

Managing someone with a mental health condition



About 1 million adults in Australia live with depression and more than 2 million have anxiety. On average, one in five women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime. One in three women and one in five men will experience anxiety.¹

This significant incidence of mental health conditions can have a marked impact on Australian workplaces through absenteeism, reduced productivity at work and increased staff turnover. Untreated anxiety and depression can also have an effect on workplace relationships and team cohesion.

Anxiety and depression affect people in different ways. While most people are able to keep working, some may need adjustments to the workplace or job to help them continue in their role. Others may need some time off.

Benefits of supporting employees

The benefits to organisations of supporting employees with mental health conditions are well understood. These include retaining skills and experience, avoiding costs associated with retraining or hiring new employees and, above

all, building a workplace culture that demonstrates to all employees that they are cared for and valued.

Employers should ensure that employees are supported to remain at or return to work, and that returning to the workplace is a smooth process for everyone involved.

Work can play a significant part in the recovery of someone with anxiety or depression, providing structure, a sense of purpose and social interaction.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. While stress and anxious feelings are a common response to a situation where we feel under pressure, they usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or 'stressor' is removed.

Anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't go away – when they're ongoing and happen without any particular reason or cause. It's a serious condition that makes it hard to cope with daily life. Everyone feels anxious from time to time, but for someone experiencing anxiety, these feelings aren't easily controlled.

Changes in behaviour

While symptoms differ from person to person, you may notice some changes in a colleague's behaviour, including:

- appearing restless, tense and on edge
- avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
- becoming overwhelmed or upset easily
- finding it hard to make decisions
- having difficulty meeting reasonable deadlines
- referring to being constantly worried and appearing apprehensive.

What is depression?

In general, a person may be considered depressed if they have had a persistently low mood (over a period of two or more weeks) and a loss of interest in their usual activities.

Changes in behaviour

In the workplace, the following changes in behaviour may be a sign of depression:

- finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- turning up to work late
- feeling tired and fatigued
- being unusually tearful or emotional
- getting angry easily or frustrated with tasks or people
- avoiding being around colleagues
- finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines or manage multiple tasks

- finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
- being vulnerable to stress and anxiety
- drinking alcohol to cope with other symptoms of anxiety and/or depression
- having a loss of confidence and negative thought patterns.

Seeking medical assistance

These are only signs that someone may have anxiety or depression. For a diagnosis and treatment advice, the person must be assessed by a medical practitioner or other health professional.

Different people, different experiences

The experience of anxiety and/or depression and its impact on day-to-day life varies from person to person. Some people can experience repeated severe episodes of anxiety or depression throughout their lives, while others have one episode, seek treatment and never have another episode. The time it takes for someone to recover from an episode of anxiety or depression also varies for each person.

Anxiety, depression and work-related stress – what’s the difference?

Anxiety and depression are clinical health conditions while stress is not.



However, when work-related stress is prolonged or excessive, it can be a risk factor for anxiety or depression.

Potential causes of work-related stress include:

- working long hours or overtime, working through breaks or taking work home
- physically, mentally or emotionally demanding work
- work that is dull and does not use a worker’s range of skills
- time pressures, including inadequate time and resources
- poor support from supervisors and/or co-workers
- lack of role clarity
- bullying, harassment and discrimination
- poor communication
- job insecurity
- low levels of recognition and reward
- poorly managed change.

Organisational obligations

Australian employers have legal obligations to take steps to eliminate or reduce the negative impacts of work on the mental health of employees and safeguard the rights of those with mental health conditions. These obligations include:

- eliminating the risks to workers’ health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable
- making changes (reasonable adjustments) to enable employees to perform their duties more effectively, provided employees can fulfil the inherent or core requirements of the job
- ensuring personal information about an employee’s mental health status is not disclosed to anyone without the employee’s consent
- ensuring a workplace does not take adverse action against an employee. It is unlawful to discriminate against, harass or victimise people with disabilities – including; temporary, permanent, past, present or future, actual or presumed mental health conditions.

Employers should seek advice or guidance from their work health and

safety regulator. Contact details are at the end of this fact sheet.

Employers may have additional responsibilities under state and territory legislation relating to the return to work process if the employee is involved in a workers’ compensation claim.

Work and recovery

Work can play an important role in the recovery of someone experiencing anxiety or depression, including:

- improving quality of life and wellbeing
- providing structure and a daily routine
- contributing to a sense of meaning and purpose
- promoting opportunities for social inclusion and support
- providing financial security.

Return to work or stay at work planning should be seen as an integral part of recovery from a mental health condition. Most people with anxiety and/or depression are able to keep working, with varying levels of support. If an employee needs some time off as part of their recovery, it’s vital that their return to the workplace is effectively supported and managed.

Barriers to working

Factors making it difficult for an employee to remain at or return to work include:

- stigma associated with mental health conditions
- perceived or actual lack of planning or support from their employer
- fear that colleagues may find out about the diagnosis or have negative reactions
- reduced self-confidence associated with the episode of anxiety/depression
- uncertainty about the type of assistance managers or supervisors will provide
- fear of discrimination and the impact on future career prospects
- concerns that causes of work-related stress have not been addressed.



Supporting employees with a mental health condition

Ways to support individuals in the workplace who are experiencing a mental health condition include:

1. Listen and offer support

Take an interest in the employee's life without intruding, while also maintaining their privacy.

2. Speak to their health professional

Seek permission from the employee to speak to their health professional about how the workplace can support their recovery.

3. Involve other managers

With the employee's consent, involve other managers and leaders who may work with the employee.

4. Seek support from human resources specialists

Seek support for the employee from any human resources specialists, occupational rehabilitation providers or Employee Assistance Programs (EAP).

5. Explore staying at work options

Depending on the severity of the case – it's common for people experiencing a mental health condition to not take time off. Instead, explore how to change their situation so they can stay at work.

6. Develop a work plan

Work with the employee to develop a plan that provides clarity on roles, responsibilities and any reasonable adjustments to the workplace to support the employee.

7. Review your employee's progress regularly

Continue to check in with your employee's progress and adjust any plan you have developed as needed. Positive feedback can boost confidence and recovery, and ensure productivity.

8. Communicate any adjustment with other team members

Discuss with the employee how and what they would like others to be told and communicate with the rest of the team about why adjustments have been made.

9. Review workloads of other team members

Manage any absences and review workloads of other team members to ensure they are not unfairly burdened by the changes.

10. Allow time off work, if necessary

If required, allow time off work and assess how arrangements can be made for the employee to return to work at an appropriate time.

11. Keep in touch

Keep in touch with the employee if they require periods of leave and support them on their return by working with them to develop a return to work plan.

Making reasonable adjustments

Some people may need some modifications to their workload, schedule or working environment.

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, employers must make changes to the workplace to enable someone with anxiety and/or depression to remain at or return to work, provided they can continue to meet the core requirements of their role. These changes, or 'reasonable adjustments', can be temporary or permanent. Employers may also choose to make temporary adjustments for staff who cannot meet the core requirements of their role.

Some examples of common reasonable adjustments employers might make are:

- offering flexible working hours, to enable the person to keep appointments with their treating health practitioner or work around the effects of medication
- changing shifts or work site location
- adjusting the environment of the workspace (if possible)
- reducing workload or specific tasks
- establishing goals, prompts, reminders and checklists to assist the employee with time management to stay on top of their workload
- providing access to professional mentoring, coaching or on-the-job peer support
- ensuring that the employee does not return after an absence to a backlog of work or emails
- identifying and modifying tasks that the employee may initially find stressful or overwhelming, for example, managing others, public speaking or direct customer contact.

When considering any reasonable adjustments, it is important that employers address any work-related contributors to stress, anxiety or depression. Even if the employee is on limited hours or duties, it is important to recognise their contribution and make sure they feel part of the team.

Australian work health and safety regulators

WorkSafe ACT

www.worksafe.act.gov.au
13 22 81

Comcare

www.comcare.gov.au
1300 366 979

SafeWork NSW

www.safework.nsw.gov.au
13 10 50

NT WorkSafe

www.worksafe.nt.gov.au
1800 019 115

Seacare

www.seacare.gov.au
02 6275 0070

SafeWork SA

www.safework.sa.gov.au
1300 365 255

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

www.worksafe.qld.gov.au
1300 362 128

WorkSafe Tasmania

www.worksafe.tas.gov.au
1300 776 572 (within Tasmania)
03 6233-5343 (outside Tasmania)

WorkSafe Victoria

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au
1800 136 089

WorkSafe WA

www.commerce.wa.gov.au/worksafe
1300 794 744

References

- ¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results (4326.0). Canberra: ABS
- ² World Health Organisation (2004). 'Work organisation and stress,' *Protecting Workers' Health Series No. 3.*

The information in this document is general advice only. The advice within it may therefore not apply to your circumstances and is not intended to replace the advice of a healthcare professional.

Where to find more information

Heads Up

www.headsup.org.au

Heads Up is all about supporting Australian businesses to create more mentally healthy workplaces. Access a wide range of resources, information and advice for all employees and create a tailored action plan for your business.

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance

www.workplacementalhealth.com.au

A national approach by business, community and government to encourage Australian workplaces to become mentally healthy for the benefit of the whole community and businesses, big and small.

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Head to Health

www.headtohealth.gov.au

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



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