**Fleet Focus – Mental Health and Wellbeing. Driver Article.**

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| **Your greatest asset is yourself**  Life can put us all under stress at various times, and we must all tend our mental health as carefully as we look after our physical health. The [World Health Organisation](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response) describes our mental health as a state of mental well-being that allows us to cope with the stresses of life, learn well, work safely, and realise our potential. It underpins your self-esteem, your relationships, your decision-making – and when it comes to driving, it also underpins your safety.  Mental health issues can refer to many different experiences and disorders, including anxiety, stress, depression and psychiatric conditions. Broadly, mental health issues can distort how we feel about ourselves and the world around us, how we perceive and react to risk, and how rational, practical or safe our decisions are.  This means our emotional and mental health can also profoundly affect *how* we drive, interfering with our perception of risk, our emotional regulation, our focus and our decision-making.    Many life events can be stressful or highly emotional. Parenthood, family illness,  bereavement, divorce, moving house, money worries – these things affect almost all of us  at some point. It’s very important to acknowledge their effects, and to realistically assess  your ability to drive safely.  Did you know that stressed drivers are [many times more likely to speed](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7571166/#:~:text=Sixteen%20drivers%20participated%20in%20the,driving%20times%20is%20also%20longer.) or fail to give way? They [accelerate intensively six times](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7571166/#:~:text=Sixteen%20drivers%20participated%20in%20the,driving%20times%20is%20also%20longer.) more often than non-stressed drivers and brake harshly twice as often. They were also 20% more tired after a driving test than non-stressed drivers. In a study of [stress and emotion on driving behaviour](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7571166/#:~:text=Sixteen%20drivers%20participated%20in%20the,driving%20times%20is%20also%20longer.), sad drivers were more likely to be stressed and, even though their driving didn’t change significantly, they were involved in four times as many collisions as the comparison drivers.  Stress, money worries and relationship problems can all affect the quality of your sleep, so you may also find you are more tired than usual. It’s very important to have had sufficient good quality sleep before you drive.  Driving for work can be stressful and isolating. Male HGV and van drivers have a [significantly higher risk of suicide](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/suicidebyoccupation/england2011to2015)than males in other sectors.  Long-term stress is also bad for your physical health, raising your risk of cardio-vascular and other diseases.  Your employer has a legal responsibility to manage the level of organisational stress you are exposed to. If your job demands more than you feel you can cope with, tell your manager.  **Low moods**  Often, we can set aside personal problems or worries while at work, but sometimes we can’t. If you are stressed, unhappy or anxious, this can affect your driving. Those emotions can be a persistent distraction from the road. They can also hijack your brain’s resources, meaning there is less processing power available for situational awareness and rational decision-making.  If you are having a bad day – or a bad week – the first step is to tell someone, preferably your line manager. There are also strategies you might find useful for clearing your mind of persistent negative thoughts before you drive:   * Writing your worries or feelings (without judgement) onto a piece of paper, folding it and putting it away until later. * [Mindfulness](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/). Take a minute before driving to breathe deeply and focus on what you can see, hear, taste, feel and smell. This is a great exercise to ground you in the here and now, and is proven to [make people safer](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61d570b3a2957b5f755587d2/t/639c603e8ae4f309957e1282/1671192639663/Case+Study+-+Nottingham+Trent+University+–+Mindfulness+2022+.pdf) drivers. * [Breathing exercises](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1mW6885X3N2gKnVjXT00KCj/how-to-reset-your-brain-with-your-breathing) improve how we feel because they engage our parasympathetic nervous system, which slows the heart, lowers blood pressure and changes your brain chemistry. * [Stand up straight](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25222091/) and [smile](https://www.bps.org.uk/research-digest/adopting-smile-can-make-you-feel-happier-large-global-study-finds). Our bodies are feedback machines. They do not only reflect how we feel, they can create how we feel. Standing up straight, with relaxed shoulders, positively changes our mood. Believe it or not, making your mouth smile also improves your mood. It stimulates dopamine, serotonin and endorphins – all feel-good chemicals. * Eat well and get enough sleep. When we are miserable or stressed it’s easy to neglect ourselves but eating good quality food and getting enough sleep is essential for your brain health. Eating junk, missing meals or getting too little sleep pretty much guarantees you’ll feel dreadful.   **When to seek help**  Sometimes, negative feelings persist for days or weeks or are too intense to manage. It’s very important to tell someone – your GP or a mental health support line. Remember, a mental health condition is an illness, just as a disorder in any other part of your body is an illness. It can take courage to talk to someone, but it is the first essential step to feeling better.  If your job involves safety-critical tasks like driving, then it is crucial that you speak up about persistent low mood, stress or anxiety. These issues put you and others at risk if you are behind the wheel without treatment.  The good news is that most people can drive safely once they have treatment.  **Be your own best friend**  Managing your mental and emotional health is crucial, for your wellbeing, for your safety and for your quality of life. If you find yourself thinking it’s not important enough to mention or act upon, or you fear people will think badly of you, imagine instead that your best friend is having these feelings instead of you. What would you advise them? Would you think less of them for being stressed or depressed? Probably not. You’d want them to get help and become healthier and happier.  Be your own best friend today. Assess your state of mind, ask for help if you need it, and ensure you are always fit to drive.  *If you need urgent help for mental health concerns, call the Samaritans on 116 123 for free at any time.* |