Webinar: How Has Lockdown Impacted the Mental Health of Whole-sale Financial Markets Professionals?
Responses to unanswered audience's questions
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> > **Any tips on how to deal with anxiety? Sometimes it is hard to take a sick day for that as many organisations/managers do not understand mental health (even though they say they do).**

A number of things to look at here. If we're talking about anxiety in general:

Reduce your coffee and tea consumption because taking in too much caffeine is proven to increase your heart rate, your anxiety levels and nervousness.

Deep breathing is the best way to calm anxiety. And it will usually work when anxiety levels have got too high to try reasoning yourself out of it. Interestingly, neuroscientists have recently discovered why deep treating calms anxiety – it disrupts the passage of neurons that carry messages to the brain's arousal center that activates anxiety.

Try and step back from what is making you anxious and stressed when it becomes too much - it can help you to shift perspective in a positive way. It allows you to be more reflective and be aware of the full range of choices open to you.

If your anxiety is COVID-19 related, try and limit your news intake and use only trusted sources like BBC or NHS to get your information.

Also, you could **try and reframe how you think about the situation you face** – be positive but realistic. A lot of this is to do with the conversations we have with ourselves. If you can view things in a more positive light it can make a big difference to mood and our sense of control. So rather than thinking "Here I am, stuck inside again", reframe it as, "Now I can focus on some things I've wanted to do but never got round to". Instead of seeing some things, "Just too much to deal with right now", try saying "Yes, it's a challenge but it's something I can deal with."

An attitude shift can help as well. Manage what you can; let go of what you can't. Again, it is about having a realistic perspective – it's about being accepting of the limitations you face. There are some things you can't do or change, so forget them and focus on the things you can affect.

Some people find it helpful to periodically make lists of what they are grateful for. Its value lies in reminding us of the good things that we have in our lives and writing the list reconnects us with those positives. It helps move us into a more optimistic frame of mind that can be important as a counterbalance to the sometimes-bleak things we must deal with, especially when we are feeling low.

Try and bring the normal into play, this will help reduce the sense of uncertainty. Try and retain as much of your life's normal routines as you can, as this will help to anchor you when so much else is changing around you.

Keep the scale of threat in perspective. People can't help linking the shocking things that they can see happening globally - the growing casualty figures, the hospitals struggling, the lack of protective equipment etc, with their own personal risk. They project these worrying global events onto their personal circumstances and that can mean their anxiety levels get out of proportion to the real personal risk they face at that moment."

> **What are your personal opinions on allowing employees more flexible working conditions on the back of the lockdown? Is this likely to improve mental health during the transition back to a 'normal' work life?**

"I think a more relaxed attitude towards flexible working from employers that were previously sceptical about it, is very likely to be one of the positives to come out of all of this. Employees have had to be allowed more flexibility during lockdown, as so many have child and elder care responsibilities. Yet overwhelmingly they have managed to do their work to a high standard, albeit it not necessarily to a conventional office timetable.

When employers allow flexibility around their working patterns, it takes some of the pressure off employees, making it more likely they will remain in good mental health throughout lockdown. I think many employers will have learnt from this and will take a similar view during the transition back into normal life, whatever"

> **How is it best to manage the transition as we return to the workspace when some of the team have been furloughed and others have been working 60+ hours per week working from home?**

"I think it has to be a gradual return with some groups of employees returning first and then others in stages that build up over time. That will allow businesses the time to make the necessary preparations to protect the wellbeing of returning employees before they come back. This is especially important because so many employees are already anxious about the public transport risks associated with a return - they really need to feel confident that their employer has taken every step to safeguard the working environment. That can only happen by organising the return in a measured way.

I would expect the last groups of staff to return to be those who can most easily work from home and if that happens it will also avoid putting unnecessary strain on a socially-distancing transport system."

> **Are you able to strike a balance between returning to work to get the economy going, protect your business, whilst still protecting your employees? And how do managers get this right?**

"I think businesses will come out of lockdown with a different perspective on some of these issues. Every business will have to work to get the balance right. Business leaders know that many employees are concerned about the possibility returning to a work environment that isn't completely safe and that doesn't have all practical precautions in place. Moreover, everything that is happening now is in the full glare of media spotlight and the whole nation will be watching what happens as more businesses try to get back to something like normality.

Also, the wellbeing agenda is so big now in the UK workplace that I think any return to work processes will have to prioritise how to protect the health and wellbeing of the employees. So, whilst getting workplaces up

and running again is an absolute imperative, the human side of this can't and won't be ignored - even if it slows the pace at which businesses can function close to capacity."

> **Do you have any advice for those with pre-existing anxiety disorders? How to manage bad days and explain to management why productivity peaks and falls.**

"I wish it were otherwise, but the experience of people with mental health problems in UK businesses remains dependent to a large extent on the quality of their line manager. Whilst the way mental health problems are viewed and managed has improved significantly, especially in the financial sector where many companies have made tackling mental health at work a strategic priority, there is still a long way to go. The line manager is invariably the first organisational touchpoint for anyone experiencing mental health issues.

Where the manager has been trained to understand mental health at work and in how to support someone struggling with a mental health problem, the employee's experience will be much more positive, and they are likely to come away feeling well supported. But there remain too many managers who have had no training and either don't understand mental health issues or don't feel confident in having conversations around mental health. Where this is the case, the conversation is likely to go badly for both the employee and the business.

I think the starting point needs to be to try and have the conversation, to explain to the manager what it is like to have an anxiety disorder, how it impacts on work and what supportive steps they might take to help the employee at those times when work is more problematic. If anxiety is a long-term condition it is likely to be considered a disability and businesses are required to make adjustments to support an employee."

Nigel Jones
Executive Coach, Wellbeing Consultant and Advisory Group and Chair
City Mental Health Alliance

> **Feels like presenteeism has crept in like how it was in the office. Many of us spend days sitting in front of computers on client calls, training, team meetings etc during normal working hours. Some senior people keep sending emails into evening and early mornings… How to resist this pressure?**

"Add to your email signature an explanation of when you are and when you are not logging on.

Explain when sending emails that you are sending them at a time that suits you but that you are not expecting the recipient to respond until it suits them.

Encourage leaders to listen more – easier said than done!"

> **What are your personal opinions on allowing employees more flexible working conditions on the back of the lockdown? Is this likely to improve mental health during the transition back to a 'normal' work life?**

"A return to the previous norm is now inconceivable. Greater flexibility/agility is here to stay. Precisely what it will look like remains unclear and will vary between organisations. People's mental health reactions will also vary, including in the light of how employers address the "return to the workplace" challenge.

Overall, mental ill health is expected to increase for some time, and remain high well beyond the end of the immediate Covid-19 infection challenge, and taking that into account will be critical for all employers as they develop their plans for the coming months and years."

> **Do you feel there is a stigma if you come forward to your leadership when are struggling? I had a trading friend who was afraid of being managed out if he came forward.**

"City Mental Health Alliance has been one of many organisations trying to reduce this stigma. Progress has been made, and in some ways accelerated by the current crisis and the light it has shone on the importance of employers looking after their people's health. But exceptions remain, and caution is needed."

> **How do you create opportunities for senior leadership to listen? Surveys are one way, but you run the risk of communication fatigue.**

"Encourage them to lead by example, share their stories, and encourage collaboration – internally and externally – the same approach as CMHA has been advocating for many years and which remains as relevant now as it has been in the past."

> **Could regulating emotions lead to people feeling they cannot be honest about how they are feeling? Is resilience sometimes making staff feel that to suffer with poor mental health is a weakness?**

"This is a both/and, not an either/or issue. It is important for employees to build resilience and for employers to help with that. It is also important for employers to adapt their working practices to reduce the stress imposed on employees – including through embedding the new-found agile practices which many have discovered in recent months can be highly effective."

> **Will employers be expected in the future to bear the costs of employees working from home? Heating, electricity etc.? What protection do employees have if they are asked to return to a workplace that they feel is unsafe?**

"This has been one of the most common questions raised with the LawCare helpline – available 24/7, in confidence and free, to all solicitors. Suggest raising it with them."

> **Businesses are taking measures to support their employees in their mental and physical wellbeing. How can we show empathy from our business to our clients and find this balance between what we are receiving and what we can do for our clients?**

"Show empathy. Ask how the crisis has affected them, including in terms of their preferred ways of communicating (what times of day, which method, etc) and listen and act on what they tell you."

> **Employers should bear in mind that social zoom sessions (e.g. "pub quizzes", "happy hour" etc.), however well intentioned, can feel like an imposition, especially since the line between work and home is so blurry. It is difficult to decline since the assumption is the employee is home anyway.**

"Share with peers and leaders how your routine has had to change to enable you to meet the various demands on your time (work, caring, home-schooling, other home commitments, etc), what slots that leaves you for work, and ask that they respect that schedule. Also ask them the explain the same points to you."

> **Do you have any advice for those with pre-existing anxiety disorders? How to manage bad days and explain to management why productivity peaks and falls.**

"Retain close links with the people and other resources you found helpful in the past, recognising that they may for a while be accessible only remotely. Work out what your purpose is and how best to invest your work and other time in contributing to its achievement."