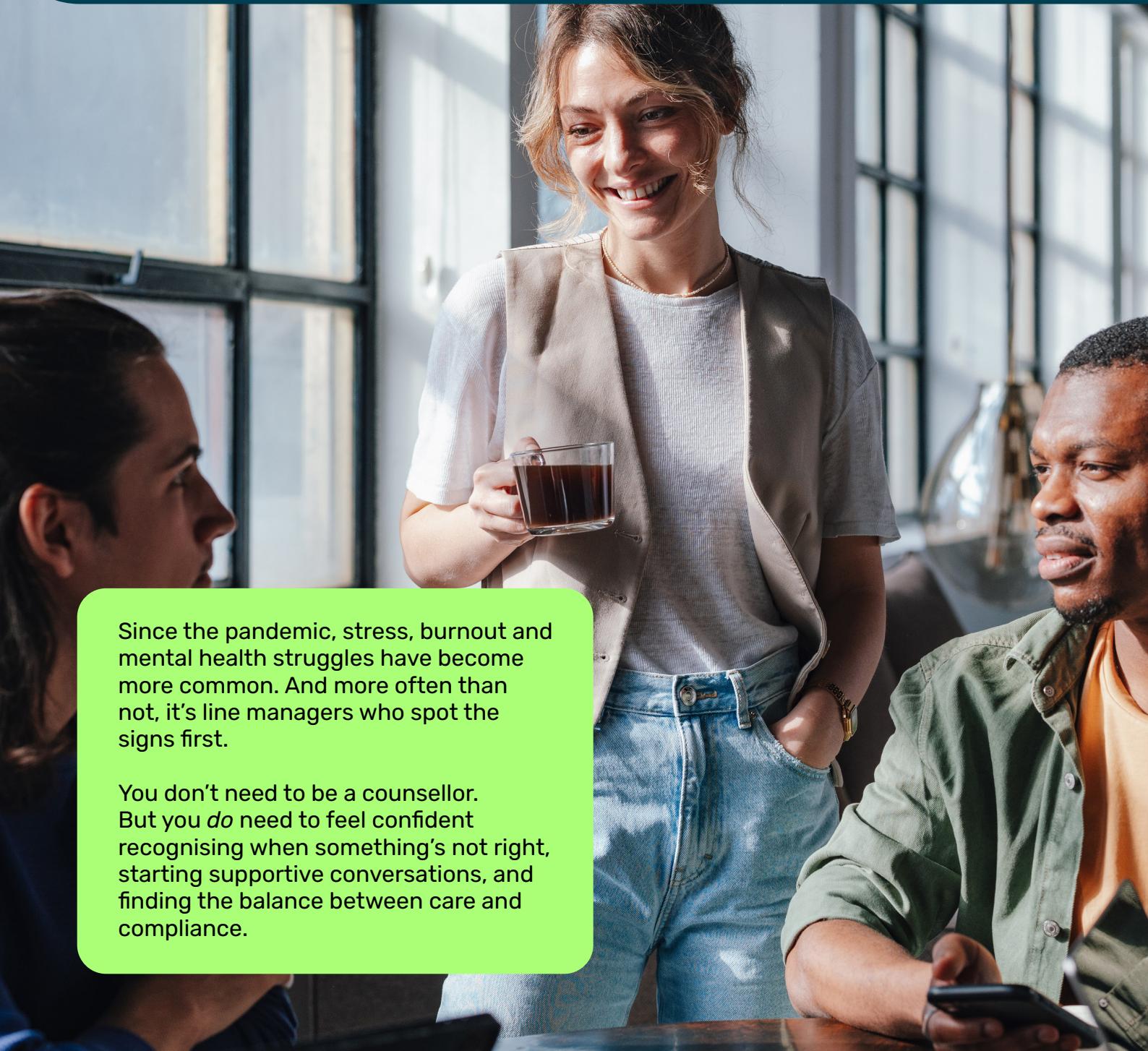breathe

The manager's mini playbook for supporting mental health

Mental health matters in every workplace

Since the pandemic, stress, burnout and mental health struggles have become more common. And more often than not, it's line managers who spot the signs first.

You don't need to be a counsellor. But you *do* need to feel confident recognising when something's not right, starting supportive conversations, and finding the balance between care and compliance.

Why it matters

The pandemic, hybrid working, and cost-of-living pressures have all left their mark. [Breathe research](#) showed a sharp rise in reported stress and poor mental health at work. For SMEs, this isn't just a "wellbeing" issue - it impacts absence, performance, and team morale.

Never make assumptions about people experiencing poor mental health. The rise in cases post-pandemic highlights just how individual each situation can be - and why early, supportive intervention from managers matters.

Spotting early signs

Mental health struggles don't always look the same, but there are common indicators managers can look out for:

Behaviour changes   someone suddenly quieter, or unusually short-tempered.

Withdrawal   avoiding meetings or social interactions.

Defensiveness   overreacting to small requests or feedback

Presenteeism   at work in body, but not really able to perform.

> **As Natalie Ellis, Managing Director at Rebox HR and Breathe Partner, put it:** *"If you know your team well, you'll notice the signs early. That's why building relationships matters - you'll spot when someone just isn't themselves."*

Watch the webinar with Natalie on-demand: [Understanding mental health in HR and employment law](#).

How to start the conversation

Managers often fear saying the wrong thing. But the simplest openers are often the most effective:

💬 "I've noticed you seem quieter than usual - how are you doing?"

💬 "I wanted to check in. Is there anything making work harder for you right now?"

💬 "What support would help you most at the moment?"

Don't be afraid to ask if someone is OK. A simple, open question is often the starting point. You don't need to fix the situation - showing care and willingness to listen is what matters most.

Balancing care and compliance

Managers have a **duty of care** to the individual - but also to the wider team and the business. That means sticking to process, even in sensitive situations.

Case example 1:
An employee began harassing their manager with hundreds of messages. When suspended, they disclosed poor mental health. Despite repeated offers of support (OH, EAP), they refused to engage. Eventually, capability procedures were used fairly to bring the situation to a close.

Case example 2:
Another employee accused colleagues of "hacking" their devices and leaving nails under their car tyres. Instead of framing it as "suspension," the manager (guided by HR) suggested "taking a short period of paid leave while we investigate." The softer phrasing diffused tension, while process protected both sides.

👉 **Key takeaway:** Support with empathy, but don't avoid fair procedures. Boundaries matter.

Support toolkit

You're not alone - managers can (and should) lean on resources:

Occupational Health (OH): impartial advice on adjustments and capability.

Counselling/EAP: give employees a safe, external space to talk.

Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA): trained colleagues who can listen and signpost.

You can read Breathe's blog '5 ways to support your employees' mental health'

Stress risk assessments (HSE): structured way to identify triggers and set practical support.

Natalie emphasised: *"HR and managers aren't medically trained. That's why tools like OH and risk assessments are so valuable - they give you clarity and protect the business."*

Breathe's HR Partner network can help you with tools like these. Reach out to one of our Breathe Partners.

Quick wins for managers

Phrases to use:

"Help me understand what's worrying you."
"We're on the same team - let's work through this together."
"What would make this feel more manageable for you?"

Boundaries to hold:

- You're not their therapist.
- Stick to your company's sick pay and absence policies.
- Avoid making assumptions or "special deals" outside process.

When to escalate:

- If the employee refuses to engage in procedure (capability/disciplinary).
- If behaviour impacts the wider team.
- If you've offered all reasonable support but performance hasn't improved.

You don't need to solve every mental health challenge. Your role is to notice, ask, signpost, and follow fair process. Done well, this protects your people, your team, and your business.

The key question isn't "Did we care?" - it's **"Did we act early, offer support, and follow fair process?"**

If the answer is yes, you've done what's expected of you as a line manager.

Next steps

Record mental health check-ins and actions in Breathe. Document support, follow fair process, and create clarity for everyone involved.

→ **Learn more about Breathe's HR software**

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