

Chronic Illnesses and Long Covid in The Theatre Industry

There is a vast range of different chronic illnesses, usually life long conditions. In most cases, they are manageable in the right environment and with understanding from those around.

However, because of the nature of these often invisible illnesses, they are rarely discussed and too often not given much thought. Often theatre workers, especially freelancers, do not feel comfortable speaking about them, in fear of loosing or not getting work.

People navigating a career in theatre with a chronic illness could very easily be supported and included if a little thought was given and conversations were opened up. Good practice is not only statutory duty, but also imperative to keep the industry diverse and inclusive of all practitioners with excellent skill sets. Reasonable adjustments are often low/nil cost.

In February and March 2021, data was collected from people with chronic illnesses and long covid across the theatre industry.

- 92% said their health affected their job.
 - Health forms:
 - 37% said they have never been asked to fill out a health form.
 - 32% said they had been asked but didn't feel comfortable disclosing.
 - 24% said they had but not very often.
 - 1% said they felt supported in the industry.
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Considerations:

Do not assume people are in the same place as they were before the pandemic. Health and circumstances are likely to have changed for many people.

When people are put under stress or in an unsupportive environment it is more likely individuals will experience flare ups of their conditions.

List of long term health conditions:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK263824/>

Long Covid:

At the time of writing this (2nd April 2021) the ONS has released an estimate that there are currently 1.1 million people with Long Covid. Symptoms and severity of this vary hugely. The majority of the symptoms that come with this are detrimental to the type of work that is undertaken in theatre, many people in our industry are and will be affected by this.

Suggested guidelines:

These are examples that are currently being implemented by companies or examples which would make theatre more inclusive and safe.

Every individual will have different needs depending on their condition. The below list is general guidance which would offer better conditions for everyone with a chronic illness and would also benefit many other individuals across the industry.

- Rehearsal schedules devised with everyone in mind - Opening a discussion between all company members regarding rehearsals before a schedule is produced.
- Appointing a member of the company or building be appointed a “welfare person”. Someone anyone could speak to if they have concerns or need support.
- Covers for the technical team and assistants for creatives.
- Thinking about ways of making interviews, auditions and meetings more accessible. Asking if there is anything that will make the experience easier.
- Two sessions of tech rather than three in a day.
- Ensuring the whole team get sufficient breaks.
- An open discussion on the first day of rehearsals. There are many examples of companies forming a circle with all company members where everyone is welcome to share anything they wish in a safe space.
- Health forms given to the whole team to complete prior to rehearsals.
- In addition to a health form, providing a space (either on a form or over email for example) for people to be able to communicate anything they would like to disclose or discuss in a safe environment prior to rehearsals commencing.

Useful links around long term health conditions and employment:

<https://www.acas.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments>

https://www.healthyworkinglives.scot/workplace-guidance/illness-absence/supporting_employees_with_long_term_health_conditions/Pages/supporting_a_return_to_work.aspx

<https://www.weshallnotberemoved.com/2020/09/15/seven-principles-to-an-inclusive-recovery-for-the-arts-creative-sector/>

The information given in this document are findings from an Arts Council funded DYCP project focusing on chronic illnesses in theatre, looking at the current situation, what can be done and what practices will help conditions.

If you would like to discuss any of this in more detail please feel free to contact:
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