

creating a mentally healthy workplace

Mental health difficulties are common and can impact a person's capacity to function in the world, including at work. However, there are processes that can be put into place to help people to thrive and successfully contribute to your workplace.

The cost of mental health in the workplace

It is estimated that workplaces that support the wellbeing of their staff experience three times less absenteeism than less supportive workplaces¹.

If the mental health of employees is not prioritised, workplaces may have problems with low morale, underperformance, absenteeism, a poor public image, and staff turnover might be higher. Absenteeism and presenteeism costs Australian workplaces up to \$17 billion per year². Creating a mentally healthy workplace is in everybody's interest!



Did you know?

There are more workers compensation claims for 'mental injury' than claims for physical injury? By setting up your workplace with the right supports and structures you can create the conditions for a mentally healthy workforce.

Young workers need particular support for their wellbeing at work

Whilst the areas covered in this article will benefit all of your staff, young employees might require some additional thought. It can be harder for young workers to understand what is expected of them at work, and to have a voice when things are not going well – especially if it's their first job. They might feel the need to demonstrate their work ethic or 'earn their stripes' and not look after themselves as they should. Or they might feel that their opinions are not as important as those with more experience.

How is your workplace demonstrating the importance of psychological health to its young workers? Are they explicitly encouraged to take breaks, leave on time, make use of supportive practices at work? They might need to hear from leaders that such practices are supported.

How is your workplace showing young people that they will be listened to if they raise concerns or have ideas about wellbeing? Can you include younger staff on a wellbeing working group or explicitly request their input?

How is your workplace creating opportunities for young workers to build social connections and practice self-care? Do they have time during work hours to get to know each other? Are you scheduling a range of group-based activities – not just those that revolve around alcohol?

Consider providing young workers with a supportive mentor to help them to develop confidence, skills and supportive relationships in the workplace.

¹ Worksafe Queensland

² Productivity Commission. (2020). Mental Health Inquiry Report. Canberra.

Promoting positive practices

Promoting mental health in the workplace involves taking a strengths-based approach, focusing on opportunities and resources that help to foster a healthy, positive and supportive workplace culture.

Management commitment

Creation of a mentally healthy workplace takes management commitment. If you show your workers that you are serious about workplace mental health, they'll be more likely to follow your lead. According to Worksafe Australia, to demonstrate your commitment, you should: get involved in health and safety issues, invest time and money in health and safety, and ensure health and safety responsibilities are clearly understood. This applies to all workplace risks, including those that impact mental health. Do you remind leaders of their obligations and of the benefits of supporting mental health at work?

Businesses need a plan to eliminate or minimise psychological health and safety risks to the public and their staff. Safework Australia offer a [free online tool](#), called People at Work, to help businesses identify, assess and manage psychosocial risks at work and provide guidance on practical ways to manage them. For further information visit www.peopleatwork.gov.au.

Identifying psychosocial hazards

Leaders should develop and endorse workplace policies that align with a mentally healthy workplace, for example an anti-bullying policy.

Young workers may require learning and development opportunities around the effective identification and management of psychosocial hazards in the workplace. Psychosocial hazards are things that increase stress at work (for example, bullying, lack of role clarity, or low levels of job control). In addition, your leaders and staff may require assistance and training to build their capacity to recognise and respond to psychosocial hazards that may impact on young workers' mental health.

Involve young workers in wellbeing at work

Can you include young workers in planning your 'mentally healthy workplace' initiatives? They may have ideas such as inclusive social events, making time for reflection about work, protecting breaks or encouraging staff to take accrued time off. You could invite young workers to be involved in developing and promoting communications such as emails, newsletters and posters with key messages that promote commitment to a mentally healthy workplace. Or support young workers to take on leadership roles in workplace wellbeing. Consult your young workers as they may have ideas about what will work.

Be a self care role model

Encourage young workers to stay well by modelling self care: let your staff see that you look after yourself too. Do you leave work on time? Take breaks? Have a healthy work/life balance? How do you manage stress? When you and your senior staff model self-care, it encourages young workers to do the same.

Train your staff to improve mental health in the workplace

Providing mental health training to supervisors and leaders is an important part of creating a mentally healthy workplace; they set the tone of a workplace's culture. Training such as [Mental Health First Aid](#) (mhfa.com.au) helps managers feel equipped to assist young people when they reach out for support.

WorksafeQueensland have devised a [Mentally Healthy Workplaces Toolkit](#) (worksafe.qld.gov.au) that includes the competencies for managers to reduce workplace stress.

Once you've trained your managers, consider extending this training to all employees.

Flexible work practices

Flexible work practices support the mental health of young workers by increasing their sense of control at work. Flexible practices are those that allow for alterations to be made to days, location or hours of work. Young workers may benefit from flexibility around their study, career or other responsibilities.

Your workplace benefits from flexibility too, making it more attractive to young job seekers and allowing you to retain staff for longer. Have you developed a policy around flexible work practices?

How do you maintain a healthy workplace culture?

Meaningful consultation with staff is a cornerstone of creating a mentally healthy workplace. If young people feel like they can reach out to you early, it helps things to feel less overwhelming. Regular check-ins with staff are an important way to develop open working relationships where problems can be raised in a timely way, supportive conversations can occur and problems can be addressed. This is especially important for young staff who may find it more difficult to seek support.

Promote a healthy workplace culture by putting the right structures in place to encourage consultation and ensure managers are aware of their responsibilities around workplace mental health. Does your workplace have a mental health policy? Is there a procedure in place that outlines how to consult young workers?

Learn more about how to have a supportive conversation by visiting headspace.org.au/employers.

Promoting respectful work interactions is important. Leaders should model open, honest and effective communication. Do you respond to people in a timely way? Are mistakes viewed as valuable learning opportunities? Disrespectful behaviour must be addressed and it is helpful to have policies to support expectations. Acknowledging the strengths and accomplishments of workers and seeking their input can help them to feel valued in their role.



The benefits of a mentally healthy workplace may include increases in productivity, work engagement, job satisfaction, attraction of top talent and decreases in work-related injuries, illnesses, claims, absenteeism and turnover.



For more information on what you can do to support young employees at work, check out headspace.org.au/employers