What works for you?

How to help colleagues through tough times

mental health foundation

Supporting your colleagues

For many of us, work is a major part of our lives. It is where we spend much of our time, where we may have most contact with other people, where we make our money and where we sometimes make our friends. Having a fulfilling job is good for your mental health and general wellbeing.

We all go through tough times and work can help us cope or make us feel worse.

Someone you work with may be feeling the distress that comes with life events such as the loss of someone close.

They may say they are at the end of their tether, but feel unable to take time off. Or they may be experiencing panic attacks or a mental health problem like depression, whether or not they have had it diagnosed by a doctor. 'Emotional crisis', 'nervous breakdown' or 'mental health problem' – we may describe these experiences very differently, but the important thing is that there are ways that, as colleagues, we can help.

However powerless you may feel at first, knowing the basics about how to support your colleague can really help you – and them. Although you can't solve your colleague's problems, there are a few simple steps you can take.

Working in a supportive team that cares about the wellbeing of its members can make a huge difference to their ability to cope. This booklet outlines how you can help someone get through a difficult time or find a way of living with a long-term problem.

What is mental health?

How you think and feel about yourself and your life affects how you behave and how well you cope when times are tough. It affects your ability to make the most of the opportunities that come your way and play a full part in your family, workplace, community and among friends. It's also closely linked with your physical health. Whether you call it wellbeing, emotional welfare or mental health, it's key to living a fulfilling life.

At work, you may be down or upbeat, calm or edgy, you may withdraw or you may socialise with colleagues. Many things can affect how you feel. Your home life, personal relationships and financial situation affect your mood at work just as much as the tasks you have to do, your working environment and your relationship with your colleagues.

You bring what's happening in your life to work with you every day: the excitement of a new home, grief at the loss of a loved one, worries about how your children are doing at school.

How you think also influences how you respond to events. It's different for everyone and some people are more emotionally resilient than others.

That's no-one's fault. It's just the way we are. Pressure at work, for instance, motivates some people, but the same amount of pressure can make others feel stressed and, over a long period, that's not good for your mental health.

'When I was getting depressed I just used to bottle it up.

I was tired all the time, I felt useless at work, and I felt guilty about that. I didn't want to go out with my friends because I felt I wasn't any fun to be around.'

What are mental health problems?

Mental health problems affect the way you think, feel and behave. They are problems that can be diagnosed by a doctor, not personal weaknesses. Mental health problems are very common. About a quarter of the population experience some kind of mental health problem in any one year.

Anxiety and depression are the most common problems with around one in ten people affected by a mixture of the two at any one time. Although anxiety and depression are common, they can be severe and long-lasting and have a big impact on people's ability to get on with life.

Only 1-2% of people experience a severe mental illness, such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, and have periods when they lose touch with reality. People affected may hear voices, see things no-one else sees, hold unusual beliefs, feel exceptionally self-important or read particular meanings into everyday events.

Although certain symptoms are common with specific mental health problems, no two people behave in exactly the same way when they are unwell. Many people who live with a mental health problem or are developing one try to keep their feelings hidden because they are afraid of other people's reactions. And many people feel troubled without having a mental health problem that can be diagnosed – although that doesn't mean there's any less reason to offer your support.

How do I know if my colleague has a mental health problem?

Sometimes it will seem obvious when someone you work with is going through a hard time, but there is no simple way of knowing if they have a mental health problem and sometimes you don't need to know. It's more important to respond sensitively to someone who seems troubled than to find out whether or not they have a diagnosis.

Signs of depression
People who are depressed may:
– be tearful, nervous or irritable
– have low confidence
– lose interest in their work and find it difficult to concentrate
– feel overwhelmed and unable to deliver what is expected of them
– lose their appetite
– get tired easily

At worst, they may feel suicidal.

Signs of anxiety
Anxiety takes many forms from general anxiety to anxiety triggered by a particular situation (a phobia). People experiencing anxiety may seem unusually worried or fearful in most situations. They may:
– appear pale and tense
– be easily startled by everyday sounds
– have difficulty concentrating
– be irritable
– try to avoid certain situations

Panic attacks are usually a sign of anxiety and are common in the workplace. Someone experiencing a panic attack may breathe rapidly, sweat, feel very hot or cold, feel sick or feel faint. A task that other people consider simple may seem impossible to them. The symptoms of a severe panic attack can be quite similar to a heart attack, and someone experiencing one may be convinced they are going to die.

'Every time I have to make a presentation or speak in a meeting I get this sense of dread. My heart pounds and races, my hands get really sweaty and I feel faint. I'm getting better at managing it, but I still feel really anxious.'

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a common form of anxiety involving distressing repetitive thoughts. Compulsions are the actions which people feel they must repeat to feel less anxious or stop their obsessive thoughts. For example, some people cannot stop thinking about germs and the diseases they could catch. To cope with this anxiety, they may start washing their hands over and over again. Compulsions commonly involve checking, cleaning, counting or dressing rituals.

'I used to get so anxious I had to check and re-check I had everything: my security pass, my credit card, my phone. Sometimes I'd be driving along the motorway and I would be so worried that I had forgotten my case I'd have to pull in and check. It was always in the boot, but that worry was never far from the surface.'

Self-harm
Some people who are distressed deliberately harm their bodies, usually secretly, using self-harm as a way of dealing with intense emotional pain. They may cut, burn, scald or scratch themselves, injure themselves, pull their hair or swallow poisonous substances. Self-harm can be a sign of other mental health problems.

Why don't we talk about mental health?

'When people in the office are talking about mental health problems, it makes me feel odd. If I'm down at the time it feels like I have a guilty secret.'

'I haven't got bipolar written on my forehead, but for me it's not an issue. Some people at work know about it just because it has come up in conversation.'

There are good reasons why someone with a mental health problem might not want people to know. Mental health remains one of the last taboos. It's an area many people don't understand very much or talk about very often and, as a result, we often act on the prejudices that society holds. This can lead to unfair treatment – discrimination.

A survey has shown that most people with mental health problems expect to experience discrimination if they speak out, but the number who actually met discrimination when they did tell someone was much lower.

The media often portrays people with mental health problems as dangerous, but people with mental health problems are more likely to be the victims of violence or to harm themselves than to be violent towards other people.

'If I told people I've been diagnosed with schizophrenia they would probably want me out. People all think schizophrenia makes you dangerous. It has some effect on me at some times, but I'm not dangerous. I'm just not sure I trust anyone enough to tell them.'

How can you help?

When a colleague tells you they have a mental health problem, becomes distressed or starts behaving out of character, it can be very confusing. It may distress you, too. Knowing how to respond can be difficult and it can seem easier to ignore the situation than to try to provide support. But providing support at work can make a huge difference to someone's life.

The most important thing you can do is treat them with respect and dignity. Talking with your colleague is the first step towards finding out how they would like you to support them.

It's good to talk

It can be a very big deal for a person to discuss how they feel and they may feel ashamed to 'admit' their problem. Be open and tell them that you care. Let your colleague know that you are there if they want to talk. Make sure you can talk somewhere quiet and private. You may want to have lunch or a coffee or go for a walk together to keep the conversation between the two of you.

'Someone from work wanted to have a talk to me about the problems she was having concentrating after her partner died. We went to a local coffee shop and chose a table at the back so no-one could overhear us.'

Once you have found a time and place for a private chat, make sure that you won't have to run off to a meeting or take a phone call. Make sure the time is convenient for both of you.

'I was a bit scared of telling her, because you never know how someone is going to react, but we talked about it and it is good to know that if things go wrong there will be someone at work who understands.'

Let your colleague share as much or as little as they want to

Ask questions to help you understand what they are going through, but tell them that they don't have to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Make it clear that you don't blame them for their problems.

Don't try to diagnose someone or second guess their feelings

You probably aren't a medical expert and, while you may be happy to talk and offer support, you aren't a trained counsellor. Try not to make assumptions about what is wrong or jump in too quickly with your own diagnosis or solutions.

Keep your questions open-ended

Say 'Why don't you tell me how you are feeling?' rather than 'I can see you are feeling very low', and try to keep your language neutral. Give the person time to answer and try not to grill them with too many questions.

Reassure them that what they tell you is private

Ask them if they have discussed their situation with others and if they do or don't want you to mention it to anyone else. Ask them how they would like you to help them.

Talk about wellbeing

Exercise, good diet and relaxation can all help improve everyone's mental wellbeing. Talk about ways of de-stressing and ask your colleague if there is anything that they find helps. Ask if your colleague is in touch with any self-help groups or has supportive friends.

Tips for listening

Sometimes the most important part of talking is letting the other person know that you are listening.

– Listen carefully to what your colleague is saying to you and repeat what they have said back to them to ensure you have understood it.

– Try to interpret the words in terms of feelings so you could respond 'I can see that it makes you very unhappy when…'

– You don't have to agree with what your colleague is saying, but by showing you understand how they feel, you are letting them know that you respect their feelings.

– If you disagree, be open and honest about it, and continue to listen to what they have to say.

The power of words

The words you use can have a powerful effect on how people feel. Jokes and banter may seem harmless, but saying 'keep taking the pills' or calling someone a 'nutter' can be hurtful, and makes it less likely they will open up. It's worth remembering that this can be classed as harassment and bullying and can result in disciplinary action. If you aren't sure if a comment is offensive, think about how you would feel if it was directed at you.

Mike worked until his situation became too difficult.

'Before I got ill I got on really well with the people I was working with, but that changed as soon as I was diagnosed with a mental health problem. I was the same person, but they treated me differently. My colleagues would tell jokes or make judgements about people and I would say, "Hang on a minute, that's me", but then they'd say. "We don't mean you". But it did mean me and if they were making jokes about race or gender they wouldn't get away with it.'

How do I respond in a crisis?

People with mental health problems sometimes experience a crisis, such as breaking down in tears, having a panic attack, feeling suicidal, or losing touch with reality. This can be a response to a build up of stress at work or at home. You may feel a sense of crisis too, but it's important to stay calm yourself.

There are some general strategies that you can use to help

– Listen to your colleague without making judgements
– Reassure them and offer practical information or support
– Ask your colleague what would help them
– Avoid confrontation, even if they become agitated or aggressive
– Ask them if there is anyone you would like them to contact - perhaps a friend, relative or carer
– Encourage them to get appropriate professional help
– If you are aware that a colleague has self-harmed, make sure they get the first aid they need

Seeing, hearing or believing things that no-one else does can be the symptom of a mental illness. It can be frightening and upsetting. Gently remind your colleague who you are and why you are there. Don't reinforce or dismiss their experiences, but acknowledge how the symptoms are making your colleague feel.

Helping someone with a mental health problem through a crisis can be stressful and upsetting. It is important to talk it through with your HR manager or boss or a friend without identifying your colleague.

How do I respond if a colleague is suicidal?

If your colleague says they are feeling suicidal or can't go on, or if you suspect they are thinking of taking their own life, it is very important to encourage them to get help. They could contact the Samaritans straight away – they can call 08457 90 90 90 at any time for the cost of a local call. They could also get help from their friends, family, GP or mental health services.

You can ask your colleague how they are feeling and let them know that you are available to listen. Talking can be a great help to someone who is feeling suicidal, but it may be distressing for you too. It is important for you to talk to someone about your own feelings and Samaritans can help you as well. Or you may just want to talk to a friend or family member, without mentioning your colleague's name.

Keeping in touch

Many people who have mental health problems dread returning to work after they have been off sick. And it can be awkward to know what to say when people have been ill, especially if it has never been talked about. There are ways of keeping in touch that will help overcome that awkwardness later on. You could:

– Ask the person who is off work what they would like their colleagues to be told – try to get a balance between maintaining their confidentiality and letting people understand what's happening
– Invite them out when staff are spending leisure time together – they may decline, but still appreciate being asked
– Send cards and call your colleague if you would normally socialise with them – just as you would if they had a physical health problem
– Have a 'cup of tea' policy where someone can come into the office informally before returning to work.

'I still have a napkin that all my colleagues signed with get well messages when I couldn't make it to the Christmas party one year. They all told me how much they missed me being there, and it meant so much to me.'

What can I do as a manager?

Managers often find it difficult to deal with someone they think has a mental health problem, particularly if the person or they themselves are reluctant to talk about it. But it's important to talk.

– Take time to talk to the person privately and ask if something is wrong. Take your steer from them. Don't try to diagnose what you think is the matter.

– Ask what would help them at work. They may need a quiet place to work or more time to perform certain tasks.

– If they haven't been performing as well as usual, they may feel guilty or fearful about it. Be honest in assessing their performance – they may feel their performance is worse than it is.

– It can be useful to agree in advance how to handle any continuing problems. Encourage your colleague to identify factors that might play a role in them becoming unwell and consider how to deal with them. You may also want to agree how best to respond to a crisis.

– Don't make assumptions about what someone can and can't do.

– Be aware that new computer systems or other changes, restructuring or the risk of redundancy can be especially difficult for someone who is also coping with a mental health problem.

– In the language you use and the attention you give them, treat them with respect and act as a model to encourage other colleagues to do the same.

– Suggest they ask for advice from your occupational health advisor or contact any support service your organisation uses such as the Employee Assistance Programme.

– After your first conversation, fix another meeting to check how your colleague is coping and whether further changes to their working arrangements are needed. Then keep the dialogue going.

Returning to work

Coming back to work after a period off sick due to mental ill health can be exhausting. In some jobs, the person could begin by doing a task at home. Sometimes a phased return to work can be helpful, with someone working a few hours a day and building back up to working their contracted hours. If you're unsure what is reasonable, ask for advice from your HR manager or occupational health advisor.

Janet cares for her elderly mother who is often suicidal.
'My mother is prone to attempting suicide. My boss is very understanding and when my mum needs me, he says, "Fine, go". I drive a bus for people with special needs and if I need to get to my mother I finish my route and then another driver takes over. I have worked with the same person for three years and they are very understanding. They know I will only take the time off that is needed.'

Sarah works as a medical secretary.
'I was trying to cover up my depression and hide the fact that I wasn't performing very well. If my boss had pointed out that he was aware that there was something wrong and asked what he could do to help then it would have been different.

People in my new job know that I have bipolar disorder and I'm amazed at the number of people who say they have mental health problems and are on medication for depression or anxiety.'

'When I challenged management about being overlooked for promotion after being ill, they said they'd 'acted in my best interests' and hadn't approached me because they didn't want to 'put too much on me'. All without talking to me!'

A healthy workplace

You don't have to have a mental health problem to have mental health or wellbeing needs. A workplace that is positive about mental health supports the wellbeing of all employees, as well as encouraging openness about mental health problems.

Simple steps like taking a lunch break, exercising and eating a healthy balanced diet can help our mental health. Looking after staff has benefits. It encourages loyalty and brings out the best in all employees.

Job design and matching people to the right role is also key. Advice from your HR manager or an external HR advisor can be a great help in making sure your workplace is healthy.

What does the law say?

Employers and staff should be aware of the law relevant to mental health at work:

– The Equality Act makes it illegal for an employer to treat employees or job applicants disabled by mental health conditions 'less favourably' than other employees. An employer also has to make 'reasonable adjustments' for all employees with a disability.

– The Health and Safety at Work Act says that every employer must, as far as reasonably practicable, ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees. This applies to mental and physical health.

– Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations say employers must assess risks to the health and safety of employees. The regulations are particularly relevant to stress and the effects of stress on mental health. Employers' risk assessments should help them determine how to minimise risks to their staff.

– Data protection regulations say that all information on workers' health is 'sensitive and personal data'. They say that employers should be allowed to hold only limited health information with strict limits on who can access the health files of an employee with mental health problems.

More information and support

Someone to talk to

Samaritans
www.samaritans.org
Confidential emotional support 08457 90 90 90, 2 4 hours a day
email: jo@samaritans.org

Bristol Crisis Service for Women
www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk
Information on mental health

Mental Health Foundation
www.mentalhealth.org.uk
Information on mental health problems and how to look after your mental health

Mind
www.mind.org.uk
Mind Infoline
0300 123 3393
Confidential information on mental health issues
email: info@mind.org.uk

Scottish Association for Mental Health
www.samh.org.uk
General mental health enquiries and advice on legal and benefits issues
0141 530 1000
Monday-Friday 2-4.30pm
email: info@samh.org.uk

Self-harm

National Self-harm Network
www.nshn.co.uk

Mental Health First Aid
Mental Health First Aid training for people working with the general public

Scotland
www.smhfa.com

Northern Ireland
028 9031 1611
email: c.hind@hpani.org.uk

England
www.mhfaengland.org

Wales
www.mhfa-wales.org.uk

Mental health at work

Samaritans
www.samaritans.org
Samaritans provide courses to businesses, helping staff deal with customer conflicts and internal issues. Courses include the WorkLife programme tackling stress in the workplace, and teaching effective communication via email.

The Shaw Trust
www.tacklementalhealth. org.uk
National charity providing support to disabled and disadvantaged people to turn their lives around through employment. It has a free online resource for employers and colleagues and information on legislation.

Employers' Forum on Disability
www.employers-forum.co.uk
An employers' organisation setting out to enable companies to become disability confident by making it easier to recruit and retain disabled employees. The Forum publishes guidelines on making adjustments for people with mental health problems.

Mindful Employer
www.mindfulemployer.net
Led and supported by employers, this initiative is aimed at increasing awareness of mental health at work and providing support for businesses in recruiting and retaining staff.

Understanding the law

Information about how the Equality Act applies to mental health
http://www.mind.org.uk/ help/rights_and_legislation/ disability_discrimination_ under_the_equality_ act_2010

Health & Safety Executive
www.hse.gov.uk/legislation/ hswa.htm

Stress at work

Health & Safety Executive
www.hse.gov.uk/stress/ standards/index.htm

If you have found this publication useful and would like to make a donation to the Mental Health Foundation, please contact us on 020 7803 1121 or visit www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-involved

For more information about mental health, visit: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

It can be hard to know what to do when someone you work with is going through a tough time or has a mental health problem. But knowing how to support your colleague can make a huge difference to how they cope. This booklet outlines how you can help and suggests where to go for further advice.

changing
minds