

COVID-19 AND THE WORLD OF WORK

Preamble

- Work is an activity involving ***mental*** or ***physical*** effort done in order to achieve organisational purpose effectively.
- Employees' mental wellbeing is key in their performance
- Everyone is feeling the strain of having to adjust to this new, uncertain reality in a way that goes beyond job stress
- The impact of COVID-19 has sent shockwaves throughout our organisations, the industry, the nation and globally.
- The sudden adoption of working remotely, combined with schools closing and required online homeschooling options, among others has created additional stress and chaos

Job stress as a result of COVID-19

- COVID-19 has created trying times for workers and their families. The rising uncertainty is increasing stress, anxiety and fear among workers and their families.
- The levels of stress, anxiety, worry and fear are rising among managers, supervisors and workers of every level and in every job
- COVID-19 threatens to exacerbate the underlying mental health conditions of employees and family members.
- COVID-19 creates isolation and separation from the protective aspects of work, i.e. the psychosocial benefits of work. This is happening in many forms, including:
 - Office closings
 - Project shutdowns
 - No group meetings greater than 10 people
 - Smaller staff in the field or in the office
 - Staggered shifts in the office or in the field
 - Meaningful human connections like handshakes have been eliminated

Job stressors amidst COVID-19

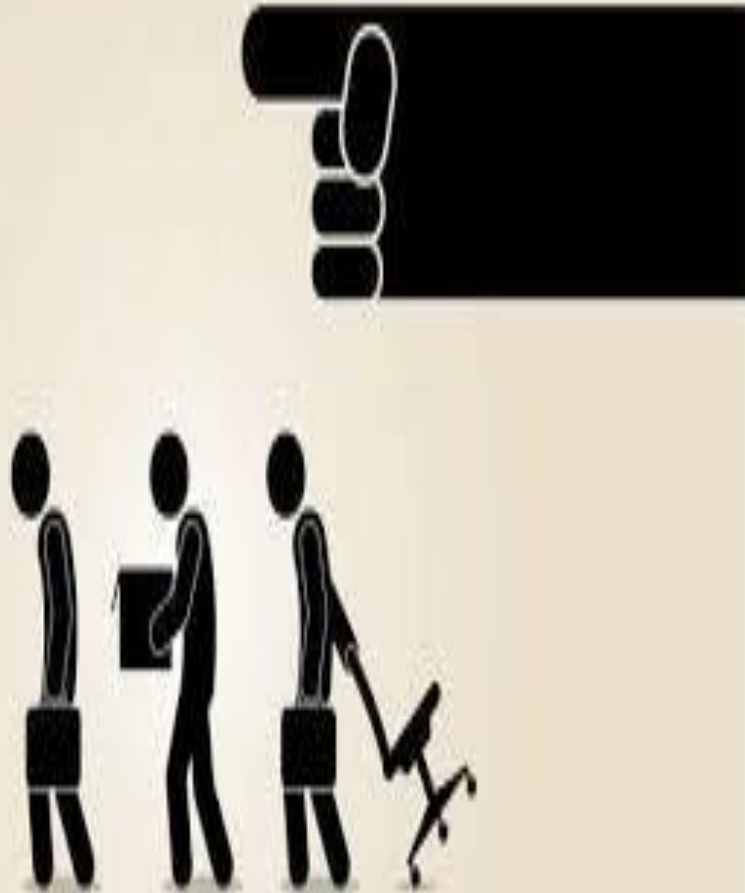
- In the midst of COVID-19 pandemic some of the key factors that can affect employees' mental wellbeing which in turn can have dire influence on their performance include the following:
 - Fear of infection
 - Fear of job loss
 - Working from home
 - Work environment/Work space/ layout
 - Work and family life balance etc.
 - Interrupted earnings (as some companies would have to cut down cost such as wages and salaries to survive)
 - Rising expenses and debt etc.

Fear of infection

- Employees (especially frontline officers) are anxious about contracting the virus, bringing it home to their families, friends or loved ones
- ***Stressors***
 - The fear of coming into contact with an infected person unknowingly during the course of providing services to customers, relating to colleagues, supervisors, commuting and from work, among others
 - Fear of contracting the disease
 - Worry about protecting their family from illness when they come home,
 - Working with the public at a time of high panic and stress, etc.
- ***Suggestions***
 - Ensure employees wash their hands and have access to basic hygiene supplies, like hand sanitizer or soap and warm water.
 - Enforce regular disinfection of high-touch areas
 - Ensure managers are communicating proper behaviour to every employee
 - Provide avenues for employees to practice relaxation techniques



Fear of the Job loss



- Lockdown as a result of COVID-19 has led to the closing of some organisations.
- This will lead to decrease productivity and revenue, yet organisations would still have some fixed costs to settle such as rent, labour etc.
- To survive, organisations would have to put up appropriate strategies to make profit or break even. Many organisations in this effect would have to lay off some employees to be able to achieve this.
- A huge number of employees have been laid off in a number of countries such as the United States
- Having access to such information could arouse the fear of the unknown with regards to local employees' job status during and after this pandemic.
- The outcome is a decrease in local employees' sense of job security which could result in a lot of anxiety and stress related disorders

- ***Stressors***

- Fear of losing job
- An increase sense of job insecurity
- Thoughts about how one could manage in the face of job loss
- Worry about how to face family and friends with the news about their job loss
- Fear of how long one is going to remain unemployed

- ***Suggestions***

- Initiate an open communication with employees
- Be transparent as much as possible providing employees with all necessary information
- Ensure all anxieties, doubts among others are erased by being transparent and by providing any information employees need to know as and when needed
- Where furlough or lay off becomes necessary, do well to openly and honestly communicate to employees

Fear of the Job loss



Working from home

- Normally, working from home offers many benefits, from increased productivity to better work-life balance.
- Working from home as a result of COVID-19 pandemic is not “normal”.
- Many businesses have had to transition practically overnight to a fully remote workforce.
- Everyone has to figure out how to communicate and work together in this new arrangement.
- These sudden transitions comes with some associated stressors that could affect the wellbeing of employees



Working from home

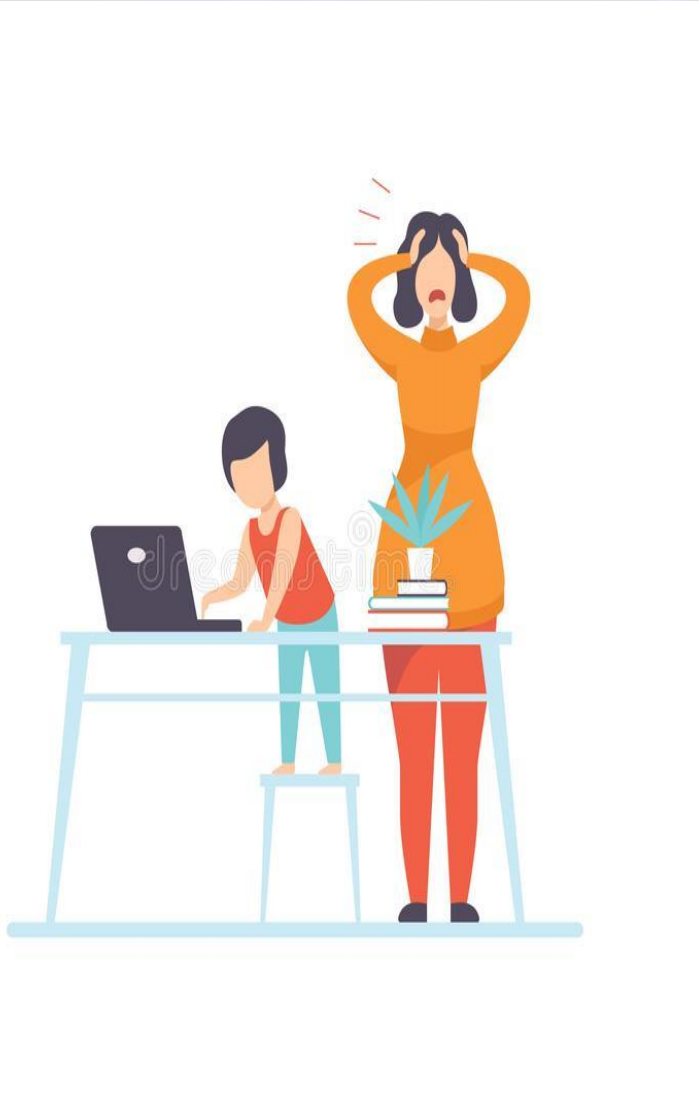
• *Stressors*

- Employees staying with their spouses, children, and or family members would have to adopt strategies to balance their resources to meet job demands
- Many employees are working from home with spouses, partners, roommates, or children and other family members in the same space
- Inadequate resources such as internet access etc. could be frustrating
- Managing distractions from family especially children and spouses
- Managing role infusion: roles to children, spouse and work
- Where employees would have to work from a company server from home, it could be stressful when its difficult to get access or quick access to needed information to work with.



How can organisations overcome the stresses that results from remote work?

• *Employees*

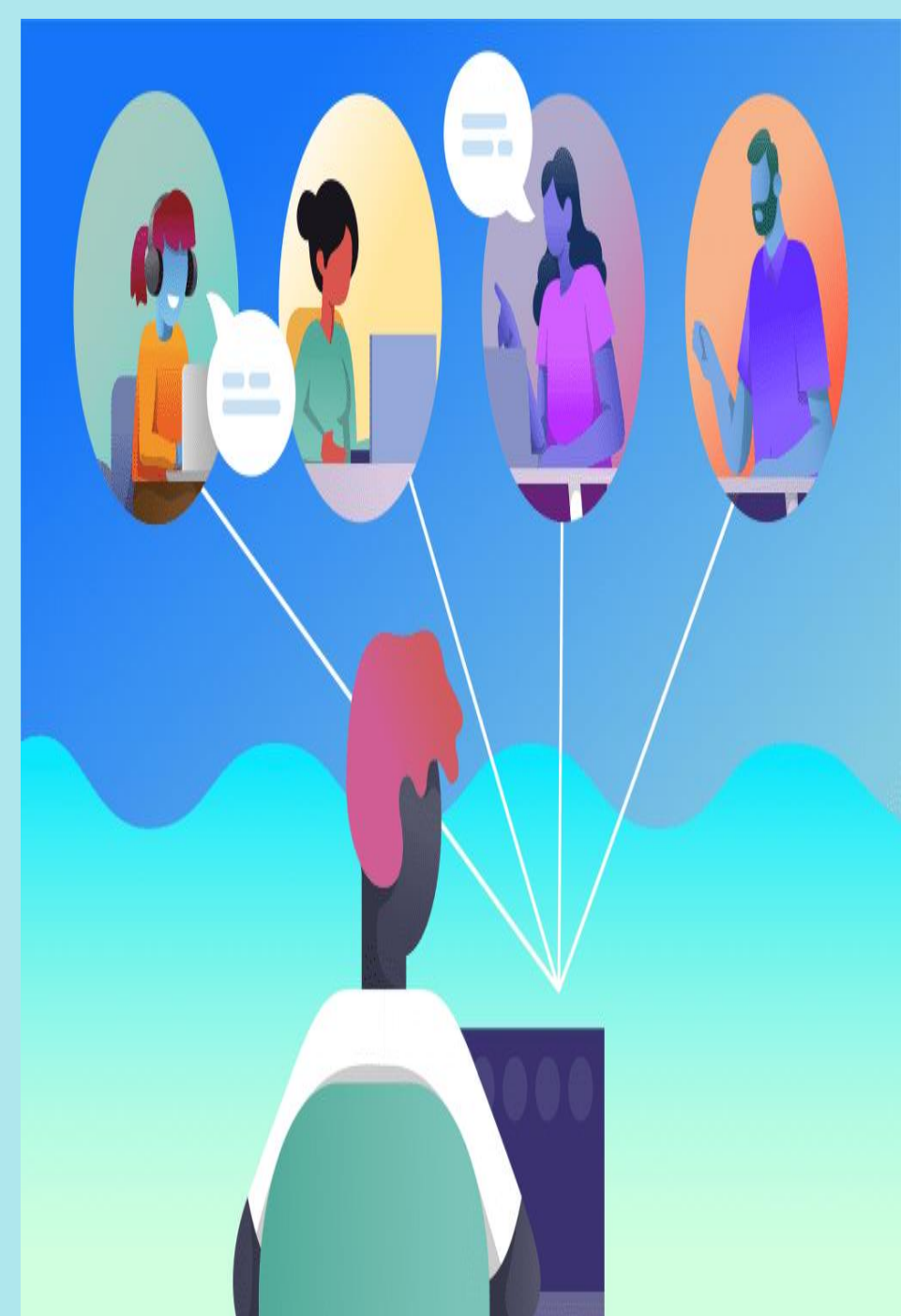


- Develop a mind set of work at home
- Accept that this is an uncertain and temporary situation that has necessitated the need to work from home
- Set aside a place in your house/room where you can isolate yourself to work
- Avoid other physical health related issues. For instance use dining furniture or learning furniture(if available) rather than sofa or bed
- Communicate with your organisation about the key resources you will need to help accomplish your task from home e.g. mifi or any other internet devices, stationeries etc.
- Communicate flexible work hours with your line manager or supervisor
- Communicate with family members about the need to isolate yourself for some specific hours to meet work demands
- Continuously keep in touch with team members.
- Team members can consistently have virtual meetings to encourage and support each other towards achieving their goals in the midst of the pandemic
- Ensure to document any work related communication (in the form of instructions to execute some specific tasks among others) that goes on between you and your line managers or supervisors and send copies to them

How can organisations overcome the stresses that results from remote work?

• *Employers*

- Set up organizational policies on how staff are to work from home
- Provide available resources for staff to be able to work effectively and comfortably at home
- Provide platforms where employees could seek for counsel or help from the organisation
- Encourage flexible work hours whiles employees are working from home
- Issue clear directives about respecting when employees are on or off their time scheduled for work
- Educate managers on best practices for dealing with remote employees, so they are better able to mentor and support their teams to:
 - more generally, to keep remote employees engaged and emotionally healthy,
 - communicate standards for staying in touch during the workday,
 - retaining or rebuilding team culture,
 - keeping long-term objectives rather than hourly output in mind



Stress Reduction Strategies

- A few additional practical strategies to help employees deal with the mounting pressures of COVID-19 include:
 - Offer employees resources via email on stress management, self-care tips and behavioural health resources.
 - Provide information to your employees on any online health services the organisation may have as part of its employee benefits programme.
 - This will provide employees with peace of mind for communicating with primary care providers while not wanting to risk being exposed to COVID-19 in clinic waiting rooms and while people are being instructed to not visit emergency rooms unless they are experiencing life-threatening symptoms.
 - Hold toolbox talks on stressors and stress management and coping, emotional intelligence, psychological safety and other self-care practices.



Tips for managing stress from COVID-19

- Regularly ask your workers how they are doing and if there is anything stressing them
- Be well informed with information from official sources, regularly communicate with workers and share relevant information as it comes to hand
- Consult your workers on any risks to their psychological health and how these can be managed
- Provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns and to find workplace information in a central place
- Inform workers about their entitlements if they become unfit for work or have caring responsibilities
- Proactively support workers who you identify may be more at risk of workplace psychological injury (e.g. frontline workers or those working from home)
- Refer workers to appropriate channels to support workplace mental health and wellbeing, such as employee assistance programs.

Tips for managing stress from COVID-19

- Alleviate employees concern about COVID 19
- Remote work with critical resources to keep you compliant while improving the mental health of your employees
- Communicate to your employees about options available for them and let them know that they do have options.
- Make sure your employees know who to contact when they have questions about benefits, time-off policies, working from home, or other assistance programmes you offer. This will help in reducing overall workplace anxiety and COVID-19-related job stress.
- Organisation's COVID-19 stress management plan might need to include some sort of information campaign using email, newsletters, an internal web page, or company announcement dedicated to answering COVID-19 related questions.
- Organisation's COVID-19 stress management plan need to include resources on employee self-care.
- Remind your employees to take advantage of their health care benefits, particularly with regards to mental health.
- If you have an employee Assistant Programme (EAP), make sure everyone knows how to access it

Tips for managing stress from COVID-19

- In communications with employees and business partners, it is advisable to use reassuring language that demonstrates empathy and concern, such as:
 - We care about you and your families.
 - We are continuing to monitor the situation closely, and we will keep everyone informed of new developments and decisions.
 - We are in this together, and we are working hard to lessen the impacts.
 - We are committed to communicating regularly to keep everyone updated.
 - Take time for self-care practices for yourself and for your family.
 - We have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that can be helpful for taking care of you and your families. We encourage you to use this free and confidential service.

NOTE



During a crisis, leaders need to be communicating with empathy and compassion.

When everything is chaotic, people seek comfort and familiarity.

Be sure to address some of their most common questions and fears right now

References

- Marie-Reine P. (April 10, 2020). *Managing Workplace Stress During COVID-19*. Retrieved from <https://www.bamboohr.com/blog/managing-workplace-stress/>
- Beyer C. (April, 2020). *How to Help Your Employees Cope with the Stress of COVID-19: Communication strategies to promote mental well-being in your workforce during & after the coronavirus pandemic*. Retrieved from <https://www.constructionbusinessowner.com>