

Resilience During a Public Health Emergency

Public health emergencies are common but unpredictable occurrences. Events such as the 2020 outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (COVID-19) can be a source significant anxiety and worry around the world because of the unpredictable impact it may have on our lives at home and work.

When such events start to have visible impact on our health, well-being or financial stability our level of anxiety can grow even higher. Other factors such as our lack of control, incomplete information and the constant flow of information from the media only heighten our emotional reaction. Those with a history of mental health problems, substance abuse or social and financial instability are most at risk for stress and anxiety.

What to expect

The good news is that we are resilient. With the right response, we can tolerate a lot and bounce back from most stressful events. The first step in coping with stressful event is to be aware of the impact the event may be having on our health and well-being.

We all deal with uncertainty and stress in different ways. We interpret events differently. We express emotions in unique ways. Stress impacts our behaviors differently, particularly depending on how severely an event impacts our lives.

Despite these individual differences, it is common human experience to be impacted by extreme stress and threats to health and safety. Below are some normal reactions to such circumstances.

During times of high stress, it is perfectly natural to feel:

- Overwhelmed / shocked
- Frightened
- Anxious
- Distressed
- Worried
- Confused
- Helpless and powerless

These reactions may express themselves in different ways, including:

- Anxiety about travelling, internationally and in our daily routines
- Anxiety being amidst crowds
- Difficulty concentrating, attending to tasks
- Uncharacteristic changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns (too much or too little)

- Unusual irritation, agitation, heightened sense of alertness and jumpiness
- Preoccupation with or spending significant time watching news or social media
- Concerns relating to the safety of family members and friends
- Heightened emotions, such as increased sadness, irritability and anger
- A strong desire to be with friends and family
- Uncharacteristically rigid behavior or a desire to implement strong rules to navigate the situation

These events can impact us at work:

- Lower productivity and work quality
- Absenteeism
- Difficulty concentrating or staying on task. Gossiping or excessive “water cooler talk.”
- A breakdown in communication or conflicts with others
- Social isolation or distancing
- Changes in group effectiveness. Some teams come together under stress. Some deteriorate.
- Workplaces more directly impacted (healthcare, transportation, customer service) may experience higher anxiety.

Managing stress and building resilience

One of the most important factors in managing stress and building resilience during a public health emergency is being aware of what we **can** and **cannot** control. Excessive exposure to news and social media can leave us more anxious as we worry about things we cannot control. But there is a lot we can and should control:

- Focus your energy on the things over which you have influence and control.
- Follow all instructions for maintaining personal health and safety.
- Stay knowledgeable through reputable sources in your country. Separate facts from your emotions. Avoid imagined fears and “worst case scenario” thinking.
- Limit exposure to news and social media. Instead, monitor the situation through government websites such as, the World Health Organization; the Public Health Agency of Canada; the US Centers for Disease Control (USCDC); the Australian Chief Medical Officer; or the UK National Health Service.
- Eat a healthy diet and stay as physically active as possible.
- Stay socially connected. But be aware when others are worsening your anxiety.
- Stay connected to family and friends who are far away or living abroad. Use social media as a tool to monitor the well-being of others.
- Expect emotions to vary from day to day.
- Keep up with hobbies and things you enjoy. Use your leisure time for self-care and positive distraction.

- Avoid self-destructive ways of coping, such as excessive alcohol, drug use, gambling, overeating.
- Stay rested and keep regular sleep routines. Intrusive thoughts that disrupt sleep are normal and should pass.
- Express your feelings as they arise. Allow others to comfort you.
- Talk to a counselor if the feelings become prolonged or too intense.

For Children

- Minimize exposure to news, adult conversations and social media.
- Ask children what they have seen or heard. Be prepared to correct faulty information.
- Encourage children to say how they are feeling about the event.
- Assure children that their parents and adults are taking care of them and will continue to help them deal with anything that makes them feel afraid.
- Help children recognize past times when they have shown courage in coping with a new scary situation. This will help empower and increase self-esteem.
- Let children know these events occur occasionally. Be optimistic. Let them know that many people are working to resolve the situation.

Crises and widespread social emergencies of any kind can be stressful. If you are experiencing severe or persistent symptoms lasting longer than a few weeks, contact your Employee Assistance Program. Counselors are available 24/7.

Remember that wherever you are, Caterpillar's confidential **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is available and accessible 24/7/365.

 **1-309-820-3604**

 **1-866-228-0565**

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