How is Aetna International supporting employee and member mental health during this crisis?

We have long recognised the importance of comprehensive well-being and mental health support for employees and members. Even before the Coronavirus outbreak, employees and members could schedule face-to-face or telephone visits with clinical counsellors when they needed support, through our EAP program. They also had free access to myStrength – a personalised app that helps address stress, anxiety and depression. These benefits are more important than ever during this period of heightened stress and uncertainty. Of course, these support tools are in addition to our psychiatric and psychological treatment benefit, which is included in our medical plans. Importantly, all of these support tools and benefits are confidential. As an organisation we simply want to make sure employees and members know that there is a support system in place for them.

How has your own Hong Kong team been impacted as the outbreak has expanded globally?

Like employees in most businesses, our colleagues were understandably worried about the safety of working in our local office. We acted quickly to arrange for expanded remote work and more flexible schedules (such as staggered work arrangements) to minimise the number of people working at the same time in the office.

We have since been adapting to the operational impact caused by social distancing measures, business travel restrictions and other health requirements. We recognise the emotional impact of the changes as prolonged isolation, economic fears, health concerns and loss of control bring stress and anxiety. We’re encouraging employees to take advantage of the same wellness support offered to members and find ways to support each other during these difficult times.

How have employees responded?

They have expressed appreciation for the increased communication from senior leaders about the latest COVID-19 updates, flexible working arrangements, business continuity plans and wellness resources. At the end of the day, we are all in this together, and part of that means we are learning as we go, reacting to new developments, and communicating as openly as possible. We have
been holding additional virtual all-employee meetings at the global and regional level, to ensure employees are fully up to date on our organisational decision-making. We have also had additional calls with our in-house medical teams, who can provide expert analysis and advice about the virus itself, which is really helpful. The participation among staff has been excellent and our hope is that they feel reassured during this time.

**What adjustments have you made to benefit plans to address people’s concerns?**

We understand that many people might not feel comfortable going to see a doctor in person these days. In March, we gave members 90 days of free access to vHealth, our virtual health care service. They can speak confidentially to a doctor by phone or video link about any aspect of their health and well-being without the worry of catching infections or leaving their home.

We are also waiving all cost-sharing (coinsurance), co-pay or other deductible charges for inpatient admissions at all in-network facilities for treatment of COVID-19 or health complications associated with the virus. This policy applies to all our international medical insurance members and is effective through 1 June 2020.

**What positive outcomes have resulted from this experience?**

It’s been beneficial to have more robust, two-way communication between senior leaders and employees. We are already seeing how flexible and resilient our business can be when needed. And we’re so glad our members are getting to see the value of our services in good times and bad – especially when it comes to the convenience of such remote health services as vHealth.

**How are you preparing for people to return to the office? Do you think you will do anything differently than before?**

We are taking a thoughtful approach and incorporating what we’ve learned during this period of extreme remote working. As the Hong Kong government and other local leaders lift social distancing orders, we will communicate our approach to returning to the office, likely on a rolling basis. We will prioritise returns by business necessity and implement protocols related to social distancing, hygiene, office cleaning and visitors to keep our worksites safe.

**Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would do differently?**

I am sure this is new to all of us, and I think we’re doing our best to make the best decisions we can with the information available at any given time. We are learning new ways to work and cope as we go, using the latest information to react as quickly and intelligently as possible. Our resilience and flexibility have been tested during these times, but I do feel we will come out of this a stronger, more collaborative organisation that’s even better equipped to serve our members and address their needs.
SIGN UP TO OUR COVID-19 WEEKLY BULLETIN

This content first featured in our COVID-19 Weekly Bulletin. You can sign up to receive the emails here. This weekly bulletin synthesises the latest information on mental health and COVID-19 to support companies and their staff, as well as fresh expert viewpoints and case studies from CMHA HK member companies.

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The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.