

May 2019

viewpoint

Ramadan – how much do you know about this sacred month? And how can you support your employees as they celebrate?

The most sacred month of the year in Islamic culture is Ramadan. The holy month of fasting occurs during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar¹ and this year begins on 6 May and lasts until 4 June.² During Ramadan many Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, not eating or drinking at all during daylight hours.

Islam is the second largest organised religion in the world and the Pew Research Centre reports that globally there are 1.8 billion Muslims, equating to around a quarter of the world's population.³

So, given the vast numbers of people all over the world who will be observing Ramadan over the coming weeks, it's vital, as with any religious festival or celebration, that you understand how your employees will be celebrating, avoid the risk of unconscious bias and discrimination and ensure you can appropriately support those that are observing this important festival.

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How much do you really know about Ramadan?

While you will no doubt have heard of Ramadan, and have staff who celebrate it, how much do you really know about the rituals and the significance of the month for your Muslim employees?

Ramadan is celebrated as the month in which the prophet Mohammed received the first of the revelations that make up the Koran and is the fourth of the five pillars of Islam! The idea is that the month of fasting gives Muslims time to reflect on their spiritual life and is believed to be a way to self-purify both spiritually and physically. It's a time to detach oneself from material pleasures and reminds those celebrating that others are less fortunate than themselves.

The beginning and end of Ramadan are determined by the lunar Islamic calendar, so the dates it is observed change every year. The end of Ramadan is marked by the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, the “festival of breaking the fast”. This is a day of togetherness with Muslims gathering

in the local mosque or at an outdoor prayer ground for the Eid morning prayers. It is a joyful and charitable celebration with worshippers dressing in their finest clothes, adorning their homes with lights and other decorations and giving to charity before enjoying a lavish meal, often together with family and friends. Gifts and greeting cards are exchanged and children may receive presents.



Do all Muslims fast during Ramadan?

Not every practising Muslim chooses to observe the fast during Ramadan and exceptions are made for the elderly, young children, women who are pregnant, nursing or menstruating, as well as those who are ill and travellers.

If someone misses the fast out of necessity they are often expected to make up the time later in the year. With a large number of those who might miss the fast being of working age, employers need to consider that some employees may be fasting outside of the set dates of Ramadan and prepare for that accordingly. The elderly or those with serious illnesses are not expected to make the time up later but will instead pay a tax called a 'fidyah', where they give money to help feed a poor person for every day of Ramadan they miss.

How might your fasting employees feel during Ramadan?

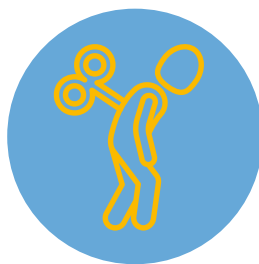
For those of us that do not celebrate Ramadan, the thought of not eating or drinking at all for more than 14 hours a day isn't a pleasant one and we would probably assume it will make us feel quite unwell. But is this actually the case? Does fasting during Ramadan really have a negative effect on the health of those taking part?

"41% of people fasting during Ramadan suffered from headaches, compared to just 8% who were not fasting."

It seems the answer isn't exactly clear. According to a 2016 study, there are both positive and negative health effects for Muslims observing the fast.⁴ On the positive side, Muslims who fast say it is good for losing weight and even for helping to stop smoking, as cigarettes are included in the fast along with food and drink.⁵

However, there may also be some negative impacts on the health of your fasting employees.

"the impacts of Ramadan fasting on health are not clear, as studies have found positive and negative health effects on Muslims observing the fast."



Feeling the fatigue

Not eating and particularly not drinking will lead to tiredness and fatigue, which can be problematic for the overall health of your fasting employees. This can be even worse when Ramadan falls in the summer months or for those observing these celebrations in countries with warmer climates. One study in Saudi Arabia found that 41% of people fasting during Ramadan suffered from headaches, compared to just 8% who were not fasting, perhaps a side effect of dehydration.⁶

Another factor that could contribute to fatigue is lack of sleep. Eating at different times of the day can lead to changes in sleep patterns and reduction of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, similar to the effects of jet lag. While studies are inconclusive as to the full extent of fasting's impact on sleep,⁷ Specialist Khaleel Ahmed says that it is the key to performance levels not being impacted during Ramadan.

"Our performance level during Ramadan may be robust enough to not be negatively impacted by the fatigue we subjectively feel. Alleviating that subjective tiredness may lie in paying attention to how well we sleep and understanding the patterns of our sleep."⁷



Fasting and chronic conditions

Even though lots of the evidence around the health impacts of fasting for healthy employees is inconclusive, the evidence is more obvious around the challenges for people with chronic disorders that choose to fast.⁸ This can be particularly bad for people who require medication to be taken throughout the day, as oral medication is also included in the fast. Interestingly, even though those who are sick can be exempt, there are still many people on medication who choose to take part.

Diabetics and patients on insulin should be particularly careful if they do choose to fast, as there's a risk of going into diabetic shock (hypoglycaemia). Conditions that need medication to be taken throughout the day, or are affected by food and drink intake, need to be managed carefully to ensure those fasting remain healthy over the course of Ramadan. An example of this was noticed during a study in Turkey, which found an increased rate of peptic ulcer complications during Ramadan.⁹

Will having fasting employees impact the workplace?

But how does having millions of Muslims fasting during Ramadan impact workplaces globally? If a large proportion of employees are fasting and not feeling their best – how might this affect their mood and productivity? This is especially important as many of those celebrating will be of working age.

“By having an open conversation about whether they will be fasting, employers can find out what support their teams would most appreciate.”

Firstly, you'd imagine that suffering from a headache could be a problem at work, particularly for people in office roles who are probably looking at a screen all day. As well as being uncomfortable and painful, when you combine headache symptoms with tiredness and dehydration, these could lead to debilitating pain that causes a productivity drop in the workplace.

Being tired and dehydrated could be even more problematic for those in manual, active jobs, operating heavy machinery, on their feet for long periods of time or even outside when it's warm. Not only can it make working more difficult, it could be potentially dangerous.

The impacts of fasting on each employee are likely to be subjective and dependent on the individual, so it is hard to say how each person will be affected by it. But given the sheer number of individuals over the world who will be taking part in Ramadan, it is in the best interest of employers to support their employees during Ramadan so they can stay healthy and still thrive in the workplace.

“It might also be worth considering offering a more flexible approach to work patterns, so those fasting can find a way of working which best suits their needs.”

7 ideas to support your fasting employees during Ramadan



1. Ensure religious festivals are covered in your corporate policies

While it might be expected that religion is covered in a Diversity and Inclusion policy, it is worth employers ensuring that Ramadan and other religious celebrations are definitely covered in corporate policy. Having a structured system in place supports employees, gives them the freedom to practice their faith and also reduces grounds for discrimination claims.¹⁰



2. Offer benefits to look after the health of your employees

As well as offering traditional benefits like private medical care, employers can look at new healthcare tools to help keep their staff healthy. By offering virtual GP services, second medical opinion providers or other digital healthcare tools, employers can give their staff access to vital medical information that can be critical for keeping them healthy during the month of fasting.



3. Educate other employees

While most people will have heard of Ramadan, will all your employees understand the significance of the festival and the reasons for observing it? Perhaps consider educating staff on Ramadan so they understand the festival and the dedication a month of fasting involves. This is a particularly important point to consider in countries where Islam isn't a prominent or widely practiced religion.



4. Talk about Ramadan

While it may seem like an inappropriate conversation to many, the TUC (Trade Union Congress) in the UK advises that employers shouldn't be shy about asking Muslim colleagues if they will be observing Ramadan. By having an open conversation about whether they will be fasting, employers can find out what support their staff would most appreciate.¹¹



5. Be flexible

If someone is observing Ramadan, not only will they be fasting and probably eating very late they may also need time for regular prayer. Employers could consider offering those fasting the chance to change their breaks from a lunch break to smaller more regular breaks and maybe start later or leave early, especially on a Friday afternoon to attend prayers.



6. Think about timings

Consider scheduling meetings and challenging work in the mornings as the effects of fasting may be felt most strongly in the afternoon. It might also be worth considering offering a more flexible approach to work patterns, so those fasting can find a way of working which best suits their needs.



7. Remember people are fasting

Remind people not observing Ramadan not to offer food and drink to those who are. Avoid work meetings at lunchtime and work events in the evenings. If such meetings do need to take place, let your Muslim colleagues know that their attendance is not compulsory.

Summary

Whatever the reason for the celebration, it's really important that an employee observing any ritual feels that their employer understands how to support them and is willing to do so. Employers should not see religious or other celebrations as having a negative impact on their workplace, but should use it as an opportunity to engage their employees and celebrate diversity. By showing they care for the needs of all their employees – without discrimination, employers can actually boost the engagement, productivity and long-term commitment of their teams.

To all our Muslim colleagues, members, clients and friends, Ramadan Mubarak!



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