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Safe Actions For Employee Returns



Stress, Emotional & Mental Health Considerations

Providing employees the support needed to return to work

The safety and physical health of employees is top of mind for organizations as they look to reopen workplaces and have workforces return. Another set of considerations for employers must be the mental health and mental wellbeing of their employees. Employers must consider how they intend to allay the concerns, anxieties and uncertainty that workers may feel about their lives, jobs and the future of the organization when returning to work. Mental health distress and mental health conditions may continue to impact employees' return to work and their ability to safely focus on the job at hand.

COVID-19 increases risk for employees experiencing mental health distress in several ways. Employees may have experienced high levels of stress associated with fears of themselves or family members being exposed to or infected by COVID-19. They may experience other mental health impacts stemming from stress caused by financial, employment, food, housing or child/family care instabilities. In general, trauma increases risk for development of mental health issues and substance use disorders.

What is covered in this document:

Resources for Leadership and Supervisors
Resources for Human Resources
Education and Awareness Topics



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Isolation is a particular risk factor. Extended social isolation increases risk for the development of mental health issues and substance use disorders, which can exacerbate pre-existing conditions, and increase the risk of depression, poor sleep quality, impaired cognitive functioning, as well as suicidal thoughts or relapse. Isolation is a well-documented risk factor for suicide, and connectedness is one of the best protective factors that helps to increase people's resilience and buffer them against their mental health crisis.

Employers can expect that stress and mental health effects of COVID-19 may be prolonged or delayed. Each person will experience the stress and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic differently. Some may not show signs of or experience mental health distress for weeks or months. This means that employers should build both short- and long-term responses to these mental health considerations, and ensure mental health continues to be prioritized after the immediate return-to-the-workplace scenarios.

Below are several factors for employers to consider regarding employee emotional and mental health when drafting overall plans for returning to work and full operations. Having employees know their employers are supporting them through these difficult times can make a significant difference for their mental and physical health. Buy-in and engagement from leadership, management, human resources, communications and employees themselves is critical for success.

Leadership, Supervisors and a Culture of Mental Health Safety

Leadership, supervisors and other managers have an essential role in addressing mental health impacts from COVID-19. Leading by example and building a culture of mental safety are critical. Building mental, emotional and psychological safety into every process (communications, trainings, etc.) builds resilience in the workforce.

Though employers may be working with limited resources and a limited workforce, prioritizing stress and mental health initiatives has immediate and long-term positive impacts. Poor mental health and stressors at the workplace can be a contributory factor to a range of physical illnesses like hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular conditions, burnout, and financial impacts from increased absenteeism, negative impact on productivity and profits, as well as an increase in healthcare costs.

- Recognize that stress and mental distraction can pose great hazards to worker safety, and take extra precautions for workers performing high-risk tasks
- Provide support and information about reducing social isolation while working remotely
- Provide support and information for employees anxious about leaving the relative safety of quarantine
- Provide training for all leadership, supervisors, and employees on recognizing the signs of stress and other mental health emergencies and how to create a culture of support and trust
 - Ensure leadership and supervisors understand and validate the stress and other mental health distress issues an employee may be experiencing
- Increase connecting with employees as they continue to work remotely, continue to work on-site, or return to working on-site. Location of work (remote versus on-site) will affect the modality of checking in; however, frequent check-ins are important.

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- If there is interest, consider creating peer-led initiatives (e.g. slack channels, support groups). Provide training for peer leaders on moderator skills, handling sensitive topics, and more.
- Lead by example – demonstrate, encourage and support a work and home life balance while working remotely. Working from home or working remotely can challenge the balance of these structures; discuss with HR and supervisors how to be role models and support healthy habits while working from home
- Train supervisors and other leaders on how to address “hot topics” such as:
 - An employee tested positive for COVID-19 and coworkers are anxious about their return to the workforce
 - Strong reactions, fears and anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. fears of contracting the virus, strong political opinions, opinions on re-opening, etc.)

Human Resources

Employers have a unique ability and responsibility to manage their relationship with benefit providers, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and health insurance plans to ensure workers have access to the help and support they need. Human Resources teams and supervisors can help make this difference a reality.

When developing policies, consider a tiered approach. While members of the workforce may be experiencing mental health distress and not have a diagnosable mental health disorder, at least 20% of the working-age population has a diagnosed mental disorder and 5% of the population has a severe mental health disorder diagnosis. While it is not the responsibility of an employer or supervisor to diagnose mental health conditions, ensuring benefits and policies recognize that differing levels of care are needed is critical to ensure treatment.

Assess Internal Resources

- Evaluate if health benefits are adequate and conform to parity requirements under the law
- Assess if communication needs to be mailed or translated into different languages to be received and understood
- Evaluate if EAP resources are adequate; if not, address identified gaps either with EAP or with other resources (e.g. if your EAP does not offer virtual support options, identify some within the community or your organization’s healthcare plan to share with employees)
- Communicate the “how” of navigating healthcare benefits and EAP services – for employees in distress or employees who have not used these benefits before, not knowing how to navigate resources is a barrier to accessing them

Connecting Employees to Mental Health Resources

- Encourage EAPs and health insurance plans to be very active in promoting their telephone and online counseling services through various communications, campaigns, etc.

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- Consider establishing a peer advocates group that involves front line workers, union representatives, and others to foster communication and reduce stigma about seeking help for stress, emotional, and mental health concerns
- Consider establishing a mental health taskforce with management representation from all functional areas. Provide training on how to spot the signs of mental health issues, approaches for handling or starting a conversation with an employee who is exhibiting signs, and consider having an identifier worn or used by every member of the taskforce so employees can easily identify who they can speak with should they want to do so
- Send reminders about EAPs and how to get ahold of medical benefits administrators

Communicate Your Resources

- Communicate frequently to reassure employees they can get help for any kind of problem, and promote a culture that normalizes seeking support
- Consider using mobile and digital tools to provide company resources to employees
- Repeatedly share all the resources provided by your benefits providers and local community programs
- Provide easy links to national support and resource hotlines, including but not limited to:
 - [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
 - [Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#)
 - [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
 - [Eldercare Locator](#)
 - [National Sexual Assault Hotline](#)
 - [Find a Health Center](#)
 - [211.org \(multilingual resource to connect to local crisis and emergency services\)](#)
 - [Aunt Bertha Resource Database \(multilingual resource to connect to reduced-cost social services\)](#)
 - [SAMHSA National Helpline](#)
 - [Crisis Text Line | Text HOME To 741741 for free 24/7 Crisis Counseling](#)
 - [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\): Find Support](#)
- Provide information about where to access self-screening assessments, for example:
 - [Mental Health America Self Screening Tests](#)

Adjust and communicate appropriate HR policies and resources

- Allow for flexible policies as schools restart, daycares reopen and schedules become reestablished
- Ensure the EAP offers financial counseling and support to help employees manage financial stress

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- Ensure the EAP offers counseling for substance misuse, fatigue, family stress and general mental health support; if counseling cannot be provided by the EAP, ensure policies allow for increased need for off-site counseling
- Allow for flexible policies as employees receive elective and routine medical care that may have been postponed due to the pandemic
- Allow for flexibility of employees to utilize paid time off to spend time with family or loved ones they were physically separated from during quarantine to help restore their connection with others, reduce stress, and regain a sense of normalcy
- Provide a confidential helpline or email address for employees to get help accessing personal resources and treatment privately
- Provide a confidential helpline for employees to raise job-related concerns anonymously
- Be ready to provide assistance or links to local/county/state/national resources on common employee concerns, such as applying for unemployment, food insecurity, childcare, etc.
- Provide support for counseling for employees who test positive or develop COVID-19 or lose a loved one due to COVID-19

Education and Awareness

An educated workforce can better protect themselves from the impacts of mental health and stress related to COVID-19. Consider building a robust formal and informal education and awareness plan that ensures employees are aware of these impacts, aware of workplace resources, and know they are supported. Communicating on these topics in small, easy to understand pieces of information is encouraged, as is sharing on multiple channels (e.g. posters, infographics, social media, brown bag lunch, email communications, communications from leadership, etc.).

- Provide workers with education and opportunities to practice practical ways of reducing stress, such as mindfulness training, deep breathing exercises, yoga, and other forms of self-care
- Educate all leadership, supervisors and employees on:
 - Understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on stress, mental health and substance use
 - Recognizing the signs of impairment, substance misuse or mental health distress
 - How to engage in mental health first aid and suicide prevention efforts
 - Provide formal and structured trainings as well as informal reputable resources employees can access on their own. Some examples of reliable and evidence-based free information can be found at:
 - Mental Health America
 - National Alliance on Mental Illness
 - Psych Hub
 - Other local organizations and institutions that provide community-specific information and resources

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- Other specific topics an employer may want to include over the next several months are:
 - Mental health 101 – understanding mental health disorders and the brain
 - Addressing the stigma surrounding mental health disorders
 - The relationship between mental health and the increased risk for developing a co-occurring disorder, including physical health problems, substance use disorders and an increased risk of suicide
 - Industry-specific topics

Other Considerations

- For those working in essential or high-risk industries, employees may need elevated levels of support and services, both now and over the coming months. Other vulnerable populations (those with previously diagnosed mental health conditions or substance use disorders) may experience magnified or different impacts. COVID-19 impacts may also manifest as an increase in rates of substance use in the workforce. Remember that building mental, emotional and psychological safety into every process (communications, trainings, etc.) builds resilience in the workforce and that each employee will experience this differently.