

# Lend a helping hand

## Employers should check in to see how staff coping with pandemic strain



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### Hey there, time traveller!

This article was published **04/05/2020** (1961 days ago), so information in it may no longer be current.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the workplace. While many employers responding to the crisis have been understandably concerned with business resilience, logistics and processes, organizations also need to focus on the well-being of their employees.

Employers are currently supporting a predominantly at-home workforce that's grappling with new challenges, experiences and pressures. Putting mental health at the forefront of the conversation is an important step business leaders can take to ensure their team has the resources it needs.

An important question employers can ask right now: "Are you OK?"

Across the country, people are experiencing heightened anxiety and fear. According to a recent survey conducted by the Angus Reid Institute, about half of Canadians say their mental health has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked to describe how they were feeling, respondents said they were worried (44 per cent), anxious (41 per cent) and bored (30 per cent). Although a third — 34 per cent — also said they feel grateful. Just six per cent noted they were happy while 16 per cent described themselves as depressed.

The research makes one thing clear: the pandemic has had a major impact on our daily lives, families, routines and workplaces.

Working amid a crisis can strain employees further, especially those working remotely for the first time. COVID-19 has left an indelible mark on the workplace and additional pressures such as supporting aging loved ones and homeschooling children can break employees both physically and emotionally. Despite the growing need for mental health care right now, people may not feel they have the space, time or energy to devote to it.

Healthy virtual workplaces can help address these situations. With many employees experiencing increased stress, distractions and other concerns, leaders should be monitoring their teams for anyone who might be struggling.

“Check in on how employees and their families are coping,” says Mary Ann Baynton, director of collaboration and strategy for Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, a free public resource funded by Canada Life. “Ask if there is anything you can do to help. Although there is probably not much you can do, there may be resources your organization offers that your employees are not aware of.”

Baynton says employers want to optimize the contribution of each employee, so they’ve got to support each one to maximize their energy and focus.

“Our physical, mental and financial health will have the most significant impact on our energy and focus at work,” says Baynton. “So, while it’s the right thing to do and it’s the noble thing to do, it’s also the prudent thing to do. Taking care of your employees is good for your bottom line.”

Control of our everyday environments has a direct effect on our mental well-being and workplaces must adapt. That means safeguarding employees and addressing their emotional and financial well-being.

Shane Solomon’s team at Republic Architecture in Winnipeg started working remotely on March 20, 2020.



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Shane Solomon, principal architect at Republic Architecture, says he felt lonely during the first few workdays of the COVID-19 lockdown.

“Our goal has always been an empowered, engaged team and never more so than now,” says Republic’s president and founder. “Human connection is so important and to maintain it, we’re finding new ways to facilitate co-operation and social interaction.”

Since they’ve been working from home, the needs of Solomon’s employees have changed.

“From the way we work to how we communicate, our reliance on the technology we use has shifted,” he says. “It’s important that my team feels they can reach me and each other. We’ve worked hard to create an environment of support.”

Currently, Republic is experimenting with a formal program to support mental health. They’re working with an executive coach to provide team members with access to mental health supports that explore stress management and foster the creation of personal growth plans.

During a crisis, leaders need to communicate with compassion. When everything is chaotic, people seek comfort and familiarity. Baynton says recognizing and validating all of the experiences helps to normalize what people may be going through.

“This alone can reduce stress,” she says.

To support the health and wellness of at-home employees during COVID-19, Baynton has some recommendations.

“Shorten online meetings to 30 minutes or less. You can have more of them if needed, but keep them shorter to make it easier to stay focused,” she says. “Take more time to ensure there is clarity about priorities and expectations. Don’t leave employees feeling they should be doing it all.”

One key area of support from Baynton — link what you are doing to the greater good.

“Employees need to feel that what they are doing now matters.”

For those that are working from home, she recommends employers share a wellness resource with their team and ask employees to report back on what resonated the most for them. This is a way to get employees to explore what they need and share what works.

“Just as the experiences and emotions can differ from person to person, so will the coping strategies that are most effective,” she says.

*“Employees need to feel that what they are doing now matters.” – Mary Ann Baynton, Workplace Strategies for Mental Health*

Solomon admits that when the crisis started, he struggled.

“Our team has had the ability to work from home for years but I never did. Work was work. Home was home,” he says. “For the first few days of the COVID lockdown, I felt lonely. I missed the energy of my colleagues.”

After a week of working at his dining room table, he started to get back into a rhythm and being at home started to feel more normal.

“Right now, I think remaining calm, communicating regularly and openly and maintaining a level of normalcy are important for staying connected to the team.”

Republic also has a director of health and wellness, a position created two years ago, to help keep employees healthy and productive. Prior to the pandemic, the wellness director provided Republic with daily food options and in-house physical training.

“Now that we’re all working from home, our director of wellness emails us a workout plan each day with an accompanying YouTube video to demonstrate the moves,” Solomon says. “He offers suggestions for healthy recipes we can make at home and encourages us to share what we’re doing to keep fit.”

While the coming weeks will still be full of uncertainty, employers play a big part in helping their team stay safe and connected. Some tips: ensure your team leaders are checking in on employees to see how they’re coping (how about a video conference coffee break?); reach out to employees with updates on the organization; if you have an employee assistance program, make sure your people are aware that help is available to them; and consider a buddy program that encourages employees to regularly connect with one another.

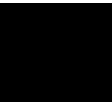
Solomon says he’s made it known to his team that it’s OK to feel anxious and reach out for support.

“We care a lot about our people and our people care a lot about each other. Team members speak daily about everything from current projects to their house plants,” he says. “We’ve used online tools to collaborate during the workday and when the day is done, we use those same tools to connect socially.”

As employers look to both short and long-term solutions to support their workforce during this crisis, mental health care should remain a focal point. Employers who are compassionate, proactive and accommodating will be better positioned to emerge in the post-pandemic era with a resilient — and appreciative — workforce.

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