

Promoting positive mental health at work

A guide for employers



Mental health and the workplace

Poor mental health affects at least one in five people in Northern Ireland.

Mental health is the foundation for our health and wellbeing. It gives us the ability to cope with everyday pressures, manage changes in our lives such as the birth of a child, redundancy, retirement or bereavement and helps us to bounce back from difficulties.

Anyone can suffer from poor mental health. Mental health problems are characterised by changes in thinking, mood or behaviour, and include anxiety and depression.

In general, employment has a positive effect on people's mental health. It can provide a sense of purpose and self-worth and opportunities to meet people and make friends. Being in work can also help in the recovery of those with mental health problems.

Various factors in the workplace can cause stress or increase the risk of developing or worsening existing mental health problems. These include unrealistic workloads, lack of support, long hours, poor management practices, bullying or harassment, lack of communication, unclear role and responsibilities, poor work/life balance, the physical environment (eg lighting, noise, ventilation) and lack of opportunities for career progression.

Events outside the workplace such as bereavement, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, financial problems or physical illness/health problems can also impact on a person's mental health and their work.

Productivity, performance, attendance, staff retention and morale are all affected when employees experience poor mental health.

Why promote positive mental health at work?

Mental health problems cost the Northern Ireland economy over £790 million every year.

Between 10% and 25% of full-time workers may experience mental health problems.

Mental health problems can affect people at any age, but they often begin when a person is young and can last for a long time, so the cost from lost or reduced productivity in the workplace is high.

It makes good business sense to protect and promote the mental health of your employees. There are a number of benefits for employers:

- reduced staff turnover/better staff retention;
- improved productivity/performance/creativity;
- reduced staff absences and associated savings;
- compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995;
- enhanced reputation as an employer;
- strengthened capacity of an organisation;
- improved working relationships.

Benefits for staff include:

- improved mental and physical health;
- reduced risk of mental health problems;
- support in recovery from mental health problems;
- improved morale;
- increased self-esteem and confidence;
- better working conditions;
- better work/life balance.

The workplace offers an opportunity to reach large numbers of people with information and support to improve their mental health and to reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems.



Good practice in supporting mental health in the workplace

It is important to promote mental health at both organisational and individual level.

Create a culture of openness

- Outline the organisation's commitment to the health of its employees through a mental health policy.
- Make employees aware that it is safe for them to discuss mental health problems without fear of job loss, harassment or isolation.
- Provide mental health awareness training.
- Actively support employees experiencing mental health problems at work and where necessary assist their return to work.

Recognise the work/life balance

- Show trust and respect, and acknowledge that people do have a right to a fulfilled life inside and outside work.
- Consider offering flexible working opportunities such as flexitime, part-time work, job share, working from home or term-time work.

Set realistic job demands

- Pay attention to the way a job is designed – vary tasks to avoid monotony.
- Make sure that employees have the physical resources and skills for the job.
- Encourage employees to take their regular breaks and leave entitlement.
- Create a culture where excessive hours are discouraged.
- Review work demands regularly.

Give employees a say in how they work

- Provide opportunities at the beginning of a project for employees to influence how work is planned and carried out.
- Allow employees some control over the pace of their work.

Provide employees with support

- Provide appropriate training, on the job support and mentoring schemes.
- Use appraisals to provide constructive feedback.

Encourage good relationships

- Develop appropriate policies and procedures to deal with violence, bullying or harassment.
- Create teams with the appropriate expertise and experience.
- Encourage honest, open communication at all levels within the organisation.
- Create opportunities for social activities.

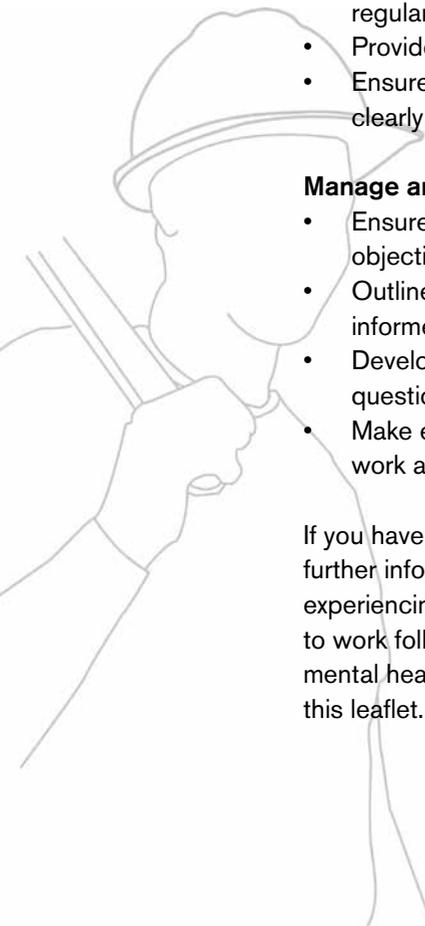
Make the job role clear

- Provide employees with clear job descriptions and review at regular intervals.
- Provide new employees with a thorough induction.
- Ensure the roles and responsibilities of team members are clearly defined and understood.

Manage and communicate change in the organisation

- Ensure that employees are made aware of the aims and objectives of any change.
- Outline the timetable for change and keep employees informed.
- Develop a system so that employees can ask questions/discuss concerns during phases of change.
- Make employees aware of how the change will affect their work and provide training to support this.

If you have concerns for an employee's mental health or require further information on looking after employees who are experiencing mental health problems, supporting those returning to work following a period of absence or employing those with mental health problems, refer to the 'Help is at hand' section of this leaflet.



Mental health in the workplace: legal requirements

By promoting mental health, you are complying with legislation.

This guidance will support the implementation of related national strategies, as well as a number of legal requirements regarding employment, including employers' duty of care. These include:

- *Health, work and wellbeing: caring for our future*, a Government strategy to improve the health and wellbeing of working age people, available at:
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209570/health-and-wellbeing.pdf
- *Working for a healthier tomorrow*, Dame Carol Black's review of the health of Britain's working age population, available at:
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209782/hwwb-working-for-a-healthier-tomorrow.pdf
- *Working our way to better mental health*, a Government framework for action, available at:
www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm77/7756/7756.pdf
- Employment laws regarding equality, anti-discrimination, health and safety, maternity and parental leave, and flexible working:
 - Employment Rights Act 1996, available at:
www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1996/Ukpga_19960018_en_1
 - Disability Discrimination Act 2005, available at:
www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/ukpga_20050013_en_1
 - Work and Families Act 2006, available at:
www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga_20060018_en.pdf

In addition, the Health and Safety Executive's standards for managing work-related stress may provide a valuable tool. These are available at: www.hse.gov.uk/stress

We would also recommend referring to National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidance PH22, *Promoting mental wellbeing at work*, available at: guidance.nice.org.uk/PH22

Key steps for action

For successful change, **consult, communicate and plan.**

There are a number of key actions that employers can take to promote mental health in the workplace.

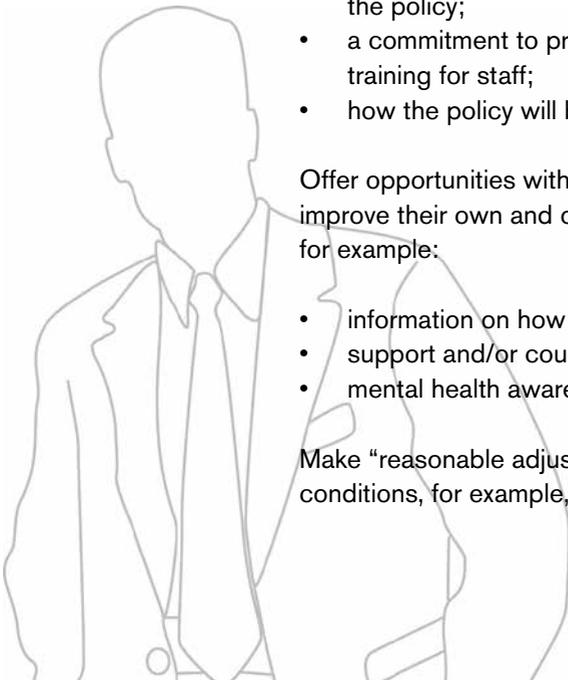
Consult and communicate with employees to develop and implement a policy on mental health and commit to addressing the issue. A policy should include the following:

- a definition of mental health;
- the legal obligations of the employer;
- the aims of the policy – to promote mental health and wellbeing, to identify issues that have a negative impact on mental health, and to provide assistance and support to staff experiencing problems;
- a statement that the policy applies to all staff;
- the commitment to consulting and communicating with all staff;
- the organisation’s strategy to address mental health problems;
- the roles and responsibilities of staff in implementing the policy;
- a commitment to provide mental health awareness and training for staff;
- how the policy will be monitored and reviewed.

Offer opportunities within the workplace for employees to improve their own and others’ mental health by providing, for example:

- information on how to look after their mental health;
- support and/or counselling;
- mental health awareness training.

Make “reasonable adjustments” to employees’ working conditions, for example, flexitime or working from home.



Help is at hand

Supporting the health and wellbeing of employees involves assessing their needs. The Public Health Agency has an online health assessment tool, available at: www.healthatworkni.org

To find out more about workplace health and wellbeing support, visit: www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/health-and-wellbeing-work-resource-guide

For further information on how to promote mental health in the workplace, visit the following websites:

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service	www.acas.org.uk
British Occupational Health Research Foundation	www.bohrf.org.uk
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland	www.equalityni.org
Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland	www.hseni.gov.uk
Mental Health Foundation	www.mentalhealth.org.uk
Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health	www.niamh.co.uk
Aware Defeat Depression	www.aware-ni.org
Mindwise	www.mindwisenv.org

Information leaflets on promoting mental health can be downloaded from www.mindingyourhead.info and are available from the central health promotion resource service in your local Health and Social Care Trust. Details can be found at www.publichealth.hscni.net

Lifeline is the Northern Ireland crisis response helpline service for people who are experiencing distress or despair. If you or someone you know is in distress or despair, Lifeline is here to help. Call **0808 808 8000**. Calls are free and lines are open 24 hours a day.

Local directories of services are available for all areas. Check with the health improvement resource service in your local Health and Social Care Trust.



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