



What is mental health stigma?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stigma as “a mark of shame, disgrace or disapproval which results in an individual being rejected, discriminated against, and excluded from participating in a number of different areas of society”.¹

Mental health issues are common - more common than most people realise. One in five Australians has experienced a mental health issue in the previous 12 months, and it is estimated that 45% of Australians will experience a mental health issue in their lifetime.²

While the types of stigma experienced and the impact felt varies significantly for each individual living with mental health issues, for those experiencing anxiety and depression, the stigma and discrimination they encounter may be worse than the condition itself, and the greatest impact of mental health stigma is often felt in connection to personal relationships and employment.³

Approximately **1/3** of the average person's life is spent at work
Nearly **1 in 10** workers experienced stigma at work in the last year⁴



How does mental health stigma impact workplaces?

Stigma in the workplace can be detrimental to both employees and employers. It can lead to:

- Workers having lower self-efficacy and self-esteem and compromised engagement in employment⁵
- People being turned down for a job because of their mental health condition
- Those living with mental health issues refraining from looking for work or seeking a promotion because they anticipate discrimination
- Discriminatory behaviours from managers and colleagues if a worker discloses a mental health issue. For example:
 - micro-management
 - a lack of opportunities for advancement
 - over-inferring of mistakes to illness
 - gossip and social exclusion.⁶
- Those living with mental health issues ignoring their symptoms, which “hampers the prevention of mental health disorders, the promotion of mental well-being and the provision of effective treatment and care.”⁷



Reducing stigma in the workplace

There are a number of ways that employers can reduce stigma in the workplace to ensure employees are encouraged and able to seek help, including identifying and managing mental health issues early and providing timely support and assistance.

Research suggests that focusing on the following five areas can help to reduce stigma in the workplace:⁸

- 1 Culture and leadership** – employers need to lead from the top and model organisational attitudes that create positive change.
- 2 Public awareness campaigns** – promoting understanding and dispelling myths through awareness campaigns can help to reduce stigma. However, it is important to note that awareness raising activities are only effective as part of a broader effort that addresses all five points on this list.
- 3 Education** – workplace education strategies that equip employees (especially managers) with the skills required to initiate conversations about mental health are crucial. These skills should extend to how to make reasonable adjustments to a role or the workplace to ensure that employees with a mental health condition can participate and remain in good work.
- 4 Creating opportunities for contact** – creating opportunities for staff to listen and learn from advocates living with mental health conditions, from either inside or outside the organisation, can help to normalise the experience of mental health issues and increase empathy and understanding.
- 5 Diversity and inclusiveness** – if workplaces are inclusive and appreciative of diversity in all its forms, the mental health and wellbeing of all employees, not just those living with mental health conditions, will improve, and stigma reduction activities are likely to be more effective.



Further reading:

- [Mental health stigma in the workplace](#), Comcare
- [Beyond Blue Information Paper: Stigma and discrimination associated with depression and anxiety](#), Beyond Blue
- [Five ways to reduce stigma in the workplace](#), SANE Australia
- [National Stigma Report Card - Findings relating to Employment](#), Anne Deveson Research Centre and Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences

¹ World Health Organization (2001), 'The world health report 2001 - Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope', available online: https://www.who.int/whr/2001/en/whr01_en.pdf?ua=1.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007), 'National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing', available online: [https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/6AE6DA447F985FC2CA2574EA00122BD6/\\$File/National%20Survey%20of%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20Summary%20of%20Results.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/6AE6DA447F985FC2CA2574EA00122BD6/$File/National%20Survey%20of%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20Summary%20of%20Results.pdf)

³ Beyond Blue (2015), 'Beyond Blue Information Paper: Stigma and discrimination associated with depression and anxiety', available online: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/position-statements-and-policy-submissions/stigma-discrimination>

⁴ SuperFriend (2020), 'Indicators of a Thriving Workplace Survey: 2020 National Report', available online: https://superfriend.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Indicators-of-a-Thriving-Workplace_double-page.pdf

⁵ Stang, A. L., Earnshaw, V.A. et al (2019), 'The Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework: a global, crosscutting framework to inform research, intervention development, and policy on health-related stigmas', available online: <https://bmcmmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-019-1271-3>

⁶ Brohan, E. & Thornicroft, G. (2010), 'Stigma and discrimination of mental health problems: workplace implications', available online: <https://academic.oup.com/ocmed/article/60/6/414/1390841>

⁷ SANE Australia (2019), 'Reducing stigma: What is stigma?', available online: <https://www.sane.org/information-stories/facts-and-guides/reducing-stigma#what-is-stigma>

⁸ Queensland Mental Health Commission (2019), 'Reducing mental health stigma in the workplace', available online: https://www.qmhc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/reducing_mental_health_stigma_in_the_workplace_january_2019.pdf