

Returning to the Workplace During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Emotional Considerations

As local and state authorities begin to relax restrictions of their shelter in place orders put into place due to the Coronavirus Pandemic, businesses will gradually reopen and employees will be returning to their workplaces. Employees may have some anxiety from being at home for such an extended period. For some, this could be their first time experiencing such feelings. Employers must recognize this and provide the support needed during this unprecedented time.

Stress

Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances.

Anxiety is a normal and often healthy emotion, however when a person regularly feels disproportionate levels of anxiety, it can become a medical disorder. In some cases, the shelter in place orders have shown to increase these type of feelings. While a number of different diagnoses constitute anxiety disorders, the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) will often include the following from [Medical News Today](#):

- Restlessness, and a feeling of being "on-edge"
- Uncontrollable feelings of worry
- Increased irritability
- Concentration difficulties
- Sleep difficulties, such as problems in falling or staying asleep

Employers can help ease the stress in getting back to work by:

- Maintaining communication
 - Showing that the company has a plan in place and is acting on it is a great way to curb anxiety. This can add a level of comfort amid uncontrollable events
 - Having regular meetings to discuss new events or phases
 - Making managers responsible for setting the mood of their workers and leading the way in recognizing and remediating stress (provide them with the tools and resources to do so)

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease. Typically revolving around an event or something with an uncertain outcome. Anxiety is a reaction to stress.

- Assessing current internal resources (Information taken from [National Safety Council](#)):
 - Evaluate health benefits currently in place. Are they adequate?
 - What benefits are available for mental health?
 - Evaluate Employee Assistance Program (EAP) resources. Are they adequate?
 - Educate employees on how to access mental healthcare benefits (this may be the first time an employee has such a need)
- Looking for alternative work or projects that can keep individuals busy during slow periods (a busy mind will be focused on productive tasks and less likely to dwell on negative thoughts and uncertain outcomes)
- Continuing the conversation
 - Consider establishing a peer advocate 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
 - Bring work teams together periodically to get feedback on productivity successes and barriers. Recognize accomplishments and determine as a team what can be done to improve/overcome. Conduct a reset if enthusiasm has taken a dip.

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- Consider having the company president or other high ranking manager establish companywide periodic briefings of business updates and future outlooks
 - This will keep the channels of communication open
 - Making it motivational and encouraging will ease fears and instill confidence
- Whatever management is doing, make it visible to employees
 - Prominently place posters throughout the workplace
 - Provide hygiene/cleaning stations in accessible locations
- Keep an eye on the future – have employees visualize what a better version of themselves might look like 90 days into a project or production schedule

Employees also have a part in coping/limiting stress

Certain lifestyle changes can help alleviate symptoms of stress and anxiety throughout the pandemic. These techniques can be used along with medical treatments for anxiety. Techniques to reduce stress and anxiety can include the following from [Healthline](#):

- Maintaining a positive attitude
- Eating a balanced, healthy diet
- Limiting caffeine and alcohol consumption
- Getting sufficient rest between shifts/workdays. Individual needs vary, so be mindful what is appropriate
- Getting regular exercise
- Meditating
- Scheduling time for hobbies
- Keeping a diary of your feelings
- Practicing deep breathing
- Recognizing the factors that trigger your stress
- Talking to a friend or colleague
- Taking breaks during work shifts to relax the mind, take deep breaths, and unwind

- Staying connected with loved ones and nature by taking hikes or walks on trails in forests, by the ocean, or in other open areas
- Staying informed about the pandemic, but limit exposure to news sources. Stress levels can increase when continually hearing of rising statistics and repeatedly seeing disturbing images
- Knowing what is in your control versus what is not. Do not dwell on the latter

Conclusion

Knowing your employees and observing behaviors can help manage the level of care that is needed. 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.

Additional resources for Mental Health:

- 1 National Safety Council Safe Actions for Employee Returns [Stress and Mental Health](#)
- 2 Resources for emotional support and well-being from the [California Department of Public Health](#)
- 3 [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)
- 4 SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- 5 [National Sleep Foundation](#)

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