

## True or False?

Before answering these questions you will need to view the film called *The Breakdown* which is located at: [www.shift.org.uk/employers](http://www.shift.org.uk/employers)

This section explores;

- What to do if you notice a member of staff is distressed
- How to recognise signs that a member of staff could be experiencing poor mental health
- Measures that line managers can take to help prevent issues from escalating to a point they impact on ability to work effectively
- Measures that managers can take to help promote the mental wellbeing of their staff



To help you find the answers to these questions and/or address other questions you may have on managing and supporting people with mental health problems, see the Shift Line Managers' Resource (LMR) at [www.shift.org.uk/employers](http://www.shift.org.uk/employers)

**1.** Paul's outburst at the photocopier was a clear sign that he was distressed. The following list could be signs of mental distress and things to look out for in colleagues. True or False?

- |  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| <b>A.</b> Poor performance                     | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |
| <b>B.</b> Increased sickness absence           | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |
| <b>C.</b> Changes in a persons usual behaviour | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |
| <b>D.</b> Increased alcohol consumption        | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |

**2.** Unlike Mark, Bernie had previously noticed that Paul had been 'on the brink for sometime'. The following are measures that Mark should have taken which may have helped prevent Paul's condition from escalating to the point he suffered a crisis in the office. True or False?

- |   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| <b>A.</b> Mark should have used their regular contact, such as appraisal or other one-to-one meetings, as an opportunity to find out about any problems Paul had been experiencing.                         | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |
| <b>B.</b> When having informal chats with Paul, Mark should have used open ended questions to give Paul the maximum opportunity to express any anxieties or concerns.                                       | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |
| <b>C.</b> Even though he recognised Paul was distressed and it was affecting his work Mark should have waited for Paul to approach him about his problem as it's not his job to ask about 'personal' issues | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |
| <b>D.</b> Allowed Paul a say in how he does his work or how he could improve his performance.   | <b>TRUE or FALSE</b> |

**3.** After Paul's outburst Mark takes him off to have a cup of tea to find out what has been going on. The following are just some of the things that Mark should take into account during their 'chat'. True or False?

- A.** As a line manager it is not Mark's responsibility to look at addressing Paul's mental health problem and so it would be better to just have a generic chat about work issues. **TRUE or FALSE**
- B.** Mark should ask Paul if he has any ideas about adjustments to his work that may be helpful. **TRUE or FALSE**
- C.** Since the chat is of a personal nature and is confidential, notes about the conversation should not be recorded. **TRUE or FALSE**
- D.** Mark should give Paul information about the support available, and how to access it. **TRUE or FALSE**

**4.** The following are some of the steps that Bernie could have taken to improve the mental health and well-being of his staff which could have perhaps avoided Paul's outburst from occurring in the first place. True or False?

- A.** Bernie could have spoken to his staff about issues that might have an impact on their mental well-being **TRUE or FALSE**
- B.** Bernie could have provided his staff with information about promoting positive mental health, available services and how to access support **TRUE or FALSE**
- C.** Promoted good mental health practices such as operating flexible working hours **TRUE or FALSE**
- D.** Created a work culture where everyone is treated with respect and dignity and made it clear that bullying and harassment would not be tolerated **TRUE or FALSE**

**Visit [shift.org.uk/employers](http://shift.org.uk/employers) for more information.**

## Answers

**1a-1d.** Are all true. All four answers could be an indication that someone is experiencing poor mental health. However, mental health problems can affect people in different ways. So these and other symptoms should not, by themselves, be looked on as a 100% reliable diagnostic tool for identifying mental distress. The best thing to do when you recognise a potential sign is simply to ask someone how they are feeling. The earlier you notice that an employee is behaving out of character and action is taken to address it, the better. Early help and support can help prevent people suffering distress from becoming more unwell. There is a wealth of information and existing literature on how to identify the early signs of mental health distress. For example, see accompanying website [www.shift.org.uk/employers](http://www.shift.org.uk/employers).

**2a. True.** Regular work planning sessions, appraisals or informal chats about progress are all ordinary management processes which provide neutral and non-stigmatising opportunities to find out about any problems an employee may be having that impact on his work. If Mark, once he recognised signs of distress, had asked about any factors that were affecting Paul's health to start with he could have discovered the problem earlier and been able to find ways in which to alleviate them and support Paul.

**2b. True.** In meetings, Mark should have asked questions in an open, exploratory way to invite Paul to discuss what had been happening and how he was feeling. It would have been up to Paul how much he wanted to disclose but he should have been given the opportunity to do so. If Mark had done this he could have found out what was wrong earlier and discussed options for helping Paul overcome his problems and continue working satisfactorily.

**2c. False.** Under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) it is Mark's duty to ensure that Paul is not made ill by his work. Failure to assess the risk of stress and mental health problems and to take steps to alleviate them could leave him open to potentially costly compensation claims. It was therefore bad practice that Mark did not give Paul the opportunity to raise any issues earlier and to just expect Paul to go to him if he was unhappy. It is tempting as a manager to put off or avoid any conversations that may bring up emotional issues as they can feel awkward. People are often fearful as they don't know what to say or how to respond. But many people find it hard to admit they are having problems and by asking someone how they are can create an environment where staff feel able to raise any concerns. This can help any issues from building up to a point they damage individual's and their ability to perform at work.

**2d. True.** Mark should have given Paul a say in how he does his work. Other things that Mark could have done to promote Paul's mental wellbeing at work were to A.) Ensure that Paul clearly understood his role and Mark's expectations. B.) Made sure that the demands placed on Paul were fair and realistic. C.) Provided Paul with the information and support that he needed to do his job effectively. D.) Protected Paul from conflict and unreasonable behaviour. E.) Communicated with Paul during times of change and listened to his concerns. *(See page 12 in the LMR for other measures that Mark could have taken to identify Paul's distress earlier)*

Download a poster of 'handy tips for line managers' from [www.shift.org.uk/employers](http://www.shift.org.uk/employers)

**3a. False.** Although it is true that it is not Marks' responsibility to try to work out or diagnose what is wrong with Paul, it is his responsibility under the DDA to ensure that he is not made sick as a result of his work and to also identify and address barriers to normal working life that Paul is experiencing.

Mark's initial reaction was to discipline Paul but this would just prevent Paul from revealing anything, and would certainly not help address the issue. It's therefore important for Mark to take Paul somewhere quiet where they can talk in private and re-enforce that he is looking to assist, not seeking to discipline him. Instead Mark should reassure Paul that it is OK to be upset and be supportive, asking open questions to give Paul the opportunity to express himself fully.

By really listening and giving Paul the time to answer it will provide the space to gain insight into the problem and possible solutions and/or actions that need to be taken. Each situation will be different, meaning that each case will need to be treated differently. Sometimes the most appropriate course of action may be to listen then let the person go home but it must be judged on a case-by-case basis.

*(See page 14 in LMR for further examples of things to ask/cover when an employee is distressed)*

**3b. True.** Work related stress is common and stopping this turning into distress does not mean you have to make large changes to working practices. Most adjustments are simple, easy to implement and based on common sense. They should naturally suggest themselves following discussion between the manager and the employee about what might be helpful and what is possible. To help make reasonable adjustments that are appropriate it would help Mark if he was more informed about the impact of Paul's condition. It is important however that Mark does not put undue pressure on Paul to disclose sensitive information as it is up to Paul on how much he reveals. *(See page 20 in the LMR for ideas of reasonable adjustments)*

**3c. False.** Paul may be reluctant to talk if he does not feel it is safe to open up with Mark, especially if he has seen other colleagues with similar problems being discriminated against. It is therefore key for Mark to create a supportive environment and be clear about the limits of his confidentiality.

Although personal information can be kept confidential and it is also up to Paul to decide precisely what he wants colleagues to be told, at the same time Mark cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality as there may be issues that may have a health and safety risk, which may need to be discussed further.

Also, in terms of the meeting itself it is important that the main points from the conversation are in fact recorded - not just to protect the organisation and Paul but also to show what actions were agreed and used as a check that they have been carried out fully.

**3d. True.** Mark should give Paul information about the support the organisation provides such as occupational health, counselling and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP). Mark should also ask Paul if he is aware of other appropriate support available that he could access to help solve issues outside of the work environment such as relationship, bereavement, counselling, drugs/alcohol services/advice, legal or financial advice.

**4a. True.** Sometimes people do not know that healthy choices such as eating a balanced diet and reducing caffeine consumption can have a positive effect on their mental health. By making staff aware of these things Bernie could have helped promote their mental wellbeing, thus preventing mental ill health. *(See page 9 of the LMR for 'Tips for staying happy' or download from [www.shift.org.uk/employers](http://www.shift.org.uk/employers).)*

**4b. True.** If Bernie had created greater awareness around mental health problems amongst his staff, for instance by giving them information including the sources of help available and how to access services, they would have then been in more of a position to recognise symptoms both in themselves and in colleagues quicker. They would also have been willing and able to access help earlier thus preventing problems from escalating.

**4c. True.** Promoting good mental health practices such as flexible working hours enables employees to balance the demands of home life with work. By creating a more positive working environment it helps individuals to perform better, benefiting themselves and the organisation.

**4d. True.** It has been shown that a work culture where everyone is treated with respect and dignity and where bullying and harassment is not tolerated creates a reduction in sickness absence, grievance and discrimination claims, complaints and the incidence of mental health problems.