

How Can Employers Navigate Mental Health at Work?

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Almost half of Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime, yet corporate Australia has been slow to progress in the management of this life-threatening issue. Research by national mental health charity SANE Australia found that a staggering 95% of survey respondents believe their employers and managers need more education on mental illness, and better training at 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,” SANE Australia’s CEO Jack Heath said. *“As the recent report card of the National Mental Health Commission highlighted, more is required to assist people once they are working,”* 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 conducted by SANE of Australian employees found that a majority of respondents say that no support had been provided to them at work when mentally unwell, and less than half of managers (43%) had any understanding of mental illness.

The first step for HR may be to better promote awareness about mental illness and the factors that contribute to it, such as bullying and work stress. Managers also need to take the initiative and raise the topic of mental health in routine team meetings, 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 counsellor. They should however have the skills to respond to any early signs of mental health problems in the workplace,” Heath said.

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. It is vital that employee’s privacy is respected if they do not want to discuss personal issues.

To view the article online: <http://www.hcamaq.com/article/how-can-employers-navigate-mental-health-at-work-148474.aspx>

Peoplogica offers a range of tools to help inform managements approach to this pervasive workplace issue. Our Organisational Pulse Survey help measure, among other areas, employee wellness and organisational resilience. If you would like more information please **click here** or contact us:

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