

Communicating with people who are absent with a stress-related illness

Stress-related absence can appear to be a difficult issue for managers to deal with. There is still a stigma associated with mental health problems. Managers are often reluctant to communicate with absent employees because they fear they will be accused of bullying and harassment.

The following is common-sense advice and best practice in managing such situations. Nothing will work perfectly all the time, but if you do the right things, consistently, then you are less likely to have problems. If you do encounter problems, get support from appropriate sources. The worst thing you could do is to use avoidance as a coping strategy when managing stress-related absence.

Good practice includes the following:

- **Discuss the management of stress-related absence with your team while everyone is at work.** A very wise manager once said the best thing for a manager to be is 'predictable'. You will have far fewer problems with communication during absence if your team members know what to expect. In fact, if they have been involved in, and contributed to the discussion during team meetings, all the better. Then if/when you phone up your team member the first time it will be seen as normal and expected.
- **If your organization has a policy, follow it.** Make sure you know what the policy is on sickness absence, and that your team members know this as well. If there is training available, make sure everyone attends who needs to, you included. It is also advisable to check relevant policies to see if stress-related absence should be treated differently. For example, you may need to make an earlier referral to Occupational Health.
- **If a team member phones in sick, try if at all possible to take the call personally.** It is good if you can agree during this first call how communication will continue, e.g. that the employee will make a follow-up call. If they don't make the follow-up call, you should contact them.
- **Maintain regular contact.** It is not harassment to maintain contact. Indeed, if communication breaks down, or contact ceases for a number of weeks or months, this can be seen very negatively by employees, that they are not missed or valued.
- **Provide reassurance, particularly about practical issues** e.g. their job is not in jeopardy, money worries.

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- **Be a good listener.** Ask open questions; ask ‘what can I do to help?’; give the employee the opportunity to explain the problem, and ask about needs/wants and what support they require. Listen to what they say.
- **Explore options when appropriate.** If the illness is severe and long-lasting, it may be helpful to start to explore some options, e.g. some home working for a couple of days a week, phased return, other adjustments that will make the return to work easier and rehabilitation more successful. When dealing with long-term stress-related absence, getting options/adjustments right could make the difference between successful rehabilitation and loss of the employee.
- **Respect medical and personal boundaries.** Don't put pressure on the employee to divulge personal or medical information – it is their choice to reveal this information or not and within their rights to withhold it if they so choose.
- **Avoid excessive pressure to name a return date.** Pressure of this kind while someone is in crisis will probably make this situation worse. Stress is a reaction to excessive pressure or demands, so adding to the pressure at this stage may increase the stress and prolong the illness/absence.

If you would like more information on dealing with mental health issues at work, an excellent resource is called: “Mind OUT for mental health.” It has been produced by the Mental Health Foundation. Copies of their booklet for managers can be ordered by phone 0870 443 0930. Their website is www.mindout.net

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