

Mental health in the workplace

Carolyn Roberts reflects on the work of Scottish charity SAMH to help better educate organisations

'What will happen if I tell my boss I've got a mental health problem?'

Every week, the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) information service receives a query like this. The 'correct' answer is easy. It goes like this:

'Nothing bad will happen if you tell your boss. He or she will discuss whether you need any reasonable adjustments made to your environment or workload, just as the Disability Discrimination Act requires. Nobody will think any worse of you, and nobody will treat you differently.'

The honest answer might look a bit different. Perhaps something like:

'Well, it depends. Your employer might comply with the Disability Discrimination Act, you might be asked about reasonable adjustments, and everything might be fine. Or you might suddenly find yourself being ostracised, whispered about, marginalised, or possibly even becoming a candidate for a suspiciously unexpected redundancy.'

It is hard to believe that in 2009, people still face such uncertainty about disclosing a medical condition. But unfortunately, it is true. Although many employers have taken pains to educate themselves about mental health problems and about their obligations under the DDA, there are still far too many who, either through ignorance or fear, know nothing about such things. The DDA makes clear that a disabled person is anyone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. That means that many mental health problems are covered by the DDA – but employers do not always realise this.

Seventy-nine per cent of people with serious mental health problems are unemployed, the highest rate among any group of disabled people. And one of the main barriers to employment that they face is stigma – real or anticipated. A 'seeme' survey found that fewer than four in 10 employers said they would consider employing someone with a history of mental health problems. Even where an employer has no intention of discriminating, the fear of stigma may prevent someone from disclosing their mental health problem, or even for applying for

a job in the first place. The same 'seeme' research found that 43 per cent of people with mental health problems had not applied for a job because of the stigma associated with mental health problems. Fifty-seven per cent of people in the same survey had concealed their history when applying for posts.

One in four of us will experience a mental health problem at some point in our lives. There are roughly 2.4 million adults of working age in Scotland, so that means around 720,000 people will potentially experience a mental health problem while in employment. And yet SAMH still hears from employers who do not think mental health has anything to do with them. Thankfully, not all employers think like that. Over the last 18 months, SAMH has been delivering mental health awareness training to public and private sector employers, in an effort to reduce stigma and help employers to understand their obligations. We have delivered training to colleges, public authorities and manufacturers, and the response suggests that employers do want to address mental health in the workplace but might not know how to go about it.

Often, we have found that managers are simply scared to raise the topic of mental health with their staff. That is understandable but it means that issues get swept under the carpet until they can not be ignored any longer – by which time an employee might have become seriously ill. The ability to talk about mental health – both positive and negative – in a calm and sensitive way is an invaluable asset for any manager.

That is why SAMH has produced two publications aimed at employers. The first, *Making reasonable adjustments for people with mental health problems*, provides guidance for employers and employees on what reasonable adjustments are, how to make them and what sort of adjustments might be suitable for a member of staff experiencing mental health problems. We received such good feedback on this guide that we followed it up with a second one, *Working it out*. This takes a wider look at promoting positive mental health in the workplace and supporting staff who have mental health problems.

SAMH understands that most businesses are operating under pressure and do not have time to introduce complicated new procedures. So *Working it out* suggests practical ways in which employers can use their existing processes to promote and

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manage mental health in the workplace. For example, most organisations will have first aiders who receive training, so why not build mental health awareness into their existing training?

Both of these SAMH guides emphasise not only the legal duties on employers but also the business case for focusing on mental health. Both employers and employees benefit from a focus on mental health. For example, the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline introduced a 'team resilience programme' which encouraged employees and managers to raise issues early and provided support where necessary. They found that work-related mental health problems fell by 60 per cent, reported work-life balance conflicts reduced by 25 per cent and staff satisfaction increased by 21 per cent. A separate 2004 investigation found that health promotion programmes led to an average 34 per cent drop in absenteeism and concluded that every pound spent on promoting health could save employers £2.50.

Appropriate employment can be good for mental

health. *A world to belong to*, a SAMH research report, found that people using mental health services who were currently in voluntary or paid employment had more contact with a range of people (including but not limited to colleagues) than those who were not. And we know that social contacts are important for mental health: if you do not have anyone to talk to, it is not going to do your mental health any good.

In addition to the human cost of stigma, there is also a financial cost associated with the high unemployment rates of people with mental health problems. The SAMH research report *What's it worth?* found that the cost of worklessness among people with mental health problems in 2004/05 was £915 million, with the total social and economic cost of mental health problems standing at an incredible £8.6 billion.

As well as providing training and information, SAMH also provides a Workstep service which helps to find work placements for people who are recovering from mental health problems or who have other disabilities, and then works alongside both the employee and employer to ensure that things work out for them both. Workstep provides as much or as little support as the individual and the employer need, from accompanying people to interviews to providing coaching in specific aspects of a role. In many cases, it might be that all the person needs is some moral support, and Workstep can provide that too.

For people who are on a Workstep programme, the decision about disclosing their disability to their employer is easy: disclosure is a condition of taking part in the programme, and any employer working with Workstep is likely to be supportive. But for far too many others, the decision on whether to disclose is fraught with fear and uncertainty. It should not be like this. Ignorance and stigma serve neither employers nor their staff and applicants. SAMH is working to change the perception of people with mental health problems and the knowledge and confidence of employers, so that one day, no one will need to ask us:

'What will happen if I tell my boss I've got a mental health problem?' ■

