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Raising mental health awareness amongst employees



In partnership with



Putting the spotlight on mental health awareness

The numbers of employees forced to stop work as a result of mental health problems were 50% higher than for those with physical health conditions. The cost to the UK economy of poor mental health now stands at £99 billion.



We spoke to Poppy Jaman, CEO of City Mental Health Alliance to get her views on how businesses can successfully develop mental health awareness among their employees. Wellness through open discussion of their individual experiences.

How can employers and managers empower employees to take control of their own mental wellbeing?

Education and appropriate training of employers and managers is critical. We need to ensure that the people managers in our business are skilled and confident enough to talk about mental health, they also need to be able to recognise the early signs of distress and know where to signpost people who need more support.

Organisations should create a communications strategy that regularly reinforces positive mental health messaging and ensures that there are multiple appropriate channels through which people can seek help, at convenient times in their working day. The communications must repeat and stress that talking is important; that seeking help is a strength, not a weakness and it demonstrates someone who is taking control. It should be made very clear that talking about stress and distress is not career limiting, and this should be supported by internal story telling of personal mental health stories from within the organisation.

What other effective measures can be put in place to develop and support mental health awareness?

The City Mental Health Alliance Guide to Thriving At Work is a unique toolkit to help organisations which employ over 500 people to become mentally healthy workplaces. The Guide was jointly developed by CMHA members, including Legal & General, and was based on their collective wisdom and experience. It includes clear interventions, good practice and self-assessment tools that will help organisations to build a strong mental health strategy and support mental health awareness.

Suggested interventions include recommendations around training; creating a narrative around mental health and wellbeing which is consistent and repeated across the workplace; and interventions based around major life events of employees (new parents, carer responsibilities, divorce); as well as starting to include mental health and wellbeing data as a regular part of boardroom meeting agendas.

Ensuring that mental health standards are met, and employees are supported to develop awareness around their mental health, requires significant effort and resources from a company. How do you encourage an organisation that may be already overworked and under-resourced to take on more work for itself?

This is a tough one, but I see it as a business critical issue. This is not more work, this should be part of capacity and capability building. If an organisation is overworked and under resourced, then I imagine they are already an organisation that is experiencing stress and health issues in the workforce. So pausing and directing efforts to think about the mental wellbeing of its number one resource, its people, is not only the right thing to do, but it makes business sense. You can't run a successful business without talented, productive and engaged people.

Just because a company or a manager has good intentions, it doesn't necessarily translate into good workplace practice. Where do you see companies getting it wrong and what can be done to help avoid it?

BITC data showed that 76% of managers felt that staff wellbeing was their responsibility but only 22% had ever had any form of training on mental health. Even with the best will in the world, quality training and education which is critical to help people managers is not enough. Organisations must also provide an informal opportunity to talk and learn from each other as well – that can be as important as formal training. It's about creating a culture of openness, one where discussion provides an ongoing opportunity for supporting managers to evolve thinking and practice.

Flexible working is becoming more and more common, but how can managers make sure that home workers don't feel isolated?

Flexible working can bring a lot of benefits, but yes, organisations should guard against the risk of home workers feeling isolated. There are a number of ways to help people who are working from home, or working flexible hours, feel anchored.

Regular reviews are obviously a critical part of management. These reviews should include recognition of what constitutes wellness for the employee (such as making time for a team sport, which can be agreed and tested regularly.)

I think it's important that weekly/monthly face to face meetings are held in person with line managers. While the holistic question of 'How are you?' should be very much part of the one to one meetings.

Even with remote working practices, good line management can be applied, and it is still crucial to check if people are well.

Of the six core standards, where is the best place for a business to start?

I believe that businesses need to start with a commitment to all the standards, self assess and go on the journey. It's not going to happen overnight, and businesses just need to start from where they are. They need to be honest and take as long as they need to get it right. It's good for people, it's good for business reputation, it's good for society.

What examples of good practice are you seeing in businesses taking steps to encourage their staff to address mental health issues?

I am seeing a huge number of examples of good practice across businesses. One of which is the commitment to training the people at the very top – the board and senior managers who set the culture for an organisation. For example, earlier this year, Deloitte provided mental health first aid training for 536 partners and directors. Mental health networks also help to create a more open culture and challenge the stigma, and we're seeing this in organisations such as Bank of England, EY and Schroders. We're also seeing a large number of organisations in the City using well-established campaigns such as 'This is Me' and the 'Green Ribbon campaign' as a platform to encourage the sharing of stories and raising awareness.

Indeed, it is important for businesses to encourage and support the sharing of stories of mental health challenges and recovery. This can be especially powerful when it comes from leaders and managers. As a high-profile example, we have seen Antonio Horta Osario talk about his mental health challenges in a very public way. When employees see that a business supports someone living with a mental health condition and their recovery back into the business, that will really help more staff to address their own mental health issues.

It's definitely not all top down, and we know the value of peer support groups. I know that Legal & General has supported staff through peer support groups, which is inspiring.

Protect your bottom line. Invest in mental health awareness.

As you can see, it's important to start developing mental health awareness with your employees. The quicker you address the issue in your business, the less negative impact it will have on its performance and profit. It may seem like a big investment now, but in the long run it could save your business thousands, as the last thing you want is rising absenteeism.

The steps you can take in your business include:

- Ensure mental health and wellbeing information is accessible (such as desk drops, website pages, security passes, screensavers)
- Support existing campaigns and resources (such as Legal & General's Not A Red Card) that will raise the profile of mental health issues at work.
- Deliver mental health awareness campaigns, promoting conferences, training, and events.
- Provide information on the company's commitment to mental health and where employees can find tools and support.
- Make sure employees share their experiences and challenges around mental health, as well as their roads to recovery.
- Encourage employees to attend mental health meetings, events and training.

To ensure the measures you introduce are successfully working, you'll need to continually measure their performance. Some of the simple ways you can do this is by monitoring website attendances, gathering information from mental health first aid champions, as well as including questions in employee surveys.

All this will help you better understand whether your business is delivering the right levels of information, tools and support to protect your employees' mental health.