

A photograph of two men in a workshop setting. The man on the left is wearing a maroon shirt and is looking down at a project on a workbench. The man on the right is wearing a dark polo shirt and is also looking down at the project. They appear to be collaborating on a task. The background shows a workshop with various tools and equipment.

Skills
Development
Scotland

Looking after mental health at work

WELCOME

These resources have been written to help you talk about mental health at work and show you some tips on looking after your mental wellbeing. If you are experiencing significant and/or prolonged difficulties with your mental health, please speak to your GP or a mental health support organisation.

Work can contribute positively to mental wellbeing by providing things such as friendships, meaningful activity and learning opportunities. However, sometimes work brings pressures which can either create or add to problems with mental health. If you are experiencing difficulties with your mental health, work can sometimes feel like an additional pressure even if there are no direct issues at work. When working towards an apprenticeship, the challenges of combining studying for a qualification alongside work may at times add to those pressures. The advice below is about talking to your employer about your work, but remember that you can also speak to your learning provider about support for the qualification part of your apprenticeship too.

Looking after our mental wellbeing by adopting some of the strategies in section one will help to minimise the risk of work stresses adding to any difficulties with mental wellbeing.

It is known that there are some key things in the workplace which can make it more likely that mental wellbeing may be affected such as:

- inadequate health and safety policies
- poor communication and management practices
- limited participation in decision-making or low control over your area of work
- low levels of support for employees
- inflexible working hours; and
- unclear tasks or organisational objectives.

Many of these will be the responsibility of your employer to have in place. But there are key things which you can do to help work to be a positive experience and not one that creates or adds to mental health difficulties.

- Ask for clarity about what is expected of you.
- Your employer should support you to understand clearly what is needed from you at work and what they expect of you. Sometimes though this is not always as clear as it should be.
- You can ask for clarity with questions such as:
 - What are my priorities this week/month/next three months?
 - How will I know that I am doing a good job?
 - How will I know that you are happy with my work?
 - I'm feeling a bit stressed, what are the most important things for me to focus on right now?

- Be clear about the support you need. If there are areas of the job where you feel you need support, make sure you ask clearly and explain why you need that support. It can be helpful to break down how you ask for support in to three key areas – **Feelings, Needs and Requests.**

Feelings

- Describe the emotions that are coming up for you. For example:
 - I'm feeling really overwhelmed, I don't know where to start with my work and studying.
 - I've got really difficult things going on at home and it's making me feel really low and I'm finding it hard to get motivated.
 - I'm not sleeping well because I'm worried about things and it's making me really anxious and unfocused at work.

Needs

- Describe what your needs are at this time. For example:
 - I need to try and find a way to get on top of things.
 - I need to try and stop worrying that what's going on at home is affecting my job.

Requests

- Clearly make a request that would help to meet your needs. For example:
 - Can you help me to be really clear about what I need to achieve over the next month please? Can you tell me what is less important?
 - Can I have a chat once a week so I can tell you how I'm feeling and what is going on at home?
 - Would it be possible to come in a bit later some days and work later if I haven't slept well?

We will talk more below about having conversations with your employer or learning provider about mental health. Thinking about these three areas in advance can be really helpful to get clear about what support you need.

Talking about mental health with employers

Many people find it hard to talk about their mental health and it can feel even harder to talk to your employer. This can be for several reasons such as finding it hard to put feelings into words, especially if you are not feeling ok. Some people may also worry that the person they talk to may react in an unhelpful or unfair way.

Being able to talk openly about what is going on for you is almost always the best way to get support and start moving past the current challenges. Employers can be a good source of support and knowing what is going on for you can allow them to see what more they can do at work to help.

It is not compulsory to disclose a mental health difficulty to your employer but it is especially important if:

- It is starting to cause any difficulties at work, for example due to being off sick or because work is falling behind.
- You work in area where a mental health difficulty could affect your own or others safety – for example if you drive a lot for work and you are not sleeping well or you are taking medications that affect your concentration.

Even if the above don't apply, it will usually be more helpful to be open about any mental health difficulties with employers.

Being able to tell your employer will help them to understand what is going on and provide any support they can to help you get back on track. There are undoubtedly still a small minority of employers who do not take mental wellbeing as seriously as they should. However, awareness of mental health and the need to support staff is now widely recognised as essential for employers, and most will have a very sympathetic and supportive approach to staff who are experiencing difficulties. Employers also have legal responsibilities to act fairly and reasonably which we will go into a bit later. Some top things to consider if you are finding things difficult and want to talk to your employer are:

- Identify someone to talk to who you feel comfortable with. Hopefully this will be your manager but if not, see if there is someone else who you would feel able to approach.
- Check to see if your company has organisational policies about mental health and wellbeing. Many will have supportive policies which make explicit how the organisation should support people experiencing difficulties with their mental health.
- If your company has a Human Resources department, it may be helpful to ask for a confidential discussion with them to get advice about how you can best be supported. This may be especially helpful if you do not feel able to discuss things with a manager at first.
- Many companies offer support to staff through an Employee Assistance Programme which can include things like counselling, advice around finances and other issues. These can be a great source of support which will generally be free and completely confidential. The HR department in your company should be able to give you details if your company provides one.
- If you are going to discuss your mental health with your employer, there are some useful things you can do to prepare:
 - It may be helpful to write down beforehand the issues you are facing in your mental health and how it is affecting you so you are clear what you want to say. A template is provided below to help with this.
 - It can be useful to let the person know in advance that you wish to discuss your mental health. You can ask for a private space and enough time to be able to have a good conversation. This will also allow the person to come to the meeting prepared and ready to help.
 - If you have discussed matters with your GP or another medical professional, it will be helpful to summarise their views and what support they are providing.

- Think about what you are comfortable sharing and if there are any areas you would prefer to keep private.
- If you feel your mental health is affecting work, try and be honest about this and describe the ways it is making things difficult.
- Think what support you would find helpful. For example:
 - Do you need some time off?
 - Are there aspects of the job that are particularly challenging where you need more support?
 - Are there ways your employer could check in with you more regularly to help you to plan and feel on top of things?
 - If things are tough outside of work, are there things your employer can do to help?

It can be helpful to work through some of the following questions to help you get clear about how to approach a conversation about your mental health:

	My plan
What are my hopes for discussing my mental health with my employer? What would I like to come out of the discussion?	
Who in my organisation do I feel comfortable to discuss this with? human resources, immediate supervisor, colleagues?	
How will I feel most comfortable sharing this? Note from GP, in person, in writing?	
What information do I want to share? Is there anything I want to keep private?	
What support do I want from my employer? Understanding, help, adjustments?	

Your employers' duties

Most employers will be sympathetic and supportive and do everything they can to help. Most want to do this because they want the best for the people in their organisation. Employers also have legal duties around mental health, particularly where someone has been clearly identified as having a mental health difficulty, e.g. through a GP or other health professionals' diagnosis. People with a clearly identified mental health difficulty will generally have legal protections under the Equality Act 2010:

- Employers must ensure they do not discriminate against people due to mental health difficulties.
- If someone has a mental health difficulty and it may affect their work, employers must attempt to see if they can reduce the impact of a person's health condition on their ability to work, and to ensure they are getting the right support at work. Often, simple workplace changes can allow people with mental health conditions to continue working productively.
- These are known as "reasonable adjustments" and an employer has a duty to consider them if they know a person is experiencing a mental health difficulty.
- 'Reasonable' means an adjustment that is effective for the employee without being too disruptive, costly or impractical for the employer to provide.
- Whilst many people with mental health conditions might not consider themselves to be disabled, their condition might be considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010 if it has a substantial impact on their day-to-day life over a long period.
- Whether the Equality Act applies or not, it is still good practice for employers to make reasonable adjustments to support staff who need it.

'Reasonable adjustments' could include things like:

- allowing the use of paid or unpaid leave for medical appointments
- taking a flexible approach to start/finish times and/or shift patterns
- providing a quiet space for breaks away from the main workspace
- increasing the frequency of supervision
- supporting someone to prioritise their work
- providing a job coach.

If you are discussing your mental health with your employer, it will be helpful to think if there are reasonable adjustments they could make which would allow you to continue working at your best.

Making a plan with your employer

If your mental wellbeing is creating real challenges, it may be helpful to create a clear plan about the support that you need. A **Wellbeing Action Plan (WAP)** helps to set out clearly how any difficulties with mental health are affecting work and what you and your employer can both do to help with this. It should cover areas including:

- approaches you will take and behaviours you can adopt to support your mental wellbeing
- early warning signs of poor mental health that your manager or supervisor can look out for
- any workplace triggers for poor mental health or stress
- potential impact of poor mental health on your performance, if any
- what support you need from your line manager
- actions and positive steps you and your manager will take if you are experiencing stress or poor mental health
- an agreed time to review the WAP and any support measures that have been put in place to see if they're working
- anything else that you feel would be useful in supporting your mental health.

If you think this would be helpful, ask your employer to make time where you can work through the plan available in the link below.

You can download copies of the **Wellness Action Plan** from the website of MIND.



Getting support

If you are struggling with your mental wellbeing, the key thing is to ask for help. As well as your employer, learning provider and GP, there are many organisations who provide support for emotional and mental wellbeing. Some of these organisations are listed below.

Penumbra

Penumbra provide a wide range of mental health support services across Scotland.

0131 475 2380

Breathing Space

Breathing Space is a national telephone support service run by the NHS.

It provides emotional support 24 hours a day and can be called by anyone needing someone to talk to.

0800 83 85 87

Mental Health Support Service (Access to Work)

This confidential service is available at no charge to any employees with depression, anxiety, stress or other mental health issues affecting their work.

0300 456 8114

Samaritans

Samaritans provide a non-judgemental listening space for any kind of emotional distress, including, but not only feelings about suicide.

You can call Samaritans free at any time of the day on **116 123**.

SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health)

SAMH also provide a wide range of mental health support services.

0344 800 0550

Skills Development Scotland

1st Floor, Monteith House
11 George Square
Glasgow G2 1DY

www.sds.co.uk

