

Covid-19 and employee wellbeing.

Research by the London School of Economics has revealed that all measures of wellbeing in the UK are at their lowest point since records started in 2011. Many people are on the threshold of psychiatric morbidity. The cost of Covid-19 on mental health and wellbeing is estimated at costing the UK £2.25 billion per day <https://bit.ly/2ZTyPxt>

Studies are suggesting that social distancing has had the largest impact on wellbeing. Those most affected have been women and ethnic minorities. During lockdown, individuals could well have lost sleep, felt stressed and become anxious about their future and the health of their loved ones. These factors could well have a negative impact on your employees. See [mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coping-with-loneliness](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coping-with-loneliness)

Increased stress

High stress levels have been linked with higher rates of accidents at work. This has been linked with individuals making more errors and rushing. Another study has linked stress to transient depression and subsequent higher rates of accidents. This issue appears to be due to being distracted, feeling aggression and feeling rushed as well as having less ability to control thoughts and actions. The Health and Safety Executive research report Investigation of the links between psychological ill health, stress and safety from 2006 gives detail on how psychological health can affect safety [hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr488.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr488.pdf)

Growing anxiety

Anxiety is a common psychological issue in the UK working population and will be even more prevalent due to the coronavirus lockdown. Anxiety often results in a lack of control over negative thoughts and research has linked this with a drop in safety performance.

Anxiety can have a range of effects on performance, this includes making an increased number of errors and interpreting information as threatening. Steps to reduce anxiety include being more mindful of breathing rate, tackling anxious thoughts, making a note of how you feel and facing the issues that are causing anxiety etc. Further information can be found on the nhs.uk website at [nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/anxiety/](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/anxiety/)

Actions that employers should be taking to manage stress and anxiety in the workplace include:

- > Developing a mental health at work plan that outlines the support available to employees in respect of promoting mental health and wellbeing
- > Making information on mental health awareness and the promotion of wellbeing easily accessible for staff
- > Holding open conversations with employees on mental health and ensuring that staff members receive the support they need

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- > Provide line managers with training so they can effectively communicate with and manage staff with mental health issues
- > Promotion of a healthy work life balance and promoting opportunities for development
- > Monitoring mental health and wellbeing amongst staff using data such as absence rates and from talking to employees

Further information can be found in the 2017 study Thriving at Work: The Independent Review of Mental Health and Employers, See <https://bit.ly/3haV4VH>

Lack of sleep and fatigue

Fatigue could be a common issue for those returning to work from lockdown. Fatigue has a negative effect on visual perception, distractibility, reaction time and concentration. Fatigue can also make decision making impaired and can make an individual indifferent to their performance. Take time to provide guidance to employees on how to get a better nights sleep. Key points for staff could include:

- > Keeping a regular schedule of sleeping hours
- > Getting up is they can't sleep and doing something relaxing like reading until they feel sleepy
- > Cut down on caffeine intake through the afternoon and evening
- > Avoid rigorous exercise near bedtime
- > Keep the bedroom dark and cool.

For more information see the nhs.uk website at [nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/sleep/](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/sleep/)

Here are some further practical action points for managers:

Develop your health and safety approach to ensure that it acknowledges work related stressors. This could include:

- > Developing a supporting culture for reporting mental ill health
- > Carrying out a stress at work risk assessment in relation to staff coming back from lockdown
- > Considering the impact of organisational changes and job uncertainty
- > Including state of mind as a consideration in general risk assessments and your Covid-19 risk assessment
- > Increasing communication on welfare issues, particularly for home workers
- > Providing a safe space for staff to go to if they need 'down time' due to feeling overwhelmed
- > Introducing a buddy system so an employee can talk freely with a peer about their concerns.

Ensure that managers are aware of the link between mental health on safety so they can:

- > Be aware of mental health when accident investigations are being undertaken
- > Understand how to act on observed behaviours that could indicate mental ill health
- > Spot signs of stress, fatigue or drug and alcohol abuse
- > Brief staff on getting back to work and the potential workload
- > Ensure that staff are taking regular breaks
- > Ensure staff adhere to amended working times
- > Make use of the many support lines and resources available to help employee wellbeing
- > Stay visible and available for staff to talk to and make relevant reminders to staff that they are there to talk to.

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Education of staff on the effects of their state of mind on their work performance to enable:

- > Improving the self awareness of employees in respect of the impact of their mindset on work performance
- > Employees to stop and evaluate their state of mind to avoid more hazardous activities when their mindset is not commensurate to safe working.

As well as the items mentioned above, there are other steps that employees can be taking to look after their wellbeing. These steps include setting goals to bring structure to the day and the evening, limiting time spent listening to the news and being selective about social media use, taking time not only to relax but also to be

active and trying to spend a little time each day in a green space. To this end employees should be encouraged to talk about worries that have been caused by or exacerbated by the pandemic. Their particular concerns will then be identified and they can then be signed posted to relevant guidance and support by line managers.

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