

Protecting Employee's Mental Wellbeing Through COVID-19: An Interview with Raymond Lew, CEO of Sun Life Malaysia

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The pandemic is evidently having a huge impact on our mental health. Fear, worry, and stress are normal responses when one is dealing with real threats and facing uncertainty. Therefore, it is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear and anxiety in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As organisations are adapting to the new normal, leaders need to keep top of mind the mental health of employees as they transition to new ways of working. On this occasion, **HR in Asia** sits with **Raymond Lew, CEO of Sun Life Malaysia (SLM)** to discuss how businesses can help employees combat their fear of Coronavirus and protect their mental wellbeing.

Question: *It's been six months since WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a global pandemic. How do you cope with these difficult times? And how does it affect you mentally?*

Answer: As shown during this pandemic, the only thing certain today is uncertainty. I've experienced my fair share of challenges, just like everyone else had over the past few months. Concerns such as keeping the business operational, safeguarding the livelihood of our beloved employees and Clients, and worrying over my loved ones' health remains at the top of my thoughts daily.

During this period, I made sure to take some personal time off daily to recharge myself mentally. This is through regular talks with my family members and activities such as reading and reflecting daily to maintain my mental health. I also keep to my regular exercise routines as a way to help combat other health issues and illnesses that could impact my work. By doing the above, it allows me to give my best to the responsibilities and tasks at hand in navigating through this challenging period.

I always believe that we need to ensure the well-being of our body, mind and soul collectively in order to have a secure, meaningful, and healthier life. This is because protecting oneself goes beyond just physical, as our mind and body are interconnected. With the need for proper protection now more crucial than ever, I urge people to ensure they have health and financial protection so they can at least have some peace of mind knowing that their loved ones are well taken care of in the event of any unfortunate situations.

Question: How important is it to maintain a stable mental well-being in this climate?

Answer: That definitely goes without saying as being mentally strong is important in any climate but this current health and economic landscape puts that priority at the forefront exponentially.

In line with our business purpose of helping Malaysians to achieve lifetime financial security and live healthier lives, I see the urgent need for people to focus on their mental health in order to avoid serious after-effects. While it is still early days to see the long-term effects of the pandemic, it's never too late to start taking better care of ourselves.

At SLM, we have a strong responsibility to ensure the health and safety of our Clients and employees while at the same time, offer protection to as many people as possible. To help alleviate the financial stress of our Clients, we established a RM1 million Relief Fund to support those financially impacted and offered deferment of premium/contribution payment. In addition, we also extended complimentary coverage to ensure our Clients are able to deal with the pandemic impact along with other protection needs or illnesses.

That wasn't all. With outdoor and group activities halted during the restricted movement period, we brought communities together through our virtual initiatives such as workouts, mini challenges and even an e-forum with influential speakers to keep Malaysians healthy holistically – be it financially, physically, mentally or spiritually.

Question: Based on your experience as a leader, how does the pandemic affect employees' mental health and well-being? Will this have an impact on the company at large, too?

Answer: It's important to remember that not everyone with mental health issues is struggling with the same problems. Some employees might be struggling with financial problems, while some might be dealing with medical or physical issues.

When the Movement Control Order (MCO) was first implemented earlier this year, the sudden transition that took place certainly caused a lot of stress and sleepless nights for our management team. We acted swiftly to alleviate the situation with our employees' and Clients' safety and well-being in mind. Through our robust business continuity procedures, we instated a work from home procedure immediately upon the MCO announcement and transitioned all our employees within the first week as a means to protect them while providing regular communications to ensure they stay engaged and motivated.

With our business operating optimally within the first few days of MCO, we could ensure that the necessary coverage and assistance were continuously provided for our Clients to deal with the pandemic impact.

A company can only be a well-oiled machine if each part within the machine is functioning well – and a large part of that effective function stems from a healthy and happy mind. This is why we concentrated our efforts on our staff's well-being through workshops, seminars, town halls and various other engagement initiatives. It has proven to be impactful in nurturing a positive culture across the company despite the challenges.

During this period, we also conducted regular checks and provided morale support to our staff and advisors as some of them had to deal directly with individuals and families who have been affected by the virus. Many of our staff have been uplifted by being able to help these families in their hour of need through their insurance/takaful plans with SLM. Watch this video [here](#) to know more about how we brought a bright side to COVID-19 and stayed true to our commitment of giving the very best for the well-being of our people.

Question: What are the financial and physical aspects of employee well-being?

Answer: Finances are a big part of our everyday lives. When the MCO was first announced, many were concerned about their job security and stability as they had family members dependent on them along with monthly commitments and so on.

Our first priority back then was to ensure our employees received the care they needed. The adage that employees are the most valuable assets holds true, especially for us as an insurance provider. We provided security for their main concerns – job security and finances – by assuring them of their positions.

On the physical aspects that affected employees' mental well-being, most concerns were centred around being sedentary during the MCO and worrying about the health of loved ones along with other physical concerns.

To address some of their concerns, we conducted several virtual wellness sessions from workout activities to webinars to ensure our employees stayed healthy and engaged. We also took on a new open communications approach with our employees through regular scheduled check-ins via video calls and virtual town halls to align business operations.

Creating an environment where our employees had less to worry about wasn't only beneficial to them but it was immensely beneficial to us as a company as well – with more focused and dedicated employees all working towards a common goal of keeping our Clients protected through these difficult times.

From an employer's perspective, it was a no-brainer for us to protect and support the well-being of our people. After all, we can't possibly expect Malaysians to believe we can financially protect them if we can't even take care of our own employees.

Question: *So what should companies do to take care of their employees better? Is there any dangerous risk if leaders neglect mental health issues?*

Answer: As we take our employees' mental well-being seriously, we established the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) that offers counselling, legal and financial consultation and crisis intervention services to our employees. The service is provided by a 3rd party partner and the conversations are kept confidential.

We also put together a return to office plan during the Recovery MCO period that first and foremost, assured our employees' safety were not compromised. We had in place strict social distancing guidelines for employees to adhere as advised by the local authorities. In addition, all our employees were provided essential items such as masks and hand sanitisers to keep safe and minimise the risk of virus transmission.

We have also maintained working from home as an enabler to ensure that there is no overcrowding at any one time within the premises as per regulatory requirements.

See also: [7 Ways to Support Employee's Mental Health amidst the Pandemic](#)

Question: *Some recent reports found that COVID-19 is affecting leaders' mental health as well. Do you have any tips for leaders to fight in such a situation?*

Answer: I refer back to my personal philosophy of feeding the body, mind, and soul mentioned above. I believe that everyone, regardless of position, can always benefit from taking better care of their own self.

Take the time to enrich yourself in ways that benefit you physically, mentally, and spiritually as explained below:

o Feed the body involves watching what you eat and how you take care of your physical body. This comes in the form of having healthy and home-cooked meals along with regular exercise sessions.

o Nourish the mind through constant learning and reading to broaden your thoughts to new possibilities, beliefs and interest. Besides that, I urge you to engage more with positive people so that their good influence can rub off on you.

o Feed the soul with activities that make your soul happy, be it doing community work or spending time with family and friends as they can work wonders in improving your mental health and overall well-being.

Question: As a company that advocates healthy living, how else did SLM incorporate mental health assistance for their employees during COVID-19?

Answer: We are cognisant of the rise in mental health issues during this period. Besides the initiatives that I mentioned above, below are some of the others measures taken to assist our employees:

o Mental

§ Introduced 'wellness days' off for our employees to recharge.

§ Organised empowerment initiatives such as virtual talks on financial and physical topics to help them during those uncertain times and also, wellness sessions such as virtual zumba and yoga to help them live healthier lives.

§ Conducted the Brighter Wellness E-Forum where we brought 4 key influential speakers together to share how they innovated and maneuvered through the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the session on mental wellness provided our employees with valuable insights and tips on mental health, which included the importance of self-care for the mind.

o Physical

§ Instated immediate "work-from-home" operations for more than 600 employees.

§ Established a non face-to-face sales process and equipped advisors with a comprehensive set of digital tools so they could continue to perform their line of work in a safer environment.

§ Our Agency force was provided with virtual training sessions to continuously upskill their knowledge and provide our Clients the most suitable protection that fits their needs.

§ During the RMCO, we implemented staggered work hours to keep our employees safe.

o Finance

§ Finance is a big part of mental health and it can be seriously stressful to those with financial troubles.

§ To help with this, we provided early salary payout to ease their financial burdens.

§ We also provided hardship allowances to employees who needed it.

Question: What can businesses learn from SLM in terms of protecting their workforce well-being through COVID-19?

Answer: As I mentioned, the initiatives during the pandemic above have exemplified our efforts in ensuring our employees receive the care they need and at the same time, providing a safe and conducive working environment for them.

We have seen the company morale remaining positive during this challenging period and we are more focused on our purpose of empowering Malaysians to achieve lifetime financial security.

From the results we have seen, I hope other businesses will take a leaf from our book and do what they can to alleviate their employees' worries. With the rise in mental health issues these days, corporations should invest in a culture that supports their staff's mental and emotional well-being and play their roles in addressing that silent threat.

About Raymond Lew



Raymond Lew is the Chief Executive Officer & President of Sun Life Malaysia Assurance Berhad. He is also the Country Head of Sun Life Malaysia, overseeing the insurance businesses of Sun Life Financial in Malaysia.

He has been with Sun Life Malaysia since 2013. Prior to his appointment as CEO in 2017, he was the Deputy CEO, overseeing distribution, marketing, analytics and client experience. At the same time, he also spearheaded digital and process improvement as well as pioneered the transformation of client experience within the Company.

Raymond has assumed various senior leadership positions over the last 27 years in both local and international MNCs and financial institutions, and he is a Fellow of the Malaysian Insurance Institute (FMII).