Taking Care of Business

Managing mental health in tough times: Webinar FAQs

mind.org.uk/work

mind
for better mental health

Contents

Introduction 3

The webinar panel 4

Frequently asked questions

Legal

Legally speaking, where do people stand if they face discrimination? 5

To what extent must an employer agree to an employee's requests for adjustments and how is the 'reasonableness' of a request decided on? 5

When considering whether to disclose a mental health problem at work, what factors should you consider and is there legal support to help with this? 6

Should mental health in the workplace be viewed as a health and safety or as a diversity issue? 7

Promoting wellbeing

Should initiatives to promote wellbeing and provide support be aimed at all staff or only at those staff who identify as having a mental health problem? 8

How do you improve your workplace culture in relation to mental health? 9

What action have employers taken to support good mental health at work? 9

What kind of positive language and terminology can we use to get staff interested in supporting good mental health at work? 10

Is 'wellbeing' a useful term? 10

Tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems

What happens when employees don't want to engage with line managers or employers? 11

Supporting staff with mental health problems

I'm worried about an employee's mental health – what should I do? 12

How can I support an employee with anger management issues? 13

How can I support an employee who is having suicidal thoughts? 14

How can you make sure that your mental health problem is acknowledged, understood and properly supported at work? 15

How can we help an employee with anxiety and depression who's been very distressed at work recently? 16

A person that I manage has been off sick with depression. How can I best support them to return to work? 16

How do you support someone who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder? 17

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 22 March 2013, Mind hosted a webinar, with a panel of experts, to help line managers 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 answer the most common questions that you asked us to provide line managers support on: promoting wellbeing at work; tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems; supporting people with mental health problems; and the legal implications.

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

Professor Stephen Bevan, Director of the Centre for Workforce Effectiveness at The Work Foundation

Stephen is Director of the Centre for Workforce Effectiveness at The Work Foundation and is an Honorary Professor at Lancaster University. He joined The Work Foundation from the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) at Sussex University 2002 as Director of Research.

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. 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

Ash Tuft, Line Manager at Enterprise Rent-a-Car

Ash is a Recoveries Supervisor at Enterprise and has been a line manager for two and a half years. She currently directly manages two team leaders who oversee a total of 15 employees. Prior to that, Ash managed 13 direct line reports until the growth of the business increased new roles to share line management responsibilities.

Note that The Work Foundation, Enterprise Rent-a-Car 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

Legally speaking, where do people stand if they face discrimination?

Mind's response

If you are considered to have a disability, the Equality Act 2010 says you have a right not to be discriminated against in employment. This means that employers must not treat you less favourably than other people, either as an employee or a job applicant.

Someone with a mental health problem is considered disabled if it has a substantial and long-term (12 months or more, or recurring over a long period) adverse effect on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. You would still be covered if these effects are controlled by treatment, if without the treatment, your mental health problem would have substantial and long-term adverse effects on your ability to carry out activities.

If you are unsure about whether or not your mental health problem is a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, please request a copy of Mind's 'Proving Disability Checklist' by emailing legalunit@mind.org.uk

A member of staff is no longer able to travel to their normal place of work (in London) and has requested working from nearer their home. How reasonable is this request, especially when the job (for sensitivity reasons) is based in the office in London? To what extent does an employer have to agree to the employee's requests for adjustments?

Mind's response

The law recognises that adjustments may need to be made in certain areas to help disabled people to overcome barriers not faced by people who do not have disabilities. Where a disabled employee, including someone experiencing a mental health problem, faces disadvantages in the workplace, the employer will need to make changes deemed "reasonable" which would help a disabled person to overcome the disadvantage.

What is reasonable for the employer to do will be judged according to a number of factors including, for example, an employer's finances, the extent to which the adjustment will prevent the problem and what is practical within the organisation. For more guidance have a look at the Employment Statutory Code of Practice (chapter 6), which gives guidance on employers' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

For me it was easy to speak out after I had recovered from a breakdown and reflected on the situation with more insight, confidence and knowledge of my rights. How would you approach dealing with these situations while in the moment where the risk of 'speaking out' involves being 'let go'? Is there legal support for these situations?

Mind's response

There is law in place to protect you at work if you are considered to be disabled because of a mental health problem. This law, the Equality Act 2010, is there to ensure that you are not discriminated against at work.

It's also important to remember that, whether you have a mental health problem or not, all workers have the right to work in an environment where risks to their health and safety are properly controlled. Employers also have a responsibility to protect an employee who has returned to work from sickness absence if they have become more vulnerable because of illness, injury or disability.

The decision to disclose a mental health problem to your employer is something you should always think carefully about. Every person's situation is unique, but our guide 'How to be mentally healthy at work' can help you to think through the potential risks and benefits. The benefits of disclosing to your employer include:

- If you have a mental health condition that is considered to be a disability, your employer has a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make 'reasonable adjustments'. You can ask for such adjustments at the point when you need them, even if you did not volunteer information about your mental health problem earlier. If you don't disclose your mental health problem, and your employer has no way of knowing that you have a mental health problem, he or she will not have any legal responsibility to make reasonable adjustments. If you do disclose your mental health problem, your employer may want to clarify some details about your disability, as generally it's at this point that their duty to make reasonable adjustments kicks in.
- Being open about it can encourage others in the same situation to do the same.
- Keeping it secret may be too stressful, or against your beliefs.
- It could give you the opportunity to involve an outside adviser or support worker who could see you at work or speak directly with your employer.
- It could make it easier to go into work at times when your symptoms are more visible.
- It enables you to get the support of colleagues.

Ash's top tips

From my experience it is important to think about how you approach this subject so that you have fully considered how you are going to speak out, considering all the possibilities of how others may react. It will also help you decide what you really do and don't want to speak out about so that the communication from you comes across clearly, concisely and fits the ethos you are trying to promote.

I've discussed this area within my company to make sure I approached it in a way that reflects what I want in place – calm, nonjudgemental communication in order to really understand everyone's point of view and solutions. Top-down culture change is important, as is speaking out. I always think of what I want to achieve and how I'm going to have the smoothest road, even if it might take a bit longer.

Would you rather mental health in the workplace was viewed as a health and safety or a diversity issue?

Mind's response

Whether your staff have a mental health problem or not you have a 'duty of care' under UK law to protect the health, safety and welfare of all your employees (Health and Safety at Work Act 1974). You have a duty to assess the risks arising from hazards at work, including work-related mental health problems. In this sense, mental health in the workplace is a health and safety issue. More information is available about your duty at hse.gov.uk/stress/standards

We want employers to embed mental health across all areas of their organisations. A wide range of policies and practices interact closely with staff wellbeing and mental health, but many don't properly reflect this. You should think about the policies in the organisation that might have an impact, and make sure that they support wellbeing and manage stress. These should help set the organisation's approach to promoting wellbeing, tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems and supporting staff who are experiencing mental health problems.

We would recommend that organisations review all of their policies to ensure that they take account of the impact these processes can have on an employee's mental wellbeing. In particular, employers should review their policies on:

- performance management
- disciplinary action
- recruitment
- change management
- redundancy
- equality, diversity and inclusion
- bullying and harassment.

Mental health in the workplace should also be viewed as a diversity issue. We know that there is a lot of stigma and discrimination around mental health at work. In our recent poll on workplace stress, one in five people reported to us that they couldn't tell their boss if they were overly stressed at work and one in four people thought they would be perceived as less capable than their colleagues if they revealed a mental health problem. Therefore, employers need to work hard to change workplace cultures in order to promote awareness and to allow people to disclose any problems that they are experiencing. From this perspective mental health at work should also be viewed as a diversity issue.

Promoting wellbeing

I'm a volunteer coordinator and I have around 20 volunteers who identify with having mental health issues. I'm looking at options for setting up either a group to offer informal support or a mentoring system, but I can't decide whether it's best to involve the whole volunteering team, or focus it on individuals who have identified. There are obviously pros and cons to both, but I'd appreciate any advice from anyone who has set up something similar in the past.

Mind's response

While volunteers are outside the protection from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, many organisations try to follow the same procedures as for paid staff.

If possible, you should offer support and set up wellbeing initiatives that benefit all your staff, not just those who have identified as having a mental health problem.

Raising awareness and promoting discussion of mental health and wellbeing among all your staff are important and help drive engagement, overcome prejudice and mean that employees will be more likely to disclose issues sooner.

It is important to encourage a good work/life balance, develop good communication and support flexible working practices across organisations. Promoting positive working relationships and social activities are also key. Investing in these approaches sends out a clear message to all staff that their mental health is valued by the organisation

We recommend that you develop a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) with all of your staff – not just those who have identified as having a mental health problem. The WRAP was originally a healthcare tool which identifies the individual's specific symptoms, triggers and support needs, giving the patient 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.

In the employment context, this model enables the line manager and employee to have a dialogue leading to practical and mutually agreed steps that will be taken to support the employee's mental health at work. It would usually be drafted by the employee, in some cases with support from a health professional, and then discussed and agreed with the manager. A WRAP should cover:

- the signs and symptoms of the person's mental health problem(s)
- any triggers for distress
- what support can help
- who should be contacted if you are concerned about their health.

By planning in advance, you will be able to ensure that all individuals receive the support they need.

Answered live in the webinar

How do you improve your workplace culture in relation to mental health?

Steve

Many larger organisations have invested quite a lot in training and awareness-raising among their line managers. BT is often cited because their approach has been very effective. If you're off sick for more than six months with a mental health problem, and you work at BT, you've got an 80 per cent chance of getting back to work, which is phenomenal. And they've put lots of their line managers through very short but informative and empowering training workshops that get people to think about mental wellbeing and the signs.

Essentially, for many of those managers, behaviour that they might previously have interpreted as being a performance problem, they now think about in terms of being about their employee's health. And I think that's a really positive thing, which shows that you can affect the culture by making sure that line managers are well trained and informed.

It does also have to come from the top. And sometimes that can be a big challenge. We still hear anecdotes from city investment banks where people say: "Sickness is for wimps," or "people who have sickness absence problems are a drain on the business, we need to get them out." And so on.

I think that culture is gradually disappearing, but unless people at the top of organisations are able to take this seriously and to invest time and effort to make sure that line managers are trained and that support is available, progress will be slow. But I'm optimistic that people are getting this.

What businesses have shown strong leadership on this?

Emma

At Deloitte, one of their senior partners, John Binns, had an experience of depression, and he thought his career would be over once he disclosed. And he's in a very high-pressured role – 400 emails a day.

Actually, they said to him "Come back when you're ready. Don't worry about firing on all cylinders, we'll stand by you." And he said that, as a result he felt more committed to the organisation than ever before. But he also recognised that he's a high-valued member of staff and he wanted to ensure that anybody else across the firm, if they experience a problem, would get the same support. So, he set up a mental health champions scheme where seven partners are trained in mental health awareness, and anyone across the firm can go and talk to them. So, that's really sending a message that people's mental health is valued. And obviously, if they are experiencing a problem, that will be supported.

Steve spoke about BT. They produce information for all staff about wellbeing and how to take care of their own. They train their line managers on soft skills, because often, in the UK, people are promoted because of technical skills, but people skills are very different. They also have their staff undertake routine assessments about how they're doing, and depending if they get a red, green or amber light, that is alerted to their manager who can then respond appropriately. They also have 'Advanced Directives' which are similar to a Wellness Recovery Action Plan – they outline what support someone needs.

When training people on managing mental wellbeing, how do you get over the issue of terminologies? Stress management has negative connotations. Is there a better way to attract people to training and development around this area?

Steve

The words we use are really important. It might sound trivial, but I think it is important to people. We've just finished a massive study looking at schizophrenia, and that word just strikes fear into people's hearts. I think it's a big issue… I've long thought that "stress" can be an unhelpful term. I'd rather see more positive words used. Although it might sound trite, talking about "psychological resilience" or "coping" is a much more positive way of thinking about it.

We do need to think about this in a more positive way. I think managers have the opportunity to think about what people can still do despite the fact they might be ill and to focus on what they can do, their capacity, if you like, rather than their incapacity, how you can build their resilience, how you can support coping.

Is 'wellbeing' a useful term?

Emma

Yes, absolutely. I still can't believe our health system separates mental health from physical health. You need a holistic approach. So, talking about staff wellbeing, I think, is really helpful because there are so many linkages between boosting someone's physical health to help their mental health. I would agree that wellbeing and resilience are more useful terms.

Tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems

What happens when employees don't want to engage with line managers or employers?

Mind's response

We find that people are often more motivated and engaged when wellbeing policies are robust and firmly rooted in the organisation's policies and practices. In a recent Populus survey, 60 per cent of employees said they'd feel more motivated and more likely to recommend their organisation as a good place to work if their employer took action to support the mental wellbeing of employees.

A workplace culture where employees feel able to voice ideas and are listened to, both about how they do their job and in broader decision-making about the organisation's direction of travel, is also a key driver of employee engagement. This is because employees feel more committed to the organisation's goals when they feel that their work is meaningful and valued.

Our top five tips to help line managers engage with staff are:

1. Treat people as individuals – flex your management style to suit the needs of the staff member and the task. The best way to do this is to ask what support they need.
2. Try to use a management style that allows your staff to be autonomous while ensuring that they still feel supported.
3. Get mental health on the agenda – regularly ask your staff how they're doing, create space for them to ask questions and raise issues, and give them permission to talk about home as well as work issues.
4. Communicate clearly and develop an atmosphere of trust – this is essential to maintaining motivation levels. A key part of this is asking for feedback about the support you provide.
5. Ensure that work is organised efficiently and effectively and that people understand their role in the bigger picture.

Ash's top tips

There are some conversations employees have to have with their line manager, and others that they may be able to have with a 'mentor'. Within my department I work with employees who don't directly report to me but feel more comfortable talking to me about certain aspects of their mental health.

Often we meet to prepare for a meeting with their line manager so they feel comfortable, and on occasion I accompany them to that meeting so that they feel more at ease. It is important that we work on building trust with our employees, but it can also be important to recognise that they simply feel more comfortable going into greater detail with someone else – so long as that doesn't eliminate their direct line manager from the management and decision-making process surrounding that employee.

Supporting staff with mental health problems

I have an employee who displays signs of serious mental health issues but refuses to accept something's wrong. Her behaviour and performance are greatly inhibited and she has regular days off. We have tried on all levels to offer support but she will not engage. Meanwhile the problems continue and are affecting the team. Any tips?

Mind's response

First, a note of caution: Don't make assumptions about whether or not someone is experiencing a mental health problem – in any situation there could be a wide range of factors at play. However, if mental ill health is suspected or disclosed, it is crucial that line managers facilitate an early conversation about the person's needs to identify and implement appropriate support or adjustments.

Basic good people-management, empathy and common sense lie at the heart of effective management of mental health in the workplace.

Managers need to ensure they are seen as approachable and listen when staff ask for help. Managers should also be mindful of whether the workplace culture is conducive to disclosure.

While mental ill health is a sensitive and personal issue – like any health problem – most people prefer honest and open enquiries. Often employees will not feel confident in speaking up, so a manager making the first move to open up a dialogue can be key. You can't force someone to disclose and a manager should not suggest that someone is ill. Relationships with line managers, however, can make all the difference, and a supportive relationship, with regular supervision and help managing workload can support people who are experiencing mental health problems.

Regular catch-ups or supervisions are an opportunity to start the conversation, which should always be in a private, confidential setting where the employee feels equal and at ease. Questions should be simple, open and non-judgemental to give the employee ample opportunity to explain things in their own words. If there are specific grounds for concern, such as impaired performance or high absence levels, it is important to address these at an early stage. In all cases, people should be treated in the same way as someone with physical health problems – a good starting point is asking how they are.

Handling a mental health disclosure can be viewed with fear by line managers, but it need not be awkward or taxing. Remember that the aim is to create an honest and open dialogue that will lead to a system of support and understanding between employers and employees. Generally a common-sense approach based on open communication and good people-management is all that is required. The rules of thumb are:

- **Encourage people to talk** – create an open environment at work where people feel able to have a dialogue about their mental health. Remember everyone's experience of mental health problems is different. Focus on the person, not the problem and ask open questions about their triggers for distress and what support they need.

- **Avoid making assumptions** – disclosure can be difficult so make it easier for people by ignoring the mental health stereotypes that exist. Don't try to guess what symptoms an employee might have and how these might affect their ability to do their job – many people are able to manage their condition and perform their role to a high standard.
- **Respect confidentiality** – remember mental health information is confidential and sensitive. Don't pass on information unnecessarily; employees shouldn't have to fear private information being leaked to colleagues.
- **Respond flexibly** – mental health problems affect everyone in different ways and at different times in their lives, so adapt your support to suit the individual. Work with your employee to develop an individual wellness recovery action plan or WRAP which identifies signs of distress, who to contact in a crisis, and what support your employee would like or need.
- **Seek advice if you need to** – If you're still unsure, the person lacks insight or an issue is particularly complex, seek advice from expert organisations such as the CIPD, Mind, Centre for Mental Health, Mindful Employer or your local Mind or GP. You may also want to take specialist legal advice on what your duties are towards the person and how you can deal with the situation. Encourage your employee to do so too. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) can also help both line managers and employees.

Remember that, once aware of health or disability information, the employer also has legal duties to consider making reasonable adjustments as well as a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and preventing personal injury.

However, if the person doesn't open up and their work is affected then you may have to consider a formal performance management route giving the staff member every opportunity to discuss their health.

How do you recommend supporting an employee with anger management issues in the workplace?

Mind's response

It is important to understand the triggers of someone's anger. You could suggest to them that they might find it helpful to keep a diary or note down the times that they have felt angry. This could include what the circumstances were, whether it was something someone said that made them feel angry, and how it made them feel and behave.

There are lots of calming techniques that you could recommend to your employee. They include:

- Breathing slowly – one technique is to breathe out for longer than you breathe in, and then relax as you breathe out.
- Counting to 10 before you react – this gives you time to calm down so you can think more clearly.
- Doing something creative – this can channel your energy and focus towards something else.
- Listening to calming music – this can help change your mood and slow your physical and emotional reactions down.
- Using a relaxation technique such as yoga or meditation.

For more useful tips on managing anger and stress, we would suggest that you read Mind's booklets on 'How to Deal with Anger' and 'How to Manage Stress'.

Ash's top tips

From a practical point of view this is something I have dealt with and the advice from Mind is very useful. There is also a particular technique that I've developed with an employee who can have quite extreme outbursts. When they feel they are close to boiling point they email me or another designated member of the management team who will then take them out of the office environment for a short amount of time and have a general conversation to allow them to calm down.

This, along with some of the advice from Mind, has meant that they feel more able to control their outbursts. It also allows them to assess when they are becoming angry and remove themselves from a situation before it even gets to this level.

A staff member has told me he is having suicidal thoughts. The doctor has been of little help – simply prescribing medication and telling him to come back in three months. Where can he get extra support? I have been supporting him in and out of work but there seems to be no improvement and it is impacting on my own wellbeing as well as on other colleagues.

Mind's response

The best approach is to signpost to the appropriate support. This might include an Employee Assistance Programme or the Mind Infoline that can provide details of appropriate local services. In this situation, as your staff member has told you that he is having suicidal thoughts, it would be best to advise him to contact the Samaritans who provide services 24 hours a day.

There is a risk that you may become his sole confidant so you must remember to be realistic in what you offer to do in order to protect your own wellbeing.

Ash's top tips

It is really important that you recognise that there is only so much you can support someone and that you are not responsible for them. Pointing them in the direction of help, but understanding that it is ultimately their choice, is often the most practical thing that you can do.

I often tell employees that my job is primarily to help support them within the work environment. By contacting an EAP provider and charities like Samaritans or Mind they can speak to someone who is better trained and equipped than I am.

If I am very concerned about a colleague I will check back with them regardless of whether they contact me, and always without judgement. Most importantly you need to ensure that you don't become too involved. If you look after your own wellbeing, and that of other colleagues, you will all be in a better place to offer every individual a productive, healthy working environment.

How can you ensure that you receive proper support, and in essence 'prove' that there is a problem in the first place?

Mind's response

Many employers now have positive policies on disability and equality at work and take a more positive view of mental health problems, which ought to mean that being open about your mental health is less of a risk. There are also laws in place to protect you at work if you are considered to be disabled because of a mental health problem. Remember that disclosing a mental health problem at work is your decision. It's a sensitive and personal choice, but being open can help you get the support you need to stay in work and stay well.

It might be useful to request a one-to-one meeting with your manager. You can take this time to talk openly about your mental health, your work demands and what adjustments would help you to manage your distress and perform well at work. Remember you are the expert on your needs. You can agree a plan of changes with your boss and a time to meet again to discuss whether things have improved. If you're not sure what might help, try small experimental steps, and make a note of whether they help or not.

If your boss is unhelpful or dismissive, remember they have legal duties under the Equality Act to make 'reasonable adjustments' and not to discriminate in recruiting, retaining or promoting staff. A mental health problem can be a disability under the Act so you are likely to be protected (see p.5), but always seek legal advice. If you need help showing your employer that your mental health problem is a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act, then you might want to consider requesting a copy of Mind's 'Proving Disability Checklist' by emailing legalunit@mind.org.uk, which sets out the factors to consider when you are trying to explain the effects of your mental health on your everyday activities.

Ash's top tips

'Proof' is a topic that I've seen first hand and has become quite contentious. Ultimately if an employee is attending work then they may disclose as much or as little as they wish. If an employee is signed off work then their doctor's note should be sufficient.

I've seen examples where employees have worried that they will face discrimination if their doctor's note contains certain words. I've also seen employees, who are not covered by any formal documentation, disclose a great deal about their condition.

In short, I would say that from a manager's perspective proof shouldn't be the most important aspect, we should build trust with each and every employee, always listen and support them, and understand if there are factors impacting on their general wellbeing. We should support them whether or not they have a formal diagnosis of a mental health problem.

Answered live in the webinar

How can we help an employee who is suffering with anxiety and depression and who's at times very distressed in the workplace?

Emma

I think using the Wellness Recovery Action Plan would be really useful because you can use it to explore particular triggers within the workplace that may cause them to experience anxiety and depression. You can then try and offset these triggers.

Last year, I lost a family member in a tragic accident, and when I came back to work, I was okay, but one part of my job that I really couldn't handle was taking calls from people. We often take calls from people who've been discriminated against and are in quite tough situations, and I didn't have the emotional resilience to deal with that myself. So, I spoke to my manager and she said, "What do you want?" And I said, "It'd be really useful if someone could field my calls for a couple of weeks." So, I got back to people by email or advised a colleague on how to respond to them.

I think it's about having that very individual conversation about things that they might be finding particularly challenging, and then how you can temporarily relieve that.

Ash

You need to have open conversations and ask open questions as much as possible. We might have jumped to the wrong conclusion and it's really important that we haven't labelled someone as being unwell when that actually might not be what's going on.

I think just asking, "How are you feeling, is there anything you're finding particularly tough at the moment?" is important. That can sometimes lead to a really good and productive conversation because you're getting to understand exactly what they're really struggling with and what the triggers are.

If you're managing someone who has been off sick with depression, and they're coming back to work soon, what should you say or do to support them when they return?

Ash

You probably really need to start thinking about doing things now. Something the employee feels comfortable with, which you can discuss with them. But whether it's meeting up for a coffee or talking to them on the phone, whatever they feel more comfortable with, and talking to them about coming back into work.

Their first day is going to be important. It's probably going to be quite a stressful experience for them, so, making sure that you've talked through and understood what that employee needs or wants, and then carrying on having that conversation, can really help.

A lot of employees want support to begin with, but after they get a bit of support, they often feel more able to go it alone. Making sure you're regularly checking in with them to make sure whatever you're doing is still relevant, and whether they feel like they can be stretched a little bit more. What do they feel they're capable of? What do they feel that they need from you?

It's a two-way conversation. On the one hand, of course it's about the results that you need to get as a business. But on the other hand, it's also about ensuring that you bring that employee along with you, so that they feel as supported as possible.

Emma

Someone told me recently when they went back to work, their manager came and met them at the entrance and walked in with them, because they said they were feeling quite anxious. I think something small like that just to help them walk back into the office could be really powerful.

[As part of the person's return-to-work plan, it would be useful to explore any reasonable adjustments to their role or support measures that you could put in place to help them stay mentally healthy at work. Discussing these in advance with the person should also provide reassurance that their needs will be met on their return. For more information about when an employer may have a duty to make adjustments to someone's job role, have a look at the Mind legal briefing on disability discrimination in employment, under the section 'The duty to make reasonable adjustments'.

Steve

What we hear a lot is managers saying "I'm not sure if I'm allowed to contact people when they're off sick". And you can. If you're in doubt about how to do that, then get some support. But actually, quite often people say, "I was off sick for all this time and no one ever contacted me." Get involved while they're still off so you can talk to them about how they can come back. You keep those lines of communication open.

Ash

I think you use the forum they feel most comfortable with as well. If they want to just discuss things by text, just text. If they want to pick up the phone, do that. But it's all about what they need from you. So, scheduling those calls, do they want to be contacted once a week, once a month? Making sure that you're doing what's relevant for that individual rather than what might be easier for you.

Paul

It might be worth mentioning as well that the government has a scheme called 'Access to Work', which people are entitled to and employers are entitled to access, which gives support for people who are experiencing mental health problems. There's help in place for employers as well as for employees in terms of some of the support that can be funded. Particularly people who might… be experiencing panic attacks whom I think require help with transport to get to the workplace, that kind of thing is available with the government scheme.

How do you support someone who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

Emma

You need to think about how it will impact upon how that person performs at work. What would we need to put in place to offset that? Also speaking to them about how much they would like colleagues to know about what's going on. I think that's an issue. It's very sensitive information, it's people's personal choice.

It might just be talking about how someone has a health condition that can manifest in this way, so, if you spot this, it's helpful to do this, it's not helpful to do that, and so on. I think it would just be about speaking to the person so they can say what they want to happen.

Steve

The better informed you are, the better you understand broadly what bipolar disorder is and how it manifests itself. Obviously, everyone's different as well. It's important that person is getting proper medical care. And if you need to get some information about that, then obviously, if you have an occupational health expert who can help you with that, then that's great.

I think, often, it's back to being led by the individual. Because quite often it's about the individual understanding what might trigger a period of anxiety or depression as a result of their condition. And helping them, perhaps, if they want to disclose to some of their closer co-workers who might be able to spot those signs and provide early support, or the line manager doing that.

It is sensitive and it can be something that causes line managers to be anxious. The more informed they are, and the more they're led by the needs of the employee, I think the better.

mind
for better mental health

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

mind.org.uk/work
work@mind.org.uk

Support us

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.

Join us

Help us make change happen. Be part of our work. Become a Mind member today.
mind.org.uk/get_involved/membership

Contact us

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 333
9am to 6pm Mon – Fri

Mind
15-19 Broadway
Stratford
London
E15 4BQ

Find your local Mind at mind.org.uk/mymind

@MindCharity
facebook.com/mindforbettermentalhealth

Mind is a registered charity No. 219830