



SME HR & Line Manager Mental Health Training

Questions and Answers

Introduction

We recently hosted our first of four dedicated SME mental health webinars for 2022. These sessions are intended to support our clients and their employees with their mental health strategy. They also offer the opportunity to ask questions which may be affecting a whole range of businesses.

Our first session, HR and Line Manager Mental Health Training, received a huge number of questions, so we have summarised those with similar themes and hope this document is helpful in answering these for attendees and those who may have missed the session.



Lack of engagement for support

1 What should I do if an employee is struggling with their mental health, but won't go and see a GP?

You cannot force them to see their GP, and this may be a big step for them, but you could signpost to alternative support services available as a first step either via the company (such as a confidential EAP) or a charity helpline. But there comes a point where a conversation needs to be had that if their mental health is affecting their role, they need to address it, or their job may be at risk.

2 I have a member of staff who has been off work for three months with depression. I have tried to reach out to support and understand how we might be able to help them, but they will not engage with me through any means. They say I am making it worse. What should I do?

It is not unusual for an employee to struggle to engage with their direct line manager when they have poor mental health. If you can, we would recommend gaining the support of a HR contact or more senior manager. Whilst you might need to give the employee some space, they remain an employee and you need to be able to agree how and when you can gain an update on how they are getting on.

3 How might I engage a member of staff to be more open and honest about how they are feeling? I hear "I'm fine, all good" but their behaviour says otherwise.

If it is not affecting the quality of their work or the health of others there is little that can be done except be there if they change their mind. Ensure that they are aware of the support routes available. It might be that they want to engage with these outside the workplace, and this is ok.

4 If an employee claims to have a disability but will not disclose - how do you manage any reasonable adjustments? Can you insist that they advise you of their disability?

This is more of a legal matter so we would recommend guidance from an HR contact.



Mental Health Strategy

1 Should we be seeking to understand the status of our employee's mental health and how should we do this?

This needs to be kept informal, for example open conversation, but offering clear routes to support if/when needed. Remember, employees are not obliged to inform you about their mental health, it's something very personal. As a business or employer, a good way to support them is by ensuring they know where to go should they need support.

2 What kind of things can a company do to promote good mental health within an organisation? We have mental health champions within the company, and it would be useful for them to know about best practice ideas for promoting helpful conversations about mental health in their teams.

There are some great resources available to organisations and individuals – some at no charge, either available as complimentary services with insurances, or through the government or charities. Each company will be different in their approach, but we suggest considering Line Manager Training, Mental Health ambassadors,

Mental Health First Aiders and providing all staff awareness training. The overall strategy and philosophy that a company adopts is really key and cannot be underestimated as too is the behaviour, and ethos of the senior managers (lead by example).

3 How should a company view employees requesting a mental health day? Do you believe it is something that the company should actively encourage?

We have used wellbeing days at Aviva, and they can go down well if used judiciously. This is an employee benefit, above and beyond annual leave, and is at company discretion. If an employee is asking for a day off because they are struggling with their mental health, then sickness absence may be appropriate.

4 Would a wellbeing catch up with all staff members be worth implementing?

We would recommend starting by asking the staff if they would like this. Get their buy in first and go from there. You might find a mixed response; it doesn't have to work for everyone.



Return to the office

- 1 We covered a few questions during the webinar around working remotely and whether this is helpful or unhelpful with poor mental health. We also heard that some employees are experiencing anxiety around the return to workplace, particularly those who are considered vulnerable.**

You might find it helpful to recap our webinar with Onebright on **'Managing Covid related anxiety and distress in returning to the workplace'** for some guidance on this.

- 2 I no longer work side by side with my team and feel distant from them. How would I know if something is wrong?**

We'd recommend an open conversation. Be honest with how you feel and ask them how you might be able to address it. For example, "I feel as though I am a bit out of touch, I'd like to trial weekly 121's / team catch ups, how would this work for you?".



Supporting others

1 I have an employee who has a tendency to catastrophise. How would you manage them as I'm concerned, they may bring down the team morale?

If it impacts on the wellbeing of others in the team, the member of staff needs to be made aware of the effect they are having on others. Firstly, ask them if they are ok and if they need any support. Then be clear on what you need from them to improve. If changes are not made you might need to implement a performance plan so that the individual has clear guidance on their unhelpful behaviours and how these need to change.

2 If I have a staff member off with anxiety and that anxiety was triggered by the emergence of poor performance and potential disciplinary procedures starting - how do I balance a structured and careful return to work, with the need to address the issues that emerged that likely caused the anxiety?

It's important to remember to give the employee the time and resources they need to address their mental health issues. An employee who is anxious may well indicate they care about doing a good job and they may need support with this. However, the poor performance still needs to be addressed and when a business feels they have done everything they can to support the employee it is time to look at whether this is the right role for the employee.

3 What is the right thing to do when an employee asks you to keep the reason for their absence confidential in a very small team when the absence leaves other staff under pressure?

Agree with the employee what they would like to be said and respect that. This could be as simple as "I need to let you know; X has been signed off from work. They have asked for privacy, so I won't be disclosing the reason for absence. I know you'll handle this with the upmost respect for our colleague".

4 I have a lot of mental health issues. Is it helpful to let someone suffering know this or not?

This is a personal decision. If you do, ensure you don't compare but use your knowledge to empathise. Remember that we all experience things differently so just because something happened a certain way for you, it doesn't mean the employee will experience the same.

5 What can you do about a case of suspected bullying when higher management are aware, but the employee feels not enough is being done and continues to dread coming to work?

If you can, we would recommend gaining advice from your HR contact. Keep communication open with your employee and ask questions so that you understand what actions would be helpful for them. You might also want to consider suggesting to senior management that there is a need to implement a company ethos and anti-bullying policy. Finally, if you feel comfortable to do so, and it's appropriate, it may help to speak with the individual who is conducting the poor behaviour. Simply saying that their behaviour is making you and others uncomfortable can be enough to make the individual realise. Please also be aware that this individual may also be experiencing their own challenges so remaining sensitive is important.

Supporting others - continued

- 6 We have someone who we suspect has a deteriorating neurological condition, but their counsellor thinks they have anxiety. They have been absent for three months but now want to make a return to work. We worry that they are not able to carry out their role. How can we best manage this?**

This is a complex situation and would ideally have HR guidance. If they have been off for a period, they will have been professionally diagnosed and signed off by their GP. Ask them to get their GP's guidance on what duties may need to be adapted. What do they feel they can / cannot do? Consider what a phased return to work might look like and gain agreement from the member of staff. This will likely require working closely with the employee on their return to understand what they are or are not coping with. They may need further input from the GP if they are not able to build up to their normal duties.

- 7 How do you get a team on board to support a colleague coming back to work on a phased return?**

This is a difficult one and education is key to help people understand that employees are much more effective when returning to an enabling and supportive environment.

- 8 I have an employee who is exceptionally shy. I am concerned that they could be susceptible to mental illness but wouldn't have the confidence to raise anything.**

If it is not affecting the quality of their work or the health of others there is little that can be done, except reassuring them that you will be there to source help if they ever need support.

- 9 How would you approach someone that you think is struggling? And how would you escalate if the situation doesn't get better?**

Ask them if they are ok. If it is not affecting the quality of their work or the health of others there is little that can be done except reassuring them that you will be there to source help if they change their mind. If it is affecting their work, then a plan may need to be considered to help you both focus on their performance.



Crisis Management

1 Our company experienced the loss of a life of a colleague. How would you best support employees in this situation?

This is really difficult and there is no easy, or one way, to support employees at this time. We would recommend signposting to support services for staff. This could be inhouse, or charity organisations, such as Mind, or the Samaritans. You might have some teams or individuals who want to do something to mark their life and remember them. This could be led by the team leader or wellbeing/HR leads if available.

2 If the employee says work is not causing their poor mental health, how much do you probe to why and what you can do?

If it is not affecting the quality of their work or the health of others there is little that can be done except for you to be there to source help if they do decide to disclose what is affecting their mental health.

3 How do I gain an employee's faith in my confidentiality if we might then have a situation where I need to inform another manager / HR if I'm worried about their safety? Would this cause them to lose their trust in me?

Confidential means confidential unless there is a disclosed risk. The employee needs to be aware that if there is a real risk to self or others then you have a duty of care to disclose this. You can cover this at the outset of a conversation so that they understand. You could say, 'I am here to support you and I want you to know that anything you tell me will be confidential. I will not break this unless something you tell me indicates that there is a real risk to you or another. In that case I might need to disclose for further support'.

4 How do you know whether an individual means harm to themselves?

You can ask them, be direct in your questioning. For example, "how strongly do you feel these thoughts are impacting you? Do you have a plan if these thoughts get worse?".



Miscellaneous

- 1 I know that an alternative role can be helpful if someone is unable to complete their normal role due to their health. But we are a small company, if there are no roles available, what next?**

If there is not an alternate role available, see if there any duties that could be amended or distributed between other colleagues, even for a short period if necessary. Unfortunately, it might be that the individual would need to explore options outside of the organisation. Support them in identifying their strengths and opportunities. This might come in the form of allowing them time for interviews and sharing their strengths to boost confidence at a difficult time.

- 2 There is no sick pay at our company and no provision if staff need to take time off with poorly dependents or taking care of relatives. Staff must use annual leave for this which I've had complaints about, and I find it puts me in a difficult position as a line manager.**

As a Line Manager, you have the difficult role of delivering company policy without necessarily having a say in it. You could try putting a case forward to HR or senior management for decisions to be made, but it isn't for the manager to solve or take responsibility. As a manager you can be open about the policies and give warning if someone is to only receive statutory sick pay. If you can, be flexible around making time up around appointments, where possible, but this may not be feasible in all roles.

- 3 What is the true reach of poor mental health?**

We're all familiar with the statistic that 1 in 4 suffer from poor mental health. Realistically, mental health issues affect not only those who are suffering but also those around them and most people are close to someone who has struggled.

- 4 How do you know if you are perhaps having a mental health issue, and it's not just an off few days?**

Usually there are changes in behaviour with one of the most common being avoidance. You might notice that you don't take pleasure from the things you normally do. It may help to talk to a trusted friend to express some of the feelings you may be having.

- 5 Is there any advice for dealing with complex issues such as addiction?**

Mental illness and addiction don't necessarily go hand in hand. Addiction is an illness in its own right and should be treated as such through clinical guidance.





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