

Mentally Healthy Workplaces

Health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity but a positive state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. A healthy working environment is one in which there is not only an absence of harmful conditions but an abundance of health-promoting ones.

– The World Health Organisation

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What makes a workplace mentally healthy?

Mentally healthy workplaces aim to enrich the working lives of their employees and, most importantly, do not contribute to or cause psychological harm.

Many factors influence a person's mental health. While employers cannot directly influence their employee's private lives, past experiences or family backgrounds, they can influence the culture their employees work in, foster an understanding of mental health conditions, and include mental health in their policies and plans.

Many organisations have published guides and resources for improving and managing mental health in the workplace, some of which are listed below.

Recommendations from the literature include but are not limited to:

- Offering flexible working hours
- Providing Mental Health First Aid training (<https://mhfa.com.au>)
- Encouraging open discussion of mental health
- Displaying information for mental health services in the workplace
- Assessing risks to mental health when designing and making changes to roles
- Including mental health in policy making
- Supporting employees to stay in the workforce, and developing return to work programs for those who have taken a leave of absence

What about stigma?

We know that 1 in 5 Australians will experience mental health issues at some point in their lifetime. We also know that 1 in 5 employees have taken time away from work in the past 12 months due to feeling mentally unwell. Despite this rate of occurrence, a recent Australian study¹ found that 1 in 3 people have reservations about working with someone experiencing anxiety or depression.

¹ <http://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl1270-report--tns-the-state-of-mental-health-in-australian-workplaces-hr.pdf?sfvrsn=2>
This is a Regional Arts Victoria Members Resource.

These reservations come from the stigma attached to mental health. Words like lazy, unreliable, weak, incompetent, crazy and others are used to describe various mental health conditions. Employees often do not disclose their specific condition because of this stigma. In the wider culture, people with mental health issues are considered unable or unwilling to function.

However, the majority of people with mental health conditions are only affected some of the time, or at levels that do not interfere with their ability to work. Workplaces that are literate in mental health and provide support when needed can help break down this stigma, and distribute the importance of maintaining mental health into the public and private sphere.

Resources and Reading:

Australian Psychological Society – [Understanding and Managing Stress tip sheet](#)

www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/StressTipSheet.pdf

Beyond Blue – [Heads Up](#) website

www.headsup.org.au

Beyond Blue and TNS Social Research Study – [State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia](#)

www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl1270-report--tns-the-state-of-mental-health-in-australian-workplaces-hr.pdf?sfvrsn=2

Comcare – [Working Well: An organisational approach to preventing psychological injury](#)

www.comcare.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/41369/PUB_47_Working_well.pdf

Safe Work Australia – [Preventing Psychological Injury Under Work Health and Safety Laws](#)

www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/SWA/about/Publications/Documents/855/Preventing-Psychological-Injury-Under-WHS-Laws.pdf

Social Firms Australia Ltd - [Disclosure of a Mental Illness in the Workplace: A Guide for Employers](#)

http://socialfirms.org.au/sites/socialfirms.org.au/files/product/SoFA_Employer_handbook_May12_F_web.pdf

Super Friend – [Return to Work Guidelines for Organisations](#)

www.superfriend.com.au/uploads/page/331/Return-to-Work-Guidelines.pdf

The Australian Human Rights Commission – [Workers with Mental Illness: a practical guide for managers](#)

www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/publications/2010-workers-mental-illness-practical-guide-managers

The Australian Public Service Commission – [Working Together: Promoting mental health and wellbeing at work](#)

www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/mental-health

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance – [Developing a mentally healthy workplace: A review of the literature](#)

www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/developing-a-mentally-healthy-workplace_final-november-2014.pdf?sfvrsn=8

World Health Organisation – [Healthy workplaces: a WHO global model for action](#)

www.who.int/occupational_health/publications/healthy_workplaces_model.pdf