



Mental health guidance for managers

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Why is mental health an important issue at UCL?

Mental health conditions are common. In any one year approximately one in four British adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health condition. Stigma still exists around mental health and though this may be lessening in recent years, it means that many people have limited understanding or harmful misconceptions about mental ill health.

The ongoing stigma can lead to people feeling ashamed of their condition and may hinder them from seeking help, especially if they are a man or from a culture where mental ill health isn't seen as a health issue at all. It can be the case that some people lack the insight to realise that they need help or help is available, as mental health conditions can cloud thinking and decision making. It is not uncommon for mental health conditions in the workplace to be exacerbated as well-meaning colleagues do not know how to respond to issues or may be reluctant to help for fear of saying or doing the 'wrong thing'.

With the intense level of competition between universities, staff working in higher education increasingly work in high-pressured environments with long working hours, which can impact on mental wellbeing if sustained for an extended period. While recognising workplace demands can vary, UCL is committed to being a responsible employer. It is necessary to avoid chronic workplace stress and unreasonable demands in order to safeguard the mental health of our employees.

Increased understanding of mental health will, in time, help reduce any inequalities and discrimination experienced by those who have mental health difficulties. Having managers that are interested and confident in discussing these issues is vital for creating a non-judgemental, supportive environment at UCL and will help improve the mental wellbeing of staff.

Professor David Lomas
UCL Vice Provost (Health)

Mental health and equality law

'Disability' is one of protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 and some long term mental health conditions and illnesses, such as depression, bipolar affective disorders, personality disorder and schizophrenia can all be considered disabilities. For a mental health condition to meet the definition of disability, it must have a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on a person's ability to do day-to-day activities. It is worth noting that coverage under the Act is based on symptoms, rather than being given a specific diagnosis.

Under the Equality Act 2010, we have a legal duty to be proactive in making reasonable adjustments to the workplace to overcome the barriers experienced by people with long-term mental health difficulties.

Overview of mental health conditions

It is important to realise that most mental health episodes are short-lived. However, even when people experience more serious, long-term or recurring problems, they are very often able to live meaningful and satisfying lives, particularly if adjustments can be made to accommodate the effects of their condition.

Mental health issues are given names to help distinguish one group of symptoms from another but mental health diagnosis is a sensitive topic.

For more information, please go to Mind's introduction to mental health problems at: <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-introduction/types-of-mental-health-problems/>

The most common mental health conditions include:

Anxiety Disorders

Whilst anxiety is a normal feeling, it can become a disorder when the feeling becomes too strong, when there is no threatening situation to cause it or it stops a person from doing everyday activities. Anxiety disorders include panic attacks, phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Mood Disorders

Also known as affective disorders or depressive disorders, people experience mood changes or disturbances, generally involving either mania (elation) or depression. Mood disorders include depression.

Psychotic Disorders

Psychotic disorders involve distorted thinking awareness and distorted thinking. Although symptoms may vary, two of the most common ones are hallucinations and delusions. Psychotic disorders include schizophrenia, which is much misrepresented in popular culture. 1 in 100 people will experience schizophrenia during their lifetime and the majority will lead ordinary lives.

Eating Disorders

Characterised by unhealthy attitudes to eating, eating problems are more prevalent in women than men, though numbers continue to rise in young males. They include anorexia nervosa, bulimia and compulsive eating.

Personality Disorders

Personality disorders are often the most misunderstood and stigmatised diagnoses in mental health. These conditions can mean patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving are more difficult to change and people can experience a more limited range of emotions, attitudes and behaviours.

Mental health and academia

Anecdotally, mental health issues are common in academia. Whilst there may not be a large body of research to evidence this, the research that does exist shows a link between the levels of stress academics face and a subsequent impact on mental health. An Australian study¹ found that the rate of mental illness in academic staff was three to four times higher than in the general population whilst other research estimated this to be as high as 53 per cent for UK academics².

Another study published in 2013 by the University and College Union³ used health and safety executive measures, assessed against a large sample of over 14,000 university employees, to reveal growing stress levels among academics prompted by heavy workloads, a long hours culture and conflicting management demands. The study also concluded that academics experience higher stress than those in the wider population.

Stress in itself is not a medical condition but UCL's own research shows that prolonged exposure to unmanageable stress is linked to psychological conditions such as anxiety and depression as well as physical effects such as heart disease, back pain and headaches.⁴

It is important to be aware that statistics show that low-skilled and low paid employees are also more likely to suffer poor mental health than the general population⁵, particularly if an employee feels they have little alternative in the labour market. Therefore poor mental health could be just as prevalent for UCL staff in low grades, manual or professional services positions.

Organisational culture

The way work is organised and the work climate can be contributing factors that affect a person's mental health. For example, stress can be increased by:

- Decision-making processes and treatment of employees that are perceived to be unfair
- Job insecurity, for example among employees on time-limited funding contracts
- Long or irregular working hours

There is evidence that interventions by managers to improve working conditions can help reduce stress and improve mental health in the workplace. For example, by increasing employee control over their work, enabling greater employee participation in decision-making and encouraging flexible working practices to help improve work-life balance⁶.

Often it is about common sense. Managers who regularly ask staff how they are and take an interest in their team's lives outside work are more likely to build trust and therefore effectively prevent and manage stress and mental ill-health at work. Conversely, managers who assume staff are okay, are indecisive and inconsistent, give mostly negative feedback and create unrealistic deadlines are likely to exacerbate stress.

1 Winefield, Anthony H.; Gillespie, Nicole; Stough, Con; Dua, Jagdish; Hapuarachchi, John; Boyd, Carolyn (2003) Occupational stress in Australian university staff: Results from a national survey.

2 Kinman, G (2001) Pressure Points: A review of research on stressors and strains in UK academics

3 Bloomer, E (2014) Workplace interventions to improve health and wellbeing

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

Good line management is therefore crucial in supporting well-being, spotting early signs of mental health problems and initiating early intervention, while poor line management may exacerbate or even cause mental health problems through an unhelpful approach or behaviour.

Impact of work and non-work factors on mental health

Most people's mental health problems are a combination of influencing factors both inside and outside work. For example, someone experiencing severe anxiety due to a debt problem might find that the demands of their job, which under normal circumstances are manageable, are now beyond them. Conversely, someone who is under prolonged stress at work might find difficulties in their relationships outside work, due to working excessive hours or using alcohol as a coping mechanism. This then creates a negative feedback loop which further undermines their performance and puts greater pressure on them in the workplace. It is therefore neither possible, nor especially useful, to disentangle the impact of various factors on mental health and so it is in the manager's interests actively to support staff with mental health problems, whatever the original cause or trigger.

Supporting employees

Rather than trying to diagnose or resolve an employee's mental health problem, the best way of supporting someone is to listen sensitively, non-judgmentally and signpost them to more appropriate sources of help, such as Occupational Health & Wellbeing, the Employee Assistance Programme, their GP or a relevant helpline.

UCL has an Employee Assistance Programme, called Care first, that provides confidential, impartial advice and support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The service is free for UCL employees to access and staff do not need permission from a manager to contact Care first. Through Care first staff can access a number of services including face-to-face and telephone counselling from members of, and Accredited to, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). Telephone: 0800 174319

Please see: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/occ_health/eap.php

It can of course be very hard to judge whether to suggest that an employee seeks help for their mental health. Not everyone in distress will have a mental health problem, so signposting to medical help may not always be appropriate or well-received. If you do decide to do so, think about the language you use. For example, suggesting that somebody e.g. 'seems to have a lot to cope with and might benefit from talking to somebody about it' is rather different to suggesting that the person has a mental health problem.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, UCL has a legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' for staff with long term mental health difficulties that have a substantial impact on their ability to carry out day to day activities. This means that managers are obliged to make reasonable adjustments to a person's job or working environment to reduce the impact of a person's health condition on their ability to work, and to ensure they are getting the right support. The types of reasonable adjustments that can support people with mental health problems stay productive at work are changes that are often relatively easy and inexpensive to put in place with some thought and preparation. Many of these are just good management practice.

When deciding whether an adjustment is reasonable a manager should consider:

- How effective the change will be in avoiding the disadvantage the disabled worker would otherwise experience
- Its practicality
- The costs & the availability of financial support.
- UCL's resources and size

Examples of adjustments are:

- Allowing a person who had difficulty travelling in crowded trains to start early and finish late in order to avoid the rush hour.
- Removing the expectation that an administrator covers reception during the receptionist's lunch break because they found this direct contact with staff and students aggravated their mental health condition.
- Arranging for someone who became very drowsy after their monthly medication to take a day off and make up the hours elsewhere.
- Appointing a 'buddy' or 'mentor' – someone on a similar grade and outside the usual management structure – to show a new employee the ropes and help them settle in to the workplace.
- Enabling a person to arrange their hours to permit them to attend a weekly therapy session
- Permitting someone to take a short break out of the office when they became particularly anxious
- Supporting someone to prioritise their work
- The possibility of working from home, a reduction in hours or relief from some responsibilities to prevent the person having to take time off sick during fluctuations in their condition.
- Arranging for someone who found the distractions of an open-plan office detracted from their work performance to have their desk in a quieter area, if one is available.
- Enabling a person to arrange their annual leave to allow regularly spaced breaks throughout the year.

- Creating the possibility of part-time working and job-share arrangements for someone who was unable to work full time.

It is important to note that UCL managers are encouraged to support all staff with mental health conditions not just those protected by equality law.

UCL holds a central budget for reasonable adjustments. For more information about this contact the Equalities and Diversity Team in UCL HR.

Sources of support at UCL

For enquiries about reasonable adjustments, including for people with mental health conditions, in the workplace contact the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Team in UCL HR equalities@ucl.ac.uk

UCL's Occupational Health and Wellbeing can undertake assessment on behalf of managers and offer advice on adjustments, rehabilitation and prognosis. Please consider referring early for advice. For management referrals form to Occupational Health in UCL HR [click here](#), email ohsadmin@ucl.ac.uk or call 020 7679 2802 int. 32802

UCL's Employee Assistance Programme
ucl.ac.uk/hr/occ_health/eap.php or call Care first directly on 0800 174319.

For general queries about supporting staff with mental health conditions at work contact the HR Advisory Services Team
ucl.ac.uk/hr/consultancy/

Sources of information

Time to change: Ending mental health stigma
time-to-change.org.uk/your-organisation/support-employers

Mind: Useful resources on taking care of your staff
mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/useful-resources/
mind.org.uk/media/550657/resource4.pdf *****

ACAS: Promoting positive mental health at work
[acas.org.uk/media/pdf//a/Promoting_positive_mental_health_at_work\(SEPT2014\).pdf](http://acas.org.uk/media/pdf//a/Promoting_positive_mental_health_at_work(SEPT2014).pdf)

NHS Health at Work: Guidance on mental health at work adjustments
nhshealthatwork.co.uk/images/library/files/Government%20policy/Mental_Health_Adjustments_Guidance_May_2012.pdf

Royal College of Psychiatry: Resources for employers.
rcpsych.ac.uk/usefulresources/workandmentalhealth/employer.aspx

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