Supporting occupational health and wellbeing professionals

Supporting workplace mental health and wellbeing **in COVID-19 and beyond**

Author: Dr Gail Kinman
Visiting Professor of Occupational Health Psychology, Birkbeck University of London

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Who is this factsheet for?

Employers who are reviewing their approach to workplace mental health and wellbeing, national policy makers, and the community and voluntary sector.

This document highlights best practice pre COVID-19 and provides new information concerning what is a rapidly evolving situation. It was informed by a review of research, evidence-informed resources and tools offered by professional bodies, and a webinar involving experts on work and wellbeing.

This document aims to:

- highlight the need for effective policies and practices at the organisational level to help support the wellbeing and mental health of staff during the pandemic and beyond
- provide examples of best practice to help employers implement systemic, sustainable interventions.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health and wellbeing of the UK population has generally deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic[1]. Mental health and wellbeing should be valued as core business assets – this is more important than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The benefits of supporting employees' mental health [2,3,4]

As well as financial savings, supporting the mental health of employees can lead to:

- increased productivity and improved work performance
- reduced absenteeism, turnover, and injuries
- enhanced reputation, recruitment, and retention
- improved mental health also benefits overall health.

Dealing with employees' COVID-related anxiety and distress in the workplace

Feeling worried, anxious, and overwhelmed is understandable in the current crisis, as the situation is rapidly changing, and the future is uncertain. People react in different ways, but common fears and concerns about COVID-19 related to work[5] are:

- being exposed to the virus during their commute or at their place of work
- bringing the virus home and infecting their family
- being redeployed, furloughed, or made redundant
- changes in work role and practices, and concerns about having the necessary skills
- dealing with changing work patterns/shifts and loss of control over working routine
- reduced working hours or loss of overtime
- physical distancing at work, or social isolation when working at home
- feeling powerless and lacking a sense of control
- changes in domestic responsibilities, such as childcare, that can interfere with work
- poor work-life balance
- being unable to challenge unfair or unsafe practices due to job insecurity
- the impact of the crisis on future career opportunities.

How employers deal with these issues will have a major impact on the wellbeing and productivity of their staff, both now and in the longer-term. Of some concern are the findings of a CIPD survey[4] where nearly one-third of respondents reported that their employer/line manager had not checked on their health and wellbeing since the onset of COVID-19. To support staff, attention will be needed to:

- ***Assessing and managing risk.*** A health needs assessment is a simple way to gather anonymous information about the health of a company's workforce and provides a baseline of data to track progress against. Guidance is also available on developing and evaluating workplace health interventions.
- ***Communicating and meeting needs.*** Being proactive in offering support to staff; listening and helping them find solutions to difficulties; communicating regularly about the current situation and future; identifying and addressing stress.
- ***Adapting to change.*** Managing change effectively; ensuring that staff can influence changes; taking a creative approach to flexible working to meet employee's needs; using graded or phased return to work plans.
- ***Helping people adapt and cope.*** Ensuring that expectations and targets are realistic; implementing individual wellness action plans (see below); ensuring opportunities for support; encouraging staff to take breaks.
- ***Reviewing the situation regularly.*** Maintaining regular 'catch-ups' with staff to ensure their needs are met and they are adapting to new ways of working; being aware of their individual circumstances and expectations.

RESOURCES TO HELP EMPLOYERS

Work-related stress, depression or anxiety is defined as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed upon them at work. The 2019/20 Labour Force Survey[6] found:

- Work-related stress, depression, or anxiety has increased in recent years, accounting for 51% of all work-related ill health cases and 55% of all days lost due to work-related illness.
- It is more prevalent in public service occupations, such as health and social care and education, in larger workplaces, and among female workers.
- The main causes were workload pressures (e.g. tight deadlines) and lack of management support.
- Assessing the risk of work-related stress is crucial for organisations to support the wellbeing of staff during the pandemic and beyond.

Managing psychosocial risks: the HSE Management Standards Approach

Supporting mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond involves managing work-related stress. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has developed a risk-assessment process to help employers manage workforce wellbeing. This involves a set of benchmarks – the HSE Management Standards – for measuring good management practice in six key areas: demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change. If managed ineffectively, they can lead to poor health, lower productivity, and higher sickness absence[7]. The HSE provides a step-by-step risk assessment framework for organisations to diagnose the key hazards and take remedial action (see below). Interventions developed with input from staff can be particularly effective in improving wellbeing[7].

ENHANCING LINE MANAGERS' STRESS COMPETENCIES

Employees often cite poor management behaviour and lack of support as the main cause of work-related stress[7]. Managers also play a key role in reducing and managing stress among their staff – this is particularly important in the current crisis. YouGov survey data show that managers need more guidance, training, and support for this role[8], as only:

- 11% of managers had received training on understanding workplace stressors
- 31% of employees felt their managers could have sensitive discussions about their wellbeing or signpost them to expert help
- 40% of people professionals believed that managers could spot the early signs of mental ill health in their staff
- just over one line manager in four indicated that their performance in managing staff wellbeing is not formally assessed. Clearly, people management should be more than an 'optional extra' to a manager's role.

Online materials and a people managers' guide are available to help line managers support the health, wellbeing and engagement of their staff. As managers are likely to be under pressure during the crisis, it is also crucial for them to prioritise their own wellbeing.

Some tools to support the mental health of employees during and beyond COVID-19 can be found here and here. Guidance on supporting staff who may be experiencing trauma is also available.

SIGNS OF STRUGGLE[9]

This checklist can help employers identify any changes in behaviour that suggest an employee is struggling and needs support.

- ***Expressing distress*** e.g. reports feeling stressed; emotional outbursts such as irritability or crying.
- ***Social withdrawal*** e.g. not participating in social activities; not engaging in prosocial behaviours.
- ***Extreme behaviours*** e.g. being impaired by alcohol or drugs; expressing desire to self-harm.
- ***Attendance*** e.g. lateness, increased absenteeism or presenteeism.
- ***Performance*** e.g. a noticeable decrease in quality/quantity of work; failure to meet deadlines.
- Spotting signs of struggle when staff are working remotely is more challenging, so employers should be particularly vigilant. Focusing on the tone of emails and verbal and non-verbal communication online, having regular 'check-ins', and proactively signposting sources of support will be helpful. Support from peers can be particularly effective during the pandemic. Guidance is available **here**.

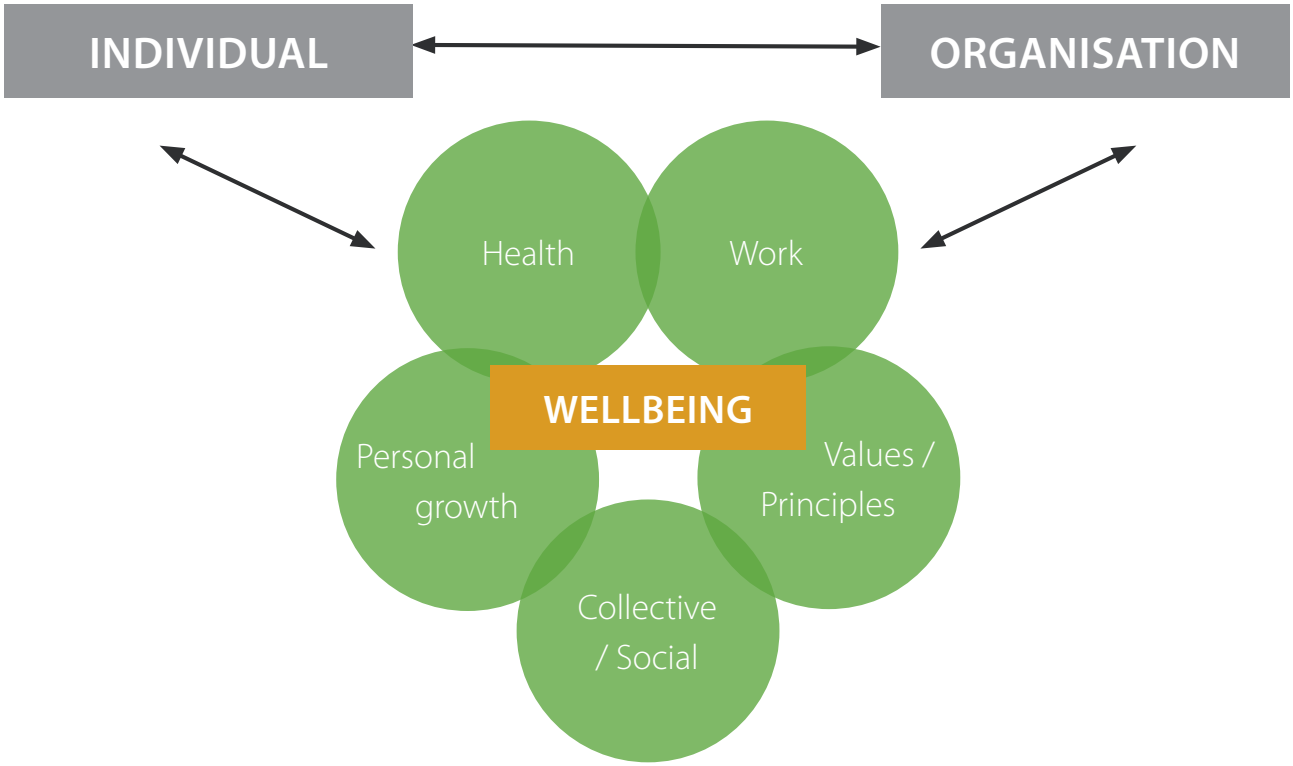
WORKING FROM HOME

At the start of the pandemic, many employees had to work from home with little notice or preparation. There is little evidence that wellbeing and performance has suffered in general[10], but some people (particularly those with caring responsibilities, who work longer hours, and who have little contact with their manager) are having more difficulties. A survey conducted earlier in the pandemic found that 75% of respondents had not had a health and safety risk assessment of their homeworking arrangements[11]. It is important to recognise the risks as well as the benefits of working from home and provide appropriate support. Some key actions for employers are set out below[12, 13, 14].

Guidelines are available for employers on protecting the health and safety of homeworkers and supporting healthy, sustainable home-working during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Issue	Solution
Health and safety	Make sure home office arrangements are safe and ergonomic; encourage staff to take regular breaks and exercise.
'Always on'	Support boundaries for the working day; provide guidance on 'switching off'.
'System overload'	Agree ways of working including systems and platforms to be used; manage email traffic; manage online meetings.
Access to support	Schedule regular check-ins.
Isolation	Encourage social connections and peer support via informal messaging groups; virtual coffee mornings; quizzes etc.
Burnout	Review priorities and targets and offer flexibility, especially to working parents; involve staff in decisions about reorganising work and tasks.

THE FIVE DOMAINS OF WELLBEING: A HOLISTIC MODEL



Source: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-well-being-agenda_2016-first-steps-full-potential-exec-summary_tcm18-10456.pdf

Supporting mental health and wellbeing in an effective and sustainable way requires workplace initiatives for each of the five domains shown.

- ***Health:*** focus on physical health (e.g. health promotion, occupational health support, managing disability); physical safety (e.g. safe working practices, equipment, and training); mental health (stress management, risk assessments, conflict resolution training, managing mental health).
- ***Work:*** focus on the work environment (e.g. open, inclusive culture); line management (e.g. training and people management policies); work demands (e.g. job design, role, quality, working hours); autonomy (control, innovation); change management (e.g. communication and involvement); pay and reward (e.g. fair and transparent remuneration practices).
- ***Values/Principles:*** focus on leadership (e.g. clear mission and objectives; health and wellbeing strategy); ethical standards (e.g. dignity at work); diversity (e.g. inclusion, valuing difference).
- ***Collective/Social:*** focus on employee voice (e.g. communication and involvement); positive relationships (e.g. management style, teamworking).
- ***Personal growth:*** focus on career development (e.g. mentoring, performance management); emotional (positive relationships, resilience training); lifelong learning (e.g. access to training, mid-career review); creativity (e.g. open and collaborative culture, innovation workshops).

More information can be found here.

The Better Health campaign provides support with losing weight, getting more active, improving mental health, or quitting smoking. It encourages people to take simple steps to improve their health and feel better. The campaign targets all adults over 18, with a focus on those aged 40-60.

The Better Health website has a wide range of free tools and support to help with making healthy changes that add up.

Wellness Actions Plans (WAPs) can help managers support the mental health of their staff during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. WAPs:

- are personalised, practical tools that are useful whether people have a mental health problem or not
- help identify what keeps people well at work, what makes them unwell, and how to address a mental health problem at work if this occurs
- are particularly useful when employees return to work after experiencing a mental health problem, as they provide a structure for conversations about the actions needed to support them and the adjustments that might be required.
- Guides on setting up WAPS for line managers and employees are available, and WAPS for those working at home are available here and here.

WELLNESS ACTION PLANS

Source: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-well-being-agenda_2016-first-steps-full-potential_tcm18-10453.pdf

Make a Commitment to Mental Health at Work

This comprises six standards[15].

1. **Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity:** 'one-off' interventions will not make a long-term difference to employee wellbeing; a wide-ranging, long-term plan is needed.
2. **Proactively ensure that work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes:** what do you expect of staff and when and how do you expect them to do it?
3. **Promote an open culture about mental health:** open conversations about mental health and foster a culture where your employees feel able to seek support if they are struggling.
4. **Increase organisational confidence and capability:** ensure that people at all levels of your organisation have a clear role to play and that they feel supported in fulfilling it.
5. **Provide mental health tools and support:** ensure your staff are aware of the support that is available to them and encourage them to access it.
6. **Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting**: recognise that factors such as wellbeing, engagement and retention are crucial indicators of a company's performance.

FURTHER RESOURCES

AXA. ***Supporting Mental Health of Employees During and Beyond COVID-19***
https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/AXAEMHGuide.pdf

BITC. ***Mental Health for Employers Toolkit***
https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/mental-health-for-employers-toolkit/

BITC. ***Mental Health at Work 2019: Time to Take Ownership***
https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/mental-health-at-work-2019-time-to-take-ownership/

BITC. ***Suicide Prevention and Postvention Toolkits***
https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/suicide-prevention-toolkit/

BITC. ***Health and Wellbeing at Work Summary Toolkit***
https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/health-and-wellbeing-at-work-summary-toolkit/

BITC. ***Drugs, Alcohol and Tobacco. A Toolkit for Employers***
https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/drugs-alcohol-and-tobacco-a-toolkit-for-employers/

BITC. ***Sleep and Recovery Toolkit***
https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/sleep-and-recovery-toolkit/

BPS. ***Covid-related anxiety and distress in the workplace: A guide for employers and employees***
https://www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources/professional/anxiety-distress-workplace

Charlie Waller Trust. ***Working from home: Your wellbeing action plan***
https://charliewaller.org/resources/work-from-home-wellbeing-action-plan

City Mental Health Alliance. ***Recovering at Work: How Businesses can Support Staff Who May be Facing Trauma***
https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/download/Guide%20to%20Recovering%20at%20Work%20-%20how%20businesses%20can%20support%20staff%20facing%20trauma.pdf

International Labour Organization. ***Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond***
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_751232.pdf

Mind. ***Guide for Employees: Wellness Action Plans***
https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5760/mind-guide-for-employees-wellness-action-plans_final.pdf

SOM. ***Sustaining Work-Relevant Mental Health Post COVID-19 Toolkit***
https://www.som.org.uk/Sustaining_work_relevant_mental_health_post_COVID-19_toolkit.pdf

Thriving at Work. ***The Stevenson/Farmer Review of Mental Health and Employers***
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658145/thriving-at-work-stevenson-farmer-review.pdf

PHE. ***Health Matters: Health and Work***
https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2019/01/31/health-matters-health-and-work/

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5. https://www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources/professional/anxiety-distress-workplace
6. https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf
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12. https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Working%20from%20home.pdf
13. https://www.som.org.uk/home-working-and-display-screen-equipment-dse-during-covid-19-factsheet
14. https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/remote-working-line-manager-guide
15. https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/commitment

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