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[Blog article](#) by Dr Evelyn Collins CBE, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Time to Talk Day

Over the past year we have found ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, not something many of us imagined we would experience in our life time. It has impacted on every aspect of our lives including on jobs, education, social lives and, for many, on our mental health.

Today is 'Time to Talk Day', a time for all of us to talk about mental health and address the stigma often attached to mental ill health. The Equality Commission, along with key partners, developed a **Mental Health Charter** for employers in 2016, to enable employers to demonstrate their commitment to improve the working lives of their employees who are experiencing mental ill-health, to helping them through difficult times.

To date over 200 employers have signed up, from the public, private and third sectors, making public their commitment to address mental ill health in their workplaces, an increasing area of concern facing many employers.

It is the most common cause of absence in the public sector and second most common across the workforce as a whole. It has been identified as a major cause of ill health and disability in Northern Ireland with 1 in 4 adults and 1 in 9 children experiencing mental ill health at some points in their lives.

Covid-19 has added to our stresses and strains. Results of a survey carried out last year by mental health charity [Results of a survey](#) (*pdf*) found that 60% of adults and 68% of young people reported that their mental health had got worse during lockdown.

The [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development](#) has reported that, in relation to mental health specifically, employees reported reduced motivation, loss of purpose and motivation, anxiety and isolation. Symptoms ranged from irritability and anger to depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

We all need to take stock of each other's needs, including our mental health needs, during these unprecedented times. Pre-pandemic worries may now be exacerbated, while new concerns have emerged including job security, returning to the workplace, using public transport, childcare and financial security.

Others worry about contracting the virus, the impact of social restrictions and isolation on family and friends and if life will ever return to normal. For many the novelty of virtual meetings, working from home and home schooling has long since passed. Finding a balance and space for some self-care and mental well-being may appear impossible to many right now.

Mental illness can have a significant, adverse and long-term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. We all know how important health and safety in the workplace is, and everyone needs to start thinking of mental health and well-being in the same way.

It is also important to remember that these worries and anxieties do not only affect certain grades or types of jobs – they can apply to everyone in the workforce, from support staff to senior managers. By addressing and supporting our colleagues who are dealing with mental ill-health we should see improved attendance, decreased costs and increased productivity – a win win for all involved.

There are lots of things we all can do – the Equality Commission and our partners in the Mental Health Charter can help with this. And often it is the small changes that can make the difference – how employees are treated by their line manager and other leaders can make a massive difference to how they feel about themselves and their work. An open culture where managers can have a flexible approach without making assumptions about mental health and take steps to understand an employee's situation can often help too.

More information on the Mental Health Charter and how the Equality Commission can offer advice and guidance to both employers and individuals is available from our website: www.equalityni.org/MentalHealthCharter