



The culture of silence around mental health in the workplace must end

[Ann Robinson](#) , Tuesday 4 October 2016, The Guardian

(...) The mental health of the UK workforce is in a grim state, according to a major new survey. More than three quarters of the 20,000 workers aged 16- to 64 who took part said they had

experienced symptoms of poor mental health, and nearly two thirds of those with mental health problems felt work was a factor.

The study, published on 4 October, also found a shocking lack of employer awareness and responsiveness. More than half of the employees who disclosed their symptoms of poor mental health said their employers took no action. A minority of managers (22%) surveyed said that they'd had training in spotting and supporting employees who are struggling, and most managers (63%) said they felt obliged to put the interests of their organization above the wellbeing of team members.

But that is obviously a false dichotomy. You don't need to be a business guru to see that maintaining physical and mental wellbeing in the workforce is an essential prerequisite to growing a healthy and sustainable business.

Henry Stewart, founder of London-based training business Happy, says: "People work best when they feel good about themselves. People do not work well when they are bullied, told off or blamed. Such behaviour should have no place in the modern workplace. We need environments where people feel trusted to do their best, within guidelines, and where the role of managers is to coach not instruct. Do that and you will get both better mental health and a more productive organisation."(...)

Mental ill health is now the leading cause of sickness absence in the UK, with more than 15m absence days attributed to stress, anxiety and depression in 2013, at a cost to the UK economy of £8.4bn. The Centre for Mental Health has also calculated that presenteeism, the practice of staying at work more hours than required, usually because of job insecurity, costs the UK economy £15.1bn per annum. (...)

Serious companies are paying attention. Marks & Spencer sent 20 senior leaders on a six week challenge to learn more about how to "inspire mental wellbeing" among staff, and work with the M&S employee wellbeing manager to understand what the business is doing to support its employees.

"As a result of taking part in the programme, senior leaders in the M&S food business team introduced steps to prevent unhealthy working habits, such as sending emails during the weekend or late at night, and also encouraged employees to talk with colleagues rather than relying on email," says Beth Ryder, M&S employee wellbeing manager. "Positive interventions introduced as a result of the programme also included restricted meeting length and better encouragement for employees to plan regular time away from their desks."

The mental health charity Mind has developed disclosure tools to help managers. "Mental health is still the elephant in the room in most workplaces – employees are reluctant to raise the subject for fear of discrimination, while managers often shy away from the subject for fear of making matters worse or provoking legal consequences," reads the introduction to the tools. "This culture of silence means undetected mental health problems can spiral into a crisis, resulting in sickness absences."