



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Inclusive workplace guide: Fostering health and safety during self-isolation, remote work, and a pandemic.

Amid this pandemic, working at home is different for everyone. Some might have demanding caregiving obligations; others may find themselves completely alone for days or weeks on end. Some are experiencing a little of both. The common thread is that self-isolation can result in significant physical, mental, and emotional impacts.

Employers can have a positive impact on organizational health and safety by addressing the unintended health consequences of remote work amid a crisis. Promoting and encouraging an inclusive virtual work environment can help employees feel socially connected and have a positive impact on organizational health and safety.

How can organizations support employees who are self-isolating and working from home during the pandemic?

Stay connected

Physical distancing can make everyone, particularly those who live alone, feel disconnected.ⁱ Socializing and interacting with colleagues while working, even if for brief moments, was a regular part of the employee experience before employees began working remotely. In a virtual world, we don't have a "coffee run" or a desk-side chat to make these connections.

- » Do: Set up a channel that facilitates informal workplace conversations and provide employees with opportunities to take virtual breaks with one another.
- » Do: Encourage team members to connect with at least one person in the organization each day via video conferencing or phone, and chat about something other than work!ⁱⁱ
- » Do: Take advantage of virtual platforms to host social events and facilitate shared experiences for employees (e.g. recurring wellness breaks, breathing exercises, stretching exercises, virtual games, book clubs, facilitated discussions about current events).
- » Don't: Make employees feel like they have to be exclusively focused on work during their standard working hours, as this can contribute to burnout.

Remind employees of support systems

Check-in with team members on a regular basis and remind them of support systems that exist to help them maintain their mental wellbeing.

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- » Do: Speak openly about accessing your own support systems to help. Encourage your team and your colleagues to participate in your Employee and Family Assistance program (EFAP), if available, or engage with your Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) or Wellness Committee or Employee Resource Group (ERG), where available.
- » Do: Alternatively, share the contact information of local crises or distress resources or centres with your colleagues.ⁱⁱⁱ
- » Don't: Be offended if team members are reluctant to share details about their mental wellness or personal lives. We all have different ways of coping and expressing ourselves.

Acknowledge that this is a psychologically challenging time for everyone

We are all coping in a time of uncertainty and anyone can experience loneliness, anxiety, stress, and depression.^{iv}

- » Do: Be open to sharing how you are doing as this can help create a psychologically safe space for colleagues to share their own experiences.
- » Do: Be willing to provide flexibility and accommodation to help employees cope during this psychologically challenging time.
- » Do: Promote kindness, patience, and understanding in your organization and encourage regular breaks.^v
- » Do: Give the benefit of the doubt to everyone. Assume they are doing the best they can, within their personal circumstances, with the resources that are available to them.
- » Don't: Assume that introverts, individuals without any caregiving responsibilities, and people without prior mental health problems or illnesses are doing fine and require less support/accommodation.
- » Don't: Misinterpret the work ethic of employees who might not immediately reply to emails or instant messages. This can create pressure on employees who feel the need to prove themselves by being more accessible or working longer hours, which can contribute to burnout.^{vi}

Update your workplace violence and harassment policies

Recognize that there has been an uptick in anti-Asian comments and incidents, and that the stress induced by the pandemic has increased the risk of violence or harassment both on the street and in the virtual work environment.

- » Do: Review and update existing policies on violence and harassment prevention in the workplace.
- » Do: Proactively use your internal and external communications channels to promote awareness of violence and harassment. Engage your OHS or Wellness Committees to help spread the word.
- » Do: Share resources to promote diversity and inclusion learning throughout your organization to counteract stereotypes, xenophobia, and microaggressions.^{vii}
- » Do: Communicate how to effectively raise issues through your conflict resolution method or process. If need be, review your process to ensure that it is effective in a virtual workplace.



- » Don't: Rely solely on policies to mitigate risks. The written rules indicate how things are supposed to happen. It is the unwritten rules that govern what actually happens.
- » Don't: Neglect diversity and inclusion efforts during a pandemic; diversity and inclusion efforts are particularly important during this time to ensure that employees feel psychologically safe, valued and included.

*Endnotes include sources indicated above.

ⁱ “Mental Health Tips for Working from Home.” *Government of Canada*.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/covid-19/mental-health-tips.html>

ⁱⁱ “When Home Becomes the Workplace: Mental Health and Remote Work.” *Forbes*.

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/news/mental-health-tips-working-home>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Help Employees Maintain Positive Mental Health During the COVID-19 Outbreak.” *Workplace Safety and Prevention Services*. <https://www.wsps.ca/Information-Resources/Articles/help-your-workers-maintain-positive-mental-health.aspx>

^{iv} “How to Keep your Mental Health in Check When you Work from Home.” *We Work Remotely*.

<https://weworkremotely.com/how-to-keep-your-mental-health-in-check-when-you-work-from-home#>

^v “Help Employees Maintain Positive Mental Health During the COVID-19 Outbreak.” *Workplace Safety and Prevention Services*. <https://www.wsps.ca/Information-Resources/Articles/help-your-workers-maintain-positive-mental-health.aspx>

^{vi} “When Home Becomes the Workplace: Mental Health and Remote Work.” *Forbes*.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/onemind/2020/03/17/when-home-becomes-the-workplace-mental-health-and-remote-work/#6807adf51760>

^{vii} “Preventing Stigma During COVID-19.” *Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety*.

<https://www.ccohs.ca/newsletters/hsreport/issues/current.html?=&wbdisable=true>