

WORKPLACE SUPPORT • ARTICLE 3

SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

A COMPASSIONATE EXPLORATION

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Mental health is just as important as physical health, yet it is often far less visible. An employee with a broken arm is likely to receive understanding and practical support without question. Someone experiencing anxiety, depression, burnout or trauma may look physically well while struggling immensely beneath the surface.

Mental health exists on a spectrum, and everyone has mental health just as everyone has physical health. At different points in life, we may all experience periods where our emotional wellbeing is challenged by work pressures, personal circumstances, illness, grief or major life changes.

Creating workplaces that recognise and support mental health is no longer simply a "nice to have." It is essential for employee wellbeing, productivity and long-term organisational success.

Mental Health Affects Every Workplace

Mental health difficulties are incredibly common.

Employees may be living with:

Anxiety disorders

Depression

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Bipolar disorder

Eating disorders

Burnout

Stress-related illnesses

Long-term grief

Panic disorder

Others may not have a formal diagnosis but are experiencing significant emotional distress due to work or life circumstances.

Many people continue attending work despite struggling because they worry about:

Being judged.

Appearing weak.

Losing opportunities.

Being viewed as unreliable.

Letting colleagues down.

Financial pressures.

As a result, people often hide their difficulties until they reach crisis point.

Signs That Someone May Be Struggling

Mental health difficulties don't always look obvious.

Some people withdraw and become quieter.

Others become more irritable or emotional.

Some throw themselves into work, becoming perfectionists or working excessive hours to hide how overwhelmed they feel.

Possible signs include:

Difficulty concentrating

Forgetfulness

Increased mistakes

Changes in attendance

Reduced confidence

Loss of motivation

Irritability

Fatigue

Social withdrawal

Tearfulness

Increased anxiety

Difficulty making decisions

Reduced productivity

These signs do not automatically mean someone has a mental health condition, but they may indicate that additional support or a conversation would be helpful.

The Difference Between Stress and Mental Illness

Stress is a normal response to pressure.

Short periods of stress can even help people stay focused and motivated.

However, when stress becomes prolonged without opportunities to recover, it can begin to affect both physical and mental health.

Chronic stress may contribute to:

Burnout

Anxiety

Depression

Sleep difficulties

Physical illness

Reduced immune function

Emotional exhaustion

Mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety disorders are not simply "too much stress."

They are recognised health conditions that may require professional support, treatment and workplace adjustments.

Understanding this distinction helps reduce stigma and encourages people to seek help earlier.

The Cost of Hiding Mental Health Difficulties

Many employees become experts at masking their struggles.

They smile through meetings.

They continue delivering work.

They avoid discussing how difficult things have become.

However, masking comes at a cost.

Constantly pretending to cope requires enormous emotional energy.

Over time this may lead to:

Burnout

Emotional exhaustion

Increased sickness absence

Reduced confidence

Isolation

Poor work-life balance

Declining performance

Employees shouldn't have to hide their wellbeing in order to protect their career.

A supportive workplace makes it safe to ask for help.

What Can Employers Do?

Managers are not expected to become therapists.

Their role is not to diagnose or treat mental health conditions.

Instead, managers play an important role in creating an environment where employees feel psychologically safe enough to speak openly when they need support.

Supportive managers often:

Listen without judgement.

Notice changes in behaviour.

Encourage honest conversations.

Respect confidentiality.

Ask what support would be helpful.

Review workloads regularly.

Offer flexibility where possible.

Signpost professional support.

Sometimes simply asking,

"How are you really doing?"

can make someone feel seen and valued.

Practical Workplace Adjustments

Mental health support does not always require major changes.

Often small adjustments can make a significant difference.

Examples include:

Flexible working hours

Hybrid working

Temporary workload adjustments

Additional supervision

Regular wellbeing check-ins

Clear priorities

Written instructions

Quiet spaces for breaks

Phased returns after sickness absence

Protected lunch breaks

Flexible appointment times for therapy or medical appointments

The aim is to reduce unnecessary stress while enabling employees to continue contributing effectively.

Building a Culture of Psychological Safety

People are more likely to seek help early when they believe they will be met with understanding rather than criticism.

Psychological safety means employees feel able to:

Ask questions.

Admit mistakes.

Share concerns.

Request adjustments.

Offer ideas.

Challenge problems respectfully.

When people fear judgement, they often stay silent until difficulties become overwhelming.

Creating a culture where conversations about mental health are normal benefits everyone - not only those experiencing mental illness.

Looking After Your Own Mental Health at Work

Employees also play an important role in protecting their wellbeing.

Helpful strategies include:

Taking regular breaks.

Setting realistic boundaries.

Taking annual leave.

Seeking support early.

Speaking with a trusted manager.

Using employee wellbeing services.

Maintaining healthy routines outside work.

Getting enough sleep.

Staying physically active.

Connecting with supportive colleagues.

Looking after your mental health is not selfish - it is essential for maintaining both wellbeing and performance.

The Benefits of Supporting Mental Health

Workplaces that prioritise mental wellbeing often experience:

Higher employee engagement

Lower staff turnover

Reduced sickness absence

Greater productivity

Improved teamwork

Better morale

Increased loyalty

Stronger workplace relationships

Employees who feel supported are more likely to remain motivated, contribute positively and enjoy their work.

Final Thoughts

Mental health affects us all. Whether someone is experiencing temporary stress or living with a long-term mental health condition, feeling understood and supported can make a profound difference.

A mentally healthy workplace is not one where people never struggle. It is one where people know they can ask for help without fear of judgement.

By creating compassionate, psychologically safe environments, organisations enable employees not only to manage challenges but to thrive. Supporting mental health is an investment in people, and when people flourish, workplaces flourish too.

A gentle reminder

This resource offers general information and reflection. It is not a diagnosis or a substitute for individual medical or therapeutic care. If you are worried about your safety or someone else's, seek urgent professional support.

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