Mental health factsheets

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FACT SHEET: COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Introduction

Mental health is a positive attribute and something that we all have. It is about more than whether we experience mental health problems, and is not about whether or not we have a diagnosed mental illness. Many things affect our mental health, including having good relationships, coping skills, and feeling respected. An important contribution to mental health is having employment or some form of meaningful activity. The following commonly agreed definition of mental health emphasises a positive sense of well being, resilience to cope with life's difficulties, and self esteem:

'Mental health is the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life, survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of well being and an underlying belief in our own dignity and self worth.'

The term 'mental health problems' covers a wide range of conditions; this brief guide is intended to help you understand more about some of the most common mental health problems. Remember that we are all individuals, and two people with the same diagnosis may experience very different signs and symptoms and behaviour.

Stress

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them. If pressure is excessive and goes on for too long, it can lead to mental and physical ill health such as depression, anxiety and coronary heart disease. Stress can be caused by factors at work or home, with the latter being the more frequent cause. How people cope with pressure will be affected by a variety of factors including support from friends and family and work, as well as personal coping mechanisms.

Anyone can experience stress at work, depending on the demands of their job, the conditions in which they work and their individual susceptibility, which can be increased by problems outside work.

Common symptoms include:-
- Increased anxiety and irritability
- Impaired sleep and concentration
- Verbal or physical aggression
- Reduced attention span and impaired memory

Early recognition of signs of stress is crucial to prevent it becoming more serious. Most people make a full recovery, often without needing to take time off work. Individuals should be encouraged to seek help from their GP, occupational health service if there is one, or other professional.

It can be difficult to know when 'stress' turns into a mental health problem, or when existing mental health problems are made worse by stress at work.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal part of life in response to stress or uncertainty, but problems arise if it becomes too great to handle and stops the individual coping with everyday life, including work. Generalized anxiety affects someone all the time; phobias lead to extreme fear of a particular object or place. In obsessive-compulsive disorder, certain words or ideas keep coming to mind and people repeat things over and over again to get rid of these thoughts. For people with panic attacks, anxious feelings may come out of the blue.

Common symptoms include: -
- Agitation
- Sleep disturbance
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Loss of appetite/ excessive appetite
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach disorders, palpitations
- Panic attacks

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Recovery can be greatly helped by support received from people at home and from managers and colleagues at work. Treatment aims to help someone reduce the symptoms of anxiety to an acceptable level so they do not interfere with day-to-day living. People can help themselves by learning to relax, taking exercise and learning more about their symptoms.

Depression

This is one of the most common forms of mental health distress. We all go through difficult phases in our lives. Depression is used to describe a range of moods, from low spirits to a severe problem that interferes with everyday life. Depression is only a significant problem if it lasts for more than two weeks.

Common symptoms include:-
- Low, depressive mood with negative thoughts about self and others
- Numbness, emptiness and despondency
- Lack of interest in life and motivation to do things
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Social withdrawal
- Lack of appetite/ comfort eating
- Sleep disturbance
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs
- Feelings of guilt
- Self neglect
- Anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self harm

Over 80% of people with severe depression can be helped quickly, 50% will recover with only minor relapses and 25% will recover completely. Recognising someone is experiencing depression and supporting them to seek help and treatment will speed their return to normal performance at work and reduce needless distress.

Bi-Polar Disorder

This is a disorder affecting a person's moods. These mood changes can be extreme and unpredictable. Most often there is a high period alternating with a low period, with a stable period in between.

It is difficult to generalize about how the illness will affect someone. About 1 in 100 of the general population is likely to develop bi-polar disorder.

Common symptoms include:-
- Elated mood with no obvious cause
- Periods of deep depression
- Lack of energy; or boundless energy and restlessness
- Rapid speech and disordered thoughts
- Little or no sleep, waking early
- Reckless decision making, lack of inhibitions
- In extreme cases delusions or hallucinations

Bi-polar can be managed successfully with support, medication and other forms of treatment, and many people make a full recovery.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a term used by mental health professionals to describe a condition where thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences are severely disrupted. Roughly a quarter of people diagnosed will recover completely, two thirds will have multiple episodes and ten to fifteen per cent will experience more enduring problems. Many people with schizophrenia lead full and fulfilling lives that include having relationships, children, work and study.

Common symptoms include: -
- Strongly held beliefs which are out of keeping with your background and usual way of thinking
- Hearing voices
- Paranoia
- Seeing, tasting, smelling or feeling things that are not there
- Believing that people, events or objects control thoughts and actions in a way that cannot be logically explained
- Confused or muddled thinking or speech
- Loss of feelings

First symptoms tend to be experienced by men in their twenties and women in their thirties. For more information about stress, early signs and how to deal with it, look at the resources section.

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Most people will experience aspects of stress at work sometimes, and no employer can totally prevent this. However, when employees become so stressed that their health and functioning are affected, there will usually be characteristic signs and symptoms.

The earlier you can pick up on a problem the better. Whether the issue is stress-related or a mental health problem, action taken early can help stop the problem escalating.

Any of the following can be a sign that something is wrong and as an employer you need to take appropriate action to help.

Indicators of individual stress
- Increase in unexplained absences or sick leave
- Poor performance
- Poor time-keeping
- Increased consumption of alcohol, tobacco or caffeine
- Frequent headaches or backaches
- Withdrawal from social contact
- Poor judgement or indecisiveness
- Constant tiredness or low energy
- Unusual displays of emotion e.g. frequent irritability, anxiety or tearfulness.

Indicators of group level stress
- Problems with recruitment
- Disputes and disaffection
- Increased staff turnover
- Increased grievances and complaints

These can all be signs that stress has built to such an extent that an individual may be in danger of developing more severe anxiety or depression. Effective help in the early stages can help to prevent long-term problems both for individuals and organisations. Clearly this should be sensitively handled or the intervention may exacerbate the problem. The emphasis should be to provide reassurance and give the individual the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling and to encourage them to seek help.

For more information about stress, early signs and how to deal with it, look at the resources section.

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FACT SHEET FOR EMPLOYERS: MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS TRAINING

Training courses are designed to help to create an environment where resilience is enhanced and well-being is protected, allowing people to respond positively to challenges and perform at their best. Any training provided will need to be tailored to the needs of your organisation, including the culture, working environment, and particular issues relevant to mental well being and stress, for example, major reorganisation, down sizing, moving site etc. Training needs to be simple, cost effective and focused on benefiting all involved.

Training for employees should aim to enable them to:

- develop skills to recognise when colleagues need support at work and gain confidence in handling difficult conversations or situations
- value differences and recognise the strengths individuals bring to the team
- experience reduced levels of stress, leading to a more pleasant and productive working environment
- identify sources of potential stress and recognise the importance of achieving a healthy work/life balance
- recognise potential problems in themselves or colleagues and know what to do
- communicate more effectively when handling difficult conversations or situations at work, reducing stress and the risk of problems escalating
- contribute to a workplace culture that promotes mental health and well being and reduces stress
- know some simple steps they can take to look after their mental well being.

Training for managers should aim to enable them to:

- develop skills to recognise when a person needs support at work and gain confidence in handling associated management situations
- identify sources of potential stress and put systems and practices in place to reduce its impact on staff
- achieve reduced levels of stress for staff and enhanced effectiveness of teams
- lead successful teams contributing to a productive and profitable organisation
- recognise potential problems in themselves and their staff and know what to do
- communicate more effectively when handling challenging management situations
- recognise how management style and the culture of the organisation can impact on the well-being of staff
- Apply learning to reduce levels of stress and enhance the effectiveness of the team

Formats
Training needs to be interactive, providing a variety of group and individual exercises, case studies, scenarios, questionnaires, group discussion, personal reflection and action planning.

Sample Course Contents:

Managing Stress:

What is stress and what is stress risk management?
Early identification of stress and stress-related problems
Stress and the law, including HSE Management Standards
Case studies
Creating a good climate
Stress prevention exercise
How do you react?
Behavior management strategies to minimize risk
Stress scenarios, appropriate support and adjustments
Individual stress risk assessment and management
Personal action planning

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Managing well being:

What does well being mean?
Factors affecting vulnerability
Early warning signs
The link between work pressure and vulnerability
Prevention of stress and enhancement of well being through effective management of work pressures
Enhancing enjoyment and satisfaction at work
Creating a climate of openness and trust at work
Action planning to enhance well being at work

Tools and techniques for individuals:

Understanding the nature of stress
Increasing awareness of stress in yourself and others
Taking control of your life
Time management
Assertiveness
Identifying pressures that you can do something about and tackling key stressors
Coping strategies – social support, relaxation, physical activity, sleep

Resources for mental health awareness training:

WorkLife for Managers – Tackling Stress in the Workplace CD-Rom
This award-winning CD-Rom, with its high quality mix of content and interactive elements, aims to reduce the potential for stress at work by developing managers' skills and confidence to tackle problems before they escalate, increasing productivity and profitability.

For information contact:
Samaritans
The Upper Mill
Kingston Road
Ewell
Surrey KT17 2AF
www.samaritans.org
t: 0208 394 8300

For more useful resources, look in the resources section.

Providers of mental health awareness training:

WorkLife for Managers
For more information, including prices and bookings, please contact:
Steve Tollerton
t: 0208 394 8370
e: s.tollerton@samaritans.org

The Samaritans
Offer a range of workplace training, including:
Communication and listening skills
WorkLife for Teams

Kipepeo
Provide a set of training interventions on stress and mental health at work

For more information, including prices and bookings, please contact:
Kipepeo
t: 01263 862286
e: info@kipepeo.co.uk

In Equilibrium
Offer a range of in-house training and consultancy, including:
Stress Management for Managers, Stress Management for Individuals, Managing Well-being, Bullying and Harassment, Stress Risk Assessment, Increasing Energy, the HSE Management Standards and Conflict Resolution.

For more information, including prices and bookings, please contact:
In Equilibrium
t: 01383 622 002
e: training@in-equilibrium.co.uk
www.in-equilibrium.co.uk

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FACT SHEET FOR EMPLOYERS: MANAGING SOMEONE WITH A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM

Managers need the information and skills to manage someone who has a mental health problem, is distressed or is off sick or returning to work after an absence due to mental health.

Managing someone with a mental health problem.

Try to enable an employee to continue to contribute to the organisation as long as possible. Regular review of progress, as part of the normal annual appraisal scheme, is essential.

- Focus on achievements and successes, not on the disability
- Encourage the individual to assess their own performance and if there have been any changes establish why
- Consider how existing adjustments might be made more effective, for example, part-time working, job sharing or working from home
- Establish whether medical advice is needed – from the GP, occupational health or other health professional.
- Agree with the individual what they wish colleagues to be told.

When an employee is in distress:

- Be accepting, calm and reassuring, and ask the person how you can help
- Try to find or make private space
- Ask the person what they would like – someone to talk to or to be left on their own, to have someone contacted from home or a close work colleague
- Explore if work is a factor in their distress and ensure the person knows what kind of support the organisation can offer
- When the person is calm they may wish to carry on working, or it may be appropriate to suggest they take some time out or go home early.

Keep in touch during sickness absence.

It is important to keep in touch with someone while they are off work, so that they know they are not forgotten and that support is available.

- Keep in touch.
- Reassure them about practical issues such as financial worries, job security.
- Ask if there is anything you can do to help.
- Reassure them about confidentiality.

Assisting return to work.

Effective planning about return to work should involve the individual and their line manager, and where appropriate, the GP, and occupational health or Human Resources if you have these.

- Discuss any adjustments needed
- Agree how progress will be monitored
- Ensure they do not return to a massive build up of work such as a huge number of e-mails
- Be realistic about work loads
- Give positive and constructive feedback
- Discuss what colleagues will be told
- Make the person feel welcomed back.

Absence management.

Work-related stress is now recognised as a significant cause of absence. Stress may result from a variety of underlying causes, including:

- Poor, unsafe working conditions
- Boredom
- Work overload
- Perceived lack of control over work activities
- Job insecurity
- Worry over career and promotion prospects
- Workplace relationships
- Stress from some cause outside work

Look at sickness absence.

One way to assess levels of stress in your organisation is to look at patterns of sickness absence. Some level of absence is inevitable, but high levels of employee absence are costly. Employee absence needs to be handled sensitively.

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Review absence patterns.
Conduct a systematic review of your absence patterns to identify trends or issues that may be affecting your workplace –for example, certain areas of the organisation consistently experiencing high levels of sickness, or certain times when absence is high.

- If absence is widespread across the organisation, this may be related to the overall culture of the organisation.
- If particular departments or work groups experience higher than average levels of absence, then you need to target these and investigate the reasons. It may be due to the nature of the work they do, management styles, or the physical environment in which that group works.
- Or it may be a few individuals who make up most of the days off work.
- Record the following information:
  - Name of employee
  - Date of first absence
  - Cause of absence (to include the categories of stress-related and long-term chronic illness which may include mental illness)
  - Whether the illness or injury is considered to be work-related
  - Working days absent
  - Date the employee was last contacted, and outcome
  - Expected length of absence, if known, and return-to-work date

Identify underlying reasons for sickness absence patterns.
Use:
- interviews with managers and team leaders
- group sessions with samples of employees
- questions incorporated into annual staff attitude surveys.

Return to work interviews.
Conduct return-to-work interviews for all staff who have been absent. This should be carried out by the immediate supervisor/ manager. Use the interview to identify the cause of absence and explore any problems:
- ask for reason for absence
- assess whether the reasons offered are consistent with other reliable evidence
- raise any doubts, and allow the employee to explain
- keep some written record in case the formal disciplinary procedure needs to be invoked in future.

Identify solutions.
If stress is identified as the cause of absence, identify solutions, such as:
- occupational health activities
- employee Assistance Programmes
- individual counselling
- organisational change eg work design, management style, communications, resources.

Set a target for improving sickness absence.
You could set a target of, for example, reducing sickness absence by 1.5 days per employee per year, or by 10% per year for a particular department.