Partnering Minds
UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE. UNLOCKING POTENTIAL.

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE, UNLOCKING POTENTIAL

White paper series · Paper 1

The conversation that matters: why your line managers need mental health first aid skills

Many people who are struggling at work don't tell anyone. The person best placed to notice is usually their manager. This paper sets out the evidence, and the human skills that make the difference.



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AT A GLANCE

Mental ill health is one of the biggest people risks organisations face. Managers are the front line.

Every working day, someone in your organisation says "I'm fine" and doesn't mean it. Whether they get support early, or only when things reach crisis point, often comes down to one thing: whether their manager notices, asks and knows what to do next.

The key points

- **The problem is large and growing.** Around 964,000 workers in Great Britain reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2024/25, costing an estimated 22.1 million working days.[1]
- **The cost is real.** Poor mental health costs UK employers an estimated £51 billion a year, much of it through people at work but struggling.[2]
- **Managers are under-equipped.** Only 29% of employers train managers to support staff with mental ill health.[3]
- **Training works.** Where managers are trained, employers are far more confident they can spot the signs and have sensitive conversations.[3]
- **The stakes can be life and death.** 6,162 suicides were registered in England and Wales in 2025, and the male rate is around three times the female rate.[4]

What this paper is, and isn't, arguing for

This is not a case for turning managers into counsellors. Mental Health First Aid does not teach anyone to diagnose, treat or tell people what to do. It builds something simpler and more powerful: the confidence and human skill to notice when someone isn't themselves, start a supportive conversation, listen without judgement and help them find the right support.

Those are leadership skills. In my experience, they are among the most important a manager can have.

> *"Most people don't need a mental health expert. They need someone who notices, and has the confidence to ask."*
>
> MICHAEL BECK

BEFORE YOU READ ON

If you were struggling, who at work would you tell?

Your line manager? A colleague you trust? HR? Or would you hold it in, put a brave face on it and carry on?

Take a moment with that question. Be honest with yourself. Your answer is the reason this paper exists.

If you would hold it in, you are far from alone.

5%

of UK adults said they would speak to their line manager about their mental health.

Vitality and Opinium, 2026[5]

19%

chose not to tell anyone at work about high levels of pressure or stress, and 21% said their work suffered but they took no time off.

Mental Health UK, Burnout Report 2025[6]

Interestingly, 60% of workers in the same Mental Health UK research said they would feel comfortable talking to their line manager about *stress*.[6] The surveys asked different questions, but together they point to the same gap: stress has become acceptable to talk about at work, while "mental health" still carries a stigma that keeps people quiet.

Now turn the question around

If someone in your team was struggling right now, would they tell you? And would you notice if they didn't?

1. **Have your line managers been trained to have a mental health conversation?**
   Or are you relying on goodwill and instinct?
2. **Do your people know where to turn?**
   Is support visible, trusted and easy to reach, on every site and shift?
3. **Do your senior leaders talk openly about wellbeing, including their own?**
   People take their cue from the top.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO ME

I've seen what happens when no one asks.

I've spent 35 years working with people: as a senior operational leader with Tesco, Asda, Budgens, Iceland, Apple and Haven, and then developing leaders and teams in organisations of every size. In all of that time, the thing that has mattered most hasn't been a strategy or a system. It has been whether someone felt able to say "I'm not okay", and whether the person in front of them knew how to respond.

At 30, I was promoted into a senior field role, and a leadership programme changed how I led. It taught me that results come through people, and that people only give their best when they feel seen. That belief is why I became an MHFA England Instructor Trainer, why I volunteer as a group facilitator with Andy's Man Club in Worthing, and why I spoke at the Second National Advancing Men's Mental Health in the Workplace Conference in 2024.



Every week I see how much changes when someone is simply asked how they are, and then properly listened to. I also see how often people wait far too long, because they didn't feel safe to speak, or because no one noticed.

Workplaces are one of the best places to change that. We spend a large part of our lives at work. Our managers see us more often than many of our friends and family. With the right skills, they can be the first to notice, and the reason someone gets help early.

THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE

The numbers behind “I’m fine”.

Mental ill health is not a niche issue affecting a few people. It touches every team, and its cost shows up in absence, performance, retention and, at its most serious, in lives lost.

1 in 4

people in England will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year; 1 in 6 report a common mental health problem in any given week.

Mind[7]

964,000

workers in Great Britain reported stress, depression or anxiety caused or made worse by work in 2024/25, with an estimated 22.1 million working days lost.

Health and Safety Executive[1]

£51bn

a year is the estimated cost of poor mental health to UK employers. Presenteeism, people working while unwell, accounts for around £24 billion of it.

Deloitte, 2024[2]

41%

of employers say mental ill health is a top cause of long-term absence. Average absence has risen to 9.4 days per employee per year.

CIPD, 2025[3]

6,162

suicides were registered in England and Wales in 2025, a rate of 11.3 per 100,000 people. Rates have generally risen since 2017.

Office for National Statistics[4]

3×

the male suicide rate (17.5 per 100,000) is around three times the female rate (5.5). The highest rate is among men aged 50 to 54.

Office for National Statistics[4]

Behind every one of these figures is a person, and very often a colleague who sensed something was wrong but didn’t know what to say. That gap between noticing and acting is exactly where training makes a difference.

WHY LINE MANAGERS

Managers set the weather for their teams.

Line managers are usually the first to see the early signs: someone going quiet in meetings, a change in energy or mood, missed deadlines from a normally reliable person, more short-term absence, or an "I'm fine" that comes a little too quickly. They are also the person most employees will, or won't, choose to speak to.

Yet most managers were promoted for being good at the work, not for knowing what to say when someone is struggling. So when they're unsure, they often say nothing, or say something well-meant that closes the conversation down. It's rarely a lack of care. It's a lack of confidence.

29%

of employers train managers to support staff with mental ill health.

CIPD, 2025[3]

45%

of managers have received dedicated mental health training, leaving more than half without it.

Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health, 2024[8]

Training changes what managers feel able to do

The CIPD's 2025 research shows a clear difference where managers are trained:[3]

63% vs 45%

of employers are confident managers can **spot the early warning signs** of mental ill health when managers are trained, compared with where they aren't.

73% vs 57%

are confident managers can **have sensitive conversations and signpost** to support when trained, compared with where they aren't.

Confidence matters because early, small conversations prevent bigger ones later. The manager who asks "How are you, really?" in week one is often the reason a conversation in month six never becomes a crisis, a long-term absence or a resignation.

THE SKILLS, NOT THE DIAGNOSIS

Mental Health First Aid builds human skills, not clinicians.

Just as a physical first aider isn't expected to perform surgery, a Mental Health First Aider isn't expected to diagnose or treat. MHFA England training gives people a structured, practical way to respond, and the confidence to use it.

What MHFA training is

- ✓ Recognising possible signs that someone may be struggling
- ✓ Starting a supportive, non-judgemental conversation
- ✓ Listening properly, without rushing to fix
- ✓ Encouraging the person towards appropriate support, professional or otherwise
- ✓ Knowing how to respond safely in a crisis
- ✓ Looking after your own wellbeing while supporting others

What MHFA training isn't

- ✗ Diagnosing mental health conditions
- ✗ Counselling or therapy
- ✗ Telling people what to do or how to feel
- ✗ Replacing occupational health, an EAP or the NHS
- ✗ Making managers responsible for someone's recovery
- ✗ A tick-box exercise

The everyday skills that make the difference

1. **Notice**
   Pay attention to change: in mood, behaviour, energy or performance. Change is often the first signal.
2. **Ask, and ask twice**
   "How are you?" invites "fine". A second, genuine "No, really, how are you doing?" gives permission to answer honestly.
3. **Listen without judgement**
   Give time and full attention. Resist the urge to fix, compare or reassure too quickly. Being heard is often the support.
4. **Signpost**
   Know what help is available, from your EAP and occupational health to a GP, Samaritans or peer support, and help the person take the next step.
5. **Follow up, and look after yourself**
   Check in again. And recognise your own limits: supporting others is easier when you're supported too.

THE SCEPTIC'S QUESTIONS

"Is this just the latest HR fad?" Fair questions, honest answers.

Some leaders still quietly wonder whether mental health training is real, necessary or just the latest trend. Those doubts deserve straight answers.

"Isn't this just the latest trend?"

No. Mental Health First Aid was developed in Australia and has been delivered and evaluated since 2000. It came to England in 2007 through the Department of Health, nearly 840,000 people have trained as MHFAiders in England, and it is delivered in 51 countries.[9] Employers' legal duty to protect workers from stress at work dates back to the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.[10]

"Does it actually work?"

An independent review of 18 controlled trials, involving 5,936 people, found MHFA training improved knowledge, recognition of the signs, confidence to help and the amount of help people went on to give.[11] To be honest about it, the effects were small to moderate and strongest in the first six months, which is exactly why refreshers and leadership backing matter. A 2026 UK trial across nine workplaces makes the same point: MHFA training boosted knowledge and confidence but, on its own, did not increase formal help-seeking. The researchers concluded that trust in, and awareness of, the MHFAider role are critical.[12]

"We already have an Employee Assistance Programme."

Good. But support only helps if people reach it, and nearly one in five people keep their stress to themselves.[6] A trained manager is often the bridge between someone struggling in silence and the help you're already paying for. In MHFA England's 2026 survey, half of MHFAiders said they point people to an EAP and nearly six in ten to their GP.[13]

"Our managers aren't counsellors."

They don't need to be. MHFA doesn't teach diagnosis or therapy. It teaches people to notice, ask, listen and signpost, which are leadership skills by any measure.

"We trained people before and nothing changed."

Skills fade without practice, and a network of MHFAiders works only when people know who they are, they have time to do the role and leaders visibly back them. Nearly half of MHFAiders say lack of time is one of their biggest barriers. Where there is an MHFAider policy, 87% feel supported, compared with 56% where there isn't.[13] Training is the start, not the whole answer.

"Can we afford it right now?"

Poor mental health already costs UK employers an estimated £51 billion a year, and Deloitte estimates a return of around £4.70 for every £1 invested in mental health support.[2] The question is less whether you can afford it, and more what not doing it is already costing.

A CLOSER LOOK

Men, work and the conversations that don't happen.

Men account for the large majority of suicides in the UK. According to the ONS, the male suicide rate in England and Wales in 2025 was 17.5 per 100,000, around three times the rate for women, and men aged 50 to 54 had the highest rate of any group.[4] Samaritans reports that 4,231 men died by suicide in 2024, around 11 men every day.[14]

Men's mental health charities, including Andy's Man Club and CALM, often describe suicide as the biggest killer of men under 50. The official data supports the heart of that message: the ONS found suicide was the leading cause of death for men aged 20 to 34 in every year from 2001 to 2018, accounting for 27% of male deaths in that age group in 2018, and the leading cause for men aged 35 to 49 between 2011 and 2015.[15]

Many of these men were working, and many were in contact with someone. Samaritans highlights research showing that 9 in 10 middle-aged men who died by suicide had been in touch with a statutory service in the year before they died.[14] The opportunity to notice is often there. The skill and confidence to act on it is what's missing.

What Andy's Man Club teaches us

Andy's Man Club was founded in Halifax in 2016 by Elaine Roberts and Luke Ambler, Andy's mum and brother-in-law, after Andy Roberts took his own life aged 23.[16] From nine men at the first meeting, it has grown into free, peer-to-peer talking groups meeting across the UK every Monday evening.

As a facilitator, the lesson I take into every workplace is simple: men will talk when the setting feels safe, the questions are genuine, and nobody is trying to fix them. That's exactly what good managers can create at work. **#ITSOKAYTOTALK**

What this means for leaders

- **Don't wait to be told.** Men in particular may not volunteer that they're struggling. A manager who notices and asks makes it easier.
- **Make it normal.** Leaders who talk openly about wellbeing, including their own, give others permission to do the same.
- **Know where to point people.** Visible support, from MHFAiders to EAPs and peer groups, means no one has to work out the next step alone.

THE BUSINESS CASE

Doing the right thing is also the smart thing.

Supporting mental health isn't only a moral responsibility. Deloitte's 2024 analysis estimates that employers see an average return of around **£4.70 for every £1** invested in employee mental health support.[2] MHFA England's own research finds that 92% of people agree MHFAiders contribute to healthier, more productive workplaces.[13]

What does that look like day to day? In MHFA England's October 2026 survey of 6,454 MHFAiders, more than four in five had a one-to-one conversation about someone's mental health in the past year. Nearly two in five supported someone in a mental health crisis, and one in three helped a colleague return to work.[13] The findings are self-reported, but they show what trained people actually do.

Employers also have a legal duty to protect workers from stress at work, assess the risk and act on it, under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.[10,17] There is no law requiring mental health first aiders, but the Health and Safety Executive's first aid guidance says employers should consider mental ill health in their first aid provision, and names mental health trained first aiders as one option.[18] Trained managers are one of the most practical ways to spot and act on those risks early.

What good looks like

Training a handful of people is a start. Building a workplace where people feel safe to speak up takes a joined-up approach:

1. **Raise awareness for everyone**
   Give all staff a shared language for mental health and a clear picture of the support available.
2. **Equip every line manager**
   Make mental health conversations part of what good management means, not an optional extra.
3. **Build a trained MHFAider network**
   A visible network of Mental Health First Aiders across sites, shifts and levels, backed with protected time to do the role.
4. **Name a lead and set a policy**
   MHFAiders with a named MHFA lead are far more likely to feel supported (89% vs 64%).[13] MHFA England's Workplace Mental Health First Aid Standards set out what good support looks like.
5. **Keep skills fresh**
   A four-hour MHFA Refresher every three years keeps confidence and knowledge from fading.
6. **Lead from the top**
   Senior leaders who talk openly and visibly back the approach make it real. Without that, training alone can only do so much.

A word of balance. Training is not a substitute for tackling the causes of poor mental health at work, such as unmanageable workloads, poor job design or a lack of control. The most effective organisations do both: they build good work, and they equip people to support each other.

HOW PARTNERING MINDS CAN HELP

Practical, human training your managers will actually use.

As an MHFA England Instructor Trainer, I deliver the full range of MHFA England courses, in person or online, and tailor the mix to your organisation:

Mental Health Aware
Half day. Builds awareness and a shared language for everyone.

MHFA Champions
One day. For line managers who need confidence to spot and support.

Mental Health First Aiders
Two days. Creates your network of trained MHFAiders.

MHFA for Managers
Designed for managers: supportive conversations and psychological safety.

Mental Health Skills for Managers
A shorter course on everyday skills to support team wellbeing.

MHFAider Refresher
Keeps skills current; recommended every three years.

Alongside training, I work with leaders through ICF-accredited coaching and leadership development, so the skills become part of how your managers lead every day.

> *"The sensitivity of the trainer, Michael, when discussing difficult topics meant that the group felt comfortable to share. I would recommend this training course to anyone and everyone!"*
>
> LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT



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Let's talk about your managers.

A free, no-obligation conversation about where your organisation is today and what would help most.

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IF YOU NEED SUPPORT NOW

If anything in this paper has affected you, or you're worried about someone, you don't have to deal with it alone.

Samaritans
Call free, any time, on 116 123, or email jo@samaritans.org.

Shout
Text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential support, 24/7.

Andy's Man Club
Free, peer-to-peer talking groups for men, every Monday evening. andysmanclub.co.uk

Emergency
If someone's life is at immediate risk, call 999 or go to A&E. For urgent mental health help, call NHS 111.

This paper is for general information and does not constitute medical or legal advice. Statistics are drawn from the sources listed and were correct at the time of writing (November 2026). Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a registered trade mark of MHFA England.

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