Supporting employee mental health in a post-pandemic world

Insights from our team of 40+ professional coaches

Practical exercises to implement with your teams straight away

Real-world examples from the Sanctus community of 300+ HR and People professionals

Sanctus

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The Heart of Sanctus:

Meet the HQ Coaching team

Special thanks to the Sanctus Head Coaches who provide guidance, support and oversight to our wider team of 40+ wonderful Sanctus Coaches. The coaching team have worked with us to put together this Big Read, sharing their invaluable insight and expertise.

The Sanctus coaching model and practice was one of the first, structured and regulated coaching models in the world for the workplace setting and today, still one of the most robust. Sanctus coaches work on a 1:1 basis with employees across a range of inspiring organizations (from VICE to Boston Consulting Group, Reach PLC to Red Bull, Patch Plants, VaynerMedia, The Body Coach and many others), providing proactive mental health support and guidance in safe, supportive & completely confidential spaces.

Benjamin Graham
Coaching Practice Officer

Ben has been with Sanctus since its inception back in 2016 and has been integral to shaping Sanctus' mental health philosophy and practice. Ben has spent 10 years working as a Psychotherapist, Coach and an Organisational Consultant. He's a full member of the UKCP, with much of Ben's work rooted in the practice of Gestalt.

Dr Albert Viljoen Head Coach

Dr Albert Viljoen worked as a General Practitioner in South Africa for five years before wanting to move into work that was more holistic and integrative. Albert trained at The Coaching Center in Tokai, Cape Town, where he obtained his ICF ACTP Diploma in Practitioner Coaching. He combines his medical experience with his coaching experience to deeply understand someone else's world.

Valentina Passoni, Head Coach

Valentina is a creative at heart who loves to blend coaching with lateral thinking approaches, helping clients to think outside the box. She's trained in Co-Active Coaching - CPCC, ORSC, Leadership Circle Profile and is an accredited PCC with the International Coaching Federation. Valentina is also a musician and a vocal coach, leading workshops to help others find ways to be more creative in their lives.

Agnieszka Walczuk, Head Coach

Agnieszka is passionate about people, and this interest led her to spending more than a decade in HR and L&D, before deciding she wanted to pivot into talking therapies and services. She brings a wealth of experience from both the corporate employer side, but also the employee-led side. She is passionate about bringing vitality and authenticity to Leadership Development and has a number of training and qualifications: Counselling Training, Somatic Experiencing for Trauma Resolution Trainee, Professional Co-Active Coach Certification (CTI), Systemic Coach Training (ORSC), the Leadership Circle Profile & System Certifications, and Multidimensional Leadership Development Programme with CTI. She is also a Growth Edge Coach dedicated to bringing Vertical & Adult Development methodologies to the corporate world.

A looming mental health crisis;

Preparing for a long-tail of mental health challenges post-pandemic

There's no denying that the last year has been a whirlwind. While it's going to take some time for the dust to settle and for us to see the true scale and effect that the pandemic has had, there's no doubt the events of the last year have impacted every single one of us in some way or another.

It's caused us to rearrange how we live, work and interact with each other. Caused us to reflect on and question things we accepted to be the norm until not long ago. Made us weary of the things we once loved, yearn for the things we once took for granted and pushed each of us to our limits in some form.

The impact on people's well-being has been vast. And whilst it's thrust the conversation around mental health into the limelight - and forced us to face up to and talk more honestly about things such as *burnout, workload, stress levels* and a host of underlying issues which were a cause for concern even before the pandemic, this has been at the expense of many people's well-being.

It is estimated that the impact of COVID could have increased the prevalence of behavioural health conditions by as much as **50%**[1], with **60%** of adults also reporting worsened mental health conditions as a result of the pandemic[2]. It's also important to note that there's expected to be a much longer tail of poor mental health issues well beyond the pandemic itself ending; sometimes referred to as the "shadow pandemic".

It's also important to be aware of the impact of COVID on underrepresented groups. For example, **69% of those in the LGBQT+ community** experienced depression during the pandemic[3], while those in the BIPOC community consistently face worse rates of poor mental health compared to non-BIPOC people[4].

60%
of adults report their mental health worsened by the pandemic

The long and the short of it is; we're facing a reckoning. We're emerging from the dust bruised and battered by the events of the last year. We're balancing a desire to move on and move forward whilst still processing what we've collectively been through.

69%
LGBQT+ community experienced depression during the pandemic

It's more important than ever to be looking after ourselves, looking out for each other and to be prioritising mental health and wellbeing right now. But you already know this.

You probably also already know to be on the lookout for signs of anxiety, burnout, stress, low-mood, depression and other cases of poor mental health.

[1] McKinsey, 2020
[2] Mind, 2020
[3] The Guardian, 2020
[4] Mind, 2020

So what makes this ebook different and why should you read it?

Using unique insight gained from our team of 40+ professional coaches, who work with hundreds of employees every day, we've identified the key themes and challenges that are cropping up for people right now.

And, therapist and Sanctus Chief Practice Officer Ben Graham, alongside our team of Sanctus Head Coaches, has helped us drill down into the root of these issues in order to identify common triggers, looking beyond the headlines and articles you'll typically find online.

By knowing the root cause, it can be easier to understand, be empathetic to and tackle different emotions and challenges your colleagues and employees may be experiencing.

And of course, we've also looked at what you, being in a role that requires looking after the wellbeing of your people, can do to provide support to your colleagues and your teams. This is backed up by insight gathered from our HR community; a group of over 300+ HR professionals facing all the same challenges as you.

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Anxieties around transitioning back to in-person

A study conducted by King's College London from 2020 found that rates of anxiety in the UK have significantly increased during the pandemic, with **57%** of survey respondents reporting symptoms of anxiety.[5]

It's particularly important to be mindful of this as we return to work as 37% of respondents to a CIPD survey said that stress-related workplace absence had increased in the last year. This is on top of the already high **54%** of all working days lost due to poor mental health in 2018/2019.[6]

54%

of all working days lost are due to poor mental health in 2018/2019

[5] Kings College London, 2020
[6] CIPD, 2021

So how will anxiety specifically play out in the return to work?

Anxieties around our social life

Over the last year our nervous systems have been acclimated and reshaped to having less contact with people. More than that, we've been told day in, day out that being around others isn't safe.

So it's likely there'll be general anxiety around how much contact we want to have with people. Many worry that there will be peer pressure and an expectation to be social again or return to pre-lockdown levels of socialising. Many will feel unable to assert their boundaries and their need for space and a slow re-entry.

The social contract has changed and people don't know what other people expect of them, or even what they expect of themselves.

Anxieties around health risks and exposure

Given the risk of exposure, risk of vulnerable contact and general levels of focus by the media on health and hygiene, health anxiety has increased in many,[7] including those who didn't experience much prior to lockdown.

Others have been exposed much more to sickness and to the loss of loved ones, which puts this more front of mind.

[7] World Psychiatry, 2020
[6] CIPD, 2021

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Underlying Fears

What's driving the experience of anxiety

At its simplest, anxiety is a normal response to a threat. The energy in our body builds to meet the threat but if the threat is something that cannot be easily met with helpful action, like a negative thought, a perceived loss, or a microscopic virus (!), then the energy can't be discharged and may stay within us. This creates a potential loop of anxious feelings, thoughts, and over time, beliefs. The nature of the pandemic and its unfolding has produced some connected anxious experiences based on the threats that we have been facing.

Hypervigilance

We've spent a year being told that threats are everywhere. The graphs on the news, the stories of variants in other countries, the threat levels of holiday destinations. Other people carry the virus and so they can be experienced as dangerous. This continued sense of exposure to threats - and potential threats - can lead to PTS(D) and anxiety. Further, the environment of the news, social media and apps - all of which are designed to draw our attention for short periods of time - reinforce a picture of threat but without any context to help us decide what is really threatening to us (and therefore requires action) and what is worth knowing about (or isn't, as the case may be). A natural response to this kind of situation can be avoidance or obsessive thinking. We start to respond by avoiding what we perceive as dangerous and narrow our worlds to provide a sense of safety. This is a temporary solution but also can lead to chronic anxiety and phobias.

Loss of control

When we feel safe , it's easy to direct our energy outwards. We have a sense of ease in taking action and making changes in the world around us. In contrast, when we feel out of control, we can feel unsafe. If we are often anxious or struggling to adjust to a new situation, sometimes our attention turns inward onto our own thoughts, feelings and even physical body. Feeling less able to control the world around us, we try to control ourselves. This can often lead to greater feelings of anxiety and depression, hence the health anxieties surfacing.

Confrontation with death

People in general do not like to think about death. We avoid that which terrifies us and, as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote about, our society has gradually hidden death from view; dying is something we do in hospital or away from the community. The pandemic has brought us face to face with more of the reality of death and dying. For many of us this has been the first time. Thinking about our own mortality can be so frightening that people avoid it completely and so effectively that they don't know they're doing it - throwing themselves into activity or working even longer hours. For some of us, it is not only a case of corona-habits but a way of coping with our existential dread.

Providing Support In the Workplace for Anxiety

Here are a few things to consider as you plan to support your teams in managing and preventing anxiety as we return to the office.

Viewing anxiety as upwards energy

We all experience feelings of anxiety, worry or fear sometimes. They can be useful and normal responses to threat (or perceived threat). Think about that prospective job interview or your speech for your best friend's wedding.

Essentially, anxiety is meant to prepare your nervous system to respond to a threat. Whether the threat is real (eg. a lion running towards you), or just speculative or perceived ("What if I die from Coronavirus?") your nervous system will kick in the same way and try to send blood to our muscles to fight or run away.

In order to reduce anxiety, we need to become more in touch with our environment and the world around us, and less with our internal worries, to contextualise our embodied response to the situation. The bottom line is, sometimes our fear is validated, and can mobilise us into action: "Run from the Lion!". Other times we need to recognise that our bodies are playing tricks on us: "I don't have any symptoms, my test is negative, I can reassure myself."
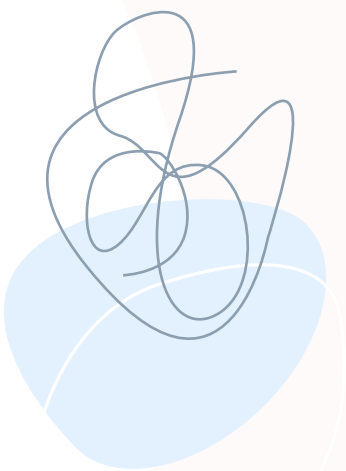
Cater for
different needs

We will all have different degrees of anxiety as we return to the office. Some of us have faced extreme loss and feel out of control, others have gone into hibernation for the year and feel more at ease to reconnect with others. Take this into account and try to be as inclusive as you possibly can in the guidelines you are setting to cater to as many human experiences as possible.

Some people will enjoy interacting with each other at the office, others may miss the solitude of their working spaces.

Make sure when you introduce one guideline that may exclude some of your employee's experiences you also cater to those differences by offering an alternative. For example, daily stand-up meetings and no meeting Fridays could be a perfect way to cater to opposite needs.

Help people reconnect in
a safe and inclusive way

Offer your employees a variety of social events to make sure you are inviting them to reconnect in their own unique individual way. Some will want social events over a beer or a coffee, others will want experiences and activities. On page 49, we've included a list of all the events we've run for our team in recent months for inspiration.

Make sure employees understand that although you may be organising socials and reconnection events, not everyone needs to attend everything. In fact, encourage your employees to think about their individual needs and look after themselves in their unique ways. Pace is key.

Duty of care

It's also important to note that a mental health issue is classed as a disability if it has a long-term impact on an employee's ability to do their job, and is covered under the Equality Act 2010. Employers have a duty of care from a legal standpoint, so it may be worth considering running Occupational Health Assessments in the business.

At the very least, ensure that wellbeing questions are incorporated into manager 1:1's and catch ups so that employees have a regular opportunity to share what is going on for them. Managers will need to be trained for these conversations, and we'd also recommend considering external support so that employees have a confidential space separate from the business where they can seek professional support.

Encourage employees to be explicit in their needs to their manager, HR or colleagues and to communicate if they've been affected in any way by the pandemic. For example, an employee who is hearing impaired or hard of hearing may need to lip-read, which has been made impossible in many instances due to people wearing masks.

Practical Exercises for Anxiety

Here are some practical exercises you can run with your teams to help manage and support those experiencing anxiety and to put some of the above into practice.

Hold spaces for your employees to check in with themselves during the day

- Give your employees a way to check in with themselves throughout the working day. There are many ways you could do this:

- When setting up meetings or sending calendar invitations, be as specific as you can get around what the aim of the meeting is, how you expect people to show up, what the agenda is and what is needed from each participant or the whole group. This will give people the space and time they need to prepare for the meeting, both practically and psychologically.

- Holding meditation sessions at the beginning and end of each day. This could be done both online or in-person.

- Set up a quiet room in the office where your employees can go to decompress, relax, meditate or take power-naps. Think plants, comfy seats and nature sounds in the background.
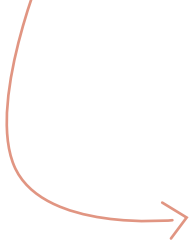
- Encourage journaling breaks throughout the day to allow your employees to break from practical tasks and check in with themselves.

- Have check-ins at the start of each meeting, where employees can share what's going on for them if they want to. This will allow people to stay more present throughout the day.

- Consider having an external professional available to employees who can confidentially and impartially give employees a space to share what's going on for them and help them to explore this further.

Encourage breaks and boundaries

Many have found themselves working longer hours with the split between home life and office life breaking down. Help your teams to set boundaries and take breaks by encouraging them to do so or, even better, by taking breaks together.

- As a business, define boundaries as to what is ok and what is not ok in your workplace culture and help your employees to embrace this on a daily basis. For example: it is not ok to skip lunch breaks, it is not ok to regularly work late, it is not ok to give employees really short notice deadlines. It is ok to negotiate your needs, it is ok to take care of yourself, it is ok to say no.

- Encourage employees to block off periods of time in the calendar as no meeting breaks. This also means embracing the answer "no" as an organisation.

- Encourage employees to take some meetings on the phone and on the move to allow people to stretch and move away from laptops.

- Encourage your team to book holidays in their calendar. Employees have been wanting to "save holidays" for better days where we can travel and truly enjoy our breaks. However taking regular well deserved breaks is important and encouraging long weekends could be a way to meet your employees in the middle.

Team check-in sheets

Giving your employees and teams a way to check-in with themselves and others can be a light and playful way to open up a dialogue around what's going on them and their state of mind. It may also make it easier for employees to ask for help, if they need it.

This team check-in sheet *(p. 18)* provides useful prompts to allow people to check-in in different ways depending on what's front of mind for them. Not all prompts need to be covered in one check-in, so we'd suggest asking each person to choose a prompt and talk to it.

Make sure your employees know that they don't have to completely disclose what is on their mind if they don't feel they want to. Metaphors and visuals can speak a thousand words whilst still making the individual feel safely heard.

Team check-in sheet

The weather in my life at the moment is... (how I am feeling)
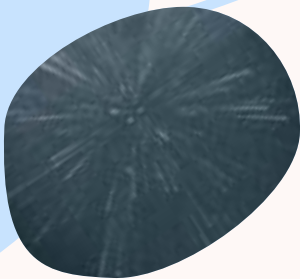
A mistake I made and need to learn from
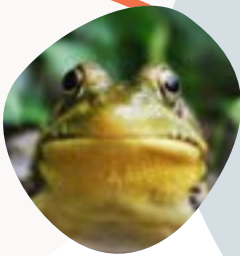
Something I need help with

One Glow & One Grow
– Something I did really well
–Something I learnt (skill or sth about me)

An acknowledgement
I want to give

Frog(s) I have to eat

How someone stepped on a rake
(had unintentional impact)

The Blob Tree

The Blob Tree[9] is a simple yet effective communication tool that's been scientifically proven as a useful way to express emotions. Serving as a visual stimulus, it gives people a way of reflecting on and understanding their emotions and helps them to articulate these to a wider group.

At the start of a meeting we would suggest asking each team member to pick a number from the tree and talk to why they've chosen that number, in whatever way and depth feels comfortable to them. As a line manager or meeting facilitator, pay particular attention to any asks for help, however subtle.

[9] The Blob Tree
Communication Tools
Find Out More

Breathing exercises are powerful (and free)

One of the easiest and most immediate things you can do to help manage your own anxiety or that of someone else is breathing exercises at the start of meetings.

You don't necessarily need to do them just in case people are anxious, but perhaps if you can sense that there is anxiety in the room. One of the two check-in sheets previously can be a great way of getting a sense of this.

For the breathing exercise itself, it doesn't matter what form they take except for one crucial element - that you breathe out for longer than you breathe in. When we breathe out we activate our parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to calm us down.

We'd recommend someone leading it, and it doesn't have to be longer than 30 seconds. You can also encourage people to not take part or turn off their camera if they feel more comfortable.

Ask people to breathe in for 4 seconds and breathe out for 6 seconds.

Tell people to focus on each breath and really feel it.

Acknowledge that this might feel a bit weird - particularly if it's the first time anyone's done it and in a company meeting too.

But it's a really simple, powerful tool.

Ask for feedback and suggestions

Our recommendations come from experience and scientific studies, however there is no one size fits all approach. Make sure that you review with your team the interventions you put into place to check that they are easing anxiety in the workplace.

If things are not working out the way you planned then it's important to let go of what you have implemented and ask for feedback or suggestions. This will help your employees feel heard and will help ease anxieties as a result.

Burnout, Low Mood & Motivation

10   Forbes, 2021
11   The Drum, 2021

It's been a tough year on many levels. People have powered through but many of us are now burnt out or feeling low, particularly as the finish line is in sight. One study from Indeed found that 52% of survey respondents are suffering from burnout in 2021, a rise of almost 10% since pre-pandemic.[10]

Some industries will have been impacted worse than others. For example, a study conducted into the marketing and creative industry found that 95% of respondents reported that their workload has negatively affected their mental health.[11]

It feels like the end of a double marathon and we need recovery time, but we're not sure when we're going to be able to get it. A large part of people feeling motivated and inspired is driven by them having something to look forward to and having connection to a purpose. Although restrictions are easing, there is still a lot of uncertainty floating around about what we'll be able to do and when.

This makes it hard to plan ahead and find things to look forward to.

We've all been guilty of waiting to book our next holiday as a way to save our days for when restrictions have been lifted further. This aggravates burnout and further depletes energy levels, exhausting fuel tanks which are already empty.

And so many of us are now floating in a state known as "languishing". Our Chief Coaching Practice Officer, Ben Graham, spoke to the Metro[12] and Stylist[13] about this state, one of the biggest we're seeing in 2021, but essentially:

Languishing is defined as being in an emotional state that's not quite at clinical levels of poor mental health, but equally not one where we're thriving.

Benjamin Graham
Coaching Practice Officer

Underlying Fears:

What's driving the experience of burnout

Being caught in the 'liminal space'. The liminal space, also known as the crossover space, is a place of transformation and potential. It is a place where the continuity of the 'old world' has been radically disrupted but the 'new' arrangement is not yet in place. Disorientation is a common feeling in transitions and yet the pandemic is a very slow transition. A new normal is still yet to emerge fully. Many of us may be finding it hard to let go fully of the 'old', to grieve it and accept it's passing because we don't know what is truly lost yet. We also don't know what steady ground we can stand on in the future. Psychologically that is exhausting.

Holidays abroad are a good example. What used to be fun and easy is now most likely neither of those things. We have to navigate testing, entry requirements, restrictions, safety and a whole host of other concerns. For many people, holidays abroad were a part of their way of life; it was something they did regularly and in some sense organised themselves around. Now this is much harder to do. These changes can leave some people feeling powerless or even despondent since a way they recognised that they were doing well in life has become totally disrupted and new ways have yet to take its place.

What people need to do instead is focus on what is possible now. This may mean spending time reflecting on what has changed for them and how they feel about it for some time. If they have already spent time doing that, they may be more in touch with what they want and can start to explore new ways of discovering fun and finding joy in the present. This could be a new hobby, walking in nature or finding new ways to socialise with friends. Or it could be something bigger, such as coming to a decision that the town you've moved to is where you will continue to live after the pandemic. This can all take time and is not such a straightforward process as we are creatures of habit, so it's okay to go slow.

Life without adequate down-time.

During lockdown, our workspace and living space merged, leaving us without any clear separation between work and home-life. Many of us started working longer hours.

One reason is that we felt bored: with nowhere else we could go, we ended up just working into the night. Another reason is that - due to the lack of direct human contact - many people feel they lose touch with whether they are working hard enough. We often gauge our safety in a group by checking that we are behaving according to the group norms, e.g. when do people arrive/leave the office? Do people eat lunch at their desk or take a longer period? How do people dress? Working from home offered a new type of freedom but also more disorientation as we tried to cope without some of this usual feedback. And, as a default, a lot of us overcompensate by working harder and longer hours, so as not to be furloughed or even reprimanded for slacking off.

And then, with nowhere to go on weekends or holidays, many of us just didn't take any leave, resulting in a long, stressful year without any clear breaks to recuperate.

Losing touch with our purpose, or our driving energy.

Some of us are fueled by contact with our colleagues; others work hard so we can go on an extravagant holiday; and others work to get to the next level in our careers. Lockdown has impacted a lot of these dimensions, leaving us adrift. Without these benchmarks and rewards to work towards, without your manager's smile as you hand in a good project, or the jokes and socialising with your team, our work starts to lose its energy and vitality, and we may feel like we have lost our purpose.

Providing Support In the Workplace for Burnout, Low Mood & Motivation

Here are a few things to consider as you plan to support your teams in managing and preventing burnout as we return to the office.

People experience burnout as a whole

Burnout can develop if a person has been under stress for a prolonged period of time.

At the most basic level, stress is our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event. When stress is experienced regularly and consistently, it may feel like a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion called burnout.

Stressors can be experienced in all the areas of our lives, be it work or home life, friends and family. However work stress will undoubtedly have a big impact on us as, according to a Progressive Economy Forum report, Brits work an average of 42.5 hours a week, putting them above the European average of 41.2[14]. So it's important that we talk about stress in the workplace and it's important that you invite people to talk about their whole lives and not just the work.

As someone in HR, this will help you to better understand this person, what's going on for them, and how they respond to different situations.

Allow for a transitional period for employees, where productivity and output may be lower than usual levels. People need the time and mental space to adjust to new ways of working and living as the lockdown eases, so it's important that it's given to them.

People are at opposite ends of the spectrum

Employees are going to be experiencing burnout in different ways.

Some can't wait for normality and have so much pent up social buzz that they'll be burning themselves out through trying to do everything and over-socialising. Others are burning out through a lack of inspiration and things to do.

Be aware of this and allow everyone to create their own boundaries. Some people might want to come into the office, some might want to stay at home for example.

Balance individual identity and group belonging and create Psychological Safety

Gone are the days where a job is just a job. So much of our individual identity is now tied up with our work and people want to be themselves, while still feeling like they can grow, both personally and professionally, and do fulfilling work.

It's important to allow spaces where people can be themselves, can speak up, can have their identity recognised and taken into account in a work context. People can be the "I", while still belonging to the group and the team; the "We".

When the "I" becomes at odds with the "group" and the work, or the "I" is hidden and left at the door during the working day, you'll find people will feel anxious and burnt out incredibly quickly.

Ensuring good sync between the two will also have the benefit of employees being more likely to speak up and voice concerns. Be that around workload, around anxiety or burnout, or be that around the work feeling at odds with the company mission and purpose.

So look for activities that help to cultivate a sense of "We" and of team connection, but while also allowing individuals to showcase and bring their individuality to work.

It's also important that there is a sense of psychological safety among the group; a belief that one won't be punished if one makes a mistake. Studies have shown that in cultures where psychological safety is present, there is more healthy risk-taking, more creativity and more open discussion.[15]

Practical Exercises for Burnout, Low Mood & Motivation.

Here's a list of practical things you can do to help your team manage and prevent burnout.

Help inspire people again

There's lots of energy going out at the moment, particularly into work, but not much energy coming back in to help replenish us. So think of ways you can bring that energy back into people.

- **Put on events that can inspire your employees.**

   Think drawing sessions, yoga, photography, book clubs etc. Invite your team to bring forth their skills and interests; a great way of them getting to bring forward the "I" while also forming connections as part of a group.

- **Create spaces for connection.**

  We've obviously been a bit light on connection (the human kind) over the last year. Think of ways you can bring this back in...social events, 1:1 speed meet and greets, team lunches, a buddy system...(we've included a list in this big read of everything we've done which you can use as inspiration on page 49)

- **Do something collectively as a community.**

  There's something about doing things as a community which has incredible healing powers. For example, create a huge blank space in the office where people can draw their experiences of the pandemic to help move past the shared experience together.

- **Equally, give space to people to replenish in whatever way feels right individually.**

  Just make sure to create space in people's diaries for them to choose how to spend it other than working!

Workforce planning

Anytime that an employee is doing work that they don't love or aren't trained in, or have too much on, they run the risk of burnout. This risk is doubly increased after a pandemic where, as mentioned, there's little energy coming back in to refuel us. It's important to be workforce planning to ensure you have the right people and enough people. Ask yourself:

- **Do your employees have both the skills and the support needed to deliver on expectations?**

- **Are the expectations and deliverables that have been set clear and, ideally, co-created with employees?**

- **Are employees being encouraged or having to work after hours to keep up with workload?**

- **Are these expectations realistic? We need to move to being more realistic vs idealistic, particularly right now.**

- **Finally, do you have the right people in the right roles? Are they doing work they love?**

Be sure to normalise conversations with your team around capacity. Give them the space to be honest if they're juggling too much. Equally, give them the space to say they can take more on. In absence of these spaces, you'll often find employees keep their heads down trying to power through.

Gig work through websites such as Fiverr and Upwork is always an option if you aren't in a place where you can hire full-time support.
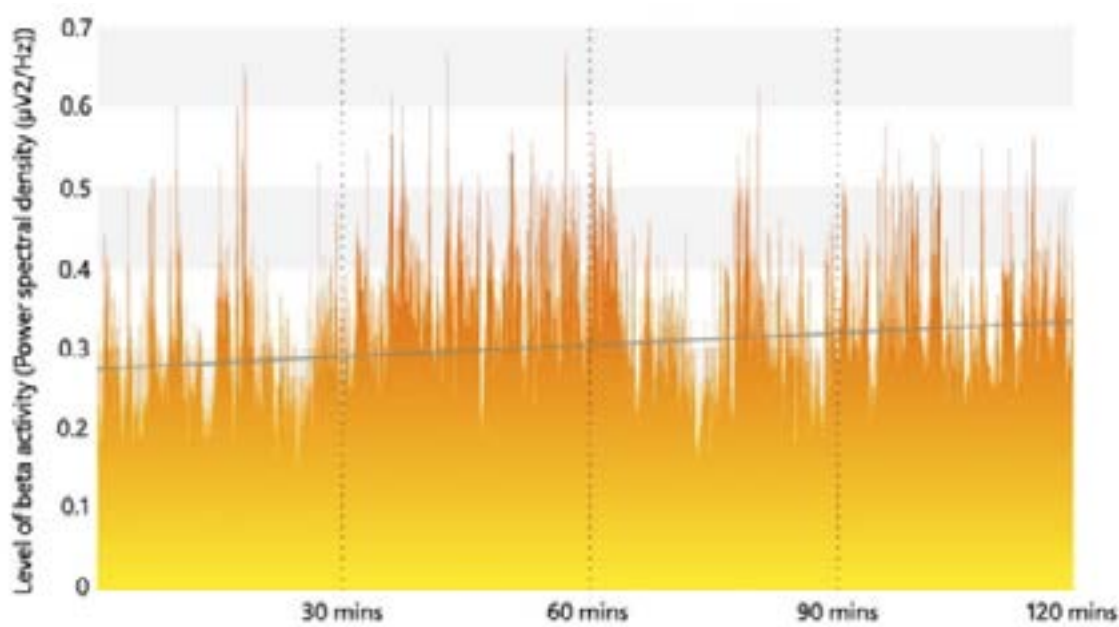
Encourage breaks

A slightly more obvious and simple one, and yet one that is one of the first things to get left by the wayside.

Strongly encourage people to take regular breaks throughout the day and to shut their laptop. The below graph shows all the benefits you need to see, showing that stress levels throughout the day remain at a consistent level if breaks are taken, while without breaks, those stress levels rise.

Stress level during meetings

🟠 Stress level during meetings   🔵 Stress level during breaks
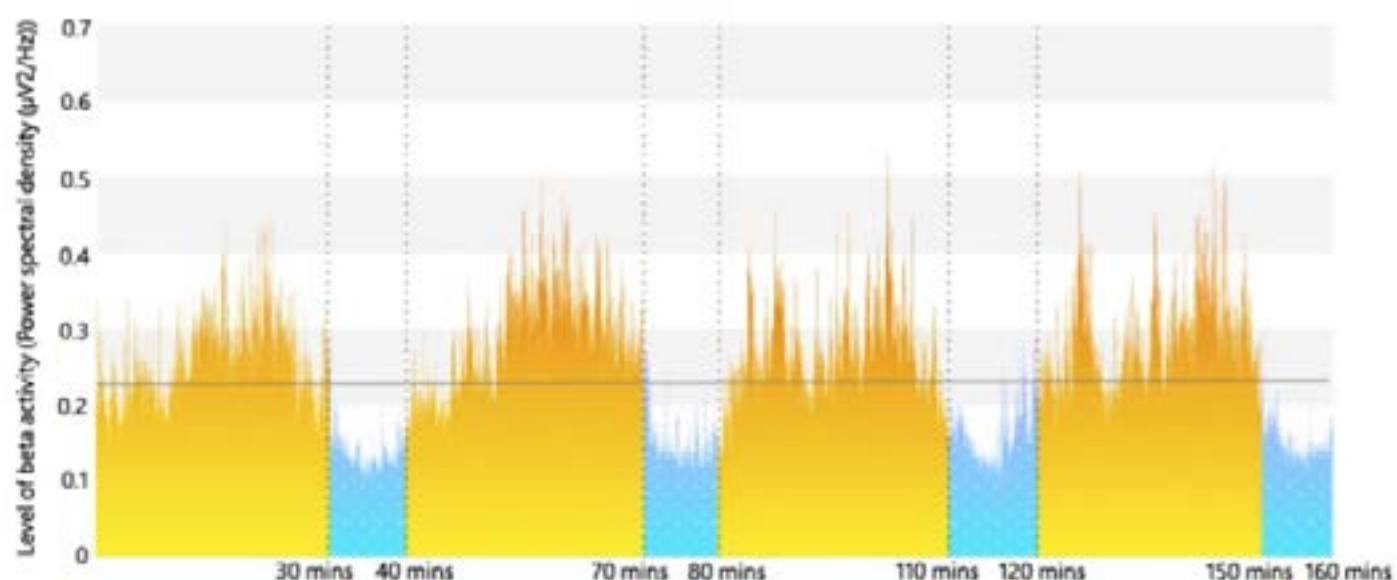
No Breaks

With breaks

Image Credits: Microsoft/Valerio Pellegrini[16]

There are a few ways you can do this:

- Make breaks official. Create a calendar event and invite the team in. For example, perhaps there are no meetings between 10.30 - 11 each day.

- Encourage people to have walking meetings over a phone call rather than a virtual video call.

- Point people to apps like Pomodor, which uses the Pomodoro Technique, a way of working that breaks work down into small chunks separated by breaks.

- Encourage setting healthy working boundaries. What this looks like for each person will be different, so it's not a one-size-fits-all. But a classic example is to encourage people to not check emails or work messages outside of working hours.

- Remind yourself of your team's purpose (and connect that with individual purpose)

When we are in the thick of it - working on day-to-day tasks - it's easy to lose sight of the big picture. When we feel this pressure, it's important to set intentional spaces to help your team reconnect with their passions, their vision and their dreams, such as:

- Create a dreams-day: where you and your team reconnect with these passions. What inspires you? What makes you feel energised?

- Is there a bigger purpose you can tap into in the work that you do? What are the favourite aspects of your work? Create space to reflect on how you can bring more of what fuels each of you individually into your day-to-day work. Or consider how you might re-organize your team so that individual contributors are able to tap into personal passions or skills more frequently.

- Set time aside for a team-building day. Although these are more enjoyable in person, they can still work well online when you have a good facilitator.

- Create a culture of celebration: in Sanctus, we have a #shoutout channel on Slack where we can commend each other's work & contributions. These can be great to boost morale, and to show your colleagues how much you value them. We also have a weekly 'Celebration Station' where we celebrate achievements of our organisation together.

- Connect team KPIs to personal goals & aspirations. With the pressure of organisational output & requirements, it can be easy to lose sight of individual needs. By creating a formalised check-in, where you make time to get an understanding of your employees' personal dreams or goals, you not only demonstrate that you are prioritising individual growth and aspirations, you are then also able to create a connection between individual contributions and wider team or organisational goals. This is an incredibly powerful way to fuel work with new energy, purpose and passion.
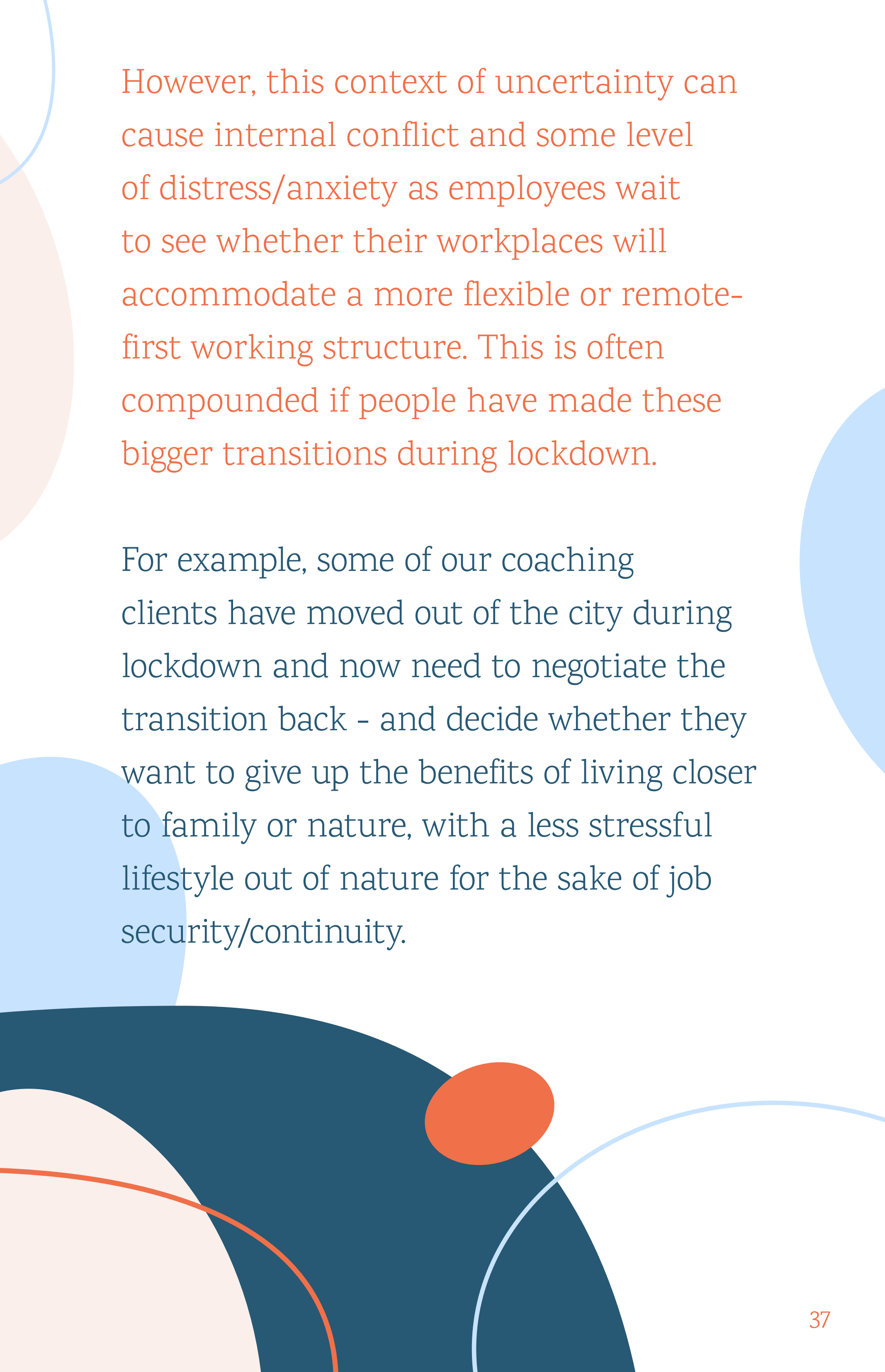
Uncertainty around choice post-lockdown.

Although lockdown has obviously been tough, in some ways it made things easier for people. People were presented with a very clear set of small instructions. This advice was communicated regularly and, for the most part, people understood the role that they needed to play.

And now suddenly we're being presented with a lot more choice. Choice around the benefits of better work-life structure. Choice around the benefits of remote-first work. Choice around socialising again.

The broader conversation around redesigning the workplace has empowered employees to speak up around what works for them vs solely being guided by the preferred choice of the employer.

However, this context of uncertainty can cause internal conflict and some level of distress/anxiety as employees wait to see whether their workplaces will accommodate a more flexible or remote-first working structure. This is often compounded if people have made these bigger transitions during lockdown.

For example, some of our coaching clients have moved out of the city during lockdown and now need to negotiate the transition back - and decide whether they want to give up the benefits of living closer to family or nature, with a less stressful lifestyle out of nature for the sake of job security/continuity.

Underlying Fears:

What's driving the experience of uncertainty

Uncertainty is at the root of most mental health challenges.

Most mental health challenges (anxiety, stress etc) are actually very closely linked to how people cope with uncertainty. On the whole, life is uncertain. However, our sense of calm, security and safety are derived from reasonable degrees of certainty & predictability. We base our day-to-day decisions on things we can predict: the time we wake up, what we will be having for breakfast, who we will be seeing and the time the train arrives: all these little moments give your mind a sense of predictability, control and security.

Although lockdown was difficult at first, over time the initial shock and impact of change receded and people readjusted. Things became predictable again.
Many re-adjusted to a new rhythm which has become the 'new normal' for them.

With lockdown easing, we are to adjust to yet another change, loaded with uncertainty. Although some things are returning to the previous status quo, with restaurants and offices opening up, nothing is quite as it used to be. As we re-emerge we are flooded with

questions, as we try to confront the uncertainty of Reality version 3.0: "When do I put my mask on, when do I take it off?"; "Shouldn't that man be wearing a mask?"; "Is that cough hay fever or Corona?"; "Is my vaccine protecting me against the new strain?" "Do I hug, elbow or wave at my colleagues?" These unanswered questions can make all of us feel anxious, stressed, angry and mentally exhausted.

With more options opening up, we are confronted again with the burden of choice

For the last year and a bit, life may have been quite bleak and boring. On the flip-side, though, life was also very contained and predictable. With less options on what to do on the weekend or who to interact with, we were also liberated from making our own decisions.

In his book "Paradox of Choice", Barry Schwartz shows us that more choice actually leads to a lower quality of life.[17] Also known as 'analysis paralysis', there's a tipping point where "freedom to choose" becomes "overwhelmed with choice". "Where will I go this weekend?" "Who do I want to see first once the lockdown is lifted?" "What will I do for my next holiday?" "Which days do I want to go into the office?"

This is in stark contrast to the last year, where many of our choices were made for us: ("what am I allowed to do?"/"what have I been doing?")

Freedom of choices also implies responsibility of choice, which provokes additional anxiety as you then have to confront the potential outcomes of those decisions: "What if I get it wrong?"

[17] Barry Schwartz, 2004

Our brains are built for routine.

Any new parent knows this all too well: if you want to avoid absolute chaos at home, the best thing you can do for your newborn and toddler is to create a regular routine: feeding time, bed-time, play-time. All these give your toddler a feeling of security and containment; and adults are not much different. A regular routine gives your mind a sense of predictability and safety.

Apart from the emotional predictability, routine also conserves energy. The top two priorities for your brain are: 1: Don't die, and 2: Conserve energy (so you won't die). When confronted with anything new, your brain spends energy to learn what this is. Once you repeat the activity again, and again, and again, your brain starts creating neural pathways or "shortcuts", so it can just run the program on auto-pilot and save energy. This is why routines and habits are so powerful: our brains are built for it.

Every time things shift or change (school, children, work, tests, home/work, life), life asks us, 'what do you want?' and answering this in new circumstances takes emotional and physical energy.

Although you may have more freedom on when and how often you want to go into the office, this variability also breaks the regular, predictable 5-day routine from pre- and during lockdown.

Providing Support in the Workplace for Uncertainty

Some important things to be aware of as you begin to understand what your role is in helping to manage the feeling of uncertainty that will be present in your business.

The Importance of Clarity

Much of the uncertainty people will be feeling right now, and indeed much of the anxiety and burnout previously mentioned, is arising from the lack of clarity that people have.

How do we define uncertainty?

A situation in which something is not known, or something that is known is not clearly defined, or ambiguous.

Of course, uncertainty is just part of life. But right now this uncertainty is heightened and it can feel like areas of our lives which previously were relatively stable are full of uncertainty. Uncertainty can play out in a number of different ways. Typical questions that may be firing around in the minds of your employees on a daily basis might include:

- What does this "new normal" look like?
- Is it safe to get back on the trains?
- Should I hug people in the office?
- Am I ready to leave the house yet?
- Where do I want to live?
- What will my colleagues think of me if I don't want to touch them?
- Are my colleagues as health-conscious as I am?
- Shouldn't we wear masks when we have meetings in that tiny meeting room?
- Which days will be best to go into the office?
- Am I missing out on anything important if I decide to stay home today?

These are just a tiny number of the dozens of questions that will be present in the minds of everyone as we emerge from the pandemic.

So it's important that businesses provide as much clarity as possible. Crystal clear, explicit clarity around expectations, communication, support and guidance in order to minimise the uncertainty, which in turn can help dissipate or help with felt anxiety or stress.

Consider things like:

- Is flexible working welcome? If so, what structure will this take? What days will people be in? How do you work as a team if some of you are in the office and others are at work?

- Is self-testing necessary, encouraged or obligatory? Don't leave room for interpretation: be absolutely explicit.

- Do people need to wear face coverings while walking in the office? If there are certain contexts to wearing masks, and certain contexts where employees don't need to wear them, make this absolutely clear to everyone.

- Where can and can't people sit?

- Are there certain meetings or events that people are required to attend? When it's optional, what are the conditions for those who don't attend?

- Have you acknowledged the toll the last year has taken, and what this means of business expectations on approaching tasks, output, operational processes etc?

- Are there exemptions to certain policies for those who feel uncomfortable, or those who have vulnerable people to take care of? Have you communicated these exemptions clearly?

Real-world examples & tips from the Sanctus community of **300+** HR & People professionals

- Have a booking system or sheet in place for people entering the office.

  Include things like time of entry and leaving, mode of transport and also space for COVID test results.

- Form a COVID control group, a group that comes together to collaborate and plan for the reintegration into the office. Ensure senior leadership are part of this group and that the group regularly communicates with the wider business.

- Provide free tests to your team, or clearly signpost them to places they can find them, for example, the gov.uk website.

- Consider operating a wristband system in the office so that employees can visually communicate their comfort levels with certain interactions without having to be put on the spot talking about it. i.e red for total social distancing, yellow for elbow greetings, green for ok with hugs.

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- Welcome back to the office packs can be a nice idea, with written guidance on how to safely integrate yourself back in, practical resources like masks, as well as something fun or more of a treat.

- Consider an all-in-the-room or all-on-Zoom policy. So if even one person will need to dial into a meeting remotely, have everyone do so from their laptops, even if others are in the office.

- Be crystal clear on your flexible working policy, and allow for as much flexibility as possible. Many might not yet be ready to return to the office and this needs to be accommodated. For example, 51% of employees say they don't feel comfortable returning to the office until they're fully vaccinated.[18]

- Micro events will work better for many employees vs large-scale events. i.e a few people playing games together. Again, be clear with people what they're expected to attend and what's optional.

- This list isn't exhaustive and there'll be hundreds of ways you can bring about clarity for your teams. We'd suggest starting with a survey; hear in their own words what they're struggling

[18] Harvard Business School Online

"clear is kind, unclear is unkind"

with or what they'd like more clarity on, and then adapt to that. As Brené Brown says:

Being explicit and clear will mean individuals won't have to guess or make assumptions about what is ok and what is not, as you will be holding one unified perspective for them.

It's also okay for you as a business or an HR leader to not have everything fully figured out yet. The important thing here is that you provide clarity by communicating regularly and being honest about what phase of planning you're at. If your update is "we haven't fully decided what we are doing about X yet, but we are considering various routes and will update you by Y date", then that still gives people some clarity.

Even better, continually gather feedback from your teams where relevant and appropriate. Having them bought into the process and the journey by ensuring they feel listened to will also provide some much-needed clarity.

Practical Exercises for Uncertainty

Here are some other practical exercises for bringing clarity to your workplace.

Create a structure

What structure this takes will be dependent on your business, but whatever it is, ensure that you have a structure and that you stick to it. Keep the consistency as regularly moving things around will add to the uncertainty. Be clear about what meetings are mandatory, and also set clear in-office guidelines so employees don't have to feel anxious about enforcing things themselves.

Have people clear diaries as they re-enter the office

Re-integrating into office life is going to be overwhelming for many people. It'll likely be the first time they've seen their colleagues and perhaps commuted. People are going to want to chat and catch up too.

So we'd encourage you to allow people to keep more space in their diaries for the first few weeks that they enter back into the office.

Take it as a chance for people to connect with each other and get used to the "new normal". This will have positive impacts on employee morale and productivity.

The benefits of building a "connected workplace" has also been backed by multiple studies. One such study from Kaleido Insights[19] has found that employees who felt they had a "connected culture" in their workplace were twice as likely to be more productive compared to those workplaces without this sense of connection.

This sense of connection is best fostered through a blend of effective use of technology and communication tools, while supporting work/life balance and allowing employees plenty of opportunities to interact with each other. In the same study, employees spoke of several ways that their business helped to create connection:

24%
Virtual happy hours

26%
Enhanced Collaboration tools

22%
Peer chats

15%
Group video games

50%
Frequent employee communication

Need some inspiration?

Like all businesses, we're still figuring things out in this post-pandemic world. We don't have all the answers and we're learning as we go. But culture and connection are incredibly important to us, so we've tried a range of different events with different aims to help bring about some connection, downtime and learning. Here are a few things we've tried over the last year - we hope it helps provide some inspiration:

- **A photography workshop** with a follow-up session where people presented the photos they had taken (virtual).

- **A live drawing class** (virtual).

- **A watercolour painting class** (virtual).

- **Various talks on mental health,** ranging from inspiring personal stories of overcoming challenging moments, to more practical and actionable ones such as: the science behind sleep and the link between gut health and mental health. As well as topics covering financial wellbeing and practical sessions to help our team feel more empowered and in control of their finances (virtual).

- **Walk and talks.** Team members paired up randomly with another colleague for a 30-min chat (virtual).

- **Gift hampers / care packages** Included in this was a mental health pledge - a small card with space for each employee to write their own pledge on; a commitment they were going to make to themselves and their mental health (delivered).

- **Inspiration station / celebration station.** A meeting at the end of the day on Friday for the team to come together and celebrate each other and shout about any wins from the week (virtual).

- **Celebration station pivoted to a town hall.** Same format, although each part of the business now also presents key things that they're working on to make sure we're all in the loop .

- **Daily stand-up.** 15-minutes at the start of the day a few times a week for each team member to chat through key updates from the previous day and key plans for thea day ahead, as well as provide the opportunity to share blockers or ask for help (virtual).

- **Lunch with the team, often with a theme.** For example we had one around comedy, where everyone brought their favourite joke and one where we each shared our favourite poem (virtual and in-person).

- **No meetings week.** One week a month all internal meetings are cancelled to allow people space for deep work. This has been key for all of the team to help manage "zoom fatigue".

- **Storytelling.** We've asked both internal Sanctus team members as well as external speakers to share stories with us over the last year in different ways, some as talks, some as blog posts. We've covered things such as pregnancy loss [20], the challenge of being a carer [21] and experiences of being LGBTQ+ in the workplace [22]. They've allowed us to get to know each other better, develop more empathy, build stronger team bonds, and helped us to challenge unconscious biases that we might have.

- **Anonymous group journaling sessions.** These themed, virtual group journalling sessions have been facilitated by a coach and have allowed the team to come together, reflect and anonymously share how they're feeling. The act of being vulnerable and honest with each other (albeit anonymously), and doing this exercise as a group has been powerful. We've been trialling it with clients too and it's been so successful we're launching it as an external product in the Summer.

- **After work drinks.** People may stay online after the town hall session, or people may physically go to the pub after time in the office, numbers allowing (virtual and in-person).

- **Quiz nights and game nights.** Obviously very popular at the start of lockdown, these aren't done so much anymore but will still pop up occasionally! (virtual).

- **Themed email threads.** Each month we've chosen a theme, and kicked off an email chain around that. For example, one month was Nature, so we asked the team to reply with an image of them in the great outdoors and why that place mattered to them. It's an incredibly simple and powerful way to share experiences and connect virtually.

[19] Sanctus, Miscarriage & Pregnancy Loss,
[20] Sanctus, The silent struggle of carers 2020
[21] Sanctus, "The only gay in the workplace" 2020

Navigating the next phase & moving beyond mental health 'lip service'.

This is a new world for all of us and through this Big Read you'll have seen there's going to be a lot going on for people as we navigate through the next few months.

It's not going to be a simple case of restrictions lifting and then picking life back up where it was in March 2020.

Things are different now. People's wants and needs in their lives will have changed, perhaps forever. There's clearly going to be a large mental health overhang too, whether employees realise they're going through it or not.

And ongoing structural changes and adjustments as we adapt to the 'new-normal'.
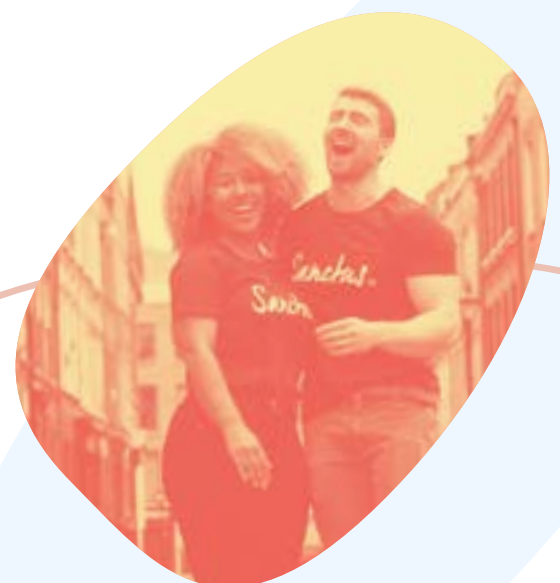
You're not expected to have this all figured out and to have all the answers. No one does.

But what is critical is that mental health remains firmly front and centre of our minds for all of us as we emerge from lockdown. That means front and centre for ourselves by ensuring we put our health before all else, but also front and centre for businesses who ensure the human cost is weighed up with all decisions that are being made.

A Deloitte survey published last year found that poor mental health was costing UK businesses up to £45 billion a year[23], a figure which was broken down to be between around £1500 and £2000 per employee depending on your geographical location. After the year we've had, it would be no surprise if these figures were higher.

Every year, poor mental health costs UK business

£45 billion

[23] Deliotte, 2020

If you want to not only attract and retain the best talent, but also ensure that they flourish, we've got to move beyond paying lip service to mental health. Here's how that can be done:

1 **Canvas:** Speak to your employees and find out where they might need to be better supported or what they feel is missing from the current wellbeing offering.

2 **Secure Leadership Buy-in:** No workplace wellbeing strategy will work without senior leadership buy-in and role-modelling. Employees need to know that those at the very top prioritise workplace wellbeing, and are willing to move beyond token gestures and lip-service.

3 **Allocate Sufficient Budget:** Build mental health support into your business strategy, budget and agenda for the rest of the year and beyond. Deloitte found that **for every £1 a business invested into mental health, they'd see an average of £5 returned.** So don't see this as a cost, see it as an investment.[24]

4 **Educate & Engage:** Make mental health a part of your daily conversation. Storytelling is an extremely powerful way to do this - invite members of your team who may feel confident sharing their own experiences or journey with mental health, as well as external speakers. Share and signpost to external resources on specific themes where relevant.

5 **Review & Assess:** Keep reviewing what's working and what isn't. The best way to do this? Go back to step one and constantly be speaking to your employees to gather their feedback. Take stock of Structural Issues: No amount of external mental health support or wellbeing perks can make up for fundamental issues such as poor resource planning which leads to continuous burnout or a deeply embedded toxic workplace culture. Look inwards with honesty and identify areas which may need to be reassessed from a strategic, structural and cultural point of view.

[24] Deliotte, 2020

There is no foolproof formula and one size does not fit all, however at Sanctus we believe there are some core conditions which underpin positive mental health:

We must feel safe enough To be aware of what is most relevant to us To make choices which develop meaningful connection to ourselves and others And to know when it is time to rest.

Or, rephrased in a way which prioritises the whole before the individual:

To provide the energy for choices which develop meaningful connections For what is most relevant to rise to awareness There must be enough safety And the permission to rest when it is time.

Together we'll build post-pandemic workplaces that bring out the best in your employees.

SANCTUS COACHING

Proactive 1:1 mental health coaching to help your employees navigate life's ups and downs.

"

Sanctus has been the most successful partnership Octopus Group has made in 20 years

SIMON ROGERSON
CEO OCTOPUS GROUP

SANCTUS COACHING,
TRUSTED BY 100+ PARTNERS

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VICE   Reach

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