



# MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH LEADERS' GUIDE

Leadership is the foundation for building and maintaining mental health and wellbeing across organisations. Individual leadership (of self and others) creates an environment that reduces the potential for individual mental health related issues to arise. A mentally healthy workforce will also be more engaged, cohesive, motivated and high performing.

Leaders have a key role to play in shaping the work environment and managing workplace pressures. This includes providing strategic as well as day-today direction, managing workloads and creating a positive work environment.

## SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH

Most individuals will ask for help with physical injuries but are less likely to do so when it comes to mental health. Stigma is one explanation, and it's also possible sometimes people do not relate their symptoms with ill health.

As a leader you should make it clear there is no shame in seeking help for mental health issues and that while help seeking can sometimes be hard, not doing so may impact on their performance and lead to inadvertently letting their colleagues or loved ones down.

When supporting others your role is not to act as a counsellor. A range of additional support is available for those who need it. Your role is to recognise when someone in your team is not ok, have a conversation with them about this, arrange for them to get the support that they need, and keep connected with the individual and their care support network to support their recovery (enabling time off to attend appointments, accommodating any absences from work, working with them to ensure that the wider team have the information they need to provide a supportive work environment).

[Read more about developing a culture of mental health wellbeing at work](#)

## SIGNS OF STRESS

There are many obvious causes of stress in people's lives, in particular, exposure to a traumatic event, significant physical health issues or the loss of a loved one. Other sources of stress are less extreme but are

nevertheless important, and the cumulative effect of these can be significant. It is important to check on how people are going during these times.

- **Performance pressures:** Fears of failing or the impact of not performing as well as one hoped.
- **Change and transition:** The prospect of redundancy or retirement can be particularly difficult for many people, especially those who have been in the organisation for many years, or when this change has been sudden or involuntary.
- **Relationship issues:** When relationships break down, it can be difficult to see a path forward. In longer term relationships where there are shared finances and children involved, the separation process can often be lengthy and emotionally draining.  
Financial pressures – it might be an unexpected bill that causes financial pressure, a partner losing a job, dropping to one income to raise a family, or a relationship split.

## BUILDING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

A healthy environment is one where it is clear what is expected. People receive regular (constructive) feedback about how they are going, their contribution is acknowledged and recognised appropriately, and any performance issues are addressed appropriately/in a timely manner. People feel supported, teams work collaboratively towards common goals, and teamwork and maintenance of a healthy lifestyle is encouraged.

Good leaders:

- Know their people.
- Are visible, accountable and role model what is expected.
- Are authentic and present, especially during times of change.
- Set clear goals, understand abilities and guide performance.
- Create a shared sense of purpose and values.
- Engage people to do willingly and well what needs to be done.
- Build capability and talent.
- Reinforce the importance of teamwork, buddy support and self responsibility.
- Promote a healthy workplace culture.
- Are approachable.

[Read the Mental Health Foundation's guide to mental health in the workplace](#)

## WHEN SOMETHING BAD HAPPENS

Sometimes bad events happen – for example recent natural disasters like earthquakes have had a major impact on some workplaces. Sometimes staff members are injured or die in the workplace, or in difficult circumstances that will impact on wider team members. Others are involved in assessing the safety of buildings and infrastructure for the wider public, and others still may have seen their designs fail in a catastrophic event.

## 1: ACKNOWLEDGE AND LISTEN

The leadership has a responsibility to acknowledge the event. Do not ignore the event, or carry on without acknowledging the event. However, do not over-emphasise the event either. Talk about facts only. What you could do: approach it the same way you would send a message over the Telephone: calm, straightforward and clear.

Provide an opportunity for discussion. Expect that some members will not want to talk about the event, or others may only wish to discuss it with their peers. Each person will cope with a difficult/stressful event in their own way, and we do not want to interfere with positive coping strategies.

## 2: INFORM – CHECK IN AND APPLY THE MODEL

Most individuals (80%) will have some short-term reaction to stressful or difficult events. Remind your team that it is important for them to take care of themselves. For some they may not be bothered at all, but for others some symptoms of distress may continue over the following days or weeks. Reinforce that this is normal. However, if these symptoms become too distressing, there are resources available, and inform them that you will help them to access them.

## 3: RESPOND – OBSERVE, FOLLOW UP, MODEL

Observe and follow-up with members later on to see how they are doing, and ensure that you model healthy coping. People want to hear leader's negative emotions or thoughts after a distressing event. They don't need you to pretend that everything is okay. However, they also need to see their leader managing their reactions in a healthy manner, including seeking care when/if necessary.

[Read about positive communication at work](#)

# KEEPING AN EYE OUT

The philosophy behind recognising stress reactions in other people, in some respects, is very simple. Any sort of change in behaviour, that can't be explained, is cause for concern. Changes in behaviour to watch for may include:

- **Temperament:** A usually easy-going person may become difficult to be with.
- **Standards:** Someone who usually takes pride in their appearance or work may let standards slip.
- **Interests:** Some people who had a range of interests may be completely disinterested in prior interests. In addition, their range of interests may narrow to include only those things that are causing them stress.
- **Decision making ability:** Some people may make uncharacteristically rash decisions. Others may be very rigid, in that they stick to a decision even if it needs to be adapted to changing circumstances.
- **Pace:** Some people become extremely active, trying to do lots of things – they become almost “hyper”. Others slow down, and even though they may think they are productive, may achieve very little.
- **Control:** Some people exhibit less control over their behaviour and emotions when they are under stress. They tend to play hard or be more expressive and emotional. Others are over controlled, and try to keep their emotions and feelings in check.

- **Memory:** Some people have problems with their memory when they are under stress. They are often absent-minded and forgetful, especially of those things that are outside their narrowed field of focus.
- **Susceptibility to illness:** Someone who is usually very healthy may seem to be sick all of the time, or complain of minor illnesses.
- **Personality:** Some usually sociable people withdraw and spend less time with other people than they normally do. People who may not usually get angry very easily can become angry for trivial reasons. Others may be irritable much of the time.