

Coronavirus crisis

What you need to know: Staff mental health and wellbeing

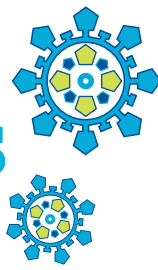


10 points on how to protect staff mental health during the Covid-19 crisis

- 1** This is a worrying time. The pandemic doesn't just impact on physical health; your mental health can also be affected. If you already experience poor mental health, you may find your condition has worsened. Even if you have never been affected, you may be struggling. All education staff are key workers. Depending on your circumstances, anxieties about your family's health and wellbeing will likely be compounded by concerns related to full opening of schools/colleges from September.
- 2** There is much we can do collectively and individually to alleviate concerns and many resources are available. As a member of the NEU you are well-placed to help yourself and colleagues through this difficult time and get support from your workplace reps or branch officers.
- 3** Many schools and colleges have trained Mental Health First Aiders. These colleagues will be alert to signs that others are struggling and will be able to signpost you to sources of support.
- 4** If COVID-19 protocols or new working practices in your workplace are unsafe or causing distress, don't put up with them. The nation is depending on education staff more than ever before and, in return, you have the right to be treated fairly. Your employer must negotiate new protocols with staff and not seek to impose them. Adaptations to working arrangements must happen in consultation with NEU reps and members.
- 5** Expectations around workload must be both reasonable and negotiated. Whatever your working arrangements, taking regular breaks is essential. Despite the crisis, there must be agreement that no-one should be constantly available or expected to respond to messages within unrealistic timeframes, or at evenings and weekends. If there is no reasonable email protocol in place in your school/college, discuss with fellow NEU members what you think is reasonable, and then raise this collectively with management. For example, you may decide that there should be no expectation to read or reply to emails before 8am and after 5pm on working days. At this stressful time, when there is an even greater need to rest and relax, it might also be worth having an understanding that work-related emails and group messages, eg on WhatsApp, will not be sent by anyone outside of set times. At the end of your working day, put your phone away, switch off your computer and try to relax.

Coronavirus crisis

What you need to know: Staff mental health and wellbeing

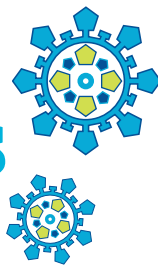


- 6** Working with fellow NEU members and members of other unions in your workplace, you can tackle collectively some of the issues which are causing concerns. For example hygiene issues, refusal to follow Government and union guidance to allow vulnerable people to work from home, refusal to pay those self-isolating, employers pressing ahead with redundancy procedures and other employment procedures such as disciplinary and capability and refusing to postpone restructures. You can read examples [here](#) about how NEU members and reps have secured important protocols to keep members and pupils safe both physically and mentally. If you are successful, please submit your story about how NEU is making a difference in your area.
- 7** Some staff may still be working from home in September and the possibility of local lockdowns means that this could be the case for many more education staff over the coming months. If working from home, try to ensure that your work environment is separate from your living space and is as comfortable as possible.
 - Physical health can impact on mental health so make sure you can sit comfortably (see [NEU guidance](#) on working safely at home).
 - Try to talk to colleagues often during the day, rather than emailing all the time. Having a virtual social event to look forward to will help you bond as a team, for example a drink at the end of the day or a virtual quiz.
- Make sure your line manager is aware of any caring responsibilities you may be juggling. If you have young children at home, this may impact on your working arrangements and cause stress. If you are sharing childcare responsibilities, it is important to think about how to balance these. This might mean working at different times during the day, or blocking out periods of time to be with children. It is important to discuss your specific working arrangements and any restrictions during this period with your head teacher/line manager. The NEU expects all leaders to be reasonable in their expectations – these are exceptional times.
- Take regular breaks, including a lunch break every day, and whatever outside exercise is permitted, along with as much fresh air as possible. Set a time to finish work and stick to it.
- 8** Take advantage of technology. Using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype or other communication/collaborative working platforms can help you connect with colleagues and work together. See [here](#) for information on popular video conferencing services. It can be good to use a range of technologies so you're not always typing or looking at a screen – mix things up with a telephone or video call, or have a virtual coffee break.

In order to avoid isolation, it's important that colleagues who may struggle with this new environment receive support. If you are struggling, you are unlikely to be alone. A colleague may be able to help, or you should be provided with on-line training.

Coronavirus crisis

What you need to know: Staff mental health and wellbeing



9 Look after your own wellbeing when you're not working.

There are simple steps we can all take to look after ourselves. You may be struggling with loneliness or, in the event of further lockdowns, may be finding it hard to be cooped up with your family

- Keep in touch digitally with family and friends and consider reconnecting with those with whom you've lost touch. Talk about your worries. And focus on what you can control rather than what you can't.
- Look after your body by staying active and busy – sit less, dance, walk up and down stairs, clean your home or have a clear out, or a digital clear out!
- Keep your mind stimulated – read, listen to podcasts, watch films, do puzzles and jigsaws, but limit your intake of news if this is upsetting you.
- Find ways to relax and be creative, eg DIY, arts and crafts, yoga, listening to music, exploring new recipes.
- Try to stick to your normal sleeping and waking schedule.

10 Accessing further support

Check what is on offer from your employer. You may be able to access free, confidential wellbeing or counselling services.

Help and advice

[The Education Support Partnership](#)

supports the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. Call the helpline on **08000 562 561**.

Some staff, particularly leaders, will sadly need to offer support to children who have lost a loved one or who have a family member who is seriously ill. [The Charity Winston's Wish](#) provides guidance and resources for schools.

[Mind has published useful guidance on coronavirus and wellbeing](#)

[Government advice is here](#)

[The NHS has published helpful tips for staying at home](#)

[Contact details for Samaritans](#)

The NEU AdviceLine is currently operating by email only. If your query is not addressed in the coronavirus or advice section of our website, email us at adviceline@neu.org.uk.

[Mental Health First Aid \(England\)](#)

includes resources for working at home.

If your symptoms don't improve, contact your GP surgery. GPs are still offering telephone and video consultations throughout the coronavirus crisis.