

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

Here are some options for you to consider if you need to support the workplace needs of a worker with mental illness.

Many workers with mental illness will not require any workplace support. Others may require only brief or specific support, while some may require support over a longer period of time.

Effective actions will vary, depending on the individual needs of the worker, the nature of your workplace and the tasks associated with the job. The choice of actions should be guided by consultation with your worker and with appropriate professional advice.

Flexible working options

Flexible working options are probably the most effective strategy for meeting the workplace needs of workers with mental illness.

There are a wide range of flexible work arrangements that can be introduced, including working hours, tasks, responsibilities or location. Some examples are:

- variable start and finish times and days worked, provided core business hours are worked, the overall fortnightly or monthly hours are met and the essential business needs are achieved
- working from home, provided the allocated tasks are met and core meetings and events are attended
- ability to work part-time
- discretionary leave where additional sick leave provisions are made available to the worker
- offering the worker a variety of tasks
- offering a work area in a quieter location
- providing a privacy screen or arrangement to offer the worker their 'own' space
- changing or sharing responsibilities or tasks, such as providing administrative duties rather than telephone or face-to-face contact with customers.

It is important to consult with your worker. Discuss reasonable adjustments that would suit the job requirements and their own circumstances. A worker with mental illness may have already developed good strategies that can be adapted to their work environment.

If flexible work arrangements are considered, care should be taken to ensure that this does not lead to isolation from the workplace, colleagues and workplace support.

Strategies to address difficulties with thinking processes (e.g. memory and concentration)

Some workers may experience difficulties with their *thinking processes* such as:

- concentrating on tasks

- attention to work tasks
- memory
- processing information
- forming clear thoughts.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- writing work instructions down rather than just telling a worker what to do; you may choose to email information and instructions about work tasks
- colour coding or highlighting specific information or tasks that you would like the worker to prioritise
- using diagrams, aids or models to demonstrate work tasks required; this can assist the worker to remember and process information more efficiently
- providing a diary or electronic organiser to diarise work tasks, requirements and/or deadlines
- making yourself available to discuss the progress of work tasks or nominating a colleague to act as a 'buddy' for the worker
- providing keyboard overlays to assist the worker remember special functions or shortcuts.

For workers experiencing difficulties with concentration, processing information, forming clear thoughts

Strategies that you can consider include:

- allowing extra time to complete jobs, projects or tasks
- allowing short breaks when a worker needs to clear their mind
- providing room dividers, partitions, soundproofing or visual barriers to minimise distractions and enhance thinking processes
- reducing noise in the work environment
- explaining complex ideas as clearly and simply as possible – repeat and rephrase explanations and information
- providing flexible work arrangements, such as allowing short breaks from work to enhance thinking, and flexible start times to enable the worker to start work at their most productive time
- redesigning the requirements of the job, such as swapping complex tasks for a number of smaller ones that do not require as much intensive thinking and processing
- organising a mentor with similar skills, knowledge and experiences from within or outside the workplace to support the worker with thought processing strategies
- allowing the worker to use a portable CD player or MP3 player as a tool for minimising distractions and industrial noise and increasing concentration
- providing access to an external provider such as the Employee Assistance Program or a Disability Employment Services provider to assist the worker with thought processing strategies in the workplace.

Strategies to address difficulties with organisation and planning

Some workers may experience difficulties with organisation and planning such as:

- planning or carrying out tasks
- managing multiple tasks
- meeting deadlines
- avoiding certain tasks.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- developing a written plan of action with the worker that features achievable tasks with set times for completion
- providing a checklist of the tasks to be completed
- allowing extra time to complete tasks
- providing written information about deadlines
- reminding the worker of important deadlines through informal emails
- using email to provide written information about tasks and to provide informal support
- setting up informal support meetings to discuss progress, being careful **not** to treat these meetings as 'performance' meetings. For example:
 - clearly outline the purpose of the meeting at the beginning and end of the meeting
 - meet at an informal location, such as a café or quiet office area
 - do not formally record the outcomes of the meeting; inform the worker if you intend to take notes and the reasons why
 - be aware of your body language: folded arms and legs, limited eye contact and sitting behind a desk give the impression of a formal, rather than an informal meeting
- assisting the worker to manage multiple tasks by redesigning the work requirements so they can focus on a few specific tasks
- suggesting the use of a personal diary (hard copy or electronic), personal organiser or mobile phone reminder to keep track of required tasks and key dates for their completion
- rearranging job responsibilities/tasks, such as exchanging a single demanding project for a job consisting of a number of smaller tasks
- organising a mentor with similar skills, knowledge and experiences (from within or outside the workplace) to support the worker in organising and planning work tasks
- providing access to an external provider, such as the Employee Assistance Program or a Disability Employment Services provider to assist the worker in developing planning and coordinating strategies.

Strategies to address difficulties with social interactions (e.g. avoiding working with colleagues)

Some workers may experience problems with *social interactions* and you may see them:

- avoiding social interactions
- avoiding working with colleagues.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- not making social activities mandatory for all workers
- if the worker is required to regularly meet with colleagues, business representatives or the general public, swapping these tasks with less 'social' activities
- allowing the worker to work from home for a short period of time
- if the worker is located in a busy area, relocating them to a quieter part of the workplace
- providing a mirror so the worker knows when colleagues are going to approach them to avoid getting startled
- allowing telephone calls during work hours to external support people such as their doctor or family member
- providing access to an external provider such as the Employee Assistance Program or a Disability Employment Services provider to assist the worker to develop social strategies in the workplace.

Strategies to address difficulties with physical symptoms (e.g. pain) and functioning (e.g. fatigue)

Some workers may experience problems with *physical symptoms and functioning*, as a result of their mental illness or medication, such as:

- blurred vision
- pain, tremors or stiffness
- heart attack symptoms
- being sleepy and fatigued
- functioning best at certain times of the day
- turning up late for work.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- reducing writing tasks by enabling the worker to tape record meetings
- introducing assistive technology to enable the worker to reduce keyboard activity and reading from a computer screen (e.g. speech recognition software allows a person to use speech to access all functions of the computer)
- providing training to the worker about accessible computer functions, such as enlarged print options
- reducing physical activities by identifying less physically demanding tasks
- providing short breaks to relieve any physical symptoms
- providing flexible work options such as part-time work, use of annual or sick leave to structure a rest day after two or three days consecutive work

- allowing work from home for a period of time to allow work and rest throughout the day
- breaking up more demanding tasks with interludes of less strenuous tasks.

Sleepy/fatigued/turning up late for work

Some workers with mental illness function best at certain times of the day as they may have had disrupted sleep or be groggy due to the effects of medication.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- identifying with the worker the most productive time of the day for them to complete work tasks
- structuring work and work hours to match their most productive time of the day
- allowing the worker to have input into rostering arrangements.

Strategies to address absence from work

A worker may be absent from work due to medical appointments.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- providing limited paid time off if a worker has to attend medical appointments during work time
- organising a time-in-lieu arrangement for long appointments and/or if the financial viability of the organisation is affected
- encouraging the worker to organise medical appointments on a quieter day of the week, grouping appointments together or booking appointments at the start or end of the working day to minimise the impact on the workplace
- providing a limited number of cab vouchers to assist the worker to attend medical appointments.

Other reasons for absences may include not being able to cope in the work environment.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- meeting with the worker to identify the reasons for the absences
- exploring alternatives to being absent for a whole day, such as:
 - using a quiet room for breaks
 - taking a part-day absence
 - if the worker works part-time, allow them to swap with another day in the week, if this suits them
 - offering flexible work hours such as part-time, job sharing or working from home for some or all of the time
 - providing a quiet area to enable the worker to talk to a support professional by phone during the working day

- organising to meet with the worker to discuss work levels and report on any essential work priorities that need to be attended to while they are on leave
- organising an informal meeting when the worker returns to provide an update of work matters that have occurred during their absence
- ensuring that the worker does not return to a stressful situation such as a backlog of work, emails and requests for work.

If there is a continued pattern of absences, the reasons given are questionable and/or the worker fails to follow procedures, a more formal approach of managing the worker's performance may be required.

Strategies to address difficulties with emotions (e.g. anxiety and frustration)

Some workers may experience problems with their *emotions*, which can include feeling:

- frustrated
- stressed
- anxious
- angry
- sensitive to feedback
- worried about work
- on edge, restless
- low mood.

Strategies that you can consider include:

- avoiding being drawn into arguments
- reminding the worker of basic rules of behaviour in the workplace, such as treating everyone with courtesy and respect and not displaying violent/threatening/bullying behaviour
- allowing flexible timing of breaks to enable the worker to use stress management techniques to cope
- encouraging the worker to walk away from frustrating situations and confrontations
- demonstrating more positive responses to frustrations at work (e.g. you can encourage the worker to outline their issues using 'I feel' statements rather than 'you' statements, which can incite more frustration and anger)
- letting the worker know when there is a positive change in behaviour, such as saying to them 'you handled that situation well'
- allowing telephone calls during work hours to external support people, such as their doctor or family member
- taking immediate action if you are worried a worker is in danger of hurting themselves or others, physically or psychologically; in these situations, whether the person has a mental illness or not, you have an obligation to try to prevent risks to health and safety
- providing access to an external provider such as the Employee Assistance Program or a Disability Employment Services provider to assist the worker to develop strategies to manage their emotions in the workplace.

If a worker appears sensitive to feedback, highly anxious, prone to excessive worry about work

Strategies that you can consider include:

- providing praise, positive feedback and encouragement as often as appropriate
- couching feedback in positive terms and discussing negative feedback in private
- delivering any negative feedback in a constructive manner (ensure the issues are work-related; do not engage in long discussion; and be clear about the issues and strategies)
- organising a mentor with similar skills, knowledge and experiences from within or outside the workplace to support the worker in areas such as managing work without getting stressed
- minimising anxiety prior to meeting by providing advance notice to the worker about the topics to be discussed and their role in the meeting
- allowing the worker to provide written responses rather than verbal responses and feedback
- providing access to an external provider such as the Employee Assistance Program or a Disability Employment Services provider to assist the worker manage their emotions in the workplace.

If a worker is acting out of character and behaving inappropriately (e.g. inappropriate language, clothing or contact with colleagues or actions)

Strategies that you can consider include:

- providing flexibility, such as small breaks during work, to relieve the build up of stress
- helping the worker understand the difference between what is reality and what is not
- minimising stress if the behaviour seems to be set off by stress
- gently and matter-of-factly disagreeing with strange ideas
- providing clearly documented and discussed guidelines about appropriate behaviours in the workplace