

**JANUARY 2020**

## Blue Monday and dealing with mental health in the workplace

With festive celebrations over, dreary weather, looming Christmas bills and faltering New Year's resolutions, the third Monday of January (this year, Monday 20<sup>th</sup> January) has been labelled 'Blue Monday' - the most depressing day of the year.

Despite the concept being created by a travel company to boost summer holiday bookings, Blue Monday is a chance for employers to focus on mental health in the workplace, and assess whether they are doing enough to identify mental health issues and support affected employees.

Mental health problems amongst staff can lead to a number of issues for employers, ranging from poor performance and productivity, to low morale and poor retention rates. Employers could also face claims for discrimination, constructive dismissal or personal injury if they fail to manage mental health issues proactively and sensitively throughout the employment relationship.

### How to manage mental health in the workplace

#### Create a Supportive Environment

Providing support to manage health problems effectively through early recognition and appropriate management such as access to counselling or advice on wellbeing, will promote good mental health and an open environment. If you are concerned about an employee's mental health, then communication is key. It is important not to jump to conclusions and attempt to diagnose a problem. Find time to speak with the employee to discuss any concerns and where

appropriate direct them to support, such as an employee assistance programme. Ensure that such programmes are publicised to all staff on notice boards and the intranet and consider arranging mental health awareness training and/or appointing mental health champions. Encourage people to speak up and feel comfortable to admit when they are struggling, this will help to remove the stigma of mental health issues.

#### Promote good health and recognise good work

Remind employees of their value to the company and promote staff engagement policies – which should be in place all year round. Take the time to recognise and praise achievements and hard work to remind employees that they are valued. Ensure appropriate training is offered so employees feel motivated and supported in their roles. It is also helpful to encourage regular breaks, especially in the winter months when employees may see little daylight during the working week and ensure that employees take their full annual leave entitlement. Regular workplace social activities can also foster good communication and teamwork. Promoting a healthy work-life balance – such as offering gym memberships and hosting non-alcohol centred events – can also motivate employees.

#### Flexible working options

Most employees will have 'pulled a sickie' or taken a 'duvet day' at some point in their career. Organisations that offer flexible working options are less likely to be impacted as employees will have the flexibility to work in a way that suits them and accommodates their mental health needs, for example by promoting "Working from Home" policies which can reduce stressful

commutes or allow them to fit in an exercise class during the working day.

### Implement effective management of sickness absences

It is important to monitor employee absences to understand when mental health issues are arising and to maintain reasonable contact during absences so that absent employees feel included and valued in the workplace. Conducting 'back-to-work' interviews will help to ensure that an employee is fit to return to work and whether adjustments need to be made to the working environment.

### Confidentiality

It is essential to keep an employee's personal information private and this may be particularly important when dealing with sensitive mental health issues which may be exacerbated in the event of disclosures to colleagues. However the need for confidentiality should be balanced against the employer's responsibility to protect its employees and the business from harm.

So, whether the third Monday in January really is the most depressing day of the year or just a marketing ploy, we encourage employers to start serious and supportive conversations about depression and mental health in the workplace. Ask yourself, what initiatives, policies or support you are giving to employees with mental health conditions and think about whether there is more you can do. In an increasingly pressured world, employers have a responsibility to promote good mental health in the workplace and those that do so will reap the benefits of an engaged and productive workforce.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues covered in this e-alert or you would like us to review any relevant policies, please get in touch with your usual Stephenson Harwood contact.



**Paul Reeves**

Partner

T: +44 20 7809 2916

E: paul.reeves@shlegal.com



**Katy Carr**

Senior associate

T: +44 20 7809 2402

E: katy.carr@shlegal.com



**Elsbeth Hunt**

Trainee

T: +44 20 7809 2903

E: elspeth.hunt@shlegal.com