

Supporting mental health at work

1 . Understanding the law

If an employee has poor mental health, it's important their employer takes it seriously and with the same care as a physical illness. For example, the employer should talk to the employee to find out what support they might need at work.

Mental health problems can happen suddenly, because of a specific event in someone's life, or it can build up gradually over time.

There are many types of mental health conditions, for example:

- depression
- anxiety

Less common ones include:

- bipolar disorder
- schizophrenia

Stress is not classed as a medical condition. But it can still be serious and cause, or make worse, other mental health conditions. For example, if you have stress over a long time, this might lead to anxiety or depression.

Spotting possible signs of a mental health problem

Not everyone will show obvious signs of poor mental health and it's important not to make assumptions. But some possible signs at work include:

- appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn
- increase in sickness absence or being late to work
- changes in the standard of their work or focus on tasks
- being less interested in tasks they previously enjoyed
- changes in usual behaviour, mood or how the person behaves with the people they work with

It can be harder to spot these signs if employees are working from home. It's important for employers to regularly ask their employees how they're doing. They should help them to be open and honest about how they're feeling.

The sooner an employer becomes aware of a mental health problem, the sooner they can provide help and support.

The law on mental health

Employers have a 'duty of care'. This means they must do all they reasonably can to support their employees' health, safety and wellbeing. This includes:

- making sure the working environment is safe

- protecting staff from discrimination
- carrying out risk assessments

Employers must treat mental and physical health as equally important.

Discriminating against someone with a disability

By law (Equality Act 2010) someone with poor mental health can be considered to be disabled if:

- it has a 'substantial adverse effect' on their life – for example, they regularly cannot focus on a task, or it takes them longer to complete tasks
- it lasts, or is expected to last, at least 12 months
- it affects their ability to do their normal day-to-day activities – for example, interacting with people, following instructions or keeping to set working times

Poor mental health can be considered a disability even if they do not have symptoms all the time.

If an employee is disabled, employers:

- must not discriminate against them because of their disability
- must make [reasonable adjustments](#)

It's a good idea to work with the employee to make the right adjustments for them, even if the issue is not a disability. Often, simple changes to the person's working arrangements or responsibilities could be enough. For example:

- allowing them more rest breaks
- working with them each day to help prioritise their workload

Find out more about:

- [disability discrimination](#)
- [supporting disabled people at work](#)

2. Looking after yourself

It's important to look after your mental health at work and ask for help when needed.

To help support your mental health and wellbeing, you can:

- stay in contact with people – talk to people you work with or friends about how you're feeling
- have a routine so you plan in advance what you'll be doing each day
- keep active and exercise
- make time for activities you enjoy
- reflect on what helps you feel more positive and what does not

Talking to your manager

If you have a mental health problem, it's up to you whether you disclose it to your manager and at what stage.

It can be a good idea to talk to your manager as early as possible about your situation and how you're doing. They might be able to help support you quickly and throughout your mental health problem.

For example, they might be able to support you with extra breaks to manage your workload. This might help prevent you needing to take time off on sick leave.

You and your manager might want to discuss changing your working pattern to suit your situation. For example, you might agree to change your start and finish time.

You can also let your manager know what kind of contact you'd like. For example, talking over the phone, having face to face meetings rather than video calls.

If your manager is concerned about your mental health they might arrange a conversation with you to see if you need any support. It's up to you how much information you share with them.

Find out more about [examples of reasonable adjustments for mental health](#) to see what support could be given.

Support available through work

You can check with your employer what support is available if you have concerns about your mental health.

Employers have a 'duty of care'. This means they must do all they reasonably can to support your health, safety and wellbeing.

For example, some organisations offer counselling. If they do, it'll usually be through a scheme known as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

Your organisation might also:

- have a mental health 'champion' – someone at work who leads on changing attitudes to mental health
- have a health and safety officer or trade union representative
- offer support in other ways, such as a mental health support group, or mental health network with other organisations
- offer mental health training on how to look after your mental health at work

If you're off sick because of your mental health

If you're off sick because of a mental health problem, you should agree with your manager:

- how you will stay in touch
- how often the contact will be
- how you will contact each other, for example by email, phone or face-to-face meetings

Continuing to have contact with your employer is important. It can help:

- you stay informed
- keep your employer informed so they can plan ahead
- your employer provide you with the support you need

You should keep in contact as agreed. But if you feel you cannot follow the plan for any reason you should tell your employer as soon as possible. You should then agree to an alternative contact plan together.

For example, if you had agreed to talk face to face but you're finding it overwhelming, a phone conversation could be an alternative option.

When you're ready to return to work, you should talk with your manager about the process for when someone returns to work.

Find out more about:

- [keeping in touch during absence](#)
- [returning to work after absence](#)
- [sick pay entitlement](#)

Reasonable adjustments for mental health

Reasonable adjustments are changes an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to someone's disability.

If you need a reasonable adjustment for mental health you should talk with your manager or employer. You should work together to agree any reasonable adjustments.

[Find out more about reasonable adjustments for mental health](#)

If you're unhappy with how your mental health problem has been handled

If you are unhappy with how your mental health problem has been handled at work, you can raise this with your employer. It's usually best to raise the problem informally first by [talking to your employer](#).

If you cannot reach a solution to the problem, you can [raise a grievance](#). This is where you make a formal complaint to your employer.

3. Managing employees' wellbeing

Employers have a 'duty of care'. This means, as an employer, you must do all you reasonably can to support your employees' health, safety and wellbeing. This includes:

- making sure employees can work safely and healthily
- protecting employees from discrimination, for example making sure reasonable adjustments are made for disabled employees
- carrying out risk assessments

You should also remind managers to communicate regularly with your teams. You should support them if they need to have sensitive conversations with their team members.

Creating a supportive environment

If employees feel they can talk openly about mental health, problems are less likely to build up. This could lead to:

- less time off for poor mental health
- improved morale at work

You must treat mental and physical health as equally important.

You should create an environment where your employees feel able to talk openly about mental health.

For example, you should:

- make sure managers model positive wellbeing behaviours and use their voice to challenge stigma
- make sure employees have regular meetings with their managers, to talk about any problems they're having
- provide resources to support open conversations about mental health

- increase awareness of mental health through training and campaigns
- appoint mental health 'champions' who are trained to listen and tell staff where to get support

Find out more about [promoting positive mental health at work](#), including:

- understanding mental health
- creating a mental health strategy
- educating the workforce

Supporting your team

You should be approachable, available and encourage team members to talk to you if they're having problems.

Your management style should suit the needs of each person. For example, if someone is working from home you could ask them if they prefer to talk over the phone, through video meetings or by email.

You should keep in regular contact with your team to check how they're coping.

You should check:

- how they're feeling
- how their work is going and if they need support
- if they have the right set up if they work from home

[Find out more about mental health support and training](#)

Assessing mental health at work

As an employer, you should talk to managers to understand how their teams are doing. You should find out which resources are helpful and if they need any more support.

If there is an online channel where employees share updates, it might be useful to regularly check it. This could help you understand employees' concerns and areas where they need more support.

You could also use wellbeing surveys to understand:

- how your employees are feeling at work
- where the sources of stress are

Training managers

As an employer, you should train managers to:

- talk and listen sensitively
- have knowledge of mental health
- know what support and guidance the organisation can offer

Training managers can give staff more confidence to talk about how their mental health affects their work.

You should train all managers, supervisors and team leaders to make sure they understand:

- how the law relates to mental health at work

- how to talk with and encourage staff to raise any mental health concerns
- what support and workplace changes are available to staff – for example if someone needs a quieter place to work in an open plan office
- how to deal with mental health sensitively and fairly

Acas provides [training on mental health in the workplace](#).

Talking to someone with poor mental health

Knowing how to approach and talk to an employee who has a mental health problem might seem difficult.

As an employer, if you believe an employee has poor mental health, you should arrange a conversation as soon as possible.

Some employees might not feel comfortable talking about their mental health straight away. But it's important to let them know they can talk about their mental health at any time. This could include arranging appropriate follow up conversations if concerns continue.

To help the person feel comfortable talking, you should:

- talk to them in private
- be flexible about when and where you talk
- approach the conversation in a positive and supportive way

It might be difficult for someone to talk about their mental health. So it's important you're calm, patient, supportive and reassuring.

When talking to employees, it's important to remember that factors outside of work could also have an impact on their mental health. For example, if someone close to them has died.

You should know what resources and support you can offer and tell employees about them. For example:

- an employee assistance programme (EAP) offering staff counselling
- mental health 'champions'
- external support networks

If an employee's mental health problem is a disability, or could reasonably be believed to be a disability, you must make [reasonable adjustments](#).

An employee's mental health problem might not be a disability. However, their job could be making it harder to deal with. You should still consider whether you can offer any workplace changes or support to help them. Changes are usually small but they can prevent employees needing to take time off.

If an employee talks to you about their mental health

If an employee approaches you to talk about their mental health, you should thank them for opening up to you. Give them as much time as they need to talk.

During the conversation, you should:

- listen carefully to what they say
- try to identify what the cause is, for example by keeping questions open ended
- think about ways to help, for example if they know about options for support at work or how to request reasonable adjustments
- reassure them – let them know you'll help them get the support they need

You could agree to take time to think through what you've discussed before making any decisions.

Using the right language

Use appropriate language when talking about mental health. Language can affect how people feel and cause distress.

Be sensitive in the terms you use. Do not use words that are offensive or negative. For example, instead of saying 'suffering from mental health issues', say 'someone who has concerns related to their mental health.'

Being clear about confidentiality

You should reassure the person that you will not share anything they tell you with anyone else without their permission, unless there's a good reason to. If there is, you should be clear about who you'll share it with and why.

If you direct them to external support networks, for example an employee assistance programme (EAP), reassure them that the conversations will be confidential. However, let them know they can still talk to you about it if they want to.

Reasonable adjustments for someone with a disability

By law if the person's poor mental health is considered a disability, you must make reasonable adjustments. This is to help them carry out their job without being at a disadvantage.

Find out more about:

- [reasonable adjustments for mental health](#)
- [supporting disabled people at work](#)
- [mental health and the law](#)

Knowing what support is available for employees

You should not be expected to be an expert in mental health. But, knowing what support is available can help.

Trade unions and other employee representatives can help you promote positive mental health.

Trade union representatives are usually:

- trained by their union on mental health
- more willing to share concerns than employees might be
- aware of issues that could cause mental health problems
- able to work with you to promote the support and resources available to employees

Getting support for yourself

You might find that you need advice and support for your own mental health. For example, you might be under more pressure than usual to support your team and resolve problems.

It might help to talk things through with someone who can support you, for example:

- your own manager
- someone else at work
- a mental health 'champion' or network at work
- a counsellor, if you can access one through work

If your organisation offers counselling, it'll usually be through a scheme known as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

If you think an employee is at risk

If you think an employee is at risk, you should encourage them to seek help.

This could include speaking to:

- a trusted friend or family member
- their GP
- occupational health

Your organisation might have an employee assistance programme (EAP) who you can:

- contact for advice
- direct your employee to

You can also tell them about external organisations who can help, for example:

- [Samaritans](#)
- [Shout](#)
- [Campaign Against Living Miserably \(CALM\)](#)
- [Papyrus](#)

The NHS provides a list of helplines and services that can support people with mental health problems:

- [England – mental health helplines on the NHS](#)
- [Scotland – mental health services on NHS 24](#)
- [Wales – mental health services on NHS 111 Wales](#)

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999.

Employers have a 'duty of care' to do what's reasonable and practical in situations involving an employee's mental health.

For example, a manager could go with an employee to hospital. Or they could stay in contact with the employee until someone reaches them.

Once the employee is safe

Once the immediate situation has been handled, you should start thinking about how you can support the employee going forward.

The employee might need to take some time off. You should:

- follow your organisation's absence policy
- agree with the employee how you'll keep in touch during absence

When an employee is ready to return to work, you should have a process to follow.

Find out more about:

- [sick leave](#)
- [keeping in touch during absence](#)
- [returning to work after absence](#)

4. Support and training

You can get specialist mental health advice and support from:

- England – [mental health helplines on the NHS](#)
- Scotland – [mental health services on NHS 24](#)
- Wales – [mental health services on NHS 111 Wales](#)

If you need to talk to someone, you can contact:

- [Samaritans](#)
- [Shout](#)

Mental health support at work

Some organisations offer counselling for employees. It'll usually be through a scheme known as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

If you're a member of a trade union, you can also get help and information on mental health from them.

A [Wellness Action Plan from Mind](#) can help employers and employees put steps in place to support mental health at work.

Find out more about supporting mental health from other organisations:

- [Mental Health at Work](#)
- [NHS Every Mind Matters](#)

If you have poor mental health or a disability, you can also get support from [Access to Work](#).

Support for employers

Employers and managers can get government guidance on supporting their employees' health and disabilities.

[Find support with employee health and disability on GOV.UK](#)

Helping someone else

Supporting others with poor mental health can be a challenge. Make sure you look after your own wellbeing.

[Find out more about helping someone else from Mind](#)

Training and tailored support for employers

Acas offers [tailored support for employers](#) on mental health and wellbeing.

Our practical mental health training course can help managers:

- recognise the signs and symptoms of poor mental health
- have conversations about mental health with more confidence
- identify and address issues earlier
- support employee wellbeing, both remotely and in the workplace

[Book a mental health training course](#), or arrange [training tailored for your workplace](#).

Acas also offers a [free online training](#) on mental health awareness for employers.

5. Having a policy

As an employer, it's a good idea for your organisation to have a policy that covers mental health.

A policy can help make clear:

- the best way for employees to raise any concerns they have about their mental health
- how managers can respond and support staff with their mental health

You should support everyone to follow the mental health policy. You should:

- share the policy across the whole organisation
- regularly review it
- use it as the basis for any mental health training for managers
- show it to and discuss it with employees regularly
- include it in any employee induction process

You should work with any recognised trade unions your organisation has when developing and reviewing a policy. You should also check if your organisation has an agreement with the trade unions that requires you to do this.

You should follow your policy but also consider employees' individual circumstances. You might need to adapt how you support staff because everyone's experience of mental health problems will be different.

What a mental health policy should include

A mental health policy should cover:

- what mental health is and how it can affect people – including how it can affect anyone at any time and how it can affect everyone differently
- how the organisation is open and trained to talk sensitively about mental health problems
- what mental health training is given to managers and individuals
- what support is available – including where to find internal and external support
- what happens if an employee needs time off for mental health
- what the return to work process is after someone has time off
- how conversations about mental health will be kept confidential
- what an employee can do if they have a concern about how they've been treated
- how and when the policy will be reviewed and updated and who with

If you need support creating a mental health policy, Acas offers [tailored support for employers](#).