

Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces

Release 1, September 2021



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

About this Blueprint

The Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces has been produced as part of the National Workplace Initiative. This is an \$11.5 million investment by the Commonwealth Government in creating a nationally consistent approach to mentally healthy workplaces in Australia.

The National Workplace Initiative is a collaborative project of the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, a group of national organisations representing business, union, mental health, workplace health and government sectors. The contract for the project is held and managed by the National Mental Health Commission, which is also a member of the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces outlines the core pillars and principles underpinning a nationally consistent approach to mentally healthy workplaces. It also outlines key focus areas within the digital portal that the National Workplace Initiative is creating to connect people with the information and support they need to make workplaces mentally healthy.

The Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces is intended as a living document that will be updated as our understanding of mentally healthy workplaces evolves and as research evidence and good practice continues to emerge. The National Workplace Initiative seeks to further develop the Blueprint in collaboration with organisations and businesses, workers and their representatives, experts and other stakeholders.

The National Workplace Initiative welcomes feedback and suggestions for additions and improvements to the Blueprint, including practical guidance for creating mentally healthy workplaces.

The National Workplace Initiative will progressively release future versions of the Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces that incorporate this feedback.

Note on language:

We acknowledge that there is a wide variation in what work looks like for people across Australia. There is also a wide variation in the language people use to define their experience of mental health. We recognise that language related to mentally healthy workplaces is always evolving. Please refer to the Glossary at the end of this document for more information about the terms we use in this Blueprint.

To sign up for updates about the National Workplace Initiative, future versions of the Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces and news about the forthcoming digital portal, visit: www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/mental-health-reform/national-workplace-initiative

Introduction

All of us experience ups and downs throughout our working lives, whether they are financial stress, difficulties with colleagues at work, excessive job demands, the death of a loved one, or other big life or work events. These are the experiences that people bring to work every day that organisations and businesses cannot afford to ignore. Mental illness is also common, with one in two Australians expected to experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

Workplaces can be a source of comfort, helping people through life's challenges. We can connect with others and find a listening ear. Workplaces can also provide a safe place to talk, or encouragement to seek professional support. Importantly, work can promote mental health by providing things like financial security, social connection, structure and opportunities for personal growth and development. It can also provide us with a sense of purpose and meaning.

However, workplaces can also negatively impact our mental health. Exposure to experiences like bullying, harassment, unreasonable demands and excessive control can harm mental health, confidence and careers. We can also be negatively impacted by poor work or organisational design when policies, technology or management processes create chronic stress.



Mentally healthy workplaces are good for business

Healthy organisations are powered by healthy people. People make critical decisions, produce and deliver essential products and services, and interact with customers and the public on behalf of organisations and businesses.

To function at their best, people need healthy environments, cultures and practices to protect them during challenging times, support recovery from mental ill-health and provide opportunities to develop.

Investment in mentally healthy workplaces provides returns to organisations, including increased engagement, loyalty, productivity and time at work. It can also reduce injuries and the costs associated with sick leave, compensation claims and time away from work. Mentally healthy workplace initiatives can help organisations attract and retain talented and skilled people.

Aside from the benefits that mentally healthy workplaces may create, it is important for every organisation executive, leader and business owner to understand that they have a range of legislated requirements related to mental health at work. Understanding and meeting requirements related to work health and safety, workers' compensation, discrimination, privacy and workplace relations is essential for protecting people, reputations and organisations.

Making complexity simple by focusing on key principles

People may become interested in making their organisation or business mentally healthy for many reasons. In researching how the National Workplace Initiative can help, we heard that it is common for people to feel confused about where to start.



Human resources and safety professionals

“ Do we have the right policies and programs?”

The amount of information and resources available online can be overwhelming, and it is hard to know what is relevant and what to trust. It can also be challenging to understand which roles hold accountability for driving mentally healthy workplaces within an organisation, and what capabilities are required.

Like many strategic approaches, the best path for any organisation or business to create mentally healthy workplaces can evolve over time. Using key principles to guide action, being aware of legislated requirements and testing what works can help people identify the best approach for their organisation or business.



Industry bodies

“ How do we address mental health in our industry?”



Small business

“ How do we support people going through a rough patch?”



CEO and leaders

“ How are we performing relative to others? Are we compliant?”



Sole trader

“ How do I manage stress from work?”

Foundations of mentally healthy workplaces

There is no simple solution to creating mentally healthy workplaces. Instead, it hinges on commitment and action to strengthen three key pillars across any organisation:



Protect

Identify and manage work-related risks to mental health.



Respond

Build capability to identify and respond to support people experiencing mental ill-health or distress.



Promote

Recognise and enhance the positive aspects of work that contribute to good mental health.

These pillars intersect, with action in one area often leading to improvements in others.

It's the law: Organisations and businesses have legal obligations related to Protect and Respond pillars making these a good place to focus on first.

How we will help achievement in these pillars

There is no single formula or step-by-step plan for achievement in these three pillars. Because each organisation is different, different things will be more important to address.

On the journey to creating mentally healthy workplaces, people can expect to progress through stages including:

- Setting up for success by understanding how to achieve change, whether as an individual or leading an organisation of thousands.
- Understanding how to measure and monitor mentally healthy workplaces to track change.
- Creating foundations for mentally healthy workplaces by building capability across the three pillars of Protect, Respond and Promote.
- Identifying how to refine existing approaches to support different groups, career stages and types of work.
- Demonstrating leadership by extending approaches into supply chains and communities.



Protect

Organisations and businesses have legal obligations related to work health and safety that include psychological health.

These obligations include taking reasonably practicable steps to identify and manage “psychosocial hazards”, which are aspects of work that can lead to psychological or physical harm. These can stem from how work is designed and managed, the work environment and equipment, interactions with others or the types of tasks required.

Aspects of Protect can include:

- Awareness of legal requirements related to work health and safety, workers’ compensation, workplace relations, privacy and discrimination.
- Psychosocial hazard identification and management.
- Work design.
- Consultation and communication with workers.
- Resilience training to support mental health during high-pressure situations.
- Proactive and systematic stances to address bullying, harassment and discrimination.
- Creating environments where people feel safe to raise concerns at work.



Respond

It is common for people to experience periods where they need additional support or flexibility because of life circumstances, caring responsibilities or mental ill-health. Organisations can support people by building capability to respond and support people experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

Creating an environment that reduces stigma, makes it safe to talk, supports early intervention and ensures people are able to recognise, respond and refer will lead to a win-win situation for individuals, organisations, businesses and communities.

Being able to respond appropriately to mental ill-health in the workplace is also linked to legislated duties ranging from workers compensation, discrimination, privacy and workplace relations.

Aspects of Respond can include:

- Legal requirements related to work health and safety, workers' compensation, workplace relations, privacy and discrimination.
- Recognising and responding to signs of mental ill-health and distress.
- Compassionate and supportive conversations.
- Strategies to address stigma within organisations.
- Reasonable adjustments to support people experiencing mental ill-health.
- Promoting help seeking and pathways to treatment.
- Research-supported early intervention initiatives.
- Return to work and stay at work initiatives.
- Considering mental illness within diversity and inclusion programs.
- Tailored approaches to ensure people get the right support for them.



Promote

Bringing out the positive elements of work can enhance mental health. Strong workplace relationships, feeling work has purpose, and creating opportunities for personal and professional development are good for mental health. By building on the aspects of work that help people thrive, organisations and businesses can function at their best too.

Aspects of Promote can include:

- Opportunities for personal and professional development.
- Meaningful connections at work.
- Recognising and rewarding positive behaviours.
- Opportunities for people to shape their work.
- Recognition and celebration of diversity and inclusion.
- Connecting to meaning and purpose.
- Holistic health and wellbeing programs.



Protect

Identify and manage work-related risks to mental health.



Promote

Recognise and enhance the positive aspects of work that contribute to good mental health.



Respond

Build capability to identify and respond to support people experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

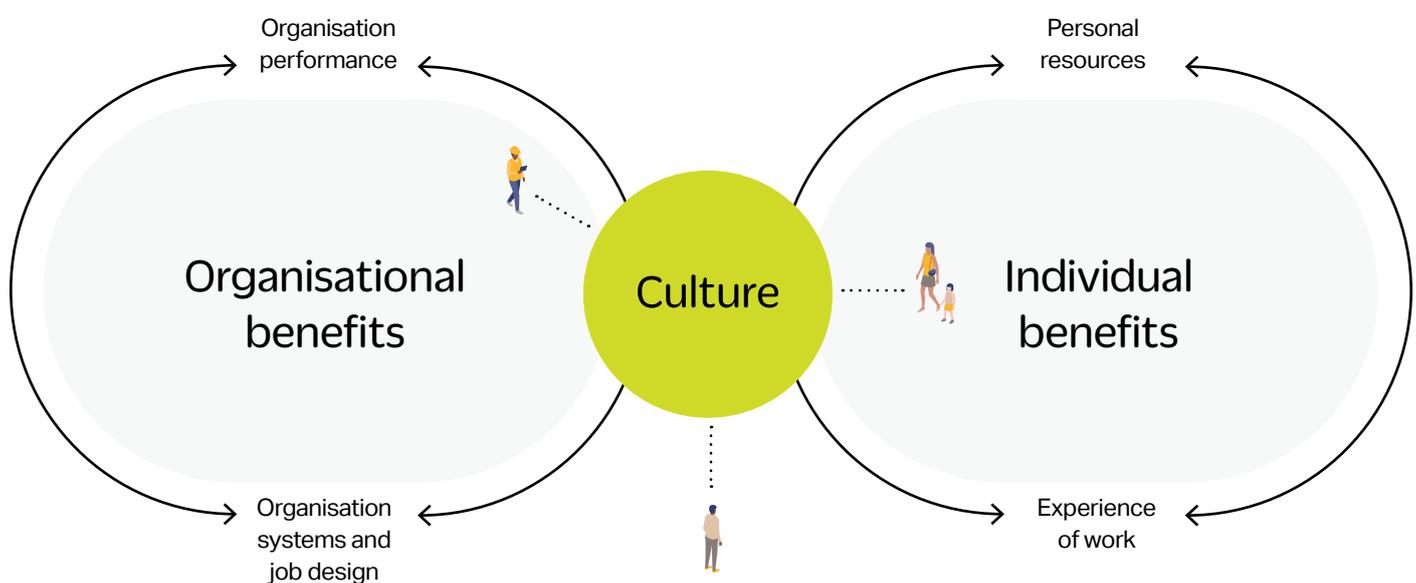


 These pillars overlap, with action in one of these areas often leading to improvements in others.



A continual improvement approach

Creating mentally healthy workplaces takes time but it does not need to be overwhelming. Often the process will be a journey made up of small actions. Other times it may require a bold strategic shift or investment. Creating mentally healthy workplaces is not a set and forget exercise; it is something that requires ongoing attention.



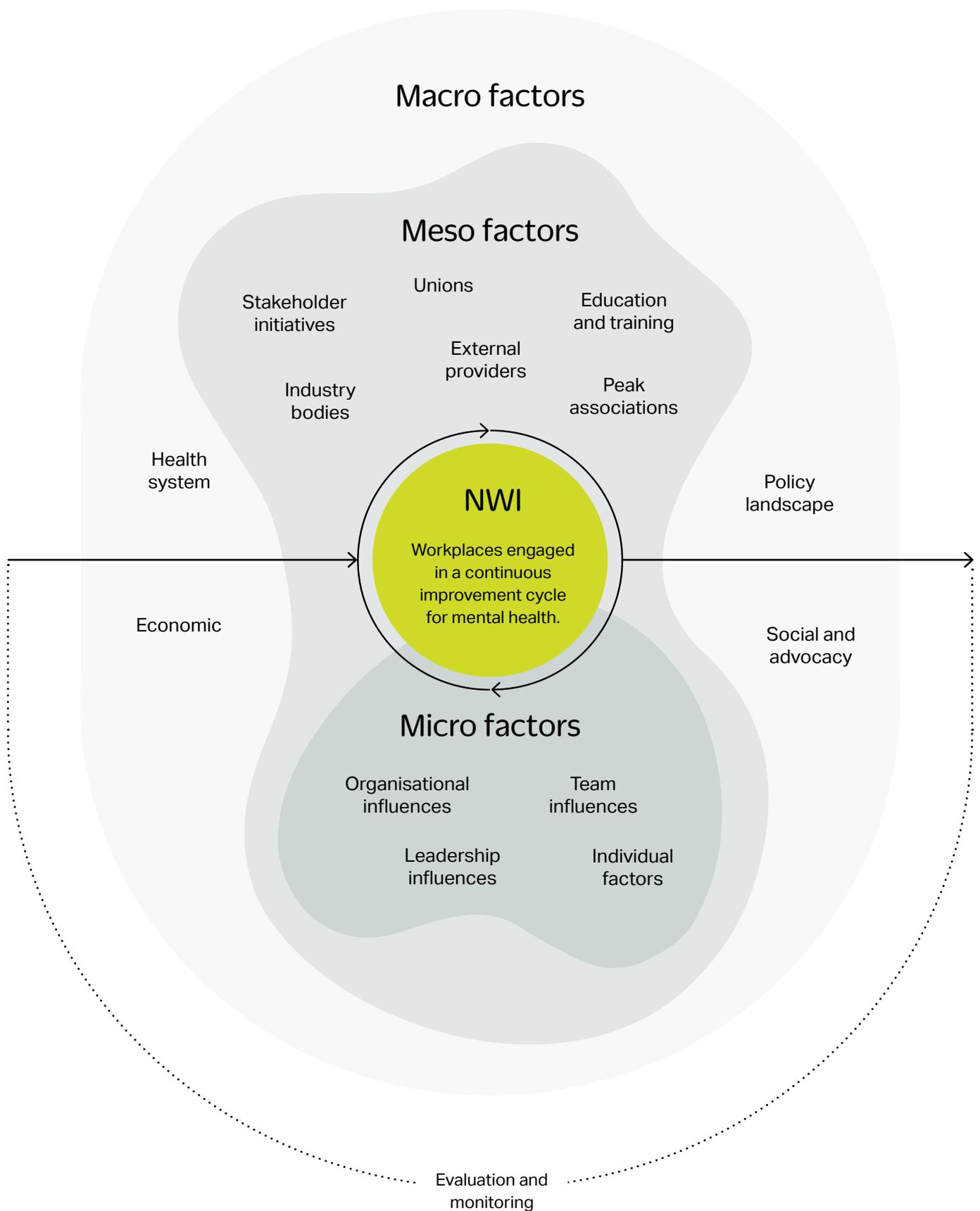
Like physical health and safety at work or diversity and inclusion initiatives, creating mentally healthy workplaces evolves over time. It takes continual improvement, assessing where action is required and learning from what works and what needs improvement.

Everyone has a role to play and there are no simple solutions. Small businesses and sole traders need a different approach to larger organisations, and different roles and professionals offer different perspectives to mentally healthy workplaces.

Achieving a nationally consistent approach to mentally healthy workplaces requires action from industries, policy makers, researchers and service providers supporting organisations and businesses. These larger-scale initiatives can provide tailored supports, focus on key industry needs and provide expert advice.

Many industries are already taking steps to support mentally healthy workplaces. This Blueprint can act as a common foundation that can be adapted and tailored to suit the needs and contexts of a range of work environments and industries. It can create a common language that links different frameworks in different contexts.

A continual improvement approach



The core principles of our change process

From factories and farms to offices and online businesses, there is huge diversity in where and how work occurs in Australia. However, there are some core principles for change that set initiatives up for success. Thinking about “how” change can happen in an organisation or business can be just as important as thinking about “what” change to make.



1. Consult and listen: In addition to being part of legislated requirements, consulting with a range of workers provides valuable insights about what people need, what could improve, their solutions and where initiatives may come unstuck. Listening to workers makes initiatives more likely to succeed and can help design enhanced systems and job roles. Approaches such as audits can help determine risks and opportunities.



2. Engage decision makers early: Whether it is a team of two or an organisation governed by a board, engaging decision makers from the beginning is essential for successful change. These people set the tone, culture, budgets and strategic directions of organisations. They also bear most of the accountability for legislated requirements.



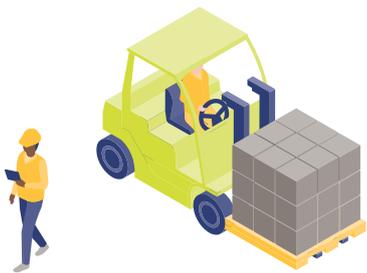
3. Link action to outcomes: There are many valid reasons organisations may choose to invest in mentally healthy workplaces from compliance through to social benefit. Being clear on the “why” will help maintain motivation and enthusiasm.



4. Assign accountability: Shared responsibility for mental health is important, but so is individual accountability for action. Assigning clear, tangible, realistic and measurable accountabilities for specific activities will make it less likely things fall through the cracks or get put on the backburner.

The core principles of our change process

Some of these principles are more relevant for medium to large organisations, others more relevant to sole traders and small businesses, but they are all worth considering in any approach.



5. Integrate into business as usual: Activities that are built into strategic plans and existing workflows, policies and practices are much easier to maintain than stand-alone initiatives. Building things into existing practices, like work health and safety assessments or professional development, can make changes more likely to stick.



6. Make change visible and transparent: People can become easily frustrated and cynical if they feel talk is not backed up by action. Bringing people on the change journey and clearly communicating outcomes and updates can improve results. Talk openly about mental health and aspects of work that can help or hinder it. Make sure people feel involved in decisions and efforts are visible and accessible.



7. Base decisions on research-supported approaches: Drawing on expert sources and focusing on initiatives with research support will help protect both people and investments. Initiatives that do not work can waste time, money, hope, trust and goodwill.



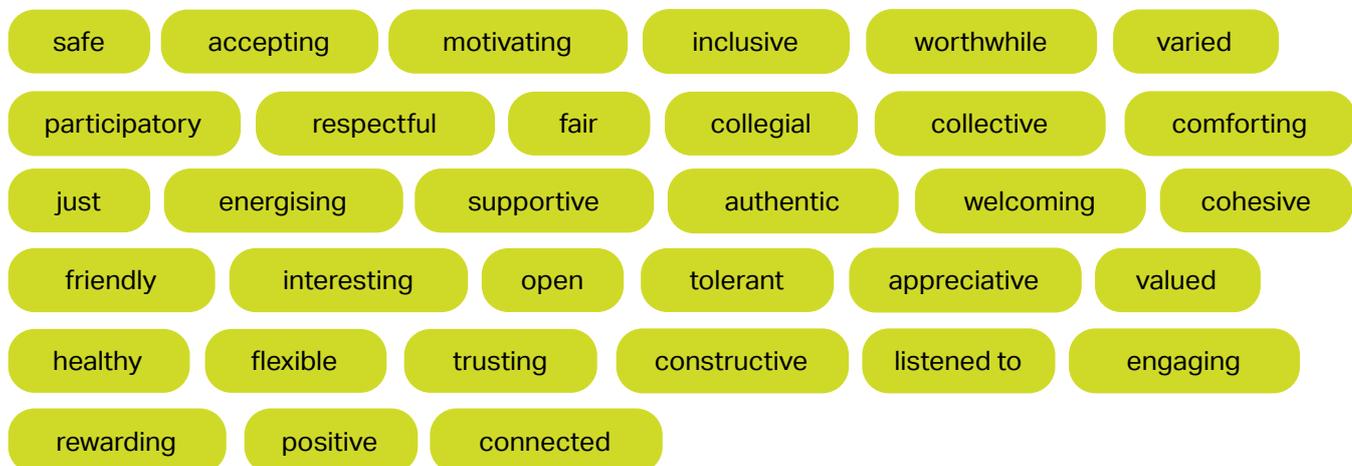
8. Continually review and improve: Rather than trying to do everything at once, adopt an incremental approach that starts small, reviews where action is required, identifies what is working and responds to what needs improving. Regularly review outcomes, both hits and misses, and respond accordingly.

What we are working towards

Creating mentally healthy workplaces is more than simply providing supports for people in distress. Although awareness and supports for mental ill-health are important, they are not the entire picture. Mentally healthy workplaces also reflect environments, cultures and practices that protect and promote mental health. They involve making decisions and taking action that proactively shapes how individuals experience work.

Many organisations are aware of the importance of finding ways to support and enhance mental health at work. However, there is an overwhelming amount of advice to consider and messages can seem to conflict.

Mentally healthy workplaces can be:



What we are working towards

Some of this confusion comes from differences due to organisation size. As mentally healthy workplaces are linked to how things operate and how decisions are made, the size of organisations may influence what mentally healthy workplaces look like. Larger organisations may need to focus more on systems and processes and small business may need to focus more on relationships.

Mentally unhealthy workplaces can be:



Mentally healthy workplaces



What do mentally healthy workplaces look like for a sole trader?

Sole traders recognise the importance of looking after their own mental health as an essential investment in the quality of their work. They set healthy boundaries that allow time to connect and recharge.

They recognise that good business practices are also good for mental health, with effective and compliant processes reducing some of the stress that can come with running a business. They reach out for help when required, whether it is with finances, administration, strategy or mental health.

Sole traders understand the impact of businesses they are working with or supplying to, and can respond to unsafe situations. They recognise that businesses subcontracting work to sole traders have a duty to protect their mental health.

Sole traders also recognise the impact that their work has on others and understand their role in protecting, responding and promoting mental health in people around them. They understand the value of a strong professional and personal network for providing support in tough times.



What do mentally healthy workplaces look like for small businesses?

Small business owners model the importance of looking after mental health as an essential investment in business health. They balance the pressures of running a small business with time away to connect and recharge, and encourage their people to do the same.

Small business owners recognise that addressing psychological hazards at work is as important as addressing physical hazards and do what they can to support people in their roles. Rosters, equipment and technology support mental health rather than creating chronic stress. They recognise that good business practices are also good for mental health, with effective and compliant processes reducing some of the stress that can come with running a business.

Small business owners support their people through the peaks and dips of being in a small business by keeping communication open, listening to concerns and finding ways to support their valued teams. These initiatives may be informal, but they make people feel heard and valued.

Small business owners ensure their people have the resources, skills and support they need to perform their roles. Workers are clear about what is expected of them, they feel confident raising issues, and feel connected to the team and valued for their contributions. People feel they can be themselves at work, no matter who they are.



What do mentally healthy workplaces look like for medium to large organisations?

Leadership teams make a commitment to mental health that is visible across all policies, processes and practices. Leaders create a safe and inclusive environment from the top, starting with what they say and do. Leaders proactively invest in a strategic approach that integrates best practice into operations, safety and human resources, beyond legislated requirements. Leaders prioritise good work design that considers the work, the organisation's systems, the physical work environment, and the needs and experiences of workers. Leaders design their systems, technologies, and work practices to ensure work responsibilities can be carried out in a mentally healthy way.

Managers are trained and capable, with people management recognised as a critical skill requiring ongoing development. Managers are recognised as the people who shape the day-to-day experience of work for many, and are empowered and accountable for this essential role. They recognise that mental health fluctuates and people may occasionally require additional support. Managers feel equipped and supported to respond appropriately and balance support for individuals with organisational needs. They genuinely engage and consult with workers.

Individuals and teams have the resources, skills, technology and support they need to perform their roles. People are clear about what is expected of them. Communication and consultation with workers is open and respectful, and people feel connected and valued at work. Schedules, equipment and technology support mental health rather than creating stress. Time away from work is encouraged to enable people to refresh, recharge and enjoy life.

Interactions with customers, suppliers and contractors reflect the same commitment to protecting mental health. People feel they can be themselves at work, no matter who they are.

The digital portal for mentally healthy workplaces

Coming in late 2021

A digital portal is being created as part of the National Workplace Initiative to connect people with the information and support they need to make mentally healthy workplaces.



As well as guiding users through the necessary actions in each of the three pillars, the digital portal will also provide:

- * Answers to common questions about mentally healthy workplaces.
- * Guidance to help measure and track the impact of initiatives.
- * The latest news and research on mentally healthy workplaces.
- * Case studies from other organisations and businesses.
- * A community of other champions of mentally healthy workplaces.

Our approach

To ensure the National Workplace Initiative and its digital portal support lasting change, it is following some key guidelines:

Amplify not duplicate:

We aim to build on existing research and resources and integrate with existing initiatives to amplify great work. We will connect people with information and ideas rather than re-inventing the wheel.

Co-design and consultation:

Just as it is important to consult with workers, we will work with a range of people, including people with lived experience, to understand what they need, where they see gaps and how they experience what we create. It means sometimes things in the digital portal shift and evolve over time, always with the intent to make them better.

Create true value:

The digital portal will make it easier to take action and solve challenges related to mentally healthy workplaces. We will take the guesswork out of what to trust and where to start. Through this, we will create something that organisations and businesses value, and contributes to long-term change.

Communicate purposefully:

The digital portal aims to cut through complexity to bring clarity and consistency in how people communicate about mentally healthy workplaces. We aim to reduce stigma through the language we use and celebrate strengths and diversity.

Make research-supported decisions:

As a Government-backed initiative, there will be rigour in the content we include. We will draw on a range of sources to ground our content and design. These include research studies, consultation, user testing and monitoring outcomes from our work. We will also help people to collect and use data to make decisions and drive change.

Design for the long-term:

Change takes time and consistent effort. We want to work alongside organisations over time create sustainable and lasting change. We will break down their journey into simple, achievable steps that people can work through at a pace that suits them.

Mental health supports for individuals

If you or someone you know needs support, here are some support services you can reach out to now. In an emergency, please call 000.

Organisation	Contact	Description
Head to Health	w headtohealth.gov.au	Provided by the Department of Health to search free or low cost digital supports for mental health.
Beyond Blue	t 1300 22 4636 w beyondblue.org.au	24/7 support for mental health and wellbeing via phone, web chat and online forum.
Lifeline Australia	t 13 11 14 w lifeline.org.au	24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.
Suicide Call Back Service	t 1300 659 467 w 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	t 1300 78 99 78 w mensline.org.au/phone-and-online-counselling	24/7 telephone and online support, information and referral service for men
Kids Helpline	t 1800 55 1800 w kidshelpline.com.au	24/7 telephone counselling for young people under 25 years.
headspace Australia	t 1800 650 890 w headspace.org.au	Telephone and web chat for young people aged 12 to 25 years.
QLife	t 1800 184 527 w qlife.org.au	Telephone and online chat support service for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI) communities.

Mental health supports for individuals

If you or someone you know needs support, here are some support services you can reach out to now. In an emergency, please call 000.

Organisation	Contact	Description
Relationships Australia	<p>t 1300 364 277</p> <p>w relationships.org.au</p>	Relationships Australia offers a broad range of services to individuals, families and communities throughout the country.
Butterfly Foundation	<p>t 1800 334 673</p> <p>w butterfly.org.au</p>	Support for people affected by eating disorders via telephone, web chat or email.
Carers Australia	<p>t 1800 422 737</p> <p>w carersaustralia.com.au</p>	Carer gateway of practical advice and connection with local carer services.
SANE	<p>t 1800 187 263</p> <p>w sane.org</p>	Resources, forums and support for people affected by complex mental health issues.
National Debt Helpline	<p>t 1800 007 007</p> <p>w ndh.org.au</p>	Financial counselling advice for financial hardship.
Counselling Online	<p>w counsellingonline.org.au</p>	24/7 support for anyone affected by alcohol and other drugs.
Gambling Help Online	<p>t 1800 858 858</p> <p>w gamblinghelponline.org.au</p>	24/7 support for anyone affected by gambling.
Wellmob	<p>w wellmob.org.au</p>	Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Supports for organisations and businesses

Organisation	Contact	Description
Fair Work Australia	w fairwork.gov.au	Information about workplace rights and obligations.
Australian Human Rights Commission	w humanrights.gov.au	An independent third party which investigates complaints about discrimination and human rights breaches.
Safe Work Australia	w safeworkaustralia.gov.au	An Australian Government statutory agency established to improve work health and safety and workers' compensation arrangements across Australia.
Office of Australian Information Commissioner	w oaic.gov.au	The independent national regulator for privacy and freedom of information.
Ahead for Business	w aheadforbusiness.org.au	Supporting small business to be mentally healthy.
My Business Health	w asbfeo.gov.au/my-business-health/home	A free portal provided by the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman.

Mental health: A positive concept and more than just the absence of illness. In this Blueprint, the term mental health is used to refer to a state of wellbeing where a person can realise their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to their community.

Mental ill-health: A term that encompasses both mental illness and changes in emotion or behaviour that can impact a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for a mental illness diagnosis. These changes can result from life stressors and often resolve with time or when the individual's situation changes. These changes may develop into a mental illness if they persist or increase in severity.

Mental illness: A disorder diagnosed by a health professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional and/or social abilities. Mental illness can vary in both severity and duration. The term mental illness is used to refer to a wide spectrum of diagnosable conditions that affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves, and interacts with other people.

Psychosocial hazard: Psychosocial hazards at work are aspects of work and situations that may cause a stress response which in turn can lead to psychological or physical harm.

Mentally healthy workplace: This Blueprint uses the term mentally health workplace to broadly describe workplace experiences that protect, respond to and promote mental health.

Lived experience: In this Blueprint, lived experience refers to people who have either current or past experience of mental ill-health or a carer.

Our approach to language has adhered to the conventions outlined in the [Life in Mind National Communications Charter](#), where applicable.

How this Blueprint was developed

The Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces has been informed by a wide range of perspectives through research reviews, expert advice, consultation and feedback. The National Mental Health Commission would like to thank members of the National Workplace Initiative Framework Working Group including:

Mark Goodsell, Chair	Australian Industry Group
Ngairé Anderson	Comcare
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Jorgen Gullestrup	Mates in Construction
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David Kelly	South Australian Mental Health Commission
Prof Tony LaMontagne	School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University
Jennifer Low	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Sean Marshall	Health Services Union, Australian Council of Trade Unions
Dr Ruth Martin	Small Business Wellbeing and Support, The Treasury
Dr Robyn Mildon	Centre for Evidence and Implementation
Professor Sharon Parker	Future of Work Institute, Curtin University

The evidence behind our approach

Our Blueprint is based on research about mentally healthy workplaces. If you are interested in reading more about the research underpinning this approach, we recommend reading:

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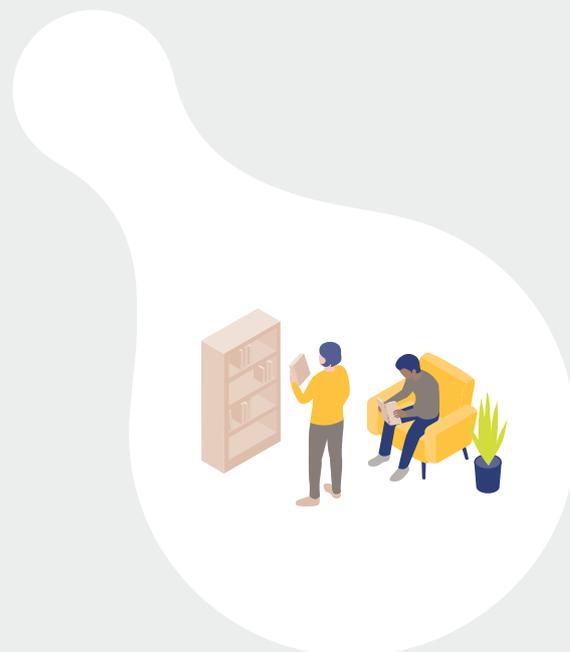
The evidence behind our approach cont.

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