

Mental health at work: How to spot when a colleague's struggling

With the increased attention on managing our own wellbeing and mental health at work, how can we as employees, managers and leaders help our colleagues when they are struggling?

Absence due to poor mental health is at the highest it has been in the UK for many years. Poor mental health accounts for more than half of all work-related illnesses, with around 51% of long-term sick leave due to stress, depression or anxiety.¹

The Mental Health Foundation also highlight that over the past decade, the number of workers aged 16 - 34 years old who reported that their mental health limits the type or amount of work they can do has more than quadrupled.²

WHY HAVE NUMBERS RISEN?

It could be argued that there are many different factors contributing to this, such as:

- An increase in awareness, which then results in an increase in reporting mental health issues.
- The impact of COVID and how everyone's life changed overnight.
- The younger workforce prioritising their mental health, along with the idea that they are seeking true work/life balance and not waiting to reach burnout before they take mental health sick leave.

Whatever the reason, the increase in employee mental health sick leave, and the subsequent increase in the amount of time employees are off, is high.



¹ Ten workplace mental health statistics for 2023 – [MHFA England](#)

² Mental health at work: statistics – [Mental Health Foundation](#)

WHAT SIGNS CAN WE LOOK OUT FOR?

Behaviour

The most common is a change in their behaviour. For example, if Pete is normally always smiling and asking how everyone is, but recently is quieter and not his usual bubbly self, then something might have changed for him.

Another example is a change in someone's working behaviour. For example, someone who used to put on their camera when on a video call, is now not putting it on. Other work behaviour changes may include:

- coming to meetings unusually late or uncommonly early,
- sending out multiple emails late at night or early in the morning,

These might be signs that something has changed for them.

Changes in someone's 'normal' behaviour is usually a reliable indicator that something is going on.

Physical appearance

For example, is Emily looking tired all the time? Is she complaining of lack of sleep or is she perhaps looking less presentable than usual? Is she appearing more irritable and not turning on her camera as much?

These are some subtle signs to watch out for, as any change in appearance might be easily attributed to a short period of stress when a project deadline is due. However, longer periods can have a negative impact on mental health.

Physical health symptoms

Does Raj complain of headaches and physical bodily pain more? Has his appetite decreased or increased and is he stating he is doing less or being less active than usual due to these physical health complaints?

Engaging in the world

Alice has always loved to go on a weekend brunch with her team and never misses book club but slowly she is disengaging from work social activities, as well as doing less with her husband and kids. Everyone has noticed she is quieter and more withdrawn.

Each of these statements can have straightforward explanations, however, if we notice these things and are worried, a simple thing to do is ask the person, "how are you doing?"

A common answer to this question is often, "fine". It is encouraged to ask it again, "no, how are you really?", and see if you get a different response.

Asking twice is often a good strategy to give someone permission to open up, if they wish, and demonstrates you are actually asking because you care and are not just being polite.



HOW CAN YOU HELP?

There are some do's and don'ts, if you are worried about someone, want to ask more and offer a listening ear:

DOs

Educate yourself

Stress, burnout, depression and anxiety are the highest cause of mental health absences in the UK.

Listen

Be non-judgemental and paraphrase. It's okay to say "I don't understand but I am listening, I want to help".

Encourage open conversations in your teams

Don't be afraid to say when you are struggling.

Help the individual to access support

Whether that's via a manager, the HR department or their GP.

Be mindful of language and of what you share

You want to connect and be helpful but everyone experiences mental health in different ways so be mindful of this.

DON'Ts

Sensitivity is the key

Don't say "I have to talk to you about your behaviour or mood". Instead try saying "you don't seem like yourself recently, is there anything I can help with? Anything you want to raise, or discuss?" Then follow with: "If not that's fine, I am just letting you know that if you need anything I will listen and try to help".

Don't tell them your story

Let them tell you theirs.

Don't invalidate in any way

By saying things like: "I have known you for years, you never struggle, you are strong and will get through this."

Don't say blunt phrases

When someone is highly emotional, don't say things like, "I think you need time off". Instead, try saying "you are a valuable colleague and someone who is an important part of the team, but if you need time off and you feel it will help you, we will support you and make a joint plan for what you feel you need".

Remember - you are not a mental health professional, nor are you expected to be one. What you are doing is noticing that there might be a problem, offering a listening ear and then directing the individual to go to their GP, HR, and encouraging them to get help. We all need help at different times in our lives, there is no shame in this and the longer you suffer and avoid it, the worse it can get.

Please do ask the questions and do seek support if you need it.

PHC's mental health support services

Mental Health Assessments and Support service

Faster access to support and treatment for mental health conditions via our clinically led pathway, without the need for a GP referral*. Members can benefit from:

- Talking to an expert without any fuss
- Receiving the right care and treatment
- Quality care nationwide
- Guidance every step of the way

Available to over 18's only and only if Mental Health is a core benefit on the member's plan.

Counselling and Support service

Sometimes daily life can seem full of challenges. So it's reassuring for a member to know they've got somewhere to turn to when they need reliable information or support, and someone to talk to when things don't run as smoothly as they'd like. Members can benefit from:

- Unlimited phone support, available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
- Face-to-face or remote counselling
- Confidential live chat support from our counsellors
- LifeManagement™ support
- Online portal access

Available to over 16's only.

24/7 Health Support Line

Online and telephone access 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to a team of health professionals to answer a member's health questions. Here, a member can get clear health information they can trust, supported by clinical evidence, to point them to services where they can get the care they need. Members can speak to them day and night.

Our team of experienced health professionals include nurses, counsellors, midwives** and pharmacists**.

**Subject to the terms, conditions and the underwriting terms applied to your cover. For example, if you are covered on moratorium underwriting, we may require some further information from your registered GP in order to assess whether your claim is eligible.*

***24/7 health support line midwife and pharmacist services available 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm Saturdays and 8am to 12pm on Sundays.*