



environmental
services
association

COVID-19: Mental health support & information for the waste management sector



Environmental Services Association

SUMMARY

Covid-19 and the measures taken in response, such as lockdowns and social distancing, are likely to have a significant impact on the mental health of employees. Some of these effects remain largely unknown or have yet to fully materialise and will likely affect workers in different ways.

The pandemic continues to create uncertainty for many employees in the waste management sector, with some having continued to be at work providing front line services essential for the UK economy, others poised to return to work and others likely to remain working from home. Combined, this has created an unprecedented set of circumstances and challenges for the sector as organisations ensure that measures are in place to support good mental health, while managing any fears and concerns employees may have, or potential ill health.

This guidance offers tips, suggestions and points to consider in helping manage employees' mental health as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to assist and support managers in opening up a conversation on mental health, and to ensure that wellbeing is integrated into day to day business decisions, rather than perceived negatively as something that requires an intervention only after a mental health issue has been identified.

An appendix to this guidance lists further reading and points to existing mental health resources and information sources.

INTRODUCTION

This guidance has been produced by ESA's H&S Strategic Group with the approval and endorsement of ESA's Board. It represents a sensible, reasonable and proportionate approach in helping manage the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This guidance forms part of a suite of resources produced by the Environmental Services Association (ESA) which aim to address the priority risk areas identified within our H&S Strategy. Collectively, this suite of guidance represents ESA's commitment to continued improvement in our sector's health and safety performance and to raise health and safety standards for the betterment of all those who work in the industry or are associated with its activities.

The principles contained within this guidance are equally relevant to decision makers across the full spectrum of organisations that make up the waste management sector. We would therefore actively encourage its dissemination and uptake beyond the ESA Membership.

This guidance is aimed primarily at the manager level and offers suggestions for supporting employees' mental health during the pandemic. The guidance aims to raise awareness of the factors that could affect the mental health of employees; the tell-tale triggers to look out for; assistance that could be offered; and suggestions for initiating a discussion on mental health in the workplace. Specific guidance is also available for those employee groups that may require additional mental health support during the pandemic.

COVID-19: MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

Covid-19 and the measures taken to combat it such as national and local lockdowns and social distancing are likely to have a significant negative impact on the mental health of employees.

It is not yet known what the mental health impact will be as there are so many factors to consider, many of which are still ongoing. During this outbreak many employees will have needed to cope with additional pressures on their time, coupled with worries of the potential ill health of themselves and their families.

There are several wide ranging factors which could negatively impact on employees' mental health and may result in both short and long term effects, such as loss of motivation, anxiety, feelings of isolation and low mood, irritability, depression or exasperation of an ongoing mental health issue.

Factors employers should be considering are;

- Employees being concerned and anxious about themselves and/or family members and friends contracting the virus
- Employees suffering physical and mental health effects from taking less exercise and/or drinking more alcohol
- Working longer hours or irregular hours
- Additional pressures such as combining work with home schooling children or having to care for elderly, unwell or shielding relatives
- Loss of income into the household, resulting in financial worries
- Worries surrounding job security and the long term financial impacts of Covid-19, including where companies are making large scale redundancies
- Worries surrounding the furlough or job support scheme and uncertainty about returning to work
- Fears about returning to the workplace including using public transport for commuting
- Effects of suffering a bereavement, especially given funerals cannot take place as they normally would

What do we need to do?

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees and must follow the law, however, this only sets the minimum standard and those measures are unlikely to be sufficient to properly support employees through the extreme circumstances we are currently experiencing.

Whilst it can be difficult for employees to open up about their mental health, employers do need to take action to raise awareness of the issues Covid-19 may bring to employees and introduce measures to support their employees to enable them to protect their own mental health, address their fears, concerns and manage any potential health conditions.

It is important to raise awareness amongst the whole workforce of the potential impact and early signs of a deterioration in the mental health of themselves or those around them. Some suggestions are:

- Provide guidance to help employees recognise the early signs of declining mental health to prevent a bigger problem later on, such as; mood changes, irritability, aggression, poor work performance, working longer hours or not wanting to go home, poor punctuality, increased absence due to sickness and inability to deal with normal workload.
- Distribute regular communications regarding what resources are available to help employees build their own resilience and explain what support is available. Do not be limited to mental wellbeing but also inform of ways for employees to ensure their own physical wellbeing, such as information on exercise and finances.
- Provide information on how employees can access support for their mental health wellbeing and assurance that this process is totally confidential.
- Hold regular 1:1 meetings with direct reports with the emphasis on wellbeing to pick up on any signals that the employee may be struggling. Ask open questions to try and gauge how they are coping and whether they have any concerns and, if so, make sure they are pointed in the right direction to get help.
- Inform employees about any updates to Covid-19 Government guidance that may affect them and their work, but be careful to limit this to information from reputable sources.
- Be honest and acknowledge that this is a stressful situation for all: you do not have to have all the answers, and if you do not check into it and get back to them.

There may be groups of employees that need additional support:

Employees working from home - Make sure the lines of communication are kept open, contact your employees on a regular basis and ensure they are informed of what is happening in the wider business. Provide the right technology for your workers to allow them to work effectively from home and allow them the time to keep non-work related, social relationships with their colleagues going by using virtual technologies such as Zoom and MS Teams, or try having a virtual lunch or coffee break together. Be aware that homeworkers may have many distractions at home, such as home schooled children, dependants etc. so you may need to be flexible about the working day. Encourage employees to still take breaks away from their work, stop their work at a reasonable time and to take their annual leave entitlement.

Employees working to provide core/front line services – Include employees on decisions about work practices, listen to their concerns and make sure you address them. Remember some employees may have vulnerable people in their household and may need more reassurance than others about the Covid secure measures in place. Keep financial worries at bay by ensuring every employee is aware of the arrangements for pay should they need to self-isolate or look after a sick family member. Have regular team meetings, and if needed 1:1 meetings, where employees can voice confidentially any concerns they may have. Train supervisors/managers to recognise signs of anxiety and stress in the workforce.

Furloughed or shielding employees – These employees may miss out on many of the regular corporate guidance and information send out to those continuing to work, therefore ensure there is a process in place for this to be sent to the workers where the guidance may impact them. Have social sessions to which furloughed and shielded workers are invited and encourage them to join in. Keep in regular contact to check on their wellbeing and to inform them when their period of furlough is expected to end. Be sensitive to the fact that these workers may have taken on additional responsibility for dependants and relatives at home.

Employees returning to work from furlough or shielding – At some point it will become necessary to bring workers back to work from furlough or after they have been shielding, whether this be back to the site or office, or working from home. Recognise that some employees will feel nervous about returning and have concerns about still catching the virus, consult with them and explain the measures put in place to ensure their safety at work and take their concerns seriously. Make sure returning employees are re-inducted and re-trained where necessary and remember that processes and procedures may have changed whilst they were away from work or they may just require refresher training. Consider bringing employees back on a phased return to ease them back into working life and allow them time to re-design their work life balance. Give as much notice as possible that they are required back in work to allow them to make arrangements for dependants to be cared for. Be aware that their work output may well be lower than previously until they get back up to speed, and reduce their workload accordingly if necessary.

Employees affected by redundancy – Recognise that the redundancy process can have a negative impact on the mental health of workers at risk of redundancy; those selected for redundancy; those who are not selected; and the managers/supervisors who must carry out the redundancy process. Both during and after the process explain to employees what support is available to them. If possible allow exiting employees to still access support to help them with their finances and obtaining alternative employment. Have a mechanism in place to allow employees to ask questions and ensure their questions receive prompt answers. Once the process is completed ensure the remaining workers are able manage their new workloads.

It is recognised that during this pandemic many employees are now working from home and may continue to do so for some time. This can lead to feelings of isolation and not feeling part of the wider team as well as not feeling able to access wellbeing services that are available to site and office based workers. Organisations can overcome this gap by providing socially distanced wellbeing support through:

- weekly webinars on subjects that may affect employees such as home schooling, reduced finances, access to healthcare, exercising in a pandemic etc.
- hold virtual clinics with professionals who can give tailored advice to employees about the problems they are facing now, offer an opportunity for 1:1 sessions
- bite-sized videos that employees homeworking and those away from work can access on relevant subjects
- make resources available through web based application that can be accessed through mobile phones and tablets making them available to employees without IT access and furloughed workers
- support and education sessions for workers on furlough
- working from home guidance

FURTHER READING AND INFORMATION

A selection of resources relating to managing mental health, which are free and available online:

1. Web sites

Mental Health at Work

<https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/>

MIND

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Heads Together

<https://www.headstogether.org.uk/>

Every Mind Matters

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

2. Videos

I had a Black Dog – His Name was Depression: Building Resilience (Black Dog Foundation)

Short animation that is free to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc>

60 second ad: Time to Change

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdPZ7rw0wMc>

Talking about Mental Health: MIND video series on You Tube. First edition available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YaS_4tXBNU

3. Activities that may support mental health

Yoga

30 days of Yoga with *Adriene* – 30 free yoga sessions for beginners

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXU591OYOHA>

Mindfulness

<https://www.oxfordmindfulness.org/learn-mindfulness/online-sessions-podcasts/>

Exercise

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/?tabname=strength-and-resistance>

4. Looking after mental wellbeing while at home during the pandemic

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips/>

5. Workplace Wellbeing Awards

Workplace Wellbeing Index

https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/workplace-wellbeing-index/?_ga=2.242324359.48352794.1584614609-389908514.1584614609

6. Free apps that are available to support mental health

Search in the app or play stores for:

1. Elefriends



Elefriends is a supportive online community from the mental health charity Mind. We all know what it's like to struggle sometimes, but now there's a safe place to listen, share and be heard. Whether you're feeling good right now, or really low, it's a place to share experiences and listen to others.

- Post updates and catch up with the community feed.
- Read and write posts offline.
- Share photos directly from your device.
- Passcode protected.
- Choose when and how you want to receive notifications.
- Moderated by the 'Ele handlers' from 10am until midnight

2. Silvercloud



Silvercloud provides a wide range of supportive and interactive programmes, tools and tactics for mental and behavioural health issues. These programmes address wellbeing, life balance, time management, communication skills, goal setting, communication and relationship management, anger management, stress management, relaxation and sleep management, among many others.

3. Happier

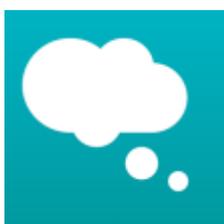


This App is only available on the Apple Store for iOS devices.

Happier helps you stay more present and positive throughout the day. Its Apple Watch app is like your personal mindfulness coach -- use it to lift your mood, take a quick meditation pause, or capture and savour the small happy moments that you find in your day.

- Share how you feel using our Apple Watch and we'll help you lift your mood with inspiring quotes, clear your mind with a positive meditation break, or easily capture and share something positive using just your voice.
- Use Happier as an on-the-go gratitude journal to record happy moments both big and small.
- Take our bite-sized, expert-led courses to discover new ways to find joy, calm, and satisfaction - they take just a few minutes a day, and help you become more resistant to negativity you may encounter, and more resilient overall.
- Connect with other Happier users in a positive and supportive environment.

4. Catch it



Catch It is a joint project between the Universities of Liverpool and Manchester, to help users better understand their moods through use of an ongoing diary.

The app was designed to illustrate some of the key principles of psychological approaches to mental health and well-being, and specifically Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

5. SAM: Self-help for Anxiety Management



[SAM](#) is an app to help you understand and manage anxiety. The app has been developed in collaboration with a research team from [UWE, Bristol](#).

SAM will help you to understand what causes your anxiety, monitor your anxious thoughts and behaviour over time and manage your anxiety through self-help exercises and private reflection.

The "Social cloud" feature will enable you to share your experiences with the SAM community while protecting your identity.

Couch to 5k



Walk and run your way to 5k with this Couch to 5k app designed to take total beginners from walking to running for 30 minutes in just 9 weeks. Millions of people have already started running with our simple Couch to 5k plan - so download it now, grab your trainers and get ready to become a runner.

Presented in association with BBC Get Inspired, the app builds you up gradually with a mix of running and walking. All you have to do is choose one of our four famous trainers and let them guide and motivate you through each session.

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