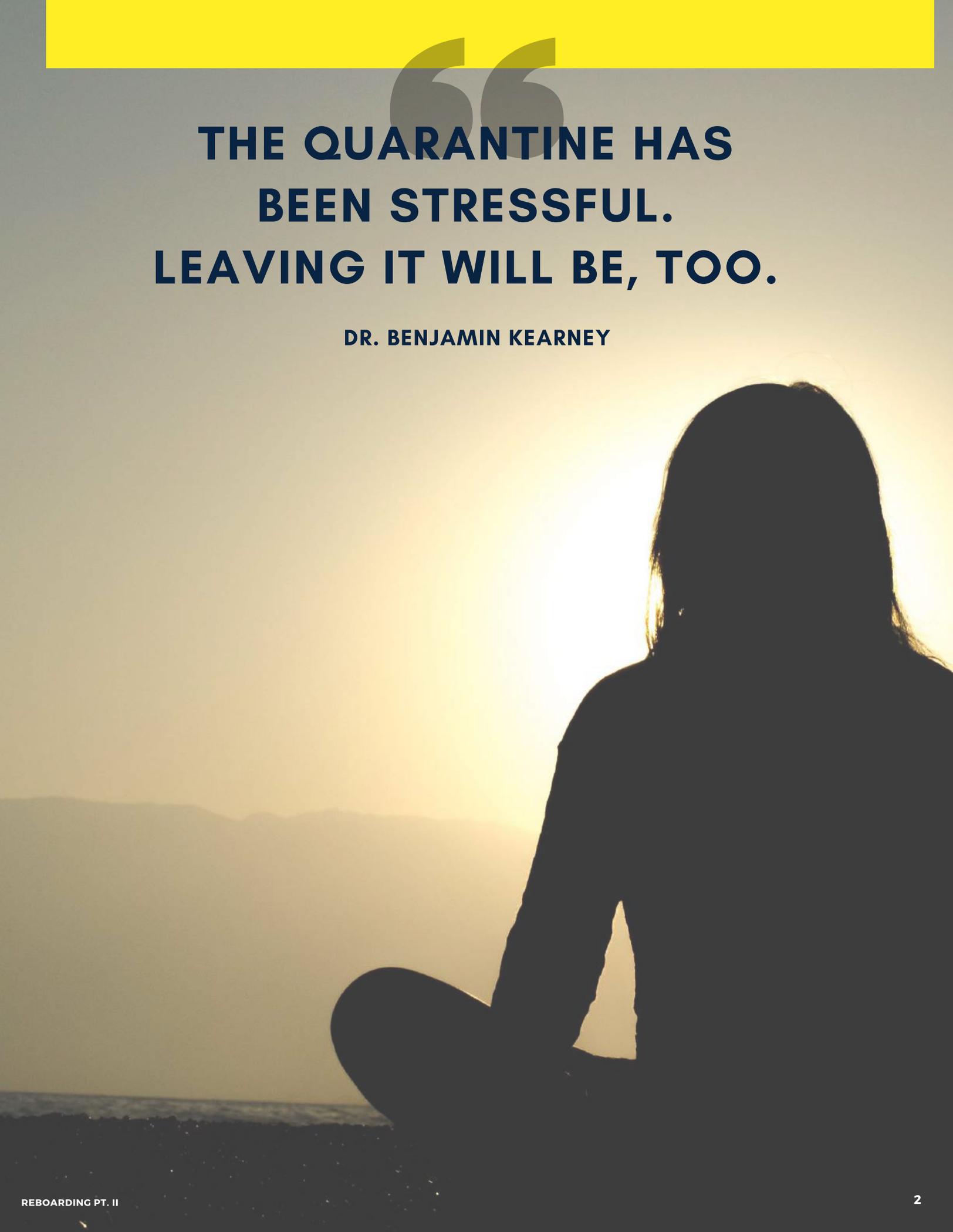


# REBOARDING

UNDERSTANDING THE WIRING OF THE HUMAN BRAIN AND MOVING FORWARD **PART II**

A person is shown in silhouette, sitting in a meditative pose (lotus or similar) on a dark surface. They are facing away from the camera, looking towards a bright sunset or sunrise. The sun is a large, glowing orb in the center-right of the frame, casting a warm, golden light across the sky and creating a lens flare effect. The background shows a hazy horizon with distant mountains or hills. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

**“**  
**THE QUARANTINE HAS  
BEEN STRESSFUL.  
LEAVING IT WILL BE, TOO.**

**DR. BENJAMIN KEARNEY**

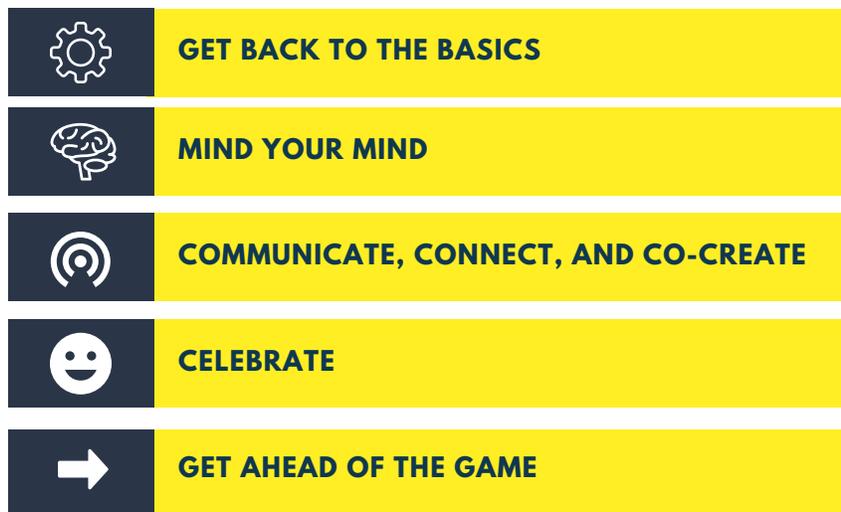
# REBOARDING: PART II

UNDERSTANDING THE WIRING OF THE HUMAN BRAIN AND MOVING FORWARD

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, Health Action Council and Mendelow Consulting Group released Reboarding: Learning from the Past to Prepare for the Future. Now, we are pleased to bring you, **Reboarding II: Understanding the Wiring of the Human Brain and Moving Forward.**

In our first article, Reboarding: Learning from the Past to Prepare for the Future, we gathered insights from six extraordinary people who, having faced adversity or tragedy in the past, are now well positioned to see a difficult situation with hope. From their insights, these five core tactics emerged.



The term ‘reboarding’ describes the process of re-entering a ship, train, airplane, or bus following an initial exit. In today’s context, it also is the process of returning an employee to work following an extended absence. Whether we are talking about a new parent coming back after maternity/paternity leave, or an employee coming back after a longer period of illness, best-in-class organizations will prepare a return-to-work plan or reboarding process.

Reboarding II dives into the science behind the human emotions present so that we can better understand how to reboard people, businesses and communities. We combined information from Dr. Benjamin W. Kearney, Executive Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer for OhioGuidestone and Senior Fellow for the Institute of Family & Community Impact, and David deBardelaben-Phillips the Founder and President of Energetic Awakenings to provide useful insights and inform the actions we take now.

Forward-looking leaders will not treat reboarding as an event, but rather a transition that requires on-going attention and adjustments. By understanding the architecture of the human brain better, we can develop appropriate responses and support for our teams.

# WE ARE HARDWIRED TO NOTICE CHANGE

As we emerge from the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic, we are noticing things are different. This is normal. Human beings are hard wired to notice these changes. It's natural to compare the past and present or speculate about the future. This is our brain's complex, overlapping system for processing sensory input at work. This processing helps us to focus on what's important in the moment.

As the pandemic continues and we realize the need and desire to turn things back on, these changes may be overwhelming. By being mindful of these processes, we can learn to lessen the negative impacts they may have.

We interviewed Dr. Ben Kearney to gain insights on how to lessen the negative impacts your employees may have as they reboard.

**Dr. Kearney, as employers reboard their employees, can you share what is occurring in the human brain as a result of the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic?**

**Dr. Kearney:** *Our brains have complex, overlapping systems for processing sensory input and helping us to focus on what's important in the moment. So here's how you can think about it, if someone is out walking on a pleasant day, deep in thought, and a barking dog suddenly comes charging at them, the structures in their brain will force their attention away from their musings, no matter how profound, and direct it toward the impending attack. This shift does not require any deliberation. It just happens in a fraction of a second.*



## FIGHT OR FLIGHT

The "fight or flight" response is a part of the sympathetic nervous system in our bodies. It prepares the body to respond during any potential danger. Working in concert with the sympathetic nervous system, the parasympathetic nervous system constrains the body from overworking and restores the body to a calm and composed state.

During a crisis, a fight or flight response happens automatically and plays a critical role in how we deal with the stress or danger and whether one survives a life-threatening situation. It is important to invest in both so you can navigate stressful times.

# WE ARE HARDWIRED TO NOTICE CHANGE

Conscious thought takes a back seat to the stress processes that are more adept at helping humans survive. We often call this the “fight or flight” response. But because not all threats are as clear and immediate as an aggressive animal, the brain has other automatic systems for processing input and responding appropriately. Some of the same brain structures involved in fight-flight are also responsible for alerting humans to changes in familiar settings.

The hippocampus in the brain, time-stamps sensory input as it passes through. One of its jobs is to organize memory and learning. For example, when someone arrives home after work, their mind may be on any number of things — office drama, dinner plans, a song they heard on the radio. But if something in their home is different, their brain will attend to that immediately. Was that light on when I left this morning? Is that gas I smell? Where’s the cat, he always greets me at the door?

The hippocampus’s access to memories makes it ideally suited to notice change. If it senses enough change in the environment, it can alert another structure called the hypothalamus, which plays a key role in the fight-flight stress response. The hippocampus also works closely with the thalamus, which acts as a central relay station, receiving information from the body and relaying it to other parts of the brain, and vice versa. The thalamus hears when the hippocampus sends an alert that “something is different” — or, depending on the input, “something is wrong” — and relays it to the prefrontal cortex, the most advanced part of the brain, where conscious thought occurs.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MOTION

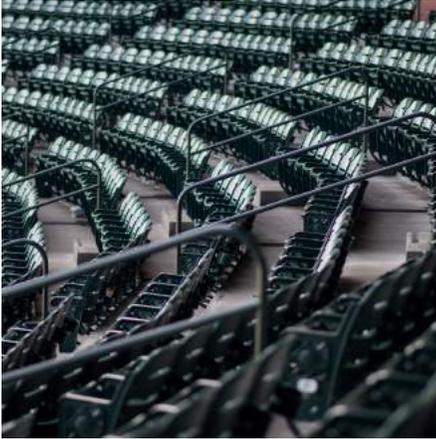
If you look across a complex scene but nothing is moving, we are hardwired to notice the first thing that moves. Or, if you are in a crowded room, the second someone says your name, you can pinpoint it.



**Dr. Kearney, how long do you think it will take individuals to become fully comfortable again?**

**Dr. Kearney:** *Imagine coming home one day to find that someone had redecorated the house and rearranged all the furniture. Even if you like the changes, how long would it take you to become familiar with where everything is and feel fully comfortable again? The prefrontal cortex primes the hippocampus with expectations. And when those expectations aren’t met, it can trigger a stress response. So even though some employee’s speculation will be exciting, some employees will wonder if returning to activities will be safe, and under what conditions will it be safe.*

# THESE TRIGGERS WILL BE EVERYWHERE



Don't mistake the power of this pandemic, the visual cues of its existence and its impact on human development. Every individual is responding differently. Employers have an opportunity to provide a foundation for consistency and continuity. They are in a position to recognize and diffuse triggers. Here are some actions employers can take to support employees during this transition:

- ✓ **RESPOND DON'T REACT**  
Don't shut down automatic employee responses to stressful situations, but instead change their expectations.
- ✓ **REMEMBER NOT ALL CHANGE IS ETERNAL**  
Communicate that this will end. Learned helplessness can create anxiety and depression.
- ✓ **BE GENTLE WITH COLLEAGUES**  
Find ways to focus on attunement and empathy. Employees need to support each other more now than ever.
- ✓ **SAY NICE THINGS**  
Appreciate employee's experiences and humanity by expressing gratitude and sympathy.
- ✓ **PAY ATTENTION TO HOW YOUR EMPLOYEES CARRY STRESS**  
Remind employees to prioritize exercise and sleep.
- ✓ **REVITALIZE**  
Find ways to re-energize employees in the workplace. Identify activities they can do both virtually, and in the physical workplace.
- ✓ **FIND JOY AND HAVE FUN WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES**  
Nothing is better at generating resilience and hope. We will get through this together.

# TAKING ACTION IN THE WORKPLACE



In addition to Dr. Kearney's recommendations, we reviewed a range of articles from organizations, feedback from our members and other employers to identify additional steps you can take as employees return to the workplace:



## FOCUS ON GOALS

Recommunicate business goals



## BE TRANSPARENT

Give employees complete details, including expectations, rules and updated policies and procedures



## TRAIN

Train leadership on managing change



## COMMUNICATE

Convene to capture employee suggestions and concerns



## LISTEN

Develop forums for employees to work together



## POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Refresh human resource informal and formal policies and procedures



## REWARD

Give rewards and celebrate

Even the best laid plans can change but taking some of these steps can help you avoid unnecessary risks or poor communications.

# BALANCING TO THE 'RELAXED STATE'



Here are some ways you can help your employees reduce stress and support the parasympathetic nervous system.



## **SLOW DEEP BREATHING**

Most people take 12 to 20 breaths per minute. Slowing the breath down sends a message to the brain to calm down and relax. So, as you bring employees back to work consider starting meetings with a simple deep breathing exercise. Consider doing this now on your virtual meetings.



## **LAUGHTER - IT IS THE BEST MEDICINE**

Studies have shown that laughing with others releases endorphins which are our feel-good-chemicals. A good laugh fires up and cools down stress response, and it can increase and then decrease heart rate and blood pressure resulting in a calmer, more relaxed state. Promote laughter in the workplace.



## **MEDITATION**

Meditation is a simple technique that, if practiced for as few as 10 minutes each day, can help control stress, decrease anxiety, improve cardiovascular health, and achieve a greater capacity for relaxation. As your employees face stress, meditation can give them the space to sort out which demands on energy, attention, and emotions are valid and which are not.



## **EXERCISE**

Physical activity increases the production of the brain's feel-good neurotransmitters, also known as endorphins. Get your employees on the move. Create a wellness competition or sign up for Health Action Council's free Step Up Challenge. To learn more go to: [www.healthactioncouncil.org](http://www.healthactioncouncil.org).



## **SOCIALIZATION**

Social connectivity and positive social interactions significantly reduce stress hormone levels. Research shows that the more social support a person has, the lower their cortisol levels. Find creative ways to maintain safe social connectivity and interactions.



**TO EQUIP YOUR  
EMPLOYEE'S  
SPACE CONSIDER  
PURCHASING  
YOGA MATS,  
PILLOWS, OR  
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RECLINER. HAVE  
MEDITATION  
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GUIDED  
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TRACKS  
AVAILABLE.**

# SUMMARY

As we emerge from the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Reboarding II gives us background on the brain science behind the human emotions present, and the actions employers can take to successfully reboard people, businesses, and communities. We recognize that noticing things are different is normal and that human beings are hard wired to notice these changes.

It's natural that humans continuously compare the past and present or speculate about the future. This is the brain's complex, overlapping system for processing sensory input and helping us to focus on what's important in the moment.

## IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER:

**RESPOND DON'T REACT**

**REMEMBER NOT ALL  
CHANGE IS ETERNAL**

**BE GENTLE WITH COLLEAGUES**

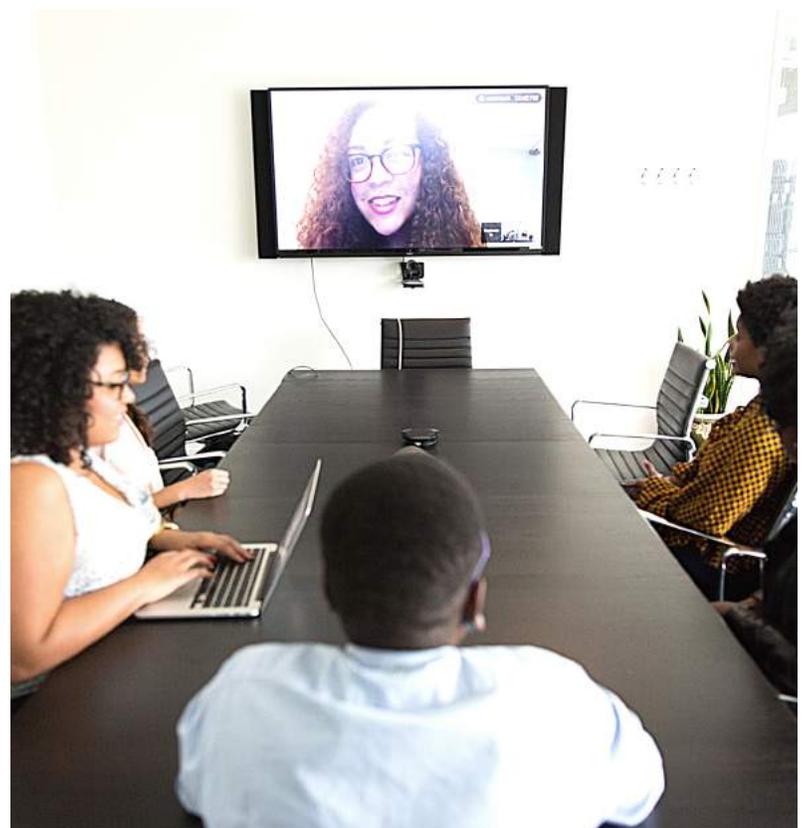
**SAY NICE THINGS**

**PAY ATTENTION TO HOW YOUR  
EMPLOYEES CARRY STRESS**

**IDENTIFY WAYS TO RE-ENERGIZE  
EMPLOYEES IN THE WORKPLACE.**

**FIND JOY AND HAVE FUN WITH  
YOUR EMPLOYEES.**

By having a better understanding of the architecture of the human brain, employers can develop appropriate strategies and responses and support for their employees. These strategies can be altered and updated to address issues as they arise. Forward-looking leaders will take these steps to strengthen their organization.



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## BENJAMIN KEARNEY, PH.D

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Benjamin W. Kearney, PhD. Is a licensed psychologist serving as the Executive Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer at OhioGuidestone in Cleveland, Ohio. In his capacity, as EVP he oversees strategic planning, directs clinical programming and evaluation, as well as performance and quality improvement. Ben trains on mental health and interpersonal psychology applications for business settings. Recent events include presenting at the International Association of Applied Psychology Conference in Vienna, Austria; Child Welfare League of America's National Conference; and with organizations such as the Ohio Department of Health, Educational Service Center, and WVIZ's Idea Stream.

## DAVID DEBARDELABEN-PHILLIPS, ACCEP, MED, BBA

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David deBardelaben-Phillips is the Founder and President of Energetic Awakenings in Cleveland, OH. He is also a member of the executive leadership team for Health Action Council. David has 19 years of experience working in benefits, healthcare, and wellness. His professional experience includes his tenure as Senior Director at the Council of Smaller Enterprises (COSE) and Training, Quality Assurance, and Customer Service Manager for Cole Managed Vision. David holds an Advanced Certification as a Core Energetics Practitioner (somatic psychotherapy) from the Institute of Core Energetics where he now serves on the faculty. He earned his Master of Education from Cleveland State University and his undergraduate in Business Management from Marshall University.

## AMY SWANSON, MPA

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Amy Swanson, MPA, is an accomplished healthcare executive with 20+ years of demonstrated results leading business development, marketing, and outreach efforts in the public, medical and healthcare sectors. She is a Principal with Health Management Associates where she handles Health Improvement and Communications for Health Action Council. As a Vice President with UnitedHealthcare, she was responsible for managing growth, business development, employee engagement and launching innovative products and programs. Prior to this role, Amy served as CEO of Voices for Ohio's Children and Vice President and Regional Manager of Burges & Burges Strategists. She has a deep understanding of the complex healthcare and insurance ecosystem, combined with a passion for leading teams, improving patient outcomes and providing high-quality services to customers.



Health Action Council is a not-for-profit 501(c)(6) organization representing mid and large-size employers that works to improve human and economic health through thought leadership, innovative services, and collaboration. It provides value to its members by facilitating projects that improve the quality and moderate the cost of healthcare purchased by its members for their employees, dependents, and retirees.

Health Action Council also collaborates with key stakeholders health plans, physicians, hospitals and the pharmaceutical industry to improve the quality and efficiency of healthcare in the community.

**LET'S KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING**

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