Supporting mental health at work

1 . Mental health and the law

If a worker has poor mental health, it's important their employer takes it seriously and with the same care as a physical illness.

There are many types of mental health conditions, for example:

- depression
- anxiety

Less common ones include:

- bipolar disorder
- schizophrenia

Stress is not classed as a medical condition. But it can still be serious and cause, or make worse, other mental health conditions. For example, if you have stress over a long time, this might lead to anxiety or depression.

Mental health problems can:

- happen suddenly, because of a specific event in someone's life
- build up gradually over time
- be hard to spot because everyone has different signs and signals
- be hidden because many people find it difficult to talk about their mental health
- change over time which means that an employee's ability to cope with the demands of the job might change

Spotting possible signs of a mental health problem

Not everyone will show obvious signs of poor mental health and it's important not to make assumptions.

Some possible signs at work include:

- appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn
- increase in sickness absence or being late to work
- changes in the standard of their work or focus on tasks
- being less interested in tasks they previously enjoyed
- changes in usual behaviour, mood or how the person behaves with the people they work with

It can be harder to spot these signs when working from home. Employers should regularly ask workers how they're doing. They should help them to be open and honest about how they're feeling.

The sooner an employer becomes aware of a mental health problem, the sooner they can provide help and support.

The law on mental health

Employers have a 'duty of care'. This means they must do all they reasonably can to support workers' health, safety and wellbeing. This includes:

- making sure the working environment is safe
- protecting staff from discrimination
- carrying out risk assessments

Employers must treat mental and physical health as equally important.

Agency workers

When an agency offers an agency worker an assignment, they must give the worker details of:

- any risks to their health and safety – this includes mental health
- how the hiring organisation will protect them from these risks

Discriminating against someone with a disability

By law (Equality Act 2010) someone with poor mental health can be considered to be disabled if:

- it has a 'substantial adverse effect' on their life – for example, they regularly cannot focus on a task, or it takes them longer to complete tasks
- it lasts, or is expected to last, at least 12 months
- it affects their ability to do their normal day-to-day activities – for example, interacting with people, following instructions or keeping to set working times

Poor mental health can be considered a disability even if they do not have symptoms all the time.

If a worker is disabled, employers:

- must not discriminate against them because of their disability
- must make reasonable adjustments

It's a good idea to work together to make the right adjustments for a worker, even if the issue is not a disability. Often, simple changes to the person's working arrangements or responsibilities could be enough. For example:

- allowing them more rest breaks
- working with them each day to help prioritise their workload

Find out more about:

- reasonable adjustments for mental health
- supporting disabled people at work
- disability discrimination

2. Talking about mental health

Knowing how to approach and talk to a worker who has a mental health problem might seem difficult.

As an employer, if you believe a worker has poor mental health, you should arrange a conversation as soon as possible.

Helping someone to feel comfortable

Some workers might not feel comfortable talking about their mental health straight away. But it's important to let them know they can talk about their mental health at any time. This could include arranging appropriate follow up conversations if concerns continue.

To help the person feel comfortable talking, you should:

- talk to them in private
- be flexible about when and where you talk
- approach the conversation in a positive and supportive way

It might be difficult for someone to talk about their mental health. So it's important you're calm, patient, supportive and reassuring.

When talking to workers, it's important to remember that factors outside of work could also have an impact on their mental health. For example, if someone close to them has died.

Understanding what support is available

You should not be expected to be an expert in mental health. But knowing what resources are available can help workers get the support they need.

You should check what resources and support you can offer and tell workers about them. For example:

- an employee assistance programme (EAP) offering staff counselling
- mental health 'champions'
- external support networks

If a worker's mental health problem is a disability, or could reasonably be believed to be a disability, you must make [reasonable adjustments](#).

A worker's mental health problem might not be a disability. However, their job could be making it harder to deal with. You should still consider whether you can offer any workplace changes or support to help them. Changes are usually small but they can prevent workers needing to take time off.

During the conversation

If a worker approaches you to talk about their mental health, you should thank them for opening up to you. Give them as much time as they need to talk.

During the conversation, you should:

- listen carefully to what they say
- try to identify what the cause is, for example by keeping questions open ended
- think about ways to help, for example if they know about options for support at work or how to request reasonable adjustments
- reassure them – let them know you'll help them get the support they need

You could agree to take time to think through what you've discussed before making any decisions.

Terms used around mental health

Use appropriate language when talking about mental health. Language can affect how people feel and cause distress.

Be sensitive in the terms you use. Do not use words that are offensive or negative. For example, instead of saying 'suffering from mental health issues', say 'someone who has concerns related to their mental health.'

Being clear about confidentiality

You should reassure the person that you will not share anything they tell you with anyone else without their permission, unless there's a good reason to. If there is, you should be clear about who you'll share it with and why.

If you direct them to external support networks, for example an employee assistance programme (EAP), reassure them that the conversations will be confidential. However, let them know they can still talk to you about it if they want to.

If you think a worker is at risk

If you think a worker is at risk, you should encourage them to seek help.

This could include speaking to:

- a trusted friend or family member
- their GP
- occupational health

Your organisation might have an employee assistance programme (EAP) who you can:

- contact for advice
- direct a worker to

You can also tell them about external organisations who can help, for example:

- Samaritans
- Shout
- Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)
- Papyrus

The NHS provides a list of helplines and services that can support people with mental health problems:

- England – mental health helplines on the NHS
- Scotland – mental health services on NHS 24
- Wales – mental health services on NHS 111 Wales

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999.

Employers have a 'duty of care' to do what's reasonable and practical in situations involving a worker's mental health.

For example, a manager stays on the phone with someone until help reaches them.

Once the worker is safe

Once the immediate situation has been handled, you should start thinking about how you can support the worker going forward.

The worker might need to take some time off. You should:

- follow your organisation's absence policy
- agree with the employee how you'll keep in touch during absence

When a worker is ready to return to work, you should have a process to follow.

Find out more about:

- sick leave
- keeping in touch during absence
- returning to work after absence

3. Creating a supportive environment

If workers feel they can talk openly about mental health, problems are less likely to build up. This could lead to:

- less time off for poor mental health
- improved morale at work

As an employer, you should create an environment where workers feel able to talk openly about mental health.

For example, you should:

- make sure managers model positive wellbeing behaviours and use their voice to challenge stigma
- make sure workers have regular meetings with their managers, to talk about any problems they're having
- provide resources to support open conversations about mental health
- increase awareness of mental health through training and campaigns
- appoint mental health 'champions' who are trained to listen and tell staff where to get support

Being a supportive manager

As a manager, you should be approachable, available and encourage team members to talk to you if they're having problems.

Your management style should suit the needs of each person. For example, if someone is working from home you could ask them if they prefer to talk over the phone, through video meetings or by email.

You should keep in regular contact with your team to check how they're coping.

You should check:

- how they're feeling
- how their work is going and if they need support
- if they have the right set up if they work from home

Find out more about mental health support and training

Getting support for yourself

You might find that you need advice and support for your own mental health. For example, you might be under more pressure than usual to support your team and resolve problems.

It might help to talk things through with someone who can support you, for example:

- your own manager
- someone else at work
- a mental health 'champion' or network at work
- a counsellor, if you can access one through work

If your organisation offers counselling, it'll usually be through a scheme known as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

Understanding mental health in your organisation

As an employer, you should talk to managers to understand how their teams are doing. You should find out which resources are helpful and if they need any more support.

If there is an online channel where workers share updates, it might be useful to regularly check it. This could help you understand workers' concerns and areas where they need more support.

You could also use wellbeing surveys to understand:

- how workers are feeling
- where the sources of stress are

Training managers

You should train managers to:

- talk and listen sensitively
- have knowledge of mental health
- know what support and guidance the organisation can offer

Training managers can give staff more confidence to talk about how their mental health affects their work.

You should train all managers, supervisors and team leaders to make sure they understand:

- how the law relates to mental health at work
- how to talk with and encourage staff to raise any mental health concerns
- what support and workplace changes are available to workers – for example if someone needs a quieter place to work in an open plan office
- how to deal with mental health sensitively and fairly

Acas provides training on mental health in the workplace.

Trade union representatives

Trade unions and other worker representatives can help you promote positive mental health.

Trade union representatives are usually:

- trained by their union on mental health
- more willing to share concerns than workers might be
- aware of issues that could cause mental health problems
- able to work with you to promote the support and resources available

4. Looking after yourself

It's important to look after your mental health at work and ask for help when needed.

To help support your mental health and wellbeing, you can:

- stay in contact with people – talk to people you work with or friends about how you're feeling
- have a routine so you plan in advance what you'll be doing each day
- keep active and exercise
- make time for activities you enjoy
- reflect on what helps you feel more positive and what does not

Talking to your manager

If you have a mental health problem, it's up to you whether you disclose it to your manager and at what stage.

It can be a good idea to talk to your manager as early as possible about your situation and how you're doing. They might be able to help support you quickly and throughout your mental health problem.

For example, they might be able to support you with extra breaks to manage your workload. This might help prevent you needing to take time off on sick leave.

You and your manager might want to discuss changing your working pattern to suit your situation. For example, you might agree to change your start and finish time.

You can also let your manager know what kind of contact you'd like. For example, talking over the phone, having face to face meetings rather than video calls.

If your manager is concerned about your mental health they might arrange a conversation with you to see if you need any support. It's up to you how much information you share with them.

Support available through work

You can check with your employer what support is available if you have concerns about your mental health.

Employers have a 'duty of care'. This means they must do all they reasonably can to support your health, safety and wellbeing.

For example, some organisations offer counselling. If they do, it'll usually be through a scheme known as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

Your organisation might also:

- have a mental health 'champion' – someone at work who leads on changing attitudes to mental health
- have a health and safety officer or trade union representative
- offer support in other ways, such as a mental health support group, or mental health network with other organisations
- offer mental health training on how to look after your mental health at work

If you're off sick because of your mental health

If you're off sick because of a mental health problem, you should agree with your manager:

- how you will stay in touch
- how often the contact will be
- how you will contact each other, for example by email, phone or face-to-face meetings

Continuing to have contact with your employer is important. It can help:

- you stay informed
- keep your employer informed so they can plan ahead
- your employer provide you with the support you need

You should keep in contact as agreed. But if you feel you cannot follow the plan for any reason you should tell your employer as soon as possible. You should then agree to an alternative contact plan together.

For example, if you had agreed to talk face to face but you're finding it overwhelming, a phone conversation could be an alternative option.

When you're ready to return to work, you should talk with your manager about the process for when someone returns to work.

Find out more about:

- keeping in touch during absence
- returning to work after absence
- sick pay entitlement

Reasonable adjustments for mental health

Reasonable adjustments are changes an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to someone's disability.

If you need a reasonable adjustment for mental health you should talk with your manager or employer. You should work together to agree any reasonable adjustments.

Find out more about reasonable adjustments

If you're unhappy with how your mental health problem has been handled

If you are unhappy with how your mental health problem has been handled at work, you can raise this with your employer. It's usually best to raise the problem informally first by talking to your employer.

If you cannot resolve the problem, you can raise a grievance. This is where you make a formal complaint to your employer.

5. Having a policy

As an employer, it's a good idea for your organisation to have a policy that covers mental health.

A policy can help make clear:

- the best way for workers to raise any concerns they have about their mental health
- how managers can respond and support staff with their mental health

You should support everyone to follow the mental health policy. You should:

- share the policy regularly across the whole organisation
- regularly review it
- use it as the basis for any mental health training for managers
- include it in any employee induction process

You should work with any recognised trade unions your organisation has when developing and reviewing a policy. You should also check if your organisation has an agreement with the trade unions that requires you to do this.

You should follow your policy but also consider workers' individual circumstances. You might need to adapt how you support workers because everyone's experience of mental health problems will be different.

What a mental health policy should include

A mental health policy should cover:

- what mental health is and how it can affect people – including how it can affect anyone at any time and how it can affect everyone differently
- how the organisation is open and trained to talk sensitively about mental health problems
- what mental health training is given to managers and individuals
- what support is available – including where to find internal and external support
- what happens if a worker needs time off for mental health
- what the return to work process is after someone has time off
- how conversations about mental health will be kept confidential
- what a worker can do if they have a concern about how they've been treated
- how and when the policy will be reviewed and updated and who with

If you need support creating a mental health policy, Acas offers tailored support for employers.

Reviewing policies

Employers should review relevant policies to make sure they're suitable for workers with mental health problems.

It can help to consider if the policies:

- use language that demonstrates care
- use triggers points for absence that put employees with recognised and ongoing mental health problems at a disadvantage
- allow managers and employees to take a person by person approach
- are flexible to accommodate mental health conditions that might change over time

6. Support and training

You can get specialist mental health advice and support from:

- England – mental health helplines on the NHS
- Scotland – mental health services on NHS 24
- Wales – mental health services on NHS 111 Wales

If you need to talk to someone, you can contact:

- Samaritans

- Shout

Mental health support at work

Some organisations offer counselling. It'll usually be through a scheme known as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

If you're a member of a trade union, you can also get help and information on mental health from them.

A Wellness Action Plan from Mind can help employers and employees put steps in place to support mental health at work.

Find out more about supporting mental health from other organisations:

- Mental Health at Work
- NHS Every Mind Matters

If you have poor mental health or a disability, you can also get support from Access to Work.

Support for employers

Employers and managers can get government guidance on supporting workers' health and disabilities.

Find support with employee health and disability on GOV.UK

Helping someone else

Supporting others with poor mental health can be a challenge. Make sure you look after your own wellbeing.

Find out more about helping someone else from Mind

Acas training and tailored support for employers

You can:

- book a mental health training course
- do free online training on mental health awareness for employers
- get tailored support for employers on mental health and wellbeing