

Factsheet: **Worried about a member of staff?**

Mental health concerns, addiction and bullying amongst staff can be issues that affect the bottom line for your business. An unhappy or unhealthy member of staff may make mistakes that could prove expensive and difficult to resolve, and their problems could escalate. This could mean time off sick, or they may leave, resulting in recruitment and training costs and loss of continuity for clients.

It is in your organisation's interests to ensure that staff work in a healthy environment where there is no bullying, excessive workload or long-hours culture, and where individuals are properly trained, supervised, supported and provided with all they need to do their work.

How to talk to a colleague about mental health

Talking about mental health at work can be difficult. Some may find it helps to be open, and feel relieved that things are not hidden any more, but they may also experience negative reactions. It's important for people to remember they're not alone, and that many people in work have mental health problems. It's the individual's choice to talk about their mental health with colleagues or employers, there are no set rules, but talking may help to get the practical support needed to stay healthy at work.

It is also not necessary to be an expert in mental health to talk to a colleague who may be experiencing an issue. People may feel anxious about starting the conversation, but it's important to remember that talking could make all the difference to the employee's mental health. Knowing they have permission to talk about the situation will be a huge release for some.

The conversation could be started with a simple 'How are you?' Offering to make the person a cup of tea, inviting them somewhere private for a chat, or suggesting popping out to a nearby café or for a walk, can all get people talking. Setting aside enough time to talk and switching the phone off are also good things to do in this situation. Remember to give the person your full attention and listen intently to what they are saying.

Here are some useful tips on how to start that conversation from **Mental Health First Aid England** [MHFA] www.mhfaengland.org :

- ▶ **Keep the discussion positive and supportive – explore the issues and how to help**
- ▶ **Be mindful of body language – make sure it's open and non-confrontational**
- ▶ **Be empathetic and take them seriously**
- ▶ **Don't be tempted to say things like 'pull yourself together'**
- ▶ **Ask questions such as 'How are you feeling at the moment?', 'How long have you been feeling like this?', 'Is there anyone you feel you can ask for support?', 'Are there any work issues that are contributing to how you are feeling?', and 'Is there anything I can do to help?'**
- ▶ **Listen carefully, don't interrupt, and try to be non-judgmental**
- ▶ **Be reassuring and signpost them to support such as LawCare, HR, another colleague, or suggest they visit their GP or seek counselling**

Stress and depression

Everyone is different. Some people thrive in a busy and stressful environment while others find it more difficult to cope. As a business, it is important that you allow for the different abilities and working practices of your staff, and that everyone can safely air their grievances without negative repercussions.

“She just gives me more and more stuff to do, including things I’m not qualified for, and when I ask how I am supposed to get through it all she just says, ‘You’ll cope’. But I’m not coping.”

Our experience shows that some managers and supervisors believe that piling work and pressure on staff will achieve the best results. This is storing up problems for the future. Health and Safety legislation imposes a duty of care on employers to pay heed to their staff’s mental health and wellbeing. If you suspect that an employee is experiencing stress or depression, it’s important that they are encouraged to seek help from their GP immediately and take time off, with their work assigned to other colleagues.

Long serving staff might have helped to build the organisation’s reputation and should be supported through difficult times. Reassure the person that their place will be kept open and their boundaries respected, and discuss with them how you can help. If it is appropriate, this may include some contribution to the financial costs involved in getting that person fit and well enough to return to work.

Addiction

Alcoholism and other addictions are progressive diseases which, unless treated, can continue to get worse. The business has much to lose, especially financially, if the problem is ignored. Staff struggling with addiction may:

- ▶ Be depressed, overconfident, angry or paranoid, sometime by turns
- ▶ Miss appointments and deadlines
- ▶ Be negative or unrealistically positive in the advice they give
- ▶ Make frequent administrative errors
- ▶ Blame others for their mistakes
- ▶ Neglect personal dress and hygiene
- ▶ Come into the workplace smelling of alcohol
- ▶ Over-react when challenged

Once there are indications that a member of your staff is addicted to alcohol or drugs, it is important that you take immediate action. The first step is an informal interview where the issue is raised and possible ways forward identified. There may be exceptional circumstances which can explain the person’s behaviour. If so, these should be discussed and measures taken to try to resolve the situation.

Treatment

The staff member should be encouraged to go to their GP and honestly discuss their addiction. GPs can refer them to various local services, which may be all that is required. Most health authorities operate addiction services, which are usually free on the NHS and often involve counselling, group support and sometimes drug therapy.

One of the most successful programmes is the 12-step method employed by **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**, **Narcotics Anonymous** and other organisations. AA is free and there are meetings all over the UK. In-patient treatment for alcohol and drug dependency can be very successful, but is often expensive, with prices ranging from £500 per week to over £6,000. Your organisation may consider paying for in-patient care for a member of staff. Some types of private medical insurance cover treatment for alcoholism.