



Mental Health and Wellbeing During COVID-19



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Introduction

Mental health problems are common, with 1 in 6 adults reporting a mental health disorder, such as anxiety and close to 551,000 people in England with more severe mental illness (SMI) such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Problems are often hidden, stigma is still widespread, and many people are not receiving support to access services.

Together with substance misuse, mental health illness accounts for 21.3% of the total burden of disease with poor mental health being estimated to carry an economic and social cost of £105 billion a year in the United Kingdom.

Mental health problems and suicide are preventable. Promoting good mental health will impact on physical health and many other aspects of people's lives.

Mental Health Promotion

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as 'a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'.

Our mental health influences our physical health, as well as our capability to lead a healthy lifestyle and to manage and recover from physical health conditions.

People with physical health problems, especially long-term conditions, are at increased risk of poor mental health - particularly depression and anxiety.

Around 30% of people with any long-term physical health condition also have a mental health problem. Poor mental health, in turn, exacerbates some long-term conditions, such as chronic pain.

Preventing Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems start early in life. Half of all mental health problems have been established by the age of 14, rising to 75% by age 24.

Social risk factors such as poverty, migration, extreme stress, exposure to violence (domestic, sexual and gender-based), emergency and conflict situations, natural disasters, trauma, and low social support, increase the risk for poor mental health and specific disorders.

Across the United Kingdom, those in the poorest 20% of the population are twice as likely to be at risk of developing mental health problems compared to those on an average income.

Mental Health and COVID-19

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is going to have an impact on everyone's daily lives, as the government and the NHS take necessary steps to manage the outbreak, reduce transmission and treat those who need medical attention.

It may be difficult, but by following guidance on social distancing, or staying at home, you are helping to protect yourself, your family, the NHS and your community. During this time, you may be bored, frustrated or lonely.

You may also feel low, worried, anxious, or be concerned about your health or those close to you. Everyone reacts differently to events and changes in the way that we think, feel, and behave and these may vary between different people and over time. It is important that you take care of your mind as well as your body and to get further support if you need it.

Working from Home During COVID-19

To comply with Coronavirus stay-at-home orders, some organisations have asked that employees to work from home, where possible.

The COVID-19, or Coronavirus outbreak, has led to lockdowns and social distancing measures throughout many countries, including the United Kingdom. For many organisations, this has meant that they have asked their employees to work from home where possible.

Technology has allowed many businesses to work 'as usual' from home. In these unprecedented times 'usual' can be hard to sustain, especially for those who live alone and those who are classed as lone workers.

Working from home in normal circumstances can lead to feelings of isolation, but this is even more acute when abiding to stay-at-home measures. Isolation and anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the impact of the Coronavirus means that many employees may be at risk of suffering from mental health issues.

For many, these challenges increase with the added stress of looking after children who may be unable to attend school or supporting loved ones who become ill and need care. There is also the inability to rely on the support systems that were in place before Coronavirus measures were announced.

Communication Channels

Communication is more important than ever during these unprecedented times, when many employees are having to adjust to home working. Not only is communication important to the day-to-day operations employees may need to complete, but also in monitoring the mental health of employees.

To promote maintaining healthy communication many employers are recommending that line managers create time during the working week, in addition to work-related communication, for staying in touch with their employees. Many employers have adapted weekly social activities such as Friday work drinks or post-weekend team catch-ups, using technology such as Skype, Teams or Zoom to maintain morale during these unprecedented times.

Employers should also communicate to employees that they understand the unusual circumstances many may find themselves in. This, and promoting openness to discuss mental health is important in these uncertain times – especially as we do not know how long lockdown measures may be in place.

Promoting Regular Routines

When working at home, maintaining a routine can be difficult. Without our normal commutes or set in-office meeting times, many can find it challenging to maintain regular work outputs, which can increase anxieties and stress levels.

Employers should encourage their employees to maintain their previous routines, where possible. If an employee previously left to go to work at 7 am – general advice is that they should continue to wake at the same time and use spare time to prepare their bodies and minds for work with other activities such as indoor exercise, or a morning walk/run whilst maintaining social distancing.

Employers should also try to encourage line managers to maintain previous team meetings or one-to-ones on a similar schedule, so employees still feel they have the opportunity to maintain communication and be in contact with their colleagues via technology such as Skype, Teams or Zoom.

IT and Technology

Wherever possible try and use IT equipment and technology provided by your employer - but if there is no alternative most conference software can also be used on mobiles and tablets. If and where possible, contact your IT department for any assistance or advice.

Use online training to guide you to learn new skills - Microsoft and other companies that provide remote working software have good, free videos available to help.

Try and use video calls whenever you can - there is no substitute for seeing another person's face. If videoconferencing is a step too far, you can do WhatsApp video for basic video calls with close colleagues. If you would check in with colleagues in person in the office - check in with them virtually as well - whether by video or by call/email.

Try and keep your work channels clear for work topics - but create social channels too on your intranet or messenger tool. Have a space where people can talk openly about subject matters without talk of the virus - and have a separate space where people can find updates about policies and procedures relating to the outbreak.

Formal and Social Flow of Work

It is important that structured and unstructured connections with work and colleagues carry on whilst people are working remotely or flexibly.

If you are a manager, let your staff know how and when to contact you for advice, support and guidance. Try to use video for all formal discussions, and any discussions where you are checking in on someone's well-being - the non-verbal communication is key for this.

Follow-up video chats or calls with a quick note with a summary of the actions to take, or your understanding of the major points to ensure that things are clear. Use software such as Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp for general communication and social interaction with employees.

Try and keep a separation between work and personal, think for example before connecting with colleagues you would not ordinarily link with on things like Facebook and respect the boundaries people have between work and home life.

Mental Health Support

If possible, employers should try to encourage mental health self-assessments. Some employees may not feel comfortable discussing mental health issues with co-workers or their line managers – and in these cases, self-assessment can be better in identifying those with increased mental health risks.

This can be a particularly difficult time for people with pre-existing or past mental health problems. Staying at home may be bringing back memories of bad times to people who have experienced depression or trauma. Know your people and offer a little extra to those who are more vulnerable if you notice changes in their behaviour.

These circumstances might lead people to disclose mental health problems they have previously not disclosed at work. Treat new disclosures with respect and compassion and make any adjustments for the employee, where necessary.

Employers should also make sure they identify employees with additional risks which may make mental health issues as a result of home working, more likely. Lone workers may suffer from feelings of isolation faster than those who live with others.

Employees with existing health conditions or disabilities may also find the current circumstances more stressful – and therefore, may require more employer support such as an Employer Assistance Programme (EAP).

If you have self-care techniques which work for you during these unprecedented times, then try and make sure you use these as much as possible as a form of relaxation and mindfulness. You may need to think differently – for example doing exercise workouts from videos or online steam feeds which is being offered by some leisure providers.

Make sure employees are also made aware of any internal support, where available, such as mental health champions/mental health first aiders and that suitable contact methods are widely communicated.

Essential Workers

If you are an essential worker coming to work during the epidemic, thank you for everything you are doing in our communities. It will feel unusual, and may add to the anxiety you feel, or that loved ones feel for you.

If you can reduce your travel, consider doing so, or changing the method of transport you use or the times you travel to reduce peak times, and observe social distancing guidelines.

Maintain the scrupulous hygiene measures advised by authorities. Hand washing, catching sneezes and coughs, and not touching your face are still a key strand in preventing the virus spreading. If you are conducting any site activities, then it may be advisable to have at your

disposal some antibacterial gel and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as gloves and a facemask.

The virus is likely to be a hot topic of conversation at work for the foreseeable future. Try to minimise gossip and hearsay about both the news and personal stories of things you have heard and people you know. It can help bring back people's anxiety.

Look for specific advice from a professional institute (e.g. IOSH, IIRSM, IFSM), trade organisations, trade press and mental health charities etc. Such resources and material that which be obtained via these outlets not only offer vital staff on the front-line useful reading material but can also offer provide much needed advice and support.

COVID-19 Health and Wellbeing Checklist

- **Food:** do you have a way to get food delivered if you need to self-isolate?
- **Cleaning:** do you have cleaning supplies?
- **Work:** can you carry on working, including working from home? If not, can you find out your rights to payment or benefits?
- **Medication:** do you have enough medication, or a way to get more?
- **Health:** can you reorganise any planned therapy or treatments?
- **Connectivity:** have you got ways to keep in contact with people you see regularly, like their phone numbers, email addresses? Do you need help setting up digital communication, like a video calling app?
- **Routine:** can you create a routine or timetable for yourself? And if you live with other people, should you create a household schedule? Do you need to agree how the household will run with everyone at home all day?
- **Exercise:** is there any physical activity you can do inside your home, like going up and down the stairs, using bean tins as weights, or exercises you can do in your chair?
- **Nature:** have you thought about how you can bring nature into your home? Can you get some seeds and planting equipment delivered, or put up photos of green spaces?
- **Entertainment:** have you thought about things to do, books to read or TV shows to watch?
- **Relax:** have you got materials so you can do something creative, such as pencils and paper?

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Sources: Public Health England, Mind,
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