

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Mental Health Network
www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/
toolkit/

Mind
www.mind.org.uk/

Wellbeing Project
https://thewellbeingproject.co.uk/
mental-health-toolkit/

EqualEngineers
https://equalengineers.com/
mental-health-first-aid/

Mental health at work: signs, symptoms and support solutions

Mark McBride-Wright provides an introduction to mental health issues in the engineering workplace, and ways that firms can support their employees.

Introduction

Mental health is a shared experience – it doesn't discriminate based on your background, gender or identity. Everyone is susceptible to poor mental health at some point in their life, and as the conversation around mental ill health increases, the taboo lessens. The barriers that once prevented us from talking openly about our experiences are being broken down the more society accepts its prevalence.

That said, what exactly constitutes a mental health issue?

Types of mental health issues

Mental health is a broad term that covers a range of mental disorders, such as anxiety, panic attacks, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and psychosis. However, the most common mental health issue in Britain is 'mixed anxiety and depression', with 7.8% of adults meeting the criteria for diagnosis¹.

Signs and symptoms

Mental ill health isn't always obvious. It's unique to every individual and an experience that affects people differently. However, there are some common signs and symptoms to look out for.

Physical

Those suffering from poor mental health can show symptoms of:

- | frequent head/stomach aches or other minor illnesses
- | trouble sleeping or concentrating
- | general drowsiness and feeling rundown
- | lack of self-care
- | distinctive weight loss or weight gain.

Emotional

Emotions affect us differently and can fluctuate with hormones, lifestyle change and major life events. However, some common signs to watch out for include:

- | irritability, aggression or tearfulness
- | loss of sense of humour
- | indecisiveness
- | brain fog (loss of concentration or difficulty remembering things).

Behavioural

Behavioural changes tend to be what people first notice when it comes to someone's mental

health. These include:

- | losing interest in social activities or conversations
- | increased conflict with others, especially loved ones
- | erratic or socially questionable behaviour
- | distinct personality shifts.

Mental health in the engineering sector

In October 2019, EqualEngineers released the first-of-its-kind *Masculinity in Engineering* report², revealing that:

- | over one-third of engineers would describe their mental health as fair or poor, and over one-fifth have taken time off work because of it
- | nearly one in five engineers admitted they had lost a work colleague to suicide
- | engineers are twice as likely to feel comfortable sharing their physical health problems than their mental health ones
- | men are 3.5 times more likely than women to admit they've self-harmed or considered taking their own lives.

These statistics are concerning for the engineering industry, and we should all keep them in mind when working with colleagues who display any of the aforementioned signs and symptoms. There are also specific work-related signs we can look out for. These include:

- | frequent errors, missing deadlines and/or forgetting assigned tasks
- | taking on too much work, working out of hours and/or offering to help with every new project (this can be a sign of someone trying to distract themselves from their personal issues)
- | Increased sickness or absence, or to a lesser extent, someone who is normally punctual consistently arriving late.

Ways to offer workplace support

At an individual level, simply asking someone how they are and letting them know you're there if they need someone to talk to can be all it takes. At an organisational level, the *Masculinity in Engineering* report suggests three approaches that can make a difference:

Treat physical and mental health the same way

Organisations tend to focus solely on physical

health. However, working cross-sectionally to embed positive wellbeing programmes and guaranteeing the funding and resources are available to ensure their success creates an inclusive mental health culture.

Make engineering more inclusive

A significant proportion of men in engineering feel excluded, or even discriminated against, by diversity and inclusion (D&I) programmes. As they make up the majority and are the most likely to suffer from poor mental health, tackling their feeling of exclusion in their workplace culture must be at the centre of wellbeing and D&I programmes (without diminishing the work or sanctity of those spaces to begin with).

This can be done by promoting the benefits of experiential learning and shared experiences, with the focus on tackling the 'toxic' in toxic masculinity – the reason why men find it so hard to open up about their mental health.

Offer flexible working

One thing the coronavirus has shown us is that flexible working solutions are possible and don't diminish the value or productivity of employees. Offering this work-life balance going forward is imperative for improving employee wellbeing.

Dr Mark McBride-Wright PhD, CEng, MChemE is the Founder and Managing Director of EqualEngineers, which supports engineering organisations in equality, diversity and inclusion, with a speciality on engaging the male majority.

The *Masculinity in Engineering* report from EqualEngineers is available at <http://bit.ly/EqEngMasculinityReport>.

Website: <https://equalengineers.com>

REFERENCES

1) Mental Health Foundation (2020) *Mental health statistics* [Online] Available at: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-most-common-mental-health-problems (Accessed: April 2020)

2) EqualEngineers (2019) *Masculinity in Engineering* [Online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/EqEngMasculinityReport> (Accessed: April 2020)