

Members' Corner



**Lee Dargue,
Environment, Health and Safety
Specialist,
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Mental Health in the Workplace

Lee opened by explaining that he is particularly concerned about Mental Health in the Workplace and how to break down the stigma that has been attached to workers who have mental health problems and discuss the issues more openly.

Is it a Personal or Work Issue that is responsible for the problem?

Lee's short presentation is primarily about problems occurring within the workplace but he stressed that work and home life are inextricably linked and something affecting an individual in one area of his life will undoubtedly impact on another.

Some people are able to separate home life and work life, but it can be very difficult, depending on the issues. Spouses will say "don't bring your work problems home". The standard response of managers is "don't bring your home problems to work". This is not particularly helpful, but managers are often unprepared and untrained to deal with or help employees whose work is being affected by their home circumstances. The employer is not, after all, a life coach but where there are professionals within the company such as within HR or occupational health then the employee can be pointed in their direction for help/support. Work issues causing mental health problems should certainly be acknowledged and addressed by management.

What is Mental Health?

The term is usually perceived in a negative way. It is our state of well being and intertwined with our physical health. Problems can present which are either acute or chronic and minor or major – in the same way as physical problems. It is not helpful or appropriate to compare apparently similar mental or physical health issues experienced by others as we are all affected differently.

Be mindful that issues occurring today could have an impact on mental health well into the future. From a business perspective, employers need to consider and address situations which may or have led to mental health problems, in

order to protect the business by preventing absenteeism and lowered productivity.

What is available already?

- Line managers – to offer empathy and support
- Friends and colleagues
- Employee benefits / referrals
- Occupational health – such as nurse, physiotherapist, counsellor.

If you are an employer who does not provide such benefits, ask yourself what would be the longer term cost of not providing this assistance and the employee subsequently being off work. Ask what could go wrong and how you can mitigate it.

Other 'Happenings'

Government are now showing much more interest in this area:

- Better referrals
- More funding
- Starting early: looking at school age mental health issues
- Focusing on prevention - to prevent issues occurring or getting worse

Geoff Brown commented that there are some Stress Risk Management Statistics on the HSE website and other information which may be of some value to Members' own organisations.