Note on Mental Health & Wellbeing response to Covid-19

Introduction:

The outbreak of COVID 19 throughout the world is a source of significant stress, anxiety, worry and fear for many people. This arises from the disease itself, as well as from impacts such as increased social isolation, disruption to daily life and uncertainty about employment and financial security.

The World Health Organization has acknowledged that this time of crisis is generating stress in the population and published a short document on ‘Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations during Covid-19 Outbreak’ on 12 March 2020. [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf]

The WHO document sets out some key considerations on the general population approach (reducing stigma, importance of getting information from trusted sources, getting involved in community support efforts), as well as specific considerations for healthcare workers and managers, children, older and vulnerable adults, and those in isolation or quarantine.

The Government Action Plan in response to Covid-19, published on 16 March 2020, acknowledges the importance of people maintaining their wellbeing and resilience to push through this unprecedented outbreak.

National Response:

There are existing HSE guidelines, published in 2014, on ‘Psychosocial and Mental Health Needs following Major Emergencies’.[2]

The guidelines recognise that prior to, during and following national emergencies there would be a need to support certain members of the population with their emotional, cognitive, social and physical needs. In the current context, the HSE is considering drafting additional guidelines on specific themes that may augment the current guidelines.

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2 [https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/mentalhealth/emer.pdf]
In line with the WHO considerations, and the existing HSE guidelines, the Department of Health and HSE proposes a continuum of supports and a ‘stepped care’ approach to support the mental health and wellbeing needs of the population during the COVID 19 outbreak.

These include:

1. A whole-population approach to raise awareness and promote mental health and wellbeing
2. Provision of online life skills supports for frontline health professionals
3. Provision of additional online counselling interventions for staff and/or members of the public
4. Provision of online supports for individuals with new/existing complex mental health needs

1. A whole-population approach to support and promote mental health and wellbeing

Under the Government Action Plan, ‘Actions for Everyone’ includes the adoption of behaviours to interrupt virus transmission (hand washing, respiratory hygiene, social and physical distancing), as well as actions to build solidarity and community support networks. These include people being aware of ways to look after their own and others’ mental wellbeing and resilience and accessing advice and supports from the HSE and other trusted mental health service providers.

Taking steps to protect and maintain mental health builds resilience so that people can adapt to challenges and adversity, and maintain a positive sense of well-being and self-worth, combined with a sense of control and self-efficacy.

There are a range of existing mental health and wellbeing supports available to the public, providing information and resources to raise awareness of the various protective factors, and enable them to practise these protective behaviours, for example via the HSE’s Your Mental Health website, Healthy Ireland programme, and mental health promotion NGOs and initiatives.

A primary protective factor consistently recognised in both research and evidence-based practice is that of social supports. The availability and utility of social supports buffer the effects of stress and can reduce the prevalence of distress and psychological symptoms, including depression and anxiety.

Therefore, the first stage response is a ‘whole of society strategy’ that responds proportionately and flexibly to the needs of the population and promotes a sense of safety and calm by providing
positive messaging, self-help advice and signposting people to services where possible to seek additional advice and support.

This strategy should also incorporate the range of mental wellbeing protective factors, such as physical activity, healthy daily routines, creative activity, etc as well as a focus on helping people cope with the constraints on daily life, and the additional stress from self-isolation and quarantine due to a case of the disease.

**New Covid-19 Mental Wellbeing initiative:**

The Department of Health (led by Healthy Ireland team) and the HSE, in collaboration with key cross-Government and cross-sectoral partners, have been developing a new mental wellbeing campaign. This campaign will offer support and resources to help deal with the stress, anxiety and isolation currently experienced by many people.

The campaign, which will be hosted on [gov.ie](http://gov.ie), will point people to the HSE’s Your Mental Health supports and resources which include many online and telephone services, as well as providing tips and advice from cross-Government and Healthy Ireland partners on topics such as physical activity, parenting, coping with daily routines, supporting the ‘coccooned’ and getting involved in the community solidarity efforts.

The development of the campaign is being informed by HSE research and experience in mental health promotion, and the market research insights arising from the Department’s Communications strategy. In addition, the NPHET Subgroup on Behavioural Change is undertaking research on wellbeing and resilience to support the ongoing communications work. The campaign is expected to be ready to launch in the coming week.

**HSE mental health:**

The Mental Health Unit and the HSE have established a working group to determine how best to provide additional on-line interventions to assist people with their mental health needs while in isolation. The HSE already delivers and funds a wide range of mental health and psychosocial support services. HSE are planning a range of initiatives and service expansions, including through psychosocial management in each CHO. In addition, NGO’s currently in receipt of funding from HSE are being supported and encouraged to develop updated responses to the COVID 19 outbreak.
The HSE are currently considering how implementation of additional services during COVID 19 should be delivered on a phased basis. This allows for a considered response to issues as they emerge. These will be detailed in a further paper.

In collaboration with the Mental Health Unit, HSE Mental Health Services have been providing various online digital services for over two years and it is noted that online health interventions are particularly suited to remote access to supports during the COVID 19 outbreak. A planning group has been established to develop online mental health responses during this crisis led by HSE Mental Health in liaison with HSE Employee Assistance Programme. Additional funding for potential expansion of services is being sought through the Sláintecare integration fund and an application has been submitted to Pobal for approval. The potential for availing of existing funding under the COVID 19 action plan will also be considered.

At present, there is a range of existing services which offer online text and telephone supports to people seeking mental health information and advice. These include: Samaritans; Pieta House; MyMind; Turn2Me; Aware; Crisis Text Ireland; Shine; BeLongTo; LGBT Ireland; Jigsaw; Bodywhys and Childline. The YourMentalHealth.ie website provides a ‘one-stop-shop’ portal for people seeking information, supports and services, including information on accessing urgent help and a mental health text messaging support service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to connect people with trained volunteers.

In addition to these existing services, the HSE, in collaboration with SilverCloud, have developed and commenced roll-out of an online Life Skills module for health care professionals working on the front line during this crisis and there is potential to expand the provision of these online modules to NGOs and to the wider public if required.

The HSE planning group have a strategy in place to expand existing online counselling interventions for staff and/or the wider public if and when required. The ability to create additional online interventions to augment existing services should assist greatly with the mild to moderate mental health needs of the population.

HSE are also planning delivery of additional tele-psychiatry services to support those with complex mental health needs.