Mental health and COVID-19 for public servants: Manage psychosocial risks

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Protect your mental health

Get help

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Balance family life

Supporting employees and teams

Caregiving while working

Manage psychosocial risks

Information for employees: COVID-19

> **⊘ If you are in distress,** please contact your <u>Employee Assistance Program</u> or nearest <u>crisis / distress centre</u>. If it is an emergency, call 9-1-1 or go to your local emergency department.

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Easing of COVID-19 restrictions at federal worksites | New

The Government of Canada's <u>response to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions for federal workplaces</u> is now available. Psychological health and safety factors have been integrated throughout the <u>guidebook</u> for federal organizations, including <u>practical considerations</u>.

COVID-19 and psychosocial risk

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with related stressors and physical distancing measures, are affecting the mental health and well-being of many federal public servants. The risk landscape for workplace psychological health and safety is also changing as a result.

According to the <u>National Standard of Canada on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace</u> (the Standard), there are at least 13 psychosocial factors that employers can and should address. When addressed effectively, these factors have the potential to positively impact the mental health, psychological safety and participation of employees. While there are increased risks related to all 13 factors in the COVID-19 pandemic context, the <u>Centre of Expertise on Mental Health in the Workplace</u> offers guidance to federal organizations on addressing four key factors for which:

- risks are most significant (highest likelihood and/or highest potential negative impact) and
- possible interventions are tangible and feasible (technologically, financially, etc.) in the current critical services-only environment

Proposed actions are adapted from <u>the Suggested Responses Documents</u> from GuardingMinds@Work.

Managing the risk to protection of physical safety

From The Standard:

> "Protection of physical safety is present when a worker's psychological, as well as physical safety, is protected from hazards and risks related to the worker's physical environment."

<u>Watch this short video</u> to learn more about protection of physical safety.

Increased risk due to COVID-19

Protection of physical safety plays a key role in the mental health of employees during the pandemic, particularly for frontline workers such as healthcare workers and public safety personnel, given their increased risk of infection to COVID-19. Research shows that employees experience lower rates of psychological distress when they have higher levels of confidence in safety protection at work.

Not protecting frontline workers could lead to:

- increased absenteeism based on fear of infection
- increased absenteeism based on exposure and infection to COVID-19
- increased mental distress based on fear of infection, and
- decreased morale, based on decreased trust that the employer has their best interests in mind

Actions you can take

To mitigate the risk to the protection of physical safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations should:

- Communicate with staff directly about how their organization is protecting physical safety. At a minimum, organizations should provide clear, accurate and timely information about:
  - steps the organization is taking to mitigate the risk of infection, based on guidance and information for Government of Canada employees
  - specific guidance for frontline employees, including healthcare workers, public safety personnel, ship crew employees and other frontline workers
  - health and safety policies and procedures, especially new policies or procedures developed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic
  - how to identify and report a health and safety hazard or incident

- any workplace incidents that arise affecting the health and safety of employees (e.g. diagnosis of COVID-19 in a particular work area)
- what supports are available to support employees should they experience psychological impacts of incidents and accidents including, at minimum, contact information for the organization's <u>Employee Assistance Program</u>
- how the employer is ensuring that they are meeting their health and safety responsibilities in the legislation, regulations and collective agreements

- In consultation with the appropriate health and safety committee, ensure employees have access to the proper equipment to protect their physical health, appropriate to their role and work location, such as personal protective equipment, office equipment and ergonomic equipment
- Offer training to staff on how to minimize exposure to, and impact of, physical hazards related to COVID-19, and on how to cope with psychological impacts of incidents and accidents, starting with high-risk populations such as frontline workers
- Document all incidents, accidents and responses related to COVID-19
- Ensure that timely and effective supports are available following a critical incident, including the workplace. Your organization's <u>Employee Assistance Program</u> may be able to provide critical incident or traumatic event response services, or contact Health Canada's <u>Specialized Organizational Services</u>
- Ensure staff have sufficient opportunities and facilities for rest, particularly for individuals working shifts or extended hours
- Review work-scheduling practices to ensure they do not impose undue risk of psychological harm

- Conduct an organizational risk assessment to ensure that the physical and psychological risks related to the pandemic are mitigated. Physical risks could include the risk of transmitting COVID-19, risks related to involuntary telework, etc.
- Review your risk management plan in the context of COVID-19 in collaboration with Occupational Health and Safety Committees, and invite staff to share their concerns and questions. This review should aim to ensure that policies, procedures and programs are:
  - consistent with changing jurisdictional recommendations
  - adapted to changing knowledge of the pandemic
  - still feasible given current organizational capacity
  - in compliance with current legislation, regulations, collective agreements, and
  - being operationalized, and are achieving their stated objectives
- Respond promptly and effectively to incidents, work-related illnesses and accidents
- Consider providing additional supports and services for employees working in high-physical-risk positions and/or environments
- Communicate directly with people managers. At a minimum organizations should share the following messages:
  - ensure that front line workers feel safe, respected, prepared, and supported foster a dialogue with employees about their physical health and safety through a variety of channels including team meetings, one-on-ones, focus groups, electronic discussion boards, virtual town halls, and electronic newsletters
  - be aware that:
    - implementing strategies to conserve the supply of Personal Protective Equipment may lead to feelings of frustration, anger, fear and lack of trust on the part of front line workers,

especially if there is a known shortages of supplies. This can be true even when conservation strategies are evidence-based and supported by infectious disease expert. Make sure that when you are addressing employees' concerns regarding physical safety, you are not minimizing employees' experiences

- employees reporting to the workplace in-person, even if they are not working on the front lines, may experience increased anxiety related to COVID-19 exposure. Prolonged exposure to anxiety can have on adverse impact on an employee's mental health over time

Managing the risk to clear leadership and expectations

From The Standard:

"Clear leadership and expectations is present in an environment in which leadership is effective and provides sufficient support that helps workers know what they need to do, explains how their work contributes to the organizations and discusses the nature and expected outcomes of impending changes...Transformational leaders are seen as change agents who motivate their followers to do more than what is expected. They are concerned with long-term objectives and transmit a sense of mission, vision, and purpose. They have charisma, give individual consideration to their workers, stimulate intellectual capabilities in others and inspire workers."

Watch this short video to learn more about clear leadership and expectations.

Increased risk due to COVID-19

There is a risk that workplace leadership and expectations may be negatively affected during the COVID-19 pandemic due to shifts in the work environment. Many Government of Canada employees may be adjusting to major changes in where, when, how and on what they are working, facing issues such as:

- current projects being put on hold, with or without new priorities taking their place
- working remotely and/or managing remote teams
- difficulty in accessing, or inability to access, corporate IT networks
- increased or decreased work demands

There are various ways these developments could negatively affect clear leadership and expectations. For example, if employees are able to work, but their current projects are on hold and they don't have a clear priority to replace them with, they may be uncertain with regards to what's expected of them.

Actions you can take

To mitigate the risk to clear leadership and expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations should:

- Communicate with staff regularly about COVID-19 and its impact on the organization, sharing direct, timely and accurate information. Messages can come from all levels of the organization, but messages should also come from Deputy Heads on occasion to demonstrate leadership. At minimum, organizations should share:
    - Information for Government of Canada employees page
    - COVID-19 updates from the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer and

- Mental health and COVID-19 for public servants resource hub
- Share information with people managers (supervisors, managers, executives, etc.) about how employees can stay healthy and productive during COVID-19, including the following Government of Canada resources:
  - Working remotely and Working remotely: Tips on staying productive
  - Mental health tips for working from home
  - Supporting employees and teams
- Encourage people managers (supervisors, managers, executives, etc.) to:
  - hold regular staff meetings as much as possible to stay connected with employees, share information about how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the team's work and discuss employee questions and concerns
  - establish formal and informal communication links with bargaining agent representatives to better identify concerns affecting employees
  - contact employees individually, as they may not always be comfortable sharing concerns, personal matters, and mental health issues in a group setting;
  - discuss changes in performance expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic with each individual employee on an ongoing basis
  - demonstrate leadership at different levels (i.e. employees should receive communications from their immediate supervisor every day, but may also benefit from occasional messages from members of their Executive team during these uncertain times).

Managing the risk to psychological and social support

From The Standard:

> "Psychological and social support comprises all supportive social interactions available at work, either with co-workers or supervisors. It refers to the degree of social and emotional integration and trust among co-workers and supervisors. It refers also to the level of help and assistance provided by others when one is performing tasks. Equally important are the workers' perceptions and awareness of organizational support. When workers perceive organizational support, it means they believe their organization values their contributions, is committed to ensuring their psychological well-being, and provides meaningful support if this well-being is compromised."

Watch this short video to learn more about psychological and social support.

Increased risk due to COVID-19

There is a risk that psychological and social support in the workplace may be negatively affected during the COVID-19 pandemic due to impacts on the ability to communicate, for reasons such as:

- employees experiencing difficulty accessing, or the inability to access, corporate IT networks
- lack of in-person contact, due to many employees being encouraged to work from home

- overloaded telecommunications systems, including Government of Canada teleconferencing services, due to the need to communicate while social distancing
- employees juggling personal responsibilities during the workday, such as childcare
- many employees being on leave due to reasons related to the pandemic

There are various ways these developments could negatively affect psychological and social support. For example, it may be more difficult for managers or colleagues to notice signs and symptoms that an employee is experiencing a mental health issue or domestic violence, and therefore offer support in response.

Actions you can take

To mitigate the risk to psychological and social support during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations should:

- Communicate support services, resources and information on mental health and related subjects to all staff regularly, and encourage them to get help if they need it. At minimum, organizations should share:
  - resources from the <u>Mental health and COVID-19 for public servants</u> hub on Canada.ca and ways to <u>get help</u>
  - information on mental health-related benefits, such as the <u>Public Service Health Care Plan</u>
  - information about how to contact their organization's peer support program, if applicable
  - information about <u>leave provisions</u> during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Provide people managers (supervisors, managers, executives, etc.) with:

- contact information for organizational corporate functions that can provide assistance and guidance on measures related to mental health support, such as occupational health and safety, labour relations, the duty to accommodate, disability management, etc.
- guidelines on how to support mental health in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as <u>Supporting employees and teams</u>
- other resources for assistance with managing psychological health and safety for their teams, such as <u>Specialized Organizational Services</u>
- Encourage people managers (supervisors, managers, executives, etc.) to:
  - maintain open communications with bargaining agent representatives to share ongoing concerns and identify specific issues raised by employees directly to them
  - find alternative ways to keep in touch with their employees, if traditional methods are not available
  - check in with their employees regularly, to share information from your organization that employees may not be able to access (i.e. if they are on leave, if they lack access to corporate networks) and to encourage them to ask for support if something is negatively affecting their well-being
  - take the time for team-building exercises to build or enhance trust and social cohesion, and support them in doing so by sharing resources, such as Workplace Strategies for Mental Health's <u>Building Stronger Teams</u>
  - encourage their employees to take their breaks

Managing the risk to involvement and influence

From The Standard:"Involvement and influence is present in a work environment where workers are included in discussions about how their work is done and how important decisions are made. Opportunities for involvement can relate to a worker's specific job, the activities of a team or department, or issues involving the organization as a whole."

Watch this short video to learn more about involvement and influence.

Increased risk due to COVID-19

There is a risk that involvement and influence may be negatively impacted due to the need for senior management to make major, rapid decisions for how their organizations can operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sweeping changes on how, when, where and on what employees are able to work were likely made at the highest levels and without employee consultation given the pandemic circumstances. There are various ways these developments could negatively affect involvement and influence. For example, employees may feel that they have lost control or autonomy over their work.

Actions you can take

To mitigate the risk to involvement and influence during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations should:

- Seek employee input on actions that the organization is proposing to take, or feedback on actions the organization has taken, in response to the pandemic, using as many touchpoints as possible to facilitate outreach to employees who may have limited network access

- Encourage people managers (supervisors, managers, executives, etc.) to:
  - provide each employee with as much control as possible with respect to their tasks and how they organize their work, and invite their suggestions, questions and concerns with what has been requested of them
  - engage staff via meetings, emails, etc. to solicit their opinions and feedback on how to move forward with the team's regular work (or other priorities they've been called upon to advance), the volume of work demands, how the team is communicating, resources and/or equipment, team morale, etc.
  - engage the bargaining agent representatives to ensure all concerns expressed by employees directly with them are identified

Additional resources

Given the diversity of workplaces and organizational cultures across the federal public service, the four key psychosocial risk factors highlighted here may not be the factors your organization needs to focus on at this time. Federal organizations are encouraged to conduct their own psychosocial risk assessment and develop appropriate guidance for their organization. The additional resources listed below may serve as a starting point, or contact the Centre of Expertise on Mental Health in the Workplace for more information.

- National Standard of Canada on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace
- GuardingMinds@Work
- Mental Health Job Aids for Managers: Psychosocial Factors (Canada School of Public Service, Centre of Expertise on Mental Health in the

Workplace)
- Managing Through COVID19 – How to Support your Employees' Mental Health: An Employer's Guide (Ottawa Public Health)
- Being a Mindful Employee: An Orientation to Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace e-course
- "have THAT talk" video series (City of Ottawa, Mindful Employer, Mental Health Commission of Canada)
- Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan for the Health Sector -Pandemic Influenza Psychosocial Annex

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