

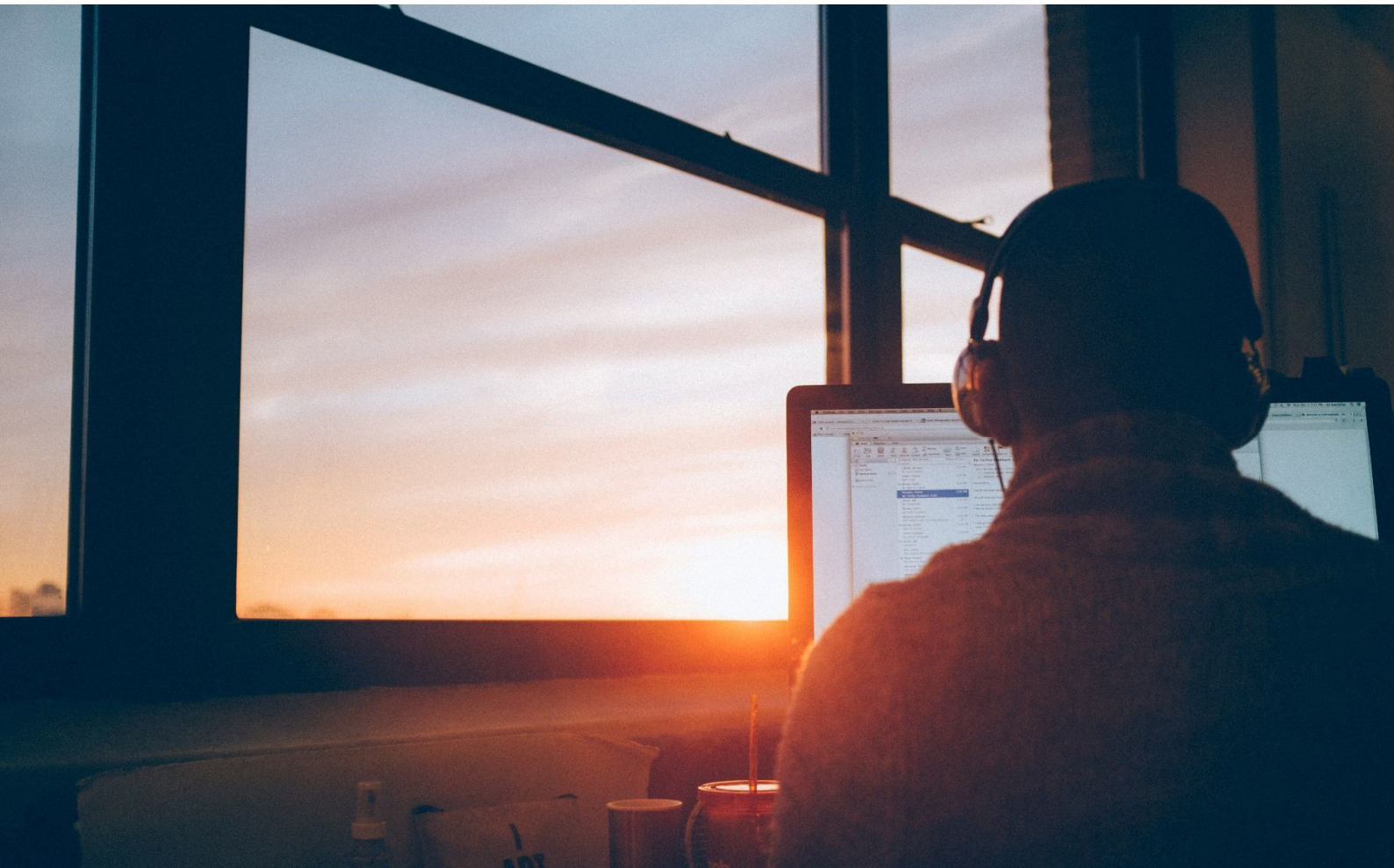


**City Mental Health  
Alliance** UK

Centre for  
Mental Health



# Recovering at work: how businesses can support staff who may be facing trauma



**A City Mental Health Alliance and Centre for Mental Health Guide**

## Introduction

This guide has been produced by City Mental Health Alliance and Centre for Mental Health to help businesses become “trauma informed”. It will help businesses to better understand and support their people through the psychological and emotional traumas that people may have experienced in 2020. Our guide mainly relates to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, but it also looks at the difficult and triggering conversations and experiences of racism, and some of the lessons are relevant for other causes as well. We have provided an overview of some of the difficulties that people may experience – from more mild trauma to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – and some practical tips for employers to reduce the risks to their people’s mental health, both in the short- and long-term.

All of us will be affected in different ways by the seismic events of 2020 and all of us will react in different ways. Some will come through the crisis with no ill effects to their mental wellbeing. Others will have experienced distress so severe that they will meet the clinical criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Others will find themselves somewhere in between. It is estimated that at least half a million more people in the UK will experience some kind of mental health difficulty this year as a result of Covid-19.

We hope this guide provides some useful information, as well as ideas, so that employers are better able to support their people who are living with trauma.



## What Is Trauma?

Trauma comes in many different forms. When we think about trauma, we tend to picture the reaction to a large scale event or tragedy. Trauma can of course be the result of violence, accidents and unexpected death or suffering of loved ones. It can also take the form of more hidden and drawn-out experiences that are physically or emotionally harmful, such as abuse, neglect and lacking basic needs such as shelter, food and human contact. In these challenging times, the UK population will have had traumatic experiences of different kinds – both sudden and life threatening, as well as drawn out and rooted in anxiety. For example, the anxiety of working as a carer/key worker and not being able to access PPE is an experience which can cause trauma. For some of us, this will have a lasting impact, including developing into the serious mental health condition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Employers should be aware that a key feature of experiencing trauma is that it does not always immediately follow the event. Just thinking about something traumatic can lead us to re-live it over and over again. We might be able to ignore it and distract ourselves but some memories or feelings will show up uninvited, forcibly, and stay beyond their welcome. The impact on mental health can take many months and sometimes years to surface and this delay may also make it hard to ask for help if everyone else seems like they have, or expect you to have, 'moved on'.

### Trauma

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a branch of the US Department of Health and Human Services, defines traumatic experience as: an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA, 2014) This definition would include systemic trauma. Systemic trauma refers to the harm caused to people by contextual features of environments and institutions through, for example, poverty, racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression (Goldsmith, Martin & Smith, 2014).

### Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events. Someone with PTSD often relives the traumatic event through nightmares and flashbacks, and may experience feelings of isolation, irritability and guilt. They may also have problems sleeping. Symptoms are often severe and persistent enough to have a significant impact on their day to day life. PTSD can develop immediately after someone experiences a disturbing event, or it can occur weeks, months or even years later.



# What may be causing people in your workplace to experience trauma

The global events of 2020 have had the potential to create trauma in people across the world, many of whom will be in the workplace.

## Illness

Experiencing severe virus symptoms or being treated in hospital for the virus, especially in intensive care, can be traumatic. We know that, as of August 2020, about 100,000 people have been treated in hospital for Covid-19 in England, while nearly 13,000 patients in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have received intensive care. This will have had a significant impact on the patients themselves and their family and friends. Experts say that Covid-19 patients may be even more likely to experience trauma and PTSD than those who have been hospitalised for other infectious diseases because of the associated isolation. There is some evidence that family members of people who have received hospital treatment for Covid-19 might experience trauma symptoms later as well. Patients being separated from family and friends at such an anxious time may exacerbate the psychological effect\*. There is also the domino effect on people living with other health conditions, who have had planned surgeries, treatments and procedures been postponed due to COVID-19. This is leaving thousands of people continuing to live with pain and chronic conditions, while being reliant on their families. Many studies point to the fact that people who live with chronic illness are at a greater risk of experiencing PTSD-like symptoms.

\*<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/28/screen-survivors-of-covid-19-for-ptsd-say-mental-health-experts>

## Bereavement

We already know that the impact of losing someone close to us will almost always negatively impact on a person's mental health, and COVID-19 has led to more people in this country being bereaved. By May 29, the death rate in England was 7.5% higher than it has been in recent years so there are more people in our workplaces living with grief. And bereavement has, and is, happening in more complicated circumstances. For the hundreds of thousands of people who have been bereaved during lockdown, the normal process of grief was not allowed to play out in the way in accordance with a family's wishes. Mental health experts are saying that Covid-19 may increase the risk of 'complicated grief' because people are less likely to be able to be with a loved one during their final hours and normal forms of mourning have been restricted. In these times, bereavement is something which may be more likely to create trauma.

*“Grieving during this pandemic has been made difficult because we are not able to do those things which we know we know can help us. We are not coming together to grieve, we are not coming together to support each other. This is making the grieving process harder and, in some cases, is making the loss harder to accept and process.”*

**Dr Andrew Iles, Consultant Psychiatrist, Priory Group**

## Impact of lockdown

For others, the trauma may be an indirect effect of lockdown and other restrictions introduced because of the pandemic. Levels of domestic abuse and violence, which are known to cause trauma, surged during the lockdown – Refuge said that in May 2020 it recorded a 66% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse helpline over a three week period, with a 957% increase in web traffic over a two week period. Financial insecurity has also become more acute for many, especially where they or a family member has lost their livelihood. And this financial anxiety is set to get worse as we face a recession. Meanwhile, people in higher risk groups, most notably those who were advised to shield due to long-term conditions, have been leaving with fear, anxiety about the future and are more likely to experience isolation. Indeed, social distancing has decreased everyone's connections with others in some way. It reduces our ability to create a sense of community and combat feelings of isolation.

For some people, the psychological impact of the current situation could stir up traumatic memories. We know that traumatic experiences are a major cause of mental ill health. Experiencing anxiety, grief or isolation because of Covid-19 may bring back painful memories, of even unrelated events, for some people. The current crisis could be especially challenging for people living with a mental health illness.

## Impact on people from Black and Minority Ethnicities

People from Black and Minority Ethnic communities have been more affected, both directly and indirectly, by the pandemic than white people. Public Health England reported that people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death when compared to people of White British ethnicity. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10 and 50% higher risk of death when compared to White British. PHE also suggests that people of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups may be more exposed to COVID-19. This could be the result of factors associated with ethnicity such as occupation, population density, use of public transport, household composition and housing conditions. Also, many of these communities have experienced racism in the UK and other Western nations for generations. Traumatic images of violence, including the death of George Floyd, and conversations about racism in the media, may have had a triggering effect on many Black people. It could cause people to relive their own experience of racism which can lead to trauma.

## Trauma is a normal reaction

The important thing to remember is that traumatic stress symptoms are a normal human reaction to any crisis. It is worth noting that “events” like Covid-19 are not just single events but an unfolding situation where different people might have a traumatic experience at any time over a period of many months. This means that people within your workplace may be at different stages of coping with trauma. And, as the crisis evolves, for many the traumatic experience may be yet to come.

# How the workplace can support recovery

## The role of the workplace

After a traumatic event that affects a lot of people at about the same time, research shows that relatively few people seek help for their mental health through formal channels, such as doctors and specialist services. Instead, “recovery is played out through the relationships that exist within families, communities and workplaces” (Whittle et al., 2012). In other words, a person’s workplace, physical or remote, is one of the communities that they can use to make sense of what has happened and find shared ways of understanding it to try to resume ‘normal’ life.

Workplaces have the opportunity and a responsibility to support their people who may have had a traumatic experience during this time. Early interventions and a supportive community can play a key role. Research from mental health organisation, Unmind, showed that more people are turning to their places of work for help: by the beginning of May, 79 per cent of businesses had seen a rise in staff requests for mental health provisions since the outbreak began.

In the aftermath of a crisis, some people feel stuck in the moment, as if there is no way back to normality; other people try to pick up where they left off, as if the crisis never occurred. However, coming to terms with what has happened requires integrating the traumatic experience into the ongoing stream of life.

Guidelines for recovery from collective trauma recommend a process of gradual reengagement with day-to-day life in which communities (in this case within a workplace community) have time and space to acknowledge and make sense of what has changed or been lost.

**It is important for employers to recognise that they may need to adjust their expectations of staff during this time. Just as businesses are being asked to change their physical spaces to make it safer for more people to come to work, they should also be thinking about offering reasonable adjustments and offering support to make work safer for people’s mental health as they come back to the office or continue to work remotely from home.**

## Suggested actions for workplaces

We have drawn on the experience of what leading workplaces are doing that will help workplaces to be 'trauma-informed' and provide ongoing support to the mental health and wellbeing of their people.

### 1. Create an open and supportive culture

More businesses are creating cultures where mental health is openly talked about and conversations about mental health are normalised. They are doing this via awareness campaigns and everyone from CEOs to people in their early careers sharing their personal stories about the impact of lockdown on their mental health.

For example, at Allen and Overy, a global senior partner did a regular weekly blog where he shares his own experiences of lockdown, as well as the stories from people across the global business.

*"Never has there been a more important time to look after each other."*

**Richard Houston,  
CEO Deloitte UK**

Deloitte UK held a firm wide webinar during lockdown to discuss practical tips and support on looking after your wellbeing. This was led by Richard Houston, Senior Partner and Chief Executive of Deloitte UK. Find out more by visiting:

[www.citymha.org.uk/Resources/Case-Studies/395-/NewsArticle](http://www.citymha.org.uk/Resources/Case-Studies/395-/NewsArticle).

In these environments, people are more likely to ask for help if they are struggling.

### 2. Providing, and regularly signposting to, mental health support

Employers signposting their people to a range of mental health support is important for not only directing people to appropriate help but also normalising help seeking behaviour. Companies often signpost to Mental Health First Aiders, Mental Health Champions, the company EAP and/or appointments with counsellors or psychologists. For example, Legal & General has a dedicated Wellbeing Hub which lists names and contact details of all Mental Health First Aiders. The company makes frequent mention of the Mental Health First Aiders in its wellbeing and mental health related communications to employees at both a Group and location-wide level. Some are also offering peer support programmes, and these have been implemented broadly in blue light services. Many companies are also signposting to external support, including the The Samaritans (phone and text support services) or Shout (text support service).

### 3. Increasing mental health literacy in line managers

Organisations are providing mental health training for their line managers to help them feel more confident in talking about mental health and more able to spot the early warning signs of employees who may be struggling. This includes proactively initiating conversations about mental health by, for example, asking open questions such as "How are you managing?".

This is especially important now for those people who will have been through traumatic experiences as a direct result of Covid-19. These will include anyone who has had severe Covid symptoms, and those who needed hospital treatment; anyone who has been bereaved; and anyone with family members who have died, been very unwell or who work in high-risk environments such as hospitals, care homes or public transport.

For example, Allen & Overy has developed its own half-day mental health training for line managers. Read this case study by visiting:

[www.citymha.org.uk/Resources/Case-Studies/378-/NewsArticle](http://www.citymha.org.uk/Resources/Case-Studies/378-/NewsArticle).

#### **4. Giving people reassurance and control about returning to the workplace**

For those people in office-based jobs, anxiety of returning to the office could trigger poor mental health. Where possible, companies are giving their people control of the decision of when and how to return, although we appreciate there are certain roles for which this is not possible. For those people who are returning to the office, a clear and transparent protocol for how people should interact in the office, how positive cases of Covid-19 will be managed, and details of cleaning are being provided.

#### **5. Updating bereavement policies**

A number of businesses are recognising the impact of lockdown on the grieving process and have taken action, such as increasing bereavement leave and extending the mental health support offered via EAP to family members. For example, Wells Fargo moved quickly to increase bereavement leave from five days to ten. Further, managers were given discretion to speak with bereaved team members and determine whether more time was required for given individual circumstances.

#### **6. Supporting people in their early careers**

Young people already had a higher reported incidence of poor mental health before the crisis. A CMHA survey at the start of 2020 revealed that 76% of young job seekers had experienced poor mental health, such as anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. And their mental health has been significantly impacted by the current pandemic and associated lockdown.

ONS Office for National Statistics (ONS) revealed that one in three 16–34 year olds have experienced mental health symptoms such as loneliness, anxiety and depression this year.

In response, organisations are offering people early careers support: ranging from setting up buddy systems, regular line manager check ins and mental health and resilience training. For example, Hogan Lovells rolled out training for the line managers of new trainee solicitors on how to manage and support people in a remote working environment, as well as how to spot any signs of poor wellbeing. Please see the CMHA and Charlie Waller Memorial Guide to supporting people in their early careers during the pandemic. (This can be accessed here: [www.citymha.org.uk/docs/EarlyCareersCoronavirusReportFINAL.pdf](http://www.citymha.org.uk/docs/EarlyCareersCoronavirusReportFINAL.pdf).)





## 7. Supporting people from Black and Minority Ethnic Background

Many businesses are working to improve their understanding of racism and the experience of their colleagues from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds through the sharing of stories and training. For example, CMHA members have trained their Mental Health First Aiders to help increase their understanding of, and confidence in talking about, the challenges facing people from these communities and particularly Black people. It is important to ensure that the workplace wellbeing system has been designed to be supportive of the needs of this community through, for example, appropriate representation and awareness of the particular mental health challenges that they may face.

## 8. Proactively offer reasonable adjustments

Discussing how best to support people to do their work should be an ongoing conversation. Those who previously did not require reasonable adjustments for mental health reasons may now need some. It may be helpful to provide examples of adjustments available, particularly for colleagues who are unfamiliar with workplace adjustments. Likewise, adjustments which are already in place should be reviewed in case they need updated.

It is important to recognise that the support will not be the same for everyone. For example, some people find it more difficult to be in social situations after a traumatic event, but others seek to surround themselves with people. No two people will want to process things in the same way. For example, in recognition of differences, Wells Fargo gives managers discretion to speak with bereaved team members and determine what the need for compassionate leave is.

## When external help is required

Most people who experience traumatic events do not require specialist treatment; and for some, it can do more harm than good if it is unnecessary or poorly-timed (too soon or too late). Two thirds of people get better within a few weeks and without any treatment so usually there is a delay in clinical interventions to see if things improve on their own.

Workplaces can play a role in supporting staff by spotting signs of distress and signposting to appropriate support. There are a range of treatments for related mental health conditions for adults which include talking therapies and prescribed medications. The NHS UK website provides up-to-date guidance about the treatments available for PTSD: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/).

For more information, please visit:

### NHS UK

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/)

### Mindful Employer

[www.mindfulemployer.net](http://www.mindfulemployer.net)

### Health and Safety Executive

[www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mental-health.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mental-health.htm)

### Cruse Bereavement Care

[www.cruse.org.uk/](http://www.cruse.org.uk/)





## Summary

Covid-19 has been a shock to us all. It has placed an unprecedented pressure on the wellbeing of the world's population and the global economy. It is causing trauma. Workplaces have an opportunity and a responsibility to support their people, and this will play a critical role in how we recover from the collective trauma.

A trauma-informed workplace will seek to provide long-term, reliable mental health and wellbeing support. It will seek to bring people together, rebuilding relationships, and giving all members of the community a voice in planning for recovery. And, where there has been loss, it will be empathetic, support people to grieve and come to terms with a changed future.

By taking these steps, it is also an opportunity to prepare for the recovery from Covid-19 and create mentally healthy workplaces that give people the best possible chance of a healthy return to work.

This will support society's recovery as a whole, and also support our economic recovery. Because it will only be possible for businesses to build back better if they have healthy people.

## Further reading

Centre for Mental Health has produced a leaflet (about supporting friends and colleagues during the pandemic) and a briefing about trauma, mental health and coronavirus. These resources can be found here:

[www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/supporting-mental-health-during-covid-19-brief-guide](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/supporting-mental-health-during-covid-19-brief-guide)

[www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/briefing-56-trauma-mental-health-and-coronavirus](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/briefing-56-trauma-mental-health-and-coronavirus)

A range of City Mental Health Alliance coronavirus resources can also be found on our website. Visit [www.citymha.org.uk/Resources/Coronavirus](http://www.citymha.org.uk/Resources/Coronavirus).



## About Centre for Mental Health

Centre for Mental Health is an independent, not-for-profit thinktank dedicated to eradicating mental health inequalities through changing policy and practice. Our work drives change to make life better for people with mental illness, and creates the conditions for better mental health for all.

We have over 30 years' experience in providing life changing research, economic analysis and policy influence in mental health. Over the last decade, our work has expanded to include physical health, wellbeing, inequality and multiple disadvantage across the life course.

[www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk)

## About the City Mental Health Alliance

The City Mental Health Alliance (CMHA) is a membership organisation that works with senior leaders in large corporate businesses typically from financial, legal, professional services and technology sector to help transform workplaces into mentally healthy environments. The CMHA is established in the UK, Hong Kong and Australia.

The CMHA works hand in hand with members, at a leadership and operational level, to facilitate change and embed good mental health practice within workplaces in a sustainable and measurable way. We are a solutions-focused organisation and offer tailored training, consultancy and leadership coaching. Contact us to find out more: [cmha@citymha.org.uk](mailto:cmha@citymha.org.uk).

Our strength lies in the unique collaboration of our members, working together to draw upon the vast pool of knowledge and experience from across business, and with guidance from our expert advisory board, to find, test and deliver solutions that work for our members.

### Who we work with

The CMHA works directly with senior business leaders and HR and wellbeing professionals to embed good mental health practice within their organisations in a sustainable way. We have also developed a number of strategic partnerships with organisations, regulators, policy and law makers who have influence over the direction of mental health in the workplace e.g. National Governments, World Health Organisation, World Economic Forum, regulators, industry bodies, and relevant charities. We do not promote or endorse commercial products and services from other organisations.

[www.citymha.org.uk](http://www.citymha.org.uk)

### Our vision

Our vision is to create mentally healthy workplaces and inspire health creation in businesses.

Health creation means creating working environments and experiences that are so positive they improve peoples' health – both physically and mentally.





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