Mental health and the coronavirus
A best practice guide to protecting the mental health of the workforce

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Employers have a vital role to play in protecting the mental health of the workforce during the coronavirus crisis and beyond.

The extreme measures put in place to limit the spread of coronavirus have transformed the workplace as never before. Entire workforces now have to work from home; people who had work to do one day have been suddenly furloughed, their to-do list put on hold indefinitely; and entire industries have ground to a halt.

The impact of this on the mental health of the workforce cannot be underestimated. While we are getting to grips with the logistics of new ways of working, it’s important that we don’t overlook the psychological impact this is having on people, or fail to put measures in place to help them cope.

According to psychological research, there are four elements that are essential to building the resilience needed to stay healthy under pressure. Known as the 4Cs, these are our need for positive interaction with others (community), wanting to feel part of something important (commitment), the chance to stretch ourselves without feeling overwhelmed (challenge), and the need to have a sense of control over our daily lives (control).
With coronavirus forcing governments to intervene directly over where people work, how they socialise and even when they can leave their house, the ways in which we used to go about meeting the above psychological needs have been severely compromised. We can no longer interact with colleagues, or even family and friends, as we used to. Those on furlough may feel their life is suddenly lacking in purpose, and those still in work may feel completely snowed under rather than challenged.

Add to that the extent to which people who were already struggling with loneliness, anxiety, domestic violence or even suicidal thoughts will have had existing problems exacerbated by the crisis, and it’s essential that employers think about proactively protecting the mental health of the workforce at this time.

Protecting mental health

By considering how to use the 4Cs to give people back a sense of control, community, commitment and challenge at this difficult time (see page 4), employers now have a valuable role to play when it comes to protecting the mental health of the workforce. Further support can be provided by educating people about how to use the “happiness tools” we all have at our disposal to stay positive over the coming months (see page 10).

When it comes to helping those personally affected by the crisis, it is important to think through in advance how best to compassionately support bereaved employees and colleagues should the organisation lose one of its own people to the virus (see page 7).

It is also crucial that managers keep checking in with those whose ongoing mental health issues have been worsened by the current pandemic, and make use of the pathways already in place to support those employees. Having counselling services or kind and empathetic managers is not enough if those exhibiting signs of distress are not actively directed to the right sources of help.

Resources such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs) have a particularly vital role to play at this time, providing services ranging from emotional counselling to financial, legal and debt information to critical incident and trauma support (see page 7). The confidential nature of EAPs make them particularly appealing to those affected by the increase in domestic violence (see page 6).

Keeping people positive

As well as helping people to access support services when needed, it’s also important to keep employees’ spirits up in the first place.

Stoicism, a school of ancient Greek philosophy which shares many of the central tenets of modern cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), reminds us that a great part of how we feel about any situation is down to how we choose to respond to it. The happiness tools outlined on page 10 equip us with the psychological insights needed to manage our happiness levels proactively.

Equipping employees with these insights, to help them control how they feel at a time when so much feels out of their control, will not only empower individuals to stay emotionally healthy during the coronavirus crisis, but also give them useful skills for managing their mental health for many years to come.
Help people to stay healthy under pressure

There are four elements, known as the 4Cs, that are essential to building the resilience needed to stay healthy under pressure:

- **Control** — I have a sense of control over my daily life.
- **Community** — I get to experience positive interactions with others.
- **Commitment** — I feel that I am part of something important.
- **Challenge** — I can stretch myself without getting overwhelmed.

The social distancing measures — which arguably would be more accurately referred to as “physical distancing”, as people need social support more than ever — and economic disruption brought about by the coronavirus have radically transformed how we work and live, but it’s still possible for employers to ensure fundamental psychological needs are being met in the following ways.

1. **Create a sense of control**

Give people back a sense of control by not being too prescriptive. For example, allow parents now also tasked with home-schooling to flex their hours so they can continue to work while meeting their additional family commitments. Remind people of the benefits of structuring their day, so that they feel in charge of how they organise their work and what time they eat or exercise.

Even those people who have been furloughed — and thus have had the work they were striving to achieve suddenly taken away from them — will gain much from having some type of structure to their day. They would benefit from continuing to get up and “work” at something, be this a new skill that might benefit their career in future, a charity project or mastering a musical instrument or language they always wanted to learn.

Everyone should be encouraged to schedule in time for things they enjoy, such as connecting with nature where possible, actually talking to friends instead of just texting them, eating healthy food and getting enough rest.

2. **Sustain a sense of community**

Different personalities will respond in different ways to the challenge of distancing themselves from others and having to work apart from colleagues.

Introverted personality types, and those used to home working, might actually welcome the opportunities home working provides to live a healthier lifestyle, in terms of being able to prepare healthier food at home and take exercise during the day. By contrast, extroverted personality types, who like to bounce ideas off others, might struggle and should be encouraged to “meet” colleagues for “virtual coffees” and use social networking sites to maintain social connections.

Digital workplace wellbeing apps, such as Mercer’s Ondo, can also help individuals to focus on their social wellbeing in conjunction with other health goals. For example, allowing teams to set shared wellbeing goals, such as going for a daily walk or taking part in a group dance or mindfulness workshop at the same time, will boost social as well as physical health. Research into happiness also shows that finding time to help others is the best way of fighting loneliness.

3. **Commitment to a cause and meaning in crisis**

Closely linked to control and community is a sense of commitment to work and personal responsibilities. An extraordinary example of this comes from Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl, who was able to survive the most appalling and dehumanising of experiences because of his observation that the main difference between those who survived and those who didn’t was a sense of purpose. A trained psychiatrist before his incarceration, he started scribbling his thoughts on the importance of meaning on bits of paper and visualising the book he would write one day.
The resulting book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, led to a new school of psychotherapy that highlighted the importance of meaning for sustaining good mental health, in even the most desperate of situations. It’s why people who have lost a loved one set up a charity in their name to give meaning to tragedy, and why thousands of people are volunteering to cook meals for exhausted healthcare workers, deliver medicine to older people having to self-isolate and even offering to take part in essential clinical trials.

The fundamental desire we have to be connected to something bigger than ourselves is why governments have shifted their coronavirus communications from telling people what to do to explaining to them why doing so will protect others. This approach works because in times of crisis, our natural desire to help comes to the fore.

**4. Rise to the challenge**

One of the most powerful ways to protect people’s mental health at the current time is to help them to view the coronavirus threat as something they can personally help to combat, thereby giving them a positive focus.

Employers who can connect their people to a shared purpose and invite them to rise to the challenge will not only give them a sense of direction that will protect their mental health, but also allow them to emerge stronger from the crisis as a result.

It’s also important to ensure people don’t become overwhelmed by the scale of the challenges ahead. For example, encourage them to break down their work into more manageable chunks and to work in “sprints” to complete a task, free from interruption, in 1.5- to 2-hour bursts, so that they can pop out for a walk, have a healthy snack or connect with a colleague before starting the next task. The focus should be on quality outputs and problem-solving, rather than hours worked, so people don’t extend their day in unhealthy ways or start to feel weighed down.
Supporting those who are struggling

Living under the spectre of coronavirus is extremely testing, putting a strain on individuals, relationships and existing mental health conditions.

Even for people whose mental health is generally good, the changes to every element of our lives necessitated by coronavirus are a lot to deal with. For those with existing anxiety disorders and other mental health conditions, stress levels will be even higher. Instead of the general anxiety they may have been experiencing, there is now a very tangible threat that could result in an ongoing sense of dread, or even panic attacks.

Individuals with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), who were repeatedly checking things as a way of coping with uncertainty before but who might have been able to manage these symptoms to lead a relatively normal life, will now be at risk of their symptoms becoming so extreme that they are unable to do their work.

Meanwhile, people who were already struggling to deal with issues such as loneliness, suicidal thoughts or domestic violence will now almost certainly have had the challenges they face amplified in potentially life-threatening ways.

Don’t make assumptions

In all of the above cases, employers should not assume or take for granted that they know which individuals are at risk or that they know how to respond.

Unless managers have received advanced empathy training, they are unlikely to be able to identify where people are in their lives right now, especially when the option of reading body language or observing individuals more closely (as might have been possible in an office environment) has been taken away.

Furthermore, even if they could identify a person in crisis, being able to express empathy for their situation or making them feel understood and cared about, is not enough unless this is combined with actively directing people towards resources that can actually help.

Take action on domestic violence

As feared, the lockdown measures have resulted in an increase in domestic violence, with those affected no longer able to use time at work, and away from their partner, to carry out the safety planning their employer might have previously.

The number of domestic killings in the UK has doubled during lockdown and calls to domestic violence helplines have increased by 120%,1 so employers asking people to work from home very much still have a duty of care to ensure anyone affected by this issue is helped to get support.

With a quarter of women experiencing domestic violence during their adult lifetimes and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimating that 2.4 million people (1.6 million women and 786,000 men) being subjected to domestic abuse in the last year alone,2 the problem is incredibly widespread. No section of society is immune, yet most victims will hide any signs of abuse for fear of stigma, losing their job or making the problem worse.

Employers can help by reassuring all staff that anyone affected who comes forward will not be judged but instead given the help they need to safely leave a violent partner. This typically needs to include measures to keep them and their children out of harm’s way as well as access to the financial support and (in some cases) police protection needed to live an independent life. A good EAP can connect anyone going through this issue with these resources and also provide the case management needed to aid the individual and their employer through this process.

Employees should also be informed of the UK government’s new public awareness campaign highlighting that if anyone is at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse, they are still able to leave and seek refuge. The campaign, #YouAreNotAlone, is seeking to create a community around those affected by domestic abuse and reassure victims that support remains available.

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Empower managers

With most physical diseases, there is a clearly defined course of action for employees to take to have their complaint diagnosed and their recovery facilitated. With mental health or emotional issues, however, often there is no such established pathway.

Instead of day-one interventions to find out why someone didn’t connect with work that day, snapped at a colleague or burst into tears during a video call, most managers will shy away from asking people how they really are for fear of seeming intrusive, or not knowing what to say if their team member actually opens up.

The solution to this is to ensure all managers know that they are not personally responsible for solving a team member’s problem. However, it is their duty to stay in touch with people and offer kind enquiry into how they’re coping at this particularly challenging time, so they can direct them towards relevant support services such as an EAP.

The value of an EAP

Offered by most employers but typically under-utilised by employees, EAPs have a particularly vital role to play. In addition to offering counselling services for those feeling stressed or anxious, they also offer financial, debt and legal support, as mentioned above. This latter aspect is particularly relevant currently, when people may have been pushed into debt by unexpectedly finding themselves having to work fewer hours than normal or for reduced pay; furthermore, they may also be struggling to get their money back for cancelled services or holidays.

Prepare for deaths

Given the scale of the coronavirus’ spread, very sadly for most employers it’s only a matter of time before someone becomes seriously ill or dies. The more prepared the organisation is for this event, the better able it will be to manage the trauma experienced by those closely affected.

Critical incident plans need to consider three phases:

1. **Before:** This preparatory phase is the most important, and involves a range of key tasks. These can run the entire gamut from appointing an appropriate critical incident support consultancy for psychological assistance, to refining business continuity plans for addressing logistical and wellbeing challenges, liaising with family members and even representing the company at the funeral.

2. **During:** At this stage, the company will need to respond to an employee’s death or illness, contact the deceased’s family and close colleagues, and share the news with employees before they hear via other sources, such as the media.

In addition, managers will need to give staff the opportunity to talk to a counsellor as well as provide them with literature that explains why any feelings of distress in these circumstances are a normal response to an abnormal event. Again, those struggling should be directed towards the support available from the EAP.

In the event that someone is personally affected by coronavirus through the death of a loved one, good EAPs will also offer professional trauma and bereavement support to help that person cope with such a sudden loss.

### Employee Assistance Programme

#### Core Services

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3. After: This requires checking back in with those most closely affected to see how they are feeling, and screening for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after about four weeks. Symptoms can include hyper-vigilance, constantly thinking about what happened, flashbacks, anxiety and disturbed sleep patterns. Specialist assistance should be offered where appropriate.

At the same time, employers need to review how effective their approach has been, and refine and update critical incident plans as needed based on any learnings. What would they do differently next time?

Revise business continuity and wellbeing plans

It will come as no surprise that most business continuity plans have proved inadequate at dealing with the coronavirus crisis. Their principal focus was on the practical aspects of how best to relocate people to new buildings or get services up and running rather than on how to quarantine their entire workforce effectively, and the health and wellbeing implications of this.

Policies now need to be not only amended to reflect the evolving advice from government and health officials, but also anchored in overall health and wellbeing, as well as business continuity plans. In short, in addition to adjusting working patterns and protecting critical operations, people must be supported to stay healthy.

For example, instead of simply asking people to work from home, adaptive working patterns need to be put in place that allow people to adjust not only where they work, but also when and how they work. This will help them respond to the challenges associated with social distancing in different ways, be this the need to work around caring for young children, to take time out during the day to exercise so that they don’t become too sedentary, or to “meet” with people online to avoid becoming lonely.
Mental health and the coronavirus

Can stoicism protect our mental health?

Stoicism, a strand of ancient Greek philosophy, can remind us that much of how we feel about the current situation is down to how we process what is happening to us.

Stoicism has developed somewhat of a negative reputation over time, due to the assumption that stoical people simply accept whatever happens to them. However, stoics could arguably be seen as the pioneers of what we now refer to as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), due to their ability to reframe situations and an innate understanding that much of how we feel about a situation depends on how we internally process what is happening to us.

At a time when much of the world and our future destiny feels out of our control, this is a surprisingly reassuring concept. Far from suppressing their emotions, stoics are able to keep calm and carry on by focusing on positive emotions and challenges. In their view, we have more control over our negative emotions than we think, and the so-called “Stoic Gods” of nearly 2,500 years ago send us only those challenges that we can rise to. They tell us not to take life for granted but to fight for what is important.

Focus on what matters

Try this exercise if you are beginning to feel overwhelmed: contemplate for a moment what life would be like if you lost something of great value to you. The aim is not to dwell on this — this is not an invitation to sink into further gloom — but rather to reconnect with what matters most to you and remember how much is good in your life currently. Stoics are able to contextualise challenging situations, small or large, by focusing on what really matters to them so that they don’t fall into despair.

Similarly, however important our current predicament might seem to us, the reality is that the overall levels of happiness in our life are only 10% defined by circumstances — the money we have in the bank, our job, where we live and whether we can travel.

By reminding ourselves of what really matters, we can start to put the dramatic events surrounding us into perspective. The same research draws our attention to the fact that the impact of what we can do — our intentional activity, as scientists call it — has a much greater impact on our happiness levels.

Reframe the situation

For those still struggling to stay positive, another exercise is to regard the disruption caused by coronavirus as an opportunity to reflect on their life. If you’ve lost touch with your family or old friends, maybe now is the chance to pick up the phone. If your work–life balance was completely out of kilter, could now be an opportunity to spend quality time with your loved ones? If you’ve allowed yourself to get into unhealthy habits, does working from home provide more opportunities to prepare food that is more nutritious (rather than rely on takeaways and eating out)? Could you fit in a bit of daily exercise?

If there are things you really don’t like about your life right now, maybe now is the time to reflect on what you’d like your life to look like in future and create an action plan of how to get there.
Utilise happiness tools

Making use of “happiness tools” is another way to help people remain positive and boost their emotional wellbeing during lockdown, or indeed at any future point. As the happiness flower below illustrates, these strategies include:

- **Get moving**: Exercising gives us an emotional lift as well as a physical boost, releasing “happy hormones” in the form of endorphins. Do an activity you particularly enjoy, be it running, dancing or even a free online workout hosted by a celebrity.

- **Count your blessings**: Gratitude is such a powerful driver of happiness that simply making a note at the end of each day of three things to be thankful for — via a “gratitude journal” or simply by making a mental note — can increase our wellbeing by reprogramming the brain to focus on the positive.

- **Share how you feel**: You don’t need to visit a counsellor to talk about how you’re feeling. Be open and honest with friends and family if you’re struggling to stay positive, and talk about what’s on your mind: articulating our feelings gives us back a sense of control.

- **Connect to nature**: Nurture a plant or garden or take up the ancient Japanese practice of *shinrin yoku*, “forest bathing”, a form of relaxation which simply involves being calm and quiet among the trees and observing nature around you, while breathing deeply.

- **Moderate TV use**: Watching television can provide much needed escapism, but it’s a passive activity that can zap happiness over time. Keep healthy by still making time for active things, such as exercising or talking to friends, and limit the amount of bad news you consume.

- **Connect with a friend**: Many of us have spent so much time “liking” friends’ photos and posts on social media that we’ve forgotten what it’s like to connect with them in real time. So pick up the phone or video call a good friend for an incredibly powerful happiness boost.

- **Have a laugh**: Laughter not only decreases stress hormones and lowers blood pressure, but also promotes an overall sense of wellbeing, so allow yourself to enjoy humour where you can. If there’s a comedian or comedy show you love, give yourself permission to enjoy watching that.

- **Treat yourself**: Do something that gives you joy each day, whether it’s reading a book, calling someone you care about, having a luxurious bubble bath, listening to your favourite song or getting out and about in nature to enjoy some fresh air or gardening.

- **Be kind to others**: Be mindful of people who might be on their own at this time and take part in active forms of communication with them, such as calling them or inviting them to take part in an online quiz. Being kind to others also has the power to make us feel happy ourselves.

- **Get enough sleep**: Financial worries and stress can lead to sleeplessness, which can cause carbohydrate cravings that lead us to eat unhealthily, put on weight and lack energy. Switch off all screens before going to bed, relax with music, yoga or meditation and allow enough time for rest.

- **Stay spontaneous**: At the same time as scheduling in the things that can help you to stay positive, allow yourself to be spontaneous and do something different each day. Check out online interest groups and take up a new hobby or start a new course if possible.
Conclusion

The potential impact of the coronavirus crisis on mental health cannot be overstated. Employers have a valuable role to play in continuing to provide the psychological elements of control, community, challenge and commitment that we need to stay healthy.

At the same time, employers need to be mindful of people who might already be struggling with issues ranging from domestic violence to anxiety or OCD conditions, now almost certainly exacerbated by the measures in place to reduce spread of the virus.

In thinking about how to protect the mental health of people, it’s also important for employers to draw on learnings from the psychology of happiness, the value of stoicism and cognitive behaviour therapy, to help us shape how we feel about events. Using the happiness tools discussed here can all play a part in boosting our mood at a challenging time.

Top tips

Do

• Recognise the importance of giving employees a sense of purpose.

• Encourage people to develop or retain a mindset of challenge, control and community.

• Be mindful of people already affected by mental health or domestic violence.

• Educate people about the happiness tools they can use to boost wellbeing.

• Get reacquainted with referral mechanisms to EAP and occupational health support services.

Don’t

• Assume managers understand their role in supporting mental health.

• Leave deciding how to respond to a death until after it’s happened.

• Underestimate the importance of protecting mental wellbeing at this time.

• Forget to show the caring face of the company and direct people to support as appropriate.

• Underestimate the importance of positive psychology and happiness tools.
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Wolfgang is a partner and leads Mercer’s Workplace Health Solutions, advising companies on health and wellbeing strategy, integrated models of healthcare and proactive interventions, such as resilience programmes. He is a member of the Global Health Management team, founded the European Health & Well-being Network, and is a member of various national and international research organisations and a regular speaker at professional conferences around the globe.

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