

Help for troubled colleagues



Untreated mental health conditions in the workplace take a heavy toll on the entire workforce, often leaving employees feeling lost, alone and disconnected. Because of the significant time spent at work and the close working relationships that exist among employees, the workplace provides a unique opportunity to recognise potential mental health problems early and provide support and assistance.

If you are concerned about a colleague, the following points will help you approach and support them¹.

Understand the signs of poor mental health

Symptoms vary but if you see a change in a colleague's behaviour or performance that lasts for two or more weeks then it may indicate they are struggling with their mental health.

Talk to them

It can be difficult to talk to a colleague about their mental health so make sure you choose an appropriate time and place, don't make any assumptions and listen and respond to them flexibly. Reassure them and talk about the next steps they can take to get help.

Signpost support

It is also good to highlight the support tools that are available. These could include your employee assistance programme (EAP), where they can access 24/7 support and advice, charity helplines and their own GP.

Remember you are not a therapist. As a colleague, showing you're concerned and care about their welfare and helping them find appropriate support will be greatly appreciated.

Workplace bullying

Bullying used to be a playground issue but it can also affect the workplace.

A survey by the TUC² found that nearly a third of people have been bullied at work.

As well as arguments and rudeness, more subtle forms of workplace bullying can include³: excluding and ignoring people and their contribution; overloading people with work; spreading malicious rumours; unfair treatment; picking on or regularly undermining someone; and denying someone training or promotion opportunities.

Whichever form it takes, it's a serious issue. As it can lead to mental and physical health problems it is important to speak out if you experience or witness bullying in the workplace.

Approaching your manager, someone in the HR department or calling your EAP for advice on how you could deal with the problem informally can help.

You may also want to talk to the bully. Often, they are unaware of how they are making you feel and drawing their attention to this can help resolve the problem.

Where these steps don't help, you may wish to make a formal complaint.

It's also important to recognise that bullying is a reflection of the bully's weaknesses rather than anything to do with you and your abilities. Remembering this will help you stay calm and safeguard your mental health.

Workplace burnout

While not considered a mental illness, burnout can be considered a mental health issue. It's having a growing impact on workplaces and in 2019, was recognised as an occupational phenomenon by the World Health Organisation.

According to Mental Health UK, burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion⁴ which can occur when you experience long-term stress in a job or when you have worked in a physically or emotionally draining role for a long time.

It is more likely when employees:

- Expect too much of themselves
- Never feel that the work they are doing is good enough
- Feel inadequate or incompetent
- Feel unappreciated for their work efforts
- Have unreasonable demands placed upon them
- Are in roles that are not a good job fit

Burnout doesn't go away on its own. If the underlying causes aren't addressed, it could cause further harm to physical and mental health. Recognising the signs of burnout – and taking appropriate steps to address it – is essential.

Common signs of burnout⁵ include:

- Feeling tired or drained most of the time
- Feeling helpless, trapped and/or defeated
- Feeling detached/alone in the world
- Having a cynical/negative outlook
- Self-doubt
- Procrastinating and taking longer to get things done
- Feeling overwhelmed

Tips for dealing with a stressful work environment

- Try to avoid unnecessary conflict when feeling stressed
- Take short breaks from work, as appropriate. Go for a walk outdoors for fresh air and to improve concentration
- Set aside a block of time to check emails and phone messages rather than dealing with each one as it comes in
- If you are feeling overwhelmed, make a list of all current tasks and focus on one task at a time. Don't try to do everything at once. Ask your manager to help prioritise those tasks that are most important
- Focus on solutions rather than problems



What can you do?

Foster a positive and supportive work culture so that colleagues feel safe asking for and receiving help.

Sources:

1. [supporting-our-colleagues-guide.pdf \(mind.org.uk\)](#)
2. [Nearly a third of people are bullied at work, says TUC | TUC](#)
3. [Bullying at work - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)
4. [Burnout - Mental Health UK \(mentalhealth-uk.org\)](#)
5. [Burnout - Mental Health UK \(mentalhealth-uk.org\)](#)

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