Supporting good mental health in the workplace

A resource for agencies
Enquiries:
Mental Health Commission
Level 5/81, St George’s Terrace, Perth 6000
GPO Box X2299, Perth Business Centre, WA 6847
Telephone: (08) 6272 1200 Fax: (08) 6272 1299
Website: www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au

Public Sector Commission
Dumas House, 2 Havelock Street, West Perth 6005
Locked Bag 3002, West Perth WA 6872
Telephone: (08) 6552 8500 Fax: (08) 6552 8710
Website: www.publicsector.wa.gov.au

© State of Western Australia 2014
There is no objection to this publication being copied in whole or part, provided there is due acknowledgement of any material quoted or reproduced from the publication. Published by the Public Sector Commission (Western Australia), June 2014. Copies of this report are available on the Public Sector Commission website at www.publicsector.wa.gov.au

Disclaimer
The Western Australian Government is committed to quality service to its customers and makes every attempt to ensure accuracy, currency and reliability of the data contained in these documents. However, changes in circumstances after time of publication may impact the quality of this information. Confirmation of the information may be sought from originating bodies or departments providing the information.

Accessibility
Copies of this document are available in alternative formats upon request.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health in the workplace</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer and employee obligations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An inclusive work environment</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting mental health and wellbeing</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and awareness raising</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing performance</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive recruitment</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking about mental health</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting individuals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making reasonable adjustments</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support services and resources</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and support for employees</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources for agencies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: The legislative environment</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WA Artist David Giles is the winner of 20 art awards and has had over 40 solo exhibitions in locations including New York, Paris and Singapore.

David ‘came out’ about his mental illness in 2005 as a community service. He wanted to show that people with mental health issues can still be happy and successful.

He has given the Mental Health Commission permission to use his artwork because he believes passionately in mental health reform. 

Foreword

The Western Australian Government is committed to supporting people who have mental health problems or illness and has endorsed *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody’s business*. This forms part of the Mental Health Commission’s ten year strategic plan. The Mental Health Commission’s vision is to achieve an environment where everyone works together to encourage and support people who experience mental health problems or illness to stay in the community, out of hospital and live a meaningful life.

The strategy recognises that employment helps individuals build a satisfying life even while experiencing mental health problems or mental illness and highlights the important role of employers in creating a mentally healthy community that supports recovery and social inclusion.

This resource has been developed for WA public sector chief executive officers and managers to highlight the importance of good mental health in the workplace and how you can support your employees through effective workforce management strategies.

M C Wauchope
PUBLIC SECTOR COMMISSIONER

Timothy Marney
COMMISSIONER
MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION
Mental health

According to the World Health Organisation, good mental health is not simply the absence of a mental disorder. It is a state of wellbeing whereby an individual can realise their own potential, manage everyday stresses, work productively and contribute to their community.

A mental illness significantly affects how a person thinks, behaves and interacts with other people. It is clinically diagnosed according to standardised criteria. Around two per cent of the population experience recurring mental illness, which significantly affects their quality of life.1 Mental illnesses are of different types and degrees of severity and include mood disorders, such as bipolar disorder or depression; anxiety such as phobias or post-traumatic stress; or psychosis, such as schizophrenia.

A mental health problem is a broader term including both mental illness and symptoms of mental illness that may not be severe enough to warrant a diagnosis of a mental illness.2

In a practical sense, a mental illness or problem “affects a person’s thinking, emotional state and behaviour, and disrupts the person’s ability to work or carry out other daily activities and engage in satisfying personal relationships.”3

One in five Western Australians experience mental health problems each year, with nearly half the population experiencing a mental health problem at least once in their lifetime.

While some people may experience an ongoing problem, many people experience one-off, or intermittent occurrences of poor mental health as a response to life events such as housing or financial worries, family or relationship upheaval, changes to work environment including retirement and redundancy, a traumatic event, illness and injury or loss of a loved one.

These statistics mean that every Western Australian is likely to be affected by poor mental health, either directly or indirectly through a family member, friend, neighbour or colleague. However, with the right level of support people are able to sustain and positively influence family, work and community lives.

3 Kitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM. Mental Health First Aid Manual. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2010
Mental health in the workplace

It is estimated that between 15 per cent and 30 per cent of employees will experience mental health problems. They can affect anyone at any time and it is highly likely that most managers will supervise someone with a mental health problem at some point in their career.

Despite this, nearly half of all senior managers believe none of their workers will experience a mental health problem at work.

People with mental health problems successfully work across the full spectrum of workplaces. Some people disclose and some do not. Most importantly, people with mental illness will have varying degrees of success with their endeavours, just like any other worker.

There are many examples of prominent people with successful careers who have a mental illness. Those who discuss and reflect on their mental health problems often see their illness as a catalyst for change and contribute their achievements to successfully managing their mental health issues.

Regardless of the clinical diagnosis, an individual’s response to their mental health problems or recurring illness will be affected by:

- their level of understanding and insight
- support from family, friends, work colleagues and their employer
- getting the right support from mental health professionals and community organisations.

The support provided in the workplace plays an important role in an individual’s ongoing mental wellbeing and there are many good reasons why employers should seek to actively support employees with mental health problems.

Having a better understanding of mental illness, promoting good mental health in the workplace and supporting those who may be experiencing mental health problems are essential components of creating a safe and healthy workplace that benefits all workers.

Some of the benefits of encouraging good mental health practices can include:

- increased employee retention and reducing the loss of corporate knowledge
- increased productivity for all employees
- decreased absenteeism.

A workplace that promotes good mental health and supports those affected by mental health problems or illness can achieve more through greater morale and productivity for all employees.

---

Employer and employee obligations

There are legal requirements for employers and employees in relation to the management of mental health problems or illness.

Employees (including those who have a mental illness) have a duty to take reasonable care to ensure their own safety and health at work, and to avoid affecting the safety or health of another person through an act or omission.

Employers have legal obligations in relation to the management of mental illness in the workplace.

- Occupational safety and health legislation requires that employers provide a safe and healthy workplace for all workers that does not cause ill health or aggravate existing conditions. This includes maintaining an environment that supports good mental health.

- Both Commonwealth and State legislation address discrimination on the grounds of impairment and include requirements in relation to reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of employees. The definition of ‘disability’ in discrimination legislation is broad and includes both permanent and temporary mental illness. Some, but not all, mental illnesses can constitute a disability. Each individual case is different and will depend on the severity of impairment as a result of the illness.

- Privacy legislation requires that personal information about a worker’s mental health status is not disclosed to anyone without the worker’s consent.

Appendix 1 provides further details regarding the legislative and other governing requirements that support the recruitment and employment of people with a disability, including those with mental illnesses.
Many people with mental health problems or illness report experiencing stigma from others and having to deal with personal shame as a consequence. Understanding and talking about the nature and extent of mental health problems improves chances of removing stigma and allowing support to be given more easily.

Most employees will be able to successfully manage their mental health problem or illness without it impacting on their work. Some may require workplace support for a short period or periods of time, while a minority will require ongoing workplace strategies, similar to a physical illness or condition.

There are simple, yet inexpensive steps that you can take to reduce stigma, improve performance, retain staff and improve the working environment for everyone in it.5

**An inclusive work environment**

Employees do not have to disclose whether or not they have a mental illness unless it affects their ability to perform the ‘inherent’ requirements of their job.6 However, if agencies create a trusting and inclusive working environment, employees may be more likely to disclose, thereby allowing you to better understand and work with them to address their needs.

You can create a supportive work environment that promotes diversity and supports good mental health through a range of activities that may include:

- championing a work culture of respect for diversity and support for individual strengths and needs
- dispelling myths around mental health through newsletters, posters or forums
- treating mental health problems like any other illness
- ensuring staff are aware of your employee assistance program and how to access it
- promoting flexible work practices such as flexible working hours or working from home where appropriate
- encouraging staff to maintain a balance between physical, mental and social wellbeing

---

6 Privacy Act 1988 (Cwlth)
• promoting a culture of performance feedback that encompasses regular one-to-one
discussions between managers and employees
• encouraging regular team meetings
• acting on discrimination or bullying, including the use of inappropriate language
• using prominent and respected champions to reinforce messages about mental health
and the importance of maintaining supportive work places.

Training and awareness raising

A lack of understanding can prevent people from providing support to colleagues affected
by mental health problems or illness in the same way that they would if their colleague had
a physical illness.

Coordinating awareness raising activities, providing information and training staff will
develop a greater understanding of mental health and contribute to a more supportive
culture.

Agencies should consider addressing topics such as:
• mental health awareness or a mental health first aid course
• stress management and work/life balance
• time and project management
• interpersonal skills and negotiation
• diversity and disability awareness training
• information session or events based around RUOK? day and Mental Health Week.

Managing performance

There is potential for mental illness to complicate and confuse the identification and
management of performance. While a mental health problem may contribute to a change
or decline in work performance, it is critical that managers of staff do not assume the entire
behaviours and actions of an employee are the result of a mental health problem or illness.

When undertaking performance management processes in relation to an employee with
a mental illness or mental health problem, it is important to focus on the behaviours
which are affecting their ability to perform their role and not on the illness. Performance
management discussion should be handled sensitively, recognising that talking about
mental health problems is likely to be difficult for employees and employers alike.

Any performance management process should be undertaken in accordance with:
• the WA Public Sector Code of Ethics
• the WA public sector Performance Management Standard
• your agency’s code of conduct
• your agency’s policies and procedures.
Inclusive recruitment

It is in the interests of all organisations to ensure that recruitment processes minimise stress or anxiety that candidates can experience when applying for a job. The interview is a common source of anxiety for anyone and a good interviewer or panel can create a calm and welcoming environment.

You can create an inclusive recruitment and selection process for applicants by generally being open to options to adapt and modify the process to provide appropriate adjustments so that all candidates are supported to present themselves confidently, just as you would someone with a physical illness or condition.

Simple ways to optimise recruitment processes include:

- using inclusive statements that promote your agency as an equal opportunity employer that values diversity
- reducing complicated job descriptions and excessive selection criteria
- allowing extended reading time before an interview
- providing opportunity for questions throughout the interview
- encouraging candidates to pause and compose themselves if they become flustered
- using smaller recruitment panels.
Supporting individuals

Talking about mental health

Regular meetings with all employees should be a part of day to day good management practice. They allow for discussion regarding work performance and an opportunity for managers to raise any concerns for an employee’s wellbeing. They also provide a confidential environment for an employee to raise health and wellbeing problems or concerns they may have. Some employees may choose to disclose their health issues, while others may not.

There may be occasions where an employee has not spoken of a mental health problem, but you notice a change in behaviour, workplace relationships or work performance that is out of character for the employee. While it can be a sensitive issue to address, it is reasonable to discuss these matters with the employee if there is concern for their safety or well-being or if their job performance is negatively affected. It is particularly important if you feel they may pose a risk to themselves or others.

Strategies such as mental health first aid workshops will assist in providing managers with the skills to raise and discuss these issues in a respectful and sensitive manner with employees, providing an opportunity to discuss any changes to work practices or the working environment that can be put in place to support and assist the employee.

Treating people equally doesn’t mean treating people the same. Section 66R of the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 provides for reasonable adjustments to afford persons with an impairment access to employment.

In some situations, the fact that the worker has not disclosed their mental illness will limit or even prevent you from providing reasonable adjustments or support. In other situations, it will still be possible to proceed with an adjustment to assist your employee regardless of their non-disclosure. Broader strategies in the workplace with an emphasis on creating a safe and healthy work environment for all will also benefit workers with an undisclosed mental illness.

---

Making reasonable adjustments

If an employee chooses to disclose a mental illness, the approach to managing it should be tailored to the individual and the workplace. It is important to work with the employee to determine if any changes to their work practices or environment are needed, what they should be and how long they may need to be maintained, and how often the arrangements should be reviewed, in the same way that would occur with a physical illness.

Remember to focus on the behaviour and not the illness. It is important to ask the employee what adjustments may best support them in the workplace. Do not automatically assume time off work will be helpful as it could make things worse.

Employees experiencing one-off, or intermittent occurrences of poor mental health as a response to life events may need only short term adjustments to assist them to return to health. Regular reviews will ensure that adjustments can be modified or ceased if no longer needed or are still appropriate if the arrangement is to be extended.

The choice of actions should be guided by consultation with your employee and with appropriate professional advice. In all cases you should respect employee confidentiality and disclose information only with consent.

Depending on the severity of the illness or problem, reasonable adjustments could include:

- changing some aspects of the job or altering the way in which tasks are undertaken
- flexible working arrangements or part time or flexible working hours
- physical modifications, for example a workplace that has privacy or less noise and distractions
- additional levels of support such as a buddy, a coach or a mentor to provide assistance as needed.

It is important to openly discuss with the employee the impact that any job or role modifications may have on work value, particularly if the arrangement is likely to be, or becomes, long term. Regular meetings will provide opportunity for any issues that may arise to be respectfully and openly discussed and resolved.

In all cases, you should engage in joint and flexible problem solving to identify and reduce any triggers for mental problems or illness and to establish and maintain the right level of support over time.

The ‘Resources for agencies’ section of this guide provides further advice, including a link to a guide for managers developed by the Human Rights Commission, which provides practical advice on discussing mental health problems with employees and making reasonable adjustments.
Resources and support for employees

Some people experiencing mental health problems or illness may not seek help, even though effective treatments are available. The workplace can play an important role in whether someone seeks help or not. It is important that managers do not take on the role of counsellor for employees dealing with a mental health problem. They should have an understanding of the support available should an employee need it, or if they have concern for an employee’s health and wellbeing.

mindhealthconnect

This is a national initiative operated by Healthdirect Australia on behalf of the Federal Government. The website aggregates mental health resources and content from the leading health focused organisations in Australia. You can access a range of mental health resources including online programs, fact sheets, audio and video, and online communities www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Employee Assistance Provider

Ensure that the details of your employee assistance provider (EAP) are available on your agency’s intranet, through line managers, and human resources area.

Ensure employees understand they can access the service for a variety of reasons, and for family members or providing support to family members with a mental health issue.

Medical practitioners

You may wish to encourage your employee to talk to their General Practitioner (GP) or contact the after-hours GP helpline on 1800 022 222.

Online resources and telephone support

beyondblue 1300 224 636 or www.beyondblue.org.au
SANE Helpline 1800 18 7263 (SANE) or www.sane.org
Headspace (youth) or www.headspace.org.au
Reachout (youth) au.reachout.com
24 hr crisis support
Crisis Care Helpline - 9223 1111 or country toll free 1800 199 008
Lifeline - 13 11 14
MensLine - 1300 789 978
Samaritans - 9381 555 or country toll free 1800 198 313
Mental Health Emergency Response Line
• Metro: 1300 555 788
• Peel: 1800 676 822
• Rural and remote areas (RuralLink): 1800 552 002
Suicide Callback Service - 1300 65 94 67

A list of mental health services and support groups is available at the Mental Health Commission's website at www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/getting_help/mentalhealthonline.aspx

Western Australian Association of Mental Health (WAAMH)
The Western Australian Association of Mental Health (WAAMH) is the peak body for non government mental health organisations. Their service directory can be found at http://waamh.org.au

Support for colleagues and carers
Employees who support someone with a mental illness, either professionally or personally, may also need your support.

Family and carers can also access support through Carers WA or the Mental Health Carers and Friends Association (WA) Inc (Arafmi). These organisations provide a variety of services including free phone and face to face counselling, support groups, respite options, advice and advocacy.

Arafmi Mental Health Carers 9427 7100 or www.arafmi.asn.au
Carers WA 1300 227 377 or www.carerswa.asn.au
Resources for agencies

Below are a number of resources that can assist you in managing mental health in the workplace, as well as information, ideas and assistance to help you create and manage a workplace with good mental health practices.

Mental Health Commission
The Mental Health Commission was established in March 2010 with Australia’s first Mental Health Commissioner. It is a key step in implementing mental health reform and places Western Australia with the international leaders in mental health service delivery such as Canada, Scotland and New Zealand.

www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au

Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody’s business: Reforming Western Australia’s health system is the Mental Health Commission’s ten year strategic policy, with a whole of government and community approach.

Count me in: disability future directions
This strategy was developed by the Disability Services Commission to guide all Western Australians when responding to people with disability.


Workers with mental illness: a practical guide for managers
The Australian Human Rights Commission has developed a comprehensive guide to managing mental health in the workplace.


JobAccess Australia
JobAccess Australia is an Australian Government initiative that provides workplace solutions for the employment of people with a disability, including mental illness. It also runs job in jeopardy assistance (through Disability Employment Services) providing immediate support to employees who are at risk of losing their job as a result of disability, injury or health condition.

www.jobaccess.gov.au
beyondblue interactive online resources
beyondblue has developed a series of free online resources to raise awareness of depression and anxiety in the workplace, and provide practical strategies to support individuals and promote mental health in the workplace.


Mindful Employer
Mindful Employer is an eLearning and face-to-face workplace mental health training program for all and any sized business Australia wide.

[www.mindfulemployer.org](www.mindfulemployer.org)

Commonwealth government research into mental health and employment
The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations has undertaken detailed research into mental health and employment, including strategies to support employers in engaging with and retaining staff with mental illness.


PriceWaterhouse Coopers Workplace wellness in Australia report
This report looks at the current state of workplace wellness in Australia and ways in which wellness in the workplace can be optimised.


Suicide prevention
The Western Australian suicide prevention strategy is a call to action, and includes Agency Plans to prevent suicide and appropriately respond to suicidal behaviours.

The Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention leads the strategy and makes recommendations to the Minister for Mental Health on matters related to suicide.

Organisations can access support and further information and resources by contacting the Mental Health Commission.


Equal Opportunity Commission
The Commissioner for Equal Opportunity provides information about the Equal Opportunity Act 1984, investigates and conciliates complaints, conducts community education and training and develops programs to promote equal opportunity.

More information relating to discrimination against a person with a mental disability is available on the Equal Opportunity Commission website at [www.eoc.wa.gov.au](www.eoc.wa.gov.au)
Appendix 1: The legislative environment

There are a number of legislative and governing requirements that support the recruitment and employment of people with a disability, including those with mental illnesses.

Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cwlth): Prevents discrimination against a person’s disability when offering employment and in determining employment conditions.

Privacy Act 1988 (Cwlth): Provides protection in relation to disclosure of personal information about a worker’s mental health status.

Mental Health Act 1996 (WA): Provides for the care, treatment, and protection of persons who have mental illnesses, and for related purposes.


Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984 (WA): Requires employers to provide a safe, hazard-free work environment as far as is reasonably practicable and employees to take reasonable care to ensure their own safety and health at work, and to avoid affecting the safety or health of another person through an act or omission.

Public Sector Management Act 1994 (WA): Requires public sector bodies and employees to observe the principles of conduct and comply with the provisions of that act and any other act governing their conduct; Commissioner’s instructions, public sector standards and codes of ethics; and any code of conduct applicable to the public sector body or employee.

Commissioner’s Instruction No.1 - Employment Standard: Requires that employment decisions are based on merit and free from bias, nepotism and patronage.

Commissioner’s Instruction No.7 - Code of Ethics: Sets out the minimum standards of conduct and integrity to be complied with by all public sector bodies.

Commissioner’s Circular 2012-05 - Code of Practice: Occupational Safety and Health in the Western Australian Public Sector: Promotes practical preventative strategies to assist public sector CEOs to ensure compliance with the OSH Act and regulations.