

# Managing mental health related absences in the UK



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## Why this matters right now

Mental health is now one of the biggest drivers of sickness absence in the UK. The CIPD's latest **Health and Wellbeing at Work** report puts average sickness at **9.4 days per employee** (the highest in over 15 years).

And the HSE reports **16.4 million working days** lost in 2023/24 to work-related **stress, depression or anxiety** alone.

This guide gives you a clear process to prevent problems early, handle short- and long-term mental health absences fairly, and support staff back to work – while protecting your business.

## What the statistics show us



### Average sickness:

UK employees average **9.4 days** off per year – the highest in 15+ years.



### Prevalence:

Mental ill health is a leading cause of both short - (27%) and long-term (41%) absence.



### Days lost:

**16.4m** working days lost to work-related stress, depression or anxiety (2023/24).



### Common issues reported:

Stress, anxiety, depression; workload pressure; management style.

Mental ill health is a leading cause of both **short- and long-term** absence. Tackling the work factors and running a fair, consistent process is now a commercial and compliance essential.





## Recognising early signs and preventing absence

Think about the culture in your business. Do you think you or your managers can spot signs of mental illness? Would employees feel comfortable discussing any issues they were having with their managers? And are managers equipped to deal with those conversations? These are all easier when there's trust and openness.

### What to look out for:

- Noticeable changes in behaviour or mood (anxious, withdrawn, irritable, tired).
- Drop in focus on tasks or quality of work; mistakes increase.
- Increase in sickness absence or being late to work.
- Avoiding calls/meetings; changes in appetite/sleep.

### Practical preventative actions:

- ✓ Be clear on role priorities and try to reduce conflicting deadlines.
- ✓ Allow temporary flexible working with start/finish times or short breaks.
- ✓ Train line managers in supportive one-to-ones and workload planning.

### How to intervene early:

1. **Informal check-in:** 'I've noticed a few changes and wanted to check in. How can we help?'
2. **Listen and reassure:** It's often more important to listen than have the answers. Avoid assumptions; acknowledge impact; agree next steps.
3. **Signpost to support:** Make sure your managers know where employees can access Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP)/GPs/occupational health (OH); company wellbeing resources.
4. **Agree short-term plan:** Consider making small, time-bound adjustments and a set review date.
5. **Record any discussions:** Keep factual notes; share a short follow-up email.



**Manager tip:** Focus on **work impact** and **support options**, not medical details. Ask what helps them do their job safely and well.



## Short-term mental health absence process

There are a few stages in the absence process you can support with:



### When notified of absence

- Thank them for calling; avoid pressure to disclose details.
- Confirm how to keep in touch and provisional return date.
- Explain self-certification (up to seven days) and fit note if eight days or more.



### If patterns emerge (e.g., frequent short absences)

- Move to attendance review: facts, support offered, expectations, and trigger points.
- Consider OH input before any formal action (especially where disability may be relevant).

Consistent steps and light adjustments can help with safe returns for employees, improve and maintain good attendance in future, and build evidence that your process is fair.



### During the absence

- Keep proportionate contact and agree channel/frequency.
- Offer support: EAP, OH referral, wellbeing resources.
- Consider short, temporary adjustments that could encourage a safe return.



### On return (same day if possible) hold a return-to-work meeting

- Welcome them back, check how they are and if there are any limitations.
- Discuss any medical advice they've received and/or medication or treatment they may be on to assess potential future absences or reoccurring issues.
- Review possible triggers including workload, conflicts, environment.
- Agree adjustments and a check-in date.
- Record and store notes securely.







## Long-term mental health absence process

Be clear on what you class as a 'long-term absence', for instance whether it's four weeks, eight weeks, or a longer period. Whatever you decide, have a fair and consistent process in place.

### Step 1

- ✓ Hold regular welfare meetings that are supportive.
- ✓ Seek consent for OH referral and GP reports if needed.
- ✓ Open the discussion about reasonable adjustments.



### Step 2

- ✓ Review OH advice; agree a phased return plan where feasible.
- ✓ Consider case conference (manager, HR, OH) if complex.
- ✓ Keep regular, respectful contact and document any decisions.

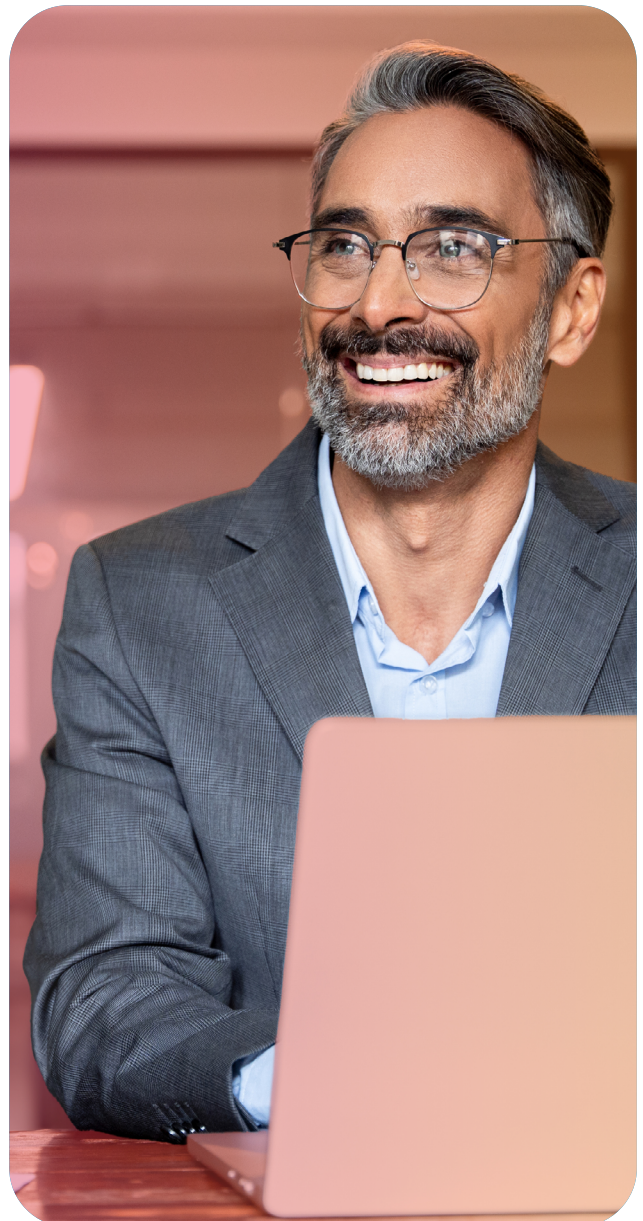


### Step 3

- ✓ Reassess capability to return within a reasonable timeframe with adjustments.
- ✓ If prospects remain unclear, consider a formal capability process (fair stages, medical evidence, right to be accompanied).
- ✓ Only consider dismissal after exploring adjustments, alternative roles, suitable timescales, and consulting fully.



**Legal low-down:** Poor contact once SSP ends can backfire. Maintain proportionate, compassionate contact and a clear paper trail of conversations and decisions.





## Reasonable adjustments to support working

Your main focus following any mental health-related absence should be supporting employees back to work. One way you can do this is through reasonable adjustments:



**Time-based:** Flexible start/finish, protected breaks, temporary reduced hours, phased return.



**Support-based:** Regular check-ins, buddy/mentor, training refresh, temporary change of manager, EAP/OH support.



**Task-based:** Adjust workload/targets, redistribute high-pressure tasks, quiet workspace, fewer meetings.



**Environment/delivery:** Hybrid options, clarity over priorities, meeting agendas in advance.

ACAS emphasises that mental health adjustments help people stay in work, remain productive and safe, and improve retention.

### Considerations for your process

- Reasonable adjustments aren't just for the employee to think about and propose. Proactively think about how you could support the employee.
- You don't have to agree to every request, but you need to show you've considered them. If you can't or don't want to agree to a request, you need strong evidence as to why the adjustment wouldn't be reasonable.
- If you accept reasonable adjustments remember that's not the end. The employee will likely need continued support.
- Don't forget, if an employee is classed as disabled you have a legal obligation to make sure they aren't at a disadvantage when doing their job.







## When mental health could be a disability

Under the **Equality Act 2010**, a mental health condition may be a **disability** if it's a **physical or mental impairment** with a substantial and long-term (12+ months) adverse effect on normal day-to-day activities. If so, you must consider **reasonable adjustments** and avoid discrimination (including direct discrimination and discrimination arising from disability more indirectly).



### Case example: Kelly v London Underground

An Area Manager with hearing loss alleged a failure to make **reasonable adjustments**. Two adjustments were in issue: funding effective **hearing aids** and providing **voice-to-text software** for meetings. The employer cited post-Covid **budget constraints**, but the tribunal found the cost was modest compared to the business cost of losing or replacing an experienced manager.

## Health & Safety implications and what you must do

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) says that stress is an adverse reaction someone might have to excessive pressure or other demands. While pressure can be a good thing, when it becomes too much, it can cause stress.

- The **Health and Safety at Work Act 1974** puts a 'duty of care' on employers to protect employees from the risk of stress at work.
- The **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999** requires all employers to make 'suitable and sufficient assessment' to the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activity.
- The HSE expects employers to **assess and control stress risks** (e.g., demands, control, support, relationships, role, change).
- Do a **stress risk assessment** where there's evidence of risk (individual or team).
- Act on findings: workload planning, job design, manager training, change management.
- Monitor outcomes and review regularly.

HSE data show stress, depression and anxiety are major drivers of lost time. And it's not exclusive to any particular sector.



## Fit notes and how to use them well

Employees can self-certify if they're off sick for up to seven days, but after that they'll need to provide a fit note from their GP or a healthcare professional.

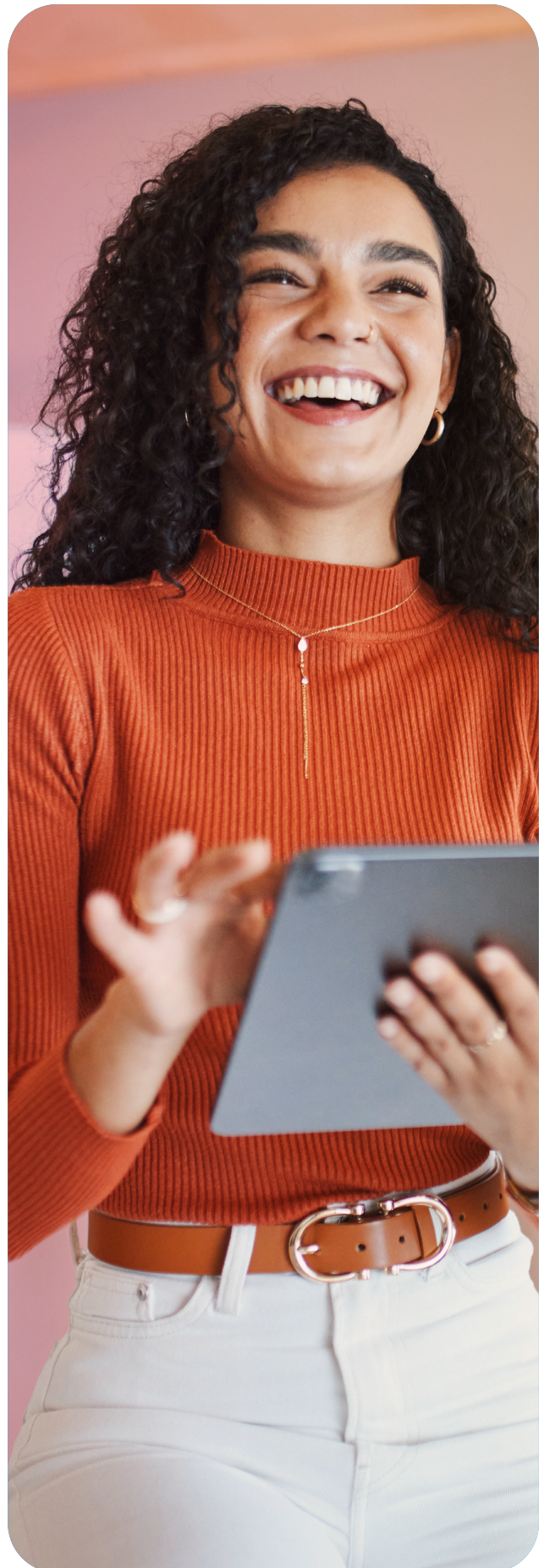
- You need a fit note before an employee can return if they're off sick for **over seven calendar days**.
- If the fit note says they can work, you don't need to take further action.
- If the fit note says 'may be fit for work' it suggests you may need to adjust hours or duties and have further discussions.
- If an absence goes over seven days and the employee doesn't provide a fit note, it could affect their SSP.

## Pay, SSP and company sick pay

- Employees who are off work due to sickness for four or more consecutive days are entitled to SSP if they meet the eligibility criteria.
- They may receive more if you offer company sick pay.

Under the Employment Rights Bill, reforms are expected to take place from April 2026 to:

- Remove the lower earnings limit, making SSP available to all workers, no matter their income.
- Introduce a new rule so employees on lower wages will receive 80% of their average weekly earnings or the standard SSP rate – whichever is lower.
- Remove the current three-day waiting period, meaning SSP will be payable from the first day of sickness absence.





# Get ready for anything with Citation

Running a business means you have a lot to think about. And mental health-related absences can be tricky to navigate – policies, processes, training. That's where we come in.

You can count on our HR and Employment Law experts to support your every step of the way, backed by 24/7 advice. Want to make our team part of your team? Just give us a call on **0345 844 1111** to discuss how we can help.