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UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES
FROM OUR WORLD



MENTAL HEALTH PEOPLE MUST COME FIRST WHEN A PANDEMIC STRIKES

COVID-19 has been one of the greatest global challenges facing businesses and communities in the 21st century. The scale of its impact means now more than ever it's important for companies to put employees' health and wellbeing at the forefront. LSM is finding success with its mental health first-aider network.

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Tim Woodgett, Chair of LSM's Health & Wellbeing Committee and co-founder of LikeMind, the Mental Health Insurance Network, and Andrew Cummins, LSM Mental Health First Aider, shine a spotlight on LSM's approach to mental health and wellbeing and discuss how COVID-19 has raised the stakes.

Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual can realise their full potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to their community. While these may seem like simple goals for some, they are challenging for so many of us with mental health struggles.

Work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 44% of work-related ill health and 54% of working days lost in 2018–19 according to the UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE). The cost to businesses is substantial – up to £45 billion each year. Risks to mental health in the workplace, according to the World Health Organisation include: inadequate health and safety policies,

poor communication and management practices, limited participation in decision-making, low control over one's area of work, low levels of support for employees, inflexible working hours and unclear tasks or organisational objectives.

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the potential for many of these risks to increase.

Stress triggers are rising because of COVID-19

The immediate workplace health and safety risks may be obvious. But we should not underestimate the potential for stress to arise in the context of working from home, perhaps in close proximity to others, juggling physical space, digital bandwidth, work deadlines and care priorities. At the other end of the spectrum, some employees may be working from home alone, isolated from society and colleagues with none of the support and camaraderie of a physical workspace.

Different interactions, changing work requirements, altered capacity, lack of security, health or financial anxiety, new routines – all of these can be potential triggers of stress and anxiety and may impact individuals' capacity to work productively and fruitfully.

Against this backdrop, organisations around the world are re-thinking how they can support employees to maintain their physical and mental health and wellbeing during these challenging times.

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Support framework is in place

LSM has a long-held commitment to supporting health and wellbeing in the workplace. We recognise that there is no health without mental health and that we need to operate a mentally healthy workplace, free from stigma, where people are equipped to support themselves and each other.

Types of support vary around the LSM office network, but in London, an Employee Assistance Programme has been in place, for some time, providing a confidential 24/7 information and advice service for employees and family members on both work-related and personal matters. In addition, employees can access a private health care programme which offers a 'Stronger Minds' team which will put them in touch with a trained counsellor within a short period of time – hours as opposed to days. Referrals from this service enable employees to access further therapy including psychological or psychiatric assistance as needed.

But sometimes people need something less formal, a safety net or just a sounding board which enhances the sense of community and is fundamental to a healthy workspace.

To supplement the employee assistance and private health care programmes, in January 2018 LSM established a mental health first-aider network. Three of the five volunteers who trained in that first wave are still in post and the team has now expanded to over 20 active members with a similar number due to attend training accredited by Mental Health First Aid England. We are looking to roll out a similar support programme to our international offices in the near future.

Courses, which are developed with input from clinical experts and those with experience of dealing with mental health issues, are grounded in research and rigorously tested. Those who attend, gain an understanding of mental health and the

factors that can affect wellbeing; practical skills to spot the triggers and signs of a range of mental health issues; confidence to step in, reassure and support a person in distress using the Mental Health First Aid action plan and enhanced interpersonal skills, such as non-judgmental listening. First Aiders are also given the knowledge to help someone recover their health by guiding them to further support as appropriate, plus an understanding of how to keep themselves safe while performing their duties.

But of course, no programme can be fully effective unless people know it exists and feel comfortable accessing it.

The Health & Wellbeing Committee has run presentations for all the teams in London, offers 'Lunch & Learn' sessions and coordinates a programme of visiting speakers. Topics have included managing anxiety or stress, improving resilience, financial wellbeing, and children and mental health. The aim is to de-stigmatise issues, to be proactive in terms of offering advice and support and to give people a toolset to draw on if needed.

Recognising that there are very few places in the physical office space that employees can retreat to if they feel low or need to take time out, the team has also pioneered the creation of a wellbeing space within the office and produced posters for the backs of doors to toilets.

Whatever the mode of communication, the service offering is always the same – the team is available, trained to listen without judging, and conversations are completely confidential (provided there is no concern an individual may be a danger to themselves or others). Photos of the first-aiders are on all the posters because people are more likely to use the service when they recognise someone they know as part of the network.

Putting people first

As the scale of the impact of COVID-19 becomes apparent around the world,

demands on the mental health network have also increased, with many of the volunteers receiving more calls.

At this time, one of the firm's top priorities has been to ensure employees understand how important it is that they look after their mental health and wellbeing.

Employees have been advised on how to establish a good home-working environment and are encouraged to take regular breaks, make time to go out to exercise or relax, and reap all the associated rewards – raised levels of Vitamin D from sunlight, higher serotonin levels, an improved sense of calm, relaxation and sense of wellbeing. LSM is very much a community and the executive team is keen to make the most of every opportunity to emphasise and support employee health and wellbeing. A range of wellness activities are now accessible to employees online including yoga, nutrition classes and online team social activities are being encouraged to keep people connected and engaged.

Network is expanding

The value of the mental health first aider network is that it is driven by employees, supported by the executive and its goal – to make LSM a better place to work – is universally supported. In the UK there is a growing number of people signing up for training as a Mental Health First Aider and scope for its expansion is being explored.

Materials and resources are being shared with employees overseas and there are also moves afoot to research and establish a mental health network to support LSM employees working internationally with volunteers trained and accredited by appropriate local mental health bodies.

Now more than ever it's important that we look after our mental health and wellbeing. The imperative for businesses to address mental health in the workplace has never been greater as the pandemic has brought us new challenges on every level. ■



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