

MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

COVID-19 AND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF EMPLOYEES

DATE: APRIL 2020



PURPOSE

This briefing note provides a summary of guidance material to assist individuals and businesses in supporting mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19, and shares some examples of current activities being undertaken by Consult Australia members.

INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 (a strain of coronavirus) was confirmed as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in mid-March 2020.

The Australian and state/territory governments have iteratively implemented a range of measures to slow the spread within the country. This includes a range of non-essential services closures, travel restrictions, self-isolation requirements, restrictions on certain types of mass gatherings, and instructions and/or advice to the public and employers on how they can minimise risks. As a result, there has been a significant impact on businesses, people, and local and national economies.

Health concerns, economic challenges, changed working environments, and job uncertainty for many employees can lead to a range of mental health challenges in response to a rapidly evolving and changing situation from COVID-19. Each of these changes or impacts from COVID-19 would alone result in community and organisational-wide impacts on mental health, and together require a concerted effort to support our people, our businesses, our industry, and the broader community through these challenging times.

HOW WE CAN SUPPORT OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUPPORT OTHERS

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia, many mental health non-government organisations (NGOs), government agencies, universities, employee assistance providers (EAPs) and media organisations have released material to raise awareness of the mental health challenges that many may be experiencing. The common message is that we are all impacted by and may be experiencing challenges as a result of COVID-19, and this reflects the relationship between our mental health and our wellbeing (whether it be physical, financial, social, emotional, or even our autonomy).

This material also provides some tips and strategies we can all put in place to, not only support our own mental health, but also how we can support our colleagues and others in the community.

Set out below are some salient points from the material recently developed. Additional links to this information are available at the bottom of this briefing note under 'related links'.

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Some challenges that we might experience in response to COVID-19

- Heightened anxiety and/or fear is a common reaction to COVID-19. We are all naturally concerned about our loved ones, broader impacts, and the degree of uncertainty, and this can make many of us feel uncomfortable or scared.
- The situation we are all experiencing, and some of the unique challenges that individuals are experiencing, can make us feel overwhelmed and stressed. Sometimes this might result in increased irritability, and/or outbursts of anger and arguments.
- Excessive worrying, and other challenges from COVID-19, can also mean that we are finding it difficult to sleep and relax.
- Dealing with many of the personal challenges created by circumstances that we are currently in can lead to an increase in the usage of alcohol or drugs.
- We might find it more challenging to communicate or listen, and there may be times where we struggle to articulate our message clearly or comprehend what someone is saying to us. This can also lead to confusion and difficulty making decisions.
- Sometimes we might deal with the challenges we are experiencing from COVID-19 by denying feelings, saying that we don't care, or ignoring the situation at large. This is sometimes how we try and cope with a situation, however it is unlikely to be a sustainable (or healthy) approach in the longer-term.
- We might also experience physical symptoms as a result of some of the mental health challenges that we are also experiencing. This could include headaches, stomach pains, weakness, sweating, and tense muscles.

Suggested strategies

- As much as possible, we should try to maintain perspective on the current situation we are in as much as possible. One tip for doing this is to make sure we remind ourselves that many experts and others in the community are dedicated to containing the virus, treating those affected, developing a vaccine, and limiting the economic impacts. Another tip is to make sure we are getting our information on the virus from reputable sources – the World Health Organisation, the Australian Government, or your local state and territory government websites are good sources of truth.
- Focus on what we can each do to help minimise the spread of the virus – implementing personal hygiene guidance, following social distancing requirements, and meeting other requests of us during the response period. This can help make us feel like we are doing our part for the community to contain the virus and it will also reduce the risk for our loved ones.

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- It has been suggested by some that COVID-19 has attracted the most attention in the media (as a proportion to all news stories) on record. This is a lot of information to digest, particularly in the era of a 24-hour news cycle. While it is helpful to be across the topic, too much exposure to the media coverage can also create some challenges for us. We should consider if we need to limit our exposure to this coverage – one strategy is considering what our regular habits are and perhaps planning to follow something similar.
- With so much uncertainty and lots happening around us, many of us may be feeling out of control of many aspects of our lives. This can be difficult when we are used to a certain level of autonomy in our lives. One strategy we could follow is thinking about and writing down what is causing us concern that we can control and what is causing us concern but can't be controlled. This can also give us a good to-do list in these challenging times.
- It can sometimes be easy to fall into bad habits with our diet when we are experiencing challenges like we are with COVID-19. It is important to remember that eating healthy food and drinking water regularly will help equip our bodies to deal with the many challenges that we are experiencing.
- Another strategy we can put in place is focusing on people around you, such as family, children, friends and colleagues. This can help ensure we are maintaining social connections and sharing our experiences by mentoring, talking about our tips for dealing with our new environment, or finding ways to help others can be very rewarding.
- Remote working and some of the other measures we have had to put in place can sometimes blur the lines between our home and work life. It's important to remember that we need to take breaks to enjoy some activities and be physical. Maintaining a routine, and allocating time for work, family and yourself may also help – one tip is coming up with an activity that replaces your 'commute' at the beginning and the end of each work day.
- It's important that we do not bottle up our concerns and feelings about the current environment we are living in. Regularly talking about our concerns and feeling with loved ones and friends is an important step in helping us digest and come to terms with the situation we are in, and this can help address some of the challenges that many of us are experiencing.

All of these strategies can also be used to help others around you. The key messages from the annual RUOK? Day are particularly relevant during these COVID-19 times (as they are throughout the year) – be kind, look out for others, and keep connected.

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HOW BUSINESSES CAN SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF EMPLOYEES

A range of guidance material has also recently been released on how businesses can support the mental health of employees in the context of COVID-19. This guidance will also assist employers in meeting psychological health obligations under work health and safety (WHS) legislation.

SafeWork NSW recently presented to Consult Australia's Mental Health Working Group their [guidance material for businesses](#). While this material was developed within NSW, the tips and suggestions included are relevant for any jurisdiction. However, it is worthwhile checking for additional guidance from the equivalent WHS agency in your state or territory as there may be additional resources available or further details on complying with the relevant WHS legislation.

SafeWork NSW's guidance includes some steps that employers can take to reduce workplace mental ill-health in the current environment, noting the challenges of heightened anxiety and stress for workers during a global pandemic and the current economic circumstances. These steps include:

1. Undertaking a [mental health skills training course](#). SafeWork NSW's course, developed by the Black Dog Institute, aims to help employer and employee participants to learn about common mental health conditions, how to boost resilience at work, and also provides skills to have effective conversations about mental health. SafeWork NSW's course is free for NSW private sector individuals or businesses with up to 199 employees.
2. [Manage risk factors](#) by being informed about the current situation through official information sources. Implement the advice and recommendations from your WHS agency and the health departments. Identify and support workers that may be at more risk of workplace psychological injury (i.e. frontline workers or those working from home in isolation).
3. [Lead change](#) by consulting employees on how work will be conducted differently to enable appropriate health measures, by leading by example as a manager or employer, by enabling flexibility and considering good work design to help employees manage their work and other responsibilities, and ensuring there is clarity around entitlements that can be accessed if required.
4. [Provide support](#) to employees by being open, transparent and supportive. Encouraging open discussions to enable employees to share or learn from others and sharing support services will also assist. This includes an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider if available and other free services such as those available at Beyond Blue and the Black Dog Institute.

Guidance by SafeWork NSW also focuses on how employers can provide a mentally health work environment for employees who are working remotely/from home during COVID-19.

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This notes that WHS legislation obligations still apply in these situations, and highlights how factors such as isolation can contribute to mental ill-health and should be considered by employers. SafeWork NSW recommends employers undertake the following actions if they have employees in this circumstance:

- Consult employees on working from home arrangements and seek any feedback on concerns;
- Develop an understanding of the importance of social connections to maintaining good mental health – iCare in NSW have developed [social connections toolkit](#) which is a useful resource;
- Stay connected with staff members through real time communication (phone or videoconferencing) instead of only relying on text or email;
- Recognise the signs that may be indicating an employee is struggling by being aware of behaviour and communication changes – RUOK Foundation have [advice on how to pick these signs](#);
- Promote an inclusive culture by setting up virtual social events to encourage interactions;
- Encourage staff to follow a routine which ensures clear start and finish times, and includes breaks for physical activity; and
- Share resources and educate employees on ways they can stay mentally healthy while working from home (some of these are at the end of this briefing note under the 'related links' section).

EXAMPLES OF SOME CURRENT ACTIVITIES AT MEMBER FIRMS

Members of Consult Australia's Mental Health Working Group provided the below examples of some mental health activities that their business is currently undertaking in response to COVID-19.

- Scheduling more frequent team catch ups and one on ones – one firm asks their managers to ensure all staff members have had a chance to talk to someone each day (i.e. a social check in or a work related video meeting);
- Virtual wellbeing activities (one firm runs virtual yoga sessions once a week);
- Providing access to mindfulness applications such as Calm;
- Regular CEO updates seeking to provide certainty and to answer anticipated questions;
- A COVID-19 intranet page with regular updates and FAQs;
- Regional managers discussing and sharing activities with managers in other regions (including around the world) to help inform future activities; and
- Conducting social events by videoconference – i.e. a virtual lunch (one firm organised pizza deliveries to all employees for the videoconference), team drinks, games (another firm did a videoconference bingo).

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Please contact James Robertson (Policy Advisor, Consult Australia) at james@consultaaustralia.com.au if you would like further information on any these activities or the work of the Mental Health Working Group.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Department of Health, [COVID-19 updates \(updated regularly\)](#)
- Beyond Blue, [The Facts – Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)
- Lifeline, [Mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak](#)
- ROUK?, [Staying more connected is more important than ever](#)
- SafeWork NSW, [COVID-19 and mental health at work](#)
- SafeWork Australia, [Mental health and COVID-19](#)
- Head to Health (Federal Department of Health), [COVID-19 support for mental health](#)
- The University of Melbourne, [COVID-19: managing stress and anxiety](#)
- The One Brief, [Impacts of mental and emotional health on employee wellbeing](#)
- UK Government, [COVID-19 guidance for the public on mental health and wellbeing](#) (please note: any specific directions in this guide are UK-only measures)
- Beyond Blue will also be shortly launching a new COVID-19 Mental Health Support Service. Please refer to [their website](#) for further information on this arrangement.

WHERE TO CONTACT FOR HELP

- A range of crisis support links are available [here](#). This includes contact information for Lifeline, Beyond Blue, and state-specific mental health crisis services.
- Your firm may have an employee assistance provider that may be available for a discussion on mental health. Many firms also have a mental health first aider who may also be a good first point of contact for anything you would like to discuss.
- Consult Australia also has a Mental Health Ambassador Network, with some members available for a conversation on the topic. Please contact james@consultaaustralia.com.au if this of interest (all queries will be treated confidentially).

This Briefing Note provides a summary only of the subject matter covered, without the assumption of duty of care by Consult Australia. The summary should not be relied on as a substitute for legal or other professional advice.