



**Women's mental  
health issues –  
not to be ignored  
at work**

# Women's mental health issues – not to be ignored at work

UNISON recognises that the excessive pressure of an increasingly demanding work culture in the UK is one of the biggest challenges to the mental health of all our members. But, as the Mental Health Foundation states “Mental health problems affect both men and women, but not in equal measure.”

Among the statistics (in ‘Fundamental facts about mental health 2015’), the Mental Health Foundation found that:

- In the UK, women are almost twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders.
- A 2008 systematic review of 31 studies estimated that in the UK, among parents, around 10% of women and 6% of men had mental health problems at any given time.
- Around 50% of women with perinatal mental health problems are not identified or treated.
- In a 2008 British survey on 6000 women, it was found that 4 in 5 lesbian and bisexual women reported having had a spell of sadness, feeling miserable or depressed. Further, 1 in 5 lesbian and bisexual women have deliberately harmed themselves in some way.
- Women are disproportionately impacted [with mental health problems] by lower household income compared to men.

In relation to employment, the Mental Health Foundation found that:

- In the UK, 70 million days are lost from work each year because of mental ill health, making it the leading cause of sickness absence.
- In 2013-2014, work-related stress, depression and anxiety accounted for 39% of all work-related illnesses, with rates consistently remaining higher among women than men, particularly in the 45-54 age group.
- The results of a poll reported by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2011) indicated that 4 in 10 employees are afraid of disclosing their mental health problems to their employers due to the perceived risk of jeopardising their career.

## Stress

Work-related stress is not an illness itself but can cause serious illnesses such as depression, high blood pressure, aches and pains. Stressful and unsupportive work experiences can also contribute to existing mental health problems.

## Anxiety

Women are twice as likely as men to experience anxiety disorders such as panic attacks. About 60% of the people with phobias or obsessive compulsive disorder are women.

## Depression

More women than men experience depression, partly because of social factors such as poverty and isolation and biological factors such as the hormonal changes experienced by women during menopause. Symptoms include low mood, lack of energy and motivation, and in extreme cases can lead to suicidal behaviour. Bipolar disorder, sometimes called manic depression, is when a person may switch from having periods of extreme low mood to being ‘high’ or having extreme elation, energy and often recklessness.

## PMS

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) is the name given to a collection of physical and emotional symptoms that can occur in the two weeks before a woman's period. Each woman's symptoms are different; they may be mainly physical, psychological, or both. Severe cases of PMS are sometimes recognised as Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD), and usually show severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and irritability before menstruation begins.

## Post-natal depression

The term ‘baby blues’ is often used to describe a short period of mild depression that women may experience after having a baby. But at least 8 to 15% of new mothers go on to develop postnatal depression (PND), which is much more severe. Many new mothers experience this severe depression without recognising it or realising that it is a treatable illness.

## Self-harm

Self-harm describes a wide range of things that people do to themselves such as cutting, scalding or burning, in a deliberate and usually hidden way. Many more girls than boys self-harm. Self-harm is a symptom of underlying mental or emotional distress.

## Eating disorders

Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are more common in women than men, particularly for young women. People with anorexia nervosa don't eat enough, usually because they feel that their problems are caused by what they look like. People with bulimia nervosa can't stick to a healthy eating pattern. They tend to binge, that is, eat a lot at once. This makes them feel guilty and out of control so they then panic and punish themselves by starving, making themselves sick, taking laxatives or over-exercising. As well as the mental distress, eating disorders can lead to a number of serious physical problems.

## Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Worldwide, more women are affected by PTSD than men, largely because women are exposed to more sexual violence. The risk of developing PTSD after any traumatic event is 20.4% for women and 8.1% for men.

## Dementia

Two thirds of people with dementia are women. Risk of dementia increases with age, and women have a higher life expectancy than men.

## How UNISON can help

UNISON is aware that people with mental health problems face many barriers in their lives and their workplaces, often because of ignorance and prejudice. People with mental health issues continue to have one of the lowest employment rates of any group of disabled people.

For those in employment, the Acas 2016 report, 'The Management of Mental Health at Work' has highlighted some factors that can help them to return to work after a period of sickness absence related to their mental health problem. This includes:

- "Being given time to access the help of health professionals, such as their own GPs and counsellors. They were also signposted to such help, for example via Employee Assistance Programmes.
- Not being pressurised to return to work prematurely, but instead being given time, space and a sense of control over the pace of their return to work.
- Being given time to become re-orientated to the workplace.
- Reasonable adjustments being made, for example changes to hours of work and avoiding sources of stress that might trigger symptoms."

UNISON will speak up on behalf of our women members experiencing mental health problems in the workplace.

UNISON reps should consider the following:

- raising awareness of the issues amongst members, representatives and employers including of the need for reasonable adjustments to enable members to remain at work
- encouraging members to disclose any mental health problems to ensure that they get the support they need at work
- encouraging employers to give better training to managers to help them recognise early warning signs of distress, and to be open to discuss mental health issues
- encouraging a culture of openness at work about time constraints and workload – employees must feel able to speak up if the demands placed on them are too great
- negotiating effective policies with the employer that acknowledge the association between work-related stress and mental health, and describe how staff who experience mental health problems will be supported such as allowing staff to attend counselling and support services during working hours as they would for other medical appointments
- ensuring that health and safety policies are put into practice, that risk assessments are up-to-date, that there is consultation with all staff and appropriate monitoring
- negotiating disability leave that records absence related to a woman's disability separately from other sickness absence
- promoting the messages about work-life balance in the workplace including benefits of flexible working for employees and employers.

## Further information from UNISON

- **'Guidance on disability leave'**, including a model agreement is available to download from: [www.unison.org.uk/about/what-we-do/fairness-equality/disabled-members/](http://www.unison.org.uk/about/what-we-do/fairness-equality/disabled-members/)
- **Information on 'Stress'** [www.unison.org.uk/knowledge/health-and-safety/stress/](http://www.unison.org.uk/knowledge/health-and-safety/stress/)
- **There for you**  
'There for You' offers a unique confidential advice and support service just for members of UNISON and their dependants. [www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/](http://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/)



## Other sources of information

### TUC

'Representing and supporting members with mental health problems at work: guidance for trade union representatives'

[www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/disability](http://www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/disability)

'Trade unions and mental health: a resource list'

[www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/trade-unions-and-mental-health-resource-list](http://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/trade-unions-and-mental-health-resource-list)

### The Mental Health Foundation

The UK's leading mental health research, policy and service improvement charity.

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

### Mind and Mind Cymru

Providing supportive and reliable information, membership and support networks, professional training as well as campaigning for change.

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

### SAMH

Scotland's leading mental health charity, providing community based services for people with mental health problems; national programmes; policy and campaigning work as well as raising funds to ensure their work can continue.

[www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)

### Inspire (the new name for Niamh, the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health)

A charity and social enterprise based in Northern Ireland focusing on promoting wellbeing for all through their mental health, learning disability and professional wellbeing.

[www.inspirewellbeing.org](http://www.inspirewellbeing.org)

### Rethink Mental Illness

A charity that brings people affected by mental illness together to support each other through their services, groups and campaigns.

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

### Hafal

Wales' leading charity for people with serious mental illness and their carers.

[www.hafal.org](http://www.hafal.org)

### Support in Mind Scotland

A charity seeking to support and empower all those affected by mental illness, including family members, carers and supporters.

[www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk](http://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk)

### MindWise

An independent charity in Northern Ireland that works to support those at risk of, and affected by, severe mental illness and mental health difficulties.

[www.mindwisenv.org](http://www.mindwisenv.org)

### Dementia UK

Providing specialist one-to-one support and expert advice.

[www.dementiauk.org](http://www.dementiauk.org)

### Alzheimer's Society

The UK's leading dementia support and research charity.

[www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

### Alzheimer Scotland

The leading dementia organisation in Scotland.

[www.alzscot.org](http://www.alzscot.org)

## Other sources of help for individuals

### The Samaritans

Offering emotional support 24 hours a day.

Call 116123

Or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### Lifeline

The Northern Ireland crisis response helpline service for people who are experiencing distress or despair.

Call 0808 808 8000

### Breathing Space

A free, confidential, phone service for anyone in Scotland experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

Call 0800 83 85 87, Monday to Thursday, 6pm to 2am, Friday to Monday 6pm to 6am

### The Mind infoline

Providing information on a range of topics including:

- types of mental health problem
- where to get help
- medication and alternative treatments
- advocacy

Call 0300 123 3393

Or email [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

Or text 86463

**Not in UNISON?**  
**Join today at [joinunison.org](http://joinunison.org) or call 0800 171 2193**