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Reasonable Adjustments for Mental Health in the Workplace

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Introduction

Reasonable Adjustments can be a vital part of ensuring that people who are struggling with their mental health feel supported in their workplace and allow them to manage and treat their illness successfully.

If they are used consistently and fairly, they can allow a colleague to feel in control during a time when their illness may make them believe otherwise.

In this guide, Amy Sayer will explain the context behind reasonable adjustments and give practical examples of how they can be used successfully within a workplace.

Good Luck!

Pooky

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When to have a conversation about mental health in the workplace

The signs and symptoms of a colleague who is struggling with their mental health can be so different for each individual. Taking the time to know your staff and care about their general wellbeing will allow you to recognise the physical or behavioural symptoms of a colleague who may be struggling. It might be that they have been having periods of unexplained and sporadic absence, or that their performance in the workplace is less than their usual standard. It could be that they are appearing to be tired, tearful or have been aggressive or confrontational with colleagues. Delaying the conversation further can lead to potentially more distress and shame for the colleague involved and it is the duty of a workplace to offer meaningful and timely support when needed.

It would be a good idea to ask if the colleague wants someone else with them - a trusted colleague or union representative could help them to feel supported and allow them to feel more assertive about their needs.

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How to have Conversations about Mental Health in the workplace

Before explaining what reasonable adjustments are and how they can be used in the workplace, there needs to be a clear framework about how discussions surrounding mental health are carried out. There would be little point trying to apply reasonable adjustments in a workplace which has stigma and awkwardness about discussions surrounding mental health.

The four vital aspects of an authentic conversation about mental health in the workplace are:

- Time
- Location
- Be present
- Use empathy



How to have Conversations about Mental Health in the workplace

- **Time**- Both the quantity of time and the timing during the day you are planning to talk about the mental health of a colleague is important. There must be an extended amount of time available for this type of conversation to allow the colleague to have enough time to think about what they want to tell you, and not feel rushed or embarrassed if they need this time, or possibly an additional meeting at a later date. These conversations can be hard and potentially upsetting so they need to be held at a time which works to support and allow recovery time afterwards.

- **Location**- There must be somewhere in your workplace which has the privacy that a conversation about mental health deserves. This could be an office which is in a quiet location away from interruptions. The location options could ideally be discussed in advance to reduce anxiety.



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How to have Conversations about Mental Health in the workplace

- **Be present**- Make sure to take the office phone off the hook put mobile phones out of sight and reach, and ensure this conversation is given the focus it needs so that the person feels able to be listened to and reassured if necessary.

- **Use empathy**- People who are struggling with their mental health do not need quick-fix sympathetic comments, but need the time and space to feel like the person listening to them is trying to understand how it feels to experience mental ill health. This allows them to offer reassurance and ideas for reasonable adjustments which feel comfortable and specific enough to their individual experience.



What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments are part of the Equality Act 2010 which states that staff suffering from mental ill health should not be disadvantaged within the workplace due to their condition. This is applicable if their mental health is a long-term condition and had been diagnosed by a professional (either a GP or psychiatrist). These should be as accessible and well-known as any adjustments you would make for a physical disability. In order for these to be applied consistently and fairly, all employees will need to receive training on how they can be used if they are struggling with their mental health.

Employees and their managers will need to be confident talking about these and applying them when necessary and the only way for this to happen is if there is a mental health policy which is well-known to staff from the moment of their employment.

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What are reasonable adjustments?

If a colleague is needing to visit the GP for appointments regarding their mental health during work hours, this would be a reasonable adjustment. Being able to have an appointment with their regular doctor will allow them to feel more comfortable talking about their symptoms and getting the best support possible. If they are prescribed medication to help their mental health condition, there could be side effects for the first couple of weeks as their body adapts to it. Flexible working may be needed during this time to allow them to come into work later or leave earlier if their side effects are affecting their ability to work full-time.



What are reasonable adjustments?

Similarly, if a colleague is offered counselling sessions by their GP, or has them privately, they should be allowed the time to attend these appointments. There needs to be some consideration of the fact that they could be distressing and it may not be an option for the colleague to return to the workplace immediately afterwards.

Reasonable adjustments must be manageable and financially viable. For example, a full-time paid member of staff could not have reduced hours for a whole year. They could have it for a limited period of time and if their mental health is not improving, then a reduction of hours may be suggested to redistribute duties elsewhere in the workplace and potentially increase the contract of another part-time colleague.



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What are reasonable adjustments?

It might be that the colleague has additional responsibilities which are causing mental ill health, so it might be appropriate to have these reduced for a short period of time whilst recovery is taking place. It should be made clear this is supportive and they can take on the responsibilities in the future.

It might be that the physical conditions of the workplace will need adapting to help a colleague who is struggling with hypervigilance from their anxiety. This could mean providing blinds, different lighting, or moving to a quieter working area. This could enable them to feel supported and could mean that coming into work feels easier on their senses.



What are reasonable adjustments?

They might need to work from home for part of their weekly hours so that they can focus in a quiet environment and have the time to recover from the busy work environment. The key part of supporting a colleague by giving ‘reasonable adjustments’ is that they feel in control of any changes and have time to discuss them face-to-face so that they can ask any questions and plan things with their boss. They can be very badly handled if via email to take things away from colleagues in a semi-threatening and undermining way. Being made to feel inadequate and powerless at a time when their mental health issues are making them feel like that already will not have a good outcome.



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What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments have the potential to allow a colleague to stay in employment and receive the best treatment and care possible for their illness. Within the workplace, if they are part of a wider culture of acceptance to discuss and engage in supportive discussions about mental health, they will reduce the shame and stigma which can prevent the right treatments being accessed.





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