
Guidelines: Mental Health for Business and the World of Work

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Work and good mental health

It's understandable to feel unsettled at this time. Whether you're a business owner who employs staff or a sole trader, a manager at an organisation or an employee, your workplace is probably facing difficult times and it's normal to be focusing on what that means for you.

There are many actions that employees, managers and business owners should take in their normal everyday lives to protect and nurture their mental health. And these still apply in the current circumstances.

- Be realistic about what can be achieved.
- Keep the hours you work in check and be mindful of work-life balance.
- Stay in touch with family and friends.
- Eat well, prioritise sleep and stay physically fit.
- Try and find time to switch off from technology.
- Monitor warning signs of poor mental health.
- Reach out to mentors and colleagues for support.
- Maintain interests outside work.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Access information and support services.
- Consult your company's Human Resources or Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provider, if you have one.

For small businesses owners

We're all facing unprecedented challenges due to the coronavirus outbreak, and we're working in ways we've never had to before. The impact on small business owners is significant.

Pressure on revenue, employee management issues including staffing levels, working from home arrangements for short or extended periods and planning for the future while dealing with the present, are all weighty issues that need to be addressed. Carrying fixed costs like office rentals and staff salaries, even though you aren't able to use your office or have staff come in, is added pressure on the business owner.

Looking after your own mental health as well as that of your staff is equally important.

Supporting employees

If you're a business owner or manager, it's important to think about how you can support your employees during these uncertain times.

- Maintain regular communication with your employees. A routine daily check in is good for you and for them.
- Keep staff up to date about your business' response to the coronavirus outbreak
- Make sure your staff are aware of the supports that are available to them (for example, if you have an Employee Assistance Programme [EAP] in place)

- If you're concerned about a workmate, make sure to check-in, have a conversation with them and encourage them to get the support they need
- Don't forget to take time to look after yourself too.

If you lose your job

Losing your job and having your income reduced can cause significant emotional distress. This is compounded by the fact that it's nothing you did wrong, but due to a situation beyond your control. Businesses are closing or running at significantly decreased output, during lockdown and likely beyond.

It is just as distressing and heartbreaking for many business owners to have to let staff go, often people who have been loyal and who they have known for many years. It's worse that the reason for this is that the business is trying to survive, and it's not that the staff did anything wrong. It is equally distressing for employees who suddenly find themselves without employment, even if they know it is due to the pandemic.

For owners or managers, and employees who have lost their jobs, the situation can take a serious toll on many aspects of their lives – their health and wellbeing, relationships and families, as well as how they see their future. These feelings of distress tend to be heightened during times of uncertainty and upheaval, where there is no clear end in sight and no certainty as to whether finding another job will be a possibility.

Losing your job or financial security is a loss like any other, especially under these circumstances. It is likely to trigger a grief process in everyone involved. This happens in stages, which repeat over and over until acceptance is reached.

The stages are:

1. Shock, denial (disbelief, feeling numb)
2. Bargaining (trying to make sense of things; looking for who to blame)
3. Anger (at the injustice, at the people involved, at the situation)
4. Sadness (at the loss of financial security, at the state the world is in, at the effect on the family)
5. Anxiety (about the future and survival)
6. Acceptance (of the current reality and that there's nothing you can change about the loss of your job)

Feelings of anger, anxiety and sadness may also become clinical conditions like depression. Physical symptoms are also common with all of the emotional states. Look out for symptoms that are present daily for at least two weeks, especially if they are becoming more frequent or more intense.

- Problems getting to sleep or staying asleep
- Sleeping more than 10 hours per day and still feeling tired.
- Constant tiredness and fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling overwhelmed, anxious or fearful
- Mood swings or overreacting to small things
- Muscle tension or pain

- High levels of frustration
- Feeling angry, irritable or intolerant.

If you have at least 2 weeks of mood and sleep problems, along with any 2 of the other symptoms on this list, it may be time to speak to your GP or a mental health professional. This is also necessary if you have 2 weeks or more of the following happening:

- Severe emotional reactions that persist beyond a usual period of adjustment (two or more weeks)
- An inability to function and carry out day-to-day tasks
- Using alcohol or other substances to 'self-medicate' or cope
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Tips to care for your mental health if you lose your job

If you have lost your job, you are likely to feel less stressed and more in control if you can take steps to help improve your situation.

There are many helpful things you can do to help you cope.

- Remind yourself that it's ok to feel unsure about the future.
- Be patient with yourself. Recovery from any significant setback takes time.
- Get support. Identify family members you can talk to who will help you remain positive.
- Understand that you're not the only one who has lost their job because of the extraordinary impacts of the coronavirus outbreak. Share your story with trusted colleagues.
- You may find it useful to write down your concerns and worries and work through them methodically.
- Draw on your strengths. Remind yourself of a tough time that you've managed to overcome in the past, even though it didn't feel like you were going to make it at the time.
- Stay healthy. Try to maintain a balanced diet.
- Exercise regularly. Ideally you should do 20 minutes of aerobic exercise daily, possibly also stretches. Even in lockdown, there are many exercises you can do.
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs. They only provide short-term relief, then make things worse.
- List your skills, not just the ones you were using in your previous job. You may be surprised to find that you have other skills which may be able to take you into a different kind of job that fits into the COVID-19 market.
- Chat to others who know you, and get their input on your skills and alternate ways of working.

If you have a pre-existing medical condition that may be aggravated by stress (diabetes, asthma, hypertension), talk to your GP to check how your physical health is doing and if you need more support.

Is there a hidden gift?

Perspective is really important here. Is there some advantage to being retrenched or being forced to work differently? Is there an opportunity to take a small break, to do the scaling down you've been wanting to, to explore that other work option?

Social support is necessary for everybody

It's important that you seek out support – this will not only be good for your mental health but good for your business too. Social support has been studied in the area of coping with dread diseases, and it is also an important buffer during times of upheaval like during this pandemic and economic instability. There are 5 types of support, which you can find from different sources. A free download explaining this in detail is available on www.thoughtsfirst.com

The 5 types in summary:

- Emotional (a safe person to vent with; who won't judge, tell others or force advice on you)
- Instrumental (practical, hands on)
- Esteem (you are still worthy, even when you make mistakes or behave badly)
- Information (reliable, useful; confirm through at least three sources)
- Companionship (people, pets, a book, a plant. Actually no one is a stranger anymore, we are all in the pandemic world together, facing the same threat).

Working from home safely and productively

During the coronavirus outbreak, many people are either already working from home or are likely to have to work from home for a period of time. With this in mind, here are some tips for employees and managers that will help support everyone's mental health.

If you need to work from home, you should:

- Set a work schedule for the day and stick to it
- Shower, and dress comfortably, as if you're going to the office
- Maintain a healthy work-life balance by setting time limits
- Create a separate office or workspace, if possible
- Move around every hour, and go outside once a day (if it's responsible to do so)
- Choose a good chair and set up your computer properly
- Keep connected to colleagues and communicate daily with your manager
- Keep the kitchen stocked with healthy snacks and meals.

If you are a small business owner, or a manager with a team working from home, you should:

- Ensure employees are aware of resources to support their mental health and wellbeing
- Be aware that individual circumstances vary and consider options to support each team member's needs

- Provide strong IT support and guidelines for remote working so employees can be fully productive
- Be mindful of the disruption that potential school closures may cause to families
- Agree on working hours that employees know they are not expected to work beyond
- Touch base with each team member daily and have regular longer one-to-one meetings
- Remind employees to work in ways that are kind to their mind and body
- Maintain regular virtual team meetings
- Advise teams to stay as connected as possible
- Remember that being a manager doesn't make you immune to the same stresses as your employees and that you need to look after yourself too.
- (Little Book of Motivation – Lockdown edition: free from www.neilbierbaum.com)

Try to maintain a practical and calm approach

Widespread panic can complicate efforts to manage the outbreak effectively. Do your best to stay calm and follow official advice, particularly around observing good hygiene habits.

Watch out for stigma

Remember that no one wants to catch the virus or have a loved one become ill. Also, no one wants to pass the virus on to someone else. The virus does not discriminate, as we have seen – the rich, famous and royal have all been victims of it as well. The coronavirus can affect anyone regardless of their nationality or ethnicity and remember that those with the disease have not done anything wrong.

If there is fear about being ostracised for possibly being sick, people are going to hide their symptoms, will be reluctant to seek medical help in the early stages, and will not stay home until it's too late to keep people around them safe. Similarly, if there is fear of losing your job for absenteeism, people will also tend to deny or make light of symptoms, hoping that it's just a cold.

Choose your news

Aim for balance between knowing what's going on and getting swept up in negativity around the economy and the spread of the virus. Being exposed to large volumes of negative information can heighten feelings of anxiety. While it's important to stay informed, you may find it useful to limit your media intake if it is upsetting you or your family. Limit yourself to 15 minutes of exposure to news and social media, once or twice per day.

It's important to get accurate information from credible news sources. As much as you can, try to avoid fake news, or news that is overly sensationalist, as this might make you feel more anxious. Choose news publications that are credible, and respected.

Accessing support

If you are in urgent need of support, or are concerned that someone you know may be at immediate risk, contact SADAG on:

- Cipla Mental Health Helpline (24 Hours): **0800 456 789**
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: **0800 567 567**
- Dr. Reddy's Mental Health Helpline: **0800 21 22 23**
- Substance Abuse Helpline (24 Hours): **0800 12 13 14**
- Cipla WhatsApp Chat Line (9am - 4pm): **076 882 2775**
- General SMS Line: **31393**
- Substance Abuse SMS Line: **32312**
- www.sadag.org
- Facebook: The South African Depression and Anxiety Group

Additional self-help links and resources:

www.thoughtsfirst.com (Stress, Anxiety, Sleep, Social Support)

www.neilbierbaum.com (Free e-book: The Little Book of Motivation)

www.practicalmindfulness.co.za (Free online course on mindfulness basics for anyone)

<https://www.discovery.co.za/corporate/covid-19-how-to-cope-with-longer-lockdown> (Free online podcast on How to cope with a longer lockdown: Advice from a clinical psychologist)

<https://lifepodcasts.fm/podcasts/371-locked-and-down/episode/304238-on-staying-motivated> (Free online podcast series on lockdown and COVID-19)

COVID-19 resources:

National Hotline : 0800 029 999

National WhatsApp : 0600 123 456

National Institute for Communicable Diseases website: <http://www.nicd.ac.za>

COVID-19 information website: <https://sacoronavirus.co.za>

Information and financial support for businesses during the coronavirus outbreak

Resources for returning to work: www.return2work.co.za

Information on relief for small business, workers: WhatsApp bot: 087 250 2674

Business for South Africa (B4SA) website: www.businessforsa.org