

# The road to enlightenment work and mental health in the pandemic

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## Disclaimer

This discussion paper was written by Adrian Wakeling, senior policy adviser at Acas.

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This paper is not intended as guidance from Acas about how to manage mental health in the pandemic nor as an endorsement by Acas of practices to be adopted in the workplace.

## Setting the scene

The impact that Covid-19 is having on our mental wellbeing – sometimes referred to as the 'shadow pandemic' – is clear to see in the numbers:

### Depression

More people are experiencing some form of depression. [Figures from the Office of National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) show that 19% of adults were likely to be experiencing some form of depression during the pandemic, almost double the proportion (10%) from before the pandemic.

### Poor coping strategies

[Recent research from Bupa Global](#), for example, found that 38% of UK board-level executives have used drink and drugs to manage pressures of the pandemic.

### Loneliness

[Research from the ONS](#) reveals that at the start of November, with its darker evenings, 8% of adults were 'always or often lonely', representing 4.2 million people.

### Inequality

Mental wellbeing is strongly influenced by many socio-economic factors, so it is perhaps unsurprising that the shadow pandemic has hit some groups more than others. For example, [ONS statistics on the impact of the pandemic on different groups show](#) that black and minority ethnic groups suffered a 'triple whammy of threats' to their mental health, incomes and life expectancy that left them more

vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic. The health crisis has also had a disproportionate impact on the young, women and those with caring responsibilities.

## The challenge for UK workplaces

The challenge for UK workplaces is to not just acknowledge the scale of the problem, but to understand the causes and respond appropriately. I have been talking to the heads of employee wellbeing at Fujitsu, Defence Intelligence (Ministry of Defence) and Amnesty International about their organisations' experience of life during the pandemic. Acas has worked with all 3 before, providing a range of training and in-depth advice.

When I met up with them, I was keen to find out the answer to the 2 questions. What impact is the pandemic having on attitudes to employee wellbeing? Some commentators have suggested that an increased awareness of mental health may offer a small silver lining in these troubled times. And what is being done to help the wellbeing of staff? [The Acas framework for positive mental health at work](#) operates on 3 levels – with joint responsibility shared between the individual, manager and employer – but where is most emphasis and resource being directed?

### What impact is the pandemic having on attitudes to employee wellbeing?

For all 3 organisations – and many other businesses our advisers have been working with – the pandemic has pushed mental health up the workplace agenda. As Sarah-Jane Littleford (head of responsible business for Fujitsu global delivery) said "since March 2020, mental wellbeing has become a runaway issue."

In an [Acas discussion paper about building better working conditions](#), we spoke of the ongoing 'national experiment' relating to remote working – with ONS figures showing around [34% of employees work from home](#). You could argue that a similar national experiment has been conducted to find out how well we cope under high levels of stress and anxiety: in other words, what are your coping strategies and how well are they working for you?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. [The government's review of mental health at work](#) by Lord Stevenson and Mind's Paul Farmer placed the responsibility for getting employees to thrive at work, rather than strive, very much at the door of employers. After all, it's the employer who sets the tone, who can most influence the culture and who can do something about the key work determinants of good health – that is good jobs (things like job security, autonomy, opportunities for progression and pay).

Fujitsu, the MOD and Amnesty have all started to take a strategic approach to mental wellbeing. The experience of Acas advisers certainly reinforces the view that this is the hardest bit to get right; and Sacha Draper (head of internal communications and people engagement at Amnesty) acknowledged that changing workplace culture takes time and is "a bit of a long road to enlightenment."

Reflecting on where you are with mental health – yours or that of your team or organisation – is not, of course, a luxury afforded to everyone. Many frontline key workers are so engaged with the physical health challenge they have little time to manage their own mental health. Recent [research on key workers living through lockdown](#) from the royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce (RSA), for example, found that "half of all key workers feel it is likely they will face burnout this winter (rising to 63% of NHS staff and 58% of social carers), with social care workers finding it more difficult to take time off if unwell". For many such workers, the mental health dimension of the pandemic may be waiting in the wings.

### What is being done to help the wellbeing of staff?

It seems as if emergency responses are a good place to start to respond to the health crisis, and this often involves engaging directly with individuals. Defence Intelligence has launched a mindfulness initiative, and it is surely encouraging that 15% of their workforce are now meditating on a regular basis. They have also developed special training for staff who, as part of their jobs, are exposed to traumatic images (which shows that vulnerability comes in many forms).

Amnesty has attempted to achieve that trickiest of things when working remotely: 'keeping people connected and recreating an authentic work environment'. Sacha suggested that it's harder to notice when people are struggling, so Amnesty has launched a new psychological first aid network to respond quickly to staff most in need.

As with many organisations, line managers continue to provide the interface for many workplace interventions around wellbeing. In response, Fujitsu has created a new section on their intranet for managers, with things like 'talking tips' on what questions to ask staff and how; as well as a charter which sets out expectations about the pastoral care managers should provide to their teams.

One of the ongoing concerns for Defence Intelligence regarding their line managers is addressing the very different approaches individuals take. Martin Short, head of wellbeing, diversity and inclusion estimates that the number of staff with neurodiverse conditions is 10 times the average – and they have been providing support to those managers who said they particularly struggled with interpersonal skills. A key part of this effort involves providing clear guidance and frameworks for structured conversations they might have with staff about their wellbeing – something that would surely be of benefit to all managers.

Although an employer's role in promoting positive mental health can be the hardest to fulfil, actions can signal the right intent. Fujitsu have introduced, for the first time, a global employee assistance programme, covering 14,000 employees in their global delivery business unit, across countries as diverse as China, Costa Rica, Russia and India. Defence Intelligence has set up a dashboard to indicate how well different areas of the business are doing in a whole range of areas – many of which reflect the '5 drivers of workplace wellbeing' developed by the [What Works Wellbeing Centre](#) (namely: health, security, environment, relationships and purpose). According to Martin, they are very much looking at the bigger picture and "measuring things like fairness and feelings of job security".

For Sacha at Amnesty, the strategy is broken down into 3 parts of a pyramid – with reactive measures like equal access to support at the top, upskilling managers and identifying the causes of stress in the middle, and the tricky 'preventative systemic factors' at the bottom.

The immediate challenges of the 3 organisations I spoke to mirror many experienced by those working remotely, which appear to involve a continual process of adaptation. Looking ahead, they all recognise the need to address the danger of burnout and fatigue. Sacha acknowledged that staff may not have taken as much leave as normal and she is personally looking forward to "having a break working from the living room". Amnesty have been running regular stress and resilience workshops for all staff. At Fujitsu, senior managers are offering webinars to staff on personal tips on how to 'recover better'; and, conversely, MOD's intelligence unit are aiming to develop a training package to educate senior managers about what good work looks like.

## Conclusion

In a previous Acas discussion paper, [Parity and integration? The new challenge for mental health at work](#) (PDF, 217KB, 7 pages) I argued that what mental health needed was not only parity with physical health, in terms of awareness and resources, but also 'integration'. Mental health has to be seen as a part of all aspects of our working lives. Perhaps, we need to go further and call for parity, integration and clarity. Like the written contract of employment, physical health has always been an explicit, clearly defined part of working life; but, as with the psychological contract, mental wellbeing has generally only been implied. It is surely time to spell out what expectations we have for our mental wellbeing at work that reflect current realities. In her LinkedIn article ['Why we need a new workplace contract'](#), my colleague Gill Dix makes the case for a new form of 'collective contract' with "a greater emphasis on compassion, power sharing, and trust".

Writing in a recent [article in The Times about wellbeing](#), Richard Layard and Gus O'Donnell said that 'building back better' should "not be mainly about roads, railways and buildings" but it should be about "spending more on mental health".

Money talks, of course, but not without changing attitudes. Waking up to the importance of mental wellbeing – in board rooms as well as on shop floors – may be, as Sacha Draper said, a "road to enlightenment"; but despite the very encouraging evidence of good practice on the part of some organisations, we must all work hard to ensure that the road is not overly long and that no one gets left

behind.