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HOW TO STAY (RELATIVELY) SANE WHILE WORKING FROM HOME

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The COVID-19 crisis has put plenty of focus on the responsibility of organizations and businesses for workplace health and safety. We've focused on work-at-home arrangements, policies for communicable diseases, and managing temporary layoffs while still focusing on overall viability. Now, as discussions turn to how best to return to work, discussions are moving toward how to practise social distancing in the workplace, cleanliness and determining if wearing masks at work is the right thing to do.

At the same time, while there's been some attention on the issues of the mental health of work-at-home employees, I am confident that COVID-19 will also help to raise the importance of mental health in the workplace as it is a far bigger issue than one might think. For instance, the Canada Safety Council reports that mental health claims are the fastest growing category of costs in Canada, rising to the level of 30-40 per cent of all disability claims. Not only that but 75 per cent of employers indicate that mental health issues are the leading cause of short- and long-term disability claims in their organization.



Mental illness and mental health issues have long been a well-kept secret in the workplace in that employees suffering from depression, anxiety, eating disorders, burnout and/or addictive behaviours rarely disclose their circumstances and ask for assistance. Today, with COVID-19 and the sudden shift to working at home, we can add panic and fear about job loss and economic insecurity to the mix of issues.

However, another result of this pandemic is the need for more management training on recognizing and helping employees manage mental health issues. How many managers reading this article can confidently say they have a good understanding of mental illness, an

awareness of the symptoms and/or ways in which to assist their employees? How many managers can say that they are very confident in helping employees with any mental health issue that arise during this COVID-19 shutdown? Lastly, how many managers even recognized that the mental health of their now remote employees was an issue and put steps in place to help their employees?

An earlier Conference Board of Canada report suggests that approximately 44 per cent of managers have never had any training on mental health and/or how to manage mental health issues in the workplace. I wonder what the statistics would be today? If the number of mental health issues are increasing, it suggests the need for more management training.

My little survey of 10 work-at-home employees last week, identified that isolation and the social interaction of "real people" was two of the bigger issues about working from home. No office banter, no ability to walk over to a colleague and ask for a second opinion and/or to collaborate on a project. And, there's no opportunity to congregate in the lunch room to see how everyone is doing.

With employees working at home for approximately the last six weeks, we can be absolutely assured that some individuals are indeed experiencing mental health issues. It appears that many will continue working at home for some time, and so managers need to ramp up their attention to the issue as we begin to move into the recovery mode. Some of the following suggestions might be helpful:

Work assignments — take time to review the work assignments to date. Are all assignments done on time in spite of the challenges of working at home? Stop and look at what assignments can be set aside. Make sure that work assigned is value work and set aside other work that can be pushed to a later date. Focus on assignments that directly support the mission, goals and objectives.

Redefine productivity — knowing that your work-at-home employee is probably dealing with other responsibilities that might interfere with the normal hourly work time, focus instead on productivity in instead of hours spent.

Flexibility — every employee has their own needs. Stay in close touch and be sure that they are not feeling overwhelmed. Inquire what kind of support they need including delegating some control over their workload and timing. Recognize that individuals are

still going through the change management cycle and that they are testing out their new reality while not knowing what life will be like when it returns to a so-called normal. Some of course, may have experienced family illness and death and are mourning their loss.

Increase check-ins — most employers are making good use of the various technologies for group meetings but it is equally important to make individual phone calls to ensure employees know they are valued and not forgotten. As a manager, set up a call sheet so that you try to get to everyone within one week. With larger number of employees you might consider a "phone chain" by delegating some calls to other key personnel. The goal is to ensure that employees are getting their needs met and that they feel safe.

Stay alert — even though you are not meeting face to face, managers can be alert to the symptoms of stress. Pay attention to the tone of voice and listen for signs of irritability. Look for the sources of stress that you can assist with. Watch for signs of poor concentration and a slowness of decision-making. Watch for work delays, excuses and being late to a conference call. Speak to the employee but be careful to only focus on work requirements rather than the privacy of a potential illness. However, confront the employee and lead them to taking care of themselves. Direct them to your employee assistance program and/or the digital therapy being offered in Manitoba.

Be collaborative and creative — an employee hunkered down at home with work and family responsibilities might quickly lose sight of how things could be handled differently so as to manage their stress. Explore the issues from the employee's perspective and work with them to think "outside the box." Coach them to be creative in resolving the little issues that could grow into annoying big issues. Invite the employee to make suggestions and work together toward a solution. This gives the employee a sense of control.

Engage in self-care — managers can't care for others when their own stress is at a maximum. Watch for signs of stress such as irritability in your voice. Check your level of patience; if it is low, then it is definitely time to concentrate on yourself. Follow the same advice as you give to employees; stay organized, take breaks, apply the usual stress management techniques. Reach out to other managers to discuss the issues of the day and share strategies for self-care.

As noted earlier, 30-40 per cent of all disability claims are related to mental health issues. So, don't be fooled into believing that COVID-19 is not impacting some of your employees. Take time to gain more knowledge about mental health and the strategies that can be undertaken to support employees both during COVID-19 and afterwards.

Source: How to Support Sources: Remote Employees' Mental Health During COVID-19, Boss Women; Mental illness common in the workplace, CBC News, June 20, 2011

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