

Sleeping Happy Illness

Health Wellness Care

Stressed Exercise

Mind Positivity Anxiety

Support Life Help Sad

Well-Being Anxious

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SERIES BY:



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What is mental health?

The World Health Organization defines it as “A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”

Regardless of how you define it, mental health is a complex issue and one that requires additional consideration during a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond supporting teams with the operational aspects of transitioning to working from home, adjusting to different business practices, and adapting to changes in work priorities, consideration must be given to the mental health and wellness programs provided to individuals and teams.

In this series we’re sharing insights and guidance on providing mental health support from several different perspectives including: **Supporting our Organizations, our Teams, Ourselves, and our Co-workers.**



Leadership

Supporting our Organizations

Organizational and personal adaptability and resilience are key traits required to survive and even thrive in a crisis. It is important to understand that mental wellbeing is a shared responsibility between employers and employees. In times of crisis it's important to reframe our approach to fit the current circumstances, knowing our employees are facing additional stresses both at work and home and realizing that some of our traditional practices such as in-person meetings are not possible.

As a senior leader, supporting employee mental wellness can be done by ensuring appropriate supports are in place and communicating resources and supports available to managers and employees. Existing programs and policies should be reviewed to assess relevance and identify any adjustments that may be required to fit the current circumstances. Questions to ask during the review should include:

- What adjustments have we made to our **communication approach** that can help with employee anxiety and uncertainty about work?
- What adjustments need to be made to ensure managers and employees are given **enough time to connect** and check in?
- How will the organization address **workplace factors that affect mental health**?
 - How is this addressed when your employees are now working from home?
- What is the organization doing to **raise awareness about mental health**?
 - What actions are being taken now to raise awareness of mental health issues specific to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How does the organization **mitigate risk**?
 - What additional risk mitigation strategies should be put in place for the current situation?
- What **additional actions** can the organization take to support employee mental wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Are there additional **policies or guidelines** that need to be put in place at this time that will directly or indirectly support employee mental wellness?
- Eventually, as a **return to work plan** is developed, how is mental health of employees being considered in this plan?
- Does the organization have **programs and resources that can assist employees** such as:
 - An employee assistance program (EAP)
 - Respect in the workplace policies (anti-harassment, bullying, violence & discrimination)
 - Paid sick time
 - Short-term and long-term disability coverage
 - Health and safety systems
 - Wellness programs
 - Return to work programs

Employers who are finding themselves dealing with workplace mental health issues for the first time may be unaware to learn that they have a duty to accommodate. Once an issue has been identified, and/or disclosed, the employer must respond by providing accommodations to the employee.

Being proactive by having the right resources and supports in place will help both you, as the employer, and your employees manage and find ways to address mental health issues during these unprecedented circumstances.



Guidance

Supporting our Teams

Good managers know that they require a number of skills to help keep their staff engaged, focused and productive. Some of the best managers are genuinely empathic, trust-worthy, informed and communicative. They also take the time to establish relationships with and make a habit of effectively recognizing employees. As we wade into the new reality of living in isolation and working remotely, it's important to recognize that these and other skills are needed to keep your teams on track.

After initially scrambling to get staff settled in to working from home you've probably already addressed the basics of effectively using technology to set the new rules of engagement, have a clear communication plan in place, are holding frequent check-ins with the group and are setting up frequent or weekly one-on-one check ins with specific individuals to address questions or concerns.

As you shift from initial crisis response to settle in for the longer duration of new routines and ways of working, you should consider the mental health of your team. This is a key component in the shift from initial crisis response to the longer-term navigation of the new working world.

At any given point in time, 20% of your team may be thriving under the new challenge, 60% are managing and coping, and 20% may either be disengaged or struggling. Factors that can contribute to team members being disengaged or struggling may include:

- Feeling isolated,
- Being overworked,
- Feeling a lack of connection to the work team,
- Having difficulty getting organized and motivated,
- Inadequate office space and/or furniture,
- Having trouble staying on task and/or meeting deliverables,

- Getting frustrated with reliability of equipment and resources,
- Household or family distractions,
- Busy caring for children and/or others,
- Trying to support home education of children,
- Anxious about personal and situational uncertainty, and
- Worried about losing their job and dealing with financial concerns.

It is likely that most of your team members, at varying points in time, will experience at least some of these factors. Some will be able to cope, whereas others will find it more difficult. As a manager or supervisor of people it is important that you look for and act on any warning signs that indicate an employee is struggling with mental health issues. It is also important that you know what resources your organization has in place to deal with workplace mental health issues.

Some warning signs you may notice, or others may report to you, that could indicate a possible mental health issues include:

- Consistent tardiness or frequent absences from schedule meetings,
- Signs of fatigue, lack of focus,
- Change of appearance and lack of concern for personal hygiene,
- Frequent complaints about ailments,
- Unexplained moodiness, emotional and anger outbursts,
- Pronounced sadness or depression,
- Heightened anxiety,
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions or remembering things,
- Sudden difficulty working with colleagues, lack of cooperation,
- Missed deadlines due to procrastination,

- Decreased productivity,
- Working overtime to get simple tasks done,
- Major changes in personality,
- Extreme highs or lows,
- Avoiding friends and social interactions ,
- Indications of substance dependence or abuse,
- Strange ideas or delusions, and
- Talk about suicide.

On their own, or if very infrequent, these symptoms may not indicate a serious mental illness and there is no one play book for dealing with mental health issues. A mental health issue can be connected to factors inside and outside the workplace and are often triggered by a significant event, making it important to be extra vigilant under the current circumstances. Look for unusual actions and for more than one occurrence. If moodiness, tardiness, hygiene and project issues are starting to affect other team members, it's time to speak to your team member about your concerns.

Managing performance issues virtually is not ideal and under normal circumstances your conversations would be face-to-face. You can, however, take steps to make the meetings as personal and effective as possible. Begin by making sure the conversation is a private one. If someone is acting up in a group meeting, arrange to call them back or video chat with them after group call.

When you start talking to an employee about their well-being, focus on what you or others have observed such as performance concerns, increased absences or tardiness. Remember, you are not a trained professional in mental health, so you are not able to diagnosis their condition nor are you legally able to delve deeply into their health issues. Don't make the discussion specific to mental illness unless it is addressed by the employee first. Focus instead on what support you or the organization can provide. Demonstrate that you take the situation seriously and would like to provide support.

As a manager it is important that you:

- Deal with the issue in a timely fashion,
- Allow for adequate time to get to the root of the issue,
- Be emphatic not judgmental,
- Realize that everyone's situation is unique,
- Treat the matter with the upmost sensitivity, in a private setting and that any notes taken are well secured to ensure private matters remain private and confidential, and
- Be prepared to provide the employee with a plan to help them.

Given the sensitivity of mental health issues, not every employee will want to discuss their personal situation with you. Should the employee be in denial about having a mental health issue, or decline speaking to you about any personal issues, then focus the conversation only on performance concerns, and provide them with one-on-one coaching. Performance conversations should be documented. You should also mention to them that, if they feel there is a problem, there are resources available to them, including your human resources department, any employee assistance program (EAP) you may have, and other resources provided at the end of this series. Throughout the conversation ensure that you:



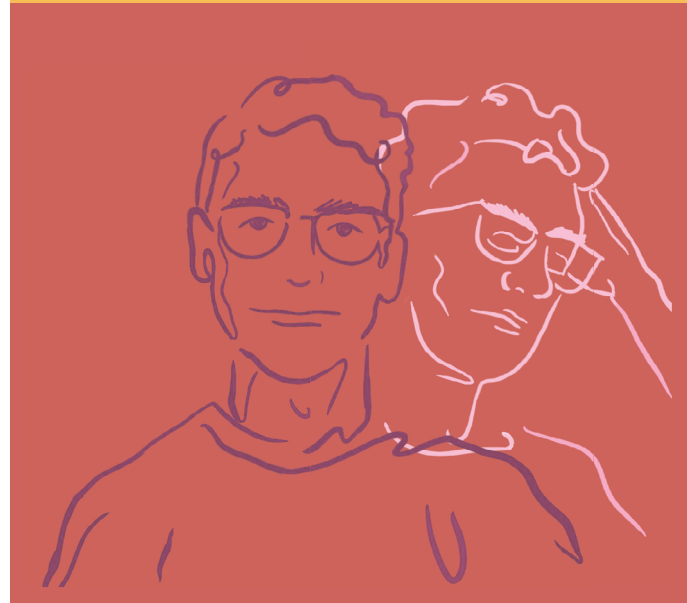
If the employee is comfortable sharing information with you then the discussion can move to one where organizational supports and resources are discussed. Once an employee has disclosed to you that there is a mental health issue, as an employer you MUST be prepared to work with the employee to find a way to work through the issue. Finding an appropriate solution and customized “accommodation”, with a goal of integration rather than segregation, requires that you:

- Be respectful of the employee's dignity,
- Ensure the disclosure of any illness must be taken seriously, and that
- Confidentiality of the information disclosed is maintained.

Flexibility in developing and adapting an accommodation plan (e.g. time off, reassigned duties) is crucial to ensure employee needs are met. Accommodations do not have to be permanent solutions and will change over time depending on the situation. Documenting the accommodation plan, subsequent conversations, meetings, agreed upon adjustments, and outcomes are important.

If things intensify, it is important to intervene as soon as possible. If you are concerned the situation is escalating quickly and that an employee may harm themselves or others or if they may be experiencing suicidal thoughts, you should:

- Act promptly – call 911 or reach out to appropriate third parties (their emergency contact, human resources, emergency room or doctor) immediately,
- Keep the employee on the line until they have gotten help (even if you believe they have calmed down or stabilized),
- Listen and offer support, and
- Ensure they have support if being transported to another location.



We say we're fine, even when the truth is we're ecstatic, exhausted, grateful. Or even freaking out. Every time we just go through the motions, we miss out on the chance to connect for real. In times of crisis we need each other more than ever.

Connecting doesn't just feel good— it's good for our mental health.

Learn more about Workplace Mental Health by visiting the [ACEC-BC Mental Health Resource page](#).



Self-care

Supporting Ourselves

Regardless of our role or position on a team, it is important that we each consider our own mental health. Our mental health can be affected by a number of factors inside and outside the workplace. Often mental health issues can be triggered by a significant event, including the abrupt and unprecedented changes we have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to understand that each of us are dealing with different situations that affect both our personal and professional lives, which have become more interconnected than ever before.

During times of crisis, many of us are likely going to see some level of impact on our mental health, which may also affect our work performance. Given the turmoil and significant changes to our lives, this is reasonable, but there are some actions you can take surround work that can help to make a difference, including:

- Taking **regular breaks**
- **Participating** in regular meetings
- Keeping to a **schedule**
- Having **discussions with colleagues** about strategies for balancing work
- **Disconnecting from work** at the end of the day
- Seeking out **interaction and connection** with your colleagues
- **Talking to your manager** about challenges you are facing so that you can discuss possible modifications to your workload

However, there will also be cases where taking these steps will not be enough. And if that's the case, it's okay.

You, as an employee, have an obligation to be fit for work and your employer has an obligation to ensure you and your co-workers are able to work safely and productively. If your symptoms are beginning to affect your behaviour, ability to work, your performance of work, or the safety of others, you should seek help. Some of the common signs that could indicate you are dealing with a mental health issue include:

- Lack of focus,
- Procrastination,
- Withdrawal,
- Difficulty adapting to changes in the workplace,
- Uncontrollable anger,
- Emotional outbursts,
- Lethargy ,
- Lack of stamina,
- Disengagement,
- Heightened anxiety,
- Extreme and prolonged sadness,
- Difficulty following simple instructions,
- Absenteeism (missing scheduled teleconferences and other meetings),
- Missed deadlines,
- Errors in work, and
- Declining social (distanced) interaction.

There can be stigma associated with mental health and a prevailing misconception that mental illness is a result of personal weakness. This can make it difficult for individuals to seek the support they need to improve their situation. The reality is that mental illness is not a case of "shaking it off" or "mind over matter" and

is something that most individuals have very little control over. Your mental health is your personal and private business and you have a right to privacy. Understandably, disclosing personal information can cause anxiety, fear, and embarrassment but it is important to seek out and receive the support you need. This includes:

- Reaching out to others to share your concerns and seek support,
- Contacting your physician (note that there are options for phone and video consultations), and
- Discussing your condition with your supervisor or manager (or human resources department if you are unable to speak to your manager).

By discussing your condition with your manager, you may be able to work to find a solution that will help improve the situation. In the current circumstances, exploring approaches to address specific stresses

such as adjusting work hours or changing work responsibilities may help. You may also need to request an accommodation that, working in tandem with your manager and your own health care professionals, will help you get better.

Accommodation is the process of finding alternative arrangements to minimize or eliminate any barriers you may be facing. Generally, the right to request accommodation falls under the prohibited ground of disability which means you should not face any negative consequences for disclosing your condition.

The Resources section of this series provides links to several tools (like the Canadian Mental Health Association **Mental Health Meter** and **Bounce Back BC's** websites) that individuals can access. However, if you are concerned about your mental health, it is strongly recommended that you consult a medical professional for guidance.



NEED HELP?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

cmha.ca

416.646.5557



The Team

Supporting our Co-Workers

As a team member, we all have different relationships and interactions with our co-workers. Under the current circumstances, many of us will display different behaviours at work as a result of the various stresses and home situations we are dealing with. As co-workers we may notice some of these different behaviours. Being able to identify signs of mental health issues can help you recognize when your co-worker may be struggling. If one of your teammates is dealing with an issue at work or home, you may find that it affects their behaviour at work.

Identifying signs of mental health issues can be difficult when we are working remotely and have less interaction with many of our co-workers. However, the relationships you have developed with co-workers prior to this crisis can help you identify changes. Things will be different when we work on remote teams, but you should be careful not to dismiss observed changes.

Some of the most significant signs of mental illness include:

- Major changes in personality,
- Feelings of depression,
- Feeling extreme highs or lows,
- Heightened anxiety,
- Avoiding friends and social interactions ,
- Substance abuse,
- Confused thinking,
- Strange ideas or delusions, and
- Talk about suicide

Co-workers may not always share or show these signs in the workplace. Some types of behavior linked to

the signs of mental illness that may show up in a work setting include:

- Chronic tardiness or absences from work commitments such as conference calls,
- Continually missing deadlines,
- Changes in personal appearance (lack of grooming or hygiene),
- Emotional outbursts,
- Complaints of fatigue,
- Consistently low morale,
- Excessive media consumption, and
- Excessive work hours that do not equate to increased productivity.

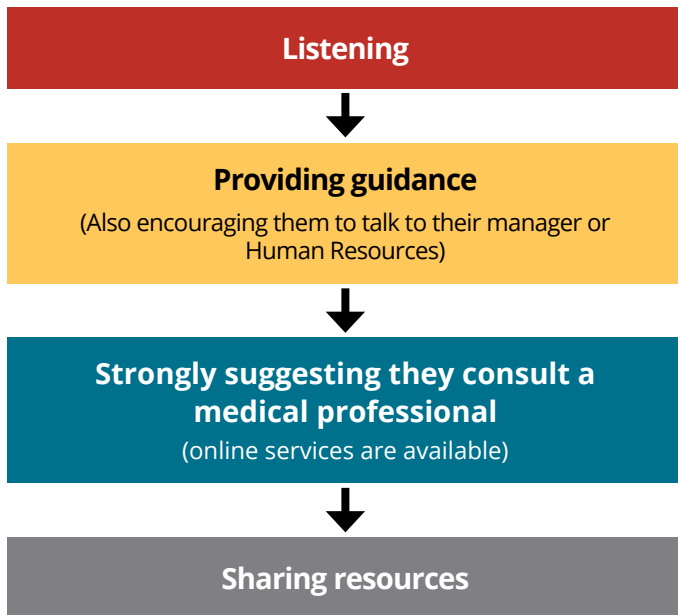
Figuring out how to raise concerns about a co-worker can be difficult. Individuals often hesitate to address incidents and issues in the workplace because they are uncomfortable dealing with sensitive and personal issues, worried they have made a mistake or have misunderstood a situation, or are afraid they will make the situation worse.

In the current situation, many people are doing a good job of checking in with each other at the start of work calls and meetings. Some people us are going to express some concerns and stresses related to our individual situations. Listening to co-workers, both in what they are saying but also in what they are not saying can indicate that they may be struggling.

If you recognize a sign that is concerning and are comfortable, you may choose to reach out to your co-worker. While working remotely, this could be done by setting up a call to talk one on one or sending a short message to see how they are doing.

It is important to not make assumptions and initially keep the discussion about work. Asking a question like “Are you depressed?” would NOT be appropriate as it states an assumption about your co-worker’s mental health that could be offensive or embarrassing, even if true. Instead, start with a gesture of support by asking “How are you doing?”, “Is everything is all right?”, “Is there anything I can do to help?”, or “I’ve noticed you’ve been (coming online a lot later, distancing yourself from the group chats, missing the group check-ins).”

If your co-worker feels comfortable sharing with you, you can support them by:



If you are concerned that the situation is escalating quickly and that your co-worker may harm themselves or others, or if they may be experiencing suicidal thoughts you should immediately contact management, human resources, or the police. In all cases, where a person may harm themselves or others it is important to intervene as soon as possible.

Not everyone will have a close enough relationship with their co-worker or feel comfortable asking their co-worker the types of questions that can reveal the presence of a mental illness. In this case, reach out to your manager or human resources team and share your concerns. They can address the concerns in a private manner and access the necessary resources. Reporting is the right decision.

Why should you take action?

By understanding mental illness and showing compassion, we can create an environment where those that need it can be supported. At present, we are all facing incredible stress and uncertainty. Taking time to acknowledge this and to be aware of how it may be affecting others and ourselves is critical. We’ve heard that we’re all in this together, and this includes mental wellness.

When we can take care of ourselves and each other, providing support where we can and helping people find the resources they need, we build strength and connection in our organizations. This will create preventative and positive cultures that endure beyond any crisis.

Learn more about available resources by visiting the [ACEC-BC Mental Health Resource page](#).