Supporting mental health in the workforce makes sense, not only on a human level, but also on a corporate one.

Long before COVID-19, studies showed that one in seven people experience mental health problems in the workplace (14.7%). And there is now a tsunami of data to show the pandemic has escalated what was already a crisis.

Poor mental health is impacting every business at every level. The Bupa Global Executive Wellbeing Index found 72% of UK executives have experienced at least one mental health symptom in the past year.

Addictions and mental health problems often go hand-in-hand, and the Index confirmed that nearly two thirds (64%) of those reporting mental ill-health during the pandemic had turned to potentially dangerous coping mechanisms.

Two out of five (38%) used alcohol or drugs as a release — with some using both, 16% are gambling and 16% have disordered eating.

A leading addiction charity reported an 86% increase in the number of people seeking help in January, compared to the same time last year.
The number of people seeking treatment for opiate addiction is at its highest level in five years. The Royal College of Psychiatrists warns that in England alone, nearly 8.5 million adults are drinking at dangerous levels. When questioned, more than half (53%) confirm they are using alcohol because of a mental health challenge.

This increase in addictive behaviour is likely to have long-term impacts on physical health. Drug and alcohol abuse increase the risk of liver, kidney and heart disease. Alcohol and binge eating can lead to weight gain, increasing the risk of diabetes, heart disease and many cancers.

In these challenging times, economic uncertainty, home-schooling and working from home can all increase anxiety and stress. Research from Bupa and the Business in the Community found that just 14% of those surveyed reveal mental health conditions to their managers, with a third (30%) telling no one at all.

Bupa Clinical Director for Mental Health, Pablo Vandenabeele, says, “After families, it is colleagues and employers who are most likely to recognise a mental health or addiction problem — and these personal connections can play an important part in ongoing support and recovery.”

However, current ways of working mean that many of us only see others through a screen, which makes it harder to spot signals. Taking less care of your personal appearance could be an indication of depression, for example, but how can we tell when so many of us have resorted to casual ‘COVID-wear’?

More people are experiencing insomnia, disordered eating and low mood — but when does this suggest something more serious?

Pablo says, “Employers have a duty of care, and a moral responsibility, to support their workforce, and we know that early and effective intervention reduces the human and financial burden of addictive behaviours dramatically.”

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“From the top down, there needs to be an acknowledgement that it’s OK to not be OK, and that support is not only available, it is also clearly signposted.” He believes employers can also prevent issues and explains, “We are quite good at dealing with bad news, but we are hopeless at dealing with uncertainty.

“So now, more than ever, it is important for employers to be transparent about what is happening within the business, and how they see life beyond the pandemic. Uncertainty will only cause further distress.

“Staff need to feel trusted, and reassured that their efforts are still ‘visible’, and while some will be looking forward to returning to a workplace, others will have enjoyed working from home, or may be anxious about returning,” Pablo says. “Managers need those insights about individual employees, and an understanding of their strengths and vulnerabilities.”

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but key ingredients include good communication, building supportive teams and utilising the talent and resources within teams and organisations. However, like addictions themselves, the first step is recognising there is a problem.