

Mental-health **FIRST AID** AT WORK

As levels of stress and anxiety rise, BMAS highlights the role of mental-health first aiders in the workplace.

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Mental health has become a major concern as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected almost everyone – both personally and professionally. The stress of this alone is now being recognised, alongside other upsetting and inescapable global issues.

To add to this, our personal lives are often busy and conflicted, with access to support services currently limited due to pressure on both supply and demand. Pressure at work can further escalate levels of stress and anxiety.

It's inevitable that the effects of mental ill-health will have an impact on the workplace. It's estimated to cost UK employers up to £45 billion each year (Deloitte 2020) and affects attendance, performance, turnover and presenteeism. Approximately one in four people in the UK will experience a mental illness each year and the largest causes of sickness absence for our country's workforce are depression, stress and anxiety.

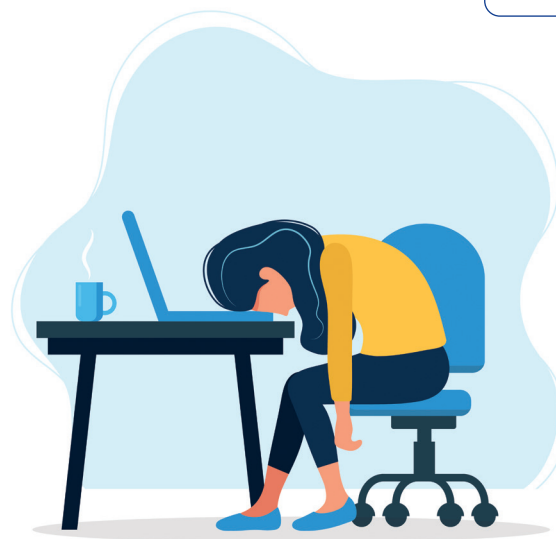
'The largest causes of sickness absence for our country's workforce are depression, stress and anxiety'

People don't always realise they're mentally ill and, even when they do, they may be unsure how to seek help, or be unwilling to do so. There's still a stigma around poor mental health, making it more difficult for people to discuss it. Managers can also be uncertain about how to intervene and support an employee who may be struggling with a mental-health challenge.

Employers have a duty of care to ensure their employees work in a safe environment and this includes measures to ensure risks of mental harm are managed, as well as risks of physical harm.

The Health and Safety Executive produces guidance on six areas of work associated with poor mental health if not properly managed: demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change. These are known as the Management Standards.

An increasingly popular intervention in the workplace has been the implementation of mental-health first aiders. These are employees who undergo a short training session on how to recognise the early signs and symptoms of common mental-health conditions found in the workplace.



Trained mental-health first aiders support colleagues and guide them to professional help if required. Promoting a greater awareness of mental health in the workplace is another important part of the role.

There are many organisations that deliver mental-health first aid training. Their aims are usually to:

- Provide information on mental health
- Develop skills in spotting signs, symptoms and triggers
- Develop confidence in talking to colleagues with symptoms
- Provide signposting to extra support
- Develop safeguarding skills for those supporting others

Research by the Health and Safety Executive on the impact of having trained mental-health first aiders in the workplace revealed mixed results. Positive effects of the training included raising employees' awareness of mental-health conditions, and providing a better understanding of where to find information and professional support.

However, although employees were more confident about helping individuals who were experiencing mental ill health or a crisis, the presence of mental-health first aiders did not appear to have influenced any changes to the management of mental health in the workplace (HSE 2018).

On balance, having members of staff who have undertaken some training to help and support employees experiencing mental-health challenges might be something to consider in your workplace. Training courses are usually short (one or two days), with some tailored specifically to supervisors and managers.

For advice about this or any other employment matter, please contact advisoryservice@bvna.co.uk