

The impact of long-term physical health conditions on mental health:

Why & how employers should act now.

Long-term conditions are persistent health conditions that need ongoing management, such as through medication, lifestyle adjustments or other self-management practices. They are also known as chronic conditions. Examples include diabetes, asthma, arthritis, epilepsy, chronic fatigue, and high blood pressure.

Living with long term conditions can cause tiredness, frustration, and worry, especially for people dealing with pain, tests, treatments, flare-ups or coming to terms with their condition. Having a long-term condition can lead to social isolation, low self-esteem, stigma and discrimination.

All of these things can make day-to-day stress levels high, and the development of a mental health problem such as depression or anxiety more likely. In fact, research shows that people with long-term physical conditions are more than twice as likely to develop mental ill-health. It's a vicious cycle as mental health problems can then make it harder for people to cope with their physical health conditions. Add the everyday pressures of work into the mix and the result is a specific and difficult set of circumstances for individuals.



A growing issue

The UK general & working population is aging, and many studies show that the incidence of long-term health conditions rises with age.¹

A current issue

The CIPD estimate that 25% of workers in their 50s have a health condition that impacts on how much and what work they can do.²

A 2022 snapshot of UK workforce age suggests that 33% of workers are 50 or over.²



A capacity issue

*"Only 42% of managers say they feel "completely" empowered and capable of helping their company achieve its well-being commitments."*³



A productivity issue

*"There is no question that caring for how employees feel at work is the right thing to do. Both the moral and business cases are now settled, especially given our most recent field research showing that employee wellbeing drives productivity as well as recruitment and retention of talent which, in turn, has measurable impact on a company's overall financial performance."*⁴

A learning issue

*"Most employers want to help, but many lack the capacity or knowledge, with smaller employers often struggling with resourcing [...] overall, the UK's work and health infrastructure remains fragmented and underdeveloped."*⁵



A profitability issue

Evidence shows that investment portfolios of companies that are known to prioritise health & wellbeing significantly outperform the general market in stock performance.⁶



A reputational issue

As well as supporting individual team members there are massive benefits to be had by supporting the mental health and wellbeing of people with long-term health conditions. Amongst many:

- Feeds positive workplace culture
- Inclusive practice replicable across all employees
- Better retention
- Lower sickness absence rates
- Reputational value

How can employers take action to make a difference?

Through Living Well: Emotional Support Matters, Mental Health Foundation and The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) supported organisations to build their capacity and improve the mental health and wellbeing of people living with long-term health conditions. This included the facilitation of a peer learning network as well as provision of relevant training and support for key individuals.

As part of this work, participating organisations worked to embed a “mental health lens” in all their activities from front-line services right through to governance, embedding it in their culture. Although our original focus was on members of the public, we quickly realised that staff members and volunteers were also benefiting from this culture change and the enhanced provision of support for mental health and wellbeing.

For example, some managers focused on supportive communication - being fully present, asking open questions, listening intently, reflecting back what they hear and validating the experiences of their employees – and found it hugely effective in demonstrating a culture focused on wellbeing.

The Living Well Emotional Support Matters project

The Living Well: Emotional Support Matters project was a partnership between Mental Health Foundation and The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE). It supported charities working with people living with long-term health conditions in Scotland to provide tailored, practical mental health support. The emotional wellbeing of this group was known to be disproportionately negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The project aimed to grow the capacity of participating organisations to deliver mental wellbeing support for their service users, staff and volunteers through the facilitation of training and peer learning.

Over 1000 staff and volunteers were reached during the lifetime of the project.

ACAS recommend that employers, as part of their duty of care for employees, should create an environment where their employees feel able to talk openly about mental health.⁹



For example, they should:

- make sure managers model positive wellbeing behaviours and use their voice to challenge stigma
- make sure employees have regular meetings with their managers, to talk about any problems they're having
- provide resources to support open conversations about mental health
- increase awareness of mental health through training and campaigns
- appoint mental health 'champions' who are trained to listen and tell staff where to get support

Our partners told us:

“The training on how to confidently have conversations about mental health made us realise that we have some gaps within our training. So we’re rolling it out to all of the UK delivery staff and volunteers, and we’ll train them up to be able to cascade it going forward as well.”⁷



“Culture change isn’t something that happens overnight, but I do see the impact of the project in changing our culture. Slowly, but I definitely see increased openness to discuss mental health within the staff team and within the board level. I think we’ve already made some practical changes, but I think that enshrining this into strategy for our sustainability in the long-term is vital. If all the staff suddenly decided to leave, then a lot of the learning and a lot of the prioritisation would be lost.”⁸

1. Office for National Statistics Business Insights and Conditions survey breakdown workforce age

2. CIPD (2022) Understanding Older Workers: Analysis and recommendations to support longer and more fulfilling working lives.

3. Deloitte Insights, 20 June 2023

4. Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, University of Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre online news, 18 May 2023

5. The Health Foundation. (Oct 2024) Towards a healthier workforce Interim report of the Commission for Healthier Working Lives.

6. Fabius, Raymond MD; Phares, Sharon PhD. Companies That Promote a Culture of Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Outperform in the Marketplace. Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine 63(6):p 456-461, June 2021

7. Service manager, Versus Arthritis

8. Manager, Braveheart

9. <https://www.acas.org.uk/supporting-mental-health-workplace/creating-a-supportive-environment>