

Mental Health in the workplace

Around one in four – that’s 25% of workers in the UK, **will suffer from poor mental health** at some point in their working life. The cost to business, work teams, workers and their families is high. Absences, mistakes, lost productivity, poor working relationships, uncertainty, misunderstandings and arguments, broken relationships, financial hardship and debt, the list goes on. Most workers will return to health and productivity. The employer can do much to assist and aid recovery. Also, the general promotion of wellbeing and good health can help minimise the adverse elements above.

So why don’t we tackle the issue?

As a manager or business owner you may consider a conversation about mental health is way down in the “**too difficult to do tray**” but what can we do? What are we doing to manage mental health?

A. You can talk to workers about their job.

The discussion does not have to start with “how is your mental health”? Your prime consideration as a manager is how does the worker’s circumstances impact on their job and those around them in the workplace. What can be done to improve the situation? What is the performance gap - exactly? Are there unhelpful or disruptive behaviours, mood swings, outbursts or periods of tearfulness?

The Health and Safety Executive has created **6 management standards** that identify factors impacting on workplace stress and contributing to poor health and wellbeing.

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/wbk01.pdf>

1 Demands - Includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

2 Control - How much say do the people have over the way they work?

3 Support - Includes encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

4 Relationships - Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

5 Role - Do people understand their role within the organisation and does the organisation ensure roles are not conflicting?

6 Change - How is organisational change (large and small) managed and communicated?

The HSE document provides guidance for organisations as a whole and this leads to having a risk assessment for stress factors.

Whilst recognising that there may be many factors impacting on your worker both inside and outside the workplace, **the above elements relate to the workplace, the job and others**. We suggest that this is can be a useful framework for your discussion.

The initial step addresses current circumstances, the workload; and if the employee has been absent the impact of the absences. Generally, a performance gap relates to the a) work quality and / or b) work quantity.

In exploring the current circumstances, you may communicate some observations, specific issues with evidence of any problems. Remember, you are making an enquiry as to how the person is coping. It’s not a disciplinary hearing.

At any point the worker may say they have been struggling, even breakdown or simply say nothing!

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At these stages you are looking for ways in which you can support, help and assist. Think of some practical suggestions, temporary adjustments or different ways of doing things perhaps with the support of others. Perhaps work is reassigned for a short period to avoid overwhelm.

Whatever you do – put a date in the diary to review what has been talked about. It could be “have a think about what we have said, and we will talk again tomorrow!”

It may be that a number of discussions are needed before a worker mentions that they have an underlying problem, concern, difficulty or impairment.

It's not the manager's job to be a relationship counsellor, debt advisor or psychiatrist (of course you may be able to signpost people to those that can help). Your discussion may mean that a worker will acknowledge they have wider problems and concerns. For many workers they may be trying to hide any problem from their employer for fear of what might happen. The importance of worker being able to meet the expected standards is likely a major concern for them. Working together on an agreed improvement plan can be a huge relief for all concerned.

We should not forget that managers and directors are employees too.

B. You can plan a recovery programme

One of the difficulties for managers is the uncertain nature of the recovery period. If Sandra breaks her leg, then as long as there are no complications and there is access to physio then the recovery will take between X to Y weeks. Everyone can see the problem and how the recovery is going!

For mental health and wellbeing, a recovery period is more difficult to predict and often there is no incremental straight-line full fitness.

The initial introduction of the HSE management standards in the 1990's recognised that earlier intervention and planning for recovery was very important. As a general guide it was believed that for a worker to be fully productive the recovery period could be **twice as long as the period of absence, or impairment / incapacity**. So, for a three-month absence a further 6 months may then be needed to get back to the optimum levels of performance – perhaps with some good and bad days along the way. Clearly the sooner a worker can start a phased recovery the better the outcome.

Not all impairment is the same, every person is different, and the context varies in all cases.

It will be important for the employer to obtain a report from the worker's GP or an occupational health professional. Over time updated reports should be obtained. The medical opinion can give a prognosis in respect of the likely period of absence and recovery together with suggestions on what elements should be included in the recovery plan and things not to do.

All cases are different – don't be tempted to simply do what you did for the last person.

A planned return or improvement programme needs time. A plan, implementation and review. Put case reviews in the diary. For the absent employees this might mean a home visit or mix of visit and telephone contact. Record a short file note of what was said and done and what was agreed as the next step. Confirm in a letter.

Phased returns to work, or a redeployment of a person to another job role and / or return are proven to work and be supportive of positive health and wellbeing. A manager may be thinking I haven't got time for this or “come back when you can do the job”. Almost always not managing the

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situation ends up taking more time, you have the uncertainty within your work team and often an increased cost of engaging temporary support or failing to meet productivity targets.

C. You can create a supportive working environment

Managers and supervisors can improve their awareness and spot the signs of poor health and wellbeing. Looking for unusual patterns of absence or productivity can be a useful marker. Arguments and disruptive behaviour can be a trigger point, behaviour irrational or inconsistent. Look out for workers withdrawing and / or being tearful in the workplace.

Flexible working arrangements can support changing needs. Whilst there are formal arrangements for requests, shorter periods of temporary agreed adjustments may be all that is needed to deal with specific unplanned life events.

Some larger organisations have followed an initiative to create wellbeing “first aiders” or “first responders” as a person to go to when a worker can’t cope or is overwhelmed. If a line manager has many reports or can’t be approached, then this may be helpful. However, today’s managers should expect this topic to be on their agenda. Incidents of mental health concerns have steadily increased over the last 20 years since the management standards were created. This is unlikely to change and indeed the risks for managers themselves suffering from poor mental health and wellbeing are more prevalent. For all managers better knowledge and awareness in this area can improve personal productivity and performance – both indirectly and directly.

D. Recognise the issue

If you employ enough people for long enough then you will, if you haven’t already, encounter a worker with a mental health problem. There is a risk in every workplace – can any organisation avoid the 6 factors in the HSE management standard?

Let’s be knowledgeable and prepared to tackle these issues and let us have the courage to act on what we see around us and create a workplace that can support those working within it.