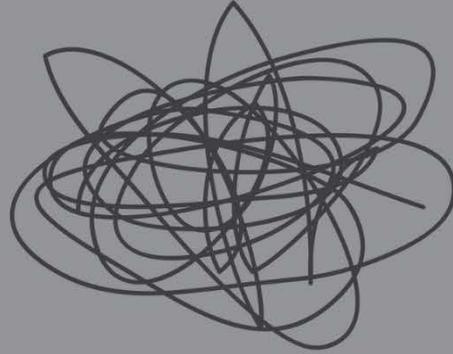


Mental Health in the Covid-19 Era - Theories, Tips and Myths



The information in this guide has been compiled by Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Dr Graham Fawcett, who works with Anvil's in-house Occupational Health team to provide ongoing guidance and support for our clients.

The advisory provides some practical guidance and expert opinion to help organisations understand the known psychological effects of the pandemic - and examine a few myths. The advisory also looks to the future in light of announcements regarding the potential readiness of a vaccine.

It covers:

- The psychological characteristics observed in response to Waves 1 and 2 of the pandemic, and lessons learnt
- How to improve communications and operational mechanisms during lockdowns and extended periods of working from home
- Myths associated with Covid-19 and possible responses post vaccination
- Looking to the future

Please note: The content of this advisory was produced in November 2020. We always recommend seeking up-to-date advice on the issues covered.

WAVE 1 RESPONSES

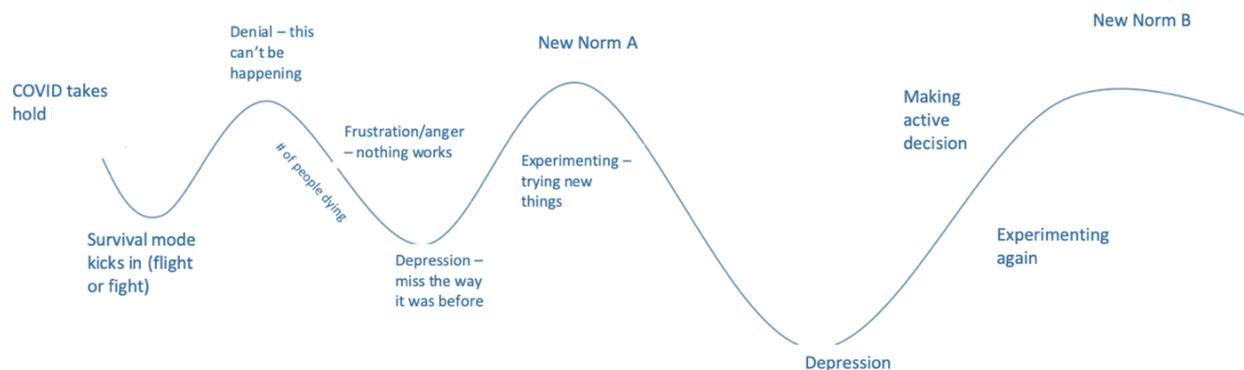
What we now refer to as Wave 1 of the pandemic affected all of us and understandably increased general anxiety levels in various degrees. Individuals previously presenting as calm may have experienced periods of uncertainty and worry; those with existing worries were more likely to have seen an increase in anxiety; and those with moderately higher levels of anxiety were at risk of more clinical style presentations.

What manifested for many was poor sleep, which then exacerbated anxiety levels and increased agitation. There were understandable worries, not just about immediate personal safety and wellbeing but also concerns for loved ones, in addition to broader concerns about the wider ranging, longer-term impact of the pandemic. These mounting concerns, compounded by disrupted sleep patterns, led to general feelings of fatigue and malaise, and many found themselves feeling overwhelmed, trapped in a seemingly vicious circle.

The Looping Grief Cycle

Many people found themselves experiencing what's often referred to as the looping grief cycle. Grief is generally a response to a specific event, and it typically goes through a seven-stage process:

- **Shock** - Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news
- **Denial** - Trying to avoid the inevitable
- **Anger** - Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion
- **Bargaining** - Seeking in vain for a way out
- **Depression** - Final realisation of the inevitable
- **Testing** - Seeking realistic solutions
- **Acceptance** - Finally finding the way forward



The circumstances of Wave 1 meant that there were multiple grief events happening all the time, which significantly compounded the situation. From the profoundly serious and highly impactful events of losing loved ones and not being able to say goodbye properly, through to people feeling as if their personal freedoms were being taken away, as basic day-to-day activities were restricted.

As a result, many individuals found themselves experiencing a constant range of grief events that cascaded, and found themselves becoming increasingly stressed, tired and fatigued, which in turn led to a significant increase in stress hormones. The required isolations for many also led to increased loneliness, particularly amongst older and more vulnerable members of society. This, combined with the general unpredictability, uncertainty and uncontrollable nature of events, led to many people feeling less able to cope with life in general.

The Impact of Home Working

There were additional complications added into the mix for different social groups as working parents were suddenly having to juggle working from home with home schooling, and others found themselves having to work in extremely cramped conditions, in homes not equipped to deal with prolonged periods of work activities.

Many organisations also saw splits between furloughed and non-furloughed staff. Furloughed staff potentially felt cast aside and more at risk of future redundancy, whereas those who remained working potentially resented those they felt were being paid to stay at home and do nothing.

As the first Wave came to an end and we began to see signs of at least some normality returning, there was still a widespread feeling of uncertainty, with many understandably worrying about how they could or would transition back to work and other activities safely.



Technology obviously helped to some extent, with a surge in the use, for both business and leisure, of tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Although it had its advantages, it wasn't a complete substitute for in-person meetings, and it also brought its own issues as its usage increased, with people starting to suffer from what became commonly referred to in the media as "Zoom Fatigue".

WAVE 2 RESPONSES

During Wave 2, subtly different responses in mental health and mental wellbeing were noticed. Wave 2, and any future waves, are likely to be more characterised by a general low mood, probably best described by the English term of being 'fed up'. People are 'fed up' of having to go through another lockdown and feeling as though, despite all their efforts over the initial nine months, they're still in the same position.

What's also being seen is an increase in feelings of depression and presentations of depression in some of those previously more resilient people. Again, the presentations are fatigue, poor sleep, or hyper sleep (sleeping for a very long time) and increased agitation.

A possible explanation for this is not so much a "grief response", but what is often called a "learned helplessness response". Learned helplessness is the phenomenon where despite feelings of having tried hard to do certain things, everything fails. A feeling of powerlessness then takes over.

This can eventually lead to a presentation which resembles depression but is more characterised by simply giving up. It manifests in a "what's the point" approach to life and can lead to lethargy.

The time of year that lockdowns happen can also have significant impact, so should also be factored in. Isolation in Summer in the Northern Hemisphere, for instance, is different to isolation in Winter. There are fewer opportunities for informal contact outside – talking to neighbours, bumping into people in the street – which although may seem trivial, do have a positive impact.

Wave 2 responses have also been complicated to some degree, by a lack of clarity around what is and isn't permissible. Many people admit to having cut down on the amount of time spent watching the news and keeping a close eye on media updates. With guidelines changing regularly, lines are becoming blurred and confusion is creeping in. It therefore becomes more difficult for people to stay positive and look to the future as they would have potentially done initially.

Many people are obviously still dealing with issues of complex grief, with a sense that they haven't been able to grieve properly for loved ones. They may have also found themselves experiencing extremely stressful situations such as losing jobs and worrying about the long-term impact on their financial situation.

There's also uncertainty about a return to work and the potential future of pre-existing working environments. Although some of the concerns around work obviously surfaced in Wave 1, they have shifted. In Wave 1 there was more optimism that "all would be well" by September. In Wave 2, it's accepted that there can be no clear answers just yet.

Those who need to continue working from home are also likely to experience different emotions in Wave 2. Although not ideal, many viewed the working from home experience during Wave 1 as a short-term issue, seeing it almost as a novelty of sorts. The experience of Wave 2 and any future waves will be different as the novelty has now worn off and people know that it's going to be difficult.

What can be done?

It's important for individuals to appreciate the impact each stage of the pandemic could have on them, whilst also trying to ensure that they maintain habits that help to keep them active and engaged.

Routines

Creating daily and weekly routines, factoring in time for exercise and maintaining social contact, even if it can't be done in person, is important. Although it may be tempting to take naps during the day, especially if lethargy sets in, avoiding sleep during the day, can help to encourage more regular sleep patterns at night.



It's also important for people to experience the act of "getting up and going to work" even when working from home. Just getting changed into work attire, albeit slightly more relaxed, and then changing again at the end of the official working day, can help to differentiate between work and leisure time when lines are blurred.

Where possible, defining an official work area, even if not in a separate room, and then hiding or covering it at the end of the working day, can also help with the distinction.

Many people are also finding that leaving the house, just to walk around the block can act as a partial substitute for the previous work commute and help them to wind down.

Technology and Media

Although it may still be necessary to rely on technology as an alternative to face-to-face meetings, learnings from the Wave 1 experience highlight the importance of limiting the use of video calls. If such sessions are required, then it's recommended that users switch off the 'self-view' function. What became clear in Wave 1 was the detrimental impact that seeing ourselves on screen for prolonged periods could have. Additionally, although staying informed is important, a reduction in news voyeurism can help to improve feelings of wellbeing. Rather than constantly checking the headlines, making a point of catching up on news events once a day and for a short period of time may be beneficial.

Human Contact

Staying in touch with loved ones and friends is important as people's informal contact with others is reducing. People are missing the more informal social interactions that they previously took for granted and potentially didn't pay much heed to – stopping and having a random chat with colleagues in the office for instance, or chatting over a quick coffee or lunch. To replicate the same virtually takes far more effort so these more spontaneous social engagements have disappeared for many people.

Stimulants

It's also advisable to switch to more natural stimulants to keep our bodies functioning if possible. Many people are seeing an increased reliance on caffeine which can have a detrimental effect. When the body is already agitated and stressed, an excessive intake of caffeine can exacerbate symptoms, so reducing intake to 2-3 shots per day maximum can prove beneficial. For those in the Northern Hemisphere transitioning through Autumn and Winter seasons, taking a break during the working day to go outside and walk when the sun is high is also recommended. Not only does it act as an energy and mood booster but vitamin D can also help to support the immune system.

Employer Support

Of course, there is no such thing as a standard reaction to the Covid-19 situation, so employers need to appreciate the different impact it may have had, and continue to have, on employees. Managers and team leaders should be encouraged to take a consultative approach and take on board the concerns that individuals may have, even if not all of them can necessarily be resolved.

LONG COVID

Although it's still far too early to state anything conclusively, there are concerns that over and above the short-term symptoms experienced by those testing positive for Covid-19, there may also be some longer-term implications.

Physical Impact

For those who have been symptomatic, some are experiencing post viral fatigue which is to be expected after any significant virus. In addition, there have been cases of individuals experiencing much longer-term Covid-19 symptoms – including the cough, fever and loss of taste – in something that's becoming referred to as Long Covid.

Although it obviously varies with age, publicly available statistics suggest that around 80% of people with Covid-19 symptoms recover within eleven days; around 13% will have symptoms for at least four weeks; 4-5% for at least eight weeks; and for 2%, symptoms have been known to last for at least twelve weeks.

It's currently unclear as to whether there are multiple factors at play but, from studies so far, what appears to be the case is that, of those who are symptomatic, around one in 20 may go on to have longer term difficulties.

Psychological Impact

Psychologically, we are seeing several different implications of Covid-19. Probably the most concerning one is being popularly referred to as "brain fog" where measurements are showing up to an eight-point IQ deterioration in standard IQ tests. This is roughly the kind of deterioration typically expected over a ten-year period in what is called "fluid IQ" for those typically over the age of 40.

Anecdotally, people who are experiencing brain fog as a result of Covid-19 report that the feelings come and go, so there is therefore some indication that this is a temporary inflammatory issue which will right itself over time.

However short-term though, this is something that employers may need to be aware of. Although the impact on office-based staff may be minimal – they may simply not feel up to their normal performance levels for a while - where people are dealing with high-precision instruments, heavy machinery or vehicles, employers may need to think about regular occupational health assessments for those who may have been affected.

The Unknowns

Exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions

Some literature suggest that pre-existing mental health conditions worsen as a result of Covid-19, particularly if an individual has suffered from Long Covid. There is no firm evidence yet that that is the case. There will understandably be an impact, albeit potentially temporary, as anyone suffering from a long term serious illness, the prognosis of which is uncertain, is going to have concerns and worries.

Long-term prognosis

Although people understandably want answers, it's still too early to draw conclusions, as we can't yet say whether Long Covid is an inflammatory condition or could reflect permanent damage. There's also no certainty as to its potential average duration. Around the World, Long Covid centres are being set up and research is continuing. From an occupational health point of view, again, we're currently unable to draw conclusions on a functional level about people's prognosis, although this will hopefully change over time.



Organisational Support

Even some of the most resilient of employees are now professing to experiencing periods where days, weeks and even months are starting to blur. For organisations, it's important to encourage and support routines and to look at ways to help employees navigate these uncertain times.

Informal Wellbeing Check-ins

Having regularly scheduled meetings can help, not just in creating a sense of routine, but as a way to check in with people and informally assess their general wellbeing. Having a 5-minute chat at the beginning of each meeting can be a good way to gauge people's moods. Even without asking how people are feeling, simple innocuous questions such as "what can you see out of the window?", "what are you having for lunch today?", "what are you working on right now?" can be a great way to get people talking, without it feeling too inquisitorial. By getting them talking, it's often possible to sense their general mood just from their tone and the amount of information they share.

Communication Channels

There are obvious pros and cons to having cameras active during remote meetings. It's recommended that cameras are kept on allowing people to see each other and feel more connected, but as stated earlier, this is best done with the self-view option switched off.

It's also worth thinking about other communication channels that can be used for more informal conversations and interactions outside of official meetings. For example, setting up WhatsApp style chats for members of teams so that they can keep in touch, share more fun/light-hearted news and build camaraderie, can really help to make people feel more connected with their colleagues and peers whilst apart.

THE COVID-19 MYTHS

Through the popular press in particular, we're being led to believe that there is a significant increase in mental health issues including suicidality. A very recent large-scale study published in the UK, suggests that such increases are marginal and that there is currently no evidence of an increase in suicidality or completed suicides within the UK.

There is some evidence of some increase in mental health issues generally, but on examination of the literature, it suggests that there's an increase in generalised anxiety, which is obviously to be expected. Anxiety though, does not equate to a mental health condition diagnosis or signify that those suffering from anxiety will go on to develop a mental health condition as a result.

It's clear that the psychological impact of experiencing Covid-19 can be deeply worrying for some people and a small number may develop some kind of mental health concerns, along the lines of anxiety or depression. Interestingly, PTSD has also been mentioned. The supposition is that those experiencing PTSD are more likely to be those who have spent periods of time hospitalised in intensive care and are coming out with Post ICU Syndrome. This is not at all surprising as being intubated can be a frightening experience for some, who may then experience trauma as a result.

It's believed that most mental health issues brought on or exacerbated by Covid-19 will be transient and contextual. Employers need to be sympathetic, empathic and understanding. Covid-19 is, for many people, deeply frightening, particularly if they have a pre-existing condition. It shouldn't be at all surprising that staff and colleagues may be more concerned than normal.

A Vaccine

Although there's been some encouraging news recently about a vaccine, we need to remain cautiously optimistic for now. Even when a vaccine is officially approved for widespread usage, there will still be significant logistical and supply chain issues to overcome. All things considered, it will take up to four months for a population to be vaccinated from the date of regulatory approval in a nation. Health care workers and the most vulnerable (over 80s and those with serious pre-existing conditions) will be vaccinated first. Vaccination will then proceed through age cohorts in decreasing-age bands. For international companies, the ability of low-income countries to secure vaccines during 2021 is degraded and initially reliant on a number of Non-Government initiatives.



There are also two drags on widescale vaccination uptake. The antivaxxer movements in various countries could represent a significant concern. Secondly there are significant cold chain issues in the first vaccines coming to market representing challenges for distribution in warm or hot climate nations.

We also need to be aware that news about the vaccine may start to affect people's behaviours as we start to see an increase in hope and optimism.

Paradoxically, this may lead to greater carelessness and people defying restrictions as they believe a cure is so close that there is no longer any need to take precautions and restrict movements, regardless of official guidelines.

Potential Psychological Benefits

Despite the extremely negative impact that Covid-19 has had, there have been some potentially positive outcomes too. As we've become acclimatised to working from home, more people have been able to reflect on their work-life balance. With people no longer needing to commute regularly, many may look to readdress their futures and be reluctant to return to previous routines. Although some may find this helpful for their general wellbeing, it could obviously cause issues for employers who may need to review future working practices and the need for employees to be in certain locations.

With news of a vaccine finally breaking, although it may be some way off yet, it does provide a glimmer of hope and a possible return to some sense of normality. From now on we should see a steady increase in optimism and a steady reduction in some of the transient mental health issues.

It's important though to keep expectations in check so that people don't become overoptimistic too soon and start to get careless with their self-care. We also need to be conscious of the fact that "yo-yoing" around the optimism gradient can be bad for people's mental health. For example, if people believe that they can start going out again by the end of the year and then they can't; and that a vaccine will be available by Spring and then it isn't, that can have an impact on their mental wellbeing. We may find ourselves returning to the "learned helplessness" as people start to feel that nothing is really changing, despite all their best efforts.

THE FUTURE

No-one can predict exactly when this pandemic will end or when organisations and their employees will be able to return to a state of normality. The situation will vary country to country and despite all the best projections and modelling, there can be no definitive answers yet.

For some employees, current events may leave psychological scars which could remain with them longer-term. Organisations have a duty of care to provide the necessary protection and support for all their employees both during and after this pandemic.

ANVIL SUPPORT

Anvil provides a range of services that can help organisations to navigate these difficult times and support their teams 24/7, wherever they are located. Our services include:

- Return to work / return to travel health risk assessments
- Medical emergency response plans
- Pandemic and public health advice
- GP consultations and mental health counselling via telemedicine and video appointments
- Emotional support and wellbeing programmes

For further information on any of the Anvil services or guidance on how to address the longer-term concerns or implications of the current pandemic, please contact us directly via enquiries@anvilgroup.com or visit www.anvilgroup.com

Content for this advisory was drawn from our recent webinar “Mental Health in the Covid-19 Era – Theories, Tips and Myths” hosted by Dr Graham Fawcett, which is available to watch on demand via:

http://info.anvilgroup.com/mental_health_webinar_10nov20

Further Information Sources

<http://info.anvilgroup.com/covid-19-resources>

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

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