Mental Health: Is Your Workplace Ready?

While conversations are emerging around mental illness and workplace psychological injury, the importance of reducing stigma, implementing early intervention strategies and providing appropriate support through periods of illness should not be underestimated.

Speaking at the Marsh Workforce Strategies Forum, NSW Mental Health Commissioner, John Feneley, highlighted that workforce health and safety is not only about physical health, it's also about mental health and wellbeing. Workplaces need to think about total engagement of employees, and ways to make them feel like they are contributing to society in a meaningful way.

"When workplaces are mentally healthy we are able to give our best, which is good for us and good for our employers," says Feneley.

To assist in achieving change, the Mental Health Commission of NSW developed a 10 year strategic plan for mental health reform, called *Living Well*, which includes emphasis on wellbeing in the workplace.[1]

THE ROOT OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness is common. One in five Australians experience mental illness in any given year, and 45% will experience mental illness in their lifetime. Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent, followed by mood disorders such as depression, and substance use disorders. About 3% of Australian adults live with severe and persistent mental health conditions such as schizophrenia.[2]

Mental health conditions are complex and varied, and often results from the interplay of a number of factors. These may include environmental influences such as social isolation, trauma or family breakdown; biological factors such as genetics and hormones; cognitive factors such as negative thought patterns and low self-esteem; and stress and substance misuse.

Mental health conditions can affect all ages. The teen years and early 20s are the most common time for an onset, with 75% manifesting before the age of 24.[3] With a large number of young people being affected by mental health conditions, this can potentially affect their ability to be productive in the workforce. Workplaces therefore need to look after both their older employees as well as younger employees for a productive and sustainable future.

1 Mental Health Commission of NSW (2014), Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014-2024, www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/our-work/strategic-plan
2 Ibid.
3 Mental Health Commission of NSW, http://nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/mental-health-and/youth-and-young-adults

MARSH & McLENNAN COMPANIES

3m Australians a year are affected by mental health issues.

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HOW CAN WORK HELP?

Workforce participation is an essential part of the recovery journey for many people with a mental health condition. A job brings opportunities for social inclusion and financial independence, both of which support mental health. It can also provide people with a sense of meaning and purpose, and give structure and routine to each day.

Everyone's experience of mental health conditions is different. Managers can assist by initiating a discussion with individual employees about how the employer can support them in their return to health. Some people will need time away. Other people may need adjustments to their work. Adjustments may include a change in work hours, such as for health appointments; changes to work demands, such as a staged return to full duties; and changes to work routines, such as assistance with establishing new goals and deadlines. The Heads Up initiative by the national Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance and beyondblue outlines how employees and employers can best support people in the workplace.

"Each of us needs something different from our workplaces to maintain our wellbeing and ensure we participate and contribute in line with our potential," says Feneley. "The overall approach needs to be based on creating workplaces that accommodate us all."

MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS: THE FACTS

- One in four people will experience anxiety at some point in their life. Over two million Australians experience anxiety in a year.[4]

- Three million Australians a year are affected by mental health issues.[5] More than half don't seek help.[6]

- Eight people die each day in Australia by suicide.[7]

- One in 10 women experience depression during pregnancy; one in seven experience it post-partum.[8]

More investment is needed to build awareness within the workplace both before (prevention and intervention) and after (support and management) mental health incidents.

4   ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007 (2008), p 27 & 280 (Courtesy of beyondblue)
5   ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007 (2008), p 41 (Courtesy of beyondblue)
6   Whiteford, H. A., Buckingham, W. J., Harris, M. G., Burgess, P. M., Pirkis, J. E., Barendregt, J. J., & Hall, W. D. (2014). Estimating treatment rates for mental disorders in Australia. Australian Health Review, 38, 80–85 (Courtesy of beyondblue)
7   3303.0 ABS Causes of Death, Australia, 2014 (2016). Preliminary data. Suicide (Australia). Table 11.1 (Courtesy of beyondblue)
8   www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/pregnancy-and-early-parenthood/mental-health-conditions/depression

$2.30 return for every $1 invested in mental health initiatives.

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🔍 John's Story[9]

John Canning is a partner at King & Wood Mallesons law firm. He had a high flying year in 2007, but in early 2008, found himself confined to bed, crying.

"I did not know what was wrong and was scared," John says.

With the help of his wife, John got in touch with the Black Dog Institute and went on to receive a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. He worked with a psychiatrist to get well, and today manages his health via what he calls his 'eight pillars of resilience' – including exercise, sleep and social connection.

John has shared his mental health issues with his employer and has found them to be very supportive. He is now a community presenter with the Black Dog Institute. He is passionate about increasing knowledge of mental health in the workplace, particularly in the legal profession, as well as decreasing the stigma that can be attached to it.

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

Simply being at work is not the same as being productive. Untreated mental health conditions result in 12 million days of reduced productivity a year in Australia, that is, three to four days off a month.[10] The key is ensuring the illness is managed, both inside and outside work. Often, people miss the warning signs until a serious event or outcome has occurred such as hospitalisation. So workplaces must make some real adjustments. A good place to start is a work culture in which leaders embrace mental health education and awareness.

Suzanne Gibson, a provisional psychologist and Manager for southern NSW at occupational rehabilitation firm IPAR Rehabilitation, observed that when it comes to occupational health and safety, most companies have a policy or strategy on reducing the risk of physical injury. However, there is a real lack of emphasis on and awareness of psychological health. More investment is needed to build awareness within the workplace both before (prevention and intervention) and after (support and management) mental health incidents.

Businesses on average will experience a $2.30 return for every $1 invested in initiatives that foster better mental health.[11]

"We recognise that assisting employees with mental health conditions and their return to work is not without its complexities and costs. But workplaces that embrace difference, and eliminate prejudice and discrimination, have the advantage of attracting and holding onto a wider range of talent and resources," advises Feneley.

💰 COSTS TO THE WORKPLACE

- Psychological injury at work is expensive: the average cost of a psychological claim is $199,000, in addition to the cost on managers and co-workers.[12]

- The longer a person is away from the workforce, the lower the chance of them returning. Eg. If someone is away for more than 70 days, the chance of returning to work is less than 35%.[13]

📊 IMPROVING THE SITUATION

- Focusing on mental health can foster higher educational achievement, safer workplaces and communities, improved relationships and personal dignity.

- Meaningful employment, income, social inclusion, psychical and psychological safety, and opportunities for self-determination all support development and retention of good mental health.

9   Supplied by Mental Health Commission of NSW, accessed via http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/mental-health-in-the-workplace-is-costing-business-11-billion-a-year-20141130-11xd3n
10   beyondblue (2013), National Workplace Program Flyer, www.headsup.org.au
11   beyondblue and PwC (2014), Creating A Mentally Healthy Workplace: Return on Investment Analysis, www.headsup.org.au
12   Comcare (2011), Comcare Submission to the Public Hearing, House Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into Mental Health and Workforce Participation, www.aph.gov.au
13   The Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (2010), Realising the Health Benefits of Work, A Position Statement, www.racp.edu.au

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND THE WORKPLACE

There is a direct link between wellbeing and resilience. The happier you are, the more psychologically resilient you are," says Gibson. "And generally, we've observed that psychologically resilient people recover better from stress situations."

One way of improving psychological resiliency is through positive psychology. Positive psychology is not just about surviving. It focuses on living a fulfilling and happy life, and being proactive in achieving this. The PERMA model, designed by American psychologist Martin Seligman, follows this approach.[14] It is a scientific approach to psychological wellbeing and happiness, comprising five elements.

PERMA	THEORY: WHAT IS IT	PRACTICE: IN THE WORKPLACE
POSITIVE EMOTION	Happiness leads to a pleasant life.	Sustained wellbeing is maintained by positive emotions at home, socially and at work. Research has shown managers who demonstrate positive emotion and encourage an energetic approach to new experiences are the most successful in staff retention. Performance reviews should be tailored and individuals' strengths should be highlighted.
ENGAGEMENT	Performing tasks in which we are completely absorbed.	Employers need to match the skill level and challenge level of a job/task to employees. The right balance will create a state of joy for the employee as they become fully engaged in the experience.
RELATIONSHIPS	Positive rather than destructive. Vital for happiness and connectivity.	People with resilient mindsets tend to have better interpersonal skills. In turn, they are better at seeking help and speaking up when there are issues. This helps to explain why certain people in high stress level jobs can handle the stress better than others. However, this could change quickly if there is an interpersonal issue with a colleague or manager. Team building activities are one way to mitigate these issues.
MEANING AND PURPOSE	Feeling we are part of something and contributing to something bigger.	Employers can include employees in team goal development to provide a sense of belonging. Employees want to know their role contributes to the overall success of the team and the company.

The PERMA model helps us to understand and explore what we can do to maximise each element to reach a life full of happiness. It also helps employers in building a resilient workforce as a means for reducing the impact of mental health conditions and absenteeism.[15]

Our productivity is inextricably linked to mental health. Employers need to understand their role in re-positioning mental health and in creating wellbeing in the workplace. The right focus and investment will reap long-term gains for both the organisation in higher staff retention and productivity, and for its people through a sense of purpose and achievement, and ultimately help to prevent crisis outcomes.

SUPPORT AND MORE INFORMATION

Various national and local resources are available for companies that need guidance or support on starting or improving their wellbeing and mental health programs and strategies. These include organisations like beyondblue, Heads Up, The Black Dog Institute, IPAR, Mental Health Australia, Mental Health Commission of NSW and other state-based associations. To better manage stress, anxiety, depression and trauma in the workplace, it's an idea for staff and employers to do the Mental Health First Aid Course.

14 Seligman, M. (2011), Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being and How to Achieve Them, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London UK
15 Ibid.