

How to help staff members in distress during an infectious outbreak

As the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spreads, and the media coverage continues to escalate, many people are anxious about the uncertainty of what is happening.

It is normal to feel nervous about COVID-19, however, some people may be more vulnerable to worrying thoughts if they already have a health or anxiety disorder. In either case, it is important to pay attention to the emotions and feelings expressed by your staff and know how to help them when they are distressed.

Read cues and signals

- Behavioral
 - An increase or decrease in energy and activity levels
 - An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
 - Having trouble relaxing or sleeping
 - Crying frequently
 - Worrying excessively
 - Blaming other people for everything
 - Having difficulty communicating or listening
- Cognitive
 - Having trouble remembering things
 - Feeling confused
 - Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
 - Having difficulty making decisions
- Physical
 - Having stomachaches or diarrhea
 - Having headaches and other pains
 - Loss of appetite or eating too much
 - Sweating or having chills
 - Getting tremors or muscle twitches
 - Being easily startled
- Emotional
 - Being anxious or fearful
 - Feeling depressed
 - Feeling guilty
 - Feeling angry
 - Feeling heroic, euphoric, or invulnerable
 - Not caring about anything
 - Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

Listen and empathize

Listen closely and think before you react to the situation. This is an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with the person. Make sure to listen first so you learn more about what is bothering them and can give them the support they need. Be careful not to react too quickly, make light of the issue or tell them to just deal with it.

Understand the triggers

Remember that the emotional distress that is being displayed is usually triggered by underlying issues. Ask about what is driving the distressed response, i.e., “You don’t usually react that way in meetings, is there something that is bothering you right now?” Be careful not to pre-judge the situation. Instead, focus on listening to the person’s concerns and making them feel heard and respected.

Transform the problem into a positive change

If a person becomes emotional, comment on the person’s strengths while communicating hope and support. Once you know what the problem is, then you can help the staff member find a solution.

Help them keep their dignity

When someone is going through a tough time and you are talking to them about it, it is important to give them space to process their situation and keep their self-respect. Most people will already feel embarrassed that their manager is learning about their situation. No one should be made to feel bad about becoming emotional or crying.

Offer reasonable assistance

Sometimes the person will benefit from having a few personal days to sort things out. In these cases, allowing leave, adjusting a schedule and/or workload may be the simplest solution.

Note: If the staff member’s behaviors have become unmanageable, this could affect other staff, and a different approach may be needed. Options could include formal counseling, conflict resolution/mediation and/or disciplinary action. If a staff member expresses their emotions in ways that hurt or frighten others, consult with your human resources department as soon as possible.

Someone who is having difficulty managing stress, hypervigilance, obsessive reading about the crisis and/or worrying about the effects may need additional help. Remind them that the Employee Assistance Program is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all year long. All services are free and confidential. Your staff, and their household members, can call and speak with a clinical professional to get the support they need.

Your program website is a good resource for mental wellness education, and it also has easy-to-use Digital Cognitive Behavioral Therapy apps, including FearFighter® for anxiety, panic and phobia and MoodCalmer® for depression.

Magellan Healthcare is here to provide you and your staff members with compassionate and caring support during this difficult time.