Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19:

MEDIUM TO LARGE BUSINESSES

THE MENTALLY HEALTHY WORK PLACE ALLIANCE

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MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK DURING COVID-19

COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work. The pressure of rapid responses, high uncertainty and finding new ways of working has created both challenges and opportunities.

Supporting mental health and wellbeing both throughout COVID-19 and the road to recovery is an important investment in the people who are the public face, decision makers and drivers of your organisation.

The good news is that you do not need to be a mental health expert to build a mentally healthy workplace. Much of what you need to do to support mental health is simply good people management.

This guide outlines principles for creating a mentally healthy workplace during COVID-19 which complements advice on how to protect the physical safety of your workforce. Every organisation is different, so we recommend working with your staff, managers, people leaders, health and safety representatives and union representatives to turn these principles into action.

Work is good for mental health

It is important to recognise that work can be very good for our mental health and wellbeing. In addition to providing financial security, work also provides benefits such as a sense of purpose, social connections, routine and opportunities to grow, develop and make valued contributions. By creating opportunities for people to do their best work, both your organisation and your people will benefit.

**Simple actions can help.
These include ensuring:**

- people have clear roles;
- their workload is reasonable;
- they have a say over how work gets done;
- there are positive relationships and supports in place at work; and
- they are consulted during periods of change.

As many organisations are re-designing what their workplaces might look like, now is the opportunity to think about how your workplace could benefit from a mentally healthy approach.

Find out more:

Visit the Royal Australasian College of Physicians to understand more about the Health Benefits of Good Work Initiative.

How COVID-19 can impact mental health at work

Although work is generally good for mental health and wellbeing, certain things about work or the workplace can impact mental health and wellbeing. COVID-19 has also created unique work pressures that can impact mental health. These include things like:

- Concerns about exposure to COVID-19 through work or commuting
- Concerns around hygiene practices and access to personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Stress from having to work from temporary workplaces that are not set up well
- Increased work-related violence or aggression in customer facing roles
- Increased racism, discrimination or stigma at work
- Social isolation because of suspected workplace exposure or physical distancing arrangements
- Uncertainty about future employment
- Increased or decreased workload or work hours
- Insufficient training or support to use new equipment, software or processes
- Increased risk of workplace bullying, conflict or harassment due to strained work relationships
- Witnessing serious illness or death of colleagues or clients (e.g. in health and care settings)
- Concerns about the potential long-term effects COVID-19 may have on the ability to work
- Vulnerable people having to stay away from work for long periods of time
- Additional pressures created by home schooling or additional carer responsibilities
- Increased exposure to family violence
- Lack of clarity about roles and management expectations during rapid responses
- Perceived injustices or lack of fairness in decisions made by management.

People with an existing mental illness may also face a unique set of additional challenges associated with COVID-19, for example:

- People with generalised anxiety may find the increase in negative or conflicting information has increased their level of worry and anxiety
- People with depression may find the changes in routine and isolation from others has worsened their mood
- People with eating disorders may find the change to routine, restrictions around exercise and food insecurity has led to an increase in concerns about size, shape and weight and disordered behaviours
- People with obsessive compulsive disorder may find frequent reminders about hygiene, handwashing and germs anxiety provoking or stigmatising.
- People who have experienced trauma may find certain situations triggering which could lead to being re-traumatised

Find out more:

- Learn more about mental health hazards in the workplace and how to manage them at Safe Work Australia.
- The People at Work tool provides a free, reliable and valid assessment tool for identifying risk and resources to support your organisation to respond.

WHY INVESTING IN MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES MAKES SENSE

Benefits of building a mentally healthy workplace during COVID-19

Building a mentally healthy workplace is not only good for your people, it is also good for your organisation, with benefits including:

- **Enhanced work performance and engagement.** Positive wellbeing and job satisfaction can enhance performance, productivity, team cohesion and additional effort at work.

- **Reduced costs of mental ill-health and psychological injury.** Sick days, staff turnover, workers compensation claims and other management effort to manage mental health at work costs time and money. Prevention strategies and early intervention can help reduce costs to your organisation.

- **Attracting (and keeping) great talent.** Organisations creating healthy environments are more likely to attract and retain the best and brightest talent.

- **More responsive and agile organisations.** When people are functioning at their best, they can think more clearly, flexibly and creatively. This means your organisation as a whole can be more responsive and agile.

- **Your people are your organisation.** Your people and how they interact with customers, clients, suppliers and the general public reflect your organisation. The mental health and wellbeing of people in your organisation can ultimately influence how others experience your brand.

Employer obligations related to mental health

Employers have duties and obligations under the WHS laws to provide safe work, this includes both physical and psychological safe work. All organisations have obligations to do what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise work-related risk to psychological health and safety, including any risks created by COVID-19. Organisations also have obligations to consult with workers and their representatives about health and safety. Similar to obligations to identify and manage the physical risks related to COVID-19 organisations also need to identify risks to mental health, assess these risks, eliminate or minimise the risks and review to ensure these strategies are effective.

> **Find out more:**
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> To understand more about how to meet your legal duties, you can visit Safe Work Australia *or* seek advice from your state or territory regulator.
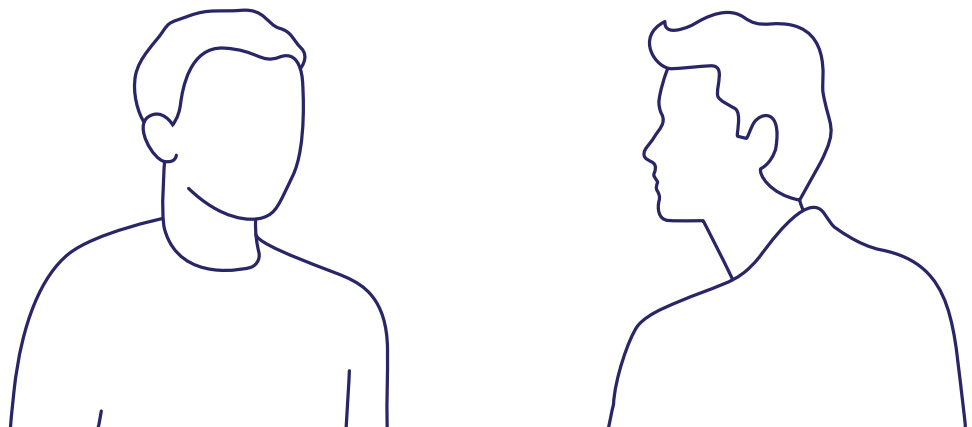
CREATING A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE DURING COVID-19

Tips for supporting your people during COVID-19

Leaders and managers can do many things to support mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19, including:

- Regularly communicate with people and check-in on how they are going

- Facilitate open communication, providing opportunities for people to provide input and feedback

- Provide people with an internal point of contact to discuss any questions or concerns

- Consult workers and their representatives about risks to their mental and physical health and safety to find out whether aspects of their work are causing them stress

- Recognise and celebrate positive things such as new ideas, innovations or ways of supporting each other

- Celebrate the things that have worked well during COVID-19 and discuss which of these things are worth continuing into the future

- Acknowledge that uncertainty and change can be stressful and provide updates about how the organisation is responding

- Address risks to mental health as much as you reasonably can

- Source advice from reliable information sources to reduce misinformation and conflicting advice

- Refer people to appropriate work-related mental health and wellbeing support services, such as Employee Assistance Programs or the Beyond Blue's Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service and make sure these resources are easy to find.

- Consider flexible work arrangements to help people fit in responsibilities outside work

- Encourage people to have downtime, take leave and have breaks

- Proactively support people exposed to more stressors (e.g. frontline workers or those working from home)

- Inform workers about their entitlements if they become unfit for work or have caring responsibilities.

- Inform workers about their rights under WHS laws, including the right to stop work in certain circumstances and the right not to be discriminated against or disadvantaged for raising work health and safety concerns in the workplace

- Proactively reach out to people who are isolating, stood down or less connected to their usual team

Find out more at:

- Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service Guide for Managers

- SuperFriend COVID-19 Support Guide

- Australian Psychological Society Guide for Maintaining Employee Engagement during COVID-19

Supporting managers and people leaders

One of the most cost-effective strategies for improving workplace mental health is to invest in building the capability of managers and people leaders. Managers with good people skills, an understanding of mental health and capacity to thoughtfully assign and manage work are key to creating a mentally healthy environment. Poor management not only creates stress and impacts on the quality of work, it is also one of the most common reasons why people resign.

Given strong management is crucial to effective responses to COVID-19, organisations should consider the specific supports they are providing for managers and people leaders. This may include professional development, training or facilitating networking to ensure they have the right tools and supports they need to manage their teams and the organisation effectively during uncertain times. Senior leaders should check-in with managers and people leaders to understand how they are managing and whether additional support is needed.

Find out more at:

- Black Dog Institute's free workplace toolkit with strategies for enhancing awareness and capability to manage mental health in the workplace.

- Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service Guide for Business Owners and Managers.

- SuperFriend's Resources for People Leaders during COVID-19
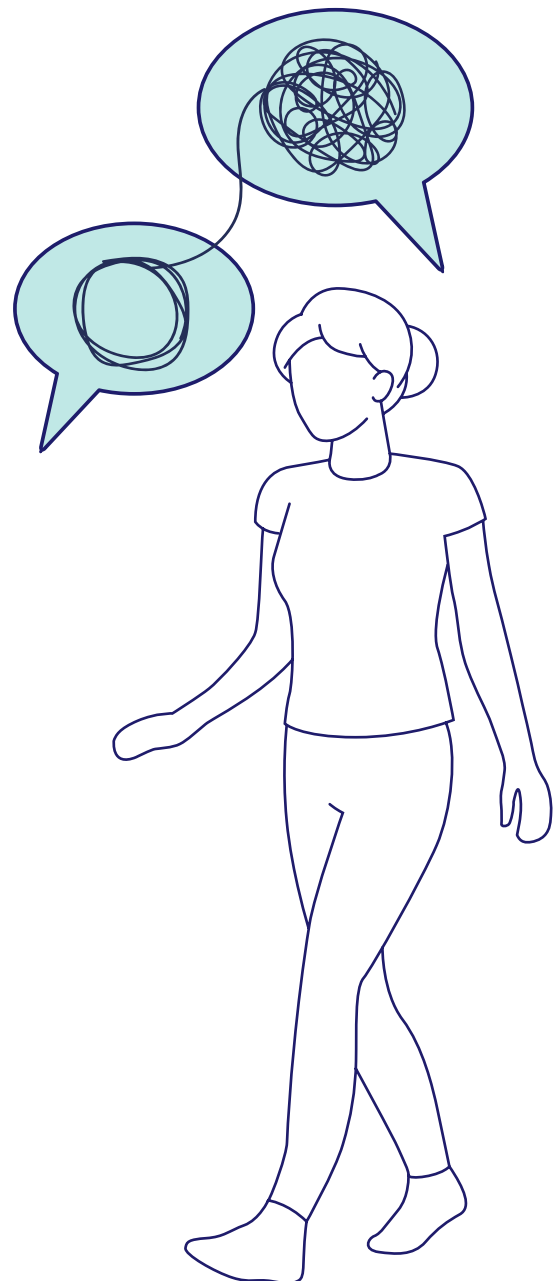
PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Coordinate your approach across the organisation

Building a mentally healthy workplace is about creating an environment and culture that recognises mental health and wellbeing as an important asset. A strategic approach goes beyond raising awareness and supporting people affected by mental ill-health and suicide. It also includes proactively reducing work-related harm and identifying ways to promote the positive aspects of work.

Coordinating action across health and safety, human resources, operations and communications teams under strong leadership support and guidance will make your approach more efficient and effective than relying on disconnected and reactive solutions. This can begin by securing commitment from the leadership team, creating a working group to lead change and identifying and agreeing on priority areas for action.

> **Find out more at:**
>
> - Heads Up Strategies for healthy workplaces
> - Future of Work Institute Thrive at Work toolkit
> - Centre for Transformative Work Design SMART work design model
> - SuperFriend's Building Thriving Workplaces: Guidelines and Actions

Commit to continual improvement

Focusing on specific, targeted action areas in a continual improvement approach can help make change achievable and long-lasting. A continual improvement loop involves:

- **Plan**: Identify an opportunity for change and potential solutions to create a plan for action.
- **Do**: Put the plan into practice as a trial to see if it works.
- **Check**: Look at how the trial change worked. Was it successful? Is it worth expanding across the organisation?
- **Act:** Take action based on what you learnt. You might decide to roll-out the change across the organisation or go back to the drawing board.
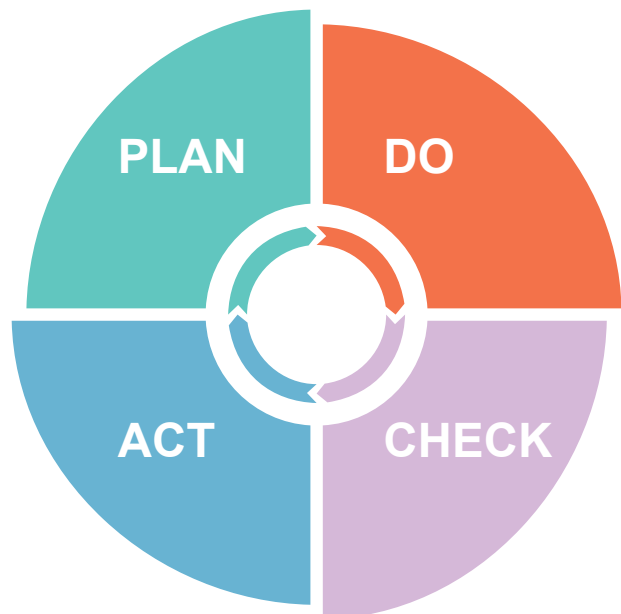
Identifying areas for action can come from a range of sources including consultation with workers, focus groups, engagement surveys, audit tools or reviewing existing human resources or health and safety data.

Consult workers and be transparent about change

The current climate of change and uncertainty is difficult for many people, particularly when changes impact careers and livelihoods. Poorly planned or communicated change can create additional stress, lead people to imagine worst case scenarios and rumours to spread. Some decisions or changes are never easy, but they can be managed with dignity, fairness and respect.

Organisations have specific legal requirements to consult workers and their representatives about changes that may impact their health and safety. Benefits of consulting your people and being transparent about potential changes also include people feeling more empowered, respected and accepting of any change.

It is important to understand that it is normal for people to feel a range of emotional reactions in response to change, particularly if they are being redeployed, stood down or made redundant. These reactions may vary from person to person and include frustration, anger, shame, embarrassment or hopelessness. It is important to listen and acknowledge that this is not business as usual and it is okay to not feel okay.

Find out more at:

- Safe Work Australia Model Code of Practice on Work Health and Safety Consultation, Cooperation and Coordination.

- The Australian Council of Trade Unions COVID-19 Checklist for Health and Safety Representatives

- Australian Psychological Society Guide to Coping with change during COVID-19

Keep communication clear, consistent, considerate and timely

Clear, consistent, considerate and well-timed communication is a powerful tool in creating an environment of trust and respect that is foundational to a mentally healthy workplace. Communication helps you manage change effectively, helps people remain connected and informed, clarifies expectations and reduces conflict.

Good communication is a two-way process, with leaders and workers listening to each other. By creating an environment in which open communication is expected, workers will feel more comfortable raising issues and contributing to solutions. You do not need to have all the answers, often people will be happy knowing what progress is being made and how the organisation is approaching unknowns.

Your internal communications plan should include a healthy flow of information about changes to daily operations or conditions, management expectations and which protection measures are in place. It should also consider which areas of the organisation or locations require different messages or ways messages need to be tailored to different audiences such as people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Align your approach with your inclusion and diversity strategy

Inclusive organisations benefit from the wide range of perspectives, ideas and experiences that a diverse workforce brings. They also create environments that enhance mental health through a sense of safety, acceptance and belonging. Organisations with strong capabilities to support diversity are also better positioned to respond appropriately to the needs of more vulnerable groups during COVID-19.

Some workers have become more vulnerable to racism associated with COVID-19 or may be more vulnerable to the physical or mental health impacts of COVID-19. Ensure that you have considered how you will identify and support more vulnerable workers such as young workers, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and the LGBTIQ+ community, as well as people experiencing mental illness or family violence.

The Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service includes information on mental health during COVID-19 in languages other than English.

Find tailored supports via organisations such as:

- Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia: COVID-19 worry getting you down?

- Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet: social and emotional wellbeing resources

- Mental Health Australia: Embrace multicultural mental health resources

- QLife: Resources and peer support for the LGBTI community

- Reachout.com: Resources and supports for Young People

- SANE: Resources and supports for people affected by complex mental health issues

- 1800Respect: Resources and support for people experiencing family violence

Invest in positive and protective relationships and cultures

Teams that work well together perform better. Positive relationships at work enhance and protect mental health and wellbeing. They also provide opportunities to notice changes signaling someone might need support.

The pandemic has changed many relationships at work. Some of these changes have been positive, with people brought closer together through shared experience. However, there have also been strains on work relations with some managers having to become more directive to drive rapid responses, people responding differently to increased pressure both at work and at home and teams having to re-negotiate their new normal.

Relationships are also important to maintain for people who are isolating or are away from the workplace. Reaching out regularly helps them stay connected, signals your support and makes it easier for them to re-engage down the track.

Be a role model by looking after yourself

Business owners, managers and leaders are human too. We all need to look after ourselves by taking time out to sleep, exercise, refresh and do things we enjoy, as well as seeking additional support when we need it.

It is easy to get distracted by all the urgent priorities both at work and at home. However, as someone who sets the tone of your organisation, how you look after yourself acts as an important example to others.

For more tips on looking after your mental health during COVID-19, visit:

- Department of Health
- Beyond Blue

Know where to get reliable information and support

People can become distressed, frightened or even harmed by conflicting advice or misleading information about COVID-19. Workplaces can also play a powerful role in reinforcing health information from reliable sources to counteract some of the misinformation and conflicting advice circulating in the general community. Providing updates on health advice from trusted sources such as the Department of Health and basing organisational decisions on reliable data can help people stay safe and calm.
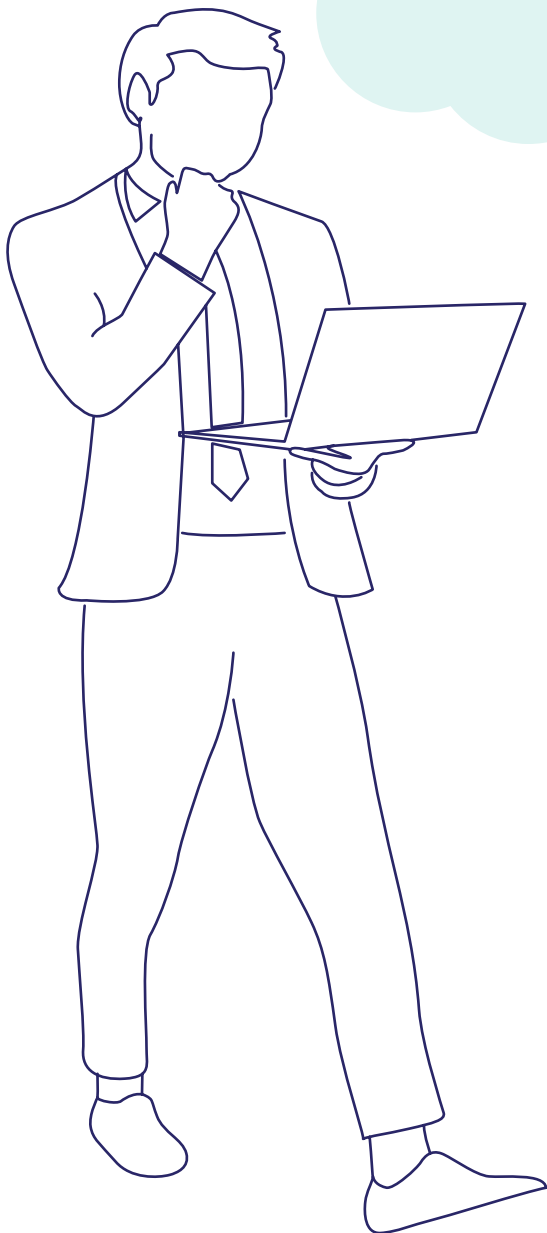
Find trusted advice at:

- The whole of Government website for the Australian business community: https://www.business.gov.au

- Safe Work Australia: https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au

- The Fair Work Ombudsman: https://coronavirus.fairwork.gov.au

- The Australian Taxation Office: https://www.ato.gov.au

- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry updates: australianchambercovid.com

- Australian Department of Health: https://www.health.gov.au/resources

- The Australian Industry Group: https://www.aigroup.com.au

- The Business Council of Australia: https://www.bca.com.au

Expect some ups and downs in the road to recovery

It is normal for mental health and wellbeing to fluctuate during the various stages of responding to a crisis such as COVID-19. There can be peaks of excitement and a sense of togetherness during rapid responses, as well as periods of heightened anxiety and worry if data predicts negative experiences ahead. There can also be times when the energy and mood of people drops and they feel frustrated, disconnected and exhausted once all the activity has calmed down.

The road to recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 is likely to be uncertain, unpredictable and long. Understanding that fluctuations in mental health and wellbeing are normal and listening to your people can help your organisation prepare for the journey ahead. Helping them connect to evidence-informed supports that can prepare them for this and build their resilience may also help.

To access free programs to improve resilience and navigate tough times visit:

- Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service helpline, resources, forums and online chat
- Black Dog Institute HeadGear app
- This Way Up's Coping and Resilience Tools
- Black Dog Institute MyCompass program
- MindSpot Clinic Online Assessment and Treatment
- SuperFriend's Wellbeing Check-in and Self-care Action Plan

Design for the future

Many organisations have found innovative ways to work throughout the pandemic, and things we thought would take years to change have changed within weeks. As your organisation looks to the future, it can also be an opportunity celebrate new ways of working and re-imagine how and where work is done. Putting these principles into action now could set your organisation up for being mentally healthier in the longer term.

Thinking ahead to the future, these research-informed toolkits can provide some additional tools, case studies and resources:

- Heads Up Strategies for healthy workplaces
- Future of Work Institute Thrive at Work toolkit
- Centre for Transformative Work Design SMART work design model
- SuperFriend's Building Thriving Workplaces: Guidelines and Actions

SUPPORTING PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN THE WORKPLACE

Signs to look out for

You don't have to be a mental health expert to spot signs that you or someone around you might need extra support. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations and these are not the only signs you or someone around you might need support. Some signs to look out for include:

- Being less social than usual or becoming withdrawn
- Changes in attitude towards work
- Changes in tone in communications, even via phone or email
- Being less interested or engaged in things they usually enjoy
- Difficulties concentrating or remembering things
- Experiencing changes in mood
- Becoming more rigid, inflexible, or irritable than usual
- Becoming easily frustrated with tasks or people
- Making simple mistakes or missing deadlines
- Changes in how they interact with team members
- Unable to switch off
- Being late or absent from work without a clear reason
- Drinking more alcohol or taking other drugs to cope
- Making statements that provide hints that they are not doing so well

The main thing to remember is to trust your gut – if you feel there is a change, reach out to check-in on how they are going.

How to have a supportive conversation

A simple conversation can play a powerful role in keeping someone safe during a difficult time and connecting them to support.

Starting these conversations can feel challenging and you may fear that talking about things might make it worse. However, talking often makes people feel heard, understood, supported and less distressed. You don't need to be someone's manager or good friend to ask if they are okay.

Here are some simple tips for reaching out to someone you think might need support:

Find a private space to have the conversation so you are not putting them on the spot somewhere public

Check-in and ask them how they are going

Ask open questions such as "how are you going?" or "what's on your mind?"

Listen without judgement

Encourage action such as calling a support line, making an appointment with their GP or contacting the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if available

Check in after the conversation to see how things are for them now

Look after yourself and seek support if you have been affected by the conversation.

The list of resources in this guide provides some ideas on where to link people into support.

Being prepared helps

Having a list of additional supports to refer people to readily available can make it easy to quickly connect people to support. Facilitating training in how to have conversations about mental health and suicide can normalise these conversations and empower people.

Supporting people with a mental illness

Some people with a mental illness have experienced an increase in symptoms as a result of COVID-19. The impact of mental illness on work can be harder to see than a physical injury or disability, and symptoms may include changes in things such as concentration, memory, attention, problem solving, interactions with others or ability to regulate emotions. Even though the signs are more subtle, there are still clear obligations for organisations to support people experiencing mental illness related to reasonable adjustments, managing disclosure of a mental illness and appropriate performance management.

Reasonable adjustments for a people experiencing mental illness may include things such as time off, flexible working arrangements or changes in responsibility.

Defining these adjustments should be a collaborative effort between the organisation, workers and any health professionals involved. Supports and communication with team members to promote a culture of care and inclusion within the worker's broader team may also help.

It is important to protect the privacy of your workers as well as ensure they are treated fairly. Building mental health literacy and capability can help your organisation respond quickly and appropriately when these situations arise and ensure your employee is supported and able to continue as a valued member of your workforce.

Some initial ideas on ways to support people who are experiencing mental ill-health include:

- Listen and offer support
- Explore adjustments to help people stay at work
- Develop a work plan
- Check-in with them regularly
- Communicate any adjustment with other team members where appropriate
- Review workloads of other team members to make sure adjustments are not creating conflict
- Allow time off work
- Keep in touch

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

If you are concerned about yourself or a colleague, help is available through these free and confidential supports.

Organisation	Phone number	Website	Description
Head to Health		headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support	Provided by the Department of Health to search free or low cost digital supports for mental health.
Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service	1800 512 348	coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au	24/7 support for mental health and wellbeing via phone, web chat and online forum.
Lifeline Australia	13 11 14	lifeline.org.au	24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.
Suicide Call Back Service	1300 659 467	suicidecallbackservice.org.au	24/7 telephone crisis support for people at risk of suicide, carers and bereaved, as well as online resources and information.
MensLine Australia	1300 78 99 78	mensline.org.au/phone-and-online-counselling	24/7 telephone and online support, information and referral service for men
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800	kidshelpline.com.au	24/7 telephone counselling for young people under 25 years.
headspace Australia	1800 650 890	headspace.org.au	Telephone and web chat for young people aged 12 to 25 years.
QLife	1800 184 527	qlife.org.au	Telephone and online chat support service for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI) communities.
Relationships Australia	1300 364 277	relationships.org.au	Relationships Australia offers a broad range of services to individuals, families and communities throughout the country.
Butterfly Foundation	1800 334 673	butterfly.org.au	Support for people affected by eating disorders via telephone, web chat or email.
Carers Australia	1800 422 737	carersaustralia.com.au	Carer gateway of practical advice and connection with local carer services.
SANE	1800 187 263	sane.org	Resources, forums and support for people affected by complex mental health issues.
National Debt Helpline	1800 007 007	ndh.org.au	Financial counselling advice for financial hardship.
Counselling Online	State-based numbers	counsellingonline.org.au	24/7 support for anyone affected by alcohol and other drugs.
Gambling Help Online	1800 858 858	gamblinghelponline.org.au	24/7 support for anyone affected by gambling.
Wellmob		wellmob.org.au	Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

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