

## Questions and comments on health promotion and employment policies

**Q** Won't employees think we're interfering in their private lives?

**A** It depends what you do and how you do it. Offering information, help, advice and support is not the same as telling someone what to do or not to do. Showing concern is not the same as prying. Clear policies and procedures which apply to everyone will avoid discrimination or inconsistency in the way individuals are treated.

For example: An alcohol policy is not about preventing people from drinking at all. It should raise awareness of when it is appropriate to drink; the possible effect of drink on someone's ability to work, and should offer help and access to treatment to people who have a problem.

**Q** Should we provide a range of health checks for all our employees, and won't this cost us a fortune?

**A** On the whole, general health checks for all your employees are not worthwhile. It would be more effective, and less costly for you, if you allowed staff paid time off to go to their GP or NHS clinic for appropriate screening and health checks. (*see Health Checks and Screening*)

**Q** We thought it would be good for the company image to get a team together for a corporate challenge 10km run, but no-one was interested.

**A** Any one item on its own may not attract support, particularly if it involves strenuous activity which people are not used to, and if it seems to be more to do with the company's needs than the employees'. Try introducing a range of opportunities which encourage people to try things out.

**Q** If we introduce a childcare leave policy or flexible working, won't staff who are parents constantly be taking time off to look after their children?

**A** One of the biggest stresses for parents is juggling the demands of work and their children's needs, especially when their normal childcare arrangements go wrong, for example if the child is ill or the school is unexpectedly closed for a day. Allowing a parent a few odd days off a year to deal with such emergencies is likely to have a significant impact in reducing stress and staff turnover. In the long run the employer benefits because less stressed workers are more productive, and lower staff turnover means lower recruitment costs.

For example: throughout the NHS there are policies which allow staff paid time off to fulfil carer responsibilities, such as when a child or other dependant is ill. Flexible working hours and job sharing are also common.

**Q** What benefit will the company/workplace get from an Equal Opportunities or a Harassment policy?

**A** Discrimination, even if unintended, cuts your company off from a vast pool of talent. 'Equal opportunity' does not mean treating everyone the same. It is about not making assumptions about people from particular groups but recognising their individual needs and abilities. Together with a policy against harassment, it's about finding practical ways to challenge and change the attitudes and behaviour of some people who are threatening or damaging to others. It's about looking at whether the organisation encourages and enables all your staff to reach their full potential. A climate of fear is not the best way to motivate people. People work best when they feel valued.

**Q** Aren't some people more likely to suffer from stress than others and isn't stress also caused by problems outside work? Surely we don't have to do something about that as well?

**A** Anyone can be vulnerable to stress, depending on the pressures they are facing at any time. Employers are responsible for making sure that work doesn't make their employees ill. They are not under a legal duty to prevent ill health caused by stress due to problems outside of work. But since non-work problems can affect people's performance at work, it is in the employer's interests to see if there are ways of relieving pressures at work so that combination of work and non-work pressures does not become excessive. It is better to try and help employees so as to avoid them having to take long term sickness absence.

**Q** Everyone gets a bit down at times. How can we in the workplace do anything about someone who seems depressed?

**A** Depression is more than just feeling sad or down. It is not a sign of weakness or laziness – it involves real chemical changes within the body and brain. Anxiety often arises as a reaction to stress or uncertainty. It can become a clinical problem when it is too severe for the person to handle and stops them from coping with everyday activities, leading to panic attacks and phobias. Since between 10% to 25% of adults suffer from anxiety and depression at some time in their lives, it may be an issue facing many employees and workplaces. People with either depression or anxiety can respond well to various forms of treatment. A supportive relationship can help people to cope. So, in the workplace, a supportive manager and a policy and procedure which recognises the role of the workplace in tackling problems, can help individuals to cope better.