

# Social Distancing is Taking a Toll on Pros' Mental Health

Rica Bhattacharyya & Lijee Phillip

**Mumbai:** Social isolation and work from home seem to have started eating into the minds of working professionals.

There has been a 35-40% increase in the number of cases of stress and panic attacks in April over previous months, according to data from counselling firms.

A large number of the callers seek cure for mental stress arising out of social isolation and the work-from-home milieu—leading to anxiety, depression, loneliness, newly formed OCDs (obsessive-compulsive disorder), and even fear of death in certain cases.

Many large companies are waking up to this problem and some are already hiring mental health professionals to deal with the situation. Companies such as Lupin, Tata Steel, Mahindra & Mahindra and TVS & Sons are seeking professional help to enable their employees deal with stress.

"Social isolation has become a challenge across industries," Lupin's global human resources president Yashwant Mahadik said. The pharma company is currently in the process of signing up with a provider of employee assistance programme (EAP) for mental wellness of employees. "After a week or so (of working from home) people have started to miss the office routine," Mahadik said.

Times have never been better for counselling firms, which have seen a massive surge in number of clients.

Take, for instance, Itohelp.net, which has signed up 40 new companies in April alone—corporate clients usually take months to enter a counselling contract. Optum, another health and wellness company, has seen a threefold increase in calls over the past one month.

Amber Alam, Optum's director for EAP and wellness services (Asia Pacific), cited the example of a professional who reached out to the company seeking counselling assistance. The person has decided to divorce his wife and quit job too as he found working and helping in the house too strenuous. "Things have changed and have become tense ever since he has started working from home," said Alam.

"Employers are recognising the need for mental health support during these challenging times," said Itohelp.net director Archana Bisht. The stress from social isolation as a result of work from home increased further due to issues related to dealing with children, helping elders and also psychological issues



ANIRBAN

like claustrophobia, panic attacks, depression, hypochondriasis, apart from the uncertainties around the pandemic as well as fear of death, said experts. Economic insecurity is further adding to the worries in addition to the fear of losing jobs and fear of the future.

"This kind of sale (of counselling services) is highly unusual for us as our sales cycle is pretty long; decision-making around hiring mental health counsellors in companies can take many months," said Bisht.

The sudden spike in demand for counselling services is predomi-

nantly on account of the absence of EAP programmes in many companies. An EAP can help corporations and their employees with a variety of issues within and outside the workplace, including mental health services and employee assistance with personal, family, and work issues. "Sales enquiry around laying down a structured mental health programme has shot up, as most of the employers who did not have an EAP programme are considering rolling out this benefit at the soonest," said Alam.

WFH and social isolation have further augmented many pre-existing issues such as domestic aberrations, substance abuse, OCD, hypochondriasis, among others, according to Optum.

Moreover, there are people who live alone and for them their workplace had been the primary source of social connect. They are now unable to meet people or move out.

**There has been a 35-40% increase in the number of cases of stress and panic attack in April**