Our learning from COVID-19: 12 Lessons from the South East Health and Wellbeing COVID-19 team and community

Like so many others, the South East Health and Wellbeing COVID-19 Team was set up at pace to support the response to the pandemic. It was made up of individuals from different teams and organisations as well as drawing on a wide community of people within and outside the NHS. Experts and generalists alike worked to support the health and wellbeing of colleagues across the South East, for some this was a new role but for all of us this was a new environment.

One aspect that has been specific to this programme and team was that our remit was explicitly 'to support others in supporting others'. We worked to the principle that 'reflexive teams are effective teams'. In doing so we recognised the importance of maintaining reflective practice to enable us to be as productive, responsive and effective as possible. Never before have we had an opportunity of such significant change in such a short period to remind us of so many leadership lessons.

Here we outline twelve learning themes that emerged within our 'internal' team as well as our wider 'network' team. This was done through focused meetings in June 2020 that helped us consider how we have grown and developed through COVID-19 and to inform the way we go forward.

Lessons from the team and our community

How easy it is to be busy

One of the initial reactions we saw both in ourselves and through our wide networks in the early stages of response and throughout as it continued, was the urge to get busy. This came from a very positive and helpful intention to support people and benefit others, but it also often tripped us up. People would try to squeeze in calls at difficult times, work excessive hours and often duplicate work others were doing. Working with psychologists helped us recognise this as an emotional response, going into 'action mode' and where we did not see adequate action it led to feelings of guilt and shame. Seeing leaders stepping out of this mode consciously actually led to *more* productivity and resilience. People did this through intentional time out and strengthening boundaries, enabling improved work-life balance and emotional resilience. We have recognised that as programmes and services are re-launched, the 'busyness' kicks back in and it takes real discipline to maintain a level of 'space' to avoid reacting instead of carefully responding.

Time to think and reflect

Many highlighted the importance of reflection, time to develop innovative solutions and to share successes and learning either within their team or outside. A big factor in this has been to not just share what is happening and what people are thinking, but also how they are feeling and concerns they have. We often have a tendency to share plans, updates and tasks but in working within teams sharing our anxieties, conflicts and values has shown vulnerability and humanity which have reminded us why we come to work. At times where we have been most busy, this time to think has been even more important and more missed when it hasn't happened. Many of our network also shared what they had learned about themselves personally during this time – identifying behaviours and activities they want to stop or continue on a personal level, recognising the benefits to their teams as well as themselves. Where colleagues have passed away, the importance of taking time to reflect together as well as individually was emphasised as beneficial. Using memory trees and faith conversations were shared as examples of different ways of coming together.

Balancing clarity of task with your values

In the first stage of the pandemic there was so much uncertainty - confusion about which tasks were highest priority, what would be paused or continued and where our resources and people would be deployed. Many people were working across multiple programmes and work-areas often spanning directorate and organisational boundaries. Teams that had a very clear purpose were able to mobilise more quickly and while job titles or descriptions did not exist people were able to share tasks, prioritise and delegate effectively. This meant we were able to achieve more in shorter timescales than expected. The flipside of this meant we often fell into a trap of purely 'task-focused' conversations which were pacey and after a longer period became depleting. Awareness of this in our and others' teams meant balancing a fast-paced task-focused style with returning to original principles and values and reassessing priorities as well as making time for personal connections.

Maintaining positivity while recognising the struggle

Having a team that get on well personally has been vital and a barometer for our team's wellbeing has been the level of positivity and humour in our conversations. At periods, like in any team, this dipped and at times turned into painted smiles, hunched shoulders and determination to get the job done. At these points, a member of the team raised the awareness of others by highlighting the struggle and enabled others to identify ways we could re-prioritise, pitch in to help each other and improve our wellbeing. This helped us feel more connected, supported and part of a team.

Pace is addictive

Many people related that working at speed leads to an adrenaline rush that can be hard to beat, but that it isn't sustainable longer term without balancing down-time. Working with partners in the military we heard repeatedly the importance of decompression time, de-briefing and good communication. We noticed as people became depleted the pace felt the same, even when the level of productivity was not as great. Many also noted the motivation that came from tangible achievements and immediate feedback and benefits. Regular rhythms such as routines, meetings and deadlines helped many members. Others fed back that taking time off isn't a luxury but is part of serving our community.

Technology as an enabler or obstacle

The virtual working environment has been both made and broken through technology. At times work has been easier than before, with many of us appreciating the chance to connect from our homes. At other times, we have been surprised at the seemingly disproportionate level of negative impact IT problems have had on our emotional wellbeing. Technology has been a mirror of our working world, bringing up issues around autonomy, self-agency, bureaucracy and collaboration. Learning new technological skills has led to renewed confidence and embracing virtual working for the long term. Being in peoples' homes has led to a more holistic view of our colleagues which has helped significantly in pushing forward the wellbeing agenda. However, being 'zoomed out' has been a major factor in maintaining productivity and many have reflected that having no travel between meetings has led to a lack of space between them. Some related building in short breaks between calls, scheduling exercise sessions through the day and other forms of flexible working.

The importance of flexibility and boundaries

When asked about what people valued from lockdown, flexible working practices was perhaps one of the most commonly related positive aspects. Whether people stated they would never go back to 9-5 office environments, enjoyed greater autonomy over their time, appreciated less travel or being able to join an exercise class during work time – most referred to it in some way. We have seen reduction in formality in meetings often with family members and pets having cameos. While almost all have missed face-to-face interactions, we would hazard that some level of increased flexible working and reduction in 'presenteeism' are inevitable post-COVID. We have seen many inside and outside our team and network also struggle with boundaries. People have shared innovative

solutions to avoid the temptation to work longer hours or blend work and home-time too much. Some used badges, mugs, workspaces and other things to signal to themselves when they were 'off'.

True connection for the team

Members shared that time with their team, profound compassion and a sense of connection is what kept many people going. People valued different versions of social time together to just connect in a non-task focused way. This was also valued for pseudo-teams and networks, like the SE HWB C19 network. Many shared that having a supportive, like-minded group that encouraged reflection, was approachable, encouraging and informative was refreshing, motivating and energising. Many said that connecting with their teams and others regularly in a non-task focused way is one of the main things they will maintain going forward. For some this was a formal session and others a more social setup.

Appraisals and feedback

Feedback has been another aspect that has grown during COVID. Some said that formal appraisals were unrealistic or undesirable during this period and opted for more frequent, shorter sessions, or check-ins, to give people more real-time feedback in a way that promotes better motivation and awareness. Others said appraisals were even more of a priority during this period, which perhaps highlighted the variation in practice and experience of them. Many have developed new simplified models and ones which incorporate health and wellbeing into the conversation.

Keeping health and wellbeing as a priority

For many, health and wellbeing has been more of a priority over the last few months than ever before, both professionally and personally. Boundaries have been tested and strengthened. A fundamental principle we came back to repeatedly was that wellbeing was not an optional extra and needed to be taken seriously by everyone individually and collectively. Many reflected that this is a change we would like to see made permanent. Some are developing formal measures and leadership roles to ensure the organisation keeps an eye on this, others are putting in place informal practices and engaging people through values and faith-based approaches. For many, personal attention to their own wellbeing (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual) has been a positive outcome of COVID and one that people want to continue – exercise, hobbies and family time have all been popular as well as the use of apps and meditation.

Our roles as role-models

Many people fed back their learning through COVID has been to talk about what has helped them personally with intention to help team members do the same. Taking time out regularly featured often, as well as paying attention to physical and mental and emotional wellbeing. As a team we were very conscious of practicing what we preached, spending a lot of time focused on best-practice often made us question our own ways of working. Individuals in the team regularly shared ways they were adapting their working styles to find better ways whether that was flexing the hours they worked, sharing their learning and difficulties and just listening. Compassionate leadership practices also featured heavily in network members' reflections – taking time to ask how people really were, using appreciative inquiry approaches, asking what they could do to help and making time to laugh with colleagues through quizzes, dances and humour.

What was normal anyway?

On considering what we will take forward into our 'normal' jobs we have recognised that everything about our previous work and roles needs to be reviewed post-COVID. How and where we work, who we engage and what our priorities are – the problems we are working to solve have shifted. There is still much concern around further peaks in infection rates and service pressures as well as the

impact on people's mental and emotional wellbeing being longer lasting. As such the health and wellbeing of our colleagues – near and far is a much higher priority for all of us that it ever has been before. For many this has been an opportunity to forge new relationships, enable better collaboration and connections and reassess the underlying problems. Simply returning to things as they were is not an option.

What has been your learning from COVID-19? Why not use [this template](#) to capture your reflections and the changes you want to make? (link to reflection template)