

White Paper

Interpreting research data from the fields of positive psychology and staff mental health to inform practice.



Promoting Staff Mental Health and Well Being

Staff mental health and well being has a crucial impact on every workplace. Businesses whose staff have good mental health and well being tend to be more productive, have higher profits, higher staff retention rates and much higher levels of customer satisfaction (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). However research over the past two decades has shown that work can actually be hazardous to staff mental health and well being. Studies have indicated that staff can develop weakened immune systems, heart disease, chronic stress and fatigue and addictions when they are in stressful, chaotic work environments that do not promote good mental health and well being (Carrol, 2007; Diener &

Biswas-Diener, 2009; Rohrer, Pierce & Blackburn, 2005, Hunt, 2009). In 2004 the World Health Organisation encouraged both governments and workplaces to recognize the economic and social benefits of promoting staff mental health and well being and take action towards actively promoting positive mental health.

Why this is important.

Growing evidence suggests that workplaces around the world are being challenged with rising rates of mental health problems. Approximately 20% of Australians will experience some form of mental health problems

each year (ABS, 1998). It is estimated that mental health problems now cost Australian workplaces in excess of \$10 billion dollars every year from loss of productivity and participation in the workforce (ABS, 2008).

Work is a vital part of people's lives, they spend over 1/3 of their lives in work. If workplaces do not seek to actively promote and support staff mental health and well being there will be significant ramifications for individuals, families, businesses and society as a whole (WHO, 2004; Walker, Moodie & Herrman, 2004; Ziersch, 2005).



What The Research Reveals

In 2000 the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care documented the importance of mental health promotion in Australia, which they considered to be “any action taken to maximize the mental health and well being of individuals”. This policy led to the acknowledgement by business leaders that work is a critical element of mental health and well being, and that workplaces have a responsibility to promote, and support, staff mental health and well being (Millar, Liossis, Shochet, Biggs & Donald, 2007; ABC, 2007; Vic Health, 2006)

During the past decade specific risk and protective factors for staff mental health and well being in the workplace have been identified. The protective factors act to promote staff mental health and well being, and the risk factors are recognized as precursors to staff mental health problems (Vic. Dept of Human Services, 2006; Hunter Institute for Mental Health, 2009).

Chaotic and highly stressful workplaces can contribute to staff mental health problems which in turn impact on productivity as well as having negative effects on staff’s personal well being (Benevolent Society, 2009).

Diener & Biswas-Diener, (2009), the Institute of Directors (2006), and [Kjerulf](#) (2006) have identified that staff with good mental health and well being; work better with others, are more creative, are solution focused, have more energy, are more optimistic and motivated, get sick less often, learn faster, make better decisions and are more productive.

Donovan, James, Jalleh & Sidebottom (2006) conclude that “a primary objective for mental health promotion was to reframe people’s perceptions of mental health away from the absence of mental illness, to the belief that people, and workplaces, can act proactively to protect and strengthen their mental health and that of their staff”.

In Summary:

The Research Indicates

Workplaces have a responsibility to support and protect staff mental health and well being, and it is beneficial for them to adopt practices that strengthen their staff.

There are specific risk and protective factors within workplaces which can be addressed in order to promote, and protect, staff mental health and well being.

Both workplaces and staff have a responsibility to participate in developing positive staff mental health and well being.

Implications Of The Research



- There are significant benefits for businesses who take time to foster staff mental health and well being such as: increased productivity, higher staff retention rates and reduced absenteeism.
- Workplaces can promote good mental health and well being for staff by identifying strategies they can implement that will encourage protective factors and ameliorate the risk factors within their environments
- Both the business community and individual employees need to recognize and acknowledge that good mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness and that they both have a role to play in developing staff mental health and well being.
- Policies need to be implemented to encourage workplaces to develop positive qualities that promote staff mental health and well being and allow individuals to flourish (Carrol, 2007; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2009).

As the Mental Health Council of Australia acknowledged “not only does work provide income, it influences self-worth and status, it provides socialisation, it is the structure around which lives are organised and it facilitates opportunities for achievement and skill development. These things are crucial for good mental health and well being” (MHCA, 2002).

Unfortunately too many workplaces take their staff’s mental health and well being for granted – focusing on these areas only when problems arise. The good news is that there are many things workplaces can do to promote staff mental health and well being and the more time and energy that is invested the more healthy individuals and workplaces will be.

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