

**We are here to help you.**

## Risk Insight: Health, Safety and Wellbeing of People during Covid-19



**The spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19) is unprecedented and we understand this is an incredibly difficult time for families and businesses. We are here to help customers and businesses who are affected by the impact of Covid-19 in these challenging times.**

### **Important Note**

Please ensure that you comply with ongoing Government guidance regarding vulnerable individuals, individuals that need to self-isolate, the need to limit non-essential travel and lone work risk assessments. Please consider the need for alternative skilled personnel.

It is understood that customers will complete their own risk assessments. We understand and support our customer's responsibility to safeguard staff, persons they owe a duty of care towards and follow Government guidance and laws.

Remote working offers many advantages to the employer and employee and it will help to maintain work productivity. But, for many, working in the home environment can present health and safety hazards and conditions which can negatively impact on personal health, safety and wellbeing. Working in isolation and finding that home has now become a permanent workspace may prove difficult for some workers to adjust to. There is also the additional challenge that for some, they will have their partner and any children residing in the combined home/work environment for the foreseeable future.

This guide covers some of the health, safety and wellbeing management issues that employers will need to consider as this new way of working becomes a more regular feature of our working lives.

## **The Environment**

Many employees will be setting up 'temporary' work spaces within their homes.

As a starting point, as far as individual circumstances permit, there should be enough room for work to be carried out, including space for the workstation, other equipment and storage of materials. Employees should ideally choose one room to keep all of their work equipment to reduce physical intrusion into the home and help keep domestic interruptions to a minimum. However, the COVID-19 outbreak presents unique social isolation challenges and therefore one way of combating the impacts of working from home permanently is to relocate where you work throughout the day. The World Economic Forum suggests encouraging homeworkers to move around their home to try out different environments, even working or taking calls outdoors. Using pictures and photographs of happier times can also enhance our work environment.

Maintaining postural comfort will be important for those not working at a formal work station, so setting up on a desk or table is better than working from a settee or favourite armchair. To reduce risks of postural discomfort, workers should be encouraged to break up long spells of display screen work and introduce hourly rest breaks or changes in activity. This will also help combat eye fatigue associated with extended use of display screens. By moving from sitting to standing at regular intervals this can help prevent postural discomfort, with each shift to a new work zone helping to provide a new perspective, re-energise and help people to refocus. It is important that, wherever possible, work spaces are kept separate from areas which are normally used to relax, such as the bedroom or lounge as this can help some people get into a work mindset and to stop work activities intruding into important non-work time.

Those who are working from home with other members of the family around might be faced with additional noise and distractions so they may struggle to find focus and concentration. It is therefore vitally important that people managers have regular conversations with their team members to understand individual circumstances and consider making changes to workload for those who are affected or providing other options and additional work flexibility.

For those trying to educate their children as well as doing their own work, setting up together might help so that all members of the family can be considered as working at the same time. Setting up a work and/or home school timetable will help to maintain some level of normality and structure to the day and establishing a work and rest routine is a helpful way of keeping on track. This may not be the same for everyone and therefore expectations should be realistic. There are many online apps available which can help create scheduling and help make sure rest and fitness breaks are incorporated into the day. Also, sometimes individuals just need to hear from senior leaders that they have explicit permission to take breaks, so it may be useful to regularly communicate and encourage this approach.

Sheds and garages are not generally recommended for remote working because it's often impossible to control security and the working environment. You should also be careful about letting staff choose attics and cellars as very often these have poor natural ventilation and light but are both beneficial to our wellbeing. It may not be possible to specify exactly where people can work as this will be entirely dependent on their personal

circumstances, but it is sensible to provide some outline guidance to help them make the most of the situation they are in.

General health and safety hazards also need to be considered as employers have little direct control over the home workplace. Employees need to ensure good standards of housekeeping, including removing trailing leads or cables. They must also be aware of the risks this can pose to other people, such as children, who are sharing the home-work environment.

## **Breaks and Downtime**

Don't underestimate the power of fresh air. Encouraging people to take a morning walk, bike ride or run can really help set them up for the day and boost mental wellbeing, especially if they would normally undertake exercise as part of their daily commute. The advice and guidance on social distancing has increased and therefore for anyone who chooses to go outdoors they must avoid being in proximity to other people and follow the current government guidelines for time spent away from their home.

People managers might want to introduce a daily 'thumbs up' check in, just so that they know if any of their team are unwell and need support, particularly if they alone or are self-isolating. Increased social isolation measures may affect people in different ways and they may need additional support to adapt to residing and working permanently at home. Even for those who may already be used to agile or home working, the constant lack of social interaction may start to impact on individual resilience and therefore managers should be prepared to think about what support mechanisms are available to those who might need them.

People managers may wish to introduce daily walking breaks so that everyone has some down time at the same time every day, allowing colleagues to call each other for a catch up. There are also many online/virtual wellness and fitness events springing up so encouraging short bursts of activity or actively encouraging participation in meditation and mindfulness practice can provide employees with different experiences to their working week.

Homeworkers should be encouraged to put some boundaries around work time so it doesn't start to encroach on personal time. Home and work can blur together, particularly when the office is the kitchen table and the mobile phone is the only source of staying in touch with friends and colleagues. It may be useful to introduce rules about when workers need to finish or close the door on work when the time comes, and to switch off mobile devices. Some people find that a good way of closing off from work at the end of the day is to take a short walk as they might have done as part of their commute home.

## **Interaction with Others**

Working from home can be lonely, even if homeworkers are surrounded by other family members. Personal relationships are normally very different to the relationships we have with colleagues who we work alongside every day. The absence of the physical 'work family' will be unfamiliar territory to many who are currently adopting to the new homeworking regime and some people may relish the prospect of working from home whereas others may miss the formal work environment. Organisations that make sure that workload and work-related activities are scheduled and that they are realistic will allow employees to see that there is some structure to the day ahead and a connection with work. Encouraging employees to maintain their normal 'waking up' routine and getting ready for the day ahead will also help individuals maintain a sense of structure and purpose.

As people adjust to working from home, you might find that some employees start to adopt different practices to help them get through the day. This might be listening to music, podcasts or the radio, particularly if they live alone and find the quietness difficult to deal with. People managers should familiarise themselves with the choices made by individual team members and accept that different coping methods are likely to be adopted. What works for one person may not work for another but encouraging people to share their experiences within homeworker networks can provide some reassurance to those who are trying things out for the first time.

## Top Tips for Helping Employees Curb Isolation

- **Phone calls:** Arrange business calls first thing in the morning so employees are immediately hooked into work life. It can also help them plan priorities for the day ahead.
- **Skype/MS Teams Calls:** Try to use webex and face to face conferencing where possible. Seeing, rather than just hearing a colleague can be hugely beneficial and help people managers spot changes in individual behaviour or body language.
- **Social media:** LinkedIn etc. are good ways to connect with likeminded people but should be used in a disciplined way. Encourage workers to switch off from media coverage which can be counter-productive and cause increased anxiety.
- **Webinars or online events:** Offer great opportunities for networking and training and can be utilised for online networking, meeting people and developing a wider support network.
- **Virtual Connections:** Advice is to avoid face to face social interaction with others. This can be difficult, especially for those who live alone or those who will have limited support from their usual home/family network. Opportunities to collaborate can be provided virtually so allow some time for colleagues to chat over a coffee and make the best use of platforms such as MTeams, Zoom or Skype.

Whatever you choose to do, make sure there is enough time to have breaks away from technology and avoid back to back meetings which can lead to both physical and mental tiredness. When meetings don't require formality, encourage colleagues to have regular virtual walking meetings and step away from their devices and screens.

During periods of uncertainty and a reduction in work activities which are usually dependent on face to face interaction, organisations may be worried about the impact on productivity. However, using this time to carry out team training, share expertise across different business areas or explore opportunities for either personal growth or team development, can have long term benefits and boost team morale.

## Anxiety and Stress

Experiencing anxiety now and then is a normal part of life. It is not unusual for people to temporarily feel anxious when facing stressful situations, uncertainty, or extreme challenges. The emotions of anxiety and fear in confronting a real threat are part of our survival instinct.

Being concerned about what we are told in the news is understandable but for many people it can make existing mental health problems worse. Individuals with pre-existing anxiety or mental health disorders are facing challenges at the moment and there is a lot of misleading information. It is better to stay informed by sticking to trusted sources of information such as the government, Public Health England and NHS websites. Encouraging employees to limit their exposure to social media channels may help curb some of the uncertainty and avoid exposure to scare stories often shared on social media platforms.

Organisations should provide access to information such as people policies, their sickness absence policy or special arrangements during COVID-19. Employers should aim to keep intranet sites updated and ensure there are ways for employees to access up to date company information. There should also be clear information on how employees can access support for dealing with IT, software or equipment failures as well as procedures if information technology systems fail.

For employers who offer Employee Assistance Programmes, occupational health advice lines or access to other benefits such as financial advice services, it may be useful to communicate how employees can access these, particularly if they are likely to experience a reduction in their income. Organisations may need to identify people as key contacts who have specific responsibility for routinely contacting homeworkers, such as employee representatives, health and safety advisors or human resource personnel.

Many people who are dealing with changes in both their home and work environments may start to adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms such as binge eating, smoking or using alcohol as a way to deal with ongoing uncertainty. Access to gymnasiums, clubs and sports halls has all but ceased and therefore individuals may need extra encouragement to stay fit and well. There are strong links between physical and mental health so it will be increasingly important for everyone to explore ways of staying physically well whilst at home and to avoid long periods of inactivity. People managers can support team members by having regular contact and dialogue and by role modelling healthy behaviours such as participating in daily exercise or ensuring team members have access to wider support networks. As well as physical activity, creative hobbies such as painting or drawing, gardening or exploring community volunteering opportunities are all excellent ways of maintaining individual wellbeing. Practising yoga or meditation can also help to reduce anxiety and stress as these focus on our ability to create space through developing deep breathing practice, helping to reduce the levels of the stress hormone cortisol, our body's natural stress reaction. A number of free apps and podcasts are readily available.

The UK mental health charity MIND also have a selection of online resources which highlight ways in which individuals can protect their own mental health or manage ongoing mental health issues. In addition, mental health 'wellness action plan' templates are available and may be useful for people managers to use and make it safe for open dialogue to take place with their team members. Encouraging employees to record their daily achievements and recognise their strengths and contributions, both personally and professionally can also help individuals maintain a sense of value and purpose and help them focus on the things they are in control of.

For people managers who are managing team members with a pre-existing health condition there may be a need to consider additional flexibility or workplace adjustments to support them in keeping well. If further measures are taken and increased lockdown arrangements come into effect, then more alternatives and stop/start indicators for the working day may need to be considered.

Also remember that at some times there may be increased tension in the home environment and some employees may struggle to openly express that they are experiencing problems. Organisations may wish to consider signposting external support services or make information available and easily accessible to their workforce.

We don't yet know the full impact the coronavirus will have on our working practices, but it's likely that once a new way of working has been established, it will be hard to go back to the traditional ways.

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