

The APEC Digital Hub for Mental Health Workplace Wellness and Resilience Work Group: Supporting Workplace Mental Health and Safety through Unprecedented Times

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak and the necessary public health measures to contain its spread are creating stress for people and communities across the world, with a profound impact in the Asia Pacific region. Physical distancing and other significant changes in how and where we work have been prioritized to maintain the physical health and safety of people and communities. But have the mental health impacts been considered enough? Have we put the safeguards in place to ensure that our populations are supported to keep mentally strong, resilient and well during this time of crisis?

Around the world, countries have had to make difficult decisions and shift how we live, limiting mobility, reducing access to physical activity and outdoor space, closing schools and stopping non-critical services, leaving many isolated, disconnected, far from loved ones and at risk. Many workplaces have had to make difficult decisions, forcing employees to work from home, laying off segments of the workforce, losing revenue, stopping or shifting operations. In the case of critical and essential services, companies must negotiate how to support employees who may be at high risk of contracting COVID-19. These dramatic changes are having a significant impact on the mental health and wellness of employees. For some it is fear, anxiety, stress, burnout, and depression and for others it is exacerbating existing serious mental health issues. As COVID-19 continues, and we move from the emergence of the pandemic to its peak, and then post crisis, the mental health impacts will evolve but continue to take a toll on employees.

More than ever, workplaces should be expanding the notion of health and safety to include both mental and physical health when putting workplace health and safety measures into place. Prioritizing mental health during a crisis will enable organizations to retain staff, increase engagement and productivity and ensure a smoother return to work when the pandemic is over. Mental health issues are the silent echo of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ripple effect will be felt long after it is over. Prioritizing workplace mental health and safety now is vital for sustainability and viability for organizations.

The APEC Digital Hub's Workplace Wellness and Resilience Working Group, led by Ms. Sapna Mahajan (Canada) and Dr. Hiroto Ito (Japan) is pleased to share *A New Horizon for Occupational Health: APEC White Paper on Workplace Mental Health and Safety*. This *White Paper* outlines the economic imperative of promoting mental health in the workplace, identifies existing model programs for workplace mental health and safety and issues a call to action for enhanced mental health and safety in the workplace across the APEC region. The release of this White Paper is extremely timely: the global and regional mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be far-reaching, long-lasting, and unprecedented. Workplaces must play a central role in supporting employee mental health both during and after the pandemic.

Recommendations for Workplace Mental Health and Safety Planning and Support during a Crisis:

During a crisis such as the ongoing pandemic, there are three distinct phases to be considered, as described in the table below:

Table 1: Workplace Mental Health Challenges Consideration during Phases of a Crisis

	Phase 1: Emergence of crisis	Phase 2: During the crisis	Phase 3: Post-crisis
Challenges	<p>Uncertainty of significance and duration of the crisis</p> <p>Potential disruption of regular supports and services</p>	<p>Work style and environment changes (e.g. lockdown)</p> <p>Isolation</p> <p>Fear or anxiety</p> <p>Balance between work and family demands</p> <p>Potential loss or uncertainty about economic and job security</p>	<p>Changes of economic environment and labor market</p> <p>Economic recovery and uncertainty</p> <p>Lasting impact of traumatic events</p>

Each phase will involve different impacts on the mental health and wellness of employees. It is imperative that workplaces have concrete emergency mental health and safety plans in place **prior** to a crisis to ensure necessary supports are in place and to facilitate roll out of mental health and safety supports during a period of crisis. Workplaces are encouraged to demonstrate leadership and consider taking the following steps:

Planning:

- When assessing the risks and impact of critical events such as COVID-19 on staff, integrate the psychological health and safety considerations into emergency plans
- Equip and support managers and workplace leaders to address unique mental health issues faced during time of crisis through training and planning in advance as much as possible.
- Of the 13 psychosocial factors that impact employees’ mental health and well-being¹, organizational culture, psychological & social support, clear leadership & expectations, and balance are important during a crisis and should be reviewed by the organization and integrated into planning.

¹ <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/13-factors-addressing-mental-health-workplace>

Communication:

- Leaders should lead with empathy, authenticity and vulnerability, acknowledging the stress and challenges of the situation and providing a safe and supportive environment
- Workplace leaders must acknowledge that it is not business as usual and that this pandemic will impact mental health not just physical health.
- The organization should acknowledge the increase of fear, stress, anxiety and depression felt by many employees.
- Leaders can play a role in breaking down stigma and encouraging those struggling to seek care. They can also support those with preexisting mental health conditions to receive continued and additional support as needed.
- Leaders and managers should promote the existing mental health services and supports that the organization offers, providing details on how employees can access them.

Ongoing Support:

- Ensure when managing workplaces during critical events that psychological risks are reduced to the best extent possible and supports for ongoing psychological safety are in place.
- Explore the possibility of offering enhanced mental health services and supports such as virtual/online care, peer support and community health care.
- Monitor the mental health and psychological support needs of employees regularly to tailor resources accordingly and ensure policies, processes and programs are put into place for the eventual return to work post pandemic.

The APEC White Paper on Workplace Mental Health and Safety provides a framework on how workplaces can take action and support the mental health and wellness of employees. The White Paper is a timely and important resource to support workplaces leaders to provide necessary mental health support both during the current global pandemic and in the long term.

For additional resources on mental health and COVID-19, please visit the Digital Hub at:

www.mentalhealth.APEC.org