

International Men's Day 2023: Zero Male Suicide

On 19 November each year we mark International Men's Day. Established to celebrate the positive contributions that men make to society, it has now grown into a global movement advocating on issues relevant to men and raising awareness of men's well-being.

In a world where silence often surrounds the struggles of men, it serves as an opportunity to highlight and confront challenges that men may face. This year, International Men's Day is underpinned by a powerful and poignant theme: **"Zero Male Suicide."**

The silent epidemic of male suicide

The importance of this year's theme is very clear when you consider it in light of the statistics on male suicide.

Indeed, according to the latest data from the Mental Health Organisation, suicide is the leading cause of death in men under the age of 50 in the UK. Further, the latest research by the Office for National Statistics and the Samaritans, reports that in England men account for 75% of deaths by suicide and are 2.9 times more likely to die by suicide than women. No surprise then that male suicide has been described as a "silent epidemic."

An increasing amount of research undertaken in the past few years has helped to raise awareness and target action, especially in relation to why men account for the majority of suicide-related deaths.

Factors affecting mental health

Whilst both men and women experience mental health difficulties and similar challenges, research shows that there are notable differences between the issues affecting them and the factors contributing towards those issues.

Whilst the 2017 Mental Health Foundation report on the mental health of women and girls confirmed women are more likely to be diagnosed with common mental health problems than men, this doesn't mean that men don't also struggle with their mental health.

Research from the Men's Health Forum shows that men are far more likely than women to go missing, sleep rough, become dependent on alcohol and use drugs frequently. The propensity for men to "bottle up" their problems rather than talk about them exacerbates the difficulties they face. More often than not, this demotivator to speaking up is driven by gender-related barriers and stigmas.

The fact that the NHS, using the latest data from the Office for National Statistics, has confirmed that only 36% of referrals for psychological therapies are for men may be evidence of the reluctance that men in particular fail to seek help or support for mental health. It may even be evidence of a failure to recognise how much they are struggling. This can

go on to have a severe impact on overall well-being and can lead to suicide in the most extreme and devastating of cases.

Men's mental health in the workplace

As employment lawyers, we are keenly aware of the impact of mental health concerns in the workplace and the fact that work-related factors can have an adverse impact on an individual or team's well-being.

Common scenarios where mental health issues may arise and on which we have to advise include:

- Bullying and harassment at work;
- Discrimination;
- Mistreatment of whistle-blowers in the workplace;
- Navigating the impact of serious allegations or disciplinary charges, some of which may affect an individual's regulatory status and their ability to practise their profession;
- Grievances, investigations and other internal processes.

It is estimated that over a third of our lives are spent at

work so employers and fellow employees can play a pivotal role in supporting the well-being of everyone in the workplace.

The starting point for any employer, and colleagues, is to create a culture of mental well-being and psychological safety in the workplace and to be attuned to the mental health of those around them.

Practical steps that should be taken by employers to cultivate this culture include:

- Facilitating open and stigma-free conversations about mental health in the workplace and making men feel comfortable discussing their challenges. This can be achieved in part by promoting days like International Men's Day and Mental Health Awareness Week;
- Providing/attending training including Mental Health First Aid courses which enable attendees to recognise signs of mental health issues and how to respond appropriately;
- Providing access to healthcare benefits including employee assistance and promoting them internally;
- Handling health issues at work, and internal processes, sensitively, with an open mind and recognising the risk of the mental health impact that internal processes can have on all involved – making reasonable adjustments where necessary;
- Encouraging work-life balance to reduce stress and

ensure that workers can manage their professional and personal lives effectively. This can be encouraged through initiatives such as the Mindful Business Charter;

- Implementing mental health programs that provide resources and support e.g., counselling and stress management initiatives; and
- Not only encouraging employees to speak up, but listening when they do so, recognising when mental health issues are a risk and supporting employees accordingly.

Of course, the workplace is only one possible factor that may contribute to a mental health crisis.

We can also all do our bit in society to foster an environment that is supportive of men's mental well-being.

One way to do this is to use International Men's Day as an opportunity each year to remind ourselves to check in on the well-being of male friends and family members frequently, open up the conversation on men's mental health and suicide and break the taboo that often stops men from seeking support.

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