

A MATTER OF HEALTH

Jacqui Burke looks at the issue of mental health and the workplace.



October's World Mental Health Day got me thinking about how well small businesses tackle this issue. In recent decades many health conditions have benefited from public awareness campaigns, resulting in more open dialogue, but mental health remains one area where employers typically feel ill-equipped to support their staff and employees often feel that they need to hide their condition from their employer.

So why does mental health matter in the workplace?

From a purely commercial point of view, it matters because of the high levels of absenteeism and associated loss of productivity now associated with mental health. At certain times of the year (especially over the summer months when holidays and children being off school create additional pressures) mental ill health has become the most common reason for staff absence in the UK.

A recent report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that employees with mental health concerns find it hard to concentrate at work, take longer to do tasks, and are more likely to come into conflict with colleagues and customers.

The Department of Health advises that one in four of us will experience a period of mental ill health at some point in our lives.

The first step for employers to take is to develop greater awareness and understanding of mental health - organisations such as MIND provide lots of information to help employers understand the signs and symptoms of mental illness.

It's then important to put into place measures intended to prevent the work environment from causing or adding to mental health issues. This includes:

- Developing a supportive culture where staff feel comfortable talking about their concerns (this might be internal management and/or an external counselling service)
- Putting into place policies and procedures that focus on the well-being needs of staff,

and prevent behaviour such as bullying and harassment that are likely to lead to increased stress levels

- Treating an employee's need for time off due to mental illness with the same respect as their need for any other type of illness
- Training line managers to understand the signs and symptoms of mental illness in members of their team - according to the CIPD study, a third of managers would struggle to identify the warning signs.

In response to the needs of employers, ACAS have recently updated their guidance on Mental Health in the Workplace, providing useful case studies highlighting good practice, as well as sources of further support.

Flourishing People provide training and advice for businesses on how to develop a positive and supportive culture.

Flourishing People
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