

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: PROMOTING EXERCISE & HEALTHY HABITS

Physical health should not be overlooked when building mentally-healthy workplaces, and instead employers need to take into consideration the role they play in supporting their employees to lead healthy lifestyles. These healthy habits can contribute to improved mood and cognitive functioning, allowing employees to bring their best selves to work.

Allianz's employer poll found that nearly 60 per cent of respondents promote the mental health benefits of physical activity and general good health, but 50 per cent believe their organisations could do more in this space.¹ This guide provides some tips for employers to consider to promote the physical health of their employees.

Four ways to inspire greater physical health

› Send regular communication to remote employees:

Working remotely can at times be isolating. It's important for employers to proactively drive connectedness. A simple way of achieving this is by sending regular communications that prioritise their wellbeing. The memo can be a reminder to take a break or a walk – while simple, it encourages employees to break up their working day, as well as acknowledges their remote working situation.



› Help employees understand their physical health status:

If employees are struggling to complete their role, it can place extra strain and stress on their overall physical and mental health. Physically demanding roles in particular require regular evaluation. For those in labour-intensive industries, free, voluntary onsite health assessments within the workplace may help to ensure employees are fit enough to complete their duties. An example of a tool used to ensure employees are safely able to perform their duties is wearable sensor technology that enhances injury prevention.



➤ **Have regular forums with employees:**

Provide employees with the opportunity to give feedback on job design for physically demanding roles, as well as to communicate issues that affect their health. Employees are more likely to participate in an initiative that has been constructed around their input. However, expert opinion should ultimately be taken into account in relation to job design. Some examples that employers can promote include: providing pedometers for employees, introduce a competition around steps (STEPtember) and rewarding the most successful employee, and providing educational talks with experts/presenters that have experience in the industry.

Case Study:

Sydney Water – A Healthier You

In 2017, Sydney Water set out to deliver their ‘Safe and Well Together Strategy’ to empower and support employees by reducing the impact of injury on the organisation, the individual, and ultimately, the people of greater Sydney.

Since introducing the new strategy, Sydney Water has focused on fostering greater organisational change by embedding the safety operating model, and positioning safety and wellbeing within their culture.

This ambitious approach aimed to achieve sustainable and continuous improvement to the safety and mental health for Sydney Water’s employees.

Key elements of the ‘Safe and Well Together Strategy’ have been:



- The Safety Differently campaign
- Use of Dorsa Vi sensor technology to review manual handling activities
- An onsite physiotherapy, and injury prevention and management program
- An ‘alcohol and other drugs’ awareness program
- A safety, governance and reporting framework
- Risk reduction program
- New safety standards
- A revised corporate safety induction
- A new health and wellbeing strategy
- A new injury management strategy
- An occupational hygiene strategy
- A restructured safety team, focusing on higher capability and a new business partnering model
- A new safety assurance function

This deliberate and disruptive approach has encouraged a positive shift in performance by engaging, encouraging and empowering the frontline workforce. Sydney Water staff and contractors have embraced the revised approach as an opportunity to work collaboratively to improve safety performance.

Sydney Water achieved a significant improvement in safety in the 2017/2018 financial year, largely due to a shift in culture, towards one where all staff and contractors are encouraged and empowered to manage safety. There has been an increase in staff and contractor participation in a range of safety and wellbeing initiatives.

The implementation of this safety strategy has seen a demonstrated reduction in the number and severity of injuries, particularly musculoskeletal conditions, that were becoming increasingly prevalent in an aging, physically engaged workforce. The employee Total Recordable Injury Frequency Rate (TRIFR)* decreased, from 23.01 in 2016–17, 11.5 in 2017–18, to 8.6 in 2018–19. Employee injuries are down by 48 per cent and contractor injuries decreased 54 per cent in 2017–18.

*The Lost Time Injury Frequency Rate is the principal measure of safety performance in many companies in Australia. The definition of L.T.I.F.R. is the number of Lost Time Injuries multiplied by 1 million divided by the number of man-hours worked in the reporting period. It is a universal measure of safety.

Healthy eating in the workplace and at home

Simply put, when we're feeling well, we're at our best. And feeling well starts with what we eat.

Eating well often requires a conscious individual effort to make the right choices. However, there are small changes that can be made by an employer to help make healthier eating the norm.

Here's a simple checklist with steps to help encourage healthy eating at work and at home:

- ✓ Offer employees free, healthy food options, such as fresh fruit in the kitchen.
- ✓ Make it easy for employees by ensuring kitchens have the right equipment to prepare and store healthy meals. If there is an onsite canteen, ensure there is a range of healthy food options to empower employees to make healthier food choices.
- ✓ Develop working relationships with surrounding restaurants, grocery stores and cafes that offer healthy food option.
- ✓ Consider informing your employees about a range of healthy food providers and delivery options.
- ✓ Offer incentives and awards that are fun but also educate on healthy eating. This could include offering free cooking classes at a nearby location or bringing in a nutritionist to provide an educational talk and offer tips on how to make quick and healthy meals for the working day.
- ✓ Provide employees with a healthy eating recipe book at the end of the financial or calendar year event.



Smoking and alcohol consumption

Employers need to look at how their culture impacts employees' decisions to participate in extra-curricular or social habits, such as smoking and drinking. Some tips to consider improving your culture within the workplace include:



- ✓ Do employees get 'extra' smoke breaks? If so, you could consider offering all employees the same break times.
- ✓ Are all company achievements rewarded with 'team drinks' or drink carts on a Friday afternoon? If so, you could consider rewarding your employees with an alternative, such as a voucher for gym access, relaxation massage, sports stores and professional consultations, healthy eating recipe book or a discount to a health food provider who delivers healthy food boxes to your home.

Sleep hygiene

As an employer, it's important to support employees in creating healthy sleeping habits. For example, employers should be mindful of whether emails are stored on an employee's phone, as there is a risk the employee may feel the need to be constantly 'on' and this can negatively affect their sleep hygiene. As such, employers should practice what they advocate for, and if possible avoid after hours contact, even if there is no expectation of an immediate response.

Practicing healthy sleep hygiene helps ensure adequate sleep is achieved, which is especially important for our overall health and wellbeing.

Adequate sleep contributes to improved mood and cognitive functioning as well as being more alert, focused and happier. By making sleep a priority, employees will wake up feeling rested and ready to tackle the day. If individuals experience a lack of sleep, this can lead to negative work outcomes, such as absenteeism, occupational accidents and poor performance.²

References

¹ Allianz (2019). Employer Pulse Check. Mental Wellness in the Workplace Survey. Question 6, Question 7.

² Rosekind, Mark & Gregory, Kevin & Mallis, Melissa & Brandt, Summer & Seal, Brian & Lerner, Debra. (2010). The Cost of Poor Sleep: Workplace Productivity Loss and Associated Costs. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine*.



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