

LET'S CHAT? Talking about Mental Health in the Workplace

Look for an appropriate space and time

- Conversations about mental health can (and should) happen anywhere and anytime: in the kitchen, in meetings, in the corridor etc.
- Invite your employee to continue the conversation somewhere private, comfortable and neutral.
- If you are unable to speak at that moment in time, arrange a suitable time and place to talk, and ensure the individual will be safe until you speak again.
- Prioritise the conversation over other meetings and deadlines if you sense urgency.

Ensure confidentiality - Being upfront and honest about confidentiality from the start will build credibility and trust.

- Be ready to discuss and agree with the employee what (if any) information they would like shared, and with whom.
- Note that you may have to break confidentiality if the person is experiencing a crisis and is at serious risk of harm to themselves or others.
- Remember, any information shared in confidence should be kept confidential even if you no longer line manage the individual.
- Mental health problems should not be the source of gossip in the workplace and such behaviour should be challenged.

Take an open mind-set into the conversation – Do not assume that high absence or poor performance is due to a lack of interest or ability; they could be as a result of poor mental health or wellbeing.

- Also, do not assume that poor mental health or wellbeing will result in absence or poor performance.
- Raise any employment issues with the employee but listen to them without passing judgement, and consider their concerns addressing the mental health issue if it arises.

See the whole person – Everyone's experience of mental health is different so treat people as individuals and focus on the person, not the perceived problem.

- The issue may be a direct result of workplace conditions and/or things happening in their personal life (physical illness, bereavement, financial worries, menopause, parenthood etc) might be contributing to them experiencing poor mental health.

- Be ready to have conversations that relate to events outside the workplace.

Communication regularly with your employees – check in with employees regularly, particularly if you have noticed a change in them.

- Ensure you are accessible to them, either in person, by phone or email.
- Make sure you take steps to normalise the conversation; for example, by adapting your support and supervision templates to include questions around wellbeing, and raising it during team meetings.

Humanise the conversation – Be aware of how you project yourself in terms of voice volume, body language, conversational responses and adjust accordingly.

- Avoid asking questions that require a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.
- Use open questions instead. Respond with empathy to what they say and reassure them that you hold a genuine interest in understanding them better.

Actively listen – When employees tell you they’re struggling, give them your undivided attention and really listen to what they say.

- Don’t interrupt them with questions until they are done.
- Check your understanding by paraphrasing what they have said back to them, and avoid using dismissive comments like ‘you just need to go for a walk’ or ‘you are young, what do you have to worry about?’ or ‘everyone has down days’.
- Reflect words they use to show that you’ve listened and understood; it should encourage them to open up more.

Talk about other support options – if you employees experience an on-going mental health issue that affects their daily life then the workplace has a duty to put ‘reasonable adjustments’ in place to support the individual to stay in work or return to work following a period of ill-health.

- Discuss the issues constructively and ask what support they need so that they can continue to be able to do their job effectively.
- Involved them as much as possible in finding solutions to any to any work related difficulties by asking them ‘what would you like to happen next?’.
- Signpost to further information and support: GP, HR, occupational health, Employee Assistance Programme, supporting charities etc.
- But also appreciate that the individual might have supports in place already and just require job-specific support.