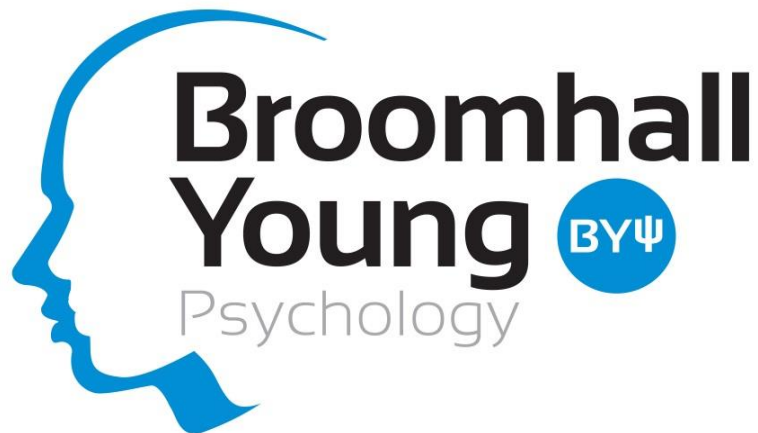


# Difficult Conversations Series: Discussing Mental Health in the Workplace



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# OBJECTIVES & LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Understand the definitions for mental illness and associated signs
- Be able to articulate common managerial challenges and strategies for addressing these
- Feel confident in effectively running a meeting to discuss mental health issues
- Have an awareness of relevant Public Sector codes and government legislation
- Know how to access resources

# Mental Illness – What is it?

- Dimensional & Categorical Models
- Mental illness is a general term which refers to a group of cognitive, emotional and behavioural disorders.
- Your role is not to diagnose a worker and you should seek professional advice and help as required.
- The main disorders that will be dealt with here are:
  - mood disorders (such as depression and bipolar disorder)
  - anxiety disorders (such as ptsd and phobias)
  - psychotic disorders (such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder).

# Mood Disorders - Depression

- Depression is one of the most common of all mental health problems. In any year, four per cent of the Australian population will experience depression. 880,000
- The words 'depressed', 'feeling down' and 'blue' are often used to describe the mood a person may be experiencing.
- This is different from clinical depression. Clinical depression is characterised by having a persistent low mood (over two weeks or more) and a loss of interest in daily life which seriously affects the ability to function.

# Signs of Depression

- The main indicator that a worker may have depression is a significant change in their behaviour, such as:
  - finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
  - feeling tired and fatigued
  - getting easily angry and frustrated with tasks or people
  - avoiding being around work colleagues (e.g. sitting by themselves)
  - Finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines
  - finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
  - finding it difficult to manage multiple tasks or demands
  - drinking more alcohol to cope with other symptoms of depression
  - feeling more vulnerable to stress and anxiety
  - making statements of self worthlessness (e.g. I'm a failure)
  - unusually high absenteeism

# Bi-Polar (Manic Depression)

- Extreme mood swings that change between periods of extreme low (depression), extreme high (mania) and normal mood
- When a person with bipolar disorder is in a high (mania) mood, they may display:
  - extraordinary levels of energy, productivity and creativity at work
  - a dramatic change of personality in the workplace, such as being very loud, talking fast and rushing from one topic to another making little sense
  - poor concentration and great difficulty holding to any task
  - high risk taking in areas such as safety, spending, drug and alcohol use and cutting corners in a task
  - an inability to accept constructive criticism in the job, as they may appear to know everything and deny ever being wrong.
- Depression as above

# Anxiety Disorders

- Approximately one in seven (14%) Australian adults experience an anxiety disorder in any one year
- There are several types of anxiety disorders:
  - generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
  - panic disorder (PD)
  - social anxiety disorder
  - obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
  - acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
  - phobia



# What are some of the signs or indicators that a worker may have an anxiety disorder?

- The main indicator that a worker may have an anxiety disorder is a significant change in their behaviour, such as:
  - unusually irritable or uneasy with colleagues
  - excessively worrying about work: workload, deadlines
  - having difficulty concentrating on work tasks
  - developing elaborate plans to avoid certain work tasks
  - having an anxiety attack, with physical symptoms
  - inability to carry out tasks considered reasonable and achievable
  - being unusually 'on edge' and restless.



# Psychotic Disorders

- An 'episode' of psychosis is a period of time when a person is unable to maintain contact with reality
- Schizophrenia is not about having a 'split personality'
- Schizophrenia tends to occur between adolescence and the mid-twenties and affects less than one per cent of the population
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Personality Disorders

# Managing Mental Health in the Workplace

- It is highly likely that, as a manager, you will supervise a worker with mental illness at some point in your career
- Mental illness is more prevalent than many people realise.
  - Around 45% of Australians aged between 16 and 85 will experience a mental illness at some point in their life
  - one in five Australian adults will experience a mental illness in any given year.
- A worker may develop mental illness prior to employment or during employment.
- Research indicates that 'job stress and other work-related psychosocial hazards are emerging as the leading contributors to the burden of occupational disease and injury'

- Providing a healthy and safe workplace benefits all workers, including those with mental illness. It also makes good business sense:
  - A total of 3.2 days per worker are lost each year through workplace stress
  - Stress-related workers' compensation claims have doubled in recent years, costing over \$10 billion each year
  - Survey of over 5000 workers indicated that 25% of workers took time off each year for stress-related reasons
  - Work pressure accounts for around half of all W/C claims
  - Australian businesses lose over \$6.5 billion each year by failing to provide early intervention/treatment for employees with mental health conditions.

- *Despite one in five Australians experiencing mental health problems each year, nearly half of all senior managers believe none of their workers will experience a mental health problem at work.*

# Why develop Mental Health Strategies for the Workplace?

- *Because a safe and healthy workplace is good for business*
- *Because it improves productivity*
- *Because mental illness can affect anyone*

# *Because it is the law*

- As an employer, you have legal obligations in relation to the management of mental illness in the workplace.
  - *Ensuring health and safety*: OHS legislation requires employers to ensure the workplace is safe and healthy for all workers and does not cause ill health or aggravate existing conditions.
  - *Avoiding discrimination*: disability discrimination legislation requires ensuring the workplace does not discriminate against or harass workers with mental illness. Employers are also required to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of workers with mental illness.
  - *Ensuring privacy*: privacy legislation requires employers to ensure personal information about a worker's mental health status is not disclosed to anyone without the worker's consent.
  - *Avoiding adverse actions*: Commonwealth industrial law: to ensure workplace does not take any adverse action against a worker because of their mental illness.

# The Difficult Conversation – Disclosure & Confidentiality

- *What do I do if a worker is displaying symptoms of mental illness but they have not told me about any issues?*
  - There is no legal obligation for a worker to disclose information about their condition
- Many people choose not to disclose due to:
  - Performance normal
  - Attitudes of others
  - Discrimination



- Your main role in this situation is to:
  - determine whether workplace adjustments can reasonably be made, based on how the worker is performing in the job (without needing them to formally disclose their mental illness)
  - consider OHS requirements and privacy principles.

# What about impacts on other work colleagues?

- While respecting the privacy of the worker with mental illness, you should:
  - provide support to work colleagues to address workload concerns (as you would for any other worker who is absent or not performing at their normal level for health reasons)
  - ensure the safety of workers
  - provide counselling or other support, such as access to an Employee Assistance Program.
- Where the worker with mental illness has agreed that their disability can be disclosed to the workplace, you could also:
  - provide information to work colleagues about the nature of the mental illness and encourage them to be supportive
  - arrange for a mental health service to provide information and training.

# What can I disclose to others?

- It is important not to breach a worker's privacy by telling colleagues about their mental illness unless the worker has agreed that you can do so.
- Discussion between yourself and the worker with mental illness is essential in determining the parameters for disclosing a worker's mental health status to their colleagues.
- If the worker does not agree to disclose their mental illness, discuss what adjustments will be possible without such disclosure

# The Difficult Conversation: What do I say?

1. Plan a meeting
2. Initiate the meeting
3. Observe confidentiality
4. What words do I use?
5. Prepare for possible responses
6. Create an outcome

# 1. Plan a meeting

- Think about what you would like to talk about with your worker. What is the purpose of the meeting?
- Meeting with a worker who seems to be experiencing difficulties generally happens so you can:
  - talk about any work-related concerns you may have
  - identify what may be the cause of the problems
  - identify what reasonable adjustments the worker may need to enable them to be a productive worker again
  - develop a plan of action with the worker.
- It is important to remember that it is reasonable to ask questions for the purposes of identifying reasonable adjustments in the workplace.
- It is not reasonable, and it may be unlawful, to ask questions of a worker about their illness that are:
  - personal, that may cause humiliation and/or are in no way related to the real task of determining what reasonable adjustments could be provided
  - used as the basis for discriminatory decisions such as unjustified dismissal.

- When planning a meeting, you should also consider:
  - the best place to meet: find an informal, non-threatening place, such as a work room that is quiet and private
  - the best person to meet: this may or may not be you, depending on your role and relationship with the worker
  - the best time: choose a time that best suits you and the worker
  - the best strategy: reassure the worker and highlight their skills, abilities and value to the organisation.
- It is appropriate to offer your worker the opportunity to bring a support person to any meeting you arrange to discuss their mental illness issues.

## 2. Initiate the Meeting

- It is your role as manager to initiate the conversation.
- Explain why you are meeting with them.
  - Let them know that you are concerned about their workplace performance, and whether this may be due to health issues, and explain why.
  - It is important not to try to diagnose mental illness or to try to be a counsellor.
- The main focus should be work-related issues that you have noticed in the workplace, for example:
  - 'I'm concerned about you. You are a very competent worker but I have noticed lately that you are having trouble coping with (customer calls).'
- Asking open ended questions can help start the conversation, such as:
  - 'What do you think are the problems?' and 'How can I help?'



# 3. Observe Confidentiality

- Discuss policies and practices are regarding privacy and confidentiality to reassure them that any information presented will be kept private
- Make clear that information can only be disclosed is if there is a serious or imminent threat to the health and safety of the worker concerned and/or colleagues
- Outlining privacy and confidentiality not only critical for developing and maintaining trust, it is essential when negotiating reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

## 4. What language do I use?

- First and foremost people with mental illness are people and therefore it is important to use 'people first' language when referring to a person with a mental illness.
- Rather than describe the person as being a disease ('Margot is a depressive'), describe the person as experiencing/having mental illness ('Margot is experiencing depression')

- A mental illness can be specifically described as 'a person experiencing':
  - Depression
  - bipolar disorder
  - an anxiety disorder or, more specifically, a person experiencing:
    - a panic disorder
    - obsessive compulsive disorder
    - post-traumatic stress disorder
  - a psychotic disorder or, more specifically: schizophrenia.

## 5. Prepare for possible responses

- Be prepared for the meeting to become uncomfortable or for the discussion not to go the way you wanted it to go.
- Some people can feel very threatened when any attempt is made by a manager to discuss personal issues such as mental health.
- Reactions can be as extreme as displaying anger and denial.
- It is important to stay calm, firm, fair, consistent and in control.
- Focus on their wellbeing & how you can help: repeat

## 6. Create an Outcome

- There are two outcomes that can occur:
  - denial of any workplace issues by the worker and therefore withdrawal of the offer of reasonable adjustments in the workplace
  - acknowledgement of workplace issues and a subsequent plan of action to identify, implement and evaluate *reasonable adjustments* in the workplace.
- If a worker chooses not to seek assistance from you let them know that you are available at any time should they require assistance.
- If you feel the work performance of the worker is impacting on the business then you have a *right to address these issues through formal avenues*, such as performance appraisal meetings.
- If you feel there is a health and safety risk in continuing to allow the person to work, or to carry out certain work duties, then you have a duty of care to take action to ensure the person is safe in the workplace.

# What are 'reasonable adjustments'

- Reasonable adjustments are changes to a job, which can be made to enable a worker to perform their duties more effectively in the workplace.
- They should respond to the particular needs or issues of a worker and can include:
  - offering flexible working arrangements (e.g. job rotation, variable start and finish times)
  - changing some aspects of the job or work tasks (e.g. exchanging a single demanding project for a job consisting of a number of smaller tasks)
  - changing the workplace or work area (e.g. moving a worker to a quieter work area)
  - purchasing or modifying equipment.

# Practical Strategies:

- #5 *Examples of reasonable adjustments to address the effects of a worker's mental illness in the workplace*



# *What do I do about performance concerns?*

- As a manager, you may be unsure how to deal with performance concerns for workers, including workers with a suspected or known mental illness.
- You are entitled to apply your standard performance management system to all workers where you have a legitimate concern about their performance.

- However, as part of that performance management system, you will need to:
  - take into account personal circumstances
  - consider whether a mental illness may be contributing to the poor performance
  - consider the seriousness of the performance concern (as for more serious matters, such as violence, there may be no option but to take strong disciplinary action regardless of whether there is a reason, such as a mental illness)
  - consider whether the performance concern relates to a key part of the job or if the work could be adjusted to address or avoid a recurrence of the particular concern
  - encourage and enable the worker to discuss the performance concern and whether there are any health issues that may have impacted on their performance.

- As with all workers with performance issues, you need to:
  - address your concerns with the worker in a sensitive manner by identifying work-related adjustments to assist them meet the inherent requirements of the position
  - provide a timeline to implement the work-related adjustments
  - ensure that you and the worker are both clear about the requirements of the job and standards for performance
  - undertake disciplinary action or termination if:
    - it is not a result of mental illness
    - it is directly related to performance or an inability to perform the key requirements of the job
    - it occurs after considering whether reasonable adjustments are possible.
- If poor work performance continues after the identified timeline you may decide to recommence the disciplinary process with the worker.

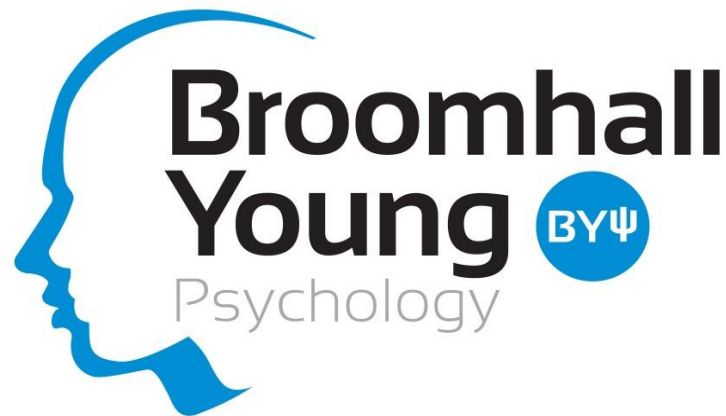
# When a person is a risk to themselves or others

- A very small number of people with mental illness may become aggressive If a worker shows aggressive behaviour in the workplace it is important to:
  - stay calm
  - talk in a calm, slow but firm manner
  - keep at a reasonable distance
  - suggest the worker sits down to help them feel more at ease; you should also sit down and not stand over them
  - try to calm the situation and create some trust by offering a cup of tea or coffee
  - give a firm command, such as 'stop please'
  - if they do not stop, leave the worker alone in a safe environment where they are not at risk to themselves or others, until they have calmed down
  - take any threats or warnings seriously

- contact the police or security if you are concerned about the safety of the worker and/or co-workers;
- contact the worker's treating practitioner, if known
- access your nearest appropriate medical practitioner.
- If you believe that the worker poses a health and safety concern in the workplace, you have a duty of care to take action to prevent any risk.
- Where to call for help:
- **Immediate assistance**  
Police: 000  
Acute Crisis Intervention Service (ACIS) 131465

# Resources and assistance

- Employee Assistance Program
- Handout #6
- [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) resources for managers & leaders



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