

**A year in lockdown**

# A year in lockdown

For nearly a year now we have been living a disrupted lifestyle. As we approach the anniversary of the first COVID-19 lockdowns it's important to remember to take care of our mental health and those around us.

Mental health has been a growing topic of conversation during the global pandemic and the situation has made many of us more aware of it. While it's extremely relevant for this uncertain time we're going through now, we should bring mental health into everyday lives and look after it long term.

Working from home for so long has been a big change for many people and has had an impact on mental health for some.

In this guide, we will share some ideas that you can use to help with mental health and working from home.



## 1 in 6

People report experiencing a common mental health problem eg anxiety and depression<sup>1</sup>



**“Whether an illness affects your heart, your leg or your brain, it’s still an illness and there should be no distinction.”**

- Michelle Obama on mental health

## Mental health

### The importance of mental health

There are times when we can feel stressed, anxious or frightened. Most of the time these feelings will pass, but for some people, these feelings may develop further and become more serious. This could happen to any one of us or someone we know.

Our mental health can change over time or by circumstances such as bereavement, trauma, stress, health conditions or more recently by the global COVID-19 pandemic. So, it's important to look after our mental health at every stage of our lives.

It's healthy to know and say how you're feeling. However, this can be difficult for some. Although more widely accepted and talked about, there is still a stigma around mental health and people feeling comfortable enough to open up about it.

## Be aware of the signs that you or someone else is struggling

When we are around other people it's easy to pick up on changes in somebody's wellbeing. But working remotely, or when not seeing others, it can make this even harder. Simple actions or words can sometimes be a signpost that someone may be struggling or in need of help but they don't know how to express it, ask for help or know how to start a conversation about it. You may even notice some of these signs from yourself.

### A long sigh

Sighing can be the body's way of regulating breathing at times of stress. It's also used as a subconscious message of upset or distress without having to verbally say so. Listen out for this on calls or when you are with others.

### Feeling tired

Lack of sleep or exhaustion are often precursors to burnout. It's the body's way of telling you to rest. We may accept it as normal with our busy lives but listen to what your body is saying. If you see this maybe consider a holiday/vacation or break to recharge your batteries.

### Saying 'Fine! Whatever!'

If someone is becoming irritable it could be due to feeling stressed or anxious. Try to understand where this is coming from and offer support.

### Forgetfulness

Poor memory or concentration can be a sign that someone is struggling with their mental health. It can also be a sign of being overwhelmed. If this is happening, try asking whether they are ok.

### Saying 'I'm alright'

But what does this actually mean? Is it good or bad? Saying this can often be a guise for not feeling comfortable sharing what's really happening. Listen to how they say it and the tone of voice.

### Feeling overwhelmed

Does someone look or sound worried or stressed when new work comes in? They may be overwhelmed because they are low on time, energy or emotional capacity. If this happens open up a discussion about the workload

### Withdrawn

Is someone not turning up to meetings? Are they keeping their camera and microphone off? This is a common sign that someone is struggling. They may be genuinely busy, but it's worth checking with them to be sure.

### Saying 'I'm sorry'

If someone is apologizing a lot or becoming overly critical it can be a sign that they are struggling. Poor mental health can cause low self-esteem and confidence.



**"I'd never heard the word before but for the first time I had a diagnosis that explains the massive highs and miserable lows I've lived with all my life."**

- Stephen Fry on bipolar disorder



**Over three quarters  
(78%) of us would  
tell friends and family  
we are 'fine', even  
if struggling with a  
mental health problem <sup>2</sup>**



### **Ask twice**

Recently, Time to Change shared a helpful way to open conversations by asking someone twice if they are ok. People often say they're ok when asked, however, if you suspect that someone is struggling with their mental health or mental wellbeing ask once, then ask them again.

**Remember you don't have to be an expert and you're not expected to solve the issue. But do:**

Take it seriously and don't judge.

Actively listen by asking open questions and summarize to show you've listened and reflected.

Remember that you don't have to fix it.

Show you care. Simple phrases such as "that sounds difficult" can show you care and are listening to them.



**"It's difficult to describe depression to someone who's never been there, because it's not sadness. I know sadness. Sadness is to cry and to feel. But it's that cold absence of feeling - that really hollowed out feeling."**

- JK Rowling on depression



## Where to get support from

To find out more about mental health or if you, or someone you know, is struggling there are a number of helpful resources.

### Online support

**NHS Every Mind Matters:** <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

**Mind:** <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

**Rethink Mental illness:** <https://www.rethink.org/>

**Samaritans:** <https://www.samaritans.org/> or call 116 123 (free)

**Time To change:** <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

**Mental Health Foundation:** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/getting-help>

## Friends, family & colleagues

If you feel comfortable doing so, talk with someone you trust about how you are feeling. While they may not have all the answers it's a good way to open up the discussion and talk about any potential next steps you may want to take.



**“You don’t have to struggle in silence. You can be un-silent. You can live well with a mental condition, so long as you open up to somebody about it.”**

- Demi Lovato on mental health

## Working from home

It’s nearly a year for colleagues who have been working from home rather than the office or traveling to see customers and suppliers. Over this time, new habits and practices that we may have keenly adopted last March have now been forgotten.

As we look forward to longer and lighter days, take the time to look back at some of the things that may have worked and helped you previously or refresh with some new ideas that others have shared.



## **2/3 of workers now working from home during the pandemic felt less connected to their colleagues<sup>3</sup>**



Regular contact with others is important for our mental health and wellbeing. Some may be alone for long periods or only seeing their immediate family within their households. Talking to others is a great way to lift our moods or talk through things that may be troubling us.

While working away from the office try some of these things to stay connected and in contact.

### **Take a coffee break**

Replace your usual time to make a drink in the office by asking your teammates or other colleagues when they are having a break and see if you can coordinate for the same time. Make your drinks and catch up on a call or video.

### **Get walking**

With the better weather on the way and staying at home restrictions gradually lifting see if a colleague who lives locally wants to meet for a socially distanced walk in your lunchbreaks. If not, walk in your local areas and call each other on headphones.

### **Get together for happy hour**

Schedule a group gathering with your colleagues to replace the post-work drinks at the local or the post-football gathering at the pub. It doesn't have to be alcoholic, it's an opportunity to get people together without it being just about work projects.

### **Get gaming**

If there are colleagues with similar interests such as online gaming, see if there's a platform people can use together.

### **Have team meetings**

If you don't have them already, set them up frequently. We all share so much when in the office together and collaborate, this is a great opportunity for all team members to hear the same thing at the same time and work together.

### **Start calls with a check-up**

A simple 'how is everyone doing?' at the start of calls/meetings can be a great way to get people talking informally with others. The meeting may be someone's only interaction with others that day so it's good to check that people are ok.

### **Line manager 121s**

If you need more support or time with your line manager reach out to them or schedule time in their diary. This is a great way to make sure you get the support you need.

## Distractions at home

For many of us working from home is not the norm and we've had to adapt to a new situation, environment and in many cases juggling home life at the same time. It can cause additional stress, anxiety and worry.

Remember working from home is not the ideal setup for everyone, so be patient if calls or meetings don't run as smoothly as they would in person or the office.

## Children and pets interrupt the flow

It's unavoidable that for some colleagues there may be children popping up in the background on camera, a little one asking mum or dad a question or a pet jumping on the desk or blocking the camera. Colleagues are likely doing all they can to minimize these things from happening. If they do happen, remember this is a difficult and strange time for everyone and be patient with colleagues.



## Internet connection drops

Some people may be living in areas that do not have high-speed internet connections. If this happens on a call or video, make allowances and give colleagues a few minutes to resolve the issue.

## Distractions happen

The home telephone line rings, the doorbell chimes and the dogs start barking. If this happens, allow others to resolve the issue so you can get back on topic as soon as possible.

Get to know your colleagues' home situations, you may be able to avoid some of these things by finding out the best times to schedule calls or meetings by understanding some of the challenges they are facing.

## Take a break

In a normal day in the office we would have lots of mini breaks eg traveling to/from work, doing the school run, popping out for lunch, visiting the kitchen, having a chat at the watercooler and visiting other colleagues at their desks. However, over the past year it's become easy to get to lunch time or the end of the day and realise you've barely moved away from your screen or had a break. People also feel the pressure to be online and available at all times, replying to messages and emails instantly and needing to prove they are actually working.

**1 in 3 people in the UK have noticed that their eyesight has deteriorated because of increased screen usage<sup>4</sup>**

Our screen use habits have also increased drastically. We're spending the day looking at our monitors, then of an evening and weekend we switch to watching television, using mobile phones, tablets or back at the monitors for things like gaming, friends and family video calls and other things.

With prolonged screen use our eyes get tired, strained, have trouble focusing or it can lead to headaches.

Not having breaks can mean we lose focus, concentration and fatigue sets in. Giving yourself regular breaks means that you return feeling mentally and physically refreshed.

Try introducing some of the following.

### Use the 20/20/20 rule

Every 20 minutes look at something 20 feet away (6 meters) for 20 seconds, this gives your eyes time to rest and recharge. Try setting a reminder on your phone or alarm for 20-minute intervals.

### Take a break mid flow

For some this can be effective as you're excited to get back after your break and carry on where you left off.

### Work in intervals

Set an alarm to work on a piece of work then break when the alarm goes off. After the break set another interval until the next break. This can keep you focused on the task in hand.

### Schedule breaks at regular points in the day

If it helps, have set times throughout the day where you take breaks. Mark this in your calendar as reminders so you stick to them.

### Give your break an intention

Have a purpose to your break, whether it be making a drink, checking on someone else working at home, running an errand, stretching your legs or grabbing lunch

### Break when a decision is needed

When a decision is needed, rather than committing to it straight away have a break then come back to make it. The break can help to refocus the mind and make better decisions.





## Lunch breaks

The lunch break is usually the signal that we're halfway through the day, however working from home means we don't always take them.

A good lunch break, give you the time to prepare, eat and enjoy your food, move your body and reset your mind and eyes.

Try these tips:

### Block out your calendar

Put your preferred lunch break in your calendar for a set time eg one hour. That way you see it as a reminder and others see that you're unavailable at that time.

### Set your Teams profile to 'Do not disturb'

You can do this by clicking your Teams profile picture in the top right corner. Just remember to change the status when you return.

### Tell your colleagues

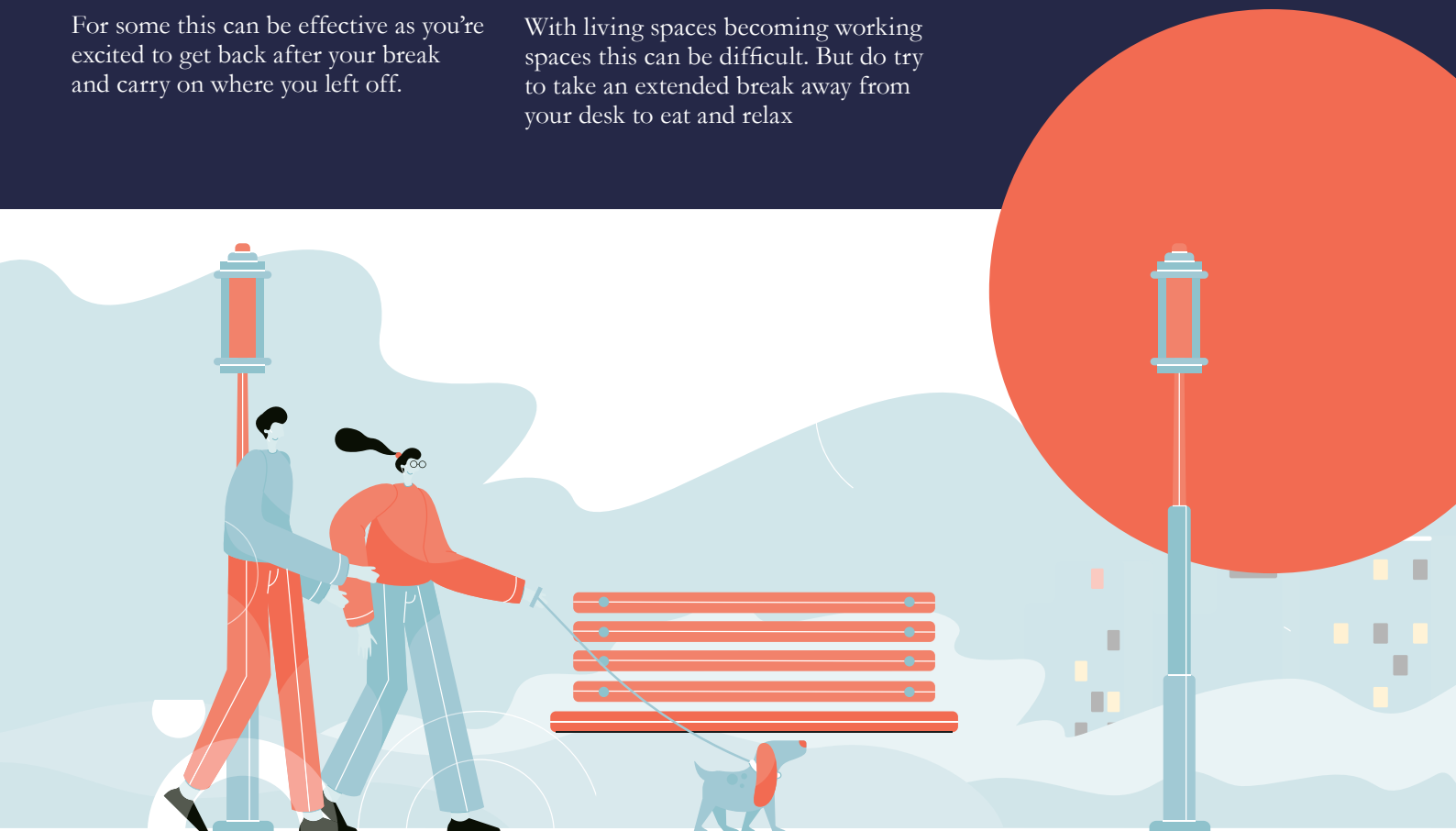
Tell your colleagues you're taking your lunch and will be back at X time. It also encourages them to take their break as they know their co-workers are offline too.

### Avoid setting lunchtime meetings

For some this can be effective as you're excited to get back after your break and carry on where you left off.

### Take your lunch break away from your desk

With living spaces becoming working spaces this can be difficult. But do try to take an extended break away from your desk to eat and relax



1 <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/>  
2 <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/news/ask-twice-people-urged-new-research-shows-three-quarters-brits-would-say-they-are-%E2%80%99%E2%80%99-even>  
3 <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/two-thirds-of-employees-feel-less-connected-working-from-home#gref>  
4 <https://www.fightforsight.org.uk/news-and-articles/articles/news/screen-time/>