Working effectively with people with mental illness

What is mental illness?

- A varied group of conditions that significantly affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves, and interacts with other people
- Close to 1 in 5 Australians will have a mental illness in any year
- Mental illnesses are diagnosed according to standardised criteria
- They are different from temporary mental health problems that may be experienced following stressful life events
- Mental illnesses have been identified as the third biggest health problem in Australia, after heart disease and cancer
- Some major types of mental illness include:

  - Anxiety disorders – most common at 9.7% of Australian adults in any year

    - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (3.3%)
    - Generalised Anxiety Disorder (3.1%)
    - Social Phobia (2.7%)
    - Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (0.4%)

  - Substance use disorders – 7.7% of Australian adults in any year

    - Dependence on alcohol or a drug, leading to problems at work or home, and/or causing damage to health

  - Depression – 5.8% of Australian adults in any year
  - Psychotic disorders, including Schizophrenia and Bipolar disorder (0.4- 0.7%)

    - Mental illnesses in which a person has lost some contact with reality

Affects of mental illness in the workplace

- Mental illness will have a varied impact on a person's work, and everybody's experience will be different.
- Some examples of activities an employee with mental illness may have difficulty with include:

  - Maintaining concentration and attention
  - Side effects of medications, including tremors, blurred vision or drowsiness
  - Working with excessive noise or distraction
  - Getting to work on time
  - Communicating effectively and interacting with co-workers
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  - Maintaining energy over a full work day
  - Handling time pressures and multiple competing tasks

- Understanding and interpreting criticism
- Responding to unexpected change

Reasonable adjustments for mental illness

- Reasonable adjustments need to be individualised to meet employees' specific needs.
- It is important to ask the employee what would be most helpful for them.
- Some examples of reasonable adjustments that may help employees with mental illness include:

  - Flexible working arrangements
  - Working from home
  - Working part time
  - Flexible start and finish times
  - More frequent and flexible breaks
  - Workstation set-up to reduce noise and distractions
  - To do lists or checklists
  - Flexible arrangements to attend therapy appointments in working hours
  - Allowing extended periods of unpaid leave for hospital admissions
  - Use of a Personal Digital Assistant – e.g. Blackberry, iPhone
  - Receiving instructions in writing or by email, as well as verbally

Sources

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