

## Employment Case Study

### Champion Megan and her Manager

In this case study, Champion Megan, a person living and working with mental illness, and her manager share some of the practical things they do to help keep Megan as mentally well as possible at work. Megan works full-time and has been with this employer for well over 3 years now.

#### Megan's perspective

As someone who has struggled with their mental health since childhood, I know the vital role that my employment plays in helping me to stay mentally well.

The first step to me getting support at work was for me to acknowledge and suggest to my manager that I may need some support. I'd been silent about the severity of my mental ill-health, was performing well, and my manager was unaware that I could benefit from any support at work. Everything was fine on the outside, but on the inside I faced a daily struggle to manage the symptoms of my poor mental health.

**"I know the vital role that my employment plays in helping me to stay mentally well."**

Despite living with long term and enduring mental ill-health on a daily basis which could very much benefit from support, a negative experience with a previous employer, over a decade ago, put me off from telling any of my employers since. However, I've changed a lot since then and the world of work has changed too. I now think that it's better for me and for my colleagues if I'm open about my poor mental health.

**"A negative experience with a previous employer put me off sharing my experiences...I've changed a lot since then and the world of work has changed too."**

It is usually my poor mental health, rather than my work itself that negatively affects me. However, after a work meeting that did have a negative impact on my mental health, I decided to be more open about my mental ill-health. Having been with the organisation for well over 2 years, I decided that I had enough of a 'good track record' at work to be able to disclose without negative consequences. Even with my previous bad experience, and a lot of self-stigma and societal stigma, I decided to overcome these and take the step to open up.

**“My manager listened to me, asked how they could help, and over time I gradually opened up more and more.”**

I had a conversation with my manager and it went well. They listened to me, could see my point of view, and asked how they could support me at work. This led to a process where I gradually opened up more and more. It's not easy for me to share how unwell I can be as I'm not proud of some of my associated symptoms, and I feel very vulnerable. For me, trust and psychological safety is very important, and it took time to build trust and rapport to such a level with my manager. Following a series of conversations between myself and my manager, the following support has been put in place:

- **Openness:** My manager and some of my colleagues (known at work as my support network) know about the severity of my poor mental health, signs to look out for if my mental health worsens, the 'tricks' I can use to hide my true feelings and to isolate myself, who to contact (a friend) should it become a lot worse, and they encourage me to take breaks as I'm prone to overwork and burnout.
- **Trust:** Having people who I trust and that I feel I can be totally honest with about my thoughts and feelings and knowing that these people will 'react appropriately' / won't panic / won't 'ship me off' to mental health services hugely helps me. I find that talking purposefully with acceptance and reflection, not rumination, to supportive people about my poor mental health helps to keep me well, alongside self-care. We keep the focus positively on

keeping me well and performing well at work – two things that both me and my manager want.

- **Flexibility:** I can have flexibility in my working pattern if needed – just knowing this is an option is very preventative for me and as a result I often don't need to use it.
- **Communication:** I can communicate via text rather than speaking if that is easier for me. I have been honest about how lonely and isolating living with my mental illness is, and I've asked for help with keeping me connected. Text messages help me feel connected, are quick and easy to send, and is something I regularly do with my manager. It is an opportunity for my manager to spot any changes in my moods by how I message, but it's also just nice to message without thinking about mental health at times. Because I'm used to regularly contacting my manager, I'm also much more likely to speak up early when I begin to notice I'm becoming more unwell. My mental health can worsen when I'm on annual leave, out of my usual routine, and away from my usual connections so my manager and some of my colleagues, with my agreement, keep in touch with me when I'm on leave. We don't talk about work (I'm on leave after all!), but just say 'hi' and generally check in.
- **Communication continued:** My manager has told me that I'm not easy to 'read' when I'm struggling with my mental health (I became so used to hiding it for decades!), so I have thought about this and devised a way of sharing how I feel with them. I use a system with colours and each colour has a description associated with it as to what this means I'm feeling and the impact on my mental health. This is a quick and easy way for me to let my manager know how I'm doing and we can implement any, pre discussed and agreed, preventative measures if needed. My poor mental health fluctuates in severity, so we have an open, honest, and flexible approach to managing it.
- **More than my mental illness:** My colleagues treat me as a whole person, not just focusing on my poor mental health. Equally, my poor mental health is a part of me and does have an impact on my life, so it's not something to be dismissed and completely ignored all the time – it's about balance for me.

- **Work environment:** Hybrid working has become the norm in many office environments, but for me my mental health is better if I spend most of my work-time in the office or meeting people in person. My manager is aware that if I start wanting to frequently work at home that this is an indicator that my mental health is declining and I'm withdrawing. My manager and many of my colleagues undertake hybrid working and again this is where text messages help me to feel connected to my colleagues that I don't see very often. I think what's key is to have two-way conversations; what works for me might not work for other people. Some people might need to listen to music at work, or to change where they sit for example – these things aren't important to me, so what is important is that I am asked what I think might help me.
- **My manager:** My manager is consistently calm and supportive even when I become very mentally unwell. They listen to me, are reassuring, are positive about me, remind me to be kind to myself and to look after my basic needs, they keep me connected (often via text, and sometimes by meeting up in person) and crucially do not let me become silent and isolated. I'm pragmatic and do not expect an immediate response – I know my manager cares about me a lot and I don't need or expect instant reassurance. My manager is not a GP or therapist and I don't expect them to be. I am not asking to be 'fixed', but to be accepted for who I am. Acceptance is not the go-ahead for deliberate unhelpful and mean behaviours, or being a 'rubbish colleague'; I'm referring to acceptance that I sometimes have behaviours (withdrawing, tearful, angry with myself, uncommunicative) that I can't help when I'm very unwell.

Of course I am at work to work and like everyone else I'm subject to performance reviews and policies; it is the ability to be open and honest to put things in place that enable me to perform just as well as I always have done, but with less strain on my mental health. Self-work and setting myself realistic expectations from myself and my employer have really helped me. It's not been easy to take a long, hard, look at myself, but I am aware that my choices and attitudes can go a long way to helping me manage my poor mental health at work.

The support for me at work has massively improved my quality of life both inside and outside of my workplace. My colleagues want me to be as well as possible at work, not just from a work output point of view, but because they care, and

importantly I believe that they care. A sense of having support and of being supported is very preventative for me and often reduces the need for more intensive support. Their support also seems to help me to take more care of myself too.

You don't need to be an expert to help someone. My manager is one of the most supportive people for my mental health and they have no direct personal experience of poor mental health. I believe it is an open, non-judgmental, and culture of learning that helps me most.

## Manager's Perspective

For years I had no idea that Megan lived with enduring mental ill-health and struggled on a daily basis. Her work was phenomenal. As far as I was concerned she was a bright, hardworking, well liked, high achieving member of the team.

**“For years I had no idea that Megan lived with enduring mental ill-health...her work was phenomenal.”**

I was pleased that Megan did tell me about her poor mental health because it meant I, and other colleagues, could support her. It took many months to get to where we are now with what I believe is a good support network in place from myself and a small number of colleagues. Megan has learnt to trust me and this hasn't been easy for her. She always worried that if I knew too much she'd lose her job. I still find this really hard to hear, actually upsetting to hear, but I accept this is Megan's reality and she feels vulnerable. I reassure her regularly and hope Megan does now believe and trust me but I expect that seed of doubt is still there.

**“Megan has learnt to trust me and this hasn't been easy for her. She always worried that if I knew too much she'd lose her job.”**

Supporting Megan has been one of greatest challenges in my professional life; it has also been the most rewarding. I have learnt such a lot, about mental illness, about Megan, and about myself. It has been a rollercoaster at times where I've

felt unsure that I'm doing the right thing by Megan, that I'm good enough and won't let her down. It is a responsibility but not a chore – I do this gladly because I want Megan to live her best life, and be well enough to do the challenging job she has.

### **This is what I've learnt:**

1. **Time. It takes time.** Sitting and listening and giving time to let Megan explain how she's feeling. This can be difficult when you have 101 jobs to be getting on with. But this is important and writing that report can wait. I believe there is nothing more important than the wellbeing of our staff and have adjusted the wiring in my brain to make it ok for me to sit and listen, and not do.
2. **I can't fix Megan.** This has been hard for me because I like to help, sort and fix. It took a while to realise this was not (a) possible, or (b) what Megan needed or wanted. She needed me to listen, understand and support.
3. **Don't take it personally** when Megan is really unwell and withdraws from me and the support we have in place. It's not me, or Megan. It's the mental illness. It is important to be consistent and reassuring that I am still there.
4. **Create a network of support** from other trusted colleagues. Megan has a different type of relationship and support from 3 other colleagues which gives her options and always someone to talk to if one of us is unavailable.
5. **Discuss different ways to communicate** for when Megan is unwell and finds usual communication methods more difficult. It's all about planning in advance when things are going well.
6. **Know the signs to look out for.** Megan is very good at hiding her mental illness but has shared what signs to look out for.
7. **Be as flexible as you can be.** Very occasionally Megan might feel better working at home or in a private office, or coming in later.

8. **Remind myself I am good enough** – I'm not a mental health expert and I don't need to be. When I get it wrong, Megan will let me know!
9. **Remember Megan is not her mental illness.** She is an all-round amazing woman who happens to have this daily battle with poor mental health.

**“Creating the right environment at work to help a person with mental ill-health thrive is the right thing to do.”**

Thank you for taking the time to read our case study. We are happy to speak to you if you would like our insights to help you to navigate your own journey. To enquire about speaking to Megan and/or her manager, please email [yes@yorkcvs.org.uk](mailto:yes@yorkcvs.org.uk)

For more practical resources for ending mental health stigma in workplaces please use the York Ending Stigma employer resources at [www.yorkcvs.org.uk/york-ending-stigma/employers-area](http://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/york-ending-stigma/employers-area)

## York Ending Stigma



To find out more about all our work and to join us to end mental health stigma in York, please refer to our website <https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/york-ending-stigma/> or email us on [yes@yorkcvs.org.uk](mailto:yes@yorkcvs.org.uk)