

Mental Health at Work Commitment guide for employers during coronavirus



How to use the guide

This guide has been designed to support organisations to tailor existing workplace interventions to support the mental health of your staff during the coronavirus pandemic, using The Mental Health at Work Commitment framework as a basis.

Throughout this guide, we will provide practical examples of what employers can do to support staff and respond to the current coronavirus pandemic.

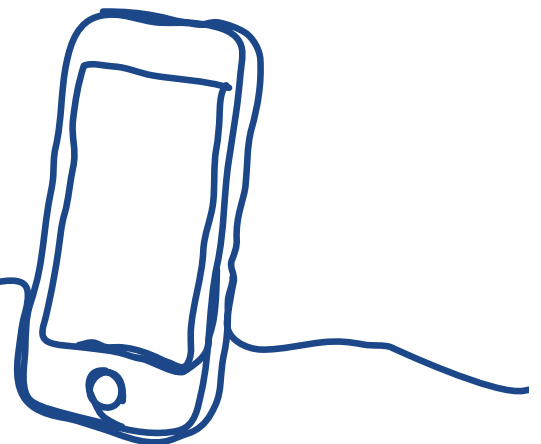
The Mental Health at Work Commitment is a simple framework that builds on what good practice looks like and includes six standards for how organisations can better support employees' mental health:

- Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity.
- Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes.
- Promote an open culture around mental health.
- Increase organisational confidence and capability.
- Provide mental health tools and support.
- Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting.

We know employers come in all shapes and sizes, with different working practices and environments. We also know the coronavirus has impacted organisations across sectors and industries in a variety of different and complex ways. However, we all have mental health and supporting everyone's wellbeing throughout this period is more important than ever.

We hope that organisations, regardless of sector or size, will be able to adapt these recommendations to their needs and consider how they can most effectively support the mental health of their people across all areas of their organisation – adopting a range of approaches and channels to engage people who are classed as key workers, remote workers and staff that are on furlough.

As the situation continues to evolve you can find our most up to date resources on the coronavirus by visiting www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/coronavirus



Standard one – Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity

This standard contains four main actions:

- 1 Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan, drawing from best practice and representing the views of employees across the organisation, specifically exploring feedback from people with mental health problems.
- 2 Demonstrate senior ownership and drive board-level accountability, underpinned by a clear governance structure for reporting.
- 3 Routinely monitor employee health and wellbeing using available data.
- 4 Seek feedback from your employees and create clear opportunities to make improvements based on feedback.

In response to the coronavirus, employers should consider:

Maintaining a positive culture where people feel able to talk about their mental health

This is more important now than ever as employees are likely to be experiencing a range of different interconnected issues; including money worries, caring for others, but also increased feelings of loneliness and isolation due to social distancing. Organisations should start by creating a mental health plan for this period as a clear indication to staff of the importance of mental health and wellbeing at this time. This could build upon a plan you already have, or be a new plan that is flexible during these unique times. This plan should include:

- how you will promote the wellbeing of all staff
- how you will tackle the work-related causes of mental health problems, including routinely taking stock of the wellbeing of your staff
- how you will support staff experiencing poor mental health
- how you will promote a positive work/life balance
- signposting to relevant sources of information and support both inside and outside your organisation
- offering clear guidance around what is expected of employees during this period
- acknowledging that this period is difficult for all staff to go through.

Organisations should also develop a communications plan which includes:

- Regular updates from senior leaders to reinforce the importance of staff wellbeing during these difficult times
- Business updates and changes in policy e.g. changes in financial or IT policies to reflect new working practises
- Regular updates on the support available from managers, staff networks, HR, EAPs and other external providers.

Ensuring sickness, absence and wellbeing reporting processes are adapted for new ways of working

As organisations adapt to changing circumstances presented by the coronavirus it is important that underlying reporting processes remain supported. Organisations that make use of paper return to work forms and face to face meetings will need to consider digital alternatives, as well as considering accurate ways to report new reasons for absence. This will ensure that the data collected on sickness, absence and staff wellbeing remain the most accurate.

Creating new mechanisms for feedback

Employers should ensure existing mechanisms for obtaining employee feedback and embedding employee voice remain suitable and supported. Methods for obtaining feedback could include:

- Online communication tool such as Microsoft Teams
- A dedicated email address with a mailbox for employees to send any questions or concerns
- An already established staff forum or newly set-up forum which represents employee voice during the current situation
- Digital area such as a staff intranet.

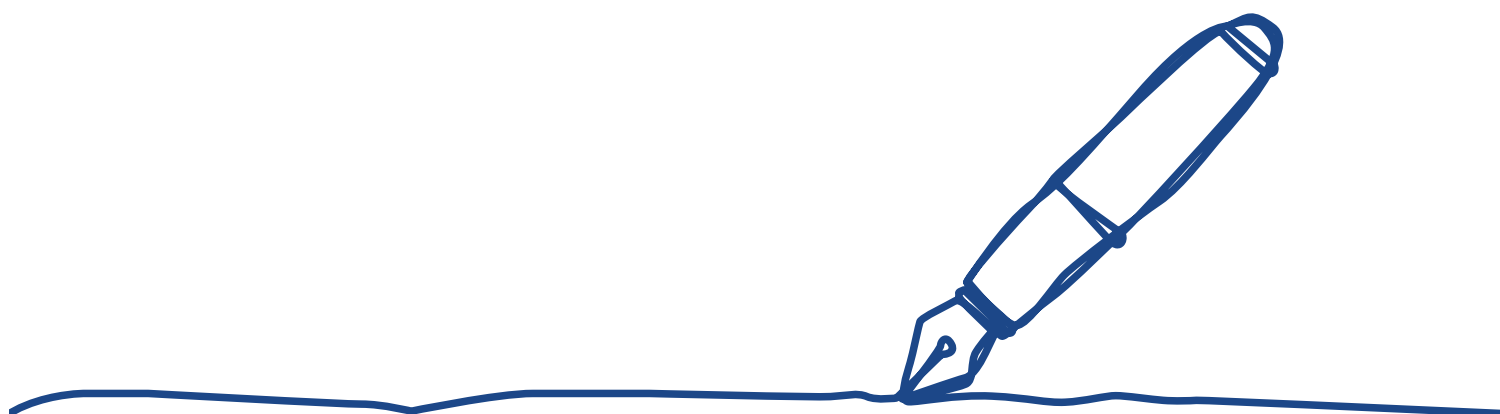
Planning for the longer-term impact of coronavirus

It's important that organisations put plans in place on how to support staff when lockdown measures are eased and working life adapts to a 'new normal'. Responding to change within organisations is inevitable and it's important that staff wellbeing is considered throughout this time.

Feelings of uncertainty are likely to persist for some time, so it is vital that organisations send clear messages on return-to-work plans. We have worked in partnership with the Society of Occupational Medicine alongside ACAS, BITC and CIPD to produce a [Return to Work Toolkit](#) which provides a comprehensive guide on how to approach the return to work process.

Coming out of lockdown will not be a simple reversal – it is going to be different for every organisation and it is going to be different for individual members of staff as people's experiences of the outbreak will be varied. For example, whether staff have been furloughed, provide caring responsibilities, some may have even contracted the virus or lost a friend or family member to it. As such, some staff will have significant concerns about returning to work and it is important that employers manage employees' anxiety and potential reluctance to return to the office through meaningful two-way dialogue and exploration of tailored individual ways of working.

Organisations need to ensure they are providing a workplace which is coronavirus secure, and they shouldn't expect staff to return to work if it is unsafe. Organisations have a responsibility to make the workplace safe and work together with employees to make decisions over their working environment and ensure that they understand new safety measures.



Standard two – Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes

This standard contains five main actions:

- 1 Provide employees with good physical workplace conditions.
- 2 Create opportunities for employees to feedback when work design, culture and conditions are driving poor mental health.
- 3 Address the impact that a range of activities have on employees, including organisational design and redesign, job design, recruitment, working patterns, email, 'always-on' culture, and work-related policies.
- 4 Give permission to have a work/life balance and to work flexibly and agile.
- 5 Encourage openness during recruitment and throughout employment so appropriate support can be provided.

In response to the coronavirus, employers should consider:

Ensuring staff are comfortable with their workload and how they do their work.

During these difficult times, staff may feel as though it is not possible to take care of their wellbeing. It can be easy for workplace habits to develop in a way which has a negative impact on the mental health of employees. Recent research from the Institute of Employment Studies has revealed that 75 per cent of employers have not carried out health and safety risk assessments for home-workers.¹ If the majority of your workforce is now working from home, then you too may be restricted in carrying out usual risk assessments for health and safety including for mental health and stress. Managers need to keep checking in with their staff to ensure that they are comfortable with their workload, and how they do their work.

¹ IES, 2020, Homeworker Wellbeing Survey

Ensuring staff maintain work/life balance

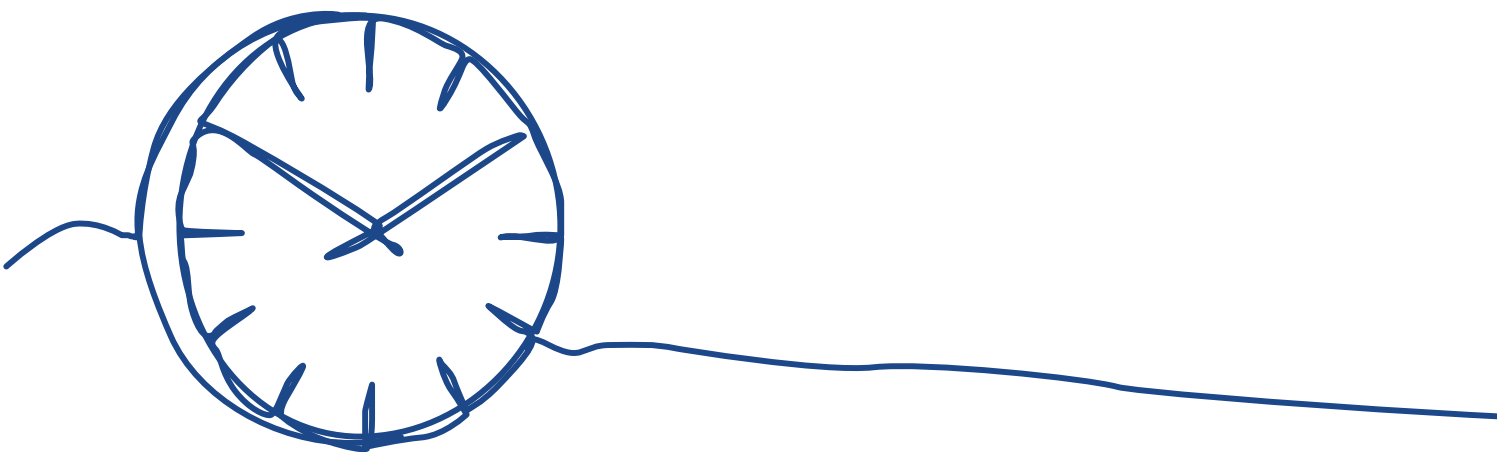
Whilst remote working can support the health and productivity of employees, it can feel isolating too. It can also lead to the development of an 'always-on' culture in which employees feel pressured to always be available and checking their emails. To challenge this, employers should consider:

- ensuring workloads are manageable and having mechanisms for staff to feedback and get support when this is not the case
- relaxing rules around working hours, and allowing employees to work at times which suit them while also ensuring people are not working above their hours
- encouraging staff to take regular breaks throughout the working day, including some physical activity if possible.
- ensuring employees have the right equipment to work, and that if employees have any reasonable adjustments in place for their mental health that these are in place in the employee's home working environment, for example, a light box, specific chair or office equipment.

Offering flexibility for key workers

If your workplace is still open and you have staff who are going into work during the coronavirus outbreak, giving people some control over when and how they work can help everyone be healthier and productive. For example, it can help an employee manage stress by allowing a later start/finish time so they can travel on public transport at a time they feel more comfortable. Similarly special considerations should be made for key workers who are parents and have childcare responsibilities, being flexible and adapting your approach during this period is essential.

You can find more guidance on coping as a key worker [here](#).



Standard three – Promote an open culture around mental health

This standard has three action points:

- 1 Proactively change the way people think and act about mental health by raising awareness and challenging mental health stigma.
- 2 Empower employees to champion mental health and positively role model in the workplace.
- 3 Encourage open two-way conversations about mental health and highlight the support available at all stages of employment.

In response to the coronavirus, employers should consider:

Establishing new ways of working for this period

The coronavirus pandemic will require organisations to implement numerous new ways of working. Some of these may be limited to the current period, whilst some may be embedded as permanent changes. Undoubtedly, the speed at which many of these new ways of working will be deployed across businesses will necessitate some level trial and error, so it is also important to think about how you will reflect on what's working well and what isn't.

Poor communication regarding such changes and new ways of working can cause stress. Staff may be affected if they are:

- overloaded with information they can't process
- excluded from key knowledge and conversations
- unable to tell managers how they're feeling.

Employers also need to make extra considerations for members of staff who may find this period more challenging due to being alone, being parents or carers, or if they themselves or someone they live with becomes unwell. Employers should be flexible and consider relaxing rules around sick pay and extending other leave entitlements such as sick leave and carers leave.

Using Wellness Action Plans as a tool for sharing mental health support needs

This is an uncertain and worrisome time for many, so some of your staff may need additional support. [Wellness Action Plans \(WAPs\)](#) are an easy, practical tool that can support the mental health of employees by providing a framework to reflect on the triggers of their poor mental health, what activities support their mental health and what strategies they might adopt to minimise poor mental health.

Everyone can complete a WAP and by encouraging your staff to complete a Wellness Action Plan you can reinforce the message that we all have mental health and empower employees to take an active role in managing their own wellbeing.

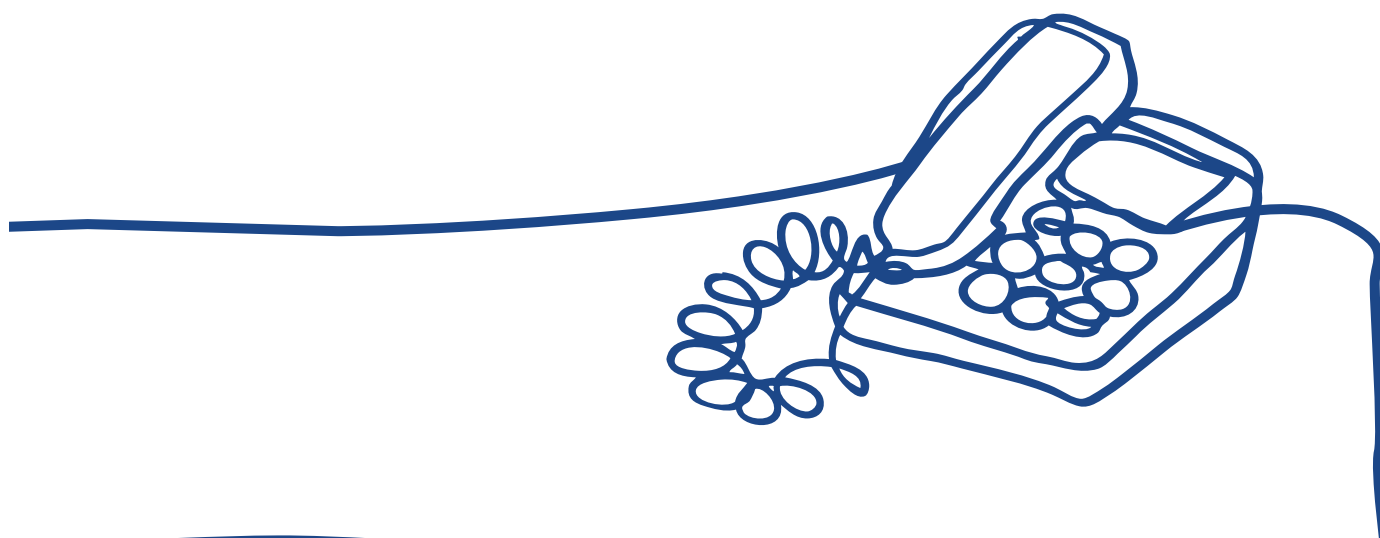
If your employees already have a WAP then it would be helpful to review in light of recent developments and changes.

We have also developed a new WAP for employees who are working from home in response to the coronavirus to use – you can access it [here](#).

Continue the conversation on digital platforms

Time to Change offers a wide range of digital materials including social media assets, postcards, email signatures and short videos that can support your organisation to continue to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and in addressing mental health stigma. You can find their library of digital resources [here](#).

You can also find a range of activities designed to address mental health stigma in workplaces on the Time to Change website [here](#), a number of which have been created to be delivered via digital platforms or can be easily adapted.



Standard four – Increase organisational confidence and capability

This standard has four action points:

- 1 Increase mental health literacy of all staff and provide opportunities for staff to learn about how to manage their own mental health.
- 2 Ensure all staff are suitably prepared and educated to have effective conversations about mental health, and where to signpost for support, including in inductions for all new staff.
- 3 Train line managers in spotting and supporting all aspects of mental health in the workplace, and include regular refresher training.
- 4 Support managers to think about employee mental health in all aspects of their role including during staff inductions, one-to-one meeting, team meetings and return-to-work meetings.

In response to the coronavirus, employers should consider:

Digital capabilities in delivering training and support

Organisations should ensure that proper inductions can still happen remotely if you are taking on new starters during this time, covering the same learning objectives that would have otherwise been delivered face to face. They should include relevant information including signposting to available support and details of who they can speak to if they experience mental health problems.

Delivering an effective induction programme is essential. Starting a new role can feel unsettling at the best of times, and if employees aren't given the right expectations and guidance, it can knock their confidence and trigger existing mental health problems. Mind offer e-learning packages for organisations, they will help your employees to better understand and manage their own mental and to support their colleagues, and better equip managers to encourage mentally healthier workplaces. For large organisations we license our eLearning courses but also have a [free eLearning course for people working in small workplaces](#).

If your employees are still coming to work, peer support programmes can be hugely beneficial. However, not everyone may feel comfortable to access peer support, whether due to social distancing measures or their own comfort in discussing their mental health, so communications including newsletters, intranet pages, online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Slack can also be valuable.

You could also encourage employees to access online peer support such as [Elefriends](#). This is a supportive online community where you can be yourself. 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 safe place to share experiences and listen to others.

Standard five – Provide mental health tools and support

This standard has three action points:

- 1 Raise awareness of the resources and tools available, including [Mental Health at Work](#).
- 2 Ensure provision of tailored in-house mental health support and signposting to clinical help, including but not limited to digital support, occupational health, employee assistance programmes, the NHS.
- 3 Provide targeted support around key contributors of poor mental health, e.g. financial wellbeing.

In response to the coronavirus, employers should consider:

Making sure your staff know about the wellbeing support your organisations has available

Ensure your employees know the package of support that is available to them and know how to access it during this time.

You can provide support in-house or buy in additional support for employees. This could include:

- access to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (including through digital platforms)
- counselling through Access to Work
- Occupational Health
- Employee Assistance Programmes and other tailored mental health and wellbeing support
- Reflective Practice where employees can examine and learn from their experiences and perhaps adopt practical new habits.

If your staff are working remotely then you should speak to your provider and look at what services they can offer virtually. For example, they could offer counselling over the phone or via Skype or similar. If you are a small employer and are unable to buy in any support for you staff at this time, then you should:

- ensure you send reliable information to staff on how they can support their mental health
- ensure employees can access their line manager, HR and support staff whilst working from if they have any questions or any support
- reach out to your industry bodies and organisations such as FSB to see if they can provide any support
- access the free Health for Work Advice Line service provided by NHS occupational health services.

Some employers extend support to organisations in their supply chain, particularly smaller employers, to help them improve the mental health of their employees. In the current situation, employers that have the resources to offer such support have an important role to play in ensuring that all employees have the support they need to look after their mental health. We recommend that they use their influence over their supply chains and customers to encourage and support other organisations. For example, you could share resources, knowledge and training courses.



Standard six – Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting

This standard has two action points:

- 1 Identify and track measures for internal and external reporting, including through the annual reports and accounts.
- 2 Measure organisational activity and impact using robust external frameworks, e.g. the [Business in the Community Responsible Business Tracker](#) and our [Workplace Wellbeing Index](#).

In response to the coronavirus, employers should consider:

Developing a clear picture of the mental health of your organisation during this period.

This will help you understand what is affecting mental health of staff and how well you're supporting them. Think about the tools and methods you have used previously to ask your staff about their experiences, perceptions and wellbeing levels – like staff surveys, HR data and appraisals – and adapt them to the current environment. Putting relevant questions into these existing tools will help you build a comprehensive picture, without creating extra work. Some other measures you could include are:

- monitoring how many employees are taking annual leave
- tracking how many employees have used internal peer support groups or, if you have one, your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- monitoring feedback from staff surveys – to see how employees are feeling and if they feel this period has impacted their mental health
- surveying staff throughout the period to find out how they are doing and whether there is any further support you could provide.

At a team level, it's important managers regularly take stock of the mental health of their staff, the types of pressures they're under and how to alleviate them. A useful way of doing this is to carry out a regular mental health audit, which allows staff to share their challenges and work together to identify solutions. You can find more information on this in our How to take stock of mental health in your workplace guide [here](#).

We're Mind, the mental health charity. We want to support a million people to stay well and have good mental health at work by 2021.

Be part of our movement for change in workplace mental health.

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