

Mental health at work: insights from the Priory

Mental health at work is a hot topic nowadays because it has such far-reaching consequences for both people and productivity.

Our jobs probably have the biggest impact on our psyche after immediate family, according to consultant psychiatrist Dr Paul McLaren. No wonder they affect our mental health.

PES joined forces with the Priory in London to host two exciting wellbeing seminars on this important subject. Here we share some insights from Dr McLaren's presentation.

Workaholism

Why does work affect our mental health so much? Firstly, because workaholism has become commonplace. For some people, work acts like a drug. It can help to bury difficult emotions, allow withdrawal from other aspects of life, or even become a search for meaning. This can make it addictive.

Stress, strain and burnout

But work addiction doesn't solve any problems. The outcome of workaholism is stress, strain and burnout. Even 20 years ago burnout was recognised as reaching epidemic proportions in America. Not much seems to have changed, and now we see the same thing happening in the UK.

Workplace distress is implicated in at least 15% of occupational disability claims, making it a 21st century epidemic. The most 'toxic' occupations are considered to be healthcare, financial services and the police, where the risk of suicide increases.

Anxiety, panic, depression

Three common mental disorders repeatedly top the occupational stress list – anxiety, panic and depression.

Anxiety can include phobias, and may or may not involve actual panic attacks. Sometimes anxiety is much more generalised. A panic attack, however, is something quite specific and very frightening for the sufferer. It's characterised by a sudden rush of fear accompanied by physical symptoms such as breathlessness, palpitations, dizziness, trembling, choking, nausea and chest pain.

Women are two to three times more likely to experience panic attacks than men. Divorce or separation are associated with increased occurrences, and family history is a significant risk factor.

Many people are sceptical about panic attacks but they are very real. The good news is that those affected should respond well to treatment if the problem is recognised and accepted by employers.

Depression is a condition that involves much more than low mood. It can mean poor concentration, irritability, and loss of enjoyment of things that normally give pleasure. Around one in four people will seek help for depression at any time – how many of your own workforce might be affected?

Recognise the signs

How do you know if someone is suffering mental distress at work? Look out for uncharacteristic mistakes, expressions of unhappiness, absenteeism or passive-aggressive behaviour. Loss of motivation or confidence may indicate distress.

Organisations that grow rapidly, or downsize dramatically, can affect people's state of mind. One study showed that employees' health could be negatively affected if the workforce grew by more than 18% per year. Another found that workers who kept their jobs during major downsizing were twice as likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease.

What can employers do?

Mental ill-health among employees needn't be debilitating. Employers can learn to spot the signs early and give an appropriate response – this is the key to success. It's important to distinguish between an ongoing mental health condition and distress that's actually caused by work (or a combination of the two).

The former needs to be managed by the employee with support from their employer. The person may well have already disclosed their diagnosed mental health condition. This needn't impair their ability to do the job, provided reasonable adjustments are made. Remember that some conditions are protected characteristics in the Equalities Act. Simply having time off may not help the person, so it's important to understand their specific needs.

Occupational stress may trigger an episode of mental illness, and of course, it can affect any employee, whether they have an ongoing mental health condition or not. In both cases, the onus is on the employer to spot the signs, take appropriate action and create a supportive culture.

Training in mental health awareness and resilience will help employers, managers and colleagues understand the issues. Enlightened employers are going one step further and training staff to become mental health first aiders, who are able to offer immediate support and provide sources of referral if needed.

Be a good employer

If work is a source of stress then employers should take action to improve employee wellbeing. Why? Well not just because it's the right thing to do. It's also

makes total business sense if the organisation is to grow in a healthy, sustainable way.

Here are some of the things that create occupational stress. If you recognise these in your organisation, it may be time to take action.

- Working long hours
- Work overload and pressure
- Lack of control
- Lack of participation in decision-making
- Unclear management and work roles
- Not enough social support
- Poor feedback and communication

Let's not forget that a positive work experience can actually be protective and helpful for some people who are suffering mental distress. If the job isn't the issue, then a healthy work environment can offer social contact, routine and a chance to become absorbed in other activities.

Get expert help

Take a look at our interactive diagram on what makes a positive employee experience for more ideas. If you're not sure where to start in implementing change, our wellbeing, HR and employee benefits experts are here to help.

About PES

Delivering a great employee experience is a challenge for growing organisations. At PES, it's what we do. Our [online employee benefits](#) platform, [HR support](#) and [workplace wellbeing](#) services bring out the best in your employees – enabling your business to thrive.