

# MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE



What should I do if a staff member is displaying symptoms of a mental health issue?

## 1. Identify concerns and plan a meeting:

Initiating a discussion with a staff member about their mental health (as it relates to the workplace) is often what many managers find most difficult. It is important that you take the time to think about, plan and resource yourself prior to meeting with the staff member. Some things to consider when planning a meeting:



- Identify the best place to conduct a meeting, one that is quiet, private and non-threatening
- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting. Explain that you are concerned about their performance in the work place and that it may relate to health issues. e.g. “I am concerned about you. You are a competent worker but of late it appears that you are having some issues managing the completion of your work”
- Assure the staff member that you intend to work with them to help them to address the issues at work and seek the supports they may need  
Resource yourself on the basics of Mental Health and become familiar with the appropriate language to describe mental illness (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hr/ohs/mental-health/what-is-mental-health.php>)
- Seek assistance/information from professionals if required
- Establish what resources the University can offer to assist the staff member i.e. Employee Assistance Program (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hr/ohs/assistance.php>), Flexibility and Work-life balance options (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/careers-at-deakin/why-deakin/wa/family.php>)
- Establish what policies and processes your organisation has in place to assist staff members experiencing mental health issues i.e. reasonable adjustments; return to work arrangements (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hr/ohs/manual/compensation.php#rehab>)
- Offer the staff member the opportunity to bring a support person
- Identify the staff member’s strengths and the positive and productive contributions they make to the organisation

## 2. Discuss and assess

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### Privacy Obligations

Creating an atmosphere in which the staff member feels safe and comfortable may enable them to feel more open to having a discussion about their mental health/illness. To do this:

- Adopt a calm and professional manner
- It is important to be clear about the confidentiality requirements under OH&S and Privacy legislation as well as any organisational policies that may exist
- Inform the staff member that their information and what you discuss with respect to their health will remain confidential. Should disclosure be needed the staff member should be made aware of whom the disclosure will be made to and for what purpose.

### Effective communication and active listening:

Whilst mental health is a personal and sensitive issue it is important not to shy away from the subject as this can perpetuate stigma and increase feelings of anxiety. Honest and open enquiries are better received than a reluctance to name and address the issue. The aim is to create an open and honest dialogue that fosters a system of support and understanding between the staff member and yourself.

#### *Key things to consider:*

- It is important to familiarise yourself with the key words that describe the issue and consider the language you use.
- Listen and be empathic. It is important that you are able to get a sense of the problem from the staff member's perspective before you can begin to address any issues.
  - Focus fully on the speaker and show your interest – nod occasionally; maintain eye contact; smile at the person; ensure your body language is open and inviting;
  - Avoid interrupting. Listen to what the staff member is saying and try to recognise any causes of unhappiness or stress.
  - Avoid appearing judgmental. Keep an open mind and do not jump to conclusions about the staff member's health, the impact on their work, or possible solutions.
- It is reasonable to ask questions and discuss an staff member's mental health/illness with them for the purposes of identifying supports and reasonable adjustments. Ask open-ended questions that are simple and non-judgmental and allow the staff member the opportunity to explain. A good starting point is often simply asking about how they are.

Some other questions that may be useful are:

- How are you doing at the moment?
- More recently you have appeared distracted/upset/down/frustrated. Is everything ok?
- I've noticed that you have been arriving late most mornings. Is everything ok?
- I've noticed that you have fallen behind in meeting your work requirements. Is everything ok?

It is **not** ok to say or ask:

- You're clearly struggling. What's up?
- Why can't you just get your act together? And who do you expect to pick up your workload?

- Everyone else is under the same pressure and coping. Why aren't you?

Tell them about the problem and give examples. Explain how the problem is affecting the individual or the team or their work. Remember to focus on the issues and not the person. Explore the issues together by asking them what they perceive the issues to be and how you may be able to help.

### 3. Collaboratively develop solutions

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It is part of your role as a Manager to explore solutions within the work environment that enable the staff member to remain a productive member of the workforce. This may include collaborative and effective performance management or it may require reasonable adjustments.

- Discuss the options available. These may include flexible work hours; regular rest breaks; changing work-tasks, demands or timeframes; working from home or part time; time off for appointments etc
- Ask the staff member for proposals to resolve the issues. It can be helpful to ask:
  - What support or adjustments could we introduce to minimise triggers or support you to manage your symptoms at work? Is there anything we should try and avoid doing?
- Document any agreement and give a copy to the staff member.
- Offer the staff member resources such as written material about mental health and accessing support. Encourage them to access their GP if they have not, or to utilise organisational resources such as EAP or any health and wellbeing programs that are available.
- If the staff member does not acknowledge any workplace issues then you should end the meeting and advise the staff member that you are available to them should they require any assistance and/or support. You can offer them the choice of seeking confidential support through Employee Assistance Program (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hr/ohs/assistance.php>).

If in this instance you feel that the staff member's performance is impacting on core business and you cannot make reasonable adjustments to their workplace, then you may consider addressing this through more formal processes.

### 4. Follow up

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An organisation's duty of care does not end with the meeting. It is important to follow up with the staff member and review any plans or adjustments made, to ensure that the adjustments remain appropriate and that sufficient resources and supports remain available. Key things to remember:

- Arrange a follow up meeting
- Monitor and provide feedback on progress
- Provide support where required