Wellbeing at work

Public sector resilience in a time of change

Supported by
High-profile accounts of mental health problems could help all public sector workers get the support they need, says Jane Dudman.

For me, it has never been more important to focus on personal wellbeing and resilience,” says Carolyn Wilkins, chief executive of Orthodox Care Ltd. She says that while working in local government at a time of significant change, it is challenging and complex, it also brings opportunities for staff and communities to do things differently.

Pressure tells: identifying and coping with public sector stress

A bit of pressure is, apparently, good for human beings. It energises us to get things done. But when pressure tips over into unrelenting stress, as it has done in so many public sector workplaces, it has to be taken seriously as a health issue. This supplement looks at the stress facing people who deliver public services and how they deal with it. As Mind’s Faye McGuinness explains, the worst thing about coping with stress can be the “drip-drip effect” from a number of factors, including heavy workloads, long hours and, for some, shift patterns. From resilience training for Croydon council staff, to NHS England’s programme to improve staff health through health checks, access to early physiotherapy and better food outlets, many public bodies are starting to realise the benefits of supporting their staff through change. The results can be significant: 91% of the 6,500 staff surveyed by Northumberland, Tynes and Wear NHS Foundation Trust now think their employer is taking proactive action on health and wellbeing.

While workers in emergency services are twice as likely as those in the general public to think about mental health problems, they can now get support from a specific support line, the Blue Light programme.

And while Professor Cary Cooper has said advice about the toll of today’s “always-on” culture on our ability to down in the blue and to relax, there is plenty of advice and practical information available. The finding that people need to support themselves better in their work tasks after having sex - an effect that lasts up to 24 hours - may be of particular interest. 

Overview

Our new mental health strategy for the public sector is changing the way we look at the challenges facing public sector staff, and there are now several initiatives to support many of those facing everyday stress as a result of their public sector work, such as Mind’s Blue Light support line for emergency service workers.

If you would like to know more about the Guardian’s mental health policy, please contact Chris Iggulden, chris.iggulden@theguardian.com.

Jane Dudman

About the author

Jane Dudman is a consultant in organisational change and performance management and the founder of Halo Psychology, a consultancy specialising in organisational change and performance.
Smarter working to save time and cash

Stress and its effects are a very real threat – but a few simple remedies can build resilience, says Victor Smart

Everyone from social workers to senior judges can find themselves suffering with stress. And yet people can usually cope with bouts of short-term stress in the workplace so long as they are well supported and get recovery time. So the aim is to retain – or regain – that inherent ability to bounce back.

The experience from central civil service is encouraging. Staff numbers and budgets have been cut in nearly all departments while workloads have risen and new Brexit departments set up – and yet the latest Cabinet Office employee survey shows staff engagement ratings rise in nearly every department.

Faye McGinnis, from mental health charity Mind, says although the police are cited as a resilient group, they pay a price for their macho culture – and, the police are, says McGinnis, “twice as likely as the general population to report mental health problems: “For police, because it’s a “moving environment – people don’t like to admit to feeling stressed. And yet people can cope with even long and severe adversity – so long as they have a clear idea of what they and their teams are striving to achieve.”

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Who nurses the doctors?

Short-term responsibility to patients and overwork get in the way of health professionals taking care of themselves, says Sarah Johnson

When Laura-Jane Smith took time out of her clinical training for a PhD, she found she was constantly unhappy, and suffered from palpitations, nausea, severe headaches, and breathlessness among other physical symptoms. The hospital doctor’s days were dominated by negative thoughts. She recalls: “I once walked for 30 minutes with ‘I hate my life. I hate my life’ on a loop of internal monologue that I feared had no end.” Eventually, Smith was diagnosed with depression and anxiety and ended up leaving the PhD. She is not alone. Countless healthcare professionals suffer from burnout, depression, anxiety and addiction. Estimates from Public Health England put the cost to the NHS of staff absence due to poor health at £2.4bn a year - excluding the cost of agency staff to fill in gaps and the cost of treatment. In his independent review looking at the impact of staff health on NHS performance, former medical director Steve Boorman, who is honorary professorial fellow of the Royal Society of Public Health, found that health workers often did not prioritise their own health. “They did not want to take time off as they felt patient care would suffer when temporary cover was needed to replace them,” he explains.

Dr Clare Gerada, medical director for the NHS Practitioner Health Programme, explains why this is so: “You only have to look at what you’re trained to do as a doctor or a nurse. You’re trained to put patients first and to put their needs above your own.” NHS England now has a specific programme, supported by chief executive Simon Stevens, that advocates health checks, access to early physiotherapy and mental health support, and improvements in food available on site and staff vaccination uptakes. But Boorman admits that progress is inconsistent and staff health is still a low priority for leadership and for NHS staff themselves.

“Good staff health isn’t about token Zumba classes or lettuce leaves for the worried, but about helping people understand the impact poor health may have on themselves, their family and those around them – in the case of NHS workers, the vulnerable patients that need care,” he points out.

Smith, who is back at work after seeking help from the NHS Practitioner Health Programme and undergoing therapy, says that finding a space in life for creativity also helped her. Anxious to prevent a relapse, she has made herself a number of promises: “I will take all my annual leave. I will say ‘no’ more often to extra work tasks, I will value activities that make me happy. By making time for the things that recharge me, I am now more effective - a better colleague and a better doctor.”

Are we digitised to death?

Cary Cooper

The digital world has taken over all our lives. Sometimes that’s for the better, but there are also unintended negative consequences.

Apps, social media, emails and the like have made communications much simpler and quicker - but, on the flipside, have made human contact at work less likely. Dramatic cuts to the public sector workforce in local government, central government, the health service, the police and many others, have, in many cases, doubled individual workloads. Many of these bodies have turned to the digital world to deal with the public, and even one another - emailing people in the same office rather than talking to them. It’s a dystopia foreseen way back in Albert Einstein’s day when he wrote: “I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.” Mobile phones now have such a wide variety of apps, many of which just distract us away from interacting with our colleagues - and that could, in the long run, be used as manipulative management tools. Look around the canteen at lunchtime - if people even have time to eat away from their desks - and you’ll see people on their mobiles tweeting, Facebooking and texting, sitting opposite another who’s doing the same. Is this really good for building a work community? Is this a culture that enhances our wellbeing and colleagueship?

The recent law passed in France, making it unlawful in both public and private sectors for managers to send emails outside of office hours, blazes the trail here. It can’t realistically be enforced, but it sends a clear message to employers about how they should use the digital world. Already, businesses such as VW block emails at night. And Liverpool council’s initiative to prevent email communication between staff - albeit only on Wednesdays - was implemented back in 2002. But the public sector needs more innovative solutions to delivering better public services, which means more face-to-face interaction. There is an old Chinese proverb about society more generally but applies to the workplace as well: “If you are planning for one year, plant rice. If you are planning for ten years, plant trees. If you are planning for a hundred years, plant people.”

Professor Sir Cary Cooper, CBE, is the 50th anniversary professor of organisational psychology and health at the Alliance Manchester Business School and president of the CIPD.