

Chapter 1

COVID-19 and Employee Psychological Distress: Building Mental Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Mental health issues have been persistent for decades and represent a costly burden across both developing and developed nations. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified such issues, especially psychological distress, in ways never experienced before across the globe. Employee psychological distress, synonymous with emotional suffering, is a crucial determinant in employees' overall physical health and contributes to overall decreased productivity in the workplace. Since pandemic outbreaks have lasting effects, developing a mentally resilient workforce is of utmost importance to manage employee psychological distress. Mental resilience enhances one's ability to manage, survive, and even grow within challenging environments. Against this background, the chapter explores the relationship between crises such as COVID-19, psychological distress, and the associated negative work outcomes. Finally, strategies for building a mentally resilient workforce are recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

It is well-established that employee health and well-being have important implications both at work and for other aspects of an employee's life. Years of research have shown that healthy employees translate into positive work outcomes and productive workplaces. Indeed, organizational productivity is tied to employee performance. Global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has threatened employee health and well-being in unimaginable ways. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since then, this disease has resulted in the loss and disruption of human life across the globe and continues to present an unprecedented challenge to public health, world economies, and the world of work (WHO, 2022).

Even as strides are made in the development and availability of COVID-19 vaccines (Greenwood & Krol, 2020), high death tolls, multiple waves of infections, reinfections, the emergence of variants, and the continuous resurgence of cases into 2022, have put many businesses, large and small, across developing and developed countries, in financial crisis. In fact, this disease has spurred furloughs and layoffs as millions of businesses face survival concerns and foreclosures, with more than half of the world's workforce at risk of losing their livelihoods (WHO, 2022). Several enterprises and employees remain uncertain about what recovery and the future could look like. It is clear however, that within an uncertain global and economic outlook, developing and maintaining a healthy and motivated workforce presents a big challenge to employers.

Undeniably, safeguarding the health and well-being of workers should be a top priority for employers. Within the context of the current pandemic, however, the physical health and well-being of employees have taken center stage. As development and progress are made with vaccines, protecting the physical health of employees from COVID-19 is no longer the primary concern. Promoting the mental health/well-being of employees is now viewed as the key to the survival of workplaces. In fact, psychological distress has emerged at the forefront of the pandemic as societies, systems, and workplaces are being transformed; there are no vaccines for employee psychological distress (Singh & Ramdeo, 2021). Psychological distress is one of the most common dimensions of poor mental well-being. It can take many different forms and is known to occur on a continuum of severity with depression and other anxiety-related mental disorders. It is therefore characterized by mental and physical symptoms, as well as, emotional suffering, which threaten the social well-being of affected populations.

Indeed, employees are experiencing elevated levels of psychological distress and are grappling with thoughts of isolation, trauma, burnout, suicidal thoughts/tendencies and stress as the world and workplace undergo significant changes. This

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