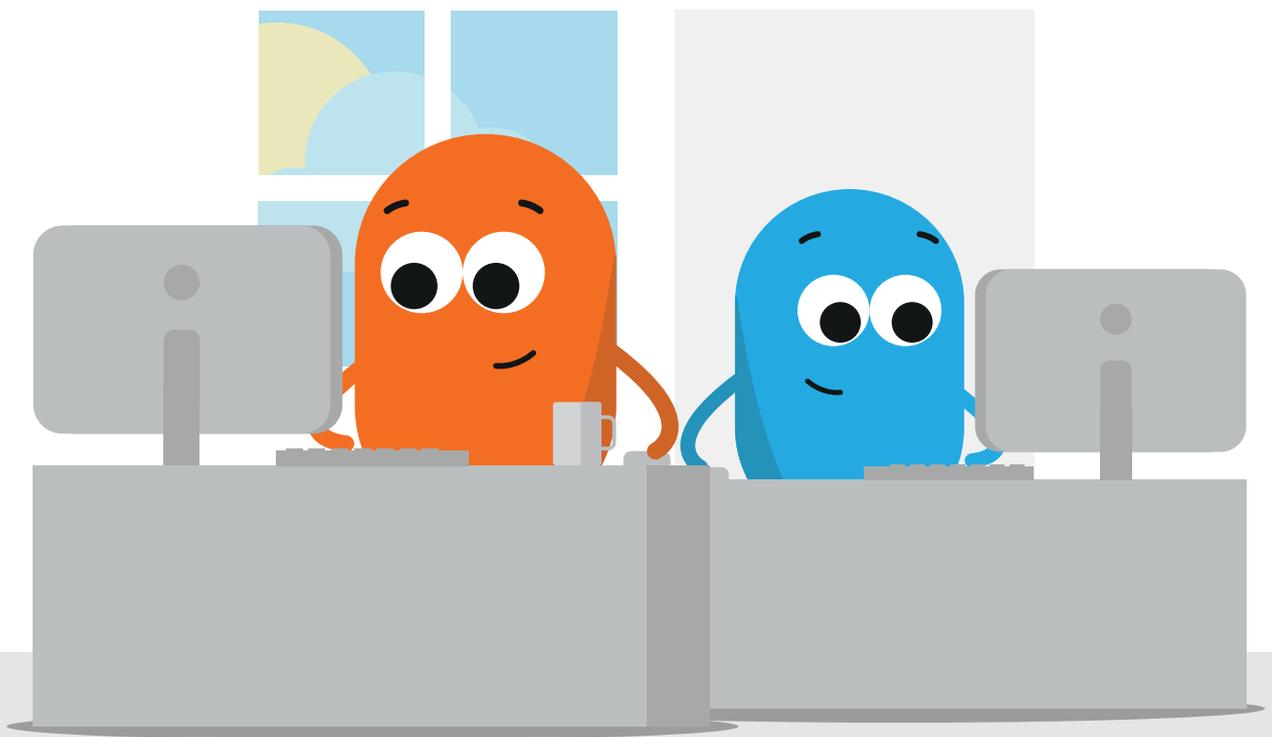# Understanding the importance of mental health in the workplace

Mental health in the workplace

Mental health is an issue your organisation can't afford to ignore.

Keeping your workforce well should be of the highest importance for any HR team. And, while good physical health is vital, supporting good mental health should never be overlooked. The impact of good mental health at work is felt across the business, with everything from productivity to workplace atmosphere affected.

Mental health can vary widely in its severity and complexity. All mental health conditions, such as anxiety, OCD, depression and bipolar disorder, have a scale.

Each will have risk factors specific to the individual, and can be experienced as mild, moderate or severe episodes.

As well as having a huge impact on individual employees, poor mental health has severe repercussions for employers – including increased staff turnover, sickness absence due to debilitating depression, burnout and exhaustion, decreased motivation and lost productivity.

The facts speak for themselves:

The Centre for Medical Health estimates that mental health problems in the UK workforce cost employers almost **£35 billion a year**[1]
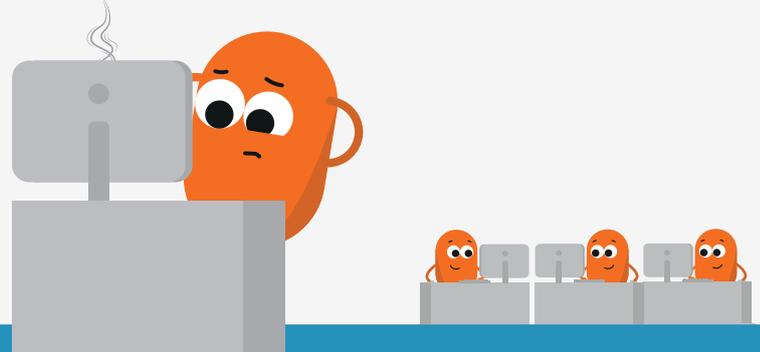
26bn

Presenteeism – coming to work but being unproductive because you're unwell - accounts for as much as £26bn in lost productivity each year[2]
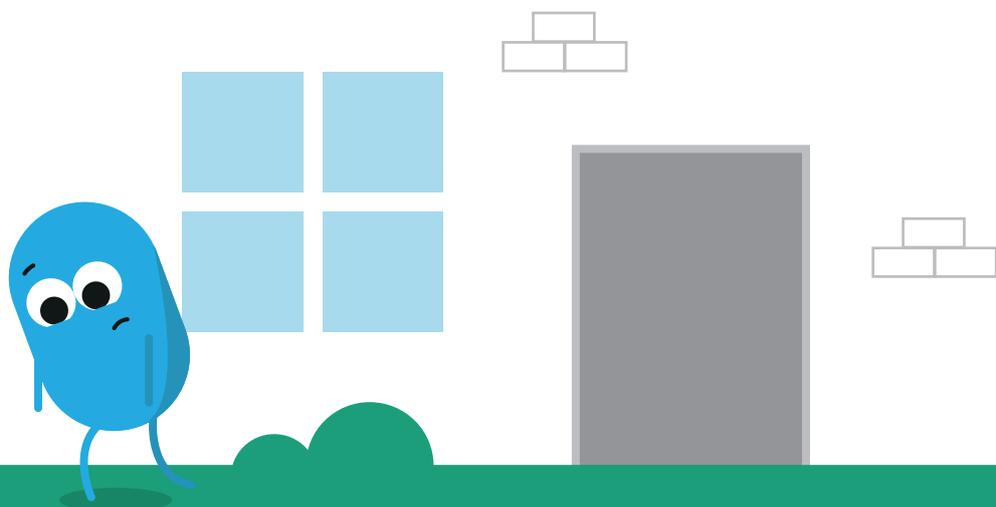
1 in 4

One in four people will experience a mental health issue in any given year[3]

49%

In 2016/17, anxiety, depression and stress accounted for **40%** of all work-related ill health, and **49%** of all working days lost to ill health[4]

1: Centre for Mental Health, Mental Health at Work: The Business Costs 10 Years On (2017). 2: The Stevenson / Famer review: Thriving At Work, 2017.
3: Mental Health Foundation - Fundamental Facts About Mental Health 2016. 4: Health & Safety Executive (2017).

But as well as the clear business case, employers must legally abide by relevant health & safety and employment law, as well as the common law duty of care, which includes:

Ensuring that staff do not work excessive hours.

Providing areas for rest and relaxation.

Protecting staff from bullying or harassment, either from colleagues or third parties.

Providing adequate training and feedback on performance.

Protecting staff from discrimination.

Ensuring a safe work environment.

Consulting employees on issues which concern them.

Clearly defining jobs and undertaking risk assessments.

Providing communication channels for employees to raise concerns.

An employer can be deemed to have breached their duty of care by failing to do everything that was reasonable in the circumstances to keep the employee safe from harm.
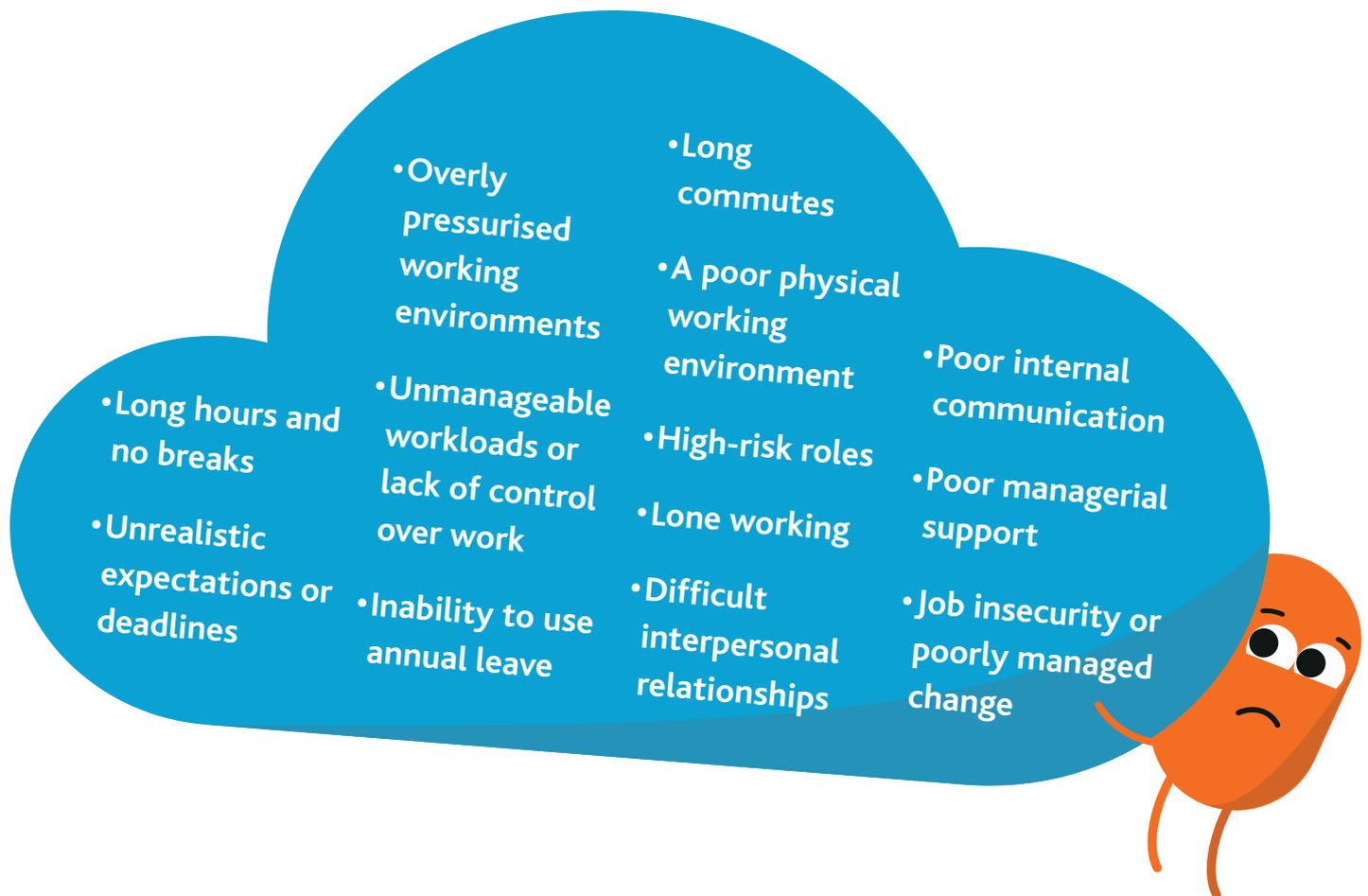
Early intervention - Spotting the signs

Poor mental health in the workplace is caused by a range of factors. The most frequent factors are workload, the individual's health, weight, financial concerns and caring for elderly relatives. These can act individually or combine to create the increased risk of mental illness.

But whether the primary cause is 'home' or 'work'-related, a healthy working environment – and, in particular, managers who are skilled in spotting early signs of mental ill health and providing appropriate support – plays a critical role in keeping employees healthy and preventing full–blown mental illness.

Workplace triggers for stress and mental health problems include:

- Overly pressurised working environments
- Long commutes
- A poor physical working environment
- Poor internal communication
- Long hours and no breaks
- Unmanageable workloads or lack of control over work
- High-risk roles
- Poor managerial support
- Unrealistic expectations or deadlines
- Inability to use annual leave
- Lone working
- Difficult interpersonal relationships
- Job insecurity or poorly managed change

Some of the key things to look out for are changes in an employee's usual behaviour, such as poor performance, tiredness, or increased sickness absence. You might notice they are smoking or drinking more, or taking drugs, or experiencing problems with colleagues.
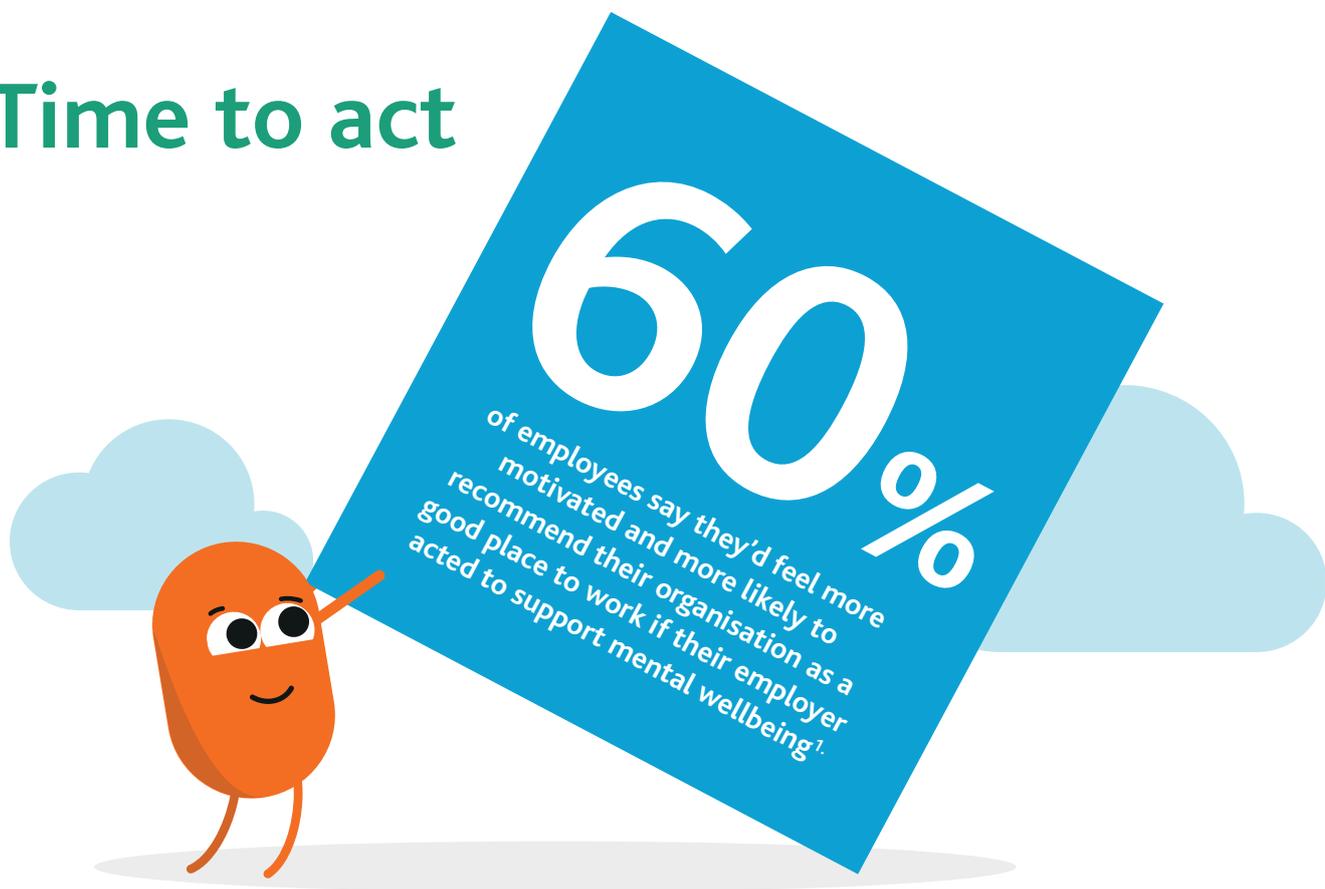
A normally punctual employee might start turning up late, or, conversely, they might start coming in much earlier and working later. Other signs might be tearfulness, headaches, loss of humour and mood changes.

Recognising colleagues' difficulties at an early stage makes it easier to help them and provide appropriate support. Investing time and effort in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of your staff will be repaid many times over in terms of enhanced morale, engagement, loyalty and productivity.

> **Line managers should know their team better than anyone. They are therefore ideally placed to spot the early warning signs that someone is mentally unwell. There will be times when you notice that someone who you manage is behaving out of character or seems unhappy.**

Time to act

60%

of employees say they'd feel more motivated and more likely to recommend their organisation as a good place to work if their employer acted to support mental wellbeing[1].

In many workplaces, mental health is the elephant in the room. Too often, employees are scared to talk to their manager and problems can spiral. Employers need to raise awareness and promote discussion of mental health and wellbeing to proactively challenge this harmful culture.

Employers should send a clear message that staff wellbeing matters. Colleagues take cues from how leaders behave. When the CEO speaks out about mental health it can have a huge impact.

Other key actions that senior managers should take include:

Embedding mental health from the start

Ensure staff are given information on how mental health is managed and what support is available as part of induction. Equality and diversity training should also cover mental health; for example, with a scenario exercise to challenge myths and prejudice.

Raising the mental health profile

Invite a speaker on mental health to an event as part of activities for diversity, disability or mental health awareness. Hearing what it's like to have a mental health problem from people who have experienced the issues first hand can help break down negative stereotypes.

Making the most of internal communication

Raise awareness through blogs, myth busters, factsheets, tips for managers, useful web links and FAQs. You can also use posters, noticeboards, staff newsletters, magazines, intranet and internet pages to get the message out.

Encouraging mental health champions

People at all levels talking openly about mental health sends a clear message that you'll get support if you're experiencing a mental health problem and that this isn't a barrier to career development.

1: Mind Resource Guide 3, How To Promote Wellbeing.

The importance of employee engagement

Employee engagement and wellbeing are interdependent. When staff feel involved and well informed about what's happening in the organisation, it increases motivation and helps people understand how their role fits into the bigger picture.

You should be as open as possible about strategic vision and direction and try to involve all staff in decision-making – not only about how they do their job, but also about the direction of the organisation.

Manage organisational changes, such as cost-saving and efficiency measures, new work content and technology, in a way that involves and listens to staff, and take positive action to address any issues identified.
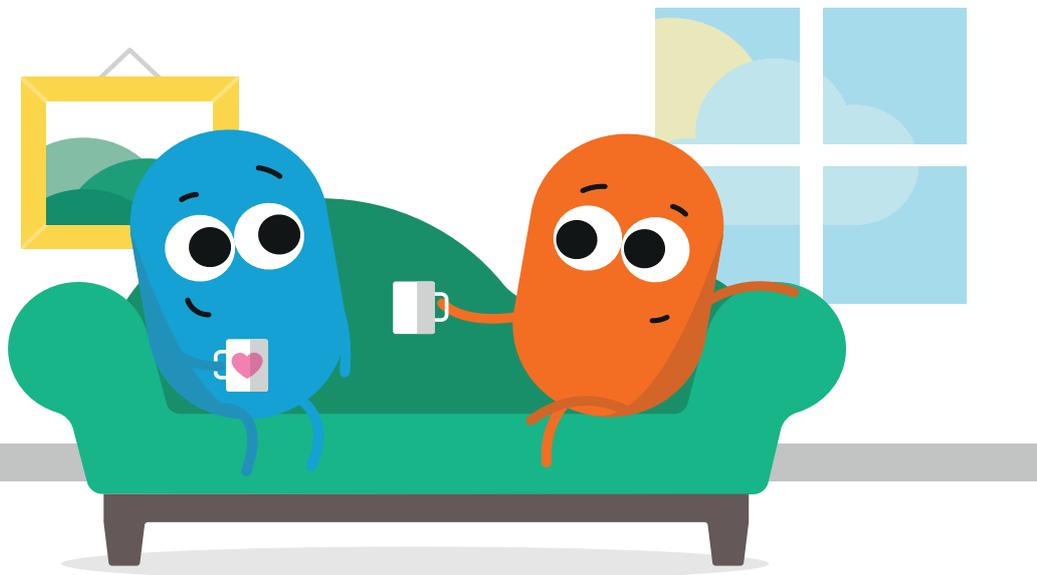
Key steps to embracing dialogue, feedback and engagement include:

- Staff surveys and focus groups.
- Staff forums and diversity networks.
- Engagement steering groups.
- Monthly or quarterly performance review meetings.
- Improvement or planning 'away days'.

- Regular group problem-solving meetings or innovation events.
- Work-stream groups that bring together different parts of the organisation.
- Feeding back board decisions to all staff.
- Effectively using internal communication channels.

> **(!) When employees are involved in finding solutions, they feel ownership of the final decision – and morale and productivity levels are less likely to be affected.**

Creating a culture of openness

Ensure you speak regularly with team members to check how they're doing and to reflect on what might be causing them stress.

You can do this at a team level by adding a standing item to team meetings where people talk about wellbeing and stress as a group. This can:

- Promote open dialogue and embed positive attitudes and behaviours.

- Help to normalise conversations about mental health.

- Help staff to think more about their own and colleagues' mental health and what factors can affect this.

Poor communication can be a significant cause of stress. Levels of staff wellbeing and engagement will be negatively affected if staff feel:

- Overloaded with information they cannot process.

- Excluded from key knowledge and conversations.
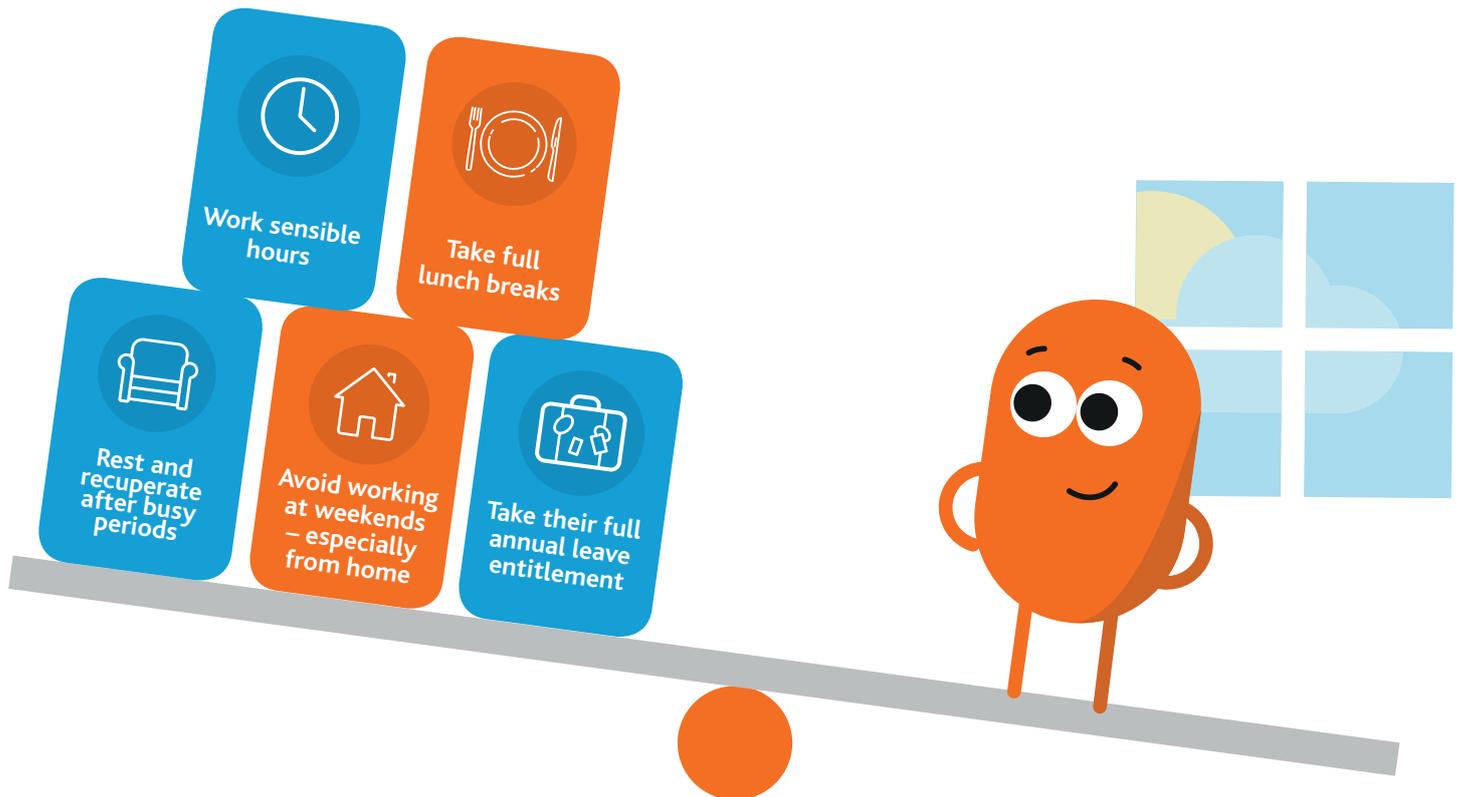
- Unable to feed their views upwards.
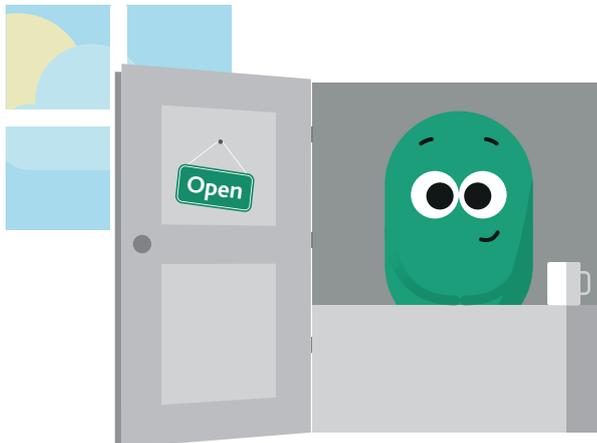
Where communication is clear, open, effective, manageable, and responsive, staff will be able to access all the information they need to do their job while avoiding overload.

Striking the work/life balance

In the short term, long hours might seem manageable, but sustained pressure and a poor work/life balance can quickly lead to stress and burnout, reducing levels of employee productivity, performance, creativity and morale.

This can be avoided by encouraging staff to:

- Work sensible hours
- Take full lunch breaks
- Rest and recuperate after busy periods
- Avoid working at weekends – especially from home
- Take their full annual leave entitlement

Flexible working, in terms of working time, location or the pattern of working, can support healthier and more productive ways of working for all staff. For example, it can help an employee to manage stress by allowing a later start time twice a week to accommodate exercise.

Flexible working benefits employees and employers alike:

- Employers benefit from increased morale, commitment and productivity and reduced sickness absence.
- Employees can fit their lives around their work – helping them balance busy lives while remaining healthy and focused.
- Flexible working can be a vital early intervention to prevent mental health problems from getting worse and resulting in sickness absence and can support a phased return to work after a period of sickness absence.

Wherever possible, senior leaders and managers should be role models for healthier work habits and encourage staff by example.

Learning and development

Research on employee engagement reveals that employees need to feel valued, supported and that their work is meaningful.

A positive culture that values all staff and invests in their skills and development builds the trust and integrity essential to maintain commitment and productivity levels.

Ensure you give all your staff development opportunities wherever possible. This can be done in a cost-effective way by using skills and knowledge within the organisation to develop coaching, learning, training and job-shadowing opportunities.

Managers should also make themselves available for regular work-related conversations with employees.

Peer support allows colleagues to support one another outside of the line-management structure and offers a great way to maximise the range of skills and experience held within your organisation.

Mentoring and buddy schemes can help new staff to understand your organisation faster and can support all staff in gaining confidence and developing new skills.

If you want to take positive action to make your workplace a mutually supportive environment where good work relationships thrive you should:
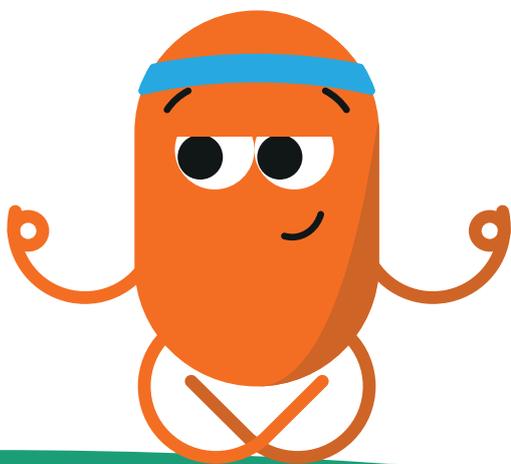
1
Encourage exercise and regular social events to boost staff health, team work and mental wellbeing, such as lunchtime walking clubs or 'Lunch and Learn'.

2
Promote positive behaviours to avoid conflict and ensure fairness.

3
Ensure robust policies on bullying and harassment are in place and well publicised.

4
Encourage and support a culture of teamwork, collaboration and information-sharing.

The role of technology in future mental health

With the constant advent of technology, what are the implications for technology tackling mental health in the workplace?

Our devices can already be used to quantify and improve our well-being in the form of wearable fitness trackers, meditation apps, virtual therapists and more.

With the impact of mental health illness in the workplace continuing to soar, it's not hard to imagine a time when future technology will play its part in improving workplace health.

With this in mind, Health Shield is launching Thrive – a clinically-proven app which prevents, detects and treats common mental health conditions and helps to build resilience in employees. It's built using computerised cognitive behavioural therapy and its mindfulness exercises can help to manage an individual's mental wellbeing.

How does it help?

The Thrive app can help your organisation in a number of ways – it can be integrated with current wellbeing services, support links of your choice can be added, your branding can be applied and emotional/usage reports can be sent quarterly, which allows you to gain an invaluable insight into your organisation's wellbeing. Using evidence-based techniques shown to be clinically sound, Thrive helps users self-manage their mental wellbeing. The self-management techniques included have been shown to halve the time to recover for those with mild depression or anxiety when used regularly.

For more information, please email: thrive@healthshield.co.uk