



Skills  
Development  
Scotland

# Mental health and wellbeing support for apprentices

# 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.

## What is meant by mental health and what can you do to help keep yours in good shape?

We all want to live happy lives with few worries and feeling calm and upbeat most of the time. But life is full of challenges and difficulties with mental health are common and affect many people at different stages of life. For some, these are brief episodes of difficulty, while others can experience difficulties with their mental health for prolonged periods. Difficulties with our mental wellbeing can be caused by a wide variety of things such as:

- Difficult past events in our life, especially traumatic events.
- Difficult things in the present such as money worries, relationship or housing problems.
- Some people may be at more risk of difficulties with their mental health due to the way their brain, mind and body work, sometimes for genetic reasons.

The most common difficulties with mental health are those which affect our emotions and are often referred to as emotional wellbeing. You are likely familiar with ideas such as depression or anxiety where people can experience symptoms such as profound sadness, lack of energy or unsettling anxiety and agitation. Most of the guidance in this resource is aimed at these types of difficulties. It is important to ask for help, and it is a really good idea to get help from people such as your GP if you are experiencing these.

Some people may also experience very significant difficulties with their mental wellbeing. This may include feelings of sadness or anxiety going on for a long time, or which are very overwhelming. For other people, they may have experiences where their sense of reality may be affected. For example, they may hear voices or experience thoughts and beliefs which are not real. If you or someone you know is experiencing these types of experiences, it is very important to get help from a GP or reputable support organisations as soon as possible. Links to support are available at the end of this guide.

Some factors which can affect our mental wellbeing may be hard for us to control, such as if we lose a job. However, there is lots we can all do to help us to maintain our mental wellbeing and to allow us to deal with the difficulties life can throw at us.

## What helps us to keep mentally and emotionally well?

There is now lots of evidence that there are key things we can all do to give ourselves the best chance of having positive mental wellbeing and developing the resilience to face any challenges which life may throw up. One approach to this is the **five steps to wellbeing** which identifies five areas which can really help to keep us well and resilient:

- **Connect** – positive relationships are crucial to wellbeing and spending time to develop and maintain these will be a huge help.
- **Be active** – this could be sport and exercise, but it doesn't have to be. Take a walk, go cycling or do some gardening. Find an activity that you enjoy and make it a part of your life.
- **Keep learning** – learning new skills can give you a sense of achievement and a new confidence. Simply trying something new can be good for well-being.
- **Give to others** – the evidence is huge that helping others is very good for our own wellbeing, it really is a win-win situation. Even the smallest act of kindness, whether it is a smile, a thank you or a kind word will make a difference to others, but also make you feel better.
- **Be mindful** – be more aware of the present moment, including your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you. Some people use meditation to help with this but it's not necessary, mindfulness can be found in many day to day activities. There is more about mindfulness later on in this resource.

**It can be easy in busy lives to forget to pay attention to these areas and start to experience difficulties with our wellbeing creeping up on us.** It might be helpful to write down a plan of how you want to make sure you are building areas that help your wellbeing into your life. A planning tool to help is below.



## My “five steps to wellbeing” plan

Wellbeing area	Things to consider	What I’m going to do
Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who are people who bring me joy and make me feel at my best?</li> <li>• How do I ensure I keep in touch with people regularly?</li> </ul>	
Be active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I enjoy doing regularly that keeps my active?</li> <li>• How can I build this into a regular habit and routine?</li> </ul>	
Keep learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What am I interested in that I would love to learn about?</li> <li>• How can I find ways to learn new things?</li> </ul>	
Give to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can I do regularly to support other people?</li> <li>• Are there ways I can do small things that help other people?</li> </ul>	
Be mindful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can I do to maintain my focus on what is going on without distractions and be fully present with what I am doing?</li> <li>• Can I build time to do exercises such as the breathing exercise below into my routines?</li> </ul>	

## Mindfulness and breathing techniques

In our busy lives we can run on auto pilot and become less aware of ourselves and the world around us. We can also spend a lot of time thinking about difficult areas of life such as things that have gone wrong in the past or things we're worried about in the future. This is known as excessive rumination. It is important to think about these things, but spending too much time doing so can cause anxiety and low mood.

Mindfulness is about taking time to be more deeply aware of thoughts, feelings and sensations at that moment and have less focus on the past or future. It can help to settle brooding or upsetting thoughts. It is not about trying to make thoughts go away but seeing them as 'mental events' that you can have some control over.

Closely related to mindfulness is the importance of how we breathe in managing our emotions. The way we breath can have a powerful effect on our mental state. If we are upset or agitated our breath will be short and rapid. When we are calm our breathing is slow and smooth. These usually happen automatically, but we can choose to take control of our breath and by doing so, we can send signals to our brain to help calm our minds.

## Breathing and calming exercise

Below are two useful exercises which can help us to be more mindful and to create a sense of calmness. These will be especially helpful at times where you may feel more agitated, low or distressed.

### 7/11 Breathing

This exercise helps us to focus on controlling our breathing, which helps to calm our mind. When we breathe out for longer than we breathe in, it sends a powerful message to the brain that there is no need for worry and can help to settle the mind.

- Try to find a comfortable position, wearing loose clothing.
- Pay attention to your breath as it goes in and out of your body.
- Breathing deeply into your stomach. Your stomach should rise as you breathe in, not your chest.
- Our body relaxes on the outbreath, so breath out for slightly longer.
- Count to seven as you breathe in, and to eleven as you breathe out. If this is too long you can amend it to what works for you, e.g. breathe in for three and out for five.
- Continue this for five to ten minutes.





### **Grounding 5,4,3,2,1 activity**

Another great way to calm ourselves is to allow our minds to deliberately focus on the world around us. This helps to take us out of the worries of our thoughts and allow our bodies to send signals to our mind to relax. This activity can be especially helpful for settling the mind if it is agitated or upset.

#### **Look around you and find 5 things (something that catch your attention)**

- Take a minute to describe it in detail to yourself.
- What is it made of?
- What colours is it?
- Are there any marks or stains on it?
- Try to describe everything you can see about it.
- Repeat this for another 4 objects you can see.

#### **Do the same for 4 things you can touch.**

- It might be the material of your clothes, or the tea mug, or the carpet.
- Use your fingers, or the skin of your cheek to really explore the texture, temperature and the feel of the object.

#### **Now do the same for 3 things you can smell.**

- You might have to work a bit harder at this one.
- Maybe move into your kitchen, or the bathroom.
- Smell the soap, or shampoo.
- Try different foods, explore your fridge.
- Have fun with it!

#### **This time find 2 things you can taste**

- Find something you can eat.
- Lick it or chew it very slowly.
- Really try to think about the taste.

#### **Find 1 thing you can hear.**

- It might be birds singing, or traffic going past your home, or the fridge humming.
- Just try to focus on it for a few minutes.
- Does it taste as you expected?



# 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](http://www.sds.co.uk)

