



reba

**Technical
Training Guide**

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES



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Simplyhealth



Editor's welcome



One of the many outcomes of the coronavirus pandemic has been a deeper recognition of the different roles that being at work plays for us all.

As well as providing income and benefits, it also provides structure, companionship, a support network and hopefully fulfilling, engaging work.

The social distancing demanded by the pandemic has shown just how important those factors are in our lives. You only have to look at the variety of innovative ideas - from online quiz nights to virtual banquets - that people have devised to make sure that they can retain social contact with their colleagues and other networks during lockdown.

It has also shown the importance of a supportive working environment, as we've had to rapidly adjust to new routines and rethink the balance between work and other aspects of life, such as childcare.

Hopefully some of our new-found working practices and support networks will endure for the long term, alongside re-introducing more familiar ways of working.

However, there will continue to be many situations where employers need to be able to provide emotional support. Bereavement, domestic violence and addiction are just some of instances where employees need additional support from colleagues, line managers, the wider working community and their employee benefits.

In this guide we explore some of the ways that employers can help, from understanding the business advantages of providing emotional support, through to building an employee benefits strategy for all of your workforce. The information here will help you to get started, or build on your existing offering, to make emotional support an integral part of your workplace culture.

Maggie Williams
Editor

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This report was devised by Debi O'Donovan and Phil Hayne of REBA in association with Simplyhealth.

The guide was edited by Maggie Williams, written by Samantha Barrett and designed by SallyannDesign.

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Sponsor's comment



We've seen a whole new world spring-up before our eyes. At Simplyhealth, we've pushed our technology further, by enabling most of our employees to work comfortably from home instead of in the office. We've guided our customers and partners every step of the way, through empathy and careful observation during this challenging time. One thing's for sure - providing health and wellbeing support for people is paramount in life, whatever the situation.

Keeping emotional support front of mind

The coronavirus outbreak has emphasised how important emotional support and human contact are. At Simplyhealth, our staff have access to a 24/7 counselling helpline as well as an EAP service and a group of trained Mental Health First Aiders, who are volunteering members of our staff. Over the weeks, we've offered webinar events from health and wellbeing experts to provide support and information. When our employees see the value in emotional support, they're better at supporting customers with theirs.

Our health plans provide the same value to our customers, with mental wellbeing at front of mind. The 24/7 counselling and GP services are included on our plan, so employers offering this to their employees know that support is in place if their employees need it. These services are crucial. Employees can feel cared for, which leads to a happier, healthier, productive working environment.

Life after lockdown

I'm hoping we can take positive learnings from lockdown and use them to steer away from the '9-5 mindset' that still exists around the UK. The COVID-19 outbreak is proving that many job roles can continue as seamlessly at home as in the workplace, sometimes more so. Commuters are saving time, money, energy and stress by working just as well from home. And, the environment is recovering from the drop in pollution across the globe.

These positives are what we should take forwards to make the world of work more manageable, convenient, and kinder to our health. Can we all learn from this pandemic? I hope so.

Pam Whelan
Director of Corporate





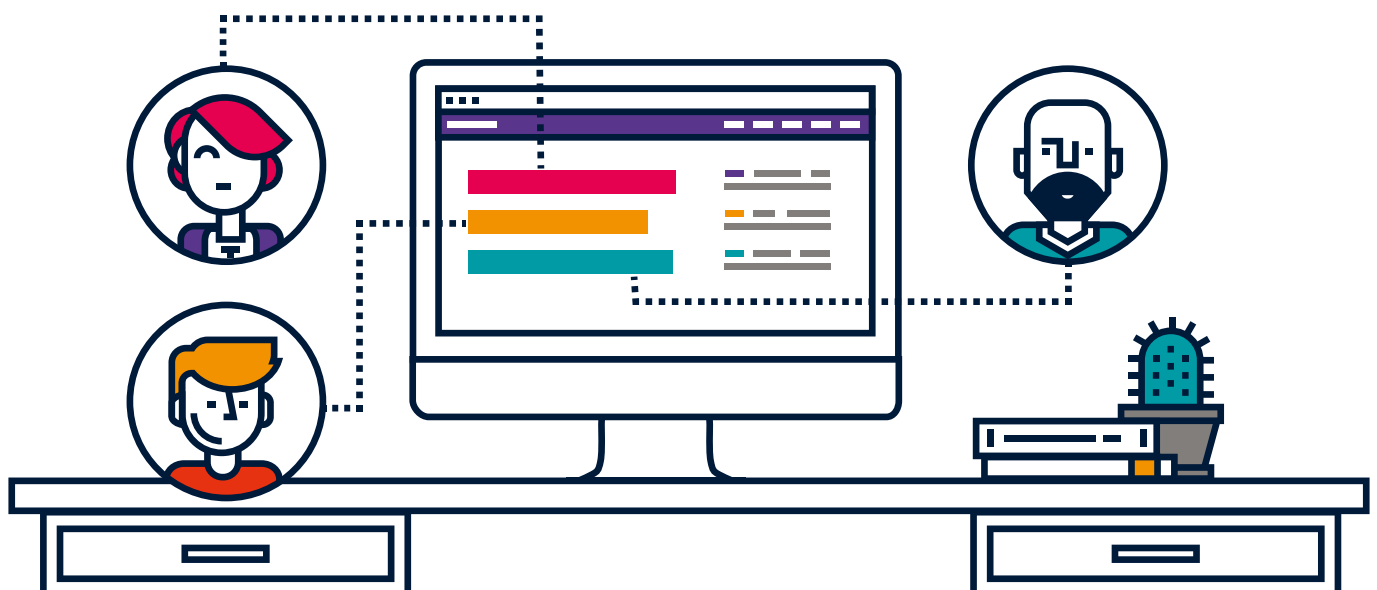
Chapter 1: Why does supporting your employees emotionally matter for both staff and for the business?

From the birth of a child to the breakdown of a relationship and the loss of a loved one, life can definitely be something of an emotional rollercoaster. Supporting your employees through the tougher times is beneficial for them and the business.

Dealing with a difficult situation can have a significant effect on our emotional wellbeing. In the workplace, this can result in distraction, distress and irrational behaviour.

Where the situation becomes overwhelming, the emotional response can lead to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression. As an example, take grief. Mental health charity Mind says that, while we're all likely to go through it at some point in our lives, it's a very individual process which can include a whole range of different emotions including sadness, shock, disbelief, denial and depression.

For an employer, being able to support employees emotionally has a number of benefits. As well as helping employees feel able to cope, which can mean they're more motivated and productive, it can help the broader business. By being regarded as an organisation that cares about employees' welfare, employee engagement increases and it's much easier to attract and retain the right people.





Chapter 2: Emotional support and the coronavirus crisis

While the primary concern was its effect on our physical health, the coronavirus crisis has also highlighted the importance of emotional support.

Alongside worries about health, job security and household finances, the need for social distancing has proved particularly testing. Whether separated from friends and family members or missing the banter of work colleagues, being unable to spend time with other people has led to feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression.

The way in which organisations have treated their staff during this time will have repercussions. While those ignoring the rules around social distancing and furloughing have come in for criticism, organisations that offer employees greater flexibility around home and work responsibilities and provide more emotional support, regular updates and catch-ups are likely to secure higher levels of employee – and customer – loyalty.

Sadly, the effects of the pandemic on employees' emotional wellbeing are unlikely to end when social distancing requirements are eased. Whether they've had the virus themselves, lost friends or family members, or found social distancing and lockdown difficult, the emotional issues relating to the coronavirus are likely to be felt for many years.

Given this, providing emotional support to employees will become even more important.



49.6% of people in Great Britain aged 16+ reported high anxiety in the period 20th to 30th March, compared to 21.0% of people in Q4 of 2019.



The top three concerns were wellbeing; work and household finances. 8.5m people were most concerned about their wellbeing; 6.2m about their work; and 5.3m about their finances

Source: ONS, Personal and economic wellbeing in Great Britain, May 2020





Chapter 3: What sort of support can employers offer?

Showing you care about employees' welfare requires a package of measures, with both benefits and culture playing an important part in creating a supportive work environment.

On the benefits side, there are a number of different products that can help support employees emotionally. First up, there are those that enable employees to access help, such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs) or counselling, or improve their own ability to handle difficult situations, for instance mental health resilience training and mindfulness courses.

Alongside these, there are plenty of benefits that will provide practical support that can potentially reduce the risk of stressful situations. For example, to ease money worries, financial education and benefits such as shopping discounts, loans and enhanced pension contributions can provide practical solutions.

Likewise, on the health side, products such as medical insurance, health cash plans and group risk benefits can support everything from everyday health needs through to financial support for serious conditions. Knowing they can access a virtual GP or get a second medical opinion can ease an employee's health worries.

Emotional support also links well with other aspects of an employer's wider wellbeing strategy. Taking more exercise, sleeping well and taking control of debt can all fuel improvements in mental health and emotional wellbeing, making it easier to cope when times are tough. Highlighting this can bring another dimension to wellbeing and help to promote the benefits and initiatives your organisation offers.

Providing benefits is only half the solution, with a culture of support and inclusivity essential to demonstrate your commitment to employees' emotional wellbeing. Employees can quickly become cynical when an employer offers a range of wellbeing benefits but expects them to work long hours and accept rock-bottom rates of pay.

Creating the right culture requires consideration of many different aspects. The policies you have in place can help to send out the right signals, with generous holiday packages, maternity and paternity leave and training and development programmes showing you care about employees.

It's also good to think about life events that can cause emotional distress and have policies for these. Bereavement policies are commonplace but forward-thinking employers also take events such as relationship breakdowns, miscarriage and the loss of a pet into consideration. Having these policies ensures consistency and shows you care but also demonstrates to employees that support is available, so they don't have the additional worry of having to ask for it.

Offering flexibility can also be important, allowing employees to balance work and life so they can deal with difficult situations in their lives such as child or elder care.

Your strategy on corporate social responsibility will also demonstrate the organisation's broader ethical stance. This can be complemented by charity support and fundraising events.

There are also softer things you can do that will signal the organisation cares. Taking an interest in employees by celebrating birthdays, weddings and promotions or checking in when they're off sick to make sure they're ok are simple acts that will always be appreciated.





Chapter 4: Who needs to be involved in emotional support?

When it comes to creating a supportive workplace, everyone's got a role to play. Some will have formal responsibilities while for others, it's an opportunity to get involved as much, or as little, as they like.

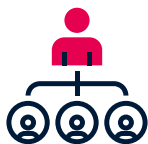


HR, reward and wellbeing teams

Responsible for the emotional support framework and strategy, HR and reward managers and wellbeing teams have an essential role to play in creating a supportive work environment. As well as putting policies in place, they're also in charge of implementing and promoting benefits and training that can support employees emotionally.

They also need to be alive to any potential issues that might affect employees' emotional wellbeing, for instance a redundancy programme or the death of a colleague. By being reactive and putting appropriate programmes and support in place, employees will feel more supported.

There's also a softer side to their involvement. By recognising employees as individuals, perhaps by celebrating birthdays, weddings and promotions, it can help to create a caring culture and a safe space for seeking help.



Line managers

While the HR function may be deciding the strategy, line managers are very much on the frontline. They're in the best position to spot any changes in behaviour that might indicate someone is having a tough time emotionally. By checking in with employees regularly, they can make sure they're ok and support them where necessary.

Training is available to help line managers spot warning signs and to enable them to have difficult conversations with employees but it's also important that they don't feel it's their responsibility to solve their problems. Where they don't feel comfortable doing this, knowing where the employee can go for help is also beneficial.

Employee recognition also falls within their remit. Praising an employee for their achievements will help to set the right tone.



Employees

Employees also have an important role to play in ensuring everyone feels supported emotionally, although how much they get involved is entirely up to them. As well as taking resilience training, to help them cope more effectively in a crisis, they can also put themselves forward as champions, buddies or mentors to help spread positive messages about emotional support.

Those affected may also want to consider featuring as a case study in the company newsletter to show how they were supported and to raise awareness of the services they used, for instance the EAP.



Chapter 5: Supporting at risk-employees

Emotional support can be even more important for employees who are already experiencing pressures such as domestic abuse, addiction, debt or a mental health issue. For these individuals, work is often a positive part of their lives but their behaviour can sometimes put them at risk of losing this lifeline.

Promoting the policies your organisation has will encourage more employees to come forward to ask for help. Running awareness campaigns will also help to remove any stigmas by making it a workplace topic of conversation.

Also consider the procedures you might need to support at-risk employees. For example, if someone is suffering domestic violence, it might be necessary to divert calls, block emails and allow them to alter their hours to avoid their abuser. Similarly, consider whether your organisation would fund treatment for alcohol or drug dependency.

Where an employee is diagnosed with a mental health condition, they have additional protection under the Equality Act 2010. Working with them to make any reasonable adjustments to their role is essential.

Understanding the warning signs that someone is at-risk will also help, especially as not everyone will feel comfortable coming forward. Increased absence, poor time-keeping and reduced quality of work are all indicators of serious problems and warrant investigation.

And, as these are serious issues, keep details of organisations, such as SMART Recovery, Refuge, Mind and StepChange, so that employees can seek professional support and advice.



Almost one in three women aged 16-59 will experience domestic violence in her lifetime (ONS 2019)



3-5% of the average workforce is alcohol dependent and up to 25% drink heavily enough to be at risk of dependence (International Labour Organisation)



One in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year (Mind)



12.8m households have either no, or less than £1,500, in savings (The Money Charity)

How to build an inclusive strategy that works for everyone

Nobody knows what pressures life will throw their way, so it's important to build an emotional support strategy that's inclusive. This ensures that all possibilities are covered but also means no one feels left out – something that can potentially affect emotional wellbeing.

First, think about what issues might affect employees. This could come down to demographics, for instance if your workforce is young, financial worries may be common, whereas older employee might experience more health issues and bereavement.

Employee feedback can be invaluable too. By finding out more about employees and getting them involved in designing the strategy, it'll cover their needs but you'll also secure their buy-in.

Also consider how to deliver emotional support. Using a range of different methods such as apps, internet material, phone support and face-to-face chats will ensure you reach as many employees as possible.

Variety is also important in promotions. Using different hooks, such as money worries, mindfulness training and grief counselling, will reach a broader audience. But also remember that not everyone will be in touch with their emotional side so use examples from sport, entertainment and the news to encourage these employees to engage too.



Supporting employees emotionally when they're working from home

Lockdown forced millions of employees to work from home to curb the spread of the coronavirus. But, whether through necessity – as we await the freedom that a vaccine will bring – or desire – as people realise the benefits working from home offers – remote working will remain a major part of the way we work long after lockdown is forgotten.

Although some of the stresses experienced during lockdown will no longer be there, remote working brings a number of pressures that can affect employees' emotional wellbeing. Alongside feelings of loneliness that can come from working alone, without face-to-face interactions there's a risk that communications can be misinterpreted, potentially leading to anger and distress.

Ensuring normal working conditions are replicated as much as possible is essential. Regular contact is a must as it provides social interaction as well as enabling you to check on the employee's wellbeing. For this, video calls are regarded as the best method, offering much more insight than a phone call or email.

Neither should the social element be overlooked. During lockdown many firms found it beneficial to set up social media channels to allow employees to chat and share their experiences. Knowing you're part of a team, and being up to speed with all the office gossip, can help to counter feelings of loneliness.

It's also essential to maintain some physical contact where practical, perhaps with a regular meeting in the office or at a mutually convenient location. After all, as anyone separated from their friends, family and work colleagues during lockdown will testify, nothing can truly replace spending time in another person's company.





Quiz

1. When dealing with a difficult situation, what are the potential effects on an employee's emotional wellbeing?

- A. Distraction and distress
- B. Irrational behaviour
- C. Mental health issues
- D. All of these

2. What percentage of people aged 16+ reported high anxiety in the first week of coronavirus lockdown?

- A. 21.0%
- B. 49.6%
- C. 69.6%
- D. 80.3%

3. What was the number one concern among the public in lockdown?

- A. Wellbeing
- B. Finances
- C. Toilet paper supply
- D. Work

4. What benefits can help employees improve their ability to deal with difficult emotional situations?

- A. Higher pension contributions and life insurance
- B. More holiday and longer lunches
- C. Mental health resilience training and mindfulness courses
- D. More home-working

5. Why is it beneficial to have policies for life events that cause emotional distress?

- A. It ensures a consistent approach; encourages employees to seek help; and shows you care
- B. It prevents legal action and helps to reduce insurance premiums
- C. It ensures employee assistance programme use increases
- D. It means you can refuse to support an employee with an issue that isn't covered by a policy

6. Who is responsible for the emotional support framework and strategy?

- A. Managing director
- B. Employees
- C. Line managers
- D. HR and reward managers and wellbeing teams

7. What training can help a line manager support employees emotionally?

- A. Mental health resilience training
- B. Public speaking training
- C. Mental health awareness training
- D. Advanced data manipulation training

8. What percentage of the average workforce is alcohol dependent?

- A. 1-2%
- B. 3-5%
- C. 10%, rising to 25% around Christmas
- D. 25%

9. Why should you get employee feedback when designing an emotional wellbeing strategy?

- A. It protects you legally if you've excluded any emotional issues
- B. It helps secure employees' buy-in and ensures the strategy reflects their needs
- C. It saves you having to put together a presentation for the board
- D. It meets EU regulations

10. From an emotional wellbeing perspective, what is the best way to stay in touch with employees who are working remotely?

- A. Video calls
- B. Email
- C. Phone call at the start of the day to make sure they're working
- D. Text

1. D, 2. B, 3. A, 4. C, 5. A, 6. D, 7. C, 8. B, 9. B, 10. A.
Quiz: The answers



Who we are

About our sponsor: Simplyhealth

Since 1872, we've been helping people get healthcare through our health plans, charity partnerships and by being a voice in healthcare. Today we're delighted to be the UK's leading provider of health and dental plans, which help individuals, families, employees to get support with their health when they need it.

What Simplyhealth does:

Our health cash plans enable businesses to look after their employees, and make it easy for people to maintain their health and wellbeing, so they can look after the business.

We offer two types of preventative health cash plans:

- **Optimise:** our health plan, covering a range of treatments including visits to the optician, dentist, 24/7 GP services and more
- **Denplan:** our dental plan, covering all clinically necessary treatments, routine examinations, hygiene treatments, plus cover for accidents and emergencies

In 2017, Simplyhealth and Denplan united under one Simplyhealth brand and today we're proud to be the UK's leading provider of health cash plans, Denplan dental payment plans and pet health plans.

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Simplyhealth is a trading name of Simplyhealth Access, which is authorised by the Prudential Regulation Authority and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority.

About us: Reward & Employee Benefits Association

REBA is the professional networking community for reward and benefits practitioners. We make members' working lives easier by saving them time, money and effort through sharing experience, ideas, data and insight with each other. We help members to pursue best practice, increase professionalism in the industry and prepare for upcoming changes. REBA also lobbies government on members' behalf.

What REBA does:

- Runs regular conferences and networking events, both face-to-face and virtually, through webinars and online platforms
- Produces benchmarking research, insight & data reports and analysis
- Delivers information that reward and benefits practitioners need to know, both online and in our daily emails
- Helps with supplier shortlisting and research
- Supports the reward and benefits community through our rebaLINK peer-to-peer networking platform

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