



FAQs on mental illness for employers

What is mental illness?

Mental illness affects one in five people² in Australia regardless of their background, age, level of education or professional experience. Mental illness presents with symptoms that affect the way a person thinks, feels and acts.

It is highly likely at least one worker in your workplace will, at some point in time, have a long or short-term mental illness³. Mental illness is often not disclosed for fear of prejudice and stigmatisation.

Common mental illnesses include mood disorders (e.g. depression and bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders and psychotic disorders (e.g. schizophrenia and some forms of bipolar disorder).

Can a person who has a mental illness work?

Yes - People who have a mental illness successfully work in all types of jobs across all industries. Some people disclose their mental illness and some do not. Most importantly, people who have a mental illness can succeed or fail in work, just like any other person⁴.

Examples of prominent people who have a mental illness and openly discuss and reflect on their mental health issues and have developed successful careers include:

- Dr Geoff Gallop – Former WA Labor Premier
- Wayne Schwass – Sports Commentator/Formal AFL footballer
- Garry McDonald – Actor

Does it cost more to employ a person who has a mental illness?

No - With understanding and support, a person who has a mental illness can be a loyal and productive employee.

WISE Employment can assist employers with any additional costs associated with employing and / or training new employees through government-funded subsidies, ongoing support and workplace adjustments.

WISE Employment's services are cost-free to eligible employers.

The statistics

Research¹ on small to medium enterprises commissioned by WISE Employment reveals that:

- 26% of employers would consider hiring a person with a mental illness
- The majority of employers that had employed someone who has a known mental illness found the experience positive or very positive, citing their employee was hard working and fitted in well with the team. Less than 1 in 10 employees reported a negative experience which is comparable to hiring anyone from any background.
- 63% of employers described their experience as positive or very positive
- 34% of all managers had a friend or someone close to them who has a mental illness and 26% have a family member who has a mental illness

¹ SME Readiness to Employ People with a Mental Illness, McNair Ingenuity Research, September 2014

² National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007

³ Australian Human Rights Commission, Workers with Mental Illness: a Practical Guide for Managers, May 2010

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, Workers with Mental Illness: a Practical Guide for Managers, May 2010

Will workers compensation insurance costs be higher?

Workers compensation insurance costs are based on industry risk profile, payroll levels and claims history. It is important to note that insurance companies do not require employers to provide information on employees who have a mental illness.

Research by the Australian Safety and Compensation Council⁵ (now Safe Work Australia) found that people who have a disability - including those who have a mental illness - do not have a higher risk of occupational injury. In fact, the incidence of occupational injury is lower for people who have disabilities.

Will a person who has a mental illness be violent?

People who have a mental illness are more often victims of violence rather than being violent themselves. Only a very small number of people who have a mental illness have the potential to be violent and this behaviour can be managed through the use of medication.

WISE Employment can assist with pre-screening candidates who may be at risk of being unwell. We can work with you to discuss appropriate employer and employee support services that may be required - or offer advice on the types of responses needed - in the unlikely event someone poses a risk to themselves or others.

Will a person who has a mental illness fit in?

Just like the rest of the community, people who have a mental illness have different personalities, interests and interpersonal skills. With one in five Australians⁶ experiencing mental illness in any given year, it is likely many businesses currently employ someone who has a mental illness and don't know it.

Mental illness awareness training can be made available for employers and co-workers. A WISE Employment representative can assist employers to access training if required.

Will a person who has a mental illness have more sick days?

There is no direct correlation between mental illness and the increased use of sick days. A person who has a mental illness may or may not have more sick days than someone without a mental illness. The need for time off will vary from person to person. Flexibility and understanding can assist the employee.

Will a person who has a mental illness be productive?

People who have a mental illness successfully work in all types of jobs, across all industries.

For some people who may not be able to maintain 100% productivity, the Federal Government's Supported Wage System (SWS) may be accessed.

A third party assesses the person's productivity (at no cost to the employer) and they are paid a pro rata wage based on the assessed productivity. The SWS system can give an employer scope to employ a person who has a severe or persistent mental illness and give someone a much needed opportunity to work without unnecessary impact on the business. A WISE Employment representative can assist with SWS enquiries.

What support is available to an employer?

Contact your WISE Employment representative and they will provide you and your employee with ongoing support for as long as you need it. This may include on site work visits, off site meetings, support with training, conflict resolution with co-workers, coaching or other tailored support.

How do I manage a person with a mental illness?

The same as any other employee – you are not managing the mental illness. If performance is an issue, employers should approach the employee to address the performance as they would any other employee. Part of that process would usually include a discussion to identify if there are any other issues the employee is dealing with which may be affecting their performance – if mental illness is disclosed as being the cause (or part of the cause) the employer and employee should work together to identify how they can be supported to overcome the performance issues. WISE Employment can assist with this if necessary.

⁵ Australian Safety and Compensation Council (2007) Are People with Disability at Risk at Work? A Review of the Evidence, Australia

⁶ National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007



Find the right staff with WISE Employment

We help employers find the ideal worker by understanding their needs and presenting them with a variety of candidates from diverse backgrounds, including people who have a mental illness. Our services are cost free and continue for as long as employers need us. We also help businesses to access government-funded incentives and support including wage subsidies and training packages.

If you need to find the right staff today, call WISE Employment on **1800 685 105** to speak with a WISE representative or visit wiseemployment.com.au/empowermental