

The mind at work

The mounting social and economic costs of poor mental health highlight the need for business leaders to play their part in meeting this complex challenge.

STORY THEA O'CONNOR



“First consider: is this person OK?”

NICK ARVANITIS, BEYONDBLUE

When Daniela Fazio told her boss that she was suffering from a mental health condition, it wasn’t planned. The words and tears just tumbled out. “One day, when I was really struggling, my boss asked me what was wrong,” the lawyer recalls of that day in 2011. “I replied, ‘I think I have depression’ and burst out crying.”

Fortunately for Fazio, her boss hugged her and told her to take time off if she needed it. A GP subsequently diagnosed severe depression and anxiety.

The following year, Fazio undertook regular cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) sessions with a psychologist. “My appointments were often within work hours,” she says. “I’d ask my boss if that was OK and she would always say ‘Yes, health comes first’.”

She believes her boss’s kind response may have saved her life. It also led to an unwavering commitment to the job.

“I didn’t miss a day’s work during that whole time, despite being severely depressed,” recalls Fazio, who has since established her own firm in Sydney. “If I’d had to stay at home with my own thoughts, I’m not sure I’d be here today.”

Depressing numbers

Not everyone is as fortunate as Fazio in having a switched-on boss.

In *beyondblue’s* 2014 *State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia* report, only 56 per cent of the 1126 respondents believed their most senior leader valued mental health. Just 52 per cent rated their workplace “mentally healthy”, defined as promoting a positive workplace culture while supporting people with mental health conditions.

Mental health issues affect almost one in two Australians at some stage of their lives. The cost to Australian workplaces is estimated at almost A\$11 billion per year: A\$4.7 billion in absenteeism, A\$6.1 billion in presenteeism (where employees are physically present but not engaged) and A\$146 million in compensation claims.

Find out more

Heads Up:
www.headsup.org.au
Free resources and tools for a mentally healthy workplace.
SANE’s Mindful Employer Program:
www.mindfulemployer.org
An online and face-to-face workplace mental health training program for businesses Australia-wide.
beyondblue National Workplace Program:
www.beyondblue.org.au
or call 1300 134 644.
Black Dog Institute Workplace Programs:
www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
Programs include mental health in the workplace, as well as organisational and personal resilience.
Australian Human Rights Commission:
www.humanrights.gov.au
The commission has a guide for managers, titled *Workers with Mental Illness*.



With research indicating that fewer than half of Australians with mental illness receive treatment for their conditions, there’s a strong argument that earlier assistance for struggling staff could reduce the workplace cost.

The argument is strengthened by World Health Organization projections that by 2030, mental health conditions will be the leading cause of ill health globally.

In research for *beyondblue*, consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers concluded that for every dollar invested in creating a mentally healthy workplace, organisations could expect a positive return of A\$2.30. Smaller workplaces could expect much more.

Prevailing attitudes

Mental health advocates say organisations must do more than have a mental health program in place;

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they also need to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. A 2014 survey by *beyondblue* found that one in three Australians have reservations about working with a person experiencing depression or anxiety and believe such a person would not be able to perform their job adequately.

“Some workplaces have it all – the program, the resources and the employee services to support individuals,” says Nick Arvanitis, head of research and resource development at *beyondblue*. “However, they still have the stigma of mental illness. If that persists, people won’t seek help or use the available resources.”

Patrick Corrigan, a professor of psychology at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the US, has dedicated much of his working life to understanding and countering the stigma surrounding mental illness. His research has found that while education is important, the most powerful way to battle stigma is for people to have personal contact with someone who has experienced a mental illness. That’s why *beyondblue* sends presenters, including Fazio, into workplaces to share their personal stories.

Walking the talk

Arvanitis says that in workplaces that do a good job, senior managers and leaders speak up about mental health and illness and share any personal experiences. “On the other hand,” he says, “we hear stories where organisations invite our guest speakers and there is no senior management presence or endorsement at all.

“The challenge for leaders is to not only put good resources and strategies in place, but to be seen to value mental health.”

David Banks, general manager of operations support at NAB Wealth, champions mental health for his team of 160 people in Sydney and Melbourne. He is very conscious of walking the talk.

“It’s about opening yourself up first, showing people it’s OK to be a bit vulnerable to talk about your life challenges,” says Banks, who has publicly shared his wife’s battle with breast cancer. “It shows you are human, creates trust and allows other people to reach out and connect.”

R U OK? Day is a mental health and suicide prevention initiative founded by Australian Gavin Larkin to encourage meaningful connection with those who might be struggling. Keen to integrate R U OK? Day into his team’s everyday language and culture, Banks focuses on equipping his managers to have effective conversations about mental health when they need to.

Strategies for building a mentally healthy workplace

1 Design and manage work to minimise harm, e.g. encourage flexible work, reduce known risk factors.

2 Promote protective factors at an organisational level to maximise resilience, e.g. team-based interventions, leadership training, enhancing organisational justice.

3 Build personal resilience, e.g. cognitive behaviour therapy-based stress management training, physical activity programs, coaching and mentoring.

4 Promote and facilitate early help-seeking, e.g. wellbeing checks or health screening, employee assistance programs.

5 Support workers’ recovery from mental illness, e.g. supervisor training, return-to-work programs, work-focused exposure therapy.

6 Increase awareness of mental illness and reduce stigma, e.g. workplace awareness-raising, education programs.

Source: *Developing a mentally healthy workplace*. November 2014. A literature review for the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

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“It’s about reminding managers to listen and ask questions,” he says. “I model this with my senior leadership team, and it’s amazing how many things can work themselves out. You’d like to work a nine-day fortnight to get the right balance? Easy. We can start that now.”

Creating confidence

Arvanitis agrees that conversations make a positive difference. He warns managers against going down the performance management route as a first course of action.

“That can get really messy,” he says. “If you notice that one of your employees is struggling, first consider: is this person OK?”

Workplace programs such as those offered by *beyondblue*, SANE Australia and the Black Dog Institute educate managers about the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions and offer guidelines for having a conversation with a colleague. Four hours of training will significantly increase managers’ confidence in approaching workers who might be struggling, according to the preliminary results of a trial conducted by Dr Sam Harvey, of The University of New South Wales, in conjunction with the Black Dog Institute.

Without such education, managers can inadvertently invalidate workers who find the courage to speak up, says Eliza Oakley, manager of SANE’s workplace program Mindful Employer.

“Stigma and discrimination can show up in subtle ways,” she says. “Comments such as ‘Your work is really good [so] there can’t be anything wrong with you’, or ‘Sure, you can take some time off, but I need you to know I don’t believe in mental illness’ can leave the person confused and trust broken.” >

Developing wellbeing

What about a manager's legitimate concern about a person's ability to do the job? It's understandable that a boss expects a good performance. The legislative framework around this issue cuts both ways. Anti-discrimination law says employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to help an employee with a mental health condition do their job; the employee still needs to fulfil the requirements of the job and to work safely.

Many of the work-related factors that help protect against mental health conditions – having control over one's work, adequate support for the level of demand, good communication across the organisation, fairness and the like – are also determinants of a happy, productive workplace.

That's why Perth-based organisational psychologist Stephen McDonald, when advising on workplace mental health strategy, recommends a focus on developing optimal wellbeing.

"We work at three levels: an organisation's policies and procedures, working relationships within and between teams, and individual capability," explains McDonald.

"For a truly mentally healthy workplace, you need a framework that extends from proactive prevention through to intervention and treatment. This will require several providers. No single consultancy will have all that expertise."

In the end, mentally healthy workplaces don't only benefit those who are ill. Says Arvanitis: "Everyone benefits when organisations engage employees, involve them in decision-making and address workplace stressors." ■

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Reducing the stigma around mental health

Professor Patrick Corrigan, from the Illinois Institute of Technology in the US, looks at three different approaches to dealing with stigma:

Contact: Very effective. This involves face-to-face contact with a person experiencing mental illness. Corrigan's research has found that using an everyday person with whom the audience can identify is more effective than using a high-profile celebrity or sports person. Video-based contact is also effective, especially for young age groups, but not as much as direct contact.

Education: Moderately effective. Providing factual information – mental illness is common; it's a true medical condition; many people recover from it – can correct misinformation and promote more positive attitudes.

Protest: Least effective. This "shame on you" approach to stop people having negative thoughts and attitudes towards a particular group can sometimes have a rebound effect, increasing stigma rather than reducing it.



Concerned about an employee?

While each situation is different, these suggestions will help when it comes to talking with a colleague about their mental health condition:

■ Learn about depression so you can better understand why a person with the illness behaves in a certain way.

■ Find out what help is available in your organisation (such as an employee assistance program) or in the local community.

■ Consider getting support. Discuss in confidence how to handle the situation with your manager, the HR department or a trusted family member or friend.

■ Think about how to approach the person you supervise or manage. Who's the best person to have the

conversation? What's the best time? Where's the best place?

■ Assure utmost confidentiality.

■ Think about how you would express concern about an employee's physical health, and use a similar approach.

■ Don't diagnose. It is your role to assist the person to get the help they may require, not to diagnose.

■ Finish the conversation with a plan for the next steps.

■ If the person doesn't want to talk, respect their choice and leave the door open.

Source: www.headsup.org.au