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A guide to promoting mental health in the workplace

- Employers Resource -



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Kronprinzenstraße 6
45128 Essen

Authors: Lee Knifton, Verona Watson (Mental Health Foundation),
Heleen den Besten, Rob Gründemann, Anja Dijkman (TNO)

Editor: Dr. Reinhold Sochert (ENWHP Sekretariat)
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2. Why is mental health important for a successful business?

There are many reasons why employers should make mental health promotion in the workplace a priority. The mental health of employees is an important health determinant. In today's global economy it is an important driver for successful business. More and more companies realise that the commitment of employees is crucial for the success of the organisation.

The costs of work related mental ill health

The economic business case for mental health is compelling. For example in the UK, studies show that common mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression account for 60 million lost working days each year. The cost to the employer through loss of productivity due to mental problems is higher than that caused by most other health problems and much higher than in working days lost to industrial disputes for example. Mental health promotion can reduce the costs of absenteeism and associated management time.

In recent decades the increasingly global nature of our economies, and the advances in workplace technology, mean that the nature of work is changing rapidly. This affects the content, organisation and intensity of people's work, which increasingly requires more skills and competences in terms of innovation, communication and social intelligence. These rapid changes in the nature of work can be rewarding for employees, however, they can mean that employees may experience more pressure and demands upon their cognitive, social and psychological skills. Mental health is crucial: both for the formation of these skills and their effective use in the workplace.

However, across European countries and workplaces, poor mental health is significant and increasing. The workplace can provide a healthy culture and environment that is psychologically supportive to the workforce. It is a challenge to employers as well

as to employees to make the workplace a healthy workplace; physical, mental and social!

Facts and figures of the impact of mental health

- 25 percent of European citizens will experience a mental health problem during their life time
- 27 percent of the adult population in Europe is affected by mental health problems, that is 93 million people
- The World Health Organization estimates that by 2020 depression will become the second most important cause of disability in the world
- Total costs of mental health disorders in Europe are estimated to be 240 billion Euro per year. Direct costs such as medical treatment account for less than half of this sum. The larger amount of 136 billion Euro is due to lost productivity including sick leave absenteeism
- Across Europe the levels of absenteeism, unemployment and long term disability claims due to work related stress and mental health problems have been increasing. For example: Around 10 percent of long-term health problems and disabilities can be ascribed to mental and emotional disorders
- There are 58.000 suicides per year in EU. In comparison: 50.700 deaths are caused by traffic accidents.

Productivity and performance

Mental health promotion can also boost productivity and performance. A good working environment can help to increase morale, teamwork and communication. Staff turnover is lower and so are the associated costs of recruitment and training. A healthy workplace can help people to cope with change and difficult circumstances, which is particularly important in challenging economic conditions.

Business case for mental health

- www.who.int/mental_health/policy/services/essentialpackage1v13/en/index.html for WHO resource with overview of mental health and workplaces
- www.workingforhealth.gov.uk – UK Government business case, health-check and evidence based approaches
- www.scmh.org.uk/pdfs/mental_health_at_work.pdf – The business case developed by The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health
- www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/02/16100540/0 – Scottish Government, It Pays to Look After Your Workforce – Employers
- www.enwhp.org – *work. in tune with life. move europe* campaign tool: Guide to the business case for mental health

Reputation

By developing mental health promotion programmes and policies, you can enhance the public reputation of your organisation. This can improve your business reputation amongst potential future recruits, and it may increase your chances of gaining public contracts. It can also improve your reputation amongst the wider public and customers as an organisation that demonstrates corporate social responsibility. Good organisational reputation will be associated with a healthy and stimulating workplace where personal development is part of the organization learning culture.

No health without mental health

There is good evidence to show that poor mental health and stress can lead to an increase in a range of physical illnesses. These include coronary heart disease, stroke and diabetes. This can happen directly by mental distress affecting physiological vulnerability, but also indirectly by increasing the dependence upon negative lifestyle factors such as smoking and alcohol consumption. These are major social and workplace issues but also mean that there is a compelling business case to act now.

Legal requirements and insurance requirements

Last but not least there are laws to be considered governing workplace stress and mental health, such as the EU Framework Directive on Health and Safety at Work of 1989. However, they do vary in the different countries.



3. What employers can do to promote mental health and prevent stress

The workplace can provide a mentally healthy environment that is supportive to all the workers. A wide range of interventions can promote mental health and prevent stress and help to develop resilience amongst employees as well. Really long-term effects can be achieved only with comprehensive health promotion and prevention strategies, developed and implemented in a coordinated effort by those responsible on all levels. The combination and coordination of various interventions both on individual and organisational level is essential for maintaining the mental health of employees.

Which of the following elements can be used or combined depends on specific company requirements.

Less stress on the long-term? Only with improvements in the working conditions!
Aim: Reducing and modifying potential sources of stress in the working environment

In relation to mental health problems, interventions focussing solely on changing individual behaviour are not particularly effective either for employees or for companies. They need to be supplemented with organisational measures addressing the potential sources of stress in the working environment. This is the only way to positively influence factors relevant on an organisational level, such as work satisfaction, motivation and productivity. Some examples of organisational interventions for promoting mental health are shown here:

- **Reorganise poor working processes**
In face of increasing work intensity, higher time pressure and the extra work involved, no company can expect its employees to increase their output. In fact, the risk of psychological problems increases with negative consequences for the mental health of the employees. Contrary

to general opinion, studies have confirmed that shorter working hours and doing away with overtime do not automatically result in lower productivity. Optimising working processes (e.g. by job enlargement, job rotation, flexi-time) and restructuring tasks to lessen pressure (e.g. creating clerical jobs to relieve skilled personnel from administrative tasks) can motivate employees on the long term. These measures serve at the same time to promote the mental well-being of the employees.

- **Increase control over own work and empowerment**
Employees should have certain amount of autonomy in organising their own work. Professionals have agreed on this for quite some time. Freedom to organise their own working day and to carry out tasks under their own initiative, is an important health resource to the employees. Setting out target agreements in place of detailed specifications on processes would be a practical measure to start with.
- **Include employees in decision making and problem solving processes**
Employees should be involved in relevant decision making processes whether by surveys or in forums and workshops. This is a central prerequisite for maintaining a mentally healthy workforce.
- **Balancing efforts and rewards**
There is also a strong correlation between an effort and reward imbalance and negative impact on mental health. Within reason, employers can take steps to minimise this, for example by paying a decent wage to the lowest paid employees.
- **Improving communication and feedback**
Creating a culture of recognition and trust in the company is essential for professional commu-

nication and cooperation. In turn, this plays an important protective role in promoting and maintaining the employees' mental health. Suitable methods to use are communication trainings – verbal and non-verbal, internal or external – and training courses in personnel management techniques and staff behaviour. Employers can train their managers in supportive leadership style. A manager should attend to employees needs, act as a mentor or coach, encourage creativity, motivate employees and communicate goals.

- **Clear roles and expectations**
It is important to be clear about what employees can expect from the organisation and what duties and tasks are expected of the employee. If employees feel that their employer has failed to deliver what has been promised it can result in reduced motivation, commitment and performance.
- **Encouraging and strengthening social support**
Of course social support cannot simply be regulated. But what can be done is to design the organisational conditions to encourage and strengthen a supportive culture in the company: applying a transparent decision making and information policy built on open dialogue and trustworthy cooperation. By providing opportunities for after work activities for example or allowing extra time to help colleagues, the management can show that it explicitly encourages the staff to support one another. The most important factor of all is the example set by the management who should also take part in the activities themselves and use social support as a criteria in their performance appraisals.
- **Further training and qualification**
Continuing education and further training belongs to every good personnel development strategy. By providing opportunities for personal development it can at the same time hide potential for promoting health and character development.

Managing stress: The basic element of behavioural prevention.

Aims: Resilience to stress by learning and practicing coping strategies suitable for everyday use.

Interventions aimed at increasing individual and social skills for managing stress situations are effective. This has been substantiated in a whole range of studies. They reduce absenteeism and stress related disorders and at the same time improve the quality of working life - both for employees free of disorders, employees at risk of mental disorders and for those already suffering! Training courses showing how to cope adequately or how to avoid stress should therefore form the central element of the strategy in the field of behavioural prevention. Because the range of techniques used in training courses on the issue of stress are as varied as the causes, here are some recommendations:

- **Using cognitive-behaviour techniques**
A training course should contain elements of cognitive therapy, a form of behavioural therapy. Cognition encompasses attitudes, thoughts, valuations and beliefs and cognitive and behavioural related techniques can help make people aware of them, test how they compare with reality, modify irrational attitudes and help "transfer" them to everyday life appropriately. Individual coping strategies can be developed if necessary.
- **Apply multi-modal methodology**
Training courses should use multi-modal methodology, for example a combination of information materials, videos, role playing or learning with models. In this way, the training takes on a workshop character that is more effective than up-front teaching. Concerted, practical training of the newly learnt techniques is essential.
- **Making trainers out of employees**
An effective element is to train employees on how to instruct their colleagues. In this way, the "snowball effect" can be put to optimal use.



Relaxation as an optimal solution

Aims: To reduce emotional and physical tension in stress situations, encourage self-regulation in dealing with stress

Relaxation techniques are another good prevention measure. Monitored studies have shown that stress symptoms can be alleviated by using techniques such as muscle relaxation, meditation or autogenic training. Relaxation techniques are easy to get across and need little effort or cost.

Alleviate anger through exercise

Aims: To modify anger, aggression, negative feelings and perceptions, banish negative thoughts, increase self confidence, develop social competence through group activities

According to specialist literature, exercise can also help reduce stress at work either in the form of company sport activities, fitness or jogging groups. It is therefore a good idea to include it as an element of the company prevention strategy. Physical exercise is associated with a range of positive psychological effects, e.g. a reduction in negative feelings or an increase in self esteem achieved by learning to master difficult situations. At the same time, group activities can encourage social skills and support among colleagues.

Careful needs assessment and evaluation are essential

If a concept for promoting mental health and preventing stress is to be successful it must be planned accurately and in cooperation with the employees. Before commencing, a systematic needs analysis should be carried out, specific targets set out and regularly updated and evaluated.

Promoting mental health and stress prevention

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- www.bbc.co.uk/headroom – Staff and employers will also benefit from greater awareness through information campaigns. BBC campaign Headroom has multi-media resources to promote mental health and well-being.
- www.mentalhealth.org.uk – Downloadable resources such as top 10 tips for wellbeing and podcasts
- www.stuc.org.uk – Trade Union leaflets promoting positive mental health at work
- www.mhfestival.com – Mental health arts festival to promote mental health in Scotland
- www.healthscotland.com/workpositive – Work-Positive is a line management resource to support employers to tackle sources of stress in the workplace. This includes a range of downloadable tools for assessment and addressing stress in the workplace
- A number of leaflets can be downloaded from the UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE) website including management standards to tackling stress including audio www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/stresspk.htm supported by a thorough stress management toolkit for managers www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm
- www.prima-ef.org – EU programme looking at workplace stress linked to violence including harassment, and bullying.



4. What employers can do to support, retain and employ people with mental health problems

Just like physical illness, mental health problems can affect anyone, of any age and background. The most common forms of mental health problems are depression and anxiety. Many of the symptoms are similar to those that people experience when they are under considerable pressure; sleepless nights, loss or increased appetite, fatigue, irritability, worry etc. When these symptoms are long lasting with a severe impact on everyday life functions, they indicate the presence of a mental health problem.

Most people recover from their mental health problems. A small proportion of people, 1% or 2% of the population, develop more severe and enduring mental health problems, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression, which requires more intensive, and often continuing, treatment and support during their lifetime. However with support people can and do recover. Offering early support can reduce the duration and severity of a mental health issue and enhance recovery. By addressing stigma through training and campaigns you increase the chances of people seeking help early. It also increases the chance of managers reacting well. In particularly stressful professions, routine counselling has proven to be effective in both identifying problems, but also in de-stigmatising the issues.

If mental health problems persist you may need to assess risks for the person at work and any adjustments that may be needed. Remember that each person is different; see the person not the illness. Be positive and focus upon peoples' contribution to the organisation and their recovery. It may be useful to draw upon the specialist support of services such as occupational health, and for a persistent mental health problem the person may want to involve an advocate or health supports outside of the workplace. Employers should try and make reasonable adjustments where necessary. These

will vary according to the needs of the person and the nature of the workplace but can include: changing or reducing workload, flexible working, phased return to work, flexibility to have breaks or to attend appointments.

If a person's mental health problem requires them to be absent from work, as an employer you should ask the person what they would like their colleagues to be told. This remains a sensitive area and many people worry about discussing this with colleagues when they return to work. To overcome some of this difficulty, keep in contact with the person in their absence as you would for someone with physical illness, whether short or long term, isolation can make it harder and more stressful to return to work. Have a policy where people can informally visit before returning to work.

Good employers need to consider not just current employees, but also those people applying to join the organisation who have experienced mental health problems. Employment for someone who has experienced mental health problems can be beneficial for the person and for the company. It is illegal to discriminate against applicants based upon previous or current mental health problems. Good employers can be proactive.

There are a number of steps that you can take:

- Education campaigns against stigma have been developed across many European countries and workplaces are an important setting. Employers can often access a wide range of resources to address stigma.
- Be clear in job adverts that you are receptive to applicants that have experienced health or disability issues. Many people fear disclosure therefore in application packs and interviews assure them that you will be confidential and sup-



portive. If an applicant has had a mental health problem that has resulted in sustained absence from employment, then consider accepting a personal or health reference instead of an employer reference.

- You can also make links with your local employment centre, or supported employment agency. In many cases wide range assistance is available to employers to support the employment of people who have experienced mental health problems.

Stigma, discrimination and recovery

- A range of multi-media materials to address mental health stigma can be obtained for the UK from www.time-to-change.org.uk and in Scotland from www.seemescotland.org.uk.
- Challenge discrimination with “The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission” www.equalityhumanrights.com or “The Scottish Human Rights Commission” www.scottish-humanrights.com.
- A deeper understanding of the relationship between work and recovery can be obtained through Scottish recovery Network www.scottishrecovery.net or Voices of Experience, the Scottish national mental health service user led organization www.voxscotland.org.uk

Supporting, retaining and employing people with mental health problems

- www.euse.org – European Union of supported employment, which has national members in most EU countries.
- www.tuc.org.uk/extras/mentalhealth.pdf – Employment advice for unions and workplaces
- www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications – What works for you, booklet about supporting colleagues designed with workplaces.
- ?SAMH guidance

5. How to create a mentally healthy workplace – A plan of action in 7 steps

Step 1: Getting started: Communication and consultation

It is important to have clear leadership and meaningful involvement in the development of a mental health programme. Organisational commitment to promoting the mental health of all employees is crucial regardless of their role within the organisation. Any programme should try to address the range of mental health issues and provide clear definitions including:

- Promote positive mental health in the workplace
- Understand and prevent issues that cause stress and mental health problems
- Support employees who develop mental health problems
- Develop effective policies to reintegrate and employ people who have experienced mental health problems

Mental health and well-being needs to be addressed at an organisational level. All elements of the organisation have a role to play in designing, implementing, monitoring and reviewing policies and practice. Ideally you should set up a mental health and wellbeing working group with representation from senior management, employees, trade unions/works council, human resources and occupational health.

When the topic of mental health is placed on the agenda of the organization, it is particularly important to be clear about what employees can expect from the organization. Be aware that all employees need to be informed about all the steps you take in the action plan. Employees should be involved in the decision making process when dealing with stress and mental health problems. Employee involvement will lead to a sense of ownership of the programme, greater employee flexibility and commitment to measures and changes. The organisation can inform staff through a range of communi-

cation methods such as intranet, newsletters, team meetings and training sessions.

Step 2: Gather evidence

It is important to consult with employees and managers to identify strengths and weaknesses in your organization’s approach to mental health and wellbeing. Stress risk assessments can help provide information in these surveys but need to be supplemented with wider information on mental health promotion, retention and employment. Ideally you should undertake a survey with employees to understand their needs and ideas for a mental health program. You should also carry out an organizational workplace assessment of policies, practices and structures that affect mental health and wellbeing:

- Employee survey: A survey or consultation carried out with the employees to find out how mental well-being and workplace stress factors can be improved and how they perceive the working and employment conditions for those experiencing mental health problems. This can be planned together with the employees and promoted widely to get a good response and to give better support to the findings. If the feedback is inadequate, discussion groups can be organised with the staff.
- Organizational assessment: A workplace assessment should be undertaken by senior management or authorized staff within the organization. This should capture relevant organizational policies on health promotion, employment and discrimination. This can be done by using a questionnaire in the resource packs we have indicated. You can also organize meetings with middle managers and/or employees to discuss the current situation at work and the factors which lead to stress and potential mental health problems (see also ENWHP Mental Health Check at www.enwhp.org).

Early signs of mental health distress at an organisational and individual level

Organisational level:

- Work not finished; less productivity; more over-time
- Lower quality of work (more errors)
- Less customer friendliness and poor services
- Increased sickness absence
- Poor teamwork and collaboration between departments

Individual level:

- Changes in a person's usual behaviour
- Poor performance
- Changes in emotional mood (tearfulness)
- Problems with colleagues
- Increased sickness absence including frequent short spells

The earlier you notice that an employee is experiencing mental health problems, the better for all concerned. Your early actions can help to prevent the employee becoming more unwell. Particularly managers should play a key role in identifying and addressing the barriers to normal working life which the employee might experience.

Step 3: Setting targets

To be able to assess the effect of your activities, the objectives and targets should be established. For example targets can be:

- To reduce levels of stress at work on specific topics by 10% in one year
- To decrease the sickness absence percentage due to psychosocial reasons by 5% within two years
- To re-integrate / employ an agreed number employees with long-term absences or mental health problems in 2 years

You should discuss as a group what you see as valuable targets for a program that are wider than this such as awareness of program, uptake of initiatives, sense of wellbeing.

Step 4: Develop concrete plans and measures

Formulate plans to meet the targets that have been set. Try to have a blend of long-term plans for the

organisation, with achievable solutions that achieve quick wins, high impact and balance cost/benefits. It is important to involve the employees in these processes to ensure that measures fit with their needs.

Measures should be clearly formulated and targeted. You can target specific groups of employees (e.g. a department) or the whole organisation. For each activity consider: Who is taking responsibility, what is to be completed, where, when and how.

A wide range of initiatives have been outlined in this brochure to help to inform your plans. It is not desirable to be too specific but we would suggest that plans should involve the following components:

Components for your mental health and well-being work plan

- Information and awareness campaign
- Employee and manager training
- Anti-bullying and discrimination actions
- Tackling identified sources of workplace stress
- Policies to support people if they develop mental health problems
- Recruitment practices that do not discriminate against people with mental health problems

Step 5: Implementation of actions and measures

Commitment of both employees and management is important for effective implementation of mental health promotion programs. All organisation levels should be involved and communication should be clear at all levels. When developing your plans you may find that other existing policies may cover some of your planned actions, for example bullying, stress management or recruitment policies. This is valuable since mental health programs will have a greater chance of success if they are embedded within wider policies of the organisation.

However it is essential to have a clear written mental health action plan and policy for your organisation. This allows you to see the whole range of issues in a single document and to plan for a co-ordinated response. It allows you to assess progress over time across the range of mental health issues.

Step 6: Evaluate measures

Assess the effects of your actions and compare them with the target that was set at the beginning. If there are differences between the results and the targets, determine where to apply changes that will lead to improvement. Evaluation measures should relate to the clear measurable targets that you set such as staff absence, but you may also want to evaluate other things. For example employee awareness of the initiatives, people's involvement in activities, employee sense of wellbeing.

Step 7: Consolidate mental health activities in policy of the company

This action planning process should be mainstreamed and become part of the daily routine of the company. To ensure it is consistently part of the organization agenda, the following things can be done:

- Keep on giving attention to signals of stress
- Have regular meetings with employees to discuss stress and mental health problems at work and have a clear timetable for improvements
- Discuss workload and mental health in annual performance interviews
- Involve mental health improvement plans in planning and control cycles
- Incorporate mental health in the quality standards policy of the organisation
- Encourage management to undertake relevant training and to show their interest in the mental health of the workers

The ProMenPol database and toolkit

www.mentalhealthpromotion.net/ - ProMenPol, a European Commission funded project, identified and gathered useful and practical approaches to the promotion and protection of mental health. Its database and toolkit offers a structured selection of mental health promotion tools in three settings: Schools, workplaces and older people's residences. At present it consists of a method of accessing the tools database using as a basis a 4 stage process for implementing mental health promotion in each of the 3 settings.

The stages of the implementation process are:

- Preparation
- Needs analysis and planning
- Implementation/intervention
- Follow-up and evaluation

When the final version of the toolkit is available in late summer 2009, it will provide a process manual for each of the stages of mental health promotion implementation as well as an enhanced search function. These manuals (one for each setting) will provide step-by-step instructions on how to implement a mental health promotion project from the beginning to the end.



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European Network for Workplace Health Promotion – ENWHP

The European Network for Workplace Health Promotion was founded in 1996 by a number of organisations in the field of public health and occupational safety and health. Today, members from 31 European countries share the common vision “Healthy Employees in Healthy Organisations”. In ongoing cooperation the ENWHP has developed uniform quality criteria and disseminates examples of good practice to elevate the importance of

health at the workplace. The ENWHP Secretariat and the co-ordination of the “Move Europe” campaign is based at the BKK Bundesverband in Essen, Germany.

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