



BRIEFING SHEET

Working with learners who have mental health difficulties

Introduction

This briefing sheet is one of a series that were developed by NIACE on behalf of the DIUS to support work-based learning practitioners when they are working with learners who have a learning difficulty or disability. The other briefing sheets may be found at:

www.niace.org.uk/research/workplacelearning/Publications.htm

Each briefing sheet is designed to offer a brief explanation of a learning difficulty or disability, indicate how it may affect learning in the workplace, and offer some practical suggestions for practitioners about how they may support learners alongside a case study.

In every instance we advocate using a person-centred approach, where the learner and their particular strengths and interests are placed at the centre of the learning and assessment process. More information about using a person-centred approach may be downloaded at:

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/pdf/Person-centred%20approaches%20and%20adults%20with%20learning%20%20%20%20%20%20%20difficulties.pdf>

What is Mental Health?

“Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

World Health Organisation(2007)

Research suggests that one in four people will experience mental health difficulties at any one time and will receive support from their GP, through counselling or therapy. Forty percent of people experiencing mental health difficulties do not receive any support and they may continue to live their everyday lives but they may find that these difficulties will impact on all or some aspects of their daily experiences.

“Every organisation in Britain is affected by mental distress and ill health in the workforce. At one time one worker in six will be experiencing depression, anxiety or problems relating to stress. Mental ill health is normal in every workplace in the land.”

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2007)

There is no one cause of mental health difficulties and the affect they have on the individual will vary considerably. There are many factors that can impact on an individual's mental well-being: family history; childhood experiences; loss; separation or socio-economic influences, housing, education, poverty, poor general health and employment.

It is important to remember that most people recover from mental health difficulties and being involved in learning and working has proven beneficial in that recovery process and in maintaining positive mental health.

How does Mental Health affect work-based learning?

‘Just as there is no such person as a typical learner, neither is there any such person as a typical learner with mental health problems.’ Mather and Atkinson (2003)

It is very important to recognise that mental health affects every individual differently. It is crucial to understand a person's needs, by talking with them to find out what works best for them. However, research over time has highlighted key areas that can impact on learning for people with mental health difficulties. The following list identifies some of these key areas:

- Anxiety about failing – will the training be too hard?
- Anxiety about disclosing to fellow workers their concerns or that they experience mental health difficulties.
- Poor concentration – this could be due to their anxiety about returning to learning but could be a side effect of medication.

- Short term memory difficulties – again linked to anxiety or medication.
- Attendance may be erratic due to the sometimes fluctuating nature of mental health difficulties.
- Timing of training – again linked to medication. Some people will find it difficult to 'get going' early in the day, or may become very tired in the afternoons.
- Low self-expectation – external reinforcement that it will be too difficult and too hard could come from family, friends or healthcare professionals.

The attitude and ethos of the workplace can have a major impact and this can affect mental well-being. 'Workplace attitudes indicate widespread discrimination towards people experiencing mental ill-health, although this may not be conscious or intentional.' Shaw Trust (2006)

What can I do to help?

It is essential to build up a good relationship with the learner and to remember that they are the expert on their own mental health. They may have developed strategies to address some of the areas identified and wherever possible these should be incorporated into your support in the workplace.

- Offer flexible timings for the training – be prepared to extend deadline.
- Use small group or one to one training – with a space available if the learner is feeling too anxious (such as a chill out room or time to get a coffee or cigarette).
- Provide a quiet space for assessment.
- Use variable approaches to meet the needs of the individual e.g. practical observation with verbal questioning rather than lots of written assessment papers.
- Record assessments or use photographic evidence of achievement.
- Use emailing or texting – if a learner does not want to talk.
- Be relaxed – if you are anxious and worried this will reflect back to the learner.
- Consider staff training across the workplace to raise awareness of mental health and to develop a healthy work environment for all staff. This also ensures that there is a consistent approach to meeting the needs of learners effectively.
- Liaise with awarding bodies to ensure additional time, frequent breaks, extended deadlines, etc. are available for the learner.
- Develop a 'buddy' system or mentoring to ensure the learner has support when you are not available.
- Ensure you have support – looking after your own mental well-being is very important.

Case Study

Background: Sam has had depression and was in hospital as a result of a nervous breakdown. He is in recovery but still taking medication which has enabled him to return to work in a local nursery. A side effect of the medication is that he finds it difficult to get up in the mornings and cannot concentrate for long periods of time. Sam loves being outside with the plants and spends much of his time working alone in the large greenhouses.

Sam's Concerns: The company are keen for all employees to develop their skills and gain recognised qualifications. Sam enjoys the practical aspects of the training but is concerned about the written work and having to be inside with work colleagues in a classroom setting. He is getting worried about the amount of written work he will have to do and deadlines for work. The thought of exams is a major worry and he is beginning to lose sleep over this and is sure his work will suffer.

Working with an Assessor: His assessor has been informed, with Sam's permission, about his mental health difficulties and arranges to meet with him in a small, private office on site. The assessor asks Sam to go through his concerns and responds to them individually. The assessor talks through the training programme and reassures Sam that it is very different from school exams and explains the range of assessment methods that can be used including practical observations and questioning – just Sam and the assessor not the whole group. There will be times when Sam will be training with a number of colleagues and they agree that Sam will sit nearest the door and if he is feeling anxious he will quietly leave the room and takes some time, returning when he is ready to continue. If he is unable to return the assessor will agree a time to support him to ensure he does not miss any of the work. This support could be by telephone, email or face to face. Sam and the assessor negotiate the delivery.

Sam is finding the training very interesting and enjoyable. He is managing the deadlines and by attending afternoon training workshops he is able to fully participate. By keeping Sam informed prior to the training starting, ensuring he had key people he could contact and by addressing his concerns the assessor enabled Sam to relax more and demonstrate what he could do rather than focusing on what he thought he could not do. Communication and trust are key.

Assistive Technology

There is very little specific assistive technology to support people with mental health difficulties. Small handheld records can be useful if note taking in a group is difficult and the use of emails or texting can aid communication when a learner may not wish to talk with anyone.

DDA

Many learners who have a learning difficulty or disability are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and subsequent legislation. They may be protected as both employees and as learners. In every case, a learner's disability or learning difficulty must meet the criteria described in the Act:

“Subject to the provisions of Schedule 1, a person has a disability for the purposes of this Act if he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

(DDA, 1995)

Further information about disability legislation and its application in the workplace or in learning may be found at: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx>

Sources of further information and support

Mather, Joy and Atkinson, Sue (2003): '*Learning journeys: A handbook for tutors and managers in adult education working with people with mental health issues*' NIACE

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2007): '*Mental Health at Work: Developing the business case*' Policy Paper 8 The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health

Shaw Trust (2006): '*Mental Health: The Last Workplace Taboo*' Shaw Trust

World Health Organisation (2007): Fact sheet: '*Mental health: strengthening mental health promotion*' WHO

www.niace.org.uk/mentalhealth - network and information downloads

www.mind.org.uk – leading mental health charity

www.rethink.org – leading mental health charity

www.mentalhealth.org.uk – mental health foundation

www.csip.org.uk – Care Services Improvement Partnership

www.scmh.org.uk – Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health

www.shaw-trust.org.uk/mentalhealth - leading charity

www.shift.org.uk – Department of Health's programme site to reduce stigma and discrimination