

INSIDE OHS

In-depth review for readers of *Occupational Health News*



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Tackling the taboo of workplace stress can reap rewards

Delays in managing and supporting workplace health initiatives literally cannot be afforded, according to Access EAP clinical services manager Marcela Slepica. "Mental health issues continue to cost employers in sick days – with one fifth of Australian workers having taken time off in the last year due to stress, anxiety, depression or feeling mentally unwell," Slepica said. "This absenteeism is resulting in 12 million days of reduced productivity imposing a direct economic cost on employers, which amounts to a staggering \$6m lost each year."

Slepica's concern is supported by PwC's *Creating a mentally health workplace – Return on investment analysis* report, supported by leading mental health initiatives beyondblue and HeadsUp. PwC's survey showed the prevalence of mental health conditions across the Australian workforce. In particular, 33% of workers in financial and insurance industry sectors experienced a mental health condition, and 32% within information media, telecommunication and essential services (electricity, gas, water and waste).

The University of NSW collaborated with the Black Dog Institute on *Developing a mentally healthy workplace: a review of the literature*. The report summarised findings in the field. It found the cost of workers' compensation claims for stress-related mental disorders was estimated at \$200m a year. The combined cost of depression-related absenteeism, reduced productivity and staff turnover was estimated at \$12.3bn a year.

However, research showed employers could cost effectively tackle the risks. PwC determined "effective action to create a healthy workplace" could provide organisations on average with a positive return on investment (ROI) of \$2.30 for every dollar spent, with even higher yields in the most affected industries.

Inside OHS spoke to Slepica about triggers for mental health challenges and how managers could proactively handle them.

Top 5 triggers for workplace stress

Access EAP has collected data from more than 400 organisations to better understand the nature of workplace stress. The data revealed managers should keep in mind:

1. Job insecurity;
2. Work overload
3. Organisational change;
4. Conflict with a manager or colleagues; and
5. Bullying and harassment.

When left unmanaged, Access found workplace stress could manifest in a diverse range of symptoms across employees. "Some people become withdrawn, have difficulty sleeping and the longer and more severe the stress, the greater the effect," Slepica said. "Stress in the workplace may cause headaches, gastrointestinal conditions, high blood pressure and sleep disorders."

Slepica explained the incidence of mental health conditions was rising in the modern workplace, where changes in employment markets left organisations and their employees vulnerable to restructuring and job insecurity. "Workplaces have changed, there is much more pressure for organisations to be competitive and to survive."

For some workers, that could be exacerbated in the age of the smart phone where "we are much more available than we used to be".

In making themselves accessible to workers, managers must be conscious of the "stigma" that could be associated with identifying with a mental illness. Slepica said a similar stigma existed 20 years ago for workers who were diagnosed with cancer and concealed from colleagues and managers.

Collaboration can be a key to better health

Slepica identified mental health as "everyone's responsibility". Access EAP's data nominated five strategies managers could promote to staff to help manage their stress levels individually:

1. **Work out your priorities.** "Write them down each morning, prioritise them and take one thing at a time."
2. **Practice saying no.** "If you are already feeling overloaded, think hard before committing to other people's expectations or agendas. We often perform tasks just to feel accepted by other people."
3. **Don't take things personally.** "Stress in others can also make them behave atypically or unkindly. Learn to defuse situations rather than bottle them up and let go of grudges."
4. **Prioritise relaxation and exercise.** "These are not optional extras for handling stress, they are essential. Set aside time each day for recreation and exercise ... Hobbies that focus attention are also good stress relievers."
5. **Identify your stress situations.** "Make a list of events that leave you emotionally drained and one or two ways to reduce the stress for each."

Workplace leaders are 'critical'

Business owners and executives played an "even more critical role" in creating environments that facilitated positive mental health and wellbeing, Slepica said. "They have the capacity to influence colleagues and implement the necessary changes to work towards workplace wellbeing. Increasing awareness of mental health in the workplace will help remove stigma and create a more open environment."

So, how can leaders realise a positive ROI on initiatives designed to create a healthy workplace and enhance workers' wellbeing? Slepica said "every little bit counts".

Approaching individuals: 'don't judge'

First, it's critical how managers broached an issue with a worker they suspect was having difficulties. "Don't judge – most people are afraid of being criticised or judged," Slepica said. She recommended consulting the worker, asking if they would like to discuss if they were experiencing any particular stress. She said: "Take them away from the open plan and comment on what you have observed, eg 'I'm worried because I've heard...'" EAPs could offer training on how to manage difficult conversations that potentially made many people "nervous".

Slepica added: "Always follow up ... Don't just forget about it. You can ask 'are you sure you're okay?', here are some resources which may help you'."

Workplace culture and environment

Leaders should use opportunities like Mental Health Month and targeted social activities like morning teas

to focus on the workplace environment, Slepica said. She emphasised openly acknowledging stress as an issue was important to demonstrate managers were not "judgemental or critical".

Physical wellbeing could also be an important supplementary initiative across an organisation. Slepica explained "physical wellbeing is a part of emotional and mental wellbeing ... group yoga and corporate challenges bind people together. They can talk about it." Other ways to encourage physical wellbeing to alleviate workplace stress included looking at healthy eating, making available fruit baskets, healthy snacks or getting a healthy lunch together regularly as a team.

'Don't hide and pretend'

Slepica highlighted none of the initiatives could work in isolation "You can't find the one answer that's going to solve everything. You need to do something on a consistent basis." She observed managers and leaders were critical to that effort.

"Attitudes are dependent on leaders. Good role models like the CEO or general manager or senior managers need to be supportive of changing people's attitudes toward health and wellbeing and making people aware."