

Attention, Footwear Firms: Focusing on Employee Mental Health Is Essential Post Pandemic

By [Meredith Derby Berg](#)



Kenneth Cole, chairman and CEO of Kenneth Cole Productions.

CREDIT: AMANDA DEMME

Pandemic concerns might be waning somewhat in the United States, but ongoing distress has underscored the importance of keeping mental health in check. And in this critical moment, many footwear firms have put a priority on supporting the overall wellness of their employees.

"Mental health is arguably the worst pandemic the world has ever faced," said Kenneth Cole, founder and chief creative officer of Kenneth Cole Productions. "Because of the related stigma, two out of three people affected don't seek help or care."

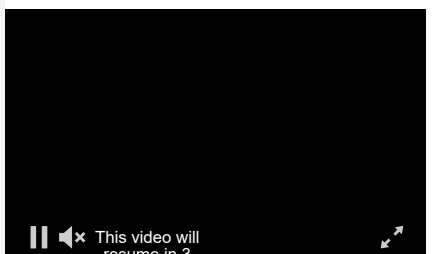
Experts said that it's important for employers to recognize that for people who suffer from mental illness, such as depression, productivity is often affected.


"They can't deliver against expectations when they're not feeling their best. Their thoughts are unfocused and they're worried about other things. They can't prioritize and make good decisions," said Cathleen Swody, an organizational psychologist and founding partner of Thrive Leadership, an executive coaching firm in Hartford, Connecticut.

A recent Conference Board survey found that 60% of workers in the United States are worried about their mental health following the pandemic. On a positive note, the survey, taken by 1,100 people from early to mid March, also found that an overwhelming majority feel their supervisor genuinely cares about their wellbeing.

This compassion is true of the shoe industry, as many footwear brands and retailers have a new recognition and have put subsequent supports in place for employees, including: 24/7 access to mental health resources; improved mental health coverage through insurance; employee assistance programs; frequent executive-led employee check-ins; increased flex time; and wellness events and socialization opportunities.

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While companies can't be held responsible for employees' mental health, leaders can help reduce anxiety and stress at work as well as act as a starting point for mental health resources. At Kenneth Cole Productions, for example, associates have 24/7 access to health information and support through the service Care24. They also have access to a behavioral health coaching service through company insurance.

In 2020, Cole founded [The Mental Health Coalition](#), a group of mental health organizations, brands, and individuals that, together, work "to shift culture and change the narrative around mental health in a way that will empower individuals living with mental health conditions and/or support others in their lives who are."

The coalition also has a comprehensive list of mental health resources available online to give people access to needed treatment.

Two Ten Footwear Foundation said that due to psychological and emotional trauma of COVID-19 in 2020, its referral partner FEI Behavioral Health saw mental health counseling reach an all-time high for footwear sector employees and that this trend has continued into 2021. Two Ten's core mission is to provide emergency financial relief to industry employees facing hardship, and it is specifically set up to refer out for mental health-related concerns.



Joanne Crevoiserat, Tapestry's new CEO, and her team have made mental health a focus.

CREDIT: K CANFIELD

"COVID-19 has impacted the work performance and personal lives of employees, imposed enormous financial hardships, contributed to a growing suicide rate, created higher levels of stress, and contributed significantly to unhealthy lifestyles with associated medical problems," said Terri Rawson, chief marketing and development officer at Waltham, Massachusetts-based Two Ten. "Not only has it caused more employees to seek help, but those with pre-existing mental health conditions are experiencing more severe symptoms."

Rawson added that more than half of the employees in the footwear industry are "financially vulnerable — living paycheck to paycheck — and the constant stress over their finances can be debilitating."

Nordstrom, Macy's, DSW and JCPenney are among the many retailers that furloughed portions of their workforce during the pandemic, according to Two Ten. The nonprofit awarded about \$1.1 million in crisis relief to 1,800 footwear families from March 16 to May 8, 2020, the height of the first wave from the coronavirus.

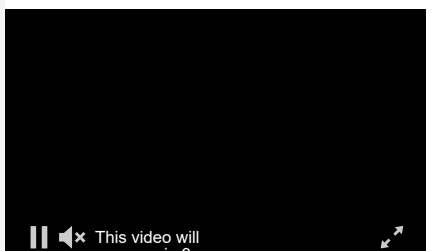
Tapestry, home to luxury brands Coach, Kate Spade and Stuart Weitzman, has seen a "significant increase" in usage of its employee assistance program since the pandemic, said Beth Stankard, senior vice president and human resources business partner at Coach.

The program "offers short-term counseling to help associates and members of their household manage everyday life issues. Licensed consultants are available to assist with everyday needs and life events including emotional issues, relationship concerns, family relationships coping with a serious illness or loss of a loved one, eating disorders, weight control, sleeping difficulties, workplace concerns and smoking cessation, among others."

In addition, new programming has been added at Tapestry in an effort to support mental health, including Zoom seminars with licensed therapists on topics such as grief during the pandemic, adjusting to being at home, and coping with racial injustice events, said Stankard.

"We have also noticed that smaller Zoom breakout sessions have been quite impactful, as associates are able to have more honest and authentic conversations in a smaller group setting," said Stankard, who added that last September, Tapestry provided the app Headspace to employees in North America and Europe at no cost.

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At Tapestry's Kate Spade brand, an internal community of employees called Mind Body Soul hosts biweekly meditations, sends out monthly newsletters and hosts events for employees with speakers and experts in the mental health space. During the pandemic, the group has expanded its support, said Stankard.

Overall, at Tapestry, "We have become more proactive in our approach and in how we have leveraged these resources to ensure that they are visible and that our associates are aware of what is being offered," said Stankard. "We will continue to offer programs and resources to our associates and to foster a culture and community where wellbeing is top priority, and where our associates can take time for mind, body and life."

At Zappos, flexibility for employees has been a priority during the pandemic.



Zappos has made flexibility a priority during the pandemic.

CREDIT: ZAPPOS

"We've been encouraging leaders to worry less about time behind the computer screen, and more about setting clear expectations for employees in order for them to better manage their own time since everyone's needs have been different," said Nicole Singleton, Zappos human resources director. "We've also made it a priority to recreate some of employees' favorite onsite events virtually—instilling fun while remote by sending out creative culture boxes that coincide with the specific event."

The online retailer said it had success with a virtual wellness event that included activities and vendors who presented about employee benefits, the science of sleep, herb container gardening, body positive weight management, eating well at home, and "radical ways to think about self care".

In another example, global retailer Foot Locker said that within its commitment to provide additional resources for employees over the last year, it created a hub called "Live Well.Work Well" that emphasizes mental health support for all global offices.

The hub includes "tips on working remotely, finding work/life balance, coping with anxiety, and offering technology support," according to a company spokesperson. Foot Locker also provides tele-health benefits and paid time off for employees who need to care for themselves or loved ones, as well as a weekly wellness series that discusses how to maintain mental health and balance.

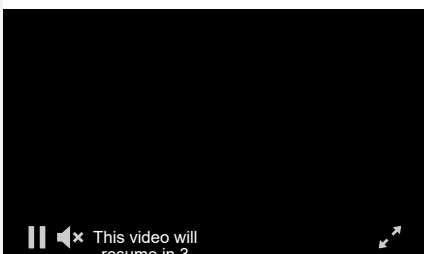
Further, "Knowing so many individuals were feeling stressed and anxious, we distributed two sentiment surveys, one to understand how we can make working from home better for our team members and another that gathered their thoughts, feelings, and concerns about returning to the workplace. Since then, we have leveraged this data when making decisions around when and how to return to the workplace," the spokesperson said.

When it comes to corporate leadership and mental health, executives who lead with empathy are going to have the most success in making their workers feel comfortable and connected during challenging times, said Marilyn Puder-York, a Stamford, Connecticut-based executive coach and psychologist. This, in turn, will help improve the overall wellbeing of employees. If this communication is done well, it can increase loyalty and reduce anxiety, even during a tumultuous time, she said.

"What leadership has to do is assuage the anxiety that the teams or the staff have in an organization when it is going through traumatic changes due to an external factor," said Puder-York. "There has to be a balance of truth telling, empathy and realistic optimism. You tell the truth, you understand that this is an anxious time, that we're all impacted one way or the other, but there is hope that people can re-enter work and the jobs will come back."

There is an expectation that the retail industry will see a post-pandemic sales bounce, though hiring at least for now is not as robust as forecast, according to [government figures](#).

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For employee morale, it's also important to periodically check in with teams to show appreciation for their work and to show concern for how people are faring, said Puder-York. During those meetings, ask if people need referrals to an employee assistance program or other support services.

Puder-York also suggested improving mental health benefits to include substance use disorder, general therapy or psychiatric therapy, or adding mental health coverage overall if it's not already a component of the company's benefit plan.

Finally, as people begin to re-enter the workplace, or as in-store associates return to work in larger numbers, leaders should be patient and acknowledge that the transition may be challenging, said Swody.

"There was a sense of urgency last year, there was a lockdown. We don't have that now. There's not a sense of urgency coming back" to the office or to stores, said Swody. "It's important for managers to normalize that they are still figuring all that out."

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