

Back to the workplace

A guide to addressing employee mental health after the lockdown



This booklet is a part of White Swan Foundation's Workplace Mental Health Program. Based on our partnership with mental health professionals and subject matter experts, we deliver communication products that take into account the biological, psychological and social factors influencing decisions around mental healthcare.

Using knowledge as a tool, the organization has the experience of affecting mindset shifts on mental health among people. Additionally, we have the capability to design effective communication plans for a diverse range of audiences.

Having worked with a range of communities, White Swan Foundation also brings the ability to engage the hitherto unaddressed stakeholders of different communities and help them play a constructive role in creating mental health-friendly environments.

White Swan Foundation has collaborated with several organizations to deliver various knowledge-led products that have helped them take the first steps towards building a mental health-friendly work environment. To know more about our program, or to initiate conversations around mental health in your organization, write to connect@whiteswanfoundation.org

We have provided additional reading material as hyperlinks. To access them, it is recommended that you view this book on a computer.

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Read more about mental health, visit www.whiteswanfoundation.org

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Foreword

In just three months, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about tectonic shifts in our lives that none of us could have been prepared for. One of the most impacted spaces is our professional life. As we now attempt to move from our living rooms to office spaces, we are grappling with an evolving new normal.

In this, one thing seems to be emerging clearly—people strategies adopted by businesses have to move beyond the usual focus areas. In particular, a holistic approach towards mental wellbeing of employees is crucial.

You may wonder why— the isolation forced on us by the lockdowns, bleak news on the spread of the pandemic, fear of contracting the virus, combined with the uncertain economic future will surely lead to higher stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns.

What are the mental health considerations that you and your organization need to keep in mind before you take the next step? What does prevention and preparedness mean today in the context of employee mental health? The challenges we face today cut across industries and national borders. Business has a unique role to play today: Not building back but building forward a more resilient society that can withstand future crises.

Today, as organizations begin considering reopening the workplace and make themselves future-ready, it is our responsibility as employers to consider how these shifts could impact employee mental wellbeing, and what we could do to make the transition easier. Many of these concerns will be unsaid and unseen—how do organizations detect these and intervene before it becomes a crisis?

White Swan Foundation, leveraging its strong focus on workplace mental health and partnerships with leading mental health experts, has put together this book that will offer clear guidelines to help employers and their employees cope and thrive in these unprecedented times.

Parthasarathy NS

Former COO and co-founder, Mindtree

Introduction

Four months after the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 as having reached the pandemic stage, countries across the world are beginning to ease lockdown restrictions. Mental health experts are starting to point out that this pandemic may have long-term impact on our mental health too.

As organizations begin to transition employees back to the workplace, we talked to experts to create a list of considerations for organizations, with regard to the mental health of their employees.

Disclaimer: *This booklet is intended as a starting point for organizations that want to address employee mental health during this critical time. It is by no means exhaustive, nor does it cover the specifics of interventions required by all industries.*

This booklet has been curated with inputs from:

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Opening up the office

With researchers recommending physical distancing to be continued to the extent that is possible until a COVID-19 vaccine is found, your organization could consider extending employees' work-from-home timelines, and open the office space in a staggered manner. While the requirement of employees who need to be on the workforce can look different for each organization, here's an idea of what implementing this could look like:

- Begin with essential workers (facility management staff, security staff, and other facility/technical maintenance staff).
- Have knowledge workers come as and when they need to be present at the workplace. If there's a product launch or a deadline that needs to be met, invite key employees who are working on the project.

Staggering office arrival timings will help avoid a crowded window-period of employees entering the premises and decrease the risk of the virus spreading; this can help employees adjust to their return to the workplace.

Ensure you follow the latest set of security guidelines by the WHO on keeping office spaces safe.

[Click here](#) for guidelines from the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

The director of a large organization in India shares their plan for bringing employees back to the workplace. "When the risks go down, we intend to identify the employees who want to return to the office space. A large number of these are likely to be those who want the office space or the routine. We will offer people the option to choose how many days they want to be in the office every week: beginning from zero days, and going up to five."

Understanding employees' emotional state

Several organizations have begun addressing their employees' emotional state and wellbeing during the lockdown phase. As employees return to the workplace, it is important to acknowledge that they may be experiencing:

- Anxiety around their own health and safety. These concerns may increase when they consider returning to work and sharing space with many others, after weeks of working from home.
- Some amount of social anxiety, and/or fear.
- Uncertainty about both the pandemic and the economic situation; worries about job security and financial wellbeing.
- Loss of motivation to work, and a questioning of their own priorities or life goals.

Preparing to welcome employees back to the workplace

According to mental health experts, there is a likelihood that this pandemic will lead to an increase in the number of people experiencing mental health issues. Acknowledging how employees may be feeling, making space for them to express themselves, and offering resources (such as counseling) can help mitigate the impact. Make the transition easier by addressing issues that are likely to be a cause for concern:

- Clearly communicate what measures, you as an organization, are taking to decrease employees' risk of coming in contact with someone who may be a carrier of COVID-19, and how you will make arrangements for social distancing norms to be followed at the workplace.

- Detail the measures you are taking to disinfect the office and the common spaces, particularly those with heavy traffic; common areas like the lobby and transport facilities offered by the organization.
- Inform employees about what official activities will continue during this time—will small or large meetings continue? What is the cap on participants per meeting? What are your revised policies on onsite travel? What other official activities that were commonplace earlier will now need to be revised or cancelled altogether, keeping the required precautions in mind?
- Communicate that it is normal to feel anxious or worried during this time; to have concerns about returning to work and being around groups of people after the lockdown.
- Arrange for a town hall or a session/webinar with a health professional who will be able to address employees' concerns around returning to the workplace, and what precautions they may need to take to stay safe.
- Circulate details of your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), along with information about helplines and other mental healthcare resources that the employee can reach out to.

Having clear and consistent communication about all of these will help employees trust that the organization values their safety and wellbeing.

Logistics

Following the lockdown, employees may need more support than usual as they return to work. Some things to consider:

- Protective gear (masks, gloves or any additional protective gear that may be required) for employees working on the ground, or whose job roles bring them in contact with a large number of people.
- Transportation facilities to avoid crowded public transport (or if public transport is not yet operational). If this is not doable, an alternative is to

- set up an official forum or platform where employees can carpool with each other.
- Childcare facilities—this is important, given that schools are likely to reopen much later than offices. If this is not doable, consider offering work-from-home, or flexitime options to parents of young children.
 - If lockdown restrictions return, employees may also need help in getting groceries and other essentials. Consider making these available through tie-ups with retail brands.

Human resource management: Some things to consider

We can expect that people will have a different outlook to work, after this extended period of working from home. They now know that they don't 'have to' work from the office. It has been proved that they can deliver while working from home. Naturally, their expectations may have changed, and management will have to respond accordingly. It is time to move away from authoritative management styles at this time, and engage with employees differently. Instead of mandating employees to come back to the workplace, leaders need to ask themselves what purpose is served by the employees coming back to the office floor.

Aditi Raghuram, Industrial/organizational psychologist

- If you are clear about what measures your organization is taking to tackle the economic impact it's facing, communicate this to your employees on a regular basis.
- Remember that employees may not have access to public spaces or other spaces where they might've usually socialized. Create opportunities where people can engage with others at work. Short workshops (with physical distancing measures, as appropriate) on art therapy or doodling, for instance, can help them express their emotions and connect with others.

- Equip middle managers to talk about mental health.
- Offer coaching to leaders, who are now faced with unprecedented challenges and difficult situations.
- Reconsider how performance appraisals for the quarter during and immediately after the lockdown will be run, with the awareness that this pandemic has brought about significant disruption to our lives and has impacted all of us, even if in different ways. This will mean revising performance targets for this duration.

For managers and leaders

As a manager/leader, you will play a critical role in letting your employees know that their mental health is valued, and that it's okay to talk about what they're going through. Here are some things you will need to keep in mind.

- Be aware that due to the impact of the pandemic, the lockdown and all the stresses that have come with it, your team is unlikely to be at the peak of their productivity; this is to be expected.
- If you don't know your team well, take the time to connect with them and understand their personal circumstances. This will help you know what they're dealing with.
- Be open and vulnerable about your own worries and concerns.
- Have one-on-one conversations with your team about their individual roles and performance.
- Connect more often with new employees on your team. They are likely to be anxious about their own role, and unsure of how this situation may affect their career trajectory.
- If there are employees who have left the organization during this period (whether this is because of resignations, or layoffs), mark their exit with a small meeting or get-together to acknowledge their contribution to the team.
- Communicate business updates regularly with your team. This is a

time when people are worried about losing their jobs, so it may be important to increase the frequency of this communication.

- If you are unable to offer reassurance or don't know what the future looks like, be transparent with your team about it.
- Hold regular meetings with your team and watch out for signs of distress. If you think one of your team members is experiencing distress, have a conversation with them and refer them to a mental health service if needed. [Click here](#) to know more about what the signs may look like.
- Communicate your appreciation to your staff members for doing the best they can in the circumstances, and acknowledge the risks they are taking by coming into the workplace.
- Have a cheat sheet with information available, about mental health-related resources, whether they're facilitated by your organization, or otherwise. This could include—contact details of your
- EAP services, health facilities nearby, and helplines for general psychosocial support as well as specific support (domestic violence, challenges faced due to disability).
- Be aware of your own mental health, and seek help when you're feeling overwhelmed.

Encourage your teammates to offer their support, as allies to their colleagues.

This means:

- *Checking in on their colleagues on a regular basis*
- *Providing non-judgemental listening to those who are stressed*
- *Offering information about help that is available, should they need it*

Employees who match one or more of the following parameters may be more vulnerable:

- *Those who live alone*
- *Those with preexisting health issues*
- *Those with preexisting mental health issues*
- *Those working on the ground*
- *Caregivers*
- *Expectant parents or new parents*
- *Employees who identify as LGBTQIA+*
- *Women who experience domestic violence*
- *Single parents*

Resources

As your employees prepare to return to the workplace, share information about helplines and other resources that address issues, including:

- *Mental health*
- *Domestic violence*
- *Substance use*
- *Caregiving*

Along with this, ensure that you periodically share resources that contains the latest information on understanding how COVID-19 spreads, and what employees need to do for their own safety as well as that of others.

Talking about the COVID-19 pandemic

As employees return to the workplace, there are likely to be conversations around COVID-19. Here are some pointers on how you, as a leader, can talk about the pandemic in a way that sets the tone for general conversations on the workforce:

- Talk about your own concerns and worries around the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Normalize their concerns.
- Encourage employees to talk about the concerns with a point person (their manager, or a specific person in HR/leadership).
- Emphasize that your organization has a clear policy against discrimination of people who may have tested positive, or who have been in contact with someone who has; persons from a particular geographical location (from the north-east of the country), or family members of healthcare and other essential workers.
- Share information about any anti-harassment policies and platforms that your organization has, and encourage people to report any bullying due to health issues that they experience or witness.

The workplace and mental health

Read more about workplace mental health here:

1. Why address mental health at the workplace?
2. This is what mentally-healthy workplaces look like
3. Recognizing emotional distress at work
4. Managing mental health while working from home
5. Addressing mental health, dealing with the challenges of creating a mental health-friendly workplace

Log on to www.whiteswanfoundation.org for more resources on workplace mental health. Write to us at outreach@whiteswanfoundation.org if you would like to begin conversations on mental health at your organization.



www.whiteswanfoundation.org