

Occupational health information sheet

Reasonable adjustments for staff with mental health problems

If mental ill-health affects an individual's ability to carry out day to day activities then they are likely to be covered by the Equality Act 2010 and the Council is required to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace/work activities to support them.

The first step in making reasonable adjustments for someone with a mental health problem is to have an open and frank discussion. Adjustments need to be agreed between the employer and the employee or applicant. Every reasonable adjustment is unique to the individual's specific needs and abilities, and the requirements of the employer.

Some mental health problems can be episodic: a person can experience long periods when they are perfectly well, but may then experience a further episode of difficulty. The times when they are unwell will not always be the same, but there may be symptoms or issues that are common to each episode. So rather than agreeing one or more specific adjustments that will apply all the time, it may be more helpful to agree adjustments that can be implemented when they are needed, and revoked when they are not.

In order for reasonable adjustments to be constructive, they must focus on what the person can do – not on what they can't. It is also important that you do not make promises that you are unable to keep: be realistic.

Be clear about what you need to know. Staff should not feel they have to disclose every aspect of their mental health problem: your discussions should focus on the problems they are experiencing in the workplace, and what actions can be taken to address them.

This information sheet suggests areas where you could make reasonable adjustments. Not all of them will be suitable, and it is not an exhaustive list: there may well be others that your staff would like you to consider.

Remember: if you are not sure what will help someone – ask them!

Practical solutions

1. Adjust the recruitment process

You could provide more time for tests, assignments or interviews, allow applicants to come in early to orient themselves, and/or provide a quiet area for applicants to wait in, rather than a busy reception.

2. Amend your induction.

Tell your new employee about your standard induction and ask if there are any areas that might cause them difficulties. If so, could you adjust the process, without reducing its effectiveness? For example, you could offer a mentor, arrange additional support for the first few months, agree a longer induction process, and/or provide induction information in writing as well as verbally.

3. Allow variations in working hours.

- There are many reasons why someone might need to adjust their hours. They might need to access a service that is only available during working hours, or they might find it difficult to function in the morning, perhaps as a result of prescribed medication, but be able to work well later in the day. Just moving someone's start and finish time ahead by an hour might make all the difference to their ability to do their job well.
- Allow several short breaks instead of one main lunch break. Some people might have difficulty in concentrating for long periods: breaking up their working day differently could help.
- Permit more breaks at certain times. If someone is doing particularly stressful work, could you increase the frequency or duration of their breaks to allow them time to recover?
- Allow the person to change their workplace. For some people, noisy environments might adversely affect their mental health at times: could they work somewhere else?
- Ensure access to natural light and fresh air. Many people benefit from sitting near to a window, particularly if they are able to open it to allow fresh air to circulate.
- Move their workstation. Would it be helpful to be based in another position – e.g., so their back didn't face the door?
- Provide a quiet space for breaks. A quiet place away from the main workspace is helpful for many people.

4. Other actions

- Agree an "advance plan". You might be unsure about how to handle changes in an employee's mental health. It could help to discuss this when the person is well, and agree how you will deal with any recurrence of mental health problems.
- Agree changes to communication methods. For some people, there may be times when it is hard to communicate face-to-face. At these times, you could agree that they can communicate by email, or work from home.
- Allow changes to tasks when needed. When a person is unwell or has just returned from a period of absence, it may be helpful for them to focus on a particular type of task. Could they swap some tasks with a colleague, or work to a different job description for a time? This can help to rebuild confidence.
- Provide more support when needed. Many employers already require regular meetings between line managers and staff. If you don't, you could consider introducing them as an adjustment, and if you do, it might be helpful to increase the frequency of these meetings at certain times. Sometimes all that's needed is time to talk things through.

- Implement a “buddying” system. Some employees might find it helpful to have a “buddy”, coach or mentor for a time, to provide advice, guidance or support.
- Agree an “early warning” system. Some people might want to ask a specific colleague to alert them if their behaviour starts to change in a way that suggests their mental health is deteriorating. This can identify triggers for pre-agreed adjustments to be put in place.
- Allow the use of headphones. This can help people who have difficulty concentrating or who sometimes hear voices.

Communication

- Communicate Council policies to staff. It is important to make clear that reasonable adjustments are not about unfair advantages or favouritism, but are a way of removing barriers preventing people with disabilities from making a full contribution in the workplace – or sometimes from contributing at all.
- Let staff know it’s okay to talk about mental health. There is still a lot of stigma around mental health problems, which may make staff reluctant to tell someone they need an adjustment. Set out clearly what will happen when someone discloses a mental health problem.
- Tell those who need to know about adjustments. When you make a reasonable adjustment for someone, do inform any staff who need to know about it. This does not mean that you need to tell other staff about the person’s disability: you just need to ensure they know about the arrangement, so that they do not prevent reasonable adjustments from working