Co-existing in the workplace with Covid-19

As we begin the process of reintroducing staff back to the workplace, this period of transition can activate feelings of worry and fear. As news of a pandemic swept in, the overwhelming message was isolation for safety. Health officials and leaders have taken significant and effective measures to reduce transmission and flatten the curve, however the virus remains. It makes sense that we are apprehensive with returning to having more contact with people. We are wanting to resume our routines and connections amidst a virus that has lessened but not eliminated. How can we address the emotional impact in this important transition?

Assessment:

First take some time to explore the realities of your worries. Often, we sit with a vague or nagging discomfort that we don't take the time to clarify for ourselves. Sitting down and writing out what exactly is contributing to those uncomfortable feelings gives us some feedback about how to move forward. For example, the overwhelming concern might be "I'm going to get the virus and give it to my whole family and it will be devastating." That is a very heavy internal burden that would make any of us emotionally dysregulated. While our first reaction is to push that away, this is the time, in a safe and reflecting way, to explore the realities of that thought. For example, ask yourself more about this fear "How do I think I will get the virus?" "How am I going to spread it?" "How am I going to manage my work wearing a mask all day?" Get clear about what your concerns really are.

Problem Solving:

When you are clear about the source of your anxiety, you can address it. We aren't returning to "business as usual," many steps are being taken to address safety in your workplace. Familiarize yourself with those changes and discuss with your leaders about what this will mean for the way you do your work. Uncertainty and unpredictability can contribute to unhealthy amounts of fear and stress. Planning and information will reduce that stress.

Unhooking from Anxiety:

After you have confronted your anxiety, it's time to unhook from it.   Sometimes anxiety puts our planning into overdrive and we get stuck in the "what ifs" and planning for every potential future outcome. Make your problem solving relevant to the here and now. Sometimes we think our worrying makes us vigilant, that it protects us. The reality is that most of our worrying won't come true anyway and it robs us of peace and joy in the present moment. We give much of our time and energy focusing on things that will not happen.   One strategy to address this is "Name It To Tame It." Actively identify "This is a moment of anxiety" or say "That is my anxiety talking." When we call it out for what it is, a feeling of anxiety, rather than a fact, we reduce the intensity and it's power over us.

Moving Forward:

Some anxiety and fear is normal in this process. If you are feeling this way, no doubt your team members are also experiencing their own worries in this process. Support and validate each other through this changing work situation. However, we don't want to keep activating each other and intensifying an environment of fear. Instead of dwelling in the intensity of anxiousness, move to taking care of our emotions and each other. Rather than staying stuck in ruminating in our worries as a group, validate each other for example,"This is a hard time" or "Change can feel unsettling" and then explore options. We can feel worry AND move forward simultaneously.

Support:

Sometimes we have other things contributing to the complexity of our situation, for example pre-existing depression or anxiety, or our own grief or loss, that makes it more difficult to cope. When the intensity of emotional experience is impacting our functioning and you notice yourself struggling to cope, reach out to EAP.

For Further Information:

https://stewartmckelvey.com/thought-leadership/returning-to-work-covid-19-and-mental-health-considerations/

https://cmha.ca/news/6-tips-to-respond-to-employee-anxiety-about-covid-19

https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/employee-mental-health

This article is directed at teachers returning to work, but has relevant information for other work settings:

https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/back-in-the-classroom-strategies-for-teachers/

Contact Information:

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