

Latest developments related to the Mental Health Strategy

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You will recall that in December last year we sent a [FICSA Communication \(37/19\)](#) to update you on the status of the UN System-wide Strategy on Mental Health and Wellbeing (MH Strategy). Since then, the emergence of COVID-19 across the world has dramatically impacted us in many ways. The virus affects not only physical health, there are also multiple risks to mental health and wellbeing: anxiety related to the unknown, to the risks, working remotely and being socially isolated, as well as fear for family, friends and self. Often UN staff also work away from their usual social supports in challenging environments.

These developments have shifted the focus of work of the MH Strategy Implementation Board from long-term (over five years) to a focus on urgent action to increase the level of support provided and to increase efforts to look after the health and wellbeing of staff. Although the overall MH Strategy remains the same, how activities are prioritised will change in order to ensure the provision of resources that can be adapted by UN organisations to address current and emerging mental health and wellbeing issues arising due to the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond. The focus is on actions that both individual staff members and organisations can take.

Some of the immediate actions that will be implemented include those that respond to mental health and wellbeing needs and consequent implications (immediate, short-term, and long-term), including the impact of working from home, dealing with uncertainty and grief, domestic abuse and suicide prevention. We felt that developments in the following areas would be of specific interest to our members:

Changes to the MH website

Information related to maintaining good mental health in the shadow of COVID-19 has been added to the general UN COVID-19 website which is accessible to all UN staff: <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/wellness> At the moment, this site contains basic information for staff on protecting their own mental health as well as tips for managers on how to support the mental health of staff they supervise in the current environment, particularly in the context of working from home. There are also some basic tips on what to do if you feel anxious as well as links to online guided meditation. In the coming days and weeks more information will be added, so please keep checking back.

The regular website on general information related to mental health for staff is also being maintained: <https://www.un.org/en/healthy-workforce/> and contains a lot of complimentary information which is useful in addressing concerns about mental health in general in the workplace.

Psychosocial Support

There is currently, unsurprisingly, an increased demand for Psychosocial Support across the UN System. The MH Implementation Board is exploring options to increase capacity in this area, while continuing to work on where the current gaps are. Some of the options being considered include immediate access to tele-counselling as this is not covered by all organizations' insurance plans at the time of writing and it needs to be urgently addressed. In addition, work is progressing rapidly on the

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completion of a Minimum Services Package in order for the Implementation Board to be in a position to recommend actions that facilitate increasing capacity across all agencies. We will keep you updated on any developments in this regard.

Domestic Abuse

The Secretary General has recently drawn attention to the dramatic increase in domestic abuse around the world due to lockdown situations in many countries. Sadly, UN staff are not immune to this trend. A reference group has been formed to work on this issue and a tab will be added on the website to facilitate access to help and information for all UN staff members.

What next

Some HQ duty stations are considering a staggered return to work approach in the coming weeks. In this regard the Implementation Board is focusing on developing a strong foundation for a post-quarantine period, to ensure staff can transition smoothly when able. This work will consist of the points mentioned above as well as ongoing projects.

Ongoing

Among other areas, work will continue on the development of an implementation advice/guide to organisations; this will be an important tool to ensure

implementation of a comprehensive Mental Health Strategy across all organisations. It is also essential that managers and leaders have the knowledge and skills to respond to current and emerging needs. Work started in this area will continue to be built on. You can refer to the [Mental Health website](#) for existing tools in this area. Another key area which cannot be neglected is the work around stigma reduction to ensure that staff with a mental health condition are not discriminated against.

In order not to overburden an already overtaxed system, the Implementation Board will make every effort to ensure that they minimize the duplication of effort across agencies. This has been a guiding principle to date, and efforts in this regard will be reinforced in order to pool and adapt resources that have already been developed and make them accessible to all UN organisations, particularly in the areas of website content, handouts, training, webinars etc.

COVID-19 is a challenge to all of us in so many ways, but it has also provided an opportunity to shine a light on the often-neglected area of staff mental health. Let us use the resources available to us to help us and our colleagues through this difficult time and to help us to build a strong foundation for a workplace which is free from stigma related to mental health and which supports all affected staff. FICSA will continue to follow this project.

