# Mental health at work during COVID-19

COVID-19 has changed how many workers have to work. These changes may increase the risk of harm to the mental health of workers. When this is paired with feelings of anxiety, fear, or uncertainty about the COVID-19 pandemic, workers may be more at risk of experiencing mental distress while at work. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) 2015, agencies and workers both have a role in ensuring work is mentally healthy, and that mental health (psychosocial) risks are managed effectively throughout this time. This guide outlines how government agencies, managers and workers can work together to do this.

## Common mental health risks

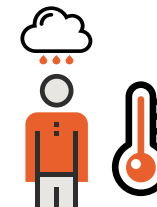| Social isolation | Change to routine or structure | Workload and work hours | Potential exposure to COVID-19 | Job change or job loss |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social isolation may cause workers to feel a loss of social connection with colleagues and other support networks. Workers may perceive less support for work and non-work concerns, may feel increasingly lonely, and may experience a loss of closeness and shared purpose with the team. Over time, this may harm a worker's mental health. | Routine and structure are beneficial for mental wellbeing. A drastic or sudden change to these may impact mental health, and may cause a worker to experience uncertainty, stress or anxiety. This may affect a worker's motivation, productivity, feelings of success, contribution to the team/work, or sense of purpose at work. | An increase or decrease in workload and/or work hours can cause increased stress and fatigue for workers. This can negatively impact a worker's mental health. This risk may particularly affect those working in essential services, frontline roles, or those who working from home who may find it difficult to 'switch off' or separate work from home. Additionally, many workers may have to manage additional responsibilities in the home during this time, such as caring for children or elderly. | Workers may become fearful about themselves or a loved one being exposed to COVID-19, both within and outside of work. Workers may also worry about how others may treat them if they are known to have contracted COVID-19. Excessive worry of exposure may harm a worker's mental health. | Workers may be required to change the work they do or how they work during this time. Some workers may be concerned about being restructured or made redundant as a result of COVID-19. The uncertainty or change from this may cause a worker to feel mental distress. |

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# Responsibilities

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**Responsibilities under HSWA 2015**

Agency (PCBU) and people leaders must:

- Ensure the health and safety of workers
- Provide and maintain a work environment without health and safety risks
- Provide information, training, instruction or supervision necessary to protect workers from health and safety risks
- Monitor the health of workers, and work conditions, to prevent injury or illness to workers from the work they do

Workers must:

- Take care of own health and safety
- Comply with any reasonable instructions given by the agency (PCBU)
- Co-operate with any reasonable workplace health and safety policies or procedures that your agency/manager (PCBU) has notified you of

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## Agency

### What do agencies need to do?

An agency (a PCBU) has a responsibility to eliminate or minimise risks, so far as is reasonably practicable. At an agency level, this means having effective systems for protecting the mental health of workers from work-related mental health risks. This may include policies, processes, guidance, training, resources, and assurance to check controls are in place and working effectively. If your agency doesn't have these in place already, look for interim solutions that may bridge this gap while you look to build longer-term solutions for the business. A systematic approach to risk management should still be applied during a pandemic, however, what is deemed *reasonably practicable* may change depending on the resources available or timeframes required during this time.

✓ Develop policies, procedures and guidance on mental health risks. Clearly describe roles and responsibilities, and ways to report concerns

✓ Develop training for leaders and workers on mental health risks **t**hat may stem from COVID-19, their consequences, and ways to manage them

✓ Provide a system for leaders and workers to raise concerns and report incidents relating to mental health risks

✓ Regularly check controls are in place and are working effectively

✓ Report on themes in data collected on mental health risks

✓ Take action to address concerns that are raised by workers and managers

✓ Engage with workers, Health and Safety Representatives, and unions when making changes that may affect the health and safety of workers

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### Example

A group of frontline workers in an agency are required to continue working as usual during COVID-19. The agency identifies through a risk assessment that this group may be exposed to several new mental health (psychosocial) risks during this time. In particular, they identify that increases to shift-length and work hours due to COVID-19 related work pose a high risk for workers. To address this, the agency adapts their work hours and roster policy to ensure workers are supported with more days off after longer shifts and put a limit on the number of consecutive days than can be worked. They also clearly outline the role of managers in ensuring processes are followed. The agency's Health and Safety team send guidance to managers on how to put these changes in place and host a weekly online webinar to discuss questions and feedback from managers on these changes. Through a weekly health and safety 'pulse-check' of workers, the health and safety governance group see that the risk for this group of workers is being managed effectively, with workers reporting low levels of stress and fatigue from the changes to their shifts and rosters. The governance group continue to closely monitor this data over for changes.

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# People leaders

## What do people leaders (managers) need to do?

As a people leader, you are acting on behalf of the agency (the PCBU). It is important to understand what the agency expects of you to support your workers relating to mental health risks. Mental health (psychosocial) risks are things that may have a negative impact on a worker's mental health and wellbeing. These risks may be harder to spot, and the consequences of them may appear slowly over time if a worker is continually exposed to things that cause harm (psychosocial hazards) in their work. People leaders should help their workers to identify what might cause them to experience poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and assess the likelihood of this happening. People leaders should work with workers to find ways to eliminate or minimise the risk, and ensure they know how to report any concerns.

✓ Ensure you and your workers understand your agency's policies and procedures and know what your personal responsibilities are for managing psychosocial risks

✓ Help your workers to identify psychosocial hazards and assess the risk to them

✓ Work with workers to put in place appropriate controls

✓ Ensure your workers understand where and how to seek support, and how to report any psychosocial incidents/concerns

✓ Encourage a culture where your workers feel comfortable raising concerns

✓ Act on any psychosocial concerns/incidents that workers raise or you become aware of

## Example

Tim is managing a team of ten workers who are required to work from home through COVID-19. Tim gets in touch with the Health and Safety and Human Resources teams to ask what relevant policies and procedures there are for working from home. The agency doesn't yet have a working from home policy, but while they're working on it, they release guidance to managers on managing teams remotely, which describes the importance of engaging with team members and an expectation that managers take a lenient and flexible approach to managing their team's workload during this time. Tim's health and safety team recommend that all managers make a **working from home plan** with each worker to determine the risks and how these will be managed. In his one-on-one talks with each worker, many of them express concern about how they are going to complete their normal contracted hours while managing schooling and carrying out tasks for their dependants.

Tim recognises that a normal workload may be a significant psychosocial risk for many of these workers as all of them having caring responsibilities for kids or elderly family while at home. Tim discusses the agency guidance on flexible approach to work and puts a plan in place for each worker for managing this. For some workers, this includes reduced work hours and workload, and for others it includes adjusted hours of work around other responsibilities. In his weekly one-to-one catch up with each worker, he checks how their flexible work plan is working for them and makes adjustments where needed.

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## What do workers need to do?

It is important that you understand your role in managing health and safety risks that may affect you, particularly mental health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Work with your manager to identify and assess potential risks to your mental health, and to find ways to eliminate or minimise these. Keep an eye out for any signs or symptoms of psychosocial harm that you may be experiencing, and report concerns and seek help early if needed. It is also important to remember that the things that impact our mental health outside of work may impact our ability to perform at work, just as the things that impact our mental health at work may affect us at home. This can create a harmful cycle if mental health risks are not effectively managed, so it is important to report any concerns you have to your manager or agency as early as possible.

- ✓ Work with your manager to identify and assess mental health risks that may apply to you or your situation
- ✓ Work with your manager to find ways to eliminate or minimise the risk of harm and put these in place
- ✓ Raise any concerns and/or incidents relating to mental health risks with your manager or Health and Safety Representative.
- ✓ Ensure that you understand your agency's policies, procedures and guidance on mental health risks
- ✓ Complete any training relating to managing mental health that your agency provides

## Example

Jenny is a worker in a team of five who are all required to work from home during COVID-19. During the first week, Jenny has no issues and enjoys being able to relax at home while working. However, into her second week she starts to feel frustrated and unmotivated because she can't get things done like she usually can, and she can't get to her usual lunch time gym session which helps her to recharge. Jenny feels less resilient and starts to get annoyed with her colleague over a piece of work after detecting a negative tone in her colleague's emails to her. Jenny raises her concerns with her manager and they discuss how working remotely and a change of routine can take time to adapt to. Jenny realises that the change of routine has started to have more of an impact than she anticipated and that her mood is affecting her view of her colleague, and that this is continuing to affect her mood outside of work. They discuss some of the ways they could support Jenny to feel better and adapt to this working environment. Jenny and her manager put a flexible work plan in place to allow her to complete a televised exercise class each morning to help her to feel recharged, as well as a reduced expectation for outputs during this time. Jenny's manager also agrees to reimburse phone calls so Jenny can regularly pick up the phone to speak to her colleague to ensure the tone and meaning behind messages isn't lost in an email.
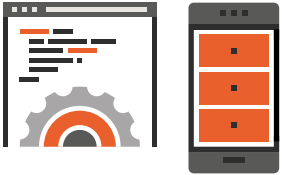
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# Taking action

Take a systematic approach to managing psychosocial risks in the workplace. Agencies and managers should engage with workers when identifying mental health (psychosocial) risks and determining appropriate controls. Here are some common risk scenarios as a result of COVID-19 and examples of how they can be managed.

| Scenario | Mental health risks | Agency | Manager | Worker |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Worker required to work from home for several months** | • Social isolation/loss of connection with team<br>• Loss of routine | • Develop a working from home policy which addresses common psychosocial risks<br>• Develop guidance that helps workers to set up their workspace and create routine | • Use a team meeting to discuss the agency's working from home policy and what this looks like in practice and what workers can expect from you while working from home<br>• Have a regular wellbeing check-in with workers at each catch up | • Write a daily-routine to put structure in your work-day around what is realistic to complete during COVID-19. Include time for exercise, meal breaks, and time for socialising with friends, family and team members via phone or video call |
| **Worker deployed to another agency to support COVID-19 response work** | • Job change/sudden change of work tasks and responsibilities<br>• Increase in workload/ excessive work demands | • Ensure there is a written agreement between home and host agencies and host agencies entering the secondment arrangement which details how health and safety risks will be managed and roles and responsibilities relating to health and safety | • Ensure workers have the required skills, training and resources to perform the job safely<br>• Ensure workers are provided with all available information on the changes in a timely manner.<br>• Set up a regular one-to-one catch ups to check-in on workers | • Regularly communicate with your manager about how you are finding work and any concerns you have |
| **Worker required to work on the frontline during Alert Level 3 or 4** | • Exposure to COVID-19<br>• Uncertain work circumstances | • Provide clear guidance on the level of risk and the controls in place to manage these<br>• Conduct regular pulse-checks of worker wellbeing and common indicators for psychosocial risks<br>• Listen to worker concerns and work with managers and workers to address these | • Check in with workers to understand the factors at work affecting mental health that the agency may be able to change<br>• Support worker to address concerns about exposure and ensure they have access to all relevant information | • Proactively manage your mental health and wellbeing by putting a self-care plan in place to manage stress<br>• Report concerns early through your manager or H&S reporting system<br>• Seek support through your manager or agency support services and talk about how you are feeling |
| **Worker managing additional family/caring responsibilities while continuing to work** | • Reduced capacity to complete full time work<br>Excessive demands outside of work | • Develop a flexible working policy and encourage managers to generously apply this when supporting workers with additional duties during COVID-19 | • Have regular communication/ check-ins with workers and openly discuss how they are managing during this time and how a flexible work arrangement may support them | • Talk openly with your manager about how a flexible work arrangement may work and communicate any needs for changed or reduced hours |

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# Support and resources

**Websites/apps**

- **Allright.govt.nz** is a website with the *Getting Through Together* mental health toolkit which has practical mental health and wellbeing advice and support during COVID-19
- **Melon** is an app with a health journal, resources and self-awareness tools to help you manage your emotional wellbeing. You can also join their online community to connect with and support others, and watch daily webinars about health and wellbeing
- **Mentemia** is an app that you can use to monitor, manage and improve your mental wellbeing by setting daily goals and tracking your progress
- **Staying on Track** is an e-therapy course that teaches you practical strategies to cope with the stress and disruption of day-to-day life (Just a Thought)

**Phone or text services**

- **1737** is a free service for New Zealanders feeling down, anxious, a bit overwhelmed or just need to chat to someone. You can call or text for free 24/7 to speak with a trained counsellor
- **Employee Assistance Programme** – speak to your manager or take a look on your agency's intranet for information on the employee assistance programme available to you. Some EAP providers may be able to offer tele-consultations

**Guides/resources**

- **Wellplace.nz** – **Managing mental health problems at work**
- WorkSafe New Zealand – **Work isn't just physical**
- WorkSafe New Zealand – **Fatigue**
- Government Health and Safety Lead – **Mental Health pocketbook**
- Government Health and Safety Lead – **A mental health guide for New Zealand Leaders**
- Government Health and Safety Lead – **A guide for maintaining health and wellbeing**
- Government Health and Safety Lead – **Working From Home**

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