

Looking after our mental health in stressful times

The emphasis in our new COVID-19 reality is about looking after our physical health and the massive impacts that the virus is inflicting on our economy. However, we must not forget about the psychological effect of the crisis even on the usually stoic individuals within our industry.

We've seen it in recent years with other traumatic events such as the Canterbury and Kaikoura earthquakes that while the physical damage is relatively easy to understand, it's the anxiety and mental stress that often lingers the longest and is a more complex problem to overcome.

There's no doubt that despite many transport companies operating as essential services during the lockdown, there's still a great deal of stress within the industry over the potential loss of jobs or businesses not making it through. For those carting, organising freight, driving the trucks, and interacting with customers, there's the additional stress that comes with a heightened level of exposure to the virus. There's also the eerie, surreal reality of driving around the country on empty streets, with shops, bars, and cafes closed. You can't underestimate how being a witness to such surrealness impacts your psychological state.

This makes doing everything we can to manage the wellbeing of our people all that more important. The Mental Health Foundation has put out some good advice on how to do this for operators with staff on the frontline:

- **Acknowledge it's hard**

Let your staff know they're doing a great job in difficult, uncertain circumstances. Remind your team of the strengths they already have. Let them know their wellbeing is important and they will be supported through this.

- **Hold regular team check-ins**

It's important to check in with the people you manage regularly and have open, honest communication. Have a meeting at the start of the day/shift and let everyone know the action plan. Allow space and time for questions. Debrief at the end to discuss any concerns.

- **Set up a buddy system**

Identify people within your team who can take on a pastoral care role. Create a buddy system and encourage people to talk to each other about any worries they may have in a safe, informal environment. Ensure people know they can contact helplines like 1737 to speak with a trained counsellor anytime.



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- **Make staff wellbeing a priority**

Role model wellbeing as much as you can by taking regular breaks and doing things to relax and re-centre during your work day. Providing opportunities for people to actively boost their wellbeing will have huge benefits to staff morale.

In our industry, we often aren't very good at expressing our feelings, but ask your colleagues and employees about how they are getting on and don't just take 'good' or 'fine' as an answer. Understand their situation and see if there are things about their work that are affecting them. Discuss their route, the toilets, rest areas, and food joints available to them, their interactions with customers, any fatigue or hygiene issues, and find out if there's anything you can do to alleviate issues they are having.

Another tip I'd give to operators is to help your drivers limit the amount of news they are listening to. News recently is of a fairly depressing nature and with only the virus to report on; it's pretty repetitive. Encourage your drivers to listen to podcasts and music instead. In fact, a good team-building exercise can be to encourage your drivers to share their favourite podcasts and what they like about them, a bit like a book club.

Above all, remember to be kind to each other and let's be thankful for what we do have—a beautiful country, strong caring communities, and an industry that is, once again, carrying the country on its back.

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