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How to Support Your Staff's Mental Health and Wellbeing During Challenging Times

Introduction

No one can deny that we are experiencing challenging times. The UK has been experiencing a cost-of-living crisis since late 2021 and it is becoming clear that it is having numerous effects on our mental health and wellbeing.

New data shows that the cost-of-living crisis is still causing widespread mental distress with almost one third of adults (31%) in the UK feeling anxious in the last month due to their financial situation. Worrying about bills and the cost of food, on top of our usual daily stresses, can make it hard to find the time to look after yourself. But even when there's so much going on, it's important to find time to protect your well-being and mental health.

Challenging times can affect us in different ways.
They can create feelings of uncertainty, worry and can also exacerbate feelings of loneliness or isolation. Therefore, it is important to take the time to understand how mental health is being affected and the ways in which we can look after our employees. We must remember though, that everyone has their own journey and circumstances, so we must consider the individual.

When it comes to mental health, there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

One of our virtual roundtable events focused on this topic. We were joined by various L&D professionals from a variety of sectors, and together we came up with a range of ways in which we can support our colleagues and employees during these times. We hope you find it useful.

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A Good Work-Life Balance

A healthy work-life balance will mean different things to us all. It's not so much about splitting time 50/50 between work and leisure but making sure your employees feel fulfilled and content in both areas of their life. A healthy balance could be:

- meeting deadlines at work while still having time for friends and hobbies
- having enough time to sleep properly and eat well
- not worrying about work when at home.

This can be challenging if, for example, some employees also have caring responsibilities or health difficulties. It can be easy to normalise working long hours or being under extreme stress, especially if we've been doing it for a long time or all our colleagues are in the same boat. Our assumptions and habits around work can become deep-rooted unless we take a step back once in a while. You can see some helpful tips on **maintaining a healthy work-life balance here**.

Encourage a Culture of Openness

Openness comes from the top, and if you want to see this within your employees, you should also be modelling this same behaviour. Communicate openly, be transparent about any decisions, involve the team in the process and be willing to listen to feedback and ideas from your team. One easy way to do this is to hold regular town hall meetings where employees can actively listen, ask questions, and provide feedback. This can help alleviate anxieties about the future of the company and offer reassurance in a time of uncertainty.

Regular Meetings

Whether team meetings, one-to-ones or daily catch-ups, regular team meetings create spaces to keep in touch and keep everyone up to date. Arranging regular meetings help your staff feel valued, as well as reduce the feeling of loneliness and isolation. Though be mindful not to arrange too many, as it can lead to 'digital' fatigue.

Structure

Though work provides our days with a helpful structure, we must make sure the work time itself has a healthy structure, and that we maintain the boundaries between our professional and personal lives.

Here are some tips to help your employees:

Training and Education
Offer training sessions or workshops to educate employees and managers about mental health awareness, destigmatisation, and strategies for self-care. This can help create a more supportive environment and equip individuals with the tools they need to manage their mental health effectively.

Flexible Work Arrangements
Consider implementing flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options or flexible hours, to accommodate employees' needs during challenging times. This can help reduce stress and allow individuals to better balance their work and personal responsibilities.

Access to Mental Health Resources
Ensure that employees have access to mental health resources, such as counselling services, support groups, helplines, and online resources. Provide information about available resources and how to access them confidentially.

Lead by Example
Finally, leaders should lead by example by prioritising their own mental health and well-being and openly discussing their own struggles and coping mechanisms. This can help create a culture of openness, empathy, and support within the organisation.

By implementing these strategies and fostering a culture of support and understanding, you can effectively assist employees facing mental health challenges and create a workplace where all individuals feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Making Mental Health Part of the Discussion

Overall, we need to be able to talk about our mental health. Though all the above techniques can be put in place to help support each other's mental health, we can't ignore that people may want to talk about any anxieties, worries or concerns that may be causing them distress. Therefore, make sure you are transparent with your staff about what ways they can ask for help, and what things you have in place to support.

Here are some further tips to help with making mental health part of the discussion:

Promote Awareness Campaigns
Launch awareness campaigns or initiatives to promote mental health awareness within the organisation. This can include events, activities and communication campaigns to raise awareness and encourage dialogue about mental health.

Encourage Self-Care
Promote self-care practices and encourage employees to prioritise their mental health and well-being. This can include setting boundaries around working hours, taking regular breaks, and practising stress management techniques.

Listen and Validate
When employees do open up about their mental health, listen actively and validate their experiences. Show empathy, offer support, and reassure them that they're not alone. Avoid judgement or dismissive responses.

Mental Health Champions
To support their staff, many companies are assigning Mental Health Champions or Mental Health First Aiders, who act as specific contacts that the employees can turn to. Mental health champions work alongside your HR team to create a positive mental health at work experience for everyone.

Mental health is something we are passionate about at Virtual College. If you would like to find more mental health resources to help support you and your staff, click here

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