

Managing employees with mental health challenges – five key tips

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Statistics from the Ministry of Health show that the numbers of adults seeking mental health services have reached record numbers in recent years, with close to 4% of the population seeking services (see [Office of the Director of Mental Health and Addiction Services Annual Report 2017](#)). With that in mind, and with [mental health awareness week](#) coming up on 23-29 September, it is timely to consider how employers can best support and manage employees who are facing mental health challenges. While there is no 'one size fits all' approach, we set out below five key tips to assist employers responding to these situations.

1. Start the conversation

In our experience, employers can be hesitant raising concerns about an employee's mental health. This is understandable, as conversations about someone's private health and wellbeing are never easy to begin, and employers are often worried about offending or upsetting their employees. The reality is that if an employer has genuine concerns about an employee's health and how they are coping at work, then the employer has a duty to raise those concerns. That is what good faith is all about; the employee is entitled to visibility of their employer's concerns, and the employer needs to better understand what is going on for their employees, and how they might help.

While this article is focussed on employers, the same also applies to employees. If you are an employee who is facing mental health challenges that are impacting on your work, start a conversation early and ask for the support you need before the best opportunity passes.

2. Be clear about what your concerns are

Although it is important to start conversations early, it is equally important for employers to be clear about their concerns before they dive in. So, before you start a conversation with an employee, ask yourself (or your managers) – why are we raising this? Is it that we are concerned about the employee's health and need to know how to support them, or are there performance or disciplinary concerns (or both) that we need to address?

Clarifying the nature of your concerns is critical, as that will drive the approach you take and the policies and procedures you must follow. Remember too that if you are addressing performance or disciplinary matters, but there are indicators that suggest mental health issues may be playing a role, don't ignore that – ask. If mental health is the driver for an employee's behaviour then that will - and in fact must - shape the approach you take.

3. Think creatively and tailor your solutions

The best employers are flexible and nuanced in their management of these situations, and mental health is a particular area where different employees will have entirely different needs. You are obliged to make reasonable accommodations for your employees, so ask the employee what might help them best. Can you offer flexible working arrangements? Are there simple changes, like access to quiet rooms, a temporary change in starting hours or mentoring support that you can implement? You do not have to implement arrangements that are unsustainable, but do consider the best possible solutions that will meet the employee's individual needs.

4. Privacy should be top of mind

Information about an employee's health is particularly sensitive and needs careful management. As an employer you must have robust privacy controls to ensure that all your employees' health information is kept safe and shared only with those who need it (and otherwise in accordance with privacy laws). Remember too that our privacy laws are not just about keeping things secret, but are focussed on respecting a person's right to understand what their information is going to be used for and where it may be shared. So take the lead and ask the employee about who you can share their information with. For more serious situations, consider having an agreed plan about who you can contact in times of crisis, such as key family members or clinicians.

5. Build a culture of openness and acceptance

Although the law provides a framework to approach these issues, a good and open work-place culture will take you further.

So use the opportunity in this upcoming mental health awareness week to think about how you can start building a workplace culture that supports good mental health. Check if you have clear policies and information available about how you will support and manage employees who face mental health challenges. Talk about mental health and, most importantly, rather than seeing mental health as a problem or cost, try to focus on ways that you can promote good mental health for everyone. For more great information about how you might do this, see the Mental Health Foundation's website, and particularly the [Working Well Guidance](#).

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