

# Health and Wellbeing at work



As we head into the winter, the expectation is that we will see an acceleration of 'hybrid' working practices. For many it may also be the time they return to work for the first time following furlough. This may leave some feeling anxious about the practicalities of returning to potentially crowded spaces and transport systems as well as how best to balance the priorities and pressures of this 'new normal'. Having access to health and wellbeing support such as an Health & Wellbeing helpline (Employee Assistance Programmes) can help, though users may need help understanding how to access, and fully benefit from what's available.

## Why health and wellbeing support is going to matter even more in our 'hybrid' working world, and how to get the most from them

'Hybrid working', or where workers are juggling being back at work for some days a week while still working at home for others, is likely to be the reality for many employees over the coming months.

[A recent survey](#) by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) highlighted that this gradual return to working is likely to have an impact on employee wellbeing, especially in terms of potential anxiety around being back in the workplace, on public transport and among crowds.

Other concerns, [as a survey by the recruitment website CV-Library has also shown](#), include worries around what these new forms of working will mean for flexibility and work-life balance, workplace productivity (especially if workers are chopping and changing how and where they work) and even having to deal with 'workplace politics' again.

## Access health & wellbeing hesitancy

Yet the other side of this coin is there can often be hesitancy or apprehension about using these services - how it works or how to access it, even if it is something fully available to them through their company's health insurance package. They may assume their anxiety or mental ill health is not 'serious' enough to warrant seeking help or worry about whether employer-funded services are genuinely confidential - as an aside, they are and will be covered later.

A key focus of wellbeing strategies over the coming weeks and months may therefore need to be around communicating the value of using a health and wellbeing service and, crucially, helping everyone understand what to expect when they contact their provider.

## Making the case for good mental health

Taking communicating 'value' first, it is nowadays well recognised that when we have good physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, we are generally more resilient and feel better able to cope with the pressures of day-to-day life.

When we have a concern about our physical wellbeing - a bad back or a musculoskeletal injury, for example - we don't think twice about booking an appointment with a medical professional to discuss our concerns and seek advice on appropriate treatment.

Why, then, should it be any different with every day worries be they medical, mental, legal or financial to name a few of the many things covered by this service? Yet, too often, it is. People wait until they are really struggling before considering the options available for help, even sometimes only asking for help when they are spiralling into a crisis.

What's more, many of these concerns be they physical or mental can be interlinked. If we're in pain or worried about something, especially if we're sitting around waiting to be seen by a GP or specialist, that can feed through into anxiety, stress, sleeplessness or depression, all of which can affect both our personal and professional lives.

## Impact of the pandemic on NHS waiting times

On the issue of 'sitting around waiting', the Covid-19 pandemic has invariably made life more difficult in this context, with NHS services seriously stretched with significant waiting times, especially for referrals to counselling.

Indeed, [according to a survey by remote GP service HealthHero](#), more than 50% of those who have avoided making GP appointments reported worsening mental health problems.

This is where employer-funded, insurance-based alternatives that offer speed and ease of access to high-quality support can make a real difference.

For instance: One of the great values of a helpline is that, rather than having to rely on (and feeling guilty about approaching) the hard-pressed NHS, the helpline is a mental health resource that you can use for as little or as much support as you need, as and when you need it.

What's more, it's not just something that the insured can benefit from. Access to the Health and Wellbeing Helplines are also available to family members aged over 16, who live with the insured.

Which brings us to our second question: what should you expect when you do first make contact with the Health & Wellbeing provider? Let's answer this by answering the five most common questions that tend to be asked about the WPA Health and Wellbeing Helpline.

## 1 How do I use the WPA Health and Wellbeing Helpline?

Contacting the helpline could not be easier. You just call the freephone number provided within your product documentation.

Use of the service is confidential (and we'll come back to this) but it is not anonymous. The helpline team will need to record personal details from you so that they can confirm the level of support you have via your WPA cover.

If your call relates to mental health concerns, you may be asked some standard risk questions for your own safety.

## 2 OK, so what can I ring up about?

The WPA Health and Wellbeing Helpline Support Line is available 24/7 and provides support in four key areas:

- **Mental/emotional health and counselling.** Our helpline counsellors can help you to cope with stresses/pressures from any aspect of your work or personal life.
- **Legal matters.** This includes advice and guidance on consumer rights, property, landlord/tenant, family and motoring law, for example.
- **Money matters.** Financial wellbeing is an increasingly important part of the EAP offer, and in the case of the Health and Wellbeing Helpline includes advice and support on things such as managing creditors, budgeting and debt management plans.
- **Health and wellbeing information.** This can include advice, support and guidance on lifestyle issues such as diet, exercise and sleep.

As well as support and advice in all these areas, it provides the following more-specific support:

- **Telephone counselling.** This will normally comprise confidential, single-session telephone counselling sessions not exceeding 60 minutes. It may include signposting to relevant onward referral resources for continued support and will be provided by a team of confidential counsellors.
- **Online computerised cognitive behaviour therapy (cCBT) life skills course.** Called 'Living Life to the Full', this is an online cCBT life skills course aimed at people who would like to develop their skills in coping with anxiety and depression, as well as people suffering from anxiety or depression.

## 3 Who will I speak to when I do ring up?

All aspects of the WPA service are provided by people who are both qualified and highly experienced in their professional field. This can include, for example:

- Counsellors who have completed BACP-accredited (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) training to a minimum of diploma level and have several years of experience working as a counsellor prior to joining the 24/7 support line team.
- Legal advisors who have a law degree and have completed a LPC (Legal Practice Course).
- Money/debt support, which is provided by a specialist debt management team at Payplan.

## 4 Is it really confidential?

Absolutely, yes. If you access this service through your organisation's EAP, it is not going to get back to the HR department or your boss unless you explicitly consent to them becoming involved as part of any ongoing help or assistance programme being put in place.

No information about you or the issues presented by individuals are shared with anyone outside of the 24/7 support line teams.

The only limit to this is that the team will intervene and, if necessary, break confidentiality if you or someone else is in danger of being harmed by your or someone else's actions. If you have any concerns about this, you can of course talk to the advisor so they can reassure you accordingly.

Another question often asked in this context is: "how confidential is it when it comes to work-related issues?"

You can also rest assured here. Work-related problems are treated just as confidentially as all other issues. The helpline team will not discuss issues you have presented with anyone at all.

If you are struggling with a work-related concern, we can usually help you think about how best to address the situation or help you think about who, within your own workplace, you feel safe talking to about a difficult situation.

## 5 What happens next, especially if I need more support?

Your WPA insurance may include additional support that you can access privately and then claim back via your cover.

If you are unsure, just call the WPA team to discuss. You will be signposted to additional resources that are likely to be of further assistance.

## Why health and wellbeing support can make all the difference

To conclude, health and wellbeing support is an often underutilised benefit yet provides an invaluable, sometimes life-changing, service to those who use it. If you do nothing else, put the number in your contacts and tell your family about it.

### About the authors

Nic Paton is editor of Occupational Health & Wellbeing magazine. Debbie Cullen is a Mental Health/EAP and Wellbeing Specialist at Validium.

### About WPA

WPA is a specialist not-for-profit health insurer. With a history dating back to 1901 they look after private individuals, families and all businesses from micro enterprises through to blue chip global brands.