

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Managing Concerns and Anxieties about Infectious Diseases at Work

Whether they are common or rare, infectious diseases may affect your business, workforce, and the people you manage. With the recent outbreak of COVID-19 (commonly known as Coronavirus), there is growing concern about the spread of infectious diseases in the workplace.

This article provides a brief overview for managers with best practices on how to communicate and manage employee concerns, whatever the nature of the infectious disease.

What is an infectious disease?

Infectious diseases are illnesses caused by germs (such as viruses, bacteria, or fungi) that can make you sick if they get into your body and multiply. While not all diseases are spread from person to person, those that are are classed as contagious (or "communicable"). These may be transmitted when an infected person coughs or sneezes or has contact with blood or sexual fluids of another person, or when a person touches an object an infected person has used, such as a doorknob or computer mouse.

Some infectious diseases can be transmitted to people from insects or animals but cannot spread from person to person. Fears about infectious diseases sometimes result from people's mistaken beliefs that they can "catch" illnesses that are not contagious.

Best practices for managers

Share accurate and up-to-date information. If an infectious disease is causing concern in your workplace, sharing accurate information about the disease is the first step toward helping to manage anxieties in the workplace.

Offer reassurance and help people stay focused.

Make clear that your organization takes health and safety very seriously and will take appropriate steps to protect employees. If your employees normally travel to a country where wide-spread infection has been reported, stay mindful of updates from the State Department, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization**.**

Describe the steps your organization is taking to protect employees, customers, and the public.

If an outbreak of an infectious disease occurs in your community, give your team information about how your organization and department plan to keep the business running smoothly. Explain what human resources (HR) policies are in place, what type of medical leave and flexible work options exist, and what pay and benefits will be available. Try to develop procedures that will allow key business tasks to be delegated to others or done remotely if people get sick.

Help people to stay focused on their work and maintain normal routines.

Encourage any employees who shows signs of stress or anxiety to contact the assistance program. The program offers support and resources for many personal and work-related issues.
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What to do if an employee has infectious disease-related concerns

If one of your team is worried that they may have been exposed to an infectious disease, speak to your human resources (HR) department about issues such as:

- how to protect the privacy of an employee who has or has had an infectious disease if others ask about the illness
- what leave or flexible work options are available to someone who has had or has been exposed to an infectious disease
- when an employee may return to work after developing an infectious disease or traveling to a country where the employee may have been exposed to one
- how to avoid discriminating against or engaging in potentially unfair treatment of someone who has or has had an infectious disease
- what to do if someone refuses to come to work for fear of being infected with a highly contagious disease. The employee's refusal may be protected under state or federal laws.

Maintaining good communication with employees, HR, and senior leaders is key to helping your team stay calm, focused, and productive when people have worries or fears about infectious diseases.