

A Leader's Guide: Responding to Employee Anxiety about Coronavirus:



Workplaces are entering uncharted waters as they try to figure out how to protect both the health of their employees and their businesses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

None of us has a playbook for this!

Company responses thus far have included halting non-essential business travel, cancelling professional conferences, having more employees work from home, forming task forces, dusting off emergency response plans, ordering increasingly stringent safety measures, and increasing the availability of hand sanitizers.

And, it's not just health risks that have employees worried; there is also heightened concern about job security and the value of retirement portfolios as the stock market continues to fluctuate.

High levels of stress are detrimental to health and are a well-documented drag on productivity. Stressed employees are at risk for increased levels of resentment, anger and fatigue. This can lead to diminished teamwork. As well as problems in the customer service and product quality domains. **So what can business leaders do to help mitigate employee anxiety and stress during this difficult time?**

Increase management visibility and continuously gather feedback from employees. Keep connected with employees whether they are in the office or working remotely. Make sure they have plenty of opportunities to tell you what they are thinking and feeling. Listen to their suggestions and help them feel safe. Share as much information as possible about the rationale for all management actions taken in response to the threats posed by COVID-19.

Apply the skills you have learned in other change management situations. Change makes many people anxious. Schedule changes, alternative work arrangements, new safety measures etc., no matter how justified, are still changes. Provide encouragement and acknowledge everyone's strong efforts throughout the entire process of adaptation. Positive reinforcement works and it doesn't cost a dime.

Understand the variability in individual employee responses and respond accordingly. One size does not fit all when it comes to the experience of stress and anxiety. Some employees will be much less concerned about the virus threat and their employer's strategic responses to it, while others may seem to be bordering on panic. Remember, you can consult with Best Care EAP about any employee that may concern you.





Send updated information to employees regarding the public health announcements and risk reduction recommendations. Have one person in the organization collect and disseminate the most accurate, current and useful information about COVID-19 so that every employee doesn't have to do it for themselves*. This may also avoid the problem of employees falling down the rabbit hole of internet misinformation and rumors.

Practice self-control and stay calm, Without self-control, it is easy for a leader to fall in to the grip of panic and be at the mercy of his/her feelings. Stress and panic create a myriad of reactions. Do you blow up? Do you cause more panic and angst? Are you indecisive? Or maybe you have a tendency to shut down and hide in your office. A leader who can exhibit strong self-control even in the midst of crisis is much more capable of making rational decisions, communicating clearly, and working to effectively solve problems.

It looks like this current situation may be more of a marathon versus a sprint. Crises require that leaders demonstrate confidence when they may feel the most vulnerable, and maintain vision for others when their own line of sight is obscure.

The quality of leadership you demonstrate during difficult times will leave a powerful mark on employees long after the crisis passes. Take advantage of this opportunity to learn and demonstrate your commitment to the welfare of your employees and your customers/patients. You will see it come back to you many fold in the future.

* Several helpful resources are available right on the front page of our website. [BestCareEAP.org/What's Happening](https://www.BestCareEAP.org/What's_Happening).

To manage your stress in a difficult moment:

STOP (S_top, T_ake a breath, O_bserve, and P_roceed)

Identify your stress/feelings and how your body and mind are responding.
Then choose the best, most calm and helpful way to respond.
This allows you to control automatic responses that can be negative for you
and the people you work or live with.