



LIVING WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

Supports for staff managing mental health conditions during COVID-19

The emergence of the COVID-19 health crisis has seen a rapid change to the work structures of staff, with the majority now working remotely and implementing new ways of approaching work, teaching and communicating with students and colleagues.

The University acknowledges 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 those who live alone may now have limited social contact. Staying engaged in work is important to our mental health and it is essential that we support all our staff in continuing to engage in the most productive and supportive way possible.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING

Try to maintain perspective

While it is reasonable for people to be concerned about the outbreak of Coronavirus, try to remember that medical, scientific and public health experts around the world are working hard to contain the virus, treat those affected and develop a vaccine as quickly as possible. Australia is one of the safest and best-resourced countries in the world to manage the disease.

Use known skills and strategies

Those who have developed and used tools that have helped their mental health and reduced stress in the past are encouraged to make the time for these critical self-help strategies. Some examples include mindfulness, meditation and supportive apps such as Unwind, Headspace, Ten Percent, Bliss, Smiling Mind, etc.

The healthy routines that usually serve people well at any time are especially important – e.g. healthy eating, regular exercise, consistent sleep, leisure activities, hobbies and creativity.

Stay connected

It's more important than ever that people actively maintain social connections while physically distant, and there are many virtual options available to do this. Now more than ever it is important to acknowledge personal feelings and share them with those we trust. Staff who live with a mental health condition that is episodic will benefit from maintaining a close connection with those who usually assist them with insight into how well they are coping.

Access quality information, in limited volume

Being exposed to large volumes of negative information can heighten feelings of anxiety. Everyone would benefit from limiting the consumption of news coverage and social media involving distressing virus updates or other negative news in general at present. It's also critical that staff are sourcing reliable information from reputable sources, especially [State](#) and [Federal Health](#) departments.

The present circumstances are challenging for everyone, so please try to extend as much kindness and courtesy as possible, starting with kindness to self. The whole University community need to be aware of self-talk and personal expectations, as well as mindfulness about communications with others during times of stress.



UNIVERSITY SUPPORTS

Counselling support

- Staff who are concerned about their mental health can contact the **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. This confidential counselling and support service available to all staff, including related family members at no cost and has trained counsellors and specialists who can provide advice and referral services. They can be accessed via **AccessEAP** or by phoning **1800 818 728**.
- Staff who have existing patient relationships with mental health professionals are encouraged 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.
- **Telehealth NSW** also provides online appointments with medical practitioners that are bulk-billed through Medicare. General Practitioners can also assist with referrals to counsellors, occupational therapists and other via a **Mental Health Care Plan**. Medicare rebates are available for a limited number of consultations within the guidelines

Online Resources

- **Information on Coronavirus** - The University has established this website for students and staff, which includes a series of FAQs. Staff should review this site for current information on available supports and resources. A dedicated information line has also been established for student and staff enquiries. Call +61 02 9852 5399, from 8am to 5pm AEDT Monday to Friday, or email coronavirusadvice@westernsydney.edu.au with any questions or concerns relating to the coronavirus.
- **Mental Health and Wellbeing** - This site has a raft of general information and resources to support students and staff who are concerned about their mental health, or concerned about a family or friends wellbeing.
- **Work Health, Safety and Wellbeing** - WHS and Wellbeing have a raft of online resources available to staff to support positive mental and physical health.

Reasonable Adjustments to Working Arrangements (RAPs)

Some staff may find that they need to change aspects of their work, including their hours and times that they are on duty, in order to manage mental health and maintain wellbeing.

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**. Staff who have existing RAP's that require review in the current circumstances, or staff who would like to discuss what is involved in developing a RAP can contact the **Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)**.

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.





INFORMATION FOR MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

It is important that managers and supervisors keep up to date on the policies and resources in place to support staff with mental health conditions. Managers and supervisors should ensure they have familiarised themselves with relevant University policies, including the Disability Policy.

If a manager or supervisor becomes concerned for a staff member, or a staff member discloses concern for their own wellbeing as a result of a mental health condition they should:

- encourage the affected staff member to access the **EAP Program** or other professional counselling services they may already have in place,
- advise the staff member of other support services available to them, such as those outlined in this resource,
- provide them with alternative contacts if they are not comfortable talking with their manager or supervisor, such as the appropriate **Senior HR Partner, HR Advisor** or **OED**,
- discuss what work related provisions may assist them in managing their mental health, i.e. a flexible work arrangement, or regular check-ins with other staff members. Contact your **Senior HR Partner** or **HR Advisor** for advice before finalising any arrangements, and
- where there is significant and immediate concern for the physical safety of an individual, call Emergency Services on 000.

OED can also assist supervisors with understanding their obligations under the Disability Policy which covers mental health conditions, and talking through the available options.

Refer to the *Supports for supervisors of staff with mental health conditions during COVID-19* resource for more information.

MORE RESOURCES AND TOOLKITS

Lifeline - **Toolkit for Working from home and how to maintain our mental health and wellbeing.**

Australian Psychological Society – **Tips for coping with Coronavirus anxiety.**

Beyond Blue - This website has useful resources to support individuals managing mental health concerns. They have also developed a range of tips and information focusing on the unique issues brought about by **COVID-19**.

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.

SANE Australia - has a range of useful information and resources for those with or supporting someone with mental ill-health, including a series of **guides and factsheets** for specific mental health conditions.

Transcultural Mental Health Centre (TMHC) - 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. They have a range of mental health resource translations.

Reachout – This website has resources for under 25s and parents and has useful tips and resources for coping during a pandemic.

Headspace – This website and app is offering free mindfulness and meditation recordings for to help people cope with Coronavirus.

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.