

Sexual health – why it is a workplace issue

Sexual health is an important part of everyone's health, regardless of whether or not they are sexually active.

Sexual health includes reproductive health, contraception, protection from STIs (sexually transmitted infections), but it is also about the expression of individuals' sexuality and being able to enjoy healthy and pleasurable sexual relationships.

According to the current working definition of the World Health Organisation (WHO), sexual health is:

...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (WHO, 2006a)

www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/

Why is it relevant for workplaces?

All sorts of things to do with someone's sexual health may impact on their time at work, often in ways that they may not feel able to discuss with managers or colleagues. Someone may be worried that they could have a sexually transmitted infection, or that they may be pregnant and don't want to be, or is having difficulty conceiving. They could be experiencing relationship difficulties, or problems with their sex life, whether it's their libido or their sexual function. These could all make it difficult to concentrate on work, or may end up with staff taking time off sick through stress and anxiety, or for health issues that they do not feel comfortable discussing at work.

How can promoting sexual health awareness help us in the BHAW Award?

Here are some examples of how sexual health can be promoted and addressed in order to help you reach the criteria of the Better Health At Work Award. Those criteria where there could be a sexual health link are included below, but you may have other ideas too of how a sexual health issue could be relevant to meeting one of the criteria for the Award:

Bronze

Criterion 1: A health needs assessment will be offered to the workforce *and*
Criterion 2: Raise health awareness with the workforce, through a minimum of three health campaigns or events throughout the year, based on the outcome of your health needs assessment.

There are now questions included in the baseline health needs assessment around sexual health, so this is an opportunity to evidence how you have provided information on a range of topics to do with sexual health. You can use the information from the HNA to target events and campaigns around topics that employees have said that they would like more information on. You could use quizzes, screening events (e.g. Chlamydia and gonorrhoea screening for under 25s), displays, information in toilets or changing rooms for staff to access more discreetly, information on staff intranet etc. More information is available on the Resources section of the BHAWA website.

Criterion 3: Positive mental health and well-being to be promoted through employee support, training and awareness-raising

Provide information about relationship advice and support, including domestic violence and abuse, as these all impact significantly on mental health and well-being. Including signposting to services for people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or are trans or gender-questioning, can help improve employee's mental health and well-being, as well as make staff feel valued and included. When organising training, include awareness-raising training to address stigma, e.g. re LGB and Trans issues, or living with HIV.

Criterion 4: Raise awareness of risky alcohol and drug use within the organisation

Incorporate messages around risks that people may take when they have been drinking or using other substances, such as more likelihood of unprotected sex. Ensure information about where and how to access emergency contraception is available, as well as sexual health services for testing and treatment for STIs, including HIV.

Criterion 7: Sickness absence rates and causes to be collected and monitored

Ensure policies are sensitive to the needs of people who may be experiencing relationship difficulties or domestic violence and abuse.

Staff experiencing the menopause or those who are gender transitioning may need extra support and sensitivity in recording and reporting of sickness absence, as well as managing the consequences of sickness absence.

Criterion 8: General awareness of how health can be affected by work activities and assessment of risk

Ensure the organisation is aware of the impact of workplaces and work activities on staff who are pregnant, or experiencing menopause, such as the need for fans, adequate ventilation, as well as easy access to toilet and wash facilities.

Criterion 10: The workplace environment should be conducive to health and employee welfare should be addressed – drinking water, washing facilities, clean toilets, eating facilities etc.

Provide adequate facilities for menstruating people – bins in all toilet areas, including a bin in male toilets if possible for trans men. Consider providing gender neutral/ unisex toilets and wash facilities. Consider the needs of those who are pregnant, going through menopause, trans.

Silver

Criterion 1: The organisation will be expected to have a policy regarding Alcohol, Drugs and Other Substances

This could be a valuable opportunity to highlight the impact on sexual health that alcohol and substance use can have. This could include: risky sexual behaviour; loss of inhibitions, leading to sexual contact that people may not have otherwise wanted; physical and mental or emotional effects, such as the impact on relationships; loss or difficulty getting or sustaining erections, increase or decrease in arousal.

Signposting could include giving information about sexual health services, emergency contraception, psychosexual counselling, relationship counselling.

Criterion 2: The organisation will participate in a minimum of four local, regional or national campaigns throughout the year, and ensure these activities are fully evaluated

There are several local, national and regional sexual health campaigns, such as World AIDS Day, Sexual Health Week and others, so use these opportunities to run a sexual health campaign in your workplace. Addressing sexual health issues in a campaign, along with other health issues, helps to normalise discussion of sexual health issues and shows employees that yours is an organisation where they can discuss these issues and get help and support where needed.

Criterion 5: Equality and diversity issues will be addressed, to include the needs of carers, pregnant and breastfeeding workers and workers with disabilities where appropriate

Ensure equality and diversity policies address issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and age, including how your organisation supports employees affected by issues related to the ageing process, such as menopause.

Provide information on the menopause and offer support to staff affected by the menopause, also addressing these needs in policies such as Health and Safety, Sickness and Absence Management.

Criterion 7: The organisation will promote general health improvement through facilitating a healthy living culture and healthy behaviours both in the workplace and beyond

Use opportunities to highlight the link between sexual health and other health areas, such as mental health and drugs and alcohol. Encouraging a culture of openness

around discussing sexual health issues can make a huge difference to staff who may worry about stigma and judgment, and appropriate signposting can encourage them to seek help and support.

Gold

Criterion 2: A follow-up Health Needs Assessment will be offered to the workforce

It would be useful to share with staff the (anonymised) results from the initial HNA from Bronze Level and compare it to the results from the follow-up survey. You can then assess how much people's level of awareness of, and interest in, issues around sexual health and relationships has changed and hopefully demonstrate that staff are more open to receiving information and accessing appropriate support.

Criterion 3: The organisation will participate in a minimum of five local, regional or national health campaigns / events throughout the year

As with previous campaigns undertaken for Silver Level, there are many opportunities to develop and participate in sexual health campaigns. A level of innovation might be achieved through, for example, partnership work with your local sexual health service or using new methods of communicating with staff about sexual health issues.

Criterion 4: Health topics should be promoted in the wider community and to families of the workforce. In addition the organisation should share good practice and encourage other businesses to participate in the BHAW award

Encourage employees to take home information about sexual health and relationships and share these with family, friends and children. This could include taking leaflets to share with them, discussing bodies, body parts and puberty development, discussing feelings and emotions, healthy and unhealthy relationships and self-esteem.

Criterion 6: The organisation will have a policy in place for bullying and harassment. There should be evidence that this policy is actively monitored and reviewed

Ensure that bullying and harassment policies include bullying related to sexual orientation, gender identity and issues related to the menopause, sexual function or dysfunction.

Criterion 7: The organisation will have a proactive system in place to support staff on long term sick to return to work and will raise awareness of and support staff with long term conditions

Ensure that managers have training around HIV and can support staff living with HIV appropriately and sensitively, while raising staff awareness of HIV, addressing stigma and misinformation amongst staff (ensuring the HIV status of any staff members is not disclosed).

Useful websites for information and campaigns

Sexual and reproductive health

www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/sexualHealthtopics Reliable information from the NHS choices website on a range of sexual health topics including: Sex and young people; menopause; fertility; transgender health; talking about sex.

www.fpa.org.uk National sexual health organisation which provides accurate, up to date sexual health and contraception information and a services finder.

www.nhs.uk/oneyou/sexual-health Part of the 'One You' campaign for engaging adults in their 40s and 50s about all aspects of their health.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual sexual health

www.lesbisexyandhealthy.co.uk Sexual health information for lesbian and bisexual women, developed by and for women in the North East.

www.mesmacnortheast.com Gay/bisexual men's health project, offering advice and information on many different health issues including sexual health, STIs and HIV, as well as groups, a help-line and drop-in service.

HIV and AIDS

www.avert.org Reliable source of information about HIV/AIDs both in the UK and globally, with resources and other sexual health information.

www.tht.org.uk UK campaigning charity re HIV and sexual health. Includes extensive section re trans identities and excellent downloadable guides to sexual health for trans people.

www.eyesopenart.org Eyes Open is a multi-agency Regional Group who work together to promote HIV awareness and Worlds AIDS Day.

www.worldaidsday.org

www.test.hiv Free, self-sampling HIV-testing kits can be ordered online by those at higher risk of HIV.

Young people

www.brook.org.uk National young people's sexual health & wellbeing charity, with information about all aspects of sexual health and an 'Ask Brook 24/7' facility.

www.bishuk.com Very accessible website for young people (and adults) 14 and over about all aspects of sex, bodies, relationships and sexual health.

www.disrespectnobody.co.uk Site – linked to national campaign - aimed at young people, addressing unhealthy and abusive relationships, consent, porn and sexting.

Relationships

www.relate.org.uk Counselling, support and information for all relationships.

www.familylives.org.uk , Non-judgmental support and advice for parents, carers and children and young people, with 24-hour helpline, online advice and parenting/relationship support groups.

Transgender issues

www.gov.uk/government/publications/recruiting-and-retaining-transgender-staff-a-guide-for-employers

www.be-north.org.uk Support and advice for trans and non-binary people in the North.

Menopause and other women's health issues

www.bohrf.org.uk/downloads/Work_and_the_Menopause-A_Guide_for_Managers.pdf

www.tuc.org.uk/equality-issues/gender-equality/supporting-women-through-menopause

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-medical-officer-annual-report-2014-womens-health>

Talking to children and young people about puberty, sex and relationships

www.fpa.org.uk/help-and-advice/advice-for-parents-carers

www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/talking-about-difficult-topics/

Sex and alcohol

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexandyoungpeople/Pages/Sexandalcohol.aspx

www.bishuk.com/sex/booze-and-sex/