

# Workplace Mental Health



# Mental Health And The Workplace

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## What is mental health?

Mental health is defined as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' (World Health Organisation, 2010).

Mental illness is different to mental health. A mental illness impacts how a person feels, thinks, and behaves. There are different types of mental illness including depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder which can range in varying degrees of severity. Achieving and maintaining good mental health and wellbeing is important for everyone.

## Why is mental health relevant to the workplace?

It is estimated that, at any point in time, 1 in 6 Australian workers will be suffering from mental illness. A further one-sixth of the population will be suffering from symptoms associated with mental illness, such as stress and fatigue, which, while not meeting criteria for a diagnosed mental illness, will be affecting their ability to function at work.

Mental illness is one of the leading causes of sickness absence and long-term work incapacity in Australia and is one of the main health related reasons for reduced work performance.

Research shows that absenteeism, reduced work performance, increased turnover rates and compensation claims as a result of mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, cost Australian businesses up to \$12 billion each year.

Employers and workplaces can play an active and significant role in supporting the health and wellbeing of their workers as well as assisting in recovery from mental illness. Every dollar spent on effective mental health actions returns \$2.30 in benefits to the organisation.

## What is the role of work in mental health and wellbeing?

Creating a mentally healthy workplace has many benefits for both employers and employees. From an organisational perspective, addressing mental health in the workplace can increase productivity and employee engagement. For the individual, it means a healthy, balanced life and psychological wellbeing.

Increasing knowledge and understanding of mental illness is the first step to reducing stigma and improving wellbeing in the workplace. Throughout this toolkit we have provided a range of information and resources to help you create a mentally healthier workplace.



# Stress, Depression And Anxiety

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## What is stress?

Stress is our body's response to a demand placed on it. Stress is often confused with anxiety, but stress is not a diagnosable mental illness. Stress is a normal condition, experienced by everyone. It involves an emotional, physical or mental response to events that cause bodily or mental tension. It can be thought of as a state of readiness – the 'fight or flight' response.

A small amount of stress from time to time is not a problem, it can even motivate us to get things done. But when stress is intense and ongoing, it can start to impact our physical and mental health.

## What is depression?

We all have times when we feel low, have a drop in our self-worth and feel somewhat depressed. In most cases, we 'bounce back'. People with clinical depression, however, experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time and sometimes, for no apparent reason. And they can't just snap out of it: the strategies we usually use to lift our mood simply don't work.

Depression influences not only how we feel, but also how we think, behave and interact with others. Someone with depression can start to feel isolated and withdrawn from what's going on around them. Depression influences not only how you feel but also how you think, behave and interact with other people.

If these signs persist for most of the day for most days over a two week period, and they interfere with your ability to manage at home and at work, then you might benefit from getting an assessment by a skilled professional.



## What Is Anxiety?

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Just as there are times when you might feel down, but are not clinically depressed, there are times when you will feel anxious, but do not have an anxiety disorder. It's normal to feel anxious in high pressure situations such as a job interview, when you're speaking in public, or when you're experiencing change in your life or work environment and you're uncertain what the future will hold. To a degree, this anxiety can help us, making us stay focussed and alert.

Anxiety becomes a problem when you start to feel anxious most of the time and about even minor things, to the point where your worry is out of control and interfering with your day to day life.

### **Anxiety disorders are a mix of:**

- Psychological symptoms: frequent or excessive worry, poor concentration, specific fears or phobias e.g. fear of dying or fear of losing control
- Physical symptoms: fatigue, irritability, sleeping difficulties, general restlessness, muscle tension, upset stomach, sweating and difficulty breathing
- Behavioural changes: including procrastination, avoidance, difficulty making decisions and social withdrawal

To be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, a combination of symptoms is present on most days for more than six months and interferes with your ability to function at work or at home.

It is common to experience a low mood secondary to excessive worry and the two conditions

- clinical depression and anxiety disorder can occur at the same time.

## Changes In Behaviour

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If you notice any change in behaviour or performance in yourself, a colleague, friend, or family member consider whether it may be due to a mental health issue.

### **The types of changes in behaviour could include some of the following:**

- Change in routines (stopping participation in sport, social activities)
- Talking about unusual/disturbing thoughts
- Reporting or demonstrating symptoms associated with high levels of anxiety and/or lowered mood
- Lowered concentration and performance
- Reduced motivation
- Increased absenteeism
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Decreased personal care
- Use of drugs (illegal and/or legal) or alcohol
- Reduced activity and energy
- High levels of irritability or aggression

If you see changes like these, and you feel you can talk to the person because you know them well or you have some responsibility for them, don't be afraid to ask if things are OK. They might want to talk – or they might not – but just letting someone know that you've noticed and that you care can make an enormous difference.

# Having A Conversation About Mental Health

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## Keeping in touch

Regular, simple, informal conversations help build a sense of belonging and connectedness which has been shown to promote wellbeing. Find the time to ask about the weekend, have a chat about what you watched last night, ask how the holiday went or just ask how things are going.

Checking in regularly with colleagues, friends, and family also means that we are more likely to notice when things are different or their behaviour changes. It can make the person we're talking to more open to sharing information with us, and make a 'difficult' conversation easier because you've already shown that you're interested and care.

## Having the conversation

If you notice any changes in behaviour or performance in yourself, a colleague, friend or family member, consider whether this is a mental health issue. Starting a conversation with someone whom you're concerned about can help them open up, share their worries with you, and seek further support if necessary. Talking to someone about their mental health isn't always easy, but it could help them get better.

## Here are some key points to help you start a conversation:

- Choose a good time and place to talk where you are both comfortable and relaxed.
- Mention the change in behaviour you've noticed and add something positive, e.g. 'I've noticed that you've been.... You're usually so...'
- Encourage the person to talk by using open-ended questions, e.g. 'What's on your mind?' If the person is reluctant to talk, ask more questions, don't give up.
- Listen actively, giving the person time to talk without interrupting or giving advice.
- Avoid the temptation to fill the silences.
- Reflect back some of the things you've heard to show you understand.
- Encourage them to talk to their GP or another health professional if they need help.



# Employees

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## What are my rights?

### Protection from discrimination

If you have a mental health condition, certain laws protect you against discrimination in the workplace. The Australia-wide Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and equivalent state and territory laws make it unlawful to discriminate against, harass or victimise people with disabilities – including in an employment context.

### Privacy

Your right to privacy is covered by the Australia-wide Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and similar legislation in some states and territories. If you tell your employer you have a mental health condition, they can't disclose this information to anyone without your consent. They can only use this information for the purpose for which you told them, such as adjusting your role or working environment to make allowances for your mental health condition.

### A healthy, safe workplace

Workplace health and safety legislation requires employers to ensure that workplaces are both physically and mentally healthy for all employees. This means steps must be taken to ensure that the working environment does not harm mental wellbeing or aggravate an existing condition.

Under each state's work health and safety (WH&S) legislation, your employer is obligated, so far as is reasonably practicable, to provide a safe and healthy workplace. This means they must take action to prevent or lessen potential risks to the health and safety of you and your colleagues, including your mental wellbeing.

## What are my responsibilities?

**If your mental health condition does not affect how you do your job, you have no legal obligation to tell your employer about it. This applies whether you are a current employee, or a potential employee going through the recruitment process.**

WH&S laws protect your right to a safe workplace, but you also have responsibilities under the same legislation. You must take care of yourself and others and cooperate with your employer in matters of health and safety. This applies to all workers, whether they have a disability or not.

As well as this, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) your ability to work safely is an 'inherent' or essential requirement of any job. If your disability could reasonably be seen to create a health and safety risk for other people at work, then your failure to tell anyone about that risk could be a breach of your obligations under WH&S legislation.

### You need to tell your employer when your mental health condition:

- affects how you carry out the inherent requirements of your job. In this context, the purpose of providing the information is to enable your employer to identify reasonable adjustments that might assist you to perform your role.
- affects your health and safety and/or the health and safety of colleagues.
- is affected or could be affected by the nature of your work. A failure to disclose a mental illness may disentitle an employee to workers compensation should they suffer any recurrence, aggravation or exacerbation of a pre existing mental illness.



## Six ways employers and people leaders can help make workplaces mentally healthier

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### 1. Smart work design

- Establish flexible working hours.
- Address workplace culture of when, where and how you work.
- Involve staff in deciding how work is performed.
- Listen to people's ideas about how to get their work done.
- Monitor staff workloads.
- Ensure your physical work environment is safe and encouraging.

### 2. Building personal resilience

- Provide stress management and resilience training for those in high-risk jobs, such as emergency service workers exposed to significant levels of trauma or stress.
- Use evidence-based approaches such as cognitive behaviour therapy.
- Provide and encourage regular physical activity opportunities like lunchtime yoga, jogging or meditation.
- Encourage mentoring and coaching.

### 3. Building better work cultures

- Learn how to have conversations with people you're concerned about and encourage all staff to look out for each other.
- Provide mental health education to the whole team.
- Reduce stigma. Speak openly about mental health conditions.
- Ensure senior staff are engaged in mental health promotion and providing a safe and positive workplace.
- Implement a mental health policy including zero tolerance of bullying and discrimination.

### 4. Increasing awareness of mental health

- Provide access to mental health information. Leave brochures about mental health on team notice boards.
- Talk openly about mental health at work.
- Conduct mental health awareness programs and mandatory training.
- Include mental health development in staff induction and development.

### 5. Supporting staff recovery from mental illness

- Provide supervisor training on how to support workers recovering from mental illness and stressful life events. Facilitate flexible sick leave.
- Modify duties and work schedules when appropriate.
- Provide a supportive environment and ensure no discrimination or bullying occurs.

### 6. Early Intervention

- Encourage staff to seek help early.
- Consider wellbeing checks once appropriate supports are in place.
- Provide mental health training so staff can support each other.
- Provide a peer support program for staff

# What help is available?

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## GP

Building a team to support you is key to managing mental illness and the first step is to book an appointment with your GP. They can provide accurate diagnosis, referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist, and develop a Medicare mental health care plan.

- Book a long consultation
- Get your symptoms assessed
- You may be referred for expert advice or therapy
- You may need medication
- Persist until you find a GP you click with

## Employee Assistance Program

An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a work-based preventive and proactive intervention program designed to enhance wellbeing of all employees in dealing with personal and/or work-related concerns that may impact wellbeing, work performance or health and safety.

Programs include a range of counselling services, assessments, referrals and resources for all employees, and also work in a consultative role with managers and people leaders to address organisational challenges and needs.

Workplaces should regularly promote their EAP internally to encourage employees to utilise their services.

If your workplace is not currently using an EAP, you can contact a provider to contract their services.

## Websites

Black Dog Institute - [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

Head to Health - [www.headtohealth.gov.au](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au)

Beyond Blue - [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Reach Out - [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

Sane - [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

## Phone Lines

Suicide Call Back Service - 1300 659 467

MensLine Australia - 1300 789 978

Kids Helpline - 1800 551 800

Lifeline - 13 11 14







**1800KINAWAY**