Navigating Psychological Risk

Your Responsibilities as a Leader During the Coronavirus Outbreak
A Fact Sheet from Dr Paula Robinson & The Appli Team

We have received an overwhelming number of inquiries from our clients asking how we might be able to assist workplaces and employees during these challenging times. Many leaders have expressed that one of their immediate concerns is their ability to support the physical and mental wellbeing of employees serving on the frontlines of this situation. They are also very concerned with helping those that are working remotely. In response to these concerns, we have put together a Fact Sheet that we hope will provide employers and leaders with some clarity on their responsibilities and how they may be able to maintain best practices during this difficult time.

What You Need to Know

- **Workplaces are legally responsible for not only the physical safety of their employees, but also their psychological safety.** Australian WHS Laws require employers to 'manage' risks to psychological health and safety arising from the business by eliminating exposure to psychosocial hazards so far as is reasonably practicable. Work-related stress if prolonged and/or severe, can cause both psychological and physical injury.

- **Many organisations are already grappling with how to provide a productive yet psychologically safe workplace as more staff are required to work from home, and the lines between work and home become increasingly blurred.** There are unique challenges for workers on the front lines as well.

- **EAP programs will be overwhelmed.** EAP and mental health programs are a valuable component of a safe workplace strategy. However, they are reactive. The reactive treatment model is further complicated when people are communicating digitally instead of face-to-face. Workplaces must take a proactive and preventative approach to support employees' mental health and wellbeing. Evidence-based wellbeing interventions can be thought of like an inoculation, providing people with a buffer of skills to stay more mentally healthy and resilient during tough times. **It is essential to start now so that employees may be able to build these critical skills through regular habits, which can take a few weeks of daily practice.**

- **Social isolation is a big risk factor for developing a mental illness.** Psychological research indicates that relationships are a significant predictor of both physical and psychological wellbeing. Further, poor workplace relationships and remote work have been identified by SafeWork as two critical psychosocial safety hazards that commonly lead to psychological injury. It is vital now for leaders to support employees through regular communication that reminds them they are not alone. We anticipate that this will be one of the biggest challenges for employers and leaders to manage as part of risk mitigation strategy and legislative compliance.

- **Self-help providers will be crawling out of the woodwork.** As with most crises, we expect to see a large number of 'self-help gurus' and predatory companies emerge hoping to offer their solutions to employers and organisations in need. Please be wary of companies that are using assessments, interventions or programs that aren't based on a solid research base. There is great opportunity for self-help products to do psychological harm, especially in this current climate.

What You Can Do

- **A Simple fix could be seen as tokenistic by employees.** For example, reading a newsletter, listening to a webinar or a podcast is great for awareness but probably won't lead to the effective management of one's mental and physical health, fitness and wellbeing. If employees believe that the response is not appropriate, it can impact the trust they have in the organisation. **Make sure you have a regular, ongoing and meaningful plan.**

- **Do not wait.** Communicate your strategy to your employees immediately. Worry about uncertainty, job loss and economic downturn can quickly produce fear, stress, anxiety, feelings of helplessness and depression. No strategy, or an unclear one, can increase risk for employees. It can also damage company culture for the long-term (post Coronavirus).

- **Find ways to reduce feelings of isolation.** Part of your management strategy should include a plan to make sure employees feel supported and maintain social interaction as much as possible. This plan may include the use of video conferencing tools, chat programs, social network groups and virtual social events to keep people connected.

- Ask your managers and teams to extend as much empathy and compassion as possible. Many workers will be supporting sick parents, caring for children and babies, and dealing with extreme stress while also trying to work productively. Schedules may need to change to accommodate specific needs and productive work. **Remember, post Coronavirus, employees will be thinking about how you looked after them during these extraordinary times. You must maintain an authentic, caring and positive culture.**

How We Can Help

The Appli team is here to help answer your questions and support you during this unprecedented time. Please contact us if you need help navigating this evolving challenge. We can also offer you our consulting services and evidence-based digital workplace solutions such as our Appli Work Fit Platform that can be implemented immediately.

Contact us today to see how we can help.

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