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Six expert tips for managing lockdown stress

When Covid lockdown hit last year, Spark realised it needed a whole new response around mental health and wellbeing. Part of that was working with outside experts on a range of responses to help staff. In the second in a two-part series, psychotherapist Amanda Maoate offers six practical tips for looking after your mental health and wellbeing – and that of your employees | Content partnership

Tip 1: Start with yourself. Check in, and be kind

When Heather Polglase, human resources director for Spark, New Zealand's largest telecommunications and digital services company, found herself in the thick of dealing with the wide-ranging mental health and wellbeing ramifications of a Covid-19 pandemic lockdown on the company's 5000 staff - all within six months of taking on the new role – her first instincts were to support everyone else.

After all, that's what the head of the HR team is there for.

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But as the days went on, Polglase realised she was doing it tough too. A step-up role, pandemic uncertainties, worry about her locked-down mum, and trying to combine a super-busy job with being mum to a three-year-old who couldn't go to daycare.

She needed, as the clichéd metaphor goes, to put on her own oxygen mask at least at the same time as helping others.



Spark's HR director Heather Polglase had a tough new job - and a three-year-old daughter at home. Photo: Supplied

And that's a lesson many of us need to learn, says Amanda Maoate, executive coach and registered psychotherapist working with Spark on its new mental health and wellbeing strategy.

"There's a strong theme of people being hard on themselves during the pandemic," Maoate says. It might take the shape of feeling bad because you aren't as productive as you normally are, or because you are tired or unmotivated. It might be worrying about not sleeping well, or drinking one too many glasses of wine at night. Or it might just be forgetting to think about your needs at all.

"People need to get a lot better at checking in on themselves," she says. "Ask yourself 'How am I going?' and if that means you have to take a day off to refuel, then do it.

"We have to learn that when we live in uncertain times, stress levels go up and our brain does not function the same way it normally does. But that doesn't mean it's always going to be like this."

So how do we change our own state of mind? How do we become more comfortable with the uncertainty?

Maoate suggests people conduct a regular stocktake of their own wellbeing. “Think: 'How am I feeling today?' And then step back from it and acknowledge how you are.

“You might realise, ‘I am under the weather today’, so then you can have a bit of a plan around what you need.”

It might be as easy as having two coffees instead of one, or having a chat to your mum or a good friend, or you might need a bit more formal or structured intervention.

Maoate says it's easy to think that a brisk walk or a healthy meal is the answer, but that's only part of the picture.

“I think with wellbeing, that people are getting better at recognising the important part that nutrition and exercise play. But there’s a whole other part to wellbeing which is the psychology and the neurology around it – asking ourselves how we are feeling and being able to tap into that is a good first step.



Amanda Maoate recommends a regular stocktake of your mental health and wellbeing. Photo: Supplied

“It’s about really dialling up the connection between how we perform and the brain science behind our performance.”

Listening to your feelings, and implementing strategies around how you feel is important, Maoate says. And at the very least, be kind to yourself.

Tip 2: Find out what's going on for others

Whether you are the owner of a small business or a manager at a big corporate organisation, you need to start having wellbeing conversations - or identifying the people within your organisation who can have those conversations, Maoate says.

Companies need to get beyond the 'How are you doing?' 'I'm okay' type exchange, particularly if they have concerns about people in their team.

"Start being curious. You might say, for example, 'Hey we realise things are really tough at the moment, so I want to find out what's going on for you. Do you have support people, or are you aware of what support is available?' It's about reaching out and offering some possibilities and pathways."

And then it's important to follow up. "You might say, 'I'd really like to catch up again next week to see where you've got to'. Or, for example, if you find out they are struggling and you discuss them going to see their GP, you might say, 'Cool, How about we talk again after that, see how it went?'"

Tip 3: Bad sleep matters

Sleep is a huge problem for a lot of people at the moment, Maoate says. It might be finding it hard to get to sleep, waking up often at night, or having weird dreams.

Sleep is often a symptom of a bigger picture, but the issue has been exacerbated over the last few months by the fact that for many people, office and bedroom are the same place these days.

Still, there are tools and strategies that can help, Maoate says, particularly around developing a nightly bedtime routine.

"It's about dealing with the underlying stuff, but it's also about rewiring and retraining your brain so when you go into your room, your brain isn't confused about what the room is for. And it's about creating regular times for sleeping and waking up, and a routine - it could be a shower and pyjamas and a chamomile tea and blackout curtains, whatever works."

Tip 4: Feeling unmotivated is normal

Maoate says tiredness and lack of motivation can sometimes have nothing to do with the amount of sleep you are getting. "We've been in a long race and it's uncertain when that race is going to end, and that's tiring."

One piece of advice is to concentrate your energy on the things you have control over and try to ignore the things which you can't do anything about.

“I talk to a lot of people who are moaning and groaning about things that are completely out of their control - such as the decisions the Government is making. Look at those times where you get angry or upset, stop and identify which category they are in, and refocus your attention in on areas where you have some control. That might be how you spend your spare time, or who you spend that time with.”

Tip 5: Create structure – at home and in the team

Maoate gets up early, walks the dog, has breakfast, does some yoga, takes a shower and then starts work. It creates a structure in her day, and gives her a feeling of control, she says.

“I would suggest, if people are feeling a bit low, anxiety is rising, things are going a bit pear-shaped, they should look at introducing more routine and structure into their day. It can help relieve some of the anxiety.”

Managers can implement a philosophy at work, she says.

“You might say, ‘Every day we are meeting at 8.30am, and then every Friday we are going to have a shared virtual lunch and everyone gets a turn to choose what the theme is.’

“You can create some sense of predictability within a workday and within your week.”

Tip 6: Activate your brain

Maoate is advising people she talks to to set aside a bite-sized portion of their day to learn something new. “It’s invigorating and energising to identify something you’ve been curious or passionate about and then you can set, say, 20 minutes of your day aside to learn about it.

“It might be that you’ve heard of Bitcoin but didn’t know how it worked, so go for it. Typically, when I talk to someone about what they are learning, their face will light up and you can see the area that gives them energy and makes them smile.”

Spark is a foundation supporter of [Newsroom.co.nz](https://www.newsroom.co.nz). Amanda Maoate is an executive coach and registered psychotherapist with [humansoftware](https://www.humansoftware.co.nz)