

Guidance for managers

Talking at an early stage

The earlier you notice that an employee is experiencing mental health difficulties the better; early action can help prevent the employee becoming more unwell. Line managers can play a key role in identifying and addressing barriers to normal working life rather than trying to understand the diagnosis. If an employee is already off sick, lack of contact or involvement from the manager may mean they feel unable to return; involvement and reassurance at an early stage minimises the risk of not returning to work and the difficulty of resolution.

Using ordinary management tools to identify problems and needs

It might be that certain tasks, work environments, times of the day or particular teams are associated with people experiencing difficulties. Discuss whether there is potential problem at scheduled or usual work planning sessions, appraisals or informal chats about progress; these may provide neutral opportunities to find out about and discuss any problems an employee may be having.

If you have specific grounds for concern it is important to talk about these at an early stage. Ask questions in an open, exploratory and non-judgmental way. When talking to an employee remember stress affects people differently, making adjustments to the job could relieve the stress and you should be positive and supportive – exploring the issues and how you can help.

If a person has experienced a period of sickness absence, you should discuss the format of their return to work and integration in advance of any return date. A documented plan can be valuable. You both might want to agree when they have reached the stage of 'business as usual'. At this point, you can use normal management processes to review their performance, needs and work planning.

Managing an employee who becomes tearful and upset

The important points are to talk to them, reassure them, state positively that all help, assistance and support will be offered, and affirm that discussion will continue at a pace that suits them; ask if they would like someone of their choice with them. Try to be sensitive to the level of information the individual can cope with; in the midst of a crisis they may not be able to think clearly and accept complex information.

Remember try to remain calm yourself!

Many problems build up over time and whilst you may feel the pressure to do something it may be better to take some time to properly consider the options. Try to agree with the person, what is urgent and what is important.

You may need support in managing the situation. If the session is not proving helpful for the person or you rearrange it for when the person is less upset. If the problem continues you should encourage them to seek appropriate help, your occupational health department or encourage them to see their own GP.

One in four people will experience 'mild to moderate' mental health problems, but a much smaller number will experience more severe anxiety or depression, associated with episodes of 'mania': extreme heightened activity, psychosis, loss of touch with reality, hallucinations, distortion of the senses. In these rare instances, an employee may behave in ways that impact on colleagues or clients. In this situation you need to be aware of your responsibilities for all employees.

Take the person to a quiet place and speak to them calmly, suggest that you contact a friend or relative or that they go home and contact their GP or a member of the mental health team if appropriate. You may be able to make an appointment and go with them to the surgery – if they wish this.

If someone is experiencing hallucinations or mania, they may not take in what you are saying, in this case the person will need immediate medical help. If an employee is disturbing others and refuses to accept help seek advice from your occupational health provider, the person's GP or contact NHS Direct, or the ambulance service.

Managing a person with an ongoing illness

Most people who have ongoing mental health problems continue to work successfully, but where someone needs support, managers and employees can work together to ensure a flexibility to suit their health needs.

People with mental health problems should be treated in exactly the same way as any other member of staff unless they ask for help or demonstrate clear signs that help is needed. It is discriminatory to make assumptions about people's capabilities, their promotability or amount of sick leave they may need because of their illness.

Coping strategies

Most individuals are encouraged to develop a coping strategy as part of their care which often involves noting signs of a possible relapse and taking pre-emptive action, such as, cutting down on work, being careful about drinking alcohol, taking exercise and finding time to relax. It is important you support the employee at this first warning stage. Small and inexpensive adjustments may well prevent a more costly period of illness.

Advance statements

Some people find it useful to draw up an 'advance statement' which explains how they wish to be treated if they become unwell. The statement can cover practical arrangements such as treatment preferences, details of the people to be contacted or provided with information.

It might be helpful to draw up an advance statement which relates to the workplace. It could include signs that indicate that the person is becoming unwell, who to contact (perhaps a close relative, care coordinator or GP), what sort of support is helpful and what is not. If an employee draws up an agreement with you, it is important for you to put the statement into practice to maintain trust.

Supported work projects

There are many projects offering support to employees who have experienced mental health problems and to employers. These projects have excellent success records in placing people in employment and in supporting them to be effective employees in the long term. In fact many people require only minimal support once they have been given the opportunity to work.