

The Psychological Effects of The Coronavirus Pandemic on Employee Welfare

Samantha T. Young

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CORONAVIRUS REPERCUSSIONS ON THE WELFARE OF EMPLOYEES

The coronavirus pandemic has been defined as an unprecedented time for skilled employees to endure, as the period of isolation brought out various evolved norms for individuals to assimilate with. Businesses and organizations were forced to strategically renovate the way employees carry out their roles and duties essentially due to the demand for a virtual lifestyle with the amount of cases mentioned on news channels. At the height of the pandemic, Spring of 2020, employees were either completely remote, or on the front line observing the authentic suffering for those infected with the virus. Many remote plans heightened anxiety levels for employees during this time through the unknown factor of the security of their employment while furthermore being able to support themselves personally or family members as well. The coronavirus pandemic has negatively affected the psychological wellbeing of employees due to the stressors of isolation, economic insecurity, as well as inaccurate statistics reflecting testing protocols and results provided by government agencies.

On a psychological standpoint, employees' mental health was challenged during this period of isolation as depression and anxiety rates increased rapidly. Anxiety was especially relevant for those nurses on the front line who were attending to an illness never seen before while having no preventative measures available, such as a Covid-19 vaccine. Nurses were vulnerable as they were expected to attack the virus, while working at risk due to the shortage of masks and protective supplies readily available to keep the employee safe from the patient's infectious illness. In the United States, it was reported that a 32 year old nurse committed suicide due to an intense concern over the rationing of N95 masks, intensive care beds, gowns, and face shields. The hospital environment became a traumatizing place for many healthcare workers to endure along with extensive pressure to heal patients, even though there was little knowledge on the correct care plan to treat the virus. This pressure led to nurses committing suicide to escape

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the stressful situation of either becoming infected and passing the illness to loved ones or not being able to save a patient in critical care from the intensity of the virus. From experiencing the height of the pandemic, “there is a clear need for a structured model of nursing workforce mental health preparation, monitoring, support, and healthcare, to inform advocacy and timely intervention in pandemic response” (Rahman & Plummer, 2020). It is therefore recommended that management teams now going forward, are obligated to place importance on mental health resources, where nurses and healthcare employees would feel slightly less anxiety filled due to isolation and pressure due to a support team readily available, which could have prevented the nurse suicide rates that were calculated.

Despite the increased anxiety rates due to the impact of the intense spread of the coronavirus on the nurse population, in general all employees endured anxious sentiments as a result of work related stressors. The media portrayed healthcare individuals in a heroic manner, which placed pressure on upholding those viewpoints and making a great impact through providing competent care during a time of such despair. For those in the healthcare field, work was not only required to continue in person as this was the most urgent field, but these employees were exposed to increased risks because of the nature of their work. Similarly to nurses, risks were inevitable to escape because of the essence of their job duties. Although Weibelzahl, Reiter, and Dudens 2020 study uncovered the clearly noticeable anxiety and depression rates from healthcare workers due to the “intolerance of uncertainty”, the study also exclaimed the declined aid that these employees were reporting (Weibelzahl et al., 2020). Majority of healthcare professionals admitted to no desire to seek psychological help to mitigate some of the stressors that they have experienced throughout this pandemic within the workplace. Collectively, the common stress factors reported were essentially extreme, “...worry about

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infecting family members, experience fears and uncertainty concerning the mortality and morbidity of the disease, and some must face death of colleagues” (Weibelzahl et al., 2020). All of these defined stress factors correlate with one common feeling, fear. However, evidently the influence of self confidence levels tailored to feeling as if you are capable of getting the required work done correctly was found to reduce these negative feelings tied to working during the coronavirus pandemic. Although this study further stressed the importance of organizations including mental health resources for employees, findings show that with immense pressures during this period, healthcare workers had little to no time to focus on their own mental health and participate in counseling provided by their employers aimed at relieving feelings of anxiety and depression. Therefore, the lack of time allotted to provide for self care initiatives contributed to deterioration of employees psychological well being.

The mental and physical wellbeing of employees furthermore depend highly on the situation within their work. For instance, healthcare employees clearly work in a fast paced and pressured environment during the coronavirus pandemic, while some employees are granted the opportunity to work from home. Although some employees were given the option of remote work, individuals had many different experiences as some lived alone, truly feeling a state of isolation, while others were comforted by family members. Further taken into account, the amount of organizational support that employees received affected their psychological wellbeing during the height of the pandemic. Working at home could be easily facilitated and comforting for the employee if management is found to create an environment of, “effective formal and informal coworker support” (Oakman et al., 2020). Communication is a major component to a coworker relationship in order to aid in problem solving and sharing ideas to collaborate and innovate, which makes work even when performed at home, still effective. Especially for those

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individuals not assimilated into the technological society we live in, support has been found to be a great resource for employees provided by organizations, which tends to any software questions one may have when separated from their workspace to ask these questions in-person. Most importantly, it is essential that organizations create a boundary management effort so that employees are clear on working hours, to avoid feeling like they must work more hours because they are conveniently at the comfort of their own home. Organizations who create daily time limits for individuals to be on company software reported to provide more stability for their workforce through which employees then did not experience burnouts within work (Oakman et al., 2020). Although these initiatives have been proven to increase an employees stability during the coronavirus pandemic, not all organizations' protocols embodied actions to facilitate the change in work, which essentially led to increased stress and hindrances in employee wellbeing. Regular communication between management and employees, aid with useful technology, and financial compensation for any inconveniences to the employee are all factors that increase the wellbeing if they are promoted by the employer.

During the coronavirus pandemic when individuals felt hopeless and apprehensive while being uncertain about the future of our world, individuals were faced with requirements to continue work but in a remote sense, due to closure of in-person facilities and a state of isolation instilled. The anxiety brought out by this virus contributed to, "...impair critical work (goal progress), home (family engagement) and health (somatic complaints) outcomes due to increased emotional suppression and lack of psychological need fulfillment (Troughakos et al., 2020). Threatening events, such as the coronavirus pandemic, are known to trigger anxiety, which has led society to cope in a way where we suppress the true feelings we are all undergoing, as if it is our method to forget the tragedy during this time period. As fulfillment is at an all time low, goal

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attainment then decreases due to the direct relationship between the two constructs, which further results in decreased autonomy for employees. Autonomy is recognized for self esteem and the promotion of wellbeing where if this need is not met, the results can affect both work and family sectors within life. During this time especially, employees endured not only mental health negative effects, but increased hardship in balancing work life and family needs. With decreased autonomy, employee focus could not be concentrated on one aspect of life, also aligned with the remote nature of working. Due to the fact that work could be done at home, it was evidently difficult to disconnect from the job and tend to family needs and because negative emotions were suppressed, making the individual less motivated to perform activities that did not get a task completed and grant them a sense of satisfaction. Not only were anxiety rates high, but because that fulfillment was hindered, employees did not focus on aspects such as family life, if it did not contribute to providing temporary fulfillment. There was no longer a serious desire to engage with family when there was not only difficulty in disconnecting from the work life, but difficulty with personal attributes and confidence. The pandemic truly showed the unbalanced lifestyle that could be brought out from moving work closer to home during a crucial breakdown point in employee psychological well being.

As it was difficult to balance both home life and work life, employees added intense pressure within their work efforts to help control feelings of job insecurity during this time period. Job insecurity, defined to align with threatening concerns for one's financial situation whether related to ability to preserve one's job or be able to provide for yourself or family members. Employees who have a, “greater experience of economic hardship... is associated with higher levels of psychological distress” (Wilson et al., 2020). This time period was especially mentally draining for those individuals who were within an industry negatively impacted by the

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coronavirus pandemic. For example, many restaurants were required to completely shut down indoor dining, making waiter and waitress jobs diminish, leading to increased job insecurity and higher depression rates as a result. Many occupations also experience income reductions as organizations were having money troubles, which trickles down to the employee and their share of profit. As employees' lifestyles began to change due to various job losses or pay cuts, psychological disorders related to depression became very prevalent. Unemployment rates throughout covid have been the highest they have ever been, as this point in history has been correlated with the Great Depression. Through obtaining statistics on a United States population of 474 employees, it has been made evident through research that, “greater depressive symptoms were correlated with greater job insecurity, financial concern, concern about covid-19 daily life being affected by covid-19, perceived likelihood of contracting covid-19, following news coverage of covid-19 and self quarantining” (Wilson et al., 2020). Financially speaking, the economic situation of the world has trickled down to the employee as it has affected their psychological wellbeing in regards to stability of their employment and compensation. This study in particular further displayed the need for organizational support to promote security for employees and to attempt to stabilize all areas of their employment so that work can still be efficiently performed and not distracted by psychological conditions relating to anxiety and depression.

The coronavirus pandemic has normalized travel bans, lockdowns, and complete isolation that has transported the global economy into a recession, one similar to the Great Depression. The pandemic has been surrounded by accumulation of loans, bankruptcies, and turmoil of financial status. Although these negative effects will carry out to the global economy, the crisis will impair the working class and lower-income households more vigorously than the wealthy. In

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fact, the World Bank has broadcasted an estimation of about 60 million individuals hitting the poverty line and the economy will diminish by 5.2% as a result of the pandemic's effects (Reinhart & Reinhart, 2020). Businesses were required to shut down and remain closed, and those who obtained the opportunity to stay open struggled to survive as raw material prices increased and their products became too expensive for consumers to then buy and support the organization. The unemployment rate within the United States has hit its highest peak in history due to the fact that generally workers are being laid off as companies struggle to maintain their profits. Workers who are still having a secure placement within an organization are feeling detached from their normalized environment as all work has been moved to a virtual style, where employees struggle to keep up with the demands from various platforms along with personal needs, and in result they leave their job. These measures explain why unemployment has become a common resource for employees as it evolves into their only option for survival. It is often not thought about in terms of the future of society but unemployed individuals, "...will lose skills and miss out on professional development opportunities during the long spell of unemployment making them less attractive to potential employers" (Reinhart & Reinhart, 2020). This statement correlated with the situation that some graduate students are finding themselves in where they have not been able to gain professional experience, harming their chances of landing a role in the future, which displays how severe the economy is at this time and how challenging it will be to bounce back in the future.

Given that our economy is in a state of complete depression and instability through weakened markets and high unemployment rates across society, employees are experiencing extreme feelings of despair in regards to their capabilities and employment. Business owners for example had to completely shut down their facility, emerging a need for using life savings,

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entering the individual into a deeper state of debts that will be mentally challenging to overcome and ultimately “hinder rebuilding” (Reinhart & Reinhart, 2020). Without feelings of secure placement within employment, or individuals can not land a placement due to the tough job markets, mental health over their financial situation has created another downfall in humanity. Within modern society, individuals forced to leave their roles are struggling to support themselves and their family members under unemployment. Graduate students are developing anxiety as the pressure is shifted into having the necessary skills and experience for a full time role, but no opportunity to gain this experience within the pandemic times. Employees are feeling a sense of uncertainty surrounding whether their organization will choose to protect them during these struggling times, or if they will be able to afford to employ their current workforce. In fact, “Pay cuts were a common response by employers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 49% of Americans saw the pandemic as a major threat to personal finances” where then, “57% reported experiencing medium to high levels of psychological distress, including depression and anxiety” (Wilson et al., 2020). The unknown factors surrounding one's employment or future of employment is why anxiety rates reported to be extremely high during this time, as the unknown virtue is a difficult concept for some to bear. Therefore, extreme worry was placed on meeting needs for survival and living as comfortably as individuals did prior to Covid-19.

Public policy and government intervention played an important role in employee welfare throughout this difficult affair. In fact, the publicity of the coronavirus infection rates has brought increased panic for society to endure and install more fear of being out of isolation. Watching the news broadcast the updated infection rates furthermore increased handwashing rates as individuals used the action as a proactive coping mechanism to feel a sense of safety within themselves. Through research performed observing employees during the pandemic and

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the impact on their health anxiety determined that, "...handwashing frequency buffered individuals from suppressing their emotions" (Troughakos et al., 2020). The act of psychically cleansing the hands served as protection against the unexplained spread of the devastating virus. In turn, this coping mechanism has the potential to mitigate the levels of anxiety and its consequences on an employee.

Although the infection rates that were displayed on public platforms installed fear within individuals, especially employees eager to go back to their normal work environment, the authenticity of the reported numbers pose a question for many individuals. There were many complications within the testing measure that were being used, which ultimately lead to inaccurate statistics of this novel virus that has made such an impact on our daily lives. Through a state of pure global health crisis and economic turmoil, the media and the CDC began to compare United States infection rates to other countries such as Italy and China, without accounting for population. For example, reporting that Italy has more cases than China is misleading because China's population is more extensive rather than Italy, making the comparison inaccurate. Evidently in terms of this misleading viewpoint, "...the headline 'The United States Is Now the Epicenter' (i.e., of cases) does not reflect that, the US population is over five times that of Italy and is spread over a much larger areas" (Pearce et al., 2020). Furthermore the reported deaths do not accurately state those who solely passed from Covid-19. All deaths during this time point were being filed as coronavirus deaths, when individuals may have had covid, but other conditions were the reason for death. Headlines labeled all of these individuals as deaths, which made the numbers look massively larger, installing more fear and anxious feelings into the public. A misconception like this within headlines of newspapers or on

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television makes the common individual fear the virus more and stay in their house with little social interaction with others outside of their pod.

Despite the inaccuracy of the reported infection rates on headlines, the tests used to accumulate data provided false results which were still taken into account in the reported infection rates. Like any type of medical test, there are technical errors that could transpire, especially in the situation of the pandemic, where getting a decent swab of the patient or cross contamination of specimens become two factors that have contributed to the false positive and false negative tests. Depending on the cleanliness of the facility performing the tests, oftentimes due to the high volume of tests being done within a day, swabs are getting confused and misplaced very easily. There is clearly an organization and policy issue for the way tests are performed and the atmosphere in which the data is being collected to add to these alarming statistics.

The inaccuracy of information that became evident during the height of the pandemic, as it installed a larger strain on the mental health of the public watching the statistics, demonstrated the need for improved surveillance systems in the field of epidemiology. These errors have led to public mistrust of policy and procedures during the coronavirus pandemic, as infection rates seemed more severe than they actually were and no exact numbers were found to be recorded. Testing strategies therefore should estimate population numbers along with the data of the location being focused on, while not including just individuals who are experiencing symptoms or testing positive, while including concrete infection and death numbers to be reported. It has been made evident of the need for, “validation data for each test brand, laboratory, and country are needed because the tests cannot be identical in performance across sources and field administrators” (Pearce et al., 2020). With accurate information on all testing brands and

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laboratories examining specimens, data could account for these differences, rather than ignoring them. When data is miscommunicated with individuals in isolation, negative emotions will be enhanced in a way that encourages people to become scared of ever returning to a state of normalcy, or ever return to how society was prior to the coronavirus pandemic being introduced into the United States.

The coronavirus pandemic has evidently negatively affected the psychological wellbeing of employees through an extensive period of isolation, economic insecurity, as well as inaccurate statistics provided by government agencies. Mental health was challenged as employees were faced with increased pressures in the healthcare field or served with the challenge of working remotely with limited guidance and support. Anxiety and depression rates at this time were at an extremely high rate due to feelings of job insecurity surrounding the current economic turmoil the United States has been faced with. Organizational protocol was crucial during this point as the efforts management portrayed helped increase employee satisfaction and security within their role, which promoted a more effective workforce. Employees working from home experienced difficulty balancing both work and family, as disconnecting from the company software was hard to do since everything is in proximity to your own home. The struggle to maintain work and family needs was enhanced through feelings of job insecurity surrounding mass shutdowns of businesses and unemployment rates increasing. Employees devoted an abundance of time into their work to feel more secure within their roles to attempt to ensure they would not be laid off due to profit losses for companies. Aside from work and family, inaccurate statistics have made it harder for individuals to move closer towards normalcy as these government reports installed more fear and interest in an isolated lifestyle.

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