

Supporting staff wellbeing with stress management, mindfulness and trauma-debriefing

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Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust

What was the problem?

The trust saw a significant negative trend in wellbeing and increased rates of burnout in 2015, which correlated with increased sickness rates.

Junior doctors in particular showed high levels of stress and burnout despite high levels of engagement. They provided examples of the pressure they were under and how they needed more support for their wellbeing.

What was the solution?

The trust developed its 'Steps 4 Wellness' programme for improving physical health, mental health, making healthy choices and socialising at work. It focused initially on mental health, as this had greatest demand.

Steps 4 Wellness aims to support staff through:

Resilience training: A half-day course that provides Foundation Year 1 (FY1) doctors with practical tools during their induction period to cope with stress in the workplace. It benefits from junior doctors' insights about the pressures that affect wellbeing in their early months – for example, coping with being on call for the first time. The trust and its medical education team continually update and improve their support for junior doctors' wellbeing.

Mindfulness training: A voluntary six-week programme open to all junior doctors, which provides tools and techniques based on mindfulness methodology to help staff cope with pressure at work.

Critical incident stress management service: This offers a debrief session within 72 hours to individuals affected by an emotionally traumatising incident in the workplace. It is targeted at defusing emotional reactions to trauma to prevent sickness absence. The trust invited staff across the organisation to train in trauma-debriefing skills. Debriefers are placed on an on-call rota in groups of three for two weeks at a time so some are on standby if required after an incident. Initial outlay for the critical incident stress management service was about £3,000 to train the 17 debriefers. As the role is voluntary, they fit their duties around existing workload demands. The trust was keen to support this investment in its staff, and is now reaping benefits in sickness prevention.

Mental health awareness training: The trust provides clinical staff and managers with information, tools and resources to improve their understanding of mental health conditions, how they can affect people at work and how colleagues with a mental health condition can be better supported. Staff engagement team members provided the mental health training courses and resilience courses.

What were the challenges?

The main challenge was encouraging staff to take up the offers: those too busy to attend are the ones under most pressure.

What were the results?

Staff who attended the trauma debriefs commented positively, and sickness rates improved. Of 52 staff debriefed after an incident, none took long-term sickness leave. Stress-related sickness overall has reduced since introducing these measures.

What were the learning points?

It is important to help staff make time to engage with health and wellbeing offers that will support them in the longer term. For example, during 'Wellfest week' the trust gives all staff three hours of personal time to do something to support their wellbeing.

Next steps and sustainability

The trust took part in the 'Britain's Healthiest Workplace' audit in 2016, which compares the effectiveness of organisations' health and wellbeing provision. The trust completed the audit before it launched Steps 4 Wellness, so identified several areas for improvement. It anticipates the results will improve after a re-audit. These results will identify more areas for improvement.

Want to know more?

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