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Breaking the silence: how to encourage open conversations around mental health

In partnership with

onebright
mental health

Legal & General

Opening up to mental health

Ask yourself: Would you talk with your manager if you had a physical illness or injury such as broken leg? Of course, it could affect job performance. Would you receive support from colleagues and family? Certainly, there is no stigma around having a broken leg and seeking treatment.

Now ask yourself: What if you had a mental health problem? Would you discuss it with your line manager? If not, why not?

Many employees still fear to talk openly about their mental health, with most citing concerns that if they do discuss it, they may suffer discrimination from colleagues and managers alike. This pervasive fear has fostered a culture of silence that has cost businesses, individual employees, and the government billions, according to the Stevenson-Farmer Thriving at Work Report (pg24-25).

Whilst much has been done in recent years to raise awareness of mental health challenges and reduce the stigma attached to them, for many people, talking about mental health in the workplace still remains a taboo.

It's a fact: Fear shuts down the conversation

In a 2017 survey that preceded our launch of the "Not A Red Card" campaign we found that only 4% of employees who have experienced depression and 5% who have experienced anxiety, felt able to talk to their manager about their experiences. [1]

This is in contrast to 21% and 27% of respondents who said they would talk to their friends about these issues, as well as the 23% who said they would have no problem speaking with their manager about a physical health issue. Yet a huge 78% of employers believed their employees are comfortable discussing such problems at work. The figures speak for themselves. Fear has shut down important conversations about mental health in the workplace. Roundtable discussions at the 2017 Not A Red Card Forum, between 160 business leaders, mental health experts and sporting personalities identified a lack of education and understanding of mental health in the workplace. This was one of five key barriers in creating an environment where people feel they can ask for help and support if suffering with their mental health and wellbeing. This lack of understanding resulted in perceptions around mental health that substantiate the aforementioned fear, such as:

- You can't do your job as well
- Decision making will be questioned
- You will need a lot of time off sick
- Colleagues will have to pick up the strain which will cause resentment
- Your colleagues will treat you differently and worry about saying the wrong thing, or be afraid of causing offence
- It's a 'home' issue, not a 'work' issue
- You will be seen as weak
- Subconscious bias from managers will result
- Fear of discrimination / not belonging / failure / career being affected will exist

"Awareness of mental and emotional health at work is now higher than ever before and organisations are keen to invest in initiatives to support their employees at an ever-earlier stage," states Antony Brown, CEO at Onebright. "However, employees are often reluctant to ask for support due to uncertainty and worry about the consequences of disclosing a mental health issue. The challenge now is to ensure that employees feel safe to talk about how they feel and are confident that the support offered will have meaningful and lasting impact."

It's time to get rid of the fear

So how do you get your workplace to break the silence and start talking about mental health? We've been working with Onebright for a number of years to provide mental health support, and now teamed up and now we're exploring methods to encourage open conversations and help businesses overcome the stigma surrounding mental health.

Making mental health the norm

For too long, talking about poor mental health has been a taboo subject. Often employees fear negative consequences if they do speak up about an issue. These can be worries that colleagues will treat them differently, that they will be overlooked for promotions or even dismissed for speaking up.

In order to start to dispel these myths, employers need to make talking about mental health at work the norm.

There are a number of ways to increase visibility of mental health issues within your organisation:

- **Awareness days and campaigns** – These are great ways to get everyone in the business involved. Below are some examples:
- Time to change pledge
- Green Ribbon
- **Identify Role Models** – fear of not being seen as able to progress in an organisation if they disclose a mental health concern can stop employees from disclosing poor mental health conditions. Encourage senior leadership to share their stories and show that mental health is not a glass ceiling.

The importance of the right training

Another barrier to open conversations around mental health is the fear of saying the wrong thing. Often people can feel uncomfortable, or worry about giving the 'wrong' response if someone does disclose a mental health issue to them. Basic mental health training for all employees can help dispel these fears.

Providing specific training for line managers and those who have responsibility for others welfare can also be invaluable. Training can give managers the confidence to start conversations about mental health struggles, and to take appropriate steps to signpost employees to relevant help.

Training for line managers should include the following:

Spotting the signs – How to spot behavioural changes and symptoms if an employee is suffering from mental health issues.

Mental health skills – How to talk about it and what words are best to use/avoid.

Workplace adjustments and return to work – training for managers to enable them to help people to stay at work where possible or integrate individuals back into the team for an effective and successful return to work.

Providing Support

Once you've started the conversation with an employee about mental health it's important to keep it going. Mental ill health isn't something that can be sorted in one quick chat, you need to provide ongoing support or signposting to resources and, if necessary, professional help.

External sources could include organisations like the Samaritans, Mind or their GP.

A buddy system could also be in place, offering employees access to those who have received training, or have relevant experience, and can act as a friend, mentor or guide. Peer mentoring can also be of value where a long term relationship is facilitated to offer the role of befriender, listener and mediator. Care needs to be taken to ensure boundaries are in place to ensure that as a friend in a workplace setting, that friend operates in a way that they are comfortable with and does not impact them negatively – for example keeping conversations to working hours.

More structured support may also be available. For example, Group income protection policies, like the one we offer, often come with added benefits such as Employee Assistance Programmes. These can sometimes provide fully funded Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for insured employees suffering from mental ill health, to help them recover from long term absence. Our policy can provide access to psychological support services from Onebright. They provide a highly effective range of evidence based psychological therapies, where appropriate. This can help employees to overcome their problems, support them in returning to work and stay at work in the longer term through provision of relapse prevention programmes. An innovative multi-channel delivery model is used to ensure employees have access to treatment in the way that best suits them, helping them to get back to being themselves.

Making adjustments

Making reasonable adjustments can go a long way with helping an employee who is struggling with their mental health. By making a number of reasonable adjustments, it could help to reduce the impact on someone's ability to work and ensure that the right support is being provided.

These can be done by offering a confidential discussion between managers, employees and relevant experts (for example, your insurance provider, occupational health, other medical services and HR) and agreeing what's right for each individual.

The adjustments you could introduce, depending on the practicality, include:

- Flexible hours
- Working from home
- Adjusting break times
- Altering targets or tasks
- Reallocating duties
- Introducing buddy systems
- Create quiet rooms
- Give employees time off for appointments

These are just some of the adjustments you could make. Further ways to adjust an employees working environment can be found in the Thriving at Work report.

It's a two way conversation

Once an employee has disclosed they have a mental health problem it's good to get them to provide feedback on their experiences. Staff surveys allow employees to anonymously share feedback on how well your mental health provision is working, without fear or embarrassment. This allows a business to understand how its mental health plan is working, and what could be done to make it work better.

Conversations about mental health should be made part of the normal working environment. To keep the dialogue open, use employee one-to-ones as an opportunity to check in with how your employees are feeling mentally.

Wellness Action Plans

If someone is about to return to work after experiencing mental health symptoms , it's a good idea to create a tailored recovery and resilience plan. It's about keeping the conversation going even after absence or treatment.

One of the ways to do this is to create a 'Wellness Action Plan' (WAP). They provide a structure for conversations around what support is available and what reasonable adjustments might be useful to consider. WAP should cover things like:

• Techniques the individual can adopt to support their mental wellbeing

• Early warning signs of poor mental health

• Any workplace triggers for poor mental health or stress

• Potential impact of poor mental health on performance

• What support they need from you as their manager

• Actions and positive steps you will both take if they are experiencing stress or poor mental health

• An agreed time to review the WAP, and any support measures which are in place

• Anything else that they feel would be useful in supporting their mental health

WAPS should be regularly reviewed and agreed with employees so you can continue to monitor their mental wellbeing and provide appropriate support.

It's time to get rid of the fear

As you can see, encouraging open discussions about mental health in your business doesn't need to be difficult. If you follow these simple steps it will help ensure that tricky conversations can be made easier,

and should break down the silence stifling business and employee wellbeing. The silence can finally be broken and employees and employers alike can look forward to improved mental wellbeing.

About Onebright

Onebright is a multi award winning psychological healthcare provider with a reputation for clinical expertise and innovative digital healthcare. Onebright manage over 4000 quality assured, mental health clinicians across a wide range of specialities including Cognitive Behavioural Therapists,

Practitioner Psychologists, EMDR Consultants, Psychiatrists, Child and Adolescent Clinicians. [2]Their mission is to transform psychological healthcare, to give people the help they need, when they need it and how they want it – regardless of where they live.

[1] Data collected at 2017 Not A Red Card Forum via Doo Poll

[2] Data from Onebright 2019