Mental Health: Recognise and Respond – A Session for Managers

Mental health has become one of the biggest challenges to manage with the continuously evolving work dynamic. Organisations are realising that they must address all aspects of employee health, including stress and anxiety, to avoid a decline in productivity and prevent work burnout. From a positive perspective, the pandemic has amplified conversations around mental health that weren't necessarily in the spotlight before. Every manager has a legal, business and moral responsibility to be proactive in helping support their employees during times of need. Our working lives can have a powerful influence on our mental state, and as leaders in a demanding and high-pressured world, it is essential that we develop the confidence and competence to identify individuals at risk and intervene in an appropriate and effective way.

While mental health in the workplace has become a hot topic in recent years, there's no doubt some stigma still exists around discussing mental health in a professional setting.

Nearly 350 million people worldwide live with common mental disorders like depression and anxiety. Suicide is the second-largest cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds globally. Depressive diseases are projected to be leading the global burden of disease by 2030. The good news is that there are things each one of us can do to help minimise the risk of these statistics increasing!

Mental health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ‘A state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’.

Mental illness

The Mayo Clinic states, 'Mental illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions—disorders that affect mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors'. Mental illness becomes a concern when ongoing signs and symptoms affect your ability to function.

The mental health continuum

Mental illness becomes a concern when ongoing signs and symptoms affect a person’s ability to function. Mental illness occurs on a continuum from showing no symptoms and not having a diagnosis to being diagnosed with a serious mental illness (e.g. anxiety, depression, personality disorder, schizophrenia).

Mental health also occurs on a continuum. One can be in a state of optimal mental health, poor mental health, or somewhere in between. Optimal mental health is characterised by positive emotions, satisfaction with life and positive psychological and social functioning.
According to this dual-continuum model, it is possible to have a mental illness and be in a state of positive mental health. This is likely to occur when the individual is coping effectively, responding well to treatment and is experiencing fewer symptoms. At the same time, it is possible for someone who does not have a mental health diagnosis to be in a state of poor mental health. Perhaps the individual is under a great deal of stress, which has had a negative effect on their mood, thinking patterns and personal relationships.

While not everyone has a mental illness, we all have mental health. It is important to remember that mental health is not static; one’s position on the continuum can fluctuate. This means that, like our physical health, we can take steps to improve and maintain our mental health. Mental health becomes a concern when ongoing signs and symptoms affect one’s ability to function.

**Depression and anxiety**

According to the Mental Health Foundation, 'Depression is different from feeling down or sad. Someone experiencing depression will experience intense emotions of anxiety, hopelessness, negativity and helplessness and the feelings stay with them instead of going away'. Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried about what could happen in the future. It is a natural response when we perceive that we are under threat. Depression and anxiety are different conditions, but they commonly occur together. Both depression and anxiety are treatable. Finding the right treatment can be a trial-and-error process, as everyone is different. Treatment may include medication such as anti-depressants, psychotherapy such as CBT, lifestyle changes and social and community support.

**Supporting someone with depression and anxiety**

- Be there and use reassuring language.
- Use small gestures to show you care.
- Don’t judge or try to encourage them to cheer up.
- Avoid tough love or advice.
- Avoid minimising, comparing, or trivialising.
- Learn about the condition.
- Most importantly, be patient.
Understanding suicide

• Depression and suicide are linked, with an estimate that up to 60 percent of people who die by suicide are depressed.
• The desire to kill oneself is a cry for help.
• A person who is suicidal sees the world in black and white—lacking the ability to see other available options.
• Help involves identifying the level of intent and lethality, getting them support and helping them see the alternatives.

All you need to do is to ask, ‘How are you feeling’? Be sensitive to current situations and past experiences.

The risk is greatest when the individual has the means, the opportunity, a specific plan and the lack of a deterrent. YOU can be that deterrent! YOU can get them help!

AID
• Ask: ‘Have you had thoughts of suicide or killing yourself’?
• Intervene immediately.
• Don’t offer to keep the conversation confidential.

LIFE
• Locate help.
• Inform others.
• Find someone to be with person so they are not alone.
• Expedite help.

Why is mental health so hard to talk about at work?

The stigma of mental illness is a powerful barrier to understanding and supporting mental health needs. Social stigma is strong disapproval of a person due to perceived characteristics or membership in a group that is deemed undesirable. The workplace is no different.

Barriers you may encounter

• ‘What will people think’?
• ‘I don’t need help’.
• ‘Everybody gets stressed out sometimes’.
• ‘I should be able to handle this’.
• ‘Will this be kept confidential’?
• ‘Nothing will help me’.
• ‘Who would I talk to anyway’?
• ‘I don’t have time for this’.

Practical conversation tips

• Prepare yourself mentally and practically; educate yourself.
• Make sure it is a good time for both sides.
• Ask open-ended questions to explore what’s going on.
• Don't interrupt or rush the conversation. If needed, sit patiently in silence.
• Don't try to diagnose someone or second guess their feelings.
• Explore what support is available for the person.
• Avoid assumptions about what the individual might need. Promote empowerment and help the person consider what they need and what may have helped them in the past.
• Work together to find solutions and encourage them to develop an action plan; agree on the next steps around when and if a follow-up is needed.
• Show support and trust, be honest, respect boundaries and be sensitive.
• Look after yourself.

The LISTEN Model

Listen actively and validate
Involve and inform them of their options
Share your understanding
Think about body language
Empathise and encourage
Next steps forwards

Remember

• You cannot assure confidentiality.
• There may be occasions where health and safety dictate that you have to escalate the matter to emergency services, human resources (HR), or Health & Safety (H&S).
• Get support for yourself.
• It is better to overreact than to later ask yourself whether you could have done more.
• Whatever happens, do not feel guilty.

Invest in yourself and manage your energy

• Practise mindfulness.
• Use relaxation techniques.
• Allow yourself ‘me’ time.
• Connect.
• Practise gratitude.
• Eat a nutritious diet.
• Get enough sleep.
• Exercise.
• Take time out (particularly after a difficult conversation).
• Know your limits.
• Get support.