



Spotlight on...

**Confident and informed
line management**

Confident and informed line management is one of seven key building blocks for creating a workplace environment inclusive of mental health and free from mental health stigma and discrimination.

It is essential that line managers lead by example and maintain mental health as a top priority, approaching the subject with empathy, compassion and support.



Why informed and supportive line management is important in a workplace

A poll of 1,000 Scottish workers, commissioned by See Me, found that only 68% of people thought that someone in their workplace with a mental health problem would be supported by management.

Line manager's legal obligations:

- Every employer has a legal duty of care to prevent physical and psychological harm to employees under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. This duty also applies to line managers in regards to their direct reports.
- Health and safety in the workplace is no longer just about slips, trips and physical harm, but also extends to the psychological harm that can result from extended exposure to work related pressure and stress.
- Employers also have a legal duty of care to protect employees with a physical or mental disability from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.
- Discrimination is not just about bullying and harassment, but extends to failure to make reasonable adjustments after a disclosure is made, and organisational policies and practice negatively impacting somebody with a protected characteristic.
- It is essential that line managers have the correct understanding of what is required of them and relevant support, training and development to uphold these obligations. This keeps employees safe from harm and the organisation safe from prosecution.

Line manager's role in supporting employees:

- In relation to health, wellbeing and safety at work, line managers are the first point of contact for most employees in the workplace. Disclosure around mental health problems and conversations around support are often dependant on individual relationships with the line manager.
- Line managers are the gatekeepers for mental health support in the workplace. An employee who discloses to a line manager with a good understanding of available support and procedures will likely have a good experience; however, disclosing to a line manager who does not have that, can lead to negative experiences and a reluctance to seek further help in the future. Therefore, it is essential that line managers understand and are confident in implementing disclosure policies and procedures.
- Line managers should not be expected to be experts in mental health problems and their treatment. They should be expected to be able to open supportive conversations about mental health with employees as part of their support and supervision; discuss reasonable adjustments based on individual needs, and role model anti-stigma and discrimination attitudes and behaviours that contribute to a mental health inclusive culture.

- People are often promoted to managerial roles because of their project management skills. When the role requires leading a team of employees, regardless of its size, the line manager should have the knowledge, skills and empathy required to support the mental health needs of employees. This should be noted during recruitment and induction for managerial positions, as well as part of learning and development once in post.
- Line managers have their own mental health needs too. Employers should offer opportunities to debrief and share learning of what works to support the mental health and wellbeing for employees. For example, by working with human resources and/or peer line managers in complete confidence when they are not experienced enough in managing new or challenging situations.

A manager's role in preventing stigma and discrimination:

- Line managers don't have to be mental health specialists or counsellors. All they should be asked to do is to listen to the employee without judgement, provide a compassionate response, and work with them to identify and review reasonable adjustments needed to help them stay in work (or return to work after a period of absence).
- Line managers advocating for change and leading by example will help to challenge stigmatising and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours within their teams and the wider organisation.
- Line managers and supervisors who talk openly about mental health, sharing their own stories (where safe and possible) encourage and empower others to open up, creating a trusting and supportive, two-way feedback environment where it is safe to talk about mental health.

- Line managers have a key role in identifying early signs of employee poor mental health and support needs. Regular open, honest and supportive conversations about mental health at work can help reduce the likelihood of employees reaching a crisis point and subsequently, having to take long-term sick absence which often has negative impact both on the employee, the team and the organisation.

Leading by example includes looking after your own mental health:

- Line managers also have a duty to themselves to look after their own mental health at work. Leading by example means more than just talking about mental health, but taking action to prioritise someone's own wellbeing.
- Line managers should have access to guidance on how to set boundaries when discussing a mental health disclosure at work with an employee or colleague and be able to confidently and sensitively assert what their role is in relation to discussing, providing or signposting to support.

Benefits of line managers being confident and well-informed on mental health and tackling stigma and discrimination:

- Line managers actively taking action to reduce the stigma around mental health problems in their teams will lead to more employees seeking help early, reducing long term absence rates, increasing productivity and relieving workload pressures on other colleagues.
- Employees with good mental wellbeing are more likely to be creative, loyal and productive.
- Employees who see their organisation (via line managers) taking action to prioritise workplace wellbeing will be more engaged, giving their best each day and motivated to contribute to organisational success.

Key actions for line managers

1. Make time to know employees by setting up regular catch ups. Make sure they're accessible and contactable (i.e. in person, virtually, phone, e-mail, etc.)
2. Be ready to respond. Know the policies/ procedures and keep updated on changes. Reach out to others in human resources, senior leadership, support organisations like ACAS, etc. to find answers to questions.
3. Know where to signpost both within the organisation e.g. Employee Assistance Programme, and externally.
4. Build in wellbeing questions and check-ins into support and supervision sessions, 1-1 meetings and also at team level (e.g. how are we doing/feeling today?). Contribute to this conversation sharing own perspective.



5. Act on disclosures. Have a conversation with direct reports as soon as they disclose poor mental health, to help you discuss, identify and introduce appropriate support or adjustments. If it's a colleague but not a direct report, offer to have a conversation and encourage them to reach out to their line manager (or HR if they don't feel they can), and signpost to sources of information and support, e.g. Employee Assistance Programme.
6. Maintain confidentiality and reassure the individual that private information will not be shared with colleagues without their permission, even when you no longer supervise them. Do not promise to keep confidential any information that may put your employee or someone else in danger – know and follow organisational policies and procedures around safeguarding.



What the See Me in Work programme identified

1

18% of people could not talk to their manager if they were struggling with their mental health.

2

81% of people do not agree that their manager prioritises their mental health and wellbeing.

3

When managers act as positive role models, talking openly about mental health and prioritising their own wellbeing, this creates a more positive team environment.

4

The See Me in Work e-learning module for line managers can help them understand their role as well as get a better understanding of the impact that mental health stigma and discrimination can have on their employees.

5

The Let's Chat tool helps line managers understand how best to set up and have a conversation about mental health needs with their employee, and have easy access to signposting information.

Key resources and reading

- **Health and Safety Executive:**
www.hse-network.com
- **Confident and informed line management – A case study from Scotrail:**
www.seemescotland.org/media/10232/see-me-bb5-case-study_line-management.pdf
- **See Me in Work e-Learning:**
www.seemescotland.org/e-learning
- **Let's Chat Tool, See Me (2019):**
www.seemescotland.org/workplace/resources-and-e-learning/tools-and-packs
- **Guidance on Equality Act 2010:**
www.acas.org.uk/equalityact
- **Mental Health in the workplace – A quick guide for managers:**
www.assets.bupa.co.uk/~media/images/healthmanagement/workplace-mental-health/manager-mental-health-support-guide.pdf





**Find out how See Me in Work can help
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