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Coronavirus (COVID-19): Mental health and returning to the workplace

This guide outlines considerations and provides advice on how mental health can be supported as lockdown ends and there is a phased return to the workplace.

Mental health related absence is the most common cause of long-term sickness absence in UK workplaces. Stress related absence in particular has increased, with 37% of respondents to the [CIPD and Simply Health Health and Well-being survey](#) saying that stress-related absence had increased in the last year. Work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounts for 44% of work-related ill health and 54% of working days lost, in 2018/19 ([HSE, 2019](#)). As well as sickness absence, poor mental health at work can lead to increased staff turnover, reduced engagement and high presenteeism.

These facts relate to a world pre-COVID-19; early indications suggest that the pandemic (and measures taken by government to control it such as lockdown and social distancing) will have a significant impact upon the mental health of employees. It is very possible that these mental health implications will be felt for many months and even years. As early as two weeks into lockdown, employees were reporting a range of health effects including negative impacts on mental health and overall well-being.

This guide outlines considerations and provides advice for employers, people professionals and people managers on how employee mental health can be supported as lockdown ends and there is a phased return to the workplace.

What is mental health?

Everyone has mental health and, like physical health, it fluctuates along a spectrum. It can vary from good mental well-being to severe mental health problems. Work can have a

huge impact on mental health – it can promote well-being or trigger problems.

Poor mental health can include struggling with low mood, stress or anxiety. A mental health problem is generally defined as when poor mental health continues for a prolonged period. There may or may not be a diagnosis of a specific condition. Common mental health conditions include depression, anxiety, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorders and bipolar (Mind have a useful [list of mental health conditions](#)).

Mental health problems affect around one in four people in any given year. Work related stress is a form of poor mental health, defined by the [Health and Safety Executive](#) as a reaction to excessive pressure or other type of demand placed on an individual at work. Stress can be a significant cause of illness.

How will COVID-19 affect our mental health?

We do not yet know exactly what the mental health impacts of COVID-19 will be. There are many factors to consider including the impact of the lockdown and ongoing restrictions such as social distancing and self-isolation. Some employees will be fearful about contracting the virus, others will be anxious about family and friends. Many will have suffered bereavements during this time, often without the chance to say goodbye or attend funerals. There will also be fears about job security, returning to the workplace (including using public transport for commuting) and financial concerns. Some employees are working longer or more irregular hours and many are combining work with home-schooling and other family responsibilities, leading to a poor work-life balance.

Early research into the health impacts of lockdown including findings of fatigue, musculoskeletal conditions, poor work life balance, reduced exercise and increased alcohol consumption. In relation to mental health specifically, employees were reporting reduced motivation, loss of purpose and motivation, anxiety and isolation. Evidence from previous quarantine situations, prior to the current pandemic, suggests that there are long lasting effects on mental health. These symptoms ranged from irritability and anger to depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

What should employers do?

It is well known that many employees do not feel comfortable in speaking up about poor mental health; this is unlikely to change following the pandemic.

Employers will need to adapt a range of measures to support employees experiencing poor mental health as a result of COVID-19. Measures will need to range from supporting employees to regain an effective work-life balance and addressing fears about return to work, right through to support for severe mental health conditions. Some employers, particularly those who have employees working in front line response roles, must start to

act now to put necessary support in place.

What remains important is that people experiencing poor mental health are not labelled by focusing on a diagnosis, and instead discussions and support focus on the impact it has on them at work.

The law and mental health

Employers have a duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees. This includes mental health and well-being. You can find out more about health and safety at work in our [health and safety factsheet](#).

Employees who have a mental health condition may be disabled as defined by the Equality Act 2010, and will therefore be protected from discrimination during employment.

Employers are required to make reasonable adjustments for employees with disabilities. What is 'reasonable' will depend on the circumstances, the nature of the disability and the resources of the employer. It could however include amendments to hours or location of work, provision of specialist equipment or the duties of the job itself. More information is available on our [disability discrimination topic page](#).

Under health and safety legislation, employers have duties to assess the risk of stress-related poor mental health arising from work activities and take measures to control that risk. More information on stress at work is available in our [factsheet](#). You may also wish to refer to the [Health and Safety Executive Stress Risk Assessment tool](#).

Employers must follow the law – but this only sets a minimum standard. Employers who go above and beyond will see improvements in organisational culture, employee engagement, reduced absence and presenteeism and a reduction in staff turnover. In the current situation, the minimum standards set by law are unlikely to be sufficient to support employees through the many different potential mental health and well-being impacts of COVID-19. Not everyone will wish to disclose a mental health condition and not all conditions will fall under the definition of the Equality Act: it is however good practice to make adjustments and provide support for employees regardless of definition.

Prevention – what employers can do now

Employers have two current areas of focus to consider. Firstly, supporting the mental health of employees who are continuing to work in essential and key worker roles, many of whom will be working under significantly increased pressure that may make them more vulnerable to stress or other mental health conditions. Secondly, they need to support those who are currently working from home and will start to return to the workplace on a phased and adjusted basis in the weeks and months to come.

The resilience of all employees has been challenged by the current situation – although the mental health and wellbeing implications of this will vary from employee to employee.

Employers and HR may wish to consider some of the following:

- Where employees started work for the organisation in the time prior to (or even during) lockdown, they may need a re-induction into the workplace to help them feel connected and engaged (this could also help cover any health and safety changes in line with the [Government's COVID-secure workplace guidelines](#)).
- Brief managers on the potential mental health implications of COVID-19 and their specific roles and responsibilities in relation to supporting staff.
- Communicate regularly on wellbeing and mental health support, wherever possible supported by activities that encourage physical, mental, financial and social wellbeing.
- Provide mental health awareness-raising activities – work towards a culture where it is acceptable to talk about and seek support for poor mental health.

The CIPD has a range of guidance on supporting health and wellbeing in the workplace, available on the [wellbeing topic page](#).

You can also download the workshop materials provided here to run a briefing session for people managers on mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health and wellbeing briefing for people managers

(546 KB)

Early intervention

Where the signs and symptoms of poor mental health and well-being are well understood at all levels within an organisation, it can support early intervention and the opportunity to take early action to prevent the situation escalating. Sharing information about mental health can also enable employees to identify signs, especially early ones, in themselves and seek support.

Some of the typical signs and symptoms of poor or declining mental health may be more difficult to identify in employees working from home or more flexibly.

Typical signs include:

- Working long hours / not taking breaks
- Increased sickness absence or lateness
- Mood changes
- Distraction, indecision or confusion

- Withdrawal
- Irritability, anger or aggression
- Uncharacteristic performance issues
- Over-reaction to problems or issues
- Disruptive or anti-social behaviour.

Note: if one of more of these signs are observed it does not automatically mean that an individual is experiencing poor mental health but it should be a prompt for a manager to have a well-being conversation. Take care not to make assumptions.

Where signs are identified, managers should have a conversation with the employee. This can be as simple as a phone call or online meeting to check in with the individual. A good starting point is for the manager to simply ask someone how they are. Where appropriate share any observations in a non-judgemental manner and check if support is required. HR should look to provide simple guidance to managers on structuring these conversations. The sooner such a conversation takes place, the more quickly support can be provided to the individual.

Where more specialist advice is required, consider a referral to Occupational Health.

In an advance of any planned or phased return to work, rather than wait for signs or for employees to express concerns, managers can be proactive. Encourage them to contact their team members to discuss any concerns that they may have or any specific issues pertaining to them (such as health conditions of vulnerable family members).

Effective communication plans detailing how the organisation will be approaching the return to work and prioritising the health and safety of employees will also help to allay concerns and fears, supporting mental well-being.

Managing mental health disclosures

Disclosures about mental health conditions may be made to managers or directly to HR. Where they are made to HR, wherever possible HR should encourage the employee to share the information with their manager. Consideration should be given to:

- Referral to Occupational Health or the employee's own GP where specialist advice is required.
- Signposting to organisational support services for mental health and general well-being.

Wherever possible, HR should provide training to managers on how to respond to a disclosure, as well as how to approach the provision of ongoing support.

Managers who receive a disclosure can follow this [simple framework from Mind](#) and

consider the following:

- Arrange a time to have a conversation with the employee. Where they are working from home this may need to take place via online meeting – this is preferable to a phone call where possible. Let the employee choose the time and medium to ensure that they will not be interrupted.
- Embed confidentiality in those conversations – reassure employees that their personal information will be treated sensitively. It is fine to ask what information, if any, they wish to be shared with colleagues.
- Encourage people to talk – and to take up mental health and well-being support.
- Discuss a plan for support – ideally this should include reasonable adjustments or practical support and a time period for review. Discuss what signs and symptoms or triggers to be aware of and the possible impacts on work. Plans will need to be flexible as mental health conditions may fluctuate.
- Reassure – be clear with employees that no assumptions will be made about their mental health and that the organisation will provide the necessary support.

Both managers and HR should seek additional advice where required, especially where mental health conditions are particularly complex.

In an emergency, if you are seriously concerned about an employee's mental health and believe they may be in immediate danger, call 999.

Supporting the return to the workplace

The complex nature of well-being and mental health means that there is no single solution for supporting the returning to the workplace. It is now clear that the return will be gradual and phased, with those employees who can continuing to undertake a degree of homeworking. Employees may also be working a range of different patterns and hours to allow for effective social distancing. Some activities will remain curtailed. Of course, some employees never left work, continuing to work in essential and key roles under a range of challenging circumstances. The continuing threat of the virus will also mean that many employees will also be working whilst retaining care or childcare responsibilities and have other pressing personal issues that may have an impact on their mental health. Even if employees are not experiencing poor mental health they may have concerns and fears about return to a physical workplace, including using public transport or staying safe in the work environment.

Here are some potential interventions for organisations to consider:

- Write a detailed communication plan covering practical issues such as hygiene and approach to maintaining social distancing in order to allay concerns. Refer to the [Government guidance on COVID-secure workplaces](#) for the types of measures you should put in place.

- Continue providing employees with ways to connect with colleagues whilst working from home or social distancing. Promoting online communities, virtual social groups and using social media can all help to connect people.
- Provide manager training on mental health conditions including signs and symptoms.
- Consider introducing an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) where one does not exist.
- Review existing mental health services to determine if they are scalable and can cope with increased demand.
- Offer work life balance support in the form of 121 coaching, guidance or training.
- Provide mental health awareness activities for the wider organisation. These can take various forms including promotion of national events, workshops or awareness campaigns.
- Offer resources for employees to access in their own time. These can be produced specifically for the organisation or curated using external sources.
- Consider adapting flexible working policies for quicker decisions and increased opportunities to change or reduce hours.
- Wherever possible, encourage senior leaders to include messaging about well-being and mental health in wider communications about the organisational response to the pandemic. This can help to create a culture where it is acceptable to talk about mental health.
- Establish an internal network of well-being or mental health champions who can support the organisation.

Where employees have experienced or are experiencing poor mental health, or have taken absence from work as a result of a mental health condition, there are some other specific actions that organisations and managers may take:

- Keep in contact with the employee on a regular basis and updating them on any key organisational communications or changes.
- Make it clear that the employee should not rush back to work until they are ready.
- Refer to Occupational Health or signpost other relevant services.
- Consider phased returns to work – even where the employee is working from home and not returning to a physical workplace. Conduct a formal return to work meeting, even if this is conducted via online meeting or phone call.
- Discuss the support the employee needs to help them to make a successful return and support their mental health – this should include the role of the manager and how they can help.
- Ensure ongoing dialogue and regular contact following the return to work.
- Review performance objectives and workload – adjust where necessary.

Advice for people managers

People managers play a critical role in supporting employee well-being and mental health: how people are treated and managed on a day to day basis is central to mental health. Management style is also the second main cause of work-related stress.

HR professionals should consider encouraging their managers to undertake the following.

Regular check in meetings

Managers should be checking in with their teams, individually, on a regular basis. Ideally this check in should be “face to face” via virtual meeting. This will help managers to be alert to signals of poor mental health. Encourage managers to have a well-being conversation; provide them with a simple framework or questions that they can ask their teams. HR must ensure that managers have a clear process to follow in the event of a mental health disclosure as a result of a check-in conversation.

Looking for signs

Managers should be trained on the potential signs of poor well-being and mental health, as well as how to handle a disclosure of a mental health condition. Managers do not need to become mental health experts but they do need to know how to identify and refer. Where managers are concerned about the mental health of their employees, they should signpost to relevant support services. HR should ensure that managers are briefed on any services that are available, such as Occupational Health and EAPs.

Role modelling

Managers can encourage employees to take care of their well-being and mental health by acting as an effective role model. Managers can share how they are looking after their own well-being at this time, encourage their team members to undertake any organisation-provided well-being activity and share well-being and mental health messages. This will help to create permission for their team to do the same and encourage people to seek help if they need it.

Connecting people

Connecting with others supports good mental health. Managers should take regular opportunities to bring employees together virtually. As well as work-related meetings, encourage social connections through social media or informal online meetings. To avoid overwhelming people, taking part should always be optional.

Review workloads

There are many reasons in the current situation why employees may be unable to be as

productive as they would be under normal circumstances. Managers should be sensitive to this and recognise that expectations may need to be adjusted in the short term. Existing objectives, workloads and deadlines should be adjusted to take into account the changing context.

Promote learning

Learning can boost well-being and can provide purpose and structure to the day – especially for employees on furlough. Managers can encourage learning whilst working from home – but it should not be mandated.

For more information on how managers can support mental health, download this [CIPD guide written in collaboration with Mind](#).

Looking after yourself: advice for people professionals

People professionals have had to respond with speed and flexibility to a challenging and changing situation. As well as managing existing workloads, there has been a need to adapt policies, support people managers, increase communication and deal with the complexities of furlough. The demands on the profession have been high. This makes it important for HR to look after their own well-being and mental health at the same time as supporting others. HR professionals are reminded to:

- Seek support for their own mental health if they need it
- Talk to their own HR teams about well-being and mental health
- Prioritise self-care activities
- Take regular rest breaks and continue to take annual leave
- Be aware of the signs and symptoms of poor well-being and mental health and identify if they apply to themselves.

The CIPD has a range of resources to support members with their well-being and mental health, including a new [well-being helpline](#).

You can also watch this [CIPD webinar on HR resilience: looking after yourself and your HR team](#).

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