



Mental health guidance

for union reps

prospect.org.uk

Prospect reps' mental health guidance

You can find sources of emergency support on page 6.

Prospect is committed to supporting the mental health of you, our reps. As a union would not be able to carry out our collective work, provide services and benefits to members, or achieve success without your dedication and hard work.

Being a rep can be rewarding but it also sometimes involves responding to difficult and demanding issues. We have produced a pledge articulating our commitment that will shape our work to support your mental health. Ensuring reps have the support, tools and networks to manage these stresses is vital for our union – supporting individuals and providing collective support to manage difficult situations.

This document provides information and resources to help representatives understand and improve their own mental health. It also contains a variety of links and information on sources of professional and emergency support.

If there are any tips you have learned during time as a rep which you think may help others in looking after their mental health, please send them to chris.warburton@prospect.org.uk.

Reps' guidance

Management standards

The Health and Safety Executive developed the Management Standards to make it easier to assess and tackle the factors that can cause stress at work. While they are primarily designed as a tool to help assess stress risks in an organisation, they also provide us with a useful framework to think about the stress risks we face as individuals – potentially including those arising out of our rep roles.

Work through the following questions, which are derived from the Management Standards. The answers could help you to understand the pressures you face and, as a result, what practical things might need to change. Is there anything that could reduce the pressure you are under? Speak to your fellow reps, your senior branch or section officers, or your full time official (FTO) for practical support.

Demands – this includes issues such as workload and work patterns:

- Are the demands of your rep role achievable in the time you have available for carrying them out – e.g. your facility time? Is there too much work to do in the time available?
- Do you have unachievable deadlines or time pressures related to your rep work? Does your employer consult you in sufficient time?
- Do you have to work very intensively?
- Do you have to neglect some tasks – either those related to your rep role or your day job – because you have too much to do?
- Do you have to work long hours to complete all your work – be that stemming from your day job or your rep work? Does rep work eat into your personal time?
- Is the work too difficult, for example a task in which you have not been trained or developed competence? Is union work appropriately distributed among reps?
- Do different groups demand things from you that are hard to combine?
- Does anyone in your branch monitor and seek feedback on reps' workload and tasks?

Control – this considers how much say you have in how you go about your rep functions:

- Do you have a choice in deciding what union work you do? Have you been consulted over your union workload?
- Do you have some say over the way you go about your union work, for example planning, timescales, workloads?

- Can you use your skills and initiative when performing your rep functions?
- Have you been encouraged to develop new rep skills to help you undertake new and challenging functions?

Support – this covers the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the branch or section, the union centrally, fellow reps and members:

- Do you have adequate practical and social support from members, other reps and members of Prospect staff?
- If your work gets difficult, will your fellow reps help you?
- Do you know what support is available – either from the union or via your employer – and how and when to access it?
- Can you speak to your fellow reps or members about something that has upset or annoyed you? Are your fellow reps/members willing to listen to your problems and concerns?
- Are you supported through emotionally demanding work?
- Are you given supportive feedback on the work you do?

Relationships – this includes positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour:

- Are you subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour?
- Are you subject to bullying?
- Do you receive the respect you deserve from colleagues, members and other reps?
- Are relationships at work/in the branch strained?
- There is friction or anger between colleagues?
- Do you know what to do or who to speak to when faced with any of the issues above?

Role – this includes whether you understand your role within your branch/section and whether you have conflicting roles:

- Are you clear about the goals and objectives of your union/branch/section?
- Are you clear about your rep functions?
- Do you understand how your work fits into the overall aim of the union/branch/section?
- Have you received enough information to ensure you understand your rep role?
- Do you know how to go about getting your role done?
- Are you clear what your functions are and what is expected of you in your rep role?
- Are the different elements of your rep role compatible – for example, negotiating and personal cases?

Change

This considers how change – large or small – is managed and communicated:

- When consulting you, does your employer provide you with timely information to enable you to understand the reasons for proposed changes and consult members and other reps?
- Does your employer ensure adequate consultation on changes and provide opportunities for you to influence proposals?
- Are you consulted about any changes to your union role and work? Are you clear about how the changes will work in practice?

Justice and fairness

- Are outcomes in the branch/section such as seniority and workload distributed across reps in a fair way?
- Are branch/section practices and procedures implemented consistently and decision-making process operated fairly?

- Is the interpersonal, day-to-day tone of the branch/section and how reps and members are treated respectful, polite and uphold dignity?
- Is there transparency about what is going on in the branch/section?

Further guidance

Personal casework can be very demanding and potentially distressing. Speak to your branch secretary if you feel your personal cases are too difficult to manage or beyond your competency.

Ensure you have received the appropriate rep training – Prospect offers a range of training courses, speak to your organiser or visit the [training pages on our website](#) for more information.

Draw support from your FTO – speak to your negotiator or organiser if you are struggling. They have a huge amount of knowledge and experience and will be able to offer considerable practical support.

Make use of your employer's employee assistance programme (EAP), if they have one. EAP services provide a range of support including online information, confidential helplines, access to self-care tools and counselling support. EAPs vary in depth and breadth of provision between providers and the specifications of the employers who commission them. They are often under-utilised, for a variety of reasons. Contact details can usually be obtained from the HR department.

Are you a new rep who would benefit from shadowing/buddying with a more experienced rep? Speak to your branch secretary or organiser to see whether this could be arranged. Does your branch/section have a shadowing system in place for new reps? If not, consider suggesting this at your next branch meeting, or speak to your branch secretary.

Do you have enough reps in your branch? If you feel you don't, speak to your branch secretary about how the branch could tackle this. If you're a branch officer, speak to your organiser who will be able to support rep recruitment programmes.

If you're a secretary, consider how you apportion personal casework.

Are people with mental health problems encouraged to become representatives? Having reps with mental health problems can bring benefits to the individual themselves –for example, the support, resources and sense of purpose that it can bring – but also to the union, which will gain their insight and lived experience. Ensuring that meetings and activities are accessible for people with disabilities, including mental health problems, will help send a message that the union is a welcoming place for everyone.

Ask your fellow reps how they are. The mental health charity Mind has useful guidance on [helping others going through a difficult time](#).

Put mental health of reps on the branch/section meeting agenda.

General mental health advice

It's important to take care of yourself. Many of the suggestions below can be easier said than done. But there are small, simple steps you can take to look after yourself.

Keep in touch and draw support from colleagues, family and friends. Humans are social animals – group life is central to us and is a key source of meaning, purpose and direction. Social groups can be any group of people with whom you identify. It could, for example, your team at work, your organisation, occupation, trade union, gender, sexual orientation, race, the neighbourhood where you live, your hobbies and interests and so on.

Feeling connected to a social group is especially important when it comes to our health. Research shows us that social groups provide people with physiological resources and have been shown to buffer the effects of stress, to help overcome substance misuse, to protect against depression relapse and to cope with the consequences of injury and trauma. This is

because belong to a social group contributes to feelings of control and gives us access to social support, as well as a sense of purpose and meaning.

Our sense of identification with multiple social groups is important because being a member of multiple groups appears to be particularly important for health and well-being.

The key is identify which groups provide you with practical and emotional support, are practically and emotionally compatible with other group memberships you hold, but you don't spend as much time with the group as you could.

Use the Management Standards to think through the pressures you are experiencing – ask yourself the questions listed above. Is there anything you can change in your rep role? Is there anything you can change in your day job? Speak to your branch organiser or secretary, or perhaps your line manager.

Take your breaks and go home on time – get away from your workstation. Go for a walk and get some fresh air. This could be a particularly acute problem if you have a high union workload on top of your day job.

Take your leave – poor work/life balance is a key driver of stress, but research suggests that millions miss out on their leave entitlement each year. Plan ahead so you know when you are going to take leave. Try to use it all by the end of the leave year. Do not use it as an opportunity to do work free of distractions.

Create a boundary between work and home – if you can, switch off your mobile phone when you leave work, and turn off your laptop at the end of the working day. If you work at home, create a separate space in which to work, if possible. This needn't be elaborate or even a separate room – it could just be a corner you use solely for work.

Eat well and keep active – exercise can reduce the emotional intensity you are experiencing. Even short bursts of activity can enhance our mental alertness, energy and positive mood. Participation in regular physical activity can increase our self-esteem and reduce stress and anxiety. Evidence suggests that what we eat may affect the way we feel. Improving your diet may help to improve your mood; give you more energy; and help you think more clearly.

Identify your triggers – working out your personal stress triggers can help you anticipate problems and think of practical solutions. Even if you can't avoid the situations you identify, being ready can help.

Organise your time – if you can adjust the way you organise your time, you may feel more in control and better able to cope with pressure. Make a to-do list and prioritise.

The Mental Health Foundation has more on [how to look after your mental health](#).

Five ways to wellbeing

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are a set of evidence-based actions developed by the New Economics Foundation that promote people's wellbeing. While they are not the biggest determinants of wellbeing, they provide some simple things individuals can do in their everyday lives. They are:

1. Connect with the people around you
2. Be active
3. Take notice of the world around you
4. Keep learning
5. Give back to friends, family, strangers or the community.

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing has more information on [the Five Ways to Wellbeing](#).

Professional mental health support

The following information may be of use if you feel you need professional support to help with the mental distress you are experiencing. It is taken from [NCVO guidance](#) for volunteers, the mental health charity Mind and other organisations.

NHS psychological therapies

You can access psychological therapies through the NHS, with a referral from your GP. However, there are often long waiting lists. Some of the services the NHS can offer include talking therapies, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and counselling. They can help with many mental health problems, including anxiety and depression.

Most areas in England have an [NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies \(IAPT\) service](#) – a programme offering talking therapies for common mental health problems – but the kinds of therapies available differs from region to region. You can refer yourself directly to IAPT.

Other parts of the UK have similar programmes, but access is usually arranged through your GP.

Find a therapist

If you would like to seek therapy privately, look for a therapist using the online search function of a reliable website which only lists therapists who are registered with a professional body, such as the [Counselling Directory](#) or the [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy \(BACP\)](#).

Private therapy can be expensive. Some community and charity sector organisations may offer free or low-cost talking therapies. Mind has more information on [how and where to find a therapist](#), including [charity and third sector therapists](#).

NHS urgent helpline

The [NHS urgent mental health helpline](#) is open 24/7 for advice and support. You can call for yourself, your child, your parent or someone you care for.

Call an emotional support or advice helpline

Emotional support and advice helplines can help with information and support.

- Mind's [Infoline](#) can provide advice and signposting.
- Rethink Mental Illness provides [emotional support and a national advice service](#) for those experiencing severe mental health problems, including advice on therapy, medication, navigating the criminal justice system and your rights under the Mental Health Act.
- Samaritan's helpline provides a [confidential 24/7 listening service](#).
- [Time to Talk](#) provides a place for people experiencing mental health problems to provide peer support to each other.

You can find more [crisis helplines and listening services](#) on Mind's website.

Call 111 or ask for an urgent GP appointment

You should call [111](#) or ask for an urgent GP appointment if you:

- need urgent help for your mental health but it's not an emergency
- can't access your local NHS urgent helpline
- need help but aren't sure what to do.

111 will tell you the right place to get help if you need to see someone. You can also use the [online 111 service](#).

Call 999 or walk into an A&E

If you don't feel you can keep yourself or someone else safe, you should immediately call 999 or walk into an A&E. You can use the [NHS accident and emergency services finder](#) to find your nearest A&E.

The NHS has information on [how a mental health emergency is treated in A&E](#).

Further resources

- Every Mind Matters – Expert advice and practical tips to look after mental health from the NHS www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters
- Mind – charity providing a wide range of information and resources to support mental health www.mind.org.uk
- Mental Health Foundation – information to support mental health www.mentalhealth.org.uk
- OCD UK – Supporting those with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in the UK www.ocduk.org
- Rethink Mental Illness – Practical support and information on mental health www.rethink.org
- Sane – A leading UK mental health charity for anyone with mental illness www.sane.org.uk
- Time To Change – A charity trying to change attitudes to mental health www.time-to-change.org.uk