



## Taking care of your mental health

A guide for employees



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.

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# Understanding mental health

**Mental health is a positive concept related to the social and emotional wellbeing of people and communities.**

The concept relates to the enjoyment of life, ability to cope with stress and sadness, the fulfilment of goals and potential, and a sense of connection to others. Mental health is about wellness rather than illness and is not merely the absence of a mental health condition. Like physical health, mental health is not fixed. Mental health exists on a continuum, or range: from positive, healthy functioning at one end through to severe symptoms of mental health conditions at the other.

A person's mental health moves back and forth along this range during their lifetime, in response to different stressors and circumstances. At the **green** end of the continuum, people are well; showing resilience and high levels of wellbeing. Moving into the **yellow** area, people may start to have difficulty

copng. In the **orange** area, people have more difficulty coping and symptoms may increase in severity and frequency. At the **red** end of the continuum, people are likely to be experiencing severe symptoms and may be at risk of self-harm or suicide.

Risk factors and protective factors influence mental health and can nudge people back and forth along the continuum. They can be individual or related to family, work or other life circumstances.

Risk factors may increase the strain on our mental health, while protective factors can counteract these by helping us to stay or become well. With much of people's time each day spent at work, the workplace is a very influential environment when it comes to mental health and wellbeing. A positive and supportive workplace can mean the difference between being 'in the green' or 'in the orange'.



Positive, healthy functioning

Severe impact on everyday functioning

Adaption based on Corey Keyes' mental health continuum model<sup>1</sup>

# Mental health in the workplace



Work can have a positive effect on our mental health. It can make us feel good about ourselves and give us a sense of purpose. It gives us a chance to interact with others, and access supports that we might not get outside of work. On the other hand, factors like job stress, bullying, and discrimination can negatively affect our mental health, possibly triggering a mental health condition or causing an existing condition to worsen.

When we speak about mental health in the workplace we are talking about how our working environment affects us – either positively or negatively – how it impacts our ability to do our jobs, and how it influences our overall wellbeing.

So, it makes sense to look closely at how we do our jobs, while also recognising that how we manage our mental health outside of work is just as important.

Stress is part of everyday life, and it is not always a problem. A little bit of stress – like the stress we feel during a job interview – can sometimes help us perform better. It is usually temporary and can help us to focus and perform well under pressure.

Workplace stress is something we all experience, whether it's in the form of heavy workloads, tight deadlines or workplace culture, it can contribute to us feeling pressured at work. Like stress in general, when workplace stress starts to become intense, comes from multiple sources, or is drawn out for long periods of time, it can increase risks to physical and mental health or cause an existing condition to worsen.

There is often stress relating to our work that needs to be managed but we must also remember to monitor the stresses in our personal life, too. Learning to identify when we're stressed – so that we can avoid or manage these situations – is an important way to stay well.

Everyone is different, with varying roles – at home and at work – and there is no single best approach to staying mentally well, but there are several things we can do every day to improve our wellbeing.

Keeping our mental health in good order requires us to look at four key areas of our lives, which form the following chapters:

- Our work
- Our lifestyle
- Our social relationships
- Our thoughts



## Our work

While much of our working environment is determined by others, individually we can take steps that will help to protect and enhance our mental health and wellbeing.

All employees, including managers, can adopt some common strategies to help in their work roles.

### 10 tips for working in a mentally healthy way

- 1 Limit working extra hours
- 2 Schedule meetings in core work hours
- 3 Take regular breaks
- 4 Try not to take work home
- 5 Take holiday leave
- 6 Set realistic deadlines and deliver on them
- 7 Sometimes, it's OK to say "No"
- 8 Have a technology switch-off
- 9 Make use of the Employee Assistance Program (or similar)
- 10 Explore suitable flexible working arrangements



### 1. Limit working extra hours

Deadlines or intense periods of activity at work can sometimes mean we can't stick to standard hours of work. It's when long hours become the norm rather than the exception that they can negatively impact our health.

Try to limit the amount of overtime you do. If it's becoming more normal to be working extra hours, discuss your duties with your manager.

### 2. Schedule meetings in core work hours

Scheduling meetings to begin and end only within core working hours will allow you to work with the certainty that your 'out-of-hours' times will be protected, so you can plan accordingly.

Common email diary systems allow you to block out times in your calendar so meeting organisers with visibility of your diary are aware of your commitments.

### 3. Take regular breaks

Getting some fresh air and leaving your workplace, or simply moving from your work area can help make you more productive at work.

#### Some tips for breaks

- Take a break once an hour to increase work productivity
- Leave the workplace during lunch to stay refreshed during the afternoon
- Exercise at lunchtime to boost productivity for the rest of the afternoon
- Use breaks to help refocus
- Take time out for an afternoon tea break that provides more than just caffeine



### 4. Try not to take work home

When we're busy or have pressing deadlines, it's easy to get into the habit of taking work home, but this should be the exception and not the rule.

By ensuring our work doesn't come home with us, we can pay full attention to those who are waiting for us at home and get the downtime we need for a healthy work-life balance.

If you must take work home, agree on a set time to do it – the earlier the better.

### 5. Take holiday leave

Having a complete break from work has mental and physical health benefits. Taking a holiday can help to reduce work-related stress, prevent anxiety and depression, and increase work performance and productivity. Employees taking leave is in employers' best interests, too.

### 6. Set realistic deadlines and deliver on them

Managing your schedule so you deliver work on time will not only contribute to improved productivity, it will also help you complete your tasks to a high standard and without undue pressure.

While any schedule is subject to change and few things run perfectly smoothly, following a process can be a huge help to meeting your objectives.

### 7. Sometimes, it's OK to say "No"

It's not always easy to say no. We all like to please our colleagues and be seen as a 'can-do' person in the workplace, but we all have the right to set work limits when demands exceed our capacity to deliver.

Don't be afraid to say no and state your reasons. When your response is genuine it won't mean you are letting your team down. It's more likely to simply mean the task will be completed in another way and you'll be in a better position to say yes the next time.

### 8. Have a technology switch-off

Many of us are required to work outside our normal working hours from time to time. But we all need a break from work to unwind and de-stress. None of us should be expected to send and receive work emails at all hours, and both employees and managers need to ensure a culture of endless email-checking doesn't become ingrained.

#### Some tips around email use:

- Ask yourself if you really need to be contactable 24/7
- If possible, don't add your work emails to your personal mobile
- Try being strict with yourself about when you check your emails – don't make it a habit outside of work
- Lead by example – don't let late-night emails become part of your work culture
- Ask yourself who's driving any expectation of out-of-hours emailing – is it coming from your manager, or do you enjoy feeling in demand?
- If you're not able to respond to all urgent or important emails during your work day, it may be a sign that your workload is too high. You might need to discuss this with your manager.



## 9. Make use of the Employee Assistance Program (or similar)

Many employers offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or similar program to assist employees with personal and work-related issues that may impact their job performance, health, mental and emotional wellbeing.

If your workplace offers a service, you may find it useful to chat with someone about something – particularly if you are not coping. EAPs offer confidential, short-term counselling, referrals and follow-up services that are usually free.



## 10. Explore suitable flexible working arrangements

Flexible working arrangements can help many employees improve their general wellbeing by working in ways that better fit their day-to-day life. Laws exist that support employees who meet certain criteria.

These working arrangements need to be negotiated with your employer, and you will need to be able to do your job in an effective manner that suits you and your employer.

Flexible working arrangements can include:

- Flexible location – working from home or somewhere more convenient, instead of the office or work site
- Flexible hours – changing start or finish times to accommodate personal or family commitments
- Flexible patterns – working longer days to provide for a shorter working week
- Flexible rostering – split shifts
- Job sharing
- Graduated return to work – where an employee returns to work part-time and gradually builds up to full-time by an agreed date (after parental leave or extended sick leave)
- Purchasing extra leave – e.g. only 44 weeks might be worked in a year with the reduced salary payments spread across 52 weeks.



## Our lifestyle

Eating healthily, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, and avoiding harmful levels of alcohol and other drugs can help you keep your mental health on track, manage symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve your overall wellbeing.

### Exercise

We all know that exercise is one of the most important things we can do for our health and wellbeing, but sometimes even with the best of intentions, exercise can slip to the bottom of the list.

Exercise has not only been shown to be effective in treating mild to moderate anxiety and depression, it is a proven method for combating stress.

Exercise isn't just going to the gym or going for a run. There are many ways to become more active; alone, with others, with a trainer, in classes, or with sports groups. Experiment and find what works best for you.

### Relaxation

It's important to take time out for yourself to do something you enjoy. It may just be putting away electronic devices for a set amount of time to get away from the outside world and any pressures or demands, or spending time with family or friends.

There are many types of relaxation techniques. Spend some time thinking about the positive things that help you to relax. It may be useful to make a list of what works for you so you have it on hand when you need it.



## Ways to maintain and improve your wellbeing

### Keep fit

- Go for a walk or a bike ride
- Go bush walking
- Go swimming
- Do yoga or tai chi
- Go to the gym
- Get good quality sleep

### Entertain yourself

- Read a book or magazine
- Write a letter or email
- Play a solo card game
- Do a crossword or sudoku
- Go to the movies or a market
- Visit a museum, art gallery or library

### Pamper yourself

- Have a bubble bath
- Buy some flowers
- Lie on a beach
- Get a massage

### Around the house

- Cook something new
- Listen to music or the radio
- Play in the backyard with your children or pets
- Do some gardening





### Practical strategies for improving sleep:

- Reduce or eliminate caffeine, nicotine and alcohol
- Stick to a regular sleep pattern – even on the weekend
- Cut out naps, which can interfere with your quality of sleep
- Exercise, particularly early in the day
- Ensure you have a comfortable sleeping environment
- Ensure bedroom temperature isn't too warm – cool conditions help you get to and stay asleep
- No phones, TVs or laptops in the bedroom
- Try to relax and slow down at least 30 minutes before going to bed
- Look for ways to lessen the impact of shiftwork on your quality and quantity of sleep

### Our social relationships

Healthy relationships support good mental health, while social isolation and poor relationships can be risk factors for mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

Part of building strong relationships is having good, open, and regular communication. This can be done by sharing your thoughts and feelings with family, friends and trusted work colleagues.

Some people find sharing personal information a natural and easy thing to do. Others might need support from a health professional or community group to feel more comfortable opening up.

The quality of your relationships is just as important as the number of people in your social network. Good mental health is linked to having a supportive network that you relax and have fun with, as well as call on in difficult times. We can sometimes be so busy that we lose touch with others, but making an effort to stay in touch can have huge benefits.

### Ways to stay connected:

- Call a friend or family member for a chat or arrange a catch up
- If you don't feel you have anyone to call, reach out to acquaintances and neighbours
- Don't be afraid to smile and say hello to strangers you cross paths with
- Spend less time in front of the TV and computer screen
- Join networking, social or special interest community groups that meet on a regular basis
- Consider volunteering, which lets you help others, and is a great way to meet new people
- Take your children or pets to the park or playground



## Our thoughts

There are many studies that show that psychological therapies can help us to manage the way we think and behave. These therapies recognise that if we can alter our thinking and look rationally

at difficulties that arise, we can shift from negative or unhelpful thoughts and reactions to more positive problem-solving approaches.

## Learning the connection between thoughts and feelings

### Situation

**Recall a recent situation that you found upsetting or difficult.**

E.g. My colleague was abrupt and dismissive with me after I asked him to change something in a document.

### Mood

**What were you feeling? How strong was this mood? (0-100%).**

E.g. Hurt 80% Angry 90% Frustrated 80%.

### Unhelpful thinking

**What was going through your mind?**

Sometimes the way we talk to ourselves can be unhelpful or make us feel like we're not coping. Below are some examples of negative thoughts that we're all guilty of from time to time.

- Black and white thinking – “I must get everything done before I go home, otherwise everything will be a disaster.”
- What-ifs? – “What if I put all this effort in and fail? I'll never be able to look anyone in the eye.”
- Spiral of negatives – “I'm not going to get the project finished on schedule, which means I'm useless. I'll end up losing my client.”
- Leaping to conclusions – “My colleague was abrupt with me. He must be angry about what I said at the meeting.”
- Over-generalising – “That client has threatened to take his business elsewhere. All my clients must be unhappy.”
- Looking too far ahead – “If this doesn't go well there are all sorts of negative consequences.”
- Strong, uncompromising words – “I should ..., I must ..., I always ..., I never ...”
- Unkind or mean to oneself – “I'm a failure, I'm stupid, I'm a fraud ... someone will see through me one day, and see I'm not all that great after all.”

## Challenging unhelpful thoughts

Ask yourself these questions:

- If a close friend or someone I loved was thinking this way, what would I tell them?
- Five years from now when I look back, will I see things differently?
- Are the things I'm jumping to conclusions about justified by evidence?
- What am I ignoring about my strengths, and how am I coping?

## Helpful thinking

Write alternative balanced thoughts that could have been more helpful.

E.g. He's not always like that. Maybe he's stressed about his divorce and it's got nothing to do with me. Maybe I should just ask how he's going.

## New mood

Rate your moods again after practicing helpful thoughts. List any new moods (0-100%)

E.g. Hurt 10% Angry 10% Frustrated 20%.



# Symptoms of common mental health conditions

## Anxiety

Symptoms of anxiety often develop gradually over time. As we all experience some anxiety, it can be hard to know how much is too much. To be diagnosed with an anxiety condition, it must have a disabling impact on the person's life. There are many types of anxiety with a range of symptoms, including:

- Hot and cold flushes
- Racing heart
- Tightening of the chest
- Excessive fear or worry
- Obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviour

See the more extensive list below.

## Common symptoms of anxiety

### Behaviour

- Avoiding or fearing objects or situations
- Performing rituals in a bid to relieve anxiety
- Not being assertive (e.g. avoiding eye contact)
- Difficulty making decisions
- Being startled easily

### Thoughts

- "I can't control myself"
- "I'm about to die"
- "People are judging me"
- Having upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event
- Finding it hard to stop worrying
- Unwanted or intrusive thoughts

### Physical

- Shortness of breath
- Vomiting, nausea or stomach pain
- Feeling detached from your physical self or surroundings
- Sweating, shaking or numbness
- Feeling dizzy, lightheaded or faint
- Difficulty concentrating

### Feelings

- Overwhelmed
- Fear (e.g. when having to face certain objects or situations)
- Worried about physical symptoms
- Dread
- Constantly tense or nervous
- Uncontrollable panic



## Depression

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years), and sometimes without

any apparent reason. Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that has an impact on both physical and mental health.

### Common symptoms of depression

#### Behaviour

- Not going out anymore
- Not getting things done at work
- Withdrawing from close family and friends
- Relying on alcohol and sedatives
- Not doing usual enjoyable activities
- Unable to concentrate

#### Thoughts

- "I'm a failure"
- "It's my fault"
- "Nothing good ever happens to me"
- "I'm worthless"
- "Life's not worth living"
- "People would be better off without me"

#### Physical

- Tired all the time
- Sick and run-down
- Headaches and muscle pains
- Churning stomach
- Problems sleeping
- Loss or change of appetite
- Significant weight loss or gain

#### Feelings

- Overwhelmed
- Irritable
- Frustrated
- Lacking in confidence
- Indecisive
- Disappointed
- Miserable or sad

On their own, these indicators are not enough to confirm that someone has anxiety or depression. Only a health professional can provide a diagnosis.

Take the anxiety and depression checklist at [beyondblue.org.au/checklist](https://beyondblue.org.au/checklist)

For additional information on anxiety and depression, please visit [beyondblue.org.au/the-facts](https://beyondblue.org.au/the-facts)

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Keyes, C.L.M & Westerhof G.J. (2010). Mental illness and mental health: The two continua model across the lifespan. *Journal of Adult Development*, 7(2), 110-119.

HOPE. RECOVERY. RESILIENCE. Find out more at [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

## Where to find more information

### Heads Up

[www.headsup.org.au](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

### Head to Health

[www.headtohealth.gov.au](http://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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