Enhancing Psychological Health During Times of Crisis in the Workplace
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We are living in extraordinary times where there is no roadmap. The rate at which life-altering decisions are being made for us is overwhelming and often results in fear, mistrust and disbelief. Amidst all this, there are things employers can do to help promote and protect the psychological safety of their employees. These suggestions stem from the 13 factors as outlined in the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

The essence of psychological health and safety is the way people interact with one another on a daily basis. Current pandemic conditions put stress on everyone in these interpersonal interactions, sometimes because the opportunity to connect with colleagues in the same way has been eliminated due to working from home situations. For example, interactions through email, or even teleconferencing, are not as complete a communications vehicle as face-to-face means. This is exacerbated when the content of the communication is challenging, such as lay-off notices or other restrictions. Under “normal” circumstances, the “Canadian Mental Health Commission has reported that, in any given year, one in five people in Canada will experience a mental health problem or illness, with a cost to the economy well in excess of 50 billion dollars.” (Canadian Mental Health Commission) The effects of the current pandemic will most certainly result in a heightened concern for the mental health of our workforce.

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Many things can be implemented or heightened during this time to foster psychological health and safety in the workplace. Some of them are presented below, organized the psychosocial factor in the Standard to which each primarily relates.

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<th>PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTOR</th>
<th>RECOMMENDED ACTIONS</th>
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| Psychosocial & Social Support | • Display trust in employees who are working from home. Resist the urge to “check up on them” unless milestones are not being met.  
• Provide assistance to those working from home where possible (e.g., IT support, office supplies that can be supplied without the employee having to ask for first). “When workers perceive organizational support, it means they believe their organization values their contribution.” (p. 20) |
| Clear Leadership & Expectations | • Provide regular updates to everyone so it is clear that leaders are aware of developing issues and are interpreting changes within the context of their workforce.  
• Outline the unknowns, be clear of the changes coming or underway. Be succinct and offer the opportunity to answer questions. |
| Civility & Respect | • Be kind to one another. This is even more difficult when communication is only electronic. This applies to colleagues, customers, vendors – like the supply chain, we don’t all understand how we are all affected by this. And, unlike a normal business day, decisions and actions are affecting people personally as well as professionally in any case. |
| Psychological Demands | • Consider if what we are asking of others is reasonable, especially given their new reality. It may be helpful to understand the home situation, within boundaries, of employees and what new working conditions mean for them. For example, when is the best time to have a check-in given the home childcare situation. The same time might not work for everyone.  
• The matrix of Control/Reward/Demand/Effort is shifting for many as the demands increase, control is reduced, efforts re increasing – is the reward sufficient to compensate? Rewards are not just monetary – say thank-you, offer perks. |
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<th><strong>Workload Demand</strong></th>
<th>• Everyone is trying to manage these – especially essential services still operating. Promises for future compensation (not just monetary) may help in the short term for psychological health as well as job retention.</th>
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| **Recognition & Reward** | • Don't wait for legislative direction – ask for employee ideas regarding how to adapt current practices. Recognize all ideas that come forward and explain why some were advanced and not others.  
• Celebrate the work of the team, even for maintaining the status quo in such unusual circumstances. |
| **Involvement & Influence** | • Include workers, to the degree possible, in making the necessary decisions. Those working on the front line may bring a necessary reality to opportunities regarding how to organize their work differently. |
| **Balance** | • Consider the employee’s demands of personal life/family/partners/parents etc. to a greater degree than may be needed normally in order to determine how work demands can most reasonably be met  
• Ensure opportunities are promoted to employees, and the employers are available, to talk about the situation and alternative approaches  
• Encourage breaks are taken as scheduled, especially when working from home – consider a short phone/video call “around the water cooler” for breaks |
| **Psychological Protection** | • Encourage employees to ask questions, send feedback, report mistakes and problems, or propose a new idea without fearing negative consequences to themselves, their job, or their career |
| **Protection of Physical Safety** | • This is likely already top of mind in these times but ensure that everyone is aware of all the efforts being undertaken.  
• Ensure all health and safety concerns are taken seriously and there is a way these concerns can be conveyed from employees and responses shared back.  
• Workers asked to do work that they believe is unsafe, have no hesitation in refusing to do it.  
• Workers get sufficient training to perform their work safely  
• The organization assesses the psychological demands of the jobs and the job environment to determine if it presents a hazard to workers’ health and safety. |
When things settle out into the “new normal”, consider exploring the **National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace** for more widespread application in your workplace. There are resources and trainings available to support this progressive step.