

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR MANAGERS

Supporting Employees: Coronavirus Fears & Concerns

Managers and supervisors have a special role to play in helping their employees adjust during periods of prolonged stress. Here are some actions to consider, as the situation warrants.

Communicate with your employees

A message should go out to all employees from a senior manager.

- › Communicate the importance of the situation. Reflect the normal fears and anxieties that we all share.
- › List any steps the company is taking to ensure the safety of its employees.
- › Remind employees of resources available to them in the community and through their jobs, including the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Communication is a two-way process

Communicating by email can be a place to start for formal announcements and ongoing updates. Connecting personally with employees will also be important. Ask your employees how they are doing. Be prepared to spend some time listening.

- › What are their main concerns?
- › What do they need from you?
- › Provide updates, or access to information, as more news comes in.

Anticipate business disruption

- › Recognize that productivity may be lower and errors may be higher
- › Be patient and compassionate during this temporary disruption.
- › Consider “back-up” plans to ensure that essential business operations can continue in the event of increased absences.

Be aware that some individuals may have more intense reactions than others

- › They may behave in ways that are unusual to see in the workplace.
- › Reactions may include panic attacks, reluctance to come into work, or hyper-vigilance to their health and the health of others. The best course for managers:
 - Communicate your willingness to talk.
 - Be patient.
 - Use active listening – giving feedback to let them know you hear them.
 - Be supportive.
- › Make sure they know where to get support. Your EAP may be a good place to start.

Use the resources available to you as a manager

- › If you have concerns about how individual employees are reacting, or the effect on your workforce in general, call your EAP for a management consultation.
- › Consider scheduling a critical incident stress-debriefing group or wellness seminar, through the EAP. Services can be delivered virtually and/or telephonically.
- › Remember to take care of yourself so you can take care of your employees; use your EAP if needed.

Resources for managers: Coronavirus preparedness

World Health Organization (WHO):

Coronavirus updates:

www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

Preparing the workplace:

www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf

Pandemic preparedness:

www.who.int/influenza/preparedness/pandemic/en/

Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC):

About Coronavirus:

www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

Pandemic Resources:

www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/index.htm

Travel Health Notices:

www.cdc.gov/travel/notices

Health Promotion Materials:

www.cdc.gov/handwashing/materials.html

COVID-19 Video Series:

www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/videos.html

U.S. Government pandemic preparedness:

www.ready.gov/pandemic

International SOS:

www.internationalsos.com



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WHAT CAN I DO?

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When a situation like the emergence of a disease occurs, people are affected differently. As a manager, it will be important for you to offer support to those who are struggling with their reactions. You may not be sure what you should say and not say. Here are some suggestions to help guide you.

- › Notice if employees are having difficulties or displaying anxiety. They may not come to you themselves out of embarrassment or feeling it is inappropriate or unprofessional.
- › Address specific fears with a rational approach. Healthy employees may be reluctant to come to work or attend work functions. Validate their fear, while also reviewing what you know.
- › Encourage concrete moves to help reduce anxiety, such as preparing for quarantine or making plans for child care in the event of school closings.
- › Respect their privacy. Leave it up to the person to decide how much they want to talk about their reactions and what they want to share. Avoid asking intrusive questions.
- › Acknowledge the distressing nature of the situation and how they are reacting to it. Normalize their feelings by saying, "I understand how upsetting this is."
- › Let your genuine concern and care show. Ask what they need. Offer practical help as appropriate, such as shifting workloads or work processes to accommodate higher absenteeism (if possible).
- › If an employee wants to talk about their experience, be ready to listen.
- › Some common reactions during these situations include: reduced concentration, withdrawal, crying and anger. Be patient with them, and don't take reactions personally. Lower your expectations for a while.
- › Provide regular updates from your company leadership and ensure employees know where to find them.
- › Remember that you can't take away others' feelings, but you empathize. News of a serious disease can spark fears over health, loved ones, and even our livelihoods that we all share.
- › Keep offering your support, even if it's declined at first.
- › Recognize your own reactions and take care of yourself.
- › Support the use of professional help if needed. Tell them about the EAP and give them the phone number.

Try to avoid...

- › Staying away from the subject because you are uncomfortable.
- › Pretending nothing is happening.
- › Using clichés such as "I know just how you feel," "Everything will turn out for the best," "It must be part of a bigger plan."
- › Minimizing the situation – "It could be a lot worse."
- › Trying to "fix it" or provide information you don't have.
- › Giving unsolicited advice. Compassion is more valuable than advice.

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COPING WITH THE FEAR OF CORONAVIRUS

Supporting Employees: Coronavirus Fears & Concerns

Anxiety is understandably high as we are learning more about the spread of COVID-19. The information below may be helpful in managing the fear you may feel. Resources for up-to-date medical information and advice about coronavirus are at the end of the article.

Managing fears

A good way to manage any kind of fear is to become educated about it. The more we know about the real dangers, the more we can take effective steps to avoid or minimize them, thereby putting some fears to rest. Accurate information is an effective antidote to unrealistic fears. The resources at the end of this article are a good source of accurate information.

Monitor your exposure to the news. Media news coverage can arouse emotion and increase fear. It's important to get the facts, but it may not be helpful to hear reports over and over. Be aware of how you and family members respond to news stories. Limit television or online coverage if it becomes distressing.

Put your risk into perspective. The term "pandemic" can be very scary. It's important to stay aware and informed, but try to make sure your level of fear does not exceed your risk factors.

Focus on what you have control over. News stories and images about the spread of a disease can make us feel anxious and helpless. Knowing how to minimize your risk can reduce anxiety. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have information about how to reduce your risk of contracting the virus.

Be always aware, but not always fearful.

Awareness means paying attention to news that is specific to where you live. Awareness is not the same as being in constant fear. Constant fear can create stress and be counter-productive. It can be harder to deal with a true risk when everything seems like a danger. We want to focus on what *is* happening, rather than getting caught up in thoughts of what *could* happen.

Take a break from the fears. Like changing a channel on TV – intentionally shift your focus away from stressful thoughts. Spend time doing things that can distract you from worries and that help you feel more calm and balanced.

Notice if fear begins to become panic. It's normal to be afraid, but if you find yourself needing extra support due to being anxious the majority of time, having difficulty sleeping or finding yourself unable to cope, you might want to talk to a professional. A licensed professional can help you understand the root of your feelings and work with you to find management strategies targeted specifically to you.

If children have fears, give them honest information at a level they can understand. You don't need to explain everything about the virus and risk. Give them only as much information as they request. Encourage your children to talk to you about their thoughts and feelings. Listen to their concerns, and then reassure them. Explain that there are steps that everyone can take to protect themselves. Limit your child's exposure to news reports. Seeing repeated coverage can be disturbing. It can be helpful to watch the news with your child and discuss it afterwards.

We have to walk a fine line between awareness and fear. Try to keep your thoughts in sync with what is actually happening, not what your worst fears may be. Understand that national and international health organizations are working diligently to understand the risks and keep the public safe.

Resources for more information

World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

WHO travel information: www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/travel-advice

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

CDC travel information: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html

Get support.

Talking through concerns and sharing your fears can help you put them in perspective and help you feel calmer. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available 24/7 to offer support to you and your household members.

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SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

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You're not immune from your own emotional reactions to the impact of coronavirus disease. It's important for you to prioritize your own self-care to help you cope with any unsettling emotions this situation can bring. Self-care means making the choice to act in healthy ways rather than just reacting to events. Here are some self-care reminders that you may find helpful to share with employees and to use yourself.

Physical coping strategies

- › **Getting enough sleep to feel rested** is a key ingredient of self-care. It impacts both mood and energy level. Establish a routine and get to bed at a reasonable hour.
- › **Physical activity** is a good way to reduce feelings of stress and tension. It will also help you sleep better, if it's done at least several hours before bedtime. Talk to your doctor before starting any exercise routine.
- › Eat **well-balanced meals** at regular times of the day.
- › Nurture yourself by **doing something calming and relaxing**. Deep breathing, meditation and progressive relaxation can help you de-stress. But simply doing activities you enjoy can also help release tension.
- › **Avoid alcohol and drugs** as a means to cope, unless your doctor gives you a needed prescription.

Mental coping strategies

- › **Get the facts** about the problem from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), rather than relying on the social media and television to provide information.
- › **Give your thoughts a break** from focusing on the "what-ifs" that scare you. Concentrate on the here and now needs of your loved ones, activities you enjoy, and the practical things you need to get done.

- › **Structure your time.** Large blocks of unstructured time will tempt your thoughts to center endlessly around what troubles you most. This can make your interpretation of what's happening more upsetting than it actually is.
- › **Remind yourself of your abilities and strengths.** Self-statements such as "I can handle this uncertainty" get you back in touch with the fact that you're steering your own ship – you're not a bottle tossing and turning on life's seas.
- › **Set short-term goals.** What are some things that you want to get done in the next hour? The next day? The next week? Focus on short-term accomplishments to help you feel more in control.

Emotional coping strategies

- › **Reach out to people who care and give voice** to your feelings and fears. Talk out your thoughts and worries with loved ones.
- › **Spend time doing enjoyable activities.**
- › **Have realistic expectations for yourself.** There are many unknowns in this situation, for which you cannot have the answer. You can't control every outcome. Give yourself a break and realize you are doing the best you can.

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