



## **Keeping Happy and Healthy NEU guidance for members, reps and local officers**

### **Introduction**

This guidance document is aimed at NEU members who are worried that their mental health is suffering because of the demands of their work. It will also be of use to NEU members who are considering returning to work following a spell of absence due to a mental health condition.

The NEU itself cannot offer medical advice or counselling. What we can do, however, is to assist with the work environment, which is the trigger for many employees' anxiety or depression. We can also put members in touch with professional counsellors who can help them to make a full recovery.

For many teachers and school employees, excessive workload is a key cause of the deterioration in their mental health. For others bullying or harassment is a major factor. Where either workload or bullying/harassment is at the root of their health problem, then they are unlikely to be the only member of staff affected. In such circumstances a collective approach from the NEU school rep or branch/district may be the best way of addressing the issue for all concerned.

At the end of this document is a list of guidance documents which will support members with workload issues. The NEU campaigns vigorously on workload issues and further information and guidance is also available on the [website](#).

### **Are mental health conditions common in the education profession?**

The answer to this question is a definite yes, so there is no need for members to feel isolated or stigmatised if they suffer a mental illness. Mental ill health is the second largest cause of sickness absence in the UK and is, therefore, extremely common. About one in four people in Britain has this diagnosis at some point in their life. Education is considered to be one of the most stressful professions. It is hardly surprising that many teachers and school employees will experience a problem at some point in their career.

### **What sort of mental health conditions are caused by stress?**

Stress caused by excessive workload, poor pupil behaviour, lack of communication and conflict at work can lead to all sorts of problems, including anxiety, depression, insomnia, an increased dependency on drugs or alcohol, and changes in behaviour. Events in people's home lives can also contribute but it is often the intensity of work pressures, combined with other problems and pressures that tips people 'over the edge'. If teaching and working in education did not take such a heavy toll, most school staff would be in a stronger position to withstand other pressures such as divorce, bereavement and other unhappy life events.



### **How would I know if I am developing a mental health condition?**

You may feel overwhelmed, as if you cannot face going to work. You may start to experience headaches and find it difficult to sleep. Your behaviour may become erratic or you may experience extreme mood swings and become tearful.

Often it is partners, friends or colleagues who may recognise that there is something wrong before you are able to admit it to yourself. Most teachers and school employees are extremely dedicated to their job and will try to carry on for a long time before recognising that they cannot cope any more. It is, therefore, those around them who are most likely to notice changes in personality or behaviour.

If someone who cares about you, and whom you trust, suggests that you seek help, then please consider doing so. Early intervention is recognised as being a major factor in recovery and in many cases can prevent a problem from becoming a full-blown crisis. Similarly, if you become aware that a colleague or friend is suffering in this way, a few words of support and advice may encourage them to seek the help they need.

### **How can the NEU help me?**

There are two principal ways in which we can help.

Firstly, direct professional support provided, in the first instance, through our network of lay officers. The contact details for your NEU local officers can be found on your NEU membership credential, or visit the [website](#).

Both lay officers and NEU staff have a wealth of experience in supporting members whose work is making them ill, and in directing them to other effective sources of help. Secondly, we work hard to try to publicise good practice on areas such as stress, harassment and bullying, absence monitoring and many others. The NEU has published guidance for school leaders: Preventing Work-Related Mental Health Conditions by Tackling Stress. Head teachers who follow this advice are much more likely to lead happy, healthy and ultimately successful schools.

In terms of practical, individual support, the NEU can, through its local officer network:

- intervene at an early stage of any difficult work situation to ensure that you receive help and support before you become ill. This includes taking steps to seek to resolve any work-related problems which are making you ill.
- act as a 'buffer' between you and school management, if you find direct contact difficult during sick leave
- help organise flexible working hours, additional class support or a phased return to work (see section below on returning to work)
- advise on sick leave entitlements
- accompany you to meetings with school management.

### **Who else can help me if I feel that I can't cope?**

Remember you are not alone. Apart from family, friends and the NEU, there are many sources of assistance. Your GP is an obvious first port of call as are any local employee assistance programming. You can also contact the Education Support Partnership (see



contact details below), an independent charity that provides practical and emotional support to trainee, serving and retired teachers, school staff and their families. Through coaching, counselling, information and money advice, the charity helps tens of thousands of school employees each year on the phone or online.

The NEU Benevolent Fund provides assistance to members when they have suffered sickness, accident or injury, unemployment or bereavement. The fund can provide short-term grants to cover essential items during an emergency, and more substantial applications will also be considered.

If you are signed off sick with a mental health condition by your GP, perhaps with medication and counselling, you may be referred by your employer to its occupational health service. If not, you may be able to request such a referral. Remember that the occupational health service is a neutral body and is not biased in favour of employee or employer.

Discussing the situation with an occupational health professional is helpful since it brings into the open the question of whether work was a contributing factor to the illness. If so, occupational health can advise on changes that need to be made to the way in which you are expected to work.

Since 2010, the medical statement issued by GPs, either indicates that you are 'not fit for work' or that you 'may be fit for work' under certain circumstances. Your GP will also be able to suggest changes that would assist a return to work.

There are four types of alterations listed on the medical statement (commonly known as the 'fit note') which the GP can tick. These are:

- phased return to work
- altered hours
- amended duties
- workplace adaptations.

A key feature of the system is that if you have been on sick leave you will need to discuss as fully as possible with your GP what measures would assist your return to work. You will then need to discuss these recommendations with your head teacher, with the support of your NEU school representative or local officer if necessary.

It is important to note that if your head teacher will not, or cannot, make the changes necessary to support your return to work, you are deemed to be 'not fit for work' and should remain on sick leave.

Note that if you are disabled and covered by the Equality Act, the new procedure does not alter the duty on the employer to make reasonable adjustments regardless of what a GP recommends. Furthermore, if you are disabled within the meaning of the Act, you may be able to insist that proposals in a fit note are reasonable adjustments and should be implemented by the employer.



## **Returning to work**

Returning to work after a prolonged period of sickness absence can be a daunting prospect. The NEU can help to support you through this process by negotiating properly planned, mutually agreed and supportive return to work plans, which will include adjustments to your working pattern for a set period of time, as recommended by your GP on your medical statement.

Examples of adjustments could include some, or all, of the following:

- a phased return to work
- a timetable adjustment
- additional support in class
- no expectation that any extra-curricular activities will be undertaken.

This list simply includes a few examples of adjustments that may assist a return to work. Remember that you should know better than anyone else what support would benefit you most. You may find it helpful to discuss this with a representative from your local division of association.

Don't worry if you experience a setback after your return to work. This is quite common and may indicate that further support may be needed. In such cases, the NEU will continue to work constructively on your behalf with your school and the occupational health service to achieve a full recovery.

In moments of crisis, some employees suffering from extreme stress simply resign. We would strongly advise against such decisions being made in haste. Better to consult your GP and the NEU before making such a decision.

## **Further support**

Education Support Partnership  
Free helpline: 08000 562 561  
[educationsupportpartnership.org.uk](http://educationsupportpartnership.org.uk)

## **Useful NEU publications available on the website at: [neu.org.uk](http://neu.org.uk)**

Preventing Work-related Mental Health Conditions by Tackling Stress – guidance for head teachers  
Tackling Workload Together  
Tackling Stress  
Sickness Absence Monitoring  
Bullying in the Workplace  
Cyberbullying  
Making Work Fit – reasonable adjustments for disabled school and college staff  
Teachers' Sick Pay and Sick Leave Entitlements  
Flexible Working