



**THE MENTALLY  
HEALTHY  
WORK PLACE ALLIANCE**

**Heads <sup>û</sup>p**

# Taking care of your mental health in the workplace

A guide for employees



**Mental health in the workplace is everyone's business. Employees, managers and leaders all have a role to play. It's about identifying what you can do to promote good mental health, support others and, importantly, look after your own health and wellbeing.**

Creating a mentally healthy workplace has clear positives for all employees.

At an individual level, you benefit from reduced job stress, an improved work-life balance and access to support if you're experiencing a mental health condition.

While productivity and profitability are obvious priorities for employers, employees also benefit from being part of a thriving business. Jobs are more stable, rewards are more frequent and overall confidence is higher.

Reduced turnover also has positive outcomes for team cohesion and relationships – no-one likes it when friends and colleagues leave a workplace, and constant changes to team dynamics can be unsettling for everyone involved.

## **What you can do**

All employees play a significant part in shaping workplace attitudes and the overall working environment.

This is reflected in the way you treat your colleagues, work together as a team and get involved in workplace initiatives to promote health, safety and wellbeing.

## **Ten things you can do to make a difference**

- 1** Talk openly about mental health in the workplace.
- 2** Share your own personal experience of a mental health condition (if you feel comfortable doing so.)
- 3** Encourage open communication when problems arise and help to find solutions.
- 4** Respect other people and celebrate difference.
- 5** Be open to learning about mental health conditions and other people's experiences.
- 6** Respect the privacy of others.
- 7** Be a positive role model – be genuine in your actions and promote the kind of culture that inspires people to do their best.
- 8** Speak up if you see instances of bullying, harassment or discrimination.
- 9** Cooperate with workplace policies and procedures, and support initiatives aimed at improving mental health in the workplace.
- 10** Understand how your workplace can support you and how you can access help if you need it.

## WHAT IS A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE?

A mentally healthy workplace promotes a positive workplace culture, minimises workplace risks related to mental health, supports people with mental health conditions appropriately and prevents discrimination.

Promoting good mental health and creating a positive, productive working environment go hand in hand.

At an organisational level, clear policies to encourage good mental health are crucial, as is strong leadership to implement them. Employers also have a legal responsibility to identify workplace risks to the mental health of their employees, and take action to remove these. While these activities must be led from the top, staff at all levels can contribute ideas, be open and receptive to change, and help to make the strategy for a mentally healthy workplace part of their daily routine.

## Managing your stress levels at work

Stress is a normal part of life, and work is no different. Some stress can be beneficial. Under pressure or working to a deadline, we are often able to complete a task more quickly, or find a new and creative solution to a problem. Equally, most job roles and working environments have stressful elements.

When work-related stress is prolonged or excessive, however, it can be a risk

factor for anxiety or depression. By asking employees about issues that cause stress, employers can take action to reduce or eliminate these so far as is reasonably practicable.

You can help to manage your stress levels by identifying your own triggers in the workplace and collaborating with your supervisor to address them. Finding a work-life balance that suits you, taking regular breaks and speaking up early if you're feeling overwhelmed are among the proactive steps everyone can take to look after their own mental health.

## Checking in with a colleague

We spend almost every day with our colleagues, so we're in a good position to spot changes in their mood or behaviour. For some people, uncertainty about how the conversation might pan out or fear of causing offence can prevent them from talking to someone they're concerned about. Checking in might be the push your colleague needs to take action.

Try to understand their situation and encourage them to seek support.



Helping the person find further information and support services can also be really useful, as this step can seem overwhelming for someone with anxiety and/or depression.

Remind yourself that this is no different to talking about how someone is feeling – the topic is just a bit more delicate. Don't worry if you don't quite know what to say. Just by being supportive and listening, you're helping to make a difference. You don't need to have all the answers – it's about the conversation and the support you offer by listening.

Remember, speaking openly about mental health in the workplace will reduce stigma and encourage people to seek support.



## Supporting someone with a mental health condition

There are a number of positive things you can do for a colleague experiencing a mental health condition.

These include:

- indicating you've noticed a change in their behaviour
- suggesting they see their doctor
- offering to help them make an appointment and find further information
- asking them how their appointment went
- spending time talking with them about their experiences
- speaking openly about anxiety and depression
- referring them to resources at work, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- encouraging them to exercise, eat well and get involved in social activities
- appreciating that they opened up and shared their story with you.

At the same time, avoid:

- pressuring them to snap out of it, get their act together or cheer up
- staying away from them or giving them too much space
- telling them they just need to stay busy or get out more
- assuming the problem will go away on its own.

## IS EVERYTHING OK?

If you're struggling to cope or concerned about a colleague, learning more about the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression is a good place to start. It's not your role to provide a diagnosis or counselling – that's what health professionals are for – but you can encourage your colleague to seek support and let them know you're there to help.

### Anxiety

Symptoms of anxiety and related conditions vary from person to person.

Some common signs in the workplace may include:

- appearing restless, tense and on edge
- avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
- becoming overwhelmed or upset easily
- finding it hard to make decisions
- referring to being constantly worried and apprehensive.
- getting angry easily, or frustrated with tasks or people
- avoiding work colleagues, such as sitting alone at lunchtime
- finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines
- finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
- being more vulnerable to stress and anxiety
- having difficulty managing multiple tasks or demands
- drinking more alcohol to try to cope with other symptoms
- losing confidence and having negative thought patterns
- taking excessive sick leave or unexplained absenteeism.

### Depression

It's important to recognise that depression is different from feeling sad or down. In the workplace, a person experiencing depression could show a range of symptoms.

Some common signs might include:

- finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- turning up late to work
- feeling tired and fatigued
- being unusually tearful or emotional

On their own, these indicators are not enough for a diagnosis or confirmation that someone has anxiety or depression. Only a health professional can provide an actual diagnosis.

For more information on anxiety and depression visit [www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts)



## Rights and responsibilities

All employees have formal rights and responsibilities under discrimination, privacy, and work health and safety legislation.

Remember that for every right you enjoy as an individual, you have a corresponding responsibility to respect others and not to infringe on anyone else's entitlement to equal treatment.

Visit [www.headsup.org.au/responsibilities](http://www.headsup.org.au/responsibilities) for more information.

## The right to protection from discrimination

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* requires employers to ensure workplaces do not discriminate against or harass people with a disability, which includes mental health conditions.

Employers are also required to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of employees with mental health conditions.

## The right to privacy

Your right to privacy is covered by the Australia-wide *Privacy Act 1988* 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. This information can only be used for the purpose for which you told them, such as adjusting your role or working environment to make allowances for your mental health condition.

## The right to a healthy, safe workplace

Under 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 health.

In practice, this gives you a right to working conditions that do not cause a mental health condition or aggravate any existing mental health condition.

### The right to fairness

Employers are required under Commonwealth industrial law, Fair Work, to ensure a workplace does not take any adverse action against a worker because of their mental health condition.

### What are my responsibilities?

As an employee, you might think that looking after health and safety in the workplace is your manager's job, but staff at all levels have a responsibility under WH&S 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.

If you have a mental health condition and it 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.

As well as this, under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* 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.

Creating a mentally healthy workplace is not the responsibility of one person. It requires the commitment and involvement of all staff across the organisation. Together, you can create a supportive, responsive and productive working environment that benefits everyone.





## Where to find more information

### Heads Up

[www.headsup.org.au](http://www.headsup.org.au)

Heads Up is all about supporting Australian businesses to create more mentally healthy workplaces. Access a wide range of resources, information and advice for all employees, and create a tailored action plan for your business.

### The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance


[www.workplacementalhealth.com.au](http://www.workplacementalhealth.com.au)

A national approach by business, community and government to encourage Australian workplaces to become mentally healthy for the benefit of the whole community and businesses, big and small.

### beyondblue

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

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

 1300 22 4636

 Email or  chat to us online at [www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

### mindhealthconnect

[www.mindhealthconnect.org.au](http://www.mindhealthconnect.org.au)

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.



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