

# OPENMINDS

OPENING THE CONVERSATION IN THE WORKPLACE

## Frequently asked questions

THIS RESOURCE WAS CREATED IN CONSULTATION WITH

## Open Minds FAQs

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Mental health is something all employees have. Just like physical health, mental health needs to be taken care of, not only to reduce the risk of illness, but also to increase the potential of individuals and teams. Good mental health leads to positive life outcomes for employees and ultimately, better business results.

In any workplace there will be a range of mental health experiences across employees and this will change over time. The experience of mental illness is common in New Zealand so it's vital that employers can have conversations about mental health with their employees and support them through tough times.

**There are several reasons to make mental health a priority in your workplace:**

- **Mental health issues are common**

In New Zealand one in five people over 16 years of age experience some form of common mental health issue in any year and almost two in five adults have experienced a mental health issue over their lifetime. (Te Rau Hinengaro). Workplaces which are supportive of people with mental illness are better able to provide non-discriminatory services that benefit all employees.

- **Safe and healthy workplaces are good for business**

A healthy work environment reduces staff turnover, stress, and personal grievance claims, as well as increasing productivity.

- **Ignoring mental health issues costs employers**

Workplaces feel the effects of poor mental health of employees through increased absenteeism—when workers are off sick—and increased presenteeism—when workers are at the workplace but not mentally engaged with work. The Southern Cross Health Society 'Wellness in the Workplace' survey of 2015 (BusinessNZ, 2015) estimates that New Zealand lost approximately 6.7 million working days to absence in 2014. The direct costs of absence alone, most commonly from minor illness, amounted to \$1.4545 billion across the economy in 2014. It is estimated that on average, employees have nearly three times as many presentee days as absentee days resulting in much higher 'hidden' costs of poor mental health.

- **Mental health is affected by both work and what is happening in our lives**

Employee health affects the workplace and the workplace affects the health of employees. It is important for employers to understand the difference between *pressure*, which keeps us all going and makes us productive, and *stress*, which makes unmanageable demands that damage both employees and the business. There should also be an awareness that life outside of work affects the wellbeing of workers.

- **It is the law**

**Workplaces are legally required** to take **all practicable steps** to ensure the health and safety of their employees. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, workplaces have a role to play in the prevention of harm to all people at work. This includes mental harm caused by work-related stress. In providing an environment where employees are not exposed to hazards, employers must consider the traditional concepts of *health* as well as *safety*.

*A mentally healthy workforce has positive consequences for the wellbeing of the individuals, the productivity of organisations, and the economy of New Zealand.*

Workplace Wellbeing	
BENEFITS OF HIGH WORKPLACE WELLBEING	COSTS OF LOW WORKPLACE WELLBEING
31% higher productivity 37% more sales 3 x more creativity increased customer satisfaction reputation as a good place to work	2 x sick leave 2 x workplace conflict 3 x cardiovascular episodes 3 x back pain reports 2 x injuries

The workplace contributes psychological hazards and benefits	
BENEFITS	HAZARDS
social interaction and relationships meaning and purpose positive emotions engagement and flow	bullying and discrimination perceived workload stress and burnout lack of support

*SOURCES: Harvard Business Review 2012, Robertson and Cooper 2011, Canadian Mental Health Commission 2013*

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## **I'm worried about an employee's mental health – what should I do?**

If you become aware that an employee is, or may be, experiencing an issue, be proactive in raising it with them directly and identifying what support they require.

If an employee discloses that there is an issue:

- do not assume what they need – ask
- take responsibility for supporting a solution within the workplace
- be clear about what support you are and aren't prepared to provide
- support the employee to make a plan
- maintain regular communication and check in
- be respectful of their personal information
- practice 'good employer attributes' (caring, empathy, having integrity, treating people fairly, being flexible)

Having a good relationship with your employees makes it easier to have confidential discussions.

Start by having a quiet word with the employee and avoid making assumptions. You may discover there is a problem at home bothering them and all that is needed is understanding and patience.

Some problems at work have health and safety implications, especially those involving stress, fatigue, bullying or workplace violence. Employers need to take all practicable steps to address workplace hazards and prevent harm. Think about both the harm to the employee of hazards and the possible risks caused by fatigue or stress when an employee is carrying out their work.

Talk to your human resource advisor or department about your concerns, after letting your employee know you are doing so. Remember, this is about supporting your employee, not creating more stress by trying to figure out their situation without their involvement.

Sensitive issues will need to be treated in a confidential way, treating the employee with respect and consideration. Focus on what the employees can do and on what you can do to enable employees to reach their full potential.

**Identifying the issue with the employee will help decide what steps are most appropriate to take to resolve the issue.**

For more information go to: [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/worried-about-](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/worried-about-)

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## How do I know it is a mental illness?

### Check assumptions about mental illness

It is not the role of a manager or co-worker to diagnose mental illness, nor to make any assumptions about whether symptoms are related to a diagnosis.

Common symptoms of mental health issues that may signal to the manager that the employee is experiencing difficulties include:

- an increase in unexplained absences or sick leave
- poor performance, judgement, or timekeeping
- a lack of energy
- uncommunicative or moody behaviour and withdrawal

The types of symptoms that may be noticed in a workplace as early warning signs include:

Change in emotional reactions	Change in thinking	Change in behaviour
<p><b>an increase in:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fear and anxiety</li> <li>• anger and irritability</li> <li>• sadness and despair</li> <li>• emptiness or hopelessness</li> <li>• disconnectedness</li> </ul> <p><b>less</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• involvement or enjoyment</li> </ul>	<p><b>difficulties in:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concentrating</li> <li>• following complex instructions</li> <li>• remembering</li> <li>• communicating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• withdrawing from others</li> <li>• being unavailable</li> <li>• being overprotective</li> <li>• startling easily</li> <li>• denying and avoiding</li> <li>• taking greater risks</li> </ul>

### Address behaviours

It is important that behaviours causing issues are discussed in a safe and compassionate way, support is given and potential actions are identified that address both the employee's concerns and those of the business. These actions may include a referral to Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) counselling services, accessing additional professional help, or taking time off.

For more information go to: [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/)

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## What happens when employees don't want to engage?

Understanding what stops people from talking about their mental health problems or the impacts of issues on work or life is important. It could be fear of the unknown or uncertainty. It could be concerns about job security and how managers and colleagues will react. Employees can be concerned that revealing a vulnerability will lead to being perceived as weak or unfit for the job.

Mental health issues may mean employees experience loss of confidence, and negative thoughts about themselves or others. Sometimes people experience a loss of concentration, memory or reduced problem solving ability. This may lead to increased irritability or insecurity.

As a manager you may need to make the initial move to start the conversation about mental health. You may be able to use your usual management practices such as review or planning meetings to talk in a supportive and non-threatening way about any problems someone may be having. Informal catch ups can be opportunities to ask how someone is feeling.

Focus on describing what you have observed and work related issues. The use of open ended questions and non-judgemental language will help to identify the cause of any problems and identify any supports needed.

If the employee chooses not to get assistance at this time make sure you leave the door open to them by letting them know you are available if they should need support later.

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## What do I do if an employee is having thoughts of suicide and self-harm?

Employers have a responsibility to respond appropriately to employees who are experiencing thoughts and feelings about suicide, and to employees who are affected by the suicide death of a co-worker, friend or family member.

A person who is thinking about suicide might not ask for help, but that doesn't mean that help isn't wanted. They might fear the stigma, or feel ashamed of how they're feeling. They may feel that they don't deserve help, or that no-one can help them. People who feel suicidal often feel alone and that the world would be better off without them. Support from people who care about them can play an important role in supporting them through it.

If you think someone might be at risk, pay attention to changes in behaviour, trust your instincts and ask directly if they are thinking about suicide.

If someone expresses thoughts or feelings about suicide, it's important to take them seriously.

If someone tells you they are thinking about suicide, thank them for telling you, and invite them to keep talking with you. Let them know there is help available to them. Encourage them to get help and talk to someone about what they are going through.

### Call for help or get more information:

- **Suicide Crisis Helpline 0508 828 865**
- **Lifeline 0800 543 354**

If someone has attempted suicide or you're worried about their immediate safety, do the following:

- Call the local mental health crisis assessment team or go with them to the emergency department at the nearest hospital
- If they are an immediate physical danger to themselves or others, call 111
  - stay with them until support arrive
  - remove any obvious means of suicide they might use (e.g. rope, pills, guns, car keys, knives)
  - try to stay calm and let them know you care
  - keep them talking: listen and ask questions without judging
  - make sure you are safe

**For more information** Mental Health Foundation suicide prevention information: [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/resource/48/suicide-worried-about-someone](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/resource/48/suicide-worried-about-someone)

Breaking the silence in the workplace: A guide for employers on responding to suicide in the workplace: [www.sprc.org/resources-programs/breaking-silence-workplace-guide-employers-responding-suicide-workplace](http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/breaking-silence-workplace-guide-employers-responding-suicide-workplace)

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## Do I have the right skills to manage a person with a mental health issue?

Managers generally already have the skills needed to support positive mental health. Although mental health issues can be perceived as more difficult to manage than physical illnesses, the same approach for dealing with physical illnesses is often appropriate. There is no need to be an expert counsellor to manage mental health issues; rather, it is about being a good employer. Take the time to learn about mental health issues so you feel confident providing support. The key is to have open communication with your employees so they feel able to discuss their problems.

While there are differences between dealing with a musculoskeletal disorder (such as a bad back) and dealing with mental health issues (such as anxiety or depression) there are also similarities, particularly in the way the health issue is managed in the workplace.

Musculoskeletal disorder:	Anxiety or Depression:
<p>Coping strategies may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>diagnosis leading to medical treatment</b></li> <li>• <b>management support/understanding</b></li> <li>• <b>self-help:</b> e.g. exercise routines</li> <li>• <b>working environment:</b> ergonomics, having the right chair, etc.</li> <li>• <b>workload:</b> avoiding certain activities such as lifting</li> <li>• <b>flexible working arrangements</b></li> </ul>	<p>Coping strategies may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>diagnosis leading to medical treatment</b></li> <li>• <b>line management support/understanding</b></li> <li>• <b>self-help:</b> e.g. therapeutic techniques</li> <li>• <b>working environment:</b> managing interactions with colleagues</li> <li>• <b>workload:</b> avoiding stressors that may trigger symptoms</li> <li>• <b>flexible working arrangements</b></li> </ul>

[1] from ACAS *Promoting Positive Mental Health at Work*, 2014

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## What are some dos and don'ts of talking about mental health?

### Do

- make sure you have time to talk
- use appropriate language
- ask open questions that help you to understand
- reassure the person that you will do your best to help and you are there if they want to talk
- let the person share as much or little as they want, be prepared for silences and allow time for thinking
- ask if they require assistance and how they would like you to support them
- be empathetic
- respect people's personal information and keep information confidential
- maintain regular communication
- be clear about what support you are and aren't able to provide

### Don't

- be judgmental or make assumptions
- assume what they need – ask
- use derogatory terms (e.g. 'schizo', 'crazy')
- speak down to the person
- avoid people or assume the problem will go away
- tell them that they need to stay busy, get out more and have a good time
- make statements such as 'snap out of it', 'you're just imagining it', 'get your act together' or 'pull yourself together'
- diagnose or second-guess someone's feelings
- question someone with quick-fire questions
- talk over someone about your own or anyone else's experiences

## Appropriate language

It is important to use 'people first' language when referring to a person with a mental illness. We are people first, so rather than describing the person as being a disease, describe the person as experiencing or having mental illness.

**E.g. Don't say 'John is depressed' or 'Sarah is schizophrenic'**

**Instead say 'John is experiencing depression' or 'Sarah has experienced schizophrenia'**

Avoid inappropriate words such as 'psycho', 'mental' or 'crazy.' These words create stereotyped views of mental illness and can create fear and reinforce stigma.

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Reasonable accommodations include making adjustments which will allow an employee with mental health issues to participate more equally in a workplace. This can be physical adjustments or modifying how a job is done.

Reasonable accommodation is not about lowering the standards of the job performance or qualifications; it is about changing the way those standards are met.

Under the Human Rights Act 1993, employers have to make “reasonable accommodations” for employees with disabilities, including people with mental ill health, unless it would be unreasonable for them to do so.

**Discuss with the employee any reasonable accommodations they may need. These could include:**

- restructuring jobs or changing tasks to allow the employee to do what they are most confident and capable of
- adjusting schedules to allow the employee to work when they feel best and to attend appointments that support recovery
- offering part time work – as a transition or on a more permanent basis
- having flexible sick leave provisions including leave without pay if appropriate
- ensuring people know how to use technology to support themselves
- providing private space to work or modifying work spaces if noise or distractions cause issues

**Accommodations do not usually cost an organisation to implement, but if they do, funding may be available from sources such as:**

- **Job Support and Training Support Fund** ([www.workbridge.co.nz](http://www.workbridge.co.nz))
- **Work and Income Modification Grant** ([www.workandincome.govt.nz/individuals/a-z-benefits/modification-grant](http://www.workandincome.govt.nz/individuals/a-z-benefits/modification-grant))
- **Mainstream Supported Employment Programme**  
([www.workandincome.govt.nz/employers/employ-staff/modification-grant-employers](http://www.workandincome.govt.nz/employers/employ-staff/modification-grant-employers))

**For more information, go to:**

[www.employment.govt.nz/workplace-policies/employment-for-disabled-people/reasonable-accommodation-measures/](http://www.employment.govt.nz/workplace-policies/employment-for-disabled-people/reasonable-accommodation-measures/)

## What do I tell other staff?

Disclosing a mental health issue at work is a big concern for many people as they can be afraid they will experience stigma or discrimination from other workers.

It is very important that the person feels they are in a supportive environment, which may mean that the team needs some information. Discuss with the person what they would like colleagues to know along the way.

Co-workers can potentially be a support for some people at work and it is helpful for other staff to understand why a colleague is getting any accommodations, especially if it is affecting their own duties.

**Principles to help guide managing communications and planned disclosure with co-workers include:**

- **discussion and agreement** with the employee about how much information and detail about their health and recovery will be disclosed to others, whom it will be disclosed to, and when
- **clarifying the purpose** (e.g. for health and safety reasons) and the method of disclosure
- **communication in regards to the reallocation of duties**, including the impact of leave on the workload of other employees and any required reallocation of tasks

If it is not possible to have this discussion at first and gain the person's agreement on content, audience, or method, then the 'less is more' principle is most appropriate until discussions can take place.

## What supports are available?

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand has an A-Z of mental health conditions which offers information and links to support groups and services as well as to further information on each topic. [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/)

### Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)

EAPs offer workplace support including counselling and a range of services including critical incident responses, supervision and other wellbeing services. There are a range of private EAP providers available and can be easily searched online for contact details.

### GP (family doctor)

Often the best starting point is your GP (family doctor). GPs are trained to assess, treat and manage many mental health issues within primary care (in the community rather than in a hospital). GPs can refer you to your local community mental health service or elsewhere if needed.

To find a GP call the national free Healthline service on **0800 611 116** or Search [Health Navigator](http://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/services/)'s online database for GPs or specialists in your area.  
[www.healthnavigator.org.nz/services/](http://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/services/)

### Local Community Mental Health Service (provided by District Health Boards)

Contact details are in the front of the phone book under Hospitals and Other Health Service Providers. There may be specialist Māori, Pacific Island, Adult, Older Persons and Child & Adolescent services. You will usually need to be referred by your GP.

### Stress & Fatigue

Information on stress, fatigue, morale, distress and what healthy work looks like. This section also contains some useful tools and advice for workplaces.

[www.worksafe.govt.nz/worksafe/information-guidance/guidance-by-hazard-type/stress-fatigue](http://www.worksafe.govt.nz/worksafe/information-guidance/guidance-by-hazard-type/stress-fatigue)

### Bullying prevention

Bullying prevention tools, the guidelines were developed with Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and has a focus on both employees and employers responding early before a situation gets out of hand and focusing first of all on workplace based solutions. The guidelines provide a clear definition of bullying.

[www.worksafe.govt.nz/worksafe/toolshed/bullying-prevention-tools](http://www.worksafe.govt.nz/worksafe/toolshed/bullying-prevention-tools)

## Work-related health

WorkSafe's "Healthy Work" outlines our plan for a New Zealand where, ultimately, fewer people experience work-related ill-health. It includes guidance, tools and resources for workplaces to manage health risks at work and to reduce work-related diseases and ill-health.

[www.worksafe.govt.nz/worksafe/information-guidance/work-related-health](http://www.worksafe.govt.nz/worksafe/information-guidance/work-related-health)

## Helplines

Below is a list of some of the services available in New Zealand that offer support, information and help. All services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week unless otherwise specified.

### National helplines:

- Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland
- Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
- Healthline – 0800 611 116
- Samaritans – 0800 726 666
- Depression Helpline – 0800 111 757 or free text 4202 (to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions)

For a full list of helplines and online support visit: [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/helplines/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/helplines/)

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## Open Minds Resource List

### Videos



The fears and worries that both employers and employees may have when talking about mental health at work.



How easy is it to talk about mental health at work and what unintentional barriers may stop the conversation.



How different people experience mental distress and the role of workplace stress.



How to begin the conversation, with useful opening questions and helpful approaches.



Strong leadership is essential for creating a workplace environment where talking about mental health is normal.



The benefits of talking about mental health and the risks faced when workplaces avoid the conversation.



Training Video: Role plays on how to have conversations about mental health issues in the workplace.

### Tips & factsheets

Practical information and tips to help you talk confidently about mental health at work.

- Why talk about mental health at work?
- How to have a conversation about mental health
- Quick tips on having a mental health conversation in your workplace
- Let's make mental health part of the conversation: A guide for managers

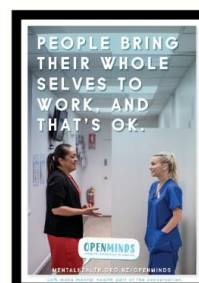
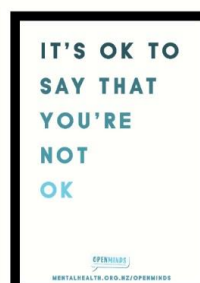
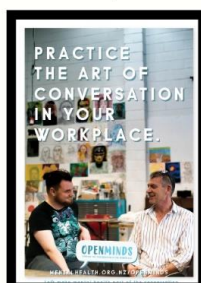


### FAQ

We give you some dos and don'ts when it comes to talking about mental health in the workplace, and set out some answers to frequently asked questions. We've also put together a raft of places to go to for extra support and advice.

### Posters

A selection of posters for you to print and display in your workplace.



For videos and other workplace resources visit  
[mentalhealth.org.nz/openminds](http://mentalhealth.org.nz/openminds)

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