



COVID-19: Managing stress for remote teams

For leaders

COVID-19 has seen rapid changes to our way of life (e.g. study, work, social gatherings), and disrupted plans due to travel restrictions and **physical distancing** measures as part of our effort to slow the spread of transmission.

Looking after our wellbeing, and supporting our teams to do the same, can help to reduce stress. It's also crucial in enabling us to still take calm and effective action in the midst of this global health event.

People are naturally concerned for their own and their loved ones' health and safety

Challenges of remote work

- **Lack of face-to-face supervision.** Employees may struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication, and feel that remote managers are out of touch with their needs which could be perceived as unsupportive or unhelpful.
- **Lack of access to information.** The extra time and effort needed to locate information, as well as disruption to interpersonal relationships among co-workers, are sources of stress from working remotely.
- **Distraction at home.** The blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life can have a negative effect on subjective wellbeing.
- **Social isolation.** Loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. Isolation has adverse effects on physical health, and can increase anxiety and stress.

What can you, as a leader, do to support your team?

The stress and anxiety of COVID-19, as well as the challenges of remote work, can adversely impact your staff's productivity. Having a concrete plan in place to guide your staff through this turbulent period can help reduce uncertainty and thus alleviate some stress and anxiety.

Task-oriented

- **Identify which tasks can be done remotely.** Help your staff develop their own pipelines of work.
- **Identify which tasks cannot be performed remotely.** These tasks may be captured in other business continuity programs of work if identified as critical to business.

Wellbeing

- **Provide opportunities for remote social interaction**
 - Leave some time at the beginning of team calls just for non-work items
 - Have virtual office parties (e.g. have pizzas delivered to everyone at the start of the videocall)
- **Offer encouragement and emotional support.** During this period of uncertainty, you have to:
 - acknowledge their stress
 - listen to their concerns
 - empathise with their struggles.

If you feel you or your team need more support please speak to a healthcare professional or someone you trust.

Communication-oriented

- **Establish structured regular check-ins.** This could take the form of a series of one-on-one calls if your employees work more independently from each other, or a team call if their work is highly collaborative. The important feature is that the calls are regular and predictable, that they are a form in which employees know that they can consult with you, and that their concerns and questions will be heard.
- **Provide several different communication technology options.** Email alone is insufficient. Video conferencing gives participants many of the visual cues that they would have if they were face-to-face. This helps reduce the sense of isolation among teams, and is useful for complex or sensitive conversations, as it feels more personal than written or audio-only communication.
- **Establish rules of engagement.** Set expectations for the frequency, means, and ideal timing of communication for their teams. For example, "We use video conferencing for daily check-in meetings, but we use Instant Message (IM) when something is urgent."
- **Decide how you will manage sharing files** if one or all of you are working remotely (e.g. Microsoft Teams, One Drive, Drop Box etc.).

General counselling and mental health support

- Beyond Blue - phone: 1300 22 4636
- e-headspace - phone: 1800 650 890
- Mensline - phone: 1300 78 99 78
- Mindspot - phone: 1800 61 44 34



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