



Protecting and supporting your staff's mental health

A line manager's guide during the Coronavirus crisis

Introduction

These are unprecedented times and all employers are having to work quickly to put in place strategies to help protect their businesses and the staff they employ. Now, more than ever, line managers and leaders need to pay particular attention to protecting the mental health of their employees (and themselves, of course).

This guide is to help employers consider how to protect their staff's mental health and wellbeing while we are dealing with Covid-19.

The main mental health difficulties people might be struggling with, or develop, are:

- **Anxiety**
- **Depression**
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**
- **Stress**

These may be exacerbated by issues such as loneliness, grief, poor sleep, financial worries and juggling conflicting demands.

You do not have to be an expert in these areas but it is important to do what you can to protect staff mental health by listening, helping where you can in terms of reasonable adjustments, where appropriate, and signposting. You will also need to have the relevant information available, where possible, especially in terms of procedures around areas such as remote working, safety and guidelines for essential key workers, furloughed staff (if you have staff on the Job Retention Scheme), reduced hours, potential redundancy and financial support. If you don't know the answers make sure you can signpost people to those who do.

Develop a mental health plan

Although this is new for everyone as things are changing rapidly it is important either to develop a new workplace mental wellbeing plan or update your existing one to be responsive to this situation. This is to ensure that actions are put in place to safeguard people's mental health and that those with existing mental health conditions are being looked after during this crisis.

We hope the suggestions in the guide will help you with this.

Leadership skills

Compassionate leadership

As a leader, you should make your team's wellbeing a priority, supporting those in need and acting as a unifying force for employees during these adverse times. As not every employee is in the same situation, being mindful of each employee's personality, health and personal circumstances is crucial during this time and will guide decisions on how best to manage all team members.

Be approachable and available

If you are fully available to listen to employees' questions and concerns, it will help them feel less isolated, overwhelmed and uncertain. This is especially important for new staff who may require additional support and guidance.

Be able to motivate

It is important that you can motivate your team to keep working, reduce panic and adapt to the new changes around them. It is more important than ever that you should be proactive in addressing uncertainty and providing clear direction.

Be able to put in place new and flexible ways to measure productivity

Instead of using traditional metrics like hours spent in the office, look more closely at results or output instead. A confident, sensitive and proactive approach will inspire workers to play their part and remain productive. As work days may become less defined and productivity harder to oversee, leaders will need to allocate time and energy into redefining activities, goals and deadlines, bearing in mind that a one size fits all approach will not apply during this time.

Delivering unwelcome news

In this current climate, you may well have some difficult decisions to make. Will staff need to be furloughed, work reduced hours, be laid off altogether or even made redundant?

- **Be clear about what you are having to do** and the reasons for it.
- **Be straightforward, authentic and compassionate.** This is a horrible situation and out of your control but it is also important to remember that your employee might be very upset, scared or angry. Try to allow them to say how they feel without being over-defensive or over-apologetic.
- **Make sure you have the right information** about the kind of help the employee can access.
- **Be clear about what might be happening next** as far as you are able – and be prepared for the kind of questions people might ask such as 'If I am laid off, will I get my job back?', 'What will happen after I have been furloughed?'. If you don't know the answers be clear and honest.
- **This is a difficult, worrying and stressful thing to have to do**, so make sure that you have enough support to help you through this.

Managing staff working from home

The speed of the transition into working from home combined with the additional concerns and uncertainty related to the coronavirus has created enormous anxiety and pressure to learn new ways of working very quickly. Other worries may include health, finances, food and medicine supplies, housing, impractical working conditions, caring for the elderly and/or sick and looking after children at home, to name but a few. For those with existing mental health difficulties, this may be especially challenging. Many of us are quickly finding ways of adapting to the new environment but we also need to be especially careful to protect our own and others' mental wellbeing.

This will also be creating challenges for many line managers, themselves working from home, to learn new skills very quickly in order to lead their staff effectively during this time, while protecting their mental wellbeing.

Here are some guidelines to help:

Communication

As a manager, it is vitally important that you stay in touch with your team, and enable your team to stay in touch with each other, more frequently than you would under normal circumstances. If you can, use a video conferencing platform such as MS teams (if your company has it), Zoom or Skype etc to replace face-to-face communication, rather than relying solely on email or the telephone.

- **Increase one-to-ones.** As employees may be struggling with the reduced access to managerial and colleague support, communication and social contact, it is important to keep in touch, seeing this as a two-way process. Try to take time to check in with employees regularly without micromanaging or pressuring them about deadlines.



- **Have plenty of team meetings both formal and informal.** Connectivity is important, especially during this time of social distancing. If your team is small enough, try having daily 'stand up' meetings just so you can all check in with each other. This is important to help staff stay connected with each other and the work they are all doing, and keeps the team culture alive. Don't forget the value of humour and fun when having online team meetings. For example, some firms are having 'Dress up Fridays'. Teams may also want to find innovative ways of keeping in touch with each other informally or socially using a platform such as Slack or Zoom.
- **Let people know what is going on.** With everything changing so rapidly, it is essential to keep your staff informed. It is vital to communicate regularly even if you don't have new information to share so as not to fuel uncertainty, anxiety or unhelpful speculation.
- **Ensure everyone has access to the right equipment, information and technology.** Have people been provided with the right equipment to enable home-working? Is everyone confident about using it? Some people might not be familiar with this kind of technology and need extra guidance. If you have an intranet, is everyone able to access it?
- **Set boundaries** and be clear about when and how these forms of communication will take place and when you are available. Let your employees know when it is a good time to contact you in the work day. It is important for you to protect your own boundaries and mental health and keep your availability to working hours. It is also important to respect your employees' working patterns, which may need to be more flexible than previously.



Set expectations

Managers should expect distractions to be greater during this unplanned work-from-home period as well as the possibility of increased stress as staff try to juggle conflicting demands and emotions. It is particularly important to be clear about role expectations and discuss collaboratively how these can be met, with sensitivity to other demands. This will help reduce stress and give people a sense of greater control over how they manage to achieve what is expected of them.

- **Be clear about your expectations** of the employee but acknowledge that you understand the employee might need to adapt the working day according to other responsibilities and be clear about what is expected in terms of output.
- **Supporting them** with this and highlighting points of contact and support are essential.
- **Encourage your staff to try and keep to a regular working pattern** with a clear delineation between work time and home time. This is especially important when working from home. With technology, work can easily leak into your non-work time, making it harder for people to switch off and have the essential non-work time needed to maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- **As situations may change** for individuals, regular reviews are important.
- **Structured check-ins are important** to discuss projects, updates, issues, concerns, communication and teamwork. The important point is that the calls are regular and predictable, and that they are a forum in which employees know that they can consult with you, and that their concerns and questions will be heard.
- **Don't forget reasonable adjustments will still apply** to team members with mental health difficulties, so it is important to discuss how best to support and enable those people to do their work, especially at a time where there may be increased anxiety or low mood. However, some people with mental health difficulties may find that working from home suits them better. Be sure to look at each case individually.

Monitoring your team's mental wellbeing

- **Create an environment of psychological safety** where people are not afraid to have frank and open discussions about their mental wellbeing as well as give ideas about how working from home practices may be improved for them and others. This is a new skill we are all learning so be open to suggestions.
- **Continually gauge stress and engagement levels.** Make it clear to your team members that you are concerned about their wellbeing. Some people may thrive in their new working environment, some may not. This may be hard for you if you are managing conflicting demands and are also getting used to a new way of working.
- **Notice how your team members are working in a remote environment** so that you can pick up on any changes. Not being in the same room means you don't have extra information from body language to get a sense of what people are thinking or feeling. Potential signs may include a lack of engagement on email or on video conferencing, sending emails late at night or all the time or not at all, a change in the language used in emails, not delivering on agreed targets, changes in productivity (increased or decreased) and/or quality of work. As with non-remote working, you need to be sensitive to any changes in behaviour.



Having a conversation about mental health

- **Start with an open question** such as "How are you managing in the new circumstances?" In the same way as you would during a face-face conversation, be careful to just listen.
- **Try not to offer your experience of the current circumstances.** You are likely to be extremely empathetic given you are adapting too but remember that it is possible that you are experiencing this in a different way in much the same way as any other stress will be experienced differently between individuals.
- **Offer encouragement and emotional support.** If you are really concerned about someone and they do not seem to be opening up, you may like to give an example of why you might be concerned about them - be specific and objective: "I noticed that you sent that email at 1am".
- **Be aware of services to which you can signpost people who are struggling.** If the employee has a known mental health difficulty, check that their usual support and treatment systems are still available to them. If you have an EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) or counselling service within your company, how can employees access this?

Work-life balance

It is very easy to be 'always on' while working at home or to create unhealthy habits, particularly if caring for children/family in the day and working late at night and at weekends. Breaks and rest periods must be taken, otherwise exhaustion and burnout will follow.

- **Allowing some physical rest and time for yourself**, and encouraging it for your team members is essential. These are unprecedented times and so acknowledging this and being flexible is key.
- **Set a good example.** If you choose to send emails late at night, early in the morning or at the weekend, be explicit about why you are doing this; that it fits with your chosen pattern of working and you do not expect others to do so. But make sure that you are taking breaks as well if you are not keeping a strict boundary between work time and home time.
- **If scheduled holiday has been planned**, ensure employees are taking it and turning off from work.
- The Charlie Waller guide [Working from home: Your Wellbeing Action Plan](#) can help you create the necessary balance and gives tips on ways to protect your mental health during this time.



Digital wellbeing

Now, more than ever, we will need to be mindful of our digital wellbeing. Here are some guidelines for you, as a manager, and your team:

- **Turn off pop-up notifications and alerts on your computer/phone** and make use of the 'do not disturb' or 'sleep' functions on your phone while you are working on tasks that require concentration. You will be much more productive and less distracted.
- **A break away from all screens** can allow your mind to recharge and you will be more focussed when you return. Resist using your phone (social media, checking the news etc) during breaks. Make sure you get up, move around or do some stretches at regular intervals when working on a computer, preferably every hour.
- **Find ways to protect yourself from the build-up of emails** and the need to react or respond instantly to any digital demand (email, text, WhatsApp and so on). Using your email signature to signal when you are not available and effective use of tools such as out-of-office can help with this. Likewise, respect other people's working patterns which may be different from yours.
- **When working with people using a different working pattern from you**, put in place boundaries around when you are and are not contactable. For example, do you really need to respond to emails or messages straight away?
- **Respect your need for home time**, arranging online meetings that do not encroach too much on this. This is not being unreasonable or unhelpful, it is being sensible in terms of protecting your own wellbeing. Remember, you will work much more effectively if you have adequate sleep and down time.

Managing employees who are being furloughed (on the Job Retention Scheme)

You may be taking advantage of the government Job Retention Scheme for some of your employees. While these people will not be allowed to work during this time, it is important to keep them engaged so that they do not feel forgotten. Bear in mind this may be an extremely anxious time for them and may also have serious financial implications, so it is important to be especially sensitive to the impact on their mental wellbeing.

- **Be as honest and transparent as possible with people.** Clearly communicate the reasons why they are needing to be furloughed, providing as much reassurance as possible about both their performance and that of the company. Where possible make sure you have the answers to questions about matters such as planned annual leave or maternity/paternity leave.
- **Make sure you keep communicating** what is going on with your company; there will be huge amounts of anxiety and speculation about what will happen at the end of the furlough scheme. It is important to be as clear and transparent about this as possible and check with individuals how they would prefer to be contacted.
- **Do you have online social events?** Make sure you invite furloughed workers along to these so they still feel part of the team.
- While furloughed workers cannot do any work for you, you could **direct them to useful CPD or development activities** they could be doing during this time to increase their skill set.
- Don't forget to attend to **how employees will be taken off the scheme and re-integrated into work**, remembering to communicate with all staff about this.

Signposting

Be aware of what support is available, for example:

- Do you have an EAP (Employee Assistance Programme)? What help is it able to provide currently?
- Online self-help resources for support with mental health difficulties.
- Have up to date information about new company sickness/absence procedures, sick pay, IT support and financial support.
- Trusted sources for Coronavirus updates.
- Information about online classes such as Pilates, yoga, keep fit or mindfulness. There are also other recreational resources such as virtual access to museums and galleries.

Resources

Mind

[Supporting your own wellbeing and that of your team](#)

ACAS

[Good practice steps for employers](#)

Harvard Business Review

[A guide to managing your \(newly\) remote workers](#)

CIPD

[10 top tips for working remotely](#)

GOV.UK

[Coronavirus advice](#)

[COVID-19: guidance for employers](#)

The Charlie Waller Trust

[Working from home: Your Wellbeing Action Plan](#)



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