



Resource 4

# How to support staff who are experiencing a mental health problem

[mind.org.uk/work](http://mind.org.uk/work)



## Introduction

Right now 1 in 6 workers is dealing with a mental health problem such as anxiety, depression or stress. This can stop people performing at their best.

Organisations perform better when their staff are healthy, motivated and focused. Smart employers support employees who are experiencing mental health problems to cope and recover. The support people receive from employers is key in determining how well and how quickly they are able to get back to peak performance.

Standing by people when they experience a mental health problem is not only about keeping hold of a valuable staff member – it also sends a message about your organisation's values. All employees need to see that their organisation lives its values and treats its people well. Trust and integrity are key drivers of engagement and organisations that support staff reap the benefits in terms of loyalty and commitment from all employees.

We all have mental health – it moves up and down a spectrum from good to poor and it's affected by a range of factors both in and outside of work. Starting a conversation about it doesn't have to be difficult – we can show you how to effectively support your staff and increase employee engagement, motivation and productivity.

This guide sets out simple, practical and inexpensive steps that any organisation can take to support staff at every stage of the mental health spectrum – whether they're stressed or have a diagnosed mental health condition. The approaches in this guide are universal principles designed to support a diverse range of people across a range of workplaces. It looks at:

1. How to create a culture that supports staff to be open about their mental health
2. How to have a conversation with someone about their mental health
3. How to support someone experiencing a mental health problem
4. How to manage an employee's time off sick and their return to work

Mind is not providing legal advice but practical guidance – employers may also need to obtain their own legal advice on the approach to take in any particular case. Having clear policies and approaches for managing mental health helps organisations ensure consistency but in practice this may look different in different workplaces and contexts. For example small businesses may not have formal policies for every situation but they can still develop a clear positive culture and approach on mental health and communicate this clearly to staff.

# 1. How to create a culture that supports staff to be open about their mental health

Too often employees are scared to tell their manager about a mental health problem and so problems can spiral. A recent survey revealed that one in five people felt they couldn't tell their boss if they were overly stressed at work and less than half of people diagnosed with a mental health problem had told their manager.<sup>1</sup>

Organisations need to send a clear signal to staff that their mental health matters and being open about it will lead to support, not discrimination. A simple way to communicate this is to explain that mental health will be treated in the same way as physical health.

Organisations can back this commitment up with a clear mental health strategy and specific policies to ensure employees experiencing mental health problems get the support they need straight away. Our previous guide, *How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems*, sets out simple, practical and inexpensive steps to help you improve mental wellbeing for all staff, tackle the causes of mental health problems and boost employee engagement.

If you take proactive steps to create a more open and supportive culture, over time staff should begin to feel more confident to talk to managers about their mental health. However, it's important to remember culture change doesn't happen overnight and the individual relationships between managers and employees are the key to getting this right. If people are able to receive support quickly, this can often help steer them away from developing a more serious problem. For this reason, it's vital that organisations have clear, well publicised channels in place for employees to raise concerns and take positive action promptly when staff seek help.

Our previous guide highlighted key manager behaviours that help create the right culture and space for staff to be open and seek support. Managers need to be approachable and confident about mental health and should take steps to normalise conversations about mental health and encourage open dialogue. Regular one-to-one meetings and catch-ups are a great place to ask your staff how they're getting on and doing so regularly will help build trust and give employees a chance to raise problems at an early stage.

1. Populus poll for Mind of 2,050 adults in England and Wales in employment – polled between 6 and 10 March 2013

## 2. How to have a conversation with someone about their mental health

Work is the most stressful factor in people's lives<sup>2</sup> but often people don't feel able to ask for help when they're struggling. This silence feeds misunderstanding and prejudice which can make it harder for people to be open. This is why it's vital that managers routinely ask staff how they're doing and discuss their mental health – it helps build up people's confidence to speak up earlier on and get the help they need sooner.

Sometimes people can worry about how to approach a conversation about a person's mental health but there are no special skills needed – just the ones you use every day as a people manager like common sense, empathy, being approachable and listening. If you do nothing, problems can spiral, with a negative impact for individuals and organisations.

If you think a member of your team may be experiencing a mental health problem, you may need to take the lead and raise this with them, as people often don't feel able to bring it up themselves. Sometimes when managers lack confidence about mental health they may make this conversation overly formal or escalate it to HR or Occupational Health straight away. However, as their manager, you will know your employee best and it's important you take the lead and talk with them yourself. The way managers behave and the relationship they have with staff are key factors in shaping how employees respond when they're experiencing stress and poor mental health. It's vital that managers start this process off in a positive and supportive way.

It needn't be awkward or difficult – just as you would with physical health a good place to start is simply to ask someone how they're doing. The first step is to establish open communication (which should be maintained if people take time off for sickness absence) leading to understanding and appropriate support.

### How do I know if someone's experiencing a mental health problem?

You know the people in your team and you may notice changes in them. However, it's important to remember everyone's experience of a mental health problem is different and there may be no outward sign – this is why it's so important to create an environment where people can be open. You should never make assumptions about people's mental health but clues might include:

- changes in people's behaviour or mood or how they interact with colleagues
- changes in their work output, motivation levels and focus
- struggling to make decisions, get organised and find solutions to problems
- appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn and losing interest in activities and tasks they previously enjoyed
- changes in eating habits, appetite and increased smoking and drinking.

2. Populus poll for Mind of 2,060 adults in England and Wales in employment - polled between 6 and 10 March 2013

## How to have a conversation with an individual about their mental health

1. **Choose an appropriate place** – somewhere private and quiet where the person feels comfortable and equal. Possibly a neutral space outside of the workplace. If they are a remote worker, consider whether going to where they are may help.
2. **Encourage people to talk** – people can find it difficult to talk about their mental health but it helps to have an open culture where conversations about mental health are routine and normalised. Ask simple, open and non-judgmental questions and let people explain in their own words how their mental health problem manifests, the triggers, how it impacts on their work and what support they need.
3. **Don't make assumptions** – don't try to guess what symptoms an employee might have and how these might affect their ability to do their job – many people are able to manage their mental health and perform their role to a high standard but may require support measures when experiencing a difficult period.
4. **Listen to people and respond flexibly** – everyone's experience of a mental health problem is different so treat people as individuals and focus on the person, not the problem. Adapt your support to suit the individual and involve people as much as possible in finding solutions to any work-related difficulties they're experiencing. Remember effective workplace adjustments are often quite individual but needn't be costly or require huge changes.
5. **Be honest and clear** – if there are specific grounds for concern, like high absence levels or impaired performance, it's important to address these at an early stage.
6. **Ensure confidentiality** – people need to be reassured of confidentiality. It's sensitive information and should be shared with as few people as possible. Create strict policies to ensure this. Discuss with the individual what information they would like shared and with whom. For further information on data protection see the [Information Commissioner's Office](#).
7. **Develop an action plan** – work with your employee to develop an individual action plan which identifies the signs of their mental health problem, triggers for stress, the possible impact on their work, who to contact in a crisis, and what support people need (see next section). The plan should include an agreed time to review the support measures to see if they're working.
8. **Encourage people to seek advice and support** – people should speak to their GP about available support from the NHS such as talking therapy. If your organisation has an Employee Assistance Programme it may be able to arrange counselling. The Mind Infoline can signpost people on to support and our network of local Minds across the country can also help source advice and support.
9. **Seek advice and support yourself** – the Mind Infoline and local Minds can provide information to employers too. Occupational Health (if you have it) can provide tailored advice to support both employers and employees. If relationships have become strained or confrontational mediation can help – some local Minds run mediation services, as do ACAS. Small businesses can access the free [Health for Work Adviceline](#) service provided by NHS occupational health services.
10. **Reassure people** – people may not always be ready to talk straight away so it's important you outline what support is available, tell them your door is always open and let them know you'll make sure they get the support they need.

### 3. How to support someone experiencing a mental health problem

Now you've opened up a dialogue with your employee about their mental health the priority is to develop positive steps to address the key issues they're struggling with. Clear policies on workplace adjustments are crucial to support staff to cope and recover and reduce the length of mental health related sickness absence.

These steps are generally quite small and simple adjustments to someone's job role or extra support from their manager. Often the necessary change is one of attitude, expectations or communication – rather than a major change or significant cost. However, effective steps tend to be very individual. For this reason it's vital you have a meaningful conversation with your employee about their needs and really listen to them.

- Be positive – focus on what employees can do, rather than what they can't.
- Work together and involve people in finding solutions as much as possible.
- Remember people are often the expert when it comes to identifying the support or adjustment they need and how to manage their triggers for poor mental health.

While voluntary and agreed adjustments are supportive, it's important that people are not treated differently or asked to do things that others are not required to e.g. keeping extra-detailed timesheets. Being micro-managed or made to account for all of your time can be counter-productive and damage peoples' self-esteem. It may also be discriminatory.

In some cases people may be unable to identify appropriate adjustments themselves so you may need to try some out. The best approach here is to decide on positive action and regularly monitor and review this to check it's working, further tweaking the approach if necessary.

#### Case studies – simple, practical and inexpensive changes

Sita was experiencing anxiety and needed the reassurance of her boss regularly acknowledging her work, saying 'thank you' and greeting her in the morning. Otherwise she worried she'd done something wrong.

Simon takes his lunch break in three 20-minute slots over the day to manage his mental health and take time out when he's feeling under pressure.

Alison experienced a family bereavement and was struggling with phone calls from the public which can be challenging and emotional. A temporary adjustment was put in place so another team member could field her calls for a period until she felt able to manage external contact again.

Some organisations have policies on leave of absence and extra leave to enable staff who are experiencing a personal crisis to take some time away from work. A short period of unpaid leave can be effective in supporting people experiencing situational depression – e.g. triggered by bereavement or relationship breakdown.

## Workplace adjustments

Adjustments for mental health are generally simple, practical and cost-effective. This is not an exhaustive list – employers should explore with the individual their specific needs and be as creative as possible when thinking about how to address these issues.

### Changes to how people perform their role

- Flexible hours or change to start/finish time. For shift workers not working nights or splitting up their days off to break up the working week can also help
- Change of workspace – e.g. quieter, more/less busy, dividing screens
- Working from home (although it's important to have regular phone catch ups so people remain connected and don't feel isolated)
- Changes to break times
- Provision of quiet rooms
- Light-box or seat with more natural light for someone with seasonal depression
- Return-to-work policies e.g. phased return – reduced hours gradually building up
- Relaxing absence rules and limits for those with disability-related sickness absence
- Agreement to give an employee leave at short notice and time off for appointments related to their mental health, such as therapy and counselling.

### Changes to the role itself (temporary or permanent)

- Reallocation of some tasks or changes to people's job description and duties
- Redeployment to a more suitable role
- Training and support to apply for vacancies and secondments in other departments.

### Extra support

- Increased supervision or support from manager. For example, some people can take on too much so may need their manager to monitor their workload to prevent this and ensure they're working sensible hours
- Extra training, coaching or mentoring
- Extra help with managing and negotiating workload
- More positive and constructive feedback
- Debriefing sessions after difficult calls, customers or tasks
- Mentor or 'buddy' systems (formal or informal)
- Mediation can help if there are difficulties between colleagues
- Mental health support group or disability network group
- Self-referral to internal support available
- Identifying a 'safe space' in the workplace where the person can have some time out, contact their buddy or other sources of support and access self-help
- Provision of self-help information and sharing approaches and adjustments that have proven effective at supporting others
- Encourage people to work on building up their resilience and doing things that support good mental health such as exercise, meditation or eating healthily
- Encourage people to be more aware of their mental state and reflect on what factors affect it in the workplace
- Provide regular opportunities to discuss, review and reflect on people's positive achievements – this can help people to build up positive self-esteem and develop skills to better manage their triggers for poor mental health.

## Legal duties

Remember, 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. For information about when an employer may have a duty to make adjustments to someone's job role, see [Mind's legal briefing on disability discrimination in employment](#).

## On-the-job support

From time to time we all need extra practical support or reassurance from managers. This on-the-job support is often key to supporting people's mental health by helping them cope with challenges they're experiencing at work. If you follow the steps in the previous section you should have a positive conversation with your employee, leading to mutual agreement on key practical support measures. It's vital that support measures are decided by managers and employees together as people usually know their own mental health and needs best. Other staff such as HR can also help you develop appropriate support.

The goal for managers should be to help people feel trusted and capable and provide a sense of supported empowerment. Sometimes managers can micromanage staff who are experiencing a mental health problem or take away all challenging and meaningful work responsibilities from them. This can often be counter-productive because if people don't feel their work is meaningful they can lose motivation. Self-esteem and anxiety issues can also be exacerbated when people feel their abilities aren't being trusted.

On the other hand employees don't want their manager to be distant when they're struggling. Managers should continue to give employees work that is challenging and engaging but at the same time it's important to be there to offer support. The only way to get the balance right is to maintain regular communication, keep asking people what works for them and tweaking your level of support and involvement in response.

It's also important that all staff are trained in issues relating to mental health so employees who have mental health difficulties do not experience prejudice or discrimination and are appreciated for the contribution they make in the workplace. In some cases an independent support worker may also help support staff.

## Example of on-the-job support

When people feel under pressure they can find it hard to prioritise their workload. Flexible working hours and increased one-to-one supervision can help people better manage their time and plan and prioritise. Some people find a regular surgery-style trouble-shooting session with their manager helpful. You can go through the person's to-do-list together to coach them on how to approach challenging tasks. This can act as a useful pressure valve to help people regain confidence and cope with challenges.

## Other forms of support

Not all support comes from line managers or HR. Our guide, *How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems*, has lots of useful ideas about workplace policies and initiatives that promote positive working relationships and help colleagues support one another. Peer support, buddy systems and mentoring, staff forums, diversity networks and mental health

and other support groups can all support good staff mental health in this way.

## Developing an action plan

Organisations should support managers to work together with staff to develop a personal action plan to proactively manage their mental health. This allows people to plan in advance and develop tailored support for a time when they're not coping so well. It also facilitates open dialogue with managers – leading to practical, agreed steps which can form the basis for regular monitoring and review. An action plan should cover:

- symptoms, early warning signs and triggers
- potential impact of people's mental health problem on their performance
- what support they need from their line manager
- positive steps for the individual to take.

All staff should be offered a personal action plan. This sends a clear message that employee wellbeing matters to the organisation and encourages early disclosure.

## Case study: simple changes

Chloe was experiencing depression. Fearing the worst, she disclosed her condition but found that her boss did everything to support her by offering:

- weekly catch ups to prioritise her workload
- flexible working
- afternoon naps to cope with the side effects of medication.

This aided Chloe's speedy recovery and ability to stay in work.

*"It doesn't feel like I've been punished for being depressed, it almost feels like I've been rewarded for being honest."*

## 4. How to manage an employee's time off sick and their return to work

Sometimes an employee may be so unwell they need time off work to recover. The way organisations manage a period of sickness absence is key in shaping how well and how quickly people are able to return to work and get back to peak performance. To effectively support staff to recover and return to work as quickly as possible employers should:

- be proactive and get involved as early as possible if someone is unwell
- take a person centred approach and be sensitive to the individual's needs
- be positive, professional and supportive throughout the process
- maintain contact with people throughout their sickness absence.

Organisations and managers should refer to the ten steps outlined in section two to shape a supportive approach to a member of staff who is off sick. Early intervention is vital – employees' mental health problems are much more likely to become recurrent or long-term if not addressed promptly, with a negative impact for the individual and the organisation.

It's important to keep lines of communication open. Managers sometimes lack confidence or worry about doing or saying the wrong thing. As a result they can be reticent about maintaining contact with staff, but it's vitally important they do so. Some organisations provide role play scenario training to build

managers confidence so they can proactively manage these conversations in a way that leads to greater understanding and support.

Organisations will have policies on sickness absence and return to work. These should make it clear people must be treated equally whether their sickness absence is for a mental health or physical health problem. Organisations should support managers in this – for example HR can provide advice and support about how best to maintain contact during an employee's sickness absence so managers can positively manage their smooth return to work. If the relationship has broken down with the manager, make sure the person leading the contact is someone who knows the employee and has a good relationship with them.

The way employers manage a period of sickness absence also sends a message about the organisation's values that has a wider impact than simply on the individual. Trust and integrity are key drivers of engagement and organisations that support staff reap the benefits in terms of loyalty and commitment from all employees. If sickness absence is managed poorly, the relationship between employee and employer can break down. In some cases people may lose confidence to return to work – leading to the loss of a valuable member of staff and damaging morale across the organisation.

## Tips for managers – while an employee is off sick

- Send a 'get well soon' card as you would with a physical health problem
- Be clear the organisation will support people during their absence and reassure them their job will be there when they return
- Maintain regular open and meaningful communication with people – agree together the frequency of contact early on and confirm this in writing
- Take your lead from how people choose to communicate – whether by phone, email, text or face-to-face – and keep checking that the current arrangement is still working for people
- Have an open-door policy so the person can approach you with any concerns
- Ask how people are doing and focus conversations on their well-being
- Make it clear people should not rush back to work or push themselves too much
- Consider visiting the employee at home, but only with their consent
- Staying in touch with friends can support people's smooth return so encourage work colleagues to keep in touch
- Keep people in the loop about important developments at work so they still feel connected
- Regularly communicate with HR/ Occupational Health, act on their recommendations and keep people informed
- Agree what information they would like shared with colleagues – close colleagues will want to know how they are getting on
- Communicate clearly with the team and ensure they understand the situation. If they have to pick up extra work it's vital this is managed well. There may be uncertainty about if or when their colleague may return. If colleagues feel the person is receiving unfair special treatment this needs to be constructively challenged
- If there are grievances or other concerns raised, work to resolve these as quickly as possible and keep people informed of progress.

## Preparing for an employee's return to work

When people are ready to return to work managers should arrange to meet up in a neutral comfortable venue to catch up and discuss the details of their return together.

An effective return-to-work interview is vital to build trust and engagement with the employee and support their smooth and sustainable return to work. By following

the key principles outlined in section two you should have a productive conversation leading to a return-to-work plan that identifies positive steps to support their return.

If the person is not yet open about their mental health, the interview is a great opportunity to explore with them what factors are contributing to their absence and to identify if they have an underlying mental health problem.

## Tips for the return-to-work interview

- Tell people they were missed
- Explain the return-to-work process/procedures
- Reassure people they are not expected to walk straight back into full time hours or to manage a full-time workload
- Ask the employee how they're feeling
- Use open questions that require more than just a 'yes' or 'no' answer and give people lots of space and time to talk
- Listen and try to empathise with the employee
- Ask if there are any problems at work that might be causing them stress
- Ask if there are difficulties outside work that might be contributing to their absence
- Discuss the person's mental health problem and the possible impact on their work
- Discuss possible solutions and ensure you are aware of sources of available support
- Discuss any worries the person has about returning to work, reassure them that this is normal and agree a strategy to address these concerns together
- Try to prepare people for how they may feel on their return and also to think about how they want to manage their return e.g. what they want to say to colleagues
- Understand that despite looking fine, someone may still be unwell.

## Return-to-work plan

It's absolutely vital an employee's return to work is managed well. If it's too pressurised or overwhelming, there is a risk they may find it stressful and may then go on sick leave again. A return-to-work plan is a key tool to help you manage this process. It should address the person's health needs and ensure their return to work is supported through appropriate agreed steps (outlined in section three) for employees and managers to take. This may include:

- practical steps and workplace adjustments
- on-the-job support from line manager and HR
- other forms of support such as peer support.

Discussing these steps in advance with people and producing a written plan together will help reassure people their needs will be met on their return. Doing so helps managers and employees to identify what is expected of each person and to reduce anxieties either person may have. Having a written plan also helps you to monitor and review the approach and actions you've each committed to – in order to check they are working as intended. If not, further alterations can be discussed.

## The first day back at work

The first day back at work is very important. Managers should try to make this as smooth as possible. People can often feel anxious about returning to work. They may feel self-conscious about something that happened before they went off sick or feel they've let colleagues down. You should decide together beforehand what colleagues will be told. People may like to be met at the door or to travel in together. Managers may also want to check that the employee has plans for lunch – possibly with a colleague they are close to.

## Tips for managers – when people return to work

- Meet the individual on their first day back
- Have a plan for the person's first day to ensure they feel included and welcomed e.g. in lunch plans
- Discuss if there are particular tasks, responsibilities or relationships that people are apprehensive about and consider temporary changes to their role during their initial return to work to help manage this
- Explore potential return-to-work adaptations with an open mind
- Explain any recent changes that affect the individual's role, responsibilities and work practices
- Incorporate a phased return to work for the individual, if appropriate
- Make the individual's first few weeks back at work as low-stress as possible
- Involve a 'buddy' – someone they are friends with – to help people reintegrate into the workplace, involve them in tea rounds and lunch plans and also bring them up to speed on any changes to how things are done in the organisation e.g. changes to staff, systems or processes
- Promote a positive team spirit and encourage colleagues to make sure the person feels welcome and their return is comfortable
- Colleagues are often unsure if it's ok to ask how people are but, just as with a physical health problem, most people appreciate being asked how they're doing
- Keep in regular contact with the returning employee and regularly ask how they are
- Ensure there are regular on-going opportunities to monitor and review what's going well and what's not going well, to make sure the support / adjustments are helping and to tweak these if they aren't quite right.

## How to help employees plan to stay well

Once people are well, it can be easy to forget what they've learned about factors that affect their mental health. However, it's vital to help people reflect on this and develop a plan to promote positive, healthy behaviours.

Counsellors often suggest that people produce a plan that outlines their triggers and signs.

Signs might include things like smoking, not looking after yourself, working long hours, stopping seeing your friends, stopping exercising or eating poorly. Keeping an up-to-date action plan (see section 3) can help people to monitor their mental health when they return to work and take necessary practical steps to minimise the possibility of poor mental health developing once again.

## Further resources

We have produced a series of free resources to help improve mental wellbeing in the workplace which you can read online or download at [www.mind.org.uk/for-business](http://www.mind.org.uk/for-business)

### Introduction to mentally healthy workplaces

Helps you to understand the relationship between good employee mental health and getting the best out of your staff. It will help you to start thinking about what you already do to support mental health in your workplace, what impact this has and how to build on it.

### How to take stock of mental health in your workplace

A resource for line managers and HR professionals which provides practical advice on how to collect vital information about your employees' wellbeing in a joined-up and comprehensive way.

### How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems

Sets out simple, practical and inexpensive steps that line managers and HR teams can take. It is designed to help you create a more open and supportive culture, improve mental wellbeing for all staff, and boost employee engagement.

### Guide for small businesses

Produced in partnership with the Federation of Small Businesses, this guide offers advice to small businesses on managing mental health and supporting staff.

### Webinars

We have held a number of interactive webinars where our panel of employers and mental health experts respond to questions about how to create mentally healthy workplaces. Visit [www.mind.org.uk/for-business](http://www.mind.org.uk/for-business)

### Mind Workplace

Mind Workplace offers a wide range of training courses designed to improve mental health awareness and equip staff to deal with specific situations in the workplace. Visit [www.mind.org.uk/for-business/training-consultancy/](http://www.mind.org.uk/for-business/training-consultancy/) for more information.



## We're Mind, the mental health charity.

We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give support and advice, and fight your corner.

Our Taking Care of Business campaign aims to give employers simple, inexpensive and practical ways to improve mental wellbeing and employee engagement.

[mind.org.uk/work](http://mind.org.uk/work)  
[work@mind.org.uk](mailto:work@mind.org.uk)

## Support us

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Help us make change happen. Be part of our work. Become a Mind member today.  
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