

# Improving mental health in the workplace

## The problem

Typically a third of our lives are spent at work. Employment can provide financial security, structure, fulfilment and purpose to life.

However, work can also generate pressure which, while sometimes positive and motivational, can become excessive and beyond the coping skills of an individual, triggering stress. Stress affects an estimated 500,000 employees in the UK. Common causes of stress include the threat of redundancy, pay stagnation or reduction, restructuring, outsourcing, changes to working practices, budget cuts, poor management, increased workload, poor morale, grievance and disciplinary processes, health and safety burdens and staff shortages.

These everyday work issues are causing mental health problems for at least three in ten employees, from episodes of depression to chronic conditions, costing British businesses up to £1,000 per employee each year.

Moreover, around 18% of employees are affected by personal problems at work, such as bereavement, relationship and family issues, which can result in depression or stress, loss of concentration, reduced productivity and changing relationships with colleagues.

Each year in the UK, 140 million working days are lost through sickness absence, costing employers £9 billion in sick pay and associated costs.

Stress at work, whatever the cause, is a key driver of long-term absence and has more than doubled since the 1990s, with one in five workers having taken a day off sick for stress.

Mental health problems cost the UK an estimated £105 billion a year in health care, lost productivity and benefits. Currently, 40% of all disability benefits claims are due to mental health issues.

### Call to action:

The British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP) advocates that all employees should have access to workplace counselling, providing support to Britain's stressed-out workers whilst bringing benefits to British businesses and saving the Government money.

## Workplace counselling

### The intervention

Workplace counselling is a confidential, short-term intervention, paid for by employers, which is usually offered by an in-house service or through an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). By being accessible to employees, these services can deal with problems early. Workplace counselling can alleviate the psychological impact of negative work situations and keep employees working and productive.

### The costs

A typical annual Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) subscription cost is £14 per employee for an organisation with 100 employees, with much larger organisations typically paying only around £6 per employee (depending on the range, variety and cost of services selected).

Workplace counsellors employed within in-house services can often offer additional skills, including stress management training, coaching, mediation and post-trauma support.

Freelance workplace counsellors can provide 'as needed' local counselling from as little as £40 per session hour (depending on skills and experience).

## Sickness reduction

Research demonstrates that counselling can reduce sickness absence rates by over 25%. For example at EDF Energy since the start of their Employment Support Programme the percentage of employees off work has fallen from 29% to 14.7%.

## Cost benefit

Studies of the economic benefit of workplace counselling also report that it *at least* covers its costs, with some finding a substantial positive cost-benefit. Despite this only a third of employees currently receive support to manage workplace stress.

## Short waiting times

Employees with EAP provision are accepted for treatment in an average of nine days compared with the average waiting time on the NHS of 64 days. In addition, workplace counselling has treatment completion rates of around 80% and improvement and recovery rates of 70%. Workplace counselling is also likely to offer a choice of time, location and type of therapy – all of which are associated with better recovery rates.

## Current provision

Currently around 13 million employees have access to workplace counselling, representing a significant reduction in burden to the taxpayer and on over-stretched NHS mental health services. If the Government were to support greater provision of employer workplace counselling services for the remaining 15 million workers, savings would significantly outweigh investment.

The programmes themselves are popular among employees; among the 643 workers surveyed at Astra Zeneca, 92% viewed the provision of workplace counselling as an important service and 95% agreed it could assist people in distress.

## Early intervention

By treating poor mental health, reducing lost productivity and helping people return to work, workplace counselling can produce multiple benefits to the exchequer, boosting employment taxes while reducing the burden on major government departments.

### Call to action:

BACP recommends that the Government encourages greater provision of workplace counselling, both by actively advocating its benefits and cost-effectiveness to employers, and by considering financial inducements to build on the current level of tax relief.

## About the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy

The British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP) is the leading professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, with a membership of over 41,000 practitioners. All BACP members are bound by the *Ethical Framework for Good Practice for Counselling & Psychotherapy* and within this, the Professional Conduct Procedure.

BACP has a specialist division – BACP Workplace – which promotes and supports the professional practice of counselling in the workplace.

Our members work both within organisations and externally, providing workplace counselling from their private practice or through employee assistance programme.



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