Business Disability Forum

Sample

People manager guide

Mental health at work

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Introduction

This guide is designed for people managers, supervisors, project and matrix managers and line managers.

It will also be helpful for Human Resources and Diversity & Inclusion teams and people with responsibility for owning and reviewing employment-related policies.

This guide is about mental health and so it may challenge you to look at your own attitudes and assumptions about people who have a mental health condition or who experience a period of mental ill-health. It will also help you to look after your own mental wellbeing.

Most of all, this guide will help you to become a better people manager for all of your employees including those experiencing mental ill-health or who have a long-term mental health condition.

Attitudes, assumptions and facts about mental health

- One in four people will experience some kind of mental ill health in the course of a year.[1]

So, it is very likely that you know someone who has or is experiencing mental ill-health.

Attitudes towards mental health in society are, thankfully, changing. Whether it's the royals' "Heads Together" initiative, the profile of mental health in government health policies or campaigns such as "Time to Talk " and "Time to change", it's clear that there is greater awareness of mental health than perhaps ever before. And if this higher profile helps to reduce stigma and give people who are experiencing mental ill health the confidence to ask for the help they need, that can only be a good thing.

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1 Mind - https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/

This positive change means that the people you work with or manage are more likely to talk about their mental health and open up about anything they are finding difficult at work as a result. This offers you a better opportunity as a manager to give your team the support or adjustments they need to reach their full potential at work, delivering better business and health outcomes for everyone.

However, although there has undoubtedly been progress on cultural perceptions of talking about mental health, there is still more work to do. Too many people experiencing mental ill health are still afraid to talk to their manager because they fear that a mental health condition will be viewed as a weakness or that they will be feared and avoided.

● 54% of employees feel comfortable talking generally in the workplace about general mental health issues.

● 16% of employees felt able to disclose a mental health issue to their manager.[2]

Most of us spend much of our life – or at least our waking life – at work. So employers have a huge role to play in supporting their employees to manage their mental health and to support them through periods of mental ill health.

Yet many of us still have unconscious biases that may affect the way we view a colleague experiencing mental ill-health. It's important to consider and challenge these biases as they can cause us to make bad decisions.

People you work with or manage are more likely to talk about their mental health.

2 Mental Health at Work Survey Report 2018, BITC

What can you do as a manager?

In the course of your working life as a manager, you will almost certainly manage someone who is experiencing mental ill-health.

How you behave and manage your team can make a real difference not only to the individuals you manage but to the culture of your organisation as a whole in creating a positive, supportive culture where employees will thrive.

How open people can be about their health, both physical and mental, will depend a great deal on how they think you will react.

As a manager, you can do three things to support people experiencing mental ill-health in the workplace:

1. **Set the tone** – challenge stigma and build a culture in which people are comfortable being open about mental health to themselves and others.

2. **Be proactive** – identify and remove potential stressors that might damage your team's mental health and promote positive wellbeing and coping strategies.

3. **Be responsive** – get to know your team to help you identify when mental ill-health may be affecting someone's work, then do something practical to remove any triggers or barriers they might be facing.

This guide has been written to help you do this.

How you manage your team can make a real difference to the culture of your organisation.

What do we mean by mental health?

The kind of language we use to talk about mental health is changing rapidly. Historically, the term 'mental health' has been used to refer to a whole range of very different experiences – from someone experiencing a long-term condition like schizophrenia or a personality disorder that they may manage for their entire lives, to someone experiencing a shorter spell of stress, anxiety or depression following a traumatic incident, for example.

One is not more important or valid than the other, but what this means is that we have been using the same words to refer to really very different experiences. More confusing, sometimes "mental health" gets used as a shorthand for mental ill-health or a mental health condition, when the reality is that we all have mental health, just as we all have physical health.

This guide was last reviewed in January 2020 and uses language that was generally seen as best practice at the time. Depending on when you're reading this, things may have changed. In this guide, we will be talking about:

- Mental health – a catch-all term covering good or poor health, similar to how we may discuss physical health.

- Mental health conditions – referring to long-term health issues which may cause someone to become unwell or cause them to do things differently. Remember, someone with a mental health condition is not unwell all the time, in much the same way that if you have a physical health condition like diabetes this does not mean that you are always ill.

- Mental ill-health – referring to when someone who is unwell. This might be related to an underlying mental health condition or could be a shorter-term illness.

- Mental wellbeing or resilience – referring to a positive state of mental health, as we might talk about physical fitness.

We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health.

You may well have come across the following mental health conditions:

Schizophrenia.	**Depression.**
Manic depression.	**Anxiety disorder.**
Post-traumatic stress disorder.	**Obsessive compulsive disorder.**
Self-harm.	**Personality disorders.**
Bipolar disorder.	

You don't need a detailed medical understanding of what these terms mean any more than you need to understand the medical ins and outs of other illnesses or diseases. What you need to know as a manager is how to address and remove any barriers that an employee with a mental health condition – whatever it might be – may face at work, just as you need to know how to address any barriers experienced by an employee with diabetes or MS or any other physical disability or health condition.

If you do want to know more about a particular mental health condition or diagnosis the MIND website has a number of useful resources.

What you need to know as a manager is how to remove any barriers that an employee may face at work.

Who experiences mental ill-health?

The short answer is that anyone can develop a mental health condition or experience mental ill-health. Mental ill-health can affect children and older people as well as people of working age. Just as some people develop illnesses like diabetes, MS or cancer, others will acquire a mental health condition. Some people will have a condition that lasts all their lives and which they will have to manage as they would say, asthma. Many will have an episode from which they will fully recover.

Having experienced mental ill-health in the past does not necessarily mean that the person will be ill again – some people recover fully. Others will have a fluctuating condition and so will have periods when they are well and periods when they are not.

Sometimes mental health problems are triggered by a life event. Think about the following situations:

Starting at a new school.	Puberty.
Noticing how you look – body image.	Studying and taking exams.
Starting college or university.	Getting a partner.
Your first job.	Working with your manager or boss.
Starting a new job and working with new colleagues.	Getting married.
Coping with an increased workload or promotion.	Dealing with bereavement.
Having children.	Unemployment.
A health scare or illness.	Getting divorced or breaking up with a partner.
Being made redundant.	Retiring.

Some of these can be rich, rewarding and satisfying life events but all of them can also be the cause of stress or distress. They might be the trigger for depression, anxiety or some other mental illness even if they are seemingly "happy" events.

We've probably all heard about post-natal depression or post-traumatic stress disorder and it's easy to understand someone feeling depressed after losing a loved one. Remember, however, that there isn't always an easily recognisable trigger for a mental illness.

It's all too easy to judge people, often without realising. When someone tells you that they are experiencing mental ill-health, it can be helpful to reflect on your unconscious reaction. For example, you may feel differently when someone who has been bereaved tells you that they have depression to how you feel when someone who seemingly has a good/happy/successful life tells you the same thing.

Anyone can develop a mental health condition at any time. Unless you are that person's therapist you won't know why they are ill and you won't know how long they will be ill – and usually, it's not that straightforward for the person's therapist either! There are no set limits for "getting over" the death of a loved one or post-natal depression and there is no "type" of person who develops a mental illness. Some people will recover from their mental health condition and others will not. Many have fluctuating conditions which mean that there will be times when they are well and times when they are not.

Your job as a manager is not to judge or diagnose mental health conditions. It is to remove any barriers that an employee with a mental health condition in your team may face at work.

There isn't always an easily recognisable trigger for a mental illness.

How will you know if you have someone in your team who has a mental health condition?

There are a number of ways that you might know:

- They might tell you.

- You might notice a change in their behaviour or appearance:

  - The way they communicate or relate to others might change.

  - You might notice changes in routine or habits.

  - Their performance or attendance might give you cause for concern.

  - Their appearance might change.

How do you think you'd feel if a member of your team told you that they had a mental illness? It will probably depend on your own experience of mental health. If your immediate reaction is alarm just remember that most people try to conceal their mental ill-health if they can. If someone does tell you, this is likely to indicate that they have a good level of self-awareness, want to take practical action to help themselves, trust you and feel that they can be open with you. This is a good sign.

Managing people who tell you that they have a mental health condition

Some people who know they are experiencing mental ill-health or have a mental health condition are willing to talk to you about their condition and that can be very helpful. They might tell you the nature of their condition, e.g. bipolar, or simply that they have a condition that affects their work from time to time.

The good news for you is that people who know they have a mental illness often know how it affects them and how to manage their condition. If they tell you about their condition, ask them what they need from you as a manager as they may well know how they work best and any changes or adjustments they need. As an employer you have a legal obligation to make what are known as "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people. These are changes to the way in which a disabled person works or their working environment that are needed because of their disability. Someone with a mental health condition is very likely to be covered by The Equality Act 2010.

If you want to know more about adjustments please see Business Disability Forum's people manager guides on 'Disabilities which are not immediately visible' and 'Making adjustments' or you can find useful resources on our Knowledge Hub.

Fluctuating conditions in people who are well most of the time

Some people will know that they have a fluctuating condition which means that they will be well most of the time but will have periods when they are not well.

Talk to them when they are well about how they are when they are well but just having "a bad day", and what their symptoms are when it is something more serious, so that you know the difference and you know when you need to act. Ask them what would be most helpful for you to do and how you can best support them when they become unwell. A tailored adjustment plan can be a useful tool in these circumstances.

Tailored adjustment plans

A tailored adjustment plan is a document drawn up by the manager and the employee and can be used to:

● Record the effects of a mental health condition (or another disability or condition) on the employee at work.

● Describe symptoms that might indicate that the employee is not well.

● Agree what the manager will do in these circumstances e.g. what to say to the employee and how and who to contact if the employee's behaviour is a cause for concern.

● Maintain up to date records of emergency contacts.

● Record any changes or adjustments that have been agreed with the employee to the way that they work.

● Agree what to say to colleagues.

● Agree how to handle periods of absence and how to maintain contact with the employee.

The tailored adjustment plan is a living document and should be reviewed regularly to ensure that everything is up to date and that the adjustments are working for both the employee, the rest of the team, and the business as a whole.

The plan will also help the employee to talk to a new manager about the effects of their disability if you leave or they move departments.

If you are the new manager of someone with a tailored adjustment plan in place this makes it much easier to have an initial conversation with your new report as you already have a good idea of what has worked in the past and how these adjustments might work in future.

You can find a template for a 'tailored adjustment plan' on Business Disability Forum's Knowledge Hub.

Sample

Managing people who haven't told you they have a mental health condition

We are Business Disability Forum. We believe the 26 million people in the UK and over 1 billion people worldwide with disabilities and long-term conditions enhance the social and economic health of our societies.

We are the world's first business disability network and have almost 30 years' experience bringing together business, disabled opinion leaders and government to transform opportunities for disabled people to contribute equally to society and economic growth.

Our aim is to help organisations become fully accessible to disabled employees, customers and service users for mutual benefit.

Our 300 plus Members collectively represent around 20% of the UK Workforce and employ an estimated 8 million people worldwide.

We provide them with pragmatic support through training, consultancy, resources and guidance plus peer to peer learning and support.

Our leading business inclusion Advice Service provides a responsive space for members working on any aspect of disability inclusion to talk through ideas, trouble shoot, and get case support on the disability related challenges in their business.

Our community of businesses, thought leaders, and disabled people develop research which influences policy development.

Our events, sector networks, and subject task groups bring together professionals with shared interests to learn from one another, share insight, and collaborate on projects.

Join us

If you are not already a Member or Partner of Business Disability Forum, why not join us? To find out how, contact our team on telephone number **+44-(0)20-7403-3020**; or by email to **join@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

For a full list of our Members and Partners and for further details on the service we offer please visit **www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or contact our team:

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Content has been removed for sample purposes.
Pages 17 —44 are available in the full booklet.

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