

Furlough was blessing and curse as hospitality workers report both psychological stress and physical health benefits

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The first COVID-19 lockdown was associated with psychological stress for hospitality workers who experienced work loss, according to new research by the Pennsylvania State University, emlyon business school, and the Georgia Institute of Technology.

The study, conducted by Alicia Grandey, Gordon Sayre, and Kimberly French, compared the health of hospitality workers in the UK and US, a month before, and a month after the lockdown was announced.

Many of the participants experienced some form of work loss: 44% were on furlough, 13% on reduced hours, and 6% were laid off. Experiencing work loss was linked with higher psychological stress as a result of threatened job and financial security.

Despite these costs, participants experiencing work loss also reported engaging in more exercise and relaxation, with improvements to psychological and physical health.

“Having more time for leisure was one positive we observed, but importantly its benefits did not last. In a follow-up survey two months later, we only observed the lingering costs of work loss on psychological stress,” says Professor Sayre.

The researchers collected data in February of 2020 for an unrelated project on hospitality workers, but adapted the effort given the extraordinary circumstances. As a result, they had data on the same 137 hospitality workers a month before and after the first lockdown was imposed.

In the pre-lockdown survey, respondents rated their general health, how often they sleep, and stress levels. In the post-event survey, the participants were asked to rate the same factors but this time for ‘the past month’ during the lockdown.

“Overall these findings demonstrate the complicated reality many hospitality workers faced in the early stages of the pandemic, having more time for leisure but also coping with threats to their job and financial security. While work loss is undoubtedly stressful, our results suggest that using that extra time to engage in recovery behaviours like relaxation or practicing a hobby can help minimise the harm to one’s psychological and physical health,” says Professor Sayre.

The research was published in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology.

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