

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.

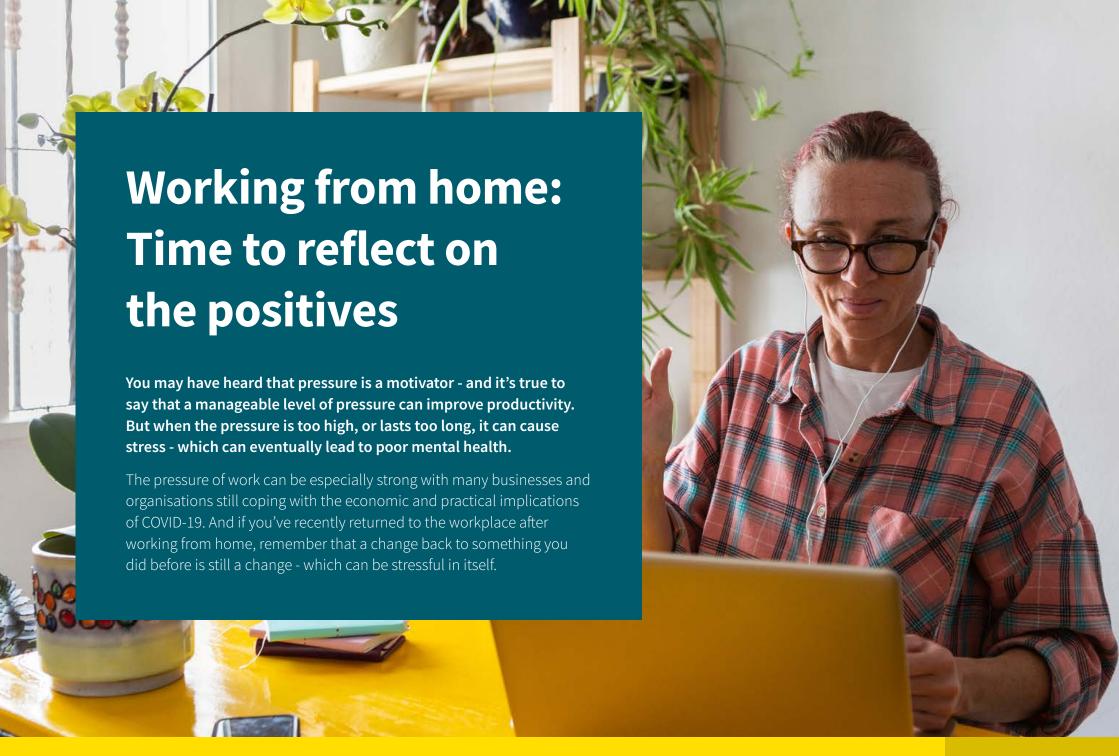


Warning signs to look out for

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:





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.





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.

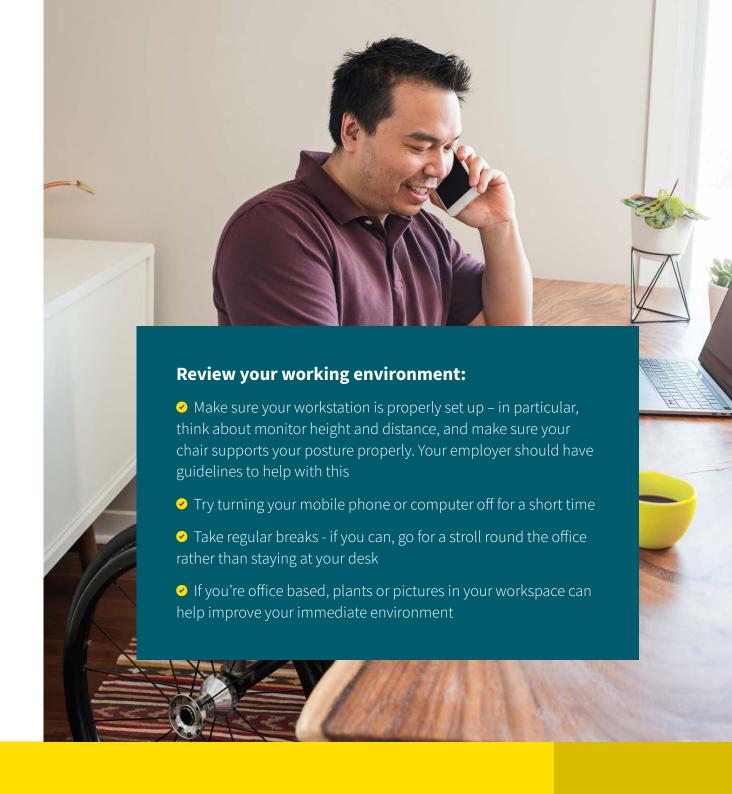


Thankfully, many would prefer their employees to go home on time, or work from home so they can meet family commitments, rather than putting in consistently long hours and compromising their wellbeing.

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.



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:

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

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Healthy eating

Fitness and exercise

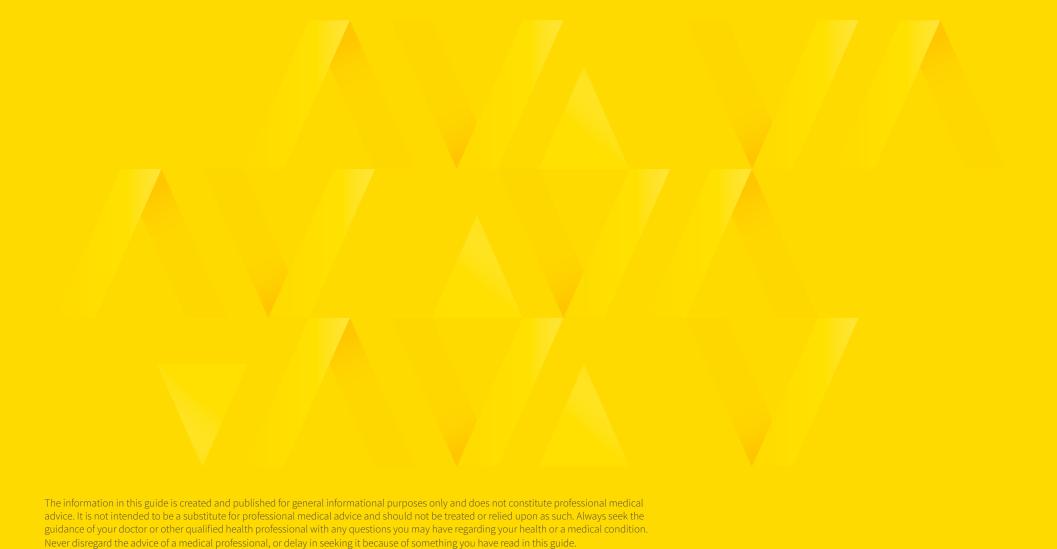
Mindfulness and meditation

- 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



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