

How can we reassure employees who are worried about the coronavirus?

Dealing with illness in the workplace can be challenging at any time, but it is especially so during an infectious disease outbreak such as the COVID-19 coronavirus. Some employees may be anxious and fearful about contracting the virus, bringing it home to their families, losing pay for time off and not being able to pay the bills. Along with the basic notices on what precautions the employer is taking and how employees can help stop the spread of germs in the workplace, the following tips may help reduce employee fears.

Communicate frequently. Giving periodic updates lets employees know the employer is staying on top of things and up to date on developments. Lack of information can make some employees feel the employer has something to hide or isn't taking the situation seriously. Let employees know what plans are in place, if committees have been formed, and any other notable actions.

Provide information on what COVID-19 is. Knowledge is power, and employees may be feeling a bit powerless against the virus. Use information from the CDC, WHO and other local authorities to help explain it is a respiratory virus infecting the lungs, how it spreads, how to break the chain of transmission, who is most at risk and who is not.

Also, according to the CDC, someone who has completed quarantine or has been released from isolation does not pose a risk of infection to other people, which should help allay fears of being around those employees who have returned to work.

Empathize and listen. No one is going to feel better by being told they are irrational, or by having their concerns ignored. Let employees know their concerns are normal and the employer wants to hear them. Give them several channels to voice their concerns, whether to their manager, HR, a safety committee or other appropriate channel. Consider offering a channel for anonymous concerns to be submitted for those afraid to speak up. Follow up individually where possible and companywide in the periodic updates when appropriate.

Make sure you listen openly and do not react defensively. Some employees just need to feel heard and not immediately be stonewalled with company policy language. If they have a long-winded or complicated concern, see if you can restate it back to them in a more simplified manner both to show understanding and to know how best to help them.

Make it easy for sick or exposed employees to stay home. Many employees may not have enough paid leave accrued to make it through an illness or quarantine period where telecommuting is not an option, which might make them afraid to report their symptoms or exposures. Some stringent absenteeism policies (such as no-fault point policies) might also discourage them from staying home. The economic impact for many employees is very real—loss of pay or potentially their job means bills don't get paid—homes can be lost and groceries may be scarce.

Do what you can to alleviate these fears by temporarily adjusting policies where possible. Let employees know that attendance policies will be relaxed and in what ways and that such absences alone will not put their jobs in jeopardy. Consider allowing employees to go negative in their paid leave banks or, if possible, create a Communicable Paid Sick Leave policy to address these leaves specifically. Leave donation policies may also be used effectively in such situations, and interest-free employee loans may be another option. Whatever the employer can do to reduce the economic impact for employees will greatly ease their minds, instill company loyalty and, most important, get them to stay home when sick.

Such measures may also give the employer's reputation a boost, as those in the community and on social media will appreciate an employer taking care of its employees. On the flip side, harsh policies with no flexibility will likely work against an employer's reputation.

Remind employees about available benefits. Many employers have employee assistance programs that usually offer a few free counseling sessions over the phone. These confidential sessions could be quite useful for employees during this time to help understand and reduce their anxiety over the virus.

If your plan offers a telehealth program, remind employees they can use this feature from home instead of going to a doctor's office. They can then get direction on how to proceed given their symptoms.

Flu shots are also generally covered under employer health insurance plans and, while they won't stop a COVID-19 infection, they can stop employees and their family members from developing respiratory issues due to the flu and save them the worry and potential quarantine period of thinking it might be a COVID-19 infection.

Many group health plans are also covering COVID-19 testing without passing on any of the costs to employees, which can also relieve money worries.

Be generous where possible. Not every employee request can be honored, but relaxing some normal practices and policies may do a lot to ease nerves. If an employee wants to wear a mask at work, even though most won't stop the virus from passing through, let them wear it if possible. If an employee wants to telecommute and can do that successfully, let them do so on a temporary basis. An employer's willingness to help employees cope can go a long way to reduce stress.

Be creative. This may be the time to consider flexible scheduling, alternative workweeks, staggered shifts or rotating telecommuting weeks among staff to reduce the number of employees at the workplace at one time. Fewer people can mean lower risk of exposure and may help those who must report to work feel there are measures being taken to protect them.

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