

Keeping a clear head

With so much focus on children's well-being, it can be easy to overlook those who care for them. *Katy Morton* considers staff mental health

Work is the most stressful factor in many people's lives. In research commissioned by the mental health charity Mind last year, one in three people said their work life was either very or quite stressful.

According to Andrea Clifford-Poston, an educational psychotherapist and author of several books on behaviour, people who work with children are particularly prone to various forms of stress.

'In some cases, this stress can turn into anxiety,' she explains. 'Staff can become anxious if they are worried something is out of their control or beyond their expertise.'

'People expect those that work in nurseries to be experts in childcare, which can create an internal pressure if there is a child a staff member can't manage.' Ms Clifford-Poston says that if anxiety isn't addressed it can become a mental health issue, particularly if a worker has a history of mental health illness.

Along with anxiety, other common mental health conditions are depression, including post-natal depression, panic disorder – where sufferers experience regular and recurring panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety disorder or the eating disorders anorexia and bulimia. People are more likely to suffer from mental health issues if they have experienced them in the past.

A PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH

Mind says managers should ensure there are measures in place to

prevent staff suffering from high levels of stress and anxiety. Emma Mamo, head of workplace well-being at the charity, recommends nurseries create a 'wellness action plan' for all staff. This involves a manager sitting down with a member of staff and noting down their mental health triggers, the signs they might display if they are feeling more stressed than usual, and how a manager can help them.

Ms Mamo says the plans are useful because they help normalise mental health illnesses, encourage dialogue, and produce strategies to help people.

Anxiety can become a mental health issue if not addressed

Catriona Nason, director of Day-care Doctor, adds that employers can carry out a 'stress audit' to identify where stress can originate within an organisation, its causes, and the effects on employees.

A typical stress audit includes a questionnaire of a sample of employees, interviews to complement questionnaire findings, and a report with recommendations for long-term stress management strategies.

Another method to help reduce stress levels of staff is to encourage them to take breaks. This gives workers a chance to get away from their job, says Ms Clifford-Poston. She recommends this is in 'a room away from the children'. She also suggests holding weekly meetings to provide a safe forum for staff to talk about any personal issues they are having.

To help boost the self-esteem of staff and make them feel valued, Ms Mamo at Mind says that nursery managers and owners need to reward team members for good work and support them with professional development. Having a member of staff whose responsibility it is to oversee the well-being of the team is also beneficial (see case study).

It is also useful for managers to have an eye on the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance for areas of work that can have a negative



STAFF MENTAL HEALTH

impact on employee health. They include demands – such as workload, work patterns and work environment, control (how much say a person has in the way they do their work) and support provided by an organisation and colleagues.

RECOGNISING SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Half the battle is determining if a member of staff has a mental health issue in the first place, since most that do are unlikely to speak up or admit it, explains Ms Nason.

‘A sign that a member of staff may be suffering from a mental health issue is if they are acting differently to normal. They may be turning up late to work, taking lots of time off, calling in sick and not attending meetings. Younger practitioners may be unusually rude or aggressive.’

Mental health conditions can also affect a person’s stamina, and capacity to concentrate or communicate effectively, so they may struggle to meet deadlines and interact with others, find it difficult to handle negative feedback and juggle multiple tasks.

Yet the Mind survey showed that one in five people felt they couldn’t tell their boss if they were overly stressed, and many diagnosed with mental health problems reported keeping the information from their boss.

Ms Nason says it is common for members of staff to abstain from

putting information about any medical conditions, including mental health illnesses, on forms held by their employer because of fear about other people’s reactions and of losing their job.

SUPPORTING STAFF WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

According to Jacqui Mann, managing director of HR4Nurseries, the Equality Act 2010 states that employers have to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for staff suffering with mental health problems.

The act says that factors such as the cost and practicality of making an adjustment, and the resources available to the employer, may be relevant in deciding what is reasonable.

‘It’s key for managers to know where an employees’ stress comes from. The manager should have regular meetings with the member of staff to ask about any adjustments they need making to their role’, explains Ms Mann.

‘Managers also need to have a discussion with the employee about what they want other staff to be told.

‘Staff suffering from mental health problems should be encouraged to see a medical professional.’

Ms Mann says that if a member of staff has been off for some time with a mental health condition or is on medication, a nursery can contact the



MORE INFORMATION

- Equality Act 2010, www.gov.uk/equality-act-2010-guidance
- Mind, www.mind.org.uk
- HSE, www.hse.gov.uk
- Mental Health Foundation, www.mentalhealth.org.uk
- OCD action charity, www.ocdaction.org.uk

employee’s GP with their permission to obtain a medical report, which can cost anything between £75 and £200.

‘This way, nurseries can find out more about an employees’ condition and what measures the organisation can put in place at work to support them,’ she advises.

‘However, a GP will only include information an employer has asked for, so nurseries have to make sure they ask the right questions.’

Ms Mann says that if an employee won’t see their GP or let their employer contact their GP, another option is to ask if the member of staff will be assessed by an occupational health professional. However, this is more expensive.

Occupational health professionals aim to find out the impact of work on an individual’s health and work to make sure that an employee is fit to do their job. ■

Training courses

- ACAS runs training courses to help managers and supervisors raise awareness of mental health issues in the workplace and manage them effectively, see www.acas.org.uk
- The Mental Health Foundation runs a mental health awareness training day, see www.mentalhealth.org.uk
- Mind offers a number of courses on mental health awareness, see www.mind.org.uk/for-business

CASE STUDY: BRIGHT KIDS NURSERY GROUP



Bright Kids, which operates three nurseries and six out-of-school clubs, employs a well-being

development and coaching executive to provide support to individuals across the company.

Members of staff are referred to Sam Mulhall (pictured) if their manager identifies they aren’t coping and need more support. Identification happens during a one-to-one meeting, which take place every six to eight weeks.

Ms Mulhall has delivered stress management courses

to Bright Kids’ nursery staff and has helped practitioners with a range of issues – from phobias and stopping smoking to more common areas such as debt, family problems, depression and anxiety. She will also extend her skills with counselling training.

‘Following a referral, I set up a well-being meeting for the member of staff during work hours, which normally lasts an hour, in which they can offload their problems’, she says. ‘It sounds a cliché, but often a problem shared is a problem halved.’

‘Meetings are strictly confidential and commonly take place in a private room at the nursery where the

employee works; however, it is down to the preference of an individual whether they want to meet there, at Bright Kids’ head office, or a coffee shop.’

Staff will often attend a follow-up meeting. Employees can continue to meet with Ms Mulhall over a period of months.

‘I don’t give medical advice. It’s about empowering individuals, guiding them and making sure they have a support network,’ she says.

‘Through coaching we look at what is in a staff members’ control. We talk about nutrition and discuss what foods are in their diet.’

‘We discuss exercise, what an employee loves doing and

how they relax, all of which are extremely important to reducing stress and encouraging well-being.’

Ms Mulhall also acts as a go-between for staff and their managers to help start dialogue. She says this is important as it keeps managers, who can provide day-to-day support, in the loop with their staff’s concerns.

She now aims to spread this practice by training managers to deliver staff coaching techniques in their settings.

Bright Kids is also planning on establishing health and well-being champions in all its settings as part of the Worcestershire Works Well initiative.