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Mental health in the workplace

An overview of mental health in the workplace focusing on supporting employees' mental health

Introduction

Mental health issues can affect one in four people at some point in their lives and have a significant impact on employee wellbeing. They are a major cause of long-term absence from work. Employers should promote good mental health and provide support for employees who are experiencing mental ill health including anxiety or depression.

This factsheet gives an overview of mental health issues in the workplace. It provides guidance on supporting employees' mental health at work, including spotting early signs of mental ill health and training line managers. It emphasises the importance of making helpful adjustments at work and offers guidance on providing specialist help for employees who need it.

What is mental health?

We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. Both change throughout our lives, and like our bodies, our minds can become unwell. The [World Health Organisation](#) describes mental health as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community'. 'There's no health without mental health' was the central and powerful message from the UK's Department of Health in 2011. In 2017 the Government published an independent expert review of mental health and employers, [Thriving at Work](#), to which the CIPD contributed. The reviewers, Lord Stevenson and Paul Farmer CBE, concluded that we are facing a mental health challenge at work that is much larger than they thought.

Our [Health and well-being surveys](#) show that mental health issues are a major cause of long-term sickness absence from work and our report [Employee Outlook: Focus on mental health in the workplace](#) found that more than three people in ten have experienced mental ill health while in employment. So it's likely that we'll be either affected ourselves by a mental health issue or be supporting someone who is.

Mental ill health can range from anxiety and depression (the most common mental health conditions) to severe mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. The websites of organisations such as [Mind](#) and [Rethink Mental Illness](#) describe the most common physical and psychological aspects of different mental health conditions.

People with the same mental health condition can experience different symptoms, and to a different extent. This means that workplace support needs to be tailored to an individual's specific needs. The [Thriving at Work](#) report makes clear that even people with a serious mental health condition can thrive at work if they are given the right support

There's a strong business case for organisations to promote good physical and good mental health for all staff. Actively promoting staff well-being leads to greater staff productivity, morale and retention, and reduced sickness absence and 'presenteeism'.

Mental health in the time of coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised serious concerns about people's mental wellbeing. The fear and uncertainty about the risk of infection many feel for themselves and their loved ones is exacerbated by many other pressures on people. Many employees are isolated because of restrictions, while others face income or job loss. Many have had to juggle caring responsibilities and work. These concerns continue to be a severe test of people's resilience, and it's clear that the future still holds a lot of uncertainty. Our 2021 [Health and wellbeing at work](#) survey report shows that since the onset of COVID, more organisations are stepping up their efforts to foster mentally healthy workplaces with wellbeing activity is increasingly focused on mental health.

Employers should ensure they have an effective framework in place to support people's mental health, and offer sources of help such as counselling, an employee assistance programme and occupational health services where possible. They need to ensure line managers in particular have the ongoing guidance needed to support their teams, so they can have supportive and empathetic conversations with individuals and make work adjustments where needed. All employees should be encouraged to have a good self-care routine including a healthy approach to diet, relaxation and sleep.

Our guide [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Mental health support for employees](#) provides advice

for employers. CIPD members can also use our [Wellbeing helpline and resources](#). There's more on what employers should be doing in our [Responding to the coronavirus hub](#).

Supporting employees' mental health at work

Employers should promote good mental health as well as providing support when an issue emerges. Listen to our [podcast on promoting and supporting good mental health](#).

The [Mental Health at Work Commitment](#) provides a framework to help organisations put in place the key actions needed to support better mental health outcomes for employees, and links to practical tools to help implement each of the six standards. Signing the commitment sends a strong message to employees as well as the wider community that mental health is a priority for the organisation. Our Mental health at work hub has resources to help implement the six standards.

The UK government has launched a [Voluntary Reporting framework](#) to support employers to report on disability, mental health and disability. This will help to ensure that an employer's approach to inclusive employment and progression is integrated across the organisation and taken seriously by managers and employees.

An [organisation's culture](#), and the extent of awareness and training around mental health, will affect whether employees and line managers have open and supportive conversations. Employers should take the key steps below to better support employees and demonstrate their commitment to promoting positive mental health.

Developing people managers' skills

Our 2021 [Health and wellbeing at work](#) survey report, in partnership with Simplyhealth, finds that 'management style' is the second main cause of work-related stress. This finding is a stark reminder of the negative impact people managers can have on people's mental wellbeing, if they are not trained and supported to go about their management role in the right way. Our practical [line manager support materials](#) are built on research showing the behaviours managers need to exhibit to engage staff and promote positive wellbeing. They will help managers to explore and develop their own management behaviours.

Good people management can help manage and prevent stress which can be linked to common mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Our joint guidance with mental health charity Mind, [People managers' guide to mental health](#), contains information, practical advice and templates to help managers facilitate conversations about stress and poor mental health. It also sets out practical steps

employers can take to create a mentally healthy workplace.

Our guidance for people managers on helping teams thrive at work has six steps, including supporting the mental health of remote teams.

Spotting early signs of mental health issues

Employers and managers should be alert to the early signs of stress and mental ill health, and know how to respond. Early intervention can help prevent issues from escalating, but employers should not give advice about a mental health issue as they are rarely qualified to do so. The websites of [Mind](#) and [Rethink Mental Illness](#) give information on potential signs of mental ill health.

Signposting to support

It's important that line managers have the knowledge and confidence to signpost an employee to more expert sources of support, for example recommending a GP visit or referral to occupational health. A fit note enables the GP to advise on the effects of the mental health condition and any changes the employer could make to help the individual return to work. Various mental health charities (see Useful contacts) also provide helpful resources for individuals, carers and employers. See more in our factsheet covering sickness-related absence.

Increasing awareness of how to access employer-funded support

Employers who offer an employee assistance programme and/or counselling services should ensure employees know how to access them.

Review job design and workloads

Our research shows that unmanageable workloads are the main cause of work-related stress. Providing meaningful work with realistic timescales will help to manage the risk of work-related stress which can tip over into poor mental health. See our [job design factsheet](#).

Promote awareness of mental health issues across the workforce

Promoting awareness and educating the whole workforce about mental health can help to reduce the stigma and replace common myths with facts.

Promote work-life balance

Long-hours working is not a sustainable way of operating and will take its toll on people. An appropriate balance between work and personal life means people remain refreshed and productive. See our working hours factsheet.

Offer flexible working

Offering more flexible working arrangements can be an adjustment for someone who is returning from work following mental ill health, and it can also help to prevent stress if someone wants a better work-life balance to suit their individual circumstances. See our flexible working factsheet.

Address the risk of suicide

Organisations should have a strategy to help prevent the risk of suicide as part of their mental health framework. If an employee dies by suicide, the impact on colleagues can be traumatic, so organisations also need to have a framework in place to support people after a suicide.

Business in the Community have a [suicide prevention toolkit](#) that organisations can download. The [Samaritans](#) can be reached 24/7. There's also the [Campaign Against Living Miserably \(CALM\)](#), a charity providing helplines and support dedicated to preventing male suicide.

Making mental health a part of wider wellbeing at work

A wellbeing policy should cover both physical and mental health. It should:

- Begin with a clear statement which commits the organisation to developing a working environment that promotes employee health and wellbeing.
- Be championed by senior management.
- Be kept under constant review.
- Outline the responsibilities of key stakeholders including senior leaders, people professionals, [occupational health](#) and employees.
- Set out the available advice, support and training to enhance employee wellbeing.
- Incorporate the process for evaluating the effectiveness of all wellbeing initiatives.

An organisation's approach to well-being should treat people as individuals with varying needs and who require tailored support. There's more in our wellbeing at work factsheet.

Recruitment

Due to fear of discrimination, or for other personal reasons, potential employees may disclose a mental health issue in their application or at the interview stage. The organisation should:

- Make clear, when attracting candidates, that it's committed to fostering a mentally healthy workplace and supporting anyone with a mental health issue.
- Make clear it's willing to make adjustments for applicants and that this policy includes people with a mental health condition.
- Ensure all employees understand the concept of adjustment and that managers have the confidence to discuss suitable adjustments.

When creating job descriptions and person specifications, care is needed to allow for reasonable adjustments to accommodate people with a mental health issue. It's important to distinguish between essential and desirable requirements for the job, and focus on what is to be achieved rather than how.

As someone with a mental health issue may not have attended an interview for some time, the organisation should:

- Allow an applicant to be accompanied and/or to have additional time to undertake a selection test.
- Appreciate that someone with a mental health condition may understandably have gaps in their employment history.
- Provide the appropriate environment to try to ensure an applicant is able to demonstrate fully their ability to do the job.

Adjustments at work

A manager needs to have a supportive conversation with the employee about how their mental health condition impacts their work and what adjustments could help. This should be a two-way discussion about the nature of the adjustment required, but colleagues should not be told the medical reason behind any decisions.

Examples of more typical workplace adjustments for line managers and employees to explore and agree together include:

- Adjustments to working hours or patterns.
- Adjusting someone's duties if some cause too much pressure.
- Providing a mentor.
- Temporary part-time hours.

- Working from home.
- Job sharing.
- Minimising noise or providing a quiet working space.
- Increasing supervision and support.

It's wise to document the reasonable adjustments that have been agreed.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[Wellbeing helpline and resources for CIPD members](#)

[Mental Health at Work gateway](#)

[Acas - Supporting mental health in the workplace](#)

[GOV.UK - Employing disabled people and people with health conditions](#)

[GOV.UK - Expenses and benefits: counselling for employees](#)

[Mind - the mental health charity](#)

[Rethink Mental Illness](#)

[The Mental Health Foundation](#)

[BACP – The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#)

Books and reports

COOPER, C. and HESKETH, I. (2019) *Wellbeing at work: how to design, implement and evaluate an effective strategy*. London: Kogan Page and CIPD.

RACE, M-C, and FURNHAM, A. (2014) *Mental illness at work: a manager's guide to identifying, managing and preventing psychological problems in the workplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Visit the [CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop](#) to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

BASKA, M. (2019) Employees still scared to open up about mental health, says survey. *People Management* (online). 13 August.

CHURCHILL, F. (2019) Workers call in physically sick to hide mental ill-health, poll reveals. *People Management* (online). 29 August.

DONALDSON-FEILDER, E. and LEWIS, R. (2016) Taking the lead on mental health: the role of leaders and line managers. *Occupational Health & Wellbeing*. Vol 68, No 7, July. pp16-17.

O'KANE, O. (2021) Is a mental health pandemic in the workplace on the horizon? *People Management* (online). 17 February.

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