

PUBLICATION

Managing Stress During a Pandemic: Ways to Improve Your Employees' Mental Health

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Hanukkah, Christmas, Diwali, Holi, New Year's, Thanksgiving, Easter – these are all holidays that are celebrated and times that we enjoy with our families. We think of these times as having lots of laughter, joy, hugs, family gatherings and hope to reminisce upon the memories for years and generations to come! But, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we celebrate holidays. Take us, for example; we have not seen our family in Texas in more than a year because of the pandemic. We have missed out on celebrating these holidays with loved ones and meeting new additions to our family. Not seeing loved ones in person has added more stress on top of the stress that already comes with the holidays. And, for those who have been able to gather with family, the stress of how to interact with them during this pandemic (i.e., do we hug, sit close to them, hold a new baby, etc.) has weighed heavily on everyone's minds.

These issues equally apply in the workplace. Employees may have difficulty balancing family obligations with work responsibilities. Some may feel guilty about taking time off or worry about coming back to unfinished business and heavy workloads. Others may struggle with managing day-to-day operations with a reduced workforce due to vacations and possible periods of quarantines for those who have traveled. Indeed, research has pointed to the dramatic effect the pandemic is having on overall mental health. Mental Health America (MHA) released its [2021 State of Mental Health in America Report](#), which spotlighted the [impact of COVID-19 on mental health](#). The report noted that:

- The number of people looking for help with anxiety and depression skyrocketed;
- The number of people screening with moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety has continued to increase throughout 2020 and continues to rise as the pandemic continues;
- People screening at risk for mental health conditions are struggling most with loneliness or isolation; and
- There was a notable increase in the rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation for those of a minority group.

Although the major holidays are now behind us, stressors continue to come from all directions. What can employers do to help alleviate some of the stress that affects their workforce? Here are some best practices to improve your employees' mental health at any time of the year:

1. **Embrace Diversity:** Companies should recognize and acknowledge other holidays outside the traditional recognizable holidays such as Cinco de Mayo, Chinese New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and Ramadan, to name just a few. A simple email to your employees wishing them well as they celebrate their holidays demonstrates that you understand that your workforce is diverse; or you could allow your diverse employees to express what their holidays mean to them and ways they celebrate.
2. **Virtual Check-Ins/Gatherings:** Designating a specific time for employees to meet in a virtual group setting in order to share feelings with other co-workers will allow them to gain rapport and trust with one another and upper management. When people feel connected, they naturally want to please one

another, which leads to greater engagement and possibly greater productivity in the workplace.

3. **Refer to Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** If a company has an Employee Assistance Program, it should remind its employees about it. This notification should inform employees about the benefits that are offered under the EAP, stressing the importance and benefits of utilizing such programs and reminding them that their use of the EAP will be confidential.
4. **Share Information About Mental Health Resources:** Companies can create a resource guide for employees who may not feel comfortable seeking help through an EAP or if they do not have an EAP. This resource guide could include information about mental health resources on a national and state level such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [Hotline](#) or the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), which has a Community Resource Directory for each state.
5. **Practice Paced Breathing Exercises:** Companies should remind employees that it is okay to take a step back from an overwhelming situation and just breathe. Send an email to your employees outlining the following breathing exercise: "Whenever feeling overwhelmed or your heart begins racing, feel free to step away from the person or situation and pace your breathing. Breathe in for four seconds, breathe out for four seconds, and then slowly increase the length of each breath in and out." If we take control of our physical actions, then our minds will learn to not automatically assume we need to go into distress mode.
6. **Create a Mindfulness Program:** Companies can offer a mindfulness program which can include virtual yoga and meditation classes, or just allow employees time to take a few minutes a day to meditate in their workspace. Taking a few minutes to oneself can decrease stress and allow one's neural pathways to create new connections, and therefore create new habits.
7. **Limit Contact During Time Off, If Possible:** Send employees a message before they leave on vacation or PTO, wishing them well and clarifying any necessary guidance. Make clear that they are not expected to check work e-mail, respond to work e-mail or write any work e-mail. This is a stressful time, and people need to feel free to focus on their families, especially since the majority of our time this past year has been spent working at home with our families and trying to function.

Following some of these tips can help your employees improve how they manage the stress that has been created during this pandemic.

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