



CCL's Guide to Working from Home - COVID-19 & Mental Health

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Introduction

Counsel's Chambers Limited ("CCL"), as a Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU), recognises its responsibility under Work Health and Safety legislation to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of its workers and others at the workplace. This includes providing and maintaining a work environment where risks to health and wellbeing are minimised. This Management Plan has been designed to provide information for workers managing mental health in isolation and for PCBU's how they can support the workers.

This document has been created in consultation with:

- a) Madeleine Fabian – Founder & Facilitator of Meeting Minds using evidence-based strategies;
- b) Greg Muir – Managing Director of Beaware Solutions Pty Ltd, CCL's WHS consultant; and
- c) incorporating advice and guidelines from SafeWork NSW and government health authorities.

This document incorporates:

- a) CCL's Working from home policy – see Annexure A;
- b) CCL's Working from home checklist – see Annexure B;
- c) Manager's "check-in" guide – See Annexure C; and
- d) CCL COVID-19 Mental Health Workshop Outlines – See Annexure D.

Aim

The aim of this document is to identify evidence-based actions to support the mental health of CCL's employees in response to the psychological risks posed by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Background

Australians have been affected by an outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a novel (new) coronavirus (COVID-19) first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

As of 31st March 2020, there has been more than 766,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 internationally, with 36,800 reported deaths. The Australian Department of Health has confirmed 4,359 cases of COVID-19 (2032 in NSW) in Australia as at this date, with 18 deaths attributed to the virus.

The Australian government and health authorities have advised and enforced restrictions on the following to reduce the spread of COVID-19 such as:

- social distancing of 1.5m
- no gathering of more than two people in public
- hold meetings via video conference
- eat lunch at your desk rather than in a common area
- avoid non-essential travel
- consider if you can, stagger or cancel non-essential meetings
- where possible work from home

With the advice and restriction in place, a large number of the work force has had to adapt to a working from home model where a vast majority of workers will now be working remotely or in isolation. The health and wellbeing of everyone is as important as ever to ensure the workers feel safe and healthy while adapting to a new working environment. CCL has devised this management plan to provide information and guidance to its workers and managers.


Rationale

The psychological stressors that have been identified as being of particular relevance to this plan are:

- Prolonged stress (due to additional workplace pressures as well as financial, family or health concerns)
- Trauma (including experiences of loss, shock and complex grief)
- Isolation (increased working from home and decreased social support on site and outside of work)

It is important to remember the complex interaction between general wellbeing and our response to stress. In addressing mental health risk, it is impossible to entirely isolate the impact of specific external stressors from an individual's overall level of vulnerability or from more general stressors and protective factors in the workplace.

In order to best support staff mental health and wellbeing, three domains should ideally be addressed simultaneously so that they support each other. These are:

	Promotion of positive mental health	Promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, supporting resilience and building a good workplace culture.
	Prevention of mental health problems	Reducing, or mitigating the impacts of, risks to mental health in the workplace.
	Intervention for people needing support	Supporting staff who are currently experiencing mental health difficulties, or recovering from a mental illness.

Because of the need for timely intervention to maximise mental health supports, this summary focuses on interim actions intended to reduce or mitigate the stressors identified above (isolation, trauma and prolonged stress) in each of these domains. More general mental health supports that are likely to protect against these stressors have also been included and adapted to the current circumstances where possible. However, this plan is not exhaustive.

Actions

CCL will implement a high level of communication strategies to ensure workers and managers are provided with the necessary information to maintain business continuity and reduce the risk of feeling isolated.

CCL will take the following actions to supports its workers:

1. CCL will hold video conference calls via Webex on a daily basis to debrief, check in on workers and provide an update on business.
2. Each department will schedule conference calls via Webex at a minimum once a week.
3. Workers are provided with a Working from Home Check List to promote a healthy working environment, developed in compliance with Code of Practise: Managing the Work Environment and Facilities. Checklist attached in Annexure B.
4. CEO or Managers will complete 'check ins' with individual workers on a regular basis. Guidance tool attached in Annexure C.

5. CCL's Safety Officer in consultation with Madeleine Fabian – Meeting Minds, will provide resources for self-care on a regular basis.
6. Action 6. – CCL has engaged Madeline Fabian Founder & Facilitator of Meeting Minds to host three (3) COVID-19 Mental Health workshops via Webex for all staff to participate in – workshops outlined in Annexure D.

- **Maintain your routines as much as possible.** Try to keep as much consistency in your life as possible. Get up, take breaks, eat and go to bed at the same time each day. Try not to cancel your usual plans – adapt them instead if you can. Do yoga at home instead of in a class, move that weekly lunch date or team catch-up online.
- **Focus on the things you can control.** There are lots of things that we can't control. But we are not helpless. Try to focus on positive actions that you can take, either for yourself or for someone else. Especially when you are feeling down or stressed, try to think of something simple that you can do quickly, however small.
- **Keep in touch.** Sometimes when we are used to communicating with others in a particular way it can be hard to develop new habits but now is the time to reach out. Make specific times to talk with your colleagues and others about things other than COVID-19 or work. Aim to do this every day.
- **Separate your work.** If you are working from home or working overtime make a conscious effort to delineate your work time from your free time. If you can, make a work space that you don't use for anything else. You could also try changing into and out of your work clothes or any other quick rituals between 'states'.
- **Cut yourself some slack.** Recognise that this is not a normal time and you are unlikely to be at full capacity in all areas of your life. Allow yourself to believe that whatever you are able to do at the moment is enough.
- **Communicate your needs.** Be proactive about asking for what you need from others. For example if you are taking some time out to recharge and would like not to be disturbed, or if you are feeling the need to hear a friendly voice, if it would help you feel good to share a virtual coffee break, let people know.
- **Expect up and down emotions.** Everyone reacts to stressful situations differently. You, or the people you know, may feel withdrawn, sad, distracted, forgetful, anxious or irritable or may behave out of character. Try to be forgiving of them and of yourself.
- **Go on a news diet.** Information overload can be very bad for our mental health. If you find yourself compulsively checking for updates that might be a sign that you would benefit from cutting back on your exposure to the news. Limit the information you receive to specific times and reliable sources. Ask others to support you by not exposing you to COVID-19 news unless necessary. This might mean taking social media breaks throughout the day.
- **Find ways to move.** Physical exercise is very important for emotional wellbeing. Even if it's not 'traditional' exercise do your best to find ways to get up and move around. Getting up from your desk frequently will help. If you forget you could set an alarm to remind you.
- **Know what makes you feel good.** Make a list of the things that usually make you feel good and think about how you can bring more of them into your life now. You might need to think creatively about how you can access them remotely. Think about your sources of support and how you can keep them within reach.
- **Try not to compare.** Other people may be feeling or behaving in ways that we find difficult to understand or may seem to be coping better or worse than others. Try to keep in mind that we rarely know everything about another person or their lives. Everyone's experience of this time will be different, and each person responds to times of stress in their own way. It doesn't help us in any way to compare ourselves to others.
- **Avoid unhelpful coping strategies.** We've all got them. They make us feel good at the time but worse in the long term. They could be related to food, alcohol and other drugs, spending, social media or other things. Identify what yours are, think of something else that's enjoyable to do and, when you feel the pull of your go-to temptation, give your healthy option a try instead.
- **Change it up.** Novelty can change your mood faster than almost anything else. If you are feeling stressed or down it might help to stop what you are doing and change something. Change your task, your posture, your environment, your clothes, your background image – anything

If you are feeling very worried or very down

It's natural to feel particularly worried or down during times of increased stress and lots of people benefit from getting some extra support at these times. If worry or low mood is consistently interfering with your ability to do the things that you need or want to do each day, or to find much enjoyment in life, then it's best to talk about it with a mental health provider.

- Headtohealth.gov.au is a directory of mental health treatment, information and support that can be accessed online.
- Beyondblue provides a 24 hr mental health support, information and referral service on 1300 22 4636 and online chat from 3pm – 12am daily at beyondblue.org.au

❖ *Some services might be experiencing high levels of demand so their response times might be longer than usual. If you experience delays, try to be patient but also persistent in your efforts to make contact – your mental health is important.*

- **Communicate regularly and consistently.** Set up a regular schedule of communication at all levels (including meetings, emails etc.) and stick to it. Use it to communicate any upcoming changes and also be explicit about what will be staying the same for now. Even if there's no news or no change, use your schedule to communicate that. This will help foster a sense of security and continuity. If the communications schedule changes, let staff know with plenty of notice.
- **Acknowledge the situation.** It can help for staff to hear you acknowledge that you understand that they are working in an unusual situation with additional pressures (at work and outside of it). It may help to alleviate their stress to hear that you understand that, although everyone is doing their best, 'business as usual' is not always possible.
- **Be clear about priorities.** Situations and workloads changing rapidly can disorient staff and not knowing what is expected of us is a large factor in workplace anxiety. Help staff to understand what to prioritise by being very specific about what the most important tasks are and what's 'nice to have'. Update this information regularly. It could form part of your communications schedule.
- **Check in about wellbeing.** Check in regularly with staff one-on-one about how they are coping. Ask about how they are coping and what they're concerned about outside of work as well. Keep these discussions separate from any discussion about anything else, particularly work tasks.
- **Repeat yourself.** It is often difficult for people to absorb information or reassurance when they are feeling high levels of stress. If there is something that is very important for people to understand it will help to communicate the same message at different times and through different mediums.
- **Express your appreciation.** There is no better time to acknowledge the work of your staff than in the midst of difficult circumstances.
- **Provide options for further support.** Make sure staff know where they can access mental health support if they are feeling distressed or finding it difficult to go about their day and that these options are visible to them as much as possible.
- **Discourage discussion about COVID-19 that is not work-related.** Explain to staff that it is important that everyone is given the opportunity to consume news and information relating to COVID-19 at a rate and extent that is comfortable to them. Some people may be coping by limiting their intake of news to particular times, sources or circumstances. Others may just need a break from the topic. Ask that everyone support each other's mental health by limiting discussion of COVID-19.
- **Avoid debates.** People will have differing perspectives on risk and what adequate risk management is. Trying to convince people of a position or course of action by arguing the facts can increase anxious or frustrated feelings and can further entrench the very belief that we are trying to change. Avoid as much argument about the details as you can. If you need to, simply state your position. E.g. "We are following ... guidelines", "we are taking ... precautions" etc.
- **Offer choice.** Offering staff as much control and autonomy over their work environment or practices as possible reduces the risk of developing mental health problems in response to prolonged stress. Even choices that are seemingly unrelated to obvious stressors can reduce feelings of anxiousness and helplessness.
- **Encourage the use of personal coping strategies.** You might consider offering more flexibility than usual to allow staff to recharge in whatever way works for them. Encourage staff to express what they need from others and to be supportive of others' individual coping styles. Be explicit about how staff can best go about communicating their needs.
- **Expect up and down emotions.** Everyone reacts to stressful situations differently. People may seem withdrawn, distracted, forgetful or irritable or may behave out of character. Try not to take it personally and encourage staff to be tolerant of each other. Address inappropriate behaviour as necessary, but understand that it may be related to a stress response.
- **Communicate the positives.** Focus discussion on things that are within our control and actions that are being taken. Talk about what has gone well and any positives that have come out of this challenge.

Tips for talking with a staff member who is feeling very worried or down

- Ask questions to try to understand what their concerns are and what impact they are having on their work and life.
- Acknowledge their concerns. Feeling heard and understood can help alleviate feelings of anxiety. You don't need to agree with their concerns in order to acknowledge them.
- Express your care for them as an employee and as a person.
- Ask them to identify existing sources of support and coping strategies in their lives (family, friends, meaningful or restful activities) and to think about how they might access them.
- Tell them what assistance or flexibility you are able to offer them within the workplace.
- Let them know that there are other supports that they can access. A good place to start is www.headtohealth.gov.au

Mental Health Services Contact Details




24/7 Mental Health Services

Beyond Blue

Anyone feeling anxious or depressed


 beyondblue.org.au

 1300 22 4636

Kids Helpline


Counselling for young people aged 5 to 25


 kidshelpline.com.au

 1800 55 1800

MensLine Australia

Men with emotional or relationship concerns

 mensline.org.au

 1300 78 99 78

Open Arms

Veterans and families counselling


 openarms.gov.au

 1800 011 046

Lifeline


Anyone having a personal crisis


 lifeline.org.au

 13 11 14

Suicide Call Back Service

Anyone thinking about suicide

 suicidecallbackservice.org.au

 1300 659 467



Is it an emergency?

If you or someone you know is at immediate risk of harm, call **triple zero (000)**

Annexure A – CCL’s Working from Home Policy
WORKING FROM HOME POLICY

Purpose

This policy is designed for employees entering a temporary working from home arrangement. The policy and procedures are for employees and their managers to clearly set in place a safe working from home environment.

Policy Statement

Counsel’s Chambers Limited, is committed to policies and procedures which support flexibility in the workplace.

Counsel’s Chambers Limited recognises that there are circumstances where allowing an employee to temporary work from home may assist the staff member to balance his/her work, health issues and/or family or other responsibilities.

However, Counsel’s Chambers Limited also recognises that it is not always appropriate for an employee to carry out part or all of his/her duties from home and there are reasons why approval of a Working from Home Arrangement may be refused or limited.

Hours of work

Working hours will be in line with Counsel’s Chambers Limited office hours 8:30 am - 5:00 pm.

Sick leave

If you are sick or unable to work, you must follow Counsel’s Chambers Limited ‘sick leave’ policy by notifying your manager and provide the required certification. In the event of a pandemic and the employee becomes infected with mild symptoms and wishes to continue working, the employee must ensure isolation and protective measures for the safety of other occupants.

In the event of an emergency

In the event of an emergency or injury, contact your manager as soon as reasonably practicable within 24 hours, an incident report will need to be completed.

Police/Fire/Ambulance 000
Poisons Information Centre 131 126
Counsel’s Chambers Limited 9231 3644
Health direct 1800 022 222

Working from Home Checklist

The Working From Home Checklist is to be completed by the employee intending to work from home. The checklist should be completed by the employee applying to work from home and should be reviewed by their manager/safety officer prior to the employee commencing a working from home arrangement to determine if the home work area is appropriate and or if any equipment or furniture is required.

General Manager: _____ **Date:** ___/___/___

Document No.:	Author:
Title:	Approval:
Issue Date:	Revision Date:

Annexure B – CCL’s Working from Home Checklist

Chair

The chair is easily adjusted from a seated position (Seat back height and angle, seat height)	Yes	No
The seat back is adjusted so the lumbar support of the chair supports the lower back	Yes	No
The forearms and wrists are parallel to the floor or angled down slightly when chair height adjusted	Yes	No
When chair height is adjusted appropriately, the feet are positioned on the ground	Yes	No
If feet are not positioned on the ground, a footrest is provided	Yes	No
Seat back angle is adjusted so user is in an upright position when using keyboard	Yes	No

WorkStation Desk

Desk is large enough for the completion of mixed tasks (computer and reading / writing (Australian Standard 4442:1997 advises this should be at least 1600mm x 800mm)	Yes	No
Desk is between 680mm and 735 mm high	Yes	No
If desk is height adjustable - is this easily adjusted? Adjusted so forearms are parallel to floor or angled down slightly?	Yes	No
Desk is designed so frequent trunk twisting / rotation is not required	Yes	No
User is able to sit close to workstation without any impediment	Yes	No
If documents are regularly referred to, can they be positioned and supported (ie. use of document holder, or desk slope) to avoid unnecessary neck movement (looking sideways / downwards).	Yes	No
Power outlets are not overloaded with double adaptors and power boards	Yes	No
Power cords have been tested and tagged within the last 5 years?	Yes	No
Connectors, plugs and cords are in safe working order?	Yes	No

Monitor

Is positioned at approximately an arms distance when in an upright seated position	Yes	No
Is positioned at an appropriate height (neck remains in a neutral position not required to look upwards or downwards to view monitor)	Yes	No
If using a laptop, this is either raised, or this is positioned on a docking station	Yes	No

Monitor is positioned away from direct light sources and is free from glare / reflection Yes No

Keyboard and Mouse

Elbows remain close to side of body when keyboard and mouse are utilised Yes No

Mouse is at the same level as the keyboard Yes No

Separate keyboard and mouse is used if utilising laptop computer for extended periods Yes No

Work Environment

Lighting is adequate (able to read / refer to documentation without eye strain) Yes No

Noise levels are not distracting from task concentration Yes No

Ventilation (natural or artificial) is adequate Yes No

Walkways are clear from clutter and trip hazards Yes No

The work area is segregated from other hazards in the home (i.e hot cooking surfaces) Yes No

Pathways to exits reasonably direct and clear Yes No

Security is sufficient to prevent unauthorised entry Yes No

A communication procedure has been established to ensure regular contact between employee and manager Yes No

Other Factors

Telephone or other communication devices are readily available to allow effective communication in an emergency Yes No

Emergency contact numbers and details are known Yes No

The employee's fitness and health is suitable to the tasks to be undertaken Yes No

Any special needs to the health and safety have been advised to the employer Yes No

Remedial Control Measures

Where NO has been identified for any item within the Checklist, the employee must identify appropriate control measures to remove or reduce the risk associated with the hazard.

Additional Requirements:

Declaration

The designated home office or alternate office/location has been inspected and any risks to safety discussed with the employer.

The employee is aware there should be a change in location or conditions of the workspace;

- The employer must be informed; and
- A new checklist must be completed and signed off by the employer

Employee

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Reviewed by

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

Annexure C – Managers 'Check-in' Guide



Annexure D – CCL COVID-19 Mental Health Workshop Outlines

WORKSHOP 1 - Taking care of our MH during COVID-19

- How COVID-19 might impact on our MH and wellbeing 5min
- Protective factors and balancing some of the risk factors presented by COVID-19 5min
- Good working from home practices 5min

Handout - self care plan for homework

WORKSHOP 2 - Knowing when and how to get MH support

- Recognising when we're not feeling well 5min
 - Monitoring your wellbeing (MH/wellbeing axis)
 - Overview of common symptoms
 - A good rule of thumb
- What we can do about it - a tour of resources and services 8min
 - Self help (online)
 - Standard services (phone and online)
 - Crisis services (phone, online and in person)
- Disclosing MH to work and workplace flexibility 2min

Handout - Disclosure factsheet. Beyondblue magnets

WORKSHOP 3 - Approaching a colleague to offer MH support

- Recognising when a colleague is struggling 5 min
- Having a conversation with a colleague when we think they're struggling 10min
 - Staying within your role
 - What to say/not to say
 - Connecting them to further help
 - Privacy and the limitations of privacy

Handout - MHFA workplace guidelines