Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace
- Beyond Blue 'Heads Up' Program

Almost half of all Australians will be affected by a mental health disorder at some stage in their lifetime.[1] Despite this statistic the stigma surrounding mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression, remains. Whilst most people may only suffer a short term disorder, it is important to raise the awareness of mental illness so people can obtain the help and support they require. This reduces the chance of the issue developing into a long term problem of which the consequences can often be dire. It is only through increasing the awareness and prevalence of mental health issues that this stigma can be reduced. As most people spend a large amount of their time at work, the workplace can have a huge impact on a persons mental health.

What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness does not discriminate, anyone may be susceptible to succumbing to such illness at any time. Certain factors may influence a persons likelihood of developing an illness such as genetics, personality type, biological factors, substance abuse or a stressful situation or event. The most common forms of mental illness are anxiety and depression. Whilst separate they can occur simultaneously. Anxiety that is not properly managed has the potential to develop into a form of depression.

It can often be difficult to determine whether a person is suffering from anxiety or general everyday life stresses. A person suffering from anxiety may avoid workplace activities, become overwhelmed or upset at the drop of a hat or be in a constant state of worry. Signs of depression on the other hand must occur for at least two weeks and include a lack of interest and motivation in everyday activities or generally feeling miserable. It is important that a person who thinks they may be suffering from a mental illness obtains a proper diagnosis.

Workplace Risk Factors

It is not the workplace itself that creates a mental illness. However, an event or other factor at work may be a contributing factor. Whilst an event such as an Armed Holdup or witnessing a traumatic event may be clearly identifiable as a potential contributing factor, others are less visible. Other factors that may incite workplace stress which may lead to anxiety or depression, can include unreasonable work demands, lack of support from management, undefined or unclear roles or poorly managed workplace change, these are only a few examples.

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, '4326.0 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results' (2007), page 7.

Why and How to Manage Workplace Risks

It is estimated that 6 million working days are lost each year due to mental illness.[2] Whilst mental illness may not be as visible as a broken leg, the flu or some other illnesses, it can have the same impacts in terms of an employee requiring extended or frequent periods of personal leave. The long term flow on effects from this may include decreased workplace productivity, high staff turnover or reduced employee performance, all of which have an impact on your businesses profitability. The benefits of creating a mentally healthy workplace should therefore be evident.

The benefits that come from creating a mentally healthy workplace flow through to all levels and areas of a business. If an individual is happier and healthier, they have fewer sick days and are likely to stay at a workplace longer. An organisation is able to keep good staff resulting in improved morale and lower staff turnover. If staff are happy at work this will flow through to customers who have a better experience at your venue resulting in increased revenues and profits for your business. It also means an employer is better able to meet the various legislative obligations which must be complied with, such as work health and safety.

Creating a mentally healthy workplace does not need to be difficult. In fact most of the things which can be done are general human resource practices, such as communicating with staff, ensuring policies and procedures are in place and consistently enforced and ensuring adequate position descriptions and training are provided. In addition employers need to ensure that work demands are not too great and the person has the skills and abilities that are required to complete the tasks and duties that are expected of them. For example, an employee may have been promoted to a managerial or supervisory position due to their excellent performance in a lower level role. However as good as that employee may be, they may find the extra responsibility overwhelming either due to their personality or a lack of adequate skills required in a supervisory role. Whilst further training may assist, it may be that such a role is not suited to that employee and they return to their pre-promotion position. Alternatively other adjustments to the role may be able to be made whether temporarily or permanently. Not properly managed, such a situation could be a trigger for the development or aggravation of a mental illness.

A problem that is often faced when it comes to an employee with a mental illness is how to performance manage them. There is a fear that any such action may negatively impact on their state of mind. However, mental illness is no excuse to not performance manage. The same disciplinary process should be applied across the business to all employees. Treating one employee differently to others may have an impact on the mental health of others.

Managing workplace risks also makes sense from a legal perspective. Under work health

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[2] Beyond Blue, 'Beyond Blue National Workplace Program', page 3.

and safety legislation employers have a duty to ensure that they provide a safe workplace. This is not just safe from physical injuries but also potential mental injuries. That being said, it is not only the employer that has a duty under work health and safety legislation, so too does the worker. They have a duty to take reasonable care not only of their own safety but also for the safety of others. This means if they know they have an illness which is having an impact on their ability to adhere to this duty they are required to advise the employer so that adequate steps can be taken to address the issues. But this does not mean the employer can then advertise to all employees that someone has a mental illness. Under privacy legislation such information, as with any other illness or matter, must be kept private.

Support is the Key

To address and effectively manage issues of mental health in the workplace there needs to be a collaborative approach between employers and employees. The key to treating a mental illness is support. However, before support can be obtained the person affected needs to understand that they may have a problem. By talking about mental health issues in the workplace, it not only raises the awareness of the commonality of such issues but it helps those who may be affected understand that they may in fact have a mental illness and therefore require further support. It allows people experiencing an issue to know that they are not alone and that support is available both from the workplace as well as from external services trained to deal with mental health issues.

Mental illness remains a sensitive topic. People often feel uncomfortable speaking about it. But this does not mean nothing can be done, there are other ways in which support can be provided. Simple things can play just as great a part. This may include placing posters on noticeboards with contact details for support services such as Beyond Blue. A person suffering a mental illness may feel embarrassed to ask for help, however they may write down a number where they can do so in private.

Where can Employers and Employees Obtain Support and Advice?

The Heads Up program has been developed by Beyond Blue and is aimed at increasing the awareness of mental health issues in the workplace. By increasing awareness it is hoped that people will begin to feel comfortable in talking about their illness and taking the steps required to get help. Employers and employees can find more information as well as links to some useful tools and information at www.indst.headsup.org.au. Alternatively, AHA(WA) Members can contact the Workplace Relations Department for further information on 9321 7701 or visit the members section of the website.