



# MANAGING GUIDE TO MENTAL HEALTH



Version 1.0



# Introduction

This guide offers practical advice, information, and conversation checklists to help managers better support employees dealing with stress and mental health challenges. It covers all aspects of the employee lifecycle, from recruitment and managing mental health at work to supporting a return to work after a period of absence. By facilitating open conversations and providing the necessary support, managers can help employees stay well and productive, leading to improved performance and better retention of talent and expertise. Additionally, this guide outlines practical steps that employers can take to foster a mentally healthy workplace.

## Who is this guide for?

Employers come in all shapes and sizes, with diverse working practices, environments, and workforces. This guide is designed to assist anyone responsible for managing people—whether you're a line manager in a large organisation or an owner-manager of a small business. It's also intended to be a valuable resource for HR professionals and occupational health teams.

While every workplace context is different, the principles, checklists, and practical advice provided in this guide are adaptable to various work environments and management styles. It can be used by individual managers as a quick reference in their day-to-day roles or integrated into HR policies and practices across teams and organisations. Please note that this guide offers practical guidance, not legal advice. Employers may need to seek their own legal counsel to determine the best approach for specific situations.



# Terms

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## Useful Definitions

**Mental health:** Just as we all have physical health, we all have mental health, which can vary from good wellbeing to mental health problems.

**Mental wellbeing:** This refers to the ability to cope with daily stress, work productively, and interact positively with others. When we mention wellbeing, we're focusing on mental wellbeing.

**Poor mental health:** This occurs when we struggle with stress, anxiety, or low mood, which might make us feel restless, confused, or irritable. We all go through periods of poor mental health—it exists on a spectrum.

**Mental health problems:** These are long-lasting issues that affect our ability to live the life we want. This might involve a formal diagnosis or simply experiencing prolonged poor mental health.

**Common mental health problems:** These include conditions like depression, anxiety, phobias, and OCD, which affect many people each year, ranging from mild to severe. Severe mental health problems: These are less common but include conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, often requiring long-term treatment.

**Work-related stress:** Defined by the UK Health and Safety Executive, work-related stress is a negative response to excessive workplace pressure, which can lead to mental health problems like depression or anxiety.

**Burnout:** A result of long-term work stress, burnout leads to exhaustion, lack of motivation, and job dissatisfaction. It affects both mental and physical health and impacts work performance.

**Stigma:** Stigma is the negative belief that a characteristic makes someone unacceptable, leading to discrimination. In mental health, stigma can prevent people from seeking help.

**Self-stigma:** Self-stigma occurs when an individual internalises public stereotypes about mental health and applies them to themselves, leading to shame and isolation.





## Purpose of this guide

Awareness of the impact of poor mental health in the workplace is growing. In 2022, the CIPD revealed that poor mental health was the leading cause of long-term sickness absence in UK workplaces. Meanwhile, Mind's 2020/21 Workplace Wellbeing Index found that 14% of employees rated their mental health as poor or very poor.

However, there is still significant room for improvement. The CIPD's Good Work Index 2022 showed that just over half (56%) of respondents felt their organisation supported mental health, and only 52% felt their organisation encouraged open conversations about mental health. Mind's index also revealed that only 58% of employees who experienced mental health challenges felt confident they would receive support if they disclosed their struggles. Furthermore, 46% of those who did speak up felt their situation did not improve. While mental health is a primary focus for most employers, with 68% of HR professionals agreeing their organisation actively promotes mental wellbeing, there are still concerns. Despite the majority (81%) of organisations increasing their mental health efforts in response to the pandemic, only 48% believe they have been effective in identifying and managing COVID-19-related mental health risks.

Leadership in mental health is also an area for growth. Just 42% of respondents felt senior leaders actively encourage mental health awareness through their actions. Additionally, less than half (38%) believe managers are confident in handling sensitive mental health discussions or guiding employees to expert support. Even fewer (29%) believe managers are skilled at recognising the early signs of mental ill health.

These findings highlight the need for organisations to adopt more effective strategies to support mental health. Many employees remain hesitant to address mental health concerns for fear of discrimination, while managers may avoid these discussions, worried about saying the wrong thing or facing legal repercussions. This silence can allow mental health issues to escalate, leading to higher rates of sickness absence, presenteeism, and staff turnover.



# What is mental health?

## Background

Just like physical health, mental health is something we all have, and it can fluctuate along a spectrum from good to poor. Poor mental health can affect anyone, regardless of age, personality, or background.

Mental health problems can arise from both personal and work-related experiences, or sometimes without any clear cause. Around one in four people in the UK will experience a mental health issue each year, and in England, one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety or depression) at any given time.

Additionally, employees may be affected indirectly if family members or loved ones are struggling with mental health, which can in turn impact the employee's own wellbeing. Poor mental health can influence how a person thinks, feels, or behaves. In some cases, it may significantly limit their ability to manage everyday tasks, affecting their relationships, work, and overall quality of life. However, many individuals are able to manage their mental health condition effectively alongside their professional and personal responsibilities, often with the help of treatment and support.

## Mental Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is our ability to manage daily stress, work effectively, interact well with others, and achieve our potential. When we refer to wellbeing, we are specifically talking about mental wellbeing, which can change from day to day, or even hour to hour, influenced by various personal and professional factors.

It's important to understand that people facing mental health challenges can still have a high level of overall mental wellbeing, while those without mental health issues may also experience times of lower wellbeing.

The main point is that everyone's mental health journey is different. Even two people with the same condition can have very different symptoms and ways of coping, which is why individual support is crucial.

## Impact of Work and Non-Work Issues on Mental Health

A common misconception is that mental health issues stem solely from personal, home-based challenges, leading some employers to feel it's not their place—or responsibility—to support affected staff. However, CIPD research reveals that over a quarter of UK employees (27%) report that their work has a negative impact on their mental health. In reality, mental health struggles often result from a mix of work-related and personal issues. For example, someone facing intense anxiety due to financial stress may suddenly find their usual job tasks overwhelming. Likewise, prolonged stress at work can make external responsibilities, such as caregiving, increasingly difficult to manage, creating a negative cycle that affects both personal life and job performance.

Since work and non-work pressures can't easily be separated, it's in an employer's best interest to actively support staff dealing with mental health challenges, regardless of the initial cause. By providing the right support, employers can help individuals with mental health issues thrive, reducing absences and boosting overall employee engagement.

## Types of Mental Health Problems

Mental health, like physical health, is something we all have and must care for. Good mental health means we can think, feel, and react as needed to live fully. However, periods of poor mental health can make it hard or even impossible to manage these functions. Mental health issues range from common conditions like depression and anxiety to more complex ones such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Terms like “depression” and “anxiety” may feel familiar, but they have specific clinical meanings that differ from everyday usage. For instance, feeling "depressed" isn't the same as a diagnosis of clinical depression. Many mental health problems have overlapping symptoms, and individuals may experience multiple conditions or struggle without a specific diagnosis. Each person's experience is unique and can change over time. Thus, it's best to focus not on labels, but on how an individual is impacted at work and the support they need.

Below are some commonly recognised mental health conditions with a brief description of their symptoms. Note that people may experience these conditions differently:

- **Depression:** Persistent low mood affecting everyday life, ranging from low spirits to, in severe cases, suicidal thoughts.
- **Anxiety:** Feelings of worry, tension, or fear that can become overwhelming if prolonged.
- **Panic Attacks:** Intense fear responses, often exaggerated beyond typical stress responses.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD):** Characterised by repetitive thoughts (obsessions) and behaviors (compulsions) intended to reduce anxiety.
- **Phobias:** Extreme fear or anxiety about specific situations or objects, significantly impacting daily life.

- **Bipolar Disorder:** Alternating episodes of extreme highs (mania) and lows (depression), sometimes with psychotic symptoms.
- **Schizophrenia:** A complex condition involving psychosis, affecting perception and behavior uniquely for each person.
- **Personality Disorders:** Patterns of behavior and thought that impact relationships and day-to-day functioning, with mixed views on the usefulness of this label.
- **Psychosis:** Experiences such as hallucinations and delusions that alter one's perception of reality, either occasionally or chronically.

Remember, mental health terms don't capture each individual's unique experience. The most important approach is to offer understanding and support tailored to each person's needs.

## What is Stress?

We all know what it feels like to be stressed, but defining it precisely can be challenging. When someone says, "I'm stressed" or "This is stressful," they could be referring to:

- Situations or events that are demanding (such as juggling many tasks or responsibilities)
- Their personal response to these demands (the feelings or reactions they experience when faced with pressures they find hard to manage)

There isn't a universal medical definition for stress, and healthcare professionals often disagree on whether stress is a root cause of problems or a response to them. This uncertainty can make it difficult for people to identify the causes of their stress or figure out how to manage it.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them." While some level of pressure is beneficial in a work setting, as it can motivate and increase energy and productivity, too much pressure can have the opposite effect.

## Is Mental Health Protected by Law?

In the UK, mental health conditions are protected under the Equality Act 2010 if the condition qualifies as a "disability" as defined by the Act. This means individuals with mental health conditions who are treated unfavourably may be able to claim discrimination.

Because poor mental health is often a "hidden" disability and individuals may be hesitant to disclose their condition, it's considered best practice for employers to make reasonable adjustments for employees experiencing mental health challenges, even if they don't meet the Equality Act's strict criteria. For instance, fluctuating mental health conditions may not meet the Act's "long-term" requirement (lasting 12 months or more) but may still require appropriate support in the workplace.

Public authorities also have additional responsibilities under the public sector equality duty. More information on these obligations can be found through the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

Under health and safety laws, employers must assess and manage the risk of stress-related mental health issues arising from workplace activities. The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) offers Management Standards to help employers fulfill these obligations.





# Why does good mental health matter?

## The Positive Approach

*“When I returned to work on a graduated basis, the supportive and positive approach from my company made me feel more engaged and energised than ever before, resulting in greater productivity. I felt valued and was given the time and support to return to my full potential. This experience made the business case for investing in employee wellbeing perfectly clear to me.”*

Effectively managing and supporting mental health at work is a crucial and evolving responsibility for employers. Promoting health and wellbeing is central to creating a positive work environment and enhancing employees' quality of life.

There are also clear business advantages to supporting mental health: fostering a positive mental health culture can lead to increased staff engagement, improved performance, and strengthened loyalty.

## The Cost of Poor Mental Health at Work: Key Facts

Mental health issues are estimated to cost the UK economy £117.9 billion each year. The Thriving at Work report by Stevenson-Farmer underscored the substantial financial impact of mental health challenges on employers, a finding further supported by Deloitte's ongoing analyses. In their March 2022 report, Deloitte estimated that poor mental health costs UK employers £56 billion annually, broken down as follows:

- Absenteeism: £6.1 billion
- Presenteeism (reduced productivity while at work): £24.8 billion to £27.6 billion
- Staff turnover: £22.4 billion

These figures highlight the economic imperative for employers to prioritize mental health and create supportive work environments.

## **Absence Due to Mental Health**

Mental health issues, including stress, are the leading causes of workplace absence. According to the CIPD, poor mental health remains the top cause of long-term sickness absence (lasting four weeks or more) across the UK workforce, with stress ranking as the third most common cause. Both are also significant contributors to short-term absences.

## **Presenteeism and Mental Health**

The cost of poor mental health to businesses goes beyond absenteeism. Many employees experiencing mental health challenges continue working even when unwell, which can harm performance and indicates an unhealthy workplace culture.

CIPD research highlights that presenteeism (working while ill) remains widespread. In 2022, 65% of HR professionals reported seeing presenteeism in the workplace (down from 75% in 2021), but it remains especially high among remote workers (81% in 2022, up from 77% in 2021).

Additional research from CIPD found that 46% of employees reported working in the past three months despite feeling unwell. Workload is a major factor: 65% of those with an “excessive” workload reported working when ill, compared to 36% of those who felt their workload was “about right.”

This tendency to work while unwell can worsen mental health conditions, highlighting the importance of not only managing absence and return-to-work support but also actively supporting employees’ mental health while they are on the job.

## **Staff Turnover and Mental Health**

Investing in mental health at work helps reduce the risk of losing valued employees and their skills. Research shows that individuals with long-term mental health conditions leave their jobs at nearly twice the rate of those without such conditions and at a much higher rate than those with physical health issues. This results in approximately 300,000 people leaving the labor market each year due to mental health challenges.

## **Conflict at Work and Mental Health**

Workplace conflict is both a cause and consequence of stress and poor mental health, leading to costly, time-consuming challenges for employers. CIPD research shows that conflict at work has widespread negative effects, with fewer than 25% of employees reporting no impact on their wellbeing.

The most common effects are psychological, including stress, reduced motivation, and increased anxiety. Some employees report severe impacts on mental health, such as stress-induced sickness absence, sleep issues, heart palpitations, and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts. Other effects include low confidence and heightened anxiety, underscoring the importance of proactively managing workplace conflict to support overall mental wellbeing.

## **Corporate Governance and Employer Brand**

Employers who neglect to manage mental health effectively at work risk damaging their employer brand in several ways. Poor mental health management can harm employee wellbeing, damage the organisation's reputation, and make it harder to recruit and retain talent. According to a Deloitte report, 37% of employees think about their mental health more than before the pandemic, and 31% now expect more support from their employer. Failing to address mental health can also result in lower employee morale, decreased engagement, and reduced performance. Additionally, employers may face costly legal actions, including personal injury claims, unfair dismissal, discrimination suits, or breach of contract.

On the other hand, proactively managing staff mental wellbeing can strengthen a company's corporate responsibility efforts, helping to establish it as an ethical, attractive employer.



# Good practice in recruitment

## **Disclosure of Mental Health Issues**

Many job applicants fear disclosing mental health conditions due to the stigma and misunderstandings surrounding mental health. As one individual shared, they concealed their depression and self-harm as "stress" when applying for jobs, fearing rejection due to mental health stigma. Despite this, they were only invited to one interview out of nearly 90 applications, and ultimately did not get the job, leaving them feeling worthless.

Under the UK Equality Act 2010, job candidates are not obligated to disclose mental health conditions to prospective employers. It is also unlawful for employers to ask candidates about their health during recruitment, except in specific situations. However, there are ways employers can lawfully facilitate disclosure to ensure individuals with mental health conditions have equal access to opportunities, receive necessary support, and are protected from discrimination.

Employers outside the UK should familiarise themselves with local laws regarding disclosure and their obligations.

## **Recruitment, Selection, and Assessment**

Hiring the right person for the job from the start is essential in preventing stress and promoting mental wellbeing. A significant source of work-related stress and poor mental health often stems from a mismatch between the individual and the role, or between the person's values and the work environment.

Selecting candidates based on competence and potential, alongside realistic job descriptions and person specifications, is vital not just for performance but for managing mental health. Accurate job descriptions help candidates make informed decisions about applying, increasing the likelihood that they'll be a good fit for the role.

It's important to remember that experience with poor mental health does not equate to poor performance. Employers should avoid discriminating against individuals based on unjustified assumptions about their abilities. Discrimination based on mental health could be direct under the Equality Act and, beyond the legal implications, it's not good business practice to overlook a candidate who has the necessary skills for the position.

Recruitment should focus on hiring the most qualified person for the job, using objective criteria based on competence and potential. If concerns arise about a candidate's health or disability, employers must assess whether reasonable adjustments can be made. These adjustments can increase the candidate's chance of securing the role, as employers must show they've considered adjustments before making a final decision.

Throughout the recruitment process, reasonable adjustments may be necessary. This could include modifications for neurodivergent individuals or anyone requiring health-related support, whether or not they meet the legal criteria for a disability. Proactively offering these adjustments is considered best practice and helps ensure an inclusive process for all candidates.

### **Job and Person Specifications**

When creating job specifications, distinguish between essential and desirable requirements. Focus on what's necessary to perform the job (e.g., knowledge or experience), not how tasks should be done, allowing flexibility in approach.

Clearly define mental and emotional demands without overemphasising personality traits. For example:

- Say "someone effective at networking," not "upbeat and sociable."
- Say "there may be pressure during events," not "you must handle stress."

This ensures roles focus on skills and flexibility, not personal traits or unrealistic expectations.

### **Improving Recruitment Processes**

Promote inclusion and diversity by highlighting your commitment in job adverts. Provide training for staff to prevent discrimination and unconscious bias.

Clearly communicate that your organisation supports mental wellbeing and provides assistance for those experiencing mental health challenges. For example, include statements like, "We are committed to protecting the physical and mental health of all staff."

Ensure candidates know that workplace adjustments are available and encourage them to disclose mental health conditions confidentially, with health information kept separate from the application form.



## Pre-Employment Health Questionnaires

Under Section 60 of the UK Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful to ask about disability or health before a job offer is made, except in specific circumstances. This ensures equal access to job opportunities and prevents health or disability information from being used to filter applicants before they demonstrate their qualifications. Breaching this can lead to legal action by the EHRC, and if such questions are asked prematurely, employers must prove they did not discriminate, as the law assumes discrimination unless proven otherwise.

## Exceptions to the Ban on Pre-Employment Health Questions

Health and disability questions can only be asked before a job offer in certain situations. These exceptions include:

- To assess if the applicant can participate in a job-related assessment.
- To determine if the applicant requires reasonable adjustments during recruitment, including assessments or interviews.
- To confirm if a particular disability is a genuine occupational requirement for the job.
- To verify whether the applicant can perform an intrinsic job function, though these are rare and must be objectively justified.

If such questions are necessary, they should be kept separate from the application form to ensure the selection panel does not see health-related information. In small organisations where one person handles the recruitment process, steps must be taken to disregard this information during shortlisting and selection to comply with the Equality Act.

### e 1: Examples of appropriate and lawful health enquiries pre-job offer

<b>Application form or equal opportunities form</b>	Please contact us if you need the application form in an alternative format or if you require any reasonable adjustments to the selection process, including the interview (for example physical access, communication support, personal support).
<b>Assessment</b>	Some of our roles require applicants to complete an online test. Please provide details below of any reasonable adjustments you would need in order to be able to complete these (for example extra time, online access, communication requirements).
<b>Invitation to interview</b>	Please respond to confirm your availability to attend at the time allocated and to indicate any reasonable adjustments you may require for the interview.
<b>Monitoring</b>	XX is an equal opportunities employer. The following information will be treated confidentially and will assist in monitoring XX's equal opportunities policy. Your application will not be affected by the information provided in this section, which will not be seen by the selection panel. Do you consider yourself to be disabled? (Yes/No)
<b>Occupational requirements</b>	An essential criterion for this project is experience of mental health services of an NHS trust from a service user's perspective. This is an occupational requirement, so you will be asked about your knowledge of NHS mental health services during the recruitment process.

## **Health Questionnaires Post-Job Offer**

While many employers choose not to use health questionnaires during recruitment, some find them useful after a job offer to help support new employees and ensure they can perform their role effectively. If used, health questionnaires should be given to all new recruits to avoid discrimination claims and promote an inclusive workplace culture.

A job offer may be conditional on medical checks, but any reasons for withdrawing an offer must not be discriminatory. If an offer is withdrawn due to a mental-health-related disability, the applicant may be able to file a discrimination claim.

If health questionnaires are used, employers should emphasise that they are intended to identify any health issues that could affect the employee's ability to do the job or create workplace risks, and to ensure reasonable adjustments or support. The questions should be framed positively to encourage employees to disclose mental health information, with clarity about who will see the details.

Our health questionnaire template includes:

- Only relevant health information related to the job.
- Open questions allowing employees to disclose information in their own words.
- Non-prescriptive questions, avoiding pressure to disclose specific conditions or details.

For roles with specific health requirements, such as working with chemicals, more targeted questions may be necessary, but this will fall under exceptions for intrinsic job functions.

## **Template Health Questionnaire – Post-Job Offer**

Your responses to this questionnaire will be CONFIDENTIAL and shared only with [HR/occupational health/your manager]. They will not be disclosed to anyone else without your written consent. Our goal is to support and maintain the physical and mental health of all employees at work.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to assess whether any health conditions may affect your ability to perform the duties of the position you have been offered or pose any risks in the workplace. Based on your responses, and in consultation with you, we may recommend adjustments or assistance to help you carry out your role effectively.

Do you have any (physical and/or mental) health condition(s) or disability which may affect you performing in this role (based on what you know from the job description, interview and any previous experience)?	
Would you like to tell us about any past examples of (physical and/or mental) health condition(s) or disability that were caused or made worse by your work, so that we can explore any support you may need?	
Do you think you may need any adjustments or assistance to help you to do the job? If so, please give suggestions so we can discuss suitable changes with you.	

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### Intrusive or Inappropriate Questions to Avoid

- Is there a history of mental health issues in your family?
- Do you suffer from, or have you ever experienced, any of the following conditions? [Exhaustive list such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc.]
- Are you currently taking any tablets or medications? If so, please provide details.
- Have you consulted a doctor in the past two years?
- Are you undergoing or awaiting treatment (including medication) or investigations? If so, please provide details of the condition, treatment, and dates.

These types of questions can be intrusive and unnecessary. They may discourage individuals from disclosing important health information and could potentially violate privacy rights. Instead, employers should focus on whether an employee is able to perform their job with or without reasonable adjustments.



# Prevention

## Active Prevention

"My employer fosters a supportive environment by encouraging colleagues to look out for one another and offering flexible work patterns to accommodate individual needs."

Many mental health issues at work escalate because problems go unnoticed and untreated. Proactive communication and strong people management can help prevent stress and mental health challenges. Often, it's about using common sense to address concerns before they develop into more serious issues.

## Induction

A strong induction programme is key for new, promoted, or redeployed employees, as it helps ease the transition into a role. A poor start can affect confidence and worsen existing issues. An effective induction should include:

- Organisational orientation – understanding the employee's role and the company's goals.
- Meetings with the line manager and key colleagues.
- Health and safety information and overview of terms, pay, and benefits.
- Clear job expectations and insight into company culture and values.
- Information on health and wellbeing initiatives and work policies (flexitime, home working).

For hybrid roles, the induction should guide new employees on working effectively in this setting, with extra support from managers and mentors to help them integrate and understand the culture.

## Impact of Manager Behaviour

How employees are treated by their managers directly affects their mental wellbeing, trust, and engagement. Good management helps spot early signs of distress and offers support, while poor management can worsen mental health issues.

Mind's 2020/21 Workplace Wellbeing Index found that only 66% of employees felt their manager supported their mental health. Those whose managers were unsupportive were 28% more likely to experience anxiety. CIPD research also identified management style as the third leading cause of work-related stress.

Managers who build trust and foster an open, respectful environment create a culture of psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable discussing mental health concerns without fear of judgment.

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### **Building Resilience and Stress Management Skills**

Employers can help employees manage workplace pressure by focusing on resilience and stress management. Resilience is the ability to recover from challenges, change, or pressure. Effective approaches focus on strengthening individual, team, and organisational resilience, as they are interconnected. Building resilience helps employees manage stress better while ensuring employers take proactive steps to identify and prevent it.

### **Managerial Leadership and Role-Modeling**

As a manager, it's essential to foster a positive culture within your team:

- **Lead by Example:** Encourage healthy working habits by maintaining work-life balance, taking breaks, and setting boundaries, including limiting work communications outside of hours.
- **Build Confidence in Mental Health:** Learn about your organisation's mental health policies and familiarise yourself with key mental health terms to confidently support your team.
- **Normalise Mental Health:** Regularly check in with employees, allowing them to discuss both work and personal stressors, creating an open, supportive environment.



- **Take Stock:** Discuss wellbeing during team meetings, addressing any concerns and creating action plans to improve the team's mental health.
- **Be Available:** Ensure open communication through regular one-to-ones and make it clear how staff can contact you, especially for remote workers.
- **Treat People as Individuals:** Respect employees, offer feedback, and use a coaching management style to support their development.
- **Embed Employee Engagement:** Encourage open dialogue, involve employees in decision-making, and help them see how their work aligns with the organisation's goals.
- **Create Learning Opportunities:** Offer coaching, development, and training to help employees excel in their roles.
- **Promote Positive Relationships:** Foster teamwork and collaboration, modeling these behaviors for the team.



# Early intervention

## Watch for Early Signs

Some employees may experience poor mental health at work, regardless of how well they are managed. Spotting early signs of stress or mental health issues allows managers to address problems before they escalate into a crisis or result in sickness absence.

Proactive, attentive management can make a significant difference, helping to prevent issues from worsening.

## Workplace or External Triggers

Managers should be alert to workplace triggers that can impact mental health, including:

- Long hours without breaks
- Unrealistic deadlines or expectations
- High-pressure environments
- Overwhelming workloads or lack of control
- Poor relationships or communication
- Unsupportive culture or management
- Job insecurity or poor change management
- High-risk roles
- Lone working

External factors can also affect wellbeing, such as:

- Childhood trauma or abuse
- Social isolation or discrimination
- Poverty, debt, or bereavement
- Long-term stress or physical health conditions
- Unemployment or homelessness
- Being a carer or experiencing domestic abuse
- Substance misuse or significant trauma (e.g., military combat or violent crime)
- Physical health issues like head injuries or neurological conditions

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## **Early signs of poor mental health**

Managers who know their staff and regularly hold catch-ups or supervision meetings to monitor work and wellbeing are well placed to spot any signs of stress or poor mental health at an early stage. Often the key is a change in typical behaviour. Symptoms will vary, as each person's experience of poor mental health is different, but there are some potential indicators to look out for.

## **Physical**

- Indigestion or upset stomach
- Headaches
- Appetite and weight changes
- Joint and back pain
- Chest or throat pain
- Sweating
- Constantly feeling cold
- Lapses in memory

## **Behavioural**

- Increased smoking and drinking
- Using recreational drugs
- Tearfulness
- Withdrawal
- Visible tension or trembling
- Nervous, trembling speech
- Restlessness
- Lateness, leaving early,
- Distraction or confusion
- Working for longer hours
- Intense or obsessive activity
- Repetitive speech or activity
- Uncharacteristic errors
- Uncharacteristic problems with colleagues
- Apparent over-reaction to problems
- Risk-taking
- Disruptive or anti-social behaviour

## **Psychological**

- Anxiety or distress
- Feeling low
- Mood changes
- Resigned attitude
- Indecision
- Irritability, anger, or aggression
- Loss of motivation
- Over-excitement or euphoria
- Loss of humour
- Increased sensitivity
- Difficulty relaxing
- Illogical or irrational thought processes
- Impaired or inconsistent performance
- Difficulty taking information in
- Responding to experiences, sensations
- Increased suicidal thoughts
- Increased sickness absence



## Encouraging people to talk about their mental health

If poor mental health is suspected or disclosed, it's crucial for managers to facilitate an early conversation about the individual's needs in order to identify and implement appropriate support or adjustments. Effective management of mental health in the workplace relies on empathy, good people management, and common sense. Managers need to be approachable and listen when staff ask for help, as a trusting relationship is essential for employees to feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues like mental health. This should be supported by a workplace culture that is open and inclusive about mental health, where employees feel safe to express their concerns.

### Broaching the Subject of Mental Health

Discussing mental health can be challenging, as it is a deeply personal issue, but addressing it openly is often more helpful than avoiding the topic. Shying away from mental health discussions can reinforce stigma and heighten anxiety. Many employees may feel hesitant to speak up, so it can be beneficial for managers to initiate the conversation. However, it is essential that managers approach the topic without making assumptions. Regular check-ins or one-on-one meetings provide a good opportunity to start the conversation in a private, confidential setting where the employee feels comfortable.

Questions should be simple, open, and non-judgmental, giving the employee the chance to express themselves freely. If there are specific concerns, such as changes in performance, they should be addressed early but with the same respect and sensitivity given to someone with a physical health issue. A straightforward question like "How are you?" can be a good starting point.

#### Questions to Ask:

- How are you feeling right now?
- I've noticed you seem a bit down, upset, stressed, frustrated, or angry. Is everything alright?
- I've observed that you've been arriving late recently—are you okay?
- The reports have been a bit delayed lately, which is unusual. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?
- Is there anything I can do to support you?



- What would you like to happen next? How can I assist?
- What kind of support would be helpful for you right now?
- Have you had a chance to talk to your GP or seek help from other sources?

#### Questions to Avoid:

- You're obviously struggling. What's going on?
- Why can't you just get it together?
- What do you expect me to do about it?
- Your performance is really falling short – what's happening?
- Everyone else is managing just fine. Why aren't you?
- Who do you think should handle the work you can't manage?

Managers should address any work-related issues reported by employees facing mental health challenges, as this can help them better manage difficulties in other areas of their lives. Managers should also encourage employees to seek support from their GP or other professional sources. It's important that employees are aware of the support available, whether through HR, an employee assistance program, or mental health helplines like Mind or SANEline.

Employers must clearly communicate through policies on stress and mental health that support is available for anyone facing mental health challenges, as well as inform employees about the relevant procedures for ill health.

### **Responding When Someone Shares a Mental Health Issue**

If an employee confides that they're experiencing poor mental health, or if you suspect it, having a sensitive and supportive conversation is crucial. This helps in assessing their needs and determining the appropriate support or adjustments required. Effective management of mental health at work involves strong people management skills, empathy, and common sense.

- **Choose the Right Setting:** Make sure the conversation happens in a private, quiet space where the employee feels comfortable. If they work remotely, consider offering a walk or virtual meeting, giving them notice about the topic so they can prepare and choose a private location at home.
- **Avoid Making Assumptions:** Mental health disclosures can be difficult for employees, so keep an open mind and let them speak freely. Don't guess symptoms or how it might affect their work. Many employees manage their mental health well, but may need support during tough times.
- **Ensure Confidentiality:** Employees might feel anxious about sharing personal information, so it's important to reassure them that their disclosure will be kept confidential. Understand your organization's policies on who should be informed, ensuring only essential parties are involved. Be clear that you'll only break confidentiality if there's a risk of harm.

- **Encourage Open Communication:** Foster an open dialogue and be sensitive to the fact that everyone's experience with mental health is unique. Use a conversation checklist to understand how the issue affects them, the implications for their work, and what support they need.
- **Respond Flexibly:** Mental health affects people differently, so adapt your support based on the individual's needs. Work together to create a wellness action plan, which doesn't have to be costly or complicated. Simple workplace adjustments can make a significant difference.
- **Develop an Action Plan:** Collaborate with the employee to create an action plan that outlines the signs of their condition, stress triggers, work impact, and who to contact in a crisis. Set a date to review the plan and adjust it as necessary. Ensure follow-up meetings are scheduled to check on progress.

This approach not only supports the employee but also helps create a culture where mental health is taken seriously, with empathy and practical steps toward improvement.

### **Encouraging People to Seek Support**

- Encourage employees to speak to their GP about available NHS support, such as talking therapies. If your organization offers an employee assistance program (EAP), it may provide access to counseling services. Additionally, make sure you're familiar with other support options available to employees, especially those working remotely, as these may vary.
- The Mind Infoline is a useful resource for signposting individuals to support, and local Mind hubs across the UK can offer further advice and assistance.

### **Reassuring People**

- Not everyone may be ready to open up about their mental health straight away. Let employees know what support is available, and reassure them that your door is always open for a conversation. This creates a supportive environment where they feel comfortable reaching out when they're ready.

### **Seeking Advice**

- If you're unsure about how to proceed, or if the issue is complex, seek advice from expert organisations. Encourage employees to do the same. Employee assistance programs can also provide guidance. If workplace relationships are strained, consider mediation to resolve conflicts. Additionally, involving occupational health services, if available, can help both the employee and manager discuss the situation and agree on appropriate support or adjustments.
- Remember, when an employer is aware of health or disability-related information, they have a legal obligation to consider reasonable adjustments and ensure the employee's health and safety at work.

## Conversation Checklist

- Ensure there are no interruptions; turn off phones and minimise distractions.
- Use simple, open, and non-judgmental questions.
- Avoid judgmental or condescending responses.
- Speak in a calm tone.
- Maintain appropriate eye contact.
- Practice active listening.
- Encourage the employee to share their thoughts and feelings.
- Demonstrate empathy and understanding.
- Be patient, allowing for pauses in the conversation.
- Keep the focus on the person rather than the problem.
- Refrain from making assumptions or providing solutions too quickly.
- Follow up in writing, particularly with agreed actions or support.

## Wellness Action Plans

Given the high levels of stress and poor mental health we are seeing in the workplace, there is a growing demand for innovative and proactive ways of managing mental health at work. The Wellness Action Plan is inspired by Mary Ellen Copeland's Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP): an evidence-based system used worldwide by people to manage their mental health.

A Wellness Action Plan is a personalised, practical tool (that can be used whether someone has a mental health problem or not) to help identify what keeps people well at work, what causes people to become unwell, and the support they would like to receive to boost wellbeing or support a recovery.

As a manager, encouraging your staff to draw up a Wellness Action Plan gives them ownership of the practical steps needed to help them stay well at work or manage a mental health problem. It also opens up a dialogue with your team member, to help you better understand their needs and experiences and therefore better support their wellbeing. This in turn can lead to greater productivity, better performance and increased job satisfaction.

Employers who choose to introduce new starters to the Wellness Action Plan during the induction process are able to demonstrate their commitment to staff wellbeing from the very beginning, sending out a clear message that proactive management of the wellbeing of their workforce matters.

Wellness Action Plans are also particularly helpful during a return-to-work process as they provide a structure for conversations around what support and/or reasonable adjustments might be useful.

By giving your staff an opportunity to draw up a Wellness Action Plan, they will be able to plan in advance and gain an awareness of what works and what doesn't work for them. A Wellness Action Plan can help employees to develop approaches to support their mental wellbeing, leading to a reduced likelihood of problems such as work-related stress.

By regularly reviewing the agreed, practical steps in the Wellness Action Plan, you can support your team member to adapt it to reflect their experiences or new approaches they find helpful. By allowing the individual to take ownership of the process and of the Wellness Action Plan itself, you will be empowering them to feel more in control.

### **What should a Wellness Action Plan cover?**

- approaches the staff member can adopt to support their mental wellbeing
- early warning signs of poor mental health to look out for
- any workplace triggers for poor mental health or stress
- potential impact of poor mental health on performance, if any
- what support they need from you as their manager
- actions and positive steps you will both take if the staff member is experiencing stress or poor mental health
- an agreed time to review the Wellness Action Plan and any support measures that are in place
- anything else that the individual feels would be useful in supporting their mental health.

### **Workplace adjustments**

Various aspects of work and the workplace can cause substantial disadvantages for people with disabilities. The UK Equality Act 2010 says that employers must take reasonable steps to remove the disadvantage. The purpose of the law is to place a duty on employers to address the disadvantages encountered at work by people with disabilities, and the starting point for any consideration of reasonable adjustments should be what difficulties someone is experiencing in the workplace.

'Reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities or health needs are commonly perceived as adaptations to the physical environment where this causes difficulties, such as wheelchair ramps, or communication assistance, such as sign language interpreters. In relation to mental health, more often the obstacles are less tangible and relate to negotiating the social, rather than the physical, world of work. A requirement to work set hours, for example, or the practice of only having occasional supervision might cause a substantial disadvantage for someone with certain mental health problems.

### **What is 'Reasonable'?**

An employer's duty to make adjustments is based on what is considered reasonable, depending on the specifics of each situation. Adjustments should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors like:

- The effectiveness of the adjustment in reducing the disadvantage.
- The feasibility of implementing the adjustment.
- The potential impact on service delivery.
- The financial and other costs involved, including any financial assistance available (e.g., Access to Work scheme).
- The potential effects on colleagues.

Managers should discuss the practical implications of any requested adjustments, considering factors like previous experiences, ease of accommodation, any impacts on team dynamics, and other relevant concerns. Both the employee and manager should clearly understand the factors that will influence the decision regarding what is reasonable and practical.

Employers should approach adjustments flexibly, rather than rigidly. Adjustments for mental health can often be simple, and offering support to all staff—whether or not they have a formal diagnosis—can benefit the organization in terms of loyalty, productivity, and reduced absenteeism. This approach can also help normalise mental health and disability in the workplace.

It's important to remember that each person's experience of mental health challenges is unique. Two individuals with the same diagnosis may have very different symptoms and require different accommodations. Often, the individual will be the best guide to their own support needs, so it's crucial to manage employees as individuals.

A Wellness Action Plan is a practical way to discuss and identify what adjustments may be needed. This process can be simple. For example, one employee with anxiety requested that her manager remember to say "thank you" after completing a task, helping to prevent self-esteem and paranoia from escalating into distress.

Below are examples of potential adjustments that may help employees manage mental health symptoms and improve their work performance. These are not exhaustive but may serve as a starting point for discussion. Managers should always be guided by the individual's input, as their experience will provide the most accurate understanding of their needs.

## **Workplace Adjustments**

Although making "reasonable adjustments" may not be a legal requirement for employers outside the UK, these guidelines can still serve as a useful reference. Employers should ensure they understand local laws and any specific obligations they may have regarding employee health and accommodations. It's important to check the relevant legislation to fully grasp the provisions and duties that apply within your jurisdiction.

## **Possible Adjustments**

- Flexible working hours or changes to start or finish times
- Adjusting the workspace, such as moving to a quieter area or reducing the number of people around, or adding dividing screens
- Allowing remote work on specific days or during certain periods
- Modifying break times to suit individual needs
- Providing access to quiet rooms for relaxation or focus
- Installing lightboxes or ensuring a seat is positioned to get more natural light



- Offering time off for mental health-related appointments, such as therapy or counseling
- Adjusting duties temporarily, such as balancing desk work with customer-facing roles, reducing caseloads, or changing shift patterns
- Reallocating tasks or revising the employee's job description to better align with their capabilities
- Redeploying the employee to a more suitable role if necessary
- Increasing supervision or offering additional support from a manager, buddy, or mentor
- Providing extra help to manage and negotiate workloads
- Offering debriefing sessions after difficult calls, customer interactions, or challenging tasks
- Using mediation if interpersonal difficulties arise between colleagues
- Providing access to a mental health support group or disability network group
- Identifying a designated 'safe space' in the workplace where employees can take a break or access support
- Offering resources to promote self-care and wellbeing
- Encouraging employees to engage in activities that foster resilience and support mental health, such as exercise, meditation, or healthy eating
- Regularly providing opportunities to discuss, reflect on, and celebrate achievements, helping individuals build self-esteem and manage triggers for poor mental health



# Supporting people to return to work

## Proactive Management

“A crucial part of my return to work was hearing from my manager while I was off. He reassured me that my job was secure and that I was valued as part of the team. He made sure I could return gradually, increasing my hours as I felt ready. The flexibility in the support plan was essential.”

Proactively managing absence is key to supporting employees with mental health issues. The manager plays a critical role in this process. When an employee is unwell to the point of needing time off, the way the organisation handles their absence significantly impacts their ability to recover and return to work effectively.

Managing an employee’s mental health during sickness absence is particularly important if they are away for two weeks or more. During this time, it’s essential that managers agree on the frequency and methods of communication—whether through phone calls, emails, or face-to-face meetings. This should be outlined clearly in the absence management policy, so both managers and employees understand the expectations for staying in contact. If the manager is the cause of the employee’s distress, another staff member or HR representative should take over communication.

The CIPD guide *Managing a return to work after long-term absence* provides key principles for supporting employees through the return-to-work process, including:

- Maintaining communication during the absence
- Preparing for the employee's return to work
- Supporting both the employee and manager during the initial return
- Continuing to support the employee and manager after they've returned to work.

## **Return-to-Work Interviews**

Research by CIPD consistently highlights return-to-work interviews as an effective way to manage employee absence. A well-conducted interview can build trust, foster engagement, and support a smooth and lasting transition back into the workplace. When an employee is ready to return, the manager should arrange to meet in a neutral, comfortable setting to discuss the details of the return. The employee should be informed in advance that a return-to-work interview will take place, emphasizing that it's a supportive process aimed at facilitating a successful reintegration into work and addressing any ongoing health needs.

If an employee is not yet open about their mental health, the return-to-work interview can serve as an opportunity to explore the reasons behind their absence and identify any underlying mental health issues. Effective interviews can help spot mental health concerns early, preventing them from escalating and worsening over time.

Access to occupational health services is considered one of the most effective ways to manage long-term absence. Additionally, NHS England's Adult Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services, which offer cognitive behavioural therapy, counselling, and employment advice, can benefit employees, typically through GP referrals. Employers can also encourage employees to seek support from third-party organizations such as local Minds, which offer mental health services along with vocational support. There is also a wealth of online resources available (see Useful contacts).

Early intervention is crucial. Some employers choose to refer employees with mental health issues to occupational health services from the first day of absence, understanding that mental health problems are often recurrent or long-term if not addressed early on. If an employee has been off work for a month, the chances of a successful return to work significantly decrease, as they are more likely to have lost confidence and become distanced from the workplace.

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### **Return-to-Work Interview Checklist**

1. Start by letting the employee know that they were missed during their absence.
2. Ask how they're feeling and if they are ready to discuss their return.
3. Clarify the return-to-work process and what procedures will follow.
4. Reassure the employee that they are not expected to jump straight into full-time hours or manage a full workload right away.
5. Use open-ended questions that encourage more than just a "yes" or "no" response, allowing the employee plenty of space and time to express themselves.
6. Listen actively, showing empathy and understanding towards their situation.
7. Inquire about any work-related issues that might be contributing to their stress or well-being.
8. Explore if there are any personal or external factors that may have played a role in their absence.
9. If the employee has shared mental health concerns, discuss these and how they might affect their work.
10. Explore possible solutions and ensure you're aware of any support options available, whether internal or external.
11. Address any concerns the employee may have about returning to work, validating their feelings and collaborating on ways to address those worries.
12. Assist the employee in thinking about how they would like to manage their return, such as how they wish to approach their colleagues or what they want to share.

### **The First Day Back**

The first day back at work is crucial, whether the employee is returning to a physical workplace or working remotely. As a manager, it's important to ensure the day goes smoothly for the returning employee, as many individuals feel anxious about re-entering the workplace. They may feel self-conscious about events that occurred before their absence or worry about letting down colleagues. It's vital to have a conversation with the employee ahead of time to decide what information will be shared with their colleagues.

If the employee is returning to a physical workplace, they might appreciate being met at the door or traveling in with you or another colleague. For those working from home or in a hybrid setup, consider offering virtual support, such as scheduling virtual coffee breaks or catch-ups with coworkers. The goal is to help the employee gradually reintegrate into the work routine, while also catching up on any missed tasks or updates within the organisation.

During the first few weeks of their return, managers need to stay proactive. It's important to keep in mind that an employee may not be fully recovered when they return, so ongoing support and potential adjustments to their workload will be necessary to help them ease back into their role, especially after an extended absence.



# Managing performance

## Adopting a Positive and Supportive Approach

Mind's Workplace Wellbeing Index measures the impact that poor mental health has on employee performance. According to its 2020/21 report:

- 74% of individuals report difficulty concentrating due to their condition, and 51% struggle with multitasking.
- 52% sometimes avoid challenging tasks, while 51% find it takes longer to complete their work.
- 40% experience difficulty making decisions, and 35% have trouble learning new tasks.
- 14% are more likely to get into conflicts with colleagues.
- 9% feel they depend more on their colleagues to complete work when their mental health is poor.

While most organisations have performance management policies in place, it's crucial to explore any potential health issues, particularly if they are suspected or known, before initiating formal performance processes. If the underlying causes of poor performance are not addressed, solutions may be ineffective, potentially leading to sickness absence.

Performance management should be a positive and supportive process. It benefits both the organization and the employee to discuss potential adjustments and support that could help the employee perform at their best. Contrary to the stereotype that people with mental health conditions cannot perform at a high level, many individuals with mental health challenges continue to thrive in their roles. However, there may be times when their performance is impacted, especially if they fear disclosing their condition and accessing the support they need.

It's important to create an environment where employees feel safe to disclose any health conditions that may affect their performance. Managers should assure employees that any disclosure of mental health conditions will be handled in a supportive manner, without triggering disciplinary action. According to the 2019 BITC Mental Health at Work survey, 9% of employees experienced dismissal, demotion, or disciplinary action after revealing a mental health condition.

Performance discussions should focus on the individual's work and how it may be affected, but open and non-judgemental questions about their wellbeing can help uncover any underlying health issues. It's also important to explore other potential workplace challenges, such as strained relationships with colleagues, which could be influencing the employee's mental health and performance. While managers should never force someone to disclose health issues, using conversational techniques can create a space for employees to share, if they feel comfortable.

An effective performance management approach should not rely solely on annual appraisals but should include ongoing, constructive feedback and open dialogue. This continuous communication is essential for building trust and enabling a two-way discussion about health-related concerns. It helps identify additional support or coaching the employee may need and allows for setting realistic timelines for improvements.

### **Tips for Managing Underperformance**

Each employee requires individual consideration, but some general guidelines include:

- **Focus on the person, not just the problem** – Avoid making assumptions about how mental health affects performance. Even individuals with significant mental health challenges can still excel at work.
- **Ask simple, open, and non-judgemental questions** – Encourage honest dialogue and avoid making the conversation feel like an interrogation.
- **Consider health-related solutions, not just performance-based ones** – Look for ways to support the employee's well-being, not just address performance issues.
- **Make it clear that the organisation is committed to providing support** – Ensure the employee knows that the company is ready to offer assistance or accommodations to help them reach their full potential.
- **Allow the employee to have support during discussions** – Offer the option for the employee to have someone, such as an advocate or someone familiar with their condition, present during meetings.
- **Use mediation to resolve conflicts** – If appropriate, use mediation to address any workplace conflicts that might be affecting performance.