

The top of the page features a graphic with black silhouettes of people in a meeting or collaborative setting. A central figure is shown in profile, wearing a hard hat, looking towards the right. Other silhouettes are visible around the edges, suggesting a group of people. The background is a solid light blue color.

## Workplace prevention of mental health problems

### GUIDELINES FOR ORGANISATIONS

These guidelines consist of actions organisations can take to prevent common mental health problems in the workplace. It is hoped that they will be used to improve the practices of organisations as they work to reduce the risk of job stress and mental health problems in the workplace. The guidelines are intended to complement existing legislative requirements for occupational health and safety and the prevention and management of discrimination and harassment.

#### The mental health and wellbeing strategy

In aiming to prevent the development of mental health problems among employees, organisations should develop a comprehensive mental health and wellbeing strategy. This strategy should be integrated with the broader health and wellbeing policy, and should address work-related risks to employee mental health, using a systematic approach to planning, implementation and monitoring.

The organisation should have a specific policy on workplace prevention of mental health problems. It should take an organisation-wide approach, with the full commitment and involvement of all stakeholders, including all levels of management, people with mental health expertise and employee representatives. To ensure sustainability, the mental health and wellbeing strategy should be integrated within the organisation's broader strategic management processes and should not be seen as an 'added project'.

An ideal mental health and wellbeing strategy should be systematically implemented and evaluated and should cover the following:

- the development of a positive work environment that supports and encourages mental health
- balancing job demands with job control
- appropriately rewarding employees efforts
- creating a fair workplace
- provision of workplace supports
- effective management of performance issues
- provision of training to develop management and leadership skills
- supportive change management processes
- development of a mental health and wellbeing policy
- provision of mental health education.

#### Implementing a mental health and wellbeing strategy

The mental health and wellbeing strategy should be supported by a detailed implementation plan covering timing, content, strategies, monitoring and evaluation. It should be consistent with any relevant industry standards and guidelines for mental health and wellbeing. Implementation of the strategy should be based on scientific theory and research, with the strategy updated regularly to keep it current and relevant.

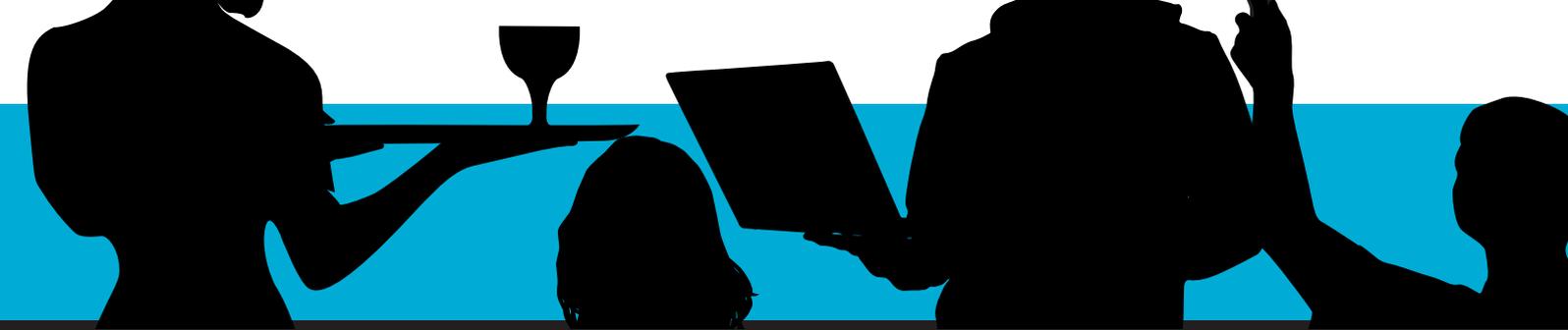
The strategy should be implemented so that it includes all employees within the organisation, regardless of employment status, physical location or work hours. It should recognize the needs, preferences and attitudes of different groups of employees (e.g. by ethnicity, gender, level of literacy, and workplace role).

#### Resources

Senior management should provide appropriate resources and supports to implement the strategy. This includes making provision and providing funding for mental health education and training during employees' regular hours. Planning and implementation of initiatives should optimise the use of on-site personnel, physical resources, and organisational capabilities.

#### Outside support

When the organisation lacks the necessary expertise to develop and implement the strategy, it should engage the services of external consultants or mentors. Where possible, senior management should seek out opportunities to find out what other organisations are doing and what seems to be working for them. Smaller businesses and organisations should access the support provided by external personnel or organisations such as the Federation of Small Business and Chambers of Commerce to assist in promoting a mentally healthy workplace.



## Creating an implementation committee

In larger organisations, senior management should create a small group or committee which is responsible for developing and implementing the strategy. An implementation committee is a group that is responsible for developing, implementing and evaluating the mental health and wellbeing strategy. Where possible, this committee should include a range of stakeholders (e.g. supervisors, employee representatives, unions) with a variety of expertise and perspectives (e.g. mental health, occupational health, human resources). The roles and responsibilities, as well as the time commitments, of those involved in designing, implementing and evaluating the strategy should be clearly documented.

The committee should make key decision makers aware of the business case for improving workplace mental health and wellbeing, including improved productivity, and a reduction in staff turnover, absenteeism, and other costs. They should also provide a business plan and an evaluation plan in order to demonstrate that the strategy can be kept accountable and that the results will be measured. The plan should also make clear the roles and responsibilities, as well as the time commitments, of those involved in carrying out the strategy.

Senior management should provide the committee with the education, training and resources they need to be effective. This training should include what to do when approached by an employee with a mental health issue.

## Carrying out a needs assessment

Those implementing the mental health and wellbeing strategy should conduct an assessment of the current mental health and wellbeing status and needs of the organisation. This might include an assessment of indicators of employee mental health and wellbeing, level of mental health knowledge, identification of sources of workplace stress, extent of engagement in current programs and activities, and employee preferences for opportunities to enhance their mental wellbeing.

In carrying out the needs assessment, consideration should be given to employee privacy and confidentiality, and any concerns about the process of assessment and monitoring should be addressed.

Other available data relevant to employee mental health and wellbeing should also be examined. This might include previous employee survey results, absenteeism and turnover reports, exit interview data, employee assistance use data, and workers' compensation and occupational health and safety data. Evaluation of previous workplace programs can assist in learning from past successes and failures.

Those implementing the strategy should ensure that the data gathered is used to help make the business case for mental health and wellbeing programs and to ensure the effective design of the strategy.

## Developing an action plan for implementing the mental health and wellbeing strategy

**An action plan for the implementation of the mental health and wellbeing strategy should be developed. The action plan should:**

- be based on the information collected in the needs analysis
- include the objectives, specific strategies to be used, targets to be achieved, and activities to be carried out
- consider how key groups or individuals will be identified and involved
- outline the time frame, responsible people, expected outputs and potential obstacles
- include a plan for ensuring the strategy is sustainable
- outline a marketing and communications plan which motivates employee participation
- incorporate employee feedback

**The organisation should have an individual who takes leadership in implementing the strategy as stated in the action plan.**

## Assessment and evaluation of the mental health and wellbeing strategy

Evaluation of mental health and wellbeing programs should be carried out to determine their impact and cost-effectiveness, demonstrate accountability to stakeholders and identify potential improvements.

An evaluation plan should be created before implementation has started. The evaluation plan should include a clearly defined set of process and outcome measures based on goals and objectives set during the planning process. A sustainability strategy should also be devised to ensure that mental health in the workplace remains an important issue to the organisation following implementation of programs.

As part of the assessment and evaluation process, organisations should formally assess how they perform against these guidelines, including conducting regular surveys of the organisational climate or other employee feedback mechanisms.



## Developing a positive work environment: what managers and supervisors can do

### The role of leadership

Senior management and other supervisors play an important role in developing a positive and mentally healthy work environment. As part of their leadership role, senior management should hold supervisors and managers at all levels accountable for maintaining a mentally healthy workplace and encourage them to have an open and understanding attitude to what people say to them about the pressures of their work or other problems. Supervisors and managers should be hired based on their ability to demonstrate an understanding and commitment to leadership capabilities and supportive management practices as well as technical skills.

Managers and supervisors should ensure that organisational priorities, practices, and workplace norms promote a mentally healthy workplace. This can be done by:

- Being a good role model in the workplace:
  - modelling actions that promote mental health in the workplace (e.g. demonstrating self-care and balance between work and other aspects of life, seeking out additional training as required)
  - modelling appropriate language use to decrease stigma and discrimination in the workplace (i.e. don't use the terms "wacko", "going mental", "schizophrenic", but instead use person-first language, "a person with depression, schizophrenia, etc")
  - apologising when appropriate
  - behaving in ways that are consistent with the organisation's stated goals
  - being enthusiastic, optimistic and showing confidence in employees
- Creating a supportive culture:
  - encouraging team work and collaboration
  - welcoming new ideas
  - discouraging gossip and rumours
  - creating a no-blame culture by not punishing employees for mistakes, but viewing them as an opportunity for learning and support
  - promoting mentoring and coaching amongst employees
- Communicating effectively in the workplace:
  - having transparent and accountable communication processes
  - being approachable and available to communicate by implementing an open door policy and by being regularly visible in the workplace
  - asking staff how they are and scheduling regular catch-up meetings to discuss how they are going
  - minimising anxiety prior to meetings by providing advance notice to employees about the topics to be discussed and their role in the meeting
  - structuring regular team meetings to enable active communication between teams of employees

- introducing themselves to staff
- identifying and targeting problematic interpersonal relationships in the workplace before problems escalate
- asking employees for feedback regarding what the supervisor or manager can do to improve their approach
- informing and preparing staff for anticipated periods of increased work (e.g. seasonal demands, peak shift hours)
- being honest and transparent in communications with employees about the factors that affect the organisation, both good and bad
- ensuring that there are clear and regular lines of communication for staff working in isolation. (e.g. a regular phone catch-up)
- Taking action to support employee mental health:
  - communicating regularly with employees about the organisation's commitment to mental health
  - considering the impact on employee mental health and wellbeing when making organisational decisions
  - raising awareness and encouraging open discussion of mental health and wellbeing
  - reacting in an accommodating and cooperative way when approached by an employee to discuss a mental health issue
  - being positive about adopting reasonable adjustments (adaptations to working practices) that will support employees in doing their jobs
  - encouraging acceptance of people with mental health problems
  - encouraging employees to look after their own health (i.e. encouraging exercise, and providing information and advice on diet, and the risks of smoking and alcohol abuse).

### Developing a mental health and wellbeing policy

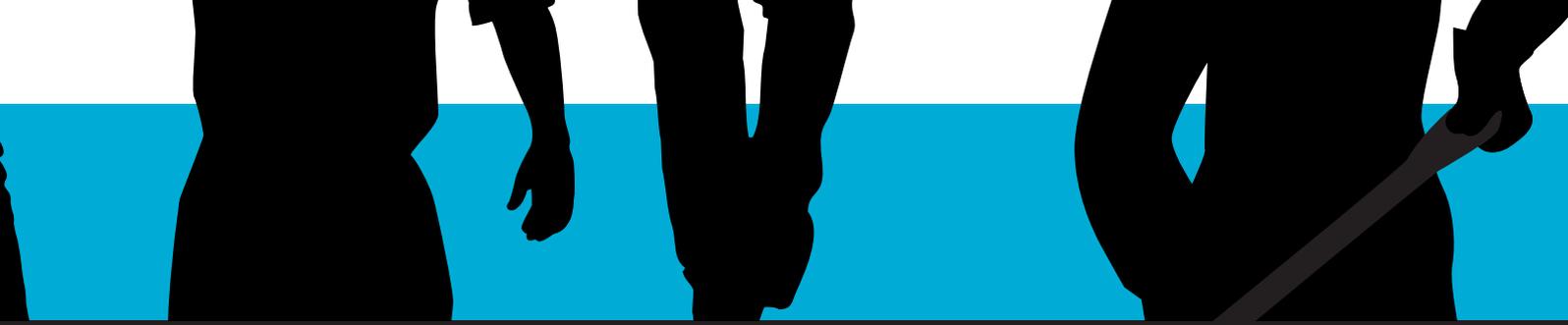
Senior management should develop a mental health and wellbeing policy. This policy should cover prevention strategies for reducing the risk of mental health problems, and a commitment to developing management skills that promote mental health and wellbeing. The policy should link to other key policies, such as those on human resources, health and safety, equal opportunity, bullying and harassment, violence and conflict resolution etc.

The policy should align with the organisation's corporate mission and its vision and values, supporting both short and long-term goals, going beyond regulatory requirements to foster an environment that promotes good mental health.

In developing the policy, senior management should gather relevant data on mental health issues facing the organisation, including risk factors and impacts. The policy should also be developed and reviewed in consultation with employees, employee representatives and any other stakeholders.

The policy should be written in plain language, making it clear who is responsible and accountable for carrying out any actions or procedures. A timetable for implementing the policy should be identified, as well as scheduling regular processes for policy review and updating.

Senior management should ensure that the policy is implemented,



supported and promoted by all staff, making very clear to all staff their commitment to the policy. They should provide adequate resources and supports to enable staff to implement the policy, ensuring that everyone has the skills and knowledge to put their responsibilities relating to preventing mental health problems in the workplace into practice.

Senior management should also ensure that all new employees are aware of the policy at the time of induction.

## Considering the physical work environment

The physical work environment can have an impact on mental health. Where possible, managers and supervisors should monitor and review the physical work environment, and eliminate potential stressors (e.g. temperature, lighting, noise, ventilation, interruptions, lack of personal space, poor ergonomic design, and unsightliness). Access to common areas where employees can interact socially should be provided, as should regular access to sunlight and fresh air.

## Balancing job demands with job control

Job stress increases the risk of mental health problems. It can be prevented by making sure the requirements (demands) of a job are adequately matched with the resources needed to do the job well, and by providing employees with genuine control over their work.

Managers and supervisors should promote job control by:

- allowing an appropriate degree of self-management of workload
- allowing employees to have a say over when breaks can be taken, where possible
- offering opportunities for employees to voice challenges and concerns
- consulting with staff about decisions that affect them, and making these decisions as early as possible
- providing employees with the opportunity to discuss aspects of their role that may cause conflict between personal beliefs and professional demands
- allowing employees to explore internal positions that may better match their skills and style (e.g., via job-shadowing or career-development discussions) when appropriate
- providing training for staff at times of change to work practice or when new policies are being introduced
- encouraging employees to set work-related goals which give them a sense of purpose and meaning in their work.

Where job demands are excessive, managers and supervisors should identify ways of moderating employee workloads. This can be done by:

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities:
  - ensuring that staff have clear, current and adequately detailed job descriptions that define their responsibilities and expectations
  - ensuring that employees have clearly defined roles and responsibilities at the time of induction or when changing

positions

- ensuring that when employees are working in teams, all team-member roles are clearly defined
- setting realistic and agreed goals and deadlines, and giving employees the means to achieve them
- clarifying work priorities, and considering eliminating activities and roles that are not essential
- negotiating reasonable schedules and deadlines with senior management where appropriate
- giving employees clear instructions and directions
- Ensuring manageable workloads:
  - monitoring workloads to ensure that employees are not overloaded
  - monitoring performance targets to ensure they are realistic
  - ensuring that job design and workload allow employees to complete their work within allocated hours
  - ensuring that workloads and tasks match employees' abilities, personal attributes and experience
  - ensuring that there are sufficient staff to do the work required
  - encouraging that employees to talk to their supervisors when they feel workload pressures or are finding it difficult to maintain a balance between work and other aspects of their life
  - ensuring employees have enough to do, as under-loading can also be a source of employee stress
  - if the employee reports to more than one supervisor, coordinating with other supervisors to ensure workload expectations are consistent and reasonable
- Encouraging appropriate breaks from work:
  - ensuring that job design and work allocation allow employees to take appropriate breaks
  - providing time to recover from demanding tasks — don't expect employees to go from one high pressure project to another
  - actively discouraging employees from working excessively long hours
  - encouraging employees to take their entitled leave (e.g. sick days, holidays, time off in lieu, parental/carer's leave)
- Allowing flexibility in working arrangements:
  - allowing flexibility in the location and timing of work, as long as the allocated tasks are carried out and core meetings and events are attended
  - allowing employees some flexibility to take paid or unpaid time during the day for medical appointments or other urgent personal matters
  - offering discretionary leave in situations where other leave options are not available
  - applying the principles of consistency and fairness throughout the organisation when allowing flexibility in work arrangements.



## Rewarding employees' efforts

Being inadequately rewarded (e.g. wages, promotion, job security, positive feedback) for work efforts increases the risk of mental health problems. Managers and supervisors can play an important role in ensuring that workplace effort is balanced with reward.

Managers and supervisors should promote recognition of employee efforts in the workplace by:

- ensuring that employees are paid equitably for the work they do
- ensuring that staff are rewarded for working overtime, either with time off in lieu or pay
- praising staff and providing positive feedback for good work achieved
- appropriately acknowledging and rewarding employees' efforts and achievements in a fair and timely manner (e.g. celebrations of employee or team milestones and achievements, financial compensation, recognition in team email/newsletter etc.)
- celebrating shared organisational accomplishments
- encouraging and rewarding employees who acknowledge, support and encourage others
- evaluating and rewarding team performance as well as individual performance
- ensuring that employees are accountable and rewarded for their performance in a team
- providing opportunities for learning, problem-solving and personal development
- providing opportunities for career advancement
- as far as possible, ensuring that employees' jobs are secure.

## Providing feedback on performance

The manager or supervisor should create clear employee appraisal processes in order to give the employee adequate feedback on their performance. They should ensure that the issues discussed are specific and work-related. Any negative feedback should be delivered in a private setting and in a constructive manner, including being clear about strategies for improvement. The supervisor should ensure that there is time in meetings or at reviews and appraisals for staff to discuss how they are feeling, as well as asking employees for feedback regarding how the supervisor can help them be successful.

## Creating a fair workplace

Being treated unfairly at work is linked to an increased risk of mental health problems. Managers and supervisors should treat employees justly and fairly by:

- holding all employees accountable for their actions in the workplace
- maintaining the confidentiality of employees' personal information in all communications
- treating people from all cultural backgrounds fairly
- adopting non-discriminatory language in all communications
- asking for employee input into the fairness of policies and procedures
- Being transparent about practices and procedures:
  - ~ using a fair and open system for awarding salary increases or payment of bonuses
  - ~ ensuring that merit, person-job fit, and competence are the basis for recruitment, selection and promotion
  - ~ having clearly established avenues for development and advancement
  - ~ having clear supervisory and appraisal structures
  - ~ allocating work duties and responsibilities in a transparent and fair way
- Having clear procedures around complaints:
  - ~ encouraging managers to have an open door policy for employee complaints and concerns
  - ~ having systems in place to enable employees to report unacceptable behaviour and for supervisors to deal with such behaviour promptly and confidentially
  - ~ ensuring that employees are aware of alternative routes for raising concerns, e.g. trade union representatives, health and safety representatives, human resources or occupational health personnel
  - ~ treating all bullying complaints seriously, and dealing with these complaints promptly and confidentially
  - ~ not holding victims accountable for the psychological effects of bullying
  - ~ having effective ways of addressing inappropriate behaviour from staff, customers and clients.



## Provision of workplace supports

Senior management should provide a range of support systems, for example, peer support, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) or information about local support agencies that will help employees deal with both work-related and personal problems (e.g. health issues, personal finances, parenting and other care responsibilities). They should provide specific support services for employees who are having problems with their mental health.

For new employees, a support network should be created by pairing them with a mentor and a peer during their orientation. Managers should be offered opportunities for training and mentoring to enhance their interpersonal and people management skills.

## Reducing the risk of mental health problems in shift workers

Due to the nature of their jobs, shift workers are known to be at higher risk of mental health problems. To reduce this risk, shift work schedules should be designed to avoid shift changes at short notice. Supervisors should have regular consultations with shift workers to ensure issues can be identified early and changes made where possible. In addition, the organisation should provide shift workers with training on how to manage sleep problems and fatigue.

## Managing staff during times of organisational or role change

Organisational change, if poorly handled, can increase the risk of developing mental health problems. To reduce this risk, when planning organisational change, senior management should assess potential risks to mental health and monitor these on an ongoing basis. They should also ensure that employees are given additional support for their mental health and wellbeing during times of organisational change. This should include providing employees with access to the relevant support, e.g. emotional, practical or training support.

As far as possible, senior management should ensure that any proposed major changes to the duties and responsibilities of staff are discussed with the employees involved in advance. If the organisation is downsizing or restructuring, senior management should communicate openly with employees about the changes in order to reduce employee uncertainty. They should also have strategies for supporting those who will lose their jobs and those who will stay but may feel insecure.

## Managing mental health-related under-performance

**In situations in which under-performance may be related to mental health problems, supervisors should address their concerns about performance with the employee in a sensitive manner. They should ensure that the employee is clear about the requirements of the job and standards for performance.**

**If the employee is suspected of having a mental health problem, the supervisor should attempt to provide assistance before taking disciplinary action. If a mental health problem is identified, the supervisor should consider work-related adjustments to assist the employee to meet the inherent requirements of their position and provide a timeline to implement these.**

**Senior management should provide access to mediation to manage situations in which under-performance is complicated by interpersonal conflict. They should also put processes in place that allow employees to express concerns about a fellow employee's performance, where these concerns are about safety.**

## Developing leadership and management skills

Effective management skills are essential for the prevention of mental health problems. All managers and supervisors should receive regular training to develop their skills.

This training should include:

- stress management skills
- development of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-management and social-awareness skills
- management and leadership styles
- following appraisal processes correctly
- providing positive feedback and appropriate support
- demonstrating that staff are valued
- the importance of offering training and resources for staff to do their job
- conducting regular one-to-one supervision sessions
- supporting employees who are struggling with work or personal problems
- identifying and dealing with bullying
- having difficult conversations and managing conflict.



## Providing mental health education to employees

Senior management should ensure that the organisation provides mental health education to all employees in the workplace. Mental health education for all employees should cover:

- Basic information about mental health and mental health problems:
  - what mental health is
  - what a mental health problem is
  - how common mental health problems are
  - the types of mental health problems
  - the warning signs and symptoms of mental health problems
  - the factors that determine a person's mental health, including employee lifestyle choices and social conditions that influence a person's mental health
  - the myths surrounding mental health problems which lead to stigma and how to work actively to dispel these myths
  - the importance of physical health for mental health
- Mental health and the workplace:
  - that mental health problems are a leading cause of worker disability
  - that being in paid employment or volunteer work, compared with being unemployed, is usually better for mental health and helps protect against mental health problems
  - the workplace factors that influence a person's mental health
  - an understanding of the levels of stress that can improve performance and those that can reduce it
  - how to reduce stressors in the workplace to prevent mental health problems
  - the things to notice that might indicate that an employee has a mental health problem, such as effects on attendance, completing work tasks, displaying unusual behaviours
  - the impact of the symptoms of mental health problems on the skills necessary for work, such as problems with concentration, memory, decision making and motivation
  - the fears employees may have about disclosing their mental health problem (e.g. stigma from others and not wanting to identify as 'crazy')
- Prevention of mental health problems:
  - the steps that can be taken to preserve and maintain mental health and wellbeing, including those related to developing healthy habits, fostering relationships and self-care
  - an understanding of a range of evidence-based stress management strategies that can help prevent mental health problems
  - positive coping skills, including assertiveness, communications and conflict management, time and workload management, and problem solving skills

- Management of mental health problems:
  - the importance of early identification and intervention
  - the benefits of seeking professional help for mental health problems
  - the counselling and other support services available through the organisation and in the community and when it is necessary to refer someone to these
  - where to go for assistance if not confident in dealing with an employee's mental health problem
- Mental health of colleagues:
  - how to watch out for and reach out to fellow employees who may be developing a mental health problem by focusing on their concern for the person and their desire to help
  - how to approach and interact with an employee who is in a distressed state
  - how to respond in a mental health crisis situation
  - employee rights and responsibilities, including their responsibility to report situations that threaten mental health and wellbeing to a supervisor
- Mental health information materials:
  - employees should be given mental health education materials that they can take home and share with their families.

## Additional education for managers and supervisors

This should include:

- management styles and practices that can help promote the mental health and wellbeing of employees and minimise their stress
- what to do if an employee refuses to recognise a mental health issue or get help
- how to deal with under-performance issues when mental health problems are involved
- how to investigate and take remedial actions if an employee reports a situation that threatens the mental health and wellbeing of employees.

## Employee responsibilities in preventing mental health problems

In addition to actions taken by the organisation to protect employee mental health, employees also need to take responsibility for their mental health by:

- recognising that they have a responsibility to promote their own mental health and wellbeing and take action to protect against mental health problems
- looking after their own health (e.g. by exercising, eating a healthy diet, engaging in relaxing activities, and not smoking or abusing alcohol)
- maintaining a balance between work and other aspects of their life by engaging in enjoyable activities, self-care behaviours and social engagement with family and friends
- Engaging in mentally healthy practices in the workplace:



- taking the breaks they are entitled to during their working day (i.e. coffee and lunch breaks) and sticking to their specific hours of work (i.e. start and leave work on time)
- asking for help with their workload if needed
- attending any training designed to enhance their ability to undertake their role more effectively
- taking an active part in any discussions or stress risk assessments, or completing any questionnaires when asked to do so
- attending any mental health and stress management training courses arranged by their employer
- Being considerate of fellow employees:
  - being respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with customers, clients and the public
  - not disclosing personal information that has been shared by a fellow employee, unless they are concerned the employee is a threat to him or herself or could harm others
  - providing support to fellow employees, where possible, to help them cope with stress and mental health issues when they arise
  - being sensitive when talking about mental health problems and not using stigmatising terms (e.g. talk about 'a person with depression' rather than 'a depressive')
  - not talking about people who have made 'stress claims' in a disparaging way
- Taking action on interpersonal problems:

If an employee is having problems with a supervisor or fellow employee, they should:

  - try to talk to the person about it
  - if they are unable to talk to the person, draw on other assistance that is available (e.g. Human Resources department or EAP/counselling service, or union representative)

- Taking action on mental health concerns:

If an employee thinks they may have any sort of mental health problem or is experiencing excessive stress, the employee should:

  - identify and avoid stressors, accepting what they can't change and proactively addressing problems
  - raise with their supervisor the issue of 'reasonable adjustments', such as working shorter hours or having more supervision at work, as appropriate
  - seek professional help and speak to their supervisor, human resources representative, union representative or other appropriate workplace person about these concerns
- Supporting the mental health and wellbeing policy:

All employees have a responsibility to support the mental health and wellbeing policy, including:

  - reading and fully understanding the policy
  - complying with this policy at all times while completing work-related duties and while representing management
  - informing a supervisor or manager if they believe that the policy has not been followed.

## How these guidelines were produced

These guidelines were produced using the Delphi method, which is a systematic way of assessing the consensus of a panel of experts. A wide range of potential actions were derived from a review of the research and best practice literature. The actions included in the guidelines have been rated as important or essential by expert panels of employers, mental health professionals and employees with experience of mental health problems.

Details of the methodology can be found in Reavley NJ, Ross A, Martin A, LaMontagne AD, Page K, Jorm AF. Development of guidelines for workplace prevention of mental health problems: a Delphi consensus study with Australian professionals and consumers (in submission).