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FOUNDATION

Supporting children, adults and families
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the *Shaw* mind
WORKplace

supporting mental health at work



Promoting a positive environment
for mental health as
an employer or manager

We now spend a great portion of our adult lives either in the office or completing work-related tasks at home, instead of taking the time to relax and recuperate. Spending this much time on work-related tasks increases the impact that working life has on our mental health. Therefore it is important that your employees are in a positive working environment that protects their mental health. This is not only good for the employee but it ensures that the business continues to run efficiently and in a financially advantageous manner. The effects of poor mental health on business finances can be found in our brochure titled: *'Mental Health and Business – The cost of mental health and ways to reduce the impact on business'*.

The terms mental illness and mental health problems can be used in a number of contexts. In this brochure we use these terms to refer broadly to all mental health conditions including stress, anxiety and depression.

Ways to promote a positive work environment

As an employer or manager there are a number of proactive steps that can be taken to make your working environment more mental health friendly. Many changes that can be made are small, low cost adjustments that have the potential to have a big impact on the mental health of the organisation. Before making any changes, it is a good idea to plan ahead and involve staff in any decisions before they are made. After all, your staff are the ones experiencing the current arrangements, and will be affected by any future changes; they will know what feels best for them. Discussing ideas with your staff is likely to generate specific changes for your business, some of which will only apply to your place of work. However, there are some universal changes that you will be able to implement, if you are not doing so already. Some changes to promote a positive work environment are:

- **Normalise mental health:** If mental health is discussed on a level playing field with physical health from the outset of employment, then people are going to feel more comfortable discussing any problems they have when they arise.
- **Identify stress triggers:** Every workplace is going to have instances of high stress, but if you can identify common triggers of stress amongst your employees then you can focus your efforts to improve these areas.
- **Promote feedback:** Encourage feedback on both your leadership style and any previously implemented changes. If feedback is requested regularly and anonymously then people will be more likely to be honest. This will allow for more efficient changes to take shape.
- **Maintain realistic deadlines and targets:** Ensure that any tasks you are setting for employees can realistically be completed within work hours by the deadline you have set. This includes ensuring there are enough personnel in the team assigned to the task.
- **Avoid isolating staff:** Whilst some staff may need to (or prefer to) work from their home offices, you will need to ensure you are regularly checking in with them to avoid them feeling isolated.
- **Maintain an open and honest environment:** If you request feedback, avoid chastising those who have made suggestions for improvements. Ensure people know who to contact when they need help or assistance. Importantly, be supportive when people ask for help.

What to do if you suspect a person is suffering

If you suspect that a person is suffering from a mental health condition then it is important to keep three key points in mind: confidentiality, privacy, and presumption. It is important if you think a person is suffering that you keep these thoughts confidential and that you discuss it with the employee directly. The rule of confidentiality can only be broken in the event that you believe the employee is in crisis and needs assistance. Otherwise, you should maintain absolute confidentiality at all times.

The best person to approach about the observations you have made is the employee. Schedule a meeting with them and discuss if they need extra support during this time. Be mindful in these situations that mental health can be a very private matter, so some employees may not be comfortable talking about it with you. In these situations it is important to respect the employee's privacy as they do not have to disclose this information to you. A person who is willing to discuss their condition may not be happy going into too much detail and so you will again need to respect the employee's privacy and boundaries.

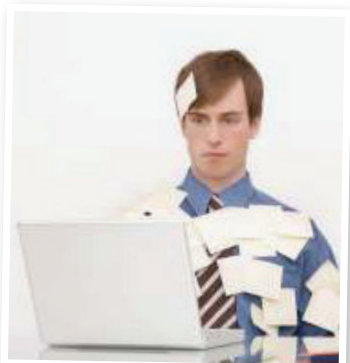
Trying to discuss the issue with the employee can also clear up misinterpretations of behaviours. Many behaviours that are warning signs of mental health deterioration can also have simple alternative explanations. Therefore it is important to avoid assumption.

Some of these warning signs include:

- Unexpected and sudden changes in mood.
- Decreases in work rate.
- A sudden reduction in the quality of work produced.
- An inability to focus.
- Repetitive questions.
- Anxious and fidgety behaviour.

The most important thing to do when you suspect a person is suffering is to be supportive. Having support at work from management will no doubt relieve a lot of worry and stress from the mind of a suffering employee which can enable them to focus more clearly on their recovery.

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The rights of an employee

If an employee has come to you and disclosed that they have a mental health condition then it is important to keep this confidential. As an employee with a mental health condition they have certain legal rights and can request the company make reasonable adjustments to assist them in continuing to do their job. Reasonable adjustments is a vague term and can change depending on the job role and company size. It is especially vague in mental health terms when problems are not easy for people to quantify. In order to implement these adjustments you may need to discuss the issue with a member of higher management or Human Resources. Before doing this, you must remember to discuss it with the employee and receive their consent to discuss their condition.

Below are a selection of potential reasonable adjustments:

- Changes to employee work hours, such as moving to flexi-time contracts.
- Changes to the work location, for instance the option to work from home.
- Moving a work station to a more suitable environment, for instance a quieter room.
- Increasing the amount of training and support that is provided.
- Increased flexibility for how breaks are taken, for instance allowing smaller more frequent breaks instead of a single lunch hour.
- Increasing the amount of one-on-one contact with the employee.

It may be that you are in an industry where some of these adjustments cannot apply. For instance, a retail assistant cannot work from home. However, it is important to be aware of employee rights to ensure you are prepared for the potential changes that may need to occur.

Boundaries and your own mental health

As has been previously mentioned, confidentiality and respecting people's privacy is important when dealing with mental health problems. This does not mean that you are prevented from researching a little about the problem your employee is suffering with. Some employees may be able to provide information like this to you themselves, but independent research may be best when staff are not comfortable discussing matters in detail. Doing some surface level research on the problem will give you information to try and empathise and understand what your employee is going through. It will also inform you of some key signs to look out for and may assist you in deciding on the best adaptations to make to your work environment in order to assist the employee.

Keep in mind that you are not the person's healthcare professional, and as much as you may want to help them, there are limitations to what you can and should do. Whilst it is your job to ensure that the employee is satisfied at work, it is not your job to provide therapy or treatment. If a person is at this stage, and you feel uncomfortable with the level of support they need from you, then you will need to have a conversation to discuss your boundaries.

Boundaries are also important for your own mental health and wellbeing, as having someone become dependent on you can be a very stressful experience. When talking about your own mental health it is also important to remember that, as a manager, you are also an employee, and as such will share the rights of those whom you oversee. For more information, please see our brochure titled 'Promoting positive mental health and dealing with mental illness as an employee'.

Planning with your employees

One way to normalise mental health in the workplace is to discuss with employees a plan for a positive mental health environment. You may even be in an environment where this is already an ongoing practice. These plans for action can be for those who have previously suffered with poor mental health, those who are returning to work, and those who wish to pre-empt any problems. In fact, having a plan of action prior to any problems is greatly recommended! Plans of action will vary depending on the person involved, the jobs that need to be completed, and the employer and employees' past experiences with mental health. When looking to create a plan of action with your employees you may wish to ask them to consider the following questions:

- How do you maintain positive mental health at work and at home?
- How can your manager support your mental health and what are some situations to try and avoid?
- If you have previously struggled with poor mental health, what are some early warning signs that others should be mindful of? What should people do if they see these signs?
- What changes could be facilitated to help reduce the risk of poor mental health, both by yourself and your employer?
- If poor mental health does occur, what is the best course of action for you?

These plans are not fixed and it is recommended that you review the plans, the work environment, and the current mental health of the team at regular intervals.

For further information about all aspects relating to mental health, please visit our **website** or follow us on **Twitter** or **Facebook**.





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