Taking Care of Business

HR policies for improving mental wellbeing and employee engagement: Webinar FAQs

mind.org.uk/work

Contents

Frequently asked questions

Legal

Promoting wellbeing

Supporting staff

Tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems

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 gives employers simple, inexpensive and practical ways to improve mental wellbeing and employee engagement.

On 26 March 2013, Mind hosted a webinar, with a panel of experts, to help HR professionals and senior management teams manage mental health in the workplace.

On the day our panel answered as many questions as time allowed, but we weren't able to answer all of those that came in. In this resource, we've put together the most common questions you asked us to provide HR professionals and senior management teams support on:

- creating a mentally healthy workplace
- supporting staff with their mental health
- supporting line managers to manage mental health in the workplace.

The webinar panel

Chair
Paul Farmer, Mind Chief Executive

Paul Farmer has been Chief Executive of Mind since May 2006. Mind is the leading mental health charity in England and Wales and is an influential voice on mental health issues. It was established in 1946 and has since grown into a major network of over 160 independent local Minds, providing over 1,300 local services in England and Wales, helping around 280,000 people every year. Mind is also a partner in the Time to Change campaign, the biggest ever campaign in England to tackle stigma and discrimination around mental health.

External expert
Eugene Farrell, Key Account Director, Healthcare Consulting, at AXA PPP Healthcare

Eugene is qualified in Health Economics and Psychology and has more than 25 years of experience in the UK healthcare arena. He has worked in both the public and private sectors and, for the past 15 years, has specialised in the development and provision of employee support services, including the development of integrated healthcare, absence management, employee assistance, wellbeing and occupational health services.

Mental health expert
Emma Mamo, Policy and Campaigns Manager at Mind

Emma joined Mind in 2007 and currently oversees Mind's campaigning to uphold the rights of people with mental health problems and promote social inclusion. This includes working for a fairer benefits system, making workplaces more mentally healthy and raising awareness of the injustices that many people with mental health problems experience.

Since 2010, Emma has led Mind's Taking Care of Business campaign which aims to show employers simple, inexpensive and practical ways to improve mental wellbeing and employee engagement.

Case study
Jonathan Bowers, Managing Director of UKFast

Jonathan, previously the Communications Director at UKFast, made the transition to Managing Director in April 2012 after founder Lawrence Jones made the decision to take more of a strategic role as the firm's CEO. UKFast looks after 250,000 web sites for customers including UKTV, the NHS and BP.

Note that AXA PPP Healthcare, UKFast and Mind are 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.

Frequently asked questions

Legal

What are an employer's legal obligations in relation to the provision of a clear policy on mental wellbeing?

Mind's response

Whether or not you have a mental health problem, an employer has a duty of care to their employees' physical and mental health under health and safety legislation. Employers have a duty to assess the risks arising from hazards at work, including work-related mental health problems. You can find out more information from the Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards for work related stress. Employers also have obligations to disabled people under the Equality Act 2010.

What is a reasonable amount of time for an employer to consider a request for a reasonable adjustment and, secondly, to implement reasonable adjustments?

Mind's response

The relevant law, which is the Equality Act 2010, recognises that adjustments may need to be made to help disabled people overcome barriers not faced by people who do not have disabilities.

It's hard to say how long it should take to consider a request – but delaying without a reason or ignoring a request could be unfair or even discriminatory.

Where a disabled employee, including someone experiencing a mental health problem, faces substantial disadvantages in the workplace, the employer will need to make changes deemed reasonable in order to help a disabled person overcome disadvantage.

What is reasonable for the employer and how long it will take to implement that reasonable adjustment will be based on a number of factors, including the size of the employer.

For more guidance have a look at the Employment Statutory Code of Practice (chapter 6), which explains employers' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

Answered live in the webinar

What is a 'reasonable' adjustment?

Eugene

I think that organisations need to look at what the employee can do, not what they can't do, and start from that and move forward. They should do everything in their power in terms of reasonableness.

The test of reasonableness is rather complex. You can't say definitely what's reasonable, but the organisation doesn't have to change everything, so the employer doesn't need to feel threatened and the employee actually can feel they're having a dialogue about what they can do and what would work for them.

Having that two-way conversation will enable a reasonable adjustment to happen that both parties can be happy with.

Emma

They can be really simple and very individual. I know one person who experienced anxiety who just said to her boss, "I really need you to say 'thank you' after I do something and to smile at me and say, 'Good Morning', because if you don't, I worry I've done something wrong."

Someone else takes their lunch break in three 20-minute slots over the day so they can take time to manage their mental health and take time out when they are feeling under pressure.

These are really cost-effective measures: it's just about having that conversation. When some people feel under pressure, they can find it hard to prioritise their workload. So I know that when I'm feeling a little bit under it my manager will put in place fortnightly catch-ups in between our monthly catch-ups and it will be a sort of doctor's surgery: "Is there anything you're finding challenging? Can I support you with this?"

She helps me action some of those things. Things like that are really useful and effective.

Promoting wellbeing

How can you get senior management to prioritise mental health?

Eugene

I think it's really important that the senior management in the organisation get to see, for example, statistics on what mental health is looking like in the workplace, not only from audits but also absenteeism, et cetera. Get them involved in what the cost looks like so that they can do something – have it high on the agenda to take action.

But also that they get a commitment to driving policy and culture forward, so that's about engagement. It's about looking at programmes they could take on within the workplace. It's about being committed themselves to making change in the workplace and that really takes some work from managers, from HR to make sure that that's regularly on the board agenda.

What language do you use?

Jonathan

We believe that there doesn't need to be a divide between the workplace and the home. Any conversation that an employee has with somebody else, maybe their manager or another colleague, can be a personal conversation and can tackle a difficult issue.

We actually made sure that no one manager looked after more than six people within the business. This ensures that everybody has the space and the time to take on board the challenges that their team faces. And we look at ways when somebody does bring a challenge to us that might relate to depression or stress or any other mental health problems that we find the best people to help them work through that challenge.

Quite often our personal trainer Joe acts as a wellbeing champion within the business. We also psychometric test everybody that comes into the business and in terms of managers we look for people who are caring.

Managers in our business wouldn't make it in other businesses as manager because they may not be demonstrative or loud or pushy enough, in some ways, but they care about their teams and they nurture them.

Answered live in the webinar

Are there organisations where senior leadership has really made a difference?

Emma

National Grid are good at prioritising the mental health needs of their staff. EDF Energy have also been highlighted as best practice, as well as BT. There are companies that do see this as quite central to achieving their business outcomes, and how you get senior leadership onboard is what we were discussing earlier about the business case – if you don't act it will cost you, if you start being proactive, you'll reap the benefits in terms of minimising the negative and boosting employee engagement.

Jonathan

For us, as a business, we're very lucky that right from the top down, people take this incredibly seriously. There are statistics by the Positive Group, which say that even somebody witnessing somebody else being rude to somebody, knocks that person's concentration by 20 per cent for two to three hours.

Now, somebody being rude to somebody knocks that person's concentration, [whom] they've been rude to, for 40 per cent for two to three hours. I don't believe that anybody can multi-task. I believe that we all need to be focused on our business and on what we are doing. When our productivity gets knocked in that way it's bound to have a knock-on effect on what we produce.

A happy employee who's engaged and loves what they're doing always produces more than somebody who feels disgruntled.

Are buddy schemes a good idea?

Emma

Absolutely. I'm actually an official buddy to three people within Mind. I volunteered to be a buddy when we had new starters coming in a newly formed department. I'm also a buddy within Policy and Campaigns, our wider department, to an officer who doesn't work within my team. Buddying up with this person was about sharing my expertise in terms of policy and campaigns and then offering support outside of the line management structure. A colleague in another department also approached me when they were promoted to a manager and said: "Oh, can I come to you with any issues?"

I think peer support and buddy systems are really important because it's about maximising and utilising the skills and experience that you have in an organisation. And for anybody dealing with work issues, someone else has faced it, and they'll have good tips. You can make them as formal or informal as you like. It's about offering a range of ways.

Supporting staff

Any thoughts about onsite workplace counselling?

Mind's response

Onsite counselling is one of the many counselling options available. It is important to have a wide range of services available for employees to be able to access both at work and offsite.

Sometimes for example, people find it much easier to access support from a service that is separate from their workplace. They might find it easier to disclose an issue and be more comfortable discussing the details.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), for example, can contribute to a comprehensive support package for staff. Others might like the idea that an onsite counsellor has a more intimate knowledge of the workplace. The most important consideration is getting some counselling in a timely manner.

I employ staff who work out in the community which makes noticing signs of stress more difficult. Is there anything I can do?

Mind's response

If you have staff that work remotely, it is important that you schedule in time for regular face-to-face catch-ups. These can be over coffee or lunch. It's also useful to make sure that you touch base with staff by email and telephone in between these meetings to identify any emerging problems.

We would also recommend that you develop Wellness Recovery Action Plans (WRAPs) with your staff that work remotely. The WRAP is originally a healthcare tool which identifies the individual's specific symptoms, triggers and support needs, giving the person control over their treatment. Given mental ill health fluctuates and affects no two people the same, this person-centred approach leads to more effective support.

Tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems

Answered live in the webinar

How do you get employees to engage?

Jonathan

We found for a long time that getting feedback from the team [helped]. Because feedback is the way we've grown, both from our clients and from our team.

Getting it from the team would have to involve pizzas at lunchtime potentially. Or a nice dinner at Lawrence's and Gail's house in the evening, and over many an informal dinner party we have formulated new ideas for the business.

Definitely giving a vested interest to people helps. We started a printout newsletter that we send out to everyone's homes and all their parents' and families' homes as well, and part of it includes the employee of the month, which the whole team votes on.

We created ways for the team to get involved with a vested interest that they themselves made. In a way we're lucky we only have 200 people, which sounds like a lot, but for us it's very manageable in terms of everybody knowing everybody and everybody knowing the effect they can have on the business and the rewards they can get from the business.

Emma

I think it's just important to have a range of ways for people to get involved. What I would be concerned about, if they are finding that people aren't engaging, is finding out what the underlying reason for that is.

When we talk to employees about starting to address mental health in the workplace, we say to them: "You need to get your house in order, you need to get all your policies and practice in place, you need to get your staff views, and then you need to go out and start promoting wellbeing." Because sometimes, if you start promoting wellbeing, but there are some serious issues in the workplace, then people often won't engage with it because they may see it as tokenistic. So, I think it's about trying to diagnose why people aren't engaging and what some of the barriers might be.

A line manager at my workplace has started to performance manage one of her staff. That member of staff has now told her that she's been feeling really stressed. What should we do?

Eugene

For an employee, when they are being performance managed, it is stressful because there's much more focus on what they're doing. There's much more focus on how they are doing things and that can feel like a very intense pressure point at that particular moment.

I think it's important for the line manager to understand that and to set out very clearly what the expectations look like for the individual and how those are going to be met. So that it's very open and very transparent. And also to understand that the employee can feel anxious, is going to feel stressed about this and part of that management is to give them that little bit of space to allow them to be able to work in the way that they find comfortable but also be realistic about what can and can't be done.

You should make it very clear along the way so that milestones can be measured and the employee has goals to aim for and things to work towards that feel manageable.

You should demonstrate that there is a series of steps to get to where they need to be rather than one huge thing which can become overwhelming.

In a good organisation they have quite a lot of leeway to achieve what they need to do and to support the employee. And that's not about getting rid of employees from the workplace. That's about making sure that their performance is the right performance for that organisation and it's got to be better for them and the organisation in the long term.

Emma

It's not clear if they were experiencing some stress or pressure before the performance management started and I think sometimes with poor performance and experiencing a mental health problem the lines can get blurred. I'd want to also explore if this was an issue that led to underperformance and then it's about looking at what support you can put in place to offset that. Then you can look at their performance as well.

Jonathan

I agree that transparency, and taking a positive approach to how to improve that person's performance, is the key to making it work. But we have a philosophy that if you get the right people on the bus then you can move them into different positions.

So actually if somebody is not performing in a particular role it might be that that role just doesn't inspire them enough or that they've hit their challenges there and they want a new challenge.

We're constantly looking at ways to move people around the business. There are people in the company who joined six or seven years ago and have had six or seven roles within the business. And they may not necessarily be promotions. They may be just a change of perspective, a fresh new look at a different skill. But something that helps them to keep developing.

I think the biggest performance issues happen when people start to feel stagnant and they don't feel as though they are developing themselves.

How should HR support line managers to get this right?

Eugene

It's definitely important for an organisation to ensure that people feel empowered and able to have that conversation in the workplace, particularly with line management. When these situations exist then HR has a role.

You might want to look at how you can support people with an occupational health service, as a good place to bring people to and to help them, or if they have an Employee Assistance Programme that might be a good place to confidentially seek some support. If those don't exist, then HR can champion the role in trying to get those into the workplace to support the organisation.

HR has a really important role in training line managers beyond their technical ability, to develop their softer skills so that employees feel like, "Yes, I can talk to my line manager, my line manager understands, my line manager will do something to help me and support me."

HR should support the line manager to support the employee, but not necessarily take that situation over so that then the line manager is not doing that role and does not learn how to provide that particular support.

They can be supported through this by using a buddy system. And then they'll feel more confident to support the next situation that they see. Another tool for HR staff is being able to offer staff a reasonable adjustment. Somebody who has a mental health problem may qualify for that.

mind

for better mental health

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Mind is a charity and we rely on donations to continue our work. Please visit mind.org.uk or call 0300 999 1946 to find out how you can 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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