

WORKING TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

As yet it is not clear what the mental health impacts of the pandemic will be and the phased return to the 'new normal', led by the Roadmap for Reopening, will not automatically see a return to wellbeing, according to Dr Kara McGann, Head of Social Policy at Ibec. In fact, she claims that for many it is likely to exacerbate the strain being experienced.



During the pandemic, employers and employees have had to rapidly adjust to the new work environment, and for many this has involved working from home.

Mental wellbeing describes the way we think and feel about ourselves and others, our confidence, and our ability to control things in our life. It goes beyond whether we experience mental health problems and is not about whether or not we have a diagnosed mental illness.

Mental health problems may range from the worries which everyone experiences as part of every-day life to serious long-term conditions.

Our mental health, like our physical health, can fluctuate over time and it is likely at some point that everyone will experience a strain on their mental health.

During pre-COVID-19 times, one in five people of working age were reported to experience a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression. However, times have changed and the

natural response to any crisis, not least a pandemic that has impacted our ways of living and working, is a level of stress and a strain on our mental health and wellbeing.

Early signs suggest that the crisis, the measures taken to lock down the economy and response to the health issues, in addition to related complexities experienced by different people, will have a significant impact on the mental health of individuals for some time.

INITIAL PANDEMIC CONCERNS

During the initial stages of the pandemic, concerns ranged from worries about the health of one's self or loved ones; the impact of social distancing and isolation; the dual priorities of care (child or elder) and work; fear of job and financial insecurity as well as the challenges posed by

working differently to normal.

Added to these for frontline workers, such as those working in healthcare, food retail and manufacturing or transport, were concerns regarding their own safety and the fear of passing the virus to their loved ones; increased demands in their work including long hours, increased numbers of patients and the resources to deal with these changing circumstances, and the lack of time for their own self-care.

As weeks moved on some employees reported a negative impact on their wellbeing, experiencing intense feelings of loneliness and disconnection from family, friends and colleagues, and they struggled with the varying demands on their time and how they worked.

Others experienced an improvement in wellbeing as they got used to the situation and regained some control



There have been increased demands on frontline medics and healthcare workers – working long hours, increased number of patients and the resources to deal with these changing circumstances, and the lack of time for their own self-care.

over their routines (sleep, eating and exercise), their new ways of working and remaining socially connected, and the measures they took to protect their health.

Employers and employees alike rapidly adjusted, focusing on keeping the workforce physically healthy. For some this involved remote working or supporting social distancing and hygiene standards for workplaces and introducing responsive family-leave policies and flexibility to accommodate varying needs where possible.

Others worked on accessing government supports to maintain a connection between employer and employee where conditions had changed.

EMERGING FROM LOCKDOWN

As yet it is not clear what the mental health impacts of the pandemic will be and the phased return to the 'new normal', led by the Roadmap for Reopening, will not automatically see a return to wellbeing. In fact, for many it's likely to exacerbate the strain being experienced.

The experience of COVID-19 is likely to stay with us long after the incidences of the virus or deaths have reduced, as people begin to reconstruct their lives in the shadow of the virus. And some commentators have suggested that the

mental effects of the pandemic are likely to last longer than the physical health impact.

People may have 'scars' from the fear they have experienced, their own or loved one's illness, death of friends or family, job loss or changes in the way they work as well as a multitude of psychosocial factors. Others will have depleted their resources juggling demands on the work and home front without the necessary supports.

Many have been firefighting by working differently, often irregular hours, maybe remotely, or with PPE and changed shifts for their protection, while other people may be juggling working with child or elder care responsibilities that have been thrust upon them.

And there may be those who continue to work at the coalface in healthcare, food retail and transport roles, unable to 'stay home'.

Each of these brings challenges for employees and employers alike and not everyone will react in the same way. No one has the rule book or guide for how we are supposed to do this, and everyone is trying their best to keep going.

Ibec has seen a shift in the approach of employers to mental health even before the pandemic... our research shows that the number of organisations offering stress management and mental wellbeing programmes to staff has doubled over the last five years

– Dr Kara McGann, Ibec's Head of Social Policy



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr Kara McGann, Head of Social Policy at Ibec, provides strategic advice and support on diversity and inclusion, skills and labour market policy and practices to member organisations of the Irish employer and business representative body.

This includes lobbying at a national and European level and the development of tools and guidelines and representing business in various fora. Kara is also a board member of Skillnets, Chair of the Joint Equality Council at ESB and a member of the Governing Authority of DCU.

Prior to joining Ibec in 2008, she worked for a number of years as an organisational psychologist and human resources manager in industry and lectured at undergraduate, postgraduate and executive level. Kara holds a PhD in psychology from UCD, a Master of Business Studies and is also a practicing psychotherapist.

SILVER LINING

What is a positive, however, is that mental health has been acknowledged by all stakeholders as something essential to focus on and protect during this crisis. In the past, research reported how employees often feared being open about their mental health, due to stigma and the perceived impact disclosure would have on their relationships and career. Many employers also feared talking about mental health and saying the wrong thing or adding to an already difficult situation for their employees.

However, an antidote to that stigma and fear of disclosure may come about due to the widespread concern for the population's emotional wellbeing and



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mental health, regardless of any pre-existing condition or diagnosis.

This has been demonstrated by media coverage, the uptake of employer initiatives around wellbeing, apps on resilience, mindfulness and meditation trending and most interactions being prefaced by a wellbeing check-in. This may help to change attitudes towards mental health and wellbeing and remove the stigma from our society.

FUTURE SUPPORTS

Ibec has been working in this area for almost a decade and has seen a shift in the approach by employers to mental health even before the pandemic. Research by Ibec has shown that over the last five years the number of organisations offering stress management and mental wellbeing programmes to staff has doubled.

There was also an increase in the provision of mental health information, the use of employee assistance programmes and even the corporate support of mental health charities had risen. All of these initiatives send a strong message to employees regarding the organisation's commitment and the importance of mental health.

We must now continue to preventatively and proactively

help people to manage through the current uncertainty, protecting their mental health so they can fully participate in this new normal. Actions may include the following:

- Reassurance from the leadership team regarding a plan on how the organisation will reopen or respond to COVID-19 going forward.
- Updates on the phased re-opening that covers the health and safety changes using the 'Return to Work Safely Protocol'.
- Briefing of managers on the mental health challenges that may emerge and how they can support themselves and their teams.
- Communication around mental health and wellbeing and the tools available to employees, and encouragement to engage in activities that promote physical, mental and social wellbeing.
- Reminding people of who they can reach out to for support such as mental health champions; mental health first aiders or the EAP as appropriate.

Further shocks will face our employees and employers including the challenges of the future of work, Brexit, large-scale automation and certain jobs becoming obsolete. Supports for personal wellness in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, in addition to greater investment in resilience approaches will enable the workforce to maintain their wellbeing and increase adaptability to prepare for future crises from a stronger foundation.



Led by the Government's 'Roadmap for Reopening', rolling out the phased return to the 'new normal' will not automatically see a return to wellbeing.



IBEC'S 'KEEPWELL' PROGRAMME MAKES ITS MARK!

Ibec has been helping companies in Ireland to embrace corporate wellness through its KeepWell programme, which was launched in late 2017 to focus on key areas of workplace wellbeing ranging from leadership, mental wellbeing and absence management to physical health activity and healthy eating.

All participating companies receive the KeepWell Mark™ framework of standards which covers all aspects of wellbeing in the workplace, tools to benchmark current performance and invitations to 'KeepWell' community events and clinics for best practice sharing and expert advice.

For further information on improving your organisation's health and wellbeing visit www.thekeepwellmark.ie