



Managing hazards to employee mental health during coronavirus (COVID-19)

Working from home has typically been a perk offered to employees to enable flexibility and assist in managing work-life balance. Employees very much value this flexibility, as well as decreased work distractions and less time spent commuting. Research shows that allowing employees to work from home can result in several mutual benefits, including increased productivity, greater work satisfaction, and decreased turnover.

Yet there are some downsides to working from home, including difficulty navigating one's intra-team relationships and cultivating a sense of community. These challenges become particularly salient while living and working through a global pandemic. What has traditionally been seen as a wellbeing enabler, working from home full-time is taking its toll on the mental health of many workers.

While promoting general mental health and wellbeing through our workplaces is important and helpful right now, it is also critical that employers consider their duty of care for employee health and wellbeing. An integral part of this is taking appropriate steps to manage psychosocial hazards.

What are psychosocial hazards?

Psychosocial hazards involve aspects of the design, organisation and management of work, and its social context that have the potential to harm the health and wellbeing of employees.

Many of the mental health impacts experienced at work through the COVID-19 pandemic relate to the ways in which work is designed and organised. We are working in an unprecedented time and plagued with a range of challenges, which if not managed well, are likely to exacerbate what is already a stressful time. Outlined below are five key psychosocial hazards to be aware of, with tips on how your organisation can better manage these risks *before* they result in harm.

Conflict between work and family

The line between work and home is more unclear than ever before, with many people transforming their homes and spaces, usually reserved for relaxation, into their workspace. For many, this will be their first experience of navigating a full day of work from home. This presents real challenges for keeping the domains of work and life separate and avoiding ‘creep’ between these two domains. Where work interferes with home, or vice versa, this results in conflict. There are two key types of conflict to consider when exploring this tension:

- a) Work-family conflict: where work demands interfere with family obligations
- b) Family-work conflict: where family demands interfere with work obligations

Typically, employees find work-family conflict more stressful. Over the years, the difficulty of juggling work and care obligations has been noted by employers, with consideration and flexibility historically offered to assist parents. Nevertheless, the uptake of flexible work arrangements is increasingly accessible for all workers who may recalibrate their working location and hours of work to accommodate for lifestyle, care, professional development or out-of-work commitments.

More recently, in line with changing expectations of men and women at work, some organisations have offered flexibility in the location of work as being the norm, rather than the exception. This has resulted in flexibility being more accessible for *all* workers as they navigate the work-home interface.

Stress occurs when we experience difficulties successfully integrating home and work life. While there isn’t a lot of research available on involuntary working from home, at least one study has demonstrated that involuntarily working from home is associated with an increase in work-family conflict, and this effect is more pronounced for workers with low self-efficacy (that is, low belief in one’s ability to successfully juggle both roles).¹

Given that we know that women tend to bear the brunt of household chores and unpaid care, it may be that women are more pre-disposed to experience the tensions that give rise to work-family conflict. Although fairer distribution of unpaid care and chores will alleviate this conflict within the home, there are also a range of additional mechanisms that can be targeted to reduce work-family conflict.

¹ Lapiere, L. M., Van Steenberg, E. F., Peeters, M. C., & Kluwer, E. S. (2016). Juggling work and family responsibilities when involuntarily working more from home: A multiwave study of financial sales professionals. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 37(6), 804-822.

Tips to address conflict between work and family

- Ensure managers are regularly checking in with staff and offering support to help manage work demands, including review of deliverables and hours of work required.
- Let employees know that you understand the challenges

they may be facing and offer plenty of flexibility in work arrangements, such as adjusting work hours.

- Provide employees with practical suggestions on managing both work and family demands.
- Boost self-efficacy: recall, celebrate, and mentally ‘mark’ the times you successfully navigate the work-family balance.
- Emphasise the value placed on employee wellbeing and encourage self-care.

Workload and over-working

Having our work close by at home, enabled by technology, blurs the boundaries between work and home life. This can lead us to feel “always on” and experience difficulties “switching off”. In 2017, the European Union conducted research to investigate the impacts of telework and ICT-mobile work and found that employees whom predominantly work from home report being more stressed than those that are office-based.² This may come as a surprise to many, given work-life balance is one of the most common reasons employees cite for pursuing working from home arrangements.

With work right at our fingertips and disconnection from our colleagues, it may be that many employees become far more task-focused and less relationship-focused. Working from home reduces visibility between employees and managers, and can leave employees feeling pressure to “look busy” and ensure high levels of productivity, which may lead to over-working.

For many, working from home also means the office is in the next room so psychologically detaching from work and switching off may be more difficult, resulting in a decision to continue working.

Tips to address over-working

- Provide employees with practical tips on how to psychologically detach from their work.
- Discourage overworking and ensure senior leaders role-model a balance between work and home.
- Encourage positive ‘connection’ between members of your team through sharing ‘lessons learned’ in navigating workload and overwork.
- Ensure managers know not to put unnecessary pressure on employees, particularly through conveying mistrust in their ability to self-manage and complete their work.

Uncertainty about the future

Organisations have responded to COVID-19 with unprecedented changes that have resulted in ambiguity and left many employees feeling uncertain about the future. While some employees may cope reasonably well with uncertainty, for others this may result in employees feeling a loss of control which is likely to give rise to stress and anxiety about their imagined futures.

² Eurofound and the International Labour Office. (2017). *Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and the International Labour Office, Geneva. <http://eurofound.link/ef1658>.

Generally, organisations can reduce feelings of uncertainty across their workforce by being transparent, sharing information, explaining the reasons for change and communicating progress in moving towards an agreed 'future state'. However, at this time, changes aren't being designed and implemented by organisations – there is considerable social and economic uncertainty, which has resulted in many organisations reacting to, as opposed to planning for, this evolving situation. This has a flow on impact to employee wellbeing.

Savvy organisations will have undertaken scenario planning and kept employees informed on how they expect to transition through the pandemic. Others are still determining what the future will look like for their organisation. For these employers, employees in your organisation are probably asking “What is our long-term plan?”

Tips to address uncertainty

- Keep employees up-to-date on organisational planning for change – you might not have all the answers yet, but employees will feel more confident in knowing what progress is being made and what issues you do not yet have an answer to.
- Let employees know what future impacts are being anticipated.
- Share the organisation's view on what the future of work will look like for your organisation.
- Engage employees in planning for change and consult them on decisions.

Isolation

Experiences of isolation at work are common for remote workers and despite what many think, isolation is a different issue to loneliness, as discussed below. Isolation involves feeling cut off from work and having limited access to the connections, resources and information required to enable job performance. Working from home often sees employees receiving less feedback and recognition, getting less information, experiencing a shift in the way communication occurs, having difficulty contacting co-workers, not having access to colleagues to bounce ideas around with, and getting less time with managers to discuss work progress.

This can become very frustrating and cause stress for employees concerned about their performance and productivity. Impacts to communication and information sharing and lack of access to work resources can hinder our ability to get on with the job, resulting in unnecessary delays, confusion about goals and priorities, and general uncertainty.

Tips to address isolation

- Ensure employees feel they have sufficient access to resources required to undertake their role.
- Increase communication and information sharing and ensure information is reaching employees.
- Raise awareness of the importance of colleagues being available to each other.
- Provide technology to enable team interaction and collaboration.

Loneliness

People are social beings, we crave social connection and our workplace is a significant source of social interaction, friendship, emotional support and meaningful relationships. Many Australians live alone and working remotely may result in limited opportunities to connect or interact and intellectually engage with others.

Research has shown that loneliness is one of the biggest challenges associated with remote working. Further to this, many Australians are currently working less than normal, and some do not have any work at all, which also poses a significant risk to wellbeing such as 'feeling flat', stressed, irritable or depressed.

Tips to address loneliness

- Remind employees of the important role social connection at work plays in mental health.
- Create time to intellectually engage in creative thinking or problem-solving using platforms where team members can visually connect with one and other.
- Encourage employees to take time in their day to connect with others – let them know this is an acceptable way to spend work time.
- Have regular days or times focused on 'checking in with a colleague'.

Finally, we note that everyone is different – we all respond to different stressors in different ways. It is best to avoid a one size fits all approach to your workforce. Individual conversations between employees and their reporting managers are always best in building relationships, offering support and finding out what each employee needs to remain happy, satisfied, psychologically well, productive and engaged at work.

Seek support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety your employees experience as a result of COVID-19 is impacting on their everyday life, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals, skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help manage stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

Australians referred to a psychologist by their GP might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. They may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so they do not need to travel to see a psychologist.

There are number of ways a person can access a psychologist. They can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask their GP or another health professional for a referral.

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The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak. Visit psychology.org.au for more.