

## Mental health awareness playing our part in making work better

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Acas Chief Executive Susan Clews has worked in Acas frontline operations and as Director of Strategy and Chief Operations Officer.

Acas is known for the evidence-based guidance we provide to employers and workers on the law and good practice. But sometimes providing 'what to do' guidance alone won't do the trick. Sometimes we want to challenge the way workplaces look at issues with a view to making working life better for all, and to make workplaces more productive.

If ever there was an area which required a mindset shift, it's the management of mental health at work.

### The changing mental health agenda

Thanks to the fabulous work of charities, campaign groups and the voice of those with lived experience, the agenda is changing, and the principles in the [Stevenson/Farmer review on GOV.UK](#) on managing mental health at work have laid a solid foundation for the future. At Acas we are committed to supporting this changing agenda.

We believe that positive mental health at work is a shared responsibility – one in which individuals, managers and employers all have a key role to play. This is reflected in the Acas framework for positive mental health at work we launched last year, and our [training programme](#), which has rolled out across the country.

As we develop our thinking, and the support we provide, we need to know more about our audiences. And we have started by commissioning a new poll: [Stress and anxiety at work: personal or cultural?](#) The focus is on employees, and in particular their experiences and coping strategies around stress.

### Recognising the triggers and solutions

I'm intrigued to think back. Did my parents talk about stress at work? Did I, and my peers, when I started working? Perhaps stress was always a factor, under a different name. Or perhaps it's a genuine outcome of the increasing complexity and pace of work. I'm not sure, yet I fully recognise as a leader and employee that workplace stress is part of today's vernacular.

Statistics continue to demonstrate high levels of work-related stress and anxiety. Our new poll is no different. Two thirds of employees (66%) say that they have felt stressed and/or anxious about work in the past 12 months.

It's reassuring that a majority (79%) feel "very" or "fairly confident" in identifying the causes of what makes them feel this way. Self awareness is a good starting point. The most commonly cited reasons were workload (60%), followed by the way individuals are managed (42%), and balancing work and home life (35%).

And when it comes to solutions, the responses very much reflect the causes, with employees saying "a reduced workload" (33%), "better flexible working opportunities" (26%) and "more clarity around what is required from me for my job role" (23%) would help reduce their levels of stress and anxiety.

## Recognising each other's roles

Asked whose responsibility it is to help manage stress and anxiety about work, a majority (72%) say that it is up to line managers to take action, 60% felt it was for the individual, and 31% said their colleagues (31%). A quarter (28%) said this was the responsibility of HR.

The spread of responses indicates that employees are well on the way to understanding that responsibility for mental health does not sit at the door of one individual. This is encouraging.

### Line managers and colleagues

The importance placed on the role of the line manager is also understandable, since they are often seen as the gateway between individuals and the organisation. Yet the poll found that less than half (43%) said they would talk to their manager if they were feeling stressed and/or anxious.

Colleagues were also identified as playing a key role, with more than one in five (22%) saying that "more supportive colleagues" would help them feel less stressed or anxious. Indeed, it's encouraging to see that over half (57%) have in the last 12 months personally asked a colleague how they are feeling because they were concerned that they were stressed or anxious.

For this to be sustainable, we need to be sure that organisations encourage a baseline awareness of the triggers and signs of stress at work, a knowledge base applicable across the whole organisation.

## A move to solutions

In its commitment to supporting mental wellbeing at work, Acas continues to develop its services to ensure that the gap between experience and management of stress at work can be filled.

And we are committed to continuing to explore the very different experiences and perspectives of people in different roles when it comes to mental wellbeing at work, and making our new framework a reality.

But there are also wider challenges about the way organisations operate when it comes to mental wellbeing, and the cross over here with the ['good work' agenda from the IPA](#) is noteworthy.

## Wider challenges that affect mental health

Unlocking workload concerns must in part involve considering job design, and the way we respond to technological change – both key drivers of good work. Addressing line manager capability is another dimension that chimes across the good work and mental health agendas.

And it's no coincidence that achieving better work life balance, including greater flexibility in the way we work – considered by our poll respondents as important for managing stress – is also an important component of the good work agenda.

## A critical turning point

This is a complex agenda, and a challenging one. But the profile and significance of mental health at work is now at a critical turning point.

As Chief Executive I recognise the need to take action to change the mindset as well as the action plan. This involves walking the talk – senior leaders must visibly demonstrate commitment to an open culture when it comes to mental wellbeing at work; to supporting opening conversations and facilitating learning opportunities; and to addressing the stressors that undermine wellbeing, and can erode our opportunities for good work.

## Read more

[Stress and anxiety at work: personal or cultural?](#)