Workplace Mental Health Resource for Managers

Version 1

Date: October 2020

Building a mental health strategy to reduce risk at your workplace

"One in five Australian workers is currently experiencing a mental health condition"[i]

It is becoming increasingly recognised in Australia that the mental health and wellbeing of staff is a contributing factor to an organisation's success. Positive mental health creates a strong and resilient working environment for productivity, whereas mental ill-health can have negative impacts directly on productivity and staff retention.

Workplace mental health strategies, while on the agenda for Australian business leaders, are at varying stages of maturity. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the presence and complexity of mental ill-health, making a comprehensive strategy even more relevant.

This guide is a resource for leaders and managers to understand the different aspects of developing a mental health strategy and provides some different aspects to consider when developing a mentally healthy workplace.

Why have a workplace mental health strategy?

The costs of mental ill-health in the workforce presents itself in several ways including workers compensation claims, absenteeism and presenteeism (attending work whilst unwell or otherwise unfit to work). Presenteeism is shown to be the most significant cost to organisations, and it is also the most invisible.
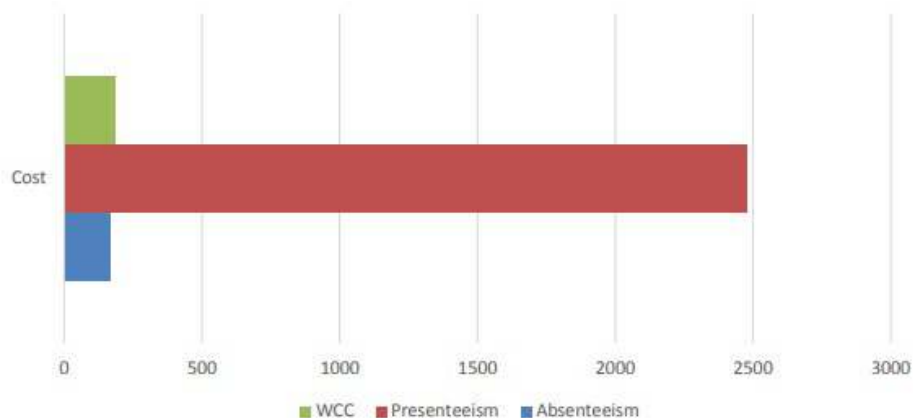
Annual cost to NSW employers of mental ill-health ($millions)[ii]

Creating a workplace that promotes mental wellbeing, adopts early intervention strategies, and has a policy to manage mental illness can be done by considering the following questions.

- What role does a manager or business leader play?
- How can peer support help?
- What are the tools employees can use to engage in their own self-care?

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Aspects of a mental health and wellbeing strategy

Employment represents a significant part of a person's life, therefore employers can affect their employee's mental health in a positive or negative way, whether it be intentional or not.

Mental health is complex, representing the convergence of multiple influences such as a person's own mental and physical state, job related factors and aspects of their personal life such as relationships, previous trauma, or financial situation. In the current environment, many Australians are finding their resilience eroded by natural disasters such as drought and bushfire as well as the numerous pressures introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Awareness and resilience building

There are three main ways organisations in Australia engage with employees to facilitate mental health resilience. Job design, positive psychology activities and addressing mental health as it occurs[iii]. Combined, they play an important role in engaging with employees to prevent or address mental health issues.

1. **Job design** – as jobs can be designed to minimise risks to an employee's physical health, so too can they be designed to aid in mental health and wellness. There are multiple aspects to consider ranging from stress that is intrinsic to the job role (such as workplace conditions, physical danger and exposure to trauma) to an employee's experience in the organisation (such as ongoing conflicts or lack of consultation).

2. **Positive psychology** – workplace health programs, positive role modelling by management, community engagement activities and a strong line of communication to demonstrate support are all important to remove the stigma attached to mental illness and open the channels of communication.

3. **Tackling mental health** – understanding mental health and building resilience strategies, supporting the identification of mental health issues when they occur (whether in the early stages or when more acute), knowing how to assist and having the appropriate referral pathways in place for support.

What to do in the current COVID-19 world

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in modern business bringing about a confluence of financial, health and social pressures. Past experiences and studies indicate that this is likely to be hard felt from a mental health perspective now and for some time to come. Considering financial hardship alone, a study into the effects of the Great Recession 2007 – 2009 revealed "*declines in mental health that were still evident several years after the official end of the recession*"[iv]

Mental health policies need to be updated to consider the new environment we are in and plan for the long term. Below are some key activities leaders can undertake to protect the mental wellbeing of employees during and after the pandemic.

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Policies and practices

Understand that everyone is different and will react differently to changes and increased stress. Let them know that their mental health is important.

- **Implement controls** to protect employees and customers. Not only does this help them to be safer but also feel safer and reduce their emotional load. It also highlights the importance the organisation places on staff wellbeing and will reduce the anxiety associated with operating in the new conditions.

- **Regular communications** are vital to keep employees up to date with the changing conditions and ensuring you include your plans to address mental health. Communicate with integrity, your staff will know that you don't have all the answers and the situation is fluid but ensure you have a consistent set of principles that you will operate by and their health and safety is one of them.

- **Returning to work** after shutdown, or a period at home, consider their emotional state as well as the physical logistics. Their resilience may be eroded, and they may have concerns about their safety returning to work. Find out what they are concerned about, take on board suggestions and concerns (surveys are useful), explain what protective measures have been put in place. Above all ensure there is a pathway for them to openly discuss their concerns.

- **Mental illness recovery** – there should also be a return to work plan for someone who has been on leave for a mental illness. It should incorporate recommendations from their doctor and be respectful and considerate.

- **Crisis Support** – a person's mental health can vary from day to day, resilience strategies aim to reduce the incidence of more acute issues however mental health can deteriorate quickly and an organisation should be prepared to act quickly ensuring the availability of suitable support and referral pathways.

- **Identification of risk** - being aware of the high-risk areas and possible indicators will help to you to mitigate risk and respond quickly if required. Having a procedure in place and being able to call upon people with appropriate training is also important should there be a traumatic incident.

Changes to jobs and procedures

Review the potential impacts of new guidelines on the workforce and take steps to address or minimise them.

- **Social distancing** - do new "physical" distancing rules result in increased isolation? Job roles are often changed to limit the spread of COVID-19 leaving people on their own more, which is lonely and can remove important job support. This can be exacerbated with increased isolation at home. Actively look at job role changes and if this is the case ensure you implement strategies to increase connection such as regular calls, meetings, and peer support.

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- **Workload changes** - is there an increase or decrease in workload inducing stressful conditions, repetition, or boredom? If so, make appropriate changes or adjust expectations to ensure they are reasonable.

- **Allow for a broader context** - consider that employees may have increased strain in their personal lives such as financial strain, children at home, difficult relationships, elderly parents etc. Make sure they have access to support resources if needed.

Let staff contribute to the solution, it is their job and they usually have great ideas on how changes can be made to meet new guidelines while keeping the job manageable and productive. This will also give them greater agency over what is happening in their life, therefore reducing stress.

External interactions

- **Challenging behaviours** - if dealing with external clients, partners, or the general public, review how interactions may change under the new conditions. Are they under more stress, are they projecting more stress onto your employees? Implement strategies to make experiences less stressful for them, as well as procedures to ensure your staff are protected both physically and emotionally. This includes ensuring they are supported if they need it and offering de-briefing opportunities if required.

- **Vicarious trauma** – is a risk for people who are exposed to other people's stories of trauma and distress. In some job roles this occurs on a regular basis and employers need to ensure such employees remain safe, while also offering training to manage this exposure and understand when to seek help. Managers and supervisors should also receive training to be able to identify signs of vicarious trauma and ensure referral pathways are in place.

Most importantly leaders need to "walk the talk". Ensure you continue to exhibit behaviours that reinforce your messages for a healthy workplace and incorporate them into your daily discussions.

Referral pathways

- **Employee Assistance Program –** should be reviewed and updated to ensure there is a comprehensive mental health component. It needs to be clearly communicated, respectful of the individual and confidential.

- **Mental Health Support –** curating referral information from trusted sources for employees via internal communications will help to have it at hand when an employee needs it. There are some sources at the end of this document that may be used.

Skills updates and training

Mental health awareness and training should fit within the suite of policies for cultural competency, diversity and general health and wellbeing.

Formal training can help people manage their mental health and create an environment of support. People can learn how to protect their health just as they can their physical health. Teaching techniques to be self-supporting will empower them to take the most appropriate action for themselves.

"A 4-h manager mental health training programme could lead to a significant reduction in work-related sickness absence"[v]

There are demonstrable benefits of enabling staff to manage their own mental health. Like managing physical health, people can learn how to take care of their mental health, recognise when there are problems, know when to seek help from a professional and join forces with others offering peer support. Also like our physical health, there are constant changes to the way we feel, we have good days and bad days. This is normal, but when is the right time to ask for help? Furthermore, everyone is different, we react differently to external and internal pressures and different strategies will help us to cope. Ongoing attention to these dynamics helps people to address mental health matters early before they become more acute or identify more serious issues and take action.

A comprehensive training program would include different strategies to address mental health including:

- **Mental health awareness -** the first step is to de-mystify mental health concepts and encourage people to talk openly about their emotional state. Reducing the stigma and improving understanding can be facilitated by learning about the concepts of mental wellbeing and how to stay mentally healthy. The importance of self-care and developing strategies to build resilience is covered in awareness training and better understanding facilitates empathy and understanding for people who do have a mental health illness.

  Mental health awareness training is a good step to starting a conversation with staff about mental health, facilitate their engagement and signify the organisations commitment to workplace mental health. This type of training can be delivered via eLearning, facilitator-led group sessions, or company forums.

- **Peer Support** – encouraging peer level, informal support networks and mechanisms is an important component of improving and addressing mental wellbeing at work. Staff are often more likely to seek support from a friend or work colleague than from a manager or through more formal pathways, and ensuring staff have the basic skills and awareness to help them navigate these supportive conversations and guide their peers to the appropriate help is an important step.

- **Safely asking about suicide –** being able to ask someone directly if they are considering suicide is a challenging thing to do. However, it can save a life. Having some or all your workforce trained to talk safely and comfortably about suicide with a person in distress is an important aspect of ensuring the wellbeing of the workforce.

These skills can be taught to anyone and don't require specialist skills or qualifications.

- **Challenging behaviours -** dealing with people who are distressed, angry or otherwise challenging to manage can be one of the most difficult parts of someone's role. This can equally apply to external customers and clients, or colleagues and employees. Providing training to people likely to be exposed to challenging behaviours, to enable them to better understand what is behind the behaviour and how to safely intervene or de-escalate the situation is important for the wellbeing of those on both sides of the interaction.

- **Management training** – providing those with direct line management responsibilities the training and skills to identify signs of mental ill health or work stress and to provide safe and supportive interventions, is a key factor in workplace mental wellbeing. Managers will feel better enabled to support staff they are concerned about and initiate sensitive conversations. Employees will feel more able to talk confidentially and safely with managers about mental health or work-related stress concerns

- **Specialist training** – some organisations have specific risk areas where having specially trained personnel ready to respond can reduce the overall negative impact if there were a more acute need, or even an incident. After doing a risk assessment and response plan, appropriate training of the relevant personnel can be undertaken to ensure negative mental health effects are managed.

Resources

For Crisis Support

If life is in danger call 000

For 24-hour telephone support call 13 11 14.

For more information visit www.lifeline.org.au

For Workplace Mental Health

Working from Home Toolkit - https://www.lifeline.org.au/media/3g4hhs5q/web-mar2020-ll-2pp-tool-kit-covid-19-wfnwoqjmgwhq-301321.pdf

Lifeline Training - https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-involved/corporate-training/

Head to Health - https://headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support/covid-19

Mental Health at Work - https://www.mentalhealthatwork.nsw.gov.au/

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For Mental Health Resources

Mental Health resources https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/information-and-support/

Support Services - https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/external-support-services/

Mental Health and the Coronavirus - https://nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/mental-health-and-the-coronavirus

[i] TNS Social Research, *State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia,* 2014

[ii] SafeWork NSW, *Mentally health workplaces in NSW: A return on investment study*, October 2017

[iii] Griffith University, *Implementing mental health initiatives in Australian business – triggers, facilitators and barriers*, January 2020

[iv] Association for Psychological Science, *Hardship during the Great Recession linked with lasting mental health declines,* September 2019.

[v] Milligan-Saville et al, *Workplace mental health training for managers and its effect on sick leave in employees: a cluster randomised trial,* The Lancet, November 2017

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