How to: Support colleagues to stay mentally healthy in unusual working conditions

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Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic means many people are continuing to work remotely. For some, prolonged homeworking may be having a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing. People may be experiencing a decline in motivation, feelings of isolation, lack of boundaries, burnout or a decline in productivity.

As the UK enters a second lockdown, the CMHA UK team has updated this fact sheet detailing useful resources and tips to support you and the mental health of your employees.

Impact of long-term remote working

Issues that can arise which might impact the mental health of employees working remotely include:

- Loneliness from a lack of human connection, collaboration and communication with others

- Being unable to set healthy boundaries between work and personal time and being unable to 'unplug'

- Lack of motivation

- Zoom/online meeting fatigue due to constant back-to-back meetings with no breaks in-between
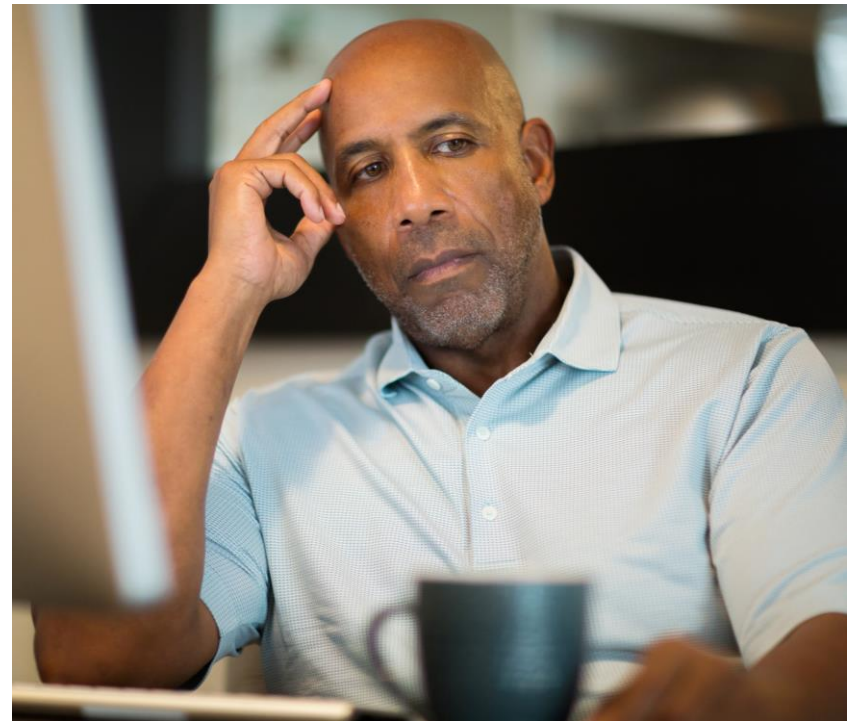
The CMHA UK has put together the following tailored recommendations on how to support colleagues during the coronavirus pandemic.

1 Create a Culture of Wellbeing and Psychological Safety

- **Regularly communicate with employees.** Keep them informed on what measures are being put in place and how this may impact them

- **Help teams stay connected.** Maintain regular team and 121 meetings and encourage line managers to schedule regular check-ins with team members. Regularly check-in with those that cannot work from home for example post room functions and security. Ensure they are aware of and have access to mental health support

- **Engage senior leaders to role model mentally healthy behaviours.** Find ways to share how they are looking after their own mental health and that it is okay to do the activities that support your personal mental wellbeing and to seek support if needed. For example, by sharing personal stories, blogs, speaking at events or sending key mental health communications

2 Developing a Mentally Healthy Working Environment

- **Be aware that individual circumstances vary.** Remote working may not be appropriate for some people. Consider options to support individual employee needs and whether you can keep your workplace open for those whom working from home is proving bad for their wellbeing

- **Help people create boundaries.** Set clear expectations of working hours, and highlight that employees are not expected to stay logged in or check emails after their working day is finished. Encourage employees take appropriate rest breaks away from their work and screen. Consider implementing rules on meeting scheduling such as none between 12pm and 2pm, turning 30 minute zoom meetings into 25 minutes and one hour zoom meetings into 50 minutes

- **Consider setting up peer-group support.** For example, setting up randomised virtual coffee meetings between people across the organisation to facilitate connection across people who do not work together directly. Consider "buddying" new joiners with those who are only a year or so ahead of them, rather than assuming that very junior people will be comfortable sharing their worries with those who are much more senior

- **Provide training to employees.** Develop knowledge and skills on good practice of mentally healthy and effective home working, how to develop effective strategies to support and nurture their mental health and wellbeing

- **Provide training to line managers.** Develop knowledge and skills on mental health awareness, how to confidentially lead and support their teams through challenging times and how to look after their own mental health and wellbeing

- **Review the process for performance reviews.** Consider whether they are fair and reflective of the current circumstances. For example, some professional services firms use billable utilisation as an integral part of performance reviews. Consider the impact of these metrics on employee wellbeing and whether they take into account the challenges people have been experiencing

3 Provide and Signpost to Accessible Resources, Tools and Support

- **Ensure that employees are aware of resources for support on mental health and wellbeing.** For example, regularly signpost to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Mental Health First Aiders (or equivalent) and where they can get help or information (internally and externally) if they are concerned about their physical and/or mental health

- **Be mindful that certain groups or individuals may be more affected by ongoing events.** Vulnerable groups could include those that live alone, carers, victims of domestic abuse, people experiencing bereavement, people with pre-existing mental health or physical health conditions, younger people, people who are new to the company and parents. Where needed provide extra support and ensure resources are made available to them

- **Encourage employees to stay active.** Signpost to support on how to look after physical health

- **Share different experiences of people from across the business.** Storytelling can help to challenge mental health stigma and normalise the situation and associated feelings. This could be via staff emails, employee webinars, This is Me videos or internal blogs

- **Communicate and signpost to information, resources and support that supports the specific needs of diverse groups.** For example for Black and Minority Ethnic, LGBT+, Women, Neurodiverse

- **Promote self-care.** Consider how you can help people achieve the Five Ways to Wellbeing (Give, Keep Active, Take Notice, Connect and Learn). This is important at a time when everyone has less access to their usual ways to wellbeing – such as the gym, family and friends and holidays

- **Monitor employee wellbeing.** Consider conducting pulse surveys to monitor employee mental health and wellbeing and seek feedback from colleagues on what support is needed during this time

These principles have been adapted to be specific to respond in the coronavirus pandemic from the CMHA UK's Thriving at Work Guide. For the full guide on how to create mentally healthy workplaces click here.

Expert viewpoint

Chris Beedie, Director of Science & Research at CHX Performance and Honorary Professor in Cognition & Neuroscience, School of Psychology, University of Kent, provides advice on how to look after your wellbeing during lockdown:

"
I strongly encourage you and your colleagues who are working from home to:

- Spend as much time as possible with family and people with whom they are able to meet face to face

- Get as much exposure to natural daylight as possible, the earlier in the day the better

- Eat regularly and as healthily as possible, and ideally have as many meals as possible with family or housemates

- Walk and exercise regularly. If possible, with family or friends. Having a 'fake commute' at the start and end of the working day is beneficial for many people

- Pick up the phone and chat with people for no other reason than to ask how they're doing

The reality is that whilst seeming relatively insignificant, the above activities – individually but ideally collectively – can make a significant positive difference to mental health.
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Resources

Advice for employers

CMHA coronavirus resources:
https://citymha.org.uk/Resources/Coronavirus

CIPD: Responding to the coronavirus
https://www.cipd.co.uk/news-views/coronavirus

ACAS: Advice for employers and employees:
https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus

Resources to promote good mental health

CMHA UK workplace mental health training:
https://citymha.org.uk/Training

World Health Organisation: #HealthyAtHome - Mental health:
https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus

Mind: Coronavirus and your wellbeing:
https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/

Mental Health Foundation, looking after your mental health during the Coronavirus outbreak:
https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak

Mind: The 5 Ways to Wellbeing:
https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-yourself/five-ways-to-wellbeing/

Resources

Important information

Gov.uk: Latest government advice and information:
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public

World Health Organisation:
https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

Support

Help and advice lines:
http://citymha.org.uk/help-and-advice-lines/

Save the Children: how to talk to kids about the coronavirus:
https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/how-you-can-help/emergencies/coronavirus-uk-outbreak-facts#coronavirus

Contact

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City Mental Health Alliance