



Do you employ staff?

Employee Bereavement and Mental Health

Coronavirus and Mental Health

Due to Coronavirus and the UK lockdown, this has been a difficult year for the majority of people. Even if your employees have been able to remain working throughout the year, their lives outside of work will have been drastically different to what they are used to. Lockdown saw schools and workplaces close, the public limited to one hour of exercise time outside of their home, and family members were unable to see each other. Eventually people were able to visit family, but only in a socially distanced and very controlled way, with the majority of the population not hugging their family or friends since early March. Restaurants, pubs, gyms, bowling alleys, community centres and libraries all closed, leaving many people without access to their hobbies and social routines. Whilst many of these facilities are now reopening in varying degrees, the months of closure and isolation did noticeably have an effect on our society. There is also no guarantee that anything will stay open or life will return to normality before the end of the year, with “local lockdowns” becoming more and more common and infection numbers rising across Europe.

As well as the changes to how we live our day to day lives, many people have found the Coronavirus pandemic to be an incredibly frightening experience. Whether this has been due to personal underlying health conditions, or concerns for friends and family members, feeling anxious over health concerns for a prolonged period of time can have a profound effect on a person’s health and well-being. Many people have also been fearful of their financial security. Widescale redundancies are currently taking place with more expected, this understandably leads people to be worried about their own circumstances and any personal financial commitments. Living in a time of uncertainty can be stressful and overwhelming.

Mental health charity Mind recently conducted a survey into how 2020 and the Coronavirus have affected people within the UK. They found that 22% of adults who have never before reported any mental health issues would now

describe themselves as having “poor mental health”. The survey also showed that 65% of people with pre-existing mental health conditions would now describe their symptoms as worse than before this year. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) also conducted a survey into the mood of the UK public, and found that 37% of people are suffering from “high levels of anxiety”. This equates to 19 million people within the UK. When we consider these statistics, it’s highly likely that you could have employees who feel that their mental health has deteriorated over the last 8 months.

Some employees will be able to easily identify any changes to their mental health, especially if this is something they have experienced before. For others, it may be harder to understand how they are feeling. It may be down to you to identify changes in your employees and to initiate communication with them. Common symptoms of mental ill health could be as follows:

- Appearing more tired than usual
- Appearing withdrawn / less communicative than usual
- An increase in absence or poor time keeping
- Showing less of an interest in things that would previously have been interesting or enjoyable
- Appearing to be less focused
- A reduction in productivity
- Displaying more emotion than usual (upset, tearful, moody, agitated, etc.)
- Speaking in an overly negative way / appearing to focus on the negatives in situations, rather than remaining neutral or positive

Bereft Employees

Coronavirus can be fatal; many people have lost their life after contracting the virus. Whilst this would be upsetting at any time, suffering a loss has been worsened for many people due to the constraints of the UK lockdown. Many people have been unable to say goodbye to their loved ones, with deaths being sudden and unexpected. Goodbyes have had to be said over the phone or via video calls, or they have not happened at all. Following this, families and friends have not been able to come together to hold traditional funerals and mourn their losses in the usual way. An inability to perform the usual mourning rituals, whatever these may be, can have a traumatic impact on what is already an incredibly difficult thing to go through. It is through our mourning rituals that we release our emotions and come to terms with the loss of a person. Many people are reporting difficulty processing their grief as a result of the lockdown and the isolation it brings, which is in turn resulting in rising levels of mental ill health as people feel they do not have access to their usual support network or usual way of life whilst going through difficult personal circumstances.

Supporting Your Employees

The key to supporting employees with mental health issues, or employees who have recently suffered a bereavement, is a sensitive and empathetic approach with clear communication. If you create a workplace where open communication is valued and encouraged, it is more likely employees will be able to discuss any issues or difficulties they have with you. An Employee Well-being Policy (or similar) may help you to deal with employee mental ill health or employee bereavements, in a consistent, confident and compassionate way.

Policies relating to mental health can vary, but if you have an Employee Well-being Policy / Employee Assistance programme, it may include access to counselling. The policy / programme may also indicate the identity of the best person to talk to within the Company, such as the employees Line Manager, a member of your HR Team or your Mental Health First Aider. Whilst there is a need for management to be sensitive and empathetic, managers should refrain from attempting to “cure” employees as it’s likely medical support may be required in some instances. Focus should instead be on supporting employees and making any necessary reasonable adjustments within the workplace. You can also encourage helpful behaviour such as regular exercise, eating healthily, and reminding employees of the dangers of conspiracy theories and unreliable news sources. People who are anxious about Coronavirus are likely to become more so if they focus too heavily on rumours and unreliable accounts of what is happening. You may choose to impose a rule that prevents employees from discussing the virus or death toll within the workplace, to give employees a break from what can be a stressful subject.

There is no legal rule on what leave or support an employee is entitled to when they suffer a bereavement (with the exception of the loss of a child under 18 years of age) so many employers have to make discretionary decisions on the amount of Compassionate Leave an employee should receive, and whether that leave is paid. Some employers choose to offer a set amount of leave, usually one working week or less, which is unpaid in the majority of cases. However, discretion is often applied as grief is an on-going process and many employees need more leave if the person they have lost was a member of their family or a very close friend. The anniversary of a death, especially the first anniversary, can also be a painful reminder that causes employees to struggle at work. With consideration to the amount of people who will have lost a loved one throughout 2020, now is the time to consider implementing an Employee Bereavement / Compassionate Leave Policy (or including this topic in another relevant or similar policy) if you do not already have one.

How Can We Help?

If you have any queries relating to the content of this newsletter, or any other HR related topic, please don’t hesitate to contact us via hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk.