BLACK DOG INSTITUTE

Fact Sheet

WORKPLACE WELLBEING

What this fact sheet covers:

- Why worry about workplace mental health and wellbeing?
- Top ten factors involved with workplace mental health
- Practical strategies to increase workplace wellbeing
- How to find a job that suits you
- References

Why worry about workplace mental health and wellbeing?

As you are reading this, 1 in 6 Australian workers will be experiencing a mental illness. Many others will be experiencing the initial signs of mental illness including insomnia, worry and fatigue.

Depression and anxiety are now the leading cause of long-term sickness absence in the developed world. They are also associated with presenteeism, where an employee remains at work despite their condition causing significantly reduced productivity. In Australia alone, poor mental health at work is estimated to cost the economy over $12billion/year including over $200million worth of workers compensation claims.

While the dollar values are striking, there is a significant human cost as well. We know that meaningful employment is integral to recovery from mental illness, yet there is a tendency for these individuals to be marginalised from the workforce. In reality, research shows that the majority of mental illness seen in the workforce is treatable, and possibly even preventable.

From an organisational perspective addressing mental health in the workplace can increase productivity, and employee engagement. For the individual, it means a healthy, balanced life and psychological wellbeing. The benefits of a mentally health workforce are crystal clear.

"A mentally healthy workplace is one in which risk factors are acknowledged and addressed, and protective factors are fostered and maximised."

The top ten factors involved with workplace mental health

Research has shown that there are a number of factors that need to be addressed to achieve a mentally healthy workforce.

1) Demand and Control

Jobs that are characterised by high emotional and/or cognitive demands have a higher rate of sickness absence due to mental illness. This is particularly the case when the role involves a high job demand (eg time pressure) but low job control (eg low-decision making capacity). Typical examples of these workforces include teachers, nurses, lawyers and industrial workers.

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2) Opportunity and security

Roles involving variety, task identity, significance and appropriate feedback are more likely to be associated with higher levels of workplace wellbeing. Job insecurity, lack of appropriate resources, lack of learning opportunity and a disproportionate pressure to perform are associated with poor workplace mental health.

3) Trauma

Occupations with regular exposure to traumatic events have an increased risk of mental health problems including depression and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This includes police officers, paramedics, fire fighters, military personnel, medical staff and journalists. A recent review estimated that 1 in 10 emergency workers currently suffer from symptoms of PTSD.

4) Relationships with colleagues and managers

Team relationships, and the focus on relationships placed by leadership, affect individual mental health outcomes. In many occupations, interpersonal relations are the most frequent source of workplace problems and stress, particularly if indicative of workplace bullying. Social support in the workplace, as well as perceived support from the organisation as a whole, appears to have a protective effect against mental health difficulties.

5) Leadership training

Managers and supervisors play a clear role in the welfare of staff. The actions and opinions of someone in a leadership role can have a potent influence on a staff member at risk of mental illness. Research shows that managers provided with mental health training feel more confident in discussing mental health matters and have staff that display reduced psychological distress. Additionally, an inspiring, motivated and caring leadership style has been associated with enhanced mental wellbeing.

6) Organisational change

Common organisational activities such as restructuring and downsizing can result in increased job strain and insecurity. Research shows that even those staff members who were not at risk of job loss experienced increased rate of mental illness, sickness absence and disability. Humanising an organisation and planning how any changes take place can provide a level of support resulting in improved job satisfaction and mood.

7) Recognition and rewards

Recognition and reward in a work environment refers to appropriate acknowledgement and gratitude of an employee's efforts in a fair and timely manner. Two major research reviews have suggested that an imbalance between effort and reward results in an increased risk of mental disorder. Additionally, these factors may indicate a disconnect between organisational culture and employee expectations.

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8) Safety and environment

A mentally healthy workplace provides a both a physically and psychological safe climate for employees. This includes a commitment to stress management, addressing of environmental triggers such as poor lighting or noise exposure, and participation of all levels of management to the development of safety frameworks.

9) Stigma

Mental illness remains the most stigmatised group of disorders in the workplace. Employers frequently state they would not employ someone with a known mental disorder and employees will not risk disclosing any mental challenges. A responsible workplace should make every effort to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking and support..

10) Work/ life balance

Even with an understanding and proactive employer, individual employees may experience personal crises that will impact their productivity and ability to remain at work. Life experiences such as marital distress, financial strain or dependent children can exacerbate work stress and result in strain, illness and sickness absence. In addition, other issues such as substance misuse, poor diet and limited exercise may be directly related to the organisation culture as well as personal choices. Research has shown that job satisfaction, organisational support and resilience training can have a protective effect on individuals at risk.

Practical strategies to increase workplace wellbeing

A recent research review by Harvey et al has identified a number of interventions that are effective in reducing significant mental illness in the workplace. These include -

1) Increasing employee control through implementation of multi-level working committees and greater employee input into work hours and location

2) Consider workplace health promotion strategies that include both physical activity incentives and mental health awareness and education. Programs that involve cognitive behaviour therapy and relaxation training are been shown to have an effect in previous studies.

3) Implement resilience training for high risk occupations such as those exposed to significant levels of trauma or stress

4) In-house workplace counselling may be of benefit, as is the provision of formal return to work programs.

5) Provision of peer support schemes or other ways to ensure staff are able to seek help early if needed.

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How to find a job that suits you?

When looking for a new job or as part of your current work, remain independent of it, and try to become part of something worthwhile that is larger than yourself. This helps keep a sense of perspective. Achieve balance and peace of mind via things such as:

- Meditation and other techniques to calm the mind
- Getting involved in a hobby/interest
- Listening to music
- Sleeping well
- Eating well
- Using exercise as a stress release
- Taking things in moderation
- Avoiding the use of alcohol to 'wind down'
- Recognising the importance of work-life balance

For more information on workplace mental health visit:

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

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