

## **Extract from mhfa Line Managers' Resource**

**This is a guidance document the principles of which may be useful when dealing with someone whose mental health is not well**

[https://mhfaengland.org/entity/sharepointdocumentlocation/63c4fc2b-0c4a-e711-8107-e0071b668081/d78574f9-20c3-4dcc-8d8d-85cf5b7ac141?file=line\\_managers\\_resource.pdf](https://mhfaengland.org/entity/sharepointdocumentlocation/63c4fc2b-0c4a-e711-8107-e0071b668081/d78574f9-20c3-4dcc-8d8d-85cf5b7ac141?file=line_managers_resource.pdf)  
(accessed 16.06.17).

### **Talking at an early stage**

#### **Engaging with someone who is reluctant to talk about their mental health**

Firstly, you need to reassure the employee that your talk is confidential, although in certain situations you may not be able to guarantee total confidentiality (see below). Then you should consider – from the employee's point of view why he or she might be reluctant to talk. Are they fearful about being judged or even of losing their job? Is it really safe for them to be open with you? Will any disclosures be treated sympathetically and positively? If this employee has seen others with similar problems being discriminated against then from their point of view they are wise to be cautious.

You need to be realistic. You may not be able to change the culture of the organisation overnight but you may be able to take some first steps.

In the short term you can meet the person in a private confidential setting. You could even meet outside the office, in a café or somewhere the employee feels comfortable. If it is too difficult for the employee to talk now reassure them that your door is always open.

Before the meeting ask if the employee wants to bring an advocate, trusted colleague, friend or family member to support them in a meeting. Indeed some people might find it easier to talk to someone of their own choosing, e.g. someone of the same age, gender or ethnicity – or someone who is not their line manager.

In larger organisations the occupational health advisors may liaise with staff. In cases where employees are reticent about contacting the occupational health department you might choose to intervene. Whichever approach is adopted clear communication between you as line manager and the occupational health department is needed to ensure that contact with the member of staff is co-ordinated and supportive.

You must be clear about confidentiality and who will be told what. You can clearly explain the limits of your confidentiality (personal information is confidential but issues that may have a health and safety risk to the employee or colleagues will need to be discussed further).

You should agree with the employee how problems will be monitored. If adjustments are being made, ask how they wish this to be communicated to other staff.

Make sure you deal with any hurtful gossip or bullying promptly and effectively. It is your responsibility to ensure that employees are not bullied or harassed on account of any disability or additional needs.

### **Issues to raise with an employee who is experiencing mental ill health**

- Ask open questions about what is happening, how they are feeling what the impact of the stress or mental ill health is. Ask them what solutions they think there might be but appreciate that they may not be able to think clearly about solutions while experiencing distress.
- How long has the employee felt unwell? Is this an ongoing issue or something that an immediate action could put right?
- Discuss whether work has contributed to their distress. Listen without passing judgement and make sure you address their concerns seriously.
- Are there any problems outside of work that they might like to talk about and/or it would be helpful for you to know about? (you should not put pressure on the person to reveal external problems).
- Is the employee aware of possible sources of support such as: relationship or bereavement counselling, drugs/alcohol services/advice, legal or financial advice?
- Ask the employee if there is anything that you can do to help and make sure that they are aware of any support that the organisation may provide such as reference to occupational health, counselling, Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), brief psychological therapies, health checks and that if they access them it will be confidential if that is the case.
- Is there any aspect of the employee's medical care that it would be helpful for you to know about? (for example, side effects of medication that might impact on their work). While you have no right to this information, the employee should be aware that you cannot be expected to make 'reasonable adjustments' if you are not informed about the problem.
- Does the employee have ideas about any adjustments to their work that may be helpful? These could be short or long term.
- Do they have any ongoing mental ill health that it would be helpful for you to know about? If so, is it useful to discuss their established coping strategies and how the organisation can support them? (see section 7 for more information). It is the employee's choice whether to reveal this but you can explain that it will be easier for you to make reasonable adjustments for a health issue you know about.
- Establish precisely what they wish colleagues to be told and who will say what. Any inappropriate breach of confidentiality or misuse of this information might constitute discrimination, and
- Agree what will happen next and who will take what action.

You might also consider whether the employee has been affected by an issue that may affect others in the team/organisation such as a threat of redundancy. If so then you will need to undertake a stress risk audit followed by team-based problem solving. Discuss this with our health and safety department, (you might consider bringing in someone from outside the department or an external expert to help).

It is important that you record all conversations accurately – not just to protect the organisation and the employee, but also to show that the actions have been carried out fully. Once the conversation has been recorded it is best practice to provide a copy to the member of staff involved to obtain their agreement to its accuracy.

## **Managing an employee who becomes tearful and upset**

Try and be calm yourself

Emotions are a natural part of life and sooner or later it is extremely likely that a member of your staff will become upset. This can happen for any number of reasons and can be connected to something at work or outside of work.

When this situation arises:

- Reassure them that it is okay to be upset and that you are listening. In fact, the process of listening may provide an important space for both you and the employee to gain insight into the problem and possible actions.
- Ask if there is anyone they would like contacted or if they would like to choose someone to be with them
- Make sure the employee is offered and provided an appropriate space where they can express emotion freely and compose themselves in privacy
- Alternatively, you might suggest that you both leave the building for a short time to go and have a hot drink or for a short walk to give the person time to collect themselves. They may wish to go alone. However, it would be best not to let the person leave the building alone if they are still very distressed. They may also nominate someone else to go with them.
- Be respectful towards what the employee would like to do. Once they have recovered sufficiently, they may want to carry on working or take a break or possibly go home.
- Reassure the employee that they are valued and that you support them, as they may feel embarrassed about what has happened, and

- Never just ignore the person even if you are worried how they will take your intervention – doing nothing may make the situation worse.

Try to be sensitive to the level of information and support the employee can cope with at a given time. In the midst of a crisis they may not be able to think clearly and take on board information. The important points are to talk to them, reassure them their job is safe, state positively that all help, assistance and support will be offered, and affirm that discussion will continue at a pace that suits them.

Problems can build up over time and whilst you may feel pressure to take action immediately, it may be better to take some time to calm yourself, reflect and consider the options. Try to distinguish, with the person, between what is urgent and what is important.

You may also need support in managing this kind of situation but do take into account the confidentiality of the employee. If the session is not proving helpful for the employee you could then rearrange for another time in the near future to discuss the issues when the person is less upset.

## **Managing your own mental health**

There may be times when you experience distress yourself. It is important to look after your own mental health. Finding support whether it is internally within the organisation or externally with friends and family for example, can be extremely helpful towards re-establishing well-being.

## **Managing the rest of the team**

Be aware of the impact one employee's mental ill health could potentially have on the rest of the team.

This could be in response to:

- The person's particular symptoms or behaviour while unwell
- Any reasonable adjustments that made, and
- An increased workload for staff if the person is not well enough to work

In these instances it would be advisable to:

- Be honest and open with the team as long as it does not breach any agreed confidentiality with the employee concerned
- Identify working conditions that may negatively influence the well-being of the team, and change them were necessary
- Create an environment where staff can air their concerns openly to avoid gossiping and any resentment towards the member of staff who is off work due to mental ill health, and
- Treat all staff fairly otherwise staff may show lower commitment to their job. If a member of staff experiencing mental ill health is offered flexible working hours as a reasonable adjustment for example, then it may be appropriate to offer the same conditions to all staff. Staff do not have to have the same experiences for you to create flexible arrangements. The important thing is to focus on promoting the well-being of your team. Employees who feel stable and supported will help improve performance and retention of staff through increased employee contentment and loyalty.

## **Communicating with colleagues**

You should agree with the employee whether and precisely what they wish colleagues to be told. In general it is best to talk to someone experiencing mental ill health in an honest, matter-of-fact way – that is in the same way you would deal with someone's physical health problems.

If the person takes sick leave you could send them a card as you would if they were off work with a physical problem. You should ask whether they want to be visited and respect their wishes.

There person's requests may change very quickly or over time. If they initially request little contact, this may change as their mental health improves. Someone experiencing mental ill health should be treated in exactly the same way as any other sickness absence.

If your organisation has a written absence policy, you will be in a position to discuss with the person at the start of absence how often contact should be made. The employee then has a right to expect that frequency of contact.

## Recognising when professional/clinical help is needed

Although someone does not have to be 100% well to work and in general work is good for mental health, in some instances an employee may really not be mentally well enough to work. If someone continues to show signs of distress despite the reasonable adjustments and support you have provided then you should seek advice from Human Resources (HR) and/or refer the individual to the Occupational Health (OH) department. Sometimes people refuse to be referred for an OH assessment and in these instances you can tell them that you want them to see their GP before coming back into work.

If you work for an organisation without an OH or HR department you can encourage people to see their own GP and seek appropriate help. You can state what their job involves in a referral letter.

One in four people will experience 'mild to moderate' mental ill health, such as anxiety and depression. However, a much smaller percentage will experience episodes of more severe anxiety or depression that may be associated with episodes of 'highs'. These may present as:

- Extreme heightened activity, and/or
- Loss of touch with reality, hallucinations, and distortion of the senses e.g. seeing or smelling things that aren't there.

In these rare instances, an employee may behave in ways that impact on colleagues or clients. In this situation you need to be aware of your responsibilities for all employees.

Try to take the person to a quiet place and speak to them calmly. Suggest that you contact a friend or relative or that they go home and contact their GP or a member of the mental health team if appropriate.

You might also be able to help them make an appointment and even go with them to the surgery – if they so wish.

Be aware that if someone is experiencing hallucinations or heightened senses, they may not be able to take in what you are saying. In this case the person may need immediate medical help

If an employee is disturbing others and refuses to accept help, you should seek advice from your Occupational Health provider if you have one, or from the person's GP if you know whom that is otherwise contact NHS Direct, or the ambulance service if the problem is really urgent.

This situation is rare and when it does happen it is usually not completely 'out of the blue'. This is why early identification of changes in behaviour and prompt action are so important.

## **Useful Resources / Contact Numbers**

- NHS Employers – Guidance on Prevention and Management of Stress at Work. October 2014.  
[www.nhsemployers.org](http://www.nhsemployers.org) (accessed 24.5.18).
- NHS Employers – Guide on supporting workplace mental health. Supporting staff who are experiencing mental health problems  
[www.nhsemployers.org](http://www.nhsemployers.org) (accessed 24.5.18).
- Mindfulness  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) (accessed 24.5.18).
- For advice on workplace adjustments refer to NTW (HR) 10 – Managing Sickness Absence Policy

- Care First - Telephone No: 0800 174319

For information/Advice on Benefits, Debts, Employment, Family and Personal Matters, health issues and confidential counselling

- Team Prevent (Occupational Health) – Telephone No: 01327 810271
- NTW Recovery Clinic – Telephone No: 07983 716551
- Samaritans – Telephone No: 08457 90 90 90
- Rethink mental illness – Monday to Friday 10am – 2pm – Telephone No: 0300 5000927
- The Mind Infoline – Telephone No: 0300 123 3393 or [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)
- Citizen Advice Bureau. For information about Benefits, Debts, Legal issues contact [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk) for a listing on its local services (accessed 24.5.18).