Well-Being in the Workplace:

COVID-19, Stress and Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all. People have been experiencing varying degrees of stress, anxiety, fear, grief and loneliness for months. Our lives have additional uncertainty regarding our physical, mental and financial health and well-being. While the sacrifices we are making for our health, families and communities are temporary, it does not make the situation any easier. It is normal, reasonable and understandable for anyone to be experiencing anxiety, depression, addiction, or other mental or behavioral health concerns.

Employers are in a unique position to support workers by:

- Promoting an open and supportive work environment

- Knowing and responding to signs that someone may be struggling

- Sharing resources with all employees and encouraging everyone to use them

- Taking steps to support mental health, including providing reasonable accommodations, when appropriate

support your employees

Open and Supportive Environment

A first step toward supporting employees is to simply and genuinely acknowledge that this has been a difficult time. Highlight that it is understandable for anyone to be struggling. Share information about available resources and supports with everyone, not just an individual you believe may be having a tough time. Consider sending all-staff email messages, mentioning resources and supports during staff meetings and posting information in public areas of the workplace. Frequently let staff know that anyone could be having a difficult time right now and encourage everyone to reach out for help, whether through work or an outside resource.

It can also be helpful to give employees current information and updates about the pandemic and its impact on the company or organization. Be as flexible as possible with remote work, hours, breaks etc. so employees can take care of their personal and mental health needs during the day.

Signs Someone May Need Help

The following behaviors might be signs that someone is struggling:

- Changes in work habits
  - Having lower-than-normal productivity (e.g., working slowly, missing deadlines)
  - Having difficulty concentrating or making decisions
  - Forgetting tasks, procedures or requests
  - Overworking
- Having difficulty with changes in work procedures or routines
- New absenteeism or tardiness
  - Calling in sick frequently
  - Missing meetings
  - Showing up late
- Changes in demeanor
  - Exhibiting excessive nervousness, restlessness or irritability
  - Seeming passive, worried or tense
  - Exhibiting excessive fatigue
- Seeming withdrawn
  - Exhibiting an unwillingness to communicate or retreating from interactions
  - Appearing emotionless or numb

It is not the role of a supervisor, HR department, or employer to diagnose anyone. It is appropriate, however, to discuss changes in work performance. When talking with an employee (whether you initiate the conversation or they do):

- Listen empathetically.
- Reassure them about their experience and their value to the workplace.
- Let them know that you understand they're struggling and you want to help.
- Consider offering constructive feedback and task-focused guidance.
- Offer to provide ongoing support and to regularly check in with them, if they would like.
- Provide information about available supports and resources.

Information about Available Resources

Let all employees know that finding ways to cope with challenges is important for everyone, that support is available and that they are encouraged to reach out.

- Remind workers of supports that are available through your health care plan.
- Share the WEDC and DHS flyer: Support and Resources for Coping with COVID-19 Stress.
- Refer people to your human resources department and/or employee assistance program, if applicable.

Additional Steps to Support Mental Health in the Workplace (from the CDC)
https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/workplace-health/mental-health/

- Make mental health self-assessment tools (https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools) available to all employees.
- Offer free or subsidized clinical screenings for depression from a qualified mental health professional, followed by directed feedback and clinical referral when appropriate.
- Offer health insurance with no or low out-of-pocket costs for depression medications and mental health counseling.
- Provide managers with training to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and depression in team members and encourage them to seek help from qualified mental health professionals.
- Give employees opportunities to participate in decisions about issues that affect job stress.
- Provide reasonable accommodations. Not only will it support your employees; it is also required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Additional Resources for Employers on COVID-19 and Mental Health

- 8 Ways Managers Can Support Employees' Mental Health (https://hbr.org/2020/08/8-ways-managers-can-support-employees-mental-health)
- Help Employees Maintain Positive Mental Health During the COVID-19 Outbreak (https://www.wsps.ca/Information-Resources/Articles/help-your-workers-maintain-positive-mental-health.aspx)
- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health (https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)

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