



Local Government
Workplaces Initiative



UNC

SCHOOL OF
GOVERNMENT

Creating Emotionally Health Workplaces During COVID-19

Overview

- Part I: The Research
- Part II: Burnout
- Part III: Workplace Interventions



Part I: The Research

- Conducted 60 interviews with employees of four local governments
- Asked questions about how COVID-19 was affecting them and their workplaces
- Patterns of Results
 - Personal Stressors
 - Organizational Stressors

Poll

- Are you worried about your employees'/colleagues mental health?
- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

CDC on COVID-19 Stress Effects

- Feelings of fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, or frustration
- Changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- Physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs



Poll

- Are you aware of anyone (you, family members, friends, employees, bosses) who has experienced these symptoms in response to COVID-19 stress? (please check all that apply):
- Feelings of fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, or frustration
- Changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
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Examples of Stress Effects

- I won't sugarcoat it. I've had some tough days where I've just been, well, I'm not going to make it today. This is just going to be the day I'm going to stay in bed and not going to do anything. – Assistant Manager
- I've been drinking more to cope with the stress. I'm at the point where I may need to seek help. – Librarian
- I've upped my anti-depressants to cope with the stress of it all. – Planner



Personal Stressors



- Social isolation for those living at home alone
- Competing demands for those with kids
- Social unrest around racial injustice
- Vitriolic political climate nationally
- Loss of loved ones to COVID
- Others?

There's now more than one full-time job at home. Our families have also had to make significant adjustments, modifying their lives to allow us to transform our homes into remote workplaces. Just last night, my boyfriend did not get home until around 8, and I had to sign on for a meeting at 5:30, so the kids and I had to eat early without him. I was trying to rush them through dinner to sign on in time (which I did), but then trying to focus and pay attention to my meeting, while keeping two kids quiet and occupied for hours, at the end of a day, was difficult at best. It wasn't even that I had a specific responsibility during the meeting, but I needed to be able to hear and focus. And there were times when I couldn't. The stress was palpable.—*Strategy Manager*



Organizational Stressors



- Risks of Exposure
- Politics of Mask Wearing
- Inadequate Communications
- Micromanagement
- Organizational Cohesion-
Disintegration

Organizational Stressors



- Concerns over risks of being exposed to virus at work
 - Safety concerns about return to work, interacting with public
 - Stress over mask noncompliance in organizations and by public
 - Worries about bringing virus back home to family
- We have people who've been out sick for weeks with no indication why they've been out, and that makes us wonder if we've been exposed. We are all on pins and needles. --Tax Assessment Assistant
- Firefighters typically don't think of their own safety. They could have easily gone in there and gotten COVID themselves. That's just part of the job. COVID response is one of the first things that could really have a direct effect on the family members. What they are worried most about right now is bringing COVID home to their families. --Assistant Fire Chief

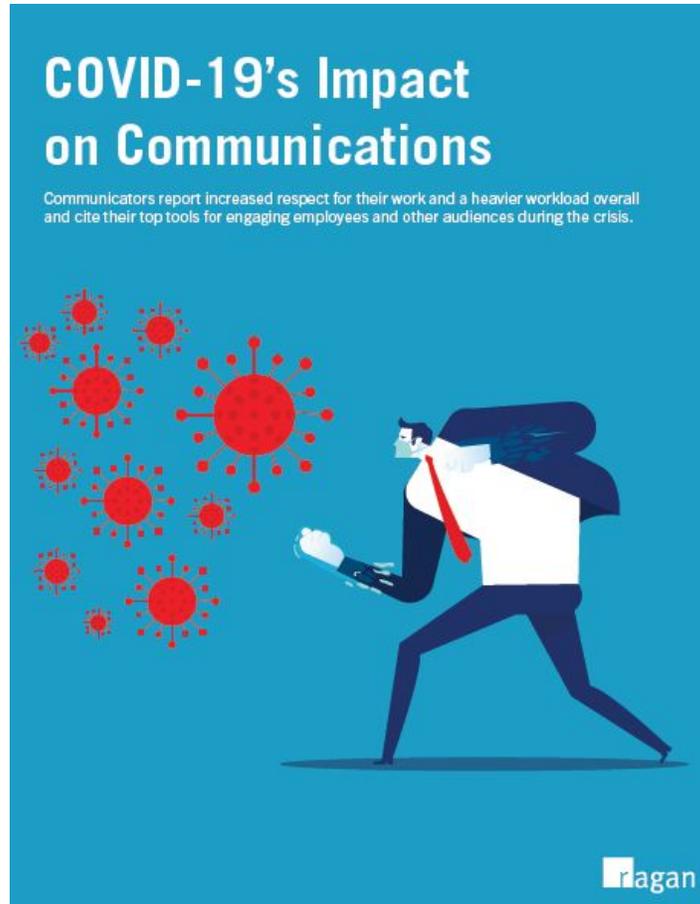
Organizational Stressors

Politics of wearing a mask

- My coworkers, even my department head, talk about COVID as being a hoax. They refuse to wear masks. They act like children not wanting to brush their teeth. They lean in to talk to me. I have an auto-immune condition, so I'm at risk. I've been laughed at for wearing a mask. I go home mentally exhausted because I'm terrified of catching it. I think to myself, "where do I want to be buried?" It's 90 days to the election and I don't want to quit, that wouldn't feel right. But I'm working with people who have turned science into politics. -- Elections Office Administrator



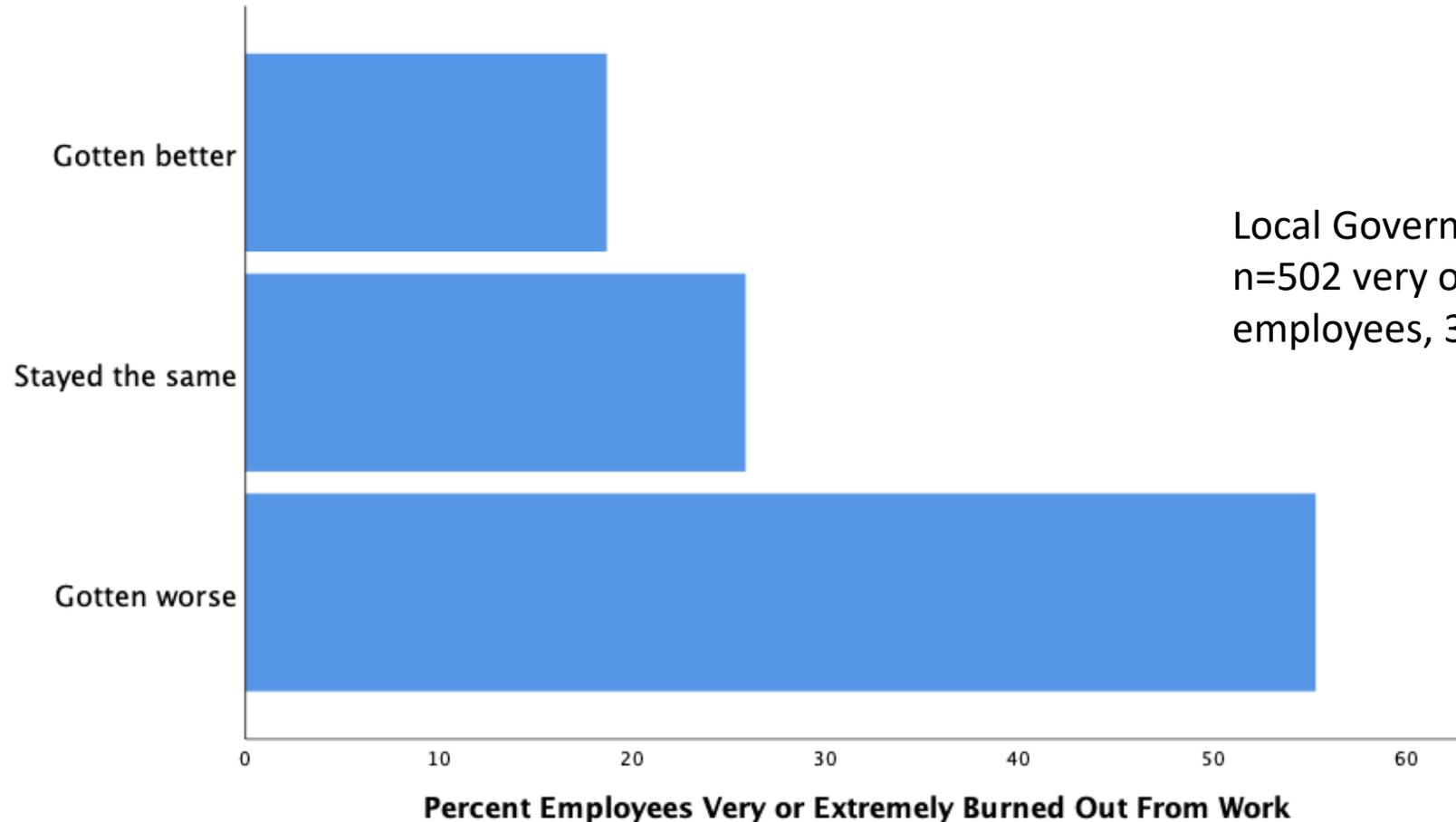
Organizational Stressors



- Communications a component of stress and wellness (Miller, et al, 1990)
- Communication (or lack thereof) can create uncertainty, especially around budget issues
- Elected officials and managers can set the tone of reassurance or introduce further uncertainty
- Our council in March started questioning whether the town needed to think about furloughs. It's caused a lot of stress and anxiety with employees. *–Permitting Coordinator*
- Our manager has done an awesome job of keeping employees posted on the state of the budget. This has gone a long way towards easing our fears of being laid off or let go. *-- Planner*

Organizational Stressors: Communications

Communications Before v. After COVID



Local Government Workplaces Initiative 2020,
n=502 very or extremely burnt-out
employees, 3 counties

Organizational Stressors

- Supervisory Responses
 - Empowering–Micromanaging
 - Flexible—Inflexible
 - Understanding—Not Understanding of Childcare Demands
- My supervisor has been great in all this. She's **very flexible** in allowing us to telework and understanding when our kids make appearances on Microsoft Teams. I can't imagine the stress I'd be feeling if she'd been difficult. –*Library Associate*
- I think it's also we're starting to learn how to do this, but I think it's also difficult for some supervisors to shift and change from managing in person to managing virtually, how do you **manage to performance versus managing to the time clock?** –Parks and Rec Director



**Support with
empathy &
compassion**

THE DICTATOR'S GUIDE

MANAGING REMOTE TEAMS DURING COVID-19

When COVID hit, my supervisor wanted me to **account for my activities minute by minute**. He made me take leave for any hours that fell short of a 40-hour week. This made me feel **distrusted and micromanaged**. Other supervisors are allowing their employees to make up the 40 hours through readings, training, webinars. Also my supervisor **didn't seem to care that I had kids at home without any childcare**; he wanted me at this office, so I ended up bringing them in. None of this happened before COVID, when I worked right around the corner from him. *–Program Coordinator*

Organizational Stressors

- Supervisory functions complicated by COVID (difficult conversations, performance evaluation, onboarding)
- I actually had a situation that required a **little more coaching**. There was some disciplinary action involved. In that I spent a lot of time working with my supervisor and HR trying to get some feedback of, what's the best way to do this because to me it just felt awkward. To do it over a video chat and when it did occur that **employee declined video**. They said, I don't want to be on camera. It was a very **contentious heated conversation** because we didn't have that face to face. And I think people feel **a little more empowered across the technology** and when you can't see them. It was not as productive as I would like it to have been. *–Inspections Manager*



Organizational Stressors



- Organizational Cohesion-Organizational Disintegration
- I have lost three relatives to COVID and my coworkers have experienced the same. So anyone can receive bad news at any time. No one is invincible. **This has increased our compassion.** We look out for each other, figure out ways to assist each other, check in. This has been an improvement since COVID. – Benefits Specialist

Basic human fear has taken a toll in my workplace. Where people used to say, “Good Morning,” they now avoid each other. It’s like **we’ve added emotional distance to social distance**. It makes the **days seem longer**, because people are staying in their cubicles and not taking the breaks they normally would. We used to have daily celebrations, for birthdays, promotions, retirements. **All that has stopped.** – *Administrative Coordinator*



Workplace culture is changing in the sense that we are not together. And so, you **lose camaraderie**. You just don't interact. It's easier to create kind of a **mental and emotional silo** of here's what affecting me because right now I'm the person I interact with the most. You **don't empathize** the same way. You don't see people so you don't know what people's circumstances are so when a situation comes in, if you're in a meeting about someone and **you don't have any kind of context** to understand where they might be coming from. It's just not the same, because you're not right there and, for me, body language is very important. -- *Recreation Manager*

Organizational Stressors

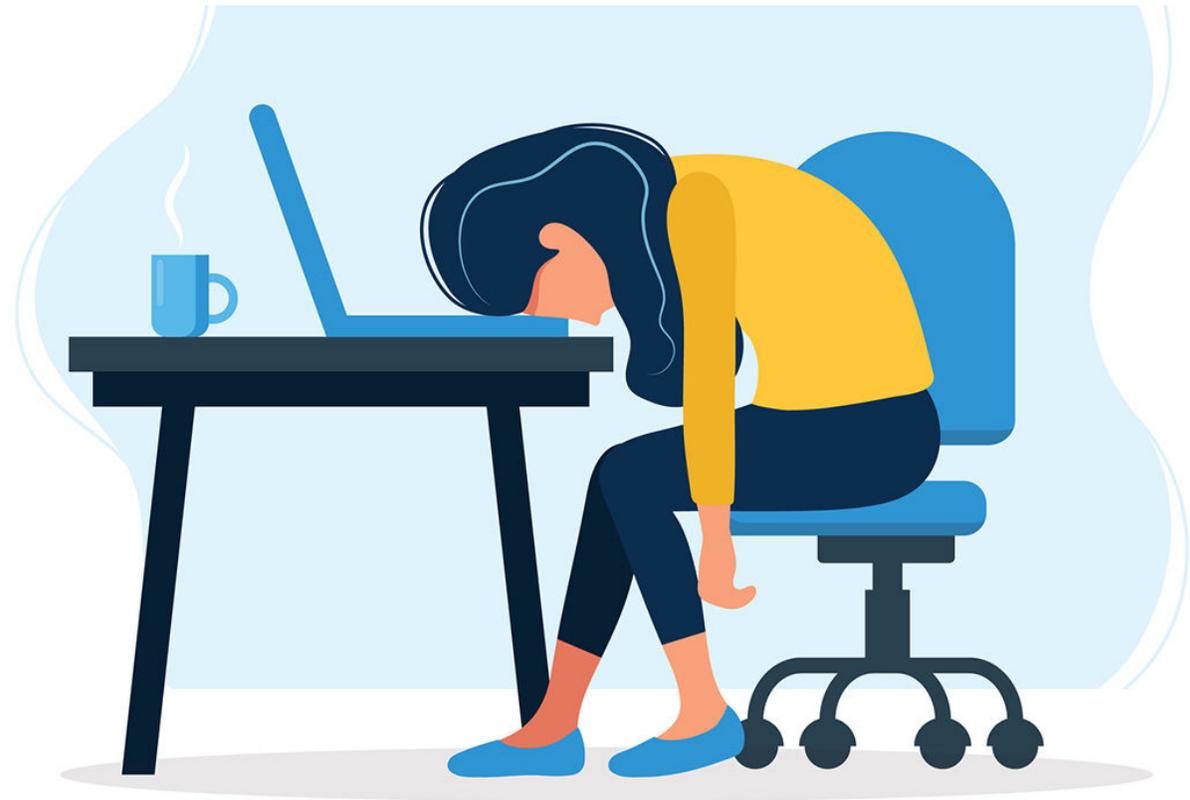


- Risks of Exposure
- Politics of Mask Wearing
- Inadequate Communications
- Micromanagement
- Organizational Cohesion-Disintegration
- Others?

Part II. Burnout

Burnout

- Emotional Exhaustion
- Cynicism
- Ineffectiveness



Emotional Exhaustion



- Feeling of being overextended, depleted, used up
- Incapacity to disconnect from job, even during sleep
 - I feel used up at the end of each day.
 - I feel emotionally drained from my work.
 - I feel fatigued when I have to get up in the morning and face another day on the job

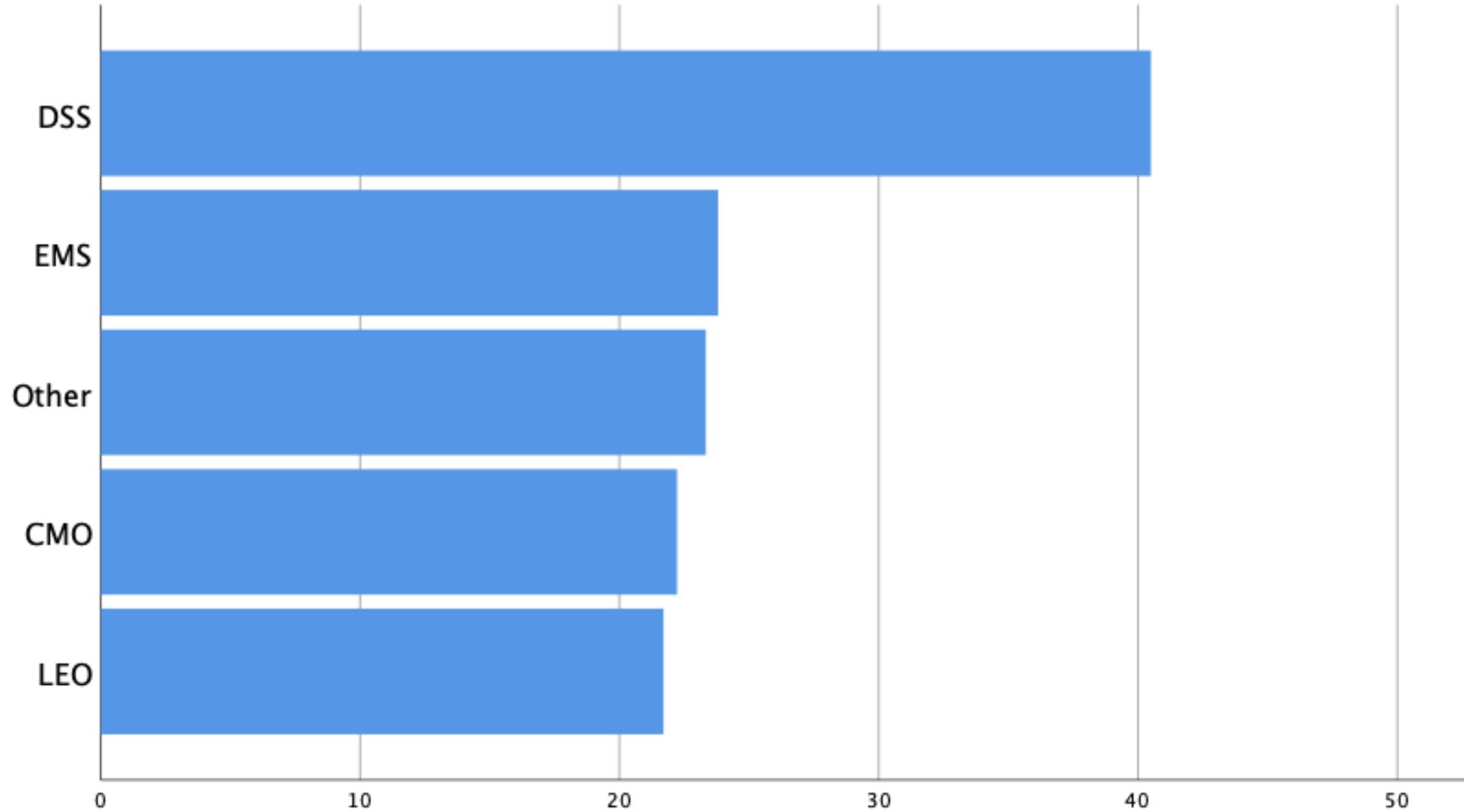
Poll Question

- In thinking about your work over the last 30 days, how often have you felt emotionally drained from your work?
 - A. Not at All
 - B. Very Little
 - C. Moderately
 - D. A Lot
 - E. Extremely

Why Care About Burnout

- Physical health effects such as sleep disturbances, headaches, respiratory infections and gastrointestinal problems (Kim, Ji and Kao 2011)
- Mental health effects including depression and anxiety (Koutsimani, Montgomery and Georganta 2019)
- Associated with arteriosclerotic disease risk factors (Kitaoka-Higashiguchi, et al, 2009)

Percent of County Employees Who Are Very or Extremely Burnt Out



Source: Local Government Workplaces Initiative, n=1,214, 3 counties, 2020

Part III. Workplace Interventions

Workplace Interventions

- Fostering communications
- Supporting employee mental health
- Avoiding micromanagement
- Maintaining organizational cohesion



Communications



- Deliberate consistent communications to staff that re-assure
 - Elected officials in particular
 - Budget issues
 - Knowns/unknowns
 - COVID updates
 - Show care and concern
 - It's OK not to be OK
 - Workplace civility and nonpartisan workplaces
- Ideas
 - Town hall
 - Weekly updates
- What else?

Supporting Employee Mental Health

- Cumberland County provided **two weeks of emergency leave**, to be taken for whatever reason
- The City of Lexington is using **Zoom to foster candid discussions** about working from home, the challenges and opportunities, in light of different work styles coupled with periodic in-person socially distanced team meetings outside in parks.
- New Hanover County conducting **resiliency training**
- The City of Wilmington **doubled its EAP counseling sessions** and making compassion fatigue survey available to employees
- The City of Burlington makes **critical incident management available** to employees **across the organization**, not just first responders
- Chancellor Guskiewicz has made October 9th Zoom Free Day, giving UNC faculty/staff break from being online
- Others?



Avoiding Micromanagement



You may be micromanaging if you:

- Require employees to be available from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
- Require check-ins daily
- Mandate end-of-day reporting for all employees
- Use screen logging to track employee time
- Others?

Avoiding Micromanagement

- Adjust your expectations
- Be flexible and patient
- Clearly communicate expectations
- Manage for results, not inputs
- Educate supervisors about remote work benefits
- Train supervisors to check in rather than check on
- Others?

Flexibility is the
future of work



Maintaining Organizational Cohesion



- Find happy medium, too much can be stifling, too little alienating
- Continue celebrations – anniversaries, birthdays, achievements – via Zoom or MS Teams OR in socially distanced settings (e.g., in park with masks, 6 feet apart)
- The Town of Cary employs a variety of online opportunities for keeping employees connected, including **The Joy Channel** (for spreading positivity), **#CaryStrong** to give shoutouts to various projects, and the **Weekly Virtual Article Club**, where a facilitator leads an article discussion over important topics, whether masks, mental health, or inequality.
- Others?

Questions?

