

New strategies required to address mental health in Australian workplaces, 03 August 2010

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The stresses and strains of working long hours, commuting, and dealing with work and life issues are just a few of the daily challenges that have the potential to impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of employees. Yet mental health in the workplace and its impact on employees and the business has long been the topic that managers (at any level in an organisation) are reluctant to talk about or deal with effectively, as Barbara Holmes discovered first-hand when researching and writing this article. “It was quite difficult to persuade organisations who are initiating programs to address these issues in a positive and meaningful way and to share their achievements”, she said. “Several organisations were happy to talk ‘off the record’ but felt it was not a topic that they should ‘talk about’ openly.” Interestingly, even though one in five Australians experience mental health problems each year, nearly half of all senior managers believe that none of their workers have, or will experience in the future, a mental health problem at work.¹

Research undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission, as part of the development of their *2010 Workers with Mental Illness: a Practical Guide for Managers*², found that 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 in any given year.³ The research also indicated that there are significant benefits for employers who make an effort to address mental health issues in the workplace. These benefits will be covered later in the article.

If not addressed appropriately, mental health-related problems can have a significant negative impacts on a business’ operations, for example:

- A total of 3.2 days per worker are lost each year through workplace stress.⁴
- Stress-related workers’ compensation claims have doubled in recent years, costing over \$10 billion each year.⁵
- In a survey of over 5,000 workers, 25% of the workers who participated indicated that they took time off each year for stress-related reasons.⁶
- In relation to psychological injury claims, work pressure accounts for around half of all claims and harassment and bullying for around a quarter of claims.⁷
- Preliminary research shows that Australian businesses lose over \$6.5 billion each year by failing to provide early intervention/treatment for employees with mental health conditions.⁸

In the United Kingdom, similar research has been reported by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) who report that stress at work is a massive problem and (according to the Labour Force Survey⁹ in 2008/9) an estimated 1.2 million people were suffering from an illness they believe was caused by, or made worse by, their current or most recent work. Internationally, there have been cases from France and China revealing work-stress-related suicides. The report goes on to state that any stress can reduce employee well-being, and it is well recognised that excessive or sustained work pressure can lead to stress. Occupational stress poses a risk to most businesses and compensation payments for stress are increasing. It is important to meet the challenge by dealing with excessive and long-term causes of stress.

The CIPD annual absence management surveys show that stress is one of the main reasons for people taking sick leave from work, and stress-related absence is increasing. In the 2007 research report — “New directions in managing employee absence: An evidence-based approach”¹⁰ — it was found that the average length of time someone takes off work with stress is 21 days per year.

Other research has found that:

- Three quarters of executives say that stress adversely affects their health, happiness and home life as well as their performance at work.¹¹
- Stress may be experienced as a result of an exposure to a wide range of work demands and in turn can contribute to an equally wide range of health outcomes. It is important to recognise that stress is a state, not an illness.¹²
- Where employees are stressed because they have no say on how work is done, or need to do work that involves a fast pace and need to resolve conflicting priorities, or have a lack of recognition, understanding and support from their managers, there is a higher risk of the employee suffering a psychiatric disorder.¹³

It is obvious that organisations need to do more to make themselves more aware of this potential impact on the business and employ strategies to deal with mental health sensitively and effectively.

Providing a healthy and safe workplace benefits all workers, including those with mental illness. It also makes good business sense.

Therese Fitzpatrick, National Workplace Manager of *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*, says, “It’s important for organisations to understand the implications of mental health issues, to recognise situations early, and to provide ways to help staff re-adjust, within the workplace.” She says that there has been a change in attitudes to mental health issues over the last 10 years and that it is somewhat less of a taboo topic to talk about it now as compared with previous years. Ms Fitzpatrick says, “The impact of depression in the workplace has led to more people talking about the issues and the impact on business ... what has helped create the change is that there are now ‘high profile’ people talking about their experiences and this is a very positive move.”

Telstra case study

One organisation that has developed and implemented a long-term approach to mental health issues in the workplace is Telstra. Telstra began promoting and having discussions around mental health programs from 2003. At that stage they used service providers who were not only experienced in this field, but who had also had a “lived with” or experienced mental health issues in their lives. These early initiatives were very successful and opened the door to a more comprehensive strategy which would put greater emphasis on the role of the manager in managing all aspects of occupational health, including mental health issues.

Karen Oldaker, a Group Manager responsible for Health & Wellbeing, Health Safety and Environment, and Human Resources at Telstra, commented that — by mid 1995, it became apparent that mental health in the workplace was an important business issue, and that any decision to progress mental health initiatives needed to be based on sound research and best practice. Research projects were undertaken to identify issues and key areas of concern. This research, together with data reviews and external literature reviews, identified the priorities which formed the basis of Telstra’s strategy for “Creating a Mentally Healthy and Supportive Workplace”.

Ms Oldaker said, “One of the keys to Telstra’s success was gaining commitment from the Executive team. We did this by emphasising the importance of Telstra being viewed as an Employer of Choice, the ‘duty of care’ Telstra has as an employer, the benefits to the business and, most importantly, the benefits to individuals.” The proposals for the strategy also came at a time when the organisation was going through a major change and it was recognised that many staff would need additional support to adjust to the organisation’s transformation. An important step in gaining executive commitment involved demonstrating the impact of mental health on the bottom line through the use of statistics to show the cost/impact of mental health issues on the general public, which could arise from issues such as presenteeism or absenteeism. The move to develop employee “resilience” also meant that mental health was looked at in the context of general wellbeing.

As part of the development of an “early intervention approach” the Health & Wellbeing team (their portfolio includes mental health, physical health promotion and occupational health) took steps to ensure that their

work was directly linked with the efforts of the Human Resources (HR) team. For example, their work was linked in with the work being undertaken by the Diversity and Disability task force to create an integrated early intervention strategy. An integral component of the early intervention strategy involved a targeted program of communication and promotion, which focused on educating managers on all aspects of mental health and potential impacts on the workplace.

In 2007, Telstra launched its Resilience@Telstra program. This program gives employees the tools to manage and identify their own behaviours, establish their “state of resilience” and maintain their own “balance”, using a measurable resilience scale. The program then delivers tools and support to help the employees address specific issues.

In 2008/2009, Telstra repositioned their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) — moving from a reactive position to an early intervention position. This involved working with their EAP provider to get a better return on investment for their employee base, focusing on:

- working collaboratively
- opportunities to undertake research
- providing and marketing online EAP services directly to staff
- providing life coaching for staff
- delivering a “Manager Assist” service (helps managers to deal with difficult situations) that operated 24/7, and
- creating greater awareness to employees of the services available and that these services were also available to family members.

Following the success of Telstra’s employee resilience program, in December 2009, Resilience2@Telstra was launched. Resilience2@Telstra consists of nine programs, which offer workshops ranging from 30 minutes to three hours, and provide education and resources related to the development of resilience. When creating the Resilience2@Telstra program, the aim was to create a program that had the ability to be tailored to meet specific needs of a workgroup, be accessible across a vast demographic and be linked inextricably to employee resources such as the EAP.

The resilience workshops provide the opportunity for employees to take up confidential one-on-one coaching sessions with the EAP provider. An early indicator of success has been an increase in the number of requests from areas of the business which are seeking to implement the programs within their workgroups. To date, over 1,000 employees are scheduled to attend the workshops. In addition, a number of face-to-face seminars and phone discussions are in the pipeline.

Telstra’s EAP provider can support/work with employees who have taken time off work due to a mental illness. The EAP provider can also provide the employee’s manager with tools, guidance and coaching to ensure the most effective outcome for the employee via the Manager Assist program. Telstra uses their rehabilitation providers to assist employees to return to work where the employee requires further assistance. Telstra does not differentiate between non work-related or work-related injuries when providing support.

Ms Fitzpatrick (*beyondblue*) reinforces the importance of an effective and integrated rehabilitation program and says, “Organisations need to encourage managers, HR professionals and OHS specialists to become more involved in this issue.” She suggests that the key question to ask is: “If this was a physical problem, how would we deal with it?” Ms Fitzpatrick believes that the key principles are the same, in that they need to:

- consult to determine the needs of individuals
- talk to OHS (with permission) about how they can help
- develop a written plan
- review the plan regularly
- ensure that adjustments can be made (where necessary) to accommodate individual needs.

These might include:

- a change of hours
- changes to duties/responsibilities, or

– a change of workplace/location.

- recognise that each person's needs are different so it is important to keep asking the questions
- think about the rest of the team and their issues
- consider how to "keep in touch" if the employee is off work (to help them stay connected)
- ask the individual what they would like communicated to the team, and ask permission before acting
- create opportunities for others to be heard
- address any stigma issues, and
- manage the team around the issues and workload, whilst providing support and resources.

Ms Fitzpatrick also indicated that good policies and procedures need to be in place. These policies and procedures should identify who needs to be involved in managing particular situations.

At Telstra, the feedback on the programs and tools implemented so far suggests that the integrated approach is having a significant and positive impact. For example, Telstra identified that the online EAP program "eapDIRECT" had a very low subscriber base. To address this concern and encourage employees to use this resource, competitions (to win items such as a Nintendo Wii) were run, which increased the subscriber base of eapDIRECT by 117%. Similarly, the promotion of the Manager Assist program increased in terms of usage rates by 22% through a targeted and vigorous campaign to raise awareness. The designated "Mental Health Day" has evolved into a "Mental Health Month".

The theme "Walking In Your Shoes" has been used in all promotional materials, including those used in foyer displays, workshops and on the company's intranet. The aim is to provide a positive message that encourages staff to share their stories and experiences.

Another innovative initiative, which has demonstrated the importance of the mental health strategy, involved linking resources with SANE Australia. This has provided employees with access to online videos of people recounting their personal stories and experiences relating to mental health. Three employees have subsequently published their very personal and moving stories, and this has paved the way for many others to share their experiences of how they got through the difficult times. This blog was in the "Top Ten Blogs" for the Telstra intranet site for 2009.

Telstra's approach to dealing with mental health issues in the workplace has focused not only on programs and workplace initiatives, but also on educating employees and managers. This approach has created a workplace culture which is more accepting and supportive of differences.

Ms Fitzpatrick has indicated that her experience in working with many Australian businesses suggests that effective and targeted education is the most effective approach to take when dealing with mental health issues. She suggests that the most effective strategies:

- have an organisation-wide perspective and use a "top down" approach that concentrates on organisational change
- involve HR professionals in an integrated process that includes a range of programs, procedures and training courses
- promote early interventions
- include a comprehensive communication and education strategy
- address workplace practices that impact on mental health such as long hours, stress and bullying which can exacerbate situations.

The work undertaken by *beyondblue* has recognised that change within large organisations creates challenges at all levels, especially in relation to creating or maintaining connections with staff. It is, therefore, important to monitor people who might be more vulnerable. Ms Fitzpatrick says that for organisations to recognise what can be done to change a situation (or potential situation) they must become proactive rather than reactive. Becoming proactive and including mental health issues on the organisations health and wellbeing agenda can lead to the following benefits:

- improved workplace performance and service delivery

- improved and more confident decision-making by staff
- a reduction in interpersonal conflicts, and
- fewer days lost due to mental health issues.

The following organisations can provide further support and guidance:

- Beyond Blue — see www.beyondblue.org.au
- SANE Australia — see www.sane.org/, and
- Lifeline — see www.lifeline.org.au/.

About the author

Barbara Holmes is the Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International — one of Australia's leading consultancies in the area of diversity, work/life balance and flexible work arrangements. Much of Barbara's work involves working with managers and employees in client organisations to create change in the workplace, enabling business to thrive and employees to achieve the balance and career goals to which they aspire. Barbara has worked extensively in Australia and around the Asia Pacific region, providing advice, consulting support and a range of practical tool kits and resources to government and private sector organisations.

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Footnotes

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- ⁷ Comcare, 2005, 'Working Well: An Organisational Approach to Preventing Psychological Injury, A guide for Corporate, HR and OHS Managers', see www.comcare.gov.au/forms_and_publications/publications/safety_and_prevention/?a=41369 (cited in Australian Public Service, 2006, 'Turned Up and Tuned In', see www.apsc.gov.au/publications06/turneduptunedin.htm).
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