

# Mental Health in the Workplace

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Mental health disorders are the third largest health problem in Australia, after cardiovascular disease and cancer. It is currently the leading cause of non-fatal disability, however only three per cent of Australians identify it as a major health problem.

Around 45% of Australians aged between 16 and 85 will experience a mental illness at some point in their life, while one in five Australian adults will experience a mental illness or a serious mood disorder in any given year. Common conditions like depression and anxiety may impact on work performance, so it is important to know how to manage mental health issues in your workplace.



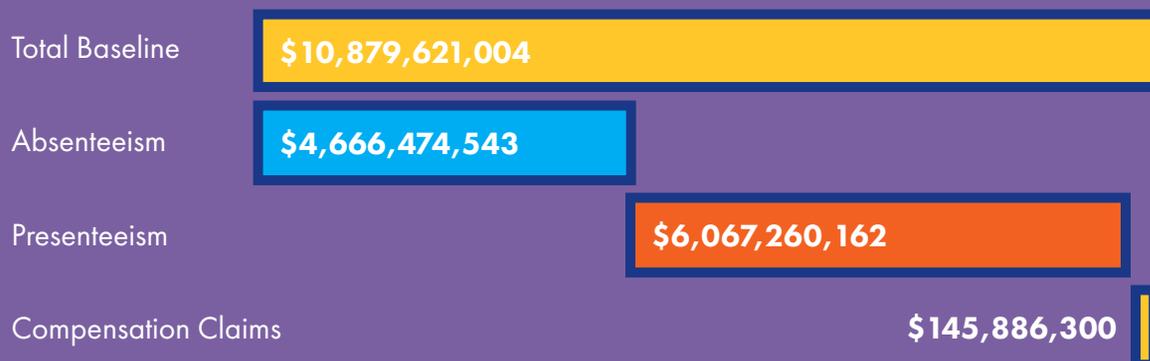
**AT ANY GIVEN TIME 1 IN 5 EMPLOYEES  
ARE LIKELY TO BE EXPERIENCING A  
MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION**

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, which includes organisations such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), Australian Industry Group, The Australian Psychological Society Ltd, beyondblue, the Black Dog Institute, Business Council of Australia, Comcare, COSBOA, Mental Health Australia, Safe Work Australia, SANE, SuperFriend and The University of New South Wales, published a report in March 2014 which indicated that:

- Overall prevalence of mental health conditions is highest in the financial and insurance sector with 33% of people experiencing a mental health condition. Following is 32% in the information media and telecommunication and the essential services (electricity, gas, water, waste) industries.
- Substance use conditions are most prominent in the mining, construction, accommodation and food services sectors
- Anxiety conditions are most prominent in the IT, media, financial and insurance industries
- Depression is most prevalent in the accommodation and food services, personal and other services, arts and recreation services, the professional, technical sector and essential services industries.

## BASELINE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION IMPACTS, BY INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

Source: The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, March 2014



In addition, the Alliance found that untreated mental health conditions cost Australian workplaces approximately \$10.9 billion per year. This comprised of \$4.7 billion in absenteeism, \$6.1 billion in presenteeism and \$146 million in compensation claims. (Presenteeism can be defined as an instance where an employee attends work, but is not fully productive as they are experiencing a health issue, in this case a mental health issue).

As a national workforce we (employers, employees, persons conducting business, volunteers etc.) are highly skilled and legislated in interpreting work health and safety requirements in our workplaces. For example, first aid compliance codes require workplaces to undertake first aid needs assessment, determining first aid training, first aid kits and first aid facilities and thus guides us in managing physical injury and illness confidently and competently. However, when it comes to assessing workplace mental health matters, organisations are not as confident because there is no code of practice in mental health. Workplaces nevertheless are required to assess their mental health risks using the general health and safety risk assessment approach.



**UNTREATED DEPRESSION RESULTS IN OVER 6 MILLION WORKING DAYS LOST EACH YEAR IN AUSTRALIA**

Interestingly, in a study published by beyondblue, the “State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia” 2014, found that there is a direct correlation between the importance placed on physical safety by an organisation and its safety performance. With the concept of zero harm now being extended beyond physical safety to include mental health, it is interesting that this same correlation is not evidenced in an organisation’s focus on mental health.

## PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES AND ORGANISATIONAL LEADERS WHO BELIEVE THEIR WORKPLACE HAS SPECIFIC PRACTICES AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH

Source: "State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia" 2014, beyondblue

In my workplace there is/are:	EMPLOYEES	LEADERS
Provision of information about the workplaces' legal responsibilities	<b>46%</b>	<b>72%</b>
Return to work policy for staff with a mental health condition	<b>44%</b>	<b>74%</b>
Processes and policies to support those who disclose a mental health condition	<b>44%</b>	<b>70%</b>
Leaders who are committed to promoting the mental health of staff	<b>37%</b>	<b>71%</b>
Employee input into planning, implementation and review of mental health programs in the workplace	<b>25%</b>	<b>57%</b>

A key issue facing organisations which aim to develop a mentally healthy workplace is the disconnect between leaders' and employees' perception of mental health initiatives. Whilst 71% of leaders felt that they were committed to promoting the mental health of staff, only 37% of employees agreed. More concerning is the finding that, whilst 57% of leaders felt that they had engaged with employees to provide input into the planning, implementation and review of mental health programs in the workplace, only 25% of employees agreed! This indicates that the same rigor and consultation which is applied to the development of physical safety programs is lacking in the development and implementation of mental health programs.

Some organisations feel that a significant investment in employee assistance programs (EAPs) is enough. The issue these organisations face is that these programs are not being actively utilised by employees due to:

- Lack of employee engagement in the development of the program
- Ineffective communication of program initiatives and benefits

- The reactive nature of the programs themselves, relying on employees not only understanding mental health issues, but also recognizing that they may need assistance
- The perceived stigma associated with mental health issues with a sub culture of “just suck it up”
- Lack of trust in the confidentiality of information provided to EAP providers

A mentally healthy workplace is a workplace which engages with its people, seeking input and commitment. As the safety industry has moved away from the use of lag indicators to manage safety performance, to a more proactive and behavioural approach; the same approach should be used to promote the mental health of employees. The commitment of organisational leaders is the first step in achieving a mentally healthy workplace as is the implementation of organisational policies and procedures. It is vital that this commitment is demonstrated in practical ways which are effectively communicated to employees. This can include:

- Consultation with employees to understand the triggers of poor mental health specific to their workplace, such as stress and inflexible working hours, and tailoring their actions to address these risks.
- Providing mental health training for staff to provide managers, supervisors and employees with the skills and knowledge to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and enabling them to manage their own mental health and support their co-workers, and
- Taking a proactive approach to promoting mental health at work – developing and implementing strategies to maximise mental health outcomes in the work place and creating a positive workplace culture.

## Why is Mental Health Training in the Workplace Important?

- To improve workplace productivity by reducing absenteeism and presenteeism
- To empower managers to have difficult conversations
- To provide a pathway for intervention
- To create a supportive environment for staff who are experiencing a mental health problem
- It makes good cents! Research shows that some businesses realise a return of up to \$15.00 for every \$1.00 invested in creating a mentally healthy work place (Price, Waterhouse and Coopers).

**RESEARCH SHOWS THAT SOME BUSINESSES REALISE A RETURN OF UP TO \$15.00 FOR EVERY \$1.00 INVESTED IN CREATING A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE**



## Conclusion

Common conditions such as depression and anxiety may not only impact on work performance of the employee but can also present a significant risk to the safety of the employee and others through inattention and distraction. It is therefore vital to effectively manage mental health issues in the workplace.

Mental health in the workplace represents a significant cost and risk to business. There is no doubt that organisations are acting to better manage mental health in their workplaces; and are seeking support in the form of quality education, strategy development and implementation.

Workplace mental health training should form part of a good mental health strategy. Initial steps in the strategy are to create awareness and reduce the stigma associated with mental health. This can be achieved by providing leaders and employees with training in mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health training equips workforces with the knowledge and skills to proactively manage and respond effectively and appropriately to mental health issues in the workplace. It also allows managers and supervisors to be aware of the conditions which are prevalent in today's community, to have the "tough conversations" if required and understand their role in promoting a mentally healthy workplace.

[info@premiumhealth.com.au](mailto:info@premiumhealth.com.au)

1300 721 292 | [premiumhealth.com.au](https://premiumhealth.com.au) | ABN 24 692 649 946 | ACN 060 000 017