



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

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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 our members.

A recent Mental Health Foundation survey found that:

- one third of respondents feel unhappy or very unhappy about the time they devote to work
- many more women report unhappiness than men (42% of women compared with 29% of men), which is probably a consequence of competing life roles and more pressure to 'juggle'
- nearly two thirds of employees have experienced a negative effect on their personal life, including lack of personal development, physical and mental health problems, and poor relationships and poor home life.

Both women and men can experience mental health problems equally, but some are more common among women, not least because of various social factors. For example:

- more women than men are the main carer for their children and they may care for other dependent relatives too – intensive caring can affect emotional health, physical health, social activities and finances
- women often juggle multiple roles – they may be mothers, partners and carers as well as doing paid work and running a household
- women are over represented in low income, low status jobs – often part-time – and are more likely to live in poverty than men
- poverty, working mainly in the home on housework and concerns about personal safety can make women particularly isolated
- physical and sexual abuse of girls and women can have a long-term impact on their mental health, especially if no support has been received around past abuses.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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 some 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.

UNISON can

- represent women members with mental health problems effectively
- raise awareness of the issues amongst members, representatives and employers including of the need for reasonable adjustments to enable members to remain at work
- encourage members to disclose any mental health problems to ensure that they get the support they need at work
- encourage 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
- encourage 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
- negotiate 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
- ensure 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
- negotiate disability leave that records absence related to a woman's disability separately from other sickness absence
- promote 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/
- **Information on 'Stress'**
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/

Other sources of information

TUC

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

www.tuc.org.uk/equality-issues/disability-issues

'Trade unions and mental health: a resource list'

www.tuc.org.uk/equality-issues/disability-issues/disability-discrimination/disability-resources/trade-unions-and

The Mental Health Foundation

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

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mind and Mind Cymru

Providing advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. They campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

www.mind.org.uk

SAMH

Scotland's leading mental health charity, providing help, information and support, and campaigning on behalf of people with mental health problems.

www.samh.org.uk

Niamh, (the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health)

The largest and longest established independent charity focusing on mental health and wellbeing services in Northern Ireland.

www.niamhwellbeing.org

Other sources of help for individuals

The Samaritans

Offering emotional support 24 hours a day.

Call 08457 90 90 90 (UK)

Call 116123 (ROI)

Or email jo@samaritans.org

Lifeline

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

Call 0808 808 8000

Rethink Mental Illness

The advice and information line operates Monday to Friday, 10am-2pm providing practical advice on:

- different types of therapy and medication
- benefits, debt, money issues
- police, courts, prison
- your rights under the Mental Health Act

Call 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Breathing Space

A free, confidential, phone service for anyone living 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

Offering an information line to answer questions about:

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

Call 0300 123 3393

Or email info@mind.org.uk

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