



Mental Health at work

12 May 2021

Workplace culture can be a direct factor in work-related stress and the sad truth is that many employers just don't know how to deal with this effectively.

At GMB we deal with hundreds of cases where employers have either bad practices or a culture that contributes to poor mental health within their workplaces.

Every week we deal with cases where employers overwork their workers to the point of exhaustion, which inevitably puts employees under huge mental stresses and can trigger a wide range of mental health issues.

“ [.@BBCNews](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56844444) coverage of [@GMB_union](https://www.gmb.org.uk)'s social care members' survey on mental health and the pandemic pic.twitter.com/6h3tejy3GD

— GMB Research & Policy ([@ResearchGMB](https://www.researchgmb.org.uk)) [April 23, 2021](https://www.gmb.org.uk/research)

There are different approaches, hard and soft, but the underlying feature is a culture where employers will push employees to work harder and longer to ensure they deliver on their goals or targets, sacrificing time with their friends and families.

The culture created often leads members worry about taking Annual Leave in case a task isn't completed, worrying they will lose out to others in the race for promotion, or worse even become employed if they have a zero hours contract.



This is wrong on many levels.

Managers themselves should never contribute to a culture within the workplace that puts people under direct pressure to take on additional tasks and give them unmanageable workloads. That's just bad management.

One in 4 people will experience some kind of mental health issue within England in any given week and 1 in 6 people will report a common mental health problem. That means 1 in 4 people in work - so how do many workplaces deal with such conditions, and how should we be dealing with them?

In many cases, especially around work-related stress, many direct factors can be managed.

Today is #timetotalkday2020 - Just like physical health, our mental health can be damaged by work - 1 in 6 workers are experiencing mental health issues right now. If you need someone to speak to, @GMB_union reps in your workplace are trained to help. @GMBLeicester @GMBMIDLAND pic.twitter.com/WwqZOVAM1Q

— Natalie Grayson (@NGraysonGMB) [February 6, 2020](#)

One quick example would be by having more manageable workloads, and employing more people to do the project or tasks – a simple fix.

But equally there are indirect factors like annual leave being declined or collective consultations for a change in terms and conditions or redundancy that can all place stress on an individual's relationship with management - and their ability to manage their mental health.

But whilst as individuals we deal with their issues, their effects impact the lives of the rest of the workforce, our friends and colleagues too.

Many people book annual leave because they feel they need that time away, a refresh or a new space.

But when your employer denies the request it creates a feeling of entrapment.

Collective consultations take a hit on workers as well, with all the waiting and the stress wondering if your 'time is up' - especially for those who work several jobs just to pay to put



bread on the table.

The sad truth in Britain is that more than often, managers and companies are just not up to scratch in dealing with these situations.

Too often, managers palm off these problems as if they don't matter or just find a new route to write off the problem as an employee being lazy.

They can't be bothered make adjustments to the workload or conditions to make it easier for their workmate.

The fact is that too many managers do not see Mental Health in the same way they view physical disabilities.

What's equally depressing is when companies 'wave the flag' about how they are at the forefront of tackling Mental Health issues - when this couldn't be further from the truth. Just waving a stick about employee assistance programmes whilst failing to get to the root causes in the workplace is not being at the forefront. It's being at the very back of the queue in the fight for good mental health. It's literally the crisis point.

“ This time last year I was absolutely crushed by an experience at work. My mental health was shattered and I thought my career wouldn't recover. [@GMB_union](https://t.co/R2T3G5wd69) helped me build confidence and feel empowered again. This [#HeartUnionsWeek](https://t.co/R2T3G5wd69) is emotional in the best possible way. <https://t.co/R2T3G5wd69>

— Jenny Symmons (@jenny_symmons) [February 12, 2021](https://t.co/R2T3G5wd69)

But it's not just managers' fault. When companies don't train managers to spot mental health conditions, they can't be expected to magic up this skill. And when a manager reports an incident, or an employee for that matter, it is up to the senior management to react.

“ [@GMB_union](https://t.co/Tv33fFvnmy) know that coronavirus is having a huge impact on our members' mental health.

We want to hear about your concerns and your experiences, to help us build a campaign for real change in the workplace. <https://t.co/Tv33fFvnmy> [pic.twitter.com/H5vrO8tG4W](https://t.co/H5vrO8tG4W)



They are the ones who carry the can for workplace culture and they have to lead the way in changing working patterns, workloads or management techniques.

There are many basic things we can do in our workplaces to ensure we are tackling the causes. At the forefront (although it's fair to say that not subjecting your workers to structural changes yearly is the very first) is ensuring workers have access to reasonable adjustments, lighter and more manageable workloads, and most importantly the ability to have time off.

Trade unions have collective role in tackling any injustice the worker receives, but we can also help tackle the root causes in the workplace. We can promote good wellbeing, promote the need to have decent terms and conditions, better working hours, access to better annual leave, and negotiating as a collective for secure employment with good wages. Trade unions can be an ally to employers in resolving some of the structural issues in the workplace. It doesn't always have to be about butting heads.

Employers need to come away from the dark ages and stop pretending to care with superficial fixes to some of the Mental Health triggers in the workplace. They should work with us to get to the bottom of the cause.

At the end of the day, we both want the same thing – happy, productive and dedicated workplaces. It's time for them to work with us to look to the future and stop holding on to practices that focus on productivity or performance.

A happy workforce is properly resourced and productive.

It can't be a coincidence that is more likely to be a unionised workforce.