COVID-19 and Psychosocial Wellbeing
Q&A

Covid-19 has affected society in many different ways. Therefore it will be indispensable for organizations to guide their employees when restarting work activities in a shared space. In doing so, paying attention to (psychosocial) wellbeing of employees will be more important than ever. This document is designed to help employers answer 10 questions that they might have.

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1. Is it necessary to react to the past events?

Everyone reacts differently to the COVID19 pandemic and the measurements. Some employees will remain very calm, while others might experience this as shocking or depressing. We would recommend employers to acknowledge that these are abnormal circumstances, regardless of the reactions.

The reason being that **'not reacting'** to the events **might negatively affect the consequences**. Especially when there are consequences tight to the events that are an immediate affect of decisions or negligence of the management (ex. dismissals, infections although employees pointed out the risky situation, etc.). It will be highly important to show up and actively support employees in the wake of such crisis.

In case the abnormality of the circumstances won't be recognized, employees might get the feeling that they aren't allowed to experience certain struggles. This might negatively affect their "healing" process. **Express that these are extraordinary circumstances and that everyone reacts to it in his/her own way, but that there are no better or worse reactions.** This message can be comforting for employees, it might lower the threshold for difficult conversations and strengthen the feeling of belonging.

2. Is professional support recommended immediately when restarting business?
We recommend to initially take matters into your own hands. Employees need **"real connection"** and **"natural support"**, which is best provided by people they know in their close environment (colleagues, team leaders, family, etc.). Therefore professionals won't be the most appropriate resources at first hand.
Nevertheless, we are **at your service in case you would like some support** in preparing the restart of business or when you notice along the way that extra support might be desirable.

3. Is it useful to brief employees before officially restarting business?
A first briefing could help **reduce anxiety and uncertainty about the physical and economical elements**. Uncertainty increases fear, while knowledge reduces fear and increases the feeling of being in control. Therefore it should be a priority to brief employees about the **safety measures** and provide them with the **correct information**.
Furthermore the first briefing should aim at increasing the **sense of security**, provide **recognition** and **practical support**.

Tips

Do not underestimate the importance of the **Timing** and **Medium** of such meeting. We want to avoid gathering everyone in one room, but at the same time we want to make it personal.

- If employees work from home, it is recommended to brief them beforehand through conference call.
- In case employees are temporarily unemployed, you might want to consider the support of team leaders to contact employees before returning to work.

Preparation: To answer questions, shatter assumptions and to reassure people, the messenger will need honest and correct knowledge about:

- COVID19 (spread of disease, risks, ...)
- Safety regulations
- The future of the company

Content wise the first briefing should aim at increasing the **sense of security**, provide **recognition** and **practical support**.

SENSE OF SECURITY

- **Explain why** it was decided to restart business.
    - Make it clear that the decision was made in line with governmental guidelines, that are based on insights of physicians and scientists, in order to control the risk of infection.
- Focus on the measurements to keep employees safe.
    - Ex. The extra safety measurements about social distancing and hygiene. Consider hanging posters and/or make safety guidelines accessible to everyone (ex. intranet).
- Speak with a **calm voice** and use **easy language** to ensure the message gets across.
- Use **"We"** to increase the sense of belonging.
- **Lead by example!**

RECOGNITION:

Recognize the fact that it are difficult times. Stress the importance of the roles and work of employees and **thank** them for their **flexibility.**

- Leave room for **questions, emotions and frustrations**, **listen actively** and show understanding for their **concerns**.
    - Remember that you aren't expected to have all the answers and communicate this to your employees. However, show that you capture questions/concerns and indicate when there will be another update. Overall, employees will appreciate the transparency and vulnerability.

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

- Provide clear **guidelines in case employees get ill**.
- **Also share difficult messages and be clear.** Ex. About the decease of colleagues, the economical damage of the company and the impact, etc.
- Inform employees about their options in case they need support.
    - Do team leaders have the necessary information to support their team members?
    - Is there a dedicated team to answer questions about COVID-19?
    - Share contact details about the person of trust and Mensura.

4. When is certain behavior or fear abnormal?

It is important not to underestimate but also **not to overestimate reactions** to difficult situations. Some people will speak-up when they need help, while others might rather keep quite.

If symptoms don't subside or diminish but augment over time (ex. someone doesn't return to work, fear increases and/or there are signs of avoidance behavior), it is recommended to refer the employee to a professional. Overall, the easiest way is to do this through the occupational doctor or Prevention Advisor Psychosocial Aspects.

Persistent changes in behavior, performance and social contacts are important symptoms that someone might not be feeling well.

Tips

How to handle depressed or anxious employees?

- Check in an open, calm and neutral way what is going on.
- Discuss your observations with the affected person.
- Don't judge but express your concerns and willingness to help.
- Respect the persons' will not to talk about the issue (if applicable) and suggest to talk to someone else like the person of trust or Prevention Advisor Psychosocial Aspects.
- Follow-up and don't hesitate to reach out to Mensura in case of doubt.

What definitely not to do?

- Minimize the problem.
- React overly concerned or paternalistic.
- Diagnose.
- Try to heal or find an immediate solution for the feelings.

5. How to handle fear for infection?

It is possible that employees will be reluctant to return to work out of fear of being infected. Therefore we recommend to **promote personal safety**. There are a number of actions people can take to increase their personal safety and that of their environment. **That sense of control is very important to reduce anxiety and turmoil**. Think about following governmental guidelines about hygiene (washing your hands), social distancing, etc.

6. What to do when an employee gets infected with the Covid-19 virus after business has restarted?

1. **Show empathy.** Chances are that the employee is scared/concerned, even when the symptoms are mild. Leave space to express these emotions.
2. Ask about the **contact with other employees** over the past 2 weeks.
3. **Notify HR.** They probably can inform you about the protocol that needs to be followed. Moreover, you might want to align on **ownership to inform the other employees** that were in contact with the infected employee. Take into account that this news might come unexpected and again cause stress and concerns. It is recommended to quickly contact the other employees and send them home asap. Also remember to show empathy towards these people.
4. **Expect nervousness in the full team**. Try to reassure them, and assure to provide them with the correct information.
5. **Keep in contact (mail/phone) with the infected employee** and the people who were in close contact with this person.

7. How to handle stigma about COVID19?

Employees might have preconceptions about others who have been infected with COVID 19. They might express these preconceptions "I refuse to work with a corona patient", but more often people they will show this through more indirect behavior like avoidance. Obviously this might negatively affect the wellbeing of this employee. Additionally, such behavior increases the risk that fear of the COVID-19 virus continues to increase.

Preconceptions are often rooted in false knowledge or lack of knowledge. Therefore it is important to provide employees with accurate knowledge.

Tips

- Point out that people who are completely recovered from Covid-19 aren't contagious and therefore shouldn't be handled differently.
- Consider to reinforce company values like inclusion, anti-discrimination and collegiality.
- Inform all employees about the procedures in case of illness.
- Mind your language:
  - Avoid the word 'Corona' since this refers to a group of viruses, varying from a regular cold to SARS. Prefer the term COVID-19. "Co" refers to Corona, "Vi" to virus and "D" to disease.
  - Do not connect Covid-19 to a place or ethnicity (Ex. 'Wuhan virus' or 'Chinese virus').
  - Avoid words like "Covid-19 victim", but reframe to "people that are infected by/healed from Covid-19".

8. Do you anticipate increased workload?

Maybe your company ceased activities or worked at reduced capacity for a while, resulting in an increased workload. Besides, the chances are real that not all employees will return immediately. As an employer **you can't change this reality**, but it will be important to **guard the physical and psychological wellbeing** of the employees that did return to work. Part of this is showing that you care.

Tips

- Recognize the efforts of the employees that returned to work and show appreciation.
- Ensure sufficient time to connect and ventilate, despite the increased workload.
- Build in extra breaks when shifts get longer.
- Consider to offer healthy food and exercise opportunities.
- Provide perspective (communicate for example possible solutions to reduce the workload in the long term).

9. Are you prepared in case measures will be tightened again?

It will be important for employees to find a new routine, while keeping the **necessary flexibility**. Keep in mind that there might be a second peak of infections and that measurements might be tightened again.

Tips

- Discuss what went well and what could be done better in case there is a similar situation in the future.
- Promote knowledge sharing between team members. You can't predict who will get ill and it brings peace of mind to know that someone can cover you. This also applies for members of the leadership.
- Make sure that there is a platform available to easily share knowledge and documents.

10. Are employees informed about available resources in case they need psychosocial help?

If the team leader doesn't know (anymore) how to support an employee or an employee isn't comfortable to discuss certain concerns with the team lead, it is important for them to know their options.

- The Person of Trust (if applicable);
- The Internal Prevention Advisor (if applicable);
- The prevention Advisor Psychosocial Aspects

Tip

Make sure to communicate the contact details of these resources. Click here for a template.