



COMBATING ANXIETY IN THE WORKPLACE

HR and management can do a lot to help employees struggling with mental health issues, and doing so can make for a happier and more productive workplace.

No employer wants to see their staff suffering. When someone falls ill or becomes injured, most businesses and HR departments are on hand to support them and give them the time they need to heal. However, when it comes to mental health it can be trickier. The symptoms of a condition such as anxiety can be difficult to spot, while the things you can do to help are less obvious.

Approximately five per cent of men and seven per cent of women suffer from generalised anxiety disorder in the UK. This means that if your workforce consists of 20 or more people, it's fully possible that at least one staff member is going

through something like this. To ensure everything runs smoothly, you should familiarise yourself with what anxiety is and how you can help.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety UK defines the disorder as "a normal response to stress or danger" involving "adrenalin being quickly pumped through the body enabling it to cope with whatever catastrophe may come its way". It becomes a health problem when this response occurs where there is little or no danger present.

A person with anxiety may find themselves short of breath and feeling sick because they are terrified of a phone call they have

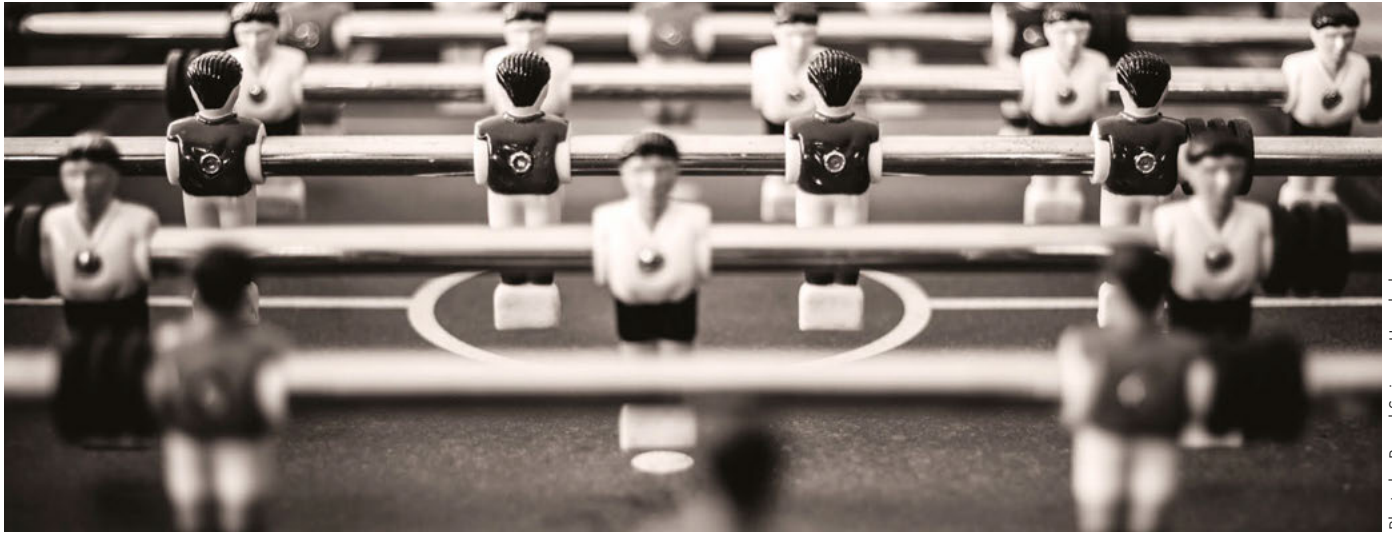


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to make, or even having a panic attack for no obvious reason. The symptoms can be a lot more subtle. The sufferer might become withdrawn or irritable with no obvious cause, for example.

What can you do to help?

The first step if you think an employee is dealing with an anxiety disorder is to talk to them about it. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) recommends that this is done in a private place where you know you won't be interrupted. Don't presume anything, instead asking open questions such as "I was wondering how you are doing".

Try not to be patronising. The employee might not need time off or special treatment, and in many cases it might be better off to address any professional concerns - such as high absence levels - at the beginning so it doesn't become awkward later down the line.

There is not much you can do to help them get better; to do that, your employee needs to visit their GP and discuss the options

for treatment. However, you can make it clear that you will be there for whatever they need and encourage them to get whatever support they require. You should also work to create a workplace culture that supports staff to be open about their mental health.

Encouraging a positive workplace

Mind recommends creating "a clear mental health strategy and specific policies to ensure employees experiencing mental health problems get the support they need straight away". Simply explaining to your employees that you will take mental health issues seriously and treat them in the same manner as physical illness can be a huge help.

You can also take steps to encourage a more open and less stressful workplace. Simple steps such as encouraging exercise, allowing employees to pick music to play in the background and organising social events can help create a positive workplace culture that can be incredibly helpful with dealing with mental health.

Sources

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