Mental health and wellbeing in the workplace

Evidence shows that being employed has a positive impact on a person's mental health[1]. However, simply being in employment is no guaranteed safeguard against mental ill-health.

With the average full-time employee spending a third of their waking hours each week at work[2] for an average 40 years plus, the workplace has a significant influence on the individual's mental health and wellbeing. How an employer responds to this responsibility will determine the impact on the employee's mental health, for better or worse.

60-70% of people with common mental health conditions are in employment[3]; however there is a misguided belief that people with a mental health condition are less productive, or not able to work. Sadly, it is often the case that businesses will find ways of filtering these employees out of the organisation.

While this may appear the easiest and cheapest solution, the cost of replacing a staff member is on average £30,000 [4]. In addition, legal costs can easily mount up if there is a claim of unfair dismissal, and in many cases mental ill-health will be covered under the Equality Act[5].

The reality is that one in six people[6] in the workplace will have a diagnosable mental health condition. Much could be saved by supporting staff to stay healthy and productive by managing their mental and/or physical condition.

The estimated cost of mental health related absence in the UK is £8.4 billion per year[7]. This cost can be drastically reduced by implementing simple steps to improve the workplace culture around mental health and thereby minimising both the number of absent employees as well as the time they are off.

Studies have demonstrated that a healthy workplace can be achieved by offering employees greater control and flexibility over their work; greater participation in decision-making; and by helping managers improve their people management skills[8]. NICE guidance, PH22[9] in particular, covers further recommendations for businesses to promote mental wellbeing at work[10],[11].

Many organisations in Suffolk and UK-wide already work towards changing the culture in the workplace to support positive mental health. The BBC Radio 4 programme 'All in the Mind' has for the last two years nominated managers for their 'Individual Award', recognising the essential support they offered to an employee with a mental health condition. The interview[12] with last year's winner, and the employee who nominated him, highlights the difference a supportive manager can make.

'Time to Change', is an anti-stigma campaign run by the charities 'Mind' and 'Rethink Mental Illness'. This national campaign offers a chance for businesses to publicly show their intentions to improve the mental health of their employees by signing the 'Time to Change

Employer Pledge'. 'Time to Change' shares several video examples[13] of what good support looks like in the workplace.

Suffolk County Council signed the pledge in 2014. As a result of the work that followed, we have seen a positive change in the support to employees, including increased confidence among staff in disclosing their mental health experiences to their manager and colleagues.

Projects included implementing a mental health policy and toolkit, and dedicated training for managers. Nevertheless, the most impactful initiative also proved to be the simplest; for the past two years the council has marked the 'Time to Talk Day' in February by encouraging all staff to take five minutes from any meeting they have on the day to talk about mental health with the attendees.

The opportunities for improvement in the workplace

The challenge in many workplaces is that managers either don't see it as their responsibility, or don't know what they can do. This is often linked with a fear of unintentionally making matters worse by saying or doing something that will upset the individual. Unfortunately, by ignoring the issue it is likely to worsen. Talking to the employee and offering support early on, including reasonable adjustments, can make all the difference in the longer term.

Reasonable adjustments can include anything from specialised training or equipment, to changes in responsibilities or allowing flexible work hours. The adjustments are often inexpensive and only needed for short periods. Free advice is available from 'Time to Change'[14] and 'Acas'[15] for managers and 'Rethink Mental Illness'[16] has advice for the employee. Furthermore, businesses of any size can access the free offer of occupational health support through 'Fit for Work'[17] which includes a phone advice service. For employees with a mental health condition 'Access to Work'[18] offer assessments and personalised support plans to either remain at or return to work.

The organisation can support managers to support employees by revisiting their policies and procedures to ensure they outline best practice and encourage all employees to support those who are experiencing poor mental health. Simple things such as encouraging people to take regular breaks as well as promoting physical activity, like walking meetings, will also positively impact on the culture of the organisation and the individuals' wellbeing.

The individual's ability to cope with pressure will differ depending on a range of factors such as previous experiences and current circumstances. The individual can, however, build their level of resilience by improving their general wellbeing. The 'Five ways to wellbeing' is a framework that lists a set of actions to improve people's wellbeing[19].

When you Connect with others like family and colleagues, you allow them to support and enrich you every day.

To Be active improves your emotional wellbeing.

When you Take notice of what is around you, the unusual or the beautiful and savour these moments, it helps you reflect on what is important to you.

To Keep learning builds confidence.

When you Give – a smile, your time or money – you are creating connections which can be very rewarding.

All this will help you to cope better with the challenges of everyday life.

Mental health is everybody's business, and never more so than in the workplace where the individual employee, managers and the organisation as a whole can influence the emotional wellbeing in the workplace.

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