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**TO: ALL HEADS OF DIVISIONS/CHIEF DIRECTORATES/ DIRECTORATES/ HEADS OF INSTITUTIONS/
DISTRICTS/ SUBSTRUCTURES**

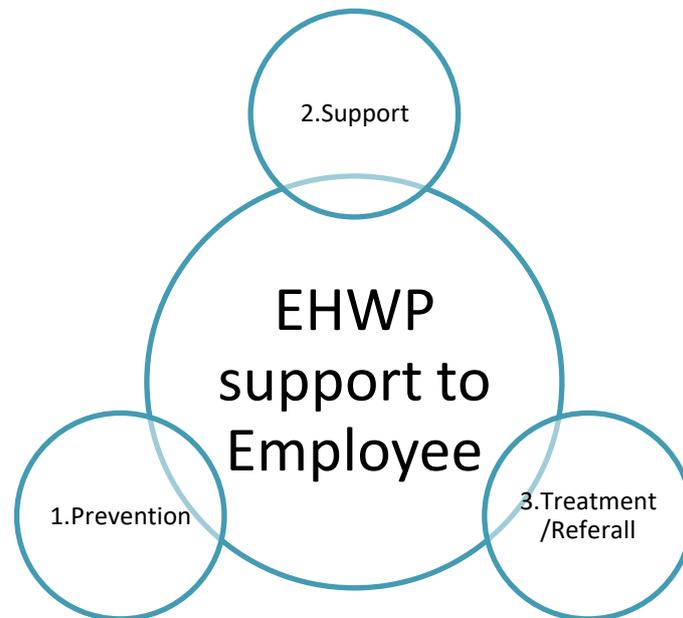
**EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLNESS CARE AND SUPPORT FOR WESTERN CAPE GOVERNMENT HEALTH
EMPLOYEES DURING COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on all aspects of society, including the mental health and physical health of the general population. The threat impacts on both the physical and mental health of employees as well.

The Department cares about the mental and physical wellbeing of its employees and wants employees to know that they have someone to turn to during this pandemic whenever the need arises. The wellness service is a means for the WCGH to show the employee they are valued and appreciated. The Employee Health & Wellness Programme (EHWP) is administered by Metropolitan Health PTY.

The department in partnership with the Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP) Service Provider **Metropolitan Health PTY** would like to provide the following guidance for the management of mental health in the work-place.

The EHWP guidance is based and derived from the **National Department of Health: Psychosocial support for health workers during the COVID-19 response**. Initially action should be at prevention, support, psychological first aid for those presenting with mental health symptoms and then progress to appropriate referral.



1. **Prevention**

1.1. The main aim of **Prevention** principle is to normalize psychological reactions to the current unusual circumstances, reduce anxiety and consequent extreme reactions and keep the workplace stable and effective. The reason for this is that many health care workers may experience reactions such as constant anxiety, panic attacks, fear, low mood, preoccupation with thoughts of COVID-19, nightmares, difficulty concentrating, minor changes in sleeping patterns and appetite, short temper and lower tolerance levels. These can seem excessive or abnormal but are normal psychological reactions to extreme or abnormal events or circumstances such as COVID-19 has brought. People may also experience recurrence of symptoms associated with illnesses or medical conditions that have been previously well-controlled. In most cases the best option is to keep busy as this is likely to distract from ruminating about the apparent hopelessness of the situation. ¹

1.2. **Actions managers can take during this time:**

- 1.2.1. Provide accurate and timeous information as situation unfolds especially about Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and what the department plans are in managing the COVID situation.
- 1.2.2. Take health worker questions, needs and concerns seriously. Respond as soon as possible.
- 1.2.3. Be mindful of not using fatalistic, threatening or commanding language in verbal and written communication as this creates more anxiety and fear amongst workers.
- 1.2.4. Provide rest spaces and enforce mandatory rest periods for all health-care workers.

¹ National Department of Health: Psychosocial support for health care workers during COVID 19

- 1.2.5. Arrange a group an onsite or virtual Group Debriefing for health-care workers via the EHWP (See Figure 1) by requesting this from Janice.Andrews@westerncape.gov.za
- 1.2.6. Encourage employees to use the EHWP in their individual capacity by phoning 0800 611 093 or using *134*664*39#.

1.3. **Actions Employees can take during this time:**

- 1.3.1. Take the initiative to be informed through reliable information sources.
- 1.3.2. Avoid spending too much time discussing negative information and issues in the workplace.
- 1.3.3. Make sure you take breaks at the stipulated times on a regular basis.
- 1.3.4. Be considerate and supportive of colleagues.
- 1.3.5. Reconnect with your personal reasons for choosing to become a health worker.
- 1.3.6. Contact the EHWP if you or your house-hold member is feeling anxious by phoning the toll-free number 0800 611 093 or using *134*664*39#

2. **Support**

2.1. The main aim of the **support principle** is to actively support health care-workers that are working in teams and who come in daily contact with patients. The support principle is based on the need to mitigate the effects of constant exposure to tense and anxious mental environments. The main action of this principle is that teams should institute a daily group check-in strategy. This will allow for workers to discharge anxious feelings in a safe environment and recognise that others are having the same experiences. This has the effect of normalizing what can feel like extreme reactions when experienced in isolation and reduces anxiety.²

2.2. **Actions managers can take during this time:**

- 2.2.1. Implement mandatory time for formally regrouping, reconnecting with colleagues at the start of the workday or at least 3 times a week in times of crisis, noting social distancing.
- 2.2.2. Encourage and promote an environment where health workers are visibly and regularly recognized for their effort.
- 2.2.3. Introduce a buddy system, where staff members have a designated colleague to decompress with when faced with a challenging moment.
- 2.2.4. Provide basic training on how staff can support each other this can be arranged via the EHWP by contacting Janice.Andrews@westerncape.gov.za this type of training will be done via zoom or Microsoft Teams.

² National Department of Health: Psychosocial support for health care workers during COVID 19

2.3. Actions Employees can take during this time:

- 2.3.1. Make the effort to participate in recommended strategies to support mental health.
- 2.3.2. Identify a colleague you can reach out to in challenging moments.
- 2.3.3. Be available to other colleagues for support.
- 2.3.4. Participate actively in training initiatives to acquire skills to support yourself and others.
- 2.3.5. Check in with your support buddy at least 3 times a day.
- 2.3.6. TELL SOMEONE as soon as possible when you feel overwhelmed and talk it through – it only needs to take a few minutes.
- 2.3.7. Remember that crying is not the worst thing that can happen - it can be an effective decompression tool. People usually feel better after crying.
- 2.3.8. Contact the EHWP if you are feeling anxious by phoning the toll-free number 0800 611 093 or using *134*664*39#

3. Treatment (Referral for Treatment)

- 3.1. The main aim of **treatment** principle is to actively assist and stabilise the employee and prevent further psychological complications, this is usually done immediately when the person is presenting with overwhelming thoughts, feelings or behaviours that put themselves or others at risk.

3.2. Actions both managers and employees must take:

Triage

- 3.2.1. Speak calmly to someone who asks for help.
- 3.2.2. Acknowledge the person's concerns and fears without dismissing, denying or trying to downplay them.
- 3.2.3. Repeat back what you have heard so that the person feels like their concerns are understood
- 3.2.4. Name the feelings that you see the person displaying and try to reflect how these may be normal under the circumstances.
- 3.2.5. Gently encourage the person to say what they think will help them best to function at this point.

3.3. When to make a Management Referral to the EHWP:

- 3.3.1. As humans, we are very adept at sensing levels of distress in others. It is important to try to be calm gauge how distressed a person is before making a referral. Recommending professional help too early or incorrectly can disempower a person and discourage them from drawing on effective personal resources.

Refer to the EHWP when the health-care worker presents with the following.

- 3.3.2. Is showing extreme signs of distress or irrational behavior – crying excessively, repeated anger outbursts, difficulty working in a team, antagonizing other colleagues, extremely anxious, and cannot be stabilized by any means. (Follow the process on Figure 1)
- 3.3.3. Has had to deal with more than 1 deaths on one shift.
- 3.3.4. Has tested positive for COVID-19 as a result of work exposure (Follow Process in Figure 3). The employee has a history of serious mental illness (psychotic disorder, recent major depressive episode, bipolar disorder) and is showing any sign of stress, distress or unusual behavior. The process for referring a health worker is in Figure 1.

Yours sincerely



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