Work related stress during COVID 19 - Guidance for employers and employees

Stress Defined

There are as many formal definitions of stress as there are subjective experiences of it. Each one differs slightly in focus and in degree. What is severe for one person, another may experience as mildly uncomfortable. The experience may last a few hours for one, and a few days or longer, for others. All definitions have in common that stress is an experience, usually temporary, where an individual feels things very differently to 'normal'. It is a negative experience. Feelings of speeded up confusion, disorientation, hurry and panic emerge, sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly. We feel overcome by external demands that we so not feel capable of meeting.

A working definition of stress is such that a person perceives that there are social/psychological demands placed on them, which they feel unable to meet. This inability causes them on-going distress. This distress effects people differently physically, emotionally and mentally. It alters how they think about themselves and how they behave to others.

Acute versus Chronic Stress

An Acute stress reaction is one where a sudden event (called a 'stressor') has sudden consequences just after the event. This might be witnessing a violent act, experiencing a threatening situation or facing an anxiety-provoking event such as an exam. The individual can feel stressed briefly, discover ways to overcome the stress, and recover. We each learn ways to manage and overcome stressors as they arise, thus building resilience to meet new pressures and developing a degree of self-insight as to what 'works' for us and what doesn't. Chronic stressors are longer-term, and their consequences slowly unfold and can extend over periods of weeks or months. Long-term stress (chronic) results when the causes remain into the long term and the individual therefore has no respite from it. Chronic stress can have more serious psychological and social consequences and can lead to mental health issues, psychiatric illness and/or disorder. The Global Pandemic COVID 19 was an acute stressor but as there is no clarity yet as to when restrictions will be lifted and a vaccine developed it is now a chronic stressor for which the skillsets and coping mechanisms we have developed for other shorter-term stressors are unlikely to suffice. However, those skillsets that were useful in the early days, can be built upon, into the future.

We now need to develop and practice a broader and deeper level of coping skills to maintain our wellbeing, to protect our mental health during the on-going phases of COVID-19 and to build resilience throughout to better manage this uniquely challenging time.

Causal factors

Research suggests that most stress reaction, whatever the direct overt cause, comes as a result of a combination of factors rather than one single factor. The following categories suggest ways to break down and explain the elements of stress:

- the **demands** placed on us
- the degree of **control** we have over our environment
- the **supports** we get from others
- **relationships** and how healthily connected we are to others
- **role** and how we fit our roles and understand them
- **change** and how it is brought about

For further information around these categories, see www.workpositive.ie

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Managing Mental Health at Work during COVID 19

COVID 19 is a stressor which has interfered with elements of each of the above and so is undoubtedly a chronic global stressor. It puts increased demands on the individual from many angles and invades many areas of our lives. It reduces our control over our and our loved ones' lives and our health, changes how we work, alters our financial wellbeing and it decreases our access to regular social support from activities enjoyed with friends and family. It strains our relationships, alters our roles and it has and continues to change our lives and thus our societal norms fundamentally.

Regardless of circumstance, there is a mental health fallout from COVID 19. While the virus is a public health issue, it affects individuals' wellbeing, sense of security and stability, performance and resilience. This will also affect their work, how they perform at work and the attention they can afford to give to work. A crucial step in better managing the stress caused by COVID 19 is to acknowledge that it is a stressor, which cannot be denied, avoided or repressed. It has to be recognized, sign-posted, understood and then managed in a solution- focused, sustaining, long lasting way. This involves both individuals gaining insights and self-management and organisations developing and adopting supportive systems of work.

Individual Stress Management Approaches

The initial approach most of us take is to panic and let the emotion drive our behaviours. While this cannot be avoided to a certain extent, we can with practice contain and better direct our reactions. The first step in this is to identify the particular aspect of the stressor which upsets us.

For instance, is it the reduced control and lack of social support? Or, is it the increased demands and lack of positive relationships? It is never easy when experiencing high stress, to identify our stressor accurately – as the experience of the 'panic' interferes with our problem solving skills, our ability to focus, and our clarity of thought and accuracy in assessment. That is why it is advisable to try to review our past periods of stress calmly in order to identify what are the recurring stress inducing elements of events.

We can also gain insight into why that event upsets us, and this knowledge gives us a sense of increased control over the experience. We can then proceed to identify solutions while we also try to reduce our exposure to the stressful item.

Through developing small shifts in our cognitive and emotional perspective, we can identify strategies to bypass or better manage the experience of stress. This may require counselling or we can do it through self-driven actions to alter our behavioural response, slowly gaining expertise, with practice, until the stressor is reduced to a manageable quantity.

Doing things we enjoy, engaging in distraction techniques, taking up passive, relaxing activities and simply going for walks or being in nature can all help in this. Gradually facing down small stressors gives us the needed practice to overcome subsequent exposures better. This is what builds resilience - an ability to overcome challenging stressors. We will practice some behavioural responses, which may not be useful, so we discard them. Over time, we gather and keep those practices, which suit our mindsets, personalities and abilities, in order to be better able to master those things that stress us.

Self-efficacy is an important contributor to stress management. People, who feel more able and competent in the face of a pressure, will be better able to approach it. This is borne out by neurological research, as our attitude and orientation to a thing has physiological effects to either help or hinder our achievement on a task. As well as developing self-efficacy and practicing mastery over small

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stressors, we also need to use social supports and lean on those with whom we have relationships, during stressful times.

Social attachment is very important to; people in distress often find it helpful to talk to others, 'take their mind off it' by engaging in pleasurable, soothing or invigorating activities with others and be around supportive, non-critical people.

Physical exercise, healthy diet, relaxation, and regular sleep patterns help to reduce mental and physical tensions built up from stress and further facilitate recovery.

Employers role in Managing COVID 19 Stress

The following section has a focus on the first stressor that Covid brought about in terms of work, which was working from home. However we previously managed stress, either individually or leading an organisation, will no doubt have played a role in how we have thus far managed this Covi 19 stressful time. Those who have already been exposed to large-scale stressors and who have put in place control systems may feel more capable of dealing with this current stress. On the other hand, people who have experienced long-term stress before may find this experience resurfaces some of these panic reactions to overload their coping mechanisms in the face of the novel pressures brought about by the COVID crisis. As this is an entirely new situation, there are no 'tried and tested' remedies for overcoming this particular stressor, but there are reliable systems in place to deal with general organisational stress. Insights from the general stress research can help us to better cope and to improve our environments and stay solution focused.

It is useful to use the Stress Model used in our *WorkPositive*[CI] framework to organise and categorise strategies employers can develop and apply to encourage better practices to improve our workplace and coping mechanisms. These should assist us in all aspects of our lives, but the focus here, is on improving our working lives.

Demands

Increased demands from work should be identified, acknowledged and attempts made to eliminate or reduce them. Demands include the imposition of working from home. Working from home need not be a stressor, but it being imposed in such a sudden way, means that it is more likely to be one. There are positives about working from home, which may be ignored, because it was not volunteered for – we generally have an antipathy to being told what to do, and being deprived of things we previously had. So the attitude to working from home will have a big influence on the experience of it. Regardless of our motivation now to be cooperative with the regime of working from home, attitudinal drag can mean we remain steadfastly working against making it work for us.

Secondly, we may have treated the situation as a temporary one, and made our work at home station fragile, uncomfortable, or unsustainable. Rather than alter the set-up two or three weeks in, sometimes people refuse to see the need for change, because they do not want that change. Thus, some may remain working in such precarious situations, when a few hours re arranging things to make a proper more permanent working space could improve levels of ease and comfort and workability hugely.

Both of the above scenarios are illustrative of how working from home is made needlessly stressful - but small attitudinal shifts can release some of the unwarranted stressors from the situation. We may have to juggle with other family members' need for working space and this can bring about other secondary stressors in terms of relationships – these tensions become part of a negative perspective

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on working from home. However, these, again, can be avoided by looking at, discussing and negotiating the demand of the new working situation – seeing it in the longer term and accepting that a makeshift approach is not working.

Working from home brings about increased technical demands for many people, as well as increased challenges of time and task management. There may be ergonomic demands, to do with space, seating, light, heat and noise levels. The employer ensuring – as far as possible and practicable – that staff access any equipment available can partly manage these increased demands. Employers can also ensure that tasks are fairly dispersed and time is given to those working from home not just to perform the tasks on a rote basis, but also to have time for taking more short breaks.

- Employees should be able to attend briefly to household issue as might arise.
- Employees should be given some control over their time management, but not so much as to feel isolated.
- Increased non-work demands on employee resources must be accepted in some circumstances
- Reduced demands should also be investigated; are people still challenged/motivated?
- Increase supports should be put in place to help employees deal with them; research shows that supports can mediate the negative stress effects of increased demands.

Control

This is an area where employers and employee should work together to ensure that the system of work, as far as possible, allows the employee to have control over how they arrange their working day. With levels of control so severely reduced during COVID, it is important that where control is possible, it is highlighted and encouraged for individuals and teams at work.

Allow the employee to approach their working week as suits them, self-allocating tasks to suit their mindset and other demands that working for home will result in, for their circumstances.

Encourage a 'Monday to Friday' schedule and mark the boundaries with weekends clearly.

Send a Monday morning communication, and late Friday afternoon sign offs – team email, ideally, or for smaller workplaces, individual phone calls.

Similarly with the 'working day', mark out the time – if 9 am is the start time, suggest a small easy piece of work is done first thing each day, and perhaps introduce a 10 minutes team message (text or email) for the last ten minutes of every day, or alternative days.

Marking out and differentiating the working time zone from the non-working time zone can replace to an extent the demise of the actual geographical locator of work being 'there' and home being 'here'. How managers manage, people should alter.

Over-surveillance is likely to get strong negative reactions from those working from home as it implies lack of or low trust. Trust is crucial during this time so where there are surveillance measures, they should ideally be more support-loaded than watchful.

Setting targets should be maintained but managing the process involved to reach the target should be adapted. Contacting employees needlessly every day may be too much and get resistance – it is counterproductive to employ a means of checking up on a person, which results in them being less productive.

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Do you know your employees and what works for them? If not, ask them, listen to them, and decide based on the task needs, not based on assuming they need close supervision. Some control over the workweek is crucial for those new to working for home, so contact once or twice a week might be acceptable.

Consult with employees about when they might like to be contacted, rather than ringing or emailing at random. That only serves to keep an employee tense and increase feelings of disempowerment. Decide on best methods of contact – phone, email or other.

Not everyone wants their home visible, so do not force options, which an employee does not want. Research shows clearly that where control is managed, under conditions of trust and support, employees are likely to be more committed as well as more innovative in how they work.

Every few weeks, re engage and ask employees about the system of work, get feedback on how it is working and whether they feel they need more – or indeed less- contact from managers to perform to their best and meet targets.

Systems already in place for performance management need not be bypassed. Nor should they be re-invented. Performance can still be target-driven, but the methods employed to guide them should be adapted to meet the needs of a more fragmented workforce working from home.

Support

Supportive leadership, which talks to the individual, not their role, is much more aligned with high performance outcomes than directive formal 'management' of individuals. Using a person's name, asking about their own wellbeing and then asking for their view of the work item is far more beneficial to the employer than merely directing that the same piece of work merely 'be done'. Affective commitment by employees – actually feeling part of the broader workplace and willingly acceding to the systems of work there – is developed by decent behavior and supportive communication styles of managers and leaders. Now more than ever this commitment is needed, when employee workday experience is devoid of the usual camaraderie and collegiality, which normally boosts commitment and engagement. Managers and leaders set the culture, and the culture has to shift when such global change has occurred.

There should not be an 'overdoing' of sugary emails about wellbeing, as that devalues the efficacy of authentic supportive behaviours and employees are generally wise to the bluff.

Managers and supervisors should be aware that a substantial part of their role to be supportive and motivational for staff. What they communicate and more so how they communicate is much more important now than ever before.

The many obvious and less obvious challenges people are experiencing may result in their being much more fragile. A harsh word now may push someone into an anxiety spiral whereas two months ago, it would have been robustly dealt with, or ignored. Be mindful of what words you use, your tone and attitude.

Extreme care should be taken when giving corrective feedback – old rules no longer apply. Approach such necessities with a nicer tone, a more open querying approach, an accepting albeit correcting orientation.

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Offer support, encouragement, and assistance for the individual to improve to the set standard in that item of work not adequately performed. All communications should be more generous, more humane and more attentive to the employee than prior to COVID.

Relationships

Managers, supervisors and employees should understand that this is a different situation and that it calls for different interacting styles. Everyone within an organization should communicate in a supportive, less directive and more conciliatory tone during this time. Those who are not talented at this style, should be coached in it or their staff-facing role reduced.

How we relate dictates how the other person understands us, how they decide whether to cooperate and what they then do to execute their intention. It is not what is said that brings the message, but how it is said, the media used and the tone of delivery. These are the elements of relating to others, which foster either good relations, or poor relations within a workplace. Employees who feel supported are more committed to the employer and to the role they play at work. Supportive words should be chosen over corporate words. The frailty of the human condition has been shockingly exposed; emotions are raw. Remind everyone to invest more time in the relating aspects of work.

Engage an employee's opinion on any new methods, ask for feedback regularly and encourage appropriate working relations between colleagues.

Set aside time during the week for employees to meet and greet each other.

Let the team either decide or suggest a time – for a 20-minute break where they communicate about non-work related issues, within existing teams, or across teams.

Ensure everyone has some non-work contact with another or others every week. A good working for home system does not eradicate the social element to work. This element is crucial for wellbeing and for some; this may be their only social outlet. If so, they need it to perform at their optimum. This should be structured into the day and into the week so that it is not only allowed but also encouraged.

Role

A person's work role is the bounded area of responsibility to which a person agrees. Ideally, this role fits with their personality and strengths. Some people will have experiences role shifts during Covid which they move into easily. Others are acutely aligned to their previous role and so, care is needed if asking them to do things far outside that role; it can be seen as a 'change too far'. People can become highly embedded and attached to roles, so expecting them to reach far outside or inside its parameters is not beneficial. Asking someone to do tasks, which they feel are not within their role can confuse them and make them disengage from the organisation, feel removed from the work culture or feel threatened. In order to avoid this, ensure that people keep their roles insofar as possible. If required to do other work, this is not assumed nonchalantly and incorporated into their schedule. It should be clearly, transparently communicated to them and their new broader or narrower role explained and rationalized to them. This is so they can then chose to commit to that, genuinely and authentically.

Foisting a new role or new tasks on people without their buy-in will increase stress at this already fraught time.

At meetings, managers should ensure that roles are clear, altered roles are highlighted to all and the needs of the organisation are fully explained to validate this.

Reduce ambiguity or confusion around roles and reinforce to each the value of his or her inputs to the role. A person's role within an organization may appear silent, but it is valid and has an important place in how they identify themselves with the organization.

This, in turn, feeds into their commitment to its goals and values. Do not play around with roles just to get more work from a person; if altering roles, be transparent and fair.

Change

All of the above should work together at organisational level to ensure that people feel part of the bigger system of their specific workplace. While change is with us and will continue, how we communicate the micro changes within the organisation must be constant.

Regular (ideally weekly) information sessions, by email, e-zine, or some written form of communication should be standard. This is in order that the massive change societally can be re-framed against the steady givens of the workplace.

People should have things to rely on, within their workplace.

Set goals for people within their role, and allow them negotiate through the goals with a degree of flexibility.

Monitor progress but through supportive questioning and open questions. Ideally set periods around goals, agreed with the employee, and make contact half way through the period. This contact should be scheduled in, and aim at directing goals and getting progress on them and feedback from the employee.

Ask about their workstation, their working day, and encourage that they get up and take short breaks and include some levity to their day. The point here is to reinforce and highlight those things, which are not changing, systems that are on going, the same as before, to anchor the employee and engender a sense of safety for them.

Synopsis

Employers and employees can devise ways to make working from home during this pandemic less stressful. Some strategies can be developed by the employee for his or her wellbeing and incorporated into their day. Others can be developed by employers to ensure that the communications, relationship management and leadership to all employees, at all hierarchical levels are more supportive, more sustaining and more mindful of human frailties than has previously been the case. Within reason, employers should ensure that employee's mental health is provided with extra supports and that their systems of work are adapted to these unusual, unique and historic times. As employees return to work, their mental wellbeing should be addressed within any novel Risk Assessments and Control measures devised. Those returning to the workplace will have changed their methods of work, their attitude to work, their insights into the value of work and their motivation to work. Ignoring this changed social and psychological environment of the workforce would not make for a complete or adequate policy approach.

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