

Section 2

# Common COVID-19 Stressors that Impact Employees' Mental Health

The global impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented. It has changed the way billions of people around the globe live and work. This section highlights widespread stressors that are impacting employee mental health. These COVID-19 stressors are common, and your employees will directly experience a number of them. Some stressors are readily apparent in the workplace and explicitly linked to workplace practices and policies. Others are less obvious. Irrespective of visibility, they can all have profound impact on employee mental health. Because these stressors are affecting so many people, even small increases can translate to a substantial—but manageable and even preventable—impact across your workforce.

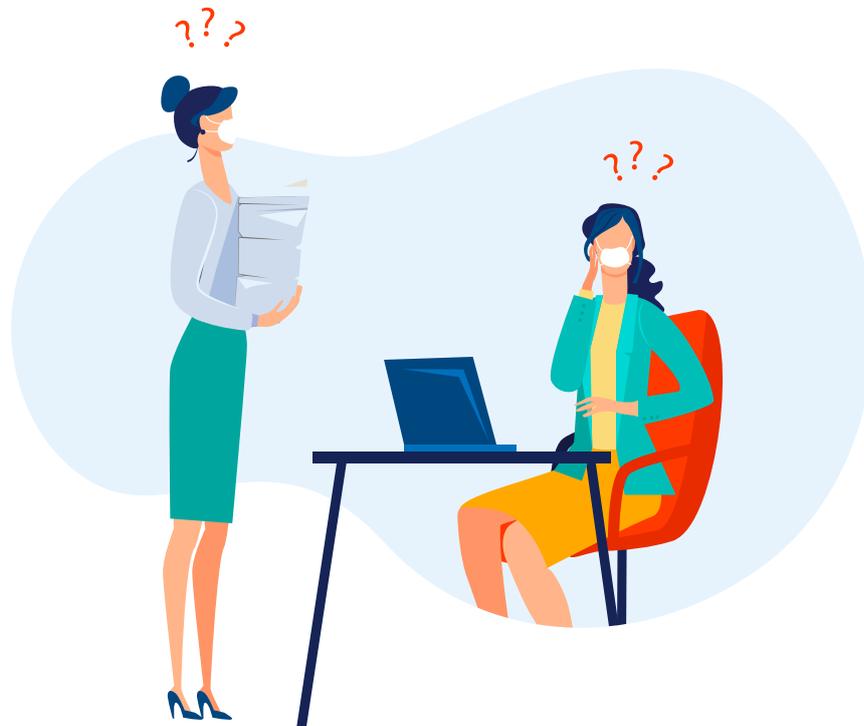


## Common COVID-19 Related Stressors

1. High Ambiguity and Uncertainty
2. Overwhelming COVID-19-Related Information in the Media and on Social Media
3. Risk of Infection
4. Physical Distancing and Social Isolation
5. Change in Work Demands, Structure, and Processes
6. Changes in Domestic Responsibilities that Increase Stress and/or Impede Work
7. Having a Loved One Sick with COVID-19 and/or Loss of Loved Ones
8. Financial Concerns and Job Security
9. Worsening of Comorbid Long-Term Health Conditions
10. Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns Related to New Monitoring Efforts in the Workplace

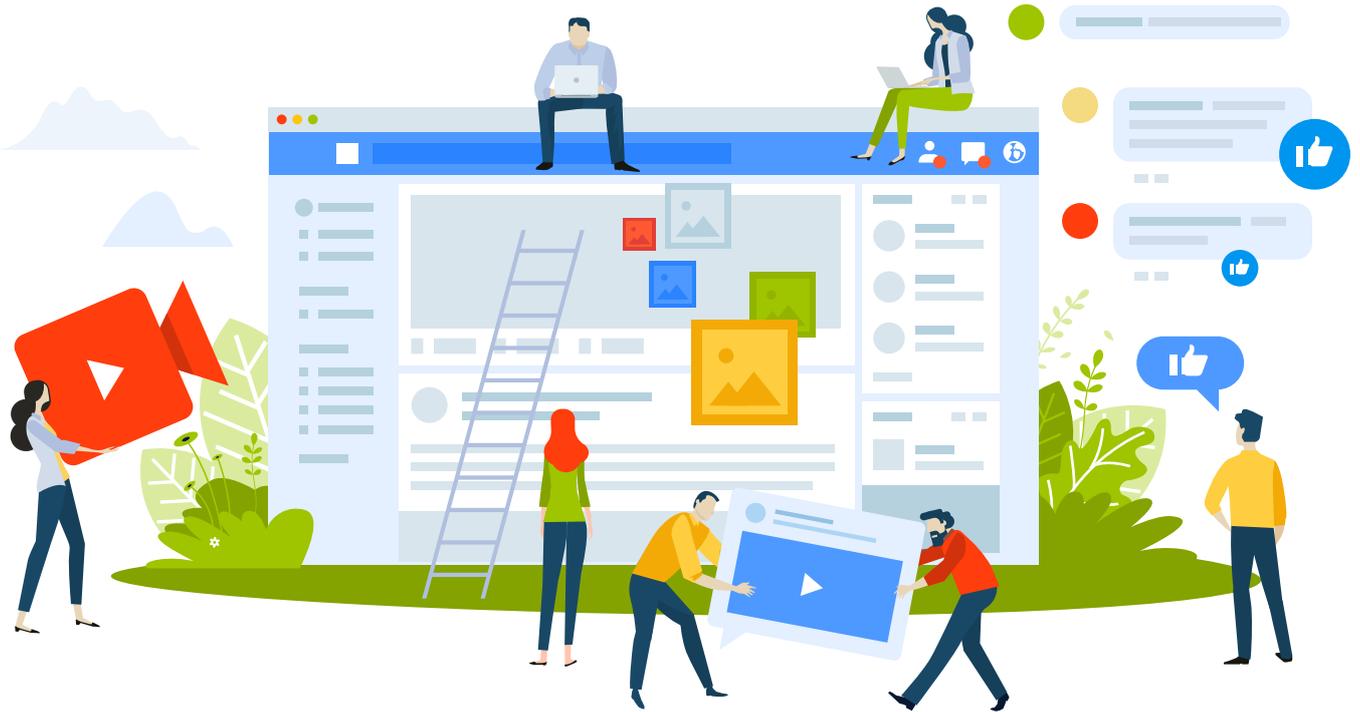
## 1. | High Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Uncertainty is destabilizing and can be a major source of stress. It has been linked to both physical and mental health problems. During this pandemic, there are seemingly endless unknowns. There is no certainty of how COVID-19 will progress medically, socially, and economically. Without this information, employees lose the ability to plan their work and personal lives with confidence. For example, employees who usually travel for work or who are generally responsible for bringing people together may fear they are not able to do their job given current restrictions. Others might have planned to use their vacation time far in advance, and now that opportunity for stress recovery and restoration is jeopardized. Given the many unknowns related to COVID-19, employees have many questions and concerns about staying safe in the context of returning to the workplace. Also, without clear communication about the future of the company, or their specific projects and business unit, employees may fear for their job security. This lack of control, especially when combined with increased work and life demands, can have an adverse impact on employee mental health.



### Learn More

- Coping with Uncertainty During COVID-19: An International Gottman Trainer Shares Their Perspective (Source: [Gottman](#))
- The Great Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing with the Stress of Uncertainty (Source: [APA](#))
- Advice for Dealing with Uncertainty from People who Have Been There (Source: [NPR](#))



## 2. | **Overwhelming COVID-19 Related Information in the Media and on Social Media**

Employees are facing a deluge of information about COVID-19. The pandemic is now the topic of everything from texts to advertisements. Even polite ‘small talk’ and work projects have been infiltrated by the virus. Some employees, in an effort to stay informed or manage their anxiety, may be spending an excessive amount of time reading news or checking social media posts.

Not only is the content of some COVID-19 news coverage upsetting, the way that some stories are presented can be alarmist or overly dramatic. Stories which appear to blame victims (for example, because of obesity) or which promote conspiracy theories about the causes of the pandemic can lead to divisiveness and polarization of opinions. This can make an already upsetting situation even more distressing for some people. The constant barrage of frightening, negative, and often contradictory information can also be overwhelming. In response, some workers may become fatigued and ‘opt out’ intellectually, emotionally, or entirely.

### **Learn More**

- Media Exposure to COVID-19: How Much is too Much? (Source: [Psychology Today](#))
- Too Much Coronavirus Media May Be Bad for Your Health (Source: [APA](#))
- About Seven-in-Ten U.S. Adults Say They Need to Take Breaks From COVID-19 News (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

### 3. | **Risk of Infection**

Many employees will be stressed about contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to loved ones. Even when following appropriate protocols, workplace logistics may increase risk due to activities such as traveling on public transportation or airplanes, gathering for in-person meetings, and sharing supplies. Employees also may be concerned about becoming infected in the office through contact with contaminated surfaces or coworkers who are ill.

Given the risks associated with COVID-19, employees will be afraid of their possible infection and might feel helpless or angry if they cannot remain careful and protected from potential risk. Careful organizational planning and detailed execution of programs that reduce risk of infection are essential as employees return to the workplace. Being around coworkers who have a mutual understanding of risk factors and individual needs given various home life situations will reduce potential conflict and promote a safe space at work.

#### Learn More

- Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19 (Source: [CDC](#))
- Putting the Risk of COVID-19 in Perspective (Source: [NYT](#))
- Dealing with Stress, Anxiety, and Grief during COVID-19 (Source: [NIH](#))



## 4. Physical Distancing and Social Isolation

Physical distancing is an effective and necessary strategy for mitigating the spread of COVID-19, but it may also have some negative consequences for employees. First, many people have been socially isolated and may not have had access to the social supports they typically rely on to help them through difficult times. The disruption of regular routines and social contact from family, friends, colleagues, and other community members can lead to feelings of boredom, loneliness, sadness, and despair.

Physical distancing also poses a logistical challenge. For workplaces that rely on face-to-face interaction, employees will be forced to navigate new decision-making, brainstorming, and feedback processes. This can greatly impair communication and even lead to a complete communication breakdown if not handled effectively.



### Learn More

- How Can Social Isolation Affect Us? (Source: [The Guardian](#))
- The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness (Source: [Psychology Today](#))
- Loneliness: Why Employers Should Care (Source: [APA](#))

## 5. | Change in Work Demands, Structure, and Processes

Employees have been forced to adapt to new work demands, structural changes, and processes during the coronavirus pandemic. Communication, workflow, and scheduling have all shifted to contain the virus. Many companies are, at least temporarily, turning entirely to telework. Some projects have been paused, while others have been halted permanently. Other aspects of work are being reimagined—from manufacturing procedures to office floorplans to hourly shift structure.

COVID-19 presents unique stresses for employees - whether they remained in the workplace throughout or have had to transition to working from home and then transition back to the workplace.

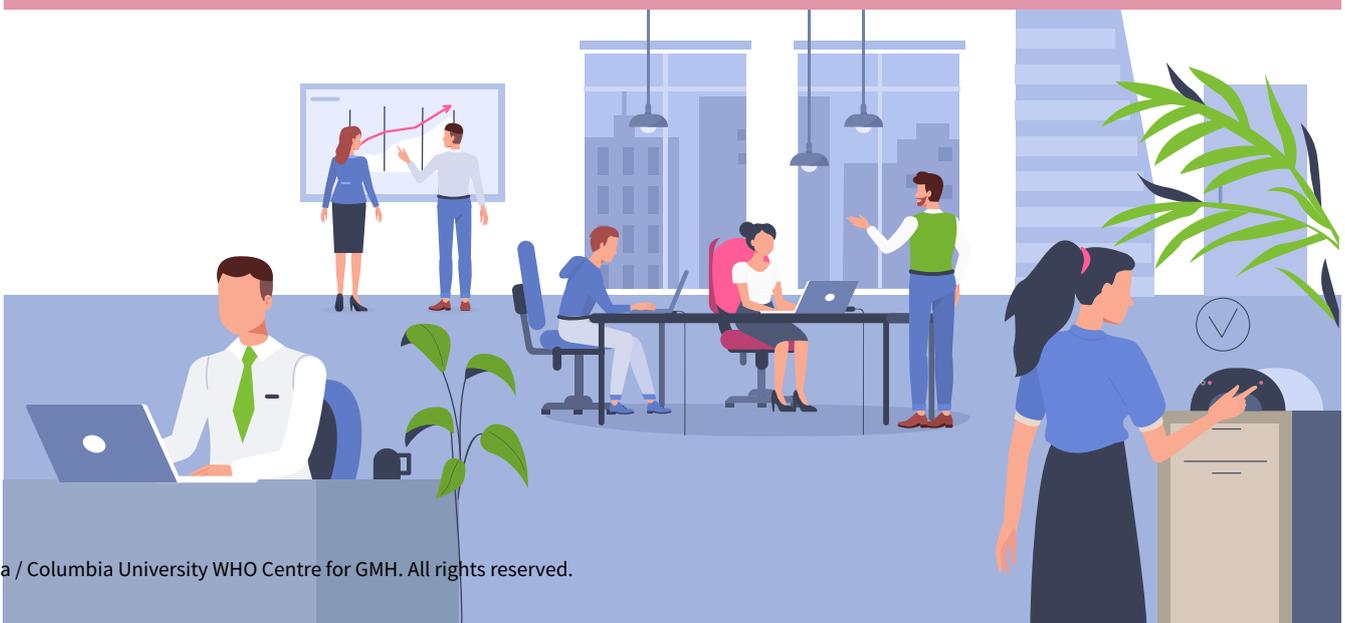
Furlough and termination of employees leaves more work to be covered by remaining staff, who might not have had appropriate handover or training to complete tasks satisfactorily. If this work was not previously in their job description, issues of interest and investment and feelings of incompetence, anxiety, or resentment about taking on the new responsibility may emerge. Conversely, some employees may feel “survivor’s guilt” for retaining their job while their peers lost their jobs, which can lead to experiences of grief, distress, and anxiety.

Changes in how, when, where, and how much employees are working have the potential to create work-life conflict. When these work demands spill over and interfere with home obligations, they can create stress and dissatisfaction in both settings. This is exacerbated by the collapse of naturally-occurring breaks that the traditional structure had provided. Home concerns were more easily left at home and work concerns were more easily left at work when each had distinct places in our lives. During the pandemic, demands and stresses co-mingle in novel ways that can be challenging to juggle.

Lastly, an increase in teleworking can escalate the pressure on employees to be online and attentive 24/7. For those working from home, there could be unrealistic expectations that employees should be available all the time. Having more difficulty disconnecting from work and getting the stress recovery experiences they need (for example getting enough sleep, relaxing, and spending time with loved ones) is a common source of stress for employees at this time.

### Learn More

- Coronavirus: How to Work From Home, the Right Way (Source: [BBC](#))
- Preventing Information Overload in the “Always On” Workplace (Source: [Sodexo](#))
- WHO “Healthy at Home” Suggestions (Source: [WHO](#))





## 6. | **Changes in Domestic Responsibilities that Increase Stress and/or Impede Work**

COVID-19 puts enormous stress on families. Schools are closed. Older adults are most vulnerable to the virus.

Workers with children or those caring for a senior face an exponential rise in responsibility. This can be too much pressure for any individual to handle alone. There will be trade-offs between roles that could lead to a loss of work quality. This may be the first time that employees face this degree of pressure of balancing work and personal demands. For some, this intensified experience of role conflict will be especially distressing and overwhelming.

Consider an employee who is a parent with two school-aged children who were looked after by a home helper until 8pm each day, until now. In the current context, the employee is now tasked with homeschooling the children, feeding them, cleaning the house, working full-time, and remaining healthy themselves. If they are also taking care of a senior who is at risk of becoming sick or is sick, the stressors only grow.

### **Learn More**

- Supporting Children's Mental Health During COVID-19 School Closures (Source: [NEJM Journal Watch](#))
- Coronavirus and COVID-19: Caregiving for the Elderly (Source: [Johns Hopkins Medicine](#))
- Supporting Working Caregivers (Source: [ReACT and AARP](#))

## 7. | **Having a Loved One Sick with COVID-19 and/or Losing a Loved One**

Given the prevalence of COVID-19, it is inevitable that some employees will have loved ones who fall sick with COVID-19. Experiencing stress is normal when a family member or friend is ill, but in the context of a virus that has no vaccine, cure, or treatment, we should expect heightened distress.

Furthermore, COVID-19's long incubation period and the necessity of quarantining sick individuals limit caregivers' ability to physically comfort loved ones who are sick, which might have been their strategy for showing love and support in the past. This could lead to hampered focus and motivation, as well as increased risks for elevated anxiety and despair.



Unfortunately, some employees will experience the death of a loved one during this pandemic. Beyond the expected suffering that comes with such a loss, the circumstances around this virus could make grieving even more difficult. It is likely employees would have been unable to spend time with the person or be present for the moment of death. Comfort given and shared through physical touch would have been prohibited or severely limited.

Public health protocols during the pandemic have restricted a variety of rituals such as funerals and memorial services that are an important part of the grieving process. As a result, typical plans for honoring the body may have been impossible to follow through with. In general, grieving may feel rushed, and there are few opportunities to access community support or distraction.

### **Learn More**

- Grief and COVID-19: Saying goodbye in the age of physical distancing (Source: [APA](#))
- Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives (Source: [APA](#))
- Managing Grief During a Pandemic (Source: [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#))



## 8. | Financial Concerns and Job Security

Most countries have seen dramatic increases in unemployment and job insecurity due to COVID-19. This has led to growing concerns over family finances. In many contexts, employees are afraid of losing their job and of a family member losing theirs. In a survey of UK workers, 44% of employees reported losing sleep due to stress about money during the pandemic (Source: [Institute for Employment Studies](#)).

Employees who lost household income as a result of the pandemic may be struggling to meet their financial obligations, including basic living expenses and payments for housing and consumer debt. For others, plans that were made based on projected regular income or side projects that provided supplemental income will need to be changed or cancelled. These financial stresses can affect concentration and people's capacity to focus at work.

Personal relationships also suffer - money troubles can be an important predictor of a relationship breakdown. People with financial concerns are also more likely to go to work when they are ill, which is always ill-advised but particularly troublesome in the context of COVID-19. Those with retirement savings or pension plans may have increased anxiety about their financial security given market losses and volatility. The economic ramifications may require re-examining, and perhaps downgrading expectations about quality of life and security in the future.

### Learn More

- How Will People React to the New Financial Crisis? (Source: [APA](#))
- How to Mitigate the Mental Health Consequences of the COVID-19 Financial Crisis (Source: [Psychiatric Services](#))
- Short on Cash? Here's Some Advice for Families Stretching Their Budget (Source: [NPR](#))

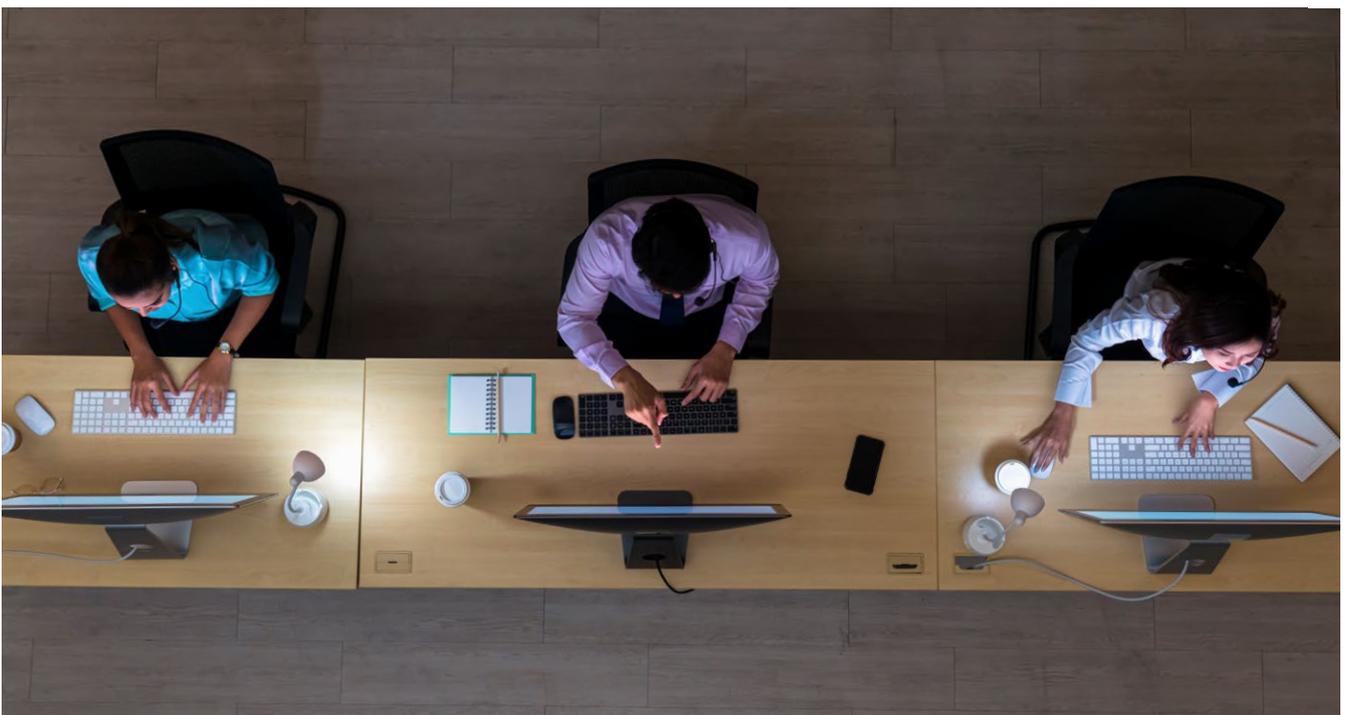
## 9. | Worsening of Associated Long-Term Health Conditions

As many employees shift to telework to accommodate social distancing, ergonomic concerns arise that have the potential to exacerbate pre-existing health conditions such as musculoskeletal pain, migraines, and heart disease, among others. About one in four employees with these chronic illness also have depression and anxiety (Resource: [Lancaster University](#)). During this pandemic, many workers have made stop-gap adaptations to convert their homes into workspaces, often without the tools and furniture needed to remain healthy and work safely over the long-term. In an office, employees might have had access to standing desks, ergonomic computer equipment, protective footwear, and built-in breaks for physical reprieve. When working from home, it is easy to remain hunched over a small laptop screen without proper back support for hours.

Additionally, employees with other health conditions including diabetes or cancer might not have been able to access the treatment they need given limited access to non-emergency or non-COVID-19 related care. This delay or complete treatment gap could lead to impaired health, causing greater distress and putting workers at a higher risk of developing a mental health problems.

### Learn More

- Workplace Chronic Disease Self-Management (Source: [Self-Management Source Center](#))
- Addressing Chronic Disease in the Workplace (Source: [Vital Record](#))
- Musculoskeletal Toolkit for Employers (Source: [Business in the Community](#))



## 10. Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns Related to New Monitoring and Tracking Efforts in the Workplace

As employees re-enter the workplace with new safety and physical distancing protocols and organizations adjust to telework, rotating schedules, and other new arrangements, employees will likely be subject to more (and different types of) screening and monitoring than they were before the pandemic began. While new approaches may be necessary to create a safe and healthy work environment and evaluate job performance, these efforts can feel intrusive to some employees. If not managed well, frequent check-in calls, emails, and the use of productivity software to track remote workers can diminish trust and leave employees feeling micromanaged.

Many employees have privacy concerns regarding their health status as workplaces require temperature checks, contact tracing, and activity monitoring. Employees reactions will vary depending on cultural and societal norms. While some might see these measures as supportive, others may feel unduly watched and infringed upon in terms of their right to privacy.



### Learn More

- Balancing Employee Public Health and Safety (Source: [PWC](#))
- Reporting, Recording, and Communication of COVID-19 Cases in Workplace: Data Protection as a Moving Target (Source: [Journal of Law and the Biosciences](#))
- How to Safeguard the Privacy of Workers with COVID-19 (Source: [SHRM](#))