SAMH

for Scotland's mental health

HOW TO BE MENTALLY HEALTHY AT WORK

samh.org.uk

for Scotland's mental health

THIS BOOKLET IS FOR ANYONE WHO IS MANAGING THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK. IT COVERS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND MENTAL HEALTH, MANAGING STRESS AND DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK, AND WHAT SUPPORT YOU CAN GET.

Further information

To read or print SAMH's information booklets visit samh.org.uk.
If you require this information in word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email communications@samh.org.uk

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How are work and mental health related?

Please note: this resource is for people managing their own mental health at work. If you are an employer, see our Workplace resources on SAMH's website.

Many people find going to work is good for their mental health. It can help you look after your mental health by providing:

- a source of income
- a sense of identity
- contact and friendship with others
- a steady routine and structure
- opportunities to gain achievements and contribute.

At times you may find that your work is affected because of your mental health problem. For instance, if you are experiencing hypomania, you might find it difficult to concentrate. But by making a few changes, and with support from your employer, work can be a positive experience.

What if work is making my mental health worse?

Unfortunately, you might find work can have a negative impact on your mental health.

This could be because of:

- workplace stress
- poor relations with your colleagues
- the type of work you're doing
- experiencing stigma, or being treated unfairly because of your mental health problem
- being unsure whether to tell your boss and colleagues about your mental health problem
- worrying about returning to work after a period of poor mental health.

'I found work helps me to maintain an important part of my identity – separate from the illness. It's still me in here.'

If work is affecting your mental health, you can take steps to address the problems.

Whether you have a mental health problem or not, your employer has a duty of care to you under health and safety legislation. Employees have the right to:

- work where risks to their health are properly controlled
- protection after returning to work from sickness absence if they have become more vulnerable due to their illness.

For more information, see the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) *(see Useful contacts on p.24)*.

'Work takes my mind off my mental illness but also makes it worse as no-one around you knows what you are going through so you feel you have to pretend everything is fine.'

What is disability discrimination?

You are considered disabled if your mental health problem has a substantial and long-term adverse effect (12 months, or more) on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

It is discrimination if you are treated worse than others at work because of your disability. The Equality Act 2010 protects you from discrimination when you're:

- applying for a job
- at work
- made redundant
- dismissed

What if I'm unemployed?

People experience unemployment for different reasons, such as:

- redundancy
- sickness
- lack of opportunities
- relocation
- dismissal
- not being well enough to work

When looking for a new job, challenges such as finding a suitable role, writing applications and attending interviews can take time. You might find that being unemployed affects your confidence, or that it can be disheartening if employers don't get back to you.

Who can support me in finding a job?

If you have a mental health problem and you're facing barriers to finding employment, there are organisations that can support you:

- Your local Jobcentre Plus can support you in finding a job that is right for you.
- SAMH provides Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services in some areas that can support you in finding and maintaining work if you have been experiencing a severe and enduring mental health problem.
- Fair Start Scotland is the Scottish Government's employment support service which helps people to find work.

(See Useful contacts on p.24).

Will I always get the support I need to go back to work?

Not all employment schemes recognise the particular needs of people with mental health problems. SAMH is campaigning to improve this. Getting the right support can make a big difference to your mental health.

What if I'm not well enough to work?

If you are unable to work there are still ways of getting the benefits of having a job, such as meeting new people, gaining skills and contributing to a community. If you feel able to, you may want to think about:

- Volunteering. For local volunteering ideas and opportunities, see the Volunteer Scotland website
- Joining a community group. You can search for local community groups and services on the find a community support group or organisation on the government's GOV.UK website. Alternatively, you could check your local noticeboards and newspapers to find out what is available near you
- Doing a course. The Open University has a number of distance learning courses that are free. See their website for more information.
- Skills Development Scotland is the national skills organisation and works to help people increase their employability skills. See their website for more information.

(See Useful contacts on p.24).

What type of work suits me?

Figuring out what type of work suits your needs can help you feel better able to manage your mental health while working. When deciding what sort of work would suit you, you might want to think about:

- how many hours you can work – do you have other commitments that take up your time?
- when you can work them – do you need time during the day to go to appointments, or evenings free for childcare?
- where you work – how long do you want to commute?
- who you work with – do you prefer to work on your own, or with other people?

Flexible working

With flexible working, you work a set number of hours (possibly full or part-time) but have greater control over when you work.

You may have to be in work for certain 'core hours' (for example, 10am to 4pm) but can vary the times you start and finish work outside of these hours.

'I FIND IT USEFUL TO CREATE SPACES IN THE DAY WHEN I CAN STOP, REFLECT AND ADDRESS SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE DAY.'

Possible advantages of flexible working

- greater control over hours worked
- better work-life balance
- chance to avoid rush-hour crowds and peak travel costs
- availability to attend medical appointments

Possible disadvantages of flexible working

- not always possible – for example, some roles require you to work set hours
- can be challenging if you struggle with creating structure for yourself

Everyone has the right to request flexible working once they have worked for the same employer for 26 weeks or more. See the government GOV.UK website for more information on flexible working and how to request this *(See useful contacts on p.24)*.

'MY EMPLOER GIVES ME THE CHANCE TO [DO A] MORE FLEXIBLE WORKING HOUR SCHEDULE, AS LONG AS THE WORK IS DONE.'

Part-time work

Part-time work is where you work fewer hours a day or fewer days a week.

Possible advantages of part-time working

- better work-life balance
- time in the day to attend medical appointments, study part-time, look after your wellbeing

Possible disadvantages of part-time working

- lower income
- less time to get to know your colleagues
- less time for training and development

Shift work

Shift work takes place on a schedule outside the traditional nine to five day. It can involve working evenings, nights, mornings and weekends.

Possible advantages of shift work

- greater flexibility
- time in the day to attend medical appointments, study part-time, look after your wellbeing
- working late may suit someone who takes medication in the morning that makes them drowsy in the day

Possible disadvantages of shift work

- less stability
- working evenings and night shifts are linked with sleep problems
- impact on your social life

Casual work

Casual work (or zero-hour contracts) is where you can choose whether to work the hours that are available to you.

Possible advantages of casual work

- greater flexibility of work
- can usually end employment without serving a notice period

Possible disadvantages of casual work

- no guaranteed hours of work
- not always entitled to statutory benefits (sick pay, annual leave, maternity pay etc)

Remote working

Remote working is where you can do some or all of your work from home or anywhere else other than the normal workplace.

Possible advantages of working from home

- the option to work in a quieter environment with fewer distractions
- no or limited travel
- fewer social interactions (this may be positive for some people – for example, if you have social anxiety)

Possible disadvantages of working from home

- less support available from your employer
- isolation and fewer social interactions (this may be a negative experience for some people)
- difficulty switching off from work

Self employed

Being self-employed or freelancing involves working for yourself.

Possible advantages of self-employment

- flexibility to choose the hours you work
- ability to work from home or wherever suits you
- greater choice over who you work with
- greater autonomy

Possible disadvantages of self-employment

- unreliable workload and uncertain income
- less stability
- fewer employment rights

(See the government's website GOV.UK for more information on self-employment rights
See useful contacts on p.24).

How can I manage stress at work?

Good stress management is important in the workplace. If you often experience feelings of stress, you might be at risk of developing a mental health problem, like depression or anxiety, and stress can also make existing problems worse. Building resilience can help you to adapt to challenging circumstances.

You don't need to cope with stress alone. Here are some general things you can try:

- Recognising the signs of stress and the causes is a good place to start.
- Work out what you find stressful and helpful in the workplace. Once you know what works for you, talk to your employer about this. They may be able to make some changes to help you.
- Try different coping techniques to use as soon as you start to feel pressure building. Everyone is different, it may take time to find a method that works for you. Try the Stress Management Society website for ideas.

(see Useful contacts on p.24)

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- Try mindfulness. Focusing on the here and now can help you to create space to respond in new ways to situations. The be mindful website has tips on how to do this

(see Useful contacts on p.24).

- Look after your physical health. See Scotland's Charter for Sport and Physical Activity for information on how this can help your mental health.

  See our website for more information

For more ideas about coping with pressure and building resilience see SAMH' self-help and wellbeing page on our website

'I TRY TO KEEP EACH TASK SHORT AND CLEAR, TAKE BREAKS WHEN GETTING TIRED AND BE POLITE, HONEST AND EMPATHIC WITH THE PEOPLE I WORK WITH.'

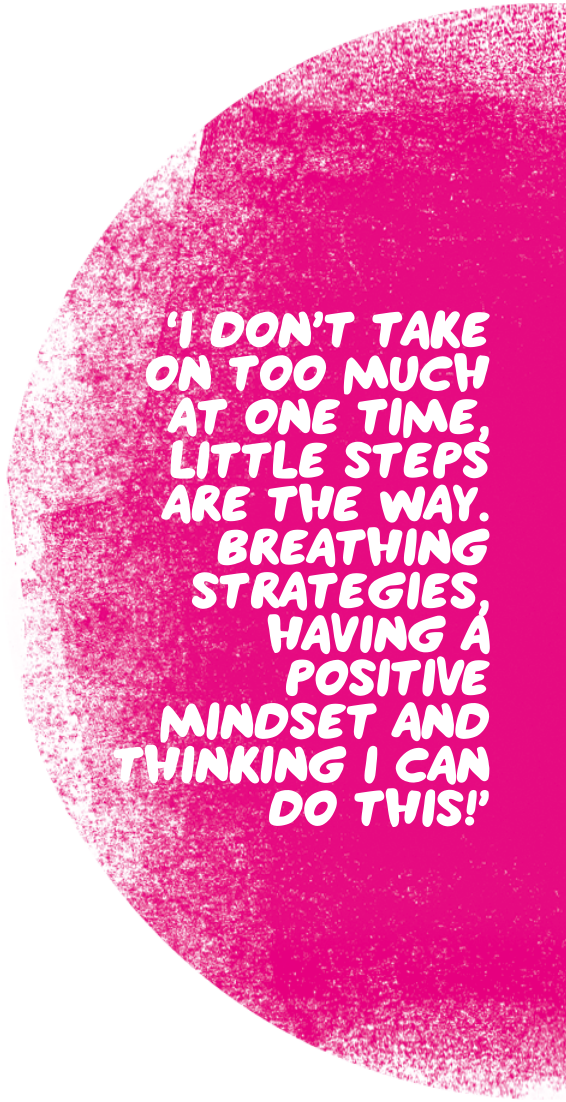
If you're finding that you're feeling stressed because of a particular problem at work, here are some suggestions of ways to manage common stressful situations:

What you can do to prevent or reduce stress

What's making you stressed at work

Having problems with your workload

- Ask for help. Everyone needs a hand from time to time. Discuss your workload with your manager. Talk about setting realistic targets and how you can solve any problems you're having.
- Balance your time. Occasionally you may need to work longer hours to get something done, but try to claim this time back later if you can. Don't do too much at once. Give each task your full attention. It often takes longer if you try to do too much at the same time.
- Reward yourself for achievements. It is easy to focus on what needs to be done next and forget to reward yourself for what you have already accomplished.
- Be realistic. You don't have to be perfect all the time.



What you can do to prevent or reduce stress

What's making you stressed at work

Poor work - life balance

- Take short breaks throughout the day as well as at least half-an-hour away from your desk at lunch. Go for a short walk outside if you can.
- Take some time off. If things get too much, taking a few days off or a long weekend can help you feel refreshed and actually increase your productivity in the long-run. Use the holiday you're entitled to.
- Don't let your life be work. Nurture your outside relationships, interests and your skills that your job doesn't use.
- Develop end of day habits. Do something at the end of each working day, such as tidying your desk or making a list of what needs to be done tomorrow. This can help you to switch off from work.

Lack of support

- Make a Wellness Action Plan to map out what causes you stress and what keeps you well at work. Make use of other support already on offer. Some organisations provide employee assistance programmes (EAPs) which give free advice and counselling. Others have internal systems such as mentoring or buddy systems.
- If you don't feel supported, communicate this. If you feel you can't talk to your boss, speak or write to your human resources department or trade union representative if you have one.
- Develop good relationships with your colleagues. Connecting with them can help to build up a network of support and make being at work more enjoyable.

How can I manage conflict at work?

Just like in your life outside of work, you might encounter people at work who upset you or behave in ways that cause you serious problems.

How can I manage difficult relationships?

Having a difficult relationship with your co-workers can be stressful, and make work harder to manage. Here are some first steps for managing difficult relationships:

- Address your concerns.
  If a co-worker says or does something that you find upsetting or offensive, arrange to speak with them in private about this. Calmly explain the situation and your feelings. If it happens again, or you don't feel you can talk to your co-worker, discuss your concerns with your manager. If you think you're being bullied, see our information below.
- Try not to get drawn into arguments.
  You won't always agree with your colleagues. But getting your point across in a diplomatic way can avoid unhelpful disagreements. You may find it helpful to use phrases such as, "I appreciate your point of view, but I don't see it that way."
- Avoid participating in office gossip.
  People often use gossip as a way of bonding. But it can put strain on relationships and cause conflict, so it can be a good idea to avoid getting involved.
- Find a common ground.
  You won't always have lots in common with each co-worker. But finding something that you both like, such as a sports team, TV programme or hobby, can give you something positive to talk about and improve your relationship.
- Keep a professional distance.
  Unfortunately it's not always possible to have good personal relationships with all your colleagues, so if you do have to work with someone you don't get on with, it's helpful to keep focused on work and stay professional.

What if my manager is the problem?

Having a good relationship with your manager can help you feel supported and involved in your role. However, a difficult relationship might make your working life feel harder. You could:

- Think about your job description, and what you understand your role to be. Is your manager making unreasonable requests or being unclear about what they expect?
- Communicate your concerns. Request a 1:1 meeting with your manager to discuss how you feel and what you would find helpful from them. If you don't feel comfortable meeting with your manager alone, request to bring a colleague with you, or ask for permission to record your meetings.
- Speak to another manager. If you don't feel able to talk to your manager, ask to meet with another manager or someone from HR. Try to provide examples of difficult behaviour and discuss what you would like to change.
- Contact Acas. Acas provides free and confidential advice on resolving relationship issues within the workplace. *(See Useful contacts on p.24).*

What if I'm being bullied?

If you're being bullied by at work, it can be difficult to know what to do. Sometimes bullying may be obvious, but sometimes it can be harder to identify. Bullying can have a significant impact on your mental health, but remember: you don't have to put up with it.

The law provides some protection from bullying. See Acas for more information about bullying and harassment at work *(See useful contacts on p.24).*

'WHEN I WAS BULLIED AT WORK I TOLD SOMEONE HOW I FELT AND WHAT WAS HAPPENING.'

If you experience bullying at work, you can:

- Find out if your employer has a policy on bullying and what their grievance procedure is. The policy should outline whether a behaviour is acceptable and how to address the problem.
- Discuss the problem with someone you feel comfortable with, such as your manager, human resources department, your welfare officer or union representative (if you have one).
- Resolve the issue informally where possible. With the support of a manager or colleague, if you feel able to, arrange to speak with the person who is bullying you.
- If you're not ready to talk to someone at work about it, the Acas website and helpline provide independent and confidential advice on what to do if you're being bullied at work. Your local Citizen's Advice may also be able to help.
- Raise a formal complaint if you still do not feel the situation is improving. You may be able to do this through formal procedures in your workplace, or you can contact Acas to discuss your options and your rights, including what you can do if you're not happy with the outcome of your complaint. *(See Useful contacts on p.24).*

If the situation isn't improving, or you do not feel like you can take action, you may decide that leaving your job is the best option for your mental health. If you feel forced to leave your job because of bullying, contact Acas or a solicitor specialising in employment law for advice about your rights. *(See Useful contacts on p.24).*

'I HAVE [BEEN BULLIED] IN THE PAST. I TOOK IT TO THE APPROPRIATE PERSON. UNFORTUNATELY FOR ME THEY DIDN'T CARE AND DIDN'T TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. I LEFT THAT PLACE IMMEDIATELY.'

What support can I get at work?

If you're experiencing a mental health problem that is affecting your working life, it can be tricky to know what action to take. But there is support available to help you in the workplace.

Remember: if you are considered disabled (as defined by the Equality Act) because of your mental health problem, you have specific rights in relation to getting support at work.

Should I tell my employer about my mental health problem?

If you have an ongoing mental health problem, or are struggling with your wellbeing, you may feel unsure whether to tell your employer or not. You might experience barriers such as:

- not knowing who, when or how to tell
- being unsure of how much to tell
- worrying how they will react
- worrying that there will be negative consequences.

The possible benefits of talking about your mental health at work include:

- having a stronger basis for requesting support at work
- not having to hide any difficulties you are experiencing
- if you choose to tell colleagues, others may also open up about their experiences of mental health problems.

Telling anyone about your mental health is a personal choice – there is no right or wrong answer. However if your mental health problem is considered a disability within the meaning of the Equality Act you will have a right to reasonable adjustments – but to get them, your employer must know about your disability.

'TALKING TO MY EMPLOYER WAS VERY HARD BECAUSE OF SHAME AND CONFIDENTIALITY REASONS BUT I WAS SURPRISED AND FELT MUCH MORE SUPPORTED AND UNDERSTOOD.'

How do I tell my manager?

It can be difficult to know how to start the conversation. To make the process easier you may want to think about:

- talking to your manager in private during supervision or requesting a one-to-one meeting
- what you would like to say during the meeting. You might find it useful to bring some notes with you.
- Filling out a Wellness Action Plan (WAP). This can help you to think about your support needs and what would help you stay well in the workplace.

What changes can I ask for at work?

Changing something about your working environment or the way you do your job may help you to stay well and work more effectively. Some of the changes you can make on your own. Others will require action or agreement from your employer.

What are 'reasonable adjustments?'

If you have a mental health condition that is considered to be a disability, and your employer knows this, they have a duty under the Equality Act to make 'reasonable adjustments' for you. These adjustments can be temporary or made on a permanent basis.

(See SAMH's guide to reasonable adjustments for more information).

If you're not covered by the Equality Act, it's still best practice for your employer to support you, within what is reasonable for your role. When asking about changes, remember you are the best judge of what you need.

What will be helpful for you will depend on what sort of work you do, and what sort of things you find difficult. You might want to ask about changes like:

- use voicemail to take messages if phone calls make you anxious
- use email where possible if you find face-to-face contact stressful
- discuss flexible working to suit your needs – for example, so you can attend medical appointments
- if you find it difficult to concentrate, move to a quieter workspace
- if you have seasonal affective disorder, move to a workstation by a window or ask for a lightbox
- ask for on-the-job support (such as a workplace mentor), or permission for a support worker to come in or be contacted during work hours
- permission to take time out when distressed. This could just be a few minutes away from your workstation, going out for some air, or having a short rest.

If you have a diagnosed mental health problem, think about what specifically could help you with the problems you experience. Your employer might refer you to an occupational health adviser for advice on how best to support you.

'MY EMPLOYER OFFERS ME SUPERVISION AND COUNSELLING.'

What if I need to take time off work?

If you are too unwell to work at the moment, you may need to take some time off from work. Sickness absence for your mental health is just as valid as absence for physical health problems. Taking time off does not mean you won't ever go back to work.

If you are off work for more than seven days in a row, you will need to get a 'fit note' from your GP or hospital doctor. In most cases, you are entitled to statutory sick pay from your employer for the first 28 days that you are off sick. For more information, see the government website GOV.UK on taking sick leave.

(See useful contacts on p.24).

Your employer should support you when you are ready to return to work.

'MY EMPLOYER UNDERSTANDS EXACTLY WHAT IT IS I'M GOING THROUGH. THEY HELP AND SUPPORT ME ANY WAY THEY CAN. I'M ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES.'

What support can I get returning to work?

Thinking about going back to your job after a period of poor mental health can feel overwhelming.

You may be worried about what colleagues will think or that you won't be able to cope. For some, returning to work is a big milestone in their recovery. Even though you're feeling better, it doesn't always mean that you're no longer experiencing a mental health problem. So it's important to think about how you can manage your mental health as you return to work.

What support is available to help me to return to work?

If you have been on sickness leave for more than seven consecutive days, consider doing the following before you return to work:

- Visit your GP. Your GP can assess whether you are fit to return to work, give you advice as part of your fit note and make suggestions about what changes your employer could make to help you.
- Your employer may also refer you to an occupational health professional. Occupational health will work with you to create a plan detailing your condition and the type of support you may need to return to work.

If you have been off sick (or are likely to be) for four weeks or more, your GP or employer can discuss with you a referral to the government scheme, Fit for Work.

Fit for Work provides impartial work-related health advice and can refer you to occupational health professionals for support in returning to work.

(See useful contacts on p.24).

How do I prepare for my return to work?

Whilst you're off work there are some practical things that you can do to make returning to your job easier:

- Keep in touch with colleagues. Using social media can be a good way of communicating if you don't feel ready to see them face-to-face.
- If your work place has a staff bulletin, ask to be put on the mailing list.
- Arrange with your manager to drop in to work before you return, to say hello to colleagues and get re-familiarised.
- In the time leading up to your return, try to go to sleep and rise the same hours as if you were going to work. This can help you to readjust to your working hours.
- Use peer support. Sharing your experiences with others going through the same thing can help you feel less alone. You could join an online community, such as Elefriends where you can talk openly about your mental health.

(See useful contacts on p.24).

What support can I get from my employer when I return?

Make use of any support you can from your employer:

- Request to return to work gradually, for example, by starting part-time as part of a 'phased return' to work.
- Make a schedule with your manager for your first week back. Plan what you will be doing where and when so you know what to expect. Arrange to catch up on any training you have missed.
- If you are worried about walking into a busy office on your own, arrange for someone to meet you at the front desk.
- Schedule regular catch ups with your manager to talk about how you are getting on. Let them know what you're finding helpful or difficult.
- Develop a Wellness Action Plan with your manager. *(See What support can I get at work? on p.18 for more information).*
- Request changes to allow you to be better able to do your job. *(See What support can I get at work? on p.18 for more information).*
- Find out if your employer has any specialist support services on offer – for example, occupational health services or an employee assistance programme (EAP).

'[MY EMPLOYER SUPPORTS ME] BY HELPING ME WHEN I GET STRESSED AND FEEL LIKE I CAN'T COPE, CHANGING MY TASKS OR JUST BEING THERE TO TALK TO.'

Useful contacts

Acas Scotland

T: 0300 123 1100
W: acas.org.uk
Advice and guidance on employment relations.

Be Mindful

W: bemindful.co.uk
Information on mindfulness, and details of local mindfulness courses and therapists

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

T: 01455 883 300
W: bacp.co.uk
Information about counselling and psychotherapy, and details of local therapists.

Citizens Advice Scotland

T: 0808 800 9060
W: cas.org.uk
Advice on employment law and other issues

COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)

T: 01786 475140
W: cosca.org.uk
To find a counsellor or psychotherapist.

Elefriends

W: elefriends.org.uk
A friendly, supportive, online community for people experiencing a mental health problem

Employment Tribunal Guidance

T: 0300 790 6234
W: gov.uk/courts-tribunals/employment-tribunal
Guidance on the tribunal system

The Equality and Advisory Support Service (EASS)

T: 0808 800 0082
Text: 0808 800 0084
W: equalityadvisoryservice.com
The helpline can advise and assist you on issues relating to equality and human rights, across England, Scotland and Wales.

Fair Start Scotland

W: mygov.scot/help-find-job/
Scottish Government employment support service helping people to find work.

Give Us A Shout

T: 85258 (text only)
W: giveusashout.org
24/7 crisis text line.

GOV.UK

W: gov.uk
Information about employment rights, Access To Work scheme and flexible working.

Health and Safety Executive

W: hse.gov.uk
The national independent watchdog for work-related health, safety and illness.

Jobcentre Plus

W: gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus
For help finding a job.

Scottish Equality & Human Rights Commission

W: equalityhumanrights.com/en/commission-scotland
Working to eliminate discrimination, reduce inequality, protect and promote human rights and to build good relations, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to participate in society.

See Me

W: seemescotland.org
National programme to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination

Volunteer Scotland

W: volunteerscotland.net
Volunteering Opportunities in Scotland

Notes

Since 1923, **SAMH** has represented the voice of people affected by mental health problems in Scotland. We are here to provide help, information and support.

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@SAMHtweets

Follow us on Facebook:
facebook.com/SAMHmentalhealth

Follow us on Instagram:
@samhscotland

samh.org.uk

SAMH is the Scottish Association for Mental Health
Scottish Charity: No. SC-008897
Registered Office: Brunswick House, 51 Wilson Street, Glasgow, G1 1UZ

SAMH
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