



# BUILDING EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Employers should focus on supporting the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of staff, says **Tynan Barton**

**M**ental wellbeing is currently the talk of the corporate town, with mindfulness having become one of the latest tools with which employers are striving to help staff manage their stress levels.

The technique, which uses meditation and breathing exercises to help focus users' attention on the present and relieve stress-inducing thought processes, is proving useful for employers keen to reduce mental ill health among their workforce, as well as sickness absence rates.

But despite employers' increasing use of, and acceptance of, the need for workplace mental wellbeing support, many organisations now discuss the subject in terms of emotional resilience.

Emotional resilience is the capacity with which an employee is able to bounce back after adversity and properly adapt to stress. It differs from mental resilience, which focuses on cognitive thinking and how an individual processes information.

Dr Wolfgang Siedl, head of health management consulting at Mercer, says: "If [an individual] has a value system, they generally feel more centred in themselves and better able to be tolerant of other peoples' beliefs."

Key elements of emotional resilience can include: emotional flexibility that allows an employee to respond to change; the ability to foster good relationships; to feel a sense of control over one's own workflow; and the ability to establish a sense of community at work.

Siedl says: "An employer should be very interested in [community], because if [employees] have a release they have an opportunity to get rid of some of the tension. There's nothing wrong with water-cooler conversations to let off steam."



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Greg Levine, VitalityHealth

While resilience is not something an employee is born with, it is something that they can learn. However, employers may feel torn between wanting to be seen as a caring employer, yet not being perceived to be too interventionist, but the workplace can be crucial to building employees' resilience. Fujitsu, for example, piloted an emotional resilience programme after identifying issues that were impacting employees.

Employers can start by creating a health profile of their workforce to ascertain if, and where, staff need support, because ignoring cases of mental ill health can be costly in the form of, say, staff presenteeism, whereby staff turn up for work but do not perform at their best.

#### IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, READ THIS...

- > Emotional resilience is the ability with which an individual is able to bounce back after periods of stress and adversity.
- > Emotional resilience can be taught and the workplace is an ideal setting to support employees' mental health.
- > Employers can build and support employees' emotional resilience to manage stress levels and reduce sickness absence.

Employers can use claims data for existing benefits, such as private medical insurance (PMI) policies, to keep track of employees' mental-ill-health-related claims.

#### Acknowledging stress

Greg Levine, director of corporate and intermediated business at VitalityHealth, says: "When [staff] actually go for support, [stress] is one of the bigger costs of overall PMI spend. There are a lot of people who never acknowledge the fact they are stressed and acknowledge that stress is impacting their presenteeism. It's probably one of the most damaging elements of wellbeing in the workplace right now."



As part of an emotional wellbeing strategy, organisations should highlight the benefits that can help to build employee wellbeing, such as employee assistance programmes, which can offer therapeutic support to staff.

Benefits providers can also help to communicate and promote an organisation's benefits support, for example wellbeing days and fairs at which they showcase the support and programmes on offer.

Larger organisations may also consider allocating space for classes such as meditation and yoga.

But structured resilience training and mindfulness programmes, rather than ad-hoc benefits support, can teach employees techniques and tips on how to deal

with pressure and recognise signs of stress in themselves.

Charles Alberts, a senior consultant at Aon Employee Benefits, says: "The vital part is not only personal resilience, but also organisational culture."

"If [an employee] gets to work and there's an environment that is trusting, one in which they can speak their mind, one where they're supported and they feel empowered in the work that they do, that environment is so key to their resilience in the workplace."

### Line manager training

Line manager resilience training is an equally important part of a workplace resilience strategy. An emotionally resilient manager can hold teams together under pressure.

Kate Nowlan, chief executive officer at employee assistance programme provider CIC, says: "A really good manager, who is in touch with their inner resilience or values, will be able to support teams."

Starting resilience training at the top of an organisation, with business leaders, is key to building an organisational culture that incorporates an open and trusting environment. Aon's Alberts says: "Where I've seen resilience programmes work well is when [employers] start at the top. If there is a firm with partners or directors, you start with them because

they, more than anybody else, need to be absolutely

## CASE STUDY BROWNE JACOBSON

### Law firm offers mindfulness and resilience support

Mindfulness and emotional resilience are hot topics for Browne Jacobson. The law firm communicates the importance of workplace wellbeing through its induction programme.

It also runs workshops on how to build personal resilience as part of its learning and development programme.

Yana Belmega, learning and development project manager, says: "[The focus] is around

increasing resilience, so looking at what [resilience] is and the difference between pressure and stress, and so on."

The organisation extended these workshops to create a programme for supervisors.

In partnership with insurer Aviva, the organisation has also held a talk for employees with a mindfulness professor.

In addition, Browne Jacobson runs an annual wellbeing fair

across its UK offices, which promote the health and wellbeing benefits available to staff, including the resilience workshops, as well as putting staff in touch with benefits providers that can give

them more information on any support that they require. Staff also have access to a local chaplain and a wellbeing and faith room that can be used during their working day.

A sports and social committee runs a variety of activities for staff, and a community action committee supports employees with two days out of work to take part in a community project.

Helen Whitt, HR adviser, says: "We have our targets to meet, and having well-engaged people here is critical to our business. We recognise that stress and issues arise internally from work, and externally from outside work, and we do this to support people in work."



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resilient. They probably are to a large extent, but everyone can learn, no matter what amount of experience they have."

Emotionally resilient staff can help to boost performance and, therefore, an organisation's bottom line. Nowlan says: "Those are staff who not only work very hard, but also know when they need to take their holidays, be with their family or have social support outside work. That will help performance at work."

But benefits professionals need to be able to clearly demonstrate these positive

### KEY STATISTICS

**39%** the total cases of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2013-14 for all work-related illnesses. (Source: The labour force survey, Office for National Statistics, updated October 2014)

**11.3m** the total working days lost due to stress, depression or anxiety in 2013-14, an average of 23 days per case of stress, depression or anxiety. (Source: The labour force survey, Office for National Statistics, updated October 2014)

**46%** the number of respondents that cited unrealistic time pressures as a significant type of stress. (Source: Britain's healthiest company, VitalityHealth [previously PruHealth] and Mercer, July 2014)

**26%** the proportion of respondents that cited financial concerns as a major type of stress. (Source: Britain's healthiest company, VitalityHealth [previously PruHealth] and Mercer, July 2014)



outcomes to their business leaders to help secure their buy-in and future investment in their strategy.

"One could back up the business case by showing how many [staff] are stressed in the workplace, and therefore reducing stress and underpinning it with research that shows how much impact resilience training has on that could

quantify the reason why a board should buy into it," says Mercer's Seidl.

Positioning their strategy within their organisation's risk strategy is one way for benefits professionals to win the attention of their leaders.

Once their strategy is in place, employers may consider addressing workplace spiritual resilience, but some might consider this to be a stretch too far, with some assuming the subject refers solely to metaphysical beliefs.

### Purpose in life

But spiritual resilience can be defined as having meaning or a purpose in life, which can help to further support employees' sense of wellbeing.

CIC's Nowlan says: "The spiritual bit is really the holding of values; somebody working for a non-governmental organisation probably has a very strong set of values as to why they are working in that sector, and that really supports emotional resilience."

Overall, employers that take an interest in the emotional resilience of staff will find that their support will contribute to a more motivated workforce, and one that is more engaged with the business goals of the organisation **EB**



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## Viewpoint



**Emma Mamo**  
is head of workplace wellbeing at Mind

### Employers have many options of how to support staff wellbeing

Prolonged stress can both cause and worsen mental health problems, which can result in sleep and concentration issues. Tackling the sources of stress in the workplace can prevent issues spiralling. Employers should prioritise the wellbeing of all staff.

Organisations that promote staff wellbeing are rewarded in terms of increased staff morale and productivity and decreased sickness absence. Small, inexpensive changes such as offering flexible-working hours, buddy systems and regular catch-ups with managers can make a huge difference.

Despite some progress, most employees still don't feel comfortable talking about their mental health at work. According to a poll we conducted, published in November 2014, 95% of employees who took time off sick because of stress gave their boss another reason for their absence, such as a headache. Similarly, an Axa PPP Healthcare survey, published in April 2015, found that 69% of managers didn't feel mental ill health was a valid reason for time off sick.

Under the Equality Act 2010, an employer has a duty to make adjustments for an employee with a disability, including a mental health problem. But supporting staff is more than a legal obligation; it is part of being a responsible employer.

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