

Mental health maintenance



Commercial vehicle workshops can be dangerous environments, but independent repair firm Sapphire Vehicle Services's managing director Perry Reeves believes that providing training for recognising the signs of poor mental health is more important than first aid.

"I think mental health first aid training is more important because there are more people suffering with mental health issues than actually injuring themselves," he says. "Providing maintenance for a truck or car will ensure that it does a good job, and the same is true for people - we need to make sure they are fully functioning."

At Sapphire (pictured above), it is crucial that staff always remain focused, especially when it comes to tasks such as brake relining. "Operators put their trust in us to ensure a vehicle is roadworthy. It is essentially a lethal object going down the road at 50mph, and we cannot have anybody working who is not focusing 100%. If a worker has a problem, we will assign them to other tasks until we are confident they are fit to work."

Group H&S manager Katie Atkin echoes this sentiment, adding: "A lot of accidents can happen because someone is not concentrating due to their mental health. If you deal with that first, you are preventing injuries further down the line."

To recognise these issues, Sapphire offers a two-day training course that equips staff members to help those that need support. Group training manager Tony Hewins says: "Those

The transport industry has processes in place to address injuries, but not all of them are physical. Ben Spencer talks to firms fighting for better mental health

taking part are given the skills to identify signs that a worker may be displaying if they are struggling. These can include taking longer than usual to complete a particular task, losing concentration, or being withdrawn."

What support is available to staff after speaking with a mental health first aider? Atkin explains that Sapphire sends out a monthly newsletter that includes phone numbers that staff members can call to seek professional help. These include the Work Guru web-based stress management programme and Mood Panda, an app that allows people to track their moods.

Both Hewins and Atkin attended a two-day pilot course on mental health which served as a precursor to the current programme. Hewins adds: "After the course, a worker asked to speak to me because I was registered as a mental health first aider, so then I thought we should develop this programme right across the site."

DUTY OF CARE

Ensuring that senior members of staff are well-versed in this area is crucial, because research from the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) revealed that many employers are unaware of their legal duties, which can include providing access to health and safety advice,

or how to spot the signs of stress. In response, it launched the Working Minds campaign in 2021 to encourage employers and workers across all sectors of the economy to sign up as campaign champions to raise awareness of stress and the impact of poor mental health.

Raising this level of awareness is crucial, as figures from the Labour Force Survey 2021/2022 published by HSE show that of the 1.8 million workers suffering from a work-related illness, just over half (914,000) were suffering from stress, depression, or anxiety.

Working Minds now has 21 partners, with the recent addition of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health.

Reflecting on the progress of the campaign, Liz Goodwill, head of the work-related stress and mental health policy team at HSE, says: "We're constantly looking for new ways to present the information and keep it fresh. Initially, the campaign was aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises, but we have found that the message we are putting out there is applicable to all organisations of any size, at any level."

Working Minds uses the Work Right website (www.is.gd/izeyog) and posters to deliver a message that encourages employers to promote good mental health with their staff through forming habits using the five Rs: Reach Out, Recognise, Respond, Reflect and Make It Routine. The HSE website also has a series of toolbox toolkits which emphasise the need to have conversations around mental health in the workplace, and a quiz that allows managers to test their knowledge of



their legal duties.

“We are trying to get mental health on the same parity as safety. For example, you would not leave a dangerous machine unguarded, and we are trying to get people to adopt a similar proactive approach to mental health.”

More broadly, Goodwill states that HSE is calling for a culture change across workplaces in the UK to address work-related stress and mental health. Also, she believes that transport managers could play a part in setting a precedent for these types of conversations. “However, managers are not doctors, so it’s important that they can signpost people to an occupational health department, an employee assistance programme or to a GP.”

Signposting is a key part of the training for those that enrol as ‘recalibrate wellbeing ambassadors’ at Metroline. Since 2021, the London bus operator has been delivering 12-week programmes as part of a collaboration with Wellbeing People.

Liz Murphy, business compliance manager at Metroline, says: “Staff members are made aware of our wellbeing ambassadors, who can be approached at any time for support, if

necessary. Our ambassadors have been provided with adequate training in relation to resource, service and healthcare signposting, understanding their own personal boundaries and their capacity to assist when required.”

As part of the initiative, interactive health kiosks (pictured above) are deployed at all locations. Murphy adds: “The kiosk provides BMI, blood pressure and body fat content as well as [Wellbeing People’s] Boomerang Life Balance on sleep, stress and work-life balance. If a staff member is experiencing any issues, they can approach one of our wellbeing ambassadors, managers who have attended the MIND mental health training, or utilise our employee assistance programme to provide the right level of support.”

BREAKING THE STIGMA

The steps Sapphire and Metroline are taking are showing an increasing openness to talk about mental health, but there is still more work that needs to be done. James Garbett, marketing and communications executive at Working

Minds partner organisation Mates in Mind, points out that truck drivers in particular can be alone and away from their families for a long time, which can affect their mental health.

“We know the transport, ship and logistics sector had the highest level of absenteeism within the private sector,” he says. “I think the pressures of deadlines and rising costs of supplies are adding up and the current economic climate is really hitting home for a lot of those people.”

Mates in Mind works with various organisations to develop mental health programmes in a range of industries, including transport, construction and manufacturing. It offers Start the Conversation training sessions for workers of these organisations to recognise the signs of those struggling with mental health issues.

Fiona Feeney, support manager at Mates in Mind, says: “We keep the language in the training simple and use a lot of infographics to aid people. We also deliver training that is tailored specifically to managers and the duty of care they have over their employees.”

While the effects of mental health may not appear as visibly as physical injuries, the effort these companies are taking to spot the signs and provide support may make all the difference. **TE**