

Small Business Guides  
to Mentally Healthy Workplaces

# Respond



**Australian Government**  
**National Mental Health Commission**

A practical guide for small business owners and sole traders to identify and respond to people experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

## About

Small businesses are the backbone of the Australian economy. Creating mentally healthy small businesses helps individuals, businesses, communities, and the economy. Your small business can play an important role in promoting mental health by providing opportunities for people to connect, learn and make a positive contribution. Work can also be a source of comfort and support during times of mental ill-health or stress. However, without planning and consideration, work also has the potential to result in negative outcomes such as stress, burnout or injury.

The pressures of running a business, finding work-life balance, and adapting to external changes can be challenging. Finding effective ways to look after mental health in your business is important for keeping things running smoothly. Looking after mental health means investing in yourself and the people working with you to support customers, fulfill orders, respond quickly and represent your business.

This series has been specifically designed to help people in small businesses create a mentally healthy workplace. The guides are based on the [Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](http://www.haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/blueprint-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces) ([www.haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/blueprint-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces](http://www.haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/blueprint-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces)) as part of the National Workplace Initiative.



This resource focuses on one of the 3 pillars of the Blueprint for mentally healthy workplaces – Respond: responding to people experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

Two other resources in this series focus on protecting and promoting wellbeing and mental health.

## Key takeaways

- There are many signs and symptoms of mental ill-health and distress, and they can present differently in everyone. If you notice changes in anyone, the best response is to talk to them and offer your support.
- Having conversations about mental health can be difficult, but you can follow some steps to make it easier. Start by focusing on behaviours you have noticed, listen, do not be judgemental, offer support, or encourage the person to speak to a professional.
- Stigma is one of the biggest barriers to help seeking for those with mental illness. By reducing stigma in your business, you create an environment where people feel safe and supported to seek help when needed.

[Click here](#) to read the other resources in the Small Business series

## Benefits of a mentally healthy workplace



Thriving workers and owners



Increased productivity



Decreased unplanned leave



Decreased occupational injuries and illnesses



Decreased workers' compensation claims



Increased engagement and job satisfaction



Decreased turnover and re-hiring costs



Increased employee loyalty



The return on investment of a mentally healthy workplace is \$2.30 for every \$1 invested\*

\*<https://www.pwc.com.au/publications/pdf/beyondblue-workplace-roi-may14.pdf>

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## Using this guide

Some content in this resource may be more relevant to small businesses with employees than people who are sole traders. However, most of this information is relevant and helpful to all small business owners. These icons can show you which content is most relevant for you.



Very relevant to sole traders

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Somewhat relevant to sole traders

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Very relevant to employers

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Somewhat relevant to employers

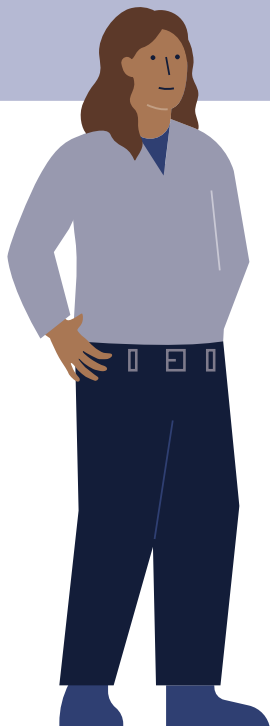
## Quick tips

Meet Sarah and Ryan. Their stories will be used throughout the guide to show you how sole traders and small businesses may put information in these guides into action.

### Meet Sarah



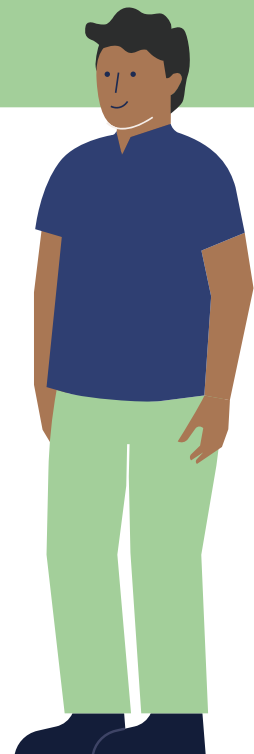
Sarah is a sole trader and has owned her cleaning business since 2009. Sarah takes responsibility for every aspect of the business, from scheduling, organising payments, doing the cleaning, and managing the finances. She works any day of the week to fit in with her clients' schedules. For example, she cleans a small office space on Saturdays so she does not disrupt their team. She has recently branched into sorting and organising people's homes and enjoys posting before and after pictures on social media. Now that her kids are a bit older, she no longer needs to work around school hours, and has been working longer hours for the past year.



### Meet Ryan



Ryan runs a small café in the city and employs 7 staff, many of whom are university students who work casually. Ryan has owned the café for the past 6 years, and there have been many ups and downs, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Ryan loves interacting with customers, especially the regulars, and enjoys baking fresh treats to sell at the counter. However, he also finds it very difficult to do the rostering, with many of his staff wanting days off for exams, parties, or family events – it seems like there is something every week. Ryan doesn't think the café would function without him there and has barely missed a day since opening.



# Key words and phrases

## Small business owner

For this guide, a small business owner is someone who is the title holder of a business and employs fewer than 20 people. This includes sole traders who have no employees.

## Mental health

A positive concept and more than just the absence of illness. In this guide, 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 ([World Health Organisation](#)).

## 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.

## Stigma

Negative attitudes or discrimination against someone based on a distinguishing characteristic such as a mental illness.

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

# Pillar 2:



Research\* shows that one in 5 Australian adults will experience a mental illness in any given year, and almost half of all Australians adults will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. This makes it likely that you, your team, co-owners, clients or contractors may experience mental ill-health at some point. In addition to mental illness, many people are also likely to experience distress in response to specific situations such as death of a loved one, relationship breakdowns, financial distress or impacts from a natural disaster.

\*<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-content/impact-of-mental-illness>

Mental ill-health or distress can be short or long term. It can be caused and maintained by a range of factors. So, it is important you know how to respond if this happens to you or someone you work with.

This resource helps you to:

- Identify and respond to someone experiencing mental ill-health or distress.
- Support yourself or other people to stay at work or return to work during periods of mental ill-health.
- Implement strategies to support yourself if you are experiencing a mental ill-health.
- Improve culture through stigma reduction.



1

# Identifying mental ill-health or distress



**Section 1:**  
Identifying mental ill-health or distress

## Signs of mental ill-health or distress



Everyone experiences stress, low mood and frustration both at, and outside of, the workplace. But have you ever wondered how much stress is too much? Or if what you might be thinking or feeling goes beyond a regular low mood? You may have noticed something in yourself or a team member that does not feel quite right.

Below are some indicators associated with mental ill-health. No one single indicator means someone is experiencing mental ill-health. However, if you see many of these together, or an increasing number over time it may be a sign that someone may need some additional support.

### Behaviour

- Not going out anymore
- Not getting things done at work or school
- Withdrawing from close family and friends
- Making more mistakes than usual
- Being late or absent without reason
- Relying on alcohol or other drugs
- Not doing usual enjoyable activities
- Unable to concentrate
- Avoiding situations for fear of becoming nervous or upset
- Not looking after personal hygiene

### Feelings

- Overwhelmed
- Guilty
- Irritable
- Frustrated
- Lacking in confidence
- Unhappy
- Indecisive
- Disappointed
- Miserable
- Sad
- Fearful
- Worried

### Thoughts

- 'I'm a failure'
- 'I'm not good enough'
- 'It's my fault'
- 'Nothing good ever happens to me'
- 'I'm worthless'
- 'My business is a failure'
- 'Life's not worth living'
- 'I can't do anything right'
- 'People would be better off without me'
- Obsessive thinking
- Often thinking about worst case scenarios

### Physical

- Tired all the time
- Sick and run down
- Headaches and muscle pains
- Churning gut
- Sleep problems
- Loss or change of appetite
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Panic attacks
- Hot and cold flushes
- Racing heart
- Tightening of the chest
- Quick breathing
- Restlessness or feeling tense
- Wound up and edgy

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## Understand more about the signs

If you want to understand whether your symptoms are in the normal range, there are some free, confidential online assessments you can consider:

The Ahead for Business mental health check-up ([www.aheadforbusiness.org.au/check-ups/mental-health-check-up](http://www.aheadforbusiness.org.au/check-ups/mental-health-check-up)) for small business owners assesses anxiety, depression, stress, alcohol use and overall wellbeing in 10 minutes.

For a more in-depth assessment, look at Mindspot's digital mental health clinic ([www.mindspot.org.au/assessment](http://www.mindspot.org.au/assessment)) which will assess stress, anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and chronic pain. This will take 20–30 minutes and allows the option to receive feedback and treatment recommendations.

- **Online resources:** Many online resources provide helpful information. You can find more information about mental health through websites such as:
  - Head to Health ([www.headtohealth.gov.au](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au))
  - Healthdirect Australia ([www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au))
  - Beyond Blue ([www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au))
  - Black Dog Institute ([www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au))
  - SANE Australia ([www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org))
- **Act:** Do things to look after yourself physically and emotionally like exercising, eating well, being social and making time for enjoyable activities. The Small Business Series Promote guide has more information on this.

### What to do if you are experiencing mental ill-health

If you are concerned about how you are feeling, there are many places you can access some additional support including:

- **Talk to someone:** Chat with a friend or family member about how you feel. You could also talk to a mental health coach from the New Access for Small Business program ([www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess/newaccess-for-small-business-owners](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess/newaccess-for-small-business-owners)) designed for small business owners.
- **Talk to a health professional:** Check in with your GP and let them know how you feel. This will be very helpful in figuring out your next steps.
- **Helplines:** If you would like to chat about how you feel, try calling a free and confidential support service. Many provide the option of an online chat if you do not want to talk. There are some helplines listed at the end of this resource.

## Reflection



If you are experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health, where would you be most comfortable reaching out for support? Are you aware of the options available if you do require some additional support?

**Section 1:**  
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## Seeking additional support

Some people can find it challenging to ask for support, even when it is not about something personal like mental ill-health. People may have beliefs that stop them seeking support, such as feeling that they will take be taking services away from others in need, that they will be judged, that they will not know what to say or that others will not be able to help.

Just like you may engage the services of accountants, lawyers, real estate agents or other consultants to help you from time to time, a mental health professional can help provide you information and advice. Here are some tips to make reaching out for help easier:

- Remember you do not need to be in crisis or have a diagnosis of a mental illness to ask for help.
- While self-tests for things like depression and anxiety can be helpful, do not rely on them. If you feel something is not right in yourself, you do not need a test score to ask for help.
- Remember everyone deserves help, even if you do not think your problem is as important as others'.
- You do not need to know the technical terms of how you are feeling. Simply talking about what your concerns are is enough. If someone needs more information, they will ask you questions to get the information they need.
- A GP can be a good place to start. They can help guide the conversation, ask the relevant questions and recommend next steps. Once you have spoken to a GP, you might be more confident talking to a friend, partner or family member.

- Write down what you want to say in advance. It does not have to be word for word, but just something so you do not feel unprepared when you arrive at your appointment.



## Reflection

If you are reaching out for help, what do you want to communicate about how you are feeling? What are you concerned about? What would you like to change? How long have you been feeling like this? What have you tried already?

### What to do if you are concerned about someone else

We spend a lot of our time at work, which means we also spend a lot of time with people we work with. This means we can often spot changes in behaviour or signs of mental ill-health.

If one of your team, clients, customers or suppliers is showing some of these signs, it is possible they may be experiencing mental ill-health or distress. For many people, talking about mental health may feel awkward. This can be particularly true in the workplace, where your relationships with employees and clients may be more professional. However, for those experiencing mental ill-health or distress, talking about it may be the first step they take towards seeking help and recovering.

Even if you do not have employees, the ability to talk about mental health is still relevant to your business. Many business owners and sole traders find themselves becoming 'incidental counsellors' for their customers and clients or find themselves in conversations with other small business owners where being able to talk about mental ill-health and distress is helpful.

If you think something seems a little off, it is always worth asking the person about it. It is often better to ask when nothing is wrong, than to not ask when something is.

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Case Study 🔍



Sarah has had one client, Jane, for over 10 years. Over the years, Sarah and Jane have developed a good relationship, often talking about what has been going on in their lives when Sarah arrives to clean. While their relationship is professional, Sarah feels she knows Jane well. One day when Sarah arrives, Jane mentions she has been exhausted and 'feels like giving up on everything'. Sarah noticed her voice seemed flat and she was still wearing her pyjamas, something that was very out of character. After several weeks of no change in Jane, Sarah realises something must be wrong and decides she will have a chat with Jane about it next time she sees her.



Reflection



If you are worried about someone, think about the behaviours you have noticed. Think of any specific examples of when they displayed this behaviour.



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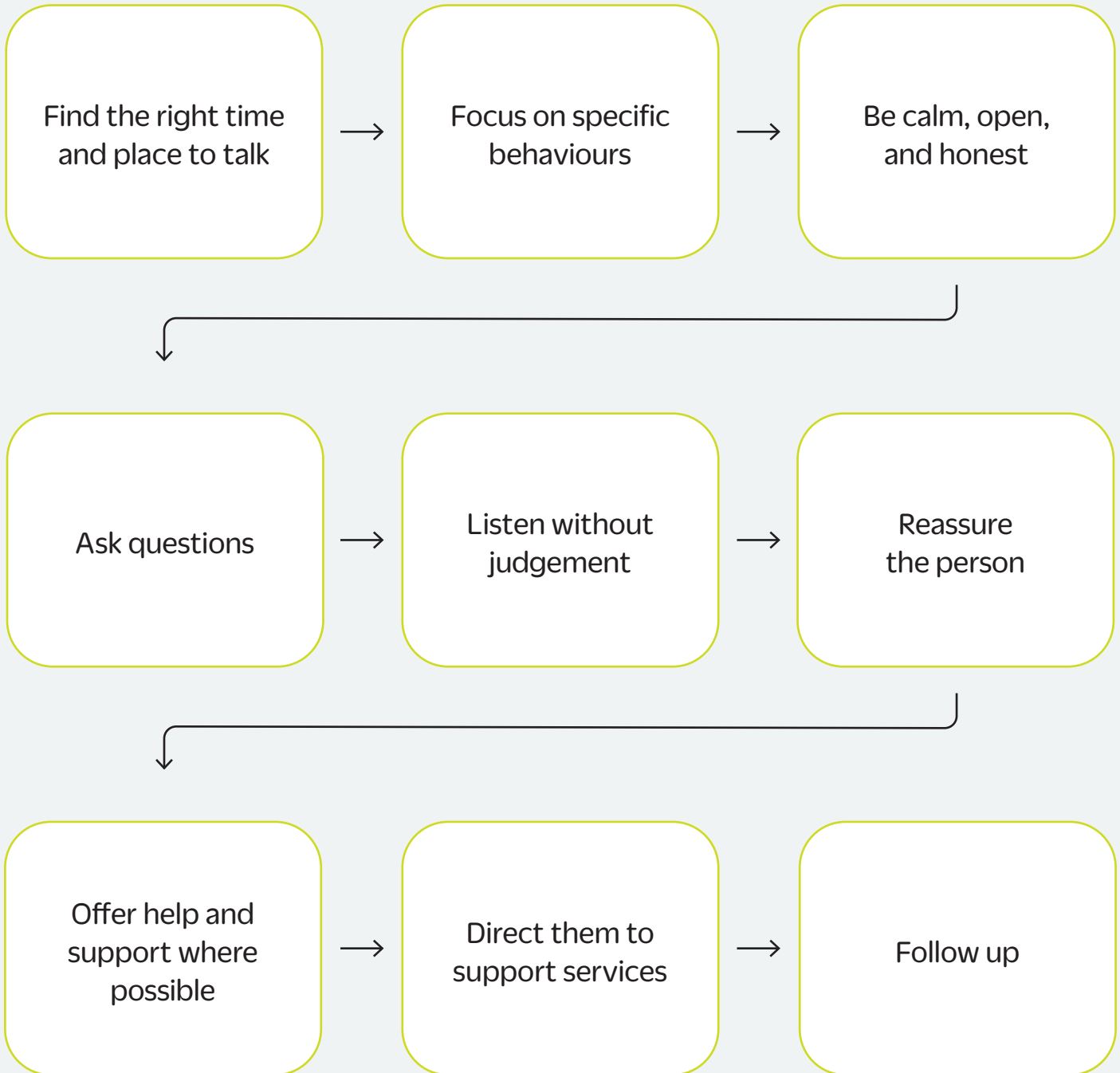
## Having a conversation about mental ill-health



Maybe you have noticed something seems different about a team member's behaviour, or a client said something in passing that you find concerning. Or maybe someone says something to you that is directly or indirectly a request for support (e.g. a passing comment or joke). How are you meant to respond? It can be difficult to know where to start, but these simple steps can help your conversation go smoothly.

- **Find the right time and place to talk:** Find a private place where the person will feel comfortable and you will not be overheard or disrupted. Choose a time when you are in the right headspace and ready to listen.
- **Focus on specific behaviours:** Start the conversation by mentioning something specific you have noticed, for example, "You have seemed really tired lately, is everything alright" or "I've noticed you're quite disinterested and withdrawn at work lately, how are things going?"
- **Be calm, open and honest:** Make sure you are relaxed and not coming across as aggressive or critical. Focus on keeping a calm voice and relaxed posture. Be as transparent as possible throughout the conversation; this will encourage the other person to do the same.
- **Ask questions:** Asking questions in response to what the person says shows you are listening and will help keep the conversation going. Try to phrase questions in a way that will get you more than a one-word or yes/no response.
- **Listen non-judgementally:** Really listen to what the person is saying. Do not interrupt them but acknowledge their feelings when they finish speaking. A good technique is to summarise what they have said and repeat it back to them.
- **Reassure the person:** Let them know it is okay for them to feel the way they do. Even if the problem does not seem big to you, it is what the person thinks that is most important. Reassure them that support is available and they can get back on track.
- **Offer help and support where possible:** As the owner of the business, you might be in a position to change something about the person's work or give them a day off to see their GP. You are not expected to fix their problems, just to be a supportive person they can turn to.
- **Direct them to support services:** Encourage the person to get some professional help. Maybe they will start by doing an online chat or calling and speaking to a support service – you can find some relevant services at the back of this resource. You could also encourage them to see their GP and go with them for support if you both feel comfortable.
- **Follow up:** Check in again after a few days or a week to see if they have taken any steps or if things have changed. You may want to set a specific time so they know they can count on you, for example, "I'll check in with you again on Friday". Continue to offer your support and encourage them to seek help.

## How to have a conversation about mental health



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Identifying mental ill-health or distress

Remember, you do not need to have all the answers. Sometimes being there to listen, helping them connect to supports or providing practical adjustments at work can be helpful enough.



**Case Study** 🔍



The following conversation took place between Sarah and her client Jane who she has been worried about recently:

**S:** I just wanted to check in and see how you were going. You haven't seemed yourself lately and I just wanted to make sure everything is alright.

**J:** Oh, thanks for your concern, Sarah. Everything is fine, I don't want to bother you with the details.

**S:** It's no bother. If you need someone to talk to, I'm happy to listen.

**J:** Well, I don't really know how to explain it...

**S:** That's okay. If you want to try, maybe it would be helpful to talk through?

**J:** I suppose. I just feel bad because things are going well for me, but I'm just not feeling happy. I feel kind of flat, like I'm empty and numb.

**S:** I see, and you feel like you shouldn't be feeling that way?

**J:** Exactly. I'm a bad person for having so many positives in my life and not even feeling happy.

**S:** You are not a bad person. I have known you for over 10 years and I have never thought that. How long have you been feeling like this?

**J:** It's been quite bad for the past month or so. I've been going through phases of ups and downs for the last few years. I think I've just given up on trying to hide it.

**S:** Yes, I've never noticed before now. I'm sorry this has been going on for so long. Is there something you have done in the past that helps make you feel better?

**J:** Not really. I eventually pick back up a little. I'll be fine.

**S:** Have you ever talked to anyone else about this?

**J:** No, not really, I haven't seen the need to.

**S:** That's okay, I just think it sounds like it might be worth talking to a mental health professional. Going through this for several years can't be easy, and they might be able to help.

**J:** I know, but I just feel silly because I don't have a good reason to feel like this. I think they should be saved for people who need it.

**S:** I don't think you need a 'good' reason. Things like this can be because of genetics or hormones. Nobody should have to suffer in silence for years just because they don't think they deserve help. Because you deserve to be happy, Jane.

**J:** I suppose.

**S:** You do. I would really like to help you, but I'm not sure how. I think it would be helpful to talk to someone who can.

**J:** I'll think about it.

**S:** Okay, I'll check in with you again next fortnight to see what you decided. You have my number if you would like to chat in the meantime.



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## People can choose not to share their concerns

Some people may not be ready to talk. It is their choice and it is important to respect their privacy. You can leave the door open for a future conversation by:

- Respecting their choice not to talk; they may not be ready to talk yet or they may already be addressing their concern in a different way.
- Leaving your offer to talk open so they can come to you if they want in future.
- Checking in briefly again after a week or so to show you are still open for a conversation.
- Acknowledging that they do not need to talk to you and encouraging them to speak to someone else they trust about how they are feeling.
- Having some helplines displayed somewhere in the workplace so people can easily access these numbers confidentially if they want. It could be on a fridge or bulletin board.

## Do I have to have a conversation about mental ill-health?

You may not feel comfortable asking someone how they are going for many reasons. You may not think you are the right person, or you may not be in the right headspace yourself. As a manager, you are not legally obligated to ask an employee or client about their mental health. However, you may have other legal obligations such as managing underperformance, making reasonable adjustments, or identifying and managing potential risks to mental health in the workplace.

If you suspect the mental ill-health is related to work, it is a good idea to check in so you can ensure the work environment is supportive and any potential psychosocial hazards are well managed. You can read more about this in the Protect resource in this series.



**Section 1:**  
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Case Study 🔍



Ryan clashes a bit with one of his employees. She is a good worker, but they have some personal differences and maintain a strictly professional relationship. Ryan has noticed some changes in her lately and thinks she might be experiencing difficulties with her mental health. However, he is not quite sure he is the right person to talk to her. He decides to do a business wide mental health week to avoid focusing only on one person. This involved an anonymous suggestion box of ways to improve the workplace and sharing mental health brochures and support services with all staff.



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## Talking about suicide



It is possible that someone mentions they are having thoughts about suicide or you notice that they are engaging in some risky behaviours that may suggest they are thinking about suicide. Being prepared for these conversations can help you respond in a calm and helpful way. Having a conversation about suicide is very similar to having a conversation about mental ill-health.

- Start the conversation by mentioning what has made you concerned. For example, it might be something they said or the way they have been behaving.
- Listen without judging or interrupting the person. Regardless of what the person says, take their reasons seriously and acknowledge them. Do not minimise their problems.
- Ask questions to keep the person talking. This shows them that you are listening and that you care. Ask direct and open-ended questions and remember that asking is not going to put ideas in their head.
- If the person does not seem to be at immediate risk, encourage them to seek help from a professional, or talk to someone close to them. You could even support them to make their first appointment.
- If you are worried about that person's immediate safety, you can contact emergency services and stay with the person until support arrives. You could also try calling a service like Lifeline or the Suicide Call Back Service together.

### Helpful things to say

- Things that acknowledge how they are feeling, for example, "I can see this is hard for you."
- Open-ended questions, for example, "How long has this been going on?"
- Asking directly about suicide, for example, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"

### Less helpful things to say

- Things that minimise their problems, for example, "Try not to worry about it."
- Questions that only allow a one-word response, for example, "Has this been going on for long?"
- Questions that sound accusatory, for example, "You don't want to kill yourself do you?"

You can read more about having a conversation about suicide in the [Conversations Matter Guide](http://www.conversationsmatter.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CM_Fact_sheet_When_someone_is_thinking_about_suicide_2021.pdf) ([www.conversationsmatter.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CM\\_Fact\\_sheet\\_When\\_someone\\_is\\_thinking\\_about\\_suicide\\_2021.pdf](http://www.conversationsmatter.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CM_Fact_sheet_When_someone_is_thinking_about_suicide_2021.pdf)).

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## After the conversation



There are many ways your conversation could go, which may impact what you do afterwards. However, there are a few things you should keep in mind:

- **Check in with the person after a few days/weeks:** Whether you ended your conversation by saying you would check in or not, following up shows the person you genuinely care. Checking in is also important to ensure no changes need to be made within the workplace to better accommodate their mental health.
- **Follow through on any actions:** If you said you would help them do something, for example, book an appointment or find more information, be sure to do it as soon as possible.
- **Remember to look after yourself:** These conversations can be draining and confronting and can have an impact on your own mental health. You may wish to talk it over with someone who does not know the person or engage in some self-care. There is more information about this in the Promote resource.
- **Keep the conversation to yourself:** Unless the person specifically said you could tell someone else, the conversation should be kept confidential. The only reason to break confidentiality is if there is an immediate danger to the person or to others in withholding the information. As with any other personal data you retain, employers have an obligation to ensure information about employees' mental health is not disclosed inappropriately.

## Tip



RU OK? ([www.ruok.org.au/how-to-ask](http://www.ruok.org.au/how-to-ask)) has lots of information on asking someone about their mental health. You can also look at some roleplay scenario videos to get an idea of how your conversation might go. RU OK? also has some resources specifically for the workplace ([www.ruok.org.au/work](http://www.ruok.org.au/work)).



**Section 1:**  
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Case Study 🔍



Sarah has been quite stressed and run down because of work lately, which caused her to cancel several social events. She is quiet and withdrawn with her clients who she previously really enjoyed talking to. Sarah recently lost a client who could no longer afford her services, but Sarah blamed herself for the loss, telling herself it was because she was 'not good enough' and 'a failure at business'. She notices her mood is very flat, and she experiences many more downs than ups each day. After several weeks, Sarah realises this may be more than a rough patch because things do not seem to be getting any better. She is worried that how she feels is impacting the quality of her work and relationships with clients, causing her further stress. Sarah looks online for some information, and notices she is experiencing many symptoms associated with depression. She is surprised because she does not know anyone who has been depressed and does not have anyone to talk to. She decides she will talk to her GP to see what her options are.



Case Study 🔍



One of Ryan's team, Rebecca, has been showing up for work late recently and appears to be frazzled and disorganised. She is impatient with other staff members and makes comments about her frustration. Ryan sees her drop and break a coffee cup out the back and start crying. He makes time to check in with Rebecca in a private space after her shift. He found out Rebecca is preparing for her university exams and is putting a lot of pressure on herself. It is causing her anxiety to be more intense than usual. She also recently broke up with her partner and is trying to manage her emotions around that while dealing with exam prep. Ryan mentions to Rebecca that she seems stressed and offers to make some temporary changes to her roster until she finishes exams. So that she does not need to cut her hours, Ryan rosters her on during quieter shifts, allowing her to bring a textbook to read behind the counter when she is not needed by customers. The idea of this extra study time is a relief to Rebecca, who really appreciates the acknowledgement and support.



# 2

## Managing mental ill-health in the workplace



**Section 2:**  
Managing mental ill-health in the workplace

## Why managing mental ill-health in the workplace is important



Small business owners or managers need to be aware of some of the things that could or should be in place to help support people experiencing mental ill-health in the workplace. Helping people stay at work or return to work quickly can help their recovery. It can also help you retain important knowledge and skills that people have.

There are also legal obligations related to helping people return to work through reasonable adjustments and making sure they do not experience any discrimination at work.



## Making reasonable adjustments



Imagine a team member broke their arm; what would need to be done to help them work? Would you change the type of work they did, decrease their workload or give them time off to attend medical appointments? Just like making reasonable adjustments for physical health concerns, you can support people to stay at work by making reasonable adjustments to their workload, work environment or other things such as rosters or level of supervision.

As well as being a good way to support people in your business, there are a range of legal obligations related to providing reasonable adjustments and ensuring the workplace is a safe environment for people. If the mental ill-health was caused by the workplace, there may also be additional obligations to help support people. See below for where to find out more about your legal obligations.

In making reasonable adjustments, you may wish to consider the following things:

- Every workplace is different, so tailor your solution to your unique situation.
- Do not make assumptions about what the person can and cannot do. Instead, talk to them about what they would like support with and what they feel they can do as usual.
- The employee may not want any changes to be made. If this is the case, check in after a few weeks to see if this is still how they feel.
- When making workplace adjustments, create a document outlining the changes made, for how long they will be made, and when they will be reviewed so that you can keep track.

## Section 2: Managing mental ill-health in the workplace

- You can make reasonable adjustments even if someone has not disclosed a specific diagnosis or talked in detail about their concerns.

These are adjustments you may wish to consider

- **Flexible working hours:** Consider part-time work, splitting shifts, working different days, extended break time, 9-day fortnights, later start times or shorter days.
- **Working from home:** Many people prefer to work from home and this might be a more comfortable environment for someone experiencing mental ill-health or distress. Try to negotiate some work from home days if possible.
- **Adjusted workload:** This might mean removing some tasks from someone's workload for a while or changing the tasks the person is responsible for. Swap one of your own responsibilities with one of theirs to help maintain balance.
- **Modified tasks:** Are there any processes or systems that might make a particular task less stressful? Think about how you can modify the person's work.
- **Time management tips:** If time management is an issue, perhaps reminders, checklists or weekly/monthly deadlines can help.
- **Regular check-ins:** Schedule a weekly meeting to see how they are going, help them with any tasks or questions and check whether the changes are working.

And remember, if you are experiencing mental ill-health as a sole trader or small business owner, you should also consider what reasonable adjustments you may need.

### Case Study



Sarah realised she was taking on too much work. She is feeling tense, stressed and many of the symptoms associated with depression. She realises she needs to make some adjustments to her work-life balance to help improve her mental health and wellbeing. She starts scheduling her days a little differently, so she gives herself one hour for lunch to go for a swim or walk and have some lunch without rushing. While this means losing some hours, Sarah did not lose any clients and has just needed to adjust her schedule slightly.

### Case Study



An employee of Ryan's disclosed he has been experiencing anxiety for some time and his social anxiety had been getting worse recently. The employee felt anxious when dealing with customers and has been worried about coming into work, so called in sick for several shifts. Ryan agreed to change some of the employee's duties while they were working on anxiety management with their support team. Instead of serving customers, the employee was allocated roles such as making coffees, preparing food and cleaning. The plan is to increase customer facing duties over time.



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Managing mental ill-health in the workplace

## Understanding legal obligations to support return to work



Obligations to help people stay at work or return to work may be contained in different legislation. It can also vary across jurisdictions, the size of your business and how your workers are contracted. It is important to seek advice for your particular circumstance to ensure you know what to do.

The following legislation may be relevant:

- **Work, Health and Safety legislation and Codes of Practice.** These outline responsibilities related to providing a safe working environment. They include obligations to identify and manage hazards that may impact on health (including psychological health) and consult with workers on matters that may impact health or safety. See [Safe Work Australia](http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au) ([www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au](http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au)) for more details and to find your local jurisdiction.
- **Workers' Compensation legislation.** These outline responsibilities for supporting workers who experience injuries or illnesses related to the workplace. This includes psychological injuries. Your obligations may include things your business needs to have in place even if no one has needed to make a workers' compensation claim (e.g. having a return-to-work policy). See [Safe Work Australia](http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/workers-compensation) ([www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/workers-compensation](http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/workers-compensation)) for more details and to find your local jurisdiction.



**Section 2:**  
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- **Anti-discrimination legislation.** These outline protections people have to ensure they are not discriminated against based on a range of factors, including mental illness. This includes rights related to reasonable adjustments. Visit the [Australian Human Rights Commission](http://www.humanrights.gov.au) ([www.humanrights.gov.au](http://www.humanrights.gov.au)) for more information.
- **Privacy legislation.** Some small businesses have obligations related to privacy legislation. Understanding privacy is important when you are collecting or managing personal or sensitive information such as people's mental health status. The [Office of the Australian Information Commission](http://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/privacy-for-organisations/small-business) ([www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/privacy-for-organisations/small-business](http://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/privacy-for-organisations/small-business)) has more information about privacy for small business.
- **Workplace relations legislation and agreements.** Small businesses have industrial relations obligations which detail things such as leave, unfair dismissal and consultation processes. The Fair Work Ombudsman has resources for small business here [Small business & the Fair Work Act - Fair Work Ombudsman](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/small-business-and-the-fair-work-act) ([www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/small-business-and-the-fair-work-act](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/small-business-and-the-fair-work-act)).

## Limits to reasonable adjustments



Small business may have less flexibility to make reasonable adjustments compared with larger organisations. As an employer, you have the right to refuse unreasonable workplace adjustments, but you must be clear about why the change would be unreasonable. This could be because:

- the adjustment means the employee will not be able to meet the core requirements of their role
- the adjustment is too expensive or unreasonable
- the adjustment will disturb or prevent other employees (including yourself) from doing their work.

If you cannot make the adjustment wanted, try to negotiate and compromise until a solution is met. Information on reasonable adjustments by the [Australian Human Rights Commission](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/3-managing-mental-illness-workplace#s3_2) ([www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/3-managing-mental-illness-workplace#s3\\_2](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/3-managing-mental-illness-workplace#s3_2)) can help guide you.



**Section 2:**  
Managing mental ill-health in the workplace

Case Study 🔍



Tom is a casual employee of Ryan's who was recently diagnosed with depression and anxiety. He is seeing a psychologist every fortnight on a Thursday afternoon, which is one of his regular shifts. To accommodate Tom's appointment, Ryan swaps this regular shift with another staff member – this is a reasonable adjustment. However, Tom also mentions that work is great for keeping his mind occupied and requests more hours. While Ryan would like to give Tom more hours, it is not financially feasible without significantly cutting the shifts of other staff members – this is an unreasonable adjustment.



## Adjustments for sole traders



You may need to consider making adjustments for yourself if you are a sole trader or small business owner experiencing mental ill-health. These adjustments may be easier if you have full control of your work – but they can also be more challenging if you cannot rely on others in the business to backfill tasks or responsibilities.

Here are some tips for making adjustments to your workload for yourself:

- Outsource something like accounting or marketing to free up time to focus on other parts of the business.
- Look at any new software or organisational tools that might make your day-to-day work easier, for example, invoicing software or scheduling tools.
- Give yourself more flexible hours where possible, take longer breaks and go for a walk or adjust your start and finish times.
- If you need to take time off because of your mental health, put plans in place to ensure things run smoothly in your absence such as writing a guide of all your processes or sharing passwords and account details with someone close to you. Look at some tips for planning for time off below.
- Talk to someone who can help, like a business advisor or one of the [NewAccess small business coaches](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess) ([www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess)).

## What are my employees' leave entitlements?



Many Australian small businesses with staff are micro businesses with 5 or fewer employees. Only 9% of small businesses employ more than 5 staff. Because small businesses often have fewer employees, balancing people's leave can be challenging. However, taking time off work is great for our mental health and may be necessary for those experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

There are also legal obligations related to providing and approving leave. All employees have certain leave requirements you must meet, and your business could be penalised for not providing people the leave they are entitled to. The Fair Work Ombudsman has a [guide](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/small-business-and-the-fair-work-act) ([www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/small-business-and-the-fair-work-act](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/small-business-and-the-fair-work-act)) on the National Employment Standards for small business. This includes minimum standards for leave allowances.

## Taking leave as a sole trader or business owner



Planning for how you manage leave can help you take the time you need to recover when you need it. Working through sickness or not taking holidays or breaks can lead to burnout, reduced productivity and mental ill-health. By having a plan in place, you can have peace of mind things are covered if you need some time away. This is particularly important for unplanned leave because this is when you may not be able to put strategies in place if you have to respond quickly to a personal or family emergency.

Here are some ideas for planning ahead to support leave:

- **Build extra time into your estimations:** When telling clients how long job completion will take, add an additional 2-3 days on top. This not only allows you to take some time off if you are unwell, but also provides wiggle room on jobs to help reduce stress.
- **Set up automated emails now:** Set up a standard sick leave email while you are well, so when you are unwell you can simply click a button to let your customers and clients know you will be off for a few days.
- **Train your team in essentials:** If there are any aspects of your business that must be done every day, train some employees to complete these tasks. Anything else can wait until you get back.
- **Create a 'cheat sheet':** This can outline the key information someone you trust would need to run the business if they took over. This could involve important phone numbers, passwords, or processes for ensuring things can run without you. Saving this somewhere secure allows you to send this or people to access this remotely in an emergency.

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- **Consider a password manager:** There are many online tools that allow you to share things like passwords without showing the details of what these are. This allows you to control when people can access important accounts or systems if you need to take leave quickly. They can also help with overall security.
- **Make a plan:** Deciding what will happen if you need to take some time off depends on your business. Maybe it will be completely out of action while you are off, or maybe there will be some tasks that will not get done while others are covered by employees. Take some time to think of what will need to be done and put measures in place to ensure this is easy to execute while you are away.

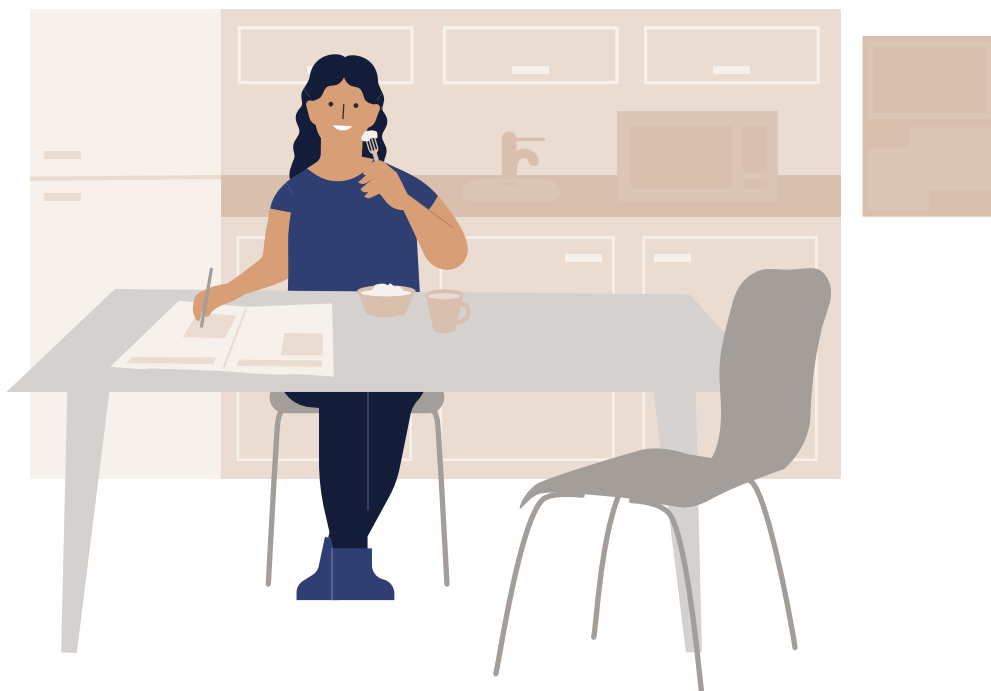
**Remember your health is important:** You are the most important part of your business, so looking after your health is looking after your business. Taking the time off to rest and recover will pay off in the long run.

Case Study 🔍



Sarah needs to take time off for an operation, and recovery will take 3–4 weeks. As soon as Sarah's operation date is locked in, she contacts all her clients to let them know she will be off work for 4 weeks from the date of her operation. Sarah offers to replace any scheduled appointments during this time with a cleaner she knows and trusts to do a good job.

By scheduling in replacements, she is confident she will not be 'replaced' in her absence. Sarah responds to enquiries and schedules future appointments while she recovers, to ensure her business still functions when she returns. Her daughter helps her manage this while she is unwell.



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Case Study 🔍



Ryan is a self-confessed 'control freak' when it comes to his business and he does not trust anyone to run the café in his absence. However, he has not had a holiday in years besides the occasional night away. He would really like to plan for some time off to relax and unwind after the stress of the past few years. He has 2 part-time employees who are competent in the day-to-day running of the café and could cover all operating hours between them. He trains them in other operational processes like ordering and rostering and gives them the necessary passwords. Ryan does a test run at the café that week, acting as though he is an employee and leaving the part-time staff in charge. The week runs smoothly and gives Ryan the confidence he needs to go on a holiday.



## Performance managing and terminating a worker experiencing mental ill-health



Although this resource aims to help you support people experiencing mental ill-health, the reality of business is that sometimes you face some tough decisions. If someone is not performing because of mental ill-health, or they are creating tension in the team or damaging customer relationships, you may be considering whether they should continue to work for you.

It is important to note that you cannot dismiss a worker only on the basis of mental ill-health or mental illness. This is against the law and employers could be charged with unfair dismissal if this occurs.

You must have a valid reason to dismiss a worker, such as poor performance, conduct or changes to your operational requirements. Having a mental illness does not mean someone will underperform, act up or behave inappropriately.



## Section 2: Managing mental ill-health in the workplace

However, if you do find a worker with a mental illness is not meeting workplace expectations, then follow these steps:

- Make appropriate workplace adjustments for the person where possible.
- Provide an informal warning about the person's performance or conduct and talk about any support you can provide or whether the adjustments made need to be changed. Keep a record of this conversation.
- If the employee does not improve, issue a formal warning clearly outlining your issues and what has already been done to rectify them.
- This warning should include a reasonable timeframe for performance to improve before taking the next steps (i.e. dismissal).
- If performance does not improve after these steps, you are within your rights as an employer to dismiss the employee. When you do this, be sure to provide very clear reasoning.
- Employers with more than 15 workers must comply with the [Fair Work Act 2009](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2009A00028) ([www.legislation.gov.au/ Series/C2009A00028](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2009A00028)), and those with fewer must obey the [Small Business Fair Dismissal Code](http://www.fwc.gov.au/what-small-business-fair-dismissal-code) ([www.fwc.gov.au/what-small-business-fair-dismissal-code](http://www.fwc.gov.au/what-small-business-fair-dismissal-code)).
- Get in touch with the [Fair Work Ombudsman](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/contact-us) ([www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/contact-us](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/contact-us)) if you need specific advice or talk to someone from your local business chamber.

### Reflection

How confident do you feel about managing performance of an employee who is under performing? How would you change your approach if you found out they were experiencing mental ill-health?

### Case Study



Ryan has been unhappy with the performance of his employee, Jax, for some time. He notices that Jax has been making a lot of mistakes including mixing up orders, leaving food out of the fridge and ignoring customers. On a few occasions Jax has called in sick for a shift just before starting. Ryan feels this behaviour is unacceptable and is placing an unfair load on him and the team. Ryan makes time to talk with Jax privately about his concerns. During this meeting Jax tells him that is currently experiencing anxiety and depression and he is currently undergoing treatment. Ryan says that he will try to support Jax as much as he can and they agree on changes in rosters and duties to support Jax.

Over the next month, Ryan observes that even with these agreed adjustments Jax's performance is not acceptable. Ryan has had to issue written warnings for swearing at a customer and leaving the cash register unattended to take personal calls, and many team members are complaining to Ryan about having to cover tasks Jax should be completing. Ryan calls the Fair Work Ombudsman to check what his options are and make sure that he has done everything he should in managing Jax. He provides a final warning and advises Jax his employment will be terminated if the unacceptable behaviour continues. The following week Jax does not arrive for his shift without advising anyone else. Ryan decides it is time to terminate Jax's employment. He writes a formal letter, including a summary of events and decisions that have been part of this timeline. He also calls Jax to advise him of this decision and provide him an opportunity to discuss this decision.



# 3

## Improving culture through stigma reduction





## Understanding stigma



For many years, mental ill-health has been misunderstood, stigmatised and not spoken about. This causes many with symptoms of mental ill-health to keep quiet and 'suffer in silence', when in fact, seeking help would help them recover. Stigma is one of the biggest barriers to help seeking for those with mental ill-health. So, reducing stigma in your workplace will help your team feel safe and confident to get help when they need it.

It is important to know that sometimes people expressing negative views about mental illness or mental ill-health can count as harassment. And actions such as excluding people from activities they can do because they have a mental illness can be forms of discrimination. As an employer, you have legal obligations to protect people from harassment and discrimination in your workplace. Check out the [Australian Human Rights Commission's information about disability discrimination](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/GPGB_disability_discrimination.pdf) (www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/GPGB\_disability\_discrimination.pdf) to better understand your legal obligations.

## Case Study 🔍



Ryan notices one of his employees, Ritesh, has been very stressed with university and seems withdrawn and distracted during his shifts. Ryan tries to give him some of the easier and less stressful jobs to give him more time to focus on his studies and reduce his stress levels. Some of the other employees notice this and begin to resent Ritesh for being the 'favourite' and always getting easy jobs. They do not seem to talk to him in the same way they used to. Ritesh decides to talk to Ryan about the situation.

Ryan is very honest with Ritesh about his reasons, but Ritesh explains that he enjoys coming to work for the distraction and enjoys socialising with the customers and other employees. For the past few weeks, he has been feeling more alone than ever. Ryan apologises to Ritesh for making these assumptions and returns his shifts to normal. He tells Ritesh he can talk to him any time if he needs to change anything about his workload or duties but will not change anything without talking to him first.



**Section 3:**  
Improving culture through stigma reduction

## Reducing stigma in the workplace



Stigma can be expressed through our language, behaviour and even our systems and processes. Even if it is not severe enough to count as harassment or discrimination, stigma can still have an impact. Examples of stigma being expressed in the workplace include:

- using incorrect or judgemental language when talking about mental illness
- making jokes or inappropriate comments about mental illness
- not accepting mental health as an appropriate reason to take leave
- responding inappropriately to signs of mental illness in others.



## Benefits of addressing stigma in the workplace



**Section 3:**  
Improving culture through stigma reduction

Mental health stigma may affect the wellbeing of your employees, clients, and customers. This could have implications for your business including decreased motivation, making mistakes or clients choosing to take their business elsewhere. However, you can reduce stigma in your workplace in many ways:

- Learn the basics of mental health and encourage your employees to do as well. Start with the information in this resource.
- Equip yourself with the skills to respond to mental health in the workplace.
- Use appropriate language and terminology when talking about mental health. Look at the advice on communicating about mental health in this resource.
- Challenge other people's false beliefs or incorrect language when you hear it.
- Normalise mental ill-health in your workplace by talking about it openly, providing information (e.g. flyers or posters), and participating in mental health campaigns like R U OK? Day and Mental Health Month.
- Actively protect and promote mental health in the workplace. You can find out more by accessing the other resources in this series.

“

I lie about being sick sometimes, because people understand if you have a cold, but not if you have depression.

Case Study 🔍



A lot of Sarah's business comes from word of mouth, so she ensures she is always friendly and professional with clients. She wants to ensure she is not stigmatising against any of her clients with mental illness. She decides to do some research around mental illness symptoms so she better understands what some people may be experiencing. She realises many people with depression lack energy and motivation, which makes it difficult to complete tasks like cleaning, and understands this may be something many of her clients are going through.



### Section 3: Improving culture through stigma reduction

#### Case Study



After learning the importance of a mentally healthy workplace, Ryan wants to ensure all his staff feel comfortable and safe to discuss mental health at work, regardless of their mental health status. He also wants to ensure his customers do not feel stigmatised while at his café. He finds some mental health training online through a reputable organisation. He asks all staff to complete the training on the work computer during quiet periods of their shift as part of their regular professional development. This training provides everyone with the facts about mental illness to help reduce stigma. Ryan is considering additional training courses in the future.



- Seek professional support. The best starting place is to see your GP; they can refer you onto other mental health services if necessary.
- Remember you are not defined by your mental illness. You are so much more than one experience – you may also be a business owner, a parent, someone with an obsession for cats or someone with a great sense of humour. Remind yourself of your other characteristics.

#### Reflection

Think about one thing you could do to reduce stigma in your workplace.

People can also feel a sense of stigma towards their own personal experience of mental ill-health. These tips can help you challenge a sense of self-stigma:

- Understand the facts around mental health, for example, mental illness will impact 1 in 5 people in their lifetime, and mental illness is not a sign of weakness. Other people's opinions and beliefs around mental health are not necessarily correct, so do your own research and use trusted sources.
- Reach out to someone you trust about how you are feeling. Talking things through may help clarify the next steps for you and boost your confidence to seek professional support.

# Mental health support services

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
<b>NASBO</b>	<a href="https://beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess-mental-health-coaching/newaccess-for-small-business-owners">beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess-mental-health-coaching/newaccess-for-small-business-owners</a>	Beyond Blue's NewAccess for Small Business Owners provides a guided self-help mental health coaching program.
<b>Head to Health</b>	<a href="https://headtohealth.gov.au">headtohealth.gov.au</a>	Provided by the Department of Health to search free or low cost digital supports for mental health.
<b>Beyond Blue</b>	1300 22 4636 <a href="https://beyondblue.org.au">beyondblue.org.au</a>	24/7 support for mental health and wellbeing via phone, web chat and online forum.
<b>Lifeline Australia</b>	13 11 14 <a href="https://lifeline.org.au">lifeline.org.au</a>	24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.
<b>Suicide Call Back Service</b>	1300 659 467 <a href="https://suicidecallbackservice.org.au">suicidecallbackservice.org.au</a>	24/7 telephone crisis support for people at risk of suicide, carers and bereaved, as well as online resources and information.
<b>MensLine Australia</b>	1300 78 99 78 <a href="https://mensline.org.au/phone-and-online-counselling">mensline.org.au/phone-and-online-counselling</a>	24/7 telephone and online support, information and referral service for men.
<b>Kids Helpline</b>	1800 55 1800 <a href="https://kidshelpline.com.au">kidshelpline.com.au</a>	24/7 telephone counselling for young people under 25 years.
<b>headspace Australia</b>	1800 650 890 <a href="https://headspace.org.au">headspace.org.au</a>	Telephone and web chat for young people aged 12 to 25 years.
<b>QLife</b>	1800 184 527 <a href="https://qlife.org.au">qlife.org.au</a>	Telephone and online chat support service for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI) communities.
<b>Relationships Australia</b>	1300 364 277 <a href="https://relationships.org.au">relationships.org.au</a>	Relationships Australia offers a broad range of services to individuals, families and communities throughout the country.

# Mental health support services

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
<b>Butterfly Foundation</b>	1800 334 673 butterfly.org.au	Support for people affected by eating disorders via telephone, web chat or email.
<b>Carers Australia</b>	1800 422 737 carersaustralia.com.au	Carer gateway of practical advice and connection with local carer services.
<b>SANE</b>	1800 187 263 sane.org	Resources, forums and support for people affected by complex mental health issues.
<b>National Debt Helpline</b>	1800 007 007 ndh.org.au	Financial counselling advice for financial hardship.
<b>Counselling Online</b>	counsellingonline.org.au	24/7 support for anyone affected by alcohol and other drugs.
<b>Gambling Help Online</b>	1800 858 858 gamblinghelponline.org.au	24/7 support for anyone affected by gambling.
<b>Wellmob</b>	wellmob.org.au	Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.
<b>13 YARN</b>	13 9276 13yarn.org.au	13YARN (Thirteen YARN) connects mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter.
<b>Standby</b>	1300 727 247 standbysupport.com.au	Provides free face-to face and/or telephone support for anyone impacted by suicide.
<b>LivingWorks training</b>	livingworks.com.au	Provides a range of online and in person training to help identify people with thoughts of suicide and connect them with life-saving first aid resources.
<b>Mindspot</b>	1800 61 44 34 mindspot.org.au	Providing assessment and treatments, including therapist support, accessible online.

## Attributions

This resource was created by Everymind, under the Ahead for Business program, as part of the National Workplace Initiative.

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### Acknowledgments

The project and support team would like to thank the many stakeholders who participated in consultation processes throughout the drafting of the guides, including those from business, industry groups, Government and non-Government organisations, and people with lived experience of mental illness and mental ill-health.



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