



## **Mental Health Awareness Week 2020**

This year's mental health awareness week (18-24 May) finds us in strange and difficult times – in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

You may be having to juggle work and look after the children. You may be on your own, or you could be working in a critical job and worrying that you are risking your health or your family's health just by going out to work.

A survey of NUJ members has shown that eight in 10 (84 per cent) fear the crisis will lead to redundancies at their workplace. Thirty-three per cent of freelancers said they did not think their income would improve until 2021; 39 per cent said they did not expect work opportunities to improve for three to six months while 16 per cent said they did not expect to make a living at all following the pandemic.

Over-working, dirty workstations, unsuitable chairs, poor posture and anxiety about having to return to a workplace are all examples of work-related stress which can affect mental health.

Among this turmoil, there are ways in which we can protect our mental health.

### **Here are some tips to help you look after yourself in these extraordinary times if you are working from home.**

- Establish a routine. Get up and get dressed in the morning and eat at regular times. Mark the beginning and end of work time.
- Have regular catch-up sessions with managers, colleagues and those whom you manage.
- Develop a regular exercise routine, even if that is not usual for you.
- If you have children, explain you are working and let them know when they can expect to see you. When you have finished work, put your phone/computer away and try to attend to them and their needs.
- Make a point of making contact with your friends and family, even if you don't especially feel like it. Maintaining social connections will strengthen your own resilience as you go through the weeks to come.
- Find some moment in the day when you can do something that is just for yourself; something restorative. Make time to do something that will allow your brain to calm: meditation, visualisation, mindfulness, prayer, yoga, tai chi, gardening...

- Establish good mental health habits: exercise, eating nutritious food, moderate alcohol and sugar intake, adopting good sleep habits.
- Be creative: enjoy music, art, building something, writing, rearranging a room, cooking a new dish, making do and mending, grow plants on your windowsill.
- Talk about your feelings. The emotions you are feeling right now (anger, sadness, fear) are normal responses to an abnormal situation.

Psychological well-being at work goes hand in hand with good management and there is strong evidence that workplaces with high levels of mental health are more productive. Addressing wellbeing at work increases productivity by as much as 12 per cent. (Mentalhealth.org.uk).

If we work for an employer, work-related stress and its impact on our wellbeing is a collective union issue. Our employers have a responsibility to us as workers, to address it. Safety committees should treat issues of work-related stress and mental wellbeing as regular items on their agendas.

Assessments should be carried out that examine all mental health risks that might cause harm in your workplace. NUJ health and safety reps have the power to call for risk assessments. Health and Safety Executive: For **employers' responsibilities**, see <https://www.hse.gov.uk/workers/employers.htm>

#### **Good practice checklist for employers when dealing with mental health problems.**

- Commit your firm to challenge the stigma that surrounds mental health issues.
- Ensure mental health concerns are discussed by company safety committees.
- Enable employers and unions to work together to support members dealing with mental health issues.
- Impose policies such as recruitment and sickness absence that do not discriminate against those with mental health conditions.
- Allow workers early access to occupational health services.
- Train all staff on mental health (ideally jointly with the union) with separate mental health awareness training for all line managers.
- Provide an employee assistance programme, an employer-paid scheme that allows employees to contact an independent adviser to discuss confidentially any issue that is troubling them, causing stress or interfering with effective job performance or attendance.
- Make sure you have strong anti-bullying and harassment procedures and a stress management policy.
- Appoint mental health first aiders.
- Put in place policies that support women through the menopause.

#### **Union assistance**

Go to the NUJ Mental Health Week podcast by Caroline Homes:

<https://soundcloud.com/nuj-1/mental-health-awareness/s-2CURViDj4GQ>

Check out the NUJ webinar on looking after your mental and physical health during Covid-19

[https://youtu.be/JnOBD5\\_U8yU](https://youtu.be/JnOBD5_U8yU)

**Other organisations and resources:**

How do we look after our mental health during the coronavirus crisis? TUC blog by Rhianydd Williams, equality and policy officer at the Wales TUC: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/how-do-we-look-after-our-mental-health-during-coronavirus-crisis>

Mental Health Awareness Week 2020: <https://www.mhaw.uk.com/mental-health-awareness-week-2020/>

Mind, mental health charity: <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Working well from home under self-quarantine for Coronavirus:

<https://www.leapers.co/resources/little-guides/coronavirus-working-from-home>