Managing the mental health effects of COVID-19 in the workplace
A guide for employers

The outbreak of COVID-19 affects most people both at home and at work, which can take a toll on mental health. This is a challenging time for both employers and workers as we adapt to new ways of working during the pandemic. Learning how to manage our stress and anxiety during this time helps us all take better care of ourselves, support the people we work with, and be more productive in our jobs.

As an employer, supporting the health and safety of your workers, including their mental health, is especially important during this stressful time. You may be in the best position to both identify mental health issues in your workers and to respond to them in appropriate, meaningful ways.

This guide explains how the pandemic can have an impact on mental health and suggests ways to promote the resiliency of workers while maintaining your own mental health during the process.

Common reactions to stress

It's normal to feel anxious about contracting COVID-19 ourselves, or transmitting it to someone else during the pandemic. In some ways, it's this anxiety that keeps us safe because it motivates us to do what needs to be done, such as washing our hands, practising physical distancing, and following public health guidelines at home and at work.

The most important action you can take to address the mental health of your workers is to take the necessary steps to ensure their physical safety, such as by implementing personal protective equipment (PPE) and personal infection control measures.

According to research conducted during the pandemic, when workers feel their safety has been addressed by their employers, they report less anxiety and less depression.

As humans, we are naturally built to experience an array of emotions in times of uncertainty. We often feel a loss of control, and this can lead to increased feelings of worry, fear, and anxiety. Some common reactions include:

- Feelings of helplessness, lack of control, and being overwhelmed

- Fear for your health or the health of loved ones

- Feelings of loneliness

- Hypervigilance, having irrational thoughts, and constant worry

- Feeling stressed and concerned for your finances, future plans

- Problems sleeping, physical exhaustion

These reactions are normal and will vary from person to person. Here are some examples of behaviours you may see in your workers during this time:

- Working too much or too little

- Social isolation, withdrawal from others

- Experiencing agitation, irritability, anger, sadness

- Reduced productivity, difficulty concentrating on tasks, easily distracted

- Late to work or absent

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If your workers have pre-existing conditions, times of stress can make symptoms worse. Look for changes in mood and behaviours, and pay extra attention to signs in your workers that they may not be coping well.

Start with education

Fight fears with facts. The first line of defence against fear and anxiety is knowledge. Given the amount of misinformation that exists on the web, you can help by educating yourself on the facts and providing reliable information to your workers. Sharing accurate knowledge in the workplace can help reduce not only the spread of the virus but also the spread of fear.

It is normal to want to gather information on COVID-19, but encourage workers to limit the time they spend watching the media, as consuming too much can increase anxiety.

Trusted sources you can refer to include the World Health Organization, the BC Centre for Disease Control, and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Communicate with your workers

One of the best ways to reduce fear and anxiety among your workers is to have a conversation with them about how they're doing. Talking about stressful situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can be a difficult and potentially emotional conversation to have — for the worker and for you. That's why it's important to take some time to prepare yourself as well. It can also help to remind yourself of the resources and programs your workplace has to support workers (see "Encourage workers to focus on self-care" section below for examples of resources).

Guiding principles

Balance business information with a focus on mental health

Continued operations are important, but protecting the physical and mental health of those in the workplace should remain a priority. Remember, the health of your business depends on the health of your workforce.

Provide consistency and regular communication

It's important that your managers, supervisors, and anyone else speaking on behalf of your business provides consistent, regular messaging around things like sick leave and how operations may change. Be proactive and clear about how public health orders may change practices at work, and acknowledge how difficult this can feel for workers. As you make decisions in response to COVID-19, be sure to share them with your workers as soon as it's appropriate. Communicating clearly and in a timely fashion goes a long way in easing the anxiety and fears in your workers.

Foster open communication

Ensure your workers feel they can share concerns they may have with you or their supervisors. Encourage open and supportive communication in your workplace and provide opportunities for workers to talk about challenges they may be experiencing.

Maintain confidentiality and reduce stigma

It's important that you maintain the privacy of your workers, especially when it comes to their physical and mental health. Stressful times like this can result in stigma towards others, which can lead to a negative

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workplace environment. Do not make assumptions and be sure to maintain the confidentiality of people with confirmed COVID-19. Be mindful of the language you use, particularly when talking about people who have COVID-19 or are being tested for it. For more ways on preventing stigma and discrimination in the workplace, see the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Share positive information

Whenever possible and appropriate to do so, share good news with your workers. Examples of this could include stories of people who have experienced COVID-19 and have recovered, or who have supported a loved one through recovery. Before sharing people's experiences, make sure you have their permission to do so and respect their privacy.

Stay connected with workers

Your work operations may have shifted to accommodate staff working from home. In this time of physical distancing, staying connected is critical for our mental health, so be sure to check in with your staff regularly via email, teleconference, or other means. You may also consider scheduling video conferences with workers to help reduce any feelings of disconnectedness or isolation. If you do have members of your team working from home, remember that your workplace has extended, so you're still responsible for both their physical and mental health (see our COVID-19 updates page for more information about health and safety during this time).

How to have the conversation

The spread of COVID-19 brings about multiple stressors, so it's essential to lead the conversation with empathy. Showing empathy demonstrates that you care and understand the feelings workers are experiencing. Here's how you can show empathy in verbal and non-verbal ways:

- **Make time** — Choose a place where you won't be distracted or interrupted, and ensure you have enough time to finish the conversation.

- **Active listening** — Listen with the goal of understanding first, and responding second.

- **Acknowledge and validate** — Accept the feelings expressed by the others and try not to judge them for feeling the way they do. Don't downplay or dismiss people's feelings.

- **Show what you understand** — Paraphrase or repeat what you've heard to demonstrate you understand their concerns. This can also be a helpful way to clarify any misinterpretations.

- **Trust and confidentiality** — Make sure they understand you will respect their privacy and will keep what they share confidential. Be mindful of the vulnerability it takes to talk about emotions.

- **Personal connection** — Share relevant examples or personal stories in a genuine way, as this can help build connection.

- **Non-verbal cues** — Eye contact, positive tone, appropriate volume, approachable posture/gestures, and welcoming facial expressions help you demonstrate empathy while still practising safe and appropriate physical distancing. When using video chat, try to glance up toward the camera to give the impression of eye contact.

- **Self-awareness** — As an employer, these difficult times can make it challenging to navigate the workplace, particularly with the changing circumstances due to the pandemic. It's important to be aware of your own wellness and ability to have conversations with workers using the above principles. Starting with self-awareness can ensure you have the capcity to enter a potentially emotional conversation. Being mindful of your own self-care can can put you in a better position to help those around you. For tips on self-care, see the "Encourage workers to focus on self-care" section, below.

Conversation starters

It can be hard to know how to initiate the conversation about a worker's mental health in the light of COVID-19. Here are some simple ways to get started:

- How are you doing today?

- I know there is a lot changing around us, how are you managing?

- You seem a bit unsettled. I'm here for you, let's find somewhere to talk.

- I've noticed [name signs/symptoms]. Want to talk about what's happening?

- I've been feeling [share appropriate personal experience], how are you feeling?

- What can I do to support you?

Not sure what to say? Be honest about that. We don't always have all the answers or know the "right" thing to say and that's okay. Here are some ways to respond when you don't know what to say:

- It sounds like you're going through a lot. I'm not sure what to say, but here's what I can do [provide resources, seek info, etc.]

- I haven't been through what you're experiencing, but I'm here to support you.

- I don't have the answers, but let's find someone who can help.

- I can only imagine what that might be like, tell me more so I can try to understand.

Encourage workers to focus on self-care

In preparing to provide support to your workers, it's essential that you also support your own mental health and are mindful of how you're caring for yourself. This helps you maintain resilience and be better positioned to help others.

Remind workers how important it is that they take of themselves. Here are some self-care tips that you can share with them:

- Set limits on accessing the news or social media. Spending too much time gathering information can skew your perspective and have significant effects on your mental state.

- Stay connected with family, friends, and colleagues through email, social media, or video or phone calls. Talking with others can help lessen your worry or anxiety and can be an encouragement to them as well.

- Exercise regularly and eat a balanced diet.

- Pay attention to your mood and how you're feeling.

- Practice stress-reduction techniques, such as mindfulness practices and deep breathing.

- Avoid unhealthy coping strategies such as smoking or overconsuming caffeine, alcohol, and cannabis.

- If you have a pre-existing health condition, monitor your health and address any additional symptoms appropriately.

- Maintain work-life balance by setting boundaries around work hours and being mindful of the separation between home and work life (e.g., limit checking emails and responding to calls during work hours, schedule and take breaks, manage screen time).

- Seek additional support if you are struggling (see the list of resources at the end of this guide).

It's important to remember you're not alone in this. With open communication and collaboration, you can navigate uncertainty and calm fears by taking action based on factual information and best practices. Know that investing in meaningful conversations and mental health strategies now will strengthen the overall wellness of your organization and build resilience in your workers for the long term.

Mental health resources

Workplace resources

Your organization may have its own resources and programs available for workers, which may include:

- Employee and Family Assistance Program

- Organization peer support team

- Occupational health nurse

- Extended health benefits provider (for mental health benefits)

External resources

Remind your workers they have informal supports in their life they can reach out to during this time — without having to meet in person — including family, friends, their faith community, or other groups they are a part of. There are also formal resources they can access, including:

- **Managing COVID-19 Stress, Anxiety and Depression** — Tips and resources from B.C.'s Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions | webpage

- **The Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre of BC** — Organization committed to helping people help themselves and others deal with crisis | crisiscentre.bc.ca; 1.800.SUICIDE (1.800.784.2433)

- **310 Mental Health Support** — Emotional support, information, and resources specific to mental health | crisislines.bc.ca; 310.6789 (no need to dial area code)

- **Red book Online** — Provides information and referrals to community, government, and social services in B.C. | redbookonline.bc211.ca; 2-1-1

- **Mental health tips for working from home** | Government of Canada

- **Centre of Expertise on Mental Health in the Workplace** — Tools and resources for organizations and managers to promote mental health | Government of Canada

Self-care resources

These online tools and resources can help support positive mental health in you and your workers:

- **BC COVID-19 Symptom Self-Assessment Tool** — Developed with the B.C. Ministry of Health, this tool helps determine whether you need further assemssment or testing for COVID-19 | covid19.thrive.health

- **heretohelp** — Strategies to help you take care of your mental health and learn how to support a loved one | heretohelp.bc.ca

- **Anxiety Canada** — Tools and resources to help you manage anxiety | anxietycanada.com

- **MoodFX** — Interactive tool to help people with depression and anxiety by monitoring symptoms and functioning | moodfx.ca