

Interview with



Our Marketing Manager Franki had a chat with West Kent Mind's Business Development Officer Lorna, to discuss the challenges we are facing as a result of COVID-19.

They talked about stresses you might be feeling, ways to manage those stresses and also where you can find help if you need some support during this time. They also touched on how businesses can support their employees who might be used to working in an office environment, and are now juggling home/family/work life all under one roof.

Hi Lorna!

West Kent Mind are experts when it comes to mental health, so thank you for chatting with me. We are living in uncertain times and I just wondered what your general thoughts were on the situation we are living in currently...

We are living in unprecedented times and everyone is facing new challenges in all areas of life. We are, as a country, adjusting how we work, we are home schooling, we have increased financial pressures and increased social isolation. It is a time of increased uncertainty and anxiety for people. While the media is amazing in lots of ways, there is a lot of content and advice out there, which can be quite overwhelming.

Our main message would be that nobody is alone in this. We are all in this together and can support each other but it is about finding what works for you because there is no "one size fits all" way to navigate through this.

As a charity, we have had to work really fast to ensure that we are still able to provide our clients with the support that is vital for the maintenance of their mental health. This has understandably resulted in increased anxiety and stress so ensuring we are able to support our clients has really been our main focus so far and this has been different for everyone.

Our duty line remains open and our hello@westkentmind.co.uk e-mail

is still active so people can contact us and are doing so.

We are in a period of adjustment and I think people are kind of living in a bit of a lag and it is when the reality sets in that people will start to need support.

Nobody knows. Who knows? We haven't been given any updates since the lockdown started so I think we've just got that uncertainty there, haven't we?

The uncertainty is one thing. Taking it one day, one week at a time is actually quite a healthy way to deal with it. You need to think ok, today this is what we do; this week, this is what we do and get through it that way because it is very difficult to have no certainty about when things will go back to "normal" and feel ok about it.

This pandemic isn't just affecting people who already live with mental ill health. It affects everyone. It is more vital than ever that we all practise self-care and really look after ourselves.

Self-care is such a popular topic of conversation at the moment and everyone interprets it in different ways but in a situation like this, what is self-care and how can people practise self-care at home?

The first thing to say that is when we talk about mental health people assume we are talking about mental ill health and we're not. Everyone has mental health and it's on a continuum and you can move around that

continuum on a daily basis.

Take time each day to do something that gives you enjoyment and pleasure. Don't be too hard on yourself - this is not a time to strive for perfection or set yourself unrealistic goals. It is a time to take a bit of pressure off yourself and look after yourself without feeling guilty about it.

We are all at home and we don't have a routine we usually would have in a normal working day or week, so it's about trying to build a new routine that works for you because structure and routine is actually really important.

So how can we implement some structure into our days without putting too much pressure on ourselves to do everything?

Simple things, such as setting your alarm for the same time every day. Get up at the same time as you would if you were going to work because it's an easy trap to fall into. You can say "Oh, I'll have a lie in today" and then the next day you have another lie in and then before you know it, a week has gone past and you've been in your PJ's till midday. It's so easy to slip into unhealthy habits.

Setting boundaries and communication are key factors in keeping ourselves mentally healthy. Just a bit of structure. You don't have to set yourself mammoth challenges or tasks. You could just say to yourself that every day I will get up at the same time and build structure that way.

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We are all in situations that we may not feel comfortable with but we must respect our own need for space and self-care, while also recognising the needs of others around us. It is a time to be a bit easier on each other. Take some time out. That could be sitting in another room reading a book, going for a walk round the block on your own, or it could be having a bath. It's about taking the time out and allowing that for other people, too.

Taking a bit of time each day to focus on ourselves may seem impossible with a house full of people but it shouldn't feel self-indulgent, instead viewed as essential. You might want to do meditation or mindfulness but, equally, it could be something as simple as sitting in the quiet with a cup of tea and a book or going for a walk. It doesn't matter what it is, just as long as it's time for you.

Would you say this could work for a two-parent households then? To have that communication and allow each other to have time on their own?

Definitely. That's something that we even have in my own house- almost like a timetable when we have scheduled "me" time. It is about finding what works for your situation that provides a bit of stability and balance and remembering that actually it's ok to loosen the reins slightly at the moment. We might find that we are doing things that we maybe usually wouldn't allow or usually wouldn't do, for example giving your children extra iPad time or to use FaceTime, but these are exceptional times and we can readjust when this is over.

Parents that feel like they have now been given the role of a teacher while still having to do their job as well, how can they juggle all of these different roles under one roof?

When you say we have been given a role as a teacher, actually we haven't.

We haven't chosen to home-school our children. This is an emergency situation and we just need to keep our children happy, healthy and engaged. Every child is different and so will react to this situation differently. There are some who are super keen and eager and will sit and do all of the work and then there will be others who won't even pick up a pencil.

This is not a time for having a family feud and that is the last thing your school would want. We aren't home-schooling our children, we are supporting them through a time which is actually really unsettling for them as well. There's an increased sense of anxiety amongst children and so our role as parents is to do what we can, when we can, without putting too much pressure on yourself or your children. At worst, it is a couple of months out of school and everyone is in the same boat.

Obviously the age of your children will have a bearing on what you do with them but, in general, keep them focused on the core subjects and any other areas that your children respond to well. Some schools are sending out lots of work, other schools send out hardly any so it's about finding a balance that works for you and your family. Try not to make an area of contention.

We must also understand it's very hard for the children as well, so it's all a bit of give and take. For most children, school is about seeing friends and playing and this has been taken from them, so they too are adjusting. If it takes a little bit of bribery or learning on technology, then so be it. Just whatever it takes to get us through this.

Children strive of on routine and structure, so ensuring there is focused time each day is important and remember that and they can be learning in different ways too. They can be out in the garden planting

things or learning to cook. There are so many other life skills that they probably don't get a chance to do at school so embrace that side of it, while putting some structure around it.

We've been so lucky with the weather so far – touch wood – to be able to go outside in the fresh air. Touching on exercise, is there a good amount of exercise for people to do? And what type of exercise? Or just simply to get active?

Exercise is great, especially in the fresh air because isolation is not just social isolation but it is isolating us from nature as well which plays a big part in our mental well-being.

In terms of what type of exercise, it doesn't really matter, as long as you can do something for 30 minutes a day to get the blood pumping around your body. If you are able to combine this exercise with fresh air, then even better. If you can't get outside, just do something that gets you moving. Have a dance around your living room, do some spring cleaning, pop on an exercise DVD...

We all know how it feels to force ourselves to do a workout we really don't want to do but then actually feel pretty good afterwards and it's also a self a sense of achievement too.

Exercise can also give you that connection too. If you go for a walk, don't look down, look up and see the people around you and take notice of the world. You can't stop and hug them but smile and say hi. That is social connection and it can really lift your mood.

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They do say a smile is contagious don't they? So if you see someone on a walk, give them a smile and then it might make their day a little bit better.

We've got a sign up on my son's room and it says "smile, and the world smiles with you" and I really believe in the power of human connection.

If anything, this period of lockdown is reinforcing how important community and social connection are. It is harder if you are living at home on your own, but then it goes back to finding ways that work for you to make you feel that you have a sense of purpose in your day.

We often base a lot of our work around the principles of the 6 ways to well-being www.wheelofwellbeing.org

These are:

1. connect
2. be active
3. take notice
4. give
5. learn
6. care for the planet.

They are evidence-based things that are proven to reduce our risk of depression, lighten our mood and just make us happier. They work and are so easy to put into our day. Due to the situation we are in now, we might need to adapt the way we do these things they are still so possible. We would urge people to take a look at these and try to incorporate them into your day.

Those who are living at home, with little social contact, what would you would advise them as they are alone and really probably feeling that self-isolation as such?

We mentioned technology and so try to make face-to-face connection as much as possible or at least to hear someone's voice. Texts and emails are great but they aren't quite the same so pick up your phone to hear someone's

voice or have a video call.

As we said, go for walks and make sure you take notice of the people around you. Maybe for those who are older and in isolation, just watching your favourite daytime TV show is a sense of social connection too. There's a sense that we aren't alone in this and the feeling will pass, it's not forever.

You can focus on that this a point in time where we need to adjust and that this is only temporary.

Another thing is learn something. Keep your minds active. Even if it's just reading a book, watching a documentary on a subject you have always been interest in, or e-learning.

On the flip side, remember your boundaries, don't watch BBC News 24/7 if it makes you feel overwhelmed or anxious. Watch it only once a day and really take care of yourself, know what your trigger points are for feeling low and try to avoid them.

Now we are forced at home, we are responsible for everything we do and don't have any external factors to blame anything on. How can we control that self-discipline? Whether that's around food or, like you said, watching the news etc.? How can we manage these?

It's a tough one isn't it? It is so easy to reach for the biscuit tin and that second glass of wine. It's about healthy boundaries and reminding yourself that actually when this is all over, you need to emerge out the other side healthy, fit, well, motivated. It's about balance because it's not a time to strive for perfection either.

It is so important that we ask how each other are and that we're honest with each other too. You are much more likely to open up if somebody asks you how you are, or if you ask someone how they are, to have it reciprocated.

Don't sugar-coat how you are feeling because we are all struggling, so have an open and honest dialogue and get the support where you need it.

And say you are struggling with over eating or you're finding yourself still eating lunch in your pyjamas, ask for help. There's no shame in that and, instead shows strength. There is so much support out there and we're calling on our friends, family and our community even more so than we ever have.

How can people spark up conversations with people that don't suffer with mental ill health and so might not 100% understand your anxieties?

For a start, as we discussed earlier, we all have mental health and have experienced physical manifestations of worry or nerves, so we can all relate.

I think we are all becoming a lot better at talking and listening. You know within your network the people that will understand and so choose who you talk to. We all need to show empathy.

It is not about saying "oh well when that happened to me and I did this...", It is about putting yourself in that person's shoes and really empathizing with what it feels like for them, because you don't know. Even though you may be going through the exactly the same situation, everyone experiences everything differently.

As a society we have to become better at listening and not being judgemental, as well as becoming better at just sitting back and letting someone speak without interjecting or interrupting. A lot of the time just getting it off your chest makes you feel a whole lot better.

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An article that Julie sent over to me which I found really interesting was that 31% of managers feel confident enough to spark up a conversation with their employees about sensitive conversations around mental health. I thought that was such a low percentage, what is happening to the other 69% of managers? Where is that conversation?

People are scared of the answer. If you ask someone how they are and they tell you honestly what is going on for them, what do you do with that? That's where people struggle.

We provide a lot of training around mental health first aid and so when we go into workplaces, we always say that we are not training you to be a mental health professional. We are training you to connect with people, to signpost and to listen. Listening is something people take for granted but it's actually a learned skill.

People also think we are born fixers because when somebody comes to you with a problem you want to fix it. This is a natural human reaction, but in a situation where somebody is struggling, they don't want to be fixed, they just want to be listened to.

Is this something you would recommend to a business right now, to deal with the negative impact COVID-19 is having on people's mental health? For us at Rap, from my personal perspective, I've felt very supported so I worry for those who are in company's who feel that they aren't. What can a business do right now to support their employees through this difficult time?

The main thing is recognising that it is a time for flexibility. It's a time for understanding that everyone is juggling not just work, but so many other commitments in their home life and everyone's situation and home set-up is different.

We are seeing great initiatives from

companies. For example, Friday drinks at 5, team meetings etc, but it's about keeping it at a level where it's not overwhelming. If somebody is trying to fit their actual work around a day while also juggling childcare, it can put too much pressure on that person to join a social chat at 3pm.

Implementing one or two things that are mandatory for people and then having some optional extras available where needed or wanted is ideal. Ensuring that your employees know there is support there and waiting, should they need it.

As a business, it is your responsibility for the well-being of your employees, so even though you aren't in direct contact with them right now, giving different options and allowing flexibility will hopefully make them feel calmer about the situation at hand.

I would also say that any sort of culture change that we see in workplaces around mental health awareness, has to be led from the top. It has to have the buy-in of the top people to show that they can be open and honest about how they are finding it difficult because nobody is immune. When you see people at the top share with their employees that they are struggling too, it opens up the conversation around it and it makes it ok.

It doesn't make the person at the top look weak either it can be quite empowering to see can't it?

It's a sign of strength that you can stand up and say "I'm the boss, but do you know what? I'm not ok with this and these are the kind of things that I'm doing and let me know what you are doing that might help me"

Opening up those channels of communication and have face-to-face contact as much as possible because it's important to hear someone's voice. It's also a time to trust your staff and

let them know you that they should make it work for them. There needs to be a level of trust and flexibility because it can increase your anxiety levels if you think you have to do all of your work in a set amount of time but actually, in your household, it is just not feasible.

Also, remind your staff of any company resources that are available through your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and circulate a list of resources.

What is an Employee Assistance Program?

An EAP is a benefit offered by some employers which gives employees access to confidential counselling and talking therapies to support staff.

Outside of this, there are talking therapies that can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week if someone just need to talk. It doesn't have to have a connection to your workplace, even though an EAP is strictly confidential, like all counselling services. So let your employees know that you're there to support them and what other outside resources are available and where they can access that help.

Some companies are doing weekly sessions for all staff and inviting guest speakers in. This would be a mandatory session for example. It lets everybody know you are taking their mental wellbeing seriously and that is something more and more companies should adopt.

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What kind of stuff do you have for people if they feel like they need to talk to somebody or get help with their mental health?

Our duty line is still open for calls and our website is updated with a list of resources and signposting to talking services.

01732 744950

In terms of community support, this is now all happening via telephone and video conference.

We are also still taking referrals for our affordable counselling service.

For workplaces, we are offering a series of workshops, awareness-raising sessions and training via remote means.

All information about our current services can be found on our website or social media platforms.

www.westkentmind.org.uk



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Thank you so much to Lorna for taking the time to speak with us and offer fantastic advice and support to those who need it during this time.

We would also like to say our telephone line and inboxes are still open for 6 of us in the Rap team so if you would like to have an informal chat with one of us, please don't hesitate as we would love to hear from you.

Thank you to all key workers and all of those staying safe at home.

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West Kent Mind, like all local Mind branches, are facing the biggest challenge in their history as they migrate all of their vital community services to remote platforms in order to continue to provide much needed support to clients and the wider community.

This comes at a time when our revenue streams have largely been stopped. If you would like to support us by donating to our emergency funding appeal, then please visit:

[The West Kent Mind Needs You Just Giving Page](https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/WestKentMindNeedsYou)

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