RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING STAFF IN HIGH-RISK ENVIRONMENTS DURING CRISIS

5 MAY 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ❖ **Offering in-person services during a pandemic** to better serve highly vulnerable populations adds an **additional layer of stress for individuals that deliver these high-risk services.**

- ❖ Leadership should clearly demonstrate that **the physical and emotional safety of its employees is its top priority. Proactively communicating the steps that they are taking to ensure physical safety** will improve the chances of keeping employees emotionally and mentally safe.

- ❖ Leadership should establish **a comprehensive plan to maximize employee safety** prior to individuals returning to work. It is important to **communicate this plan early and often**, and **constantly update** to ensure alignment with national, state, and local policies.

- ❖ **Always provide room for employees to provide feedback and discuss stressors.** Mechanisms can range from **surveys** (Survey Monkey, OfficeVibe) to **one-on-one sessions** between leadership and front-line workers. Utilize these opportunities **to support employees showing signs of stress.**

- ❖ Most importantly, **recognize employees** for their work and **drive home the contributions** that they are making to the world.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD
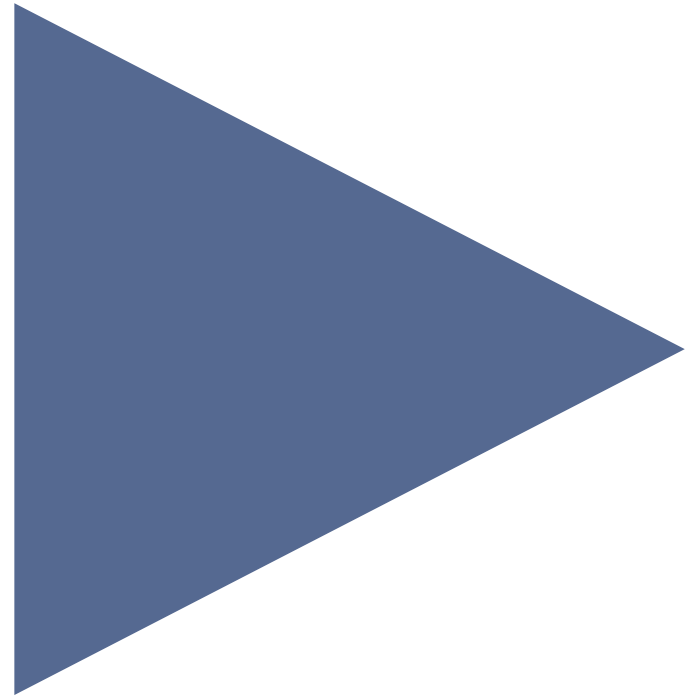
UNDERSTANDING STAFF SUPPORT DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

- We interviewed eight individuals experienced with **civilian, military, and medical crisis response** to identify themes and gather perspectives on supporting staff during times of crises.

- Select experiences of these individuals include:

  - **Crisis management and business resiliency leaders** at a multinational manufacturing company, an entertainment holding company, and a business and economic research firm;

  - Retired leaders from the **U.S. military and local law enforcement**;

  - Former director of **a large state agency**; and

  - **Mental health professionals**

Keep a close pulse on staff morale

- **The challenge isn't the work:** "Employees actually will be motivated to come in. What challenges them is anxiety around the unknown."

- **Engage directly with staff frequently.** Hold meetings to share operational updates and answer questions. Solicit feedback from staff often.

- **Don't just have an open-door policy.** Leaders need to "get out of [their] office and talk to people." "Management by walking around" is more important now than ever.

- **Find ways to assess team morale.** Survey staff to gauge how they are handling the return to the office. Be available for one-on-one conversations—even if they are not about work. Prioritizing these efforts will help set people's minds at ease.

- **Be humble and express humility.** Acknowledge that everyone's response and personal situation is different.

- **Peer support groups are vital.** Employees may not always feel comfortable talking to leadership – but they will probably relate more closely with their peers.

Maximizing physical safety will alleviate stress

- **Provide all necessary protection**. Provide masks, gloves, and other necessary PPE. Mark halls and rooms to ensure social distancing and make restrooms single occupancy. Establish screening protocols for everyone entering the building.

- **Encourage employees to care for themselves.** Ensure employees feel no pressure to return to work if sick and can take sick days to care for themselves or family members.

- **Screen clients.** Virtually connect with clients before appointments to confirm they are not sick. Provide masks to all clients and screen on arrival.

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Establish a plan early – and communicate it often	• **Develop a robust plan before staff return to work.** Create new guidelines for social distancing in the office and understand how employees are commuting to work. Ensure this is well communicated and expectations are understood. • **A crisis response team is vitally important.** Ensure that staff is aware of this team, receives frequent updates, and can provide input consistently.
Emphasize the mission of your work	• **Motivate staff by expressing how vital their work is**. The team was driven to public service; reinforce how much the staff are helping people and making a real difference in response to this crisis. *"Every day that you can deliver your service, you are making someone's life better. You are making your community better."*
Flexibility can reduce common stressors	• **Develop work flexibility.** Stagger employee hours to ensure social distancing. If the employees uses public transport, establish flexible work schedules to help staff avoid busier commute times. When necessary, implement policies for reasonable accommodations and time off. • **Manage workloads.** Ensure that staff do not become overwhelmed by carefully managing case loads.
Collaborate with partners	• **Connect with public health counterparts.** Draft guidelines and recommendations for public employees returning to the workplace. • **This is a different crisis – but there have been crises in CA before.** Utilize documentation for other crises (e.g., wildfires and earthquakes) if a clear protocol is not available.

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BEST PRACTICES AND RESOURCES
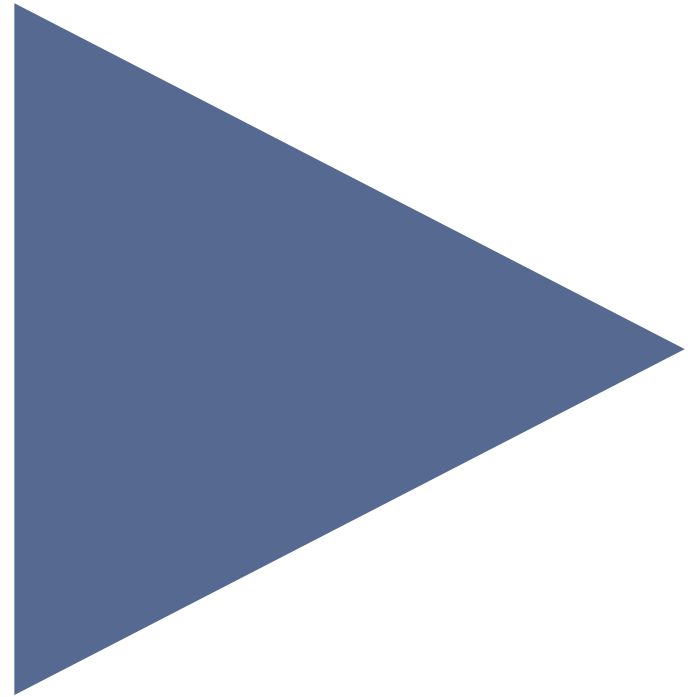
WORKPLACE PREPARATION AND PROCEDURES

Employers should do their best to operate with higher levels of compassion, kindness and listening space[3]

PHYSICAL WORKPLACE MEASURES	Set up **handwashing stations**; provide **additional sanitation measures** for workers and visitors; **utilize improved infection control and sanitation measures** for high traffic area; develop **rules around employees congregating** in groups; consider **limiting outside vendors**[1]
SOCIAL DISTANCING STRATEGIES	Implement **flexible work sites and hours**; **increase physical space** between employee workspaces; **deliver services remotely**, as possible[1]
RETURNING TO WORK	Consider having employees **return to work in phases**, with more essential employees returning first (*current spacing guidelines suggest 14 days between phases*); consider allowing **designation by employees as either vulnerable or not vulnerable**[1]; **Include managers**, as well as other essential internal team members to **engage in return to work planning process**[2]
EMPLOYEE SUPPORTS	Prepare to **swiftly address any COVID-19 related harassment**; prepare to address **stress/anxiety of employees related to COVID-19** and possibly **offer Employee Assistance Program**; co-workers and supervisors should be **reminded not to pry into employee and family members health**[1]
PROTOCOL FOR SYMPTOMS	Develop **internal procedures about employees presenting** COVID-19 symptoms, exposed to COVID-19, or tested positive for COVID-19 (e.g., contact tracing if an employee tests positive after returning to workplace); **ensure employee health confidentiality**[1]

All footnotes herein refer to references listed within Slide 15, References

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PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES

There are many psychological challenges which may present for front line workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 information overload:

- Healthcare professionals are likely receiving COVID-19 **information from many outlets,** including friends and family, social circles, and social media

- This could likely result in an **oversaturation in COVID discussions** with minimal outlets for stress-relief

> *Workers may want to set aside time to discuss "non-COVID" topics, and take time away from phones/ social media*

Fear & uncertainty:

- Workers may have fear and uncertainty about the **safety of themselves and others**

- Workers may have **additional concerns about PPE** and the **risks they may be putting upon others** – and may have **difficulty caring for oneself**

- Workers **in quarantine may experience guilt** about not working during the crisis

Difficulty staying present & attending:

- Workers may **experience anxiety**, making it **difficult to care for one's own needs**

- Workers may engage in **overpreparation to a diminishing impact**

- Workers may be **dealing with their own health issues during this time**, which could be exacerbated by the crisis

All above information above has been extracted from Resource #7 per Slide 15, References

The below list is an aggregated selection of strategies to support employee mental health during this crisis

RECOMMENDATIONS

See page 12 for list of resources to support employees

1 **Put mental health at the forefront of the conversation**, which could include: webinars or Q&A sessions on how to cope with stress and anxiety, training on best practices to support mental health, virtual mindfulness sessions, or revisiting mental health benefits offered to employees[11]

2 **Ensure timely, quality, and accurate communication** and sharing of information[8,10]

3 **Implement a buddy system** to ensure buddies are checking on each other's wellbeing; **partner more experienced workers and less experienced** workers together; **rotate workers between higher and lower stress** positions[8,10]

4 **Initiate, monitor and encourage work breaks** and time for colleagues to socialize and support each other[10]

5 **Implement flexible schedules**; reconsider **time off policies** to ensure that employees have the flexibility and time off they need[8,11]

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RECOMMENDATIONS

6 **Set upward feedback mechanisms** for staff and to deliver feedback and suggestions to management. If feedback **cannot be implemented, indicate why as soon as possible**[8].

7 Offer **voluntary debriefing** between staff and manager or teams who work together, providing an outlet for staff to voice feelings[8]

8 Orient workers on **how to provide psychological first aide and manage urgent mental health issues** within **emergency or general healthcare facilities**. Support employee's wellness plans by ensuring access to treatment – **including confidential mental wellness apps**.[10]

9 Have a **low threshold for referring workers to psychology or wellbeing services**, ensuring that the referral services have appropriately trained clinicians[8]

What not to do: [8]
- **DON'T** require staff to talk about their feelings
- **DON'T** offer non-specific training programs
- **DON'T** offer/refer workers to psychological treatment too soon
- **DON'T** offer unproven approaches for treatment

EMPLOYEE SUPPORT RESOURCES

Various resources are available to support employers and employees navigating how to best support each other during at this time

Type	Resource Link
Employee Wellbeing Support (*for employers*)	Welcoa
Employee Resource Group (*for employers*)	Mind Share Partners ; SHRM ; Diversity Best Practices
Employee Peer Counselor Support (*for employees*)	EmpowerWork
Meditation (*for employees*)	Stanford Meditation; Calm; Headspace
Online Therapy (*for employees*)	Talkspace

Resources allow staff to actively stop and check their wellness

PULSE CHECK

Boston Medical Center recommends **implementing a PULSE check**, which is a moment for employees to pause and check on themselves[9]

Pause and step away

Use your breath

Look around and name five things

Stretch and move your body

Explore your level of distress

PULSE · Check:
Resiliency strategies for you and your peers

– When you experience a distressful event and your survival instincts kick in, do a quick PULSE·Check –

P *PAUSE* AND STEP AWAY FOR A MOMENT

U *USE* YOUR BREATH FOR 4 SQUARE BREATHING
- BREATHE IN FOR 4
- HOLD FOR 4
- EXHALE FOR 4
- HOLD FOR 4
- REPEAT A FEW TIMES

HOLD / INHALE / EXHALE / HOLD

L *LOOK* AROUND YOU AND NAME FIVE THINGS YOU SEE IN YOUR SPACE

S *STRETCH* AND MOVE YOUR BODY

E *EXPLORE* YOUR LEVEL OF DISTRESS. HOW MUCH YOU ARE EXPERIENCING:
(1) Not at all (2) A little bit (3) Moderately (4) Quite a bit (5) Extremely

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Irritability and/or angry outbursts					
Hypervigilance (increased alertness)					
Exaggerated startle response					
Difficulty concentrating					
Inability to remember important aspects of a procedure					
Zoning out					
Helplessness					

– If you answered moderately or more to any of the above symptoms, don't be surprised, it is normal –

CHECK - in with your peers/colleagues. Page our Psychological First Aid (PFA) Support Service (x5804 or call hospital mainline and ask to page) and one of our own volunteer licensed clinicians will call you back within 30 minutes to provide you with immediate Psychological First Aid. Page chaplain-on-demand where one of own chaplains will call you back to provide you immediate support YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Additional resources for BMC Employees:
Employee Assistance Clinician: Beth Milaszewski, LICSW 4-4357 or beth.milaszewski@bmc.org
Employee Assistance Program: 800-327-1850 (available 24/7)

Additional Resources for BU Employees:
Faculty/Staff Assistance Office (FSAO): 617-353-5381

BOSTON MEDICAL | Trauma Surgery & Pediatric Surgery High Performance Team

We're in the process of aggregating additional resources – stay tuned!

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING EMPLOYEE MORALE

Prioritize safety[4]

- **Do not** ask employees to **work when sick**[4]
- Have **a back-up employee on call**[4]
- Increase **standards of social distancing and cleanliness**[4]

Communicate[4]

- **Utilize a platform** that all employees **can reach at all times**[4]
- Ensure **employees can read communications** before shift[4]
- Schedule **one-on-ones and consistent team meetings**[3]

Recognize employees[4]

- **Drive home contributions** that employees are making to the world[4]
- Offer **additional small gestures** if possible, like meals or discount codes[11]
- Some policy makers have suggested **hazard pay**[5]

Ask employees what they need[4]

- Encourage employees to speak up and **voice what they need**[4]
- Be **flexible in responding to feedback**—indicate **rationale if certain suggestions cannot** be implemented[8]

All footnotes herein refer to references listed within Slide 15, References

RESOURCES

Below resources are referenced in preceding slides by footnotes

#	SOURCE	LINK
1	Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner	U.S. Employer Guidance for Reopening the Workplace
2	Sullivan & Cromwell LLP	COVID-19 Response -- Return-to-work Considerations for Employers
3	Forbes	Company Survival Guide To Care For Staff During The Coronavirus Pandemic
4	Fond	4 Ways Employers Can Support Essential Employees During COVID-19
5	American Action Forum	Hazard Pay During COVID-19
6	CDC	Implementing Safety Practices for Critical Infrastructure Workers Who May Have Had Exposure to a Person with Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19
7	Canadian Pyschological Association	"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Emotional and Psychological Challenges Faced by Frontline Health Care Providers During the COVID-19 Pandemic
8	Academy of Medical Royal Colleges: COVID TRAUMA RESPONSE WORKING GROUP RAPID GUIDANCE	Guidance for planners of the psychological response to stress experienced by hospital staff associated with COVID: Early Interventions
9	Boston Medical Center	How Healthcare Workers Can Protect Their Mental Health During the Coronavirus Pandemic
10	World Health Organization	Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak
11	Fast Company	I'm a psychologist. Here's how employers can help workers get through this pandemic

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