

Fachbereich AKTUELL

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Psychological Stress and Strain Experienced by Employees during the Corona Pandemic

Expert Sub-Committee on Mental Health in the Workplace
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This guide provides more specific information on the SARS-CoV-2 Occupational Safety and Health Standard of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) and refers exclusively to the current circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The usual occupational safety and health measures necessary at work remain unaffected (e.g., risk assessments).

The aim of this guide is to help employers and those responsible for occupational safety and health in companies to monitor mental stress and strain during all phases of the coronavirus pandemic.¹

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1 What psychological challenges are employees facing?

Creating good working conditions in the face of the coronavirus pandemic is currently a major challenge for employers. Many businesses, companies and organisations have quickly adopted protective measures to prevent further spread of the coronavirus. At the same time, many businesses are asking themselves how best to protect the physical and mental health of their employees during this crisis beyond only protecting them from becoming infected. The design of working conditions has a considerable influence on how well employees can cope with these new challenges at work.²

The key areas for stress factors used when assessing and designing workplaces can also be applied to the special conditions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. Employees have to cope with psychological challenges such as:

¹ There are four global pandemic phases: interpandemic phase, alert phase, pandemic phase and transition phase. According to these, we are currently in a transitional phase.

² The Federal Government's SARS-CoV-2 OSH Standard provides employers with confidence that they are selecting and implementing suitable measures to protect against infection in the workplace. Minimising mental stress is Item Number 14 on the list of special technical measures.

- work being reorganised due to new priorities, changed work processes, and possibly changed working and rest times,
- the emotional strain resulting from the special needs of many people in this state of emergency,
- the change to working from home and the subsequent blurring of work and private life,
- changes in communication and cooperation as well as social relationships at work,
- job insecurity or a fear of losing one's livelihood due to factors such as short-time work,
- the inherent danger of being infected at work (fear of infection).

As can be seen in the following list of possible reactions, employees can react to these exceptional circumstances in different ways that vary from person to person:³

- physical
 - they experience an increase in physical complaints such as gastrointestinal problems, headaches, breathing difficulties, etc.
 - they feel tired and exhausted even after sleeping or a few days off work.
 - they feel increased heart palpitations and sweating during physical exertion, their blood pressure is higher.
- cognitive
 - they cannot mentally switch off after work.
 - they think their own performance is inadequate.
 - they often make careless mistakes, and it is difficult for them to concentrate.
- emotional
 - they feel constantly rushed, under pressure and cannot relax.
 - they feel powerless in the face of the challenges of work.
 - they are impatient and irritable when dealing with other people on trivial matters.
- behavioural
 - they skip breaks to recharge.
 - they excessively consume alcohol, cigarettes, medicines or drugs in an abusive way.
 - they display a change in eating behaviour (reduced or increased appetite).

The following checklist contains a collection of possible psychological hazards and measures for ensuring that employees remain healthy – even during a crisis. The challenges of designing and organising work make it essential to review and, if necessary, update your risk assessment, including psychological hazards.

2 How can work be designed in a way that the health of employees is not endangered?

An editable PDF version of this checklist is available for businesses to download at the following link: <https://dguv.de/medien/fb-gib/pdf/tabelle-gefaehrdungen-coronavirius-pandemie-engl.pdf>. This checklist allows you to assess the risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic, assign responsibilities, and enter effectiveness checks for your business. The list does not claim to be exhaustive. Depending on each company, workplace and job, there are possibly other hazards and protective measures which are not

³ This list is not exhaustive but rather representative.

included in the list. The stress factors listed in the table are intended to give employers and those responsible for safety and health at work a guide to what they need to do to protect the health of their employees.

Stress Factor	Hazard	Protective Measures ⁴
Scope for Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work situations that are difficult to plan, unpredictable events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees can make decisions independently and quickly as a team in critical situations • Support/reassurance from management • Quick decisions on specialist issues are made by the team with managers • Regular opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange • Mistakes are dealt with constructively (without assigning blame) • Employees can prioritise their work content independently and adjust it if necessary
Information and how it is provided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate information flow within the company (too much, too little, contradictory). • Missing information shared within the company (e.g., hygiene standards, availability and use of Personal Protective Equipment, PPE). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have clear information channels and routines by defining information flows (e.g., Who needs what information? How can relevant information reach employees promptly? Who can pass on the information quickly?) • Continuously provide employees with targeted, transparent information about the current situation (use reputable sources such as the Robert Koch Institute or information from the Federal Ministry of Health and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) • Arrange regular face-to-face or virtual meetings to ensure mutual exchange • Set core priorities for work content and adjust regularly if necessary
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misleading or contradictory information on the company's current financial situation, the impact of SARS-CoV-2, and the pandemic situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare contradiction-free (well-coordinated), specific and easy-to-understand information (to be even more certain, use information from the relevant social accident insurance institution or the Federal Centre for Health Education, BZgA)

⁴ The recommended protective measures can sometimes be used to address different hazards. Therefore, they are sometimes listed more than once in the table.

Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of guidance regarding the extent to which staff (managers, employees) are responsible for complying with hygiene and distancing regulations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define responsibilities for managers and employees regarding compliance with hygiene and distancing rules. • Ensure that all employees have adequate training and sufficient competencies to meet their responsibilities. (see also stress factor 'Training') • Provide employees with the necessary backing when they meet their responsibilities • Offer crisis coaching for managers and people in positions of responsibility (How can managers strengthen and lead the team and themselves in a crisis?), for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use crisis coaching services offered by the relevant social accident insurance institution or - from external service providers (online training, e-learning programmes, etc.)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to decide how to assign people from at-risk groups (older employees or those with pre-existing conditions). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise duty of care and, if this cannot be guaranteed, involve higher levels of hierarchy • Clear rules on assigning employees according to their training and competencies while taking into account their health status (e.g., if they belong to a high-risk group)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedure for staff returning to work after recovering from COVID-19 is unclear. • Procedure for suspected infection, cold symptoms or unexplained symptoms (cough, sneezing, runny nose, allergies) is unclear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a pandemic plan or action plan ready in the event of suspected or confirmed cases of illness from COVID-19, for example: 'Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 Suspected and Confirmed Cases in Companies' '10 Tips for Pandemic Planning in Companies'⁵ • Workplace Integration management (WIM) should be used after long-term absences
Training	<p>Lack of training for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staff usually deployed in other areas • trainees, apprentices and interns • non-company personnel, such as workers from temping agencies, volunteers who are brought in to help backup • non-professional groups (e.g., persons from the Federal voluntary service, voluntary military service, or voluntary social year) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly define which training and qualifications are required for which tasks, and under which conditions individual tasks can be taken on • Provide suitable induction and instruction in the new areas of responsibility (e.g., allow sufficient time for induction and familiarisation) • If possible, appoint a mentor • Be aware of fears, insecurities and feelings of being overwhelmed that trainers and managers might have when providing training • If there is a lack of training, make use of services to provide further training of employees (e.g., subsidies from the Federal Employment Agency for course costs and remuneration)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of new media, communication tools (e.g., videoconferencing, file sharing software, platforms, virtual whiteboards, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train employees in the use of new communication tools and new forms of work (e.g., mobile work, virtual work, virtual leadership) (see also stress factor 'Communication & Cooperation')
Emotional Strain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of becoming infected at work (e.g., lack of masks or PPE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the hierarchy of infection control measures is adhered to (see the SARS-CoV-2 OSH Standard [in English] and sector-specific information).

⁵ The majority of the links in this document are available in German only unless otherwise stated.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of empowerment, feeling inadequate and uncertain about the changing situation. • Dealing with people who do not want to or cannot comply with safety measures (e.g., adequate distancing) • Violence and harassment from customers, colleagues or managers (including verbal or physical threats, insults, harassment, and hostility via social media) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers should inform workers about the scope of protective measures taken and create transparency in areas where this has not yet been done satisfactorily • Regularly offer active discussions between work colleagues, encourage team spirit and cohesion, remove taboos about expressing fears and feelings, appreciate performance (peer consultation – also virtual) • Make use of qualified psychological first-aid counsellors in accordance with DGUV Information 206-023 'Standards in Psychological First Aid' • Provide a list of support services and contact persons – both internal and external • Report extreme incidents to the relevant social accident insurance institution • Make use of psychosocial support services (e.g., Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) or telephone crisis counselling provided by the relevant social accident insurance institution) • Protect employees from violence (e.g., by creating a physical barrier at the reception desk. Further recommendations and examples can be found in a collection of various media from the social accident insurance institutions) • Provide employees with sample responses, agree on common language rules in the event of media hostility towards employees • Expand services for addiction prevention and engage in a discussion with workers who show signs of addiction (DGUV Information 206-009 'Preventing addiction in the world of work')
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impairments/limitations caused by hygiene and distancing rules (e.g., wearing masks, changed walking routes), including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - perceiving emotions - interpreting facial expressions - hearing and understanding - accessibility in general 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the topic regularly in meetings, plan for and ask for frequent questions and details in meetings, ask for patience and understanding. • Find out how accessibility is handled in each of the federal states (see information for people with disabilities such as 'Aktion Mensch' or advice from an integration office)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of changed working and living conditions due to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - worrying about job insecurity as a result of short-time work or job loss - double burden of mobile work or telework⁶ and the difficulty of balancing family and work (e.g., no childcare) - social isolation due to working alone and mobile work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuously provide employees with targeted, transparent information about their current employment situation and discuss further action • Managers should take into consideration personal circumstances, adapt work tasks and work processes (e.g., prioritise goals and tasks for employees accordingly, see 'Leading using Objectives' or 'Ensuring safe, healthy work through leadership during the pandemic') • Provide more flexible working hours (e.g., allow staff to start or finish work earlier) • Agree to rules limiting contact to protect private life, communicate these to the team and stick to them (see tips from the kommmitmensch prevention campaign or the relevant accident insurance institution, such as 'Tips for good mental health when working from home', '7 tips to strengthen mental health when working from home')

⁶ 'Telework' in this document refers to working from home on either a temporary or permanent basis.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule regular breaks during virtual communication, do physical exercise during breaks (see ‘Working from home: how to keep conference calls relaxed’) • Organise virtual ‘coffee get-togethers’ during lunch breaks or schedule small talk at the start of virtual communication • Train employees in the use of new communication tools and new forms of work (e.g., mobile working) (see also stress factor ‘Training’).
Working Hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer working hours • Overtime/extra work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise work in a way that maintains regular working hours • Hire more workers on a temporary basis to provide fast relief • Optimise breaks, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ensure regular breaks by setting up groups that take breaks on an alternate basis. - short breaks (approx. 3 - 5 minutes duration) - arrange more breaks (also in the event of staff shortages) - allow employees to schedule their own breaks, if possible • Provide compensatory time off during quieter periods
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift Work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you introduce shift work (e.g., as part of risk mitigation for pandemics), make sure employees are involved in creating/selecting the shift system (e.g., when introducing shift work to an office, take into consideration employees’ personal concerns/circumstances, such as childcare)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-Call Work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish rules for on-call work; define and stick to free times so that free time and recreation can remain planned
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-time Work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be open and transparent about the decision to introduce short-time work; address employees’ fears about losing their livelihood; highlight prospects and emphasise a common goal (see also protective measures under ‘Emotional Strain’ as well as information on the short-time work allowance from the BMAS [in English])
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurring of boundaries between work and private life, as well as extended availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on fixed times when employees are available to protect their private life; schedule sufficient rest periods, communicate these to the team and adhere to them (see ‘Extended availability’). • If employees are showing signs of being constantly available, conduct individual discussions or address them as a team. • See also stress factors ‘Emotional Strain’, ‘Work Processes’, ‘Communication & Cooperation’.
Work Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty, resistance and conflicts related to changed or new work processes (unsure what to do) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make changes to work processes as clear and unambiguous as possible and provide transparency regarding the reasons and aims (e.g., legal requirements, compliance with safely distancing). • Involve employees in the redesign of work processes as early as possible and jointly agree on how to implement. • Provide the opportunity to give feedback on experiences with implementing changes to work processes; ensure there is mutual exchange; develop a common understanding (e.g., schedule safe trial areas or times).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative effects of changed work processes (time pressures, interruptions, extra work, ineffective or unfamiliar work processes, or a lack of technical equipment). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve employees in the planning of new or changed work processes resulting from hygiene and distancing rules (e.g., determining the pace of work, sequence of processes, scheduling breaks). Organise work processes in such a way that assistance can be requested (e.g., organise a substitute-worker system, telephone standby, IT support) in the event of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> time pressures (e.g., if mistakes happen during the handover phases) frequent interruptions to the normal workflow (e.g., when undisturbed work is necessary but not possible) lack of resources (e.g., missing or inadequate technical equipment) Introduce waiting time rules for customers (e.g., online registration) Optimise breaks, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensure regular breaks by setting up groups that take breaks on an alternate basis. short breaks (approx. 3 - 5 minutes duration) arrange more breaks (also in the event of staff shortages) allow employees to schedule their own breaks, if possible See also the kommitmentsch prevention campaign's practical guide on 'Safety and health during change processes'
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of time to safely use PPE or masks, apply hygiene measures or other protective measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise self-protection even in stressful situations (e.g., hygiene measures, PPE).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unused capacity due to tasks that are no longer required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delegate other tasks (e.g., complete tasks that have been in the pipeline for some time, preparatory work, revise or develop Internet presence. Further training, re-training (see also stress factor 'Training')
Communication & Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clearly defined responsibilities or tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulate and communicate clearly defined tasks, delineated areas of responsibility, and clear rules of responsibility for the crisis situation Create clearly defined communication structures (e.g., staff meetings, handovers, feedback sessions)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No social interaction with colleagues or managers (e.g., due to social distancing at work, isolated individual workplaces) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No or little opportunity for social support between staff Loneliness (e.g., social isolation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a manager, encourage exchange and team spirit, openly address fears and insecurities, take into account individuality (different reactions to the same situation) and contact all employees on a regular basis, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> at defined times (at the start or end of work) or by telephone or video conferencing as a team or on an individual basis (see also stress factor 'Emotional Strain') Take feedback from staff about problems in communication/cooperation seriously and include employees' suggestions for improvement. Appreciate instead of demeaning those involved (e.g., asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but human and shows a sense of responsibility)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of communication tools (e.g., no software for telephone or video conferencing) or employees cannot use these tools. • Increase in virtual communication in the office or telework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide enough functional means of communication (e.g., bandwidth, software for video conferencing), communicate rules of use. • Train employees in the use of new means of communication and new forms of work (e.g., telework) (see stress factor 'Training'). • Take into account the requirements for virtual communication when planning schedules (e.g., schedule regular breaks during and between various virtual conversations (see also the kommitmensch prevention campaign's guide 'How to stay healthy when working from home').
Work Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of social support and peer support due to changes in working conditions (e.g., social distancing, new means of communication, hygiene and distancing rules) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain and encourage communication with each other at all times. • Treat team members with respect and appreciation, take into account diversity and take it seriously. • Promote mutual support – talk with colleagues who show signs of psychological strain (e.g., suggest taking a break, make them aware of support on offer) • Colleagues react to problematic behaviour and intervene, create an environment where it is alright to talk about unusual behaviour • Avoid and condone trolling, bullying, blaming, and belittling those affected • Involve interest groups (e.g., in conflict situations) • If possible, appoint moderators (including an interpreter if there is a language barrier) who can mediate conflicts and other situations. • See also the links under stress factor 'Emotional Strain'.
Managers & Supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of leadership, lack of support when needed. • Lack of feedback or recognition for work done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise discussion groups/troubleshooting groups or one-on-one meetings (e.g., peer counselling, cross-hierarchy leadership meetings). • Encourage acceptance of emotions and fears – address individual reactions and strategies, promote mutual understanding and support, emphasise the importance of trust and cohesion in crisis situations • Keep a close eye on colleagues to recognise isolation and withdrawal at an early stage. • Sensitive, but straightforward and clear language • Acknowledge professional competence and reinforce employees' self-esteem • Managers should act as role models (e.g., when using PPE or dealing with their own health)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers are not trained to deal with crisis situations and remote leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers should make use of support services for dealing with crisis situations (see also the links under stress factors 'Responsibility', 'Emotional Strain') • Managers should take advantage of services offered by the social accident insurance institutions (e.g., 'Doing remote leadership well' from the kommitmensch prevention campaign)
Biological Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrinsic risk of infection to yourself and persons you are in contact with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full transparency when communicating the results of the company's risk assessment, take into account local conditions and involve OSH experts and, if necessary, the responsible health authority • Provide briefings and training to employees based on the results of the risk assessment (work instructions) (see also services provided by the relevant social accident insurance institution)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take suggestions and comments from staff seriously and investigate possibilities for implementing them (e.g., suggestions for improvement) • Take into account employees' fears of infection (exchange information on the current situation and how to deal with it): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enable exchange between work colleagues - conduct safety-net talks between managers and employees
Physical Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor ergonomics due to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - wearing a mask over a long period of time - hygiene and distancing rules (e.g., communicating through partitions at cash registers) - mobile work and telework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only wear a mask when you have direct contact with others and minimum distances cannot be maintained in order to avoid having to permanently wear a mask. • Determine which activities require which protective measures. • Regularly change tasks or rotate tasks between different persons; transfer other equivalent tasks if necessary • Identify and use alternative protective measures when there are health issues (e.g., use a face visor⁷) • Eliminate background noise as much as possible (e.g., no background music at checkouts (see also the recommendations 'The Coronavirus: protective measures for employees at cash registers in the retail sector') • Allow more time for work processes that take place when wearing a mask; for example, when communication takes longer (see also stress factor 'Working Hours'). • Use recommendations for designing healthy working environments and conditions for mobile working and telework. For example, information from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the kommitmentsch prevention campaign – the relevant social accident insurance institution (see examples under stress factor 'Emotional Strain' as well as 'How to work well from home', 'FAQ - What should be aware of in office workplaces?')
Workplace Design and Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of guidance on distancing when dealing with colleagues or customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full transparency when communicating the results of the company's risk assessment; take into account local conditions and involve OSH experts and, if necessary, the responsible health authority • Provide briefings and training to employees based on the results of the risk assessment (work instructions)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace design not suitable for minimising contact (e.g., confined spaces or working in closed rooms with several people) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate distancing rules and workplace design, see also stress factors 'Work Processes' "Emotional Strain' including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take into account employees' fears and concerns in the event of measures not being implemented or followed - Take suggestions and comments from staff seriously and investigate possibilities for implementing them (e.g., suggestions for improvement) - Provide the opportunity to give feedback on experience with implementing changes; address disruptions and problems due to distancing; develop solutions and continuously improve them (e.g., make it possible to sit diagonally in a vehicle when travelling as a team)

⁷ Face visors only ensure the personal protection of the wearer. It has not been proven that they are also suitable for protecting others. Face visors should only be used when a regular mask is not possible due to health reasons.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redesigned work areas to minimise contact (e.g., cramped spaces when setting-up individual workstations, altered walking routes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt work processes; for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> allocate more time for completing tasks schedule short breaks more frequently when workplaces are cramped
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too much strain on a person's attention span as a result of new types of meetings and training sessions (e.g., switching from face-to-face events to digital events, such as teleconferences, online seminars) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When planning events, consider that digital events require more concentration and attention than face-to-face events (e.g., provide less content per unit of time, divide events into several modules, schedule more breaks, provide material in advance to prepare for the event)
Work Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions on what to do when there is a lack of work resources, such as masks and PPE, are non-existent or non-transparent Uncertainties, worries and fears when there is a shortage of masks, PPE and disinfectants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full transparency when communicating the results of the company's risk assessment; take into account local conditions and involve OSH experts and, if necessary, the responsible health authority Create an overview of what resources are required and check stocks regularly to ensure that there are no shortages In the event of a temporary shortage of protective equipment, find a joint solution as a team with experts and decision-makers, agree on a joint course of action – transparent agreements Develop strategies for conserving resources when using masks or personal protective equipment (see also stress factor 'Physical Factors')
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working from home without suitable work equipment (e.g., laptop, mobile phone, hardware and software, Internet connection, etc.). Blurring of work and private life, such as when using personal equipment for work purposes (e.g., private telephone line, private e-mail account). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide enough suitable means of communication (e.g., enough internet bandwidth, software for video conferences); communicate rules for use (see also stress factors 'Emotional Strain', 'Communication & Cooperation', 'Physical factors') Train employees in the use of new communication tools (see also stress factor 'Training') Give priority to employees with inadequate work resources when returning to the workplace after working from home Ensure sensitive handling of private data (e.g., private telephone numbers), explore all alternatives to using private telephone lines (e.g., provide a company mobile phone) When using private telephone lines, make precise arrangements as to when, for what purpose and to what extent they are to be used (e.g., no calls outside agreed working hours).

Table 1: Hazards and protective measures during the coronavirus pandemic

3 Long-term negative effects on the health of employees – what do you need to consider?

The corona pandemic (and the associated constraints and lack of resources) can endanger the physical and mental health of employees due to a variety of personal and occupational challenges. In addition to physical hazards (e.g., infection), it is important to keep in mind the long-term negative effects on mental health. The risk of developing mental disorders such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, sleep disorders, depressive moods or other adjustment disorders increases the longer these exceptional circumstances last.

Even after the pandemic has been overcome, it is possible that employees will show the symptoms of the mental disorders described above, because it can be difficult to detach themselves from the crisis. Employees often 'function' well in crisis situations or exceptionally stressful situations. The reactions to what they have experienced may not occur until later. This is quite normal after an exceptionally stressful experience. Therefore, employers and OSH managers should remain vigilant during and after the corona crisis and have a system ready (if there are any signs) for dealing with mental health impairments or the development of mental disorders.

In order to strengthen employees in terms of their resistance/resilience and also to protect them from developing mental health issues and physical illnesses (e.g., cardiovascular diseases), it is important to match your own behaviour and actions to the current situation. When dealing with stress factors, people are more likely to remain healthy if they see their own work situation as understandable, manageable and meaningful (sense of coherence). In order for such a sense of coherence to develop among employees, it is important that managers themselves have reflected on the three aspects of meaning, understanding and manageability, and can respond positively to them. Managers should also create the framework conditions for a feeling of coherence to develop among employees. Figure 1 provides an excellent overview of which resources can be fostered that are crucial for these components (Strametz et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020):

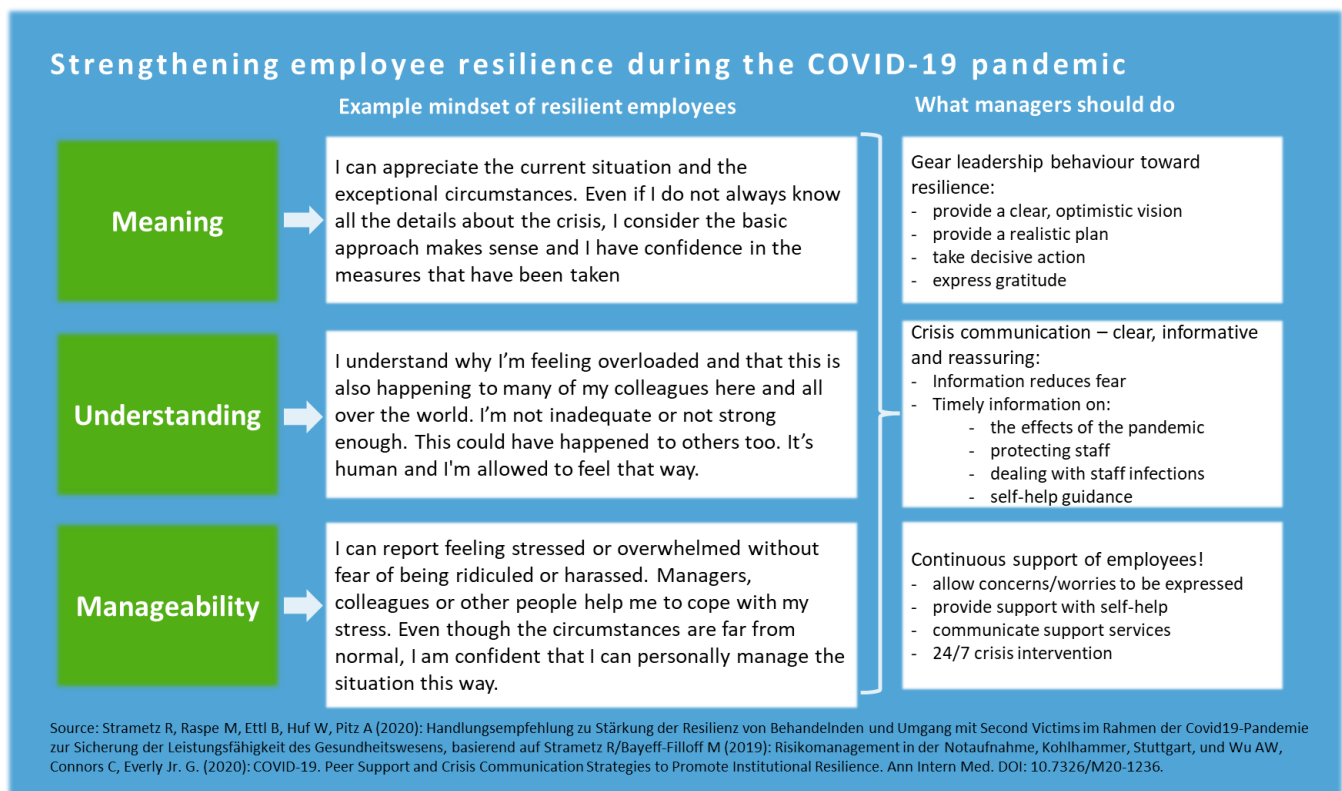


Figure 1: Strengthening employee resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If mental health impairments are ongoing, companies should make it possible for their employees to openly talk about these feelings and receive support (Strametz et al., 2020; see Figure 2). For example, psychological first-aiders or managers could become involved to provide support. In addition, professional help should be obtained for crisis intervention, such as psychosocial support services, where affected persons receive direct professional support as well as being referred to a psychotherapist if necessary. If this type of psychosocial support is not available from the company itself or from an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), other professional networks should be contacted, such as spiritual counsellors, social workers or external crisis intervention teams.

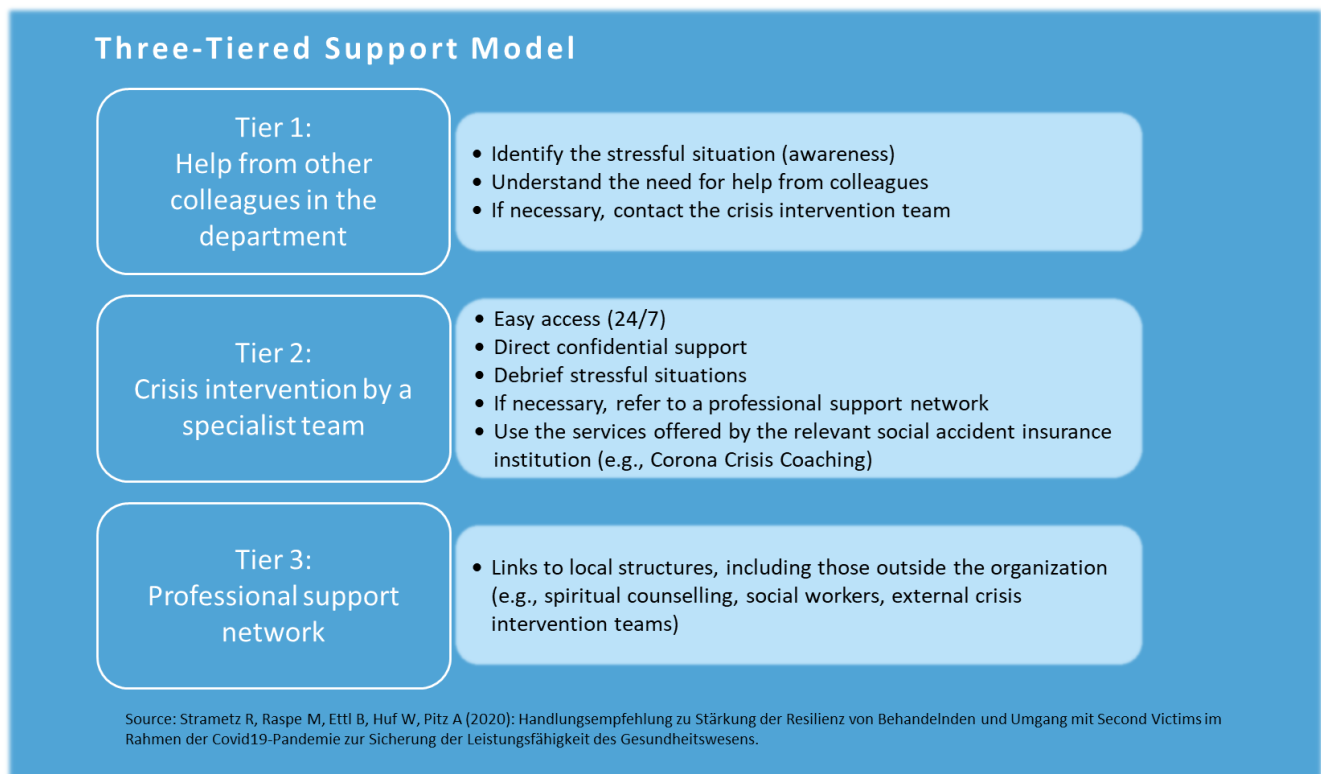


Figure 2: Three-Tiered Support Model

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