

# TOOLKIT: EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

APRIL 2020

*Many of us will be anxious over this period of uncertainty with concerns for the health and wellbeing of ourselves and for those around us, along with feeling anxious for the lasting implications on society. Those feelings are a natural human response. This toolkit is built on the best evidence to enable employers to support employees with their health and wellbeing.*

[Business in the Community](#) (BITC) calls on responsible businesses to prioritise the health and wellbeing of their people, play their part in the national effort and transform the nation's health and wellbeing at work in the long term.

Building on BITC's [Helping Your Employees Stay Well toolkit](#), this follow-on toolkit provides practical guidance and actions for employers on the following topics, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond:

- Mental health
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Financial wellbeing
- Sleep and recovery
- Physical activity and healthy eating
- Drugs, alcohol and tobacco
- Domestic abuse

We have also included a short checklist at the end of this toolkit that employers are encouraged to use, enabling them to gauge the wellbeing of their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, you'll also find a list of key resources for each topic list above that are covered in this toolkit.

## Mental Health



Mental health, along with physical health, has come to the forefront in a national effort to protect the health and wellbeing of the nation. Employees are likely to be experiencing anxiety due to a complex set of interconnected factors such as concerns over finances, anxiety over caring for the vulnerable and loneliness through social distancing.

[The Mental Health at Work Commitment](#) is a simple framework that builds on what we know, pulling from the pledges and standards that are already out there, using up-to-date research from UK employers and mental health experts.

Considering the coronavirus pandemic, we have now applied [a COVID-19 lens to the commitment](#).

This resource provides a simple overview of actions for employers to tailor their approach to support the mental health of their people during this tumultuous time.

### Social isolation and loneliness



A large part of the world is currently applying social distancing or is in full lockdown. For some, this brings positive benefits of not needing to commute, having more time to reflect and time to spend at home with loved ones.

For others, social isolation could cause loneliness. This is especially prevalent amongst people that live alone, those who are living in unsafe or unsupportive environments, key workers needing to distance from family, those on furlough, or for those who do not have the quality of relationships that they would like to have.

Social isolation and loneliness can be experienced independently from one another. Some people who appear well connected socially might feel lonely and others who live alone or with few connections might be content. But, for those experiencing loneliness due to social isolation, the negative health impact is equal to factors such as obesity and smoking.

Leaders can be a force for good to support employees with loneliness and social isolation.

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### KEY ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

- Communicate regularly to employees with the latest [UK government information](#) on social distancing and isolation and tailor messages to lead with the altruistic purpose of social distancing. Evidence shows that having an altruistic purpose such as saving lives and protecting the NHS has a positive impact on mental health and reduces the negative impact of experiences such as loneliness.
- Lead with empathy, honesty and compassion. Line managers need to regularly check-in with employees. Make time for connection and make people feel safe to talk openly by listening and supporting them. This also strengthens the quality of relationships which in turn reduces feelings of loneliness.
- Create a variety of opportunities for social connection and support mechanisms using digital approaches such as buddy systems or online social events.
- Take an inclusive approach and tailor to the needs of different groups of employees. For example, furloughed employees are more likely to experience loneliness as their social connection with colleagues will have decreased. Reach out to furloughed employees regularly, keeping them updated and apply the same approach of leading with empathy.

### Financial wellbeing

With [one in eight workers already living in poverty](#) prior to COVID-19, it's crucial that employers support employees' financial wellbeing now more than ever.

Employees may find themselves with higher bills from working at home, being furloughed, eating into their savings, taking out loans and going into debt to keep up with payments.

As people face mounting pressures and financial insecurity, one of the most important roles employers can play is preventing employees from becoming homeless. Furthermore, financial hardship can lead to poor mental health and the economic impact of COVID-19 may leave employees feeling anxious about their employment security.

Employers can take proactive steps to help employees feel more in control of their finances.

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### KEY ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

- Review work-related factors impacting negatively on employees' financial wellbeing, such as pay, type of contract, and shift patterns, and take action to mitigate against them. Consider whether you can offer any practical financial support such as loans or grants. Take a look at our toolkit, [COVID-19: helping employees facing financial difficulty](#) for steps employers can take.
- Reach out to employees and listen to what support they need, particularly those who are more likely to be under financial pressure, such as furloughed employees and groups that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.
- Ethnic minority employees are twice as likely as white employees to have no savings, with 60% of BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) workers having no savings to fall back on at all. Please see BITC's factsheet, [COVID-19: ethnicity and economic impact](#) for more information.

- Reduce anxiety by helping employees take control of their financial situation. Signpost them to reliable information and resources to help them manage their financial situation and understand what options are available to them, such as holidays from mortgage, card and loan repayments and benefits such as universal credit.
- The financial implications of COVID-19 are likely to be felt by employees long after lockdown is over. Create a strategy to help employees with the long-term impact the crisis has had on their savings, loans, debts and/or pensions.



## Sleep and recovery



According to the [Sleep Foundation](#), sleep is a vital component of health and wellbeing. It a biological process for the immune system in which the body fixes and repairs itself. Given its function, sleep is more important than ever during this period.

However, the World Health Organisation estimates that [two thirds of adults in developed countries globally](#) do not get the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep each night.

Increased levels of stress and significant life changes due to COVID-19 could lead to sleep deprivation for many employees. Employers must encourage employees to prioritise sleep to reduce the risk of poor mental health and to improve the health and wellbeing of employees for the future.

### Physical activity and healthy eating

Around [one-third of adults in England are damaging their health](#) through a lack of physical activity and only 25% of men and 28% of women eat the recommended 5 fruit and vegetables a day.

During lockdown, this is likely to be amplified as healthy routines are disrupted due to restricted

access to outdoor spaces, closure of gyms, limitations on food shopping and anxiety affecting our bodies and food intake. This will not only harm people's physical wellbeing but also their mental health as studies have shown they are intrinsically linked.

Working in partnership with employees, employers can take a positive, proactive and preventative approach to support weight management, such as encouraging greater physical activity, which is key to improving employee's immune systems.

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## KEY ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

### Prevention

- Take a holistic approach and prevent contributing to the poor mental health of employees due to work by implementing the [COVID-19 Mental Health at Work Commitment](#) actions.
- Consider work related factors such as job design and shift work that will impact employee sleep and take action to prevent, for example, having boundaries between work and home as well as advocating for work-life balance. For more information, see [BITC and Public Health England's Sleep and Recovery toolkit](#).
- Encourage leaders to role model good sleep hygiene, for example, reducing evening screen time to tackle stigma of sleep being a 'nice to have'.
- Promote access to a diverse range of sleep hygiene resources to get the right conditions for a good night's sleep, such as the Sleep Foundation's, [Sleep Guidelines During the COVID-19 pandemic](#).



## Early intervention

- Recognise sleep deprivation as an issue that many employees will experience during COVID-19.
- Empower line managers to intervene when necessary and to approach the subject with compassion, as well as opening a dialogue to recognise if sleep deprivation is a problem for an employee.
- Signpost employees to information that will help them make lifestyle changes that will address some of the problems of sleep, using government resources, Occupational Health or Employee Assistance Programmes.

## Recovery

- Encourage employees to have regular breaks and rest, including screen breaks, as well as ensuring that employees take their full holiday entitlement. Time off work is not a 'nice to have' but an essential element of building resilience during COVID-19 and work/life balance.
- Hydration aids recovery. Encourage employees to drink water throughout their day.
- If available, encourage exposure to natural light. Sunshine helps the body recover natural rhythms disrupted by poor sleep.

## Drugs, alcohol and tobacco

COVID-19 is likely to affect our use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco. People who use these substances during social occasions may find they cut down on them as pubs close and social gatherings are restricted. Others may find they increase their consumption as a way of coping with stress caused by COVID-19. This reliance will be amplified further as other healthy coping strategies, such as frequent exercise and

socialising with friends, have been limited or banned during lockdown. But tobacco, alcohol and certain drugs can all make anxiety worse. [New research](#) from China also suggests smokers with COVID-19 are 14 times more likely to develop severe respiratory symptoms.

People who have an addiction will be further impacted by reduced supplies and their access to substances and support structures changing or stopping. Responsible employers must encourage employees to be mindful of how COVID-19 has influenced their use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco, helping employees to think about alternative coping strategies and supporting vulnerable employees to manage their addiction during lockdown.

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## KEY ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

### Leadership

- Ensure you are meeting your legal requirements concerning drugs and alcohol for front line workers in essential roles and those working remotely. Review and update your workplace risk assessments and policies to ensure they apply to the current situation.

### Awareness and education

- Use of substances can become habitual. Help employees to become more aware of their uptake and make healthier choices by encouraging employees to sign up to free trackers such as [Try Dry](#) (listed on the Alcohol Change website along with more resources and tips).
- Educate employees about the impacts of different substances, particularly in relation to COVID-19. Keep up to date with government recommendations and guidance, such as advice



for smokers to switch to e-cigarettes to help them quit smoking.

- Promote a positive culture – encourage healthy alternatives to cope with stress.
- Provide information and resources on helpful coping strategies to deal with stress such as meditation and exercise that can be done at home.
- Ensure employees know how to access support and who to discuss their needs with
- Provide resources for line managers to help them understand and spot signs of substance misuse for remote workers and where to signpost employees.
- Share resources and offer support to employees with caring responsibilities for family members who have substance use issues.

## Domestic abuse

Measures announced by the government to tackle COVID-19 have seen people's day-to-day life be drastically altered. Home working, social distancing and self-isolation can cause anxiety for those who are experiencing or feel at risk of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a crime and unacceptable in any situation.

BITC's [Domestic Abuse toolkit](#) provides actions for employers to support employees at risk or who are currently experiencing domestic abuse.



For more information on wellbeing in general or during the COVID-19 pandemic, please contact Emma Gage, BITC's Wellbeing Campaign Manager: [emma.gage@bitc.org.uk](mailto:emma.gage@bitc.org.uk).



## COVID-19 WELLBEING CHECKLIST FOR EMPLOYERS

### Mental Health

- ✓ Implement [the Mental Health at Work Commitment through a COVID-19 lens](#) actions.

### Social Isolation and Loneliness

Tailor messages to lead with the altruistic purpose of social distancing and isolation

- ✓ Take an inclusive approach, leading with empathy and compassion
- ✓ Enable social connection.

### Financial wellbeing

- ✓ Review any work-related factors negatively impacting employee's financial wellbeing and take action to mitigate these risks
- ✓ Reach out to employees and listen to the support they need
- ✓ Signpost to reliable information and sources.

### Sleep and recovery

- ✓ Take a holistic and preventative approach
- ✓ Recognise sleep deprivation and provide support to employees through good line management and encouraging regular breaks for example
- ✓ Encourage leaders to role model good sleep hygiene e.g. reducing evening screen time to tackle stigma of sleep being a 'nice to have'

### Physical activity and healthy eating

- ✓ Encourage employees to protect themselves and others against COVID-19
- ✓ Share reputable free resources
- ✓ Find creative ways to help employees to support and encourage each other with physical activity and healthy eating

### Drugs, alcohol and tobacco

- ✓ Meet your legal requirements
- ✓ Help employees to become aware of their intake and educate employees on the impact of these substance
- ✓ Encourage health alternatives to cope with stress.

### Domestic abuse

- ✓ Use the [Domestic Abuse Toolkit for Employers](#) to help understand the issues, and acknowledge every employer's responsibility to support victims of domestic abuse
- ✓ If a manager suspects that an employee is experiencing domestic abuse, they should try to have a conversation to discuss the issue, identify and refer to appropriate support. See the [Domestic Abuse toolkit](#) for examples on how to have an open conversation.
- ✓ Inform all your employees that help is available. Signpost employees to organisations who can help employees affected by the issue. A full list of supportive organisations and links is included in the [toolkit](#).





## KEY RESOURCES

### Mental Health

- [Mental Health at Work Commitment through a COVID-19 lens](#)
- [NHS: Every Mind Matters Coronavirus and wellbeing](#)

### Social Isolation and Loneliness

- [BITC: Using digital technology to support employee wellbeing](#)
- [Action for Happiness: Connect with people](#)

### Financial Wellbeing

- [BITC: Helping Employees Facing Financial Difficulties During COVID-19](#)
- [Mercer Marsh Benefits: Employers Financial Wellbeing Resources](#)
- [Money and Pensions Service: Coronavirus and Your Money](#)
- [Government website: Finance for Employees](#)

### Sleep and recovery

- [BITC and Public Health England: Sleep and Recovery Toolkit](#)
- [Sleep Foundation: Sleep Guidelines During COVI-19 Pandemic](#)

### Physical activity and healthy weight

- [NHS: Gym-free workouts](#)
- [NHS: Healthy Eating and Drinking](#)
- [Government Guidance for Employers and Businesses](#)
- [Health & Safety Executive Guidance](#)

### Drugs, alcohol and tobacco

- [BITC and Public Health England: Drugs, alcohol and Tobacco Toolkit for Employers](#)

#### Alcohol

- [Alcohol Change: Advice During Coronavirus](#)

#### Drugs

- [Talk to Frank: Coronavirus](#)

#### Tobacco

- [NHS: Smoke Free](#)
- [Public Health England: Smoking & COVID-19](#)
- [Public Health England: Guidance on switching to E-Cigarettes to help stop smoking](#)
- [Health & Safety Executive Guidance](#)

### Domestic Abuse

- [BITC: COVID-19 and Domestic Abuse Toolkit for Employers](#)

