



Mental health and the workplace

Mental health and the workplace

“Mental health is not just the absence of mental disorder. It is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

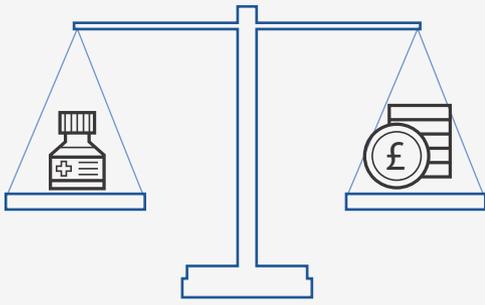
(World Health Organization, WHO)

Being ‘mentally healthy’ means having the resilience to cope with the challenges we face on a day-to-day basis. Whilst everybody’s emotional state fluctuates to some degree based on life events, some people find that their worries or anxieties begin interfering with their ability to function in their everyday lives (e.g. struggling to go to work, eat or sleep properly). Those who experience these issues for extended periods (a few weeks or more) may have a mental health condition and should seek support.

MENTAL ILL HEALTH AND WORK

Overall, mental health issues are on the rise. A survey carried out in 2014 reported that there has been a steady increase in mental illness for 16 to 64-year olds from 6.9% in 1993 to 9.3% in 2014, with a particularly significant rise amongst young women. In addition, mental health issues (including stress, depression and anxiety, and serious conditions) were one of the most significant reasons for sickness absence in the UK in 2016, resulting in 15.8 million days lost - 11.5% of all absences.

([Office for National Statistics, 2016](#))



Mental health conditions are estimated to cost the economy between **£70-100 billion.**

[\(Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2013\)](#)

70 million working days 

are lost each year in the UK due to mental health problems.

[\(Mental Health Foundation\)](#)



The number of days lost to stress, depression and anxiety has risen by **24% since 2009.**

[\(Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2013\)](#)

Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development ([CIPD](#), 2016) carried out with over 2,000 employees aimed to investigate experiences and attitudes towards mental health in the workplace. It yielded some interesting results suggesting that despite mental health issues having a profound effect on people's ability to work effectively, a lot more needs to be done to encourage open dialogue about mental health and encourage employers and managers to support employees who are experiencing mental health problems:



of respondents who reported having experienced mental health issues said that poor mental health affects their performance at work.

Of these respondents:

85% reported trouble concentrating.

64% said it takes them longer to complete tasks.

54% reported difficulty making decisions.

20%

reported said that their organisation supports people 'not very well' or 'not at all'.



46% said that their organisation supports employees experiencing mental health problems 'very well' or 'fairly well'.

The most common support offered by organisations for people experiencing mental health issues were:

Phased return to work (32%).

Access to flexible working (30%).

Occupational health support (27%).

Among respondents who described their mental health as poor, less than half (**43%**) had disclosed their problems to their employer.

MENTAL HEALTH, MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Despite the prevalence of mental health conditions, there is still a widespread lack of understanding about mental ill health, and many people find it difficult to empathise with those who are experiencing mental health problems. There is a general acceptance that physically healthy workers will be happier and more productive at work but workers' mental health has historically not been given the same prominence as their physical health.

However, the surge in popularity of the notion of 'wellbeing' as a holistic concept encompassing more than physical health (e.g. social, psychological and economic wellbeing, as well as physical considerations) has encouraged more openness about the topic of mental health. This has led to the development of the notion of a '**mentally healthy workplace**' and an understanding that workers who are mentally healthy and feel supported at work are likely to be more engaged, motivated and productive. With this in mind, three approaches have been proposed by [Mind](#) to create a mentally healthy workplace:

1. Promote wellbeing for all staff.
2. Tackle the cause of work-related health problems.
3. Support staff who are experiencing mental health problems.

Proponents of the importance of **employee engagement** argue that employees who feel an emotional connection

to their workplace are more likely to be motivated and productive, and will make a better contribution. This engagement could be based on a wide range of elements, including the nature of the work, the ethos and culture of the organisation, and relationships with colleagues.

A poll carried out in 2013 for Mind of 2,060 employed adults in England and Wales showed a clear correlation between supporting mental wellbeing and improving engagement. Mind argues that engagement cannot happen without mental health and that good mental health at work is more important than ever based on changing working practices (e.g. team-working and collaboration), which can only happen effectively in an environment of mutual trust and respect:

——— "If you look after your employees' mental wellbeing, then levels of engagement will rise and so will staff morale and loyalty, innovation, productivity and profits".

([Mind, 2013](#)).

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN THE WORKPLACE

The world of work is changing, which creates a different set of pressures for workers and new challenges for employers and managers who are seeking to support their employees and create a mentally healthy work environment.

An increase in service-based and knowledge-based activities: Many modern workplaces are based on collaborative and team-working, which can be challenging and uncomfortable for some. There is also increased pressure to keep up with technological advances and continue learning new skills. If the pace of change becomes too fast, it can lead to difficulty in coping.

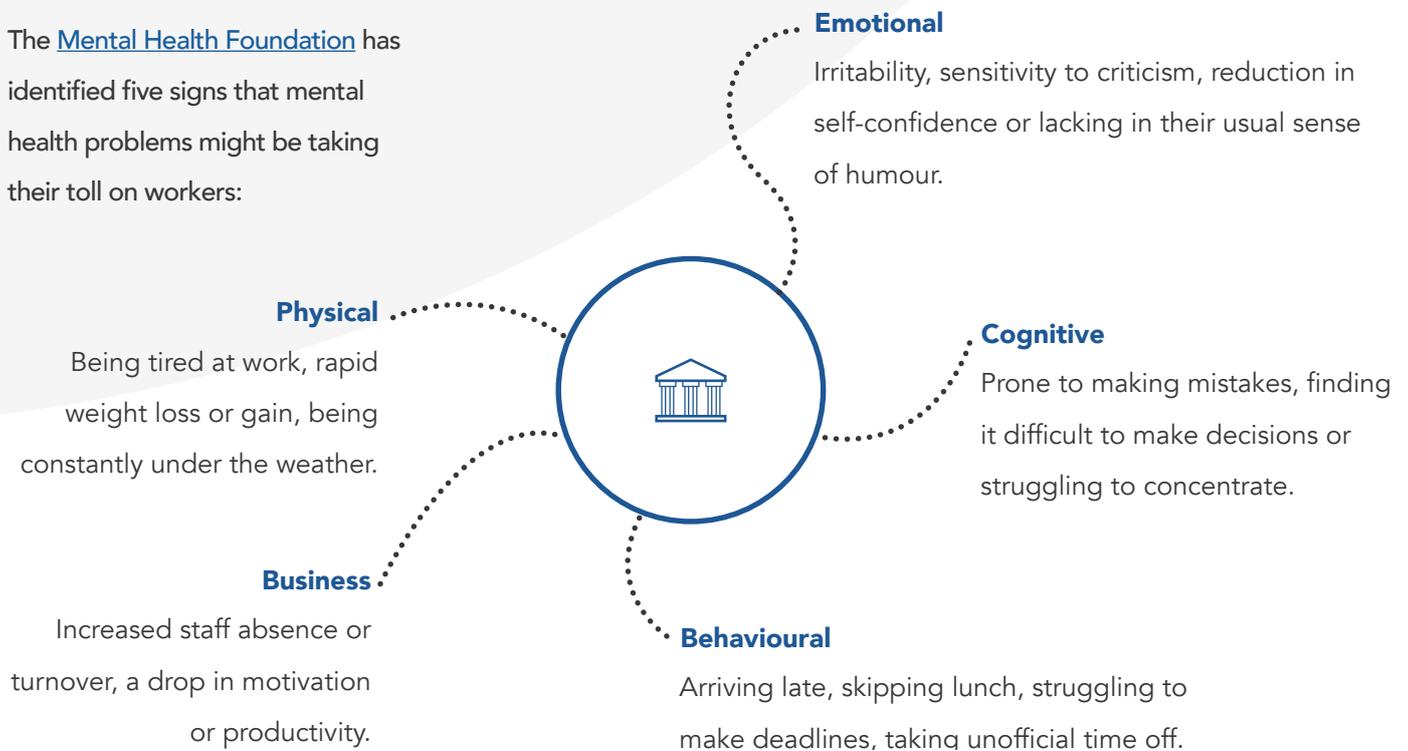
Job insecurity. A feeling of insecurity can lead to stress in its own right, and uncertainty about job security, particularly

during periods of economic instability, can put workers under intense pressure to perform to the best of their ability.

Increased competition: Competitive pressures can come in various forms including increased competition amongst organisations, which can cause workers to be put under more pressure, or competitiveness within the workforce, which can make workers uncertain about their ability to hold on to their jobs.

Changing expectations: Many workers, particularly younger workers, no longer buy into the notion of the job for life. They are more demanding and have expectations about what they can expect from their employer. Whilst this can be a positive thing for some people (particularly those who have the confidence to make demands), it can be unsettling for others.

The [Mental Health Foundation](#) has identified five signs that mental health problems might be taking their toll on workers:



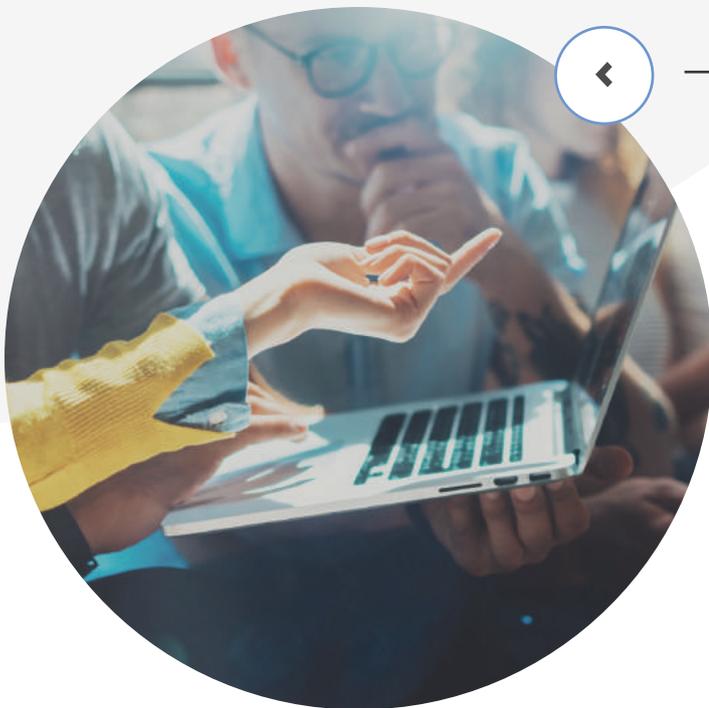
SUSCEPTIBILITY TO MENTAL ILLNESS

Whether or not a person is likely to experience mental health problems depends on a number of factors:

Genetic and hereditary factors: Some mental health conditions such as autism, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia have been shown to be associated with genetic variations, and it has been suggested that some mental health conditions can run in families for hereditary rather than genetic reasons, although the reasons for this are not yet fully understood.

Life experiences: Childhood experiences, major life events, traumatic experiences.

Lifestyle choices: Some behaviours (alcohol and drug use) can have a negative effect on mental health. In the short-term, alcohol can appear to enhance mood, but it is a depressant and regular, heavy drinking can interfere with the neurotransmitters in the brain that are good for mental health. Similarly, recreational drugs can make mental conditions worse or even cause them in the long-term. Other lifestyle choices can have a positive impact in helping prevent the onset or reduce the severity of mental health conditions (e.g. frequent exercise, good diet and good, restful sleep).



Many modern workplaces are based on collaborative and team-working, which can be challenging and uncomfortable for some.

TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

Dementia	Dementia is caused when the brain is damaged by diseases (e.g. Alzheimer's). Most people with dementia are over 65 although it can affect younger people too.
Eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia)	Eating disorders take various forms but are characterised by an excessive focus on eating habits and distorted perceptions of weight/body shape.
Anxiety and panic attacks	Some degree of anxiety is completely normal before major events such as sitting an exam or going for a job interview. However, anxiety can become a problem for some people if feelings of anxiety are very intense or long-lasting, or become overwhelming. Sometimes anxiety can lead to panic attacks.
Depression	Depression describes a sustained feeling of low mood. It can be mild, moderate or severe and encompasses a range of conditions including postnatal depression and reactive depression following major life events.
Mental health conditions caused by long-term physical illness	Poor physical health can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health problems and this is a particular issue for people who have long-term health problems such as chronic back pain or cardiac disease.
Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)	OCD is an anxiety-related condition characterised by intrusive obsessional thoughts often followed by repetitive compulsions (physical behaviours that are performed over and over again to relieve the anxiety caused by the obsessional thoughts).
Personality disorders	Personality disorders are increasingly being recognised as mental health issues and can be borderline, antisocial, dangerous or severe. People with personality disorders differ significantly from others in the way they think, feel, perceive or relate to others.
Phobias	A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder and is an overwhelming fear of an object, situation, place or animal, which can restrict a person's day-to-day activities.
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	Post-traumatic stress disorder is a type of anxiety disorder that some people experience after experiencing traumatic life-threatening events.
Major psychiatric conditions (e.g. psychosis, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia)	People with severe mental health conditions will require medication and, in some instances, hospital treatment. Some severe mental health conditions are associated with psychosis (delusions or losing touch with reality).

WHAT MAKES MENTAL ILL HEALTH ISSUES COMPLEX

Taboo and stigma

In contrast to physical conditions, people can be very hesitant to talk about mental health issues. Many people who are experiencing mental illness fear being pigeon-holed based on people's misconceptions (e.g. the incorrect belief held by some that all people with mental illness are dangerous or violent, or that people who are experiencing mental health issues can't work). Similarly, many people don't know how to support people with mental health issues so choose to ignore the topic altogether.

The lack of parity of esteem

This is the principle by which mental health must be given equal priority to physical health, a notion that was enshrined

in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. According to the [Centre for Mental Health](#), mental illness reduces life expectancy and has a similar effect on life-expectancy to smoking, and a greater effect than obesity, yet parity of esteem has not yet been achieved in many areas.

The idea that people should 'get over' their mental health issues

Many view mental ill health as a form of weakness and believe that people should be strong and 'overcome' their issues. But mental illness is an illness like any other and people deserve to receive appropriate treatment in order to recover. If a person is struggling with their mental health, simply 'being strong' is unlikely to help them overcome the problem, especially as a chemical imbalance in the brain often plays a part in mental illness.



People can be very hesitant to talk about mental health issues. Similarly, many people don't know how to support people with mental health issues so choose to ignore the topic altogether.

Lack of understanding

A person's genetic make-up, unique life experiences, level of resilience, and the extent of their predisposition to experiencing mental health issues can affect their susceptibility to mental ill health. From the outside it can sometimes be difficult to understand why some people are experiencing mental health issues whilst others aren't. There can be a temptation to think that some people 'deserve' to be struggling with their mental health (perhaps based on traumatic personal experiences) whilst others do not (e.g. those who appear to have had a relatively straightforward and happy life).

Mental health issues are often invisible

When a person is ill or injured, it is often easy to see the physical manifestations of their condition. This isn't always the case with mental ill health. The issue with this is twofold: on the one hand, it makes it difficult for friends, family or colleagues to spot signs of mental health issues in others; on the other it can mean that people who come forward to discuss their mental health issues aren't always taken seriously because they don't necessarily look ill. Various campaigns have attempted to overcome this issue, such as SANE's 'Black Dog Campaign', which aimed to raise awareness of depression, a largely 'invisible' condition, through statues of a black dog to characterise mental illness and generate discussion.

Knowing how to talk about mental health issues

Our everyday language is permeated with derogatory references to mental illness and there is no place for this kind of language in the workplace. According to

[Mind](#), approximately one in four people will experience a mental health problem each year, so it is vital that we understand how to be open about mental health issues without causing offence or stigmatising people. As well as avoiding derogatory terms such as 'mad' or 'nutter', it is considered good practice not to talk about people as though they were the mental illness (e.g. labelling a person as 'a schizophrenic' or 'autistic') but rather to acknowledge the person first and then their condition or disability: 'my colleague has schizophrenia' or 'my colleague has autism'. Another subtle yet important distinction should be drawn between describing a person as 'suffering from depression' (which makes them sound like a victim) as opposed to 'experiencing depression' (which suggests that the person has a diagnosis of depression but is not characterised by it).

SELF-MANAGEMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Self-management of mental illness is based on the premise that people experiencing mental ill health can take an active part in managing their illness rather than remaining passive recipients of care. Self-management is based on the notion of 'recovery' from mental illness as opposed to being 'cured':

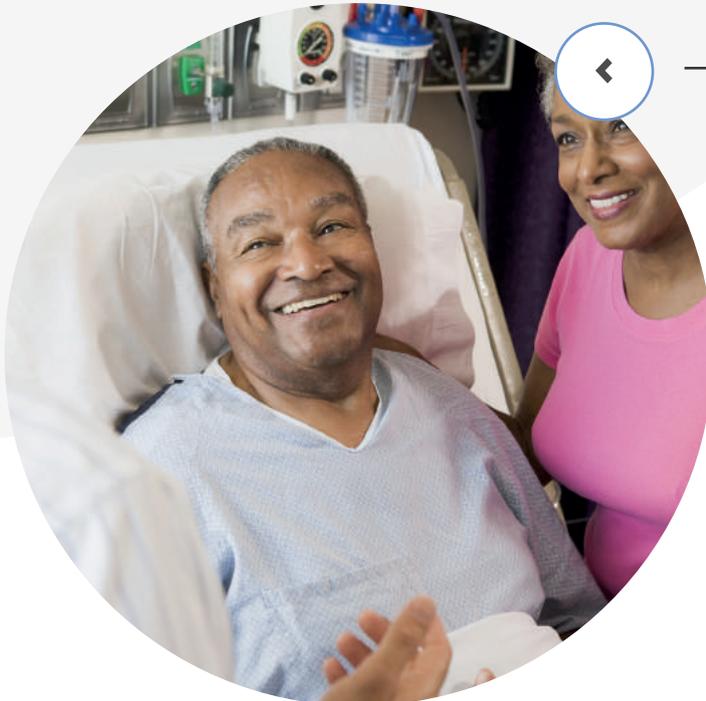
"[Recovery] is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness" (Anthony, W. A. (1993) Recovery from mental illness: The guiding vision of the mental health service system in the 1990s).

There are many self-management techniques that can help a person to manage their illness and take positive steps towards recovery, including:

- Getting the right **support from family, friends and colleagues**.
- Accessing **professional help** (e.g. counselling).
- Practising **mindfulness**, a technique that helps people to be fully present in a situation, and aware of where they are or what they are doing, rather than being passive and running the risk of becoming overwhelmed by stressful situations.
- Practising one of the many forms of **meditation**, which

teaches people to calm their minds to reach a state of thoughtful awareness.

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**, which helps people to manage their problems by changing the way they think or behave. It focuses on developing effective coping strategies and changing unhelpful beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviours.
- Putting effort into attaining a **good work-life balance**.
- **Self-help groups**: People can access mutual support (people voluntarily coming together to help each other) and peer support (support from people with similar mental health conditions).



According to [Mind](#), approximately one in four people will experience a mental health problem each year, so it is vital that we understand how to be open about mental health issues without causing offence or stigmatising people.

Support from employers

Mind has published a very [useful guide for employers](#) on how to support employees who are experiencing mental health issues. This guide outlines four important aspects for employers to consider:

1. Creating a culture that supports staff to be open about their mental health.
2. Talking to staff about their mental health.
3. Supporting staff who are experiencing mental health problems.
4. Managing an employee's time off sick and their return to work.

Additional support is available for both employers and employees and some examples are listed below.

Employee assistance programmes (EAPs) designed to identify and resolve personal issues that employees may be facing and which may be negatively affecting their work. As well as offering support to employees, some employee assistance programmes also offer managers and employers access to guidance, including advice on supporting staff who are experiencing mental health issues.

Support from Access to Work, a scheme provided by Remploy that offers grants to people who have a physical or mental health condition that makes it difficult for them to carry out their work but whose challenges were not sufficiently overcome by the adjustments their employers were able to make. Alongside Access to Work, Remploy also offers the 'Access to Work mental

health support service', which is a free support service for anyone with a mental health condition who is absent from work or is finding it difficult to work.

Training and awareness courses to help anyone who is interested in finding out more about good mental health in the workplace. These are offered by many providers, including Mind, and can be very effective at initiating open dialogue about mental health issues in the workplace, and encouraging people to take steps to improve their own mental health and support colleagues who are having issues.

As one of the UK's leading occupational health providers, Health Management, a MAXIMUS Company, helps organisations promote and maintain the physical, mental and social wellbeing of their employees in all occupations. We help your organisation manage and advise on employees' health at work and the impact of work on their health.



Our broad, cross-industry experience enables us to target **the specific needs of your organisation**, taking a flexible approach to managing the health and wellbeing of your people. In this way, we strive **to help you improve the wellbeing of your organisation's staff and your organisation's performance, productivity and profitability.**



Your tailored programme may be delivered at your offices through our nationwide network of physicians so your employees are seen close to where they live, which **reduces unnecessary travel and costs.** Alternatively, we can offer other flexible solutions including mobile health units and national telephone-based support. Whatever your need, we deliver the required occupational health services to your employees in a professional and friendly way.

We have over 50 of our own clinics throughout the UK and Ireland, and access to an additional managed network of 250, so our expert medical advice is always close by.

Find out today how we can help your business be the best it can be.

 **0845 504 1000**

 **info@healthmanltd.com**

 **www.healthmanltd.com**

Registered Office: Ash House, The Broyle, Ringmer, East Sussex, BN8 5NN

