

Parenting and Caring

Career
Transition
Series



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

Paper 4

About the career transition series

About these guides

These guides are a nine-part series developed to share research-led practices on career transitions to help support mentally healthy workplaces. In this series, you will find best practice strategies along with the stories of organisations supporting their people through eight key transitions. We share first-hand accounts of the career transitions many of us will experience in our lifetimes, whether it is having a baby or a career change, a personal crisis, or retiring from the workforce altogether.

Why these guides exist

Developed by the National Mental Health Commission in partnership with Transitioning Well, these guides emerged as part of the National Workplace Initiative (NWI) after early research and consultation highlighted the toll of a number of career transition points on the mental health of employees. These guides are based on the findings of this [Green Paper](#). They blend published research, insights from experts, and first-hand stories of individuals who have experienced or supported their people through transitions. We thank everyone who contributed to these guides and the organisations who permitted us to share their unique stories.

What these guides aim to do

- Recognise the impact of career transitions on workplaces and workers
- Inform workplace leaders and individuals about the importance of supporting transitions throughout the career journey
- Showcase how organisations can support workers across the life cycle in helping to promote and sustain mental health at work
- Share inspiring examples of forward-thinking organisations implementing research-led practices to proactively support career transitions.



Organisational-led approaches to support mentally healthy workplaces



“Becoming a parent or carer is one of the most significant transitions a person will go through in their lifetime... including the fundamental transition from ‘working person’ to ‘working parent’”

Dr Sarah Cotton, Transitioning Well

About this transition

A carer is defined as anyone who cares, unpaid, for a family member or friend who due to illness, age, disability, a mental health problem or addiction, cannot cope without their support.¹

Unsurprisingly, the transitions that parents and carers must navigate represent some of the most significant moments in their working life. Changes associated with these transitions require huge shifts emotionally and mentally. For birth mothers of newborns, the shift is also a physical one. As a result, parents and carers are at greater risk of mental health challenges during these transition periods.

However, when managed well, transitions also represent unique opportunities for growth and transformation. Supporting parents and carers to consciously navigate the caring journey can provide them with strategies that will support them through future transitions, helping them to manage the intersection between life and work over their entire working lives.

Key Messages

1. Becoming a carer is a major life transition that is characterised by significant change as an individual adjusts from being independent to being responsible for someone else's care.
2. The transition to working parenthood is particularly significant, as it requires not only a mental and emotional shift but can be accompanied by physical changes too. While it is natural to focus on the mother during this time, it is equally important to provide support for all parents, including fathers, non-birth partners and foster parents.
3. Investing in manager training and support is critically important to avoid 'the boss lottery' and to ensure parents and carers are consistently well supported. Becoming a parent or carer is not a one-off change; these transitions involve continual adjustment and readjustment.



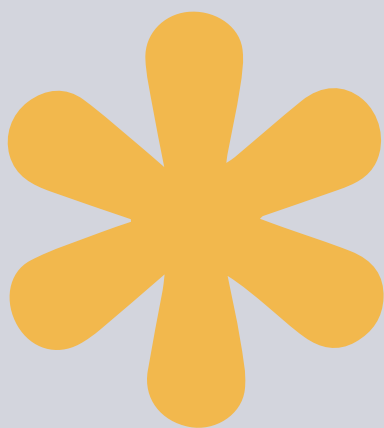
Key considerations

55% of Australian carers have lower wellbeing compared with 20% of the broader population.

Carers Australia and University of Canberra, 2021²

Postnatal depression and anxiety have strong economic costs of \$643 million, attributable to lower productivity from greater workforce exits, absenteeism, presenteeism and carer requirements.

PWC Australia, 2019³



Over 1 in 5 women experience anxiety and/or depression during pregnancy, and/or following birth. 1 in 10 expecting or new fathers experience depression and/or anxiety during the perinatal period.

Centre for Perinatal Excellence, 2017⁴

Common transition points for parents caring for children and ageing parents

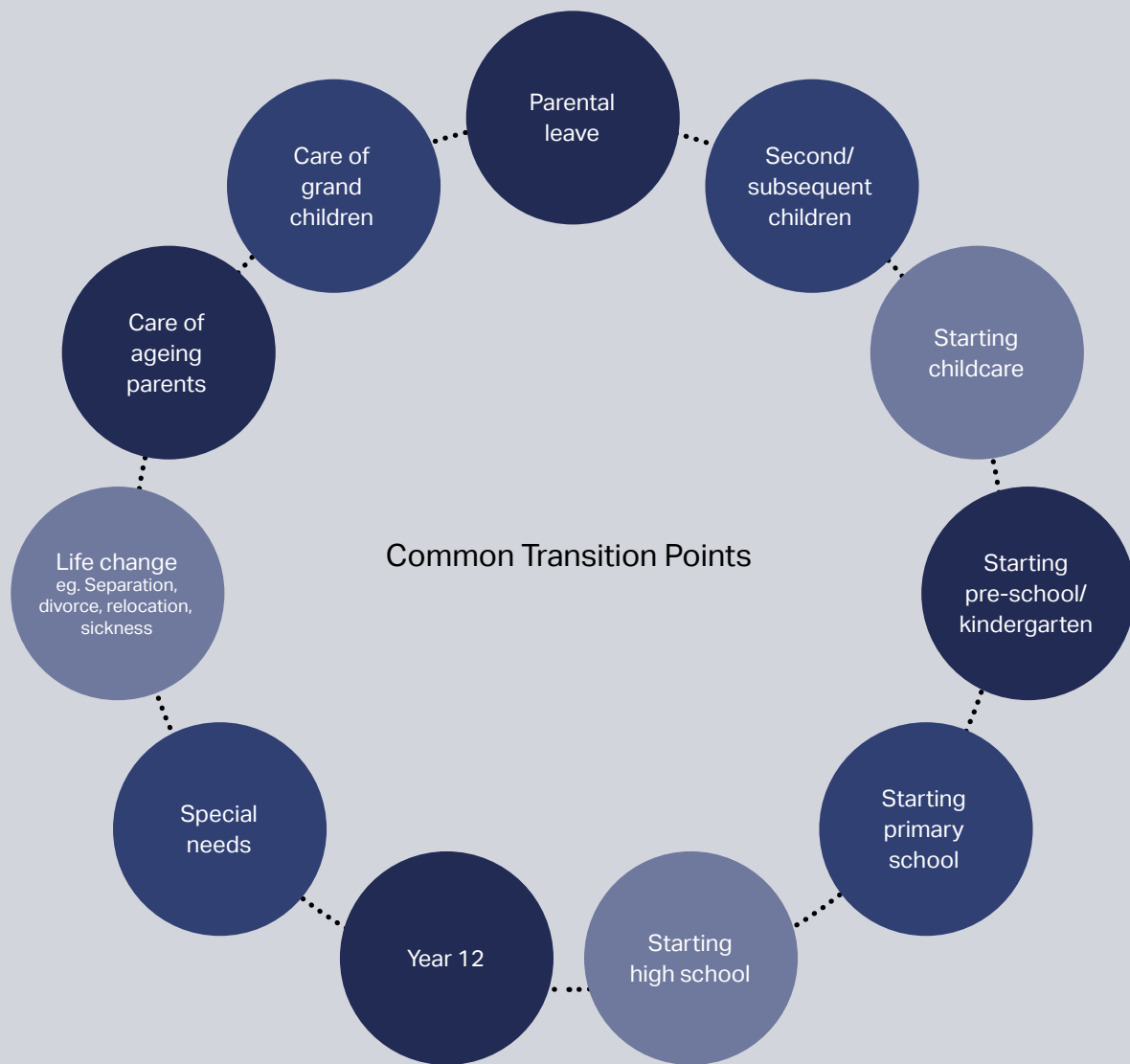


Figure. 1: Common transition points for parents caring for children and ageing parents.⁵

Why it is important to support parents and carers⁶

While many people look forward to and are enriched by the responsibilities of caring or parenting, this transition often comes with significant change. It can involve a loss of identity, meaning, relationships and structure, increasing the risk of psychological distress and/or mental health conditions. It is also worth noting Australia has one of the worst rates of mother's participation in the labour force and participation is critical to economic productivity and equality.

In addition, several work-related factors can increase the risk of poor mental health at a time when individuals are already at greater risk for mental health distress. Such factors include low supervisory support, lack of job control and role clarity, and poor change management.

Encouragingly, however, organisations that provide strong support are more likely to see increased engagement, job satisfaction, productivity, performance, employee retention, and lower rates of absenteeism.

Establishing a reputation as a family-friendly employer providing genuine and practical support to parents and carers also contributes to a healthy and engaged workforce that is more likely to attract and retain talent.

Workplaces also present a unique opportunity to educate and support carers and parents who do not typically engage with front line mental health support services, such as men and non-birth parents.

Workplaces can educate, destigmatise mental health conditions and encourage help-seeking behaviours by providing practical tools, resources and information that can help all carers to successfully navigate these major life transitions.

Risks and their impacts on the team/organisation

- Parents and carers can have higher levels of absenteeism and presenteeism, and reduced work status. Time constraints mean they can struggle to engage in workplace activities that build social and career networks, resulting in missed opportunities for advancement or promotion.
- Carers are at greater risk of experiencing higher levels of fatigue, isolation, psychological distress, anxiety, and depression.
- For sole parents or parents of children with high needs, challenges may be more significant. While these specific challenges may change over time, they continue as children age and develop, bringing with them different demands through adolescence and young adulthood.

What people say about parenting and caring

On the 'boss lottery'...

“I went on parental leave with two different line managers and each experience was completely different... the first was just really open to what's right for me and made it easy to find things. Second time, it was all about 'this is a headache, and we have to find new staff' ... it was like I was causing a problem.”

“Managers do need some guidelines and framework to have those initial conversations and learn how to build that trust, so everyone is comfortable about those next steps”

On returning to work after leave...

“When you come back to work you think you're coming back to what you knew. But because you're so different, and your world is so different, you are starting to realise that your life is never going be the same again.”

On flexibility...

“Not only can flexibility work, but it is inspiring for others in the organisation who are not at that stage in their life yet”

4 ways parents and carers may internalise this transition

According to Nancy K Schlossberg, a leading expert in transitions and career development, a transition is defined as any event or non-event that changes our roles, relationships, routines and assumptions.⁷

This transition for parents and carers may look like this:

Roles (in new parents)

"I return to work and everyone acts like I'm the same me, but I feel completely different."

Relationships (eldercare)

"All of a sudden I'm the one taking care of my parents instead of the other way around. It's a very different dynamic."

Routines

"I get up, get the kids ready, do the childcare drop-off, race into the office and arrive at my desk feeling like I've already done a whole day's work. Then I race off early to pick up my child and it's straight into dinner, bath and bed for the kids. Then I wake up the next day and do it all over again."

Assumptions

"They'd never let me go part-time."

Why unpaid care and domestic labour can feel like a burden⁸

Statistically, women are far more likely to be the carer of an elderly, sick or disabled family member. Women not only shoulder the burden of domestic work in caring, but also carry the ‘mental load’ or ‘admin’ associated with family life.

The burden of unpaid work takes a toll on women career-wise, and their mental health.⁹ A 2021 Global Deloitte study of 5,000 women in 10 countries, including women in Australia, found 77% of women interviewed said their workload had increased since the Covid crisis began and 66% said they bear the greatest responsibility for family household management and chores.

As a result, we saw a decline in female participation in the global workforce, with 23% of working women considering leaving the workforce, and 57% planning to leave their current employer in the next two years. This presents more challenges for women, as they can lose ‘power’ when taking time out of the workforce or working part-time hours. Women are also at an increased risk of domestic violence when pregnant or in the post-natal period.



The Perinatal Period

According to the Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE), women in the perinatal period are more likely to develop mental health issues at this time than at any other stage of their life. Men and non-birth parents are also at risk of mental health problems, especially if their partner is experiencing distress. Unfortunately, 74% of parents do not seek help until crisis point.

Fortunately, early intervention can reduce the severity and duration of symptoms of mental ill-health. Workplaces can play a valuable role in raising the awareness of signs and symptoms, and in educating leaders on how to support their people to seek help if required.

Barriers to help-seeking include:

- a lack of awareness of the signs and symptoms of psychological distress
- a belief that one 'should' be able to cope, fear of disclosure ('they might take away my children' / 'I could lose my job')
- stigma associated with mental health conditions
- cultural norms that discourage help-seeking.

Signs of post-natal depression:

At work

Over-or under-productivity
Changed or 'flat' personality
Loss of motivation
Difficulty making decisions or inability to concentrate (this can also result from lack of sleep).

At home

Feeling numb, disinterested or hopeless
Finding it difficult to get through the day
Feeling isolated or disconnected from others
Changes in appetite
Feeling angry, resentful and/or having thought of harming yourself and/or baby.



The (Double) Sandwich Generation

As the ageing population increases, many parents of school-aged children also find themselves looking after the needs of their elderly parents—these carers are known as the ‘Sandwich Generation’.

In four-generational structures, the ‘Double Sandwich Generation’ involves individuals in their 60s caring for their grandchildren, which allows their own adult children to work while also supporting parents in their 90s.

High levels of stress among those in the sandwich or double sandwich generation can be exacerbated by isolation, a lack of support, and their own physical health conditions.

Any transition increases the risk of mental health distress. For those navigating multiple transitions at the same time, these risks are elevated further.



Tips to support parents and carers in the workplace

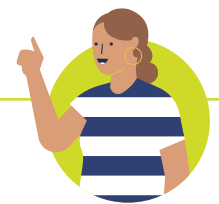


For Organisations

Parents returning to work can face discrimination. Research from the Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Program (PWWP) found returning women were demoted or had their roles changed while on leave, or experienced 'benevolent sexism'. The study also found returning fathers experience discrimination and stigma when requesting flexible work arrangements. There are many ways an employer can take action to support carers and parents.

Positive workplace policies and practices include:

- **Provide access to job-protected paid family leave**, available equally to all parents and carers.
- **Visibly support and enable dads and non-birth partners to take longer periods of parental leave.** Use senior leadership as role models and explicitly address concerns about taking leave, reassuring workers of opportunities for career growth and promotion.
- **Encourage family flexible arrangements**, including flexible use of family leave in the interests of the family, across the various transitions of parenting and caring.
- **Recognise every journey to parenthood is unique and intensely personal.** Many people will not wish to disclose their situation. For tips on how to support pregnancy loss, infertility and adoption, refer to [Supporting the Hidden Journeys to Parenthood tip sheet](#) from the [Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Program \(PWWP\)](#).
- **Automate and embed processes into systems** (e.g. reminders for when someone is returning from extended leave).
- **Champion and promote flexibility in senior leadership roles**, so this is not seen as a barrier to professional development.
- **Establish peer networks to help individuals connect with and learn from the experiences of others.** For tips on how to set up a group see the PWWP's [How to Set up a Working Parent Network tip sheet](#).
- **Provide easy and independent access to policies and procedures**, so that workers can see what is available without having to ask.
- **Provide education to the whole of organisation about emotional and mental health at this life stage** to increase capacity to identify and respond should they identify distress in themselves or others.
- **Provide access to carer-related support and direct services**, including Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and dependent care assistance programs for mental health support if needed.
- **Do not 'set and forget'.** Consider what support is needed for all types of family carers, and how those needs change over time. For example, parenthood involves ongoing transition points as children grow from babies and toddlers to school-aged children and adolescents. Refer to the PWWP's [Supporting the Ongoing Seasons of Working Parenthood tip sheet](#).



Feeling overwhelmed and not sure where to start?

Ask, do not assume. Everyone's experience and personal circumstances are unique. If you are unsure where to start, talk with your employee to understand their specific circumstances and concerns relating to their caring responsibilities and ask them how they would like to be supported. Supervisor support is key to supporting a successful transition, so opening the lines of communication is a great place to start.

What some companies are doing^{10,11}

- **Education programs for HR, managers and employees** to identify and respond to those who may be experiencing distress and perinatal mental health issues.
- **Workplace partnerships** with community groups or organisations.
- **Eldercare kits** containing information about accessing aged care facilities, fees, government assistance and rebates.
- **Childcare kits** which provide information about childcare facilities and fees, government assistance and rebates and childcare options (i.e. a childcare directory).
- **Emergency care** that provides access to registered nurses or carers for emergency care needs.
- **Dad only leave** that encourages fathers to take longer periods of parental leave in their baby's first year.
- **On-site childcare** managed by an external childcare provider, or a Family Room allowing parents to bring their children back after school or have them attend if the child is unable to go to day care or school.
- **Term-time working arrangements** (all school holidays off) and the option to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for any purpose.
- **Family-friendly meeting scheduling** (i.e. avoiding early morning/late afternoons when parents are likely to be dropping off or collecting kids or visiting elderly parents).
- **Life admin days** to catch-up with life administration tasks that often fall to the bottom of the to do list for working parents and carers (including medical check-ups).
- **Concierge or transport** services to assist with caring responsibilities or life admin.
- **Teenage time** in the form of half a day a month to spend time with teenage children.
- **Monthly allowances**, vouchers, discounts for care.

Tips to support parents and carers in the workplace



For Individuals

- **Educate yourself about the supports available** to you as a carer, such as government funded carer payments and Paid Parental Leave.
- **Seek out any available support**, practical resources and information in the workplace to prepare for your transitions (e.g. peer support groups, leave policies, COPE's free [Ready to COPE App](#)).
- **Adapt work-goals to align with caring commitments.** Ensure you are clearly defining and communicating personal boundaries to your workplace.
- **Connect with others through a local support group** or organisations that provide services and support specifically for carers and parents, such as [Carers Australia](#) or [COPE's Mama Tribe](#).
- **Speak to other family members about dividing up caring responsibilities** (e.g. siblings sharing care for an elderly parent). It may help to clearly articulate the needs of the person being cared for, and to be specific about what types of contributions are most helpful (e.g. decision making vs. financial support vs. regular social visits).
- **Reduce your risk of burnout by adopting self-care** and wellbeing strategies that provide you with sufficient recovery time (see [Beyond Blue's website](#) for ideas).
- **Reach out for help if you are experiencing poor mental health.** Several organisations provide support and education for families and carers throughout Australia—see [here](#). You can also speak to your GP to discuss your support options. Perinatal specific services can be easily located on the COPE's [e-COPE Directory](#).

Parenting and Caring Case study

SEEK recognises that its business success is a reflection of the quality of its workforce. They are committed to an inclusive culture which values diversity of thought, opinion and background, and where its employees are provided with equal access to opportunities.

At a glance



- The team at SEEK were looking for a comprehensive program complete with one-on-one sessions to support their people through their parental leave journey.
- The team sought to include both organisational and individual interventions to help all team members to bring their whole selves to work.

It's important to be proactive and work on system level changes to support parents in navigating the transition and making flexibility work for them.

Ukari Warmann, HR Director ANZ – SEEK

Activities and outcomes

- **Extending parental leave eligibility** to 18 months, with 14 weeks paid parental leave, including superannuation.
- **One-on-one parental leave transition coaching** offered to any parents taking parental leave, both before leaving and after returning to paid work.
- **Couple navigation sessions**, to facilitate discussions between partners about sharing the load.
- **Leaders' session**, a practical session focused on tips and strategies for leading a team member through the transition.
- **Making support accessible to all parents**, regardless of gender, and including both birth and adoptive parents.
- **Ongoing program evaluation** to ensure it is meeting needs at individual and organisational levels.

Key results

- 28% of employees taking parental leave are men (vs national 5%).
- Increased confidence in integrating work and non-work responsibilities, communicating with managers and the ability to request flexibility and support.
- An inclusive environment where parents can confidently deliver outcomes at work, and in their personal lives.

Evaluation results show increases in retention, engagement, mental health and wellbeing, and job satisfaction.

Advice for others

- **Investing in training** for the managers and supervisors is critically important to avoid the 'boss lottery' and all managers should have this, whether they do or do not have parents in their team.
- **Support networks** for parents within organisations provide valuable peer mentoring and support.
- **Making access to leave open and flexible** for fathers and non-birth parents helps create opportunities for inclusion and reduces implicit bias.
- **A good starting point** is recognising transitions do not flick on like a switch; they happen gradually over time. Giving employees coaching support means they have a sounding board and someone neutral to talk to, who is not their leader or partner—it is incredibly beneficial to both the employee and the organisation.



Worth a read

Working While Caring Hub,

Australian Government Carer Gateway, 2022

Read here: <https://www.carergateway.gov.au/working-while-caring>

Carers + Employers Accreditation Program,

Carers NSW

Read here: <https://carersandemployers.org.au>

Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE),

Read here: <https://www.cope.org.au>

Family Friendly Workplace™ Certification,

Read here: <https://familyfriendlyworkplaces.com>

Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Project (PWWP),

Read here: <https://www.transitioningwell.com.au/perinatal/>

Raising Children Network,

Read here: <https://raisingchildren.net.au>



Read more in this series:

Paper 1

Career Transitions Series: General Principles

Paper 2

Career Transition Series: Entering the Workforce and Young Worker Transitions

Paper 3

Career Transition Series: Learning to Lead (*this guide*)

Paper 4

Career Transition Series: Parenting and Caring

Paper 5

Career Transition Series: Redundancy and Career Change

Paper 6

Career Transitions Series: Health-Related Changes

Paper 7

Career Transition Series: Relocation

Paper 8

Career Transitions Series: Crisis and Career Shocks

Paper 9

Career Transitions Series: Late Career and Retirement

[Click here to read the other papers in this series](#)



References

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- 10 PWWP 'Supporting the Ongoing Seasons of Working Parenthood'
- 11 Human Rights Commission 'Supporting Carers in the Workplace'

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