

Coronavirus: An Organisational Crisis?

March 2020

The Coronavirus is currently predominant in news headlines across the world, and whilst the media focus is on the physical impact of the virus on the health of those infected and on how to prevent the spread of the virus, the psychological impact on people and organisations is less emphasised. Anxiety about the virus and its impact on work and travel can affect mental health and wellbeing.

Many of our clients are based in the Asia-Pacific region and are experiencing first-hand the impact of the Coronavirus on the people, organisations and societies around them. The Atrium wellbeing service offers counselling for all kinds of life events and mental health issues, so it makes sense to offer some insights into what we are likely to experience and the emotional and psychological impact of this on our daily lives both individually and in the workplace.

The Virus

The virus causes flu-like symptoms including a fever, a cough, or difficulty breathing and the UK Government says the current evidence is that most cases appear to be mild.

News coverage focuses on emotionally impactful messages, including of deaths in other countries, whole towns being locked down, and stories of people being kept in quarantine or having to self-isolate for weeks, so there is understandably a lot of anxiety about the virus.

“ The fear being experienced around the virus is anxiety about the unknown” says James Elder, the Head of Clinical Practice for the Counselling service at Atrium. “We are seeing employees in the Asia-Pacific region having to embrace new behaviours in their work and home lives; many are working from home for the first time, and whilst they may not be as concerned for their own health, they often have friends and family in the most affected groups and are having to isolate themselves from the people who are normally their support networks. ”

The UK Government has issued advice about what to do if you feel unwell, have been to any affected areas and has guidance on how to prevent the spread of disease.

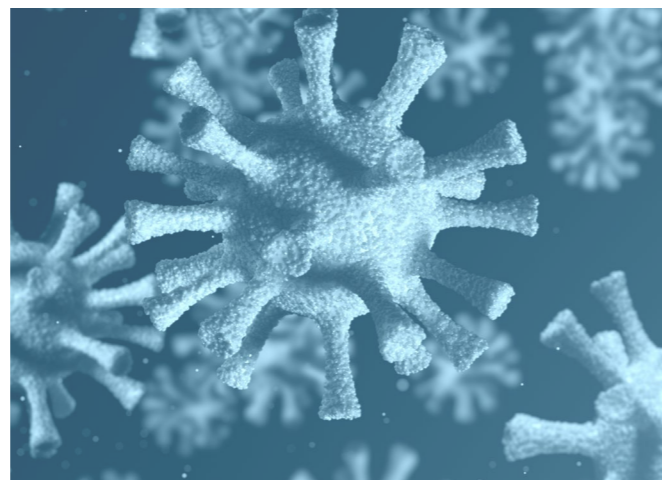
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>

Here are some suggestions which may help if you are feeling anxious about the spread of the virus.

➤ Anxiety

It is natural to feel anxiety for the health of both ourselves and others close to us when faced with an epidemic. Anxiety is the mechanism by which we project our thoughts into the future to either escape danger or search for what we want.

It's a kind of motivation that can be really valuable when we know what we want, and when danger is very obvious, but for more complex and unpredictable situations we can find ourselves unable to identify an appropriate action to take, so we stay in constant anxiety, which can in turn become overwhelming.



First-hand experience of the virus, either personally or vicariously through someone close to you can be traumatic, especially with severe symptoms or even loss of life. Trauma emerges from events that are beyond our control and can impact on our mental health with those affected experiencing hypervigilance, despair, panic, or anxiety.

Don't ignore your anxiety. It's normal to be frightened by something like this. If we acknowledge our feelings of fear then we can reduce its power. By expressing the feeling in a way you can control, either by talking to someone, or writing in a journal we can then let it go. Allow yourself to worry, take action to express it, then focus on the situation right now: are you ill? Take action where you can.

Think about your thought process; become aware of what you are thinking. Sometimes we are catastrophising, we're focusing on all these 'what ifs?' Bring things back to what you actually know. Talking to a trained counsellor can help gain perspective.

➤ Wellbeing and Health

Conduct a wellbeing check with yourself: make sure you are looking after yourself, doing what you can to help get a good night's sleep, eating well and doing appropriate exercise. People who have long-term health conditions may be even more concerned. It's important to make sure you are doing the usual self-management of your condition. Anxiety and the release of stress hormones can exacerbate physical symptoms. Make sure you are doing what you can to look after your physical health.

➤ Media

You might find that anxiety is only exacerbated by the news, and you might want to stop interacting with it entirely. But for some people this can be quite difficult. They want to know what's going on. Not knowing makes it worse. Think about limiting how much time you spend on social media or reading, listening or watching the news.

You may want to think about where you are getting your information from. Are the reports sensationalising the situation and scaremongering? Or do you feel they are reporting responsibly and with balance? The objective is to reduce anxiety and increase feelings of safety, and the news, particularly on social media, isn't always the most helpful for this.

➤ Social and Cultural

Masks, limited interaction, impact on gathering places like shops, bars, restaurants and fear that we might infect vulnerable groups will understandably promote greater feelings of isolation.

Samuel Pepys wrote of the great plague of London in 1665, and his observations still resonate today: Pepys described the changing face of London-life with increasing isolation and shops and markets closing, and the desensitization of people, including himself, to the corpses of plague fatalities: 'I am come almost to think nothing of it.'

This increased sense of isolation from travel limitations and quarantine can often be translated into the ostracism of certain groups: first people from the Wuhan region, then those from anywhere in China, and Hong Kong.

The cultural impact of this is as yet unknown but is beginning to be seen in other regions of the world as Chinese people and Ex-Pats from the Asia-Pacific region worldwide report being treated differently in the wake of the disease.

➤ The Impact On Business

Amazon recently implemented a travel-ban for their staff, and many offices in the Asia-Pacific region are operating a working from home policy for the first time.

Anywhere that people gather in numbers is likely to be affected, which means that offices, bars, restaurants, and shops will see reduced numbers of people in place, both staff and customers. For many organisations this may be a time of crisis, as employees have to operate within new working practices and business to business relationships become less fluid.

Some companies may experience drops in performance due to illness, or just through anxiety, increased workload and the introduction of new operational policies.

Changes on this scale can be unsettling to employees and the impact can be talent drain and performance reduction. The Atrium Wellbeing Team offer support to HR teams who need to build resilience within their organisations to reduce the impact of crises like the Coronavirus and enable the greater flexibility required from personnel when work environments have to change abruptly.

If you'd like a free no obligation discussion with Atrium about these or any other HR issues please email info@atriumhr.com.