Supporting your team in lockdown and beyond
GUIDE FOR MANAGERS AND LEADERS
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**Note:** A leader in this document/context refers to anyone who has staff reporting to them; that is, leader, manager, supervisor, team leader.
The lockdown challenge

The COVID pandemic has resulted in unprecedented and life-changing challenges that have tested our personal resilience and our leadership skills.

Each year one in five Australian adults experience mental ill health, with mental distress increasing during COVID-19. In addition, working from home or flexible working is becoming the new normal and as leaders we need new tools and ways of working to successfully manage remote teams.

The welfare of our staff is a priority, and we need a productive and engaged workforce to ensure the ongoing success of the University. As a leader it is important that you look after your own mental health and that of your teams, so this document provides some useful tips and resources to help you as you navigate managing teams remotely.

Source: Beyond Blue

**DID YOU KNOW**

- Lost productivity due to mental ill-health is estimated to cost the Australian economy between $10-18 billion every year, but on the flip side, every dollar invested into workplace mental health is estimated to deliver a return on investment of 5:1.
- Select interventions that target mental health issues in the workplace could potentially save the economy $4.5 billion a year.
- Mental ill-health costs employers an average of $3,200 per employee with mental illness per annum in absenteeism and presenteeism, and up to $5,600 for employees with severe mental illness.


The statistics paint an alarming picture. As leaders, we need to educate ourselves in the area of mental health, so that we can educate and support our team and others.
What does this mean for leaders?

Employee engagement, mental health and wellness are fast becoming strategic imperatives for all organisations, and it is the role of the direct manager/supervisor that has the most impact and influence on these factors. YOU play a critical role in promoting and creating a positive and mentally healthy workplace.

By looking after our staff and fostering good healthy working relationships, we can get the best out of our teams. And if our staff perform well, the University performs well.
How to identify risks and warning signs

The way staff are treated and managed on a day-to-day basis is central to their mental wellbeing and engagement. It is even more important to stay in regular contact with your team when working from home.

As a leader, you are crucial in supporting wellbeing, identifying early signs of distress, and initiating early intervention. The following tips can help you support your team’s wellbeing, and prevent and manage mental health concerns.

3.1 BE AWARE OF WORK STRESS FACTORS
Psychosocial risk factors are aspects of work and situations that may cause a stress response that in turn can lead to psychological or physical harm.3

These risk factors stem from:
- the way tasks or a job is designed, organised, managed and supervised (eg workload, deadlines and task complexity)
- lack of role clarity
- lack of support, including poorly managed change
- poorly managed workplace relationships and social interactions at work
- tasks or jobs where there are inherent psychosocial hazards and risks (eg a lack of fairness, respect and inclusion; bullying and harassment)
- lone or remote working, fatigue
- poor levels of reward and recognition.

3.2 SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR IN YOUR STAFF
Always keep your staff wellbeing top of mind and be on the lookout for the following signs:
- anyone working very long hours, or who is struggling to get their work done
- changes in behaviour and/or performance – a team member is not themselves, has mood changes, seems distant or not engaged, a drop in work performance
- a lack of online visibility, avoiding/missing online meetings, or someone is very quiet and withdrawn in Zoom meetings
- a colleague alerts you that something has happened or that something is not right with one of your team members
- you become aware of some personal issues and that something is not right at home
- your staff member is alone at home during lockdown and may feel/become isolated

Refer to the chart below to help you identify more signs of distress.

Source: www.ruok.org.au4

It’s time to ask RU OK? If you’ve noticed a change, no matter how small
If you have noticed these signs, it’s time to trust the Signs, trust your gut and ask RU OK?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?</th>
<th>WHAT ARE THEY DOING?</th>
<th>WHAT’S GOING ON IN THEIR LIFE?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Confused or irrational</td>
<td>Experiencing mood swings</td>
<td>Relationship issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moody</td>
<td>Becoming withdrawn</td>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unable to switch off</td>
<td>Losing interest in what they used to love</td>
<td>Work pressures/constant stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concerned about the future</td>
<td>Unable to concentrate</td>
<td>Financial difficulty</td>
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<td>Concerned they’re a burden</td>
<td>Less interested in their appearance and personal hygiene</td>
<td>Loss of someone or something they care about</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lonely or lacking self-esteem</td>
<td>Behaviour noticeably</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned they’re trapped or in pain</td>
<td>Changing their sleep patterns</td>
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Source: www.ruok.org.au4
Supporting your staff and their wellbeing

4.1 HELP MANAGE STRESS FACTORS
As a leader, you need to be in touch with how your staff are coping. Some of the stress factors listed in section 3.1 are largely within your control. If you recognise that a staff member is not coping well, look at what you can do to help. For example, you can:

- minimise the hours spent on Zoom
- encourage time off work
- change deadlines where possible
- provide help where required. For example, you could offer more direction, or ask ‘what do you need from me to help you cope better?’
- share the load by asking someone else in your team to help
- be encouraging and provide recognition where it is due.

If you can see the staff member’s overall wellbeing is declining, have a care conversation (see 4.4) and/or refer to someone for help.

4.2 HAVE REGULAR CHECK-INS WITH YOUR TEAM AND INDIVIDUALS
• Ensure you have regular one-on-ones set up in your diary with your team members – weekly or bimonthly meetings are recommended during lockdown.
• If you find someone is not themselves, set up another meeting and/or more regular check-ins as needed to provide extra support. Phoning or using text messages may work best for the situation and the individual; however, if the staff member avoids face-to-face meetings and is avoiding speaking to you, you have reason to be concerned.
• Ensure you have regular weekly team meetings – work related and/or social/casual.
• Arrange other check-in sessions with the team such as weekly coffee catch-ups over Zoom or fun sessions such as team quizzes, ice-breaker sessions and non-work chats.

4.3 QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK TO CHECK IN WITH YOUR TEAM
Here is a selection of questions you can ask your team members. By understanding your team members’ individual experiences and situations, you will not only show you care but will help your staff feel safe and supported. You can also identify where staff might need specific help:

- How are you coping with the current COVID-19 restrictions?
- How easy or difficult is it for you to work effectively right now?
- What support do you have at home? Are you alone?
- Is there anything I can do to support you better through this time?
- How is your remote working set-up? Are you struggling with anything technology related?
- What hurdles or barriers are you experiencing and what can I do to help you overcome them?
- What are the top three biggest challenges you face while working remotely?
- Outside work, how confident are you that you have the right support network to help you through this period?
- Do you have any questions for me or feedback on what I can do better as a manager?
- What is your greatest concern right now? Is there anything I can do to help?
**4.4 HAVE A CARE CONVERSATION**

If you have noticed that one of your team members is not travelling well, it is important to ask the question R U OK? Set up a virtual meeting as soon as possible and have a care conversation.

**Steps to follow:**

1. Ask
2. Listen
3. Encourage action
4. Check in

Source: www.ruok.org.au

**Here are some simple steps to start a conversation:**

- Ask: ‘Are you OK?’ – help staff open up by asking: ‘How are you going?’
- Listen without judgement – take what they say seriously.
- Encourage action – urge them to commit to doing one thing that might help them.
- Check in later – if they’re really struggling, follow up soon and also encourage them to seek additional help (eg Employee Assistance Program).

**These three videos can help you have the conversation:**

- How to ask (15 sec)
- How to ask a workmate (4.5 min)
- Why a conversation can help a colleague (3 min)

As the leader, you can also get coaching and advice from our EAP provider, Benestar (MyCoach), and involve your HR client team.

**4.5 WHAT DO I DO IF SOMEONE IS REALLY NOT COPING?**

Be familiar with the Mental Health Support information available. If you think someone is having suicidal thoughts, don’t be afraid to ask them and find out if they have a plan of action and the means to follow through if they are suicidal. This is important as the research shows it saves lives.

Providing hope is important. Reassure them that help is available, they are not alone. Encourage them to get support immediately (such as from their GP, family or a trusted friend). If you are concerned that your team member is suicidal at home, seek assistance immediately.

- Stay connected with them (by mobile or video call).
- Ask if they have someone with them or whether there is someone you can contact for them.
- Call Emergency Services: dial 000 (Triple Zero) (have someone do this if possible while you stay on the line with the employee).
- Notify your immediate manager and HR manager.
- Contact Campus Security on 02 9850 9999 or 1800CareMQ (1800 227 367). The number is also on the back of all MQID cards.

**Please note:**

- Having these conversations (above), can be distressing so please consider your own health and early access to supports available to you, such as from your manager, Employee Assistance Program and your health care provider. Make sure you debrief this incident with someone you trust and make sure you are okay.
- As a leader, we may not always be able to control/change the stress some staff are facing at home (in their personal life), however, we do have a responsibility to try and create a psychological safe workplace and minimise work stress.
How to combat digital overload

5.1 MINIMISE ZOOM FATIGUE

- Use technology tools to add variety to your Zoom sessions or use other channels of communication so that Zoom-type sessions are less frequent.
- Tired of emails? Online chats, workgroups on WhatsApp or groups on Facebook are other options
  - Switch to phone calls, and walk and talk – if you can.
  - For external calls, avoid defaulting to video, especially if you don’t know each other well.
  - Use the whiteboard on Zoom to brainstorm, and breakout rooms for greater team involvement.
  - Use Kahoot to run quizzes and polls with your team and make meetings and presentations fun.
  - Organise group cards or gifts for when someone is leaving or for special events such as baby showers, birthdays, the loss of a loved one. For ideas, try Kudoboard, Group Together or Group Greeting.
  - Encourage short but regular breaks for long Zoom sessions and/or workshops.
  - Avoid multitasking as it impacts negatively on productivity.
  - Make big virtual events optional.
  - Reduce on-screen stimuli. To combat mental fatigue, encourage people to use plain backgrounds (eg a poster of a peaceful beach scene), or agree as a group to have everyone who is not talking turn off their video.

A few other points to consider about Zoom and working from home:

- Think about the best times to set up meetings for your team. For example, 9am is not a good meeting start time for anyone who has school-aged children at home. This is the time that information is being downloaded from school and lessons are being set up.
- We are all human – it is okay if your Zoom session is interrupted by a family member, noise or pets. Just try to keep calm and/or make a joke out of it. It can often lighten the mood, shows your human side and is a nice break from work.
- Recognise and acknowledge the challenges that individuals have at home and accept that there are things out of an individual’s control – let your staff know that this is okay.

5.2 INCREASE THE FUN TO DECREASE THE STRESS

- Try some virtual team building activities such as those available at Quizbreaker.
- Organise a step challenge for your team – use a simple spreadsheet to track the teams’ weekly steps or use the free 10,000 steps website.
- Consider home drop-offs (such as small thank-you gifts and a handwritten note).
- Have weekly casual catch-ups/coffee sessions, and take in turns to do an activity or icebreaker
  - Get your team to take photos of what they have been up to during lockdown and share with the team.
  - Share some lockdown recipes/cooking tips – and show photos of the results.
  - Share good series or movies to watch.
  - Ask a question. For example:
    - If you could have a superpower, what would it be?
    - What’s your favourite season?
    - Which historical figure would you want to meet?
    - What’s the most interesting place you’ve ever visited?
    - Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
    - What has been the best day of your life so far?
    - What do you want people to remember you for?
    - Who has been most influential person in your life?
    - What’s the worst travel experience you’ve ever had?
    - What you are grateful for today?
    - Or search the internet for other great ideas!
Tips for managing your own self-care

To be a good leader you need to look after yourself first. If you are not feeling your best, it is hard to give your best to others. As leaders, looking after yourself and having a good self-care routine if not selfish – it is essential. It will allow you to bring the best version of yourself to work and create a positive work environment.

**Self-care tips to consider during lockdown include:**

- Make sure you eat well, stay physically fit and get enough sleep – this is always the best place to start. Try out some online fitness classes offered by our Sport and Aquatic Centre. Access live classes and find the timetable [here](#).
- Be realistic about what can be achieved in a day – for you and for your team.
- Keep the hours you work in check and be mindful of work-life balance.
- Try and find time to switch off from technology.
- Block off time in your diary to think and have regular breaks from Zoom meetings.
- If you set up a Zoom meeting, consider starting at 10 minutes past the hour to minimise back-to-back sessions.
- Meet up with a friend to walk and connect.
- Take a day or a few days off work to recharge – watch a feel-good movie, cook new recipes, read a book, go for a hike, meditate, or do some online exercise classes.
- It is okay to not be okay. When you are feeling low call a friend or family member.
- If you have been involved in a stressful situation at work or something is worrying you, find someone you trust to share this with and debrief the situation. Talking about issues can help to relieve some of the tension you might be feeling.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it.
- Access Benestar, our [Employee Assistance Program (EAP)](# provider. Six free sessions are available for staff and their immediate families each year.
- Share some of these ideas with your team and look after each other’s wellbeing.
Where can I access additional help and/or refer my team member?

- Your immediate manager
- Your HR manager
  - Contact the MyCoach for Leaders service – you will be supported by a professional coach to assist you with any work-related issues. This service is specifically aimed at assisting leaders with their unique people management challenges. It is a proactive and confidential service available both online and over the phone.
  - You can refer your staff member to MyCoach for Individuals, the confidential online or telephone counselling service.
  - Contact Benestar directly on 1300 360 364. Six free sessions are available to staff and their immediate family per year.
- Refer to the WHS SharePoint Hub – Psychosocial safety
- Our staff wellbeing page has a list of useful resources for improving wellbeing
- Contact Campus Security on 9850 9999 or 1800CareMQ (1800 227 367). These numbers are on the back of all MQID cards (for on-campus and working from home emergencies).
- Other helplines for staff:
  
  **Lifeline:** 13 11 14, lifeline.org.au
  **Beyond Blue:** 1300 22 4636 beyondblue.org.au
  **Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800, kidshelpline.com.au
  **MensLine:** 1300 78 99 78, mensline.org.au
  **Suicide Call Back Service:** 1300 659 467, suicidecallbackservice.org.au
  **Emergency Services:** 000 (Triple Zero)
Extra resources and links

**FACT SHEETS**
- How to ask R U OK?
- Identify the signs and detailed Conversation guide 4 Step Poster conversation guide
- How to support your staff during COVID-19
- Tips for coping with infectious diseases
- Preventing psychological injury at work during COVID-19

**VIDEOS**
- How to ask R U OK?
- How to ask a workmate R U OK?
- Why a conversation can help a colleague

**ONLINE ARTICLES**
- 10 ways to take care of yourself during lockdown
- Support for vulnerable staff and communities COVID-19 – a practical guide
- Macquarie staff share their lockdown survival tips
- How to talk to your team when the future is uncertain
- This Week – Managing lockdown fatigue
- This Week – Supporting staff during lockdown
- Working from home: A checklist to support your mental health
- How to deal with a year of accumulated burnout from working at home

**WEBSITES – MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**
- beyondblue.org.au
- blackdoginstitute.org.au
- headtohealth.gov.au
- mindspot.org.au
- ruok.org.au
References


