

Supporting mental health in a male-dominated workforce: The Biffa story



Men's mental health awareness days and events provide an important opportunity for organisations to reflect on how they support employee wellbeing, particularly in industries where mental health conversations have not traditionally been part of workplace culture - such as construction, manufacturing, waste management and infrastructure.

Working in a sector characterised by operational demands, dispersed teams, safety-critical environments and a largely male workforce, Biffa recognised the important role that managers play in supporting colleague wellbeing.

As an existing client, Biffa approached PAM Wellness (now part of Optima Health) to develop a bespoke training programme focused on equipping managers with the confidence and practical skills needed to support mental health conversations in the workplace.

Designing the programme

Following a consultation to understand Biffa's concerns and requirements, the programme was designed to focus on practical leadership skills, including:

- Creating psychologically safe workplaces.
- Confidently signposting colleagues to support services.
- Understanding boundaries and responsibilities.
- Managing supportive conversations.
- Recognising risk.

Following a successful pilot, the programme was rolled out through 30 interactive, 90-minute small-group webinars, initially training 500 managers across Biffa's UK business.

Feedback from the training demonstrated positive engagement and a strong response from participants.

Following the training evaluation and its own internal review, Biffa expanded the programme to include team leaders and supervisors, recognising that many of the most important wellbeing conversations take place closest to the frontline workforce.

Five lessons from Biffa's approach

Biffa's experience highlights five practical lessons for organisations looking to strengthen their approach to workplace mental health.

1. Focus on confidence, not expertise

The programme focused on building confidence rather than turning managers into mental health professionals.

2. Create psychologically safe environments

Employees are more likely to speak up when they believe they will be listened to without judgement.

3. Address barriers openly

Managers discussed workload pressures, confidence and organisational challenges.

4. Make support easy to access

Managers were introduced to internal and external support pathways.

5. Keep wellbeing conversations practical

Training focused on realistic tools, frameworks and workplace scenarios.

A trainer's perspective

Reflecting on the programme, one of the trainers involved in delivering the sessions highlighted the importance of openness, practical skills and leadership commitment.

"One of the things that stood out during this project was the willingness of Biffa managers to engage openly with what can frequently be a difficult subject."

"Mental health is often discussed as though it requires specialist knowledge. In reality, many employees simply need a manager who is prepared to listen, acknowledge concerns, have an honest conversation, and know where to direct someone for further support if needed."

"What impressed me most was Biffa's commitment to moving beyond awareness and investing in practical capability."

"The decision to extend the programme beyond managers demonstrates a genuine commitment to embedding wellbeing throughout the organisation."

Turning awareness into action

Awareness campaigns can help bring mental health into the conversation, but lasting change depends on what organisations do next.

Equipping managers, team leaders and supervisors with the skills to recognise concerns and respond appropriately can help embed wellbeing into everyday working life.

Biffa's approach demonstrates how tailored training can support this ambition, helping leaders feel better prepared to have supportive conversations and connect colleagues with the help they need.

Interested in a similar approach?

Optima Health offer workplace wellbeing and mental health training designed to help organisations develop the knowledge, confidence and practical skills needed to support their people.

To explore how a tailored programme could support your organisation, contact your Optima Health representative.

Written by Adam Brazendale, Senior Mental Health Trainer at PAM Wellness (part of Optima Health).

Further support

Mind - Mental health support.

November - Campaign raising awareness around men's health each November.

ManUp? - Men's mental health charity with supportive resources.

Samaritans - Call a Samaritan on 116 123 for free confidential emotional support 24/7.

Acas - Health and wellbeing at work.