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Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

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SUSTAINING OPERATIONS AND PREVENTING BURNOUT DURING COVID-19:
How Leaders Can Help

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused prolonged uncertainty for organizations and workers, leading to stress and burnout. What leaders do and say during times of crisis can significantly strengthen an organization, enhance operations, and improve recovery. Important leadership

> What leaders do and say during times of crisis can significantly strengthen an organization, motivate personnel, and improve recovery.

principles during a prolonged crisis include ongoing and effective communication, modeling self-care, addressing issues of grief, and restoring a sense of purpose. Below are crisis leadership actions to prevent burnout and sustain operations during COVID-19.

Communication

What leaders say, how and when they say it, are important for building trust and motivating behaviors. Using established principles of crisis communication can strengthen team cohesion and protect health.

- **Be truthful**. Say what you know and what you don't know. Commit to getting answers to questions and then follow up and provide them.
- **Avoid being overly reassuring**. This builds trust and strengthens the team.
- **Identify and utilize trusted messengers**. People are more reassured and motivated to action by those whom they most trust within the organization.

Self-Care

Taking care of yourself encourages others to do the same and enhances your ability to lead.

- **Take breaks**. Stepping away from work briefly and shifting focus reduces stress and enhances problem-solving.
- **Get sleep**. Regular and scheduled is best. Take brief naps or rest if needed. Remind others to get sleep.
- **Exercise**. Even if you cannot do your ideal routine, a brief walk or climbing stairs are helpful.
- **Avoid potentially harmful substances**. Using alcohol, tobacco, prescriptions or other substances to manage difficult emotions impairs performance and creates health risks.
- **Have a buddy**. Find a trusted peer or friend who will listen and offer helpful feedback.

Grief

This is often overlooked in crisis, but can cause distress and dysfunction when not acknowledged nor addressed. People are grieving loss of routines, a sense of certainty, feelings of safety in their community and place of work, the lives of people around them, and being connected to others. Addressing grief fosters recovery.

- **Be visible and communicate regularly**. Speak calmly to others even when they are upset.
- **Acknowledge grief**. This let's people know it's okay to feel the way they do.
- **Allow yourself to show feelings**. This reminds others that you are a person too and gives them permission to have feelings as well.
- **Honor losses**. Recognize and memorialize the difficulties and what has been lost. Involve personnel in this process to enhance self-efficacy and team cohesion.
- **Attend memorials or other services**. Being present conveys the value of these events and promotes healing.
- **Make meaning of the event**. Use what has been learned to improve things for others.
- **Focus on future-oriented growth**. Set achievable goals and recognize with the group when these are met.
- **Remember recovery from grief takes time**. Take care of yourself in the process.

Continued

Purpose

Work and home imbalance and workplace transitions can challenge the ability for workers to maintain a sense of purpose. Actions that foster a sense of purpose sustain operations and protect health.

- **Recognize challenges**. Acknowledging personnel struggles at home and work can reduce stress.

- **Learn your personnel's values**. Assign roles and tasks that specifically motivate them.

- **Encourage personnel to clarify personal values**. Knowing values helps with task assignments and optimizes workplace decision-making.

- **Make decisions consistent with organizational values**. During the prolonged uncertainty and concerns about the pandemic, adhering to values at work makes employees feel safe.

- **Seek opportunities for face-to-face interactions**. This creates space for sustaining connections and sharing among personnel that may not happen virtually.

- **Involve personnel in problem-solving**. This reminds people of their capabilities and builds trust.

- **Find creative activities for personnel**. When traditional work tasks are not possible, other engaging activities help maintain a sense of meaning and value.

- **Recognize hard work**. Also remind people of the importance of the work they are doing.