Mental health and wellbeing in a time of COVID-19

In any crisis, it is commonplace for individuals to feel a level of stress and concern. Such concerns can range from:

- Fear of self or a loved one becoming ill
- Fear of separation from loved ones due to quarantine or social distancing requirements
- Fear of losing employment and financial implications of same
- Feeling powerless to the rapidly changing and evolving pandemic situation
- Feelings of anxiety, boredom, restlessness and loneliness due to extended periods of isolation
- Fear of "what if" scenarios in the absence of certainty

Added to these for frontline workers such as those working in healthcare, food retail and manufacturing and transport can be additional concerns regarding:

- their own safety and the fear of passing the virus to their loved ones
- increased demands in their work including long hours, increased numbers of patients and the resources to deal with these changing circumstances
- lack of time for their own self care and social support

Many of these fears and concerns have emerged from real dangers and challenges due to the pandemic. However, such concerns are not helped by the level of "fake news" being circulated in *WhatsApp* groups and on social media which can fuel extremes in reactions, lead to feelings of helplessness and despair, and result in possible mistrust of information being provided and anger from being "kept in the dark".

Against this backdrop however, there is also emerging in many communities a spirit of resilience, camaraderie and care where people are reaching out to support more vulnerable members of their communities and draw on shared challenges to improve solidarity in the face of a crisis. This was demonstrated most recently in Italy by residents singing together from the safety of their homes out of windows and balconies. While in Ireland it was seen in the number of neighbourhood concerts; St Patrick's Day parades and gatherings, at an appropriate social distance, aimed at lifting spirits and uniting communities in the face of this common challenge.

What can we do to protect our mental health and wellbeing?
During this time, it is important that we take every opportunity to protect and enhance the mental health and wellbeing of ourselves and our employees not just due to the short term benefits but also to ensure the longer term impact on capacity to fulfil roles and ability to return to the 'new normal' in due course. There are a number of steps we can take:

Personally
- Acknowledge that it is normal to feel distressed, worried, anxious or angry during this crisis. This is your way of trying to make sense of the reality of the pandemic situation.

- Maintain social contacts through email, phone calls or social media platforms, while not as supportive as face to face contact it is essential for connectedness and reducing feelings of loneliness.
- Ensure you are checking trusted sources of information to get the facts about your risk and the precautions you need to be taking. The HSE website, WHO website and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre are all useful locations for information.
- Remember that there will always be "click-bait" and untrustworthy sources of news circulating and so it is important to maintain a healthy scepticism in this regard. The WHO myth busters section on their website https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters is a great resource for helping distinguish facts from rumours.
- Follow the advice around good hygiene and cough etiquette; non-essential travel and familiarise yourself with the technology to work remotely if that is an option.
- Reduce the amount of time spent watching or listening to distressing or graphic media coverage – media attention both heightens alarm as well as serving as a useful tool for encouraging precautions and prevention. As such, turn off automatic notifications and limit yourself to a period of time or particular programme to keep abreast of the situation without adding to the mental strain.
- Maintain familiar routines in as much as possible with time for healthy activities, exercise, rest and connection which are important to maintaining wellbeing. Given there is so much of our "normal" routine that has been disrupted, restoring certainty and predictability where we can helps reduce the psychological impact of this situation.

Organisationally
- Keep communication clear, regular and accurate with as much information as is possible to answer questions but without fuelling further speculation – this is not a case of "sugar coating" messages but rather saying what is known and unknown, with a commitment to answer the unknown as soon as it is possible.
- Provide sources of quality information through links to trusted websites, sources of advice regarding personal and financial health.
- Reassure employees of what the organisation is doing to be as prepared as possible for changes to how you do business, whether through the formation of a crisis team or a daily scheduled meeting of key personnel. Employees will need to adopt new ways of working; however they will be unable to do that unless there is clear and consistent overall direction.
- Remind employees of the Employee Assistance Programme details where your organisation has one in place. They can be a key resource for employees on issues like mental health, financial health, fitness and work issues.

There can be significant challenges to our mental health and wellbeing when faced with a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic that challenges not only our physical safety and that of those around us, but also changes how we work and live. The uncertainty and unknown aspect of the situation does little to reduce the feelings of anxiety and lack of control in individuals.

To address these concerns requires us to begin taking back control of the elements that we can have an impact on and bringing back routines and structures into our days that balance our personal and work lives where possible. This is an evolving situation and one that will test our resilience but by

using the tools available to us, recognising what coping measures we use and trying to ensure they are positive ones, we can reassure ourselves of our ability to get through this difficult time.

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