



PPP HEALTHCARE

# Wellbeing at work

A manager's guide to supporting mental health and wellbeing in the workplace



# Contents





# About this toolkit

**This toolkit is designed to help you to support your team's mental wellbeing and more effectively look after your own mental health.**

**15%**

of people at work have symptoms of an existing mental health condition.<sup>1</sup>

**12.4%**

of sickness absence is as a result of mental health conditions.<sup>2</sup>

While we're all more aware of the importance of looking after our mental health than ever before, it's often hard to know how to do that in practice. How do poor mental health conditions affect people and their ability to work? How, as managers, can we look after people who are experiencing mental health issues? And how can we promote mental wellbeing across our teams?

This toolkit includes ideas and advice about how you can keep yourself and your team well and start a conversation about mental wellbeing. You'll also find information on where to get additional support if you need it.

The toolkit consists of mini-guides in three areas:

**Learn** – find out more about stress and some of the most common mental health conditions and what you can do to help people who experience them.

**Manage** – practical guidance on how to manage people who may be living with a mental health condition.

**Improve** – focussing on simple ways in which we can all build our resilience and boost our wellbeing.

<sup>1</sup>Thriving at Work: a review of mental health and employers, Lord Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer, 2017

<sup>2</sup>Sickness absence in the UK labour market, Office for National Statistics, 2018



# Changing the culture

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Breaking down the stigma associated with mental health and promoting open and honest conversations is key to being able to initiate positive change in the culture around mental health and wellbeing.

Your team should be equally comfortable telling you that they are experiencing a period of depression as they would telling you that they have flu.

The only way to encourage your team to be open about mental health is to pioneer a change in the culture. The more you talk about it and normalise it, the more others will be encouraged to follow suit.

- Have the **courage** to talk about mental wellbeing and be open to sharing your own experiences. Many people find even doing this difficult. The more you do this, the more others will have the courage to do the same.
- Have the **integrity** to look at each case on its own merits and do what is right for each person.
- Think **family**. Supporting those around you who are struggling leads to trust and a stronger sense of community, and enables everyone to work better as a team.





**Learn about stress and other  
common mental health conditions**



# Understanding and dealing with panic attacks

Panic attacks can happen when the body's response to stress goes into overdrive. They generally come on without warning and can be frightening and distressing both to the person having the panic attack and those around them.

## 1 in 7

of us will experience a panic attack at some point in our lives.<sup>3</sup>

### Symptoms

Symptoms of a panic attack include:

- increased heart rate, often described as 'racing', or an irregular heart rate (palpitations)
- dizziness
- trembling
- sweating or flushing
- dry mouth
- nausea
- feeling shaky and weak
- a sense of foreboding.

Typically, a panic attack lasts between 5 and 20 minutes. Once the symptoms have passed, there's not normally a need for medical treatment, but the person may feel exhausted or vulnerable.

**Because panic attacks can come out of the blue, the first time someone experiences one they may not know what it is - which in itself can add to their feeling of panic and being out of control.**



# Understanding and dealing with panic attacks

## Causes

Panic attacks happen because of our 'fight or flight' system. We're all designed to naturally respond to fear in two ways: we either run away, or we stand and fight. Either way, our body releases a huge surge of hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. This boost triggers certain reactions in our body, which are designed to help us to be more effective at that moment of threat. For example, when faced with a threat we need to be fast, strong and alert. So, our hearts pump rapidly to get blood and oxygen to the places that need it quickly, like our brains and legs, and away from the places that don't, such as our stomachs.

In the case of a panic attack, there may not be a visible or real threat, but our bodies are responding in the same way – with a huge burst of adrenaline due to a perceived threat. Sometimes someone having a panic attack won't know what that threat is, so can't explain why their body is reacting in that way. This can make their feelings of being out of control worse. It can be helpful to explain this when they're feeling better, to reassure them that the way their body reacted was perfectly normal. This might help them to spot the symptoms earlier if the same thing happens again.

**Someone suffering from a panic attack may feel what they're experiencing is life-threatening, but in fact their body is doing exactly what it should when under threat.**

# Understanding and dealing with panic attacks

## How to help

Panic attacks can be a frightening experience for everyone involved. Those around the person often feel slightly powerless as to how to help them – especially if there is no obvious reason for the adrenaline surge. However, there are some simple steps we can all take which will make a real difference.

### 1. Stay as calm as you can

Reassure the person you are there and want to help, and tell them that they are safe.

### 2. Ask the person to look at you and copy your slow, deep breathing

Deep breathing is crucial for slowing the heart rate and helping the person to become calm. It's key to their recovery, so remind them to keep doing this as they may struggle to concentrate.

### 3. Make sure the person is not too hot

If the person is shaking and hyper-vigilant, they will be burning a lot of calories – as we would if we were running – so they are likely to overheat quite quickly. If the person is hot, remind them they can take layers off if they want to.

### 4. Reassure them that they are safe

Many people think they might be in a life-threatening situation. Because their heart rate has surged, people often think they may be having a heart attack. It's important to reassure them that they are safe and remind them to focus on their breathing.

### 5. Keep offering reassurance

When they start to calm down, reassure them that you are with them and to keep breathing deeply as this will help.

### 6. Explain that their reaction is a natural response to fear and anxiety

Once they have calmed back down and you can see that they are 'back in the room' with you, explain to them that what they have experienced is a normal response to fear. If they can learn to connect the symptoms with this, they may be able to recognise and control future panic attacks. Remember to explain this to them when they are calm: if they are still having the panic attack, they won't be able to take in what you are saying.

**REMEMBER:** If you are concerned that someone may be experiencing something other than a panic attack, call 999.



# Understanding and dealing with panic attacks

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## What to do next

Once they start to feel better, consider doing the following:

- Ask what they would find helpful at the moment.
- If they wish to stay at work (which may be the best place for them), encourage them to take enough time to recover and check on them over the rest of the day. If they prefer to go home, check who might be around to support them.
- Ask them if there's someone they'd like to sit with them, or if there's someone they'd like to talk to, like a friend or Mental Health First Aider if you have these in your business.
- You can also suggest that they visit their GP or use your company's Employee Assistance Programme if you have one.

Once they've had a chance to process what has happened and recover, help them make a plan to reduce further attacks.

## What can you do to reduce the risk of panic attacks?

Other guides in this toolkit look at ways to reduce anxiety and stress. Many of the steps recommended in those can also help reduce the risk of panic attacks. Here are some of the most important.

### Be aware of the effects of caffeine and alcohol

- Caffeine is a stimulant. It triggers reactions very similar to fight or flight, such as an increased heart rate or feeling 'jittery'.
- Many of us enjoy a drink and associate alcohol with feeling relaxed. But alcohol can affect our mood and disrupt our sleep. This can leave us feeling like we need more caffeine to stay sharp throughout the day.
- Individually, caffeine and alcohol affect us. Combined, they can create a disruptive cycle which can increase the risk of anxiety and panic attacks, particularly when we're tired and less able to process stress and high-pressured situations.

## Adopt healthier habits to reduce anxiety and panic attacks

- Be aware of your caffeine intake. Try and avoid caffeinated drinks after lunch. Experiment with decaf drinks such as herbal teas. And be sure to drink plenty of water.
- Focus on taking regular breaks and do some regular exercise, of any sort, to beat back the adrenaline build-up and release endorphins.
- Prioritise good sleep to de-stress and help you tackle any situation that comes your way.
- Remember that even moderate levels of alcohol in your system can disrupt your sleep.

As well as being mindful of these suggestions yourself, it can be useful to share them with your team to help them build resilience.

## Quick links

[Related guides](#)

# Understanding and dealing with stress

Stress is normal and, despite what many people may think, not all stress is bad for us. In fact, the right amount of stress, pressure and challenge can be good for us: it motivates us, keeps us focussed and can improve performance. It can prepare us for success. However, when stress feels overwhelming, is constant or too great, it has negative effects both physically and emotionally.

## 74%

of UK adults in a 2018 study said that they had felt so stressed at some point during the last year that they were left overwhelmed or unable to cope.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Stress: Are we coping? Mental Health Foundation, May 2018





# Understanding and dealing with stress

## Symptoms

We all experience stress differently and there are a wide range of possible symptoms. Stress can affect us both emotionally and physically, and it can affect the way we behave.

Sometimes you can tell right away when you or someone else is feeling under stress, but other times people can keep going, without recognising the signs or even realising they're under too much stress.

High levels of stress can also be a catalyst for experiencing a panic attack.

How you might feel
Irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
Overburdened and worried
Anxious, nervous or afraid
Unable to enjoy yourself
Depressed
Uninterested in life
Like you've lost your sense of humour
A sense of dread
Neglected or lonely

How you might behave
Find it hard to make decisions
Worry constantly
Avoid situations that are troubling us
Snap at people
Bite your nails or pick at your skin
Struggle to concentrate
Eat too much, or too little
Smoke or drink alcohol more than usual
Feel restless, like you can't sit still
Be tearful or cry

Common physical effects of stress
Shallow breathing or hyperventilating
Muscle tension
Blurred eyesight or sore eyes
Problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or with nightmares
Feeling tired all the time
Grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw
Headaches
Chest pains
High blood pressure
Indigestion or heartburn
Constipation or diarrhoea
Feeling sick, dizzy or fainting

# Understanding and dealing with stress

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## Causes

We all experience challenges and stress every day. Some big, some small. Sometimes we can deal with them. At other times, the same situation can be too much for us. Here are just some of the things that cause us stress:

- family, friends or relationship issues
- financial issues
- dealing with change
- lack of sleep
- poor diet
- anxiety or negative thoughts
- health worries
- medical conditions
- work concerns
- our own expectations of ourselves.

Often, there's no single factor that makes us feel too stressed. It's a combination of different things that mean we struggle to cope.

## The 'stress bucket'

One of the best ways to understand stress is to imagine a bucket which we put all our stress into. Just as a bucket can only hold a certain amount of water before it overflows, so we can only hold a certain amount of stress before we overflow and show visible signs of stress.

Some people have larger buckets than others, depending on how resilient they are to stress, which means they can cope with more stress before they overflow.

If we think of our stress going into our bucket, we can then understand that we need to balance what goes in and how we empty our buckets so we can cope with our stress effectively.

## How to help

### With your team

Have an open discussion with your team about their stress buckets. Talk them through what a stress bucket is and what is going into it and ask them what they can do to help empty it. This will help them to visualise what is stressing them and how they can help themselves to de-stress.

You can also use this session to find out how your team manage stress and encourage them to share any management tips or strategies they feel have helped.

### Remember to:

- Take note of any themes that start to emerge. For example, if several of the team mention they're not sleeping very well, arrange a further session with them to discuss support for that. You could also try one new tip for a week to see what improvement it makes.
- Remind them that when it comes to managing stress the priority is to think about what they can and can't control. Only by focussing on the things they can control can they make some room in their stress bucket.
- Encourage them to look out for the signs of negative stress in themselves and those around them, and offer support if they notice a change.



# Understanding and dealing with stress

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## Helping yourself

If we can understand our stressors and how we can relieve them, we're more likely to be able to manage our stress more effectively. Think about your stress bucket having a tap and taking positive steps to release the tap and let stress go. Here are a few actions that can help:

**Exercise** – when we exercise, we produce endorphins which beat back the adrenaline that anxiety and stress causes. [Here are some ideas for increasing exercise in your team.](#)

**Sleep** – if stress disrupts our sleep, it can become a vicious circle, with tiredness increasing our stress. [Discover how to improve your sleep patterns.](#)

**Diet** – stress often affects our diet. We may be too busy to eat properly, and rely on snacks and unhealthy food which then don't provide the energy we need. [Learn more about how our diet can help us reduce stress.](#)

**Organisation** – getting organised can help us feel less affected by stressors during the day. Simple steps to get ahead like packing lunch the night before or writing a 'to do' list can help you feel prepared for a busy day ahead.

**Talking/sharing** – talking with someone, whether a close friend, family member, colleague, counsellor or complete stranger, can help us offload concerns and may even help us resolve something that's troubling us.

**Meditation** – learning to quieten our minds can help us relax and de-stress. Taking just five minutes to be peaceful, switch off the outside world and focus on our breathing is proven to have an impact on stress levels. There's a whole host of apps and tools available to get you started.

**Positive thinking** – studies show that those that are able to see a silver lining in situations and treat failure as a learning experience are often more emotionally resilient than those who get stuck in negative thought patterns. By becoming aware of how we think and respond to certain situations, we can boost our resilience to stress. Practices such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help us work through the connection between thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions to make positive changes in daily life. [More about positive thinking.](#)

**Doing things we love** – give yourself time to do more of the things you enjoy, inside and outside of work.

**Having something to look forward to** – a holiday, night out, catch-up with old friends or a delicious dinner at the end of the day can help you keep perspective and stay excited about what's ahead.

**Going beyond your comfort zone** – this may sound counter-intuitive as a way of dealing with stress, but when you do something new or succeed in an area which you were worried about, the sense of reward and achievement is immense. It pushes you on and helps you associate the stress of stepping outside your comfort zone with positive feelings. [Read more about the benefits of stretching yourself.](#)

## Further support

There's also a range of resources on the [Mental Health Foundation website](#) to help you run a further discussion or share with your team.

## Quick links

[Related guides](#)

# Understanding and dealing with anxiety

We all feel anxious from time to time, but when does this start to become a problem? There are many forms of anxiety. In this guide, we look specifically at Generalised Anxiety Disorder and how you can support someone dealing with it at different stages.

## 1 in 20

people in the UK are affected by Generalised Anxiety Disorder.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>[nhs.uk/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder) (accessed 30 January 2020)



# Understanding and dealing with anxiety

## Symptoms

Anxiety is unique to each individual and therefore feels different for everyone. Symptoms can be both physical and psychological. See the table opposite for some of the general symptoms:

Most people with anxiety will have some of these symptoms, but not all. A lot of us feel some of the psychological symptoms from time to time; that's entirely normal. However, when these feelings persist, feel out of control, or start affecting your health or wellbeing, it's time to take action.

Someone with anxiety feels consistently anxious about things that others might dismiss.

To get a better understanding of what it feels like to suffer from anxiety, [take a look at this video](#).

How you might feel
Tense, nervous or unable to relax
Filled with a sense of dread, or fearing the worst
Like the world is speeding up or slowing down
Like other people can see you're anxious and are looking at you
Like you can't stop worrying, or that bad things will happen if you stop worrying
Worried about anxiety itself
In need of reassurance from other people or worried that people are angry or upset with you
Worried that you're losing touch with reality
Obsessed by bad experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again
Disconnected from your mind or body, or like you're watching someone else (depersonalisation, a type of dissociation)
Disconnected from the world around you, or like the world isn't real (derealisation, a type of dissociation)
Worried a lot about things that might happen in the future

Common physical effects of anxiety
A churning feeling in your stomach
Feeling light-headed or dizzy
Pins and needles
Feeling restless or unable to sit still
Headaches, backache or other aches and pains
Faster breathing
A fast, thumping or irregular heartbeat
Sweating or hot flushes
Problems sleeping
Grinding your teeth, especially at night
Nausea (feeling sick)
Needing the toilet more or less often
Having panic attacks



# Understanding and dealing with anxiety

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## Causes

Anxiety can happen for a number of reasons. Common causes of anxiety include:

**Past or childhood experiences** – going through difficult experiences can make people vulnerable to experiencing anxiety later in life.

**Your current life situation** – current issues or problems in your life can also trigger anxiety. For example, exhaustion or a build-up of stress, long working hours, money problems, losing someone close to you, feeling lonely or isolated or being bullied, harassed or abused.

**Physical and mental health problems** – physical health problems could include living with a serious, ongoing or life-threatening physical health condition. It's also common to develop anxiety while living with other mental health problems, such as depression.

**Drugs and medication** – anxiety can sometimes be a side effect of taking certain medications or recreational drugs or alcohol.

## How to help

### **Have a chat with them**

If someone in your team tells you that they're experiencing anxiety, or think they might be, the most important thing to do is to act there and then. Make time to have a chat with them; the fact that they have said something means they feel ready to talk.

Talking about anxiety can be difficult – both for them and you. We've listed some helpful tips below to manage those initial conversations. However, for more detailed guidance, read the guides on [having a conversation about mental health](#) and [how to be a good listener](#).

- Find a quiet room where they can talk without being overheard.
- Listen to how they're feeling and what they want to say.
- Be open and non-judgemental.
- Acknowledge their feelings and reassure them that what they are feeling is totally normal for someone who is dealing with anxiety.
- Find out if they've been to their GP. If they haven't, encourage them to do this; if they have, encourage them to go back if their symptoms have worsened.
- Reassure them that you're here with them and you would like to help them find the right support.
- Ask them what they think might help.
- If they are particularly distressed, ask them if there is someone they can call who can support them, or someone in the office they would like to talk to.
- If they wish to stay at work, which if possible should be encouraged, make sure they have had enough time to recover and check on them over the rest of the day to make sure they are OK.
- Find out if anything in the workplace is making the problem worse. Are there any suitable adjustments you can make?

# Understanding and dealing with anxiety

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## What next?

This very much depends on how severely they're affected and whether they are receiving treatment already.

## At the start of treatment

Someone who's receiving treatment for anxiety, such as counselling or medication or perhaps both, might find this doesn't have an immediate positive impact. They may also experience side effects and feel unwell, or be worried about what will happen to them.

You can support them at this stage by:

- Checking in with them daily, to make sure they're OK and provide moral support.
- If they're struggling with absence, speaking to your HR team for advice on how you can support them.
- Where appropriate, considering adjustments to working arrangements. Your HR team will be able to support you with this and may suggest an occupational health referral.
- If they've started counselling, being aware that this can be emotionally draining and upsetting; they may struggle to get their head 'back in the game' straight after a session. If you can, and the individual would find this helpful, arrange for them to have some time off after each session or ask them if they can arrange their sessions towards the end of the day or on a day off. This would be far better than them trying to come back to work straight afterwards.

## If they're receiving treatment

If someone's been diagnosed with anxiety and is taking medication, this doesn't necessarily mean they'll always be feeling well. Like everyone else, they'll have good and bad days; it's really important to watch out for these.

You can support them by:

- Asking them how they are, particularly if you suspect they are struggling. Have a read of our guide on [having a conversation about mental health](#) to help you.
- Finding out what their triggers are. There may be certain things that upset them; knowing what these are can help you to support them more effectively.

- Asking them how they'd like to be treated when they have a bad day. For example, when they come into work in a low mood, would they like a chat and a cup of tea, or would they like to be left quietly to work without any fuss? Knowing what they're comfortable with at low times will really help you to support them.
- Scheduling regular catch-ups to see how they're doing.

# Understanding and dealing with anxiety

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## If they're off work on long-term absence

When someone has severe anxiety, they may be signed off work by their GP. In these cases, there are several things you can do whilst they're off.

We've summarised the key considerations. However for more detail, please look at our guide on [how to manage someone with a mental health condition](#).

- Ask to keep in regular contact with them, such as once a week, over the phone or in person if they're happy with this. This helps you to keep track of their progress and to keep them engaged with work and feeling part of the team still.
- Pass on kind words from colleagues. Remind them they're missed and valued, and that people are wishing them better.
- Ask about their treatment and how it's progressing, encouraging them to seek further support if they are not feeling any better.

- Be positive and praise them for the steps they are making to recover, no matter how small.
- Remind them about your Employee Assistance Programme or any other support services you might have available.
- Read the [how to welcome someone back to work after mental illness](#) guide.

### **What is CBT and can it help with anxiety?**

Many people living with anxiety recognise that their worries can stem from or be made worse by an irrational thought which relates to irrational consequences. For example, they may be anxious about being late for work – even if they have never been late – and worry that they might be shouted at by their boss (who has never done that), humiliating them in front of their colleagues.

These sort of thought patterns and spirals can be very difficult to break. Techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can help.

This encourages the person to consider how their thoughts affect their feelings, and how this impacts their behaviour. They can then look at ways to break the pattern of negative thinking and replace it with more positive coping strategies. This could include encouraging the person to walk through a scenario with questions such as:

- Has this happened before?
- How likely is this to happen?
- Will worrying change it?
- Will I be worrying about this is a few hours' time?

In the case of the person worried about being late for work, they could think it through logically using some of the above questions. For example, has anyone else been shouted at for being late? Will they worry about this in a few hours' time?

If the answers to those questions are no, then these therapeutic techniques give them the strategies to use the facts that they know to be true to break through the irrational thought.

Once they can start to think in a different way, they can start to apply this to other things that make them anxious so that, over time, they can use this process to deal with scenarios one at a time.

**A lot of us feel some of the psychological symptoms of anxiety from time to time. This is entirely normal. However, when these feelings persist, feel out of control, or start affecting your health or wellbeing, it's time to take action.**



# Understanding and dealing with anxiety

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## How can I share this guidance with my team?

Raising awareness is key to breaking down stigma around anxiety. To help increase your team's understanding of anxiety, you could:

- Run a small awareness session in your team briefs, playing the video on anxiety and then discussing it.
- Encourage your teams to participate in any mental health sessions available, such as Mental Health Awareness Week and any others throughout the year.
- If you have people in your team who suffer with anxiety, consider asking them if they'd be happy to open up about their condition with the rest of the team.
- Discuss other mental health conditions in team briefs to raise awareness and encourage open conversation and communication.
- Be open and authentic - share your own experiences.

## Quick links

Related guides

# Understanding and dealing with depression

We hear people talking about being depressed all the time but what does that actually mean? What's the difference between feeling down and being depressed?

To understand what it feels like to be depressed, you might find it helpful to check out the video, [The Black Dog](#). Winston Churchill referred to his depression as a black dog that followed him everywhere, some days it was bigger than others and it never left him. This is the theme of this short film.

## 322 million

is the estimated number of people in the world living with depression.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates, World Health Organisation, 2017



# Understanding and dealing with depression

## Symptoms

Depression isn't just about feelings and emotions; it can have physical effects too. Here are some common signs of depression.

Most of us feel down, upset or lacking in confidence from time to time – that's entirely normal. However, when these feelings persist, feel out of control or there's no good reason for feeling that way, or they start affecting your health or wellbeing, it's time to take action.

Symptoms of depression tend to fluctuate. Someone can be fine or just a bit low one day but feel unable to cope the next – often for no obvious reason. With time, some people can learn the 'warning signs' of a bout of depression.

It's important to remember that, while the symptoms appear emotional, the cause or trigger can often be physiological – therefore depression should be treated seriously as it can be very disabling.

How you might feel
Down, upset or tearful
Restless, agitated or irritable
Guilty, worthless and down on yourself
Empty and numb
Isolated and unable to relate to other people
Finding no pleasure in life or things you usually enjoy
Little or no self-confidence or self-esteem
Hopeless and despairing

Common physical effects of depression
Avoiding social events and activities you usually enjoy
Difficulty speaking, thinking clearly or making decisions
Difficulty remembering or concentrating on things
Using more tobacco, alcohol or other drugs than usual
Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping too much
Feeling tired all the time
Little or no appetite and losing weight, or eating too much and gaining weight
Physical aches and pains with no obvious physical cause
Moving very slowly or being restless and agitated

Causes
Depression can be caused by many things, from prolonged anxiety to a sudden trauma. There is often no single cause but instead, a range of factors together. Common factors that can trigger depression:
Childhood experiences – difficult experiences in childhood can make people vulnerable to experiencing depression later in life
Significant life events e.g. the end of a relationship, bereavement, major life changes, like changing job, moving house or getting married
Other mental health problems
Physical health problems
Genetic factors – there's some evidence that people are more likely to experience depression if a family member has also suffered from it
Medication, recreational drugs and alcohol
Lack of sleep, poor diet and lack of exercise.



# Understanding and dealing with depression

## How to help

### **Have a chat with them**

If someone in your team tells you that they're depressed, or think they might be, the most important thing to do is to act there and then. Make time to have a chat with them; the fact that they have said something means they feel ready to talk.

Talking about depression can be difficult – both for them and you. We've listed some helpful tips below to manage those initial conversations. However, for more detailed guidance, read the guides on [having a conversation about mental health](#) and [how to be a good listener](#).

- Find a quiet room where they can talk without being overheard.
- Listen to how they're feeling and what they want to say. Be open and non-judgemental.
- Acknowledge their feelings and reassure them that what they are feeling is totally normal for someone who is dealing with depression.
- Find out if they've been to their GP. If they haven't, encourage them to do this; if they have, encourage them to go back if their symptoms have worsened.
- Reassure them that you're here with them and you would like to help them find the right support.
- Ask what they think might help them.
- If they are particularly distressed, ask them if there is someone they can call who can support them, or someone in the office they would like to talk to.
- If they wish to stay at work, which if possible should be encouraged, make sure they have had enough time to recover and check on them over the rest of the day to make sure they are OK.
- Find out if anything in the workplace is making the problem worse. Are there any suitable adjustments that can be made?

**It's very common to have depression and anxiety together. As a manager, you should be aware of the symptoms of both.**

# Understanding and dealing with depression

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## What next?

This very much depends on how severely they're affected and whether they are receiving treatment already.

## At the start of treatment

Someone who's receiving treatment for depression, such as counselling or medication or perhaps both, might find that this doesn't have an immediate positive impact.

They may also experience side effects and feel unwell, or be worried about what will happen to them.

You can support them at this stage by:

- Checking in with them daily, to make sure they're OK and provide moral support.
- If they're struggling with absence, speaking to your HR team to get advice on how you can support them.
- Where appropriate, considering adjustments to working arrangements to support them. Your HR team might be able to support you with this and may suggest an occupational health referral.
- If they've started counselling, being aware that this can be emotionally draining and upsetting; they may struggle to get their head 'back in the game' straight after a session.

If you can, and the individual would find this helpful, arrange for them to have some time off after each session or ask them if they can arrange their sessions towards the end of the day or on a day off. This would be far better than them trying to come back to work straight afterwards.

## If they're receiving treatment

If someone's been diagnosed with depression and takes medication, this doesn't necessarily mean they'll always be feeling well. Like everyone else, they'll have good and bad days; it's really important to watch out for these.

You can support them by:

- Asking them how they are, particularly if you suspect they are struggling.
- Finding out what their triggers are. There may be certain things that upset them; knowing what these are can help you to support them more effectively.
- Asking them how they'd like to be treated when they have a bad day. For example, when they come into work in a low mood, would they like a chat and a cup of tea, or would they like to be left quietly to work without any fuss? Knowing what they're comfortable with at low times will really help you to support them.
- Scheduling regular catch-ups with them to see how they're doing.

# Understanding and dealing with depression

## If they're off work on long-term absence

When someone has severe depression, they may be signed off work by their GP. In these cases, there are several things you can do whilst they're off. We've summarised the key considerations. However for more detail, please look at our guide on [how to manage someone with a mental health condition](#).

- Ask to keep in regular contact with them, such as once a week, over the phone or in person if they're happy with this. This helps you to keep track on their progress and to keep them engaged with work and feeling part of the team still.
- Pass on kind words from colleagues. Remind them they're missed and valued, and that people are wishing them better.
- Ask about their treatment and how it's progressing, encouraging them to seek further support if they are not feeling any better.
- Have a conversation with them about what to say to the rest of the team. Some employees may prefer that the rest of the team don't know the reason for their absence.
- Be positive and praise them for the steps they are making to recover, no matter how small. Doing something makes us feel better as achieving gives us a positive buzz. For a depressed person, 'doing' becomes very difficult, if not impossible. For example if they've managed a shower that day, praise them and encourage them to praise themselves for any small achievement.
- Encourage them to try and do more, such as a short walk daily and so on. Reassure them that they don't have to stay inside just because they are signed off: if part of their recovery involves exercise and getting out and about, then this is what they should be encouraged to do.
- Have a read of the [how to welcome someone back to work after mental illness](#) guide.

## How can I raise awareness in my team about depression?

Raising awareness is key to breaking down the stigma around depression. To help increase your team's understanding of depression, consider the following:

- Run a small awareness session in your team briefs. You can do this by playing [The Black Dog](#) video and then having a discussion about it.
- Encourage your team to participate in any mental health sessions available, such as Mental Health Awareness Week and any others throughout the year.
- If you have people in your team who suffer with depression, consider asking them if they'd be happy to open up about their condition with the rest of the team.
- Discuss other mental health conditions in team briefs to raise wider awareness and encourage open conversation.
- Be authentic and open to sharing your own experiences.

## Quick links

### Related guides



# Managing mental health issues in your team



# How to spot early warning signs of a possible mental health issue

1/1

**This guide explores how to spot early warning signs for those times when one of your team might be struggling with their mental wellbeing.**

Just like physical illnesses, the earlier you detect a mental health problem, the better. Identifying as soon as possible when one of the team is struggling will help you support that person more effectively and keep your team running at its best. It may also mean they can get help before the condition becomes more debilitating.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resources. See our quick links to visit these.

No matter which mental health problem a person may be experiencing, there may be tell-tale signs that something isn't quite right. Look out for changes in their usual behaviour.

These might include:

- Uncharacteristic and erratic behaviour e.g. becoming increasingly withdrawn or becoming more outgoing and louder
- Showing signs of aggression or developing a short temper
- Absent-mindedness
- Increased time off sick
- Lateness – turning up late for work or late back from breaks
- A drop in performance
- Change in appearance e.g. appearing unkempt
- Any behaviour that's out of the ordinary for them.

If you spot any of these signs, or someone in your team approaches you to say they are concerned about a colleague, it's always best to take it seriously. If you think something has changed, don't wait for things to get worse. Try and find a chance to speak to them sooner rather than later.

The thought of starting the conversation may be daunting. Our guide to [having a conversation about mental health](#) gives you practical tips and some suggested opening questions.

If you have an Employee Assistance Programme, the 'manager consultation' aspect of the service can be a great support and resource.

## Quick links

Related guides

# Having a conversation about mental health

1/2

**Knowing the right thing to say to someone who you think might be struggling with their mental wellbeing may feel difficult. The window of opportunity to get someone to open up can be short, and emotions are often high.**

This guide gives you practical advice about how to have an effective conversation with someone about their mental health and wellbeing. It includes tips for making sure the person you're talking to feels as comfortable as possible and offers guidance on how to hold the conversation.

## **Five top tips**

The key to having a productive conversation about mental health and wellbeing is to make sure the person you're talking to feels like they're in a safe space.

Here are five top tips for creating the right environment and making the most of the conversation.

### **1. Offer to chat to someone when the situation presents itself**

- If you see someone visibly upset or displaying any of the early warning signs – such as increased absences from work, a drop in performance, changes in behaviour – quietly approach them or message them and ask for a quick chat.
- You're more likely to get someone to open up if you raise it with them sensitively when they're feeling low, frustrated or upset.

### **2. Find somewhere private to talk**

- Don't ask a colleague who you feel may be struggling about their wellbeing in front of others as they'll be less likely to open up to you. Instead, take them away from their desk and find somewhere more private.

### **3. Ensure they're ready to have a conversation**

- If you try and talk to someone when they're highly anxious, they'll be less receptive to your support. If they tell you that they feel anxious and panicky, suggest they breathe deeply. Breathe with them until they start to feel better if you need to. They'll be far more likely to respond and communicate effectively once they feel more in control of their emotions.

### **4. Be as calm as possible**

- It's important to keep calm and control your expressions – both what you say and your facial expressions – so that the other person feels like they're not being judged. They may tell you something that will shock you; try to keep your tone and expressions calm, if they feel they have shocked or upset you they may not want to tell you anymore as they don't want to upset you further, so it is important for them that you try your best to remain in control of your emotions.

- If you find the conversation overwhelming, there are external sites like Mind that provide lots of practical guidance.
- Even if someone has told you things in confidence, don't feel you have to carry their burden alone. You can get support from Mind without breaking that confidence. Or use your Employee Assistance Programme to get help for yourself, or guidance about how to manage and support your colleague.

### **5. Listen, don't advise**

- Resist the urge to tell them what to do. It's always best to avoid giving advice, however well meaning.
- Listen only, asking questions if you need to. Once when you've got all the facts, then give them suggestions on who they can contact for additional support.
- Always ask what they think might help them.

# Having a conversation about mental health

2/2

## How to start the conversation

It might feel difficult to know the right thing to say when you're concerned about someone's mood or mental wellbeing. Here are four suggested steps you can take to start a conversation with someone you're worried about.

### 1. Talk about what you've noticed and ask if they are OK.

When starting the conversation, a helpful format to follow is: Observe, Acknowledge, Offer.

- Start with stating what you've observed
- Acknowledge that this seems out of character for them
- Finally, offer to help. People are far more likely to open up to you if you start from a position of genuine concern.

Questions you could ask include:

- "You seem a bit distracted today, are you OK?"

- "It's not like you to get so upset with an angry customer. Is everything OK with you?"
- "I noticed you were in tears at your desk. Is everything OK?"

### 2. Ask them how they are feeling and if something in particular has affected them today.

If they're feeling overwhelmed, they may not know where to start. Finding a starting point – what's happened that day – can be hugely helpful.

### 3. Establish the facts

Your colleague may just want to offload, which could mean that once they start talking it comes out as a bit of a jumble.

To help them structure their thoughts, it's always a good idea to have some questions to help direct the conversation. These might include:

- How are you feeling right now?
- Is there anything in particular concerning you?

- Have you been diagnosed with a condition and/or are you on any medication?
- Have you spoken to anyone else about this?
- Do you have a routine or things you do to help you when you feel like this?
- Is there any pattern to how you're feeling? Do you feel like this at the same time of year/day etc?
- Have you been to see your GP?
- What support might help you now?

### 4. Make sure you ask them if anything else is affecting them.

Once your colleague opens up to you, you'll often find that there's more than one thing that's affecting them – and these may not be work-related. It's really important to use open questions and not to make assumptions about what you think might be going on for them.

Once you've started the conversation, make sure you listen actively. Read our guide on [how to be a good listener](#).

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resources. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

[Related guides](#)



# How to be a good listener

1/2

**One of the hardest, but one of the most important, things to do as a manager – and sometimes as a colleague, friend or family member – is to listen. Most of us think we know how to listen. But, in fact, being a good listener – gathering information, prompting people to talk more, not jumping to conclusions – is a skill in itself.**

It can take time to become a good listener, but it's time well spent. Good listeners are able to build better relationships with their team and are often able to resolve issues more effectively.

## Why is listening so important?

Listening is the first step in helping to resolve a problem. When we don't listen properly, it's much harder for us to identify the real issue behind a problem. And until we understand an issue, we can't begin to resolve it. In a mental health context, being a good listener:

- shows you understand, which reduces the feeling of conflict/fear in the person speaking
- helps you get a better idea of the problem and of how it's making your colleague feel
- means you are better placed to offer effective and relevant help.

**“ When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new. ”**

The Dalai Lama

# How to be a good listener

2/2

## How can I become a better listener?

With a little practice, we can all become better listeners.

Listening is more than just hearing the words someone is saying: it's about understanding what the speaker is trying to communicate.

Therefore, to be a good listener, you need to set aside your own thoughts and instead try to understand what the other person is trying to communicate, both verbally and non-verbally. This is called active listening.

To practice active listening, follow these steps:

- 1. Focus** on the person speaking and make sure they can see you're giving them your full attention. Go somewhere where you won't get distracted. Turn your phone off. Then while they're speaking, try to look at them, not around the room.
- 2. Use open questions** to encourage them to open up. Open questions mean they can't give a simple yes or no answer and invite them to speak. For example, instead of saying "are you upset today?" ask "how are you feeling?" Rather than asking "does that upset you?", try "how does that make you feel?"
- 3. Ask questions if you need clarification.** This shows you're listening and that you're interested. It also helps you understand. (These can be closed questions, where you simply ask someone to confirm something.)
- 4. At a suitable point, repeat back to them what they have said.** For example, "so, what you're saying is. ....", this shows you're interested in fully understanding the problem.

**5. Don't interrupt.** Finishing someone's sentences can lead to frustration and make the other person feel pressured to hurry up.

**6. Concentrate on what the other person is saying.** Try not to focus on what you want to say as you will miss what they are saying now!

**7. Be comfortable with silences.** Don't try to fill the gaps.

For a great introduction to active listening, check out this [TED talk](#) by Celeste Headlee, '10 ways to have a better conversation'. She talks about being interested in what the other person is communicating and encouraging them with open questions which will help you to collect a lot more information from them.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resources. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

Related guides

# How to manage someone with a mental health condition

**Approximately 17% of adults in England meet the criteria for developing a common mental disorder<sup>7</sup> – so most managers will find themselves managing someone with a mental health condition at some point.**

This guide gives you some tips on how to best support a team member with a mental health condition and to ensure you meet any legal responsibilities under the [Equality Act](#).

## **What is a mental health condition?**

There are a wide range of mental health conditions. Some of the most common are anxiety and depression. In England, one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week<sup>7</sup>. Many of these people continue to work while they have the condition; sometimes they tell their managers, but some will prefer not to.

Legally, a mental health condition is no different from a physical one and if someone has had the condition for more than a year, they are entitled to certain rights under the Equality Act. These include the right to have 'reasonable adjustments' made to their work conditions.

## **Managing on a case-by-case basis**

Everyone with a mental health condition should be managed fairly and consistently. However, there are no hard and fast rules that apply to everyone, and even colleagues with the same condition will experience it differently. For example, one person with depression may just have the odd day here and there where they can't manage to come into work. Others may experience a crisis and need to take several months off.

Some people may tell you openly about their condition, whereas others may hide it and only reveal it at a formal hearing. Some will want their fellow workers to know but others would prefer to keep it quiet. Some may not even realise they have a mental health condition; instead, it can emerge at a time of crisis.

**As managers, we need to respect our colleagues' wishes about a mental health condition and try and support them in the way that they want – while ensuring the company meets its obligations as an employer.**

<sup>7</sup>Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014



# How to manage someone with a mental health condition

## Recognising a problem: absence trigger point

One of the ways managers often first notice a potential mental health issue is if a colleague is taking off more time than usual for sickness, without any other obvious reason. As a manager, it's then your responsibility to have a conversation with them to try and find out the reasons for their absence and consider what support and actions may be needed to help them.

## Working with HR

Your HR team should be able to provide guidance and support for you when managing mental health cases.

Give your HR team all the information you can, including:

- details of the diagnosis the person may have
- time off so far
- issues they have had at work, such as clashes with other people, performance issues, lateness etc.
- details of any discussions you've already had with the person
- your thoughts on the situation as it currently stands
- adjustments you think could be made.

## What can you do to help?

Once you've talked it through with HR, there are several ways to help colleagues who are dealing with a mental health condition.

**An occupational health referral** – this will give you an idea of adjustments that can be made to support the employee moving forward, whether they are in work, or off on long-term absence leave.

**Adjustments** – this will look at what adjustments can be made to the person's working life and what you can accommodate as a business. These may range from extending the number of sick days you allow in a year, to adjusting work patterns and start times or providing time off for counselling appointments.

**Regular contact/meetings** – if a colleague is off on long-term absence leave, it's really important to ensure you have regular catch-ups with them. These are an opportunity to find out how their treatment is going and discover what support they may need/no longer want.



# How to manage someone with a mental health condition

## **Making adjustments and managing performance**

When someone has a mental health condition, it's your responsibility as their employer to offer adjustments to their workload and working environment to help them manage their condition. However, on their own, these may not be enough to help them cope with their condition or improve their performance.

If they are unable to perform their role to the standard you need, as a business you have to address this. Speak to your HR team to decide whether it is fair and reasonable to consider formal action at this point. Remember, every case is different so the approach taken can vary from case to case.

## **Keeping in touch with a colleague while they are off work**

It's really important to keep the lines of communication open when someone's off work with a mental health (or physical health) condition. It makes them feel valued and that their colleagues care. It also helps with your own workforce planning and managing the team workload.

**Organising regular check-ins** over the phone to see how they are. Always make sure you call at a pre-agreed time.

**Arranging some face-to-face meetings** if appropriate. It's better to do this in a public place, such as a quiet coffee shop rather than asking them to come into the office as this could feel a little intimidating.



# How to manage someone with a mental health condition

**Keep them updated** with team news and important updates, such as team restructures, new additions to the team etc. This will make them feel included and involved.

During these check-ins there are a few important things to remember to do.

**Offer support** if needed, such as making sure they have access to helpful advice.

**Ask** if they are getting regular counselling sessions/medication/doctor's appointments etc. Promote the services you have available such as your Employee Assistance Programme.

Have a conversation with them about what to say to the rest of the team. Some employees may prefer that the rest of the team don't know the reason for their absence.

**Assess** whether you need to consider an occupational health referral and whether you need to do this immediately or whether this should be left until they are feeling a little better.

**Listen** to what they are saying and how they sound. If you feel they are not doing as well as the last time you spoke, ask them:

- If they have had any challenges
- How their medication is working for them, and
- Whether they are getting enough help and support.

**Celebrate their successes**, however small. For example, someone suffering from depression may struggle with everyday things, like getting out of bed and having a shower – something that a lot of people might take for granted. Therefore, it's important to encourage and praise the person for any achievement or progress they have made.

**Encourage them** to achieve something every day as this will help build their confidence. Reassure them that if getting out and about is part of their recovery then they need to do this, and they are not expected to stay indoors if they are off sick.

**Explain** the importance of check-ins and why you value them. This helps them to continue to feel attached to their role and feel supported, valued and missed by their team.

Once someone is ready to come back to work, it's important to prepare them and you as the manager for the possible challenges ahead. Our guide on [how to welcome someone back to work after mental illness](#) tells you more.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

Related guides

# How to welcome someone back to work after mental illness

1/3

**When someone returns to work following any period of absence, it can be very daunting for them. Often it becomes harder the longer they've been off. There's lots we can do to make it as easy as possible for them to re-integrate back into their role and the team.**

This guide provides advice on what to do when a colleague returns to work, following a period of absence related to a mental health condition.

## Planning the return to work

As with physical illness, we recover from mental illness at different speeds. So there's no set pattern to a return to work following a period of absence related to a mental health condition.

However, in your regular catch-ups with a colleague who has been absent, you'll reach a point where either you or they feel it's time to discuss coming back.

When this moment arrives, there's lots you can do to reassure and encourage them and help them prepare to come back.

- 1. Celebrate** their achievement for getting this far.
- 2. Ask** them what they feel they need or what will help them return to work. There are a range of options that you may be able to discuss to make the return easier. These include:
  - a phased return
  - keeping-in-touch (KIT) days
  - changing hours or working pattern
  - extra breaks
  - reducing workload to begin with
  - a desk move
  - refresher training.

If you've completed an occupational health referral you may have already agreed adjustments to help them. You may not be able to accommodate everything suggested.

- 3. Find out** if anything is worrying them about coming back: you may be surprised at the sort of things that people are concerned about. If you can resolve it with a small adjustment – or just provide reassurance – then this will go a long way towards getting them successfully back to work.
- 4. Agree** a start date and time. Arrange to spend some time with them initially to support them. For example, you could arrange to spend the first hour or two with them so that they feel settled and welcomed back. Give them an idea of how their first day will look so they can prepare.
- 5. Offer** to meet them at the reception on their first day back, if they'd like the extra support. Coming back to work after a break can be nerve-wracking. You could also arrange a brief catch up with the team over coffee beforehand if they would like this.
- 6. Check** all IT systems, accounts and access passes they need are in place as some could have been disabled in their absence.



# How to welcome someone back to work after mental illness

## First day back

Some colleagues returning to work after being off on sick leave may be nervous, and so a good first day is really important. Here are a few ways to try and help a colleague feel as welcome as possible:

- Be positive and friendly. Greet them with a smile!
- Ask them how they are and listen carefully to their response. If something is worrying them, don't just brush it off – try and resolve it.
- Tell them everyone is pleased to have them back and encourage your team to welcome them back individually too.
- If you have met them at the reception, take them to their desk. Some people may find large groups intimidating, so being there to support them can be reassuring for them.

## Complete a back-to-work interview

When someone returns, it's really important to have a conversation with them to fully understand how they're feeling and help them readjust to the working environment. This is called a back-to-work interview.

You should aim to complete a back-to-work interview as soon as you can. This will help you make sure that they are well enough to be in work, set out your expectations for them and let them discuss any concerns or needs they may have. It also means you can arrange any extra support quickly.

**Make sure you hold the interview in a private room. We suggest that you cover the following four areas: Welcome back, Absence detail, Responsibility and Moving forward.**

### Step 1: Welcome back

- Welcome them back to work and express how pleased you are to have them back.
- Tell them what the purpose of the interview is and what you'll be discussing.
- Update them on any information or changes they need to be aware of. Even if you've told them about new colleagues or processes while they were away, they may not have taken it all in.
- Check that they feel well enough to be back at work.

### Step 2: Absence detail

For your records and understanding, the next step is to discuss the absence with them. Even if you have had regular check-ins, it's still important to ask them if there is anything they need to add or anything they want to discuss further.

- Empathise and encourage them.
- Listen attentively to what they say and give them your full attention.
- Ask them if they are on any medication or if they have any specific needs.
- Collect any outstanding doctor's notes.

If relevant, discuss the occupational health referral. Based on what they tell you, consider whether any adjustments/special requirements to working arrangements are needed.

If you think it may be of use, speak to your HR team after the interview.



# How to welcome someone back to work after mental illness

## Step 3: Responsibility

- While you and other team members will look out for them, it's important to make it clear to a returning colleague that it's their responsibility to look after and keep themselves well. This means they should seek help in good time and follow any treatment plans they have been set.
- It's also their responsibility to let you know if the business can help them in any way. Encourage them to ask for help. Is there anything that you as a manager should be aware of or look out for, so that you can support them more effectively?
- Discuss specific support you can offer moving forward. Some of this may already be in place, such as a phased return. If they've had an occupational health referral, this will provide details on what support they need and how you can help.
- You may also want to refer them to aspects of our [building resilience](#) guides.

## Step 4: Moving forward

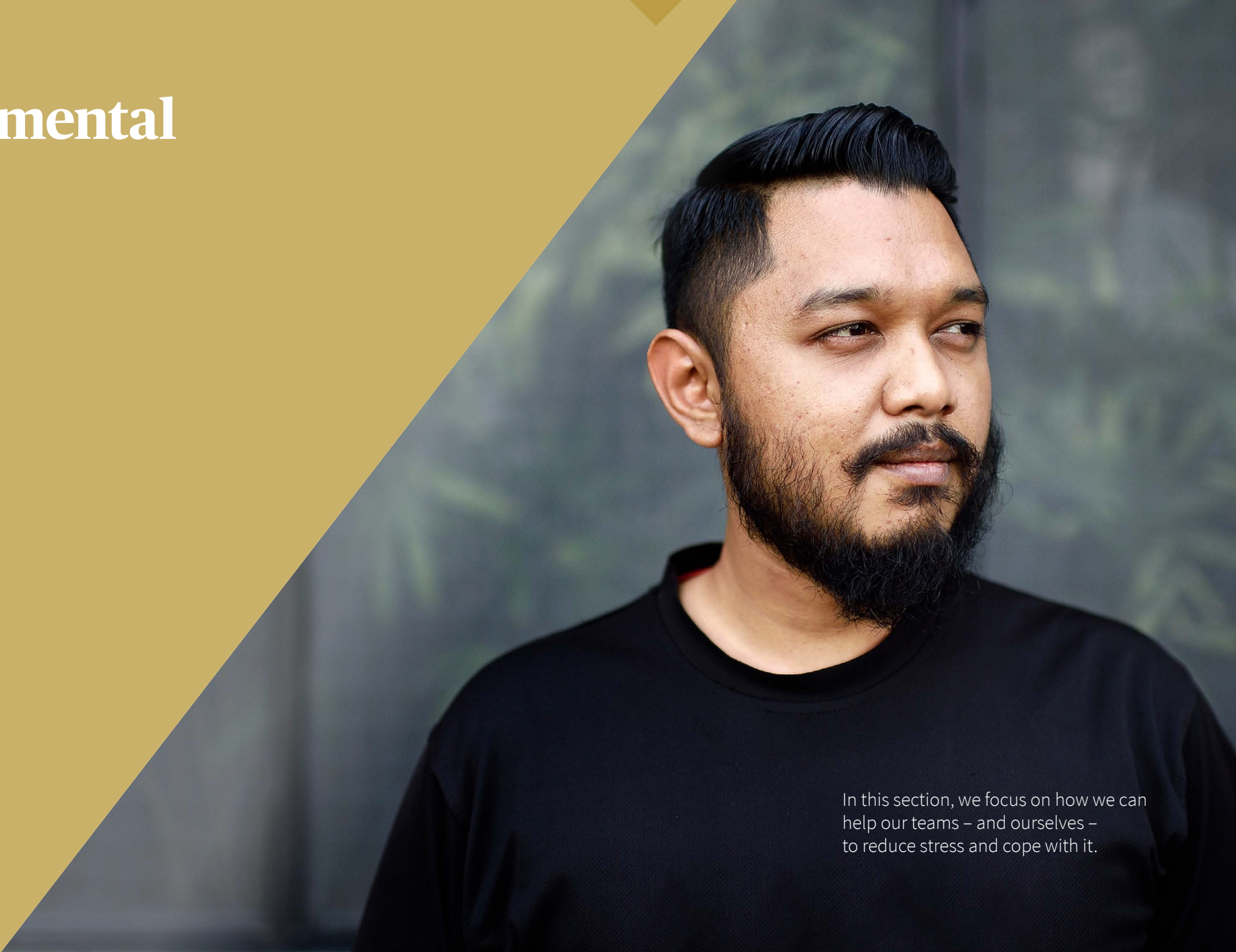
- Fill them in on anything they've missed or need to know.
- Make sure they're happy with their work and know what they'll be doing.
- Give them time to catch up with emails and updates.
- End the meeting on a positive. Tell them you're happy they are back, and you have confidence in their ability to get back into their role. This will mean they will leave the meeting on a high, feeling engaged and ready to get back into their role.
- Reassure them that you're with them every step of the way and that they should come to you with any worries or concerns.
- Ask them if they have any further questions or concerns – always leave time for them to open up and share how they're feeling.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

### Related guides

# How to improve mental health resilience



In this section, we focus on how we can help our teams – and ourselves – to reduce stress and cope with it.

# Building resilience: overview

1/1

**Factors such as lack of sleep, minimal exercise, poor nutrition and reliance on alcohol and caffeine can all be consequences of stress; but they can also reduce our ability to bounce back – our resilience. Therefore, improving these will help us to improve our overall resilience to stress.**

By helping your team to understand the link between looking after their sleep, diet and physical health and their ability to face challenges, you can help them become more resilient. Simple changes can make a huge difference to how we cope with stress – and prevent our ‘stress buckets’ from filling up in the first place.

## Where to start

Start by paying attention to your team and what they’re saying and doing. Have you noticed changes in habits, or performance? Are people talking about feeling tired or sleeping badly, joking about their reliance on takeaways or missing out on their regular exercise sessions?

Based on what they say, you can look at ways to help them build resilience. For example, if your team seem to sleep really well but don’t eat regularly or properly, it could be worth sharing a focus on the importance of healthy eating.

In this section of the toolkit we’ve developed guides on specific areas of resilience. These include:

- improving sleep
- improving diet
- the value of exercise for our mood
- positive thinking
- stretching yourself beyond your comfort zone.

# Building resilience: exercise

## Exercise isn't just good for your body – it's great for your mind too.

This guide gives you practical advice on how to talk about the importance of exercise and the role that it plays in helping to keep people feeling resilient. It shares tips on how to help colleagues incorporate exercise into their daily routines at work – as well as encouraging them to take part in exercise outside of work.

## 30 mins

of moderate exercise five times a week, research suggests, can help maintain our mental wellbeing and even prevent some mental health problems occurring.<sup>9</sup>

## The importance of exercise

Exercise has so many benefits. Research shows it can not only reduce our risk of major illnesses and chronic conditions, it also helps us tackle stress and has a positive impact on other mental health conditions. It can also boost our self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and help maintain a healthy weight.<sup>8</sup>

Exercise also helps us to keep a healthy heart, mind and body by releasing crucial endorphins. These neurotransmitters or chemical messengers interact with our brains to reduce the perception of pain and trigger a positive feeling. Getting active helps to burn through chemicals that can increase feelings of stress, such as adrenalin, leaving us feeling calmer and better equipped to deal with what life throws at us.





# Building resilience: exercise

2/2

## How to be more active

It's important to set time aside to exercise, but there are also a number of ways you and your teams can be more active during work.

### **Have standing or walking meetings and 1-2-1s.**

These are great for boosting our daily steps and getting some fresh air.

**Get active on lunch breaks.** A brisk walk is good for stress reduction and keeping us mentally focussed.

**Run a weekly step challenge.** Challenge your team to take part in a friendly competition based on who can accumulate the most steps in a week.

### **Walk instead of emailing or calling.**

Where possible, consider walking over to a colleague's desk and having a chat, rather than sending an email.

**Take regular breaks.** Keep active throughout the day with regular short breaks away from your desk. This will clear your head and also help you to feel more energised and alert.

## Further support

Mental health charity Mind has a brilliant [guide to the benefits of physical activity on mental health](#), which talks about a whole range of exercise you can try, the benefits of exercise and how to overcome any blockers or worries you may have to getting active. Share it with your teams and encourage everyone to try something new.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resources. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

Related guides

# Building resilience: diet

1/2

**We've all got at least a rough idea of what healthy eating is supposed to look like. And we all know that there's a link between what we eat and drink and our physical health. But our diet can also have a real impact on our mental wellbeing and in particular our ability to cope with stress.**

This guide explains more and gives you practical advice on how to talk about the importance of a healthy diet with your team, in the context of helping to build resilience to stress.

## 46%

of people, in a 2018 study, reported that they ate too much or ate unhealthily due to stress.<sup>10</sup>

## The importance of diet

We all live busy working lives, and so eating healthily can often fall by the wayside in favour of convenience food such as takeaways, snacking and ready meals. And when we're particularly busy, working late and too tired to cook – the times our work stress levels are highest – we're even more likely to reach for the pizza menu.

However, making better choices with food can make a huge difference to how we feel. For example, a chocolate bar or a sugary drink may give a boost for a few minutes, but it's a temporary fix. In fact, once the sugar rush wears off, we can end up feeling lower than we did before. Becoming dehydrated can also mean our concentration drops and we find tasks more difficult than normal.

Mental health charity Mind has written a detailed [guide to food and mood](#) that explains how what we eat can impact our mood. It also explains why eating healthily can help you feel better, maintain energy and concentration and so cope better with the demands of the day.

We recommend sharing this with your teams and encouraging them to make one small change each. This could be as simple as suggesting bringing in fruit for a mid-morning snack instead of a chocolate bar, or encouraging people to switch a cup of tea or coffee for water.

Small changes – introduced one by one – are far more likely to be successful than trying to completely overhaul your eating habits. Furthermore, if everyone is a part of it, this can become a talking point within the team and will mean that the team will support each other.

<sup>10</sup> Stress: Are We Coping? Mental Health Foundation, 2018

# Building resilience: diet

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## Alcohol and caffeine

When we get stressed or anxious it can stop us sleeping. So it's tempting to drink more coffee the next day to boost our energy levels, then have a beer or glass of wine to help us relax at the end of the day. However, too much caffeine and alcohol will actually interrupt sleep further, leaving us even more tired than before.

Here are some tips that you can share with your team:

- Encourage your team to keep an eye on what they're consuming weekly.
- Discuss easy ways to cut caffeine intake: start by swapping one coffee for a decaf or find a fruit-based alternative to a cola.
- Remember that tea (including green tea) and chocolate both contain caffeine too!
- Monitor the benefits. Challenge your team to try to make a small change and report back on the benefits. You could even run a competition with a small prize to encourage people to take part.

Diet is also linked very closely to sleep. What we eat and drink can seriously affect our sleep patterns. So we recommend taking a look at our sleep guide too, and some of the closely related guides and resources in the quick links.

## Quick links

Related guides

# Building resilience: sleep

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**Sleep plays a hugely important role in keeping us resilient to stress. When we're tired, we're more prone to finding everyday tasks difficult or stressful. When we're stressed, it can disrupt our sleep.**

In this guide, we share tips on how to help your colleagues consider the impact of sleep and make changes to improve their sleep quality.

## 1 in 3

The NHS says that up to a **third of us will have episodes of insomnia** at some point in our lives.<sup>11</sup>

### The importance of sleep

When we're exhausted because we haven't had enough sleep, we start the day on low reserves. This makes it harder to concentrate and stay motivated, and feel upbeat and positive about the day ahead. It can seem that we are trying to go about our day dragging our feet through thick mud. It can also affect our readiness to exercise and our diet – when we're tired, we're more likely to choose unhealthy snacks or convenience foods.

The first step for anyone experiencing sleep problems is to think about what might be the cause and then develop effective ways to tackle the problem. For example, someone who drinks lots of caffeine in the evening may find that if they reduced the amount they consumed they'd sleep better.

For parents of small children, the cause of sleep problems may be just as obvious but harder to solve. However, there are still things you can do to try and improve the quality of your sleep, even if it's still disturbed.

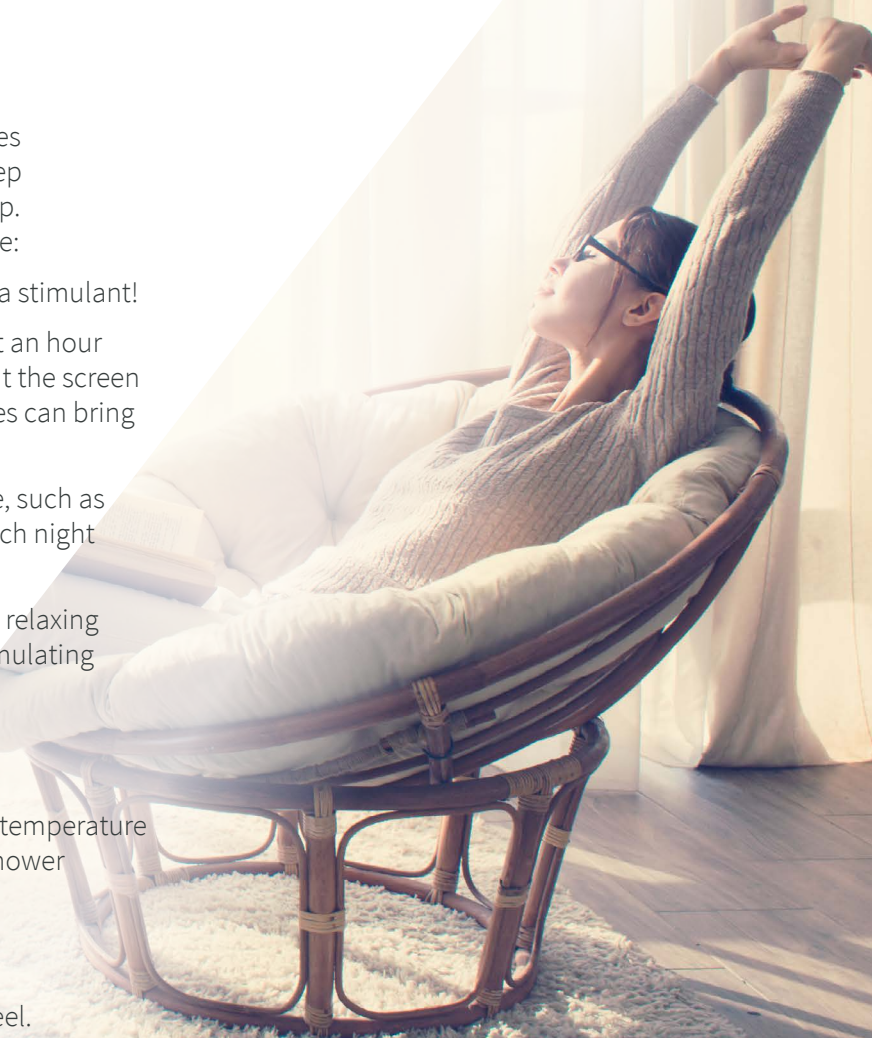
### Steps to improve your sleep

We've checked a range of expert sites for tips on how to improve your sleep routine and get a better night's sleep. Common recommendations include:

- Avoiding caffeine after 2pm – it's a stimulant!
- Switch off mobile devices at least an hour before bedtime. It's not just about the screen time itself but the fact that devices can bring stresses in.
- Establish a good bedtime routine, such as going to bed at the same time each night so your body adapts.
- Wind down before bed. Focus on relaxing activities instead of watching stimulating things on the TV.
- Take some exercise every day, but not just before bedtime.
- Attempt to lower your core body temperature before bed by having a bath or shower and keeping your bedroom cool.

Challenge your team to select one of the suggestions on the list and try it for a week and see how they feel.

<sup>11</sup> [nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia) (accessed 3 February 2020)





# Building resilience: sleep

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## Dealing with insomnia

If you've tried improving your sleep routine and are still not sleeping well over a long period, consider talking to your GP or making use of your Employee Assistance Programme, if you have one.

## Eight hours? Not necessarily...

Many of us have been brought up to believe that we function best on eight hours sleep a night. And for some people, getting less than that creates stress in itself. However, as a nation, getting eight hours sleep is increasingly rare. According to The Great British Bedtime Report (2017), 61% of British people generally have between five and seven hours sleep a night.<sup>12</sup> Working out how much you need and how best to achieve that on a regular basis is the first step.

## Stress, anxiety and worry

Stress, anxiety and worry often affect our sleep. Taking steps like reducing caffeine and increasing exercise will help, but, in some cases, other support may be needed.

Our guide to [understanding and dealing with anxiety](#) provides a useful starting point.

It's also worth taking a look at [Mind's advice on sleep problems and how to resolve them](#) and [The Sleep Foundation's website](#).

These pages have guidance on helping people to establish what might be causing their sleeping problems, so that they can identify the right support.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resources. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

Related guides

Related resources

<sup>12</sup> The Great British Bedtime Report, The Sleep Council, 2017

# Building resilience: positive thinking

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**Everyone, no matter who they are, experiences setbacks at certain points in their life. But the way we deal with problems varies, depending on the nature of the setback and on our personal circumstances at the time.**

We all know people who seem to be able to cope with setbacks better than others. They appear to pick themselves up and start again. By contrast, others seem crushed when things go wrong and unable to move forward. While some of this reflects our different natures, any of us can learn techniques to cope better with the inevitable bumps in the road. The key is in the mindset we adopt. This guide explains more and offers advice on how to develop a positive mindset.

## **The importance of positive thinking**

Negative thinking and self-doubt fuel anxiety and can eat away at a person's coping resources. When a person feels resilient, they are better able to keep going, no matter what comes their way.

There are lots of small steps that we can take in everyday situations to help us develop a more positive mindset.

**Choose your response** – we can choose to react negatively or hastily, or we can choose to remain calm and logical to find a solution. Your reaction is always up to you, so choose to take a deep breath and then approach the problem.

**Give yourself a talking to** – often, the person telling you something will be too difficult is yourself. Don't let the negative voice win: replace it with positive internal messages. If you let yourself believe you're rubbish and the setback is your fault, you're damaging your resilience and ability to focus on a new way forward.

By contrast, if you tell yourself that you have the ability to figure things out, you're strong and you can keep going until the situation is resolved, you'll have more energy to focus on the issue and will spend less energy on coping with anxiety.

**Maintain perspective** – resilient people understand that although a situation or crisis may seem overwhelming in the moment, it may not make that much of an impact over the long-term. Try to avoid blowing events out of proportion; ask yourself what's the worst that could happen, then take a deep breath and remind yourself of all the more likely outcomes.

**Build your self-confidence** – resilient people are confident that they're going to succeed eventually, despite any problems. With self-belief comes confidence and a strong sense of self, giving you the strength to keep moving forward, and to take the risks you need to get ahead. Think of times you've made it through difficult situations; remind yourself of successful projects, happy customers or colleagues you've helped.

**Develop strong relationships** inside and outside of work. The better your support network, (who you can rely on and turn to), the happier and more secure you will feel, at work and at home.

**Be flexible** – resilient people understand that things change, and that carefully made plans may, occasionally, need to be amended or scrapped. That's not failing: that's being able to adapt successfully.

# Building resilience: positive thinking

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## Accepting failure

People who have built resilience don't view failure as the end: they see it as a learning curve. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying: "Success is not final; failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts." In other words, failure is not the end.

Of course, it takes strength to pick ourselves up and try again but, when we do, we are stronger for it – and we've learned one more way not to do something.

Thomas Edison once said: "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." As an inventor, this way of viewing his 'failures' helped him to keep trying and keep believing in his goals.

## Sharing this with your team

We've developed some useful hints and tips which can help you encourage your team to adopt a more positive mindset and build their resilience.

- Encourage your team to view failures, however big or small, as opportunities to learn and that if they keep going, they'll become more resilient.
- A sense of humour is a vital tool in helping us all cope with the overwhelming feelings of failure when they happen. By reminding your teams that you've all experienced failure and made mistakes, you can show them that failure is part of everyone's life, and one of the building blocks of success.
- Take the time to promote a positive mindset. Consider sharing an inspirational quote of the week or stories of people who fought through adversity to keep your team focussed on positive thinking.

You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resource. See our quick links to visit these.

**“ Success is not final; failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts. ”**

**Winston Churchill**

## Quick links

**Related guides**

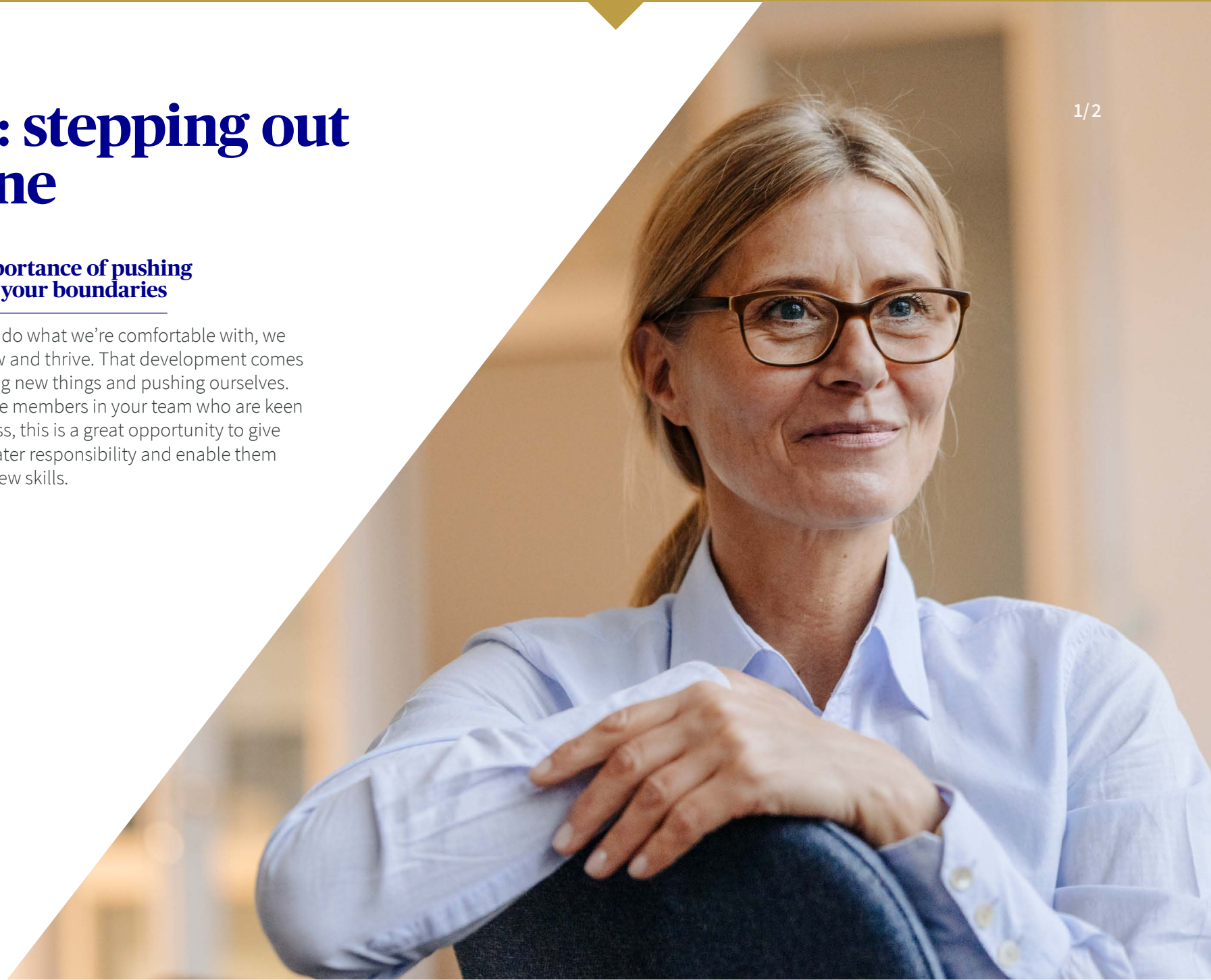
# Building resilience: stepping out of your comfort zone

**It may sound counter-intuitive, but when you try new things and take yourself out of your comfort zone, you can really build your resilience. Yes, it can be stressful in the short term, but when you succeed and surpass your own expectations, it gives you a massive boost. It's then something you can recall and draw on the next time you're in a tough situation.**

In this guide, we share tips on how to help your colleagues push themselves beyond their comfort zone.

## **The importance of pushing beyond your boundaries**

If we only do what we're comfortable with, we can't grow and thrive. That development comes from trying new things and pushing ourselves. If you have members in your team who are keen to progress, this is a great opportunity to give them greater responsibility and enable them to learn new skills.





# Building resilience: stepping out of your comfort zone

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## Steps to break out of your comfort zone

- The most important factor in breaking out of your comfort zone is setting yourself a clear, but stretching, goal: something you'd love to achieve even if it seems distant. Encourage your team to define their goal(s) and work towards them. It doesn't have to be work-related; things like doing a race for charity or learning a new skill are popular goals that can really stretch us.
  - To work towards it constructively, start by asking them how far they are from that goal. A good way of framing this is to ask someone: "on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the nearest, where are you with achieving this goal at the moment?"
  - Then ask them: "what do you need to do to get this closer to 10?" This will help them identify what they need to do to get from where they are now to where they want to be.
  - For example, if their goal is to be a team leader, they will need to gain the skills required for the role; that means getting experience and coaching, which may require them to put themselves forward for opportunities. So if that person is lacking in confidence, before developing their skillset they may need to focus on confidence coaching. By building on their skills from the ground up, one by one, a person is more likely to achieve their goal in the end.
- You might also find it useful to take a look at other closely related guides and resources. See our quick links to visit these.

## Quick links

Related guides

