Workplace dynamics during stressful times

We all respond differently to crisis situations, such as a severe financial downturn or an influenza pandemic. These events can cause fear, anxiety, panic and temporary changes in workplace, family and social dynamics. The fact that these events are so unpredictable, especially those that occur in several waves, can be more difficult to overcome as the crisis cycle repeats over time. It is important to understand how these stressful events can affect you, your co-workers and the general workplace environment in order to help you cope in times of crisis.



What to expect—from yourself and your co-workers

During a situation of upheaval, uncertainty and crisis, it is perfectly natural for you to feel:

Overwhelmed/emotional shock

- Anxious
- Worried
- Confused
- Helpless and powerless
- Loss of: control; trust; confidence; purpose

People's reactions to emotional shock vary depending on our cultural background and our experience. In times of great emotion, most of us turn to our deepest cultural or ethnic values for solace and support. Our personal or cultural beliefs affect the way we interpret the meaning and impact of a crisis situation. Reactions can range from individuals feeling the need to try to take control of the situation; those who will act withdrawn or angry; to those who are in total acceptance of the situation. Since everyone's response to a crisis will vary greatly and will be deeply personal, it is important for co-workers to be patient, open-minded and compassionate to colleagues during these stressful times.

The impact of stress on workplace dynamics

A stressful situation will also cause a variety of outward behaviour reactions. For example, if a person's response to the crisis situation is anger, he or she may behave by shouting or using inappropriate language. Some experts suggest that in times of stress, people may revert to less sophisticated or less effective ways of dealing with their work, their colleagues, supervisors and even customers. Alternately, a crisis situation may bring out the best in us, with colleagues sharing a renewed sense of closeness or teamwork.

The stress response to a crisis situation can cause changes in the workplace dynamic or balance, including:

- Increased inter-personal conflict
- A breakdown of co-worker communications
- Work team or group dynamics may improve or they may suffer—depending on the group dynamic and their individual response to the crisis situation
- Social distancing to avoid interaction and/or infection (during a pandemic)

Coping with co-worker illness and absence

When co-workers are absent during a crisis or become sick during a pandemic, the employees remaining in the workplace may experience emotional shock. The emotional reaction may be anger at the employee for putting others at risk, or even extreme fear at potentially losing a co-worker. In addition to their feelings of concern, employees will need to pull together and possibly take on more work to cover for the absent colleague. Over time, this can cause stress and anxiety for those employees left behind. It is important to take care of your emotional and physical health and to discuss your feelings with your supervisor to prevent serious stress effects.

A positive work environment is a shared responsibility, especially during a crisis. However, it is important to be sure that roles and responsibilities remain clear. Regular communication between employees and their supervisors is also important to provide assurance that the organization is working to protect the health and safety of its employees.

Identifying signs of stress

While we all experience and exhibit our stress or anxiety in different ways, the following are some general signs of stress:

- Trouble paying attention
- Feeling tired or general lack of energy
- Extreme bad temper or lack of patience
- Excessive worrying and insecurity
- Physical signs including: headache, stomach ache; neck tension; problems with sleeping or appetite

Building resilience to cope with stressful times

Promoting personal and workforce resilience will help speed recovery from a crisis such as a flu pandemic or a financial downturn. Resilience is the ability to effectively cope with, recover from, adapt to and even be strengthened by challenging life situations. The American Psychological Association indicates that several factors are associated with resilience, including:

- The capacity to make realistic plans and to take steps to carry them out.
- A positive/optimistic view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities.
- Skills in communication and problem solving.
- The ability to manage strong feeling, emotions and impulses.

Some ways we can build our resilience include:

- **Staying connected.** It is important to stay in touch with family and friends as much as possible through phone calls, email or letters, to maintain your support network during times of crisis.

- **Keeping fit.** Be sure to maintain as much exercise and stretching as possible. Also eat a healthy diet and get enough rest to build your physical resistance.

- **Maintaining a positive attitude.** Having an optimistic attitude can help you focus on the good things in your life, rather than worrying about things you may not be able to control.

- **Controlling stress by managing your worries.** Intense worrying about what might happen or how the situation might get worse can trigger our body's automatic "fight-flight" physical stress response.

Education also plays a major role in preventing the spread of disease. By understanding how a pandemic affects individuals, you can do your part to minimize the effects and control the situation. If you still have questions or concerns, you are encouraged to speak to a physician or healthcare professional.