

# Wellbeing Early Warning Signs



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## What is Mental Health?

When we talk about mental health it is often taken to refer only to mental health disorders (e.g., major depressive disorder or an anxiety disorder). But mental health actually refers to how well a person is in their thinking, managing their emotions, relating to others, and generally meeting the demands of everyday life and employment. In other words, it is a continuum, with one end marked by mental health disorders, progressing to functioning without mental health symptoms, and then through to a state of wellbeing – where an individual is thriving. At the wellbeing end of the continuum, they are engaged successfully in their personal life and work, have rich social interactions, experience a sense of enjoyment and contribute to their community.

## Why is it Important in the Workplace?

Workplaces depend on workers' thinking abilities and interactions with other people. How well a person performs in a team, relates to a customer or deals with daily challenges - all have to do with their state of mental health or wellbeing.

It is no surprise therefore that positive links have been found between the health and wellbeing of employees and productivity and performance. When people are unwell mentally, it costs businesses through sick leave, backfilling positions, lower productivity, staff turnover, and even possibly workers' compensation claims.

In addition, work is so important for most people because of the amount of time they spend there and it is such a big part of who they are and how it enables them to live, learn and grow. Work itself therefore has a potential impact on people's mental health – the way it is organised, how people are managed and how well the work environment functions. Generally, healthy work has a positive impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. The mental health of people engaged in work is up to four times better than people experiencing ongoing unemployment.

It is important therefore for all managers to be aware of the role that everyone's mental health plays in influencing overall workplace performance. Therefore it is important to protect their mental health at work and to promote positive wellbeing.



# How common is mental illness?

It is estimated that, at any time in Australia, 1 in 5 working age people will be suffering from a diagnosable mental health disorder. A further similar proportion of the population will be suffering from various mental health issues (such as worry, fatigue, sleep problems) which although not meeting criteria for a diagnosed condition will be affecting their ability at work.

It is helpful that everyone is aware of the various early warning signs that help identify potential issues so that managers and co-workers can appropriately help and support someone who may be experiencing a mental health issue.

## Mental Health Early Warning Signs

Changes in someone's usual behaviour are often signs that there could be a mental health issue that the person is experiencing. Some common mental health indicators include:

- Increased absence from work/unplanned leave
- Lowered concentration e.g. not being able to make decisions or not being able to focus on tasks
- Reduced motivation
- Decreased personal care
- Lower performance or problem solving ability
- Irritability or signs of aggression
- Reacting with unusually high emotion
- Feeling sad or anxious regularly
- Disconnecting or withdrawing from others
- Increased use of nicotine, alcohol and caffeine

The most common mental health conditions are anxiety and depression. Their descriptions and associated indicators are shown in this table.

CONDITIONS	INDICATORS
<p>Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of fear or excessive worry. It can be associated with a sense of impending disaster and reflects your thoughts and bodily reactions when you are presented with an event or situation that you feel you cannot manage or undertake successfully.</p> <p>When anxiety is too high, you may not come up with an effective way of managing the stressful or threatening situation. You might freeze, avoid the situation, or even fear you may do something that is out of character. Alternatively, it is common for people to experience panic attacks, with symptoms that can be similar to a heart attack.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawing from, or avoiding situations or certain individuals or groups.</li> <li>• Increased heart rate/racing heart and shortness of breath.</li> <li>• Vomiting, nausea or stomach pain.</li> <li>• Muscle tension and pain (e.g. sore back or jaw).</li> <li>• Having trouble sleeping.</li> <li>• Confusion and difficult making decisions.</li> <li>• Trembling and sweating, faintness or dizziness.</li> <li>• Restlessness and irritability.</li> </ul>
<p>Depression involves feeling sad, 'blue', downhearted, disappointed, detached or upset. However, a person can feel all these emotions without being 'clinically' depressed.</p> <p>Feelings of sadness or the 'blues' are generally brief and have slight effects on normal functioning. Clinical depression is an emotional, physical and cognitive (thinking) state that is more severe and persistent, and interferes with your ability to function day-to-day and at work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of interest in pleasurable activities and daily routine.</li> <li>• Social withdrawal from family and friends, not going out or engaging socially at work.</li> <li>• Worrying and negative thinking.</li> <li>• Feeling and belief of hopelessness.</li> <li>• Irritability, agitation and fatigue.</li> <li>• Changes in sleeping patterns.</li> <li>• Loss or change of appetite, significant weight loss or gain.</li> </ul>

# What is work stress?

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Stress is sometimes confused with anxiety but it is not a mental illness. It is a state of physical and mental tension, a kind of state of readiness to respond to situations that may be overwhelming or threatening us, either at work or in our personal lives. If it is thought of as “pressure” then, within limits it can have a positive impact. For example, if one experiences too little demand or pressure, then they may not be motivated enough. Just enough pressure e.g. through having a reasonable deadline or needing to learn new skills means that we can grow and have a sense of fulfilment.

At work, stress, however, is typically referred to as a negative state of being overwhelmed. Often when people are experiencing work stress their performance deteriorates. If it is experienced for a prolonged period it may show up as one or more of the indicators described above, and then even lead to other diagnosable mental health conditions. It is therefore also beneficial to businesses to manage the risk of work stress.



## What can you do for Mental Health at Work?

The majority of mental illness that is experienced in the workplace is treatable and sometimes preventable. Employers have a role to play in maintaining the health and wellbeing of their workers as well as in assisting in their recovery.

Here are some suggestions for action in the workplace:

- Talk about mental health openly to reduce the stigma sometimes associated with mental illness
- Demonstrate a visible, active commitment to mental health in the workplace so that people feel safe to talk about mental health in the workplace
- Make improving mental health a key objective of your business, following it with practical action plans
- Treat mental health the same as you would physical health in all your health and safety initiatives and business decisions
- Provide flexible options for those returning to work after absence due to mental illness
- Provide a healthy physical work environment, e.g. light, noise, ergonomically designed tools of trade
- Provide access to mental health support services for individual employees who require short term help
- Identify and support champions to promote workplace mental health initiatives
- Provide wellbeing learning programs with a focus on stress management and building resilience
- Support various health related initiatives, e.g. good nutrition and exercise

# Mental Health Check-In

### Key Points

- How do you know if you're not OK? Why it's important to check-in on your own mental health
- Tips for checking on, and supporting, your colleagues when they are facing mental health challenges
- Tips on improving your own mental health and wellbeing
- How to access support and help when your mental health is at risk

We all have tough times and down days, periods of time when we feel that things are 'not quite right'. During these times we might experience overwhelming emotions; we could feel loneliness or anxiety, we may be quick to anger or just feel 'down' or 'blue'.

But, how do we know when we need help, when we need to reach out to someone else and take the brave step to say the words "I'm not okay"?

### Time for a Mental Health Check-In

Being in touch with your own mental wellness is central to your own health and wellbeing. If your feelings of being down, tense, angry or anxious have been continuing for a long period of time, you may be experiencing poor mental health and you may need to seek support to get well again.

Poor mental health isn't a 'phase' or something people can just 'get over', and it's not something to be ashamed of or a sign that you are a 'failure'. When you are experiencing poor mental health, it's important to get help before there are impacts on your everyday life and your relationships at home, with family and friends and at work.

Mental self awareness is a vital tool for checking in on your wellbeing. Through being self aware, you can identify emotional and behavioural warning signs. Being aware of these can help prevent your mental health from deteriorating further and can serve as an impetus to seeking help. Seeing the warning signs early and getting help quickly can help you to bounce back faster and get back to living a happy, healthy life.

### Am I OK? Checklist

Thinking back over recent weeks, have I been affected by any of the following?			
	Never	Occasionally	Often
Moodiness that is out of character			
Increased irritability and frustration			
Finding it hard to take minor personal criticisms			
Spending less time with friends and family			
Loss of interest in fun/ enjoyable activities			
Difficulty sleeping			
Increased alcohol and/ or drug use			
Staying home from work			
Increased physical health complaints like fatigue or pain			
Being reckless or taking unnecessary risks			
Slowing down of thoughts and actions			
Feeling bad about yourself or seeing yourself as a failure			
Difficulty in concentrating on work or other activities			
Considering self harm or suicide*			
<p>If your answers to the above are predominantly "Occasionally" or "Often" you may need immediate help and support. If you are considering self harm or suicide, immediately call Lifeline crisis support and suicide prevention 13 11 14 or Ambulance on 000.</p>			

If your symptoms of poor mental health have been continuing for a long period of time, you may need to talk to someone about how you are feeling and how you are managing your mental health. Talking with a trusted person, a close friend, a colleague at work or a member of your family, is a great place to start. You may want to ask them if they have noticed any changes in your emotional state or in your everyday behaviour.

Speaking with someone who is close to you can help to reassure you about your own feelings and your mental health and it can also prompt you to take additional steps to improve your mental health, like speaking with a medical professional.

## Checking in on the Mental Health of Colleagues or Friends

It isn't practical or realistic to walk around with the checklist from the previous page when you want to check in on a work colleague or friend who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. That's why it's important to be familiar with the types of questions that can be useful to ask when trying to determine if someone needs help and support with their mental health.

Checking in on someone else's mental health is a wonderful way to show them that they are not alone and that others care about the challenges they are facing. However, it's important to be aware of the responsibility that comes with asking someone if they are OK and if they need support: if their answer is "No, I'm not OK. Yes, I need some help." you need to be ready to offer that support.

Also, before you ask someone if they are OK, you need to be sure that you are OK; ask yourself if you are in the right headspace to have the conversation, if you are the right/best person to be asking the question or if you think that there is someone else in their network that might be better suited to bringing up concerns about their mental health.

The R U OK Day website features some useful tips on asking someone else about how they are feeling. Before you have the conversation, ask yourself:

### Am I Ready?

- Am I in a good headspace?
- Am I willing to genuinely listen to my colleague/ friend?
- Can I give them as much time as they need?

### Am I Prepared?

- Do I understand that if I ask someone if they are OK, their answer might be "No, I am not"?
- Am I ready to hear their response if they are not OK?
- Do I know what to do next if someone tells me that they are not OK?
- Do I understand that I am not the right person to offer specific advice and support on 'fixing' someone's mental health problems?
- Do I know who to refer them to if they need specialist help?
- Will I accept that they might not be ready or willing to talk to me?

### Have I Picked the Best Moment?

- Are we somewhere relatively private where our conversation won't be overheard?
- Is this a good time for them to talk? Have I allowed enough time to have a discussion?

Talking to someone about their mental health is a big step. Here is some advice you can use to have a supporting, caring and helpful conversation:

- Be relaxed and friendly in your approach to the conversation, but also show the concern you feel for your colleague's health and wellbeing
- Help your colleague to have the conversation by asking questions and being specific. Try asking "How are you going?" or "You seem less chatty than usual. Is everything OK?"
- Listen to what they say, don't interrupt and avoid passing judgement on what they are experiencing or feeling
- Encourage your colleague to take action so that they can begin the journey towards feeling better. You could ask questions like "How would you like me to support you?" or you could say "You might want to talk with someone who can support you. I'm happy to help you to find the right person to talk to."



## Improving your own mental health and wellbeing

We all experience a range of emotions and, even when we are feeling well, we can experience difficult times, periods of being worried or stressed, as well as depression or anxiety. Looking after your mental health is important and we can all take proactive, positive steps to stay mentally well:

- Building and maintaining strong personal relationships is one of the best things we can do for our mental health. When we have a broad network of family, friends and work mates it is more likely that our emotional needs are being met. Investing in our relationships by spending time together, at work and in social settings, helps us to feel connected and supported
- Contributing to the community is a wonderful way to help others as well as broadening your social circle, adding a sense of meaning and purpose to your life and increasing your sense of wellbeing
- Living a healthy and active lifestyle has also been shown to keep you mentally healthy and reduce the incidence and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Eating a healthy diet and minimising the consumption of alcohol are also keys to a happy, healthy lifestyle
- Making sure you get enough sleep is vital for your physical and mental health, as well as for helping you to be alert and 'switched on' at work. You can enhance your physical and mental health by going to bed early to get 7 - 9 hours of quality sleep each night
- Becoming a 'positive thinker' by being conscious of negative and unhelpful thoughts and challenging them. You can do this by writing down the negative thoughts that concern you most and then writing down positive actions you can take to address any worries. It is also important to focus on things that you can actively control and positively influence. If you are having negative thoughts it is important to talk with someone about addressing these feelings

## Getting early access to help and support at work

Your workplace provides you with access to support from Converge International's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). You can speak to a qualified EAP counsellor at any time by calling 1300 OUR EAP (1300 687 327).

## Need extra support?

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Speak with your GP. Your doctor is often a good place to start for most mental health conditions. GPs can provide you with a referral to see an Accredited Exercise Physiologist and may refer you to other services for mental health. You can also get in touch with these national help lines and websites:

### **BEYOND BLUE** 1300 224 636

Works to raise awareness of depression, anxiety and suicide prevention, reduce the stigma surrounding these issues and to encourage people to seek support when they need it.

### **BLACK DOG INSTITUTE**

Information on symptoms, treatment and prevention of depression and bipolar disorder.

### **BUTTERFLY NATIONAL HELPLINE** 1800 334 673 (1800 ED HOPE)

The service is available to people with eating disorders, their carers and loved ones, and any professionals who need some assistance in knowing what to do next with a patient (note: this is general advice and not formal clinical consultation).

### **CARERS AUSTRALIA** 1800 242 636

Short-term counselling and emotional and psychological support services for carers and their families in each state and territory.

### **HEADSPACE** 1800 650 890

Free online and telephone service that supports young people aged between 12 and 25 and their families going through a tough time.

### **KIDS HELPLINE** 1800 551 800

A free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.

### **MENSLINE AUSTRALIA** 1300 789 978

A telephone and online support, information and referral service, helping men to deal with relationship problems in a practical and effective way.

### **HEAD TO HEALTH**

An innovative website that can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.

### **MINDSPOT CLINIC** 1800 614 434

An online and telephone clinic providing free assessment and treatment services for Australian adults with anxiety or depression.

### **NATIONAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED HEALTH ORGANISATION (NACCHO)**

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and Aboriginal Medical Services in each state and territory.

### **RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA** 1300 364 277

A provider of relationship support services for individuals, families and communities.

### **SANE AUSTRALIA** 1800 18 7263

Information about mental illness, treatments, where to go for support and help carers.





**1800KINAWAY**