



Supporting staff with long-term conditions.

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Workplace
Health and Wellbeing Academy

An estimated 15 million people in England are living with a long-term condition, according to The King's Fund, and this number is expected to rise in the coming decades. With an ageing population and the state pension age being pushed back to 68 in 2018, people's needs in the workplace are predicted to grow.



This has significant implications for employers and the economy in general. Employers and managers will increasingly need to find ways to support their employees to remain in the workplace.

But, if positive steps are taken early, this can go a long way in boosting work productivity, reducing levels of work absence and supporting the economy.

What are long-term conditions?

Long-term conditions (also known as chronic diseases) are conditions where there is no cure, and may be managed over an extended period of time with drugs or other treatments. The World Health Organisation reports that 58 per cent of people over 60 have chronic diseases compared to fourteen per cent of those under the age 40.

Examples of long-term conditions include:

- mental health issues
- heart disease
- kidney disease
- HIV
- cancer
- muscle, bone and joint problems
- diabetes
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Sickness absence-related costs to employers and taxpayers in the UK have been estimated at £22 billion per year, according to the NHS. And employees collectively miss out on £4 billion a year of lost earnings. This is despite increasing evidence that targeted health support can help keep people in employment, and in turn improve their health and wellbeing.

Stress and mental ill-health are two of the most common causes of long-term absence in the UK.

People are often reluctant to seek the help they need, and employers may not be equipped to tackle the issue. But there are many things that employers can do to address this.



Making the right work adjustments

Creating the right work environment and culture can be a great step forward in supporting colleagues with health conditions. To help with this Head of Advice and Occupational Health Services at Bupa UK, Kirstin Newman, recommends having the right policies and procedures in place, including having a sickness absence policy. “This sets a framework for ensuring a consistent approach and fair treatment for employees who may, for example, need to take sick leave.”

Employees who have long-term conditions may also be covered by statutory protection that requires their employers to make workplace adjustments. More information on

what’s covered in the Equality Act 2010 can be found on the **GOV.UK** website. But, even with the best intentions and support structures in place Newman admits that it can be sometimes hard for managers to support these employees. “It is a challenge to balance supporting people with the commercial realities of delivering for customers and hitting your bottom line.”

“We provide support to people to access appropriate treatment and services, understand the options available to them and provide them with clear information throughout, including being open about business impacts.”

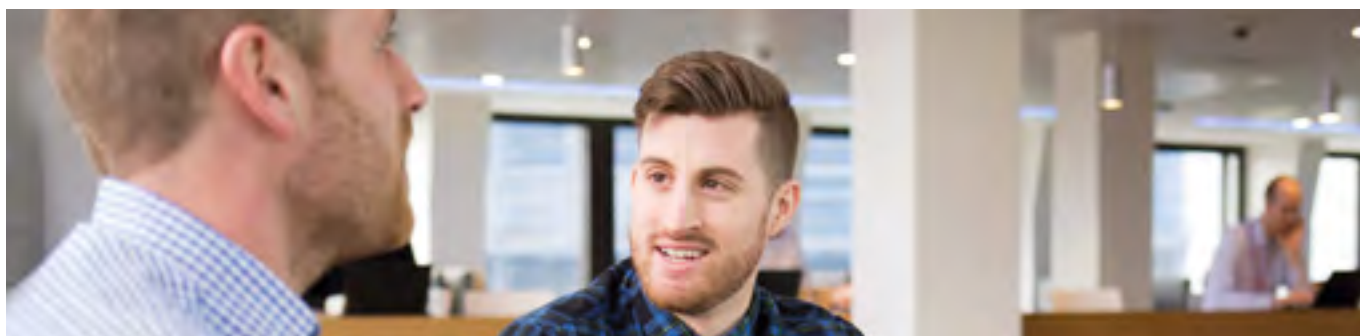
Employee benefit support

An employee assistance programme (EAP) is another valuable way of supporting people with conditions like stress and mental ill-health. “Our employees for example, have access to Healthy Minds, which helps to manage mental wellbeing in the workplace through a wide range of confidential services,” says Kirstin Newman.

“It aims to offers employees a wide range of around-the-clock confidential services and expert advice and support, so they feel reassured.”

“We also offer a quality in-house occupational health service which supports both employees and managers with quality clinical advice at pace, and have even trained some of our staff in mental health first aid,” adds Kirstin.

Another successful employee initiative that Bupa has introduced is a Performance Energy programme. This is a resilience-building training programme that helps employees to manage the everyday pressures of work and life.



Communication is king

While policies and procedures and employee focused initiatives are important, having supportive line managers can play a key role in getting the best outcomes for both the employee and business.

“Making the time for supportive but focussed conversations, being open about the challenges and seeking support from human resources and occupational health early can be helpful,” says Newman.

Graham Pembrey, a manager at Bupa UK agrees. “If you manage someone with a long-term condition, investing time in finding out in confidence how they feel, and if there’s anything you can do to support them, can go a long way.”

“Schedule regular check-ins to find out how they are doing, as their medical problems or needs may change over time. This can help managers like me to spot that someone may be struggling with work due to their health.”

Employers also need to be able to recognise the early signs that an employee may be struggling at work due to ill-health. “If they are withdrawn or their behaviour is uncharacteristic – talk to them and ask open questions and seek advice,” adds Newman.

Sources

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