

Supporting learners at mid-life



A signposting guide to

Health and
well-being

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Introduction

The strength of trade unions is the connection they have with the workplace. They represent members collectively and deal with employers, chiefly on work-related problems. These can also be individual issues caused by work, or made worse by it. Examples of these are stress due to workload or aches and pains caused by work tasks.

Sometimes members come to reps with more personal problems. For example, falling into debt can put pressure on pay, while developing an illness or suddenly having to care for a dependant can conflict with standard working hours.

Often these personal problems can be resolved or at least alleviated by having good agreements with employers over issues such as sickness absence, dependant leave and access to an Employee Assistance programme.

Occasionally, however, a member may need help with issues where no support is available through the employer and the union cannot directly help them. These are the cases that this guide is intended to help you with.

For members in mid-life, unions can offer a chance to have a conversation about development in the workplace in the context of the whole of a person's life. People don't get enough opportunities to talk about themselves in a positive way or to discuss making a change or take up new opportunities. Having a mid-life development review can have a considerable impact on people's lives: it gives people space to think, take stock and locate specialist help.

As a union rep your experience and training will have already equipped you with a lot of the skills needed to conduct a review like this. You are not expected to be an expert in every issue but you can provide additional help and support by signposting your colleagues to professional services and sources of useful information, both on- and offline. You can encourage people to explain key personal issues and to work out what questions they need to ask, and of whom.

The mini-guide series

This is one of four unionlearn mini-guides to support learners at mid-life. They cover health and well-being in general, mental health in particular, pensions and financial advice, and how to balance work with family and dependant care.

This signposting mini-guide is designed to help reps support people in the workplace who have health and well-being issues. It will help you to provide accurate information and advice to people in your workplace.

Health and well-being – how can you help?

In the UK every year around 130 million working days are lost as a result of people being too ill to go to work. About a quarter of these days are lost due to work-related ill-health. Health and well-being includes both physical and mental health.

Unions can play a key role in promoting health and well-being in the workplace. Even issues like obesity, back pain or alcohol use can be caused by or made worse by work, so unions can help get changes made in the workplace itself to tackle these.

However, if a union rep is asked for advice on personal health problems or issues they should signpost individuals to online, telephone, and face-to-face services.

Health and well-being as an issue in a mid-life review

As part of a mid-life review, you may be asked questions about support for people affected by health problems. Here are some examples.

I have just been diagnosed with cancer and have to have lots of treatment. I'm worried about losing my job – will I be allowed as much time off as I need?

I suffer from terrible back pain. I'm really worried that I won't be able to do my job in the future. Who should I talk to about it?

My workplace has just been reorganised again and I am not sure what I am meant to be doing anymore. It is really making me anxious. Who should I be talking to?

I think I might be obese. I've put on so much weight recently that I can't do up my uniform. I keep trying diets but nothing works. What can I do?

I don't know what's happening to me lately. I am going through the menopause but it can't just be that. I am feeling really ill and I keep forgetting things. Could it be early dementia?

My job is very physically demanding, and I am beginning to notice that my sight and hearing aren't as good as they were. I haven't had a medical for ages. What should I do?

I am really scared that I might be an alcoholic. It runs in the family. Is it true that the doctors will blacklist you if you admit you have a problem?

I have been getting a recurring back pain for some months and am not sure what is causing it. I think it may be how I sit at the computer. How can I deal with it?

What is signposting?

Signposting means pointing the way to useful information. You can signpost to:

- your union and employer
- websites and web chat
- telephone helplines
- social media contacts and Apps
- face-to-face services including support groups
- learning opportunities.

Knowing when to signpost

Learning reps do a fantastic job in the workplace but it is important that you know your limits. Don't assume you are an expert on personal problems. Sometimes another workplace representative, such as a steward, equality or safety rep, or a branch officer, will be able to help you but often you will need to point members to different advice-givers. You should be able to signpost members to trained and qualified specialists who can help on key topics and have access to the most up-to-date information.

"I suffered with back pain a while ago which I dealt with by taking pain killers and seeing a physio. Why should I not give advice on such matters myself?"



**Know your limits –
signpost to the experts!**



By finding out who these specialists are and by providing links to their services you can help workers plan their conversations with experts, to decide on priority issues, to decide what questions to ask and to identify areas where more help may be needed.

Do:

- listen and ask questions
- explore issues and help members to prioritise these
- build confidence and increase motivation
- identify learning needs
- set up learning opportunities
- help to make an action plan to solve the issue
- help to find information on websites
- signpost to experts
- discuss and make some notes about what to tell the experts and what questions to ask
- provide continuing support
- help the member explain the issue to their employer.

Don't:

- tell people what you would do if you were in their place; focus on the person you are listening to – it is all about them!
- promise anything about support that may be available or say that everything will be fine
- provide personal counselling, coaching, mentoring or careers advice unless you are trained
- give information or advice about complex topics such as finance or health – these need a personalised expert approach.



If you are helping someone, remember:

- It is not about you, but about them.
- You should always signpost on issues to do with personal finance or health problems.
- Every case is about the individual and their own circumstances – each person needs personalised assessment and advice.
- Be sure that you respect confidentiality and involve the member at every step of the way.
- Expert information and advice changes frequently.
- Individual rights or entitlement to services are complicated.
- Union reps can help with negotiations with employers about policies to ensure healthy workplaces and support for employees who have health issues. Work as part of a team with other union reps.



Tips for supporting people in the workplace

One of the most common health problems is back pain. Here is an example of some common-sense, self-help tips available on the NHS Choices website www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Pain

- Get some gentle exercise.
- Concentrate on your breathing.
- Read books and leaflets on pain.
- Get counselling or hypnotherapy.
- Find ways to take your mind off the pain.
- Share your story – talk to others.
- Relax and get a good night's sleep.
- Take a course.
- Keep in touch with friends and family.

However, if the back pain could be work-related, be sure that the safety representative is told about it. It may be possible to prevent it reoccurring, or others being affected.



Where to find expert help

Before you start, check if your union can help, and if anyone has any experience in developing workplace policies and strategies for promoting health and well-being or supporting workers who experience problems.



NHS

NHS Choices     

www.nhs.uk Telephone 111 for non-urgent advice

The NHS Choices website has a comprehensive A-Z guide to a wide range of symptoms and conditions, and offers information in a range of languages. The website also provides self-help tips and preventative advice. You can locate local services including GPs, hospitals, dentists and pharmacies and book appointments via the NHS website.

Among the range of resources and tools to promote healthy living, the website has some useful pages on workplace health

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/workplacehealth

The pages contain useful advice on long-term medical conditions at work, managing stress at work, tips on safe lifting and sitting correctly, and returning to work after mental health problems.

The website provides a link to <http://fitforwork.org/employee/returning-to-work>, which has advice about return to work after illness, the fit note and workplace adaptations.

You can signpost people to their local GP practice or pharmacist for specific health problems, or suggest a free Midlife MOT – everyone aged 40–74 will be invited to have one.

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/nhs-health-check

The NHS offers a series of useful apps available from the app stores:

-  *NHS Change for Life – Smart Recipes*
-  *NHS Change for Life – Couch to 5K*
-  *NHS Smoke Free*

General advice

AgeUK    

Has a page about health and well-being as you get older www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing. You can call the Age UK Advice Line on 0800 169 2081 or make an email enquiry. There are also local branches of Age UK.

Citizens Advice    

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/healthcare provides information about rights, costs, and how to access services. It also provides links to private practitioners of alternative medicine like chiropractors, osteopaths, hypnotherapists and acupuncturists. (Talk to a GP first because some of these treatments are available on the NHS.)



Common health concerns (in alphabetical order)

Addiction

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/addiction/ This page on NHS Choices offers information and advice about addictions including smoking and alcohol, and has links to Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Drug Addicts Anonymous, Drinkaware, Change for Life, and Beating Addictions www.beatingaddictions.co.uk

Cancer

www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer/ There are links to a range of specialist websites, including Macmillan Cancer Support www.macmillan.org.uk, which can offer a range of support services for those suffering from cancer, including help with money worries and advice about work. There is a telephone helpline 0808 808 00 00 and an online community at <http://community.macmillan.org.uk> Macmillan can also provide practical help locally, through nursing care and support groups, information centres and benefit advice services.

Diabetes

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes

You can find diabetes self-help groups, and a link to Diabetes UK www.diabetes.org.uk, which has a helpline 0345 123 2399 careline@diabetes.org.uk, an online community and a peer support network. Diabetes UK also has local support groups which you can search for on their website.

Hearing loss

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Hearing-impairment Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID) www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk offers a free helpline 0808 808 0123, an online forum and local support through its offices.

Heart problems

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) offers a free Heart Matters service to provide information and support and has produced a number of questionnaires and useful factsheets www.bhf.org.uk/health-at-work. This service includes pages on promoting good health at work.

The BHF Helpline number is 0300 330 3311 and you can email on hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk BHF also runs local Heart Support Groups and provides a Hearty Lives Programme for people in the poorest areas of the country.

Menopause

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Menopause

Mental health

Please see the Mental Health mini-guide in this series.

Pain

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Pain

The NHS Choices website links to the following organisations with helplines and online forums:

www.backcare.org.uk

<http://painconcern.org.uk>

Helpline 0300 123 0789 and online forum

www.action-on-pain.co.uk Painline 0345 603 1593 email painline@action-on-pain.co.uk Action on Pain also has a mobile information unit.

Sight loss

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Visual-impairment

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) www.rnib.org.uk helpline number is 0303 123 9999 and email enquiries can be made at helpline@rnib.org.uk

Weight loss

The NHS has a BMI calculator and weight loss plan with email support for those who are concerned about obesity or want to eat more healthily www.nhs.uk/livewell/loseweight. There are also links to local support groups.



Make your own local signposting directory

You may find there are face-to-face services available locally, and there will be local and regional telephone helplines. These will vary depending on the area you live in so you will need to do some research in order to signpost effectively. If you have time to visit or telephone any of them to find out what is available, you will get a feel for how user-friendly they are.

On these empty pages you can add your own list of services you have found locally, for example:

- your GP
- your pharmacist
- your union
- Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
- public library
- Age UK
- mental health support organisations

For each you can note:

Organisation

What they provide

Local office address and directions

Telephone

Email

Website

Contact name

Organisation

What they provide

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TUC and unionlearn resources

Other signposting guides in this series:

- Support for carers
- Mental health
- Financial planning and pensions

Unionlearn

www.unionlearn.org.uk

Unionlearn publications

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications including *Cancer in the Workplace: a workbook for union representatives*

Union learning Climbing Frame website and learning themes

www.climbingframe.unionlearn.org.uk

TUC

Publications available from www.tuc.org.uk/publications include:

Work and Well-Being: a trade union resource

Supporting Working Women through the Menopause: guidance for union representatives

TUC eNotes

Supporting Mid-Life Development

www.tuceducation.org.uk

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