

## Navigating mental health at work

With almost half of Australians likely to experience a mental illness in their lifetime, it is highly likely that we all know someone affected by mental illness or will ourselves experience a mental illness at some point in our career.

Research by the national mental health charity, SANE Australia, found that a staggering 95 percent of respondents said employers and managers needed education on mental illness, and training on how to manage its effects in the workplace.

'How do managers tackle the issue of mental illness at work? It's a major problem throughout Australia, affecting many people and costing the economy over \$6.5 billion every year,' explained SANE Australia's CEO, Jack Heath.

'As the recent Report Card of the National Mental Health Commission highlighted, more is required to assist people once they are working,' Mr Heath added.

According to the Commission's Chair, Professor Allan Fels, employers have a role in raising awareness of mental health and treating it with the same understanding and openness as physical health.

A recent survey by SANE Australia found that a majority of the 520 people surveyed said that no support had been provided to them at work when mentally unwell, and less than half of managers (43 percent) had an understanding of mental illness.

'It's important to promote awareness about mental illness and the factors that contribute to it, such as bullying and work stress. Managers need to take the initiative and raise the topic of mental health in a routine team meeting, to ensure a neutral, open and non-stigmatising forum.

'We need to understand it's not a supervisor's role to diagnose a mental illness nor should a supervisor be expected to be a counselor. They should however have the skills to respond to any early signs of mental health problems in the workplace,' explains Mr Heath.

If a manager or supervisor notices concerning changes in an employee's work or interactions with other staff, it is appropriate to discuss such changes with them. Consider these four steps, taken from SANE Australia's *Mindful Employer* program:

1. Plan a meeting with the staff member – think about what you want to say and stay focused on work-related issues;
2. Set-up the meeting at an appropriate time and place, ensuring the employee feels comfortable and well-supported;
3. Express your concerns in a non-confronting and clear manner – it can be helpful to give examples of what you feel are concerning changes;
4. Offer support if required, including an employee assistance program (EAP) and how can it assist, suggest your employee visit their GP or discuss possible workplace adjustments.

'People may have numerous reasons why their work performance is being affected at a particular time, including physical illness or relationship concerns – not necessarily mental illness. We also need respect people's privacy if they do not want to discuss personal issues.

### **SANE Australia**

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness.

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'We should remember too that many people manage their mental illnesses without affecting their work; some may require workplace supports for a short period of time, while others may require ongoing workplace strategies,' Mr Heath added.

*Mindful Employer* is an initiative of SANE Australia. *Mindful Employer* is a training solution that provides managers with the skills and confidence to respond effectively to signs of mental health problems at work.

*Mindful Employer* helps managers to create a more positive and supportive workplace, and avoid the costs of not responding appropriately to mental health problems.

The program, which offers both online and face-to-face support, focuses on mental illness awareness training and the skills to work with, and support, an employee who has a mental illness themselves or is caring for someone with a mental illness. It provides answers to important questions such as what are the signs of a mental health problem, what to do if you are concerned for a colleague or employee, and how to manage reasonable workplace adjustments.

'While businesses can have the best intentions, if their employees don't know how to respond, the end result can be confusing and counter productive. *Mindful Employer* training increases staff members' confidence and ability to work with colleagues who are affected, directly or indirectly, by a mental health problem.

'SANE Australia is encouraged by the National Mental Health Commission's focus on improving the workplace for people living with mental illness and we are keen to work together to advance good workplace practices in Australia,' Mr Heath concluded.

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For more information about the *Mindful Employer* program, contact Naomi Lehrer at [info@mindfulemployer.org](mailto:info@mindfulemployer.org) visit [www.mindfulemployer.org](http://www.mindfulemployer.org) or call SANE on (03) 9682 5933

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