

# Keep calm and HR on: Supporting employee mental health in the workplace

*According to research from the Mental Health Foundation, one in six people in the United Kingdom experience mental health problems in the workplace. The foundation's research also revealed that 12.7% of all sickness absence days are a result of mental health conditions. Additionally, it was revealed that better mental health support in the workplace can save UK businesses as much as £8B every year.*

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Seeing these statistics in light of the recent pandemic highlighting these issues, it's clear that it's time for HR to step up in support of employee mental health.

## Mental health in the workplace

This is not to say that HR departments around Britain are completely ignoring mental health. In recent years, mental health awareness is becoming a key focus within the industry. This is especially important considering that work itself can be the main cause of mental health issues for reasons such as workplace bullying, anxiety, and work-related stress.

It's important for HR and a company's greater workforce not only to know how to identify mental health issues but also how to support colleagues and employees. To do this effectively, HR must address the issue and promote it positively to employees. Beyond creating greater awareness,

this can enhance employees' motivation and job satisfaction.

## How HR can improve mental health in the workplace

As can be surmised from the Mental Health Foundation's statistics mentioned above, issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress can negatively affect employee performance, the business's day-to-day operations, and its bottom line.

Given this, it's essential that HR familiarises itself with various ways in which to support employees' mental health before it affects their performance and the business. This begins with treating mental and physical health as equally important. You can't have one without the other.

Here are various ways in which HR leaders can support mental health in the workplace:

### 1. Regular employee check-ins

HR teams should create open lines of communication with employees, which can help those teams and employees to identify early signs of mental health issues.

Two effective ways to approach this include collecting team sentiment data via online pulse surveys and screening tools shared through the HR system and having regular informal face-to-face meetings with employees.

These surveys and meetings can help HR to identify negative feelings early on. Especially when employees are encouraged to feel comfortable enough to speak freely. Avoid formal meetings in which senior

management and many colleagues are present, as they could trigger feelings of anxiety.

## 2. Internal training for line managers

HR should ensure that line managers are appropriately trained to support individuals who are struggling with mental health issues.

Ways in which line managers can support those individuals include looking out for other signs of issues related to mental health and possibly referring them for further help. Additionally, they can adjust the individual's workload.

The HR team can also build an in-house training programme using *resources like webinars*, guides, and online courses.

## 3. Mental health support training

HR should not limit training around employee mental health to line managers. Instead, the team should invest in employees' professional development by sending staff on mental health training courses. Such courses can equip employees with the skills they need to support their colleagues at work. The mental health charity Mind is one of several bodies that offers numerous training options, such as in-house sessions and online courses.

For decades in the past, when HR teams have considered First Aid training at work, it has been in the context of physical health and medical emergencies. However, in recent years, a growing number of organisations have created *First Aid training courses* that allow employees to qualify as Mental Health First Aiders.

By offering these programmes in the workplace, HR teams make it possible for employees to speak to someone who can support them in

overcoming their mental health issues in the workplace before those issues have too severe an effect on employees' performance. Other options for training in the workplace include Government-funded courses such as Awareness of Mental Health Problems, Counselling In the Workplace, and Understanding Behaviour that Challenges.

#### 4. Mental health-related employee benefits

HR should consider adding mental health support to employees' benefits packages. Examples of such support include free therapy or counselling sessions, as well as flexible working arrangements.

Free counselling or therapy as an employee benefit could make a significant difference to employees who are unable to access these services elsewhere. While flexi working arrangements can help staff alleviate stress by adjusting the balance between their work and personal lives.

If HR chooses to include mental health support in benefits packages, the team should ensure that all employees are made aware of those benefits. They should also encourage employees to utilise those benefits whenever required.

#### 5. Use HR tech to identify patterns

A number of HR tech solutions have absence management modules which can help to identify when employees might be struggling with mental health issues. Using those modules and the data they produce to gain a better understanding of absence records can help HR take steps to reduce absenteeism by implementing the appropriate interventions and benefits.

#### 6. Develop a comprehensive wellbeing policy

HR departments should develop a comprehensive well-being policy which covers physical and mental health in the workplace. The policy should include a clear statement of the organisation's commitment to fostering a physical and mental health-positive working environment.

The policy must be *supported by senior management* and outline key stakeholders' responsibilities. It must also incorporate processes for evaluating all well-being initiatives' effectiveness, and enumerate the advice, support, and training available to enhance employee well-being.

HR should keep the policy under constant review, making adjustments as and when necessary. It's essential that HR's approach to well-being should treat employees as individuals with unique needs who require tailored support.

## Toward better mental health in the workplace

In today's world, no organisation can afford to ignore the importance of mental health in the workplace. HR can play a vital role in ensuring that their organisation invests in employee wellness in meaningful and effective ways. In doing so, they'll reduce absenteeism, improve productivity and create a healthier workplace culture.

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