



Promoting positive mental health and dealing with mental illness as an employee

We now spend a great portion of our adult lives either in the office or completing work related tasks at home, instead of taking the time to relax and recuperate. Spending this much time on work related tasks increases the impact that working life has on our mental health. Therefore it is important that as an employee you find a way to improve your mental health at work and encourage your employer to make necessary changes for the good of their workforce.



When people think about mental health problems they are often treated as taboo but it is important to remember that, like physical health, mental health is important for our day to day lives and we should do what we can to preserve our mental wellbeing. It is important to realise that mental illness is not uncommon and as such should not be treated as a topic to avoid. In fact, 1 in 4 adults per year are likely to suffer from mental illness.

The terms mental illness and mental health problems can be used in a number of contexts. In this brochure we use these terms to refer broadly to all mental health conditions including stress, anxiety and depression.

Staying healthy at work and developing a positive working environment

When you hear that 25% of the population per year are likely to be impacted by mental health problems, you may be alarmed. There are however many things you can do, both in your home and work life, that can improve your mental wellbeing and keep you mentally healthy. Whilst a few of these changes will require agreement from your employer, most of these can be established independently and with reasonably immediate effect.

Things you can do in your home life

- **Relaxation:** Relaxation isn't always about large periods of time doing nothing. Taking thirty minutes at the end of the day to unwind and relax with a book or to soak in a bath can be beneficial in reducing many people's stress levels.
- **Regular sleep schedules:** Having a regular sleep schedule is paramount for positive mental health. To ensure quality sleep when you head to bed, avoid using computer screens or having caffeine rich drinks for half an hour before bed.
- **Maintain healthy relationships:** Isolation is a big problem with mental health problems as it often exacerbates symptoms. Having healthy relationships helps to avoid this. If you currently struggle in this area then joining clubs is a great way to build new friendships and many workplaces will have a number of social and sports clubs already running.
- **Talk about your feelings:** This is a hard task for many people but talking about your feelings with somebody you trust helps you to share the burden and relieve some of the stress you are feeling. The person you talk to may also be able to offer solutions to any problems you are facing.

- **Healthy eating and exercise:** People may find this surprising as healthy eating and exercise are often associated with physical health. However, they greatly impact your mental wellbeing as well. Striving to eat your five a day and regularly exercising is proven to improve mental wellbeing.

Things you can do at work

- **Avoid Isolation:** Working from home is appealing as it eliminates the stress of commuting. However, working alone can cause you to become isolated. If you are working from home frequently then you need to ensure you regularly check in with managers and team members.
- **Take regular breaks:** When you feel you are becoming stressed or frustrated with a project it is a good idea to take a few minutes away from your desk to allow yourself time to regroup. It is also important to take your allocated lunch break instead of working through lunch.
- **Use your holiday:** In some professions you may find that you are often left with untaken holiday. It is important to try and avoid this as time away allows your mind time to recover. Holiday does not need to always be abroad, just having time away from work is sufficient. If you are not planning a long vacation abroad then spreading holiday throughout the year to give yourself regular breaks is advisable.
- **Manage your time:** Working on your time management skills will ensure you have the best chance of completing tasks on deadline, with the minimal amount of stress. There will be situations where you are giving short notice tasks and will need to plan to avoid as much stress as possible. If tasks are regularly given unrealistic deadlines then this is something to bring up with management as this can be detrimental to your mental health.
- **Know your HR contacts:** It is always better to know who you need to contact in the event of poor mental health prior to any problems. Knowing your HR contacts and who in your management team would be best to contact will reduced increased stress in the event of mental illness.
- **Ensure your work station is suitable:** If your desk is cluttered with unnecessary items or if your equipment, such as your office chair, is not sufficiently adjusted then you are likely to suffer increased levels of stress. If equipment is not suitable then your employer should replace this for you.
- **Ask for help:** If you feel a task is getting on top of you or if you do not feel equipped to handle a task then ask for help. Members of the team may be able to pitch in and you may even be able to receive extra training. In these situations not asking for help is likely to lead to anxiety and stress.



What to do if you are suffering with a mental illness

If you are suffering from mental health condition you do not have to disclose this to an employer.

Some professions will legally require a mental health disclosure but for most careers this is not the case. Deciding to disclose a mental health issue can be a very personal decisions and we are not here to make that decision for you. However, if you do decide to disclose your problem to a line manager or a Human Resources contact then you should expect confidentiality to be kept at all times. Managers may feel they need to disclose this information to another member of the team but they should always get your consent prior to doing this. The only exception is if you are in a time of crisis and your wellbeing is at risk.

Your rights and reasonable adjustments

If you are suffering from a mental health problem and have disclosed this information to your employer then they are legally obligated, in many countries, to make reasonable adjustments to assist you in completing your role. As we have previously noted, it is your choice as to whether you disclose your condition to your employer but if a condition is not disclosed then reasonable adjustments cannot be expected. Reasonable adjustments is a vague term and can change depending on the job role and company size. It is especially vague in mental health terms when problems are not easy for people to quantify. Nevertheless, a mental illness does not remove your right to earn a living and to work and where possible concessions will need to be made. Some reasonable adjustments may include:

- Changes to the hours that are worked such as moving to Flexi time contracts
- Changes to your working location, for instance home working
- Moving your work station to a more suitable environment for your needs
- Increasing the amount of training and support you receive, especially when returning from absence
- Increased flexibility in the way breaks and time off are taken
- Increased manager contact in a one to one setting

It may be that you are in an industry where some of these cannot apply, for instance a retail assistant cannot work from home. However, it is important to be aware of your rights to ensure your work experience is the best for you.

Planning with your employer

One way to normalise mental health in the work place is to discuss with a manager or employer a plan for a positive mental health environment. You may even be in an environment when this is already an ongoing practice. These plans for action can be both for those who have previously suffered with poor mental health and those who wish to pre-emptive any problems. In fact, having a plan of action prior to any problems is greatly recommended! Plans of action will vary depending on the person involved, the jobs that need to be completed and the employer and employees past experiences with mental health. When looking to create a plan of action you may wish to consider the following questions:

- How do you maintain positive mental health at work and at home?
- How can your manager support your mental health and what are some situations to try and avoid?
- If you have previously struggled with poor mental health, what are some early warning signs that others should be mindful of? What should people do if they see these signs?
- What changes could be facilitated to help reduce the risk of poor mental health both by yourself and your employer?
- If poor mental health does occur, what is the best course of action for you?

These plans are not fixed and it would be recommended to regularly review both the plans and the current mental health of the team and work environment at regular intervals.

For further information about all aspects relating to mental health please visit our website: www.shawmind.org



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