

Working life and mental illness

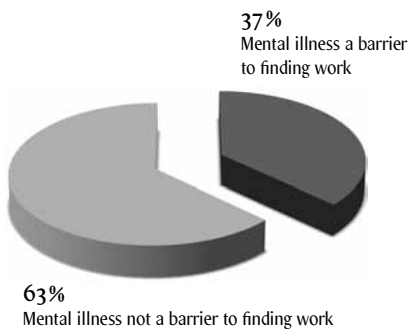
Most Australians with a mental illness receive little support or understanding at work – yet having a ‘mentally healthy workplace’ with positive, supportive attitudes to mental illness is the most important factor in successfully keeping a job and contributing to the workforce.

With one in five Australians experiencing some form of mental illness every year, they – and their families who provide support – form a significant part of the country’s workforce.

They receive far less understanding and support than they need, however – resulting all too often in stress, conflict, resignation or even dismissal. Yet better understanding and support for employees affected by mental illness not only helps them stay in work, it also contributes to more effective management of staff and resources for the employer. This Research Bulletin asks about the experience of work by Australians living with mental illness, and what would help them to maintain successful employment.

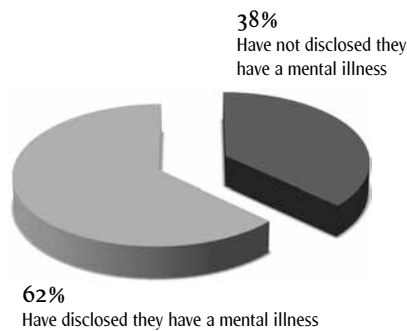
The survey was conducted in April-May 2011, using a convenience sample of 520 people who completed an anonymous questionnaire. Almost all (89%) were currently in employment. Most respondents were female (80%) and aged 25-49 (71%). The most common diagnoses reported were depression (45%), bipolar disorder (20%) and schizophrenia (7%).

How difficult is it to find a job if you have a mental illness?



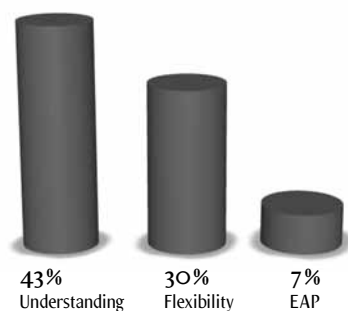
Over a third of respondents (37%) reported that mental illness had been a barrier for them in finding a job. Principal reasons for this included lack of suitable part-time employment and lack of support in the workplace from managers and colleagues.

How many disclose they have a mental illness?



Disclosing a mental illness to an employer or manager is a personal decision, and over a third (38%) had not done so. It is often made difficult by stigma, which over half (53%) of all respondents had experienced at some time at work. Not disclosing increases stress, however, and prevents access to the very support which would promote successful employment.

How much support is available to employees affected by mental illness?



The majority of respondents reported that no support had been provided to them at work. Fewer than half of managers (43%) were said to understand mental illness and how it affected people in the workplace. Only 30% had been offered flexible work arrangements, and 7% had received support via an Employment Assistance Program (EAP). Access to support from government programs (via JobAccess, for example) was also low, with 75% never having received information or help from these sources.

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What helps people with a mental illness retain employment successfully?



Respondents overwhelmingly recommended (95%) that employers and managers receive education on mental illness, and training on how to manage its effects in the workplace. This would promote a ‘mentally healthy’ workplace where stigma was reduced and people were not wary of disclosing their illness for fear of dismissal. Practical support such as flexibility (including ability to work part-time or from home) and access to external support services was suggested by 63% of respondents. These measures would also help employees who were family carers.

In summary

- Having a mental illness can be a significant barrier to finding employment for many, due to misunderstanding and stigma as well as lack of support and suitable work.
- Many people with a mental illness do not disclose their condition to employers, fearful they will lose their jobs, thus making it harder to access support. This also applies to employees who are caring for a family member with a mental illness.
- Employers and employees are often unaware of the support available from government and non-government agencies.
- A majority of employers show little or no understanding of mental illness and its effects in the workplace.
- There is an overwhelming need for education and training in the workplace about mental illness and its effects. This would also help employers and managers as well as employees, including those who care for a family member with a mental illness, to access the supports available.

Recommendations

1 WORKPLACE EDUCATION + TRAINING

There is a great need for education and training in the workplace on mental illness and how to manage its effects: for employers and management as well as co-workers.

This would help reduce the misunderstanding, stigma and stress associated with mental illness at work, so that it is treated in the same way as physical illness. It could supply common-sense training in how to manage any concerns or difficult situations; explain how people can help themselves and others, and provide confidence for employees and employers regarding legal issues such as privacy and occupational health and safety as they relate to mental illness.

2 FLEXIBILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

People affected by mental illness may have times when they need flexibility, such as being able to work part-time, work from home at times, or have workplace adjustments made. Despite its importance to sustainable employment, this flexibility is uncommon in Australian workplaces.

There is a clear need for the Government to develop and implement policies in this area to remove disincentives to employment flexibility, and promote stigma-reduction and ‘mentally healthy’ workplaces.

3 PROMOTION OF SUPPORT SERVICES

A range of supports are available to employers and employees to help sustain jobs when someone has a disability or mental illness – especially through the Australian Government’s JobAccess program. However, these support services remain too little known and are under-used.

More active promotion of JobAccess and related programs is needed by Government, so that many more employees affected by mental illness – and their employers – can benefit from the services they provide.

Mindful Employer

Mindful Employer is a new initiative of SANE Australia to promote better workplace mental health.

Employers who join the program are helped to create a positive and supportive workplace, and avoid the costs of not responding appropriately to mental health problems.

Mindful Employer includes a suite of comprehensive, flexible education and training resources for the workplace, for employers of all sizes. Visit the website for more information about this new initiative, or call (03) 9682 5933 to ask for details.

- www.mindfulemployer.org

SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.

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