

# Supporting the return to work of employees with depression or anxiety



## ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

Around one million Australian adults live with depression. Over two million have an anxiety disorder. On average, one in five women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime; and one in three women and one in five men will have an anxiety disorder. Depression and anxiety can be as serious, debilitating and life-threatening as a physical illness – yet less than half of those experiencing these conditions seek help.<sup>1</sup>

These figures have a significant impact on Australian workplaces. Depression and anxiety can have a profound impact on all aspects of life, including work.

Depression and anxiety affect different people in different ways. Most people experiencing depression or an anxiety disorder are able to remain at work. Others however, will need time off. In these cases, employers can play a key role in ensuring that returning to the workplace is a smooth process for the individual, the team and the organisation.

If an employee experiencing depression or anxiety returns to work in an appropriate and meaningful role, this may decrease the likelihood of relapse and increase the likelihood of the organisation retaining the skills and experience of that individual.

## WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

In general, a person may be depressed if he/she has had a persistently low mood (over a period of two or more weeks) and a loss of interest in their usual activities. Depression can also have a negative effect on a person's concentration, memory, sleep routine, motivation and activity levels, appetite, social behaviour, thinking patterns and feelings.

### Changes in behaviour

In the workplace, the following changes in behaviour may be a sign of depression:

- finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- turning up to work late
- feeling tired and fatigued
- being unusually tearful or emotional
- getting angry easily or frustrated with tasks or people
- avoiding being around work colleagues
- finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines
- finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
- having difficulty managing multiple tasks or demands
- being vulnerable to stress and anxiety
- drinking alcohol to cope with other symptoms of depression and/or anxiety
- having loss of confidence and negative thought patterns.

## WHAT ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

There are six main types of anxiety disorders:

- Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
- Specific Phobias
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Panic Disorder
- Social Phobia.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results (4326.0). Canberra: ABS

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While symptoms differ from person to person, you may notice some changes in the person, which include:

- appearing restless, tense and on edge
- avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
- becoming overwhelmed or upset easily
- finding it hard to make decisions
- having difficulties meeting reasonable deadlines
- referring to being constantly worried and appearing apprehensive.

Please note, these are only signs that an employee **may** have depression or an anxiety disorder. For a diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder, the person must be assessed by a medical practitioner or other health professional.

## DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY CAN AFFECT DIFFERENT PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT WAYS

The experience of depression and/or an anxiety disorder, and its impact on day-to-day life varies from person to person. Some people can experience repeated severe episodes of depression or anxiety throughout their life, while others can have one episode, seek treatment, and never have another episode again. The time it takes for someone to recover from an episode of depression or anxiety varies for each person.

## HOW ARE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DIFFERENT TO WORK-RELATED STRESS?

Depression, anxiety disorders and work-related stress can be connected, however, they are different things. It is important to note that depression and anxiety disorders are clinical illnesses, while stress is not. The World Health Organization definition of work-related stress is: 'the reaction people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope.'<sup>2</sup>

When work-related stress is prolonged or excessive, it can be a risk factor for depression or anxiety. Work-related stress can be minimised by consulting employees to identify any possible stress hazards and using a systematic approach to address these. For more information, please refer to your relevant Worker's Compensation Authority website for guidance material.

The potential sources of work-related stress can be:

- **Workplace social environment** including:
  - the organisational culture
  - interpersonal relationships
  - status
  - competing work and home commitments.
- **Systems of work** including:
  - content and/or demands of work
  - workload, work pace, work schedule or working hours
  - participation in decision-making
  - control over work
  - systems for communication in the workplace.

## EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS

Australian employers have specific return to work obligations under Accident Compensation legislation. Employers should seek advice or refer to guidance from their Worker's Compensation Authority.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organisation (2004). *Work organisation and stress*. Protecting Workers' Health Series No. 3.

## WILL ALL EMPLOYEES WITH DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY NEED TIME OFF WORK?

When an employee is diagnosed with depression or an anxiety disorder, it is important to understand that remaining at work can play an important role in the person's recovery. For example, work can:

- improve quality of life and wellbeing
- provide structure and routine to day-to-day life
- contribute to a sense of meaning and purpose
- promote opportunity for social inclusion and social support
- provide financial security
- promote recovery from a mental illness.

As with many physical illnesses, some employees with depression or an anxiety disorder may need time off work. However, effective management of the return to work process is vital to helping the person get back to work. Return to work planning should be seen as an integral part of recovery from a mental illness such as depression or an anxiety disorder.

## BARRIERS TO RETURNING TO WORK

There are many factors which make it difficult for an employee to return to work such as:

- stigma associated with depression/anxiety – and lack of knowledge and understanding about its impact on work performance
- suspicion about the severity of the employee's depression/anxiety (e.g. other team members suggesting that the employee is using depression/anxiety as an excuse to 'get out' of work)
- perceived or actual lack of return to work planning or support from employer
- fear that colleagues may find out about the diagnosis
- reduced self-confidence associated with the episode of depression/anxiety
- uncertainty about the type of assistance managers or supervisors will provide
- fear of discrimination and the impact on future career prospects
- concerns that work-related contributors or causes of stress, anxiety and depression have not been reported or addressed.

## TIPS TO SUPPORT AN EMPLOYEE'S RETURN TO WORK

Please note that this advice is for general information only and if in doubt specialised advice should be sought.

When planning a person's return to work following an absence related to depression or an anxiety disorder, a good question to ask is: "What would we do if it were a physical illness?" as many of the management principles are the same. These include:

### Offering support

Ask the person if there is anything that can be done to help support their return to work. This may include advice about where to get assistance. The employee may not wish to take up your offer, but it's important to let them know support is available.

### Putting together a plan to assist your employee's return to work

The following steps should be undertaken:

- Before preparing a plan, the manager should talk with the employee, set realistic goals with them and outline a process to monitor how they are progressing.
- Ensure that you have written permission (e.g. a signed authority) from the employee to contact their treating health practitioner(s).
- Contact the treating health practitioner(s) to seek advice on specific issues that should be considered, as well as strategies to achieve a successful return to work.



Photo courtesy of VicHealth



- Prepare the plan in consultation with the employee, their treating practitioner(s), and the occupational rehabilitation provider (if one is involved).
- Revise the plan if you become aware of any relevant changes to the worker's condition or difficulty undertaking particular duties.

### Being inclusive

Experiencing depression or an anxiety disorder can make people feel less confident at times. Help the employee to feel more comfortable by including him/her in meetings and work social events to support his/her recovery.

### Staying in touch

Keeping in touch with employees during an absence from work is likely to contribute to a smooth return to work. Keeping them connected with colleagues and the workplace can help employees feel valued. It also gives them an opportunity to give their opinion on things that may be happening in the workplace, even if they are not there. However, it's also important that the employee does not feel pressured to return to work before it is safe to do so.

### Addressing the causes

If there are specific work-related factors which the employee feels have contributed to their illness, it is important that you listen to their views in relation to these issues and take action where appropriate. This can help to improve outcomes for the individual and for the organisation, as well as ensuring that other employees are not at risk.

### Setting clear expectations

Good return to work planning prevents confusion. Writing up a return to work plan which includes the nature of duties and hours of work can set clear expectations for all involved. Everyone should agree to be flexible to allow for any changes that may occur during recovery. Any agreed changes should be implemented gradually to allow for adjustment.

### Maintaining confidentiality and privacy

It's important to keep details of the employee's illness and treatment confidential. Other staff members should be informed of any changes to work arrangements that may impact on them, for example, a reduction in work hours or changes to management responsibilities. Keeping others informed without compromising the privacy of the employee with depression or anxiety can reduce the risk of gossip and the anxiety that can be associated with returning to the workplace.

## MAKING REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Reasonable adjustments should be made on a case-by-case basis as depression and anxiety disorders affect different people in different ways. Any decisions regarding workplace adjustments should be made in consultation with the employee and documented. It is important that employers are aware of their legal responsibilities as an employer under the Australia-wide *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

Reasonable adjustments may need to be made to assist the employee to:

- deal with stress and psychological demands of the role (remember that this will be different for different employees. Do not make assumptions about what individual employees find stressful or demanding)
- interact with others
- be punctual and manage attendance



- maintain their personal presentation
- effectively organise and manage time
- maintain concentration and memory
- solve problems and make decisions
- maintain energy and motivation
- integrate with colleagues and interact with the rest of their team.

Some examples of common reasonable adjustments employers might consider making are:

- offering flexible working hours, to enable the person to have time off to keep appointments with the treating health practitioner
- shift or location changes
- adjusting the environment of the workspace (if possible)
- establishing goals, prompts, reminders and checklists to assist the employee with time-management and to stay on top of the workload
- reducing workload or specific tasks
- providing access to professional mentoring, coaching or on the job peer support
- ensuring that the employee does not return to a back-log of work or emails
- identifying and modifying tasks that the employee may initially find stressful or overwhelming, for example, the management of staff, public speaking or direct customer contact.

Providing general education to all employees about mental health problems in the workplace can help raise awareness about how to support colleagues in getting assistance. It may also reduce the stigma that is often associated mental illnesses.

When considering any reasonable adjustments, it is important that employers address any work-related contributors to stress, anxiety disorders or depression.



Photo courtesy of VicHealth

## RETURN TO WORK IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

For an employee experiencing or recovering from depression or anxiety, participation in the workplace may be a valuable part of the recovery process and can have a significant impact on the person's emotional, social and physical wellbeing. Even if the employee is on limited hours or duties, it is important to recognise the contribution the person is making and ensure he/she feels part of the team.

There are benefits for the business in keeping employees connected to the workplace. These include the retention of experienced and skilled staff, avoiding costs associated with re-training or hiring new employees and, above all, building a workplace culture that demonstrates to all employees that they are cared for and valued.

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### FURTHER INFORMATION

#### **beyondblue: the national depression initiative**

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help

**beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636 or [infoline@beyondblue.org.au](mailto:infoline@beyondblue.org.au)**

Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and referral only (local call)

#### **beyondblue National Workplace Program**

[www.beyondblue.org.au/workplace](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/workplace)

Awareness, early intervention and prevention education and consultancy program for workplaces

#### **Youthbeyondblue**

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

beyondblue's website for young people – information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

#### **Job Access**

**1800 464 800 or [www.jobaccess.gov.au](http://www.jobaccess.gov.au)**

Information for co-workers, employees and employers on how to assist people with disabilities to obtain and remain in employment

#### **Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC)**

**1300 656 419 or TTY: 1800 620 241 or [www.hreoc.gov.au](http://www.hreoc.gov.au)**

HREOC is an independent statutory organisation tasked with the protection of human rights in Australia.

#### **MensLine Australia**

**1300 78 99 78 or [www.menslineaus.org.au](http://www.menslineaus.org.au)**

24-hour support for men with family and relationship problems, especially around family breakdown or separation. This service provides anonymous telephone support, information and referral (local call).

#### **Lifeline**

**13 11 14**

24-hour crisis support, information and referral (local call)

#### **Suicide Call Back Service**

**1300 659 467**

Free national telephone counselling service for those at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide

### AUSTRALIAN WORKER'S COMPENSATION AUTHORITIES:

#### **WorkSafe ACT**

**02 6207 3000 or [www.worksafe.act.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.act.gov.au)**

#### **Comcare**

**1300 366 979 or [www.comcare.gov.au](http://www.comcare.gov.au)**

#### **WorkCover Authority of NSW**

**13 10 50 or [www.workcover.nsw.gov.au](http://www.workcover.nsw.gov.au)**

#### **NT WorkSafe**

**1800 250 713 or [www.worksafe.nt.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.nt.gov.au)**

#### **Seacare**

**02 6275 0070 or [www.seacare.gov.au](http://www.seacare.gov.au)**

#### **WorkCover SA**

**13 18 55 or [www.workcover.com](http://www.workcover.com)**

#### **WorkCover Queensland**

**1300 362 128 or [www.workcoverqld.com.au](http://www.workcoverqld.com.au)**

#### **WorkCover Tasmania**

**1300 776 572 (within Tasmania)  
(03) 6233-5343 (outside Tasmania) or  
[www.workcover.tas.gov.au](http://www.workcover.tas.gov.au)**

#### **WorkSafe Victoria**

**1800 136 089 or [www.worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au)**

#### **WorkCover WA**

**1300 794 744 or [www.workcover.wa.gov.au](http://www.workcover.wa.gov.au)**

This information sheet was jointly developed by WorkSafe Victoria and *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*



*beyondblue: the national depression initiative*

Info line 1300 22 4636 or [infoline@beyondblue.org.au](mailto:infoline@beyondblue.org.au)  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

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