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### **How to show up for your employees during these challenging times**

No employee is untouched by the impact of measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Depending on the nature of the job, some employees are working remotely, others are unable to work at all while those in essential services continue to journey to a workplace. Whatever your employees' situation, there is a good chance many of them are feeling anxious, frustrated and fearful given the current environment and high levels of uncertainty.

Nashalin Portrag, Head of FundsAtWork at Momentum Corporate, says that now, more than ever, it's important for employers and business leaders to show up for their employees. A big part of this is informative and empowering employee communication to help allay anxieties and offer some sense of comfort.

This does not need to be a time-intensive, expensive exercise. Digital communication channels are a very cost-effective option for sharing important messages and relevant information. And according to Portrag, some employee benefits providers are making it even easier by giving employers access to ready-made digital communication which can be effortlessly shared with employees.

While there are a few factors driving market volatility right now, the biggest one is COVID-19. Many employees who are retirement fund members may worry about the impact of this volatility on their retirement savings. Portrag says employers need to reassure employees that time is a great healer and, given that many of them have time on their side, their retirement savings should recover the value lost due to COVID-19 volatility.

It's also important to discourage emotional decision-making at this time, which may result in employees switching to a portfolio with less volatile assets. The problem with switching when the market is declining is that employees "lock in their losses" and lose out on the opportunity to recover their losses and benefit from increasing prices when the market recovers. Right now the best action for most employees is to remain calm, stay invested and ride out the volatility wave.

While time will heal the impact of COVID-19 volatility on most employees' retirement savings, some employees don't have the luxury of time, such as those about to retire or being retrenched. Portrag urges employers to encourage these employees to consult a qualified financial adviser for advice on how to optimise the value of their retirement savings in these circumstances.

Another area employees may worry about is whether their group insurance cover will pay COVID-19 related claims. Portrag says he cannot speak on behalf of the industry but can confirm that group insurance policies underwritten by Momentum Corporate have no exclusions for viral infections and illnesses, like COVID-19. As long as a valid claim is submitted and all premiums are up to date, the

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policies will pay the death, disability, critical illness or funeral benefits due, irrespective of whether the claim is related to COVID-19 or not.

While acknowledging that some employers may be experiencing cash flow pressures, Portrag highlights the importance of continuing to pay group insurance premiums so that employees' cover for death, disability, critical illness and funeral benefits remains in place during this uncertain time.

"If cash flow pressures are severe, rather suspend retirement fund contributions for a couple of months than stop paying group insurance premiums. Some progressive retirement funds are already offering this flexibility to employers with cash flow pressures," says Portrag. The move is supported by the Financial Sector Conduct Authority, who is also strongly encouraging employers to continue paying group insurance premiums.

Employees' mental, emotional, physical and financial health is under pressure at this time. Portrag says that certain insurers include counselling services and telehealth services as value-added benefits with their group insurance solutions. Employers should check whether their policy includes these value-added benefits and encourage employees to use them.

In fact, even if their policy does not include a telehealth service, Portrag says that in the spirit of solidarity during these trying times, Momentum Metropolitan is offering all South Africans free access to its telehealth capability, Hello Doctor, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Some employees also have access to rewards programmes by virtue of their retirement fund, group insurance and/or medical scheme membership. Certain of these programmes are offering online home-based training during the lockdown. In addition, employees with group insurance benefits have access to monthly financial rewards linked to their health status and level of activity. If an employer's workforce has access to these benefits, encourage active usage," says Portrag.

Portrag concludes, "While most businesses are challenged by the current landscape, this time will pass. In the meantime, it's important that we allay employees' anxieties and help them maintain good emotional, mental, physical and financial health during these challenging times."