

Guide

# Mental Health Inclusion



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# Introduction & Purpose

Globally, mental health challenges are on the rise. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that depression and anxiety cost the global economy \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity. In the UK, one in four people experience a mental health condition each year, and workplace stress, burnout, and poor well-being are driving record levels of absenteeism and presenteeism.

Despite this, stigma, fear, and lack of support still prevent many from seeking help. Too often, mental health is treated as a personal issue rather than a workplace priority.

Organisations that fail to address mental health risk low engagement, high turnover, and reputational damage, while those that invest in well-being see stronger performance, higher retention, and more inclusive cultures.

This guide provides practical steps to ensure mental health is embedded in workplace inclusion efforts, helping organisations move beyond awareness to meaningful action.



## Who This Guide Is For?

This guide is for leaders, managers, HR teams, and employees looking to:

- Normalise conversations about mental health.
- Create a supportive and inclusive culture.
- Embed mental health in organisational strategies.
- Ensure policies and practices promote accessibility.

With practical insights and actions, this guide will help you build a workplace where mental health is valued and protected.



## Key Mental Health Terms & Definitions

Understanding key terms is essential for effective and accurate communication. Here are some key definitions:

**Mental Health:** A state of well-being in which an individual can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community. Mental health is not just the absence of mental illness but includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

**Mental Illness:** Refers to diagnosable conditions affecting a person's thinking, feeling, behaviour, or mood in ways that impact daily functioning. Examples include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. The terms 'mental health' and 'mental illness' are often used interchangeably, but they have different meanings. Everyone has mental health, just like everyone has health.

**Mental Ill Health:** A more general term used to describe any temporary or long-term difficulty with mental well-being, which may or may not meet the criteria for a clinical diagnosis. It acknowledges that people can experience struggles with mental health without having a diagnosed condition.

**Wellbeing:** A holistic term that refers to a person's overall mental, emotional, physical, and social health. Good well-being means feeling balanced, engaged, and able to manage daily life effectively.

**Anxiety Disorders:** A group of conditions where excessive fear, worry, or nervousness interferes with daily life. Examples include generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder.

**Depression:** A common mental health condition characterised by persistent sadness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, changes in appetite and sleep, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and feelings of worthlessness or guilt.



# Key Mental Health Terms & Definitions

Understanding key terms is essential for effective and accurate communication. Here are some key definitions:

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** A condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, leading to flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and avoidance of trauma-related stimuli.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD):** A condition characterised by intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviours or mental acts (compulsions) performed to reduce distress.

**Bipolar Disorder:** A condition marked by extreme mood swings that include emotional highs (mania or hypomania) and lows (depression).

**Schizophrenia:** A mental health condition that can involve hallucinations, delusions, disorganised thinking, and impaired functioning.

**Burnout:** A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress, often work-related.

**Psychological Safety:** A workplace or social environment where people feel safe to express themselves, take risks, and share concerns without fear of negative consequences.

**Resilience:** The ability to cope with and recover from stress, adversity, or trauma.

**Emotional Intelligence (EQ):** The ability to understand, manage, and express emotions effectively, as well as recognise and respond to the emotions of others



## Tensions Around The Term “Disorder”

The term "disorder" is widely used in clinical settings (e.g., anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder) to indicate a condition that affects mental health in a way that significantly impacts daily life. However, there are ongoing debates and tensions around its use, particularly in these areas:



- Critics argue that labelling distress as a "disorder" can pathologise normal responses to life challenges, such as grief or stress, rather than recognising them as part of the human experience.
- The term "disorder" carries stigma, suggesting something is fundamentally "wrong" with an individual, rather than acknowledging the role of social, economic, and environmental factors in mental health.
- Some practitioners and advocates prefer terms like "condition," "difficulty," or "difference" rather than "disorder" to reduce stigma and focus on strengths rather than deficits.
- Different cultures perceive mental health differently. What is classified as a "disorder" in one context may be seen as a spiritual experience, personality trait, or temporary state in another.
- Efforts are being made to adjust language in mental health diagnosis. For example, some professionals advocate renaming "borderline personality disorder" to "emotion dysregulation disorder" to reflect a less stigmatising and more accurate understanding of the condition.

While "disorder" remains a key term in medical and diagnostic frameworks, many are pushing for a more nuanced, person-centred, and less stigmatising approach to mental health language.

## Understanding Mental Health in the Inclusion Context



Mental health is shaped by social, economic, and workplace factors. An inclusive culture acknowledges that mental health challenges can be worsened by discrimination, bias, and workplace stress.

Mental health experiences vary based on race, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and other identities. Structural inequalities can impact access to support, making tailored, inclusive approaches essential.

While neurodivergence (e.g., autism, ADHD) is not a mental illness, neurodivergent individuals often face higher risks of mental ill health due to stigma, lack of adjustments, and exclusion.

Recognising diverse cognitive needs supports both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees. Please see our Neurodiversity Inclusion Guide for more information on this.



# Workplace Culture & Mental Health Inclusion



“  
**1 in  
4**

adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any given year.

**NHS ENGLAND**

”

A workplace culture that prioritises mental health is one where employees feel safe to speak up, ask for support, and take care of their well-being without fear of judgment or negative consequences. Psychological safety enables open conversations, early intervention, and a stronger sense of belonging.

- Leaders and managers should talk openly about mental health, share experiences, and challenge stigma.
- Routine check-ins should include well-being discussions, not just performance updates.

## Bias & Microaggressions

Biases and dismissive comments can make it harder for employees to seek support. Phrases like the below can discourage people from disclosing challenges:

“Just toughen up!”

“You don't look sick!”

Myths and stereotypes about mental health contribute to stigma and discrimination. Common myths include:

### Myth

Mental health issues are rare.

### Fact

Mental health issues are common and affect people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds.

### Myth

People with mental health conditions can't work.

### Fact

Many people with mental health conditions lead productive lives and work successfully in various industries.

### Myth

Talking about mental health makes it worse.

### Fact

Open conversations about mental health can reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help.

Creating an inclusive, non-judgmental environment ensures people feel heard and supported.

A culture that values mental health isn't built through policies alone.

It requires consistent actions, open dialogue, and a shared commitment to inclusion at all levels



# Possible Causes of Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems can arise from a multitude of factors at work and personal life.

Understanding these causes is essential for removing barriers to mental health inclusion, creating informed and effective support systems, and offering tailored interventions to mitigate the impact.

## Work-Related Causes

- **Workload and Stress:** Excessive workloads, under-resourcing, unrealistic deadlines, and high-pressure environments can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout.
- **Job Insecurity:** Uncertainty about job / income stability can cause anxiety and stress.
- **Poor Work-Life Balance:** Long working hours and a lack of flexibility can interfere with and limit personal life, leading to stress, mental health issues, and the breakdown of personal relationships.
- **Workplace Bullying and Harassment:** Negative interactions and toxic work environments can severely impact mental health.
- **Lack of Support:** Inadequate managerial support and lack of resources for dealing with work-related stressors.

## Life Changes

- **Major Life Events:** Events such as marriage, divorce, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one can trigger significant stress and emotional impacts.
- **Relocation:** Eviction or moving to a new city or country can disrupt social networks and support systems, leading to feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety.
- **Career Transitions:** Changing jobs, receiving promotions, or facing job loss can be sources of considerable stress and anxiety.



# Possible Causes of Mental Health Problems

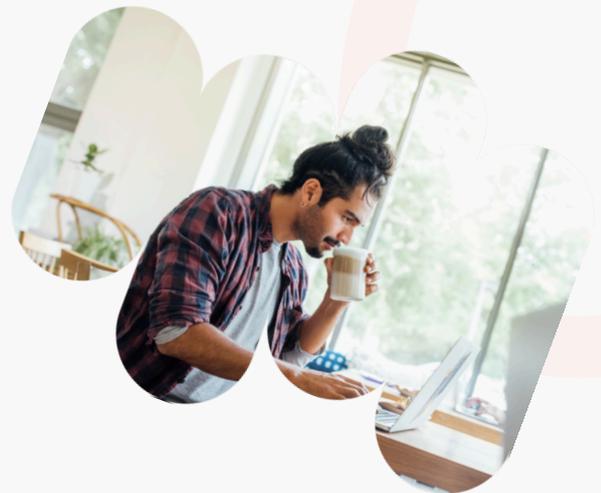
## Emotional Factors

- **Stress:** Continuous exposure to high-stress levels can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression. This includes in the workplace and personal life.
- **Trauma:** Experiencing or witnessing traumatic events can have long-lasting effects on mental health.
- **Emotional Exhaustion:** Constantly dealing with emotional demands without adequate recovery time can lead to emotional exhaustion and mental health problems.



## Physical Factors

- **Chronic Illness:** Living with long-term physical health conditions can contribute to mental health issues due to the constant management and potential pain.
- **Sleep Deprivation:** Lack of adequate sleep can impair cognitive function, mood, and overall mental health.
- **Substance Abuse:** Misuse of alcohol, drugs, or other substances can exacerbate mental health issues or lead to new ones.



## Environmental Factors

- **Living Conditions:** Poor housing conditions, overcrowding, and psychologically, emotionally and physically unsafe environments can increase depression, stress and anxiety.
- **Social Environment:** Lack of social support, bullying, microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and social isolation can negatively impact mental health. 'Oppression Fatigue' refers to the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual depletion caused by everyday individual and systemic oppression.



## Inclusive Leadership & Managerial Responsibilities

“Employers have a 'duty of care'. This means, as an employer, you must do all you reasonably can to support your employees' health, safety and wellbeing.

ACAS, 2023

For almost

**70%**

of people...

their manager has more impact on their mental health than their therapist or their doctor, and it's equal to the impact of their partner.

SOCIOLOGIST DR. BROWER, 2023



# Inclusive Leadership & Managerial Responsibilities

Leaders and managers play a critical role in shaping a workplace where mental health is valued, not stigmatised. Inclusive leadership means fostering psychological safety, listening with empathy, and taking proactive steps to support mental well-being.



## Key Responsibilities of Leaders & Managers

### Role-Modelling Healthy Behaviours

- Demonstrate healthy boundaries (e.g., taking breaks, managing workload).
- Speak openly about mental health and well-being to reduce stigma.
- Encourage a culture where self-care is seen as productive, not a weakness.

### Supporting Employees with Mental Health Challenges

- Recognise early warning signs – changes in behaviour, engagement, or performance may indicate mental health struggles.
- Handle disclosures with care – listen non-judgmentally, reassure confidentiality, and signpost to support.
- Make reasonable adjustments – flexible working, workload adjustments, or additional check-ins can make a significant difference.

## Creating Psychological Safety

- Encourage honest conversations – make well-being a standard part of check-ins, not just a crisis response.
- Address bias and stigma – challenge dismissive attitudes and ensure all employees feel supported.
- Balance accountability with compassion – focus on support rather than punitive performance measures when mental health affects work.

## Recognising the Limits of the Role

Managers are not therapists but should be confident in:

- Signposting employees to professional help or internal support (e.g., Employee Assistance Programmes, mental health champions).
- Ensuring policies are followed to support employees fairly and consistently.
- Seeking support for themselves – leaders also need space to manage their own mental health.

# Legal Protections and Employee Rights

Under the Equality Act 2010 (UK), mental health conditions that have a substantial and long-term impact on a person's ability to carry out daily activities may be considered a disability. This means employers have a legal duty to provide reasonable adjustments to ensure affected employees are not disadvantaged.



## Examples of Reasonable Adjustments

### Flexible Working Arrangements

- ✓ Adjusted start and finish times to accommodate medication side effects or sleep difficulties.
- ✓ Hybrid or remote working options for those struggling with social anxiety or sensory overload.
- ✓ Longer or more frequent breaks to manage stress levels.

### Adjustments to Workload

- ✓ Prioritisation of tasks to avoid overwhelm.
- ✓ Temporary adjustments to performance targets to account for fluctuating mental health.
- ✓ Alternative formats for communication (e.g., written instead of verbal updates) for those experiencing anxiety.

### Workplace Environment/Support

- ✓ Access to quiet spaces or noise-reducing headphones for employees affected by sensory overload.
- ✓ Providing a buddy or mentor system for support and check-ins.
- ✓ Allowing time for therapy, medical appointments, or wellbeing activities without penalty.

### Supportive Management & Communication

- ✓ Clear and predictable work schedules to reduce anxiety and stress.
- ✓ Regular well-being check-ins that focus on support rather than performance pressure.

### Employees may be hesitant to disclose mental health conditions due to fear of stigma or negative career impact. Managers should:

- ✓ Listen without judgment and avoid making assumptions.
- ✓ Reassure confidentiality and outline available support.
- ✓ Collaborate on adjustments, allowing flexibility where possible.

# Deconstructing Workplace Norms

Many workplace norms are built around productivity, resilience, and presenteeism, often at the expense of mental health. Unspoken expectations, such as working long hours, always being available, or avoiding discussions about mental health, can create environments where employees feel pressured to mask struggles rather than seek support.



## Challenging Harmful Norms

- Shift from "Always on" Culture to Respecting Boundaries – Encourage clear working hours, breaks, and disconnecting from emails after work.
- Shift from "Push Through It" Mentality to Normalising Rest – Recognise that mental health is as valid as physical health when taking time off.
- Shift from Busyness as a Status Symbol to Valuing Well-being – Shift from overwork as a measure of success to sustainable, healthy work habits.
- Shift from One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Flexible Work Practices – Adapt schedules, workloads, and expectations to support different mental health needs.

## Creating New Workplace Norms

- Psychological safety first – Make mental health conversations routine, not reactive.
- Proactive support – Encourage check-ins before burnout happens, not after.
- Redefine success – Measure performance by impact and well-being, not just hours worked.

Deconstructing outdated norms requires leaders to role-model change and employees to feel empowered to prioritise well-being. A mentally healthy workplace isn't about working harder, it's about working better and sustainably.

# Embedding Mental Health into Workplace Structures

To create a mental health inclusive workplace, organisations must go beyond awareness campaigns and integrate mental health into peer support, policies, and training. A structured approach ensures that mental well-being is treated as a core part of workplace culture.



## Internal, Peer & Employee Support Options

A strong support system helps normalise conversations around mental health and ensures employees feel they have trusted spaces to seek help. Organisations can:

- **Provide Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)** – Confidential counselling and support services for employees dealing with mental health, financial, or personal issues.
- **Establish mental health champions** – trained colleagues who offer guidance and signpost to support.
- Embed mental health into **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)** to align with broader D&I initiatives.
- Promote **allyship and active listening** – ensuring employees feel heard without overstepping boundaries.
- Encourage **peer check-ins and well-being checklists** to create informal support structures.

# Embedding Mental Health into Workplace Structures

## Inclusive Policies & Procedures

Policies should explicitly support mental health and protect employees from discrimination or bias. Organisations should:

- **Embed mental health into D&I strategies** – ensuring it is treated with the same importance as other aspects of inclusion.
- Strengthen **anti-discrimination and bullying policies** – taking mental health-related discrimination as seriously as any other form.
- Ensure **sick leave policies** include mental health-related absences without stigma.
- Establish **clear crisis support pathways** – so employees know where to turn in an emergency.



## Training & Awareness Programmes

Knowledge and confidence in mental health inclusion at all levels of an organisation help shift culture. Key training initiatives include:

- **Mental health literacy training** – giving employees practical knowledge to support themselves and others.
- **Manager & HR training** – equipping leaders with skills to recognise signs, offer support, and implement adjustments.
- **Allyship & bystander intervention** – giving employees tools to challenge stigma and step in when support is needed.
- **Mental health first aid training** – so designated individuals can provide immediate support and referrals.



## External Resources & Helplines

### NHS

Adult and older adult mental health.

Website: [england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk)

### ACAS

Supporting Mental Health at Work: Managing employees' wellbeing.

Website: [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk)

### Forbes

Tracy Brower, PhD for Forbes: Managers Have Major Impact on Mental Health.

Website: [forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com)

### Mind UK

Information, support, and a helpline for people experiencing mental health challenges.

Infoline: 0300 123 3393

Available Monday to Friday, 9 am to 6 pm (excluding bank holidays).

Offers information on mental health problems, treatment options, and local support services.

Website: [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)

### Samaritans

24/7 support for anyone in distress or crisis.

Helpline: 116 123

Available 24/7 for confidential emotional support.

Website: [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)

### Gov.uk

When a mental health condition becomes a disability.

Website: [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

### MHF

Mental Health Foundation: Provides information on mental health conditions, self-help resources, and research.

Website: [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

### NSP

National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK: Offers a supportive listening service to anyone with thoughts of suicide

Helpline: 0800 689 5652

Available from 6 pm to midnight every day.



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