



[COVID-19, mental health](#)

It's not just you. Many people are dealing with 'lockdown brain'

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Feeling more forgetful right now? Are you putting off tasks? Does everyone around you seem more irritating than usual? You might have a lockdown brain.

Your to-do list likely feels more important to you these days than ever before.

For those of us still in lockdown, it can feel like your brain is functioning at half capacity, and a to-do list can act as a guiding light to get you through the work day.

I cannot get a thing done these days unless the tasks are written in front of me in giant letters, yelling at me like a drill sergeant. I [know I'm not alone](#). And there's a scientific reason as to why so many of us are feeling this way.

HRM has covered the [cognitive impacts of remote-work](#) and COVID-19 before, but this time we're unpacking some of the common things people are experiencing as a result of long-term isolation, and what HR can do to help.

We are more forgetful

Do you feel like your ability to retain information has disappeared at the moment? Are you regularly doing that thing where you walk into a room and can't remember for the life of you why you're there? Don't worry. It's not you, it's lockdown.

Lockdown has [given rise](#) to greater rates of depression and anxiety, two illnesses that can [damage memory](#).

Not only does this hamper our ability to remember why we went into the kitchen, it can also mean we lose the important touchstones that jog our memory.

A relatively modern theory called [contextual-binding theory](#) outlines how our physical and mental states influence our memory and perception of past experiences. The theory suggests that we link memories with the context they occurred in.

For example, imagine you're on your morning walk and see a clown juggling at your local park. The context is the physical space - the park - and your mental state, likely surprise and possibly fear (if you're me). When these things are linked together it means next time you're at the park or you see a clown you'll find it easier to recall that rather strange memory of a clown juggling in the park.

But here's where it gets tricky. Let's say you start seeing clowns at the park every day. The context is the same (park, surprise, fear), so even if it's a different clown each time, because they're all linked to the same context, the memory becomes diluted and the specific clowns will become harder to distinguish in your memory.

If you're working at home every day, having the same meetings from the same position in your house and likely experiencing the same emotions (curiosity or, dare I say, [boredom](#)), differentiating those meetings in your memory is going to become much trickier.

But this is only part of the problem. As lockdowns continue and our stress levels continue to rise, the cognitive impacts on memory become more severe. In the *ABC* article, Roswell refers to it as "entering a rudimentary state of cognitive ability".

Prolonged stress and anxiety can stop us from forming new memories because [cortisol \(the stress hormone\)](#) is tampering with the hippocampus, our brains' centre for memory and learning.

Stress inhibits our ability to form pathways quickly, meaning we find it harder to retain the things we've just learnt or seen.

We can continue to do our daily activities, says Roswell, but when we try to think outside the box or try something new, our brain simply cannot form the pathways to enable higher level thinking.

What can HR do?

To escape this Groundhog Day feeling, we need to break up our days.

This pandemic might be a marathon, but we should be working in sprints, says Karen Gately, Founder of leadership and people management consultancy Corporate Dojo.

“If we are just stuck at our desk working, we’re going to lose focus and productivity,” she says.

“Working in one-to-two-hour blocks is much more likely to keep us focused and help us to retain information.

“People are entirely better off working for a short period of time, and then taking a break. That could be just walking around the house or getting out in the fresh air.”

Employers also need to give workers the flexibility to potentially start earlier or work later, and allow them short periods where they’re uncontactable so they can get into [deep work](#), says Gately.

We are more likely to make risky decisions

Prolonged periods of social restrictions can also impact our decision-making skills.

In a [study](#) released earlier this year, researchers questioned nearly 5000 participants in Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom about their decision making during COVID-19 restrictions.

The researchers found that participants experiencing harsher lockdown conditions were more likely to make riskier decisions and poor choices, such as being less altruistic and developing a desire to punish others.

“Instead of being more careful because they were in a pandemic, they were taking risks, because they couldn’t take it any more,” [said](#) co-author Francisco Lupiáñez from Italy’s Open University of Catalonia in an article for *Eureka Alert*.

They found that people were more willing to make difficult decisions without weighing up the potential social costs of their actions, such as not wearing a mask in public.

“It seemed as if the world was coming to an end and people preferred to benefit today, immediately, without thinking about tomorrow.”

This lines up with older [research](#) that suggests social isolation can lead to people making riskier financial decisions, often seeking immediate satisfaction and rather long-term rewards. Part of this was linked to the [dopamine cravings](#) created by isolation (if you’re someone who has fallen victim to the clutches of online shopping during lockdown, you’ll be familiar with this feeling).

In the workplace this could manifest as employees making poor financial decisions on behalf of the business. A less extreme example could be someone chasing quick wins to replicate the dopamine they're missing from social interactions. That might mean they cut corners or fail to work as collaboratively as is needed, for instance, resulting in decreased quality of work and potentially damaging important relationships in the process.

What can HR do?

You could try finding alternative ways to keep employees' dopamine levels high. A good place to start is through consistent recognition and reward for a job well done.

"When I feel respected and valued, these things give me energy and give me the brain chemistry that's good for the health of my mind," says Gately.

"It can be tempting [for employers] to just focus on what's not happening, so we might have to be more deliberate and purposeful about reaching out and letting people know what we are happy about [in their work].

"HR can be going to the business owner or CEO and saying, 'Hey, by the way, Mary has been doing a brilliant job. She has been working around the clock. Could you reach out and say thank you?' Simple as that."

We feel more irritable and intolerant

Last year, the overwhelming feelings we shared were [grief](#) and anxiety. As the pandemic continues and this new round of restrictions weigh on us, the feeling is different. Grief and anxiety haven't gone away entirely, but it has been surpassed for many by [anger](#).

It's easy to understand why we feel this way. Lockdown is an experience outside of our control, and when that lack of control meets the uncertainty of not knowing when your freedoms will be reinstated or how safe it is to be outside, it can result in anger and frustration.

Research on [mice](#) has shown aggression levels increase when they are subjected to isolation. In humans this often manifests as a low tolerance for those around us.

On a cognitive level, anger [narrows our focus](#), limiting our ability to take on new information. Even if the source of our anger passes, we can remain on edge and are more likely to get angry at other people or incidents.

This can create a vicious cycle. [Conflict](#) may arise between employees and, depending on their [agreeability](#) or [response to conflict](#), this could cause it to spread like other forms of [emotional contagion](#).

What can HR do?

The number one thing HR and other leaders can do right now is lead with empathy, says Gately.

"You don't have to accept bad behaviour to empathise with the underlying reason for it," she says.

“You need to create a space where employees can put their hand up and say, ‘I’m struggling’ not just when they’re feeling [overwhelmed](#), but when they’re frustrated too.”

This is where creating a psychologically-safe culture is really important, which you can read more about [here](#).

There are small changes workplaces can make too.

“Employees need the tools to [recognise](#) their emotions and the ways to [short circuit](#) those feelings.

“Make [self care](#) a priority,” says Gately. “Whether that’s taking frequent breaks to walk around the block, taking time off to recalibrate, or calling someone you can vent to.”

With lockdown brain scrambling employees’ abilities, it’s more important than ever that HR knows how to deal with mental health at work. Take [AHR’s short course](#) to gain essential skills.

TAGS : cognitive impacts, lockdown, mental health

