

Mental Health Problems

Priority 1 – to help staff stay at work!

Follow the tips below to help support staff, who may be struggling with their mental health, to maintain their attendance:

Develop your school's culture to be supportive of good mental health

Aim for a culture where mental health is taken seriously and any stigmas associated with it are removed. An individual will find it easier to discuss their mental health more openly if they are reassured that they are not going to be viewed as a 'failure' or 'weak'.

Have open conversations with staff about their mental health

It isn't always an easy conversation to have to explain to your manager that you are struggling to cope with home/work life, especially if there isn't an opportunity to do this in a busy school environment.

Ensure that all staff have the opportunity for a 'catch-up' with their line manager on a regular basis, in a confidential setting. The conversation doesn't require a specialist understanding; simply asking how a person is, and listening can help a great deal. It could be looked at similarly to a physical condition – by asking what the problem is, what is causing it and what can be done to manage/alleviate mental ill health.

Keep an eye out for the signs

Make sure you know your staff well enough to be able to identify when their behaviour is out of character. Not everyone who experiences mental ill health will exhibit obvious signs of mental ill health, but if they do they may include:

- changes in usual behaviour, mood or how they interact with colleagues
- changes in the standard of their work or focus on tasks
- appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn and reduced interest in tasks they previously enjoyed
- changes in appetite and/or increase in smoking and drinking
- increase in sickness absence and/or turning up late to work.

Remember that mental ill health manifests itself differently with each individual and at different times; therefore it is important to listen and try to understand what the individual is saying they are struggling with and what they feel would help as they know how they feel best.

Offer practical support

Talk to staff about what would help them to manage better and it may be that actions, adjustments or support are feasible. Schools should be clear with the individual as to what they cannot reasonably accommodate, as not every solution will be practicable.

Get support or guidance if required from external organisations both for the school (HR and/or Occupational Health) and/or the individual (see overleaf). Once steps to support the individual have been identified, it is advisable that an action plan is created documenting the measures put in place.

If the staff member has gone off sick...

Consider what you would do if the person was off with a physical illness – if you would send a ‘get well soon’ card or have a collection – then do that. Don’t treat a mental illness differently.

Talk as soon as you can – ask them what would work best for them in terms of staying in touch – it may be that they would prefer text or e-mail rather than phone calls. Also agree what you will share with their colleagues about their absence.

Follow the attendance management policy, reassuring the employee that the process is a supportive measure, designed to help them get back to work as soon as they are fit enough.

Consider where to meet up – offer to meet them at home if they would prefer or at a neutral venue if they are anxious about coming into school.

Help them access support – make sure they know they can bring a companion to meetings, whether that’s a union rep or a colleague.

Plan for their return – once they are feeling ready to talk about returning, discuss what practical measure can be put in place to help them make a successful return

Contact NYHR’s HR advisors to provide support at meetings held under the policy or to provide useful guidance by telephone (01609 798343) or email (NYHR@northyorks.gov.uk).

Other sources for support include:

Leaders:

- **MIND** - <https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/> - especially the free resources - very accessible and helpful guidance.
- **Mindful Employer** - <http://www.mindfulemployer.net/> - is a UK-wide, NHS initiative. It is aimed at increasing awareness of mental health at work and also includes some great resources including ‘Making work work’.
- **ACAS - Manager** - <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=6064>. More excellent guidance and ideas for adjustments. Also free online learning package.

Employees:

- Your school’s Employee Assistance Programme which provides confidential counselling: Health Assured (in North Yorkshire) and Workplace Wellness (in York).
- **Education Support Partnership** <https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/helping-you> provides free confidential support/counselling 24 hours 7 days a week specifically for any staff in education. Online contact options also available.
- **Remploy** - <http://www.remploy.co.uk/> - offers a free and confidential Workplace Mental Health Support Service for anyone absent from work or finding work difficult because of a mental health condition. It aims to help people remain in, or return to, their role.