LIVING WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

Supports for supervisors of staff living with mental health conditions during COVID-19

As a supervisor the University appreciates that you and your team will now be adjusting to significant changes to the working lives of staff brought by COVID-19. While isolation and social distancing are of vital importance in the current climate, these new measures may elevate feelings of anxiety, distress and concern for many people, and particularly for those with existing or emerging mental health concerns.

Staff may feel overwhelmed by work and personal commitments, and staff who live alone may now have limited social contact. Work is very important for our mental health and it is essential that we support all our staff in continuing to engage in the workplace in the most productive and supportive way possible.

MANAGEMENT TIPS – SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH

As a supervisor, you may be aware that one or more of your staff has a mental health condition, or may have a Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) in place. In response to COVID-19 the Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) will be checking in on existing RAP clients, but a supervisor is best placed to keep an eye on their staff's wellbeing moving forward. Please ensure you are aware of staff with mental health concerns, and maintain regular one-on-one communication. Their mental health condition may be exacerbated as a result of the rapid changes currently occurring and the resulting isolation in working from home.

Some useful tips are outlined below to assist managers and supervisors in supporting staff with mental health conditions as this unprecedented situation continues to unfold.

Maintain clear expectations and common understandings

Staff with existing mental health conditions will cope best if your expectations of their roles and their tasks are clear and defined, especially if those roles, tasks and ways of working have recently changed to adapt to COVID-19. It is therefore more important than ever to:

- communicate priorities, expected outcomes and timeframes, project milestones and agreed ways of providing status updates and touchpoints
- discuss and agree on working days and hours, methods of contact and preferred ways of communicating within the team
- determine what technology will best support the team whilst working remotely
- decide how the team will advise whether they are available or unavailable.

Minimising misunderstandings and providing clarity will help to reduce anxiety and tension and give staff the boundaries to be confident in what they do. Knowing your staff and openly discussing what works best for them will help enormously.

Recognise differences

Staff who regularly work in an office environment are used to having informal "tea-room" conversations with colleagues, so consider the personality and communication preference of each individual. A regular daily Zoom catchup that is optional may cater well to most working styles, but touch base separately if you have concerns about a staff member whose visibility or wellbeing is waning.

As a leader, you should clearly communicate what you want and expect from your direct reports, but remember to check-in and ask what they need and want from you. Prioritise returning calls and emails and show team members you are present, and just a quick Zoom chat or a phone call away. This will support the mental wellbeing of all staff, including those with mental ill-health.

Encourage staff to stay connected

It's more important than ever that people actively maintain social connections while physically distant, and there are many virtual options available. Try to remember to:

- support staff in consciously acknowledging personal feelings and sharing them with trusted people. Staff who live with a mental health condition that is episodic will benefit from maintaining connection with those who are closest and usually assist them with insight into how well they are coping. If you are aware of any mechanisms that are already in place for staff with mental ill-health, such as a counsellor, doctor, colleague or family member, support your staff to maintain these connections.

- encourage staff who have existing patient relationships with mental health professionals to maintain or re-establish those relationships to ensure that they have appropriate psycho-social support, either in refreshing existing strategies or developing new ones to accommodate the pandemic-related changes to their lives.

- let your staff know that you appreciate the work that they are doing, under difficult circumstances. Whilst you need to maintain expectations of performance and productivity, try to also maintain an awareness of the personal circumstances of staff and allow for some flexibility and understanding of the difficulties they and their families may be facing.

- extend as much trust, kindness and courtesy as possible. All of the University community need to be aware of self-talk and personal expectations, as well as mindfulness about communications with others at a time of stress. The University's EAP service has a dedicated service for managers that can provide support and coaching for difficult situations.

Consider particular groups of your staff

COVID-19 is going to have an impact on how we think and how we feel about ourselves and the world. Different groups may be affected in different ways, so consider:

- the different impacts from different equity groups like sex, age, disability, cultural background, sexuality etc.

- that some people from different backgrounds may be facing increased discriminatory attitudes and behaviours in their lives, this is well recognised as having direct impact on mental health. Therefore, where you expect this may be the case, adjust your approach accordingly.

- that being confined to the home may bring back negative memories for people who have experienced depression or trauma.

Use what you know about your staff and provide extra support for those who might be vulnerable, especially if you notice any changes in their behaviour.

New disclosures

The current circumstances may lead people to disclose mental health problems that they have not discussed with anyone at work previously, so treat these new disclosures with compassion and seek advice in managing and supporting these staff.

Your OHR Business Partners are available to discuss issues and concerns you may have about the wellbeing of your staff. OED can provide advice to supervisors and assistance in understanding their obligations under the Disability Policy, which includes mental health conditions, and in talking through available options.

Be aware of your WHS obligations

The duty of employers under the model WHS laws apply to psychological health too. Employers must do what they can to reduce the psychological risks to workers and others at the workplace, including avoiding psychosocial hazards i.e. anything in the design or management of work that causes stress.

Stress is the reaction a person has when they perceive the demands of their work exceed their ability or resources to cope. Work-related stress if prolonged and/or severe can cause both psychological and physical injury. Stress itself does not constitute an injury, but sustained stress can lead to serious injury.

Safe Work Australia has further advice and information for supervisors and you should also seek advice on your WHS obligations from Work Health, Safety and Wellbeing (WHS&W).

Promote access to support
Remind all staff of the support services available to them through the University's EAP service. WHS&W also have a range of on-line events planned to support staff wellbeing whilst the University is working within the constraints of COVID-19 which are advertised on University-wide platforms.

Encourage staff who you know to have had previous episodes of mental ill-health to use the tools and strategies they have learned in the past to manage their symptoms and reduce stress.

More information and useful resources on available supports are outlined below.

UNIVERSITY SUPPORTS

Counselling support
- Staff concerned about their mental health should be encouraged to contact the University's Employee Assistance Program. This confidential counselling and support service is available to all staff and their related family members at no cost. The EAP has trained counsellors and specialists who can provide advice and referral services and can be accessed via AccessEAP,by phoning **1800 818 728** or by downloading the EAP in Focus App. The University's EAP service also has a dedicated service for managers which can provide support and coaching in difficult situations.

- General Practitioners can also assist with referrals to counsellors, occupational therapists and other specialists in psychological health via a Mental Health Care Plan. A Mental Health Care Plan entitles the person to Medicare rebates for up to 10 individual and 10 group appointments in a year with allied mental health services. Telehealth NSW provides online appointments with medical practitioners that are Medicare bulk-billed.

Reasonable Adjustments to Working Arrangements for Staff
A workplace Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) provides accommodation to work conditions or facilities to allow staff to perform the inherent requirements of their role, in alignment with a doctor's advice. Adjustments are individualised to meet the specific needs of the person relevant to their disability or health condition. More information is available in the University's Disability Policy.

Supervisors can contact OED where a staff members existing RAP requires review because of COVID-19, or if they would like to discuss the process involved in developing a new RAP.

Supervisors can contact WHS&W where a staff has a Recover at Work (RAW) plan in place to manage work-related injuries to ensure that the staff member's recovery is suitably supported whilst working from home.

Internal Online Resources
- Western Coronavirus Information - The University has established this webpage to provide up to date information and resources to students and staff on COVID-19. It Includes information on wellbeing.

- Work Health, Safety and Wellbeing - WHS&W have a raft of online resources and events available to staff to support positive mental and physical health.

- Supports for Staff Managing Mental Health Conditions During COVID-19 - a factsheet on available supports and information for staff with existing or emerging mental health conditions.

OTHER EXTERNAL SUPPORTS

Crisis Support Contacts 24 hour 7 Days a Week

Lifeline 131 114 - Lifeline is a national charity service available to anyone experiencing a personal crisis. It provides access to crisis support and suicide prevention services. This service also has an **online chat** option as well with can be access between 7pm and midnight 7 days a week.

Beyond Blue Support Service 1300 22 4636 – A support line for people concerned about their mental health. This service also has an online chat option as well with can be access between 3pm and 12am daily. All calls and chats are confidential and one-on-one with trained mental health professionals. Specific COVID-19 advice is also available

NSW Mental Health Line 1800 011 511 – This health line is for anyone with a mental health issue. It is a confidential professional advice and referral service. Carers and mental health professionals can also access advice and relevant services through this line.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 - This service is a national telehealth provider that offers free professional phone and online counselling from qualified professional counsellors, social workers or psychologists for people living in Australia.

MORE RESOURCES AND TOOLKITS

Safe Work Australia - mental health and COVID-19 information for supervisors.

Beyond Blue - This website has useful resources to support individuals managing mental health concerns. They have also developed a range of tips and information for employers during COVID-19.

SANE Australia - has a range of useful information and resources for those with or supporting someone with mental ill-health, including the useful resource How to make working from home work for you – Our top tips.

HeadsUp – Supporting mental health in the workplace, including a resource on managing someone with a mental health condition.

Transcultural Mental Health Service (THMC) - The TMHC works with health professionals and communities across New South Wales to support positive mental health for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The have a range of mental health resource translations.

Black Dog Institute - Research institute that aims to reduce the incidence of mental illness and the stigma around It, to actively reduce suicide rates and empower everyone to live the most mentally healthy lives possible.

This Way Up - An online mental health initiative which provides a range of free evidence-based online programs around anxiety, depression and stress including additional resources to support people during COVID-19.

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