

Understanding Mental Health
First Aid and Mental Health
Advocacy in the Workplace
Level 2

About the Level 2 Certificate in Understanding Mental Health First Aid and Mental Health Advocacy in the Workplace

With one in four adults and one in ten children and young people experiencing mental ill health in any given year, at some point you are likely to find that a colleague, friend or family member has a mental health difficulty. Being able to recognise that they are struggling and feeling confident about supporting them can make a huge difference, especially as taking early action can prevent problems escalating and help individuals to recover more quickly.

This is why the concept of first aid for mental health is so important. Like physical first aid, mental health first aid is about providing initial care and support to someone in need. Sometimes this may be an emergency situation. This does not mean being a mental health expert, it means being aware of the warning signs of a developing mental health problem, or even a mental health crisis, and being able to offer appropriate support. It is about relieving a person's distress by providing comfort and reassurance and listening to them in a non-judgemental way. It is about aiding the recovery of their mental health by signposting them to the right sort of help. Ultimately, if you think that a person's mental ill health could be a danger to themselves or others, it is about preserving life by promptly seeking professional assistance. This course covers all these points and more.

First aid for mental health can be applied to many types of settings and situations. However, given the amount of time people spend at work and the increasing number of people experiencing work-related mental health problems, the final unit of this course looks at how the workplace in particular can impact upon mental well-being and what individuals, their managers and their organisations can do to create a mentally healthy environment.

Aims

On completion of this course you should:

- Understand different types of mental health problems and the factors that may increase the risk of mental ill health in individuals.
- Be able to support individuals experiencing mental ill health within the boundaries of your own role and level of expertise.
- Understand how to recognise and respond to someone experiencing a mental health crisis.
- Have an appreciation of the damaging effects of negative attitudes towards mental ill health, including the effects of stigma and stereotyping.
- Understand how to create a mentally healthy environment for individuals in a variety of settings.
- Be able to explain the value and importance of wellness action planning in protecting and promoting mental health.

Course content

There are three units in this course as follows:

Unit 1: Exploring mental health

Unit 2: Understand how to support individuals with mental ill health

Unit 3: Understand a mentally healthy environment

Assessment

Each unit in this course is split into a number of sections. Within each section there are learning **activities** for you to complete. These are intended to help you reflect upon particular issues and your own practice. These are not formally assessed and are intended to aid your learning and understanding.

At the end of each section you will also be asked to complete the **assessment** questions for that section. These questions can be found in a separate assessment booklet. These are formally assessed and you must complete these to the required standard to be awarded the qualification.

When you have completed all the assessment questions you should submit them to your tutor/learning provider for marking and feedback.

Good luck with your studies!

Unit 1

Exploring mental health





All of us can place ourselves on this line at some point. Where we begin on the line is probably down to the environment in which we grow up. When we experience things like stress, we may move away from being mentally healthy and along the axis towards mental ill health. Often, this is just for a short time and we take steps to ‘feel good’ again.

However, as you can see below, when people cannot seem to escape the feelings and thoughts that are making their life difficult they may continue to move along the axis, to the point where they experience a more prolonged period of mental ill health. Some may feel ‘stuck’ here, unable to take steps to feel better again. For some people, their mental health may deteriorate to the point where specialist support will be needed.

HEALTHY

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STRUGGLING

UNWELL

Mental ill health is a general term that describes a situation where a person’s emotional health means that they find it difficult to think clearly and rationally, interact with others, and cope with the everyday demands of life. This may mean that their relationships, their work and quality of life are all affected.

Mental ill health can also be used to describe **a range of symptoms, conditions and disorders**. Examples of mental ill health can range from the stress and anxiety that many people experience to a complete loss of touch with everyday reality or the most bleak, suicidal depression.

- **High-pressure / stressful environments** – These might involve unrealistic expectations, targets or deadlines, and unhealthy levels of competition. A high degree of pressure/stress and even danger are intrinsic in some jobs, such as the armed forces or emergency services.
- **Poor leadership and staff morale** – This can include poor communication between line managers and staff, poor internal support, conflict and difficult relationships, lack of control and participation in decision-making, and unclear tasks and organisational objectives.
- **Lone working** – As we have found during the coronavirus pandemic, lone working and home working without adequate support can be extremely isolating and damaging to some people's mental health.
- **Unsafe working environments** – Some workplaces have inadequate health and safety policies and procedures. Some people are expected to work in poor working conditions or carry out unsafe practices. All of these things can leave individuals feeling vulnerable and at risk of harm.
- **Bullying and psychological harassment** – These are commonly reported causes of work-related stress which some people feel reluctant or unable to report.



Risk factors inside the learning environment

It is estimated that over half of mental illnesses start before the age of 14 and that one in ten children and young people have a diagnosable mental health condition. Schools and colleges are on the frontline when it comes to supporting children and young people's mental well-being. Staff working in these settings are ideally placed to recognise and respond to early signs of mental health distress in children and young people. Common risk factors include:

- **Bullying** – Bullying comes in many forms: verbal, physical, emotional and social. Nowadays, bullying is often carried out online and via social media ('cyberbullying'). Whatever the type or vehicle, bullying can have long-lasting effects on children and young people's mental health, as well as their academic performance. Bullying is the main reason why children under the age of 11 contact Childline (a support service for children).
- **Exam stress** – Exam stress and the pressure to succeed academically are major risk factors for mental ill health and can lead to self-harming, eating disorders and, in severe cases, suicide. Exam stress is not a new thing, but young people today tend to take more examinations than they did in the past. For example, secondary school students are now likely to spend over nine hours more in exams than in 2016.
- **Insufficient pastoral support** – Underfunded or insufficient pastoral support can mean that the needs of children or young people who may be struggling to cope emotionally are not identified or met. This increases the risk of them developing more serious and entrenched difficulties. Children and young people are more likely to open up to a trusted adult about their difficulties in settings where there is an accessible pastoral support system.
- **Unmet learning needs** – Children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) or additional learning needs are more likely to experience low self-esteem and self-confidence, for example. If these needs are not understood or adequately assessed and addressed within the educational setting, it can become a contributing factor to mental ill health at that time or in later life.
- **Transitions** – The transition from primary to secondary school or from secondary school to college, and from there to higher education, can be extremely stressful for some people. The risk of developing (or worsening) mental ill health significantly increases during these transitions.
- **Student debt** – In England, a study by the House of Commons (2020) found that the average debt among student borrowers who completed their university courses in 2019 was £40,000. Student debt, coupled with the worries some have about their employment prospects for the future and their ability to repay their debt, is another risk factor for poor mental health.

? ? Did you know? ? ? ? ?



Some people equate ‘physical activity’ with going to the gym or some type of high-intensity vigorous exercise, which they can initially find off-putting. However, there are a huge number of other ways of being physically active. For example, walking is practical and accessible, and it can be done at low, moderate, or vigorous intensity to suit each individual. Other ways to exercise include dancing, swimming, gardening, housekeeping, fitness classes (in person or online), taking the stairs rather than a lift or escalator, or getting up from a desk or workstation to stretch and walk around.

Studies show that outdoor activities, such as walking in nature, have further benefits to a person’s emotional health. The key is **finding something that is achievable and enjoyable, and doing it as regularly as possible**. If the regularity and intensity of these activities can be safely increased over time, the physical and mental health benefits will increase too in many cases.

Diet and nutrition

There is a great deal of evidence that shows that nutrition plays an important part in the health of the brain and our emotional health. The general advice is to include fruits, vegetables, nuts, wholegrains and fish in meals, as these help to **improve brain functioning**. Preparing and cooking healthy meals also provides a **sense of accomplishment**, which can help boost feelings of self-esteem.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. **Diets that contain a large amount of processed, high-calorie and low-nutrient foods have been linked with an increased risk of depression, and some food additives have been linked to increased levels of anxiety**. An unhealthy diet can also lead to physical health problems (such as diabetes) and obesity, which can perpetuate feelings of personal failure and low self-esteem.



Signs and indicators of an anxiety disorder

The signs and indicators will vary according to the individual and the type of anxiety disorder they are experiencing. Here are some possible examples:

- Unrealistic and/or excessive fear and worry (about past or future events)
- Racing thoughts
- Pessimistic outlook, fearing the worst
- Reduced concentration and memory
- Indecisiveness
- Irritability, impatience, anger and confusion
- Restlessness, feeling 'on edge' and nervousness
- Tiredness, sleep disturbances and vivid dreams
- Palpitations, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath (indicators of a panic attack)
- Dizziness, headaches, excessive sweating
- Muscle aches and pains (especially neck, shoulders and lower back), restlessness, tremors and shaking
- Avoidance of situations
- Distress in social situations
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs in order to relax or deal with situations

Key point

Anxiety is normal and something all of us experience from time to time. However, when the level of anxiety experienced is prolonged and out of proportion to the reality of the situation, an individual may have an anxiety disorder of some kind.

Section 3

Recognising and responding to a mental health crisis

In this section you will learn about:

- What is a mental health crisis?
- Responding to a person experiencing a mental health crisis

What is a mental health crisis?

Unfortunately, some people's mental health deteriorates to the point where they experience what is described as a mental health 'crisis' or mental health 'emergency'. This may happen suddenly (perhaps in response to a traumatic event) or the person may experience a gradual worsening of their symptoms over a period of time. This is an emergency situation and appropriate action must be taken quickly.

Signs and indicators of a mental health crisis

“ A mental health crisis often means that you no longer feel able to cope or be in control of your situation. You may feel great emotional distress or anxiety, cannot cope with day-to-day life or work, think about suicide or self-harm, or experience hallucinations and hearing voices. ”

(Source: NHS, www.nhs.uk)

According to the mental health charity Rethink, a mental health crisis can mean different things to different people, but can include:

- Talking about suicide or acting on suicidal thoughts. This might include looking for ways to kill or harm themselves (such as trying to get access to pills) and talking about or writing about death, dying or suicide.



Rethink
www.rethink.org

Unit 2

Understand how to support individuals with mental ill health



Activity 5

The workplace plays a central role in many people's lives. With the average person spending more time at work than on any other daily activity, it is important that individuals within any organisation feel connected to and supported by their colleagues and managers.

Imagine you are experiencing stress and low mood as a result of your workload. What qualities or characteristics in your colleagues or managers would encourage you to share your thoughts and feelings with them? List these below.

Positive relationships tend to have the following characteristics (these are not exhaustive and you could probably think of many more):

- **Compassion** – This is the ability to convey genuine care and understanding. This will be conveyed through verbal means (the words a person chooses to use) and non-verbal means (their facial expressions for example).
- **Empathy** – An empathic person is able to put themselves in the others person's shoes in an attempt to understand their needs, feelings and experiences.
- **Respect** – Positive relationships have a healthy level of mutual respect and there is a positive regard for one another as human beings. Positive relationships are also respectful of each other's rights, views and wishes.
- **Value** – Positive relationships should imbue the person with the belief that they are valued as an individual and that regardless of their level of seniority, intelligence or experience, they are of equal value to others.
- **Inclusion** – As generally sociable beings, people need to feel like they are wanted and belong. When people feel 'different' or like an outsider they are less likely to seek support from within the group or organisation. Positive



On a practical level, there needs to be ongoing support from managers and colleagues as the person recovers. For example, managers (or mentors) should arrange regular meetings with the person to discuss how they are coping, offer encouragement and listen to any concerns. Managers should make it known that they have an **open-door policy** for anyone with mental health concerns. Managers should also **periodically check themselves** by asking questions such as: *‘Have the things that contributed to the person’s distress in the workplace been forgotten?’* and *‘Are we continuing to monitor the known “stressors” and minimise the risk factors?’*

Managers can play a huge role in a person’s recovery if they continue to be patient and flexible in their support for the individual. It is important to remember that although the person may ‘look fine’ on the surface, they may be struggling with their emotions on the inside. Therefore, it is vital that the strategies and support that have been put in place are continued for as long as is necessary. Recovery is rarely a linear process, i.e. one where the person moves smoothly along the continuum from mental ill health to good mental health once again. More often, there will be setbacks as well as successes along the way.

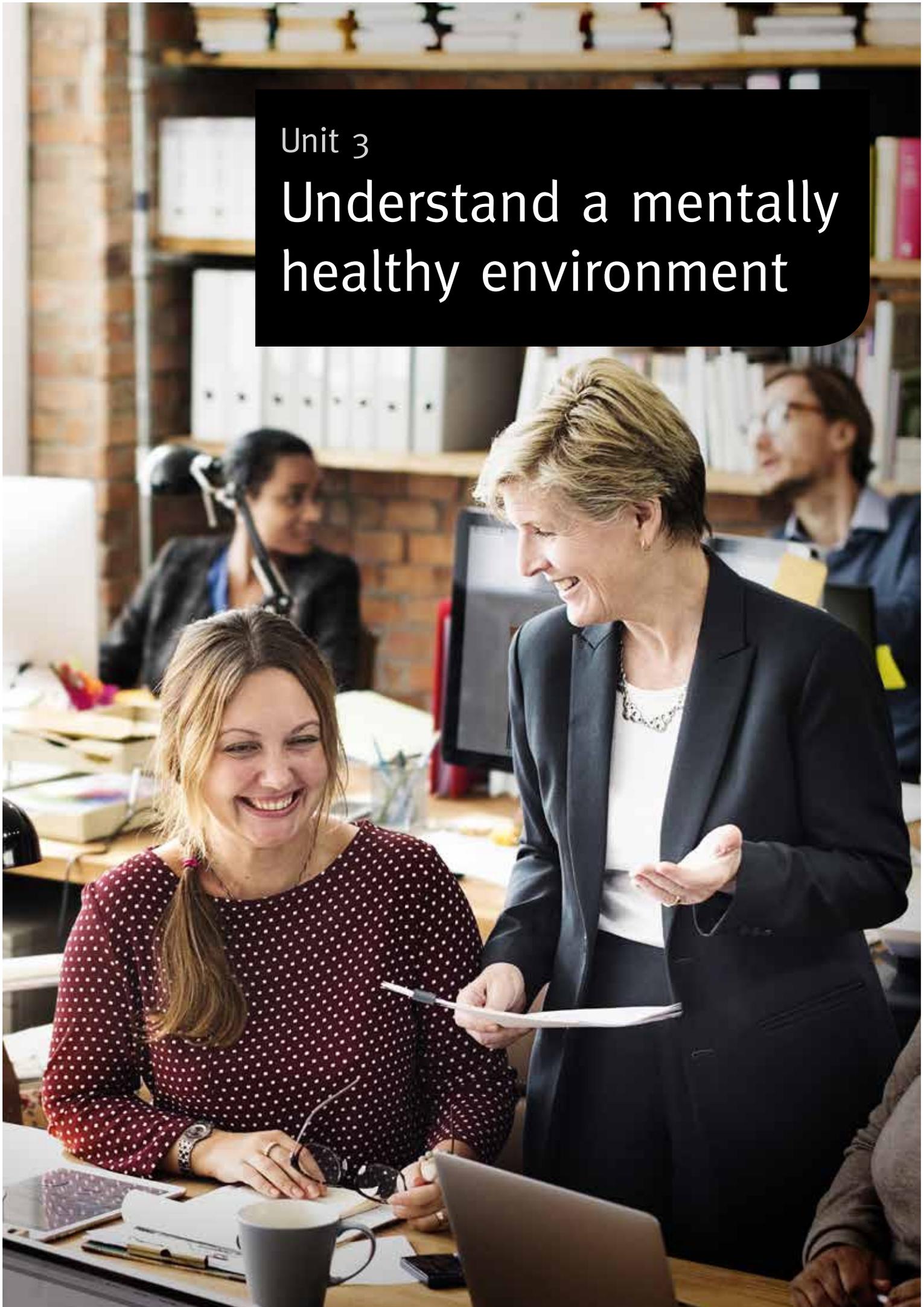
Recognising own responsibilities and limitations

If you need to support someone experiencing mental distress in your workplace or learning environment, it is important that you understand what your responsibilities are and that there will be limitations to what you can do.

Everyone in a workplace or learning environment has a responsibility to avoid acting in ways that either contribute to or directly cause physical, emotional or psychological harm to others. For example, nobody should be subject to ridicule,

Unit 3

Understand a mentally healthy environment





Strategies that promote mental well-being

Here are some of the ways in which mental well-being can be promoted within the workplace, learning environment and other types of settings:

Take stock and develop a mental health action plan

Perhaps one of the first steps in any mental well-being strategy is to take a step back and assess the possible causes of mental ill health in the workplace or learning environment and identify the areas that need improvement. This might include asking people for their views (for example, a **staff well-being survey** or, in the case of a school or college, a student voice exercise).

Analysing absence data (when and why people are absent from work) and areas with higher than normal staff turnover could also help organisations to pinpoint any trends and weak points. From here, the organisation can devise a more informed **mental health action plan** (what it intends to do to improve mental well-being) and then share this with everyone.

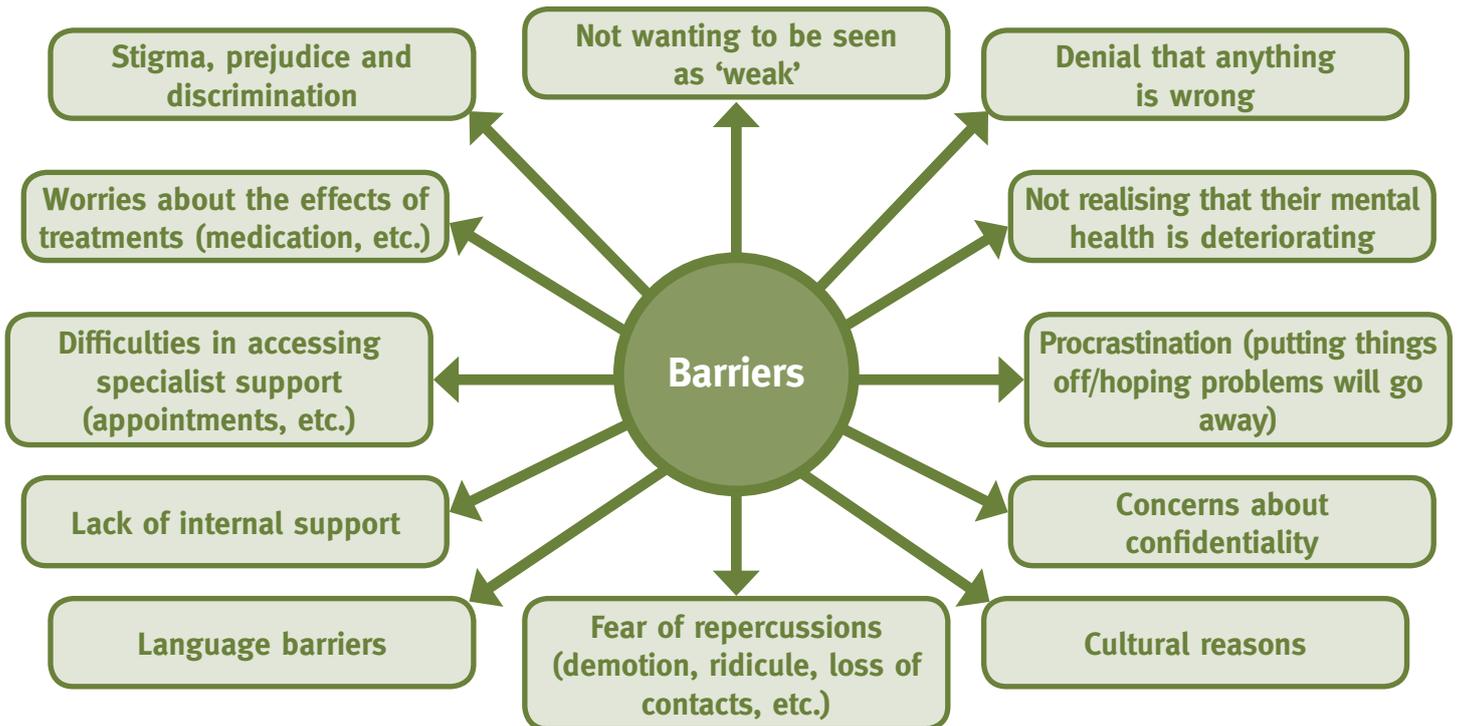
Raise awareness and educate

Any strategy must highlight the importance of mental well-being and raise awareness of the types of mental health difficulties that people may encounter. Therefore, **mental health awareness training for everyone** (including senior managers) is very important.

Alongside training, putting up posters about mental health, sharing inspirational stories and films via newsletters or the intranet, taking part in World Mental Health Day and Mental Health Awareness Week, and inviting in guest speakers to talk about their experiences are all practical examples of awareness raising activities.

Reducing barriers to accessing mental health support

Although you have examined various sources of support for mental health, it is important to appreciate that for some people there are barriers to accessing this support. These barriers include:



Many of these barriers can be overcome, but the person may need support and reassurance to move forward. **Strategies to reduce the barriers to accessing mental health support include:**

- **Mental health awareness training.** As you learned earlier, this will help people not only to become more educated about mental ill health, but hopefully more tolerant and sympathetic as well. It may also help individuals experiencing mental health issues to spot the warning signs and encourage them to talk with someone else about what is happening to them.
- **Senior managers openly challenging negative language and attitudes** relating to mental illness. This sends out the message that prejudice, ridicule, etc. will not be tolerated.