

MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH



It's well known that around 1 in 4 people experience mental health disorders each year in the UK.

Common mental health problems (CMHPs), which include, stress, anxiety and depression, contributed to around 17.6 million sick days across the UK in 2015 (mentalhealth.org.uk, 2019). Calculating average salaries across the UK this equates to nearly £2.5bn lost in sick days alone. That doesn't even include the costs to the wider economy, NHS, family lost days etc.

CMHPs impact work life not just in sick days, but in performance, delivery, drive and engagement. People across the team can be affected and, if people in the team don't understand it, they may become frustrated with the individual, and can even contribute to making it worse.

It's therefore important for both managers and their teams to understand enough about CMHPs so they don't make things worse. Additionally, it's a huge benefit (to the individual struggling and the organisation, as well as all those around them) if people know how to help and know how to approach CMHPs in the workplace.

This article aims to provide some useful tips in dealing with common mental health problems at work, with pointers on where to go for additional resource and support.

PREVENTION

It's appropriate to recognise that some conditions can more often lead to mental health problems, such as living alone, poor physical health and diet, lack of sleep, use of alcohol and drugs, and 'burning the candle at both ends'.

Of course, it's not always possible to impact these, but as an employer, it's recommended that you encourage rest, healthy lifestyle and diet for the sake of people's mental wellbeing.

Things employers/managers can do include:

- Encouraging consumption of healthy snacks instead of chocolate and biscuits
- Engage people in lunchtime team walks or exercise to get them (and you) out of the office, socialising and exercising (all proven to be good activities for strong mental health)
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- At the very minimum, get people to leave their desks for at least 30 minutes (better if it's 60 minutes) over lunchtime, don't let people eat at their desks, yes, occasionally this could be necessary, but if it's happening often then it's likely to negatively impact their productivity
- Encourage after work exercise such as running, walking, gym or classes

- Encourage voluntary activities both in and out of work – getting involved in charity work and giving back helps lift people's mood, gives a sense of purpose and also supports the local community

In addition to this, managers and teams can continually work on their team cohesion by:

- Team meetings that focus on people as well as task – get to know one another, team skills, team concerns and fears, help them learn how to support one another
- Occasionally socialise as a group in your team, whether that includes going out for lunch or after work, get people to connect on a deeper level than just work
- Make sure roles within the team are clearly defined so people know where and when to get support and from who

There are many more things managers can do to support their teams and individuals to help prevent CMHPs at work. However, as we all know, mental health isn't just about work, and at the end of the day we have no control over other people's situations. So, what can you do to help your people if they struggle with a CMHP?

RECOGNISING CMHPs

Recognising the early signs of mental health problems can help prevent them all together, common signs include:

- Shortness of temper
- Negative language – especially if usually they are positive
- Low energy and tiredness
- Arriving late to work/meetings when they used to be on time
- A sudden drop in performance

There can be other signs of someone struggling with mental health and it's important to get to know your people, develop strong work relationships with them and talk often to help identify if something changes in their behaviour that could be linked to mental health problems.

MANAGING PEOPLE WITH CMHPS

Mental ill health is the same as physical ill health, sometimes it's a case of time, a bit of support and patience that enables it to heal on its own. Other times more planned interventions may be needed, a bit of brain 'physio' (talking to someone/professionals) can help and sometimes medical interventions such as medication might be needed. But, one common requirement of all CMHPs is the need for understanding from those around, and sadly, this is often one thing that's missing. Mental health problems are not visible, they're often not measurable and can be seen by some as less significant than physical health. However, mental ill health can be far more debilitating and dangerous, and this is why it's vital for managers to recognise it and support their people when they struggle with CMHPs.

FIVE ACTIONS MANAGERS CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT THEIR PEOPLE THROUGH CMHPs

1. **LISTEN** to them when they need you to be there for them. Hear what they say to you and try to understand their situation. Encourage them to talk about the challenges they're facing and find out what you can do to support them.
2. What you don't understand, or don't know much about, take the time to **LEARN** more, so you're better placed to help them in future.
3. **TALK** about it within the team, if the individual is happy for you to do so. Help your team members learn what they can do to help, and encourage them to support their colleague.
4. Keep private conversations **CONFIDENTIAL**, trust is vital in any manager/employee relationship, especially when someone's health is concerned.
5. Be **FLEXIBLE**, sometimes people need some time off, or need help with their work/workload, they may need to temporarily change their hours or work from home. If these adaptations are possible, you can help them by agreeing to them on a temporary basis.
NOTE: Make sure you speak to your HR support with any of these adaptations, and **get it in writing**, to avoid any challenges down the road!

As always, I hope this article has been useful to you. If you have any learning needs you'd like to share or discuss, please connect with us either on linked in (Thirst4 Learning Ltd) or via hello@thirst4learning.com.

Best wishes to all.