

It's OK ... NOT TO BE OKAY ...

Let's Talk Coping with Change ... A Future of Hope ...?

Since the 11th of March, when WHO declared Covid-19 had become a pandemic and government advice led to a huge impact on businesses and personal lives. Businesses commenced lockdown measures and implemented pandemic contingency plans. Animal Techs and others associated with the industry were on the frontline continuing to provide excellent standards of care and welfare for our animals used in scientific research.

For many Animal Technicians the implications of the contingency plans meant splitting into smaller teams with extra workloads, working on a rota basis and working more irregular hours than usual. Further pressures, such as being isolated from team members, scientists, managers and other colleagues who would usually encourage us and support us with day-to-day issues, have also had an impact on mental health and wellbeing. Some employees are trying to combine home schooling and other family responsibilities with work responsibilities, leading to a poor work/life balance.

For many, factors such as social distancing and self-isolation, protecting vulnerable family members and anxiety over family and friends also causes extra pressure and uncertainty. Many employees are fearful about contracting the virus and many may have suffered bereavements during this time.

Organisations are stating that they do not yet know exactly what the long term mental health impacts of Covid-19 will be. Early research (CIPD, May 2020) into the health impacts of lockdown found increased levels of fatigue, musculoskeletal conditions, poor work/life balance, reduced exercise and increased alcohol consumption. In addition to this, employees reported reduced motivation, loss of purpose, anxiety and isolation. Evidence from previous quarantine situations prior to the pandemic suggests that there are long lasting effects on mental health. Symptoms ranged from irritability and anger, to depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

As many countries (including the UK) start to ease Coronavirus restrictions, BBC News reported (Butterly 2020) that mental health experts are starting to see increased anxiety about what life will be like after lockdown. While many people have developed their own routine of safety in lockdown, creating a bubble around themselves, physically distancing themselves from family and friends, there are bound to be uncertain feelings regarding what the future holds.

What can Employers do?

It is well known that many employees do not feel comfortable in speaking up about poor mental health; this is unlikely to change following the pandemic.

Employers need to adapt a range of measures to support employees experiencing poor mental health as a result of COVID-19. These will range from supporting employees to regain an effective work/life balance and addressing fears about returning to work, right through to support for severe mental health conditions.

Factors to consider as an Employer:

- offering long-term mental health support for those continuing to work in this essential role as an Animal Technician
- continue to offer support for those who are currently working from home and may start to return to work on a phased basis over the coming weeks and months
- provide an open culture where people feel able to talk
- provide safe working environments for employees in order to comply with Covid-19 guidelines in the workplace



What can Employees do?

- stay safe and follow government guidelines
- understand that it will be difficult to get back into a routine
- keep it simple, don't rush back and overwhelm yourself with extra anxiety
- be open and talk to friends, family and your employer if you are finding easing back into life after lockdown hard
- continue to report symptoms and self-isolate if any symptoms are developed
- be proud to have been an Animal Technician or in a supporting role during this time ensuring continued levels of excellent animal welfare standards while supporting vital research

Future of Hope ...

There are many who identify with the theory that in all of the sadness, anxiety and struggles that Covid-19 has brought with it, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Communities have come together in a way they have not before, caring, shopping, helping and looking after neighbours and friends who have needed it. People have reached out to the lonely and isolated through social media, window visits and doorstep chats, when required. Families have been able to spend more time together and there is an increased appreciation for all front line workers from lorry drivers, postmen, carers, etc ... to NHS staff .

When you do start to develop your own strategy to ease out of lockdown and find your own way forward through the Covid-19 blur, please remember that YOU are a key worker and you should be extremely proud to be an Animal Technician.

Useful links:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/support-for-those-affected-by-covid-19>
- <https://www.actionforhappiness.org/news/covid-19-how-to-respond>
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>

References:

- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD 2020)
- Mind.org.uk
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52443108>

