



BREAK THE CYCLE

Addressing mental health in the workplace: A guide for employers



Cycle Against Suicide.

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Introduction

Most adults spend the majority of their days at work, which makes it critically important to address mental health issues in the workplace. But it's not only the length of time we spend at work that makes this important; the nature of our workplaces, the relationship dynamics as well as the value we associate with the work we do all play a big role. While positive workplaces give people the opportunity to feel productive, which in turn enhances mental wellbeing, stressful work environments can contribute to poor mental health and even lead to illnesses.

Recent [research](#) into mental health in the workplace found that a large proportion – nearly 80 percent – of Ireland's corporate employees suffer from concerning levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Given the strong nexus between health and productivity, employers have to prioritize the mental health of their staff.

All employers already have health and safety responsibilities enshrined in law, and *Cycle Against Suicide* believes that supporting the mental health and wellbeing is part of that responsibility. This resource is written to assist employers and managers in fulfilling that responsibility. It offers practical advice to help organisations support the mental health and wellbeing of their staff. All types of organizations – big, small, public, private or charitable – will find the information set out in this toolkit useful in developing and implementing an effective approach to mental health. Our goal is to see that people who are experiencing stress, distress and mental health problems are able to receive the support they need within their work environments. Simply starting a dialogue about mental health in your workplace may result in positive changes, even without a formal implementation process. Large programmes are not always required.

This toolkit is not a legal guideline. Please consult relevant legal resources for details of your responsibilities as an employer, including those that relate to reasonable accommodation in the workplace.

See Further:

- *The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission* <https://www.ihrec.ie/>
- *The National Disability Authority: website* www.nda.ie

Why is Mental Health Important for A Successful Business?

The World Health Organization defines positive mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. Employees with good mental health will perform better in their work.”

For companies, supporting mental health in the workplace goes beyond complying with health and safety regulations. It creates a workforce of people with positive mental health who tend to be more productive, since the mental health of staff has a significant impact on business performance and on the economy generally.

As at 2006, the total cost from mental health problems to the Irish economy exceeded €3 billion annually. This figure includes just over €1 billion for the cost of healthcare, social care and other forms of direct care. Today, that figure would be significantly higher, with mental health problems and illnesses among working adults costing employers large amounts in lost productivity from absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.

It is therefore important that while focusing on business-critical elements like productivity, risk management, cost-effectiveness and sustainability, organizations also pay attention to the impact mental health can have on these.

By following the steps outlined below, employers can create and maintain mentally healthy workplaces that have the right tools, information, and support needed to ensure that every person in Ireland can go to work knowing their organisation recognises the importance of mental health in the workplace.

Establishing a supportive environment for mental health

1. Evaluate Your Workplace

The first place to start is with a gap assessment of your organisation. You need to first understand the stage at which your organisation is when it comes to mental health. Do you already have some processes in place to address mental health issues? If so, you may just need to tweak things a little to make it more supportive of mental health. Or is this an area your organisation has never paid any attention to? You may have to do a lot more to get things in place. You can determine the state of your organisational readiness by asking and answering the following questions:

- Do we have a common understanding of mental health in our workplace?
- Have we included mental health as a component of our health and safety policy, strategy and processes?
- Do our policies align with occupational health and safety laws and regulations and employment standards with respect to mental health?
- What resources exist in our organisation for employees struggling with mental health issues?
- Is management familiar with the legal and regulatory requirements on workplace mental health?
- Do we have processes in place for responding to issues such as suicide, violence or emotional breakdowns at work?
- Do we have processes in place for preventing and dealing with harassment, bullying or aggression?
- Have we created channels for open communications between managers, supervisors, and employees to respond to cases of trauma occasioned by personal or workplace issues?
- Does our organisation have a policy on work-life balance?
- Do we measure the occurrence of stress-related illnesses in our organisation?

- Do we offer training on mental health issues or help prevent discrimination by providing all employees with a basic level of knowledge about mental health issues?
- Do we have a return to work policy that considers mental, emotional and psychological challenges faced by staff?
- Do we recognise and respond to conflict in a timely and effective manner?
- Do we understand reasonable accommodation in the context of those with a mental health disability at work?

2. Make a Business Case for Investing Resources in Mental Health

As with any other initiative, addressing mental health issues in the workplace will require you to put some resources towards it. It is easier to secure such resources when you are able to demonstrate the benefit of such investment to the organisation, and section 2 above provides some basis for such a discussion.

You can make your business case by establishing the specific benefits of addressing mental health in your workplace and the cost of not doing so. Some of those benefits and costs may include:

- People are more productive when they enjoy positive mental health
- The economic and social benefits of a healthy and safe workplace include having a fully engaged workforce which impacts the bottom line positively and productivity.
- Not addressing mental health in the workplace may allow problems to worsen until they become a crisis.
- Being proactive on mental health issues can help avoid time-consuming and expensive problems down the line.
- Data on stress and other mental health related absenteeism in your place of work if you have it.

3. Ensure Buy-In Throughout the Organisation

No initiative, however elaborate it may be, will succeed unless there is a commitment throughout your organisation to develop a culture in which mental health issues are considered important.

- Achieving such commitment starts from the top, as management and leadership are critical to the success of any initiative. It is important to have clear leadership and meaningful involvement in the development of a mental health programme.
- Those tasked with leading the process, which may be your HR Department or other department, must know that they have the support and authority needed to tackle stigma and promote positive mental health. So, if possible, begin by obtaining a written directive or statement of commitment from the most senior leadership in the form of strategic policy direction.
- Employees are also more likely to open up about their own mental health if there is a clear signal from the leadership and senior management.
- As mental health can be a difficult subject to talk about, you may find that there is some reluctance to engage on the subject. Others will express concerns that addressing mental health could open a Pandora's box of issues that the organisation is not ready or able to deal with. Having the backing of senior management on it will help push the initiative forward.
- Appoint someone to champion your mental health policy in the workplace. Your appointed champion should be visible and be willing to lead on the subject. Larger organisations may want to appoint mental health champions for different departments.
- Prioritise getting buy-in from line managers too, as research shows that good-quality people management is one of the core drivers of employee engagement, wellbeing and good mental health.
- Be prepared to answer questions and challenges from concerned leaders who are not clear on the risks and benefits associated with addressing mental health

in the workplace. Without the right answers to their questions, they may halt the process.

Management can help drive the process by engaging employees and making it safe for employees to voice concerns. Or they could host forums where employees can share ideas on how the organisation can support positive mental health in your workplace. Management can also lead by example by being champions for mental health. The most important thing is to demonstrate that whatever strategies, programmes or initiatives your organisation develops, it has the backing of the leadership, and is thus more likely to succeed.

4. Communicate Widely and Effectively to Maximise Awareness and Engagement.

As important as it is to get leadership buy-in, don't forget that employee buy-in is just as important. Involving employees in initiatives leads to a sense of ownership and commitment to the programme, and employees should be involved in the decision-making process when developing your approach to mental health issues. In addition, make sure you seek the involvement of union representatives, where applicable, and as referred to above, middle management and line managers. It is particularly important to be clear about what employees can expect from the organisation. New hires should not be left out of the process; they too should understand the organisational vision and mission and agree with these principles.

- Any programme or initiative you come up with should not be developed for employees, but with them, which means their participation and engagement should be prioritised.
- People are more likely to participate in mental health initiatives if they understand what's in it for them, and if their concerns and questions about what is required of them are addressed.

Information and awareness are critical to securing employee engagement, so inform all employees about all the steps your organisation is taking or plans on taking on the

initiative. You can disseminate such information through newsletters, team meetings, emails, etc. You should include information that helps them understand the details of the programme or initiative, including the fact that:

- The organisation and its senior management are committed to the mental health of all staff and are working to build mental health considerations into all aspects of the organisation's operation.
- We are embarking on a new initiative to improve our health and safety management approach, so we can integrate consideration for the mental health of all employees in every aspect of our operations.
- Everyone's input is important in making this work. Everyone has a role to play and we require your assistance to identify the right approaches, develop a policy (or revise our policy, as the case may be) and to generate ideas on how we can best support mental health in our organisation, etc. We would appreciate your comments, input and feedback.
- The initiative does not focus on individuals and is not meant to discriminate against anyone or put anyone on the spot. Rather it is a holistic approach that focuses on how the organisations policies, processes, practices and procedures as well as the general work environment impact on employees' psychological health and safety.
- Those who have specific mental health needs will be able to access the following resources (list resources available in your organisation).
- This initiative is a priority for the organisation, and accountability will be built into the process at all levels.

Done right, your communication and engagement efforts should help develop a shared understanding around mental health. That way, not only will all employees understand what mental health means within your organisation, they will also have a clear understanding of expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, as well as the organisation's goals on mental health and how their individual work contributes to success.

5. Develop an Action Plan

Once you have set the ground work for what your organisations needs to do to address mental health in the workplace, you can then move on to developing the necessary plans for what you want to do. In developing your plans, bear in mind that:

- It is essential to have a clear action plan written down. This gives you a bird's eye view of many different issues in a single document and enables you to see how each one fits in with the others, so you can develop a co-ordinated response. It also allows you to assess your progress over time.
- You need to identify the many pathways through which you can embed mental health in the overall organisational culture. Suggestions and comments from employees come in handy here.
- Mental health is a complex topic, and it encompasses a wide range of issues. Your plans should be comprehensive enough to address the range of mental health issues and provide clear definitions of each one. Focus especially on clarifying the meaning of words that are frequently bandied about without a clear understanding of what they mean.
- Normalising the topic of mental health and removing stigma is one of the aims of addressing mental health in the workplace. So, ensure that your plans include positive, on-going communication on the subject.
- It is important to set goals for what you plan to achieve in each step of the process. Ensure that goals are specific, measurable, time-bound, and workplace-related. Include some quick wins that will give some psychological boost to those involved in the process.
- Each component of your plan should include an estimate of the time and effort required. The size and scope of your plan will depend on the complexity of your organisation and the programmes or initiatives you decide to implement.

6. Identify the Resources Required for Implementation

Having developed your plans and gained some understanding of what you need to do, the next step is to focus more specifically on the resources necessary to give effect to those plans. In order to achieve credibility and accountability, you have to understand what resources are available, including both financial and human resources, as well as any other resources you may need.

You can start by listing the health and safety resources that already exist, and then determining what will be required to integrate mental health requirements into them. Develop a budget and allocate funds and identify resources for specific activities. In allocating resources:

- Consider competing demands and priorities. While mental health is very important, bear in mind that resources are usually not in unlimited supply, so you may need to make adjustments to proposed activities or initiatives.
- An essential part of making your organisation's mental health initiatives work is training employees so they have the competence and confidence to bring the mental health policies and programmes to life.
- Training for line managers is particularly important as they are the ones who balance the aims of the organisation with staff health and wellbeing. They are critical in driving change and may well be the first point of contact to notice when an employee is experiencing difficulties. They should be equipped with skills in effective leadership, workplace health, stress risk assessment, mental health awareness and the management of sickness absence. Training can take many forms: induction processes, staff handbook modules, specialist supervision, intranet hosted or even lunch and learns.
- You may need to bring in external support to help with developing your programmes and initiatives; however, you may find that you already have all the resources you need internally and can reduce costs that way.

- Leverage free resources and ideas, many of which can be found online on the websites of mental health organisations.

See Further:

- *Equality and mental health: What the law means for your workplace* – Available from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission - www.ihrec.ie
- *Breaking the silence in the workplace: A guide for employers on responding to suicide in the workplace* – Available from the Irish Hospice Foundation www.hospice-foundation.ie/
- *Employee Absenteeism: A guide to managing absence* – Available from Ibec www.ibec.ie
www.mind.org.uk/assets/0001/6314/Managing_and_supporting_MH_at_work.pdf
- *Mental health information, training and education* www.mentalhealthireland.ie/
www.detect.ie/

7. Select Programs and Initiatives Best Suited to Your Organisation

Decide on what is practical for your organization to focus on in the near future. Bear in mind that what works for each organisation will vary, so you have to take into consideration your workplace dynamics. For example, you could begin by developing a specific, stand-alone mental health policy, or revising your existing health and safety policy to incorporate mental health more specifically. Or you may want to start by focusing on management training or by raising mental health awareness within your organisation. Regardless of what you find to be most practical for your organisation, remember that:

- It is important to embed mental health into all of your organisation's policies and processes whenever they are reviewed, to ensure that they reflect your organisation's commitment to mental health. The ultimate goal is to ensure mental health is covered throughout the organisation's functions and departments as well as all aspects of the employees' involvement in the workplace, including hiring, orientation, performance management, return to work, termination or resignation, etc.

- Policies should also describe the roles and responsibilities of employees at all levels in the organisation in promoting mental health and describe mechanisms to support staff who experience mental health problems.
- You should also develop guiding principles that can be applied to all future decisions and discussions as well as practices and processes that are part of the day-to-day experience in the workplace.
- Give better training to managers so that they can support positive mental health and spot stress, depression or other mental health issues and their effects on the individual.
- Encourage activities that promote good mental health for employees during the work day

8. Measure and Evaluate for Continuous Improvement

To keep building momentum, it is important to measure success, refine your approach to make it even more effective and regularly share progress and activities with employees. Without monitoring and valuation, there is no way of knowing if the policies, programmes and initiatives you have put in place are successful or the degree to which the goals you set are being achieved. For example, in evaluating your progress:

- What you measure during your evaluation stage should be the clear measurable goals you set during the planning stages. This may include level of awareness within the organisation of the initiatives or how involved people are in the initiative, or any changes in employees' reports on their mental health since implementation began or rate of absenteeism.
- Find out what is working well so you can sustain it. If there are differences between the results and the targets, determine where to apply changes that will lead to improvement.
- What isn't working so well so you can take corrective actions and improve results.
- Celebrate your successes and develop a list of possible next steps.

- Don't forget to communicate with all employees about where the organisation is in achieving its goals toward positive mental health in the workplace.

It is important to sustain your organisational focus on mental health beyond the initial implementation. To this end, there should also be management review, to see how your organisation's leadership is performing in terms of leading the process.

Management decisions made without full awareness of the impact on psychological health and safety could result in reducing or eliminating any progress. Regular review and analysis of outcomes by senior management can support the process of continual improvement.

9. See Further: Toolkits and Resources

- *Business in the Community: Mental Health Toolkit for Employers*
https://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/sites/default/files/mental_health_toolkit_for_employers_-_small.pdf
- *Mind: How to support staff who are experiencing a mental health problem*
www.mind.org.uk/media/550657/resource4.pdf
- *Mind: How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems*
https://www.mind.org.uk/media/428496/Resource3_HowToPromoteWellBeingFINAL.pdf
- *The European Network for Workplace Health Promotion: A guide for employers. To promote mental health in the workplace*
http://www.enwhp.org/fileadmin/downloads/8th_Initiative/MentalHealth_Broschue_re_Arbeitgeber.pdf

About Cycle Against Suicide

Cycle Against Suicide is a national awareness charity that strives to break down the barriers around mental health illness and works to increase awareness of the supports and treatments that are available to empower those affected.

While progress has been made in terms of prioritising mental health, the continued impact of the stigma surrounding this issue remains large. To create a discrimination-free society, Cycle Against Suicide sets out to develop public awareness of its core message:

*IT'S OK NOT TO FEEL OK; AND IT IS ABSOLUTELY OK TO ASK FOR
HELP'*