Briefing

Employment adjustments for people experiencing Stress, Anxiety and Depression

Abridged content for sample purposes

Contents

Introduction

This Briefing focuses on employment adjustments for people experiencing stress, anxiety and depression. All three are commonly experienced by people who work or would like to be working.

Wellbeing and mental wellness

Mental health refers to an individual's mental state or in other words, how they are feeling. An individual's mental wellness is variable and everyone can experience periods of mental distress, when they feel unhappy, anxious, angry or when they find it difficult to cope. Similarly we are all familiar with feelings of self-doubt, loss of confidence, guilt and low self-worth.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling that anyone can experience however it can affect people differently. Anxiety can mean constant and unrealistic worry and fear, with difficulties controlling these feelings. It is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as insomnia, sweating, a racing heart or palpitations.

10 million people in the UK are affected by an anxiety disorder,[1] when anxiety interferes with day to day activities.

For people with generalised anxiety disorder, triggers tend not to be specific. It can affect people daily and make it difficult for them to identify days when they were not feeling anxious. It is estimated that up to 5% of the UK population has generalised anxiety disorder.[2]

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[1] MQ: Transforming Mental Health - Anxiety disorder

[2] NHS - Generalised anxiety disorder in adults

Linked conditions

Other mental health conditions affecting people of working age have anxiety as their main symptom:

- Phobias e.g. agoraphobia or claustrophobia are extreme anxiety induced by particular objects or situations. This also includes social anxiety disorder also called social phobia.

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- Panic disorder.

What is depression?

Depression goes beyond the feeling of being low or sad that anyone can experience at some point in their life. It can mean feeling low or irritable, losing interest and enjoyment in life and feeling worthless.

Depression can range from reactive depression triggered by an external event such as a bereavement, divorce or post-natal depression, to severe clinical depression with no obvious external cause.

Manic depression, now known as Bi-Polar Disorder is a specific type of mental health condition that can lead to periods of depression.

Stress

According to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), stress, depression or anxiety account for 40% of all work-related ill health cases, with 12.5 million work days lost as a result of stress, depression or anxiety.[3]

Although stress is not automatically covered by the Equality Act 2010, work-related stress is the leading occupational health problem in the UK. Neither people nor organisations perform at their best when stress is not managed effectively.

Extensive misuse of the word stress in everyday language has caused it to become somewhat devalued as a serious health and safety issue. Although workplace pressure is a part of everyday life and can stimulate and motivate your workforce, it is important to recognise the difference between pressure as a positive, dynamic force and stress or 'distress' which may have destructive and demoralising effects on the mental health of your workforce.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". The threshold between healthy and excessive levels of pressure is personal and will vary between individuals and across different situations. However, there are a number of organisational factors which make it more likely that a workforce will experience stress.

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[3] HSE - Work-related Stress, Depression or Anxiety Statisitics

The HSE has identified six key factors, which affect employees as they carry out their work:

- Demands – the demands placed upon an employee in their role, including workload, the skills and capabilities of an employee to fulfil workload, work patterns and the working environment.

- Control – how much say an employee has in the way they do their work.

- Support – includes the encouragement, training and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues to assist an employee to do their work, and systems to support employees when things go wrong.

- Relationships – includes promoting positive working, clear communication and fair treatment to avoid conflict and ensuring that unacceptable behaviour including bullying and harassment is dealt with promptly and effectively.

- Role – people need to understand their role and organisations should ensure that employees do not have conflicting roles.

- Change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated internally.

Taking a strategic approach to managing organisational pressure will enable you to reduce or eliminate workplace stress. Carry out a risk assessment for stress, identifying hazards and those who might be at particular risk:

- Ensure workloads are realistic and appropriate to the skills and capabilities of the employee and that employees are not working excessive hours e.g. weekends and during holidays.

- Ensure everyone has clear objectives and is not subject to conflicting demands.

- Allow as much flexibility as possible in working arrangements and allow employees as much control as possible in the way they plan their time and perform their duties. Encourage employees to show initiative and where possible allow flexible working hours and remote working patterns.

- Provide every employee with good management on a day to day basis and fair performance appraisals; ensure they receive regular feedback, development and training opportunities.

- Take appropriate initiatives to raise awareness of stress and promote a healthy work/life balance.

- Introduce appropriate initiatives to assist employees to manage their time and control the pace of work.

- Encourage employees not to work through lunch, and to take advantage of flexible working practices if available.

- Ensure your organisation promotes a positive and inclusive culture and has clearly signposted policies on workplace bullying and harassment and that complaints are investigated promptly and effectively.

- Ensure that you have policies and procedures in place to uphold the personal safety and security of employees at work.

- Make sure that your organisation's communications are honest and open.

- Consult your employees and ensure that relevant stakeholders are involved at every stage of decision making and be particularly mindful of anxiety levels during times of job insecurity or restructuring.

Employment and people experiencing Stress, Anxiety or Depression

Many people who experience stress, anxiety or depression will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but may not consider themselves to be disabled.

Nevertheless employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities such as stress, anxiety or depression mean that barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder for employers to determine and put in place.

Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with anxiety or depression for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and appropriate disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process accounts for barriers faced by those experiencing stress, anxiety or depression – see page 29 for further details.

It is important that employers have an open and honest conversation with new employees and their support staff about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. The best practice approach is to make reasonable adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.

- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.

- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.

- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the Briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Content has been removed
for sample purposes. Pages
11 to 30 are available in the
full booklet.

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