

Looking after your mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic



As Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs), looking after our own mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is paramount.

With the current focus on flattening the curve to reduce the spread of the virus and save lives, less attention is being paid to the effects on our mental health and wellbeing. Put simply, we cannot care for others effectively if we are burnt out. Please note that this guide is based upon current advice at the time of publication (8 April 2020).

The current pandemic has brought about additional pressures such as:

- Increased anxiety and fear
- Not being able to visit loved ones in hospital/care homes
- Not being able to visit relatives, especially those that live long distances
- Enforced isolation – and the knock-on effects of those who are already suffering with mental health issues
- Lone working
- Increased domestic and child abuse
- Home schooling and increased childcare responsibilities
- Financial pressures
- Abandonment
- Increased alcohol consumption
- Dealing with death

The above are probably only the tip of the iceberg. While there are many local initiatives and schemes available, many people do not know where to go to for additional help.

How local authorities can assist

If you are working within a local authority, look into linking with other departments to pool resources and signpost to assistance available on your website. If you have not already done so, consider creating a dedicated webpage for health and wellbeing in the community.

You could provide links to:

- Gyms and fitness centres; many are offering online classes in yoga meditation and payment is either by donation, reduced rate or complimentary
- Healthy eating websites that offer cookery classes and how to use the ingredients you have in stock
- Online courses – there are a number of learning academies that are currently offering free courses or at a reduced rate
- Online activities for adults and children
- Short walks within the local area that people can take (noting the two-metre social distancing requirement!). Many residents may be unaware of the nature trails or paths in their communities

How employers can assist

Employers should be aware of how big changes to working arrangements may cause additional work-related stress and affect their employees' mental health and wellbeing. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) advises putting procedures in place so that managers and colleagues can stay in direct contact with home workers so that any signs of stress can be recognised as early as possible. It is also important to have a widely known emergency point of contact so that people know how to get help if they need it.

If you are an employer, now would be a good time to undertake a review of your stress risk assessment to reflect new working arrangements. If you advise or regulate employers that have made significant adjustments to their working practices, you could encourage them to undertake a review.

How individual EHPs can assist

Many EHPs have additional skills that could be harnessed to assist other EHPs with their own mental health and wellbeing.

These could include:

- Running online mindfulness, meditation and breathe work sessions
- Yoga and pilates
- Chat circles using existing platforms to share information – sometimes people just need someone to hear what they are saying and know that they have been heard
- Counselling – there are a number of EHPs who have retrained and are now counsellors and coaches
- Creativity – bring out the artist within

By prioritising your mental health and wellbeing, you are more likely to be able to provide the support that your family, friends and colleagues and the general public require.

Simple breath work technique that can assist with feelings of anxiousness

This can be carried out in a standing or sitting position while out walking, standing in a queue, at home or in the office.

1. Focus on your normal breathing rhythm and notice whether it is short and shallow or long and deep

2. Roll your shoulders back and take a deep breath – inhale (through the nose) to the count of three, then exhale (through the mouth) to the count of three. Do this three times, focusing solely on your breathing
3. As you complete this cycle, notice any changes that maybe occurring in your body
4. On your next inhalation, breathe in to the count of four, hold for a couple of seconds and exhale to the count of four. Repeat three times, focusing solely on your breathing
5. You can finish here or repeat, increasing the count to five

The aim of the above is simply to relax the body and aid clarity of thought. By doing this regularly throughout the day, you should see an improvement in your stress and anxiety levels.

Looking after your immune system

It is important to ensure that you are eating a nutritious diet with as much fresh fruit and vegetables as possible. Taking additional dietary supplements can assist in boosting your immune system.

Keeping alcohol to a moderate level is equally important as this may have an effect on your body's natural defences. Staying hydrated is also key, so drinking at least two litres of water a day can also be beneficial.

Further guidance

Mental health and stress at work

Mind: Mental health in the workplace.

HSE: Work-related stress

Mental health charities, groups and services

Mental Health Foundation: works to improve the lives of those with mental health problems or learning difficulties.
020 7803 1101

Together: supports people through mental health services.
020 7780 7300

The Centre for Mental Health: works to improve the quality of life for people with mental health problems.
020 7827 8300

British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy's find a therapist directory: provides details of local counselling services
01455 883300

PANDAS Foundation: aims to support every individual with pre (antenatal), postnatal depression or postnatal psychosis in England, Wales and Scotland.
0843 28 98 401

General advice and support

Citizens Advice: gives free confidential information and advice to help people sort out their money, legal, consumer and other problems.

Support for children and young people

Young Minds: provides information and advice for anyone with concerns about the mental health of a child or young person.
020 7336 8445

Childline: provides a free, national helpline for children and young people in trouble or danger.
0800 1111

Nightline: offer a listening, support and information service run by students for students.

Books

The Little Book of Breathwork by Catherine Carrigan.

Credits

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