



# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

A LINE MANAGER'S GUIDE



it all starts with you™

INTERNATIONAL  
WORKPLACE

# FOREWORD

Some 50 years after the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act in the UK, it finally feels as though the mental health and wellbeing of workers is being valued as equally by employers as their physical health and safety. Arguably, the process began back in 2004 when the HSE introduced a set of management standards to help organisations tackle work-related stress. In 2007, the new Health Act introduced a ban on smoking in the workplace, to protect the health of employees. Both signalled an acceptance that employers had an overt duty to intervene even where there was no immediate physical danger to health.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training took off when the HSE changed its official guidance on first aid in 2018, advising employers how to support employees experiencing a mental health issue. Globally, more than four million people have completed the MHFA training programme in 24 countries.

The prize is certainly worth fighting for. Approximately one in four people in the UK will experience mental illness each year. It's the biggest cause of sickness absence, with a cost to the UK economy of £74-99bn.<sup>1</sup>

Two years ago, the world's leading health and safety body, IOSH, developed a new course designed to help line managers proactively address psychosocial health and safety risk before the need for first aid might arise. Here at International Workplace, we've been developing a special version of the IOSH Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing course<sup>2</sup> for delivery in eLearning and virtual classroom formats, more information about which can be found later in this guide. The course is aimed firmly at front-line managers, to help them understand how to deal with fluctuations in people's health. It fills a very important gap that links the risk management principles used in health and safety with the people management practices used in human resources. It's widely agreed that line managers are the first line of defence in terms of employee health and wellbeing – but it's a big burden to carry. And so they need help.

Adopting organisation-wide training such as IOSH's Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing will not make a difference to workers' mental health and wellbeing overnight. But by taking these measures on board, organisations are agreeing what they need to do. And by committing to it, they're telling their workers very publicly what they can expect. We hope you find this guide useful.



**DAVID SHARP**

FCIM FIWFM TECHIOSH

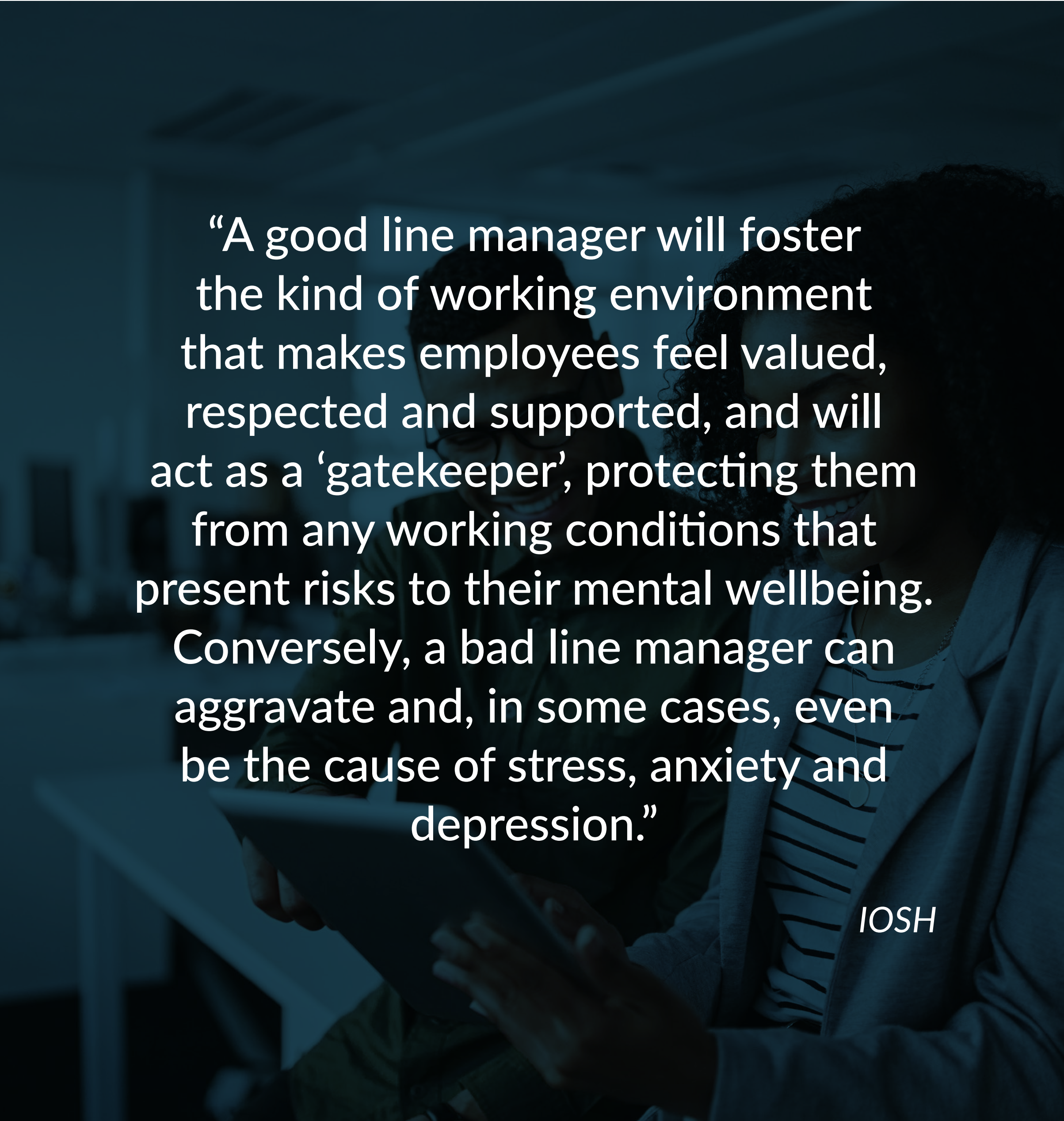
**Chief Executive Officer,  
International Workplace**

# INTRODUCTION

Employers have a legal duty to ensure that work doesn't negatively impact their employees' health. Failing to assess the risk of stress and mental ill health and to take steps to alleviate them could leave employers open to costly compensation claims. So how can organisations better support individuals with mental health problems to remain and thrive in work?

According to the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) report, *Workplace Wellbeing: the role of line managers in promoting positive mental health*,<sup>3</sup> around 300,000 people with a long-term mental health condition lose their jobs each year. This is an alarming figure. The human cost is woefully high, as is the financial burden on businesses – poor mental health is estimated to cost employers between £33bn and £42bn a year in sick pay and lost productivity.

IOSH says line managers, given their position within an organisation, are often best placed to spot the signs of poor mental health in the workplace and – if equipped with the right skill set – can manage issues effectively before they reach crisis point.



“A good line manager will foster the kind of working environment that makes employees feel valued, respected and supported, and will act as a ‘gatekeeper’, protecting them from any working conditions that present risks to their mental wellbeing. Conversely, a bad line manager can aggravate and, in some cases, even be the cause of stress, anxiety and depression.”

IOSH

# SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Line managers should know their team better than anyone.<sup>4</sup> They are therefore ideally placed to spot the early warning signs that someone is mentally unwell.



## PHYSICAL

- Headaches
- Indigestion and heartburn
- Lack of appetite or overeating
- Muscular tension, aches and pains
- Nausea/being sick
- Indigestion
- Dizziness and palpitations
- Fatigue



## BEHAVIOURAL

- Increased use of alcohol or smoking
- Change in appetite
- Restlessness or fidgeting
- Absence
- Lack of motivation or commitment
- Increased aggression
- More prone to accidents
- Avoiding contact with others
- Loss of sense of humour



## THINKING

- Poor concentration
- Unable to listen to others
- Memory lapses
- Confusion and disorientation
- Difficulty making decisions
- Poor planning and task execution
- Negative or unhelpful thought patterns



## EMOTIONAL

- Irritability
- Becoming angry with others too easily
- Depressed or tearful
- Frightened, worried or anxious
- Impatient
- Mood swings
- Panic attacks

There will be times when you notice that someone whom you manage is behaving out of character or seems unhappy. Some of the key things to look out for are changes in an employee's usual behaviour, such as poor performance, tiredness or increased sickness absence. You might notice they are smoking or drinking more, or taking drugs, or experiencing problems with colleagues. A normally punctual employee might start turning up late, or, conversely, they might start coming in much earlier and working later. Other signs might be tearfulness, headaches, loss of humour and mood changes.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Recognising colleagues' difficulties at an early stage makes it easier to help them and provide appropriate support.
- > Investing time and effort in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing (the two are linked) of staff, will be repaid many times over in terms of enhanced morale, engagement, loyalty and productivity.

# IS MENTAL HEALTH A H&S OR HR CONCERN?

Although some workplace demands trigger a stress response, frequent or severe stress is far riskier. Unmind<sup>5</sup> advises that, over time, this can lead to various psychological issues, including fatigue, anxiety, depression, burnout, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Every person in the organisation has a responsibility and role to improve psychological health and safety in the workplace. It is a joint responsibility between employer and employee. It is important for the employer to clearly articulate the expectations, roles and accountability of different people in the organisation, from senior leadership, to head of human resources, board and management, all the way to employee.

**Pam Loch, Employment Law Solicitor and Managing Director of Loch Associates, discusses whether mental health is the responsibility of the manager.**

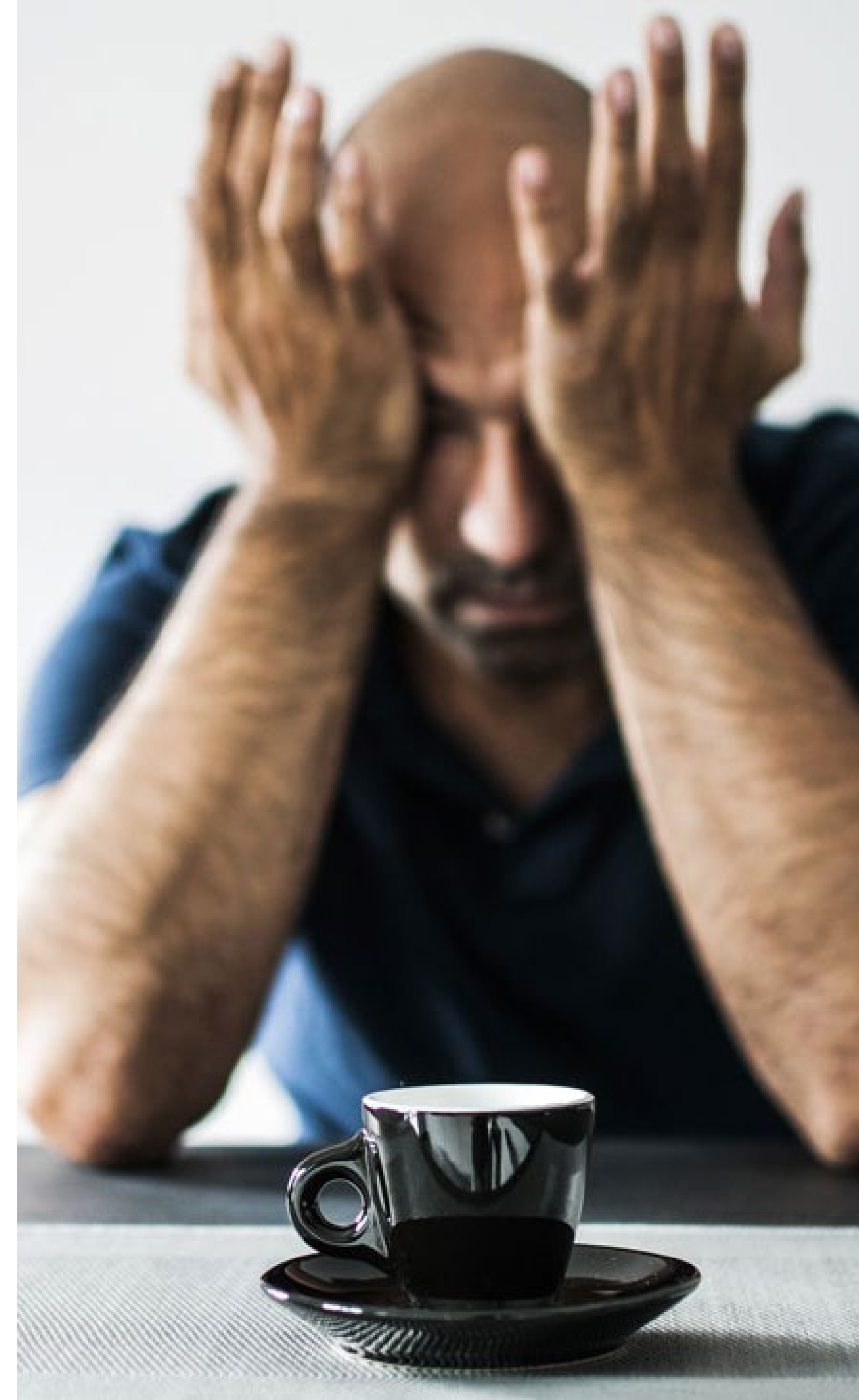
Clearly the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated awareness of mental ill health in the workplace. However, the law has been clear for some time now that an employer has a legal obligation under health and safety legislation to care for the mental, as well as the physical, safety of staff at work.

Looking after physical safety has been with us for many decades. Employers with more than five employees must have a health and safety policy and for all employers there are obligations under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and

the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSW Regulations).

What is often overlooked is that this applies to mental health and that there is also a legal duty placed on employees under Regulation 14 of the MHSW Regulations to look after their colleagues' health and safety.

Under health and safety legislation, employers are required to carry out risk assessments and provide employees with relevant training and information ▶



on the risks they face, and the measures put in place to control these risks. This is where there is a potential problem with mental health as opposed to physical health. While many managers are aware of their obligations to look after the physical safety of their teams, many are unaware of their and their teams' obligations to look after the mental health of their colleagues.

This is partly due to the lack of awareness and training provided by employers to their managers. Many managers therefore may also genuinely believe it is not their responsibility. While it has been a positive move by employers to train mental health first aiders, doing so may have reinforced managers' views that it's not their problem or

responsibility. This is why employers need to revisit their obligations and update their approach to health and safety.

Training for all staff (but especially for managers) is essential, so they recognise it is their responsibility to look after mental health, as well as physical health and safety. Managers also need to be informed and trained to know what to look out for and to spot any signs or issues and how to deal with the situation. Managers should then, as a minimum, cascade that downwards to their teams so that each employee shares the obligation to look after the mental, as well as physical, health of each other.

**“Mental and physical health are like our two feet. Technically, they’re separate. But at the same time, very much connected. If you sprain your right ankle, your left foot is forced to do extra. In doing so, you risk a brand new injury; this time, on your left. A second sprain wouldn’t be a direct result of the first, though you sense that, without the extra burden, your left foot would’ve probably been safe. It’s the same with physical and mental health. Different, yet entwined. In fact, there’s a known link between poor mental health and various physical issues, such as high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease and certain cancers, as well as a shorter overall lifespan.”**

*Unmind*

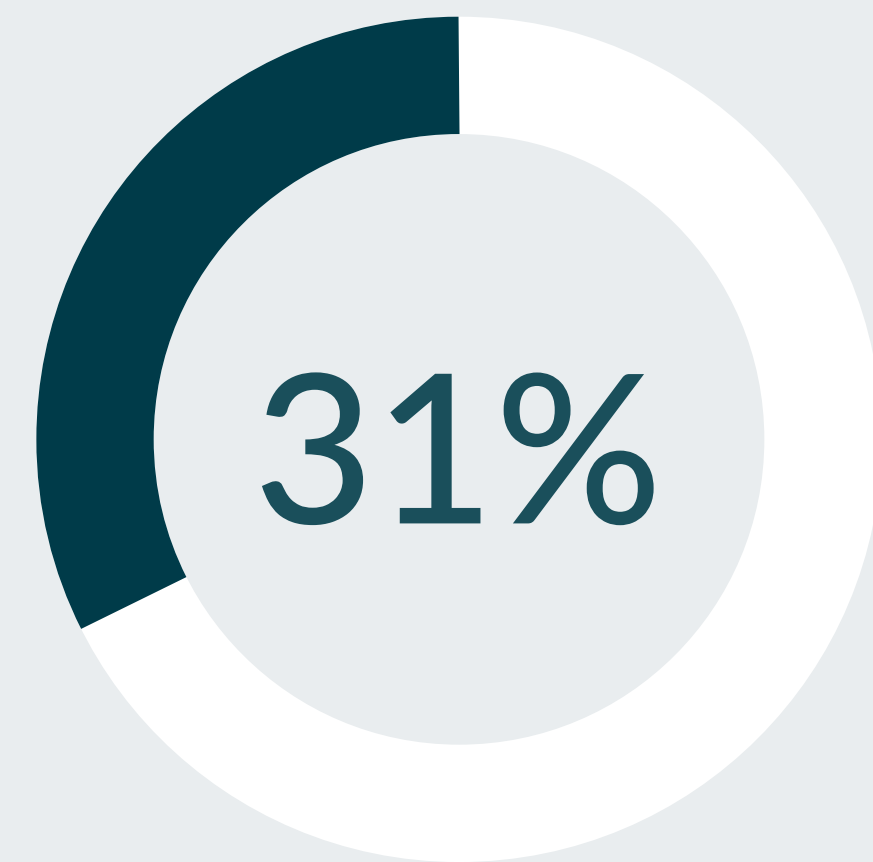
## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > The employer should clearly articulate the expectations, roles and accountability of different people in the organisation.
- > There is a legal duty placed on employees under Regulation 14 of the MHSW Regulations to look after their colleagues' health and safety.
- > Training for all staff (but especially for managers) is essential, so they recognise it is their responsibility to look after mental health, as well as physical health and safety.

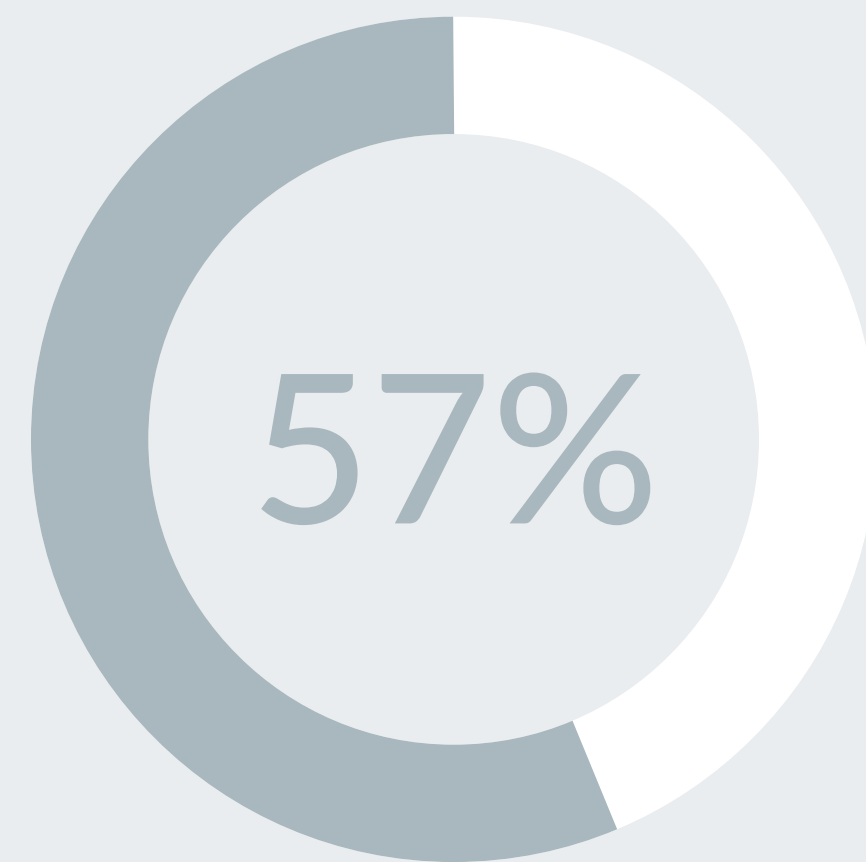
# PEOPLE MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The findings of an IOSH survey<sup>6</sup> revealed that 62% of line managers say they don't get enough help from their organisation to support the mental wellbeing of their staff.

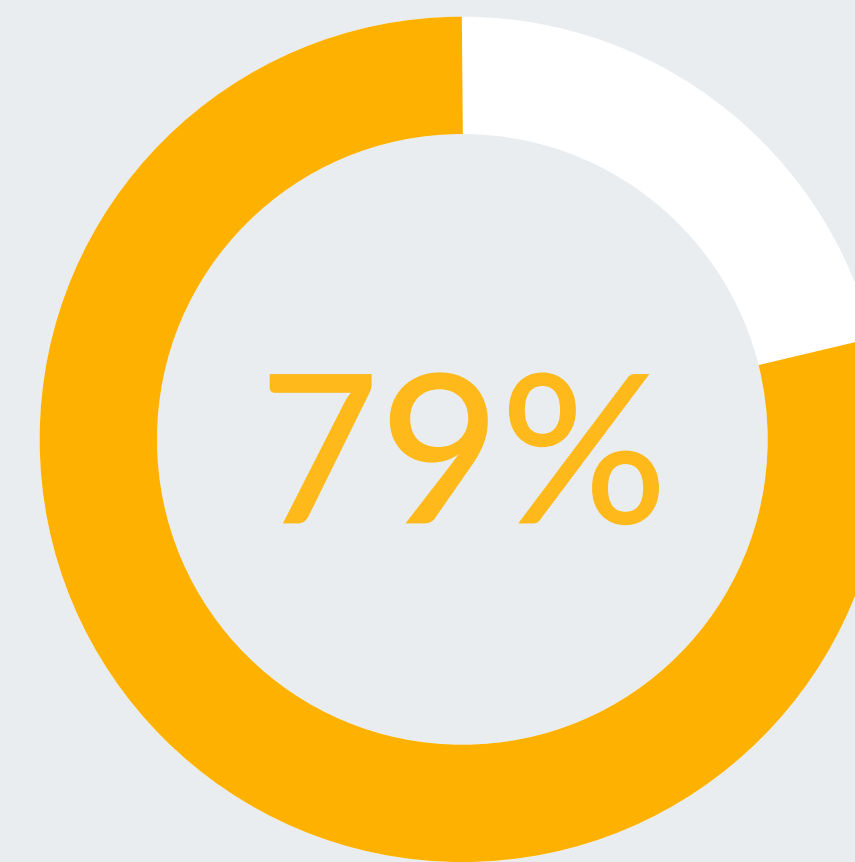
**Other findings of the survey include:**



Only 31% of respondents say they feel they have been sufficiently trained to recognise the signs of poor mental health in their direct reports.



More than half (57%) say their organisation offers no mental health and wellbeing training and/or support for managerial staff.



Those that do have training and support in place within their organisation report in most cases it is optional (79%) rather than mandatory (22%).

Taking into account that businesses have both a legal and moral duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees, training senior staff to deal with mental health issues should be a top priority.

Employers are already required by law to provide proportionate advice or training on health and safety. It is only a matter of time before regulators sharpen their focus on mental health. Line managers can be a key asset in creating healthier, happier and more productive workforces and helping their employers comply with the law, providing they are equipped with the relevant skills.



# IOSH MANAGING OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING:

A new course from  
International Workplace

Having lived and worked through a challenging 18 months, there has never been a better time to address a range of health and wellbeing management issues, including:

- Reassessing risks for a workforce with a blend of home-working, office working and somewhere in between.
- Understanding that mental health issues in this phase of the pandemic include anxieties about the return to the physical workplace.
- Enabling more fluid work arrangements in the office, including hot-desking (recognising that this raises ergonomic issues).
- Understanding that Boards need strategies for resilience and business continuity. The 'healthy hybrid' will become the norm.

IOSH Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing is the management training solution to help you address these issues effectively and ensure your teams remain happy, healthy and productive.

## THE COURSE COVERS:

**A healthy company:** understand how to manage the health and wellbeing of workers and have more effective discussions regarding their health needs.

**Health risk management:** explore what health management is and why it makes good business sense to manage occupational health and wellbeing in the workplace.

**Fitness for work:** understand non-related physical and mental health conditions and how this impacts employees' fitness for work.

**Wellbeing:** How wellbeing adds value to the organisation and how to promote healthy lifestyles and positive mental health to enable a healthy workplace culture.

To find out more about the course, visit [www.internationalworkplace.com/iosh-training/managing-occupational-health-and-wellbeing](http://www.internationalworkplace.com/iosh-training/managing-occupational-health-and-wellbeing) or call 033 210 1995.



# THE ROLE OF THE LINE MANAGER

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that organisations should strengthen the role of line managers in promoting the mental wellbeing of employees through supportive leadership styles and management practices.

This might involve the following:

- > Promoting a management style that encourages participation, delegation, constructive feedback, mentoring and coaching.
- > Ensuring that policies for the recruitment, selection, training and development of managers recognise and promote these skills.
- > Ensuring that managers are able to motivate employees and provide them with the training and support they need to develop their performance and job satisfaction.
- > Increasing understanding of how management style and practices can help to promote the mental wellbeing of employees and keep their stress to a minimum.
- > Ensuring that managers are able to identify and respond with sensitivity to employees' emotional concerns, and symptoms of mental health issues.
- > Ensuring that managers understand when it is necessary to refer an employee to occupational health services or other sources of help and support.

**“At the organisation level, it is good to have policies, structures and appropriate processes in place to cope with an employee’s physical and/or mental ill health as it should arise. But it is equally important that managers observe what is happening at work on a day-to-day basis, and to keep a close eye in particular on the interaction between the employee and their immediate manager and colleagues or team.”**

*MHFA England*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Managers should be given training to develop their motivation and performance skills.
- > Have policies, structures and appropriate processes in place to cope with employee physical and/or mental ill health.

# BEING PROACTIVE RATHER THAN REACTIVE

In October 2017, the UK Government published *Thriving at work: The Stevenson / Farmer review of mental health and employers*,<sup>7</sup> which dug into the economic impact of mental illness. To upgrade the nation's mental health outcomes, it also urged a wide range of goals for the next decade. Among these, it stated all organisations, whatever their size, should be:

- Equipped with the awareness and tools to not only address but prevent mental ill health caused or worsened by work.
- Equipped to support individuals with a mental health condition to thrive, from recruitment and throughout the organisation.
- Aware of how to get access to timely help to reduce sickness absence caused by mental ill health.

**“Use scheduled work meetings, appraisals or informal chats about progress to find out more about any problems an employee may be having. You could have health and safety as an agenda item at meetings. As well as things like display screen equipment assessments etc, this can be used for stress or mental health issues.”<sup>8</sup>**

**“If you have specific concerns about someone's health, talk about these at an early stage. Ask questions in an open, exploratory and non-judgemental way. These conditions affect people differently, so making adjustments to their job could relieve symptoms. You should be positive and supportive while exploring the issues and how you can help.”**

**“If a person has been off sick, you should discuss their return to work and reintegration into the workplace beforehand. A written plan can help. You both might want to agree when they have reached the stage of 'business as usual'. At this point, you can use existing management processes to review their performance, needs and work plan.”**

HSE



# IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING HAZARDS

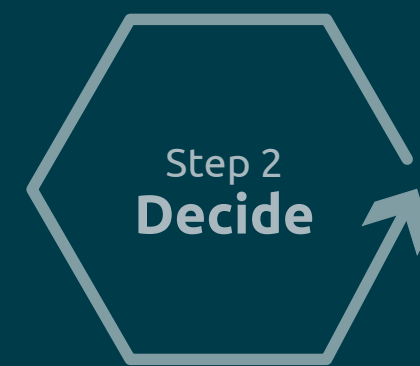
The assessment of mental health risks can be done in exactly the same way as other health and safety risks, starting with identifying the hazards and then assessing who may be harmed and the likelihood and consequence of that harm. It is critical that workers are consulted and participate in the process.

## The health risk assessment process



### Identify the health hazards

For example, by reviewing job descriptions, analysing tasks, schedules and location, consulting with workers, clients and other interested parties, analysing performance evaluations, worker surveys, standardised questionnaires, audits, and so on.



### Decide who may be harmed and how

When conducting a health risk assessment, employers need to establish who is working with the hazard and how they could be harmed, which will help them identify the best way of managing the risk.



### Evaluate the risk, decide on precautions and make an action plan

As part of the overall health management process, an organisation should address minimum requirements to protect workers from harm. These can include:

- Training and competence, e.g. first aid
- Monitoring and enforcing the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)
- A medical emergency response plan
- Occupational illness and sickness absence reporting.



### Record your findings

In order to comply with legislation, you will need to record the results of your risk assessment and show how you have implemented the relevant changes.



### Monitor the plan and update if necessary

No workplace remains the same forever and there are likely to be ongoing changes. Risks will change with new processes and procedures change and individual risk may also change. Each will bring a different hazard that you will need to update on the assessment.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND THE RETURN TO WORK

Returning to work is a huge issue in 2021. Similar issues also apply to the return-to-work process following any incident/illness.

“Line managers should ensure workers understand what is expected of them in terms of any changes to ways of working or behaving in the workplace and reinforce these messages regularly through appropriate communication channels (posters, intranet, newsletters, etc.). A process should be set up to ensure that individual workers can talk to their line manager, or other appropriate person, to discuss specific concerns and work together to address them.

“Ensuring that line managers speak with individuals to understand their concerns and work together to address them is critical and team discussions will help air potential issues and give people the opportunity to express how they feel, which in turn allows the organisation to determine what can be done to address issues that arise.”

*British Standards Institute*



## HOW TO FRAME CONVERSATIONS AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

- > **Time and place:** Choose a suitable time and appropriate place – this should be somewhere private and quiet.
- > **Encourage people to talk:** It can be difficult to talk about mental health. Asking simple open questions and letting people speak about their issues in their own words will help.
- > **Don't make assumptions:** The person may not need help or may feel they are able to manage their condition themselves. They may just need support every now and again when they are going through a difficult period.
- > **Listen to people and respond flexibly:** Make sure that the person, rather than their problem, is the focus. Adapt the support to suit them and make sure they are involved in finding solutions to any work-related difficulties they have.
- > **Be honest and clear:** If there are concerns about high absence levels or low performance, these need to be addressed at an early stage.
- > **Ensure confidentiality:** People need to feel that anything they say will be kept as confidential as possible and in accordance with any data protection laws.
- > **Develop an action plan:** An individual plan can identify the person's mental health problem, what their triggers are, possible impacts on work, who to contact in a crisis, and what support they need.
- > **Encourage people to seek advice and support:** The employee should be encouraged to seek help themselves if they haven't already. Many organisations have employee assistance programmes that can offer counselling, or helplines.
- > **Reassure people:** Remember that people may not want to talk straight away. It's important to let them know what support is available and that whenever they feel able to talk, you will make sure that they get the support they need.
- > **One size does not fit all:** Many people are able to manage their condition and perform their role to a high standard. Avoid guessing what symptoms they might have or what support they will need.

“Maintaining good levels of mental health has undoubtedly been one of the biggest challenges of the pandemic. Without question this will be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ‘long lockdown’ challenge for managers and leaders to navigate beyond the acute phase of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> There is ample evidence that employers are already taking this seriously. According to a December 2020 survey,<sup>10</sup> 96% of SME leaders identified mental health as a top priority. Furthermore, 39% stated that the wellbeing and health of their employees is likely to have the biggest impact on their decision-making over the next year.”

*Vitality and RSA*



# HYBRID WORKING AND MENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

We are entering a new world of work, where managers need to address the mental health of employees working from both home and office. As they draw up their post-lockdown plans, managers and leaders should explore the potential for a genuine ‘best of both’ model: a ‘healthy hybrid’ that can deliver inclusive productivity gains for their business alongside a healthier, happier workforce.

Where those measures have already been put in place during the pandemic, a survey by Vitality/RSA found many homeworkers have found working from home helpful for managing mental health, wellbeing and stress levels. Four in ten (44%) remote workers have found it “much” or “somewhat” easier to manage their mental health and wellbeing as a result of remote working.

Vitality/RSA advises that managers could also integrate well-evidenced behavioural ‘nudges’ such as messages that encourage mindfulness or simple breathing exercises during these short breaks. Bigger changes may also be needed and in some jurisdictions are already being considered by legislative policymakers. One such change is the idea of formal ‘right to disconnect’ policies that would grant employees a guarantee of protected time to disengage from emails and ‘always on’ work cultures.

**“Most senior leaders we interviewed suggested that clear communication and shared safe spaces to discuss emerging issues have been a key part of their crisis management strategy, for both wellbeing and productivity purposes. This idea – that colleagues can openly and respectfully share their feelings without the fear of negative consequences – is called “psychological safety” and is the key ingredient in the individual bonds that ultimately lead to a healthy workplace culture.**

**“As we move further away from the acute crisis, organisations should not throw these gains away. Informal shared spaces set up to manage wellbeing and productivity through the pandemic should continue and, where relevant, new formal employee representation forums should be set up to protect against backsliding. Employee voice and representation can help provide employees with a shared space of their own to express concerns about management and unhealthy hybrid behaviour. But in an organisation that is committed to psychological safety they can also provide a quick and constructive feedback loop between employees and senior leaders, that can help to lock in healthy behaviours.”**

*Vitality and RSA*

# CONCLUSION

Line managers have a fundamental role to play in the promotion of positive mental health in the workplace. The positive impact they can have on the wellbeing of their direct reports is huge, therefore it is vital they receive the best possible support from their organisations to empower them to champion positive mental health within the workplace.

Much more work needs to be done from the top. Organisations need to take a more proactive approach to building and maintaining a positive, supportive workplace culture, as early action can make a vast amount of difference in helping avert any issues or nip them in the bud before they escalate.

Businesses also need to work hard to break down the taboos surrounding mental health and create more open lines of communication. They need to support their managers to fulfil their role by equipping them with the skills and knowledge to promote positive mental health, but without placing unrealistic expectations on them. In return, they will reap the rewards of happier, healthier, more engaged and productive employees.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > All employers have obligations under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to look after employees' physical and mental health.
- > Investing time and effort in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of staff will be repaid many times over in terms of enhanced morale, engagement, loyalty and productivity.
- > It's widely agreed that line managers are the first line of defence in terms of employee health and wellbeing. They need to be supported by their organisation to be able to do this – 62% of line managers say they don't get enough help from their organisation to support the mental wellbeing of their staff.
- > It is important for the employer to clearly articulate the expectations, roles and accountability of different people in the organisation, from senior leadership to head of human resources, board and management, all the way to employee.



# REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- <sup>1</sup> [www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/resource/thriving-at-work-the-stevenson-farmer-review-of-mental-health-and-employers/](http://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/resource/thriving-at-work-the-stevenson-farmer-review-of-mental-health-and-employers/)
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