



Working in Westminster: A guide to looking after your mental health



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A message from our Chief Executive:



Dr Sarah Hughes
Chief Executive, Mind

I know that working in politics can be a tough job. And over the last few years, the challenges you face have only multiplied. Through the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, the demands on your time have massively increased – and potentially distressing casework feels more and more urgent.

Politics is a high-pressure working environment and achieving any sense of a work/life balance must feel impossible. Alongside the increase in abuse and threats towards MPs and their staff, it's no wonder that we're hearing of more and more people working in politics struggling with their mental health.

As Chief Executive of Mind, I'm proud to be introducing our new guide, which we hope will provide a useful starting point to help you take care of your mental health while working in politics. At Mind, we won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets support and respect. And that includes people working in politics.

We're here to support anyone experiencing problems with their mental health, including people working in politics – our Infoline is available from 9am-6pm Monday to Friday on **0300 123 3393**. This guide is just the start of an important conversation about mental health in politics. We'd be delighted to hear your feedback on this guide and what other resources you might find useful – just email our Public Affairs team at [**action@mind.org.uk**](mailto:action@mind.org.uk).

**Thank you for the
important work that
you do. And I hope you
find this guide useful.**

Helpful definitions

Mental health

We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. How we feel can vary from good mental wellbeing to difficult feelings and emotions, to severe mental health problems.

Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is the ability to cope with the day-to-day stresses of life, work productively, interact positively with others and realise our own potential.

Poor mental health

Poor mental health is something we all go through, when we are struggling with low mood, stress or anxiety. This might mean we're also coping with feeling restless, confused, short-tempered, upset or preoccupied.

Mental health problems

A mental health problem is when difficult experiences or feelings go on for a long time and affect our ability to enjoy and live our lives in the way we want. You might receive a specific diagnosis from your doctor, or just feel more generally that you are experiencing a prolonged period of poor mental health.

Work-related stress

Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them at work. Stress can be a significant cause of illness.

Burnout

Burnout is a term to describe a collection of experiences caused by long-term, unmanageable stress at work. When burnt out, you may feel exhausted, have little motivation for your job, feel irritable or anxious and you may see a dip in your work performance.

Staying well when working in politics

Working in politics can be rewarding and fulfilling. But research has found that MPs are significantly more likely to experience mental ill health than the wider population, and a recent survey painted a similar picture among MP staff. This guide is intended as a starting point to help you look after your mental health whilst working in politics.

We recognise that you face specific challenges to looking after your mental health so we've tried to bring together some top tips for everyone working in politics into one short guide.

With the right support and mechanisms in place, you can make some changes to help manage and improve your mental health. But it's possible that your work may be being affected by a mental health problem which requires attention. If that is the case, it's important that you seek professional support and take the time off that you need to recover.

Over the following pages you will find tips and resources to help you:

- **Manage stress and burnout**
- **Cope with difficult casework**
- **Manage your work-life balance**
- **Cope with abuse and threats**
- **Improve your physical health and sleep**

Managing stress

Stress is something that we've likely all experienced at work at some point. With the fast-paced nature of politics and an at times relentless workload, it's no wonder that many people working in politics report high levels of stress.

Here are some of Mind's top tips for managing stress:

- 1. Identify your triggers and make a plan:** working out what triggers stress for you can help you anticipate problems and think of solutions. Try writing down issues that come up regularly to keep track. Then you can try and make a plan about how you can mitigate or proactively manage these triggers. For example, by limiting social media use, avoiding doom scrolling or protecting a portion of your day for a particular task.
- 2. Take a break:** if you're feeling overwhelmed by a stressful situation, try to take a break. You may feel inclined to keep working, but even taking a short break (such as getting a cup of tea) can help you relieve feelings of stress and come back with a clear head.
- 3. Find a way to relax:** how do you like to relax out of work? Reading something? Listening to some quiet music? Take a few minutes for this in your working day too.
- 4. Give yourself some tech-free time:** politics moves fast! You may find that you are constantly on your phone or computer, and this can make you feel busier and more stressed. Take a screen break, even just for a few minutes.
- 5. Try mindfulness:** using mindfulness techniques such as meditation or breathing exercises have been shown to help people become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, making them easier to manage.

Did you know? The Members' Services Team run mindfulness courses for MPs and MP staff in parliament

Breathing exercises

Learning to breathe more deeply can help you feel a lot calmer. It takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere. Try this exercise that you can do whenever you feel like you need to relieve some stress.

Breathing window

1. Find a square shape in the room.
2. Trace each line clockwise with your eyes.

Take 90 seconds for you

3. Take a deep breath in and out as you follow each line.
4. Keep your breathing slow and steady.
5. This improves oxygen flow and will adjust your focus.

In

Out

Out

In

Avoiding burnout



Burnout can happen if you're constantly under lots of pressure from work – we often hear this is the case for people working in politics. Ignoring the signs of burnout can leave you feeling emotionally and mentally exhausted.

Here are some of Mind's top tips for dealing with burnout:

- 1. Take time off:** time off can feel hard to fit in when working in politics but it is extremely important for your mental health. It gives you a chance to rest and recharge.
- 2. Get enough sleep:** turn off your screens and do something to relax before you go to bed at night. Trying to maintain a regular sleep routine and avoiding caffeine too late in the day can also really make a difference.
- 3. Keep an eye on your hours:** we know that working in politics isn't a regular 9-5, but working repeated long days can lead to burnout. Try not to regularly work over your hours and take time off in lieu when you can.
- 4. Schedule in time for you:** it may sound silly, but make sure you set aside specific time for doing things that you enjoy and activities that support your wellbeing.
- 5. Ask for help:** if you're really struggling with burnout, you might want to seek professional support. The EAP available to all MPs and MP staff or your GP could be a good starting point for help.

Casework

Many MPs and staff have reported an increase in casework in the last few years, as well as a significant increase in constituents who arrive highly distressed or in crisis, feeling they have nowhere else to turn.

63% of MPs' staff said their wellbeing had been affected by the nature of their work, e.g. traumatic casework, difficult conversations with constituents etc.*

Sometimes MPs and their staff have to speak to people who are extremely distressed or even actively considering taking their own life. This can be very upsetting and difficult to deal with and it's important you take care of yourself in these situations.

Some ideas for protecting yourself during casework:

- 1. Prepare yourself:** try and schedule in dedicated time for difficult casework rather than revisiting it throughout the day. Giving yourself some time to prepare emotionally can also help anticipate upsetting situations and you can undertake training in things like having difficult conversations.
- 2. Ask for help:** even after training, some situations are beyond your area of expertise. It's important for your mental health that you seek help when you need it.
- 3. Share what's happened:** it's important that you talk about how you're feeling after a difficult conversation. Even if you are working from home or away from others, make sure to give yourself time and space to debrief with colleagues.
- 4. Take a break:** try stepping outside for five minutes after a difficult conversation or take some time away from your desk to get a hot drink.
- 5. Celebrate success:** it may not always feel like it, but your work is making a huge difference to people's lives and it's important you celebrate successes. You could try displaying thank you notes from constituents in the office as a reminder.

Did you know? Training on taking calls from people who are feeling suicidal is available to all MPs and staff.

Managing your work-life balance

Given the workload and the fast-paced nature of politics, it's no surprise that many people working in politics say that they struggle maintaining a work-life balance. Here are some ideas to help you tip the scales back in your favour:

Reclaim your lunch break!

An hour-long lunch break might sound like a million miles away from working in politics. But it's vital that you take some kind of break in your busy day. Taking time to go outside, switch off from the news and talk about something that isn't politics will help you look after your mental health at work.

Having a break can make you feel more productive when you come back and has been proven to make us feel more energised and well. If circumstances out of your control mean you have to skip a break one day, that's ok. But try not to let this become a habit.

Take your holiday!

It may feel like there is never a good time to take leave when you work in politics. In recess there's often so much to do back in the constituency, and many staff in MP's offices also say they struggle to take their allocated leave.

But it's important for your mental health that you take proper time off work, even if it's just a staycation.

Set boundaries between your work and your home life!

People working in politics often feel required to be accessible outside of working hours, whether that is by email or on the phone. However, it's vital that you feel like you have some boundaries and some time where you can switch off from work. Try deleting your work emails from your personal devices and managing notifications from your work ones.

Have a discussion with your team about preferred ways to communicate and times when you are available to help set and sustain boundaries.

Are you an MP or office manager? If you set a visible example of managing your work-life balance it can help the whole office do the same!

Coping with abuse and threats of violence

Most MPs on social media will be all too familiar with the feeling of receiving abusive messages, and the impact is felt particularly hard by women MPs who receive the most online abuse.

Everybody deserves to feel safe in their place of work. But abuse, both on and offline, can escalate into threats of violence. This can obviously be upsetting and worrying for MPs and their staff.

Here are some tips for protecting your mental health despite abuse and threats:

- 1. Stay safe:** your physical safety is the most important thing. Training and support is available to help you stay safe at work. Report all incidents of social media abuse and report threats to the Members' Security Support Services and the police if appropriate.
- 2. Monitor your social media use:** social media can be a great way to communicate with constituents. But it's important you protect yourself from the impact of online abuse. Don't be afraid to turn off social media all together if you need a break.
- 3. Talk to someone:** don't carry all the weight of abuse and threats by yourself. Tell your colleagues, who may well have had similar experiences.
- 4. Use the support available to you:** the end of this guide outlines the range of support that's available to you, both in parliament and from external organisations.

93%

of women MPs said online abuse and harassment had a negative effect on them*

Improving your physical health and your sleep

It may sound simple, but looking after your physical health can help you maintain your mental health. Taking part in physical activity and being mindful of what you eat and drink can help you manage busy periods and difficult times. Some important factors to consider:

1. Keep hydrated: changes to your routine, work schedule and travel can all affect when or what you drink, so it's important to be mindful and ensure you're keeping hydrated.

2. Think about your diet: the same goes for what you eat! In a busy job, it can be tempting to grab a quick meal on the go or rely on takeaways. This is okay from time to time but it's important to maintain a balanced diet - the NHS has helpful information on how to do this.

3. Try to avoid drugs and alcohol: it may feel like a cliché, but some people working in politics say that they revert to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. But in the long run this can make you feel worse.

4. Keep active: working in politics is busy and fast-paced, but getting active doesn't have to mean running marathons or training at the gym every day. There are lots of little things you can do to stay active.

Some small steps you can take to help you get active:

- **Take the stairs rather than the lift.**
- **Go for a walk – make sure you take that break!**
- **Try walking or cycling into work or at least part of the way.**
- **Do some simple stretches before you leave for work in the morning.**
- **If you're in the office stand up from your desk to move around regularly.**



The importance of sleep

There is a close relationship between sleep and mental health, but many of us have problems with it and often people working in politics say they struggle to get enough sleep. You could try the following to help you improve your sleep:

- 1. Establish a routine:** try and establish a routine around bedtime, to help set a regular sleeping pattern.
- 2. Avoid screens:** give yourself some tech-free time before sleep, and avoid bright screens that can affect your sleep.
- 3. Try to wind down before bed:** do a relaxing activity, like having a bath, or try a relaxation exercise before you go to sleep.
- 4. Make your sleeping environment comfortable:** you might sleep better with a low light on, or with different bedding.

Creating a Wellness Action Plan

Guide for people
working in a workplace



Wellness Action Plans are a personalised, practical tool we can all use – whether we have a mental health problem or not – to help identify what keeps us well at work, what causes us to become unwell, and how to address a mental health problem at work should you be experiencing one.

It only takes a few minutes, but by filling in a Wellness Action Plan template, you can remind yourself of what you need to do to look after your own mental health at work.

Fill in your Wellness Action Plan using the template on our website: mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/wellness-action-plan-sign-up/

Are you an MP or office manager? You can set an example by sharing your Wellness Action Plan with your team and talking about what helps you maintain good mental health!

Getting support

There are a range of support tools available to MPs and staff, some of which we've listed below. But you can also speak to Mind and other third-party services who are experts in supporting you with your mental health:

Mind Infoline

Telephone: 0300 123 3393 **Email:** info@mind.org.uk

Website: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines

Mind provides confidential mental health information services. With support and understanding, Mind enables people to make informed choices. The Infoline gives information on types of mental distress, where to get help, drug treatments, alternative therapies and advocacy. The line is open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except for bank holidays).

Samaritans

Telephone: 116 123

Whatever you're going through, Samaritans are there to listen – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Samaritans offer a safe place for you to talk any time you like, in your own way about whatever's getting to you. They won't judge or tell you what to do, they'll listen to you.

CALM helpline

Telephone: 0800 58 58 58

The CALM helpline is there for anyone who needs to talk confidentially about a tough time they are experiencing. Calls are taken by trained staff who are there to listen, support, inform and signpost you to further information. The helpline is open from 5pm to midnight every day, 365 days a year.

Shout, text support

Text: SHOUT to 85258

Shout is a free, confidential 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. The service is anonymous and won't appear on any phone bill.

Side by Side, Mind's online community

Website: sidebyside.mind.org.uk

Side by Side, is a supportive online community where you can feel at home talking about your mental health and connect with others who understand what you are going through. The community is open to anyone over 18. Side by Side is available 24/7 and is moderated daily from 8am to midnight.

Below are some support tools available to you as MPs and MPs' staff. Speak to wellbeing staff and trade union representatives for a more exhaustive list:

Occupational Health Services (for MPs)

The Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service (PHWS) provides Members of Parliament with in-house services for Occupational Health including access to Specialist Nurse Practitioner, OH Physician and mental health support.

Individual Assistance Programme (IAP) – for MPs

An IAP service is available for Members of Parliament, it is an independent and confidential support service for MPs. The IAP is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for support and advice on any issue affecting MPs, whether it is work-related, health or a personal matter.

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) – for MPs staff

An EAP is available to all MP staff for support with problems affecting their work, health and wellbeing.

Wellbeing and mindfulness

The PHWS also run a programme of wellbeing events and mindfulness programmes for MPs and MP staff.

Trauma Risk Incident Management (TRIM)

The House of Commons has trained TRIM practitioners who can assess the risk of ongoing psychological distress following exposure to a potentially traumatic event, and ensure appropriate support is implemented. This is available to MPs and all MP staff.

Qualified Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA)

Qualified mental health first aiders are available to MPs and staff based in Parliament. You can seek mental health first aiders in the same way you would with physical first aiders, and they are also available on the phone.

Please contact PHWS for further information on all of the above:
phws@parliament.uk

Wellness Working Group (WWG) – for MPs’ staff

The Wellness Working Group is a cross party group of MPs’ staff with the aim of placing a focus on staff welfare and improving support for MPs’ staff well-being.

The Wellness Working Group can be found on the intranet, on sharepoint or via the Wellbeing Hub icon on your desktop. You can also email: [**mpsstaff-wwg@parliament.uk**](mailto:mpsstaff-wwg@parliament.uk)

Members’ Services Team (MST)

The MST offers Members advice on a whole range of employment issues. The team also publishes a range of best practice employment guides for Members, which are supported by regular employment workshops targeted at Members. They also provide pastoral and signposting support to MP staff and training for MPs and MP staff on a range of topics including dealing with suicidal callers, handling stress in the workplace.

Please contact the MST: [**mst@parliament.uk**](mailto:mst@parliament.uk)



Members Security Support Services (MSSS)

The Members' Security Support Service (MSSS) provides guidance, advice and support to members of both Houses and their staff about security away from the Parliamentary Estate in four key areas:

- physical security measures
- personal security
- social media support
- security operatives

Please contact the MSSS at safe@parliament.uk

Members' and Peers' Staff Association (MAPSA)

The Members' and Peers' Staff Association (MAPSA) is a cross-party, non-political, organisation run by and for Members' staff.

Email: mapsa@parliament.uk

Trade Unions

Unite the Union and GMB provide trade union representation to MPs' staff of all political parties, both in Westminster and in the constituency.

Contact your rep to see how they can support you in the workplace.







About Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales.

We're here to fight for mental health.
For support, for respect, for you.

We change minds across England and Wales by making mental health an everyday priority. We support minds – offering help, information, advice and local services. And we connect minds. Bringing together people who care about mental health to make a difference.

We work with MPs from across the political spectrum to ensure that everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets support and respect. If you'd like to discuss how you can support Mind's work, please do not hesitate to get in touch with our Public Affairs team by emailing [**action@mind.org.uk**](mailto:action@mind.org.uk)

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