

# Staying on track

Looking after your mental health and wellbeing in difficult times

Mental Health Guide



# It's OK not to be OK all the time

**It is common to have times in our lives when we feel we just can't cope. It's nothing to be embarrassed about.**

Thanks to national campaigns and changing attitudes, many people now feel more able to talk openly about mental health issues – and to pass on guidance about looking after wellbeing, both physical and mental.

This brief guide is designed to help you look after your mental health at work and in your home life – by pointing out some warning signs that might show if you're struggling to keep stress at bay, as well as offering some suggestions on what to do if you're feeling the strain, and how to get back to your best.



# Warning signs to look out for

**It's all too easy to tell ourselves we feel fine, or that we're managing all right, when in fact stress could be affecting our wellbeing more than we realise.**

It's only natural to have ups and downs from one day to the next. But there are a number of signs - both physical and behavioural - that might indicate that someone is struggling and could be at risk of developing poor mental health:

## Possible indicators are:

- 1 Frequently feeling more irritable or aggressive
- 2 An increase in feelings of nervousness or anxiety
- 3 Increased fatigue, poor sleep or nightmares
- 4 Feeling overwhelmed by everyday tasks or commitments
- 5 Loss of weight or excessive weight gain
- 6 Loss of libido or breakdown in relationship communication
- 7 Lack of interest in personal appearance or hygiene
- 8 Increased obsessive thoughts or behaviours
- 9 Withdrawal from social and personal interactions with family or friends
- 10 Drinking or smoking more than usual
- 11 Increased physical symptoms such as headaches, aches or pains, or digestive problems
- 12 Loss of interest in work or leisure activities



# Working from home: Time to reflect on the positives

**You may have heard that pressure is a motivator - and it's true to say that a manageable level of pressure can improve productivity. But when the pressure is too high, or lasts too long, it can cause stress - which can eventually lead to poor mental health.**

The pressure of work can be especially strong with many businesses and organisations still coping with the economic and practical implications of COVID-19. And if you've recently returned to the workplace after working from home, remember that a change back to something you did before is still a change - which can be stressful in itself.

# Take work issues in hand

**If a situation at work is affecting you and you can't resolve it yourself, try talking to your manager about your concerns. Or, if you're not comfortable taking the issue to your manager, try to find someone else in the organisation.**

You could try talking to your personnel department or a trade union representative. And if your organisation has an employee assistance programme (EAP), check if it offers access to counselling or other sources of specialist help. This can also be a good route to take if you just need to talk with someone.





## Keeping on top of things

**Even if you don't have specific issues to discuss, it's a good idea to have regular one-to-one talks with your manager to share how you're feeling and whether the experience of returning to work has met your expectations.**

And, as well as your manager or other team members, there's someone else you need to 'check in' with on a regular basis - yourself. Ask yourself how you're coping, and what you could do for yourself to stay mentally healthy, as well as what might be done differently at work.

# Putting work concerns into perspective

Sometimes, we can put ourselves under more pressure than we need to at work. It's all too easy to worry that the boss would be less than happy if we need to devote more time to commitments outside work. But most employers are conscious of their duty of care, and increasingly recognise that flexible working can boost productivity as well as being positive for employees.



Thankfully, many would prefer their employees to go home on time, or work from home so they can meet family commitments, rather than putting in consistently long hours and compromising their wellbeing.

By carefully apportioning your time and priorities, you may find that it's possible to improve your work-life balance. In practical terms, you could try allocating specific times to individual tasks instead of just writing a 'to do' list at the end of each day. This can give you confidence that you'll have time to get everything done instead of dwelling on the following day's challenges even when you're not working.

# Think about your working environment

If you're returning to the workplace after working remotely, this could be a good time to review your working environment. If you aren't comfortable, or don't feel at ease with your surroundings, you could risk harming both your mental and physical health.

## Review your working environment:

- ✔ Make sure your workstation is properly set up – in particular, think about monitor height and distance, and make sure your chair supports your posture properly. Your employer should have guidelines to help with this
- ✔ Try turning your mobile phone or computer off for a short time
- ✔ Take regular breaks - if you can, go for a stroll round the office rather than staying at your desk
- ✔ If you're office based, plants or pictures in your workspace can help improve your immediate environment



# When you get home

**It's easy to let worries about things we can't directly influence encroach on time that could be devoted to relaxation or enjoying the company of loved ones.**

The ease of access to news through digital as well as traditional channels can be overwhelming - especially when the news is still unsettling. You could think about taking in updates at specific times, rather than through an 'always on' approach.

Being unable to talk about your worries can make them worse. Talk to someone you trust about anything that's on your mind.

# Mindfulness - what's that?

**For some, the idea of mindfulness conjures up images such as sitting cross-legged whilst silently contemplating a tree. But it can be different things to different people.**

Simply taking time out to enjoy the moment you're in, rather than worrying about what might be, is a perfect way to practise mindfulness. You could take a few minutes each day just to enjoy your surroundings, taking in sounds as well as visual stimulus, or quietly paying attention to your own breathing.

Most importantly, allow yourself to do things give you pleasure and help to promote positive feelings - whether it's talking to friends, spending time with family, cooking, pursuing hobbies or just reading a good book. It's about creating some 'me' time.





# Taking the physical activity route to good mental health

**Physical activity and exercise can help reduce the effects of stress. In addition to the obvious benefits to fitness, exercise releases hormones which can help you to manage stress, and promotes better sleep.**

It's easy to find ourselves becoming less active with many of us continuing to work from home. There are plenty of ways to keep active at home, including online workouts, fitness apps and yoga routines. Or, if you have a garden, you could give it a makeover.

And if you can exercise outdoors, this can help boost your vitamin D levels - and simply feeling that you're surrounded by nature can also help to raise your spirits.

# Sleep better, feel better

Having a healthy mind is much easier if we can start the day feeling bright and alert. And the best way to do this is to have a good night's sleep.



**If you're having trouble getting to sleep, or wake easily during the night, try these tips:**

**1 Wind down before bedtime**

Make sure you're not over stimulated before you go to sleep. By all means keep technology as part of your day, but leave devices such as phones or tablets outside the bedroom when it's time to sleep. And in the last couple of hours before bed, try to avoid the kind of entertainment - whether it's TV or gaming - that keeps you on the edge of your seat!

**2 Be careful what about what you eat**

It's important not to eat your dinner or snacks too close to bedtime. Eating certain foods can keep you awake, especially those which are heavy or high in sugar or fats... and late-night spicy food can also be a problem, so should be avoided if possible.

**3 Think before you drink**

Try to avoid tea or coffee close to bedtime, as both contain caffeine which keeps you alert and can stay in your system for hours. It's also best to avoid any alcohol just before bedtime. On the other hand, milky drinks can have a positive effect. Milk contains melatonin, a hormone that helps create the urge to fall asleep. It's also a source of the sleep-inducing amino acid tryptophan.

**4 Try to keep regular hours**

Having a set routine and encourages a settled sleeping pattern. Try to go to bed at the same time regularly - this should help to promote a better night's sleep.

**5 Does your bedroom promote calm and relaxation**

Dark curtains or blinds are a good idea - particularly during the light nights of spring or summer, or if you work shifts and need to sleep in the daytime. You'll also find it easier to relax if the room is free of clutter and daytime items such as office or fitness equipment.

**6 Could your bed be to blame?**

If you're not comfortable, your body will keep you awake. Consider investing in a good mattress - after all, we spend a third our lives in bed! Turn your pillows and mattress regularly, and if you suffer from neck ache, make sure you have the right height of pillow - or look into buying an orthopaedic pillow to support your neck while you sleep.

# Accept that things change... and change what you can

Change brings challenges. Small steps are the way forward. Be calm, be prepared, don't try to take on too much - and don't be afraid to ask for help.

If you're experiencing persistent symptoms, or feel worried about your mental health, do make an appointment with your GP.

## Where to look for more help and inspiration

If you're experiencing persistent symptoms, or feel worried about your mental health, do make an appointment with your GP.

### [Healthy eating](#)

### [Fitness and exercise](#)

### Mindfulness and meditation

- ✔ [The Mind website can help with information on mindfulness and how to practise it.](#)
- ✔ [Online courses from the Mindfulness Association](#)
- ✔ [Headspace](#)

### Counselling

- ✔ [MIND can help you find out about access to counselling and talking treatments](#)
- ✔ [Find out how mental health charity SANE can provide support](#)

### [Better sleep](#)

The information in this guide is created and published for general informational purposes only and does not constitute professional medical advice. It is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice and should not be treated or relied upon as such. Always seek the guidance of your doctor or other qualified health professional with any questions you may have regarding your health or a medical condition. Never disregard the advice of a medical professional, or delay in seeking it because of something you have read in this guide.

**GEN7114 10/2023 REG015**

Aviva Health UK Limited. Registered in England Number 2464270. Registered Office 8 Surrey Street Norwich NR1 3NG.  
Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Firm Reference Number 308139.

