Supporting Your People – Mental Health at Work

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We know that mental health is just as important as physical health, and paying attention to our wellbeing and supporting others to do the same allows us to live full and happy lives and reach our full potential at work.

The NHS say that one in four adults and one in ten children experience mental illness. Whilst it is encouraging that we are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of good mental health, historically, there has been a lot of stigma attached to poor mental health, which can lead to a reluctance to seek help. However, campaigns around Mental Health Awareness Week (15 to 21 May 2023) and World Mental Health Day (which falls in October each year) have helped raise awareness and highlight sources of support and information.

This year's Mental Health Awareness Week theme is 'anxiety'. The Mental Health Foundation say that anxiety is a normal emotion in all of us, and people experience periods of anxiety for a wide variety of reasons. As we move into exam season, much is being said about young people's mental health and anxiety levels (and those who support them).

For employers, there are often times when it is possible to predict when the anxiety levels of your employees may increase, for example, at promotion into a more responsible role, when returning from a period of absence or when joining the organisation as a new employee. However, many things, inside and outside of the work environment, can lead to increased anxiety, and these are not always as easy to predict. Any period of uncertainty or change can cause anxiety.

The mental health charity Mind describes anxiety as 'what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future'. They say that 'anxiety is a natural human response when we feel that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.'

Our response to anxiety is different for everybody. Still, certain ways of coping are widely recommended, for example, increasing our activity levels, spending time outdoors and talking to someone we trust.

Encouraging people to talk openly about their concerns is an important first step in offering support for many types of mental health conditions. Conversely, avoiding these crucial conversations can prevent people from getting the necessary help and support.

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Employers know the impact that poor mental health has on their employees and, in turn, their wellbeing and overall productivity.

So what can employers do to help?

Whilst we always advise providing your employees with good working conditions, this should also include routinely monitoring staff mental health and wellbeing, developing mental health awareness and encouraging open conversations about mental health support.

Another way in which employers can support their workforce when it comes to their mental health is by introducing Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs). MHFAs are taught how to spot the symptoms of mental ill-health and provide signposting and help on a first-aid basis. If you are considering introducing an MHFA scheme, do make sure that you select a recognised training provider who can prepare your MHFAs properly with thorough and up-to-date courses and a list of approved support schemes.

Employers have responsibilities to their workforce and are liable for the actions of employees in certain circumstances. It is, therefore, essential to set clear boundaries and guidelines for MHFAs within your organisation. Consider whether you need to check your company's insurance policies, as you may need to let them know you have MHFAs in place.

The implementation of MHFAs has proven to positively impact a business in various ways, including helping to reduce sickness absence and staff turnover, reduce absenteeism and decrease the likelihood of grievances. It also demonstrates that you care about your employees' mental health and gives them the confidence to deal appropriately with any concerns.

What about me – how can I help myself?

As an employer or business owner, it is just as important to look after your mental health. By demonstrating that you also take time to prioritise your wellbeing, you empower others to do the same.

The NHS list five steps to mental wellbeing:

- Connect with other people
- Be physically active
- Learn new skills
- Give to others

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- Pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness)

If one of these techniques doesn't work for you, move on and try something else.

Need further advice?

If you would like advice and assistance about the role of MHFAs, your obligations towards employees who are experiencing mental health issues, or help in dealing with mental health-related absence, performance or capability issues, please do not hesitate to contact Kevin Barnett or any other member of the Employment Team by emailing online.enquiries@la-law.com.

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