

# Calming Stress in the Workplace

A mentally healthy workplace matters

## Why address Stress?

Anxiety and stress occur when our body's stress regulatory systems are triggered by a threat. Chronic stress occurs when our body's regulatory systems do not get a break. This could be because the threat simply does not go away for example workplace bullying, there are multiple stressors and/or we are unable to calm ourselves down.

Stress is known to be a trigger for mental illness and leaves us vulnerable to physical illness. It can also trigger an acute episode of a pre-existing disease. Some of the illnesses stress has been shown to be directly related to include: cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, irritable bowel disease, psoriasis, gastric ulcers, shingles, depression, anxiety disorders.

In the workplace this results in increased absenteeism, presenteeism, interpersonal conflict, decreased job satisfaction, physical/psychological injury and loss of productivity.

## So why is stress and workplace mental health not addressed?

The two main reasons are mental health illiteracy and stigma. How many employees would feel comfortable calling their boss and explaining they just had a panic attack and won't be into work today? How many employees will share with their leaders they are emotionally and psychologically struggling with workplace demands?

In a recent study by the Canadian Medical Association only 23% of employees indicated they would feel comfortable. Employees worry they will be judged as weak or less than, worried about losing their jobs or missing out on workplace opportunities. Instead employees often choose to sacrifice their personal lives to meet job expectations. Unfortunately, these are often the required protective factors to offset illness. Mental illness research also highlights this fact with approximately 40% of Australians living with depression never seeking help. Why? The majority of Australians don't have the mental health literacy to recognise it's a problem. Not being able to recognise our mental health is affected prevents early detection and intervention which is paramount for the prevention of mental illness in society.

It is estimated stress related absenteeism costs Australian business \$10.11 billion per year.

## Myth: A mentally healthy workplace is Stress Free!

This is an important myth to address. In a competitive world business needs to creatively adjust and adapt its ways to be financially viable. New processes, new systems, restructuring, downsizing, job role adjustments, implementing fresh ideas are all part of it. And employees are required to make it happen.

Whether we like it or not change represents the loss of the way things once were. It is normal to experience anxiety and stress during these times further the less control employees have over change the more heightened their distress.

Business is great at outsourcing consultants for change management. Communication plans are designed to minimise angst and facilitate flow during project roll out however when was the last time stress education and support to develop new ways of coping were provided? Yes, EAP's are available but they don't address a culture of workplace bullying or inhouse dysfunction.

Sometimes the psychologist and GP end up advocating for the client at a regulatory body.

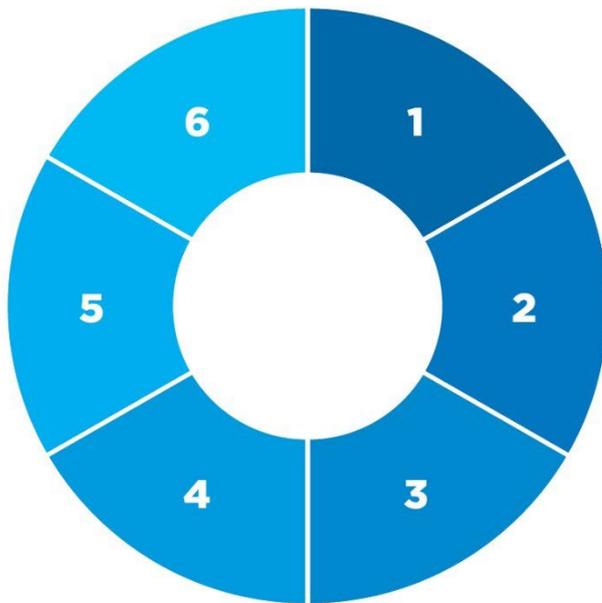


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## A mentally healthy workplace requires a multifaceted approach

The Nationally Healthy Workplace Alliance established by the Federal Government to address the escalating trend in psychological injury in the workplace has outlined six keys to maintaining mental health at work (for the full report visit our website: [ahigherself.com.au](http://ahigherself.com.au))



## Six keys to a mentally healthy workplace

- 1 Minimise Harm**  
Design & managing work to minimise harm
- 2 Protective Factors**  
Promoting organisational protective factors
- 3 Personal Resilience**  
Enhancing individuals personal resilience
- 4 Seeking Help Early**  
Promoting & facilitating early help seeking
- 5 Recovery**  
Supporting recovery from mental illness
- 6 Awareness**  
Increasing awareness - reducing stigma

A psychologically safe environment clearly requires a multifaceted approach. Common images like the one provided support a stereotype of wellness programs that not only misrepresent but also alienate the cause.

## What should a wellness program address?

The truth is a workplace wellness program can address any or all of the six identified key areas. However, what would be the purpose of investing in for example employee resilience programs when the business leaders, company policies and organisational culture reflect prejudice towards mental health. So, it's important to first get your house in order. If you don't the risk is your employees could be afraid to use it and/or worry it's just another big stick.

You don't need to do it all at once. Stage it into steps and take your time but you will need mental health champions within your organisation to drive it. For example, identify key and interested employees to be trained in mental health first aid. This helps to reduce stigma, raises mental health literacy and fosters early help seeking behaviour.

A quick word on policy – the language that is chosen and contained in your policies highlight how much value you place on the matter being addressed. Finally, we all know just because you have a policy does not mean it will be followed. Leadership and culture determine its effectiveness.



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## What does A Higher Self offer?

We work with you to identify where you are in this maze? Where you need to be and what pieces of the puzzle are required to make it happen. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel and create your own everything when great resources and research already exist. But you do need to know where to find it and how to integrate it.

Finally, when investing in employee resilience programs and reducing mental health stigma a one size fits all one therapeutic approach program is not enough. Once you understand the nature of stress the reasoning for a diverse toolbox becomes apparent.

## How expensive or cost effective will it be?

This depends entirely on your company size, resources and existing knowledge. Your leadership, policies and culture might be completely aligned to rolling out employee calming stress workshops and if you have a great training department they could be in time trained to deliver them.

In a recent meta- evaluation of 700 studies- workplace health programs resulted in a \$5.81 saving for every \$1 invested in employee wellbeing (The Health and Productivity Institute of Australia, 2015).

Workplace wellness does not need to be expensive, tax deductions are available with the cost: benefit ratio far outweighing the injury: financial payout statistics.

## Free Consultation - Chat

Contact Kim Elkovich at A Higher Self on 02 4399 2435 or visit our website [www.ahigherself.com.au](http://www.ahigherself.com.au)

