

OPINION

Handling Stress and Personal Mental Health in Post COVID Tourism & Hospitality Industry

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Ever since the start of the pandemic, the importance of taking care of one's own mental health has taken the limelight. The past year has been full of adversities and challenges, where some people thrive, while a whole lot faced a surge in problems. These changes had affected the physical and mental health of many in the tourism and hospitality industry. Not only are individuals or family units affected by the pandemic, but the community, country and world are also put to a standstill. The Indian tourism & hospitality industry sectors had taken a huge blow, with hotels, travel agencies and other allied businesses like theme parks, transportation companies having to take measures to survive, which also meant the much-dreaded restructuring, layoffs, or even closing for good. These changes started to ripple down to every individual unit (i.e., employees, family, community, etc.). Even now everyone is trying to stay afloat with each wave of change, digging deep into their individual resilience.

Un-planned changes and mental health:

Mental health affects how one feels, behave, and thinks. These three components are closely interconnected, affecting one another. Changes can come in many forms – big, small, directly, and indirectly. When situational changes happen such as the pandemic, it also affects how we feel, our views and reaction. For example, the employees in a tourism or hospitality company that is undergoing restructuring may experience a variety of reactions. One may experience anger, frustration and even disappointment with the sudden changes in leadership, work structure or even company culture. Insecurities and frustrations due to a lack of business, or increased pressure of sales may increase as the hotels and tour agencies are no longer a familiar comfortable playing ground. The need to adapt to new working norms under new leadership would be unavoidable, creating a lot of stress on the individual.

Blurred Lines between Work and Play:

The current situation in the tourism & hospitality industry across the world has forced many to spend increasing amounts of time at home, which means, spending more time with family, housemates etc. Spending more time together may bring people closer, but also create more friction. Attempts to communicate and accommodate individual needs could be relatively stressful. Working from home has diminished that work-life balance, blurring the lines between work and personal time. Getting that personal space and time becomes a challenge when one is constantly surrounded by family. Although there is a need for socialization, it is also important to have our personal time out.

Even though most tourism & hospitality professionals (especially in the customer-facing roles like sales, customer care, front office, F&B and lately chefs too) are outgoing and customer-focused they still need time from their busy schedule to focus on their own needs, reflect, care and to pamper themselves. On the other end of the spectrum, the pandemic may have drawn some people into isolation (like tour guides, drivers and sales professionals), being cut out from the world with minimal communication with their social support system. This could lead to feelings of loneliness, depression and have negative effects on the self-esteem of tourism & hospitality professionals.

A Focus on Stress Alleviation

Stress is an integral part of the Tourism & hospitality professionals' life. However, too little, or too much of it would impact one's daily functioning. For Example, a chef's lack of stressors would make him not be motivated nor show initiative to work on newer niche techniques. An adequate amount of stress would work as a catalyst to strive and sometimes push chefs to accomplish goals. However, an overwhelming amount of stress could lead to the other spectrum of problems such as a diminished sense of self, anxiety, and depression. It is important to find ways to manage these day-to-day stressors at work. There are a lot of research articles, books and internet websites that present various techniques in managing stress, yet it is also important for hotel managers to identify the techniques that work best for their individual team members.

The Way Forward:

With such inevitable changes and stressors, how can tourism and hospitality professionals tend to and maintain their own mental health needs?

First and foremost, tending to the one thing that individuals are most comfortable with is their physical well-being. Physical health has a huge impact on our mental health and vice-versa. Therefore, incorporating some exercise within the team members within their respective departments (even if it is done once a week- maybe on off-peak days of the week) would help to improve one's physical health and at the same time, making things less mundane. The staff's daily food intake would also play a part in their mental wellbeing. The movement restrictions and even limitation of recreational activities does not necessarily equate to the jeopardizing of the team's physical health.

Identifying and seeking social support is very crucial, especially now. Social support could come from a close friend, family member, colleague(s), a visiting mental health counsellor at the workplace or even the community. Speaking to someone whom one is comfortable with and trust could not only give a sense of relief but also provide much-needed emotional support. Tourism & hospitality staff can identify their own social support but may not be comfortable in reaching out for support or help, in fear of burdening others as well as it being a sign of weakness. This stigma around the idea of seeking help or social support needs to be removed.

A method that would be particularly applicable to the current situation would be for all tourism & hospitality professionals to set small realistic goals, taking into consideration the current challenges/changes. A staff member who is used to going to the gym daily may not be able to do so but could set a realistic goal of having a set of home workout activities as a replacement. These goals can be in the forms of daily goals or short-term goals. If one is unable to achieve the set goal today, they should not give up but try again the next time. When goal(s) are set, one may overestimate what one can achieve. Hence it is important to set small realistic goals to get all the tourism & hospitality professionals to come out of this pandemic as much stronger individuals. This helps not just the staff but also the management coming out victorious over this pandemic.

Authors:

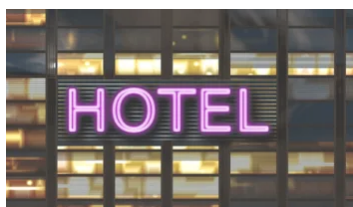


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