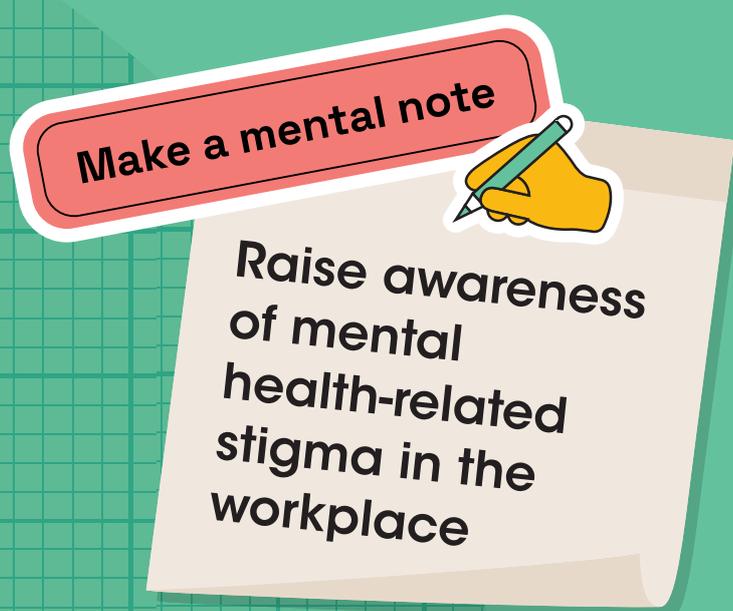


Supporting workers who experience mental health-related stigma

Mental Health-Related Stigma in the Workplace



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What can your organisation do to address mental health-related stigma in the workplace?

Managers and supervisors can work with their organisation and team to create a mentally healthy workplace. This will contribute to reducing and potentially preventing mental health-related stigma and discrimination, while also promoting overall workplace health and wellbeing.

According to Beyond Blue, there are three key and integrated areas to focus on when implementing strategies to [promote a mentally healthy workplace](#):

1. Promotion
2. Protection
3. Support

Promotion: Improving understanding and promoting positive mental health

To improve understanding of mental health amongst workers, an organisation can:

- Provide workers with information on recognising the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and suicide risk factors as well as self-care and positive coping strategies.
- Provide workers with access to **mental health training**, linked to their professional development and induction processes to create awareness and promote uptake. Free courses are available on Comcare's [Learning Management System](#). Training can aid workers to support others, improve mental health literacy and promote self-care and positive coping strategies for their own wellbeing.

To promote positive mental health and wellbeing, an organisation can:

- Enhance **manager/supervisor capabilities** and knowledge through training and educational resources to adopt a proactive leadership style which builds on workers' strengths and promotes their growth. This includes providing constructive feedback which values workers' achievements.
- Prioritise **connection** and encourage opportunities for team members to collaborate, share ideas and skills and participate in social activities together.





Protection: Fostering an anti-bullying culture, addressing risks to psychosocial wellbeing and strengthening protective factors for positive mental health

To achieve this, an organisation and its leaders can:

- Create greater **awareness** of bullying and inappropriate behaviour and encourage respectful behaviour and communication in teams.
- Promote **zero-tolerance** for discrimination against workers with experiences of mental health issues.
- **Lead by example** – Change starts with leadership. Leaders can create a workplace culture that is supportive by demonstrating positive behaviours, healthy work habits and having open conversations about mental health. Managers and supervisors need to speak openly about mental health and participate in activities that reduce mental health-related stigma and discrimination.
- Initiate, monitor and improve **work and organisational** design factors, such as:
 - » Role clarity to ensure workers understand their role, reporting responsibilities and organisational changes
 - » Job control to allow workers to participate in decisions about their work and provide opportunities for flexible working arrangements to increase work-life balance and account for individual needs
- » Appropriate resources and training for staff to enable them to do their work efficiently
- » Respectful and inclusive organisational policies to ensure workers with experiences of mental health issues have equal opportunities and are not stigmatised.
- Address environmental and operational factors, including:
 - » Consulting workers about the work environment to minimise risks such as crowding, noise, pollution, and excessive temperatures
 - » Mitigating the risk of occupational violence by conducting a violence vulnerability audit and developing appropriate policies and procedures to deal with violence and aggression towards workers to ensure they feel safe
 - » Monitoring shift work and long working hours by implementing best practice shift systems to minimise fatigue. Reviewing workloads and prioritising tasks in consultation with workers.

Support: Use promotion and protection approaches to support workers with experiences of mental health issues

Support can be provided more directly by:

- Improving **manager/supervisor** capabilities and knowledge through training and educational resources on supporting workers with experiences of mental health issues, identifying early signs and symptoms of mental ill-health and being able to refer to appropriate support services.
- Making **reasonable job adjustments** to support the worker to stay at work or return to work after a period of absence.
- Focusing on suicide prevention by having clear organisational policies and protocols around suicide risk and early intervention, including resources and training to highlight the warning signs of suicide. Employees of the Australian Public Service can improve their skills by completing [Compassionate Foundations](#) – a foundational suicide prevention capability suite.
- Managers and supervisors can support individual workers' mental health and wellbeing by having open conversations about their mental health needs. Building on this, organisations can develop a **mental health strategy** which identifies the mental health needs and priorities of the workplace, allocates appropriate human and financial resources and develops a plan of action to achieve the desired outcomes.

What can you do to support a worker experiencing mental health-related stigma?

As leaders in their organisation, managers and supervisors are integral to promoting a mentally healthy work culture and eliminating mental health-related stigma. Building on the strategies outlined above, managers and supervisors can improve their own skills and engage in activities that aim to reduce and prevent the negative impacts of stigma.

Training

Undertaking appropriate mental health training is an essential part of ensuring a manager/supervisor can provide support to workers who are experiencing mental health-related stigma and discrimination. Training can cover a range of topics including understanding key mental health concepts, identifying early signs of mental health issues, the biopsychosocial nature of many mental health difficulties, and how to have effective conversations about workplace psychosocial wellbeing and supporting team members to stay at and/or return to work. Some courses also build manager/supervisor capabilities to provide mental health first aid and improve their suicide prevention knowledge and skills. It is important that the provided training presents a nuanced and holistic understanding of mental health and wellbeing and does not inadvertently stereotype and further stigmatise people experiencing mental health issues.

Incorporating mental health training into your own professional development processes will increase your knowledge and improve your capability to mitigate the impacts of stigma. It will also assist you as a manager/supervisor to use appropriate language and communication skills when discussing mental health and wellbeing with your workers. Several mental health organisations offer in-person and online training for managers and supervisors. Training that incorporates insights from people with lived experience of mental health issues can be particularly insightful and beneficial.

Comcare's [Learning Management System](#) provides access to a number of free self-paced online learning modules and paid courses on psychosocial risk prevention, management and workplace mental health.

Making reasonable adjustments

While it is important to focus on changing the organisational culture and strengthening leadership to eliminate mental health-related stigma, there are more immediate things managers/supervisors can do in cases where stigma exacerbates the distress experienced by workers. A distressed worker may require reasonable adjustments to their work hours, role, duties or work environment to reduce the negative impacts of stigma. It is important that a manager/supervisor consults with the worker to identify stressors and makes reasonable adjustments that meet the worker's needs.

Common adjustments include flexible working hours, part-time work or split shifts, remote working, encouraging frequent breaks and adjusting the work environment, including seating arrangements, noise reduction or improving access to natural light.

To manage the negative effects of stigma, workers may need adjustments to their workload, such as prioritising tasks and reducing workload, modifying tasks to build on the worker's strengths and establishing clear workplans and goals to stay on track and reduce stress. Leave may need to be arranged to support the worker's recovery if their levels of distress become high and/or they experience other symptoms of mental ill-health. Workers can also be supported through professional training or mentoring and modifications to supervision arrangements, such as the way feedback is provided.

A [Wellness Action Plan](#) is a useful tool for managers and supervisors to use with workers to identify the types of reasonable adjustments a worker needs to reduce the impacts of stigma and improve their mental health at work.



Communication and language guides

Various guides are available from leading Australian mental health organisations to help managers and supervisors have conversations with workers about their mental health. You will find some of these listed on the Comcare [Mental Notes](#) page. When preparing to have such a conversation, consider the following:

- **Start a conversation** – If you are concerned about your team member and feel as though something has changed, check in with them and see how they are going.
- **Be patient** – It may take some time for the worker to feel comfortable around you and open up.
- **Listen** openly to the worker and let them tell their story before intervening. Ensure you use appropriate language in your response.
- **Ask them** what they would like to happen and how you can help or support them.

- Be sure that the worker is aware of your obligation to maintain appropriate privacy and **confidentiality**.
- **Provide information** on where they can get further support, including the details of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- **Remember** that you cannot force somebody to open up and it is their choice if they would like to seek help or make a formal complaint.
- **Consider making reasonable adjustments** such as flexible working or working from home options.
- **Avoid** using negative or judgmental language – certain language can sensationalise mental health issues and reinforce stigma.

See the [Mental Notes Conversation Guide](#) for more information on how to have a conversation about mental health with a worker.

Do



- Ask the person how they want their experiences described and what terminology they prefer to use.
- Where appropriate, use person first language such as a person “with experiences of”, “living with” mental health issues.
- Where appropriate, use official/professional terms such as antidepressants, psychiatrists or psychologists.
- Practice empathy and be kind to others.
- Acknowledge that the person you are speaking with is experiencing some difficulties and that you want to support them.

Don't



- Assume that everyone with experiences of mental health issues is comfortable using the same terminology to describe their experience.
- Use stigmatising language that labels a person, for example “schizophrenic”, “anorexic”, “depressed” or “bipolar”.
- Use terms like “victim”, “suffering from” or “affected with” a mental illness.
- Use terms such as “happy pills”, “shrinks” or “quacks”.
- Minimise what someone may be going through, e.g., “it could be worse...”
- Tell them that you know how they feel.



Internal support networks

It is important that managers and supervisors feel supported as they assist a worker's mental health needs and that they can turn to other professionals and services for guidance and referral. The following internal support services are available in most workplaces:

- **Human resources'** role is to support staff, including providing support and guidance in relation to their development, training and wellbeing.
- **Employee Assistance Programs** provide an array of services including counselling to support workers and manager advice helplines.

- **Health and Safety Representatives** are responsible for promoting workers' health and safety and representing workers in their group in discussions with managers on hazards and safety issues. One of their duties is to assist workers in reporting instances of discrimination to appropriate bodies such as the Australian Human Rights Commission or relevant state or territory anti-discrimination bodies.

What to do if you witness an instance of mental health-related stigma and/or discrimination?

Stigmatising attitudes can lead to discriminatory behaviour and bullying. Below are some examples of how managers and supervisors can respond in instances where they observe discriminatory behaviour or when it is reported to them. This information can also be used to raise awareness among workers within your organisation to ensure they know how to respond appropriately.

- Identify if the behaviour fits into the [definition of discrimination or bullying](#). This will allow you to follow appropriate policy, procedures and identify if there is relevant legislation and if this behaviour should be addressed and/or reported, e.g., to Human Resources (HR) or senior management.
- Communicate to the person engaging in the discriminatory behaviour that it is inappropriate and not tolerated in the workplace. Ask the person to stop their inappropriate behaviour and offer them relevant training.
- Ask the person experiencing the discriminatory behaviour how you can support them. Provide resources for further support and direct the person to areas where a complaint can be made.

- If you have permission from the person experiencing the discriminatory behaviour, you can assist them to report the incident. Ensure that the person is aware of theirs and their employer's responsibilities to maintain confidentiality. Details of the matter should only be known by those directly concerned in the complaint or in resolving it.
- Talk to senior managers and/or other representatives about having anti-stigma, discrimination and bullying policies, training, and other prevention activities in your workplace. The actions of both employers and workers will depend on the situation and the people involved. Remember that your safety and the safety of the person who is experiencing the discriminatory behaviour should always be a priority. (Adapted from Safe Work Australia, 2016)



What other legislation and guidance applies to workplace stigma and discrimination?

Commonwealth laws cover the whole of Australia, while state and territory level laws cover individual states and territories. There is overlap between the laws in terms of what they cover, in general, these laws cover the same types and areas of discrimination. In some cases, there are gaps in the protection that the laws provide, and only Commonwealth law or the state or territory law applies, not both.

Commonwealth anti-discrimination laws include:

- [Fair Work Act 2009 \(Cth\)](#)
- [Disability Discrimination Act 1992 \(Cth\)](#)
- [Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 \(Cth\)](#)

As an example of how other Commonwealth legislation applies to workplace stigma and discrimination, a brief summary of the [Fair Work Act 2009 \(Cth\)](#) (FW Act) is provided. The FW Act prohibits employers from taking adverse action against an employee (or a prospective employee) for discriminatory reasons. Section 342 of the FW Act sets out a comprehensive list of adverse actions, which includes:

- firing an employee
- injuring the employee in their employment (for example, not giving an employee their legal entitlements, such as pay or leave)
- changing an employee's job to their disadvantage
- treating an employee differently than others (for example, treating someone differently based on their sex or gender)
- not hiring someone
- offering a potential employee different and unfair terms and conditions for the job compared to other employees.

An adverse action will be considered discriminatory if it is done because the person against whom the action is taken had a 'protected attribute'.

Examples of protected attributes are:

- race
- colour
- sex
- sexual orientation
- age
- physical or mental disability
- marital status
- family or carer's responsibilities
- pregnancy
- religion
- political opinion
- national extraction
- social origin.



Where to turn to for help?

A number of bodies may be able to assist if a worker experiences bullying and/or discrimination on the basis of their mental health.

The Fair Work Commission

The Fair Work Commission only has the power to deal with issues under the [FW Act](#).

Section 351 of the FW Act explains that:

An employer must not take adverse action against a person who is an employee, or prospective employee, of the employer because of the person's race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental disability, marital status, family or carer's responsibilities, pregnancy, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin.

Other federal, state or territory laws may cover workplace discrimination issues. In some situations, you may also be able to complain to the Australian Human Rights Commission.

The Australian Human Rights Commission

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has the power to investigate and conciliate complaints in employment about unlawful discrimination in accordance with the [Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 \(Cth\)](#) (AHRC Act). The AHRC investigates complaints in the following discrimination areas: sex, race, age, and disability. Disability discrimination includes mental health related discrimination. The AHRC is an independent body and anyone who lives in Australia can lodge a complaint with the AHRC. It is free to make a complaint.

State based anti-discrimination agencies

There are state based agencies for dealing with discrimination on the basis of disability, including mental ill-health, which operate under the relevant state or territory laws:

- ACT: [ACT Human Rights Commission](#)
- NSW: [Anti-Discrimination New South Wales](#)
- NT: [Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Commission](#)
- QLD: [Human Rights Commission Queensland](#)
- TAS: [Equal Opportunity Tasmania](#)
- SA: [Equal Opportunity Commission South Australia](#)
- VIC: [Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission](#)
- WA: [Equal Opportunity Commission Western Australia](#)

For further information see:

- [Protection from discrimination at work – Fair Work Ombudsman](#)
- [Mentally healthy workplaces](#)

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

- [Full training list | Comcare](#)
- [Middle managers and supervisors | Comcare](#)
- [Comcare's role under the WHS Act | Comcare](#)
- [Workplace safety | Office Safety tool | Comcare](#)
- [Your mental health responsibilities at work | Comcare](#)
- [Work demands: Practical guidance for managers and supervisors](#)
- [Essential Good Work Design](#)

More information

- [Mental Health Supports – Mental Health Commission](#)
- [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](#)
- [National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy | National Mental Health Commission](#)
- [Inquiry report – Mental Health | Productivity Commission](#)

Other useful resources

- [Guide for preventing and responding to workplace bullying | Safe Work Australia](#)
- [Tips for managers | Headsup](#)
- [Developing a workplace mental health strategy – A how-to guide for organisations | Headsup](#)
- [Workplace mental health strategies should be the new norm | Black Dog Institute](#)
- [Our work in improving workplace mental health | Beyond Blue](#)
- [Model Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work | Safe Work Australia](#)
- [Harmful behaviours | Safe Work 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 1:** What is mental health-related stigma and how does it affect workers?
- **Resource 2:** Addressing stigmatising attitudes and behaviours in the workplace

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



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Check in

Seek help

