Employee Fatigue, Isolation and Loneliness

As we near the summer months, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic continues – filled with evolving new norms of how we go about our daily lives. We know that self-isolation and physical distancing are necessary, as they are preventative measures to slow the spread of the virus and the risk of infection. As we adopt and implement modifications to our routines, these changes can be linked to psychological effects including feelings of fatigue, isolation, and loneliness.

Employee Fatigue

Many employees have transitioned to working remotely, whether that means working from a home office, or their kitchen table – employers and employees have had to adapt. Working from home and having endless access and connectivity to your work can lead to longer working hours, which may in turn, lead to burnout. Unable to partake in face to face meetings, as well as having limited social interactions with colleagues may have employees feeling isolated. Maintaining good communication with your co-workers is essential in combating fatigue and isolation, and promotes stronger remote work arrangements.

Here are a few considerations to make the work from home transition easier:

1. Have a dedicated workspace
2. Where possible, select a workspace with natural light
3. Create a schedule
4. Change out of your pajamas and get dressed for the day
5. Maintain a healthy diet and hydrate
6. Take breaks

It is imperative to emphasize the importance of taking breaks during your workday, even when working from home. It's often a simple oversight, however, by-passing breaks may occur as you adjust to a new work environment. You may also justify additional work time in an effort to increase your perceived value and productivity. Think back to when you were at your physical workplace, you likely spent some time taking a break from your desk and catching up with co-workers during your lunch – you still need breaks from your home workspace. By taking breaks throughout your workday, you combat both fatigue and burnout. When stepping away from your computer screen or going for a brisk walk to get some fresh air – you give your eyes and mind a much-needed break. "Working at home begins to fail when individuals forgo breaks. In fact, not sticking to a schedule can have major implications for both productivity and mental and physical health."(1) Also, try eating your lunch away from your screen.

Isolation

Whether you're in quarantine because you have contracted the virus, or isolating to do your part in slowing the spread of COVID-19, being confined to your home with a decrease in social interactions can take a toll on your mental health. In a recent survey, it was found that "people are starting to feel the full effects of these practices: 54 percent of Canadians feel lonely or isolated." (2) Having strategies that will help you cope during isolation is extremely important. Some tactics to try include:

1. Create a daily routine. Keeping up with a routine will give you structure for your day.
2. Stay informed, but limit your media intake to reputable sources.
3. Stay active. Go for a walk or a bike ride, while maintaining physical distancing.
4. Keep in touch. Call or video chat with your friends and family.
5. Find a healthy distraction. Learn a new hobby or practice a skill you've been neglecting.

Loneliness

Everyone will experience loneliness differently, it is a personal experience. Some employees may not experience it at all, but others not accustomed to extended periods of time away from others, or those who covet social interactions may experience extreme feelings of loneliness. Regardless of your position, all feelings are valid. Remember you are not the only one feeling this way. "Now more than ever there is less reason to feel any shame or apprehension about loneliness; it may feel easier to share with others if you are finding it tough, and you are more likely to feel supported and understood by others." (3) It can be helpful to address your needs with friends or family members as social support is a healthy way to stay connected. The feeling of loneliness may seem never-ending, so it's important to stay connected to yourself and know your feelings are valid. Try meditation or journaling to reflect on how you're feeling each day.

The Australian Psychological Society states that "we experience loneliness because it is a trigger for us to reach out and connect with others." (4) Ensure you stay connected with your professional and personal networks. With the technological possibilities nowadays, there are many ways to stay in touch with people, regardless of where they are. Set up a weekly online video call, play virtual card or board games with friends or having a virtual family dinner can help you feel connected to your support system.

Self-Care

When what we have known as the "norm" is no longer relevant and there are so many drastic changes, it is important that we care for our mental health. One of the many ways to do so, is through self-care. The importance of "developing a healthy self-care practice means that you are willing to do some work to discover what makes you feel fulfilled. You're also willing to try and achieve a better balance between your physical and mental health." (5) Society has such a large impact on what we see as "ideal" self-care routines, but it is important to do what makes you feel good and fulfilled, as everyone's self-care routine will look a bit different.

If you're unsure where to get started, some very basic self-care tips include: getting enough sleep, eating healthy, exercising, limiting your screen time, and spending some time outside.

In addition to self-care, it is important to also practice self-compassion. Don't resist your feelings of isolation or loneliness, but instead "find ways to be accepting of them as coming and going." (6) We're all in this together.

References:

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