
Thinking about a Mental Health Safety Program

[Note: This article, though based on information collected from various Mental Health Organisation and Health & Safety bodies around the world, is the opinion of the author and should be therefore treated as such. Workplaces should ensure that any action taken in this area aligns with the requirements and guidance material provided by their relevant Health & Safety Authority.]

There is no doubt that the state of a person's Mental Health can impact on the way they do their job, which can directly or indirectly affect health and safety outcomes for themselves and others. For this reason, Mental Health must be included in the Health & Safety focus of every workplace.

The difficulty with addressing Mental Health Risk is that the causes are not always easy to identify or accurately measure because they affect people differently. For example, some people seem to thrive on deadlines and work pressures, while other people get physically ill at even the thought of a looming deadline. If we address the physcho/emotional/social stresses that detrimentally affects Mental Health as we would any other "energy sources" that detrimentally affect physical health, we are on the way to better caring for workers.

Actually, most workplaces already take some steps to minimise Mental Health Risk to workers yet may not realise it. For example, we know that some work roles come with high pressures and demands, we therefore employ people for those roles based in part on their demonstrated ability to perform the role with its pressures and emotional stresses without harm to their Mental Health. **It is just as irresponsible for an employer to put someone in a role they are not equipped to handle mentally and emotionally, as it is to put them in a high risk role they do not have the skills to handle.**

As with any other risk to Health & Safety, workplaces are responsible to educate and remind workers of risks they face, and how to minimise those risks.

Work related Mental Health pressures such as unreasonable deadlines, bullying, discrimination, harassment, and occupational violence are directly in the control of the workplace, but many of the Mental Health pressures experienced by workers are related to external sources over which an employer does not have control. What can a workplace do about the Mental Health pressures associated with marriage breakdown, financial troubles, or other personal problems? What about PTSD, OCD, ADHD, Post Natal Depression, Menopause, Puberty, Addictions, Bipolar Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, Grief, Schizophrenia etc? Should it be the role of the workplace to provide marital, financial or psychological counselling?

The answer can be summed up in an aspect of the laws often associated with Workplace Health & Safety – ***as reasonably practicable***. This means that a workplace cannot simply proclaim it's not their problem, or it's not something they had to do in the past, or they are not equipped to handle it. The issue in the law relates to that which another reasonable person or workplace would do, or does do, in the same situation. **Ignorance is no excuse under the law. It's about what a workplace SHOULD do based on what others in the same or a similar situation do.**

Also, under the law, it is ALWAYS the responsibility of workplaces to identify ALL workplace hazards (including those related to Mental Health) and to minimise the risks associated with those hazards to a level which is acceptable and practicable ***for the particular workplace***.

It is not reasonable that an employer be held responsible for the outside of work pressures on workers, but it is reasonable that they are responsible for risks associated with those pressures when they are brought into the workplace. It would be the same with drugs and alcohol. The workplace would not be responsible for whether a worker in their own time used drugs, but they would be responsible to keep the effects of that drug use from detrimentally affecting the health and safety of themselves and others while at work.

Here are some things that could be considered reasonable and practicable for workplaces to do in case workers are struggling with Mental Health pressures.

1. Let workers know that the risks associated with Mental Health are taken seriously, and that their Mental Health and Safety is as important as their physical health and safety.
2. Become aware of the symptoms of excessive Mental Health pressure, and educate workers about them; e.g., tiredness, mood changes, and drug/alcohol abuse (self medicating).
3. Educate workers about the workplace risks associated with Mental Health issues – whether work related or from outside.
4. Include Mental Health in general H&S discussions.
(Psycho/social/emotional pressures are relevant energy sources that need identifying and controlling.)
5. Assure workers that all conversations around their Mental Health issues will be kept confidential (unless otherwise required by law).
6. Train managers/supervisors to be approachable, and to make it a habit of asking with genuine interest, "How are you going?" and to say, "My door's always open" and mean it. This isn't something that can be pretended easily. Most people have very well developed BS detectors, especially when it comes to employers who have not always kept their word to carry through with what they say they will do.
7. Build relationships whereby workers are more comfortable to confide in managers, supervisors, and each other.

8. Let workers know that managers and supervisors want to know if they are struggling with high levels of anxiety, depression, etc, and that they are prepared to work with them to temporarily alleviate work related pressures as far as practicable.

9. Encourage workers to advise the workplace if they are taking prescription drugs that might negatively affect their work.

10. Address the “shame” associated with Mental Health problems. In the past, people have been harmed at work due to Mental Health problems because those struggling with their thinking thought no one cared to know, or knew how to help, so they were expected to “suck it up”, “man up”, “get over it”, etc. But now, for the safety of everyone, people struggling with Mental Health issues need to feel they can talk about the problem.

11. Provide contact details of Mental Health professionals, organisations or Government agencies that can provide appropriate support.

12. Encourage workers to look out for their mates. If they notice any symptoms in someone, ask if they are OK, and encourage them to speak to someone about it.

13. Promote and model the life skills and behaviours that help people handle mental pressures e.g., good sleep, good nutrition, moderate exercise.

Those 13 actions can be, and should be, accomplished in a variety of ways. (The more ways the better. Professional advertisers understand that someone may need to be engaged with a message as many as 11 times before they eventually take action.) Hence they can be addressed through tool box talks, safety meetings, posters, email footers/signatures, stickers on helmets or tool boxes, bumper stickers outside and inside vehicles etc.

Tool box talks (object lessons). Unless an audience has a strong pre-existing interest, **lecture is the least effective form of communication**. Keep that in mind with tool box talks. Listen to successful professional speakers and you will notice they tell stories about themselves or others that are interesting and relevant to engage their audience. Often current events are useful to communicate to workers, such as the suicide of a celebrity with a Mental Health problem.

Many people are visual learners – they need to see something to get it into their head. So if you can think of a strong (attention grabbing) pertinent visual, use it.

Example #1: “Real story” tool box talk.

Show a photo or have an item associated with a real person who was injured or suffered the consequences of unaddressed mental health issues. (Seeing and especially touching things make it more real to people.) The more personal it is and the more tragic it is the likely you are to get through to the audience. Share their story (if you have permission or if it is public

knowledge). The point is to show that bad things can happen when people don't appropriately address Mental Health problems. Even if the person killed themselves, show how it affected those who loved them – especially if there are kids involved. *“Killing yourself doesn't stop the pain, it just passes it to others.”*

Use the object or photo as an ongoing reminder to take Mental Health problems seriously. *“You don't have to do it alone like (the person you talked about) did. And you shouldn't be letting it affect your work to put others at risk of injury or harm.”* Be sure you are prepared to have workers reveal the problems, and have ways workers can access help.

Example #2: **“Ask for help” tool box talk.**

Challenge workers to see who can carry the most objects from one spot to another in a short specified time without using equipment. What they are to carry are lightweight awkward objects such as various sized balls, foam noodles, stuffed toys, and empty but sealed cardboard boxes. When finished ask why they didn't ask for help (including practical and counsel).

The point is that when we THINK we have to carry everything on our own, or that no-one is willing to help, we sensibly try all sorts of things, but still often struggle. If that continues, and pressure (such as time deadlines) increase, even in a small way, eventually we “lose control”.

When would have been the best time to avoid any loss of control?
In fact, it would have been at the THINKING stage.

What is the sensible thing to do if you are having problems focussing on your work because of stuff going on in your head about things at work or home? Ask for help.

Many people struggle with pressures relating to their work or the people in their workplace, and many struggle with pressures outside of work and bring those pressures to work which can result in distractions and poor judgement (it can be very much like being on drugs). Even when people are on prescribed medication to help them deal with their stress, the medications can cause problems in their job.

Why don't people ask for help? (Shame, not knowing who to help, wanting to try to work it out for themselves.)

Because people are often reluctant to ask for help, those who are around can help by asking, “Is there anything I can do to help?” or “Are you okay? Do you need help?” Simply offering to help can help reduce stress.

Example #3: **“Overload” tool box talk.**

Load up one person with various sized light weight balls or items. Keep loading them up until they eventually drop the load. The problem may not be any particular pressure, but just one too many. What helps prevent the incident is to remove pressure – any pressure. When you help to lighten the load of someone who is struggling with mental stresses, it helps prevent the collapse – sometimes that's suicide. You don't have to be an expert to make

a difference – just proactive – show them they are not alone, and help them find the help they need.

Other suggestions

- Most developed countries have “Help Lines” for people struggling with serious Mental Health problems. Promote and display those numbers around the workplace.
- Consider hiring a full-time or part-time workplace “chaplain” or “counsellor” who can listen and provide contacts or act as an advocate.
- Provide workers with a worthy cause they can give to or be involved in. (Helping others generally makes people feel better about themselves.) Possibly make it a cause associated with Mental Health.

Information

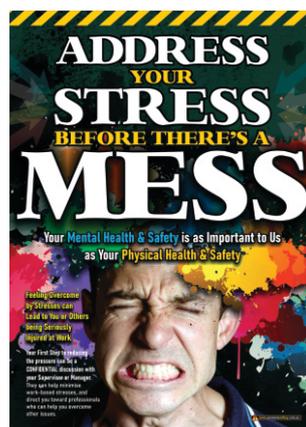
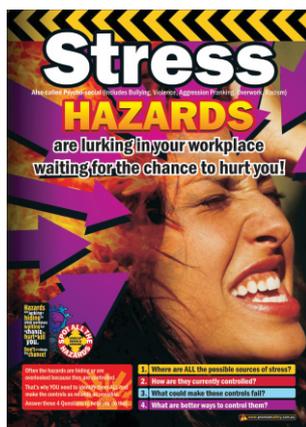
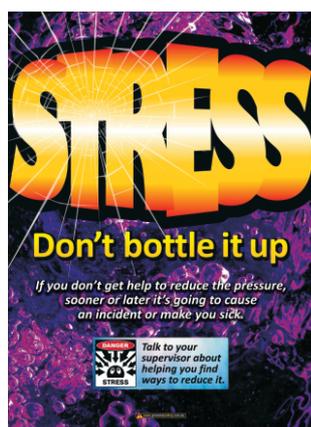
Symptoms of increased Mental Health Pressures to be aware of:

- Change in mood and how they interact with others.
- Loss of output, motivation and focus.
- Struggling to make decisions, get organised, or find solutions to problems.
- Appearing tired, jittery, losing interest in activities and tasks they previously enjoyed.
- Changes in eating habits or appetite.
- Increased smoking, drinking or addictive behaviours.

Be aware that people who work alone or on night shift are often exposed to additional pressures on Mental Health.

Mental Health Related Workplace Safety Posters

To help workplaces engage and educate workers about the risks resulting from Mental Health issues and the things workers might do to mitigate them, Promote Safety has designed a number of posters and resources.



Promote Safety also has many free graphics available on the web site to allow workplaces to build a Program around the relevant posters, or as stand alone images.

