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Guide to managing mental health in the workplace

The impact of mental health is playing an increasingly pivotal role within the workplace.

Developing an understanding of mental health from the outset for both employees and management can help to avoid any potential issues further down the line.

When we use the term mental health, we're referring to a combination of our emotional, physical, psychological and social well-being.

As a result, our mental health is directly correlated to how we think, feel and act. Mental health can also affect how an individual handles stress and performs in stressful situations, including how they may interact with others and the decisions they then make.

There are four main objectives to consider when it comes to correctly handling mental health within the workplace:

- Identifying any issues and recognising any warning signs that may arise
- Having the ability to handle staff absences due to mental health
- Understanding the associated legal implications
- Putting into place any reasonable adjustments with the aid of specific tools (e.g. stress questionnaires or wellness action plans) to manage mental health

This guide aims to provide you with an overview of each of these objectives.



Identification

Behavioural changes can be the first sign that something is amiss when it comes to mental health. You may notice a change in the mood or temperament of the person in question – do they appear to be more distracted than usual, looking and acting more distant when you speak to them? Or perhaps they seem to be more irritable or tired?

Other signs to look out for include providing short answers to questions (in a bid to avoid conversation) and/or general changes to their appearance or the way they usually present themselves.

Whilst it is often easy to identify negative changes in behaviour, there may also be less obvious signs, for example, an employee being much happier or chattier if this is out of character.

In addition to behaviour, changes to performance may also be identified. These could include making mistakes, missing deadlines or not completing/forgetting tasks, not working with the team, taking extended breaks or leave.

The specific traits seen will vary from person to person, but all could be signs of a change in mental health that may need to be addressed.

Staff absences

Poor mental health is a leading cause of long-term absences within the workplace for many companies, with over 4 million people being affected. The percentage of men is also significantly higher than women – with 76% of men being affected when compared to 24% of women.

Mental health issues can take an emotional toll on those in the workplace, as well as having a physical cost too. The annual cost of mental ill health is estimated to be in the region of between £33-42 billion, with presenteeism costing £17-26 billion and absenteeism £8 billion.

It is common for employees to hide mental health conditions and report other reasons for time off work. It is also common for employees to experience poor physical health when they are experiencing poor mental health and vice versa and so it is important to keep an open mind when dealing with employee absence and trying to do everything you can to create an open environment which encourages honesty.

Legal Implications

When it comes to mental health, there are various factors to be aware of legally. Discrimination claims in line with the Equality Act 2010 and unfair/constructive dismissals should all be taken into consideration.

The term “disability” under the s6(1) Equality Act 2010 refers to a physical or mental impairment which has a significant long-term adverse effect on the ability of an individual to carry out standard daily activities. Please note that long-term refers to an effect that has lasted/is likely to last for 12 months or is a recurring issue. This act also includes past disabilities.



In practice, this definition applies to how a condition would impact an employee if they were not taking any medication or receiving any treatment for the condition they suffer from.

A good example is migraines. Many employees will suffer from migraines and often employees will take medication to prevent them or limit the extent of them. From a discrimination perspective, an Employment Tribunal, if having to determine whether the employee had a disability in line with the Equality Act, would have to look at what the impact on the employee would be if they did not take any medication at all.

There are many impairments that are classed as disabilities, including developmental conditions (autistic spectrum disorders, dyslexia and dyspraxia), learning disabilities, mental health conditions displaying symptoms including (but not limited to) anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, eating disorders, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, self-harming behaviours and mental illnesses (e.g., depression and schizophrenia).

There are also conditions which are automatically regarded as disabilities from diagnosis such as cancer whether or not they meet the legal test.

Correctly managing mental health can help to avoid legal claims and any associated costs, improve productivity, morale and staff engagement/retention and help to prevent absences and reduce the cost of sick pay.

Reasonable adjustments in the workplace

Making reasonable adjustments within the workplace is the duty of an employer when either a provision/criterion/practice, a physical feature of the premises used or the failure to provide an auxiliary aid puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage when compared to a non-disabled individual.

In such instances, steps must be taken to minimise the impact of any disadvantage or provide necessary auxiliary aid.

There are many ways to do so, such as:

- Making adaptations to working hours such as allowing the employee to go part-time or taking longer/more frequent breaks
- Offering more flexibility over their role or workplace if they are able to work from home at all
- Changing the role/duties carried out
- Physical changes to the workplace
- Additional support and mentoring
- Accepting a higher absence rate/increased flexibility with absence reporting
- Paid time off to allow for doctor appointments/counselling
- Putting an early warning system in place in line with a wellness action plan

Managing absences due to mental health issues

If an employee is displaying signs of poor mental health, a health review process should be carried out. An informal meeting should be arranged, with the aim of an increased understanding of their condition and what (if any) assistance has been carried out thus far should be considered. Look at whether any external support may be beneficial or any



adjustments need to be put in place. You can then decide what follow up actions are required and set a review period. This should be done alongside keeping communication channels open throughout the process.

The link between stress and mental health

There are multiple causes of stress within the workplace, and although stress in itself is not classified as a disability, a stress-related condition could be.

Addressing stress early on is the best way to prevent the onset of a resultant mental health condition, such as those mentioned previously. Tools that may be useful include both Stress Risk Assessments and Stress Questionnaires.

Wellness Action Plans may also be a consideration, acting as a personalised, pro-active approach to the prevention of illness and/or absences by aiding employees in managing their mental health and wellbeing within the workplace. These plans should focus on specific questions that cover areas such as the work environment and discuss strategies that work when it comes to mental health (and those that don't).

Correctly managing mental health is conducive to a productive workforce and an engaging and inviting workplace.

If you would like to discuss the impact of mental health within your company, or have questions on anything you have read, please do get in touch.