COVID-19 FACTSHEET 1: SUPPORTING STAFF WELLBEING

Help through Crisis (HtC) is a £33 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It supports 69 partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures. The HtC learning, support and evaluation (LSE) team is a consortium of organisations commissioned by The National Lottery Community Fund (the Fund) to help build understanding and capture learning from the HtC programme.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the LSE team is developing a series of factsheets to support HtC projects as they respond to new ways of working in lockdown and beyond. This first factsheet explores how employers, managers and individuals can support staff wellbeing. Subsequent factsheets will explore digital inclusion and effectively engaging with people online. If you would like to get in touch or have suggestions for other topics we could explore, please contact: HelpthroughCrisis@ipsos.com

Summary

Supporting staff wellbeing improves the physical and mental health of individual team members, as well as increasing productivity and a team's ability to provide effective advice to the people using their services (TNLCF 2019). Organisations also have a legal responsibility to do all they reasonably can to support employees' health, safety and wellbeing (ACAS 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way people work across different organisations and sectors. Social distancing and remote working are having an impact on the crisis support sector as organisations change how staff provide support and safeguard those most at risk. Most of the projects involved in the HtC programme have closed their physical offices and teams are now working remotely. Staff may be worried about how to provide effective support to those most in need or have concerns about the future of their organisation. This is in addition to any wider anxieties about the impact of Covid-19 on their personal lives.

These changes to the workplace affect how staff wellbeing can be supported during the pandemic. This factsheet focuses on resources to support wellbeing while working remotely for both managers and staff.[1]

Personal wellbeing

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a dramatic change in daily life for most people. People looking after their personal wellbeing do so in a new context, often involving changes to how they interact with others and where they spend their time. Personal circumstances will vary on an individual basis. However, everyone should be taking steps to look after their personal wellbeing in a way that meets their needs. Suggestions of how to do this include the following:

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[1] Resources about supporting staff wellbeing for those continuing to travel into a place of work are available elsewhere. This includes specific considerations and support for those delivering frontline services (LGA 2020; NHS Employers 2020).

- **Establishing a routine** is an important part of looking after wellbeing while working remotely. Public Health England (PHE) (2020) recommends trying to follow your normal sleep and work patterns including scheduling 'commuter time' before work such as reading or doing exercise and making a dedicated workspace to live and work in different parts of the home. The Mental Health Foundation (2020) also recommends setting clear tasks for a day, suggesting that completing three major decisions or activities is a good day's work.
- **Stay connected to others** by scheduling video calls or picking up the phone. However, PHE (2020) also recommends setting boundaries with other members of a household and with colleagues so that you have dedicated time to work but can also switch off in the evenings.
- **Trying to avoid virus myths and gossip** as this may fuel anxiety. Stepping away from social media or the news may help to reduce concerns and stay positive.

PHE (2020a) has shared 7 simple tips to tackle working from home. Their Every Mind Matters website (PHE 2020b) includes a wide variety of support for looking after your mental and physical health including a quiz to provide a personalised plan for looking after your wellbeing. Mind (2020) has developed an information hub related to Coronavirus and mental health. This includes information about wellbeing, coping with going into work during Covid-19 and useful contacts.

Managers have a key role in looking after themselves as well as supporting their teams to engage in 'self-care'. Helping employees to build a routine includes: setting clear expectations around working hours; not expecting employees to stay online after the working day; encouraging regular exercise; and supporting staff to look after their finances (AON 2020). Role modelling flexible working behaviours also helps to signal to staff the importance of a positive work-life balance, along with encouraging them to switch off and take regular breaks (Mamo 2020). Creating opportunities for teams to socialise and continuing to check-in with colleagues may also help teams to stay connected.

Supporting teams working remotely

In addition to supporting people to look after their own wellbeing, managers and employers in the crisis support sector can help employees to work remotely. This can be done by, providing the required equipment, resources and emotional support needed during this challenging period. The literature points to several additional roles for managers:

- **Reassuring teams by providing clear, supportive communication** that recognises the current situation and is transparent about decisions (Mates in Mind 2020a). This includes encouraging regular verbal communication where employees can share their concerns as well as celebrate successes or milestones beyond the daily tasks of a role. Creating virtual 'watercooler moments' may help teams to feel in touch with each other and reduce social isolation (Mental Health Foundation 2020).
- **Signposting to available advice and support** both within a work context such as Employee Assistance Schemes and outside of work such as Citizens Advice or Mind websites. We have included several links to resources for managers and individuals in this factsheet which may be relevant.
- Recognising that individual employees may be facing different challenges in their home and working lives. Managers will benefit from showing **flexibility and empathy** to allow work tasks to fit in with someone's wider responsibilities at home and adapt to the differing support needs of team members. Using language sensitively to reflect the experiences of different groups should be considered and some employees may require additional support and resources (Mates in Mind 2020a; CMHA UK 2020).

There are lots of resources available that may help managers consider how to support teams at this time including the following:

- Mental Health at Work (2020) has developed a toolkit focused on Coronavirus and isolation. This includes guides to help set up remote working for staff as well as guides to supporting staff wellbeing.
- Mates in Mind (2020b) has developed several resources including a supporting remote working checklist and a homeworking mental health tips guide.
- NCVO (2020) is collating information about how charities may want to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. There are pages on protecting your staff, volunteers and beneficiaries including resources for further reading on how to support staff and volunteers to work from home.
- The World Health Organization (2020) has shared a variety of messages for different audiences thinking about mental health and psychosocial considerations during the Covid-19 outbreak. This includes guidance for the general public, healthcare workers, managers, carers and those self-isolating.

Applying a trauma informed approach

As well as the steps above, it is important to recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic is a traumatic event shared by people across the globe (Middleton 2020a). Those working in the crisis support sector may experience vicarious trauma as they support people with Covid-19 or through listening to distressing stories of the impact of the pandemic on individuals. In this way, it is essential that employers, managers and individuals recognise the traumatic nature of the situation and take steps to look after mental and physical wellbeing through a trauma informed lens.

Individuals can prevent and manage vicarious trauma through self-care and self-protection (Smeaton 2019). This includes:

- **Ensuring a balance between work, rest and socialising** with family and friends. For example, identifying activities that may help you escape, rest and play may support effective coping strategies for vicarious trauma (Pearlman & McKay 2008).
- **Transforming negative experiences** associated with vicarious trauma by identifying ways to stay connected to meaning and hope in your life or work. This could include reminding yourself of the importance of your work, staying connected to family and friends, noticing and deliberately paying attention to 'little things', and identifying and challenging negative beliefs (Pearlman & McKay 2008).
- **Building in time and space for reflection** for example by keeping a journal, meditating or engaging in reflective practice using frameworks such as Gibbs' (1988) reflective practice cycle.

Managers and employers also have a role in building open relationships to help people to cope with and recover from trauma (Middleton 2020b) and providing emotional support through regular 1:1 catch ups. Managers may want to consider reflecting on the principles associated with trauma informed care, to help check communications are trauma-informed and support individuals' safety, empowerment, choice, collaboration and trust (Middleton 2020b). Encouraging employees to complete their own Wellness Action Plan, or reviewing this in light of recent changes, can help to ensure workplace support is tailored to employees and provides a space for shared reflection (Mamo 2020).

The following resources include practical guides and templates for embedding a trauma informed approach and reflective practice:

- The Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead area has been sharing blogs on their experiences of adapting to Covid-19. They have collated several resources including tips on taking a trauma informed approach to Coronavirus, a description of how they have used reflective practice sessions online to support staff and a template for reflective practice.
- Community Care Inform has developed a practical guide to developing emotional resilience and wellbeing (Grant & Kinman 2020). The guide provides a description of emotional resilience and explains the importance of this and self-care during the Covid-19 pandemic for looking after personal wellbeing and enhancing professional practice. It sets out the responsibilities employers and individuals have to safeguard wellbeing and provides tips and exercises to support individuals to enhance their resilience.
- The Fulfilling Lives evaluation (Collinson 2020) has shared several resources related to Covid-19 including a guide to independent reflective practice which includes a reflective practice log and helpful questions to consider (Abbott 2020).
- The Headington Institute (Pearlman & McKay 2008) has an online training module about understanding and addressing vicarious trauma in the humanitarian aid sector. Although this resource has not been specifically developed in response to Covid-19, it includes relevant exercises and questions to help understand and protect against vicarious trauma.

HelpthroughCrisis@ipsos.com

Published: May 2020

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