

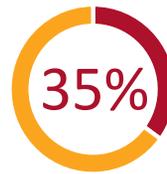
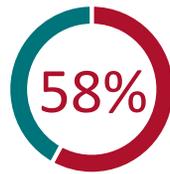
# COVID-19 and Workplace Mental Health: Keeping Your Workforce Productive



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As our lives continue to be impacted at a personal and professional level during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of your employees may be feeling anxious or stressed. In addition to helping protect their physical health and safety, there are some things you can be doing as an employer to also help look after their mental health.

It's no surprise that rates of depression, anxiety and other mental disorders soar during pandemics.<sup>1</sup> Currently, 58% of U.S. workers are suffering from COVID-related anxiety, and 35% say it's interfering with their workplace productivity.<sup>2</sup>



Although many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented, prior epidemics such as SARS have given us valuable insights that can help employers and employees reduce fear and anxiety, and maintain emotional health and workplace productivity.<sup>3</sup>



## Here's how employers can take the lead: <sup>4 5 6</sup>



### Communicate

Reassure your workforce that their health and safety is your #1 priority. Even if conditions aren't ideal, show that you are doing everything you can to protect them as well as possible. Frame messages in positive terms when possible and then be sure your actions back up your words.



### Respond

Make sure communication is a two-way street, by giving employees the opportunity to ask questions and get prompt, substantive answers. Use available expertise to maximize credibility – EAP, occupational health, or links to trusted websites. Everyone will respond differently to this crisis, so this is an opportunity to address individual concerns.



### Empathize

Acknowledge, empathize, and share your personal experience – this is a major step toward demonstrating credibility.



### **Be flexible**

The situation changes day by day, sometimes hour by hour – so be prepared with strategies and resources that meet your employees’ emerging needs, such as caring for elderly parents and children who are home from school, adjusting to telecommuting, and unanticipated challenges such as changing family relationships when everyone is home full-time.



### **Be consistent**

Get everyone on board; adapt and disseminate your current policies for health and safety, sick leave, quarantine, return to work, remote work, and flexible scheduling, so your managers and supervisors are on the same page.



### **Offer resources**

Provide credible sources of information, suggestions from experts and more access to mental health professionals (through EAP and tele-mental health options that just became much more available<sup>7</sup>) without added financial burden, and replace workplace social networking with virtual opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Recognize when an employee needs help and a referral.



### **A special note for health care workers**

Health care workers are on the front lines of this pandemic, and will often face challenging work conditions, including a higher risk of illness for themselves and their colleagues. They are in special need of substantial and specialized resources to help them deal with the inevitable challenges they will face – so proactive planning is essential.<sup>9 10 11</sup>



## Here's how you can help employees take care of their mental health:<sup>12 13</sup>

**Make sure they understand that stress and mental health symptoms are common and expected** in these extraordinary circumstances, they aren't unusual. Many experience anxiety, insomnia, and changes in eating habits. It's important to urge them to:



### Take care of themselves physically

Exercise, get outdoors, eat regular meals, do things they enjoy, and get the sleep they need. These all contribute to good mental health.



### Keep their focus

Focus on what they can control and do, not on things that they have no power over and that may generate anxiety. The message is: stay in the present, don't project into the future. Several meditation sites have released free apps that are proven to improve calmness and quell anxiety.



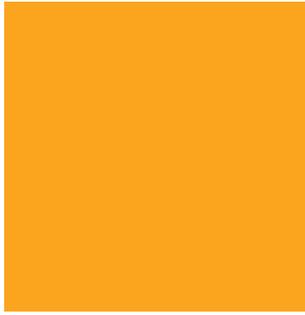
### Limit news and social media

Much of the online information is designed to engage more than inform, and greatly contributes to anxiety. Remind them it's important to get their information from a trusted site, such as the CDC or state health department; suggest they set aside a specific time to read news from credible sources.<sup>14</sup>



### Stay connected

Phone and video meetings are a great way to counteract physical isolation. Employees can take advantage of video conferencing tools that are temporarily free to connect with friends and family, engage co-workers, and to get the support they need. Loneliness is one of the most common problems faced by those who work remotely.<sup>15 16</sup>



### **Share their feelings**

Another way to stay connected is to stay in touch and share their thoughts with trusted friends and colleagues by phone or video; and to look for opportunities to help others who may be anxious or isolated.



### **Keep things as normal as possible for children**

It's not easy to suddenly be together 24/7; children know that "something's up." Employees should reassure their children that they are safe, answer their questions, and set an example by showing calm and reasonable behavior. Maintain their routine for homework and exercise; avoid using screen time for babysitting as much as possible.<sup>17</sup>



### **Separate work from home life as much as possible**

Encourage employees to set aside specific hours and a specific location (if possible) for work and leisure time, so they'll be able to transition more easily from work time to family time. Setting these boundaries contributes to successful remote work.<sup>18</sup> After all, there are many positive aspects of working at home – no commute, no dress code, eat what you want and when you want, etc. – this really helps to maintain a good attitude.



### **Seek help**

If anxiety significantly interferes with your employees' ability to function at home or at work, remind them to reach out to your company's EAP program or mental health services. There are more tele-medicine options available now than ever before.<sup>19</sup> Especially since the health care system is currently overburdened, a tele-visit is a good idea for a cold or minor illness.

## Resources:

- <sup>1</sup> [https://advice.shinetext.com/articles/we-asked-experts-how-to-cope-with-your-coronavirus-anxiety/?utm\\_source=Shine&utm\\_medium=CareForYourCoronavirusAnxiety](https://advice.shinetext.com/articles/we-asked-experts-how-to-cope-with-your-coronavirus-anxiety/?utm_source=Shine&utm_medium=CareForYourCoronavirusAnxiety)
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.ptcommunity.com/wire/more-half-us-workers-are-anxious-34-are-looking-employers-help-quell-covid-19-driven-anxiety> published 3/18/20
- <sup>3</sup> Understanding, compliance and psychological impact of the SARS quarantine experience. *Epidemiol Infect.* 2008; 136: 997-1007
- <sup>4</sup> <https://blog.shrm.org/blog/promoting-workplace-mental-health-in-the-age-of-covid-19>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/292334/covid-strategies-policies-world-largest-companies.aspx>
- <sup>6</sup> [https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS\\_FS\\_Leadership\\_Communication\\_Anticipating\\_Responding\\_to\\_Stressful\\_Events.pdf](https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Leadership_Communication_Anticipating_Responding_to_Stressful_Events.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> "Telehealth services will be covered for millions more Medicare beneficiaries, and providers will be allowed to offer these telehealth benefits to Medicare beneficiaries", Alex Azar, HHS Secretary, March 17, 2020
- <sup>8</sup> <https://realbusiness.co.uk/mental-health-covid-19/>
- <sup>9</sup> Understanding, compliance and psychological impact of the SARS quarantine experience. *Epidemiol Infect.* 2008; 136: 997-1007
- <sup>10</sup> [https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS\\_FS\\_Sustaining\\_Well\\_Being\\_Healthcare\\_Personnel\\_during.pdf.pdf](https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> The psychological impact of the SARS epidemic on hospital employees in China: exposure, risk perception, and altruistic acceptance of risk. *Can J Psychiatry.* 2009; 54: 302-311
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.hcamag.com/us/specialization/mental-health/covid-19-how-to-safeguard-mental-health/217341>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://magellanhealthinsights.com/2020/03/18/anxiety-and-covid-19/>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/pandemics>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/onemind/2020/03/17/when-home-becomes-the-workplace-mental-health-and-remote-work/#35ffebc21760>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/social-distancing>
- <sup>17</sup> [https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS\\_FS\\_Helping\\_Homebound\\_Children\\_during\\_COVID19\\_Outbreak.pdf](https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Helping_Homebound_Children_during_COVID19_Outbreak.pdf)
- <sup>18</sup> <https://realbusiness.co.uk/mental-health-covid-19/>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://whnt.com/news/coronavirus/professionals-address-mental-health-impact-amid-covid-19-pandemic/>

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