

WORKING WELL

A workplace
guide to
mental health



The purpose of the guide

The guide is designed as a resource for human resources professionals, health and safety managers, occupational health and wellbeing professionals and business managers who want to proactively understand, measure and increase mental wellbeing in their workplaces.

The guide is informed by the latest developments in mental health support practice, wellbeing science and organisational psychology literature, and condenses this vast range of knowledge and practice to provide a starting point for organisational managers to use in everyday situations.

A holistic approach

In many organisations ‘mental health’ is seen as a liability that is associated with difficult to manage behaviours, distressing situations for managers and staff, and feelings of not knowing how to address it.

However there is a much broader approach to mental health. Many international health leadership bodies such as the World Health Organization describe mental health as a state of wellbeing which allows us to work, live and interact with others to our full potential. (WHO, 2014)

Mental health is ultimately a resource that exists in all employees. Just like physical health, it needs to be taken care of in order to reduce risk of injury, illness and suffering, but also to increase potential in individuals and teams. High levels of positive mental health lead to positive life outcomes for employees and better business results.

In any organisation there will be a range of mental health experiences across employees and this will change over time. That range can include:

- People who are experiencing optimal mental health (sometimes referred to as positive mental health). This group will be engaged, generally happy, sleeping and eating well, experiencing positive relationships, and with a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life. This group is likely to experience better physical health and higher productivity. Employers should want to do everything they can reasonably do to support employees into this state, for the benefit of their business and their employees.
- People who are mentally unwell and/or have a diagnosed mental illness, who are receiving treatment but still able to work (perhaps with modified duties).
- People who lack general mental wellbeing, and a sense of being reasonably happy with life. These will often show up as disengaged and unmotivated employees who lack meaning and purpose in their daily lives. According to decades of mind/body research this group is likely to have higher rates of physical illness and workplace accidents.
- People who don't meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental illness, but who may be highly stressed or distressed due to their work or home life, or perhaps a traumatic life event.

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To respond to the range of situations outlined previously, in which organisations can intervene in building better mental health, the Mental Health Foundation has created a model of the three elements for a mentally healthy organisation. Without all three of these in place, the opportunities to deal well with mental health issues and to promote positive mental health and wellbeing may not be realised.

1. A positive psychologically healthy organisational environment
2. A proactive, fair and empathetic approach to mental health concerns including mental illness in the workplace
3. Supporting employees to engage in activities that boost positive mental health and wellbeing

This guide is structured around these three elements, describing principles, guidelines and tips for implementation to enhance and maintain wellbeing at individual, team, and organisational levels.

Communicate

Mental health and wellbeing policies may be useful ways to create improved mental health in an organisation. However it is important to involve employees in the organisational mental wellbeing approach, as people's personal experience can be of value in how language and examples relevant to the workforce are used. Many larger organisations will have natural mental wellbeing champions, who will enthusiastically involve themselves in helping meet the wellbeing goals.



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Mental health in the workplace

A psychologically healthy workplace fosters employee health and wellbeing while enhancing organisational performance and productivity (American Psychological Association, 2016).

With the increasing demand of rapidly developing technologies and around-the-clock stimulation, workplace pressures continue to mount in changing and often unpredictable environments. Productivity demands, information overload, and increasing pressure to balance work and home lives can take a toll on employees' health, wellbeing and job satisfaction, all of which can have a substantial impact on an organisation.

The two most significant ways in which workplaces experience poor physical and mental health of employees is through increased absenteeism—when workers are off sick—and increased presenteeism—when workers are at the workplace but not mentally engaged with work. The 'Workplace Wellness 2025 Report' by Southern Cross Health Insurance and Business NZ estimates that New Zealand lost approximately 13 million working days to absence in 2024. The direct costs of absence alone, most commonly from minor illness, amounted to \$4.17 billion across the economy in 2024. The average cost to New Zealand employers of absence is estimated at over \$1,319 per year, per employee.

Presenteeism has an even larger impact on productivity. According to Umbrella Wellbeing (2025), it is estimated that the impact is equivalent to over 6 lost productive days monthly. This adds up to an annual cost of \$46.6 billion across employees nationwide—resulting in much higher 'hidden' costs of poor mental health.

Some organisations respond to these challenges by taking greater care of their employees. These employers create workplaces that do more than just improve productivity – they build an engaged, wellbeing-focused organisational culture that supports the organisation itself. They build a mentally healthy workplace.

The growing areas of research into optimal human and organisational functioning and flourishing, provide organisations with a wealth of evidence-based information to apply to mental wellbeing in the workplace. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' programme, but rather suggested guidelines for best practice to address opportunities and challenges that may be unique to a particular organisation.

A mentally healthy organisation is a sustainable organisation.

Benefits to focusing on mentally healthy workplaces include greater employee retention and higher productivity. Studies have shown that 'happy employees are less likely to leave the organisation' (Marks, 2016) and 'happy employees are also more likely to be productive employees' (Kaplan et al., 2009). Employees in psychologically healthy workplaces tend to experience higher job satisfaction and morale, better physical and mental health, greater motivation, and the ability to manage stress more effectively. Further benefits to the organisation include fewer accidents and injuries, better customer service and satisfaction, and lower healthcare costs.

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When an organisation promotes positive mental health within its workplace, it becomes identified as a good place to work, attracting the most sought-after employees, and sustaining its long-term future. Minimising workplace stress plays a significant role in the employee retention equation as organisations look to optimise their workforce. The value of a positive operating philosophy substantially enhances the perception of the organisation both from within, as well as externally.

A mentally healthy workforce has positive consequences for the wellbeing of the individuals, the productivity of organisations, and the economy of New Zealand.



Workplace Wellbeing

BENEFITS OF HIGH WORKPLACE WELLBEING

- 31% higher productivity
- 37% more sales
- 3 x more creativity
- increased customer satisfaction
- reputation as a good place to work

COSTS OF LOW WORKPLACE WELLBEING

- 2 x sick leave
- 2 x workplace conflict
- 3 x cardiovascular episodes
- 3 x back pain reports
- 2 x injuries

SOURCES: Harvard Business Review 2012, Robertson and Cooper 2011, Canadian Mental Health Commission 2013

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The workplace contributes psychological hazards and benefits

HAZARDS

- bullying and discrimination
- perceived workload
- stress and burnout
- lack of support

BENEFITS

- social interaction and relationships
- meaning and purpose
- positive emotions
- engagement and flow

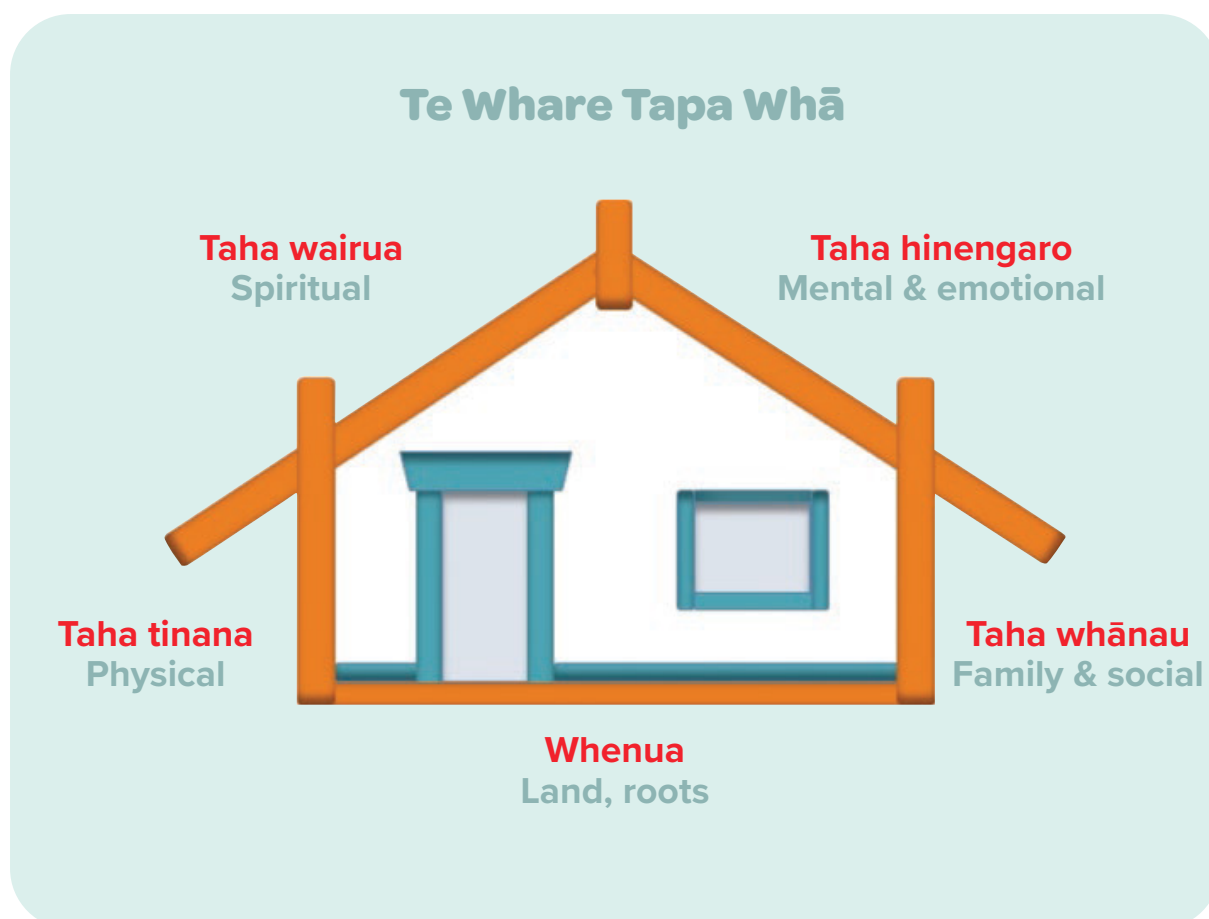
SOURCES: Harvard Business Review 2012, Robertson and Cooper 2011, Canadian Mental Health Commission 2013



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The Working Well guide provides a holistic approach to health and wellbeing which is effectively illustrated using the Māori health model, Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1982, 1994).

This model recognises the importance of the balance of multiple dimensions of wellbeing, represented by the walls, roof, and foundation of the wharenui (meeting house). These incorporate taha wairua (spirituality), taha hinengaro (mental health), taha tinana (physical health), taha whānau (family), with whenua (land) representing the connection to the land as the foundation. Each of these interconnects and contributes to the balance and strength of the whole.



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Within an organisation, taha wairua (spiritual) needs may be supported through the provision of a civil and respectful environment, where mindfulness and kindness are encouraged, bullying is banished, and diversity is embraced. Taha hinengaro (mental and emotional) needs may be met with a safe space where positive mental health is promoted, and mental health problems are addressed and accommodated without discrimination. Taha tinana (physical) health is recognised as making an essential contribution to the whole, and efforts to promote and support the development and maintenance of good physical health habits are undertaken. The mind and body are inseparable. Taha whānau (family) wellbeing ensures that the wider family and community are included in wellbeing plans, and connections with others, both within and outside the work environment are taken into account.

Wellbeing is greatly affected by the health of the relationship to whenua (land) and the environment, in which identity and a sense of self is held.

**Ko au te whenua, ko te whenua ko au
I am the land and the land is me**

1.

Maintain a positive organisational environment

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1. Maintain a positive organisational environment

Organisations are only as strong as their people, and the culture of an organisation has a significant impact on the wellbeing of the employees.

A positive workplace culture leads to increased productivity, better employee morale and the ability to retain high quality employees. Negative attitudes in the workplace, particularly when they are displayed by management, can have a significant impact on the entire workforce. Steps can be taken to ensure that a positive culture is maintained in the workplace to support the sustainability of the organisation and the happiness of the employees.

Organisations that prioritise employee engagement and wellbeing outperform the average by approximately 10% on the FTSE 100 (BITC/Ipsos MORI, 2010). The principles that contribute to high employee engagement lie firmly in the psychological and emotional wellbeing within a positive organisational culture.

A positive culture can be developed by focussing on mental wellbeing principles that are defined and implemented effectively, practices that are encouraged and reinforced, measureable and measured outcomes, and an approach that is reviewed and developed regularly, using an inclusive, leadership - and employee-empowered process.

It is also a culture that can be sensed in an energetic, enthusiastic and engaged working environment. Employees feel that their work is meaningful and they are valued and supported, they tend to have higher wellbeing levels, be more committed to the organisation's goals, and perform better.

POSITIVE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE INCLUDES:

- leadership wellbeing commitment and embodiment
- having a mental health and wellbeing policy and strategy based on best applicable practice
- clearly communicating policy and practices throughout the organisation
- a regular evaluation process of mental health in the workplace
- a regular review process for assessing progress towards meeting wellbeing objectives
- the inclusion of employees in the development and implementation of principles and practices

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MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Positive workplaces encourage the safe expression of ideas and emotions, and provide opportunity for social, constructive and supportive relationships to develop. They explicitly discourage stigma, discrimination, bullying and harassment, and actively foster diversity and inclusion.

Organisations and workers thrive in positively charged environments, where the health of employees benefits from the experience of frequent positive emotions such as appreciation and gratitude, kindness and compassion, and happiness and engagement.

These are the organisations most often described as ‘workplaces of choice’ by job-hunters, more able to attract and retain high quality employees.

Organisational culture is primarily driven by the lived values of the leadership, rather than the policies that are put in place. Where the organisational values and the leadership values are congruent, clearly expressed and modelled, there is a powerful force for contagion and adoption by employees. Therefore if a mentally healthy workplace is defined as an organisational priority, and reinforced and practiced by the leadership, the organisation has a high probability of succeeding with a vision for sustaining wellbeing, individually, in teams, and organisation-wide.

It is important to communicate this commitment to all employees, as part of induction packs for new starters, included in policy information on the intranet, and embedded in the physical environment, for example displayed on posters with supporting messages.

Include a mentally healthy workplace as one of the organisation’s defined priorities.

For a positive culture to permeate all areas of an organisation, it must be embedded and authentically enacted at every level, to provide the standard for behaviour in the workplace.

Studies have shown that positive organisational culture and leadership styles are effective in increasing engagement and productivity, supporting the management of workplace stress, and enhancing relationships and improving communication. Essentially, employees are more engaged and productive in their work when the organisational culture is psychologically healthy, and when management acts in ways that make employees happy to work there. Most studies into engagement have concluded that it is up to the senior leadership of an organisation to set the tone (Attridge M., 2009).



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MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

MANAGE PEOPLE WELL

- Keep mental health and wellbeing values central to the management process
- Create a working environment conducive to high engagement
- Maintain ethical, personal and professional standards
- Role-model appropriate behaviours
- Be transparent and equitable
- Provide mentorship and guidance
- Promote a culture of involvement and consultation
- Identify and empower mental wellbeing champions
- Facilitate and encourage employees to maintain a positive culture
- Resolve conflict and incivility immediately and calmly
- Have zero tolerance for bullying and harassment

MANAGE WORK WELL

- Be available for regular one-to-one meetings to reflect on what is going well, what has been difficult, and to engage in forward-planning for opportunities and challenges
- Proactively support staff to monitor workload, and encourage healthy working hours and a positive work-life balance
- Ensure setting of realistic targets and clear priorities
- Provide staff with meaningful work and opportunities for personal development and growth

Essential elements

Positive emotional climate

Cultivating and expressing positive emotions

Education and awareness

Educating employees on mental health and wellbeing

Effective communication

Communication based on trust, respect and civility

Not tolerating bullying or harassment

Collaborative teamwork

Working well together to share knowledge and achieve goals

Diversity and inclusion

Engaging the strengths of a diverse workforce

Positive emotional climate

“From the wellbeing perspective, a healthy workforce means that the presence of positive feelings in the worker should result in happier more productive workers” (Harter et al, 2003).

A positive emotional climate has a measurable bottom-line impact through improving individual engagement, enhancing performance and productivity, and improving business results.

Maintaining a positive emotional climate can be achieved through creating a working environment in which employees' emotional needs are taken into consideration, and employees are encouraged to share and express their feelings. Positive relationships with co-workers and supervisors further increase the strength of the emotional bonds to the organisation as measured by an increase in employee retention.



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MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Employees who are mentally healthier experience more positive emotional states, such as higher job satisfaction and self-esteem. These employees are also likely to be more engaged with work tasks and the organisation, be creative, make better decisions and problem-solve more efficiently and effectively. Happier employees tend to be cooperative and helpful in their interactions with others, and experience less stress and fewer days off work.

Mentally healthier and happier employees can positively influence their colleagues and workplace, enhancing work throughput and increasing the quality of workplace relationships.

All employees can be supported to nurture positive emotional experiences, reduce negative experiences and benefit from the associated effects.

The emotions most closely associated with positive organisational culture are:

- **appreciation and gratitude**
- **kindness and compassion**
- **happiness and engagement**

Notice negativity

Pay attention to early warning signs of insidious workplace negativity. Negative emotions can be equally as contagious as positive emotions, and severely disrupt a productive and effective workplace, diminishing the positive experiences of those who are in contact enough to be impacted.

Make an effort to identify the individual or group that is experiencing the negativity, and the nature of the issue/s that appear to have caused it. Common causes are unpopular organisational decisions, lack of consultation, and insecurity over rumours of change, or feelings of unfairness or unequal treatment. Negativity can occur in attitude, outlook, and words of one or more staff.

Pay attention to the reputation of the organisation in the community, and trends in complaints received. Carry out exit interviews to ensure closure of outstanding issues.

Information gathered will help to identify symptoms of negativity before morale-damaging consequences occur. It will also assist in preventing future workplace negativity.

TIPS TO MINIMISE NEGATIVITY

- Provide effective positive leadership
- Involve employees in decisions about their work
- Provide opportunities for people to express opinions about workplace policies and procedures
- Treat people with fairness and consistency
- Effectively communicate all that you know about pending decisions, as soon as you know it
- Afford people the opportunity to grow and develop
- Provide appropriate rewards and recognition so people feel their contribution is valued

Education and awareness

To improve the general mental and emotional wellbeing of the workforce, employees need to increase their self-awareness and their understanding of the impact of emotions on their day-to-day functioning. They need to learn more about developing and sustaining higher levels of wellbeing.

Mental health education and resources can provide valuable information for making better health choices. The close relationship between physical and mental health is not always obvious. Understanding this link can lead to positive changes in nutrition, increased physical activity, improved sleep, and the development of a healthier work-life balance, in addition to protecting mental health. Information about emotional wellbeing, coping strategies, stress management and self-care may result in cognitive and behavioural changes to increase the experience of positive emotions, decrease the experience of negative emotions, and provide greater emotional resilience. These changes are likely to grow and sustain a more positive organisational culture.

Through practice and attention, greater emotional self- and other-awareness may lead to employees seeking help for problems sooner, or colleagues offering more timely and appropriate support. An environment that allows for open discussion around mental health and wellbeing, may give courage to those who are struggling, to speak up.

Key wellbeing messages can be delivered through multiple channels, and reinforced by leadership throughout the organisation.

The investment in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of employees is likely to pay significant short- and long-term dividends.

SUGGESTIONS

- Provide education and resources
- Encourage open discussions
- Promote emotional awareness
- Deliver key wellbeing messages

Effective communication

Communication plays a key role in sustaining a positive organisational culture. At the heart of communication is the need to trust and be trusted, and the need to respect and be respected. When these form the basis of relationships, the content of the communication is able to move more easily between people.

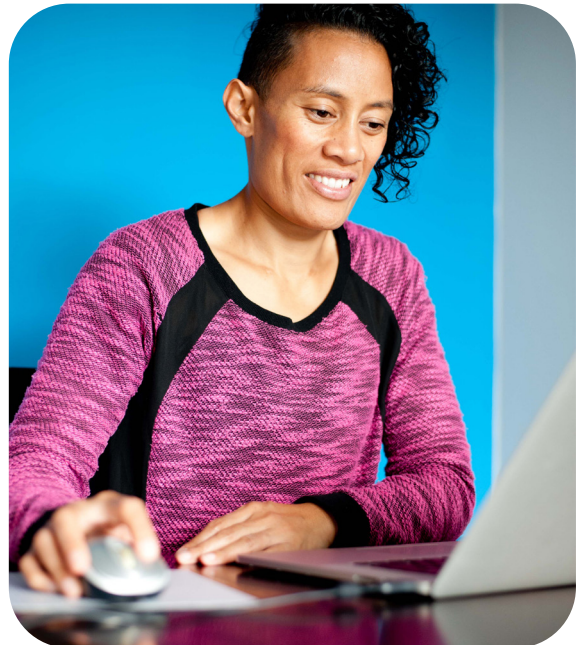
Trust

Trust is the cornerstone of the work culture of successful organisations, a foundation for empowered, engaged and cooperative employees. The integrity of the participants in a relationship is critical to effective communication.

Within a culture of trust, conversations are more open and honest, more challenging, and treated with less suspicion. Open communication can be practiced effectively across the organisation, with employees and managers equally able to state a case or raise a discussion, without tension or hesitation. If an organisation informs employees of situations before they become rumours, history has shown that employees are less likely to resist changes. Organisations do not flourish with a burden of secrets and confidences, while hidden agendas engender distrust and damage relationships. Once trust is destroyed, it is difficult to regain.

BUILD TRUST

- Tell the **truth**, even when it is hard
- **Volunteer** information even when it is not necessary to do so
- Avoid **surprises**
- **Apologise** sincerely when necessary
- **Make up** for not doing what you say you will do
- Avoid **over-promising**
- **Learn** from mistakes
- Make it okay for others to point out **discrepancies** in word or behaviour



Promote respect and civility

Positive communication is grounded in the principles of respect and civility. Most people if asked how they wish to be treated, would respond ‘with respect’. Respectful treatment of co-workers and managers helps to ensure a considerate, reflective and professional workplace, and maintain beneficial and supportive relationships.

Organisational cultures that emphasise respect and civility may prevent distress by making moral and empathetic behaviours more automatic and routine. Interactions may become more collaborative and assertive rather than conflict-laden and aggressive.

For the promotion of positive organisational culture, guidelines for communication would include respect and civility.

Respect can be demonstrated through courtesy, kindness and politeness, by encouraging others to express their opinions and ideas, and by listening attentively before expressing a viewpoint, without interruption. Practice inclusion of all team members in meetings and events so as not to marginalise or exclude anyone. Use praise more frequently than criticism and encourage others to offer praise and recognition for work well done.

Incivility is described as behaviour that is rude and discourteous, and displaying a lack of regard. Uncivil behaviour is not necessarily malicious, but may occur unintentionally through thoughtlessness or distraction. The receiver may interpret the behaviour as intentional, and take offense or feel diminished. Civil communication would not contain insults, or disparage a person’s ideas. It would not criticise, belittle, judge or patronise. Through civil communication people would be treated the same no matter their differences.

Counter stigma and discrimination

Employers need to make every effort to overcome mental illness stigma at work.

Although mental health problems are very common, there is still often stigma and discrimination towards people with a diagnosis and/or symptoms. All employers and employees benefit when an organisation has a demonstrable commitment to counter stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness, and provides a mentally healthy work environment. When an organisation demonstrates a commitment to promotion and protection of more vulnerable employees, all employees feel safe and valued. They are far less likely to act in discriminatory ways towards each other or to participate in bullying or harassment.

Mental health and mental illness.

“There is no one thing called ‘mental illness.’ Just like physical illnesses, there are many kinds, each of which differs in its effects on people’s lives. Some illnesses are relatively mild, some extremely serious. Some people have a single episode of illness, some have episodes throughout their lives, and for others the illness is ongoing” (*Leibrich J., 1999*).

Medical definitions of mental illness have been widely accepted by mental health professionals and others, but the labels attached to these definitions can themselves carry a stigma.

In addition, the ways in which ‘mental health’ is used as a euphemism for ‘mental illness’ poses a further difficulty in understanding the experience of an individual. Some people with experience of mental illness view the diagnostic labels as limiting. Rather than defining mental illness as a disability, they see their illness as a positive life force.

Mental illness is neither a defining feature nor necessarily a limiting feature of someone's employment potential.

A diagnosis of mental illness does not say anything about a person's capabilities, personality, or future. The vast majority of people who live with some kind of mental illness are able to contribute to their communities and lead full and positive lives, with the right tools and support. The very act of coping with a mental illness often gives people extraordinary strength of character. Avoid discrimination by treating all people equally, approaching them compassionately and without judgement, and build this practice into the positive workplace culture.

PRINCIPLES FOR COUNTERING STIGMA

- Mental illness is neither a defining feature nor necessarily a limiting feature of someone's employment potential
- All people regardless of their mental health status have a right to personal respect, employment opportunities, participation in and influence over decisions which affect their lives
- People who are experiencing or have experienced a mental illness are not a homogenous group, and may have diverse needs
- Organisational policy is designed to:
 - enable people recovering from mental illness to enter the workforce
 - retain people with experience of mental illness within the workforce
 - provide a supportive workplace environment in which all people are equally valued and their needs equitably catered for
 - develop a workplace environment in which employees and potential employees feel 'safe' disclosing their mental health status
 - ensure that at any one time all employees and potential employees are supported to attain optimum mental health

Zero tolerance for bullying behaviours

Workplace bullying is a significant hazard in New Zealand (WorkSafe NZ, 2014). It affects people physically and mentally, leading to increased stress levels, decreased emotional wellbeing, reduced coping strategies, lower work performance, and disruptive workplaces.

Bullying is defined as an ongoing unreasonable behaviour which is unwelcome, and is often intended to humiliate or undermine the recipient but is not specifically unlawful. An environment in which bullying behaviours are tolerated harbours fear and anxiety, and diminishes the mental wellbeing of recipients. Other people are impacted by the negatively-charged emotions and it can affect the entire organisation.

In order to maintain a positive emotional culture, and avoid the negative emotional consequences, it is necessary to be alert to bullying behaviours, and act to eliminate them immediately.

Bullying behaviour can take many different forms and can be difficult to detect when occurring subtly. One study showed the worst forms of bullying were intimidation, belittling remarks, staff being ignored and excluded, and being set up to fail (Foster, B., Mackie, B., & Barnett, N., 2004).

Bullying thrives in negative emotional climates, where undesirable behaviours are allowed to continue as an organisational norm, without consequences, and without support for those affected. Bullying is less likely to thrive in a positive environment, where it is discussed openly, unacceptable behaviours are identified and alternatives are modelled, and disciplinary consequences are implemented.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES TRANSPARENT

- Include input from employees
- Emphasise the organisation's commitment
- Provide easy to access reporting processes
- Provide support for complainants
- Review at induction of new employees
- Provide training in expected behaviours

It is important to ensure that the workplace culture promotes good relationships, effective leadership and management, clear expectations, and good bullying prevention and response processes. Creating an environment that fosters good relationships prevents bullying. If employees receive clear guidelines for expected behaviour, work culture and values, unreasonable behaviour is less likely to thrive.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, see Worksafe's guideline to preventing and responding to workplace bullying www.business.govt.nz/worksafe/information-guidance/all-guidance-items/bullying-guidelines/workplace-bullying

Collaborative Teamwork

One of the most powerful factors underlying emotional wellbeing and reducing levels of stress is social connectedness.

People are social animals and work often provides the opportunity to connect with others. The evolution of quality relationships at work is normal and an important part of a healthy workplace. In the best workplaces, employers recognise that people want to build quality relationships with their co-workers, and that organisational commitment may grow from such relationships. Working in a team forms a natural social group that can play an important role in maintaining wellbeing.

In a large Gallup study, it was found that 'I have a best friend at work' was one of the strongest predictors of productivity. Studies show that employees with a best friend at work tend to be more focused, more passionate, and more loyal to their organisations. They get sick less often, suffer fewer accidents, and change jobs less frequently. A workgroup that gets on well together is a highly productive force, sharing knowledge, and resources, and supporting each other through challenges.

BUILD A POSITIVE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE ONE TEAM AT A TIME

A happy and motivated workgroup can be seen as a microcosm of the larger organisation, representing the successful achievement of the positive emotional climate that supports high performance. This is a team whose members are happy to come to work, and enjoy collaborating and producing good outcomes. They tend to be creative and curious, and have a shared vision. There is trust and good communication, compassion and enjoyment.

For the wellbeing of individuals, teams and the organisation, encourage and facilitate social interaction. Make teamwork one of the core organisational values, and put a clear emphasis on self-managing teams that are empowered to make their own decisions. Give teams the authority to get their jobs done on their own terms, while ensuring they accept responsibility for the results. Reward collaborative ideas and practices.

Teams are a crucial part of today's business landscape. Building a great team is essential for success. Even though specific job functions and roles are assigned to employees, aim to create a unified workplace with all members working together to achieve the organisation's overall objectives.

Diversity and inclusion

A healthy organisational culture is one that actively embraces and communicates diversity in the workforce, recognising and engaging the strengths, knowledge and differing life experiences from multiple disparate perspectives. There are clear links between a diverse workforce and high organisational performance, so in addition, diversity makes good business sense.

Diversity is intrinsic to New Zealand's culture, considering that the current population includes a wide range of ethnicities, speaking over 150 languages (Statistics New Zealand, 2024).

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives are becoming increasingly fundamental to an employer's reputation and organisational success, with company culture being recognised as the biggest driver of D&I, with other primary drivers identified as equality in promotions, and flexible working conditions.

According to Lara Poloni, the CEO of AECOM for Australia/New Zealand, "With the right leadership, policies and culture, [D&I] improves the productivity and engagement of existing employees and helps attract new ones." (AECOM, 2015)

Research and numerous international case studies with businesses provide strong evidence that embracing and strategically managing workforce diversity has a positive impact on staff engagement, productivity, growth, innovation, and the overall resilience and adaptability of an organisation (Downey et al, 2015). Remarkable and unexpected outcomes may be achieved from a group that is diverse, rather than from a group whose members share similar backgrounds and life experiences.

Diversity and inclusion enrich the workplace and empower employees to bring their whole selves to work.

In a culture of inclusiveness, employees are able to bring their whole selves to work, to experience the sense of self-esteem and self-confidence to be authentic, and apply their strengths and talents without fear of judgement.

The biggest issue organisations have found in relation to D&I is in dealing with unconscious biases. The intentional practice of self-awareness in response to feelings of bias can help to make visible what may otherwise negatively impact decision-making, teamwork, and the development of positively-functioning relationships.

The challenges facing organisations include ensuring that the workplace is able to support the wellbeing of all employees, and explicitly not tolerate negative prejudice, bullying or harassment in relation to any apparent differences including ethnicity, age, gender identity, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation, life experience, personal limitation, and personal circumstance.

WHAT AN ORGANISATION CAN DO

- Create and update a formal D&I policy – an explicitly stated commitment that can be upheld, and reviewed and modified to ensure currency
- Recognise that culture is key – while policies are important, attitudes and behaviours have the biggest D&I impact
- Lead from the front – the D&I agenda should be driven by the organisation's leadership to set the example
- Actively promote D&I initiatives in recruitment and retention – found to increase the attractiveness of an organisation to potential new employees, and increase retention
- Show commitment – communicate, promote and action for diversification
- Measure and manage – ensure key aspects of D&I are measured and reported against in order to track

2.

Address mental health problems

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2. Address mental health problems

Mentally healthy environments are positive places where everyone feels supported and able to do their best work, regardless of whether or not they have a mental health problem.

Mental health problems are common, with nearly one in two New Zealanders likely to meet the criteria for a mental illness at some time in their lives. Depression and anxiety account for a significant proportion of the experiences. Mental disorders, as a group, are the third-leading cause of health loss for New Zealanders (11.1% of all health loss), behind only cancers (17.5%) and vascular and blood disorders (17.5%) (Ministry of Health, 2013).

As with any health condition, mental health problems can affect a person's functioning at work. Physical health problems tend to be more visible, are more likely to be addressed directly by management, supported by colleagues, and lead to accommodations being made. Mental health problems on the other hand may be less obvious and less well understood. Due to associated stigma, people may not want to admit to problems, nor ask for help, while colleagues and management may avoid the conversations. Early opportunities to address environmental factors and put supports and accommodations in place may be lost.

Develop and promote an organisation-wide stand for zero tolerance of stigma or discrimination related to mental illness.

Policy

It is recommended that organisations have a mental health and wellbeing policy in place that all employees are familiar with, which clearly states that employees who have mental health problems will be treated fairly and not be subjected to stigma or discrimination.

The policy outlines factors including:

- How to get support early if struggling with a mental health problem
- What return-to-work support is provided for people who have been away from work with a mental health problem
- How employee performance is managed, including making reasonable accommodations and setting boundaries
- How the organisation identifies chronic stress or fatigue in its employees
- That the organisation provides support following the suicide or attempted suicide of an employee
- Provision of basic training and information for line managers on the effects of common mental illnesses, helpful responses and suicide prevention

Collaborative relationships

The workplace plays a significant role in promoting or hindering the mental health and wellbeing of employees. Most people with mental health problems can be supported to stay at work, or to return to work after absence. In fact it has been found that a supportive workplace may provide the best environment for recovery when appropriate accommodations can be made, and employees are able to lead productive work lives. This helps to build self-esteem, confidence, coping skills, and promote social inclusion. At the same time the business retains valuable skills and experience, avoiding costs associated with retraining or hiring new employees.

New Zealand research has suggested that employers value employees with experience of mental illness, and are wanting to support them in the workplace (Lennan and Wyllie, 2005). The best outcome can be found in collaborative relationships between employees and managers, where the needs of both the individuals and the organisations can be taken into account.

Benefits

Collaborating to reduce the potential negative impact of mental illness in the workplace has many benefits. These include:

- More positive mental health (less depression, stress, burnout)
- Better physical health (lower blood pressure, less heart disease, sleeping disorders, and skin rashes, fewer ulcers, headaches, neck and backache, increased resistance to infections)
- Reduced absenteeism, particularly of frequent short periods of absence, and lower turnover
- Improved work performance such as greater productivity, decision-making, accuracy, planning and work control
- More highly engaged behaviours and attitudes including increased motivation, commitment and energy
- Improved relationships at work showing less tension and conflict, more connectedness, kindness, tolerance and patience



Check assumptions about mental illness

It is not the role of a manager or co-worker to diagnose mental illness, nor to make any assumptions about whether symptoms are related to a diagnosis. Diagnoses can change, and they are not always accurate, being based on the useful but possibly flawed diagnostic criteria of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2013).

“The very act of dealing with a mental illness often gives people extraordinary strength of character” (Leibrich, 1999).

Address behaviours

What is important in an organisation is that behaviours causing issues are discussed in a safe and compassionate way, support is offered and given, and potential actions are identified that address both the individual's concerns and those of the organisation. These actions may include a referral to EAP counselling services, accessing additional professional help, or taking time off.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

“[My manager] first noticed the changes in me. I can't thank him enough for being so kind and empathetic.” ... “We talked quite a bit, and then we worked out a plan together and he checked in with me every day for a while.” ... “I feel lucky that [the organisation] has always made it okay to talk about, so it was fine telling my team, and they were pretty supportive.” – John, analyst



Causes and management

Mental health problems in the workplace, and generally in life, can have a wide range of causes, and may be an accumulation of stressors, a single trigger, current or historic circumstances, a physical health condition, trauma, or genetics. Some people may be more affected by an event or condition than others.



Stress, anxiety, and depression

According to the World Health Organization (2022), technology, globalization, demographic shifts, emergencies and climate change across the globe are reshaping how and where we work. The pandemic has disrupted labour markets and accelerated the pace of change – especially in remote work, e-commerce and automation. Some jobs are being lost; some are being created; almost all are changing. For many, these changes are creating new pressures or exacerbating existing stresses around work that have the potential to undermine workers' mental health.

It is in the best interest of an organisation to be proactive in addressing known issues like these, by making available education and opportunities to mitigate potential problems. Stress management techniques abound, and may be learned through participation in workshops focusing on emotional wellbeing, emotional regulation, healthy thinking, mindfulness, and positive communication. It is not the frequency of exposure to minor stressors that cause ill-health, but the individual's reactions to them. More effective coping skills may be developed through learning and practice. Workplaces can encourage and promote the experience of positive emotions to help undo the harm of long-term stress, and enhance mood, all of which may have a buffering effect against the risk of symptoms of depression.

Organisations benefit significantly from efforts to help employees develop a healthy lifestyle, such as stress management, weight loss and smoking cessation programmes

Suicide and self-harm

Most people who attempt suicide don't want to die – they just want to stop hurting (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2015).

Suicidal behaviour, including self-harm and suicide attempts, has gained recognition worldwide as a considerable public health problem. Employers have a responsibility to respond appropriately to employees who are experiencing thoughts and feelings about suicide, and to employees who are affected by the suicide death of a co-worker, friend or family member.

ALWAYS TAKE IT SERIOUSLY

If someone expresses thoughts or feelings about suicide, it's important to take them seriously.

If someone tells you they are thinking about suicide, thank them for telling you, and invite them to keep talking with you. Let them know there is help available to them. Encourage them to get help and talk to someone about what they are going through.

The following services offer free support via phone or online. They can also connect you to other places and people that can help.

Need to talk? Call or text **1737** (24/7)

Lifeline **0800 543 354**
(7am - midnight)

Depression helpline **0800 111 757**
(24/7)

Samaritans **0800 726 666** (24/7)

Youthline **0800 376 633** (24/7)
free text **234**, DM on Instagram
@youthlinenz, WhatsApp 09 886
5696, webchat at youthline.co.nz
10am - 10pm

Risk and response

People with mental illness are at a higher risk of suicide, particularly people with depressive/ mood disorders, as they may be more susceptible to the negative effects of stress. The vast majority of people diagnosed with depression do not feel suicidal.

A person who is thinking about suicide might not ask for help, but that doesn't mean that help isn't wanted. They might fear the stigma, or feel ashamed of how they're feeling. They may feel that they don't deserve help, or that no-one can help them. People who feel suicidal often feel alone and that the world would be better off without them. Support from people who care about them, supportive and caring managers and colleagues, can play an important role in supporting them through it.

If you think that someone might be at risk, pay attention to changes in behaviour, trust your instincts and ask directly if they are thinking about suicide.

Return to work

If an employee has been off work to recover from attempting suicide, or having suicidal thoughts, when they return to work it should be into a caring and compassionate environment. It is important for one or more managers and colleagues to continue to pay attention, stay connected and involved, and offer support. Recovery can take time.

Awareness and education

An organisation can be proactive in raising awareness about mental distress and providing education to employees. An emotionally healthy work environment provides opportunities for developing effective support networks through encouraging social interaction and generating healthy conversations.

It is also recommended that an organisation has plans in place to deal with employee suicide and how to communicate with staff following a suicide.

A guide for workplaces: Supporting your staff and organisation after a suspected suicide and *A guide for workplaces: Responding to a staff member's suicidality* are a good place to start when developing these. More information can be found in the fact sheets of the *After a Suicide* website: afterasuicide.nz/factsheets

Other mental health problems

Other life problems that may negatively impact on the mental health and wellbeing of employees, and their ability to function effectively at work, include substance-abuse addictions (such as alcohol and drugs), and cigarette smoking. Programmes can be made available to support employees in dealing with these problems.

If someone has attempted suicide or you're worried about their immediate safety, do the following:

- **Call the local mental health crisis assessment team or go with them to the emergency department at the nearest hospital**
- **If they are an immediate physical danger to themselves or others, call 111**
- **Stay with them until support arrives**
- **Remove any obvious means of suicide they might use (e.g. rope, pills, guns, car keys, knives)**
- **Try to stay calm and let them know you care**
- **Keep them talking: listen and ask questions without judging**
- **Make sure you are safe**

Alcohol

Alcohol has a range of impairment effects on a person. It can affect judgment and reduce inhibitions. Alcohol acts as an anaesthetic, slows down reflexes and impairs co-ordination. It can be a depressive and interrupt natural sleep patterns. None of these effects are likely to be beneficial in the workplace, and many can be hidden. As the effect of alcohol varies so much between people it is not always easy to tell if a person has an alcohol problem.

Experts talk about alcohol abuse and alcoholism in different ways. Those who abuse alcohol still have the capacity to set limits on their drinking. Alcoholism on the other hand is more severe – alcoholics suffer from all the symptoms of alcohol abuse, and are physically dependent on alcohol, i.e. they rely on alcohol every day to function. People who suffer from a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression are particularly at risk of alcohol dependence, because they may use alcohol to alleviate mental distress.

It's good practice to have a written workplace policy clearly setting out your rules and expectations around alcohol.

An effective workplace alcohol policy should clearly state:

- Your organisation's position on alcohol
- Objectives and the processes for achieving them
- Employee and employer responsibilities around alcohol, such as expectations about not working under the influence of alcohol
- Procedures and consequences when alcohol use affects the workplace and/or rules are breached
- Strategies for dealing with alcohol-related issues, including:
- Procedures for approaching and dealing with an impaired employee
- Information on treatment and other support services
- Details regarding disciplinary action that will apply if the policy is breached
- Conditions associated with providing and serving alcohol in the workplace and at work functions, and strategies for minimising any subsequent alcohol-related harm
- The personnel involved in implementing the policy and their roles and responsibilities
- Assurance of, and processes for, managing confidentiality

(Wellplace.nz, 2016).

More information and guidance on writing a workplace alcohol policy can be found at wpb.business.govt.nz/workplacepolicybuilder/healthAndWellbeing/alcohol

If drinking is causing problems at work (such as time off or poor performance), then it is a problem that needs to be addressed.

There are organisations that provide treatment, support and teach coping skills to help people overcome drinking problems, and there is good evidence to show that these treatments work.

Other drugs

Drugs other than alcohol can also have a detrimental effect on mental wellbeing. For example, there is a growing body of evidence linking marijuana use with experience of psychosis (hallucinations, delusions, memory loss, and confusion) (Drug Foundation, 2016).

As with alcohol, a drug policy should be developed. The International Labour Organization recommends a policy that emphasises prevention, education, training and rehabilitation (International Labour Organization, 1996).

Where an employee's work directly impacts the safety of others, it might be reasonable to introduce a drug testing policy. More information on whether drug testing is right for your workplace can be found at www.employment.govt.nz/fair-work-practices/workplace-policies-and-procedures/alcohol-and-other-drugs

Smoking

Being smokefree helps people to flourish, and smoking cessation works to improve mental health and wellbeing in the long term (Kaplan et al., 2007).

There is strong evidence that smoking increases stress and anxiety, particularly in the long term, and the chances of developing depression, anxiety disorders and other mental illness. There is also strong evidence that smoking contributes to intellectual and cognitive decline, and increases the probability of developing dementia (Anstey et al., 2007).

Smoking cessation has been shown to diminish stress and anxiety, and related effects. In addition, improvements in physical health that follow smoking cessation lead to greater vitality, make it easier to be active, and improve happiness. Collectively, these benefits mark the improvements in wellbeing that organisations are looking to promote in their employees.

Research suggests that smokers share a nearly universal regret at the decision to smoke, and a desire to quit (Hoeck et al., 2024). Smoking is also costly to businesses due to increased sick leave and productivity lost through smoking breaks.

Introducing a smokefree workplace policy increases the mental and physical wellbeing of employees and ensures non-smokers aren't affected by second-hand smoke.

You can support employees to quit by:

- Allowing them to call Quitline and have call backs during work time: 0800 778 778
- Allowing access to the Quit Group website through your intranet
- Offering quit smoking programs to employees in the workplace
- Funding/reimbursing the cost of NRT (Nicotine replacement therapy – patches, gum, lozenges) for staff
- Having a supply of NRT on site to help staff remain smokefree during work hours
- Organising a group of staff who want to quit smoking to support each other to quit
- Offering incentives/rewards to staff who have successfully quit smoking
- Developing a referral system to other quit smoking services outside the workplace

(Northland Intersectoral Forum, 2016)

More information can be found at www.smokefree.org.nz/facts/law-policy-and-research/smokefree-aotearoa-2025

Further support

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental Health Foundation
www.mentalhealth.org.nz

COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT

Lifeline

0800 543 354

Samaritans

0800 726 666

DEPRESSION

Depression Helpline

0800 111 757 or www.depression.org.nz

SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The Lowdown

thelowdown.co.nz

Youthline

0800 376 633 or free text 234

www.youthline.co.nz

ALCOHOL & DRUGS

Alcohol and Drug Helpline

0800 787 797 or free text 8681

GAMBLING

Gambling Helpline

0800 654 655

SMOKING

Quit smoking

0800 778 778

Recommendations for employers

WHAT WORKS

- Be aware
- Be reflective
- Be relationship focused
- Be a good employer

Be aware

- Experience of mental illness is common – it is a leading cause of disability in New Zealand
- Even if you are not aware of it, you probably already have employees with experience of mental illness
- People with experience of mental illness do not necessarily have any more issues than any other employee
- People with experience of mental illness can have greater self-awareness, self-management and coping strategies to deal with difficulties in work and life generally
- Supporting people with experience of mental illness in employment can be a good investment, particularly in terms of reciprocated commitment and loyalty
- Employing people with experience of mental illness can have positive benefits for the workplace environment and culture generally, including specifically promoting and supporting the wellbeing of others
- It is unlawful to treat people differently in employment (including through job advertisements, job interviews, job offers, working conditions and pay, forcing them to retire or leave, or firing them), because of their experience of mental illness.

The types of symptoms that may be noticed in a workplace as early warning signs include:

Change in emotional reactions, such as *an increase in*:

- fear and anxiety
- anger and irritability
- sadness and despair
- emptiness or hopelessness
- disconnectedness
- withdrawing from favourite activities

less

- involvement or enjoyment

Change in thinking, such as *difficulties in*:

- concentrating
- following complex instructions
- remembering
- communicating
- conversing including hesitation, silence, and
- broken sentences

more

- intrusive (unwanted) thoughts

Change in behaviour, such as:

- withdrawing from others
- being unavailable
- being overprotective
- startling easily
- denying and avoiding
- taking greater risks
- abusing substances
- speeding or careless driving

Be reflective

- Consider how you may be directly or subtly creating barriers to employment for people with experience of mental illness (e.g. the pre-employment questions asked, why and how these are asked, how the information is used)
- Examine your assumptions and beliefs about mental illness
- Prepare for your response to a person that discloses experience of mental illness – whether you consider it as a potential risk or a potential valuable resource for the organisation
- Focus on the individual's abilities, rather than any disability

Be relationship-focused

- The relationship between an employee and employer is pivotal to positive and successful employment
- Treat employees with respect
- Treat employees as individuals who all have different idiosyncrasies, issues and needs
- Maintain an open door policy, with clear communication in both directions

Be a good employer

Making accommodations

- The Human Rights Act 1993 creates an obligation for an employer to take reasonable measures to meet an employee's needs in relation to a disability. Otherwise known as workplace accommodations, these are typically changes that are made to the work environment or in the way things are usually done
- Workplace accommodations that people with experience of mental illness *commonly find helpful* include:
 - flexible hours, in terms of how much and when they work
 - flexibility in where they work (e.g. the option of working from home)
 - flexibility around sick and annual leave (e.g. the option of additional paid or unpaid leave)
 - flexibility around attending appointments (e.g. being able to attend appointments in work time)
 - professional supervision
 - an on-the-job coach or mentor
 - being able to continue to work even when they are not 100 per cent well
 - not having to manage people
- These accommodations are generally no greater than the arrangements for other aspects of employees' lives (e.g. long-term physical conditions or impairments, children), are not onerous to implement and manage, and are not costly. They are the most effective accommodations for supporting people with experience of mental illness to work positively and successfully
- Ask all prospective employees what workplace accommodations might be helpful
- Exercise your rights, responsibilities and options as an employer (e.g. consider using a trial period to see how a workplace accommodation fits with your workplace)
- Be clear with yourself and the employee as to what you will do and what you expect them to do if an issue arises
- If you become aware that an employee is, or may be, experiencing an issue, be proactive in raising it with them and identifying what support they require
- If an employee discloses that there is an issue:
 - do not assume what support they will need – ask
 - take responsibility for supporting a solution within the workplace
 - be clear about what support you are and aren't prepared to provide
 - support the employee to make a plan
 - maintain regular communication and check in
- Be respectful of people's personal information
- Practice 'good employer attributes' (caring, empathy, having integrity, treating people fairly, being flexible)
- Create a friendly, respectful, communicative work environment, with a culture of flexibility, inclusion and diversity. This is not only good for people with experience of mental illness, but for all staff and business. Potential benefits include increased morale, motivation, commitment, loyalty, productivity, and wellbeing; and decreased absenteeism, presenteeism (i.e. attending work whilst unwell or unproductive), conflict and turnover
- Provide praise (when deserved) and critical feedback (when necessary). Raise employment issues when required
- Be cognisant of people's workloads and support self-management of those
- Give plenty of notice of planned changes, giving clear and full explanations of the change and why it is necessary

PREREQUISITES TO A SUPPORT PLAN

- build a collaborative relationship
- respect privacy and confidentiality
- listen non-judgementally and with empathy
- take care with appropriate and relevant questions
- build trust by keeping your word
- do not jump to conclusions about what is needed
- do not make assumptions about what it means to have a mental illness
- keep focused on the strengths that the employee brings to the workplace
- work with key support people such as doctor and whānau
- continue to pay attention to the impact on others in the organisation

3.

Promote positive mental health

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3. Promote positive mental health

Employees who believe their employer cares about their wellbeing have been shown to be more engaged at work than others (Rhoades, L. et al., 2002).

For the optimal functioning of employees in the workplace, it is in the best interest of organisations to take action to prevent mental illness and promote positive mental health. When people thrive, the organisations they work within thrive too.

Recent years have seen a shift away from a focus on illness alone, to more attention on wellness, in policies and practices in organisations. Illness and wellness are now considered to be more than simply two ends of a continuum, but separate operating dimensions. The Mental Health Foundation promotes a flourishing society where people are happy, healthy, capable and engaged. In other words, a society where people have high levels of wellbeing. (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2015). This reinforces the opportunity to develop a mental health programme that addresses the needs of mental health challenges, with a positive wellbeing and flourishing focus, taking the ordinary and building the extraordinary.

Positive emotions

“Positive emotions are like nutrients for the brain. The effects are accumulative but require continual reinforcement and effort (Fredrickson, 2009).”

Positive emotions include: feeling high in energy, hopeful, grateful, cheerful, feeling inspired, awed, trusting, and connected.

Most people usually prefer experiencing positive emotions because they feel good. Extensive research suggests that positive emotions also contribute to “building psychological resilience, stronger social bonds, increased cognitive ability and better cardiovascular health (Fredrickson, 2009).” In an organisational setting, positive emotions can be associated with improved business performance and better collegial relationships.

SUGGESTIONS

- Have a discussion about what the organisation already does to boost wellbeing
- Create an atmosphere that encourages positive emotions
- Review or create a health and wellbeing policy

Emotional contagion

It is important to recognise the potential power of emotional contagion. Research has shown that feelings can be infectious. People watching videos that were designed to elicit happiness or sadness, reported an increase in those same feelings. The emotional state of one person influences that of others. Therefore in an organisation where people may be interacting frequently, emotions are being passed around, and the net effect may shift towards the positive or the negative. Studies demonstrated that experiencing positive emotional contagion led to improved cooperation, decreased conflict, and an increased perception of task performance (Barsade, 2002). When negative emotions are aroused in individuals, they can readily spread through groups and even whole organisations through the process of mood contagion.

A balance of emotions

Increasing the ratio of ‘positive’ emotions to ‘negative’ emotions experienced personally or within groups, can have a significant effect on wellbeing.

That said, all emotions are functionally useful.

‘Negative’ emotions are often related to matters of immediate survival, allowing us to respond very quickly to perceived threats and prepare our bodies for fight or flight. These emotions are best experienced for short periods.

‘Positive’ emotions serve to broaden the way we see the world, through curiosity and problem-solving, building personal resources and increasing social bonds in times of relative safety.

A higher ratio of the health-building and repair effects of ‘positive’ emotions to the experience of the utility of ‘negative’ emotions’ leads to a greater sense of wellbeing.



Broaden and build

Fredrickson (2004) proposes that positive emotions do much more than make people feel good in the moment. When they are experienced consistently, it helps build physical, intellectual, social, and professional resources over the long-term. This means that when people are generally happier, they become increasingly innovative, effective and resilient. Research shows high levels of positive emotions expand people's minds to new ideas, possibilities and perspectives, and leads to people embracing solution-focused thinking over problem-focused thinking.

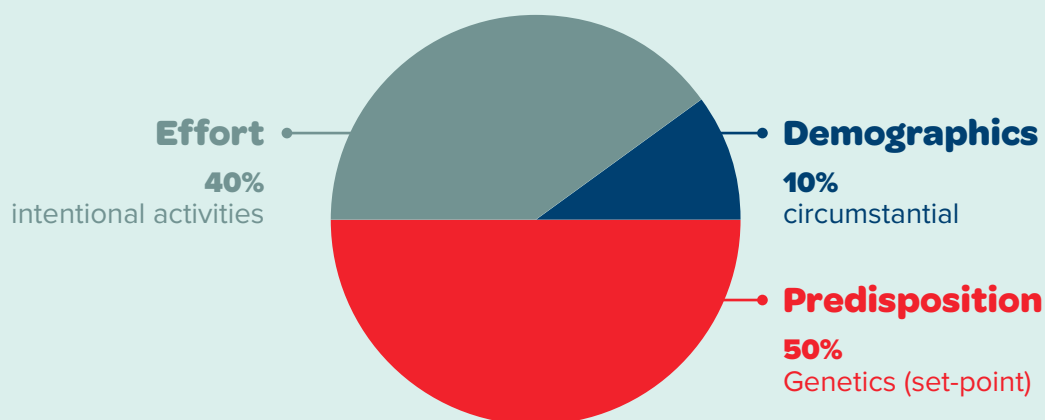
Ways to develop positive emotions are different for different people. Actions such as those described in the following section: Practising Five Ways to Wellbeing, can increase the experience of positive emotions.

Sustaining change

Generating and encouraging the experience of more positive emotions in the workplace is an important goal for organisations, and even more so is the long-term sustainability of positivity increases. People generally adapt to most changes in circumstances, both positive and negative, so it is useful to understand what can be done to make a difference, and where the most effective outcomes can be produced.

It has been proposed (diagram below) that a person's persistent happiness level is influenced by three major factors. Firstly there is a genetically determined predisposition which acts like a set-point and is relatively fixed. Then there are happiness-relevant circumstantial factors that people mostly adapt to, for example getting married, winning money, or suffering loss. Finally, there are the activities and practices that, through intentional engagement and personal choice may provide the best opportunities for sustainably increasing mental wellbeing.

A long-term increase in workplace wellbeing may be achieved by implementing wellbeing-inducing practices throughout the organisation, reviewing their effectiveness, and continually improving and adding to these.



"Pursuing happiness: The Architecture of sustainable change" (*Review of General Psychology*; 9(2), 111-131. Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K.M., & Schkade, D (2005), P.116.

Practising Five Ways to Wellbeing

Evidence suggests that improvements in psychological wellbeing can help to decrease and build resistance to some mental health problems and also help people to flourish. The Five Ways to Wellbeing sets out five behaviours or actions that have consistently been shown to improve personal wellbeing (developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) on behalf of the Foresight Commission in the UK, and adapted for the New Zealand context by the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand).

These are: Connect, Take Notice, Give, Keep Learning, Be Active.

Increased psychological wellbeing in employees is not only good in its own right, but also boosts productivity and engagement within organisations. These five ways to wellbeing are simple yet effective suggestions for activities or actions with a wide range of options to focus on building greater levels of mental wellbeing, and provide some protection from mental illness.

The evidence for what influences wellbeing is growing. Having strong social relationships (CONNECT), being physically active (BE ACTIVE) and being involved in learning (KEEP LEARNING) all have significant effects on wellbeing and ill-being. The processes of giving (GIVE) and becoming more aware (TAKE NOTICE) have been shown to specifically increase positive wellbeing. A combination of all of these behaviours will help to enhance individual wellbeing and may have the potential to reduce the total number of people who develop mental health disorders in the longer term.



SUGGESTIONS

- **Communicate:** Include information on wellbeing in any appropriate communications and/or intranet
- **Display:** Five Ways to Wellbeing posters and other resources (available from the Mental Health Foundation)
- **Invite:** input from employees and wellbeing champions as to how to take further action to make wellbeing a priority for the organisation
- **Encourage:** employees to set goals and tasks within the Five Ways to Wellbeing
- **Plan events:** that specifically incorporate the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

Connect

Evidence shows that good relationships with others including work colleagues, friends, family and the wider community are important for mental wellbeing (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Within organisations where employees feel more connected to others, and describe one or more co-workers as friends, engagement and commitment to the organisation are found to be higher. Additionally, greater productivity and creativity in the workplace have also been noted in studies.

The wellbeing of individuals is often bound up in the wellbeing of the workplace, so activities that stress the importance of fostering relationships with others at work will be more effective and far-reaching, than those that are solely focused on the individual.

“I arrange to meet a friend for lunch once a week. Just an hour away from the office having a chat, sharing worries and having a laugh re-energises me.” Julia, IT support

What we know

Other people matter. Feeling close to others and valued by them is a fundamental human need.

Studies have shown that the most significant difference found between those with mental ill health and those with wellbeing is social participation (Jenkins et al., 2008).

Happy people have stronger social networks (not ‘virtual’ internet-based ones) than those who are unhappy (Diener, E. et al., 2008).

Social relationships are important. Building stronger, broader social connections can increase feelings of happiness, self-worth and feeling understood.

Human beings are social animals, and supportive relationships promote a sense of belonging, wellbeing and security.

KEY MESSAGE

Strengthen relationships with people both at work and in the wider community to promote wellbeing and act as a buffer against mental ill health.

SUGGESTIONS

- Provide opportunities for social interaction, where people may share personal information and find common ground
- Plan activities that allow people to connect, such as a shared lunch, or a group walk outside
- Provide a physical environment that allows employees to relax together, such as an outdoor bench, shared cooking facilities and a large kitchen table

Take Notice

Paying more attention to the present moment, to thoughts and feelings and to the world around, can improve mental wellbeing.

Using attention to increase awareness, concentration, and focus on the current moment and the task at hand, has been shown to improve mental wellbeing and predicts positive mental states. These are skills that can lead to improved work flow through greater creativity, accuracy, and productivity.

Becoming more aware of the present moment means noticing the sights, smells, sounds and tastes being experienced, as well as the thoughts and feelings that occur from one moment to the next, and reconnecting with the world around.

This heightened self-awareness supports greater self-knowledge and self-regulation, which are valuable for controlling otherwise automatic emotional and behavioural responses, and instead allowing a person to choose behaviours that are more consistent with needs, values and interests.

“Since I started meditating during my morning break, I am finding I can stay much calmer when I get difficult calls and have to deal with heated emotions on the phone. Generally I don’t feel as stressed when I get home as I used to.” Matthew, Customer Services

What we know

Developing skills that increase awareness of what is immediately happening – both physically and mentally, within and around us – can improve wellbeing.

Mindfulness means paying attention to what is presently occurring, with kindness and curiosity. We might be paying attention to a thought, a feeling, physical sensations, other people or the environment around us, but to be mindful means to give the present moment our full attention, without distraction. (Mindful Aotearoa, 2016).

The evidence supporting mindfulness meditation for decreasing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress has grown substantially in recent years.

KEY MESSAGE

Take time to stop and become aware of surroundings, listening to thoughts and feelings, and paying attention to the present moment.

SUGGESTIONS

- Find ways to integrate mindfulness into work life. For example, have a two minute quiet breathing period at the start of meetings
- Provide a space for reflection, such as a comfortable corner, or an outdoor bench
- Place beautiful art and objects where they can be viewed frequently

Give

Most people would agree that giving to others is good in itself. But it can also improve mental wellbeing.

Giving is more than just the sharing of material things with others. It is about cultivating a spirit of generosity and promoting active participation in supporting others. The act of giving, receiving and being aware of acts of kindness even indirectly, have all been shown to generate positive feelings and self-worth.

Within a workplace, a culture of giving greatly enhances the positive emotional environment with all the accompanying benefits. It may be experienced through words that are shared, compliments and acknowledgements given, helping out, and sharing resources. Generosity and kindness promote social connection, empathy, and team bonding.

The positive relationships that develop in a giving environment make for effective communication and problem-solving, and reduce potential hostility and conflict. Giving time to others in a constructive way helps to strengthen relationships and build new ones.

“After [our colleague] had a stroke, my team decided to raise money for the Stroke Foundation, and we all went to the office to hand over the cheque. It felt so good to be part of something that will make a positive difference to others.” Jules, Accounts

Manager

What we know

Evidence suggests that notions of reciprocity and ‘giving back’ to others promotes mental wellbeing.

People who report a greater interest in helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy.

Research into actions for promoting happiness has shown that committing an act of kindness once a week over a six-week period is associated with a significant increase in wellbeing.

Brain science has shown that giving to others and co-operating with them can stimulate the reward areas in the brain. This indicates that social cooperation is intrinsically rewarding, and helps to create positive feelings.

KEY MESSAGE

Acts of kindness, whether small or large can increase happiness, life satisfaction and general sense of wellbeing.

SUGGESTIONS

- Get involved with a charity and find a way to involve the organisation and employees in supporting it by raising money, or volunteering
- Find ways for the organisation to be generous (and fair) whenever reasonably possible
- Encourage an environment of shared greetings and smiles, and expressed gratitude

Keep Learning

Being curious and seeking out new experiences positively stimulates the brain.

Learning, being curious, and setting goals has been shown to increase self-esteem and self-belief. It has also been shown to be effective in preventing depression in later years. Goal-setting and working towards those goals is strongly associated with higher levels of wellbeing, and in the workplace can be harnessed through effective work planning and celebration of achievement. Goals that are particularly good for enhancing mental health are those that align with personal values, that you have input into, and have an outcome that is positively stated, e.g. I will find out more about good nutrition.

Learning new skills and extending knowledge can be useful, and it can also positively affect mental wellbeing, life satisfaction, build a sense of purpose, and stimulate further interest and curiosity.

In workplaces, both knowledge and curiosity support more creative problem-solving and effective decision-making. Learning may result in deeper mastery in one particular area, and/ or a broader knowledge or command in many areas, all of which add to the capability of working teams.

What we know

Learning is more than just an activity for formal education. It can include any approaches to maintaining curiosity and an enquiring mind.

Evidence shows that continuing to learn throughout life can help improve and maintain mental wellbeing.

Many forms of learning involve being with other people, which help build and strengthen social relationships.

“Once a month we have a lunchtime workshop. An organising group member invites someone to talk to us, or do an activity, and [the organisation] provides sandwiches. I persuaded my husband to come and give us some basic accounting principles, and last month we had a demonstration on maintaining a bicycle from the bike shop – I think they sold 2!” AM, Marketing

KEY MESSAGE

Learning on any subject increases self-esteem and feelings of competency.

SUGGESTIONS

- Ensure opportunities for learning and development within the organisation
- Use goal-setting processes that include employee's personal input and highlight alignment with personal values
- Make community class schedules available, to encourage registration
- Encourage and support employees to organise lunchtime workshops

Be Active

Being active is great for physical health and fitness. Evidence shows it can also improve mental wellbeing and lower rates of depression and anxiety.

There is clear evidence of the link between physical activity and physical and mental health/wellbeing. Not only is physical activity related to cardiovascular, bone, and muscular health, it is associated with lower levels of mental illness and stress, and greater emotional wellbeing.

For an organisation, a more physically active and healthier staff may mean fewer days off work due to illness, higher productivity at work, higher levels of energy and motivation, and less mental illness and stress-related illnesses.

Being active does not mean having to go for a lengthy run. Any form of physical movement can be beneficial and the advice is to discover physical activities that are enjoyable and that suit the individual's mobility and fitness.

Common forms of daily activity may include walking, swimming, and cycling, yoga, pilates and tai chi, aerobic or strength-based physical activity including what seems like small amounts of physical activity can add up, such as housework, gardening and shopping.

At work, there may be many opportunities to walk to speak to someone rather than emailing, take five minutes to walk around the block, find a space to do some stretches, or stand up while waiting or talking.

Actively and explicitly encourage employees to stand more, move more, take the stairs, and walk and talk.

KEY MESSAGE

Physical activity every day results in significant health benefits.

SUGGESTIONS

- Provide standing desks
- Encourage walking meetings
- Provide space for classes like yoga, pilates and tai chi
- Engage in fun activities to promote being active. For example, use humour and playfulness to encourage use of the stairs rather than the lift by using signs, or treasure clues, or leaving messages
- Get involved with a company team sport such as tennis or touch rugby

What we know

Physical activity can play a significant role in slowing age-related cognitive decline.

Physical activity is thought to cause chemical changes in the brain, which can help to positively change mood.

Moderate exertion three to five times a week can significantly reduce symptoms of depression, but improvements can also be seen from single bouts of physical activity of less than 10 minutes (NEF, 2008).

Outdoor activities have the added mental health benefits associated with spending time in nature, getting some sunshine, and breathing fresher air.

Being active with others can reduce feelings of social isolation and will increase the chances of repeat activity.

The Ministry of Health has guidelines on physical activity for all ages, as well as health education resources for the public. Search “physical activity” at www.health.govt.nz.

Promoting healthy sleep habits

Regular good sleep is an essential part of maintaining positive mental health, optimal brain functioning and long-term wellbeing.

Sleep is an important key to health and wellbeing. It helps to form memories, solidify learning, reduce the risk of depression, and repair cells, boosting the immune system.

The effect of poor sleep habits may result in an increase in ‘presenteeism’, where an employee may be at work but is performing below expectations, and may be disruptive to the work of others. Even worse, sleepiness may be dangerous and cause injury.

A study found that workers who reported sleeping less than five hours, or more than 10 hours per night, may take up to nine more sick days annually than those within that range, resulting in higher costs for treatments, medication, and loss of productivity (Lallukka, T. et al, 2014).

SUGGESTIONS

- Employers to provide ‘Good Sleeping Guidelines’ to employees (see next page)
- Recognise that work stress is one key factor in sleep disturbance
- Encourage employees to talk about sleep concerns
- Pay attention to apparent fatigue and possible sleep-related issues
- Act on safety concerns

Scientific research provides information for the best practices in sleep hygiene and it is in the organisation’s interest to provide these guidelines to promote the wellbeing of employees, and provide support to resolve sleep issues where possible.

Sleep – part of the natural rhythm of life

Sleep patterns are dictated by an internal, biological clock, which works according to a 24-hour, light-dark cycle, which is why it feels natural to fall asleep at night. At that time the body’s core temperature drops. These sleep rhythms (aka Circadian Rhythms) have a major impact on the following day’s alertness. Sleep research shows fatigue and lack of sleep badly affect our ability to be productive, work safely and make good decisions. It is a risk factor in workplace accidents, particularly between 2pm and 4pm when energy levels often dip. When people are tired or sleep-deprived the neurons in their brains don’t work as well, which impairs judgement and physical coordination, making injuries more likely.

Understanding the sleep cycle

People sleep in approximately 90-minute cycles alternating between Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep and non-REM sleep. During each cycle, a person goes from having eyes shut but not being asleep, through to light sleep and then finally falling into a deep sleep. It’s during this deep sleep that the body repairs itself, builds bone and muscle and strengthens its immune system. Then the REM phase begins, dreaming for 10 minutes or so before the whole cycle starts again. During a typical night, a person completes four or five of these cycles.

The key insight is that while asleep, the body and mind are working hard to restore and repair, and needs seven to eight hours of sleep to do this work.

EFFECTS OF FATIGUE INCLUDE:

- Forgetfulness
- Irritability
- Lethargy or apathy
- Poor problem processing
- Poor decision-making
- Lack of concentration

Good sleeping guidelines

Routine

Go to bed at the same time every night, including weekends.

This helps to regulate the body-clock and could help you fall asleep and stay asleep.

Bedtime ritual

Practice a regular before-bed ritual

A routine activity just before bedtime away from bright lights helps separate sleep time from previous activities that may be stimulating, stressful or anxiety-provoking, and which can make it more difficult to fall asleep, get sound and deep sleep or remain asleep.

Relax

Do something to relax before sleeping

Have a hot drink – herbal tea, milk, chocolate. Take a soothing shower or bath. Read a book until you feel sleepy.

Let go

Let go of the day

Park any issues and worries until tomorrow. Negative thoughts make sleep more difficult. Think about the good things that happened in the day, things you enjoy doing or something you are looking forward to. Go to sleep with a positive thought in mind. A good night's sleep will help you cope more effectively.

Screens

Avoid using any screens within an hour of going to bed

Take a break from the screen. Switch off electronic devices like smart phones and computers that could disturb your sleep or keep your brain in 'work mode'. The bright lights of the screens disrupt sleep cycles.

Food & drink

Avoid eating or drinking alcohol just before bedtime

Making your body process food and alcohol increases your chance of waking up in the night and makes it harder to go back to sleep.

Caffeine

Avoid caffeine within three or four hours of going to bed, or even longer

Caffeine is a stimulant. Even small amounts can affect sleep. Monitor daily caffeine intake in drinks like coffee and energy drinks. The 2015 European Food Safety Authority advised that up to 400 mg per day would not raise safety concerns.

Environment

Quiet, cool, dark, comfortable

Create a calm, safe, relaxing sleep environment. Make sure the bedroom environment is suitable for getting a good night's rest. Deal with anything disturbing sleep such as too much noise or light, an uncomfortable bed or pillow, a disruptive or snoring partner, and avoid co-sleeping with pets.

Active

Be active

Regular physical activity throughout the day helps sleep at night. It can be as simple as going for a 30 min walk three times a week or playing a sport. Avoid activity directly before bed where possible as some people find it hard to drop off.

About sleep problems

Most people have problems sleeping from time-to-time – nights when it is difficult to fall asleep, waking up in the night, or disturbed by dreams. This is normal and most often these problems will resolve themselves after a few days. However, if sleep problems last weeks or more, this can have a detrimental impact on daily life, affecting energy levels, moods, and concentration, as well as having an impact on relationships and performance at work.

The most common sleep problems are:

- **Insomnia:** difficulty in falling asleep, getting back to sleep after waking in the night, or waking very early in the morning. It may be experienced as disturbed, shallow, or broken sleep.
- **Oversleeping:** sleeping more than your body needs, which may have less of an impact on daily life than insomnia, but may be linked to physical problems such as heart disease and diabetes.
- **Nightmares and night terrors:** intense, frightening dreams causing wakefulness and fear, increased heart rate, and sweating. These are sometimes related to life experiences. Night terrors that result in shouting or crying are often not recalled at all but can affect the quality of sleep, and cause general anxiety.
- **Sleep paralysis:** waking in the night unable to move or speak because there are still sleep hormones in the muscles, lasting between a couple of seconds and a few minutes. There is no harm in it, but it may cause anxiety.
- **Sleep walking:** getting out of bed during the night and walking or moving around, possibly carrying out activities. Not usually a problem, unless injuries occur from lack of coordination, although is disruptive to sleep cycles.

For more information on how sleeping affects your health, as well as tips and techniques for improving sleep, go to healthify.nz/hauora-wellbeing/s/sleep-tips

If sleep problems persist, see your GP.

Promoting healthy nutrition

There are clear and demonstrable benefits for organisations to promote healthy nutrition to enhance the wellbeing of employees, and ensure the best fuel for productive and high functioning days.

The right foods can help with concentration, strength and healthy weight maintenance. (Ministry of Health, 2015).

People can enjoy a variety of foods including:

- Vegetables and fruit
- Legumes (such as lentils, split peas, chickpeas and cooked, dried beans (e.g. kidney beans, baked beans)
- Fish and other seafood, poultry, eggs and some red meat
- Nuts and seeds
- Whole and less processed foods

Water should be the primary source of hydration – tap water is fine.

To maintain healthy nutrition, it is recommended that individuals limit:

- Processed meat
- Large amounts of red meat*
- Drinks and foods with added sugar
- Highly processed foods that are high in refined grains, saturated fat, sugar and salt.

** Eat less than 500 g cooked meat per week (equivalent to 700-750 g when raw).*

SUGGESTIONS

- Encourage the adoption of an organisation-wide healthy food policy, for example a healthy vending machine policy and healthy catering guidelines.
- Provide Ministry of Health eating and activity guidelines to employees (available from www.health.govt.nz/publications/healthy-food-and-drink-guidance-for-organisations)
- Post 5-a-day nutrition posters in food preparation areas
- Provide healthy breakfast options
- Encourage fresh produce swapping or buying at work
- Offer good nutrition-based workshops
- Support those who wish to maintain a healthy weight

Healthy weight

The increasing incidence of obesity in New Zealand is a cause for concern for individual wellbeing, organisational absenteeism, and increased healthcare costs. The number of people developing obesity-related type 2 diabetes is the largest and fastest growing health issue, and is closely linked to heart disease. The causes of increasing obesity are numerous. They may include the advancement of technologies that provide automation (which reduces the time people spend standing and walking during a work day) and the increase in environments that provide comfort while discouraging physical movement.

Many workplaces are now sedentary settings and often provide easy access to energy-dense food and beverages. As a result, workplaces are contributing to the obesity epidemic and the associated economic burden, and should take action to be a part of the solution.

Encouraging employees to make good choices about what they eat and drink and be physically active are important to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.

Being a healthy weight:

- helps you to stay active and well
- reduces your risk of developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.

SUGGESTIONS

- Provide health education and information
- Identify a nutrition 'champion' to coordinate healthy recipe distribution
- Maintain a supportive social and physical environment
- Subsidise nutrition and weight-loss programmes
- Seek input from employees as to useful workplace support

For more information on supporting nutrition and physical activity visit the Ministry of Health website:

www.health.govt.nz/publications/healthy-food-and-drink-guidance-for-organisations

or Health NZ:

www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/health-services-and-programmes/workplace-wellbeing/nutrition-and-physical-activity

Appendix

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<u>References</u>	<u>53</u>

For more information and support

There are a range of organisations that can support you to build a vibrant and flourishing organisational culture that supports staff health and wellbeing. These include:

Mental Health Foundation

www.mentalhealth.org.nz

The Mental Health Foundation's website provides access to a wealth of information concerning workplace wellbeing, general mental health, mental illness, case studies, programmes, links and other useful resources.

WorkWell

www.workwell.health.nz

A workplace wellbeing initiative developed by Toi Te Ora – Public Health Service, which provides resources, mentoring, networking opportunities and accreditation to supports workplaces to 'work better through wellbeing'.

Te Uru Taangata

workplaceinclusion.org.nz

The Centre for Workplace Inclusion, Te Uru Tāngata, provides equal employment opportunity (EEO) information and tools to employers and raises awareness of diversity issues in New Zealand workplaces.

Worksafe

www.worksafe.govt.nz

New Zealand's work health and safety regulator. Provides a wide range of information and guidance about health and safety in the workplace, including guidance about bullying.

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APPENDIX

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