

You first: Summary Document



1. Introduction

In recognition of the importance of staff wellbeing, Public Health Scotland (PHS) and Suicide Prevention Scotland have collaborated to produce “**You First**”, a limited edition 4-part podcast. “You First” focuses on the wellbeing of people working in potentially stressful and emotionally demanding roles across our Scottish workforce. The podcasts and this accompanying resource will be useful to people working on a range of topics, in a variety of roles and in different sectors and organisations.

This written resource has been developed to complement the podcast series, and draws on the expertise of podcast guests as well as the views of staff from within PHS and beyond. It is recommended to listen to the 4-part series and use this resource as a reminder of the key messages and suggestions offered – but even if you haven’t listened to the podcast this is a valuable tool. The information includes helpful hints and tips to look after your mental health and wellbeing as well as those you work with.

2. What can I do if I am worried about someone?

If you notice signs that someone may not be coping, it is important to take action before things become worse. Make the time and space to sensitively raise your concerns, but respect the person’s right to withhold details of their personal experiences or reasons why they are finding certain pieces of work upsetting. If they don’t want to speak to you, then you can support them to find someone they’re comfortable speaking with, who can listen and help them to find support.

If the person is someone you line manage, then consider what changes could be made to their work in order to support their wellbeing and ability to cope.

If you are worried that someone might be thinking about suicide, talk to them. Whatever the situation, encouraging someone to talk, giving them time to be heard and listening to what they say without judgement can make a big difference. We know that asking someone directly if they are considering suicide could save their life, and it can encourage them to open up and get further help.

If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health or feeling suicidal, seek help. You can contact your/their GP, **NHS24 on 111**, Samaritans on **116 123** or Breathing Space on **0800 83 58 87**.

Call 999 if you or another person is in immediate danger.

More information on how you can talk to someone about suicide is available on the [Suicide Prevention Scotland website](#).

Suicide 
Prevention
Scotland.

3. Stress



There are many things that can contribute to feeling stressed at work, including working in busy roles and regularly dealing with upsetting or traumatic data or information.

Stress is a mental or physical response to something that is causing us to feel tense or overwhelmed. When we are stressed it can trigger a fight-or-flight response in our brains which affects how we feel mentally and physically, can prevent us from thinking clearly, and may cause us to turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms.

It can be useful to equip yourself with tools to minimise the impact of stress. Some approaches include:

- Pausing work and taking regular breaks taking time away from work
- Connecting with others including colleagues or friends, family and pets
- Managing your diary so you have time to Complete tasks
- Being your authentic self and being open and honest with yourself and others
- Setting healthy boundaries
- Taking time to reflect on work during your working day
- Spending time outdoors for fresh air
- Building a supportive network / relationships with colleagues
- Being physically active
- Maintaining a good balance between life and work
- Volunteering with a charity

Exercise: Stress self-checking tool

In the podcast, Dr Rebecca Williams suggests that you can regularly use a simple check in tool to help minimise and manage stress. The tool helps identify stress, how you are coping and how it might be affecting you. What you find stressful, how you cope and how it impacts you will be unique to you. This means that having self-awareness of how stress shows up for you is important and can help you build healthier coping strategies and reduce the impact of stress on our health and wellbeing.

Ask yourself the following 3 questions:

Is anything making me feel stressed, either at work or outside of work?

Am I using any unhealthy coping mechanisms?

Do I have any symptoms of stress?

Some other helpful techniques to help with stress:

- **Breathing exercises:** Focus on calm, slow breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing or Box breathing exercises can be helpful.
- **The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding technique:** Grounding techniques help us be present in the moment. The 5-4-3-2-1 technique asks you to identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.
- **Create a catch phrase:** If you're finding your brain can't switch off from work, say a commanding catch phrase to yourself or out loud (such as "stop that" or "enough!") to stop that over thinking and then distract with something you enjoy. Finding ways of reframing unhelpful thoughts can also help.
- **Identify simple joys:** Simple joys are quick and healthy things we can do that instantly lift our mood, and provide some relief or distraction from whatever is causing us to feel stressed. Examples could include looking at pictures of family and friends, opening the door and listening to the birds for a few minutes, sending a quick message to someone you care about. Identify your simple joys and build them into your working day.

You can find more information and suggestions for breathing and relaxation exercises on [NHS Inform](#) and [NHS Lothian](#) have useful suggestions for other grounding techniques.

4. Vicarious trauma and burnout

This section of this resource is to help those working in stressful environments and with potentially distressing data or information recognise and prevent any possible negative impacts associated with this type of work.

Sometimes these impacts might be minor – maybe we find it hard to switch off at the end of the day, maybe it affects our mood, or maybe we might feel some physical impacts like tiredness, a sore head or a sore jaw. Sometimes people can experience more serious impacts such as vicarious trauma and burnout.

Trauma and burnout can happen through a natural empathy with the data, information and / or people you are working with or through the ongoing stresses of difficult and emotionally demanding roles. Recognising these risks is the first step toward building healthier, more supportive environments for all staff.

What is vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma is emotional or psychological distress which can happen due to exposure to someone else's trauma. It is also often called secondary trauma. It can have a significant mental health impact and, if not mitigated against or treated effectively, can be a pathway to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Signs of vicarious trauma could include

- Lingering or overwhelming feelings of anger, sadness, guilt or shame
- Pessimism and hopelessness
- Over-identification with the person or people who are experiencing trauma
- Distancing, numbing or avoiding further exposure
- Overstepping role boundaries

What is burnout?

Burnout is a psychological response to ongoing or unmanageable occupational stress. It's more than just feeling stressed.

Signs of burnout could include:

- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Feeling more irritable or cynical
- Low mood
- Physical signs like headaches, stomach problems, difficulty sleeping or changes in appetite
- Lack of motivation and reduced efficacy and productivity

It's normal for people working in stressful or distressing environments to experience some impacts, which along with the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and burnout should never be ignored.

Exercise: Emotional Contagion

This simple exercise can help us understand a bit more about vicarious trauma. Turn down the corners of your mouth and feel what happens in your body.

Most people report feeling a sense of heaviness and sadness in their guts and chest. Even though we may not be feeling sad, if we pull a facial expression associated with sadness, then that might be what we feel. Generally, when we smile at someone, they'll smile back. Or if someone near us yawns, we get an irresistible urge to yawn ourselves.

This type of "emotional contagion" can also happen with regular exposure to upsetting information or data about real people or hearing stories about other people's trauma or lived experiences. We can start to feel a little bit of what they might be feeling. It can have an impact on our own emotions.

What can I do to prevent vicarious trauma and burnout?

Self-care is not a luxury, but a necessity for everyone. It's important to prioritise your wellbeing and recognise when it is being impacted. When you identify physical or emotional symptoms which could be signs of vicarious trauma or burnout, it's a signal to pause, reflect, and take time out.

Exercise: Checking in with yourself

Checking in with yourself regularly can be a really helpful thing to do. Ask yourself:

Is my sleep OK?

Can I switch off from work or do I have thoughts that won't go away?

Am I present in the moment?

Am I being normal in my relationships?

Am I struggling to engage, listen to or spend time with family and friends?

If you answer 'no' to any of these questions, then it suggests that it might be worth spending a bit of time thinking about what might help.

Here are a few suggestions which might help:

- Create boundaries between work and your personal life and consider if you need to build in time or an activity to actively decompress at the end of a working day.
- Reflect on what are the difficult things you deal with in work, you could write this down. You may not necessarily think they are difficult to you, particularly if you deal with these things on a regular basis but if you were to tell someone who doesn't do your role, would they think the same?

- Remember that it's not all on you! You are part of a community who are working to help people in different ways. You can lean on others such as colleagues or managers for help or support, or just to talk about the work that you do. We all have a role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of others.

Being aware of signs and symptoms allows you to know what to look out for to prevent some of the potential negative impacts of doing your role.

5. How organisations and managers can build mentally flourishing workplaces.

It is important that organisations and line managers consider how they can support the mental health and wellbeing of all staff. They should be alert to the potential risks associated with emotionally demanding roles or tasks, should ensure that psychological safety is considered as part of their health and safety responsibilities and should consider both preventative measures and access to supportive responses.

Here are some eye-opening stats from recent survey:

- **63%** of respondents experienced at least one characteristic of burnout (Feeling of exhaustion, Mental distance from their job, Decline in performance at work)
- **16%** of respondents said they planned to leave their job within the next 12 months and 11% had left their previous job in the last 12 months. Of those 59% said it was somewhat, largely, or entirely due to mental health and wellbeing-related issues.

It is the joint responsibility of organisational leaders, line managers and staff to foster a safe and supportive culture where staff feel they can speak up if they feel they are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing.

Here are some examples of things that organisations and line managers have done to improve mental wellbeing in the workplace:

- Providing education for staff, especially line managers around how to support staff members who are going through challenging times both in the workplace and in their personal life (see awareness raising / training below for more information)
- Daily or weekly wellbeing check-ins between managers and staff
- Building in time for staff to be active, including time to go to the gym or go for walk
- Providing opportunities for staff to socialise, connect and have fun
- Ensuring policies are in place which support health and wellbeing and work life balance and ensuring line managers utilise these when needed
- Informal collective debrief as a Team (this can be done in person or making sure there is space to do this online in hybrid working/working from home)
- Building wellbeing into line manager/staff conversations, performance discussions or 1:1's
- Providing regular positive feedback for staff and building in time for staff to reflect on what's going well for them
- Investing time in building relationships with and between staff. This can be challenging in any circumstances, but potentially even more so when home working is the norm

To successfully create an environment which encourages employees to take steps to look after their wellbeing and seek support and help when they are struggling, it's recommended that managers model healthy ways of working such as taking lunch breaks and finishing on time. Managers could also reflect on how vulnerable they are with their team and ways to build trust and good relationships with the team.

Some organisations have Mental health first aiders, which have been shown to be very successful in supporting people with their mental health and wellbeing. It is recommended that Mental health first aiders focus on prevention rather than reacting to situations in the workplace where possible and helping to create a mentally healthy culture.

Exercise: Who keeps me well at work?

Ask yourself:

Which friends or colleagues can I be open with to improve my own wellbeing?

Which colleagues help me feel uplifted/ positive and how can I spend more time with them?

Who can make me feel unheard or drained?

What can I put in place to help me cope with this?

Processes and Planning

Organisational policies and processes would benefit from considering the needs of staff who may be affected by frequent exposure to potentially upsetting data and information.

An example is ensuring that it is flagged and discussed as part of the induction process for new members of staff coming into the organisation, including line managers.

Other suggestions include considering risk and impact to staff as part of project planning, communicating this to staff as work is allocated and discussing strategies, or where appropriate, opt out or temporary change of duties. A similar

discussion may be appropriate when staff are being reassigned to new posts, teams or projects.

In relation to recruitment, job descriptions should state the potential for these impacts and flag the support offered by the organisation.

Awareness raising and learning

Awareness raising and learning for staff on how to look after their own and others mental health and wellbeing is helpful. Offering different levels of learning to support the needs of the individual and groups of staff will help to create a supportive and a mentally healthy culture in the workplace.

Learning opportunities can:

- Help staff (including managers) understand what psychological safety means and how they can support themselves and others in the workplace; this could be done through awareness raising sessions, policy and training
- Improve knowledge and understanding of mental health and wellbeing, increase self-awareness and empower staff to make changes
- Support managers to feel skilled to support staff with their mental health and wellbeing and have open and honest conversations within their teams
- Suggest practical tools which support good wellbeing
- Raise awareness of where further information and support can be found
- Promote other learning resources which are available

Public Health Scotland have created '[The Mentally Flourishing Workplaces Framework](#)' - a free framework for any organisation, regardless of size or sector. It is designed to help create a mentally flourishing workplace for all employees. Mentally Flourishing Workplaces (MFW) is the result of a collaborative development.

6. Home working / Hybrid working

While there can be wellbeing benefits resulting from home or hybrid working, working remotely when dealing with potentially stressful or distressing situations can leave people feeling isolated with their work. Office working can provide space for colleagues to meet and have a quick informal tea/coffee together and debrief, and so in situations where staff are working from home, steps need to be taken to ensure they remain connected and supported.

Online working has created a culture where back-to-back meetings can be normal. Being exposed to stressful and distressing data or information with no time built in to reflect on or process our own thoughts and feelings can cause us to suppress emotions. This can lead to vicarious trauma and/or burnout.

It's important to build in time to connect and debrief with your manager or colleagues, and to ensure that you are connecting with others regularly and checking in to see how they are doing. Building in time for reflection can help us look after our own and others' mental health and wellbeing.

Working from home can also make it harder to switch off at the end of the day. When we work in an office, our commute home can help us switch off and decompress as it forces us to stop working. At home, our commute may be walking from one room to another, with no time to decompress. That's why it's important to have clear boundaries between home life and work life.

Here's some tips and suggestions:

- Where possible don't work late into the evening – make sure you have plenty of time between work and going to bed. If your shift finishes late, try to build in time to decompress before you go to sleep
- Try to do the most emotionally demanding tasks earlier in your shift, or when you know there are others available to talk to should you need to
- Pack away all work materials at the end of the day so you don't have a visual reminder of work at home
- Avoid checking work emails outwith your working time
- Build in time to debrief or decompress into your working day. Using an end of the day reflection tool can help
- Take a walk outside after finishing work

Exercise: End of the day reflection

Build in time at the end of your working day to reflect on and note down:

What's gone well today?

What do I need to think more about?

What tasks do I still have to do?

This can help you to switch off knowing that you can revisit this the following working day. In addition to this tool, separating work and home life by closing laptops and packing away work materials or ending the day with a positive distraction, can signal closure.

7. Building healthy boundaries when work is more than work

It is recognised that while people in some roles may be more likely to be exposed to potentially upsetting data or information, anyone in any role, at any level and with any length of experience could potentially be affected.

It is possible that many of us will be personally affected, or be close to someone who is affected in some way, by the issues we are seeking to improve through our work. As staff we have our own lived and living experience. Sometimes it's because of these experiences that we choose roles where we can make a difference for others. This drive to enable change can make you more motivated, productive and successful in your role, but it can also make you more vulnerable to stress and the emotional impact of the work.

It's important to build healthy boundaries around your work. These can look different for everyone, so it's important to reflect on what works for you.

Here are some reasons why healthy boundaries are important and can help:

- In this type of work, there can often be a sense, that our work is never done. But it is important that we turn off from work at the end of the working day as much as possible. Ways that we can do this include not having work apps on personal phones and putting laptops and work materials away at the end of the day.
- Remembering that while you have a responsibility TO the people you are work with or for, you are not responsible FOR them. This can be challenging when you are working with people in distress or when your work feels really important and personal to you. You might know logically you are not responsible for people, however, your work can still have a huge impact on your mental health and wellbeing particularly if you are putting pressure on yourself to do more and more.
- Sometimes it can be helpful to have some control over when you see or read particular information. Setting up a separate inbox for emails which are more likely to contain distressing information means you can access this when you are ready to. Speaking with your colleagues or line manager about how emails or documents which might contain upsetting information are tagged or flagged can also help.
- While there should never be any pressure or expectation on you or any colleague to share your personal and private experiences at work, having someone who understands the personal nature of the work for you and the challenges that this can cause can be helpful. For example, if you have personal experience of losing someone to suicide, having someone who understands can check in with you around tasks relating to deaths by suicide may be helpful.

Taking time to reflect on the difference you are making through your work (even the small wins) can really help when things are difficult. The change we are making may not always be obvious or immediate, but we can be confident that we are making a contribution which will help and improve things for others. Positive feedback is important in feeling a sense of achievement, and seeking this from others can help. Giving positive feedback to others can also make huge difference.

We hope that this resource has been useful for you. Please share with others who may find it helpful. We would like to thank the guests who contributed to the You First podcast and whose knowledge and suggestions have supported the development of this document.