

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 10 November 2020 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Change, challenge and uncertainty - a toxic mix for some employees

Change, challenge and uncertainty are forming a toxic mix for some employees – and perhaps for some employers as well.

Even in normal times, mental ill health is the leading cause of absence from work, accounting for 31.9% of all working days lost. Mental health reasons account for 39.1% of long-term sickness leave.

As people have to adjust to further restrictions, possibly being furloughed, possible redundancy, shorter hours or less money, it is no wonder that, on top of fears about the coronavirus itself, mental health conditions may well develop or worsen. And yet it's the time when you really need your employees to be at work, productive and engaged.

An online event we are running on 3rd December 2020, Promoting Mental Health in the Workplace, may be of help. Our Advice and Compliance team's Mental Health Charter initiative is part of its work to support employers to eradicate disability discrimination at work. This event will bring together legal advice and management advice relating to equality at work that aims to help employers at this most difficult time.

If you've read anything about our Mental Health Charter, you'll know it brings together the Commission, the Labour Relations Agency, Business in the Community and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland alongside mental health and disability organisations such as Inspire, the Mental Health Foundation, Disability Action, Mindwise, Action Mental Health, Change Your Mind and Aware Defeat Depression. This partnership results in a rich resource for employers who want practical help with developing policies and procedures, training staff and creating a workplace where mental health issues are less likely to occur – and if they do, there are clear, respectful ways of helping people get through it.

We'll be hearing at the event from employers who have already adopted the Charter and are creating positive change in their workplaces. We'll also be hearing from Mark Durkan MLA about the Government response to the massive issue of mental ill health and from the interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland, Dr Siobhán O'Neill.

In closing, remember any of us can be undermined by stress, anxiety or depression as we face up to unprecedented upheaval and the fallout from lockdown, and that includes you. You or your HR people may be under particular strain if you are having to downsize or make people redundant. This is the time to ensure you as an

employer are looking after not just your employees' mental health, but also your own.

If you do already provide support, then promote it to the workforce and make sure they know it's available. And if you don't, why not drop in on our event on 3 December 2020 and see what you can learn from how other employers have been coping. Watch our social media for updates.