Reducing mental health stigma

Changing the way we think and act
about staff mental health in schools

One of the biggest barriers for teachers and other school staff reaching out for help with their mental health, is the stigma that still surrounds mental health. Education Support's 2020 Teacher Wellbeing Index found that more than half (57%) of education professionals do not feel they can share mental health issues or unmanageable stress with their employer. The main concerns highlighted by teachers were a fear they might be perceived negatively, a fear that a mental health problem or challenges would be seen as a sign of weakness, and a broader and general awareness of the stigma and shame around suffering from mental health issues. 30% of education professionals (35% of school teachers) considered there was a stigma (feeling of shame) which prevented them from talking about mental health problems at work.

In order for schools to be *psychologically safe* and for staff to perform at their best, talking about mental health, and reducing the stigma attached to it, is absolutely essential. If staff feel they can ask for help if they need it, without fear of shame, judgement or putting their career

and reputation at risk, then they will likely do this sooner, rather than later. This is better for everyone, including the students and school, as well as the individual teacher. If mental health and wellbeing are talked about as part of everyday business, then people will pay more attention to self-care, value, understand and use more the mental health support and initiatives that schools have put in place to support them, and will know the signs if they or their colleagues are struggling.

Education Support

In the Teacher Wellbeing Index, Education Support found that access to supervision, or safe spaces to discuss mental health issues remained extremely low at 8%. Staff being able to communicate any issues or problems is a good indicator of whether stigma is present (or not) in a school. Changing the way we think, act and talk about mental health is possible – and many schools have already started out on the journey to tackle and end mental health stigma. This resource outlines the main ways you can do this in your school, in a way that takes account of busy timetables, and a workplace where staff are often dispersed and extremely busy. Using the other resources in this hub will also help – it sounds obvious but talking about mental health by announcing a new resource (e.g. the *signposting to support document*) or creating a *mental health plan* inadvertently also tackles stigma and sends a message to staff that this is an important part of school life. Building mental health awareness is also a key way to tackle stigma– see our mental health awareness resource for more information on *this*.

How to tackle stigma in your school

The following are ideas, tips and approaches for tackling stigma in your school. Some of them will also overlap or be effective in raising mental health awareness, as well as tackling mental health stigma. You can try them on big and small scales, in departments, teams or across the whole school. Always remember to *signpost people* to where they can get help, when encouraging people to be more open about mental health generally.

Make a public commitment

Whether through signing a pledge (see resources below) or seeking accreditation, or through a mental health policy or plan, telling your staff and colleagues that you want to tackle mental health stigma and make your school a safe place to have conversations about mental health, is an important step in the process itself.

Know the facts/myth busting

Knowledge trumps discrimination. Mental illness is still poorly understood in society, so the better informed you are, the better equipped you are to identify and respond to stigma. Short exercises (such as those listed below) that you can do with department staff or teams which build mental health awareness and tackle misconceptions are a great way to overcome stigma.

Encourage conversation - let's talk!

Whether it's making a space for tea, cake and conversation at different times throughout the year for your staff (see our *mental health calendar*), putting staff mental health and wellbeing on staff room and team meeting agendas, holding regular one to ones with staff to check in on how they are (as well as how work is going), or by setting up a wellbeing network where people share experiences and tips for managing mental health and wellbeing at work, encouraging people to talk about mental health is essential for ending stigma. The more it's talked about, in an appropriate way, the better.

Speaking of which.... language matters

Certain words and language choices can stigmatise people living with mental illness as well as reinforce myths about mental health care. Don't say 'he's OCD'. People are people, not diagnoses - use person-first language. While they may seem minimal, these changes to wording help reinforce that mental illness doesn't define a person and that everyone deserves equal respect. Also, be wary of choosing wording that connotes a lack of quality of life for people with a mental illness – for example, 'she suffers from depression' or 'he is coping with a mental illness'. A person is simply 'living with' or 'has a diagnosis of' a mental illness. If someone has disclosed a mental health problem to you then ask them how they'd like to have it talked about.

Produce, implement and communicate a *mental health at work plan*

This plan will include a range of different activities but needs to include activities to tackle stigma. Senior leaders should champion this plan and lead by example in changing the conversation on mental health.

Lead from the front

Prevention and early intervention are the most effective ways to support people to have good mental health at work, rather than tackling problems after they arise. To help this happen, leaders across your school have to visibly act to promote good mental health and drive forward activities to challenge stigma. Staff are more likely to open up about their own mental health if there is a clear signal from school leaders or senior management that this is not just ok, but something they do themselves. Leaders who get this right take responsibility to commit to cultural improvements, participate in training themselves and break stigma about mental health and career progression. Good senior leaders are open about their experiences, their coping mechanisms and tips for resilience, which can help to normalise the conversation and reduce stigma.

Managers for mental health

Good managers don't try and do too much and do not try to be therapists. They are conscious of the signs of poor mental health, clear on the support available and 'check in' with individuals at appropriate times. They encourage safe disclosure and employee led ideas for adjustments. Make sure your managers have the right training to do their job properly - deliver sessions for line managers on how to have an important conversation, with a particular focus on mental health. Ensure managers also put a wellbeing check in on agendas for one to one sessions with staff.

School mental health champions/groups

Using mental health champions across your school to promote anti-stigma activities and continue the conversations about mental health is a great way to make sure everyone in the school knows about mental health and the school's wellbeing commitments. These champions can work together as a group and should include senior leaders - they can organise events, initiatives and signposting to support, with the full support of senior staff and HR too.

Storytelling

The power of people telling their own stories, and being honest, cannot be underestimated in challenging workplace stigma around mental health. This has been proven repeatedly by employers across the country. Encourage staff at all levels to write blogs and share their experiences through internal communications or the staff intranet. If you think your staff will struggle to do this, ask for anonymous submissions and gradually work up to people putting their name to their story. Senior leaders contributing helps with this. There is a guide below which explains how to do this safely.

Regularly check in on staff wellbeing and measure progress

A routine and periodic review of staff mental health and wellbeing will tell you if your efforts to tackle stigma and support staff to have good wellbeing at work are paying off. To do this you could establish a cross-functional group to take forward the mental health agenda within your workplace who could review progress against your action plan/commitments made. You could also use a staff survey to support this, if you run one, or informal feedback mechanisms. Remember that if you're school is one that people feel it's safe and constructive to offer feedback, you're on the right track already!

Suggested resources

In addition to the ideas and suggestions above here are some downloadable resources you can use. These tools will help bring about changes through policy and practice. They range from a conversation starter tool, webinar about storytelling, and a school wide commitment, to short exercises you can do with teams, departments, whole schools and as an individual, to change the conversation on mental health.

- **Sign up to the TTC Wales pledge**
  you can make a public commitment to ending stigma at your school by clicking here and signing up to the organisational pledge.

- **What does stigma feel like?**
  A 5-10 minute exercise to be used with staff to show the impact of stigma and show you understand that it exists.

(Please note that the download asks everyone to stand up – we suggest you change the language to be inclusive of anyone who isn't able to do this if you need to do so e.g. asking people to put their hands up instead of standing up)

- **This is me storytelling webinar**
  This webinar provides practical support on how to run a Storytelling campaign, especially focused around how to encourage your staff to share stories, especially if you're limited on time or resources.

- **Mental health mythbuster**
  Use this with staff to challenge misconceptions and learn the real facts around mental health. 15 minute exercise.

- **The elephant in the room**
  A 5 minute exercise for the staff room that also can also be used for a longer discussion at another point too.

- You can download other exercises to help tackle stigma in the workplace for use with groups of staff or individuals by visiting *this website*.

- **Wellness action plans**
  wellness Actions Plans (WAPs) are an easy, practical way of helping you to support your own mental health at work and, if you are a manager, helping you to support the mental health of your team members. Everyone can complete a Wellness Action Plan – you don't need to have a mental health problem in order to feel the benefits. It just means that you already have practical steps in place to ensure you are supported when you aren't feeling great. That link will take you to a template and a guide for employers and employees.

- You can find lots of short exercises and ideas for interactive ways to have more conversations about mental health and tackle stigma *here*.

- You can also visit the *Mental Health At Work website* to search for more resources and exercises to help tackle stigma at work.

Sources:

1. https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/sites/default/files/teacher_wellbeing_index_2020.pdf

2. https://www.sane.org/information-stories/the-sane-blog/wellbeing/five-ways-to-reduce-stigma-in-the-workplace

3. https://www.bitc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/bitc-wellbeing-toolkit-mentalhealthforemployers-may2016.pdf

4. https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/

5. https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/

6. https://home.barclays/who-we-are/our-strategy/diversity-and-inclusion/disability/this-is-me/

7. https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/get-involved/get-your-workplace-involved/employer-pledge/develop-your-action-plan

Education Support

The charity for everyone working in education