

Kirklees Educational Psychology Service

School staff wellbeing support during COVID-19

May 2020



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Supporting wellbeing within the school context –

a message for senior leaders

This is a guide for leaders and managers of staff in schools in relation to what they may need to consider in order to support the wellbeing needs of all school staff as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak. It offers the most effective psychological advice for this time during the phase of staff transitioning back to school, and for staff who remain unable to transition back at this point.

Supporting senior leaders in schools.

Regardless of your school's particular circumstances, the wider societal impacts of this virus on well-being means that support for yourself and school staff will need to be increased, both at this time of considerable change and for some time afterwards.

The strain on senior leaders of leading a school through a challenging period may not be identified until after the crisis. Therefore, it is important to remain aware of your current situation and the pressures you may be experiencing as a leader(s) within a school. The role and task required may feel over-whelming, especially in light of a rapidly changing context. It is important as leaders to consider your own well-being and reflect on the following:

1. What can I/ we control?
2. What can I/ we influence?
3. What can I/we let go of?

Please see the end of this document to understand how the Educational Psychology Service can support you at this time.

Senior leaders supporting staff.

As a school leadership team, you are the best people to create an environment that supports staff wellbeing at this time. You know your school community best. A one-size-fits-all approach which ignores individual and local needs is unlikely to be successful, as each school will be affected differently.

As senior leaders you may be exceptionally busy at this time. Nurturing relationships with staff do not necessarily need to be a time-consuming process; resilience is often conceptualised as 'ordinary magic'.

It would be helpful to evaluate the needs of staff (including senior managers) prior to their return to school. It is important to acknowledge people's personal circumstances may change over the coming months and will need to be reviewed. Please use the following table as a guide to understand the needs of individual staff.

Table 1. Evaluation of individual staff needs.

<p>Possible staff needs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Burnout 2. Lack of downtime 3. Bereavement 4. Illness 5. Shielding or family member shielding 6. Stress and anxiety 7. Childcare issues 8. Financial issues 9. Social isolation 	<p>Things to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how staff wellbeing has been monitored. What have their experiences been and have they been bereaved of family members/friends? • How do they feel about the transition back to school? Are they experiencing feelings of worry, anxiety or stress? • What are their current circumstances and family pressures? Are their children back at school? How can they be supported to balance work and home life? • What information do you need to know to help create flexibility and support for them upon their return? • Have staff had sufficient time and information to prepare for their return to school? Are expectations and plans to transition children back in to school clear?
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Supporting well-being within the school context –

Universal support for staff

As humans we are biologically driven to be social and relationships are key to our wellbeing, yet we have been and continue to be directed to avoid social contact. Some staff may not have had face-to-face contact with anyone for a significant period of time.

It can feel daunting to meet everyone's needs at a time of immense change, when senior leaders will be exceptionally busy. All staff will need to be flexible and tolerate high levels of uncertainty, which can often be anxiety provoking. The following information provides clear evidence based psychological strategies to support staff, that can be implemented as part of your everyday role:

1. Ensure practical needs are met first

Meeting practical needs, including providing clear communication, routine and structure, as well as time to eat, and to rest, is often the most effective step in preventing emotional distress.

2. Normalise reactions of stress and vulnerability

The current situation is unprecedented and many reactions, including grief, stress and anxiety, are normal responses. In various ways we are all vulnerable to the impact of this virus. School leaders can help to ensure normal reactions are not viewed as weakness, but natural reactions. It can help if people at all levels of an organisation acknowledge what they have found challenging about the previous few months and mention strategies they have used to help.

3. Strengthen school belonging and connectedness

There is plenty of evidence that strengthening our sense of belonging to a group and connection to those around us can help us to deal with times of change and trauma, giving some protection against burnout and mental health difficulties. Despite a packed schedule for reopening, it's vital to provide time and space for staff to pause, reflect and regroup for short periods. Open discussions and a return to your school values can also enhance team cohesion. Continue to give everyday praise and feedback to ensure teachers and other staff still feel valued.

4. Create a robust check in system amongst staff.

For leaders, being visible, available and supportive is key to maintaining staff wellbeing. Actively encourage expression of concerns and fears and listen with patience and show compassion towards others. However, it's impossible to do this for all staff on your own. Use the 'Relational Three' whereby one member of staff e.g. Head Teacher, checks in with three colleagues who each in turn check in with three others and so on. Staff who may be shielding or unable to return to the school site may need different processes for checking in.

5. Maintain or develop systems for peer support

Leaders can encourage staff to check-in with each other. It can be difficult to be vulnerable with someone that you don't know, so instead, supporting resilience through the relationships that already exist within a school community can be most effective. Establishing more formal peer support mechanisms, e.g. buddying, can be a good way to do this. Staff who are not on the school site, will also need to receive this, and if they can, to give support to their peers which can be undertaken through a variety of remote means.

6. Check bias at the door

Be mindful that staff will have had different experiences and different challenges. Some staff will not be able to return to school immediately and it is important to encourage and provide a supportive staff group. Address individual concerns around 'fairness' and remain curious about what this may be about.

7. Communication

Communicate updates regularly with all staff and be transparent and model consistent, inclusive behaviour, even under pressure or during difficult conversations. Make sure efforts are recognised and commented upon. Consider how to keep staff who are not in school informed and part of the communication network.

8. Seek feedback from staff

Seek information about what support individuals have found helpful. Consider the use of anonymous feedback boxes or other methods to gather this.

9. Universal Staff well-being support

Consider the well-being support already available in school and how this may be available to support staff in school. Communicate to staff the offer that is provided from your school in relation to in school and out of school well-being support (this may be part of your Human Resources Package). Some NHS Trusts have introduced what they term a 'Wobble Room' during the pandemic to support the well-being of staff. It is likely that there will be challenges in implementing such a strategy in a school environment as room space is often limited. However, it would help to have a protocol in place for staff should they need to take a step back where they can.

Supporting well-being within the school context –

Targeted Psychological Support for staff

There may be some colleagues who will need more Targeted Psychological Support in addition to the Universal Offer. This could be for a wide range of reasons including health vulnerabilities, social isolation, bereavement and previous mental health needs. However, we should be careful not to make assumptions about where support is needed, and equally not take it for granted that other members of staff are 'coping well'. It is important that the Senior Leadership Team have effective ways of monitoring staff well-being and identifying where there may be a need for something more **targeted**. There should be a clear mechanism for members of the SLT to also identify their own need for additional support. *Please refer back to table 1 on page 2 to support in identifying staff needs.*

There should be a joint understanding amongst colleagues that mental health is a continuum that changes for each of us over time. This is particularly salient in the current context where things are very unsettled with all of us being expected to manage significant amounts of change within very short spaces of time.

It will be important to pay attention to the emotional well-being of staff that are not in school due to their need to shield or self-isolate. It will be necessary to think about how these members of staff are accessing the Universal Offer and consider whether their particular circumstances require some adaptation to this or something more targeted.

In the school context targeted psychological support could take many forms and staff should always be encouraged to describe what they feel would be most helpful to them at a particular time.

Targeted psychological support for school staff might include:

- Regularly scheduled peer support sessions. This could be within a group setting or through 1:1 conversations. It may be useful to have some 'peer mentors' that have had training in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA).
- Access to mindfulness sessions in school.
- Supervision from a member of SLT around a particular issue, for example, anxiety about supporting a child with health needs.
- Planned activities for a member of staff that is shielding to connect with other members of the team in a positive way.

Some colleagues may need access to Targeted Psychological Intervention. This may be additional to Targeted Psychological Support and the Universal Offer.

A targeted psychological intervention might include:

- Regular sessions with a member of the SLT that has had some training in MFHA and has access to regular supervision within a peer group of mentors or from a member of the Educational Psychology Service
- Referral to a counselling service
- Access to mindfulness sessions outside of the school context.

Information for staff around supporting their own well-being in relation to the covid-19 transition to school

In the face of significant challenges currently experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, this information is aimed to help you, as school staff, build resilience as you adapt to changes within your school system and wider school community.

This unprecedented situation is an unknown for everybody, but by engaging in some simple measures you are more likely to be able to confront any challenges approaching with more self-assurance and confidence.

As a service, we know how important our teachers' health and wellbeing are and we have sought to find ways to foster teacher resilience, informed by psychology, which you can use alongside other information available to you, in the present context.

Stay connected

Belonging is an important underlying principle for Resilience; one important consideration is ways we can promote our own sense of belonging, and connection with the staff team.

- Some teachers may return to school on June 1st, whilst others may not. Keeping in touch with close team members through virtual means is important to feeling connected whether you are back in school or continue to remain at home. Keep in touch with close team members through virtual means. Arrange coffee breaks together, 'check-ins' through text message and email to help others feel valued and 'held in mind' - even small gestures in everyday opportunities help to build relational support.
- Whilst we welcome back some school children into school, some of you may not have the opportunity to see pupils belonging to your class. Contact these pupils through letter, email or an online platform. This way of feeling connected has been shown to increase teacher wellbeing and has been a motivating factor for teacher retention.
- Take breaks and spend time with family members and friends. You can now meet up with one other person from another household in an outdoor space.
- Play games and prioritise this time with family and virtual catch ups with groups of friends.

Acceptance

It is important that you allow yourself time and space to adjust to what is our new normal. There are big changes to our lives that requires adjustment and a significant mental shift. It is normal to feel anxious, worried, low, scared, lost, overwhelmed and a whole range of other emotions. These are normal emotions in response to an abnormal time and you can feel a whole range, and at times conflicting emotions during difficult times.

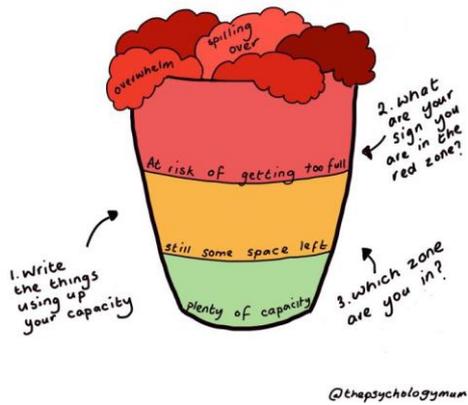
- We all respond in different ways and it is important that you do what feels right for you. Take time and space for yourself to notice how you feel and discover what works for you and what doesn't given your own unique circumstances. Nurturing and looking after yourself as best you can and treating yourself with kindness and compassion are anchors that can help you through these turbulent times.
- Try to minimise the amount of information or news reports related to Covid-19 you access, perhaps limited to once daily. Manage social media feeds so that it gives you something that makes you feel good.
- Keep an eye out for experiencing pandemic pressure. There are many posts and articles at the moment suggesting we should be using this time to help others, develop new skills, increase our knowledge and get fit. For some people these activities may be the right thing for them to do to manage boredom and keep themselves and their mind busy but everyone is different.
- Good mental health checks – are you eating, keeping hydrated, sleeping, finding time to rest, getting out during daylight hours and exercising?
- When reaching for your phone ask yourself, “Is this helping me right now or making me feel worse?” and make an active decision about whether to pick it up, or not.
- Set clear boundaries in discussions where topics are making you feel unsettled and are unhelpful to you. Give yourself the permission to limit them or end these conversations
- Find ways to relax.

Asking for help

During unsettling times like these, asking for help might seem difficult when we recognise that everyone is finding times hard; so, we might find it hard to justify and question our own help-seeking behaviour. However, seeking help has been found to contribute to building better resilience.

- Seek help and supervision through peer to peer support.
- Take time to engage in reflective thought and use these as opportunities for change - think about what is working well and identify what you might need help with.
- Based on Hepburn (2020), manage your ‘capacity cup’. This analogy helps you to recognise when things have become overwhelming and you may need to take action to reduce ‘what’s in the cup’ before it over flows. *Reflect:*

1. Write down what is in your cup? Is there anything you can pour away, or that can wait until another time?



2. From what you have identified, what is taking up the most space in your cup? Can you reduce it? How?

3. If your cup is full, avoid letting yourself or anyone else add anything else in to the cup.

4. If you notice your cup spilling over, find ways to relax. Take a deep breath and notice what is around you in the here and now.

	Ways the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) could offer support
Support for Senior Leadership Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to SLT in terms of developing effective systems for monitoring staff well-being and ensuring that staff needs are identified. • Support to members of SLT who would find it helpful to talk through an issue that had arisen in relation to the emotional well-being of a member of staff. • Support to Senior Leaders that want to discuss aspects of their own emotional well-being with somebody outside of the school context.
Support around the Universal Offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to help schools reflect on their universal offer and identify any gaps or training needs. • Support and signposting school leaders to examples of good practice in other local schools and nationally. • Sharing relevant documents around supporting the emotional well-being of staff.
Support around the Targeted Offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Training to Senior Leaders and identified 'Peer Mentors'. • Provide school teams with frameworks for running peer support sessions. • Offer advice around setting up supervision groups for peer mentors. • Offer supervision to Senior Leaders that have accessed the MHFA Training and are offering high levels of support to particular members of staff. • Provide advice around how to undertake holistic assessments in relation to an individual's emotional wellbeing needs. • Provide virtual sessions of mindfulness that could be accessed in school on a regular basis.
Support for 'Critical Incidents'	The EPS offers support to schools when they have experienced a 'critical incident'. This would be a significant event that impacts upon the whole school community. Should you wish to discuss further on how this pandemic has affected your school please contact your school Educational Psychologist or the Educational Psychology Service.

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