

Peter Barnard is the Registrar at The Grimsby Institute of Further & Higher Education. This article first appeared in Education and Health 2008.26:3,54. For communication please email: barnardp@grimsby.ac.uk

Peter Barnard

Addressing mental health issues at the Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education

The Institute has won national acclaim for its innovative and extensive work on employee health and wellbeing. This article describes briefly its work over the past 3 years.

In 2004/05 the Institute lost 4,385 working days to sickness amounting to 3.6 working days per employee (or an absence level of 1.62%). Of these days lost, 696 were due to mental health issues, representing 15.87% of the total working days lost and 0.25% of all available working days. In 2005/06 there was an increase to 894 (or 19.8% of all lost days) in the days lost to mental health issues.

Going off sick with stress

A particular problem during 2005/06 centred on individuals going off sick with stress when subject to disciplinary proceedings. Despite extensive efforts, these problems were beyond the reach of the Institute's existing procedures and systems. The HR team resolved on a course of action including:

- Training for all directors and managers on managing stress at work
- Changing the staff procedures to bar staff from receiving Institute sick pay if they went off sick when subject to formal staffing procedures
- Introducing a telephone-based employee assistance programme (EAP) to supplement the existing face-to-face counselling service for staff

The HR Director revised staffing procedures that involved extensive staff consultation and resulted in staff approval. The revised procedures were communicated to staff so that they knew the consequences of

going off sick in such circumstances. In the following 12 months this new provision was enacted only once.

The Institute's directors and managers were all trained by the HR Director and Health and Safety Manager on managing stress at work. Additionally, the HR team adapted a 'red flag' system whereby any absences for mental health issues prompted rapid intervention by the Personnel Manager. She worked with the line manager and offsite counsellor to support individuals to help them stay at work if they were struggling. This could involve reduced working hours or duties or even a month's free use of the on-site gym.

As a result of these interventions, the number of absences due to mental health issues dropped in the following year by 1/3 to 590 days (or 13.83% of all working days lost or 0.2% available working days).

During 2008 we have delivered mental health awareness training for staff in conjunction with experts from the local Care Trust and have given all staff information on positive steps for taking personal control over their mental health. Mental health features in the Health and Wellbeing roadshows being taken out to staff on-site as well as in staff presentations and newsletters.

The net saving from the reduction in sickness absence due to mental health during 2006/07 was c£22K (after deductions of training costs and introducing the EAP).

The level of sickness absence due to mental health issues in 2007/08 is currently lower after 9 months than the reduced level of the previous year.