



Guide for employees: Wellness Action Plans (WAPs)

How to support your mental health at work

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Legal disclaimer

Mind is not providing legal advice but practical guidance – employers and employees may also need to obtain their own legal advice on the approach to take in any particular case.

Having clear policies and approaches for managing mental health helps organisations ensure consistency but in practice this may look different in different workplaces and contexts. For example small businesses may not have formal policies for every situation but can still develop a clear positive approach to mental health and communicate this effectively to staff.



Introduction

The way employers view workplace wellbeing is changing.

The focus is shifting from reactive management of sickness absence to a more proactive approach of prevention through promoting wellbeing and improving employee engagement.

Employers are looking for new ways to address staff wellbeing, which led us to develop the Wellness Action Plan (WAP), a tool which helps all employees manage their mental health and wellbeing at work.

Mind's Workplace Wellbeing team provides guidance and support for employers on how to implement a comprehensive approach to managing staff mental health, including how to promote the wellbeing of staff, tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems and support staff who are experiencing a mental health problem.

This tool is one in a series of resources aimed at supporting staff mental health. To read our other free workplace resources, take a look at our [website](#).

Who is this guide for?

This guide is designed for anyone in employment or a voluntary role who would like to learn more about how to use Wellness Action Plans (WAPs) to support and promote their mental health and wellbeing at work. You could be:

- currently experiencing a mental health problem and want to find out how a WAP can help you
- currently well, and interested in using the WAP as a proactive tool to map out what needs to be in place for you to be mentally well at work



Helpful definitions

Mental health

We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health, and how we feel can vary from good mental wellbeing to difficult feelings and emotions, to severe mental health problems.

Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is the ability to cope with the day to day stresses of life, work productively, interact positively with others and realise our own potential.

Poor mental health

Poor mental health is a state of low mental wellbeing where you are unable to realise your own potential, cope with the day-to-day pressures of life, work productively or contribute to a community.

Mental health problems

We all have times when we struggle with our mental health, but when these difficult experiences or feelings go on for a long time and affect our ability to enjoy and live our lives in the way we want to, this is a mental health problem. You might receive a specific diagnosis from your doctor, or just feel more generally that you are experiencing poor mental health.

Common mental health problems

These include depression, anxiety, phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). These make up the majority of the problems that lead to one in four people experiencing a mental health problem in any given year. Symptoms can range from the comparatively mild to very severe.

Less common mental health problems

Less common conditions like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder can have a big impact on people's lives: it may be harder to find appropriate treatment and, as understanding tends to be lower, people may face more stigma. However, many people are able to live with and recover from these diagnoses and manage the impact on their life well.

Work-related stress

Work-related stress is defined by the [Health and Safety Executive](#) as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them at work. Stress, including work-related stress, can be a significant cause of illness and is known to be linked with high levels of sickness absence, staff turnover and other issues such as increased capacity for error.

Stress is not a medical diagnosis, but severe stress that continues for a long time may lead to a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, or more severe mental health problems.



What is a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) and how can it help me?

Given the high levels of stress and poor mental health we are seeing in the workplace, there is a growing demand for innovative and proactive ways of managing our mental health at work. The WAP is inspired by Mary Ellen Copeland's Wellness Recovery Action Plan® (WRAP®): an evidence-based system used worldwide by people to manage their mental health.

The WAPs are a personalised, practical tool we can all use – whether we have a mental health problem or not – to help us identify what keeps us well at work, what causes us to become unwell, and how to address a mental health problem at work should you be experiencing one.

It also opens up a dialogue with your manager or supervisor, in order for them to better understand your needs and experiences and ultimately better

support your mental health, which in turn leads to greater productivity, better performance and increased job satisfaction.

We all have mental health just as we all have physical health, and this WAP has been designed to support us all to manage our mental health, wherever we are on the spectrum.

If you are a dispersed worker, or work remotely, a WAP can help you identify how best your manager can support you and overcome the barriers which this style of working can present.

WAPs are also particularly helpful during the return to work process if you have been off work due to a mental health problem, as they provide a structure for conversations around what support will help you and what reasonable adjustments might be useful to discuss and consider with your manager.

What should a WAP cover?

- ✓ 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

The WAP is not legally binding, but is intended as an agreement between you and your manager in order to promote your wellbeing or address any existing mental health needs, including any adjustments you may wish to discuss.



How to get started with a WAP

1. Plan some time on your own to fill in your WAP
2. Schedule some confidential time with your manager to discuss it
3. Consider what it would be helpful for your manager to know before the meeting

What if my manager has never used a WAP before?

If your manager or supervisor hasn't used a WAP before, the best place to start is to refer them to our Guide for line managers: Wellness Action Plans. This sets out everything a manager needs to know about supporting you with drawing up your WAP. For further information and helpful tips, direct them to our [website](#).

By completing a WAP, you will be able to plan in advance by gaining an awareness of what works and what doesn't work for you in terms of managing your wellbeing, what support you require from your manager and developing behaviours that support your health.

In the event that you do experience a mental health problem you will then have an idea of the tailored support you need. It also facilitates an open dialogue with your manager – leading to practical, agreed steps which can form the basis for regular monitoring and review.

By regularly reviewing your WAP, you can adapt it to reflect changes in your experiences or new approaches you find helpful, and by being proactive and taking ownership of the process and of the WAP itself, it may help you feel more in control.

The WAP should be written and owned by you, expressing your own personal choices, reflecting your voice, your personal experience and your needs. Your manager's role is to discuss the plan with you and provide support, including guidance on what is possible for any reasonable adjustments. It should be a collaborative process, but led by you.

Confidentiality

The WAP should be held confidentially by your manager or supervisor. Make sure you are fully aware of how the information will be used, and only provide information that you are happy to share. If you are filling out a WAP as a result of being unwell, your manager may ask whether you consent for a copy of it to be held with HR, along with any other information about your wellbeing, such as an Occupational Health report or a Return to Work plan.

It should be up to you whether you are happy for it to be held by HR or kept confidential between yourself and your manager. If in doubt, check your company policy on this.

It is also helpful to seek advice from the health professional involved in your care, such as a GP or Occupational Health expert, on what you might wish to include in your WAP.

In order for your employer to fulfill their duty of care to keep staff safe at work, they will be obliged to break confidentiality if they believe you are experiencing a crisis. If they become aware that you or someone else is at serious risk of harm, they may decide to call the emergency services.

WAPs in action

Often the necessary change is one of attitude, expectations or communication rather than a major or costly change.

The agreed steps in these case studies were effective because they explored individual needs and put in place practical, easy to implement approaches or adjustments based on these needs.

Pete

I don't have a mental health problem but I think wellbeing and mental health shouldn't be something we only talk about when we get ill so, when my manager in my new job told me about the WAP and suggested I fill one in, I thought it would be a good opportunity to think about what makes me stressed at work and what helps me to perform well and be productive.

As part of my WAP, I identified that a few things cause me stress – for example, not being kept informed of developments in the organisation that could affect me, a chaotic office environment, and people not being supportive or approachable. Having set these out, I then considered ways they could be alleviated, such as scheduling regular catch ups with my manager to get updates on organisational developments, making

sure I factored in time to get away from my desk and out of the office and ensuring that my manager and I had time to reflect on what was working and what wasn't working.

My team seemed to be quite open about wellbeing so I chose to share my WAP not only with my manager but with the team too, so that colleagues were aware of any triggers or preferences I have in terms of how I work and the type of environment that keeps me well.

Being given the opportunity to fill out a WAP when I was a new starter made me realise how valued my health and wellbeing were by my manager and organisation as a whole and gave me confidence, especially in dealing with potentially difficult situations.

Rehana

I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, which has led to a period of sickness absence from my job as teacher, while I was in hospital. I felt work were being pretty good with me. They didn't always fully understand but they did try.

Under the 'reasonable adjustments' clause in the Equality Act, my previous employer put in place several things to help me to return to and stay in work. This included changes to my working hours so I could start and finish early, and work additional days in the school holidays. We also made changes to my role so I could teach fewer

regular lessons, which was supplemented with more in-depth work and computer development at my desk, with small groups of pupils.

My manager also arranged a personal mentor that I met with every couple of weeks to check informally on my health and monitor my workload and support needs, and gave me the option to take 'time out' in the staff room or sick room if I needed to rest between lessons.

I found that these adjustments all helped me to manage my condition, stay well and continue to perform well in my job.

Reasonable adjustments and the Equality Act 2010

As a result of completing a WAP, you might discuss with your manager whether any reasonable adjustments are needed.

A reasonable adjustment is an alteration that an employer makes which enables an employee to continue with their duties without being at a disadvantage compared to others.

Under the Equality Act 2010, there is a legal duty on employers to make these reasonable adjustments for employees with a disability. Whether a mental health problem is defined as a disability or not, employers are encouraged to make adjustments for staff who are experiencing mental health problems.

The types of reasonable adjustments commonly made for people experiencing a mental health problem depends on the symptoms being experienced, and should be tailored to suit you. It also depends on the organisation's resources, so your manager needs to be aware of what the organisation is able to provide and what is defined as 'reasonable' when entering into a conversation.

For more information have a look at the government's [Reasonable adjustments for disabled workers guidance](#), Rethink Mental Illness's '[What's reasonable at work?](#)' guide and the [Acas website](#), where you can find details of their equality and diversity advisory service.

Adjustments could include:

Support from your manager

- providing written instructions for someone whose anxiety affects their memory
- providing workload support and help with prioritising work
- agreeing the type of work you can handle whilst you are on a phased return to work
- increasing frequency of catch-ups or 1-to-1's

Flexibility with working patterns

- flexible working hours, for example, allowing a person who has difficulty travelling in crowded trains to start early and finish early in order to avoid the rush hour
- allowing someone who is starting or reducing medication to have a day off if they are experiencing side effects, such as drowsiness
- enabling a person to arrange their hours to permit them to attend a weekly therapy session
- allowing someone to take time out of the office when they became particularly anxious
- enabling part-time working or job-share arrangements for someone who is unable to work full-time

Flexibility with working patterns (continued)

- enabling someone to arrange their annual leave so that they have regularly spaced breaks throughout the year
- allowing someone who finds the pressure of large meetings very difficult to have at least 15 minutes between meetings
- a gradual return to work after periods of sickness absence
- the possibility of working from home, reduction in hours or relief from some responsibilities to prevent the person having to take time off sick during fluctuations in their condition

Changes to the physical environment

- arranging for someone who finds the distractions of an open-plan office detracts from their work performance to have a desk in a quieter area
- moving a person's workstation so that they are not placed in very busy areas or with their back to the door
- provide a quiet space for breaks away from the main workspace
- allow for increased personal space

Other types of support

- arranging mediation if there are difficulties between colleagues
- appointing a 'buddy' or 'mentor' outside the usual management structure who can show the new employee the ropes and help them settle in.

We have put together the examples on the right following conversations with a variety of people about their experiences of reasonable adjustments.

Simon

Simon worked in a busy shop and had a history of panic attacks. He was accessing support for this and making good progress but often found that without regular breaks during the day he would become agitated and sometimes start to experience physical symptoms.

When his manager suggested taking a flexible approach to breaks (dividing his lunch break into three twenty minute slots rather than a one hour block), Simon was able to spread the time he took out from work more evenly across the day and felt better able to cope.

Chloe

When Chloe's doctor recommended she change the medication she was taking for depression, she became very nervous about the prospect of telling her manager. She knew that switching to the new medication would likely result in side effects which would impact her ability to perform her role, but was afraid that if she spoke openly about this with her manager she would be judged and might even lose her job.

When her manager became aware of the support she needed, he arranged for Chloe to work flexibly whilst transitioning onto the new medication, with weekly catch ups to support her with managing her workload and the opportunity for afternoon naps when she was experiencing side effects from the medication.

All this was captured in her WAP which helped to frame the discussion and provided a written copy of what was agreed and what support Chloe needed. These adjustments were easy to implement and helped enormously in supporting her during this time.

Top tips for staying well at work

Taking action, however small, can improve your life at work or prevent stress developing in the first place.

You may be free to do some things without reference to anyone else, but some things you will need to negotiate, formally or informally, with colleagues or managers.

- Develop good relationships with colleagues so you can build up a network of support.
 - Talk to someone you trust, at work or outside, about what upsets you or makes you feel stressed.
 - Say if you need help.
 - Be assertive – say no if you can't take on extra demands.
 - Be realistic – you don't have to be perfect all the time.
 - If everything starts to feel overwhelming, take a deep breath. Try and get away from your desk or situation for a few minutes.
- Write a list of what needs to be done; it only takes a few minutes and can help you to prioritise, focus and get things in perspective. It can also feel satisfying to tick items off once they have been done.
 - Try and take a walk or get some fresh air during the day. Exercise and daylight are good for your mental health as well as physical health.
 - Work regular hours and try to take the breaks and holidays you're entitled to. If things are getting too much, book a day off or a long weekend.



- Try not to work long hours or take work home with you. This may be alright in the short term, if the work has a specific purpose and is clearly defined – a team effort to complete an urgent project may be very satisfying. However, working longer hours on a regular basis does not generally lead to better results.
- If you are provided with opportunities to have some input, particularly in decisions that may impact you, then take advantage of those opportunities.
- If you are working from home, make the most of opportunities for contact.
- Maintain a healthy work-life balance – nurture your outside relationships, interests, and the abilities your job does not use.
- Make sure you drink enough water and that you eat during the day to maintain your energy levels.
- Learn some relaxation techniques (see our booklet [How to manage stress](#)).

For further guidance on how to promote your wellbeing and proactively support your mental health at work, have a look at our booklet on [How to be mentally healthy at work](#) and the New Economic Foundation's [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#).

[How to be mentally healthy at work](#) also contains some useful information on if and how you might go about disclosing a mental health problem to HR or your manager.