

‘Sharing stories is really **powerful** and the more people share stories, the more people will talk about **mental health problems**’

Faye McGuinness, Head of Workplace Wellbeing Programmes (Strategy and Development) at Mind talks to *Governance and Compliance* about the role good governance can play in supporting workers’ mental health

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Faye McGuinness' career at Mind began three and a half years ago when she led a programme to support the mental health of people working in emergency services. This followed on from a role supporting victims of crimes at the charity Victim Support. It was in this role that Faye found support was often lacking due to institutional issues; 'what I was able to see there is that the support those working in the criminal justice system, including the Police, were giving people with mental health problems, wasn't always the most positive. They didn't always understand the needs of people with mental health problems. However, if you take a step back you can see that actually the environment that people like the police were working in wasn't very conducive to supporting their own mental health, so we needed to start with changing the internal culture before expecting them to change their behaviours.'

Since then Faye has expanded on this work in her role as Head of Workplace Wellbeing Programmes (Strategy and Development) at Mind. Faye can 'lead on work that can really support employers and employees to embed good practice in relation to mental health at work' by leading on Mind's response to the recommendations that were set out in the Stevenson/Farmer Review 'Thriving at Work.' She says that 'I feel really passionate about workplace wellbeing. I think employers play a huge role in making sure their employees feel satisfied, motivated and are essentially thriving at work.'

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### **So far, what do you think the impact of the 'Thriving at Work' Report has been? Do you think that there are many businesses that have adopted the six principles?**

The report set out 40 recommendations. There has been progress in some areas and lack of progress in other areas. As well as employers there were also recommendations for government, regulators, NHS and others. There has been progress in the public sector, which suggests that in terms of the government as an employer, things are beginning to change.

For example, all departments have conducted a Mental Health Sense Check and they've all been asked to adopt an action plan to show how they are going to meet the core standards. Other public sector bodies like the NHS have launched their NHS Healthy Workforce Framework, in response to the Thriving at Work recommendations.

Where there might be particular organisations within certain sectors implementing the standards, we're still not seeing the sector as a whole really taking it on board and implementing them.

So a key focus for Mind's Workplace Wellbeing team over the next 12 months will be to think about how we take a sector approach, so that we have key sectors paving the way rather than just a few employers within that sector.

### **What do you think the challenges are in those industries and those sectors? Why are they not pushing those changes and implementing them across the board?**

I think there is an element of employers not really knowing where to start, and being confused by the amount of resources, tools and initiatives available. Our work – in partnership with Heads Together aims to respond to this and gives employers a starting platform.

An element of employers' nervousness seems to be the worry of 'opening a can of worms', and not knowing what to do if staff come forward to talk about their mental health. There is this idea employers need to be experts in how to support the mental

health of their staff, but this is not the case at all. Employers need to create the environment for their staff to feel comfortable talking about how they feel – both good and bad, and if someone needs support for their mental health there are experts who can provide this.

### **Where can employees find these resources?**

Resources can be found at [www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk). Having all of the resources in one place creates less confusion for employers. Mind's survey of more than 550 employers indicated that a third had looked for resources and tools online but couldn't find what they were looking for. This was actually a barrier for them in knowing what actions to take to make positive changes.

Our research has shown that employers feel quite confused about what's out there, so simplifying this process is vital.

Many employers believe implementing good workplace wellbeing practices has to be big and expensive, but there are some really small inexpensive things employers can do such as signing up to the Time to Change Pledge to tackle the stigma and discrimination around mental health which still exists to get that conversation and their journey started.

Employers need to know it doesn't have to be this big overhaul, which they have to adopt. Small, inexpensive steps will make a big difference.

### **If you have to give a company three or four small steps that they could start from – if they were coming to this completely from scratch – what would those be?**

Firstly it would be having a tangible mental health plan – not just a piece of paper which sits on a shelf. The plan should be accountable, it should be held somewhere and it should have senior leadership buy-in so everybody in the organisation from senior leaders down to employees knows exactly what the organisation is doing around mental health and wellbeing.

Secondly, I think you should have more people





## It should be senior leaders that are willing to talk about their own experiences

championing mental health and wellbeing in the organisation. People who are passionate and knowledgeable about mental health and again I think that needs to be people at all levels of the organisation. Sharing stories is really powerful and the more people who share their own experiences the more people will feel encouraged to talk and open up about their own mental health.

Thirdly you need to make sure your line managers, who we often expect to know and say the right thing, so its vital managers are given the right skills and tools to be able to do this. Many line managers tell us they lack the confidence, skills and the experience to have that conversation and it actually makes them feel really nervous about supporting their staff. So I think giving them the right skills is really, really important.

### **You mentioned buy-in from senior leadership; do you think it really does have to be a top down approach, and do you think it can be built into a company's corporate governance?**

I think that we have seen real change in forward thinking organisations where there's been a top down approach and a bottom up approach.

We've seen some fantastic change that's been driven from mental health champions from the ground up but yes, you really do need senior level buy-in. This buy-in shouldn't just be a tick box. It should be senior leaders who are willing to talk about their own experiences, who are willing to be transparent about what the organisation is doing in terms of mental health and staff wellbeing. One of the things we're trying to really push for, which the 'Thriving at Work' review sets out is about how employers report and evaluate what they're doing to look after the mental health of their staff.

We want to see more employers highlighting what they're actually doing to support their staff in their annual reviews. We don't want to just see this internally, we want employers to be more accountable and publicly declare the work that they're doing in this space.

### **Could you expand on the accountability and reporting side of things, about how you're hoping to encourage businesses to do that?**

Mind's Workplace Wellbeing Index, is a benchmark of best policy and practice when it comes to promoting staff mental health. It's the first of its kind and has been developed as a similar model to the Stonewall Index. It's an

independent review by Mind, which monitors what workplaces are delivering in terms of mental health at work. We'll come into the organisation to assess the current picture by doing a full staff survey and an employer survey. It's really interesting when you see the results of those. And as a result of that, what we do is we deliver the organisation a formal report with a full set of recommendations, and we then work with that organisation to support them to implement those recommendations.

Every year we have our Workplace Wellbeing Index Award and the organisations are awarded either bronze, silver or gold. These are organisations that are willing to put themselves forward and to recognise that it's okay if they aren't getting to completely right, because they're working towards something and having an organisation like Mind to come in independently and tell them how they need to improve is a positive step.

For the past two years The Environment Agency, who have taken part in the index two years running have been awarded gold. They have been able to see where the improvements have been made. Doing it year on year allows organisations to really see the areas of progress - but also what needs to be done.

## **We're looking at quite early intervention, and thinking about what they can do to look after their own resilience. That's a word we use a lot.**

Although there has been huge progress, we recently released some data from the Index – Our survey of almost 44,000 employees found that almost half (48 per cent) had experienced poor mental health, such as stress, low mood, and anxiety, while working at their current organisation. Of those respondents, only half chose to tell their employer about their difficulties (10,554).

So we know we've still got a long way to go but we are seeing a shift. Being transparent and accountable doesn't always mean organisations are getting it right, but it does go a long way in making employees feel like their employers are actually taking them seriously.

### **At the moment this is voluntary. Do you think that there's a place for companies being required to report on this?**

Yes. One of the recommendations highlighted in the 'Thriving at Work' review was about developing a voluntary reporting framework. On top of the Mind Workplace Wellbeing Index, we're also advising government on what a voluntary reporting framework could look like. We're beginning to have those conversations about 'okay how do you push that from being voluntary to being mandatory?'

For me it seems that everybody is in agreement that it is about those small steps. Employers are nervous about talking publicly about what they're

doing around mental health because there is this feeling that people might look at them and say 'okay we're seeing an increase in the number of people in the organisation who have mental health problems. You must be doing something wrong.'

Rather than seeing it in reverse - organisations could be doing some really great stuff, therefore more people have been able to talk about their mental health problems, which is an incredibly positive thing.

So we need to work with employers to reduce that anxiousness about it and talk to them about the benefits of doing it versus the concerns that they have. We would like to see this become mandatory sometime in the future.

### **Do you think the government is supporting you in that? Do you think that they're on board with pushing this agenda?**

I think they recognise it as an important recommendation in the 'Thriving at Work' review and see the real value in it. But I think they recognise that employers are feeling nervous and if you go in really hard with that kind of regulation and make it mandatory, it could put employers off.

Slow steps are important but we have to remember our goal has to be in the future reporting becomes mandatory in the future. We need to see more accountability. Currently there is no plan for government to review what organisations are voluntary reporting on mental health, so although it's a positive step forward unless there is accountability this reporting and progress is not sustainable.

### **Do you think that there's an element of the language that's used around mental health issues that can be scary or off-putting for companies? And do you think that perhaps corporate language needs to be adapted in any way?**

Yes. Often mental health can be spoken about in a negative way, so I think the shift towards positive language is really important, particularly if you want people to be open about their experiences.

We have employers that talk to us and tell us even the words mental health can be quite scary for people and it holds a lot of stigma, so there is this debate that maybe people should be using other terms like workplace wellbeing or keeping well.

It's an interesting one because not using the term 'mental health problems' feeds into the stigma, but I understand it has to be right for the organisation. So I think every organisation needs to really understand what their employees want to hear and the language



To access tools and resources to support mental health at work you can visit [www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk)

they want to use. It's not going to be one language that fits everybody.

I think that as an organisation it could be one of the questions that you ask employees, how do you want to talk about mental health that will help you feel comfortable? And actually find out from them about how to talk about it. Language is key.

It's vital for companies to think about the language they use when talking about mental health – especially when talking to an individual about how they are feeling:

**Conversation checklist**

- Avoid interruptions – switch off phones, ensure colleagues can't walk in and interrupt.
- Ask simple, open, non-judgemental questions.
- Avoid judgemental or patronising responses.
- Speak calmly.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Listen actively and carefully.
- Encourage the employee to talk.
- Show empathy and understanding.
- Be prepared for some silences and be patient.
- Focus on the person, not the problem.
- Avoid making assumptions or being prescriptive.
- Follow up in writing, especially agreed actions or support.

Even if you're not sure, talk to the colleague you're worried about, as staying silent is one of the worst things you can do. Try to adopt a sensitive, common-sense approach. The rules of thumb are:

- Encourage people to talk – start by talking about general wellbeing, and let people know that they can talk to you if they need to. Remember everyone's experience of mental health problems is different, so focus on the person, not the problem.
- Avoid making assumptions – don't try to guess what symptoms a co-worker might have and how these might affect their life or their ability to do their job – many people are able to manage their condition and perform their role to a high standard.
- Respect confidentiality – remember mental health information is confidential and sensitive. Don't pass on information unnecessarily – not least because this breach of trust could negatively impact someone's mental health.

Even if they don't want to speak about it at that time, you've still let them know you care and you're there for them when the time is right. In addition, small gestures like thanking people for their work, making tea or coffee and asking about their plans outside work - can make a huge difference.

**What do you think the responsibility of employees is if they're suffering from mental health issues? Where and how do you think they need to approach their company about it?**

I think the first issue fundamentally is about employers

creating cultures where employees feel like they can have those conversations. And those cultures need to be created from the moment you recruit somebody, induct them and all the way through to them leaving the organisation.

So in Mind for example, we openly ask if people have mental health problems as part of the application process and we welcome it. It's something we welcome but we know that for many employees that are applying for a job, they would feel that employers are asking that they're asking because they want to sift them out.

Without a culture that supports mental health at work, employees will always feel dubious about the employer's motivation. I think having that culture is really important but I also think that employees still have a responsibility as well.

There are lots of tools and techniques out there that people can now use if they want to build their own resilience if they're feeling stressed. So I think actually as individuals we should start to try and implement those resources and techniques as much as possible, we do have to recognise that working environments don't always allow for this.

I think we also have a responsibility to look out for our colleagues. We work with them for usually seven to eight hours a day so we have a responsibility to spot signs and to spot changes, and I think the more that we breakdown the stigma, the more that we can do that. But ultimately I do think it comes down to the environment the employees work in. n

**Thriving at Work's six core standards for employers:**

- 1 Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan that promotes good mental health of all employees and outlines the support available for those who may need it
- 2 Develop mental health awareness among employees by making information, tools and support accessible
- 3 Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling, during the recruitment process and at regular intervals throughout employment, offer appropriate workplace adjustments to employees who require them
- 4 Provide employees with good working conditions and ensure they have a healthy work life balance and opportunities for development
- 5 Promote effective people management to ensure all employees have a regular conversation about their health and well-being with their line manager, supervisor or organisational leader and train and support line managers and supervisors in effective management practices
- 6 Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing by understanding available data, talking to employees, and understanding risk factors