



## DESIGNING FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

Often associated with causing stress, could the design of our workplaces actually provide spaces to help de-stress?  
*By Gary Helm, Founder of obo*

At the inaugural Mad World Forum, Wellness Director at [Business in the Community](#) Louise Aston, stepped up to present a summary review of a survey BITC had conducted in early 2018. She revealed that 61% of respondents had experienced a mental health issue *due to work* or where *work was a contributing factor*. Hardly surprising, since it is said [1 in 4 in the UK](#) copes with mental health issues each year.

And it is now well known that the knock-on effect on the economy is huge. So huge in fact that Theresa May's government stepped in with the Thriving at Work report, which sets out 'mental health core standards' to help focus employers in their efforts.

### *Mental health and the workplace*

Everyone has mental health and just as with physical health, we all go through periods of good and of poor mental health. Sometimes poor mental health can be a longstanding illness that a person manages throughout their life. Sometimes it may be a bout of poor mental health caused by stress at home or at work. In any of these circumstances there is potential for the design of a workplace to assist in managing mental health.

A 2017 syndicated research project, [Wellness Together](#), found that environmental factors can and do have an impact on the performance of staff and their level of wellness at work.

Conducted by independent researchers, the study asked people what they thought was important in the environments they work in. The results were resounding in the respect that participants all cited the design and choice of lighting, acoustics, furniture choices and ventilation as being important factors in the workplace. Getting these wrong can drastically affect wellness. 48% of the 1000 participants said that the design of their workplace had a notable effect on their decision to remain with or leave an employer.

Furthermore, the study showed that paying attention to these factors can help improve employee performance. Companies which have good environmental conditions at their workplace and have supportive or flexible working practices are more productive, innovative and consequently more profitable.

So, what of the *design* of our working environments? Could the decisions made about the physical environment also double-down on these efforts to support employees? Could we set 'core standards' for the design of our offices, studios and workplaces?

### *Designing a better workplace*

As pointed out at Mad World by Sir Ian Cheshire, chairman of Barclays and Campaign Chair at [Heads Together](#) "The workplace is a key force for good in mental health". For those whose issues are caused by work or the environment in which they work, simple steps can be taken to counter some issues. Trying to perform the simplest of tasks at work can be made nigh-on impossible when faced with distractions such as noise for anybody, let alone someone coping with anxiety or stress.

As a coordinator of workplace design, I would say that a single 'core standard' ought to be:

- Ask people what they need

The single most important step to designing a space for people is to speak to them and ask them what they need. Sounds obvious, but this simple inclusive, collaborative design step is rarely if ever taken. Asking people what they need to work well saves time and money in making sure the design incorporates these things from the get-go.

Sometimes needs might seem counter to each other, as people crave flexible working environments. For example, places to collaborate in a group and spaces to work quietly and alone. Both of these are easy to achieve without the need to move offices or build internal walls.

The choice of furniture and the finishes on products used can be the difference needed. When a deadline looms and anxiety is creeping in, a high-backed chair in a sound absorbent material can be the cocoon that allows the distractions of an open plan office to fade away, giving the mind some respite and a fair chance at concentrating at the task at hand.

Equally a large dining type table, while not traditionally thought of as office furniture, is the perfect place for a group to come together and spitball ideas in a more relaxed, less pressurised environment than a meeting room. And it has the added value of providing a table at which to get away from the desk for lunch – an underrated healthy workplace practice!

Making sure that everyone has an ergonomically proactive chair is vital. When you think that a lot of people spend more time sat in their chair at work than they do in bed each week it becomes clear that task chairs are not a fad. The stress caused by sitting uncomfortably is acute. Respondents in the Wellness Together survey stated that being able to choose between sitting and standing would be the ideal. This is entirely possible without the need to create two different environments. Height adjustable chairs and desks are becoming more prevalent in offices around the world as people discover the benefits of sit-stand working: improved blood circulation, alertness, back health and easier collaboration.

And, of course, the culture of a workplace has to allow free movement around the office to allow people to make use of different furniture and work spaces. A certain level of trust is required in this respect, from managers who like to see their colleagues at all times. “Trust is a really important part of flexible working and we need more (of that)” said Jacqueline de Rojas CBE, of President TechUK when she spoke at Mad World.

While the workplace cannot eradicate poor mental health, it certainly can alleviate triggers and provide respite for those coping with stress, anxiety and other symptoms.

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