Organisational Wellbeing and Containment of Anxiety During the Covid Pandemic

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The Mental Health Trust and It’s Staff

- The wellbeing and functioning of staff depends upon the wellbeing and functioning of the organisation, and vice versa.
- The organisation can influence the emotional impact of the pandemic upon staff and their experiences and functioning at work.
- We, the staff, are the organisation and our actions and attitudes shape the culture of the workplace and the functioning of the organisation.
- Working in mental health is a complex task which elicits anxiety.
- A key task of the mental health trust is containment of anxiety and distress which means recognising its effects and being able to think under pressure.

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Containment and Mental Health Care

- Emotional, psychological and physical containment of anxiety and distress is a key part of patient care.
- Staff also need to be contained in order to process anxiety and other projections and to maintain the ability to think.
- Bion—"Container – Contained”
- Supervision, case discussions, reflective practice, informal and formal meetings and contacts with colleagues mean containment is embedded in the fabric of the MHT.
- Offered in a hierarchical multi-layered way so staff can perform their different roles, with escalation for further containment when needed and processed advice returned to front line staff.

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The “Covid Mindset”; The Unique Nature of the Anxiety

- No blueprint or recent experience to draw upon
- Helplessness, loss of control, lack of certainty compound anxiety
- Fears about survival and threat to life stir primitive levels of anxiety
- Contact with patients, colleagues and loved ones are potential sources of danger and we have become potential vectors for viral spread which isolates us
- Increased disturbance in patients-increased pressures to containment
- Loss of usual colleagues and team structures through illness, death, self-isolation, shielding and redeployment
- Virus pervades all areas of our lives. Contagion of anxiety. Limited respite when away from work. Excessive fatigue. Dreams.
- Psychic lockdown-place of constriction and restriction
- Effects may vary or be covert, but a universal experience. None of us are exempt.

Dr Jo O'Reilly
“Fight- Flight” Mode of Functioning

- Necessary for survival when under extreme threat
- Leads to action and reaction
- Excessive anxiety paralyses thinking
- Can be difficult to move out of
- The ability of the organisation to manage anxiety and to contain staff has never been more important
1. “Covid mindset” permeates every level of the organisation and challenges the ability to think. Establish a culture and routine activities to address this, eg buddy schemes. Normalise anxiety and distress as entirely understandable responses. Identify particular stressors in yourselves and colleagues and put in place supportive structures.

2. Increased use of defences against anxiety may become problematic. Omnipotence and denial place staff at increased risk when none of us are invincible, and need to follow guidelines, take leave etc. Projection and splitting place feelings of inadequacy and helplessness in others and can create division between teams and colleagues. Eg terms such as “non-essential” services

3. Recognise the urge to take action may be a response to anxiety. Immediate and precipitate action may create further difficulties in the longer term. Run decisions by colleagues, pause when things seem urgent, consider emails as potential projections
4. **Maximise the stability of the organisation as much as possible.** Adapt rather than suspend activities and services including educational activities.

5. **Increased anxiety needs increased space to process it.** Maintain and increase opportunities for thinking at every level. Build upon existing spaces to think about the work, to share dilemmas and experiences throughout the organisation. Reflective practice, Balint groups, case discussion, staff huddles.

6. **Maintain differentiation of staff roles as much as possible.** Acknowledge some staff are exposed to increased risk and attend to their specific needs accordingly. Address guilt in staff at lower risk and support dialogue between the groups to decrease splitting.
7. **Attitude of the leadership is crucial to containment and culture.**

Projective processes may pressure for certainty and reassurance it cannot give, and staff may lose their own agency and ability to contribute if they project this into the leadership. We are all learning as we go along and have a role to play.

**Communication is key** in both content and tone - daily staff bulletins provide regular and open channels of communication showing decisions informed by staff feedback, recognise that staff have some agency and control, sharing dilemmas, encouraging input leads to creative solutions emerging from all staff. Modelling an attitude of **curiosity, avoiding blame and learning** when things go wrong.

Actions which may increase anxiety include overly positive messages which ignore difficulties, making permanent changes restructures during the pandemic, lack of staff input into redeployment decisions.
8. **Prioritise team and colleague relationships.** Supervision, team meetings and building, induction for redeployed staff, new training.

9. **Triggers and Blindspots;** Fear and threat trigger reactions based upon previous experiences of trauma and loss. Encourage all staff and teams to be mindful of their internal states and history and to seek support when needed.

10. **Pre-existing faultlines and tensions may be intensified** Be kind to one another. Functioning during a crisis calls for unity.
Recovery and Repair .....  

- Requires opportunities to process experiences and this should be negotiated with teams.
- If not addressed challenging and traumatic experiences are likely to continue to exert their effects within the organisation.
- Loss and mourning for the workplace as being able to provide certainty and to protect it’s staff will need to be openly worked through as grievance can inhibit psychological recovery.
- Splits to heal within and between teams. Not all staff have been equally affected. Need for dialogue and all staff—and importantly those shielding at home—encouraged to participate.
- Address the positive without becoming overly positive.
- Support staff with data to move from fight-flight mode whilst acknowledging some anxiety and uncertainty remains. Lifting of restrictions also increases anxiety.
- New learning, adapted ways of working, creativity and increased staff bonding have also emerged and are important to acknowledge as the organisation continues to learn about itself and to develop.