

DEPRESSION AND THE WORKPLACE – INFORMATION FOR EMPLOYERS

What is depression?

Depression is a mental illness that can present differently in different people. Common symptoms can include persistent sadness, tiredness, lack of energy and motivation, and withdrawing or disconnecting from other people.¹ Depression is very different to experiencing a 'down' day or two, or the lack of motivation everyone feels at some time.

The impact of depression on employees can include reduced concentration, reduced productivity and engagement and increased presenteeism. Where job stress is a contributor, an employee suffering depression may not be able to perform to their normal standard. This can lead to further stress, distress, and deepening depression.²



Almost 6 million work days are lost in Australia each year due to depression.¹

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

Common symptoms of depression include:

- an unusually persistent sad mood that does not go away
- loss of enjoyment and interest in once-pleasurable activities
- tiredness and lack of energy.

Other signs include:

- loss of self-confidence, poor self-esteem
- feelings of guilt and hopelessness
- thoughts of death and suicide
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- slower movements, agitation, inability to settle
- sleeping difficulties
- changes in appetite, weight gain or weight loss.¹

There are common behaviours associated with depression that may be evident in the workplace. These include:

- increased alcohol and drug use
- withdrawal from social events
- increased irritability and frustration with minor events
- moodiness that is out of proportion to recent events
- staying home from work
- increased complaints about physical health problems such as fatigue and pain
- loss of interest in pleasurable activities such as eating and exercise
- tiredness
- being reckless, taking unnecessary risks (for example, driving fast and dangerously).³

Can depression be treated?

Depression is a common serious medical condition that can be treated. It is not a weakness. Left untreated, depression can lead to suicide. The best initial source of support for someone with depression is their GP.

What can I do if I suspect an employee is suffering from depression?

For an employer, it may be difficult or challenging to know what to do if you suspect an employee is suffering from depression. Your employee may not want to talk about this topic at work, or discuss it with 'the boss'.

Pick a time and place that is neutral and convenient for both of you. Try using open-ended questions that can't easily be answered with a 'yes' or 'no', such as 'So tell me about...', or 'What can I do?' These types of questions are more likely to initiate a discussion than closed questions, such as 'Is everything OK?'

It's important to listen to your employee's answer. Offering advice or examples from your own life may not necessarily be helpful at this point. Aim to listen more than talk.

For more information about how to talk to someone who might be suffering with depression or anxiety, read beyondblue's fact sheet below.



How you can help someone with anxiety or depression

How can I help an employee with depression?

There are many sources of information that can help you support an employee with depression. *beyondblue* (www.beyondblue.org.au) provides a wide range of fact sheets on this topic that give both general information and also information specific to age and gender groups. They also provide information about particular circumstances that may be causing depression, such as grief, loss or other personal issues.

As an employer, you may consider:

- encouraging professional help – assist your employee to make an appointment
- educating yourself about depression
- asking what you can do to help
- being supportive and empathetic
- listening actively
- not passing judgement
- giving reassurance
- making your employee aware of resources that may help them.

You could offer to assist at work by:

- temporarily assisting with the employee's workload
- temporarily changing the employee's work hours
- providing opportunities to listen and communicate through regular catch-up times
- encourage partnerships with the employee's medical professionals.

Important things for employers to know when dealing with an employee with depression

- Disability discrimination and harassment is unlawful under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.
- You must observe confidentiality and respect the privacy of each employee (that means you should not unnecessarily discuss an employee's depression with others in the workplace without that employee's permission).
- You may need to provide reasonable adjustments (like time off to see doctors or psychologists) for an employee with depression.
- You need to prevent harassment and bullying in the workplace and be proactive in this regard.
- Other staff members should be informed of any adjustments that may impact on them, for example, a reduction in work hours or changes to management responsibilities. Keeping others informed (without compromising the privacy of the employee with depression) can reduce the risk of gossip, bullying and harassment.
- Try not to make assumptions about depression; instead, talk with your employee in a fair and open way to see what (if any) adjustment or assistance is needed.
- It is important to document all relevant conversations with the employee about their depression on their private personnel file, and make a note of any adjustments they may require.⁴

Does your employee have to tell you about their depression?

While an organisation is better placed to support someone with depression if they know about it, the decision to speak up or not is complicated, and there are several issues that an employee is likely to consider.

For more information on an employee's rights and responsibilities when it comes to informing their employer about their illness, read beyondblue's fact sheet below.



Do you have to tell your employer you have depression?

Where to go for more information

Lifeline (www.lifeline.org.au), Black Dog Institute (www.blackdoginstitute.org.au) and *beyondblue* (www.beyondblue.org.au) can provide further information, support or training for people who may be suffering with depression. Lifeline Top End also offers training on suicide awareness and how to talk to people who may be suffering depression. There is also a national suicide call back phone service which provides free, professional online and telephone counselling for anyone affected by suicide. Visit www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au for more information.

For more information about depression, including what makes a person at risk of depression, common treatments, and how you might be able to help, read beyondblue's fact sheet below.



Understanding depression – information for adults

For more information on organisations that can provide services to workplaces in the Northern Territory, read Where to go for more information - the fact sheet below.



Where to go for more information - Social and emotional wellbeing



References

1. Ozols, I and McNair, B 2007, *Mental health: Creating a mentally healthy and supportive workplace*, Mental Health Information Services Pty Ltd, JM Publishing, ACT, Australia.
2. LaMontagne, AD, Shaw, A, Ostry, A, Louie, AM and Keegel, T 2006, *Workplace stress in Victoria: Developing a systems approach: summary report*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, VicHealth, Melbourne, Australia.
3. Hickie, I, Davenport, T and Scott, E 2001, 'Depression out of the shadows', Women's Weekly Health series in Ozols, I and McNair, B 2007, *Mental health: Creating a mentally healthy and supportive workplace*, Mental Health Information Services Pty Ltd, JM Publishing, ACT, Australia.
4. beyondblue, *Do you have to tell your employer that you have depression?* Workplace information sheet 5, available at www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=6.1068&tmp=FileDownload&fid=356