

Supporting learners at mid-life



A signposting guide to

Mental health

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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 are affected by mental health problems. It will help you to provide accurate information and advice to people in your workplace.

Mental health – how can you help?

This mini-guide is about mental health. One in four people will be diagnosed with a mental health problem at some point in their life. This means we all know someone this applies to and may have experienced it ourselves.

Common mental health problems include anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias, panic attacks, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders, alcohol and substance dependency and dementia. The TUC Education workbook *Mental Health and the Workplace* www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications contains more detail about these and other problems.

Mental health 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 mental health problems. Here are some examples.

My life at home is really difficult at the moment. I quite often get depressed and have to take time off work. I'm worried about losing my job – is there anyone I can talk to who won't tell my boss?

If I went to the doctor about my panic attacks, would he just give me pills or is there anything else that would help?

My mother has dementia, and my son suffers from anxiety. They both live at home with me. Can I get any support for them or for me?

I have been diagnosed as being bipolar. Can I ask my employer to support me at work without getting sacked?

I don't tell people about my depression because I am embarrassed. Sometimes I feel suicidal. I feel very lonely and don't get out to see friends any more. Is there anyone I can talk to?

I sometimes feel that I will have to resign and get a part-time job. I just don't seem to be able to cope with my workload and worries at home. What shall I do?

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 from depression five years ago and tried different sorts of medication and counselling – I have lots of experience, and I know what helped me. Why should I not give advice 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.
- ✦ 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 workplaces are healthy and that there is support for employees who are diagnosed with mental health issues.

Tips for supporting people in the workplace

There are small but important things that you can do to support a colleague worried about their mental health, according to www.time-to-change.org.uk

- ✦ Take time to ask them how they are doing and listen.
- ✦ Make a cup of tea or do other small acts of kindness.
- ✦ Look out for changes, when someone doesn't seem like themselves.
- ✦ Acknowledge feelings and ask if there is any way you can help.
- ✦ Educate yourself by reading about mental health issues on the websites and other resources listed below.

www.time-to-change.org.uk also lists small things you can do to stay well at work.

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 mental health and supporting workers who experience problems.

For people who need immediate help

If you think that someone in your workplace needs urgent help with mental health problems, this is what SANE, the UK mental health charity, recommends that they do.

For general crisis support, advise them to:

- call or text a friend or family member
- call SANEline, a specialist mental health helpline 0300 304 7000 6pm–11pm
- call Samaritans listening service any time 116 123
- call NHS 111 by dialling 111
- go to the local Accident and Emergency department if they are feeling suicidal or if they have self-harmed and are concerned about it.

If they already have contact with mental health services, advise them to:

- contact the local Community Mental Health Team (CMHT)
- contact their crisis team if they have one.

If they have had no contact with mental health services, e.g. it may be the first time they have been in crisis, advise them to:

- contact the out-of-hours GP service. Google ‘Out of hours GP in x’ (give your location); alternatively the GP surgery will provide an answer phone message advising who to contact in an emergency, together with other useful telephone numbers
- make an appointment with their regular GP, as this is usually the first point of contact for anyone concerned about mental health issues.

Key to services offered



For people who need help from the NHS

GPs

They can advise about appropriate treatment for mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, and provide access to professionals who can provide talking therapies, such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

NHS

The main NHS website has pages about mental health www.nhs.uk/Livewell/mentalhealth and a list of mental health helplines. From the same web page you can search for local face-to-face and telephone services. There is also helpful advice about returning to work after mental health problems.

The NHS has produced a helpful list of ten stress-busting tips. www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression. Stress is not a mental illness but excessive stress can lead to a range of problems if it is not dealt with. There are many causes of stress at work, including bullying. These tips would provide a good basis for an initial discussion and an action plan as part of a midlife review if stress is a key issue. The tips include getting support from a range of professionals.

NHS WellMind is a free NHS mental health and wellbeing app designed to help you with stress, anxiety and depression. The app includes advice, tips and tools to improve your mental health and boost your wellbeing.

Sources of general help

Age UK

Has a page about supporting mental well-being as you get older www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing. You can download a practical guide *How to Look after your Mental Health in Later Life*, which would be helpful for anyone who is worried that retirement may have a negative impact on their mental health. This has been produced by the Mental Health Foundation www.mentalhealth.org.uk. You can call the Age UK Advice Line on 0800 169 2081 or make an email enquiry by visiting the 'Contact us' page. There are also local branches of Age UK.

Citizens Advice

You can download a free fact sheet *Help with Mental Health Problems* from www.citizensadvice.org.uk/healthcare. You can get free impartial confidential advice from your local CA Bureau, either face-to-face or by telephone on the Adviceline 03444 111 444. Visit the CA website for details of how to get advice by email, how to join in web chat, and to search for your nearest local service.

Mind

Also has an excellent free online guide *Work and Mental Health*, including tips on how to deal with stress or bullying at work www.mind.org.uk/information-support. The website has an A to Z of information and advice on a range of mental health topics. You can call the Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or email them on info@mind.org.uk. A range of languages are available. There are also local branches of Mind, some of which provide face-to-face services.

MoodTools

An app designed to help you combat depression and alleviate your negative moods, aiding you on your road to recovery.

Re-think mental illness

www.rethink.org/about-us does not provide emergency help, but has an advice line 0300 5000 927 or will reply to emails info@rethink.org. Re-think also provides local support groups and mental health services.

Samaritans

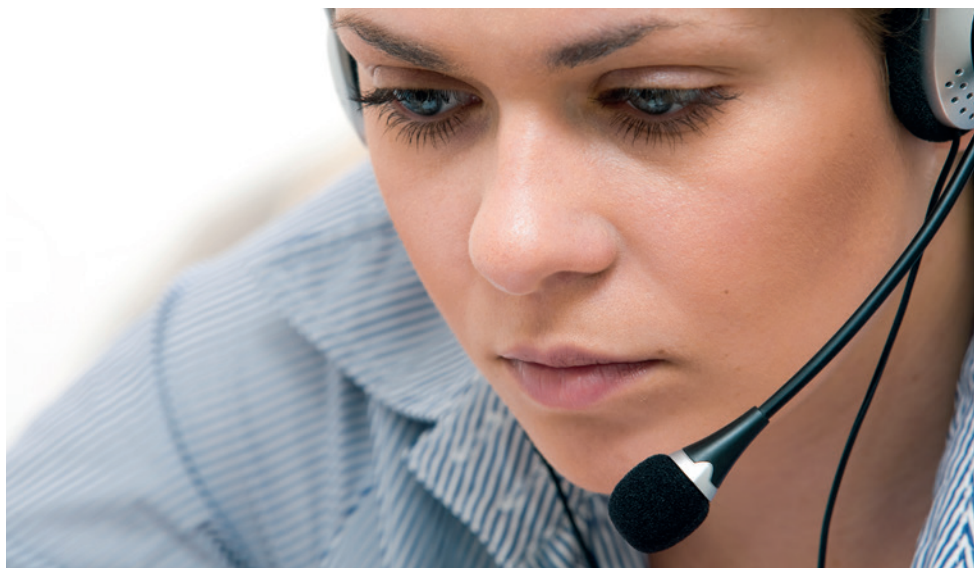
A safe place for anyone who is struggling to cope, 24/7. Call free on 116 123, email jo@samaritans.org, or visit www.samaritans.org to find details of the nearest branch.

SANE

Offers information and emotional support to anyone affected by mental health problems. www.sane.org.uk. It also offer emotional support by text (sign up for TextCare). You can also get help from others online in the SANE mental health forum or help by telephone 0300 304 7000.

Time to Change

Useful pages about mental health in the workplace www.time-to-change.org.uk. You can access a range of free resources through their mind-map which provides links to other parts of the site. Resources include how to stay well at work, how to support a colleague or to get support from employers, legal aspects and topics for a lunch-and-learn session or Time to Talk day, with some short films to start the discussion.



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 union
- Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB)
- public library
- Samaritans
- Community Mental Health Team
- Age UK
- Mind
- Re-think support group

For each you can note:

Organisation

What they provide

Local office address and directions

Telephone

Email

Website

Contact name

Organisation

What they provide

Local office address and directions

Telephone

Email

Website

Contact name

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TUC and unionlearn resources

Other signposting guides in this series:

- Support for carers
- Health and well-being
- Financial planning and pensions

Unionlearn

www.unionlearn.org.uk

Unionlearn publications

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications including *Mental Health and the Workplace: A TUC Education workbook* and information about the TUC Education course www.unionlearn.org.uk/courses/mental-health-awareness

Union learning Climbing Frame website and learning themes

www.climbingframe.unionlearn.org.uk/Home

TUC eNotes

Supporting Mid-Life Development

www.tuceducation.org.uk

TUC

Other publications about workplace mental health are available at www.tuc.org.uk including *How Are You? Mental Health at Work: a young workers' guide*.

All unionlearn publications may be made available for dyslexic or visually impaired readers, on request, in an agreed electronic format or in accessible formats such as Braille, audiotape and large print, at no extra cost.

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