

## *The COVID-19 Outbreak – Working from Home Series:*

### **10 Mental Health Considerations**

The coronavirus pandemic has shaken business leaders and upended the global economy. It's also caused enormous stress and uncertainty across populations. Many employers have watched their employees become increasingly anxious over everything from their future job prospects to fears over becoming ill from COVID-19.

Keeping employees protected from chronic stress and supporting their mental health during these difficult times will help maintain productivity and engagement until the crisis is over. But it's important to remember that social-distancing measures and business disruption are likely to continue on for months. Your organization should be focused on longer-term strategies to ensure employee success rather than short-term reactionary measures as the crisis continues to escalate. Communications will be an important aspect of achieving those goals and adjusting to the 'new normal' of business in the months ahead.

**The following are a series of messaging considerations that leaders can leverage to support employee mental health and well-being during the outbreak:**

1. Do not refer to people with the disease as "COVID-19 cases", "victims", or "the diseased". They are "people who have COVID-19", "people who are being treated for COVID-19", or "people who are recovering from COVID-19." After recovering from COVID-19, their life will go on, as will their careers and usual relationships with families and loved ones. In order to reduce stigma, it is important to avoid defining a person by their COVID-19 infection. Be empathetic to all those who are affected. People who are affected by COVID-19 have not done anything wrong, and they deserve our support, compassion and kindness.
2. Minimize watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19 if it may cause you to feel anxious or distressed, and encourage employees to do the same if they're struggling with anxiety at the moment. Also be sure to seek information only from trusted sources. Sources should provide you with practical steps to prepare and protect yourself, employees and loved ones. Seek information updates at specific times during the day—perhaps only once or twice—to remain focused while at work. After all, the constant stream of news reports about the outbreak can cause anyone to feel worried. Make sure you are getting accurate facts, such as from the World Health Organization website or local health authorities. Facts help to minimize fear.
3. Protect yourself and be supportive of others. Assisting others in their time of need can benefit both the person receiving support and the helper. For example, call or text neighbours or people in your community who may need some extra assistance. Stay connected and maintain your social networks (e.g. via telephone, e-mail, social media or video conferencing). Working together as one community can help to create solidarity in addressing COVID-19 together.
4. Feelings of intense stress and anxiety will likely be shared by you and many of your co-workers or employees. It is quite normal to feel this way. Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection of weakness or an admission that you cannot do your job. Managing your mental health and well-being during this time is as important as managing your physical health.

5. Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies such as the use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical well-being. The COVID-19 outbreak is a unique and unprecedented situation for many employees. Even so, using strategies that have worked for you in the past to manage stress can benefit you now. You are the person most likely to know how you can de-stress, and you should not hesitate to do what it takes to keep yourself psychologically well.
6. Maintain familiar daily routines as much as possible, or create new routines if circumstances change (such as managing remote work with children at home). During times of stress, pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in healthy activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly, keep regular sleep routines and eat healthy food.

**The following are suggested workplace actions leaders can take:**

1. Rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress job functions. Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues. The buddy system helps to provide support, monitor stress, and reinforce safety procedures. Carefully manage employee workloads and stress levels and offer support where possible. Be prepared to adjust performance targets for employees who remain on the job, and be flexible with deadlines.
2. Encourage and monitor work breaks. If a large number of employees are unable to work, it could lead to some employees working longer hours. In this case, you need to ensure your organization complies with employment standards and occupational health and safety legislation pertaining to hours and conditions of work. In addition, offer flexible schedules to employees whose personal circumstances have been directly impacted by COVID-19, such as having to care for children or family members.
3. Ensure that you build in time for co-workers to provide social support to each other.
4. Ensure that good quality communication and accurate information updates are provided to all employees. Employees should be aware of where and how they can access mental health and support services. Provide guidance to employees on how to access those additional resources, such as employee assistance programs (EAP) or other well-being resources your organization makes available. Consider providing counselling for those employees who are particularly anxious.

Managers are facing similar stresses as employees and may experience additional pressure relating to their roles and responsibilities. It is important that effective tactics and strategies are in place for both employees and managers, and that managers can be role models to mitigate stress and help workers remain as productive as possible through the current disruption.

To learn more and for assistance, contact Flashrock HR.

