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Safe Actions For Employee Returns

Managing Employee Stress and Anxiety – Returning to the Workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused stress, fear, anxiety, and depression across the country. Employees are no exception to these impacts. As return-to-the-workplace conversations and activities commence, employees may be concerned about being exposed to or infected by COVID-19 and bringing it home to family members. Some may be at higher risk of developing severe illness from the virus than others due to age, pre-existing medical conditions, or social factors such as poverty, use of public transportation, or living in congested urban areas.

One key to successfully managing return to work is managing employee anxiety. To address anxiety, it is important to do the following, addressed here:

- Be respectful
- Be transparent
- Educate
- Prepare supervisors
- Align your policies

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Be Respectful

Employers must recognize that this is a very unsettling time. Everyone processes difficult, new and stressful situations differently. Individual stress reactions may range from constant worry and hypervigilance to being resilient. It is essential to be respectful of every individual's beliefs and be understanding of circumstances outside the workplace, while balancing the need to get the job done. If employers approach every situation with respect and open communication, it will go a long way toward finding solutions that balance the needs of individual employees with the needs of the business.

- Remind leadership, supervisors and human resources professionals of current training options or provide new training on respectful communication, conflict resolution, stress management, and self-care
- Provide training so that supervisors understand and recognize changes in employee behavior may trigger offers for employee assistance rather than discipline
- Ensure that employees who are experiencing stress and anxiety know how to access support; normalize seeking support by discussing it openly
- Remind employees that it is OK to feel anxious and reassure them that the organization will work towards alleviating their concerns and fears
- Be aware that the COVID-19 pandemic may reactivate or exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions, including potential for people with substance use disorders to return to use

Be Transparent – Prepare the Workplace

Consistent and transparent communication about how, why and when decisions are made can help alleviate stress and anxiety. Similarly, providing employees with an opportunity and a safe, confidential space to share concerns and ideas about returning to the workplace provides a sense of teamwork and collaboration to keep everyone safe.

- Be transparent about the decision making process so that employees understand timelines, what to expect and why certain decisions were made
- Obtain employee feedback on the process:
 - Consider establishing a multi-disciplinary committee that includes key workplace stakeholders and frontline employees to develop and implement the establishment's COVID-19 exposure control plan
 - Provide a confidential email address or hotline for employees to express concerns about returning to the workplace and other stressors
 - Consider hosting a virtual town hall where open discussions can be heard
 - Send out an anonymous survey to assess concerns and stressors
 - Increase the visibility of the organization's employee assistance program
 - Develop a peer support program
- Frequently communicate the protections that will be in place (testing requirements, PPE requirements, physical distancing, sick leave and compensation policies, etc.) to prepare employees for what to expect in the workplace as they return
 - Provide an opportunity for employees to provide feedback on these measures
- Provide recommendations to address non-workplace specific concerns (e.g. public transportation, deaths of loved ones, family impacts of the pandemic, etc.)



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Educate Employees

Providing employees with reliable information about COVID-19 and mental health can go a long way to alleviating fears and anxieties.

- It is often hard for people to recognize signs of mental health distress in themselves. Educate employees about common symptoms so that employees can identify warning signs in themselves and others, including:
 - Feeling physically and mentally drained
 - Having difficulty making decisions or staying focused on topics
 - Becoming easily frustrated on a more frequent basis
 - Arguing more with family and friends
 - Feeling tired, sad, numb, lonely or worried
 - Experiencing changes in appetite or sleep patterns
 - Overreacting to normal stimuli like noise and lighting
- Provide a hub on the company intranet and frequent communications about the current status and best practices on COVID-19, general COVID-19 prevention and other actions in the workplace. Use nationally recognized resources (e.g. the CDC, OSHA, FEMA, etc.).
- Provide training to employees on stress and resilience so that they are better prepared to recognize their own stress reactions and improve coping and self-care
 - Remind employees that these signs and symptoms may not show up immediately. For example, an employee may not feel anxious about returning to work, but once they do, they may feel anxious.
- Provide lists of national and local resources on disease prevention, stress, self-care and other safety concerns

Prepare Supervisors

It is important that supervisors are ready to help employees as they return. They may be the first to notice someone is feeling anxious or fearful by recognizing behaviors.

- Lead by example – follow recommendations given to employees about managing stress, self-care, taking paid time off and using company resources
- Provide a reminder course in active listening, conflict resolution, respectful communication and resilience
 - Ensure supervisors are not dismissing employee's individual experiences, feelings and fears and instead are focused on validating them
- Ensure supervisors can recognize signs and symptoms of employees who are experiencing mental health distress or other issues such as substance misuse and can link them to appropriate company and community resources
- Adjust expectations for the first few weeks back
 - Avoid overloading employees as they readjust to the workplace
 - Decrease non-essential demands
 - Space out deadlines
 - Recognize the difference between "urgent" and "important" tasks
- Acknowledge known challenges during team meetings, and create a safe space for discussions



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Policy and Procedures

Policies and procedures should reflect the value the organization places on its workforce. It would be wise to review organizational policies and procedures for supporting employees who experience stress as well as ensuring mental health benefits are adequate. Ensure that the team developing policies includes leadership human resources, safety professionals, supervisors, employees, and members outside the workplace such as union leaders in the workplaces that have collective bargaining agreements, etc.

- Continue to support remote work – let those who can work remotely continue to work remotely
- Continue to communicate EAP and benefit resources on counseling and support frequently and through a variety of channels
- To encourage self-care, consider incorporating mental health leave into paid leave policies (e.g. provide a set number of mental health days in addition to existing sick leave for a set timeframe after return to the workplace – for example, five days of mental health leave in the first three months after the return)
- Help employees prioritize self-care and wellness during the week
 - Encourage use of personal time as needed
 - Encourage exercise and wellness breaks
 - Create a safe, quiet break space where employees can step away

