Open up at work: a manager’s guide.

Practical advice, useful tips and expert insight to help everyone.

For your team’s wellbeing.

October 2020.
Introduction.

Work is a huge part of our lives, so it’s vital that while we’re working, we’re happy and healthy.

When we think about the phrase ‘mental health’, we often think about mental health conditions. We might think of symptoms like low mood and conditions such as depression or anxiety. In fact, everyone has mental health. You and your colleagues will have times when your mental health is good – and times when it impacts on our overall wellbeing. Just like physical health.

As a manager, you have a really important role in supporting staff wellbeing and promoting good mental health in the workplace.

Less than half of people who struggle with mental health issues speak to their managers about it.

Supporting your team.

As a manager of a team, you can improve working practices, encourage your team to speak openly, and reassure them you will offer support in confidence.
Supporting team members.

Here are just some of the reasons why it’s important to think about your employees’ mental health.

- Work can contribute to changes in mental health\(^2\). Issues like bullying, discrimination, uncertainty, lack of control and a demanding role are all linked to the development of common mental health conditions\(^3\).
- Positive work and line management can help people experiencing mental health conditions, providing identity, income and purpose.

It’s good for everyone else too.

- Employees who have high levels of wellbeing are likely to be more creative, loyal and productive\(^3\).
- Stigma is reduced when people can talk openly about mental health. This leads to more understanding and a greater likelihood people will seek support earlier.

It’s good for business. If employees aren’t given the right support, the costs can mount up.

- Mental health conditions are the leading cause of long-term sickness absence.
- Increased absence and reduced productivity can see workloads grow for other colleagues, which can exacerbate some of the root causes of poor mental health.

And it helps you as a manager.

- It’s much easier to support employees at an earlier stage than wait until they reach crisis point.
- Effectively supporting employees experiencing a change in their mental health means you can employ, retain and get the best from them.

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\(^2\) Mental health conditions, work and the workplace. The Health and Safety Executive. September 2020.


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Challenging times.

Supporting wellbeing is especially important now that we are dealing with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. Whether it’s working from home, getting used to new safety procedures or being furloughed, the way many of us work has changed due to COVID-19.

Many people will also be facing added stress and anxiety due to the pandemic, both at work and their private lives.

Dealing with the impact of coronavirus may be particularly difficult for people with pre-existing mental health conditions, or those who have had them in the past4.

4 Looking after your mental health while working during the coronavirus outbreak. Mental Health Foundation. August 2020.
Mental health support.

1 in 6 people will experience a common mental health problem in any given week\(^5\).

Common mental health conditions.

Anxiety disorders
Anxiety is a feeling of unease. We all get anxious when faced with stressful situations, and it’s normal to feel anxious when you face something difficult or dangerous. But if you have anxiety that has lasted a long time and it’s severe, it will impact with your everyday activities.

Bipolar disorder
Bipolar affective disorder is characterised by extreme changes in mood. Your mood can vary from excitement and elation (known as mania) to depression and despair. You may also have mixed moods where you might feel depressed but at the same time restless and overactive. In between episodes of mood swings you might not have any symptoms at all.

Depression
Everyone has ups and downs. It’s common for people to say that they’re ‘depressed’ when they’re feeling down. But if the sadness becomes persistent and you lose interest in your life, affecting how you think or behave, it’s possible you have depression.

Anxiety may last for a long time
If anxiety has lasted a long time and it’s severe, it will impact your everyday activities.
Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder with two key parts: obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are intrusive and unwelcome images, urges, thoughts or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind. Compulsions are activities you feel you have to do to reduce the discomfort caused by the obsessive thoughts. If you don’t act on the compulsions, your anxiety or mental discomfort becomes distressing and unmanageable.

Personality disorders
If you have a personality disorder, certain ways you think, feel and behave have a significant and negative impact on different aspects of your daily life. You might have particular patterns of thoughts, feelings or beliefs that are difficult to change.

Schizophrenia
Schizophrenia affects your mood and how you think, feel and behave. It doesn’t mean you have a ‘split personality’. There are lots of very different feelings, experiences and behaviours associated with schizophrenia. This means that some people think schizophrenia may not be one condition but actually different, overlapping conditions.

Heads up – By better understanding mental health conditions, you’ll be more informed, and it’ll be easier to connect with those affected.
What to look out for.

Everyone’s experience of mental health is different and can change at different times. As a manager, it’s important to get to know your team and understand what they need and when. Looking after employee mental health is a key part of making sure everybody feels supported. However, it is important to make sure that any mental health support provided is inclusive. Good mental health support considers the impact that different life experiences can have on somebody’s relationship with their own mental health.

Understanding some of the signs of poor mental health doesn’t mean you should make assumptions about what mental health conditions your employees may have. Instead, use them as a way of noticing when you should check in and start a conversation about how your employee is coping right now.

Some early signs might be⁶,⁷:

- poor concentration
- being easily distracted
- worrying more
- finding it hard to make decisions
- low mood
- feeling overwhelmed by things
- tiredness and lack of energy
- talking less, or a flat, slow way of speaking⁸
- avoiding social activities
- talking more or talking very fast, jumping between topics and ideas
- finding it difficult to control your emotions
- drinking more
- irritability and short temper
- aggression

If you are working remotely it might be more difficult to get an idea of how people are coping. Try to use video calls whenever possible, as they help you see body language and expressions, as well as hear what somebody is saying⁴. This works for formal conversations, as well as for casual chats and virtual coffee breaks.

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Mental ill health is the most common cause of long-term absence⁹.


Heads up – When you recognise signs of poor mental health, check in and start a conversation about how your team member is coping right now.
How to help your employees.

If you’re a line manager, you play an important role in supporting your team’s mental health and wellbeing. But it can be hard to know where to start. The suggestions in this section should help.

**Look after your mental health**
As a manager, your focus is on supporting your team in the workplace but remember, your own wellbeing is just as important. You have a duty to yourself to look after your own mental health at work. Looking after your mental health doesn’t always mean you can avoid problems entirely. But we still need to look after our mental health in the same way that we look after our physical health.

**Ask for training**
Most companies offer training on mental health and stress management. You should feel confident about dealing with disclosure and managing and supporting an employee with mental health problems. Talk to your own manager about your training needs.

**Familiarise yourself with policies**
Make sure you understand any policies your organisation has relating to mental health and wellbeing. This may include sickness absence and health and safety. Make sure your team understand where to find these, what they include and what will happen if they ask for support. Make sure that the support offered in these policies is still available to people if they are working remotely.

**Make sure you have a good knowledge of common mental health problems and signs of poor mental health**
Get to know your team so you notice any changes in their behaviour. Bear in mind that mental health problems affect different people in different ways. You may have to adapt your approach to suit different individuals. If you feel you need more support and training from your company, talk to your manager.

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Make sure you consider the whole individual
There are lots of different things that shape our relationship with our mental health. These include our race, faith, culture, sexuality, gender, socioeconomic status and whether we have a disability. This context affects the way people view mental health and how they speak about it. Not everybody will feel comfortable expressing their concerns in the same way. Remember, everybody is an individual, and views can differ within cultures and communities as well as between them.

Make mental wellbeing a priority
Show staff that their wellbeing matters to you. Encourage them to work sensible hours, take full lunch breaks and engage with wellbeing initiatives in the organisation. Looking after their mental health is just as important as their physical health. This will lead to a more productive team in the long term.

Make sure you’re available
Prioritise regular one-to-ones and catch ups with your team. Make sure you use this time to check how they are and talk through any difficulties at home or work. Knowing your team’s ‘normal’ outlook and activities will give you a frame of reference to spot changes in these early. This will make conversations easier if problems do arise. If you are working remotely, try to arrange opportunities for people to connect with each other when they aren’t talking about work, such as virtual lunch breaks. These help everyone share what’s going on for them outside of their job.

Be aware of barriers to accessing support
Accessing mental health services can be more challenging for people from marginalised groups, such as those from ethnic minorities, and those from the LGBT+ community. It can also be practically difficult for those with disabilities or who do not have English as a first language. It’s important not to make assumptions, but it might be helpful to keep these things in mind when talking about mental health with your team.

Be discreet
Reassure people that the conversations they are having about their mental health are confidential, as long as they are not having trouble keeping themselves or other people safe. This can help people who feel stigma or shame when sharing their experiences and concerns. Promote a culture of openness where people feel able to share their concerns in a non-judgemental and understanding environment.


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25%

A quarter of BAME* employees who have experienced work-related mental health problems report that their ethnicity was a factor in their symptoms.11


*We understand that some people have reservations about the term Black Asian and minority ethnic (BAME). It’s a broad term that covers diverse groups of people. However, due to the nature of the data available on this subject we have used it in this article for accuracy and consistency.
How to help your employees

Keep asking questions and encourage open conversations
It might help to add staff wellbeing as a standing item on your agenda at team meetings. Give staff an opportunity to talk about how they’ve been doing and anything that might be affecting their wellbeing. Ask your team for feedback about your management and any additional support you could provide.

Help your staff prioritise their workloads and feel confident to work effectively
While it may not be possible to offer staff complete control over their workload and hours, think together about areas where they could make their own decisions and manage their own time. Make sure your team are trained to do their jobs. Look for development opportunities and make sure you’re available to offer support and suggestions too.

Make reasonable adjustments in the workplace
A reasonable adjustment is a change to how your employee works to help them overcome any disadvantages they might face. Effective reasonable adjustments can support employees with mental health problems to work to their full capacity. Whether an adjustment is ‘reasonable’ or not depends on its effectiveness, practicality, cost, your organisation’s resources, and whether any additional financial help is available.

Create a Wellness Action Plan
Wellness Action Plans can be a good way to start regular conversations about mental health and wellbeing with your team. They’re a tool to help you and your employees share what keeps you well at work and when and why you might become unwell. It’s a personal document written by employees and shared with individual managers. It helps you improve wellbeing, or support recovery, and works as an agreement and a tool to promote ongoing discussion.

Praise staff and show you appreciate their efforts
Employees who don’t feel properly rewarded for their efforts are more at risk of common mental health problems and increased stress. It’s also important to distribute praise and benefits fairly and make sure you don’t show favouritism within the team.

Prepare for staff returning to work
There may be times when employees need time off because of their mental health. Supporting return to work is about good people management. You need good communication skills and sensitivity to the individual and the context of their absence. Before they return, consider lighter duties and/or a phased return. It takes time to recover after a period of mental ill health. It may help your employee to come back to work slowly, especially if they’ve been off work for a long time.

58% of people think their organisation is effective at supporting people with mental ill health⁹.


#OpenUp
Find out what we’re doing at Bupa to get the conversation started.
bupa.co.uk/open-up
The impact of COVID-19.

During the coronavirus pandemic people are facing a lot of disruptions to their normal routines. Talk to your team about the uncertainty and the stress that the pandemic is causing.
The impact of COVID-19 on mental health.

Understand that people will feel differently about the virus
COVID-19 will affect everybody’s mental health in different ways. Some people may be very worried, while others will be less concerned. People from ethnic minority backgrounds and those living with disabilities, might be particularly concerned. This is because the coronavirus has had a disproportionate impact on these groups. It’s important to be sensitive and understanding to these concerns.

Explain how you’re minimising risk
For those who must come into the workplace, there may be fear or anger about doing so. Listen to everyone's concerns and discuss things calmly. If working from home isn’t possible, explaining the extra safety measures to your team might help them feel less anxious.

Understand that many people will feel very anxious about being at work and be adaptable wherever possible.

Keep work social
If you’re working remotely, try to maintain the informal chats and breaks you would usually have in the workplace. This might include grabbing a virtual coffee or running team quizzes, which can help people to take a break from their work.

Check on employees who are self-isolating
There may be times when members of your team become unwell or have to self-isolate for another reason. Some people may also choose to reduce the time they spend outside of their home because they, or somebody they care for, is vulnerable. It’s a good idea to check in with them regularly and ask how they are coping.

Something as simple as ‘How are you?’ is a good place to begin. Choose honest and open questions rather than avoiding the issue completely or referring to it indirectly. This is especially useful if there’s a particular issue to address, such as underperformance or absence.

Sometimes these conversations can feel uncomfortable, and you might be worried about saying the wrong thing. It’s important to listen, and to apologise if you make a mistake, even if you didn’t mean to cause offence. Above all, you should make sure that the conversation is respectful.\(^\text{19}\)

It might feel awkward to have these conversations if you aren’t able to meet face-to-face. Video calls can help you to feel more comfortable when discussing sensitive subjects as you can pick up on non-verbal cues.

\(^{19}\)Business in the Community. Let’s Talk About Race. July 2020.
Starting the conversation.

Examples for starting the conversation:
- You seem a bit down lately and I’d like to take some time to check in with you.
- I’ve noticed you’ve been late with a few pieces of work recently. I wanted to check if there is anything going on that I can help with?
- I noticed you were quite upset yesterday [when you were talking to...], [on the phone]. Would you like to talk about it?
- I’ve noticed that you’ve had more days off than usual recently – I just wanted to check in with you and ask whether there was anything I could do to help?

Keeping the conversation going:
The way you listen and respond could affect how much your colleague tells you and how comfortable they feel about further disclosure. These tips could help.
- Ask simple, open questions – let them explain in their own words. Give them time and be prepared for some silences.
- Don’t interrupt or impose your opinions or ideas.
- Show empathy and understanding. Don’t make assumptions about what they’re experiencing or try and guess how it will affect their work.
- Remember that lots of people are still able to work effectively, despite managing a mental health problem.
- It’s OK to admit that you don’t know much about a condition or diagnosis. Ask questions about how it affects them and what they think the implications are, if any, for their work.
**Example phrases and questions**

- I’m really sorry to hear that things have been so hard.
- It sounds like you’ve been having a difficult time lately.
- I’m really pleased you’ve taken time to speak to me about this.
- How do you feel this has been affecting your work?
- Is there anything you do at the moment that helps you manage how you feel/your condition?
- Is anyone else aware of how you are thinking and feeling at the moment?
- What kind of support do you think might help?
- What would you like to happen now?

**What if a colleague becomes upset?**

If your colleague is very upset, they might prefer to continue the discussion another time. Check what they need and whether they would like to take a break before going back to work.

- Would you like to talk about how we can help you now, or would you prefer to talk more another time?
- Are you feeling OK to return to work or would it help to have a break and a walk or a cup of tea?
- Is there someone at home with you who could you take a break with?

**Outlining support options**

- You should check how aware the person is of support options offered by your organisation. Think about whether the mental health resources available are accessible to everybody, and make sure your own knowledge is up to date too.
- Have you had a look at our mental health and wellbeing policy? Would it help to talk it through so you can understand how we can help you?
- Have you been in touch with our Employee Assistance Programme?
- It’s common to feel like you have to handle things on your own – but it’s always OK to seek help. Have you spoken to your GP about how you are feeling?

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**9 in 10 have experienced a mental health challenge ourselves or known someone in that situation.**

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**Heads up – The thought of talking to an employee about their mental health might feel daunting; especially if you are worried about saying the wrong thing. These useful prompts will hopefully help you feel confident when approaching the conversation.**

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**Tips and advice**
Resources.

More information from Bupa
We have more resources that can help you approach the conversation. Our workplace mental health hub provides further guidance on talking about mental health problems and dealing with disclosure. bupa.co.uk/workplace-mental-health

Legal obligation
As a manager, it’s important to understand any policies your organisation has relating to mental health and wellbeing. It’s also important to understand any legal obligations on you as an individual, or on your organisation, which protect people with a disability – either physical or mental.

Sources
4. Looking after your mental health while working during the coronavirus outbreak. Mental Health Foundation. www.mentalhealth.org.uk, updated 25 August 2020
20. It’s not 1 in 4; it’s all of us why mental health touches everyone Accenture. www.accenture.com published 2018
#OpenUp

Head over to bupa.co.uk/open-up to listen to our leaders and employees opening up the conversation.

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