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move europe

# A guide to creating a mentally healthy workplace

- Employees Resource -



ENWHP

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## Table of contents

1. Mental health is important to everyone in the workplace .....	Page 04
2. What can you do to promote your mental health? .....	Page 05
3. Managing stress .....	Page 07
4. Supporting colleagues with mental health problems .....	Page 08
5. Steps your workplace can take for better mental health .....	Page 10



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Kronprinzenstraße 6  
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Authors: Lee Knifton, Verona Watson (Mental Health Foundation),  
Heleen den Besten, Rob Gründemann, Anja Dijkman (TNO)

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## 1. Mental health is important to everyone in the workplace

As an employee you have the right to expect your employer and managers to create the conditions for mentally healthy workplaces. But you are also responsible for your own mental health by taking care of yourself and your colleagues. The European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP) is working with organizations across Europe to develop a mental health promotion campaign in workplaces called *work. in tune with life. move europe.*

This campaign aims to:

- 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?

The World Health Organization defines positive mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes 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. Employees with good mental health will perform better in their work.” So it is about the way you think, feel, and behave. Many people don’t feel comfortable talking about their feelings, but it is healthy to understand and share with others how you are feeling. There are also steps you can take to promote positive mental health and to reduce stress.

### Mental ill health?

The term ‘mental ill health’ covers a wide range of problems which affect someone’s ability to get on with their daily life. Mental health problems can affect anyone, of any age and background, as well as having an impact on the people around them such as their family, friends or carers. Most people can and do recover. On average one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem over the course of a year. However, of these, only a relatively small number will be diagnosed with a serious and enduring mental illness. Common mental disorders usually consist of experiences such as depression and anxiety, more serious illnesses are schizophrenia or personality disorders. With support, most people recover from their mental health problems, so it is important to overcome the stigma associated with mental health problems in the workplace.

## 2. What can you do to promote your mental health?

### Talk about your feelings

Talking about your feelings can help you to maintain good mental health. It can also help you to cope when you are feeling worried. Speaking to colleagues about your feelings, or sharing a problem, is not a weakness. It is part of maintaining positive mental health and taking control of your wellbeing. Being heard can make you feel supported and connected or less isolated. This does not need to be a formal process but part of everyday conversations. If you have a problem at work or feel distressed, you need to let someone know about it. Or you may have problems that are not to do with your work, but are affecting how you cope at work. It may seem hard to talk about how you are feeling, but talking about something that is upsetting you may help you to:

- sort through the problem, or see it in a new way
- ease built-up tension and gain new insight into a work situation that is causing the problem
- find out that you are not alone, and that other people share your feelings
- with the help of a colleague, identify options or solutions you had not thought before

Sharing your feelings may encourage colleagues to do the same. It is important to make the time to listen to others, to be supportive and respectful. Practise your skills of talking and listening – both as a way of connecting to others and as a way of sharing feelings or worries.

### Support social networks

Having supportive friends, family and community networks help us to deal with life and reduce our sense of isolation. They provide emotional support, fun and alternative perspectives. Social networks promote positive mental health and help to prevent mental ill health. Yet we often forget that we spend a large part of our lives with our ‘workplace community’. So wherever possible ‘make connections’

in the workplace. This can be informal such as having breaks and lunches together. You can also help to create a positive workplace by organising or participating in social groups or activities. Be creative and think of activities that everyone can join in. There will be additional benefits if the activities involve physical activity, or learning a new skill or hobby.

### Zero tolerance

Significant workplace distress is linked to bullying or misuse of power. Bullying can be overt such as physical or verbal aggression or intimidation. It can also be subtle such as making fun of people, excluding people from opportunities or promotion unreasonably, or undermining them. Anyone can bully or be bullied and it can be a difficult issue to establish. However, employees that are particularly vulnerable are those who may experience disadvantage due to gender, low income/poverty, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and employees experiencing mental health problems. In workplaces employees who have temporary contracts or low job security are also vulnerable. As an employee you can ensure that you do not go along with bullying in any form. Support rather than ignore people if they have been bullied and work with colleagues to ensure that bullying policies are established and upheld.

### Look out for your physical health and wellbeing

Improving your physical health can promote positive mental health. The first thing you can do is ‘keep active’ at work. Regular daily exercise can boost your confidence and self esteem, help you to sleep and function better. Look at your working day and see where you can fit in short bouts of activity.

You could:

- walk for part or all of your journey to work
- cycle to work



## 2. What are the effects and costs of the company doing nothing?

- abandon the lift or escalators – take the stairs
- consider walking at lunchtime
- make time for some activity before or after work – why not get together with colleagues to join a gym or sports or activity group?

There are also links between diet and mental health. Eating a generally healthy, balanced diet can improve general mood and concentration levels and help protect against feelings of anxiety and depression. Missing meals at work, eating on the run, and relying upon sugary snacks or high-caffeine drinks can create stress. So try and ensure that you:

- don't miss and take adequate breaks
- relax and help your digestion with gentle activity after your meal
- drink sensibly – plenty of water

We often drink alcohol to change our mood or to deal with fear or loneliness. However, too much alcohol damages the body and leads to mental health problems.

## 3. Managing stress

It is important to *work. in tune with life*. And that means controlling stress at work. Stress is:

“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them.” (Source: [Health and Safety Executive UK](#))

Stress is not an illness but if it becomes excessive and/or prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop. Work is generally good for people if it is well designed, but it can also be a great source of pressure. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, it can help us achieve our goals and perform better. Stress is a natural reaction when this pressure becomes excessive. Anyone can suffer from work-related stress, no matter what work they do.

### Are you stressed?

Stress produces a range of signs and symptoms, the following is not an exhaustive list of the symptoms of stress but if you feel that your attitudes or behaviour is changing due to a situation at work or home, these may indicate stress and a need to seek further advice from your GP:

### Behaviour-related you may:

- find it hard to sleep
- change your eating habits
- smoke or drink more
- avoid friends and family
- have sexual problems

### Mentally you may:

- be more indecisive
- find it hard to concentrate
- suffer loss of memory
- feelings of inadequacy
- low self esteem

### Physical symptoms might include:

- tiredness
- indigestion and nausea
- headaches
- aching muscles
- palpitations

### Emotionally you are likely to:

- get irritable or angry
- be anxious
- feel numb
- be hypersensitive, drained and listless

If you think you are suffering from any mental health problem or any of the symptoms identified in the table above, it may be advisable to speak to a doctor or GP. It is also a good idea to talk to your line manager, Human Resources department or Occupational Health expert. It is important to deal with mental health problems early and to take action. Review your lifestyle to see if you can identify any contributing factors. This may be due to workload issues such as doing several jobs at once, or taking work home with you. However, check our positive mental health section for ideas that you can act upon.



## 4. Supporting colleagues with mental health problems

Even when you take steps to promote positive mental health and to manage stress, some people will still go on to develop mental health problems. Mental health problems are common and can be experienced by anyone. For example, every year, 10% of people in the workforce will experience depression. There are different forms of depression and it is different from feeling down or sad. The person may experience persistent feelings of tiredness, negativity, anxiety, helplessness, worthlessness, and difficulty concentrating or functioning well at work. Sometimes there is a direct cause for a mental health problem, such as a life event, relationship issues, worries about finances or unemployment. A cause can also be problems within the workplace, like too high workload, a shortage of support or a conflict with colleagues or manager. Sometimes there is no clear reason. However, with support, most people recover.

### Seek support early

Deciding when you need help can be difficult. Everyone feels stressed, depressed or anxious from time to time, but if the feelings continue for some time (let's say about two weeks), prevent you from eating, sleeping or working, or interfere with the quality of your relationships, or if you want to harm yourself, then that is the time to ask for help. In principle, seek help from health services or your employer early. Problems with workload, support, or relationships with colleagues can worsen mental health and your employer has a duty to intervene. They may be able to review your work commitments or specific issues, but they can only do this if you let them know.

### Be there for your colleagues

You can be a supportive colleague by listening to someone if they are experiencing a mental health problem. It is particularly important to ensure that when someone is experiencing a mental health problem that they are given every opportunity to

participate and remain involved in everyday social activities. Keep in touch with people if they have a period of absence.

### Become informed

There are a range of courses and workshops about mental health that can help you to learn more. And there are also many local and confidential helplines, advice and support services, including (Source: Think Fit! Think Well! A simple guide to mental wellbeing for employees, British Heart Foundation):



**Beat (Beating Eating Disorders)**  
Helpline: +44 (0)8456 341414  
[www.b.eat.co.uk](http://www.b.eat.co.uk)

**Depression Alliance**  
+44 (0)845 123 2320  
[www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

**International Stress Management Association UK**  
+44 (0)7000 780430  
[www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk)

**Mental Health Foundation**  
+44 (0)20 7803 1101  
[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

**MIND**  
Information line: +44 (0)845 766 0163  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**No Panic**  
Helpline: +44 (0)8080545  
[www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)

**OCD Action (Obsessive Compulsive Disorders)**  
Helpline: +44 (0)845 390 6232  
[www.ocdaction.org.uk](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk)



**Rethink**  
+44 (0)845 456 0455  
[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

**Sane**  
+44 (0)845 767 8000  
[www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)

**The Stress Management Society**  
+44 (0)8701 999 235  
[www.stress.org.uk](http://www.stress.org.uk)

**Together**  
+44 (0)20 7780 7300  
[www.together-uk.org](http://www.together-uk.org)





## 5. Steps your workplace can take for better mental health

How you think and feel at work will depend on having an environment that promotes and supports your mental wellbeing and reduces stress.

### Job demands

Some of the most important causes of stress at work are time pressures, work overload and understaffing, all lead to too many demands being made. With your colleagues, works council, occupational health and safety service or line manager think about:

- The amount and complexity of your work. Can you cope with? Do you have the right equipment and enough time to do the job?
- Realistic targets. Are your individual and departmental targets realistic and achievable? Ask for them to be reviewed regularly.
- Your work environment. If there is a problem with noise, ventilation, humidity or temperature, discuss it and look for improvements.
- Your rewards. Become noticeable if you feel you are not being rewarded for the job you do sufficiently, not just through pay but also through staff benefits, recognition and prospects for career advancement.
- Your working hours. You should make sure you take time off in lieu as soon as possible after working extra hours. You should always take your breaks and all your holiday entitlements.

### Job control

Having more control over the way you do your work, and influence over your workplace, can help reduce stress levels. Work with your colleagues, works council, occupational health and safety service or line manager to look at ways you can, where possible, have:

- more variety in the tasks you perform at work
- a say over how you do your work
- a say in planning your overall day
- some control over your work environment – for

example where you sit, or what to display around your workstation

- a better work-life balance. That is about having some control over when, where and how you work, so that you are able to enjoy quality of life. If you feel that the balance between your work and the rest of your life is causing you difficulties, find out what adjustments may be possible.

### Job roles

Your roles and responsibilities at work need to be clearly defined.

- Make sure you have a clear and up-to-date job description that accurately describes what you do.
- If you report to more than one line manager, be clear about the demands being made on your time so that expectations are reasonable.
- Make sure you have the training and qualification to undertake your role effectively.

### Organisational change

Organisational change and insecure employment status are both associated with an increase in mental health problems. Sometimes organisational change may be unavoidable, but the way it is handled and the amount of accurate information provided and the opportunity to have some input into plans can make all the difference. If you don't feel you are being given accurate and up-to-date information about changes, ask for it. Get together with colleagues to put together questions you have about the planned change and place them in team meetings, group meetings and all-staff meetings.

### Relationships and support at work

Having a supportive environment and positive relationships at work makes it easier for you to maintain good mental wellbeing. It helps if you feel able to trust others and be open, and feel valued and able to acknowledge problems and ask for help. If you consider necessary:

- Ask about the support the organisation may provide, for example, occupational health service, counselling, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), brief therapies, or health checks.
- Consult with your line manager, works council, health and safety services, or human resource department about 'reasonable adjustments' such as: working shorter working hours, having time away from work to attend counselling or other treatment, having more supervision at work, changing the role you perform, working from home for a time, a phased return to work after a longer sickness absence.



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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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