

Work and mental health: Prevention is better than cure

Employment is generally beneficial to mental well-being, providing purpose, social connection, and financial independence. However, workplaces can also generate unnecessary stress, contributing to or triggering mental health problems. Stress is a determining factor in many mental illnesses and work can be a highly stressful environment. Whilst work fosters mental health, unsatisfactory work or losing one's job are high risk factors for mental illness, especially depression. It can therefore be helpful to know that there are strategies to assist in managing stress effectively in your workplace.

Mental illness is very common. One in five (20%) Australians aged 16-85 experience a mental illness in any year. The most common mental illnesses are depression, anxiety and substance use disorder. These three types of mental illness often occur in combination. For example, a person with an anxiety disorder could also develop depression, or a person with depression might misuse alcohol or other drugs, in an effort to self-medicate.

The Population Mental Health research team at the Melbourne School of Population Health, The University of Melbourne, recently convened a panel of experts, including the Senior Consultant of AccessResolve Workplace Services, Simon Curran, to develop guidelines for organisations to help prevent mental disorders in the workplace.

These guidelines advise organisations to develop a mental health and well-being strategy with the full commitment of managers and employees, and which is integrated into a business strategy.

One of the most important strategies to prevent mental health disorders is the provision of training to develop leadership and management skills, so that managers can ensure that organisational priorities, practices, and workplace norms promote a mentally healthy workplace.

How can you promote a mentally healthy workplace?

- encouraging team work and collaboration;
- having transparent and accountable processes;
- welcoming new ideas;
- discouraging gossip and rumours;
- apologising when appropriate;
- raising awareness and encouraging open discussion of mental health and well-being;
- encouraging acceptance of people with mental health problems;
- creating a no-blame culture by not blaming or punishing employees for mistakes, but rather viewing them as an opportunity for learning and support;
- considering the impact on employee mental health and well-being when making organisational decisions;
- being positive about adopting reasonable adjustments (adaptations to the working practice) that will support employees in doing their jobs;
- modelling actions that promote better mental health in the workplace (for example, demonstrating self-care and balance between work and other aspects of life and seeking out additional training as required);
- modelling appropriate language use to decrease stigma and discrimination in the workplace (i.e. don't use the terms "wacko", "going mental", "schizophrenic", but instead use person first language, "a person with depression, schizophrenia, etc");

- encouraging employees to look after their own health (i.e. encouraging exercise, and providing information and advice on diet, and the risks of smoking and alcohol abuse);
- behaving in ways that are consistent with the organisation's stated goals;
- promoting mentoring and coaching among employees;
- being enthusiastic, optimistic and showing confidence in employees;
- minimising anxiety prior to meetings by providing advance notice to employees about the topics to be discussed and their role in the meeting;
- ensuring that there are clear and regular lines of communication for staff working in isolation. (i.e. a regular phone catch-up);
- structuring regular team meetings to enable active communication between team employees;
- being honest and transparent in communications with employees about the factors that affect the organisation, both good and bad;
- introducing themselves to staff;
- being approachable and available to communicate by implementing an open door policy and by being visible around the office;
- asking staff how they are and scheduling regular catch-up meetings to discuss how they are managing;
- communicating regularly with employees about the organisation's commitment to mental health;
- reacting in an accommodating and cooperative way when approached by an employee to discuss a mental health issue;
- ensuring employees have clearly defined roles and responsibilities at the time of induction or when changing positions;
- identifying and targeting problematic interpersonal relationships in the workplace before they escalate; and
- asking employees for feedback regarding what the supervisor can do to improve as a supervisor.

What should a mental health strategy address?

- the development of a positive work environment that supports and encourages mental health;
- balancing job demands with job control - provide employees with genuine control over their work and an appropriate degree of self-management;
- promote work-life balance and work flexibility;
- rewarding employees' efforts and provide career opportunities;
- creating a fair workplace;
- effectively managing performance issues;
- supportive change management processes;
- development of a mental health and wellbeing policy; and
- provision of mental health education and a plan for implementation and evaluation.

Our AccessResolve team can help organisations to develop a Preventative Mental Health strategy to minimise mental health disorders and optimise well-being.

More information

Our AccessResolve Workplace Services support businesses at all levels, from developing organisation-wide strategies to assisting individual employees and their families through consultation, counselling, dispute resolution and training programs.

Our programs aim to make a difference by helping to reduce the costs of conflict and stress and improve productivity, staff retention, team functioning and effective leadership.

For more information about AccessResolve Workplace Services:

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