

GOOD BUSINESS

Keep wellbeing in mind

Episodes of mental illness can hit anyone at any time. *Andrew Don* learns how employers can look out for warning signs and support their staff in times of crisis

Most families will be touched by mental illness at some point. Yet this is an affliction that, historically, has come with stigma attached.

Travel agency owners and managers can avoid losing staff to sick leave and impaired performance if they look out for warning signs and understand best practice for dealing with mental health episodes among staff - not merely their bare-minimum legal responsibilities.

A mental health disorder can manifest itself as depression, stress, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety, psychosis, phobia and addictive or compulsive behaviour.

Prime minister Theresa May sought to bring the issue into the open in her "shared society" speech in January, when she described "the burning injustice of mental health and inadequate treatment that demands a new approach from government and society as a whole".

May levelled criticism at the lack of equality with physical illness. "All of us - government, employers, schools, charities - need to do more to support all of our mental wellbeing," she said.

NHS statistics suggest that one in four adults will experience a mental health issue at some point and it can affect anyone from office cleaners to chief executives.

Mental health conditions may emerge suddenly, as a result of a specific event or incident, or manifest themselves gradually. They could be because of workload, bereavement, financial difficulties, stress arising from family or other relationships, childhood experiences, genetics or bullying.



Mental illness can strike at any time

Post-surgical symptoms

The story of Nichola Luke, 44, pictured right, an employee of Holidaysplease, offers an insight into how mental ill health can arise.

One of Holidaysplease's best salespeople, Luke suffered "paranoia, depression and anxiety" after an operation on her knee two years ago left her with nerve damage to her left side which caused her continuous "shooting pain".

"No one could see I was in pain. I was

feeling frustrated with people who kept saying that I looked fine and that I was putting weight on, which didn't help."

It came to a head last summer when she woke up one morning and read a "not very nice email" from a customer. "He said I'd not given any service and I couldn't understand why he sent it," she says. Luke would not normally have been so thin-skinned about criticism but because of her depressed state, the complaint got to her.

She phoned Holidaysplease director Sonia Dixon and said she

wanted to pack it in - a drastic move from someone who had always loved her job and had wanted to do nothing else since she was 13. She could not sleep, kept crying and battled every day to do "normal stuff".

Holidaysplease "bent over backwards" with support, arranging for Luke to see a private doctor, counsellor and pain management specialist. She also saw a personal trainer who helped her to deal with her pain and a Holidaysplease employee, who is also a dietician, created a diet plan for her.

"I've lost three stone and now I want to get off the antidepressants," she says. Luke still suffers pain but is coping with it better. "Coming out the other side is a battle. I am susceptible



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to anxiety and depression but Holidaysplease has been really supportive. I'm not a number and they care about me," she says.

Awareness and support

Awareness of the issues at stake is important if travel agencies are to retain staff who may simply need that extra bit of understanding and support, which is what Thomas Cook realised when it launched its Employee Assistance Programme last year. It is available to all staff for a range of personal and work-related issues.

Louise McEachran, head of employee relations, says the programme offers support "in a number of different ways" and is tailored to the employee.

"This can include telephone and online support as well as free counselling sessions such as one-to-ones, cognitive behavioural therapy and hypnotherapy."

Thomas Cook also works closely with those who have time off work because of mental health issues to ensure their return to work goes smoothly. "This can include a phased return or amended duties for a set period of time," says McEachran.

In addition, agency bosses who genuinely care about their staff have more chance of supporting affected workers and ensuring that work is not making their situation worse. One such business is homeworking agency Travel Counsellors, which says it nurtures a culture of caring, "looking after each other to achieve our shared goals".

Karen Morris, operations director, says: "To ensure we are doing everything we can to keep our travel counsellors healthy both mentally and physically, we created a holistic health and wellbeing programme, targeting areas such as health and fitness; mental health, including a free counselling service; cancer awareness and achieving a healthy work-life balance."

The firm also ran its first mental health workshops at its November conference in collaboration with the Manchester branch of mental health charity, Mind.

"We are continuing to work closely



Companies are switching on to issues of mental wellbeing in the workplace

COMMON WARNING SIGNS TO WATCH OUT FOR

- An increase in unexplained absences or sick leave
- Poor performance
- Erratic timekeeping
- Bad decision making
- Lack of energy
- Uncommunicative or moody behaviour

Source: Acas

with Mind on how we can further support our homeworkers to prevent mental health issues wherever possible," she says.

Legal obligations

Agency owners should be aware of their legal responsibilities as a matter of course. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service

(Acas) points out that the Equality Act 2010 covers those whose mental illness affects their ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

The act also covers those who have had a disability in the past. It does not provide a list of impairments that are covered but considers the effects of an impairment on a person. For example, someone with severe depression with substantial effects on their daily life is likely to be considered as disabled.

This places a duty upon employers to make reasonable adjustments, which could include allowing employees to:

- Take more frequent breaks
- Allocate their break time according to their own needs rather than by a pre-determined schedule
- Shift schedules earlier or later
- Take a prolonged lunch break to attend a support meeting
- Use paid or unpaid leave for

appointments related to their condition

- Work part-time temporarily.

It might also involve arranging job sharing, reassigning tasks among workers or reassigning to a vacant position. Environment modifications may also help, such as private office space rather than an open-plan environment, allowing employees to work at home, reducing noise levels or providing a private space to talk to a supportive co-worker.

TOP FIVE REASONS EMPLOYEES ARE RELUCTANT TO DISCUSS MENTAL ILLNESS WITH AN EMPLOYER

- 1 I feel it would make my employer think negatively of me (35%)
- 2 I feel there is a stigma attached to mental health issues (32%)
- 3 I'd be embarrassed to discuss it with my employer (32%)
- 4 I don't think I'd get enough/the right support from my employer (32%)
- 5 I feel it would impact my chances of progression at work (25%)

Source: YouGov study commissioned by Totaljobs



Travel Counsellors benefit from Mind workshops