MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE.

What is mental health?

We all have mental health the same as we all have physical health, and in the same way that we can be physically fit, our mental health can be in good or poor shape. Being mentally healthy, means that we can overcome life's challenges or difficulties, make decisions and look after ourselves.

Our mental health doesn't stay the same, there are times for all of us when we feel stressed, anxious or down. However, it is important to recognise when you or someone close to you may need extra support.

There are many different types of mental health problems ranging from more common problems like anxiety or depression, to rarer disorders such as bipolar or personality disorders.

Research shows that over one in six people in England will experience the symptoms of a mental health problem in any one given week and less than half of working people with a mental health problem had told their manager.

This guide is designed to help you as an employer or manager think about the steps that you can take in your organisation to create an open and supportive culture for people to talk about mental health and wellbeing in general. You may need to take further advice on the approach to a particular case.

Good for people and good for business

Looking after the mental health of your employees has far reaching benefits and the wellbeing of staff is linked to strong business performance through happy, motivated, productive and committed staff.

Implementing mental health and wellbeing initiatives can be simple and low cost, this guide introduces how organisations of every shape and size can easily implement a mental health plan.

Over 11 million working days are lost in the UK each year because of mental health problems.

The information for this guide has been sourced from UK based mental health charities, for more information on their work and to find out more about mental health in the workplace go to the list of resources in section 6.

Many of these resources are available free of charge and are easy to use. It is well worth taking the time to research the tools that are available, you could even recruit a small team of mental health champions from across your business to take the lead on this.

1. How to implement mental health awareness in your organisation

The first step to a successful mental health plan in is that everyone in the workplace needs to be on board, with senior leaders filtering the message to employees that their wellbeing matters, that it is OK to talk about our mental health and seek support if needed.

Here are some simple things that you can do to ensure that all staff are looking after their mental wellbeing.

- Encourage staff to:
  - take their lunch breaks
  - work healthy hours
  - use their full holiday entitlement
- Provide mental health training for managers

The triggers for workplace stress and mental health problems may seem obvious:

- Long hours and no breaks
- Unrealistic deadlines or expectations
- Overly pressurised working environment,
- Un-manageable workloads or lack of control over workload
- Inability to use annual leave
- Poor physical working environment
- High-risk roles
- Difficult interpersonal relationships
- Poor internal communications
- Poor managerial support
- Job insecurity or poorly managed change

The six steps below are simple ways to to identify and manage workplace triggers.

- Use your induction period: Using a free tool such as Mind's free e-learning package can be used in the first few weeks of work and shows your commitment to looking after employees at the outset.

- Promote mental health awareness among employees: Create events around existing mental health awareness, There are many sources of free information and materials that you can use to share with staff, from posters to newsletters and magazines. Time to Change have a range of free resources to help raise awareness.

- Encourage open conversation about mental health: Mental health should be discussed openly with employees, If you have team meetings, you could run sessions or workshops on mental health to help to open the conversation, reduce stigma and get the whole team on-board, asking them for their input.

- Provide good working conditions: Good working conditions can help to prevent mental health problems and support those with existing conditions. This means offering fair pay, job security, good working conditions and education and training . Encourage your staff to adopt sensible work patterns.

- Provide effective people management: It is essential that managers have regular catch ups with their employees, this helps to build trust and gives people the opportunity to raise issues. Regular one to ones, can help identify problems early and allow both employee and manager to make a wellbeing action plan, that can stop a mental health problem from spiraling out of control.

- Monitor employee mental health and wellbeing: Depending on the size of the organisation it may be possible to use tools such as staff surveys to monitor the general wellbeing of the organisation. This can help open up communications about improving support and gives staff a safe way to feedback ways that they feel the organisation could improve.

2. How to recognise if someone needs mental health support

It can be difficult to spot when someone is struggling with their mental health. However, there are a few signs to look out for, but, remember that everyone's experience of mental health is different, the important thing, is to be open about mental health conversations.

If you notice that over the period of a few weeks a person is uncharacteristically showing some of the signs below, check in with them and see how they are feeling:

- Overly tired
- Short tempered or have outbursts of anger
- Not as motivated as they previously have been
- Less social at work or isolate themselves
- Absent from work
- Not looking after their appearance as they normally would.

Some people may find it difficult to talk to about their mental health problems. Although awareness is increasing, they may be worried about people's responses. In fact, fear of discrimination and feelings of shame are among the top reasons for people not opening up to colleagues.

It is vitally important that we create workplaces where people can speak openly about their mental health and reach out for help and support when they need it.

1 in 4 people working in a small workplace, felt that their manager wouldn't be able to spot the signs of poor mental health – MIND Index Survey 2018

3. How to talk to and support employees

It can be daunting to talk about mental health at work, you may be nervous that you will offend or upset someone. However, often the first step is to just ask someone how they are doing. They may not be ready to talk, but it is important to let them know that your door is open, and you are there to give them support if they need it.

Work can be really important in the recovery of mental health, and there are some adjustments that you can make for mental health, these are just a few ideas, it is important to discuss with the individual what they think will work for them:

- Flexible working, such as, allowing them to work remotely i.e. within set days or at times
- Adjusted working patterns to allow for early or late travel
- Excusing someone from work functions that may exacerbate a condition
- Changes to break times e.g smaller breaks throughout the day or different break patterns
- Giving employees time off for appointments such as counselling
- Changing job duties if there are tasks such as customer facing work that make the problem worse.
- Extra management support or allocating a buddy or mentor to help manage workload
- Providing a safe space in the workplace where the person can go if they are in need of time out

It is important to keep lines of communication open, to understand what changes the individual needs. Never assume that you know what can make things better, but be open to making changes that can support the persons mental health in the workplace.

Develop an action plan

Managers should develop a wellness action plan with staff to proactively manage their mental health. This will allow people to plan in advance and develop a tailored solution for support at a time when they are not coping so well. This also helps to facilitate discussion, put in place agreed steps and can be used to monitor and review. The charity Mind can provide more information on developing an action plan, with a guide available for managers and staff.

4. How to support employees returning to work

Sometimes, a person's mental health problem, will require some time off work. It is important to continue to give support for the person when off work; It can be difficult for people to return to work after suffering mental illness. They may worry about what other people will think, or that they may not be able to cope. However for most people it is a positive step in their recovery.

Keeping in touch with the person is a great way to to ease the transition back to work and can make their return much less daunting. However, it is also important to agree with the person, how they would like to be contacted and the frequency.

- Ask what they would like their colleagues to be told.
- If there is a social event, invite them along.
- Send a 'get well soon' card, as you would for physical health.
- Make sure that they are kept in the loop about important events so that they still feel involved
- Communicate clearly with the rest of the team, to ensure that they understand the situation and what is expected from them.

Returning to work

Before the person returns to work, it will be important to talk to them about the steps you can take to ensure their return is successful, think about the adjustments in part 3 and discuss how these may help the employee settle back into work. This would normally be discussed in a return to work meeting, before the person is due back at work. Ideally this meeting would take place, in a neutral and comfortable venue.

It may also be useful to refer the person to a mental health charity, who will have lots of resources, information and support available to help people returning to work.

At the return to work meeting, you can discuss a return to work plan that will put in place key steps, to ensure that their return is not overwhelming or stressful, this may include, practical adjustments, on the job support and peer support. This can be written up and agreed, which can help reassure the person that their needs will be met.

On the first day back in the office:
- Met the person on their first day back
- Have a plan for the day, with jobs to get on with and a structure to the day
- Arrange a catch up for later in the day to see how they are getting on
- Arrange lunch with someone that they are close to

5. Helping employees to stay well

A wellness plan gives employees ownership of their mental health at work and the steps that they need to take to stay well, it also reminds them what their line managers can do to better support them.

Wellness plans are not just for people that have or have had a mental health problem, all staff can benefit through a proactive approach to workplace wellness.

6. Other resources

Click on the resources below for more information, advice and templates to help implement a mental health plan for your workplace.

1) Mind mental health at work

2) Mental Health Foundation - a guide to mental health in the workplace

3) Heads Together - workplace wellbeing

4) Mental Health at Work

5) Time to Change - get your workplace involved