

## MENTAL HEALTH FOR RESTAURANT TEAMS IN THE TIME OF COVID - 19

Everything our industry and our teams are required to do combat the pandemic is becoming truly overwhelming. As individuals, the cumulative effect of separation, isolation and new financial pressures is cause for a rise in mental health concerns. Restaurant operators and employees are reporting experiences of anxiety, stress, depression and burn out, impacting both their work and personal lives.

As cases increase across the country, the pressure and stress that restaurant operators and staff are facing is increasing. Public health order changes and limitations on party and event sizes coupled with concerns over public trust and worsening weather create a climate of uncertainty that hasn't been faced in a century. Facing so many unknown hurdles has real potential to cause considerable strain, feelings of helplessness and mental health concerns.

While the distancing and changing regulations are necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19, it doesn't make it easier on operators and their teams.

COVID-19 is having a huge impact on employees' mental health. A recent Telus International Study found that 75% of U.S. employees have struggled at work due to anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20201008005618/en/75-of-American-Employees-Say-They-Have-Struggled-with-Anxiety-Caused-by-COVID-19-and-Other-World-Events-While-Working-From-Home>

**Facing mental health concerns rising out of the pandemic is essential to having successful workplaces.** In this article, we've gathered some suggestions for coping with stress in the workplace, to help you be responsive in your business and build a stronger team as a result.

The range of operational issues impacted by COVID-19 that have a profound impact mental health include:

- Changing financial situation/losing revenue;
- Facing new business pressures;
- Adapting to new regulatory requirements;
- Creating and building new business streams;
- Reducing business hours; and
- Changing staffing needs including having to let staff go.

Managing our human resources has a huge roll to play in making sure that our businesses and our teams rise to the challenges presented by COVID-19. It doesn't matter if your business has a dedicated human resources professional, or if your owners/managers take on HR tasks. Being engaged with staff and making an effort to get to know each team member's individual story, their challenges and successes, is key to navigating the challenges that the next few months will bring. Right now, our staff are the keys to success in business. As employers, we have to put an extra effort into making sure our workplaces welcome difficult conversations and that our teams are able to bring their concerns to the table as they arise. Showing empathy and support for our staff members is essential to bridging the gap between what we know as the pre-COVID workplace and the future of the post-COVID workplace.

### 1. START A NEW CONVERSATION WITH YOUR STAFF

Use this time to make sure you know your staff at a new level so that it's personal for you and for them. Think about this as your "walking a mile in someone else's shoes" exercise. Make your employees know their overall health is important to you and there is no shame or penalty in showing vulnerability.

Starting the conversation begins to put you in a position to understand your team members better. If a team member isn't on their A-game, it could be something small or something more serious that will impact their performance in the workplace. Creating a workplace culture where people feel they can share what is happening for them and where sharing is encouraged opens the door to a much more inclusive environment that keeps employees feeling secure and supported at work.

## Make it personal:

- Take 5-10 minutes to have a personal conversation with each staff member to get their insights on how your business is responding to COVID – they may have insights that will help your business navigate this crisis;
- Make sure to get to know one personal detail about each person you speak to;
- Ask each person what their biggest concern is in facing COVID. The answer is important! They may tell you about something work related or that they are worried about a child, parent or friend. Every answer will help you get to know your team better.

## Grow the connections with your team:

- Consider having an all staff “Zoom” every 2-4 weeks to make sure that even staff working different shifts are in touch with each other and that best practices are shared between teams.
- Make sure you put equal emphasis on sharing positive stories about people that are solving problems AND on sharing negative interactions that have important lessons for all team members. Pretending bad things aren’t happening isn’t helping anyone – but focusing only on the bad is exhausting.
- Share your stories about people going over and above with us @BCTastesBetter using the #StandupforService hashtag. We are dedicated to sharing positive stories about staff and we’ve had good luck with feature stories helping with staff morale.

## Ask for feedback:

Create a suggestion box that allows team members to put their ideas for how to handle COVID-challenges anonymously.

## Why does this matter?

The recent Telus International Survey found that 97% of respondents said that it is important that a company prioritizes its employees’ mental health. About 8 in 10 employees say they would consider quitting their current position for a job that focused more on employee mental health. This means that, without prioritizing mental health, employers risk facing an exodus of staff.

## 2. RECOGNIZE HOW LONG STUFF TAKES

Everything simply takes longer than we’re used to in COVID-times. Store hours are shorter, banks have longer line ups, services have limits on the number of people allowed inside their businesses. If your team members can’t get their personal chores done (going to the bank, the doctor, grocery store, uniform store or dry cleaner, etc.), their personal stress may rise.

An easy fix for this is to make sure that your staff is getting enough time between shifts to get necessary life tasks done. This can be giving a day off mid-week, allowing for 2-hour lunch breaks instead of traditional shorter breaks or offering split shifts. Just changing scheduling to give people time to get basic tasks done will help you gain loyalty from your team members. With personal must-dos complete, staff will be able to bring more concentration and patience to the workplace.

Nearly 9 in 10 respondents of the Telus survey said that having flexibility in their work schedule would positively impact their mental health.



## 3. LEARN HOW TO SEE THE SIGNS

Talk to your management team to make sure that they know the physical signs of mental health and stress. Things to look for:

- Staff being more tired and running out of patience more quickly than in pre-COVID-times;
- People expressing concerns about changes in sleep patterns or difficulty sleeping;
- Staff gaining or losing weight as a result of changes in eating patterns or appetite;
- Increasing climate of anxiety or worry amongst team members;
- Team members having difficulty concentrating or completing regular tasks;
- People requesting more time off for worsening of chronic health or mental health concerns;
- Staff talking about an increased dependence on alcohol, tobacco or other substances; and
- Team members demonstrating irritability and impatience.

30% of employee respondents feared that discussing their mental health could lead to being fired or furloughed and that 29% thought discussing their issues could cost them a promotion. Paychex Study 2020

## 4. MAKE A PLAN TO GO FROM DISTRESS TO DE-STRESS

If you have been relying on a core team throughout this pandemic, consider giving these essential team members an extra day off to catch up and de-stress. A single flex day offers a big win for dedicated staff with limited cost to you as an operator. You can ask people to plan ahead and book the day in advance. The high percentage of work exhaustion is impacting outcomes – and in hospitality, that means it's impacting guest experience.

Acknowledging the extra effort with time off is leveraging a currency and a language that you and your team member share. A staff member who sees their employer's respect in a simply concrete way like this will likely speak more highly of their workplace. For the workplace, even having a short "mental break" will help bring new clarity to their position and to their role in the company.

## 5. PLAN WHEN AND WHAT YOU CAN

The ability to plan ahead is something we're very accustomed to – but it's also something we've lost as a result of COVID-19.

One thing operators can still plan is staff schedules. Having predictable scheduling is very important. This helps staff in their personal lives, allows them to schedule personal obligations and manage their finances. When possible, we encourage operators to set schedules at least a week in advance and offer a consistent number of hours weekly. If possible, check in with staff to ensure that their availability remains consistent and that the number of hours you are offering aligns with what they need to meet their obligations.

### Why have these conversations?

Lots of hospitality and restaurant workers used to have multiple jobs. During COVID, you don't want a staff person going to or getting a second job to make ends meet resulting in additional "connections" or "potential exposures" that they could bring to the workplace. Working with your staff to secure their dedication to your business is ideal in this time – even if it means changing their pre-COVID hours or thinking differently about scheduling.

## 6. BE OPEN TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

This is a time that leaning on each other and learning from one another is paramount. Pandemics are overwhelming in scale and impact by their very definition. Add political and general unrest in the world and you have a lot of outside pressures impacting your workplace. This affects you, your staff and your customers. As a result, it's important to make sure that you are providing staff with an opportunity to decompress after each shift especially if a difficult incident like one with a frustrated or angry customer happens. Being open to whatever conversations staff need to have will help staff be ready for their next shift.

If a customer comes in and takes out their frustration on your staff, don't let it go. Talk about it and make sure that staff come up with a way to handle this kind of situation in the future. With all of us living in "bubbles", people may only have co-workers and employers to talk them through situations that arise at work.

Many of your staff may be isolating from close friends/family. In fact, coming to work may have required them to make the decision to put other in person connections on hold. Be aware of the choices people are making so they can come to work. Acknowledge those difficult choices in staff meetings.

## 7. SET THE TONE

As employers and managers, it's important to lead by example. Being generous and kind is at the core of our hospitality mantra – but we have to remember to extend our hospitality to staff members and not just guests.

Authentic kindness and recognition can work to counter stress. Take a few moments every day to send out words of gratitude for staff contributions with personal emails, in handwritten notes, on social media or with a kind message on a team message board. This will make someone's day and is itself a meaningful connection. Showing appreciation helps morale especially challenging times.

When possible, thoughtful and inexpensive gifts can also make a culture difference. Consider:

- A bakery treat;
- A coffee card;
- A bunch of flowers;
- Dinner to go “on the house” (especially welcome for employees with family at home);
- A gift card for a local business; or
- An Uber or cab home after a hard shift.

## 8. MAKE SURE THAT STAFF HAVE ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC-MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

It's important that each business sets a supportive culture that welcomes conversation and diversity – but that may not be enough. Providing easy access to professional resources might be the saving grace.

COVID-19 has normalized virtual and online support services. Many more services are available online that you might imagine.

**Here are a list of resources, free to people in BC:**

BounceBack: <https://bouncebackbc.ca/>

HeretoHelp: <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/>

Find your local CMHA branch: <https://cmha.bc.ca/>

Additional resources available through CMHA BC during the pandemic: <https://cmha.bc.ca/covid-19/>

Discovery College Kelowna: <https://discoverycollegekelowna.com/> (all courses are currently virtual so they can be accessed from anywhere)

Mental Health Line: 310-6789 (no area code) [bc211.ca](http://bc211.ca) or call 211 - multiple languages, information and non-medical referrals to services

HealthLinkBC.ca or call 811 - non-emergency health information to speak to a registered nurse

BC Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service: 1-800-663-1441

For parents/caregivers - Confident Parents: Thriving Kids: <https://welcome.cmhacptk.ca>

Check out the Government of Canada's new Wellness Together portal, or check in with your local CMHA to see what they have to offer online and over the phone.

In crisis? Please call 1-833-456-4566 toll free, 24/7 or visit [www.crisisservicescanada.ca](http://www.crisisservicescanada.ca)