



Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace

Mental health and the workplace

Most of us spend a large percentage of our waking hours at work, therefore the way we feel at work affects our overall health and wellbeing.

Work can be a protective factor for good mental health, providing employees with a sense of accomplishment and self-worth, a way to meet new people and form friendships, and a place to learn new skills and create personal challenges.

Excessive pressure and long hours at work can lead to stress and anxiety.¹ Job strain is believed to cause 17% of depression in working women and 13% in working men.² Extreme pressure leading to work-related depression costs Australia's economy \$730 million each year.²

The level of control an employee feels over their work situation, the stress experienced and whether or not the employee feels valued in the workplace can affect work performance, absenteeism, workplace safety and staff turnover.^{1,3}

Workplaces should include a variety of strategies to promote the mental health and wellbeing of employees and prevent the onset of mental health problems.

How can a workplace create a mentally healthy working environment?

For individuals

The 'A-B-C' guidelines for positive mental health provide a three step way for individuals to become more mentally healthy in their work, community and family lives.

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Being physically active relieves tension and stress and promotes overall wellbeing. Encouraging your employees to take time out of their busy schedules can actually increase their productivity on the job. Develop a workplace activity plan. Encourage employees to go for a walk during their lunch break or organise a weekly sporting match.

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Having a sense of belonging and good social networks protect against mental health problems. Organise social functions within the workplace for employees and their families. It is also important to encourage your employees to join in community clubs and activities. Remember long hours and overtime can negatively affect an employee's ability to attend to their own personal hobbies.

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Having purpose and meaning in work and personal activities provides a sense of satisfaction and achievement. Encourage employees to make work related goals and assist them to achieve their work and personal aspirations.

"Engaging in regular activity, having a good social network and having meaning and purpose in life help us cope better with problems and stress. It simply makes us feel happier too"

For managers/supervisors

An individual's ability to cope with stressors not only depends on their individual behaviour but also on the practices of the people around them. Therefore it is important that managers and supervisors understand that the way they treat people can impact on the wellbeing of their employees. Managers can minimise the impact of stress on their team and enhance the mental health and wellbeing of individual team members by following another 'A-B-C':

Actively involve employees in decisions that directly affect them, whether these are about their physical workplaces or their job goals and tasks. For example, employees could be involved in setting their tasks/goals and given the autonomy (and be accountable) for achieving them. Engaging employees in problem-solving and decision making will foster a culture of cooperation and trust between management and employees.

Build skills essentially means that all individuals be given an opportunity to at least express but preferably develop and build their talents and skills. All workers should be provided with challenging but achievable tasks that expand their knowledge and skills base. This results in a greater sense of self, contributing to a person's positive self-image and a greater sense of self-efficacy and confidence in dealing with stressors.

Celebrate achievements refers to acknowledging employees when they perform well. It is important not only for employees to have their achievements recognised by their superiors but also for other employees of the organisation to be aware of such recognition. When an employee invests effort at work that does not seem to be adequately rewarded, strain can result³. Activities that are rewarded can reinforce desired work behaviour, are more likely to be repeated and result in increased performance. Rewards also contribute to a positive self image and greater efficacy. It is important to celebrate not just individual achievements but also work team and organisational successes.

These three dimensions provide the basis for positive interactions to replace coercive practices. Together they will contribute to an overall positive mood in the workplace leading to greater effort, cooperation and trust between subordinates and their leaders. These three dimensions also provide the basis for employees to 'bond' to their workplace and to the values of their organisation.

Create a more mentally healthy working environment today!

Note: This fact sheet suggests strategies that workplaces can implement to promote the overall mental health and wellbeing of all employees. Specific strategies may be needed to address employees at risk of mental health problems or with existing illnesses.

Where to go for more information?

| Organisation | Can assist with... | Contact details | Website |
|-------------------------|--|--|--|
| Lifeline | A free telephone info and counselling service for people in crisis needing urgent help 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week. | P:1311 14 | www.lifeline.org.au/ |
| Mental Health First Aid | Provide courses to train staff about mental health and helping people with mental health problems. | P: (03) 9342 3770 Email: mhfa@mhfa.com.au | mhfa.com.au |
| Beyond Blue | An info line provides callers with access to information and referral to relevant services for depression and anxiety related matters. | P: 1300 224 636 | beyondblue.org.au |

"Keeping mentally healthy is just as important as staying physically healthy"

1. St John T. Mental health at work: the hard facts. Training Journal. 2005:5.
2. LaMontagne AD, Sanderson K, & Cocker F (2010): Estimating the economic benefits of eliminating job strain as a risk factor for depression: summary report. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), Melbourne, Australia.
3. Dollard M, Knott, V. Incorporating psychosocial issues into our conceptual models of OHS. Occupational Health and Safety – Australia and New Zealand 2004; 4(20):13.

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