

HOW TO HELP AN EMPLOYEE OR COLLEAGUE PANICKED BY CORONAVIRUS

Most people are experiencing some level of fear, and a few of us are experiencing a lot. It's really not for us to say if that is reasonable. But it is on us to help each other if we can.

Here are some tips from two psychologists about how you can help an employee or colleague who is feeling highly anxious about coronavirus. This article is broken down into six sections.

1. Detecting anxiety in yourself and others
2. Helping others with anxiety
3. Helping with a panic attack
4. The risk of using facts
5. Thinking about longer-term anxiety issues
6. How to stop anxiety spreading

1. Detecting anxiety in yourself and others

You want people in your workplace to feel safe. If they're feeling anxious, you want them to come forward. The best detection method is encouraging people to be self-aware, says psychologist Amberley Meredith.

Here are some questions that people can ask themselves.

- Am I feeling a bit overwhelmed?
- Am I constantly checking the headlines and looking for updates?
- Am I ruminating so much on coronavirus that I'm not focusing at work?
- Am I able to hear objective facts or am I focusing on fears and potential scenarios?

The mind can make those leaps and people stop hearing facts. We know someone is escalating when they can't settle and hear those facts.

It is good to be conscious of unnecessarily avoidant behaviour. If people are washing their hands and wiping down surfaces, that could be appropriate given the circumstances. But doing things that go beyond the advice of any respected authority might be a sign the anxiety is becoming too much and you should reach out. It can become a problem when anxiety is getting in the way of us living our life – when it's causing fear, suffering and avoidance.

That's detecting anxiety in yourself. How do you tell if someone is unhealthily anxious but isn't talking to anybody about it?

The behaviours described above are clues. Often when people are anxious and they're not expressing it, whether that's something to do with fears or their personal life, they will have strong reactions to other things that make them angry, frustrated or annoyed that seem somewhat disproportionate, because a channel has opened up for that other emotion to come out. So when people are reactive above and beyond what you would ordinarily expect, that's a sign that they're not coping.

2. Helping others with anxiety

If you believe someone is anxious, there is a six-step process that can help guide how you approach and talk to them. It applies to individuals, but could also be used as the framework for wider organisational messaging.

i. Recognition

Let the person know that you've noticed they seem to be behaving in a certain way and clarify this is okay. Recognise the wider coronavirus concerns and nationwide stress. Validating the person's emotions is a key step. Even if you can't comprehend why someone else would be so worried, take their feelings at face value.

ii. Understanding

If someone confirms they're feeling anxious, show them understanding. People have different experiences – for example, someone who cares for an ageing parent is likely feeling more concerned about the virus – so show them you see where they're coming from.

iii. Compassion

This runs through both those first two steps - It's showing that human kindness of, 'I actually do care, I can see that you're suffering, we want to be able to help with that.'

iv. Offering support

This is when you begin to become more action-minded. Let them know they can talk to people and that the organisation wants to be there for them. If your company provides specific resources, such as an independent counsellor from an employee assistance program (EAP), let staff know how to access them. Also ask the person if they have ideas for what might help them feel better.

v. Suggestions

It's worthwhile going beyond support and offering other suggestions that people can "hang onto, that are grounded and tangible". A suggestion can be encouraging people to check-in with themselves for the signs listed above, pointing them to worthwhile online resources, or to reach out to their families, independent professionals and so on.

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vi. When to ask for help

This is offering future advice and something of an ongoing framework. The anxious person perhaps now has a plan based on your suggestions, but here is where you tell them what to look for in themselves going forward. Let them know it's okay to ask for support and that you will check back in with them.

It's also good to prepare your company by identifying support people. They might be a practised HR professional, in-company counsellors or nurses, someone from EAP, or just capable managers. This way if some employees don't feel like they could approach an anxious person and follow these steps they know who to turn to.

3. Helping with a panic attack

Sometimes anxiety escalates into a panic attack. This is serious. A panic attack has been described as "your headspace being hijacked by your amygdala". It's important to remember that panic attacks aren't always caused by dire situations. They can be instigated by fears of coronavirus, but can also be caused by something as small as a negative judgement from a superior.

"It doesn't matter what the content of the worry is, the brain is responding to it as if it were a tiger – something they need to fight or run away from."

It triggers the flight or fight response. You can distinguish between a severe spike in anxiety and a panic attack because the latter is essentially the fear that you're going to die. It's noticeable.

If you were to ask someone if they were having a panic attack, they may not be able to answer you. Their response is likely to be a startled, stress-ridden "what!?"

It should be remembered that people who have not had a panic attack, but who are spiralling, can be approached in the same way.

A good first question might be something like, "Would it be helpful if I try and redirect your mind?" They will probably be able to nod at that.

From here, your goal is to de-escalate their mind from a state of primal fear – fight or flight – and back into a more measured way of thinking. You want to engage other parts of the brain so their body stops pumping itself with adrenaline.

Here are a few practical techniques:

- Give them out-of-order number sequences such as 7, 8, 11, 15, 21, 2, 7, 10 and ask them to repeat them.

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- Play the alphabet game. Pick a topic such as 'animals' and take it in turns to name a different thing in that topic with each letter of the alphabet – so "antelope", "bear", "cow" and so on.
- Try sensory redirection. Give the panicking person a drink, give them a stress toy or object and say "feel that, focus on what the texture feels like".

Unfortunately, what doesn't tend to work is telling people to breathe normally or calm down. They want to breathe normally, they want to calm down, but they can't. Of course, if things keep escalating and the above techniques don't work, call in someone else. Don't crowd the person, as that might exacerbate the problem, but find someone with more authority, ability or training to help. Consider contacting a useful [helpline](#). In dire circumstances, you should call an ambulance.

4. The risk of using facts

Some people might believe the trick to calming someone who is experiencing anxiety about coronavirus is to use facts. The problem here is that anxiety often leads to vigilance and hyper-vigilance. An anxious person is likely to know more about coronavirus than you do – they've been feeding their growing fear on a diet of live blogs and catastrophic headlines.

It is unwise to engage on a fact-based level unless you are very confident in the facts: "Focus on the emotions and encourage them to seek out very authentic sources."

5. Long-term anxiety issues?

For some, coronavirus will be the root cause of their anxiety. Their troubles are reactive. But others are living with longer-term anxiety issues. Now is the time to reach out for help.

"If a person has been more predisposed to experiencing anxiety, and it just so happens that the current context we're experiencing is proving hard, take comfort and hope in the knowledge that anxiety can be turned around quickly with the right evidence-based strategies."

She says this isn't just about giving people reassurance, because that alone isn't going to solve anxiety.

Encourage people to seek out the help they need and engage with a clinical psychologist who is equipped with the toolkits to help individuals deal with clinical psychology. Because there is no need to suffer in silence.

6. How to stop anxiety spreading

An anxious person doesn't always keep their anxiety to themselves. Often they feel the need to express it and the act of this can make other people anxious. This can involve simple office chats, where someone regales a colleague with all the worst coronavirus stories from around the world.

But a lot of organisations have formal and informal ways for employees to connect digitally. The company messaging app (think Slack) or social media platform can become a forum for an anxious person to make others anxious, which can be accomplished with something as simple as a news link and the message “we need to all quarantine now”.

The best way to contain this is to get ahead of it. Encourage workers to share their worries with leadership first. If they see a news link they think is relevant to others, get them to hand it to their manager who can vet the article for appropriateness.

Be explicit that you are creating a channel for people to air their concerns as a responsible step you are taking to avoid unnecessary anxiety.

If the cat is already out of the bag and someone has already begun deluging your digital channels, you should confront them respectfully.

- Let them know you’ve seen the posts, and that they seem highly anxious.
- Say you want to make sure they are feeling safe.
- Say that you want people to share information, but you don’t want undue panic.
- Ask them if there’s anything the organisation can do to better support them.

The more you make it about them, the more receptive they are going to be. If they feel they are being supported and encouraged, not criticised and controlled, they are going to respond more cooperatively.

We are possibly headed into a scenario not a single person has ever experienced before. But that is precisely why we should feel hope. Whatever happens, we will be doing it together. Be safe, be brave and be kind.

Adapted from <https://www.hrmonline.com.au/employee-wellbeing/how-help-employee-colleague-coronavirus/#.XmsJaMbzymw.linkedin> by Girard Dorner HRM Online, March 2020 with clinical contribution from Amberley Meredith, consultant at T Being Well Process and a registered Australian psychologist, Dr. Jodie Lowinger, founder of Sydney Anxiety Clinic and high-performance coaching firm Mindstrength.

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