Mental Health: Recognising Gender Differences

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This factsheet outlines the key differences between men and women experiencing common mental health issues, and how employers can better manage wellbeing in the workplace.

The total cost of mental ill-health to employers is estimated to be £1,035 for every employee in the UK workforce1.

- According to Acas, stress is now the biggest cause of long-term absence in the UK workforce2.
- 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health issue at one time3, yet less than half of those affected by mental ill health feel confident to disclose their condition to their employer4.

Prevalence of mental health issues

Depression, anxiety and stress

Mixed anxiety & depression is the most common mental health issue in the UK5.

- Women are twice as likely to experience depression6 and anxiety disorders7 than men.
- 10% of mothers and 6% of fathers in the UK have mental health problems at any given time8.
- Globally, women are found to be twice as likely to experience anxiety as men and prevalence is higher in those with chronic physical health issues9

- 83% of men who say stress interferes with their work feel it also carries over to their personal life, compared to 72% of women10.

Colleagues and line managers may be the first people to spot changes in the behaviour of people suffering from mental distress

Sociodemographic differences also show disparities in common mental health issues:

- Women from black and minority ethnic communities are more often diagnosed with mental health disorders and admitted to hospital than their white counterparts11.
- Women who are carers have a higher tendency to experience mental health issues. Research has found that 69% of carers said that caring responsibilities negatively affect their wellbeing. 58% of carers are female and the majority are aged 50-64 years12.
Cross-culturally, those under the age of 35 are disproportionately affected by anxiety disorders.  

Suicide

One person takes their own life every two hours in the UK and at least ten times that number attempt suicide.

- Women are more likely to experience suicidal thoughts than men. However, the male suicide rate is three times higher than with females.
- Suicide remains the leading cause of death for men between 20 and 34 in England and Wales.
- Among men, the group most at risk of suicide are middle-aged men in the lowest socio economic groups and suicide rates are more prevalent in male-dominated workgroups such as manual workers, farming and in the military.
- 35% of transgender people have attempted suicide once and 25% a second time.
- 8 out of 10 people considering suicide show some signs of their intentions. People who talk about or threaten suicide, or call suicide crisis centers are 30 times more likely than average to take their own life.

Dealing with mental ill health

Men and women usually experience mental ill-health in different ways.

- **Women** tend to experience low mood, be more irritable, less focused and less confident. However, they are more likely than men to seek reassurance, talk to colleagues or friends, but decline extra work or responsibilities.
- **Men** often experience anger, engage in aggressive or abusive behaviour, escapist behaviours and substance abuse. They are nearly three times more likely to report frequent drug use and to become alcohol dependent than women, increasing the risk of depression and suicide.

Men have a tendency to mainly recognise symptoms at ‘crisis’ point and are less likely to recognise warning signs. Moreover, they are less likely to seek the support of friends, relatives and professional services.

Risk factors for men and women

Research shows that working is generally related to positive mental health for men and women, however workplace stress remains a major problem.

Women are more likely to suffer from poor work-life balance, and exhaustion. In addition, bullying and harassment are more common experiences amongst women than men, affecting more than one in two women. Additionally, income inequality, lower social status and caring responsibilities often put women at a disadvantage.

For men, poor mental health is more likely driven by high pressure workplaces and work burnout. Unemployment and subsequent self-perceptions of being a ‘failed breadwinner’ increase the risk of suicide in older men, particularly with a history of depression. Finally, men going through divorce, separation or bereavement have been found to cope less well than women, often resulting in self-destructive behaviours.
The role of line managers

People spend the majority of their time in the workplace, therefore it needs to be a place where employees can speak openly and be treated fairly for mental ill issues, creating parity between physical and mental health.

Train line managers

to recognise the different symptoms of reduced mental health in men and women and improve the wellbeing of their staff.

Raise awareness

about the different mental health experiences of men and women, in particular challenging traditional views of masculinity that require men to be strong at all times.

Nominate champions

such as senior managers/leaders who acknowledge that they have mental health issues, and make it more acceptable for all to talk about mental ill health.

Call to action

We recommend that every business leader drives the issue of workplace wellbeing forward by:

1. Signing up to the Time to Change organisational pledge. Signing the Time to Change pledge and introducing Mental Health First Aid training are proven catalysts for change within organisations, and are most effective when integrated as components of a strategic approach to embedding wellbeing into organisational culture using the Business in the Community Workwell Model.

2. Introducing Mental Health First Aid training for line managers. Mental Health First Aid is a licensed training product delivered by accredited trainers including Mental Health First Aid England and Mind. Training courses range from three hours to two days.

   1. The following 8 key steps will help employers to embed wellbeing into organisational culture: Sign up to the Time to Change organisational pledge to tackle mental health stigma.

   2. Use the ‘Working Well’ segment of the Workwell model.

   3. Promote and communicate throughout the organisation that wellbeing is integral to productivity.

   4. Make employee wellbeing a core part of line manager job responsibilities, and provide line managers with the training to support their staff.

   5. Support line managers to develop interpersonal skills.

   6. Support line managers to maintain their own wellbeing.

   7. Introduce Mental Health First Aid training to line managers.

   8. Develop and promote clear referral or assistance pathways.

Useful helplines

If you are in crisis or distress call 111 immediately
prevalence of anxiety disorders in adult populations, Brain and Behavior, 2016; 0(0), e00497, doi: 10.1002/brb3.497
14 ‘Suicide | Mental Health Foundation’
https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/suicide> [accessed 13 May 2016].
15 The NHS Information Centre for health and social care, The National Centre for Social Research and The Department of Health Sciences, University of Leicester, Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England, Results of a Household Survey, 2007
17 Davies.
20 McNeil and others.
21 Mental Health America (2016).
http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/suicide
23 ‘Key Data: Mental Health’, 2014
https://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/key-data-mental-health> [accessed 13 May 2016].
24 ‘8.7% of men are alcohol dependent compared to 3.3% of women. Key Data: Mental Health’, 2014
https://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/key-data-mental-health> [accessed 13 May 2016].
25 ‘Alcohol and Depression’
http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/alcoholdepression.aspx> [accessed 18 May 2016].
30 ‘Depression & Men’
<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/depressionmen.aspx> [accessed 18 May 2016].