

Health related changes

Career
Transition
Series



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

Paper 6

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



Common physical and mental health symptoms in health-related transitions present workers with extra challenges in doing their job well. Poor work environments, where people have limited support or experience discrimination and a lack of job security, can negatively impact their return-to-work experiences.¹

About this transition

While the range of health conditions individuals may experience in their lifetimes varies greatly, we have focused on three specific health-related transitions: cancer, menopause, and gender transitions. These represent different forms of transitions, with different potential responses and risks, and provide a sample of considerations for workplaces and organisations.

Depending on the nature of the transition, some workers may move through non-work-related health conditions privately, with their workplace and colleagues unaware of their condition. There is no general requirement for individuals to inform their workplace regarding their health or medical conditions, and employers may not discriminate on the grounds of health or disability, according to the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth).


However, the Fair Work Commission states it is reasonable for employers to request information about matters that could impact upon a worker's capacity to perform the essential (inherent) requirements of a role, or where their illness/injury has the potential to place the worker, their colleagues or others at risk. This may be challenging but provides opportunities for individuals and organisations to collaborate in developing effective responses that support workers and enable them to be productive and effective at work throughout health-related transitions.

Key Messages

1. Depending on the nature of the health-related transition, some workers may move through health conditions privately, with their workplace and colleagues unaware of their condition.
2. Cancer is a major cause of illness in Australia and many diagnoses occur among the working population. And for many cancer survivors, work is more than just paid employment—it is part of their identity, helps to maintain social connections and allows them to utilise their skills and experience.
3. Health-related transitions may be challenging but they provide an opportunity for individuals and organisations to collaborate in developing effective responses that support workers and enable them to be productive and effective at work throughout this period.


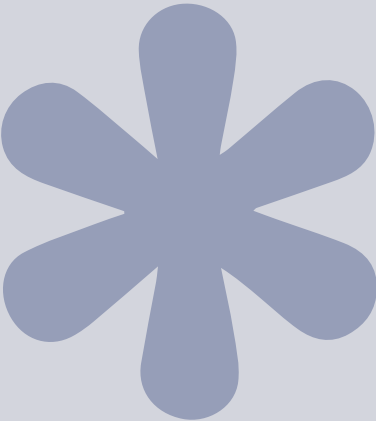


Key considerations



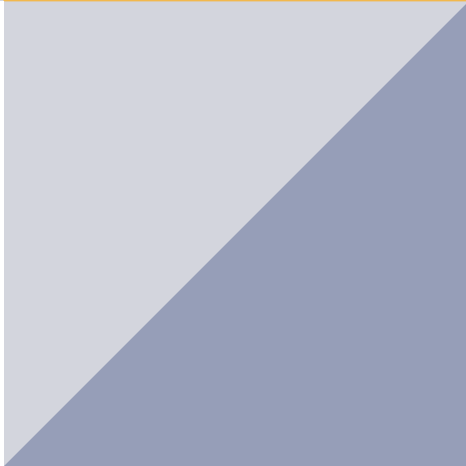
In 2022, 44% of women experiencing menopause reported impacted ability to work, with 10% leaving work due to menopause symptoms.

Thandrayen et al., 2022²



Between 2006 and 2009, 58% of people with cancer were found to participate in the paid workforce, with 42% in full-time employment or self-employed.

Fawcett Society, 2022³



According to research by McKinsey, more than half of transgender employees surveyed say they are not comfortable being 'out' at work, and two-thirds remain 'in the closet' in professional interactions outside their own companies.

McKinsey & Company, 2021⁴

4 ways people can internalise health-related transitions

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.⁵

Health-related transitions may look like this:

Roles

"I may need to manage and use my energy carefully, and this may mean changes in the role or the hours I can put into my professional role."



Relationships

"People may be scared of me or think that I am fragile."



Routines

"Finding time for treatment, resting and recovery requires me to plan in advance, but I can also be hit with fatigue and find it hard to predict my week."



Assumptions

"Team members may become resentful having to pick up extra work in my absence."



Cancer

Why it is important to support health-related transitions due to cancer

Cancer is a major cause of illness in Australia and many diagnoses occur among the working population. Thanks to improvements in cancer treatment, a lot of workers may still be able to work during and following treatment, and many cancer survivors are both willing and able to return to work following their treatment.

Despite this, the common symptoms of cancer treatment (including fatigue, vomiting, nausea, diarrhoea and headaches) are a significant challenge for workers who are trying to complete a typical working day. And unsurprisingly, mental health conditions can often happen concurrently.

In line with the notion that good work is good for us, there are various benefits of continuing to work while undergoing cancer treatment or returning soon after treatment ends, where it is safe to do so. These include routine and structure, improved financial resources, social connections and opportunities to feel 'normal' again. For many cancer survivors, work is more than just paid employment—it is part of their identity, helps to maintain social connections and allows them to utilise their skills and experience.



Tips to support cancer-related transitions



For Organisations

- **Take a person-centred approach** that focuses on treating people with compassion and respect.
- **Provide workplace flexibility**, particularly around time and conditions of work, to accommodate the effects of an employee's cancer diagnosis or treatment such as flexible start and finish times, time off to attend medical appointments and returning to work in stages.
- **Implement a range of supports**, including temporary alternate duties and providing adjustments such as ergonomic work tools. This will help to reduce the burden on individuals and support their mental health and wellbeing.
- **Regularly evaluate any adjustments** and continue to modify in line with the individual's needs and preferences.
- **Encourage communication and transparency with team members** to clarify expectations, and enable the team to offer support and assistance. Ensure that this includes being clear on what information the employee wants to share (and what they don't) and how confidentiality will be respected.
- **Have a documented return-to-work plan**, which can help with communication and expectations for all parties. Confirm who is responsible for monitoring progress of the return-to-work plan, and the interval of planned follow up meetings.



For Individuals

- **Tap into the cancer care team** (including your GP) who have a key role in return-to-work planning. Referrals to occupational therapists and/or occupational physicians for additional assessment and recommendations is useful, and can offer key emotional, psychological and physical support and monitoring.
- **Use strategies to help manage challenges with thinking and memory** include using lists, setting reminders and putting clear daily structures in place, while trying to reduce distractions, especially noise, and the need for multitasking.
- **Schedule regular breaks** as protected time to manage fatigue. This would be part of a gradual return-to-work and flexible duties.
- **Work closely with employers and managers** around proactive communication with colleagues and clients, when needed.

Menopause

Why it is important to support health-related transitions due to menopause

Menopause is the final cessation of a woman’s menstrual cycle that usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, marking the end of fertility. While the menopause itself is a single moment in time, the process of ceasing menstruation takes years, so it is more aptly described as the menopause transition. Given women aged 45 years and over are a growing segment of Australia’s workforce, it is important for organisations to better understand the impact of the symptoms of the menopause transition and to support these workers’ lives and their capacity to work.

The mental health impacts of menopause are not as well known as the physical symptoms, such as hot flushes, but are almost as common. During perimenopause—the time leading up to the final cessation of periods—many women experience changes in mood and cognition, including an increased risk of anxiety and depression, and difficulties with concentration and memory. Insomnia, which is also common during menopause, exacerbates these symptoms. Women with more frequent and bothersome symptoms tend to feel less engaged and satisfied with their work, have lower organisational commitment and many intend to leave their role. One-fifth of women experience no symptoms at all apart from a change in periods.

Despite the very real symptoms discussed, transitioning to menopause is a ‘silent issue’ for most organisations—most women do not know what to expect, and it is rarely discussed or disclosed. Those experiencing the menopause transition report a sense of secrecy and isolation, with a shortage of menopause-specific support or information in their organisation which adds to the challenge of managing symptoms at work.

There is also fear of age-related and gendered discrimination. Many women feel reluctant to raise menopause with their managers due to fear of embarrassment with concerns it will negatively affect perceptions of their workplace performance. Most women report not wanting to be ‘singled out’ but do want organisational policies in conjunction with workplace support. Proactively planning for improved working conditions for women experiencing the menopausal transition can help to ensure employees and organisations alike can benefit from improved wellbeing, engagement and retention.

According to UK research, 1 in 4 women think about leaving their jobs due to menopausal symptoms and one in 10 actually do.⁶

Menopause is part of life, but for some, it is not easy to go through

Symptoms associated with menopause vary. Those that impact on work performance the most include sleep disturbance, headaches, weakness or fatigue, anxiety, memory loss, trouble concentrating, pain in bone joints, and hot flashes, with psychological changes often preceding physical changes.

This biological transition takes about four years and for some, symptoms can last for 5–10 years. About 10% of women can also experience early menopause (before age 45), or premature menopause (before the age of 40).⁷ These conditions can carry additional effects and impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Premature or early menopause can happen spontaneously or be caused by medical treatments such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or surgical removal of both ovaries.



Tips to support menopause in the workplace



For Organisations

- **Engage in genuine consultation** to identify the needs of those experiencing menopause.
- **Train managers** on menopause-related symptoms, to help develop empathy-based professional conversations that explore practical supports for women. Ensure leaders are proactive in creating a supportive culture—do not leave it to women to raise their needs.
- **All employees can play a role in cultivating a supportive culture of acknowledging menopause as part of life** and understanding the impacts of this transition. Talk about menopause in a neutral or positive way to help remove stigma. Avoid implicit assumptions that menopause is problematic in the workplace. Demonstrate you are aware that this transition is a temporary life stage and that ageing presents health challenges more broadly for all genders.
- **Appoint a key contact person** in the organisation and upskill the human resources and human services team in responding sensitively and providing help and advice.
- **Collaboratively develop strategies** to address working conditions that exacerbate menopausal symptoms and avoid discrimination. These could include flexible workdays and shifts or changes to the immediate environment such as use of desk fans, breaks from wearing PPE, ergonomic support or allocation of quiet work spaces. For the 20% of women who are severely affected, menopausal leave entitlements and return-to-work plans could be appropriate.
- **Draw on work health and safety expertise to assess risks** and develop a plan for reasonable adjustments based on symptoms.
- **Encourage movement beyond the desk.** Being active is associated with reduced symptoms.
- **Ensure easy access to reliable information.** Organisations could provide health education and resources for women via employee intranets.
- **Increase social connection** through workplace support groups and mentoring.
- **Notice and appreciate the qualities that older female employees bring to the organisation.** This could include their steadiness, experience, insight or wisdom.
- **Provide women with access to support that is external** to the organisation to ensure that those who want to maintain their privacy are catered for.
- **Embed menopause into existing policies** (e.g. flexible work or fatigue management) or list of reasonable adjustments. Some organisations opt for a menopause policy to help bring about a culture shift and to make organisational supports explicit.
- **Remember that women's experience of menopause is very diverse** and not all women will need or want workplace support.

Tips to support menopause in the workplace

For Individuals

- **Educate yourself** about this life transition and the steps to take to help yourself.
- **Adjust diet and nutrition** to help meet the needs of your changing body, boost energy levels and mitigate perimenopausal fatigue.
- **Increase active movement**, such as walking at meal breaks. Exercise can help boost mood, reduce anxiety, promote sleep and help concentration.
- **Take regular energy breaks** to help reset energy, focus and mood.
- **Have fans and/or a water spray available** to ease hot flushes.
- **Adopt brain-friendly work styles** such as minimising multi-tasking, and scheduling distraction-free time for important focused work.
- **Keep the lines of communication open with management** in requesting flexible work arrangements or other accommodations, if needed.
- **Get advice from health professionals who are knowledgeable about menopause** and treatment options for symptoms.
- **Keep perspective** by remembering that menopause is a temporary life stage, and the benefits of women's workplace contribution.



Gender transitions

Why it is important to support gender transitions at work

Gender transitions for workers are a less frequent health transition, however they are highly impactful for individuals. During these transitions, individuals move from presenting as their assigned sex at birth to expressing a different gender identity.

The experience for transgender individuals is diverse. It can range from personally presenting as gender fluid and changes to preferred pronouns (e.g. they/them), changes in attire and presentation, through to hormonal and/or surgical gender affirmation interventions.

Transitioning gender while continuing to work can be highly stressful, and the worker is vulnerable to health and safety issues, including workplace bullying and harassment. While some of the issues faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual (LGB) and gender diverse employees are similar, there are additional challenges experienced by those experiencing gender transitions. These can make them feel even more isolated at work, and work productivity can be negatively impacted. Many individuals experience burnout and eventually leave their organisation if they feel that they have to deviate from their authentic self to fit with organisational values.

However, when transgender individuals feel supported and accepted in their workplace, they are more likely to be open about their transition and affirmed gender. This means they have a better chance of completing their identity integration. An organisation that acknowledges and hears transgender voices demonstrates a commitment to support transgender employees and creates a genuinely inclusive workplace culture. There are various benefits stemming from fostering this culture, including positive worker attitudes, higher quality work and staff retention.

Why it can be a struggle to change gender while working

- **Potential stigma** linked with being perceived as departing from community norms.
- **Increased prejudice and discrimination** as a member of a minority group.
- **Concerns and uncertainty** about how much personal information to share with co-workers.
- **Unique social, physical, and psychological challenges** for those undergoing gender affirmation surgery, which are not experienced by the gay, lesbian and bisexual community, including:
 - **More hostility**, particularly from heterosexual men, which can exert more severe personal and professional consequences.
 - Some **social relationships will also change** for the worse. Many trans people will experience **rejection** from co-workers, friends, and family members, potentially leading to depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation.
- **A change in external perceptions of work-related competence** is common and can have significant financial and psychological impacts for trans employees. Those who transition female-to-male have been found to experience no change or a slight increase in pay, and no change in views of competence. However, those who transition male-to-female can experience a significant decrease in pay, status and perceived competence.
- **Having to keep silent on their experience** due to risks of discrimination is a factor when deciding to disclose one's affirmed gender. Some individuals choose to keep the matter private as the consequences of disclosure may seem greater than the benefits.

Tips on supporting employees going through a gender transition



For Organisations

Organisations may seek to develop broader inclusion strategies that address LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices. For example, healthcare and community services agencies can gain accreditation as a Rainbow Tick accredited provider across six standards.

- **Understand the essential role of the manager** in helping to facilitate a smooth, discrimination-free experience for the employee, ensuring **the individual is involved in all steps**, that their decisions around privacy and confidentiality are respected, and that a **support team** of internal/external people to support the employee's wellbeing is provided.
- **Offer practical support such as gender transition leave**, ensuring **access to preferred facilities** (e.g., toilets), **suitable uniforms** that match gender identity, and **modifying records** to reflect preferred name and pronouns. This shows respect and acceptance.
- **Actively manage the potential for implicit bias** towards transitioning employees, noting experiences can differ.
- **Be aware of potential workplace discrimination.** Many trans employees are dismissed after transitioning due to competence-related reasons, but prejudice and discomfort by employers is more likely.
- **Increase organisational awareness around transgender individuals.** Even a low level of background knowledge can support more positive attitudes.
- **Include transgender and gender diversity issues within broader diversity and inclusion training.** This needs to be done beyond compliance activities and 'box-ticking exercises' but enable genuine and deeper engagement.
- **Support the development of lived experience groups / peer mentoring support** including opportunities to establish a queer and trans support group in your workplace or industry.
- **Provide access to suitably skilled Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** that include practitioners who have expertise in supporting transgender and gender diverse individuals in the workplace.
- **Provide training for your HR team/s** on the specific health needs that may be experienced by transgender and gender diverse employees.
- **Provide a confidential point of contact** so transgender or gender-questioning individuals can discuss plans and raise any complaints. Appointing a designated HR team member (could be the same or a different individual) to support managers and co-workers who have questions about how to best support transgender employees.

Tips on supporting employees going through a gender transition



For Individuals

- **Find a good healthcare team** who specialise in gender transitions and can link you to relevant support services. Services should follow guidelines regarding standards of care, such as those developed by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (www.wpath.org). This can help to explore your options about forms of care in a safe and positive environment. While some gender-diverse individuals can find it hard to trust health professionals, it is important to find someone you feel comfortable with. If you are in a regional or rural area where services are more limited, telehealth services may be an important part of your care.
- **Focus on physical and mental health.** In preparation for transition to your felt gender identify, it is important to prioritise physical and mental health. As far as possible, maintain a healthy diet and sleep routine, reduce your use of drugs and alcohol, and engage in regular exercise that you enjoy. These factors can all help to boost mood and connect with your body in positive ways.
- **Build personal resources.** It is also important to find ways to build your personal resources, whether that is connecting with support networks of positive family, friends and peers, taking time away from social media if it is a drain on your energy, and engaging in self-care.
- **Take some time** to find what feels right for you in how you express your identity and gender. This does not have to meet others' standards or stereotypes – it is important that you can find what feels comfortable for you around how you present, speak and what you wear, as well as your preferred pronouns.
- **The right support is key.** For many trans and gender diverse individuals, starting to present as your felt gender identity can raise mixed feelings. It can be both anxiety provoking (in relation to concerns about the reactions of others), but also build confidence (in your ability to live in your affirmed gender role), support at this time is crucial to protect mental health and wellbeing.

Health-related changes

Case study

At a glance



- Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU) recognised that while it was committed to gender equality and the wellbeing of all its employees, the menopause transition, which every female experiences, had been missing from its policies, practices and culture.
- After consulting staff through an organisational-wide survey and receiving strong support – 'I think this is brilliant! No more suffering in silence, and raising awareness always makes a workplace more inclusive and safer' – QTU approved funding for a menopause project.

Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU), which negotiates better working conditions for teachers and school leaders, is a feminised workplace with 80% of its 110 employees being women. As an employer, QTU strives to create an inclusive work environment with a strong emphasis on employees' health and wellbeing.

Activities and outcomes

The QTU menopause project was designed to support the health, wellbeing and engagement of mid-life female employees as they transition through menopause, so they can continue to be successful in their roles.

QTU engaged workplace wellbeing advisor to create and implement a comprehensive strategy for becoming a menopause-friendly organisation.

Key activities included:

- Securing leadership support and briefing senior officers.
- Surveying all staff (at the beginning and end of project).
- Establishing a steering committee.
- Training all managers.
- Providing workshops for staff
- Creating a menopause-specific policy and conducting a policy review that identified the opportunity to embed menopause into the union's flexible work policy.
- Creating a suite of education materials including posters, tip sheets and a self-care booklet for women.

Implementation began in January 2020 and continued over two years, at times intermittently due to disruption caused by the Covid pandemic.

Women could be suffering in silence and not receiving the support that could increase their engagement and effectiveness, and the organisation could lose talented women.

Key results

- **92% of staff thought the initiative was 'great' or 'good.'** "In terms of normalising menopause, this project has been excellent". A couple of people were concerned this project would re-enforce negative stereotypes of women in mid-life.
- **Increased knowledge:** Before the project 38% of staff said they were aware of the early signs of menopause. This increased to 67% at the final survey.
- **Increased confidence:** Before the project only 7% of managers felt confident having a comfortable and constructive conversation with a female staff member about menopause. After the manager training, 100% felt confident to do so.
- **Practical application:** 68% of those who attended the managerial training said they had used it to feel more comfortable talking to or assisting a staff member, and a third said they had applied the training to help a union member.
- **Talking menopause:** When women were asked if they had raised menopause with their managers since the project, ten women said they had. The majority of these had a positive experience. A few did not, saying that their manager was not well informed or relied on her own experience, which was different from that of the staff member.
- **Increased help seeking:** All women who said they were experiencing menopause at the end of the project said the training and/or resources had helped them access information, or seek help (e.g. medical help or workplace support), that they wouldn't have otherwise.
- **Positive attitude shift:** By the end of the project twice as many people rated menopause as a pathway to an empowering life stage (from 29% to 59%).
- **A longer working life:** Of those experiencing menopause at the final survey, 50% said that the menopause project had increased their ability or confidence to keep working as long as they chose.

Advice for others

- **Women's wellbeing** and experience of work can be positively impacted by taking an organisational approach to becoming menopause-friendly, especially investing in managers' wellbeing capability.
- **Refresher sessions for managers** and including menopause training in staff inductions could help ensure all women have a positive experience if they speak up at work.
- **Providing women with access to independent support** will help cater to those people who some women may never want to talk about their experience of menopause at work.

Note: These impacts were achieved during a time of high staff turnover and unprecedented disruption and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continually interrupted the project's momentum and added to the workloads of internal personnel.



Worth a read

Cancer

Practical guide: Cancer, Work and You

Cancer Council Australia, 2019

<https://www.cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Cancer-Work-You-Dec2019.pdf>

Workplace Fact Sheets, Support Resources and Posters.

Talking to your employee about cancer

Cancer Council NSW, 2022

<https://www.cancercouncil.com.au/cancer-information/legal-work-and-financial-issues/work-and-cancer/for-workplaces-employers/>

How HR can support employees who have cancer

Smith S. Australian HR Institute, 2019

<https://www.hrmonline.com.au/change-management/cancer-support/>

Menopause

Menopause in the Workplace

Australian HR Institute, 2022

<https://www.ahri.com.au/ahri-assist/health-safety-and-well-being/health-and-wellbeing/menopause-in-the-workplace>

Menopause and Work

Australasian Menopause Society, 2022

<https://www.menopause.org.au>

Guidance on Menopause and the Workplace

Faculty of Occupational Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians, 2021

<https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Guidance-on-menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf>

Menopause - Mental Health and Emotions

Jean Hailes, 2022

<https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/menopause/mental-health-emotions>

Menopause Information Pack for Organizations (MIPO)

<https://www.menopauseatwork.org/>

Worth a read

Gender transitions

Pride in Diversity,

Employer Training & Consulting, 2022

Read here: <https://www.prideinclusionprograms.com.au/about-pid/>

Employment Resources,

The Gender Centre Inc, 2022

Read here: <https://gendercentre.org.au/resources/employment>

Supporting Gender Transition in the Workplace:

A toolkit for ACT employers,

A Gender Agenda, 2022

Read here: <https://genderrights.org.au/resources/supporting-gender-transition-in-the-workplace/>

Work and Workplaces,

TransHub, 2022

Read here: <https://www.transhub.org.au/work>

Information for Employers,

TransHub, 2022

Read here: <https://www.transhub.org.au/allies/employers>

Gender Affirmation Policy and Guidelines,

TransHub, 2020

Read here: <https://www.transhub.org.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

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References

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