



Recognizing and responding to employee needs throughout COVID-19

Levels of fear and anxiety related to COVID-19 remain high around the world and it is likely to be affecting members of your team. According to Dr. Kennette Thigpen, Ph.D., Vice President of Clinical Crisis and Specialty Services at Workplace Options, employees have been seeking emotional wellbeing support due to a growing number of pandemic-related concerns. “Some employees are struggling with social isolation, while others are frustrated at the idea of going back to the workplace,” shares Thigpen. “Still others are fearful of contracting COVID-19 or infecting a loved one. Regardless of what is fueling their feelings, managers play an important role in recognizing these emotional cues and guiding workers to employee wellbeing support resources.”

Recognizing emotional distress

Overt signs of emotional distress, like crying or expressing hopelessness, are easy to spot. However, managers should also be familiar with the less obvious signs as well, which can include the following:

- attendance problems
- errors and inconsistent work quality
- reduced ability to focus on work
- mood swings
- withdrawal from coworkers
- sleepiness or fatigue
- less care of personal appearance
- signs of substance misuse

Recognizing these behaviors can be even more difficult when working in a remote setting, as is still the case for many organizations. If you are not meeting face-to-face with staff, regular check-ins to gauge their emotional health is important. Instead of generically asking “How are you?”, try more open-ended questions like, “How are you balancing your time?” or “What are you doing to take care of yourself these days?”

Responding in a supportive way

When you hear or notice signs of emotional distress, be prepared to offer appropriate comfort and guidance. Admittedly, this can be challenging for some managers. Fortunately, communicating empathy is a skill that can be taught if it doesn't come naturally. Check with your human resources or training department for more information.

Being supportive includes sharing words of sympathy and letting the employee know that you care and want to hear what they are going through. Taking the time to listen is critical. Use body language to communicate the employee has your full attention. This includes making eye contact and nodding to indicate you are following along. Avoid fidgeting, looking away or using a judgmental facial expression.

When an employee opens up to you and shares what they are experiencing, it's important to normalize their emotional response with a statement like, “I think a lot of people feel that way as well” or “That seems like a very normal response to what you described.” You might consider sharing some of your own emotional reactions related to the pandemic. The point of this is not to dominate the conversation with your own feelings, but to affirm the employee's emotions as real and important.

You should also encourage employees experiencing distress to practice self-care. This includes eating healthy, participating in some physical activity, and getting the appropriate amount of rest. If work-life balance is a struggle, discuss potential solutions.

Finally, be familiar with how to access your company's employee assistance resources so you can confidently guide team members to reach out for professional, confidential emotional wellbeing support. The only exception to this confidentiality is when an employee is at risk of harming themselves or others. You want to be able to share what kind of support is available and the best way to access it.

COVID-19 is affecting everyone, but not everyone is impacted the same way. As a manager, you are in a unique position to recognize when someone is struggling and point them to the support available to help them. Ultimately, your entire team will benefit when this is done well.