



The Employer Role: Mental Health During COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect employees well beyond the immediacy of the initial crisis. As an employer, you have a unique ability and responsibility to manage your benefit providers, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and health insurance plans to ensure your workers have access to the help and support they need. Having your workers know you are here to support them through these difficult times can make a world of difference for their mental and physical health. Your Human Resources team and supervisors can help make this difference a reality.

In these stressful times, it is not enough to post benefit information on your company website. People are overwhelmed by news about the virus, their health risk, their jobs and the economy. That is why you and your benefit providers should reinforce messaging several times, when appropriate, about how to get help for the stress they are feeling.

Employers need to reinforce what their benefits providers are saying, support the importance of getting help when needed, and, when relevant, create multi-lingual resources. Working with benefits providers to assure your employees can access remote services and adjusting internal policies can minimize the impacts on your workplace and support your workers through stressful situations.

If your organization does not offer an EAP or similar program, there are still things you can do to support your workforce as they deal with the current stresses. You may want to circle back after the crisis has passed to see if you can deploy an EAP for future crisis issues. Whatever resources you do have available, it is crucial to let your employees know about them. Employees may have a lot on their mind and may be experiencing high levels of stress – they may be more distracted, which is typical. You may need to tell them repeatedly and in a variety of ways how to access mental health services.

What you can do:

- Review our checklist for working with benefits providers to address mental health issues
- Share all the resources provided by your benefits providers and community programs:
 - Telehealth and crisis counseling by phone, Zoom, FaceTime or text
 - Online and local behavioral health support group information
 - Connections and support for people with mental health or substance use disorders
 - Resources for financial counseling and accessing financial aid
 - Resources for food insecure homes
 - Resources for childcare, nursing care, etc.
- Communicate the following related to healthcare benefits:
 - Share how to access telehealth or remote nurse line counseling
 - Discuss coverage for COVID-19 testing and treatment available through your healthcare plans or through public programs. You may have employees who are not on your plan, so include information about accessing public COVID-19 testing and treatment.
 - Post information on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 from reliable sources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
 - Explain coverage for seeking routine care, chronic illness and urgent care
 - Prescriptions: offer advice on not stockpiling medication, if possible (explain delivery benefits – mail order options, etc.) and safe medication habits if you do take medications and have a large quantity in-house (safe storage habits, etc.)
- Adjust and communicate appropriate HR policies and resources:
 - Provide a confidential help line or email address where employees can raise concerns and ask for help anonymously
 - Be ready to provide assistance or links to local or national resources on common employee concerns, such as applying for unemployment, food insecurity, childcare, etc.
 - Provide links to national support resources (such as the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) and the [CDC](#))
 - Ensure return-to-work policies (typically used following an illness) are flexible

Support those at highest risk

Many people will need to continue working in risky situations during the COVID-19 pandemic (for example, working in healthcare, first responders, child or personal care, and other professions where the employee comes into contact with large groups of people). These situations may bring them into contact with possibly infected people, even with the precautions of social distancing, maintaining personal and environmental sanitization, etc. It is important to ensure there is crisis and support counseling for these workers. They will need extra support and a place to ask for help.

A note for supervisors

Supervisors will likely see the impacts of stress on employee wellbeing and mental health firsthand. Employees may come to their supervisors when they do not know how to cope with their current situation or circumstances. Some actions supervisors can take to help in these situations include:

- Understanding the actions Human Resources is taking to provide support to employees
- Giving explicit permission to take mental health breaks, take walks and engage in other acts of self-care
- Understanding and accommodating the need for flexible scheduling, when possible
- Acknowledging the challenges with shared space at home to complete school and work
- Increase communication and check-ins
- Practicing good listening skills with your employees when they are stressed or in distress (being an active listener, being patient, asking how you can help, etc.)

We are all in a very stressful time right now. Being there for workers and making sure they know their wellbeing is of the utmost importance will help us all get through this together.