



COVID-19 WORKPLACES RESOURCE

A guide for workplace leaders
on wellbeing at work during COVID-19

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**GETTING
THROUGH
TOGETHER**

WHĀIA E TĀTOU TE PAE TAWHITI

ALL RIGHT?

 **Mental Health Foundation**
mauri tū, mauri ora OF NEW ZEALAND



INTRODUCTION: WHAT AND WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?



Balance -
reduce risks and
have protective
factors



Safe
Supportive
Strong



Feeling good
Functioning well
Connected

As managers and workplace leaders you can have a direct impact on the welfare and wellbeing of your employees. This is a time of increased pressure and stress for all New Zealanders. We all have a role to play in reducing the negative impacts associated with COVID-19, and that means we are being asked to make major changes in our lives. This is affecting how we work, how we relate, and what we can or can't do.

We need to prioritise mental wellbeing so we can manage our lives, make good decisions, manage additional stress and distress, and prepare ourselves for what's to come. This guide is designed to help you to promote a supportive environment for your employees throughout this trying time.

COMMON CAUSES OF STRESS AMONG EMPLOYEES

- Finances – will I get paid? Is my job secure?
- Can I feed my family?
- Work and home conflict.
- Parenting.
- Can I cope?
- Loss of extended supports.
- Feelings around coming back to work and redefining connections to various communities including work.

See the [‘resources’](#) section of this guide for further information.



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH

Our mental wellbeing helps us do the things we need to get through our lives, allows us to face challenges and to form relationships. These things help us feel good about ourselves.

Our wellbeing is made up of three core things:



How we feel



How we function in our lives



Our relationships with other people and places

To protect mental health we need to do two main things:



Reduce risk factors



Increase protective factors

We need to do both because simply reducing risks sometimes isn't possible. We also need things that build us up. It's really important right now to ensure we feel **safe**, have **support** and can do things to **boost** our mental wellbeing.

SAFE

Manaakitanga/
Psychologically healthy environment



Safety comes first – if we're not feeling safe, are in high distress or fatigued, our brains will not be able to function at their best. This state of mind limits our decision-making ability, future planning, creativity, affective risk assessment, and our ability to think of others' needs.

SUPPORTIVE

Awhinatia/Fair and empathetic approaches



To feel safe we need to have supportive environments to help get us through the tough times. Often these are practical solutions or answers to the questions or worries we have. Sometimes support might just mean being listened to, or having someone to share our concerns with. Support might also come in the form of work resources that allow us to do our jobs well. It's important to have a clear understanding of our roles, expectations and access to information.

STRONG

Kia Tautoko/
Boosting mental wellbeing and resilience



Support can help us learn new skills, feel a sense of mastery or success, and help with relationship-building. Ultimately, it's the combination of having a safe and supportive environment which leads to boosted mental wellbeing and resilience.



TALKING ABOUT WORK AND COVID-19 WITH STAFF

When talking about COVID-19 and its impact on your workplace, use language that demonstrates care and support for the health and wellbeing of your staff.

Let everyone know it is normal to feel stress, anger, sadness and anxiety. This is a new situation and we all are learning how to manage.

Reframe the language you use to talk about the pandemic in your communications with staff so that it promotes care and solidarity. This also helps to mitigate feelings of panic.



Use the phrase 'work from home' instead of 'work in isolation'.



Reinforce your support for staff over this time. It can be very difficult for some people to process such a drastic change. Check in with team members often.



Remind staff of support mechanisms available such as EAP, support through unions, policies around leave etc.



Practise compassion when enforcing work responsibilities and productivity.

Remember, your primary consideration should be the health and wellbeing of staff. Heavy-handed communication, unreasonably high expectations and measures can add stress in an already complex time. This can have a compounding effect and inadvertently be discriminatory or stigmatising to people who are already navigating difficult home situations (i.e. experiencing mental distress, different cultural expectations, caring for dependants, poverty, violence, etc).



HOW TO LOOK AFTER WELLBEING

Reducing stress

Now we know what we need to look after our mental wellbeing, what can we do in practical terms?

Stress is the response our body has to help us prepare for challenges or perceived threats. When we're faced with a challenge, we get a rush of natural chemicals that amplify physical strength and our senses. It is a helpful automatic physical response that can sharpen our senses and physical abilities to deal with immediate challenges.

Too much stress can be harmful. When our stress response is turned on repeatedly, it puts unnecessary strain on our bodies and impacts our ability to think.



If we don't have the opportunity to recover and calm our body down or turn off the stress response, stress can stay for an extended period of time and may build, so your body never completely unwinds. This may impact both your physical and mental health.



Below are some helpful tools you can employ to minimise the stress response:

The Three Rs

Learning and practising the ‘Three Rs’ will help you to minimise, manage and recover from stress.



Refuel/Whakatipu
Looking after wellbeing and cultivating energy to refuel.



Resolve/Whakatika
Identifying stressors and finding solutions that help resolve the causes of stress.



Relax/Whakatā
Switching on the relaxation response to restore and rest.

Effective communication

Reducing immediate stress allows people to be able to problem solve and better cope with the ongoing demands of COVID-19.

To do this, talking about how people are feeling and what is worrying or upsetting them is crucial. Clear communication can be simply - “I don’t know right now but we are working on it. What else could help right now?”

Communication activity plan

To start, how are you feeling? In order to offer support you need to be feeling personally okay. Then you can ask, what do people need? You’re wanting to ascertain the following:

What’s the worry?	What would make me feel safe? Worry less?	What’s the impact?	What do I need?	Who could help?



Here is a step-by-step guide to promote effective collaboration for staff wellbeing:

1. Assess

Work out where to start

- Remember these goals may be immediate or long-term as the situation changes. The first aim is to promote safety and support – so assessment is about asking what people need.

2. Plan

What's the best way to get there?

Don't do this alone, talk to other managers or trusted colleagues to get advice. We are all having to learn on the go.

- Think about who needs to be involved, what resources you will need and how to ensure ongoing engagement.
- Initial planning will need to focus on how you can communicate with your team.
- Talk to your people about what's needed and what would help.
- Look at what government resources are available to help.
- Look at advice from professional bodies and industry associations.
- Look at what is happening in your local community and from culturally relevant sources.

3. Do

Take the first step. Take action, start small and build on success.

- Make sure you have clear messages and everyone knows what is happening.
- Involve key leaders and staff to champion activities. Remember that when you are doing this diversity is key; ensure you have a range of inclusive activities.
- Letting people know you don't have an answer yet but you are working on it, is an action!
- Communication should be aimed at reducing stress and helping build people's personal skills to respond.

4. Review

Review your progress – what worked, what could be improved and what is next.

- How do people feel things are going and have there been any changes?
- Check-in via discussions during one-on-ones and in team meetings.

This then leads to reassessment, future plans and further actions.



Celebrate your successes.
Remember to share your results and your successes with others (colleagues and leaders).



Share your learnings.
Don't shy away from sharing the things that didn't go as well or challenges. These are important lessons for next time and for others.



RESPONDING TO DISTRESS

The COVID-19 pandemic can be overwhelming, which is a natural and normal response to unprecedented times. This section talks about the roles of workplaces in promoting supportive and inclusive working environments for people experiencing mental distress.

For more ideas and information on what you can do to manage your own anxieties, check out the [‘resources’](#) section of this guide.

Caring about colleagues

Having conversations about wellbeing is a great way to find out how your colleagues are doing and to create a supportive work culture. This is even more important in times of high stress. For many people, working from home can be isolating and difficult.

Here are some tips to having caring conversations with your colleagues:

1. Check in regularly with your colleagues

Be honest and authentic about how you’re doing and what’s going on in your household. Everyone’s situation will be different. It is not your job to fix any difficulties that people may be facing. Your job is simply to be there for your workmates. If it’s needed, have a one-on-one conversation so that your workmates can talk through what they are experiencing.





2. Remember your TOES

TOES help you to think about what you need to prepare before having a conversation if someone is experiencing mental distress.

TIMING

- Allocate time to have the conversation
- What's going on? Is right now the right time?
- Do you have any pressing matters to deal with?
What about your workmate?

ORGANISATIONAL POLICIES

- Are you aware of what your organisation's policies are?
- Are there any particular processes that might be relevant to the discussion?
- What support channels does your organisation provide?
- Is there a policy for mental health or health and safety?
- Do you know where to find this information?

(for more, check out the '[resources](#)' section about legal requirements and government support.)

ENVIRONMENT

- Do you have somewhere private to have this conversation? Is anyone else around i.e. kids, housemates, partners, etc?
- Are there any other significant distractions, i.e. noise, interruptions, etc?
- What might be the best method to communicate with the person, e.g. a phone or video call may be preferable over text/email.
- Are there any cultural protocols that need to be considered?

SAFETY

- Are you aware of any potential risks that could come up in the course of the conversation?
- What other support channels are around that you could refer your staff member to?
- If there are immediate risks of harm, do you know what you need to do?

3. Use your OARS

We're all in this waka together, so use your **OARS** to support your mates.

O Open-ended questions

A Affirmation

R Reflection

S Summarisation

In summary

- Ask questions that elicit more than just yes/no/maybe responses. This adds to understanding and allows the person to elaborate on their ideas or story.
- Affirmations help to let people know that you care about the person rather than just the work. It's important that these are genuine and not scripted.
- Echo back what you're hearing from your workmate. This helps to clarify what you're hearing and can also help you both to come up with solutions.
- Come back to the key points and lay them all out. From here, you can effectively problem-solve together.





THE ROLE OF MANAGERS

Now is the time to support your staff. Managers should show compassionate leadership to help their people get through. This section is about what managers can do to promote safe and supportive environments.

Above, there are some tips for having conversations with staff who are struggling. Check out the [‘resources’](#) section about legal requirements and government supports available to businesses.

Making policy relevant and accessible

COVID-19 means current policies or processes may no longer be fit for purpose. You may be having to respond to these changes quickly. Remember, crafting good and workable ways forward should be inclusive and employee-focused. Policies should demonstrate to employees how the organisation values them and their contributions. We want to create spaces where people can make informed decisions about their own health and wellbeing and feel empowered to do so.

You might want to consider ensuring your employees can look after themselves and their whānau by reviewing and updating your:

- Code of conduct
- Leave policies (specifically sick leave policies)
- Health and Safety policies
- Flexible work policies

There are three core things to consider when writing or reviewing policies:

 <p>Do they enable and empower staff to work to the best of their abilities?</p>	 <p>Do they demonstrate fair and equitable approaches to work?</p>	 <p>Do they centre people or processes?</p>
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It may not be possible to write new policies at this time due to other pressures your organisation is facing. Try to make time to review key policies to ensure they allow for fair treatment of staff, regardless of their circumstances. Including your staff can also help take the load off management – making it a win-win situation.

For more guidance on policy review and development, check out the Policy Builder on business.govt.nz and the [‘resources’](#) section of this guide.



Supported employment practice

In order to make policies accessible for staff, they need to be accompanied by good procedures and practices. Supported employment practices such as reasonable accommodations and return to work plans are good examples. These kinds of practices let staff know that they are valued on a human level rather than just for their ability to produce work. It also helps to address issues like prejudice and discrimination against people with experience of mental distress.

Ultimately, reasonable accommodations need to be figured out with staff, rather than for staff. Accommodations might include:



Changes to normal work hours in order to accommodate home life situations



Changing usual work loads or expectations to allow for work-life balance



Regular personal check-ins with staff to see how they're managing everything

Changes to employment?

Employment changes relating to restructuring, pay-cuts and redundancies may be an unfortunate consequence to these uncertain times. Employers should consider permanent changes to employment only as an absolute last resort, noting that preventing further negative impacts should be front of mind. It's good to think about supportive employment practices, which apply before, during, and after the employment relationship. It's important to also regularly review and evaluate how the workplace is doing with creating inclusive environments for employees.

If there are changes to employment, it's important to keep up to date with what's legally required and ensure there's sufficient due process. Check out the legal framework in the '[resources](#)' section of this guide. If redundancy is the only option, it's important to approach conversations with honesty, authenticity and compassion.

It may also be worth offering whatever support mechanisms you can to those staff, such as EAP or other counselling options, financial support options that have been available under the COVID-19 government provisions and any other information that might be relevant.



Self-care for managers

As much as your staff may be struggling with this, you may also be facing personal difficulties while trying to lead your organisation through COVID-19. Much of the advice in this guide is also directly applicable to you. However, here are a few extra tips:

- This is the time to lean on your support systems – other managers, friends, colleagues, mentors, etc. If you're struggling with everything, it's best to talk about it.
- Take an opportunity to check in with yourself to see how you're doing. If you need help, don't be afraid to ask.
- Give yourself time away from work for some breathing space. If you can't take a day off, take little breaks throughout the day.
- Limit your reading about COVID-19 to essential information. Over-exposure to information can lead to spiraling thinking patterns, which can have a direct effect on your mental and physical health.
- Allow yourself to be authentic with your staff. You don't have to have all the answers all the time. Remember, ask for help and support when you need it.



TOOLS

Here's a bank of further resources that you might find helpful:

Understanding and responding to stress

- [Personal wellbeing plan](#)
- [Reducing the impact of stress – The Three Rs](#)
- [Understanding the stress response](#)
- [Tank on empty?](#) *Here's how you can identify what stress looks like for you and the warning signs to look out for.*
- [Refuelling the tank – fuel in, fuel out](#) (individual)
- [Finding balance: Te Whare Tapa Whā](#) (individual)
Here's how you can identify different things you can do to nurture and keep yourself well.
- [Workplace fuel consumption](#) (workplace)
- [Finding balance: Te Whare Tapa Whā](#) (workplace)
Here are different things workplaces can do to create a positive culture and support their people's mental wellbeing across all domains of life.

Quick relaxation techniques

- [Switching on your relaxation response](#)
- [Simple breathing techniques video](#)
- [Introducing Mindfulness activity](#)

Problem solving

- [Identifying your challenges & practising balanced thinking](#)
- [Acceptance and change](#)
- [Working backwards to a solution](#)



FURTHER RESOURCES

Government information

- [COVID-19 government website](#)

This is the main government website for all things COVID-19 related.

- [Information for businesses](#)

This page brings together government information relating to COVID-19, how it may affect your business and how you can stay up-to-date as new information becomes available.

Other MHF resources

- [Getting Through Together](#)

- [Looking after your mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19](#)

- [Working Well Guide & resources](#)

- [Open Minds: For Employers](#)

- [5 Ways to Wellbeing at Work Toolkit](#)

Business information

- [Employment New Zealand, Coronavirus and the workplace](#)

Guidance for employees, employers and businesses, and financial support.

- [Business Leaders' Health & Safety Forum](#)

- [EMA - Mental Health for Employers](#)

This page provides practical advice for organisations dealing with COVID-19 planning from forum members and international organisations.

- [Community Law Centre - making sense of your employment situation during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

- [Pitt & Moore, A Coronavirus Legal Update](#)

Some advice on employment legalities around COVID-19.

- [Safety & Health Practitioner Online - home working essentials for managers](#)

This handy guide details what managers should consider while employees are temporarily working from home.

- [Safety & Health Practitioner Online - home working advice and wellbeing considerations for self-isolation](#)

- [Tips for managers with teams working from home](#) (LinkedIn)

- [Umbrella](#)

Downloadable versions of some of their key articles aimed at helping support mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis.

For more industry-specific advice, contact your professional associations as many of them have information for getting through COVID-19.



Health information

- [Depression.org.nz](https://www.depression.org.nz)
Tips for managing stress and anxiety over the pandemic
- [NZ Institute of Resilience and Wellbeing \(2020\). *Real-time Resilience Strategies for Coping with Coronavirus*](#)
- [MIND UK, Coronavirus and your wellbeing](#)
Tips and links to support your mental health from MIND (a UK mental health organisation)

Looking after your bubble

For Yourself

- [SAMH \(Scotland\) Coronavirus and your mental health](#)
Information, links and resources that can help keep you informed and protect your mental health.
- [Young Minds, Looking after your mental health while self-isolating](#)

For Parents and Caregivers

- [WHO, Healthy Parenting over COVID-19](#)
To help parents interact constructively with their children during this time of confinement
- [Young Minds, Talking to your child about coronavirus](#)

For Households

- [Te Puni Kōkiri, Protect our whakapapa](#)
Information sheets to help whānau stay safe during the pandemic



FOR FURTHER SUPPORT

Helpline services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week unless otherwise specified.

National helplines

- **Need to talk?** Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor
- **Lifeline** – 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP)
- **Suicide Crisis Helpline** – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
- **Healthline** – 0800 611 116
- **Samaritans** – 0800 726 666

Download the [Helplines and Local Mental Health Services Brochure](#)

For more support services available, please visit www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/helplines/

Or email our Resource and Information Service at info@mentalhealth.org.nz

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