Welcome everyone, to this session on Mental Health in the Workplace and COVID-19. I'm Louise Little, and your speaker for today is Cecilia da Forno, who works in the Cabinet Office on the Fast Stream and Early Talent Team as a mental health lead. Cecilia is also a Mental Health First Aid instructor and Mental Health First Aider herself as well. I'm gonna hand over to you now, Cecilia.

Thank you, Louise for the lovely introduction there and welcome everyone to this session on mental health in the workplace and COVID-19. I just want to add something else about myself to what Louise has already said, and that is that I have what is called 'the lived experience of mental illness'. In practice, that means I was severely depressed for very many, very many years. And the reason I'm sharing this now is not to elicit some kind of sympathy or pity, but it's because looking at the aims for the session, one of the things I want to do during the 20 to 30 minutes that we will spend together is to open up the discussion around mental health. And one of the ways to do that effectively is to be vulnerable, appropriately, and this is what I'm trying to, to offer here. The thing is, we have done quite a lot of work already in the Civil Service to support your well being and mental health. But equally, mental health issues are common and so still are stigma and discrimination for those of us that have a mental illness. And often many of us, even the well-meaning ones don't know what to say or what to do when a colleague tells us that they have been diagnosed with a mental illness, or we just notice that something isn't quite right. And we weren't there we have to take the conversation and what steps to take. So I hope that in the title we'll spend together I will be able to sketch out some useful suggestions and point you to some tools, practical approaches you can use to have a positive impact wherever you work, whether you are a manager or a colleague, it doesn't matter we can all contribute to making it better environment and supporting mental health for ourselves and others. So let's have a look at this phrase up there then, mental health. What springs to mind when when you hear that? And I will give you just a couple of seconds to reflect for yourself about what associations come up for you. When you hear that 'mental health'. So often what happens here is that we hear mental health, but we assume we actually respond as if we had heard 'mental illness'. And the associations that appear are all quite negative. In fact, while some of us will experience mental illness in our lives, we all have mental health. It is an essential component of overall health, as Mental Health for England often say that is no health overall without mental health. So here is an attempt at the definition. And what's important there is that the state of our mental health both influences and is influenced by everything around us. So how we think, feel and behave will demonstrate our state of mental health and equally, how we are feeling will influence how we perceive the past and the future, how we perceive ourselves and other people, and the world around us. And importantly, the second and final point on there on the slide, our mental health also influences our ability to cope with the ups and downs of life, with change small, but also really big, like COVID-19, and our ability to cope with stress.

So let's pick this up, then stress, it feels more socially acceptable to admit to being stressed, or to talk about stress, than to talk about mental illness. So that's where it's good to start. We all experience stress at some point in our life. And this is a useful visual tool, the performance curve to map ourselves against. So just as a way of explanation, it's pretty intuitive actually. But there is a central Green Zone, that's where we aim to be for most of the time, that's where peak performance happens where the demands of the world match our skills where we feel stretched, but competent and broadly in control - all is well. And when are the demands of the world exceed our perceived ability to cope as per definition on the slide, that's when pressure turns into stress or when we slide into that Red Zone. And if we

spend too long, too deeply in that Red Zone, that's where poor performance, exhaustion, poor concentration, even burnout can occur. And to sketch out the Yellow Zone on the left as well, that's the switched-off area, that's when we either don't have enough work to do we are disengaged, or the quantity of work is there, but we start to wonder whether it has a purpose. Whether what we are doing really matters whether people would notice if we suddenly stopped showing up. And that's as detrimental to mental well being as the Red Zone, although it's less talked about. And this curve is important for a few reasons. First of all, is a way to check in with yourself; so you can use it at different points during the day to figure out where am I on this curve? And what has put me there, what are the triggers? Or what can I do to mitigate them? Or what support can I ask for to mitigate them. You may spot some patterns, you know certain tasks or situations that consistency puts you in a Red Zone for me is using unfamiliar technology like I'm doing right now while giving this presentation that the elements that is slightly shifting me to the Red! And you can use it in in team meetings as well; if there is a sufficiently psychologically safe environment, you might ask your colleagues to plot themselves against the curve. And the two important messages to take away from from this graphic though, are the different things put us in that Red space. There isn't a one size fits all approach here. So don't judge yourself and don't judge other people for what shifts them into the Red Zone, be self compassionate and compassionate to others too. And the second point of difference is that we all react to stress in different ways. So we all have what is called a 'stress signature', meaning is a set of default behaviours we fall into when we are too stressed for too long. My stress signature is I become quite curt, quite abrupt, when I am too stressed. So get to know your stress signature, be honest about it if you can with a couple of trusted colleagues who you know you may work closely with, and they can then help you identify when you're starting to get too stressed by noticing those behaviours, because sometimes we just, we just are not self aware enough. We think if we can catch early, we can take more decisive action.

So, moving on, let's think now properly about mental illness. And the reason why I am focusing on depression and anxiety it's not because these are the only mental illnesses that it is socially acceptable to talk about. Sometimes there can be that feeling that you know, you can admit to being depressed or, or anxious or suffering from an anxiety disorder about bipolar disorder or OCD, that's more difficult. And while there may be different levels of stress, severe mental illness is a source of suffering that we need to address regardless of the label. So I'm using these, 'depression' and 'anxiety', because they are the most common they are the ones that you are most likely to suffer from yourself or to encounter among friends or colleagues. So think about signs and symptoms that you may see in the workplace if someone is suffering from depression and or anxiety. I'm going to give you just literally a couple of seconds to reflect on this and think about what you might notice.

So here is a possible list - it's not exhaustive there is plenty more. And don't use it as a checklist. You know, low morale. disengagement can be a sign of classic depression, but actually when I was very unwell, I was very bubbly, very lively, and very active and engaged. because I was desperately trying to hide my pain. I was very, very scared that people would notice that something was off and so I was working extremely hard to mask it and cover up. The really important point I want you to take away from this slide is not to memorise the list but to look at the first couple, actually, the first sentence up there. So pay attention to any persistent, unexplained changes in behaviour and mood. That's the thing you want to be alert to. And the premise for that, for that to work is that you've got to get to know the people

that you manage, and the colleagues around you. And yes, it is sometimes more challenging to do this in a remote environment, but it is possible. Only if you have a sense of who they are and how they normally operate, can you spot those changes. So let's pause for a moment then and think about the situation that we are in now. Everything I've said so far is quite generic around stress and around mental illness and those were with us before COVID-19 and will be with us afterwards. But we are in a very unusual situation at the moment. So I have just two slides with a couple of points for recollection about this. The first one, you may have heard this already, so I don't lay any claim to originality, but it is something that's important to reflect on nonetheless. Working at home during an emergency, which is what we are doing now is very, very different from working from home because it's part of our working pattern that we have chosen. So, there are practical things there that are different. For example, we may have increased care or responsibilities for relatives or friends who are shielding, for children, for other individuals. But equally as important, although more invisible, is the cognitive load that the current situation of uncertainty is causing for all of us. What do I mean by that? So, what I mean is that while we go about our daily business of dealing with work tasks and private life and so on, at the same time and part of our brain is busy trying to understand what the future might look like, and the truth is, we don't know. And the fragility of human life, and the uncertainty of the future have really come to the fore in a way that is unfamiliar and frightening. And because of that our resources are depleted because a part of our brain is busy doing all of that work while we also carry on with business as usual. And it's no surprise that many, many colleagues I hear from say they are exhausted at the end of the normal day, and they can't quite figure out why. This may be why; their cognitive load. And it's important to learn in this context, not to compare yourself to the person you were before, to the plans you had before, to what other people are doing that seem so super-efficient. Neither of us know about the challenges that each of us is facing. So again, the point about how important self compassion is, is really crucial here. What has helped me make sense of all this uncertainty? Is that connecting with my values, that's why I've put it there as the second point on the slide. What does it mean in practice? Well, you can google. If you google 'values list', there are lots of lists of values, quite long ones that come up. And they contain things like beauty, gratitude, fairness. And I'd encourage you to spend five or 10 minutes picking your five top values and your top 10. And then thinking about, okay, how can I live them out in this changed context? What can I do that still brings those values to life in in my life as it is, as it is now. So beauty is one of my values, and I used to explore London and the architecture of the city. I can't do that anymore, because I can't use public transport. So I've discovered that taking pictures of urban nature - that feeds my desire for beauty in this new context. So think about your values and how you can leave them out. And if you're managing a team encourage the people you look after to discover their values, and that's another way that you can connect with them and get to know them better. And then the final point on this slide is all about 'trust'. So what can you do whether you are a line manager or not, to help the people you work with feels psychologically safe. And why is that important? Because unless it is only if we feel psychologically safe, that we are going to be honest about the challenges that they're facing. Sometimes it can be really small stuff we're struggling with, and it can feel a bit shameful to admit that 'Yeah, I'm struggling because my neighbour is really noisy'. That's the case for me, for example. But this is the sort of stuff that we need to know about each other. So think about how to establish trust. And one way you can try and do this somebody suggested already in the discussion thread before the session. Doing a wellbeing check with your colleagues at team meetings to surface some of the different challenges that we are all facing. But give this enough time. Yeah, it's no good going around really quickly. "So I'm okay? Everybody okay? Everybody okay? Everyone? Let's move

on". That's not a wellbeing check. So give it enough time. And particularly if you are in a position of relative authority within the team, think about disclosing some vulnerability. How can the people that you manage actually say that they are struggling, if you never kind of give anything about that of yourself and say that, 'hey, I've had a tough day today', or 'I struggled to concentrate this morning'? So think about how you can foster that real trust.

And the final point there, is about logistics. So if you want to talk particularly about well being with someone, reflect on privacy. So there may be family members, there may be flatmates in the background, and the person you want to talk to may not feel comfortable discussing anything particularly sensitive in that context. So maybe warn them with an email first that you that you are going to talk about wellbeing, give them a choice of timings, so that they can maybe pick a time when they're going for a walk/they are in a different environment. Thinking also about channels of communication and options there. So, so many choices have been taken away from us or it feels like it. So where can you give your colleagues some small choices; if they prefer the phone to a video call, give them that option. If they prefer to have the camera on or off, give them that option. If sometimes they prefer instant messaging, because it's easier sometimes to write about difficult topics, then give them the option perhaps too. So, let's think in particular about the role of a line manager and that is relevant if you are a line manager now, but also if you aspire to be one, and to be fair, most of these points work for any colleague as well. So I talked before when we looked at depression and anxiety about the small changes in behaviour and mood that you may notice. And you can use these to open up that conversation around mental health because they are observations, they don't make assumptions about what's going on for the person. You just start with something you have observed. It's a fact. And that is a really good way to show that you care as a manager. Why is it important? Because there is evidence to say that if staff members think their manager cares about them as people, that it's more likely they will maintain good mental health, it's likely they will recover more quickly. If they do experience a mental illness, then they will be off for shorter periods of time. So it matters. And after you've noticed, where do you take the conversation? Well use open questions. So the questions that start with what, who, how? I've noticed you've been less active in meetings recently? What's going on? for example. And if you're stuck, like it happens to me, sometimes, I'm scrambling around in my head for - I don't really know what question to ask - what's the right word? What's the right thing to unlock this conversation? 'Tell me more' is the best open question that is not actually a question, because it allows the other person to take the conversation wherever they want. So 'tell me more'. And I found a note of caution around the 'why?' question. So it looks like an open question. It's okay, isn't it? Well, it is and it isn't. It is okay, particularly if you trusted individual if you have a good relationship already. But otherwise, that 'why' question can can can trigger our defence response. Why did you do that? It may be asked in a spirit of open-minded curiosity, but on the receiving end of it, I may start to feel you are questioning my motives? Or, have I done something wrong? So I'd say avoid 'why'. And as a line manager, remember, it's okay not to have all the answers. Sometimes we feel and I manage lots of (inaudible). Sometimes we feel we have to have all the answers; we have to fix all the problems; we have to have one conversation around somebody's mental health and they come out after an hour with everything lined up and all the resources there and they are already feeling that that's not how it works in real life. Share the responsibility. Make sure that everybody is aware of the sources of support that they can use before a crisis hits. So stick them on your internet, in your starter packs, in your welcome emails for new colleagues, everywhere and anywhere that you can think of. And take your time. It's okay to schedule

the follow up meetings after the initial conversation. And outline the next steps - you don't have to wrap it all up in one hour.

So last slide on this area, it's okay to ask, what can I do to help? What can I do to support you? Nothing wrong with that question. It's a it's a good way to show that you care. Sometimes, through it's helpful to reframe that and to put it on a more equal footing; something like how can we work together to make the situation better for you, or to make sure you can return to work? And that framing changes the power dynamics of it. It puts you in the same position as the other individual, and it also acknowledges that if someone has experienced their mental illness before, they are actually the experts on how it affects them. So it's good to work together to tackle a problem jointly. The person is not the problem - the problem is separate from the person - and you both collaborate to address it. And then I want to plug the 'Wellness Action Plan'. So this is a tool devised by Mind - you can find it on our website. And it's actually a set of open questions that help the individual explore what keeps them well, what doesn't keep them well, what they themselves can do to support their wellbeing, what others around them can do. It works if you have a diagnosis of a mental illness, and it also works to think about stress. You can use it for yourself as a self-reflection tool. You can fill it in before having a difficult conversation with your manager if you want to tell them that you're struggling but you're not quite sure how to approach it and it feels emotionally fraught - fill in the plan, share it with them ahead of the conversation, then have the conversation because you will both be better informed, better prepared. Or, as a line manager, once you've had that initial conversation, you can follow up with an email with this tool, and explain how to use it. There is also a guide on the website on how to do that. And the last point, be clear and be kind. So I have a page from Brenda Brown, the vulnerability researcher, and I encourage you to go and read some of her books because she's great. But 'be clear and be kind' - what does it mean in relation to being a line manager. Be clear, there are processes in the Civil Service to manage attendance and performance issues, and we have to follow them. Sometimes those processes have consequences. For example, if someone has been off for a long time with a mental illness, their pay may starts to be impacted. So if they are about to go on half pay, they need to know that. And they need to know that with enough in advance that they can plan for their life - because they are adults and they have a right to that clear information in good time. Even though it's uncomfortable, even though it may be a difficult conversation, don't fudge it, don't shirk away from it. Be clear, but also, be kind. Which means these processes have discretion for management built in. And let's use it, and I would encourage you to use it in the in the most compassionate way that you can. This is my personal opinion. I just think, be as kind as you possibly can be. Use the latitude that is given to you and think about how you would treat somebody suffering from a persistent and significant physical illness. Well treat somebody with a mental illness like that.

So what's next? I want to end with a couple challenges for you. So I'd like you to think about one action that you can do in the next two weeks to support your own wellbeing. Because that is really important. We can't do anything for others, we cannot change the culture for the better, unless we are nurtured and replenished ourselves. So one action for your own wellbeing in the next two weeks. And then one action that you will do in the next two weeks to support your team or a particular colleague. And I'd like you to write it down now and to commit to doing those actions in the next two weeks. And you do that. And before we come to the questions, I just want to highlight a couple of slides of resources. These are external resources that are available to everyone and we will share this slide pack in due course with

attendees. So you'll be able to have them at your disposal then. And here are some other resources or reference materials that are kind of cross Civil Service resources.

So, it only remains for me to say that there is a discussion thread available after the session and I will spend an hour or so, after the end answering questions or looking at comments there. So I hope to see some of you on the discussion thread, it has the same title as the session itself. And finally, if you wish the session had been more interactive, you have the opportunity to experience a more interactive version at the Civil Service Mental Health Conference that will take place in the autumn, (exact date TBC). So, I will be running something a little like this, but a lot more interactive and a bit longer. So I hope some of you will want to try what that feels like. This is it for me and I'm going to hand over to Louise again for questions.

Okay, thank you Cecilia, there were some excellent tips and tools there for people that I hope

you can take away from from the presentation. There's quite a few comments and your questions have been really busy in the chat and we've been working hard to try and get them on, but there's been that many that it's been slow progress. There's some comments from Mental Health First Aiders saying and that they've never been so busy and others commenting that the the experience with the Mental Health First Aiders has been excellent and such a positive experience. So well done to all the Mental Health First Aiders out there. And there's some questions coming up here that I'll just ask, that's quite common and got a lot of up-votes, and it's how people who have got anxiety about returning to work and how they can be supported. Have you got any more tips on advice on that?

Yeah, so the first point to say is thank you for mentioning Mental Health First Aiders. When I said like managers don't have to have all the answers, that's exactly what I meant. As in use this support that is there; occupational health, Mental Health First Aiders, HR case workers. So to address the actual question, how can we support people who are returning to work with their mental health? I think the most important thing is to listen, ask those people what they would want, what would help, because it may be that actually there are subgroups within the people that are returning to work or returning to the office, and they may have different needs and different desires. And we don't want to make assumptions. The other thing I would say is give people the space to talk so it's a big thing, listening, but also, we done something with Fast Streamers recently that has been really successful. And that was about 'being open' space. So just the confidential space run by me as an alpha stager and a coaching colleague - but just a couple of Mental Health First Aiders would do - for people to talk about how they were feeling, or in this case, it could be their anxieties about returning to the office. Surface that. It's incredible how much having just a simple conversation can do. In terms of specifics, it would need to be we: Where are the anxieties coming from? And what can we do to mitigate those factors? Because their anxieties may be well justified. So we need to think what can we do to mitigate them? And I don't feel like I can give very specific answers for the different contexts.

Thank you. And as Cecelia said, we're running another session and there's the discussion thread after that. I know we were late starting and we're slightly late finishing and I appreciate people have got lots of questions. But I think we've got got to the end of the session now, so thank you everybody for

joining, and I hope you join the discussion thread afterwards and can join the Civil Service Mental Health Conference later in the year.