MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: RAISING AWARENESS & ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS

Essential to a healthy and thriving workplace, whether that be in a remote working environment, in an office, or at a work site, is creating a culture that prioritises the mental wellbeing of employees. One where workers feel supported and encouraged to discuss their mental health. It's important for employers to acknowledge the benefits that addressing mental ill-health can bring to employees, including autonomy, sense of purpose, achievement, positive interactions, and personal and financial achievements. Employee mental wellbeing is an essential pillar in building successful and sustainable organisations.

Fortunately, many Australian workplaces and worksites are taking steps to address mental ill-health, although are doing so at different paces. Yet, many workers – particularly in the tourism and hospitality industries – believe that employers have a poor understanding of the impact of mental health issues on their work and quality of life.[1] In this guide, we outline a range of resources available to assist employers to raise awareness and encourage conversations regarding mental health, all to help create positive change in their workplace.

Facilitate a mentally thriving workplace

Employers have a considerable role to play when it comes to creating a mentally healthy workplace. According to Allianz's employer poll, 85 per cent of workers agreed that employers need to do more to facilitate a mentally thriving workplace.[2]

Mental health promotion and the workplace

Below are some of the ways employers can facilitate a healthy work environment, depending on the nature of their business.
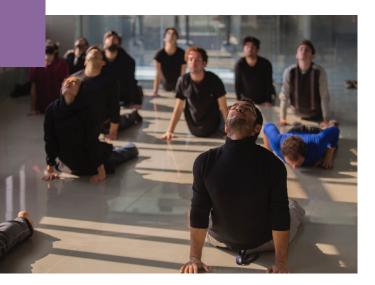
Designing work to minimise harm:[3]

> Flexible working conditions: Increase employees' control over their working conditions and environment by having them choose their work patterns and shift schedules. This can enhance an employee's mental health and reduce sick leave.[4] For example, for shift work employment send out a survey to see what days and hours suit workers best, and then accommodate where possible.

> Employee participation: Increasing employee participation in decision making enhances the level of control over their working conditions and environment. Importantly, the increase in control improves any negative symptoms employees may have been experiencing from anxiety or depression.[5] Some ways to get employees participating include problem solving committees, education workshops, and stress management courses.[6] As an example, a trade business experiencing issues with resource collection efficiencies may ask the on-site teams to come up with a solution together rather than the employer simply directing a solution.

Enhancing personal resilience:[7]

> Cognitive Behavioural Therapy work-based programs: The World Health Organisation defines work-related stress as "the response people may have when presented with work demands or pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities, and which challenge their ability to cope."[7] Safe Work Australia data shows $543 million was paid in workers compensation for work-related mental health conditions, highlighting the scale of the issue and reinforcing the importance of employers proactively addressing employees' mental health.[9] To address this, an employer could ask a mental health professional to come to a workshop and give a tool-box talk on common stressors employees face.[10] These stressors may include dealing with challenging customers or situations, tight deadlines or a temporary increase in demand. Employers could also consider offering 1:1 sessions.

> Workplace physical activity programs: These may help to promote individual resilience, decrease depressive symptoms, and increase overall psychological health.[11] A workplace could have a yoga buff in its midst, or someone really into running. Consider engaging an expert to organise a program for employees – which can also be undertaken in a virtual setting – or have a daily reminder set on computers encouraging employees to stretch.

Promoting and facilitating early help-seeking:[12]

> Peer support schemes: Provide additional mental health training to a group of volunteers, who can then provide general support to other employees by showing them how to access internal and external supports. They could also help to identify those who might be struggling at work and require professional assistance. Having a mental health team internally could reduce barriers to seeking help, and can lower sickness leave rates.[13]

> Mindfulness training: Mindfulness training, such as mediation, for four weeks duration is effective in lowering anxiety and depression.[14] Mindfulness increases performance at work through growing awareness and empathy, and encourages the adoption of beneficial behaviours to cope with complex and stressful situations. In particular, consider implementing this in nursing and healthcare environments to improve positive patient interactions and interpersonal relationships.[14]

Supporting mental health and the workplace

It's important that employers and HR managers are aware of their privacy obligations during any conversations that may occur and ensure any disclosure is to be kept strictly confidential.

There is generally (and subject to certain exceptions) no legal obligation for an employee to disclose any information regarding their mental health. If an employee does disclose a mental illness, or the employer is made aware, it is the employer's responsibility to assess and determine whether workplace changes and role adjustments can reasonably be made to support them. Consider how they are performing in their job, if they are coping, and if they are having any difficulty performing key requirements.

Employers should ask the employee what tasks are currently contributing negatively to their mental health, and communicate that they. JobAccess is a confidential advice service available to assist with specific employment issues.

Providing positive support not only to the employee, but also to their colleagues, can help to create a work culture that is more accepting and inclusive. For more information see our _Mental Health in the Workplace: Designing a Collaborative Mental Wellbeing Program_ guide.

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Case Study:
Department of Education[15]

In 2013, the Department of Premier and Cabinet's Behavioural Insights Unit (BIU), the Department of Education, and Allianz undertook a joint project to better understand the difficulties employees encounter when trying to return to work after injury. The collaboration looked to apply behavioural insights to the return to work process, and a success rate of 27 per cent back to work in the first 90 days was achieved. The success of the collaboration is best explained by employees, who said they found the return to work process clearer, easier to understand, person-centered, and empowering.

The key lessons from this trial for all employers and HR managers can be summarised in four practical tips:

1. Communication

When communicating with a worker recovering from injury, it is best to always provide a rationale if you need to request information from them. For example, if you are requesting an update on their progress because you are managing the roster for next month, or allocating workflows, tell them! Having the employee understand why their employer has requested the information can help allay any fears or misunderstandings that can arise from a simple request. In addition, check in with the employee about the best time to contact them, and what the best form of communication for them is. An employee may have just started on a medication that makes them drowsy at a particular time of day, or the employee's anxiety may increase when speaking on the phone. Supporting the employee the way that they need during their recovery shows that the employer is here for them, and can work with them during the recovery process.

2. Recovery goals

Ask the employee what recovery goals they can achieve in the workplace, and help them create suitable duties within the business that supports their goals. For example, the employee may be undertaking exposure therapy with their Psychologist. This entails gradually being around stressors that have previously contributed to their injury. If they need exposure therapy to customers, try offering to work together on the front desk. By having collegial support, the employee can take breaks as needed, and be assisted if in need during a customer interaction. Or where gradual exposure to the workplace in general is required, remember that an employee being unfit for their normal duties doesn't mean they can't be invited in for morning tea or team meetings, or informal gatherings. A continued sense of belonging in the workplace is extremely important to recovery.

3. Work from home

Can the employee participate from home or be interested in flexible hours? Commitment to the workplace and connection to colleagues can be fostered through tasks that may or may not be related to their normal work duties. Maybe they could help with the linen order? Be creative, and it may end up helping the employee to upskill while they are off, and upon their return they can teach others.

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Quick tips & resources to foster conversation

For employers:

> Partner with a mental health specialist, such as Black Dog Institute, and host mental health training days inside the workplace.

> Investigate holistic wellbeing training.

> Invest in formal management training through organisations like Australian Institute of Management.

> Offer workplace mental health first aider training to interested employees.

> Regularly conduct employee wellbeing surveys. Templates are available from organisations like WorkSafe Tas and Healthier Work ACT.

> Show mental health is a business priority by providing regular emails, news articles or insights about mental health. There are some great articles on the Beyond Blue, Black Dog and R U OK? websites.

> Provide access to free counselling services.

> Investigate the organisation's current Employee Assistance Program, ensure staff are aware of the program and provide training to leaders.

> Participate in mental health awareness days, such as R U OK? Day.

> Hang posters around the workplace that support conversation or show how to identify colleagues experiencing declining mental health.

> For employees working long hours, take the time to check in with them and ask if they are okay.

> Implement an employee subcommittee to identify and implement company wellness programs.

> Review some additional workplace guidelines from notable organisations like the below:

   • SuperFriend: Promoting positive mental health in the workplace: guidelines for organisations;

   • R U OK? At work;

   • Think mental health: How to start conversation;

   • Sane Australia: Talking about mental health in the workplace;

   • Beyond Blue: Education and Training.

For employees:

> If help is needed, reach out to national helplines and websites like:

   • 1300 22 46 36 Beyond Blue; Support Service;

   • Lifeline;

   • Suicide Callback Service.

> Try the Mindara, a mindfulness-based e-learning program designed to enhance resilience and equip you with a range of valuable psychological skills.

> Use gamification to train up resilience with tools like SuperBetter. Gaming techniques teach how to tackle a challenge and identify steps needed to reach goals.

> Investigate apps designed to calm during times of stress and anxiety. ReachOut Breathe shows how to slow down breathing and allows tracking of the heart rate throughout the day.

> Manage stress at work through journaling apps like Daylio Journal and Moody and record the mood. This may help create more open discussions with managers about wellbeing.

> Remember we are all human. Utilise the suite of daily exercises and tools designed to reduce stress, foster positive thinking and improve connections with others.

> If ever worried about colleague, ask "Are you ok?" and be prepared for their response by having supportive resources on hand.

> Engage in resilience training, and think more positively, with science-based exercises like Happify.

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