

The mental health impact of COVID-19: the disruption that no one anticipated

Ehi Iden, President, OSHAfrica, Ikeja – Lagos, Nigeria
 e-mail: ehi@oshafrika.africa
 www.ohsm.com.ng

At the end of 2019, people did not think that the novel coronavirus outbreak would so drastically change the global economic landscape, workplaces, patterns of work, families and our overall health and wellbeing. Initially, COVID-19 was trivialised in many quarters and likened to the outbreaks of SARS and MERS that were successfully confined and prevented from spreading beyond Asia and the middle east regions. But the coronavirus spread as fast as man travelled and quickly landed in every region of the world. Today, we talk of ‘the new world order’ and ‘the new normal’ in reference to the new world in which we find ourselves living.

According to Warren Buffet, who is among the most successful investors in the world, “What we learnt from history is that people do not learn from history”. This is true when we consider similarities between the current COVID-19 pandemic and the Spanish flu of 1918, which led to the shutdown of businesses, places of worship etc. while people were forced into isolation. At the end of what was described as the deadliest plague of the twentieth century, most of the survivors suffered heightened mental health conditions, including sleep disturbances, depression, mental distraction, dizziness, and pandemic-related suicide. Those who were able to return to work had difficulties in coping at work.

Are we to expect similar health outcomes post-COVID-19? Predictably, yes. As I write this there have been over five million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 100 000 deaths globally.¹ To control the spread of this novel coronavirus, about a third of the countries in the world are in some form of lock down.² The pandemic and responses to it override and disrupt personal and organisational plans, and have pushed the world into survival mode. Non-essential businesses and institutions have been forced to shut their doors and employees have gone into mandatory isolation, along with their families. None of this was in anyone’s 2020 plan.

The words ‘isolation’, ‘quarantine’, ‘infodemic’ and ‘new normal’ have become part of the new vocabulary. Isolation has disrupted social integration and support systems of our collective co-existence and greatly influenced mental health. Many suffer from loneliness and many “live-alone” employees suffer from lone-worker syndrome. Lone workers are those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision.³ Typical hazards encountered by lone workers include accidents, sudden illnesses and inadequate rest. Under lockdown conditions, the lone-worker syndrome, which is characterised by fear, anxiety, uncertainty, longer hours of work and irregular sleeping patterns that lead to a variety of mental health conditions, is a real concern.

As lockdowns are relaxed and preparations are made for return to work, the mental state of returning employees must be considered. The new ways in which we will relate to and communicate with each other must begin while employees are still working from home.

Should we retrain managers, human resources teams and others on a whole new way of communication and handling of employees? Yes, we should. There is a whole new work order and we are dealing

with people returning from isolation and not vacation. Seating plans will be changed to meet the physical distancing protocol. With few people returning to the workplace, while others continue to work remotely, the ‘buddy’ support system will be replaced with the COVID-19 legacy of ‘no hug and no hand shake’. Adjusting to all these changes will come with mental health issues. Proper people management skills will be in high demand in the new work order. In addition, management systems have changed to include not only workers who work in places of work but also, to a much greater extent than before, those who now work remotely. Systems need to be reviewed to accommodate these two categories of workers.

High levels of uncertainty put further strain on both employers and employees. The global economy is, and will be, adversely impacted by this pandemic. What does this mean for businesses and employees? Will the new work order lead to job losses and pay cuts? Has the future of work arrived faster than predicted? Will some types of jobs or roles still be needed in workplaces? Will organisations survive this pandemic? These uncertainties further exacerbate fear and anxiety thereby increasing the mental health burden of both employees and employers.

While employers work hard to keep businesses and institutions viable and to gradually re-integrate employees into new work patterns and systems, we must not forget that employers are human beings. They also underwent isolation and are not immune to the mental health issues highlighted above. There is an urgent need to create support systems for employers and managers to enable them to attend to the needs of employees while also dealing with increased workloads. If not cautioned, they are likely to suffer from compassion fatigue. Knowing this, we need to consider options for mental health support for employers and managers.

In fewer than six months, COVID-19 has completely disrupted the world of work leaving us all to learn and adjust to the new workspaces and work patterns.

This article is based on Ehi Iden’s blog article available at http://ohsmcomng.blogspot.com/2020/05/covid-19-change-no-one-anticipated-and_29.html.

REFERENCES

1. Euronews. Coronavirus statistics: latest numbers on COVID-19 cases and deaths. Available from: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/25/covid-19-coronavirus-breakdown-of-deaths-and-infections-worldwide> (accessed 25 May 2020).
2. Business Insider. Countries around the world are reopening — here’s our constantly updated list of how they’re doing it and who remains under lockdown. Available from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/countries-on-lockdown-coronavirus-italy-2020-3> (accessed 29 May 2020).
3. Health and Safety Authority. Lone workers. Available from: https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Hazards/Lone_Workers/#who (accessed 29 May 2020).