Employee Safety

# How to Manage Employee Anxiety in the Workplace During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Roland Jones | Jul 09, 2020

**The COVID-19 pandemic is creating elevated stress and anxiety levels among both employers and employees. Here's how businesses can keep their workers physically safe while also thinking about their mental health.**

As states continue to reopen and businesses establish plans to bring their workforces back to work safely, much careful thought is likely being given to safety procedures designed to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

These procedures may include placing social distancing decals on the factory floor or figuring out the cafeteria's new seating rules.

But while working out the logistics of a returning workforce is important to safeguard its physical safety, ensuring its emotional and psychological welfare is just as important.

It's an issue that is likely often overlooked but is of vital importance, as the pandemic is taking a toll on the mental health of Americans.

> **The mental health impacts of the pandemic "seem to be spreading and accelerating."**
> Paul Gionfriddo
> Mental Health America

And it's also true for those many essential workers who have continued to work throughout the COVID-19 crisis, providing much-needed services to their communities.

*Read more about reopening in the MSC Direct Reopen Safely Guide*

A *survey of 1,038 U.S. employers* by global human resources consulting firm Mercer shows 35 percent find the challenge of employees not coming to work due to fear of getting sick is one of the largest they are currently facing.

# Supporting Your Employees' Mental Health During a Crisis

Employees often look to business leaders and managers to provide leadership and support during difficult times.

The *U.S. Chamber of Commerce recently suggested ways* a company's leadership team can meet this need and help their employees work through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those suggestions include:

- Providing frequent updates to make sure everyone in the organization is up to date—something that's especially important concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, when new statistics and safety guidelines are issued constantly.
- Showing sensitivity toward your workers' challenges, such as caring for elderly parents, or trying to home-school children. Those challenges may make it hard for them to work a typical 9-to-5 workday.
- Building a sense of community by staying in touch with workers through such channels as video, instant messaging, virtual happy hours or informal catch-ups.
- If you're a leader, being sure to take care of yourself while supporting your team should be a priority. It's just as important to take care of your own needs, too.

And in May the World Health Organization *warned* of a "massive increase in mental health conditions," pointing to the threat of social isolation, fear of contagion and loss of family members that is "compounded by the distress caused by loss of income and often employment."

More recently, *data released by Mental Health America*—a national mental health advocacy organization—from its *free online mental health screening program* shows over 88,000 people developing anxiety or depression as a result of the pandemic, while more than 21,000 Americans who completed the organization's health screening said they thought about suicide or self-harm on more than half of the days in May.

"Our May screening numbers were unprecedented," says MHA President and CEO Paul Gionfriddo. "And what is most troubling," he adds, is that the mental health impacts of the pandemic "seem to be spreading and accelerating."

## Supporting Your Workers

The apprehension is not surprising. As we emerge from our homes to resume work after several weeks in lockdown, coronavirus cases *continue to spike* nationwide, leaving many questions unanswered: How safe is it to resume our daily lives without a vaccine, and how safe is it for us to be around others?

Indeed, the pandemic has created a major dilemma for business leaders: Reopening your business means asking employees to risk exposure to the virus, while keeping your business closed indefinitely means it may never get back on its feet again.

The challenge is particularly acute for manufacturing companies where much of the essential work

cannot be done remotely. Many reopening amid the pandemic are instead relying on safety measures designed to keep employees safe, such as frequent cleaning and sanitizing of work areas, splitting work shifts and using social distancing rules.

*Read more: Best Practices for Reopening Safely After COVID-19: What Manufacturers Need to Know*

Given all this, working during the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to create significant amounts of stress for employees as they navigate new safety procedures, try to maintain established production levels and, of course, fear the possibility of catching the virus.

The good news is there are resources to help employers support their workers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the nation's health protection agency, has *dedicated a page* to the stresses brought about by the pandemic, with tips on how to spot increased stress during an infectious disease outbreak and take care of your mental health.

And the National Safety Council maintains a *COVID-19: Mental Health and Wellbeing* page that offers resources for supporting workers during the crisis and beyond, including mental health checklists and a list of helpful resources.

## Providing Leadership and Community

Employers can provide leadership and support during this time by building a sense of community, according to the CDC. Helping others cope with stress, such as "by providing social support, can also make your community stronger," the *CDC notes*. "During times of increased social distancing, people can still maintain social connections and care for their mental health. Phone calls or video chats can help you and your loved ones feel socially connected, less lonely, or isolated."

Surveys show the COVID-19 transition to work provokes much fear in workers, and so companies would do well to proactively create return-to-work strategies that address the need to keep workers safe.

According to one *poll of employees returning to work*, almost half said they are afraid that their employer will bring people back to work before it's safe to do so, while 80 percent said their employers will need to make changes to protect their health and safety before they feel comfortable returning to work.

One approach companies can take to alleviate this concern is to make it clear to their employees that, in addition to the third-party mental health programs available to employees, the company itself is a place that has a strong awareness and sensitivity to employee fears. In this way, companies can reassure employees that their welfare is always placed first.

Regular communication is important, too, particularly from company leaders.

Those companies that offer regular briefings and updates to their employees generate more positive views among their workers. According to the same poll, 90 percent of workers who receive updates from their employer *say they are proud to work for the company*, versus 35 percent who did not receive information from their employer. And 84 percent of workers who did receive updates from their employer say they are looking forward to going back to work, versus 41 percent who did not receive information.

As the COVID-19 pandemic changes work trends, HR leaders may also want to consider offering employees greater flexibility in their work schedules. This flexibility may help to alleviate stress on those caring for children or sick loved ones, or it may help alleviate the fear among those workers that

they appear not to be fully committed to their job.

As Gartner, a global research and advisory firm, *notes*, the pandemic has increased the trend of employers "playing an expanded role in their employees' financial, physical and mental well-being." By offering more support in these areas, companies can promote physical health and improve the emotional well-being of employees.

*How has your company helped workers deal with the emotional challenges of working amid the pandemic?*

**www.mscdirect.com/betterMRO**          Copyright ©2024 MSC Industrial Supply Co.