



Live & Learn
MENTAL HEALTH

Beyond the Zoom face

Remote working may be undermining the mental health of your team. Here are five ways to support your colleagues when working from home

By
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orking from home is the present reality for lots of office workers, whether they like it or not. For some, working while wearing their slippers is also their future.

Tech giants Facebook, Google and Reddit are among the business that have started offering remote working for the long term. But while this affords many opportunities, it also creates mental health concerns.

The challenges of remote working

Anyone who has worked in an office – or in any other workplace for that matter – has probably woken up in the morning, wanting to avoid the traffic and preferring to do their job in the comfort of home. Having this opportunity every so often is likely to benefit most people and give them a boost they need.

But working from home for much of the week, and for long periods, can present numerous challenges. People who have other remote workers in their household can find it impractical. Those with children off school may find it impossible. And anyone who lives alone can suddenly feel very isolated and lonely, especially in light of Covid restrictions.

Mental health can suffer in any of the above situations, as well as others. Whether it is anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress or a combination of these things, the mental wellbeing of remote workers is a very real and immediate concern.

Spotting mental health problems

If colleagues are having mental health problems in the office, it is easier to notice them and offer help. You might notice Dave from marketing is quieter than normal, or walk in on a colleague crying in the toilet. Moreover, most businesses have implemented a way for people to communicate mental health issues, or concerns about other staff members, in the physical workplace.

The same cannot be said about remote working, however. It is much more difficult for us to notice a decline in the mental health of our colleagues, staff and even our managers and bosses when our only professional contact is via a videoconferencing call. Also, the avenues of support that organisations may have rightly implemented for mental health may not be applicable in the current situation, leaving no real support network right now.

So, how can we look past the Zoom face and understand how our colleagues are really feeling? And, if there are issues, what can we do to get them to come forward and seek help?

1 Maintain open lines of communication

Remote teams should have open lines of communication that make the remote-working world more like their office environment. In the office, workers are able to get up from their desk, ask questions of others, and seek assistance. The same principle should be adopted virtually by making teams responsive and available whenever possible.

We can also open up lines of communication specifically for mental health. Some businesses are already implementing a buddy system where every worker has a confidential buddy they can chat to about their mental health problems.

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2 Schedule talk sessions

Another way to cut and paste a normal part of the working day into remote working is by taking a scheduled break session together. When we are in the office, we tend to take breaks in small groups to catch up on things unrelated to work. This can still happen with video calls at set break times to give us more interaction that is not connected to deadlines and work tasks.

3 Hold one-to-one manager meetings

Most workers are more likely to express mental health problems to their managers and colleagues if they are also close friends. They will also be more inclined to disclose their issues to a manager if they know the manager may have some authority to help them, especially if their mental health issues are being caused by overwork.

One-to-one manager meetings give leaders the opportunity to ask how their team members are coping while working from home. If the manager can state their own challenges first, it may help their staff member to open up as well.

4 Give more praise

When we work from home independently, it is very easy to feel underappreciated or undervalued

as a staff member. One reason for this is we get less feedback and acknowledgement for our work than we would in an office environment. This lack of perceived appreciation for our work may also increase feelings of loneliness.

It has never been so important for managers and bosses to look out for the great things their staff are doing in difficult circumstances, and mention this to them individually and as a group.

5 Get remote work certified

New remote working team courses are being developed in response to the current situation. These are excellent for getting teams to create a supportive remote-working culture and helping them to look out for the signs of declining mental health in colleagues. These qualifications don't just help individuals to identify mental health concerns, they also show that organisations are willing to invest in ensuring their staff are happy and healthy.

By following these five steps, we can better support colleagues who aren't coping at home. They help us to see beyond the Zoom face. ■

Amy Watmore is founding director of The Administration Hub, a provider of innovative remote working courses. See www.theadministrationhub.co.uk