

# Preparing for the journey ahead



This information has been compiled by Dr Simon Clift MFOM (Consultant in Occupational Medicine) and Dr Graham Fawcett (Consultant Clinical Psychologist) both of whom are currently working 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 psychological impact of Covid-19; support their employees through the early stages of functioning in the newly imposed and dramatically different environments; and prepare themselves for the journey ahead using occupational health based initiatives.

It covers:

- The effects on people of social distancing and quarantine
- The occupational health response needed, including infection control, ergonomic measures and physical wellbeing considerations
- The psychological aspects and underlying issues that affect everyone
- How responses will evolve over time
- Managing home working for the individual and the organisation
- The importance of engendering community

## THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING AND QUARANTINE

For organisations to support their employees through this understandably stressful time, it helps to have a deeper understanding of the primary stressors currently at play and how these can manifest.

### Stressors during quarantine

There are various stress factors that we can expect during a quarantine situation:



**Post-traumatic stress symptoms** - Where quarantine or self-isolation lasts 10 days or more, it's common to see an upsurge in post-traumatic stress symptoms, typically manifesting as avoidance behaviours – for instance, a reluctance to go outside or to come into contact with other people. There's also an upsurge in feelings of anger – either at the situation itself or at others.

**A fear of infection** – This can take hold in one of two ways (or both):

- a fear of infecting other people, particularly loved ones
- individuals becoming hypersensitive to their own 'symptoms' – for instance, an everyday headache, cough or sore throat can now generate a real fear of having become infected with the virus

**Frustration and boredom** - Exacerbated by a lack of daily routine and activity, frustration, boredom and irritability can easily take hold.

**Inadequate supplies** - The frustration at not being able to freely access basic supplies can create anger and anxiety, which for some people will not necessarily cease once supplies are more readily available. For some, these feelings can continue for many months afterwards.

**Inadequate information** - Poor or inaccurate information can often lead to catastrophising about what is happening, raising anxiety levels further.

Although some of these stressors may dissipate post quarantine, it's important to remember that they may then be replaced with alternative ones.

### Stressors after quarantine

**Finances** - Once the quarantine or period of self-isolation has subsided, people whose finances have been severely impacted are at an increased risk of being psychologically affected with feelings of anger and anxiety being common as the longer-term implications hit home.

**Quarantine stigma** - There will be some people who will also feel a certain level of stigma at having been quarantined, even when it's not logical to do so.

With both of these, there could be a level of resentment as to 'why this happened to me and not others' and a feeling that the individual has personally failed in some way.

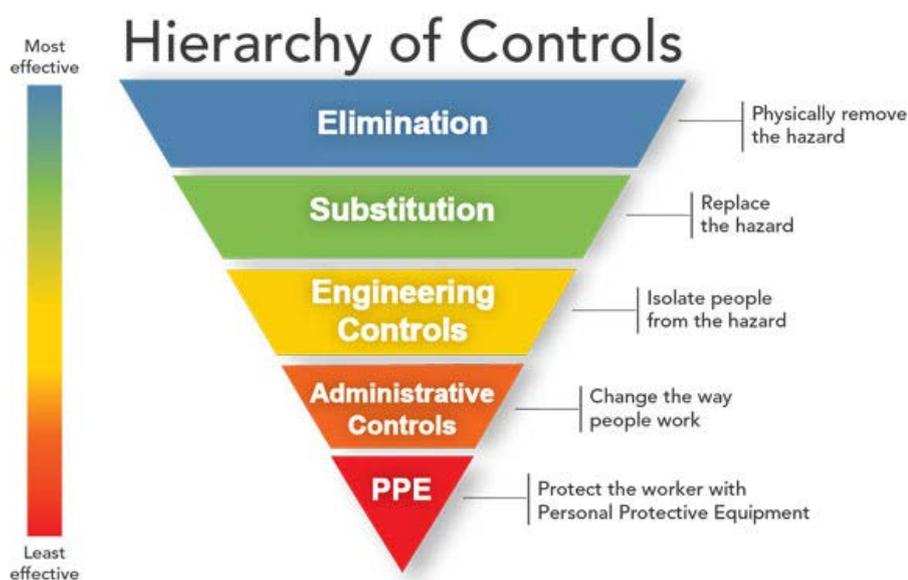
While it's obviously not within the power of organisations to mitigate some of the above stressors, there are a number of basic measures that companies can undertake to support their employees. These include:

- looking at ways of helping them adjust to their new circumstances;
- setting realistic expectations around how long the situation may last and not making false promises; and
- providing clear and consistent communication in order to keep employees informed and engaged.

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESPONSE

To help organisations respond to the current situation there are some established tools/resources which can provide at least some base level guidance upon which to build, including ISO 45001.

ISO 45001 is an International Standard that specifies requirements for an occupational health and safety (OH&S) management system to enable an organisation to proactively improve its OH&S performance in preventing injury and ill-health. ISO 45001 describes a hierarchy of controls required for a robust and effective response to general workplace hazards in the order of their effectiveness.



1. Eliminate hazards as far as possible.
2. Ensure that the organisation has effective preventive and protective measures in place.
3. Identify workers who may be at increased risk of hazards, including those considered disabled under the Equality Act 2010.
4. Promote and protect both physical and mental health.

These can be very much applied to the current situation in the following ways:

### Infection Control

The 'hazard' in this case clearly relates to the risk of infection. Social distancing and self-isolation have both been very clearly identified as a key part of this response. In some ways it is reasonably straightforward at the moment for many organisations, with so many workplaces being temporarily closed and national guidelines in place, but the challenge will come when facilities start to re-open.

Organisations will need to have specific 'return to work' control measures in place including very clear instructions to workers not to attend work if they are systematic or if they've been in close contact with a suspected case.

Organisations will also need to consider other potential return to work measures such as making sure that, where possible, there's more distance between employees within an open environment and ensuring that there's adequate ventilation in place.

They may also need to consider allowing flexibility of working hours to avoid peak commuting times when public transport is likely to be more crowded. Possibly rotating staff between home and office could address both of these concerns so that there are smaller numbers of people on the premises or travelling at any one time.

Continuing virtual meetings with colleagues could also help to address these issues, at least during the transition period, with individuals/teams justifying why they need to physically come together rather than justifying their home working arrangements.

Organisations can also help to protect their workforces by continuing to reinforce and provide more adequate facilities to support the very basic public health measures currently being undertaken, well beyond Covid-19, including providing facilities to enable more frequent handwashing and more regular and thorough cleaning of frequently touched surfaces.

### The pros and cons of face mask usage



It's worth briefly covering whether or not the use of face masks should be considered as lockdown measures ease. There's no specific evidence of benefits outside of healthcare environments except for two particular groups of people: those who are sick and show symptoms, and those who are caring for people who are suspected to have the coronavirus.

Frequent hand washing with soap and water is far more effective than wearing face masks. In addition, removing a mask requires special attention to avoid hand contamination, and the wearing of a mask could also breed a false sense of security.

For some though, the use of a facemask is more of a behavioural nudge, as explained by Donald Low, a behavioural economist and professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology: "Putting on a mask every day before you go out is like a ritual, like putting on a uniform, and in ritual behaviour you feel you have to live up to what the uniform stands for, which is more hygienic behaviour such as not touching your face or avoiding crowded places and social distancing."

Should individuals choose to wear masks, it's vital that they understand how to use, remove and dispose of them properly and remember to use them in combination with frequent thorough hand washing and other preventative measures.

### Ergonomic Measures

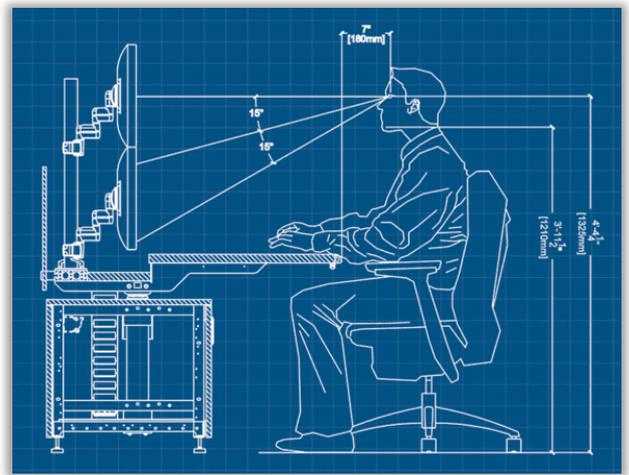
With many employees now working from home, organisations need to have policies and procedures in place to ensure that their staff are able to maximise the set-up of their new temporary work environments.

#### 1. Workstation equipment

Not all employees will have the ideal workspace at home, and this can lead to potential work-related injuries if a sub-optimum set-up is used for an extended period. Organisations need to ensure that they are aware of and, as soon as possible, can address these issues.

This could involve sending monitors and keyboards to employees if they are working from laptops and providing guides for employees on how to set up their home workstations properly.

Other sensible ergonomic measures include encouraging employees to take regular breaks and allowing them time to schedule exercise into their working day. Even microbreaks of two to three minutes away from their desks every 20-30 minutes can help – getting up and moving is even more important whilst working in adapted spaces.



## 2. Working from home strategies

The Society for Occupational Medicine (UK) provide some useful guidance for safe and effective homeworking which organisations should be encouraging their employees to follow:

- i) **Be realistic** - Managing expectations of ourselves and others in terms of the amount of work that can be done during the typical working day, whilst also dealing with family commitments, headspace, motivation etc.
- ii.) **Set boundaries** – Where possible, keeping regular working hours will help to maintain routine and a sense of some normality.
- iii.) **Prioritise recovery time** - Downtime is essential for long term health and job performance and people who neglect this are more likely to burn out.
- iv.) **Maintain contact with others and offer and receive support** - To prevent feelings of isolation, it is crucial to maintain contact with colleagues – not just about work issues, but social interactions too.

### Physical Wellbeing

When taking an occupational health approach, it's important for organisations to look at the broader positive wellbeing measures and initiatives and not just focus on the immediate 'hazards'. Physical wellbeing can play a significant role in the current climate as it can boost immunity and can also play a part in reducing comorbidities.

This is also the ideal time for organisations to consider rebooting general corporate wellbeing programmes, the longer lasting benefits of which are something positive to focus on and maintain well after the Covid-19 period has passed. These could include supporting employees with programmes that promote regular exercise, healthy eating, reduction in caffeine and alcohol intake, cessation of smoking and the encouragement of relaxation techniques, immersive activities and better sleep hygiene – all of which bring positive long-term physical benefits.

### Psychological Wellbeing

Without exception, the current pandemic will affect everybody psychologically, albeit in varying degrees and at various stages. It's important for organisations to understand the underlying causes and issues and be aware that, however resilient some of their employees may appear, it's likely that they will be prone to a certain level of anxiety, which could manifest as follows:

- Anxiety driven insomnia typically characterised by difficulty getting to sleep and/or fitful sleep or periods of wakefulness.
- Unpredictable waves of calm and then intense anxiety which can be quite overwhelming – the anxiety is often associated with the realisation that we're no longer able to do certain things or see certain people.
- General demotivation or an inability to focus on basic work tasks or day to day activities.

### **Why is this?**

We know that anxiety in part is characterised by any one of three factors becoming a problem. If life becomes unpredictable, uncontrollable or uncertain, then these are key triggers for generalised anxiety. Understandably, we can therefore expect an increase in anxiety levels right now, which can significantly impact our general wellbeing.

### **How can this be addressed?**

Unfortunately, we're not going to be able to end the pandemic overnight and, however long it lasts, life will not return to normal straight away. We can however take some small steps towards mitigating the psychological impact and helping us to cope.

As organisations, we need to support our employees in these areas. Encourage employees to focus on anything that can help them to regain a small sense of predictability, control or certainty, e.g.

- Setting a schedule for work, family and personal time - getting up, going to bed, regular mealtimes and exercise etc. is crucial. Deciding when we are 'at work' whilst at home and when we are officially 'off duty' where possible so that our time/days feel more certain and predictable.
- Doing absorbing tasks when not working – anything from gardening to clearing the loft, jigsaw puzzles or crafting can help by distracting and keeping the brain occupied but can also help individuals to regain a sense of control.
- Talking on social media at scheduled times - 'being' with other people regularly at predictable times can help to alleviate anxiety. Setting up virtual appointments and dates (whether work or social – either phone calls or video catch-ups) gives us something to look forward to and something predictable to focus on.

### **How responses will evolve over time**

Responses will naturally evolve over time and are likely to follow a fairly predictable pattern -

- Denial (of the loss of control or any personal impact) – we might initially see aspects of denial with individuals not thinking things are as bad as everyone says and that it's not going to happen to them or affect them etc.
- Panic (to regain control and certainty) – due to the uncertainty and trying to regain control e.g. the stockpiling of food and certain household items – these are behaviours that make people feel they have control and security.
- Grief – this can manifest as anger or sadness at the loss of opportunity to do normal things or there may be a significant increase in 'complicated grief' where there is the loss of a loved one and people are unable to be with them in their final hours, say good-bye or even mourn them properly. This interruption to the normal grief process can have profound implications on people and impact them significantly longer-term.
- Acceptance of the new normal – although we may not be there yet, there will come a certain level of acceptance of the new norm as people become more acclimatised and realise that they have to deal with the situation and 'get on' with life as best they can.

These responses don't necessarily happen in this order – people can go back through cycles or sway from one to another over time.

There is nothing predictable about the current situation or different people's responses to it, so organisations need to be able to address and deal with all of them at any given time and provide the varying levels of support that their employees will need.

Having a solid understanding of the psychological impact of the pandemic can help organisations to support their employees in the most appropriate way. The following section looks at the different psychological considerations that organisations need to be aware of and be able to support their employees with.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS – GENERAL

- **Living life** - What does this look like in this time? Being able to accept the situation and draw at least some positive experiences from it can be significant helpful. Life may be changing but our altered circumstances may provide some people with the opportunity to do something they've always wanted to do but not had the time – from learning a new skill to just spending more time with their family or reconnecting (virtually) with distant friends and social groups.
- **Personal connections** - We are naturally social creatures so self-isolation can be understandably difficult for many individuals. Setting up regular check-ins, group chats or other ways of feeling involved with family and friends can help. Thanks to technology, virtual cocktails, meals and parties can provide a positive alternative until the real thing is possible again.
- **Improving individual resilience** – We may need to use regular coping mechanisms but with some extra creativity. For example, how people used to exercise regularly may now not be possible whilst gyms are closed but how else could this be undertaken – possibly via online classes, virtual PT sessions etc.?
- **Containing anxiety** - It may not always be easy for individuals or organisations to do this but it's important to maintain optimism whilst still remaining realistic. People will understandably feel negative for a time, but many will then settle into a new normal. Some may still cope by denial though - denying the impact, denying that they need to do anything differently etc. and it's important for organisations to understand this and support them as appropriate.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS – HOME WORKING

- **News** - We are already alarmed and anxious so although it's important to stay informed, be sensible in the consumption of media. Choosing trusted news channels, a maximum of a couple of times a day, is key as an overload of news can have a detrimental effect on our psyche.
- **Office at home** - Set clear office hours that work for you and your family and try to establish a defined shut down process that allows you to mentally delineate between work time and down time. Where possible, also try to create a dedicated workspace, not the bedroom or kitchen – i.e. not a place that you'd normally associate with relaxation or family time.
- **Team support** - During times of high stress, teams can experience more conflict, division or blaming behaviours so team support is crucial. Work to celebrate wins, however small, and provide positive feedback.
- **Meetings** – However disrupted schedules may have become, it's helpful for regular meeting rhythms to be maintained. Plan for how these could be done remotely – e.g. if you usually have a team meeting on a certain day, continue this. Team leaders may also need to schedule some more regular informal “check-ins” to see how team members are coping and how they can be supported.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS – CHILDREN

Many employees will have families, so it's important for organisations to understand the impact of the current situation on children and to consider the broader family issues that their employees may be dealing with day to day.

Not just in terms of fitting work around childcare commitments, but also being aware of how the situation may be affecting children and the steps parents can take to help address this.



- **Under 5s** tend to be calm if parents are calm so establishing routines and creating distractions really helps as does keeping them away from news programmes. This all takes time and focus so employers need to be aware of these needs and provide the necessary support for parents, even if that's just additional time or flexibility to allow parents the necessary focus.
- **5s – 11s**, despite their often mature attitudes at times, are still young children and not 'little adults' so explaining in simple but clear terms what is happening, being truthful and answering lots of questions to help them make sense of the situation can be a real help. They too may need lots of attention and reassurance which, again, takes time.
- **Teenagers** can reason like adults, but they don't have the broader life experience to fall back on, so they too need reassurance, time and distraction. Containing social media (if possible!) and encouraging face-to-face online chats with friends and relatives about regular day to day topics can help.

## A POSITIVE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESPONSE

### Engendering community and team cohesion

Social support is generally a psychological protective mechanism that can be built up through shared activities and a feeling of camaraderie. When social support is missing, people are more prone to psychological problems. When it's present, they are considerably more likely to be resilient to both internal and external stress factors.

Organisationally, team cohesion is crucial. Team cohesion is facilitated by a common background, shared experiences, confidence in the leadership and a clear and meaningful group mission. It can bring people together and generate the positive community environment that is needed.

### Consultative leadership

As important as team cohesion is an organisation having a consultative leadership style. The ability of leaders throughout the organisation to give considered direction calmly and clearly is vital. If organisations have managers not able to reassure and instil confidence, then the organisation is likely to experience a ripple effect of psychological problems amongst employees in the months to come.

In order to live up to this, leaders need to be able to –

- lead by example - e.g. displaying calm responses.
- maintain objectivity and discipline ensuring that team members feel treated justly, fairly and reasonably.

- know their team members personally – understanding their circumstances and how these may affect them.
- be subject to the same adverse conditions as their teams.
- be willing to place the needs of their team before their own needs.

### How to engender these positive traits in virtual work settings

Creating team cohesion and demonstrating positive consultative leadership can prove more difficult when teams are dispersed but it is possible through a number of initiatives including:

- Maintaining regular meeting schedules and enhancing them where necessary to factor in the more unusual and unpredictable circumstances employees now find themselves facing.
- Having a check-in time at the start of a meeting – there's no 'water cooler' for staff to gather around so even having a dedicated 30 seconds per person at the beginning of each session can help – general questions such as "How are you doing? What are you looking forward to today? How was last night?" etc. can be enough for individuals to feel more connected.
- Always have the camera on during meetings, unless there is a compelling need for privacy. Being able to see team members is far more important than just being able to hear them.
- Make use of apps to keep the more 'personal' side of work going – e.g. consider using WhatsApp groups or similar for light-hearted 'office chat' and community spirit/fun.
- Rely less on the use of email communication and talk things through with team members. Aside from the virtual meetings, call people wherever possible to pass on news and information.
- Consider beginning and end of the day group huddles – again, not to focus on projects or tasks but to check in on people and ask general questions such as "How was your day? How do you want tomorrow to go?" etc. The questions can be very simple, but they will help people to feel connected and valued and could also help managers to pick up on any potential issues before they escalate.

## 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.

However the current pandemic may be modelled, what we do know is that behaviours and actions in the early days will have a significant impact on the ultimate outcomes - the behaviours that organisations demonstrate now will amplify over time.

We also know from history that many people will remain cautious for some time afterwards, so organisations need to be prepared for any return to normality to potentially take longer than they may anticipate.

Organisations also need to be prepared for lots of questions from their employees, including why they need to come back into the office/workplace and what measures are being taken to protect them.

As people become acclimatised to home working, some may find that it suits them and may start to reassess their commutes and their need to spend as much time on site. It would therefore be wise for organisations to start considering some of these scenarios now and be ready to address sensibly when the time comes.

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 of their employees both during and after this pandemic.

## ANVIL SUPPORT

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

- ✓ Pandemic and public health advice
- ✓ Return to Work / Operations Restart planning
- ✓ GP consultations and mental health counselling via telemedicine and video appointments
- ✓ Emotional support and wellbeing programmes
- ✓ Health risk assessments
- ✓ Medical emergency response plans

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](mailto:enquiries@anvilgroup.com) or visit [www.anvilgroup.com](http://www.anvilgroup.com)

Our recent webinar **“Occupational Health Responses to Covid-19: Preparing for the Journey Ahead”**, on which this advisory is based, is also available to watch on demand via:

[http://info.anvilgroup.com/occupational\\_health\\_covid-19](http://info.anvilgroup.com/occupational_health_covid-19)