

Coronavirus: coping with the new normal

8 April 2020

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Acas Chief Executive Susan Clews has worked in Acas frontline operations and as Director of Strategy and Chief Operations Officer.

There are currently over 5,000 people ringing the Acas helpline every day. They call to get help answering questions about redundancy, sick pay, holiday, working at home, trying to save a business, looking after children or those who need care. The list is long and varied. The very fabric of our working and personal lives has changed dramatically, and people want to know what happens now?

First, we need to get the nuts and bolts of working and home life right where we can. That means establishing our rights and responsibilities, as individuals, managers and employers, and trying to get some sort of routine up and running. But beyond the practical needs we all have, it is not surprising that our helpline advisers are picking up on a great deal of underlying stress and anxiety associated with what has very quickly become the new normal way of life.

This new normal presents us with some difficult challenges relating to how we:

Cope

I know from talking to colleagues in Acas that a lot of energy is taken up worrying about things none of us would have given a second thought to only a few weeks ago: like getting the food and medicine we need and keeping in touch with family and friends. Let's remember to be patient with each other as we scale these challenges.

Communicate

We have faced, but overcome, a huge logistical challenge in Acas, kitting our staff out so they can work from home. Homeworking on such a mass scale requires flexibility and understanding, as many people will have children or pets very close at hand! This can feel awkward at times, but it is something we need to embrace for the foreseeable future.

Keep healthy and well

Coronavirus is a crisis for our mental as much as our physical health. What heartens me is that people are being very creative in finding their own coping strategies and reaching out to support others. It feels like a very organic thing, with virtual groups being set up for exercising, learning or just chatting.

Stay productive and engaged

So many people have commented on the difficulty they have with the new ways of working. Structure is what we crave but we have to accept this will take time to emerge. But we know that setting new routines and managing boundaries in working at home can help. In

the meantime, let's celebrate every milestone at work, however small.

As managers and leaders, we are often expected to have all the answers. But this simply isn't possible, and it is okay to acknowledge that. We are being challenged to think outside the parameters of how we normally function. It would be very easy to try and replicate what we are used to – for example, replacing a day of face-to-face meetings with a day of Skype meetings. But I have a hunch that we may discover better, smarter ways of working as a result of the current crisis.

If I had to express in one word what has most moved me in recent weeks, it would be 'spontaneity' – in the way colleagues have offered to help without having to be asked. Who knows, we may even come out the other side with some valuable lessons learnt and a new approach to what we prioritise in work and life.