

# Managing Mental Health in the Workplace



**“What mental health needs is more sunlight, more candour, and more unashamed conversation.”**

**- Glenn Close, actress**

**“Mental health needs a great deal of attention. It’s the final taboo and it needs to be faced and dealt with”**

**- Adam Ant, singer**

**“There is hope, even when your brain tells you there isn’t.”**

**– John Green, author**

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Over the course of your life, if you experience mental health problems, your thinking, mood, and behaviour could be affected.

Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including:

- ▶ Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry
- ▶ Life experiences, such as trauma or abuse
- ▶ Family history of mental health problems

Mental health problems are common but help is available. People that experience mental health problems can get better. There are a number of reasons why employers and managers should pay attention to Mental Health issues in the workplace. Not only is Duty of Care required, but there are many positive outcomes available to those who choose to look after employees who face the spectre of poor Mental Health.

# Managing Mental Health in the Workplace

## Look after your employees, look after your company

Once aware of health or disability information, employers have legal duties to consider making reasonable adjustments. They also have a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and preventing personal injury. However, adjustments should be made to help all staff cope and recover, whether or not they have a formal diagnosis.

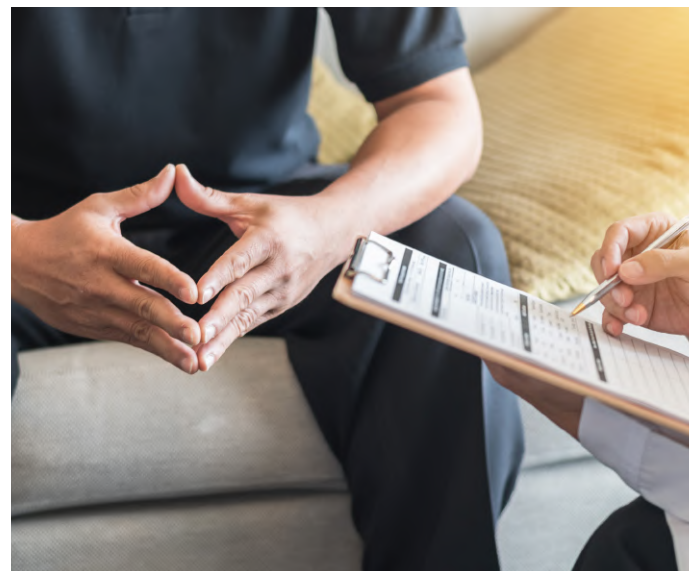
Sometimes people who have mental health problems are treated unfavourably because of their mental health condition. This is classed as discrimination and, if your employees experience it, they may have a legal right to challenge the action that led to this discrimination. Generally, employees who seek advice regarding discrimination are advised that it is best to resolve disputes informally where possible. But if they cannot sort their problems informally or by raising a formal grievance, you may find them making a claim to the Employment Tribunal.

If they are successful, the Tribunal has power to award them financial compensation (money) and/or make a recommendation (for example, recommending that your employer makes reasonable adjustments to help you at work).

So obviously it is best to avoid finding yourself sitting across the table from your employee in an Employment Tribunal situation.

Even in situations where the employee's grievance is not found to be "disability discrimination" from a legal perspective, they may still have other employment rights you need to consider.

And of course please spare a thought for the individual in question, who will be suffering from the effects of their mental health condition, in addition to being put through an enormous amount of stress and anxiety as they seek out fair treatment or if that is not possible, reasonable compensation. Take a look at the following checklists and ensure that wherever possible, these have received attention and where practical, action.



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## Mental health checklist for the proactive employer

### Does your organisation...

- ▶ Have a policy for health/mental health promotion at work which demonstrates a positive approach to the employment and retention of individuals with a disability (physical or mental)?
- ▶ Have a designated Board or senior staff member with responsibility for organisational workplace health and wellbeing?
- ▶ Collect, analyse and report on important data such as employee health/sickness absence and employee turnover rates (e.g. annual cost estimate, quarterly health audits)?
- ▶ Have access to full and effective Occupational Health Services?
- ▶ Provide access to confidential counselling?
- ▶ Survey your employees by questionnaire or focus groups to find out about satisfaction/perceptions about company culture and support in response to episodes of sickness/ workplace stress and quality of Occupational Health Service provision?
- ▶ Provide training/education and information about mental health issues?
- ▶ Have a stated objective to promote the mental and physical well-being of employees through awareness raising activity and/or training / staff induction?
- ▶ Appoint a person with a clear lead for workplace health?
- ▶ Have a mental health policy?
- ▶ Specifically cover mental health in relevant policies e.g. health and safety, flexible working, work-life balance, equal opportunities, diversity?
- ▶ Raise awareness of its duties under the Equality Act?
- ▶ Raise awareness of its duties under health and safety legislation?
- ▶ Raise awareness of its organisation's policy around sickness absence?
- ▶ Maintain policies or procedures around planning and monitoring the return to work from sickness?
- ▶ Conduct evaluations regarding the effectiveness of the above policies?



# Managing Mental Health in the Workplace

## Supporting an employee with mental health needs

According to Mind, the mental health charity, simple changes in attitude, expectations or communication can make a big difference. By focusing on what someone can do rather than what they can't do, by remembering to thank them for work done well, or by allowing an additional 10 minute break when they feel under pressure; a person might feel more able to remain at work.

They suggest some easy, cost-effective solutions:

- ▶ Flexible working hours – many people who have depression or anxiety suffer from insomnia or some form of disrupted sleep; being able to start later and finish later can reduce some of the pressure
- ▶ Change of workplace – a quieter space may allow someone to concentrate better, or they may prefer to be situated next to a supportive team member
- ▶ Allow time off for medical or therapy appointments
- ▶ Offer additional training or supervision as required
- ▶ Re-allocation of tasks or change of duties – this can be a temporary adjustment until they feel able to take on a full workload again
- ▶ Implement a formal or informal buddy system
- ▶ A Lightbox or a seat next to natural daylight can help those who with Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.)
- ▶ Working from home – this may help those who have anxiety around commuting, or have low energy levels. They might be capable of more productive work at home.
- ▶ Phased return to work, building up hours gradually

## Managing absence

If your employee needs to take sick leave you can help by keeping in touch at agreed times and by agreed methods – phone or email - to see how they are doing and offering reassurance that their job is safe.

Focus on their wellbeing and avoid placing undue pressure on them to return. You can keep them informed of any major changes at work. Access to Occupational Health services can be very helpful if your organisation has this facility.

Offer a return to work interview in which you can check their progress and agree how to manage their return – consider all the adjustments in the previous section. Explain any changes to their role or work and consider offering lighter duties initially. Agree which hours they will work and what to communicate with the wider staff team.

Once the employee is back at work arrange regular catch up meetings to that you can discuss their progress, and suggest an open-door policy so that they can raise any concerns they have.

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## Conclusion

### Talk

Despite the increase in mental health awareness, stigma is still entrenched in the workplace. Talking about mental health matters, through talking we can change how people think about mental health and how sufferers deal with it.

### Promote a healthy workplace environment

Our environment plays an important role on our mental health, and fostering healthy well-being at work can prevent problems from escalating.

### Identify mental health problems

Feeling sad, stressed or confused is a normal part of life, but how do you know when it's a mental health problem? Awareness and understanding is fundamental to identifying mental health.

### Support those experiencing mental health problems

Employers are not qualified to give advice on mental illness, but understanding, listening, and engaging in effective conversation can help immeasurably.

