

PREVENTION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS
IN THE CONTEXT OF AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC:
FOR EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS IN QUÉBEC



Organisation
de la sécurité civile
du Québec



**INFLUENZA
PANDEMIC**

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for Québec employers and workers. Its purpose is to provide information about the psychosocial effects of an influenza pandemic and about means for preserving the well-being of the target audience.

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www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca

Unless the context otherwise requires, references to the masculine include the feminine and vice versa.

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PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

Most Quebeckers have never had to deal with an influenza pandemic. Indeed, a pandemic is an exceptional situation that will affect people both physically and psychosocially.

In this context, psychosocially refers to anything that has an impact on the individual's thoughts and emotions (psychological considerations) as well as relations with family, significant others, work, and society (social considerations).

Today, we can draw lessons from the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, which impacted on every sphere of human activity: individual (stress, grieving, anxiety, depression, etc.), family (increased caregiving for children and elderly parents, parents having to keep their children home, etc.), professional (job loss, longer work hours, more tasks, etc.), financial (unemployment, poverty, etc.), social (e.g., reduced social support, availability of friends, and activities). Moreover, it has been recognized that being a carrier of a dangerous condition increases insecurity and social exclusion.

The entire population will therefore have to face the psychosocial consequences of the influenza pandemic. Many people—divided between their own needs, that of their significant others, and their work responsibilities—will find themselves in a delicate situation.

Rapidly determining the people who will be particularly affected by the pandemic's psychosocial impacts will make it possible to initiate measures to help keep these people in their workplace.

The symptoms (signs) of psychological distress fall into four categories: physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. To be significant, these symptoms must be accompanied by changes in habits and behaviors.

Physical Signs	Fatigue or nervousness	Backaches or headaches	Feeling of heaviness in the chest or stomach	Higher heart rate	Muscle tension	Insomnia
Cognitive Signs	Difficulty in making decisions	Absent-mindedness (forgetfulness, problems with concentration and attention)	Pessimism (views future, particularly their own, as very negative)	Nightmares	Distrust	
Emotional Signs	Irritability	Anxiety	Depression	Anger	Excitability	
Behavioral Signs	Arguments, aggressiveness, mood swings	Isolation, inability to express their opinions	Rigid attitudes	Passiveness	Coffee, alcohol, or drug abuse, medication overuse	

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING WELL-BEING

Remember that human beings are highly adaptable and that everyone has the resources and strengths for dealing with the situation.

I Get Informed:

- When information is lacking, the imagination takes over, which leads to rumors, anxiety, and irrational fears. Consequently, I seek out reliable information from competent authorities and credible documents. I stay up-to-date on changes in the situation. The Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux frequently publishes information, including on the government's Web site at www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca

I Get Organized:

- I determine who I can help (elderly parent, vulnerable family member, etc.) and what type of assistance I should provide.
- I determine who I can count on to take over the care of my children, my family, or someone else who is under my care and protection. I check on what kind of help I will receive.
- I establish and maintain ties of solidarity with my family, friends, and colleagues. In short, I build a small network that has rules designed to safeguard as well as tips for lightening the load and preventing exhaustion.
- I don't hesitate to ask for or to accept help. Accepting help is taking steps to stay healthy.

I Take Care of Myself:

- I take care of my health by staying fit, by taking part in physical activity, and opting for a healthy lifestyle.
- I seek out occasions to improve my well-being by pampering myself a bit (reading, renting a movie, taking a relaxing bath).
- I allow myself time to relax, rest when tired, and practise relaxation.
- I spend time with friend who makes me feel good and makes me laugh.

REACTIONS TO WATCH FOR

- I no longer feel able to make decisions or play my normal role.
- I no longer know where I am or where to start my work.
- I feel irritable, impatient, and absent-minded. I make errors in judgment and blame coworkers.
- I have a hard time controlling my reactions, moods, and acts. I get angry, shout at coworkers, and treat equipment roughly.
- I have physical pain, headaches, etc.
- I always feel like crying, sleep poorly, and have been eating poorly or very little for some time.
- I'm exhausted. I feel at the end of my rope.

CHECKLIST TO FACILITATE SCREENING FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS REACTIONS IN WORKERS

I have noticed changes in the person's behavior and attitudes that reflect the symptoms below. One of these symptoms alone is not a cause for alarm. The appearance of several, their frequency, and their intensity can indicate a certain level of distress.

Behaviorally:

- Mood swings, aggressiveness, impatience ☐
- Isolation (the person no longer joins in with others) ☐
- Crying jags ☐
- Difficulty in organizing tasks ☐
- Lateness ☐
- Complaints about a coworker's work pace ☐
- Neglected appearance ☐

Emotionally:

- Irritability ☐
- Anxiety ☐
- Feelings of depression..... ☐
- Anger ☐
- Excitability ☐
- Changeable mood..... ☐

Cognitively:

- Difficulty in making decisions..... ☐
- Forgetfulness, problems with concentration and attention..... ☐
- Pessimistic thoughts..... ☐
- Mistrust ☐
- Errors in judgment..... ☐

Physically:

- Complaints about fatigue or nervousness ☐
- Complaints about backache or headache ☐
- Complaints about feelings of heaviness in the chest or stomach ☐
- Complaints about muscle tension ☐
- Complaints about insomnia ☐

WHAT TO DO?

Preventing Employee Psychological Distress:

- I go over the importance of preparing both personally and professionally for the pandemic with my employees. ☐
- I invite my employees to familiarize themselves with the psychosocial information on the government's Web site about the pandemic. ☐
- I invite my employees to prepare their families for the fact that they will be away from home. ☐
- I convey information about the pandemic and work provisions. ☐
- I inform employees about the type of help they may receive, if needed. ☐
- I plan measures to ensure employees have breaks. ☐
- I send messages to every member of my team to make them aware of the vigilance they need to exercise with respect to their well-being and that of others. ☐

If I notice signs that a staff member could be experiencing psychological distress:

- If I feel uncomfortable broaching this question with him, I ask one of his significant others to do so. ☐
- I can talk directly to him about the issue, emphasizing the effort he puts into his duties and job. ☐
- I share with him my observations and concerns about him. ☐
- I emphasize the negative effects of fatigue on his health. ☐
- I emphasize the importance of being able to count on him. ☐
- I emphasize the necessity to get a few hours of rest. ☐
- I give him the information required so that he can consult a professional with the employee assistance program (EAP). ☐
- I check to see if teamwork itself is being affected. ☐
- If needed, I contact an EAP representative for advice about appropriate action. ☐



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