

HSE Chair Sarah Newton on mental health and the Working Minds campaign



HSE Chair, Sarah Newton

I remember vividly the day that the MP Charles Walker stood up in the House of Commons and declared himself proud to be a 'practising fruitcake' during a parliamentary debate. That poor mental health was a subject for discussion in the House seemed to be a watershed moment in itself, but what struck me most about my colleagues who shared their experience of anxiety, depression and, in Charles's case, OCD, was that in many cases this wasn't just an act of speaking out; this was the first time they had spoken to anybody about it.

It seems unconscionable now that less than a decade ago, the stigma and isolation that can be associated with mental health issues persisted to the extent that people would hide their distress from their employers, colleagues, friends and even members of their family.

By speaking openly about their own struggles with stress and anxiety, high-profile figures from Stephen Fry to Jesse Nelson have helped to generate a public conversation which has thankfully created a shift in attitude and neutralised that perceived shame. There is far greater recognition that taking care of our mental wellbeing is as important as maintaining our physical health.

Perhaps one of the most salient lessons we can take from the pandemic is that no matter where we work or what we do, all of us can feel mentally, emotionally and psychologically vulnerable at times. For employees in work which is insecure, low-paid or carries inherent risk, that vulnerability is often amplified. A recent survey of 40,000 workers by the charity Mind suggests that two in five employees' mental health worsened during the pandemic. Over 17 million working days were lost last year as a result of stress, anxiety or depression. Two weeks ago the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) chief executive and I signalled this as a potential health

and safety crisis which aside from the personal cost to workers, could potentially negatively impact on productivity and the wider economy.

For almost half a century, the HSE has worked with businesses across a range of sectors and industries to ensure all of us can go home safe and well at the end of the working day. Our Working Minds campaign is a reminder to employers that their responsibility to safeguard the health and safety of their workforce extends to psychological risks as well as physical ones – especially if they work from home. We know that small and medium-sized businesses often don't have the resources of large corporates, so HSE has created a suite of materials including the five R's (Reach out, Recognise, Respond, Reflect, and make it Routine), Stress Indicator tool and Talking Toolkit, which employers can use to proactively ensure the wellbeing of their workforce.

Part of this is creating a culture where workers can feel as comfortable raising issues of stress as reporting that they have gone down with flu. With our campaign partner Mind, we are encouraging people to join our network of Working Mind champions to ensure nobody needs to struggle alone and in silence. At HSE we are working hard to support our staff through the challenges many of us have faced over the past 18 months, for example by embracing flexible work patterns or giving additional support to those whose roles have become increasingly demanding through the pandemic, but we are all on this journey together and it's important that we all share what we learn as we move forward.

Organisations of all sizes can adopt the Five Rs, which I would suggest results in another 'R' – resilience. Investment in the emotional and psychological resilience of any organisation's greatest asset, its workforce, is an investment in your organisation's success.

Through my work with my local NHS Trust, I have met many people who have experienced profound mental distress who have been supported back into work after an absence. Many have said being back in employment has given them a sense of purpose and literally been a 'life-saver'. The old HSE adage that "good health and safety is good for business" is as relevant today as ever; an open, supportive work environment which safeguards the mental health of its workforce can enable organisations and their employees to thrive.

Read more about the Working Minds campaign [Working Minds – Work Right to keep Britain safe \(campaign.gov.uk\)](https://www.campaign.gov.uk/working-minds)