



Human Resources & Health and Safety



Do you employ staff?

Mental Health;

The Importance of Open Communication

Introduction

We all know that mental health is a serious issue that affects many people, but are you aware of the statistics? According to Mind, a UK Mental Health Charity, 1 in 6 people in England report experiencing some form of mental ill health every week. Due to the stigma surrounding mental health that prevents many people from seeking help, Mind estimates the true statistic to be 1 in 4. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have also conducted research into this, and state that 3 in 10 people experience mental ill health at work. This means that most of us will have a friend, family member or colleague who has experienced mental health problems, although they may not have disclosed this to us. Despite these statistics showing how common mental illness is, there is still a lot of social stigma surrounding it, causing people to feel uncomfortable and unaware of how to talk about it.

Unfortunately, this lack of comfortable communication often extends to the workplace. Many managers don't feel able to discuss such a sensitive topic because they don't have a lot of experience of it, because they don't want to say the wrong thing, or because they simply struggle to understand mental ill health. Shying away from the issue and avoiding conversations will only worsen the situation, whereas both Mind and the CIPD agree that open communication can help both employers and employees, possibly leading to an improvement in the employee's health. This is incredibly important when we consider that mental ill health is often perceived to be a disability covered by the Equality Act 2010, meaning that correct management is essential to prevent an employee feeling discriminated or harassed.

Management Training

It is essential that all members of management are provided with training on how to manage employees with mental health issues. This training should focus on developing the necessary skills and qualities a person would need to discuss a sensitive issue e.g. good communication, active listening, empathy, open mindedness, professionalism, etc. The training should also include an element of role-playing to enable managers to practice taking part in difficult and sensitive conversations that could take place, practice makes perfect!

Managers should be trained to have a positive attitude towards mental ill health, rather than immediately viewing the employee and their illness as a problem. Instead of negatively thinking "how are we going to cope with this?" managers should instead think "how can we help / how can we work with this?". By providing managers with training and heightening their levels of awareness, you are empowering them to manage employees who may disclose sensitive medical information. Employees can often feel ashamed of having to admit to having a mental health problem, so it is important they are not made to feel like a burden or a problem. Training managers and providing employees with positive experiences, will help to create an inclusive Company culture that focuses on open-mindedness and support, which will be beneficial to both the Company and its employees.

Open Communication

Communicating with employees does not have to be difficult or complicated. Sometimes the simplest approach is the easiest and most effective. To get the conversation started, all you need to do is ask employees how they are and make it clear that you're focused on their answer. Sometimes this is all employees need to "open up". Once employees do start talking, focus on listening rather than providing a solution. Employees don't need their manager to provide an immediate solution or "cure", they need someone to listen to them and provide them with support where possible.

Managers need to be mindful of the language they use when discussing mental health and other sensitive subjects. For example, saying "You don't quite seem yourself lately, is everything ok personally?" is nicer than saying "You're really down in the dumps lately, what's up?" Subtle differences can alter how employees perceive the communication. The more supportive and sensitive a manager seems, the more an employee will feel comfortable. Managers should avoid a "stiff upper lip" approach to their communication, as this may make employees feel like the questions are ingenuine, or that the conversation is a negative one.

When discussing mental health, remember that this is a sensitive subject that not all people can easily discuss. An employee may struggle to get their words out, they may need to pause and collect their thoughts, the conversation may take time. Patience is key. Once the employee has finished talking, they should be thanked for sharing their thoughts and feelings. Whilst managers cannot provide medical advice, they can remind employees of the resources available to them. There are numerous charities and support networks available, employees do not just have to rely on the assistance of their GPs. Reasonable adjustments may be discussed at this point if possible, but this would depend on the nature of the employee's role and the resources available within the Company. Sometimes it can be easy to make reasonable adjustments, other times it can be more complicated or difficult. It all depends upon the resources available to the employer.

Ultimately, it is up the employee to seek assistance for any medical issue they have, whether this is physical or mental. Employees are more likely to seek help when they feel there is no need to be ashamed for their illness. By

increasing open communication, we are helping to decrease the social stigma towards mental ill health.

How Can We Help?

If you are currently managing an employee who is suffering from mental ill health, or if you have any queries relating to any of the above, please don't hesitate to contact us at hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk