

Research into mental health first aid in the workplace prompts new guidance

December 18 2018, by Emma Thorne

Concerns about how businesses use employees to support colleagues with mental health issues, highlighted by University of Nottingham research, have prompted new guidance for bosses.

The guidance, released by the chartered body for health and safety professionals, assists businesses with designing robust [mental health](#) systems and highlights how 'mental health first aid' (MHFA) needs to be included in a wider system of support for employees.

Workplace MHFA is due to be debated by MPs in Parliament tomorrow (Wednesday 19 December) as the Government faces calls to put it on an equal footing with physical first aid.

But the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) cautions against an over-reliance on volunteer MHFAs as they don't tackle the root causes of [mental health issues](#). Instead, IOSH argues they should be only part of a much wider business approach.

Wider system of support

Such concerns were raised following Nottingham's research, which exposed 'significant issues' with workplace MHFA implementation, and in a subsequent high-level round table featuring organisations including Mind and the Institute of Directors.

IOSH's guidance is split into two sections:

- **Mental health in the workplace: benchmarking questions** is a simple tool to help organisations with the design of their mental wellness systems and asks benchmarking questions about workplace mental health and wellbeing support.
- **Mental Health First Aid: workplace considerations** is an information sheet which considers the adoption and implementation of this intervention. It summarises some limitations and how 'mental health first aiders' (MHFAs) can be integrated into a wider system of support.

Using MHFAs more widely may ensure that they are better integrated into the organisation's plans and activities that are designed to enhance wellbeing in the workforce.

Professor Avril Drummond, from the School of Health Sciences at The University of Nottingham, said:

"We are delighted that IOSH have moved so quickly following our research publication to produce some practical guidance and resources for the workplace.

"The bottom line is that mental health initiatives must be both top down and bottom up: they must be a whole organisation approach."

Root cause

Duncan Spencer, Head of Advice and Practice at IOSH, said:

"Mental health first aid and similar training courses are specific interventions that may be considered for managing mental wellbeing, but they don't tackle the root cause of the issue.

"IOSH calls for a 'prevention first' approach incorporating MHFA as part of an organisation's overall efforts to protect their workforce from [mental health problems](#).

"Good mental health and wellness at work should be governed by a whole-system approach where OSH professionals, HR, and all managers contribute.

"The real cause of work-related mental ill health is related to culture and the way an organisation operates. Only good management can change that."

Mental health problems are a global issue and the [economic consequences](#) are large. In the UK alone, the annual cost to the economy is estimated to be between £70 and £100 billion, with around 15.8 million working days lost per year. The consequences for employers can include increased staff turnover, burn-out, exhaustion and presenteeism. There is therefore an increasing recognition of the need to address mental [health](#) in the [workplace](#).

Provided by University of Nottingham

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