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GUIDANCE

Covid-related anxiety and distress in the workplace: A guide for employers and employees

As Covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased, and in some cases temporarily re-introduced, people will experience many different emotional responses to what is happening, whether returning to workplaces after furlough or a period of remote working, or continuing to work in the same setting as they did during lockdown.

Each employee will have their own specific concerns regarding their work or personal experience.

Feeling worried, concerned or anxious is understandable in a situation that is changing and uncertain. These are common responses and show increased vigilance which helps protect us from harm.

How individual employees and employers deal with these feelings can affect their transition into new ways of working, as well as their wellbeing and performance in the immediate and long term.

SHARE is a psychologically informed approach developed for this document to help employers and employees deal with Covid-related anxiety and distress and adapt to new ways of working. This document offers practical steps and ideas for creating healthy, sustainable working conditions.

The five components of SHARE are:

1. **S**AFE working: Assessing risk in the workplace

2. **H**ELP yourself and others: Communicating and meeting needs.

3. **A**DAPT to change: Diverse workplace situations and adjusting to the 'new normal'

4. **R**ELIEVE the pressure: Helping yourself and others to adapt and cope.

5. **E**VALUATE: Review the situation regularly to ensure ongoing success

Part 1 – SHARE Advice for Employers and Employees

Part 2 – Making the transition to new ways of working: Employer and employee stories

COMMON CONCERNS AND FEELINGS

Responses will be influenced by a wide range of risk factors including vulnerabilities within the family, change in job roles, threat of redundancy, skill shortages, social networks, and current and previous experience of loss, bereavement, and illness. Feelings are likely to be significantly affected by factors that increase the risks and challenges posed by Covid-19 (e.g. being from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] background).

FEAR OF EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

- During the commute to work.

- At the workplace e.g. lack of care over sanitising (e.g. inability to wash hands in hospitality settings or shops after contact with customers' products, glasses, plates, etc), people not maintaining physical distancing, worries about the effectiveness of personal protective equipment (PPE).

- Bringing the coronavirus home and infecting loved ones, including those who were asked to shield.

- Becoming ill, and fear of death as a result, particularly for those at increased risk.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WORK-RELATED DISTRESS

- Fears of redundancy, redeployment being laid off or re-furloughed.

- Moral distress, threats to the individual's purpose and sense of belonging.

- Changes in work role and practices, and concerns about not having the necessary skills for this.

- Impact on job performance.

- Dealing with changing work patterns/shifts, redeployment, loss of control over working routine or locations.

- Stress because of the effects of the pandemic on existing health conditions and disabilities (e.g. hearing impairment making communication in masks more challenging).

- Concerns about childcare and other caring responsibilities in a changing environment.

- Being or feeling unable to challenge unfair or unsafe practices.

CONCERNS RELATED TO FINANCIAL PRESSURES

- Employer restructuring to make savings.

- Organisation going into liquidation/bankruptcy.

- Cost cutting leading to reduction in training and development opportunities.

- Reduced hours or loss of overtime resulting in a smaller pay packet.

- Personal or household debts run up because of lockdown.

OTHER EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- Resentment and perceptions of unfairness when people are managed or treated differently.

- Irritation about colleagues' varying interpretations of risk at home and at work.

- Frustration/discomfort at having to wear PPE and the effects on job performance.

- Concerns regarding protection provided at work and managers' interpretation of risk.

- Stress for managers when balancing employee concerns and organisational pressures.

- Grief due to bereavement or other losses (e.g. teams, colleagues, or roles).

- Sadness about returning to the workplace having found pleasure in working from home.

- Feeling emotionally exhausted, numb, lacking enthusiasm or engagement.

- Feeling disempowered and that things are out of your control.

1. SAFE working: Assessing and managing risk in the workplace

As lockdown restrictions change, employers should continue to focus on the safety and wellbeing of their employees. Ensuring that employee wellbeing is prioritised will help to optimise performance. It is in everybody's interest to have a physically and psychologically safe working environment. Covid-19 presents unprecedented challenges for safe working and wellbeing. Prioritising employee wellbeing may have short term costs but is likely to optimise performance over the medium to long term.

SAFE WORKING – WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

What are the risks? Use current government guidelines to assess and manage the direct health risks. Consider reviewing your existing stress risk assessment to identify sources of stress and how to manage these. Be aware that these risk factors may change regularly.

How to identify individual needs? Understand that everyone's situation is different. Employees have unique concerns and face their own specific challenges, e.g. caring for children and relatives, transport issues, disabilities, neurodiversity, experience of illness including long-Covid, loss, change. Apply the same return to work process to all employees but allow for different outcomes, e.g. some people might continue working from home or remain longer on furlough.

How to address issues? Encourage open communication about worries and wellbeing issues. Make it clear that sharing concerns is valued and that it is safe to do so. Recognise that some employees may feel unable to talk openly with managers. Other options include occupational health providers, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPS), Trade Unions, mental health first aiders, GPs, mental health charities, or informal support from trusted co-workers (e.g. colleagues providing peer support for mental health). Make employees aware of these options.

SAFE WORKING – WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO?

Are you unsure what is happening? Ask. You can request information about how your employer is following government guidelines on Covid-19 risk assessments. Trade Unions, EAPs, mental health charities and GPs can also provide advice.

How to get involved? Your organisation will be making changes so that your workplace is safe for you to return. Get involved in consultations about this.

Why are there differences? Understand that everyone's situation is different. Some colleagues may need to return to the workplace later or have different hours (e.g. because they have been shielding, have caring responsibilities, or can do their job from home).

Are you informed? Identify your needs and your rights and how your employer may meet them.

TIPS AND RESOURCES

Risk assessment

Stress risk assessment

Mind

The Samaritans

Employee Rights

Co-worker Bereavement

Working with traumatic material

2. HELP yourself and others: Communicating and meeting needs

Communication is key to addressing anxiety and distress. Two-way communication about new ways of working will help to reduce uncertainty, distress and ambiguity, and give insight into how to implement supportive measures.

HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS – WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

Are you being proactive? Even if employees appear to be coping, ask them how they are and whether they need additional support. Remember to look out for clues that people are 'just bearing up', even though they say that everything is ok.

Are you helping to find solutions? As an employer, you are in the best position to support your employees. Be flexible in meeting their needs or in finding alternative solutions.

Are you communicating enough? Keep people regularly informed about steps to make the workplace Covid-19 secure. It is better to repeat and re-present information at times when anxiety is heightened. Remember, people may not be taking things in because of lowered cognitive processing.

Do you know how to look out for signs of stress? Knowing your team will help you spot changes in behaviour, such as changes in performance, irritability, lack of attention, being clumsy, making mistakes, social withdrawal, uncharacteristic or unpredictable behaviour. If you notice these signs, ask how the employee is and give them time and space to tell you.

Can you listen actively? Ask employees what help and support would make a difference. Use active listening skills to make sure they feel you are genuinely listening. These include: have the discussion when and where you can be free from distractions/interruptions; keep an open mind; avoid jumping to conclusions and solutions; let the employee tell you what is important; ask one question at a time; don't rush; be attentive; summarise what you've heard and repeat back.

HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS – WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO?

Do you speak to your employer? Tell your employer about your concerns and needs. If you are uncomfortable about discussing your personal circumstances with your own manager, ask someone to come with you, e.g. a trade union representative, HR or another manager, or colleague. If your employer does not know, they can't help.

Can you look out for others? Take care of colleagues by noticing if they behave differently to normal. Are there signs of irritability, lack of attention, being clumsy, making mistakes, being withdrawn, uncharacteristic or unpredictable behaviour? If so, signpost them to the support on offer, such as occupational health providers, employee assistance programmes, trade unions, mental health first aiders, or informal support from trusted co-workers.

TIPS AND RESOURCES

Mind

The Samaritans

Upskill: Identify your own training needs, e.g. for stress awareness training, listening skills.

To work out what good listening looks like, think of a time when you felt well understood by someone who was listening to you. What was it they did that helped you to feel heard? Simple openers such as, 'I just wanted to check you are ok?' 'How are you coping with things?', can be a good starting point. Mindful listening can also be useful.

Samaritans Working with compassion toolkit

3. ADAPT to change: Diverse workplace situations and adjusting to the 'new normal'.

Consider different ways of working to reduce fears or concerns related to work and the workplace. In order to adapt to the changes ahead, try to inform yourself of any new requirements and prepare what you need to reduce potential anxiety.

ADAPT TO CHANGE – WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

Concern about exposure to the virus: Follow up-to-date government advice. Consult staff about physical changes to the workplace or working procedures to limit risk of exposure.

- Engage with employees so that they can feed into and influence changes and solutions.

- Communicate changes clearly.

- Involve trade unions.

- Monitor the changes and report back to employees.

- Extend home working arrangements e.g. especially when workers, or their families, are at higher risk.

- Use graded or phased return plans to support returning to work.

- Provide support for staff experiencing excessive anxiety.

Risk on public transport? Extend home working and ensure access to resources for effective working (e.g. laptops/workstations, etc). Offer flexible working hours to allow commuting outside peak times. Encourage cycling to work, and consider offering face masks and hand gel for commuters.

Feeling unable to perform effectively? Check whether this is an accurate perception. What is the evidence? How do we know? It may be helpful to temporarily change the tasks or targets being assigned to people. Consider resources and skills needed for performing effectively or 'well-enough'. Be alert for signs of stress and mental or physical ill-health; follow this up.

Read our guidance for safe and sustainable working from home.

ADAPT TO CHANGE – WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO?

Need time to prepare? Before returning to work, try visualising what the new workplace will look like. What is the layout? What are the procedures? You could request photos and ask managers about the changes. Consider what it will be like to have more people around.

Concerned about public transport? Plan journeys in advance to avoid overcrowded services.

Need to upskill? Do you need new skills or resources? Discuss these with your employer.

Are you seeing the gains? New ways of working can create opportunities as well as challenges or threats. You may learn new skills or find that things work more effectively. Be flexible. Adjustment can take time. Don't expect too much of yourself too soon.

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TIPS AND RESOURCES

Government coronavirus advice

Guidance for safe and sustainable working from home

4. RELIEVE the pressure: Helping people to adapt and cope

Additional training, resources, or mentoring may be necessary for adapting to new ways of working. It is normal to find that performance is affected, and to be concerned by recent events. Settling into a new routine takes time.

RELIEVE THE PRESSURE – WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

Are you being realistic? Relieve some of the pressure by setting realistic expectations and targets.

What about system factors? There may be very good reasons why someone is struggling. Look at factors in the system and setting that can be addressed.

Extended high levels of anxiety? If this is over a prolonged period and starting to have a negative impact on mental or physical health, employers should encourage employees to:

- talk about what they're experiencing

- consider internal peer support structures

- see their general practitioners

- take up remote support

- consider being referred to occupational health providers

- if available, consider self-referral to IAPT.

Wellness Action Plans? Employees could be invited to complete Wellness Action Plans and discuss these with their line manager to support their mental health in work.

Do you create opportunities for support? Organisations can create opportunities for employees to discuss their experiences together as part of routine meetings or during sessions arranged for this. The links below take you to resources that have been effective in healthcare settings but can be used in many different workplaces. Most require no training.

What about holidays? Annual leave may have been disrupted by lockdown. Employees should be encouraged to consider taking breaks from work. If workloads are high, they may be reluctant to do this but it is still very important that they take time away from work.

RELIEVE THE PRESSURE – WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO?

How to do your job in the new normal? How will workplace changes affect your job performance? Discuss this with your manager and agree targets, expectations and training.

How to find support? When you need to, make use of the support offered by your employer, (e.g. occupational health, EAP, or external sources). If your mental or physical health has been affected:

- Make an appointment with your GP and/or your employer's occupational health provider.

- Consider completing a wellness action plan with your managers.

- If available, make use of peer support initiatives to connect with colleagues, and reduce anxiety and isolation.

- Have informal conversations with colleagues.

- If available, consider self-referral to IAPT.

Missed holidays? Annual leave is important for wellbeing but may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Consider taking time off if you need it, even if you are unable to go away.

Remember: This has been a very unsettling time for many people. It is perfectly normal to feel different. It is okay not to feel okay. Give yourself time and try to share experiences with others.

TIPS AND RESOURCES

NHS

Every Mind Matters

Mind

The Samaritans

Wellness Action Plans

Approaches to support group conversation/reflection about self-care and the pandemic

20 minute care space and Taking Care Giving Care rounds

CareSpace

10 minute pause space

Schwartz rounds – Group Reflection

10 minute pause space

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5. EVALUATE: Review the situation regularly to ensure ongoing success

EVALUATE – WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

Maintain regular reviews with each employee using the SHARE approach. Lockdown conditions, easing and re-introduction of restrictions, and personal circumstances are all subject to change. SHARE helps to check:

• Whether employer and employee needs are being met.

• How people are adapting.

• Understanding of individual circumstances and expectations.

Doing this means using a collaborative approach to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications.

EVALUATE – WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO?

Immediate, short and long term?

The situation may change over time and without warning.

Regular check-ins with your employer will help you adjust to the new normal.

Agree times that work for you and your employer so that this can happen.

Part 2 Making the transition to new ways of working: Employer and employee stories

ARCHITECTURAL STUDIO

An architectural studio closed its offices during the lockdown. As the business prepared to reopen, the human resources manager issued a survey to all staff to understand their thoughts, feelings and ideas about returning to the office and to identify how people would be travelling to work. The manager had individual discussions with staff who were identified as vulnerable or extremely vulnerable. Using all this feedback and the government guidance, the organisation prepared the first draft of their Covid-19 risk assessment which was shared with staff for comment. A range of new ways of working were proposed including extending homeworking arrangements and limiting the number of workers in the office each day to a safe and manageable level. The survey will be reissued periodically to help assess how things are going.

HOUSING DEVELOPER

A large housing developer had a central training centre. After assessing the risk, which involved consultation with staff across the business, the organisation decided to temporarily close this facility and deliver training using an online meeting platform. After booking on to courses, delegates receive an individual phone call to check if they have any worries or practical challenges about this new way of working. Trainers start each session with an induction into using the technology to relieve the worries at the start of the day. Feedback is closely monitored to check how delegates are finding the experience.

ADMINISTRATOR IN A LEGAL FIRM

Grace is an administrator at a legal firm. She has been working from home during the lockdown and providing administrative support to the managers in her firm. She usually catches a bus to the office where she works and has no other means of transport. She lives with her husband who has recently finished chemotherapy treatment, although he is not in the extremely vulnerable category. When Grace's employer contacted her to say that employees would be returning to the workplace in the next few weeks she got in touch with her line manager to discuss her concerns about using public transport. Her line manager agreed that she could carry on working from home as this had been an effective arrangement, and that they would review the situation again in a number of weeks.

HEALTHCARE

An organisation delivering healthcare was aware that there were considerable effects on wellbeing following the rapid reorganisation of services in response to Covid-19. As staff were redeployed back into their previous roles, space was agreed for some group sessions for staff to talk through the impact of the changes using a combination of structured small group work and Schwartz rounds delivered virtually. Being able to express how challenging it had been, hear about common experiences and seek support from each other was felt to be helpful in the adjustment process and helped staff to self-care and work together more effectively.

SELF-EMPLOYED CONTRACTOR

Mark works as a self-employed marketing consultant. Even before the lockdown work was drying up. After consulting his accountant, he was able to take advantage of the government's furlough scheme. However, in good years Mark would additionally receive dividend payments. He has therefore seen a significant drop in income. Mark has found that he is largely ineligible for other benefits and has had to take advantage of a food bank to provide enough food for his children. This had an impact on his identity and self-esteem. He used the 'shout' text-based service for support, and then had cognitive behaviour therapy online from the NHS. Mark knew that he needed to be more proactive. He reached out to his network of other self-employed people, and re-established some contacts with the local Chamber of Commerce. One of these conversations encouraged him to proactively contact a previous client who was delighted to hear from him and has now offered a four-month long engagement.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION (HEI)

During the transition to remote working department heads worked with each team member to identify their needs and develop an appropriate pattern of work. This supported staff to continue working whilst managing competing demands. Non-compulsory twice weekly team meetings supported transition, enabled discussion of challenges and anxieties, and kept staff informed of organisational plans and changes. This facilitated planning within the department for the following academic year. There were informal touch points throughout the week to support peer contact. Regular face-to-face contact helped identify staff exhibiting signs of stress and highlighted staff who might need further support. Due to the demands on staff during the transition to remote working, staff were required to take any scheduled annual leave, and book any remaining leave entitlement to promote wellbeing.

WATER BOARD

A large water board employs over 50 heavy goods tanker drivers involved in transferring waste products across the network. As part of the HSE guidance on protecting those at greatest risk of Covid-19, the board created a health vulnerability assessment and a role specific risk assessment to ensure those at greatest risk are working in the lowest risk roles. This was based upon the guidance produced by the Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) and the Covid-Age ALAMA (Association of Local Medical Advisors) guidance. This process is undertaken for any employee who was shielded as part of the government campaign, or who is assessed as being high risk during the early stages of Covid-19. The internal clinical occupational health team led this approach alongside the operational health and safety team who were able to engage with local managers to support the risk assessment process. Approximately 5 to 10 of the heavy goods tanker drivers were high risk or shielded during Covid-19. Prior to their return to work they were assessed using a health vulnerability questionnaire and had a role-based risk assessment. For the drivers who were identified to have either a 'High' or 'Very High' Covid-Age, the role-based risk assessment allowed them to perform low risk duties. The control measures put in place included being allocated their own vehicle and visiting small remote sites. Throughout the process the organisation supports the drivers through internal communications, manager guidance and both an OH advice line and a HR run Covid-specific email service.

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REFERENCES

Easing lockdown: how employers and employees can prepare for the new normal at work

Working Safely During Coronavirus (COVID-19)

HSE Work-Related Stress advice

Working from Home: Healthy sustainable working during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond

Understanding Stress NHS website

Every Mind Matters NHS website

Coronavirus and your wellbeing, Mind

Wellness Action Plans

Schwartz rounds

10 minute pause space

20 minute care space and Taking Care Giving Care rounds

Self-care and compassion sustaining approaches for staff

Cycle to Work Scheme

E-scooter rental scheme

FURTHER READING

Society of Occupational Medicine's Sustaining Work-Relevant Mental Health Post COVID-19 Toolkit

ACAS Coronavirus (COVID-19): advice for employers and employees

IOSH Webinar 'Managing mental wellbeing when returning to work'

Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), Health and well-being at work, (2020)

CIPD (2018) people managers' guide to mental health

Kwiatkowski, R. (2009). 'Will you bounce or shatter?'. *Springboard, 3*, p.46.

Siegfried, T. (2018). Top 10 secrets about stress and health.

SOURCES OF HELP

NHS Psychological therapies (IAPT) services

Shout – for Support in a Crisis

Samaritans

NHS listing of mental health apps

Sane

Mental Health Foundation: mental health in the workplace

Time to Change

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