

Five Mental Health At Work Predictions For 2018

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With the UK's productivity, or rather lack of productivity, continuing to prove problematic, the media shining a light on eating disorders and issues ranging from domestic violence to traumatic childbirth experiences affecting women in particular, there are lots of trends keeping mental health high on employers' agendas for 2018.

Read on for our top five mental health at work predictions for the year ahead...

1. Impact of mental health on productivity

As the Office for Budget Responsibility downgrades productivity growth for the seventh year in a row, Britain remains one of the least productive nations in Europe.

With 33 productive days lost per year by the 56% of employees who suffer from mild to moderate depression (according to research published by Britain's Healthiest Workplace) employers are becoming increasingly interested in the impact of the mental health of the workforce on its ability to perform. Not least because research by Warwick University shows that joyful employees are also 15% more productive than their gloomier counterparts.

As a result, we can expect lots more employers to start implementing mental health strategies that are designed to boost not only employee wellbeing but also the ability of those employees to perform when they're in work. A key part of this will be training managers to proactively incorporate the mental wellbeing of employees as part of their overall people management and performance management duties.

2. Supporting victims of domestic abuse and violence

According to figures released by the Office for National Statistics, 1.9 million adults aged 16-59 experienced domestic violence in the year to March 2017. A total of 83,136 high-risk cases were discussed at multi-agency risk assessment conferences in the year ending March 2017, including 36 cases per 10,000 adult females. That's 3.6 high-risk cases per 1,000 females, meaning the problem is as prevalent as ever.

The sheer scale of the problem is that an organisation employing 1,000 people will typically have a couple of hundred employees affected at some point in their lives and as many as a few dozen living with domestic violence at any one time. Add to that the fact that over half of the victims of domestic violence will call in sick at least three times a month and it's no wonder that the problem is estimated to cost the UK economy well over £1.9bn a year in lost wages, productivity, absence and long-term illness.

Following the momentum of the 2017 #MeToo campaign, employers are becoming increasingly open to not just helping address sexual harassment in their workplaces, but also creating a safe environment where employees affected by domestic violence can come forward. More and more employers are looking to proactively provide appropriate support to improve individual situations, be that discreet access to a room where an employee might do safety planning with the police during working hours, the opportunity to flex their hours to avoid stalking or access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) that can provide the professional emotional, legal and financial support they need to make significant changes to their life.

3. Destigmatising the impact of birth trauma on employees

Another mental health issue that's set to become much less taboo this year is the extent to which thousands of women are suffering from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, following a difficult or frightening birth during which their life, or the life of their baby might have been at risk. The effects of this trauma can continue to impact on women (and men

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witnessing traumatic births) long after they return to the workplace.

Many of those struggling to cope will feel guilty about seeking help if they managed to leave hospital with a healthy baby, meaning that the resulting flashbacks, constant fear that their baby or someone they love might die and insomnia issues will stay with them. The result is that the Birth Trauma Association estimates that 1,000 women developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Wales alone last year, yet just 22 cases were recorded.

With 20,000 women experiencing a traumatic birth experience every year in the UK, many workplaces will be affected by this issue. Employers can help by gently directing those affected to use the EAP and using events such as Birth Trauma Awareness Week to raise awareness of the problem. By bearing in mind that giving birth can be a potentially traumatic experience, checking in with employees to find out how things went and reminding them that they have access to the EAP while they're on maternity or paternity leave, employers also have a valuable role to play in giving people timely access to the professional trauma support they might need to normalise their experience, before it can spiral into something as serious as PTSD.

4. Addressing loneliness at work

As employers constantly drive to boost efficiency, many of the social structures that were once in place at work have become eroded. More and more employees are working from home and workers who might have once come into a depot and met with their colleagues for a coffee before starting their working day, or worked alongside a colleague, are now working alone, with their computer directing them straight to their jobs, with no need for colleagues to come together at the start or end of the day.

For many, not only does this mean that the social support structures that were once in place have gone, eliminating one of the most enjoyable parts of their day, but the access to peer advice and support has also gone. Similarly, employees who might have regularly come together for team meetings are now being kept abreast of things via email, on the grounds that this takes less time, with little or no understanding

of what everyone else is working on and what's going on in their lives.

The result is that more and more employees are becoming chronically lonely, with mental health at work issues getting worse and not better. This year, employers will start to recognise the value of allowing employees to have positive social interaction, and the importance of this for preventing long-term mental health and absence issues.

5. Supporting employees affected by disordered eating

Eating disorders are mental health problems where someone experiences issues with their body weight and shape, and engages in behaviour that disturbs their everyday diet and attitude towards food. For the most part, the 1.6 million people estimated to have an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia have learned to manage their disorder but remain at risk of becoming tipped back into wanting to over-control their weight when other issues affect them.

If an employee starts walking around the office to talk to everyone in person, that might initially seem like a positive way of them getting more face-to-face time with people, but could soon reveal itself to be the person becoming obsessed with getting enough steps in each day to keep their weight down. Similarly, although there might be lots of general talk about the need to lose a few pounds after Christmas, some people might become obsessed with this or start to clearly show signs of excessive weight loss.

Typically, many employers have struggled to support affected employees, with a survey by the charity Beat revealing that a third of sufferers say they have experienced stigma or discrimination in the workplace, while 40% say their employers' impact on their recovery was unhelpful.

With the media shining a spotlight on the problem last year, more employers will be thinking about how they can help affected employees. Critical to this will be spotting the early warning signs that a disorder is beginning to resurface again, so that they can provide a more compassionate and effective response, to help prevent an employee's disorder from spiralling out of control again.

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