

## **5 ways to create a safe and inclusive workplace during the pandemic**

Whether your employees are working from home, returning to the workplace, or have been in the workplace all along, they have been with some constant companions: COVID-19-related stress and anxiety.

It's hard to avoid. We're inundated with information all day long, from pandemic news briefings to whispered conversations between friends and co-workers.

"It's time for a longer-term approach to managing pandemic-related stress and anxiety," says WSPS Workplace Mental Health Consultant Krista Schmid. Here are five ways to create a safe and inclusive culture as the pandemic evolves.

### **1. Understand what employees seek from their employer.** Briefly,

- guidance, assurance and leadership
- a sense of involvement and community
- knowing their voices will be heard
- honesty, authenticity, and even a little vulnerability

Be mindful of this while making decisions, implementing new measures, drafting communications, etc.

**2. Keep people informed and up to date.** Adjust the content, channel and frequency of communications. These changes can include of CEO fireside chats, team coffee breaks, or other lively information-sharing sessions — virtual or otherwise. Update employees on how the organization is doing and if new measures are being put in place share how they will affect employees.

For developments outside the workplace, encourage employees to follow accredited sources of information. This is not the time for unreliable news. The World Health Organization has labelled sketchy pandemic news as an "infodemic."

### **3. Conduct COVID-19 hazard assessments and joint health and safety committee (JHSC) inspections.** Be sure to include psychological hazards. For example:

- some workers may experience increased workloads, longer working hours, and reduced rest periods. They may also worry about getting infected in transit or at work, and passing the virus on to others.
- people working from home may be suffering from isolation, blurred work/life boundaries, or a greater risk of domestic violence.

- economic insecurity and fear of job loss and closures can affect workers, managers and senior leadership.

Before conducting the assessments and inspections, brush up on [13+ workplace factors](#) that can potentially cause mental harm or injury.

“While conducting assessments, watch for psychological signs, such as mood changes, low motivation, exhaustion, anxiety, increased irritability, and depression,” says Krista. Physical symptoms may include changes in appetite and weight, digestive issues, and higher consumption of alcohol and other substances.

“When assessing any risk, keep in mind the characteristics of individual workers. We each have a different risk tolerance.”

For more on conducting psychological hazard assessments, check out [Managing work-related psychosocial risks during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), a guide published by the International Labour Organization.

**4. Engage employees** so that they feel part of COVID-19 solutions. For example:

- rotate membership in cross-functional response and recovery teams.
- speak with employees during assessments and inspections. This gives them an opportunity to voice concerns or suggestions, and may give managers insight into individual situations (e.g. someone with a pre-existing health condition or who may have immunocompromised individuals in their home).
- explain how fulfilling their roles and responsibilities under the Internal Responsibility System can help keep them and their co-workers safe during the pandemic.
- establish a means of submitting questions, concerns and suggestions. Acknowledge submissions promptly and reply ASAP.
- conduct an anonymous survey to assess employee satisfaction with the workplace’s response to COVID-19.
- recognize employee contributions and find reasons to celebrate.

**5. Find ways to address feelings of isolation**, for employees still working from home and for those returning to the workplace and facing a different environment. Communal spaces may be closed or restricted, exacerbating feelings of isolation they may already have. Look for ways to continue having authentic connections, virtual or otherwise.

*This article was prepared by Workplace Safety & Prevention Services (WSPS), helping Ontario businesses improve health and safety for over 100 years. For more COVID-19 related*

information, visit our COVID-19 hub <https://covid19.wsps.ca/> or contact WSPS at [customercare@wsps.ca](mailto:customercare@wsps.ca).