



Supporting occupational health
and wellbeing professionals

POSITION STATEMENT

MENTAL HEALTH
AND WORK

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The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) welcomes the progress made in reducing stigma surrounding mental ill health in the UK, although it notes the concerning recent reversal of this positive trend.¹ That said, it is fair to say that most people in the UK feel able to speak more openly about mental ill health and are aware that they can seek support when they need it.² Employers are also more aware of their responsibility to create healthy, supportive workplaces,³ supported by a range of helpful legislation (Appendix 1).

However, SOM is keen that greater awareness does not lead to the over-medicalisation of common emotional challenges that arise both at work and in everyday life. Disappointment, disagreements, disputes and uncertainty about the future are common and may not represent mental ill health or require healthcare intervention. While these experiences and events should be recognised and supported by colleagues, friends, managers or others, we must distinguish between normal emotional responses and clinically significant mental disorders.

Making this distinction is important for employees, employers and the wider healthcare system. NHS GPs and mental health services are under increasing pressure and should remain focused on helping people experiencing mental health conditions who are most likely to benefit from clinical assessment and treatment. There is also a potential danger of over-medicalising normal distress, which could suggest to individuals that they are unwell, when in fact they are experiencing common, non-pathological responses – and non-occupational healthcare professionals are often not best placed to provide work-focused advice in the limited time they have available. The result is that problems that should be managed/solved by workplaces could lead to time away from work, which benefits neither employees nor employers.

1. **Mind. (2025).** Alarming rise in mental health stigma says Mind, as research shows public attitudes to mental health worsening. <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/alarming-rise-in-mental-health-stigma-says-mind-as-research-shows-public-attitudes-to-mental-health-worsening/>
2. **Rethink Mental Illness. (2024).** UK putting on a 'brave face' when it comes to talking about mental health. <https://www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/media-centre/2024/uk-putting-on-a-brave-face-when-it-comes-to-talking-about-mental-health/>
3. **GOV.UK. (2025).** DWP Employer Survey 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-employer-survey-2024/dwp-employer-survey-2024>

It follows that employers need to support workers to have a good state of mental health. Many lower-level, non-diagnostic, psychological difficulties can be effectively addressed through supportive management, non-complex workplace adjustments, healthy workplace cultures and early access to occupational health advice. Occupational health professionals are ideally placed to help employers determine when workplace support or adjustments are appropriate and when specialist healthcare is needed.

Good work is widely recognised as a key determinant of mental health and wellbeing,^{4, 5} consistent with the principles set out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists⁶ and the World Psychiatric Association.⁷ Psychologically healthy workplaces can reduce the risk of work-related stress, support recovery from mental ill health and improve wellbeing and work participation. Employers should focus on creating healthy workplaces that protect mental wellbeing and enable people to remain in, or return to, good work wherever appropriate.

SOM welcomes the current government's focus on reducing health-related economic inactivity through initiatives such as the Keep Britain Working agenda.⁸ When employers have easy access to occupational health advice they can support people to remain in or return to work, create psychologically healthy workplaces, and use clinical and workplace interventions according to need.⁹ The UK needs a psychologically healthy workforce to be productive.

4. **GOV.UK. (2025).** Promoting work as a health outcome: guidance for AHP leaders. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-work-as-a-health-outcome-guidance-for-ahp-leaders/promoting-work-as-a-health-outcome-guidance-for-ahp-leaders>
5. **WHO. (2024).** Mental health at work. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work>
6. **RC Psych. (2022).** Occupational mental health: Addressing patients' occupational, educational and psychosocial needs as an essential aspect of mental health care. https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/position-statements/ps01_22.pdf?sfvrsn=dad49604_8
7. **WPA. (2022).** Position Statement: Mental Health in the Workplace. <https://www.wpanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/6.GA23.10.6-Mental-Health-in-the-Workplace-Position-Statement-19.5.22-14.6.pdf>
8. **SOM. (2025).** The Keep Britain Working Review Final Report: Workplace Health Provision. <https://www.som.org.uk/keep-britain-working-review-final-report-workplace-health-provision>
9. **GOV.UK. (2023).** Occupational Health: Working Better. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/occupational-health-working-better/occupational-health-working-better>

SOM therefore calls on the government and employers to:

- Continue challenging and addressing stigma surrounding mental ill health while avoiding the unnecessary medicalisation of normal emotional experiences.
- Improve access to occupational health services and evidence-based workplace mental health support.
- Equip managers to identify and support employees experiencing everyday psychological difficulties. Managers should also be able to identify the signs of more debilitating mental ill health to refer those workers to appropriate healthcare experts.
- Promote good work as a key determinant of mental health and wellbeing, and an important part of recovery wherever appropriate. Employers should also recognise that healthy workforces work more efficiently.
- Ensure specialist mental health services remain focused on people with greatest clinical need.
- Ensure all clinicians ask working-age adults about their work and make remaining at, or returning to, work a key treatment outcome.

SOM believes employers, employees and indeed the UK will benefit from employers taking a balanced, evidence-based approach to mental health. Employers who ensure distressed workers are well managed within the workplace and help unwell workers access appropriate care are likely to flourish. Protecting workers' mental health improves productivity, staff retention and reduces complaints and litigation risk.

Appendix 1: Relevant Policy and Legislative Context

SOM's position is consistent with the following legislation, policy and guidance which promote mentally healthy workplaces and support people to remain in, or return, to work:

Legislation

- Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974
- Equality Act 2010 (including the duty to make reasonable adjustments)
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

- HSE Management Standards for work-related stress
- HSE guidance on managing work-related stress and promoting psychological health at work

Government Policy

- Keep Britain Working Review (2025)
- Occupational Health: Working Better (Department for Work & Pensions/Department of Health & Social Care)
- Promoting Work as a Health Outcome (Department of Health & Social Care)
- The government's wider agenda to reduce health-related economic inactivity and improve workforce participation

NHS and Public Health

- NHS Talking Therapies
- National guidance on workplace mental health and prevention

Professional Guidance

- World Health Organization Guidelines on Mental Health at Work