Social Distancing and its Effect on Mental Health
April 2020
by Bob Swanson

During this unique period of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been encouraged to maintain social distancing of at least six feet and avoid gathering in groups (when possible) to reduce the spread of this virus. Social distancing’s intent is really physical distancing while still remaining in social contact with others. Little or no social contact can quickly create feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression.

The current situation impacts the mental well-being of all of us, and it can especially have a negative impact on individuals living with mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders (even those in recovery from a substance use disorder). Let’s first discuss some common reactions to our current situation. It is very reasonable and fair to be worried about the gravity of this pandemic, the lack of understanding of COVID-19 and the economic consequences from our stay at home orders.

Your employees are likely concerned about their health, the health of their families and their family’s economic vitality. If they’re still working, they’re uncertain for how long. If they have been furloughed or laid off, they wonder when they’ll be able to return to work. As a business owner, you are anxious about the financial viability of your business, how long this situation will last, and what impact it is going to have on your business.

With all these concerns floating around, what can be done to maintain good mental health during these times of social distancing? First – social distancing does not mean social isolation. It is critical to remain connected with others on a regular basis. Maintain a regular schedule, eat well, get enough sleep, maintain good personal hygiene, exercise, get fresh air, limit media consumption, set boundaries on your work schedule when working remotely and engage in activities that bring joy.

As a business leader, what can you do for your employees? Encourage and facilitate regular communication with and among your employees. Use technology as much as possible for meetings and communication, because we all benefit from visual communication. Make yourself available to employees to answer questions and reassure them about work and other issues that may arise. Your employees need to know you care about their complete well-being. Make mental health visible by offering support and creating an environment where it is safe to talk about.

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As touched on earlier, people living with mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders (and those in recovery) are especially vulnerable right now. It is critical they stay on their treatment plan, including use of their prescription medications and maintain contact with their medical provider and support group. Thankfully, many medical providers and support groups quickly adopted virtual meeting technology to adapt to our current environment.

Here are several resources available to help:

- [http://workplacementalhealth.org/covid19tips](http://workplacementalhealth.org/covid19tips) (COVID-19 Mental Health Tips)
- [http://nami.org/covid19](http://nami.org/covid19) (National Alliance on Mental Illness’ COVID-19 page)
- [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/) (CDC’s COVID-19 Page)
- [https://www.samhsa.gov/](https://www.samhsa.gov/) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

We all are in an unprecedented and uniquely challenging time. But remember, neither you nor your employees are alone. We will pull through these times together.

About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.