



## Managers & Supervisors

Managers and supervisors are in many ways first responders to mental illness in the workplace. Depending on your training and experience, and your knowledge of mental illness, you can make all the difference between early and constructive intervention, leading to recovery and uninterrupted productivity, or a downhill slide.

A sympathetic workplace that reaches out is vital to the recovery of someone facing mental illness. Research has proven that in your position as manager or supervisor, you will be the key role model. It takes work to know how to do it right. It very seldom comes naturally, and it's certainly not something that gets taught in school.

In the workplace, roadblocks to recovery include:

- Stigma from ignorance and stereotypes;
- Perceived or actual lack of support;
- Fear of negative reactions from colleagues if the illness is disclosed;
- Uncertainty about types of assistance that can be provided;
- Fear of losing one's job.

Providing education to all employees about mental health can help raise awareness and encourage individuals to seek help. Because each person's circumstances are different, plans should be tailored for each employee. For example, a plan for an individual with a mental illness will look different than that of an employee with a loved one facing a mental health challenge. A good question to ask yourself is: "What would we do if it were a physical illness?"

Here are some tools to support an employee:

- (1.) **Offer support:** Ask if there is anything you can do to support him or her. The employee may not wish to take up your offer, but it is important to make clear support is available. Specific support might include referring that person to resources at work, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- (2.) **Develop a plan:** Flexible plans that meet the needs of both the employer and the worker, rather than one-size-fits-all rules, are much more likely

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to succeed. Talk about the plan together as you work through the steps to remaining at or returning to work.

- (3.) **Be inclusive:** Fear of stigma – actual or perceived – can affect a person’s confidence. Speak openly about mental health conditions in the workplace and encourage others to do the same.
- (4.) **Stay in touch:** If an employee has taken time off for recovery, keeping in touch will make return to the workplace easier for everyone involved. Maintaining a connection can help employees feel valued. However, it is important not to make the employee feel pressured to return to work before he or she is ready.
- (5.) **Address the causes:** If there is a specific work-related factor which the employee feels has contributed to his or her condition, listen and be open about making changes. At the same time, if you have built a good relationship, the employee will be far more open to your honest feedback.
- (6.) **Set clear expectations:** Write up a return to work or stay at work plan sets clear expectations for everyone. Flexibility is key. Allow for any changes that may occur during recovery.
- (7.) **Maintain confidentiality:** The details of an employee’s condition and treatment must remain confidential unless he or she gives permission.

Managers and supervisors may need to make changes to an individual’s workload or schedule to accommodate a need. Implementing these adjustments should be a joint effort and one that is documented. Reasonable adjustments might include:

- Flexible working hours;
- Shift or location change;
- Adjusting working environment;
- Establishing goals to assist the employee with workload;
- Reducing workload;
- Providing access to a professional;
- Identifying and modifying tasks.

The benefits of a stigma-free workplace for organizations are many. They include retaining skills and experience, avoiding costs associated with retraining or hiring new employees, and building a workplace culture that demonstrates a dedication to all employees.

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Yes, no question, the topic of mental health is a delicate one. And you can make a world of difference by being supportive and listening. You can be the catalyst for eliminating stigma.

*\*information provided by HeadsUp.org/au*

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