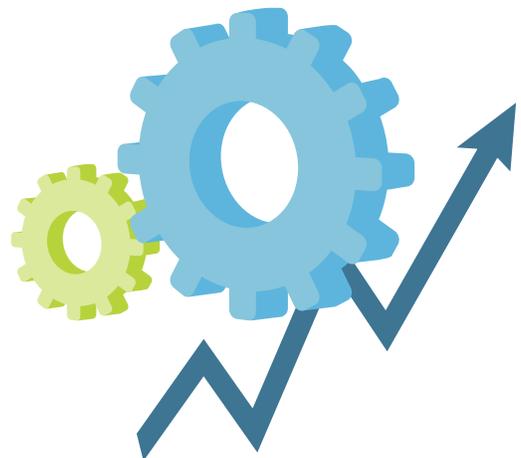
- 60% of a person's health and quality of life are directly related to lifestyle choices.<sup>8</sup>
- 40% of an individual's likelihood of premature death is due to their behavioral patterns.<sup>9</sup>
- A diet high in refined sugar impairs brain function and actually worsens mood disorders like depression.<sup>10</sup>
- Sitting for long periods of time increases the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer.<sup>11</sup>
- Depression is linked to insomnia, unexplained pain, stomach issues, and a decrease in the body's ability to fight infection.<sup>12</sup>

It isn't difficult to correlate the months-on-end stress caused by the pandemic with the habits and lifestyles that have led to the reported unhealthy weight changes and an increase in mental health conditions. This is why HR directors should look for health and well-being solutions that emphasize habit change as a foundational element of the program.

---

Habit change helps prevent, reverse, and slow the progression of chronic disease—all essential elements for enhancing mental health, resilience, and human performance.

---



<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4703222/> <sup>9</sup> <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa073350>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/sitting-disease-how-a-sedentary-lifestyle-affects-heart-health>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.healthgrades.com/right-care/depression/how-depression-affects-your-body>

## Choose Their Own Journey

One of the reasons so many health and well-being programs fail to deliver long-term results is that they're designed with a one-size-fits-all philosophy. They have a standard format with the same curriculum for all participants with limited regard for an individual's unique needs or goals.

A better approach is to use a program that is hyper-personalized for the participant. This means choosing a program that incorporates a wholistic view of the individual, including personality, mental health status, social situation, living environment, needs, goals, and genetics. Focusing on just one of these elements doesn't get at the heart of what causes unhealthy habits over time. To treat the whole person, a program need to address all of these factors. It is only through this approach that individuals can make long-lasting health improvements.



It's really extraordinary when somebody can take their life back and realize that they're going to live a longer healthier happier life where they can go take vacations and enjoy them, and play with their children and play with their grandchildren, and live their life on their terms."

**Julie Wilkes, Senior Manager,  
North American Well-Being &  
Resistance Lead at Accenture.**

## Dedicated Coaches to Support the Journey

According to the American Psychological Association, "Having someone with whom to share your struggles and successes makes the work easier and the mission less intimidating."<sup>13</sup> This is something HR directors should not overlook when choosing a health and well-being program. Many solutions provide virtual coaches through chat, live webinars, or pre-recorded videos. While these are good options, they don't provide the one-on-one relationship vital for program success. For example, when a participant chooses to chat with a virtual coach, the person on the other end doesn't know anything about the individual seeking help. They don't know the person's specific health challenges, their background, or their social determinants. Therefore, the guidance provided is more likely to be generic, not personalized to the participant.

Dedicated coaches, on the other hand, know the individual and have established a relationship through regular phone or video sessions over time. These coaches are more effective in helping guide and support participants while also holding them accountable. The best programs are those where coaches are matched to participants based on personality type. When coaches and program participants have complimentary personalities, it builds trust and improves collaboration, which ultimately leads to greater long-term success.

---

As the impact of the pandemic lingers, dedicated coaches serve as an always-available resource to help guide participants on their post-pandemic journey to better health and well-being.

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.apa.org/topics/lifestyle-changes>

# Genetics

Our genetics play a significant role in our health and well-being. They provide the instructions that make a person’s body function effectively, which may explain why traditional programs fail to create true health improvements. For example, research shows that a person’s genes can influence their predisposition for being overweight by as much as 80%.<sup>14</sup> A health and well-being program that doesn’t incorporate strategies for overcoming these types genetic influences is likely to fall short.

Having genetics data informs a more strategic, personalized recommendations that helps individuals overcome their genetic influencers to create sustainable habit change.

## Genes That Influence Health, Well-Being, and Resilience

BDNF Gene	DRD2 Gene	MC4R Gene	FTO Gene
Determines resilience to stress <sup>15</sup>	Regulates dopamine, appetite, growth hormone <sup>16</sup>	Regulates satiation response <sup>17</sup>	Determines how the body breaks down fat <sup>18</sup>
Decreased levels of BDNF are implicated in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety and depression</li> <li>• Impaired mental cognition</li> <li>• Neurodegenerative diseases</li> <li>• Response to exercise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Induces cravings</li> <li>• Creates feelings of pleasure and satisfaction</li> <li>• Influences addiction</li> <li>• Influences development of severe obesity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influences appetite</li> <li>• Induces overeating</li> <li>• Significantly impacts obesity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implicated in body mass index</li> <li>• Increases odds of obesity</li> <li>• Combined with MC4R, FTO further increases the risk of obesity, as well as type 2 diabetes</li> </ul>

# Measurement and Monitoring

Understanding how individuals are progressing throughout their post-pandemic health and well-being journey is important. The best programs don’t use the “set it and forget it” approach; they are designed to change as the participant’s needs change. This is why more effective solutions incorporate PROMIS® (Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System). PROMIS® is a tool used to evaluate and monitor physical, mental, and social health at any given point and over time. Measurements include things like resilience, mood, anxiety, sleep, and energy level—all key factors in overcoming the impact of the pandemic on a person’s health and well-being. Based on the individual’s scores, coaches can modify the program to address current and ongoing areas of concern.

The stressors and poor habits that have built up over the past year aren’t going to just disappear once the pandemic is over. The risk is that these factors, if not addressed, have the potential to cause an increase in chronic illnesses like obesity, hypertension, diabetes, or metabolic syndrome. In order to be addressed, these factors must be identified, measured, and managed over time.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/why-people-become-overweight> <sup>15</sup> <https://elifesciences.org/articles/15092>  
<sup>16</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8260195/> <sup>17</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31954858/> <sup>18</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17434869/>

# The Journey Forward

Pandemics change us. Things we used to take for granted, we now hold dear. We realize how much we have to be grateful for and how quickly life can change. But along with the struggles come opportunities. Now is the time for employers to take a new look at their health and well-being benefits and ask these questions:

- Are your employees actively participating in your health and well-being programs?
- Have your healthcare costs gone down since implementing the programs?
- Have your current programs increased employee satisfaction and engagement?
- Do your benefits vendors guarantee performance?
- How well do your existing benefits programs align with your other employee-engagement programs?

The bottom line is that the programs that didn't work before the pandemic are going to be woefully ineffective in our new post-pandemic reality. Employees need help. They need solutions that can help them recover and restore their health and well-being. The type of program an employer chooses to implement could make all the difference.

