



# Open up at work. Manager's guide

Bupa. Better for business

Workplace

Health and Wellbeing **Academy**

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# Introduction

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

When you think about the phrase 'mental health', you might think about conditions such as depression or anxiety. But, everyone has mental health. You and your colleagues will have times when your mental health is good – and times when it impacts on your 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<sup>2</sup>.



**Less than half**  
of people who struggle with  
mental health issues speak to  
their managers about it<sup>1</sup>.

**Click the home icon at  
any point in this guide  
to return to this page.**



<sup>1</sup>How to support staff who are experiencing a mental health problem. Mind. September 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Mental health conditions, work and the workplace. The Health and Safety Executive. September 2020.

**Supporting  
your team**

**Mental health  
support**

**Conversation tips**

# 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<sup>2</sup>. Issues like bullying, discrimination, uncertainty, lack of control and a demanding role are all linked to the development of common mental health conditions<sup>3</sup>.
- 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<sup>3</sup>.
- 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.

<sup>2</sup>Mental health conditions, work and the workplace. The Health and Safety Executive. September 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Mental health in the workplace. World Health Organisation. May 2019.

**Heads up – 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.**



## Challenging times

Supporting employee wellbeing is particularly important in the midst of a cost of living crisis. Rising inflation and housing instability combine with post pandemic challenges to make life hard for many.

Many people have experienced ongoing anxiety, and extra stress as a result of these issues. This can cause new mental health struggles to emerge, as well as worsening pre-existing ones. Being sensitive and supportive to these concerns can make a big difference in how well your employees will cope.

**Being sensitive and supportive can make a big difference in how well your employees will cope.**

# Mental health support



**1 in 6**

people will experience  
a common mental  
health problem in  
any given week<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>Mental health facts and statistics. Mind. 2020.

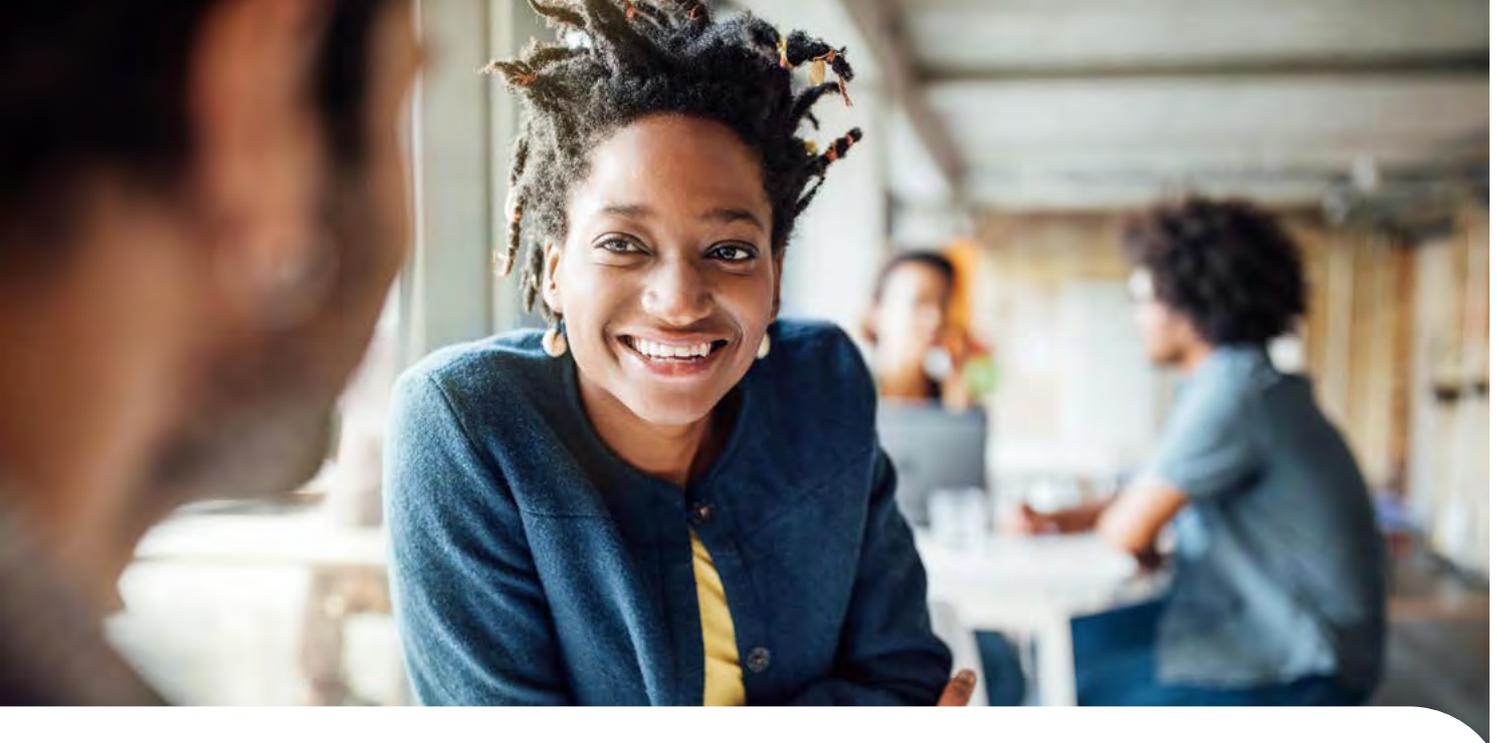


[Common conditions](#)

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# 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 may 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, or if it starts to affect how you feel 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.

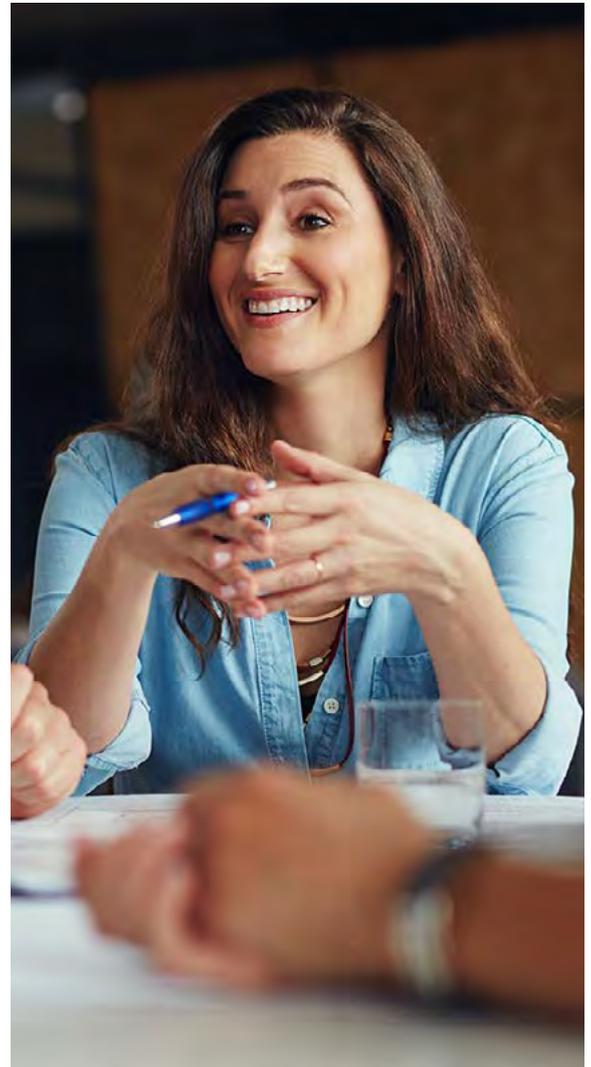
## Personality disorders

If you have a personality disorder, the way you think, feel and behave can 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.

**Obsessions are intrusive and unwelcome images, urges, thoughts or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind.**



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**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 be<sup>6,7</sup>:

- 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 speaking
- avoiding social activities
- talking more or talking very fast, jumping between topics and ideas
- finding it difficult to control their 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 saying<sup>4</sup>. This works for formal conversations, as well as for casual chats and virtual coffee breaks.

<sup>4</sup>Looking after your mental health while working during the coronavirus outbreak. Mental Health Foundation. August 2020. <sup>6</sup>How to manage stress. Mind. March 2020.

<sup>7</sup>Depression. Mind. November 2017. <sup>8</sup>Wang, Jingying, et al. "Acoustic differences between healthy and depressed people: a cross-situation study." 2019.

# Mental health conditions

are the reason for 13% of days taken as sickness absence.

Sickness absence in the UK labour market. Office for National Statistics. [www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk), 3 March 2021.



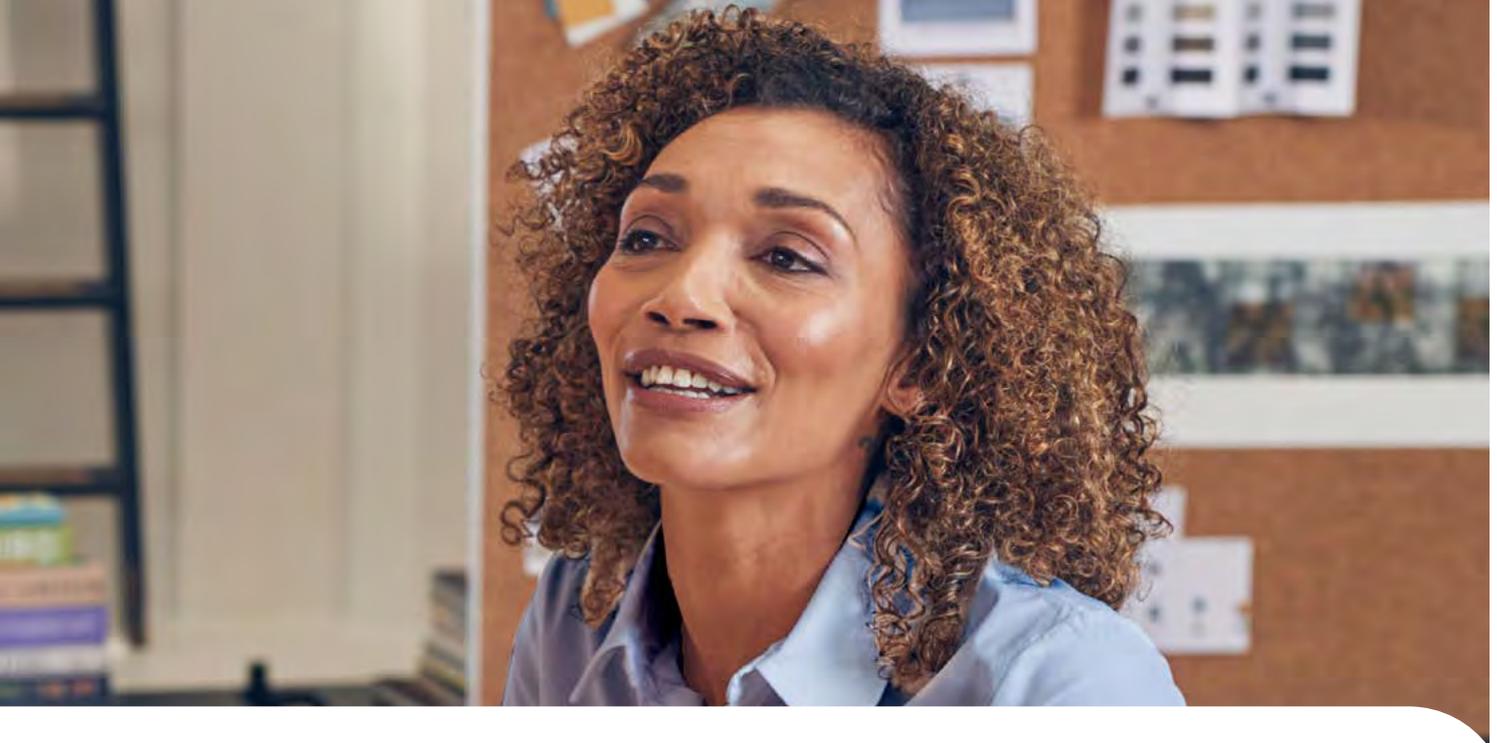
**Heads up - When you recognise signs of poor mental health, check in and start a conversation about how your team member is coping right now.**

Common conditions

Spot the signs

Helping your employees





## 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 that 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<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>

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.

<sup>10</sup>People Managers' Guide To Mental Health. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. September 2018.

## 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<sup>12</sup>. 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<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>

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 your team works remotely, try to arrange opportunities for people to connect with each other socially, 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<sup>14</sup>, and those from the LGBT+ community<sup>15</sup>. It can also be practically difficult for those with disabilities or who do not have English as a first language<sup>12</sup>. 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<sup>10</sup>

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.



**Heads up – Looking after your team's mental health is just as important as their physical health. This will lead to a more productive team in the long term.**

<sup>10</sup>People Managers' Guide To Mental Health. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. September 2018. <sup>12</sup>What is diversity and difference? Mind. July 2020.

<sup>13</sup>How to implement the Thriving at Work mental health standards in your workplace. Mind. September 2020.

<sup>14</sup>Perceived barriers to accessing mental health services among black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. <sup>15</sup>LGBT in Britain – Health Report. July 2020.



# 25%

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

<sup>11</sup>Business in the community. Mental Health at Work: Time to Take Ownership. [www.bitc.org.uk](http://www.bitc.org.uk). Published 2019.

\*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.

Common conditions

Spot the signs

Helping your employees



## How to help your employees

### Keep asking questions and encourage open conversations<sup>10</sup>

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.



### Create a Wellness Action Plan<sup>13</sup>

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.

### Help your staff prioritise their workloads and feel confident to work effectively<sup>10</sup>

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.

### Praise staff and show you appreciate their efforts<sup>10</sup>

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.



### Make reasonable adjustments in the workplace<sup>10</sup>

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.

### Prepare for staff returning to work<sup>10</sup>

There may be times when employees need time off because of their mental health. Supporting their 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.

<sup>10</sup>People Managers' Guide To Mental Health. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. September 2018.

<sup>13</sup>How to implement the Thriving at Work mental health standards in your workplace. Mind. September 2020.

# Conversation

## tips and advice

**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<sup>19</sup>.

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.

<sup>19</sup>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.
- 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?

**9 in 10**

of us have experienced a mental health challenge or known someone in that situation<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup>It's not 1 in 4; it's all of us why mental health touches everyone Accenture. 2018.

**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.**

# 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/business/workplace-wellbeing-hub/mental-health-in-the-workplace](https://bupa.co.uk/business/workplace-wellbeing-hub/mental-health-in-the-workplace)

## 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.

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## #OpenUp

Head over to [bupa.co.uk/open-up](https://bupa.co.uk/open-up) to listen to our leaders and employees opening up the conversation.

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