

COVID-19 and the Workforce: Intersections of Coronavirus, Employment and Disability Inclusion

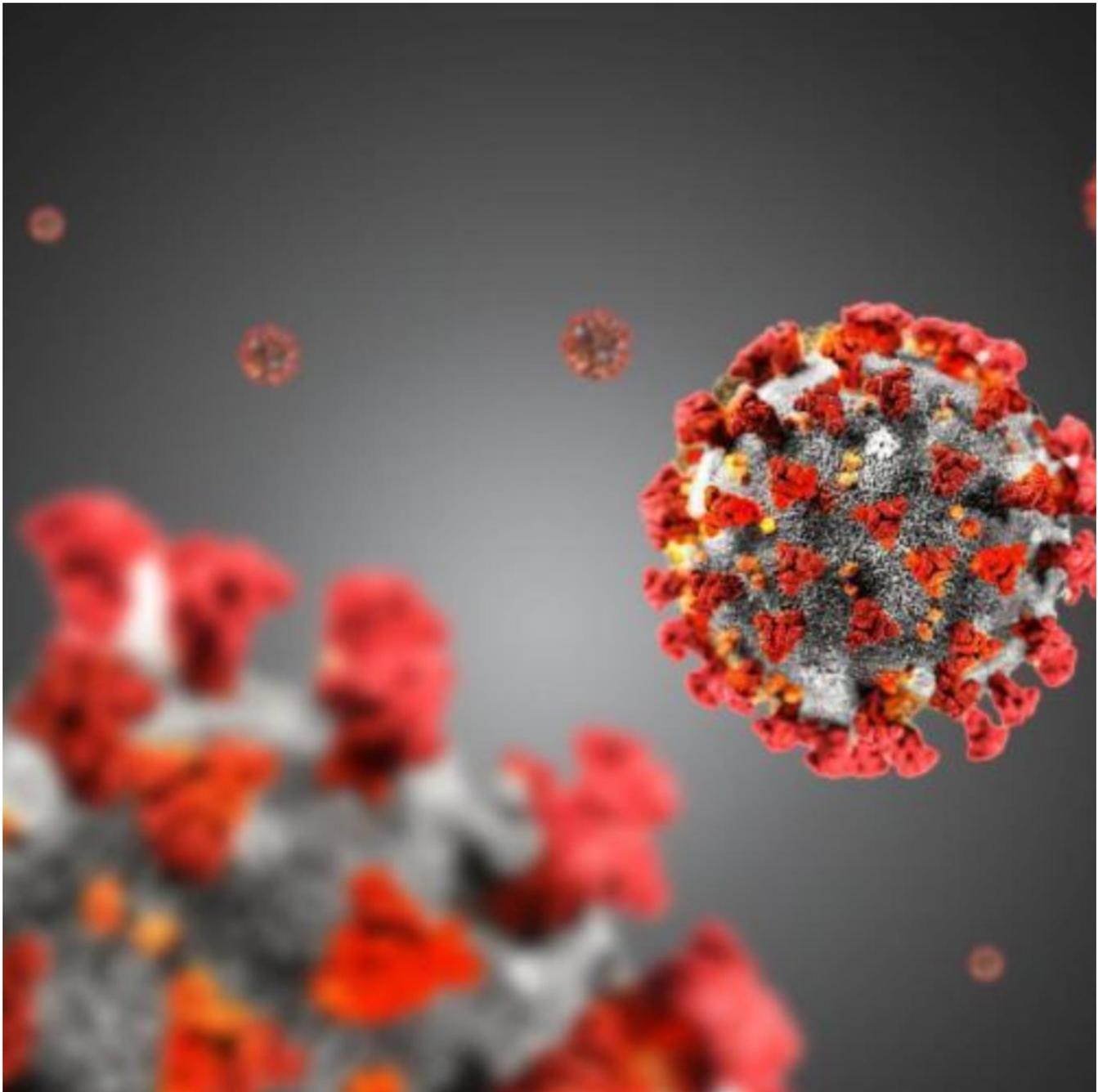


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Introduction

As we work together and learn during this unprecedented time, we are guided by two broad principles:

1. Designing and implementing responses to COVID-19 that are based on facts, objective evidence, and science; and
2. Ensuring that our responses are genuine, effective, and meaningful by taking into consideration the functional needs of all employees, including individuals with disabilities through the provision of reasonable accommodations, including accessible websites, online systems, mobile apps and other forms of information and communication technologies.

Disability:IN has compiled the following resources to support your disability inclusion work during COVID-19. Please know that more resources will be added as they become available. If you have a resource that isn't listed but should be, please email Kate@Disabilityin.org.

Mental Health

Paul Gionfriddo, the President and CEO of Mental Health America (MHA), addressed [Coronavirus and mental health in a statement](#) published on March 12, 2020. Recognizing that associated anxiety will rise as the number of COVID-19 cases increase, especially for employees who have mental health conditions and those who may develop them during this crisis. The post has a list of recommendations that employers can use to assist employees with and without disabilities.

- The American Psychiatric Association Foundation Center for Workplace Mental Health published a series of tips for employees on maintaining their health and wellness during this uncertain time. The article includes guidance specific to those diagnosed with mental health conditions and offers managers and HR professionals ways to support employees. To read the full article: [Working Remotely - Your Mental Health & Well-being](#)
- The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention released [Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty](#).
- According to a *Harvard Business Review* article, [That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief](#). David Kessler, co-author of "On Grief & Grieving," shares his thoughts on the grief you may be feeling, how to manage and find meaning in it.
- Bender Consulting, a Disability:IN certified Disability Owned Business Enterprise (DOBE), is offering two free modules from the iDisability learning suite. These e-learning modules will ensure people with disabilities are included in your COVID-19 response strategies. They are accessible & will advance disability inclusion practices: [Visit iDisability](#)

Recognizing Employees' Mental Health Issues During a Pandemic

Research recently conducted by Accenture estimates that 9-in-10 employees have been touched by mental health challenges; among Millennials, that figure rose to 93 percent. Of the 2,170 employees across the UK who participated in the Accenture survey, 66 percent had personally experienced mental health challenges: [Accenture Research: It's Not 1 in 4; It's All of Us](#).

Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic may adversely impact employees who have diagnosed mental illnesses. Employees who have been traumatized in the past, are at increased risk for serious reactions to trauma. Others may develop mental health conditions during the crisis.

The most common conditions in the workplace are depression and anxiety. The following list identifies the signs of major depression and anxiety that you may notice, even if your employees are working from home, and the actions you can take as an employer to assure employees receive the support & services they need to stay healthy and productive.

Only trained mental health professionals can diagnose. This list is provided to help you recognize when someone is in need, not to diagnose the type of behavioral health issue they are experiencing.

Depression

Major depressive disorder lasts for at least 2 weeks. It affects an employee's ability to work and have satisfying relationships.

Some of the signs you may observe:

- Behavior:
 - Crying spells
 - Withdrawal from others
 - Neglect of responsibilities and loss of motivation
 - Loss of interest in personal appearance
 - Use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Physical:
 - Fatigue & lack of energy
 - Weight loss or gain
 - Unexplained aches and pains

Anxiety

An anxiety disorder differs from normal stress and anxiety. It is more severe, lasts longer and interferes with work and relationships.

Some of the signs you may observe:

- Psychological:
 - Excessive fear and worry
 - On edge or nervous
 - Decreased concentration, memory & indecision
 - Anger, irritability, impatience
- Behavioral:
 - Avoidance of situations
 - Obsessive or compulsive behavior
 - Distress in social situations
 - Phobic behavior
 - Panic attack

How to Help

1. Assess for risk of suicide or harm
2. Listen nonjudgmentally
3. Give reassurance and information
4. Encourage appropriate professional help
5. Encourage self-help and other support strategies

Source: [*Mental Health First Aid*](#)

What to Say and What Not to Say

As you are listening nonjudgmentally, saying nothing is not the answer. The following are tips on what you *could* say to be supportive and helpful.

Say This:

- You don't seem like yourself. Do you want to talk about it?
- It seems like you're going through a tough time. How can I help?
- I'm worried about you. Can we talk about what's going on?
- Are you comfortable talking about this? If not, is there someone else you can talk to?
- How can I/we support you?
- Do you know where you can go for help?
- Are you thinking about harming yourself? Do you have a plan to harm yourself? *(Yes, it's OK to ask. You won't put the idea in someone's head and asking is actually the first step to prevention.)*

Avoid Saying:

- You just need to cheer up/change your attitude.
- Everyone feels that way sometimes.
- Just pray about it. (While prayer can be an important source of strength and comfort, it's not a replacement for treatment.)
- You should just [fill in the blank].
- Yeah, we all feel a little crazy now and then.
- Stop being so negative; just start living.
- Shake it off.
- You have the same illness as [fill in the blank].
- Why are you acting so weird?
- Nothing *(Yes, it may feel awkward to start the conversation, but it can make a difference, so refer to the suggestions at left and then reach out.)*

Source: Adapted from the following: [GuidanceResources](#); [mentalhealth.gov](#); [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#).

The Interactive Process

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, employers are required to begin the interactive process when an employee is having difficulty performing their job and it is reasonable to conclude that the problem may be related to a disability.

The manager should confidentially notify the employee of the performance problem and inquire whether the employee may need a reasonable accommodation to perform the essential functions of their job. The employer is not required to lower performance standards or expectations.

Many employees are working from home at this time, but even in this situation, hiring managers should stay alert to an employee whose performance is lagging. Examples of things that may be said that should put the hiring manager on notice are: an employee's spouse calls to say the employee cannot work because they cannot focus, or the employee says they have not been themselves since the doctor changed their meds to help them cope.

In the current situation, checking-in with employees on a periodic basis may be a vital lifeline and can prevent performance issues. Once problems are noted, addressing them quickly, confidentially and sensitively, will hopefully enable the employee to meet performance standards with or without an accommodation.

Finally, be prepared to offer support and services. Here are some tips from the American Psychiatric Foundation for managers and HR professionals to support employees:

- Show empathy and be available
- Stay connected – Check-in with employees once a week or more often, if possible, to provide support and coaching.
- Recognize the impact of isolation and loneliness – Consider holding virtual coffee klatches or happy hours. Encourage employees to share stories of how they are coping and when appropriate, infuse appropriate humor into the conversation.
- Encourage online training to sharpen and/or develop new skills for your employees.
- Check-in with your EAP to confirm the availability of mental health services and how employees access them. Also connect with your company's health plan to learn what they are offering to support plan members and pass that information onto employees. Be sure to include all relevant website links and phone numbers for both the EAP and health plan in communicating with employees. If your company has a peer support network, be sure to make employees aware of this resource and how to connect.

Source: [*Supporting Employees During COVID-19*](#)

For more information on accommodations available for employees with mental illness: [Job Accommodations Network - Accommodations for Mental Health Impairments](#).

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) provided a detailed bulletin entitled [Q&A About the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and COVID-19](#) on March 18, 2020. The bulletin includes access to EEOC's publication entitled [Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the Americans With Disabilities Act](#) along with links to [guidelines and suggestions made by the CDC for state/local public health authorities](#) about steps employers should take regarding COVID-19. Employers should remember that guidance from public health authorities is likely to change as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. Therefore, employers should continue to follow the most current information on maintaining workplace safety.

The EEOC also provides [Work from Home Guidance](#) that may assist organizations in understanding how to approach work from home for employees with disabilities.

U.S. Department of Labor

The [Department of Labor has created a Coronavirus web page](#) with resources to help employers and employees to prepare for the COVID-19 virus. The page includes links to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's [COVID Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19](#), the Wage and Hour Division's [COVID and the American Workplace](#) page and more.

Since one critical strategy for Coronavirus is social distancing, many employers will opt for telework or work from home strategies to keep their workers and communities healthy. Following are some supporting resources.

Job Accommodation Network

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) published a blog on [The ADA and Managing Reasonable Accommodation Requests from Employees with Disabilities in Response to COVID-19](#). The blog provides Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance assistance and practical strategies for employers on accommodating individuals with disabilities during the COVID-19 public health situation. The post includes guidance on the Family Medical Leave Act and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.

JAN also provides [Telework Guidance](#) and has a comprehensive [Searchable Online Accommodation Resource](#) to discover what employees with disabilities might need to successfully work from home. JAN also created its [COVID-19 Page](#) to share Coronavirus resources for employers covered by the ADA with strategies for dealing with communicable diseases such as COVID-19 in the workplace.



Families First Coronavirus Response Act National Online Dialogue

Hosted by the Office of Compliance Initiatives in partnership with Wage and Hour Division and the Office of Disability Employment Policy, this [national online dialogue](#) provides an innovative opportunity for employers and employees to play a key role in shaping the development of DOL's compliance assistance materials and outreach strategies related to the implementation of the FFCRA.

Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, or EARN, is a technical assistance provider of the Office of Disability Employment Policy. EARN is operated by Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, who will host a [webinar on April 1, 2020 from 1:00-2:00pm ET](#) to feature a discussion about balancing guidance on COVID-19 containment from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. During this webinar, the presenters will examine implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on disability-related inquiries, medical examinations, and interpreting direct threat. The webinar will also include a discussion about requirements for reasonable accommodations for telework, requests for which have spiked due to the required social distancing period.

Global Resources

Facilitated on March 24, 2020 by the International Labor Organization's Global Business and Disability Network, the [Disability Inclusion in Covid-19 responses in the World of Work](#) webinar covered good practices on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Covid-19 responses related to the World of Work. The archive page includes access to the recorded webinar, a summary of Q&A's during the webinar, and two presenter slide decks.

The World Federation of the Deaf published a [COVID-19 page](#) that includes resources to help keep the more than 70 million deaf people throughout the world updated in their national sign languages throughout the pandemic.

Accessible Tools and Content

It is important to review the tools organizations use for distance-based connections. Are your video conferencing system and other information and communication tools accessible for users of assistive technology? Review the [Disability:IN Accessible Technology Procurement Toolkit](#) for guidance.

Also, when team members present content for remote colleagues, is the content presented in a way that all colleagues can capture, including workers with disabilities? Check out [Accessible Teaching in the Time of COVID-19](#) for recommendations and practices. While this tool was developed for online university teaching, the lessons are transferable to other communities.

Disability Community

There are some quality posts from the disability community that will assist employers in understanding the mindset of employees who have pre-existing conditions and are concerned during this period of time.

- [5 Things to Know About Coronavirus And People With Disabilities](#), Andrew Pulrang, *Forbes*
- [COVID-19 Information By and For People with Disabilities](#), a plain language guide created by the Self Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center for individuals with intellectual and development disabilities.
- [What You Need to Know About Coronavirus \(in American Sign Language\)](#), New York City's Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
- The National Association of the Deaf [COVID-19 Resource Page](#) includes videos in American Sign Language (ASL) about COVID-19 and ASL videos from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- American Foundation for the Blind [COVID-19 Resource Page](#)
- National Federation of the Blind [COVID-19 Resource Page](#)
- American Association of People with Disabilities: [How the Disability Community Can Respond to COVID-19 – Ensuring People with Disabilities Can Access Prescription Drugs During the Current Crisis](#)