

EAP and Work-Life Services



Psychological Preparation for Pandemic Influenza in Organizational Settings

Randy Martin, PhD
Director, Humana
EAP
12-1 to 12-3-14

Humana[®]

Objectives

- Identify anticipated psychological responses by employees to an influenza pandemic
- Recognize the importance of personal and organizational resilience in managing the psychological impact of a pandemic
- Understand strategies for proactively building a culture of organizational resilience prior to a pandemic
- Learn what organizational leadership can do to maintain work continuity during and after a pandemic

Understanding why we respond the way we do in high-stress situations

- When early humans encountered danger, their bodies prepared them for “fight,” “flight,” or “freeze.” People today respond to modern stressors in much the same way, even though these are not necessarily productive responses.
- Responses to stress during a pandemic will differ from individual to individual. People who have a tendency to “fight” are likely to engage in interpersonal conflict. People who characteristically “flee” will refuse to come into work and may take a medical leave of absence. Those who “freeze” will feel numb, helpless, and unable to function.
- People who demonstrate resilience, however, will be less likely to fight, flee, or freeze and will be more likely to constructively respond to stressful circumstances like a pandemic.

Considerations

- There is no way to predict with accuracy how employees will respond during a flu pandemic, although prior experience with the aftermath of traumatic events offers some guidance.
- The severity of the emotional impact will depend on several factors, including the number of people affected, the mortality rate, and the stability of community infrastructure, e.g., transportation system.
- The role of organizational leadership in managing responses to a pandemic is crucial. Plans will only be as effective as the people carrying them out.
- Organizations that have developed a “culture of resilience” will be more likely to effectively respond to a crisis.

How a pandemic would impact employees

- Fear for personal and family safety
- Grief over loss of family members/friends
- Anxiety about finances and meeting everyday needs
- Depression, hopelessness, and worry about the future
- Anger at community leaders and/or employers if there is a perception that response to the pandemic is inadequate
- Feeling helpless; loss of control

Anticipated reactions to grief and loss

Several aspects of a pandemic may complicate grief and loss reactions.

- Inability to see loved ones or say “good-bye” to those who may die in the hospital or while separated from family.
- Inability to retrieve the body for timely burial or funeral rituals.
- Shortage of caskets, burial sites or crematoriums.
- Mass stockpiling of corpses until burial or cremation can be facilitated.
- Reactivation of previous losses.

Source: Division of Mental Health Services, NJ Department of Human Services

What will happen in the workplace?

Signs and symptoms of stress:

- Behavioral, e.g., hostility, impulsivity, misuse of alcohol and prescription or illicit drugs, errors and accidents, poor performance
- Cognitive/emotional, e.g., anxiety, depression, decreased concentration, mood swings
- Physical, e.g., fatigue, headaches, poor or increased appetite, muscle pain

Building resilience to manage stress

- Resilient people and organizations will be best prepared to cope during and after a flu pandemic
- Resilience is an important component of “stress hardiness”
- Applies to both individuals and groups
- Can be fostered by organizational leadership before a pandemic, during a pandemic, and after a pandemic

What is resilience?

The ability to recover quickly from stress, change, or misfortune; buoyancy.

Where does individual resilience come from?

- Genetic factors
- Psychological factors
- Culture/beliefs/values
- Role models
- Problem-solving skills
- Social support
- Physical health/well-being

Building organizational resilience before a pandemic

- Get leadership and line management on board by demonstrating the importance of building resilience and managing stress
- Train managers to boost their own resilience and learn how to foster greater resilience in employees
- Provide scenarios on communicating with employees during a pandemic or other traumatic event and ask managers to participate in role plays
- Offer organizational-wide resilience training to employees

Promoting a positive emotional response during a pandemic (1)

- Communicate early and often
- Demonstrate that your organization and leadership can be trusted
- Share what you know *and* what you don't know as the situation develops
- Identify a consistent messenger with authority to disseminate information
- Use a flexible style of communication
- Ensure two-way dialogue
- Be attentive and responsive to diversity in the workplace

Source: *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness*; Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 2006. Information provided by Crisis Care Network.

Promoting a positive emotional response during a pandemic (2)

- Create a website to serve as a central source of authoritative information; include access to resources like the EAP and articles on managing stress
- Develop fact sheets and tip sheets for taking care of yourself and your family emotionally
- Suggest using your Work-Life services to help employees balance work, personal, and family needs
- Promote resilience – set manageable goals, maintain optimism, take reasonable steps to ensure safety, encourage giving/receiving emotional support in creative ways, etc.

Source: *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness*; Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 2006. Information provided by Crisis Care Network.

Promoting a positive emotional response during a pandemic (3)

- Train leaders within the workforce on the importance of stress management and psychosocial support
- Provide training for managers on how to identify employees who need additional help
- Empower staff with promotion of reasonable work/rest cycles
- Identify pre-arranged rest/recuperation areas supplied with food, relaxation aids, resources, and means for communicating with significant others
- Recognize that emotional reactions (grief, anger, fear, etc.) are normal responses to this highly unusual challenge

Source: *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness*; Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 2006. Information provided by Crisis Care Network.

Ways your EAP can help

- Assist with emotional support for employees in distress
- Facilitate referrals to face-to-face sessions for employees who want to meet with someone to talk about their concerns
- Offer telephonic sessions for employees who do not want to meet with counselors face-to-face
- Provide manager consultation to support managers in working through the complex employee situations and concerns that may come up over the course of a pandemic flu outbreak
- Offer Critical Incident support: on-site counseling in a group or 1:1 format to help employees who may be experiencing the aftermath of a traumatic incident related to the pandemic

Ways Work-Life Services can help

- Adult care options for caregivers of older adults who may be experiencing health problems related to the pandemic, or who may have lost their regular healthcare aid or other supports as a result of the pandemic
- Child care assistance for parents whose children may no longer have access to daycare, school, or in-home child care
- Targeted referrals or community assistance that may be available for those impacted by the pandemic

Summary

- Psychological preparation for an influenza pandemic is as important as physical preparation
- A pandemic will have widespread emotional impact on the lives of employees and will be particularly difficult for those without strong coping skills
- Building organizational and individual resilience before and during a pandemic can help employees cope and foster business continuity
- EAP and Work-Life Services are valuable resources for building and maintaining resilience