

Creating a mentally healthy workplace

We have noticed there is increasing ‘conversation’ about how to manage mental health in the workplace. Ideally every workplace would be a mentally healthy workplace. Employees’ mental health is as important as their physical health and safety. So this Newsletter is dedicated solely to this area of concern.

Many people will have a diagnosable mental illness at some point in their lives. In New Zealand this is estimated to be nearly half of the population. It's safe to say that none of us are immune! There is little point saying ‘it’s a community problem’ and trying to wash our hands of it, especially when we spend a large majority of our lives at work. It is everyone’s responsibility including at our place of work.

Most people with a medically diagnosed issue such as depression, anxiety or addiction will continue to be active in the workplace, and their continuing to work, or a gradual return to work, is usually in everyone’s best interest. With employers taking the right approach these situations can be positively managed. Other aspects of poor mental health such as toxic stress, and lack of engagement can be extremely costly to organisations, resulting in reduced productivity, conflict, presenteeism, bullying, and other problems.

The benefits of creating a mentally healthy workplace are the same as the benefits of creating a healthy workplace in general:

- Improved productivity
- Lower staff turnover
- Reputation as an employer of choice
- Retaining skills and experience
- Financial savings for the business

What can you do?

Small business owners in particular may feel they don’t have the expertise or resources to create a mentally healthy working environment or support employees with a mental health condition. The good

news is that there are a number of simple, effective actions you can take to promote positive mental health in your workplace.

A positive working environment is everyone’s responsibility. How people within a business can support a mentally healthy working culture depends on their role. Regardless of the job title, all employees have a responsibility to look after their own mental health.



Business Owners, Organisational Leaders, Managers and Supervisors can play a key role in creating and maintaining a mentally healthy workplace by (this is not an exhaustive list):

- demonstrating a visible, active commitment to mental health in the workplace
- speaking openly about mental health in the workplace (including any personal experiences)
- making mental health an objective of the business
- communicating a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and discrimination
- developing their own leadership and people management skills and amongst their managers
- providing flexible working conditions that promote employee mental health

WELCOME TO OUR AUTUMN NEWSLETTER



Dr Simon Ryder-Lewis

Welcome to our spring newsletter! We always aim to keep you up to date with the latest developments in Occupational Health and Safety. If you have any questions about the articles here, or if we can help with any issues you have at work, please give us a call.

Our Services

- Individual Work Site Assessment
 - Walk through surveys
 - Hazard identification and management
 - Noise, lighting and air quality (dust) monitoring
 - OOS hazard identification and management
 - Health and Safety Compliance
- Pre-employment Medical exams
- UKOOA / OGUK exams
- Training for Staff and Management
 - Use of personal protective equipment
 - Stress and fatigue
 - Understanding the HSE Act
 - Influenza pandemic planning
 - Manual handling
- Health Monitoring
 - Work site clinics
 - Absenteeism management
 - Accident investigation
 - Hearing and respiratory testing
 - Injury management and rehabilitation
 - Gradual return to work programmes
 - Influenza vaccinations
 - Drug and alcohol testing
 - Occupational vaccinations

- identifying and supporting internal 'champions' with the skills and influence to lead workplace mental health
- informing managers and employees about mental health, including training and support options.
- making reasonable adjustments to support employees with a mental health condition to do their job.

Employees involvement in developing mentally healthy practices is vital. Employees' responsibilities include:

- taking reasonable care of their own mental health and safety, and that of their colleagues
- educating themselves about mental health
- cooperating with workplace policies and procedures
- supporting initiatives aimed at improving mental health in the workplace

Addressing Workplace Risk Factors

Employers can also implement specific strategies to address risk factors in their business. Employers and managers need to ensure they have realistic expectations about what employees can achieve and how the working environment can support effective work practices. Again, this is not an exhaustive list.

Managing mental demands

- give employees the opportunity to determine the pace and order of tasks
- ensure appropriately timed and regular breaks
- provide sufficient information to enable employees to perform tasks competently
- monitor progress and take on feedback, considering whether any changes are required
- train managers to not only identify and respond to conflict as soon as it arises but to have the skills to manage staff effectively and communicate appropriately with staff

Managing physical demands

- manage environmental factors such as noise, vibration, lighting and equipment design
- ensure initial training is adequate and regular retraining occurs
- manage breaks and consider job rotation

Managing emotional demands

- offer support to discuss concerns, workload and challenges

- provide training on managing difficult situations
- offer debriefing or regular supervision
- ensure clear processes and procedures around managing stressful situations
- promote work-life balance
- offer team focused activities such as lunches, morning teas or social occasions as a way of recognising team contributions

Enabling a level of control

- allow for a level of self-direction/autonomy. This could include supporting employees to determine how their work is organised or how problems are tackled.
- offer opportunities for employees to provide feedback regarding their role, such as performance reviews, team meetings or supervision sessions.
- where possible, give employees input into decision-making about roles, responsibilities, resourcing, policies and procedures. Team meetings can be a good forum for discussions

Creating a supportive environment

You can offer support in a range of ways. Things like practical assistance, clear communication, positive feedback and emotional support are all aspects of creating a supportive workplace culture.

- encourage communication between employees
- be open about mental health in the workplace
- establish a peer support or mentoring program for staff
- offer team-building activities to support group dynamics and productivity
- pay attention to employees who are behaving or talking in ways that are unusual for them. Approach them with sensitivity and respect to enquire about what is happening
- offer emotional support to those who disclose personal information
- ensure adequate backfilling of roles or redistribution of work when employees are out of the office or away on leave. Consider swapping tasks within the team to avoid other colleagues taking on an excessive workload
- offer role-specific training, but also consider training related to broader workplace issues such as communication, leadership, mentoring, cultural awareness and mental health

Concerned about someone at work?

If a colleague or someone in your team is struggling and you think they need support, it's important to take action. Start by having a conversation. Remember, it's not your job to offer a diagnosis or counselling. Providing emotional support is about being willing to talk about what is going on, how the person feels and options for support. Opening a conversation with a simple "are you OK?" may be all that is needed to start a conversation.

It's crucial to act or get advice if:

- you are concerned about their mental health or wellbeing
- their work standards or relationships are being compromised
- the person is a danger to themselves or others
- you hear that they are feeling suicidal or planning to end their life-take this very seriously and help them to seek support immediately

It is helpful to talk openly about depression and anxiety and reassure them that their privacy will be respected. If the person doesn't want to speak about it, respect their choice, but leave the door open for further discussion. They may choose to talk about it later or continue the conversation with others.



Some workplaces offer Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) which are confidential and can offer the employee the support they need through some counselling.

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Supporting an individual's mental health needs

- as a manager or leader, there are a number of practical things you can do to support individuals in the workplace who are experiencing a mental health condition. Some ways to approach this may include;
- take an interest in the employee's life without intruding, while also maintaining their privacy. Listen and offer support.
- seek written permission from the employee to speak to their treating health professional about how the workplace can support their recovery. This is something Work Health Solutions can assist you with as often our specialist is able to bridge the gap between work, the employee and the treating doctor and open the lines of communication.
- explore the possibility of staying at work before assuming the employee will need time off.
- develop a work plan together with the employee. This should provide clarity on roles, responsibilities and any reasonable adjustments to the workplace to support the employee's recovery. Adjustments might include allowing time off to attend appointments or modifying the employee's working hours.

- seek support from your Human Resources Specialists, Occupational Physician (Work Health Solutions Ltd), EAP and The Mental Health Foundation (in particular see www.workingwell.co.nz)
- manage absences where required and review workloads with other team members to ensure they are not unfairly burdened by the changes
- allow them time to attend specialist appointments within work hours
- communicate with the rest of the team about why some adjustments have been made, in a way that protects the employee's privacy. Discuss with the employee how and what they would like others to be told
- keep in touch with the employee during periods of leave and support them on their return. This might include a return to work plan, developed collaboratively, and regular problem-solving meetings between the employee and his/ her manager.
- if it's a work related stress issue or bullying- address the concern, don't bury your head in the sand over it. This sends a poor message to the rest of your staff about your ability to commit to a mentally healthy workplace.

Recovery and Work

For someone experiencing a mental health condition, work can play a vital role in their recovery. It can provide structure and routine, contribute to a sense of purpose, and provide financial security and social connection.

Recovery is an individual process that varies from person to person. There are many effective treatment options for anxiety and depression for example, including medical, psychological and lifestyle strategies.

Most people benefit from a combination of treatments, but what works may vary from person to person.

Part of their recovery might include learning to manage or avoid things that trigger setbacks, recognising the early warning signs of relapses, learning new ways to reduce and manage stress, looking after their physical health, participating in enjoyable activities and having regular appointments with health professionals.

Work Health Solutions can support you to walk this path with your employees. Please also check out the working well website at the NZ Mental Health Foundation as they offer support and education for managers and leaders on Mental Health in the workplace.

Health & Safety at Work Act 4th April 2016



Our summer newsletter early in 2016 will be dedicated to the new Health and Safety at Work Act and what this means for all of us. It's due to come into force on the 4th April 2016.

If anyone has questions they would like us to answer please email them to me on info@workhealthsolutions.co.nz

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