UOW ADMINISTRATION

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE GUIDELINES

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1 Introduction

The University of Wollongong is committed to providing a safe and healthy workplace. To achieve this, the University has developed and implemented a workplace health and safety management system that provides support and resources to the UOW community to meet legislative requirements and effectively manage workplace health and safety risks including psychological and wellbeing risks.

The University is committed to identifying potential workplace hazards that could result in risks to mental health and preferably remove or implement risk management strategies to lower the risk. The University acknowledges that mental illnesses can have unquantifiable costs on the livelihoods of employees and their families as well as significantly adding to the cost of business through absenteeism and presenteeism. As a result the University will provide appropriate support for employees experiencing a mental illness.

2 Purpose

This document has been developed to:

- outline prevention strategies and raise awareness of mental health for University staff.
- Provide guidance and assist staff who experience a mental illness as well as those who are supporting students, colleagues and/or peers experiencing a mental illness.

3 Definitions

Employee Assistance Program (EAP) - is a work-based intervention program designed to enhance emotional, mental and general psychological wellbeing.

Mental Health – is the capacity of individuals and groups to interact with one another and the environment, in ways that promote subjective wellbeing, optimal development and the use of cognitive, affective and relational abilities.

Mental Illness – is a health issue that can significantly affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves and interacts with other people. Mental illness is a general term that refers to a group of illnesses including, but not limited to:

- mood disorders (such as depression and bipolar disorder)
- anxiety disorders
- psychotic disorders (such as schizophrenia and some forms of bipolar disorder).

4 Building a Mentally Healthy Workplace Culture

The University of Wollongong is committed to continually building a mentally healthy workplace culture that reduces the stigma associated with mental illness and supports any staff who are experiencing a mental illness.

The psychological and physical health of staff can be adversely affected by exposure to a poorly designed or managed work environment, a traumatic event, workplace violence, fatigue, bullying or harassment and excessive or prolonged work pressures. Any of these factors can increase the likelihood of workers experiencing a stress response.

Increased frequency or duration of stress responses have been linked with high levels of unplanned absences including sick leave, staff turnover, withdrawal and presenteeism and increased task errors. It can be a significant cause of injury or illness which may lead to depression and anxiety in the long term.

A number of resources can be used to improve this culture including improving job design to reduce the risk of fatigue, bullying and stress. In addition the University will attempt to raise awareness of mental health by participating in awareness events such as ‘R U OK Day’, World Mental Health Day and Mental Health Week.

The University will provide staff with information and training that educates staff on providing support to people who may have a mental illness and to inform managers so that they can identify potential issues and assist them accordingly.
5 Identifying Mental Health Issues in the Workplace

Recognising and promoting mental health is an essential part of creating a safe and healthy workplace. Importantly, managers and workers both have roles to play in building a safe work environment, one that will not create or exacerbate a mental illness and where workers with mental illness are appropriately supported.

Individuals may identify that they have a mental health issue and seek treatment from their medical practitioner to help recover without impacting their work. For others though, depression and anxiety may not be easily identified or diagnosed, impact on their work and work-relationships and how they function within their workplace. Signs and symptoms associated with mental illness in the workplace include:

- finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- turning up to work late
- feeling tired and fatigued
- being unusually tearful or emotional
- getting angry easily or frustrated with tasks or people
- finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines
- finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
- having difficulty managing multiple tasks or demands
- being vulnerable to stress and anxiety
- drinking alcohol to cope
- having loss of confidence and negative thought patterns
- appearing restless, tense and on edge
- avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
- becoming overwhelmed or upset easily
- finding it hard to make decisions
- referring to being constantly worried and appearing apprehensive.

Where a colleague, supervisor or friend in the workplace identifies someone who shows symptoms of mental illness like the ones outlined above it is appropriate to ask if they are OK and also check to see if there are any things which they need assistance with. This is also a chance to refer the person to see their doctor or utilise the Employee Assistance Program. Approaching someone with a suspected mental condition can be difficult, please refer to the Australian Human Rights Commission Publication "Workers with Mental Illness: a Practical Guide for Managers".

The University currently offers two training courses that help raise awareness on workplace mental health including identification and appropriate responses. The training courses “Mental Health in the Workplace for Managers” and “Mental Health First Aid” are courses delivered by external providers and have both been embedded into the Professional and Organisational Development (PODs) training program. In addition the Mental Health in the Workplace for Managers training program has been embedded into the UOW Heads and Leaders training to ensure that senior management at UOW have the skills and knowledge necessary to understand the importance of mental health in the workplace. This training requirement has also been highlighted in the University's Disability Action Plan.

The National Workplace Program is an awareness, early intervention and prevention program coordinated by beyondblue. It aims to increase the knowledge and skills of staff and managers to address mental health problems in the workplace. The University may utilise the National Workplace Program or similar where it is identified that this training is required.

6 Assisting Staff With Mental Health Conditions

6.1 Early Intervention

When an employee makes a report about a mental illness it should be taken seriously at all times and acted upon immediately. In most cases this will be the person’s direct supervisor.

Extra support is available from the WHS Unit and Staff Services to help develop a return to work plan incorporating reasonable adjustments as identified by their treating doctor. Guidance on the return to work process has been established in accordance with the University’s Injury Management Program.

The worker, their supervisor and doctor will be continually consulted to agree on action and encourage access to psychological support such as the EAP or other treatment identified by the treating doctor.
6.2 Employee Assistance Program

The University provides confidential counselling services designed to enhance the emotional, mental and general psychological well-being of employees through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP is provided by an external organisation, Optum, who specialise in the provision of EAP services to government and private organisations including other universities.

All UOW employees and members of their immediate family have access to qualified counsellors via face to face or phone consultations to assist with a range of work or personal conditions that might be impacting their lives. Managers and supervisors can also utilise the Manager Hotline which provides brief support and advice on people-related conditions.

The EAP is a confidential service, Optum is a completely independent provider and no information will be disclosed to the University without the consent of the worker receiving the service. The WHS Unit has been allocated the responsibility to provide advice on the EAP and monitor how it has been implemented across the University.

7 Related Documents

- WHS Act NSW 2011
- WHS Regulation NSW 2011
- UOW Mental Health Strategy
- Safe Work Australia Fact Sheet - Preventing Psychological Injury Under Work Health and Safety Laws
- Australian Government – Australian Public Service Commission (Comcare); as one; Working Together: Promoting mental health and wellbeing at work
- beyondblue Website
- beyondblue National Workplace Program
- Black Dog Institute
- Mental Health Council of Australia
- Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria)
- Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance
- Optum – Employee Assistance Programs
- Comcare – Working For Recovery – Suitable employment for return to work following psychological injury

8 Version Control Table

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