A New Reality
living with Covid-19

The pocket guide to returning to the workplace
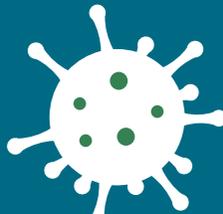
See Change and Mental Health Ireland are delighted to co-produce this guide to support people returning to the workplace after a prolonged period of Covid-19 measures. This has been an unusual and uncertain time for all of us. We hope you find the tips in this guide helpful.

About this Guide

Some of us may have previous experience of mental health challenges prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and for some of us mental health challenges might be new and unfamiliar.

Some of us are returning to work and feeling anxious for the first time in our lives. Others have been managing our mental health since before the pandemic and may find that we are affected in new ways. Some of us may have been working hard to maintain our wellbeing without our usual mental health supports and services. This guide will help you understand anxiety brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, and how you can improve your experience of returning to work. It also includes tips to help you manage your family and home life.

A note of thanks
We want to thank the See Change Ambassadors (these are people who share their personal experience of living with a mental health difficulty) and the Community Based Workers Network in Cavan/Monaghan and the South East for taking part in the survey we used to develop this guide and for their other helpful suggestions.

Contents

About us: See Change

See Change is Ireland's National Mental Health Stigma Reduction Partnership working to change minds about mental health problems in Ireland. We have partnered with over 100 Irish organisations to create a community-driven social movement to end mental health stigma and discrimination.

See Change runs a 6-step workplace programme for workplaces who wish to develop an open culture about mental health and reduce stigma around mental health issues. We also work with over 50 ambassadors (people who share their personal experience of living with a mental health difficulty). In addition, we run the National Green Ribbon Campaign. This is a campaign to help end mental health stigma. You may know it or have seen people wear green ribbons on their lapels.

People with mental health conditions can be challenged by the prejudice and stereotypes that result from misconceptions and misunderstandings about mental health. See Change's vision is that everyone in Ireland can be open and positive about mental health, understanding it as a normal part of the ups and downs of life.

In 2017, we conducted research that showed that 4 in 10 people would hide a mental health difficulty from family, friends or colleagues1. With this in mind, See Change works to reduce mental health stigma across Irish society.

For more information visit: www.seechange.ie

About us: Mental Health Ireland

Mental Health Ireland is a national voluntary organisation whose aim is to promote positive mental health and wellbeing to all individuals and communities in Ireland. Mental Health Ireland's vision is for an Ireland where mental health, wellbeing and recovery are valued as an essential part of the nation's wellbeing and health. MHI leads the way in informing Irish society's understanding of mental health and fostering a culture where people with mental health challengess are respected and supported.

Across the country, Mental Health Ireland works with a network of mental health associations (MHAs). Members of these local associations include volunteers who have a particular interest in mental health. These range from people in the local community, with lived experience of mental health challenges, to family members and carers, and professionals working in the mental health area. Having this broad representation in the MHAs allows a range of projects and initiatives to be developed and implemented in a way that reflects local communities.

The activities Mental Health Ireland and the MHAs are involved in include:
•   supporting and promoting mental health awareness in communities;
•   working with local Mental Health Ireland development officers to deliver workshops on mental health and wellbeing;
•   recovery initiatives such as peer-led day services, Recovery Fairs (mental health promotion events) and Recovery Colleges (learning to help recovery);
•   fundraising and accessing grants to support new initiatives.

For more information visit: www.mentalhealthireland.ie

Stress and Anxiety

We all feel stressed and anxious at some point in our lives, and it is normal to experience stress and anxiety in everyday situations. Stress is a natural reaction to difficult situations in life, such as work, family, relationship and money problems. Some stress can help us to react better in challenging situations, but too much stress or stress over a long time can affect our physical and mental health. This means it is important that we manage our stress and keep it at a healthy level to prevent long-term damage to our bodies and minds.

Stress

Stress is a physical or emotional response to an immediate threat. This threat is called a stressor. For example, a stressor might be an important deadline, a traffic jam or money worries. When faced with a stressor, we can experience an increase in heartrate, sweating, or a feeling of worry or fear. Once we have addressed the stressor or learned tips or tricks to manage it, our physical or emotional state usually returns to normal.

Everyone experiences stress. However, when it is affecting your life, health and wellbeing, it is important to tackle it as soon as possible

Body
Headaches
Frequent infections
Taut Muscles
Muscular Twitches
Breathlessness
Skin Irritations
Fatigue

Emotions
Irritable
More Fussy
Loss of Confidence
Depression
Apprehension
Alienation
Apathy

Mind
Worrying
Muddled Thinking
Impaired
Judgement
Nightmares
Indecision
Hasty Decisions
Negativity

Behaviour
Accident prone
Loss of Appetite
Loss of Sex Drive
Drinking More
Smoking More
Restlesness
Insomnia

If you experience any of these symptoms over a long time, and think they are affecting your everyday life or making you feel unwell, make an appointment to see your GP (doctor). Ask them for information about the support services and treatments available to you.

It can be helpful to recognise how feelings of fear impact us around returning to the workplace and what safety measures we can put in place to overcome those fears. Stress and anxiety feel different for everyone, and bring out different physical and emotional responses in us.

Understanding these things can be helpful in managing anxiety.[3]

Anxiety

The word 'anxiety' tends to be used to describe worry, or fear that is nagging and persists over time. Anxiety is usually associated with a perceived threat of something going wrong in the future. But anxiety can also arise from something happening right now, and from uncertainty. [4]

General feelings of anxiety

The feeling of anxiety can be accompanied by persistent thoughts. Unlike stress, feelings of anxiety can continue even after a concern or event has passed. Anxiety is a normal emotion and we can all feel anxious at times.

Stress is a common trigger for anxiety. This is why we need to notice and catch anxiety symptoms early, as this can help prevent an anxiety disorder developing.

Anxiety as a mental health condition

An anxiety disorder is when we become unable to regulate our normal emotion of anxiety. The anxiety is present all the time and affects our daily life. Most people who experience an anxiety disorder speak of a heavy feeling in their body or of being jittery all the time. Common anxiety disorders include generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety, phobias and panic disorder. Anxiety can be also be present in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Stress

Walking home at night and being followed.

Anxiety

Walking home at night and thinking you are being followed.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Not being able to go out alone for fear of being followed.

Anxiety and Covid-19

Unlike fear, which is one of the stress responses to an immediate danger, anxiety is an ongoing sense of worry. Covid-19 can be quite scary to think about and brings up feelings of fear. Anxiety happens when we become overwhelmed by fear and want to avoid situations that might make us anxious. We may be feeling this during the current pandemic as we attempt to adapt to this new normal.

The difficultly with Covid-19 is that the threat is still present and is a real concern that we need to manage to maintain good mental health.

What are the challenges we are facing?

We are all going through a challenging time, and we need to acknowledge that our responses to this uncertain situation are natural.

We may experience social anxiety as we find ourselves mixing with others again after being isolated for months. We may feel worried for ourselves and our families becauseof the changes in routine, additional stresses and potential risks of coming into contact with Covid-19. We may needto continue working or begin working from home, and we may worry about loneliness.

Specific examples to Covid-19

In the following pages, you'll find tips for dealing with specific challenges about Covid-19 that our Ambassadors and Community Based Workers shared with us relating to the workplace, and the home and family life.

"An emotional need is to be prepared by my employer before returning. I would like to be talked through the procedures put into place and the cleaning protocol around the office. It's also important to have a point of contact, should there be concerns once I returned to the office."
-Survey Participant.

These tips can also help us navigate in public spaces.

Workplace Challenges

Workplace Challenges	Tips to reduce anxiety
Arriving and having to touch door handles and surfaces that other people have touched	Follow hygiene measures. Bring your own face covering, hand sanitizer and antibacterial wipes. Ground yourself before entering by taking some slow deep breaths to reduce stress and anxiety. (see below for more tips).
Sharing office space and common areas such as bathrooms and canteens	Discuss physical distancing and hygiene arrangements with colleagues and agree protocols (rules).
Being unsure who is responsible for cleaning	If it is not clear who is responsible for cleaning, your workplace may already have guidance on this and you can ask to see this if it's not readily available. Ask your manager.
Worrying about physical distance and what to do if others are not keeping their distance	Discuss physical distancing arrangements with your colleagues and agree protocols. Review how well this is working at team meetings. It's okay to take breaks and step away from situations that are uncomfortable or put us at risk.

Workplace Challenges	Tips to reduce anxiety
Adjusting to the physical changes in the workplace (signage, dispensers, floor markings, changes in furniture & spacing, still being in work and experiencing changes as others return).	Take some time to familiarise yourself with the new signage and layouts. Recognise that these measures are there for everyone's safety. Allow extra time for hand-washing and sanitising. Developing a new routine can help us adjust to the changes.
Getting back to face-to-face meetings Getting used to new social standards and changes in policy and procedures	Take some time to get familiar with the changes. Discuss and agree with participants how to conduct meetings. Take some time before and after the meeting to ground and centre yourself. This will help to reduce stress and anxiety. Discuss the impact of changes with management and colleagues to help you come to terms with the new situation.
Feeling unsure of your role, performance and ability to express your concerns to supervisors without fear of backlash or ridicule	Ask for a meeting with your direct manager to talk about your role and set realistic and achievable goals.

Workplace Challenges	Tips to reduce anxiety
Additional stress due to underlying health conditions or caring responsibilities and concerns (such as crèches, schools or day services being closed or operating differently)	Take all the steps you can. Discuss your concerns and needs with your employer to see if an agreement can be reached or support is available.
Knowing what to do if someone at work gets Covid-19	Each workplace will have its own emergency response policy. Discuss this with management and at team meetings. Get familiar with the policy so you know what to do if someone shows Covid-19 symptoms at work.

Knowing what to do if your employer is not following return to work protocols / rules (for example, not following physical distancing guidelines and so on)	Employers must follow public health guidelines. It's a difficult situation if they don't. Ask your manager to put safety measures in place. Follow the recommended public health guidelines yourself (physical distancing, hand sanitising, cough etiquette, using a face covering). You may need to ask for support from an external agency.
Worrying about what might happen if you refuse to return to the workplace due to fear of getting Covid-19	Knowing our rights is important. Contact Citizens Information (www.citizensinformation.ie) for more information or talk to an employment rights specialist. Discuss your health concerns with your GP (doctor). It is important that we mind ourselves and manage the stress we may experience around the issue. Be gentle with yourself.

Workplace Challenges	Tips to reduce anxiety
Worrying about having to self-isolate and how to look after your wellbeing while in isolation	Needing to self-isolate is difficult. Try to keep up a healthy daily routine doing the things you know work for you. The Five Ways to Wellbeing suggests daily activities that promote wellbeing. See more details on page 22
Being more tired than usual (due to travelling for work again, socialising, and so on)	Give yourself extra time for tasks or activities. Remember that being extra tired is a normal response to a stressful situation like this.

"**My biggest social need is to be talked through the new social standards at work, like what is the correct way of saying hello. Are meetings in person allowed? If so, what's the maximum number of colleagues to be allowed to have a meeting together?**"
-Survey Participant.

"**'With extremely high stress levels to follow as businesses try to come back, there should be consistent training for all people managers and HR for managing such extreme stressful situations.**"
-Survey Participant.

Mindfulness is one of many practices that some people find helpful when dealing with stress and anxiety. Breath awareness, that is, noticing the sensations created by breathing, can help to ground you. So can focussing on the connection your body is making with the seat or your feet with the floor. Taking a few deep and slow breaths helps to reduce the effects of stress on the mind and body.

Home and family life challenges

Challenges	Tips to reduce anxiety
Coping with the impact of changes on my family – less time together, feeling more tired and stressed when at home	Discuss concerns with the family and agree practical steps to take such as safety measures, working hours, planned time off. Plan some fun activities together. Talk to the family – adults and kids alike. Listen to their concerns, answer questions, share facts. Let them know it's ok to feel fearful, upset or concerned.

Challenges	Tips to reduce anxiety
Bringing the germs home and making family members ill.	Learn how to protect yourself and the family. Be prepared by having a supply of hand sanitiser and spare face coverings. Follow hygiene measures and wash hands regularly and upon returning home. Share concerns with your family so they can support you to reduce risk.
How family members are acting or reacting	Have a conversation with the family about how you are feeling. Acknowledge that family members may not see things the same way you do. It's okay to set our own boundaries.

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Worrying about children returning to school and changes due to Covid-19	Think about childcare options in advance and have a Plan B. Talk with the school to get official updates about any changes. Talk to someone you know and trust about your concerns.
Speaking with children about the anxiety they are feeling	Ask children what they are worried about. Invite them to come up with solutions while guiding them in line with public health guidelines.

Remember:

o   Avoid negative conversations where you can.

o   Look for accurate information (from the Health Service Executive, Irish Government and the World Health Organisation).

o   Acknowledge how you feel.

o   Limit the amount of news you read, watch or listen to

o   Stay in touch with friends and family.

o   Do the small everyday things that keep you well.

o   Notice what else is going on for you.

o   Reduce screen use and video calls.

o   Use wellbeing and recovery-based models such as the Five Ways to Wellbeing and CHIME (refer to note 4 on the back page).

Tips to share with colleagues

You can't pour from an empty cup... take care of yourself first.

As we move through this it is important to be aware that we are all affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in different ways.

Now more than ever it is important to show compassion, as we don't know what others may have been through over the last few months. Leading by example is a great way to encourage other people.

• Focus on what is inside our control, not on the things we can't control.

• Stick to a schedule where possible – routines really help.

• Prioritise wellbeing. Take a daily walk or other exercise, eat well, keep a good sleep routine.

• Make an extra effort in social situations with colleagues who may be feeling anxious or stressed.

• Look at ways to stay connected with colleagues who may not be in the office, or who don't share the same shifts or locations as you.

• Access an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or similar support if they are available in your workplace.

• Know when and where to get support at work or in the community.

• Ask for help if you are struggling with how you are feeling.

• If you feel professional support would help, talk to your doctor about the options available to you.

Supporting staff
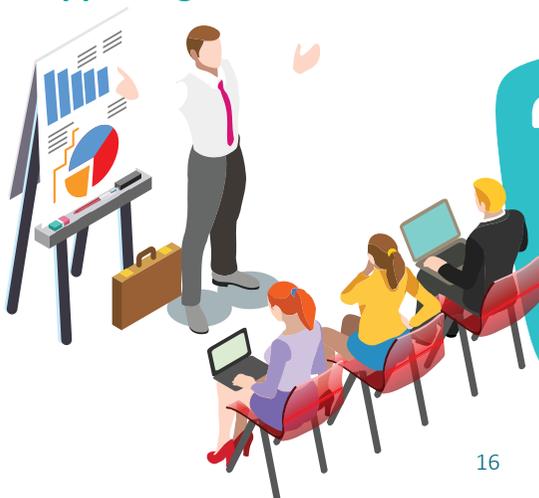
"I believe in general companies should actively work on enabling their employees to be able to work from home as much as needed/wanted/preferred going forward."
-Survey Participant.

When we are supporting staff, we should think about all their needs and if and how we can meet them in an effective way.

Here are some of the things we need to think about now:

- Welcoming people back

- Giving clear direction and leadership

- Providing reorientation and a debrief

- Arranging reasonable work-related adjustments if needed

- Discussing travel to and from work

- Encouraging self-care, while maintaining your own

- Encouraging people to talk about their experience during the lockdown

- Supporting staff to work well from home by taking regular breaks, making sure they have the right chair for them, lighting and safety measures are appropriate(ergonomics), providing supervision and managerial support, and so on.

Having open and understanding conversations

Mental health stigma and language

Mental health stigma has been described as a sign of disgrace which negatively distinguishes one person from another and is rooted in everyday language.

The language that is commonly used about mental health can create a barrier that prevents people truly
understanding and helping others.

Although the use of words such as 'crazy', 'nuts' or 'psycho' may seem trivial and innocent, these words are the building blocks of stigma and can lead someone to conceal their difficulty or their need for support.
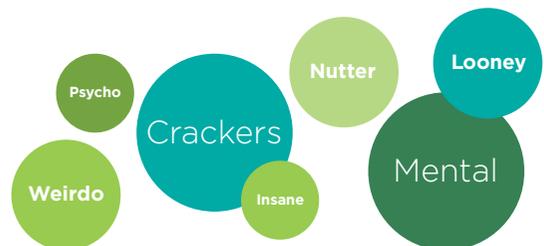
Using words like these that are often associated with mental illness increases stigma.

The language we use can have a big impact. When people are anxious, language becomes even more important.However, it is possible to have conversations that have the same meaning and tone without using stigmatizing language.

These are extraordinary times. Remember: we all have mental health and anyone can experience a mental health challenge at any time in their lives. Some people around you may be struggling, some may have a mental health difficulty, or some may be experiencing a mental health challenge for the first time.

While it may feel okay to have conversations like the ones below, they are leaning towards the negative and could cause some colleagues to feel anxious . Being more conscious of the language we use can lead to more meaningful and supportive conversations.

Avoid:

"Isn't this whole Covid thing just **crazy**?"

"It's **mad** how much the office has changed."

"I don't want to go into the canteen with everyone touching everything, the place is crawling with germs."

Instead try:

"Isn't this whole Covid thing just **bizarre**?"

"It's **strange** how much the office has changed."

"I'd like to use the canteen but am concerned about its cleanliness."

Supportive Conversations

Returning to work means we may now be in contact with our colleagues again. Our conversations may be a little different, and it may be more difficult as we follow the physical distancing guidelines. During this time, having open and understanding conversations is very important.

In the context of Covid-19, it's important to understand the power of stigma. For anyone who has experienced stigma in their lives because of their lived experience of mental health difficulties, they may perceive the physical distancing measures we take as stigmatizing actions towards them.

To make sure nobody feels the additional barrier that stigma creates in these situations, we need to address the issue in an open way. This means having conversations about the reason for the physically distant measures so that there is no confusion or misunderstanding.

Here are two people with very different experiences of the same situation. The thing that is missing is conversation so that they can both understand the other's point of view.

"She didn't come over to say hi, she must know that I've been having a tough time and not want to talk to me because of it."

"It's so good to see her again, it's a shame I can't go over and hug her to say hello because of the 2m distancing."

Physically distant doesn't have to mean socially distant.
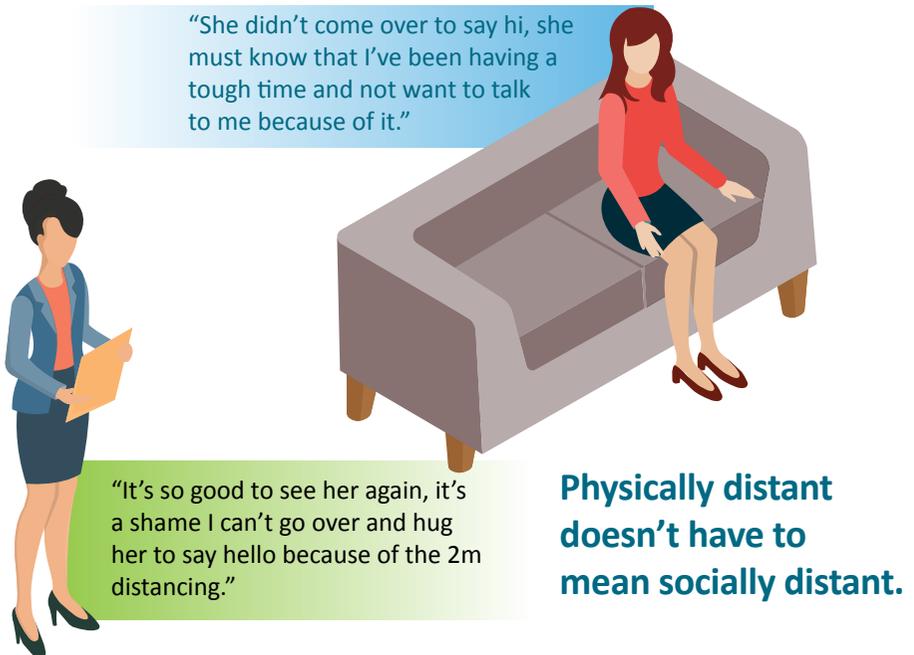
When returning to work, we may feel socially 'out of practice'. It might be useful to consider conversation starters to help us get used to being around more people. The tips below can help us to open the conversation up and understand each other better.

- Ask general open-ended questions like 'How are you finding being back in work?' Say that it is great to see you rather than just thinking it.

- Be understanding if a person does not want to eat in the canteen.

- This is a good time to encourage setting boundaries like; If I need some space for myself, I could politely decline an invitation for a lunchtime walk

"Language and workplace behaviour guidelines should be revisited to ensure everyone is able to discuss opportunities and obstacles openly"
-Survey Participant.

Dealing with the sense of loss

Some of us will have experienced bereavement through losing someone we know and love during the restrictions or directly because of Covid-19. Not being able to have the traditional wake and funeral will have affected us greatly.

Others will have experienced loss in other ways, such as the loss of employment or social connection with work colleagues, friends and family. We may have felt the loss of our liberty or common routines which were standard in our daily way of life before this.

Acknowledging our own experience of loss is important. Each loss is valid and we should honour the loss by allowing ourselves time to process whatever has affected us and look for support if we need it.

Going through a pandemic brings many challenges. We have all gone from living 'normally' to living in lockdown, and then living in uncertainty as to how long lockdown life will last. We have probably all been through the following stages of grief and loss:

1. **Denial** that it was really happening, or as severe as it was being made out to be, or that it could affect 'me or my family'.

2. **Anger** that we were being forced to change our lives so rapidly, and without support or clarity.

3. **Bargaining** may have had us focused on what might have been and what could have happened differently or negotiating with a higher power for things to go back to the way they were.

4. **Sadness** for what we have lost, or what might have been, for time or experiences lost, for loved ones lost during the pandemic, or even the global human loss.

5. **Acceptance** of the situation as it really is. This step helps us to grow forward and is part of a resilient mindset.

6. **Meaning** - finding meaning allows us to grow from adversity.

Connecting with kindness

We may worry as we return to the workplace about getting Covid-19 or carrying the virus to others. We may feel anger towards others for a variety of reasons. Feeling an emotion and acting on it are separate things. We can acknowledge the feeling without behaving in a negative way. Instead, we can look for ways to express ourselves clearly and kindly.

When we connect with others through kindness, we are empathising with them. We can all play our part in reducing the stress we feel by connecting with kindness, with ourselves as well as with others.

- **Smile with our eyes from behind our face coverings to connect with others.**

- **Use friendly body language and gestures that demonstrate patience.**

- **Show more compassion, tolerance and kindness.**

- **Use open and thoughtful language**

The Five Ways to Wellbeing

The Five Ways To Wellbeing are simple, evidence-based actions you can do every day to feel good and function well. (New Economics Foundation, 2008)

Connect with people around you, friends, relatives or co-workers you haven't spoken to in a while. try to make new connections where possible.

Be Active - do what you can to stay active. Try a new class in the gym, walk instead of getting the bus, try gardening, dancing or cycling. Choose something you enjoy, that suits your mobility and fitness levels.

Take Notice - take time to look around you: notice changes in the world, the passing of seasons. Be aware of your feelings and reflect on your experiences. Be present in the here and now.

Keep Learning - try something new; a new hobby or language course. Take on a different responsibility in work. Set yourself a challenge you will enjoy avchieving.

Give - do one good deed every day. Smile at a passer-by. Make someone a cup of tea. Join a community group. Doing good for someone else can be beneficial to your mental health.

We can all do our best to develop helpful ways to deal with our stresses and anxieties so that we can bring the best of ourselves to our relationships with others.

Thoughtful gestures and 'Random Acts of Kindness' are relevant now more than ever. Despite the 2-metre physical distance measures, we can still connect with others with kindness across the space between us.

Resources

You can find See Change resources on our website: **www.seechange.ie**

You can find Mental Health Ireland resources here: **www.mentalhealthireland.ie**

1. What is stigma? Booklet available from See Change.

2. Stress. Booklet available from Mental Health Ireland.

3. Anxiety. Booklet available from Mental Health Ireland

4. CHIME Model, see Leamy et al. (2011)
For more information, visit **www.mentalhealthireland.ie**

CHIME Recovery Process

C

Connectedness
- Peer support and support groups
- Relationships
- Being part of the community

H

Hope and optimism about the future
- Belief in possibility of recovery
- Motivation to change

I

Identity
- Dimensions of identity
- Rebuilding/redefining positive sense of identity

M

Meaning in life
- Spirituality
- Quality of life
- Meaningful life and social roles
- Rebuilding life

E

Empowerment
- Personal responsibility
- Control over life
- Focusing upon strengths

See Change is working positively to reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health problems and to ensure that everyone enjoys the same rights on an equal basis.

www.seechange.ie

Mental Health Ireland

Connecting for Life

Plain English
Approved by NALA