

MEDNET GROUP

ADJUSTING TO THE NEW NORMAL:

Managing stress while working from home

EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK



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Foreword

WRITTEN BY MIRANDA STEAD, DIRECTOR OF MEDNET GROUP

Mednet Group are two partnered healthcare communications agencies with diversity and inclusivity at our core.

Mednet Ltd is a certified woman owned business and Attigo CIC is a Social Enterprise.

Our business model integrates a social enterprise mission and delivery into its core by employing highly skilled people who may otherwise struggle to gain or retain employment through reasons of long-term conditions – mental health conditions, for the most part.

We take the issue of stress awareness very seriously and realise how important it is that employees are advised on how to adjust and look after their wellbeing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also felt it extremely relevant to highlight this issue in stress awareness month.

We therefore wanted to make some recommendations and give specific strategies to help people in this difficult time, when so many aspects of working life may have significantly changed, which in turn can be very stressful for individuals and their families. We also wanted to signpost to some excellent materials that have been developed and are available via the [Stress Management Society](#).

This handbook was written by Alex Teahan, one of our medical writers. We hope these recommendations help you to look after your wellbeing and work effectively, both during and beyond the coronavirus pandemic.



Adjusting to the new normal: managing stress while working from home

It seems somehow appropriate that stress awareness month should land during such a time as this COVID-19 pandemic; a time where stress levels are higher than usual for many people in the country.

Regular activities like meeting up with friends, going to a bar or a restaurant are now off the table, and even simple everyday tasks such as going shopping or travelling are now met with novel anxieties and unfamiliar restrictions. Fundamental aspects of working life too are now significantly changed, which for many will be yet another source of stress.

While acknowledging the dire situation facing many businesses and employees, or already in some cases, former employees, this article will focus on 'the new normal' for businesses who are fortunate enough to be able to implement a working-from-home (WFH) business model, and the people who are now adjusting to this new mode of working life.

Given the unprecedented situation and unfamiliar working context many of us now face, it is vital that employers and employees are effectively advised on how to adjust and look after their wellbeing in these difficult times.



The social element

While technological advancements have connected our society greater than ever before, many people find digitally-mediated connection is no substitute for the in-person social interaction they now lack, following the implementation of social distancing measures.

Humans are, by and large, very social creatures, yet we can no longer use many of the tools we have developed to facilitate traditional forms of social interaction; tools which help us to intuitively gauge others' emotional states and engage empathy, such as reading body language, facial expressions and tone of voice are impaired or removed entirely depending on the extent to which video and voice calls are used and their quality.

Teams which previously relied on a high degree of collaboration, need regular supervision or support, or benefit from the casual conversations they used to have at their desks, when making a drink, or on their breaks are now working out how to digitally enable these aspects of work. For some, there will be a sense of loss which, without intervention, could deepen the longer the lockdown remains in place.





Recommendations

Try to get used to digitally connecting with your colleagues as a matter of routine, both for formal and informal chats.

Using instant messaging, texts, voice calls or video conferencing are our best tools for remotely connecting with others. Video and voice chats may feel more personal and allow more nuance in communication than purely text formats, but there are many reasons why someone may dislike these formats, so make sure to work out with your colleagues how it would be best to stay in touch.

Would you regularly speak to people at your desk to discuss work, ask questions, share something interesting you learned or joke around? Perhaps you spend your lunch with colleagues sometimes, or have drinks after work on a Friday? It might be a good idea to set up a group chats or schedule individual calls so you can still do this remotely.

Discuss any emotional difficulties – your own, or your colleagues’.

Stress, sadness, worry and other negative emotions are to be expected during these difficult times. Discussing your feelings with others may help you to feel better, and you may find you both share similar experiences, which could help them too.

If you don't feel comfortable doing this, there are many [helplines](#) which may provide the support you need. You could also chat to your Mental Health First Aider, speak to HR or access your organisations' Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), depending on what is available.

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If you're unsure how to approach a colleague you think may be experiencing emotional difficulties, it could help to just simply ask, 'How are you doing?'. If their answer is positive or neutral but sounds unconvincing, perhaps mention that, or ask them again so they know you are really interested – but don't push it if they aren't forthcoming again. Sharing your own difficulties first may help them to open up.

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Organisation, motivation and performance

Despite many people becoming more productive when they WFH, organisation, motivation and performance can be negatively impacted when some employees transition from the office.

One reason this could happen is because our minds automatically create associations with different environments, based on what we do and experience in them. The office may be associated with focus, quick thinking, or a particular way of communicating, which kick in when we enter the space. Different associations will be linked with where people relax at home. These associations can influence how we think and feel, how we act, and what we remember; this can make it difficult to maintain our usual working state if we work in our bedroom, for example.

Additionally, we build up associations with specific times of the day and events that occur at those times. Therefore, changes in our usual routines, habits, rituals or schedules can also negatively impact our organisation, motivation and performance. This reduces our self-efficacy and can lead to either not meeting our work objectives or overworking as a compensatory strategy, increasing our stress and predisposing us to or exacerbating symptoms of mental ill health in turn.

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If you're struggling with any of these issues, there are a few techniques which may help you to reduce your stress and get back on track.

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Recommendations

Find ways to easily transition between 'work-mode' and 'leisure-mode'

If you are able to do so, it may help to set up your own office space at home, ideally in a separate room than where you sleep or relax after work, so you can form work-related associations with that space and find it easier to get into work-mode, while being able to wind down quicker once you finish your work, transitioning to leisure-mode in a different space.

Some of us aren't fortunate enough to be able to set up a separate workspace, but there are a few ways you could influence your frame of mind based on whether you are working or relaxing:

- Persist with the morning routine you would usually go through before heading into the office, to prime your mind for engaging with your work.
- Dress how you would usually dress for the office when you're working, and dress how you usually would for your leisure time when you finish – the clothes we wear can have a big influence on our state of mind.
- Change how your space looks when you're working and when you're not – whether that's blocking out your usual field of view while working, or having specific items on your desk which represent work (e.g. stationary, post-it notes, photos, books, or whatever else you usually have on your desk in the office).

- Create new habits or rituals before you begin working and when you finish working, and do them every time you need to transition between work-mode and leisure-mode; this will form new associations between the action and whatever follows it, making it easier to get into the appropriate frame of mind for what you're doing. This could involve tidying your space, taking a walk, heading to the shops, meditating, working on a hobby, or anything else which helps you to mark the start and end of your work day.

Plan your day and keep to your schedule.

While some people may enjoy and work effectively by spreading out their work over the course of the day instead of working in the usual block of hours they would in the office, others may struggle with the lack of structure; if this is a problem for you, try to plan your day, whether in a notepad, calendar, excel spreadsheet or other format, keeping to your usual working hours and breaks.



Specific strategies to support mental health

While there are many strategies through which employers can support the mental health of those whom they employ, there are many techniques individuals can utilise to support their own mental health too.

As comprehensive as an organisational wellbeing strategy may be, it is only effective when employees engage with the processes implemented and the techniques they are provided information on.

It can be difficult to motivate yourself to use these techniques if you are stressed or have other mental health difficulties, so try to access internal or external support for planning and reviewing your self-help strategies if you're struggling.





Recommendations

Find a form of meditation that works for you.

Many people will have their own reliable techniques to relax and de-stress, whether before, during or after work; others may struggle to do so. If you're feeling stressed, it may help to do some form of meditation. Mindfulness is often recommended for this and there can certainly be great benefits, however, it is not a panacea for everyone. People with obsessive-compulsive disorder may find being told to focus on their breathing is actually harmful, while someone with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, or have other sources of executive dysfunction may have difficulty not engaging with their thoughts. Others may find it to be too boring to be effective.

Thankfully, there are many different kinds of meditation techniques, so it may help to explore these and see if any work for you; meditations which incorporate visualisation, progressive muscle relaxation, or yoga can help some people to relax if pure mindfulness does not.

There are many free resources online which can guide you through different meditations or teach you to do it yourself, including [Cumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust](#) and the [Mental Health Foundation](#).

Access available resources to support your wellbeing – whether internal or external to your organisation.

If your organisation has MHFA(s), an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), self-help guides, signposting guides, or other types of support, they could be a valuable resource to reduce your stress and improve your wellbeing if you are struggling in any way.

There are too many excellent external resources to sufficiently cover the specific strategies they recommend here; it may help to read [MIND: Coronavirus and your wellbeing, Every Mind Matters](#) (who also have specific guidance on [managing worry about Covid-19](#)), [My Whole Self](#), or other available advice you may find.



The benefits of remote working

Despite all the aforementioned advice on managing potentially stressful aspects of working from home, it is important to acknowledge that there can be many benefits to stress levels and mental health while working from home too.

Working from home can provide greater flexibility, allowing us to practice self-care, look after our home, complete our usual tasks such as shopping or attending appointments, or look after anyone we care for with greater ease at a time that works for us, if the way the business functions makes it possible to shift our days around. For those of us with a nightmare of a commute, cutting that out can not only remove the stress experienced during our journeys, but also increase how much time we have available outside of work.

Research suggests that many of us perform better when working from home, and for those of us who prefer working from home, we will likely feel less stressed.

It may be that businesses implement more home-working possibilities beyond social distancing measures, whether that be on a permanent, flexible or individual basis. It won't be ideal for all of us however, so keep your employers updated on how you're finding the situation, whether you're working more effectively and experiencing less stress or not. If you have the opportunity to work from home or from the office depending on what works best for you, then that is likely not only going to be better for yourself, but better for the business you work for too.



Mednet Group's approach

At Mednet Group, we are in a similar situation to many businesses; we have moved towards home working for everybody in the organisation, where previously this was only done on an irregular basis as a form of reasonable adjustment. We have implemented many of the aforementioned employer recommendations, including:

- Facilitating digital communication through Microsoft Teams, so employees can connect remotely as easily as possible.
- Scheduling daily team-meetings in the morning to help people maintain communication, retain their usual structure, raise any issues and ensure everyone is clear on their tasks for the day.
- Scheduling buddy catch-ups between managers and two employees, across different teams, to encourage informal social interaction across the business.
- Sharing weekly top-tips for looking after your wellbeing and being productive while WFH, so everyone has techniques and resources to help manage their stress levels.
- Setting up stress workshops with interactive activities, as an opportunity to raise stress awareness and clearly communicate the wellbeing processes in place, such as the role of the MHFA and where helpful resources can be accessed.

Our approach is continuously evolving; we are constantly looking out for new ways to understand how the transition to home working is affecting our employees and developing new strategies to support wellbeing, at a business-wide and individual level.

How is your organisation managing the transition? Do you have any helpful innovations to share?

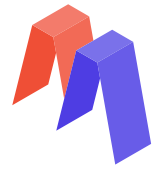


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Visit our website, chat with us on social media, or contact us directly, so we can all move towards a more stress-aware and effective working culture in these difficult and changing times.

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MEDNET GROUP

INFO@MEDNET.CO.UK

+44 (0)113 872 2039

40 OTLEY ROAD, LEEDS, LS6 2AL