

HOW TO SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUR EMPLOYEES & TEAM MEMBERS

Looking after your employees' and team members' mental health, as well as your own, is an important part of any business; managing the mental health of your staff, promoting their wellbeing, and tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems.

However, knowing how best to do so doesn't always come easily. For this reason, we have created a guide to assist you in supporting the mental health of your employees and team members. This is a starting point from which business leaders can begin the work of supporting their employees and their mental health.

WELLNESS ACTION PLANS

A Wellness Action Plan (WAP) is a tool that can be used to help you identify what keeps you and your employees well at work, what causes you and your employees to become unwell, and what support can be given to either boost a person's wellbeing, or to help them through a recovery.

The WAPs are a personalised, practical tool we can all use – whether we have a mental health problem or not – to help us identify what keeps us well at work, what causes us to become unwell and the support we would like to receive from our manager to boost our wellbeing or support us through a recovery.

As a business leader, encouraging your team to draw up a WAP will give them ownership of the practical steps needed to help them stay well at work or manage a mental health problem. On top of this, it allows for a discourse to begin between you and your employees regarding their needs and experiences of wellbeing in the workplace.

Alongside the obvious benefits of simply helping to improve a person's mental health, from a business perspective, the assistance that a WAP can provide will likely contribute towards increased productivity and performance levels as well as higher levels of job satisfaction - all of which can also contribute towards a lower level of staff turnover.

While an introduction to WAPs are important for existing staff, once in place, it is recommended that WAPs are used for new starters as part of their induction to your business. This demonstrates a commitment to their wellbeing from the company as well as showcasing your creativity in care.

WAPs can also be used in conversations regarding a return to work following time off due to a mental health-related issue or problem.

WHAT SHOULD A WELLNESS ACTION PLAN COVER?

A Wellness Action Plan should cover the following:

- Approaches a person can adopt to support their mental wellbeing
- Information about the early warning signs of poor mental health to look out for
- Information on any workplace triggers for poor mental health or stress
- Information on the potential impact(s), if any, of poor mental health on performance
- Information on the support they require from you as their manager
- Actions and steps that all parties can / will take if a person is experiencing stress or poor mental health
- A confirmation on an agreed time to review the WAP
- Any support measures which are in place, as well as an agreed to time review them

Alongside the above, which should not be considered an exhaustive list, it is important to add in anything else that either you or your employees believe would be useful in supporting your team's mental health.

Please note: *The WAP is not legally binding, but is intended as an agreement between you and your team member in order to promote their wellbeing or address any existing mental health needs, including any adjustments they may wish to discuss.*

SUPPORTING STAFF WELLBEING

As a manager, or business leader, your encouragement will be key in your team members developing their WAP. As a minimum, it would be recommended that you begin by asking your team member(s) to attempt to complete the WAP themselves and then follow this by scheduling a time, date and place to meet and discuss their WAP with you. The WAP can then be finalised based on these discussions.

Questions you could ask the person you are supporting to think about might include:

- What are you like when you are feeling well and flourishing at work?
- What does a work environment that promotes good mental wellbeing look like?
- What would help maintain your mental wellbeing?
- What coping strategies do you already use for dealing with poor mental health and how / why have these been effective?
- Have you addressed similar challenges in the past? If so, how?
- What hasn't worked for you in the past and why do you think this might be?

It is key to remember that in most instances, an individual is the expert on their own mental health and one should not presume to know more about someone else's issues than they do. The WAP provides the space and structure to consider this.

The WAP should include anything that is important to the person's mental wellbeing; from their triggers and signs of poor mental health, to what action to take and what support they need when or if they become unwell.

Once the WAP has been completed, you should ensure that time is made, possibly within your existing catch-ups or 1-1s, to review the WAP with the team member and make any changes required.

It is key to think about the WAP as an ongoing, regularly updated and flexible document to ensure its utmost effectiveness. As such, regular feedback with your team members to discuss what is and isn't working is an essential part of the process.

You are able to, and it can be helpful to, encourage your team member(s) to seek advice from a healthcare professional, such as a GP or Occupational Health expert, on what they may wish to include in their Wellness Action Plan.

As a manager, being as creative as possible when thinking about how to address the specific needs of your staff can be of great benefit. Remember too that there is unlikely to be a 'one size fits all' approach and so careful consideration to any issue should always be taken.

Please note: *Each individual should write and take ownership of their WAP in order to best express their own personal choices, experience(s) and their needs. Your role as manager is to discuss their plan with them and provide support, including guidance on what is possible for any reasonable adjustments. Avoid influencing them in any way by offering your own personal advice or suggestions.*

CONFIDENTIALITY

The WAP should be between manager and employee only, held confidentially and securely. The employee should be informed of how the information will be used, and clarification of their understanding of this must take place. This will help to ensure that the individual will only provide information that they are happy to share.

If the employee is filling out a WAP as a result of being unwell, you can ask whether they would consent for a copy of it to be held with HR along with any other information about their wellbeing, such as an Occupational Health report or a Return to Work plan. However, consent must be given for this by the individual.

In order to fulfil your duty of care to keep your staff members safe at work, you are obliged to break confidentiality if they are experiencing a crisis. If you become aware that someone is at serious risk of harm, whether this is the employee or someone else, you should call the emergency services.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

As a result of completing a Wellness Action Plan, one outcome could be the decision to make some reasonable adjustments. A reasonable adjustment is an alteration that an employer makes which enables employees to continue with their duties without being at a disadvantage compared to others.

Under the Equality Act 2010, there is a legal duty on employers to make these reasonable adjustments for employees with a disability. Whether a mental health problem is defined as a disability or not, it is encouraged that employers make reasonable adjustments for staff who are experiencing mental health problems.

The types of reasonable adjustments commonly made for people experiencing a mental health problem depends on the symptoms being experienced by the individual, and so as mentioned previously, a 'one size fits all' approach will not work. Your business's available resources may also factor into what adjustments are able to be made at all. As such, it is important that you are aware of what your business may be able to provide and therefore help to define what could be considered 'reasonable' in the context of these discussions and decisions.

Reasonable adjustments could include (though would not be limited to) the following:

- Providing written instructions for an individual whose anxiety affects their memory
- Providing support with a person's workload and helping them prioritise their work
- Agreeing the type of work they can handle whilst they are on a phased return to work
- Increasing the frequency of catch-ups or 1-1s
- Flexible working hours
- Providing a day off for a person who is starting or reducing medication if they are experiencing any side effects of this
- A change in hours to accommodate therapy or counselling sessions allowing someone to take time out of the office when they became particularly anxious
- A change to part-time working or job-share arrangements
- Allowing the employee full control over their annual leave arrangements (ie: not putting any blocks on the time of year or frequency)
- Allowing for breaks between meetings to reduce the pressure they can have on a person
- Allowing for a gradual return to work after a period of sickness or absence related to another issue
- Working from home
- A reduction in hours
- Relief from some responsibilities within their role
- A change in location within the office (for example: moving a desk from a busy area to a quieter area)
- Provision of a quiet space within the workplace
- Providing mediation if a situation between team members requires it

USEFUL LINKS

- Rethink Mental Illness: <https://www.rethink.org/>
- ACAS: <https://www.acas.org.uk/>
- Reasonable Adjustments For Disabled Workers: <https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers>

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