Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace

White Paper

Mental Health is of increasing concern

It seems as though everywhere we turn the headlines are about mental health and the challenges we are currently experiencing in the modern world. The statistics are stark with around 15% of people at work experiencing mental health difficulties at any one time and an estimated cost of £33bn-42bn annually to UK employers (Stevenson and Farmer, 2017).

45%

In 2015-16 **work related stress** accounted for 45% of all working days lost due to ill health.

Mental ill health is recognised as a significant cause of absence from the workplace however it is also a cause of much presenteeism, where employees continue to work in spite of illness resulting in loss of productivity for themselves and sometimes those around them. This is particularly common in organisations with a culture of long working hours, or during periods of job insecurity where people are more likely to go into work when they are ill rather than take a day off sick. In 2015-16 work related stress accounted for 37% of all work related ill health cases and 45% of all working days lost due to ill health.

Is this just the tip of the iceberg? The stigma attached to mental health problems means at home and in the work place.

The NHS is struggling to meet the demand for psychological therapies and many employers are asking themselves what they can do to support and enhance the mental health and wellbeing of their employees. The big question is do workplace wellbeing programmes work? It seems unlikely that offering a weekly session of Indian head massage is going to help employees with juggling today's demands of deadlines, long working hours and job security concerns. So a wider approach is required to promote and retain mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, starting at the top of the organisation.

Culture, language and behaviour

The most significant barrier to progress is still the stigma associated with mental health. At the highest organisational level, culture needs to change in order to address the stigma of mental health. While senior executives feel unable to be open about their own struggles and individuals still believe mental health illness is a limiting factor to career progression, then the culture is hard to shift. Senior leaders willing to share their lived experience can galvanise support in an organisation.

In addition, a change in the culture of organisations is needed where wellbeing is considered as key to individual and business performance. Organisations with high levels of employee wellbeing have outperformed the market by 2-3% over a 25 year period (Edmans, London Business School, 2015).

Organisations and individuals that hold themselves accountable for wellbeing can mean the difference between wellbeing treated as an "added extra" to being an integral part of the performance and development of a company. This will have the power to move behaviours and attitudes forward.

Mental health strategy

All organisations regardless of size should work towards developing a mental health strategy.

Stevenson and Farmer advocate the adoption of core mental health standards as a framework for a set of actions that can be implemented quickly:

- *Create, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan which promotes positive mental health and outlines the support for those who need it.*
- *Develop mental health awareness among employees by making information, tools and support accessible.*
- *Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling, during the recruitment process and at regular intervals throughout employment; offer appropriate workplace adjustments to employees who require them.*
- *Provide employees with good working conditions and ensure they have a healthy work life balance and opportunities for development.*
- *Promote effective people management to ensure all employees have a regular conversation about their health and wellbeing with their line manager, supervisor or organisational leader and train and support line managers and supervisors in effective management practices.*
- *Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing by understanding available data, talking to employees, and understanding risk factors.*

(Stevenson and Farmer, 2017)

Implementing a mental health strategy

Communication of the mental health strategy as well as education, campaigns and role modelling in the workplace can facilitate a culture shift in the organisation, placing a focus on the importance of good mental health.

Education and training can raise mental health awareness and teach first aid, arming all levels of employees with the skills to recognise and access help for themselves and others and giving them the language to start an open dialogue about mental health in the workplace. Practical skills include self-help strategies such as mindfulness, meditation and yoga. There should also be an internal resource available offering information and sources of support for mental health conditions.

Many employers provide resources to enhance the physical health of their employees, such as discounted gym membership. Naturally there is now a trend to provide similar resources to enhance the mental health of employees. Indeed the link between mental health and physical health means strategies can improve both.

A holistic approach to wellness means that mental wellbeing is part of the approach alongside physical and emotional health for workers. For example, campaigns aimed at encouraging workers to take their lunch break away from their desk, yoga or Pilates classes in the workplace, through to classes and digital Apps in mindfulness, and meditation classes. There is no single approach to addressing wellbeing but it is key to deliver a programme which is relevant to the needs of employees and is both proactive and reactive, aimed at creating an environment which is conducive to positive mental health.

Training for managers is important, in particular to be aware of stress and how to improve the working environment. Prevention, early detection and having access to the right support at the right time is vital for a happy workforce. If you can get to the problem before it is a problem, your employees and organisation as a whole will thrive (Fonseca, 2017).

Employers needs to measure and track progress and this can be done by using data on absenteeism, staff surveys, training workshop surveys, uptake of programmes, work related mental ill health, EAP (Employment Assistance Programme) utilisation and spend on mental health claims through their corporate healthcare provision.

In addition to having a mental health strategy and implementing the core standards, employers can also choose to provide staff with external support through the use of an EAP and a private healthcare plan.

Integrating health and wellbeing provision

The Healix Wellbeing and Mental Health pathway aims to support employees at all stages by combining the services traditionally provided through an EAP with the services that have historically been offered as part of a corporate healthcare plan. Access is provided to services offering a full range of wellbeing guidance and mental health care, from sound evidence based early interventions to acute psychiatric services for complex conditions.

This approach means an EAP can be the first step on the ladder to accessing a wide range of support. It is available 24/7, providing immediate empathic expert advice and is aimed at prevention, early intervention and identification of mental health concerns at work.

References

At a tipping point? Workplace mental health and wellbeing. Deloitte Centre for Health Solutions March 2017.

Thriving at Work: The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers, 2017.

Health: our business Volume 3 Case studies from the corporate world – putting mental health and wellbeing into action. BUPA 2017.

Author: Sally Campbell, Nurse Consultant, Healix Health Services.