

# Mental Health, Resilience, and the Road Ahead

How advancement teams can cope with stress and uncertainty from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic



BY MEREDITH BARNETT

**IT WAS 6:15 ON A FRIDAY NIGHT** in May 2020, and Tony Dobies, senior director of marketing at West Virginia University, was starting to unwind from another week tackling the challenges brought on by COVID-19.

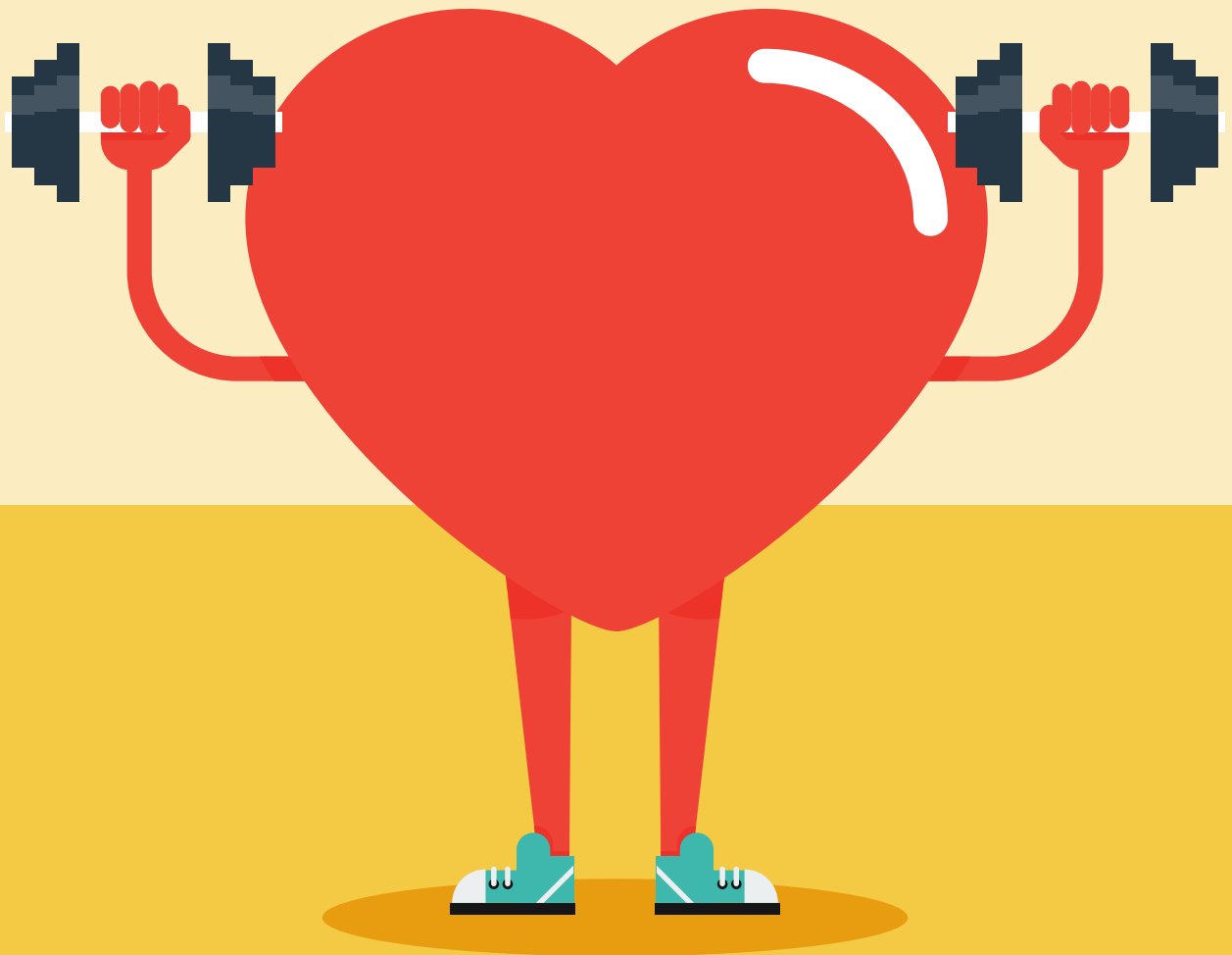
Dobies' team manages more than 100 social media accounts across the Morgantown, U.S., university, and—like so many teams at institutions across the globe—had been in crisis control mode since the pandemic began.

On this particular evening, just as Dobies started to decompress, social media notifications began rolling in. The transition to remote learning amid the pandemic hadn't been easy for some students, and parents were sharing strong opinions about online

classes on a WVU Facebook group. This constant crisis management, the blurred work/life boundaries, the anxiety: that builds up, says Dobies.

"It's not just a mental thing; it becomes a physical thing. It takes its toll," he says. "I was already concerned about our team and their capacity and ability to work 24/7 before this, and then you put a pandemic in? It's really tough."

Dobies and his team aren't alone in facing the strain, and their experiences underline a key reality: advancement has its unique stressors, but the pandemic has ramped up tension and anxiety across the world. Here, advancement professionals and wellness experts explore the particular mental health challenges brought on by the global outbreak—along



with how teams can cope now and build resilience to face an uncertain future amid COVID-19's long-term impacts.

### **Pressure and Burnout in Advancement**

In 2019—before COVID-19 emerged—the World Health Organization defined stress in the workplace as a major global problem. The WHO defines burnout as, “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, resulting in feelings of exhaustion, mental distance from one’s job, and low personal satisfaction.” Nonprofit employees may be particularly at risk for burnout: While 84% of nonprofit staff say they’re strongly committed to their organization’s mission, more than half say they sometimes or often leave work feeling run-down, according to a 2012 survey by the U.K. nonprofit career development organization Opportunity Knocks.

Plus, advancement has unique realities that can induce stress and lead to burnout, be they long trips to meet with prospects and donors or extra hours spent planning major events. For instance, 84% of fundraisers, according to a 2019 Association of Fundraising Professionals study, “feel tremendous

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pressure to succeed in their roles,” and more than half (55%) feel or have felt underappreciated in their roles.

Like their fundraising colleagues, frontline communicators can also experience intense pressure—a fact WVU’s Dobies knew firsthand from managing social media channels as a team of one for years. But he was curious about stress levels for his fellow higher education social media managers. In April and May of 2020, he worked with WVU colleagues to survey 240 social media managers across higher education. The respondents indicated that, on an average day, they’d rate their mental health as only a 6.35 on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being very positive.

### **Stress in the Time of COVID-19**

Now, atop these workplace stressors, the pandemic has disrupted industries, teams, families, and lives across the globe. Work well-being can be grouped into five determinants—and the pandemic has impacted all of them, says John de Pury, assistant director of policy at Universities UK, who leads policy work on innovation and health. Those contributing factors are:

- The nature of work itself.
- Management, including team interactions.
- Social relationships.
- Health and supports for individuals struggling with mental health difficulties.
- Healthy habits (like sleep habits, mindfulness, exercise).



“There are definitely additional stresses with COVID,” says de Pury. He cites financial strain, work/life balance, loneliness, grief, and “certainly, finding the world and working conditions stressful.”

The data on the impact of these stressors is staggering: According to a global Qualtrics survey across 10 industries, 75% of people say they feel more socially isolated and 67% of people report higher stress. The percentage of individuals experiencing significant stress and worry has been “unprecedented” during the health crisis. According to a U.S. analysis from Gallup, the decline in mental health during COVID-19 is double the drop that occurred during the Great Recession in 2008.

Within advancement, this strain has impacted everyday work. For instance, at the University at Buffalo in New York, U.S., fundraisers and donor relations professionals had to rapidly pivot to engage stakeholders in new virtual ways (like Zoom calls and video thank-you messages)—but for teams that thrive on structure and long-term planning (like communications and annual giving), the volume of work and shifting priorities have been “traumatic,” says Rod Grabowski, vice president for university advancement.

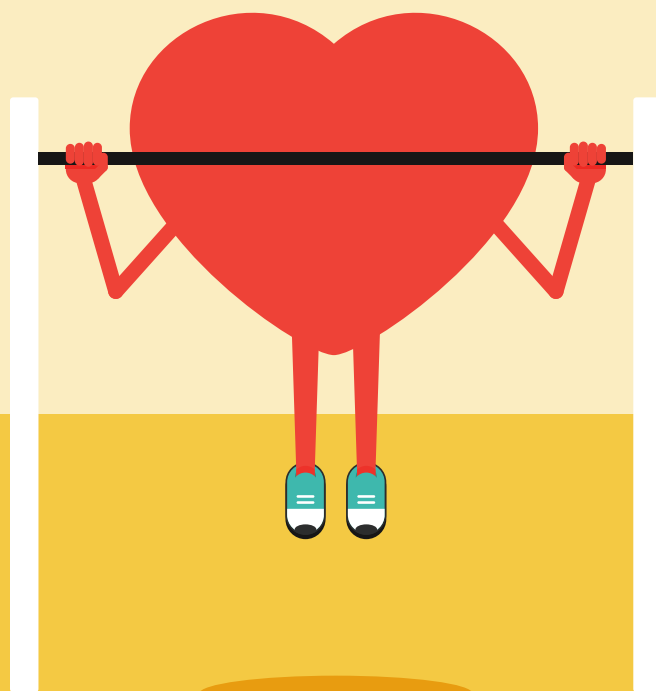
“We’ve acknowledged to our team that productivity now versus pre-COVID is not going to be the same,” he says.

Still, that drive to maintain productivity—while working from home and tending to family—has led many advancement professionals to put in longer hours than before the outbreak. Under intense crisis communications, 88% of social media managers in Dobies’ survey report that COVID-19 made their work “much harder” and 73% said working or being “on” 24/7 is one of their biggest struggles.

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Overworking is also a major concern for Simone Garske, CEO of the Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital in Brisbane, Australia, who leads a team of 20.

“There has been a trend for team members to work longer hours than ever before, and the blurring of the lines between home and work has been evident,” she says. “Long term, I worry about that being sustainable.”



### Opening Conversations

Grappling with these very real mental health challenges is essential for both advancement professionals and institutions at large. Even before the pandemic, Universities UK urged institutions to prioritize well-being to foster learning, work, and community—calling it essential to “staff engagement, productivity, and creativity” in its Stepchange framework for mentally healthy universities. Now amid COVID-19 and looking ahead, universities must plan for how to cope with staff mental health in the long term, says de Pury.

“There will be successive waves of impact on mental health and well-being,” he says. But “universities are in the people business. We should have the health and well-being of our people as a strategic priority. Now’s the time to think about those waves of impact and plan for them.”

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John de Pury, assistant director of policy, Universities UK

COVID-19 has forced many organizations and teams to acknowledge well-being, says de Pury, and open conversations with staff about wellness and the supports they need. Initiating these conversations and listening, says Garske, are the most important steps a leader can take to support mental health. Working remotely and then easing back into in-person activities as social distancing in Australia abated has been a huge adjustment, she says.

“The key issue for leaders, at this time, is to pay attention,” she says. “Be alert and aware of individual and team needs.”

To understand his team’s concerns at UB, Grabowski has surveyed his 120 staff members via email, asking about their anxiety levels, childcare, isolation, and support networks. That’s how he learned, for instance, that more than half his team (59%) was somewhat or very worried about returning to campus when it reopened.

“I have to think about my division as the people, not about the projects—the people make us successful. So, it has been my job to stay focused on their needs and their concerns,” he says.

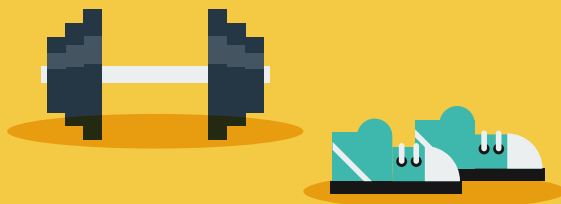
That openness and feedback helps build an open culture around mental health—one of the essential tenets of thriving at work outlined by Universities UK

### Pillars of Resilience

Launching conversations about mental health is a start—but from there, what can teams do to face an uncertain future of their work and personal lives amid COVID-19? Resilience, experts say, is what can help teams grapple with stress and face the unknown—Gallup even calls it a “make-or-break trait for organizations during tough times.”

A 2020 Gallup global metanalysis of nearly 63,000 teams found that resilience had a substantial impact on outcomes like turnover and productivity during crises. Resilient teams, according to Gallup, have the materials they need and roles that match team members’ strengths. The other three pillars of mental resilience are clarity, commitment, and connection—and each relate to key wellness coping tactics amid the pandemic.

**Clarity.** According to Gallup, when a crisis disrupts priorities, team members need information and



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**Rod Grabowski**, vice president for university advancement, University at Buffalo

to be involved in establishing new goals. Knowing what, how, and when decisions are made during COVID-19 can help quell anxiety, so clear communication is critical. Take, for instance, Jackie Menendez's approach at the University of Miami. She's the vice president of communications at the Florida, U.S., institution, and every morning at 9:30 a.m., her team of 40 “huddles” online with Zoom. It gives them the chance to review priorities and chat informally about their lives, says Menendez.

“Every single member of the team feels connected at that point, and it sets the tone for the rest of the day,” she says. Her team also manages a daily internal staff newsletter that helps keep all staff informed about university actions and wellness resources.

**Commitment.** This goes beyond dedication to the work: Gallup points out that to build resilience, it's equally essential that team members commit to each other and respect one another's work. The pandemic can put these key relationships at risk; loneliness and isolation are real challenges, says Susan Harnden,

## Personal Resilience Playbook

**Get moving.** “Walking has been my go-to activity that has really helped me keep my life balance. Put on your sneakers and go.”

**Jackie Menendez**, vice president of communications, University of Miami

**Practice deep breathing.** “In moments of stress, take long, deep breaths from your stomach. When stressed, people tend to breathe from their chest. That stomach breathing is what we do when we're not thinking about things.”

**Tony Dobies**, senior director of marketing, West Virginia University

**Reinforce flexibility.** Talk with your team about work/life balance and schedules. “Conversations about this need to be explicit. If flexibility is something you've shared with your team, then make sure you behave consistently with what you've said.”

**Jennifer Woods**, nonprofit management professor, University of Maryland

**Add a little fun to meetings.** “We celebrate our team members' individuality through their unique video backgrounds featuring great holiday destinations, past and future. From time to time a funny hat has also added color to these meetings.”

**Simone Garske**, CEO, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital Foundation

**Focus on control.** “I try to help people take stock of what they actually have control over. There's a lot of things that people are focused on right now that they don't have any control over. Instead, focus on the things they do and the small things that effect their mood.”

**Susan Harnden**, director of HealthPoint, University of Texas at Austin

**Emphasize the positive.** “As a manager, I set expectations and make sure the team realizes that we're taking this one step at a time and together we're going to get through it and be in a better place.”

**Jackie Menendez**, vice president of communications, University of Miami

**Set boundaries.** “Put your phone away in the evenings. It's a work in progress but it's been a great opportunity for me to have my evenings back.”

**Krista Boniface**, senior social media strategist, University of Toronto

**Take a brain break.** Read a book or listen to a podcast. “Because we're spending so much time scrolling on our phones, we're not giving our brains a chance to rest.”

**Erin Supinka**, associate director for digital engagement, Dartmouth College

director of the University of Texas at Austin's Health-Point, the institution's staff mental health program. When she conducts trainings with staff and managers, she encourages them to find ways to touch base with colleagues: "Sometimes this means being very conscious and deliberate about the meetings they have, and sometimes it's just checking in with people, seeing how they're doing, or finding lighthearted ways to give each other a break."

Teams have taken creative approaches to nourish social bonds while staying socially distant—some host online book discussions, yoga classes or lectures with alumni, virtual coffee breaks, or informal happy hours. Crucially, emphasizes Harnden, "Zoom fatigue" can be real, so remember that phone calls or 15-minute chats while taking a walk can be meaningful, more manageable ways to relate.

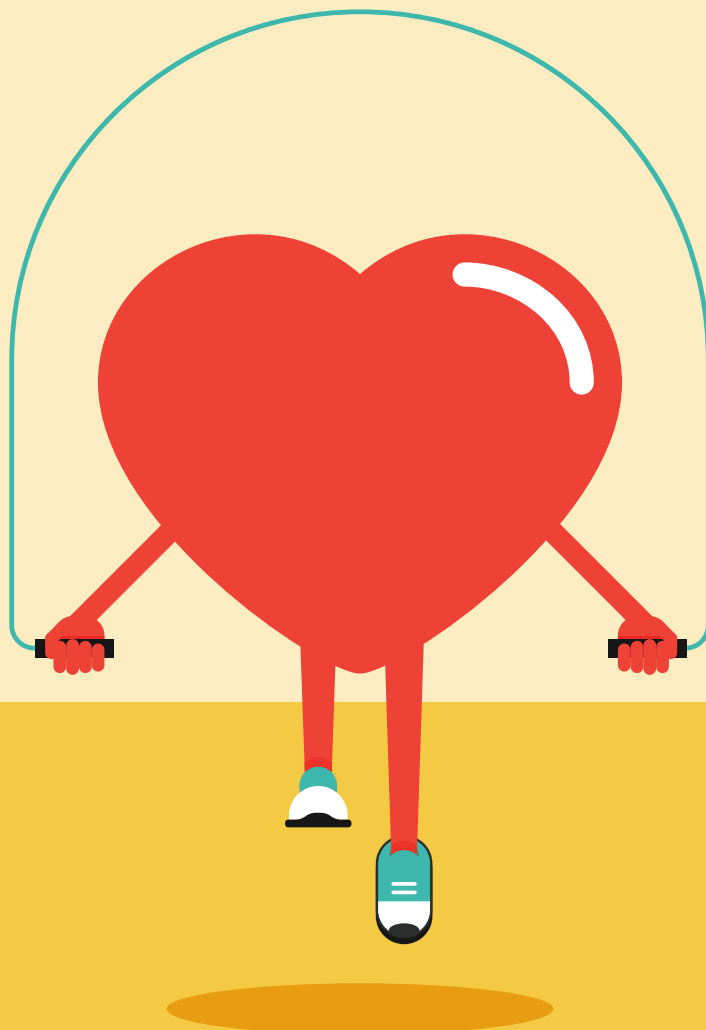
**Connection** to the mission or purpose of the organization. During a crisis, people need to see how they and their work fit into the bigger picture, according to Gallup. Advancement professionals are often incredibly mission-driven, and while that drive can sometimes fuel stress, says Harnden, it can also be the key to unlocking wellness and resilience.

**Ultimately, there's no one-size-fits-all approach for teams and colleagues to cope—and facing the impacts of COVID-19 on well-being is a marathon, not a sprint.**

At RBWH, Garske and her team raise support for vital medical research, including millions of dollars for the hospital's Coronavirus Action Fund. That mission is a source of inspiration and mental strength, she says.

"Working closely with some of Australia's greatest researchers at RBWH, who are leading clinical trials on COVID-19 treatments, has also had a profound effect on my sense of purpose and drive," she says. "I feel incredibly privileged to advance the work of these 'greats' who hold the key to our future."

Plus, the pandemic has granted some teams new opportunities to focus on projects with the most impact and that exemplify how education can transform lives and the world. For instance, Grabowski's team quickly launched student emergency funds for



COVID-19 relief and his donor relations team created more than 2,400 thank-you videos for donors from students receiving scholarships. That's the optimism, he says, that can help teams drive forward amid challenges.

Ultimately, there's no one-size-fits-all approach for teams and colleagues to cope—and facing the impacts of COVID-19 on well-being is a marathon, not a sprint, says Harnden. In the face of uncertainty, resilience and strength can spring from focusing on what we can control. Brainstorm work/life balance solutions with your team and come together for support, she says. No one has all the answers of how to get through these uncertain times.

### **Empathy and the Path Forward**

The challenges of COVID-19 are immense but humbling—and as people around the globe weather them together, we have a rare chance to rediscover our shared humanity, say mental health experts like Universities UK's de Pury.

As teams moved to work from home, they weren't bringing themselves to work anymore—instead, they let their colleagues (virtually) into their homes. For instance, Miami's Menendez says she offers her team as much understanding as she can and works to respect their weekends and time with family.

That compassion helps combat stress: When asked how they deal with chronic and acute work stress, 91% of leaders reported how expressing empathy allows them to stop focusing on their emotions and deeply connect with others, according to 2016 University of Pennsylvania research.

"This time, in a sense, has been a gift. Video conferencing has enabled me to visit staff weekly in their homes, meet their pets, their spouses, and their children. That would not have happened, had COVID

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not happened," Garske says. "Experts talk about vulnerability as a leader, but I think this pandemic has brought the human factor to the forefront and built stronger connections as a result."

That's an idea Dobies has found abundantly true amid the pandemic: When it comes to coping with mental health, be human, he says. Dobies and his team spent July and August navigating the myriad complexities of preparing to reopen WVU's campus: from COVID-19 testing to a new instructional calendar to questions about student safety. Throughout that, for Dobies, being human has meant checking on his colleagues, opening honest conversations, and acknowledging his own coping techniques like deep breathing.

Looking out at his fellow communicators in higher education, he sees resilience.

"This community is resilient. I believe that," he says. "It's clear that we've adapted to the unknown. We can learn from each other." ●

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