

EMOTIONAL HEALTH AT WORK WHY IT MATTERS AND HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT IT

A report by Family Links – the Centre for Emotional Health, with the support of IPPR | March 2018

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SUMMARY

This report proposes a new framework for emotional health, which will support employers to consider and improve the mental health, wellbeing and social and emotional competencies of their workforce. Emotional health refers to a set of malleable skills and beliefs which shape our feelings, thoughts and behaviour. The emotional health framework outlines seven social and emotional competencies or ‘assets’, which can be cultivated within the workplace at an individual and organisational level. The seven assets are:

- self beliefs
- self awareness
- self regulation
- self agency
- beliefs about others
- social awareness
- relationship skills.

While each asset is important in its own right, it is the collective interaction between them which forms our emotional health.

The financial and business costs associated with poor mental health are well-documented (e.g. Deloitte 2017), and, in 2017, the prime minister commissioned an independent review into mental health at work. In this review, the authors, Stevenson and Farmer, outline their ten year goals for mental health support within the workplace. These include:

1. “Every one of us will have the knowledge, tools and confidence, to understand and look after our own mental health and the mental health of those around us.”
2. “Employees in all types of employment will have ‘good work’, which contributes positively to their mental health, our society and our economy.”

(Stevenson and Farmer 2017)

An emotional health framework supports both of these goals. Developing the emotional health assets will give employees the skills to support the mental health and wellbeing of themselves and others, developing individual resilience. Similarly, psychosocial aspects of the working environment, including the nature and type of work, ability to maintain a healthy work-life integration, relationships with colleagues, workplace culture and organisational leadership can either promote or undermine the emotional health of employees. A two-pronged approach is

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **To implement the Mental Health Core Standards identified in the Stevenson Farmer Review:** While the core standards identified by Stevenson and Farmer were written from a mental health perspective, many of them relate to emotional health and the importance of a preventative approach. Ensuring ‘good work’ for all employees, upskilling staff – including line managers and supervisors – and encouraging open conversations, not just about mental health, but about *all* challenges employees encounter, will improve emotional health at both an individual and organisational level.
2. **Improving the social and emotional competencies of the UK workforce:** Findings from secondary analysis of the ESS suggests that the UK workforce is lacking key skills in relation to self regulation and relationship skills. The development of social emotional competencies and the emotional health assets should begin during compulsory education and should receive higher precedence within the national curriculum. These skills should continue to be cultivated during employment and be an ongoing focus of training, skill development and performance reviews.
3. **Improving job quality:** The findings in this report underline the importance of the new ‘job quality’ agenda, which aims to introduce measures of the quality of employment. Jobs which satisfy key criteria relating to quality are more likely to help develop the seven assets, such as self beliefs and self agency, which collectively contribute to the emotional health of individuals and organisations.
4. **Increasing worker voice and autonomy:** The evidence presented in this report highlights the importance of autonomy, involvement and employee voice. Lawrence and

needed to support emotional health: Firstly, upskilling individual employees, and second, creating an emotionally healthy environment through workplace policies, practices, culture and leadership. In addition to supporting mental health and wellbeing, developing the assets outlined in the emotional health framework will have wider benefits for individuals and organisations. These include building and maintaining positive relationships, coping with challenges, problem-solving, and being able to self motivate. These translate into workplace outcomes, such as job performance and productivity, staff retention and absence, and team relationships.

KEY FINDINGS

Secondary analysis of the European Social Survey (ESS) was used to examine the current state of emotional health for UK employees. Findings show that across a number of factors, UK employees report lower levels of emotional health compared to other economies across Europe. Key priorities identified for the UK workforce are as follows:

- **supporting self beliefs:** One-fifth of UK employees report low self beliefs
- **developing self regulation:** Only one-third of UK employees feel that they deal very well with important problems in life, while over one-fifth found that after something goes wrong it takes them a long time to get back to normal
- **building workplace relationships and relationship skills:** Half of UK employees report that their working relationships are not supportive.

Findings from the ESS also show there is an association between the emotional health assets and psychosocial aspects of the working environment, such as autonomy, the type of work, and having opportunities for learning and development. However, these findings are correlational and further research is needed to establish a cause-effect relationship.

A review of existing research links the emotional health assets to other key workplace outcomes, including:

- performance (productivity, motivation and engagement)
- staff turnover and reduced short and long-term absence rates
- improved team relationships and reduced conflict
- creativity and innovation.

This suggests that there is a strong business case for cultivating good emotional health within the workplace.

McNeil (2014) recommend that all companies with over 50 employees should have a 'working life forum'. This would help to ensure that employees have sufficient influence over their working lives, and would provide employees with a voice through which to maintain high levels of emotional health at work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYER PRACTICE

We put forward a number of practice recommendations to support employers to improve the emotional health of their workforce and organisation. A full list of practice recommendations is shown in the full report, both for organisations and for line managers. Support should be targeted at each of the emotional health assets:

- ensuring employees feel valued in their contributions (self beliefs)
- encouraging reflective practice (self awareness)
- supporting healthy self regulation in the workplace (self regulation)
- promoting employee autonomy and involvement (self agency)
- creating a psychologically safe culture (beliefs about others)
- fostering a compassionate workplace (social awareness)
- building positive relationships across all aspects of the organisation (relationship skills).

Employers can support and promote the emotional health of their employees through adopting a whole organisation approach to emotional health which has four key features:

- Explicit training and development of all employees
- Ensuring 'good work' for all employees
- Creating an emotionally healthy environment
- Leadership commitment

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