HR Elite

A Guide To Good Mental Health And Wellbeing During Covid19

Mental health and wellbeing during Covid19
(for all staff, at home and at work)

Introduction

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, employers have an over-arching obligation to keep their staff free from the risk of harm as far as is reasonably practicable. Employers and employees also have a shared common law general duty of care towards others who may be affected by their actions.

This of course includes physical health and safety, (considered in a separate article) but what about mental health and wellbeing during Covid19? What are your obligations for three broad groups of staff: those still working, those working from home and those furloughed? Below we have tips that employers may want to use for themselves, or to share with their teams.

For staff who have been furloughed

As the virus continues to spread and its impact on business and working life becomes ever clearer, many people are being asked to stay at home, do no work and receive a reduction in pay. Even those whose employers can afford to top up the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme are experiencing a range of anxieties around being furloughed. An employer who retains some contact with their furloughed teams, includes them in group chats and encourages them to take care of their own mental health will be able to rely on a more positive return to work for that person when the time comes. It is important for employers to reassure people not working that they recognise that this is a difficult time and keep them informed about what's happening at work; recognise that they may be anxious about returning to work, or even about not having a job to come back to.

Many of the tips for working from home (discussed later) can be used to support those on furlough. Encouraging a structure to their day, enjoying time outside, regular contact with work colleagues, looking after their physiological wellbeing and having a mix of activities will all help. Online training can be undertaken by staff on furlough, so finding relevant courses or reading for them will give them a focus and result in an engaged workforce when the time is ready to return.

Mental health while working at home

While the Government continues with a clear social distancing and work from home (if you can) message, it is important for employers to reassure people working from home that they recognise that this is a difficult time. This is particularly the case when other colleagues are continuing to work as normal and some have been furloughed. 'W*hy should they sit at home and do nothing for the same pay as I'm getting for working?*' has become a common gripe among workers and reassuring those still working is vital – after all, the future of the business may depend on them!

Some companies are writing to staff, podcasting, looming or simply telephoning to remind their teams about how they can take care of their mental health and wellbeing and the resources that exist to help them.

Maintaining an understanding of an employee's mental health when working from home is more of a challenge if you are not seeing them regularly, but there are still many things that can be done (and things that can be shared with staff so that they can take best care of themselves).

Tips for adapting to working at home

- Create a routine. It can be difficult to adapt to working at home if you are used to operating in an office or other work environment but getting into a daily routine can help. Regular routines are crucial for maintaining a sense of purpose.

- Structure your day so that you start and finish at a set time if possible, or work in discrete 'chunks' of time, allowing for breaks and a change of scenery.

- Work in a comfortable, well lit place and with adequate space and an upright chair. Considering good workstation practices will enable you to concentrate and feel more 'at work'.

- Get up regularly to stretch and have breaks – build these in (with an alarm) if you need to

- If you require special equipment for your home workplace, contact your employer who should take reasonable steps to meet your needs.

- It's quite common not to be able to focus as well at home, so don't worry if you get distracted. Work through things as best you can – you'll know if you're 'putting the hours in'.

- Intake of food and fluid is easy to ignore (or forget) when you're at home, so make sure you stay hydrated and maintain a healthy diet. A great many headaches are caused by dehydration and this impacts on your mood and your ability to concentrate. Keep a bottle of water by your desk to remind you to drink.

- Lunch breaks – always important, particularly so at home. Try not to eat at your desk (even if you do in the office!). If you can get outside into the garden or balcony, then this is a great mood-booster and breaks the day. Go for a walk if you can.

- If working inside, open windows to let some fresh air in.

- Reduce feelings of isolation by staying connected with colleagues. Using online video meetings so that you can see work colleagues in their homes from yours also reinforces that you are still having shared experiences, even though you are not in the office.

- If you have child care, elderly person care or even pet care to think about during the day, that's fine – tell your manager and work out a way that you can complete your work flexibly.

Mental health while at work

Whilst some staff are able to work from home, others cannot, and as an increasing number of businesses are now re-opening, it can be a challenge to maintain safe social distancing and working practices. It is a particularly difficult time for those people in essential industries who need to carry on working while others stay home to protect themselves.

Staff may be concerned about the risks the virus poses to their own health and that of their family. Some staff are also working longer hours and in increasingly stressful situations and so maintaining positive mental health and being conscious of the added challenges to wellbeing are vital so that staff can continue to carry on helping the public.

When assisting employees with their mental health during homeworking, employers need to strike the right balance between supporting staff while not intruding on their privacy. In particular, employers must be careful about sharing confidential information on an employee's mental health with colleagues.

Tips for managing mental health at work

- Remember that it is OK to admit that you are not OK. It is likely that many of your colleagues will also be feeling stressed or anxious in the current circumstances – check in on them and ask how they are.

- Talk through your feelings with somebody you trust. If you do not feel comfortable talking to someone you know, you could speak to a counsellor or contact an emotional support service such as Samaritans or Mind.

- If you are distressed as a result of personal or family experience of coronavirus, make sure your line manager is aware of this as soon as possible. He/she can't help if they don't know.

- If you are experiencing issues such as anger and frustration from members of the public, talking to a colleague who may be in the same situation could help.

- Try to plan when you will be able to have short breaks during your working day, for example to have a walk or a snack outside.

- Try to find somewhere quiet and calm to relax.

- Your work patterns may contribute to feelings of loneliness, particularly at a time when you can't see friends or family face-to-face. Keep in regular contact with them on the phone, by email or via social media.

- Staff networks and peer support groups are useful for sharing and for discussing common subjects.

- Use the group emails/intranet page/social media applications to keep in touch and chat about non-work related things, from film recommendations to photos of pets.

- Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle by staying hydrated, eating properly, having rest and respite between times at work and getting enough sleep. Keep as active as you can.

- Find ways to relax when you are not working. You could try reading a book or watching films. Resources such as mindfulness apps and online exercise classes may also help.

Tips for reducing anxiety – wherever you're working (or not)

- Social media and news bulletins can be informative but also stressful, so if they increase worry levels, then limit time spent on them.

- The current situation can feel overwhelming and it may help to "reframe" how you think about it. Try to see it simply as a different period of time in your life, even though it was unexpected. Concentrate on the benefits that you are experiencing from working from home.

- Keeping in mind the social distancing restrictions, try to get some fresh air in your garden or even just sitting on your own doorstep.

- Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle by staying hydrated, eating properly, getting a good night's sleep and keeping active.

- Find ways to relax at home when you are not working. You could try reading a book or watching films. Resources such as mindfulness apps and online exercise classes may also help.

- Talking to people you trust can help. Keep in regular contact with friends and family on the phone, by email or via social media.

External guidance and support

We are experiencing a challenging and unusual time. Staying fit and health in mind and body is more important than ever. Look after yourself and talk to someone if you are struggling.

Further support and information is available at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing, where you can find the Government's guidance on safeguarding your mental health and wellbeing;

- www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus, where mental health charity Mind provides tips for coping during the coronavirus outbreak, including information for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families; and

- www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/support-and-information/if-youre-having-difficult-time/if-youre-worried-about-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak, where Samaritans provides information and advice for anyone who is worried about their mental health during the coronavirus pandemic.