



# Covid-19 and Psychosocial Well-being

## Q&A

Covid-19 has had an impact on various layers of society in many ways. As an organisation, it is important to gradually bring your employees back to work with due care for their psychosocial well-being. This document aims to provide you with some guidance based on 10 questions that you might ask yourself as an employer.

## Table of contents

1. [Is it still necessary to react to the events as an organisation?](#)
2. [Is it advisable to call in professionals for support immediately during the restart?](#)
3. [Is it useful to officially brief and follow up with our employees before the restart?](#)
4. [When is behaviour and/or fear abnormal?](#)
5. [How can we deal with the fear of infection?](#)
6. [What can we do if an employee becomes infected with Covid-19 after a restart?](#)
7. [How can we deal with stigma around Covid-19?](#)
8. [Do you foresee a peak in the workload?](#)
9. [Are you prepared for a possible tightening of the measures?](#)
10. [Do employees know where they can go for psychosocial help?](#)





## 1. Is it still necessary to react to the events as an organisation?

**Everyone reacts differently to the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken.** Some employees will remain very calm, while others will experience this as shocking or suffer from depression. Regardless of the employees' reactions, we recommend that you as an employer acknowledge that these are not normal circumstances.

**'Not reacting'** to difficult events **can exacerbate the consequences.** Especially when it concerns events that are closely related to certain **decisions or omissions in the organisation** itself (e.g. announcement of dismissals, when employees have pointed out 'a dangerous situation' and suddenly have to deal with infection). So, in these cases, it is certainly important to be there for the people in the aftermath of these crisis situations.

These **abnormal circumstances call for a special response** from the organisation. Not reacting or reacting 'normally' would ignore the special circumstances and could give employees the impression that they should not experience any issues. This complicates the processing process and therefore is not appropriate. **State that these events are not commonplace and that everyone reacts to them in their own way.** No reaction is wrong. This message can be reassuring for your employees, can lower the threshold for any difficult conversations, and also creates a strong sense of connection.

## 2. Is it advisable to call in professionals for support immediately during the restart?

**In the first instance, we advise organisations to take matters into their own hands.**

Employees need **'real commitment'** and **natural support**, not from an unknown professional, but from those they know from their own environment: colleagues, managers, family. Therefore, the immediate intervention of professionals has no added value.

If you would **like guidance in the preparation** of this or if you do notice at any time that extra guidance is desirable, we will be happy to help you.

## 3. Is it useful to officially brief and follow up with our employees before the restart?

An initial briefing can help to **reduce employees' uncertainty and anxiety about physical and economic factors.** Uncertainty causes fear, but knowledge reduces fear because it increases the feeling of control. That is why it is of the utmost importance to both clearly brief workers on the protection measures and to provide them with the correct information when they return. In doing so, it is important to increase the sense of safety, acknowledge the situation, and provide practical support.



## Tips



**Timing and medium** for briefing(s) will be important. On the one hand, we want to avoid gathering everyone in one room. On the other hand, we still want to make it personal.

- If employees **work from home**, we recommend communicating before people effectively return to the workplace, via conference call.
- If the employees are **temporarily unemployed**, you can delegate the task of contacting employees even before resuming work to the team leaders.

**Preparation:** In order to answer questions, refute assumptions, and maintain calm, the messenger must have correct and honest knowledge about:

- Covid-19 (spread, risks, etc.)
- The safety guidelines
- The future of the company

**In terms of content**, an initial briefing should create a sense of safety, acknowledge the situation, and provide practical support.

### FEELING OF SAFETY

- **Explain why** the decision to restart was made.
  - Make it clear that the decision was made based on guidelines from the government, doctors, and scientists with a view to controlling the risk of infection.
- In your communication, make sure to focus on **measures** to keep employees safe.
  - Communicate immediately, for example, the extra safety regulations regarding distance and hygiene. Consider putting up [posters](#) and/or make the safety regulations accessible to everyone (e.g. intranet).
- Speak calmly and use **simple language** so that the message is clear.
- Speak in the '**we form**', as this increases the feeling of connectedness.
- Set a **good example** yourself!

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

**Acknowledge** the fact that this is a difficult time. Emphasise the importance of your employees' roles and tasks and **thank** them for their flexibility.

- Leave room for **questions, emotions, and frustrations** and listen to and acknowledge these.
  - Remember that it is okay not to have answers to all the questions yet and to communicate this fact to employees. Demonstrate that you heard the question and indicate when the next update will follow. In general, people will appreciate this transparency.

### PRACTICAL SUPPORT

- Provide **clear guidelines for workers if they fall ill**.
- **Communicate the difficult messages as well** and be clear. E.g. A colleague's death, the economic damage to the company and the impact thereof, etc.
- Inform employees where they can go for **support**.
  - Do team leaders have the necessary information to accommodate team members?
  - Has a team been assigned to answer questions about Covid-19?
  - Share the contact details for the confidential advisor and Mensura.



#### 4. When is a certain behaviour and/or fear abnormal?

It is important **not to underestimate, but certainly not overestimate, the reactions to difficult events**. Some people will indicate of their own accord that they need help, but others may be more likely to be withdrawn and remain silent.

If **complaints do not diminish or even increase over time** (e.g. someone remains absent from work, anxiety seems to increase, and/or more avoidance or control behaviours occur), it is advisable to refer the worker to specialist help, usually via the company doctor, PAPSY, or prevention advisor.

Continuous changes in behaviour, performance, and contact with others are significant signs that a person is not doing well.



##### Tips

##### How to deal with frightened and/or dejected employees?

- Check what is going on in an open, calm, neutral manner.
- Discuss your personal findings with the person concerned.
- Don't judge; express your concern instead. Indicate that you want to help.
- If the employee refuses to talk about this, respect their decision.
- Suggest that they talk with someone else, e.g. the confidential advisor/PAPSY.
- Monitor the situation and do not hesitate to contact Mensura in case of doubt.

##### What should you definitely not do?

- Minimise the problem
- Respond in an overprotective/paternalistic manner
- Diagnose them
- Try to heal them or solve their issues

#### 5. How can we deal with the fear of infection?

It is possible that employees will react reluctantly to be physically present again, out of fear of being infected. That is why we recommend **promoting personal safety**. People can work on their own safety and that of their environment. That feeling of self-control is important to counteract feelings of anxiety. This can be done by following government guidelines on personal hygiene (e.g. hand-washing), by complying with environmental measures (e.g. avoiding events), by respecting social distance (e.g. avoiding being in too small environments with too many people), etc.



## 6. What can we do if an employee becomes infected with Covid-19 after a restart?

1. **Show empathy.** Even if the symptoms are mild, chances are that your employee is still worried. Leave room to express those feelings.
2. Ask **the employee which employees they have been in contact with** in the past two weeks.
3. **Notify HR.** They probably have certain guidelines to follow. Also agree with HR **who will notify the other employees with whom the person has had contact.** Keep in mind that this may arrive unexpectedly and cause anxiety and stress again. Notifying the other employees will have to be done quickly. These employees must be sent home as soon as possible and they must call their doctor. Be empathetic to these people, too.
4. Also expect **nervousness** to arise **in the entire team.** Try to keep them reassured, but make sure you only share correct information.
5. **Keep in touch** with the infected employee **by telephone**, as well as those who have worked closely with them.

## 7. How can we deal with stigma around Covid-19?

Employees may have prejudices about other employees who have been infected with Covid-19. Sometimes people will express prejudices such as “I don’t want to work with a Covid-19 patient”, but often they will express this more indirectly by avoiding these employees, for example. Obviously, such behaviour can have a negative impact on the psychosocial well-being of the employee concerned. Moreover, there is a risk that the fear of Covid-19 will increase further.

Prejudices are often formed based on **erroneous knowledge or a lack of knowledge.** Therefore, it’s important as an employer to inform employees correctly.



### Tips

- Make it clear that employees who have fully recovered from Covid-19 are no longer contagious and therefore should not be treated differently.
- Consider re-emphasising corporate values such as inclusion, anti-discrimination, and collegiality.
- Inform all employees of the sickness notification procedure.
- Pay close attention to your language:
  - Do not use the term ‘coronavirus’ as it refers to a group of viruses, from a common cold to SARS. Instead, speak of ‘**Covid-19**’. ‘Co’ stands for corona, ‘vi’ for virus, and ‘d’ for ‘disease’.
  - Do not connect Covid-19 to a place or ethnicity by calling it things like the ‘Wuhan virus’ or the ‘Chinese’ virus.
  - Avoid words like ‘Covid-19 victim’, but say, for example, ‘people infected by/healed from Covid-19’.



## 8. Do you foresee a peak in the workload?

Perhaps the organisation has been at a standstill for a while or has been working on reduced capacity, which has led to an accumulation of work and will now increase the workload. Moreover, there is a real chance that several employees have not yet returned to work. This is a reality that cannot be changed, but in which it is important to keep employees who are at work physically and psychologically healthy. Therefore, as an employer, you will also have to show that you care about them.



### Tips

- Acknowledge the commitment of the employees who have returned to work and show your appreciation.
- Leave room to connect and vent to each other despite the increased working pressure.
- Build in extra breaks if shifts get longer.
- Consider the option to offer exercise/healthy nutrition.
- Provide perspective (for example, communicate possible solutions you are looking for to normalise the workload over time).

## 9. Are you prepared for a possible tightening of the measures?

It will be important for people to find a routine again with the **necessary flexibility**. Also take into account the fact that a new peak of Covid-19 infections is possible, thus requiring the measures to be tightened up again.



### Tips

- Discuss what went well in the past period and what could be done better if we ended up in a similar situation.
- Promote knowledge sharing among different team members. You never know who might fall ill. It brings peace of mind to all concerned. This also applies to managers!
- Provide a good database to share knowledge and documents.

## 10. Where can employees go for psychosocial support besides their manager?

If the manager does not know how to support the employee personally (anymore) or if the employee prefers not to go to the manager, there are always other options.

- The confidential advisor (if any)
- The internal prevention advisor (if any)
- Psychosocial Aspects Prevention Advisor



### Tip

Share the contact details for the confidential advisor and Mensura once more. Click [here](#) for a template.