

Managing someone with a mental health condition



Around 1 million Australian adults live with depression and over 2 million have anxiety. On average, one in five women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime. One in three women and one in five men will experience anxiety.¹

These figures have a significant impact on Australian workplaces through absenteeism, reduced productivity at work and increased staff turnover. Untreated anxiety and depression can also have an effect on workplace relationships and team cohesion.

Anxiety and depression affect people in different ways. While most people are able to keep working, some may need adjustments to the workplace or job to help them continue in their role. Others may need some time off.

Employers have an important role to play in ensuring that employees are supported to remain at or return to work, and that returning to the workplace is a smooth process for everyone involved.

Work can play a significant part in recovery for someone with anxiety or depression, providing structure, a sense of purpose and social interaction. Benefits for businesses include retaining skills and experience, avoiding costs associated with retraining or hiring new employees and, above all, building a workplace culture that demonstrates to all employees that they are cared for and valued.

What is anxiety?

There are six main types of anxiety conditions:

- generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
- specific phobias
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- panic disorder
- social phobia.

Changes in behaviour

While symptoms differ from person to person, you may notice some changes in a colleague's behaviour, including:

- appearing restless, tense and on edge
- avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
- becoming overwhelmed or upset easily
- finding it hard to make decisions
- having difficulty meeting reasonable deadlines
- referring to being constantly worried and appearing apprehensive.

Seeking support

These are only signs that someone may have anxiety or depression. For a diagnosis and treatment advice, the person must be assessed by a medical practitioner or other health professional.

What is depression?

In general, a person may be depressed if they have had a persistently low mood (over a period of two or more weeks) and a loss of interest in their usual activities. Depression can also have a negative effect on a person's concentration, memory, sleep routine, motivation and activity levels, appetite, social behaviour, thinking patterns and feelings.

Changes in behaviour

In the workplace, the following changes in behaviour may be a sign of depression:

- finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks

- turning up to work late
- feeling tired and fatigued
- being unusually tearful or emotional
- getting angry easily or frustrated with tasks or people
- avoiding being around colleagues
- finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines or manage multiple tasks
- finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
- being vulnerable to stress and anxiety
- drinking alcohol to cope with other symptoms of anxiety and/or depression
- having a loss of confidence and negative thought patterns.

Different people, different experiences

The experience of anxiety and/or depression and its impact on day-to-day life varies from person to person. Some people can experience repeated severe episodes of anxiety or depression throughout their life, while others have one episode, seek treatment, and never have another episode. The time it takes for someone to recover from an episode of anxiety or depression also varies for each person.

Anxiety, depression and work-related stress – what’s the difference?

Although anxiety, depression and work-related stress can be connected, they are different things. It is important to recognise that anxiety and depression are clinical health conditions while stress is not. The World Health Organization defines work-related stress as: “the reaction people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope.”²

When work-related stress is prolonged or excessive, it can be a risk factor for anxiety or depression. Employers can reduce work-related stress by asking employees about factors that cause stress and taking

action to reduce or eliminate these so far as is reasonably practicable. For more information, please refer to your relevant work health and safety regulator website for guidance material. Contact details are at the end of this fact sheet.

Potential causes of work-related stress include:

- working long hours or overtime, working through breaks or taking work home
- physically, mentally or emotionally demanding work
- work that is monotonous and dull and does not utilise a worker’s range of skills
- time pressures, including inadequate time and resources to complete jobs satisfactorily
- poor support from supervisors and/or co-workers
- lack of role clarity
- bullying, harassment and discrimination
- poor communication
- job insecurity
- low levels of recognition and reward
- poorly managed change.

Employer obligations

Australian employers have specific legal obligations regarding employees with a mental health condition including:

- **discrimination** – making changes (reasonable adjustments) to enable employees to perform their duties more effectively, provided employees can fulfil the inherent or core requirements of the job
- **work health and safety** – eliminating the risks to workers’ health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable
- **privacy** – ensuring personal information about an employee’s mental health status is not disclosed to anyone without the employee’s consent
- **fair work** – ensuring a workplace does not take any adverse action against an employee because of their mental health condition.

Employers may have additional responsibilities under state and territory legislation relating to the return to work process if the employee is involved in a workers’ compensation claim.

Employers should seek advice or refer to guidance from their work health and safety regulator.

Work and recovery

Work can play an important role in the recovery of someone experiencing anxiety or depression, including:

- improving quality of life and wellbeing
- providing structure and a daily routine
- contributing to a sense of meaning and purpose
- promoting opportunities for social inclusion and support
- providing financial security
- promoting recovery from a mental health condition.

Return to work or stay at work planning should be seen as an integral part of recovery from a mental health condition. Most people with anxiety and/or depression are able to keep working, with varying levels of support required. If an employee needs some time off as part of their recovery, it’s vital that their return to the workplace is effectively supported and managed. Employers and managers have a significant role to play in helping the person get back to work.

Barriers to working

For many people with anxiety and/or depression, concerns over colleagues’ reactions or a lack of support can add to existing stresses. Identifying and taking steps to minimise potential barriers will help both individual employees and the workplace as a whole.

Factors which can make it difficult for an employee to remain at or return to work include:

- stigma associated with mental health conditions
- perceived or actual lack of planning or support from employer

- fear that colleagues may find out about the diagnosis or have negative reactions
- reduced self-confidence associated with the episode of anxiety/depression
- uncertainty about the type of assistance managers or supervisors will provide
- fear of discrimination and the impact on future career prospects
- concerns that causes of work-related stress have not been addressed.

Seven tips to support an employee at work

Because everyone's circumstances are different, a plan to help someone return to work or stay at work will need to be tailored for the individual, taking into account some general points.

A good question to ask yourself is: "What would we do if it were a physical illness?" Many of the management principles are the same, including:

1. Offering support

Ask the person if there is anything you can do to support them to remain at or return to work. This may include advice about where to get assistance. The employee may not wish to take up your offer, but it's important to let them know support is available.

2. Developing a plan to remain at or return to work

Collaborative plans that meet both parties' needs – rather than something to be complied with – are much more likely to succeed. Don't make assumptions about what the employee finds challenging or what will benefit them. Rather, talk about it together as you work through the following steps:

- Before preparing a plan, talk with the employee, set realistic goals with them and outline a process to monitor how they are progressing.
- Ensure that you have written permission from the employee to contact their treating health practitioner(s).

- Contact the treating health practitioner(s) to seek advice on specific issues that should be considered, as well as strategies to support the employee as they return to/ remain at work.
- Prepare the plan in consultation with the employee, their treating practitioner(s), and the occupational rehabilitation provider (if one is involved).
- Review the plan regularly, taking into consideration any changes to the employee's condition or challenges they may be experiencing.

3. Being inclusive

Experiencing anxiety or depression can make people feel less confident at times. Help the employee to feel more comfortable by including them in meetings and work social events to support their recovery. Fear of stigma – actual or perceived – can also affect people's confidence. Speak openly about mental health conditions in the workplace and encourage others to do the same.

4. Staying in touch

If an employee has taken some time off as part of their recovery, keeping in touch will make their return to the workplace smoother and easier for everyone involved. Maintaining connections with colleagues and the workplace can help employees feel valued. It also gives them an opportunity to give their opinion on decisions or changes in the workplace, even if they aren't there. However, it's also important that the employee doesn't feel pressured to return to work before they're fully ready.

5. Addressing the causes

If there are specific work-related factors which the employee feels have contributed to their condition, it's important that you listen to their views and take action where appropriate. This can help to improve outcomes for the individual and for the organisation, as well as ensuring that other employees are not at risk.

6. Setting clear expectations

Good planning prevents confusion. Writing up a return to work or stay at work plan which includes the nature of duties and hours of work sets clear expectations for all involved. Everyone should agree to be flexible to allow for any changes that may occur during recovery. Any agreed workplace modifications should be implemented gradually to allow for adjustment.

7. Maintaining confidentiality and privacy

While it's important to inform the wider team of any changes that affect them, such as reallocating workloads or a reduction of hours, the details of the employee's condition and treatment must remain confidential unless they give their permission. Talk to the person about what they would like other colleagues to know and how they'd like to share this information.

Making adjustments

Some people may need some modifications to their workload, schedule or working environment.

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, employers must make changes to the workplace to enable someone with anxiety and/or depression to remain at or return to work, provided they can continue to meet the core requirements of their role. These changes, or 'reasonable adjustments', can be temporary or permanent. Employers may also choose to make temporary adjustments for staff who cannot meet the core requirements of their role.

Because roles, workplaces and experiences of anxiety and/or depression are different, there's no 'one size fits all' approach. Identifying and implementing adjustments to support the employee through their recovery should be a collaborative process, with any changes documented.



Some examples of common reasonable adjustments employers might consider making are:

- offering flexible working hours, to enable the person to keep appointments with their treating health practitioner or work around the effects of medication
- shift or location changes
- adjusting the environment of the workspace (if possible)
- establishing goals, prompts, reminders and checklists to assist the employee with time management and to stay on top of their workload
- reducing workload or specific tasks
- providing access to professional mentoring, coaching or on-the-job peer support
- ensuring that the employee does not return to a backlog of work or emails
- identifying and modifying tasks that the employee may initially find stressful or overwhelming, for example, managing others, public speaking or direct customer contact.

Providing general education to all employees about mental health conditions in the workplace can help raise awareness and encourage people to seek support. It may also reduce the stigma often associated with anxiety and depression.

When considering any reasonable adjustments, it is important that employers address any work-related contributors to stress, anxiety or depression. Even if the employee is on limited hours or duties, it is important to recognise this contribution and make sure they feel part of the team.

This fact sheet is endorsed and supported by WorkSafe Victoria.

Australian work health and safety regulators

WorkSafe ACT

www.worksafe.act.gov.au
02 6207 3000

Comcare

www.comcare.gov.au
1300 366 979

WorkCover NSW

www.workcover.nsw.gov.au
13 10 50

NT WorkSafe

www.worksafe.nt.gov.au
1800 250 713

Seacare

www.seacare.gov.au
02 6275 0070

References

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results (4326.0). Canberra: ABS

² World Health Organisation (2004). 'Work organisation and stress,' *Protecting Workers' Health Series No. 3*.

WorkCover SA

www.workcover.com
13 18 55

WorkCover Queensland

www.workcoverqld.com.au
1300 362 128

WorkCover Tasmania

www.workcover.tas.gov.au
1300 776 572 (within Tasmania)
(03) 6233-5343 (outside Tasmania)

WorkSafe Victoria

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au
1800 136 089

WorkCover WA

www.workcover.wa.gov.au
1300 794 744

Where to find more information

Heads Up

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

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

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.

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