

Out On Our Own

SECTION EDITOR



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Editorial

We have finally reached an era where talking about our mental health is no longer a taboo, it's just taken a pandemic for us to do so! Life has dramatically changed in the last 18 months and mental stressors are even more apparent. Many of these stressors have long been affecting the self-employed and freelancers, even before the pandemic, but as more mental health campaigns are now available, people can recognise these stressors, find the essential resources that are out there, and seek help if needed.

The two authors below approached me to

write this article, and I'm so honoured they did. It summarises poignantly mental health and freelancing. Shaun Foley, a previous OOOO author, is a freelance medical writer and can relate to many of the stressors that plague the freelance. He paired up with Matthew Knight, who set up a valuable association called Leapers to offer support and mental health advice to the self-employed and freelancers. Here, Shaun talks us through the typical stressors that we come across (go through his sources of stress and see how many relate to you). If some of them tick a few boxes, then continue to follow Matthew's top 5 recommendations that he and his team

have put together to help you check in on your mental health and suggest subtle changes that can make a big difference.

Ultimately, as a freelancer, you are not alone. Reach out to other freelancers if you're feeling overwhelmed. Join networks to meet other freelancers. Follow the advice given on these valuable resource pages for mental health. As Matthew writes "You are your business' most important asset", so put yourself first.

Stay mentally and physically safe.

Laura A Kehoe, PhD

Supporting mental health for freelancers in med comms

Stress in medical communications

Agency life in medical communications is brilliant, exciting, and rewarding, although undoubtedly busy and fast-paced, and at times can be stressful. Not all stress is bad – positive stress can help us be more focused, productive, and alert, and get things done – but consistent or excessive stress is damaging, and lots of small things can easily add up to create a feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to act.

Within medical communications, causes of stress manifest from many directions. Some of the many causes of stress in medical communications include upcoming deadlines (e.g., for publications or congresses, both planned and last minute), pressure from our clients, long working hours while on-site, employee conflict and retention, business development and retaining accounts, juggling paid and non-paid (volunteer) work, or generally just being over-worked.

I searched on Google for "stress" AND "medical communications" and found very little information on how to manage stress in our industry. Recently, many medical communications agencies have identified this issue and

implemented a number of excellent measures to help safeguard the mental and physical health of their employees when work becomes stressful.

But, who do the self-employed turn to when they are stressed or when they're looking for support? After all, they don't have a manager, HR department, or team to help them.

Stress and mental health as a freelance medical writer

Many medical communicators leave agency life and transition to freelance to regain greater control over their work-life balance and enjoy the flexibility that freelancing suggests. Indeed, there are many attractions to freelancing. When I first

started as a freelance medical writer I thought that, as my own boss, I can manage my own working hours, and take time out in the day to exercise and meet friends for lunch – which are all hugely positive for mental health and wellbeing. A report by The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE) found that "almost half of

freelancers (48%) stated that transitioning to self-employment had a very positive effect on their mental health with a further third (32%) stating it

Given these challenges, it's important to know what you can do to manage your own mental health when self-employed.

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had an at least somewhat positive effect".¹

Freelancing, however, can also be emotionally demanding and is not without its challenges. In the same report by IPSE, 53% of respondents stated that finding work had a negative impact on their mental health and they struggle with the irregularity of income that comes with self-employment.¹ As a freelancer in medical communications, stress can be caused by any number of avenues (Box 1).

These stress triggers, if not carefully managed, can even lead to common mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety. IPSE reported that "as a result of job-related stress almost half [of respondents] had felt less productive (48%), depressed or anxious (48%), or lost sleep over worry (47%). There were also 46 per cent of respondents who had experienced a lack of confidence or reduced energy levels".¹

Box 1. Sources of stress as a freelancer in medical communications

Workload

- When will I get work again?
- Why is everybody else so busy?
- How will I find time to finish all of the work that I have?
- How long can I keep up with this pace without burning out?
- How do I find time to continue to develop as a writer and deliver projects?

Finances

- Do I have enough work to cover my bills?
- How do I find the money to cover my tax bill?
- How will I afford to contribute to my pension and future?
- If I burnout, how will I cover all my financial commitments?

Work-life balance

- How do I find the time to work, exercise, and see family and friends?
- I feel unable to switch off from work
- I need a break, but if I take a holiday will the work be there when I return?
- How do I fit non-paid voluntary work into my schedule when I'm overwhelmed with paid work?

COVID-19

- How do I manage my work commitments as well as disruption to childcare/schooling?
- I feel isolated and lonely working from home as a freelancer
- My workload has changed as result of COVID-19 (e.g., cancellation of scientific congresses, shifting of planned projects)
- I worry about exposure to COVID-19 while attending meetings or meeting clients

Reliance on others

- A long-time client has moved roles and I'm worried about whether I will continue to receive work
- My client has lost an account and it has affected my workload
- I worry about not having access to statutory employment benefits (sick pay, holidays)



Leapers: the lifeline for freelancers

Given these challenges, it's important to know what you can do to manage your own mental health when self-employed. Leapers is a free and open community which supports the mental health of the self-employed. In the past 4 years, we've helped over 70,000 people who work for themselves, playing the role of a team for people without a team. Our community is a safe place to chat with fellow freelancers, make a cuppa, celebrate your little wins, ask questions to get advice, and share how you're feeling with others. We take those conversations in the community and curate them into resources and guides to support others, and signpost to valuable and effective tools we've found elsewhere, as well as working with employers to help them understand how they can support their freelancers better.

Both from our own annual research, and within the conversations in our community, we see a wide range of issues, concerns and influences that the self-employed face every day, so we've gathered our five top recommendations and resources to help. Of course, these are also available in full at <https://www.leapers.co/>, among other helpful resources for the self-employed.

1. Remember that you are your business' most important asset. If you aren't taking care of your own mental health, you're less able to do your best work. Even just taking 15 minutes a week to reflect back on what's been happening, how you've been feeling and anything which has impacted you and your work (negative or positive) will help. Keep this self-reflection in a journal, and it can really help you when you're looking back to find the common or recurring stressors, so you're more aware of your own wellbeing at work. Try setting a recurring calendar invitation for yourself, perhaps on a Friday afternoon, where you block out time to ask "How am I doing?" Use that time to also capture any consistent negative thoughts, feelings or little worries, so you can start to build up a picture of the things which you might want to tackle or change in how you work.

2. Working for yourself doesn't mean working by yourself. Find your tribe. There are dozens of fantastic communities for the self-employed and freelancers, spaces where you can chat with others, share how you're getting on, ask questions, look for advice, bounce ideas off each other, or just say good morning and make a cup of coffee. You can find sector-specific

communities (i.e., healthcare), capability-specific communities (i.e., writing) or generalised communities (i.e., freelancing). Even if you don't want to join a community, take the time to create your own support network, find fellow freelancers who understand the experience, people you turn to for specific types of questions, and even collaborators, so if you need to take a break, you've got folk who can step in to support you.

3. Rest and boundaries are really important. If there's something we've all learned over the last 18 months, it's the importance of and the difficulty in setting good boundaries between work and not work, which has been even harder if you're working from home. Establishing a time when you "switch off", routines to close down for the day, schedules of when you're not available, and consistent quality time off to rest is absolutely critical to recharge. Physical health is intertwined with mental health. That means remembering to focus on good food, good exercise, and good sleep to create a good foundation. But without rest, burnout is a risk to all of us. That said, even taking time off can cause stress, so find ways to plan time off, and clearly communicate to your clients or buddy up with a collaborator to cover whilst you're away. Even if you're not able to take the

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time off, which is a reality for many freelancers, try and ensure you're doing work which motivates you, so you're not burning out from work which doesn't align with your "why".

4. Communicate with your clients. From our research at Leapers, over half of the stressors come directly from working with others, whether it is dealing with late payments, poor client communication or behaviours, workload, or boundaries. Things will never get better unless we get better at communicating our needs and preference to those we're working with. Be clear on how you want to work, which times you're available, and anything else which is important to you, or you're seeing has a negative (or positive) effect on you. It's not about being difficult or demanding, but rather communicating how you and your client can do the very best work together.

5. Get proactive. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, don't wait until you're in crisis to seek support. Instead, start working on building up your support network and healthy working habits now, to try and avoid ever really needing to call upon them. However, if you are really struggling right now, mental health emergencies

are just as important as any emergency; you're not wasting anyone's time. Call emergency services if you don't feel safe or are at risk. If things are hard, but you don't feel at risk, speak to support groups confidentially and for free, 24 hours a day, or arrange a time to talk to your general physician. If you're doing fine, see if you can support fellow freelancers who might need a helping hand. Helping others is another way of supporting your own mental health, as there are proven benefits in being there for others, too. There are lots of amazing resources on general mental health provided by charities like Mind, or specific resources for the self-employed at leapers.co.

References

1. IPSE. The impact of the coronavirus crisis on freelancers' mental health. 2020 [cited DATE]. Available from: <https://www.ipse.co.uk/policy/research/the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-crisis.html>.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

Shaun Foley is the proprietor of Biome Professionals and declares no disclosures or conflicts of interest.

Michael Knight is the proprietor of Leapers.co and declares no disclosures or conflict of interest.

