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Mind matters: A model for mental health awareness and support from the Geological Society of London

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Up to one in four UK adults now experience a mental health issue each year. Meanwhile, the numbers of UK university students reporting a mental health condition rose by a factor of five between 2006 and 2016, reaching two percent, with some higher education institutions reporting that one in four students have accessed or are waiting to access mental health services. There are a number of aspects of work and study in the geological sciences that can contribute to or exacerbate poor mental health, with fieldwork identified as a particular source of stress and worry for students and professionals alike. Without clearly signposted pathways to support mental health in the geosciences, students and professionals may choose to leave the field.

In 2019, the Geological Society of London launched a mental health and wellbeing programme for its own staff, and is now sharing the model, and lessons learned during implementation, with geologists and employers of geologists. Following a mental health awareness course made available to all staff, staff were encouraged to apply to become a certified mental health first aider and/or to serve on the newly created Mental Health and Wellbeing Group. Over a quarter of staff members applied for one or both positions, with 20 percent selected for the group, and four of those members selected to become mental health first aiders. In addition, a member of the senior leadership team trained as a mental health champion. We have also launched a survey of employee attitudes toward and understanding of mental health, and started to deliver a series of stress-reducing activities. Early results include staff members reporting feeling more valued as people and an increased uptake of services offered through the employee assistance programme, which offers confidential support around mental and physical health. We will also assess changes in employee morale and sickness absence following the introduction of the programme. Finally, we offer strategies for proposing and implementing mental health and wellbeing programmes at other geoscience employers.