The author in Fiji with his daughter Ella.

MENTAL HEALTH
OPPORTUNITY

DAVID BURROUGHS says the disruption to work caused by Covid-19 creates an opportunity to shift our mental health efforts to where they will make a difference: work design and work culture.

It's time to take a fresh look at how we approach workplace mental health. Our Covid-forced transition to new ways of working is complicated by factors – capability, systems, culture – that were not designed to meet the emerging demands of a remote working/mixed operating model. Added to this is our cumulative mental fatigue and feelings of elevated vulnerability as we work through this transition period.

The emerging Covid-related workplace mental health challenges may appear daunting, but perhaps Covid and our imposed pivot to new ways of working can be the catalyst for organisations to rethink the way they approach mental health. As we redesign the future of work, perhaps we can elevate the notions of genuine prevention and early intervention, where work can be seen as protective of people's mental health, rather than a risk factor?

We have an opportunity to ensure people experience new ways of working that are good for their mental health, and to navigate away from low impact tick-the-box and campaign-based workplace mental health activities.

Two key action areas I think warrant particular attention are the domains of work/job design and workplace culture.

WORK/JOB DESIGN

This is a critical factor in organisational wellbeing and performance. Work itself is a determinant of mental health – 'good' work is good for people. However, while it is considered foundational for the prevention of workplace mental ill-health, work/job design typically sits in the too-hard basket.

It is often overlooked in favour of tactical, person/illness-centric and campaign-type activities – such as resilience training – that gloss over the causal and contributory factors to workplace mental ill-health.

While the evidence base for most common workplace mental health initiatives is sparse, the evidence and business case for focusing on things like work/job design is quite clear. Several decades of research have demonstrated that good work design practices have positive impacts on individuals, teams and organisations. Unlike many of the mental health approaches that make dubious claims about being 'preventative', good work/job design can identify and minimise psychosocial hazards, minimise risks of psychological and physical harm, and maximise person-job fit. Work/job design has also been shown to improve wellbeing and

enhance performance and productivity.

As we re-think and redesign how we work, it is an opportune time to apply the principles of effective work/job design in setting up our new versions of work, be they on site, working from home, or a hybrid of both.

Few roles, support systems, performance management systems, capability development initiatives or work practices were designed specifically to accommodate such a variety of new ways of working. If we don't re-craft things to the realities of our new ways of work, we run the risk of all manner of stresses, strains, liabilities and issues emerging.

If your wellbeing solution right now is based on a resilience course, gratitude journal, imposed positivity, or making sure everyone has the latest EAP number, you may have missed the boat.

RESOURCES TO THRIVE

A one size fits all approach won't cut it in our new world of work; there is huge variation in people's workplace experiences, and what constitutes 'good' work will not be the same for everybody. Ensuring a positive experience of work means we need to build and sustain the resources people require to thrive at work – sense of autonomy/agency, mastery, relational resources – and also ensure the demands we place on them are not just tolerable but manageable, given the complexities of new ways of working.

I appreciate that many organisations are already stretched thin and the thought of wholesale job design might be too much to bear, so perhaps some employee-driven job crafting is a good place to start. Giving people a sense of agency over the what, when and how of work can go a long way to improving their experience of work, particularly amid ongoing uncertainty.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

This is largely overlooked in the context of workplace mental health, perhaps because it is seen as too nebulous or difficult to influence. This is a shame, because I believe it is a critical part of the workplace mental health equation.

One of my key observations from our experience thus far of Covid-19,

is not only the way in which we have collectively encountered such transformational change and immense uncertainty, but how everyone at all levels across organisations has had to face a set of uncharted workplace social factors. Colleagues and clients have witnessed the collision of family and work life during lockdown, where no Zoom meeting was free from a visit from a housemate or pet, or someone being caught multi-tasking with their mic off or still in their PJs. As so eloquently stated by Professor Brock Bastian, "People have become accustomed to working together under a new normal – one that includes the full array of human imperfection."

Working amid such cumulative stress, mounting fatigue, technological issues and work-life boundary erosion means it has been impossible for most people to operate at their previous 100%. As human beings we are just not psychologically or physiologically equipped to manage that level of sustained complexity without it affecting our cognitive capabilities and emotional reserves. Mistakes occur, morale is challenged, vulnerability becomes acceptable and understandable, and communication is prone to misinterpretation; it becomes completely understandable and expected that we won't get it right all the time ('it' being work, parenting, partnering, etc). Covid has shone a spotlight on to our human-ness.

SAFE TO SPEAK

Speaking to large numbers of leaders and organisations throughout the pandemic, it has become clear that the leaders who have shone and the teams which have thrived amid the chaos were those who made it safe to speak up, to take a risk, to volunteer ideas – where it was okay to not be okay, and to ask for help. Those leaders and teams operated with a sense of psychological safety: their team culture was safe for interpersonal risk taking, where people can show and employ their self without fear of negative consequences.

The importance of psychological safety was well known well prior to Covid-19. However, I believe it will fast become the 'must have' cultural

characteristic of any organisation or team that wants to learn from the workplace experiment the pandemic has imposed upon us – not just in terms of navigating the emerging challenges of workforce hybridization, but in mitigating risk and capitalising on the opportunities for people to innovate and co-create a better version of the way we used to work.

FOSTERING TRUST

Transporting the norms of psychological safety into the next iteration of work is not only the work of leaders, and it requires more than a poster or catchy slogan. It requires a culture uplift and the development of intra- and inter-personal capabilities specific to the psychological job demands encountered in our existing and next new ways of work. Psychologically safe workplaces foster trust, collaboration, authenticity and agility. They aren't about asking people to tolerate the increasingly intolerable or outsourcing support at the first sign of stress – they are workplaces where people are equipped and empowered to speak up, not just about mental health concerns, but all aspects of their psychosocial climate which influence their experience of work.

FIX THE ENVIRONMENT

In summary, when it comes to workplace mental health, I think our pivot to new ways of work can be also be the catalyst for refocusing where we are paying attention in terms of workplace mental health. It's an opportunity to do things differently.

To make any real impact, I believe we need to focus less on 'fixing people' and more on improving their experience of work and the environment they work within.

I love the quote by Alexander Den Heijer: "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower." ∎

David Burroughs is principal psychologist with Australian Psychological Services, partner in Psychological Safety Australia, and co-founder of Mantle Health. He is also Mentally Healthy Workplaces Ambassador for SafeWork NSW.