



**Emotional  
Health  
in the  
workplace**



**With Australian businesses losing around 12.5 million days of productivity annually due to mental health conditions and untreated mental health problems thought to cost the Australian economy \$10.9 billion a year, it is no wonder that it has become an area for action.**

Growing scientific evidence links workplace psychosocial stressors such as job strain, job insecurity and low social support at work with poor mental and physical health. In fact, symptoms of work-related stress may include a drop in work performance, fatigue, headaches, an increase in sick days or absenteeism and contribute to anxiety and depression.

As an employer, improving your understanding of mental health issues and how they are affected by the workplace can be hugely beneficial for you, as well as for your teams, not to mention those who may be living with work-related stress and depression.



# Depression in the workplace

According to the World Health Organisation, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. By 2030, it is estimated that it will be largest contributor to the global burden of disease, most likely due to the lack of preventive programs and poor access to treatments.

It follows naturally that a condition as common as depression is likely to affect each and every workplace. More than 14% of the Australian workforce – at least 1.5 million people – are likely affected by depression according to a government health survey. Having depression can reduce a person's ability to function in every aspect of life, from work to home and socially too. The immense personal, family and financial costs associated with

depression are both a social and economic challenge. Looking specifically at the impact of depression in the workplace, every year, job-stress related depression costs the Australian economy around \$730 million – that's about \$11.8 billion over the average working lifetime. The 2010 report Estimating the Economic Benefits of Eliminating Job Strain as a Risk Factor for Depression attributes these costs to a combination of lost productivity, employee replacement costs, and treatment costs such as medications. This reinforces previous studies which show that employers are already paying a high cost for depression in their workforce, and provides a clear business incentive for employers to invest in mental health-promoting and help-seeking initiatives –

the return on investment is potentially in the tens of millions of dollars.

## Does someone you work with have depression?

It's not your job to diagnose depression in your staff, but if you suspect that an employee is experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression, it is in everyone's best interests for you to offer appropriate help and support. Depression is not just feeling down or emotionally flat – we can all feel like that at some point in our lives – but it is a serious illness that often goes unrecognised. Depression is a sustained period (persisting longer than two weeks) of low mood that can affect

every aspect of a person's life, including their ability to enjoy pleasurable activities and their motivation to participate in work and family life. In severe cases, it can affect a person's ability to engage in activities of day-to-day living. Apart from persistent low mood, you might also notice subtle signs such as an alteration in concentration, memory and activity levels, or changes in appetite and in sleep patterns. If you recognise these signs, if they are affecting normal function and if they persist longer than two weeks, depression may be the cause. Getting help is essential and a good first step for the person affected is to talk with a doctor or another healthcare professional.



## Workplace solutions and adjustments

The financial and emotional costs of an overstressed workforce may be reduced by introducing support mechanisms in the workplace. These include addressing the stigma for sufferers of stress, anxiety and depression. Research shows that the implementation of early diagnosis and intervention programs can result in a fivefold return on investment via increased employee productivity in patients with clinical depression. Most importantly, employers and colleagues should be aware that depression and anxiety are treatable. People who feel overwhelmed by stress may be depressed and should be encouraged to talk with their GP or a qualified mental health professional for help and support. Severe, untreated depression can affect an employee's productivity, as well as their judgement, ability to work with others and their overall job performance. But with recognition and care, people with depression can continue to play a productive role at work if they have the support to manage their condition.

### Common signs of depression in the workplace

- **Difficulty in concentration**
- **Regular lateness**
- **Ongoing tiredness**
- **Anger or frustration with tasks or people**
- **Avoidance of colleagues**
- **Difficulty in meeting reasonable deadlines**
- **Difficulty in accepting constructive and well delivered feedback**
- **Vulnerability to stress and anxiety**
- **Increased alcohol consumption to try and deal with the symptoms of depression**

# References

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