How to support your staff's mental health and wellbeing during challenging times
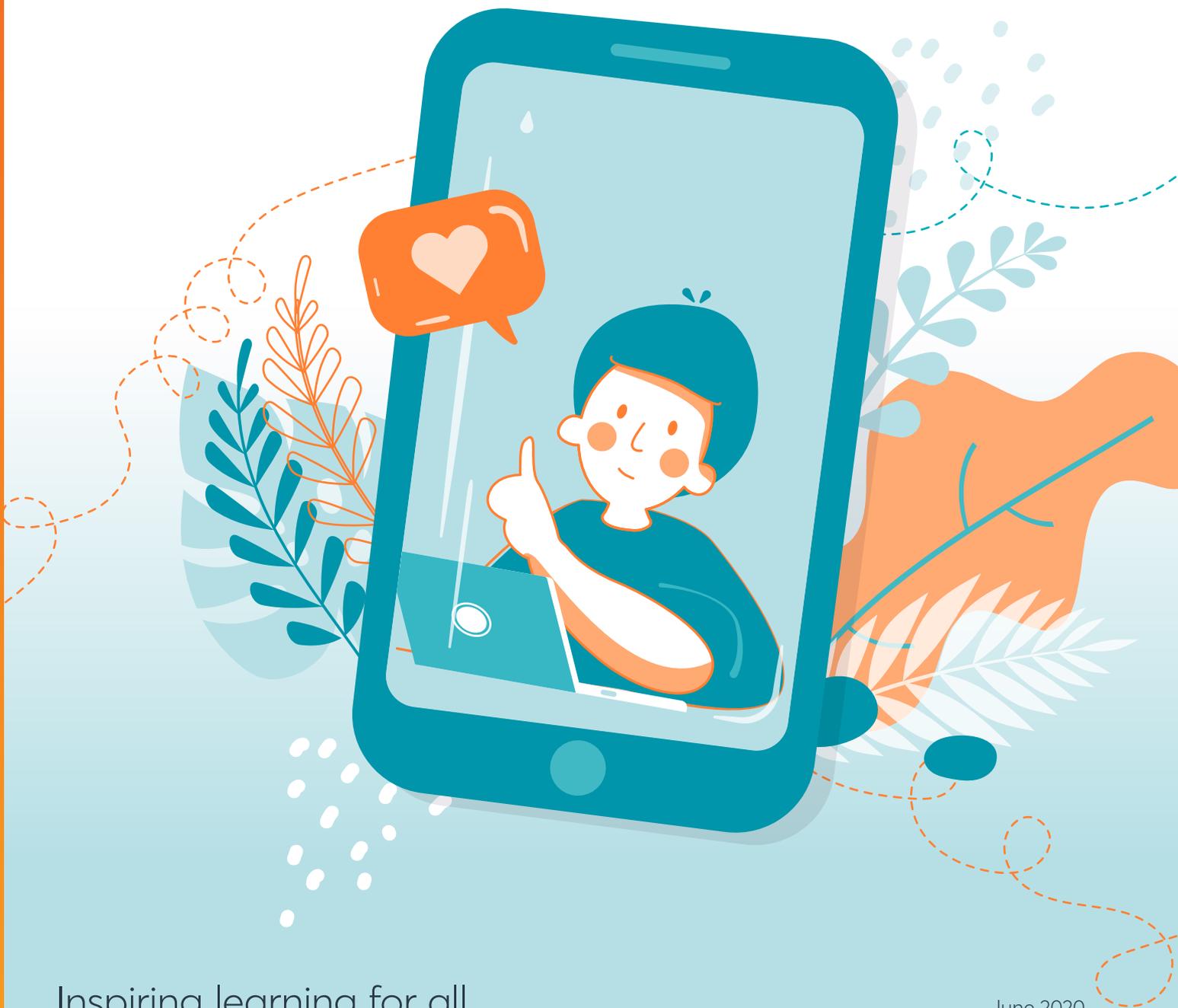
Introduction

No one can deny that we are experiencing challenging times. At the time of writing, we have been in lockdown due to COVID-19 for over two months and it is becoming clear that it is having numerous effects on our mental health and wellbeing.

Contents

Challenging times can affect us in different ways. They can create feelings of uncertainty, shock, and worry, and can also exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The ways we have had to adjust to this new life – working from home, juggling family life, or being furloughed – can also add to our stress, anxieties and worries. People are finding themselves suffering from productivity anxiety – the feeling of always having to be available, or proving that you are present and working – and, as the amount of screen time has increased and people aren't being as careful with their time, we are suffering from 'digital' fatigue, which can lead to exhaustion.

Therefore, it is important to take the time to understand how mental health is being affected and the ways in which we can look after our employees. We must remember though, that everyone has their own journey and circumstances, so we must consider the individual.

When it comes to mental health, there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

One of our recent virtual roundtable events focused on this topic. We were joined by various L&D professionals from a variety of sectors, and together we came up with a range of ways in which we can support our colleagues and employees during these times.

We hope you find it useful.

Regular communication

Working remotely has affected how we communicate. With less visual cues and ways of physically interacting with each other, it is more important than ever that our verbal communication is clear and transparent.

Companies are helping their staff by communicating about everything – meetings, tasks, what is going on in the business – and finding ways of recreating 'office chat'. How can you do this?

Tips

Communication from senior management

Whether a weekly email or video message, communication from the senior team has proven to be popular. Employees recognise it as the senior team's personal investment into what is happening and the impact it has on the staff.

Regular meetings

Whether team meetings, one-to-ones or daily catch-ups, regular team meetings create spaces to keep in touch and keep everyone up to date. Arranging regular meetings help your staff feel valued, as well as reduce the feeling of loneliness and isolation. Though be mindful not to arrange too many, as it can lead to 'digital' fatigue.
(See: Meetings: rules and etiquettes)

Create a 'water cooler'

When it comes to re-creating 'office chat', companies have been getting creative. A popular idea is creating a virtual 'water cooler' spot, a place where staff can go to chat as you would in an office.

Structure

Though work provides our days with a helpful structure, we must make sure the worktime itself has a healthy structure, and that we maintain the boundaries between our professional and personal lives. Here are some tips to help your employees.

Tips

Build in breaks

It is easy for our workdays to run away with us whilst working remotely, and with no impromptu conversations creating natural breaks, we can easily forget to take them. Whether it is a screen break, a coffee break or a chat with a colleague, these breaks are vital, especially if we want to avoid 'digital' fatigue.

Press pause

Recommend they take a moment in their day to shift their mind from their professional life to their personal life, and vice versa. There are various ways to pause between these roles, whether that is some breathing techniques, a walk, meditation or yoga – anything that creates a meditative state. Pausing techniques can be used at any moment during the day (such as one of their breaks) but it is especially beneficial at the end of work, as they enter their evening.

Learn and develop

Encourage your team to add variety to their day by undertaking some self-directed learning. Whether that is learning a new skill, taking a course, watching a TED Talk or listening to a podcast, engaging their brains and minds in new ways is great for their wellbeing.

End your workday

It is easy to allow our work to spill out over into the evening, but it is important to keep to a routine so that we have a clear break between our professional and personal time. Encourage your staff to 'mark' the end of the day, for example, by clearing their equipment away. This will allow them to relax and give their mind a rest in the evening.
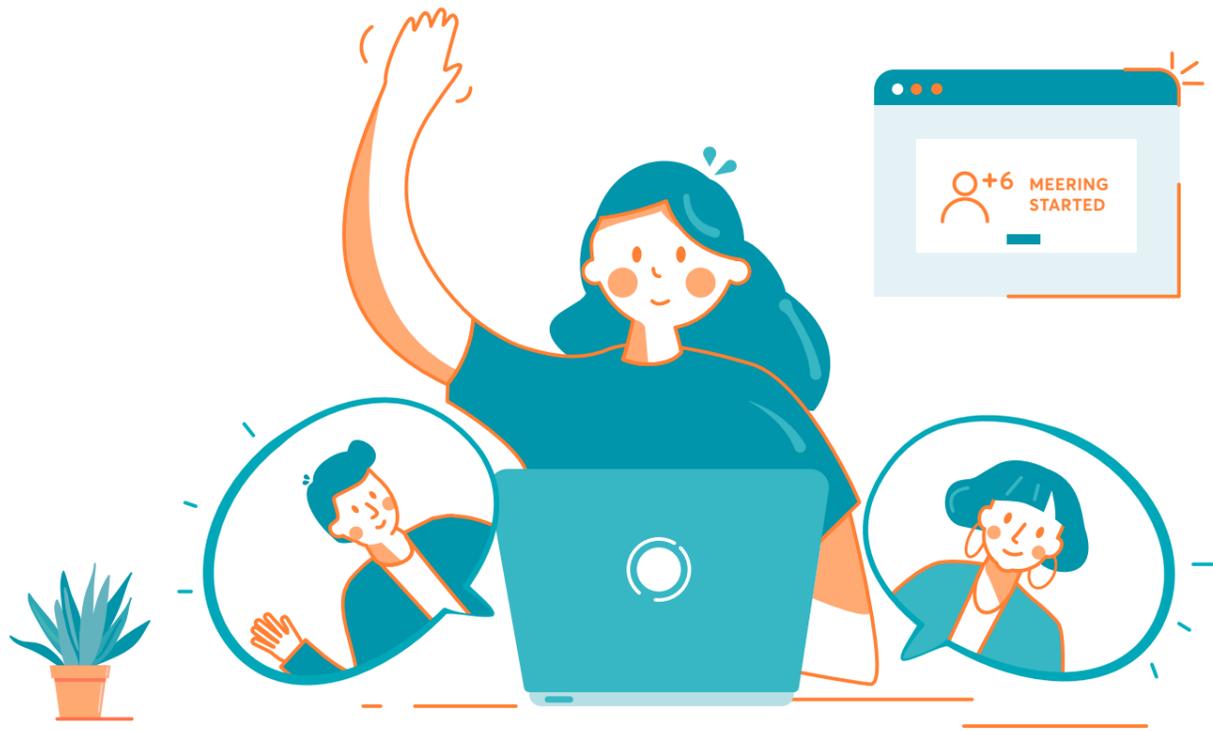
Virtual social events

Many companies are creating virtual social events or clubs using social platforms, such as Yammer or Workplace from Facebook, which are proving to be a popular way of keeping people connected and creating a sense of community.

Here are some examples:

- Running clubs, where employees can share their running times and routes
- Cooking clubs for sharing recipes and ideas
- Film clubs to discuss favourite films, actors and directors and share recommendations
- Weekly quizzes, such as Bingo, Catchphrase or Guess the Celebrity

Meetings: rules and etiquettes

As helpful as meetings are, they can also take their toll, and during this lockdown the amount has noticeably increased.

This can be overwhelming and can get in the way of completing work, meaning that people are finding themselves working longer hours to make up the time. It is important to find a balance, and establishing rules and etiquettes can help you achieve this.

Rules

- Limit the amount you have in a day
- Only book meetings at certain times of the day, such as the morning
- Make sure to have a balance between 'meeting' style discussion (such as video calls) and phone calls
- Encourage people to decline meetings if they don't feel they can make them

Etiquettes

- Agree ways of signifying that people want to speak up, such as putting their hand up, or using an icon.
  This will ensure that everyone is heard and is confident about contributing
- Have someone chair the meeting, especially when the numbers are large
- Be mindful not to speak over people
- Be strict with the time

Helpful technology

Digital technology has come into its own during this lockdown but there are a lot of choices out there. What are people recommending and how can they help you?

Microsoft Teams
Many companies have turned to Teams as a way of communicating. It includes instant messenger, video chat, calls, and the ability to create groups or 'Teams' for specific purposes.

Yammer
Microsoft's social platform for individual businesses. It allows businesses to share news, announcements, and set up topic-specific groups.

Zoom
This has fast become the video conference call software of choice.

Workplace from Facebook
Similar to Yammer, it is a tool that also creates a sense of community and helps employees feel connected.

Calendly
This helps organise your diary and schedule.

MyAnalytics (Microsoft Office 365 add-on)
This add-on analyses how you spend your time and suggests ways of working more efficiently.

Collaboration Tools
Popular ones have been Mural and Linoit, which allow teams to brainstorm ideas and collaborate. They have also been successfully used in digital training to create engaging activities.

SharePoint
This can be used to house resources and documents in one place, so employees know where to find them. This helps reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by the large number of helpful resources and documents that organisations are currently sharing.

Supporting furloughed staff

You may have staff who have been furloughed, and it is important that you are sensitive to their needs.

There are likely to be different reactions – some may embrace it and enjoy the downtime, others may be crawling up the walls and want to be back at work with their colleagues, and it may create a lot of anxiety for others. These individual responses call for different actions.

It has been suggested that communication is key, but different levels may be required ranging from minimum contact to regular contact.

The type of information you share may differ too – some may want the odd check-in, some employees may want regular updates, but others may feel left out if they hear about all the events that they cannot be part of it. It sounds complex, but being sensitive and aware of their needs will help you make a suitable decision.

Make mental health part of the discussion

Overall, we need to be able to talk about our mental health.

Though all the above techniques can be put in place to help support each other's mental health, we can't ignore that people may want to talk about any anxieties, worries or concerns that may be causing them distress. Therefore, make sure you are transparent with your staff about what ways they can ask for help, and what things you have in place to support.

Tips

Mental health resources
It can be helpful to have resources you can pass on to your staff if they are worried about their mental health. If you need some guidance, we have put together a mental health and wellbeing pack, which is filled with useful download resources, articles, book recommendations and courses.

Mental health champions
To support their staff, many companies are assigning Mental Health Champions or Mental Health First Aiders, who act as specific contacts that the employees can turn to.

Group discussions
It may help to make the topic part of team meetings. You can create discussions points and encourage your team to reflect on themselves and share what they have struggled with, how they have surprised themselves and so on. This helps to acknowledge the unusual situation we are in, the effects it is having on us, and allows us to air our worries and thoughts whilst reducing any stigma.
Overall, it can help employees realise they are not alone. This may not be suitable for everyone, as some may not feel comfortable, so a one-on-one setting could be offered instead.

Mental health is something we are passionate about at Virtual College. If you would like to find more mental health resources to help support you and your staff, visit:

www.virtual-college.
co.uk/resources/mental-
health-and-wellbeing
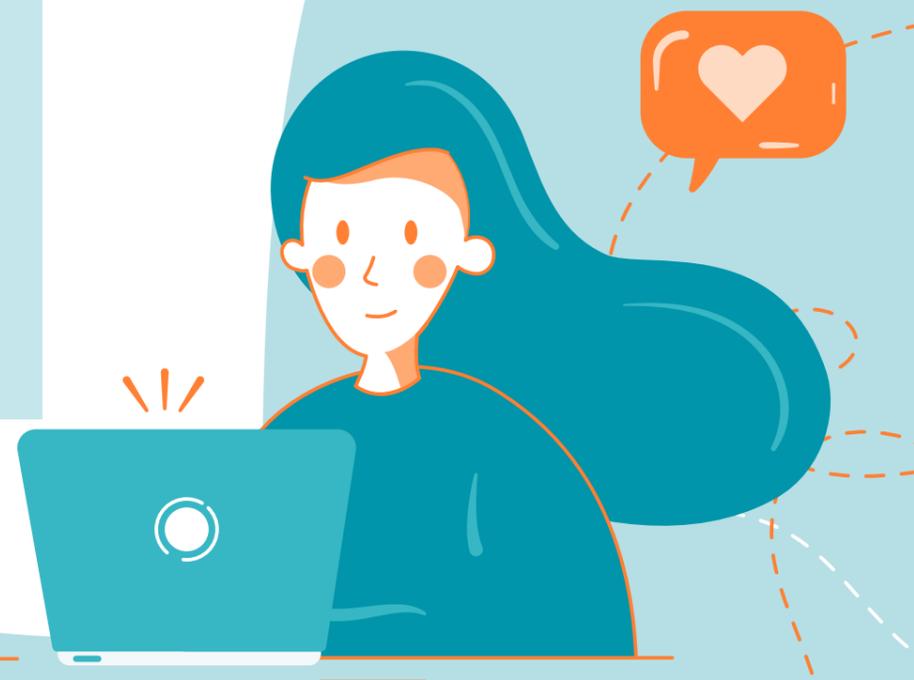
Virtual College
Marsel House
Stephensons Way
Ilkley
West Yorkshire
LS29 8DD

+44 (0)1943 605 976
virtual-college.co.uk