Supporting Mental Health of Employees During and Beyond COVID-19

About this Toolkit

The threat of COVID-19 to the health of employees extends well beyond the risk of infection. The pandemic has changed everyday life and brought with it stress and, at times, trauma that will continue to impact employees' mental health for the foreseeable future. As a business leader or manager, you have the opportunity to ensure that your organization successfully addresses the mental health impact of the COVID-19 crisis on your employees. Doing so is good for everyone in your organization, and good for business both during and beyond this pandemic.

This toolkit is designed to help business leaders and managers anticipate and take actions that effectively support employees' mental health during COVID-19 and beyond.

AXA Asia and Columbia University World Health Organization (WHO) Centre for Global Mental Health partnered in the development of this toolkit. Additional expert consultation was provided by Stephen Bevan, Head of HR research development at the Institute for Employment Studies UK and David Ballard, organizational consultant and former head of the American Psychological Association's Office of Applied Psychology, Center for Organizational Excellence, and Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program.

The information and recommendations provided in this toolkit are informed by scientific evidence and best practices. We hope that this toolkit will facilitate your making mental health an integral part of your COVID-19 recovery plan so that your entire organization can thrive now and into the future.

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Section 1

Mental Health in the Context of COVID-19: The Big Picture

What to Expect:

Mental health always matters in the workplace. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it matters now more than ever. Business leaders and managers who integrate mental health into their COVID-19 recovery plan have the opportunity to help their employees and company thrive during the recovery and beyond.

Because of COVID-19, employees all over the world have been forced to adjust their routines. Millions of workers have been working from home because of the pandemic. It is the largest and quickest mass shift in working patterns ever recorded. Returning to the office after working from home also presents significant challenges and stresses. Every employee has different circumstances. Some have their children at home. Some have responsibilities – both longstanding and new – caring for older family members who are ill. Work disruptions, extended time at home, additional personal stresses, financial pressure, caring for family members, and uncertainty about the future – all of these changes can impact employees' mental health and influence their work engagement and job performance.

Why Your Employees' Mental Health Matters at Work

Addressing employee mental health can have major benefits for the people in your workforce. When you incorporate mental health into your COVID-19 recovery planning, you have the potential to promote coping and resilience and help prevent mental illness. Attending to your employees' mental health needs during COVID-19 will mitigate the damaging effects of the pandemic and ensure that your employees are supported in ways that enhance their overall well-being and productivity. This will, in turn, enhance your organization's capacity to successfully navigate these choppy waters.

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Major Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

- **35% of individuals in China expressed experiencing psychological distress** due to COVID-19 (Source: General Psychiatry).
- **80% of respondents in India felt the need for mental health services** to deal with emotional issues and other psychological issues during this pandemic (Resource: Asian Journal of Psychiatry).
- **1 in 4 Americans are binge drinking more frequently** (Resource: McKinsey).
- **Over one third of American surveyed reported feeling anxious and depressed** during this pandemic (Resource: McKinsey).
- In the UK, **36% reported that work pressure had increased, 43% said that they did not have time to get their work done and 42% reported more fatigue than before 'lockdown'** (Working at Home Well-being Survey).
- **46% of American parents with children under age 18 reported high stress** levels related to the coronavirus pandemic were high, with **71% reported significant stress** managing their children's online learning (Resource: APA).
- **20% of Chinese adults surveyed reported anxiety and depression** associated with frequent social media exposure (Resource: PLOS One).

Supporting your Employees' Mental Health is Not Only the Right Thing To Do, it's the Smart Thing To Do.

Employee well-being is at the heart of a strong, healthy, and ethical workplace. As a business leader or manager, your duty of care and responsibility for your employees' health will always include attention to their mental health and well-being, but it can be difficult to juggle all the competing demands. In the context of COVID-19, attention to employees' mental health and well-being is both critically important and especially challenging.

This toolkit gives you information in a format that is easy to use so that you are able to successfully integrate mental health into your COVID-19 recovery efforts.

Given that we spend most of our waking hours working, our workplace environment can dramatically influence how we feel and how we function. When leaders and managers support employees' mental health, a virtuous cycle is created: overall employee well-being positively impacts work performance, which pays dividends in terms of organizational success.

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The Benefits of Supporting Employees' Mental Health

The mental well-being of the individuals who make up your workforce is a strong asset for your business - from improving company culture to increasing customer and client satisfaction.

- **Increased Productivity and Improved Work Performance**
  Employees are better able to focus on work during the workday when their mental health needs are effectively addressed. Organizations can support their employees who are experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety caused by COVID-19 by ensuring a supportive environment, providing useful information, and facilitating access to treatment. Such efforts prevent problems from growing and promote coping and resilience, which leads to positive impacts for employee health, work engagement, and performance (Resource: One Mind at Work).

- **Reduced Absenteeism, Turnover, and Injuries**
  Employees with untreated mental health concerns are more likely to miss work and leave their jobs. This puts burden on businesses to fill these gaps. High quality care for depression can lower rates of absenteeism among employees (Resource: Medical Care). Employees with better mental health are also less likely to think about leaving their job (Resource: Institute for Employment Studies).

- **Enhanced Reputation, Recruitment, and Retention**
  Companies that focus on mental health in the workplace are perceived to be more desirable places to work, which enhances recruitment and retention of the best and brightest employees. Over 60% of young professionals today describe wanting to work for a company that supports their mental health and well-being (Resource: Time Magazine).

- **Improved Mental Health is Good for Overall Health**
  Having an untreated mental health condition like depression increases risk for other health conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease. Good mental health is associated with lower rates of cancer and heart disease (Resource: Lancaster University). Employees with better mental health are more likely to attend routine health visits and engage in health activities such as exercise and following a nutritious diet, which means that that they can remain well and in the workforce long after the COVID-19 crisis.

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Section 2

Common COVID-19 Stressors that Impact Employees' Mental Health

The global impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented. It has changed the way billions of people around the globe live and work. This section highlights widespread stressors that are impacting employee mental health. These COVID-19 stressors are common, and your employees will directly experience a number of them. Some stressors are readily apparent in the workplace and explicitly linked to workplace practices and policies. Others are less obvious. Irrespective of visibility, they can all have profound impact on employee mental health. Because these stressors are affecting so many people, even small increases can translate to a substantial—but manageable and even preventable—impact across your workforce.

Common COVID-19 Related Stressors

1. High Ambiguity and Uncertainty
2. Overwhelming COVID-19-Related Information in the Media and on Social Media
3. Risk of Infection
4. Physical Distancing and Social Isolation
5. Change in Work Demands, Structure, and Processes
6. Changes in Domestic Responsibilities that Increase Stress and/or Impede Work
7. Having a Loved One Sick with COVID-19 and/or Loss of Loved Ones
8. Financial Concerns and Job Security
9. Worsening of Comorbid Long-Term Health Conditions
10. Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns Related to New Monitoring Efforts in the Workplace

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1. High Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Uncertainty is destabilizing and can be a major source of stress. It has been linked to both physical and mental health problems. During this pandemic, there are seemingly endless unknowns. There is no certainty of how COVID-19 will progress medically, socially, and economically. Without this information, employees lose the ability to plan their work and personal lives with confidence. For example, employees who usually travel for work or who are generally responsible for bringing people together may fear they are not able to do their job given current restrictions. Others might have planned to use their vacation time far in advance, and now that opportunity for stress recovery and restoration is jeopardized. Given the many unknowns related to COVID-19, employees have many questions and concerns about staying safe in the context of returning to the workplace. Also, without clear communication about the future of the company, or their specific projects and business unit, employees may fear for their job security. This lack of control, especially when combined with increased work and life demands, can have an adverse impact on employee mental health.

Learn More

- Coping with Uncertainty During COVID-19: An International Gottman Trainer Shares Their Perspective (Source: Gottman)
- The Great Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing with the Stress of Uncertainty (Source: APA)
- Advice for Dealing with Uncertainty from People who Have Been There (Source: NPR)

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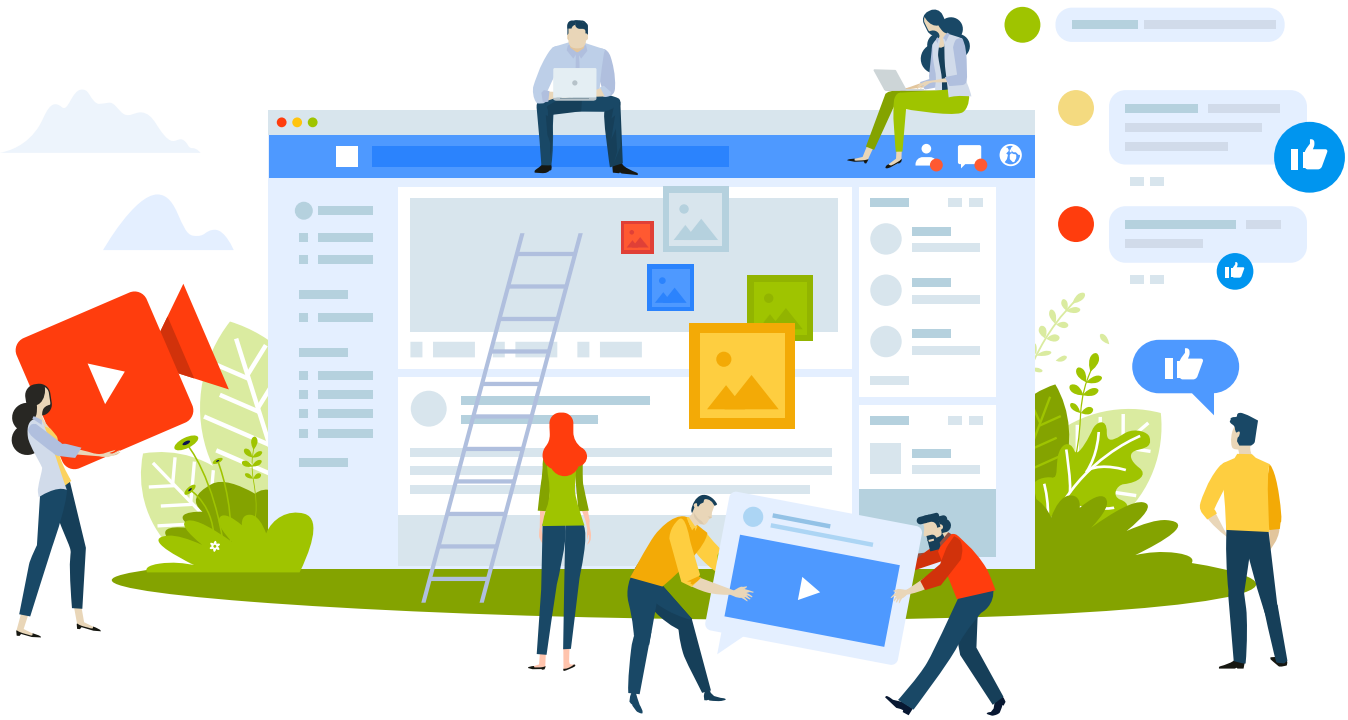

2. Overwhelming COVID-19 Related Information in the Media and on Social Media

Employees are facing a deluge of information about COVID-19. The pandemic is now the topic of everything from texts to advertisements. Even polite 'small talk' and work projects have been infiltrated by the virus. Some employees, in an effort to stay informed or manage their anxiety, may be spending an excessive amount of time reading news or checking social media posts.

Not only is the content of some COVID-19 news coverage upsetting, the way that some stories are presented can be alarmist or overly dramatic. Stories which appear to blame victims (for example, because of obesity) or which promote conspiracy theories about the causes of the pandemic can lead to divisiveness and polarization of opinions. This can make an already upsetting situation even more distressing for some people. The constant barrage of frightening, negative, and often contradictory information can also be overwhelming. In response, some workers may become fatigued and 'opt out' intellectually, emotionally, or entirely.

Learn More

- Media Exposure to COVID-19: How Much is too Much? (Source: Psychology Today)
- Too Much Coronavirus Media May Be Bad for Your Health (Source: APA)
- About Seven-in-Ten U.S. Adults Say They Need to Take Breaks From COVID-19 News (Source: Pew Research Center)

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3. Risk of Infection

Many employees will be stressed about contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to loved ones. Even when following appropriate protocols, workplace logistics may increase risk due to activities such as traveling on public transportation or airplanes, gathering for in-person meetings, and sharing supplies. Employees also may be concerned about becoming infected in the office through contact with contaminated surfaces or coworkers who are ill.

Given the risks associated with COVID-19, employees will be afraid of their possible infection and might feel helpless or angry if they cannot remain careful and protected from potential risk. Careful organizational planning and detailed execution of programs that reduce risk of infection are essential as employees return to the workplace. Being around coworkers who have a mutual understanding of risk factors and individual needs given various home life situations will reduce potential conflict and promote a safe space at work.

Learn More

- Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19 (Source: CDC)
- Putting the Risk of COVID-19 in Perspective (Source: NYT)
- Dealing with Stress, Anxiety, and Grief during COVID-19 (Source: NIH)

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4. Physical Distancing and Social Isolation

Physical distancing is an effective and necessary strategy for mitigating the spread of COVID-19, but it may also have some negative consequences for employees. First, many people have been socially isolated and may not have had access to the social supports they typically rely on to help them through difficult times. The disruption of regular routines and social contact from family, friends, colleagues, and other community members can lead to feelings of boredom, loneliness, sadness, and despair.

Physical distancing also poses a logistical challenge. For workplaces that rely on face-to-face interaction, employees will be forced to navigate new decision-making, brainstorming, and feedback processes. This can greatly impair communication and even lead to a complete communication breakdown if not handled effectively.

Learn More

- How Can Social Isolation Affect Us? (Source: The Guardian)
- The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness (Source: Psychology Today)
- Loneliness: Why Employers Should Care (Source: APA)

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5. Change in Work Demands, Structure, and Processes

Employees have been forced to adapt to new work demands, structural changes, and processes during the coronavirus pandemic. Communication, workflow, and scheduling have all shifted to contain the virus. Many companies are, at least temporarily, turning entirely to telework. Some projects have been paused, while others have been halted permanently. Other aspects of work are being reimagined—from manufacturing procedures to office floorplans to hourly shift structure.

COVID-19 presents unique stresses for employees - whether they remained in the workplace throughout or have had to transition to working from home and then transition back to the workplace.

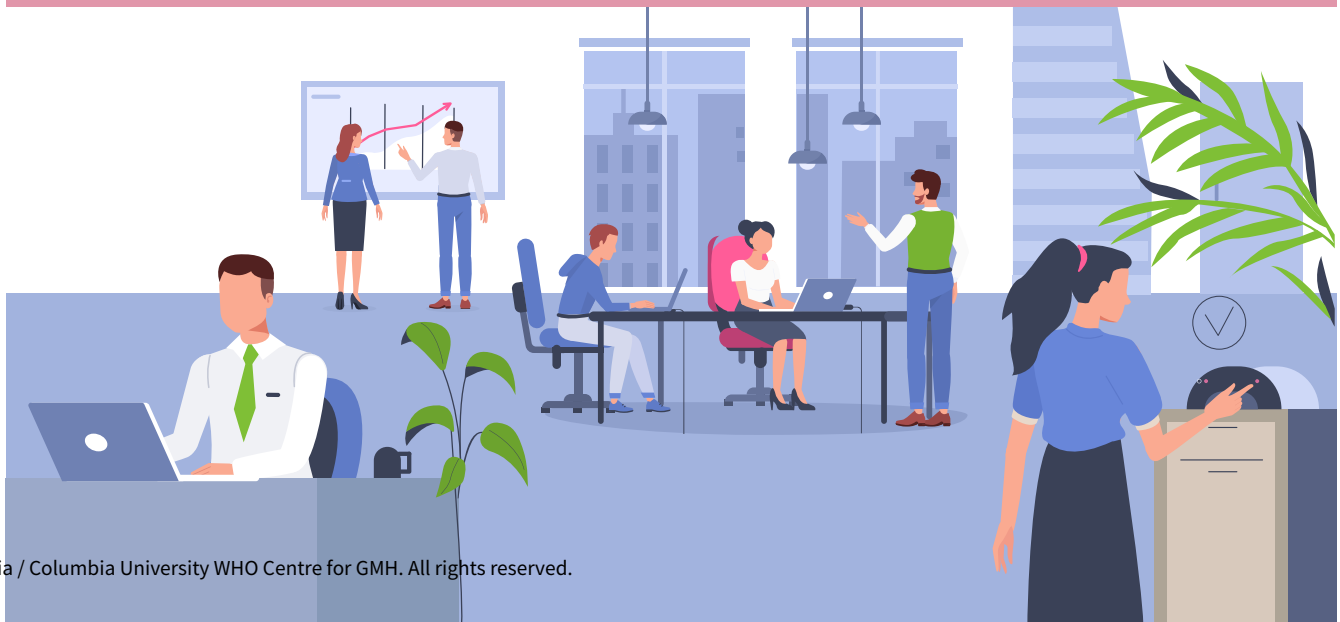
Furlough and termination of employees leaves more work to be covered by remaining staff, who might not have had appropriate handover or training to complete tasks satisfactorily. If this work was not previously in their job description, issues of interest and investment and feelings of incompetence, anxiety, or resentment about taking on the new responsibility may emerge. Conversely, some employees may feel "survivor's guilt" for retaining their job while their peers lost their jobs, which can lead to experiences of grief, distress, and anxiety.

Changes in how, when, where, and how much employees are working have the potential to create work-life conflict. When these work demands spill over and interfere with home obligations, they can create stress and dissatisfaction in both settings. This is exacerbated by the collapse of naturally-occurring breaks that the traditional structure had provided. Home concerns were more easily left at home and work concerns were more easily left at work when each had distinct places in our lives. During the pandemic, demands and stresses co-mingle in novel ways that can be challenging to juggle.

Lastly, an increase in teleworking can escalate the pressure on employees to be online and attentive 24/7. For those working from home, there could be unrealistic expectations that employees should be available all the time. Having more difficulty disconnecting from work and getting the stress recovery experiences they need (for example getting enough sleep, relaxing, and spending time with loved ones) is a common source of stress for employees at this time.

Learn More

- Coronavirus: How to Work From Home, the Right Way (Source: BBC)
- Preventing Information Overload in the "Always On" Workplace (Source: Sodexo)
- WHO "Healthy at Home" Suggestions (Source: WHO)



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6. Changes in Domestic Responsibilities that Increase Stress and/or Impede Work

COVID-19 puts enormous stress on families. Schools are closed. Older adults are most vulnerable to the virus.

Workers with children or those caring for a senior face an exponential rise in responsibility. This can be too much pressure for any individual to handle alone. There will be trade-offs between roles that could lead to a loss of work quality. This may be the first time that employees face this degree of pressure of balancing work and personal demands. For some, this intensified experience of role conflict will be especially distressing and overwhelming.

Consider an employee who is a parent with two school-aged children who were looked after by a home helper until 8pm each day, until now. In the current context, the employee is now tasked with homeschooling the children, feeding them, cleaning the house, working full-time, and remaining healthy themselves. If they are also taking care of a senior who is at risk of becoming sick or is sick, the stressors only grow.

Learn More

- Supporting Children's Mental Health During COVID-19 School Closures (Source: NEJM Journal Watch)
- Coronavirus and COVID-19: Caregiving for the Elderly (Source: Johns Hopkins Medicine)
- Supporting Working Caregivers (Source: ReACT and AARP)

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7. Having a Loved One Sick with COVID-19 and/or Losing a Loved One

Given the prevalence of COVID-19, it is inevitable that some employees will have loved ones who fall sick with COVID-19. Experiencing stress is normal when a family member or friend is ill, but in the context of a virus that has no vaccine, cure, or treatment, we should expect heightened distress.

Furthermore, COVID-19's long incubation period and the necessity of quarantining sick individuals limit caregivers' ability to physically comfort loved ones who are sick, which might have been their strategy for showing love and support in the past. This could lead to hampered focus and motivation, as well as increased risks for elevated anxiety and despair.

Unfortunately, some employees will experience the death of a loved one during this pandemic. Beyond the expected suffering that comes with such a loss, the circumstances around this virus could make grieving even more difficult. It is likely employees would have been unable to spend time with the person or be present for the moment of death. Comfort given and shared through physical touch would have been prohibited or severely limited.

Public health protocols during the pandemic have restricted a variety of rituals such as funerals and memorial services that are an important part of the grieving process. As a result, typical plans for honoring the body may have been impossible to follow through with. In general, grieving may feel rushed, and there are few opportunities to access community support or distraction.

Learn More

- Grief and COVID-19: Saying goodbye in the age of physical distancing (Source: APA)
- Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives (Source: APA)
- Managing Grief During a Pandemic (Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)

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8. Financial Concerns and Job Security

Most countries have seen dramatic increases in unemployment and job insecurity due to COVID-19. This has led to growing concerns over family finances. In many contexts, employees are afraid of losing their job and of a family member losing theirs. In a survey of UK workers, 44% of employees reported losing sleep due to stress about money during the pandemic (Source: Institute for Employment Studies).

Employees who lost household income as a result of the pandemic may be struggling to meet their financial obligations, including basic living expenses and payments for housing and consumer debt. For others, plans that were made based on projected regular income or side projects that provided supplemental income will need to be changed or cancelled. These financial stresses can affect concentration and people's capacity to focus at work.

Personal relationships also suffer - money troubles can be an important predictor of a relationship breakdown. People with financial concerns are also more likely to go to work when they are ill, which is always ill-advised but particularly troublesome in the context of COVID-19. Those with retirement savings or pension plans may have increased anxiety about their financial security given market losses and volatility. The economic ramifications may require re-examining, and perhaps downgrading expectations about quality of life and security in the future.

Learn More

- How Will People React to the New Financial Crisis? (Source: APA)
- How to Mitigate the Mental Health Consequences of the COVID-19 Financial Crisis (Source: Psychiatric Services)
- Short on Cash? Here's Some Advice for Families Stretching Their Budget (Source: NPR)

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9. Worsening of Associated Long-Term Health Conditions

As many employees shift to telework to accommodate social distancing, ergonomic concerns arise that have the potential to exacerbate pre-existing health conditions such as musculoskeletal pain, migraines, and heart disease, among others. About one in four employees with these chronic illness also have depression and anxiety (Resource: Lancaster University). During this pandemic, many workers have made stop-gap adaptations to convert their homes into workspaces, often without the tools and furniture needed to remain healthy and work safely over the long-term. In an office, employees might have had access to standing desks, ergonomic computer equipment, protective footwear, and built-in breaks for physical reprieve. When working from home, it is easy to remain hunched over a small laptop screen without proper back support for hours.

Additionally, employees with other health conditions including diabetes or cancer might not have been able to access the treatment they need given limited access to non-emergency or non-COVID-19 related care. This delay or complete treatment gap could lead to impaired health, causing greater distress and putting workers at a higher risk of developing a mental health problems.

Learn More

- Workplace Chronic Disease Self-Management (Source: Self-Management Source Center)
- Addressing Chronic Disease in the Workplace (Source: Vital Record)
- Musculoskeletal Toolkit for Employers (Source: Business in the Community)

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10. Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns Related to New Monitoring and Tracking Efforts in the Workplace

As employees re-enter the workplace with new safety and physical distancing protocols and organizations adjust to telework, rotating schedules, and other new arrangements, employees will likely be subject to more (and different types of) screening and monitoring than they were before the pandemic began. While new approaches may be necessary to create a safe and healthy work environment and evaluate job performance, these efforts can feel intrusive to some employees. If not managed well, frequent check-in calls, emails, and the use of productivity software to track remote workers can diminish trust and leave employees feeling micromanaged.

Many employees have privacy concerns regarding their health status as workplaces require temperature checks, contact tracing, and activity monitoring. Employees reactions will vary depending on cultural and societal norms. While some might see these measures as supportive, others may feel unduly watched and infringed upon in terms of their right to privacy.

Learn More

- Balancing Employee Public Health and Safety (Source: PWC)
- Reporting, Recording, and Communication of COVID-19 Cases in Workplace: Data Protection as a Moving Target (Source: Journal of Law and the Biosciences)
- How to Safeguard the Privacy of Workers with COVID-19 (Source: SHRM)

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Section 3

Effective Leadership During COVID-19

As a business leader or manager, you have the opportunity to play a central role in shaping your organizational response to this pandemic. Leaders and managers have the potential to promote organizational efforts and address individual employee concerns that reduce stress and promote healthy coping and resilience. During times of crisis, certain leadership behavior goes a long way to ensure that employees feel appropriately informed and supported. The following leadership actions will help your organization navigate this difficult time effectively so that all employees and the entire organization grow stronger during COVID-19 and beyond.

1. Communicate Clearly and Often

Share important information and resources. Provide clear guidance on protecting health and safety. Employees are counting on their leaders and managers to provide credible information and to be honest when they do not know answers to questions. Frequent, predictable communications that employees can easily participate in or access will go a long way to reducing distress, fear, anxiety, and despair. These should be characterized by transparency, authenticity, empathy, and optimism.

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2. Promote Open Two-way Communication

It is important that employees not only hear from their supervisors, but also know they can express their fears and concerns to supervisors at this time. Maintaining contact and interaction with others through video calls and group chats - both to complete work and for more informal exchange - relieves anxiety and builds a sense of community. Creating space that gives employees opportunities to speak out about their mental health concerns can help people get support early.

3. Normalize Employees' Heightened Anxiety and Stress

It is important to convey that feelings of stress, worry, and fear are normal during this time of uncertainty. We should expect these among our employees, our coworkers, and ourselves. Although these may impact us and our work environment throughout the pandemic's unfolding, these mental health concerns are common and can be effectively managed.

4. Remember and Remind Employees that Mental Health is Important for Everyone

Mental health is a specific dimension of health for each of us – in the same way that we talk about cardiac health, for example. It is important to understand that our mental health status changes – sometimes we feel stressed and fearful, sometimes joyful and optimistic. Mental health problems like depression and anxiety are common. Many factors including work, relationships, finances, physical environment, caregiving duties, family, and health influence how well we feel both physically and emotionally, and this changes over time. It is important to remember and remind employees that COVID-19 has introduced many new and different stressors to each of us that are taxing our coping skills and ability to be resilient throughout this period, and some employees will have significant mental health concerns that will call for more focused care.

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5. Make Mental Health a Normal Part of Your Conversations

Talking about mental health is difficult for many people due to stigma, and this is especially true in the workplace. Yet we know that this is to the detriment of employees' well-being and organizational success. COVID-19 has the potential to serve as an entry point for leaders and managers to begin conversations about mental health in the workplace. By actively showcasing your workplace as an open, safe environment to discuss mental health concerns, and as a place where employees can get support during the pandemic and beyond, overall mental health will improve.

6. Facilitate Peer and Team Support

Leaders and managers have many competing responsibilities that have been complicated even further by COVID-19. Encouraging the development of online and - where practical and medically-safe – in person peer support groups and teams can greatly enhance work group cohesion and individual coping skills. Peer support groups and teams can be organized around shared interests (e.g., book groups), athletics (e.g., running groups), common experiences or characteristics (e.g., women in leadership, LGBTQ employees), and professional development and skills building (e.g., public speaking courses). These networks provide opportunities for employees to connect and look after each other in ways that can be a huge comfort. Once established, such internal staff networks can often serve to alert leaders when an employee may need additional support or attention.

7. Promote and Model Flexibility

Because we cannot predict the future of COVID-19, our daily routines will continue to be impacted by this pandemic, including in ways that we cannot fully anticipate. COVID-19 is likely to have a fluctuating course, with possible cycles of viral transmission that will require flexibility and responsivity. When people aren't sure how they should behave they look to leaders as role models. Employees will follow the example of leaders they respect. When you model flexibility in response to changing policies and practices, employees will likely follow your lead.

8. Promote and Model Self-Care

The disruptions to personal routines, restrictions on activities, and change in work processes on top of the elevated stresses associated with COVID-19 put many people at risk for neglecting self-care behaviors, such as getting regular exercise and healthy sleep. Social activities and clubs are cancelled. Leaders and managers can model and share creative strategies in this regard. With your visibility, you can model the healthy behaviors you are promoting in your workforce.

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Section 4

Having Constructive Conversations to Support Employee Mental Health in the Context of COVID-19

Many people living with a mental illness have a similar anecdote: they often say, once they are feeling much better, that their recovery began when someone took an interest in them, showed that they cared, and took the time to be an ear for them when they felt very low or alone. You have the chance to be that person. (Resource: Men's Health).

The COVID-19 crisis has meant that many employees are facing difficulties both inside and outside work, and so they may benefit enormously from simple and supportive conversations with managers and colleagues who can help them if they feel anxious or depressed.

Here are some ideas that might help you have such conversations and lend a hand to help your colleague to thrive again.

Overcoming the Fear of Discussing Mental Health

You don't need to be an expert to talk to someone who isn't coping so well. With proper mental health resources, you should be reassured you will not make things worse. While you may feel uncomfortable talking to someone about your concerns regarding their mental health, simply letting them know you care can make a difference to how they are feeling and may pave the way to create an open dialogue.

By talking and listening, you can create an opportunity to encourage someone to seek help if needed. Everyone experiences mental health issues at some time in their lives, and it is vital not to underestimate the importance of just being there for someone. Many managers will be hesitant to begin a conversation out of fear of:

- causing offense or making things worse
- harming their working relationship
- not wanting to get involved
- not being sure how to respond

If you're concerned about someone, approach them and start a conversation. Try to understand their situation and encourage them to seek support. Helping the person find further information and support services can also be really useful, as this step can often be overwhelming for someone with anxiety or depression.

Remind yourself that this is no different to talking about how someone's feeling – the topic is just a bit more delicate. Remember you may be the only person to have noticed changes in their behavior or have the courage to start a conversation. This may be vital for them to get the help and support they need to stay well.

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Planning a Conversation

When you're preparing to approach someone, it can be helpful to:

- Find out what help is available within your workplace. If you work in a larger organization, does it have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or an Occupational Health Service?
- Find out what other support services are available (counselling, peer support groups, charity partners)
- Consider who should be having the conversation. Are you the best person or would another workmate or someone from HR be more suitable?
- Think about the most appropriate time and place. Choose a moment when the person will feel comfortable and be free of distractions.

If possible, set aside enough time to talk in detail. Give yourself a buffer between this conversation and the next. Ending a helpful conversation too early can appear aloof and send the message that your colleagues concerns are not really a priority.

Beginning the Conversation

Whether you are a manager concerned about someone in your team or speaking to a peer, the following tips will help you start the conversation. Don't worry if you don't quite know what to say. Just by being supportive and listening, you're helping to make a difference:

- There's no, single correct way of expressing thoughts – your key role is to be thoughtful and genuine.
- You don't need to have all the answers – it's about having the conversation and the support you offer by talking.
- Say what feels comfortable for you.
- If what you say doesn't sound quite right, stop and try again. It doesn't have to be the end of the conversation.

Begin the conversation by telling them that you have noticed that they don't seem their usual self and describe the changes you've noticed in their mood or behavior. Tell them you are worried about them and ask about what is bothering them. Some phrases that might help you get started:

- You don't seem yourself lately, would it help to tell me what's going on?
- Tell me about how you are managing during these strange times?
- I've noticed you have been quiet lately, is there anything you'd like to talk about?

While having a conversation, let the other person know they are not alone, and there is hope that things can get better. Be patient and understanding. It is important to remember that setbacks will occur. Help them overcome any setbacks and ask questions such as: What can I do to support you with this?

Check-in with them frequently to see how they are going. This shows that you care about them and provides an opportunity to talk. Point out any improvements you notice and encourage them to continue to speak with you about anything that may be worrying them.

Remember, supporting someone else can sometimes be draining on your own mental health and well-being. It is important to look after yourself by making sure you are getting enough sleep and take time out for yourself or seeking help from others when you need it.

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Asking Questions to Keep the Conversation Going

A core communication skill is asking 'open' rather than 'closed' questions. Open questions are ones which encourage the person to respond freely with their thoughts and feelings. Closed questions classically produce a one-word answer, such as 'yes' or 'no' or a fact – 'yesterday' or 'seven'. Remember that:

- Questions beginning with 'are' or 'do' tend to be closed questions because they generate just 'yes' or 'no' answers.
- Questions which begin with 'what', 'where', 'which', 'who', and 'when' are open questions. These will generate fuller answers which allow you to follow up.
- If you get the chance to probe deeper, then you could try additional questions beginning with 'how', 'why', and 'in what way'.

For example, 'Are you feeling better today?' is a closed question. The colleague doesn't have to answer anything more than 'yes' or 'no'. Or they might just answer with a grunt or a shrug of the shoulders. All you have to do is change the question slightly. Turn it into 'How are you feeling today?' and the colleague has the opportunity to describe how they feel. Open questions, therefore, are much better at providing information. Open questions are an avenue leading somewhere; closed questions are a dead end.

What to Do if Your Colleague is Reluctant to Share How they Feel

Some people are not ready, do not know how, or may not want to speak to someone about how they are feeling. Remember, however, that the longer someone delays getting the help they need, the more distressed they are likely to become, putting them in a much harder place to recover from. While this is very worrying for people close to them, it doesn't help to pressure them to talk if they are not ready; the decision to speak about their feelings needs to come from within. So, what can you do?

- Focus on spending time with them so that they don't feel alone. It can take time for someone to feel comfortable enough to talk about how they are feeling.
- Let them know that you are concerned about them and are there if they want to talk. Reassure them with phrases such as, "call me if you ever want to talk" or "I am here for you if you decide it would be helpful to talk."
- Ask them if there are any specific reasons why they don't want to seek help. Once you have an idea about what is worrying them, you may be able to work together to find a solution.
- Suggest, when they are ready, that they can speak to someone else they trust or contact a support line if they would feel more comfortable speaking to someone they don't know.
- Offer to organize access to a mental health professional or other support service.
- Some people may find it hard to talk to a mental health professional or other support service because they feel anxious, frightened that others are against them, or fearful of criticism. Explain to them that a professional support service is there to help and will not judge them.
- Some people are reluctant to seek help from a mental health professional or support service because they have difficulty putting their thoughts together to explain what is going on, find it hard to talk about how they feel, or don't realize that they need help. In this instance, you can support them by speaking to a doctor or a support service beforehand, or writing notes about your concerns in advance that you can use during the conversation.

Remember, you don't need to have all the answers or to deal with the situation on your own. There are many others in your organization who can provide advice and support.

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The Importance of 'Active' Listening

Sometimes the conversation you have with a colleague will be the first time they have talked about their mental health with someone else. It's important to carefully listen to what they say and to do so in a way where they feel confident and heard sympathetically without judgement. Remind yourself about why being listened to during a difficult time can help your colleague feel better:

- They feel understood.
- They feel cared about and accepted.
- It helps to make sense of things that are happening or have happened to them.
- It connects them with someone else when they're probably feeling very isolated and unsupported.
- It helps your colleague trust you so that they can:
  a. tell you about what's going on for them.
  b. learn from you.
  c. participate in agreeing some actions and support to help them through the crisis.
- It helps them release tension in a safe way.

It's also important to listen carefully without judging them:

- Remember that this is their story, so don't try to guess how it plays out. Instead, listen and ask questions.
- Be aware of your body language. To show you're listening, try to maintain eye contact and sit in a relaxed position.
- Repeat back your understanding of what they've said and make sure it's accurate.

Responding to What They Say

Think about the best way to respond to what your colleague is saying. You can't always fix things, but you can help them along the way. For example, you might:

- Decide that today you're just there to listen and offer support.
- Talk about it again another time if they seem reluctant or upset.
- Keep checking in with them.
- Reassure them that you'll respect their privacy.
- Think about what they need now and ask what you can do to help.

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Agreeing on Next Steps

Ideally, at the end of each conversation about mental health problems you can summarize one or two things you have agreed to do when you speak next. For example, you might:

- Discuss options for further support.
- Finish the conversation with agreement on what you are both going to do next before the next conversation.
- Appreciate that they opened up and shared their story with you.
- Make a note to check in with them again in a few days.

What if Something Unexpected Comes Up in Your Conversation?

Sometimes a conversation raises an issue or a feeling that you did not expect. Again, you can't be expected to have all of the answers, but remember that:

- If they don't want to speak about it, respect their choice, but leave the door open for another conversation at another time.
- It may take multiple attempts to have the conversation.
- Just by showing support and offering to talk, you can make a difference. The person might take action at a later stage or continue the conversation with others.
- If they disclose that they are at are feeling suicidal or they are planning to hurt themselves or others, seek guidance from a manager, HR professional or EAP immediately, or contact your local emergency life line.

Some Helpful Resources

time to change
let's end mental health discrimination

Time to Change

Go to website

RUOK?

RUOK (Australia)

Go to website

Heads up
Better mental health in the workplace

Heads Up

Go to website

mind

Mind UK

Go to website

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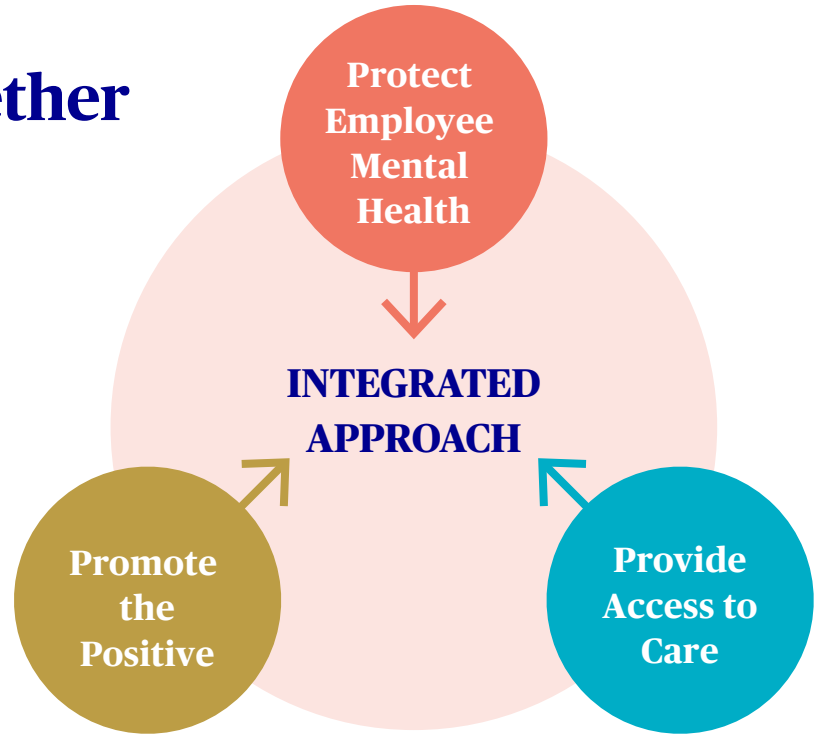
Section 5

Putting it All Together



"Graphic adapted from: Workplace mental health: developing an integrated intervention approach"

The Three Ps:

As you integrate mental health into your COVID-19 recovery plan, it is important to remember that you can support your employees in a variety of ways. These three "Ps" will help you be most effective - **Protect, Promote** and **Provide.**

At an organizational level, leaders and managers can **PROTECT** employee mental health by reducing work-related risk factors for mental health problems. At this level, you are aiming to develop and implement practices and policies that **PROTECT** mental health by preventing exposure to stress and situations that could cause mental distress or mental health problems.

You also want to **PROMOTE** good mental health by supporting routines and structure amidst uncertainties. When you **PROMOTE** coping skills, employee strengths, and positive capabilities, you are strengthening your employees' resilience and capacity to thrive even in difficult times.

Effective leaders and managers also **PROVIDE** opportunities for employees to talk about mental health needs and **PROVIDE** access to mental health services by knowing what is available within your organization and facilitating connection to resources for employees who are struggling with mental health concerns.

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Common Mental Health Concerns

Even when an organization has a comprehensive and integrated strategy for mental health in the workplace, leaders and managers should anticipate that some employees will experience mental health concerns and mental disorders that will require care and attention. Here are some common mental health concerns related to COVID-19 that you should anticipate among employees. In the following sections, you can learn more about what to expect, why it matters and what you can do.

Mental Health Concern/Impacts

1. Fear and Worry
2. Common Mental Disorders
3. Physical and Cognitive Concerns
4. Interpersonal Violence and Domestic Abuse
5. Alcohol and Other Substance Misuse
6. Grief and Loss
7. Burnout
8. Suicide Risk

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1. Fear and Worry

A. What to Expect

- Some degree of fear and worry are to be expected from your entire workforce. The novel coronavirus is poorly understood, has no vaccine and no cure. It is the most severe global health crisis for a century. Uncertainty due to COVID-19 is all around us so it is natural that employees are concerned, overwhelmed, stressed, worried, and feeling afraid. These experiences may center on concerns related to the economy, employment, finances, relationships, and of course, physical and mental health.

B. Why it Matters

- Excessive fear and worry have the potential to exhaust employee coping strategies and negatively impact resilience. With the significant uncertainty associated with COVID-19, virtually everyone is in a heightened state of vigilance, which can be fatiguing over time. Reduced coping, compromised resilience, and increased fatigue have a negative impact on overall immune functioning that increases vulnerability related to COVID-19 as well as other health conditions. Effective leaders and company responses can have dramatic and positive impact in protecting employees from having these normative responses turn into serious health problems.

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C. What You Can Do

- Acknowledge and normalize the widespread and variable nature of fear and worry that employees are experiencing. Encourage employees to maintain or develop regular practices that reduce stress. These can include meditation, exercise, healthy eating and sleep routines, and engaging in social activities like book groups and walking clubs that support positive coping and resilience.
- Encourage employees to use existing resources available through the company's wellness program or Employee Assistance Program. Directly explain how the resources can help with COVID-19-related challenges. Model the use of these resources and share with employees how this kind of self-care has a positive impact on one's own mental health. Acknowledge that such self-care can also help everyone around them at home and at work reduce stress and function at their best.
- Provide frequent communications that anticipate stressful situations for employees. Communicate with authenticity and transparency about company plans that will impact work circumstances and cause potential stress for employees. Provide opportunities to hear from employees about company policies and practices related to managing COVID-19. Share encouraging messages with employees and make use of trusted resources that provide current and accurate information.
- Check in with employees more often than usual to monitor fears, anxieties, and worries. Conveying empathy about stresses employees are experiencing, while encouraging appropriate use of breaks during the workday and time off to recharge has the potential to allay fears and anxieties and mitigate impact on employee health and functioning.
- Provide tips to help employees reduce media exposure about COVID-19 to prevent overstimulation and fatigue. This can include reducing the amount of time spent reading or watching news, limiting notifications from social media platforms, and identifying a few trusted resources that provide accurate and non-sensationalized news updates.

Additional Resources

- How to Overcome Fear and Anxiety (Source: Mental Health Foundation)
- Coronavirus Anxiety: Coping with Stress, Fear, and Worry (Source: Help Guide)
- Coping with Coronavirus: Managing Stress, Fear, and Anxiety (Source: NIH)
- Coping with Outbreak Stress (Source: CDC)
- Organizational Tools to Lessen Fear and Worry Among Health Provider Employees During Past Pandemics (Source: Psychiatric Services)

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2. Common Mental Disorders

A. What to Expect

- The most common mental health conditions that are being reported in the context of COVID-19 are anxiety and mood disorders. Many individuals with these pre-existing mental health conditions are reporting a worsening of symptoms, and many individuals who have never had an anxiety or mood disorder are reporting significant and sustained symptoms of anxiety and depression. This is true for men and women of all ages, and the number of people reporting these symptoms is above historical norms. In addition, because of the recommendations around extra handwashing and strategies to be extra careful to reduce the transmission of the virus, individuals with obsessive compulsive symptoms are also reporting an exacerbation of symptoms.

  Anxiety disorders are characterized by excessive fear and anxiety and related behavioral disturbances. In the context of COVID-19, individuals are commonly reporting elevated rates of free floating anxiety, panic, and social anxiety. These symptoms can lead to the development of generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and social phobia.

  Depression refers to a grouping of disorders, including major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and postpartum depression. The most common symptoms of depression are melancholy, severe mood swings associated with bipolar disorder, loss of pleasure, loss of energy, difficulty in concentrating, and suicidal thoughts.

  Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterized by unavoidable patterns of thoughts (obsessions) and/or actions (compulsions). COVID-19 is causing some individuals to report a worsening of obsessive thinking about germs and fear of illness and compulsive hand washing and cleaning. These symptoms are excessive compared to normal because they are especially frequent, intense, and feel overwhelming.

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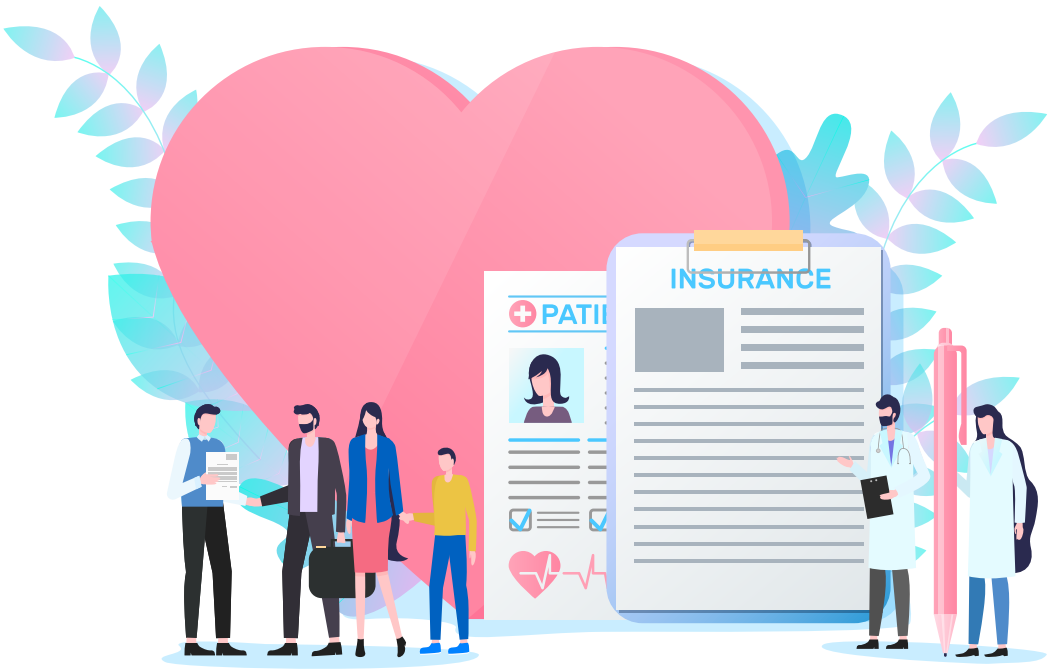
B. Why it Matters

- Even before COVID-19, anxiety and depression were extremely common mental disorders impacting more than 15% of adults in any given year. Globally, they are the most prevalent disorders, and they cause the greatest amount of disability for adults. As such, these are the disorders that are most common in the workplace, and COVID-19 has increased risk for both these disorders, as well as obsessive compulsive disorder due to the significant stresses, uncertainty, dislocation, and disruption to people's lives caused by the pandemic.
- Anxiety and depression have a significant impact on decision making and judgment, sometimes leading to increased risk of error or injury.
- Common mental disorders that go untreated have the potential to reduce immune functioning and can lead to other health problems. When people with debilitating anxiety and depression do not get the right care, they are at high risk for self-medicating with alcohol or other substances, which over time can cause significant additional health problems. In addition, untreated anxiety and depression are estimated to account for approximately 1/3 of all visits to a primary care provider. The common mental disorders are associated with chronic pain, including back pain and headaches, both of which can lead to severely compromised health and functioning and disability.
- These disorders are also highly treatable and the earlier that individuals get help the better. When leaders and managers openly recognize mental health needs and when companies provide supports to employees to get the help they need, the time that individuals suffer is diminished and the impact of the mental health condition on one's personal and work life is greatly reduced.



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C. What You Can Do

- Acknowledge that the stresses associated with COVID-19 may lead employees to feel elevated levels of anxiety and depression and provide psychoeducational materials that include relevant information in your wellness communications. Encourage employees to engage in self-care and promote company programs that support positive coping and resilience.
- Educate employees about anxiety and mood disorders with educational materials and communications that clearly eliminate shame and stigma. These materials should help employees distinguish between normal fluctuations of feelings (everyone feels sad and anxious sometimes and especially in the context of COVID-19) and disorders that are having undue negative impact on an employee's functioning.
- Facilitate access to available supports, including self-help programs, peer-led initiatives, and Employee Assistance Program services.
- Train supervisors to identify signs of anxiety and mood disorders. This requires developing the sophistication to distinguish between normative fluctuations of emotions and recognizing when symptoms of anxiety and depression are negatively impacting an employee's functioning. Encourage supervisors to have supportive conversations with employees and address related job performance concerns.
- In the context of COVID-19, leaders, managers, and supervisors will want to buttress their practice of checking in with employees, particularly those working remotely over extended periods of time and especially for employees with a known past history of an anxiety or mood disorder. This practice will promote early identification of the emergence of common mental health problems.
- Encourage employees who are struggling with common mental health problems to seek help early, emphasizing that these are treatable disorders when individuals get appropriate care.
- Demonstrate empathy and understanding about how difficult it may to take time to focus on these issues, especially given the added pressures of the pandemic. At the same time, encourage employees to pursue help, recognizing that benefits will accrue in both their personal and work lives when their mental health needs are properly addressed.

Additional Resources

- Warning Signs for Depression and Anxiety (Source: APA)
- COVID-19 vs. Your OCD Symptoms (Source: International OCD Foundation)
- For People with Eating Disorders, COVID-19 Presents New Challenges (Source: APA)
- Managing Someone with a Mental Health Condition (Source: Heads Up Australia)
- Supporting Those with Mental Health Conditions during COVID-19 (Source: United Nations)

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3. Physical and Cognitive Concerns

A. What to Expect

- People experience stress in a variety of ways that can affect them both physically and mentally. With the added pressure, disruption, and impact of the COVID-19 crisis, some employees may be experiencing somatic symptoms, including fatigue, sleep disruptions, headaches, muscle tension, gastrointestinal discomfort, and changes in appetite. For others, the stress may be affecting their thinking, making it harder for them to focus and concentrate, or impairing their problem solving and decision making abilities.

B. Why it Matters

- Although most people are equipped to handle stress in short bursts, left unchecked, chronic stress can lead to burnout. It also places wear and tear on the body that can contribute to serious health conditions, such as heart disease, obesity, and depression. Similarly, mild to moderate symptoms can progress to musculoskeletal, digestive, and sleep disorders if unaddressed. With disrupted routines, social isolation, and increased stress, some employees have also engaged in unhealthy coping strategies, including eating behaviors that have further compounded the problem. The ongoing nature of the pandemic requires attention to emerging concerns now, before they become longstanding problems.
- When employees are experiencing physical symptoms related to or made worse by the COVID-19 crisis, their job performance can suffer. In addition to increases in absenteeism, turnover, and use of medical leave, employees' productivity can decline as a result of being tired, fatigued, or in physical discomfort while on the job.
- Addressing cognitive issues is particularly important in light of the high levels of uncertainty and complexity that workers are facing in the current business environment. Employees who are struggling with attention and concentration may not only be less efficient but also more prone to make mistakes. Those whose problem-solving abilities are compromised may also make suboptimal decisions that have a negative impact on business outcomes.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has upended schedules, disrupted routines, and increased stress in ways that may be taking a toll on the amount and quality of sleep workers are getting. Sleep deprivation and fatigue, in addition to reducing job performance and posing long-term health risks for employees, can be a major risk factor for work-related accidents and injuries. One large study (Swean et al., 2003) found that highly fatigued workers were 70% more likely to be involved in accidents than those who reported low fatigue levels. Lack of sleep can also cloud employees' thinking, slow their reaction time, and increase the number of errors they make (Source: Occupational Environmental Medical).

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C. What You Can Do

- Encourage employees to use existing resources available through the company's wellness program or Employee Assistance Program and directly explain how the resources can help with COVID-19-related challenges. Specific topics to emphasize might include stress management, healthy sleep, diet and nutrition, and exercise. If possible, allow work time for employees to access these supports. Use multiple communication channels to provide clear information about the resources and how to access them. Normalize/destigmatize the use of these resources by having management visibly participate themselves and frame the supports as tools that can help everyone manage the additional stressors related to the pandemic, stay healthy, and function at their best.
- Supervisors should check in with employees more frequently than usual to monitor progress, provide feedback, help think through decisions, and identify any emerging problems. Monitor employees' workloads, stress levels, and use of time off. Encourage appropriate use of breaks during the workday and time off to recharge.
- Provide tips to help employees minimize distractions (e.g., turning off pop-up email notifications), avoid multi-tasking (e.g., using a calendar to schedule one task at a time), and keep their work manageable (e.g., breaking work tasks into smaller steps).
- Refer employees experiencing physical health concerns to their primary care doctor to rule out and/or address any underlying medical issues that could be causing symptoms.

Additional Resources

- Sleep Education – Insomnia (Source: AASM)
- What Workers and Employers Can Do to Manage Workplace Fatigue during COVID-19 (Source: CDC)
- Simple Desk Exercises (Source: Posture People)
- Can I Boost My Immune System? (Source: New York Times)

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4. Interpersonal and Domestic Abuse

A. What to Expect

- The added stress of the pandemic, along with the resulting impact on people's work and personal lives, have left some people feeling angry, scared, and out of control. This has the potential to increase acts of hostility, aggression, and in extreme cases, interpersonal violence in the workplace. Aggressive behavior can include shouting, intimidation, and threats, which can escalate to physical assaults if managers and human resources staff do not take action. Although extreme acts of workplace violence by disgruntled employees are the ones that make the news headlines, they are relatively rare. Similarly, contrary to popular belief, most acts of violence are not committed by people with mental illnesses, and people who have mental health concerns are no more likely than those in the overall population to engage in violence. Most incidents of violence at work are nonfatal and can involve clients, customers, employees, contractors, vendors, or domestic abuse that spills over into the workplace.
- Research on previous disasters suggests that the associated stress can lead to higher rates of domestic abuse during and after the crisis. Shutdowns during the COVID-19 crisis may have required people who were experiencing abuse to stay at home, confined with the perpetrator in an unsafe situation without access to the social supports and protective environments they typically rely on. Domestic abuse can take a variety of forms, including physical and sexual violence, as well as emotional abuse, such as insults, humiliation, intimidation, coercion, and control. Although managers are usually unaware of challenges that may be occurring at home, people who perpetrate domestic abuse may target their partner in the workplace because they know when and where to find them.

B. Why it Matters

- Experiencing or witnessing aggression in the workplace can have a significant impact on employee well-being, including their mental health. It can also negatively affect job performance, productivity, and morale and contribute to absenteeism and turnover. With everyone under increased stress during the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to ensure that tensions do not boil over at work and create an unsafe environment where health and productivity suffer.
- Violence threatens employees' safety at work, including the risk of physical and psychological harm. In a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, incidents of workplace violence also contributed to reports of increased stress or depression and decreased morale, productivity, and trust in management and co-workers (Source: SHRM Survey Findings). Exposure to serious incidents can also lead to depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder for those who experienced or witnessed the event.
- The social isolation and added pressures of the pandemic may have contributed to new cases of domestic abuse where none previously existed and worsened the situation for employees who were already experiencing problems. Domestic abuse is linked to a variety of serious health outcomes, including physical injuries, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and chronic health conditions, as well as lost productivity at work. People who have experienced domestic abuse are also more likely to engage in behavior that pose health risks, such as tobacco use, unhealthy eating, and alcohol and other substance abuse.

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C. What You Can Do

- Acknowledge that tensions may be running high during the COVID-19 crisis and remind employees about expectations for civil and respectful interactions in the workplace. Have clear policies for what constitutes unacceptable behavior and communicate those policies clearly.
- Address incidents of aggression early before they escalate. Ensure that you have a mechanism for employees to report aggressive or violent behavior and that employees know how to access and use it. Aggression and violence at work are typically underreported because employees do not believe any action will be taken or fear retaliation. It is important to create an environment where people feel comfortable raising concerns with management or human resources staff and believe the organization will take appropriate action.
- The pandemic has resulted in many changes to work processes, including the need for new safety protocols. This is a good time to also review your policies and procedures related to security and violence prevention, as well as your emergency action plan. Involve employees, management, human resources staff, security personnel, and Employee Assistance Program experts in your review, make any necessary updates, and communicate the policies and procedures with employees.
- Include information about domestic abuse in your employee health and wellness communications, and post information about assistance that is available, including helplines, text and chat support, and community-based organizations for people experiencing domestic violence.
- Train managers to sensitively inquire about potential cases of domestic abuse, listen nonjudgmentally, respect confidentiality, offer support, and direct employees to available legal and counselling resources. Provide clear information to all employees about how to support a co-worker who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

Additional Resources

- How To Prepare Your Workforce For Violent Incidents (Source: Society For Human Resource Management)
- Domestic Abuse Reports Fueled By More Remote Workers (Source: Society For Human Resource Management)
- Intimate Partner Violence and Child Abuse Considerations During COVID-19 (Source: SAMHSA)
- How COVID-19 May Increase Domestic Violence and Child Abuse (Source: APA)

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5. Alcohol and Other Substance Use

A. What to Expect

- While it is still too soon to get a clear picture of how the COVID-19 crisis will affect employees' alcohol and substance use in the long term, there is early evidence that the pandemic has already changed people's behavior. While some have cut back in an effort to stay healthy or because opportunities for social drinking were limited, others have increased their alcohol and other substance use as a way of trying to cope with stress, uncertainty, boredom, and loneliness. Research on previous crises points to an overall increase in alcohol consumption in the aftermath of disaster, which can cause or contribute to problems related to substance use. Therefore, it is likely that some employees have increased their alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, marijuana, and prescription pain medication use since the crisis began. Additionally, employees with substance use disorders or addictions may have had limited access to treatment, recovery programs, and social supports while physical distancing measures were in place and may be experiencing setbacks or relapses that require more intensive treatment.

B. Why it Matters

- Employees who are using substances to cope with the stress of the pandemic may feel better in the moment, but without healthier stress management behaviors, increased substance use can add to employees' stress and lead to more serious problems in the long run. Unhealthy habits also strengthen over time, so are easier to address early, before they become more ingrained.
- Alcohol use can weaken the body's immune response, so workers who are drinking heavily during the pandemic may be more susceptible to COVID-19 and have worse health outcomes if they do get sick.
- Heavy alcohol use is linked to increased health problems, accidents and injuries, and interpersonal violence. It can also impair judgement and decision making and make existing mental health concerns worse. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, this can pose serious problems for worker health, safety, and job performance and make it even more difficult for employees to cope with the challenges they face both at home and at work.

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C. What You Can Do

- Acknowledge that employees may have increased their alcohol and other substance use during the COVID-19 crisis and include relevant information in your wellness communications. Remind employees of workplace policies related to alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use and encourage them to utilize available supports, including Employee Assistance Program services, smoking cessation resources, and workplace health promotion programs.
- Train supervisors to identify signs of potential alcohol or other substance use problems, have supportive conversations with employees, and address related job performance concerns (Source: Canadian Centre for Addictions). Be sure managers are checking in with remote workers regularly and monitoring performance, since modified work arrangements during the pandemic may provide fewer opportunities for face-to-face contact, making it more difficult to identify employees who need help.
- Encourage employees who are struggling with alcohol or other substance use during the COVID-19 crisis to talk to their primary care physician or health care professional about how to reduce and prevent problematic use of alcohol and other substances before it becomes more serious and/or how to be most successful with treatment if they are already in recovery or receiving services. Evidence-based approaches like Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) can help with early identification and intervention (Source: SAMHSA).
- Have accurate information about your organization's drug screening policy and practice. Share this information with relevant employees and provide clarity regarding the rationale for the organization's policy. For instance, following a period of working from home, you can share with employees the potential for this time to be associated with increased risk of injury because of additional stressors in people's lives. You can remind them about safety procedures and your organization's alcohol and drug screening policy to prevent risk of injury for employees who work with heavy equipment or in high-risk position.
- Changing behaviors can be difficult and take time, especially now, when people are dealing with the added pressures of the pandemic. Employees who need help with alcohol and other substance use may benefit from working with a psychologist or other qualified mental health professional who can help them identify triggers, patterns, and unhealthy coping strategies, and develop the skills they need make significant, sustainable behavior changes.

Additional Resources

- Alcohol and COVID-19: What You Need to Know (Source: WHO)
- Managing Drug and Alcohol Misuse at Work: A Guide for People Management Professionals (Source: CIPD)
- COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders (Source: NIDA)

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6. Grief and Loss

A. What to Expect

- Grief is a natural response to loss of someone or something important in our lives. The COVID-19 pandemic and response strategies have caused significant and varied losses for people around the world. In places hit the hardest by the virus, many individuals have lost a family member, friend, or co-worker to COVID-19. In many cases, due to precautionary procedures to contain the transmission of the virus, people were not able to be with loved ones when they were dying and were not able to say goodbye. In many places, loved ones were not able to engage in social and religious funeral traditions. These particular circumstances can make the grieving process more stressful and complicated. In addition to the loss of life, many people are experiencing losses in terms of their personal and professional routines and financial security, which can also lead to a form of grieving. The most widely recognized aspect of grief is the emotional response characterized by varying degrees of low mood and anxiety. Grief can also cause cognitive rumination, problems concentrating, somatic complaints, and decreased energy.

B. Why it Matters

- We all experience loss in our lives, and grieving is natural. However, the pandemic has impacted millions of people's lives in ways that has resulted in much higher rates of grief and loss than at other times in recent history.
- Although individual employees will have particular and personal experiences of grief, COVID-19 allows for, and calls for, shared acknowledgement of the collective impact of the pandemic. When leaders and managers create authentic experiences that acknowledge the shared challenges, losses, and grief, it validates individual experiences and provides general social support, which has positive benefits in terms of overall well-being and coping of employees.
- Individuals who have lost a loved one during COVID-19 are at increased risk for developing the common mental disorders of anxiety and depression. Those who had a past history of a mental disorder, including a problem with alcohol or other substance use, will be at particular risk for a worsening of symptoms or relapse.

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C. What You Can Do

- Leaders and managers can provide company-wide programs and communications that recognize the burden of the pandemic and describe the experience of loss and grief associated with COVID-19. Sharing information about the number of employees who have lost a loved one or family member due to COVID-19, for example, can reduce isolation and heighten everyone's awareness about the common experience of loss and grieving at this time.
- Share psychoeducational material with employees about loss and grieving and provide opportunities for employees to talk about their experience if they choose to do so. Allowing employees to talk about their emotional experience can have the positive benefit of reducing isolation and despair. Following best practices of conducting healing conversations can promote positive coping and resilience.
- Educate employees about the difference between normal mourning and problematic grieving, and encourage employees to seek support if they are experiencing difficulty coping.

Additional Resources

- Managing Grief During a Pandemic (Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)
- Coping with Grief (Source: NHS)
- Grief and COVID-19: Saying Goodbye in the Age of Physical Distancing (Source: APA)

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7. Burnout

A. What to Expect

- Some employees can find themselves experiencing chronic work stress that, left unmanaged, can leave them physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted and disengaged, causing their job performance to suffer. 'Burnout' can affect anyone, but people whose work places them under lengthy and intensive pressure are especially vulnerable. Burnout can result in extreme fatigue which is not relieved by sleep, irritability, anger, sadness, and increased susceptibility to other health conditions.

B. Why it Matters

- The pressure, anxiety, and uncertainty of COVID-19 can mean that some employees are working at high levels of intensity for both long intervals and outside of normal work hours.
- The risk of burnout is high for employees who identify so strongly with their work – or pressure from work to which they feel compelled to respond - that they lack balance between their work life and personal life. Burnout can occur when employees experience what they feel is an unresolvable conflict between these aspects of their lives.
- Employees with symptoms of burnout can appear to be coping well with high-intensity working for a period of time. However, the accumulation of pressures from both work and non-work sources can very quickly manifest themselves to colleagues as the person 'crashes' with exhaustion and fatigue, their work quality and productivity declines rapidly, and their capacity to cope is eroded precipitously. This endangers their wider health.

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C. What You Can Do

- Identify ways that your company can help employees manage chronic stress and avoid burnout during the COVID-19 crisis to make rapid changes to their work schedules to enable them to decompress, get some rest, and remove themselves from the immediate and most pressing causes of their stress at work.
- If medical advice suggests that these employees should not return to the workplace, agree to an extended period of homeworking if this is possible, with a plan to keep in regular contact or adjust work demands as appropriate. Review these arrangements weekly.
- Provide access to interventions such as mindfulness classes or online sleep programs which help employees find relief from the symptoms of burnout and allow them to build confidence and skill in self-managing burnout by recognizing the early signs (Source: Sleepio).

Additional Resources

- Avoid Burnout Before You're Already Burned Out (Source: New York Times)
- How to Avoid Burnout in the Age of Remote Work (Source: Forbes)
- Burnout Response (Source: Workplace Strategies for Mental Health)
- How to Prevent Employee Burnout (Source: Society for Human Sources Management)
- Preventing Burnout Among Healthcare Employees During Past Pandemics (Source: Psychiatric Services)

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8. Suicide Risk

A. What to Expect

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, some employees with mental health problems may have an increased risk of thinking about dying by suicide or engaging in self-harm behaviors. This is because the high levels of stress that many are currently experiencing can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair. People who are already in treatment for suicide risk may need additional support. This includes people who are having suicidal thoughts as well as those with a recent history of suicidal thoughts or a suicide attempt. Other people may experience an intensification of existing or emerging mental health problems.

B. Why it Matters

- Suicide and the distress surrounding it can be difficult for organizations to manage, even if the underlying causes of this distress are not related to work. Helping employees to get support if they are thinking about or at risk of suicide during COVID-19 is an important responsibility of employers. Doing this well and compassionately sends out a strong signal to the whole workforce that you take their well-being seriously.
- Work can play a significant part in recovery for someone who has attempted suicide or is at risk by providing structure, a sense of purpose, and social interaction. As a manager or employer, you have an important role in ensuring an employee who has attempted suicide is supported to return to work and that the process is as safe and smooth as possible for everyone involved.

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C. What You Can Do

- While people at risk of suicide may try to hide how they are feeling, they often give out warning signs. You might notice changes in their behavior or be aware of events in their life that could be affecting them. Signs to look for include previous suicide attempt(s), talking about suicide, talking about being a burden to others, talking about feeling trapped or having unbearable pain, agitation, anxiety and/or irritability, trouble sleeping, changes in appearance, taking time off work, a recent stressful event or loss, social withdrawal/feeling alienated, or seeming preoccupied with an internal thought or problem.
- Act immediately if you notice any warning signs or if another team member comes to you with concerns about a colleague. If you feel out of your depth, consider asking the person if you can contact someone else who could help. A colleague who has been trained in mental health first aid may be better placed to offer support, or you could help the person to call a crisis line.
- A person returning to work after a suicide attempt is likely to feel isolated and alone. They may also feel ashamed or embarrassed. Any genuine care and concern you can offer will help the person feel connected and can lower the risk of another suicide attempt. Include them in meetings and social events or ask their opinion on work issues – anything to make them feel like a valued member of the team. A structured approach to returning to work is essential, and any plan should be a collaborative effort between the employee and manager. Start by setting realistic goals and objectives, as well as a process for monitoring their progress and fine-tuning the plan.

Additional Resources

- Healing Conversations for Those Who have Lost a Loved One or Co-worker to Suicide (Source: AFSP)
- Suicide Prevention & Response: New Tools Help Employers Take Action (Source: APA)
- COVID-19 and Suicide (Source: APA)

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Section 6

Additional Resources for Mental Health in the Workplace Related to COVID-19

Additional Sources

Alcohol and Substance Use

- Alcohol and COVID-19: What You Need to Know (Source: WHO)
- Rethinking Drinking: Alcohol and Your Health (Source: NIAAA)
- Health Consequences of Drug Misuse (Source: NIDA)
- COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders (Source: NIDA)
- Treatment for Alcohol Problems: Finding and Getting Help (Source: NIAAA)
- Managing Drug and Alcohol Misuse at Work: A Guide for People Management Professionals (Source: CIPD)
- Tools & Tips to Quit Smoking (Source: smokefree.gov)

Anxiety

- Coping With COVID-19 Anxiety: Frequently Asked Questions (Source: Columbia University)
- What are Anxiety Disorders? (Source: APA)
- Warning Signs for Depression and Anxiety (Source: APA)
- Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19 (Source: CDC)
- Coronavirus Anxiety: Coping with Stress, Fear, and Worry (Source: Help Guide)
- Dealing with Stress, Anxiety, and Grief during COVID-19 (Source: NIH)
- 10 Ways to Ease Your Coronavirus Anxiety (Source: NYT)
- How to Overcome Fear and Anxiety (Source: Mental Health Foundation)
- Supporting Those with Mental Health Conditions During COVID-19 (Source: United Nations)

Burnout

- Avoiding Burnout (Source: MindTools)
- Avoid Burnout Before You're Already Burned Out (Source: New York Times)
- How to Avoid Burnout in the Age of Remote Work (Source: Forbes)
- Burnout Response (Source: Workplace Strategies for Mental Health)
- Preventing Burnout Among Healthcare Employees During Past Pandemics (Source: Psychiatric Services)

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Caring for Someone with COVID-19

- Caring for Someone with COVID-19 (Source: CDC)
- How to Care for Someone with Coronavirus (Source: American Red Cross)
- Treating COVID-19 at Home: Care Tips for You and Others (Source: Mayo Clinic)

Child Care and Parenting

- Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters (Source: VA)
- Advice for Caregivers of Children with Disabilities in the Era of COVID-19 (Source: APA)
- Tips for Parents on Coping with COVID (Source: Columbia Psychiatry)
- Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children after Disasters (Source: VA)
- Top 10 guidelines on How to Help Children Navigate COVID-19 (Source: UCLA Health)

Conversations with Children

- Talking With Your Children About Stress (Source: APA)
- 6 Ways to Help Your Child Manage Their Anxiety During COVID-19 (Source: PTA)
- Talking with Children about COVID-19 (novel coronavirus): Information for Parents and Caregivers (Source: UCLA Health)
- Talking with Children about COVID-19 (Source: Columbia University)

Coping

- Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks (Source: SAMHSA)
- Focus on Right Now: How to Mentally Prepare for more COVID-19 uncertainty (Source: The Guardian)
- Coping with Uncertainty During COVID-19: An International Gottman Trainer Shares Their Perspective (Source: Gottman)
- Advice for Dealing with Uncertainty from People who Have Been There (Source: NPR)
- Coping With COVID-19 Anxiety: Frequently Asked Questions (Source: Columbia University)
- Coping with stress at work (Source: APA)
- Dealing with Uncertainty During the coronavirus Pandemic (Source: HelpGuide)
- The Great Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing with the Stress of Uncertainty (Source: APA)

Depression

- Warning Signs for Depression and Anxiety (Source: APA)
- Supporting those with mental health conditions during COVID-19 (Source: United Nations)
- Behavioral Activation to Prevent Depression During COVID-19 (Source: Psychology Today)
- Signs of Depression During the Coronavirus Crisis (Source: Child Mind Institute)

Disabilities

- How COVID-19 impacts people with disabilities: Research shows people with disabilities are at risk for mental health problems (Source: APA)
- Advice for caregivers of children with disabilities in the era of COVID-19 (Source: APA)
- COVID-19 Poses Unique Challenges for Individuals with Disabilities (Source: Johns Hopkins University)

Eating Disorders

- Stress and eating (Source: APA)
- For People with Eating Disorders, COVID-19 Presents New Challenges (Source: APA)
- Healthy Eating Tips (Source: CDC)
- Healthy Eating for a Healthy Weight (Source: CDC)
- The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Eating Disorder Risk and Symptoms (Source: International Journal of Eating Disorders)

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Elder Care

- Coronavirus and COVID-19: Caregiving for the Elderly (Resource: Johns Hopkins Medicine)
- Respect a Caregiver's Time (Resource: ReACT)
- Supporting Caregivers in the Workplace: A Practical Guide for Employers (Resource: AARP)
- Supporting Employees with Child and Elder Care Needs (Resource: Caregivers Library)

Fear, Worry, and Stress

- Coronavirus Anxiety: Coping with Stress, Fear, and Worry (Source: Help Guide)
- Employees: How to Cope with Job Stress and Build Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Source: CDC)
- How to Overcome Fear and Anxiety (Source: Mental Health Foundation)
- Coping with Coronavirus: Managing Stress, Fear, and Anxiety (Source: NIH)
- Organizational Tools to Lessen Fear and Worry Among Health Provider Employees During Past Pandemics (Source: Psychiatric Services)

Financial Concerns and Job Security

- How Will People React to the New Financial Crisis? (Source: APA)
- How to Mitigate the Mental Health Consequences of the COVID-19 Financial Crisis (Source: Psychiatric Services)
- Short on Cash? Here's Some Advice for Families Stretching Their Budget (Source: NPR)
- How to Navigate the Financial Stress of COVID-19 (Source: Psychology Today)

Grief and Loss

- Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives (Source: APA)
- Grief and COVID-19: Saying goodbye in the age of physical distancing (Source: APA)
- Dealing with Stress, Anxiety, and Grief during COVID-19 (Source: NIH)
- Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives (Source: APA)
- Managing Bereavement around the Coronavirus (COVID-19) (Source: Columbia University)
- Managing Grief During a Pandemic (Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)
- Coping with Grief (Source: NHS)

Immune System & Stress Management

- Can I Boost My Immune System? (Source: New York Times)
- 7 Ways to Keep Your Immune System Healthy (Source: Everyday Health)
- How to Strengthen Your Immunity During the Coronavirus Pandemic (Source: CNN)
- How to Boost Your Immune System (Source: Harvard Medical)

Infection Fears

- Putting the Risk of COVID-19 in Perspective (Source: NYT)
- Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks (Source: SAMHSA)
- Coping with Coronavirus: Managing Stress, Fear, and Anxiety (Source: NIH)
- Coping with Outbreak Stress (Source: CDC)
- Dealing with Stress, Anxiety, and Grief during COVID-19 (Source: NIH)

Interpersonal Violence

- Intimate Partner Violence and Child Abuse Considerations During COVID-19 (Source: SAMHSA)
- Managing Employees with Anger Management Issues (Source: SHRM)
- How COVID-19 May Increase Domestic Violence and Child Abuse (Source: APA)
- A Double Pandemic: Domestic Violence in the Age of COVID-19 (Source: Council on Foreign Relations)

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Long-Term Health Conditions

- Addressing Chronic Disease in the Workplace (Source: Vital Record)
- Musculoskeletal Toolkit for Employers (Source: Business in the Community)
- Workplace Chronic Disease Self-management (Source: Self-Management Source Center)
- 10 Ergonomics Do's and Don'ts for Those Now Working from Home (Source: Boston University)
- Ergonomics 101: Working from Home during Coronavirus (Source: University of Nevada, Las Vegas)

Media Overload

- Coronavirus Overload: Five Ways to Fight Misinformation and Fear (Source: The Guardian)
- Social Distance from Social Media: 6 Practical Tips for Surviving COVID-19 Information Overload (Source: MassBio)
- Too Much Coronavirus Media May Be Bad for Your Health (Source: APA)
- Preventing Information Overload in the "Always On" Workplace (Source: Sodexo)
- Communication Technology Tips for Staying Fully Charged (Source: Sodexo)
- Five Ways to View Coverage of the Coronavirus (Source: APA)
- Coronavirus: How News is Too Much? (Source: BBC)
- Media Exposure to COVID-19: How Much is too Much? (Source: Psychology Today)
- About Seven-in-Ten U.S. Adults Say They Need to Take Breaks From COVID-19 News (Source: Pew Research Center)

Obsessive-Compulsive Related Disorders

- COVID-19 vs. Your OCD Symptoms (Source: International OCD Foundation)
- Managing COVID-19 Concerns for People with OCD (Source: APA)
- COVID Q&A: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Source: Columbia Psychiatry)

Physical Wellness & Stress Management

- Stress Effects on the Body (Source: APA)
- Musculoskeletal Health in the Workplace: A Toolkit for Employers (Source: Business in the Community)
- 10 Chair Yoga Poses for Home Practice (Source: VeryWellFit)
- Simple Desk Exercises (Source: Posture People)

Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns Related to Monitoring and Tracking

- Balancing Employee Privacy and Public Health and Safety (Source: PWC)
- Reporting, Recording, and Communication of COVID-19 Cases in Workplace: Data Protection as a Moving Target (Source: Journal of Law and the Biosciences)
- Contact Tracing Must Balance Privacy and Public Health (Source: STAT)
- How to Safeguard the Privacy of Workers with COVID-19 (Source: SHRM)

Remote Management

- 5 Tips for Switching to Remote Management (Source: The Management Center)
- Guide to Managing Remote Teams (Source: Know Your Team)
- Caught in the Middle: 10 Tips for Managers Leading From Home (Source: SIOP)
- Effective Virtual Management Skills for Covid-19 Teleworking (Source: HumRRO)

Remote Working

- Preventing Information Overload in the "Always On" Workplace (Source: Sodexo)
- Coronavirus: How to Work from Home, the Right Way (BBC)
- WHO "Healthy at Home" Suggestions (Source: WHO)
- 7 Communication Technology Tips for Staying Fully Charged (Source: Sodexo)
- How To Get Out Of The Bad Habit Of Multitasking (Source: Forbes)

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Resilience

- Build Your Team's Resilience — From Home (Source: Harvard Business Review)
- Building Your Resilience (Source: APA)
- Understanding and Fostering Resilience in Persons Exposed to Trauma (Source: Psychiatric Times)
- Employees: How to Cope with Job Stress and Build Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Source: CDC)
- The Role of Resilience in the Face of COVID-19 (Resource: APA)

Role Conflict

- Supporting Children's Mental Health During COVID-19 School Closures (Source: NEJM Journal Watch)
- Coronavirus and COVID-19: Caregiving for the Elderly (Source: Johns Hopkins Medicine)
- Supporting Working Caregivers (Source: ReACT and AARP)

Sleep

- Sleep Education – Insomnia (Source: AASM)
- Sleep: An Important Health and Safety Concern at Work (Source: CDC)
- What Workers and Employers Can Do to Manage Workplace Fatigue during COVID-19 (Source: CDC)
- Stress about COVID-19 Keeping you Awake? 6 Tips for Better Sleep (Source: Healthline)

Social Isolation

- Coronavirus Makes Work from Home the New Normal (Source: SHRM)
- How Can Social Isolation Affect Us? (Source: The Guardian)
- Loneliness: Why Employers Should Care (Source: APA)
- Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips For Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During An Infectious Disease Outbreak (Source: SAMHSA)
- The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness (Source: Psychology Today)

Suicidality

- COVID-19 and Suicide (Source: APA)
- COVID-19, Unemployment and Suicide (Source: The Lancet)
- Healing Conversations for Those Who Have Lost a Loved One or Co-worker to Suicide (Source: AFSP)
- Suicide Prevention & Response: New Tools Help Employers Take Action (Source: APA)

Supportive Leadership

- Lead with Empathy During the COVID-19 Crisis (Source: The Conversation)
- How Leaders Can Maximize Trust and Minimize Stress During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Source: APA)
- Free Psychological First Aid Class on Coursera from Johns Hopkins University (Source: Coursera)
- The Heart of Resilient Leadership: Responding to COVID-19 (Source: Deloitte)
- Supporting Employee Mental Health while Reopening the Workplace (Source: APA)
- Managing Someone with a Mental Health Condition (Source: Heads Up Australia)
- Supporting Those with Mental Health Conditions during COVID-19 (Source: United Nations)

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Supporting Mental Health of Employees During and Beyond COVID-19

A Toolkit for Business Leaders and Managers

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