



## Mental Health in the workplace: advice for managers

Line managers are faced with numerous responsibilities relating to the guidance, support, development, discipline and performance of employees, and also hold shared responsibility for ensuring the employer's duty of care for the welfare of their staff is delivered.

Increasing recognition of the prevalence of mental health issues and workplace stress requires line managers to have greater awareness of sustainable strategies that address these issues and meet the requirements of both employees and the wider businesses.

This factsheet has been put together to help managers to identify when a mental health issue may exist; it provides practical strategies to support employees and constructively manage situations, where mental health is contributing factor.

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### Recognising mental health difficulties

Mental health refers to an individual's psychological and emotional wellbeing and the way they can use their cognitive and emotional capacity to deal with life demands in a satisfactory way. This wellbeing can be disrupted or challenged by a range of factors that impact an individual's ability to cope with the demands of life; these include neurological and biological factors, as well as the impact of distressing social or environmental circumstances.

One in every four people in the UK experience mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, mood, addiction, personality and eating disorders. Signs and symptoms for mental health difficulties vary depending on the nature and extent of the condition but it is useful for managers to be aware of some of the signs and symptoms that may indicate a mental health problem:

- Mood swings
- Low mood or feeling sad
- Personality change
- Self-harm or suicidal thinking or behaviour
- Reduced cognitive function in thought processes, memory, concentration, reasoning or decision making
- Difficulty understanding or relating to circumstances or other people
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia, hallucinations
- Excessive anger, aggression or violent behaviour
- Increased intake of alcohol, tobacco, drugs or medication
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Lack of interest or motivation
- Tearfulness
- Irritability
- Excessive tiredness

These factors indicate that an individual may be going through some form of difficulty, which may or may not relate to a mental health problem. Recognising when an employee is experiencing such issues and offering sensitive acknowledgement and support can greatly benefit their recovery, enabling them to make use of available support strategies.

## Providing management support for employees

Line managers are a primary point of contact when it comes to responding to and supporting an employee experiencing difficulties. The support available to them is essential to nurture their ongoing wellbeing and there are a number of ways to effectively engage with employees in distress and offer constructive support:

- Respond in a calm and open manner, showing empathy and understanding.
- Provide a private place to talk, allowing a support person for the employee to be present during talks if the employee wishes.
- Listen without judgement and avoid making assumptions.
- Reassure the employee that their job is not at risk and that they are an important member of the team.
- Ask open questions, for example, how are things going at the moment? Or, what or who would help you to feel safer or calmer?
- Identify what may be helpful for the employee, such as taking a break or continuing with their work, or perhaps going home or seeking medical attention.
- Differentiate between what requires immediate attention and what is important; initiate a plan and clear steps to address urgent issues.
- Reassure the employee about confidentiality and explain the strict conditions on which this may need to be broken, such as a threat to harm themselves or others.
- If the individual does appear distressed, disorientated, highly agitated, despondent, lacking control or you have any concern for their welfare, arrange for a trusted person to accompany them home or to a medical professional and remain with them until they are more settled state or are receiving medical care.
- Sensitive follow up with the individual to find out how they are doing and identify what further realistic support can be offered, but avoid becoming overly involved, taking care to maintain professional boundaries.

Importantly, managers should seek advice from their HR teams, as well as their Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if they do not feel they are in a position to support the employee in distress.

Managers can benefit from consultancy and support from the EAP, giving them the opportunity to access coaching on, for example, how to intervene constructively, fairly and consistently to help employees, as well as delivering day-to-day support that will ensure line managers understand their own boundaries and what is appropriate support for an employee in crisis or distress. Importantly, the EAP will also be able to advise the line manager on how to make a referral to the EAP to enable an employee to access the most relevant services and support available.

## Promoting a positive work environment

For engaged and productive employees it is important to establish a positive work environment that enhances and sustains a healthy culture. Providing a positive workplace for all employees can significantly benefit the growth and development of a company, improving productivity, reducing conflict and increasing employee engagement.

Line managers can promote a positive work environment in a number of ways:

- Be aware of negative or judgemental language and terminology.
- Talk to employees in a matter-of-fact way; there is no reason to treat mental health issues differently to any other work related concern.
- Talk to team members openly and sensitively without breaking confidentiality.
- Encourage and support a work environment that promotes openness, understanding and respect for mental health issues.
- Establish a culture that does not tolerate harassment or discrimination.
- Address gossip or negative behaviour immediately and directly.
- Have a policy to make reasonable adjustments when required, and make it happen in practice.
- Regularly and consistently encourage and promote healthy work / life practices, promoting an environment where all employees, where possible, can take advantage of flexible hours, working from home, or job sharing.

## Employees returning to work

Line managers also have a significant role to play when it comes to supporting employees on their return to work, if they have been absent due to mental health issues. Good practice in maintaining contact with employees and making arrangements for their return to work is essential for positive outcomes and is something that line managers can deliver in partnership with HR.

Ensuring an employee's return to work is carried out in a planned, manageable and supportive manner will help to ensure it is successful in the longer term. The ways line managers can support this include:

- Establish and follow a contact plan with the employee covering who and when contact will be made to find out how they are getting on.
- Liaise with the employee, HR, OH, and employee's GP (with their permission), to agree and formulate a return to work plan.
- Ensure that the factors which created difficulties for the employee have been identified and addressed, such as workload, role and responsibilities, work pattern, environment and relationships.
- Agree an allocated support person to assist the employee on their return to work.
- Sensitively monitor the employee's progress through agreed informal meetings.
- Identify a response support plan ('Advanced Statement') that defines the steps to be taken if the client expresses signs of excessive stress or ill-health.
- Reassure the employee that they are able to express their concerns and that realistic support will be offered wherever possible.

## Useful Resources

- **Health & Safety Executive**

[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

The HSE's Website section on 'Dealing with My Mental Health' provides information for employees facing mental health issues and a comprehensive list of mental health support organisations

- **Mental Health First Aid**

[www.mhfaengland.org](http://www.mhfaengland.org)

MHFA is an organisation that provides courses to help in the identification, understanding and support of individuals with mental health problems.

Mental Health First Aid England (2007) *Line Managers Resource: A practical guide to managing and supporting people with mental health problems in the workplace* (updated 2013).

This guide provides a practical, constructive and straightforward approach, focusing on four key areas: managing an employee experiencing mental health issues, reasonable adjustments, return to work and signposting to key employment legislation.

- **MIND**

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

MIND provides advice and support to anyone dealing with a mental health problem. They also campaign to improve services, promote awareness and understanding

- **National Institute for Care Excellence (NICE)**

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

NICE provides national guidance, advice, quality standards and information services for health, public health and social care. They also provide resources to help maximise use of evidence and guidance.

**The UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association is the body that represents the interests of professionals concerned with employee assistance, psychological health and wellbeing in the UK.** Our mission is to promote the highest standards of practice and the continuing development of employee assistance programmes (EAPs) and services in the UK. For more information on the Association and our work, go to [www.eapa.org.uk](http://www.eapa.org.uk).