Mental health at work

How to support your people before absence happens



health shield

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A guide to early mental health support at work



Mental health absence is a growing challenge for UK employers. That said, it is not one that requires a large budget or a complicated strategy to begin addressing.

It starts with a manager who notices something is different and takes five minutes to check in. It continues with an organisation that makes sure every employee knows where to turn. And it is supported by benefits that give people practical access to the care they need, when they need it.

The tools in this guide are designed to help you take those first steps. Start with your managers. Give them the conversation guide and useful tipsheets. Add a wellbeing check-in to your next team briefing. And review what support you are already offering, and whether your people know it is there.

The biggest barrier to early mental health support is rarely resources. It is having the confidence to act before the problem becomes serious. This guide is designed to help you find that confidence.

Based on findings from the Britain at Work Report 2026, Health Shield Friendly Society. This guide provides general workplace wellbeing information and does not constitute medical or clinical advice. If you have concerns about a specific individual's wellbeing, please follow your organisation's HR processes and encourage the individual to seek support from a qualified professional.

Mental health at work: key numbers



Source: Britain at Work Report 2026, Health Shield Friendly Society.

The scale of absence

9.5

average **sick days per employee** in **2026**

Up from 7 in 2025

Mental health is a key driver, especially for **workers under 44**

The cost of feeling unsupported

Employees who **feel valued** and **supported** take

8.7

sick days a year

Those who **don't feel valued and supported** take

12.3

sick days a year

A retention risk, not just an absence one

1 in 3

employees has **considered cutting their hours or leaving work** due to health-related issues

57%

of those taking **four** to **six days off** for **mental health** have considered this

And it rises to **65%**

for those taking **more than six days off** due to **mental health**

What employees want

People value healthcare and support that's easier to access.

76%

want help with the cost of healthcare

72%

value a counselling or support helpline

70%

see a mental wellbeing app as important

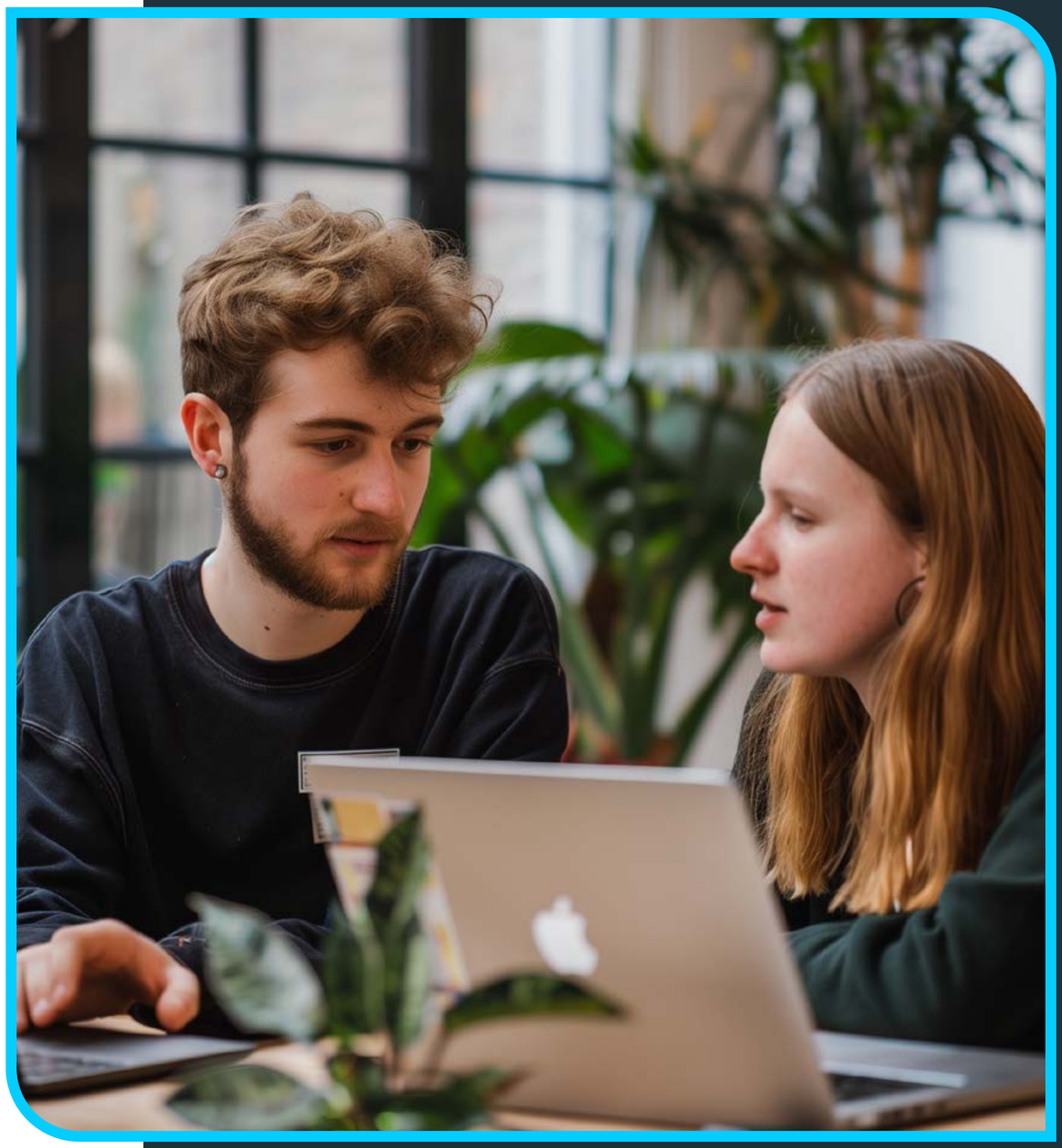
Helping people sooner, not later

Early intervention is about acting on the first signs of stress or low mood, rather than waiting for a crisis. When you step in early, you can ease worries before they take a real toll on someone's health and happiness.

Why early support matters:

- People recover more quickly when they get help sooner.
- Small, supportive steps can stop bigger problems forming.
- A culture of openness makes it easier for people to ask for help.
- Teams feel more connected, valued, and supported.

Early intervention isn't about having all the answers. It's about noticing, listening, and pointing people towards the right help at the right time.



The cost of feeling unsupported

- Employees who feel valued and supported take 8.7 sick days a year
- Those who don't feel valued and supported take 12.3

What helps people act early

Our Britain at Work survey found that:

- Employees think that a wide range of health and wellbeing benefits would help them reduce absences or return to work quicker
- Employer encouragement also plays an important role in helping people seek support sooner

Spotting the early signs



What to look out for

Everyone has off days. But lasting changes in someone's mood, energy, or behaviour can be a sign they're struggling.

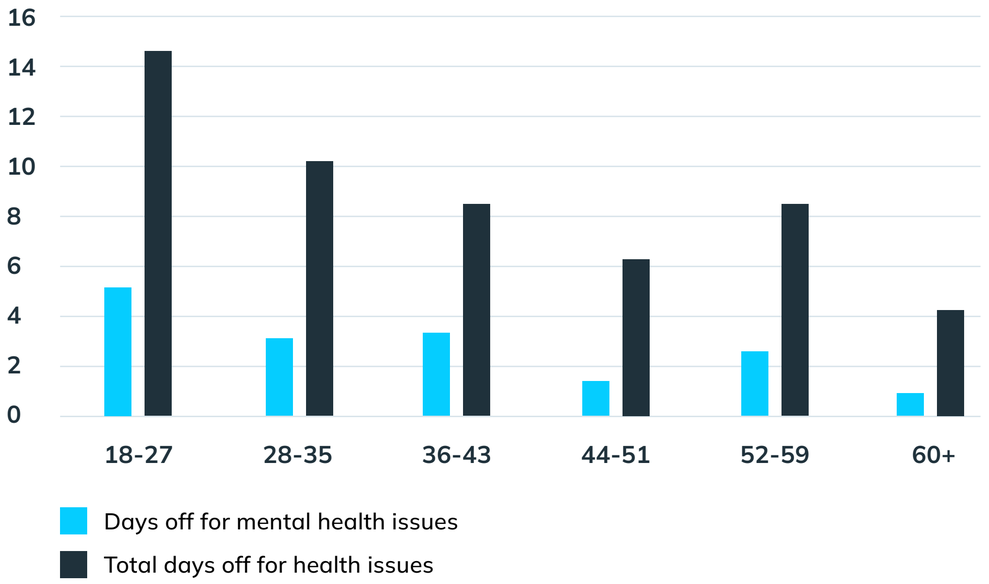
Common signs to notice:

- Becoming quiet, withdrawn, or less sociable.
- Changes in mood, like irritability or low energy.
- Struggling to focus or keep up with workload.
- More time off, or arriving late.
- Changes in appearance or daily habits.

If you spot these signs, there's no need to have all the answers. A simple, caring conversation is often an important first step.

Younger workers are feeling the strain most

The Britain at Work Report found that younger employees are taking the most time off for mental health, which may suggest they are among the people in your workplace who need the most support.



Toolkit tipsheet

How to recognise and manage stress in your team

Get the tipsheet

How to open up the conversation

Talking about mental health can feel daunting. On the other hand, a kind, open chat can make a real difference. You don't need to be an expert, you just need to listen.



Toolkit tipsheet

5 Tips for starting a conversation about mental health with colleagues

Get the tipsheet

Simple steps for a caring conversation:

1. **Choose a quiet, private moment** where you won't be interrupted.
2. **Ask gently and openly**, like "How are you doing at the moment?"
3. **Listen without judgement** and give them space to talk.
4. **Avoid jumping to fix things.** Sometimes people just need to feel heard.
5. **Point them to support** and let them know they're not alone.

A good conversation reassures people that it's safe to speak up. That sense of safety is the heart of early intervention.

Building a culture of openness

People are far more likely to ask for help when they feel safe to do so. A culture of openness takes time to build, but small steps add up.



56% of employees say they would feel comfortable talking about mental health with their manager or employer.

That means almost half may stay silent, even when they are struggling. This is why it matters to know how to open the conversation and make support easy to access.

Make it safe to speak up:

- Lead by example: When leaders talk openly about wellbeing, others feel they can too.
- Check in regularly: Make wellbeing part of everyday conversations, not just formal reviews.
- Celebrate honesty: Thank people for sharing and respond with care.
- Keep things confidential: Trust grows when people know their privacy is respected.

When openness becomes part of your everyday culture, asking for help feels normal, not scary.

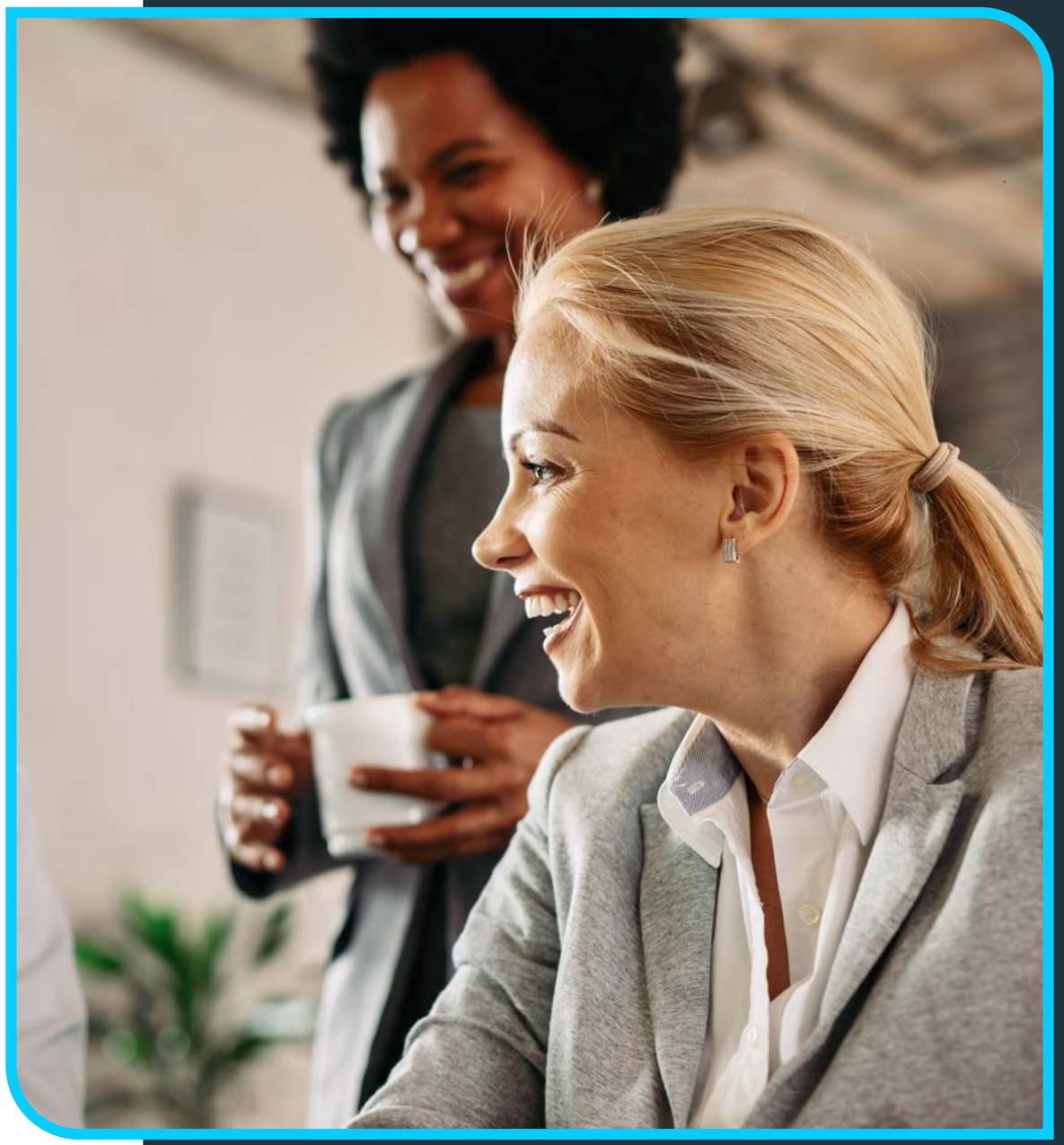
Toolkit tipsheet

Creating a culture of openness in the workplace

Get the tipsheet

Easing pressure early

Stress is a normal part of work and life. But when it builds up unchecked, it can affect health, focus, and happiness. Spotting and easing stress early helps your people stay well.



Toolkit tipsheet

6 self care tips for a more balanced working day

Get the tipsheet

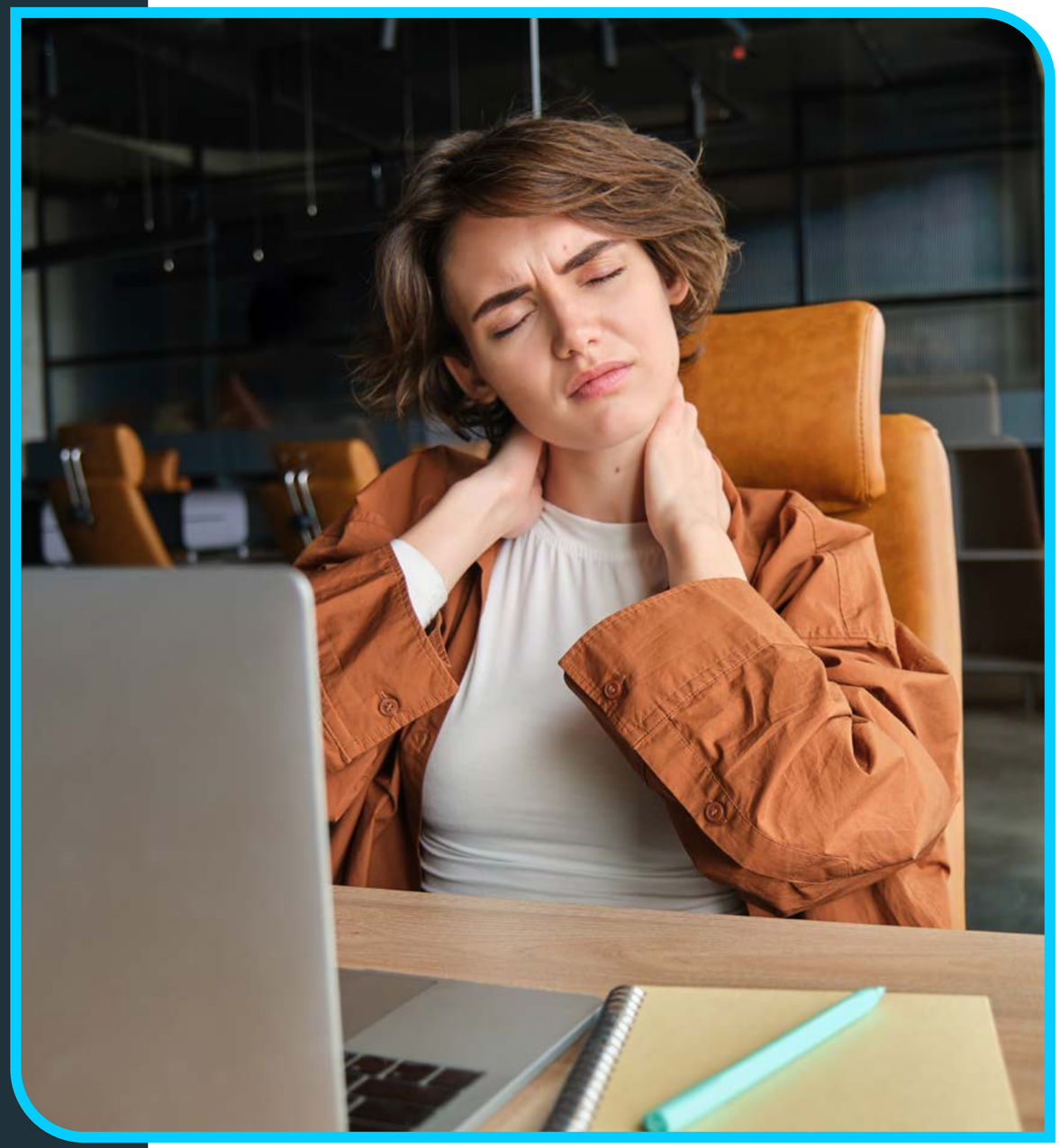
Practical ways to support your team:

- Keep workloads realistic and check in on capacity.
- Encourage regular breaks and proper time off.
- Talk openly about pressure points and busy periods.
- Offer flexibility where you can, so people can balance work and life.

Small changes can make a big difference. A quick check-in or a lighter week can stop stress from becoming something more serious.

Spotting & preventing burnout

Burnout creeps in when stress goes on too long without a break. People may feel exhausted, detached, or unable to cope. The good news is that early support can help.



Toolkit tipsheet

6 ways to manage chronic stress

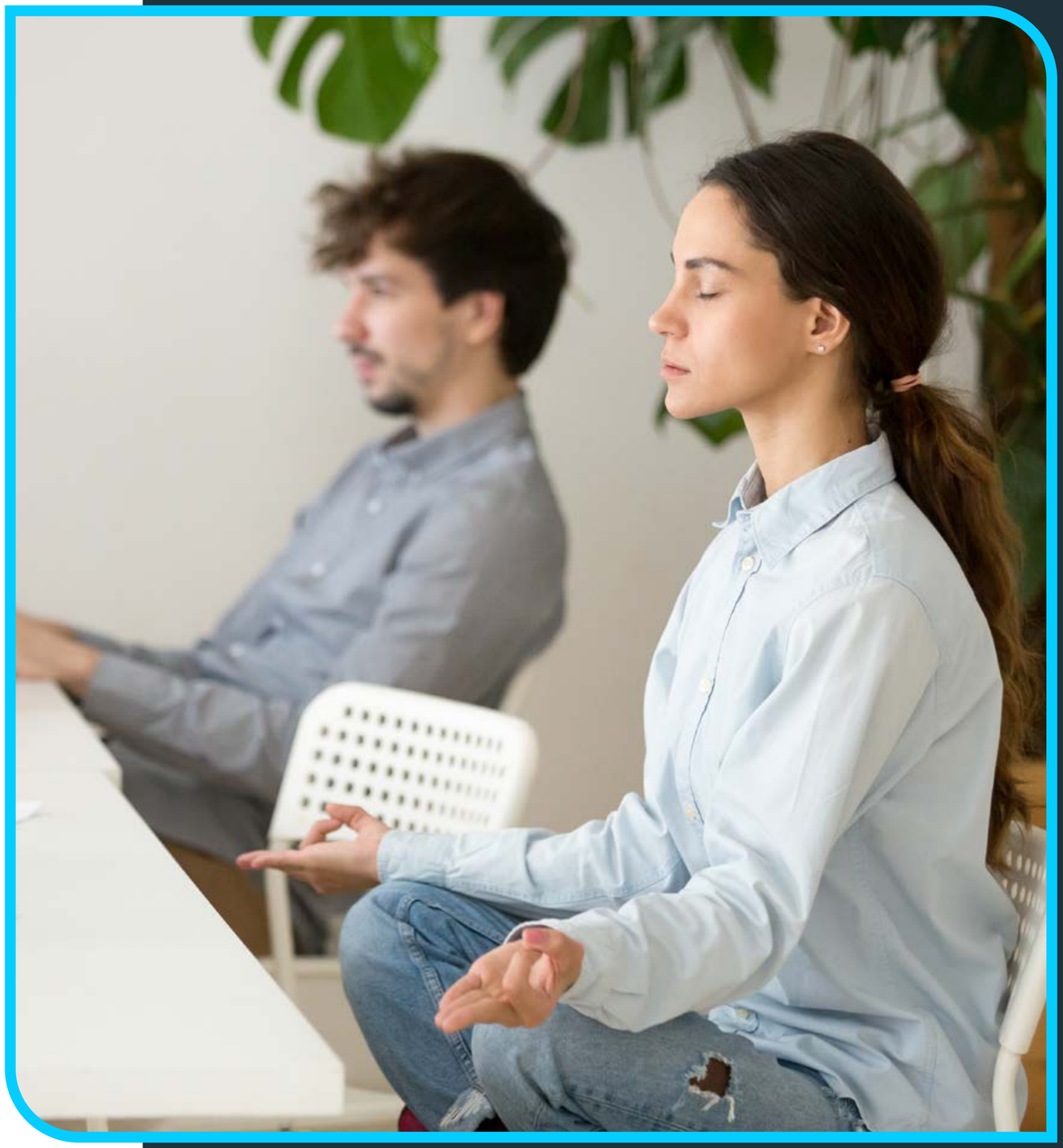
Get the tipsheet

Signs of burnout to watch for:

- Constant tiredness, even after rest.
- Feeling overwhelmed or unable to switch off.
- Losing motivation or interest in work.
- Becoming withdrawn or short-tempered.

If you spot these signs, talk to the person with care. Look at workload, rest, and the support around them. Acting early helps people recover before burnout takes hold.

Encouraging self-care



Self-care isn't a luxury. It's a simple, everyday way for people to look after their own wellbeing. As an employer, you can make space for it and encourage it.

Toolkit tipsheet

Find your calm: simple ways to encourage relaxation in the workplace

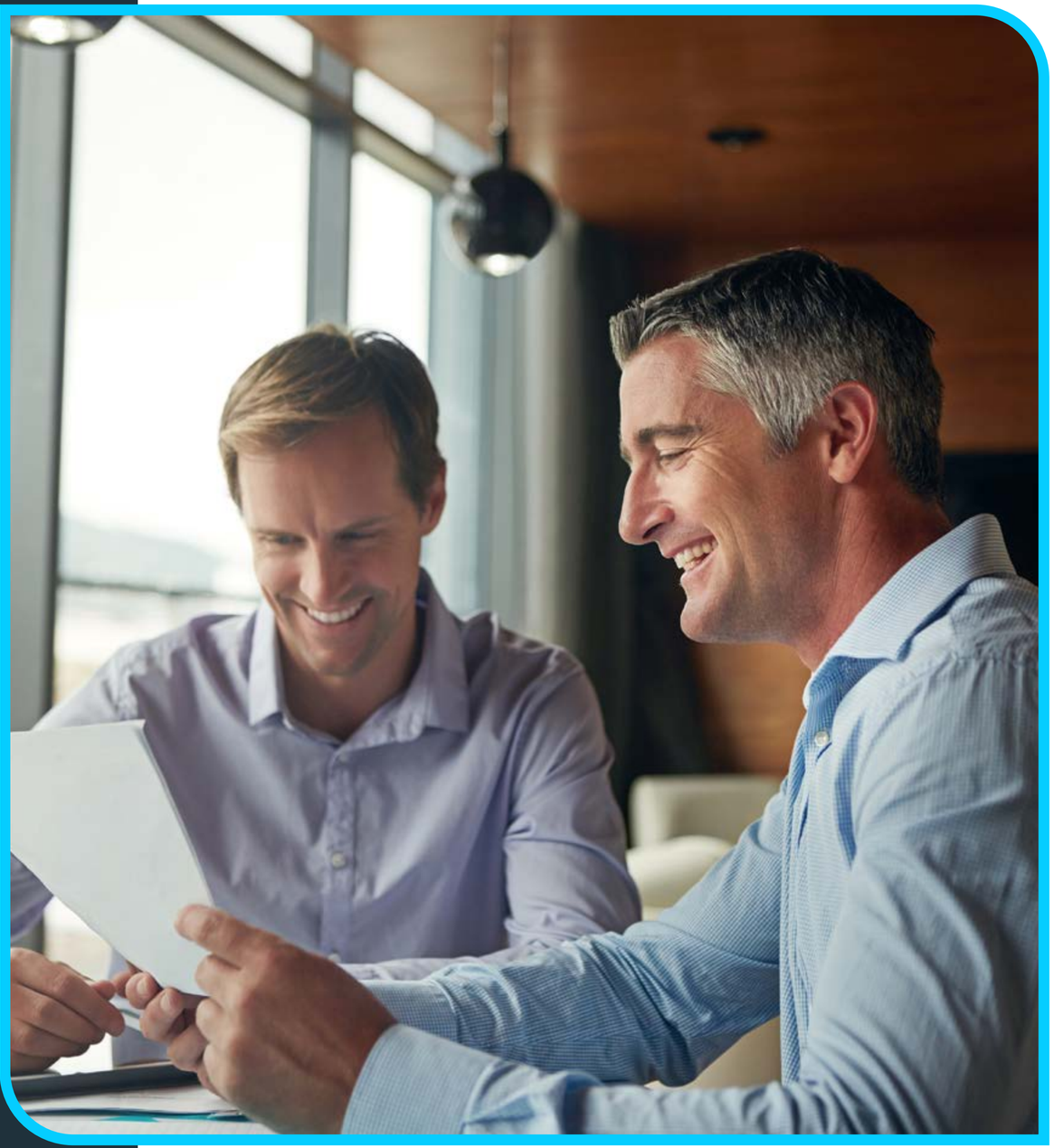
Get the tipsheet

Ways to support self-care at work:

- Encourage regular breaks and movement during the day.
- Promote healthy habits, like good sleep, rest, and balance.
- Share simple wellbeing tips your team can try.
- Respect boundaries between work and personal time.

When you champion self-care, you show your people that their wellbeing matters, both in and out of work.

Supporting men’s mental health



Men can find it harder to talk about how they’re feeling, and may be less likely to ask for help.[1] A thoughtful approach can make it easier for everyone to open up.

Toolkit tipsheet

6 types of self-care for men to live happier and healthier lives

Get the tipsheet

Ways to support men’s mental health:

- Normalise talking about wellbeing across your whole team.
- Share stories and resources that speak to men’s experiences.
- Offer different ways to reach out, not just face-to-face chats.
- Make support easy to find and simple to access.

Reaching everyone means meeting people where they are. Small, inclusive steps help make sure no one slips through the cracks.

1. Seidler ZE, Dawes AJ, Rice SM, Oliffe JL, Dhillon HM. The role of masculinity in men’s help-seeking for depression: a systematic review. Clinical Psychology Review. 2016;49:106–118. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12938354/

Support that works for everyone

Mental health affects us all, but everyone's needs are different. An inclusive approach makes sure your support reaches every member of your team.



Toolkit tipsheet

4 tips to create a more inclusive workplace

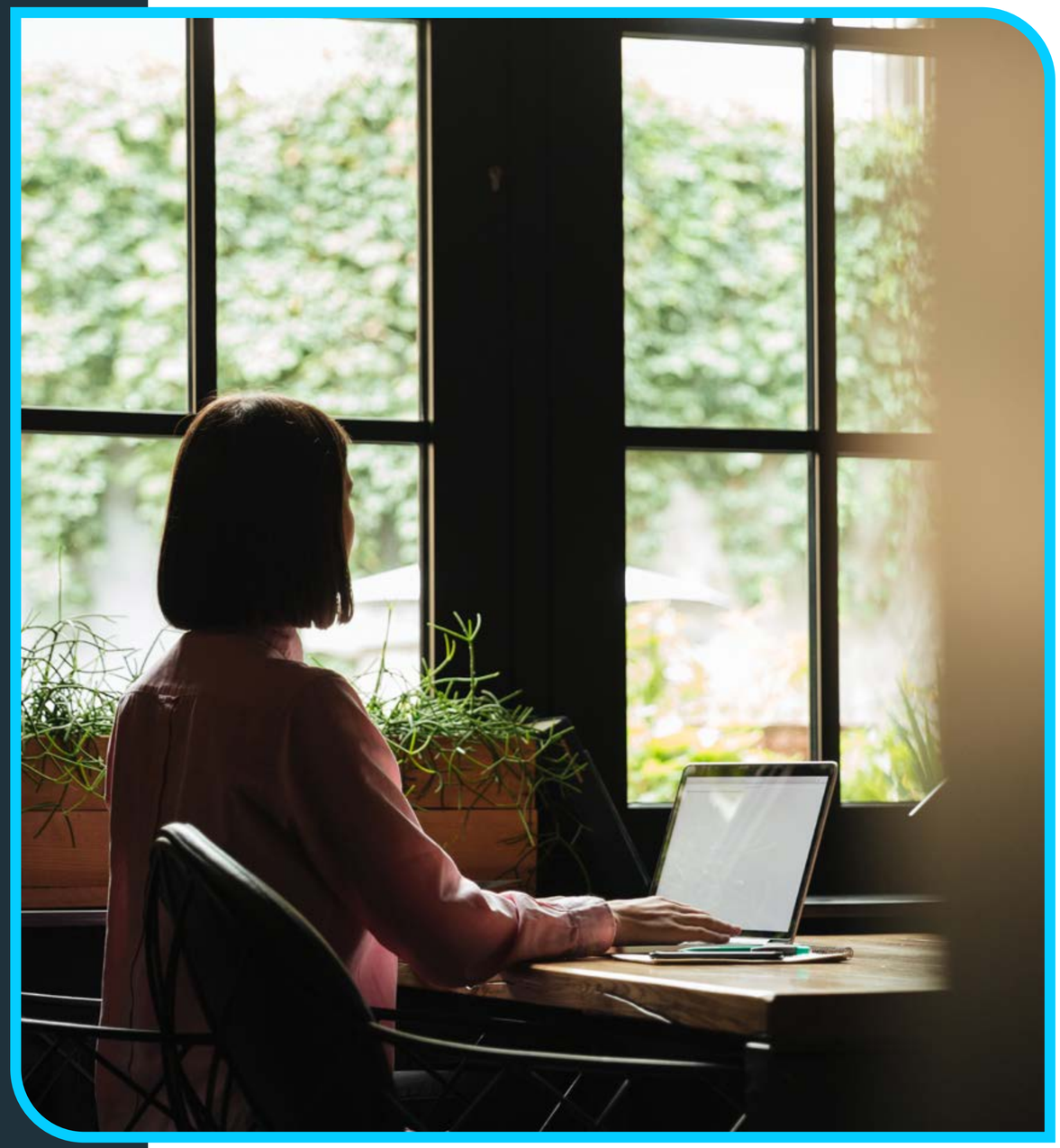
Get the tipsheet

How to make support inclusive:

- Recognise that people experience and express struggles differently.
- Offer a range of support options to suit different needs.
- Use clear, welcoming language that includes everyone.
- Listen to your team and shape support around what they tell you.

When people feel seen and understood, they're far more likely to reach out. Inclusion and openness go hand in hand.

Being there in the hardest moments



Grief touches everyone at some point. When someone is grieving, simple acts of kindness and understanding can mean the world.

Toolkit tipsheet

5 tips for supporting someone going through grief

Get the tipsheet

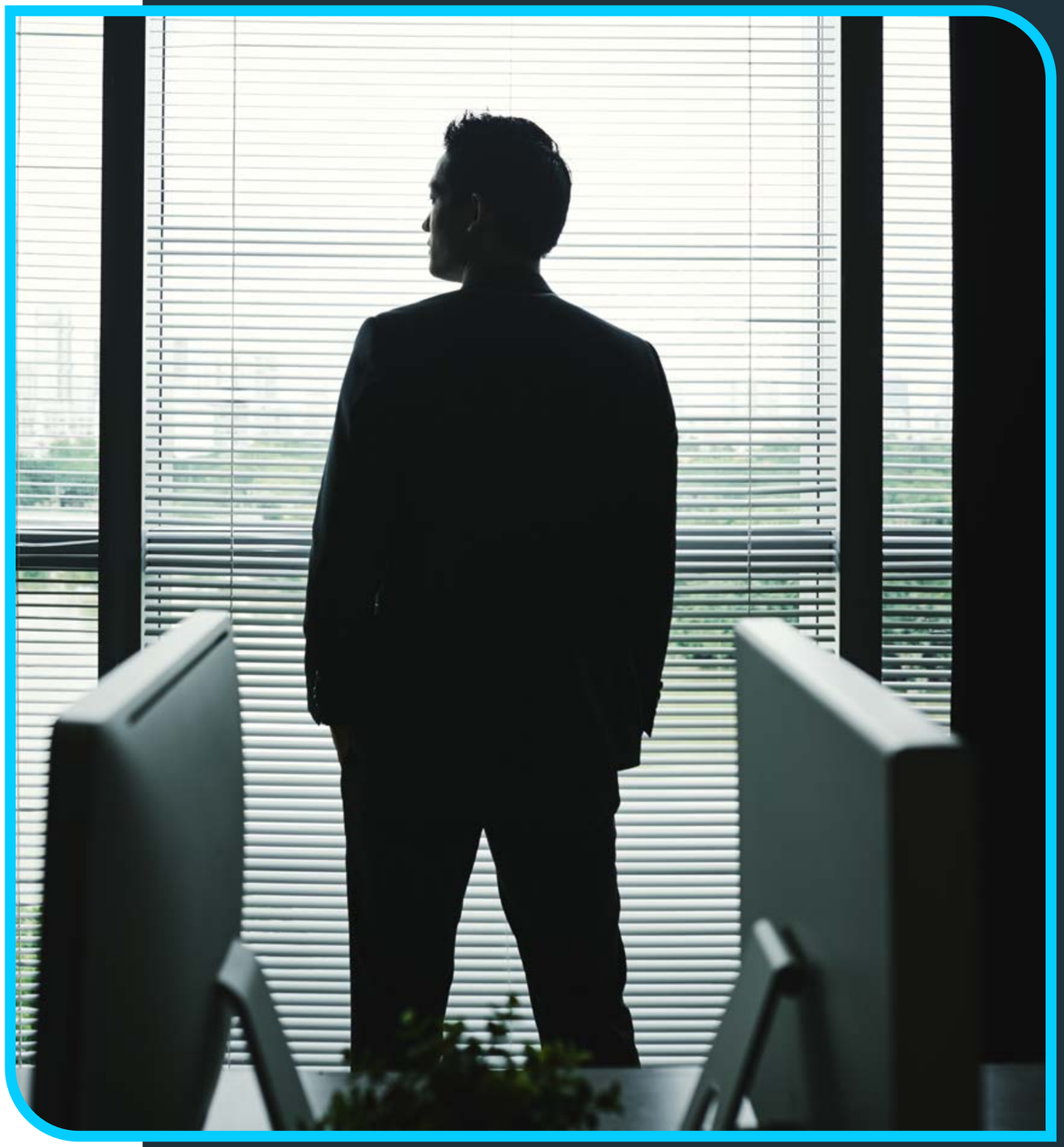
How to support someone who's grieving:

- Acknowledge their loss gently and let them know you care.
- Be patient. Grief has no timeline.
- Offer flexibility around workload and time off
- Check in regularly, without pressure.

There's no perfect thing to say. What matters most is showing up with care and letting people know they're supported.

Raising awareness of suicide

Talking about suicide can feel difficult, but awareness saves lives. When people know how to spot the signs and offer support, they can make a real difference.



Toolkit tipsheet

Free resources to educate yourself on suicide awareness

Get the tipsheet

Knowing how to help:

- Learn to recognise when someone may be struggling.
- Reach out with care if you're worried about someone.
- Listen without judgement and take concerns seriously.
- Know where to point people for professional support.

You don't need to be an expert. Showing you care and helping someone find the right support can be a powerful first step.

Supporting seasonal wellbeing

The seasons can affect how people feel. Darker winter days can lower mood and energy, while busy periods like the festive season can add pressure.



Toolkit tipsheet

Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Get the tipsheet

A festive season that feels good – financially, physically & mentally

Get the tipsheet

Caring for people all year round:

- Be aware of how the time of year may affect your team.
- Encourage natural light, movement, and connection in winter.
- Offer extra understanding during busy or stressful seasons.
- Share practical tips to help people feel their best year-round.

A little awareness goes a long way. Supporting people through the seasons shows you care about their wellbeing every day of the year.

Checklist: are your benefits working hard enough?



A quick review for HR and People teams

Use this checklist to sense-check whether your current wellbeing support is set up to catch problems early.

Listening to your people:

- [ ] Have you surveyed employees about their health and wellbeing needs in the past 12 months?
- [ ] Do you know which benefits are being used – and which aren't?

Early intervention support:

- [ ] Do your employees have access to a confidential counselling helpline?
- [ ] Is there a mental wellbeing app available as part of your benefits package?
- [ ] Can employees access a virtual GP without a long wait?

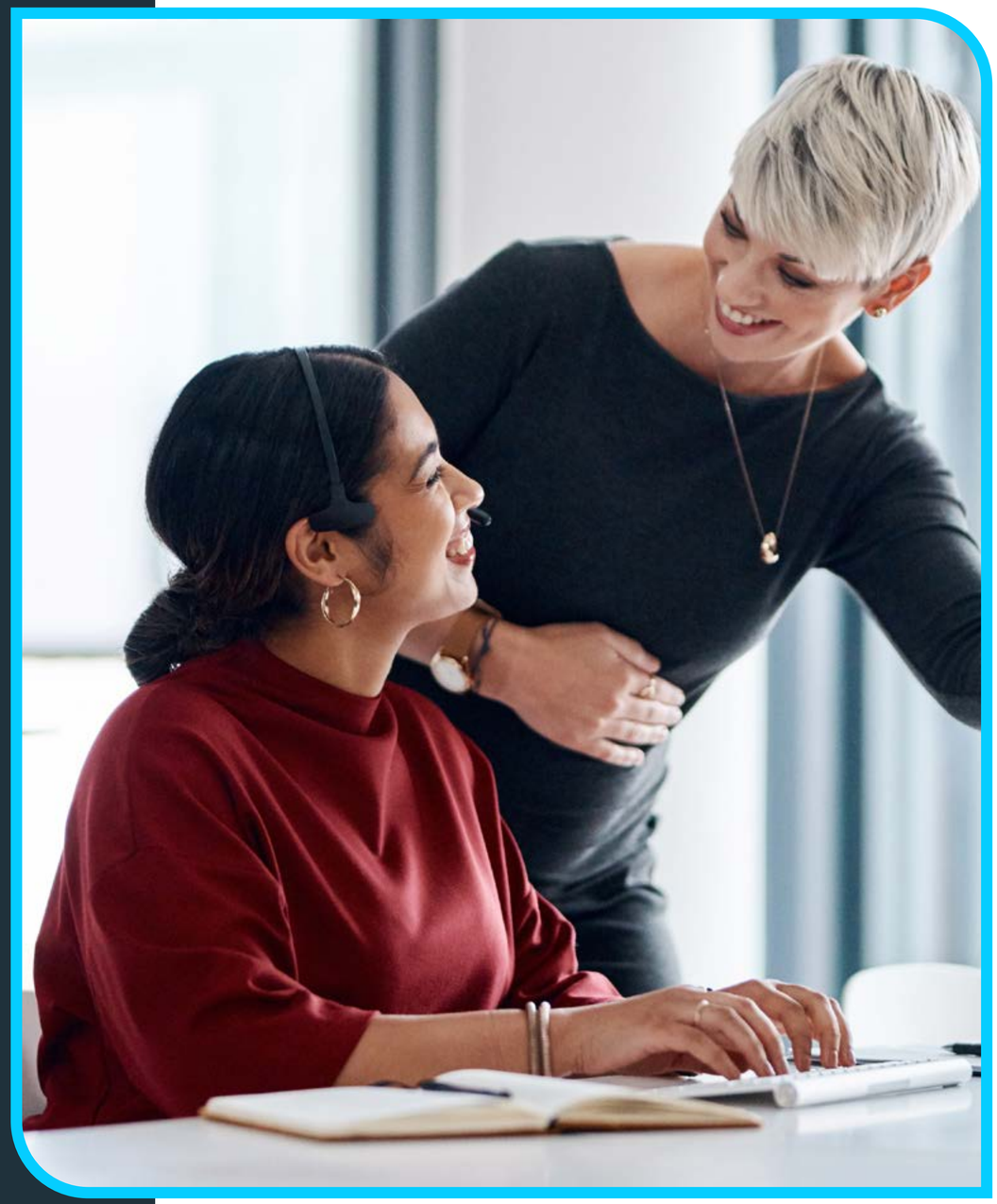
Manager readiness:

- [ ] Have your line managers been given guidance on how to have supportive conversations?
- [ ] Are wellbeing check-ins a regular part of one-to-ones across your organisation?

Communication and access:

- [ ] Do your employees know what support is available to them?
- [ ] Can they access it easily – within two minutes?

Giving employees somewhere to turn



Early intervention only works if employees have somewhere to go when a manager spots the signs or when they decide to seek support themselves. That is the gap a health cash plan can help to close.

A Health Shield health cash plan can help provide employees with access to:

- **A confidential counselling helpline** – available when they need to talk, without a referral or a long wait
- **A mental wellbeing app** – practical, self-guided support for everyday stress, sleep, and anxiety
- **A virtual GP** – access to appointments with a qualified GP, often on the same day, removing the barrier of NHS waiting times for initial support

These services are practical, affordable routes to early support that sit alongside what NHS services provide, and that can help employees manage concerns before they escalate.

When employees know they have a clear, accessible route to support, they are more likely to use it. And when they use it early, the impact on both their wellbeing and their performance at work can be meaningful.

Success story: Supporting those who support others

The Southern GP Federation Support Unit (SFSU) helps coordinate federations in Northern Ireland. They support 71 GP practices who care for around 443,000 patients.

The mental health challenge

Employees across the Southern GP Federation work in demanding front-line roles, tackling the complexities of healthcare delivery every day. From advanced nurse practitioners to paramedics and mental health practitioners, the work can be physically and emotionally taxing. A recent employee wellbeing survey made that clear, revealing high levels of stress both at work and at home.

"Our staff look after other people every day. That's their job, so we need to know they feel supported by us as their employer."

Michelle Digney, HR Manager

Building a culture that supports mental health

SFSU is committed to fostering a culture of care and inclusivity. Before turning to Health Shield, they had already taken meaningful steps to support their people – training mental health first-aiders, running a workplace wellbeing survey, and introducing an Employee Assistance Programme to give staff round-the-clock confidential support.

With those foundations in place, SFSU turned to Health Shield to help address the everyday cost of healthcare that many staff were carrying themselves. The plan gave people money back on essential costs like dental, optical, and physiotherapy. It was simple to use, flexible enough to extend to partners and children, and – crucially – easy to access, in their own time.

The plan resonated with employees and helped soften the financial strain of looking after their health. It also reflected something SFSU cares about deeply: looking after the people who spend their days looking after others.

"Since we introduced Health Shield, we've seen a very positive shift in mindset. People are using it for themselves, their children, or their partners. We work across 72 locations, so we needed something inclusive that people could access in their own time."

Michelle Digney, HR Manager

Ready to take action on mental health in your workplace?

A health cash plan can help your people get support sooner, ease everyday healthcare costs, and show your team they're valued.

See the full story

Want to go further?

If you want to give your employees faster, more accessible everyday health and mental wellbeing support, a Health Shield health cash plan may help.

From a confidential counselling helpline to a 24/7 GP and mental wellbeing app, a health cash plan can give every employee a practical route to care, without long waiting lists or inflexible appointment times.

Find out how a health cash plan could work for your team by getting in touch with us today.

Discover more:
healthshield.co.uk

Let's talk: 01270 507137

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