Managing the wellbeing of social care staff during the COVID-19 pandemic

Employers' guide
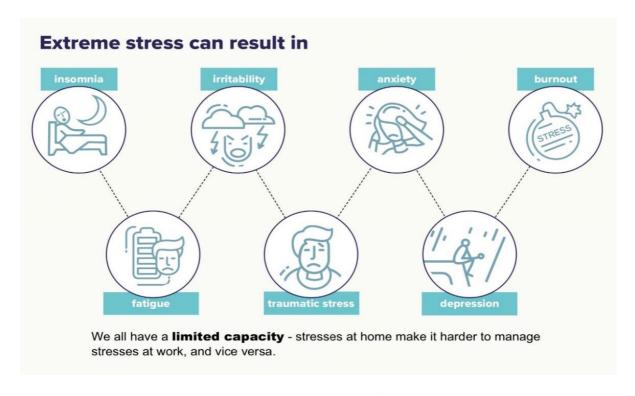
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Introduction

It is important for employers to understand how to support the psychological wellbeing of staff who are exposed to traumatic working conditions, especially where employees have little or no training in how to prepare or cope with the emotional impact of such a difficult working environment.

Employers have a responsibility to provide the necessary working conditions and support to staff to reduce stress at work, and this is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic when staff are working under excessive pressures.

During the pandemic employers will need their staff to continue to function and carry out their very important roles and manage the increasing need for their services and information whilst dealing with their own personal situations and emotions.

Frontline and key workers, especially those in social care roles, may be worried about their vulnerability to a higher risk of infection and worried about spreading the virus to their families, or they may be experiencing additional stress because of having to offer more support to bereaved and grieving residents.

Employees who are in roles that are exposed to new or additional trauma may therefore have a higher risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety and possibly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which could severely affect their work, their morale and result in long-term sickness absence, either now or when the crisis has passed.

Extreme stress can result in

insomnia · irritability · anxiety · burnout · fatigue · traumatic stress · depression

We all have a **limited capacity** - stresses at home make it harder to manage stresses at work, and vice versa.

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While employees have a responsibility to talk to their managers about issues affecting their ability to do their job, employers must ensure that managers are equipped and able to be sensitive to identifying and responding to the signs and symptoms of stress from staff, such as anxiety or social withdrawal.

This guide will help employers and managers to think about the wellbeing of their staff and fulfil their duty of care for their employees, which carries on no matter where staff are based.

Wellbeing research suggests that good organisational leadership and a supportive work culture can have a positive impact on the psychological wellbeing of these staff before, during and after the crisis. During this period of increased pressure and anxiety, it is essential that employers send a clear message that staff wellbeing matters.

1 Wellbeing tips for employers

Be proactive and make time to talk about how staff are feeling
Employers need to lead the way in raising awareness of the importance of good mental health for their staff. It is important to reduce the stigma of talking about mental health in your workplace, particularly in times of crisis. It is equally important for frontline workers to know that they don't have to feel heroic. They can feel scared and sad and cry and feel anxious, but they can still laugh and feel hope and joy as well as grief. Acknowledging all our emotions is important to good mental health.

Employees often hide mental health problems because of worries that they are letting people down by 'not coping', or fear that colleagues or managers may think badly of them, either now or in the future. Empathetic communication to staff acknowledging their fears and anxieties together with messages about how to recognise the signs of distress will ensure it is not an issue that is overlooked during long and potentially stressful working days. Emphasise that every employee matters.

Encourage open and honest conversations
Employees need to be encouraged to speak up when feeling overwhelmed or in need. Employers should create safe spaces for people to talk about their mental health challenges, past and present, and to be able to do this in their own time and without fear of feeling judged or excluded if they open-up in this way. Senior managers may be able to help here by sharing their own experiences or stories of other people who have struggled with managing their mental health during stressful times. For example, Nick Page, the Chief Executive of Solihull Council, describes his challenges of managing his mental health during a stressful time in a video for the Local Government Association (LGA.)[1]

Put support in place for staff and managers and make it widely available
Staff should know where they can go and who they can talk to about difficulties they are having. This might be their line manager, an organisation's occupational health service or employee assistance provider, or mental health champions/first aiders. Other options may

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[1] https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/workforce-videos/my-life-chief-executive-mental-health-issues

be to share open online resources on coping with anxiety and stress with frontline staff, such as Headspace's meditation sessions, or set up dedicated confidential mental health support for frontline workers. For staff members who are struggling to have good mental health it's important to have different ways they can access support to suit their particular needs or working patterns.

Many employees will be unaware of the support available to them, especially those staff who are not normally office-based. Employers may need to put additional communications in place to ensure information on wellbeing support is cascaded throughout the organisation. Managers are an important way that staff will learn about these resources so ensure that managers understand what's available and their role in helping staff to access it.

This can be a difficult topic to discuss so it may help to have additional tools to help managers to feel more comfortable raising this with members of their team, like this short video from The Samaritans. The video gives tips on how to ask simple questions, and importantly, how to listen to the answer to help someone work through what's on their mind.[2]

Crucially, there should be no threshold or qualifying conditions for staff to access the support such as being on sick leave or requiring a recommendation from occupational health. Also, support should stay in place for as long as it is needed, even if this is after the coronavirus crisis has ended.

Take stock/check the effect of these measures regularly
It is important to check how staff are doing and whether your organisation's wellbeing offers are appropriate and helpful to their needs and working conditions. Data is key: ask managers to speak regularly to their teams and feedback concerns and requests; ask for advice from your providers of mental health support about what else you may be able to do as an employer; and encourage staff to tell you directly what they need.

Wellbeing support plans must be dynamic and able to adapt to changing conditions and needs.

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[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?edufilter=NULL&v=198Ui9dWzH0

2 Supporting employees' learning

During this crisis we may not have enough staff to do all of the work needed, whether due to sickness or self-isolation, and employers may ask other staff to take on additional and new work. However, some staff may feel particularly vulnerable at being asked to do things that they do not feel trained or experienced in. It is important to make time to provide training, support, ongoing supervision and feedback on practical skills or new ways of working. Consider whether staff who are worried about what you are asking them to do can work with a more experienced team member.

Health Education England is helping to deliver bespoke training modules for staff temporarily switching roles during the crisis, aimed in particular at redeployed staff including health care professionals and care workers. The training, delivered with universities through webinars and podcasts, covers areas including advanced respiratory management and infection control.[3]

3 Thinking about the workplace

Providing care and direct support to people in our communities during COVID-19 will make our workplaces challenging environments to be in but there are things that employers can do to help manage the emotional impact of the work.

Here are some ideas:

- Increase civility: rudeness can increase when stress levels are high, but this can lead to more mistakes. Experiencing rudeness can affect the quality of an employee's work. Take steps to remind staff of positive behaviours and attitudes to ensure that rudeness doesn't impact on staff and on the levels of care they are able to provide. See www.civilitysaveslives.com for more information.

- Design well-balanced working days: try to organise shifts and tasks to balance demands and pressures on staff and try, where possible, to provide positive experiences with patients and families.

- Create time to share: ensure regular opportunities to discuss work levels and care concerns. Allowing time to share and process the traumatic impact of work or talking about things that are going well at work in a structured way can help to reduce stress and to support learning.

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[3] https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/

4 COVID-19 employment law FAQs

The LGA has a range of information in relation to the workforce implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, including a series of employment law focussed frequently asked questions covering leave, sickness, isolating, redeployment and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furloughing). There is also information on the new emergency volunteer scheme and updates on consequential amendments to legislation.[4]

5 Building managers' resilience

Ensuring that managers have good health and wellbeing is important so that they can provide good leadership and management.

Being resilient is the ability to cope under pressure and recover from difficulties. It allows you to take on new situations and demands positively, approaching things with a problem-solving attitude and keeping a sense of perspective and understanding of what needs done. It means being able to recognise and respect your own limits.

During the crisis many managers are trying to react, cope and plan across a range of issues at a pace that may be new to many of them. It can be hard to feel resilient in these circumstances. Good leaders have developed a strong sense of emotional intelligence and self-awareness and must be able to look after their own wellbeing as well as that of their teams.

Steps to being resilient include:

- being flexible and willing to adapt to change
- recognising your thoughts and emotions in different situations and having positive ways to manage them
- asking for help when you need it.

In a blog for the LGA, Jim McManus, Director of Public Health at Hertfordshire County Council shares his personal experience of learning to be more resilient as a leader.[5]

The Skills for Care website has additional resources that help team leaders and managers to build staff resilience at an individual level, at a team level and at an organisation level.[6]

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[4] https://www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-employment-law-faqs
[5] https://local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/workforce-blog/april-2020-resilience-and-leadership-during
[6] https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Leadership-management/managing-people/resilience/Building-resilience.aspx

6 Social care workers facing stigma

Employees involved in the caring for people who may be infected by COVID-19 may experience stigma from people outside of work and this can cause additional stress. Health Education England's COVID-19 resilience hub recommends that managers can help by empathising, pointing out that stigma is unsurprising, if distressing within the COVID-19 situation, and highlighting camaraderie at work.

7 Managing bereavement in care work

Dealing with death can be an inevitable part of working in social care. Care workers are often called upon to support families and friends of someone who has died but the death is a loss to them too. It is important that in this crisis situation employers don't forget to pay attention to the support their staff may need time to reflect on and deal with feelings of bereavement.

Health Education England's Minded website has advice for employers to support staff with bereavement.[7]

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[7] https://covid.minded.org.uk/end-of-life-and-bereavement/

8 Additional resources

- **British Association of Social Workers** – ethical guidance for social workers considering some of the specific choices and decisions that practitioners are having to make in this emergency situation, including rationing of support and resources and more stringent prioritisation.
https://www.basw.co.uk/covid-19-pandemic-%E2%80%93-ethical-guidance-social-workers

- **British Safety Council** – a free online course that highlights some of the pressures their teams might face, helps managers become more aware of their own actions and behaviours, and most importantly it helps manage and reduce stress levels within their team.
https://www.britsafe.org/about-us/managing-stress-within-your-team-course/

- **British Safety Council** – a free online course that provides line managers with the skills and confidence to listen to and talk with someone who feels that they need to share a problem regarding their mental health.
https://www.britsafe.org/about-us/managing-mental-health-course/

- **Community Care** – a guide on developing emotional resilience and well-being which has been updated in light of the Coronavirus.
https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/04/09/support-emotional-resilience-wellbeing-pandemic/

- **Skills for Care** – a guide for adult social care staff on how to build personal resilience with practical tasks to complete that help individuals to recognise pressure, develop coping strategies and gives advice on creating a network of support.
https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/Leadership-and-management/Resilience/Building-your-own-health-resilience-and-wellbeing-WEB.pdf

- **A free online platform** containing eight easy-to-access, short practical exercises to help NHS and frontline staff alleviate and combat high anxiety, panic and fatigue while responding to the coronavirus pandemic.
https://www.nhsinmind.co.uk/

- **Able Futures** – delivering the Department for Work and Pensions Access to work mental health support service for individuals, employers and apprenticeship providers.
https://able-futures.co.uk/