



Keeping Employees Mentally Resilient During a Global Infection Outbreak

As the COVID-19 outbreak continues to spread around the world, uncertainty is growing among people; not only does the virus seem to evolve, public opinion about the outbreak shifts rapidly amidst the spread of unverified news.

While the mortality rate of COVID-19 remains fairly low (currently 2%), we are seeing new confirmed cases added to the global count each day, with no abatement to the spread of the disease in sight. The increased transmission outside China is a core concern, with governments and companies taking more precautionary measures to combat this – travel restrictions, remote working, and the activation of Business Continuity Plans are accelerating.

What companies need to focus on now is keeping their employees safe, well-informed, and positive. This is much harder than it sounds.

The internet has, unfortunately, proved to be a worse breeding ground for harmful “viral” infections than any live food market; the amount of unsubstantiated news circulating about the COVID-19 is unprecedented. What is more damaging is that these news articles seem to spread far more rapidly (and widely) than any official, more accurate, circulars.

People are worried, and justifiably so. It is hard to know what news to believe, and being sent to work from home only makes one more isolated and tempted to trawl the internet for more information. As more employees are exposed to this, it is hard not to panic.

This is where employers can provide support.

We are lucky to be in an age where remote working is possible; many of us have laptops and can work from almost anywhere, at the drop of a hat. Good news. But doing so for prolonged periods has an impact: a sudden detachment from community, colleagues, and social life (under the cloud of COVID-19) is a likely precursor for stress and panic.

Tell your employees to maintain regular remote contact with their teams — more frequently than they would do so in the office. Stick to a regular routine, exercise, socialize, and relax. Just because there is a virus out there somewhere does not mean we have to hibernate until it eventually disappears. These are important mindsets and behaviors for sustaining normality.

Provide employees with trusted sources of information, such as local Ministry of Health websites and reputable news sources. Panic is far less likely to set in if people receive accurate information.

For most, more time at home means more time on social media, so persuade staff to avoid reading uncorroborated articles and resist the temptation of getting involved in baseless online discussions about COVID-19. If they have any doubts, they should consult the trusted sites provided to them.

Worrying during this kind of outbreak is normal, but if the anxiety continues and affects your daily lives, it can have a negative impact on our mental health.

Common psychological issues during an outbreak:

- **Anxiety**
Hiding at home, avoiding interaction, fear of infection, insomnia
- **Depression**
Moody – feeling like it is the end of the world
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**
Uncontrollable and recurring urge to clean the home and surrounding objects
- **Acute Stress Response**
Hyper-vigilance, inability to concentrate, irritable mood

Tips to help overcome the stress:

1. **Filter the information** that you are reading and receiving — don't believe everything you see. Learn to differentiate between real and unverified news by:
 - a. Using search engines to verify the information, which will usually reveal the information's source.
 - b. Referring to common knowledge and exercising some common sense.
2. **Do not follow all and every media channel** to keep up with the latest news; only subscribe to official sites such as the World Health Organization, government sites, and reputable news agencies for updates.
3. **Distract yourself from the outbreak** - Take this opportunity to spend time with family, read a book, or watch movies. Leisurely activities will help negate worrying over the outbreak and reduce anxiety.
4. **Do things that you can control** - Wherever advised and possible, avoid unnecessary exposure and large gatherings. It is important to remind ourselves to stay at home and take care of ourselves and our family. Also:
 - a. Stay healthy — exercise whenever you can, even if this means improvising with no equipment at home (consider calisthenics!).
 - b. Try doing some constructive work — do you have any DIY projects or hobbies you have been putting off? Use some of your new-found free time to start!
 - c. Don't fuel any fires — only forward information that you have verified to be accurate and reliable.
5. **Build your own support system** - At this stage, most will choose to reduce interaction and spend more time at home. This reduces the chances of talking to friends and family about worries and anxieties. Employees and their families must always feel comfortable talking to employers, who provide the technology and support systems to make colleagues feel supported.

If you provide ancillary psychological support services, such as an Employee Assistance Program, this is an opportune time to promote that and ensure all employees know how to access it. They are more likely to access it remotely too.

If someone does feel unwell, provide them with a process to follow — note that this is likely to be different from the usual process. In non-outbreak times, someone feeling unwell would visit a private medical clinic. With COVID-19, anyone feeling unwell has to report straight to a public facility, where they will adhere to government guidelines. Tell employees where to go to access care and, most importantly, how to stay calm.

These are trying times but with the right mindset and behavior, we can all do our part to protect and care for ourselves, our families, and our colleagues!

For more information on this topic or other Health and Benefits requirements please reach out to your local Marsh representative or a colleague below:

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