



Centre of Expertise on
MENTAL HEALTH
in the Workplace



COVID-19 and mental health

Frequently asked questions for managers

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What are some pandemic-related stressors that my employees may be experiencing?

The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has identified a number of reactions individuals may have to social distancing and isolation during an infectious disease outbreak, along with related stressors.

- Anxiety, worry, or fear related to:
 - Their own health status
 - The health status of others
 - The resentment that their friends and family may feel if they need to go into quarantine as a result of contact with them
 - The experience of monitoring themselves, or being monitored by others for signs and symptoms of the disease
 - Time taken off from work and the potential loss of income and job security
 - The challenges of securing things they need, such as groceries and personal care items
- Concern about being able to effectively care for children or others in their care
- Uncertainty or frustration about how long they will need to remain in this situation, and uncertainty about the future
- Loneliness associated with feeling cut off from the world and from loved ones
- Anger if they think they were exposed to the disease because of others' negligence
- Boredom and frustration because they may not be able to work or engage in regular day-to-day activities
- Uncertainty or ambivalence about the situation
- A desire to use alcohol or drugs to cope
- Symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder

Advice for addressing many of these situations is provided in this document.

Reference

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Tips For Social Distancing, Quarantine and Isolation During An Infectious Disease Outbreak*. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>

What can I say to reassure my team if they are concerned about the pandemic?

You and your employees may be reacting in different ways to various stressors related to the pandemic. Reassure your employees by increasing autonomy, connectedness and certainty wherever you can, both in one-on-one and group settings. Try using statements such as:

- I don't expect us to deliver as quickly or as much as usual under these circumstances. Right now, I expect...
- If you have any questions or concerns, or if there's anything affecting your well-being at work, I'm here to support you.
- I know you might be feeling a range of emotions right now. Myself, I've been feeling....If you want to talk, I'm available.
- Come and talk to me if you think you may need flexible work arrangements or leave from work for a reason related to the pandemic. We can discuss options regardless of your employment status.
- I know a lot of things are uncertain right now. What hasn't changed is...
- Here are some ways we can stay connected...

- If you are looking for information on how to protect yourself or your loved ones, the Government of Canada is providing up-to-date, reliable advice and information on the COVID-19 pandemic, which you can access on [Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca) from any device.
- I am learning a lot through these unusual circumstances. For example...
- Thank you for....great work on...etc.

For guidance on leave, telework and other people management-related subjects during the pandemic, contact your organization's human resources team or visit the webpage [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#).

You may also want to engage your staff in open group discussions on how you can support them, how you can all support each other and how and on what you can continue to work under these new circumstances. This will provide employees with the opportunity to ask questions, express concerns and exercise influence over outcomes.

What are signs and symptoms that an employee may be experiencing a mental health issue?

At any given time, we may have positive mental health or varying degrees of poor mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic may trigger or worsen stress or other mental health issues or even a mental health crisis amongst your employees.

If you observe a pattern of change in an employee's performance or behavior, this may be a sign that they are experiencing a mental health issue. It may be harder to notice whether your employees are struggling during the pandemic; you may have less contact than usual with employees due to social distancing measures, and consequences of working in a pandemic situation may effect changes that could otherwise have been a symptom of a mental health issue, such as reduced performance. It is imperative that you check in regularly with each of your employees – ideally, on a daily basis – to see how they are doing and if they need any support from you.

According to [Morneau Shepell](#), common signs and symptoms in the workplace can include:

- missed deadlines
- reduced productivity
- reduced quality of work
- absent or late more frequently
- relationship issues or conflicts with co-workers
- withdrawal or reduced participation
- anxiety, fearfulness or loss of confidence

Download the Mental Health Commission of Canada's [Road to Mental Readiness poster](#) (PDF) for general information on signs and indicators, and actions to take at each phase of the mental health continuum.

How can I support my employee if they are experiencing a mental health crisis (e.g. panic attack, suicidal behavior) during the pandemic?

In extreme cases, employees may experience mental health crises, such as substance overdoses, panic attacks or suicidal behavior. If you think one of these situations is underway:

- **Contact emergency services.** Call 911 and/or your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#), if they provide immediate crisis support;

- **Communicate internally and seek advice.** Alert your organization's [occupational health and safety coordinator](#) and contact the team in your organization that is responsible for disability management or human resources

How can I support my employee if they are experiencing a mental health issue related to the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic may trigger or worsen mental health issues amongst your employees due to a variety of stressors.

If you notice an employee exhibiting signs of a mental health issue and want to approach them, use the following steps adapted from Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg's work on nonviolent communication:

1. **State your observations.** e.g. Last week, you missed our daily phone calls 3 times.
2. **State the impact.** e.g. This has a negative impact on our work. I also feel concerned, because this is unlike you.
3. **State your needs.** e.g. I need to know if something is affecting your ability to perform your duties, and I want to make sure you feel safe and healthy in the workplace.
4. **Make a respectful request.** e.g. Can discuss this?

Remember, an employee does not have to provide you any details about their health situation. If the employee wants to discuss the performance issues but not their well-being, that's fine; respect their wishes not to discuss non work-related things. Explain that you are available to talk in the future and encourage them to talk to someone else they trust instead. You could also provide information that the person can take away and review later. If there are related performance issues that the employee does not want to discuss, you may want to contact the team in your organization that is responsible for labour relations for advice.

If an employee chooses to disclose to you that they are experiencing a mental health issue, you should move on to the ALGEE model from Mental Health First Aid Canada, below. As a manager, you may also be able to call your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#) for advice on how to approach or support your employee.

ALGEE Model

- **Assess** the risk of suicide and/or harm. If you think there is a crisis, call 911. Your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#) may also provide immediate crisis support. You should also alert your organization's security team and [occupational health and safety coordinator](#).
- **Listen non-judgmentally.** If there is no immediate risk of harm, listen non-judgmentally to help the person feel comfortable and speak freely.
- **Give reassurance.** Let them know you are concerned and that you are there support them. You may want to discuss flexible work arrangements, leave or other measures. You should also reassure them that their privacy will be respected. For guidance on leave, telework and people management-related subjects during the pandemic, contact your organization's human resources team or visit the webpage [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#).
- **Encourage professional support.** Examples of professional support includes your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#), employee's physician or [Hope for Wellness Line](#) (for Indigenous employees).
- **Encourage other supports.** Options include family, friends, support groups, colleagues or community resources such as the closest [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) branch or [Friendship Centre](#) (for Indigenous employees).

If the support the employee needs will have an impact on the team (e.g. absence, change in working hours), you'll need to support the team too. You should discuss with the employee what they want to share with the team and how they want this to take place – for example, whether they would like to share or would prefer you to. Depending on the circumstances, you may also wish to consult your organization's human resources team for guidance on duty to accommodate, disability management and/or return-to-work.

References

- Environment and Climate Change Canada. (n.d.). *Mental Health Crisis Support Guide for Managers*.
- Mental Health Commission of Canada. (n.d.). *Providing Mental Health First Aid to an Employee: A Guide for Managers*. Retrieved from Mental health First Aid Canada: <https://www.mhfa.ca/en/workplace-resources>
- Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (3rd Edition ed.). Encinitas: PuddleDancer Press.

What do I do if I suspect that an employee is experiencing domestic violence during the pandemic?

Federally regulated workplaces, [including government departments and separate agencies](#), are responsible for protecting and preventing against violence in the workplace, including domestic violence. Many employees of federal departments and separate agencies are spending more time in their homes - and in many cases, working from their homes – as a result of public health advice to reduce the spread of COVID-19, and thus those were already experiencing or at risk of experiencing domestic violence are now likely at greater risk.

According to the [Government of Canada](#), “any person suffering abuse from a family member or intimate partner is experiencing domestic violence. It is a behavioural pattern of abuse by an intimate partner or a family member to gain power or control.” Similar terms include family violence, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and violence against women. Domestic violence can include:

- stalking
- verbal abuse
- use of property, children or pets to threaten and intimidate
- physical violence, sexual, emotional and psychological intimidation
- use of electronic devices to harass and control (technology-facilitated abuse), or
- economic abuse such as:
 - withholding or stealing money; or
 - stopping a partner from reporting to work.

Employees who are experiencing situations of domestic or intimate partner violence may be at increased risk if they are teleworking. It may be harder to notice signs of domestic or intimate partner violence during the pandemic; you may have less contact than usual with employees due to social distancing measures, and consequences of working in a pandemic situation may result in changes that could otherwise have been a sign of domestic violence, such as reduced performance.

Regardless, some signs that domestic violence may be taking place include an employee:

- being sad, lonely, withdrawn; and/or
- missing work more often than usual;
- making excuses for the perpetrator's behavior;

- acting nervous when speaking in the perpetrator’s presence; and/or
- having trouble focusing on tasks, or being disengaged from work.

For additional signs and further information, see [Domestic violence in the workplace](#) and [Domestic violence in the workplace – for departments and separate agencies](#) on [Canada.ca](#).

If you suspect that an employee may be the victim of domestic or intimate partner violence, or if an employee has disclosed to you that this is the case:

- In cases where there is an immediate risk of harm: **contact emergency services** such as 911.
- **Seek advice.** Alert your organization’s [occupational health and safety coordinator](#) as soon as possible to inform them and to seek advice on next steps and on how to support your employee. Your employee may be eligible for [family violence leave](#).
- **Listen and empathize.** Listen non-judgmentally, giving your employee the time and space they need to feel understood.
- **Provide links to support.** Managers should ensure that employees are aware of how to contact your organization’s Employee Assistance Program. Additional support services can be identified through the below resources:
 - [Affected by gender-based violence? support services list](#) (Women and Gender Equality Canada)
 - [Victim Services Directory](#) (Justice Canada)
 - [Family Violence Laws](#) (Justice Canada)

How can I support my team if one of my employees is experiencing a mental health issue or crisis related to the pandemic?

If the support you provide to an employee experiencing a mental health issue or mental health crisis will have an impact on the team’s workload or functioning, you will need to manage the mental health of your team, too.

- **Inform the team.** Ensure that other employees on the team are informed of the employee’s flexible work or leave arrangements, either by yourself or by the employee, while also ensuring the employee’s privacy.
- **Show compassion.** If you or the employee experiencing a mental health issue have Allow employees the chance to express their concerns about the person’s well-being, while also ensuring the employee’s privacy and instructing others to ensure it as well.
- **Discuss the way forward in an open, flexible and adaptable way.** Allow employees the chance to express concerns or ask questions about any workload issues that an employee’s leave or flexible work arrangements may create. Reassure your employees as best you can, and work with the team to find solutions to any issues.

How can I support my employee’s mental health if they are teleworking due to the pandemic?

For guidance on telework and other people management-related subjects during the pandemic, contact your organization’s human resources team or visit the webpage [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#).

Employees may experience negative impacts on their mental health as a result of teleworking, especially for long periods of time. To mitigate any risks to mental health, follow the below guidelines.

- **Check in.** with teleworkers at least once a day, and via phone or video call at least once a week. During these check-ins, remind your employees that you are there to support them, and invite them to discuss with you anything that is negatively affecting their well-being at work.
- **Be alert.** It's important to be aware of any signs and symptoms of mental health issues – despite your encouragement, employees may not feel comfortable asking for support for their mental health.
- **Mitigate hazards.** Encourage all remote workers to take steps to mitigate mental health-related hazards associated with telework, e.g. loneliness, isolation, increased difficulty in maintaining work-life balance, etc. For advice, consult:
 - [Mental health tips for working from home](#) (Canada.ca)
 - [Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Centre for Mental Health and Addictions)

How can I support my employee's mental health during the pandemic if they are on leave?

You may have decided to grant your employees leave for various reasons during the pandemic, either related to the pandemic or otherwise. For guidance on leave related to the pandemic, contact your organization's human resources team or consult the [Information for Government of Canada Employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#) webpage

Maintaining appropriate contact with your employees while they are on leave can positively influence their mental health. This contact will help employees to remain connected to the workplace, and will provide you the opportunity to support or assist them. Below are some general guidelines.

- **Discuss contact.** As soon as possible, discuss with the employee how, and how often, they would like you to be in touch.
- **Communicate care, compassion and support.** For example:
 - let the employee know that you and the team are thinking of them;
 - reassure them that the team is doing fine, without discussing details of the work;
 - remind them that you are there to support them;
 - ensure that the employee is aware of resources for information and support, such as guidance on [protecting one's mental health](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic, [Employee Assistance Program](#), [the Disability Management: Employee Wellness Resource](#) handbook, or other resources relevant to the leave circumstances.
 - share non-work-related news about yourself and the team (e.g. births, engagements, etc.).
- **Plan for return-to-work.** Contact the team in your organization responsible for handling labour relations and/or, if applicable, disability management.

For additional advice, contact the team in your organization responsible for labour relations. If the employee is on leave for reasons related to illness, injury or disability, you may also wish to consult:

- [Disability management in the federal public service](#) (Canada.ca)
- [Disability Management, Accommodations and Accessibility Community of Practice](#) (GCconnex)

How can I support my employee's mental health if they have family-related responsibilities related to the pandemic?

Employees may come to you feeling anxious or stressed about family-related responsibilities that have arisen or changed because of the pandemic, such as childcare, eldercare or caring for a loved one who has contracted COVID-19.

In these cases, reassure the employee that you care about their well-being and are there to support them, and then invite them to discuss solutions with you. Solutions could involve, for example, flexible work arrangements or leave. For guidance on leave during the pandemic, contact your organization's human resources team or the [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#) webpage.

Other parts of this document offer guidance on supporting the mental health of employees who are teleworking or who are on leave.

How can I support my employees if they are experiencing increased work demands due to the pandemic?

Some teams may be facing increased work demands, which may trigger or worsen mental health issues amongst employees.

To mitigate:

- **Be alert.** Monitor your staff for signs and symptoms of mental health issues in your employees and respond to any issues.
- **Encourage care.** Strongly encourage your employees to take critical self-care steps including drinking water, sleeping, eating and taking breaks and lead by example in doing so.
- **Involve employees.** Ask for your employees' questions, concerns and suggestions regarding work demands, and let these influence your decision-making to the greatest possible extent.
- **Assess demands.** Monitor what each employee is tasked with to ensure that demands don't exceed their resources.
- **Relieve pressure.** Find ways to take pressure off yourself and the team, e.g. identifying and pausing on what can be put on hold, distributing long hours or intense taskings equitably, etc.
- **Seek assistance.** Consider contacting [Specialized Organizational Services](#) (SOS) for expert assistance in helping your employees manage their health and wellness during this period of high intensity work. SOS is a part of Health Canada and their services are available on a cost-recovery basis.

How can I support my team's mental health if there is perceived inequity on the team as a result of pandemic-related decisions?

During the pandemic, there may be situations where business decisions will be perceived by some employees as unfair (e.g. if some are able to telework and some aren't, if some provide critical services and some don't, etc.). In these cases, you should make sure to proactively discuss the situation with your team to (re)establish a sense of fairness and connectedness, address any questions or concerns and collaboratively explore solutions to any problems. Some general guidelines for this discussion include:

- making the discussion as close to an in-person discussion as you can, using video and/or the phone if possible.
- reminding your employees that decisions are based on job descriptions and operational requirements.
- making clear any expectations you have of employees regarding any measures put in place;
- reassuring your employees that you care about them and are there to support them.
- allowing employees the opportunity to raise any concerns or ask questions.
- involving your team in finding solutions.

Depending on the situation, you may wish to seek advice from [informal conflict management services](#) or the team in your organization that is responsible for labour relations.

How can I support my employee's mental health if they are in isolation during the pandemic?

The Government of Canada has [provided guidance](#) asking Canadians to self-isolate if they have a history of possible exposure to the virus or to isolate if they have been diagnosed with COVID-19.

According to the [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#) (CAMH), people may experience a wide range of feelings in response to isolation, such as fear, anger, sadness, irritability, guilt, confusion or even relief.

How you support your employee's mental health while they are in isolation will depend on several circumstances. Refer to other areas of this document if:

- your employee is on leave while in isolation;
- your employee is teleworking while in isolation;
- you think your employee may be experiencing a mental health issue while in isolation;
- you think your employee may be experiencing a mental health crisis while in isolation.

Below are some general guidelines you can use to support employees in isolation, adapted from CAMH. Managers should encourage their employees to:

- stick to a schedule and to keep as busy as they're able, from work or chores to things they normally love to do, such as reading, watching TV shows, puzzles or other hobbies;
- think of ways to stay connected to other people, such as videoconferencing, phone or text;
- take steps to care for themselves through, for example, drinking lots of water or finding ways to be physically active in their home; and
- ask for support if they need it, and ensure that they have someone that they can rely on for help obtaining things like groceries, hygiene products and toiletries.

How can I support my employee's mental health if they are diagnosed with COVID-19?

If one of your employees is diagnosed with COVID-19:

- **Demonstrate care.** Tell the employee that you care about their well-being.
- **Ask them to follow public health advice.** Ask the employee not to come into their designated workplace until their condition is resolved, and to follow the advice of their local [public health authority](#).
- **Offer support.** Ask your employee how you can support them. They may require leave or, if they have mild symptoms, they may want to telework. For guidance on leave, telework and people management-related subjects during the pandemic, contact your organization's human resources team or visit the webpage [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#).

How can I support the mental health of my team if one of my employees is diagnosed with COVID-19?

You and your team may feel stress or anxiety if they were recently in contact with this employee. If your employee has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and they were recently in close contact with yourself or your other members of your team or workplace, inform your organization's [occupational health and safety coordinator](#) and call your local [public health authority](#) for guidance.

If the team member has **not** been in close contact with yourself or other members of the team:

- **Inform the team.** Ensure that other employees on the team are informed of the employee's flexible work or leave arrangements, either by yourself or by the employee, while also ensuring the employee's privacy.

- **Show compassion.** Allow employees the chance to express their concerns about the person's well-being, while also ensuring the employee's privacy and instructing others to ensure it as well.
- **Discuss the way forward in an open, flexible and adaptable way.** Allow employees the chance to express concerns or ask questions about any workload issues that an employee's leave or flexible work arrangements may create. Reassure your employees as best you can, and work with the team to find solutions to any issues.

How can I support my team if an employee passes away as a result of contracting COVID-19?

An employee passing away as a result of COVID-19, is a [potentially psychologically traumatic event](#) for you and your team. If this type of situation arises, the following steps can help you manage the situation.

- **Contact human resources as soon as possible,** to inform them and to seek advice. You should also inform your own supervisor.
- **Attend to your needs.** If you feel stressed or distressed, take steps to care for yourself, such as calling your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#) or leaning into your personal support network (friends, family etc.).
- **Attend to the needs of your staff and coworkers.**
 - **Share information.** You need to inform your staff. Your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#) may be able to advise you on how to share this news.
 - **Assess the need for onsite critical incident response services.** The [Employee Assistance Program](#) in your Department may provide trauma counselling as part of your agreement. [Specialized Organizational Services](#), a unit of Health Canada, can offer such services on a cost-recovery basis.
 - **Encourage employees to seek additional support.** Examples of supports include your organization's [Employee Assistance Program](#) or their personal support networks.
 - **Offer compassion and flexibility.** Let your staff know that you recognize that this is a difficult time, and that you're prepared to grant any applicable leave or flexible working arrangement available through relevant collective agreements. For guidance on leave, telework and people management-related subjects during the pandemic, contact your organization's human resources team or visit the webpage [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#). You should offer staff time to attend any services that the employee's next of kin has made known.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2011, September). *Coping with the death of a co-worker*. Retrieved from American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/coworker>
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