THE KEIL CENTRE
CHARTERED PSYCHOLOGISTS

BP Position Paper[1]

Psychological Health in Business Context

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1. What is psychological health?

Psychological health is an inner state that involves a sense of optimism, calm and well-being, and feeling in control. Whilst people may have significant personal or work challenges, they feel well motivated, equipped and confident to deal productively with the demands they face[1].

Psychological ill-health is not a discrete category, but is best described as a continuum spanning health; mild, moderate or severe stress; which may result in a more serious medical condition e.g. anxiety, depression or other psychological disorder.

Most people have experienced mild to moderate stress at some time in their life, which usually resolves itself without the need for professional help.

2. Why is psychological health important for business performance?
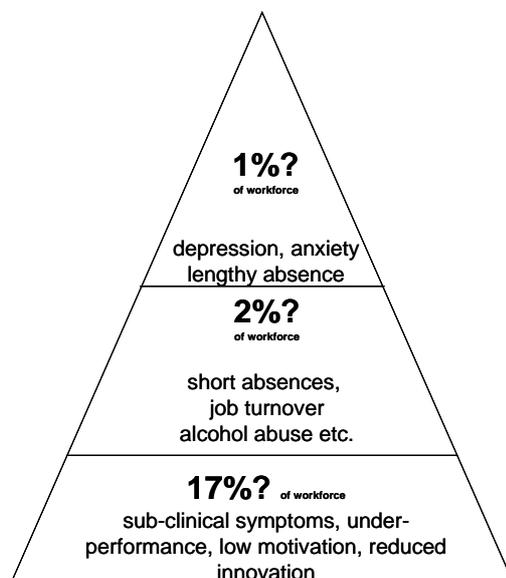
2.1.   Promoting the positive

Maximizing psychological health, and minimising psychological ill-health, are clearly important for business performance. As physical hazards to health at work are systematically tackled, and the nature of work changes to become more intellectually and socially demanding, managing "psychosocial" hazards at work and maximizing psychological health grows in importance. Managing psychological health at work is not only a medical or psychological matter – it involves the application of sound business management practices. For example, those organizations with good supervisory support, a strong concern for employee welfare, high-quality skill development, excellent performance feedback etc. experienced beneficial effects on employee well-being, and the same factors predicted business productivity over the next year[2].

2.2.   Removing the negative

Stress-related illness is one of the most important reasons for sickness absence from work in the UK[3]. UK epidemiological data indicates that, at any point in time, 600,000 people are suffering serious illness due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety, with 10 times this figure (approx 20% of the UK workforce) reporting that their work is very or extremely stressful[4]. Like the accident triangle familiar to safety professionals, a psychological health triangle exists, similar to the figure overleaf[1]. Reducing the percentages shown will have a significant impact on business performance.

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[1] This figure is compiled from UK data, and is an approximation provided for illustrative purposes only. It is known that the percentages shown vary significantly between organizations and types of job.

1%?
of workforce

depression, anxiety
lengthy absence

2%?
of workforce

short absences,
job turnover
alcohol abuse etc.

17%? of workforce
sub-clinical symptoms, under-
performance, low motivation, reduced
innovation

Tackling the work-related causes of psychological ill-health is therefore important, and this aspect of health and safety management is receiving increasing regulatory focus.

3. What influences psychological health at work?

There are three main influences on psychological health at work:

- **Work-related factors**– there are many recognised work-related stressors, which cause psychological harm e.g. lack of training, excessive workload, job insecurity, bullying. Conversely employee competence, do-able jobs, secure employment and fair and equitable treatment promote psychological health.

- **Individual differences** – people differ in their typical ways of thinking, behaving and reacting to situations and events. This can help or hinder their ability remain psychologically healthy, and cope with stressful situations

- **Non-work factors** - e.g. family & relationship difficulties, financial worries, health problems, bereavement, and the positive influence of life events and experiences

Organisations have considerable control over work-related stressors, and can exert some influence over individual differences by selection, training and competence development. For non-work stressors, organizational influence is limited to promoting a healthy lifestyle, and providing coping skills and support.

The current research evidence, regulatory approach[1] and emerging best practice agree on the wisdom of managing psychosocial stressors at work in the same fashion as physical hazards – via a risk assessment approach[5,6,7]. Much of the current debate has focused on the benefits of such an approach for individual psychological health.

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[1] For example Europe, USA and Australia

However many work-related stressors involve issues that an organization would want to manage well for other reasons[8,9], as the example in the table below indicates.

	Work-related stressor: Inadequate provision of training		
	Potential effect on psychological well-being	Potential effect on safety	Potential effect on business performance
Effect if **poorly** managed	• Ill-health • Absence • Turnover	• Mistakes • Accidents	• Poor quality work • Re-work
Effect if **well-**managed	• Confidence • Competence	• Improved human reliability	• Excellent performance • Desired results

So, managing psychological health at work is not only about minimizing illness, it is complementary to and supports safe and reliable commercial operations. Indeed, many managers do not appreciate that they may already be taking positive steps to manage psychological well-being at work by providing management support, resources, training, adequate tools and equipment, and fostering teamwork and employee involvement[10].

4. How should an organization manage psychological health at work?

A comprehensive framework for managing psychological health at work must recognize the varying degrees of control an employer has over the key influences on psychological health at work. A four-pronged approach is recommended:-

4.1. Promotion

This involves promoting, at an organizational and individual level, approaches which enhance both psychological well-being and organizational performance. This includes:-

- Building into management standards and practice the synergies which exist between developing individual psychological well-being & resilience, and organisational excellence & strength
- Ensuring a good fit between the demands of jobs, and the competence of job-holders
- Promoting the benefits of a healthy lifestyle (e.g. diet, exercise, work-life balance, social support), which supports psychological well-being

4.2. Prevention

This involves proactive measures to prevent or mitigate those work-related stressors causing ill-health or under-performance. It includes:-

- Monitoring a range of organizational indicators[11] which can provide an early warning of problems
- Involving employees at a local level in anticipating, identifying and tackling work-related stressors at source, using a risk assessment approach
- Using standards of good management practice to address any gaps revealed via risk assessment[8,9]

4.3. Management

Even in the best-managed organisation, some people will experience psychological difficulties, for example due to non-work factors. It is desirable to educate people how to spot common signs and symptoms of psychological distress in themselves and others, provide practical coping skills, and signpost where help can be accessed. Line managers have a key role in protecting the psychological well-being of their people[12], and need to be educated in what this involves. Management of psychological health includes:-

- For all employees, education & training in skills to recognize signs, symptoms, work and non-work stressors, and to develop practical coping skills, tips and techniques to boost personal resilience
- For managers, supervisors, and HSE / HR professionals, training about their important role in identifying and tackling signs, symptoms and causes of stress

4.4. Treatment & rehabilitation

It is inevitable that some employees will develop serious psychological illnesses, which require professional help. Many progressive employers accept it is part of their role to provide occupational health support in such cases, regardless of the causes. This involves:-

- For those requiring 1:1 help, providing access to professional, evidence-based treatment[13] and psychological support, and encouraging the uptake of such services
- Managing sickness-absence, and helping those with psychological difficulties to retain their job, and manage their efficient return to work and rehabilitation after absence[14]
- Providing psychological support, monitoring and treatment following traumatic incidents

5. It's a journey

The emerging research evidence, best practice and regulatory approach supports the 4-pronged promotion, prevention, management and treatment framework as a pragmatic approach to managing psychological health at work. However, very few organizations can currently claim to have achieved this state of perfection. The table overleaf describes the typical progression of organizational capability in managing psychological health, and the ideal which can be aspired to.

How would you describe your organisations' current approach to dealing with stress?

Stage	Description
1. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen	Most staff and managers believe that absence due to psychological ill-health (eg stress) is caused by weak individuals not being able to cope. There is a lot of stigma associated with psychological ill-health problems. Managers are unclear about their role in managing employees' psychological well-being, and try not to get involved.
2. Go talk to the medic	Employee psychological health is seen as an HR/ Occupational Health responsibility. Managers only focus on sickness absence rates. Access to a counselling service has been set up for individuals who are suffering from stress.
3. Let's make you more resilient	Managers have shown some commitment to promoting psychological health and dealing with work-related stress by introducing stress management techniques: for example: workshops, information resources and relaxation. The emphasis is on changing the person, not the work situation.
4. Let's tackle this together	Managers recognise that the causes of work-related stress need to be tackled, but have not done anything procative yet. They support their staff in resolving any stress-related concerns that are raised. Most people feel comfortable talking about psychological health and work-related stress.
5. A truly comprehensive approach	All managers truly believe that promoting psychological health, and tackling work-related stress comprehensively, via prevention, management and treatment, is one of their key responsibilities, and links to business performance. Risk assessments for stress are undertaken as part of the routine running of the business and effective actions are taken as a result.

6. Conclusions

Managing the psychological well-being of people at work is a major management challenge, and not an issue solely for occupational health professionals. Failing to address this challenge will result in psychological harm to people, and organizational underperformance. A comprehensive approach embracing promotion, prevention, management and treatment offers the best way forward.

7. Key references

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[10] Health Education Board for Scotland (2002) Mental well-being in the workplace: a Scottish perspective

[11] CIPD (2002) Managing organizational stress: a guide – see pages 10 and 11

[12] HSE (2000) Work-related factors and ill health:The Whitehall II Study CRR 266/2000

[13] See, for example Depression at
http://www.besttreatments.co.uk/btuk/conditions/5849.html

[14] The Mental Health Foundation (undated) Line Manager's Resource: a practical guide to managing and supporting mental health in the workplace