

# Supervisors' Guide to Supporting Learners' Mental Health



For NHS staff, supervisors,  
& line managers

## What is mental health?

Mental health, like physical health, can fluctuate on a spectrum from good to poor. Mental health problems can affect any of us, irrespective of age, personality or background. They can appear as a result of experiences in both our personal and working lives – or they can just sporadically happen.

Mental health problems can affect the way people think, feel or behave. In some cases, this can seriously limit a person's ability to cope with day-to-day life. However, many people effectively manage their mental health problems alongside the demands of a job and daily life, sometimes with treatment and support. Others may experience symptoms of mental ill health but may never be diagnosed with a condition.

**The crucial thing to remember is that everyone's experience of mental health is different – two people with the same condition may have entirely different symptoms. That's why working with people on an individual basis is extremely important. Therefore, when supporting a learner, it is important not to label them by focusing on a diagnosis. Instead, talk to them about how it impacts on their work.**

## How do I know if someone is experiencing a mental health problem?

You should never make assumptions about people's mental health, as there may not be outward signs, but clues might include:

- Changes in people's behaviour or mood.
- Changes in their work output, motivation levels and focus.
- Struggling to make decisions, get organised and find solutions to problems.
- Appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn and losing interest in activities and tasks.
- Changes in eating habits, appetite and increased smoking and drinking.

## How do I encourage learners to open up about their mental health?

Too often learners are scared to tell their supervisor about a mental health problem, and so problems can spiral. Supervisors need to send a clear signal to learners that their mental health matters and being open about it will lead to support, not discrimination. A simple way to communicate this is to explain that mental health will be treated in the same way as physical health, and to encourage an open dialogue by taking steps to normalise conversations about mental health. Regular one-to-one meetings are a great place to ask your learners how they're getting on, and doing so regularly will help build trust and give employees a chance to raise problems at an early stage.

## How do I open up a conversation with a learner about their mental health?

Work can be one of the most stressful factors in people's lives but often people don't feel able to ask for help when they're struggling. This is why it's vital that supervisors routinely ask learners how they're doing and discuss their mental health – it helps build up people's confidence to speak up earlier on and get the help they need sooner.

Supervisors should start this process off in a positive and supportive way. Although it can be daunting to have a conversation about a person's mental health, no new special skills are needed – just the ones you use every day as a clinician such as common sense, empathy, being approachable and listening. A good place to start is simply to ask someone how they're doing.

You don't need to have all the answers – it's about having the conversation and the support you offer by talking. Say what feels comfortable for you. If what you say doesn't sound quite right, stop and try again. It doesn't have to be the end of the conversation.

**If you avoid speaking to learners about their mental health, problems can spiral, with a negative impact for them.**

### Conversation tips

- **Avoid Interruptions** - Choose a quiet, private place, switch off phones/bleeps and ensure colleagues can't walk in and interrupt.
- **Encourage the learner to talk** - Ask simple, open and non-judgemental questions and let learners' explain it in their own words
- **Don't make assumptions & avoid judgemental or patronising responses.** Show empathy and understanding.
- **Listen actively and respond flexibly**
- Maintain good eye contact.
- **Be honest and clear**
- **Confidentiality**
- **Be prepared for some silences and be patient**
- **Follow up in writing, especially agreed actions or support**
- **Encourage learners' to seek advice and support**

- Possible questions to ask
- ✓ How are you doing at the moment?
  - ✓ You seem to be a bit down/under pressure/frustrated/. angry. Is everything okay?
  - ✓ I've noticed you've been arriving late recently and I wondered if you're okay?
  - ✓ Is there anything I can do to help?
  - ✓ What would you like to happen? How?
  - ✓ What support do you think might help?
  - ✓ Have you spoken to your GP or looked for help anywhere else?

- Questions to avoid
- X You're clearly struggling. What's up?
  - X Why can't you just get your act together?
  - X What do you expect me to do about it?
  - X Your performance is really unacceptable right now – what's going on?
  - X Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay. Why aren't you?
  - X Who do you expect to pick up all the work that you can't manage?



### How to support a learner with their mental health problem

After opening up a dialogue with your learner about their mental health the priority is to develop positive steps to address the key issues they're struggling with.

- Be positive – focus on what learners' can do, rather than what they can't.
- Work together and involve people in finding solutions as much as possible.
- Remember the learner will often be the expert when it comes to identifying the support or adjustment they need and how to manage their triggers for poor mental health.
- In some cases learners' may be unable to identify adjustments themselves so you may need to try some out.
- Regularly review actions to check it's working and adjust if necessary

**While voluntary and agreed adjustments are supportive, it's important that learners' are not treated differently or asked to do things that others are not required to e.g. stopping on-call requirements. This may be counter-productive and damage their self-esteem. It may also be discriminatory.**

#### Workplace adjustments

Explore with the learner their specific needs and be as creative as possible when thinking about how to address these issues. Below are some examples of adjustments you could consider.

- Changes to how the learner performs their role**
  - Flexible hours, including agreed leave to attend appointments related to mental health e.g. counselling
  - Phased return
- Changes to the role itself (temporary or permanent)**
  - Reallocating some tasks or changes to their duties



### 3. Extra support

- Increased supervision or extra help with negotiating workload
- More opportunities positive and constructive feedback to build self esteem
- Debriefing sessions after difficult workplace experiences
- Self-referral to internal support available

#### Developing an action plan

We would encourage you to work together with your learner to develop a personal action plan to proactively manage their mental health. This facilitates open dialogue with supervisors and colleagues – leading to practical, agreed steps which can form the basis for regular monitoring and review.

#### An action plan covers:

- Symptoms, early warning signs and triggers
- Potential impact of people's mental health problem on their performance
- What support they need from their line manager
- Positive steps for the individual to take

➤ **In supporting learners', it is really important to be mindful of maintaining your boundaries and remember that your role is to solely encourage learners to seek appropriate help.**

### Resources and useful links

- MIND** [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- Heads up** *Education & Training resources*  
<https://www.headsup.org.au/training-and-resources/educational-and-training/beyondblue-resources>
- Training Zone** *Resources for line managers*  
<https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/lead/culture/mental-health-training-for-line-managers-useful-online-resources>
- Time to Change** [www.time-to-change.org.uk](http://www.time-to-change.org.uk)