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COVID-19: A Fleet Manager's Guide

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Introduction

On March 5th 2020, the UK had the first death from Covid-19 and just 10 days later the World Health Organisation declared there was a pandemic. Within two weeks the UK went into lockdown and social distancing measures were put in place. Millions of people are now isolated for long periods of time with no end in sight. Many have seen their working lives and incomes suddenly come to an abrupt end as the economy shrinks.

The current crisis is likely to have a major impact on fleet drivers in a number of ways. It is therefore essential that fleet managers understand the effects of stress and anxiety on fleet driver behaviour in order to manage the risks.

This guide will help you to identify the tell-tale signs of stress and anxiety amongst your drivers and what strategies to put in place to improve safety.

Fleet Driving in a Pandemic

- The speed and scale of the impact of the pandemic is having a serious effect on mental health for some individuals. Stress is a prominent risk factor for alcohol misuse and people appear to be turning to alcohol as a method of coping with stress (Clay, 2020). Alcohol sales leapt by 22% in March topping £1.1bn in the four weeks to 22nd March - an extra £199m compared to the same period in 2019. Fleet managers need to be extra vigilant to ensure that fleet drivers are not under the influence of alcohol when they report for work.

- Social isolation can lead to stress, anxiety and depression. Fleet drivers may feel powerless in the face of such a widespread threat to their health generating fears, worries and anxieties. Anxiety states may endure, especially given that the provoking conditions will persist for some time as we battle to control the spread of the virus and find a vaccine. Stress is known to influence driver behaviour leading to increased distraction and crash involvement.

- There has been a huge increase in the demand for home deliveries as working hours are relaxed and workloads increase. Large numbers of drivers are being recruited to deal with a massive increase in online orders. Emergency service drivers are also under enormous pressure putting themselves in harm's way to help others. Passenger service drivers are required to drive a reduced number of hours during lockdown and deal with an increased exposure to the virus from their passengers. Continued and cumulative stress can lead to lack of sleep and exhaustion. Fleet managers need to be aware of the stresses and strains on different groups of professional drivers, especially the effects of fatigue on driving.

- Empty roads may be a trigger for high speed driving as fleet drivers complete deliveries. An open road with little traffic can be an environmental cue for excessive speed, especially for those fleet driver with thrill seeking tendencies.

Driver Stress: What to look out for

During the pandemic event, it is common for people to feel shocked, or numb, or unable to accept what has happened. Be aware that people react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. It is normal to experience a mix of feelings. **Drivers may feel:**

- Frightened … that they will catch virus or worried about loved ones. They may be fearful about their livelihoods in the future.
- Helpless … that something really bad has happened and feel powerless. They may feel vulnerable and overwhelmed.
- Angry … about what has happened and find people/organisations to blame.
- Guilty … that they have survived when others have suffered or died. They may feel that they could have done something to prevent it.
- Sad … that people suffered or died, especially if someone they knew has been affected.
- Hopeful … that their life will return to normal. People can feel positive about things even during lockdown as a way of coping.

People may react to the stress and anxiety in a number of ways including:-

- Difficulties with sleep
- Poor concentration
- Suffering with headaches and stress related ill-health
- Changes in appetite
- Increases in alcohol consumption

These human responses to the pandemic are quite normal but fleet managers need to be aware of how changes in a fleet driver's mental health can affect crash risk. Once there is a relaxing of the rules around lockdown you need to ensure that you maintain a vigilant watch. Research has shown that after a trauma, people are more likely to have accidents.

Effects of driver stress on crash involvement

Studies by Brenner and Selzer in the 1960's first identified the link between stress and crash involvement. They studied drivers responsible for 96 fatal accidents over a three-year period and a matched control group to determine the prevalence of social stress and acute pre-accident disturbance. Social stress included serious and disturbing personal conflicts or vocational-financial crises originating during the 12-month period prior to the fatal crash or personal interview. These included job problems or financial difficulties, actual or feared demotion, promotion, discharge, or job change, as well as conflicts with, employers, or fellow employees. Personal crises were defined as interpersonal events severely disturbing to the driver which still affected the driver at the time of the fatal crash. The study showed that 20% of the fatality drivers had acutely disturbing experiences within six hours of causing a fatal crash.

Research to develop a specific tool to measure driver stress began in the 1980's so that its effects on driving performance could be investigated.

Dozens of studies culminated in the development of the Driver Stress Inventory and in 2005 the Cranfield University spin out company called DriverMetrics® was established to make the assessment commercially available. Since then, several studies have shown that the DriverMetrics® scales are predictors of road traffic crashes (Matthews, Dorn & Glendon, 1991; Matthews, Desmond, Joyner, Carcary & Gilliland, 1997; Matthews, Tsuda, Xin & Ozeki, 1999; Dorn, Stephen, Gandolfi & af Wåhlberg, 2010).

Guidance for Fleet Managers

- Administer the Fleet Driver Risk Index to identify high levels of driver stress amongst your workforce and target those that need extra support. Some drivers may be suffering with driver stress at higher levels than others and it's important to identify those at risk.

- Ensure adequate protection and follow social distancing guidelines in the workplace to reduce fears and anxieties

- Increase levels of communication with your workforce to make sure that they feel their well-being matters. Make sure there is a two-way communication process so that fleet drivers believe in their ability to create change if necessary.

- Avoid putting too much pressure on your workforce and allow them to adopt a pace that they feel comfortable with. Increasing workloads when your drivers are already highly stressed may be counterproductive. It may take a little while to return to previous levels of production.

- Brief your workforce on the expected workload within the company so that fleet drivers are able to predict when demands may be higher than usual and prepare themselves psychologically.

- Provide support - it can be a relief for your fleet drivers to talk about how they have been affected by the pandemic – so offering support can be extremely helpful for reducing stress. Bottling up feelings can make things worse.

- Be vigilant to signs of stress such as a fleet driver being quieter than usual or more argumentative. Offer an opportunity for them to talk through anything that might be bothering them.

- Be vigilant to signs of alcohol or drug use as these may be a coping mechanism adopted by some members of the workforce. Make sure you continue with random drug and alcohol testing.

- Be vigilant to signs of fatigue as people may have trouble sleeping when under stress. Manage fatigue by building in extra breaks if working hours are longer than usual.

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Dr Lisa Dorn is an Associate Professor of Driver Behaviour at Cranfield University and Research Director for DriverMetrics®. Lisa has conducted research on driver behaviour for over 30 years and has won more than £2.5 million in research revenues as Principal Investigator. She has worked on a range of EU, EPSRC, ESRC and consultancy projects particularly focusing on behavioural interventions to reduce the risk of crash involvement for vulnerable road users. Currently, Lisa is Principal Investigator on a Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation funded by the European Commission called MeBeSafe (Measures for Behaving Safely in Traffic) to develop in-vehicle and infrastructure nudges towards safer road use.

DriverMetrics®

DriverMetrics® was established at Cranfield University in 2005, to make scientific research into employee driver safety more widely available. Today, its portfolio of scientifically validated driver risk assessments, together with integrated eLearning and driver coaching interventions are used worldwide by hundreds of organisations including Unilever, Greyhound Bus, Shell and the emergency services.

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