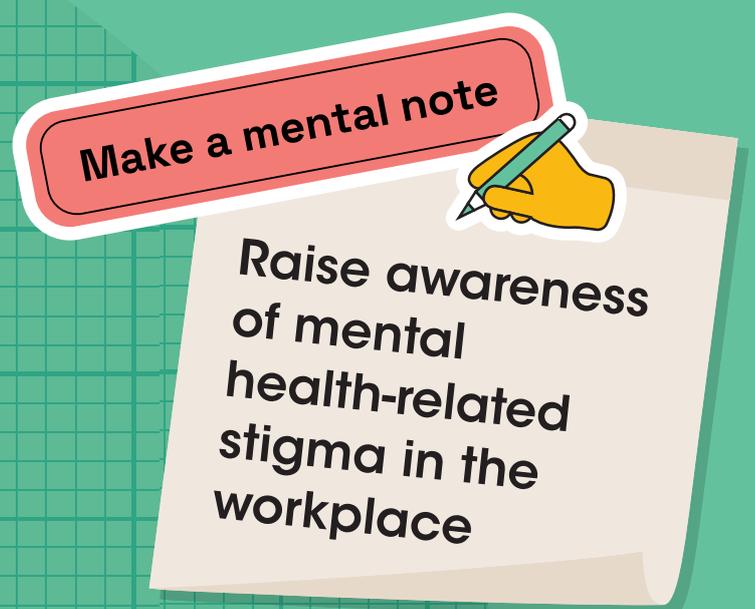


What is mental health-related stigma and how does it affect workers?

Mental Health-Related Stigma in the Workplace



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What is mental health-related stigma?

Mental health-related stigma consists of the negative stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards people experiencing mental health issues, including those living with a diagnosed mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression.

(Fox et al, 2018)

Stigma can be described as a mark of shame or disapproval that changes the way other people view and treat the individual and can lead to them being considered inferior, incapable of work or maintaining relationships, and denied access to essential services and employment. (Ahmedani, 2011; National Mental Health Commission, 2022)

Personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, and the type of mental health issue/s an individual may be experiencing can contribute to the level of stigma they are exposed to.

The external environment, including the workplace culture in which a person works also affects how strongly mental health-related stigma is experienced. In the workplace, a worker may experience stigma when completing routine tasks, attending formal meetings and networking events, and in countless other interactions with colleagues, managers and supervisors, customers or clients, as well as with the general public.

People with a diagnosed mental health condition such as anxiety and depression have reported that experiencing mental health-related stigma and discrimination sometimes makes them feel worse than the effects of their mental health condition(s). (Beyond Blue, 2015)

Workplace mental health-related stigma: A snapshot¹

- **More than two in five Australians said they had experienced a diagnosed mental illness** at some point in their life and one in five Australians said they had experienced a diagnosed mental illness that lasted 12 months or longer. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022)
- The National Survey of Mental Health-Related Stigma and Discrimination estimates that **over four million Australians experienced mental health-related stigma and discrimination** in the 12-month period prior to the survey. (Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government, 2022)
- **One in three people reported unfair treatment** in the workplace. (Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government, 2022)
 - » **Just over a quarter of people stated they wouldn't want to work closely with someone with depression** and two out of three would not be willing to work closely with someone with long-term schizophrenia. (Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government, 2022)
- Our Turn to Speak – a survey of people with complex mental health needs – reported that **78% of participants experienced some level of mental health-related stigma or discrimination** in relation to employment in the 12-month period preceding the survey, with over 50% reporting frequent or very frequent experiences in this area. (Groot et al., 2020)
 - » **Nearly 80% of people indicated they had experienced unfair treatment by employers, supervisors or managers** in relation to their complex mental health issue. (Groot et al., 2020)

¹ The terminology in this snapshot is the same as that used in the original sources to ensure that it reports what was measured.



Stigma does not only occur in interactions between people. It can also be found in organisational policies which influence workplace culture or it can refer to the way people who are stigmatised by others think of themselves.

Table 1 outlines three types of mental health-related stigma and discrimination found in the workplace.

TABLE 1 - TYPES OF STIGMA

Type of stigma	Description	Can lead to...
Public stigma	<p>A person's stigmatising thoughts, feelings and behaviours about/ towards people with experiences of mental health issues</p> <p>Example: <i>"People with depression should snap out of it."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative attitudes and beliefs such as that workers are 'dangerous' or 'incapable' based on negative stereotypes about mental health issues. Discriminatory behaviour such as the decision to not employ or promote a worker because of their mental health issues.
Self-stigma	<p>Stigmatising views that individuals hold about themselves. This may result from internalising the negative stereotypes and attitudes held by others.</p> <p>Example: <i>"I am not worthy of a promotion because of my depression."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers not seeking help because they assume that help is not warranted and they should be able to handle their own mental health issues, be stronger or more resilient. Workers not seeking employment or promotions as they feel they are less worthy due to their mental health issues. Self-criticism or judgement and low self-esteem.
Structural stigma	<p>Organisational policies and practices that enable unfair treatment of workers with experiences of mental health issues.</p> <p>Example: <i>"Mental health services don't deserve as much funding as other health issues."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers limiting the support they provide to workers for mental health and wellbeing. Workplace policies and procedures do not sufficiently support and make reasonable adjustments for workers with mental health issues. Workers with mental health issues being overlooked for promotion.

What does workplace mental health-related stigma look like?

Mental health-related stigma in the workplace can result in discrimination and have a negative impact on people at work.

Negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviour can be both intentional and unintentional, implicit and explicit, at times making them difficult to notice. Some workers might not even realise their behaviour is inappropriate or that they have a negative bias towards co-workers with mental health issues. Others may be aware of their attitudes and engage in discriminatory behaviours by choice.

Discriminatory behaviours may be very subtle (e.g., microaggressions, defensive body language) or quite overt (e.g., gossip, excluding someone from team meetings or social activities), but regardless of their intensity, they have the potential to cause harm and are always inappropriate.

Inappropriate use of language is an example of discriminatory behaviour that may be unintentional. Some terms and phrases that have been used to describe mental health conditions, symptoms or treatments evoke stigma and can be derogatory in nature. For example, suggesting that a person should “get over it” when referring to their experiences of depression is stigmatising and can negatively impact the person’s perceptions of their health and self-worth, as it suggests that the person is somewhat responsible for their condition. Similarly, describing someone as “crazy” or “psycho” and flippantly using diagnostic terms (e.g., “I am so OCD”) is not only derogatory, but also diminishes what it is like to live with a diagnosed mental health condition and promotes false information about signs and symptoms of mental ill-health. (Mental Health First Aid, 2022)

Subtle actions of rejection such as a slight step back on the mention of mental health issues, disengaged eye contact or avoidance can also be stigmatising and harmful. After learning that a colleague is experiencing mental health issues, co-workers might begin to slowly isolate the individual from social events or even during small interactions within the work environment. This in turn may lead to self-stigma, where the individual starts to believe that they are not worthy of inclusion and begins opting out of social interactions for fear they will be treated poorly.

Stigmatising views can lead to discriminatory behaviour and/or become a form of bullying. These behaviours should be identified and dealt with as soon as possible by following your organisation’s relevant policies and procedures.

Some employers may not be aware of the negative impacts that stigma has on the psychosocial safety of workers with lived experience. Workplaces that are not psychologically safe have a negative impact on workers’ behaviour and productivity. A 2014 study found that **21% of Australians have taken time off work in the past 12 months because they felt stressed, anxious, depressed and mentally unhealthy**. This statistic is much higher (at 46%) amongst those who believe their workplaces are mentally unhealthy (TNS & Beyond Blue, 2014)





How does mental health-related stigma affect people?

The personal experience of stigma is often stressful and psychologically damaging.

(Casey et al., 2021)

The following points outline some of the negative impacts that mental health-related stigma has on the lives of those affected:

Not disclosing mental health issues or asking for supports to help them flourish in the workplace

- An Australian survey found that over a third (38%) of workers who had experienced mental health issues decided not to tell their employer about their condition.
- In the same survey, just over 60% of participants stated that they anticipated mental health-related stigma and discrimination in employment. (SANE Australia, 2011 and 2013)

Discouraging reporting and help-seeking

- 71% of participants in an Australian study reported that they did not know where to make a complaint about being stigmatised or discriminated against. Of those who did contact a body such as the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), just over 80% did not proceed with the complaint. (SANE Australia, 2011)
- A worker experiencing mental health issues may not seek support from their manager/supervisor or from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for fear of being stigmatised and discriminated against if their condition is disclosed.
- Workers may avoid making a workers' compensation claim for fear of being stigmatised or discriminated against. This can result in individuals not receiving the correct treatment and/or benefits that they are entitled to.

Making recovery and return to work harder

- In the 2021 National Return to Work Survey, 69% of employees with a mental health injury reported feeling as though they would be treated differently by people at work and 37% thought they would be fired if they submitted a claim. (Social Research Centre, 2022)
- In the same survey, 36% of respondents with a mental health injury reported their employer discouraged them from putting in a claim.

Bullying and discrimination

- Employees with a disability, including some with mental health issues, have been found to be more likely to be paid less, less likely to receive benefits or be part of a union, and less likely to be in managerial, technical or professional roles. (SANE Australia, 2013)
- A worker might be the subject of gossip, excluded from workplace activities or overlooked for promotions due to their mental health issues.

Absenteeism, decreased productivity, social withdrawal

- Fear of being stigmatised may lead to the worker needing more time off work.
- The impact of stigma may make it difficult for the worker to remain motivated to maintain productivity.

Poor self-worth and lack of confidence in own ability

- Workers impacted by stigma may believe that they are not worthy of their job.

What people with lived experience of mental health issues say about stigma:

"There is definite stigma and discrimination...this includes being questioned about my competence due to my mental illness, despite consistently performing well when I was at work... [and] being 'spoken to' on numerous occasions about my need to have time off despite being forthcoming about the fact that I had a mental illness. I felt very stigmatised against, as other colleagues who took time off...were not questioned as I was, and their level of competence was never in doubt as mine was."

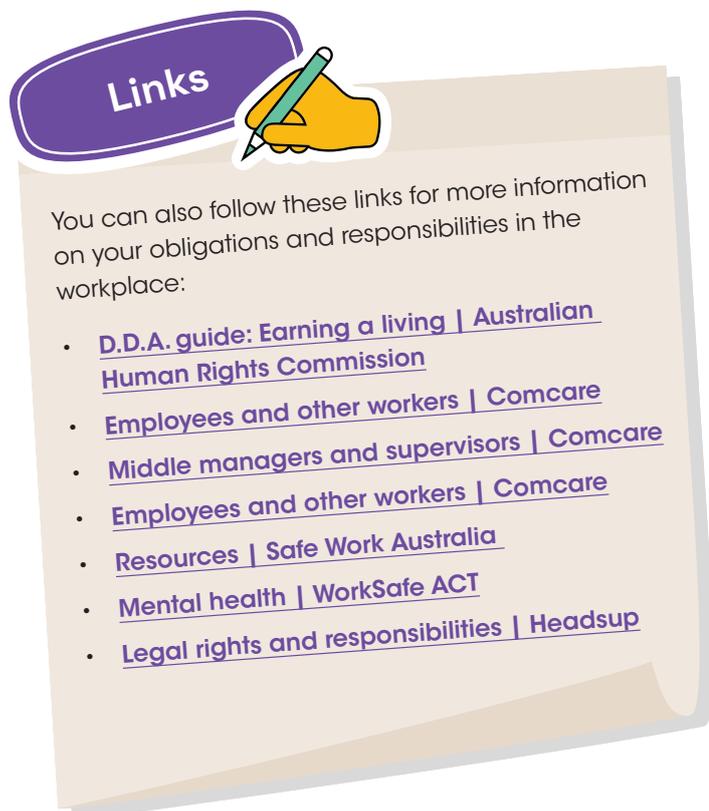
Person living with a mental health condition
(Beyond Blue, 2015)

"I think employers are reluctant. It's very hard if you have any sort of disability, let alone a mental illness that you're open about, to then be able to get employment."

Person living with bipolar and post-traumatic stress disorder." (Beyond Blue, 2015)

"...The first stigma that I put on myself was not really wanting to think that I could have a thing that needed treatment. And the second was being told to step out of work, which for me was, you know was a huge thing."

Person with post-traumatic stress disorder."
(Mental Health at Work, 2018)



Links

You can also follow these links for more information on your obligations and responsibilities in the workplace:

- [D.D.A. guide: Earning a living | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)
- [Employees and other workers | Comcare](#)
- [Middle managers and supervisors | Comcare](#)
- [Employees and other workers | Comcare](#)
- [Resources | Safe Work Australia](#)
- [Mental health | WorkSafe ACT](#)
- [Legal rights and responsibilities | Headsup](#)

Support services for managers/supervisors and workers

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue Support Service 1300 22 4636
- SANE Australia 1800 18 SANE (7623)
- [NewAccess Workplaces – Beyond Blue](#)
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support Line – 13 YARN (9276)

Comcare resources

- [Workplace safety | Office Safety tool | Comcare](#)
- [Your mental health responsibilities at work | Comcare](#)
- [Full training list | Comcare](#)
- [Psychosocial hazards | Comcare](#)

More information

- [Stigma Towards Injured or Ill Workers: | Griffith University](#)
- [Legal advice from the Workplace Advice Service | Fair Work Commission](#)
- [National Mental Health Commission](#)
- [The role of unions | Fair Work Ombudsman](#)
- [Complaints | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)
- [Diversity and discrimination | Fair Work Ombudsman](#)

Other useful resources

- [Our work in improving workplace mental health | Beyond Blue](#)
- [Employment | National Stigma Report Card](#)
- [Mental health is everybody's business | Black Dog Institute](#)
- [Factsheets & Guides | SANE Australia](#)



Comcare's position and role

Comcare's purpose is to promote and enable safe and healthy work. Comcare recognises mental health stigma as a psychosocial hazard which has the potential to cause workers psychological or in some instances, physical harm.

Comcare is a government regulator, workers' compensation insurer, claims manager and scheme administrator.

Through its role, Comcare works with employees and other workers, employers, service providers and other organisations to:

- Minimise the impact of harm in the workplace
- Improve recovery at work and return to work
- Promote the health benefits of good work.

Related guidance

This resource is the first in the series on Reducing Mental Health-Related Stigma in the Workplace.

Other topics include:

- **Resource 2:** Addressing stigmatising attitudes and behaviours in the workplace
- **Resource 3:** Supporting workers who experience mental health-related stigma

Please visit www.comcare.gov.au/mentalnotes to access the other resources in this series.



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