

We need to talk

Tips for talking about mental health in the workplace



Words Can Wound

Why 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me' is not quite true.

When it comes to the public perception of mental health issues, language is key. Here we look at key ways that language can negatively and positively affect your employees' mental wellbeing, and what employers can do to harness the power of positive communication.

What we know and how we feel about mental illness is subject to continuous change depending on the type of information accessed and how credible the information is perceived to be. Numerous studies indicate that the majority of the public are not well informed of even the basic facts about mental illness, and that much of this misinformation can be due to the language used to discuss mental illness in the workplace and in the media in general.

In the age of political correctness, people with mental illnesses are "squeezed into one size fits all boxes" (The Guardian). Removing the stigma about mental health is an important step in tackling it and using negative words can often stop people wanting to talk about it altogether. Even the phrase 'mental health issues' is often seen in a negative light, with employers and employees alike preferring the phrase 'emotional wellbeing' and discussing 'wellness' as opposed to discussing 'mental health issues'.

Mental health issues are very much in the public eye, with many high-profile figures choosing to share their own struggles with mental ill-health. From Demi Levato recently opening up about her bipolar diagnosis, to the Prince and Princess of Wales encouraging important conversations with their Heads Together charity, it's important to challenge how mental health is perceived in the UK by tackling the stigma that prevents people from seeking aid.

Heads Together has made a lasting impact on people's lives with clear evidence more people are now comfortable talking about their mental health. A recent six-film series with some of the biggest names in football and beyond having candid and honest conversations is helping bring about a 'mental health' awakening.

TAKEAWAY #1

Normalise

Don't stigmatise the subject of mental health and emotional wellbeing.



12.7% of all sickness absence days in the UK can be attributed to mental health conditions

Source: mentalhealth.org



Training for All

80% of UK employees have noticed a greater awareness of mental health issues in society at large, but 34% report no change in awareness within their workplace*.

Due to this lack of awareness in the workplace, coupled with the ongoing stigma and lack of adequate resources to treat mental ill-health, most training may need to focus on raising basic awareness. Providing anti-stigma messages and resources, such as those championed by MIND's Time to Change campaign, should be considered by employers.

However, it is important that your staff and managers understand that they do not need to become mental health experts. It is enough for them to have an understanding of mental health and an awareness of how to best support friends, colleagues and those who report into them.

Once the training is complete it is important to keep wellbeing resources on hand for staff for help and advice in the future, whether they find themselves to be suffering from a mental health issue or if they are just concerned about a colleague.

TAKEAWAY #2

Inform Staff

Provide seminars and learning materials to encourage staff to inform themselves about the issue.

Lead the Way

A lot of this stigma can be boiled down to a concept called 'boundary making' defined by Gilman in her 1982 work 'Seeing the Insane'.

The general public finds comfort in the idea that mental illness is something that is unlikely to happen to them or their loved ones, and therefore internalise the belief that those who do suffer from mental illness are extremely different from themselves.

Mental ill-health doesn't discriminate by age, gender, race, seniority or industry, so it's in the interest of all employers to normalise the conversation about mental health and to take steps to improve employee mental wellbeing.

Encouraging leaders, senior management and line managers to join the conversation is a great way to help normalise this discussion. Whether they've experienced mental illness themselves or have had a close friend or family member who has struggled, it all helps combat the 'us' and 'them' mentality that surrounds mental illness.

TAKEAWAY #3

Lead by Example

Encourage senior managers to open the conversation and share personal experiences.

Create a Platform

We know from our clients' usage data that wellbeing resources are more in demand. Across our client base, we have seen a 300% increase year on year for access to employee wellbeing resources via our Hapi app and platform.

With the Mental Health Foundation reporting that 45% of employees diagnosed with a mental health problem take time off and give another reason to their employers (Raconteur, 2019), it's time for a renewed focus on the way we communicate with staff about mental health issues.

In order for your staff and colleagues to be able to speak up about their own experiences, whether first or second hand, there needs to be a platform, or catalyst, for discussion.

This can be achieved with something as simple as introducing a mental health awareness section into your current communications meetings, implementing mental health awareness training for employees, regardless of their seniority or utilising an employee engagement app like Hapi, where all wellbeing communications and resources are available on the employees' own smartphones.



TAKEAWAY #4

Make a Safe Space

Create a platform for employees to discuss issues surrounding mental health and any improvements that can be made.

Encourage Flexible Working

Many mental health charities have attempted to combat the spread of misinformation about mental health via the sharing of simple, factual information regarding the most common mental disorders.

Unfortunately, this is not enough. As much of the stigma and misrepresentation remains, 71% of workers worry about telling their employer if they have a Mental Health Condition, in fear of getting a negative response (Priory Group). MIND, a mental health charity, states on its website that employment “provides identity, contact, friendship and structure”, however, adhering to the structure of a working day can be nigh on impossible for those suffering from mental health issues.

Many employees do not know that everyone has the right to request flexible working once they have worked for the same employer for 26 weeks or more. In organisations where flexible working is seen as a privilege only granted to a few, or that requesting it may have negative consequences on career prospects, it can become a point of contention.

The main reasons cited for requesting flexible working are commuting issues, leisure or study interests, and caring responsibilities. With 63% of full-time employees working flexibly in some way (Gallup, 2023), employees seem to be getting what they ask for. The onus is on employers to ensure that requesting a flexible working arrangement due to mental ill-health is seen just as acceptable as citing care-related issues. However, it is important to note that this will likely be a gradual change. Flexible working for childcare issues would have been almost unheard of sixty or seventy years ago, as only 19% of mothers with dependent children worked outside of the home. Compare this to 2021, when 75.6% of women, and 92.1% of men, with dependent children are currently in employment, and it is easy to see how requests for childcare-related flexibility have inevitably risen (ONS, 2021).

In the same way that you shouldn't allow more flexibility to workers with children over those having issues with their commute, offering flexible working for those with mental health issues must be done fairly. Only offering flexible working to those who suffer from mental ill-health can be just as damaging to the overall perception of mental health issues in the workplace. No one should be seen to be getting preferential treatment over other staff members, and flexible working is a benefit that should be enjoyed by all members of the workforce.

TAKEAWAY #5

Equalise the Issue

Make sure requests regarding mental health related issues are treated in the same way as any other request.

It's Time to Talk

An increasing number of employers are waking up to the fact that their employees' wellbeing is something that should be high up on the corporate agenda. Mental health in the workplace should no longer be a taboo subject and only by providing resources and open conversation can we truly remove the stigma once and for all.

However, there is much more to be done when it comes to holistic employee wellbeing. If an employee is suffering in one area of their life it will often manifest itself in other areas, therefore, to effectively improve wellbeing, a strategy must be put in place which considers physical, emotional as well as financial wellbeing.

A truly all-inclusive health and wellness programme that acknowledges and supports employees at each point of what we like to call the 'triangle of wellbeing', is the only way to ensure that employees have access to all the help they need.

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