Supporting mental health

A psychological toolkit for supporting staff returning to work after lockdown

Introduction

It has become apparent throughout lockdown that there are significant risks to both people's physical and psychological health as a result of this pandemic. Some of the negative consequences on people's mental health may include anxiety about the ongoing health crisis and fear of infection, as well social isolation due to the lockdown. Many may have experienced challenging domestic situations, such as relationship conflicts or breakdowns, juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable relative, as well as financial worries if their partner has had a reduction or a loss of income. Some may have experienced illness or bereavements.

Furthermore, whether staff have been furloughed or carried on working from home and participated in video meetings, they will still need to adjust to working in a shared environment with colleagues again. Some may take more time than others and it is likely that most people will need a period of readjustment. Some members of staff may have concerns about travelling and socially distancing on public transport – or transport may be less readily available. Many may find that they are still coming to terms with the significant change which society has seen and might struggle to adapt to another change in their routine, returning to unfamiliar work environments and practices. The aim of this toolkit is to increase your awareness of some of the mental health issues that staff may be facing on returning to work, and how you can best support them through this transition.

Coronavirus anxiety

We generally take for granted that we can go out into the world and nothing will happen to us; whereas the lockdown has encouraged people to rush into their homes and not interact with anyone outside of their house, as they might catch something life threatening. With this advice, there is an enormous loss of security and safety, which will likely result in feelings of trepidation and anxiety for many people as the lockdown restrictions lift. While some people will be desperate to return to work, others will experience lasting fear of infection from a virus which is still poorly understood.

Anxiety may present in staff in many different ways:

Physical symptoms

- Trouble sleeping
- Over/under eating
- Digestive issues
- Headaches
- Poor memory
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle tension
- Crying

Psychological symptoms

- Constant worry
- Feeling irritable
- Feeling angry
- Feeling down
- Avoiding family/friends
- Loss of interest in work
- A desire to be perfect
- Irrational fear of making mistakes

Some people will experience lasting fear of infection.

Accordingly, managers may be faced with staff who are fearful to return to work due to the health risks this poses to themselves and those closest to them, particularly if they are caring for an elderly or vulnerable relative. They may also be faced with staff who feel too afraid or unable to return to work if they normally rely on public transport to commute, as the use of this is still being discouraged due to high risks of infection.

Depression

There are many of us who rely on routine and regular social contact and support as a way of maintaining positive mental health. Many people may have found this taken away from them by the lockdown restrictions requiring social-distancing, social isolation, and remote working. People who have been self-isolating for longer due to themselves or a relative being in a vulnerable group, individuals living alone, and those with a history of depression will be the most at risk of depression.

Depression in staff may present in many different ways:

- Feeling sad
- Feeling angry
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities previously enjoyed
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Changes in appetite, overeating or not eating enough

- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Tiredness
- Restlessness
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Feelings of hopelessness

Accordingly, managers may be faced with staff who are unmotivated to return or struggle to engage with their work or their colleagues. They may struggle to readjust to stricter schedules, setting alarms, dressing for work, and travelling in - having become accustomed to working from home with more autonomy and less formality - and may require a significant period of readjustment.

Lockdown stress

While being furloughed or working from home can cause staff added stress with continually changing and uncertain circumstances, they could also experience further stress depending on their lockdown situation. For example, they may have additional responsibilities to care for vulnerable relatives or children on top of their work commitments. They may experience extra stress as a result of financial uncertainty if their partner has lost their job or significant income, or be experiencing additional strain on their relationship. On the other hand, some employees might feel a reduction in stress when working from home or on furlough as a result of fewer demands on their time and being able to spend quality time with their family, and may therefore feel stress and guilt about returning to work and leaving this behind.

Accordingly, managers may be faced with staff who are overwhelmed with the current changes to their ways of working and who struggle to adapt to returning to work. They may still be experiencing increased demands on their time as vulnerable relatives may still require support, children may still be off school, and partners may still be out of work. Feelings of increased pressure and stress may result in staff not wanting to come back to work, feeling overwhelmed by a change in workload, struggling to concentrate or engage in work tasks, and feeling unable to meet expectations.

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Stress in staff may present in many ways:

- Obesity and overeating
- Increased or excessive drinking of alcohol
- Loss of appetite
- Smoking more (if you smoke)
- Increased coffee consumption
- Excessive and continuing irritability with other people
- Excessive emotion and crying at small irritations
- Lack of interest in anything other than work
- Substance abuse
- Difficulties making decisions, large or small.
- Inability to concentrate
- Increased and suppressed anger/irritability
- Feeling out of control and unable to cope with life
- Permanently tired even after sleep
- Decreased sex drive/libido
- Nail biting/skin picking
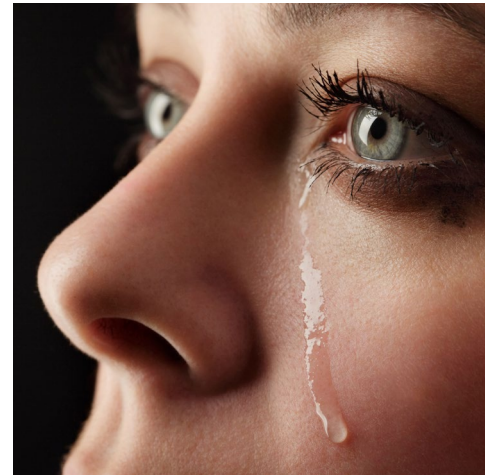
Staff may have lost family members, partners or friends.

Bereavement

Sadly, in the UK, tens of thousands of people have died as a result of COVID-19 so far. The ongoing impact of the pandemic means that staff may have lost family members, partners, or friends. They may also have experienced the loss of colleagues. Much of this loss will be unexpected and shocking and may have a significant impact on their mental wellbeing. For example, due to the infectious nature of the virus, it is likely that a number of the bereaved will have been unable to say goodbye to loved ones, either in hospitals or at funerals, where attendance has been severely restricted, and so may struggle to process their grief. Similarly, due to isolation and social-distancing restrictions, employees may find themselves physically alone when they are grieving, which can increase feelings of grief and loneliness. On the other hand, people may find that their response to the bereavement is delayed, due to being distracted by worries for others' health and their own health during the pandemic, and it may therefore hit them much later than expected.

It is also useful to be aware that staff may experience considerable anger about their bereavement, feeling that someone is to 'blame' for the death, such as themselves for infecting the person, other people who are not social distancing, or the government for it's response to the pandemic. They might also feel guilt, for being alive when their loved one has died, for not being able to visit them, or for not meeting their last wishes – this may be especially true if a loved one had to go into intensive care, despite having indicated they wanted to die at home, or was not able to return home after recovery from the virus due to existing or new health concerns. All of this is likely to have a lasting psychological impact on employees which may impact on their return to work while they come to terms with what they have experienced.

Accordingly, managers may be faced with staff who are too emotionally overwhelmed to return to work. They may struggle to concentrate and engage fully with their role and their colleagues, particularly as reminders of the deaths resulting from the virus may be discussed socially, and shown in the media, making it difficult for them to resume normal activities.

Bereavement in staff may present in multiple ways:

- Feeling angry
- Feeling sad
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling hopeless
- Losing temper quickly
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in social activities
- Lack of motivation
- Not taking care of self
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping

Medical treatment trauma

If a member of staff experienced the virus themselves and required hospitalisation, they may experience some symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or post intensive care syndrome (PICS). While someone may have recovered physically, severe illness or near death experiences can have a much longer lasting psychological impact. In addition, these symptoms can also be experienced by close family members who have witnessed the hospitalisation and severe illness of someone they love. The effects of witnessing or being involved in hospitalisation may be exacerbated by having to isolate after being treated for the virus and not being able to have the support of close family and friends. Similarly, seeing information about the virus frequently on the news or in social media or attending follow-up medical appointments could trigger psychological distress.

The symptoms of medical trauma can be very similar to those stemming from other traumatic events:

- Hypervigilance
- Avoidance behaviour
- Anxiety
- Intrusive memories
- Intense emotions
- Emotional numbing
- Exaggerated startled response
- Insomnia
- Digestive distress

Accordingly, managers may be faced with staff who are still trying to process a very traumatic event and may struggle to return to normal activities. They may be unwilling to return to work or unable to concentrate on and engage in work-related tasks and may require additional support to aid their recovery.

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Opening communication

Recognising the different impacts on staff is essential when developing strategies for supporting them. Providing opportunities to talk about what has changed is a crucial starting point for managers. Although not everyone will want or need to discuss their concerns, some employees will likely wish to speak about job-related worries including safety, infection control, social distancing and transport to work, as well as their personal circumstances, caring responsibilities, or anxieties.

A mental health audit or staff survey is a good place to start in order to get a clear picture of the mental health of your staff prior to returning to work, as well as how well you are currently supporting them and what further improvements could be made. This may sound complicated to set up, but you could adapt tools that are already in use, such as surveys, review meetings, or HR data. Putting relevant questions into these existing tools will help to build a comprehensive picture, without creating extra work. Regular one-to-one meetings and catch ups are also a great place to ask staff how they are getting on. Furthermore, doing this regularly will help to build trust and give staff a chance to raise problems at an early stage. Line managers who know their staff and regularly hold catch ups or supervision meetings to monitor work and wellbeing, are well placed to spot any signs of stress or poor mental health at an early stage. You may want to ask your team members how one-to-one meetings can be tailored to suit their needs and encourage staff to request meetings outside the normal schedule if they need to discuss anything important.

Some employees will likely wish to speak about job-related worries.

Responding to disclosure

If you suspect a member of your team is experiencing poor mental health, or they disclose it to you in a staff survey or during a check-in meeting, it's essential that you respond in an open, supportive, and empathic way, and have a conversation with them about their needs. You may find that due to the universality of the lockdown, people will be more likely to disclose difficulties as there is less stigma associated with poor mental health when it is easily attributed to a global crisis. However, some ways you can facilitate open discussion around the psychological impact of the lockdown and pandemic are highlighted overleaf.

Ways to facilitate open discussion

Ensure privacy
It's important to make people feel comfortable; therefore, it's good to have the conversation somewhere private and quiet wherever possible. If the conversation is being conducted online or by phone, try to ensure that both parties have somewhere private to talk, where they can avoid interruptions or distractions.

Encourage people to talk
It can be difficult for people to disclose information relating to their mental health, but you can make it easier for them by keeping an open mind and giving them space to talk things out. Ask simple, open, non-judgemental questions, while avoiding judgemental or patronising responses.

Actively listen
Remember that every individual's experience of poor mental health will be different, so it is important to listen and empathise without making assumptions. How you deal with each disclosure should be entirely dependent on the individual. Explore how their difficulties present, what the implications are for them, and what support they need.

Discuss confidentiality
People can understandably be anxious about disclosing mental health difficulties, so you may want to reassure them that any private information they disclose will not be passed on to their colleagues. You should also make them aware of any limitations to confidentiality. For example, you may want to create strict policies about who is made aware of disclosures if this is not already in place (as a rule, it should involve as few people as possible). On the other hand, you may want to discuss any information the individual would like shared with team colleagues and how this will be done, as this can be very supportive for some people.

Questions to ask
- How are you doing at the moment?
- You seem to be a bit down/ frustrated/anxious. Is everything okay?
- I've noticed your work has been late recently when it's usually not. Is everything okay?
- Is there anything I can do to help?
- What support do you think might help?

Questions to avoid
- You are clearly struggling. What's up?
- What do you expect me to do about it?
- Your performance is really unacceptable right now – what's going on?
- Everyone else is in the same boat and they are fine. Why aren't you?
- Who do you expect to pick up all the work that you can't manage?

How to support your staff

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Open and honest communication

It is well known that ambiguity can contribute to employee stress and anxiety, and this pandemic is creating tremendous uncertainty. Prior research suggests that companies can help reduce uncertainty by communicating openly and honestly with employees. By being more transparent and discussing worst-case scenarios, managers cannot only reduce stress, but also other dysfunctional outcomes, like increased gossip and decreased commitment, which often occurs when employees are faced with ambiguous situations. Furthermore, information sharing is often seen as an indicator of trust, so managers who are more open are also likely to be seen as more credible and trustworthy.

Accordingly, if staff are apprehensive about returning to work, particularly about how safe it will be, the best thing managers can do is communicate with them in advance to let them know the results of any risk assessments and the steps being taken to make the organisation safe for their return. This should help to ease any anxiety, as will giving employees notice so that they may mentally prepare for the changes that will be occurring and allow them to bring any concerns to your attention. Keeping people informed of what the business is doing – whether it is good or bad news for individuals – will help them to make their own decisions and give them some degree of security in very uncertain times. Knowing they are valued and supported by their employer – and that you continue to prioritise their health and safety – will be fundamental to their wellbeing.

Make adjustments

Managers need to have a sensitive and open discussion with every individual and discuss any reasonable adjustments that can be made to facilitate a safe and effective return to the workplace. It could be that some staff will prefer a phased return to their full role, or will want to discuss a new working arrangement; especially if their domestic situation has changed because of the pandemic, such as having to look after children until schools go back, looking after vulnerable relatives, or because they themselves have to continue shielding. You may also accommodate more remote working, or encourage staff concerned about public transport to take up a cycle to work loan scheme. Each individual's circumstances and needs will be different, so be prepared to adapt your support to suit the individual and mutually agree any reasonable adjustments to ensure a safe and effective return to work. For example, some employees who had a reasonable adjustment before may need a different one on their return to the workplace.

Wellness Action Plans (WAPs) are also particularly helpful during the

"**Returning to work could exacerbate stress or mental health difficulties...**"

return-to-work process, as they provide a structure for conversations around what support or reasonable adjustments might be useful. By giving your staff an opportunity to draw up a WAP, they will be able to plan in advance and gain an awareness of what works and what does not work for them. If any of your employees do experience psychological distress as a result of the lockdown, you will have an idea of the tailored support that could help, or at the least a tool to use in starting that conversation. By regularly reviewing the agreed, practical steps in the WAP, you can support your staff member to adapt it to reflect their experiences or new approaches they find helpful. By allowing the individual to take ownership of the process and of the WAP itself, you will be empowering them to feel more in control which can in turn reduce anxiety related to uncertainty.

Encourage staff to find time for virtual coffee breaks, lunch breaks, or even happy hours with colleagues.

What should a WAP cover?
- Approaches that the staff member can adopt to support their own mental wellbeing
- Early warning signs to look out for that indicate the staff member is struggling
- Any workplace triggers for poor mental health or stress
- Potential impact of poor mental health on performance, if any
- What support they need from you as their manager
- Actions and positive steps you will both take if the staff member is experiencing stress or poor mental health
- An agreed time to review the WAP and any support measures that are in place
- Anything else that the individual feels would be useful in supporting their mental health.

Encourage self-care
Many people find going to work is good for their mental health as it can help them look after their wellbeing by providing a sense of identity; a steady routine and structure; a chance to connect with friends and colleagues; and opportunities to be productive. However, returning to work could exacerbate stress or mental health difficulties if staff are not encouraged to maintain a good work-life balance or are not encouraged to continue practising good habits and self-care. There are some things you can encourage staff to do to promote self-care on returning to work:

- Work sensible hours
- Take full lunch breaks
- Rest and recuperate after busy periods
- Avoid working at weekends – especially from home
- Take their full annual leave entitlement (even if working from home, people still need time away from work)
- Practise a healthy routine for diet, sleep, and relaxation (you could offer

mindfulness courses/webinars, for example)
- Practise healthy exercise habits (you could encourage staff to make use of flexible working if possible to accommodate exercise/hobbies, which will improve staff morale, productivity, and mental health)

TIP
Wherever possible, senior leaders and managers should be role models for healthier work habits and encourage staff by example.

Reduce social isolation

For staff who have never worked from home or who are used to busy, bustling offices, social distancing measures will likely feel extremely lonely and could negatively impact on staff wellbeing. It is difficult to replicate daily interactions with colleagues and maintain social distancing, whether staff are returning to the office or working remotely; however, managers should continue to encourage staff to keep in touch with each other. Social media is a good way for staff to keep connected. You could encourage them to find time to have virtual coffee breaks, lunch breaks, or even happy hours with their colleagues. Managers could also continue to mark birthdays or other milestones with video calls or messages from colleagues. Alternatively, they could sponsor group games such as quizzes or online escape rooms so that staff can have some fun for some downtime, as opposed to only communicating to talk about work. This can provide staff with a valuable resource for social support and connection that can help to reduce loneliness and promote wellbeing during social distancing.

In addition, if members of staff are struggling with the psychological impact of the virus and returning to work, they might find it easier to speak to someone who isn't their manager. Therefore, encouraging contact with colleagues through peer support, buddy systems or mentoring programmes can allow them to support one another outside of the line-management structure as well as offering a great way to maximise the range of skills within the organisation. Sharing their experiences with others going through the same thing can help staff feel less alone and enable them to gain the confidence and skills to return to work successfully. Alternatively, there are online communities, such as Elefriends, where staff can talk openly about their mental health with others who share their experiences.

TIP
It is important that managers have their own support network in place to support their own mental health and wellbeing when supporting staff, to avoid becoming stressed or unwell themselves.

"It is important that employers ensure their staff feel their mental health matters and is well looked after in the workplace."

Key points

- ✔ Survey staff about their mental health and what support they might need prior to returning to work

- ✔ Be aware of the different ways lockdown and the virus can impact people's mental health

- ✔ Be prepared to listen to individuals' different needs

- ✔ Be transparent and open about how you plan on looking after staff's physical and psychological health

- ✔ Approach returning to work with flexibility and a willingness to make adjustments

- ✔ Encourage self-care among staff

- ✔ Encourage social connections and peer support

- ✔ Provide ongoing support and sign post to additional support services and resources

Support for staff with mental health needs

As is clear from this document, the mental health implications of Covid-19 are very significant in scale and breadth. Experiences of staff during the lockdown, and potentially of bereavement or of medical trauma, are likely to have caused a number of very significant psychological scars that may be difficult to manage. These will have an ongoing impact on mental health and wellbeing. For those with previous difficulties with mental health distress, the effect may be even more severe, presenting a range of different problems that may require additional consideration and support in the short and possibly longer term.

In order to effectively manage the mental health implications of Covid-19, it is important that employers ensure their staff feel their mental health matters and is well looked after in the workplace. There are a number of proactive support measures that may be helpful, including:

- Ensuring regular meetings with each individual upon return from lockdown, during which wellbeing and the return to work process is addressed.
- Taking a positive, non-stigmatising approach to mental health and wellbeing – promoting good mental health in the workplace as an integral aspect of workplace culture.
- Identifying mental health leaders and 'mental health champions' to cultivate a respectful and open culture of support – with a confidential, open-door policy.
- Providing training and support on mental health issues to managers to help them support the staff they supervise.

Professional psychological/counselling support
There may be some staff whose mental health needs are significant and may not easily be addressed within existing workplace structures. In such circumstances, professional psychological/counselling support may be necessary. This may take the form of a referral to a specialist psychological/counselling service able to work with a staff member with particular mental health needs, or the more general provision of an employee psychology/
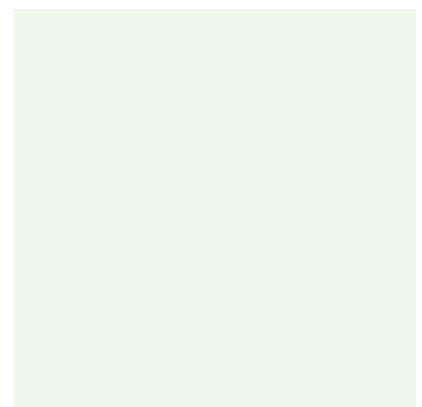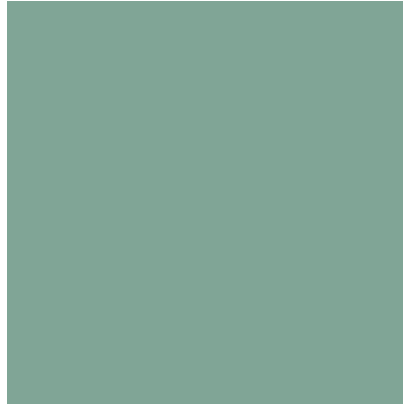
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