



When help is at hand

Health care is a high-stress working environment, so strong support structures and a culture of openness are essential

HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS and carers in any sector – in health care, in voluntary work – are known to be more at risk of serious stress-related and psychological problems. They take troubles on to their shoulders and do not always know when to stop.

At Birmingham Children's Hospital we treat and support 90,000 children, young people and their families each year. Working with often seriously ill children can, understandably, have an effect on employees, many of whom deal with sensitive and emotional situations on a daily basis.

X factor

Managing stress and wellbeing among our staff is a major issue and one we take seriously. We know that resilient and happy teams are able to offer the best possible care. Our teams make a difference to the experience of our patients and their loved ones. They provide the X factor in the treatment.

What we have learned is that it is possible to build an approach based on open and ongoing conversations about stress that provides more of a sense of

security and support. We also know our nurses and managers have an important part to play in spotting signs of stress in colleagues and encouraging the honesty that is needed.

The hospital put in place an external counselling service a few years ago but this did not provide the flexibility and responsiveness for it to succeed.

While employees were acknowledging they were experiencing stress, sickness absence rates continued to be low. They ran at levels just above 3%, compared with 4% in the NHS nationally, suggesting committed employees were fighting through their issues, while potentially bottling up problems.

In 2014, we put together a revamped package of health and wellbeing activities to cover the basics of sleep, diet and exercise, alongside training for senior nurses and managers about stress awareness, as well as the opportunity to learn skills such as mindfulness.

An integral part of the improved staff offering was a counselling service that offered 24/7 expert telephone support, and face-to-face counselling.

Working with an external psychological wellbeing specialist from employee assistance programme CiC meant we knew we had a full service in place. Any employee can contact the telephone service for a confidential discussion with a trained counsellor. The issue is worked through in conversations, or can be triaged, with the employee being referred for off-site, face-to-face counselling. No one has to wait more than one week for an appointment and usually no more than two days.

Responsiveness

Most important has been the level of responsiveness and flexibility we have seen from the service. We have to be certain our employees get the right response when they need it. Staff under pressure have found an important outlet for talking about and dealing with their challenges. In the period from November 1 2014 to the end of October 2015, 11% of employees had used the service.

Commonly, the conversations related to dealing with raised levels of pressure and problems with relationships – at work or home. And 44% of people who used the telephone service went on to take the opportunity for face-to-face counselling.

We encourage a culture of openness here – it is all part of our sense of being a community. If there is a problem, we tackle it constructively. Most importantly, since the changes, the number of staff reporting work-related stress has fallen.

We have to be realistic and understand that in a working environment like ours stress will occur. Our children and families do not expect or want our nurses to be smiling robots. What is needed, though, is confidence. Confidence that any of us, at whatever level in the organisation, can talk about how we are feeling and that there is no stigma.

This might sound straightforward in itself, but in the context of a busy hospital, it is nurses in management positions who have the responsibility for setting the tone, and getting the balance right between listening, supporting and the daily demands of delivering a service.

By Sara Brown, deputy chief officer for workforce development at Birmingham Children's Hospital