Mental health and the workplace

A guide for line managers

Good work makes us feel more fulfilled, imbues confidence and self-esteem and rewards us socially and financially. From a medical perspective, it is desirable to return to work as soon as it is safe to do so after any illness or injury.

Between 60–70 per cent of people with common mental health problems are in work. Mental ill health is estimated to cost UK businesses £35 billion annually and is the leading cause of sickness absence in the UK, with 127 million hours of work lost in 2015 due to mental health-related absence.

It's important to support those with mental health conditions to stay in work, because once they drop out of employment, re-entering the workplace is difficult. The employment rate for adults with mental health problems remains unacceptably low: 43 per cent of all people with mental health problems are in employment, compared to 74 per cent of the general population and 65 per cent of people with other health conditions.

So, if we can support colleagues in the right way it's not just good for them, it's good for society and your organisation. Supporting colleagues at work with temporary or longer term mental health issues in quite small ways can very often make them fully productive employees. Staying within such a supportive working environment and being productive will also assist their recovery.

Having a conversation about mental health as a line manager

Line managers are an important resource in the supporting of their employees' mental health. The following recommendations draw on guidance from the CIPD (2018) and ACAS (2018).

- Line managers play an important role in reinforcing the culture within the workplace. Take part in or support mental health initiatives or activities within and external to the workplace, which can include becoming a "mental health first aider", running mental health awareness activities, raising money for a mental health charity or perhaps being open about your own mental health challenges. This can help break down the stigma around mental health and will make it easier for employees to approach you for a discussion.
- If an employee approaches you about any concerns with regards to their own mental health, bear in mind the following:
  - ❖ That the conversion occurs in a private space where you will not be disturbed
  - ❖ Thank the employee for coming to talk to you
  - ❖ Give them as much time as they need
  - ❖ Focus on what the team member says
  - ❖ Be open minded and be prepared for the unexpected
  - ❖ Try to identify what the cause is and think about potential solutions
  - ❖ Adjourn the meeting if it is necessary to think through what has been discussed before making a decision
  - ❖ Consider what resources you have within the organisation or where you can get additional support to help you

- If you believe that one of your staff is experiencing poor mental health then you could take the initiative and raise this sympathetically with the person concerned as soon as possible. If you are considering referring this employee to occupational health then you should raise the issue with them and explain the reasons you are making the referral.
- A conversation about mental health needs to be handled in a positive and supportive manner. This can be difficult, and ACAS has developed a guide on how to approach a sensitive conversation on mental health (http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/t/6/Tips_to_approach_having_sensitive_conversations_2018.pdf)
- Ensure that you and your employees are all aware of all the appropriate support resources available. This will vary across organisations, but could include mental health first aiders at work, occupational health services or human resources. Where such support is not available or lacking, you may want to consider how these can be developed either internally or in partnership with third-parties such as charities or occupational health providers (see resources list at the end). If the employee has not sought medical help from their GP already then they should be strongly encouraged to do so.
- Some mental health conditions (such as moderate or severe depression for example) may well fall under the remit of the Equality Act. In such cases the employer may be required by law to make adjustments in the workplace such as temporarily reduced hours or transfer to a less stressful role. It is the responsibility of HR to consider these cases and consider a referral to an occupational health clinician may well be warranted.

Managing sickness absence and return to work

It is important that mental health-related sickness absence is managed proactively. The line manager again plays an important role here. The Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (2018) recommends that during the absence, line managers should keep in occasional contact with the worker, being mindful to not place unnecessary pressure on the worker to return to work. In addition, line managers should:

- Communicate any key organisation, project or team developments to keep the individual in the loop
- Focus conversations on the individual's wellbeing, while being respectful of any boundaries the individual wishes to keep in terms of the details of their condition
- Make it clear that the individual should not rush back to work if they do not feel ready, and that the organisation is ready to make adjustments such as a phased return if this would help their earlier return
- Reassure the individual that their job will be there for them when they return.

When the worker is ready to return to work, guidance from the CIPD (2018) suggests that managers should:

- Carry out a return-to-work interview to facilitate a sustainable and smooth transition back into the workplace. Here, managers should listen and empathise with their workers; discuss any issues in and outside of work that may affect them; consider a phased return to work for the individual where appropriate, and any adjustments and support needed.
- Explain the return-to-work process/procedures to the individual before they return and explain any changes to the individual's role, responsibilities and work practices
- Encourage colleagues to help in the individual's rehabilitation process, although any information to be shared about the health of the worker needs to be done with their agreement
- Remember that the return to work is itself part of the recovery process
- Remember that an employee is unlikely to be fully fit when they return to work, and will need ongoing support as well as possible adjustments to their workload to help ease them back into their work routine, particularly if the absence has been long term.

- Keep in regular contact with the returning worker and provide ongoing support to the worker, considering all the information provided in the sections above.

The importance of prevention

Work that is poorly designed, organised or managed can have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of workers. Therefore, it is important that workplaces are set up in a manner that firstly prevents workers from getting ill, and secondly prevents the exacerbation of existing mental health problems. The Health and Safety Executive has developed the "HSE Management Standards" which cover six key areas of work that should be properly managed (http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm). These are:

- Demands – issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment
- Control – how much say the person has in the way they do their work
- Support – the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- Relationships – promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- Role – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles
- Change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

A wealth of resources is available from the HSE to support managers and organisations to develop healthier workplaces. This includes the Line Manager Competencies Indicator Tool, which helps managers reflect on their behaviour, and how it can either add to the stress their staff experience or help alleviate the problem (http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm).

When to refer to occupational health and how they can support your employee

Where available you can refer your employee for support from occupational health. This could be for an occupational health assessment, which is to help you as a line manager/employer understand what adjustments you should make to support your employee's mental health. In addition, you may have access to an occupational health service which would provide counselling or therapy to support your employee in this process.

If you are in an organisation that does not have access to an occupational health provider, suggest your employee makes an appointment with their GP who can make a referral to NHS-funded mental health services (e.g. IAPT, counselling and cognitive-behavioural therapy). Most areas will have some mental health support that can be accessed directly, i.e. IAPT.

Advice for employees

Research shows that earlier identification and intervention on mental health problems increases the likelihood of recovery and successful return to work. Therefore, if you are struggling with your mental health you should seek additional support as soon as possible.

Share any concerns or worries with somebody. This can be a family member, friend, colleague or manager. This person can then help you as then reach out to your employer and/or mental health services.

Whether you tell your employer about any mental health problems is up to you. You might however find your employer and workplace to be an important source of support. Your employer might also be able to make adjustments that might help you in your work environment (Mind 2).

To support your mental health, Mind has developed resources (Mind 1) that allow you to create your own Wellness Action Plan (WAP). These help you identify and be aware of your

triggers, early warning signs and symptoms; understand how mental health could impact your performance; and to explore what support you need from your manager or your employer. The guide includes advice on how to raise your WAP with your line manager, as well as tips for how to stay well at work. WAPs are suitable for all employees, not only those who are experiencing poor mental health.

Where available, you can ask (or your employer may refer you) for support from occupational health. This could be for an occupational health assessment, which is to help your employer understand what adjustments they should make to support your mental health. In addition, you may have access to an occupational health service which would provide you with counselling or therapy to support you in this process.

If you are a worker in an organisation that does not have access to an occupational health provider, make an appointment to see your own GP who can make a referral to NHS-funded mental health services (e.g. counselling and cognitive-behavioural therapy).

Alternatively, there are a range of charities that can also provide mental health support, including:

- **Samaritans** are available to talk through anything that is upsetting you, including intrusive thoughts and difficult thoughts of suicide and self-harm (116 123, jo@samaritans.org)
- **Saneline** offers emotional support and information (0300 304 7000, www.sane.org.uk)
- **Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)** supports men experiencing distressing thoughts and feelings (08005 58 58, https://www.thecalmzone.net/)
- **The Silver Line** supports individuals over the age of 55 by providing information, support and friendship (0800 470 8090)
- **Switchboard** supports anyone identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (0300 330 0630, chris@switchboard.lgbt)
- **Mind Infoline** provides information on local mental health support services that can support you (0300 123 3393, email info@mind.org.uk)
- **The Helplines Partnership** provides a directory of all the helplines available in the UK, which you can search to find the best telephone support service for you (https://helplines.org/helplines/)
- NHS choices: Accessing Services info and Self help guidance which helpfully also advises on getting urgent support in crisis

Resources

The **Mental Health at Work** website is a collaboration between the Royal Foundation and Mind. It provides documents, guides, tips, videos, courses, podcasts, templates and information from key organisations across the UK, all aimed at helping you get to grips with workplace mental health https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/

The **Affinity Health at Work Wellbeing Hub** collates evidence and tools on a range of wellbeing tools, including on common mental health disorders at work. These are grouped in accordance for the employee, the manager and the organisation http://affinityhealthhub.co.uk/explore-evidence-and-tools/common-mental-health-problems

Mindful Employer is a UK-wide, NHS initiative. It is aimed at increasing awareness of mental health at work and providing support for businesses when recruiting and retaining staff www.mindfulemployer.net

Business in the Community is a network that provides toolkits on Mental Health, Suicide Prevention and Suicide Postvention to help employers support the mental health and wellbeing of employees www.bitc.org.uk

Mental Health First Aid England aims to train individuals within organisations to champion mental health by developing the skills we need to look after our own and others' wellbeing https://mhfaengland.org/

The **Health and Safety Executive**'s Management Standards cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health, lower productivity and increased accident and sickness absence rates. Resources on how to assess and intervene are available on their website http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/

References

ACAS (2018). Managing Staff Experiencing Mental Ill-health. http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=6064

CIPD (2018). People Managers' Guide to Mental Health. https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/mental-health-support-report

Mind. Support yourself at work - Download our Guide to Wellness Action Plans. https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-yourself/guide-to-waps-employees/

Mind. Disability discrimination. https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/legal-rights/disability-discrimination/types-of-discrimination/#.W8Ss-3tKjIU

Thriving at work - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers

PHE info graphics - at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677542/Infographic.png