

Tips for Employers about Supporting Employees During the Stress of COVID-19

The following tips came out of a [Whatcom COVID-19 Employer Support Task Force](#) Forum on July 24, 2020 called “How do we support employees during the stress of COVID-19?” This was the third in a series of forums created to support businesses and organizations in Whatcom County. Mental health professionals (Sterling Chick and Karen King), and human resource specialists (Pamela Wheeler, Debby Cwalina, and Linda Grant) described psychological impacts of the pandemic, how it may impact people’s work, and how employers can be supportive. For a recording of this forum and to learn about upcoming forums, visit whatcomtogether.org/events.

There have been enough disasters that patterns in people’s responses have been identified, as in this diagram. The disaster model is not an exact fit for the COVID-19 pandemic however. It may be more accurate to think of it as a siege (a prolonged attack by an unseen enemy, and we don’t know how or when it will end). “COVID fatigue” is inevitable as it is hard to maintain one’s defenses under siege for a long time.

Some signs of stress that may manifest in the workplace

include: Irritability, tardiness, tiredness, irregular attendance, drinking/smoking, isolating, increased errors, decreased productivity, stronger emotional reactions to situations, and angry outbursts.

Timely, clear communication with employees reduces stress:

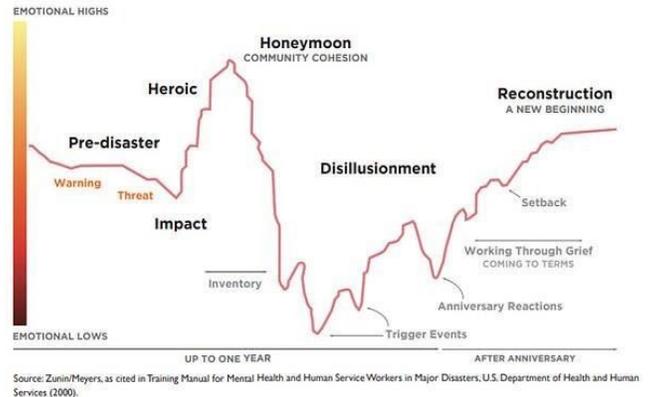
- Communicate frequently, providing information about new practices, policies, and resources that are available for workers.
- Try to stay ahead of changes that are coming. Anticipate employees’ questions regarding their jobs and how new safety requirements will impact them. Employers’ preparedness helps employees feel confident and reduces their stress.
- Summarize federal, state, and local guidance for employees in clear, straightforward language.
- Create short topical emails with information tailored to the needs of specific departments or teams.
- Include volunteers in regular communications to help maintain connection with them and reduce their feelings of isolation.

Provide ways for employees to address mental health issues

The question is not if employees will have mental health problems, it is when.
- Karen King

- Employers are in the position of supporting employees while going through this stressful experience themselves. Acknowledge that we are all in this together. Authenticity from leaders is important. It is OK to show your vulnerability.
- Have a written plan in place for managing mental health issues at work.
- Schedule regular supervision meetings. Train supervisors to recognize stress reactions.
- Have ways for employees to communicate if they are stressed or having difficulties. Make sure they know it is safe to talk about it. Respond promptly to all employee communications.
- When talking to employees, do not use diagnostic words like anxiety and depression. Use work-related terms, focusing on their performance.
- Encourage employees to take care of themselves both mentally and physically.
- Assist employees in using new federal programs to take additional health leave for themselves, or childcare.
- Isolation can be emotionally difficult for people working remotely who don’t have the usual workplace interactions. Create enjoyable ways to break up the day with playful connections such as:
 - o Short “cubicle talks” (brief daily conversations)
 - o Online meditation
 - o “Walk ‘n talks” via FaceTime or phone
 - o Virtual lunch gatherings
 - o “Water cooler” chats (post bad jokes, favorite music, funny images and videos)
 - o Staff recognition events

Phases of Disaster



Guide employees to a mental health professional, don't BE their mental health professional.
-Linda Grant