

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

- ▶ Charity Mind estimate that 1 in 4 people experience a mental health problem each year.
- ▶ Employers have a responsibility to ensure staff health, safety and welfare at work.
- ▶ How can you support your employees?

What's it about?

In September 2017 the construction industry launched a new initiative called 'Mates in Mind' backed by the Health in Construction Leadership Group and the British Safety Council designed to tackle the mental health of workers within the construction industry.

According to a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) study 18% of reported work related illness in the UK construction industry is the result of mental health problems such as stress, depression and anxiety [Source: Mates in Mind]. The Mates in Mind scheme hopes to tackle the taboo of mental health and encourage a culture of discussion and openness in the workplace.

Why does it matter?

For businesses there are significant financial impacts resulting from mental health conditions. The average employee takes seven days a year off sick of which 40% are for mental health related issues resulting in a loss of £8.4 billion a year in sickness absence. [Source: Centre for Mental Health]

Employers also have a legal duty under section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their employees. Regulators such as the HSE have in the past served improvement notices on businesses in relation to stress. West Dorset General Hospitals NHS Trust and Liverpool Hope University have both been served with improvement notices for failing to risk assess employees' exposure to causes of work-related stress.

The focus on stress and mental health marks new territory for the HSE. In recent years the number of people working in the manufacturing industry has declined and we have witnessed a shift towards a more service based industry. New statistics published on 1 November 2017 by the HSE show that 49% of all working days lost due to ill health in 2016/17 were due to stress, depression or anxiety and that 236,000 workers suffered a new case of work related stress conditions in 2016/17. Regulators are recognising the changing risks that the British workforce now face and are developing tools and resources to deal with these new risks. Businesses should therefore ensure that they have policies and procedures in place to address these risks.

Now what?

The Mates in Mind initiative offers construction firms a framework for approaching mental health issues by supporting employees and line managers through training, resources and knowledge building and sets an important lead for other businesses to follow. The HSE also have a set of management standards which if present, demonstrate good practice in relation to tackling stress. The standards cover six areas which employers should risk assess in order to manage stress in the workplace.

'The key to this is to keep it simple' says Steve Giblin Group HSSEQ Director for Speedy Services, 'the last thing an employee with an illness needs is a complicated route to get proper care. Sometimes an early conversation with someone who will just listen is the easiest way to know your organisation cares about you and will support and help you through the process. But been the macho industry that construction is – getting people to talk is sometimes the hardest thing, so simplicity is the key'..

On 26 October 2017 the government published The Thriving at Work report which put the annual cost to the UK economy of poor mental health at £99bn, £42bn of which is borne to employers. The report recommends six core standards that employers should implement and following the publication the NHS and Civil Service are the first two organisations to announce that they will abide by the recommendations. The Prime Minister is now in the process of writing to all key business groups to encourage employers to implement these standards in order to tackle the issue of mental health in the workplace.

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