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# **PRIORITIZE MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND**

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## PRIORITIZE MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

For many of us, 2020 has been a year of fast-paced change and uncertainty in planning for the future. The emergence of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) forced us into unfamiliar and unprecedented situations such as business closures and restrictions on public gathering, travel limitations due to border closures, physical distancing requirements and public mandates for face coverings. Additionally, while people are growing a bit weary of all these changes, there is concern for longer term life with coronavirus in circulation and what the “new normal” could look like.

All this combined has caused stress, fear, anxiety and depression across the country. Fear of the virus, social and physical isolation, and other impacts of the pandemic have contributed to over 40% of Americans reporting they have struggled with substance use or mental health issues. Younger adults, racial/ethnic minorities, essential workers and unpaid adult caregivers are experiencing disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use and elevated suicidal ideation – all represented in the workforce.

Additionally, COVID-19 has caused the sharpest economic pullback in modern history and a record-breaking spike in unemployment – associated with increased depression, anxiety, distress and low self-esteem and higher rates of substance misuse, substance use disorder and suicide. Our employees and their families are no exception to these impacts and need our support now, more than ever.

Many Americans spend a significant portion of their lives at work, which means the workplace can play a significant role in supporting employee mental health. This workplace support of mental health brings many benefits such as increased productivity, decreased costs, improved morale and a contribution to the wellbeing of the community at large. Some workplace stressors include role ambiguity, poor leadership and communication, excessive or insufficient workload, technology challenges due to remote working, and conflicting home and work demands. Conflicting home and work demands are particularly relevant at this time. For example, essential workers present in the workplace may struggle with children who are new to distance learning or remote working arrangements that blur the lines between work and personal time.

**However, employers can take action. Consider undertaking some of the following recommendations:**

- Create a culture of psychological safety, where employees can seek and receive the support they need – and feel safe doing so
- Strengthen workplace prevention interventions and increase treatment accessibility
- Adjust and maintain compassionate, flexible and comprehensive HR policies designed to support employee mental health and build resiliency
- Raise workforce awareness of both internal and public resources for support

- Train managers and leaders to recognize signs of an employee needing support, and on how to communicate with employees who have concerns related to mental health
- Engage in public policy discussions related to mental health promotion
- Lead by example – leaders and supervisors should model good coping strategies (e.g., not responding to email when on paid time off) so employees feel supported in doing so themselves

**As individuals, we can also act to promote mental health in ourselves and our families:**

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle with plenty of activity, good nutrition and healthy sleep
- Take time to disconnect from work and enjoy family time or hobbies
- Learn about mental health resources at work and in our communities
- Keep conversations about mental health open and help reduce the stigma

Unfortunately, mental health distress and illness stemming from the pandemic are unlikely to disappear quickly as the country recovers and people regain a sense of normalcy. The mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to manifest in the coming weeks, months and years. Prioritizing employee as well as your own personal mental health and wellbeing is critical for healthy workplaces and communities in the future.



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