
SOM mental health in the workplace for small business

Five signs of struggle

- *Expressing distress*: e.g. reports feeling stressed; emotional outbursts such as irritability or crying.
- *Social withdrawal*: e.g. not participating in social activities; not engaging in prosocial behaviours.
- *Extreme behaviours* e.g. being impaired by alcohol or drugs; expressing desire to self-harm.
- *Attendance*: e.g. lateness, increased absenteeism or presenteeism.
- *Performance*: e.g. a noticeable decrease in quality/quantity of work; failure to meet deadlines.

Spotting signs of struggle when staff are working remotely is more challenging, so employers should be particularly vigilant. Focusing on the tone of emails and verbal and non-verbal communication online, having regular 'check-ins', and proactively signposting sources of support e will be helpful. Guidance is available [here](#).

Mental health in the workplace

“No one would ever say that someone with a broken arm or a broken leg is less than a whole person, but people say that or imply that all the time about people with mental illness.”

- People often don't feel comfortable talking about mental health issues
- Stigma is more often due to lack of, or incorrect information, than bad intentions.
- Stigma often arises from individuals or groups, but an individual's own views and misinformation about mental health can create 'self-stigma'. This can lead to self-blame, feelings of shame, or denial.
- For people with a mental health problem, stigma can be far worse than the illness itself.
- Stigma is an important barrier to seeking support and can delay care and create isolation.

Working from home

There is little evidence that wellbeing and performance has suffered in general, but some people (particularly those with caring responsibilities, who work longer hours, and who have little contact with their manager), are having more difficulties.

A recent survey found that 75% of respondents had not had a health and safety risk assessment of their homeworking arrangements.

It is important to recognise the risks as well as the benefits of working from home and provide appropriate support.

Guidelines are available for employers on protecting the [health and safety](#) of homeworkers and supporting [healthy, sustainable home-working](#) during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

COVID-19 has had a rapid and sometimes devastating effect on the lives of individuals, which can be heightened by age, gender and ethnicity.

Dealing with the impact of COVID-19 has added significant stress and complexity to day-to-day activities.

It is not surprising that many business owners struggle in dealing with the impact on their mental wellbeing brought about by this major challenge

There are five sections which look at:

- recognising the problems
- reviewing what is already in place
- responding to the needs and
- refreshing and reviewing the approach

Finally, there is a self-help section and useful links to additional information.

1. Recognise

Recognise that although we can influence events, we have little control over many of the things that happen in our lives. Covid-19 is an unpredictable event that has far reaching impact, changing the ways we carry out business.

Support the workforce: Identify the kinds of support your workforce would like and need to help them get through this challenging time. Seek their views on what would be helpful to them. It may surprise you what would make a difference. Sometimes small gestures like asking for their opinions make a major difference. Remember it is in their interest for the business to survive and be successful in the future.

How are you feeling? Building and running a business is not easy. Be aware of the personal, psychological, and physical cost of managing a business. By looking after your own wellbeing you will be in the best position to support your business, employees, and family. Ignoring your feelings and delaying or avoiding seeking support can make the situation worse..

2. Review

Engaging employees at all levels in parts of this process can help communicate what the organisation is trying to achieve: and create a sense of ownership and buy-in to any changes.

What is going well?

Look at your people, systems and processes and identify which are working and delivering. Examine why some areas are performing despite the difficulties. Is there something you can learn from the areas of your business which are showing resilience? What are the features and mechanisms of success? Perhaps a sense of purpose or goal or maybe a capacity to work with uncertainty? Is this something that can be transferred?

What can be changed?

Not everything will survive, some beliefs, values or products may have reached the end of their usefulness. Can you decide which things could be changed or even abandoned? Are you able to be honest with yourself when considering something you had developed but is now underperforming?

Who or what could help?

You may find undertaking a root and branch review is difficult and perhaps would like some support. Can occupational health help you talk through your options?

3. Respond

1. Seek multiple opinions before coming to a decision
2. Avoid simple answers and groundless optimism
3. Reduce time pressures: focus on the things that bring most benefit
4. Limit objectives
5. Maintain flexible options
6. Do not underestimate the nature and power of Covid
7. Maintain communication

The risk is to overreact, pause, get the full facts, and continue to gather information as circumstances unfold, but avoid using your intuition alone before responding.

It is important to be agile and to continually review and reassess ideas and decisions.

Meeting changing demands: organisations need to deal with constant changes in what is expected of them. Each change may have a knock-on impact which takes energy and time to consider. Job roles, processes and policies may need to change, and communicated effectively to employees. Explaining the need for the changes and involving employees in designing that change can help in this transition. Provide employees with essential training; monitor the impact of any change on employees, the business, and your customers. Be prepared for further change but do not be afraid to change your mind.

Dealing with the unexpected: Even with the best planning and preparation unexpected events may occur which provide an opportunity or threat to your organisation. Just because something was unexpected does not mean that the impact is necessarily bad or negative. Spend time considering what silver linings an event may be bring.

Use the skills and knowledge of occupational health to help you generate alternative options and to develop a plan.

4. Revise

5. Self-care

Practicing self-care helps reduce stress, avoid burning out and allow you to be able to give more to your business. Self-care is about what you do in work and outside work, and can include the following aspects of wellbeing:-

- Workplace or professional – working at a consistent performance level.
- Physical – keeping fit and healthy, and energised.
- Psychological – clearing your mind and engaging in a range of intellectual activities.
- Emotional – exploring the full range of your emotions safely.
- Spiritual – reflecting on a perspective beyond the day to day.
- Relationships - developing a diverse range of healthy, supportive relationships.

In the present situation business leaders and managers will employ different styles of coping to deal with situations, events, and individuals. When faced with a difficult situation it is natural to feel anxious and stressed and be tempted to avoid tackling the problems. The use of passive coping strategies such as alcohol, avoiding making decisions or tackling problems will only temporarily relieve your feelings and can lead to increased distress. Active coping involves making plans, asking for support, engaging in problem solving and interrupting negative thinking. Active coping means that when difficulties arise you immerse yourself in the challenge, recognise that you have been successful in solving similar situations in the past and adopt similar strategies or skills. Be self-compassionate knowing you are giving your best.

Other techniques and approaches

Cognitive behavioural therapy that may help support your mental wellbeing during this period, for example:-

Work life balance

Keep a detailed record of what you do, hour by hour, not just work related but also out of work, in a notebook or diary. Record and rate how important and enjoyable the activities are to you, this will provide you with a factual record of how you spend your time, your levels of satisfaction, and achievements.

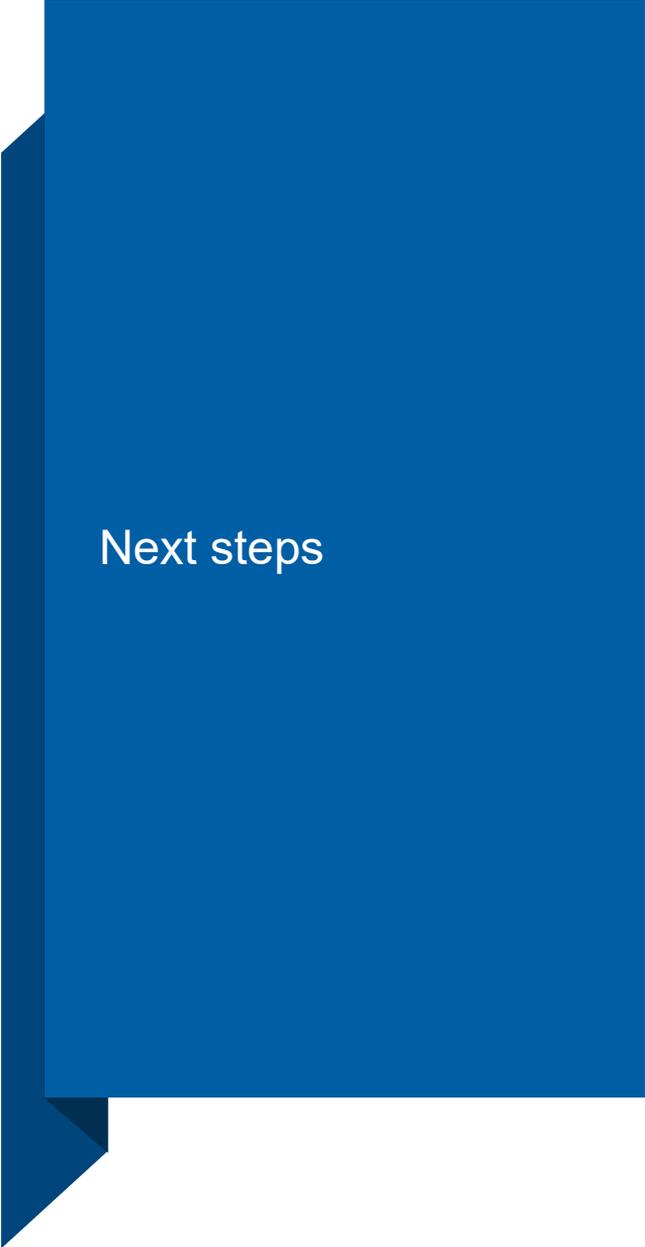
Stay energised

If you want to get tasks completed quickly and effectively it is important to stay energised. There are lots of ways to do this such as exercise, nutrition. Try doing something new or different each day or week that makes you feel happy.

Positive thinking

In the current situation it can be easy to get into the habit of automatically jumping to the worse possible conclusions. This unconscious thinking can influence how we feel, direct our behaviour without us realising, and impact our mental well-being. Be aware of these thoughts and replace them with more positive, rational thinking can support your mental wellbeing. Try creating a list of your common triggers, your negative thoughts, and think of more optimistic substitutes.

Talk to your GP - for some business owners this advice and support will not be enough to deal with their feelings so consider if medication would be helpful to you to allow other therapies to be more effective. It is not always an easy decision to start taking medication; it is not a cure - however it can be helpful in allowing other therapies to be effective.



Next steps

Undertake a wellbeing assessment using the HSE Management Standards or Public Health England's Workplace Health Needs Assessment Tool – this will give you the insight you need and provide some of the tools that are available to address the issues.

After the assessment you could consider adopting one of the many free workplace wellbeing frameworks and/or tools that can be accessed online. There are lots of different materials available so select those that reflect the current position of your workplace wellbeing strategy and that you can confidently implement as you can always continue to build on your success.

To ensure ownership and adoption engage the both the board and your employees in the process.

Make a Commitment to Mental Health at Work..through [six standards](#):

- **Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity: 'one-off' interventions will not make a long-term difference to employee wellbeing; a wide-ranging, long-term plan is needed.**
- **Proactively ensure that work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes: what do you expect of staff and when and how do you expect them to do it?**
- **Promote an open culture about mental health: open conversations about mental health and foster a culture where your employees feel able to seek support if they are struggling.**
- **Increase organisational confidence and capability: ensure that people at all levels of your organisation have a clear role to play and that they feel supported in fulfilling it.**
- **Provide mental health tools and support: ensure your staff are aware of the support that is available to them and encourage them to access it.**
- **Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting: Recognise that factors such as wellbeing, engagement and retention are crucial indicators of a company's performance.**

Wellbeing

Examples of possible workplace initiatives include:

- **Health:** focus on *physical health* (e.g. health promotion, occupational health support, managing disability); *physical safety* (e.g. safe working practices, equipment, and training); *mental health* (stress management, risk assessments, conflict resolution training, managing mental health).
- **Work:** focus on the *work environment* (e.g. open, inclusive culture); *line management* (e.g. training and people management policies); *work demands* (e.g. job design, role, quality, working hours); *autonomy* (control, innovation); *change management* (e.g. communication and involvement); *pay and reward* (e.g. fair and transparent remuneration practices).
- **Values/Principles:** focus on *leadership* (e.g. clear mission and objectives; health and wellbeing strategy); *ethical standards* (e.g. dignity at work); *diversity* (e.g. inclusion, valuing difference).
- **Collective/Social:** focus on *employee voice* (e.g. communication and involvement); *positive relationships* (e.g. management style, teamworking).
- **Personal growth:** focus on *career development* (e.g. mentoring, performance management); *emotional* (positive relationships, resilience training); *lifelong learning* (e.g. access to training, mid-career review); *creativity* (e.g. open and collaborative culture, innovation workshops).



Take home..



Take home

| Issue | Solution |
|-------------------|---|
| Health and safety | Make sure arrangements are safe and ergonomic; Encourage staff to take regular breaks and exercise |
| 'Always on' | Support boundaries for the working day; provide guidance on 'switching off' |
| 'System overload' | Agree ways of working including systems and platforms to be used; manage email traffic; manage online meetings |
| Access to support | Schedule regular check-ins |
| Isolation | Encourage social connections and peer support via informal messaging groups, virtual coffee mornings; quizzes etc. |
| Burnout | Review priorities and targets and offer flexibility, especially to working parents; involve staff in decisions about reorganising work and tasks. |