



MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SECURING
YOUR WORKFORCE'S PEACE OF MIND



Mental health is a complicated matter

Whether due to the reduction in stigma and opening conversations surrounding our mental wellbeing, or the tidal wave of economic, political, and environmental crises we face today – reports of poor mental health, burnout, and stress are at an all-time high.

As an employer, I believe it's our duty to provide the best working environment to not only support our employees at work, but facilitate new ways to help them manage their everyday lives. This is the philosophy behind Health@Work, and one I'm proud to see taken up by more and more organisations every day.

This book has been put together to help provide you with an overview of how mental health impacts both your workplace and your employees, as well as equip you with some ideas to both inspire and improve. Thankfully, the most important part has already been done – by simply reading this book, you've already demonstrated your commitment to improving employee mental health.

Thank you for joining us in building better workplaces for the future.

Marj Murphy
Director of Operations, Health@Work

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Content Note

This book has been put together to support and inform workplace mental health practices. As such, the contents will focus predominantly on mental health concerns that are commonly experienced within or as a result of employment concerns and workplace environments.

Mental health is a complex and variable topic, which is why we've included a list of valuable mental health resources at the back of this book for further reading and support.





Mental Health: It's not all in your head!

51% of long-term sick leave is due to stress, depression, or anxiety.¹

Let's repeat that – more than half of all work-related illnesses are caused by common mental health concerns.

With more and more employees reporting increasing levels of stress, exhaustion, and workload expectations in the past year, supporting better workplace mental health has become a vital aspect of retention and engagement for today's employers.

In fact, mental health has become the focal point of many wellbeing programmes, with recent estimates finding that over 90% of employee wellbeing activities prioritise mental health and stress support. While this evidences increased awareness from organisations in how mental wellbeing can make or break their employee engagement and retention, the numbers of stress and mental health-related absences remain at an all time high.²

This book is designed to serve as an introductory guide to the essentials of workplace mental health – understanding the signs and causes, environmental factors, and how you can get started on making happier, safer places to work.

Understanding mental health

Mental health refers to a person's overall state of psychological wellbeing – including our emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. That is to say, our mental health is what governs the way we feel, think, and behave, as well as how well we can relate to others and make decisions in our everyday lives.

When it comes to mental health, there are two key things to bear in mind:

1. We all have mental health.
2. Mental health and mental illness are not interchangeable terms.

While 'mental illness' refers to specific psychiatric or psychological conditions and disorders – such as depression, PTSD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, etc – 'mental health' typically refers to our resilience, adaptability, and ability to effectively navigate the challenges of everyday life.

It's important to remember that while poor mental health can lead to the development of mental illnesses like anxiety disorders and depression, many diagnosed mental illnesses benefit from unique support pathways, including reasonable adjustments – you can read more about this on page 18.



How does mental health impact the workplace?

- **Productivity** – With the combined impact on both presenteeism and absenteeism, mental health concerns have been estimated by the WHO to cost the global economy up to \$1 trillion every year in reduced productivity.
- **Engagement** – Mental health and employee engagement have mutual impact, as research by Gallup has found that highly engaged employees are 28% more likely to report good mental health than disengaged employees.
- **Retention** – Employees who don't feel mentally supported by their employers are more than 5x more likely to seek new jobs.³



Mental Health: Know the Figures

- 1 in 4 people experience a mental health problem of some kind
- 1 in 5 people experience suicidal thoughts
- 1 in 3 people with a common mental health problem receive treatment
- Reports of common mental health problems have increased by 20% since the 1990s

Mind, 2023









Workplace culture and environment

The culture in which we work has a huge impact on our mental wellbeing, both in and out of work – after all, we spend on average one third of our lives at work!

Work culture is defined as the shared values and behaviours that characterise a workplace, as well as the attitudes and practices that shape how employees interact with each other, approach their work, and perceive the organisation's goals. As such, having a positive mental health culture at work should be the foundation of your company's approach to mental health support. So how can you build this?



A positive mental health culture can look like...

-  Open & honest communication about mental health
-  Regular mental health awareness training opportunities
-  Easily accessible, confidential mental health resources
-  Leaders taking part in mental health initiatives
-  Realistic expectations and boundaries on work-life balance
-  Gaining regular feedback and insight from employees

Improving psychological safety in your workplace

A psychologically safe workplace is one where employees feel safe and supported to raise concerns, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of reprisal or punishment. So, how can you improve your approach?

1) Make a place to speak

Give your team a voice and place to be heard. Consider auditing your organisation to see how and where your employees' voice and identity can be felt within your processes.

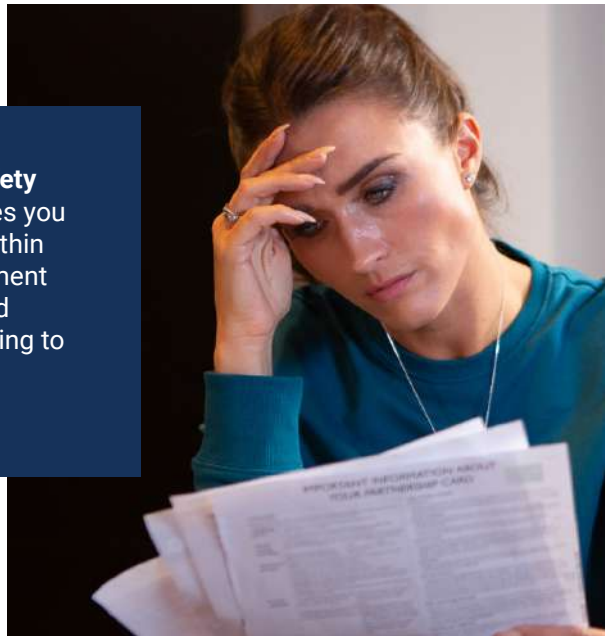
2) Acknowledge fallibility

Do your staff feel safe to admit mistakes without fear of being punished? Try to ensure that feedback is constructive and fair, and that mishaps are met with training where possible.

3) Create an environment of growth

When you prioritise your employees' growth as much as your results, your teams can begin to develop together. This encourages collaboration and mutual growth over finger-pointing and blame – but this all starts with creating an environment that encourages learning and developing.

Our training course, **Psychological Safety for Driving Team Performance**, teaches you how to assess psychological safety within your workplace, and create and implement action plans to improve awareness and understanding – find out more by heading to healthatworkcentre.org.uk/wellbeing-courses-for-managers/





Developing mental health policies



Your company's mental health policies are the guidelines, procedures, and initiatives that you put in place to promote and support better mental wellbeing for your employees.

They typically outline the strategies you've developed and implemented to prevent common workplace mental health concerns like stress and loneliness, as well as the resources you've put in place to support those employees who may be struggling.

Remember that when it comes to improving workplace mental health, a standalone wellbeing strategy should always be supported by an integrated approach throughout the whole business.

**83% of employers
who responded
to our Wellbeing
in 2024 survey
reported that mental
health & stress were
a matter of concern
to their employees.**

Considerations

“Creating effective mental health strategies, policies and guidance requires both strategy and empathy – meaning that employers must understand their workforce’s diverse needs by listening to their employees.

Policies and guidance should aim to reduce the stigma around mental ill health, create a culture of openness, consider workplace stressors, and outline proactive internal and external support to empower employees to thrive.

Developing a mental health strategy is about more than compliance; it's about showing you genuinely care. By embracing ongoing data monitoring, implementing appropriate interventions, and obtaining employee feedback, organisations can build and shape policies for continuous improvement, to make a difference to the wellbeing of their employees.”

Suzanne Wootton
Workplace Wellbeing Consultant, Health@Work



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Our Wellbeing in 2024 survey found that 40% of employers foresee employee mental health becoming a prominent HR issue in 2024.

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Stress: causes, prevention and management

Workplace stress is among the most common causes of stress in the UK.⁴ It's so common in fact, that three out of four employees currently experience moderate-to-high levels of stress at work⁵ - so it's no wonder that today's workplaces are feeling the strain of poor mental health!



Stress in the workplace refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological strain experienced by employees as a result of work-related pressures and demands. These can include:

- Tight deadlines
- Heavy workloads
- Conflicting priorities
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Poor work-life balance
- Poor communication

Of course, some stress can be expected, and even be a motivator, in a busy workplace. However, excessive or prolonged stress – known as chronic stress – has been found to have detrimental effects on both employee wellbeing and organisational performance, leading to problems such as burnout, mental health problems, and even physical health problems such as hypertension and cardiovascular disease. It can also impair our ability to focus, make decisions, and enjoy our jobs – ultimately impacting your organisation's productivity, morale, and retention.

Recognising the signs of stress

While it's important to remember that we all show stress differently – with some people able to hide their stress well, particularly when working remotely – there are a few key signs that can show high levels of stress within both your workforce and individual employees.





INDIVIDUAL	WORKFORCE
Physical symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, reduced appetite, and illness	Increased absenteeism, both long-term and short-term
Mood changes increased irritability and depressive episodes	Decreased productivity, particularly through presenteeism
Behavioural changes such as withdrawal from social groups	High employee turnover rates and poor retention
Increased interpersonal conflicts	Increased conflict between colleagues and managers
Difficulty concentrating, poor judgement, and memory problems	Decline in morale, such as a negative attitude or poor engagement
Increase in stress-related health problems such as hypertension or heart disease	Frequent breakdowns in communication between departments or seniority levels





Stress management help

While employee stress is best reduced or managed via a healthy workplace environment using the ideas laid in this book, there are some other ways you can support your employees in managing their stress, such as:

-  Setting realistic expectations and boundaries
-  Supporting employee routines
-  Encouraging workplace self-care such as mindfulness, exercise, and socialising
-  Offering meaningful mental health resources like an EAP, support group, or Mental Health First Aider

Practical, proactive support

When it comes to mental health, actions always speak louder than words. In order to demonstrate a real commitment to your employees' mental wellbeing, it's important to offer practical support measures that can be used proactively, preventing any potential mental health concerns from escalating and reducing the knock-on effect on productivity and retention.

Under the Equality Act 2010, UK law states that employers must make reasonable adjustments to make sure workers with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs.

Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are workplace or employment modifications that enable all employees to perform their job duties effectively. While reasonable adjustments are a legal requirement for employees with disabilities or health conditions, a level of flexibility can also help promote better mental wellbeing among your workforce more widely.

Some examples of reasonable adjustments for mental health may include:

- Flexible work arrangements
- Providing short breaks throughout the day
- Workplace modifications or equipment such as providing noise-cancelling headphones, adjusted lighting, or creating a quiet space
- Providing clear communication and instructions

When establishing reasonable adjustments for mental health, it's important to work closely with employees to determine how to balance the individual's specific needs with the requirements of their job, as well as ensuring that psychological safety is in place to allow employees to feel comfortable in these discussions.

Employee Assistance Programmes



Among the most popular preventative solutions are Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), providing employees with accessible mental health and everyday wellbeing resources – allowing employees to access in-the-moment support before their concerns escalate.

The Health@Work Employee Assistance Programme, provided by the award-winning, APPTS-accredited wellbeing provider **Vivup**, is designed to support your employees with every level of mental health, stress, and everyday health and lifestyle concerns, offering:

- 24/7 access to licensed counsellors
- Up to 8 face-to-face counselling sessions
- Early mental health intervention
- A dedicated menopause support service
- Expert advice and coaching for managers
- CBT self-help workbooks and extensive resource library
- Domestic abuse resources
- Personalised online wellbeing platform access
- Anonymous online peer support communities

“

Our Wellbeing in 2024 survey found that 72% of employers surveyed currently offer an EAP service to their employees, while almost 60% already have trained Mental Health First Aiders.

”



Interview with Karl Bennett, EAPA Chair

Karl Bennett is the chair of the EAP Association, as well as the Wellbeing Director for our EAP provider, Vivup.

We spoke with Karl about his insights into the state of workplace mental health.



Firstly, we know that better wellbeing leads to better mental health. Why is it so important to employers in particular?

This is a really interesting question, because there isn't a real definition of what 'wellbeing is! I break wellbeing down into four pillars – emotional, physical, financial, and community. If an organisation is supporting all of those pillars, then they can't help but have a focused, productive, and mentally supported workforce.

In terms of mental wellbeing; if employers don't signpost to proactive and preventative support, they'll start seeing a decline in focus, and an increase in conflict around both the workplace and home life.

Is the proactive element of support the most vital element, then?

When employees reach a point of crisis with their wellbeing, if employers are lucky, they'll engage with a reactive service – where they need to pick up the phone and ask for help. But the problem is, they've already reached crisis.

Instead, pick up the phone when your worry is just a pebble in your shoe, an inconvenience, or you feel that something isn't quite right. That's the time you need to speak to somebody, because it means that the time it takes for you to feel better, or to build the resilience you need, is much quicker, and happens way before that point of crisis. Engaging people early is definitely the key to supporting good emotional and physical wellbeing within a workforce.

Have you seen a connection between a workplace’s ability to proactively engage with mental health and their overall culture of psychological safety at work?

Exactly that. Psychological safety fits within the community part of the four pillars, but ‘community’ is often something that’s forgotten! For most people, wellbeing is about physical, financial, and emotional factors – but what about what’s happening at work? Do you feel like you belong? That you can ask your boss or colleagues what to do if you don’t feel well?

Can you go to HR and say, “I’m feeling a like this at the moment,” without the fear of being labelled as having an ‘emotional issue’?

A lot of what organisations should do, and *are* doing a lot more than they used to, is take a 360° view of everyone within the organisation and make sure that everyone feels accessible and approachable at all times. That feeling of having psychological safety within a business is super important, that’s the key.



The advent of hybrid and remote working has caused some huge changes to the way we see workplace mental health – can those be addressed by a more proactive mental health culture at work?

Yes! It again comes back to that idea of psychological safety. I’ve previously written about the way that people and businesses working remotely have to change their whole view around how they work together.

A great example is the activity indicators on Microsoft Teams. When you’re in the office, you don’t have to be at your computer every second of the day because people can see you’re there, even if you’re on the phone or making a coffee. Working at home has changed that and it’s driven

an anxiety around being away from your computer. But not just being away from it – wiggling your mouse, or pressing your keyboard, just to demonstrate that you're there. I've found that if I've called somebody because I can see that they're available, the likelihood is that it doesn't matter what they're doing – they'll answer the phone for the fear of not answering and therefore not feeling trusted around what they're doing.

This highlights that people need to feel available and visible to their organisation much more than they ever used to, or needed to, in the workplace. Employees have to feel secure that they're being just as productive, just as focused, with the flexibility of being able to work from home. But organisations need to recognise this as well – they need to be open and trusting with their teams, and I don't think that's happening at the moment. There's definitely a huge shift in the way that businesses need to start thinking about how they deal with that situation - if they don't, there lies the way of burnout.



Burnout has become a huge issue in recent years. Can better understanding of mental wellbeing within an organisation help?

Yes, but I think it's very difficult, as it requires a business to do a few things. First, they have to recognise that they could be doing things better, which isn't always easy to do. Then they have to do a 360° review of how they're doing things and how they could make changes. Then it requires putting measures into place.

Data can really help businesses understand where they're thriving and how to make strategies that fill gaps. Then they can start to ask questions like "Are we an inclusive organisation?", "Do we help our people?", "Do our people feel psychologically safe?" If they don't, the business isn't going to thrive. I think it's about encouraging organisations to see the benefits of making those changes – it's really difficult to describe to people how things like early intervention helps, until you show them the damage of not doing it.



You said about using data – have you seen an increase in terms of wellbeing benefit usage, and do you expect any trends to continue this year?

The problem is that EAPs are being heavily used currently simply because accessing public mental health services is so difficult right now. Until the burden on the NHS is eased, EAP usage will continue to grow – and, thankfully, to support people.

EAPs are really subsidising the NHS right now, which does risk crisis if we don't have enough counsellors to be able to support everyone. That's one of the reasons I ask businesses to focus on proactive wellbeing, because if somebody can be supported in the moment with a short conversation with a counsellor or information specialist, it frees up counselling slots capacity for those who are more in need.

Are there any best practices you'd suggest for employers when it comes to mental wellbeing?

As an employer, I'd start by looking at the data in my organisation, particularly Day One Absence levels, and identify the issues causing people to take time off. Most often, it'll be stress and musculoskeletal, and often those musculoskeletal issues are the physical manifestation of an emotional problem! Often, solutions are focused around early interventions, using EAPs and other mental health services.

Organisations with good internal communications, strong psychological safety, and the right resources in place see absences start to improve; as does resilience, and the levels of conflict productivity and output. All of this can be achieved by something as simple as introducing an EAP and understanding how best to use it.

Improving awareness – mental health training

The CIPD have found that workload and management style are the two most prevalent causes of stress at work.² Despite this, the same research also identified that lack of line manager skills in dealing with stress is the most common concern employers have for wellbeing heading into 2024 – making better manager awareness of mental health a priority development area for many organisations.

Managers serve as the frontline support for employees – meaning that early detection of mental health concerns can lead to better outcomes for employees, potentially preventing more serious issues from arising. Your company's managers are also the role models of a mentally healthy work environment, with huge influence on building a supportive atmosphere where employees feel safe discussing their challenges without fear of stigma or judgment.⁶

Importance of manager training

“We now have conclusive research on why manager role modelling is so important. A recent study conducted by The Workforce Institute at UKG found that 69% of employees say their managers had the most significant influence on their mental health – rivalling the impact of their partner, and surpassing that of both doctors and therapists.⁷

If organisations don't expect or train their managers to support employee wellbeing, then this oversight not only undermines the potential for a healthy work environment, but also risks exacerbating mental health challenges for employees.”

Declan Doyle
Learning & Development Officer, Health@Work

“
Research by Microsoft
has found that
managers are more
likely to experience
high stress than their
employees, with
more than 50% of line
managers reporting
burnout at work.⁶

”

Peer support networks



Consider building a peer support group – an informal group or community within your organisation where employees with similar mental health experiences or challenges come together to provide mutual support, share coping strategies, and offer encouragement.

Your peer support network can function both in-person and online, and can provide a place for members to connect, share, and support each other. Why not organise a weekly or monthly ‘mental health drop-in’ session with your Mental Health First Aiders to chat all things wellbeing?

Putting great mental wellbeing to work

Prioritising mental health in the workplace is no longer a valuable benefit, but a vital aspect of good workplace organisation for maximising both employee output and social responsibility.

While strides have been made in recognising and addressing mental health concerns, there is still a pressing need to do more as reports of burnout continue to escalate. By nurturing supportive environments, destigmatising the mental health conversation, and implementing proactive strategies, organisations like yours can help to shape the UK’s mental health for the better.



References

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2. CIPD, Health & Wellbeing at Work, September 2023
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4. Statista, 'Most common types of stress experienced in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2020'.
5. Champion Health, 'The Workplace Health Report', 2023
6. Microsoft, Work Trend Index Special Report, September 2022
7. UKG Workforce Institute, 'The Impact of Work on Mental Health', February 2023

Looking to broaden your mental health horizons?

Head to www.healthatworkcentre.org.uk to find out how our extensive range of resources and training opportunities can help your company make a real difference.

From comprehensive mental health training programmes to wellbeing consultancy services, our team is dedicated to supporting organisations like yours in prioritising mental health and creating thriving, resilient workplaces. Together, we can build a workplace culture where every employee feels valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Mental Health Support Resources

Samaritans

Confidential 24/7 support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

Helpline: 116 123

Text: SHOUT to 85258

www.samaritans.org

Mind

Advocacy for the views and needs of people with mental health problems.

Infoline: 0300 123 3393

(Mon - Fri 9am-6pm)

Text: 86463

www.mind.org.uk

Anxiety UK

Support for those with anxiety, stress, and anxiety-based depression.

Helpline: 03444 775 774

(Mon - Fri, 10:30am-4:30pm)

Text: 07537 416 905

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

Free mental health helpline and webchat services.

Helpline: 0800 58 58 58

(Mon - Sun, 5pm-midnight)

www.thecalmzone.net

Rethink Mental Illness

Advice and support for those living with mental illness.

Advice Line: 0300 5000 927

(Mon - Fri, 9:30am-4pm)

www.rethink.org

Papyrus HOPELINEUK (for under 35s)

Emergency helpline for those aged 35 experiencing thoughts of suicide.

Telephone: 0800 068 4141

Text: 07860 039967

www.papyrus-uk.org/hopelineuk

Zero Suicide Alliance

Service offering free online suicide awareness training courses.

www.zerosuicidealliance.com/suicide-awareness-training

Shout

24/7 text messaging services for people with mental health concerns or in crisis.

Text: 85258

www.giveusashout.org



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