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MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

AS MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES GET DISCUSSED MORE, IT'S PART OF A HEALTH CHECK-IN AT THE WORKSITE. SARAH DAVIES-ROBERTSON AND FARHAN SHAHZAD LOOK AT WAYS YOU CAN CHECK IN AT WORK.

Once upon a time, mental health at work was overlooked. We often ignored issues in the workplace, seeing a person as weak and unable to cope with the demands placed upon them.

Nowadays, we are much more sympathetic. We understand that work can cause all kinds of illnesses due to stress. There are musculoskeletal disorders due to lack of ergonomics; burnout and brownout due to stress; and anxiety and depression due to lack of compatibility with your job.

That said, organisations can be the source of stress, but individual employees are multi-faceted and complex. Perhaps an employee is predisposed to a psychiatric disorder, or maybe they even have one already. Workplaces cannot always be the source of blame, but if a person already has a diagnosis of a mental health disorder, then it is imperative that they are treated with kindness and supported through their journey.

Treating someone with a mental health disorder requires knowledge, just as we do with those with physical health problems. A psychiatric disorder may look invisible, it's not as obvious as physical illness, but it, nevertheless, requires care and compassion.

So, how can organisations help those with mental health problems? Firstly, they can learn to identify what they are. Then, they can work with individuals to tailor a support plan. Just as you would give someone time off who had chemotherapy appointments, you would

also need to give a person time to visit their therapist. Working with each employee on an individual basis is key.

What can organisations do to promote staff well-being?

It is imperative for organisations to understand the individual nature of each employee. Each worker brings a unique life history, their own psychological make-up, characteristics and traits to the workplace, and therefore needs to be treated as such. Treating staff as individuals is key to harnessing their talents.

In organisational psychological research, we see that employees are multi-faceted individuals. And while it is not expected that each manager will be a master psychologist when working with their subordinates, generating psychological and self-awareness is a must. Treating everyone the same

is where many managers fall short. Building rapport and providing ongoing support to employees is a mediating factor in safeguarding against stress and burnout.

Furthermore, organisations can promote wellbeing by establishing a healthy routine. Encouraging employees to take their lunch away from their desks will be a welcoming break that boosts overall productivity.

It's also important that, wherever possible, employees leave on time. Workers have responsibilities outside of the office, so they must attend to these needs. Neglecting family and

social affairs can breed resentment and disengagement at work. Encouraging staff to take their holiday time, leave when they should and take regular breaks will boost their overall productivity at work.

Finally, employers must actively focus on reducing the organisational factors contributing to occupational stress and burnout. Office bullying, scapegoating, bureaucracy and politics cause unnecessary work stress.

Organisations can do well to listen to their staff's needs and create an open-door policy where employees can readily express their worries candidly. Tackling structural level stressors should be a priority for organisations - not least because it is the organisation that will suffer most if not.

How does this impact tradies?

The physical aspect of being a tradesperson is often overlooked. Manual labour and physical stress can cause chronic disorders that lead to psychological stress. Back pain, for instance, is an active stressor that comes with a psychological cost.

If you are experiencing pain, get it checked out so that it does not lead to a chronic backache. If you are waking up at night and worried about the days ahead, speak to your GP for a possible referral. Low mood, anxiety and stress can be helped and the sooner you speak to someone, the better.

While it can be difficult to speak out about unfair treatment, there are options if you're being harassed and bullied at work. Consider making a complaint to human resources or speaking to FairWork Australia about any organisational issues. Remember, you are never alone and speaking up can help save your mental health. ▲

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