

Remote Work Mental Health Strategies For Your Staff



Mental health is important for everyone, but because remote workers are often isolated, it becomes even more crucial to pay attention to how workers are feeling.

When you add the recent issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, it's no surprise that 80% of workers have reported higher levels of stress and anxiety.

Who's at Risk?

Staff is most at risk if they have a history of mental illness or an existing condition.

Due to the sudden change in circumstances, you may see many conditions worsen by creating treatment disruptions and increasing feelings of anxiety and isolation.

Everyone is at an increased risk because the pandemic is causing all of us to experience restrictions in movement as well as a lack of personal control.

This leads to confusion, feelings of helplessness, and incompetence.

As the situation continues, many remote workers may begin to feel the effects of burnout.

Signs and Symptoms to Watch For

Advise your staff that the best way to protect themselves from the negative effects of anxiety, fear, and stress, is to pay close attention to any symptoms that show up and take action to address them.

All of us will experience one or more of these symptoms to a certain extent but the issue becomes more serious when they are extreme or felt every day over a period of time.

- **Difficulty concentrating:** It's possible this comes from a combination of excessive worry, restlessness, and fatigue, but chronic stress and anxiety may disrupt your ability to concentrate on tasks. Anxiety may also affect your short-term memory.
- **Sleep issues:** It's natural to go through some adjustments and variations in a sleep schedule as a result of changing the patterns of the day. However, if you are consistently taking longer to get to sleep, sleeping too late, or waking up in the middle of the night and not able to go back to sleep, there may be an underlying issue.
- **Excessive worry:** In the current climate, it may be hard to decide exactly what excessive worrying is, but if you find yourself continuously worrying and have difficulty controlling those worries, it's an indication of a deeper issue.
- **Physical symptoms:** People struggling with chronic stress and anxiety frequently feel tired. They may also experience headaches, intestinal issues, and stomach aches. Muscles also frequently feel tense.
- **Restlessness and agitation:** Feeling agitated and restless can be warning signs of burnout, Stress, and anxiety
- **Reduced productivity and job satisfaction:** Chronic anxiety, stress, and burnout often lead to feelings of frustration about work. Negative feelings about the workplace environment, fellow employees, and managers combined with concentration issues that can lead to significant productivity losses.

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isolated, it becomes even more crucial to pay attention to how workers are feeling.

How You Can Help Your Staff

As the employer, manager, or supervisor, you've got the added responsibility of ensuring your employees are mentally healthy and coping as well as possible.

The aforementioned study noted that 90% of employers need to take more action to address the challenges faced as a result of this coronavirus. 85% of respondents said they wanted small, actionable advice about how to thrive in this situation.

Fortunately, there are things you can do to help your employees stay as happy and healthy as possible while working remotely - either as part of their regular job or as a result of quarantine.

Address Your Mental Health Issues First

It's important to help yourself first because you won't be able to pour from an empty cup.

Create a realistic schedule with plenty of breaks and do what you can to stay positive.

Model the behavior you want to see from your staff.

Keep your communication channels open, encourage positive thoughts, and monitor for signs of anxiety and depression among your team.

Encourage Regular Collaboration

Check-in with your employees often. Whether that is through one-on-one phone calls and team video calls, emails, or text messages, reaching out shows that you have your employees' best interest in mind.

Facilitate connections between your staff members by creating a group channel in messaging applications such as Slack.

Encourage them to use the channel for that informal water-cooler conversation that they would have in the office. This will make it easier to maintain social connections.

Let them know that if they experience feelings of isolation, they can reach out to that channel at any time.

Keep an Eye on Work Hours and Breaks

It's harder to clearly delineate between work and home when you are working at home.

Take steps to ensure your employees are taking breaks as needed and not working too much.

Make sure that projects and deadlines are assigned realistically to avoid overworked. Your employees are stressed as it is so assigning them a heavy workload may contribute to burnout and anxiety.

Provide Access to Mental Health Resources

Put together a list of mental health resources and information to provide to your staff members. If counseling services are available as part of their benefits package, make sure they know how to use it.

If your team doesn't have access to this type of benefit through work, research, and consider subsidizing access to professional mental health care.

Many reputable telepsychiatry companies are offering it discounted and free services to people who are dealing with issues as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the least, make sure your team knows about:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, (800) 273-8255, or dial 911
- Crisis Text Line: Text 741741
- American Psychiatric Association
- American Psychological Association
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- Center for Workplace Mental Health
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- YoungMinds Crisis Messenger (UK): Text YM to 85258.
- Samaritans (UK)

Promote Schedule Flexibility

Following a schedule without being overly detailed can do wonders to make your staff feel in control. Allow them to create a daily routine that works for them, choosing the hours they'd prefer to work.

Encourage them to include things like wakeup and bedtime, meal times, and breaks in the schedule around their desired work times.

Provide an Incentive for Physical and Mental Wellness

While you may not be able to include a gym membership in your employee benefits, and most gym facilities are currently closed, there are still things you can do to encourage your staff to remain physically active and healthy.

Making an effort to maintain physical health is an important part of mental health.

For instance, the Nike Training Club is currently offering free subscriptions to people.

Tell your team about it, and hold a contest to get everyone involved.

For instance, the people who record a workout in the app at least three times a week are entered to win some sort of prize - like a gift card to their favorite online store.

Make a Slack channel for people to use specifically for cheering people on.

Consider investing in a Headspace or Calm subscription for everyone on your team, so they can use it to find ways to help them relax through meditation and guided deep breathing exercises.

Alternatively, send each team member a small gift basket filled with things like massage oil, a sleep mask, Epsom salts, and flameless candles so they can embrace a hot bath and massage to help with relaxation.

Get Them Outside

Spending time in nature, even when socially distancing, offers a variety of mental health benefits. Studies have shown it not only improves mood but also can restore the ability to focus and concentrate.

If the weather is less than agreeable, simply looking at nature pictures and listening to nature sounds, such as waves crashing and birds singing, can give us a boost.

Provide a Stipend for Home Office Supplies

Give each employee a certain amount of money to purchase the things they need to create the most productive work environment possible.

Remote working full-time can be quite the adjustment for someone who's used to the office.

Ensuring they have funds to purchase a more ergonomic desk chair is one way to help them stay productive.

Remember, not everyone has a spare room they can use to work, and most of your staff will likely have to contend with working while family members are around.

This may require adjustments to the things they normally use for work – such as noise-canceling headphones – to signal to people they are in work-mode and shouldn't be bothered. They may also be necessary to help drown out distractions.

Encourage Boundaries

Employees may be tempted to work more than they need to, simply because they're in a home office and they feel like they can use the time to get ahead.

Some may feel compelled to respond to email right away, even if they're at the dinner table with their loved ones.

To do your part to help them establish a good work-life balance, go beyond allowing schedule flexibility and institute rules such as:

- No responding to email after 6 p.m. local time, unless there's an emergency.
- No office-related phone calls after 5 p.m. local time, unless there's an emergency.
- No overtime hours, unless preapproved.

This helps draw a clear line between work and family. For people who prefer to work at night, they can address things via email before the end of their shift, so they are there for coworkers to address the following day.

The important thing to remember is that we're all in this together.

Working from home is a double-edged sword because it eliminates the commute and provides more flexibility, but it can easily lead to working too much and feeling isolated. As with everything else in life, balance and structure is the key to success.

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