



A guide

# Back to Reality after Covid – 19

Perfectly crafted  
**Occupational  
Health**

This guide outlines considerations and provides advice on how physical and mental wellbeing can be supported as lockdown ends and there is a return to the workplace after several months of being in isolation. We will also cover what employers need to do to ensure that their employees feel supported throughout the transition.

Early indications suggest that the pandemic (and measures taken by government to control it such as lockdown and social distancing) will have a significant impact upon the mental health and wellbeing of employees. It is very possible that these mental health implications will be felt for many months and even years. As early as two weeks into lockdown, employees were reporting a range of health effects including negative impacts on mental health and overall well-being.

This guide outlines considerations and provides advice for employers, people professionals and people managers on how employee mental health can be supported as lockdown ends and there is a phased return to the workplace.

# What is mental health?

Everyone has mental health and, like physical health it fluctuates along a spectrum. It can vary from good mental well-being to severe mental health problems. Work can have a huge impact on mental health – it can promote well-being or trigger problems. Poor mental health can include struggling with low mood, stress or anxiety. A mental health problem is generally defined as when poor mental health continues for a prolonged period. There may or may not be a diagnosis of a specific condition. Common mental health conditions include depression, anxiety, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorders and bipolar.

Mental health problems affect around one in four people in any given year. Work related stress is a form of poor mental health, defined by the Health and Safety Executive as a reaction to excessive pressure or other type of demand placed on an individual at work. Stress can be a significant cause of illness.

## What should employers do?

It is well known that many employees do not feel comfortable in speaking up about poor mental health; this is unlikely to change following the pandemic.

Employers will need to adapt a range of measures to support employees experiencing poor mental health as a result of COVID-19. Measures will need to range from supporting employees to regain an effective work-life balance and addressing fears about return to work, right through to support for severe mental health conditions. Some employers, particularly those who have employees working in front line response roles, must start to act now to put necessary support in place.

What remains important is that people experiencing poor mental health are not labelled by focusing on a diagnosis, and instead discussions and support focus on the impact it has on them at work.

## What employers can do now.

Employers have two current areas of focus to consider. Firstly, supporting the mental health of employees who are continuing to work in essential and key worker roles, many of whom will be working under significantly increased pressure that may make them more vulnerable to stress or other mental health conditions. Secondly, they need to support those who are currently working from home and will start to return to the workplace on a phased and adjusted basis in the weeks and months to come.

The resilience of all employees has been challenged by the current situation – although the mental health and wellbeing implications of this will vary from employee to employee.

# What should employers do for employees impacted by coronavirus?

- Is everyone in your business aware of the symptoms of COVID-19? Are they clear on the actions they need to take including how to report sickness, their sick pay entitlement and any additional cleaning requirements? If they are not clear, make sure you get a communication detailing this information out to them as soon as possible.
- For those who are still based in their usual place of work, ensure social distancing rules are being maintained throughout your business including both work and rest areas. Follow government guidance on staggering shift patterns, avoiding peak travel times and reducing public face-to-face contact
- Make sure employees have the most up to date knowledge and equipment to manage workspace cleanliness for both prevention and post-infection management

# What should employers do for employees impacted by coronavirus?

- Make sure facilities and time are easily available for employees to carry out regular hand washing with soap, water and paper towels. If possible, provide hand sanitiser and tissues and encourage employees to use them at their workstations
- Be aware of those colleagues who would be classed as vulnerable, or more at risk, and ensure appropriate action is taken
- Use your extended resources for accredited information and guidance. Public Health, Department of Health, Government, HSE, ACAS, Occupational Health, GP's and NHS111 all have relevant information that can be useful to employees

# Adjusting working conditions

- After any viral infection, and it seems common with COVID-19, it is not unusual to be left with a prolonged feeling of lethargy. For many this may mean energy levels take some time to return to normal which may impact upon their ability to fulfil full-time work commitments.
- Carry out a health assessment before they return to work to make sure workplace adjustments are made.
- The current nationally recognised period of working from home may help the post-infection colleague. Wherever possible supporting the working from home option may well cause less stress and more flexibility within the working day – all of this may help with post infection fatigue. It could also be beneficial to the employee to phase their return to work, so they can gradually build up to their normal task delivery and allotted hours
- Adopting a phased return of working hours, days and workload will allow a gradual return into the team supporting both the employee and employer
- Consider adjusting the type of work required. For example, if the role includes heavy manual labour can light duties be given for a protected period?