Impact of the Coronavirus on EAPs
Managing the Fear of Communicable Disease

| By Jeff Gorter, MSW, LMSW

Anxiety about the spread of communicable disease such as Covid-19 (Coronavirus) is understandable, even unavoidable as traditional and social media coverage continuously provides us with daily, if not hourly, updates. Based upon available information about Covid-19, governmental actions related to travel restrictions, quarantines, and organizational decisions for offices, travelers and study abroad programs are already in effect and more will likely be enacted.

And while the World Health Organization (WHO) and all affiliated nations are working to contain and counter this virus, realistically this disruptive event will likely last for months, leading many to respond with fear. From an emotional perspective, fear makes perfect sense – viral disease of any kind often triggers a vague and shadowy dread, when we are told of a **threat** without clear indications of **what we can do** about it.

Perfect Opportunity for Panic

This creates a perfect environment for panic, which does nothing to address the challenge but instead wastes time, money, and emotional resources, often leaving us with a false sense of "having done something."

There is a real and tangible danger of panic as suspicions grow and disrupt companies, organizations, and communities when coordination and support is most needed. History has shown that isolation usually only breeds more fear, not comfort, as the potential for a xenophobic or racially scapegoating atmosphere can quickly develop – which is emotionally toxic to any organization.

Finally, the speed of social media fosters an "echo chamber" of skepticism and conspiracy theories, leading some to delay or avoid treatment *("I don't want to go to a hospital…what if they quarantine me?")*

or fall prey to unsubstantiated "quack scams" *("I heard that Oil of Oregano is a sure-fire way to protect against coronavirus, and I found a helpful website that will take my credit card order!").*

Role of Business Leaders and EAPs

Business leaders play a critical role in addressing these fears, sharing real information and helping employees feel safe and confident at the workplace; in order to maintain the continued operation of your people and your business. But most business continuity preparedness plans focus solely on medical or logistical issues; few address the emotional impact. That's a risk, as your plans are only as good as the people enacting them.

EAPs play a critical role in addressing the behavioral health impact, particularly in coaching business **leaders to lead** during this challenging period. Here are some leadership tips that have proven effective in past public health crises to manage fear and encouraging hope and resilience:

Maximize employee trust and effectively communicate risk and health information

➢ Ensure you have appropriate crisis management and travel risk support.

➢ Communicate early and often.

➢ Share what you know *and* what you don't know as the situation develops, with the assurance that you will share info as it becomes available and is verified. For example, a message such as "At this point, we are able to confirm that four of our team members are in quarantine for observation and their status at this time is stable. We cannot confirm when they will be released, but we will share that information as soon as it becomes official, along with regular updates as this situation develops."

➢ Use reputable sources, such as the U.S. Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for ongoing information (https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019).

➢ Appoint a consistent messenger from the organization with the authority to disseminate information. Often this is a Senior Executive who is well-known and has an established reputation of leadership in the organization.

➢ Use a flexible style of communication, sending a consistent message through a variety of mediums (email, text, corporate websites, etc.)

➢ Ensure a two-way dialogue with monitoring of employee feedback. For example, soliciting employee input on concrete ways to support impacted team members or their families is often an effective and welcome avenue to focus altruistic initiatives.

➢ Be attentive and responsive to the wide variety of react the same way; some may be anxious, others

may express anger, while others "just want to get back to work" (i.e. finding comfort and grounding in their predictable routines). Effective leaders are able to allow each group to adapt as best fits their milieu.

Maximize adaptive behavior change

➢ Create a central source of authoritative information regarding corporate response, resources, updates, etc. Some companies utilize and direct employees to their established website for updates, while others send out a daily Status Communique to keep the workforce informed.

➢ Access and distribute fact sheets from a reliable source. Again, the CDC and the World Health Organization websites are dependable sources of factual information regarding illness prevention and precautions.

Precautions and Guidelines are Crucial

Along with leadership support, EAPs can also serve as a trusted and verifiable conduit of practical information to all employees, particularly when it comes to promoting common-sense precautions to prevent the spread of any respiratory virus, including Covid-19. The following guidelines from the CDC offers reasonable and recommended actions all business leaders can encourage, and all employees can adopt:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Finally, accepting ambiguity is challenging -- no one can predict the exact sequence of events and the health crisis related to Covid-19 is not over. This challenge, as with any challenge, starts with managing our own stress and purposefully engaging in healthy coping skills.

The following simple but effective guidelines help maintain the physical and emotional balance needed to respond to any substantive change and adapt accordingly, regardless of the stressor:

- Maintain regular sleep and dietary patterns as best you can – there is surprising comfort and strength in attending to the basics.
- Physical exercise (may require adaptations).
- Be reasonably and appropriately cautious (see CDC guidelines).
- Avoid isolating; stay connected with support systems (may require adaptations).
- Avoid over-exposure to traditional network or social media reports re: Covid-19.
- Keep moving forward -- set and act on small achievable goals.
- Utilize the full range of EAP resources (electronic, print, 1-800-support lines, etc.) ❖

- Jeff Gorter

➢ Describe rationale for any policy/operational changes (travel restrictions, moves to a work-from-home modality, etc.)

➢ Ensure equal access and distribution of resources. While certain departments or areas may not be directly impacted, the entire organization will be concerned and will welcome the offer of appropriate resources calibrated to their situation.

Reduce negative social and emotional impact and improve healthy coping

➢ Distribute information about coping and emotional self-care strategies via social media, print, website, etc. EAPs play a key role in assisting companies in this arena.

➢ Promote resilience – set manageable goals, maintain optimism, take reasonable steps to ensure safety, encourage giving/receiving emotional support in creative ways, etc.

➢ Utilize your EAP for telephonic support and as a resource for information.

Support key personnel in critical functions

➢ Train workforce leaders on the importance of stress management and psychosocial support.

➢ Empower staff with promotion of reasonable work adaptations (allow time to care for children if schools are closed, etc.)

➢ Recognize that a range of emotional reactions such as grief, anger, fear, etc., are normal responses to this highly unusual situation.

➢ Check-in often with information, support, and encouragement.

Summary

The Covid-19 crisis, like many health challenges, will be resolved through the skill and expertise of medical health care practitioners, researchers, and epidemiologists who are already in pursuit of solutions.

As EA professionals, our goal is to support and affirm the business leaders and employees who look to us for guidance, comfort, and yes, courage. And courage, to quote consultant Mathew Kelly, is "not the absence of fear, but the acquired ability to move beyond fear." Let's help them move. ❖

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References

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The Journal of Employee Assistance

Tips for raising awareness of your EAP:

Get on a local speaking circuit. Don't get pigeonholed into only hanging out with EA colleagues or just networking at EAP events. Utilize or join Chamber of Commerce, civic groups (think Lions, Rotary, etc.) and others to raise awareness of an issue or about EAP in general. Joining a business association related to EAP, such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is another possibility.

Have an elevator speech ready. If someone asked, *"What does your EAP do?"* would you know what to say in roughly 30 seconds? The following is an idea that one EA professional has used: "Anything worth losing sleep about, is worth coming in for."

Utilize social media. Some people are intimidated about getting involved in social media, but don't underestimate how much Millennials use these platforms to communicate. If you are on social media, how often? It should be on a regular basis to remain current.❖