let's talk about mental health
lamp
BUSINESS CLUB

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Mental Health in your Workplace: Topics and Issues

Eating Disorders

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a mental health condition where you use the control of food to cope with feelings and other situations. Unhealthy eating behaviours may include eating too much or too little or worrying about your weight or body shape. It is estimated that 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder.

It can be very difficult to identify that a colleague or friend has developed an eating disorder.

Warning signs to look out for include:

- Dramatic weight loss
- Lying about how much they've eaten, when they've eaten, or their weight
- Eating a lot of food very fast
- Going to the bathroom a lot after eating
- Exercising a lot
- Avoiding eating with others
- Cutting food into small pieces or eating very slowly
- Wearing loose or baggy clothes to hide their weight loss
- Changes in behaviours including stress and anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, mood swings, irritability or difficulty concentrating.

People with eating disorders often present little difficulty at work and excel at their job. Whatever difficulties they have, they will often make strenuous efforts to keep to themselves to avoid their illness being noticed at work.

A work situation is unlikely to be the sole and direct cause of an eating disorder, although work-related stress can be a factor that exacerbates the problem. Anyone can develop an eating disorder regardless of weight, age or gender or any other factors.

What can you do to support an employee with an eating disorder?

- Provide confidentiality and trusted support with open and honest conversations
- Signpost to a GP if they do not already have healthcare for their illness
- Staff who have an eating disorder may require lengthy treatment or absence to attend appointments. They may need to have their working arrangements, whether hours or responsibilities, altered to take their health needs into account.
- Staff with managerial or supervisory responsibilities will benefit from understanding how best to support someone with an eating disorder.
- If any colleagues are taking care of someone with an eating disorder, this can take its toll on their physical and mental wellbeing too. Being able to accompany a child or partner to attend appointments or family therapy sessions is vital, and flexible working practices that can accommodate this are extremely beneficial.

Sources and Further Reading

Worried about a colleague - Beat (beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Overview – Eating disorders - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

58241 (peoplemanagement.co.uk)